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The Day

FROM the slopes of the High Atlas to the wind-swept stretches of the Damascus-Bagdad trail, from the drab barrack walls of Sidi bel-Abbes to the lush miasmic jungles of Cochin-China, twenty-five thousand lean, hard-bitten men annually celebrate one red day in Mexico. Camerone Day—day of Danjou of the Wooden Hand. Wherever Légionnaires may be on April 30, there is celebrated Camerone Day. Over the shining napery of the officers' mess at Fez glasses clink. In mud-walled frontier forts tin cups clatter as bleak-eyed soldiers drink. In its Golden Book—that scroll so jealously kept in the Hall of Honor of the mother regiment at bel-Abbes—the Foreign Legion has perpetuated many names; but in all those pages of glory none will ever stand higher than Camerone.

"They were here less than sixty, opposed by an army. Its mass crushed them. Life, not honor, abandoned these French soldiers, April 30, 1863." Thus the scroll. Behind that bare recital lies a story paralleling the story of the Alamo. But the end differs. Whereas Travis, Crockett, Bowie and that galaxy of gallant Texans fell to the last man at the hands of Santa Anna on March 6, 1836, the handful of survivors at Camerone received all the honors of war from the Mexican troops who crushed them, twenty-seven years later. . . .

Maximilian the ill-fated was clinging to the throne of Mexico, that fateful year of '63, supported there by French bayonets. Mexico was aflame. The Foreign Legion was scattered along the French line of communications from Vera Cruz to Puebla, then being besieged by the French.

At dawn, April 30, the 3rd Company of the 1st Battalion of the Legion, commanded by Captain Danjou—a tough veteran of a hundred combats, with his right hand shot away and replaced by a hand of wood—marched on Palo Verde, with a mission to reconnoiter for a convoy about to start for Puebla. Danjou had sixty-one in his company, including two lieutenants—Villain, and the regimental color-bearer Maudet, a volunteer.

By seven o'clock in the morning the company had halted for coffee at the stream at Palo Verde, just beyond the deserted village of Camerone. From that direction a dust-cloud rose—mounted men. The company

Next Month—

of the Legion

By CAPTAIN
R. E. DUPUY

pushed back through the woods to Camerone; and debouching from the woods, was assailed by eight hundred and fifty cavalry under a Mexican Republican officer—Colonel Milan, who as the French were later to find out, had also under his command an additional force of twelve hundred infantry.

Forming square, the company repulsed two cavalry charges. The enemy was too strong to be held in the open, however, so Danjou moved his square of glittering bayonets to a hacienda on the western edge of the village.

Summoned to surrender, Danjou replied: "We have cartridges!" The Mexicans, dismounting, pushed their way into the hacienda, occupying part of the buildings in which the *Légionnaires* were at bay. A sharp fire fight opened at close quarters. Danjou, calling on his men to fight to the last gasp, fell with a bullet through his heart, and Lieutenant Villain took command.

Until noon the company held its opponents back, while the sun grew stronger and thirst became greater. The one well was in Mexican hands. A blare of bugles now aroused hope. Sergeant Morzicki, climbing on a roof, discovered a column of infantry moving up. French? Alas, no; Milan's twelve hundred foot soldiers.

The enemy formed for assault. A second invitation to surrender was received by the *Légionnaires* with jeers. Again and again the Mexican infantry pushed in, to be received by a steady, well-aimed fire. Sheer weight of numbers prevailed; each time the Mexican tide rose a bit higher. The surviving French were driven into the southwest angle of the hacienda court, the attackers now being able to take them under direct fire from other parts of the buildings.

At two-thirty in the afternoon Lieutenant Villain was killed, and Lieutenant Maudet, the volunteer, assumed command. Captain Maine of the Legion, then a corporal, gives a vivid picture of the battle in his memoirs: terrific heat, a torrid sun beating down upon the livid corpses, the parched but stoic wounded, and the grim survivors.

"Hope was gone," says Maine; "but no one spoke of surrender."

The Mexicans set fire to the roofs and framework of the hacienda. Through rolling, choking clouds of smoke the *Légionnaires*

doggedly held their place until—with all wood burned—there remained only the baked and charred adobe walls behind which but a dozen men still remained on their feet.

At five o'clock the Mexicans ceased fire for a moment. A third summons to surrender followed. "We didn't even answer," is Maine's comment. Hell broke again. The survivors, ammunition falling short, made every shot count. Mexican dead, heaped in the breaches made in the walls, impeded the new waves of assault.

"I propped Morzicki's body against the wall," says Maine, "and searched it for cartridges. I found two. We were now only five—Lieutenant Maudet, a Prussian named Wenzel, Catteau, Constantin and myself. At six o'clock there remained one round apiece. At the Lieutenant's command, we fired as one man, and with bayonets fixed plunged into the open.

"A wave of fire received us. Catteau, throwing himself in front of his officer, fell with nineteen balls in his body. The Lieutenant was himself struck down by two shots, one smashing his right thigh-bone. Wenzel fell with him, but regained his feet, with a shot through his shoulder.

"Three men were now still standing—Wenzel, Constantin and myself. . . . A wave of Mexicans engulfed us, their bayonets poised. An officer struck up their blades with his saber.

"Surrender!"

"If you leave us our arms and promise to help this wounded officer," I responded.

"The officer consented. . . . He offered me one arm, gave the other to the wounded Wenzel, while a stretcher was brought for the Lieutenant. We moved out to a little fold in the ground where stood Colonel Milan and his staff.

"Are these all who are left?" he demanded. And on affirmation—"They are not men; they are demons!"

"They gave us cornmeal cakes and water, which we gulped."

Thus the story of Camerone—the story of ten hours of fighting—sixty-two against more than two thousand—in an open court, without food or water, under a burning sun. Nineteen in all of the Legion survived. Of the attackers three hundred were casualties, two hundred of them dead on the field.

The Extraordinary Real Experience of an American Soldier
"TEN YEARS in the FOREIGN LEGION"