

9 things you should know before joining the French Foreign Legion

So you are committed to the idea of joining a group of men that have a reputation for being an elite force and want to know what to expect. Perhaps you were in a drinking and driving accident, maybe you are running away from a broken marriage, or quite honestly, you just do not feel like paying back those insane student loans anytime soon. Whatever your reason, you have found the French Foreign Legion, the only place in the world for second chances.

Rather than hearing from a writer who met a Legionnaire in a bar, or read a book and feels like an expert in the field, hear it from one of the ugly horses themselves. I don't consider myself a special snowflake for being a Legionnaire, but seeing very few 'inside' reports written, I feel honored to share my knowledge and experience with you and hope it serves you well.

(This post also assumes you know the basics about the Legion as far as history and training. Or at the very least, you aren't interested in that part at the moment. There are some good documentaries out there so have a look if you have not. But I'll be writing about the things you won't find elsewhere online.)



(He's probably watching man-goat relations.)

So, who can join you ask?

Well the simple answer is if you have a valid ID to show who you are, they do not care where you are from (link 1). You do have to give your passport, which they keep, and you will not get this passport back unless approved for vacation overseas or you finish your 5 year contract. I have read articles about having to do 4 pull-ups before going through the gate (link 2). This is not standard, this could have just been one corporal or sergeant playing with new recruits. You will have to do a physical test of push-ups, pull-ups and a 'beep' run test. But I watched a guy unable to do one pull-up and then ended up in my company at Castel (the regiment for basic training). Besides the physical test, you will also have to pass various medical screens (link 3), psychological test, and the grueling Gestapo.

After that, nothing else really matters for entry. You can be poor, uneducated, married, the prince of Persia, or pray to multiple gods. Chances are you will find all of these inside. There is no policy on sexual orientation, but sorry ladies, it is a boys only club at this time. Whoever you were before though will be gone once you join. You will be a single man with a French military ID card. It used to be automatic to have a fake name with fake parents, change of birthdate and birthplace. The only thing that stayed the same was your nationality and the first letter of your last name. Slater of Georgia was derived from Stribling of Arkansas in my case. That rule has changed though due to the Legion officially joining the Armée de Terre. But even before this official merger, the Legion had stopped taking fugitives of heinous crimes such as murder. At least they would not take you if your name comes up on Interpol. Maybe it is due to globalization and politics, maybe they just have so many people trying to join they are allowed to be picky. Most smurfs, or fellow recruits in blue tracksuits, you will meet in the beginning will not make it through the initial screening process. Depending on when and who you ask, that initial process of screenings could weed out 8 out of every 9 or 15 out of every 16. The only thing for sure is, anybody from around the world can knock on the door and ask to join. About 100 men show up every day to try, but at any given time, there are only around 7000 enlisted legionnaires. But if you do make it, you may want to keep reading.



(Pretty much sums up the *Bleu* experience.)

To Drink or Not to Drink

The Legion, like many of its military brethren, has a strong culture of drinking (link 4). Besides having their own vineyard and making their own wine (it is a French army after all), Legionnaires put them back. Psychologists could have a field day explaining why with all the abuse they take and the abnormal environments they live in, but if you say you drink, you will drink. The idea of having one or two responsible pints and then walking quietly home will not happen. From the first days of Castel where they force feed you a pint of whiskey on Christmas morning to drinking liters of beer out of your helmet to catch your new rank with your mouth at promotion, you will be singing Legion chants and lighting certain holes on fire before they let you walk away with just a buzz. So if this does not seem as exciting to you as it does for us, then best you say you do not drink and never let them catch you taking a sip.



(Be sure to head down to Calvi for the next *présentation anglophone*.)

Mafias

Language is both a blessing and a curse in the Legion. You may be asked to sing songs from your homeland or just enjoy being part of a brotherhood that says good night and cheers in languages you have never heard before. The trap that most recruits fall into are what the Legion calls 'Mafias', or basically staying within your cultural or linguistic identity among your fellow recruits. In order to force its new members to speak French, the Legion discourages anglophones only speaking to anglophones and Russians speaking to other Russian-speaking peoples. So whatever language you speak; Spanish, Arabic, or Mandarin, if you get caught speaking anything other than French, prepare for some *pompagne* action, in other words, physical punishment in the form of pushing Earth. This concept works in theory, but truth be told you will always be seeking somebody to communicate with and speaking no French, you will most likely hear more English than anything else until you graduate from basic training. And the French you thought you spoke was actually a new breed of French where only the key verbs are French and the rest is a cluster of every other language. For two years, I was speaking Polish and thought it was French.

Légionnaire, tu es un volontaire servant la France avec balai et serpillière.

We mockingly replace the 'honor' and 'fidelity' of our first code (link 5) with 'broom' and 'mop'. You will do much more cleaning in your first years than training or deploying. Having said that, every Legionnaire does go through CP00 - basic infantry training in the very beginning, and possibly a short tour (3 months) to Chad or Mali.



(Ah, the glory of being a legionnaire. Make *caporal* quick.)

The Training

Sometimes it is full speed to the point of injury, then others, it is so slow to the point you actually miss the abuse. You will be gassed and have to run around afterwards with the gas mask on. You will shoot the FAMAS and throw grenades, do jungle training in Guyane and desert training in Djibouti and depending on your speciality, become a sniper, a sapper, a medic or many other possibilities. The training is pretty straight forward, but one thing you will not see until you are there is the way the training can be enforced. Technically, there are human rights and you are not allowed to be corporally punished. They may make you do push-ups on your knuckles until they bleed or you have to fill a glass with the sweat dripping off your nose before they let you get out of position. Or they may just make you put your own hand over your face before they punch it. Either way, this is not your regular army where you can wave a flag and say 'this isn't right'. I had a friend miss two days of training due to spraining his ankle on a parachute jump, he was later tested on the training he missed and when he failed the test and tried to offer excuses the sergeant knocked out two of his teeth. This does not happen to everybody, but it does happen. And yes, some people have died from training (link 6).



(Look, they found somebody not hungover and sleeping for the picture.)

Ignorance is Strength

Which leads us to a bit of Orwellian philosophy. You will be told to 'leave your head at the door'. There is not much room for individuality and thinking here. They feed you, beat you, and train you like dogs. If the Legion is an awesome war machine, it is with this sort of philosophy in mind. It is a form of taught courage, ultimate discipline, and one that you can accept through alcohol abuse, shenanigans, or just giving up who you are as an individual, but it will be drilled into you and you will have a much easier time once you accept this. The less you think, the easier it will be.

It must be remembered that the Legion is not meant to be easy, and that even after a few make it through the initial screening process, then survive Castel, they eventually desert due to the environment and living conditions (or further training - my poor Croatian friend left after having his teeth knocked out - one boat to Italy and then another home.) Word of advice that most people do not know: It is well known that you must sign a 5 year contract to join, but due to French labor laws ([link 7](#)) (which you are protected by), you can leave any time within the first 6 months. It is a 'try before you buy' policy that applies to all French employees, including the French Foreign Legion. Applying this however may prove a difficult task if your French is not up to snuff and you cannot reach anybody that will listen to you seriously. You may also be cleaning stairs for a few months to help you think it over while they 'do the paperwork' for your departure.

The Pay

What about the actual moolah ([link 9](#))? Well the average Legionnaire is going to make about 1200€ and that sum does not rise a lot with time in service or promotion. If you are a parachutist, you will receive a *prime* (bonus) of about 600€, giving you a little extra pocket money and any deployment or station outside of France to include Djibouti or Guyane will net you a cool 3000€ a month. Considering this is all for you if you

choose to eat and sleep on base, that is nice playground or investment money. I suggest both, but I am not here to give you financial advice.



(The first night they let you off in the Legion.)

The Benefits

Assuming you make it in and do not find the lifestyle too bad, you are in for a fairly decent life as far as benefits. Besides getting the normal benefits of being in any military such as healthcare, food, and a place to sleep, you also get 45 vacation days. 45 paid days off! Vive la France! After joining the Air Force and thinking 30 days off a year was a luxury, 45 seemed *incroyable*. Given, if you are in training (basically the first 6 months of your contract) or on deployment, you cannot cash them in. In fact, asking for your time off requires passing by your captain to ask for approval (link 8), and it is not guaranteed you will be given your passport to travel far. There is a high rate of deserters and they try to prevent that, especially if you are in your first years. Speaking of first year, you will not likely get your full 45 days, you will still get 30, the 45 day rule will not likely apply until your second year.

Besides all of this, if you serve your five years or are injured in service and you get a *lettre de bonne conduite* (good behavior) you can apply for your French citizenship or at least get your 10 year residency card. Ideally you saved up some money, learned a new language, and quite possibly found you an eloquent French lady to call lover. Et voila, things do not seem too bad. And if you decide to stay in after the initial 5 year contract, generally things are much more laid back and you can almost make being a Legionnaire a regular 9-5.

Marche ou Crève

You will march, then you will march some more, then you will hate life and march some more. March or Die is the slogan for a reason. Back in the day when the Legion was not allowed in France and fought in the colonial wars, specifically North Africa, marching across the desert was an all or nothing trip. If you decided to quit due to hunger, thirst, or a boo-boo on your footsie, you would be left to die. They break you into it fairly well, but before joining, I would learn to feel the weight of 40k *sac à dos* on your back, shoulders, and knees and carry it as long as you can. Up and down hills if possible.

You will do one good march at the end of every week in *la ferme* (link 10), the first one will only be about 7-8km, then it doubles every next week until the fourth and final week where you do the 40km Kepi Blanc march. This is the march that earns you the right to call yourself a Legionnaire. It is not to be taken lightly, but it is perfectly doable by any man willing. What is more, this is only the beginning, towards the end of the 4 month basic training, you will do a RAID march that will be anywhere from 90-120km over a 3-5 day period that involves combat drills and campfire songs. Personal advice, pour some wine into one of your canteens, it will take the edge off the pain and help you sleep what few hours you are given to sleep. You will never get entirely immune to marching but it will get much easier, or perhaps you just get mentally strong enough to tolerate it and push through, either way, it will be a recurring theme throughout your Legion career, so take good care of those knees and finding a good pair of boots that will not leave your feet in a pile of blood is nice too.

It is up to you to decide if you want to be part of this great social experiment called the French Foreign Legion. It is no doubt one of the most unique experiences in the world, and I personally do not regret the decision. Also, they send me a pension every month so I can sip on mezcal in Mexico and make a nice easy life as a writer.

Legio Patria Nostra, comrade.



Link 1:

http://en.legion-recrute.com/mdl/info_seul.php?id=6&block=20&titre=administrative

Link 2: https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/i-ried-joining-the-french-foreign-legion

Link 3: http://en.legion-recrute.com/mdl/info_seul.php?id=8&block=20&titre=medical

Link 4:

<https://www.cairn.info/revue-guerres-mondiales-et-conflits-contemporains-2006-2-page-33.htm>

Link 5:

http://www.legion-etrangere.com/mdl/info_seul.php?id=92&idA=134&block=6&idA_SM=112

Link 6:

http://www.legion-etrangere.com/mdl/info_seul.php?id=92&idA=134&block=6&idA_SM=112

Link 7: <https://www.oecd.org/els/emp/France.pdf>

Link 8:

http://en.legion-recrute.com/mdl/info_seul.php?id=36&block=2&titre=during-my-vacation-may-i-go-abroad

Link 9: <https://special-ops.org/military/ffl/salaries-in-french-foreign-legion/>

Link 10:

http://www.legion-etrangere.com/mdl/photo/photo_liste.php?photo_theme=24&dossier=24h-a-la-ferme-4e-regiment-etranger

Link 11:

<http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2009/02/18/01016-20090218ARTFIG00479-la-legion-etrangere-est-un-vrai-scandale-.php>