

MARCHING WITH THE DEVIL



LEGENDS, GLORY AND
LIES IN THE FRENCH
FOREIGN LEGION

'THE FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION IS A PLACE OF FIERCE PASSION,
FEARS, FIGHTING AND FORNICATION. IN SHORT, IT IS JUST THE
THING FOR A YOUNG MAN WHO NEEDS TO TEST HIMSELF.'



DAVID MASON

Rather than pursue a legal career, in 1988, David Mason joined the French Foreign Legion. He stayed for five years and served in the Legion's elite Parachute Regiment. In 1998, alone with three camels, he walked across Australia at its widest point, carrying out the first recorded solo east-to-west crossing of the Simpson Desert. For this expedition he was awarded the Gold Medal of the Australian Geographical Society. David works in the Department of Defence as a lawyer, is an Army Reserve Major in the Australian Army Legal Corps and has served tours as a civilian adviser in Bougainville and three times in Iraq. In 2010 he returned from a year-long tour to Iraq, where he led a legal team working on the Rule of Law in the Iraqi Ministry of Interior.

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DAVID MASON

 hachette
AUSTRALIA

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Author's note

For nearly two centuries men have joined the French Foreign Legion. Men in its ranks have died, deserted or served their time with honour. Each man has a story of the things he saw, did and felt. This story is mine.



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2010

by Hachette Australia

(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)

Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney NSW 2000

www.hachette.com.au

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the National Library of Australia.

978 0 7336 2632 6

978 0 7336 2708 8 (ebook edition)

Cover design by Design by Committee

Map on page vii © 1992 Magellan Geographix/Corbis

*This book is dedicated to my friend Brett Duthie,
who helped me out of many tight spots when a lesser
man would not; to those few good men in the Legion;
and to those too few good men who stay.*



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PREFACE

If a man tells you he has never dreamed of joining the French Foreign Legion he is a liar, has no imagination, or both. The Legion is a place of fierce passion, fears, fighting and fucking. In short, it is the perfect home for a young man who needs to test himself somewhere unforgiving, uncaring and uncompromising.

In 1894 a French Foreign Legion general told his troops, '*Légionnaires, vous êtes faits pour mourir. Je vous envoie là où on meurt*' – which translates as: Legionnaires, you are made for dying, I will send you where you can die.

In my mid teens, while living in suburban Canberra, reading and dreaming about adventures in far off places, those words were powerful and confronting. Rather than fatalistic or focused solely on death, I read them as a challenge and an invitation to live. The words, and the feelings they evoked, remained deep inside me; I would always be someone who needed to test himself.

By the time I eventually joined the Legion in Paris and began a five-year contract of service, I was twenty-seven. After six years of study, I'd graduated from the Australian National University in Canberra. I had spent a year as an associate to a Supreme Court judge in Darwin in the Northern Territory. It was the late 1980s and, on the face of it, with an Honours degree, a Law degree and a good first job, I was on my way to a promising career at the bar.

But it seemed to me then, as it does now, that there had to be more to life. I watched my friends sucking cancer into their lungs, growing fat and grey before my eyes, and I knew that their lives of mixed portfolios, new cars and big houses was not for me. I had other ideas.

I spent a childhood on Canberra's suburban fringe, among the golden paddocks, the muddy dams and the dry eucalypt bush of Black Mountain. I spent weekends with my brothers, trapping rabbits and yabbing, playing cricket in summer and football in winter. Bloody knees and ripped shirts from playing British Bulldog in primary school were tended to by my mother with stinging solution and a needle. I broke my arms and wrists so many times falling from trees my mother asked a doctor if I had soft bones. He looked at her, then me, and said it was more likely I had a soft head. School was seldom a bore and I did well; sometimes very well. Perhaps I did too well, too easily, and had too much time to dream.

Even from my middle teens, I saw my life as being made up of a number of parts. I knew I had to have an education; it would give me choices as I grew older. I wanted military experience and to serve my country, to learn to live among men. Finally, I wanted to do something that was unique – perhaps write a poem or create a painting that moved people to tears or song, or even climb a mountain. These were things that I understood I wanted to try to do, and I challenged myself to ensure that I did get them done.

I embraced these life challenges because in my world, the industrialised, middle-class western world, there are few measures of worth other than consumption and the possession of things. Unless

you seek it out, there is no rite of passage, nothing to temper or define you. A man can hide, passive and complacent, in a large organisation and never really be exposed; forever fearful of challenge and change. Me, I wanted to be tested, so I looked for things against which I could measure myself and learn.

During my years at Canberra High School I left home to hitchhike around the country. I loved the sunrises, the open plains and the far horizons that I found. I loved, too, the frank conversations of men. I worked at an open-cut coalmine in central Queensland and, later, down shafts mining opal on Lightning Ridge.

At university I was elected President of College, played all the sport I could fit into a week and trained myself until I was lean and hard. I boxed, relished the fear of entering a ring and was a Australian Intervarsity runner-up. I parachuted, ran up mountains and sometimes ran for twenty-four hours without sleep. Neglecting any studies I did not like, I excelled in what interested me and told too many lies to too many young women I did like.

Still, this was not enough. I wasn't satisfied, no matter what I achieved; and even when I failed, it didn't seem to touch me.

There was something missing – a meaning, a thing truly significant. But if not sport, sex or drinking until I fell over, what was it to be? The answer had to be something that went to the core of me. I wanted something powerful, yet I didn't know where to look. No one I asked could guide me.

I looked to the men I knew and sought inspiration. But there was nothing in their lives that moved me. Instead, when I watched my father and other men, it was as if they were insubstantial, as if the shadows they cast were indistinct. So, if they were not my role models, where to look? Sport, acting and politics – there seemed little that appealed.

The great explorers and travellers did strike a chord with me, though. They risked everything in the pursuit of what they wanted to achieve. In driving themselves they sometimes had to abandon their home, their country and their security. I imagined that many of them were lonely and felt exposed. This appealed to me because I could relate to such aloneness; I felt alone in a world that seemed to value things that I did not.

I needed adventure, an experience that exposed me – raw and hurting. I wanted to see the hurt, and wonder and worry at the feeling it left, like at a scab on a wound. No one I knew seemed to understand this. My parents certainly didn't. I was not long a teenager when I first took off alone to hitchhike the countryside. My father ignored me. My mother gently shook her head and told her friends I would grow out of whatever it was that drove me. She was wrong. I never did and I would leave home, for weeks or months at a time, with little warning.

Was I reacting to something? Was there emotional hurt or neglect? It did not feel so then. There was a hellion inside me. It told me I was surrounded by banality; empty, fruitless, meaningless life that had little value beyond its existence. The question was not so much one of escape from a world I did not like. Rather, it was a need to reach out and become much more than I was. I wanted – no, I needed – to feel my heart soar, to sob at things that moved me. There was no finding that in peak-hour traffic standing in line for a lunchtime salad roll or negotiating a mortgage with a bank.

So I looked beyond the world of university and law. My adventure had to be unique and difficult. It was to be my crucible, and if it were anything less, it would be too easy and therefore of no value to me.

I knew I had to leave my hometown, my own shores, to have a great adventure. I embraced the hellion and the fire that drove me from the prospect of an easy life. I knew then, as I know now, there are many who feel like me. The difference is in actually doing something about it, in using the fire

a fuel to do extraordinary things.

I joined the French Foreign Legion but I could have attempted to climb Mount Everest – both extraordinary things. I chose the Legion because no one I knew had been there or could tell me anything about it. The Legion was remote, alien, intimidating and far removed from my own life, and so all the more attractive. Films and books told me it was full of men who were violent, who whored, drank and fought like demons among themselves and against their enemies. I liked the sound of that.

After its creation by King Louis-Philippe of France, on 10 March 1831, the Legion was sent to Algeria, in North Africa, where it would see a great deal of fighting over more than a century. In fact, the Legion has fought all over the world: in Spain, Morocco, Mexico, Madagascar, Turkey, Europe, Indochina, Syria, Congo, Chad, Djibouti and more. I read that one of the Legion mottos was ‘March ou crève’ (March or die). I loved the sound of that, too. It was unambiguous, uncompromising.

Along with the idea of a military life, the Legion’s appeal was its reputation as one of the world’s elite units. It was supposedly well trained, had good equipment and its men were said to be well led and honed lean. In the Army Reserve, I had been in Norforce, one of Australia’s northern surveillance units, and as an infantry lieutenant later, I’d relished being outside, leading others when the going got tough – when it was wet, when we were tired, when more was asked of us than we thought we could give. In those six years as a Reservist I came first in a number of courses and considered I’d been well trained by some of the best infantry and Special Forces soldiers in the world. I could read a map, knew about weapons and was trained to lead an infantry platoon in an attack. But while the Australian Army Reserve was all great fun, we would never be deployed or go to war. I wanted more than endless exercises.

From all that I had been able to research, the Legion’s men had created for themselves, for *la Légion* and for France, an unsurpassed history of pain, grief and glory. I *really* liked the sound of that. Surely joining the Legion was the extraordinary adventure, the crucible I’d been searching for. It was just the place for me.

I’ve waited almost two decades to tell my story. Why? Because I needed that time to put my service in the Foreign Legion into context and to judge some of the men I met against many I’ve met since. In the ensuing years, I walked alone across Australia with three camels. Later I tried to walk across one of the world’s largest salt lakes and nearly died. I served overseas as a civilian adviser on Bougainville in Papua New Guinea, and then three times in Iraq. The Australian, French and United States governments have decorated me.

Eventually, I collected my thoughts on the Legion, on the men I met and the things I did up until the end of my contract in May 1993. Not much about my experiences while a Legionnaire gladdens my heart. On the contrary, most of them diminished me in various ways. My sense of self was challenged and, at least in part, corrupted.

Some aspects of my service in the Legion made me stronger and since my contract concluded I have been gentler with myself. More than anything, I know I am able to endure the difficult, the hurtful, the heartbreaking.

And now, it is time to tell my story.

1

ENLISTMENT

Voilà la Légion.
(There goes the Legion.)

On Friday, 20 May 1988, I left the Paris Métro at Château de Vincennes and walked along the footpath on a spring morning of crisp air and newly opened flowers. I mounted the cobblestone slope to Fort de Nogent, where I was greeted by a red and green sign screwed into the stone blocks of the fort's wall. The panel of white letters read: *Légion Étrangère: Recrutement.*

My heart beat faster and my throat seemed to swell. I had travelled across the world to do something that the average lawyer would never consider doing. In fact, if I wanted to ruin my career, along with committing rape, murder or robbery, this was probably one of the ways to really cut it short. But I wanted more than a career. I wanted to join the force that told the world its standards were high and exacting; that expected excellence and did not tolerate those unwilling to give their best. I wanted to be with others who sought a military life and who demanded to be outstanding.

So I rapped on the nail-embossed heavy wooden doors until a grille slid back to reveal a shadowed face. The shadow was topped by a *képi blanc*, the iconic hat of the Legionnaire. From the shadow came a one-syllable word that was more a challenge than a question: '*Oui!*'

Then, having for years silently rehearsed the words, I said, 'I want to join the French Foreign Legion.' After a brief pause to study me, and the bag in my hand, he demanded, '*Passeport!*'

I pushed my passport through the grille and the citadel's door opened just enough to allow me to step across the threshold into the darkness within. As I did, a curious feeling swept over me. It was as if for a moment, time eddied around me. I felt part of that file of thousands of men who had done, and would do, what I had just done and crossed the divide into the French Foreign Legion. At that moment I was part of the great succession of young men looking for something beyond themselves.

From the half-light of the covered way where a portcullis would once have stood, I could see bright whitewashed façades around a square dominated by a green grassy mound that was bisected by a long disused carriageway. The Legionnaire who had opened the door, wearing a skin-tight dark green uniform and buckled black boots, indicated with a horizontal wave of his hand that I should move to my left, and I passed through another doorway into a small windowless room. That first Legionnaire I met I never got to know; not his name, his past nor his future. He would forever be remembered as a shadow.

The room had a concrete floor, four metal-grey chairs lined along one of the equally grey walls, and a poster pinned in black of a severe-faced Legionnaire looking into the distance. The air was stale with old cigarette smoke and a door too long closed. Like the chairs, the walls were smooth with many coats of paint. I sat, looked at the ceiling, waited, and looked at the poster again. My watch told me I waited fifteen minutes.

Abruptly, a plump fellow bustled through the doorway. He wore a green uniform stretched tight across his belly, with silver metal wings on his chest and two medal ribbons over his heart. The three coloured stripes on a green velcro tab over his diaphragm – two green and one gold – signified he held the rank of *caporal-chef* or senior corporal.

‘Australian,’ he declared. ‘Good. *Allons-y.*’

This last made no impression on me, as I spoke little or no French at all. He laughed and said ‘Come. Yes, come with me.’

I picked up my bag, threw it across my left shoulder, and followed him out the door to the carriageway and then into the spring sunshine of the main square. We passed to the left of the grassy mound and climbed some steps up to the entrance of one of the bright white façades.

Inside, a bitter antiseptic scent hung in the air as if the place were a recently cleaned latrine. On the first floor I followed the Legionnaire with the green and gold stripes along a corridor with a wooden floor buffed to a glassy sheen. He pointed me into another small room, containing only a narrow desk that looked to belong to some minor functionary. Gesturing to the bag I carried, he said, ‘Empty.’

As I did so, another man walked into the room. He wore two green stripes on the velcro tab on his chest – a *caporal*, or corporal – and was carrying a clipboard.

‘I hear you’re an Aussie,’ he said, in an accent that was pure East London.

‘That’s right. What’s he doing?’ I asked, nodding towards the Frenchman.

He put hands on his hips and smiled. ‘Just checking your kit for knives and shit. No worries.’

The *caporal-chef* was quickly making inroads into my bag. Pockets of blue jeans and shirts were closely scrutinised. Various items were placed at the end of the table. These included my camera, a Swiss Army knife, a pewter flask of whiskey, my address book, wallet with 850 French francs and a large envelope containing my biographical details and personal documents.

The English *caporal* made an inventory of everything I had. Jeans, leather bomber-jacket, new trainers, T-shirts, shaving gear and the rest. At the bottom of his list he drew a line, under which he began detailing the objects that had been separated.

‘The stuff we’ve got here we keep in a safe,’ he explained. ‘The rest of your shit, including the gear you’ve got on, apart from your shaving kit and two pairs of jocks, put back in the bag ... Oh yeah. Is that flask full?’ He was pointing to the pewter container.

It was and I nodded. ‘Drink it all now,’ he continued. ‘Because if you don’t, some other bastard sure as hell will.’

So I drank the wonderful liquid while being relieved of my bag and most of my gear. The *caporal* departed with the bag over his shoulder and a few final words of reassurance for me: ‘You’ll be all right. We’ll look after this stuff till you leave here.’

I was led by the plump *caporal-chef* to yet another room, where he told me to strip and gave me a cursory medical examination. He directed me onto some scales and recorded where the arrow peaked, took my height, made me open my mouth, checked me for scars and tattoos, and then checked that I had two balls and an arsehole. Over the next few months my arse got looked at more often than it had in my entire life.

He inscribed the results on another sheet of paper. ‘Okay,’ he said finally. ‘*C’est bon.*’

I pulled on my boxer shorts and again followed the *caporal-chef* back out into the empty corridor. He cried out, ‘*Gamelin, viens là!*’

I supposed it was Gamelin who appeared from a distant doorway. He ran towards the *caporal-chef*, who came to attention, arms by his sides, palms seemingly gripping his thighs, his chin elevated. This man was in his early twenties, slight, with black hair, dark eyes and small bat-like ears. He wore a brown

stained, ill-fitting dark green tracksuit and canvas tennis shoes that might once have been white, but were now snot-blotched dirty grey.

Indicating to me with an inclination of his head, the *caporal-chef* addressed himself to the brown stain in dirty green, and said something about a '*tenue de sport*'. With shaving kit and spare underwear in hand, I followed Gamelin to draw my very first Legion uniform. Like his, mine was stained green tracksuit and dirty canvas tennis shoes. This I gathered was the *tenue de sport*, or sports uniform.

After slipping into my not-so-new clothing, and still with my gear under one arm, I followed Gamelin to my bunk. The sleeping quarters was a high-ceilinged, grey-walled utilitarian space, filled with double bunks and with tall windows along one wall. A quick scan around the room told me it could hold more than forty prospective Legionnaires.

In my dirty green tracksuit, inexplicably sticky around the thighs, I was left alone for a moment on the bunk I'd been allocated. It was not long before two men wearing similarly dirty green *tenues de sport* introduced themselves. According to Tom's tattoo he was an ex-Royal Marine. Benny was from Denmark, barrel-chested and sporting a golden beard. 'Just call me Hagar,' he said. And I did.

A few minutes later, at midday precisely, there was a shrill whistle blast and a cry of '*Soupe!*' 'Lunch,' Tom translated.

We jogged out the door, the rubber soles of our canvas shoes slapping on the shiny wooden surface of the corridor, down the stairs and outside, where we joined other men who were forming up in two columns. We were counted by the English *caporal*, who then gave our number to the generous-bellied *caporal-chef* I'd also met earlier. Marking this number on a piece of paper, the Frenchman declared '*C'est bon. Allons-y, les engagés gamelle!*' And like dirty green ducks we followed in his wake.

Later I asked Tom for a translation of the *caporal-chef's* parting remark and learned that *les engagés gamelle* meant 'mess-tin enlistees'; in other words, to the unimpressed Frenchman, we'd all enlisted solely for the food. As Tom put it: 'The Frenchies think we're shit. Why else would we want to join up but to be fed?' Looking around the mess hall and viewing some of the skinny, sunken-faced specimens from whom the green tracksuits hung too loosely, I couldn't help thinking that could well have been the case.

Lunch came on large communal steel platters. There were six pieces of chicken swimming in sauce and beans. On the wooden tables, colour-bleached and corners worn from years of scrubbing, were long sticks of bread with hard crusts and interiors of little substance. If you didn't like the look of the main dish, you could always try to fill up on the bread. Many did.

As steel forks and spoons clattered against the metal trays, and the chatter of many languages filled the room, I had to lean in to hear Tom, who had already formed a rather poor view of our fellow aspiring Legionnaires. 'I can't believe these bastards,' he offered. 'You'd think they hadn't eaten for days. Bloody pigs.'

Most of the green tracksuits were Frenchmen, with a few 'Brits' (that is, anyone from the British Isles, South Africa or indeed the Commonwealth – in fact, anyone who said the word 'fuck'), along with some West Germans, Yugoslavs and others. There was even a hopeful from the Ivory Coast whose skin was as shiny and black as an oil slick. He spoke melodious French and smiled with pleasure and surprise when I introduced myself and shook his hand. We had all crossed the divide and were to live, sleep and eat together, perhaps for as long as five years.

That day was a Friday and it seemed we had an uneventful weekend ahead of us. Usually on Sunday nights, potential recruits from Fort de Nogent in Paris caught the train to Aubagne, the Foreign

Legion's administrative headquarters in the south of France, near the historic Mediterranean port Marseilles. Unfortunately for me, the Monday after I enlisted was a holiday, so it turned out we have to stay an extra week before leaving for the south.

We waited and were wasteful with our time. We spent most of it under the watchful eye of a *caporal* in a smoke-filled room, feigning interest in the flickering images on television. Our number grew about forty Legion hopefuls, many of whom sat on the plastic chairs, smoked, clapped and laughed their own farts, and scratched at their balls through their tracksuit pants.

The tedium of waiting was interrupted by two events. The first was my presentation before an officer, a *colonel*, who spoke to me in French and had me sign and countersign a number of pages. 'Tous ça c'est normale,' he told me. There was no translation into English but the Cockney *caporal* had told me what to expect. It was the Legion's contract of engagement. It meant I would be Legionnaire for five years. The authorities in Aubagne could break this contract if I did not meet the requirements or those of the recruit course. I have a copy of the contract still.

The second interruption was a visit to a hospital for tests that included checking my blood pressure, knee-bending, eye tests and an abrupt and unnecessarily exploratory rectal examination. Neither well greased nor gentle, it brought tears to my eyes.

That evening, after the hospital visit and before lights out at ten o'clock, the English *caporal* took me aside in the hallway to give me some free advice. With hands on hips and lips close to my ear he said, 'Listen mate, you've got to get yourself out of the shit as soon as you can. My advice to you is get yourself promoted fast – otherwise you'll go fucking mad. This place is shit and full of people who are shit.' He was no longer conspiratorial; he was angry.

I must have looked puzzled, so he went on. 'This place is not like what you or the world thinks it is but you'll find that out soon enough.' He was silent then. Shrugging his shoulders, he walked away into the shadows at the end of the corridor, the buckles of his boots clinking gently in time with his footfall on the wooden boards.

I soon learned that from the moment we arrived the selection process had already begun. Before the week was out, the fellow from the Ivory Coast, a Yugoslav and a couple of dark-haired, rat-eyed Frenchmen had all retrieved their gear and been escorted to the front gate, never to be seen again.

On my final night at Fort de Nogent, I lay in my bottom bunk thinking about the move to Aubagne the next day. In preparation for the grand event, we had been issued our second Legion uniform. Like the tracksuit, this was also second-hand. It comprised stained French Army combat greens, a pair of boots with the usual buckles, and a beret, seemingly large and flat enough to land a helicopter on top of it. I did not feel the least bit military, but I supposed this was hardly the point.

Our money was taken from us and we carried no identification. We were different now, separate from all others. We were in an in-between place: not soldiers, not civilians. To the NCOs around us, at least, we were the lowest forms of life. We were not even recruits yet, merely enlistees, hopefuls, little more than flesh and bone to be processed. No one listened to what we said. No one looked us in the face.

I felt vulnerable. I knew little of what lay ahead but I was relatively untroubled, as already I knew that life and love were like that. What was significant to me was that I had no control over what was to come. I had willingly thrown myself into a world that was not my own, a crucible of my own choosing, and was already being tested.

I thought about the nights I'd spent camped out in Australia's remote places, watching the stars and dreaming of adventures in other places among different people. I was finally where I wanted to be –

an extraordinary adventure.

~~Tom stirred in the bed above mine, breaking my train of thought. Looking up to the mesh of his bunk, I watched the thin mattress squeeze through the triangles of wire. I thought for a moment of my girlfriend's warm thigh inside black mesh stockings. I supposed there would be no pleasures of the flesh here, certainly not for months. My sigh at that recognition joined the nocturnal sounds of groans, moans and farts of the others on their squeaking, creaking beds.~~

In keeping with decades of Legion process and routine, late the next afternoon – Sunday, 29 May – after echoed yelling in long halls and enclosed courtyards, a hurried lunch and five rollcalls, a Legion bus spat us out at the Gare de Lyon, the main railway station for trains to the south of France. As we stepped off, there was no ‘*Bonne chance*’ from the driver. Instead, just a hiss as the door shut. We were merely the latest of thousands.

The well-practised *caporal-chef* lined us up in two long columns. He had a thick wad of documents in a briefcase in his left hand, and he waved us towards the overnight mail train to Marseilles with his right. As we snaked through the station, green duffel bags across our shoulders, trying to keep the ridiculous berets on our heads with free hands, not one person looked directly at us. Instead, there were quick, oblique glances and the shaking of heads. I even heard a muttered ‘*Voilà la Légion*’ (There goes the Legion). For some reason the *caporal-chef* was in very good humour. He nodded to the passing civilians and murmured things to them in reassuring tones. Then he indicated us with his thumb and laughed.

We soon found ourselves in economy class compartments with facing bench seats. I realised that unless I secured a window seat my chances of sleep would be very slim. I got myself one, with Haggen opposite. Before settling in I went off to the toilet at the end of the carriage, only to return and discover that a Frenchman named Becker had claimed my place. I thought for a moment and realised I didn't want to start off on the wrong foot.

‘Get the fuck out of my seat!’ I shouted.

Becker moved, not looking at me, and bleated something in French to others in the compartment. Among the words I heard him say ‘*les mad fuckings*’, as I was to learn, a label applied to me and anyone else who spoke English and stood up for themselves.

What did I care? Like most of the others, Becker stood all night. There was no room to move and after another rollcall, the *caporal-chef* locked us in the compartment. In the close, stifling heat, just before I dozed off, I wondered why it was so necessary to isolate us from the world.

2

THE LEGION'S HOME

Montrez vos culs!
(Show your arses!)

Arriving at the Gare Saint-Charles in Marseilles just after 7 am, how could we be anything but tired, apprehensive and uncertain as to what the future would hold? Hustled by the *caporal-chef* into two dirty, crumpled, twisting green lines, we headed outside to a bus sent to collect us new arrivals. As we climbed in, the driver, another *caporal*, looked at us with an open sneer and the disdain of someone who had seen it all before.

We headed north-east and inland along the autoroute for some 15 kilometres to the small town of Aubagne and Legion headquarters. Passing through the gates between the walls into Quartier Viénois, the guard, in parade dress of *képi blanc*, red epaulettes and a wide blue band of cloth around his belt, presented arms. This is the base for the *1er Régiment Étranger*, or 1 RE.

The first thing I saw, at some 250 metres across the parade ground, was the *Monument aux Morts*, the memorial to the Legion's dead. Looking like a square marble tomb, it has a bronze globe on top and is guarded by four armed Legionnaires from different eras in Legion history, also in bronze, each corner. This was the Legion's most significant monument, brought to France from Sidi-Bel-Abbes in Algeria, the Legion's former headquarters, in 1962. The bus turned to the left and climbed a small rise as we passed the *foyer du Légionnaire*, a two-storey white building that housed a bar and a shop and was the nearest thing here to an other ranks' club. The *caporal-chef* laughed again, saying 'Voilà, beaucoup de bières!' (Lots of beer there!) Another left and we passed through a second gate into the *Section Engagés Volontaires*, a compound surrounded by a 4-metre-high cyclone fence. As before, we were kept from the view of others and the world was kept from us: we were in a compound within a cage.

But at least we'd arrived. Disembarking, we took our duffel bags, which contained our returned personal items, and single-filed into the building marked *Réception*. There were green-clad Legionnaires to the left and right of our line, urging us along and shepherding us inside. We headed down some stairs and into a large windowless room, lit by ceiling-mounted fluorescent lighting encased in iron grilles.

In the unnatural light, away from the morning sun, everything seemed to lose its glow and become monochromatic – just shades of grey and black and white. Along one end of the room was a long, low counter behind which stood men with the familiar stripes of *caporal* or *caporal-chef* on their chests. Above the low hum of uncertain voices came an order: '*Deshabillez-vous!*' I looked left and right and see men forming up before the counter and taking off their combat greens.

Once we'd all stripped, we stood there, forty young hopefuls, with clothes in small bundles at our ankles and, for those without underwear, balls in their hands. And we waited. Legionnaires behind the counter smirked, laughed and pointed at the naked men before them. It was humiliating and I felt sick.

at my own powerlessness, only made endurable because so many others were in the same position me.

I heard what sounded like an order: ‘*Demi-tour droite!*’

Beside me men turned around, their backs now to the counter. So there we were, tired, disorientated and without breakfast, when another voice barked, ‘*Baissez vos culottes!*’

Men around me who still had underwear on let it fall to their ankles. I followed suit. The voice then ordered, ‘*Montrez vos culs!*’ Men bent over. I now had a translation for that particular French phrase: Show your arses!

I stopped momentarily and heard what I thought was ‘What is this bullshit?’, followed shortly afterwards by the sound of a fist on flesh and a moan. We waited too long while low-toned discussion took place behind the counter. The order came at last: ‘*Levez vos culottes!*’

Turning around, we again faced sneers and derision from the Legionnaires on the other side of the counter, while fellows in the familiar greasy-green Legion tracksuits collected our cast-off uniforms. Standing there in underwear that varied from nothing to baggy boxers, we were called in alphabetical order to the counter, where our belongings were searched.

As I waited for someone to call out my name, I glanced around at my fellow hopefuls. A few looked at their feet, as though they were ashamed of something. Others looked at the ceiling, perhaps to remind themselves where they were. It seemed to me that this Legion process had little to do with treating men with respect; it was closer to dehumanising them. I didn’t understand why it was being done and I certainly didn’t like it.

Before long, the sound of my name filled the room. I turned out the contents of my duffel bag onto the benchtop before an examining *caporal-chef*. Of particular interest to him were my leather bomber jacket, running shoes and Swiss Army knife. He compared the inventory made in Paris with what I now had before him. My flask was missing. He muttered something and shrugged his shoulders. He then took up the only book I had brought with me – an anthology of nineteenth-century English literature.

‘Ah, intellectual, non? Here, French only,’ he said, and smiled. He then watched my face as, wetting his lower lip with his tongue, he began ripping pages from the book, letting them fall to the floor. ‘I am your friend. *La Légion* no place for intellectuals.’

I looked into his narrow, dark eyes and decided that, in some circles anyway, it certainly was not.

He went through the pockets of my jeans and jacket with a dexterity that indicated experience and had me fill out a docket with my name written at the top. This docket was attached to a duffel bag in which all my remaining belongings were stuffed. He told me that if I was rejected or failed to finish the instruction, I would have them all returned to me. If I did stay, he continued, my belongings would go to the Red Cross. He then had me sign another form and waved me away with a disdainful swish of his wrist.

At the conclusion of the search, we new arrivals each had nothing save the underwear in which we stood (if we had any), as well as a pair of socks, a towel and shaving kit. Quickly issued with another green tracksuit and more tennis shoes, we were led off to our *chambres*. These were rooms of one room with white walls and white-tiled floors, eight beds, mattresses, sheets and long round pillows. Hagar, Tom and I secured adjoining beds.

It was becoming clear to me that to survive in this place I needed two things: a disposition that did not take to heart every little humiliation and a couple of mates upon whom I could rely. We were hungry and had no idea of what was to happen next. We stayed in our rooms and waited. No one spoke much; we sat on our beds, each thinking through the events of the morning.

And so the hours passed. After an afternoon of whistle blasts and yelling, of being lined up and counted, our names called too many times to remember, and an evening of sandwiches and, later, tea and nightmares for some of the younger would-be recruits, we made it through our first night in Aubagne.

At 0630 hours the next day, after more blowing of whistles, shouting and counting of bodies, we were escorted the 200 metres or so over to the regimental *infirmirie*. For the second day in a row we had no breakfast.

Ordered to strip again, we sat on hard wooden benches, bare feet on cool tiled floors, waiting. In alphabetical order, we were then called to another room. We learned from those who were first that we had to give blood; this much was obvious from the cotton swabs they held to their arms and the fact that their faces looked very pale.

‘I just don’t believe this shit,’ said Tom.

‘Fucking crap, man,’ agreed Hagar.

Then it was my turn.

I have never enjoyed having steel pointy things being stuck into me. To distract myself from the inevitable, I said hello to the medic, who wore a white T-shirt and a white coat to his knees that was spattered with blood. I nodded to the *caporal* who had escorted us from the holding centre. After waiting until the white plastic-covered bench, coloured with streaks of red, was wiped down with a bloody towel, I lay down and extended my right arm. Then I became very interested in the procedure.

This fellow in blood-spattered white wore no gloves as he prepared to stick into me a rather large calibre needle attached to a clear, semi-flaccid tube. Having tied the tourniquet, he held a test tube in one hand and, with the other, slipped the needle into my vein. I could only hope the needle wasn’t the same as the one he had used on the others.

Blood flowed down the plastic tube, turning it red. Then it flowed into the glass test tube. The medic had to exercise some dexterity to ensure my blood dripped into the glass tube, but gradually the dark red liquid flowed up its sides.

The floor was greasy with blood, I noticed, leaving me to suppose that some of my predecessors had been very generous or the medic less than coordinated. Then I felt the snap at the tourniquet released and sensed, rather than saw, the removal of the needle. The medic placed cotton wool on the puncture and folded my arm over as he waved me off the bench and outside the room. I slid from the bench, stepped onto the floor and nearly slipped on the thick, dark red blood. My feet smeared it across the tiles and red footprints followed me outside.

‘This has got to be the fucking nineteenth century!’ I declared once I’d made it beyond the door. I was appalled, and couldn’t help needing to share my thoughts. ‘Gentlemen,’ I said to a room of mostly near-naked young men, the majority of whom did not understand a word of English, ‘either France does not care about the AIDS virus or it’s a third world country. Which is it?’

‘Fuck knows,’ replied Tom. Hagar just looked very unhappy and shook his head.

The morning disappeared with more waiting, this time to have our height and weight measured. After heading back to our compound and lunch, we were then brought back to the *infirmirie* for the afternoon.

Later that day, a dentist examined me. I walked through the door into his surgery and he indicated for me to open my mouth. He said, ‘Okay, *ça va*,’ and I was waved away as he called for the next man. I never even sat down.

The last activity of the day was a visit before a tribunal of three medical personnel. In English, the

asked if I had ever been in hospital, had any physical problems or currently took any medication. To these questions I replied as well as I could, telling them about my allergy to penicillin and that I had joined for adventure and the possibility of action.

‘Okay Mason, *c’est bon*,’ said a beribboned *officier* with three gold horizontal stripes on his chest. ‘You can go.’

On our third morning at Aubagne, we had what passed in the Legion for ‘intelligence tests’. A short, plump, almost breathless *caporal-chef* went out of his way to impress upon us the importance of doing well. He said that if we performed our best, there would be much opportunity for us in the Legion. Anything to give myself a chance, I figured, so I tried my best to answer the multiple-choice tests of mathematics and logic.

Unfortunately, my educational achievements were of little help. The English was of a type I had never encountered before; it was imprecise, the meanings opaque and obscure. Looking around the room, I could see I wasn’t the only English speaker having problems. Tom happened to look up and, meeting my gaze, he lifted his eyes to the heavens, shook his head and mouthed, ‘Bullshit ...’

After an hour on one paper, we were given a short break before the next. A young Hungarian was given a paper in Romanian because there were no remaining tests in his own language. I hoped for his sake he was bilingual. Not that speaking the right language had helped me much, of course.

After a morning of exams, we were bussed off to spend the afternoon at Lavéran, the military hospital in northern Marseilles, to wait for a chest X-ray. The hospital was a place of greasy floors and walls, dirt, cigarette smoke and apathetic staff. The patients looked pallid and sickly – not unusual for a hospital, but made worse no doubt by all the chocolate they seemed to eat and their ever-present cigarettes. Looking around, I hoped I would never end up there. In contrast, even the blood-soaked *infirmierie* didn’t look too bad.

At the end of that third day I’d had enough of waiting around for health checks and intelligence tests. I was fed up with being passive, looking forward instead to regaining some control, to experiencing some physical challenges. But I had no idea when that would begin.

There was no life to the Legion legend. Not yet anyway.

3

GESTAPO

Vous êtes Légionnaires. Nix boom-boom!
(You are Legionnaires. No fighting!)

The following day, Thursday, 2 June, I presented myself to Legion security – colloquially known as ‘the Gestapo’ – at the curiously named *Bureau des Statistiques de la Légion Étrangère*, or BSLE. The Gestapo were housed on the second floor of the administration building, located just outside of the compound within Quartier Viénot. I was unprepared for the reception I received there.

An Englishman with pale blue eyes like ice, a bleached freckled face and close-cropped ginger hair met me at the door and waved me into his office. A jacket hung on the wall to one side of his desk. Above the left breast pocket was a red and blue ribbon, below it a metallic brevet, similar to that worn on the tunics of German soldiers in the Second World War. In letters about the circumference, it said *Commando Guyane*. On the desk sat a small plaque that read ‘Westway’. His rank was sergeant, or as the French say, *sergent*.

Looking at me, *Sergent Westway* said, ‘I’m the guy charged with finding out if you are full of shit or not. Have a seat.’ He opened an envelope that I saw contained my passport and driver’s licence together with the biographical details I had brought along with me to France. The two sheets of information took a couple of minutes for him to read.

When he’d finished, he looked up from his papers. ‘I don’t believe this,’ he said with genuine disbelief. ‘What the fuck are you doing here, Mason? You should be at home laying the foundation for a successful career in law. Get out of my office now. Go and pick up your kit, if there’s anything the thieving bastards out there have left – and go home. You’re wasting my time. You don’t belong here.’

I was sure this harangue was merely part of the screening process. He was testing my resolve. The *sergent* met my eyes and demanded, ‘Well, what are you waiting for?’

I gave him a measured, truthful reply. ‘I’ve come a long way to join the Legion and that is what I intend to do.’

He sighed, put his hands behind his head and leaned back in his chair. ‘Jesus Christ, you’re a fuckw... Okay, very commendable. Listen, I was at university myself, in England, then at the Sorbonne. And I’m telling you, this is no place for you. Have you looked around at the kind of people who are here? I’m telling you that we wouldn’t piss on 90 per cent of them if they were on fire. And you already know I’m right.’

After a short pause, he shifted himself forward, put his elbows on the desk and crossed his arms, preparing for a different tack. ‘Let me tell you something. You might think this is melodramatic, but hear me out. I see your life as a Rolls-Royce parked in the driveway. All you have to do is open the door, start it up and drive away. What do you say to that?’

I looked square into his icy-blue eyes. ‘You’re right. I could go back home and do just as you say, but that would be too easy. That’s not what life is all about.’

There was another pause, during which I reminded myself that I had come to look for something I could never know at home. I wanted fear and uncertainty. To play it safe was to die a death in life. People were lining up to climb Everest, had crossed deserts and reached the North and South Pole. For me, the French Foreign Legion was the place to look for a part of myself. Even though I was becoming aware that the Legion was going to be difficult for reasons other than I'd expected, I wanted to join.

Westway broke the silence with another sigh. 'Fuck me, a thinker in search of himself ... Most people in this world would call you a bloody idiot, but I'll do the best I can for you. How well did you do in your exams here?' I shook my head and replied that I had no idea.

The *sergent* told me to wait there in his office. He was gone for almost five minutes and during that time I watched the other voluntary enlistees, or *engagés volontaires* (EVs), through the office window which happened to look out over the EVs' compound. I knew my own reasons but I pondered what had brought them to this place. In Paris and during the few days at Aubagne, I had learned that many came because it was their last chance to do something with their lives, or rebuild their lives. They were often failures, and the Legion was, for most of them, the failure's choice. For men like this the Legion was a refuge; a chance to rehabilitate their self-worth through self-sacrifice to a myth and an ideal greater than themselves. Even better, the myth and the idea were things of which they could become a part.

While I knew these were generalisations, there were common themes among the groups that joined. As far as I could make out, the Western Europeans – Germans, Scandinavians and others – the assorted Brits and those from the United States were, like me, looking for a military life that challenged them. Many had either left their own militaries because they were dissatisfied with peacetime service, or they had been shown the door for excessive drinking. For some, the former led to the latter.

For the French, who formed the majority of those who joined – though they were often enlisted Belgians, Monegasques or Canadians (after all, the Legion was *Étrangère*) – they appeared to fit into that category of men whose lives had been punctuated by failure. They were usually directionless. Certainly, there were those who had served in the French Army, but most of these had been national servicemen, and that hardly counted. The Frenchmen told me they were searching for *la gloire* – something more than themselves – which sounded familiar. Joining the Legion also had the advantage, they said, of feeding you regularly and giving you a uniform that the whole world respected.

As for many of the others, including Eastern Europeans and North Africans, it seemed that being fed and having a roof over their heads were the main motivations. For these men, French citizenship after five years (which meant access to social security), and a pension granted by the French government after fifteen years' service, was very attractive.

Importantly, the common thing that brought all these men together was the one step that so many others did not take: they took the chance, crossed the threshold, and embarked on the journey that led to the Legion. Whatever I thought or would come to think of these men, there was courage at least in the first step.

Sergent Westway returned and interrupted my thinking. 'The first thing we do is change your name,' he announced as he came through the door. I asked why it was necessary and with a sly smile he simply said, 'Believe me, it's the done thing.'

He paused for a moment before going on. 'Then again if you'd rather not, that's fine. We do this to protect you from enquiries from the outside world. Or,' he added, looking out the window towards the compound, 'keeping you from the world so that you can learn to love us.'

The principle of the *anonymat*, being anonymous to the world, may indeed protect Legionnaires from wives, bankers and governments, but there were at least two other elements to the principle, one which came to me sooner than the other. Once a man's name is changed, he is prohibited from having contact with the outside world. In many ways, he is a voluntary prisoner. Few EVs understood the implications when they agreed to have their name changed. I had nothing to hide; I would keep my name.

'Okay, not a problem. I have here your test results – excellent. So I'm going to recommend that your recruit results are reasonable, you pass on to the rapid promotion stream. That will get you quickly promoted to *caporal*, and get you out of the shit.'

It was an echo of what I had heard at Fort de Nogent, and it didn't seem a bad idea at all. Besides, I could always turn it down if it wasn't what I wanted. 'Sounds like a very good idea,' I replied.

He sat behind his desk, rocked back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. 'For me this is easy. You're the one who'll have to work for it. Nothing comes easy in the Legion except for getting pissed and catching the pox.'

Again, neither of us spoke, and I looked into those pale eyes of his once more.

Westway shifted forward in his seat, shuffled some papers and said, 'Now to administrative matters. Your passport, you will not see for five years, nor your driver's licence, or anything else. In a way you become a non-person. I don't believe you can understand what this means. So let me tell you: it's a bit of shit. You will be treated like a moron, as if nothing you say is important. French officers are very different from what you are used to. Do not have high expectations of them.'

I noticed he had begun to perspire slightly and then he said, 'I know I'm not wasting my breath, so fucking well watch out. And I don't want to see you back here squealing to be released from your contract.'

'I won't be,' I assured him and he watched me for a moment without saying a word.

'Right, now I can tell you that you're in. The French are not going to reject someone like you. It's a bit too late for you to go to Castelnaudary this Saturday, so enjoy your time scrubbing pots and pans.'

I was in – and I was delighted. Even years after that meeting I remember the thrill of hearing those words. So, too, do I remember his warning. Surely it had to be his job to overdramatise things, to test the resolve of newcomers.

The ginger-haired Englishman had certainly made an impression on me during that first meeting. When I saw him again the next day, *Sergeant* Westway had little to say though, as he took me before a tribunal of officers, or *officiers*, all wearing horizontal yellow stripes on their uniform to signify their rank. The three men, with serious faces, were placed intimidatingly along the far side of a long wooden table. Behind them, hung on the wall, was a framed black and white print of a Legion officer with a neatly trimmed beard, perhaps in his fifties, kepi on his head and many decorations on his chest. It was the only adornment to a room that was otherwise grey and clean.

One of the *officiers* motioned me to sit down on a chair and then asked, 'Why do you want to join the Legion?' He held his chin between his right forefinger and thumb and waited for my reply.

'Adventure,' I responded.

There was a murmur from the three and I could sense, rather than hear, *Sergeant* Westway shuffling near the door behind me. 'Yes,' said one *officier*, 'but five years is a long time, do you not think?'

'Yes, five years may be long, but you have my background details before you. Once started, once committed, I've never given up.'

There was a nodding of heads and the *officier* in the middle of the three called me forward. On the tabletop, I saw a form. 'Sign here,' he said, indicating with his ballpoint a line at the bottom of the

page. I did.

I was now through to the next stage of incorporation into the French Foreign Legion. But if I'd thought I would now be told what was to happen next, or even the structure of my days, I was sadly mistaken.

For reasons not explained to newcomers, that Saturday we were trucked into Marseilles again and taken to the *Centre des Permissionnaires de la Légion Étrangère Malmousque* (CPLEM), or simply Malmousque. This Legion 'holiday camp' is not far from the spectacular coastal road known as the Grand Corniche, and sits perched on a small headland just a few metres from a 5-metre drop to the Mediterranean. This is the place where Legionnaires may stay and spend their leave because it costs them nothing. From the rooms you could watch small open fishing boats, luxury yachts and ferries entering and leaving Marseilles' Old Port, the main shipping lanes of which pass right by the headland. You could also rest your gaze on the Château d'If, a few kilometres out to the west, the notorious abandoned island prison where many had languished, and reflect on hope, fear, and time lost and perhaps wasted. Malmousque is a location for dreamers.

On the right of the entrance to Malmousque was a recruiting office, a *Poste d'Information de Légion Étrangère* (PILE), where hopefuls often presented themselves. There was also the ubiquitous flagpole upon which the French *tricolore* fluttered and snapped in the morning breeze.

On entering the main building, despite the profusion of light, the air was stale, laden with the two Legion fragrances of beer and tobacco smoke. To the left were the cigarette and beer vending machines. A *caporal* took charge of us and formed us up in *binomes* (or pairs), one French speaker partnered with a non-francophone, and we were then issued with equipment of rakes and small shovels. I was becoming used to the unexpected, and under close observation we spent the rest of the day weeding, collecting rubbish and watching or trying to speak to *les anciens* – those who had been in the Legion for more than five minutes.

I managed to catch the attention of one, an American named Joe. 'Listen,' he said, 'you only have to look around you to see what the Legion is like ... Jesus, where else would you find a beer machine except among a bunch of alcoholics and social cripples? I'll have done my five years in two weeks and, believe me, I'm going to be one happy camper when I walk out of those gates at Aubagne.'

'The only people who do more than five years are those people with fuck-all to do in civilian life. And you know what that means – the guys who stay are generally the shit. Some are okay, but the French are fucking hopeless. Some would kick my ass if they knew I was telling you this. So just look out and never trust a Frenchman. Have a nice day.'

Joe, from Virginia, seemed very, very pissed off, but his words and what I'd seen so far made me question the basis on which the Legion's reputation survived. Was it a fraud? Surely there had to be some substance to the Legion's fame?

Back in Aubagne that night, just before sleep, it troubled me that the negativity I'd encountered in such a short time was so consistent and from sources that seemed reliable. Even so, these shadows did not diminish my intent. I was keen to be a part of the Legion and there was a long way to go.

Sundays were usually easy days in the French Foreign Legion. As usual in Aubagne, ours began with a whistle blast at 0630 and an escort to breakfast for a bowl of chocolate and a croissant. There was another shrill blast to leave the *ordinaire* (other ranks' mess hall), and one more calling us to *corvée quartier* – area cleaning. This last activity was something of a way of life in the Legion.

We would stand in one long line and advance very slowly, with heads bent in deep scrutiny of the

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