

November 28, 1941

# THE FRENCH ARMY IN AFRICA

*Its makeup, officers, men,  
traditions, history*

*By J. Paar-Cabrera*

**E**ARLY in 1914—a few months before the outbreak of the World War—I became a lieutenant à état étranger, or, literally speaking, "on the foreign plan," in the French Foreign Legion. Three weeks later I was with a mixed column, operating in Morocco.

Military aviation was in its infancy. There were no tanks, no flame throwers. The mechanisms of the machine guns easily went out of order. Consequently it was difficult to stop the enveloping tactics of the Moroccans, who invariably delivered their strongest attacks on the rear of the French columns. The French had adopted this system of combat: As soon as the scouting cavalry reported the approach of large tribal forces, the available infantry formed a wide square. The cavalry and the artillery placed themselves in the middle of the square. When the fire of the infantry and of the artillery broke the attack, the square opened and the cavalry became the spearhead of a decisive counter-attack and pursuit.

I was a Lieutenant of the Legion. But, in my first combat in one of these squares, I commanded a platoon of a squadron of *Chasseurs d'Afrique*, subbing for its subalterns, who had all been wounded during the previous week. That first fierce fight on a rocky plain surrounded by towering ranges is naturally carved in my memory.

The squadron, dismounted to offer a lesser target, was massed behind two companies of Tunisian Tirailleurs. The Tunisian Tirailleurs are the worst fighters of the French Colonial Army. But the two companies in question were commanded by Tunisian-born officers, sons of white colonists: sound, competent men, who knew how the minds and hearts of their charges clicked.

The Moroccans came on, crawling on their bellies, taking cover in gullies and behind boulders. Accustomed to the use of a gun from their early teens, and fearless, they were redoubtable adversaries. Tunisian Tirailleurs fell, dead and wounded. But every time the line-up of the two companies wavered, the voices of their commissioned officers and sergeants ran: "Rachid, you are not praying to Allah! Keep your head up and shoot straight!" . . . "Remember, men, that no wounded is ever left behind! But the first one who throws his gun down and leaves his place gets his skull blown off!"



### 3 Colonials

The steadying detail stood ready, behind the line-up. It was composed of veteran Tirailleurs with wound stripes on their sleeves and medals pinned to their short jackets. And they meant business, with their rifles at the ready.

The Tunisians held on—for an hour—in spite of the fact that they were visibly afraid. Then their losses became too heavy. The fluctuations of their decimated array became so constant that my squadron leader ordered one Chasseur to stay back for every four horses, and all remaining Chasseurs ready to take the place of the Tunisians.

But the Commandant of the Tunisian companies was still unruffled. He was a tanned, bearded man, who kept his automatic holstered and held a walking stick in his hand. Suddenly his voice arose, loud, and derisive:

"The *ksouri* [the villagers] living near the farm where I was born, in the zone of Sousse, used to relate this tale of Si Mehmed [Si Mehmed, the fabulous wise jackal of Tunisian folklore].

"One day Si Mehmed saw an enormous lion charging at him. He turned to flee and realized that he was on the edge of a precipice; and, what was worse, a herd of smaller but very fast-moving lions leaped and bounded at the precipice's foot.

"A common jackal would have lost his head and gone down anyhow, hoping to elude the lions waiting below. But Si Mehmed was wise. He understood that to gallop down the very steep slope and to lose his balance were the same thing, and that to fall in a cloud of blinding dust in the middle of the young lions meant sure death.

"So, Si Mehmed gave a second and appraising glance at the charging lion and, by the Prophet, may Allah preserve always his name! he saw that that big lion had broken and blunt claws! And no longer teeth in his whitish gums! It was large and heavy, but old, and almost helpless!

"Si Mehmed didn't wait passively for its crushing impact. Instead, he sprang lithely, sidestepping it, bit its side and laughed when the toothless maws of the old lion clamped helplessly on his shoulder. Then Si Mehmed turned, bit the old lion between his eyes and forced it to release its hold. The old lion sat on its haunches and howled painfully.

"Si Mehmed laughed again—and sprang on a fat rabbit which had stupidly come out of its hole, hoping to see the death of Mehmed the shrewd.

"The next instant the old lion was gone, tail between its mangy hindquarters. And Si Mehmed had fat rabbit for dinner.

"Tirailleurs!

"The Moroccans, the accursed, are all around us. If you give way, they'll kill you to a man! They have better teeth than the old lion! Their teeth are their guns and bullets! But so have you. And the rest of the square is holding firmly. Fight the Moroccans, think that they'll be routed, and you'll have your fat rabbit—you'll take for your own whatever you'll find on the Moroccans killed by you!"



## Colonials

In a moment, the mood of the Tunisians changed. Forced peals of laughter broke out from among them. Their line stiffened, their firing became more accurate.

When the combat lost its crucial intensity, and it became evident that only stubborn fighting grit kept a couple of hundred Moroccans firing all around the square, the bearded commander bent sideways, digging the tip of his cane into the ground for support.

My squadron commander stared closely at him; then he swore and pointed at the ground under him.

A dark patch of gore was spreading over it. It was fed by blood, falling from under the tunic of the Tirailleur superior officer, who had been hit early in the combat, but had not mentioned it, had kept on encouraging his men until he felt sure that the Moroccan attack was broken.

When my cavalry captain sprang to support the falling Tirailleur Commandant, several Tunisians realized that their leader was severely injured. Questions and queries rang. Then their white colonist officers lost their tempers:

"Dibs! Dogs!" they roared. "The Moroccans killed your father-officer, your friend! Are you standing there like *geckos* (sand lizards) to see him die?"

The Tunisians—the cowards of the previous hour—became raging furies. Frenziedly and without waiting for orders, they catapulted on with fixed bayonets. A few minutes later they smashed a counter attack of the tribesmen confronting them and pursued them savagely.

I saw similar episodes time and again, in the long years that I spent in the French Colonial Army. And now I can confidently say: The Moroccan soldier is an unsurpassed fighter because he's an exceptional marksman, a tough hand-to-hand scrapper and a hardy man who doesn't know what fear is. But he's easily insulted, and vindictive.

The Algerian Tirailleur has tremendous endurance. He can march for an entire day with a fully loaded pack on his back, and take part in a combat thereafter without showing the least sign of weariness. But while the Berber Kabyle of Algeria is very brave, the average Berber-Semitic Algerian prefers sniping from a distance to out-and-out fighting.

The Tunisian, as told before, is lazy and cowardly but, when well commanded, he masters his fears and gives a good account of himself.

The African Negro—and that goes especially for the Senegalese Tirailleurs, of Ouoloff extraction, are good soldiers because they are docile, unafraid. But the Senegalese considers himself the equal of all good white men, and far better than many white men. When his ego is allowed to swell too much, he acquires something of that complex which induced the Roman Emperor Nero to say, when the rebellious Legions from Spain



## 4 *Colonials*

marched into Rome: "I'm too great a man to die! I should be preserved!"

Before and during the World War, all these different races serving in the French Army were excellently officered by subalterns and non-coms born in North Africa, but of European ancestry; by sons of immigrated colonists of French, Spanish and Italian extraction.

The late Marshal Lyautey used to say of these sons of European settlers: "Their knowledge of the ways of the natives is priceless, because they have assimilated it from childhood. In the native regiments, they constitute a human concrete, which keeps together men of antagonistic races and beliefs."

The secret documentary history of the World War, compiled by the French General Staff and kept in its archives, includes these passages: "Officers transferred to Moroccan battalions from Metropolitan regiments have been shot from behind, or from nearby positions. The Europeans of Africa [the sons of white colonists] know what to do with Moroccans. . . ."

"They [the sons of white colonists] are the leading spirit of the Algerian Tirailleurs. However, the greatest feather in their hat is their success in keeping in a combative mood the Tunisian Tirailleurs, most unsatisfactory soldiers of our colonial Empire. . . ."

### *In the Last War*

During the World War, the French people paid little attention to the white officers of the Colonial Regiments. Their gratitude, instead, was aroused by the exotic looking Moroccans, Algerians, Tunisians and Senegalese, who fought so bravely for *la belle France* against the invading Germans.

Thus the pro-native movement was born. It was rightfully and basically good. But it was one of those ideas which miscarry because they are not properly executed.

To begin with, it fast became a drive to elevate the natives at the expense of the white settlers. Therefore it degenerated into a racial struggle in which the white colonists blocked all provisions for the sake of retaining their jobs and the properties which they had carved out of the wilderness.

The Sabir, or town Arabs, reacted with strikes, mob attacks and out-and-out uprisings. The Ksouri, or native villagers, became unruly and refused to work with the white farmers. The nomads and semi-nomads of the interior were left to their own devices until, instead of being allowed to appoint their own chiefs, they were given veteran Arabian and Berber officers and non-commissioned officers as Caids and Sheiks, whenever one of their Caids or Sheiks died. This latter experiment didn't work so well because, while it established a network of reliable tribal commands, it placed in charge of the tribes soldiers who didn't always know thoroughly the tribes and their needs.



## *Colonials*

To make matters worse, it was the time when, by natural process of business, the industry and commerce of France had become centralized into cartels.

The trust system extended to North Africa. The colonists couldn't and wouldn't oppose it. The trusts didn't want the destruction of anybody. They considered the white settlers valuable and gave them jobs. But all the land became private property, and its products untouchable. Furthermore, the tenant-farmers couldn't hire as extra hands destitute individuals begging for a livelihood. And they couldn't distribute to stranded wayfarers excess foods which had ceased being their own.

Before and during the World War, nobody starved in Northern Africa. Fruits grew on the trees by the wayside. Green vegetables were for the taking in the open country all around towns and villages. Small game abounded, and nobody stopped those who hunted for it. The vegetation of the oases, their goat herds and the milk of their camel mares supplied the needs of the nomads. Thus Sahir, Ksouri and Bedouins could spend their lives without jobs, in idleness, and not starve.

Some hard working Berber races of North Africa—the Kabyles, for instance—crossed the sea regularly to seek employment as stevedores. As soon as they put together a few hundred francs, they returned to their native villages and squandered their hard-earned savings or gambled them away, but had a grand time in doing so. When they found no jobs in the ports of Southern France, they had their hills to return to. They plucked wild fruits, hunted, raised millet and olives and got along comfortably.

In 1919, I traveled extensively all over Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia in the pursuit of my anthropological studies. I found, everywhere, the natives split into numberless groups, factions, tribes and Moslem sects. In Morocco, there was trouble in the Chleu country, still fighting to preserve its independence. Life, though, went on forcedly-smoothly in the towns. In the hills, there were still bone or family disputes, and occasionally barouds, meaning literally gun-powder, and figuratively feud and combat. But French law was already clamping down the lid. In Algeria and Tunisia, bad feeling popped up occasionally, but the long French domination had stamped out the practice of the Baroud. However, squabbles or no squabbles, nobody starved in North Africa. Nature provided for every native not annexed into the job-dealing system of modern economics.

Still in the pursuit of my studies, I made a survey of French North Africa in 1923. The turmoil of a change was already in the offing in Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The camion and tourist routes through the desert were seizing on the living for the penniless nomad was in sight.

In the early thirties, the depression reached French Africa. The trusts retrenched or curtailed most of their operations. Countless sons



## Colonials

and grandsons of white colonists were thus thrown out of jobs. In the following three or four years, hunger became widespread all over French North Africa. The foodstuffs provided by nature being available no longer, enormous columns of stranded men, women and children formed everywhere, marched on the nearest seats of the functionaries representing the French Government. But there was no relief whatsoever waiting for them.

In 1935, the crisis reached its peak. Revolts broke out everywhere. The Foreign Legion and the Senegalese kept the peace of France in Morocco. In Algeria and Tunisia, the native Tirailleurs showed signs of disaffection and were substituted by a large number of battalions of Negro soldiers imported from Senegal.

Provisions were taken to raise funds in the colonies. One of these was the increase of the head-tax paid by the natives of Mauritania. Many Mauritanian Moors refused to abide by it. As punishment, their livestock was seized.

The two chief peculiarities of the Mauritanian Moors, called also blue men because the indigo with which they dye their garments stains their bodies, are their aversion for bathing,—they never do, as a matter of fact—and their milk diet, supplemented occasionally by a few vegetables. Consequentially, when they were deprived of their herds, the Moors of Mauretania were deprived also of their food. Savage hunger soon seized them. Out of desperation, hundreds of thousands of northern Mauritanians marched northward. Men, women and children crossed the sinister, rocky and foodless zone separating Mauritanian from Southern Morocco.

The authorities took notice of their plight. Tons of grain, idle in warehouses, were purchased from private concerns and shipped to southern Morocco. But, thoughtlessly, it was distributed unmilled in sacks to the ravenous Mauritanians, who were unaccustomed to the food and didn't know how to prepare it.

The result was a major tragedy, and reports claim a great many thousands of Mauritanians died. Besides private reports, the *Bulletin des Comités de l'Afrique Française* of the Société des Africanistes and other documents report the tragic situation of this part of North Africa at that crucial time.

Thus, before the second World War, French Africa had become a land of bitterly resentful races. And its conscripted troops had lost their fine white-colonist officers of the past. Because, as a result of their misery, many white colonists of French extraction had become radicals or pro-fascists; the colonists of Spanish blood looked longingly to the land of their forefathers; and Italian fascist propaganda had made large inroads among the Algerians and Tunisians of Italian descent. Consequently the French Government didn't any longer trust its white Africans. Those among them still allowed to obtain commissions were scattered among Metropolitan and Colonial



## Colonials

regiments. Their efficiency was thus lost—swallowed up by a mammoth system.



The images on this page first appeared in the book "LesChamps de Bataille de la Marne" (1915)

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)