

THE ADVENTURES OF BRENDAN AND REG

(a true account)

I first met Brendan some decades ago in a sleepy, dusty and seedy town, south of the border down Mexico way. I had been thrown out of the US because of scandals that even made Hollywood blush. I was drinking tequila in a grubby Cantina one afternoon, spending the last of my pesos wondering what to do next, when I heard a shot gun blast. I ran out to see what was happening and at the end of the street swinging from a down pipe of the second floor of a hacienda was a fellow who at the same time was trying to keep his trousers up with one hand. He fell to the dusty ground and started to run in my direction, with the big, fat, dirty swarthy Mexican taking further aim at him with his double-barrel shot gun. Fortunately he was not a good shot.

The man ran towards me and seeing a fellow white man yelled out, "Help. I'm a Tasmanian. Her husband came home!" Naturally I could not see a fellow Tasmanian in trouble, so spying some horses hitched nearby by, I shouted, "Here, these horses..." and together we grabbed them, mounted and rode out of that town as fast as we could. It was some miles when we stopped, looked at each other and laughed our heads off. I could recognise at once a fellow cad and scoundrel, and thought *this could be fun*. I introduced myself to my fellow Tasmanian. "Reg ole bean and you are?" "Brendan, but here they call me El Decandente," at which we threw our heads back and gave hearty laugh.

"Well ole cock," I said, "What now? I measure those back there will be after us, father, brothers, cousins and even uncles. After all, we did steal their horses. Any money on you?"

"Not a bean, old chap," he replied.

"Well I have enough pesos for two tequilas and no more."

"I say old chap thanks for getting me out of that spot of bother. Those Mexicans are a hot tempered lot. How was I to know he would come home early. Some people have no sense of humour at all."

"We're not far from the coast, so I think our best bet is to head there and see if we can hide. Those horses look a bit worn down. We might just make it."

So we headed towards the coast and within a few hours we made it to some equally dirty and dying town on the Gulf of Mexico. We gave the horses to some gutter snipe that seemed to be grateful. Brendan and I looked at each other. We had no money (except for a couple of pesos), no accommodation, no drink, no food, no cigarettes and no prospects. With hands in our pockets and shoulders slumped we trudged towards the docks. Perhaps we could find a Salvation Army hostel for destitute men. The only thing we found was a rusty, filthy old freighter, no doubt rat-infested. There was however a sign, badly written

with the following words, "Taken on crue, any color, any religion, but no Mormons, good codisions".

"That's us ole mate," said Brendan with me nodding. We walked up the creaking, swinging plank to be met by one who turned out to be the captain. He was a fat Greek wearing nothing but a soiled tea shirt with holes and some better-seen trousers tied by rope around his middle. He wore a sea farer's cap that had seen better days. He was grossly unshaven, with foul breath that smelt like mustard gas and blood shot eyes of which I was only too familiar and I soon learnt that my newly found friend, Brendan, was also.

"Sign us on captain," said Brendan. The captain whose name was Spiros replied with much hand gesturing and sensed we were running away from something. We and he at the same time saw Federales searching for something or someone at the docks, no doubt us, the captain said with a sly smile,

"You can work fur me. I am a poor captain, the boat is a poor boat. I have no money to pay, but we give you board and food and much ouzo. You like?"

I was about to protest then as the shouting Federales approached, Brendan turned and said, "We accept."

Captain Spiros grinned some more, revealing numerous missing teeth and those that remained rather black. He immediately gave orders to haul the plank up and speaking through the talking down pipe he gave orders for the vessel to move and before the long the clanking engines began to churn, leaving Mexico and all its pleasures and horrors behind. We were saved....well, for a little while.



Me and Brendan in Algiers. That's me on the left, Brendan on the right. From my own collection

It turned out that we were bound for Algeria and one can imagine it was not an enjoyable cruise ship for Brendan and me. We were put down in the stinking, sweaty, hot engine room

and what with the noise, oil and constant problems with the over-worked engine we were furiously busy. Fortunately the swearing and disgusting individual who was the master engineer did seem to know what he was doing.

The crew were a motely lot, people from many parts of the world, including Greeks, Arabs, Filipinos, Chinese, Negroes, South Pacific Islanders and some, no one knew where they come from, all speaking and yapping in their own language and from time to time fighting with each other usually with knives. One was killed during an episode and over the side he went much to the delight of enormous sharks.

Our accommodation was hamiks and the food deplorable, stuff that one would not even serve up to one's mother-in-law. However, there was plenty of ouzo and strong Turkish cigarettes that tasted like smoked cow manure and equally strong Greek coffee. The ouzo was perspired out when we worked in the engine room, so even though we drank great quantities of it, it had no long-term effects. And as for the multitude of rats, on board was this fat, lazy black cat, named Killer, whose job it was to destroy the rodents, but all it did was sleep.

What we were carrying we did not know or cared. Storage rooms were barred from everyone and we strongly suspected that it was contraband. The vessel which was named *The Black Pearl* chugged along at a roaring pace, maximum speed of ten knots. Through the Caribbean we sailed, then out to the open sea of the Atlantic, not what one would call a friendly ocean for a tug like ours. On more than one occasion, with the raising Atlantic waters and the enormous waves thrashing themselves against us did Brendan and I thought we were going down in David Jones's locker. We also thought it was best during this time to drown our fears and sorrows with more ouzo. I mean there was not much we could do, we were stuck on this hell-hole, so all we could do was to literally ride the elements out until we docked, if we ever did.

For five long miserable weeks we sailed finally through the Straits of Gibraltar, where we saw the vessels of the British Navy moored and what a sight they looked, clean and inviting and here we were under the command of Captain Ahab, whom we rarely saw. The few occasions when we did, he was continuously drunk. Who piloted the boat was anyone's guess.

Through the Straits we went and into the Mediterranean and after several more days we docked, God be praised, at a port called Annaba. Captain Spiros kicked us off the vessel as soon as he could, without a handshake or a thank you...just a "now f*** off!" We suspected he did not want us around when he off-loaded the cargo.

So there we were on land in this grimy, unfriendly Arab town, with filthy clothes, no money, no prospects. Brendan and I looked at each other with hands in pockets and sighed.

"Well what now, ole cock?" I asked.

“To quote Laurel and Hardy, ‘*this is another fine mess you got me into*’” he replied and did we laugh.

We judged that all we could do it was to walk on and see where our destiny led us. We were able to pocket some of those foul Turkish cigarettes which really spun our heads, resulting in a whopper head ache a couple of hours later. Hungry and now craving for a drink we turned corner after corner and down alley ways and streets for several hours. The place was full of babbling and yapping gypos, none of them looking all that friendly. We thought at any moment we would have our throats cut and end up in sausage meat sold at the many noisy and crowded bazaars.

It is funny reader, how when things look grim, fate takes a turn for the better. We were being followed by a gang of darkies whose intention was not to welcome us and give us the freedom of the city, but to do harm for whatever reason as we must have looked like the worse of all drop-outs, reminding me of the anti-Vietnam protesters I saw back home during the 60s and 70s.

Brendan and I were getting really worried when we entered what seemed to be a dead-end street (much like our lives come to think) and looking at each other, we muttered together, “This is it I’m afraid ole mate” then to our surprise we saw a poster with the words, “Join the Foreign Legion with no questions asked.” Without hesitation and without saying a word to each other, we entered the door next to the poster and went inside. The days of colonial France was over in Algeria, but clearly they still had a military presence and role to play in their former colony.

We stood there for some moments alone in the room which was rather sparsely furnished with a desk and a phone on top of it, with a chair behind it and two other seats before the desk. Posters donned the surrounding walls heralding the Legion and containing the French flag. We wondering what was going on, finally a man entered the room, later I learned he was a colonel in the Legion. He was rather tall, about six feet, smartly dressed, dark eyes, a thin moustache and on his left cheek a deep and long white scar which looked as though a sword had struck him. He was smoking a Cuban cigar, the aroma of which gave us a high. He eyed us with disbelief, no doubt wondering what the cat had brought in...we smiled with appealing eyes, he saying with a wheeze in his deep voice, “so you want to join the Legion, no?”

“Yes please,” I blurted out, “we wish to fight for France, viva la France.”

Almost hysterical, he shouted, “You do not fight for France, you fight for the Legion. Do you understand?”

With eyes wide we nodded vigorously, “yes”. Both of us could hear the babbling of voices outside who wanted to do us harm. They then subsided and we could envisage them walking away. We were saved.

The colonel sat behind the desk and opened a draw. From there, he took out two sheets of papers and thrust them at us.

"I am Colonel Louis Pichot Le Chamfleury. If you wish to join the Legion, fill in the form and sign."

He gave us two pens and without looking up and without a murmur we signed our lives into the care of the French Foreign Legion. Before long, we were Legionnaires, the pride of France.

We were ushered into large barracks which lay away from the recruiting office. There, we were told to remove our battered and filthy clothes where another legionnaire hosed us down as though we were cattle. Following this, we were issued with our regular Foreign Legion uniform and was given a feed, spartan though it was, it was welcoming as were the new, fresh clothes and the hosing, getting rid of weeks of grime from our bodies. Our uniforms consisted of two lots of the cut away blue coat, white shirts and white trousers and two kepi caps. Two lots of boots as well. However, that was just about the end of all the niceties if one could call them that.

Our life for the next few months was intensive training with the barrack housing a hundred men who came from all walks of life. As far as the Legion was concerned we were the scum of the earth and were held in utter contempt. And we were. Luigi, an Italian with whom we became friends, was escaping after cutting his lover's throat who he thought was being unfaithful. Gustuv, the German, was just a plain sadist who said he was looking forward in killing Arabs, while Charles the English man was there because of fraud. Charles was interesting. He had been a colonel in the English army, but had a gambling problem and to pay his debts he embezzled money from the soldier's fund. He was drummed out of his regiment in shame and was disinherited by his father, Lord Alfred Douglas of Somerset, so Charles (was that his real name?) joined the Legion to hide and to perhaps forget. One who seemed to take an intense dislike to us was a six foot six fellow from South Africa whose name was Kruger. He hated Tasmanians as he said they fought against his people in the South African War. I did not tell him that my grandfather was one of them. He liked teasing us and called us "pansies" this would send Brendan into a wild rage and I had to hold him back physically from attacking the giant South African who would chuckle and tease us further.

"Don't worry ole bean," I use to say to Brendan, "remember what Shakespeare said, 'every dog has its day'."

"Reggie m'lad that day will be soon," he said with hate in his eyes.

Well, that day came sooner than I thought it would. We have some time off from our tortuous and arduous training in which both Brendan and I were being trained as machine-gun operators. Taking the opportunity to have some fun, we walked into the town seeking a

place where we would partake of the local fire-water, so to speak, being arak. We were told it was 80 per cent proof, so that was good enough for us.

We found some grimy, dirty, dark abode where it was sold, which was apparently, an Algerian brothel. Well, we both had several tots of arak when who walks in but Kruger? We both had our arms full with the local well equipped lasses, one of mine was the resident belly dancer and when Kruger saw us he came over and started yelling, "Here are the pansies from the Legion." This was too much for Brendan, particularly with the arak being sent down his hatch on regular occasions. He sprang up before I could restrain him and placed a full fist into the bread basket of Kruger and while he bent over, sent an upper cut to his jaw. The attack sent Kruger backwards and he collided with the wall which in turn sent him to the floor and he was out cold. Kruger had met his match. With Brendan shaking his fist which was obviously causing him some pain because of the intensity of the strike, he stood over the giant and smiled.

"That will shut him up for a while," said Brendan taking another swig of arak. And he was right; we never, ever had any more trouble from Kruger even though he used to look our way, but on those occasions it was with a sense of fear and respect, particularly towards Brendan.

Before long we received orders that we were on the move. Led by a brutal Russian corporal named Vladimir, he seemed delighted in calling us names resembling female dogs. We were to march to an outpost somewhere in the desert to relieve a remaining legion corp. This outpost apparently had been subjected to regular and extreme violent attacks by ISIS and had almost been entirely wiped out. Hundreds of legionnaires had been brutally killed with no prisoners taken and we were to face this most sadistic of enemies. I can tell you, Brendan and I weren't too happy about this at all, but Gustuv was in heaven at the prospect of killing Arabs.



March or die!

Vladimir issued the order, "March or die!" And he was right. We in fours marched across the burning sands with temperatures in the 50s and if one stopped marching and collapsed, Corporal Vladimir with great enthusiasm would kick the stricken soldier sending him rolling down the sand dune to certain death, dying from heat and thirst. This we saw several times, with Brendan saying matter-of-factly "Hello, another one gone." Vladimir marched by himself in front, while in front of him was Captain Hanson, an American who had served in Korea and Vietnam. Rumours abounded that he shot (murdered) unarmed, surrendered enemy prisoners in those theatres of war and was dishonourably discharged. What better place to continue one's military career with no questions asked, but the Legion?

On this horrific march we had several rest periods and on one occasion we were attacked by hordes of ISIS on horses because motorised vehicles were hopeless in such conditions. Down they charged against the back-drop of the blazing sun with rifles being shot from the hip and a curved swords being thrust by their other hand. Brendan and I placed our machine-gun in a prominent position and were able to save the day by cutting up the attack and killing dozens of the scum-bags. Captain Hanson said good work, but Corporal Vladimir just sneered.



Holding off the attack.

That's Brendan and I with the machine gun. Luigi in the foreground. Charles behind him.

Finally after three days marching we arrived at the fort, called Fort Zinderneuf a patch of mud brick buildings surrounded by a high mud brick wall with a foot ramp inside the wall for legionnaires to mount. A tattered French flag was flown, but clearly had seen better days as a number of bullets had found their target. We were cheered at our arrival and before long those pathetic remaining creatures who had survived the ISIS mounted attacks, with their wounded left the fort to march back to the coast. One wondered whether they would ever make it or have their throats cut on the way by the murderess and blood thirsty enemy.

Weeks flew by, the time filled in with working bees, patrols, further training, but also a great deal of boredom. On one occasion within the barracks I was playing cards, poker betting with euros, with Charles, Brendan and Luigi. For some reason Charles always seemed to win and we suspected him of cheating, but we could not call him out. On a reflective note over a glass of French wine (and there was plenty of that) he revealed to me his whole story and

that's how come I know of his history as previously recited. He confessed he was addicted to the sport of betting and informed me with passion by clenching his fist, that he could not just get enough of the thrill. One night there was a great altercation. Kruger whom I have already referred to clashed with a big Negro, equal to his size, called Butelasia who said he was once a chief of the Zulus. Kruger called him a Kaffir which sent the Negro charging at him. Charles, the Englishman, scurried around like a panther, taking bets. The two giants were physically similar and the fight went for half an hour, thumping into each other and smashing wooden tables and chairs. Finally, both totally exhausted, they mutually collapsed. This gave birth to the obvious question, who won? It was deemed that Kruger had hit the floor just a second or two before Chief Butelasia so he was judged the winner. Somehow, Charles came out financially well from it all.

Well it had to come – the vicious attack from ISIS forces. It happened at dawn. The cry had come from the sentry, "To arms! To arms!" he then blew his bugle. Brendan and I rushed to our post on the parapet bringing our machine gun with us together with bounds of ammunition. The others scurried around with the Captain bellowing orders together with the Sergeant, whom I haven't introduced yet, but another sadistic bastard, by the name – would you believe...of Eugene. Corporal Vladimir was there too, shouting commands, but we all knew what we had to do.

Brendan and I peered through the barricades, "Strewth," was all Brendan said and I replied with "Strewth." There on mounted horses and camels were thousands of the dusky warriors, all yelling at a crescendo waving their rifles above their turban heads. Over their torsos they wore criss-crossed belts of ammunition. They had come to wipe us out. They were too far out for our guns to shoot at them, so for a long time they paraded and hurled abuse at us "white dogs". This was all to unnerve us, which I must admit was having an effect so down the throat with brandy which I had in my flask as did Brendan. Dutch courage.

Then horror, upon horror, they produced artillery. Six, six inch guns. We only had mortars, a short range armament, totally useless in this instant. Before long they started up with their artillery, softening us before they attacked. Down the bombs come blasting much of the fort to smithereens. Corporal Vladimir got it first, blowing his head off. Brendan with his dry wit said, "There you are then. Our brave corporal lost his head under pressure." I looked at Brendan and just shook my head. Cool, very cool.

The intensive bombing forced Brendan and I to keep our heads down, then all of a sudden it was quiet. We knew what that meant; the big push.



The attack on the fort.

Sergeant Eugene yelled defiance, “*Cre bon sang de bon jour de bon malheur de bon Dieu de Dieu de sort.*” Personally I thought he had gone crazy, but who would blame him? I sang out, “Look here Sergeant,” I said coolly, and in the manner of an Oxford undergraduate addressing an extortionate cabman or an impudent servant. “Look here Sergeant Eugene, don’t be a silly fool. Can’t you understand that in about two minutes you may be hanging on that wall with bayonets through your hands and left there, in a burning fort to die. Or pinned out on the roof with the sun in your face. Don’t be such an ass.”

Many of the men were not in a condition to fight. They had suffered fever, terrific heat, poisonous water, bad and insufficient food and the hardships of what was one long campaign of active warfare.

They then attacked in their thousands, screaming blood curling yells exhorting each other, “*Salamoune aleikoumi Esseleme, ekwan*” Peace be unto your brothers, then “Ullah Akbar”.

“Don’t shoot until you see the whites of their eyes,” commanded the captain brandishing his sword defiantly. As they got closer we heard their menacing cry of “Ul-ul-ul-ul-ullah Akbar.”

I turned to Brendan. “This is it ole cock,” I said.

“Ain’t dead yet Reggie me boy.”

“Ain’t no such word as ain’t,” I replied at which we laughed.

Our humorous period was interrupted when the captain yelled, “Fire!” And we did. Brendan and I fired that machine gun until the barrel was red hot. We cut them down like a man sheathing wheat, but still they came; there were so many of them. With fanaticism they made it to fort running amok killing everyone they saw. Down went Chief Butelasia, then Charles, screaming with great bravery, “Bet ya can’t get me,” then as an afterthought, “though the odds are not in my favour” before a dusky warrior plunged him through with his curved sword opening up his abdomen.

The captain was slain while being simultaneously attacked by six of them, firing his pistol as they did, taking four with him, but eventually he too was slaughtered. Kruger, to give him his due, had two in a head clamp having run out of ammunition, and banged their heads like water-melons smashing them, while screaming, "Come on you kaffirs I show you how a Boer fights and how he dies like a hero." One of the warriors then came behind him and plunged his lance into his back. Kruger's eyes bulged, and he then fell forward with a thump, letting out a huge groan. Poor old Luigi was defiant in his Italian, "Bastardi" he yelled, and from behind a six inch dagger cut his throat, perhaps bringing justice for a man who had cut his lover's throat.

The fighting continued with fewer of our men partaking in the melee. For Brendan and me, our machine gun had ceased up, so together we jumped from the rampart to the ground, pulled out our pistols ready to fight to the end, yelling, "For the Legion!" We emptied our weapons, sending six each of the dusky feins to their paradise. We were out of ammunition and waited for the worse. Brendan from the side of his mouth said to me "Well Reggie next time we meet it will be in the Big Bar in the Sky."

I chuckled. "See you there mate. Nice knowing ya."

Brendan then yelled, "Well what are you waiting for? Come on. Get it over with! Do your worse!" Then something bewildering happened, those surrounding us with brutality in their eyes started to back off and as they did a rider on a white steed approached. He spoke in perfect English,

"I am The Magi. ALMUKHTAR. The Chosen One. All your companions have been killed. It is only you who are left." He went on...

"Allah is Merciful and as his prophet, Allah be Praised, I am also merciful," he opened his mouth and showed his gleaming white teeth and said, "See this gap between my teeth, this is the sign of the Chosen One told by the prophets of old."

"Fair enough," I said.

He continued, "I shall let you live. Go from here and tell your superiors of the greatness of Allah and his mercy and his power. Tell them of the deaths that you have seen here and the power and terror that I shall enact on all those infidels who may come. I, the prophet of Allah, Allah be praised, has spoken and so it will be.

"Leave this fort never to return. Go to your people and warn them what you have seen. Go now, before the mercy of Allah, Allah be praised, and the mercy of The Chosen One lessens."

Well of course Brendan and I were not in a position to argue, so dropping our weapons we walked out of the fort witnessed by thousands of dark eyes. We walked as far as we could

everything in total silence and after a distance the yelling of those whom we left behind started as did the burning of the fort, what was left of it.



What was left of the fort after the attack. This appeared in "Give no quarter" magazine, the Legion's publication.

This was all very well of course. It was true we were trudging through the desert sands still alive away from the hell and carnage, but how are where we going to survive, the heat, the snakes, scorpions, the thirst and the lack of food? True we had our flasks of brandy, but our future prospects looked rather grim to say the least.

Then as luck had it, having trugged several miles, we came to the crest of a huge sand dune when as we looked below we saw a caravan of Berbers. Should we approach, after all, there was no reason to think they were friendly? We fell flat to the ground wondering what we should do. It was certain death if we continued, but it also could be certain death if we approached the Berbers if they were not friendly. Again, luck came our way. As we observed we saw a white man and he seemed to be conversing with the chief of the tribe. Surely if we threw ourselves on the mercy of a fellow white man who seemed to have some authority in the camp made up of Berbers with their camels and tents, we could be in good company.

Brendan and I looked at each other; Brendan spoke, "Well let's look at our options. If we continue out there it is certain death and no more Tasmania. If we approach them down there, it also could be certain death, a choice between dying of thirst or being strung up like a pound of meat. On the other hand, there is a minute chance that they might, just might be friendly and therefore, helpful. So wot ya think Reggie?"

I pursed my lips and sighed. "I wish Charles was here. He would look at the odds, but seeing Charles is not here....well, let's go with the latter, minute as the odds are."

Brenan nodded. We rose and waved our arms above our heads and yelled out, "Hello we come as friends!"

The Berbers reacted by rushing us fully armed with robes flying and pouncing upon us forcing us into the sand. They then kicked us down the dunes until we rolled to the feet of the white man.

“Good afternoon chaps. Colonel Samuel Withers here from British Intelligence.”

Hallelujah, we were saved!

It turned out that Withers was a jolly fellow and much to our delight he loved the whisky and cigars as much as we did. It also turned out the Berbers were no lovers of ISIS. Colonel Withers was working by gathering intelligence (and I thought there was no such thing as British intelligence) about ISIS and was sending it to the allies who were monitoring their movements.

Withers was an extra wonderful fellow. Before long he gave us clothes, more whisky and food. Soon a helicopter arrived which took us to an American military outpost near the Algerian coast, secretly located, for interrogation regarding what we experienced and knew. There was talk about us being sent back to the Legion to finish our term of service, but we protested. “What not wanting to go back to the frogs?” Beamed a CIA operative, “Don’t worry as far as they are concerned you are both dead.” Then the holy of holy words was spoken, he adding, “There are air tickets for you waiting in the General’s office. I believe they are two tickets to Tasmania.” We could have kissed him, but instead downed more whisky.

Within a week Brendan and I touched down at the Hobart airport and while going our separate ways promised to meet up weekly. I came home to Geilston Bay and he to where he called home. We did meet up at the Customs Hotel down at the wharf where we had many a session of bending the elbow. On one occasion three thugs in the bar began to tease Brendan and called him a wimp for some reason or other. I thought they were just show offs looking for trouble. I could see Brendan getting agitated. I said to the three toughies, “This is unfair, there’s three of you.”

“Oh just one of us will do,” the leader replied. “One of us will just punch his head in.”

“No,” I said. Just three of you. Unfair. You don’t stand a chance.”

The three pushed their chairs away and rose, moving towards Brendan. They were big blighters itching for trouble. As they approached, Brendan moved like lightening. As he did with Kruger he belted into the bread basket of the middle one, then followed it by an upper cut. The one from the right moved in to Brendan, but as he did so, Brendan with his elbow hit him on his nose, breaking it, sending him flying. The third thug to his left, seeing his companions slaughtered hesitated for that brief second. Brendan took the advantage and gave a karate chop with both hands to his neck sending him unconscious to the floor.

Brendan and I looked at each. “I warned them, I did.” I said.

Not long after Brendan met a local girl and they married. He became respectable. He got a job at the local Council as Town Clerk and I became a famous Tasmanian historian and

author. We met regularly afterwards to bend the elbow and remind ourselves of those adventures which we shared. But it was never the same.

THE END

PS. There now is a plaque at the old fort, containing both Brendan's and my name. The plaque is honour of those "Brave Legionnaires" *who fought for France and died for the Legion*. The CIA Operative was right – as far as the Legion's authorities are concerned, we are dead. Therefore they do not list us as deserters. Nor, however, can we claim any benefits.

Pictured below is myself on a secret tour of the battle site in the year 2018 viewing the plaque with our names on it. Did I chuckle.

