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“Failure is Not Acceptable” The Recollections of a Canadian in the French Foreign Legion

William Mitchell

I remember that day very well, a cold Tuesday in January 1989, and Pearson International Airport was bustling with travellers. I was amongst them, an inconspicuous 18-year-old middle-class Canadian boarding the plane as if it was a frequent occurrence. A seven-day vacation in France, that was the plan. I often wonder if I had known then what I do now – would I have boarded that plane? The trip lasted five years and it was no vacation, for within 24 hours of boarding the plane, I had become a member of the infamous French Foreign Legion. Life would never be the same again.

Somewhere in Paris, speaking only a few words in French, I decided to check into the address that I had so innocently found in a library book at high school – a recruiting centre for the French Foreign Legion. I had not believed it existed outside of movies such as *March or Die* or *Laurel and Hardy*. However, the old fort was quite real, the soldier in a 'white hat' who slid the peek-slit open was real, and the slamming of the huge wooden door behind me was certainly real. In a few hours, my belongings were confiscated, my passport was taken away and I was given a regimental track suit and some washing kit. I was not the only one there, people from all over the world, including places as far away as New Zealand, were being interviewed. There were some tests conducted here over the next few days, but the real testing would begin down in Aubagne – a town just outside Marseilles in southern France – where I would spend a month with hundreds of other possible recruits. I would not start basic training until April when those who were accepted were shipped to Castelnaudary (south central France between the Black mountains and the Pyrenees) – a place I

would hate for a very long time. My upbringing would have to be thrown out, my Canadian middle-class perspectives quashed, and my ethics stowed for the duration. It would take a long time before I could say Castelnaudary without shuddering.

We were divided up into sections roughly the same size as a Canadian platoon. In my section there were 47 candidates. Over the next four months we would be trained in all aspects of military life in the Legion. It was not what we learned that was particularly difficult, rather it was how we learned it that broke many. The discipline in the Legion can be described at best as being ferocious. Examples are numerous, you are starved – yet not to death. Hunger is used to teach night topography – as you will only eat when you can read and find map coordinates. At the 'farm' – a small isolated farmhouse somewhere in the Black or Pyrenees mountains – the eating room for our meals had only one entrance – via a ten-foot rope.

Fatigue – the Legion taught me the sanctity of sleep. It became a precious commodity, which at Castelnaudary came second to building seven-foot rock pyramids at three in the morning, singing, and the occasional special event like an unexpected full-dress funeral for a cigarette butt at dawn. These events were outside of the regular day schedule which began at 0400 hours and ended – on paper – at 2200 hours. Two weeks into instruction, we had our first deserter.

Violence was continuous – almost a fight every day – tension was ever-present and personal vendettas were always a diversion from the day's activities. Respect was the commodity



The author undergoing training at Castelnaudary. At left he climbs the "eavesdrop" in an exercise designed to simulate the infiltration of a building or fort. At right he takes leaps from the "paratower" during his jump training.

most sought after by everybody. To be respected by other candidates, and the Corporals in charge of us, made life so much easier. Two months into instruction the physical strain took effect. Some were released for physical damage, others for mental damage. To watch a man slowly change and finally break was something of which I took special note. Suicides are common at Castelnaudary and if you fail you get 30 days in jail. Graduation could not come too soon and for many of us, the training would continue at the Regiment.

Snapshots of Operations

French Guyana – 1989

The patrols in the equatorial forest would last ten to 20 days; patrolling was an extremely laborious job. In a good day, between 0600 hours and 1800 hours, we would be able to cover 6-7 kilometres but normally we would manage only 3-4 kilometres because of river crossings or map inaccuracies. Topography in the equatorial forest was also a slow and tedious job if there were to be any accuracy at all. Drug runners from

Surinam were our responsibility. They were running cocaine into French Guyana to pay for Ronny Brunswick's anti-Communist war. By the time the cocaine arrived on the European market, it would be cut again and again, and the price would jump making it very profitable for every kilo that made it through. The average drug runner was not the *Miami Vice* stereotype but rather a poor farmer without shoes carrying a home-made shotgun. It would be easiest if we caught them loading a *pirogue* – a large hollowed tree trunk – because they would not stand their ground. However, stumbling onto them in the jungle could prove to be quite dangerous.

Another job in Guyana, which was seen as a chance to relax, was guarding the European Space Centre. This included the radar, communications, and launching equipment. It became bothersome, however, when constant delays forced us to stay out in the bush more than necessary. There was a launch approximately every four months, as the rocket itself was shipped in sections from France and assembled on site. Security was especially tight when the rocket was moved from the building site to the actual launch pad by rail, and as it



The author presents his section.

sat exposed there for the launch. It was a very tense hour or two for many people.

As it turned out, getting used to the equatorial forest itself was very stressful. There were many sorts of animals which could be dangerous, including neuro-toxic frogs and poisonous snakes. However, the most difficult aspect of the equatorial forest was the insects. I was sure that the whole country of Guyana was built on an ant hill. If you sat down on the ground for any extended period of time (30 seconds) you would most likely be bitten by a variety of ants. If you stayed out after sunset, you risked losing your nose or ear to a parasite-carrying mosquito. A few days on the somewhat tropical Devils' Island helped us to relax before heading out into the jungle once again.

The Gulf War – 1990-1991

I remember being on leave somewhere in Paris when I received the order to return. Despite having to cut short my leave, I was still quite excited about going, and quickly bought some last minute things at Orly airport before returning to the south of France. I had no idea

then that I would spend almost five months in the desert before any action started and when it did, in the space of three days, I would come to within a three-hour drive of Baghdad before they called the cease-fire. The rush I had been in to return to southern France would turn into long days of waiting under the Saudi sun.

The long lead up to the actual invasion was the toughest. There were continuous rumours about what was going to happen when the war actually began. We passed the time in Saudi Arabia preparing equipment and replacing older stocks of gear and ammunition. There were also several exercises which were used to determine which tactics were best suited for the terrain. Differing from the other forces in Saudi Arabia, we did not go into town or live within walking distance of any civilization. The Legion spent six months at various campsites throughout the Saudi Desert.

When the war started with prep bombing and shelling, things were very tense amongst the allies. We did not trust the Egyptians or the Syrians in our zone. (It would not take long for us not to trust the Americans either as they seemed to be just a little too eager to shoot.



Above: Three hours from Bagdad.
Right: Al-Salamin airport

Speaking French at night check-points in the 82nd Airborne zone was a big risk – apparently they found French and Arabic quite similar.) Everyone seemed anxious to fire their artillery, rockets, and missiles at the Iraqis. One night on the Saudi-Iraqi border, about 13 kilometres from an Iraqi outpost, we had just gone to sleep in a reconnaissance bivouac, with nobody between the Iraqis and us except our forward observation post (FOP) fifty metres in front. At about 0300 hours, a convoy of French trucks and artillery encountered our FOP and exchanged the right codes and continued to pass between our FOP and our bivouac. The legionnaire at the FOP had no idea what they were doing but correctly followed the set procedure and let them pass. At around 0330 hours, I awoke from my sleep in a panic as the ground shook and my ears rang – I ran for my hole outside my tent thinking we were being shelled. To my surprise, just 20 metres from my tent was a battery of French 105 mm guns blasting away at the Iraqi outpost. After a heated yelling match with the artillery officer, they very quickly packed up and disappeared. We also had to leave quickly because of the danger of a



counter-battery attack on the cannon flashes which could easily be seen from the Iraqi ridge. I was not very happy the next morning and briefly considered accidentally giving the wrong ID codes to the FOPs for the next few nights.

War came and we raced into Iraq. I was on the front of the Al-Salamin airport assault, and because of the extremely open terrain, was able to see the huge divisional attack develop as we waited for the final assault orders. Flights of Gazelle helicopters hit bunkers with missiles and rockets, two American A-10s tore up the heavier

armament, and the French artillery (105 mm cannons and 120 mm mortars) finished off. The AMX-10 tanks then rushed the barrier firing at specific targets. We could trace the shooting accuracy by the shell tracer and would cheer as it found its mark. Then it was our turn. We closed to within 50 metres of the first bunkers and slit trenches, then rushed them under the cover of .50 calibre machine gun fire and a hail of 7.62 and 5.56 mm bullets. That day was unforgettable. The depths of the sky were black from the Kuwaiti oil rigs set ablaze hundreds of kilometres away to the east. It was like a storm that continuously threatened, but never arrived.

The Republic of Central Africa

There had been riots every day that week, and there was tension throughout the city. Every day we would try and push a convoy through to the airport three kilometres away and every time we would be forced to turn back. Across the street from the Bungui base was a football pitch which was being used for a landing and unloading zone for Puma helicopters running supplies from the airport. There was one day in particular which I will remember for a very long time, when a Puma had landed to unload supplies. A mass of people, mostly young adults, had surrounded the helicopter and began pummelling the helicopter with rocks and bricks. The situation was deteriorating quickly when one of our intervention squads was called in. Since manpower was simply unavailable, the squad had six muzzled and leashed German Shepherds which were very effective in crowd control. Usually, just the arrival of the dogs was enough to break-up a crowd, but this day was different. Despite the dogs being unmuzzled, the crowd continued to press on the helicopter in the field. This was probably due to the youth of many in the crowd. Normally Legion security forces were far more respected by the local population due to the fact that disputes between civilians and their government in this country were not interfered with. To that day, the Legion had refused to support government troops in their oppressive tactics – which included the offensive use of grenades and bullets – and was more content to explain to local leaders that if they did not interfere with the operations of the Legion, this would continue. However, the situation was nearing critical and possible

shooting would soon ensue to assure the safety of the pilots and the helicopter. In a last attempt to avoid opening fire, the dogs were let go. Immediately the crowd broke up in a tremendous confusion, and the netless frames of the soccer goals became covered with dangling bodies trying to avoid the huge dogs.

A perimeter was eventually established and the helicopter was unloaded, taking off immediately for the airport. As a Legionnaire, the politics have long been put aside, and as far as I was concerned the minor injuries inflicted by the dogs were preferable to spending another four months with a population upon which we had opened fire. The injured were collected and treated by the same supplies which were shipped in, the local leaders were convinced of the gravity of the situation and further clashes were avoided. However in the weeks following, government troops clashed with the oppressed population many times, killing 37 people and injuring many more.

Kinshasa, Zaire

It was not clear which military unit was supporting which politician. What was clear was that the French-trained Zairois paras had not been paid in over a year, and they had decided to collect. In a confusing chain of events, the Foreign Legion found itself in charge of Kinshasa and the international airport, which was a dangerous 27 kilometres outside of the city. In another surprising turn of events, I found myself assigned to protect two civilians carrying a briefcase to the airport for the last plane out. It was no ordinary escort, there was just myself and one other Legionnaire riding in a tiny civilian Peugeot 4L. Literally armed to the teeth, we took with us hand grenades, rifle grenades, our 5.56 FAMASs, and a reserve 9 mm automatic. We then set out in the late evening for the four-lane parkway to the airport through a fire-lit city gone mad.

It was a highly tense but uneventful trip to the airport. At the airport, mass confusion reigned as civilians of all nationalities attempted to get out of the country. Brandishing our weapons we were given a wide berth all the way to the plane. (I knew the airport very well because of a very confusing exchange of gunfire

with local troops two nights earlier.) I fought hard the urge to stop and talk to people wearing or carrying Canadian flags. I just wanted to return to the section HQ and the security of a complete military unit. We started out for the return trip to the city. The trip back was not uneventful. About 15 kilometres outside of the city, we saw what appeared to be a roadblock on our two lanes. At that second I made the decision to run it. There was absolutely no way that I would even let the civilian driver slow down. The night before a roadblock had resulted in the death of three civilians and a stolen Mercedes, so I warned the driver not to stop, and emphasized the point with my FAMAS. As we closed to about 500 metres, I prepared a AC-59 (Anti-Tank) rifle grenade on the end of my FAMAS. Ghram, the Legionnaire behind me, loaded a clip of tracer and rolled down the side window. The tension was extreme and I worried about the driver. I had no plan...maybe blow a hole through the roadblock...or just get killed quickly...we continued the approach. I soon made out a variety of Zarois uniforms around the truck which confirmed my decision not to stop. As we got closer, I pulled the safety pin off the nose of the rifle grenade and prepared to lean out of the car. At that moment however, I saw the situation more clearly and ordered the driver to slow down but not to stop. Apparently a tractor trailer had jack-knifed across the two lanes, but there was enough space to pass on the outside curb of the parkway. I told Ghram to take off his beret and keep the guns down – but ready. We approached at a slower speed...time slowed to a stand still...and then we were thankfully waved through by some lightly armed soldiers...I guess driving a Peugeot 4L rather than a Mercedes has its advantages. We passed the scene smoothly and breathed a sigh of relief.

There were some repercussions from the incident. The civilian voiced his distraught over my orders (and methods of emphasizing them) to my very concerned-looking commanding officer. However, once the civilian had calmed down and left, my CO broke into a laugh and slapped me hard on the shoulder.

In those September days of confusion, some 2000 people were killed or injured, Kinshasa was wrecked, and Seto Moboutu remained in power.

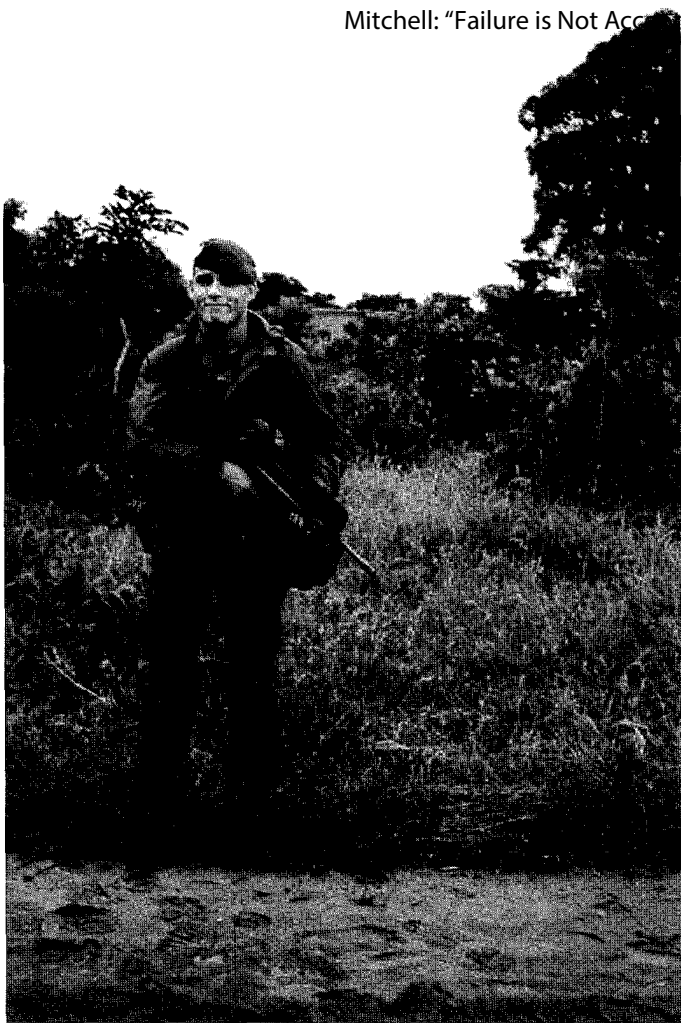
Chad

It had been a long patrol, over two weeks long, and most of us were quite sick of being bounced around in the back of the lorries on the raised dirt roads. We were 30 kilometres out from N'Djemena and excited about the prospect of mattresses, hot showers, and real food. However, it was not to be so simple. During our trip, events in N'Djemena had come to a head, and the army had split. The Zagawa (a large Chadian ethnic group) had taken 40 Toyotas, some with fixed 14.5 mm heavy machine guns, and made a run for the Southeast.

Unfortunately, the command centre in the capital was unaware of our patrol's return and did not inform us of the split, so our lead VLR lorry ran into the tail end of the rebel column. The following events occurred, pieced together after the fact, as I did not see the initial contact. As the Legion VLR approached the Toyota pick-up, which was packed with eight soldiers, one of the panicking soldiers in the back decided to place the RPG launcher on top of the Toyota cab and let go a rocket at our lead VLR. The action caused complete carnage – not only did the rocket force our VLR into a crashing roll off the side of the road – sending people and equipment in all directions, but the backwash from the launcher ripped apart the shooter's comrades behind him in the pick-up. The action ended as quickly as it had begun, and for the next three hours many of us worked very hard to save lives. When the last injured were taken out, we had lost a full combat group – three dead, the rest injured, while the rebels had fared worse; five of their own men had been killed by their own inexperience and two others severely burnt. Only one RPG rocket had been fired – incompetently – resulting in a very high cost for everyone. Over the next week a chase developed, followed by negotiations, and a solution. This would settle things until the next dry season.

Coming Home

My return to Aubagne after five years of service was extraordinarily emotional. They offered various scenarios for rank and good postings – making the choice more difficult – yet



Scenes from Chad.

I dreamed of returning home and being amongst friends and family. The memories of people, places, and situations so recently experienced were etched into my brain forever. There were many times when I regretted ever joining, but there were also times I wouldn't want to have missed. I chose to come home because of one main factor – at 23 years of age I believed I could chalk the five years up to experience and build upon it. If I stayed, I ran the risk of closing in on eight years of service, when the pension at 15 years becomes enticing, and I would consider staying in until I was over 30. The pension option compared to other pensions sounded good, but during my five-year contract I never met a Legionnaire who was able to leave the Legion cleanly (no permanent mental or physical damage) after 15 years. I walked out past the

security gates for the last time – as indistinguishable as when I first came in – hailed a taxi and within three days arrived home in Toronto where the whole thing began five years earlier.

Upon leaving the Foreign Legion in 1993, William Mitchell enrolled in Political Science at Memorial University in Newfoundland. He fills his spare time playing on the Provincial Rugby team and has won awards for his poetry. He has been accepted into the MA/PhD International Conflict Analysis program at the University of Kent at Canterbury in the United Kingdom commencing this fall.