

# HE WANTED ADVENTURE—AND GOT IT

## Wellington Man Who Served Five Years In Foreign Legion

THE year 1930 was a black one for British trade and commerce. The bearers of that trade, the great liners and the little tramps lay together in the roadsteads, falling into disuse. The slump had arrived. Throughout England's industrial towns the depression was felt most keenly. Hundreds of men were out of work as factory chimneys ceased smoking. On street corners all over Britain, out-of-work men gathered.

Among those in the great city of Manchester who found themselves jobless was a young shipping clerk. He was not content to stand and wait for the something that was always "going to turn up." Instead he remembered various tales of adventure he had read, tales by P. C. Wren and others, filled with desert sands, bedouin sheiks, desperate fights and romances.

That was how George Parker came to join the French Foreign Legion.

### Longs For The Old Life

Mr. Parker lives in Wellington now; but although the city and this New Zealand are beautiful, he longs to get back into the old life of hardship and danger and adventure. "You get restless staying in one place for long after a life like that," he says. The other evening after he had given a talk from 2YA, *The Listener* interviewed him, and he told us something of his experiences in Northern Africa; and from what he said one gathers that P. C. Wren and his fellow story-tellers about the Legion have not relied solely upon their imaginations.

When Mr. Parker joined the Legion, his first contact with the army was at Dunkirk, where he joined the 47th infantry regiment.

Soon afterward the boat steamed across the Mediterranean and into the port of Oran on the African coast. At the rails, old legionnaires and new gazed at the white town, brilliant beneath the intense blue sky and blazing sun.

The heat which came down like an invisible blanket was a foretaste of the swelter that was to follow as the detachment was marched three miles to the barracks from the ship. Oran is a town with a long history. The forts still stand where once French and Spaniards fought for its possession.

### The Glamour Began To Go

From Oran came the first long march—25 kilometres—to Sidi-Bel-Abbès in the interior. From the train the young recruits saw their new companions, smart in khaki, with blue and red kepis, marching on manoeuvres. At Sidi-Bel-Abbès was the garrison headquarters. The new legionnaires were rapidly finding the glamour of legion life evaporating in the heated air. First disillusionment came with the uniforms issued to them. These were not always new, and the boots had to be worn down to suit the new owner's foot—a painful process! On active service, the legion wears no socks. Cloth is wrapped round the feet. This saves blisters coming from the holes which would soon appear in socks.

Parker had his first taste of the rigid discipline enforced throughout the Legion when, on the march from Sidi-Bel-Abbès to a training camp, he dropped a handkerchief. On arrival, a kit inspection was held and for the loss he was rewarded with four days C.B. Then came his first acquaintance with prison camp life. The prisoners, after drilling with the others, had to do a further half hour's punishment drill, after which they had to crawl on elbows and stomach to the plate containing their evening meal. Sometimes, if the N.C.O. in charge was a vicious type with a grudge against a legionnaire, the unfortunate man, having finished the painful crawl, would have plate and food kicked into his face. In the cells, if the prisoner plagued the legionnaire-warder too much with his cries for a drink of water, he was likely to get a bucket of it thrown in his

face by way of reprimand. All these things go against the grain for an Englishman, as does having to salute an N.C.O., who might be black, white or yellow. However, the penalty for omitting the salute was heavy.

### Brush With The Arabs

The marching average of the legion was about 45 kilometres a day. On making camp, one detachment would be set to building a wall of stones one metre high and about half a metre thick all around. Others would be sent to gather grass and dried twigs for fuel. Guards would be posted, and then, just as rest was relieving the weariness of the day, the call would come to strike camp and move on.

Four-fifths of the time the Legion was on active service and the young man from Manchester saw much of the fighting. The Grand Atlas mountains were the scene of hostilities for a long time; the method of attack was to approach the Arab positions in the pitch dark, and then at dawn the charge would sound.

Mr. Parker described one such major engagement. The Legion was ordered to attack and capture Tazigout, a well-fortified sacred mountain. The whole position dominated the valley below from which the Legion had to attack; and "attack at any cost" was the Legion's order. Supporting the infantry were three French aeroplanes and one or two squadrons of cavalry; and when about three-quarters of the distance had been covered the Arabs opened a murderous fire. The Legion withdrew while the 'planes machine-gunned and bombed the Arab stronghold. This was unavailing, and four attacks had to be made before the Legion gained its objective on the ridge. The whole attack went through with blue and white burnouses flashing, tribesmen yelling, and muskets crackling. When the Arabs had retreated and the newly-gained positions were consolidated, the Legion roll-call was taken. Of twelve hundred men, eight hundred were either killed or wounded.

### Short of Water and Food

By one o'clock next morning, the Arabs had encircled the ridge. Many men were lost through the deadly sniping of the natives. There were 45

bullet holes in the Colonel's tent next morning, and the other tents were well riddled. Next day the sun arose as burning hot as ever, and parched throats began to call for water. The only water supply was in the valley. A mule, with two barrels strapped to its back, was sent down with a corporal and three men. Only the mule, one barrel, and one man came back.

Mr. Parker's company lived on one bag of carrots for three days and then, at last, reinforcements arrived.

### Not Always Fighting

But the life was not *all* fighting. There were the garrison towns where the men were rested for brief periods. Mr. Parker remembers one such place called Meknes. Here the domed minarets of the East rise up beside the modern architecture of the European quarter. Round Meknes are vast walls, built about 300 years ago by the Sultan Mulay Ismail.

In the old quarter of Meknes, Arabs, Jews, Spaniards, all the polyglot crowd of East and West, rub shoulders. Nearby in the modern European quarter are three or four talkie cinemas, several fine parks and modern buildings in the Continental style.

### Cheap Living

The legionnaire's pay is small, but he can live very cheaply. One litre of wine costs 75 centimes, or about 1¼d. Troop tobacco is 50 centimes or about ¾d for 125 kilograms or about ¼lb. The pay is 50 francs every 15 days; but if the legionnaire wants a packet of English cigarettes, they will cost him four or five days' pay.

When Mr. Parker left the Legion, it was with the rank of corporal and several medals, among them the *Croix de Guerre* with palms, for which one must have fought with distinction in five active engagements and served for four years at least in Morocco, the Sahara, or another of the French Colonial possessions.

Mr. Parker is writing the story of his experiences. When he complains with a little smile that life here is dull and lacking in flavour, one can understand.



(Paramount)

HOLLYWOOD'S IDEA OF THE FOREIGN LEGION is not far out, according to George Parker, who is interviewed on this page. This scene is from the new film version of "Beau Geste"