



'Hacking a path through dense jungle.'

The LEGION MARCHES

IT was Friday, March 9th, 1945. The village of Tien Kien, in French Indo-China, surrounded by its paddy-fields and almost hidden by thick clumps of bamboo and tufted palm-trees, looked just as calm and peaceful as always. We of the French Foreign Legion who were stationed there were conscious of the brooding suspense—that feeling of living on the edge of a volcano—but we had become used to this sensation, and none of us ever expected that particular Friday would be different from any other.



But it *was*, for it marked the beginning of what is probably one of the world's most dramatic marches, and added a new page to the chequered annals of the Legion.

At that period we of the Third Battalion of the Fifth Regiment were in a very peculiar position. We were neither in the war nor out of it; in fact, we sometimes scarcely knew who we were or what we were supposed to be doing. This seems a strange thing to say, and calls for some explanation in order that the reader may understand the sequence of events.

The whole affair, of course, was decidedly unimportant from the European point of view, seeing that it happened in such an out-of-the-way corner of the world, and for this reason very few people, I imagine, ever heard anything about it. It certainly did not feature in the newspaper headlines, but for those of us who figured in the business it was a matter of life and death—

By LESLIE J. SMITH

and there are some decidedly unpleasant ways of dying!

As you are no doubt aware, the collapse of France left the French colonies entirely unprotected, and they were mostly occupied by British and American troops. There was one exception—French Indo-China. This country was seized by the Japanese at a moment when they were pretty sure the French, overwhelmed by their own troubles, could not do very much about it. As a result, when the Japs came into the war themselves, they were firmly established in Indo-China and had obtained control of the Hanoi-Yunnan Railway, their principal objective. They also had an excellent base for operations if they decided to strike farther to the west or make a new movement towards the Chinese in the southern provinces.

One thing they did *not* do—disarm the few reliable troops that France had in the country. They had already made some sort of agreement with the Vichy Government; perhaps they thought this was enough, or perhaps they just didn't bother. They certainly annoyed any French soldiers or civilians they came across in



KENNETH
INNS

When the Japanese, having occupied Indo-China, finally declared war, the few French troops scattered throughout the country found themselves in a hopeless position. This striking story—told by a Briton serving in the famous Foreign Legion—describes how his battalion was forced to make a terrible two-months death-march through hundreds of miles of jungle and mountains.

every possible way, but things never went any farther until the last year of the war.

In 1945, apparently, the Japanese began to suspect that trouble might be brewing; the Administration started to make difficulties concerning a new treaty, somebody was reported to have been seen smoking American cigarettes in one of the larger towns, and fragments of abandoned parachutes had been found in the bush, suggesting mysterious landings. The Jap authorities decided that someone besides themselves was giving orders to Indo-China, and that unauthorized strangers were entering the country who were not emissaries of the Vichy Government. Another thing which greatly annoyed them was that American planes always seemed to know just where to look when they came over to shoot-up Jap convoys and camps. The Japanese finally decided to end this irritating situation by a surprise blow, and fixed the time for the night of March 9th.

The yellow men, however, were not the only people who had become suspicious. During the month of November, 1944, orders were given for all French troops to withdraw from garrison towns and scatter themselves throughout the villages all over Tonkin. There they were to stay until they received further instructions. This move was made under the guise of "manœuvres."

In accordance with these orders, my own company—the Tenth—had been living quietly in the village of Tien Kien for

several months, and during that time we had noticed nothing unusual. We were well placed to defend ourselves, for we had almost a clear mile of rice-fields all around us, and could spot the slightest movement in any direction. At night-time we slept comfortably, having established six guard-posts and a double ring of sentries.

On the fateful night of March 9th a Polish Legionnaire and myself sat drinking coffee in a small native *cagna* in the village. About half-past ten we set out to return to our sleeping quarters. The night was clear and still, and when we got outside we heard low, repeated thumps coming from a westerly direction. Agreeing that the

noises sounded very much like gunfire, we went along to the guard-post and asked the men there if they knew anything about it, or if there were any fresh orders. They told us they had likewise heard the sounds, and had duly reported them. No instructions had come through, however, so the best thing we could do was to turn in, which we did. But not for very long!

THE NIGHT ALARM.

At the cheery hour of one o'clock in the morning I was awakened by someone shaking my arm violently. It was my own group-sergeant, and when I sat up he told me to get dressed and be outside, armed, within ten minutes. By the



The Author.

guttering light of a candle I could see that the rest of the section were making ready with all possible speed. Not that there was much to do, for we always slept with half our clothes on.

By the time we fell in further orders had come through from the Captain; we learnt that the twelve men of our group, with a light machine-gun, were to occupy a position on the railway about a mile from the village. Away we went, feeling our way along the narrow path with our feet, for the night was pitch-black and we could see nothing at all. Arrived at the line, we took up our posts and waited for the dawn.

About five o'clock we were startled by hearing heavy bursts of firing from the direction of Co Tish, a village some three kilometres away, where some of the H.Q. staff were billeted. We guessed then that something serious was happening, and that we should very shortly be involved. At daybreak, sure enough, we were ordered to fall back on our own village and rejoin the rest of the company. Here we donned our lightest kit, loaded up with all the ammunition we could carry, and prepared the rest of our equipment for destruction if it became necessary. It was still quite early when we moved off to find and attack the Japs, who were reported to be advancing in strength.

The disasters of that day need not be enlarged upon; suffice it to say they were pretty complete. We found the enemy right enough, and at the commencement of the engagement managed to drive them back, but they were constantly reinforced and our small arms proved no match for their mortars and heavy artillery, with which they steadily smashed us to pieces. We of the Fifth Regiment were supposed to be a battalion, but were actually only two companies (the Eleventh had joined us), and two companies cannot stand up very long to such a hammering as we received. As it was, we held the Japs up for the whole day, and it was only when, just before dark, they completely over-ran our position that the survivors managed to get clear and retreat across the Red River under cover of night.

What a crossing that was! We only had two *sampans*, capable of carrying four men apiece at the most, one of whom had to make the return trip each time in order to prevent the terrified coolie in charge from paddling off downstream as hard as he could go. The pack-horses we swam across, losing two before we could haul them up the steep bank on the other side; the poor brutes vanished into the darkness, swept helplessly away by the racing current. During the whole time we were crossing, our machine-guns covered the stream, for we feared that two battalions of Japs known to be at Phu To would arrive in time to cut us off. We managed to get everyone safely over, however, and almost immediately started a long night march in an attempt to make contact with the rest of the regiment.

At four in the morning we found them, fresh and full of fight. They were the First and Second battalions, and, although completely encircled by the Japanese at Vietri, had burst through during the night and escaped into the open country. Here they had formed up across the only road and waited to see if we of the Third battalion could join them.

As our two companies were badly disorganized and had a good many wounded to look after we passed through the other battalions and continued our march to a small village, where we arrived just as day was breaking. We had covered nearly fifty kilometres during the night, so we halted for a much-needed rest. It was here that we learnt what had really happened

A TALE OF DISASTER

It seemed that the Japs, simultaneously and without warning, had attacked all the French posts throughout the whole of Indo-China. They naturally made a dead-set against the Legion, completely wiping out some of the smaller posts and capturing many of the officers. Our own Colonel, it appeared, had been seized in his bed, and several of his aides were caught likewise, so that from the very first we lacked officers. We learnt, however, that we were to be commanded by General Alessandri, who had escaped by running the gauntlet of Jap fire in his car and getting clean away. This was excellent news, for the General was an old Legion officer and exceedingly popular. With him to lead us, we felt, things might not be so bad.

Directly he had taken charge the General gave orders for the Legion to concentrate on Son La, about the only post that had not been attacked, owing to its isolated position far in the interior. Son La lay about seven days' march away, and between us and it there was nothing but jungle, mountains, and a big, deep river, not to mention several smaller streams. Our instructions were to cover the distance in three days. But even the Legion cannot achieve the impossible, and though we did our best the trek took us five long days.

I'm running ahead of events, however, so we had better return to the village for a moment.

Well, we had our orders, so we did not waste much time. All the native soldiers who happened to be with us were disarmed and told to make their way to their own homes as best they could. In the circumstances they would not have been much use to us, and it would have been impossible to find food for them. Spare rifles were smashed, equipment burnt, and surplus ammunition thrown into a nearby river. The wounded were provided with an escort and sent to a French hospital near the Red River, to which a number had already been despatched the previous night. We knew—and they knew—that the Japs would eventually get them, but it was impossible to take badly-injured men with us on the arduous march that lay ahead.

Jungle-fighting is like that. If you are tough and lucky you may survive, but if you are sick or wounded you die; and that's all there is to it.

Directly we had finished our preparations we forded the river and set off at as fast a pace as possible. The next few days were strenuous indeed—hacking a path through dense jungle, climbing steep slopes, and fording endless streams. From a European point of view that trail would have been a nightmare, but we were used to such conditions and only too pleased to find that the pack-horses were able to follow it. There were awkward moments sometimes when the path, in skirting a deep ravine, suddenly became a precipice, and we found the way

practically blocked by some projecting boulder or tree-stump. On such occasions we were obliged to unload the packs and swing the animals round the obstruction, one Legionnaire hanging on to the head and the second holding like grim death to the tail. Once safely on the path again, we loaded up and continued. This may sound tame enough when you read about it, but it is decidedly more exciting when you are obliged to do it two or three times in a morning, on a path less than two feet in width, with its outer edge crumbling away into empty space. We were lucky in losing no horses, but we saw other troops' dead animals lying at the bottom of precipices with packs still attached to their backs.

These horses, by the way, were not like their European namesakes; they were Chinese, and as small as ponies, but very strong and sure-footed—ideal, in fact, for the mountains.

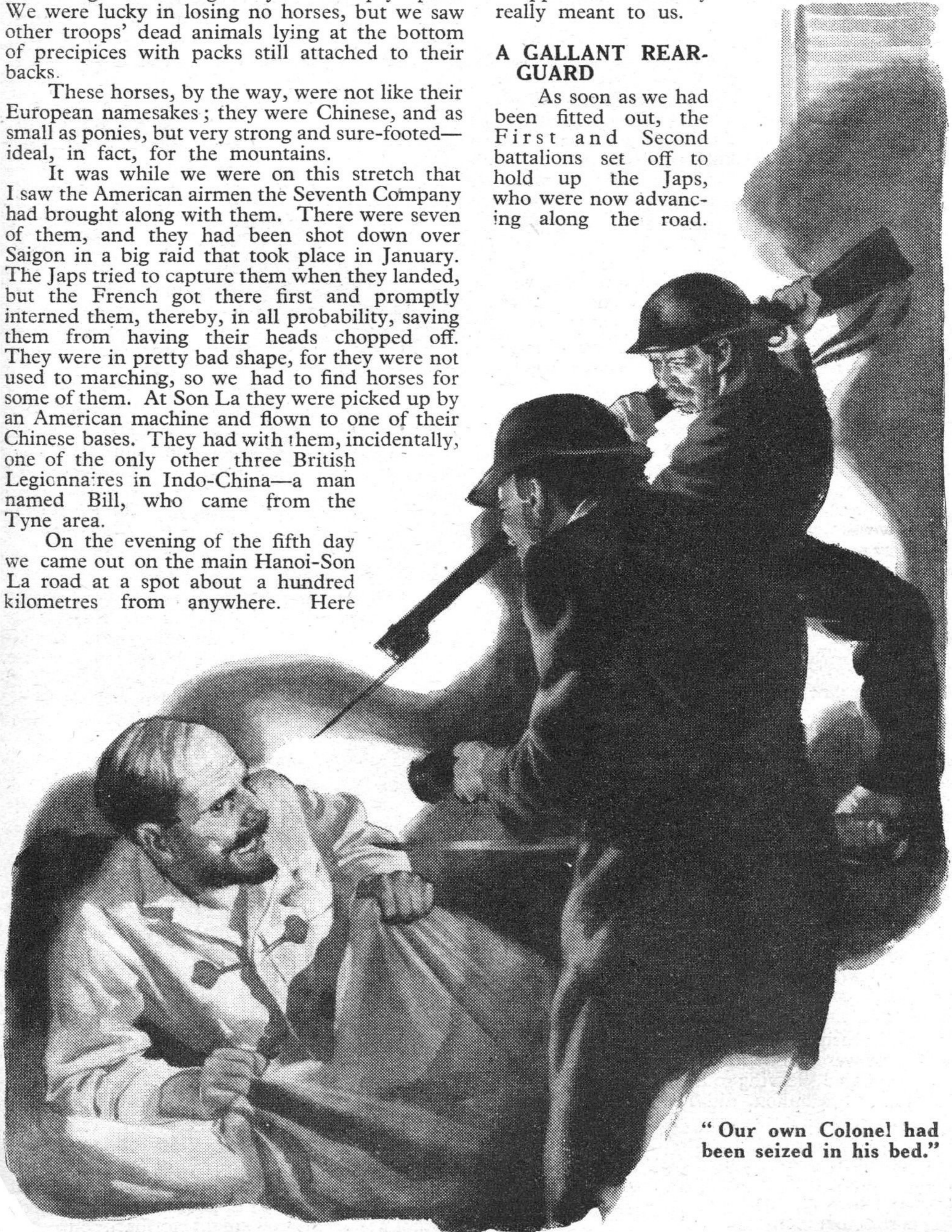
It was while we were on this stretch that I saw the American airmen the Seventh Company had brought along with them. There were seven of them, and they had been shot down over Saigon in a big raid that took place in January. The Japs tried to capture them when they landed, but the French got there first and promptly interned them, thereby, in all probability, saving them from having their heads chopped off. They were in pretty bad shape, for they were not used to marching, so we had to find horses for some of them. At Son La they were picked up by an American machine and flown to one of their Chinese bases. They had with them, incidentally, one of the only other three British Legionnaires in Indo-China—a man named Bill, who came from the Tyne area.

On the evening of the fifth day we came out on the main Hanoi-Son La road at a spot about a hundred kilometres from anywhere. Here

we had a really agreeable surprise, being issued with new weapons and equipment. It seemed that the Yanks, discovering what was happening in our part of the world, had promptly flown over our H.Q. and dropped us a few presents—and what presents! There were Bren guns, Stens, light mortars, hand-grenades, rations, boots, cigarettes, and a whole lot of stores. You've got to be in the position where you have never even seen a lot of these things, and at the same time be mortally in need of them, to appreciate what they really meant to us.

A GALLANT REAR-GUARD

As soon as we had been fitted out, the First and Second battalions set off to hold up the Japs, who were now advancing along the road.



“Our own Colonel had been seized in his bed.”

Their orders were to dispute every foot of territory, endeavouring to keep the frontier trails open till the last possible moment in order to give all scattered detachments and civilians every chance to cross over in safety. They did magnificently. Although the force numbered barely five hundred men, and there were several thousand Japs in front of them, they fought for that road most stubbornly, keeping up a dogged rearguard action for more than a hundred kilometres. When their task was accomplished, unfortunately, there were not many of them left.

With us, of the Third battalion, the situation was entirely different; we were sent about sixty kilometres across country to hold a flanking road that threatened the rear of Son La. As sometimes happens on active service, we experienced nothing but peace and quiet for nearly two weeks. The Japs knew all about this road, of course, but for some reason they left it alone. Possibly they decided that an advance along it would have been too expensive, for all the advantages lay on the side of the defenders. We were quite happy in that valley, with plenty to eat and plenty to smoke; and every day American Lightnings flew low overhead to make sure we were still there.

All good things come to an end, however, and one day we received orders to fall back on Son La with all possible speed; the Japs were on the point of cutting us off! Speed was the word right enough, for the message was already forty-eight hours overdue, and it was doubtful whether we could get through. Off we set again, marching day and night, and sometimes covering fifty kilometres a day. The going was not too bad, and within ten days we found ourselves on a hill trail some twenty kilometres behind Son La leading in the direction of the Haut Mekong.

We learnt that Son La had already fallen. The Japs were inside it, and the rest of our force had retreated, leaving our battalion to act as rearguard. Battalion, did I say? We couldn't even muster the strength of a company; and there we were, stuck up on that hill, with the enemy steadily working their way along our flanks. They reckoned to quietly surround us and later finish us off comfortably in their own time.

From that moment on we received no further

orders; the Legion had carried out its task, and everyone who could possibly escape across the Chinese border had already done so. We knew that the whole of Laos was in enemy hands, and guessed that the frontier would be blocked long before we could get there. Such was our position as we lay on that hill-top behind Son La, and it looked pretty hopeless. Our only consolation was in hearing, from the direction of the captured post, the distant rumble of machine-gun fire and the crash of explosions. We earnestly hoped that the American planes were giving the Japs a



pastings, and, as we learnt later, they certainly were.

We remained on our hill-top for a week and then, having no more food, moved on after our comrades. As we descended the slope on the far side we sent a patrol of eight men to discover if there were any Japs in the village lying ahead. There were, lots of them, and only two men of the patrol came back. Only one thing could be done now, so we turned our few remaining pack-horses loose and struck off into the virgin forest in the direction of Mong Sing, the only large town of the Haut Mekong, lying about three or four hundred kilometres distant. It took us the whole of that night to hack our way

through less than half a mile of jungle to the head of a small river, and for three days thereafter we followed the stream. There were no trails at all; we used the river-bed as a road, stumbling along up to our waists in water, occasionally tripping over the large, smooth stones lying on the bottom. No food was available, not even rice, and the ravenously hungry men ate certain varieties of plants or cut out the pith from inside banana trees. Only once did we find a pool deep enough to warrant throwing in a hand-grenade, and then we had a fish supper.

SECRET TRAILS

When we left the stream a long and weary march still lay ahead. We did not dare to approach the main routes through the valleys, which were closely guarded by the enemy, but were forced to follow trails used by native smugglers. Quite unknown to most Europeans,

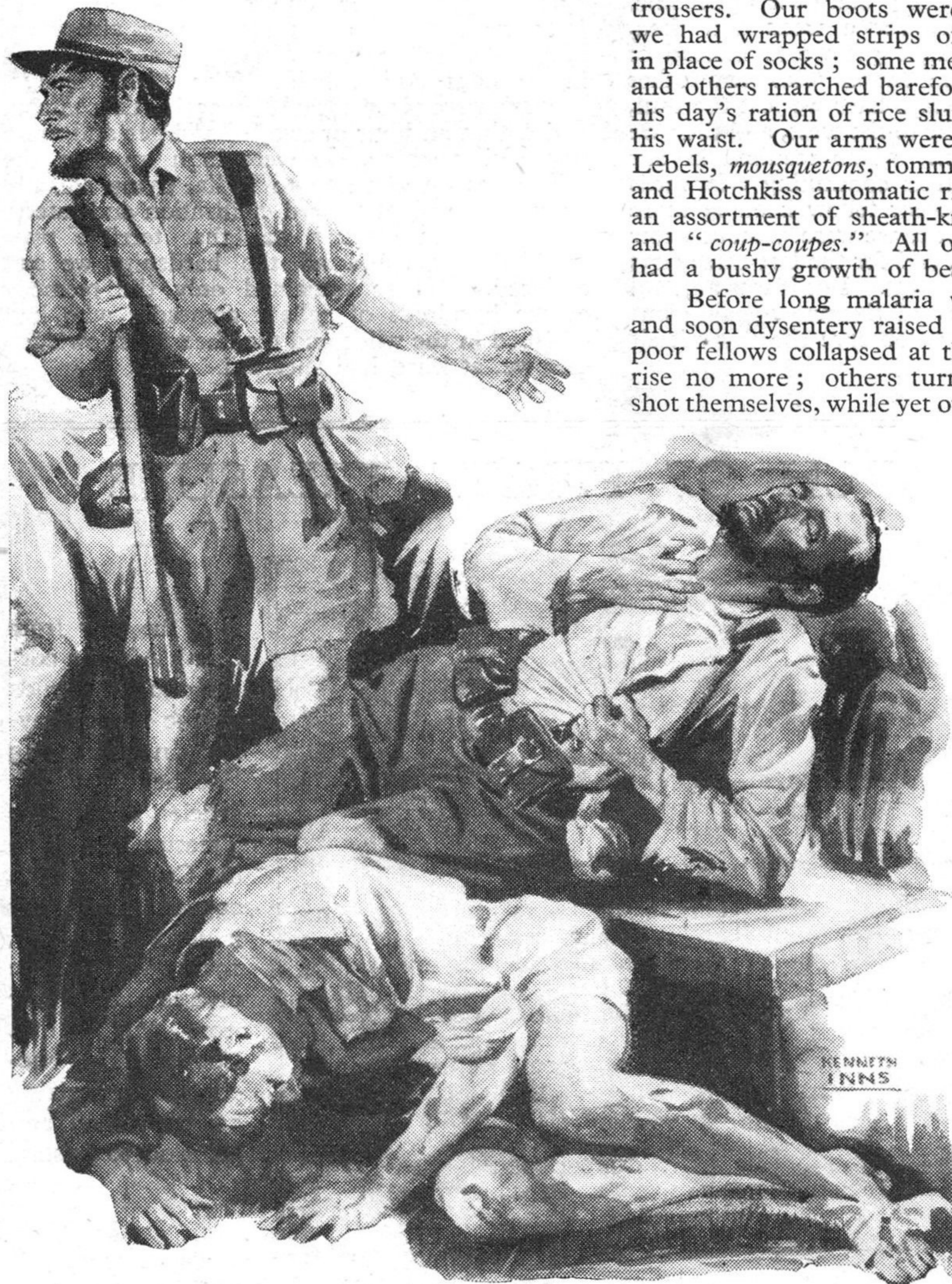
these secret paths followed the courses of hidden streams and led over the tops of high mountains. Blocked by fallen trees and tangled *lianes*, they often took us through dark tunnels in the tangled vegetation that never saw the light of day. Sometimes we floundered up to our knees in liquid mud, our clothes and flesh continually cut and torn by knife-like grasses and horrible bushes that grew hooks instead of flowers. Food was scarce and difficult to come by; what we *did* obtain was procured by holding-up reluctant villages. None of us bothered our heads much about the venomous snakes, centipedes, and mosquitoes; they were the least of our worries.

By this time we were indeed a terrible-looking crowd; Hollywood would never have recognized the romantic Foreign Legion! Although we all wore the standard leather equipment, our uniforms were nondescript to a degree. We had battered khaki topees, short-sleeved shirts, and shorts, though a few were wearing long blue trousers. Our boots were torn and tattered; we had wrapped strips of rag round our feet in place of socks; some men had donned sandals and others marched barefoot. Everyone carried his day's ration of rice slung in a bundle round his waist. Our arms were a glorious medley of Lebel, *mousquetons*, tommy-guns, Brens, Stens, and Hotchkiss automatic rifles, finished off with an assortment of sheath-knives, native daggers, and "*coup-coups*." All of us, needless to say, had a bushy growth of beard.

Before long malaria was rife amongst us, and soon dysentery raised its ugly head. Many poor fellows collapsed at the side of the trail to rise no more; others turned quietly aside and shot themselves, while yet others just disappeared.

The whole dreadful length of those hundreds of kilometres of trail must be marked by the mouldering bones of the men who could not keep up. In the bad old days there used to be a saying in the Legion, "March or die!" and never was it more aptly illustrated than during that awful period.

We crossed the Chinese frontier some time about the beginning of May. Exactly where I can't say, for there are no signposts in that region, and our few maps were quite useless. This did not mean the end of our troubles, however; rather were they intensified. The people of the villages in the south of Yunnan



"Many poor fellows collapsed at the side of the trail."

were neither helpful nor hospitable, and as we could not take food by force, as we had occasionally been obliged to do in our own country, we found ourselves growing weaker than ever. Despite this we had to continue; there was still at least a month's march in front of us before we reached Yunnan Fu, or Kunming, as it now seems to be called. So we carried on, and after a few more weary days reached a place known as Iu Ga. Here, to our surprise and joy, we found a French officer waiting to supply stragglers like ourselves with money and guides.

"Nine more days," he told us, "and you will be safe at Szemao. There you will find everything you want."

After three days' rest our sadly-diminished little company went on, but I remained behind. For some time my strength had been failing; my feet were badly cut and, bound up as they were in dirty rags, were not improving. My knee was also giving trouble, and now, to cap everything, I went down with a bad dose of malaria. I stayed where I was for a week and then, fearing that things might get worse instead of better, I set off once more, with two other Legionnaires. Some days later we lost the trail, finding ourselves too far to the west, and then we had a heated argument which resulted in our splitting forces, one man continuing westwards and myself and the other fellow heading more towards the north. Once we were without water for twenty-four hours, and for the last three days we had nothing at all to eat. But it was a grand sight to see the valley of Szemao opening out beneath our feet and to observe the town itself in the middle.

JOURNEY'S END

Szemao was a small Chinese city about two hundred kilometres south of Kunming, and here we found most of our surviving comrades, together with a French Mission. The place boasted an American airstrip, and the kindly Yankees, taking pity on our condition, immediately offered to fly us all to Kunming, but our Commandant, Tokhadze, a big, burly Russian, said: "I thank you, and you can fly out my sick, but those who are capable of marching will march. The Legion always marches!"

This decree, harsh though it sounds, suited me well enough, for by this time I was classed as unfit, and was therefore booked for the 'plane.

A few days' rest; then, at six o'clock one evening, I found myself, with twenty others, loaded into a Douglas. The take-off gave us some anxiety, because the airfield was very small, badly flooded, and completely surrounded by jungle and mountain. Everything went splendidly, however, and an hour and a half later we touched down at the big airport of Kunming. Three weeks' marching accomplished in an hour and a half! *Vive L'Amerique!*

We were given a good hot meal in the canteen, and within an hour or two, in a larger and more powerful machine, we were high up over the Himalayas on our way to India, flying steadily through the night toward civilization and safety. Half-forgotten already was that terrible two-months' march and all the hardships we had endured. There remained only the memory of the hundreds of gallant comrades who had perished in the wilds and the cheerful knowledge that we, at least, had survived.

IN SEARCH OF PIRATE TREASURE

HUNT FOR GOLD IN TRISTAN

TREASURE BURIED BY PIRATE

From Our Correspondent

LONDON, Monday.—A young Brighton engineer, Mr. Raymond C. Cooper, is selecting a crew to go with him on a treasure hunt to Tristan da Cunha.

In an advertisement in a yachting magazine Mr. Cooper asked for "a few tough souls" to join him in the treasure cruise and said that he had "definite proof of a gold location amounting to nearly £2,000,000."

To-day he is meeting in a London hotel some men and women who replied to his advertisement and will explain that he or she must put up £300 towards the cost of a 60-foot boat and additional expenses.

In return Mr. Cooper will offer each "10 per cent. of any valuables forthcoming."

At his home in Brighton Mr. Cooper showed a correspondent of the London Daily Express charts and books and said: "I am an amateur seaman, but naval men who are experts are coming. A friend has a chart which shows where the gold is hidden to within a few chains. He is a relative of the mate of Henry Lambert, an Australian pirate who was murdered after burying his gold on the island in 1810."

Mr. Cooper plans to start his venture in September. He will take with him a crew of nine.

ALL the way from South Africa a correspondent sends us the accompanying interesting "sequel" to the article on "The Treasure of Tristan da Cunha" which appeared in our issue for January, 1946. We shall be pleased to hear from Mr. R. C. Cooper if he succeeds in organizing his expedition and going out to Tristan.