



Official Newsletter of the Michigan Company of Military Historians & Collectors

March 11, 2013

"We are the Fenian Brotherhood, skilled in the arts of war,
And we're going to fight for Ireland, the land we adore,
Many battles we have won, along with the boys in blue,
And we'll go and capture Canada, for we've nothing else to do."

-Fenian soldier's song

The speaker this month will be Associate member Fern O'Beshaw who will discourse on the effects of the American Civil War upon the civilian population. Mrs. O'Beshaw is also an active Civil War re-enactor.

MEETINGS take place the second Monday of every month at the **Riverfront Hotel Grand Rapids Riverfront** 270 Ann St NW, Grand Rapids, MI 49504 (616) 363-9001. Socializing begins at 6:00 (1800), dinner at 7:00 (1900), business meeting 7:15 (1915), and program at 8:00 (2000).

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Company Notes

Any former members are encouraged to rejoin the Company, we miss your companionship. You are welcome to attend any meeting. Rejoining is simply a matter of writing a \$40 check to MCMH&C and giving it to any member who will forward it to Mike Krushinsky.

*The editorial opinions and articles in **The Cannon Report** do not represent any official position of the Michigan Company of Military Historians and Collectors (MCMH&C) only the opinions of the editor. The MCMH&C is a non-partisan, non-ideological association. All members are welcome to submit material, letters, "for the good of the company items", etc. Direct inquiries or comments to kuziaks@me.com

The Fighting Irish

Recent events in the divided country of Ireland have made this writer realize that in the 19th and 20th century Ireland has never fielded a standing army in combat. Many Irishmen had served in the British Army under the Union Jack, but at no time was there an army comprised and led by men from Ireland, except during a short period after the conclusion of the American Civil War; an event that allowed thousands of Irish immigrants to gain combat experience while fighting for both the North and South! They would comprise part of a group known as Fenians, an umbrella term for the [Fenian Brotherhood](#) and [Irish Republican Brotherhood](#) (IRB), fraternal organizations dedicated to the establishment of an independent [Irish Republic](#) in the 19th and early 20th century.

The name Fenian was first applied by [John O'Mahony](#) to the members of the [Irish republican](#) group that he founded in the [United States](#) in 1831. O'Mahony, named the American wing of the movement after the [Fianna](#). In [Gaelic Ireland](#) these were warrior bands of young men who lived apart from society and could be called upon in times of war. The term Fenian is still used today, especially in [Northern Ireland](#) and [Scotland](#), where its original meaning has widened to include all supporters of [Irish nationalism](#). It has also been used as a demeaning term for [Irish Catholics](#). Irish nationalists, while honoring the 19th century Fenians, more often describe themselves as "nationalist" or "republican". Organized for the purpose of winning Ireland's independence by physical force, the Fenians revealed Irish-American nationalism in its finest flowering and full ambiguity. A member of the British House of Commons rightly called the Brotherhood, "a new Irish nation on the other side of the Atlantic, recast in the mold of Democracy, watching for an opportunity to strike a blow at the heart of the British Empire." It is the only organization in US history which armed and drilled publicly, and invaded Canada for the purpose of using seized land as a stepping-stone for the invasion and liberation of Ireland.

At the conclusion of the Civil War IRB leaders saw an opportunity to take the thousands of recent and unemployed veterans and form an army to seize Canada and hold the country hostage until the English let go their yoke on Ireland. An audacious concept that would ultimately fail for several reasons; the primary one being the divided opinions of the Fenian leadership that led to disastrous consequences. Initially the strategy was to make a three-pronged attack: one group of 3,000 men would leave Chicago, travel north through Detroit and Windsor, Ont., to Stratford, Ont. Another 5,000 men would cross in two groups: one from Cleveland across Lake Erie to Port Stanley, joining the Chicago men at London, Ont., while the other army would cross at Buffalo to take Hamilton, Ont. After defeating the 8,000 regular Canadian military and the 10,000 militia, they would march on to Toronto. This was but a feint to lead the British to believe that the Welland Canal was the main target. The real attack would come from Vermont with 16,800 men. Cavalry would take Cornwall and Prescott, then move east to Montreal. The Montreal Irish would rise up to meet them and French radicals would supply fresh horses. As the pieces fell into place, the army would seize Pointe Levis opposite Quebec City. Fenian warships would sail in to secure the St. Lawrence River. ("Plan B" was to secure the area between the Richelieu and St. Francis Rivers and establish Sherbrooke as the Fenian capital). The plan, to succeed, would require simultaneous and successful attacks!

Buttressing this daring strategy to force concessions from the British was the political influence the Fenians felt supported them. The chief executive of the Fenians had met with President Andrew Johnson. Reportedly, President Johnson agreed to "recognize the accomplished facts" and acknowledge an Irish Republic in exile if the Fenians were to establish a foothold in Canada. The US was still smarting from a Confederate raid on St. Albans, Vermont in October,

1864. CSA troops come out of Canada, seized the funds of three banks then rode back into Canada with \$208,000. That incident and others where Britain had materially supplied the Confederacy in violation of the Neutrality Act of 1818 angered US politicians. Therefore, while not overtly supporting the Fenians the US would not attempt to deter them, initially.

However, events soon transpired that spelled doom for the Fenians. The expression “the luck of the Irish...” is only half spoken, too often we forget the rest, “... if I didn’t have bad luck I’ve have no luck at all.” Fenian Secretary of War Sweeny saw his 3-prong attack plans approved by the IRB on Feb. 19, 1866. But, the deposed leader O'Mahony had other ideas. O'Mahony believed he could regain control of the IRB with a force of 1,000 Fenians. On April 19, O'Mahony's small army invaded New Brunswick from Calais and Eastport, Maine, and seized the island of Campobello (the future summer residence of Franklin Delano Roosevelt). From this bastion, he planned to launch attacks directly on Ireland. What O'Mahony didn't know was that informers had tipped off the British, who were ready and waiting. Further, Gen. George Meade had been instructed by President Johnson in the beginning to "make a show of stopping the Fenian incursion by persuasion and without force of arms." But the US president was secretly dealing with the British. At stake was \$15 million in reparations the US was seeking from Great Britain. Johnson found himself in a difficult political situation and chose to show good faith to the Brits and the encounter was cut short, the Fenians retreated as Gen. Meade took possession of O'Mahony's ship and arms. Many British felt this was the main attack—and they were wrong. Realizing that this pre-emptive move by a splinter group of Fenians still gave Johnson room to maneuver and not alienate either the Irish electorate, the politicians, or the English.

It had been a hard chore assembling this fighting force to meet Sweeny's plan. Men forming the IRA's 13th Regiment had been on trains for four days. They had left Nashville on May 27. In Louisville, members of the 17th IRA Regiment boarded the train. At another stop, more troops got on board. The men had been ordered to dress in work clothes, disguise their intentions and appear to be laborers. It wasn't at all odd that these Southerners banded together with their Northern brethren. The IRB had been formed in the United States in 1858 following the rebellion in Ireland; America's Civil War had only temporarily put the immigrants on opposite sides of the battle lines. They arrived in Cleveland expecting boats to ferry them to Canada. A staff officer sent to Cleveland reported there were no boats. In disappointment, the men were billeted in warehouses that night and then returned to the trains to begin the tiresome trip to Buffalo. As they neared Buffalo, the train slowed so the men could jump off and avoid the police they suspected were waiting for them. Ammunition had been loaded onto wagons from the freight yard. While the Fenians hoped to confuse British spies and the American military, they did wear conspicuous green caps and green-colored items of clothing as they separated in the city.

Sweeny must have been discouraged with what he saw. Only some 1,200 men were assembled in Buffalo. Brigadier Lynch, who was to lead the attack, had come down with a fever, which took him out of the battle before it started. Sweeny telegraphed for his adjutant, a Colonel Sherwin, to take command, but Sherwin couldn't get there in time. Sweeny became more agitated at these developments. In desperation he ordered John O'Neill to take command as acting brigadier and lead the attack. O'Neill's 13th IRA Regt. of Nashville, the 7th Regt. of Buffalo, the 18th Regt. of Cleveland and accompanied by 500 Mohawk Indians from the Cattaraugus Reservation in New York, one company of 100 African American veteran soldiers of the Union Army and a Catholic priest prepared to invade Canada.



O'Neill's army, ready before sunup, made a quick march to the docks where barges ferried them across the Niagara River. Ammunition was distributed; rifled muskets purchased that April in Pennsylvania would await them on the other side. Weaponry was no problem; once the Civil War had ended, weapons and ammunition were being sold by their weight rather than count or quality.

Many of the men began wore uniforms of various sorts, although O'Neill reportedly wore gray clothing with a green decorated military cap. Men from Louisville had blue army jackets with green trim; and there were flags to be unfurled. Five banners were of six-foot regimental size. Several carried the golden sunburst and one was emblazoned with a harp. Other events were unfolding at the same moment. While Fenian groups moved about the city to confuse authorities as to the illicit army's intentions, a U.S. district attorney ordered the *USS*

Michigan, the only warship on the upper Great Lakes, to stop all movement on the Niagara River. The political tide had turned.

Steam tugs pulled the Fenian canal boats across the swift Niagara early in the morning. At 3:15, June 1, cavalry officer Owen Starr crossed the Niagara with the Kentucky and Indiana troops and proceeded to the ruins of the old military Fort Erie to capture the Buffalo and Lake Huron railway depot. Fort Erie, lightly defended by just six members of the Royal Canadian Rifles, fell to the Fenians. Proudly, the Fenians raised the tricolor flag—today's flag of the Irish Republic. Brigadier O'Neill had also crossed his men and set up a headquarters at Frenchman's Creek, near the town of Ridgeway, creating defensive entrenchments. Planning the next day's attack—and resting, knowing he was under the telescopes of the *Michigan*.

Ahead of O'Neill's battle-hardened men were the 13th Hamilton and the Queen's Own Rifles. O'Neill knew the "Redcoats" outnumbered his army. He told his commanders with audacity, "I find that encouraging. A force that size ought to be unwieldy enough to make life easy for us." He may also have known that his enemy was made up of an inexperienced army and militia. His plan was to move north along the Niagara River. Once he knew the British troops were on the move to meet him, he would turn inland and head west toward Port Colborn. Lt. Col. John Stoughton Dennis of the Queen's Own was in charge of the forces at Port Colborne—nearly a thousand militia. He knew Col. George Peacocke, commander of Niagara forces, was assembling almost 1,500 British Canadian infantry, six gun batteries and 55 cavalry to repulse

the attack. Peacocke, down the river in Chippawa near the Falls, had planned a pincer movement to trap the Fenians.

Dennis, however, decided on his own to hold the majority of his troops at Port Colborne and take 80 troops on the steam tug *W.T. Robb* east to Fort Erie to block a Fenian retreat. He wired Peacocke of his plans and set out without waiting for a reply. Peacocke's unqualified disapproval of Dennis' plan reached Port Colborne long after the *Robb* steamed off. Lt. Colonel Albert Booker, a professional auctioneer from Hamilton who had been left in command of the 13th Battalion, was told to proceed with the planned move toward Ridgeway. Seeing movement, Booker began moving 400 regulars, six field guns and 1,115 militia forward.

By 3:00 on the morning of June 2, O'Neill had moved his troops toward the ambush he had prepared. Starr's cavalry was to begin the conflict and then retreat, intending to draw the British into a trap. Firing from 10 companies of the Queen's Own Rifles began at about 8:00, using the Spencer repeating rifles they had just been issued. Traveling light, however, the men had each received just 40 rounds of ammunition at best—and they had never used the new rifles in battle. They saw the scouts, heard the bugle and expected cavalry, so they formed defensive squares—a standard defense against swiftly moving horse troops. Brigadier O'Neill ordered his troops to fix bayonets. Screaming "Fág an Bealach!"—Clear the way! —they charged forward on foot. The British and Canadians were untested recruits, half of whom were under the age of 20. As the forward part of the square was ordered to fall back and reform, the young soldiers turned and retreated in disarray.

At the end of the Battle of Ridgeway, 16 British had been killed, with two more dying later of their wounds and two from heat stroke. There were 74 wounded and six captured. Brigadier O'Neill's force saw five killed, two dying later from their injuries, and 17 wounded. All in all, it was a glorious battle for the Fenian raiders in green-trimmed uniforms, some with buttons embossed with the initials IRA—the Irish Republican Army. Not far away, in Buffalo, Lt. General Ulysses Grant, under orders from President Johnson, had sealed the border. This blocked the late-arriving Sherwin's 4,000 Fenian troops. They would not be allowed to cross and reinforce O'Neill. At the same time, the British were reinforcing their army with 101 officers and 1,841 fresh troops under the command of Col. George John Peacocke.

Unsure of the enemy's size and position, O'Neill split his army, withdrawing half back to Fort Erie. The log of the *USS Michigan* noted a large number of Fenians reentering Fort Erie the afternoon of June 2. It was there that O'Neill was soon confronted by the Canadian militia force under the command of Lt. Col. Dennis. O'Neill must have known further fighting was futile: reinforcements wouldn't arrive; Peacocke's field artillery was setting up nearby; his men were out of ammunition; and the *Michigan*, two sentry tugs and a revenue cutter were patrolling the waters. A truce was called, and it was while the Fenians were negotiating under the white flag that IRA Lt. Col. Michael Bailey was shot down.

O'Neill and as many men as possible boarded and left the Canadian shore at approximately 2:00 a.m. on June 3. Within minutes, a twelve-pound howitzer sent a shell across the path of the tug *Doyle* as it hauled its Fenian cargo toward Buffalo. O'Neill felt this was as safe a haven as he could expect under the circumstances. O'Neill and his officers were arraigned by federal officials. It had been a three-day war, glorious but achieving none of the Fenian aims. On June 4, the Fenians captured by the Canadians began arriving in Toronto. They were led in handcuffs from their train to the city jail, jeered by crowds and pelted with garbage. Of the Fenian prisoners being held in Toronto, about one-third of the 117 captives were sent to trial later in the fall of 1866. Twenty-one were found guilty of invading Canada, and seven were

sentenced to be hanged on Dec. 13, 1866, one was the Catholic priest, Father John McMahon. None of the death sentences were carried out, but Father McMahon was the last prisoner to be released. There was a large Irish population in British North America and the authorities felt it would do no good to needlessly alienate voters.

In the United States, Fenian officers who had been captured were all freed on the promise they would appear later before the Federal circuit court at Canandaigua. The paroled soldiers were given free railroad transportation back to their homes if they agreed not to again illegally cross international borders. Politics was again at work: the Irish vote was too important to U.S. politicians to be squandered on something as minor as the invasion of a sovereign nation. The planned simultaneous attack at St. Albans did not take place till June 6.

2,000 Fenians moved six miles north from St. Albans where they took Frelightsburgh, and then rolled on to capture St. Armand, Slab City and East Stanbridge. On June 8, a Friday, they defeated the British at Pigeon Hill. Then the Fenians' problems began compounding. The Irish in Montreal did not rise up. Some 10,000 militia joined the British regulars there, and three British warships sat in the St. Lawrence River with their guns trained on the Fenians. Even worse, the Fenian cause had been sold out by the U.S. government. As the Irish crossed the border, President Johnson cut a deal with the British: for \$15 million in reparation payments covering losses suffered by the Union during the Civil War the United States would enforce the Neutrality Laws of 1818. The Fenians had been successfully used as a political bargaining chip. In spite of what President Johnson had earlier told the IRB, the United States was not going to sanction war, the troops could only retreat on June 9. Then they were betrayed again. As they returned to the United States, a U.S. Lt. Col. Livingston of the 3rd Artillery Regt. unilaterally gave the British forces permission to pursue the Irish onto American soil. He watched, it is reported, while Fenians were bayoneted and killed by swords. When the Fenians finally arrived back in St. Albans, they found the park where they had camped occupied by U.S. troops and their supplies confiscated under the Neutrality Act of 1818. The defeated Fenians—no doubt tired and dismayed—were escorted to the train depot, put on board and sent back to Boston while the residents of St. Albans were entertained by a Federal army band concert.

Quickly, an American public voiced its outrage at the Fenians' treatment. Lt. Col. Livingston was reprimanded for allowing this violation of American sovereignty. In August, Canada suspended the right of *habeas corpus* for the period of a year for anyone suspected of complicity in the Fenian attacks. In Canada, Lt. Col. Dennis, who had cut off O'Neill at Fort Erie, was court martialed for cowardice. While fighting at Fort Erie, Dennis had disappeared, only to appear in Col. Peacocke's camp, clean shaven and wearing civilian clothes! The Fenians' weapons, confiscated by the crew of the *Michigan* were returned on Dec. 2. Michael Bailey, shot under a flag of truce and slowly dying, led the macabre victory parade away from the gunboat. Brigadier John O'Neill, hero of the Battle of Ridgeway, went on to be elected president of the senate of the Irish Republican Brotherhood. He tried another cross-border attack from Franklin, Vermont, in 1870, and failed. He tried in 1871 to entice Louis Riel (defender of the Métis, descendants of French coureurs de bois and Indian women in Manitoba) to take up the cause, and this attack also failed. Eventually, O'Neill retired to a town on the Elkhorn River in Nebraska, and the town was named for him.

The raids had a chilling effect on Canada-United States relations until rapprochement was reached early in the 20th century. Normalization didn't occur until the countries formed an alliance during World War II. The raids, however, did serve to bring Canadians together, and the Confederation was finalized after the 1866 incursions when the British passed the British North

America Act in 1867, creating the Dominion of Canada. It is ironic that this Fenian misadventure was also the birth and baptism, in fire and blood, of the Canadian army.

One wonders what possessed the Johnson administration to allow the arming and assembly of an illicit army within the U.S. borders. Most likely, President Johnson and Secretary of War Stanton chose to ignore the Neutrality Laws because the British had done so earlier, but it may also have resulted from political ineptitude or simple distraction at the end of a long enfeebling war. Another insight comes from an interview Johnson gave O'Neill in 1868. "General," the President reportedly said, "you people unfairly blame me a good deal for the part I took in stopping your first movement. Now I want you to understand my sympathies are entirely with you, and anything which lies in my power I am willing to do to assist you. But you must remember I gave you five full days before issuing any proclamation stopping you. What, in God's name, more did you want? If you could not get there in five days, by God, you could never get there; and then, as President, I was compelled to enforce our Neutrality Laws, or be denounced on every side."

Much of this article comes from the efforts of Walt Griersbach from MilitaryHistory.com and Benedict Maryniak.

The picture below taken by this writer at The Ridgeway Battle Site. The bilingual placard (French and English) reads:



(French and English) reads: Pro Patria - In abiding memory of the officers and men of the Queen's Own Rifles, 13th Hamilton Battalion, Caledonia and York Rifle Companies of Haldimand who fought here in defence of their country against Fenian Raiders on 2nd June, 1866." In 2006 a reenactment was staged and a monument erected to commemorate the 140th anniversary. Since then the Queen's Own Rifles of Canada return to the Ridgeway battle site each year on the weekend closest to the June 2nd anniversary

for a bicycle tour of the battle sites. Less than 300 yards from this site is the house of my cousin, James Rogozinski. We often walk over the fields that have largely remained unchanged since the 1860's, yet we are less than 5 miles (8 km) due west of the Peace Bridge spanning the river from Fort Erie, Ont. to Buffalo, NY. It is an area that shows little of the passing time. Traveling 5 miles due east from the Peace Bridge on the American side is a journey fraught with potential misadventures and demonstrates such a change in scenery that one often thinks he has traveled to another planet. Venturing from Fort Erie, at the mouth, to Niagara-on-the-Lake, at its terminus, the Canadian side of the Niagara River offers a stark contrast to any traveler who had been on the other side. It is a trip well worth taking, on both sides.

Preserving the USS Arizona

Much like the *HMS Ark Royal* in Scapa Flow the *USS Arizona* resting in Pearl Harbor presents two problems, the first being the slow disintegration of a war memorial and the second is the eventual release of fuel still contained in her bunkers. While the *Ark Royal* is estimated to have less than 1000 gallons of fuel aboard, the *Arizona* is believed to have at least 500,000 gallons remaining. The capacity of the between the hull spaces is 695,000 gallons, additional space was obtained when the anti-torpedo blisters were installed in 1929 and this space between the hull and blisters almost doubled its total supply. Unfortunately the exact distribution of fuel is unknown since all records were destroyed during the attack. There is evidence of a slight leakage of fuel but its true source is yet to be determined.

Construction of the *USS Arizona* (BB-39), second of the *Pennsylvania*-class 14 inch main gun battleships started on March 16, 1914 with the laying down of the keel at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. It was launched on June 15, 1915 and commissioned on October 16, 1917 and later decommissioned on December 29, 1941. It left New York in November, 1917 for its shakedown cruise to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. It returned to the Brooklyn Navy Yard for identified repairs and modifications. It was too late for combat in WWI primarily because of a lack of adequate fuel stocks of oil in the European Theater of Operations. Most of the large European warships still used coal. After the war the ship was based at San Pedro, California, then Norfolk, Virginia finally transferring to Pearl Harbor on April 2, 1941.

On the morning of December 7, 1941 the *Arizona* was moored inboard to the repair ship *USS Vestal*. During the attack a bomber dropped one 1760 pound armor-piercing bomb with a 50 pound warhead, penetrating the ship's interior spaces near the #2 turret, igniting the nearby munitions magazine. The battleship burned for three days. After salvage operations and retrieval of the accessible dead, the *USS Arizona* was stricken from the active duty list on December 1, 1942. The hull still entombs 1102 Navy personnel out of the 1177 killed during the attack. The Navy considered those remaining inside as personnel buried at sea and the Arizona Memorial is considered to be an active US military cemetery administered by the National Park Service. Those who survived the Japanese attack while aboard can have their ashes entombed inside the battleship by a US Navy diver. Those who served on the *Arizona* after its commissioning can have their ashes scattered in the water above the ship. As a sign of respect any ship entering Pearl Harbor "man the rails" as a salute of honor and continuing reverence for those who died serving on board.

Concern for its preservation and potential environmental disaster was initiated accidentally by a question posed to a NPS employee during a tour by a visiting professor of Materials and Metallurgical Engineering from the South Dakota School of Mines. He asked about the corrosion rates of the underwater steel structures and if a long-term evaluation program was in place. Realizing that nothing was being done or even considered a program was established and evaluation is now ongoing and continuous. This project on an underwater wreck is of great interest to the Navy. Hopefully the research results can be applied to other WWII sunken vessels throughout the Pacific for many of them are accessible to divers and contain unstable munitions.

Interestingly, like the *Titanic*, the steel rivets are corroding faster than the steel plates they join (different manufacturers) possibly causing a structural collapse sooner than anticipated. The remedies are still being evaluated as different parts of the ship require different solutions.

The French Foreign Legion in Afghanistan

When Petty Officer James walked in on his fiancée sleeping with another man he threw him through a second-story window and beat him with a wrench until the police arrived. The former US Navy signalman was facing seven years in jail for what was — by his own account — a frenzied assault. But on March 9, 2007, just three days before he was to stand trial, James, 22, packed a change of clothes and some cigarettes into a small duffle bag, said goodbye to his mother, his stepfather and his sister, and flew to Paris to start a new life. Today he is on his third tour of duty in Afghanistan — but this time it is with the French Foreign Legion. “The Legion was a second chance, an opportunity to reinvent myself,” he said. “It was either here or prison.”

The Legion, founded in 1831, is one of the only regiments in the world that almost anyone can join — no matter where they are from or what they have done. James is one of more than 700 Legionnaires, an extraordinary blend of misfits, mercenaries, runaways and romantics, fighting the Taliban in the mountains east of Kabul. Among them are a handful of Britons, scores of Russians, and others from as far apart as Algeria and China. “Nine out of ten guys here are looking for a second chance,” said James. “A big thing is guys from Eastern Europe and Russia. A lot of them are here for the money, the rest were in gangs, or in trouble with the police.” James is not his real name. The Legion gave him a new identity when he signed on in Aubagne, in the South of France. French army rules prevent journalists publishing soldiers’ surnames — even when they are false.

“If you join under a false name you can’t have any contact with your family or your past life until you get your name back,” said Adjutant-Chef Craig, 43, the Scottish sergeant-major in charge of discipline at the Legion’s Afghan headquarters in Surobi. A Legionnaire can apply to have his real name reinstated after a year — if no one is looking for him. Others join to get a French passport, which they are entitled to after five years’ service. New recruits endure a grueling 30-day indoctrination at the Legion’s “farm” in the Pyrenees, where they memorize the Legionnaire’s Code of Honor and promise, in unison, to fight to the death and never surrender. The result is one of the fiercest units in NATO’s arsenal. But their current mission, much to the soldiers’ frustration, is to befriend the population, not fight them. “Most guys here are looking for a gunfight — we’re looking for a war,” said James. “It doesn’t matter who’s war, or for what reason.”

The Legionnaires in Afghanistan have endured their share of violence. Adjutant-Chef Alex, from Newcastle upon Tyne, is expecting his fifth citation for valor for his role in a series of bloody firefights close to where ten French soldiers were killed in an ambush last year. Legionnaires are part of an effort to help the Afghan Government to stretch its authority into the upper reaches of the notorious Uzbun Valley, on the eastern fringes of Kabul province. Surobi sits astride a key infiltration route that links insurgents from Pakistan to the Afghan capital.

High in the Hindu Kush mountains, Uzbun has long been a safe haven for Taliban insurgents, and Hezb e-Islami fighters loyal to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the former Prime Minister who is now on America’s most wanted list. Between operations the soldiers relax hard in the open-air Hacienda bar at Forward Operating Base Tora that serves pastis and Kronenbourg for €0.60 (\$0.80) a bottle. The bar is named after a legendary battle in 1863, when sixty-two Legionnaires and three officers refused to surrender to almost 2,000 Mexican troops.

Alex, 43, joined in 1987 after being rejected from the British Army on medical grounds. “I learnt French the hard way,” he said. “I could ask for a campsite and a hotel but it wasn’t much use. Every time I spoke English or made a mistake in French, I got a thick ear.” Warrant Officer First Class Tom, from Liverpool, has lasted almost 30 years and served in nine countries — but it took him 12 years to get his name back. “It depends how long it takes them to forget why they changed your name,” he said.

The 52-year-old, who has four children, joined on December 19, 1979 — a week before the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. He declined to talk about his past, and it is a legion tradition that no one should ask. But he said: “It was a lot more basic back then than it is today ... It was a lot rougher. Today there are more rules.” If you were serving under a false name you were paid in cash and denied the right to a bank account. The strict rules of the legion force soldiers to embrace the regiment’s motto, *Legio Patria Nostra* — the Legion is our homeland. “It’s like a second family,” said Tom. In the late 1980s the number of English speaking recruits was about 25 per cent of the total. Today it has fallen to just 3 per cent, soldiers said. Officers — almost all of whom are French — claimed that most recruits are not criminals but adventurers captivated by the Legion’s allure, fueled by books and Hollywood films. Among their most famous recruits was the American poet Alan Seeger, who fought and died with the Legion in the First World War. “I’m no poet,” said Tom. “If I had my time again, I wouldn’t have made the first mistake. I owe the Legion a lot because when I needed them they opened the door and let me in.” The modern legion will not accept murderers, rapists or child molesters but recruits can still join without showing any kind of identification. One Mongolian man cycled halfway across the world to find a recruiting office on French soil. One of the soldiers in Camp Tora is a Harvard graduate. Officers say that about eight people apply for each place, and few get in. The unit is famed for its brutal initiations and strict discipline. “A lot of guys desert,” said James. “But it’s also part of what people join for. If the Legion became a sissy army, guys wouldn’t come, and if they didn’t come we wouldn’t exist.”

The French Foreign Legion has a force of 7,699 legionnaires and non-commissioned officers who come from 136 countries. The force was created by Louis Philippe because foreigners were forbidden from serving in the French Army after the overthrow of Charles X. Prior to this conflict Legion soldiers have served in the Gulf War of 1990-91; Cambodia and Somalia in 1992 and 1993; Rwanda in 1994, Bosnia, Kosovo and Macedonia from 1993 to 2003; and the Central African Republic in 1996. They are currently deployed in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Chad and Ivory Coast.

The only woman to belong to the legion was Susan Travers, a Briton. Attached to the legion as a driver during the Second World War, she refused to leave the Libyan fort of Bir Hakeim when the female personnel were ordered to depart in 1942. She stayed with her lover, a legion colonel, and led a convoy in a breakout through minefields and three rings of German tanks. She was accepted as a full member after the war. New legionnaires vow to “act without passion or hatred . . . respect vanquished enemies . . . never surrender your dead, your wounded or your weapons.”

After WWII the French offered many captured German soldiers, many whom were former SS, the opportunity for amnesty if they joined the Legion. France still had an overseas empire to maintain and needed bodies. It is often rumored that the majority of KIA at Dien Bien Phu, 1956 were former Nazi soldiers who died for the glory of France.