

## FRENCH FOREIGN LEGIONNAIRE, WESTERN DESERT, 1942



At the time of the French Armistice in June 1940 several thousand French soldiers and sailors found themselves on British soil. Notable among these were the troops led by General Béthouart, withdrawn from Norway after the Narvik campaign. They faced a crucial choice: whether to accept the Armistice and return to occupied France and their families; or whether to fight on under the entirely new colours of the Free French, in a war whose outcome could only be guessed. Most of the Chasseurs Alpins and sailors chose to return home; but more than half of the Foreign Legion's 13e Demi-Brigade elected to fight on under General De Gaulle. For these légionnaires, a long and extraordinary crusade was just beginning. From 1940 to 1943 the légionnaires, like the rest of the Free French, were supplied from British sources. But they made every effort to keep their traditional distinctions. From the summer of 1943, when the Free French Forces and the French Army in Africa came together after the defeat of the Axis forces in Tunisia, they formed the French Army of Liberation, and were re-equipped with American uniforms, equipment and weapons.



1 - The white-topped képi was the distinctive headgear of the Legion. It was in fact a regulation képi, with a dark blue body and a crimson top, fitted with a white sun cover. Originally this had been khaki, but the desert sun and frequent washing bleached it white. A gold lace/blue chin strap was worn by senior corporals and sergeants.

2 - Another traditional item was the 'chèche', the desert scarf of the Sahara camel troops. By the outbreak of war, this long piece of khaki muslin had become a regulation item for African and motorised units.

3 - By the time Gen. Koenig's 1st Free French Brigade won fame at Bir Hakeim, the Legion had long since received both Battledress and Khaki Drill clothing from the British. The 13<sup>e</sup> DBLE added to the BD blouse the Free French emblem - the Cross of Lorraine - on the sleeve, and Foreign Legion dark blue collar patches, with two green pipings and the seven-flamed grenade, in green for other ranks and gold for senior NCOs.

4 - Old pattern French individual equipment, issued for the Norwegian campaign. It comprised of the standard M1903/14 belt, M1862/14 suspenders, three M1916 cartridge pouches, a two-litre M1935

water bottle and sling, and a light brown satchel used for rations and small kit.

5 - British KD shorts, of the type popularly known as 'Bombay bloomers'. The buttoned legs could be unfastened and tucked into long socks, as protection against sun, insects and blister gas. They were hardly ever so worn, in practice.

6 - British hose tops, often worn rolled down over the top of the boot by the French.

7 - French M1917 ankle boots.

8 - French MAS 36 rifle in 7.5 mm calibre, issued to some infantry and all cavalry units shortly before the outbreak of war. As with other modern items of equipment, it was the mainstay of the Norway expeditionary force. The long needle-bayonet fitted beneath the barrel when not fixed, so was not carried on the belt.



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