

Call of Duty

May 2014, north-east of Kidal in Mali. End of Operation Serval.

Kamel Aït Aïssa's words echoed deafeningly around the mountains like an unbroken scream. He was leaning against a rock, shaking, and covered in bruises, his rifle still in his hand. Sweat and blood trickled down his dusty face. He appeared to only have one eye. His cry - in French - came through articulated sobs: "Mohamed, yes, you: Mohamed Aït Amar from Rosny-sous-Bois! I recognise you, you are my brother Mohamed Aït Amar from Rosny-sous-Bois, side with us, leave the French army, join us and Allah will acknowledge you!". In the silence that had followed the explosions, the young man's voice was the sign that, so close to death, there was still a life: "Join us and Allah will acknowledge you!".

Sergeant Mohamed Aït Amar took time to answer him...

Mohamed had first met Kamel as he was strolling around the Rosny 2 shopping centre¹ one Saturday with his sister Leïla. Mohamed hadn't failed to notice

¹ in the Parisian suburbs

that the look that Kamel had given Leïla had lingered a little too long. A brief altercation had ended in each feeling contempt for the other. A week later, he found himself at the football match that brought together the team from Sevrans and the team from Rosny. And now, they both did everything they could to show off their strength and skill to each other. Physically, they were alike: light complexion, shaved heads, and same height, quite muscular, casually dressed. On that particular day, the match was a nil-nil draw. In the changing rooms, they commiserated with each other. Both their families were from the same town of Tizi Ouzou in the Algerian region of Kabylia. Both had been born in the French department of Seine Saint Denis. Both shared the same passion for video games.

Kamel had grown up in Sevrans. His father had worked for PSA Peugeot in Aulnay sous Bois until its liquidation. Since then, at the age of 56, Kamel's father had been unable to find work. He drifted around the various estates, spending his days sitting on a bench. He thought about his happy childhood days in Kabylia, and about the joyful celebrations held to the sound of women singing... In those days they would play the four double-stringed lute called the kouitra, and the qanun, another stringed instrument, all the while passing around the derbouka, the large terracotta goblet covered in goatskin. Now all he could hear was silence, and the sounds of the suburbs. Sometimes, Kamel's father met up with old work colleagues from Peugeot and

had bitter discussions. Once again he would return to the subject of the strike, and the fight they had put up along with the CGT trade union federation. He would also dwell on everyone's circumstances, always ending his remarks with a disillusions: "All that for this!". And then he would return to the apartment to eat the meals his eldest daughter had prepared. He didn't speak. Kamel's mother had recently died of a breast cancer that had spread throughout her body. She had never wanted to expose her breasts to the doctor. And so the illness had eaten her alive... It happened just after her husband's redundancy. Despite these crises, Kamel was a good, hard-working student. After his baccalaureate exams, he had obtained a degree in physics and chemistry with relative ease. He was looking for work...but only ever got offered unskilled jobs. He took on temporary municipal worker contracts or worked as an assistant night watchman. His only forms of relaxation were football and video games. In terms of video games, he favoured the war games "Call of Duty" or "Battlefield Heroes". He liked to beat his own score, avoid the traps and emerge victorious.

In Mohamed and Leïla's family, the father was a builder. Now 58 years old, he could no longer work. He suffered from severe forms of chronic lumbago: stenosis, spinal compression etc. Already at 14 years old he had carried breeze-blocks. His life had been relentless, with no proper leisure time, working week-ends, doing extra hours that were at best poorly paid. Now when he walked, which he did

infrequently, he looked like a hunched old man. What had also profoundly traumatised this family had been the disappearance of a great uncle on the 17th of October 1961. As had many, this uncle had answered the call of the FLN² who intended to protest against the curfew that had just been instituted in Paris - but only for North Africans. The demonstration was harshly suppressed by the same prefect of police who had organised the deportation of jews and members of the Resistance all those years ago. The uncle's body was never found, and the family received no expression of regret. Fear had led to submission: no call for a search. No obsequies. The last two generations had had to live with this trauma. Mohamed had experienced a normal education despite a bit of bother with the police for petty theft, and had passed his vocational baccalaureate exams in "Bodywork repairs". Mohamed's mother was always cheerful, a real nightingale who sang whenever she could, sometimes even at night. Some traditional tales tell how the nightingale's trill was once known to soothe pain, promote healing and ease the dying process. This particular mother had transmitted all her energy to her children, and none to her husband. Mohamed and Kamel's friendship was finally sealed when they jointly won a "Call of Duty" multiple player video game contest. What fascinated them about this game was the possibility of raising the weapon to the shoulder so as to aim it with greater

² FLN [Front de Libération Nationale]: Algeria's National Liberation Front in the war for independence against France

accuracy, as well as the Hollywood-style production values: shells send up clods of earth as they fall and explode around the player, bullets fly in all directions, team mates are mown down by enemy fire. When an explosion happens too close to the player, for a while his vision becomes hazy and he can't hear a thing. As well as video games, the two boys loved eastern food.

The Aïssa and Amar families always celebrated the Eid³, less as a mark of respect towards Abraham for submitting to the will of Allah, and more as a chance to share a good meal and happy family time. Kamel was invited to join the Aïssas for a tagine of mutton with figs, and all kinds of pastries. Mohamed and Leïla's mother was also an amazing cook, producing Makrouts⁴ and Briwats⁵ and other such sweet things that make the palate dance with joy. The dishes were therefore worthy of this special day. During the meal, Kamel and Leïla's eyes barely met. That was the day that Mohamed announced that he had joined the French army. He had passed the physical and mental tests, and his interview had impressed the recruiting officers. Mohamed's desire to follow in his grandfather's footsteps - the grandfather who had fought the Nazis from the time of the landings in Provence in August of 1944 right through to Berlin in 1945 - had been a major factor in his decision. His

³] Eid: Known as the "big party", this celebration takes place on the 10th day of the last month of the Muslim calendar

⁴ Makrout: A North African semolina cake with a date filling

⁵ Briwat: A triangular-shaped, deep-fried pastry, with sweet or savoury fillings

enlistment in the 3^e RPIMa⁶, was to begin the following month in Carcassonne. Kamel felt both proud and sad at the prospect of his friend's departure. They ended the evening with a session of their favourite "Call of Duty" game - and Mohamed won.

Kamel then began to feel depressed. His friend was about to leave. The casual jobs he had finally made him realise that he wasn't fulfilled. He deserved better. His father barely spoke to him. He was getting progressively more jaded. Football was all he had left. At the training session one day, people gathered around a new person: Assim. He was just back from Syria where he had fought against the dictatorship. He recounted his Jihad, and how his involvement in the explosion of a lorry in front of Aleppo's prison had made it possible to free 300 prisoners. He also told stories of the torture and mass murder that had been perpetrated under the dictator's rule. Kamel was fascinated by these bloodthirsty stories of vengeance and power, in which the fighters are intent on crushing their enemies. And then Assim's pronouncements became more ideological. For the suffering of Muslims to be assuaged, it would be necessary to establish a great caliphate, an Islamic State. As the weeks went by, Assim succeeded in arousing Kamel's interest, albeit more thanks to his tales of exploits rather than to his doctrinal fervour. Kamel did not attend mosques. So, in order to

⁶ the 3rd Marine Infantry Parachute Regiment

compensate for his deficiencies, and to appear more knowledgeable in Assim's eyes, he purchased "Le Coran pour les nuls", the French version of "The Koran for Dummies". From that point on, Assim arranged to meet him in Rosny every Friday for evening prayer in the rue du Bois d'Avron's prayer hall. After the prayers, they would hold hands and talk. Assim had no problem convincing him that he could become a great fighter. Kamel's general apathy gave way to a spectacular project that mixed religious objectives with adventure. Duty was calling him - "Call of Duty" was becoming his reality. It was suggested to him that he should change his name, and fight his own Jihad by helping his brothers in southern Libya and serving Allah. Assim had contacts with a training camp. There they prepared fighters for entry into the promised land of Mali. They would pay for him to get there.

The following week, Assim accompanied Kamel to Roissy-Charles de Gaulle. His destination was Tunis Carthage airport. Once Kamel was on board, a stranger handed a handful of 500 euro banknotes to Assim, who counted it several times. Two men were waiting for Kamel in Tunis, and they took his passport and phone from him. The young man felt a twinge of sorrow when he thought of what was left of his family. But he regained his self-control - he had now become Abu Suleiman Al-Mustaqeem, one of the fighters for Allah.

In January 2013, Mohamed - now called Maurice or Momo by his friends - went to Mali with his regiment. It was the beginning of Operation Serval. Having stopped the Islamic militants' advance on Bamako, his regiment retook Gao, Timbuktu and then Kidal. It was there that he earned his sergeant stripes.

At the same juncture, Abu Suleiman Al-Mustaqeem and his band of armed fighters were falling back to the Algerian border, then heading to the 1976 frontier post on the Nigerian border - leaving in their wake terror, massacres, decapitations, desecrations, rapes and enslavement of women. They hadn't noticed the drone that was flying overhead.

Having spotted the terrorists, Serval HQ ordered the deployment of two Mirage fighter planes on a bombing mission, followed by airborne troops as back-up. Mohamed was on board. Barely touching the ground in the vicinity of the scene of the explosion, the Tiger helicopter spewed up its five men and took off. The commandos spread out in the rotor's powerful downdraft. The aim of the mission was to assess the results of the Mirages' actions and to identify the militants. Visual observation had made them aware of a survivor. The lieutenant asked Maurice to give the standard warnings of military action in Berber. He immediately did so.

It was at that point that the shout came back: "Mohamed, yes, you: Mohamed Aït Amar from Rosny-sous-Bois ! I recognise you, you are my

brother, Mohamed Aït Amar from Rosny-sous-Bois, side with us, leave the French army, join us and Allah will acknowledge you!".

Sergeant Maurice looked questioningly at his lieutenant who, somewhat surprised by the contact, gave him permission to reply. He responded in French: "Kamel, you are not my brother, you are not worthy of Allah, and we're coming in!" And then he added:"Call of Duty - game over!".