

WITH THE
FOREIGN
LEGION

Major P. C. Wren

* A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook *

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with a <https://www.fadedpage.com> administrator before proceeding. Thousands more FREE eBooks are available at <https://www.fadedpage.com>.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: With the Foreign Legion

Date of first publication: 1932

Author: Percival Christopher Wren (1 November 1875 22 November 1941)

Date first posted: Mar. 30, 2019

Date last updated: Mar. 30, 2019

Faded Page eBook #20190410

This eBook was produced by: Al Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at

<https://www.pgdpcanada.net>

The author of *Beau Geste* tells the radio audience of England about his most exciting twenty-four hours as a member of the French Foreign Legion.

With the Foreign Legion

By MAJOR P. C. WREN

From *The Listener*

Weekly Organ of the British Broadcasting Corporation

I went to the Bureau de Recrutement in the Rue Saint Dominique for enlistment in the Legion, and, to be quite fair and honest, I fully admit that the recruiting officer there made no secret of the fact that he thought I was a silly young fool. I thought it was very decent of him. He did n't actually try to deter me from joining; but he mentioned casually that the Foreign Legion was rather the spiritual home of the laborer, the long-service professional soldier, and the man who had roughed it in earnest. He added that he would be very glad to enlist me, in view of my inches, enthusiasm, and previous military experience, but I must go away and sleep on it, think it over in the light of what he had said, and return next day if I were still of the same foolish mind. I returned. I was vetted *bon pour le service* by the Medical Corps doctor, and enlisted. I had contracted to serve France for five years in any part of her colonial possessions for the sum of a halfpenny a day, without deductions or income tax. I was seeking a short holiday, experience, change, rest, and romance; and, though I was not

fleeing from justice, I took a name that was n't my own, purely in the spirit of romance and make-believe. Most *légionnaires* do this. A few do it because they are fugitive criminals, but the vast majority do it for the same reason that small boys wear black masks or feather headdresses when playing robbers or Red Indians.

I traveled that night to Fort Saint Jean at Marseille, the bureau depot and clearing house of the XIX Army Corps, which is the army of Africa. Here, it is true, I found dirt, discomfort, fatigues, nasty menial manual labor, and somewhat rough, contemptuous treatment; but what did these things matter? My barracks were a moated mediæval castle, within sight of Monte Cristo's Château d'If, and my companions were wearing the most romantic and attractive uniforms in the world! Every branch and service of the French Army was represented, and, if the noise was reminiscent of a parrot house, so were the colorfulness and the exotic sights and sounds. There were Spahis, in incredibly gorgeous dress, Zouaves, Turcos, *tirailleurs*, *chasseurs d'Afrique*, colonial infantry, gunners, sappers, and *légionnaires*; and undoubtedly the parrots could swear—as well as eat, drink, and flutter gay plumage. I was thrilled, and could n't see or hear enough of these men who brought a breath of strange and different life from across the sea—men who had marched and served and fought in such strange places—men from Africa! And I thought of a Latin tag from schoolboy days: 'There's always something new from Africa.'

I had made no friends among the recruits on our way to join the Legion. Frankly, I did n't like the look of them. Nor did I gather that they particularly liked the look of me. They were

mostly unshaven, unwashed, collarless men, rather rough, rather smelly in the unventilated barrack room, and with ways that differed widely from those to which I had been accustomed. In fact, they were entirely foreign to me in speech and habits, and some of them reminded me of the sea captain's terse official report on the manners and customs of the Cannibal Islanders: 'Manners none and customs nasty!' But after a few days at Fort Saint Jean we were shipped across to Oran in Algeria, and taken thence by train eighty miles inland, to Sidi-bel-Abbès, the depot of the First Battalion. And here things were different. We had our uniforms now, and uniform is a great leveler. We were all soon shaved and clean and shining bright. Everyone understood French, which was the lingua franca, and one quickly found one's own level, and companions of one's own sort and kind. That is one of the marvels of the Legion. Every nation is represented; and not only every class, but every sort and kind, every rank and trade and profession. I was most enthusiastic, and derived endless interest from observing my comrades—the most incredibly mixed assemblage of men on the face of the earth. They included not only people of all the nations of Europe, but even Chinese, Japanese, Arabs, and assorted Africans; and I was glad when I completed a selection of representatives of all five continents by meeting an Australian and more than one American.

But I have to tell you about one particular day of glorious life in the Legion, and will first describe some of the men of my own *escouade*, my comrades of the day in question. First

of all, there was Pierre. You would have liked Pierre—one of the merriest souls I ever met. Nothing could damp his cheerfulness except wine, and that in sufficient quantity to quench him altogether. Pierre ceased to be amusing only when he could speak no more. There was only one stage of his long and happy journeys from sobriety to speechlessness when he was ever a bore, and that was the moment—the inevitable moment—when he would tell you all about his murder, or his most interesting murder. I am afraid the story must have been true, for he always told it in the same way and never varied a detail. 'And to think how kind I always was to her,' he would expostulate. 'I hardly ever beat her when she did n't deserve it. She always had plenty to eat—when there was plenty; and she frequently tasted wine—when I was asleep.... Why, I actually married the woman. And what did she do when my back was turned, and my stomach was being badly turned, while I was doing six months in the "box" for borrowing money from a bourgeois, without telling him, one night, in the Place Pigalle? She went off with Tou-tou-Boil-the-Cat, the lieutenant of our band. Fact. She did. She won't again, though. I went after her when I came out.

"Your heart's in the right place, my love," I said. "It's your head that leads you astray." Then I cut it off. *Oui, Monsieur*. I, Pierre Pompom, held her up by her hair with my right hand—so—and cut her head off.... *Psstt!* Yes. With this very knife.' And at this point Pierre would produce a knife from the back of his belt.

Yes, I believe Pierre was a murderer. But he was a very nice one to meet, and only made these *faux pas*—or talked about them—when he was n't quite himself. But I never met a braver

man in my life. He was as true as steel, a splendid comrade, and faithful unto death.

In curious contrast to him there was Müller, a German—an aristocrat, an ex-officer, and a typical *Junker*. He was as self-controlled and unemotional as Pierre was vivacious and flamboyant. 'Hans Müller,' he called himself (though he was certainly *von* and *zu* and probably *Graf* or *Baron*, and possibly Hohenzollern or Hohenlohe). He was a man who simply hated to laugh with joy, or swear with rage, or to express any emotion whatsoever. His exceedingly handsome face, with its cold blue eyes, high-bridged nose, golden moustache, hard mouth, and fine chin, was a face that never changed, never smiled or frowned. And this was n't by any means because he was stupid, stolid, or phlegmatic; not a bit of it. He was an extremely clever man—musical, widely read, highly cultured, traveled, and in the best sense of the word a gentleman. I knew nothing of his life, but only of his death. Why he joined the Legion I don't know. But there was certainly a woman in his story. For in a quiet voice and with an expressionless face he would speak most bitterly of women.

There was Ramón Diego, a very tough Spaniard from the Pyrenees, smuggler or smuggler's muleteer, known as 'The Devil.' And he was a devil—to fight, though unfortunately he would fight only with a knife. As he explained, it was the weapon he had been taught to use in childhood, and since then he had used no other. He was a big, dark, saturnine, smouldering sort of volcano, always about to erupt; and much respected by those who did n't care for knife-fighting. I was very fond of Ramón, a simple, forthright soul.

Then there was 'Ivan the Terrible'—six foot seven (I am not sure it was n't six foot eight), weight unknown, as he always broke the machine. He had been a subaltern of the famous Preobrazhenski Regiment—Siberian Rifles (alas! no more, I fear), and made no secret of how he came to the Legion. He went on leave, and followed a lady of whose appearance he approved the whole length of the Siberian Railway from Port Arthur to Saint Petersburg, thence to Paris, on to Marseille, and across to Algiers. There the dream had ended, probably with Ivan's money. And finding the French Legion nearer than the Siberian Rifles, and probably much more likely to extend a welcome, Ivan had turned in with them, instead of going back! He was a great lad with a heart of gold, a tongue of silver, a hand of iron, and a front of brass.

Torvaldsen the Dane was another fine fellow, so clean-looking and clean-living; but Cortlandt, the Dutchman, unlike nearly all Dutchmen, was a bad lot, though he had had a lot to make him bad. And once he was up against a sergeant, his stubborn Dutch spirit kept him there. He used to drink a vile rice spirit called *tchum-tchum* which was, I suppose, the nearest thing he could get to *Schnaps*, and when he had had a drink or two of this poison, he would seek me out and remind me that the Dutch once sailed up the Medway. I invariably replied: 'Never mind, Fatty. Nobody noticed them.' And he would go away and think this over, with the help of more *tchum-tchum*, until he fell asleep.

What makes the particular day I am going to tell you about an outstanding one for me is the fact that on it I lost these friends of mine, and though I had n't known them long I missed them badly; also because I got an interesting little

souvenir scar on my head and an interesting little souvenir 'dagger' that now decorates my study wall, having failed to decorate my stomach.

We were on the march, and in a hurry. We slept where we dined, and we dined where we fell down, after marching the whole of a terrible day over sand. Although I had done some grueling marches during training days and after, I thought of the warning of the recruiting officer in Paris. There was, as he had ironically said, lots of sand; blue sky; no rain; no snow; no fog; sunshine—sunshine all the time. Camels (glimpsed far off—with scouts on them), mirages, palms, and oases (in the mirages). I thought not only of the recruiting officer, but of Coleridge's 'Ancient Mariner' and his bitter complaint. You may know the verse beginning:—

And all in a hot and copper sky
The bloody sun at noon
Stood right above...

the whole beastly show. And 4 A.M. next morning the buglers blew reveille, and this particular, slightly hazardous day in the Legion began.

I rolled over and dressed—by putting on my *képi*. I then slipped on my equipment, and was ready. I was particularly ready for my share of the contents of the pail brought from the company cooking fire by Ivan the Terrible. It was hot, liquid, sweet, and had an unmistakable flavor of coffee. I dipped out a

mugful of this heartening brew, and produced the remainder of my breakfast from my haversack. If I remember rightly, it was a hard, dry biscuit and some soft, wet macaroni. We fell in by sections, each section in three ranks, so that when we got the order to right-turn and march, we marched in threes, and not in columns of fours as the British Army does. One long march is very like another, but this was more so than most, by reason of the record length, the record heat, the soft looseness of sand, and the fact that we were marching by compass across sand dunes, and were perpetually climbing up one side and down the other, instead of marching on the flat. We were literally crossing an uncharted ocean of sand; and its billows were as regular, numerous, and monotonous as those of any of the great ocean wastes of water.

However, we realized that it was necessary to avoid the usual road or caravan route, for we were hastening to the relief of a suddenly beleaguered fort; and the Arabs would no doubt be on the watch for us on the road. We were a surprise packet, in fact, posted to arrive when and where least expected. We did n't march, as the British soldier does under a tropical sun, in pith helmets, half-sleeved, open-necked shirts, shorts, and puttees. We wore cloth caps with a peak in front and a white or khaki curtain hanging round the neck behind; thick, long, heavy overcoats buttoned right up to the throat; baggy trousers tucked into leggings; thick, heavy boots, and no socks. We were pretty well loaded, too, with long rifles, long bayonets in steel sheaths, very big water bottles, two hundred rounds of ammunition, stuffed musettes or knapsacks containing spare kit, laden haversacks, canteens, and a spare pair of boots. But besides these things each man had some such extra load as part of a tent, firewood, or a cooking vessel; so that the top of the

load on one's back rose as high as the top of one's head—or higher, and bumped against it. It took me a long time to get used to this.

No. We weren't a bit smart to look at, and there was no march discipline. We did n't march. We shuffled, shambled, staggered, tottered, strolled, rolled, bowled, and pitched along anyhow. The one thing we did n't do was to straggle. The pace was set and kept, and the slogan was '*Marchez ou crevez!*' 'March or die,' for if you did n't march you would most certainly die—of thirst and starvation if you were lucky, or of Arabs if you were n't. At the end of each hour the whistle blew and the little column halted for 'the cigarette space,' just time to smoke a cigarette. In theory it was ten minutes in each hour. During one longer halt the cooks prepared a meal of a sort of stew. In time the strain began to tell, and it was just about when people were beginning to grumble that I realized that the recruiting officer had been premature in his sarcastic praises of the desert life as regards the absence of fog. For, to the appalling heat and electrical atmospheric conditions, fog was added. A beastly oppressive choking fog of dust, that diminished the circle of our horizon and rendered the almost unbearable conditions of marching even more unbearable. 'Sand storm,' said the less experienced soldiers, but the old, long-service men growled that a sand storm was n't a sand storm while you could see and breathe and march and were n't buried alive—or dead. This was nothing but a little dust! It was truly awful anyway, and I plodded along, bent nearly double, not caring what particular name they gave it. There was one thing to be thankful for, however. We were off the soft, shifting sand dunes, and now marching across a level plain of hard, sand-covered ground. Between us and the sky was a veil

of dust through which the sun did not so much shine as loom like a ball of brass in the hot and coppery sky. And from time to time great blinding clouds of sand enveloped us.

I suppose it was owing to these conditions that the Arabs caught us as they did. We had out a 'point' and flankers, of course, but presumably the flankers were ridden down when plodding along, bent double, seeing nothing but the ground, and not caring if it snowed Arabs. They seemed to come down the wind like the dust itself. There were a few shots, a whistle, one or two orders, and thanks to Legion drill and Legion discipline the Arab charge was met in the right way, and just in time. My own *escouade* was unlucky in happening to be opposite to the thickest part of the Arab line, and, in spite of the number of men and horses that our fire brought down, the remainder charged home with lance and sword, and long gun fired at short range from the hip—with a weird and wild war cry of '*Lah illa il Allah! Allahu Akbar!*' It sounded rather like a pack of jackals. Just behind me the excellent Sergeant Krantz, a cool veteran, shouted his orders. 'Steady, now, steady! Aim low. Shoot at the horses! Aim low!' until suddenly, for the best of reasons, he stopped.

I don't really remember very much of this particular scrap. But I do remember the incredulity and the thrill at finding that I was actually taking part in a real, good, old-fashioned fight; just the sort of thing one reads about. 'This was what I came for,' I said to myself. 'The genuine thing! What splendid luck! A real fight with real Arabs in a real desert! It does n't seem

real.' But it was, and we got what is known to the vulgar as a 'bellyful.' Since the first shots and shouts it was only a matter of seconds, I suppose, when, with an earth-shaking thunder of hoofs, the leaders of the charge were upon us.

Suddenly I realized that a big bearded man in flowing, fluttering, dirty white garments, with a nasty long lance, was coming straight at me—me personally. I fired at him point-blank, and apparently missed him. Also his spear missed me, due to the fact that Pierre shot either him or his horse. Quite unwounded, I was knocked head over heels, either by this horse or another, and got to my feet as an Arab, who had reined up, or whose horse had been wounded, made a cut at me with a sword. More by luck than judgment I parried the cut, the sword striking the curved cross hilt of my bayonet. As I drew my rifle back to lunge, the Arab whirled up his sword and cut again; and either my bayonet went in under his ribs below his raised sword arm just before the blow fell, or else Ivan shot him from behind, just in time. Anyhow, the sword cut that should have split my skull only gave me a cut on the head. As I staggered back, a bit dazed, a man on the ground grabbed my leg, tripped me up, and slashed at me with a dagger. He meant well—but was presumably a bit shaken by the fall that had sent his lance, rifle, or gun flying from his hand, and only struck my cartridge pouch. After an intimate minute with him I got the dagger. Once more I rose to my feet and saw that the Arabs were in full flight—not in defeat, but according to their tip-and-run plan. 'Salvo' or rather 'volley fire' continued while they were in sight. It was not until the 'Cease fire!' sounded that I realized what this little fight had cost me personally.

Pierre was dead. The front of his coat was sodden with

blood. Hans Müller was dead, with a hideous spear wound in his throat. Ivan was dead, and, ironically in the case of so tigerishly brave a man, had his wound in his back. Torvaldsen was dead; demonstrating in death what we had known of him in life—that he had a brain. Cortlandt, though not dead, was unconscious and dying, kicked on the head by a horse. Ramón was all right, and showed me the body of an Arab whom he had killed.

At sunset the scorching wind dropped and the fog of dust slowly turned to a mere mist. When we could go no further we camped for the night, or rather for a small part of it, on a sandy plateau, scratching out a hasty square of trenches in the sand, posting sentries, and then just falling down and sleeping where we fell; many too weary even to eat.

My own personal cup was not yet quite full, as I was chosen for guard, and had to do two hours of sentry-go forthwith. Long before dawn we marched again, and when we reached the fort it was to learn that its attackers had raised the siege and departed, probably at receiving news of the approach of the main body of the relieving force. It was probably a tribe belonging to the besieging force which, on their way home to bed, had encountered us. So ended, very tamely, a nevertheless sufficiently strenuous twenty-four hours in the Legion—strenuous, but not, in the eyes of survivors of the Great War, particularly hazardous.

[The end of *With the Foreign Legion* by Percival
Christopher Wren]