

# Combat Report

Chad:

## French Foreign Legion Mission

**A former member of the French Foreign Legion describes a mission in Chad in 1983.**

Fighting in Chad has been going on for the last 20 years, and the French Foreign Legion has been involved on numerous occasions. In 1983, rebels assisted by Libyan troops were having quite a bit of success against Chadian government forces. The French government decided to intervene, and so Legion paratroops and parts of my regiment moved to Chad to halt the rebel advance.

We arrived in Ndjamena in early July 1983 and began to acclimatise ourselves to the terrific heat. During this phase the high command was sussing out the strongest men for a mission that was being planned. After two weeks a group of eight of us were taken to a camp 20 miles from Ndjamena for intensive training: mainly night marches and using the map efficiently. It was because of my map reading that I earned my place with the final four chosen for the mission.

### Locate and destroy

In the north of the FEBA (Forward Edge of Battle Area) our troops were having trouble with their radios. Intelligence had traced the problem to a jamming vehicle operating either near or just over the border with Niger: our mission was to locate and destroy this vehicle. Only four of us were to go in and do the work, but we had a team of eight others who would provide back-up.

After two days off, we moved off towards the border with Niger. We were to cover the last 10 miles on foot, during the day, in the oven-like heat, and this was greeted by a chorus of groans. We were to get into position by nightfall the following day, and watch the enemy for a day before moving in at 23.00 that night to do the job.

Next morning after breakfast we had a final check of equipment and made sure we carried no identification, so that if we were caught or killed they would not be able to trace us back to the Legion or the French army. By 08.30 we were on the trucks and moving off in the direction of the border and our drop-off point.

It didn't take too long to cover the distance, and we were soon out of the trucks, taking our bearings and heading off again. The sun was belting down and before long we were all panting and sweating and cursing.

### The plan of assault

We took a break in a re-entrant, which had a few small scrub trees and some ledges. I found a nice place and lay down and dreamt of cold beer, ice cubes and cold showers. At about four in the afternoon we prepared to move out; the sun wasn't so fierce, although it wasn't exactly cool. Off we went at quite a pace, hoping to get the final few miles out of the way before nightfall.

As the evening drew in the air got cooler and out speed increased. I was knackered and my feet were sore and hot because of the uneven and rocky ground. By eight that evening we were at the border: the enemy vehicle was a mile or so on the other side, inside Niger.

We decided to leave our back-up eight to keep the border covered; that way they would be within striking distance to come and help us if we got stuck. The four of us, me, Jonke, Kovac and Champion, moved quietly and cautiously towards our objective. As we got closer we could see lights and hear noise from the target: good news, as it sounded like they

weren't expecting visitors.

We moved to within 150 metres, where there was long dried grass and a few trees and scrub brush. It was good cover and would give us shade during the next day while we watched the enemy position to see how many soldiers were about.

When the sun came up we could see the vehicle bristling with aerials. It was next to the only house visible, which no doubt held enemy troops. But how many? All through the day we kept watch, counting six different men, which was good as we were expecting 10 at least.

By dusk we had a plan of assault ready. Everything was pre-arranged with our back-up: at 23.00 hours we would begin the assault, come what may. We noticed that five enemy had gone into the house and we supposed the sixth was in the vehicle working the jamming equipment. Jonko and I would take care of the vehicle while Kovac and Champion covered the building.

With about five minutes to go one of the soldiers came out of the house and came towards us. He was only going to the toilet, but if we waited until he finished and went back into the house we could be putting ourselves off schedule and possibly into danger.

I nodded to Jonko and drew my finger across my throat. He understood and moved off to intercept the soldier. A minute or so later he was back, giving me the thumbs-up sign. That made one less to worry about.

### My heart was pumping

We then moved towards the vehicle. I went up to the front and Jonko moved towards the back. As I drew level with the cab, the driver's door opened and a soldier started to climb out! I nearly had a heart attack but soon recovered by diving on him and getting him in a headlock to stop him shouting out. We fell to the floor with him struggling like hell.

Jonko had heard the door opening and came back to find us on the ground. Very quickly Jonko finished him off with his bayonet, then beckoned to me to follow him towards the back. My heart was pumping like mad.

Quickly I pulled the rear door open and Jonko stormed in, taking the operator completely by surprise. The vehicle was a mass of radio sets



**Chadian soldiers in a village recaptured with French assistance; we were helping them in their war with Libyan-backed rebels. The heat was incredible: sometimes 120° in the shade.**

and maps. I immediately began to set up the explosives, and as soon as Jonko had dealt with the operator he helped me.

Then Jonko set the fuse for five minutes and we moved to leave the vehicle. Just as I reached the door another enemy soldier came towards it from the rear of the building. He looked stunned and moved for his weapon. I let off a burst of gunfire.

Now we had to move fast. We headed for the position we had been in all day. The other two kept us covered, and as the other enemy soldiers came out of the front of the house to see what was going on our lads opened up and cut them down: three of them, which made seven in all. We had miscounted by one and that nearly had put the whole operation in jeopardy. Luckily we had got away with it.

As soon as we were in position, we shouted for the others to move back through us. We watched the house and no-one else came out, so we got up and started running back towards the border and our back-up and, best of all, safety. I have never moved so quickly.

When we reached our back-up we stopped and it took me a good while to get my breath and calm down. Luckily there was no pursuit. The back-up had already signalled for the trucks, and as soon as they arrived we climbed aboard and drove with all speed away from the border. When we got back we were handed some ice cold beers, and I for one have never tasted anything sweeter.

**We were trained in the use of explosives before we flew to Chad, teaching that was put to good use against the Libyans.**



# Combat Report

## Mayotte:

## French Foreign Legion Patrol Part 1

**John James Claxton, a former member of the French Foreign Legion, describes 10 minutes of action that followed 10 weeks of patrolling.**

In August 1982 I was serving with the First Troop, Fourth Squadron of the First Foreign Legion Cavalry Regiment, when we were tasked to the island of Mayotte, part of the Comoro Islands, in the Indian Ocean.

It was to be a four-month tour, and most of us were expecting four months in the sun with the odd march, and maybe the odd parade.

The island of Mayotte is strategically well placed. It has a good airport within flying distance of most African states, and it has an oil storage depot to refuel French warships. This is permanently guarded by Legionnaires, who are also there to uphold the 'French way of life'.

After seeing off the outgoing Legion unit, one troop went to the jungle camp at Kwale on the main island and two troops stayed in the main camp on the island of Dzaoudzi. I went to Kwale with the first troop. We were to spend a month there patrolling the main island, doing section drills, working to improve the camp, and all the general mundane jobs soldiers the world over love to hate.

### A fighting patrol

In late September I was sent on an NCO cadre course at Majambini, a very secluded place in the mountains of the main island. We were to stay in what had been a Governor's weekend mansion, but it was very run down and it took us two weeks to make it fit for occupation. We used all the natural resources, mainly bamboo, and built a cookhouse, storage huts, an assault course and even a jail. In between we had to mount guard, eat, clean up, and do PT and all other general duties, and this was before we even started the course!

During this time some demonstrations and rioting broke out on the main island, so the alert was stepped up and our guards doubled. In October we were in camp doing unarmed combat when the camp came under mortar attack: three rounds in total – not many, but it had us all running for cover.

As always, we had our personal weapons with us, so we headed straight for our defensive positions and awaited further developments. When everything had calmed down, including us, we surveyed the damage, which (apart from the cookhouse) was minimal. We then sent out a fighting patrol, of which I was part, to see if we could locate any sign of enemy activity.

**Most of us expected four pleasant months in the sunshine when we were posted to the Indian Ocean.**

We knew we could be heading straight for an ambush, so we moved very carefully in the dense jungle. We spent most of the time listening for movement but there was none so, as night fell, we moved back into camp, had some scrum and cleaned our weapons and ourselves.

That night the camp was put into total darkness and the guards had a jumpy time, with every bush and tree moving and looking like people.

In the morning another fighting patrol went out to check the area, and again there was nothing to be seen or heard. They day was spent digging new trenches and setting anti-personnel mines and trip flares in front of our positions. Plans were also being drawn up for wider-ranging patrols and ambushes, and if need be for patrols to stay out for very long periods until whoever attacked us was hunted down and captured or killed. And so began the 10 weeks of hunting that ended in 10 minutes of action.

The mortar that had been used against us was rumoured to be in an area called Chungi, so we were tasked to locate it. Chungi was three days' march from our base. The main plan was to move into the area and to set up ambushes. We loaded up our packs with rations, ammo, grenades, mines, radios and first aid kits, and set off for the area.

### There was the crack of a twig

Our first objective was Kwale, where there was already one of our troops, but we were heading for a position about four kilometres north of the camp by a crossing point on the river Kwale, where we would set up an ambush for the night.

In the afternoon of the first day there was a downpour that made the track slippery and very muddy, and when we stopped we were all steaming. We were also very tense; the enemy could be waiting for us along the track, so our trackers Gimenez and Symaniak were well ahead of us, leaving signs to let us know that everything was okay ahead.

By early evening we arrived at our objective, and set about building a position for our machine-gun overlooking the track down to the river crossing so that it could be manned during the night. Then we cooked something to eat, fixed a guard rota and got our head down.

My mate Tony Carlton and I had the midnight till two o'clock guard stag. When it was our turn we took over and settled down. We were lying there, quietly chatting about what we were going to do when we got back to France (a favourite subject!), when there was a crack of a twig or branch that brought us to full alert.

We peered on to the track to see what was moving about. Something caught my eye to the right of the river and I pointed it out to Tony. He moved behind the machine gun and I prepared a flare, but decided against using it as we didn't yet know it was the enemy.

We decided to wake up the sergeant. He told me to watch whoever it was and, if they got too close, to use whatever force we thought necessary. I went back to the position and we lay there waiting to see what would happen.

Whoever it was kept their distance, but made sure we knew he was there. I was glad when the guard duty finished and we were relieved. We briefed the new sentries and made our way back to our sleeping bags. I fell into an uneasy sleep, expecting to hear gunfire at any moment.

### The coast was clear

Before first light we had a stand-to, just in case whoever was out there decided to come in and have a go at us. Once the sun came up, a small fighting patrol was sent out to see if there was anyone about. They found nothing, but we now realised that we were expected and that we wouldn't have everything our own way.

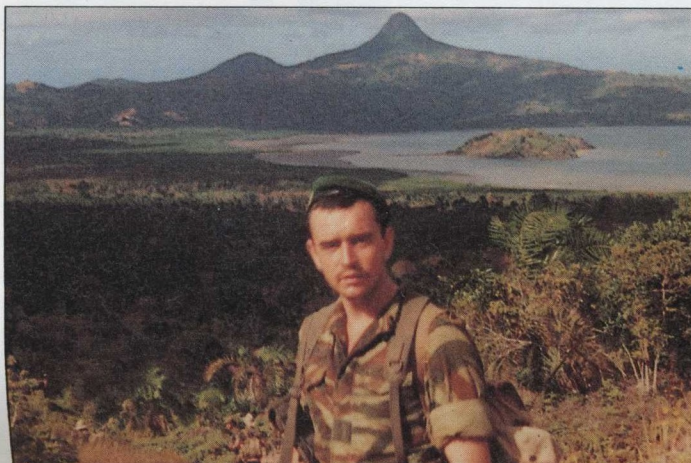
We cleared up the camp and got ready to move out, but now everyone had to be that little bit more alert. As we now expected to be ambushed at any time we kept on the move until midday, when we stopped and had a brew-up and a bite to eat.

The word was passed around to move out in 10 minutes. I was told by the sergeant that it was my turn to carry the radio which, on its own, weighed 10 kilos. I had to re-arrange my pack to fit it in, and when I put it back on it was like carrying a sack of lead. Once I was ready, off we went. The first hour was uncomfortable and I was sweating like a pig, but I soon got used to the weight. I was worried, though, in case we had to leg it from an ambush: would I have the strength to run?

In mid-afternoon two of the Section went forward and had a look around. The coast was clear, and we crossed over and took up some fire positions while we decided what to do next. We radioed the scouts who had gone on ahead and arranged a place where we could meet and have something to eat and drink and, due to the heat, a bit of a siesta. They said they had found an ideal place that was easy to defend, so we set off.

We arrived about an hour later and set about making the scoff and preparing a defensive position. We had a light snack, put a couple of sentries out and got our heads down.

**Our unarmed combat was tough, but we did not expect mortar fire during the practice session.**



# Combat Report

## Mayotte:

## French Foreign Legion Patrol Part 2

**John James Claxton continues his story of an action by the French Foreign Legion on the Indian Ocean island of Mayotte in December 1982.**

When I woke up the sun was beating down on my head and making me feel very groggy. The Sergeant decided that we could mount fighting patrols from our position, so we set about making the place more comfortable and strengthening its defences.

We had a look at the map and saw that there was a village about five kilometres away. It was decided to go down and show our faces and let it be known that there weren't too many of us, so that the enemy would be tempted to attack us or come looking for us.

We left behind a rear guard and set off, looking for ambush positions on the way. We would have liked to mine the tracks but, as the locals used them, it wouldn't have been a good idea!

When we arrived at the village, we found the locals a little apprehensive. We stayed about half an hour, hinting that we were the only ones in the area. Then we left, taking a different route back to camp to avoid any ambush.

We knew that we would be followed, so after about a kilometre we stopped and waited. After 10 minutes two young lads came along and we jumped them, frightening the life out of them. We asked why they were following us and they said they were "just going for a walk". To stop them going off and informing the enemy of our whereabouts we tied them to a tree, next to the track so it wouldn't be too long before they were rescued.

### Preparing the ambush

We arrived safely back at camp. Scoff was arranged and a guard rota worked out. We then discussed our plans for the next day. We searched the map for possible ambush positions: river crossings, track junctions, outskirts of the villages. There were so many we couldn't decide where to wait, so it was planned to send out a fighting patrol to one of the positions who would wait during daylight hours to see if anyone came along.

It was on one of these patrols that we walked into an enemy group coming in the opposite direction. We were very lucky that our scouts were a good way in front of us and saw them coming across some open ground. They called us on the radio and we told them to head back towards us, as we hastily looked for a suitable site to prepare an ambush.

We had recently crossed a river, so we told the scouts to meet us there and headed back to it to prepare the ambush. We had the high ground, and set up the machine-guns so that they would overlap each other when firing.

The Sergeant said nobody was to fire until he did, so we just lay there. I realised how noisy the jungle was; it seemed to be moving, and the mozzies were attacking us in droves.

It was about 20 minutes before their scout came into view. As he approached the river Tony sighted his machine-gun on him.

He stopped at the river and crouched down to fill his water bottle. All the time he was looking around, and I thought he knew something was up. But he stood up, replaced his water bottle and came across and carried on down the track. We thought of jumping him, but then decided against it as it might mean missing the main prize.

He passed within 30 metres of me and Tony; he looked in our direction and just carried on

down the track. We looked at each in disbelief. I was tingling with adrenalin, and found myself a little bit out of breath. It seemed ages before the main party came into view; in fact, it was about five minutes.

When they did arrive, I could count seven heavily-armed men quite close together. The Sergeant waited until the majority were in the process of crossing the river, then he let rip. A hail of gunfire exploded around them and the noise was deafening.

### My rifle was empty

Most of them were caught in the open and the river. One tried to scramble up the bank into the jungle, but gunfire followed him until he rolled back down to the edge of the river. Two tried to fire back, but were soon cut down.

It was then that I heard firing coming from behind me. It was the scout coming back along the track spraying both sides and, as I was one of the closest to him, I thought I had better move as I was in danger of being shot. So I got up and ran up the hill, shouting to Tony to do the same. I don't know where he got to but I didn't see him until it was all over. Anyway, my main thought was keeping me eye on matey on the track!

When I thought I was in a good position I turned and saw him still coming, firing all the time. I sighted my rifle on him and squeezed the trigger and nothing happened. My rifle was empty. I had committed the cardinal sin – not counting my rounds!

I quickly reloaded and, as the bloke came level with me, I fired one round that hit him in the shoulder and spun him around. I then let loose a burst of fire that hit him in the upper chest and throat, and down he went. It just wasn't real. While I was firing I thought, 'Should I keep my head down,' but something overcame my fear and made me stand up and shoot. My mates were in danger, and I felt responsible for them; and anyway I was doing the job I was trained for.

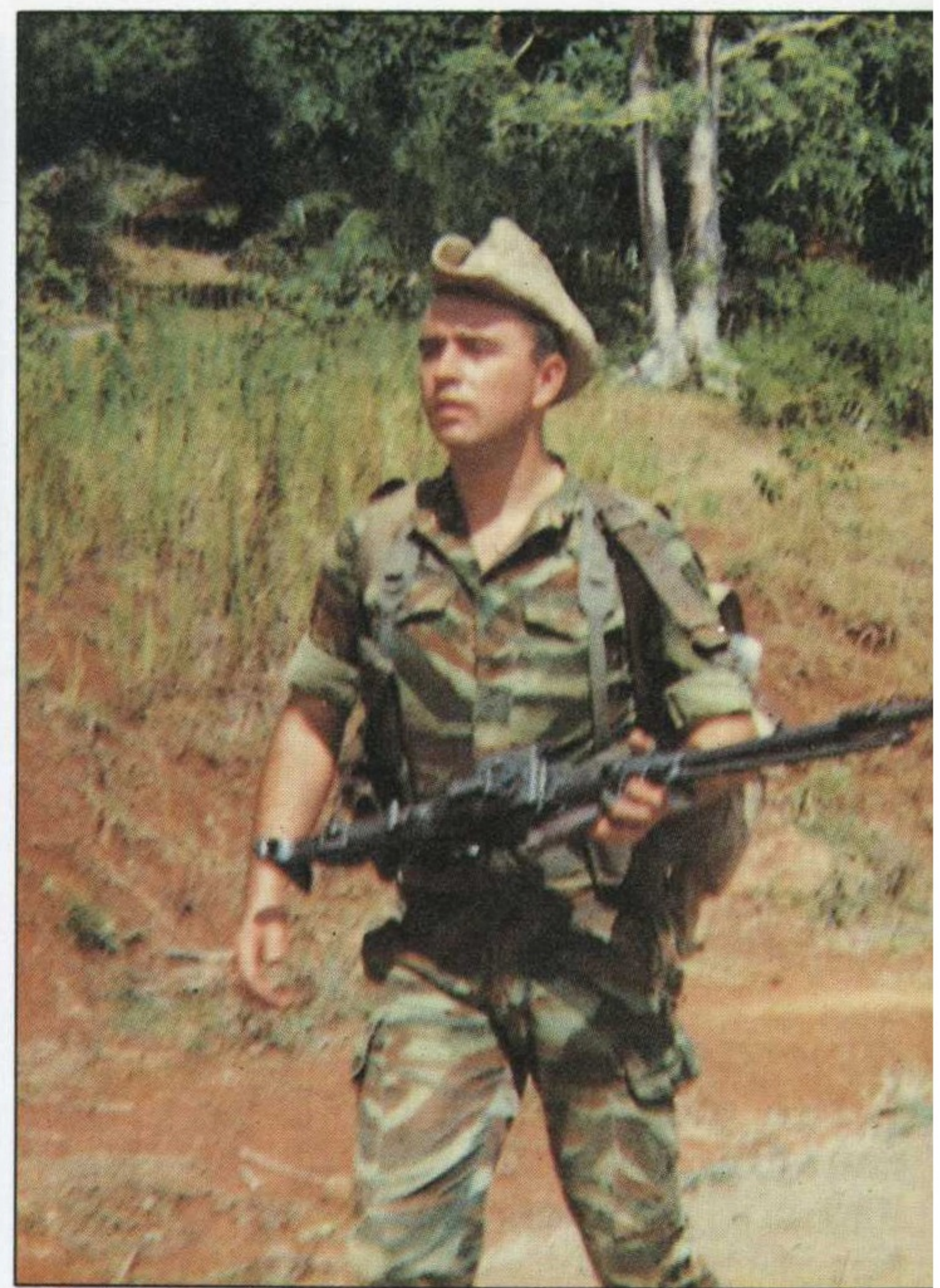
### Retrieving the bodies

By now the firing had subsided, and the Sergeant called out our names to see if anyone was hurt. Everyone shouted back, 'No injuries.' He then told us to come to his position, which was further up the hill from where I was. He left a few guys covering us and we moved down to the river to check if anyone had survived the exchange of fire. When I reached the river I looked at the bodies that were lying on the bank and in the water. They looked like pathetic rag dolls, but they were human beings.

We went into the river to retrieve the bodies and weapons. One body went down the river and took some time to bring back. I was amazed at the amount of blood; it was in pools around the bodies. One was shot up pretty bad, and his leg almost came off when we lifted him.

The Sergeant then came up and told us that we would have to stay the night until more men arrived to help us carry the bodies to the main road so that the police could try to identify them. So we moved the bodies away from the track and covered them up with a couple of ponchos. It was very hard to carry them – they just kept flopping all over the place. We then moved about 150 metres away and set about making a camp for the night. The guard position was set up about 50 metres from the bodies in case anyone came to retrieve them.

After all this I realised how hungry I was, but I found it hard to eat. I looked at Tony and he was sitting there cleaning his weapon, deep in

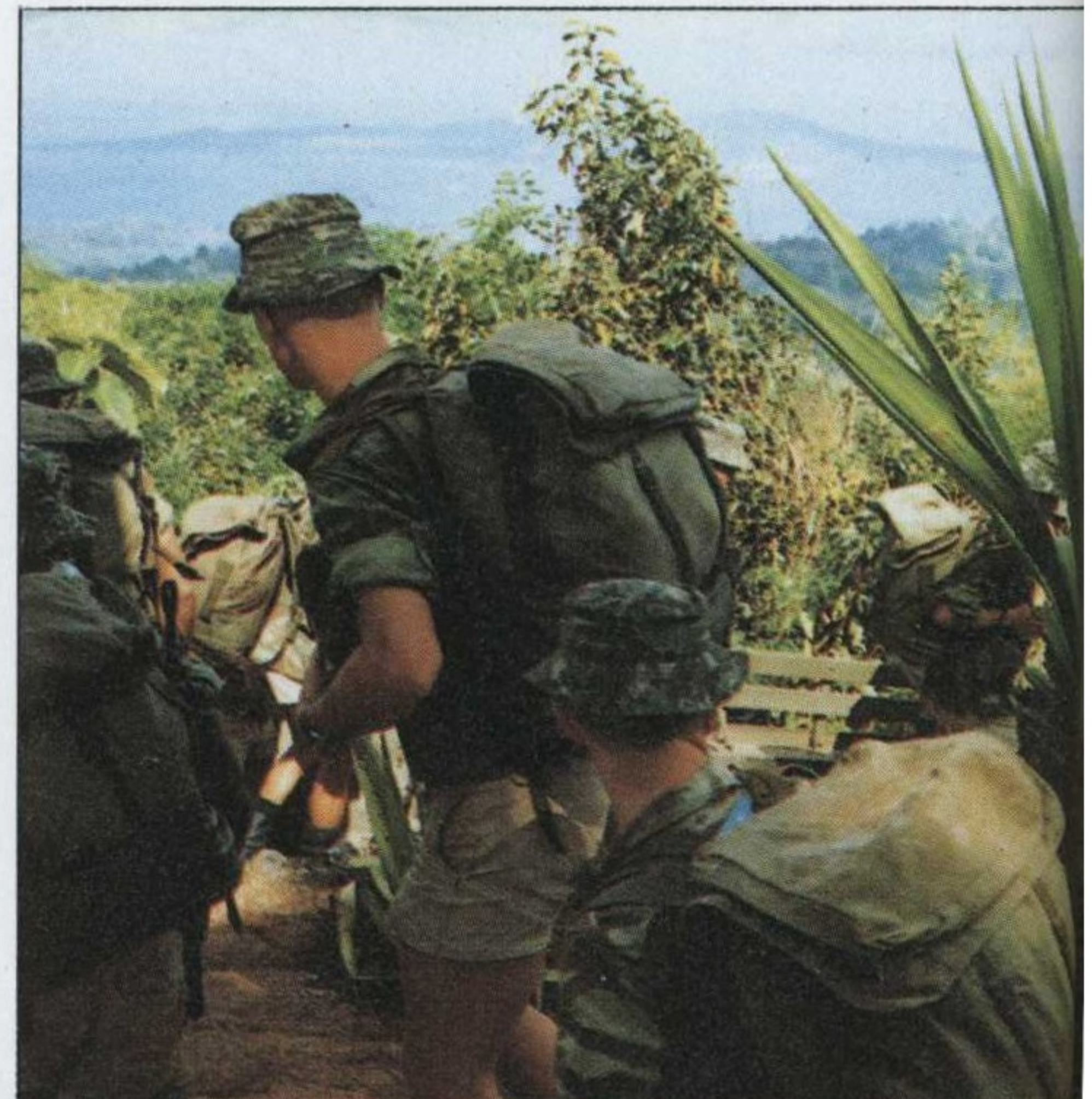


**On patrol, carrying the AA52 light machine-gun. We wanted to mine the tracks but local villagers would probably have stepped on them, so this was not a practical possibility.**

thought. I looked around at the men in my section and thought how well they had performed over the last ten weeks; heads down, and just getting on with the job. We had only done what we were expected to do: killed the enemy. Everything we had learned in the Legion told us to feel pride in that, and most of us did, but I could not understand why feelings of pity and guilt were mixed with that pride.

I knew I had acquired a great deal of affection for these Legionnaires simply because we had been through a lot together. These were the men I had shared the fear and excitement of battle with; the heat and the dust; tense, watchful nights; the risks of patrolling a desolate track. There were more admirable men in the world, more principled men, and men with finer sensibilities; but they slept in peaceful beds.

**The base was a complete mess before the Legionnaires got to work on it. After two weeks it was in fine shape, until the enemy mortared it.**



# Combat Report

## Corsica: French Foreign Legion in Calvi

**The French Foreign Legion has been stationed on Corsica for the last 25 years. There is an uneasy truce between the Legion and the FLN (National Liberation Front of Corsica).**

In 1983 there were some shootings and bomb attacks on the island, and the government decided to take some action. My section was airlifted to Corsica, where we were tasked to the mountains north of Calvi to search for any signs of terrorist activity.

One day, we had been out since early morning and decided to stop for a bite to eat. I took one of the men with me to a hotel to buy some beer and sandwiches. As we approached, two men came out of the front door; as soon as they saw us they turned around and went back in again. Something told me to be careful. I looked around, but could see nothing.

To the left, a car started up with a young woman behind the wheel. As I continued on my way, a shot rang out. I dived behind some gables and tried to see where it had come from.

### A shot rang out

It was obvious that the two men who had gone back into the hotel had had something to do with it, so I told my mate to cover me and ran to the front door. When I got there I motioned him forward. We entered the hotel, rifles at the ready; the foyer was empty. I remembered the car outside and ran to the door: just as I reached it, it pulled away. There were three or four people in it, and it was a sure bet that the two men I'd seen earlier were passengers.

By this time the four other Legionnaires in the group had arrived. They tried to stop the car, but it drove straight at them and they were forced to jump out of the way. Luckily one of them managed to get a shot at it, and it crashed about 100 metres up the road. As we approached, more shots rang out and we had to take cover, but fortunately they weren't very accurate and stopped as soon as we returned fire.

We advanced slowly. The car was empty apart from a 9-mm pistol and a small bag containing documents. Two of my men went round the back and found a woman lying in a ditch. She was crying her eyes out and bleeding from a gunshot wound to the leg. I asked her where her passengers were but she wouldn't answer.

Meanwhile I had called for assistance, and it wasn't long before a Gendarmerie mobile patrol

**Anti-terrorist patrols are ferried to the operational area by helicopter. This gives the enemy less warning than a road move.**

turned up and told me another unit was on its way. I handed the woman over to them and told them I was going after the others.

We moved along the road in fighting formation. There was a crossroads up ahead, and I had a horrible feeling that something was going to happen there so I sent a man up ahead and told him to let himself be seen while we did a detour. We got across OK, and headed back down towards him. As we came up to him a shot rang out. We all hit the deck, and I shouted, "Is anyone hit?" Everyone called back, "No". I then ordered two men to cover us while we moved to safer positions. There was a stone wall by the road, so we headed for that.

Peering over, I saw a ridge line that disappeared round a bend. They were obviously expecting us to walk round the bend and straight into their trap. Well, I had other plans. I told one man to go to the bend while the rest of us went up on to the ridge line and tried to outflank them. He gave us five minutes to get up above him, then he started moving towards the bend.

As he got there, another shot rang out. This time we saw where it came from. We returned fire while making our way towards the gunman. More shots cracked around us, this time from another position. Now I could see what was going on: they were using one man to keep our heads down while the others made some distance; then they would take cover and fire at us while he made his way back. And they were doing it rather well!

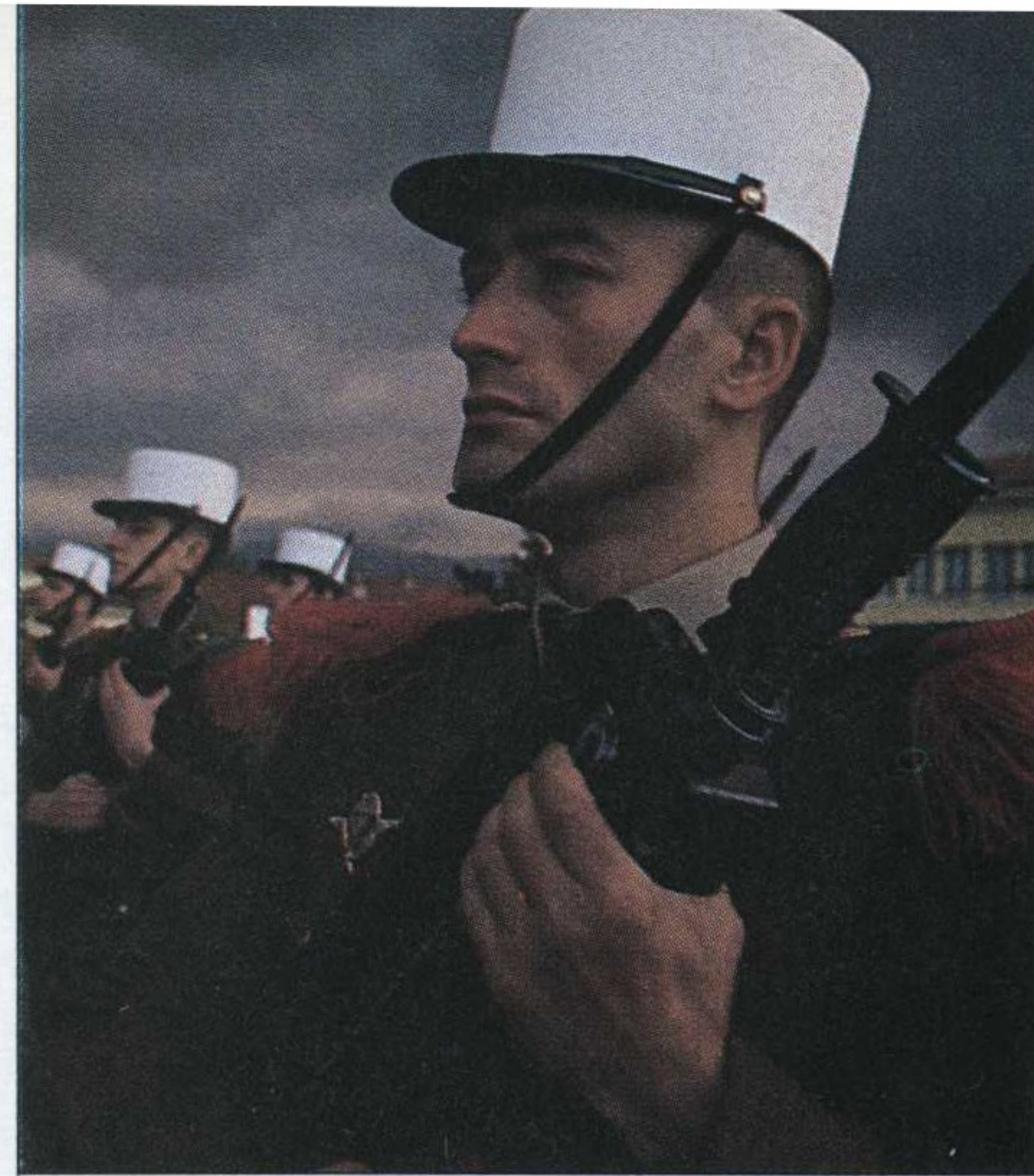
### They threw a grenade

I signalled to our man on the road to join us. I scanned the map and saw a track that led into the mountains: this was probably their escape route. I decided to head for it and maybe cut one of them off.

We spread out and started running towards the track. Two men could just be seen, higher up the mountain. They had been walking as if they were out for a stroll until they saw us! Suddenly they took off, with us in pursuit. I fired, but they were out of range. We reached the track and I left two men to keep guard.

Then the four of us headed up the steep, winding track. We climbed for about ten minutes until we came to some very large boulders. I climbed up on to one of these and could see the two men moving about below, so I took aim and fired. They took cover, and bullets whizzed over my head.

I climbed down and we continued up the track, which was getting steeper. The firing started again and we moved from rock to rock, exchanging fire. Sometimes we could see them moving about. At one stage they threw a



**Legionnaires on parade, complete with Famas and bayonets: a contrast to the hard slog of hunting terrorists hidden in remote areas.**

grenade; I thought it was a bird flying over, until it exploded!

Suddenly there was a long burst of fire, and we had to keep our heads well down. Just as suddenly, it stopped, but we didn't raise our heads in case it was a false alarm. After a couple of minutes we moved forward again and stumbled upon their firing position. They'd gone, but in their haste they had left a pair of binoculars and a full magazine. One of my men went to pick it up, but I stopped him: it could have been booby-trapped. Attaching a length of string, I told everyone to take cover. I gave it a tug and nothing happened, so I gave another tug and up it went, the bullets going off all over the place.

We checked the surrounding area and found nothing. Then we continued along the track, which finally petered out into a small footpath. I decided that to go along this would be inviting trouble, and that we had done our bit for today.

Then I heard firing coming from where I had left the two Legionnaires, so we hurried back to help them. Fortunately they had everything under control, with one dead terrorist lying on the track. He had walked straight into them and had fired when they challenged him. They had fired back, killing him instantly. We wrapped him in a poncho and carried him down the mountain to the main road.

When we got there we found that the police and other Legionnaires had arrived. I told them what had happened, and they took up the search and moved off. We headed back to Calvi.

I felt proud of the way my men had acted. We had worked as a team, and had come through unscathed. The two men who had shot the terrorist were a bit subdued, which was to be expected. But it was beers all round that night.

**Sentry removal the Legion way. A scoped hunting crossbow will kill as quickly and quietly as a knife if the shot is correctly placed.**



# Combat Report

## Djibouti: Guerrilla Patrol

**In 1983 I was serving with the 4th Squadron of the 1e Regiment Etranger de Cavalerie (REC) of the French Foreign Legion. We had been sent to Djibouti to replace the 2e Regiment Etranger de Parachutists (REP), who were on patrol in Chad.**

It was September and my troop was on a long-range desert patrol. We'd been out for two weeks, so we were looking forward to returning to Arta for a decent meal, a bed, fresh water and a few ice-cold beers. On the last night we were about 50 miles from the Ethiopian border. The troop had settled down and I was standing guard by the radio truck, chatting to the signaller, when the radio started going mad. It was all in Morse code, but from what I could hear I knew we wouldn't be staying put for much longer.

The signaller told me to fetch our troop commander. When he got to the truck he took one look at the transcription and told me to wake the troops. We were moving out! After 10 minutes, and much swearing, the lads were ready.

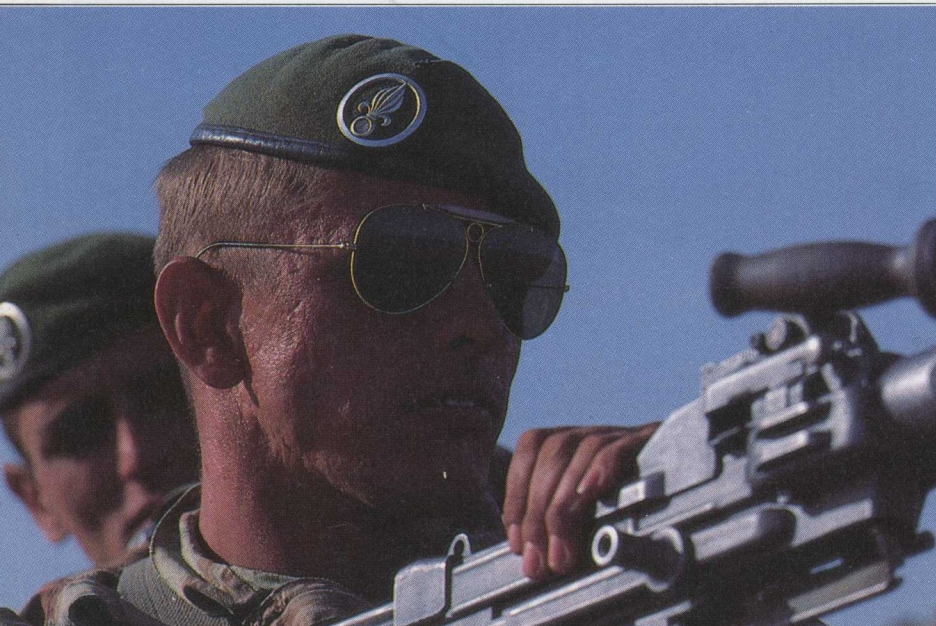
### We would be in trouble

The troop commander called us over and explained what was going on. There had been a clash on the border. Some guerrillas had come over into Djibouti, attacked a village and killed a few people. Our job was to try to capture them.

We drove off in different directions to begin the search. My battle group went straight to the village, arriving just as the sun was coming up. The villagers were very relieved to see us and immediately took us to their dead. There were three of them: two men and a woman. Each had been shot in the back of the head. Even at this hour they were beginning to smell, and there were flies everywhere.

We asked which way the guerrillas had gone, and were astounded to learn that they were only a couple of kilometres away. They were apparently under the impression that no-one would follow them, as it was very mountainous. We radioed the rest of the troop and told them we were going after the guerrillas.

**Wearing Ray-Bans against the glaring heat of the Ethiopian border region, this Legionnaire is manning an AA-52 general-purpose machine-gun.**



We drove about two kilometres, then got out and went up on to the ridgeline, where we immediately spotted a wisp of smoke. I thought we'd got them, but they were just below the next ridgeline, which would take quite a bit of time to get to as the hills were very steep. Also, if they saw us we would be in big trouble.

And that is exactly what happened. They saw us coming down off the first ridgeline and opened up. Although none of their rounds came near, I set up our machine-gun and started to put down some very effective covering fire: so effective that when we eventually got up on to the ridgeline we found a dead guerrilla.

The rest had done a bunk and were running like hell down the hill. We opened up on them, but the distance was too great and they were ducking and weaving in between the rocks and scrub.

### "Get Down!"

As we started to follow, one of the guerrillas went down on one knee. At first I thought he'd been hit, but in fact he was taking aim with an RPG-7. Someone shouted, "Get down!" and I dived into some rocks, badly grazing my knees in the process. At least that was better than getting an RPG wrapped around my head.

Fortunately the rocket went over us, but the explosion dislodged a load of rocks which started rolling down the hill towards us. We had nowhere to run to, so I tucked my head under my arms and started praying. I was hit by a few small rocks and covered in dust, but apart from that I was OK.

As soon as everything had settled down I jumped up to see where the guerrillas had got to. I couldn't see anything, but I heard one of our group calling for help. He had fractured his leg just above the knee and was losing a lot of blood. I called for the medic, but he was unconscious. Another man was bruised, and we were all a bit shaken.

Now we had problems: we were stuck halfway up a hill with three injured men and only one stretcher, which was back in the truck, plus we didn't know where the guerrillas had got to. I was pretty sure, though, that they were still running, thinking that we were in hot pursuit.

Our sergeant radioed the troop commander and explained what had happened, saying that we needed a helicopter for the casualties. Then



**A heavily-armed Panhard AML-90 armoured car on patrol through the desert.**

a man was sent back to the truck to collect the stretcher so that we could move the injured to a place where the helicopter could land.

The rest of the troop were about an hour's drive away, so for the time being we were on our own. The sergeant checked the map and looked for a landing zone. There was a plateau about four miles away, so we had to carry the injured to the truck and drive there. It sounded so easy!

By now the sun was beating down and the heat was stifling. The only water we had was in our water bottles, and that was being used to keep the injured cool. When the guy returned with the stretcher we loaded up Quinnet, the medic, who was the most serious, and then four of us lifted him on to our shoulders and set off for the truck. Our sergeant and two others stayed with the two remaining injured.

### Again it was sheer hell

Carrying the stretcher to the truck was painful. It took about 45 minutes. Once there, we put up a lean-to for Quinnet, to keep the sun off him. Then we had a drink from the water-trailer and refilled our flasks for the walk back to collect the next casualty. I told one of the Legionnaires to stay with Quinnet and to act as a guide for the rest of the troop when they arrived. Then off we went.

Getting back was no real hardship and we made good time. On this trip we picked up Lollierou, who had the open fracture. The two who had stayed behind with the sergeant changed places with two of us, and we set out once again for the truck.

Again it was sheer hell and Lollierou cried out every time we jarred the stretcher, which was almost every step, but there was nothing we could do. Luckily, after a kilometre we saw the rest of the troop coming over a hill. I have never been so relieved to see anyone. We just put down the stretcher and waited for them.

When they arrived, eight of them took Lollierou and headed off towards the trucks while the rest of us went to collect the others. Then I went with the sergeant and checked the area around the dead guerrilla. We collected his AK-47 and some papers he'd been carrying, marked the place on the map, and rejoined the rest of the troop.

The drive to the plateau was slow and difficult, but we were rewarded when we got there by the sight of a Puma helicopter. We loaded up the injured and then went back to the trucks and drove off towards Arta. We knew that we could be staying out for another night, and everyone was hoping that the radio would stay quiet. If it didn't, we were more than ready to respond: for now, though, we just wanted to get back to camp for a shower and a good night's sleep.