

1973

Rightist Plot Seen

Pétain's Body Stolen From Island Cemetery

By Jonathan C. Randal

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PARIS, Feb. 19—Grave robbers overnight stole the remains of Marshal Philippe Pétain, the World War I hero who headed the Vichy government which collaborated with the Nazis during the World War II occupation of France.

The coffin containing his body disappeared from an ill-guarded cemetery on the island of Yeu off western France, where he died at 95 in 1951. He was sent in to permanent exile there in 1945.

Ever since Pétain's death, his partisans have militated to have him buried at the national military cemetery at Douaumont, near Verdun, where in 1916 he repelled the Germans after a month-long battle that cost nearly a million French and German lives.

These rightist demands have been rejected by the Gaullists because of his

haste in seeking an armistice with the Germans after the collapse of France in 1940 and his collaboration with the Nazis when he headed the Vichy government.

Pétain was sentenced to death for collaboration in 1945.

Gen. Charles de Gaulle—who named his son, Philippe, after his old commander Pétain, and chose the marshal to serve as his namesake's godfather—commuted Pétain's death sentence. But it was de Gaulle's government that put Pétain on trial for treason in the first place, and relations between the two men throughout the years were ambivalent.

The theft of Pétain's remains brought forth predictably emotional reactions. They testified to the continuing and profound contro-

versy surrounding Petain more than a generation after he headed the Vichy government and more than two generations after Verdun.

The Gaullist-oriented National Association of Veterans issued a statement noting that "The transfer to Douaumont of the remains of a man condemned to death for intelligence with the enemy would be totally illegal." It added that those who fought in the Resistance against the Germans and Vichy "would not tolerate such an outrage."

The marshal's followers have often recalled that, in a 1938 will, Petain wrote that "My greatest desire is to be buried at Douaumont" beside his fallen soldiers. A 1971 opinion poll showed that 72 per cent of those questioned favored honoring the marshal's wishes.

With less than two weeks to go before the first round of national legislative elections, observers presumed the incident was staged to enhance the chances of the extreme right. Opinion polls show it is favored by 3 to 4 per cent of the voters.

Jean-Louis Tixier-Vignancour, a former Vichy official and the leader of an extreme rightist political party, said he had received a telephone call today from an otherwise unidentified "veteran" who said the body "had been transferred to the Verdun area about a month ago."

Officials investigating on the island of Yeu said, however, that the incident took place overnight. They said there was fresh cement which the grave robbers used to replace the 1,750 pound stone slab covering the tomb.

Lawyer Jacques Isorni, who defended Petain in the 1935 treason trial, said that he had been warned some time ago by an anonymous telephone caller that a "raid was in the offing to bring the remains of the marshal to Douaumont." He said he had told the caller "not to



PHILIPPE PETAIN
... hero of Verdun

do such a crazy thing," because "I want it to be done regularly, officially."

Tixier-Vignancour added that his caller had said the body had been stolen "to allow the president of the republic to decide on the [marshal's] final burial in Douaumont."

Already actively engaged in trying to save the ruling Gaullists from their first election defeat in 15 years, President Georges Pompidou could not be anything but embarrassed by the incident.

De Gaulle's relations with Petain began on the eve of World War I when the future Free French leader served under Petain, who later cited the young officer for bravery in action.

Although Petain prefaced an early de Gaulle book, their relationship began to deteriorate in the late 1920s de Gaulle became furious when Petain refused to acknowledge the fact that he had written most of a book the marshal published to gain the literary acceptance he needed for membership in the French Academy.

After de Gaulle went to London to head the Free French movement against Vichy, the marshal had his former protege sentenced to death in absentia for deserting to Britain.

