

Escape to Nowhere: Ron Reynolds...The Only Yank to Escape from the French Foreign Legion

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Ron Reynolds...The Only Yank to Escape

from the French Foreign Legion

As told to

FRAN LUCCA

ESCAPE TO NOWHERE

RON REYNOLDS...THE ONLY YANK TO ESCAPE FROM THE FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION

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[DEDICATION](#)

This book is dedicated to the late Kenmore East High School history teacher Robert Reppenhagen, whose intense research into the French Foreign Legion made this all possible.

CHAPTER 1

The American jazz music played by the German combo didn't help lift my spirits. After more than a year of wandering throughout the States, and then Europe, I still hadn't shaken that insatiable impulse from my system. I guess it was there, in West Berlin's "Die Badewanne" nightclub on a September evening in 1956, sitting with Kurt and the two girls, that I finally made up my mind to join the French Foreign Legion.

Kurt tried hard to lift me out of the dumps.

"Ronnie, my comrade, why are you so sad?"

"Sorry Kurt, maybe I'm homesick. After all it's been several months since I was back home."

"Well, tonight we drink and make merry."

"Yeah, sure"

"No, no Ronnie, you are too much the fatalist. Why do you not dance with Lisa?"

Lisa was a gorgeous brunette, about 18, and with the vital statistics of a Miss Universe. I couldn't speak German, and she couldn't speak English, but I don't think we would have had a difficult time communicating.

"Kurt, tell Lisa that I'm not up to dancing."

Lisa got the message and pouted. Then she whispered something to Olga, a blonde chunky girl. Both of them giggled and got up to dance together.

Kurt ordered another pitcher of beer. "What are you going to do now, Ronnie, go back to the boats?"

"No, I had enough of swab jockey life on the Norwegian ship."

"Well, then, why not stay here in Berlin with me, and I can get you a job at my newspaper?"

"Thanks Kurt, but I think I'll take in Paris next."

The combo tore into a Dixieland number, and the tempo reached a fever pitch. Looking around the night spot, I recognized the pictures of more than a dozen American jazz greats: Satchmo, Goodman, Ellington, etc. The club got its name "Badewanne," which means bathtub, from the sunken dance floor.

Two men joined our table and Lisa and Olga returned to join in the festive singing. I went through the motions, but my heart wasn't in it. The happier everyone got, the sadder I became. Somehow I couldn't go along with all the gaiety. Maybe it was because I couldn't spend any money and was dressed for traveling, not dancing.

The two men finally grabbed our dates and swept them out onto the dance floor. We didn't see any of them again.

"Sorry I'm such a wet blanket Kurt, but I guess I've got other things in mind."

“Don’t apologize my friend. It was good of you to stop by and see me on your way to France.”

As the German beer seeped alcohol into my bloodstream, my thinking became mellow and nostalgic. I thought I was seeing things more clearly, although actually my mental vision was mildly blurred by the drinks. I began to think fate had caused me to be a man without roots, not at home in America, and only an onlooker in Berlin.

It had always been my weakness and conceit to feel a bit apart in a group, especially after a couple of drinks. Philosophical ideas chased around in my mind, and again I had the familiar thought that if I could catch and pin down one of these vagaries, I would have the answer to many riddles of my relationship with the rest of the world.

What was I doing so far from home, I asked myself. I had come to Berlin to visit a friend, but I was really searching for some meaning to my life. Pushed to the back of my mind was a quixotic desire to join the French Foreign Legion. On the one hand, the idea was frightening, but on the other it had a morbid fascination, a mystical belief that it would provide me with the ultimate reality.

“A pfennig for your thoughts,” Kurt cut into my daydreaming.

I smiled. “Why is it that everyone else seems to be have a good time while I sit on the side lines?”

“Don’t get so serious,” Kurt rejoined. “I had enough realities in the war and now I just accept things.”

Kurt had served under Rommel in Africa and had been captured in Italy. He carried with him a crippled arm as his souvenir of Hitler’s Reich.

I had met Kurt for the first time in Stockholm. We were both tourists and I think Kurt took to me because I obviously was traveling on a shoestring. I toured European style to get more mileage for my money and met Kurt on a boat, which was the youth hostel in Stockholm. This ship was anchored in the harbor for sleeping, and not traveling.

At the time I didn’t expect to ever see Kurt again. We had been introduced and a group of us had walked through the city doing some sightseeing. Kurt seemed to get a kick out of my comments, which reflected a disillusioned, meager youth.

Later, sometime after I left Stockholm, Kurt had written to my home in the U.S. and obtained my address in the Norwegian Merchant Marine. We corresponded and eventually I decided to accept Kurt’s invitation to visit him in his home city. I had hesitated partly because of the difficulty of getting to Berlin. Some travelers had told me that it was very difficult to obtain a permit to cross East German territory and so most people flew in. Airplanes were not in my budget.

I started on the trip, seeing it as something of a challenge. I hitchhiked to the border of East Germany and managed to obtain a special Russian visa. My luck continued when I got a free ride on a bus to Berlin. This vehicle was deadheading back to Berlin after carrying Volkswagen drivers from the old capital to the factory in West Berlin.

Kurt was an efficient German who arranged all of my housekeeping details. This morning he had shown me through the newspaper office where he worked at laying out ads. Work was put aside while my German friend introduced me to the office girls, and then found me a bed in a youth hostel. Kurt seemed to be shaping up as a real friend.

After getting set in the hostel, I wandered about the Western area while Kurt returned to his work. In the early evening we had dinner across from the zoo at the Zoo Train Station, a low cost restaurant where you can eat all you want for a couple of marks, or about a half-dollar. It bothered me somewhat to have someone else pay the bill, but I had come this far on a strict budget which called for about twenty-five cents a meal.

All of this ran through my mind as I sat in the nightclub. My original plan was to stay in Berlin a month or two and then head for Southern Europe for the winter, continuing my travels on a tight pocket book. Gradually though, this Legion notion was popping up in the back of my mind.

All of these people having a good time struck me as victims of an illusion, of foolish and futile activity. Perhaps they might be adjusted, but I wasn't. A normal life of work and family was fine, but not for me, not yet. My thoughts went back to all my wanderings and experiences, and still it seemed something had been eluding me. I was nineteen years old and wanted to get this restlessness out of me before settling down.

Back in Buffalo, my normal middle-class family was wondering how they had produced such a maverick. I felt I had to push this thing through to some kind of conclusion before I went back to suburbia.

My thoughts drifted back to my first touch of wanderlust, just over four years ago. I had gone by bicycle from Buffalo to Washington, D.C. I recalled wryly that at first I was homesick and ready to abandon traveling for good.

Now travel itself was too routine. I craved adventure that the average individual had not tasted. Often I had dreamed of the fabulous French Foreign Legion, but now it was time to act. I swore to myself that tomorrow morning I was going to begin putting this dream into reality. I knew things appeared bleaker on the morning after, but I resolved to force myself to go on.

I patted my crotch, because there was my treasure- all my cash that I had saved up that summer working in the Norwegian Merchant Marine. This seemed a safe place. I had made my own money belt from an old jock strap and a couple of old pants pockets. I called it my grouch bag. I was banking on this money to carry me through six months of winter in Southern Europe.

Because I stretched every penny, I wasn't used to drinking—and the little I had done this evening had helped to intensify my mood. I felt I couldn't relax too much because I lacked the cash, while the unaccustomed alcohol and gaiety made me feel more like an outsider.

Several hours later, as I left the club with a slight stagger, I had made up my mind that it was now time for the great adventure. Boyish notions of romantic hardship, danger, and "beau geste" distorted my thoughts. Hitchhiking was kid stuff. I wanted stronger meat.

"Have a good night, Ronnie, and I will see you in the morning," Kurt said with a warm smile.

"Thanks, Kurt, you can see me to my train to Paris tomorrow."

"But I thought you would visit with me for a few weeks."

"Sorry, my friend, but tomorrow I move on."

Before going to bed and sleep, I took inventory of my finances. I had saved practically every cent I earned on the Norwegian ship in the few months we plied the waters in the area of the midnight sun. The savings totaled about fourteen hundred kroner, or slightly more than three hundred

dollars American. These savings were carried in my grouch bag, which the second cook aboard ship had shown me how to make. This belt later was to figure in my escaping from the Foreign Legion.

[CHAPTER 2](#)

Throughout the night I tossed and turned, wrestling with my decision to join the Legion. It was my belief that I could try anything once, and that this would be the ultimate adventure of my life. As far back as I could remember, the romantic and adventurous exploits of soldiers of fortune had intrigued me. Distant places held an enchantment. A year after my first attempt to see the world had taken me to Washington, D.C., I went on a hitchhiking jaunt to Chicago, which ended with my being placed in a detention home until my folks came after me.

After my junior year in high school, I hit the open road again. My craving for unusual experiences led me to join up with a carnival in Kansas. Life with the carnies was educational, and I learned the ropes working the hanky-panks or minor games of chance, and observing the wild parties of the carnies after work.

Then I had wandered to California and to northern Nevada, where I became a ranch hand near a town called Winnemucca. My wanderlust also found me paddling a canoe down the Allegheny River in the hope of reaching New Orleans via the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. But this trip was scuttled in a few days when the canoe was swamped in rapids.

Then it was back to California, where I finally got a job on a pear ranch after waiting around for five days. I had to sleep all night in front of the hiring gate to be sure of being among the two hundred picked for work. I worked as a swamper, whose job it was to carry boxes of fruit from the orchards to the warehouse.

My wanderings took me through many states and into Mexico, where I visited the Aztec Ruins. Before scraping up enough for a one-way ticket to Europe, I worked as a cabana boy and lifeguard at a Miami Beach resort. When I finally had enough for a boat ticket, I flipped a coin to see whether I should go to Alaska or Europe. Europe won out.

The morning sunshine chased away the blues. I relaxed because of my decision to join la Légion étrangère. I felt the question was now out of my hands. The die was cast. Premonitions of a rough life in the Legion gave me momentary qualms, but I wanted to best any challenge.

I got up, threw some water on my face, ran a comb through my hair and jumped into a pair of slacks and a T-shirt. There still were a few hours to kill before meeting Kurt for lunch, so I took in the sights of West Berlin. They reminded me of sections of good old New York City.

At noon I walked into Kurt's newspaper office. The receptionist picked up an interphone and asked for display advertising. She no sooner hung up then Kurt was bounding down the stairs toward me.

"Ronnie, tell me you have decided not to leave us."

"Sorry, Kurt, but my mind is made up. I get the next train for Paris within two hours."

"Isn't there anything I can do keep you here awhile?"

I shook my head. We walked out of the office and strolled for a half hour.

"Well, old friend, this is it for a while," I said. "I'll write to you."

"I'll miss you, Ronnie. Please take care, and may God bless you." were Kurt's parting remarks.

I went back to the hostel and found that Kurt already had taken care of the tab. I packed all my possessions in a small gym bag and went to the Zoo station. This would be the first time in months that I took a train. I usually auto-stopped or hitchhiked.

It required a special visa to get through East Germany. The Russian authorities were a somber lot but the visa proved easy to obtain.

The trip to Paris took about twenty-four hours. A hunk of cheese and some bread that I had packed in the ditty bag came in handy. The ancient train pulled into the Gare du Nord station in the northern end of Paris late in the afternoon. I managed to find a comparatively cheap hotel, the Place du Don. The skinny looking clerk peered over his glasses, signed me in and pointed to the stairway. My key number was 503, which meant hiking up five flights.

The cheaply furnished room contained an iron coaster bed, a bureau with a mirror, a pitcher and a bowl. A bare light bulb was suspended from the high ceiling. The only window overlooked a courtyard. There was no balcony and no fire escape. I tossed my bag on a chair, refreshed myself, and went out for some bread, cheese, and a quart of milk. I brought the food back to the hotel, and sat munching it with my feet propped up at the open window.

In the morning I found a gendarme and asked him to direct me to the enlistment office for the Legion, which was far out from the center of Paris at Fort de Vincennes. The metro took me underground and within a short time I was talking to a few French regulars guarding the front gate.

"What brings an American here?" asked one of the soldiers.

"I'd like to join your Legion," I told him. The trio seemed to have a private joke of their own, and after much chuckling and untranslatable phrases in French, I was led to the rear of the fort to an office where I met my first Legionnaire. He was a brutal looking sergeant of German extraction, with sun bronzed skin, and sharp features.

"So you wish to join us," he snapped.

"That's why I'm here," I replied in my best military voice, which wasn't too impressive. My previous time in uniform had been limited to a couple of months in a military school.

"Let me see your passport," he growled.

I hardly expected the sergeant to look pleased, but I was a bit taken aback when he snatched the passport, glanced at it, then threw it into a drawer. He summoned a sous-officier of corporal rank to escort me to another office upstairs. Before leaving, the sergeant asked me why I wanted to join the Legion.

"For adventure." I answered. The sergeant grunted and waved to the corporal, and away we went.

I was led to a barren office and sat in a straight-backed wooden chair. A few others were waiting to be interviewed by the officer. Seated next to me was a Belgian around forty-five. He was neatly attired and looked very sad. He spoke broken English and managed to convey to me that he was

joining to get away from a nagging wife. A look around the room disclosed a derelict wino, an obviously hardened criminal, and a dapper looking sharpie who could easily pass as a gigolo.

The corporal explained the requirements, which were not too stringent. First, your age had to be between eighteen and forty, and secondly, you had to pass the physical. The sous-officier motioned to me and I was taken to an inner office. The corporal closed the door on his way out and left me facing a handsome French captain who looked smart in his uniform with three rows of decorations. The officer startled me with his impeccable English.

“And what is the reason for such a young Yankee to come to the Legion?”

“As I answered before to your sergeant, sir, it is strictly for adventure.”

“Are you sure you know what you are doing?” he asked.

“I’m fully aware what’s in store for me, sir.”

“I don’t think you are. First of all, let me warn you that Legion life is very difficult. The discipline is strict, living conditions are not what an American is accustomed to; life in the desert is almost unbearable with day to day details and operations in the mountains. Do you think you can put up with this routine for five years?”

I figured the captain was using a negative approach, and I was determined that nothing would change my mind.

“That’s why I’m here Captain,” I answered firmly.

“Very well, Monsieur Reynolds, you have twenty-four hours in which to make your final decision. I shall expect to see you Monday morning at this time. Until then, bonjour.”

The corporal led me to the gate, and as I walked toward the city he said, “Think it over, Johnny.” I was soon to find out that any Yank or Englishman in the Legion was referred to as Johnny. Since this was Saturday, I actually had forty-eight hours in which to make up my mind.

The weekend just delayed things and gave me more time for reminiscing, which wasn’t always pleasant. My earlier life had not been unhappy. In fact, the problem was that it was just the opposite. As I thought of my family back in Buffalo, I knew that they would not approve. My parents had some tough breaks during the Depression, and also during the war when my father entered the service. Now in their middle years, life was easier -- except that they were cursed with a wandering son. Thoughts of my sister and of not seeing her for five years were not conducive to gaiety either.

As a teenager, Ron Reynolds trekked across the United States and overseas in quest of adventure. Stints as carnival worker, ranch hand, cabana boy, and lifeguard to a deckhand on the China seas could not quench his thirst for excitement until the nineteen-year-old Buffalo, New York, adventurer saw a poster in Paris luring him to a five-year enlistment in the famed French Foreign Legion. For eighteen months, that dream became a horrible nightmare of senseless desert killings and brutal and sadistic treatment, including a thirty-day imprisonment in a desert dungeon at the hands of a half-crazed Turk.

Finally, after two unsuccessful attempts to escape in which he barely survived the punishments, Ron was determined to make it to freedom or take his own life by falling on his bayonet.

His daring escape, filled with terror and suspense, was bittersweet. The Yankee mercenary found himself a man without a country and a price on his head by the French government. In essence, he had escaped to nowhere.

He says that if he had to do it over again, he would take the easy way out in front of a firing squad. On a happy note, Ron Reynolds is once again an American citizen.

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