

SIMON MURRAY

LEGIONNAIRE



'No other story ... like it' Frederick Forsyth
'... hooked from the first page' Henry Kissinger

LEGIONNAIRE

An Englishman in the
French Foreign Legion



Simon Murray

PAN BOOKS

To Jennifer, Justin, Suze and Christy

‘Out of the fast failing light and through the falling snow flakes came a sight I shall never forget. The grandest assembly of real fighting men that I have ever seen, marching with their heads up as if they owned the world, lean, hard-looking men, carrying their arms admirably and marching with perfect precision.’

FIELD-MARSHAL VISCOUNT ALANBROOKE

(His reaction to a Battalion of the Foreign Legion, as recorded in his war diaries.)

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FOREWORD

All boys have daydreams – or there is something seriously wrong. Today these may be to play for Manchester United or pilot a shuttle into space. Fifty years ago there were still dreams, but different.

For most of those now nudging sixty the first memories were of the Second World War. Heroes were either the great sporting giants – Bradman, Matthews, Finney, Compton – or the war heroes. The games we played were cowboys and Indians, cops and robbers, goodies and baddies. By common consent we protested at being cast as the baddie because the goodies always won.

The games we played mirrored the dreams we had and they evolved around the accomplishing, one day, of great feats of derring-do. The feats would be in emulation of the heroes and, the Saturday film show at the local Odeon apart, these came from books.

With no television or videos, we read voraciously and in our dreams we would ride the prairie against the Sioux, or go with Alan Quartermain to discover King Solomon's mines, or fly with Guy Gibson against the Mohne Dam. And those who read the immortal classic *Beau Geste* would defend their fort against the wild and fearsome Tuaregs of the Sahara Desert.

I do not know how many boys growing up in the Forties and Fifties read *Beau Geste*, but there must have been many thousands. It was approved reading and profoundly exciting. It introduced us to a weird regiment of desert fighters and among English boys was certainly the only knowledge they ever had of that regiment, the French Foreign Legion.

And for all of them the Legion remained just a dream. Bar one. Simon Murray actually did it. And for the most romantic of possible reasons – for a girl. Digby would have been proud of him.

The Legion of 1960 was a long way from Fort Zinderneuf, but it still contained sergeants as brutal as LeJeune. It still involved a barracks full of misfits and runaways, harsh discipline, immense physical toughness, a tradition of shared hardship and unswerving loyalty to the Legion and to comrades and service under the flag of France in the cruel deserts of North Africa.

The period when Simon Murray joined was in any case among the most tumultuous in that extraordinary combat unit's history. France was in the fifth year of a bitter war to prevent the nationalists of Algeria achieving independence. The FLN was a cunning and ruthless foe. Before Simon had been more than thirty months engaged, the Legion would split on the issue of Algerian independence, granted by De Gaulle for July 1st, 1962, and a sizeable portion of the Legion's elite would march out of their Oran barracks, singing 'Je ne regrette rien' and pass into mutiny and exile.

As a Reuter correspondent in Paris from May 1962 onwards I covered the amazing events of those years; of the OAS, including dedicated Legion veterans, trying to assassinate their own head of state, of the lofty president defying their attempts and crushing the mutiny, of the vicious manhunts through France as the French counter-terrorist *barbouzes* (bearded ones) sought to kill men who had once been heroes.

I little dreamed from my Paris office that somewhere out in the *bled* of the Algerian desert was a

wiry fellow-countryman, sun-blackened and hard as ball bearings who would one day recall and record what it was like to be a legionnaire through it all.

Nor did I think that I would one day read his book, then meet him and become a friend.

Forty years on, it remains a remarkable volume; a story of true adventure, of an age gone by, of a period of history now taught in schools, of a Legion that has also changed much. Some things remain the same. I have attended Camerone Day at the new headquarters barracks at Aubagne and held the wooden hand of Danjou. The uniform, the strange slow march, the white kepi and scarlet epaulettes – these abide. But the story Simon Murray has to tell will never happen again, and there is no other story and no other testimony like it in modern literature. That is why I believe it will become a modern classic and be read when other more transient tales have been forgotten.

FREDERICK FORSYTH
Hertford, April 2000

INTRODUCTION

I joined the French Foreign Legion on 22 February 1960. I was nineteen years of age at the time and I stayed for five years. During that time I was never without pen and paper and I recorded the events of each and every day with very few exceptions. In this book I have extracted from those diaries what might be of interest and left out, I hope, much of the boredom. There were long periods of boredom in the Legion and sometimes that was the hardest part of all. I have picked out the characters at random and none receive undue attention because that's how it was – we were all loners at the end of the day and I have highlighted the incidents which have left the deepest impressions on my memory because they mark the stepping-stones of my journey through those five long years.

When I arrived in Paris so many moons ago and stood in front of the Legion gates on that cold wet day in February, I was in a very uncertain frame of mind about it all. I knew that this was going to be something very different to what my somewhat sheltered life had shown me so far. I was not exactly classic material for the Foreign Legion although there had been a commitment to military affairs by my family in the past.

I had an elder brother who was an officer in the Scots Greys and a father, a grandfather, a great-grandfather and a great-great-grandfather who had all served as officers in the army in such fine regiments as the Black Watch and here was I about to become a second-class private in the Foreign Legion.

I had been to one of the England's oldest public schools and was the product of good middle-class stock that had made some money from the Industrial Revolution and stockbroking and finally lost most of it through the follies of my spendthrift grandparents. Nevertheless, the traditions of the family and school combined to instil in me the values that were, and indeed still are, considered as those befitting a young gentleman about to make his way in the world.

I had read Wren's *Beau Geste* as every Englishman has and I held the traditional English view that service in foreign armies in foreign lands was an acceptable way to begin life – crusading it used to be called! What I did not know at the time was that Wren had painted a picture of the Legion that was not all that inaccurate and I was about to step into a very hard way of life indeed for which I was totally unprepared. It could not have been less romantic and as a recruit I could not have been further away from normal intake.

Many people have asked me why I joined the Legion and whilst there is no great mystery, there is no clear answer. A perceptive mind may draw conclusions from these diaries – yes, there was a girl called Jennifer – but it was more than that – I was living in digs in Manchester working in an iron foundry on seven pounds a week – not much fun and going nowhere. The British Army had turned me down; told me to come back in six months time – I think perhaps I was just a young buck without much confidence in himself setting an extreme challenge to see if he could hack it in a man's world – proving something to myself; to see if I measured up. I had done my reading, I had my heroes and I

had my dreams.

~~Perhaps it was in those days so long ago when there was less of a rush through life. We had more time to sow our oats and have our adventures. We had less to lose – we had nothing. Maybe life was longer and maybe the reason is not that important anyway. What matters is that I went, and this is what happened.~~

SIMON MURRA

PART ONE

Incubation

22 February 1960 – Paris

I was awake long before the dawn and by the time there was a greyness in the sky I had finally made up my mind to go. By eight o'clock I was in the Métro heading for the Old Fort at Vincennes – the recruitment centre of the Foreign Legion. There were few people about and those who were had grim Monday-morning faces, probably reflecting my own.

From Vincennes station I walked through the streets and eventually arrived at the massive gates of the Old Fort. On a plaque on the wall there was a simple notice: '*Bureau d'Engagement – Légion étrangère – Ouvert jour et nuit.*'

I hammered on the huge doors which swung open in response and I stepped into a cobbled courtyard to be confronted by the first legionnaire I had ever seen. He was dressed in khaki with a blue cummerbund around his waist and bright red epaulettes on his shoulders. He wore a white kepi on his head and had white gaiters and I thought he looked quite impressive. I was less impressed with the archaic-looking rifle at his side. He slammed the great doors shut and beckoned me with his head to follow him.

I was ushered into a room on the door of which was inscribed '*bureau de semaine*', which I assumed meant general office or something similar. It was a primitive enough chamber with a bare plank floor and a wooden table and chair. One or two old and tired-looking photographs depicting legionnaires holding the regimental colours, men driving tanks through the desert and others marching down the Champs-Élysées hung limply on the wall.

There was a sergeant sitting behind the table who looked me up and down and said nothing. I broke the ice and said in English that I had come to join the Foreign Legion and he gave me a look that was a mixture of wonder and sympathy. He spoke reasonable English with a German accent and asked me 'Why?'

I said something conventional about adventure and so on and he said I had come to the wrong place. He said five years in the Legion would be long and hard, that I should forget the romantic idea that the English have of the Legion and that I would do well to go away and reconsider the whole thing. I said I had given it a lot of thought and had come a long way and eventually he said 'O.K.' with a sigh and led me upstairs and into an assembly hall.

As I walked into the hall I was confronted with about forty people sitting on benches around the walls. Eighty eyes immediately focused on me and my own swivelled round the room in a flash. There was not one single face on which my eyes could come to rest and I could say 'He is like me' or 'We are the same in some way'. I knew instantly that I had not the slightest thing in common with any one of them.

I took an empty place at the end of one of the benches and contemplated my feet, but I could feel

them all staring at me. They were an incredible mixture, dark, grey, white, brown, beards, moustache bald and shaggy, wearing an unlimited array of different garments, but they all looked tough and unkempt and totally different from me. I was wishing to hell that I had worn a pair of jeans and an old pullover instead of a three-piece suit with a double-breasted waistcoat, of all things.

A couple of them were sniggering on the other side of the room and I kept my eyes averted although I could feel myself getting hot. We sat for a long time until at last an officer arrived with a couple of men in white coats and we were told to strip down to underpants.

One by one we were called forward and given a series of medical tests. This took two hours and after it was over we were again left sitting on our benches. The medical had loosened a few tongues and people were chatting away to each other in different languages, mostly German. I kept myself to myself at this point and I was wondering whether I would be in time to catch the six o'clock flight from Orly back to London.

An hour passed and the officer reappeared accompanied by the sergeant who had been in the *bureau de semaine*. He made an announcement in French, from which I gathered that they had need of only seven of us and the rest could go. They read out seven names and mine was one of them.

The seven of us were called forward and led out of the room leaving behind the rest who were being herded up for departure back into the welcome arms of Paris.

We were taken along a series of dark passages and up several flights of stone stairs to a magazine at the top of the old building where we were handed battledress and trousers, a pair of boots and a greatcoat. Then we were given some food in a dingy little room with metal tables and stools.

Nobody spoke a word during the meal and when it was over we were ushered into a small room and made to listen to a tape-recording, repeated in several languages. In the room there was a single 40-watt naked bulb dangling from the ceiling on a long flex and the atmosphere was sinister. With me were two Germans, a Spaniard, a Belgian, and two Dutchmen. Everybody was tense.

The tape played in English and I was informed that I was about to sign a five-year contract and that when I had signed there could be no turning back. The voice that came over the loudspeaker was solemn and had all the gloom of a judge pronouncing sentence of death. I wanted to talk to it, I wanted to talk to anybody who was English, but it was a one-way dialogue and it was decision-making time. We listened in silence and nobody said anything, nobody started shouting to get out, nobody cracked or lost their nerve or gave way to rising panic. Then we filed through into an office one at a time and signed the contract. It comprised three enormous tomes of unintelligible French. Attempts to read it were discouraged and would have been pointless anyway.

I feel as though I have signed a blank cheque in favour of a complete stranger.

Night has fallen and we are in a dormitory. Metal beds with straw-filled mattresses and a blanket. Bugle sounds 'lights out' in the night, faint and loud against the mood of the wind. It is the end of my first day and the beginning of a new adventure. I think that the sergeant was right; it will be a long road and a lonely one. I am in the heart of Paris but it feels like the mountains of the moon.

The Next Day

We were awoken early with a bouncy bugle shattering cosy sleep and after a cold-water rinse and a mug of coffee we were put to peeling potatoes, sweeping floors and other general chores, called *corvée*, around the fort. There is very little talk primarily due to the language problem. The day passed quickly and tonight we are catching the train to Marseille. The journey begins.

24 February 1960

There was trouble on the train last night and I have already made an enemy. There were not enough seats and it was first come, first served. During the evening I left the compartment for a pee and

returned to find a Spaniard had pinched my seat. I didn't like this situation at all. I tried very slowly to get across to him that he was in my seat and reading my magazine, but he affected deafness. It was early days to be getting into fights but it was even earlier to be running away from them, and I knew quite suddenly that I would have to make a stand.

In one move, before I had time to talk myself out of it, I grabbed him by the lapels, yanked him to his feet, and threw him the length of the carriage.

We were both quite surprised: he by being thrown so violently and me by throwing him. I am quite small and I am not used to throwing people about!

However, his surprise quickly gave way to other emotions and he came charging at me. Our greatcoats and the lack of space hampered active movement and neither of us got the better of the other, but I think I gave a good account of myself. Eventually the others in the carriage got bored with it and we were dragged apart. Public opinion came down on my side and the Spaniard was shoved out of the compartment back into the corridor. He went out with wild eyes glaring at me, screaming Spanish oaths and what were obviously threats of vengeance. I shall have to watch him.

We arrived in Marseille mid-morning and were driven in trucks to a fort overlooking the port. It is called Saint Nicolas. There are some three hundred Legion recruits here and they arrive in batches of about thirty a day from the various recruitment centres at Strasbourg, Lyon, and Paris. About half are shipped to Algeria every ten days or so.

The first move was to issue us with denims in exchange for our battledress uniforms. The denims are dirty and torn, without buttons, held together with bits of string. Obviously the other gear was just for the train journey and for the benefit of the general public so that they would not feel they were travelling with convicts, because that is now what we look like.

The central courtyard of the fort looks exactly like the kind of prison compound that one sees in movies; groups cluster together looking furtive, others sit on the ground leaning against the wall, somehow everybody is whispering – or it is that I can't understand what they are saying? The N.C.O.s look tough and they probably are. Why the hell do they look like prison wardens?

The atmosphere inside the barracks is cold and gloomy. The sanitary conditions are unbelievable. In a room which looks like an empty horse stable on a winter's morning, there is a solitary tap protruding from the wall, under which there is a sort of trough. The tap runs icy water, there is no window and no light, and this is the washroom for a hundred men. The lavatories are holes in the ground with foot-stands each side. Looks like a bad place for backache. In the dormitories bunks are three-high, with the width of a man's body between them both vertically and horizontally. It reminds me of a concentration camp I once visited in Belgium that had been preserved as a macabre reminder of the Holocaust. The food by contrast is good, if you can get it. The emphasis is on first come, first served and it is a self-service operation with no limits.

It is the evening and I am lying on my bunk with people all around. I am totally unnoticed, which is comforting. Card games are in progress around the tables in the centre of the room; the whole place is a complete fog of smoke and the sound is a perpetual jangle of different tongues jabbering in a million languages, none of which I understand.

Outside it's raining and the wind is blowing hard. Earlier this evening I walked along the battlements of the fort which overlooks the harbour. One can see the Count of Monte-Cristo's Château d'If and I think I know how he felt. Strange sensations and emotions as I looked at the beckoning lights of Marseille's night-life. The boats idling on their moorings waiting for the summer sun looked tempting.

It seems impossible to believe that I have been here for only one day. I feel much more a prisoner than a soldier. I really have cut the old lifeline this time: this is a long way from home and a long way from anything I have ever known. To think, if things had gone the way they nearly did and Fate had

played a different card I would probably have gone into the British Army, been commissioned like my brother Anthony in the Scots Greys, and now be in a very different situation. I don't feel lonely but I feel cut off, totally disconnected from my own people. That's a bit frightening somehow. I could go down the plug hole tomorrow and there's not a single person here who would turn a hair.

It's going to be a long time before I see my friends again, or drink a pint, or go to the National, or play cricket. Didsbury Cricket Club will be in a terrible state next weekend without me. Anyway, I suppose I'll get used to it. They say one gets used to anything in time. What the sages do not say is how much time is needed.

Ten Days Later

Several days have gone quickly by. Each one begins at six o'clock with an assembly on the fort battlements. We stand in the cold in our thin denims and respond with a yell of '*ici*' when our names are called and then we are dispatched in small groups on *corvée*. I have been working on a sawmill for the last few days, during which it hasn't stopped raining – freezing hands fumbling with logs, soaking wet denims, blue with cold – come on Africa!

11 March 1960

There are a lot of Germans here, with Spaniards and Italians not far behind in numbers. The Italians spend much of their time buying and selling odds and ends or exchanging foreign currencies – God knows why, there's little enough money around. They are born brokers but light on credibility. I have struck up a talking relationship with an English-speaking Dutchman called Hank. He's in bad shape having run off and left his wife after a family row and he's now regretting it. He has asked to be released but it is doubtful if they will let him go because it would open the floodgates to all the others who must have changed their minds by now.

There is also an Australian swagman here and it is good to have somebody who speaks more or less the same language. His name is Treers and three years in the merchant navy as a deckhand and several doses of clap are his chief claim to fame and the core of his conversation.

A Canadian called Gagnon arrived a couple of days after Treers and he also claims to have had a long and distinguished career in the Canadian navy, but as an officer! Treers doesn't believe it – I can see why – and they are on a collision course. Gagnon is oily and unpleasant material. He brought with him two suitcases full of kit and ingratiated himself by distributing it among the parasites. The brokers could hardly believe their eyes.

We have been paid the equivalent of about three pounds in sterling. No bad for a fortnight's work. The food situation is not good in that there is not enough of it unless one is first. Hardly a meal goes by without a fight. It is amazing to watch the food disappear when we sit down to eat. Eight people sit at one table and a basket of bread is placed in the middle. Immediately sixteen hands fall on it like a swarm of flies and the bread is gone in the flicker of an eyelid.

The atmosphere is generally better now. People greet one in the morning and say 'Hi' from time to time. I am called Johnny. Apparently all Englishmen are called Johnny, nobody knows why. I am picking up some French but spend most of my time talking to Treers. We talk about everybody else.

There exists in the French army an organization called the *Deuxième Bureau*, which is responsible for military intelligence of all sorts. This organization apparently works closely with Interpol with respect to Legion recruits. All recruits must pass the *Deuxième* and if one has anything of a past that might interest Interpol, it is at the discretion of this body whether or not one is handed over or hidden in the Legion ranks. The Legion is traditionally an asylum and will only release an individual if he is either too hot to hold or there is a risk that Interpol know that he is there and can prove it, in which case the Legion must hand him over.

I was interviewed by the *Deuxième* two days ago and machine-gunned with questions for about an hour. Questions varied from where I was born, why I was born, to details of my parents and schooling and other things, but above all, 'Why?' What was my reason for joining? And what is my reason? I don't really have a slick short answer. There are many reasons but it is very difficult to explain. I told them what I thought they would like to hear – military experience and all that stuff. It seemed to go down quite well.

A German sergeant who spoke English and acted as the interpreter between myself and the French officer echoed the sergeant in Paris and urged me to forget stories of camel-riding and *Beau Geste* and all that. I said I was forgetting pretty fast. He asked me if I wanted to reconsider the whole thing and said 'No', and that was that.

We leave for Algeria tomorrow. Excitement is running high. Imaginations are working overtime. We have been given Legion haircuts – clean sweep, bald as eggs, known as *boule à zéro*. We look more like convicts than ever. I am looking forward to getting out of this rat hole.

12 March 1960

Reveille at five o'clock and we piled into trucks that took us down to the harbour. We left Marseille under a clear blue sky aboard the S.S. *Sidi-bel-Abbès*, a 5,000-ton troop-carrier cum cattle ship. The sleeping quarters are in the bowels of the ship and consist of a thousand deckchairs facing in every direction and packed as tightly as sardines in a tin. I stood on deck until the last pencil-line of land became invisible. I said goodbye to old Europe and turned to face Africa and God knows what.

The monotony of the journey today was alleviated by Treers and Gagnon finally coming to blows. Actually being on a ship has proved too much for our deck-hand and naval officer and they set to just after lunch. The fight was between-decks with all the chairs being flung about. Treers eventually closed with Gagnon and was in the process of breaking his neck when I finally got him off – I don't suppose we'll hear much more about the Canadian navy from now on.

The wind is rising tonight and doubtless tomorrow will see some sickened landlubbers.

The Following Day

Awoke at first light in a heavy sea to be greeted by the most unbelievable scene of squalor imaginable. The sea was raging and most of the deckchairs had been overturned. Bodies were lying in every direction like drunken corpses, many were throwing up where they lay without bothering to move. Long queues led to the lavatories, which turned out to be so blocked with vomit they were no longer serviceable. The impossibility of getting within range of the lavatories led the impatient to go outside and crap on deck or over the side, frequently to windward! The whole ship was a floating garbage tank.

Among the passengers there were a few women and children: Arabs returning from disillusion in metropolitan France. When I asked why they were with us, I was told that they were travelling fourth and last class. That it was the last I had no doubt, the conditions of a fifth would have been staggering even by French standards.

The wavy day dragged on and the sea dispensed misery. A meal of sorts was served but there were very few takers and eventually we crawled into Oran. The Pilgrim Fathers could not have been happier than we to put our feet again on dry land.

We piled yet again into trucks and were driven to a camp where we were given a bowl of soup. The night was cold and the soup was appreciated. At midnight we were shovelled on to a rickety train with broken wooden seats and we rolled slowly southwards into the night towards Sidi-bel-Abbès, nerve-centre of the Foreign Legion.

14 March 1960

At three this morning, a grim hour anywhere, we shunted into Sidi-bel-Abbès. Tiredness was somehow no longer apparent. It had just become a part of us.

On the station we were greeted by our first active Legion sergeant, who managed to get us into some form of order and marched us off into the night. The streets were dimly illuminated by yellow lamps, and as we shuffled along we almost looked like soldiers; ghostly figures shrouded in bulky greatcoats, plodding forward with heavy boots banging on the hard road, shattering the stillness of the pre-dawn hours, and all the while the guttural yells of the sergeant calling out the steps.

I remember very clearly my feelings this morning as we passed through the deserted streets of Sidi-bel-Abbès. Certainly there was something romantic about it all. Perhaps there was a faint chill of fear just below the surface, but it was smothered by curiosity. A vague reminiscence of my first day at boarding school; a definite feeling of being solo on this one; unhappiness nudging my elbow! But with all these mixed sensations there was a predominant feeling of being in the right place and doing the right thing. I was conscious of the fact that I was treading my own path, maybe for the first time. It was the sensation of free-wheeling downhill, aware of a gathering momentum, aware also that I had left the brakes behind in Paris, but somehow I knew that I was going to be O.K. – I would come through.

We arrived at a camp called CP3. Big iron gates swung open. We caught glimpses of guards with Sten guns wearing white kepis. Then we passed through a large courtyard and finally we were shoved into a barrack. The journey was over. Nothing happened and one by one we collapsed on the concrete floor and sleep flooded in.

It seemed only minutes later that the door was flung open and a yelling corporal started pushing us out. It was still dark outside and freezing cold. Coffee was being doled out of an enormous cauldron and it tasted delicious, like no other coffee has tasted, or ever will taste again. We were given a chunk of bread and a small square of cold raw bacon. Then we were formed up and searched. They took my address book and tore the maps out of the back of my little pocket diary. That scared me a bit. There was something sinister about it, as though they were cutting off the route back home.

Hot showers followed, the first in a fortnight and welcome. The warm water eased some of the tension.

The barracks here are in complete contrast to Fort Saint Nicolas. Everything is immaculate. The rooms are airy and the beds comfortable and well spaced out. The washrooms are spotless. We have been given new denims and boots. Morale is on the up and we are beginning to feel like human beings instead of vermin. Everybody is more relaxed and perky. It is as though we have woken up for the first time in a week. I'm picking up some more French and a bit of German and people are chatting a bit more. Faces are becoming familiar and some people are even smiling!

We have just had *appel*, evening roll-call. Everybody stands at attention beside his bed, there is a roll-call and a sergeant walks round and makes sure everything is in order and that's it. It's kipping time and don't I need it!

15 March 1960

Reveille at 0500. A cold wash, a shave and a similar breakfast to that of yesterday – but the coffee did not seem nearly as good! We piled into trucks (it's becoming a way of life) and were driven to a sandstone quarry where we spent the day swinging pickaxes and shovelling sand. The wind was freezing and played havoc with the sand and made it grisly work. A sergeant stood over us with a sub-machine-gun the whole time – difficult to tell whether he was there to defend us in case of enemy attack or to discourage us from any thoughts of running away.

We had a short break for lunch – tinned sardines and a chunk of heavy bread – and then we carried

on until the early evening and eventually chucked it in and returned to camp.

The journey to and from CP3 gave me a glimpse of Sidi-bel-Abbès. The European population is almost entirely military. The Arabs make an interesting contrast. The women are completely shrouded in white, revealing only a pair of dark eyelashes and tattooed heels to the discerning eye. The men are dressed in rags: baggy trousers and carpet-like cloaks (*djelebas*) with enormous hoods attached. They squat on the pavements in little groups, whispering furtively (perhaps only when our trucks stop right in front of them), and they periodically spit out bits of black tobacco.

Small boys drive herds of sheep and goats down the main streets and military vehicles hoot, vainly trying to clear a path. The centre of town is clean and modern shops adorn the roadside, built with an attractive yellow sandstone. There are many bars – evidence of a thirsty military population. We ourselves as raw recruits will not apparently be allowed into town for at least another two months, so the city's attractions must await future discovery.

Nine Days Later

Treers is fed up and he wants to get out.

We have been preparing for our departure to Mascara, a small town a hundred and fifty miles east, where we will do our basic training. There are two centres of 'instruction', one at Saïda and the other at Mascara. Half of us are going to each place. Mascara enjoys a reputation for being a rough kind of neighbourhood. In fact, from the way people talk about *instruction*, I think we may be in for quite a bad time.

We have been issued with kit, everything from boots to toothbrushes, and we have been relieved of our civilian clothes which have until now been kept in our lockers. In exchange for these clothes, irrespective of quantity or value, each man receives five packets of cigarettes. René Baumann who is from Curaçao fared worse than anyone as he happened to arrive with six suitcases full of clothes. He is an interesting guy and speaks six languages. We get on well.

During these last few days we have had more medicals and yet more interviews with the Deuxième Bureau, who asked the same sort of questions as we were asked in Marseille, presumably to see if one was giving the same sort of answers. One chap got a hell of a hiding for apparently giving them a packet of lies which didn't correspond to the lies he told them in Marseille. They don't like that.

We have had an I.Q. test. It was the usual thing with patterns and shapes and ducks coupled with some elementary mathematics and a bit of French history. There were also some questions designed specifically for each nationality and I had questions on English history.

The test is apparently the first of a series that we will have to take from time to time and the results will have a direct bearing on our pay. Judging by the appearance of some of the scholars here today and their furrowed brows and scratching of heads, there is going to be a shortage of cash in a number of pockets.

Treers, after considerable interviews and lots of hard-luck stories, has managed to persuade them to let him go. I feel glad for him as he has been miserable and I don't think he would have stayed the course although he is physically fit enough. At the same time I am sorry to see him go because he is the guy I talk to most. Gagnon I do not care for at all and I am relieved to hear that he is going to Saïda.

Yesterday we were inspected by the man who will be our commandant in Mascara, Captain Prat-Marca. A moustached gentleman, very French – a handsome strong face with a straight look that was good to see, clear eyes with humorous creases – I liked him on sight. I liked his swagger-stick which he kept slapping against his riding boots as he walked up and down the ranks and I liked the jaunty angle of his kepi; but despite the debonair appearance, there is about him a certain toughness, which is indelible in those who are made of the right fibre. I think we are in good hands.

So tomorrow we are off and the serious business of moulding us into soldiers will begin. We will ~~last have arrived at the beginning of it all. We have been paid again, the same amount as before.~~ Everybody has spent the evening guzzling beer in the open mess, known as the *foyer*. The mood is festive. The Germans are great singers and there was much singing with the beer that was good to hear; old German marching songs; they generate tremendous spirit! I'm feeling good and I think we are all in the right frame of mind and ready for tomorrow.

25 March 1960

Twenty years ago today I was born. What an auspicious day to be leaving my teens! I said goodbye to Daniel Treers and we left Sidi-bel-Abbès in a long convoy of Simca trucks and drove to Mascara. We followed a narrow road that wound its way through wild countryside and up into barren hills and eventually down into the plain of Mascara itself, which stretches flat as an airstrip to the horizon and nothing.

The town of Mascara is like a miniature bel-Abbès but shabbier. I'm told all towns built by the French in North Africa look the same. In the centre is la Place, with its trees and flowers neatly arranged and benches scattered around for the evening stroller to pause and watch the passers-by. The city hall, known as the *mairie*, looks smart and serious near by and the *gendarmerie* is substantial and impressive at the entrance to the town, a symbol of something French and everything that French colonial power stands for. Scruffy bars and cafés run along the side of the street, the largest of which is the Café du Commerce where the Arabs sit and discuss their affairs, sip their coffee, chew their *chique* and pass the time of day.

We passed through the bazaar where hundreds of Arabs milled around a similar number of stalls laden with fabrics and pots and pan of every conceivable shape and size and thousands of other goods and food and bits and pieces. As our trucks thundered and revved slowly through the crowded streets we saw squads of legionnaires, presumably recruits who have been here some time, marching along singing their hearts out in German and French. They march at an incredibly slow pace, almost a plod, and there is something sinister in it, and yet the singing atones for this completely – it is a really thrilling and inspiring sound with a richness of tone and tremendous harmony, as though a trained choir were in action – powerful stuff!

And then we were at the gates of the 5th Company of the Instruction Battalion of Mascara. Massive gates of wrought iron, flanked by immaculately turned out sentries with white kepis, stiff upper lips and Sten guns. The trucks pulled up in the middle of a huge mud patch of a parade-ground, down one side of which extended what appeared to be a never-ending horse trough which has since been identified as the communal wash-basin. Corporals were everywhere, pushing us around and shouting incomprehensible French at everyone. Some order was established at last and names were read out and we were assigned to various sections and barracks.

The buildings are in tune with those at Saint Nicolas in Marseille; inside everything is of cold grey stone. In the barrack rooms we each have a metal bed with a straw mattress and a metal locker stands beside it. Our kit has to be folded item by item in the open locker: shirts, trousers, vests, socks and so on all stacked on top of each other so that the pile forms a perfect rectangle. A white scarf is folded down the front with a piece of cardboard behind it for stiffening purposes, so all that is visible is a neat square white panel. The beds comprise three separate parts, which have to be dismantled and cleaned. At evening roll-call, or *appel*, a sergeant will apparently inspect before lights out, and he will go over the beds and lockers with a white-gloved hand in search of dust.

The overall atmosphere is one of frost and apprehension, as though bad trouble is imminent. I don't like it at all and it's playing havoc with my nervous system. We new arrivals feel terribly green. The French call new recruits *les bleux*.

The outgoing company which we will replace and which will now be sent as reinforcements to the various regiments is still here awaiting final exit. Their presence is symbolic of what we will look like in a few months' time – we hope. In contrast to us they are like a herd of young bullocks just kept from stampeding by an intangible discipline. Their morale is good and they create the impression of force of enthusiasm and vibrance. They are continually on the move, running or assembling in small, neat, crisp-looking squads, or marching with their heads up and with their arms swinging like hell. They are in harmony in all their movements and this effect is heightened by the singing of these marvellous songs which one can hear constantly throughout the day. These men look fit and strong and quite unstoppable, like fast-moving tanks. We, *les bleux*, are spectators, non-participants, waiting for them to clear out so that we can get on stage. We have no camaraderie, no morale, no songs and we can do nothing. There is a sort of nervous tension in our ranks. It is difficult to relax and there is an edge to one's relationship with everybody else. We are perhaps all too preoccupied with number one at the moment, ensuring we do the right thing and that we keep a low profile. We need time.

At the evening meal, '*la soupe*', the old hands showed their form and one realized fully then how new we were and how far we had to go. We were all lined up outside the *réfectoire* and on the blast of a whistle the disciplined column filed in. There were long tables laden with food, along the side of which were small square metal stools, all in straight lines – perfect precision. Each man entered, removing his kepi as he did so, and stood to attention in front of his stool. Complete silence, absolute order, rigid discipline. The numbers were right, nobody was left wandering around looking for a place. The corporal entered last and called for a song, '*La tone*'. A single voice broke the silence with the first few bars, at the end of which he yelled '*Trois*' and the old hands in silence counted four imaginary paces and then with a crash like a pistol-shot in a tunnel they yelled '*Quatre*' and blasted into '*La Légion Marche*'. In the enclosed *réfectoire* it was like being in a cathedral with sixteen choirs going for their lives – deafening and fantastic – tremendously strong and impressive. The song finished and the corporal yelled, '*Asseyez-vous. Bon appétit!*' and with a mighty roar of '*Merci, caporal*' we dived into the food, shovelling it into our faces with gusto as fast as we could, all mixed up together. The food was good: artichokes, egg mayonnaise, beefsteak, salad, cheese, all washed down with mugs of rough Mascara wine. There was a crescendo of conversation periodically checked by screams from the corporal of '*Un peu de silence*'. Everybody would start whispering and then the babble gathered momentum again and the cycle was completed by another frantic yell from the corporal.

There are a number of rules that are learned quickly in the *réfectoire*. The first is never to accept the offer of someone else's artichoke. This is fatal because while you are plucking away at the leaves the other fellow is scoffing your beefsteak and by the time you have waded through your own artichoke and his, the rest of the dishes have been licked clean.

The second rule is not to put your feet on the bar of the stool. Feet will remain at all times on the floor and the penalty for forgetting this is severe; the corporal comes up silently behind you and gives you a sharp rabbit punch on the back of the neck as you are about to swallow a mouthful of wine. It is a very nasty experience indeed and you only need one lesson to remember it a lifetime.

After the evening meal there is a period of about an hour when we can go to the *foyer* and have a few beers before we must begin cleaning our kit for *appel*. The *foyer* comprises a bar, a number of round metal tables and that's about it except for a sort of French billiard table and a broken pinball machine. The drinking gets quite serious and a lot of people with substantial capacities are in evidence.

The Germans are very pally with each other. In fact all the nationalities are cliquey. This is not unnatural in view of the language barriers. The Dutch, Germans, Spanish and Italians all seem to face the same difficulties when it comes to speaking French. All our orders are given in French and the

N.C.O.s speak French most of the time, but in the barracks or the *foyer* French is drowned completely in German, Italian and Spanish. There are supposedly fifty-two different nationalities in the Legion, but the Germans are certainly in the majority, followed in order by the Spanish, Italians, Hungarians, Dutch, Scandinavians, Greeks and the rest, and last of all the English.

There is a small British-speaking clique which comprises myself, René Baumann, de Graaf, who is a Dutchman and sleeps in the next bunk to mine, Dahms, who is German but has attached himself to us, and another Englishman called Robin White. We have our own table in the *foyer* and pool our limited resources to finance our beer.

White has finished his basic training and is leaving with the outgoing company. He is full of praise for the Legion and very keen on Prat-Marca, our C.O. He says basic training is pretty tough but one can survive it if one approaches it with the right frame of mind – whatever that is! He's a quiet chap and rather difficult to fathom. I exchanged his information about the Legion with current affairs in England – hardly a fair swap. Apparently the next two weeks will be devoted to a mammoth spring clean which always precedes basic training proper. This involves repainting the insides of all the barracks, scrubbing floors, cleaning kit, rifles, and other equipment to be used for our instruction, until everything is immaculate. White made it sound like a lot of hard work.

In our barrack room there are twelve men including Dahms, de Graaf and myself. Most of the others are German. There's one big bastard called Wormser who does all the talking and calls all the shots. He's obviously the heavy amongst this lot and somebody to steer clear of. I don't think I like him at all. His right-hand man is a guy called Maltz who laughs loudly when Wormser makes a joke and runs to the *foyer* when Wormser wants beer and shits himself when Wormser coughs.

The evening *appel* was a quiet affair. We all stood by our beds waiting for the roof to cave in but nothing happened. The sergeant walked slowly up and down in sinister silence scowling but that was all. The corporal was at pains to explain that basic training proper had not yet started and when it did so *appel* would be a very different story!

28 March 1960

The spring clean has begun. We spent the entire day with a sprayer repainting the insides of the barracks. The lime in the paint is foul and gets into eyes and throats and is very painful. The cold weather has split my hands and fingers and the lime aggravates the soreness; and to think I came here for the sunshine!

29 March 1960

Continued the painting. The barracks themselves are three storeys high. After spraying all day we end with a big wash-up. The washing process necessitates the use of gallons of water brought by buckets up six flights of stairs and then brushed all the way down again. The only taps in the building are on the ground floor, and the only drains are on the ground floor, and there are no hose-pipes. The cleaning-up process takes about two hours, and is impeded by bullying corporals yelling at everybody while the water gushes down the six flights of stairs like Niagara, with bucket-carrying slaves clambering up the stairs with their water loads adding to the confusion.

The weather is getting worse and is now bitterly cold. Eyes, skin and throat are now extremely painful from painting and life is in consequence very miserable. I have discovered a voracious appetite, which is unfortunately common to everybody, and our meals are proving insufficient. White told me that when *instruction* proper begins, appetites increase much more, money runs out and then one can see people in their true colours and correct proportions. Greed and selfishness come through with force and it is every man for himself.

The cigarette position is getting bad too, despite the fact that we are issued with sixteen packets a

month. As funds run out the heavy smokers spend much of their time searching the *quartier* for cigarette butts, and the more desperate sell their personal possessions including their watches for a song in order to raise cash to purchase the weed.

31 March 1960

A lot of men are suffering from gut trouble – good, more food for those of us who are not!

2 April 1960

Captain Prat-Marca, estimated by me to be the epitome of what a French officer should be – cold, aloof, a rigorous disciplinarian, but very fair – appeared on the painting scene today and showed concern for those of us who have been spraying the poisonous paint. It has become impossible to talk and my hands are agony if I use them for anything. Washing them is a nightmare, like putting them in fire.

Several Days Later

Basic training begins tomorrow. Our company is now up to strength and we number about a hundred. We are divided into four sections. The 1st Section, which I am in, is commanded by Lieutenant Otarc (probably related to the brandy people, the officers here all seem to be loaded). He is rather wet-looking with a big sloppy red moustache. He is also overweight and gives the impression of being in awe of his N.C.O.s. Not a strong man, I fear.

His second in command is Sergeant Volmar. Very tough and very quiet. Doesn't speak much but when he does it's often with dry humour. He has eyes that smile much more than the rest of his face. Like him. There's something strong and good about him – for all his toughness he's the sort of man that would make a good father. I know he's married – I wonder if he's got any kids. Maybe there's something sad about him too.

Under him is Chief-Corporal CrePELLI, who is Italian, with a face like a dried prune after thirteen years in the Legion. He is thin and sinewy like wire rope and his cheeks meet in the middle of his mouth. His uniform is always immaculate, he smokes incessantly and his eyes look like a couple of black pebbles which the average cobra would give its teeth for. His reputation as a killer is surpassed only by that of a Danish sergeant in the 2nd Section called Nielsen, who sports a great black beard and is known as the Sheriff. The Sheriff apparently keeps a collection of Arab ears in bottles of alcohol. These ears have been personally removed from the heads that went between them, which throws some light on the character of this Dane. CrePELLI claims to have put over thirty people in hospital during basic training over the last two years and he is proud of this. He is in charge of our close-combat programme, to which I am not looking forward.

These then are the three men who will have principal control over us during the coming weeks. They are assisted by three corporals: Batista, a noisy Italian who shouts all the time, a German called Laurenz who shouts a little less, and another German called Weiss who shouts in the evening when he's drunk and is quiet during the day when he's nursing his hangover.

Over the last week or so the famous spring clean has been completed. The parade-ground has virtually been remade and the terrain where we do a lot of our field training has been weeded of every blade of grass. When we work in the open ground hacking away with our picks and shovels, clad in scruffy denims, with the corporals standing over us with their sub-machine-guns, the scene is that of a P.O.W. camp in Japan during the war or a penitentiary in an American movie. The work continued non-stop every day until after midnight, and we were up at five every morning ready to go again.

During this time I had three pleasant days in the infirmary, which once seen could never be forgotten. The standards of sanitation were a new dimension in squalor; a dream world for bacteria.

Each bed had just a dirty bug-filled mattress and a blanket that had been there since time began. The food was inedible. I was dosed on bismuth tablets and gargled gentian violet all day. One thing about the infirmary, it is a definite deterrent to sickness.

On my return to the company I was summoned by the Deuxième Bureau where I was confronted by a lieutenant and two corporals, one of whom acted as an interpreter. I was given a letter from my mother and informed of her anxiety about my welfare, which was evident from the letter. It was over a month old and was a plea to consider carefully what I was doing before I went ahead. I had told my brother where I was going before I left for France and he had promised to let everybody know after I had gone.

I would have been in Marseille when the letter arrived but the authorities had obviously decided that it was better to let me get well settled in before delivering.

The officer said the British Embassy in Paris had been making a fuss and did I wish the Deuxième to admit or deny my presence in the Legion. Apparently, if you are under twenty-one and the right pressure is brought to bear and if it can be proved that you are in the Legion, they will sometimes let you go. I said I was quite satisfied where I was and that I would like to remain but that I would not like them to deny my presence as this would only make my poor mother more alarmed than ever. So I was asked to write a letter, which I did while they watched, in which I said that everything was O.K. and that I was having a ball. I said that I was here of my own free will and under no pressure to remain. The letter was sealed and taken by the lieutenant. That finally is a total commitment and if the door was not firmly locked before, it most certainly is now.

10 April 1960

Everything has suddenly become rather military. Instead of being treated like inmates of a penitentiary we are now being treated like recruits. I'm not sure which is worse. Certainly nothing has improved since this morning, it's just different. The first parade is at 0700 sharp and there is a penetrating inspection. There is no spit and polish as in the British army but everything has to be clean. Boots do not shine but they must be black with dubbin. Our denims have to be washed and ironed every day and the N.C.O.s check the inside of our shirt collars to make sure that this has been done. We have two pairs of everything and it is apparently wiser to put on washed wet clothes, thereby showing an effort has been made, than to parade with a shirt that may have a grubby collar. Our teeth and ears are also inspected and generally one starts the day feeling quite fresh. This is a feeling which is very short-lived indeed.

After the inspection was over this morning and various extra duties had been handed out to those below the required standard, we followed Corporal Batista for a five-mile run into the hills, at the end of which most of us were ready to throw up. We were then divided into small groups and began normal schooling in army basics such as drill, weapon training, map reading and French. We have started to learn our first song. We are also learning to march. The slow marching pace is very much more difficult to accomplish than it looks and we are like a herd of goats when we get going; it's a complete shambles and the N.C.O.s get frantic.

But the day was a good one, full of activity, and even the N.C.O.s joined in the laughter as people made idiots of themselves and fell into all the classic pitfalls that go along with learning new things; not too difficult when doing basic training in a foreign army, in a foreign language, and where the comprehension rate is slow at its best.

When we returned to camp in the late afternoon we were put through a series of ghastly tests, such as running with sacks of sand on our backs, rope climbing, press-ups, abdominal exercises, knee-bends, hurdles, sprints and middle-distance gallops, and a crawling race under barbed wire. The results were all carefully recorded in a book and we will apparently have to go through the same thing

periodically to see if we are making any progress. It's quite competitive stuff and one can see individuals carefully monitoring their results and comparing them with other people's.

15 April 1960

The weather is warmer, morale is good, and we are binding together slowly into a unit. We are spurred on by a common dislike of the non-coms. There is nothing like a little hate for bringing people together! The N.C.O.s are not too scientific in their teaching methods and firmly believe that if they cannot penetrate the brain through the normal passage of the ear, then some success will be achieved by bashing a hole through the head of the wretched recruit. Crepelli is a particular exponent of this teaching method and runs a terror campaign in the weapon training sector. If you can't take a rifle to bits and reassemble it in seconds or if you don't know the name or weight of a part of the rifle, he will hit you with it. The effectiveness of this method of teaching remains to be seen, but it does undoubtedly stimulate effort.

We spend much of our time being punished for our shortcomings and these punishments usually take the form of crawling around on our stomachs, running up hills with sacks on our backs or standing to attention for long periods with a rifle held out in extended arms – tiring!

The principal aim of the N.C.O.s is to get our denims filthy as this will ensure that we are kept busy washing them during our fleeting moments of free time.

We are making some progress in spite of ourselves. My French is getting better with increased confidence and employment and we are becoming quite accomplished singers. Tremendous emphasis is laid on the singing. When we return to camp after a day in the hills we march proudly through the streets of Mascara, signing our guts out as we try to break the windows with our voluminous melodies. The slow marching plod and the sheer force of the body of men singing in deep ringing tones with improvised harmony is like nothing I have ever seen or heard before.

The local people stand staring, mesmerized, as they have probably done for years and will continue to do, for it never goes out of fashion to watch the Legion marching, and it is a sight and a sound that grips you and holds you while it passes. The excitement on the faces of the watching crowd produces a chill down the spine and a justifiable feeling of pride. It is at moments like this that our heritage is felt, as a thousand tales of the Legion cross the faces of the onlookers, and I am indeed proud to be in these ranks. Even the corporals strutting beside us like swaggering peacocks are full of goodwill, with their chests puffed out eyeing the citizens, as if to say, 'All our own work – trained and produced by us', and they wallow in the awe of their audience.

But we are far from perfect, it is early days and sometimes the singing is chaotic. The N.C.O. in charge will then call us to a halt even if it's in the middle of town and he will have us crawling through the streets on our stomachs, ignominious wretches, kicked like dogs and yelled at as though we were vermin. The atmosphere is killed stone dead in a moment and the expression of the crowd changes first to amazement and then to humour as they move away smirking and thanking their lucky stars it is we, not they. And we suddenly forget visions of the glorious Legion as pride is pricked and reality returns. With our faces in the dust and the boots of the man in front an inch from our noses, we crawl and concentrate our minds on hatred of the stupid non-coms. Perfection and imperfection are black and white to them, each inducing a corresponding reaction, probably involuntary, of applause or abuse and the instinctive utterances that go with it.

18 April 1960

Yesterday was Easter. We were given special food and plenty of it. At lunchtime the officers and their wives came round the *réfectoire* with eggs and hot cross buns and cigarettes. It was a charming gesture and done without formality. They obviously wanted us to enjoy our day and they succeeded.

Our commanding officer, Prat-Marca, normally so cold and aloof, was running round like a mother hen dishing eggs out in every direction. It was a good day and reminded me of old friends but without sadness.

There is a new duty N.C.O. for the week, none other than the dreaded Sheriff, and I made contact with him this afternoon. It is a regulation that legionnaires salute officers and N.C.O.s when they walk past them or before they request permission to speak to them. I passed Nielsen this afternoon and as he appeared to be in deep conversation, I did not salute. This was a mistake. Suddenly his hand shot out and grabbed me by the lapels so that I had great difficulty in moving. He just held me there with my feet barely touching the ground while he carried on his conversation. He then turned to me and, peering through the black glasses which he always wears, he asked me why I had not saluted. I said I thought he was engaged in conversation and couldn't see me, to which he replied that he sees everything and he let me go. Not a man I would like to cross at all – ever.

And then evening at *appel* he went berserk. At *appel* one has to be in bed asleep with one's eyes shut convincingly, or standing to attention at the side of one's bed in uniform. To be in bed is risky as it indicates over-confidence and it encourages sadistic sergeants, of which there is no shortage, to turn one's bed over. Despite the energy that went into cleaning kit, polishing floors and windows, and dusting beds, lockers and lampshades before *appel* this evening, because we knew the Sheriff was on duty, many came to grief. Beds were overturned and dismantled, lockers were emptied and the contents hurled through the window into the night with not the slightest consideration for personal property. Many received punches and kicks, Engel worst of all.

Engel is a really tough human being by any standards. Tonight he was suspected of being drunk, the most cardinal sin of all, and the Sheriff beat the living daylights out of him. Poor Engel is a wreck. His face looks rough at the best of times, but when the Sheriff had finished with him it was beyond recognition.

There is no reason for this kind of brutality and it is quite incomprehensible to me that the officers never remark on the beatings some of the men have obviously had when they appear on parade in the morning. I suppose they regard it as part of basic training and yet the powers of a mere corporal are such that the opportunities for victimization and bullying are so totally obvious I would have thought that they would have been on the look-out for it.

Having said that, however, I do notice one thing about CrePELLI and the Sheriff: although they are not slow in pulling punches they are fairly straight as long as you do your stuff properly. CrePELLI applauds good performance just as vigorously as he attacks bad performance, particularly when bad performance is inexcusable. He was for instance terribly excited and enthusiastic when he discovered that I could shin up a rope twice as fast as anybody else and without using my feet!

The English appear to be held in high regard here, which is welcome. I think we are thought of as something quite strange. There are very few Englishmen in the Legion and I believe the general feeling is that we are all cracked and maybe slightly dangerous and therefore best left alone. They remember the war!

I read Volmar correctly – he's a good man. I think he disapproves of some of CrePELLI's teaching methods, but he would never show it intentionally. Of the other men here it is still too early to say. We don't really mix. Everybody is independent to a great extent. Nobody is keen to stand out in front or over-expose himself and nobody is prepared or wants to lean too heavily on anyone else in case the support collapses. In this atmosphere a dependence on oneself is the surest way of remaining on the path.

We all join in the singing and the drinking in the *foyer* in the evening, but there is still an overall feeling of uncertainty about the other people. There is also the feeling of competition, particularly amongst the Germans. They don't like to be beaten in the runs or on the march. Maybe it's their pride

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