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# Farewell to the Foreign Legion



In their last parade at Sidi Bel-Abbès in July, 1962, the Legionnaires present colors of the first battalion. Shortly after, they left Algeria forever.

**I**N A COMFORTLESS barracks near Ajaccio, in Corsica, the French Foreign Legion is enduring its last days.

It is dying, not magnificently as it once lived—the most decorated regiment of the French Army—but slowly, meanly, without grace, and this week will witness perhaps the most grimly ironic event in its strange history: the 100th anniversary of Camerone.

April 30 used to be the great day in the Legionnaires' calendar. A parade would be followed by a day of such unlicensed carousing that they were allowed two more days to sleep it off. But that was in Sidi Bel-Abbès, the town which the Legionnaires created, and which they had to quit last year when Algeria, despite their efforts, became an independent nation.

It is unlikely that the Legionnaires will be allowed to drink themselves insensible this April 30. In Ajaccio they are strangers, and unwelcome strangers at that.

You will not find the Battle of Camerone in any history books because, as battles go, it was insignificant. On April 30, 1863, during Napoleon III's venture in Mexico, a company of 63 Legionnaires under Captain Danjou was trapped in a *hacienda* at Camerone by 2,000 Mexican soldiers. The battle was fought for eight hours until only 12 unwounded Legionnaires were left. Danjou, dying, ordered them to fight to the death.

When ammunition gave out, only five men were left. They fixed bayonets and charged. Three reached the Mexican positions and were overpowered. The Mexican general gave orders for their arms to be given back to the prisoners, who were allowed to rejoin their unit.

The battle gained nothing at all in a military sense, but it symbolized the tradition of loyalty until death, which became the mark of the Legionnaire.

I am told that the Mexican Army still salutes when it passes the *hacienda* of Camerone. And in exactly 100 years the peal of glory that was Camerone has become the death knell of the Foreign Legion.

I cannot help recalling old Legion friends of mine and wondering uneasily what has happened to them. As a correspondent during the Algerian war, I remember sitting on a rock talking with Angelo Ricci, top sergeant of the 13th Demi-Brigade. They had trapped a sizable band of

Algerians and now were mopping up the hills.

"I have been in the Legion since the war," he said, "and I cannot go back to Rome."

"Nonsense," I said. "The war has been over a long time. Even if you had a Fascist record then, nobody would bother you now."

"That's not true in my case," he said. "No matter how long I live, I have to stay in the Legion. I can never go back to Italy again."

It was a shocking remark. What crime or crimes had been committed by this courteous, smiling Italian who used a false name and looked like Liberace?

I did not ask. In the Legion, one does not ask, or if one does, no Legionnaire is obliged to reply, even to a general.

What will happen to Angelo Ricci? What has happened to Heinrich, my jeep driver, who boasted to me that he had the S.S. emblem tattooed under his armpit? What will happen to the score or so of Yanks who served in the various Legion regiments?

I met two, both of them deserters from the U.S. Army. I will take the case of one of them—let's call him Joe—to explain the dilemma of Legionnaires today. Eight years ago he deserted from the American Army in Frankfurt, Germany, and took to petty crime. He moved to Paris, and when he heard that the police had traced him, he took a subway to Vincennes, the Paris suburb where the Legion recruiting office stands, and enlisted there.

**O**NE OF THE MYTHS about the Legion is that it asks no questions. On the contrary, it checks records carefully with Interpol. Nevertheless, it decided that there was nothing in Joe's background—even as a deserter and crook—that made him unfit for the Legion. He was accepted and shipped off to the war in Indo-China. Later he fought in Algeria.

Joe had been decorated. He spoke fluent French and German. His life story was not pretty, but the Legion had made a man out of a thug. What happens to him now? Technically, after his discharge, he would be allowed to live in France and take a work permit. But things never seem to work out that way for Legionnaires. They pine for Algeria and the comradeship, and in the old days, after drifting around awhile in Paris, they would re-enlist.

But Joe is not going to re-enlist to go to Corsica. He

The death knell already has sounded for a military legend—but what will happen to the men who made the legend, the hardened men with shadowy pasts and no future but the Legion's?

By GEOFFREY BOCCA

will take to crime, get kicked out of France, then probably be picked up by the U.S. Army as a deserter. He deserves better.

The fact is that France does not really want men like Joe. This is the problem that faces the Ministry of National Defense in Paris today: what to do with a force of nearly 50,000 men, almost all foreigners, many of them socially undesirable, some of them, such as Hungarians, without a home to go back to.

**B**EFORE April, 1961, the Legion had its glory to justify itself. Then the decline began. The First Legion Paratroop Regiment joined the Army insurrection against General de Gaulle's policy of self-determination for the Algerians. The rebellion was quickly suppressed, but the regiment, perhaps the finest in the whole Legion, was disbanded immediately and the Legionnaires dispersed to other units.

Before they were re-posted, the unrepentant Legionnaires burned their bedding and barracks furniture and marched through Sidi Bel-Abbès singing a current Paris hit song, "No, I Regret Nothing" (*Non, je ne regrette rien*). French civilians cheered them and shouted, "Vive la Légion!" As the soldiers drove off in five truckloads, many were in tears.

Two days after the First Legion Paratroop was disbanded, the full impact of the disaster struck the Legion. The celebration of Camerone was cancelled for the first time in 98 years. Later, the Legion was barred from the 14th of July parade down the Champs Elysées in Paris.

A few Legion companies still serve in the Sahara and in Madagascar. But otherwise its mission is over. The Legion recruiting offices remain open because the Army has not yet gotten around to closing them, but there are no recruits now.



The Legion inspired such film classics as "Beau Geste" which starred Ray Milland, the late Gary Cooper, and Robert Preston.

The impact of Corsica on the Legionnaires has been painful. In Sidi Bel-Abbès the Legion was alone with its own kind in the wastes of Algeria. But Corsica is a Mediterranean holiday resort. To make their discontent intolerable, off-duty Legionnaires are liable to run into tourists from their own home town. Desertions have soared, and former Legion officers, who only two years ago formed the cream of the French officer corps, are being hunted as leaders of the O.A.S. and conspirators against the life of de Gaulle.

The Foreign Legion was never intended to win battles, only to hang on, as at Dien Bien Phu, and hope for a political settlement in Paris. The Legion was frequently defeated, but in its last battle of all, it inflicted its most crushing defeat upon itself. It deserved a less ignoble ending.

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