

Three Battalions of the Foreign Regiment in the Army of the Loire

Defence of the Bannier district at Orleans by the 39th line regiment and the Foreign Legion on the 13th of October 1870.

It's a little known page of our history which we recall today. A page that is nevertheless important, in two ways.

First of all, it was the first time since the creation of the Foreign Legion that units made up of foreigners, volunteers for the duration of the war, were deployed in mainland France. One will be able to judge the degree of self-sacrifice with which these makeshift soldiers attempted to save the honour of their country of adoption...

There was also a modification of the 1st article of the law of the 9th of March 1831 decreeing that the corps of which this text ordained the creation could "only be employed outside the continental territory of the kingdom". Its necessity made essential the rapid overriding of certain preventions...

As with the example of the first armies of the republic, very fortunate in being able to assure themselves of the cooperation of the successors to the mercenaries of the old regime, the government of national defence could only be delighted, in the somber hours of 1870, with this precious support.

Though the outcome of combat was unfortunate, this episode nevertheless heralded the influx of volunteer engagements in the equally difficult hours of 1914 or 1939, as much as the participation of our regiments from North Africa in the defence or liberation of our famous "continental territory".

Since the month of April 1867 the Foreign Regiment found itself once more on the African land which had seen its birth. The "special corps" created under the empire for Mexican requirements had already been dissolved and the squadrons, batteries, companies, train or engineers had disappeared from the order of battle. The number of battalions having been reduced from 8 to 4, and, as is the custom after the end of each campaign, the effectives had been progressively reduced. From nearly 5000 men, 3000 only remained at the end of 1867, the others having been released at the end of their contract or transferred to "regular" regiments. A final measure had suppressed elite companies, creating in their place 1st class soldiers. This last reform, by the way, would be the only one to last through to our time.

Redistributed amongst the garrisons of Mascara, Sidi-Bel-Abbes, Saïda and Geryville, assuring furthermore the guarding of multiple posts established on the tracks joining these former, the units had maintained a rather dull life for the last 4 years, shared between the eternal management work for the garrisons, or the maintenance work for the tracks or some columns without any attraction apart from exhaustion. One of these latter was even able to take two battalions as far as Figuig. As for the first half of this year 1870, it had been in large part occupied by the defence of public or private crops against locusts...

That's when some almost unbelievable news reached the furthest outposts, by means of the semaphore posts to the construction of which the legionnaires had faithfully contributed: War was declared between France and Prussia. After the Crimea, Italy, Mexico, not forgetting multiple campaigns in Algeria, here was the prospect of fighting on the frontiers of France, and who knows...? For this foreign legion which had but 29 years of existence, occasions to distinguish itself had hardly been missed, and for certain it would profit from this one.

Alas! Despite its ardent desire to participate in this new campaign, the regiment was not designated to be part of the Army of the Rhine. And though this unanimous discontent did not produce such a non-regulation response as that of 1862 - the famous petition addressed to the emperor to obtain a voyage to Mexico - the protestations were no less lively.

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But then, on the 22nd of August, a decree appeared ordering the formation, in France, even, of a 5th battalion of the Foreign Regiment. It would be “destined to receive those who are engaged to serve under the French flag for the duration of the war.” That was in sum the announcement of the formation of a sort of ad-hoc regiment (Regiment de Marche) of the Foreign Legion (RMLE), which would probably not take the name, but would be marked as such in certain official lists of effectives, and would be called to fight on the front lines in France. This 5th battalion, all in all, would be the precursor to the 3rd Regiment de Marche of the 1st Foreign Regiment, created entirely on French soil in 1914 and which, itself also, would be merged into the legendary RMLE of colonels Cot, Duriez and Rollet, from 1915 to 1919. Ultimately, on the eve of Sedan, as on the day after the Marne, we seem to have taken little notice of this so-called exclusive which, in certain minds, forbade the territory of France herself to those who, everywhere else, had given striking indications of their fidelity.

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This 5th battalion was thus assembled during the course of the month of September, at Tours. By a curious coincidence it would find itself, during the critical hours of the surrounding of Paris, directly at the disposition of the delegation charged by the government of national defence for organising resistance in the provinces.

Indeed, on the 4th of September the empire had been overthrown following the capitulation of Napoleon III at Sedan. The situation was critical, so critical even that from the 18th of September the minister of war was drawing up an order for the sending to France of the 1st and 2nd battalions of the Foreign Regiment. They would, obviously, be reshuffled so that no Germans would take part and would be replaced by men of other nationalities. It was thus that the band would not be able to participate, being in that era almost entirely composed of legionnaires of enemy origin.

No sooner said than done, and with such enthusiasm! On the 4th of October the first companies arrived at Oran, joined by the remainder the following day. They embarked on the 8th. On the 11th Toulon was in sight, where they would finally land upon this French soil for which they had such thirst to fight. On the 13th the two battalions reached Bourges where they joined the 1st brigade of the 2nd division of the 15th army corps, in the ranks of which they would have the honour to serve.

And in such conditions! All was still to be organised. This Army of the Loire, created entirely by a new government which was quickly overwhelmed by the multiple problems imposing themselves upon it, lacked everything. Already, when leaving Algeria, the insufficiency of the depots had only allowed one backpack to be issued between two men. A spirit of attention to detail had already determined a manner by which this accessory could be carried alternatively, even if one of the two owners should find himself a casualty... The delegation of Tours contemplated a yet colder situation: A report on effectives dated the 4th of October indicated: “...Foreign Legion: officers: 21, horses: 4. Soldiers: 1370, horses: 5. Arms: None. Camping and other equipment: None.” As one can see, the 5th battalion - it was about them, after all - was in a rather less good situation than the two older battalions. And yet...

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For this 5th battalion, we recall, had just been formed from barely-trained troops and would find itself the first into battle. When, on the 19th of October, it joined the two others at Pierrefitte, it would already be able to boast of one of the rare feats of arms in this unfortunate war. If Orleans had fallen for a first time into the hands of the enemy, these latter would realise that these newly-become legionnaires were not there for nothing. General von der Tann noted: “If the French had fought at Sedan as they did here we would not be in Orleans”. The priest of the 2nd division of the 1st Bavarian army corps wrote, for his part, of the rear-guard provided by our 5th battalion on the 11th of October, in the districts north of Orleans: “This battle cannot be compared with the taking of Bazeilles.” A Prussian officer of the staff of prince Frederic-Charles, captain Milson de Botte,

did not fear declaring to his colleagues that he was proud... to have belonged to the Foreign Legion some years beforehand!

All the afternoon of the 11th of October, alongside the 39th line regiment with whom the Foreign Regiment would form a brigade until the end of the campaign, the 5th battalion fought toe-to-toe to defend the access to the city. Its commander, Major Arago, fell in the middle of his legionnaires. Alas, during this time, the flanks turned and soon the defenders were encircled. Night approached. Ill news came: The bulk of our forces had fallen back to the left bank of the Loire. There was nothing left to do but sound the retreat and attempt to break the encirclement. This was not easy. Not because of the pressure of the enemy, but simply because these ersatz legionnaires, who were certainly ignorant of Camerone, were animated with the same spirit as captain Danjou. It was necessary to relay the order three times before they were willing to retire step by step, doorway by doorway, house by house, responding to the fire of the Bavarians who pressed them from the north and the Prussians, who, tried to cut their route from the south, by wearing them down. Two-thirds of the battalion had fallen when the attackers were able to shake hands over the last heap of corpses. As for those who had managed to escape, they attempted to rejoin friendly lines on the other side of the Loire, to continue the fight. Amongst these, a curious figure, a certain 2nd lieutenant Kara, better known under the name of prince Karageorgevitch, or as Pierre 1st, king of Serbia. Hastily disguised as a mill worker, he succeeded in weaving between the enemy and rejoined his corps the following day.

Thus on the 19th of October 1870, the two battalions from Africa were joined by those left over from the one formed in France. A brief period of reorganisation and amalgamation and they were back en route. Unpleasant marches in this humid and cold region of Sologne, made all the more poor by lack of organisation on the part of this Army of the Loire, which the delegation of Tours was attempting to assemble. Finally, on the 28th of October, the regiment found itself on the right bank of the Loire, in front of Mer.

It was a question, on one hand, of retaking Orleans by a pincer movement, on the other hand of unleashing a larger operation to break the encirclement of Paris. If the first project succeeded, the lack of communications — it was the era of the famous balloons which wind would often send to surprising locations — as much as the lack of coordination, apparently due to the hold of civilian authorities hastily put in charge of military matters, would turn the second off course.

The first phase of the action would be marked, in that which concerns us, by the combat at Coulmiers, a serious reverse for the enemy, which would find itself constrained in its turn to abandon Orleans under pain of having its rear cut off. At 16:30 hours on the 9th of November the Foreign Regiment, until now kept in reserve, went into action without having to participate other than in the pursuit of the enemy. The 11th of November, a date still anonymous in the calendar of the era, the legionnaires made their entry into Orleans. The barracks of Saint-Charles procured for them their first quarters worth of the name since the start of the campaign. But, this appearance of rest would have a short duration. On the 15th the companies would occupy the positions on the fringes of the forest north of Orleans, towards Gidy. The march towards Paris was being organised following the directives of a government for which its only capital was on the road to perdition.

The defensive positions were organised, but with the spirit of the offensive, and with successive changes of implementation which bore witness to the indecision which presided over the manoeuvre. Finally, on the 2nd of December, the action started. The Foreign Regiment had to capture the villages situated immediately to the east of the road to Paris. Whilst the 1st battalion undertook its affair at Ruan, the 2nd and 5th, leaving from Chevilly, undertook the assault of Lion-en-Bauce.

Alas, the whole did not come together and all that was left, at the evening of the first and last day of the offensive, was to take position on some part or other of the main route to cover Arthenay. The retreat movement was immediately begun, contrived to protect the legionnaires from beginning to end. A final attack on Assas would not be able to succeed, the artillery support having precipitously fallen back without warning. For the second time the slow ordeal towards the south would be reproduced, borrowing for its last part the same itinerary as that where the 5th battalion had sacrificed themselves less than 25 days before.

It was first Chevilly, where they fell back on the 3rd of December, then Cercottes, where the Foreign Regiment would deliver its first real offensive action of this phase of the war, at the edge of this forest of Orleans which constituted the last possible position before the district defences of the city. But, neighbouring units once more gave way and the struggle became useless. There was nothing left to do but retire in good order. "The shells which come to assail us do not trouble us and the march operates nevertheless as if on the parade ground". This phrase from the original report on the action suffices in its simplicity in depicting the discipline which reigns in our ranks, and would reign there until the end of this perilous retreat...

The same places, soon, would seem the same feats accomplished this time by the entirety of the regiment: the village of Audes, Merlins road, Bannier district finally, where we finally managed to close the gates, under the fire of an enemy ten times greater. Meanwhile, a few snipers under the shelter of a hastily-arranged barricade, delivered fire to prevent the advance guard of the enemy from approaching. This temporary success would be celebrated... by taking coffee with the calm of experienced troops whilst getting ready to spend the night awaiting the expected reinforcements.

Vain hope! At 11 o'clock the order arrived to completely evacuate the city, already partly occupied by the enemy. Lt. Colonel Cannat, who had commanded the regiment since colonels Deplanque and Curten had successively and very quickly been promoted to general, was advised that he had one hour to fall back on the right bank by virtue of an agreement hastily made with the enemy by superior authorities. He could only submit. It was time, besides, and the Foreign Regiment had been warned too late of this surprise retreat. There would not even be the luxury of relieving the advance guard...

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Present for the first time in a metropolitan theatre of operation, twice "sacrificed to cover the the disengagement of other units", the Foreign Legion had, despite the weakness of its effectives, the lack of training of a part of its men, its lack of equipment, given the Army of the Loire a first demonstration of its valour, a proof of its virtue and of its principles of honour and fidelity.

The Army of the East would soon welcome it, where it would yet provide, before Montbeliard, in Besancon and even in the heart of Paris, new testimonies of self-sacrifice.

This was but an indication of the formidable exploits of the legionnaires of 1914-1918, incomparable workmen of the victory, of those who would save honour in the tragic hours of 1940, of those also who, in 1944-1945, would constitute the spearhead of the armies of liberation.