

**THE FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION:
A COMPLETE HISTORY OF THE LEGENDARY
FIGHTING FORCE¹**

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The French Foreign Legion! The mere name echoes like a rifle-shot, evoking stark images of leather-faced mercenaries, mysterious castaways from the humdrum of ordinary life, spurned lovers, disenfranchised sons, and yes, the occasional fugitive from justice. We have seen them in the movies, marching across endless desert sands and defending hopelessly remote outposts for which the names and locations have all but faded from memory. But what is the truth behind the French Foreign Legion?

I first heard of the Legion as a young boy. My Father and I have always shared a love of history, and I recall him once saying to me, "The Foreign Legion is probably the toughest, most disciplined outfit on earth." So, while recently browsing through a local bookstore, something caught my eye: Douglas Porch's 636 page *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (hereinafter *The Legion*). The book's length was somewhat imposing, but I was immediately taken in by its thirty-two pages of photographs and numerous campaign maps.

Professor Douglas Porch, of The Citadel, Charleston, South Carolina, brings impressive credentials to *The Legion*, having previously authored four other books relating to French military history.³ This background, combined with Porch's obvious affection for his topic and "several summers [of] combing archives in France for undiscovered [Legion] documents, diaries and memoirs"⁴ (where Porch apparently often visited his parents-in-law), resulted in a truly extraordinary book.

1. DOUGLAS PORCH, *THE FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION: A COMPLETE HISTORY OF THE LEGENDARY FIGHTING FORCE* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers 1991); 636 pages, \$16.00 (soft-cover) [hereinafter *THE LEGION*].

2. Judge Advocate General's Corps, United States Army Reserve. Written while assigned as a student at the 45th Graduate Course, The Judge Advocate General's School, United States Army, Charlottesville, Virginia.

3. See DOUGLAS PORCH, *ARMY AND REVOLUTION: FRANCE 1815-1848* (1974); DOUGLAS PORCH, *THE MARCH TO THE MARNE: THE FRENCH ARMY 1914-1918* (1981); DOUGLAS PORCH, *THE CONQUEST OF MOROCCO* (1982); and DOUGLAS PORCH, *THE CONQUEST OF THE SAHARA* (1984).

4. See *THE LEGION*, *supra* note 1, at xii.

In his Preface to *The Legion*, Porch explains, “This study does not pretend to be an exhaustive history of the Legion—that would be quite impossible!”⁵ He continues, “I believe that there is room for a book on the Legion that links its combat performance to its recruitment, training, rituals, and special social environment.”⁶ *The Legion* is not just a dry recitation of battle dates and crusty campaigns; it is masterfully written history. It is also a psychological study and a social analysis, as well as a solid critique of Legion training techniques and battle strategies. This is quite an undertaking—one which Porch handles brilliantly.

While a seemingly distant concept today, foreigners fighting in other nations’ armies was not unusual in years’ past. Two well-known examples from our own Revolutionary War are the Hessians, who fought for the British, and Lafayette, who fought for the colonialists. Indeed, the entire military fabric of late medieval and renaissance Europe largely rested on the shoulders of mercenary (and often foreign) troops. To this day, Swiss mercenaries continue to guard the Pope. However, Article 13 of the post-revolutionary July 1789 French Charter decreed, “No foreign troop can be admitted into the service of the State, except under a [special] law.”⁷

When the 1830 revolutionary movements began, many young men from other European countries flocked to France, hoping to find refuge in the spiritual home of egalitarian revolution.⁸ Unfortunately, the French were not particularly happy at receiving this rabble. The solution? Either turn them back at the border, which was often done, or toss them into the military. King Louis-Philippe’s 10 March 1831 “special law” creating the Foreign Legion provided the legal tool for accomplishing the latter. Quite simply, the Legion was to serve twin complementary aims: Sweep the French streets of its foreign male riffraff, while providing France with an expendable, no-risk military troop to be thrust into faraway colonial lands.⁹

Enlistment in the Legion usually took place “in a dingy room of an official building in Paris, or in one of the French provincial towns, especially those near the German or Belgian frontiers.”¹⁰ “The recruits were given a third-class ticket to Marseille and a small sum of money for food

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.* at 3.

8. *Id.* at 1.

9. *Id.* at 5, 631.

10. *Id.* at 172.

during the trip before a corporal marched them to the station The newly minted legionnaires traveled unescorted.”¹¹

Their destination? Algeria! From the onset, Algeria “was to be at once [the Legion’s] spiritual home and the crucible that would forge its unique character.”¹² It was there that the Legion earned its reputation as “Le Plus Beau Corps De France” (“The most handsome unit of France.”).¹³ German-American recruit Erwin Rosen, who enlisted in 1905, describes first seeing Oran, which “appeared quite suddenly between a narrow gap in the cliffs, ‘as if from a conjurer’s box . . . a maze of flat-roofed houses on hilly ground.’”¹⁴ A sergeant came on board, marched to the bow and shouted, “Legionnaires a moi!” (equivalent of “Attention, Legionnaires!”). Their lives would never be the same again.¹⁵

Porch omits no detail in his storied depiction of the Legion’s many Algerian adventures. When he describes the 1849 Battle of Zaatcha, one can imagine Gary Cooper charging through the palm trees, dashing out-fitted in his blue tunic and “kepi blanc” (the distinctive white legionnaire cap). His masterful prose places the reader in the thick of the battle grasping for more details.

Porch offers a fascinating recollection of the Third Republic’s little publicized 1895 disastrous campaign in Madagascar. It was here that General Duchesne ordered his troops to “march or die.”¹⁶ A more accurate description of General Duchesne’s command might have been “march and die!”

The French Foreign Legion has all too often earned its stripes through much needless suffering. In Madagascar, the French had not properly scouted out the terrain and “possibly [landed] on the wrong side of the island.”¹⁷ While waiting for a shipment of 2000 battle wagons designed to be pulled by mules over the hopelessly soggy terrain, General Duchesne allowed his troops to spend weeks in the tropical lowlands, where malaria

11. *Id.* at 173.

12. *Id.* at 11.

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.* at 171, 174.

15. *Id.* at 174.

16. *Id.* at 12, 269.

17. *Id.* at 269.

and dysentery decimated their fighting effectiveness.¹⁸ The Madagascar Campaign was won only at a terrible cost.

The traditional French refusal to “mount” the Legion (in the belief that horses and/or mules provided too convenient a vehicle for desertion) illustrates another poignant example of needless Legion suffering. The command’s stiff adherence to its “march or die” mentality often resulted in the Legion pathetically trudging after fleet-footed Arabian chargers across endless desert sands.

Who were these men? Porch digs deeply into Legion archives and diaries for the answer. Current Legion literature proclaims, “The legionnaire is seldom an angel but never a criminal.”¹⁹ This aura of mystery is due in no small part to the “anonymat,” the provision of the Legion enlistment contract which still exists today allowing a recruit to enlist under whatever name he chooses.

Certainly there have been “Beau Geste types [from the 1939 Paramount Picture starring Gary Cooper]²⁰ in the Legion,” but Porch maintains, “they [have] made up a minuscule minority.”²¹ Leon Randin wrote in 1906, “Take 100 of these unhappy soldiers, and you have a maximum of 20 or 30 scatter-brains or ‘declasses’ and 70 or 80 victims that misery or hopelessness have thrown into the chasm of the Legion.”²²

The Legion’s most reliable source of recruitment has been a constant since the very beginning: the political upheaval of other countries. “Russians after 1917, Spaniards in the wake of the Civil War in 1936, Germans in 1945 and, most recently, refugees from the former Soviet bloc” have kept the Legion ranks filled.²³ Others are “fleeing disastrous love affairs or scrapes with the law; [some] simply want a career or French citizenship. Most are looking for a new start.”²⁴ Porch concludes, “It’s the belief that one can break with the past and begin again, that salvation is to be found in the quest for danger and suffering that brings men to the Legion.”²⁵

18. *Id.* at 271, 274.

19. *See* THE LEGION, *supra* note 1, at 9.

20. *See generally id.* at 17 (of photographs); *see also*, Tala Skari & Giorgia Florio, *Through the Gates of Hell*, LIFE, Mar. 1996, at 39 [hereinafter *Gates of Hell*].

21. *See* THE LEGION, *supra* note 1, at 181.

22. *Id.*

23. *See Gates of Hell*, *supra* note 20, at 41.

24. *Id.*

25. *Id.*

Yet, “how [can] an elite unit come to be fashioned out of material regarded as unpromising?”²⁶ This question seems the primary impetus for Porch writing *The Legion*. With very few exceptions, the French Foreign Legion has rightfully earned its badge of honor as one of the toughest fighting forces in history. How can refugees from the normal motivating factors of home, family, community, and country be molded into a crack military force? Is it love for France (or the liberty France traditionally has represented)? Hardly. Porch tells us that, almost to a man, recruits who came to the Legion with such idealistic motivations are routinely ostracized as “fools.”²⁷ Neither is it the pay. While some legionnaires have of course enlisted for the “gamelle” (mess tin),²⁸ legionnaire pay was traditionally too low to be much of a draw; even today, a legionnaire recruit starts out at only \$300.00 per month.²⁹

So, what accounts for the Legion’s tenacious fighting spirit? The selection process is part of the answer. Currently, the Legion receives far too many applicants for its 8500 strong ranks. Thus it is relatively easy to weed out the physically unfit and unstable recruit.³⁰ To a certain extent, this has always been the case. “Avoid all intellectuals, argumentative people, persuasive speakers able to influence opinion . . . Give preference to farm workers, day laborers and all other manual trades,” a legionnaire officer advised in 1943.³¹

In the end, it seems the very thing which causes men to come to the Legion in the first place accounts for their valor and discipline under fire. “To those who have forsaken their past, the Legion provides a new family—a polyglot brotherhood of grit and endurance.”³² Combine this with the legendary Legion discipline (as well as extremely tough training), and the result is a fraternal bond uncommon to even the most homogeneous of “national” armies. The official Legion motto, “Legio Patria Nostra” (The Legion, Our Father) says it all.³³

Porch’s book is truly outstanding. Though it is too lengthy to read at a single sitting, *The Legion* moves right along and draws you in. Ulti-

26. See *THE LEGION*, *supra* note 1, at xiii.

27. *Id.* at 342.

28. *Id.*

29. See *Gates of Hell*, *supra* note 20, at 39.

30. See generally *THE LEGION*, *supra* note 1, at 9.

31. See *id.* at 621.

32. See *Gates of Hell*, *supra* note 20, at 39.

33. See generally *THE LEGION*, *supra* note 1, at 633, 10.

mately, it is Porch's storytelling ability, combined with his meticulous attention to historical detail, which carries the day. Through *The Legion*, you can vicariously experience life in the French Foreign Legion. You can pull back the curtain on its shrouded mysteries, experience the legionnaire camaraderie, feel the desperation, hope, and hopelessness all in one. In the end, you join the legionnaires in their quest for belonging and spiritual renewal.