



Sahara Song: The Last Legions, the First Art

FREDERIC V. GRUNFELD

APPLICANTS for the job require no references or letters of recommendation. They ask you your name, but nobody checks whether the name you give is your own: one of the advertised enticements for recruiting is that any able-bodied man from anywhere can enlist in the Spanish Foreign Legion "without furnishing proof of his identity." This convenient feature is a hold-over from the old days, when the European legions in North Africa, both French and Spanish, represented a port of last resort for a lot of missing men. In *Beau Geste* days the legion offered a man hard work, low pay, and the implied promise of a Sahara sunstroke in exchange for no questions asked and no extradition.

But here, too, the times are changing. The French have passed from the scene and today's Spanish legionnaire is apt to be a farm boy from Seville or a store clerk from Bilbao who has volunteered for three years of adventure in the Sahara rather than serve eighteen months as a draftee in some more prosaic unit of the Spanish Army. The pay is

better, for one thing, and the idea of Africa cuts a wider swath with the girls back home. "We don't get as many toughs as we used to," a veteran legion officer told me, rather regretfully. "They don't bother to come to the desert. They stay home and make trouble on street corners."

What will it do to the Foreign Legion image when they start using the swimming pool which is just being completed near the El Aaiún parade ground? (There isn't another one east of here till you reach Khartoum.) And already there are four air-conditioned movie houses in this whitewashed garrison town. A lot of people go to the movies every night of the week because there is hardly anything else for them to do. I went to see *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* with the dialogue dubbed in Spanish but the songs left in English, and then walked back to my room through the icy Sahara night, which has more stars to the square inch than any other.

Despite the air conditioning, I gather that the legion still attracts hard cases from all over. There are enough old-style desperadoes, at any rate among the foreign enlistments,

to uphold the best traditions of a service that prides itself on its toughness and teaches its soldiers to be *novios de la muerte*—"bridegrooms of death."

Most of the strong-arm types who come to the legion for sanctuary are not talking about the reason why. But at one isolated outpost in the middle of the desert I met an amiable, soft-spoken Frenchman who freely admitted that he was a retired terrorist. He had spent four years in the French Army, then four more years as an OAS commando, participating, he said, in an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate de Gaulle. "I can never go back to France," he said wistfully. "All the borders are closed to me." At the end of his three years in the legion he will qualify for Spanish citizenship, and then he wants to settle in the nearby Canary Islands, where he expects to marry a local girl he met while on leave.

For this particular ex-gunner, the legion is a sort of halfway house on the road back to respectability. For some of his comrades it represents a step up on the economic ladder: not long ago a young Sudanese walked all the way to the Spanish frontier—a matter of about two thousand miles—in order to sign up with the legion. Volunteers are arriving from Negro Africa in increasing numbers. There have been a few Americans in the legion who stayed on to become sergeants because they liked the lizard's life in the sun, and Germans who came here because some war-crimes commission was after them.

Occasionally a tourist in Spain will succumb to the call of the wild and the lures of a recruiting poster. "I'd had too much to drink the night before," a Belgian explained, making a wry face. "I was in Barcelona and feeling very bored with myself, so I signed up. I've had *mille regrets* since then. And still another two years to kick myself for it." On the other hand, the happiest fellow I met in the Sahara is a German bricklayer who enlisted when he ran out of money while visiting Andalusia. He likes everything about the legion—the food ("there's so much of it I can't finish it all"), the company ("*meine Kollegen*"),

the climate ("so much sunshine, only sometimes too hot"), and the training ("better than we had in the German Army"). He comes from Munich, speaks Spanish with a heavy German accent and German with a heavy Bavarian accent, which is further impeded by being strained through a bristling black beard. The legion is one of the world's few regular infantries in which beards are authorized decorations—presumably as outward symbols of inward fortitude. As the platoons grow more and more hirsute they begin to look like Fidelistas in dress fatigues; an unintentional effect, I should say. Talking to some with beards and some without, I noticed that here, just as in Washington Square, a man's social *ressentiment* seems directly proportional to the amount of hair on his face: why is that?

THERE HAVE BEEN Britons in the African legions ever since the 1840's, when the son and namesake of Thomas Moore ("Believe me, if all those endearing young charms") lost his life with one of the *régiments étrangers* in Algeria. But Englishmen, on the whole, do not enjoy a good reputation in the Spanish legion. "Many have been unable to adapt themselves to the hard life of the legion, and have tried to desert or feign illness," a British military attaché told me. "And some, after deserting or finishing their service, have written exaggerated accounts for the press about its 'horrors.'"

The only Briton I met in the Sahara, however, has made what guidance counselors would call an excellent vocational adjustment. He is a high-strung, adventurous type from Edinburgh who has spent ten of his twenty-eight years in various peoples' armies. His name is Charles Moncrieff. He says that his father was a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Marines, that he himself enlisted in the British Army at eighteen and spent five years in Malaya as a specialist in explosives. Then, for nearly a year, he was one of Tshombe's mercenaries in the Congo. "A hundred quid a month when you got it. And you could always pick up extra money looting—'looking for a life,' as the Spanish say. Our main job was to stop them blowing up Tshombe's bridges. I went to London

for six months after that but got stinking bored. I tried knocking about France doing nothing, but then went over to San Sebastián, and that's where I joined the legion. Two years ago. When you first get here it's not very good, but it grows on you. Now I'm the dog handler here, and that's a job I like. No, don't worry about them," he added, as the German shepherds came charging out of the kennels. "They're very friendly. They only bite on command."

The legionnaires' main gripes have to do with sand and women: too much of one and too little of the other. "There used to be a brothel here," said a bugler at one of the desert forts. "Five women for eight hundred men. But a priest came and wrote a letter to the minister, and the minister didn't like it, so they sent them away last year." The sand comes in unlimited quantities, but only part of it is decoratively arranged in the form of dunes. "It gets in your teeth all the time," said a young recruit from Asturias. The hot desert wind (known in countries to the north as the sirocco) also drives it into your eyes, ears, nose, and throat; into the lenses of your cameras, the transmission of your Spanish-made Land-Rover, and the sound-hole of your Spanish guitar. Castanets sound positively gritty in this climate. The legion's field uniform calls for goggles, a *siroquera* cloth that keeps it out of your neck, and open-toed sandals that allow the sand to run out as quickly as it pours in.

LIFE in these red-hot/ice-cold latitudes is like some giant dress rehearsal for the first man-made settlements on the moon. There are a few pinpoints of human existence surrounded by a vast geological void. The two coastal towns, El Aaiún and Villa Cisneros, are both built around Foreign Legion camps, and farther inland the Spanish have constructed a handful of desert forts with watchtowers and crenellated walls. Beyond that is only a lunar landscape of rocks and sand—a countryside so arid and impenetrable that it was left unmapped, unclaimed, and ungoverned until the beginning of this century. Only in 1934 did the Spanish government bring the hinterland

of the Provincia del Sahara Español under effective administration. But although Spain was the last European power to establish a foothold in the desert, it is also the most tenacious in holding onto it.

At last count there were less than 19,000 native Saharans (any census here is complicated by the fact that the nomads move around more swiftly than the census takers). But what the province lacks in population it makes up in size: there are 105,448 square miles of territory, which makes it slightly larger than half of peninsular Spain, and works out to about five and one half square miles per person.

Neighboring Morocco and Mauretania have both laid claim to this territory. After Moroccan independence in 1956, bands of irregulars calling themselves the Moroccan Army of Liberation pushed down through the Spanish Sahara on their way to wrest Mauretania from the French. The lightly manned inland forts were hastily evacuated. But near El Aaiún, at the cavalry post of Edchara, a company of the legion made a classic last stand against the irregulars and was wiped out like General Custer at the Little Big Horn—a captain, two lieutenants, and eighty-five *caballeros*. (Their memory, says a grim little plaque at the spot, "shall serve as a constant example of heroism" to their replacements.) Shortly afterwards, in February, 1958, the Spanish and French launched a joint counteroffensive that quickly pushed the invaders back into Morocco. Since then the legion has stepped up its strength to about twenty thousand men, and quiet reigns once more along the entire two-thousand-mile frontier. Things are so quiet, in fact, that the loudest noise you can hear in the desert is the ticking of your watch.

THE TRICKY JOB of actually patrolling this immense stretch of border falls to the Agrupación de Tropas Nomadas, or ATN—the last great camel corps in the style of T. E. Lawrence or the seven pillars of Glubb. To see one of their patrols padding noiselessly onto the horizon is a sight to make your heart leap into your mouth: the officer in front, his lance corporal just behind with pennant fluttering, and then in sin-

gle file eight or nine troopers with sharpshooters' rifles dangling from their pommels. The whole performance would wring gnashes of envy from the most push-button Pentagon technocrat. The ATN also has a stable of Land-Rovers, but the mountainous and craggy stretches to the east are impassable for any sort of vehicle. In the valleys of the moon, the nomad trooper and his camel are indispensable.

These Moorish and R'Guibat tribesmen of the Sahara are magnificent-looking people whose ancestors long ago discovered how to make an art out of survival in this murderous desert. Theirs is an austere, elegant way of life defined by an old proverb as "a tent, clean sand, and a camel." The dark-blue and brown tents, the black turbans, burnt-ocher robes, and white, gray, and yellow sands are all part of some master pattern designed by the Great Art Director in the sky. The sand—the land—belongs to no one in particular. On camelback the nomad enjoys the freedom of the high seas, and it has not yet occurred to him to circumscribe his million-acre domain with anything so absurd as a title deed.

BEFORE the Spanish arrived, the rival tribes were forever gunning each other down at the water holes and raiding each other's camel herds. These traditional aggressions are now sublimated into the camel corps, which has the double advantage of being both romantic and utilitarian. The ATN polices the oases and caravan routes, brings emergency aid to isolated families, and pays its troopers princely sums—up to \$200 a month, plus rations and quarters—for doing precisely what they like best, which is riding camels. The ATN scouts who were my guides in the desert seemed to think that this was the living fulfillment of a nomad dream: it gave him a camel, a rifle, a khaki uniform with a red dress cape and a black turban, a steady supply of imported groceries for himself and his one to four wives, and the chance to educate his children at an oasis school where both Spanish and Saharai are spoken.

Some nomads have brought it as far as *comandante* (major) in the ATN, but virtually all the camel officers are Spanish—usually old

desert hands who have spent their army lives in Spain's various North African possessions. Most of them are intensely proud of their Leatherstocking role in this frontier drama—the latest installment in the old love-hate symbiosis between Spaniard and Moor. They keep gazelles and desert foxes and even miniature dinosaurs (skinks and geckos) as pets. They regard the desert with the desperate passion of a lover for a particularly demanding and dangerous mistress. "I've been in Africa for twenty years," one of



them said. "I couldn't go back to Madrid again. I wouldn't know how to behave when I got there."

He lives in spartan officers' quarters in the multiple-domed camel-corps headquarters at Smara, about three hundred miles and a hard day's drive from the nearest outburst of civilization. Whenever his paper work permits he goes out on long-range patrols with his camels, and he likes to spend his spare time

hunting gazelles and antelopes in the desert hills. Like most of the camel officers at Smara, he is also an avid amateur archaeologist. Within an hour's ride of the fort lies one of the world's most extraordinary galleries of prehistoric art: a series of rock outcroppings, half buried in sand, on which are engraved hundreds of vivid pictures of animals and men.

This Stone Age Louvre has yet to be photographed or catalogued, and the experts are not certain of its age except that this is some of the earliest art on record. It may be as old as 15,000 or as young as 5,000 B.C., give or take a few millennia. Obviously these pictures belong to an epoch when the Sahara had a lot more water, for here as in Libya and Algeria there are river animals—crocodiles and hippos—along with land-based creatures that have since disappeared: elephants, buffalo, and rhinoceros. The human figures among them are nearly always subordinate to the animals, but here and there an artist has engraved the image of a solitary hunter, arms outstretched in the form of a crucifix.

SOME of these sandstone plates have split off from their rock base and are lying strewn about in the open desert like so many leftovers from an artists' picnic. The colonel in charge of Smara, an *aficionado* of the stone bulls, has begun rounding up the loose pieces to take them into protective custody. The courtyard of his headquarters already contains a collection of treasures worthy of Lascaux or Altamira, and in the tiny officers' club there is a pair of gazelles for which any museum director would cheerfully give his eyeteeth.

There is no danger, as yet, that marauding tourists will make off with these as souvenirs. Visitors to the province are discouraged by the need for a government safe-conduct and the lack of any habitable hotel. There is talk of building one, but it may be years before this place is put on the tourist map. If you want to see the Spanish Sahara, you must either join the Foreign Legion or be prepared to settle for a tent, clean sand, and a camel.

The Silver-Tongued Southpaw

JAY JACOBS

WAY BACK in my earliest teens, when the grasses and I were both a bit greener, I struck up a correspondence with a journeyman pitcher in the American League. Once a week during the baseball season I would receive, in return for my own lavishly illustrated twelve- and fourteen-page testimonials to the altogether mythical puissance of my hero's right arm, a postcard whose obverse invariably featured an idealized view of whatever hotel it happened to be written from, and whose reverse almost as invariably would have something like this to say:

"Hello Jay—We played three games in St. Louis last weekend. It was hot. I lost 9-3. We play Chicago tomorrow, Wed. and Thurs. I probably won't start. Write."

The constancy of my pen pal's prose style was rooted in three factors: it is *always* hot in St. Louis during the playing season; my man (who, if I'm not mistaken, was the losingest pitcher in the league that year) unfailingly took his lumps to some such tune as 9-3; and he changed teams as often as most men change their socks, somehow always managing to join a new outfit just as it was embarking for St. Louis.

It might be supposed that the reason for the latter phenomenon was that my man was more effective than most against St. Louis, and that each of his successive employers craftily took him aboard on the eve of an engagement with the old Browns, hoping to capitalize on a sure thing. The plain fact, however, is that St. Louis could not have beaten your grandmother in those days—or anyone else except my correspondent, who lost to the Browns as regularly and as easily as he was clobbered by the New York Yankees. Late in the season, the Browns proved to be as maladroit tactically as they were mechanically by trading an innocuous outfielder for my friend, thereby snatching two or three additional defeats from the jaws of almost certain victory. An

ancillary result of this transaction was a slight change in the content, if not the form, of the messages I received during the rest of the campaign: "We played three games at home last weekend. It was hot. I lost 14-3."

AS LACONIC as my friend may seem in retrospect, he was no mean stylist. As a pitcher, he may not have relished it, but the impeccable "I lost 9- [or 14-] 3" is a sentence of which any writer might be proud, and one that clearly is superior in every way to the few analogous documents we have. Consider, for example, Ring Lardner's Jack Keefe, who more or less typified his confreres of *that* era, or Jim Brosnan, who published a personal chronicle of the 1959 semester (during which he performed with notable mediocrity for St. Louis and Cincinnati), and who is more or less representative of the ballplayer of the present era. KEEFE (*You Know Me, Al*): "The way my arm was I ought never to of went in there." BROSAN (*The Long Season*): "The tensions of the inning plus the heat and humidity undermined whatever strength I had left after throwing eighty-seven pitches, many of them frustratingly good ones."

In those days, ballplayers came mostly from the farm or the hills, and were a taciturn lot. Even when they did open their mouths, their utterances usually were either unprintable or tobacco juice.

About that time, I became the New York correspondent for a West Coast "newspaper" (a mimeographed monthly got up by a couple of St. Louis Cardinals enthusiasts of Japanese extraction, whose publishing empire collapsed with Pearl Harbor). As an unaccredited member of the working press, I would hang around outside the visitors' clubhouse at the old Polo Grounds after games, in the hope of being granted an interview by Joe Medwick, Lon Warneke, or Enos Slaughter during the long subway ride downtown. Unfortu-

nately, the discourse of most of the heroes I was able to get within earshot of was limited to speculations, heavily garnished with barnyard imagery, concerning the young woman who happened to be traveling in the same car. Thus, the only by-line I ever got was the result of an outrageously extended paraphrase of a four-word observation ("... I don't know") by Don Padgett, the club's catcher of the moment.

My only reason for Prousting back to a *temps perdu* is to emphasize the change that has come over the American ballplayer during the intervening years, and to note that anyone having doubts about the cultural explosion in this country has only to turn to the sports pages to dispel them. Three decades back, ballplayers either butchered the mother tongue ("He slud into second base") or left it alone (Charley Gehring and Frank Crossetti, among many others, were proverbial for their unbroken silences); and those few big leaguers who emitted intelligible sounds with a frequency approaching that of the average Maine lighthouse keeper invariably earned nicknames like "Gabby" or "Lippy."

TODAY, however, it seems to be almost impossible to get a ballplayer to shut up, and the ordinary sports-page interview is a melange of polysyllables, periodic sentences, intensive analysis, and general erudition that would give pause to an Edmund Wilson. Indeed, just as any reference to a ballplayer in my youth was preceded by some such fixed epithet as "slugging," "rubber-armed," "gangling," "colorful," or "lead-footed," it is now almost impossible to find any .230 hitter's name unpreceded by an "articulate" or not followed by reference to his *Weltanschauung*. "Perhaps the articulate Bobby Bragan of the Braves said it best," says Arthur Daley in the *Times*: "I'd only get myself confused," offered the highly articulate left-hander," writes Harold Rosenthal of Jim Kaat in the *Herald Tribune*; Joseph Durso of the *Times* tells us that Ken Boyer is "a solid articulate man with steady brown eyes and curly brown hair."

Still concentrating on ballplayers from the neck up, Mr. Durso tells