



THE BUGLES SOUND AT DAWN ON THE DAY OF THE FÊTE DE CAMERONE : These men of the Foreign Legion are wearing hats brought back from Indo-China, where the Legion distinguished itself in action. Fête de Camerone commemorates the gallant stand of sixty-five legionnaires in the Mexican campaign of 1863.

THE FOREIGN LEGION ON HOLIDAY

The Fête de Camerone, Celebrating a Great Occasion in the Annals of the Foreign Legion

We no longer imagine life in the Foreign Legion to be one of high adventure and romantic encounters with belligerent tribesmen. It is, indeed, a life of great hardship and loneliness, and though time and time again the ranks of the Legion are sought by adventurers and romantics, their illusions are dispelled after a few days in a desert barracks; no less also by a few days in the fighting line in Indo-China, where the Legion has for so long been bitterly engaged against the Communists.

No Frenchman can serve in the Legion ranks unless he renounces his nationality. The officer commanding is authorised to accept recruits of any nationality without inquiring into their antecedents, and this has enabled many desperate characters and fugitives to join the corps. Just before the Second World War the Legion was reorganised into two regiments of four infantry battalions, one cavalry regiment, a regiment of artillery and a battalion of engineers.

Like every other army corps, the Legion has its traditions, and the men expect to be sent into the most dangerous and complicated actions. They are particularly proud of the stand made by a company of legionnaires during the Mexican expedition of the French Army in 1863, an incident they still celebrate as the Fête de Camerone.

During the Mexican campaign the City of Puebla was surrounded by the enemy, and a company of legionnaires, comprising sixty-two soldiers and three officers, were sent through the enemy lines to meet approaching reinforcements. On the way they were heavily engaged and took shelter at the inn of Camerone, where they swore to fight to the last man.

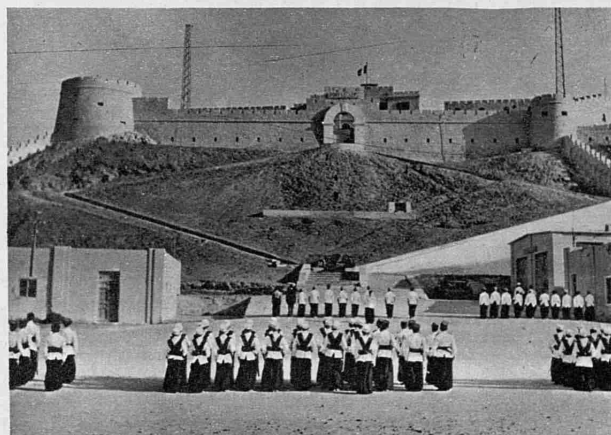
This little force repulsed the attacks of 2,000 Mexicans and held on until reinforcements reached them. By then only three were left alive, but the Mexicans had 300 dead and as many wounded.

Fête de Camerone is celebrated not as a day of sorrow but of rejoicing. When the bugle sounds at dawn the flag is raised, Mass is held and there are parades and awards of medals. After breakfast the fun begins. Differences of rank are forgotten. There are donkey races, sack races, games of skill and small concerts. There are no women, and consequently no dancing, but there is plenty of music, for wherever there are legionnaires there are bugles, tambourines, horns and flutes.

Red wine and champagne flow freely at the feast and by nightfall the legionnaires are drunk from laughing, eating, drinking and the heat of the sun. Yet in their hilarity there is always an element of tragedy and loneliness, for these are men who have forsaken their homelands for reasons rarely happy, and perhaps with no hope of return.



CELEBRATING MASS ON THE MORNING OF THE FÊTE DE CAMERONE AT FORT LECLERC, THE FOREIGN LEGION GARRISON IN THE LIBYAN DESERT : This is the beginning of a day of great rejoicing for the legionnaires. Sports events, concerts and a great feast commemorate one of the most gallant episodes in the Legion's history, when sixty-five legionnaires, besieged in the inn of Camerone during the Mexican campaign, fought off the attacks of thousands. When relief columns reached them only three remained alive.



MEN OF THE FOREIGN LEGION STAND TO ATTENTION AS THE FRENCH FLAG IS RAISED ON FORT LECLERC : Before breakfast on the day of the Fête de Camerone there are parades and the awarding of decorations



AN OFFICER OF THE LEGION POURING WINE FOR HIS MEN DURING THE FEAST : On this day all distinctions of rank are lost sight of; for once life for the legionnaires is an affair of pleasure and merry-making. Champagne flows freely at the feast.



THE FOREIGN LEGION AT PLAY : The idea is to walk on the unsteady pole across the water. The legionnaire here has fallen off, losing the prize of 1,000 francs, and the dog is retrieving his cap. Water for this pool has to be brought by lorry across the desert.



LATE-COMERS TO THE CAMERONE FESTIVITIES : They will be welcomed nevertheless, for their lorry seems to be well laden with supplies for the great feast. On the day of the Fête de Camerone even legionnaires under arrest are given a holiday.