

# The Foreign Legion

By the Late Captain Vere Shortt

**M**OST people in this country know that France, in addition to her conscript army, maintains a force of foreign troops or mercenaries—if, indeed, men can be called mercenaries who give their military services for the sum of rather less than one penny per diem. “La Legion Etrangere, or, as it is called in Britain, the Foreign Legion of the French army, a permanent part of the 19th French Army Corps, is a lineal descendant of the famous Irish brigade of Louis the Fourteenth.

First of all I wish to disabuse my readers' minds of the idea that there is anything romantic or, to coin a word, “Ouidaesque” about the Foreign Legion, because nothing could be farther from the truth. The Foreign Legion is much like any other body of professional soldiers, with the difference that the men are drawn from all nations. Roughly speaking, the composition of the Legion is as follows: About 25 per cent were Germans—mostly deserters from the frontier garrisons; about 25 per cent are Frenchmen, some of whom have entered the corps from pure love of adventure and soldiering, some because they were out of work and starving, and some because they were in trouble of some sort; and about 50 per cent of other nations—Spaniards, Italians, Turks, Belgians and a few English. Of course, many of these men were of good social position, but certainly not the great majority. The Legion asks no questions, and a man can call himself what he likes. I have known men forget to answer to their names, so new were they; but if it has done nothing else, it has given an opportunity to thousands of men who were “down and out” in their own

country to recover at least their self-respect, and in hundreds of cases has opened a new and honorable career for them.

The Foreign Legion consists of two regiments of about four thousand men each. Each regiment is divided into four battalions of about one thousand men each, which are again divided into four companies. The system is the “double company” one, as in most Continental armies. The officers consist of the colonel commanding a regiment, with a lieutenant-colonel under him, commandant (chef de bataillon), captain, lieutenant and sous-lieutenant. Then there is another rank which is quite unknown in the British army—that of adjutant or company sergeant-major. The adjutant wears exactly the same uniform as a sous-lieutenant, with the exception of a thin red silk cord braided into the gold lace on his cap. Each company is divided into four sections or pelotons, and is commanded by a captain (always a mounted officer), three subalterns and an adjutant. The non-commissioned officers are sergeant-major, sergeant-fourrier or quarter-master-sergeant, sergeant and corporal, all of whom have much the same position and duties as in the British army, with the exception that they have the right to punish. For instance, a sergeant can, and very often does, give a man three days' consigne, or confinement to precincts of barracks, without giving any reason, but simply stating in his report: “Gave the legionary A. B. three days' consigne. If the sergeant states the motif, or reason, for the punishment the case goes on to the captain of the company who will probably increase the punishment to fourteen days' salle de police or guard-

room, and send the case on to the commandant, who will alter it to twenty-eight days' prison, and send it on to the general commanding the division, who will refer the case to a court-martial, which may sentence the man to years of imprisonment or to service in a penal battalion. Thus it will be seen that the right to punish is a very real and terrible power to give to a man in a subordinate position. Personally speaking, I think this system is wrong; but on this question I am quite aware that I have the majority of French officers against me.

A word as to these same punishments—I mean the ordinary regimental ones—may not be out of place. People in Britain and elsewhere have been shocked and horrified by lurid stories of punishments inflicted on soldiers in the Foreign Legion. Now, whether there is or is not a substratum of truth in these stories as applied to men in the disciplinary battalions, I should not like to say. I have heard stories of men in these regiments who have put *en crapaudine*—that is to say, tied wrist to ankle backwards, which is a form of torture, and very severe torture; or being immured in "silos" or grain-pits; but I have never heard of these punishments being inflicted on men of the Foreign Legion except in one case. That was an Italian legionary who struck a non-commissioned officer while on active service. By all the laws of the French army there is only one punishment for an offense of this kind—death; but by some extraordinary chance—I think it was owing to the extreme provocation received—the man got off with six hours' *crapaudine*, of which he did three, and those three hours were sufficient to lay him up for six weeks.

All stories of men being kept *en crapaudine* for days may be dismissed as inventions. No man could live through the punishment. The ordinary punishments inflicted are *consigne*, or confinement to barracks, with extra fatigue duty, *salle de police*, or guard-room, and prison. In extreme cases incorrigibles are sent to the disciplinary bat-

talions, or *viribi*, as they are called in the French army. The discipline in the Foreign Legion is strict, as it must be in such a force, but neither brutal nor unjust.

A man can join the Foreign Legion anywhere in France, and at almost any age, provided that he is physically sound. On joining he is given a ticket for Marseilles, where he proceeds without any supervision whatever. If possible, men are sent in parties; but if there are not enough recruits to form one, they are often sent singly or in pairs. Arrived at Marseilles, the men are usually kept at Fort St. Jean until there are enough to form a small party, when they are forwarded by steamer to Oran under the charge of a non-commissioned officer. From Oran, if drafted to the first regiment, they are sent to Sidi-bel-Abbes; and if to the second, to Saida. It is rather funny to see a batch of recruits arrive. Most of them have sold their civilian clothes at Marseilles, and consequently turn up in a most extraordinary mixture of garments. I have seen a man arrive in a dress-coat, or, rather, half a dress-coat (he had had an argument with a friend about the ownership of a packet of cigarettes), a pair of blue dungaree trousers, no boots (he had lost them at cards in the train), and an overcoat! Poor fellow! he was an excellent soldier, and got quick promotion; he was a sergeant in two years, and got brained by an Arab mace in the fight at Ain Sefra.

On joining the Legion a man gives in his civil clothes, which are destroyed, and receives his kit, which consists of a *capote*, or long blue-gray collarless overcoat, one blue double-breasted tunic, two pairs of red trousers, three shirts, three pairs of white trousers for fatigue and summer wear, and a *kepi*; also belts, rifle, bayonet, etc., and two pairs of boots. These are probably the best, as they are certainly the most expensive, boots used by any army in the world. The contract price is about twenty-three francs (19s. 2d.) a pair. This is absolutely necessary, as for the marching the Legion has to do cheap

boots would be useless. No socks are worn; in place of these the men use chaussettes Russes, or Russian socks—so-called, I believe, because they are neither Russian nor socks, but squares of greased linen folded over the feet. I have used them myself many times, and can testify that they are excellent things to march in. The uniform is precisely the same as that of the French line, with the exception that on the collar and tunic, instead of the usual regimental number the Legion carry a grenade; that the epaulets are green with a red fringe, instead of all red; and that every soldier in the Foreign Legion wears a blue woolen sash folded many times round his waist over his tunic, to act as a cholera-belt. According to regulations, this sash is worn on all occasions, even on fatigue duty. With the officers it is replaced by a sort of waistcoat of the same cloth as the tunic. The officers' trousers are worn very full over the hips and tight round the ankles, as is the invariable rule in the army of Africa. In fact, some of the younger officers look extremely grotesque, as they go to inordinate lengths in fullness of trousers and size of kepi. The latter, for some obscure reason, is supposed to increase in smartness in direct proportion to its size.

The Legion exists primarily for two purposes: to fight and to march. When neither of these is to be done the men are put to road-making. Quite 80 per cent of the roads in Algeria and almost all the barracks have been built by the Legion; but the ability to march is the Legion's great pride. The ordinary day's march is forty kilometers, or nearly thirty miles. This is done in all sorts of temperatures, from normal to one hundred degrees Fahrenheit in the shade, each man carrying a pack of over sixty pounds weight. There is none of the smartness of a British regiment's march about the Legion. The men keep their section, and that is about all that can be said. Sometimes one sees a strong man at the end of a day's march carrying two or even three rifles. The men are marching anyhow,

and would, I fancy, to a British officer, seem to be utterly out of hand. This would be a mistake. The officers do not care how the men march, but march they must, and be fighting fit at the end of that march. There is no such thing as falling out. To do so (on the Sahara stations at least) is to invite a cruel death at the hands of the Arabs. The system of march, as laid down in the regulations, is one hour's march, five minutes' rest, and this is strictly adhered to.

Some years ago there was a case of a major who took his battalion for one of these marches. For some reason or other the men's marching was not up to his standard; so when they returned to quarters he ordered the officers to fall out, and then kept the men doubling round the parade-ground until about twenty dropped from sheer exhaustion, the others being almost in like case. I am glad to be able to state that as the upshot of this affair he was put on half-pay.

There is a sort of unwritten law in the Legion that a retreat—if such a regrettable necessity should occur—shall be carried out at the slowest walk possible. I once asked the reason of this, and was told that three-quarters of the men had run once, either from their creditors, or their wives, and that once was quite enough for any man to run! Certainly the legionary is not an adept at retreat. Eleven times in eleven great battles have whole companies of the Legion refused to obey the order to retreat, and died to the last man where they stood. How many other troops, conscript or professional, can point to the same record?

The great difference between the Foreign Legion and the rest of the French army is the strength of the esprit de corps in the former. In the national army of France esprit de corps is repressed as much as possible, and esprit d'armee is sedulously fostered. When an officer in the French army is promoted, he is always transferred to another regiment, generally as far away as possible from his old one. A man cannot get up much enthusiasm

for a regiment in which he knows that at most he will pass only a few years, and which he looks forward to leaving, as it means superior rank and increased pay. In the Legion an officer knows that, almost always, once a legionnaire, always a legionnaire, and so he develops a very strong esprit de corps; and the same holds good of the rank and file. This shows itself in the superior chic, or smartness, of the legionary to the linesman. The French pioupiou, or infantry soldier, is one of the most slovenly looking soldiers in the world, while the legionary is just the reverse. A man of the Legion will spend a couple of hours ironing a crease in his white trousers with the edge of a tin cup before going into town!

The life in the Foreign Legion, when not varied by spells of hard work, marching or fighting, is apt to be monotonous to a terrible degree; therefore, it is not surprising that many of the men drink, and drink hard. This may seem surprising when one considers their pay—a little less than one penny per day; but it must be remembered that many of the men are in receipt of money from home, and that in any case liquor in Algeria is ridiculously cheap. For a penny nearly a quart of fiery Algerian wine can be got, for sevenpence a pint of absinthe, and for fivepence a pint of bapedi, or fig spirit. Cigarettes can be procured at about a penny for twenty. Also, there is a very old custom in the Legion which forbids a man to "faire Suisse" ("do a Swiss"), which means to drink alone, under any circumstances. If a man has only a penny, and thinks he would like some wine, he has to look for some one else to share it with him; and, human nature being what it is, he generally picks on some one who has another penny to buy more wine when the first supply is finished. In this way a man will often drink more than he had any intention of doing.

One idea which people in Britain seem to have is that the cantiniere, or lady canteen keeper, is a trim damsel in a neat uniform, who exercises a re-

fining and elevating influence on the brutal and licentious soldiery by whom she is surrounded. I regret to say that this idea is a delusion. All the canteen keepers with whom I have been brought in contact have been ample ladies of mature years and forbidding presence. Some of them had mustaches, and without exception they all possessed a vocabulary calculated to paralyze an ordinary man, and even to cause the boldest legionary to turn pale, or rather blush. This is not an easy feat.

Now, this cheapness of drink, and especially of absinthe, leads to a disease which I believe is peculiar to the French army in Africa. This disease is known as le cafard. The cafard is a small beetle which spends its time pushing balls of dirt about, and men who suffer from cafard say they feel as if they had one in their head. I think myself it may be described as an aggravated case of "blue hump" bred of dullness and disgust of life. In any case, it is fearfully common in the Legion.

It may lead to anything from a mad freak without any seeming motive to an equally motiveless nomicide. If a man sits on his cot, looking straight in front of him and speaking to no one, that man requires watching. He may come out of his cafard, or quite possibly he may seize his bayonet and stab the nearest man, run amuck, and eventually have to be shot down like a mad dog.

Another result of the hard work and monotony is desertion, or, as it is called in the Legion, going en pompe. Men very seldom get away. In the settled parts of Algeria there is a standing reward of twenty-five francs for each deserting legionary brought in, and on the Saharan stations capture by Arabs means torture and death. On these stations photos of the bodies of legionaries who have been captured by the Arabs are hung in the barrack-rooms to discourage intending deserters. This does not render the Arabs popular with the Legion, and accounts for the merciless nature of the small

fight which constantly take place in the south of Algeria.

The Foreign Legion, as at present constituted, was raised in 1831, and since that date has taken an honorable part in every war which France has fought. It has been commanded in turn by some of the most celebrated soldiers of France, among others Marshal M'Mahon and Generals Canrobert, Bazaine and De Negrier. Its losses have been enormous. Two thousand men of the Legion were lent to Spain in the Carlist war for a consideration of eight hundred thousand francs (which was never paid), and of these five hundred returned to Algeria starving and in rags. It will never be known how many of the Legion have left their bones in the swamps of Indo-China and Madagascar, but they must number many thousands.

Probably every known profession and trade is represented in the Foreign Legion. The officers' mess and other buildings at Sidi-bel-Abbes were designed, built and decorated by legionaries. At that time one company alone yielded seven men who were qualified architects. There is a legend in the Legion to the effect that in the Mexican war the authorities wished to hold a High Mass in the Cathedral in Mexico City. The local clergy refused to have anything to do with this scheme, and the French authorities were in despair. At last a man was found in the Legion, who announced that he had been an Archbishop, and was one still unless he had been unfrocked! Inquiries were made, the man's story was proved to be true, and he conducted Mass, going back to his duties afterwards.

This term of enlistment for the Legion is five years, and at the end of his service the legionary receives a suit of plain clothes, a ticket for any town in France he wishes, and a franc a day for subsistence. On arrival at his destination he usually finds himself penniless in an already overstocked labor market, and as often as not goes straight to the nearest recruiting office and re-enlists in the Legion.

The Foreign Legion, contrary to general belief, is not a regiment of criminals, but a body of men in the main good, honest soldiers, who are worked very hard for miserable pay. The shooting of the Legion is the best in the French army, and it does not stand to reason that desperate criminals would be trusted with ball cartridge for musketry or any other purpose. The motto on the Legion's colors is, "Honneur, Valeur, Discipline" ("Honor, Bravery, Discipline"), and it may be confidently stated, without fear of contradiction, that in its eighty-five years of existence the Legion has lived up to its motto.

In connection with the recent expansion of the Foreign Legion, the Paris newspapers stated that in the early days of the war eight thousand Italians, inspired by the example of Ricciotti Garibaldi, joined this force. The Swiss, like the Americans, numbered four thousand five hundred, and the Russians nearly four thousand, besides Poles, Alsace-Lorrainers, Czechs, Armenians and Syrians.

Much interest was aroused by the announcement made at the beginning of last September that the King had approved of the reinstatement of John Ford Elkington in the rank of lieutenant-colonel, with his previous seniority, in consequence of his gallant conduct while serving in the ranks of the Foreign Legion of the French army. Colonel Elkington, on the 14th of September, 1914, had been cashiered by sentence of a court-martial after thirty years' service in the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. He at once joined the Foreign Legion under his own name. "It was hard work," he said to a correspondent, "and we were nearly always in the thick of it. I had to take things as they came, and three weeks after I had enlisted I was at the front. It was not new to me, and I did not need training. Many of the men of the Legion wore medals—medals of all the wars for the last twenty years. I could not wear mine even if I wanted to; I was cashiered, and had no right to them any longer." A friend sent

him a copy of Rudyard Kipling's poem, "If," which he carried in his pack on many a long march through France. He read it in bivouac and in the trenches, and he said: "It pulled me through the bad times." A clever American surgeon named Wheeler also became a helpful friend, and

when they went into action both fell together. Colonel Elkington spent ten months in hospital at Grenoble, where a damaged leg was operated on eight times, and eventually saved. The Croix de Guerre was afterwards conferred upon him for bravery at the front.

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## WHERE THE WEST BEGINS

Out where the handclasp's a little stronger,  
Out where the smile dwells a little longer—  
That's where the west begins.

Out where the sun shines a little brighter,  
Where the seas of snow are a trifle whiter,  
Where the ties of home are a wee bit tighter—  
That's where the west begins.

Out where the skies are a trifle bluer,  
Where friendships of men are a little truer,  
Where the petty things of the day are fewer—  
That's where the west begins.

Out where a cheerier breeze is blowing,  
Where the bread of the nation is in the growing,  
Where there's more of reaping and less of sowing—  
That's where the west begins.

Out where the world is in the making,  
Where fewer hearts in despair are aching,  
Where there's more of giving and less of taking—  
That's where the west begins.

Where there's more of singing and less of sighing,  
Where there's more of giving and less of buying,  
Where a man makes friends without half trying—  
That's where the west begins.

ARTHUR CHAPMAN.

