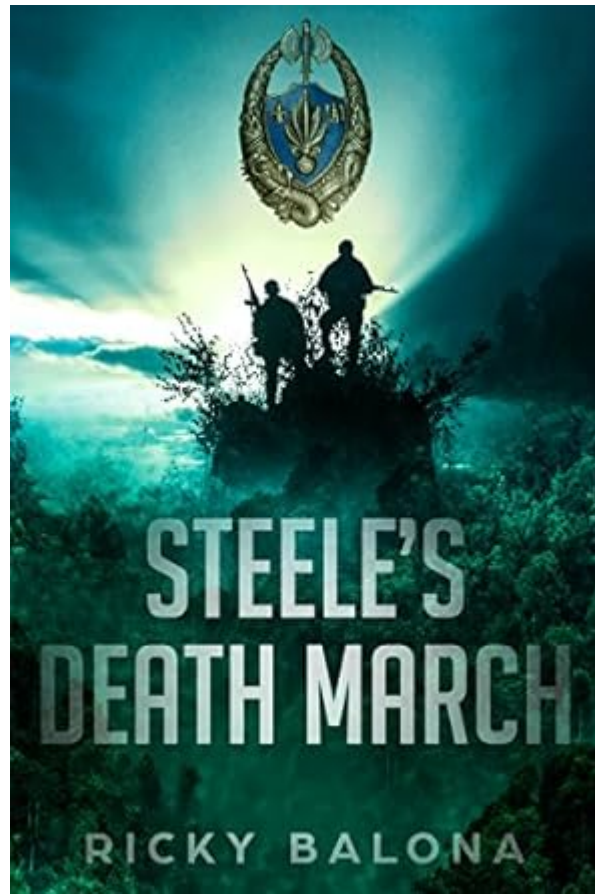




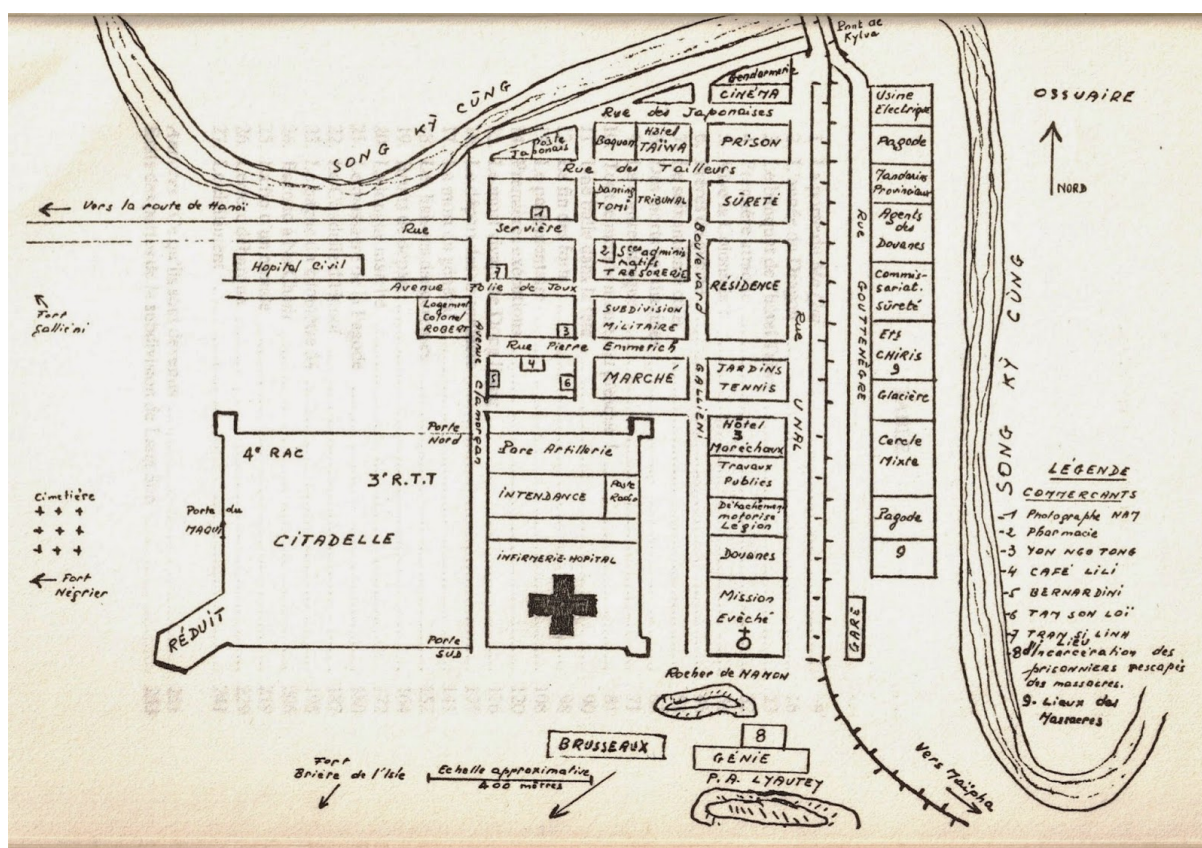
Steele's Death March

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Dedicated to my amazing family and brother Legionnaires.

This novel is based on factual events. The treacherous Japanese attack on French Forces in Indochina on 9 March 1945 and the French Foreign Legion's desperate march to safety in distant China.

LANG SON



Hanoi 1954

Glancing nervously from his wristwatch to the Hanoi Opera House down the Rue Paul Bert the owner of the café poured another two glasses of Ricard. These military types made him nervous. A few too many beers and they might wreck his establishment.

“Do you have the telephone number of the Military Police, Claudine?” He turned to the pretty waitress polishing glasses.

“Yes Monsieur, it is on the back of that bar tab next to the telephone.” She wondered why he seemed so concerned. She found them exciting, not like the usual stuck and posh clientele who flooded in every evening around this time when the Opera finished. Glancing into the mirror running the length of the bar counter she applied lipstick then checked her hair.

Taking the two glasses from the owner, she walked over to where the two Legionnaires sat at a table near the entrance. Smiling coyly, she took her time placing the glasses of Ricard on the table knowing the Legionnaires were staring down her cleavage as she bent forward. They tipped her slightly more than the Opera clientele did. The two Legionnaires drank their Ricard while watching her wiping down the table in front of them. Returning to the counter, the owner gave her a sideways glance.

“Do you know they cannot keep their eyes off of your arse when you polish the tables?” He snorted in disgust.

“They seem very nice Monsieur. I heard the poor boys talking about Dien Bien Phu. I feel so sorry for our brave soldiers. What will happen to us now

that the war is almost over?”

The owner did not like her question. It troubled him deeply that the Viet Minh were poised to take control of the country. They would not patronise the arts as the French Colonials did. His business was finished or would be in a very short time. There were rumours of the country being divided between North and South. Perhaps he would head for Saigon or even back to Paris.

“The officer is very well spoken and apparently, comes from a well off family. His name tag says Bastien-Thiry. That Sergeant looks like a tough nut, though.” He muttered to no-one in particular. The owner felt a chill run down his spine each time the Sergeant looked at him.

“Another two Kronengbourg barman and make sure they are bloody well cold this time.” Fixing the owner with his cold blue eyes, the Sergeant slammed his hand down hard on the table then went back to their conversation.

“Do be a good chap, and add two Cognacs to the order as well please, old boy.” Turning toward the counter, the officer smiled at them politely.

“The real stuff mind you, not that imitation you served us the last time.” Claudine smiled wondering how the officer and the Sergeant had become such firm friends. “Strange things happen in war.” She thought to herself.

“Well I had promised you a beer in Biarritz the last time we met Steele, but I am afraid this will have to do at the moment.” He gestured to the café with its wooden chairs and tables set near the plaza. Men dressed in black suits accompanied by their women wearing the latest fashion from far off Paris began crossing the street.

They spilt from the Hanoi Opera House modelled on the Opera Garnier in Paris. It seemed for a moment that they were back in France with all the colonial buildings and street side cafes. “This is more than I could have hoped for just a few weeks ago Mon Lieutenant. How did you manage to reach friendly lines after we escaped from Dien Bien Phu?”

Tentatively taking a sip of his Kronenbourg, the Lieutenant shook his head. “To be honest, I was a little unsure of my abilities at navigating through the dense brush. However, I soldiered on with the men until we managed to cross over into Laos. We were starving, wounded and hunted by the Viets until we stumbled across a Laotian village where they hated the Viets more than they hated the French.” He paused accepting a cigarette offered by Steele. Lighting up, he continued. “They guided us to a French army patrol, and they shipped us back here to Hanoi then straight to the hospital.”

For a moment, he stared into space. “We are the only ones who made it Steele. The prisoners were all forced marched, beaten and starved to death. Nearly more than two-thirds of our men died at the hands of those bastards.” He clenched his fist in anger. “It was thanks to you I made it

through the ordeal Steele. I often wondered what had become of you when you left us and headed back to the cuvette of Dien Bien Phu in your attempt to rescue some of the prisoners. What happened there?”

“Let’s just say that I managed to get a few out, Mon Lieutenant.” He took a large swig of his beer. “Right old chap we leave it at that shall we?” Bastien-Thiry noticed Steele’s reluctance to offer any more details. Steele nodded wishing to change the subject. He felt bitterly disappointed that he had not rescued more than a handful of the prisoners being led on the death march by the Viets. “You said earlier that you wanted to know more about your father Mon Lieutenant. Perhaps we should then talk about him and what he achieved here in 45.”

“Let’s dispense with the formalities Steele. Please call me Christophe, no more of the military rank for now.” Steele noticed a change in the young officer. He had aged after the battle of Dien Bien Phu. His eyes were harder, and he was not as naïve as before the traumatic experience. In his early twenties, the young man looked more like a thirty-something-year-old. War ages men prematurely. “I idolised my father, Steele. He was an officer in the Legion based in Algeria at Sidi Belle-Abbes where I spent my younger years. We returned to France when he was promoted and transferred to a regular French unit for a while. When war seemed imminent, he requested a transfer back to the Legion which was granted, but while he shipped out to Algeria again, we stayed in France believing it to be safer if war did break out. We all placed too much confidence in the Maginot line.” Shaking his

head, he smiled at the thought of a static line of defence against airborne drops and fast-moving Panzer divisions.

“We had a hard time during the war with the occupation and all that it implied. To make matters worse, we received a telegram stating that my father had been posted to the 5 Regiment d’ Infanterie de la Legion Etrangere in Indochina at the outbreak of war. As you can imagine, we received very little mail from him. The postal service was not running too smoothly at that time.” Steele smiled at the last remark.

“He did keep a very detailed diary which I read and reread a dozen times. He mentioned you quite frequently Steele.” For a moment, they watched the Opera clientele flooding into the café discussing the performance as if they were newspaper critics. “I remember the day the war in Europe ended. I was beside myself with joy thinking that my father would soon return to us after all those years, but sadly it was not to be. News started filtering back to France about the Japanese massacres of French troops and civilians during their coup de etat on the 9 of March 1945. Indochina had sided with the Vichy government during the war, and apart from fierce fighting in 1940 when the Japanese moved into the country, the two sides co-existed for a while. When the Germans surrendered, the Japanese did not want the French forces in Indochina joining up with the Allies rapidly advancing in the Pacific. But then I do not need to give you a history lesson Steele. You were there Steele you fought and survived as you always do, as you always will. Tell me about the Japanese treachery and the Alessandri column. Tell me about my Father, Steele.” Draining the glass of Cognac in one gulp, Steele felt himself slipping into the past, into a desperate march through hundreds of miles of dense jungle relentlessly pursued by the Japanese.

Chapter 1

Lang Son - 9 March 1945

Cursing the fading light, Steele stared into the dusky twilight. For days now they had been placed on alert only for the order to be cancelled a few hours later. For the motorised column of the 5eme Regiment Etrangere d'Infanterie under the command of Lieutenant Duronsoy this time, things felt different. Steele had always relied on his sixth sense, and this was one of those times where all his instincts told him that something was wrong, very wrong. He looked down from the walls of the Citadel toward the small town of Lang Son. Situated to the North East of Hanoi the town was an important route as it was a gateway to China sixteen kilometres away. Blessed with a pleasant climate, sound economics, and famous caves the town of Lang Son was also strategically important.

“Mon Lieutenant I think you should have a look down there. It seems the entire Japanese garrison is out on the streets. Where are all the other officers and the commander of the garrison?” Steele pointed to the old quartier of Lang Son. In the fading light, large groups of Japanese infantrymen walked the streets between the Japanese Headquarters situated on the far side of town. “Colonel Robert and two of the highest ranking officers have been invited by their Japanese counterparts to dine this evening over at their Headquarters. They had at first insisted General Lemonnier accompany the three officers, but he managed to decline their offer. It's nearly twenty hundred hours Steele so keep an eye on the situation.”

Lieutenant Duronsoy looked at the three forts situated on the hilltops a little way out of town. Fort Negrier lay to the west still understaffed and in desperate need of reinforcements if anything were to happen. Fort Gallieni

was almost in the same situation, and to the south, the Fort Briere de l'Isle stood ready although the commanding officers request for a ditch to be dug around the fort had been ignored. As had the request for added protection along the ramparts, the excuse from High Command had been that the constructions would be aesthetically displeasing. All seemed quiet, but it was difficult to tell in the darkness. In the distance, Steele heard the low growl of vehicles approaching. Garrisoned by a Regiment of Tirailleurs Tonkinois supported by Lieutenant Duronsoy, the citadel of Lang Son stood like a beacon in the dark night, visible to the nervous men pacing the ramparts in the three forts or cautiously patrolling the dimly lit streets alongside their Japanese "allies".

"What is the situation down there caporal?" Lieutenant Duronsoy called out to one of the Legionnaires loading ammunition into one of the two outdated Renault F.T 17 light tanks. "All good Mon Lieutenant, where do you wish us to position the tanks?"

Steele watched the young Lieutenant taking stock of the situation. He was a man respected and well-liked by the Legionnaires. Hardworking, dedicated to his men and an exceptional leader. The young officer commanded men twice his age with ease, men who had been serving in the Legion while he was still in diapers. Steele had seen a large number of officers reduced to psychological wrecks by the Legionnaires when they did not gain their men's respect.

"Position your F.T 17 at the Maqui gate over to the east of the citadel. If the Japs attack through the graveyard, it will make a fitting final resting place for those bastards. Keep the second F.T 17 as a mobile reserve. Be ready to give fire support to positions under heavy attack." He barked his orders.

“Oui Mon Lieutenant, we will give them a warm welcome.” The hard-bitten caporal smiled sarcastically. The Legionnaires were itching for a fight.

Taking up position on the ramparts above the Maqui gate Steele looked out over the rooftops of the buildings to the east of the citadel. Moonlight reflected off of the winding Song River toward the north which turned and flowed in a southerly direction past the Governor’s Residence and the scatterings of civilian shops and military installations.

“Keep an eye out boys, you all saw the Jap reinforcements pouring across the border from China a few days ago.” Scanning the open ground between the cemetery and the Citadel Steele searched for a sign of the Japanese infantry. For the moment, they milled around in Lang Son to the north under the few electric streetlights still working or crowded around street corners drinking alcohol.

“There are reports that the Japanese strength now stands at approximately ten thousand men. They have heavy weapons, possible air support and overwhelming numerical superiority. If there is a fight, the odds will be ten to one against us.” Lieutenant Duronsoy watched the reaction on the faces of the Legionnaires. They either feigned indifference or smirked.

“Do those odds include the Tirailleurs Tonkinois here in the citadel Mon Lieutenant?” Turning toward Steele, he smiled before answering his question. “No Sergeant Steele, if it is calculated only Legionnaires against the Japanese the odds are around one hundred and fifty to one against us.” Someone let out a low whistle. “Well for the Jap's sake I hope they behave themselves tonight. Those types of odds only make the Legion fight

harder!” Steele replied. Bursting into laughter, the Legionnaires returned to their positions taking extra ammunition with them.

“Keep a sharp lookout up there Steele. I know I can count on you.” Lieutenant Duronsoy set off to inspect the Western wall. “Get the ammunition belts ready. Open the spare ammo boxes now!” Turning to the two Legionnaires manning the Hotchkiss M 1914 machine gun on the ramparts Steele piled a couple more sandbags on the old stone wall immediately in front of their position. Satisfied he knelt beside the loader as he fed a belt of ammunition into the feed tray of the machine gun. A loud metallic sound echoed into the night as the gunner chambered the first round in the breach. Having chosen the two Legionnaires specifically for their cool-headedness under fire Steele glanced at the two men. Stocky and built like a brick shithouse Legionnaire Wallace hailed from the Gorbals, a hard-working class area on the banks of the River Clyde in Glasgow. He claimed a fierce fighting spirit ran through the blood of every Scotsman and was quick to prove the point with his fists if any of his fellow Legionnaires disagreed. Wallace served with the Black Watch during the Great War. Legionnaire Jones sat behind the machine gun, his finger on the trigger. Far from his native Wales, Jones was a World War One veteran, he too having learned his trade in the muddy trenches of France.

Scanning the middle ground between the Citadel and the graveyard Steele felt his heart race, adrenaline rushed through his body. Hundreds of Japanese infantrymen slithered on their stomachs toward the Citadel. It looked like a tidal wave slowly encroaching on the French positions. Grabbing a flare gun, Steele fired into the air above the enemy creeping slowly forward. Arching into the night sky, the flare fizzed on its trajectory

for a few seconds before exploding into a shower of light bathing the Japanese troops below in its eerie glow. “Open fire!” Slapping Jones on the back Steele emptied the magazine of his Tommy gun directly into the enemy. The night erupted with the sounds of gunfire drowning out the savage cries of the advancing Japanese. Firing from left to right Legionnaire Jones manning the Hotchkiss watched the tracers cutting through the ranks of the tightly packed Japanese troops. Bullets chipped the weather-worn headstones in the graveyard as the machine gun scythed down the leading elements. “Here we go again. When I was on the Lewis gun at Passchendaele, the Huns, at least, had enough sense to use cover. These slant eyed bastards run straight forward!”

The human wave transformed into a tsunami. Jumping to their feet the second wave of Japanese infantry rushed through the graveyard reaching the first strands of barbed wire hastily strung earlier that evening. The survivors of the first wave rose up when their comrades reached them. The losses suffered were made good by the Japanese, who had gone to ground close to the French positions. Pushed onto the razor-sharp barbs by the impetus of the charge the first line screamed in pain. Their comrades rushing blindly forward trampled them underfoot using their bloody bodies to jump through the gaps in the wire. Lobbing grenades over the parapet, Steele showered the enemy with shards of white hot metal.

Bullets cracked overhead or slammed into the walls of the ramparts. Flares and tracers lit the night sky. “Bloody hell Sergeant, is that not coming from the direction of Fort Negrier!” Wallace pointed toward the west. Artillery fire echoed above the noise of battle surrounding the citadel as Fort Negrier came under heavy fire from the Japanese artillery. Assailed from all sides

the French forces at Lang Song fought desperately against overwhelming odds. Outgunned and outnumbered they fought isolated battles knowing there would be no help from their comrades. Each fort, every firebase, and strongpoint came under Japanese attack simultaneously.

Swarming toward the gate, the Japanese troops began bunching together jostling to claim the honour of being the first into the French position. “Baionette au canon Legionnaires” Steele screamed above the frenzied yells of “Banzai!” as the Japanese infantry poured through the shattered wooden doors of the citadel. “Keep firing at the Japs crossing the graveyard Jones!” Turning to face the interior courtyard Steele lobbed half a dozen grenades down on the massed Jap infantry. Ignoring their losses, the Japs pushed on. Their bayonets glinted menacingly on their rifle barrels in the moonlight. Firing from behind a makeshift barricade of sandbags and wooden beams the Legionnaires braced themselves for the hand to hand combat which seemed imminent.

Standing defiantly in the face of the enemy charge the thin line of Legionnaires levelled their rifles firing off one last salvo before the enemy wave crashed against their defences. Roaring across the courtyard in the light tank Lieutenant Duronsoy fired the 50 calibre machine gun at the attackers while the driver sped into the massed enemy troops crushing a few and halting the impetus of the advance. Steele jumped down from the rampart landing feet first on the back of a stunned Jap. Crushing his skull with the butt of his Thompson machine gun, Steele fought his way to the line of Legionnaires. Circling the courtyard Lieutenant Duronsoy signalled to Steele.

“Follow me, men!” Rushing straight at the Japanese the Legionnaires sunk their bayonets into living flesh. Bringing the light tank to a halt at right angles to the Legion’s bayonet charge Lieutenant Duronsoy mowed down the ranks of tightly packed Jap infantry. Refusing to turn and run the Japanese had to be eliminated one by one before Lieutenant Duronsoy sped through the gate followed by Steele and the advancing Legionnaires. Running over the dead Japanese piled high around the entrance, Steele ordered the men into line formation.

Suddenly the second light tank appeared at the corner of the North wall. Its gunner rained down death and destruction on the Japanese infantry caught in the open ground of the cemetery. Providing covering fire the two tanks supported Steele’s counter attack. Tracer rounds fired by Jones on the parapet stitched ahead of the advancing Legionnaires cutting down the Japanese troops massing for another attack. “This is as far as we go boys!” Signalling the Legionnaires to halt their advance Steele began regrouping his men. Two wounded were carried by their friends back to the citadel while Steele and the Legionnaires laid down covering fire. “Back to the walls now men!” Withdrawing in good order, the Legionnaires returned to the Citadel finishing off any wounded Japanese in their path with a bayonet thrust. Splashing through the pools of blood at the gate Steele repositioned the Legionnaires at the defensive barrier before joining Jones and Wallace on the rampart.

“That showed the bastard, hey Sarge!” Wallace grinned from ear to ear. “That was only the beginning Wallace. They can easily replace their losses, but all we can do is hope to hang on until daybreak. Perhaps then we might

be reinforced.” Jones cursed as a bullet tore through his shoulder. “Bloody hell, aim straight you bastards!” He clutched the wound turning toward the men at the barricade. “It’s the Japs. They are in the building behind us, Sarge!” Three men at the barricade were shot in the back before Lieutenant Duronsoy led a group of Legionnaires in a desperate room to room fight clearing the Japanese, who had managed to infiltrate the Legion defences and taken up positions in the buildings. “Here we go again. Jones see what you can do for Wallace and keep your heads down.”

Sprinting down the stone steps, Steele gathered men along the way. He stood beside the door leading into the officer’s mess. Breathing hard he nodded to a Legionnaire waiting with a grenade in hand. Taking a step back, Steele kicked the door open. Tossing the grenade into the room, the Legionnaire pressed against the outer wall waiting for the explosion. “Going left!” Steele sprayed the room with a burst from his Tommy gun. Firing from the hip, a Legionnaire darted to the right. He shot a dazed Japanese soldier in the face. Blood and shattered bone fragments sprayed across the room staining the white walls a dark crimson. Trampling over broken glass Steele breathed in the acrid fumes hanging heavy in the room.

Two more Legionnaires rushed in taking up a position at the door on the far side of the room. “Room clear let’s do the same thing again!” Working their way through the building Steele and his team cleared room after room until they recognised the familiar voices of their friends coming from the other side of the door they were facing. “This is Sergeant Steele, do not clear this room!” For a few seconds, Steele waited tensely hoping his call had been heard. He ordered the men to move into the room they had previously cleared. Slowly he opened the door. “It’s me, Steele, hold your fire!” He

heard the worrying sounds of a round being chambered in the room opposite. "Open the door and come through Steele, I think we have killed all of them." Lieutenant Duronsoy smiled.

"Sneaky little bastards, shooting our boys in the back, I hope none of them expected us to take prisoners." Steele's men slipped into the room checking the cupboards and other places where any survivors might be hiding. "You are wounded Mon Lieutenant." Pointing to a dark patch seeping blood on the officer's shirt Steele called for a medic. "One of them nearly ran me through with his bayonet. It's not a serious wound, though. Ruined my good shirt he did" A Legionnaire walked over with a bottle of Cognac taken from the officer's drinks cabinet. "Put some of this on Mon Lieutenant. It helps to disinfect the wound." Splashing a little Cognac on the wound Duronsoy then took a long swig straight from the bottle. He offered it to Steele.

Gulping down the strong alcohol, Steele then passed it on to the next man. "The situation is serious all over the country Steele. I have had brief radio contact with the other half of our detachment in Hanoi. They are at this moment engaged in heavy combat against the Japs. The officers were invited to a dinner by the Japanese as they were here. The high ranking officers all over the country have been assassinated, and every French position is under attack. We are on our own Steele." Outside the volume of fire intensified. "It seems they are determined to take the citadel. If we are to do a Camerone then so be it." Nodding grimly Steele knew what the young officer was referring to.

The battle of Camerone took place in Mexico on the 30th of April 1863. Under the command of Captain Danjou, two Legion officers, and sixty-two

Legionnaires fought against a force of nearly two thousand Mexican infantry and cavalry. They held out in an old hacienda preventing the Mexican forces from reaching a shipment of gold travelling along the road. Fierce fighting raged throughout the day. By 16h00, only five Legionnaires were still able to resist. Out of ammunition, they fixed bayonets and charged the Mexicans. Two were killed almost immediately, but the remaining three continued to press home the attack.

They were surrounded by the Mexicans who levelled their own bayonets at the advancing Legionnaires a Mexican officer prevented his troops from killing the three survivors. When asked once again to surrender the Legionnaires replied that they would only do so if they were allowed to keep their weapons and the wounded received medical attention. The Mexican Officer agreed to the terms stating that he could not refuse anything to men like them and that the Legionnaires were demons, not men.

Steele walked back to the rampart. He looked at the Legionnaires manning the barricade and along the ramparts. He felt a heaviness in his heart knowing that by daybreak many, if not all the Legionnaires defending the citadel would be dead.

Chapter 2

Once again Steele scanned the area between the Citadel and the graveyard. The cries of the Japanese wounded who had survived the Legionnaires coup de grace still lingered in no man's land. "How are you feeling now Jones?" Inspecting the wound, Steele was relieved to see the bullet had only grazed Jones's shoulder. "Wallace did his best to patch it, Sarge. Thank goodness it

was not serious. Look at the dressing he put on.” Laughing at the sight of the polka dotted scarf hastily taped over the wound Steele shook his head. “That was all I could find Sarge. The medics need all the dressings for the severely wounded.”

Dropping flat on the ground, Steele felt the concussion of the first artillery shell slamming into the Northern wall. Heavy mortars arced through the humid air exploding with deadly precision within the walls of the citadel. “Keep your heads down boys. The Japs are hammering the wall. Won’t be long before they come pouring through.” The earth shook like a living thing. Steele kept his mouth open to prevent his eardrums bursting. A Legionnaire thrashed about on the dirty cobblestones of the courtyard. Both his legs lay at unnatural angles. Shattered bones protruded through the flesh. He tried in vain to stem the flow of blood. Darting into the courtyard, a Legionnaire grasped the wounded man by the back of his shirt. He managed to drag him halfway to safety before a white phosphorus round exploded showering both with burning phosphorus. Their screams of pain ended when one of their comrades fired a short burst of machine gun fire into their badly burned bodies.

“Keep your eyes on the holes in the walls the Japs will be here soon enough.” Jones and Wallace had been staring down at the bloodstains on the courtyard and the two smouldering bodies. Steele wanted to keep their attention focused on the task at hand. It served no purpose to dwell on the horrors taking place all around.

During the following agonising hours filled with death and suffering the Legionnaires managed to retake the artillery positions overrun by the

Japanese. Supported by the Legions light tanks the Tirailleurs Tonkinois advanced right up to the main Japanese positions but were thrown back after inflicting heavy casualties on the Japanese entrenched in the buildings.

Counter-attacking the Japs rushed across the open ground unmoved by the terrible losses of human life suffered. Pushing through the gaps in the wall breached by their artillery they infiltrated the citadel. Vicious hand to hand fighting ensued with no quarter given or expected. Steele rushed from one desperately defended position to another all the while coordinating his actions with Lieutenant Duronsoy.

Steele fought like a man possessed. Flashbacks of battles long forgotten ran through his mind. Images of the frenzied fighting in a shield wall as a Knight Templar assailed him. He was wading ankle deep in blood on the streets of Constantinople repulsing Sarasin warriors swum before his eyes. He visualised the Mexican cavalry charging the outnumbered Legionnaires at Camerone, the Legions most glorious battle.

Desperate last stands, similar to the ones being fought all over Indochina at this very moment by then Legion and French Forces. But then again who would ever believe this tough as nails non-com had lived through all of it? He fed on the adrenaline, the heat of the moment decisions made in battle. No civilian would ever understand the bond between brothers fighting for each other, the camaraderie which would survive beyond the war. No one would understand except a veteran. For a few precious hours, the Legionnaires held back the enemy. Wounded were given what treatment was available while those fit to fight did so with a vengeance knowing that a fate worse than death awaited them if captured alive.

Time had no meaning. In the continual ebb and flow of battle, nothing else mattered except the survival of their comrades. Through practice, Steele managed to deliver headshots most times while using a bayonet he did not make the mistake of lodging the blade in a bone. This was warfare on an industrial scale, unlike the Crusades, although the battles for the Holy Land seemed more up close and personal closing with the enemy armed with a sword rather than a rifle or submachine gun.

The first hint of a golden dawn appeared on the easterly horizon. For the Legionnaires, it brought the hope of resupply of ammunition and medical supplies. “What did they say Mon Lieutenant?” Steele knew the news was not going to be pleasant. “To put it bluntly Sergeant, we are fucked.” Slamming the radio with his fist, Lieutenant Duronsoy lit a cigarette. “Pass the word to the other section commanders. The transmission was weak, but our boys in Hanoi have been fighting all night. There are heavy casualties, but the Legion still holds, for the moment anyway.

All across the country, every French position has been under attack since last night. There will be no air supply, and the roads are not an option at this time.” He looked tired, dried blood and bandages attested to his courage. “The commander of the Tirailleurs Tonkinois will be launching the last assault on the Jap positions in a few minutes.” He shook his head. “Inflict the maximum amount of casualties on the enemy. Perhaps by some miracle, they will force them to withdraw for a while.” Lieutenant Duronsoy grimaced with pain as he stood up. “I will let the officers know what the situation is. Steele let the men know. I don’t like leaving them in the dark. Every man should know the situation as it unfolds.”

Moving through the courtyard, Steele stopped at each position informing the Legionnaires about the latest developments. For the most part, they merely nodded resignedly to their fate. Exhausted from the continual strain of combat the Legionnaires gathered up what ammunition they could find. The Vietnamese cook struggled with a heavy pot. Its sides were blackened with soot. Stopping at each position he ladled out steaming rice while his assistant filled the Legionnaires water bottles with rum-laced coffee.

Artillery shells screamed across no man's land. The Japs had not spiked the French guns the previous evening when they overran the artillery emplacements. Now they paid the price for their mistake. Shells burst amongst the houses across from the cemetery or exploded with devastating effect on the Japanese positions.

Counterfire from the Japanese artillery added to the deafening noise of battle. Small arms fire erupted along the line of Tonkinois attacking the Japanese first line of defence. Steele watched the nimble Vietnamese soldiers rushing into the devastated houses, pushing the Japanese back. The light tanks supported the attack with Lieutenant Duronsoy co-ordinating as usual. For what seemed an eternity the Tonkinois disappeared into the black palls of smoke. Reaching a crescendo, the volume of gunfire suddenly slackened.

Bursting through the smoke four Tonkinois emerged carrying their severely wounded commanding officer. Lieutenant Duronsoy rushed to their side, loading the critically injured Captain onto the back of the light tank. He administered what aid he could to his countryman while the courageous

Tirailleurs Tonkinois met the Japanese banzai attacks head-on. Outnumbered and outgunned the Tonkinois slowly made a fighting withdrawal back to the citadel.

Throughout the day, the Legionnaires and Tonkinois kept the enemy at bay. Battle fatigue began to set in. A young Legionnaire stared at the corpse of a dead Japanese soldier lying crumpled on the ground in front of him. Heavy, bloated flies buzzed through the dead man's mouth and out of the empty eye sockets. Crawling over the mush that had once been the man's brains they swarmed in the hot afternoon sun. Soon disgusting white maggots would be crawling all over the body feasting on the decaying flesh.

“We won't be able to hold off the next assault Steele. The men have fought like lions, and I do not intend to see them die in some futile last stand action. We will break out and join up with the men at Fort Briere. Perhaps there we will be able to hold out until help arrives. I am leaving you and your team to cover the withdrawal. Be sure to leave the Japs a few surprises, Steele.” He reached out his hand. “See you at Briere, Mon Lieutenant.”

Shaking the young officer's hand, Steele set off in the direction of the citadel gates,

“It seems like we have been given a bit of a suicidal mission Sarge.” Pulling the pin from a grenade Jones lifted the leg of a dead Jap. He dug a small hole in the dirt, lowered the limb so that it applied enough pressure on the spoon to keep it down then covered any trace of his footprints. “Not a suicide mission Jones, it's only a rearguard action.” Steele chuckled running

a trip wire attached to a daisy chain of explosives and grenades strung out along the courtyard. Heavy gunfire indicated the arrival of the column under the command of Lieutenant Duronsoy smashing through the Japanese lines.

To the south explosions echoed through the warm afternoon air as the artillerymen destroyed their guns. Hurriedly they mounted a truck then sped off after the column. “Well, that leaves only us Sarge.” Looking around Wallace suddenly turned a whiter shade of pale. “Why the hell do we have that bastard with us, Sarge?” He pointed to a stocky Legionnaire nervously looking over the parapet toward the Japanese lines.

“He was in the immediate area when I chose men to join our team. What is the problem, Wallace?” Looking very, uncomfortable Wallace shook his head. “Nothing Sarge, getting hit by friendly fire sucks doesn’t it?” He skulked away glaring at the stocky Legionnaire.

Wondering what that was all about Steele ordered Jones to lay down fire on the Jap positions. Each Legionnaire in his six-man team fired away at the Japanese lines with captured enemy rifles using up all the ammunition left.

“Hey you, Legionnaire, stop right there!” Moments before the stocky Legionnaire opened a side door on the ramparts Steele rushed forward. “The place has been booby-trapped, what the hell are you doing about to open that door?” For a moment, the stocky Legionnaire turned pale. “I was told we needed ammunition from the stocks in there, mate.” Steele bristled. “Well don’t go in there and who are you calling mate Legionnaire?”

Turning to face Steele, the stocky Legionnaire glared. "I am Sergeant Koltz. I think we are on an equal footing here Steele." He hissed. "Then grab that other Hotchkiss and get to the ramparts," Steele replied. For a moment, Koltz hesitated then hurriedly snatched the Hotchkiss from an abandoned sandbagged bunker. "What about the magazines Koltz?" He shot Steele a sharp glance then retrieved a pouch of magazines. "For fuck's sake Koltz, the breech block is not even on the weapon. It's there on the sandbags. Assemble the weapon now!" Losing his patience, Steele wondered why he had the misfortune to choose someone like Koltz now. There was something strange about Koltz Steele had noticed but now was not the time. Waves of Japanese infantry began forming on the outskirts of town.

"Here we go, men. At least, the others left us with a plentiful supply of ammo." Running along the ramparts, Steele encouraged his team to lay down withering fire on the Jap positions. "What the bloody hell?" Koltz still fumbled with the breech block of the Hotchkiss. The weapon lay in pieces while he fiddled with the moving parts. Having no time to deal with this Steele swiftly assembled the machine gun. "Do you even know how to fire it, you fat piece of shit?" He slapped Koltz across the head. Koltz shot Steele a murderous glance. "No one does that to me!" He brought himself up to his full height, sucking in his belly. "Stand down, or I will kick the shit out of you Koltz. How is it a Sergeant does not know how to handle a weapon even the greenest recruit could?" He glared at Koltz towering head and shoulders above the insolent non-com.

"I sacrificed my weapons knowledge to carry out a much more important role. That is all I have to say, mate." Steele bristled wondering what the

function Koltz performed for all those years. He turned to question Koltz more closely when a barrage of mortar fire walked its way across the battered citadel. Hot shards of shrapnel whizzed through the dust-filled air. Hundreds of Japanese infantry emerged from the war-torn village. Rushing confidently across the open ground they screamed their terrifying battle cries.

“Open fire! Give them all you got!” As one, the Legionnaires poured down a murderous volume of fire on the advancing enemy. Tearing significant gaps in the tightly packed ranks, the Legionnaires managed to halt the first wave. “What the hell happened to you, Koltz?” Looking down at the three spent cartridges Steele inspected Koltz’s weapon. “After the first burst the gun stopped firing, must have a broken firing pin or something.” He stood up then kicked the Hotchkiss.” Using a lot of self-control, Steele reached down and inspected the weapon. He unclipped the magazine and pulled the bolt back. A cartridge had lodged in the breach. “It was a stoppage Koltz. All you had to do was clear the blockage. Now tell me what you did here before.” Jones and Wallace looked over at Koltz, hate written all over their faces.

“I’ll tell you what he did Sarge. That fat bastard was in charge of the Legion’s disciplinary unit. He was in the bloody Military Police. See these scars on my back?” Pulling off his shirt Jones turned his back toward Steele. Dozens of deep scars crisscrossed Jones’s back. “I spent three weeks in the disciplinary unit in Hanoi a few years ago. All I did was smack a bloody cruel Corporal Chef after a night on the town. Koltz treated us worse than the Japs would have. That is one cowardly, sadistic son of a bitch!” He nodded over to Koltz. “How dare you speak to me like that

shithead?” Koltz took a step toward Jones. Wallace along with the other team members levelled their weapons at Koltz. He paled noticeably realising he no longer enjoyed his position of authority. Out in the field accident could and did happen. It was only a question of when it would happen for Koltz.

Steele distanced himself from the ex-military policeman. “Back to your position boys, we will sort this out later. We have more pressing problems right now.” He pointed to the second wave of Japanese forming up. Their officers goaded the troops forward, the late afternoon sun glinting off of their razor-sharp samurai swords. “I’ve got my eye on you, Koltz. We have all heard the horror stories coming out of the disciplinary unit. Accidents do happen.”

Chapter 3

A red flare hissed across the late afternoon sky from the direction of Fort Briere. “It’s time to get the hell out of here boys. That’s the signal.” Steele fired a green flare in acknowledgement. “Move to the rear door and keep within the markers, put one foot in the wrong place, and you will send us all to hell.” He fired off a last magazine at a Japanese officer haranguing the third wave. He threatened them with a fate worse than death if this assault did not succeed where the two previous waves had failed. Smiling at the sight of the Jap officer falling under the hail of lead Steele followed his team to the rear door.

Heading in a south-westerly direction, he led his team through dense scrub avoiding Japanese roving patrols. In the near distance, the sounds of explosions signalled the arrival of the Japs in the citadel. Steele had

supervised the rigging of booby traps throughout the building. He wondered how many kills he had got.

Heavy fighting since the night before had taken its toll on the survivors of Fort Briere de l'Isle. Thankful for reinforcements the officer in command, Commandant Boery welcomed Lieutenant Duronsoy and his men. Japanese fighter-bombers had pulverised the fort a few hours earlier. French casualties stood at two hundred dead and around three hundred and fifty wounded. Surrounding the fort, over one thousand Japanese troops lay dead. Packs of wild dogs roamed the gullies and crevices gorging on the dead. Occasionally the wild dogs would come across a severely wounded man. Their desperate cries were sometimes carried on the wind to the defenders manning the ramparts of Fort Briere. Occasionally the screams were ended when the wounded held a grenade to their chests or shot themselves in the head as the dogs approached.

Darting from cover to cover Steele led his team into Fort Briere. "Glad you could make it Steele. I knew if anyone could it would be you. Did you bring out all your men?" Clapping Steele warmly on the back Lieutenant Duronsoy smiled. He looked haggard, tired but determined to fight on. "What is the situation at the moment Mon Lieutenant?" Heavy fighting raged all around. "We are surrounded, heavily outnumbered and have lost at least one-third of the fort to the Japs. Our boys are holding them on the ramparts and in the corridors blocking their advance further into the fort. I know you and your men are exhausted, but I need you at the north-eastern blockhouse with me."

Nodding Steele waved his men over. "Follow me. We still have a job to do." Replenishing their ammunition Steele noticed there was almost nothing left in the store. Empty ammunition boxes lay scattered across the dank subterranean munitions room. A single naked lightbulb swung on the ceiling in rhythm to the mortar bombs and artillery shells impacting above.

Within the hour, the situation deteriorated rapidly. "We are out of ammunition. The wounded have no medical aid. I am afraid I must take the difficult decision to surrender. The men have fought bravely, but I will not throw away their lives needlessly. There is still hope we might end up in a camp for a short while before Allied forces liberate us." Addressing the surviving Legionnaires and a handful of French regulars along with the remnants of the Tirailleurs Tonkinois, Lieutenant Duronsoy looked apprehensively down at the courtyard of the fort. From his vantage point in the blockhouse, large numbers of Japanese infantry were clearly visible in the fading light.

"Mon Lieutenant, the bastards are using gas!" Three French regulars stumbled into the blockhouse tearing at their shirts. Their skin blistered, clawing at their throats they struggled to breathe. They dropped to the floor foaming at the mouth. "End it for God's sake!" Lifting his Hotchkiss Koltz aimed it at the suffering soldiers writhing on the ground. "Not with that you idiot, you will kill half of the men here with the ricochet." Suddenly Koltz dropped the machine gun to the floor. Snatching a rifle from a shocked Tonkinois soldier, he fired three well-aimed rounds into the dying men's faces.

“What the hell has got into him?” Steele turned to Lieutenant Duronsoy. A figure darted toward the aperture in the blockhouse. For a moment, Koltz wriggled, stuck halfway through. His butt too big for the firing slit he made a superhuman effort. Popping through the aperture, he plummeted onto the cobblestones of the courtyard down below. His Hotchkiss clattered loudly surprising the Japs forming up for another attack. “Must have lost his nerve and committed suicide. He could have had the decency to leave his weapon and ammo with us before he jumped.” Looking down on the inert body of Koltz, Lieutenant Duronsoy shook his head. “Wait Mon Lieutenant. I think I saw him move!” Bullets slammed into the wall inches from the firing slit as Steele peaked down into the courtyard.

He watched opened mouthed when Koltz suddenly leapt to his feet. Swinging wildly, he knocked a Jap clean off of his feet. Grabbing the Hotchkiss, Koltz waded into the enemy firing left and right. With no time to reload, he used the machine gun as a club bashing skulls and fracturing jaws. “What a fighter!” From their grandstand view, the French troops cheered Koltz on giving him what fire support they could. Chasing a terrified Jap up the stairs and onto the wall of the fort Koltz hurled the Hotchkiss down at the Japs who had re-entered the courtyard. Screaming like a Viking berserker, Koltz dived at the helpless Jap, who fell to the floor under a shower of blows.

Grabbing hold of the near unconscious Jap, Koltz picked him up by his belt and collar. “Mon Dieu, it can’t be true!” Lieutenant Duronsoy shook his head when Koltz lifted the man above his head. He turned to throw the screaming Jap over the rampart and onto the rocks below. “Holy shit Mon Lieutenant, Koltz must have got his hand stuck in the Jap's belt!” They

watched as both men went over the wall and plummeted toward the jagged rocks.

Walking over toward the firing slit which Koltz had squeezed through, Wallace picked up a tube which had fallen out of Klotz's trouser pocket. "Well, well, what do we have here? I thought that bastard didn't have it in him." Snatching the tube out of his hand Steele opened it. "I saw him going through the dead Japs pockets earlier. No-one worries if the lads take wallets or a watch Mon Lieutenant. It's the spoils of war." Nodding discreetly in agreement Lieutenant Duronsoy studied the grey tablet Steel placed on the palm of his hand. "Philopon, it's made by the Japanese pharmaceutical companies. It's a drug made from chemicals, methamphetamine which is used by the Germans as well. They call it Pervetin, but it is the same thing." Steele thought back to the times in the trenches of World War One when pills were given out to troops with the promise the tablets would make them more alert.

All they did was to give them rapid bursts of superhuman strength and reckless courage. "From what I hear the Americans and British use something similar Mon Lieutenant. We even used to eat crackers which had been laced with Cocaine during the conquest of Morocco and Algeria."

Steele laughed. "The boys would march fifty miles in the blazing African sun, fight and then still be ready for more." Lieutenant Duronsoy looked at Steele surprised. "That was over a hundred years ago Steele, why do you say that as if you were there?" Kicking himself for a slip of the tongue Steele shrugged. "I did not mean to be taken literally, Mon Lieutenant. I merely meant the Legion when I said us." Looking around the room, Steele

pointed to the Legionnaires. “How could I be that old Mon Lieutenant, you and I are spring chickens compared to these poor guys?” Lieutenant Duronsoy smiled at the remark.

Both he and Steele were the only ones who looked to be in their mid-twenties. The average age of the men in the unit was forty-five to fifty years old. Wondering how these “old men” ended up fighting in Indochina Steele decided it might have been due to many of them being posted to Indochina before the outbreak of war. They were all near their retirement and were to spend the last year or two in the far off colony.

Unfortunately, they were stranded at the outbreak of hostilities, doomed to wait until the war was over before returning home. Now they fought for their survival.

“Any further resistance is futile. We have no ammunition left, and I do not wish to prolong the suffering of the wounded. I am surrendering the Fort to the Japanese officers now.” The commander of Fort Briere de l’Isle announced walking through the gate toward the Japanese officers waiting for his capitulation. A short moment of relief, then the thought of being captured by the Japanese brought on a feeling of intense unease amongst the Legionnaires. “I don’t like this” Glancing at the Japanese officers standing at the gate with their hands on their Samurai swords he saw the expression of utter hate in their eyes.

Chapter 4

After the preliminary negotiations had taken place, the commanding officer of the French forces returned to the fort. "The Japanese have given their word that the wounded will be taken care of and if we evacuate the fort without our weapons, we will be held as prisoners of war in accordance with the Geneva Conventions. We have five minutes to decide." There was a murmur of discontent amongst the troops gathered in the corridor and the small portion of the fort still under French command. "We have seen what the Japs are capable of Mon Commandant. Why should we believe them? I will take full responsibility for the Legionnaires here. Do you intend doing the same for the Tonkinois and the French forces present?" Lieutenant Duronsoy looked the commandant straight in the eyes.

"That I do Lieutenant." He bristled not used to subordinates dictating to their superior officers. He called for the surviving members under his command to assemble. Already having disabled the remaining light tanks engine and weapons, Lieutenant Duronsoy called his men together. "It has been an honour fighting beside you Legionnaires. With any luck, the Allies will be here soon, and we can join them when we are liberated from the camps. The fight is not over. It is just delayed for a month or two. Keep your spirits and strength up and never forget that you are Legionnaires. Follow me." Wallace and Jones glanced at Steele. "If there is any slight chance of us escaping the emergency rendezvous will be at the village of Duong Tinh, do you know the place?" Steele whispered. Nodding the two men shuffled toward a small metal trapdoor on the floor. Steele looked around suddenly noticing the absence of Legionnaires Jones and Wallace. He merely shrugged wishing them well.

Out in the courtyard, the Japanese herded the French soldiers into groups. Tonkinois on one side, their French officers, roughly pushed across to the area where the Legionnaires stood staring defiantly at the bayonet-wielding Japanese soldiers. French regulars were held the opposite side to the Legionnaires. Watching the situation grow more dangerous by the second Steele tore the Legion insignia from a young Legionnaire's shirt. "Slip over to the other side while they are still sorting everyone out." He opened his mouth to protest, but Steele shoved him into a group of French artillerymen passing by.

"All of you Legionnaires form up along the wall on the double!" Waving his Samurai sword dangerously close to the prisoners, a Japanese officer screamed and goaded his men to usher the Legionnaires along to the far wall of the courtyard. Machine gunners mounted their weapons in the courtyard, a line of bayonet-wielding Japs formed up between the Legionnaires and the other survivors gathered on the opposite side. "Tie them up with this rope!" Slicing the cord of the French flag hanging limply on the mast the Jap officer laughed as the Tricolor drifted slowly onto the ground. As if he was making a statement he stood on the flag then wiped his boots on the French colours.

"My men were only following my orders. I take all the responsibility for their actions. If you wish to shoot me for this, then do so. I insist that you spare the lives of my men under the Geneva Conventions!" Outraged at the audacity of the young Lieutenant Duronsoy the officer sneered. He raised his Samurai sword. Crouched behind their machine guns, the Japanese soldiers loaded their weapons. Outraged the French and Indochinese troops

began to protest. A volley of rifle fire inches above their heads stopped them in their tracks.

“Allons infants de la Patrie, Le jour de gloire est arrivé!” Lieutenant Duronsoy began singing “La Marseillaise.” His strong voice carried above the noise of the Jap soldiers muttering in protest. Lifting his Samaria sword, the officer shot his men a withering glance. Falling silent they gripped their weapons tighter. The French national anthem was taken up by the Legionnaires. With a dozen different accents, the Legionnaires sang the magnificent refrain. Steele watched a young Jap machine gunner gulping down rice wine. His hands shook lifting the bottle to his lips.

Spontaneously joining in, the Tonkinois and French regulars began singing. “La Marseillaise” echoed through the valley. Defiantly the Legionnaires stared down the barrels of the Jap machine guns. Lieutenant Duronsoy stood at the front of his men. Waiting until the end of the chorus the Japanese officer suddenly barked a quick order. The machine guns spat death as he swiftly lowered his sword. Raking left, and right the gunners riddled the Legionnaires with bullets. Men fell to the ground screaming in pain. Hindered by the ropes binding his hands behind his back Steele bolted sideways knocking a Legionnaire to the ground. He shuddered violently with every round that sent white-hot flashes of pain through his body. He attempted to shield his comrade Steele lay crumpled on top of the now wounded Legionnaire. Bodies began falling on top of Steele. Blood pooled on the courtyard stones, the stench of death hung heavy in the air.

As suddenly as it had started the machinegun fire ceased. Shocked by witnessing the massacre the Tonkinois and French troops cursed the

Japanese. Under orders from their officer, a platoon of Japs drove the prisoners through the courtyard and out of the gates using their bayonets persuasively.

Under the dead weight of numerous bodies, Steele watched the Japs leave their machine guns, the barrels still shimmering with the heat. Bayonets or entrenching tools in their dirty hands they advanced on the pile of dead and dying Legionnaires. In a frenzied blood lust, they stabbed or hacked at the bodies. Skulls shattered under the violent blows of sharpened entrenching tools. Playing dead Steele felt a bayonet pierce his left shoulder. Wounded but still clinging to life the Legionnaire whom Steele attempted to shield with his own body let out a scream. Kneeling on the pile of corpses a Japanese sergeant grinned at the helpless man. Steele lay trapped under the weight of dead bodies unable to move.

The Jap flashed a smile revealing two gold front teeth. The Jap first reached down through the tangle of limbs then ripped Steele's sergeant stripes off of his shirt using his razor-sharp bayonet. Holding the stripe's up to his friends he showed off his trophy. Shoving the stripe's in his top pocket, the Jap turned his attention to the wounded man beneath Steele. Grunting in frustration Steele could not move. Wide-eyed in terror the Legionnaire lay trapped, watching the grinning Jap moving his bayonet excruciatingly slowly toward his eye. Ever so slowly the Jap punctured the man's eye pushing the blade deeper into the socket. Screaming in pain and terror, the wounded Legionnaire twitched convulsively as the blade was pushed deeper and up into his brain.

Burning with hate Steele could smell the Jap sergeant's fetid breath close to his face. He laughed when the Legionnaire finally lay dead. He withdrew the bayonet dripping warm blood over Steele's face. Steele noticed the Jap had a long scar running the length of his forearm. Lying amongst the dead Steele felt his wounds slowly beginning to heal. Suddenly a bright flash blinded Steele then another and another. Confused Steele closed his eyes waiting nervously for the impact of a bullet, but nothing happened. Shocked he watched two Japanese men dressed in civilian clothes taking photographs of the massacre.

He cursed as they took close-up photographs of the faces of the dead Legionnaires. Changing flash bulbs with every photo they walked over the bodies indifferent to the blood staining their immaculately tailored suits. He turned his head sideways hoping to see a survivor amongst the heap of corpses. All he witnessed was the Japs ransacking the fort. High above on the ramparts, they screamed their "Banzai" victory cry, holding up their blood-soaked bayonets.

"How the hell am I supposed to get out of here now?" Watching the endless procession of Japanese troops and officers surveying the massacre, Steele felt a need for revenge. For a second, he thought he heard something. Perhaps he imagined it, but he could have sworn he heard a groan, a low murmur. A dozen Jap officers walked into the fort. They laughed at the scene in the courtyard. "Arrogant fools," Steele muttered between clenched teeth. "Soon you will not be laughing when we invade your precious homeland. Expect no mercy when we attack Japan. The world has heard of what you have done in Nanking and elsewhere. This day of infamy in Indochina will be avenged." Blood and gore dripped down on Steele. The

smell of death oozed from his pores. Again a low murmur, could it be someone else had survived the massacre? Turning his head, Steele caught sight of a hand trembling. By now the Japs had taken to rummaging through the Fort searching for loot like all soldiers do or were herding the prisoners into an area near Lang Son. Wriggling around Steele managed to free himself from the bonds binding his hands.

Steele slid his hand through a jumble of limbs grasping hold of the outstretched hand. For a second, he felt the hand tighten around his own. He pulled on the hand until he reached the knots. It was difficult undoing the bonds without seeing what he was doing, but Steele managed to free his fellow prisoner. Drawing on all of his remaining strength Steele pulled the wounded Legionnaire toward him in spite of the dead weight of the bodies. Able to poke his head out of the carnage pit Steele watched the last remaining Japs walking out of the courtyard, they were secure in the knowledge that all the Legionnaires had gone to meet their ancestors.

“Try to remain calm brother!” Pulling the wounded Legionnaire from the body pit, Steele lay low. Hearing the hobnail boots of the Japs still pacing the corridors Steele peered cautiously from his hiding place. Slowly he raised his head. Night had fallen, occasional gunfire testified to the valiant resistance of the French forces still fighting the Japanese. “Here we go mate, where are you hit?” Emerging from the pit, Steele dragged the wounded man free of the cadavers. He reached down for his canteen. Neat Cognac burned down his throat. “Here, take a sip of this.” He held his canteen to the lips of the Legionnaire. He dragged him across the courtyard. Coughing after taking a large gulp the Legionnaire pulled the flask toward his lips again.

“Take it, easy comrade. We still have a long way to go.” He drank heavily draining about a third of the bottle. “Okay, that’s enough mate. As I said where are you hit?” It was of no use looking at the blood smeared over the Legionnaire as Steele had blood all over his uniform too. “It hurts like hell, but I don’t think it is life-threatening.” The dark-haired Legionnaire lifted his hand smirking. He pointed to a bullet wound in his leg and another on his arm. “That’s nothing, a mere scratch. We will have you ready for service in no time.” Steele joked. He tore off a strip of the wounded man’s shirt then bound the wounds. “We have to find disinfectant, or you will get gangrene.”

Crawling across the bloodstained cobblestones, Steele reached for the medical pouch strapped to Lieutenant Duronsoy’s webbing. Pulling the tab open he searched through the pouch finding Sulphur powder. For a moment, Steele looked into the eyes of the dead officer. Slowly he reached across closing his eyelids. “See you in Valhalla Mon Lieutenant. You have certainly earned your place amongst the brave. You will live forever in the halls of Asgard.” For a moment, Steele smiled wryly. It was not the first time he had found himself invoking the Norse Gods. Unshaken in his Templar beliefs he, however, had a thirst for the Nordic sagas and listened intently to Scandinavian Legionnaires recounting tales of a warrior’s paradise. He ripped the package open sprinkling the Sulphur powder over the injury. Placing a field dressing on the wound Steele dragged the man across the courtyard. “Basta, I curse the yellow, slant-eyed bastard with the gold teeth. I swear by the honour of my family I will not let the vendetta rest until he and his entire family are dead!” Cursing under his breath, the

wounded Legionnaire's eyes burned with hate. Steele turned to ask the Legionnaire his name.

"I, Giuseppe Capulet swear on this blood oath." Not needing to ask his name Steele cast a wary eye over Capulet. He was shorter than average but stocky with dark hair and olive skin. He spoke French with an accent Steele could not immediately place. "On my island, a vendetta lasts for generations." Reaching for a shard of broken glass Capulet swiftly sliced his forearm. Fresh blood trickled onto his already blood-soaked uniform. Knocking the broken shard out of Capulets hand Steele shook his head. "Bloody hell Capulet, you have enough blood seeping out of your wounds. Could you not have used some of that instead of cutting yourself? What did you have to go and do that for?"

Capulet looked at Steele as if he were asking an idiotic question. "That way when I see the scar every day I will be reminded of the pain and blood. It will drive my desire for vengeance. Have you never had a vendetta?" Capulet drew closer to Steele staring intently into his eyes. "Ha! I knew it. You too know the meaning of holding a grudge, of seeking revenge."

Smiling slyly Capulet fought for breath before continuing. "Are they dead yet, and their family do they still live?" Thinking of Jean, Steele shook his head. "He still lives, maybe one day." Steele trailed off. "Enough of this nonsense Legionnaire, the Japs will be swarming over the area again shortly." Wishing to end the conversation Steele turned to search the immediate area.

The open gates were out of the question, so Steele put the wounded Legionnaire over his shoulder. Mounting the stairs, he climbed the ramparts. Artillery shells rained down on the citadel. Perhaps the Japs had not taken control of the entire area. Steele felt a pang of regret thinking of all the men who had died defending the citadel. He slid over the ramparts, hanging onto his back the wounded Capulet moaned in pain. “Not far to go now, Capulet. Hold on to me tightly. I need to use both hands.”

Using the gaps in the wall as handholds Steele climbed slowly down. His arms and legs trembled under the strain of Capulets body weight. Reaching the moat, he checked on the soldier. “You are okay for now. Can you walk?” Taking tentative steps, the Legionnaire climbed up the sandy ground of the moat. “Bloody hell, to think the Top Brass found a decent moat and a high wall along the ramparts esthetically unpleasing is such bullshit.” He felt the anger rising up inside. “I wish that I had the time to take out the bastards back in their comfortable offices for the deaths of all the brave men here today.” He set a course toward the hills overlooking Lang Son. All the while Capulet mumbled under his breath alternatively cursing the Japanese in French and a language similar to Italian.

Authors Note: The actions of Lieutenant Duronsoy throughout the chapters are taken from actual historical facts recounted by witnesses who survived. The massacre at Fort Briere des Isle took place as did the last heroic rendition of the Marseilles by the victims.

Chapter 5

Slowly Steele dragged Capulet over the rough terrain. Hiding at times when Japanese roving patrols moved through the area Steele reached a hill

overlooking Lang Son. He felt the familiar rush of adrenaline coupled with fear. "It will be light soon we had better find a place to hide. How are you feeling Capulet?" Steele looked over to where Capulet nursed his wounds. "It will take more than that to put me down." He pointed to the blood smeared dressings on his arm and leg. "There is a pillbox somewhere close by. I remember standing guard there a few times." Capulet pointed to the top of the hill. "Apparently, it overlooked Lang Son and the river." Continuing, Capulet pointed at a dead tree sky lined by the approaching dawns light. "The pillbox is next to the tree. Can't remember what the view from there was like, though." He laughed.

"If you were standing guard up there how come you do not remember the view, you were supposed to be an observation post?" Steele looked sharply at Capulet. "Ah, you know what the boys are like Sergeant. We all crammed bottles of red wine into our rucksacks when we had duty up there. From the moment we got up here, we drank until we had to come down again. Getting back down was the hard part!" Capulet chuckled. "And to top it all, the pillbox must have been made by the tallest men in the Legion. Most of us could not reach the firing slit. We had to stand on boxes to see out. If the Japs are in there, they sure as hell won't be able to see out!" He laughed again until he clutched his wounds in pain.

Shaking his head but not in the least surprised with the Legionnaires drinking Steele left Capulet crouched behind a clump of boulders. Snaking through the dew-laden grass, Steele noticed a well-worn path heading up to the hilltop. Keeping low Steele treaded softly alongside the path, the long grass deadening the sound of his footsteps. Hearing voices, he froze. Straight ahead he spotted the angular lines of a concrete bunker in the semi-darkness. He felt for a weapon finding only small rocks. Clutching a sharp rock in his hand, he slithered closer. He could hear at least two Japs chatting

excitedly up ahead. For a moment, he wondered why he was advancing on the Japanese soldiers in the pillbox. He could just as quickly turn around and avoid a deadly confrontation, but it was something ingrained in his warrior's spirit. He advanced toward the enemy. Leopard crawling Steele cursed when his knee brushed against something causing a loud noise. The Japs stopped talking. Steele braced himself for the worse. Seconds later that seemed to take hours they continued their banter. Reaching down, Steele felt a bottle close to his knee. Gripping it tightly he continued his advance discarding the rock on the way.

Steele watched the two Japs peering through the firing slit. "Bloody hell, the only two Japs over six feet in the entire Japanese army and I have to stumble across them." Steele thought to himself. He skirted around the back moving stealthily. He braced for the attack. Throwing a rock over the pillbox, it crashed in front of the Japs bouncing down the hill. Curt shouts emanated from the pillbox. Their attention riveted to their front Steele dropped into the narrow entrance behind. Both Japanese soldiers turned around wide-eyed in terror. Before them, stood a Legionnaire. His were eyes burning with revenge. A thin scar ran down his face. He clutched a wine bottle in his hand. For a second they wondered whether to laugh as they brought their rifles to bear on their attacker. Steele smashed the Jap to his left in the face with the bottle. Howling in pain, the Jap felt his jaw shatter. Breaking glass slit his face and eyes. Swinging the broken bottle to his right, Steele embedded the deadly shards in the other Japs neck. Twisting violently, he felt the jagged edges slicing through the man's neck and arteries. Blood spouted over the dull grey concrete walls. Pulling the bottleneck free, Steele lunged at the man's throat stabbing down violently. Blood and air bubbles spouted from the Jap's neck. He dropped to the floor. His body wracked by death spasms.

Eyes wide in fear the other Jap clutched his jaw holding up his hand in surrender. "You bastards don't surrender. All you will do is look for an opportunity to take us with you. Sorry mate but war is war." He lifted his hand. Blood dripped off of the blood smeared bottleneck. Steele kicked the Jap in the groin. Doubled over in pain the Jap lay on the ground. Suddenly Steele noticed the improvised firing step the Japs had created. Bodies of dead Legionnaires had been piled up three high to enable the Japanese to look out of the high firing slit. Seeing his dead comrades treated in such a disrespectful way Steele felt the anger rising within. Grabbing the dead Japs rifle Steele looked at the fixed bayonet at the end of the muzzle.

He held the Jap's face close to the dead Legionnaires. One of the bodies on top had a gaping chest wound. Steele looked down at the Jap's bloodstained boots. "You bastards think that you can tread on our dead? Well, then you can join them." He slammed the Japs face hard against the open wound pushing his face into the already decomposing flesh. Thrashing around the Jap struggled to break free of Steele's iron grip. Steele brought his boot down with terrible force on the man's lower back. Using both hands, Steele slowly lowered the bayonet-fixed rifle. Kicking the Jap over so he could watch Steele first punctured his lungs with the razor sharp weapon then thrust the bayonet through the man's shattered jaw until it lodged in his brain. Moments later the Japanese soldiers lay dead.

Steele felt his hands shaking uncontrollably. He dropped to the side of the pillbox feeling the cold concrete at his back. "What have I become, what has happened to me?" He gasped for air surrounded by half a dozen bodies. Two nearly full bottles of Japanese rice wine lay close to him "At least there is one common point between soldiers." He drank deeply.

Suddenly a movement caught his eye near the pillbox entrance. Levelling the rifle he waited. "Thought you could do it all without me, basta!"

Capulet dropped painfully into the bunker. He held out his hand for the rice wine. "It seems they had the same idea when they were sent up here for guard duty." He took a swig then coughed. He rattled off a string of insults in the Italian sounding language. "What have these bastards done with our friends?" He shook his head staring down at the dead littering the bottom of the bunker. "I don't want to move around here too much as we may be spotted, but we have to lay our brothers to rest. I am not leaving them to be trampled underfoot by the Japs again." Steele said between clenched teeth to Capulet. Dragging the two dead enemy corpses outside Steele dropped the bodies into a rocky crevice. With the help of Capulet, he heaved the bodies of his comrades into a shallow trench beside the bunker. Using a discarded entrenching tool they took turns to shovel earth over the shallow grave. Capulet made a crude wooden cross which he placed on the burial mound.

"Not much else we can do here now Capulet. I was hoping to be able to rally a few survivors, but that looks increasingly unlikely." Steele scanned the town of Long San far below with a pair of high-powered binoculars which the Japanese soldiers had placed on the parapet. Smoke rose slowly into the early morning air. Running amok through the streets, Japanese soldiers set about looting shops and houses. Steele was horrified to see groups of soldiers dragging young women into the buildings or merely raping them in the narrow side streets.

Steele closed his eyes struggling to come to terms with everything that had happened. Adrenaline shot through his body at the sound of a voice barking orders in Japanese filled the bunker.

Chapter 6

Staring at each other Steele and Capulet reached for their weapons. Suddenly the voice crackled again, this time, more impatiently. Drawn to the sound Steele and Capulet stared at an olive green radio partially hidden by kitbags. "What the hell do we do now?" Capulet tugged at Steele's sleeve. "The Japs will know something is wrong if we don't answer. How is your Japanese?" Steele replied hoping Capulet had picked up a little during the Japanese occupation. "Basta, I made a point of never learning their damn language!" He spat. Reaching for the handset Steele mumbled a reply. An irritated voice on the other end rattled off while Steele listened carefully. Replying curtly Steele hoped he had bought them some time.

"What did they say, Sergeant, you seem to understand those bastards." Pointing down at a gathering mob of Japanese soldiers on the banks of the Ky Cong River Capulet turned to Steele. "They are up to something are they not Sergeant?" His voice filled with nervous tension.

Small boats commandeered by the Japanese sailed close to the riverbank. Steele could clearly see machine gunners setting up their weapons on the decks. Hundreds of Japanese infantry milled around, their mood was one of excited anticipation. Through the binoculars, Steele watched them talking animatedly. Turning to Capulet, Steele grimaced. "I have a very bad feeling Capulet. The Jap on the radio told us to watch the river. He said we would have a grandstand view of what was about to happen down below."

"Perhaps they are transferring the prisoners to a prisoner of war camp Sergeant." Steele looked over at Capulet. The Legionnaire glanced nervously at the Japanese activity down below. Jubilant cheers erupted from the massed ranks of the Japanese as the first French prisoners were brutally chased down to the riverbank. Another group of bedraggled prisoners ran the gauntlet their uniforms in tatters, bloodied by the Japanese rifle butts and physical assaults along the way. The Japanese formed a semi-circle

around the prisoners. The French troops were trapped. “There must be at least four hundred and fifty, maybe five hundred men down there Capulet.” Handing the binoculars to Capulet, Steele dreaded the thought of what might be about to happen. “It’s as I said Sergeant, They must be transporting the men to a camp. Here come more boats.” An old French steamer approached the riverbank stopping around fifty meters from the shore. On the mast fluttered a Red Cross flag.

Steele scanned the riverbank once more. Huddled along the shoreline the tightly packed prisoners looked nervously at the Japanese infantry, bayonets fixed to surround them with a ring of cold steel. Those standing waist deep in the river waved at the Red Cross steamer pleading to be let on board. Prisoners deprived of food and water drank thirstily from the muddy waters. The radio crackled into life startling Steele. “Steele, my dear old friend, how good it is to be able to talk with you again!” Cold shivers ran down Steele’s spine hearing that voice. “It is I, Jean. Have you missed me at all over the last few years?” Steele felt a terrible rage mounting up in him. For the sake of the men trapped down at the riverbed, he blocked off his emotions turning his attention to the hundreds of desperate men staring down the barrels of the Japanese infantry.

“Come now Steele, be polite and answer me. You never had the best of manners when you were a Knights Templar all those centuries ago. I doubt that your time spent in the French Foreign Legion has changed anything. I know exactly where you are positioned. Take a look at the steamer, here on the deck.” Grabbing the binoculars, Steele focused on the upper deck of the steamer. The early morning sun glinted off the slow-moving murky waters. He scanned left and right coming to rest on a group of men in civilian clothes. In the centre sat a dark-clad figure. Steele felt his hands tremble, his heart raced. There on the deck sat in an ornately carved dark wooden

chair, not unlike a throne Jean looked directly in Steele's direction. To Jean's left a pretty dark haired Indochinese girl held a drink on a silver platter along with a bowl of fruit. To the right, a young man stood with a radio strapped to his back while Jean chatted away into the handset.

Seated at a lower level on the stained wooden deck were an assortment of Japanese officers and important looking civilians. Ashore the starving prisoners watched while Jean's entourage quaffed Champagne and feasted on exotic foods most of them had not seen since the war began. Turning to a group of soldiers Jean issued commands. "When people are in need I hand them a solution to their problems Steele. If they are obedient and follow my will, they are rewarded."

Hurriedly a small wooden lifeboat was lowered into the water. A wiry young man rowed the boat closer to shore. Prisoners surged toward the lifeboat. Sharp commands rang out. Walking wounded were given priority and loaded into the lifeboat. It set off back to the steamer packed to capacity, water lapping at the gunwales. "I see the prisoners have still kept a semblance of discipline and humanity. That is very admirable under their precarious situation Steele. It bothers me, but not to mind. Perhaps this will get your attention and loosen your tongue."

Jean shouted a command. He raised his left arm. "Are you ready to talk Steele?" Crouched in the bunker, Steele grabbed the handset. "What the hell do you want, you scum!" He screamed, all the while staring at the lifeboat and Jean standing there with his arm theatrically held up high. Drawing closer to the steamship, the young man laboured under a full load of passengers. "Ah! So you are there my dear friend. Do you see me?" Waving wildly Jean flapped his arms up and down." Machine gun fire echoed across the waters. Gunners on the Steamboat opened fire on the lifeboat. Tracer bullets stitched death back and forth. Wooden splinters flew into the air.

Helpless men waited in terror for death to come. Within seconds what remained of the lifeboat drifted downstream in the now bloodied water surrounded by the bodies of the prisoners. From the shoreline the incensed French prisoners cursed the Jap machine gunners on the steamboat, shaking their fists at the murderers. Behind their heavy machine guns, the Japs swivelled the barrels toward the prisoners ashore.

“Oops! That’s my mistake. I forgot I had given orders to open fire when I brought my arm down. But is that not just like soldiers for you Steele? They are always obeying orders even if they are totally bizarre.” Laughing Jean reached out for the glass of Champaign the young girl held. “Well, I take it I have your full and undivided attention now. My man was ready for the ultimate sacrifice anyway. This is what you will do now Steele.” He emptied the glass then nodded to the girl. She bent over to refill the glass. Jean absent-mindedly patted her firm ass. She turned smiling shyly. She knew that the slightest expression of distaste would have deadly consequences.

“But before let me tell you what has been happening last night and this morning. Obviously, I would like to take credit for this diabolical plan, but I have to admit I only played a small part in the planning. You have no idea how easy it is to manipulate the fanatical Japanese High Command. Their death before surrender code makes it so much easier than your Western ideology of leaving no man behind or your notion of an honourable surrender.”

“Well, this is how things went last night. All across the country, your high ranking officers were invited out to dine with their Japanese counterparts. At each dinner party, the officers were either executed or captured to use as leverage during the battle which we were sure would take place. I must say one thing for you lot. You put up one hell of a fight. Everywhere there have

been reports of French Forces fighting like lions against the Japanese. Here in Lang Son, you were so outnumbered we thought it would be a walk in the park. Then again the Japanese have not had much experience fighting against the Legion. Well, rest assured they know now.” He issued another command. Smaller vessels drew closer to the shore while the Japanese tightened the ring of steel pushing the prisoners into a tight group.

“Your General Lemonnier and the government official Auphelle were taken to the caves not far from here. We gave them a choice last night of ordering you all to surrender or if not they would be put to death. Even under torture, they did not issue the orders. They were both decapitated this morning by Japanese officers.” He said it so offhandedly, so casual it made Steele’s blood boil.

“Those men are prisoners of war Jean, show a little humanity!” Screaming into the handset, Steele watched the Japanese troops growing more restless. “I knew that you were in the area, Steele,” Jean replied. “I had my followers take photographs, and they also filmed the French dead. We were able to identify you at Fort Briere des Isles. I could see that you were wounded but not dead. Did it hurt Steele? I really hope so!” Jean laughed.

“It has been nice chatting with you Steele, but we both know what this is about.” Jean waited for a few seconds before continuing. He drained another glass of Champagne, ordered the young girl pouring his drinks to take off her top then fondled her perky breasts. “I want the Ark, Steele. The Ark of the Covenant and I want it now!” He threw the empty glass against the side of the steamboat. A dozen tiny crystal shards cascaded across the deck. Reaching out for another glass the young girl stifled a cry of pain. Blood smeared the deck where she walked. A shard of crystal had cut deeply into her bare foot. Managing to smile politely she offered Jean his drink. Another shard sliced her foot almost to the bone. She cried out in

pain. Fumbling for a moment, she spilt the drink over Jean's black robe. "Pain is for the weak, my dear." Jean smiled. "Something I will teach you shortly, I have some pressing matters to attend to first."

"I will never give you the Ark Jean. This is between us, those men down there have families, and they are innocent. They have nothing to do with the Ark, nor should they become pawns in your sadistic games." Steele hoped Jean would see reason. Suddenly remembering Capulet was sitting next to him Steele turned to look at the Legionnaire. Capulet sat wide-eyed staring at Steele. "I have no idea what you two are talking about Sergeant. Perhaps I should leave you to talk in private to that idiot down on the boat." He slipped out of the concrete bunker taking up a position toward the rear where he could watch for anyone climbing up the narrow path.

Steele focused the binoculars on the deck where the Japanese officers were seated. They all watched Jean intently. Turning to the officers, Jean held up his left hand. A senior officer screamed orders to the troops lining the riverbank with a bullhorn.

"Well, this is simply a small demonstration on what awaits the rest of the French Forces in Indochina Steele. I will ensure not one of your vaunted Legion members survive. We will hunt you down throughout the country and exterminate every last one of you. Perhaps when you have seen enough bloodshed, you will come to your senses and tell me where the Ark is hidden. Join me, Steele, we will set up a new world order and rule the planet like the immortal kings we are." Jean seethed waving his arms around. Steele watched helplessly as Jean dramatically lowered his hand. Along the banks, the impatient Japanese troops let out a blood-curdling shout of victory. Bayonets at the ready they charged the defenceless prisoners. Screams of terror and pain drifted across the valley. Lunging with their bayonet-tipped rifles the Japanese crashed into the prisoners. Furiously

they hacked at the panic-stricken men. Blood gushed from open wounds. Any attempt to escape by swimming across the river was brutally terminated by the machine gunners aboard the small vessels.

Steele felt sick to his stomach. He watched a small group of prisoners making a desperate last stand. Throwing small rocks at the advancing Jap, a few of the men managed to wrestle a rifle or two away from their executioners. They fired until the clip was empty or were hacked to death.

Slipping on the blood-soaked riverbank or finding their rifles too unwieldy in the melee numerous Japanese assailants slung their rifles. Reaching for the razor-sharp entrenching tools they set about hacking at the dwindling number of prisoners with renewed vigour. Terrified prisoners watched as the Japs decapitated their comrades with swords, used pick axes, and heavy nail-studded clubs to commit gruesome, bloody murder.

Those not directly participating in the massacre in the front ranks followed behind searching the piles of dead and dying. Plunging their blood-soaked bayonets again and again into anyone showing signs of life they made a thorough job of ensuring no French troops were left alive. The Ky Cong River ran red, stained by the innocent blood spilt.

“Enjoy the spectacle, Steele. I will hunt you down. There is no escaping my vengeance. By the way, I have always admired your choice in women, Jasmin is a real cutie. She has no idea a company of Japanese troops is on their way to the orphanage at this very moment. “The village of Duong Tinh is it not?” Steele jumped when he heard Jean’s voice suddenly crackle over the radio. He slammed his fist into the wireless. It dropped to the floor of the bunker. His heavy combat boots made short work of the outer metal casing. Instantly he regretted his actions. Why did he not think of contacting friendly forces nearby if they were in range? He might have been able to

alert them. Never surrender to the Japs as a slow, painful death would be their only fate.

Trembling with shock Steele attempted to hold the binoculars steady. The gruesome massacre down on the riverbank was drawing to a close. Groups of Japs ordered Indochinese villagers to drag the bodies into a hastily dug pit. Each body was bayoneted before being thrown into the mass grave. Drunk or high on opium the Japs missed the bodies occasionally and sunk their deadly blades into the Indochinese villagers by mistake. This only drew cheers and triumphant shouts from their comrades.

Scanning the steamboat, Steele watched Jean stride regally across the deck with the young serving girl in tow. Bowing low the Japanese officers on deck showed the utmost respect to the psychotic maniac. Disappearing below decks, he left the scene of his crimes.

Minutes later the officers on deck were disturbed by the sounds of the servant girl shrieking in terror coupled with Jean's maniacal laugh. It was not long before her lifeless body slipped beneath the murky waters of the Ky Cong. Closing his eyes, Jean lay down on a comfortable bunk. He reached out for a glass of Champaign then reminded himself to find another young serving girl when he awoke. Resting his head on a silk covered pillow, he fell into a deep sleep pleased with the day's events.

Steele slipped to the bunker floor, the concrete wall against his back. He held his trembling hands over his ears attempting to block out the screams still echoing in his head. Closing his eyes images of helpless men brutally murdered assailed his mind. He breathed hard attempting to regain control of his emotions. For what seemed an eternity he remained immobile. Forcing his eyes, open Steele suddenly remembered Legionnaire Capulet. Sliding through the firing slit, Steele caught sight of Capulet sitting with his back to a tree.

Moving slowly toward Capulet he stopped a few feet away. A low sobbing sound emanated from Capulet sitting with his legs drawn up and with his hands covering his face. Steele knelt beside him placing a hand on his shoulder. Capulet managed to regain a sense of composure. Wiping the tears from his dust encrusted face, Capulet stared into space. "We have to get out of here Capulet. That maniac will have sent out patrols to intercept us here at the bunker. Grab your gear and let's move." Mechanically he picked up a Japanese rifle, checked the magazine and clipped on a grubby webbing belt with extra magazines. Loading a rucksack with the few provisions found on the dead Japanese, binoculars and rice wine, Steele gathered up what ammunition and serviceable weapons he could find. Between them, they had forty rounds of ammunition, a rifle each and a single frag grenade.

"Right Capulet, we will get off of this hill, the bush is thicker over there." Pointing to the slope facing away from Lang Son, Steele searched the terrain for any sign of the enemy. "We will head toward the West. Duong Tinh is around thirty kilometres from here. Sooner or later we will stumble upon survivors or even friendly units still active." He turned to Capulet. "Sounds reasonable Sergeant, but I must warn you." He drew himself up to his full height, which still made him head and shoulders shorter than Steele. "I do not want to know who that bastard you were talking with over the radio with is. Nor do I care what bloody Ark he is searching for but I will tell you this, though." He fixed Steele with a piercing glare, his face inches from Steele's "If you ever tell anyone I was crying like a little girl, I will kill you!" He drew a finger across his throat. Turning sharply Capulet walked off in the direction Steele had indicated. Shaking his head, Steele managed a small smile. "Not a chance you are Swiss as you claim Capulet, but then every Legionnaire is entitled to anonymity."

Taking one last look at Lang Son, Steele put the horror behind them. He wondered what lay in store for them on the journey ahead. He thought of Jasmin. It was thirty kilometres to the orphanage. He set out with the hope of reaching her before the Japanese did. In his heart, he knew the chances were slim.

Authors note: At the Citadel in Lang Son resistance continued for more than 20 hours against over 10 000 Japanese troops. The French Forces suffered 120 Killed in Action with a further 140 seriously wounded hospitalised plus dozens less seriously injured. After the surrender 460 survivors and walking wounded were taken to the banks of the Ky Cong River. There they were brutally murdered in cold blood by the Japanese. In total between the 9 and 13 March 1945, 1 128 French and Indochinese prisoners were murdered.

Chapter 7

Steele looked back at the hill overlooking Lang Son. They had not walked far before he spotted figures darting toward the bunker they had so recently vacated. Darting into the thickest area of the bush they could find Steele and Capulet lay low. Counting, at least, a dozen Japanese troops Steele searched for the most concealed path down the slope where they would find dense cover in the valley below.

A sudden movement caught Steele's eye. Capulet moved with lightning speed. His bayonet flashed straight at Steele's face. It missed by inches, a small amount of blood splashed into Steele's cheek. "Bloody snakes, they make my skin crawl when I see them," Capulet stated matter of factually. He chopped at the deadly snake once more as it wriggled in its death spasms. Nodding his thanks, Steele turned to the hillside. A sudden explosion echoed across the valley. "Ha! I knew those bastards would go snooping around in the bunker." Looking very proud Capulet shrugged his

shoulders. “I found another grenade outside the bunker. I pulled the pin and jammed it under one of the Jap bodies.” Smiling, Steele imagined the Japs moving the body of their comrade. The grenade exploding in the confines of the concrete bunker would have been deadly. The desperate cries of mortally wounded men came from the bunker while their friends rushed to their aid shocked at the carnage caused by the explosion.

“Well done Legionnaire, now let’s get the hell out of here,” Steele whispered. Moving fast and low they wove their way between the bushes desperate to put as much distance between them and the Japs. Sweat poured down their faces, the backs of their combat jackets were soaked. Small flies buzzed around their faces attracted by the perspiration. The constant drone and their irritating attempts to fly into the men’s eyes and ears nearly drove both men mad.

Dropping behind a small rocky outcrop, Steele caught his breath. Capulet lay flat on his back gasping for air. “Too many motorised patrols Capulet?” Steele laughed. Too short of breath to reply Capulet simply nodded. “Where are we headed, Sergeant?” He turned and heaved vomiting almost on Steele. “Holy shit Capulet, how much rice wine did you drink?” Steele moved further away wrinkling his nose at the disgusting smell. “Let me check your dressings. I don’t want your wounds to become infected,” Steele muttered. He took the bandages covering Capulets wounds on his arm and leg off. Steele sniffed close to the wounds. “Smells okay but when was the last time you had a shower Capulet?” He laughed. Placing fresh wound dressings on Capulets arm and leg Steele wondered how much further Capulet would be able to travel. He had lost a substantial amount of blood, and the constant running must be taking its toll on him.

“There is a village not far from here. We are going there.” Scanning their front with the binoculars, Steele watched the Japanese rushing headlong

toward their position guided by a local tracker. “Do you think we will find any of our boys there Sergeant?” Wiping his mouth Capulet turned to Steele. “I don’t know, but there is someone I have to make sure the Japs don’t get their hands on.” Shoving the binoculars into his backpack, Steele made ready to move on. Capulet let out a long sigh.

Crawling through the undergrowth, Steele slithered along the tree line bordering the village. Water buffalo grazed in the rice paddies. Chickens scurried along the dusty village square. Dark smoke drifted lazily in the warm air, burning wooden huts crackled as the flames spread from hut to hut. A large brick building stood imposingly at the end of the square. Its whitewashed walls chipped and flaking. Wisps of smoke drifted past the bell tower. Steele felt his heart race. He searched the entire village with the binoculars but saw only dead bodies strewn through the street. Acutely aware of the Japanese patrol closing in on them Steele decided to throw caution to the winds.

“Cover me Capulet and if anything happens, leave.” He handed Capulet most of the ammunition and their one grenade. “Here, take the rice wine as well.” He laughed then shook his head as Capulet took a long drink from the bottle. “It helps me run further Sergeant, and it dulls the pain.” He took another swig. “I will watch your back but just let me in on what the plan is. That is if you have one Sergeant.” He expected a sarcastic answer, but Steele dropped beside him. Capulet dug deeply in his pocket. He pulled out a battered banana leaf. Slowly opening the banana leaf, he divided up the cold rice into two equal portions. Scooping up the glutinous rice in their dirty hands they wolfed down their meagre ration. Steele shook two cigarettes from his crumpled pack. Capulet lit a match with trembling hands. For a moment they inhaled deeply, their ordeal seemed to be on hold as they savoured the strong tobacco.

“We used to stop here quite often when we did our mobile patrols through the area with Lieutenant Duronsoy. There are an orphanage and a school over there.” He pointed to the whitewashed building. “I have to know if the children are still alive and their teacher too.” Capulet rubbed his chin. “Is the teacher a woman?” He smiled slyly. “Why do you stick your neck out for a woman? There are many to be had in any village?” He stubbed out his cigarette. “Don’t ask too many questions, Legionnaire. If I am not back soon, leave. By some miracle, survivors may rendezvous here so keep your eyes peeled.” Steele whispered. He began to crawl toward the village. Turning Steele watched Capulet gulping down the last of the rice wine. Focusing on the objective Steele worked his way toward the village of Duong Tinh.

The hamlet was all but destroyed. Choking on the acrid smoke, Steele slipped closer to the whitewashed building. Scattered through the dusty streets bodies decomposed in the hot sun. Flimsy wooden huts crackled as the flames ate at the remaining timbers. Glancing back in Capulets direction he felt a pang of disappointment, Capulet was nowhere to be seen.

Darting from cover to cover he avoided entering the structure through the heavy wooden door hanging sideways off one remaining hinge. He crept up to a side window. Cautiously he peered through the shattered glass. A torn mosquito net hung limply in the infirmary above a blood-stained bed. He felt his stomach turn. The bodies of two small children lay under a woman. She died in a vain attempt to protect the children with her body. All three had been riddled with bullets where they lay. Flies buzzed hungrily around the dark red pool of blood on the floor. Wherever he turned, he saw similar scenes of death.

Hugging the wall Steele made his way to the rear of the building. Darting through the open door, he moved quickly along a narrow corridor. Flames

licked at the wooden roof, taking hold the fire began swiftly spreading. Thick smoke filled the corridor forcing Steele to crouch low. He turned left entering the communal cooking area. Rushing through the opposite door, he stumbled into a small cell-like bedroom. Clothes littered the floor, blood smears on the wall and floor testified to the violent act committed so recently. He dropped to one knee. A small neckless he had given Jasmin lay discarded on the floor. Scooping it up he turned away, grief coupled with guilt washed over him. The unbearable heat drove him out of the building moments before the roof collapsed in a shower of sparks. Gasping down lungful's of smoke-filled air Steele staggered to the bullet-riddled walls of the one-room schoolhouse. He looked at the large gaping hole in the wall deciding it must have been a small calibre artillery shell. The Japanese must have used white phosphorous shells to start all the fires and high explosives on the brick buildings.

Dreading what he would find inside Steele knew it would be only a matter of minutes before the fire reached the school room. Burning embers dropped onto the battered roof. A low groaning noise alerted Steele to the imminent collapse of the orphanage only a few feet away from where he stood. When it fell, it would land directly on top of the school.

Pushing through the shell hole in the wall Steele searched the devastated room. Body parts littered the rubble-strewn floor. The children trapped in the small space were torn apart by the artillery shell. Sick to his stomach Steele walked in a daze to the back of the room where the explosion had torn down most of the wall. Without warning a burning rafter fell from the orphanage roof missing Steele by mere inches. Flames immediately sprung up. Staggering over the rubble, he stood for a moment on the remains of a heavy wooden school desk. Part of the wall had fallen on it crushing the back legs. The thin coat of varnish blistered with the heat of the burning

rafter, flames licked at the wooden desk. The desk formed a ramp. Steele took two steps up the table ready to jump out through the open breach in the wall. He anticipated the rush of fresh air as he prepared to launch over the fallen debris.

He felt a hand grab his combat boot at the ankle. Instinctively he turned and fired, the shot splintered the smouldering wood. His heart skipped faster. The hand looked like a woman's. The tight grip loosened. He watched as if in slow motion the delicate fingers release their hold then slide limply back under the shattered desk.

"Holy shit, Jasmin I found you!" Steele dropped to his knees grabbing her arm. He pulled, but she was trapped. Rubble and the burning rafter lay on the slanted desk. Parts of the wall under the desk prevented him from reaching her. In a panic, he kicked at the rafter attempting to shift its weight. It did not budge. With frightening speed, the flames devoured any combustible material in the shattered room. Pulling away chunks of masonry until his hands bled Steele cleared away enough to enable him to see Jasmin through the smoke. She was conscious. Her eyes pleaded with him to get her out.

Sliding under the shattered desk, Steele tried lifting the heavy weight with his back. It had moved only a few inches before the exertion sapped his strength. He tried again but froze hearing high pitched screams in Japanese getting ever closer.

Adrenaline coursed through his body. With superhuman effort, Steele managed to lift the desk just enough for Jasmin to free her legs. Shots rang out chipping plaster from the wall.

More shots were fired. Jasmin was swiftly pulled from under the burning desk. Wriggling through the gap Steele expected to come face to face with a

Japanese soldier.

“Did you think that I was really going to leave you? Basta!” Capulet fired two more rounds at the advancing Japanese. “If we run like hell we might just make it into the bush over there,” Capulet screamed as he reloaded. Slinging Jasmin over his shoulder Steele bolted after Capulet. Bullets cracked overhead. They made it as far as a shallow ditch near the dusty sand road. The enemy fire intensified. Steele attempted to shield Jasmin from the deadly accurate rounds pouring toward them.

Steele heard the sound of rushing feet crunching over the sand road. He swung his rifle toward the sound. In a split second, he lifted his head and shoulders up, fired and dived down again. Skidding to a halt the Jap body landed near the ditch. Reaching out Steele thrust his bayonet in the corpse, just to make sure. Under fire, he hastily pulled the dead Jap closer to act as some small protection against the enemy fire. Blood dripped in small rivulets down the side of the ditch. In a state of shock, Jasmin stared at the blood forming dark red pools. She watched large red ants scurry angrily having been disturbed. Rushing toward the unexpected bounty the ants followed the trail of blood to the still warm body disappearing into the entry and exit wounds.

“We can’t stay here. It’s suicide. Capulet, get your grenade ready.” Steele shouted over his shoulder. A steady volume of rifle fire kicked up dust around their improvised trench. Occasionally the body Steele used as a sandbag twitched involuntarily, pierced by bullets. “Damn, I am sure I had it in my ammo pouch.” Searching hurriedly through his webbing Capulet suddenly froze. He elbowed Steele in the ribs. Pointing to Jasmin, Capulet backed away to the side of the ditch.

She lay huddled in the dirt, a grenade clutched to her chest. Trembling she pulled the pin holding the spoon down. Her body shook involuntarily with

every volley fired over the top of the trench. She curled up into a ball on the bottom of the trench strewn with shell casings and dirt. Steele touched her shoulder gently. She did not respond. A quick movement caught his eye. The Japs were preparing to outflank their position. Working their way down the other side of the dusty road a group of enemy troops moved swiftly through the village. An officer led the machine gun group accompanied by the Vietnamese tracker who had doggedly followed them from the bunker at Lang Son.

Choosing his target Steele aimed then fired. The tracker went down screaming clutching his chest. Caught by surprise, the machine gun group hurriedly set up their weapon preparing to lay down suppressing fire while the group across the street would assault Steele's position.

Steele lifted the captured Arisaka rifle to his shoulder. Through the sights, he caught a glimpse of the Japanese officer shouting his commands. The officer jerked backwards grasping at the bloody mess where his jaw had been. Blood streamed down his hands. He stared at the bone fragments and shattered teeth on the sand in front of him. Unnerved by the unexpected resistance the gun crew fired the first burst high above the trench. A rifle fired inches away from Steele's face almost bursting his eardrums. "Got you, you little bastard!" Capulet shouted jubilantly watching the machine gunner slump forward. The dying soldier's finger still clutching the trigger sent a long burst of tracer rounds into the smoke-filled air.

"Watch our front Capulet I can hear a lot of movement. They are going to rush us any moment now." Changing his magazine Steele tapped Capulet on the shoulder. As if on cue the squad of Japanese infantrymen screamed a blood-chilling "Banzai!" Rushing into the middle of the sandy street they closed in for the kill.

Jasmin popped the spoon on the grenade she was clutching to her chest. With lightning reflexes, Steele tore the grenade out of her grasp. He threw it over the side of the shallow trench, exploding in midair cutting down the first two assailants. Undeterred the rest of the squad surged forward, bayonets glistening in the sun.

“Keep your head down Sergeant!” Steele recognised the familiar Scottish accent. Withering machine gun fire scythed down the lead elements of the Japanese squad. Caught in the open a few continued their death-defying charge only to be cut down by well-aimed fire from Steele and Capulet. A figure darted toward the Japanese troops firing short bursts from the hip with his machine pistol. Steele watched the figure jump over their trench in one sudden leap. He caught a glimpse of a Capitaine’s rank badge on the man’s tattered combat jacket. For a moment Steele thought he imagined things. There it was again “Bonne Seant!” screamed the mysterious figure cutting down Japanese troops with sustained fire. It had been a long while since Steele had heard the Knights Templar battle cry. Placing himself in a position between the Japanese and Steele’s group the Capitaine continued to lay down accurate fire. The Jap survivors melted back into the devastated village where they would undoubtedly regroup for a counterattack.

“Right Capulet let’s get the hell out of here!” Hoisting Jasmin over his shoulder Steele made his way as fast as he could toward the tree line where Wallace stood waving them in. Crashing into the undergrowth, he dropped to his knees exhausted. Jasmin lay curled up holding her hands over her ears when Wallace lay down covering fire for Capulet. “What the hell is he doing? Since when did we start rescuing wounded Japs?” Wallace screamed to no one, in particular, shaking his head in disbelief. “Give the bloody fool a hand Jones, the Jap is almost bigger than him,” Wallace shouted above the rattle of the machine gun. Relief washed over Steele. He thumped Jones on

the shoulder smiling, still trying to catch his breath. “Good to see you, Sergeant, somehow I knew you would make it here.” Jones laughed then set off into the open ground running steadily toward Capulet struggling under the weight of his burden.

Regaining consciousness, the wounded Jap grabbed Capulet’s rifle, throwing the Jap over his shoulder onto the ground Capulet set about pummeling him in the face with his fists. Grabbing one arm, Jones started dragging the now unconscious Jap toward the cover of the tree line. Capulet took hold of the other arm and together they made it back to Steele and the others. Sprinting across the open ground, the Captain regrouped with the Legionnaires gathered in the tree line.

“What the hell do you think you are doing Capulet? Since when do we rescue wounded Japs?” Steele slapped Capulet across the head. “Do you not recognise this bastard Sergeant?” Capulet gave Steele one of his irritated looks. Kicking the Jap prisoner over Steele took a closer look. His blood froze recognising the Jap's gold teeth. He inspected the prisoner's arm. A dark scar ran the length of his forearm. “I never believed it possible but it seems we have been given an unexpected chance to avenge our murdered comrades.” Steele spat the words furiously.

“What is going on here? We don’t have time to hang around. The Japs will be regrouping.” Lighting a cigarette, the Captain spoke directly to Steele. He was slightly taller than Steele, dark brown hair greying slightly at the temples. His gaunt face drawn with exhaustion testified to the nightmare he had survived and the continual strain of keeping a small unit together harried at each turn by the merciless Japanese. “I am Sergeant Steele, 5th Regiment Etranger d’Infanterie, Motorized Section. We were under the command of Lieutenant Duronsoy.” Steele did not snap to attention as he normally would have when addressing an officer. Any lurking Jap sniper

would have targeted the Capitaine if he noticed the men saluting or standing to attention when speaking to him. “I see Sergeant, and how is my dear friend Lieutenant Duronsoy? Did he make it out of Lang Son?” Steele shook his head. “No Mon Capitaine, he did not. This murdering bastard was one of those responsible for the massacre. He crawled over the dead and wounded robbing the bodies and finishing off the wounded with a knife.” Steele snarled kicking the Jap in the face. “I will tell you what happened and how Lieutenant Duronsoy died, defiant to the end,” Steele said to the Capitaine. “But may I suggest we put some distance between those Japs and us. I don’t expect any more of our boys will make the rendezvous here in the village.” Nodding in agreement the Capitaine walked next to Steele as he listened to him explaining the events at Lang Son, the massacre of the prisoners and the Lieutenant Duronsoy’s last desperate stand at Fort Briere des Isle. “I have not introduced myself, Steele. I am Capitaine Bastien-Thiry, also of the 5th. I will be heading toward Vietri. There were rumours of our boys concentrating in the area for a last push against the Japs. I think it would be advisable if you were to follow me.” It was not a request. It was an order. Steele smiled. He liked this officer’s will to fight and the way he led by example. “We are ready to follow you to Vietri Mon Capitaine, but the girl comes with us.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry nodded. “C’est la amour.” He said softly to himself. “But in this green jungle hell, I don’t think there will be any happily ever after for the two of you.”

Chapter 8

Pushing on relentlessly the small group trekked through the foreboding hills. Desperate to evade the pursuing Japanese troops at times only a few hundred feet behind they pushed on. Exhausted and hampered by the prisoner, Capulet dragged, kicked or beat the Jap from time to time keeping

pace with Capitaine Bastien-Thiry who led the way. Steele brought up the rear keeping a wary eye out for their hunters. He noticed the Japanese were a lot less effective without the Vietnamese tracker he had shot earlier. Jasmin limped painfully onward. She had not uttered a word, and Steele put it down to traumatic shock. It pained him to see her in such a state. She had always displayed a “Joie de Vie” that was so intense it had always astounded him. She followed like a wounded child, eyes staring at the bush surrounding them, fearful.

Capitaine Bastien-Thiry followed a narrow sand road which led in the direction of Vietri. They did not walk on the pot-holed road but walked a few meters in the bush where their small group would be able to drop flat and hide in the scrub if a Japanese motorised patrol suddenly appeared.

“There should be a small stream a few hundred meters further on Steele. I suggest we stop and fill what water bottles we have.” Bastien-Thiry looked quizzically again at Steele. “I know you from somewhere Steele. Did you ever serve in the region around Saigon?” Shaking his head, Steele lifted the binoculars to his eyes. “No Capitaine, I have always been around Hanoi and the northern parts of Indochina. I thought I saw movement down the road Capitaine.” Steele focused on a dust cloud in the distance. “Something is coming down the road at quite a speed Capitaine. Hang on a minute.” Slinging his rifle, Steele shimmied up a tree on the roadside. “Capitaine Bastien-Thiry set the men in an ambush position in the bush near the side of the road. “See anything Steele?” Bastien-Thiry called out to Steele. Squinting at the moving vehicle through the binoculars Steele replied. “It looks like a single truck, French army but I can’t be sure who is in it. Might be our boys, or it might be the Japs.”

“I will take out the driver when the truck gets into the kill zone Mon Capitaine. You boys take care of any passengers.” Steele shouted down to

Bastien-Thiry. The vehicle turned into the stretch of road in front of Steele. Taking careful aim, he waited for a clear shot at the driver. Tiny flies buzzed angrily around his face attracted by the sweat. Ignoring the unwelcome distraction, Steele took up the slack in the trigger. He felt his heart beating a little faster as it always did when he had someone in his sights. Only a few seconds to go and he would open fire.

He could now see the driver. Thinning blond hair close-cropped. Steele watched the driver's pudgy hands gripping the steering wheel tightly as he careened down the road which the monsoons had left in a terrible state. "Don't fire it's Koltz!" Wallace sprung to his feet waving wildly as the vehicle sped past. "The dirty bastard did not even slow down!" Jones screamed in frustration.

A few meters down the road the vehicle suddenly skidded to a halt amidst a shower of dust and sand. "Thank God the bloody idiot saw us. My feet were starting to ache." Wallace laughed. Relief washed over the weary men. For too long they had watched their backs expecting the Japanese to close in on their small unit at any moment. "At least we will arrive in Vietri in style hey Steele," Capulet said as he pushed the prisoner toward the open tailgate of the vehicle. Roughly kicking the prisoner in the butt, Capulet somehow got him onto the back of the truck.

"You are a sight for sore eyes, where did you get the truck?" Capitaine Bastien-Thiry eyed Koltz warily. Snapping to a semblance of attention Koltz simply shrugged. "Found it abandoned by the side of the road Capitaine. I was hoping to get back to Hanoi." He fumbled in his pocket then slipped a grey pill into his mouth. "Take it easy on the Philopon Koltz. How much of that stuff do you have?" Steele muttered shaking his head. "That was the last one. Do you have any?" There was a sense of urgency in Koltz's voice.

“Well, well what do we have here?” Eyeing Jasmin up and down Koltz stepped toward her “What is your name Mademoiselle?” His face was mere inches from hers. She backed away wrinkling her nose at the stench of his breath. “Leave her alone Koltz. She is with me.” Steele positioned himself between Jasmin and Koltz.

“Not very talkative is she?” Koltz spat. “She has not said a word since we pulled her from a burning building. It must be the shock.” Steele replied. He placed his hand on her shoulder guiding her toward the cabin of the truck. “That is what I call the perfect woman. Does not say a word but has a great ass and perky tits. What is she like in the sack Steele?” Koltz let out a dirty laugh looking at the others to see if they had been impressed by his words. He turned around a second before Steele’s fist slammed into his face. Dropping to the dirt Koltz curled into a ball waiting for Steele’s onslaught.

“That is enough of this nonsense Legionnaires. Keep your fighting for the Japs.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry growled taking command of the situation. “Steele and Jasmin will ride with me in the cabin. Steele, you will drive. The rest of you in the back, and keep your eyes open.”

Racing down the rough sand road, Steele drove as fast as the battered old truck would allow. “What happens when we get to Vietri, Mon Capitaine? Do we regroup and attack the Japs?” Steele turned to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. “To be honest, I doubt if there will be enough of our men to launch any type of attack. Perhaps we will hold them for a while, long enough for the Allied forces to liberate Indochina.” He leant wearily against the side of the door. “It has been a long war Steele, with little or no contact with our families in France.” He took a long sideways look at Steele. “You look a bit young to have served in the Great War Steele do you have an older brother?” Steele waited a moment before answering the Capitaine’s question. “Why do you ask Mon Capitaine?” Wondering where this was

going Steele pretended to concentrate on the road ahead. “There was a Legionnaire by the name of Steele who fought with us at Verdun. One hell of a fighter he was too. You look identical to him, same name. Hell, you even have the same scar down the side of your cheek!” Bastien-Thiry took a long hard look at Steele out of the corner of his eye.

“Strange things happen in war Capitaine. What was the battle cry you were screaming in the village?” Cursing Steele narrowly avoided a deep pothole in the road. “It was the battle cry of the Knights Templars Steele. But you would not know much about the Templars or their order. Am I right?” Steele merely shrugged then asked Jasmin how she was feeling.

They drove on in silence for the next few kilometres. Steele wondered just how much Bastien-Thiry knew about him. Staring out of the window Bastien-Thiry felt his heart racing. “Could this really be the immortal Knight Templar? He did recognise Steele from the battle of Verdun. He had not changed in the slightest. Possibly one or two more scars but the mannerisms, voice, all were as he remembered.

“Watch out Steele!” Jasmin screamed as they turned a sharp corner. Breaking sharply by instinct Steele slammed head-on into a motorbike with sidecar speeding toward them in the middle of the road, shuddering under the sudden impact the momentum of the truck carried them forward over the bike and sidecar crushing the occupants under the heavy wheels.

“Bloody hell, I didn’t see them coming around the corner!” Steele shouted bringing the truck to a halt. He jumped out of the cabin and ran to the twisted motorbike. His heart pounded, and he suppressed the urge to vomit thinking he had just crushed two of their own soldiers.

It was plain to see it was a French motorbike and sidecar. Both occupants lay twisted in the wreckage. A gut-wrenching scream of pain echoed down

the now silent jungle road. "Is anyone injured, are you all okay?" He turned to the Legionnaires in the back of the truck. "Yes, a little bruised and shaken but no serious injuries Sergeant," Wallace replied nursing a graze on his forehead.

Rushing over to the first casualty Steele looked down at the injured man. Relief washed over him as he stared at the khaki coloured uniform of the Jap. His features were contorted with pain. Blood pooled in the sand around him. Steele walked over to the overturned sidecar. The occupant had borne the brunt of the collision. He was dead, his body crushed by the truck's wheels.

A shot rang out. Spinning around Steele saw Capitaine Bastien-Thiry holstering his sidearm. "Bloody Japs think they own the road, could never stand their arrogant manner of driving." He signalled to Steele. "Get the men to move the wreckage off of the road. Five-minute smoke break." Steele nodded then walked over to the tailgate. "Clear the road then take a piss in the trees. I don't know when we will be able to stop next." They jumped down from the truck. "Don't you mean we don't know when you will run over more Japs Sarge?" Wallace quipped as he ran into the bushes. Laughing at the remark, the Legionnaires relieved themselves along the side of the road.

"What about me Steele. A girl needs a little more privacy." Blushing Steele buttoned up the front of his combat trousers. "Of course, you do Jasmine. I apologise for that. Perhaps I could escort you a little way into the bushes." He noticed a small stream running parallel with the road.

"Mon Capitaine there is a stream nearby. We should fill our water bottles. Those that are lucky enough to have them that is." Koltz shouted out. He rummaged through the dead Japs knapsacks strapped to the wreckage of the motorbike. "I knew these bastards would not be going thirsty." He held up a

metal water bottle with its cloth cover. He searched through their pockets taking cigarettes and slipping other objects discreetly into his pockets.

Inspecting the vehicle, Steele walked over to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. “The truck is a little dented in the front Mon Capitaine, but otherwise, it seems pretty good considering.” Nodding over to where Jasmin waited patiently at the side of the road Steele continued. “I will take her a little further into the bushes Mon Capitaine. The men can fill their water bottles while Koltz guards the prisoner. He has already taken one from the dead Japs.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry smiled in agreement then led the Legionnaires down to the stream. Koltz scowled at the prisoner who was still tied up with his hands behind his back, then at Steele for suggesting he stay with the prisoner.

Steele led Jasmin further into the bushes. She carried a small handbag slung over her shoulder. “I will be okay here on my own Steele. Please return to your friends. I need some privacy.” Jasmin smiled coyly rubbing her stomach. Steele knew that dysentery was rife in this climate. Jones swore Wallace could be heard farting a mile away when he had the shits. “All right, but keep your eyes open Jasmin. I will return in five minutes.” He walked back toward the road lighting a cigarette.

Catching sight of the Legionnaires washing their faces in the stream Steele sat down waiting until he would go back and fetch Jasmin. Two shots shattered the silence. Dropping his cigarette, Steele called over to the Legionnaires for support. Rushing headlong through the bush Steele called out for Jasmin. “Shots fired in the area where I left Jasmin Mon Capitaine.” He shouted over his shoulder.

Pushing through the dense bush Steele reached the spot where Jasmin was supposed to be. She was nowhere to be seen. Forming a skirmish line, Steele led the Legionnaires on a sweep through the immediate area. “Help

me, Steele, there were Japanese soldiers over there!” She pointed to the far side of the rock pool. “Get back to the truck Jasmin. We can’t have you hindering our movements.” Pointing in the direction of the vehicle Capitaine Bastien-Thiry gave Jasmin a gentle push. “Spread out and keep your eyes open men. It’s not like the Japs to fire two shots then run away.” They had circled the area expecting to make contact with the enemy at any second. Steele felt the adrenaline rushing through his body. He treaded softly looking through and not at the bushes to his front searching for the hidden enemy. Every nerve end tingled with anticipation. Breathing short and sharp he listened for the slightest sound which would indicate the presence of the enemy. Reaching their starting point Capitaine Bastien-Thiry signalled a halt.

“There is nothing at all here Mon Capitaine. Let’s cut our losses and get the hell out of here.” Steele muttered. They headed toward the truck. “I can see Koltz. The stupid bastard is asleep. I am going to kick his butt so hard.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry snarled. Breaking the cover of the tree line the Legionnaires approached the truck. Capulet sauntered over to where Koltz slumped with his back against a tree. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry had a shocked expression on his face as he watched Legionnaire Capulet kick Sergeant Koltz on the shoulder. Koltz tumbled sideways revealing a large gaping wound across his throat. “Jesus Christ, the poor bastard! I hope for his sake they did that to him after he died.” Wallace managed to blurt out before spewing into the bushes. Standing around Koltz’s blood-soaked body, the Legionnaires looked on in horror. His throat had been slit from ear to ear. His penis cut off then stuffed into his mouth. “The fucking Japs are animals. I will kill the bastard!” Jones screamed in anger bounding over to where the prisoner had been left on the wooden floorboards of the truck. “Where the hell is the filthy bastard? He is not here.” Steele’s eyes focused

on a small handbag in the dust. Slowly he picked it up. His mind reeled at the thought of Jasmin being taken alive by the Jap prisoner. "The Jap must have seen his chance to escape when Koltz fell asleep. He somehow cut the cords around his hands and freed himself." Capitaine Bastien-Thiry pointed to the pieces of rope on the back of the truck.

"Koltz has a tube of Philopon in his fist. It does not make sense." Steele shook his head. "And why would that be Sergeant?" Bastien-Thiry pried the drugs from Klotz's cold dead fingers. "Well, Mon Capitaine, Philopon is a methamphetamine tablet used by the Japs to keep their troops marching and fighting far beyond the limits of normal endurance. Koltz would have been so wound up he would not have slept for days." Looking into Jasmin's handbag, Steele found only an assortment of lipsticks and mascara. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry made a hard decision. "We can't endanger the lives of the men in a wild goose chase for a single civilian, Sergeant. Tell the men to mount up. We are leaving now."

For a second Steele hesitated. The Legionnaires were all looking at him for an order. He had confidence in the knowledge that they would follow his lead if he decided to search further for Jasmin. "By the way Steele, I found this at the rock pool. This type of ammunition is hardly a standard issue for the Japanese army." Steele looked at the small calibre 22 casing in the palm of Capitaine Bastien-Thiry's hand. "I find it incredibly hard to believe she had anything to do with this Mon Capitaine. If she did, on the other hand, we have a problem. She knows where we are heading." Grabbing a stained and tattered tarp from the back of the truck Steele draped it over Klotz's mutilated body. Put the body in the back of the truck, men. Take what we can use from the dead Japs and the motorbike, weapons and ammo. And any food they might have. We leave in two minutes." Steele felt exhausted. Wallace and Jones searched through the wreckage finding a leather map

case. Inside were handwritten notes in Japanese which they handed to Steele. “They must have been dispatch riders delivering a message. Can’t understand what it says but the map needs no translation.” Jabbing his finger at the town of Vietri on the map Steele spoke softly to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. “Our forces are indicated by this blue circle around the town.” He then pointed to three bright red arrows converging on the French position from the north, east, and south. “Looks like our boys in Vietri will need a hand Mon Capitaine.” Gunning the engine Steele pressed down hard on the accelerator.

Chapter 9

“If we carry on like this we should reach Vietri in about an hour Mon Capitaine. Do you think anyone will be there?” Lighting a cigarette while steering with his knees, Steele waited for Capitaine Bastien-Thiry to reply. “As far as I know General Alessandri and some Officers were plotting to resist the Japanese until the Allies landed in Indochina. He began military exercises under the guise of annual military readiness with the consent of the Japanese High Command.” Bastien-Thiry reached for Steele’s cigarette. He took a few puffs. “Holy shit, this is a great time to start smoking.” He glanced at Steele’s again. “Here you go Mon Capitaine, a box of Golden Bat cigarettes.” Steele reached into his backpack which he had placed on the floorboard between them. He rummaged around until he found a small parcel wrapped in canvas cloth. “These are the contents of the Jap ration pack I found earlier.”

Searching through the contents in his lap Bastien-Thiry took note of what the Japanese rations were like in comparison to their own. For the last few years, the French Forces had survived on what was at hand. They used what tin foods they had at their disposal for emergencies but raided nearby villages for fresh rations. After all, which soldier would not enjoy a chicken

or even a goat, “sentenced to death for aiding the enemy” after weeks on dry rations.

“Bloody bastards just have a look at what they get in their ration pack!” Sorting through the ration pack, Bastien-Thiry placed the contents on the dashboard cracked by the scorching sun over the years. “Peanut and sesame bars, a tin of Meiji fruit flavoured candy, Green Tea, a tin of Tuna and a box of boiled rice. “All you do is mix an equal part of water to the content of the box of rice, and off you go.” Steele laughed. “Somewhere in there is a box of cigarettes Mon Capitaine.” Bastien-Thiry waved a pack of cigarettes in the air. “Bastards even have waterproof matches.” Steele laughed. “Yes, and as usual they also have dog biscuits. Called concrete slabs by the Germans and bloody hard in whatever army uses them in their ration packs!”

Steele expected to run into a Japanese column at any moment. His muscles were taught gripping the steering wheel. He searched ahead at every turn in the jungle-covered sides of the roads for a sign of an ambush. Reaching the town of Vietri, Steele slowed down searching for a sign of the French military. “They have all gone, all gone!” an Indochinese villager shouted at the truck. He waved his hand, clicking his fingers in the direction of the West.

“Up ahead there Steele, I see the bridge. Twilight spread rapidly over the banks of the Red River. Steele slowed to a crawl searching for any sign of friendlies. Indochinese street vendors peddled their wares to the passing truck. “They seem very non-committal Mon Capitaine. I suppose if it were me, I would not be eager to choose between two opposing armies occupying us.”

“Look over there, Mon Capitaine, near the road leading to the bridge.” Steele pointed to a group of men piling sandbags around a machine gun emplacement. “Those are our boys Steele. Don’t want any trigger-happy

sod opening up on us by mistake.” Bastien-Thiry shouted back as he opened the door and stood waving on the running board. The machine gunner swivelled his weapon toward the oncoming truck. In the buildings running parallel with the road, Steele noticed Legionnaires in the windows and doorways aiming their weapons at the vehicle, driving slowly Steele brought the truck to a halt in front of the machine gun emplacement.

“Good to see you, boys. We could do with a little extra help here.” Smiling wearily a Legion Pioneer took a break from preparing explosives and wiring them to the bridge supports. “We are under orders to hold the Japs back for as long as possible. The last man standing will blow the bridge.” Steele glanced over at Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. “They sound a little fatalistic Mon Capitaine,” Steele grinned.

“The Legion does not retreat Sergeant. We die where we fight, to the bitter end like at Camerone.” The Pioneer sneered at Steele. “A fighting withdrawal is better than a suicide mission, that way we kill more Japs,” Steele replied taking stock of the situation. He called the noncommissioned officer in charge of the defences over to the truck. “We have twelve men in total, one machine gun with limited ammo and a few grenades. The men are all armed with old Lebel rifles. There are also two airmen who arrived a few minutes ago. They insist on going back to the airfield to destroy their plane. It is not in any condition to fly, but they don’t want to leave it to the Japs. By the way, I am Adjutant Schmidt.” He shook hands with Steele then nodded at Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. He called the airmen over to the truck.

“Do you think we can trust Adjutant Schmidt, Steele?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry spoke softly to Steele. “He is a German, and as you know, they were not too reliable from the start of the war. Remember there were around two thousand German Legionnaires who insisted on being repatriated back to

Germany when war was declared. The Japanese never let them go back home, though.” For a moment Steele watched the Adjutant checking the wiring on the explosives. “I will trust him Mon Capitaine. The Japs are not asking anyone what nationality they are before shooting them. He is first and foremost a Legionnaire. Listen to the accents of the Legionnaires here. Many of them have German accents.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry nodded. “Very well Steele, I will take charge of the defence of the bridge. You see what those airmen want. Give them a rifle and let them dig in with the rest.” Steele discussed the futility of returning to the airfield with the two pilots. They described the aircraft and various other items they did not wish the Japanese to get their hands on. “Mon Capitaine, with your permission I will take Wallace and Jones and the two pilots back to the airstrip. We will not be too long. I have an idea that will help us defend the bridge a little longer.” Steele attempted to persuade the Capitaine to let him take the truck to the airstrip. “Very well Steele, don’t be long. Here come a few more stragglers. The Japs won’t be far behind.” They watched the trickle of French soldiers passing over the bridge. Wounded and sick were allowed across while those fit for duty dug in beside their comrades waiting for the Japanese onslaught. “The airstrip is around one kilometre from here Mon Capitaine.” Steele pointed in the direction they had come. “Okay, Sergeant but you do understand that if you are not back in time, we will blow the bridge. You will have to find another way across the river.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry waved Steele through the improvised roadblock.

The airstrip was deserted except for a few local Indochinese villagers who looted the mess tent. They ran into the bush when the truck appeared pots and pans clanking all the way. One pilot set about pouring fuel over the aircraft while Steele followed the other into the armaments hanger. Steele let out a low whistle when he stepped inside the hanger.

Capitaine Bastien-Thiry paced anxiously behind the machine gun emplacement. It had been almost an hour since Steele had left. Heavy fighting was taking place near the area where Steele had driven off to with the pilots. Almost as soon as the firing started it suddenly ceased. The Legionnaires gripped their weapons tightly knowing that the Japanese would soon be attacking their position.

“Alert, Japanese vehicles are coming down the road!” The warning cry came from one of the sentries Capitaine Bastien-Thiry had posted at the end of the small cluster of houses around the bridge. Far off a column of trucks advanced inexorably toward their position. There were at least ten trucks loaded to capacity with Japanese infantry. A shot rang out from the French position. The lead vehicle swerved and came to an abrupt halt. “Hold your fire until they get closer!” Bastien-Thiry shouted although he noticed with satisfaction the body of the driver being unceremoniously pushed from the cabin before another took his place.

“Stand by men they are forming up for the attack!” Watching the Japanese trucks drive off of the road and onto the grass verge Bastien-Thiry checked his weapon. Harangued by their officers and non-coms the infantry began lining up in the road. “There must be at least two hundred of the bastards Mon Capitaine.” Adjudant Schmidt was surprised at how calm he felt. He had fortified the position as best he could under the circumstances. The cluster of buildings had been turned into mini-fortresses, and the Japs would have to cross an open field of at least one hundred meters with no cover before reaching the first houses. He then turned to the Legionnaires in his immediate area. Most were exhausted from their ordeal which led them here. Each man had three magazines for their rifle and the machine gun only four hundred rounds. “The Japs could overrun us by numbers alone.” He thought.

Steele drove to the sound of the guns. It had been a short, violent exchange of fire. He hoped to reinforce the men desperately trying to reach the far bank of the river running close to Vietri. "There is nothing we can do for the poor bastards Sergeant," Wallace spoke softly to Steele as they surveyed the carnage. A mixed group of French troops and Legionnaires lay dead on the roadside. Their bodies twisted in the agony of their final death spasms. "They have all been gunned down and finished off with the bayonet. They must have been caught in an ambush." Steele whispered while checking the bodies. "Hey Sarge, I have a live one here!" Wallace called out to Steele.

"What happened here, Legionnaire?" Wallace asked as he gently cradled the wounded man's head. He waited for the wounded man to sip a little water from the canteen Jones held to his lips. "We were setting an ambush for a truck we heard coming down the road." He coughed, blood trickled down his chin. "We hid in the bushes ready to open fire. We never expected to see a pretty young blond girl driving the truck." He grimaced in pain. "She had three small European children in the open cabin with her." Steele felt his heart beating faster. "Naturally, we stepped out from our ambush positions to warn her of the dangers ahead."

He coughed again. Blood seeped from a bayonet wound in his chest. "There was a tarp covering the back of the truck. The tarpaulin suddenly came off, and we were staring down the barrels of a dozen Japs in the back." He convulsed spitting more blood. "They opened fire at point-blank range. I will never forget their evil smiles." There was nothing they could do for the wounded man. He convulsed one last time. Jones closed the dead man's eyes. "Lay the bodies out on the side of the road. Collect up weapons, ammunition and food." Steele's mind raced. The wounded man confirmed his worst fears. Jasmin was indeed helping the Japanese the big question was what leverage did they have over her?

Capitaine Bastien-Thiry took one last look at the Legionnaires preparing to meet their fate. He aimed at the Japanese commanding officer. The long line of advancing Japanese infantry stretched across the open field as they took the first few steps toward the French position. Adjutant Schmidt checked the plunger beside him making sure he could reach it and blow the bridge when they were about to be overrun. "Adjutant Schmidt, what the hell are you doing this side of the bridge with the plunger? Surely you should be on the other side waiting until the last of our men crossed the bridge before blowing it?" Capitaine-Bastien-Thiry waited for a reply. He watched Adjutant Schmidt grimace in pain. "Take a look Mon Capitaine. Perhaps you will now understand." For a moment Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stared at the Adjutant. "Very well, carry on Adjutant Schmidt. And God be with you."

The advancing Japanese broke into a slow trot. They could see their prize stretching across the Red River. They would sweep aside the handful of French troops with ease and capture the vital bridge for Japan and the Emperor.

Careering around the corner Steele and his men drove at breakneck speed down the road as they approached the Japanese infantry out in the open. While they were in the hangar, the pilot had shown them two crates, inside were twin machine guns which were usually mounted on their aircraft. Working furiously they installed two sets of twin machine guns on the truck. Now it was time for payback. Steele manned one of the guns while Wallace stood ready at the second twin machine gun. Jones drove like a bat out of hell along the road beside the Japanese trucks.

"Open fire!" Steele screamed above the roar of the engine. Dust kicked at the heels of the lead elements of the Japanese troops. Steele adjusted his fire accordingly and watched in satisfaction as tracer rounds chewed up the

Japanese advancing through the open field. They cut the Japs down before they even knew what hit them. Brass cartridge cases bounced off of the floor of the truck. Cordite filled the air. Exhilaration and adrenaline pumped through their bodies. Steele swivelled the weapon toward the trucks parked neatly in a line. He squeezed the triggers guiding the tracers into the vehicles shattering windscreens and igniting petrol tanks. "Halt the truck Jones!" they skidded to a halt. Reloading Steele and Wallace meticulously raked the surviving Japanese troops with hot lead. Supported by fire from the French positions Steele took his time aiming at the Japanese vehicles making sure that they were all disabled. Wallace took care of the infantry by emptying his last belt of ammo at the survivors staring down the barrels like deer caught in the headlights of a car.

"Well done men, let's finish off the bastards and take what we can from them," Steele shouted as he slammed on the roof of the cabin for Jones to stop the truck. "Bloody hell it's becoming an obsession looting the Jap's possessions. But if we don't, there is no way we are going to get a resupply from our own side. I feel like a damn pirate!" He was about to dismount when a shell streaked past obliterating the first house near the bridge. "Tank alert, to the right Sergeant, three Jap tanks!" Jones shoved the gears into first. "Get the hell out of here Jones!" Steele fired on the lead tank knowing it would merely distract them for a short time. There was no chance the bullets would penetrate their armour.

Screaming past the truck the tank shell exploded in the trees beside the road. Steele felt the concussion of the blast. Shrapnel whizzed through the air. Steele cursed hanging on tightly to the machine gun mounting as Jones drove at full speed over a ploughed field. Two more shells exploded nearby peppering the side of the truck with deadly metal slivers. One of the pilots dropped to the floorboards clutching a gaping wound in his chest.

Jones drove into the thick plume of dark smoke billowing out from the house which had been hit by the first tank shell. Under cover of the smokescreen, he managed to bring the truck to a sharp halt behind a house. Bruised and shaken the Legionnaires dismounted taking up a position in the house overlooking the field. Bodies lay strewn across the open ground. A fire broke out amongst the bullet-riddled trucks parked beside the road. Small arms ammunition began exploding with the heat of the fire. Petrol tanks erupted in a shower of deadly flame.

“Take him to the rear, try and get the pilots across the bridge!” Steele shouted at Jones who struggled to haul the wounded pilot off of the truck. “It is of no use. He is dead.” It was the second pilot who spoke softly to Jones. With a pained expression, he helped Jones pull the body off of the truck and laid the dead man on a narrow wooden bench in the garden of the house.

“Here come the tanks! Let them roll past then attack them from behind.” Steele screamed taking cover in a ditch. Advancing halfway across the open field the tanks slowed down then came to a halt. From a distance, they began shelling the houses one by one. The commander of the lead tank must have been a veteran with experience. He knew not to get too close to soldiers in a built-up area without any support troops around the tanks.

One by one the wooden houses splintered into matchsticks as the tank shells exploded directly on target. Flames spread from house to house causing the survivors to withdraw almost to the bridge itself. “There are vehicles coming down the road Sergeant!” Pointing at the still burning Japanese trucks, Wallace loaded the last two hundred round belt of ammunition into one of the twin machine guns. “This is the last of the ammunition Sergeant. I will throw the breach blocks into the river at the last possible moment when I run out of bullets.”

“Here they come men, avenge our dead friends!” Steele shouted above the noise of battle. Taking a heavy toll on the advancing Japanese infantry, the Legionnaires held their positions for a short time. “Here come the tanks Sergeant!” Wallace pointed at two tanks pushing through the rubble. Their engines roared, billowing smoke the Japanese tanks followed by small groups of infantry running behind came to a halt as they reached the ruins of the first houses. Firing their machine guns and cannons the two tanks laid down support fire for the infantry. Right angles to their attack the third tank came in for a flanking manoeuvre attempting to break through the French positions from the side.

“Start pulling out men, Wallace and Jones get the truck across the bridge now!” Fumbling in his pocket for matches Steele waited for Jones to start the truck. “Bloody hell Sarge the engine’s had it!” He pulled Wallace from the truck seconds before a shell slammed into the house beside them. Shrapnel riddled the cabin shattering the windscreen and setting the tarpaulin alight. “Get to the other side and cover the others when they cross over. Jones and Wallace is that understood?” He heard a brief reply from Wallace then ran over to where he had last seen Capulet. The shallow foxhole was empty. Cartridge cases litter the bottom. An empty rifle laid beside the hole its stock was broken. A shell exploded showering Steele with debris. His head spun, struggling for air he dropped to the ground. Through the fog which clouded his mind, an engine roared ever closer. The terrifying sound of tank tracks clanked down the rubble-strewn cobble street straight toward him.

Groggy and only half-conscious Steele watched the tank drawing ever nearer. He lay dead still watching the tank treads almost touch his boots. Rolling to his left as fast as he could Steele felt his stomach churn. The tank passed over him with only inches to spare between the steel hull of the

metal beast and his face. The shadow cast by the tank passed, for a second he looked up at the concrete grey sky. Three figures suddenly appeared standing menacingly over him. Three Jap soldiers smiled down at their victim. Bayonets levelled they stepped toward the Legionnaire lying flat on his back in the street.

Bullets cracked through the air. A fine crimson mist hung for a millisecond in the air. Dead and dying Japs fell on top of Steele. Reaching for his combat knife, Steele plunged the blade deeply into the nearest dying Jap. Two more shots rang out. The bodies shuddered then slumped forward. Extricating himself from the tangle of dead bodies Steele glanced over to where the shots had come from. Capulet grinned broadly giving Steele the thumbs up sign.

Adrenaline shot through Steele's body replacing the shock he had felt seconds before. He sprang to his feet chasing after the tank. With their infantry protection dead, the Jap tank men were vulnerable to close quarter infantry assaults in the streets.

Reaching into his small knapsack, Steele expected his hand to be lacerated by broken glass. He gripped the petrol filled bottle a rag stuffed in the neck. Wondering how it had not shattered, he slipped his hand in his pocket searching for matches.

The metal beast rolled and bucked crushing a narrow stone wall. Steele leapt onto the back engine cover then crouched against the turret. Shielding the match against the light breeze blowing across the river, Steele smiled in satisfaction when the petrol-soaked rag ignited. "God damn it!" he swore. The turret hatch on the Japanese Type 95 Ha-Go light tank was tightly closed from the inside. The 37mm main gun fired, Steele fell against the turret, his rifle barrel clanged loudly against the metal. Inches from Steele's head the tank commander fired the rear 7.7mm machine gun at the madman

climbing on his tank. The turret rotated following Steele as he tried desperately to stay out of the line of fire.

The driver jammed on the brakes. Steele tumbled forward sliding over the front of the tank. Momentarily his eyes locked with those of the tank driver. His eyes widened at the sight of the Legionnaire sliding past his open driving slit. Flinging the Molotov cocktail through the narrow slit, Steele prayed the petrol bomb would do its job. He received his answer seconds later in the form of terrifying screams.

Dark smoke seeped from the turret hatch and streamed from the driver's slit. The odour of burning flesh wafted from the confines of the tank. Bounding off of the disabled tank Steele sprinted to where he had last seen Capulet. Grinning from ear to ear Capulet waved Steele over to where he lay facing the enemy. "That was pretty well-done Sergeant, only two more to go." He laughed. "Thanks, Capulet, you did all right yourself then. Let's get the hell out of here. They are ready to blow the bridge." Tapping Capulet on the shoulder, Steele got ready to withdraw.

"Before we, go take a look at who I bumped into earlier Sergeant. It's our old friend from Lang Son." Leading Steele into a bullet-riddled house Capulet pushed open the door leading to a narrow room. Staring at the scene before him Steele wondered if Capulet had been driven mad by the recent events. "Got him real good didn't I Sarge? He screamed like a little girl, not so brave when they are on the receiving end these Jap bastards are they?" Beaming with pride, Capulet pulled blood-stained gold teeth from his pocket.

Bound hand and foot to a crude wooden table the Japanese prisoner who had escaped previously when Jasmin vanished and Koltz was murdered lay dead. "What the hell did you do Capulet?" Steele shook his head. Smiling smugly Capulet looked at the body. "They say an eye for an eye Sergeant.

Or in this case, it's a dick for a dick" He laughed. "I vowed vengeance, and I delivered on my word. A vendetta is a vendetta, Sarge."

"I would say your vendetta was successful Capulet but did he say anything before he died?" Shrugging his shoulders Capulet spat at the body. "He mumbled a little, screamed a lot then died, that's all." Steele began to feel frustrated. "What I meant was did he say anything about how he escaped or what Jasmin had to do with. Did he kill and mutilate Koltz?" Looking bewildered Capulet shook his head. "I was too busy to ask. And in any case, he did not speak French." He turned to Steele. "Are we going to cry over this bastard? I don't give a damn what anyone thinks." Steele grabbed Capulet's arm. "Get back to the bridge, they are about to blow it up, and I don't feel like being used as target practice by the Japs if we have to swim across."

"We are the last survivors Mon Capitaine the others are dead or have already made it across the bridge." Dropping down beside Capitaine Bastien-Thiry, Steele shouted above the clamour of tank shells coupled with the small arms fire directed at the bridgehead. Pausing for a moment, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry tapped Steele on the back. "Get going Sergeant. Take Capulet with you as well. I will hold the Japs long enough for you to make it across." Flying masonry and shrapnel screamed through the air as the last house took a direct hit from a tank shell. "No Mon Capitaine, I will stay and cover you. Get across now along with the Adjutant." For a moment Bastien-Thiry bristled at Steele's insubordination. Something in Steele's cold blue eyes made him change his mind. "Alright Sergeant but the Adjutant has chosen to stay behind. Take my advice and follow us now. I will need your help in keeping the others alive on the other side." He pushed Capulet toward the metal bridge spanning the Red River. "Let's go,

Sergeant, the Japs will overrun the position in a matter of minutes. We have no time to lose.”

Sprinting from cover to cover they reached the bridge. Steele fired at the first group of Japanese infantry climbing over the rubble. Two dropped to the ground mortally wounded while the others scurried forward firing as they advanced. Fire from the far bank cut into the enemy troops. “This is our last chance. Run like hell!” Steele screamed pulling Capulet by the arm. “Let me help you, Sergeant. His wounds slow him down.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry gripped Capulet by the other arm. Together they ran over the metal bridge, rounds pinged off of the metal beams or spent their force in the murky river below.

“Move your butts the Japs are swarming over the bridgehead!” Wallace screamed firing off the last three rounds in the Japanese Arisaka rifle he had taken off a dead body earlier. Panting for breath Steele suddenly felt as if he had been kicked in the shoulder by a mule. He stumbled forward almost dragging Capulet down with him. He let go of Capulet’s arm. Crashing heavily onto the metal railing spanning the bridge he lay wondering what hit him. “Carry on Capulet. I will get Steele!” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry reached down gripping Steele under the arms. “Leave me Mon Capitaine. I will be fine in a few minutes.” Steele looked down at the blood stain seeping down his combat jacket. “You are most definitely not fine Steele. You have a bloody great hole in your shoulder.” Struggling across the bridge, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry heard running feet behind him. “Take his legs Wallace I’ll help the Capitaine this side!” Reaching out for Steele’s arm Jones waited for Wallace to get a grip on Steele’s legs. Together under a hail of enemy bullets, they struggled the last few meters to the relative safety of the temporary defensive position thrown up hastily before the battle.

Attracted by the firefight solitary French soldiers and Legionnaires took up position alongside the riverbank. Firing with great effect on the Japanese troops they slowed the advance considerably.

“Lay down Steele. I think the wound is pretty serious.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry lowered Steele into a vacant sandbagged trench. “I’ll be alright in a few moments Mon Capitaine, have they blown the bridge yet?” He asked clutching the wound which had already started healing. “Not yet Steele, bloody hell the two remaining tanks are starting to cross along with their damn infantry.” Steele pulled himself into a position where he could see the bridge. Japanese troops swarmed over the bridge supported by the two light tanks.

“I thought the Adjutant was going to blow the bridge. It seems he had a change of mind!” Dodging the sporadic enemy fire, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry sprinted toward the bridge somehow thinking he could break through the enemy lines and detonate the explosives wired to the bridge. Dropping behind cover, he waited while the lead enemy tank sprayed the bridgehead with machine gun fire.

The lead tank was about to cross the far end of the bridge when there was a tremendous explosion. Suspended in midair the bridge hung for a moment clouded by smoke then crashed into the fast-flowing waters below. Both Japanese tanks and a few dozen infantry disappeared below the murky waters. “What a way to go. The Adjutant was severely wounded in the legs and knew he could not make it if we had to march further. He chose to sacrifice himself in the hope we would make it a little further and carry on the fight.” Steele said as he saluted Adjutant Schmidt. Having laid an extra charge at his feet, Adjutant Schmidt ensured he would never be taken alive by the Japanese when he blew the bridge.

From the far side of the bridge, Jean and members of the Brotherhood watched the last of the Legionnaires warily leave their positions and head toward the town of Vietri. The Japanese military intelligence had recently discovered that the General Alessandri and the commanding officers of the Legion had planned an armed resistance against the Japanese. Their spies confirmed the Legions breakout through the encircling Japanese forces and their progression toward the North. Jean began smashing his fist against the dashboard of the motor car which had previously belonged to the governor of Lang Son province. Jean ordered his chauffeur to drive back to Hanoi.

CHAPTER 10

Far from the brutal killing fields of the Pacific war, Jean landed his newly acquired seaplane on the sparkling waters surrounding a secluded island. Palm trees swayed gently in the warm tropical breeze. Perched high on a clifftop an old French citadel rose majestically above the tree-lined cove. He marvelled at the technical advances made over the last few centuries.

Safe in the knowledge those high ranking military members of the Brotherhood on both sides would keep his island off limits to their respective forces Jean taxied to a wooden pier. Two figures clad in dark monk-like robes opened the aircraft door. Respectfully the two figures bowed low as Jean strode hurriedly past. Pushing past four well-built young men Jean sat down in his Sedan chair and closed the curtains. Instantly the four men grasped the wooden carrying handles that passed through brackets on the side of the enclosed chair. With one swift, practiced movement the porters lifted the carrying handles to their shoulders. Sitting comfortably in the gilded litter Jean poured a glass of Vintage Cognac.

Having finished his third glass of Cognac, Jean felt the porters slow down then stop. Gently they lowered the Sedan chair to the cobblestone piazza of

the Citadel. He waited until a servant opened the curtains before striding out into the courtyard. Hanging flowers and tropical fruits grew from the century-old gardens within the fortress walls. Crystal clear waters trickled gently into the Koi pond teeming with the red and white coloured fish. In stark contrast to the hot tropical sun burning above the interior of the Citadel was a place of serene tranquillity.

Jean had chosen this particular island carefully. Colonised by French troops and run by Jesuit priests for nearly one hundred years the defences were stout and the local population subservient. He kept the Islanders ignorant of events in the outside world. All radios were contraband, but through necessity, a trusted few sailed to the mainland from time to time for provisions. Jean enjoyed the power and adoration that went with being a god-king. Peasants lived in their palm frond huts while he and a few devout followers lived a life of luxury in the Citadel.

Ignoring the servants eager to assist their lord in any way Jean walked briskly down a torch-lit corridor. The flickering torches spread an eerie glow along the dark stone walls. Two heavy wooden doors creaked open. Dismissing the servants Jean struggled to close the massive doors. Ornate lamps strung from the walls and ceiling illuminated the spacious room. Dark stained furniture carved by hand, original paintings by European masters and a well-stocked drinks cabinet reflected the opulence to which Jean had grown accustomed ++to.

They would be arriving soon, his loyal brotherhood members. Casting a critical eye over the antechamber, he paused before opening a smaller door at the far side of the room. Incense wafted forth while candles flickered mounted along the narrow tunnel in silver candleholders.

Descending into the depths of the Citadel Jean checked the vast subterranean hall. All seemed ready for the yearly ritual. Tugging on the

silver-plated chains which would bind the sacrificial victim he nodded pleased with the servant's handiwork. There would be enough time for a hot bath and some sensual pleasures. Moving through the courtyard, he barked instructions at the head servant. Minutes later Jean soaked in a mosaic bordered replica of a Roman bath accompanied by a young island girl.

Twilight cast long shadows on the island. Below the ramparts Jean watched the Brotherhood elite disembarking from a two C-Class Empire flying boats. These luxurious machines had a crew of five and could take up to fifteen passengers. Even during these dark days of war and destruction, the Brotherhood elite suffered no lack of comfort. Meeting up in neutral countries the thirty Brotherhood elite comprised of influential entrepreneurs, high-ranking religious and military people and a few members of royal families set off for the annual Brotherhood meeting.

Filled with a mixture of trepidation and intense excitement the members climbed the long stone pathway to the Citadel. Jean let them walk as a way of reminding them that he was in charge. First, they would rest then later that evening the ceremony would begin.

Deep in the bowels of the Citadel thirty black-robed figures shuffled in a solemn procession through the narrow torch-lit corridor. Arriving in the throne room, they stood at their respective places around a huge semicircular table waiting for the order to be seated. Through the smoke-filled air, Jean entered the room from a separate doorway. An air of anticipation permeated the chamber. Set on a marble dais Jean's ornate throne allowed him to look down on the Brotherhood members. Ceremoniously he paused then seated himself on the throne while the Brotherhood members bowed their heads. He nodded and with a dandy wave of one delicately manicured hand bade the members to be seated.

“I must commend you all on being present at this year’s meeting in spite of all the difficulties you must have faced at this apocalyptic time in history. Then again you are all aware of the consequences of being absent.” The members nodded in agreement. “Let me refresh your memories of the glorious past of our noble order.” They had all heard the story many times before but for their own safety feigned absolute awe at each word Jean uttered.

“Let me begin at the beginning!” He smiled at his feeble play on words. During the Crusades, I embarked on a holy mission. I followed the soldiers and knights attending to their spiritual needs. It was there in the Holy Land, in the scorching desert that I met our sworn enemy, Steele the immortal Templar Knight. After a long search, my loyal followers and I discovered a cave deep in the desert. We discovered the Ark of the Covenant, and as we were performing a ritual, Steele attacked. He slammed his fist down on the armrest. His beady eyes burned with hate and fanaticism. “You should have seen the light emanating from the Ark my brethren. Such power, it was such an opportunity to change the world.” He shook his head. Raising himself up from his throne Jean paced up and down the dais.

“One of our dear brothers touched the ark by mistake with his bare hand. His body ignited spontaneously. It was at that moment when the power of the ark was almost at its zenith that I heard the cursed Templar battle cry. Above the waves of intense sound generated by the ark the battle cry “Beau Saint” shattered the concentration of our brethren. It was the cursed Templar Knight Steele followed closely by dozens of his comrades. Jean neglected to mention in reality it was only Steele and his friend John.

“We fought like demons but were eventually overwhelmed.” He also neglected to mention the two Templars had annihilated his followers and

Jean's hired killer cowardly stabbed John in the back. Steele avenged his dead comrade by brutally ending the life of Jean's hired killer.

As Steele was about to send Jean to meet his snivelling ancestors the ark's power grew in intensity. Incandescent lights whirled around the cavern as the high pitched noise grew in intensity. A blinding flash of light coupled with the sound of thunder knocked Steele backwards. Both lost consciousness.

"I had studied all the old scriptures and occult writings. It was immortality I sought, and by the grace of my knowledge and wisdom, I achieved it. Unfortunately, Steele was caught in the radius of, and undeservingly the stupid bastard was granted the gift of immortality too." Jean shuddered thinking about how different things would have been had Steele showed up only a short while later instead. He would have been the sole recipient of the gift of immortality, and the world would have been his. Instead, it had been a long drawn out battle over the centuries between his vision of an ideal world and Steele's outdated notions of honour, protecting the weak and chivalry.

"I attempted to retrieve the ark after the Templars stole it from me. I searched the world coming close to finding it some times. Yes, I have picked up trinkets on the way like the Spear of Destiny. I looked upon the Holy Grail with my own eyes. I pillaged the Inca pyramids as well as the pyramids of the Pharos's in my search for power." He paused theatrically. "Yet the one relic I desire the most remains hidden, and only Steele knows where."

"I offer an earthly life beyond your wildest dreams." He pointed at the seated figures listening intently, hanging on to his every word. Together we search for the Ark. Find it, and you shall all be immortal." Nodding eagerly the Brotherhood members were becoming more enthralled by the minute.

“Speaking of the Spear of Destiny it is safe in my private villa in the Vatican. I could not trust that blundering idiot with the genuine article, so I made sure Adolf had a convincing replica displayed in Nuremberg during the war. That brings me to another point. Herr Doctor where are Hitler and his top henchmen at the moment?” Standing bolt upright a member clicked his heels. “Hitler and his wife are on their way to South America along with a select cadre of military and financial geniuses. They are in one or more of our latest design of U-Boat, the XXII Sire.” His accent was distinctly German.

“Heading for the base in the Antarctic are they?” Jean dismissed the German member with a wave of his hand before he could answer. “Old Adolf made a complete and utter mess of things. I financed his rise to power, cleared the way politically one way or another to ensure he would rule Germany with an iron fist. Bloody hell, I even helped him with more than a few chapters of his book, Mein Kampf.”

“Our primary aim is to find the Ark of the Covenant.” Slamming his fist on the throne once more Jean paused for effect. “I have given you all the worldly riches and power you desired and much more. Find the Ark and immortality will be your reward!” An enthusiastic cheer erupted from the members. “We keep the world in a constant state of war and terror. You reap the technological and financial rewards!” The industrial entrepreneurs nodded their approval. Once civil unrest, unemployment and terror grip the population of any given country we offer a solution to the sheep of the world. They are only too willing to surrender their freedom for an oppressive regime if they feel that they are being protected. By the time they realise that they are being enslaved it is too late. We already have the laws in place allowing us to ship dissidents off to the camps or gulags. Our armies are ready to fight and die for the idea we put forth at the time. We

have absolute power over the world's population. Empires are created and destroyed by our decisions alone." Enthusiastic applause erupted.

"And now for the moment, you have all been waiting for!" Clapping his hands in excitement, Jean waved toward a side door. All eyes fell on a slim blonde woman pacing into the chamber. She stood self-consciously aware that all eyes were on her. Her black robe was not the same as the members. She wore a thin silk robe which clung to her body and accentuated her feminine charms. "Be seated, my love. You have earned the privilege of our magnificent company. Gentlemen, this young lady, got closer to Steele than we hoped. Thanks to her we know where he and the damned Legion are heading. I have passed the information on to the Japanese Secret Police." He pointed to a Brotherhood member. Nodding his thanks, the Japanese member mentally undressed the girl.

"I present to you Jasmine, for her service above and beyond duty I have offered her the chance of immortality." Stunned silence, Jean turned abruptly to face the members. Sudden applause echoed through the chamber. "Jasmine will be given a chance to once again prove her loyalty by offering her body to me as a sacrifice!" A discreet chuckle emanated from the members as Jean led Jasmine toward a velvet-lined chair set in the centre of the room. Below etched in the stone floor stood the symbol of the Black Sun. "I had workmen construct the specific design in the castle of Wewelsburg which is or should I say was the spiritual home of the German SS Generals. I have instructed the Black Sun to be constructed in various other places as well. Patience and if this works I will bestow upon you all, my loyal follower's immortality." He snapped his fingers, and two members strapped Jasmin to the chair. "Let me once again explain the hereditary of our brotherhood." Running the length of the wall hung a large black flag

which bore the symbol of the brotherhood, a pyramid with the all Seeing Eye at the apex in white.

Dramatically Jean lifted a steel dagger above his head. With one swift movement, he cut a rope suspended from the high vaulted ceiling of the throne room. Flags and banners unfurled draping the wall illuminated by the flames of multiple torches facing the seated members. Snatching a long metal pointer Jean walked purposefully toward the first banner.

“This was the first of our illustrious standards. I present to you the Sedes Sacrorum or Holy See. He waved toward the banner depicting two keys and a Papal Mitre on a red background. “It is the symbol of the Vatican and the power of the Catholic church. As a military order, the Knights of the Sedes Sacrorum or S.S were bestowed by the Pope with powers to kill or torture and mount counterintelligence operations against all Heretics who did not embrace the church. These men were absolved of all earthly sins. They were guaranteed a place in heaven for protecting and promoting the church.” He watched as members wheeled a metal table containing medical equipment alongside the chair where Jasmin began to show signs of unease.

“We accomplished the impossible during the Inquisition where we tortured, burned at the stake and murdered thousands for witchcraft. But that was not enough.” He moved along the wall slicing another cord. A huge banner bearing the runic symbols of the S.S in silver on a black background fluttered in the chill breeze.

“A fellow member and Jesuit priest Archbishop Pacelli spent weeks with Adolf when he was imprisoned after the Munich Putsch. It was through his insistence that Hitler founded the Schutzstaffel or S.S. The Nazi’s signed a pact with the Vatican and the Holy Roman seal was then handed over to the new S.S. In 1933 the Concordat was signed between the Vatican and Franz von Papen whereby the Vatican bestowed exclusive power to the S.S. The

old Roman straight-arm salute was used as was the old Jesuit skull and crossbones on military insignia.”

Three members gathered around the table sterilising the medical equipment. Jean continued. “We see Himmler as the new Grand Inquisitor of the most murderous and evil incident in history where millions of people were again burned alive. This time in ovens across Poland and Russia, it is obvious the S.S. were the new Knights of the Inquisition under orders from the Vatican to eliminate heretics.” Pausing for a drink Jean searched for any signs of uneasiness amongst the members. Seeing none, he proceeded. Jean continued with the silver dagger in his hand. He slashed through a third rope. The flag of the United States of America hung in the chamber.

“The war in the West has now ended, for the moment at least. We then handed the Holy Roman seal over to the Americans for the next chapter in our history. The Skulls are an old American organisation with links to me. We will have members as future presidents of the United States. Especially amongst the families who financed the war in Europe, on both sides. We are gaining the influence of the Secret Service. They will control the everyday life of the population and ultimately, be granted the duty of protecting any future president. This means that even if the current president is not one of ours, we will be able to hold him and his family virtual hostage at all times under the guise of providing his security.” Jean thought for a moment. “I have this vision in which men in black will destroy an Asian country. I am working with Pol Pot a little known South East Asian communist scumbag but never the less useful for my cause. He will one day be set up in a position of power which will enable the Brotherhood to trade diamonds for weapons in exchange for human misery. Later on, I will persuade a certain American Secretary of State and President to create an Islamic caliphate

causing terrorism and mayhem throughout the civilised world, all for their greed and my creation of a world order under my authority.”

Waving his manicured hands, Jean pointed to another member to the right of the table. “Where is the United States regarding military supremacy at the moment brother?” Springing out of his chair the member replied in curt military fashion. “Our army was smaller than that of Portugal’s at the beginning of the war Sire. Now we are the most powerful army in the world.” He bristled with pride. “We purposefully did not bomb certain industrial sites which our esteemed colleagues own and may I add on a more personal note that Hugo Boss designed the most stylish uniforms of the war for the German military.” A round of applause directed at the German industrialist sitting at the end of the table left him blushing with pride.

“How goes the financial plan we put in place?” Jean pointed to yet another member. “There was a meeting in Strasbourg between Reichleiter Martin Bormann who as you all know was Hitler’s financial director in occupied France. In Strasbourg at the Rotes Haus on the 10th of August 1944 with top industrialists like Krupp and I.G Farben and Bormann’s son in law, Otto Skorzeny famous for his daring rescue of Mussolini among others present. They planned to funnel out vast amounts of money, artworks, and gold bullion. This is being done through Swiss bank accounts and the assistance of the Vatican. Being businessmen and not politicians, they realised that Germany would lose this war. The Odessa organisation has been set up to provide a safe escape route for the members of the S.S and other loyal servants of my cause. Bormann is now underway to Argentina where he will direct the operations of the shadow companies the industrialists set up in Spain, South America, and other countries.

We are purchasing vast areas of land which will be used by our people to carry on research as well as investing in the financial future of another Reich. How goes the transfer of the greatest scientific minds of the former Reich?" Jean waited for an answer.

"Under Operation Paperclip we are gathering up all the leading scientists in Germany including Von Braun who as you know designed the V2 rockets. We believe with the research opportunities available and the financial assistance of the American agencies we will land a man on the moon within the next twenty or thirty years at the most. That is as long as those Communist bastards do not get their hands on more German scientists than we do." He turned to a member further down the table. "No offence brother, no insult intended." The Russian member merely nodded. "Our agents are moving all the leading German scientists to the States. Their Nazi party membership has been removed from their files, and we do not look too deeply into their past except for what they can contribute to our great nation regarding scientific progress." He smiled smugly. "They even have a new and revolutionary aircraft design. It is circular in shape and goes faster than anything we have. Lucky for us they did not manage to get the aircraft mass produced during the war. We are planning on conducting test flights. There might be a problem if civilians see the aircraft, so we have a plan to concoct a story about flying saucers and aliens from outer space!" The last statement brought about peals of laughter from the members.

The American member continued. "Be aware that the American High Command is planning an operation by the name of "High Jump" due in around two years. It is far in the future I know, but we have top secret info that the Germans built a military base under the ice when they dropped flags and colonised certain areas of Antarctica in the late thirties. Since then there have been many submarine sightings, and we have kept a close watch

on activities down there. Admiral Richard. E. Byrd has been earmarked as the commander of a force comprising of at least four thousand men and numerous ships. If the Nazi's have a secret base in Antarctica, indeed we will soon find out." Jean smiled then nodded. "Indeed brother you will soon be finding out. I have a sneaking suspicion that there are more than just penguins down there now."

A strong wind gusted through the narrow corridors fluttering the flames in the torches. Outside the weather had turned. Dark storm clouds pregnant with rain hovered above the citadel. Lightning struck several trees near the village sending the villagers scurrying to the village hall. Dropping to their knees, the villagers supplicated themselves before an oil painting of their lord and master. Jean stared benevolently down upon his loyal subjects. They knew it was he who called on the gods of thunder and lightning if they displeased him. Only the all mighty Jean was powerful enough to do such godlike deeds. It had been passed down from father to son through the generations, and they would beg his forgiveness for whatever they might have done wrong to upset him. After the storm had passed, they would send the young girls of the village to their lord and master as an offering. They lived in the hope that one day perhaps a village girl would have the honour of bearing him a son, but none as yet ever had. Deep in the bowels of the citadel, the meeting grew more intense by the minute.

Chapter 11

"Herr Doctor, please step forward!" Jean commanded. He pointed his manicured finger at an ageing blonde, bespectacled man member who sat bolt upright. His heart pounded, perspiration trickled down his forehead in spite of the chill draft blowing through the citadel. "It would be my honour as always to avail myself to your wishes, my lord." Nervously he walked

around the table. Standing in the centre of the Black Sun symbol etched into the floor the doctor struggled to hide his trembling hands.

“Herr Doctor, would you please tell the members who you are and what function you performed in the Brotherhood.” Seated on his throne Jean fixed the unfortunate member with a deadly stare. He enjoyed watching the most powerful men in the world cowering before him.

“My lord, esteemed members of the Brotherhood, I am Johannes Wagner. I was a successful archaeologist in the early thirties.” He was acutely aware his voice was filled with fear. “As the Nazi party rose in popularity I was approached by Himmler with instructions to create a special unit in the S.S by the name of the Ahnenerbe. Our organisation had specific instructions to research the archaeological and cultural heritage of the Aryan race.” He sought support or protection in the eyes of his fellow members on the opposite side of the table. He only received blank stares in reply. They were all extremely grateful it was not their turn to face the wrath of their lord Jean.

Clearing his throat, he continued. “Himmler began using the Ahnenerbe more for his own personal interests in the occult than for archaeological exploration. He sent us to the four corners of the globe searching for valuable occult books, relics, and artefacts. Some expeditions were undertaken in Tibet, Finland and even deep into the South American rain forests. We have officially disbanded a few months ago.” He bowed low praying that all Jean wanted was an explanation of their activities during the war.

Jean smiled, but there was no warmth in his dark beady eyes. “Thank you Herr Doctor, but I am afraid you neglected to mention your massive failure concerning the one and only order I personally gave you.” Jean threw his

empty crystal goblet at the trembling doctor. It missed the doctor's face by a hairsbreadth smashing against the far wall.

"Slamming his fist on the throne's armrest Jean stood bolt upright. He held the silver dagger clutched tightly in his left hand. "I pumped millions of dollars into your bumbling expeditions. I assisted with the formation of the unit and even gave ideas on how to structure it. I will admit that the ex-chicken farmer Himmler knew chicken shit about culture and had very vague ideas concerning the powers of the occult, he did interfere in things. But that is no excuse!" Waving the dagger under the nose of the now whimpering doctor Jean slashed the doctor's face with the razor sharp blade. He watched a trickle of crimson blood roll down the doctor's face and dropped onto the Black Sun.

"What was the only order I gave you Herr Doctor?" Jean raised the dagger once more. "You ordered me to recover the Ark of the Covenant, my lord." He dropped to his knees, head bowed.

"Yes, indeed Herr Doctor that was the one and only request. But you chose to ignore my wishes even though you took full advantage of my generosity." Jean circled the kneeling man like a shark circling its prey.

"Did you think the Brotherhood was your private travel agency?" He slashed at the doctor again, this time, he severed an ear. "Hold him down and attach the shackles on this miserable failure!" Swiftly following Jean's instructions, the members closed in on the terrified doctor. Submerged under a wave of bodies eager to show their enthusiasm to avoid frightening consequences, the doctor was bound hand and foot tethered inches above the Black Sun.

"I gave you clues, I pointed you in the right direction, but still you and some of the most brilliant minds in Europe could not manage to find the

Ark.” Slicing back and forth Jean cut the dark robe from the doctor’s body. It made no difference to Jean that he carved into living flesh while doing so. “With the sole purpose of finding the Ark the entire world has been plunged into a world war. Millions have been sacrificed, billions of dollars in damage caused and empires made and lost. All you had to do with the world at your disposal was bring the Ark to me, its rightful owner. Instead, you spent time tracing the origins of the Aryan race, took plaster cast masks of Tibetan monks or wrote ridiculous theories on a fabled land within a hollow earth.”

The dagger glinted in the torchlight flashing down swiftly. Doctor Wagner screamed in pain. Jean stepped back to admire his handiwork. Deep incisions in the shape of a triangle with the all Seeing Eye seeped blood from the doctor’s chest. Rivulets of blood dripped from his body then onto the Black Sun below. The blood ran along the narrow grooves in the stone. “Each time we sacrifice to the Black Sun it brings us closer to the day when the earth and all its inhabitants will succumb to the lord of darkness. It has been foretold that I am the prince of darkness. Sacrifices ensure that one day shortly I will once again have the Ark and all its power.” The Brotherhood members bowed low chanting. An atmosphere of pure evil permeated the chamber.

It was at this moment that Jean turned to Jasmin. He smiled menacingly at Doctor Wagner’s tortured body. Jasmin my dear, your greatest moment is near at hand. With the help of these gentlemen, I will grant you immortality.” He led her from the chair to a steel operating table hurriedly wheeled in by two men dressed in operating uniforms, masks, and gloves. Oblivious to the whimpering emanating from the dying man manacled above the Black Sun Jean and the members watched as one of the masked men removed Jasmin’s thin robe.

Chapter 12

“Do not fear my little one. You are one of the chosen few.” He stroked her hair then lay her down on the stainless steel bench. She recoiled from the cold of the operating table for a heartbeat. Gently the masked assistants held her down. One then rubbed an alcohol solution on her arm using cotton wool swabs. He looked over at Jean. “We are ready to carry on with the transfusion my lord.”

Jean nodded then pointed to the table. Obediently the remaining members returned to their respective places around the table. Eagerly they watched the masked men change their sterilised gloves which had been exposed to bacteria for new ones. “These gentlemen are very experienced medics having worked in hospitals throughout the war. Trust me when I say you have nothing to fear.” Jean placed a cold hand on Jasmin’s forehead then lay down on the operating table beside her. After swabbing Jean’s arm with the alcohol solution, the first medic then opened a metal box.

“Here we go my pretty. You must be so excited!” Jean muttered noticing the extreme tension written all over Jasmin’s face. “We noticed that clotting of the blood occurred during our early attempts at transfusion, we now have another solution which I firmly believe will work.” Nodding to the two men standing beside the operating table Jean waved his hand. The medic opened the metal box open revealing six 20cc syringes. “The procedure is simple enough. They extract my divine blood from the syringe and then inject it into your veins.”

Jasmin shuddered then thought about immortality. She would learn from Jean then have him shut up in a concrete slab for all time. Attempting to relax Jasmin lay holding Jean's hand.

“We are ready to start with the transfusion my lord.” Holding a syringe, the medic hovered over the couple. “Then go ahead my good man.” Jean waved nonchalantly.

Taking a full sample of Jean’s blood, the medic passed the syringe to his assistant. The assistant immediately stabbed the needle into Jasmin’s vein. The process continued for a few minutes until the syringe had been used. Sterilising the syringes hurriedly they continued while monitoring Jasmin’s life signs. Confident in their diagnosis they began the second round of transfusions.

“Jasmin felt the needles pierce her flesh. She thought that if she were to hang on long enough, she would achieve her desire. Suddenly it felt as if hot lava rushed through her veins. Jean noticed her discomfort. Gripping her hand tightly he turned his head to look at her.

For a moment Jasmin looked to be in good health. Then suddenly the blood vessels on her face began to grow more visible. Jean’s blood pumped through her veins. Discomfort turned into agonising pain. She screamed as her limbs began to shake uncontrollably. Gripped by spasms her body shuddered and convulsed.

Working feverishly the two medics pumped more blood from Jean's veins into Jasmin. Sweat dripped down their faces as they called out for assistance. Three members rushed to the operating table taking a firm hold on Jasmin’s juddering body. Her eyes bulged in their sockets. Her pain wracked screams drowned out the roar of the storm outside. Turning his head sideways Jean signalled the two medics to cease with the transfusion of blood.

Jasmin lay convulsing on the table blood seeping from her body orifices. She gave one final agonising scream then slumped down lifeless on the cold

metal surface. "My lord we tried our best, but your blood is not compatible with the physique of a mere human." Shaking with fright the two medics expected the worse. Jean lifted himself off of the table. Absent-mindedly he reached for the still full syringes on the table. He hovered over the two medics, syringe in each hand.

"You have served me well the two of you." He threw the syringes on the floor watching the glass vials shatter then stain the stone floor with his unnaturally dark blood. "As promised I will keep my word and have you flown to the jungle retreat of Mengele in Brazil. Perhaps there you could be of some assistance to the doctor. He is still experimenting with whatever he was doing in the camps. Off you go now before I change my mind." Bowing gracefully the two medics hurried from the room where they ran down to the jetty. Amid the lightning and thunder, the seaplanes pitched and tossed on the heavy seas. The medics found it preferable to wait out the storm exposed to the elements rather than sheltering in the citadel.

"Brothers

"Well, brother members as you can see we have not as yet perfected the art of transfusing my divine blood into the body of a mortal. Perhaps by next year at this time, we will have advanced further in the medical field." Lighting up a cigarillo Jean walked over to where Doctor Wagner lay writhing in pain. "I grow weary of tonight's entertainment. Let us adjourn to the dining hall. I have developed a healthy appetite."

Inhaling deeply on his cigarillo Jean watched the tip glowing bright red. With one swift movement, he reached down grabbing the tortured Doctor Wagner by the hair. Jean slowly pushed the glowing cigarette into Doctor Wagner's eye. Thrashing and screaming wildly the condemned man waited for his fate. He hoped it would be a quick death.

“Follow me, my brothers. We will leave this filthy disappointment to reflect on his failure. Perhaps when the mood takes me, I will finish him off. But for the moment I wish him to be left as he is bleeding and suffering for a few days.” Forming up into a long line the dark robes Brotherhood members snaked up the spiral staircase behind their leader. Heavy wooden tables that were laden with food waited although Jean seemed to be the only one with an appetite. Jean called a member over. “I entrust you with the demise of the Legion units heading for China. There can be no escape for any of them. Is that understood?” Nodding slowly the member felt a chill run down his spine. If he did not succeed in halting, the Legions withdraw there would be nowhere on this earth he could escape the consequences of failure. The Brotherhood would hunt him down, and his death might be even worse than the Doctor tethered above the Black Sun. While the surviving Brotherhood members celebrated at least another year of untold power and wealth, the chosen one plotted the Legions last known position and the possible escape routes from Indochina to the safety of China. In a day or two, he would be amongst them. He brushed up on his schoolboy French and weapons handling.

Chapter 13

Steele clutched his shoulder. Tentatively he moved his arm feeling the circulation return. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry observed Steele suddenly shocked when he realised that he was fighting alongside the famed Knight Templar. Growing up hearing the stories about Steele past down from generation to generation starting with family members who had served with Steele during the Crusades.

“We have no time for explications now Mon Capitaine. We have to get the men moving.” Steele avoided the awkward moment by gathering up Legionnaires and a few Colonial Infantrymen. “The locals say large

columns of French troops moved through here yesterday. Apparently, they are heading for Tong.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry announced to the assembled troops while looking around the area for transport.

“If we walk to Tong from here it would take around seven hours Mon Capitaine, but there is the wounded to consider.” Steele knew Capitaine Bastien-Thiry would do all he could for the wounded. Rifle fire cracked overhead. Firing from the far bank Japanese soldiers sniped at the Legionnaires hurriedly searching for any form of motor transport. Secretly Steele thought the odds of finding anything at all were remote if not impossible. “I doubt that the Legion or any French troops would have left vehicles behind knowing that the Japs were right behind them. There are two abandoned trucks near the military base down the road. Perhaps we could get one of them moving.” Wallace mentioned all the while watching a Japanese spotter plane slowly circling overhead.

“Anyone here knows anything about repairing trucks?” Steele shouted above the increasing volume of rifle fire exchanged by the two opposing sides on either side of the riverbank. He scanned the line of haggard men loading and firing their old Lebel rifles. “We’ve got three here who say they do Sergeant. Two of them worked in the Navy dockyard, and the other is an aircraft mechanic.” Wallace shouted across to Steele.

“A bloody lot of good that will do us repairing the trucks, two sailors, and a pilot.” Capulet laughed as he reloaded his magazine. “Shut the hell up for once Capulet you stubborn Corsican bastard.” Steele towered over Capulet clenching his fists. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry moved in to defuse the situation.

“How do you know that I was from Corsica? I never told you anything about my life before the Legion.” His eyes were burning with indignation. Capulet turned his attention back to the Japanese on the far river bank.

Steele reached out and grabbed Capulet by the scruff of his neck. “Only a Corsican says “basta” after nearly every sentence.” He whispered menacingly into Capulets ear. “You are in charge of the mechanic's security. Anything happens to them, and I will personally shoot you in the leg and leave you for the Japs. Is that understood Legionnaire? You can also forget about any vendetta against me Capulet. I sapè di Corsica è u so populu. Basta”

For once Capulet dropped his hard man image. He ceased to free himself from Steele’s iron grip. “Yes, Sergeant. I know Corsica and her people. That is what you just said there. I am from Calvi. Basta”

“All right Capulet, do what the Sergeant says this instant. And what the hell does basta mean?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry snarled shoving Capulet toward the three men waiting to attempt repairs on the trucks. “Basta means enough. Don’t ask me why we say that but we do, we are Corsicans.” Swelling with pride Capulet held his head up high.

“All right you lot look alive and let’s get over to the trucks on the double.” Turning to the three Capulet wondered why they simply stood there looking at him. “They outrank you Capulet. It is one of them who should be giving the orders.” Smiling Capitaine Bastien-Thiry nodded over to the men. For a second Capulet hesitated then replied. “It’s okay Mon Capitaine. I am a Legionnaire.” He set off down the road with the three mechanics following closely behind.

“You certainly find some of the finest characters in the Legion, hey Steele.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry quipped. Chuckling Steele smiled in agreement. For a moment he had been transported back in time remembering the long sandy beaches of Calvi with the majestic citadel overlooking the bay from the hill on one side and the ruins of an old Roman tower used for storing salt on the other end. He could smell the Maquis, and see the mountains

rising magnificently above the valleys. Crystal clear mountain streams flowed into the waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

The smell of food assailed the ravenous Legionnaires and the French Colonial troops. Streetside vendors plied their wares. On the corner of a looted French Café, a shady character offered teenage girl to the troops. “Let the men have a little bit of relaxation Mon Capitaine. God knows when we will ever have this opportunity again, if ever.” Noticing Capitaine Bastien-Thiry’s reaction, Steele decided to cut the Legionnaires some slack. “I see what you mean Sergeant. In theory, you do have more experience than me regarding these matters. For the moment I give you carte blanche. I have something to attend to.”

“No problem Mon Capitaine, but have a look over there.” Pointing in the direction of the opposite bank Steele watched the Japanese rounding up the local inhabitants. Heavily laden with planks of wood and under constant threat from the Japanese soldier's Indochinese villagers began placing the wooden beams in position. “Looks like we do not have too much time before the Japs cross Sergeant. Slow them down if you can.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry mentioned off-handedly to Steele as he walked toward a Buddhist temple further down the road.

Steele aimed at the workers on the bridge. He felt anger rising within him. Safely hidden behind cover, the Japanese threatened the locals and goaded them with rifle butts and bayonets. Swiftly the beams began to span the meandering river below. It would not be sufficient in any way to hold vehicles, but their infantry would storm across at the first opportunity. Steele set the sights of the machine gun on the bridge then waited while the Legionnaires first ate their fill like all soldiers then chased girls. Steele wondered how the repairs on the vehicles were going all the while scanning the far bank for enemy targets. He fired three times over the heads of the

locals watching Jap troops drop. He wondered why they never rushed out to rescue their wounded or retrieve the bodies of their fallen brothers.

“An hour or so later the Legionnaires began to reassemble at the bridge. They smiled and chatted with each other all the while taking up positions along the river bank. Steele set off to find Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. He walked along a narrow dirt road lined with shady trees. All the French businesses were empty while locals strutted around in looted clothes and dinner jackets. Making eye contact with a group of young Vietnamese Steele saw there was no sympathy in their eyes. It would be a hard fight retaking Indochina once the Japanese were defeated. He cleared his mind of thoughts regarding the future. His immediate objective was to see the remnants of the Legion remained a formidable fighting force. Pushing open a heavy wooden door Steele felt the cool breeze blowing through the ancient monastery. Robed monks sat meditating with one eye fixed on the armed foreigner noisily walking through their sanctuary.

“The men are ready and waiting for further orders Mon Capitaine. Am I intruding?” Steele noticed Capitaine Bastien-Thiry hurriedly attempted to shove a dog-eared photograph into the pocket of his combat jacket. “No, not at all Steele. Our first concern is for the men, just between you and I. How are they doing as far as morale goes?” He fumbled with the photograph.

“They are fed and should we just saw that they are happy Mon Capitaine as far as other needs are concerned. Is that your son?” For a moment Steele waited thinking that he had overstepped his boundaries. “Yes Steele, this is my wife and my dear son Christophe, how I miss them.” He touched the photo gently. Steele remained standing while Bastien-Thiry held the photo up for him to see. “They are in occupied France Steele. Every waking moment I think of them. Somehow I believe we will survive, and I will be

reunited with my family, but the news from France is not good. Yes, De Gaulle liberated Paris, but the Russians and Americans stand face to face in Berlin ready to fight each other over their political ideals. Is another war about to engulf Europe?”

“I do not think so Mon Capitaine. We have all had enough of the killing and destruction, even the Russians. It will be a while before we conquer Japan, but then I think it will be many small wars and not a global conflict after we take Japan. You know that business people finance most wars for profit rather than patriotism?” Steele looked at the photo Capitaine Bastien-Thiry handed him. The photo depicted an attractive woman standing arm in arm with her young son. Steele thought how lucky the Capitaine was. Many men had lost their families in the war while he still had something to fight for other than inflicting the maximum amount of casualties on the enemy before you, in turn, meet your maker.

“May I respectfully say your wife is beautiful, and you have an adorable son Mon Capitaine?” Steele thought of his daughter so many centuries before, and his first and only love Gudrun. “Thank you, Sergeant, I live in the hope that one day we shall be reunited.” Bastien-Thiry stood up folding the photograph in a waterproof sachet. He then placed it in a tin cigarette box. Pushing the tin cigarette box into the pocket of his combat jacket Bastien-Thiry placed his hand on Steele’s shoulder. “It is an honour to serve with you, Steele. My son will one day know of your deeds and possibly serve with you as well. For now, let us save as many Legion lives as possible.”

Steele returned to the bridge where the Legionnaires were not making much difference between local Vietnamese and Japanese infantry. Steele watched four Indochinese men drop under a hail of bullets as he ran toward the bridge. “Fire only on the Japs you idiots.” He smacked a Legionnaire

aiming at an elderly Vietnamese man struggling with a heavy piece of lumber. "Aim at an enemy target only!" Steele screamed.

A truck suddenly careened around the corner. Capulet stood proudly on the passenger seat holding onto the windscreen of the old French army truck. "Ha, I told you we could do it, Sergeant. One truck for the use of infantry transport at your disposal Sergeant" He beamed down at Steele. "Pile in and let's get out of here. We found an 81mm mortar at the base with twenty rounds. What do you want us to do with it, Sergeant."

Steele nodded to Wallace and Jones. "Set up the mortar and keep the Japs heads down." Jones smiled at Wallace. They set up the 81 then primed the rounds. Within minutes a steady deluge of fire rained down along the shattered houses on the far bank. Wallace dropped rounds down the tube in quick succession watching the arc then adjusting so that the rounds exploded closer and closer to the bridge. "How many rounds have you got left?" Steele shouted. "Last one going out now Sergeant!" Jones yelled pissing on the tube to cool it down.

"Don't want to lug the tube further than we have to Sarge." Wallace laughed. "Bloody hell then just drop it in the river you bastards," Steele muttered. The chances of finding extra rounds for the mortar were minimal while the effort of carrying the tube and base plate was great. "Pick up all the rifle and machine gun ammo you can, we leave in five," Steele shouted suddenly aware of the rounds whipping about them coming from a different direction.

"Mon Capitaine, the Japs have crossed over the river. We are taking fire from the South!" Steele positioned a few Legionnaires accordingly. Steele watched Japanese scouts sneaking through the streets to their South. He counted five scouts pushing through the Indochinese villagers using their rifle butts to force a way through the crowds of locals undecided as to

whether they should stay or leave their homes for the moment while the two occupying forces battled it out.

“Get the men onto the vehicle! Capulet, Wallace and Jones come with me!” Hurrying toward the scouts infiltrating the area Steele slipped between the buildings occasionally glancing back at the professional way in which the Legionnaires covered each other while moving through a built-up area. Each man watched the back of their brother in front as they swiftly moved from corner to corner. Steele raised his hand. The squad stopped where they were continually scanning their surroundings. Waiting patiently Steele felt the familiar sensation of adrenaline rushing through his body. He drew the razor-sharp combat knife from his faded and weather-beaten webbing. He preferred wearing faded combat fatigues and tattered webbing as it was more comfortable and it set him aside from the raw recruits.

He waited for the last member of the Jap scouting patrol to pass before he slowly drew nearer. Vietnamese locals went about their daily business as if it were an everyday occurrence. The last man in the scout patrol made the mistake of not looking to his rear. Steele stalked his prey through the marketplace filled with the scents of the Orient. The stench of blood replaced the sweet smell of coconut and spices as Steele slit the scout’s throat. Warm blood-soaked Steele’s combat jacket. Without signalling Steele watched his team sneak up behind the Japanese scouts one by one and eliminate the enemy. They had all learned their trade well in the narrow streets of Algeria.

Stealthily they all advanced on the lead scout together. He turned wide-eyed to see four cold-eyed Legionnaires staring down at him. He turned to scream, but Steele’s knife slashed his throat. “Okay, boys let’s get back to the truck. Well done on the job.” Moving toward the vehicle Steele made a subconscious headcount as all non-coms or corporals do. He suddenly

stopped when he found there was one man short. “Wallace and Jones get to the truck on the double. I am going to see where the hell Capulet has gone.” He pushed through a crowd of locals selling food and trinkets.

“What are you doing Capulet? We don’t have time for this shit!” Steele grabbed Capulet by the arm. He noticed blood smeared on Capulets arms. “I am simply warning the bastards, Sergeant.” He pointed to four heads staked on wooden poles. “I am just busy with the last one Sarge.” He cut through the tendons slipping his knife between the neck vertebrae. Victoriously Capulet held the severed head aloft. Kicking down a street vendor stall, he retrieved a long wooden stake which he pushed into the ground. “Hold this for a moment please Sergeant,” Capulet asked Steele pushing the severed head toward him. Steele waited patiently while Capulet shoved the stake into the soft earth then retrieved the severed head. “Thanks, Sarge.” He shoved the head onto the stake patting its cheek. “No quarter asked for and no quarter is given, hey Sarge, basta!” Capulet smirked.

“Where do we go from here Sarge?” For a moment Steele watched the severed heads dripping blood down the stakes. “We find the rest of the Legionnaires Capulet. They are only a few hours ahead of us. Then we make the Japs pay for what they have done.” Steele walked ahead of Capulet. “Do you think that by cutting off the heads of their comrades and putting them on stakes you will intimidate the Japanese following us Capulet or are you not worried that it will escalate the atrocities perpetrated by them afterwards in revenge?” Slipping past a group of kids selling cigarettes Steele and Capulet approached the truck. “I don’t know Sarge I enjoy doing that sort of thing, that’s all. I don’t give a damn about your high and mighty humanitarian crap, with all due respect Sergeant.” He jumped onto the tailgate of the truck. “I will die here in Indochina Sarge, far from

my beloved Corsica. But Emperor Napoleon suffered on St Helena as do I here. He was from Corsica too. We are a proud nation.” He slipped onto the hard, wooden bench running down the side of the truck. Steele slammed the tailgate shut and shoved the metal pin in place locking the tailgate. “Okay Mon Capitaine, we are good to go. The Capitaine reserved the driving to Steele. “We are loaded to capacity with stragglers and wounded Steele. The Legion is ahead of us. Catch up to the main body, or we perish along the road.” Steele gunned the engine then turned toward the West. On the outskirts of the town, Japanese troops advanced searching every building for French stragglers. Lining up a dozen Vietnamese villagers in front of the severed heads of their comrades the Japanese troops opened fire then finished off the survivors with their bayonets. Threatened by their officers for wasting time they rushed after the French Foreign Legionnaires.

Chapter 14

Steele travelled along the narrow paths less used and avoided the roads he knew the Japanese would be advancing down. For the moment they managed to keep ahead of the enemy, but Steele knew it would only be a matter of time before they ran headlong into a Japanese patrol.

“There is a village ahead Mon Capitaine. Perhaps they will be able to provide us with a bit of food and water. I think we are almost out of rations.” Pointing at the small isolated village comprising of scattered huts and narrow footpaths Steele slowed down.

“Have the men form a defensive perimeter around the truck while I take a few men into the village Steele. See what you can do for the wounded.” Pushing open the door Capitaine Bastien-Thiry called out to four Legionnaires. Steele ordered the remaining men to form a circle around the

truck. They used the opportunity to relieve themselves in the bushes before taking up position.

Within minutes the Capitaine returned empty-handed. "Mount up men it seems the villagers heard us coming. They have fled into the jungle taking their livestock with them. All we got was half a small pot of rice they left on the fire. Bastien-Thiry designated a Legionnaire to share the rice out among the men. "Well, that was a bloody fine meal, Wallace." Jones laughed gulping down the single spoonful of rice he was handed. "Share and share alike Wallace. Next village we get to it had better be at dinner time."

"The men reported boot prints in the sand along a footpath Steele. Let's take a look. Following the Capitaine, Steele pushed through a tangle of vines and bushes to where three Legionnaires knelt beside a winding path. "There must have been dozens of them Steele. Look at all those tracks." Looking up and down the path Capitaine Bastien-Thiry shook his head. "Take a closer look at the boot prints Mon Capitaine. They are the regular French army boots. It seems that we are headed in the right direction." Kneeling beside the boot prints left on the sandy track Steele searched for any signs of the men who made them. "If we hurry we might catch up Mon Capitaine. I can't drive down this narrow track, but the small road we are on runs parallel so perhaps we will see them soon." Steele ordered the men into the truck then gunned the engine.

Smiling sarcastically Steele turned to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. "We are in a country thousands of miles from home where the local inhabitants hate us Mon Capitaine. The Japs want to kill us, and we have no food and little water." Lighting two cigarettes the Capitaine handed one to Steele. "The Vichy government no longer exists, the new French government thinks of us as traitors. As far as we know all the top officials and officers are either dead or in a Jap prison camp. What could possibly go wrong next?" He

inhaled deeply on his cigarette. “We could run out of petrol.” The Capitaine pointing at the fuel gage responded. The needle hovered on empty. “Still good for a few more miles Mon Capitaine, after that, we march as the Legion always has.” Thinking of the wounded Steele drove along refreshing his memory on making stretchers for the injured using branches and cloth.

Slamming on the brakes, Steele scanned the tree line ahead. “Did you see that Mon Capitaine?” He asked slowly opening the door. Thompson machine gun at the ready Steele slipped through the bushes bordering the track.

“Hold your fire, Legionnaire!” A gruff voice called over to Steele. Behind thick logs strewn across the track, Steele was relieved to see a group of Legionnaires even though they did have their weapons pointed directly at him.

He turned to his left noticing more Legionnaires staring down at him from an embankment. Like the men in the truck, they looked weary, hungry and unshaven. Their uniforms were dirty, but their weapons were spotless.

Capitaine Bastien-Thiry walked up to join Steele. Together they climbed over the obstacle blocking the path. Shaking hands warmly with the senior noncommissioned officer in charge they explained where they had come from. After a brief discussion with the Legionnaires holding the roadblock, Steele walked back to the truck.

“All right you lot, off you get. We can’t take the truck past the roadblock. We don’t have any fuel left anyway.” Groaning and muttering under their breath the men disembarked from the truck. “You lot are a sight for sore eyes!” Wallace beamed. “Don’t get to happy mate. They are the rearguard. We don’t even know how many of our boys survived. Who knows how long

they can hold the Japs off for once they attack?” Pessimistically Jones pointed out the reality of the situation.

“We now have three more Mon Capitaine, three of their guys are wounded, and they want us to take them with.” Steele nodded toward two walking wounded, and a man lay writhing in pain on the ground. “Form up the men Sergeant. I have some information to share with everyone.” Steele nodded then called to the Legionnaires.

Hidden from prying eyes, Steele sat the men down in a clearing surrounded by thick bush. “Listen up men. The Capitaine will brief us on the situation.” Nodding to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry, Steele stood to the side while the Capitaine addressed the Legionnaires.

“As far as we can tell the situation remains critical, to say the least. We will be marching through the town of Tong tonight then on toward Son La. It is at Son La the Colonel Alessandri is regrouping the Legion. When we get there, I am sure we will find medical care for the wounded and enough food and water for all.” He paused for a moment. “Mon Capitaine, will they also have beer, enough for even me?” Capulet shouted out. The Legionnaires chuckled. “Shut your bloody mouth Capulet!” Steele snarled then turned his back. He smiled, then listened to the Capitaine as he continued with the briefing.

“Here we are just outside of Tong. There may be a few elements of our forces in the area and hopefully stragglers like us trying to catch up with the main body. Therefore do not fire without identifying your target before. He drew a line in the sand with a stick. “There is Son La.” He pointed to a matchbox in the sand. Drawing a rough line from their current position to the matchbox Capitaine Bastien-Thiry turned to the men. “The journey is roughly two hundred and thirty kilometres. On foot, it should take us a few days. We will encounter mountainous terrain, thick jungle and we will also

have to cross the Black River. I will brief Sergeant Steele who will, in turn, give his orders to the corporals in command of each of the three groups.” He waited for questions, but there were none. “The Legion has a motto from the old days in the deserts of North Africa.” He held his head up proudly. “Marche ou creve.” The Legionnaires nodded wryly. “March or die. As always the motto fits the situation, the Legion will march. The Japanese will die.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry saluted Steele. “Over to you Sergeant.” Steele returned the courtesy by saluting smartly.

“We leave at dusk. Corporals stay with me while the rest of you sort out your marching kit. See that the wounded are as comfortable as possible then start making stretchers for them.” After orders with the corporals, Steele supervised the destruction of the truck and the distribution of wounded amongst the three groups.

Resting until the sun began to set the Legionnaires began forming up as twilight descended on the jungle. They exchanged greetings with the men remaining behind. Setting off in the dark Steele led the way through the jungle following a narrow track he been informed of by one of the Legionnaires at the roadblock.

Steele slogged along the gravel path. Boots crunched rhythmically, night birds sang in the treetops. Dark shadows of the men behind snaked along sometimes struggling over babbling jungle streams with the wounded. The scent of rotting foliage mixed with the warm night air.

Pushing ever onward the small column neared the town of Tong. From a distance, the stench of burning timber wafted on the wind toward them. “I think we should take a break Mon Capitaine. I will scout ahead. I don’t like the look of this.” Pointing to the faint red glow in the night sky above Tong Steele whispered to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry.

“Affirmative Steele, take a few good men with you. I will arrange another form of transport if we are forced to cross the Red River again.” Following the track, Steele had led the column through the dark jungle eventually arriving at the bank of the river. There the men waited, falling down where they had stopped, exhausted by the forced march. Filling their canteens, they drank the muddy water wondering where their next meal would be coming from.

“Merde, why does he always have to choose us? I wanted to get some sleep back there.” Wallace whispered kneeling beside Jones in the mud. “Because I know I can rely on you bastards.” Wallace turned around in shock. Steele’s face was inches from his. “I didn’t see you in the dark Sarge. Sorry about that.” He drew his shoulders in expecting a smack to the head. “Relax Wallace. We have more pressing problems. I made my way toward the bridge. The boys in Tong must have blown it, but the Japs must have attacked the town from a different direction. All I saw were burning buildings and Japs. Let’s get back to the Capitaine.” Sloshing down the riverbank through the reeds and ankle deep water they made it back to the column undetected.

“It would seem we are in a bit of a dilemma Sergeant. Tong is now obviously out of the question. The men manning the roadblock, well?” He shrugged his shoulders. Both knew the small group fighting a desperate rearguard action would be overwhelmed and exterminated by the Japanese. “We owe it to them to get our boys across safely. Their sacrifice will not be in vain.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry led Steele to a narrow beach alongside the fast flowing river. “I promised you an alternative way across the river if Tong had fallen. This is the best I could come up with at such short notice.” The Capitaine whispered pointing to a group of men under armed guard on

the beach. “They will do Mon Capitaine, and beggars can’t be choosers.” Steele laughed.

Chapter 15

Tepid water soaked into Steele’s boots. Levelling his weapon at the local fisherman, he ushered the reluctant white-haired old man to the wooden sampan. “This is going to be long and tedious Sergeant. There are only two sampans which hold four men each at a push. Set up a defensive perimeter on the opposite bank. I will be in the last boat once all the men are across.” Pointing to seven Legionnaires, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry turned once again to Steele. “Keep a close eye on our river men Steele understandably they are rather reluctant to be pressganged into service.” Smiling in the dark night, Steele turned to the Legionnaires wading knee deep in the river beside the sampans. Signalling with his hand, Steele directed four men to the first sampan then once the remaining three embarked on the second he climbed in.

Crouched one behind the other with the water threatening to swamp the sampan at any moment, the boatman began to paddle into the fast flowing river. Steele was alarmed to see how swiftly the current swept the small boats downstream toward Tong. In the near distance, they could clearly see the burning buildings alongside the river. Sporadic gunfire erupted on the outskirts of town. Perhaps it was the Legionnaires who had been at the roadblock or maybe another group of stragglers. Whoever it was Steele did not give much for their chances of survival.

“We are heading too far downstream. Use your rifle butts or hands but fight against the current.” Steele whispered hoarsely to the men on his sampan. The men on the second boat did the same. Exhausted the Legionnaires

crunched onto the gravel of the far bank. Immediately Steele set up a small defensive perimeter.

Tugging at a Legionnaires sleeve, Steele pointed to the boatmen who began back paddling away from the shore. Together Steele and the Legionnaire both placed a firm hand on the prow of the sampans. "Get in and make sure he goes back for the rest of our men. They both look pretty shifty. I think they will do a runner first chance they get." Patting another Legionnaire on the back Steele pushed him onto the boat. "This arrangement will slow things down a bit, but at least we don't end up with half of us on one bank and the others on the opposite side." He warned them to alert the next boatload across of the swift current then pushed the sampans out into the river. The boats slipped into the night.

Steele felt the urge to light up a cigarette but resisted. Mosquitos swarmed over their exposed arms and faces. Wondering how many leeches were crawling up his legs, Steele listened for any sounds of the approaching enemy. After what seemed an eternity Steele heard a low whistle. Replying he caught sight of the sampans a little further downstream from his position. Laboriously the men onboard paddled to shore then dragged the sampans to where Steele waited. Again and again, they left then returned bringing a wounded man across on each journey.

Finally, the last group of Legionnaires arrived close to their position. The two boatmen disappeared downstream under cover of night. The second Capitaine Bastien-Thiry disembarked carrying a wounded Legionnaire through the knee-deep water.

"I feel rather bad not being able to pay the ferrymen. Unfortunately in times of war one cannot always be a gentleman, never mind." Capitaine Bastien-Thiry took a compass from his pocket. "We head northeast Steele. That is the direction in which lies Son La. Are the men ready?" He asked the

question but already knew Steele would have already taken the necessary steps. "Ready as they ever will be Mon Capitaine. I will take the point." Handing the compass to Steele Capitaine Bastien-Thiry felt the enormous weight of responsibility on his shoulders. He was thankful that he had an efficient and experienced Sergeant to share the burden. He wondered how far they would have got if Steele were not with them.

The first hint of dawn appeared in the sky to the east. Steele called a halt then trudged wearily down the column of worn-out men until he found Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. "How are you doing Mon Capitaine?" He dropped down beside the officer. "As well as might be expected Steele, thank you for asking. What is the situation?" He felt his stomach tighten knowing Steele would not have called a halt for anything. "We have another river crossing ahead. The Japs will be swarming all over the area come daylight. We either have to hide during the day, or we find a way across now." He waited for the Capitaine to ponder the question. "If we conceal ourselves from the enemy we lose an entire day's marching. We have no idea how long Colonel Alessandri will wait for stragglers. We must push on Steele. We cannot hope to hold off repeated attacks during the day if the Japanese discover us."

"That's what I thought Mon Capitaine. There is a narrow area where we might be able to wade across. May I suggest you move the men up to the river bank while I scout ahead?" Steele whispered. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry smiled then nodded. "Of course Steele, by all means, please take whomever you need with you and find a way across." Groaning Wallace and Jones began to get to their feet. "Come on Capulet you lazy bastard. You know he is going to get us to tag along." Casting a wary eye over at Steele Capulet painfully got to his feet. "Well someone has to watch out for that crazy bastard. If it weren't for me, he would have been dead a long time ago." He

puffed out his chest and limped toward Steele. Wallace and Jones shook their heads smiling at Capulets delusions of grandeur. Slipping stealthily through the brush along the river bank Steele led the Legionnaires to a narrow stretch of the river. Three small islands stood like stepping stones across the river.

“The river is still at least one hundred meters wide here, but if the water is not too deep, we could wade or swim from island to island and then reach the far bank. Wallace and Jones come with me. Capulet, wait here for the Capitaine and the others.” Steele said quietly as he began wading into the murky waters. Daylight was almost upon them. He was sure the Japs would be watching the river.

“It is feasible Mon Capitaine we will have to swim at one or two points, but if we leave now, we can be across at sunrise.” Steele knelt down in the bushes next to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. “Right, well-done Sergeant lead the way. I will stay on this side with a small rear guard.” He tapped Steele on the back.

“Follow me, boys, keep a tight hold of your weapons and make sure you get the wounded across.” Turning to the line of gaunt faces Steele began wading once again through the river. Struggling against the current the Legionnaires slipped across the river unseen by the enemy. Setting up the Hotchkiss machine gun on the far bank Wallace and Jones covered their friends braving the rapid waters. Steele went back twice to help the wounded across. As the first golden rays of dawn illuminated the treetops, the Legionnaires lay hidden in the foliage drained of their strength. Only Steele kept on moving from group to group checking on the wounded, designating men to fill water canteens and redistribute ammunition.

“Sarge come here quickly. We can see the Japs.” Jones waved frantically. Moving low Steele dropped down beside Jones. “Over there Sarge near

where we crossed. I can see a few of the little bastards in the bushes. Pointing to the far bank Jones turned to Steele. "There, by the big tree Sarge, I can see them standing around smoking cigarettes." Wallace smacked Jones playfully on the back of the head. "Which big tree Jones, is it the bloody green one?" He laughed. Jones turned to reply, but Steele cut him short. "I see them, Jones. Lie still and don't move."

Patrolling close to the river bank the Japanese troops strolled past with their rifles slung. The Legionnaires watched the enemy walk down to the river bank. "Merde, they are sure to see the bootprints in the sand. There is no way in hell even those short-sighted bastards can miss the trail we left there." Cursing Steele aimed at the one who seemed to be in command.

Watching the enemy through the sights of their weapons they braced for the moment all hell would break loose. Suddenly one of the Japanese soldiers broke away from the group running straight toward them. Here we go, boys, wait for me to drop that loud-mouthed bastard first then you open fire." Steele whispered. Frantically the Jap rushed ahead then suddenly propped his rifle against a tree at the riverside. Fumbling with his buttons, he dropped his pants turning his back on the Legionnaires. Even from a distance of around one hundred meters, Wallace swore he heard the Jap let off a wet fart. Squatting down the Jap emptied his bowels in one sudden movement. His comrades jeered or walked off holding their noses. Clutching his stomach, the Jap continued to squat letting out thunderous farts.

"The dirty bastard didn't even wipe his ass." Shaking his head in disgust, Wallace looked horrified. "Well, what do you use when there is no toilet paper out here?" Jones smirked. "I use a stick or leaves. I suppose that explains why you always smell so bad, Wallace." He quipped. "I used to use leaves until one night I grabbed a small stick to wipe my ass, but it was

a thorn bush. I won't make that mistake again." They both burst out laughing.

"Quiet you two!" Steele whispered while the Jap pulled up his trousers all the while looking in their direction. He looked around suddenly realising that the rest of his group had wandered into the thick bushes nearby. Snatching his rifle the Jap hastily rushed after them.

"I am happy to see those sons of bitches are suffering from the shit's as well. Makes me feel a lot better knowing I am not the only one." Grinning Wallace relaxed behind the machine gun. "If it is any consolation Wallace I reckon almost everyone has the shits. It's the bad water and also being so hungry you will eat something even if it is almost rotten." Steele said as he signalled to the machine gun team to start withdrawing from the area. "Catch up to the others. I will be along shortly." He waited for Wallace and Jones to disappear through the bushes then grabbed a handful of leaves. When he was sure, they were out of earshot he unbuttoned his trousers and squatted down. Steele cursed the stomach cramps, weakness and nausea associated with diarrhoea, yet another burden on the combat soldier since time immemorial.

Hitching up his trousers Steele stood looking across the river. His heart raced as he watched the Japanese patrol return and begin scouring the riverbank. They seemed unconcerned, not even bothering to look for boot prints in the sand. Instead, they positioned themselves along a narrow stretch of beach. Minutes later Steele saw dozens of sampans rounding the bend in the river. Packed to capacity the sampans ferried Japanese infantrymen toward the opposite bank. A single boat broke away from the loose formation to pick up the group waiting across from Steele. Rushing after Capitaine Bastien-Thiry and the rest of the unit Steele doubted that

they would be able to outpace the Japanese intent on eliminating any stragglers before they reached the dubious safety of Son La.

Chapter 16

“We have no other option, Steele. We must continue onward in the hope of reaching Son La ahead of the Japs. I do not need to spell out the consequences of being taken alive by those sadistic bastards.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry’s face was etched with concern. He glanced down at the Legionnaires sprawled in the mud. The wounded wore filthy rags or blood soaked bandages over their wounds. A few of the men began showing signs of Malaria while they all suffered to some extent from diarrhoea. “We march and stay ahead of the Japs.” He solemnly declared. “I agree Mon Capitaine. If we attempt a rearguard action, with the intention of slowing the Japs advance, they will simply outflank us. We march, as we always do.” Steele replied then began shaking the men awake. “Bloody hell we only had a few minutes rest. Is the Sarge trying to kill us before the Japs do?” Struggling to his feet Wallace griped. “Give us a hand you lazy sod. My shoulders are killing me.” Jones said holding out his hand. Jones pulled him to his feet then took the Hotchkiss machine gun from Wallace. “Let me lighten your load brother.” He smiled sarcastically hoisting the machine gun onto one shoulder.

Hacking their own path through the thick foliage, the Legionnaires avoided the paths used by the locals. They knew the Japanese would be racing down the tracks searching for them. Step after painful step they trudged along seeing only the heels of the man ahead. Heads down they marched. Steele paused toward the late afternoon. Thankfully the men dropped to the ground where they stood.

“I can see a road ahead Mon Capitaine. Let the men rest while I see what is up ahead.” Steele said as he watched a medic tear a strip off of his dirty

shirt to bandage a Legionnaires leg cut by bamboo. They all knew infection would set in almost immediately.

Keeping low and under cover of the thick foliage bordering the road, Steele moved in the direction of Son La. He had not progressed far before he heard the unmistakable sounds of the Japanese infantry marching confidently down the middle of the road. Steele lay flat on the ground then crawled into a thick bush. Immediately he regretted his choice of concealment. Thorns ripped at his flesh. He lay motionless in the thorn bush. A column of Japanese infantry passed his hiding place unaware that they were being watched. A runner sprinted down the column then spoke excitedly to the commander of the unit. Shouting orders the commander halted the column. More orders followed then Steele watched the Japanese unsling their rifles. Spreading out they took up position on the far side of the road intently studying the terrain on the other side. The Japs set up two machine guns facing the far side of the road and a mortar in a ditch on Steele's side. Stealthily moving away from the Japanese troops Steele snaked up a tree. From his vantage point, he surveyed the far side of the road. He now understood what all the excitement had been about. Slipping through the bush, he made his way back to his group.

Leaving the wounded in the care of the medic and tree Legionnaires Capitaine Bastien-Thiry led the rest of the men closer to the road. "There they are Mon Capitaine all ready to attack." Indicating the column of Japanese infantry concealed on the far side of the road awaiting orders Steele turned to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. "What do you suggest Mon Capitaine?" Steele asked. "I will keep two men with me. We will take care of the mortar team." The Capitaine replied after a brief pause. Steele nodded. "You make your way behind the left-hand machine gun position and eliminate them once the fighting starts. Corporal Estevan will deal with

the machine gun group on the right. Are there any questions?” Steele shook his head. “Well, that’s sorted then. Brief the others and let’s move into position.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said all the while keeping an eye on the Japanese troops.

Waiting patiently concealed by the bushes bordering the road Steele watched the Japanese machine gun team sighting their weapon. Locked and loaded the gunner sat behind his machine gun. Beside him, the number two knelt beside a row of magazines with one held in his hand ready to reload after the first mag had been fired. Two riflemen lay on their backs next to the machine gun team. Both had their regulation army issue caps pulled down over their eyes.

A low coughing sound signalled the firing of the first mortar round. It sailed through the warm air on its trajectory. Two more shots followed in quick succession. “Stupid bastards should have waited to see if they hit their target with the first round before firing more,” Wallace smirked. “Perhaps they have enough rounds to adjust their aim afterwards,” Jones whispered. “Always looking on the bright side aren’t you.” Wallace sneered taking up the slack in the trigger.

Fanatical cries of “Banzai!” erupted down the roadside. As one the Japanese infantry sprang from their positions. Running headlong across an open rice paddy their bayonets glinted menacingly in the sunlight. “Open fire!” Steele roared. Wallace fired a short burst directly into the backs of the gunner and loader. They fell forward before being able to fire a single bullet. Steele popped a round each into the two riflemen who had hurriedly taken up their positions when the first mortar rounds left the tube.

“Get moving boys!” Steele screamed feeling the weariness suddenly replaced by a jolt of adrenaline. He sprinted across the road firing a round into each of the bodies. Jones dragged the dead machine gunner by the

heels a short distance from the weapon then sat down and began firing. Caught out in the open the attacking Japanese infantry hesitated suddenly aware their rear positions had been overrun. Mortar rounds landed close to the Japanese while both captured machine guns raked their ranks with deadly accuracy.

In the centre of the rice paddy surrounded by a scattering of huts stood an old French blockhouse. Torn and battered the tricolour hung limply from the mast in the humid air. Firing from the protection of the blockhouse walls the defenders stopped the attack.

“Capulet get the men moving!” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry shouted to the Corsican. Grabbing the makeshift stretchers, the group under Capulets command struggled across the knee-deep water of the paddy field. Hoisting a wounded man onto his shoulders, Capulet trudged through the mud cursing all the way.

A group of Legionnaires ran from the blockhouse firing as they went. Isolated individuals still resisted the French attack but were soon cut down. Firing into the enemy bodies to make sure that they were dead and not faking the men from the fort reached Capulet and the wounded. “You bastards took your sweet time. This guy is as heavy as hell!” Capulet groaned.

“Well, it looks like they made it safe and sound,” Wallace mumbled searching through the dead Japs pockets. “Damn it. All they ever have is soggy rice.” He wiped the blood off of the tin then used his dirty fingers to shovel the rice into his mouth. “Thanks for sharing you dick.” Pushing past Wallace, Jones retrieved a tin of Japanese cigarettes from a body. Lighting up he began dismantling the Japanese weapons. He threw the firing pins and breech blocks into the paddy field where they sank beneath the muddy waters.

“Okay, that’s the signal. The guys in the blockhouse will cover us. Get a move on!” Panting through the open field Steele expected to come under fire at any moment. Relieved he skirted around the blockhouse wall. Stepping into the dank interior, he wrinkled his nose. It stank of unwashed bodies, garbage, and infected wounds.

“We are leaving for Son La in the early hours of the morning Steele. The Japs don’t normally attack at night so get some rest. All we have to eat here is rice, but the commander of the blockhouse says they were ordered to hold their position until tomorrow morning. I suppose we are the last of the stragglers lucky enough to have made it this far.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry smiled at Steele while he spoke, but he looked haggard and worn. “I will have the men ready to march out tomorrow morning. At least we have the men from the blockhouse with us. That brings our numbers up a little.” He had counted heads earlier. Forty-three men altogether, hardly an army but who knows what they will find in Son La? Steele checked on the sentries then curled up on the concrete floor of the blockhouse amidst the groans of the wounded and the nightmares of those still unscathed.

Chapter 17

Slogging along the red gravel path the Legionnaires marched under a blazing sunset against a colourless sky. Razor sharp vines and thorn bushes sliced into their flesh. Son La, it began to sound like a mystical land they would never reach. Suddenly from out of the darkness in the deep jungle where the trees grew so thick and high the sun never shone on the damp soil a bugle sounded “Le Boudin”, the Legions famed call. Gunfire erupted further ahead. Steele marched to the sound of the guns. It was near to the rendezvous point the men at the blockhouse had said they were to meet up with the rest of their company. In desperation, the Legionnaires marched toward the rendezvous point to avoid being outflanked by the enemy.

Walking ahead of the group Steele searched the path for signs of the Legion.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a sudden movement. Two shadowy figures leveled their rifles in his direction. "Sergeant Steele, Motorized column. We are coming in!" He shouted catching sight of the Legions famed White Kepi one of the men was wearing. "All right but do it slowly, can't trust anyone nowadays." The Legionnaire with a heavy German accent replied. Steele raised his weapon above his head waiting a few moments for the rest of the column to catch up. "Mein Gott, you look like shit! Come on in." Said the German Legionnaire as the column slowly wound through the makeshift defences.

"It looks like we are no longer alone Mon Capitaine. Perhaps we will make it to Son La after all." Steele smiled. "That we might Steele at least we know others are resisting the Japanese." Capitaine Bastien-Thiry replied then felt his heart sink. Winding their way to the small command post set at the foothills of the dark foreboding mountains towering ahead he noticed all the Legionnaires manning the hastily dug foxholes were in the same dire state as his men.

They were into the mountains marching along the little-known trails used by smugglers. It was here they caught sight of Colonel Alessandri riding up and down the column on a shaggy horse encouraging his men. The first forced march had been sixty miles. No food for forty-eight hours. Each time they stopped to prepare food the Japs attacked. The Colonel had not eaten either refusing to eat if his men had not. Machine gun fire cracked overhead, mortars coughed, and the rear guard dropped back to hold the enemy.

Steele felt the pain in his legs with each step. His chest ached, and his stomach growled, but still, he dragged his men over the treacherous terrain.

From their vantage point higher up they watched helplessly as the Japanese overran the rear guard. No quarter was given. Wounded had their throats slit while the bodies of their comrades were bayoneted multiple times with sadistic pleasure.

“We have received news from Son La Mon Capitaine the Americans have dropped boots, new weapons, and supplies,” Steele said as he walked alongside Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. Through the woolly numbness of fatigue and hunger, the Capitaine nodded then replied. “It will be good to have new weapons, and boots, especially the boots.” He winced stubbing his barefoot on a jagged rock. Steele nodded looking down the winding column of ragged men. Their uniforms in tatters, marching through the slime and sharp pebbles either barefoot or feet wrapped in banana leaves. Their boots had not withstood the harsh mountainous terrain or the rivers and swamps of the jungle. Many staggered on like zombies delirious with fever. The column wound its way to the Black River constantly forming small rear guards to delay the Japanese. When these units were about to be overrun, they dropped back to the next group defending hastily prepared positions. This was the Legion and discipline still held, they were marching through a living hell, but they were organised as a fighting force despite all that nature, and the enemy could throw at them.

Climbing the foothills, Steele looked behind. The Japs were closing in rapidly on the column. They press-ganged local villagers into carrying their mortars and heavy equipment. Using rawhide whips, the Japs beat the villagers or used rifle butts to make them move faster. When a villager dropped through exhaustion, the Japs shot him where he fell. Sick and wounded Legionnaires wracked with pain and fever hobbled ever onwards knowing that to be left behind was certain death.

The diet of mildewed rice, when available caused beriberi. Men hobbled on with limbs almost twice their normal size. Wounded marched slowly along, their bloodstained bandages yellow now from the dust.

Steele and the men of his group fought their share of rearguard actions. Steele felt great satisfaction each time he had an enemy soldier in his sights. Squeezing the trigger, he felt the weapon recoil. Following through he watched the Japs drop from a clean headshot or purposefully aimed for their stomach. A long and painful death is what they deserve was all he thought. Day after torturous day the column marched all the while losing men along the way. The Japanese had begun to flank them. Each day a few more men died through sniper fire or during a desperate attempt to slow down the Japanese advance. Occasionally a Japanese spotter plane flew overhead but did not drop any bombs as their own troops were too close to the Legionnaires.

As if it were a mirage which some of the men who had served in the blazing sands of North Africa had experienced, the town of Son La appeared in the distance. Growing nearer with each step the Legionnaires marched toward Son La. In the distance, the sound of gunfire echoed down the valley toward them. Son La was under attack, but the First Battalion held them outside the town. Steele watched Capitaine Bastien-Thiry organise food and medical treatment for the men before he allowed a medic to tend to his lacerated feet. Steele knew as they all did. This was not their destination. China was their objective. Many more men would die on the way. Walking over to the supply building Steele took a look at the new Sten gun the Americans had dropped. The short submachine gun with its nine-millimetre cartridges and thirty-two round magazines were ideal for the close combat jungle fighting. There were also Bren guns, hand grenades and large stocks of rations and cigarettes. "The Americans will never know how much we appreciate these

supplies, Steele. Perhaps they understand how much we needed them.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said turning to Steele. “Yes I know Mon Capitaine, and somehow I don’t feel totally abandoned by the Allies. Perhaps when this is over the Vichy past will be forgotten or overlooked.” Steele replied.

Steele woke to the sounds of the bugler sounding “Rassemblement”. A short distance from the town gunfire erupted when the first rays of the morning sun bathed the battered town in its early morning glow. Picking up his newly acquired Sten gun Steele hurried the men of his section along.

Out in the courtyard of the old French military base officers were standing ready to distribute the new arrivals amongst the three battalions of the Regiment. “They are keeping most of the men for the First and Second Battalions Steele.” Clean shaven and wearing new boots and combat jacket complete with rank insignia Capitaine Bastien-Thiry announced. “We are to form up with the Third Battalion Steele. Have the men ready to march in an hour.” Steele nodded wondering where the Third Battalion was off to. “There is a road approximately sixty miles from Son La. If the Japanese take that road, then they will be able to outflank Son La and attack it from the rear. Our mission is to hold the Japs off and prevent them from getting anywhere near here.” Looking around Steele noticed a dozen small horses. They were of the indigenous type, Chinese horses as small as ponies with long shaggy hair. They were nimble and sure-footed, ideal for the rough mountainous terrain of Tonkin.

“We have been reorganised into a complete section or platoon. You will have three teams consisting of a corporal and five Legionnaires in each team. My command team comprises of myself, and two men on the 60mm mortar.” Announced Capitaine Bastien-Thiry, watching the Legionnaires assembled in ranks in the courtyard. “Excellent Mon Capitaine but don’t we have a radio operator?” Steele asked looking over the section. “That is one

luxury we do not have Steele. The Battalion Commander and one of the other sections have radios. But we will have to rely on runners.” Snapping to attention Steele saluted the Capitaine.

“Capulet load up two horses with food and ammo. Wallace and Jones, you take one as well. Make sure you take all the spare ammunition and magazines you can get your hands on. The rest of you prepare to move out on my orders!” He handed over the section to the corporal on duty then walked down the narrow lane to the infirmary. Stocking up on medical supplies he glanced down the corridor into the main ward. Dozens of wounded and sick lay crowded in the small room. Severely wounded were placed on the few beds available while the others lay on the floor even spilling out into the corridor. Steele did not wish to think of what their fate would be. When the Battalions moved out of Son La, they would be left to the mercy of the Japs. But that is the way of jungle warfare. If you are lucky and tough, you might survive. If you are too badly wounded or sick to keep up with the others, you are left behind. Even Colonel Alessandri left his wife and two children behind in Tong. Naively the French thought the Japanese would treat the women and children with compassion and mercy.

“I have sent for the medical equipment to be brought here and loaded on the horse Mon Capitaine. What are the First and Second Battalion missions?” Steele asked Capitaine Bastien-Thiry while they waited for the Legionnaires to load up the last horse. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry cleared his throat before answering Steele. “Both Battalions are under orders to hold out along the road leading to Son La for as long as possible. They are to give stragglers and civilians a chance to slip past before the Japs close the net. There are less than five hundred Legionnaires altogether, and the Japanese troops outnumber them at least ten to one. Our Battalions are so reduced in numbers they are more like company strength. The companies

are actual platoon size. They have done a fine job so far holding the enemy off but our days here at Son La are numbered. Soon they will withdraw toward China delaying the enemy every foot of the way. We will then fight our way through and join up with the two Battalions.” He looked confident, but Steele noticed the Capitaine touch the breast pocket of his combat jacket. That is where he kept the tattered photograph of his wife and son.

“Do we know much about the men in our section Mon Capitaine? I think I see a few familiar old faces but are they all from a combat company?” Steele asked surveying the section now waiting in ranks for the order to depart. “Not much is known about any of the men Sergeant except that they are all Legionnaires who have made the march this far. It is your job to whip them into shape and make them fight together as a team.” Steele smiled. “That is my job Mon Capitaine.” He laughed. “And I am damn good at it.” He thought to himself.

Moving out the Battalion marched along the sandy road into the countryside. Men still hobbled or struggled with the effects of fever for no one wanted to be left behind. Reaching their objective, the Battalion was deployed along the road in separate sections. Steele’s section dug in on a small hilltop overlooking the road. They waited and braced themselves for the Japanese onslaught. Steele worked the men hard but fairly until they were a cohesive combat unit. Day after day they expected to hear the fanatical “Banzai” scream echoing from the jungle tree line. They waited for the waves of Jap infantry charging furiously with bayonets glinting menacingly on the barrels of their rifles storming their positions. But as sometimes happens in a war they hurried up and waited and waited and then waited some more.

“Well, this has been a very pleasant two weeks Sergeant we could almost believe the war was over.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry smiled sarcastically.

American Lightings flew low checking on the Legions positions. “It is good to have air support for once hey Steele.” He poured Steele a small cup of army -issue alcohol, clear, strong liquid which burned the hell out of their throats.

“The men are in a much better condition than I could have hoped for a few weeks ago Mon Capitaine. They work well together and have a good fighting spirit although I have some reservation about two of them.” Steele pointed over to a middle-aged Legionnaire struggling to reassemble a Bren gun. “Forget about asking him to do it blindfolded. He still can’t do it properly after a week even in broad daylight.” He shook his head. “Ah, Legionnaire Santos, he said that he was in a combat company in Vietri until they were overrun. He got out with a few others, but they marched off without him when he fell behind.” Nodding his head, Steele thought Santos looked more like the type who had volunteered for the Legion band straight after basic training or perhaps an office job pushing a pen instead of fighting.

“The other is Legionnaire Sledge. He handles a weapon not too badly but knows nothing about life as an infantryman. He can’t build a shelter, heat up rations or make a canteen cup of coffee over a fire even. He speaks French like a gentleman with the slightest hint of an accent. He has impeccable manners. He never curses and has an air of entitlement about him.” Steele nodded in the direction of a flabby Legionnaire in his early thirties. “Perhaps he was an aristocrat before he joined Steele, more than a few members of royalty have served in the Legion. A prince of Denmark, a prince of Monaco, counts from various countries and even the non-marital son of Napoleon to name but a few.”

Chuckling Bastien-Thiry added. “How much do you know about me and my family Steele, it might be that my ancestor, a descendant of the Knight

Templars was the one who held the severed head of Louis XVII aloft after he had his head sliced off by the guillotine during the revolution?” He quietly said. “Jacques de Molay you are avenged,” Steele replied. “concerning the Templars vengeance on the French Kings for the destruction of their order and the burning of the Last Grand Master Jacques de Molay and his men at the stake.” Steele continued. “Precisely Steele, we do not have much time left here I imagine. I told you that my family comes from a long line of Templars, descendants the noble knights who pushed the Saracen hoards out of Europe and pursued them all the way to the godforsaken sandpits from whence they came.”

He stood proudly staring Steele in the eyes. “I am a direct descendant of Frederik Bastien-Thiry, he fought at the Battle of Montgisard in 1177 under the Templar banner. Outnumbered they faced the army of Saladin and won. I have heard the legend handed down by my ancestors Steele.

Chapter 18

For a long moment, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stared at the distant horizon. He dropped his cigarette on the sand then crushed it under the heel of his combat boot. Reaching into his pocket, he fumbled with the packet. Lighting up another cigarette he took out the battered photograph of his wife and son. “Do you think my son will be proud of me one day Steele? I have fought wars but do not think I have done enough to merit the illustrious company of the Knights Templars, to stand as an equal to my ancestors?” He gently touched the image of his wife then his son. “You have done as much as they Mon Capitaine. When you lead these men through hell and bring them out alive on the other side, I can truly say that you are a Templar and one of the finest I have ever had the honour of

serving with, Bonne Seant Mon Capitaine and Vive la Legion!” Snapping to attention Steele saluted Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. Proudly returning the salute, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry caught sight of two Legionnaires running at a moderate pace toward their position. “It seems our vacation has come to an end, Steele. Assemble the men and get ready to receive new orders.”

Capitaine Bastien-Thiry emerged from the command bunker looking serious. Stopping only to grab a tin of rations each and fill up their water bottles the two runners carried on back the way they came. “Listen up men. The news is not good. The First and Second Battalions are planning on withdrawing from Son La. They have fought valiantly inflicting massive casualties on the enemy but in doing so have lost a substantial number of their own men. Any civilians or military personnel who were in the position to escape toward China has either already done so. Their work in Son La is done. Now it is up to each Battalion to fight their way through to safety. Sergeant Steele will brief you on our objective once I have spoken to him, I will tell you, however, the message we have just received is forty-eight hours old. To be honest, I have no idea if Son La still holds.” He waved Steele over and together they went into the command bunker where Capitaine Bastien-Thiry briefed Steele in greater detail. Emerging moments later from the command bunker Steele ordered the corporals to make one last kit check.

“We are the section the farthest along the road. It will take a while to catch up with the rest of the Battalion. They have already started marching toward Son La leaving us as rear guard. I know that I can count on all of you to keep up and fight as we shall have to do before long.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry addressed the Legionnaires formed up beside the road. “Sergeant Steele will lead the way. The Japs will be expecting us.” For some days they had been aware of the shadowy figures observing them from the tree line.

Some of them were Legionnaires separated from their units which were an added bonus as their ranks swelled with each new arrival. For the most part, they were the Japanese observing the Legionnaires movements. Out of boredom some of the Legionnaires occasionally fired at the Japanese scouts who returned sporadic fire ineffectively.

“Right I need five volunteers with me up front Sledge, Santos.” Before Steele could finish his sentence, Wallace and Jones stepped forward. “Yes, we know that you were about to volunteer us for point again Sarge and what about our little Corsican friend?” Jones asked. Cursing under his breath, Capulet stepped forward. “The only thing I am happy about is that I do not have to take this dumb animal with me.” He said handing the reins for the pack horse to another Legionnaire. “Come now Capulet. I see a great bond building between you and your horse. You’re almost as close to it as you were to the goats on your island.” Jones laughed narrowly avoiding Capulets fist. “Hold me back someone I will kill him with my bare hands!” Capulet ranted. “Let’s save the fighting for the Japs. Follow me.” Steele set off adjusting the straps on his backpack. Soon enough the sounds of heavy fighting echoed down the valley. Marching down the road was hazardous but cutting a path through the dense jungle would take too long. Hoping to link up with the rest of their Battalion marching hard for Son La they pressed on under almost constant attack. Men died along the way, but the section under the command of Capitaine Bastien-Thiry regrouped on a hilltop along a narrow track twenty miles behind Son La leading to Haut Mekong.

“Mon Capitaine I think that we are too late. Son La has fallen, and we have been left behind to act as a rear guard for the survivors of the two battalions and the remnants of our Third Battalion.” Steele whispered to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. Allowing the men to dig in and rest on the hilltop Steele

accompanied by Capitaine Bastien-Thiry led a small patrol toward the outskirts of Son La. Marching by night they had taken up position on a small hill carefully camouflaging their position before daybreak. Japanese troops packet into the town using it as a forward base from which they could conduct their ruthless pursuit of the French forces.

“It seems they will not have everything their own way at least.” Pointing to the sky, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry nudged Steele. American Lockheed P-38 Lightning fighter aircraft swooped down out of the rising sun. Explosions rocked the military base. Heavy clouds of dark smoke rose into the early morning sky. Secondary explosions shook the ground as stockpiles of ammunition detonated.

Skimming the rooftops, the fighters rained down death and destruction with their Browning machine guns before disappearing over the treetops. “That was magnificent!” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry whispered ecstatically. Scurrying around the Japs attempted to extinguish the burning ammunition dumps and man their anti-aircraft guns in case there was a second wave of fighters on the way.

Bullets stitched their way inches past Steele’s head. A bullet skimmed off of a rock slamming into Wallace’s shin. Steele spun around staring at Legionnaire Santos holding a Sten gun pointed in his direction. Kicking the weapon out of Santos’s hand Capulet pinned him to the ground with his razor-sharp combat knife pressed against Santos’s throat.

“I didn’t mean to. It was an accident I swear!” Santos screamed feeling the cold steel against his throat. Wallace grimaced in pain. He clutched at his shattered knee. Holding a first aid dressing on the wound, Jones attempted to staunch the flow of blood. “You stupid fucker what the hell did you do that for?” Jones screamed binding his friends wound and administrating a morphine injection.

“The gun started firing on its own. I never pulled the trigger. I swear on my life.” He wriggled in Capulets grasp attempting to break free. “Let’s worry about that later. For the moment take this and get ready to use it, Santos. It seems that you have stirred up a hornet's nest.” Steele tossed a Lebel rifle at Santos. He gasped for air as the rifle hit him in the stomach. “Get off of him Capulet. The rest of you get Wallace the hell out of here. I will cover you for as long as possible!” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry began to protest but saw the look in Steele’s eyes. He dropped two grenades beside Steele and three spare magazines for the Sten gun. “Move your butt’s men. Steele, we will set up the Bren gun halfway down the path. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry shouted pushing Santos ahead of him.

Waiting for the first group of Japs to reach the top of the slope Steele stepped out from behind a tree. Wide-eyed the three Japs stared for a split second at the Legionnaire fixing them with his cold blue eyes. Steele squeezed the trigger firing a long burst into the three Japs. Crumpling to the ground, their bodies rolled halfway down the slope.

Bullets kicked at the dirt around Steele. He pulled the pin from one grenade, released the spoon and counted off two seconds before tossing it downhill. It exploded in mid-air peppering some Japs with its deadly shrapnel. Moving from cover to cover Steele withdrew down the opposite side of the hill. Reaching the narrow jungle track, he trotted down the gravel path hearing the Japs closing in on him.

“Steele, we are over here!” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry yelled waving his arms. The Capitaine had chosen the ambush point well. Steele would have walked straight past the line of Legionnaires hidden in the bushes ready to open fire. “How is Wallace Mon Capitaine?” Steele asked knowing there was no way he would ever be able to keep up with a wound like that. “Not too bad Steele.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry replied kneeling beside Wallace.

Perspiration ran down his face, gritting his teeth. Wallace managed a brief smile. Out of Wallace's line of sight, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry shook his head. Steele knew the chances of survival if wounded were minimal at best. Shaking like a leaf, Santos looked over to where Jones wound another bandage around Wallace's shin. For a second he caught Jones's eye. There was no mistaking the deadly intent in Jones's eyes as he stared Santos down. "Stand by men, here they come!" Steele whispered hoarsely.

Rushing blindly the Japanese ran straight into the ambush. "That's bought us sometime now get up and run like hell!" Capitaine Bastien-Thiry shouted pointing in the direction of their section on the remote hilltop. Pushing on through the vines ripping at their skin and sharp bamboo thickets the Legionnaires fought their way through the dense jungle taking turns to carry the now delirious Wallace on their backs.

"Almost there Mon Capitaine but look at the tree line near the hill. I see Japs scouting our positions." Steele lay down in a ditch gasping for breath. "It would be nearly impossible to get up the slope without being spotted by the Japs. It won't take long for the Japs following behind to catch up with us either. It seems we are stuck between a rock and a hard place Steele." Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said watching the tree line through his binoculars.

"If someone distracted the Japs in the tree line do you think we could make it back to the rest of the section Sergeant?" Steele turned to see Santos lying flat in the scrub behind him. Steele felt a need to control his temper before he replied. All he wanted to do was punch Santos in the face with all his strength. It was one thing being wounded in combat by the enemy but totally unacceptable when one of their own maimed a Legionnaire for life putting all the others at risk through carelessness. Steele turned to Santos, but he was no longer there. Steele simply shrugged then went back to watching the enemy's movements.

“What the hell is that?” Capulet cried in surprise. He pointed to the tree line where the Japs circled the area like sharks waiting for their prey. Shots rang out missing the Japs by more than a few feet. Legionnaire Santos calmly reloaded the old Lebel rifle before firing off another three rounds. Screaming eagerly with malicious glee the Jap patrol rushed toward Santos standing on the far side of a clearing. This was one they would take alive and torture at the bottom of the hill to undermine the French moral. Dropping the rifle Santos sped off into the jungle drawing the enemy patrol away from Steele and the men.

“Brave but foolish that man,” Jones said hoisting Wallace over his shoulder. “Hang on mate, and we will get you sorted. You will be walking again in no time.” Jones wondered how that would ever be possible. “This is our chance. Move it!” Steele shouted hurrying the Legionnaires forward. Rushing up the brush-covered slope the Legionnaires dropped panting into the slit trenches dug into the hill. Steele glanced around noticing a few more crude wooden crosses stuck into mounds of earth. “Each day spent here we lose more men to snipers.” Gaunt-faced Legionnaires stared downhill waiting for the next assault. “Sergeant the men report numerous accidental discharges with the Sten guns. They are good weapons but prone to stoppages, and if a round is in the chamber, the gun goes off on its own if knocked.” Speaking to Steele, a corporal loaded his Sten gun then smacked it against a tree. Five rounds had thudded into the nearby rock face before the corporal unclipped the magazine. “I see corporal not very stable are they? Thank you for the enthusiastic demonstration.” Shaking his head and smiling Capitaine Bastien-Thiry dismissed the corporal. “Perhaps it was unintentional, but Santos’s bullets came really close to your head Steele. Poor Wallace was in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“I wonder what happened to Santos. Do you think they caught him?” Capulet asked while shovelling earth from the slit trench he was digging. “Don’t know mate, not that I really care either,” Jones said looking in the direction of the shelter used as an infirmary. “It’s been almost a week that we have been stuck up here on this crappy rock. Do you think the Japs are going to get tired of being shot attacking the hill and just piss off back to where they came from?” He added chopping through the roots of a tree where he was attempting to dig his foxhole. He stopped for a moment looking at the blisters on his hands. “Bloody entrenching tools and boots designed by some damn professor in a laboratory who has who never set foot in the jungle.” Capulet laughed. “It is the same as the rations made by bloody scientists and nutritionists who sit in their damn offices and have never been in the field. They do not know the struggle to find water. Never mind crystal clear drinking water that comes out of their taps. I have pushed bloody camels out of a drinking hole and slurped down their dung and piss filled water. If we got all the bastard politicians and scientists to sit out here instead of us, the war would be over.” He smiled then ceremoniously took a bow. “All good man but what would we be doing then, stuck in some fucked up office job. Do you see yourself maybe working in a factory?” Jones looked over to where Capulet still chopped at tree roots. “Hell no, what would I do in civilian life in Calvi. Tend to sheep or fish for a living maybe work in a shop from nine to five only having a siesta between noon and three in the afternoon?” Capulet shook his head. “That is not for me. We are descendant of the men who fought alongside Emperor Napoleon we fought at Balaclava in the Crimea we conquered half the world. The bloody roast beef took the other half.” Jones knew he was referring to the British. “How is Wallace doing Steele?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry asked sitting on a log next to Steele. “Not very well Mon Capitaine. I don’t think he will

survive much longer unless his leg is amputated at the knee.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry turned pale. “I have been doing what I can for the wounded, but we have minimal medical supplies left and almost no food. We can’t hold out here much longer.” Steele continued knowing the Capitaine was well aware of their situation.

“Do you think Wallace will make the journey on the back of a horse if you were to amputate his leg?” Lighting up a cigarette Capitaine Bastien-Thiry waited for Steele’s reply. “I don’t know Mon Capitaine, but I do know he will die if we don’t at least try.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry looked down at the Japanese bodies scattered midway up the hill. The stench of decomposing corpses wafted over to their positions on the warm breeze. “We leave tomorrow night Steele. There is no other alternative. The First and Second Battalions would have made some progress toward the border by now. The rest of our Third Battalion should not be too far behind. We will break through and continue marching until we reach China. The wounded will be loaded onto the horses. Ammunition and whatever food we have will be fairly distributed amongst all the men. I will assist in any way with Wallace’s amputation.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said quietly walking over to where the wounded lay under a makeshift shelter.

“Ready as we will ever be Mon Capitaine. I have sterilised the equipment in boiling water and disinfectant.” Steele held a razor sharp knife above Wallace’s injured leg. Taking a deep breath, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry held Wallace’s leg down while Steele began cutting through the flesh. “I have used all the chloroform we had, I hope like hell he doesn’t wake up halfway through,” Steele muttered as the knife hit bone.

“Well, that was something I hope I will never have to do again. I hope Wallace pulls through.” Wiping his forehead, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry watched a Legionnaire bury Wallace’s severed lower leg. “Nothing else we

can do now Mon Capitaine,” Steele said. “We must concentrate on the living and get them out of here. I will start making preparations for the breakout tomorrow night.”

Chapter 19

“Our next objective is the town of Mong Sing which is approximately three hundred and fifty miles from here. Tonight we break through the encircling Japs and keep to the jungle. That is our only hope if we wish to make it all the way to China.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry announced to the tense men sitting around the command bunker which consisted of a trench with a few logs and dirt over the top. “Sergeant Steele will lead the breakout followed by the wounded on the horses. I will follow keeping the Japs off our backs for as long as we can.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry wished that he could give the men more hope, but he knew their chances were slim.

“I’ve sent a patrol down the slope to recon a village not far from here. They should be back soon, and we will know if the Japs are in the village or not.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry scanned the tree line. He turned to Steele. “If the Japs hold the village they effectively cut us off from the road and the rest of our forces. We will have to find an alternative route to Mong Sing.”

Steele grabbed the Capitaine’s arm. “Down there Mon Capitaine, it’s one of the men from the patrol. He looks in a bad way.” A second Legionnaire stumbled through the tree line. They scrambled up the slope collapsing into the first foxhole they came across.

“The others never made it Mon Capitaine the village and the road leading up to it are swarming with Japs.” Lighting a cigarette, the Legionnaire spat on the sand before continuing. “Moments before the Japs spotted us I saw a Santos. He looked like a madman. He was hiding behind a tree watching us all the while. I tried signalling to him, but he stared at us with crazy eyes.”

Sitting upright he pointed in the direction they had come. "I think he followed us back here after the Japs attacked us. Keep a lookout for him. He is still one of us." Steele nodded then asked for Capitaine Bastien-Thiry's binoculars. He scanned the tree line hoping to catch a glimpse of Santos. Instead, all he saw were dozens of Japanese troops taking up positions in the trees.

Night fell blanketing the jungle in almost total darkness. The sounds of the nocturnal animals distracted the Japanese sentries. Unseen a dozen Legionnaires crawled toward the Japanese positions. Steele led the assault group directly up to the enemy positions. He had previously scouted around the tree line finding the area where he expected to encounter the least amount of resistance.

Forming up in line with Steele in the centre the Legionnaires advanced. A cry of alarm sounded from the Japanese position when the ghost-like figure of a Legionnaire appeared through the mist a few feet away. Half a dozen Sten guns blazed away at the enemy caught unawares. Two Bren guns and an assortment of Lebel and captured Japanese rifles spat death. Not expecting to be attacked by the men they had surrounded the Japanese were cut down by the deadly fire. "Move it, men, push on through!" Steele hollered above the noise of battle. Men on both sides dropped mortally wounded to the jungle floor, never again would they see their respective homelands.

Following closely behind were four wounded or seriously sick Legionnaires tied onto the shaggy Chinese horses led by a Legionnaire each. Once through the contact zone, they followed a small stream stumbling over the flat stones hidden under knee-deep water. Steele waited with his men until Capitaine Bastien-Thiry linked up with them. "This way Mon Capitaine, follow me." Steele tugged at Capitaine Bastien-Thiry's sleeve in the dark.

Leaving the battered Japanese troops firing at shadows the Legionnaires regrouped in the stream catching up to their sick and wounded on the horses. "How many made it Steele?" Wiping a trickle of blood from a gash on his arm Capitaine Bastien-Thiry knelt down beside Steele. "We lost four men breaking through Mon Capitaine. We are down to twenty-one men fit for duty and four wounded." He shuddered inwardly thinking of the men he described as fit for duty. Their food ration was almost finished, most had either dysentery, or a minor wound which would inevitably turn septic in the humid jungle and all of them were nervous wrecks.

"Very well Steele, it saddens me that they are no longer with us, but they died for their friends. Let's put as much distance between the Japs as possible and us before daylight."

Capitaine Bastien-Thiry looked drawn and haggard in the pale moonlight. Pushing forward Steele followed the stream knowing it was taking them in the right direction. Stumbling on for three days the Legionnaires sometimes waded through the waste-deep water. Their food supply exhausted they scoured the streambed for certain varieties of edible plants and even cut the plinth out of banana trees so ravenously hungry were they.

All the while Steele tended to the wounded watching Wallace burn up with fever. One man died from his wounds. Hastily covering the body of their comrade with a thin layer of earth the Legionnaires gave the fallen man a last salute leaving him lying alone forever in the deepest jungle. "Sledge, the men, require some form of nutrition. Slit the throat of the pony." Pointing to the shaggy horse, Steele pushed Sledge toward the animal drinking from the stream. Approaching the animal from behind Sledge patted the horse on the head. "Would you be so kind as to lend me your knife please, Sergeant?" He held out his hand. "What the hell Sledge, don't tell me you don't have a knife of your own?" Steele reached down slipping

a knife from his boot. He had one on his webbing and another on his belt. “Here you go. Make it quick and clean Sledge.” Blood dripped into the clear waters of the stream as Sledge hacked at the horse’s neck cutting deep gouges into its flesh but missing the artery. He dropped to the ground clutching his stomach as the horse kicked him twice in quick succession. In an instant, the horse was gone rushing downstream through the swarms of mosquitoes advancing toward their human prey.

“You stupid fuck what do you think you are doing?” Capulet screamed showering Sledge with blows. “That was our only hope of a meal. Do you know how long we could have gone on the meat the horse would have provided?” He held Sledge’s head underwater for a few seconds. Steele pulled Capulet off of Sledge. “Take it easy Capulet there is a deep pool ahead. Perhaps we can go fishing?” Uncharacteristically Capulet grabbed Sledge by the collar of his combat jacket and shook his hand. Steele watched in amazement. “Give me a grenade Sarge. I will go fishing.” Capulet pulled a grenade from Steele’s webbing then walked toward the rock pool.

Amidst the smell of fish cooking over an open fire, Capulet walked over to Steele. “Hey, Sarge I have something to report.” He stood to attention looking very formal. “And what might that be Capulet?” Steele asked wondering how long it would be before the fish were ready. “Well, I shook hands with the bastard and do you know what I noticed?” He turned dramatically toward Steele. “I don’t know Capulet tell me what you noticed.” Steele began to feel irritated. “Well, his hands are as smooth as a baby’s ass Sergeant. Have you ever known a soldier to have baby soft hands?” He spat the words turning his back on Steele. “There is something not right there Sarge. You mark my words.” Capulet turned swiftly sinking

up to his knees in slimy glutinous mud. “God Damn it I hate this fucking country!” He screamed.

Cutting their way through the virgin jungle, they kept well clear of the roads and tracks swarming with Jap troops. Sometimes they waded through swamps and rivers shoulder high holding their weapons above their heads. Each man kept a small pouch of mildew rice strapped to his chest. From time to time they came to a village where they “persuaded” the villagers to hand over rice at gunpoint.

Floundering in liquid mud Steele led the desperate men through jungle paths which never saw the light of day so thick was the overhead canopy of trees. Cut by vines and grass with razor-sharp thorns the Legionnaires stumbled on. Venomous snakes, spiders, and centipedes made the trek through the jungle and mountains even more deadly. Sometimes men just disappeared in the deep jungle never to be seen again. Their mouldy bones rotted under the dank vegetation.

Some of the men marched with tattered boots while others continued on barefoot. Others wrapped leaves or strips of cloth around their swollen and cut feet. Malaria took its toll on the men. Two Legionnaires simply placed the barrels of their rifles in their mouths and pulled the trigger unable to go on. Jungle gave way to mountains with narrow tracks used only by smugglers, day after dreadful day they marched. China seemed a distant dream to the Legionnaires going through a living nightmare.

“We are heading in a northerly direction Mon Capitaine. In a little while, we will reach the town of Dien Bien Phu. Perhaps some of our units are still there. It is not far to go now.” Steele said watching Capitaine Bastien-Thiry lying on the ground scratching at his month-long beard. “Very well Steele. Get the men moving.” He gripped a tree trunk pulling himself to his feet. “Let’s go, men, Dien Bien Phu is the next town.” Steele turned to the

Legionnaires sprawled on the hilltop. He turned to walk down a narrow path alongside a mountainous ridge. He heard none of the usual groanings and complaining. Turning around he saw the men staring at him defiantly.

“We can no longer continue like this Sergeant. I am speaking for myself and the other men in this group when I say that we no longer have confidence in your ability to lead us to safety. We think marching into Laos is a better option, and we will do so with or without your permission.” Legionnaire Sledge announced sitting upright against a dry tree trunk perched precariously on the narrow path. “What the hell did you say, Sledge?” Steele turned to stare at the Legionnaire in disbelief. “You heard me, Steele. We are going to Laos. You and the Capitaine can take your chances in Dien whatever the bloody place is called.” He stood holding his rifle in Steele’s direction.

“Get up all of you, or you will regret it, now!” Steele felt his blood boil. “No, we will not. I am taking command of the unit, and we will head for Laos.” Sledge declared cocking his rifle. Steele glanced at the Legionnaires deciding that they were more intrigued by Sledge’s behaviour than openly mutinous. “We will be in Dien Bien Phu by tomorrow. I am giving you a direct order Sledge. Put down that weapon, or I will shove it down your throat.”

A shot rang out. Sledge dived to the ground scraping his elbows and knees on the rocky ground. “I am tired of this fucking jungle, and I am tired of this bull shit. All I want is to get to Dien fucking whatever and have something to eat, a beer and a good whore in that order, basta.” Capulet held his rifle aimed at Sledge’s head.

“Tough man, are you?” Steele sauntered over to Sledge. “Don’t think that I have not heard you were inciting the men to rebel and turn against us.” Sledge stared at Steele until he felt a fist slam against his jaw. He dropped

to the stony ground. “What is your matricule Sledge?” Steele slammed his fist into Sledge’s stomach pulling him to his feet. “What is your matricule Sledge?” Gasping for breath Sledge shook his head. “Every Legionnaire is given a number when he enlists Sledge. Until your dying day, you will never forget that number, and you don’t even know yours?” Pushing Sledge toward the edge of the track Steele threatened to push him over the edge. “Where did you serve Sledge, tell us the unit and how many years of service in the Legion you have.” Steele gripped Sledge by the throat. Squirring to break free Sledge turned pale staring down at the sheer drop a hundred feet below. “Please do not drop me, Sergeant. I was an industrialist in Hanoi before the war. I tried keeping things together during the Japanese occupation, but then they attacked everyone last month, you know they assaulted all the Europeans and shoved them into prison camps. The women were raped, and I watched as one was literally torn limb from limb by those savages fighting over her. I thought my only chance of survival was to pretend to be one of you. The Legion always comes out on top. I threw away my business suit and put on a pair of khaki shorts, boots and combat jacket I bought from the street sellers. I met up with some soldiers who were making their way toward Son La and there I was placed in your section. No one asked too many questions as I speak excellent French even though I am not a French citizen.”

“Holy shit Sledge you talk too much. You are at the moment in the Legion, get your shit together and move out.” Steele slapped him around the head then pushed him toward his rifle and empty pouch which before held a meagre supply of rice. “Get moving now. Anyone else has anything to say?” He stared at the Legionnaires, who simply smiled and slung their weapons. “And by the way, the Japs have total control of Laos with strong border defences running the entire length of the country.” Steele turned

back to the mountain track they had painfully trudged up hours before. In the distance, a long column of Japanese infantry slogged up the track. “How the hell do those bastards always know just where to find us?” Steele grumbled while he attached a grenade to the tripwire he had placed across the path. They marched off leaving Sledge to follow behind. Far in the distance, the sound of a dog howling echoed up the mountain pass.

While Capitaine Bastien-Thiry led the men along the treacherous, narrow path, Steele fought a desperate rearguard action. With sheer drops on one side and towering rock on the other, the Legionnaires struggled up the winding tracks sometimes no more than a few feet wide. A mule lost its footing plunging over the side cartwheeling as it struck overhanging rocks on the way to the bottom taking the wounded man strapped to its back on its death plunge.

Steele made the Japs fight for every inch of the way. Positioning a Legionnaire with a Sten gun and a machine gunner on the corner of every turn the path took Steele fired on the Japanese as they poked their heads around the corner. Another team further up the track kept the enemy at bay while Steele and his men withdrew then set up their defences around the next corner.

Chapter 20

“Thank God, what a beautiful sight Steele.” Standing on a hill overlooking the valley of Dien Bien Phu Capitaine Bastien-Thiry pointed toward an airstrip built by the Japanese surrounded by a cluster of houses. Further, in the distance, the main town beckoned like a beacon to the bone-weary and desperately hungry men. “It looks like quite a sizable town Mon Capitaine. There are many huts, but I can see some solid brick buildings, two or three stories in height. There must be some of our men still there.” Steele said smiling for the first time in days. “This would be a great place to hold back

the enemy if we had more men, don't you think?" Capitaine Bastien-Thiry pointed to the valley below.

Steele looked around. "Possibly Mon Capitaine but there are numerous access routes into the valley, and if the enemy were to drag artillery pieces up here into the hills overlooking the town they could shell us at will." He replied noticing the many caves that would be ideally suited for artillery positions. "If they were to place anti-aircraft guns on the hills and block the roads they would be able to isolate and take out the defences one by one Mon Capitaine." Advancing cautiously down the hill Steele kept an eye out for movement along the trail leading into the valley. "Perhaps Steele but dragging artillery up the hills would take an enormous amount of manpower, and the Japs do not have enough men for that. Not even the Vietnamese have sufficient people in the area to do that." Capitaine Bastien-Thiry smiled taking another look around the valley.

"I don't see anyone in the town Mon Capitaine. Maybe we are too damn late, and everyone has fled." Steele scanned the buildings with binoculars. "The locals are caught between the Japanese and us. We take what we need to keep marching toward China while the Japs press-gang them into carrying all the heavy equipment they use against us." He shook his head. "Not a good place for them to be Steele." Halfway down the hill, Steele heard the sounds of aircraft engines.

"Sergeant there is movement behind us!" Capulet whispered urgently. "Get down men. Take the wounded and the ponies into that cave." Steele urged. They watched as the column of Japanese which had pursued them through the mountains passed close by heading for Dien Bien Phu. A dog howled again followed by harsh laughter from the Japanese patrol.

"The Allies dropped supplies and a special forces team here a few weeks ago. This must be another airdrop!" Capulet pointed to the sky smiling

broadly. “At least we have not been forgotten.” He scanned the hills then pointed to four planes slowly circling above. One by one they positioned themselves for a landing on the abandoned Japanese airfield. Grabbing his friend by the shoulder a Legionnaire suffering from open ulcers on his arms and legs waved at the planes. “My God, they are coming to take us home. I knew they would!”

“Hold it boys let’s see who it is first.” Steele signalled for the Legionnaires to go to ground in the bushes. “What the hell are those two doing?” He shouted watching two Legionnaires stumble down the slope heading toward the landing aircraft. “There are no markings on the planes Mon Capitaine.” Steele pointed to the four aircraft touching down on the sandy runway. Dust swirled in the propeller wash. Engines spluttered then shut down.

“I don’t like the look of this Mon Capitaine. Two of the planes are Japanese, one is British, and the other an American made aircraft.” Watching the two Legionnaires crossing the runway Steele cursed their stupidity. The aircraft doors opened disgorging heavily armed soldiers. “Who the hell are those guys?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said aloud to no-one in particular. “They look pretty disciplined. They are definitely a professional lot. See the way they took up their positions.” Steele murmured scanning the new arrivals with his binoculars.

“They are a mixed bunch. Some of them are Asians while the others are Europeans.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry pointed to the men on the runway. “Could they possibly be a Colonial Regiment or even Legionnaires?” Steele asked with a hint of hope in his voice. Stumbling toward the men on the runway the two Legionnaires breathed a sigh of relief when four men in olive green uniforms advanced toward them grinning broadly.

From the hill, Steele and the Legionnaires watched helplessly as the four men in olive green uniforms hacked at the two Legionnaires with their

machetes. Within a matter of seconds, both men lay writhing on the ground bleeding profusely.

“The bastards, what did they do that for?” Slamming his fist against Steele’s shoulder, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry cursed under his breath. “Well, I guess that answers the question as to whether they are on our side or not,” Steele muttered rubbing his shoulder. Down on the runway, the two Legionnaires lay motionless in the dirt.

A small group broke off from the main force heading toward the town while the rest of the men scanned the hills looking for survivors making their way into Dien Bien Phu. “Here comes another aircraft Steele.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said pointing to a smaller plane circling the airfield. “Seems they have company, take a look down there Mon Capitaine.” Steele nodded toward a column of Japanese infantry breaking through the jungle and linking up with the men in the olive green uniforms.

“Do you think they might be mercenaries Mon Capitaine?” Steele asked. “I doubt it, Steele. The Japs are not in the habit of employing mercenaries especially, not European ones.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry replied watching the small plane taxi to where the Japanese commander barked orders at his weary troops. Lining up hurriedly along the runway the Japanese prepared to present arms. “Who the hell would be so important as to merit such an extravagant ceremony in the middle of nowhere?” Steele muttered as the aircraft door opened.

His question was answered as a group of black-uniformed men descended the metal stairs placed alongside the aircraft door. “It’s Jean, the bastard. I should have known.” Steele muttered. “Is that Jean the monk, the sworn enemy of the Templars?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry asked watching Jean descend the stairs then walk past the Japanese troops barely acknowledging the guard of honour. He paused for a moment to pat a skeletal figure on its

filthy matted head and beard. Smiling diabolically Jean threw back his head with laughter as the figure sat on its hind legs and howled at the sky.

“It is unbelievably evil what these bastards are capable of doing to a man’s mind Mon Capitaine.” Steele gasped. Shaking his head, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry looked on in disbelief. “That cannot possibly be Santos could it Steele?” he asked grimacing with horror. “Yes, it is Mon Capitaine. Take a closer look.” Steele held out the binoculars. A Jap soldier gripped the rope tied around Santos’s neck striking him with a piece of bamboo. Santos howled like a rabid dog straining against the rope scampering in the dirt on all fours. Jean issued a curt command. A Jap soldier begrudgingly threw a cooked chicken he had been ordered to fetch from Jean’s plane into the dirt. Santos waited until Jean snapped his fingers. Howling with delight, Santos threw himself on the chicken devouring it within minutes.

He stared up into the hills before making his way into Dien Bien Phu surrounded by his entourage of mercenaries and Japanese officers. Santos scampered along following Jean through the deserted streets.

“They have more fresh troops now Steele. Do you think we will ever get to China?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry pointed down to the men in the olive green uniforms. “I know Mon Capitaine, but we can’t give up now. I have an idea.” He walked through the cave entrance. Large enough to accommodate the surviving Legionnaires and the three remaining ponies the interior offered an ideal resting place.

“There is a little water trickling through a gap in the rocks near the rear of the cave Sergeant. If we cover the entrance with brush no-one will know we are here. The thing we need most is food and medical supplies. God only knows where we could get them from, though.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry

spoke quietly to Steele. It was apparent the men were in dire need of rest and nourishment.

“I am going into the town tonight.” Keeping his voice down Steele outlined his plan. “I need two volunteers, who is with me?” Steele looked at the Legionnaires slouched against the cave wall or sitting on the damp floor. All were desperately tired and starving, but those capable of raising their hand did so. It filled Steele with a sense of pride. “Capulet you will come with me. Sledge you too. Rest while you can, we leave at sunset.” Steele said then began inspecting arms and ammunition which would be suited for the mission.

Chapter 21

Bent double Steele led the way down the hill under cover of darkness. Making their way toward the airstrip, Steele paused in the bush to make sure of his position. Hours before he had observed the enemy camp below noting where their sentries were posted and the location of their supplies.

Slipping stealthily through the dark night Steele approached a cluster of tents set up near the airstrip. A campfire glowed betraying the enemy's position. Two guards sat beside the fire drinking coffee from canteen cups while two others patrolled the perimeter. Steele felt his stomach contract when the smell of meat wafted on the light breeze toward them. Close beside him, Sledge sniffed the air then crawled closer to Steele. “I would literally kill for a piece of B.B.Q meat right now Sarge.” He drew the entrenching tool Steele had given him earlier from his webbing. “You could not kill a pony before Sledge. What makes you think you could kill a person. A person who is a breathing, living human being? Who may have a family perhaps?” Steele pushed Sledge further. “Take out the sentry on the

left if you are capable.” He turned to Sledge. “I am on it Sarge, watch this.” Sledge began crawling toward the enemy outlined by the luminosity of the fire. Capulet followed closely behind.

Under times of extreme stress men notice the minutest detail, Steele watched a small bug crawl across a blade of grass. Capulet noticed how the embers glowed in the dark. Sledge thought of the man’s family as he drew his entrenching tool. Standing close by Steele watched as Sledge crawled toward the sentry dressed in olive green. He moved when the light wind rustled the grass. Slowly but surely Sledge advanced toward the sentry standing, staring at the darkness before him. Bored out of his mind the sentry thought of home or fantasised about some buxom blonde he would never meet on leave. He heard a movement in the tall elephant grass. Dismissing it as the wind and knowing how the grass cut deeply into a man’s face and hands he rested his weapon on his shoulder.

Steele was inches behind Sledge when he watched him creep up to within arm’s reach of the sentry. Striking down with all his might Sledge brought the entrenching tool sharpened like a razor down on the sentry’s neck. The body hit the ground with a thud. Its head almost separated from the neck. Sledge pounced on the body striking again and again. He moved like lightning searching through the sentry’s ammo pouches. Dog biscuits were devoured in seconds as Sledge shoved them into his mouth. He held out half a packet of biscuits to Steele. Steele shook his head then moved toward the second sentry. Tugging at the dead man’s boots Sledge tried them on for size. “Perfect fit might as well take his socks too. He won’t need them anymore.” He crawled through the brush toward Steele.

Waiting for the man to pass Steele crept out of the shadows. Steele whipped a length of rope around the man’s neck and pulled it tight. He held on while the sentry struggled and kicked until the convulsions ceased. Dropping the

sentry to the ground, Steele tied the unconscious man's hands behind his back and shoved a dirty rag into the sentry's mouth.

Crouched beside one of the tents Steele stabbed his knife into the thin cloth pulling it downward. He poked his head through the gap then held his breath. Before him, in the dim moonlight, his eyes fell on boxes of food. He cut the hole wider and slipped through. Waiting outside Capulet and Sledge grabbed the boxes Steele dropped at their feet then hurriedly shoved them into their backpacks. "He is coming round. Make use of the prisoner." Steele ordered strapped a kit bag full of rations and bread on the prisoner's shoulders. Glaring at the prisoner staring defiantly at them Steele pulled him roughly to his feet. Propelling the prisoner forward with a swift kick in the butt Steele pushed him ahead of the others.

Struggling under the weight of their booty the three Legionnaires panted up a narrow path. They walked halfway to the cave where the rest of the men were waiting until they came across a small broken down hut. There Capitaine Bastien-Thiry remained with a handful of men. Steele dropped the boxes on the ground. "Brought you a gift Mon Capitaine, see what information the men can get out of him." He then turned back to the enemy camp while Capitaine Bastien-Thiry and his men carried the food back to the cave along with the now fearful prisoner.

"Right here we go boys, well-done Sledge again. I didn't think you had it in you." Steele smiled in the moonlight. "I told you that I could kill for something to eat Sarge. Man's most primal instinct was taking over." Sledge replied then pointed to a tent. "The tent flap is open Sarge, and I can see a red cross marked on the crates. What do you think we should do Sarge?" Steele peered at the two guards still sitting around the fire eating meat.

“We sneak around the side and avoid any unnecessary confrontation. We really need any medical supplies that we can get our hands on. Follow me.” Steele moved low skirting the areas illuminated by the glow of the fire. Capulet and Sledge followed closely behind.

Suddenly a dark shape rushed out of the shadows barking loudly. “Bloody hell I didn’t see that damn dog!” Capulet yelled. For an instant, they stared in disbelief. Santos strained against the metal chain attached to the collar around his neck. He howled and pounced at Capulet. Steele lifted his Sten and fired two short bursts at the guards. Both crumpled under the deadly hail of bullets then lay at unnatural angles on the blood-soaked ground.

“Help me calm him down, Sarge!” Sledge shouted holding Santos in a headlock. Cries of alarm sounded in the village. Headlights appeared speeding down the rutted dirt road leading from the village to the airstrip. “Sledge, grab the medical supplies. Capulet, get whatever food you can. I will take care of Santos.” Steele yelled aware that discretion was now no longer a priority. Unbuckling the collar around Santos’s neck, Steele pinned his arm behind his back.

Capulet you go first. I will follow with Santos and Sledge you watch our backs. It won’t be long before this place is crawling with Japs.” Steele said pointing to the approaching headlights. Already a Japanese patrol rushed the far end of the runway spreading out to sweep through the camp in line abreast formation.

Pushing Santos along Steele moved as quickly as he could toward the cave. Down in the valley, the Japs swept through the camp then fired illumination mortars in four different directions. Tracer bullets cut through the darkness bouncing off rocks spinning wildly into the night sky. Steele guided Santos gently but firmly into the cave. From the back of the cavern, Steele heard the sounds of muffled screams.

“Very well done Steele, you did a truly excellent job. It seems like Christmas has come early this year.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry beamed delightedly. “We have been sorting through the supplies you brought back from the camp. We have enough basic medical supplies to treat the sick and wounded which means basically everyone present, except you Steele.” He slapped Steele on the back. “I have distributed rations to each man, not too much mind you. For the moment we have to be careful. Our stomachs have shrunk through lack of food. If we were to eat a normal size meal in one sitting, we would become seriously ill. Stomach cramps and diarrhoea would immediately follow.” He pointed to a banana leaf on a stone. “That’s yours, Steele. I gave you a little extra.” Steele sat down on the gravel floor of the cave staring at the food before him. After the past few weeks, he had almost forgotten what a square meal looked like. A slice of bread, two bananas, a tin of sausages with a small amount of rice and two spoons of sugar lay on the banana leaf. Besides, the food, were four cigarettes and half a tin mug of Saki rice wine. “What a bloody feast Mon Capitaine. Has the prisoner talked yet?” Staring at the back of the cavern Capitaine Bastien-Thiry shook his head. “Not yet but he has not been given much chance to I’m afraid.” Steele looked at the Capitaine. “It seems that they have not bothered taking off the gag you placed in his mouth. I will say this though the German members of our unit were extremely interested in him.”

Chewing on a piece of bread Steele washed it down with a sip of Saki feeling it burn down his throat. “I will first have something to eat Mon Capitaine then I will see what the prisoner has to say. Where do we go from here?” Steele asked lighting a cigarette from the embers of a small fire deep inside the cave. “We recuperate here for a couple of days. When the men are in better shape, we carry on marching toward the border. If my estimates are correct, we might have a slight chance of joining up with the main

column. They should be regrouping at a town called Bountai.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry nodded toward the prisoner. “When you are finished eating we will interrogate him.”

Steele wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his tattered combat jacket. “Let’s see what the prisoner has to say but firstly how is Santos doing?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry shook his head. “Santos has been heavily sedated, but I fear he will be scarred psychologically for the rest of his life.” Steele smiled sarcastically. “And the rest of the men won’t be after their ordeal here in Indochina if they survive that is?” He chuckled to himself.

At the far end of the cave, three Legionnaires stood around a bloody and beaten prisoner wearing only his olive green combat trousers. “Has he said anything yet? Do you know what nationality he is?” Steele inquired glancing at the blond-haired prisoner. Steele watched a trickle of blood drip from his mouth run down his chest. His eyes were swollen and dark bruising begun to show on his stomach and arms.

“We found this in his wallet, Sarge. He is a damn traitor look at this.” Handing a folded identity card to Steele the Legionnaire punched the prisoner in the chest. Steele glanced quickly at the identity card then passed it on to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. “Well, it would seem we have a member of the German Communist party in our midst. I wonder what the hell they are doing here in Indochina.” He took a closer look at the prisoner. He seemed to be in his early twenties. He avoided eye contact with Capitaine Bastien-Thiry by staring at the ground.

“He does not speak French or English Mon Capitaine, only German and a fair bit of Russian.” It was Legionnaire Brasov who spoke. “Ask him how he got here and what their mission is, numbers and commanding officers, that sort of thing please.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said feeling a little uneasy. “This is the part I hate Steele, but we have to do what we have to do

to get information.” Steele nodded. “I don’t like it either Mon Capitaine, I never have, but we have to put the lives of our own men first. If it helps keep them alive, then C’est la Guerre as they say.” He stepped closer to the prisoner. Grabbing a handful of hair Steele pulled the man's face close to his. “Tell me what I need to know, and you may just walk away from here. You have my word.”

Staring defiantly at Steele the prisoner sneered. He grunted then spoke in German. “He said that he couldn’t trust a fascist mercenary who fights for the capitalist bankers oppressing the working class people.” A German Legionnaire translated smiling broadly. “God damn Commies, they are always saying the same thing, a bunch of bloody parrots they are.” He chuckled.

“Tell him I will keep my word. Otherwise, he will die a slow and painful death. I will hand him over to Brasov. He fought for the Tsar against the Bolsheviks. They killed his whole family. Then there are a few German Legionnaires itching to get their hands on him as well.”

Hesitating for a moment, the prisoner shrugged then seemed to resign himself to his fate. He began talking. “He says there are twenty-two of them here. There were over one hundred and fifty of them taken from the Russian prisoner of war camps. They were all either member’s of the Communist party before the war, the older ones, that is. The younger ones were civilians or young soldiers. The Commissars promised a better chance of survival than Stalin’s death camps in Siberia.” Translating the German Legionnaire offered his water bottle to the prisoner.

Taking a long drink, the prisoner continued. “He says they were sent to re-education camps in which they were well fed, clothed and given extensive lectures on communism.” Steele lit another cigarette. Continuing to

translate the German Legionnaire wiped the blood off of the water bottle then relieved the prisoner of his boots.

“He says they were trained and shipped off to fight the Nazis in East Prussia to prove their loyalty. They came face to face with a French S.S Regiment, the Charlemagne. The Charlemagne was holding a thin corridor along the coast which enabled the civilians to escape the Russian advance. Boats ferried the civilians across the bay to an area still held by the German forces.” Steele noticed most of the Legionnaires were listening intently. “German communists fighting against French Nazis, that’s a new one.” Steele chuckled.

“Well, it seems the French fought like demons holding back the Russians until the civilians escaped then they withdrew after inflicting heavy casualties on the German Communist unit. According to him, the twenty-two of them here are the only survivors of the unit. They were sent off to Indochina to train the communist insurgents who are supposed to be rising up against the Japanese and also their old French Colonial rulers. It was not until recently they discovered their commander was Jean.” The Legionnaire shook his head. “Who the hell is Jean, Sergeant?” Steele hesitated for a moment. “Jean was the pretentious bastard getting off the plane with all the pomp and ceremony. Don’t worry about him for the moment let’s just say he and I have a long history of animosity between us.”

“Ask him what he knows about Jean?” Steele said to the translator. Waiting for them to continue Steele ordered a couple of Legionnaires to take up a position at the cave entrance. “Everyone seems pretty interested in what’s going on here. We don’t need a couple of Jean’s men sneaking up on us.” He said to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry.

“Well, he says they don’t know anything except that Jean finances most of the operations and funds the communist groups in South East Asia.

Apparently, his latest prodigy is a Viet by the name of Ho Chi Minh. He leads around ten thousand communist guerrillas, the “men in black” as they are called. He says that they are clandestinely supported and trained by the American O. S.S as well as Jean.” The German Legionnaire said.

“Why on earth would the Americans destabilise South East Asia by aiding a communist insurgent group Mon Capitaine?” Steele asked. “There are many things we do not understand regarding their foreign policy Steele. Perhaps they think that they can take over Indochina and do a better job than we,” replied Capitaine Bastien-Thiry.

“He says he does not know what the Japs or Viets did to Santos, but he has heard of a brainwashing technique in use by the communists. To be honest, I don’t think he knows much more Sarge. Can we finish off this traitorous scum?” The translator asked staring at the prisoner with hate-filled eyes. “I gave him my word he would be released if he talked. He does not have much information we can use. I’m afraid that he stays alive, for now anyway. Is that understood?” Steele bellowed the last sentence staring at the men surrounding the prisoner. Nodding the Legionnaires returned to their places in the cave chewing on bread or smoking cigarettes.

Picking up on the mood in the cave the prisoner crawled into a small recess hoping the Legionnaires would forget he was there. For a moment he caught Steele’s eye. He motioned Steele to come over to where he sat. “What do you want?” Steele asked curtly. Tracing numbers in the sand with his finger the prisoner using sign language indicated the numbers of troops the Japanese had at their disposal. Viet Minh effectiveness was noted as well as the German Communist unit. Steele handed the prisoner a cigarette and lit it with a match.

He nodded his thanks then continued. He drew a rough outline of the area in the sand. He placed a stone on the line representing the airstrip then another

where the cave was situated. He traces a line directly west, the direction Steele had planned on taking to reach the town of Bountai. Shaking his head, the prisoner indicated that Steele should not proceed westward.

“Alright enough of this charade, tell me what it is exactly you are trying to explain,” Steele said to the prisoner in German. Startled, the prisoner’s jaw dropped. “Why did you not let on you spoke German?” He looked up at Steele. His one eye was almost swollen shut, dried blood covered his face. “I have my reasons. What do you know about Jean?” He knew the prisoner already denied much knowledge of Jean except that he backed them financially. “It is said amongst my comrades that Jean has targeted this particular unit for personal reasons.” He pointed to Steele and the Legionnaires scattered around the cave, sleeping or eating.

“Did they say why?” Steele asked sitting down beside the prisoner. “No, we did not know why we do not care either. We are here to free the people.” Steele cut him short with an irritated wave of his hand. “Cut the propaganda crap I don’t need a lecture on the virtues of communism. What does all this mean?” He pointed to the drawing in the sand.

“Jean is planning on cutting you off when you try and head westward and link up with the column. He is sending out patrols ahead of you with orders to intercept and destroy you and your men. You are Steele are you not?” Steele nodded. “He has somehow managed to persuade the Japanese commander to follow his instruction, the Viet Minh and of course, my unit is all out to annihilate every man here.” He waved a hand encompassing all the Legionnaires in the cave. “Honestly Herr Steele I do not know much more. I do have one critical piece of information to share with you but only if you honour your agreement to let me live. Jean merely said that he has been searching for something you stole from him. You were to be captured

alive, if possible.” He noticed the Legionnaires occasionally look up at him with murder in their eyes.

“I think we have managed without your help so far. Perhaps we don’t need you anymore.” Steele stood up and turned to walk away. “You have managed to make it this far Herr Steele but have you ever wondered how the Japanese followed you through the almost impenetrable jungle and swamps? Tracked you over mountain trails so narrow you have to walk in a single file for fear of falling over the edge?” He looked at Steele pleading for his life. This was his last bargaining chip, he hoped like hell he would live. “Tell me more, and I will see what can be done.”

“Do you not think I had a sneaking suspicion that someone was giving our positions away all the time? I have an idea of who the culprit might be, so that is no new information.” Steele lied. He did wonder about the ease in which the Japs followed them through the deepest jungle if it weren’t for someone marking the way. He turned to leave. “Corporal, take care of the prisoner.” Steele nodded to the German Legionnaire staring down the prisoner. “I will do it right away Sarge.” Eagerly the Corporal jumped to his feet. After all the time spent without food and a place to shelter he felt like a new man.

He stepped toward the prisoner holding his bayonet outstretched. It glinted menacingly in the light of the fire. “Wait, Sergeant. I have something else to tell you. I know where Jean’s lair is, well at least the one in China and he is heading there now.” Steele held up his hand. “Wait a moment Corporal. Let me hear what he has to say.” Stopping the corporal abruptly nearly dropped his bayonet. “Bloody hell Sergeant you never told us you could speak German.” Steele suddenly realised the whole conversation had been carried out in German. “Well let’s just say I have been around long enough to have learnt a few words.” Looking sheepish the corporal turned to Steele. “Sarge

when I said I would shoot you in the back if you made us walk through any more of those jungle swamps infested with those damn leeches I never meant it. Really I did not Sergeant.” He looked like a schoolboy caught with his hand in the cookie jar. “That’s alright Corporal I did not think that you had the balls to do it anyway.” Laughing loudly the Legionnaires enjoyed the Corporals discomfort.

“Back to your places men, I have something to discuss with the prisoner.” Steele dismissed the Legionnaires with a wave of his hand. “Tell me more about Jean’s lair as you call it. Why would he have taken you there in the first place?” Steele sat down staring intently at the prisoner. “We delivered works of art which were first looted by the German army then taken afterwards by the Russians. Jean has a stronghold over the border in China. We were able to move freely about as he had connections with the Chinese Communist rebels in the area.” He looked anxiously in Steele’s direction. “I have told you all I know Sergeant. You have to keep your word. You promised I would live.” Pleading with Steele, the prisoner stared at the exit to the cave. He calculated the odds on rushing through and out into the open valley. Instantly he dismissed the idea as suicide.

“What is your name boy?” Steele asked. “I am Klaus Wittman Sergeant.” Walking toward the Legionnaires resting on the cave floor Steele made an announcement. “This is Klaus, and he will be treated as a prisoner of war. If anyone intentionally harms him, you will have me to answer to. Is that understood?” In silence, the Legionnaires simply nodded. One of the German Legionnaires threw Klaus a slice of bread and a water bottle. “I am from Dresden what news do you have? Are our boys still holding the bloody Russians back? My family has a restaurant in the city centre. I have had no news from them for the longest time.” For a moment Klaus looked at the floor of the cave then turned to the Legionnaire from Dresden. “I am

sorry mate, but Dresden is no longer. The Americans and British hit it with incendiary bombs day and night. There is nothing left.” One by one the German Legionnaires approached Klaus seeking news of their towns and cities wondering if they had been spared destruction. All of them sat in grim silence after hearing about the thousand bomber raids and the advances made by the Allies deep into the heart of the country.

Outside the aircraft took off in a northerly direction while the Japanese and German communists spread out in search of French stragglers. Steele watched the Legionnaires standing guard at the cave entrance making sure no-one ventured out. For the moment the Japanese had no idea where Steele and his men were. Once they continued marching the Japanese would undoubtedly pick up their trail with the help of the traitor. Steele and the men were content in the cave recovering slowly from their ordeal. Ahead lay weeks of hard marching through jungle and mountain trails with the enemy hard on their heels every step of the way. For the moment they slept, ate and waited for the right moment before slipping through the hills surrounding Dien Bien Phu on their perilous journey to safety in distant China. Steele wondered how they would be received by the Chinese if they made it across the border. Each day the Japanese numbers grew steadily, their heavy weapons and even a few spotter aircraft had caught up with the columns tracking the Legion.

Chapter 22

“The holiday is over boys, time to get going again unless you would rather go into the town and introduce yourself to the local Japanese commander,” Steele said gathering up his weapon and two grenades. “I am going down into the valley with three men for supplies. According to Klaus here there is a food depot which is very lightly guarded. When we get back, I will distribute the supplies, and then we carry on marching before sunrise.” He

turned to leave. “Do you really think it’s worth the risk Sergeant? I am very well aware of the desperate need for supplies but going down there is suicidal.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry pointed at the valley where yet another Japanese column prepared to head out into the surrounding hills searching for French troops. The late afternoon sun setting in the west bathed the valley in golden sunlight accentuating the vivid shades of jungle green through which the enemy could clearly be seen. Those remaining in the town and near the landing strip set up halfhearted defensive positions knowing that they were not about to be attacked during the night.

Returning from their night raid Steele and the three Legionnaires dropped off backpacks full of tinned food, mostly Japanese and a few fresh rations. “Well done Steele, did you meet with much resistance?” Taking a slice of almost raw water buffalo, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry grimaced as he attempted to chew into the hard steak. “Not much Mon Capitaine, we did have to eliminate two Jap officers sitting around the B.B.Q and a guard, but I don’t think the officers felt much.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stared at Steele for a moment. “They had been gulping down rice wine at an alarming rate.” Steele handed Capitaine Bastien-Thiry a half-full bottle of rice wine. “To be honest, this was full, but we were thirsty climbing these damn hills. There were two other bottles as well, but they broke when one of the men dropped them by mistake.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry smiled at the excuse. “Well done Steele, I do not know how we would have made it this far without you.”

“How is Santos doing Mon Capitaine, I have been watching him, but all he does is sitting the corner looking at Capulet and cowering.” Steele pointed toward Santos who had not moved from the small area of the cave allotted to him by the Legionnaires. “He has been very disruptive on the men’s morale Mon Capitaine as they all imagine the fate which awaits them if

captured by the Japs or even the communist Viets if I may add. I have tried talking to him, but I think it would take ages under the right medical care to change what they have done to him psychologically.” Glancing over at Santos Steele watched Santos snarling at Capulet.

“Right Steele we rest until midnight then we head off toward Malitao which should take around two weeks instead of heading west then north following the column. After that, they are going to the town of Sze Moa in China. I really hope we can sneak out of here without attracting any attention, Steele.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry seemed concerned. He knew someone was giving their position away but had yet not uncovered the traitor.

Under a shadowy moon, Steele set off with the advance party over terrain he had already scouted out. Slowly and stealthily they moved through the dark night avoiding Japanese observation posts. Two O.P posts had to be taken out by Steele, and his men before the rest of the Legionnaires could follow. By daybreak, they had advanced thirty kilometres through the hills escaping detection the team slipped into the thick jungle cutting their own trail through the dense foliage.

“We have been moving northward for two weeks now Sergeant, do you not think we have missed the column, perhaps we are even ahead of them?” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry took a reading on his compass. “Who knows Mon Capitaine but we press on toward Malitao where we will either see evidence of the column had passed by, or we beat them to Sze Moa in China. What will we do there Mon Capitaine?” Steele scratched his leg then lit a cigarette. He placed the hot coals on a leech sucking his blood. It wiggled then dropped to the muddy riverbed floor. Steele crushed it under his heel watching his own blood spurt from the leech. For a moment he wondered why the leech did not die immediately after sucking his blood. “I presume we will be reorganised after a short rest and recuperation then we will

march straight back here and retake Indochina. It does, after all, belong to France does it not?" Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stated.

"We will be in Mailto tomorrow Mon Capitaine. I can see the rooftops of the houses and all the huts surrounding them." Steele pointed to the town from his perch overlooking the valley. "It will be a hard job breaking through the enemy lines Mon Capitaine. The Japs are stretched across the valley almost right up to the town." Steele pointed to the Japanese infantry preparing to move in on the town. Their patrols walked confidently toward the first few huts. Infiltrating the immediate area they casually continued onward until they came under a deadly hail of fire. The ranks of the advancing Japanese thinned then went to ground.

"Holy shit Mon Capitaine I think we have found them!" Steele exclaimed excitedly. Suddenly the moral went skyrocketing. "Let's cut through the bastards and join up with our battalion. I bet they have been giving the Japs hell all along the way," Sledge shouted aiming a wounded Japanese machine gunner. Steele waited until Sledge took the shot and the Jap crumpled. "Take it, easy boys, there are about a hundred of the bastards between the rest of our men and us. We wait until dawn then we break through. Dig in men." Steele set up the Legionnaires in all-around defence in a triangular formation with the three machine guns at the points.

As dawn broke, Steele and his men skirmished through the Japanese forward position. Under covering fire from the Legionnaires manning strategic positions in the town, they stumbled into a shell-scarred building. "Capitaine Bastien-Thiry reporting, bloody good to see you old chap." He slapped a gaunt-looking Lieutenant on the shoulder. "What is the situation at the moment?" He stopped suddenly looking around the room. Exhausted almost skeletal men stared at the new arrivals then went back to firing on the Japanese attempting to close in on the town.

Waving a hand around the room the Lieutenant indicating the dozen or so Legionnaires simply shrugged his shoulders. "We have orders to hold the building until the last moment then get the hell out of here and regroup with the rest of the battalion over there." Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stared at the small whitewashed road marker indicating the border between China and Indochina. "So near yet so far Mon Capitaine. I was hoping to find the battalion in better shape, but unfortunately, they look as bad as or even worse than us." Steele nodded at the ragged Legionnaires fighting a desperate rear guard. Barefoot, for the most part, suffering from dysentery and infested wounds they fought knowing their friends were setting up the next defensive position where they would retire to when told to do so. Discipline held firm even under such desperate circumstances.

"What's wrong with him?" Pointing at Santos, the Lieutenant shook his head. "Is it shell shock or jungle madness?" Santos squatted in the corner whimpering like a dog. From time to time he glanced at Capulet. "The Japs did a number on him he thinks he is a dog. Sometimes I think he is trying to say something but Santos either growls or whines." Steele said loading rounds into his magazine. Glancing over Steele saw Capulet staring angrily at Santos. Slowly Capulet moved his hand toward his bayonet. Santos backed into the corner cowering.

"Capulet get the wounded ready to move, strap that one onto Wallace's mule. After that wait for my signal." Towering over Capulet menacingly Steele waited until he had stalked off into the adjoining room which served as a makeshift casualty station. Peering around the corner, Steele felt his stomach tighten. Five wounded Legionnaires lay in their own blood on the concrete floor littered with broken tiles, garbage and shattered bits of furniture. Clouds of bloated flies buzzed angrily when disturbed by the bearded medic rushing from one injured man to another. "Get in here you

and give me a hand. I can't stop the bleeding on my own!" The medic threw Capulet dirty rag which matched the torn curtains hanging in the shattered window. Steele went back to the business of killing the enemy.

"That's it, men, it's time to pack it in and get the hell out of here." Excitedly the Lieutenant screamed his orders. "The wounded have all been taken across the border so let's start moving out. Keep down and move fast!" Darting into the room, Steele saw only bloodstains where the wounded had been. He searched the building for Santos.

"He went with the wounded Sergeant. I didn't think he would be of much use giving his current state." Steele shook his head. "And did Capulet go with them Mon Lieutenant?" Both men darted out of the doorway running down the deserted street toward the stone marker. "Was that the small one with the shifty eyes?" Catching his breath, the Lieutenant then nodded. "Yes, he was assisting the medic. I apologise for not informing you before taking command of your men, but I had to make a split-second decision. I am sure both your men will be with the rest of the battalion just over the hill." Heavy enemy fire followed the Legionnaires on their desperate bid across the frontier. Waiting in hastily dug defensive positions, the battalion prepared to meet the impending Japanese attack.

Steele gathered his men together beside a small stream. "Has anyone seen Santos and Capulet?" He paced nervously cursing himself for not having kept a closer eye on Capulet. "Wallace says he saw Capulet pushing Santos to keep up with the rest of the wounded but then they were separated from the rest of the group, and no-one has seen them since. Perhaps they are somewhere amongst the rest of the men." Capitaine Bastien-Thiry said shrugging his shoulders. Looking around Steele glanced down the line. "If this is all that remains of the battalion it will not take us long to find them if they are here Mon Lieutenant."

Chapter 23

“Sarge, the scouting party has reported no advance by the Japanese across the frontier. They said that a small group of our wounded was found hiding in the huts. It seems that they could not make it through the Jap lines. All of the men were taken into the centre of the village where the Japs slit their throats one by one.” Jones spat angrily. He turned toward the small town across the frontier. “I know what you are thinking Jones, but we are in no shape to exact revenge on the Japs right now.” Looking around Steele saw the skeletal figures of the survivors. “Around one-third of the men did not make it out of the original column that left Tong. There are two other columns which set off in different directions. I hope they fared better than we did.” Steele nudged Wallace wondering if he was still alive. Opening his eyes, Wallace managed a quick semblance of a smile. “It will take more than a little march and a few Japs to kill me, Sarge.” Delirious, Wallace shivered before losing consciousness.

“There are at least nine or ten days marching ahead until we get to Sze Moa where we should find decent food and medical care. After that, we must then march to Yunnan Fu or Kunming, and that will take us approximately twenty days. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stared at Klaus for a moment. “What are we going to do with this one Steele?” Klaus sat with two German Legionnaires talking. No shoes, tattered trousers and shirtless he was indistinguishable from the others. “He did guide us through the enemy lines from Dien Bien Phu. Remember the time we almost walked into an ambush? He snatched a machine pistol off one of the wounded and gunned down two Japanese machine gun teams.” Steele smiled at the thought. “Yes, I know we owe him. Sledge is not a Legionnaire, but he has done his part. Perhaps for the moment, we will turn a blind eye. After all, our boys have fought and died for each other since this all began. Most of them are from

countries currently at war with each other.” Steele continued while he watched two officers talking while looking in their direction. “Only the Legion can form men of different nationalities into elite soldiers willing to fight and die for a common cause.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry nodded enthusiastically. “And that common cause is the honour of fighting for the Legion Steele.”

“It looks like trouble Mon Capitaine coming our way Mon Capitaine,” Steele said as the two officers approached. The taller one called out for Steele then gave him his orders. Ten minutes later Steele marched down the sand road ahead of the battalion in search of the Chinese officials said to be meeting them.

“Why did they choose you, Sarge?” Jones asked cursing under his breath. “They asked us to go on ahead because I can speak a little Mandarin, Jones. Here come two riders. Galloping to within a few feet of Steele and his men the two riders skidded to a halt amidst a shower of dust and pebbles. “Sergeant Steele of the Second Battalion, Major.” Snapping to attention Steele addressed the Chinese officer smartly. Looking down from his horse the officer seemed surprised to hear a foreigner speaking Mandarin.

“I am Major Woo. I am here to discuss your battalion’s passage through to Sze Moa and ensure that you do not interfere with or even march through towns or villages in the region.” He paused for a moment. “It is a pity you speak Mandarin and French Sergeant. I would have welcomed the opportunity to practice my English.” Steele nodded then smiled. “Well, then Major Woo it would be my privilege to be of service to you. English is my mother tongue.” Major Woo beamed. “At last, I have found someone with whom I may converse. Let us ride Sergeant. Lieutenant, dismount and carry on with the Sergeants men on foot. Steele noticed the Lieutenant’s reluctance to dismount.

“I cannot ride while my men are forced to march in their condition Major,” Steele said wondering if he had offended the Major. “Well, then we walk together Sergeant. Please tell me about your journey.” Dismounting the Major ordered his Lieutenant to ride ahead and prepare for the Legions arrival.

By nightfall, the men of the second battalion were sheltering in thatched huts preparing rice and chicken in the woks, provided by Major Woo. Steele was given the task of translating the terms of the agreement whereby the Chinese would allow the Legion passage provided they paid their way. Chests of gold coins transported by the battalion headquarters section provided the necessary funds. There was no transport in the region recently devastated by an earthquake. Day after day they marched. Men died along the way succumbing to their infected wounds or some tropical illnesses.

Finally, on May 12 the battalion entered Sze Moa where they regrouped with the other two battalions. Colonel Alessandri greeted the men warmly. Medical teams tended to the wounded, priority cases were airlifted to Kunming.

Steele helped a wounded Legionnaire over to French mission where wounded and sick received treatment before being flown out. For a moment he stared blankly at the familiar figures of Santos and Capulet. Santos lay on the floor of the mission with a priest kneeling beside him. “What the hell are you doing Capulet and why did you run off on your own?” Steele stormed over to them. “Glad to see you made it Sergeant,” Capulet replied sarcastically. “I have been telling you all along that an evil spirit possesses him. I want to make the mark of the cross on his forehead and get him to a priest for an exorcism.” He noticed a knife in Capulets hand. White-faced, the elderly priest, looked desperately at Steele for help.

“He has been brainwashed Capulet, enough of your mumbo jumbo. Now leave Santos to the medics and come with me.” Steele grasped Capulet firmly by the arm lifting him to his feet. “Santos will be evacuated to Kunming shortly. You are coming back with me.” Hesitating Capulet cursed then patted Santos on the shoulder.

Some of the strain was gone from the faces of the men who had marched over a thousand kilometres in ninety-three days fighting all the way. Offered an airlift by the Americans a big burly Russian, Commandant Tokhadze said. “I thank you, but you can fly out my sick and wounded, those capable of marching will march. The Legion always marches.” Airlifted to Kunming then on to Calcutta in India the critically sick and wounded did not have to endure the three-week long march to Kunming.

Chapter 24

“We have been here in Kunming for three weeks now, let us return to Indochina and get stuck into the Japs Mon Capitaine,” Steele begged, knowing that if he procrastinated any longer the chance of finding Jean would be slim. He knew Jean did not stay long in one place. Klaus was the only one who claimed to have any knowledge of Jean's lair in this very region. Steele knew it would not be long before iron discipline and organisation of the Legion came into full swing. Klaus would be compromised in no time at all.

“I have good news for you in that case Steele. I managed to persuade the higher powers to run a little reconnaissance mission along the frontier. They were only too willing to accept you and your men's request to volunteer for the mission. “Basta, here we go again. I am taking two pairs of boots along with me this time.” Capulet cursed then began sorting his kit out. Jones shook his head and tapped Klaus on the shoulder. “Let's get you ready boyo.” Steele watched Sledge walk up to Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. He

attempted a salute. Rolling his eyes, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry nodded and pointed Sledge in Steele's direction. "Is there anyone else joining us Mon Capitaine?" Steele asked. "No Steele, I thought it best to keep it in the family, so to speak." He gathered the men together. "We leave for a small village here in the Yunnan province not far from our present location. It's a place called Jinning situated approximately fifty kilometres South West of here." He lit a cigarette then continued. "I have arranged for a small boat to take us to the Dianchi Pool as this lake is called. It will leave us with around ten kilometres to march once we are dropped off on the far shore."

Scratching his head, Jones looked at the rough map Capitaine Bastien-Thiry had managed to requisition from a Chinese officer. "But Mon Capitaine, that still leaves us at least three hundred kilometres to the border with Indochina. What do we do after we get to Jinning?" For a moment the Capitaine hesitated. "Leave the thinking to me, Jones. Get ready to move out at midnight tonight. Steele, see to it the men have what they need in the way of ammunition, weapons, and supplies." He turned abruptly and walked off to his tent.

"He doesn't seem to be in a good mood. Maybe if he gets to grips with the Viet Minh or the Japs, he will be a little happier." Steele smiled checking through Sledge's kit. Still gaunt and underweight the team was never the less still in fighting shape. "Has anyone figured out how we will be resupplied en route? As we all know, there is little or no food to be had along the way in the villages." Capulet scratched his head. "I think something strange is going on here."

The trip across the lake was uneventful except for Sledge who puked almost as soon as the first small waves gently rocked the boat. Setting foot ashore the Legionnaires checked their kit silencing any objects that might rattle or clink giving their position away. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry took point instead

of ordering one of the men to walk in front. He set off at a blistering pace. “Bloody idiot isn’t carrying this damn machine gun, and ammo is he?” Jones whined. “Shut up Jones and keep walking,” Steele whispered roughly then slung Jones’s extra ammunition belts across his shoulders. “Never expect your men to do something that you will not.” He thought to himself. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry eventually called a short halt. “There are three different paths, Steele, get Klaus up here, and we will see if it was worth all the trouble of keeping him alive.” He stood at the junction looking at the map. There is nothing on this part of the map Sergeant, only a blank area encompassing fifty square miles. It seems as if the map makers deliberately avoided this area.”

Quietly Klaus approached the junction where Steele and the Capitaine stood. “So what do you say Klaus, which path do we take?” Steele asked. Clearly, nervous Klaus hesitated. “We came through here at night Mon Capitaine, but I am almost sure that we are near the place Jean uses as his base here in the Yunnan province. I recognised the little village we came ashore at. If we continue up this mountain path, I think we will arrive there very shortly.” He closed his eyes as if visualising the route they had taken. “We go left Mon Capitaine, I am sure of it.” He pointed to a narrow path leading up the side of a hill the men would have sarcastically called a mountain.

As good as his word Klaus led the team up the narrow path. Presently they arrived at a rocky outcrop. “Over there Sergeant, that is where Jean has his fortress. We dropped off weapons and supplies at the temple on the top of the hill.” Klaus pointed to a two-story pagoda with a tower. “They will be able to see our every move Mon Capitaine. If Jean has his men positioned on the temple walls, they will annihilate us before we even get close.” Steele said scanning the walls for signs of life. “Take a good look at the

place and wait for my orders, Steele.” Capitaine Bastien-Thiry returned with Klaus to where the men waited.

“Steele I need you over here, make sure the men are ready to move out in five minutes.” The usual chorus of groans and curses from the men accompanied the Capitaine’s order. Steele waited for Capitaine Bastien-Thiry to continue. “This is your chance Steele we can finally get our hands on Jean and finish him for good. I will leave that to you. His lair is somewhere up ahead. I have sent Sledge and Klaus to reconnoitre the area.” Steele peaked over the outcrop. “It must be at least one-hundred yards along a narrow path devoid of cover Mon Capitaine. If they are spotted, they are dead men. Why did we not wait until nightfall?” Turning to Steele Capitaine Bastien-Thiry smiled. “If Jean is there he will want to get his hands on you just as badly as you wish to take him out. I know it sounds very cold, but I would rather risk losing those two than two Legionnaires.” He lay down next to Steele watching Klaus and Sledge advance toward the temple.

For what seemed an eternity the two men walked hesitantly up the narrow path expecting to be gunned down at any moment. Reaching the large wooden doors, Klaus covered Sledge while he slowly opened one of the doors. He disappeared inside, Klaus waved to the rest of the men waiting to advance then slipped in after Sledge. Minutes later Klaus appeared in the window of the tower. He signalled again then disappeared from view.

“Right, it seems as if there is no-one home. Steele and I will go next. You two follow when we are in the building.” Pointing to Capulet and Jones, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry set off up the path. “We shouldn’t be walking together Mon Capitaine, what if we both get taken out? The men will be leaderless.” Steele said. “Have no fear Steele. I am almost sure the place is

deserted.” He replied walking nonchalantly with his weapon slung over one shoulder.

Stepping through the partially open door, Steele scanned the courtyard. In the centre, he saw a small fish pond with a fountain bordered by small trees. He walked to the far end of the courtyard coming to a wooden door studded with metal nails forming the symbol of the Brotherhood. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stood beside Steele covering him with a Sten gun. A clamour behind them in the courtyard announced the arrival of Capulet and Jones.

Kicking open the door Steele stepped inside the long narrow corridor leading deeper into the temple. Stale cold air sent chills down his spine. It felt as if he was entering a crypt. The smell of rotting vegetation and damp earth permeated the narrow passageway. Sledge rushed into the corridor panic-stricken. “Mon Capitaine, it’s Klaus he fell from the tower onto the flagstone courtyard below.” He babbled wide-eyed with shock. Steele turned to face Sledge. Automatic gunfire erupted outside. A heavy metallic object smashed into the back of his skull. Dropping to the soggy earth floor, Steele felt his spin then go dark.

Regaining consciousness Steele tried moving. His hands were tied to the armrests of a heavy wooden chair. A strip of leather around his throat tied to the back of the chair restricted his movements further. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched a dozen flaming torches slowly advancing through the dimly lit cavernous dungeon. Forming into a semi-circle in front of him Steele stared at the black-robed figures holding their torches outstretched. One of the figures broke off from the rest of the formation to light torches hanging off of the wall and then a large brazier filled with wood and coal. Firelight flooded the dungeon revealing Brotherhood banners on the walls. He stared at an ornate high-backed throne structure set on a raised platform. Slowly the Brotherhood members circled Steele strapped to the chair. Each

took it, in turn, to stare at the immortal Knight Templar, hate-filled eyes glared at him from the depths of their black hooded robes. Chanting eerily the Brotherhood members began to work themselves into a state of frenzy like excitement. Their bizarre procession circled Steele faster by the minute. Body odour now mingled with the stench of wood fire smoke and rotten vegetation. Reaching a crescendo, the chanting stopped abruptly. Jean stood before all assembled on his podium. Graciously he acknowledged his servants with a slight wave of his hand. Maliciously glaring at Steele, he smiled triumphantly. Cheering wildly the Brotherhood members took up their semi-circular positions once again eagerly watching Jean closing in on Steele with a razor-sharp steel dagger.

Chapter 25

Jean drew his face close to Steele's. His breath reeked of fish and broccoli as he spat into Steele's face. "You haven't changed a bit since the last time we met Steele. Perhaps a few more scars, but generally still the handsome devil you have always been." Slashing the knife down Steele's face his eyes sparkled watching the blood trickle down Steele's cheek. "I am really going to enjoy this Steele and do you want to know what the best part is?" He paused sensing the Brotherhood members hanging off his every word. "I managed to surround you with my people. You never had the faintest idea who they were nor did you know that they were constantly feeding me information." He turned to acknowledge the applause from the Brotherhood members magnanimously. "Your little girlfriend, Jasmin, she was one of my converts. Pity, she died during a failed blood transfusion. My blood or should I say our blood does not seem compatible with mere mortal's bodies." Jean snapped his fingers. A member rushed over to his side holding a silver tray. Grasping a bottle of champagne from the tray, Jean sabered the

cork with his silver knife. Champagne gushed from the bottle. Jean held it to his thin lips drinking heartily. “It is an excellent vintage Steele. I have been saving it for an exceptional occasion.” Lifting his head, Steele looked Jean straight in the eyes. “It looks like you spilt more of it than you drank when you opened it you stupid bastard.” Steele sneered. Jean smacked him on the side of the head with the bottle.

“May I present to you the person responsible for this little setup? He went beyond the call of duty marching through the jungles and mountains on your epic escape from Indochina.” Turning to the robed members, Jean pointed to a member on the far left. “Please step forward and receive just compensation for your contribution brother.” All eyes were on the member as he shuffled nervously toward the centre of the room. Striding purposefully toward the member Jean guided him to where he stood facing Steele.

“Behold the traitor in your midst Steele. The Brotherhood member who walked beside you day after day knowing you were his mortal enemy. I give you Legionnaire Sledge!” Dramatically Jean threw back the black hood on the monk-like habit covering Sledge’s face. He threw back his head laughing when Steele locked eyes on Sledge.

“Our member, dear brothers, left the comfort of his luxurious home to slip into his role as a wayward Legionnaire lost in the chaos of the retreat. I call it a retreat Steele because it sounds better to me than a fighting withdrawal.” He snapped his fingers again. Two members rushed forward with a wooden chest which they placed at Sledge’s feet. Kicking the lid off of the chest Jean smiled as the members’ murmured their approval. Gold and silver coins, jewellery and pearls glinted in the light of the torches. “There is more Sledge I have included title deeds to some prime real estate

properties worldwide and bonds. But wait there is more!” He beamed pausing for effect.

“Stand proudly before your enemy Sledge.” Jean smiled triumphantly. He nudged Sledge closer to Steele. “Take this dagger and make your mark. You will have the privilege to draw first blood. The others will all have their turn later.” Standing before Steele, he gripped the dagger tightly in his sweaty hands. Sledge stared at Steele then lifted the dagger. Hovering above Steele’s chest, the dagger remained there in Sledge’s trembling hand. For what seemed an eternity he stared into Steele’s defiant blue eyes.

“Ha! It is just as I had expected. You do not have the nerve to do it, just as you did not have the nerve to throw your friend Klaus of the tower an hour ago. We had to do it for you.” He slipped behind Sledge. “Then there is another problem Sledge. You swore to remain loyal to the Brotherhood no matter what.” Unsheathing another dagger from the folds of his black monk’s habit Jean slashed down suddenly severing Sledge’s Achilles tendons on both feet. Howling in pain and fear Sledge squirmed on the floor almost fainting at the sight of his blood dripping on the stone floor.

“You were supposed to deliver Steele to me and the Japanese patrol following the Legionnaires, but you did not comply with my orders. Instead, you began befriending the enemy. You stopped marking the trail causing us to blunder around in the jungle for days searching for any trace of them.” Cutting off an ear Jean held it up for all to see. “When I give an order I mean for you to listen. At times you fired on the Japanese patrols killing or wounding a few. In spite of all I have done you turned against me. Was the seaside villa and riches not enough?” He caught Steele’s eye for a moment. “How do you inspire loyalty and command men with no need to buy their loyalty, Steele?” Not waiting for an answer Jean knelt down. Gripping Sledge around the neck he pushed the dagger into the base of

Sledge's skull. Sledge screamed out loud. He stared at Steele with terror-filled eyes. Slowly his body twitched then slumped to the cold stone floor.

"Enough of the preliminaries, let's get down to business. Steele, you are finished this time I give you my word." Smiling sadistically Jean stepped toward Steele with the bloodstained dagger in his hand. "Another person is dead because of your stubborn refusal to tell me where you hid that damn Ark of the Covenant! How many more will die because of you Steele?" He foamed at the mouth, the ravings of a lunatic. "You will never wield the ark's power Jean you faggot. What have you done to my men?" Steele snarled inches from Jean's hate-filled eyes. He whispered the last sentence causing Jean to lean forward. Steele brought his knee up hard into Jean's crotch. Doubling over in pain Jean squirmed on the floor. Rocking the chair forward before the Brotherhood members could reach him Steele crashed to the floor. Eager hands assisted Jean to his feet while the others pushed Steele's chair back into the upright position.

"Did you bloody fools not think to tie his feet to the chair?" Jean screamed holding his crotch. "If you really need to know the German mercenary met with an accident when he slipped from the tower. The other two fought back, but they were gunned down by my men. I presume they were confirmed kills?" Hesitating for a moment some Brotherhood members nodded eagerly. "Good, that leaves only you Steele. Let's carry on shall we?" Jean looked around the floor stained with Sledge's blood then shrugged his shoulders. "Someone pass me a damn knife!"

"One last question Jean you prick, what happened to the Capitaine?" Playing for time, Steele asked the question not expecting a reply. A sinister smile played on Jean's lips. "This is going to break your heart, Steele. Brother step forward, and remove your hood. Shocked at the response, Steele sat bolt upright in the chair. A dark robed figure stepped forward. For

a heartbeat, Steele looked into the black void of the hoodie covering the Brotherhood member. Slowly he pulled back the hood without any trace of emotion on his face. Astonished by the turn of events Steele stared at Capitaine Bastien-Thiry. “Why Mon Capitaine?” was all Steele could utter.

“I have my reasons, Steele. I kept my word as an Officer of the Legion by ensuring the men under my command reached China. We kept the Japanese at bay long enough for the surviving civilians to escape before we crossed ourselves crossed the frontier. I have been a member of the Brotherhood for years. I could not believe my luck when I bumped into you at the village where you were attempting to rescue Jasmin.” He paused when Jean stepped forward.

“I sent the good Capitaine to intercept you in the village. We knew you, and your outdated notions of loyalty would send you rushing to aid a damsel in distress.” Laughter filled the room. “You always managed to stay one step ahead Steele.” Reaching for a cigar Jean nodded to Bastien-Thiry.

“I learnt to respect you, Steele. Under different circumstances, we would have been friends.” Steele sneered at the Capitaine. “Our world is changing Steele. I believe the world under one strong leader such as Jean is our only option. If I may add, he pays a hell of a lot better than anyone in the world pays their military. When this war ends, I will have lands the size of a small kingdom and riches I never before dared dream of.” He shuffled his feet looking sheepish. “This is not the first time I have served our great leader Jean.” He raised his arm in a salute. “All hail Jean the magnificent!” The members cried in unison turning to salute Jean.

“You have sold your soul to the devil Mon Capitaine. You shame the Legion and the flag you served. I will remember you when this is over.” Steele added menacingly. Turning pale Capitaine Bastien-Thiry stepped back waiting for Jean to continue. He hoped like hell Jean had the power to do

something to contain Steele. He did not want to spend the rest of his life looking over his shoulder.

The muffled sound of an explosion penetrated the thick underground dungeon. Staring at the members, Jean snapped his fingers. Three men under the command of Capitaine Bastien-Thiry detached themselves from the rest. Hastily snatching weapons stacked near the entrance, they disappeared down they quickly went to investigate.

Taking advantage of the sudden distraction Steele slipped the knife he had retrieved off of the floor earlier. In a split second, he had slit the cords binding his one wrist then the other. Lastly, he cut through the bond strapped tightly around his neck. With a cry of alarm, a Brotherhood member backed away from the wiry knife-wielding figure with blood streaks running down his face. The last thing on this earth he saw was Steele's cold blue eyes as the dagger slit his windpipe.

Jean pushed someone in front while he fled to the rear of the room. "Get him, you cowards!" He shrilled in a high pitched voice. "Outnumbered 10 to one Steele stood his ground as the Brotherhood member's crowded in on him. Armed with knives, flaming torches and the shattered chair legs they stepped closer.

"Get your head down Sarge!" Tracers cut through the Brotherhood ranks slaughtering the members closest to the door. "Vive la Legion!" screamed Capulet spewing death from his Sten gun. Firing from the hip Jones emptied a magazine from the Bren gun into the room. Panic ensued while the members scrambled through a small side door. Jean found himself face to face with Steele. Backing against a wall Jean pointed to the chest overflowing with gold coins. "Take them, Steele, they are yours. This is a mistake. I never intended to harm you, my old friend."

Steele stepped closer never taking his eyes off Jean despite the chaos erupting in the room. Plunging the dagger deep into Jean's stomach Steele twisted the blade. Screaming in pain Jean held onto Steele's arm attempting to dislodge the blade. Head-butting Jean twice Steele retracted the dagger from Jean's stomach and swiftly bashed his head against the wall.

"I never liked these bloody priests anyway! They are too touchy-feely with the choir boys for my liking, basta." Capulet laughed reloading his weapon. He fired a short burst into two wounded Brotherhood members then let his Sten gun drop from his hands. "What the hell is this?" He exclaimed pointing to the chest containing the gold coins. Dropping to his knees, he scooped up the contents of the chest. "What the hell would you do with all that gold out here Capulet you idiot, just too much weight to carry in our packs?" Jones said crushing the skull of an injured member with the butt of the Bren gun.

"With this gold, I will march on Paris as did a fellow Corsican all those years ago. I will lead the Grande Armee and avenge Waterloo." Laughing Capulet scooped handfuls of gold coins into his kitbag. "That was a joke you bastard. Drinks on me when we get to the first whore house, and I might even pay for your ladyboy Jones." He laughed until Jones elbowed him on the head. "I will pay my own way, and it will be the first round-eyed girl I see you prick." Shoving Capulet aside Jones closed the lid of the chest and hoisted it onto his shoulder.

"Put the loot down in the corner Legionnaires. We still have things to do!" Steele almost lost his footing in the puddles of blood on the floor. "Let the others go. I will see to this one." He strapped Jean to the throne-like chair on the podium. "Don't leave me here Steel. Surely we can come to some agreement." Muttering the words Jean pleaded with Steele. "I am sealing you up once more you bastard. I hope this time it will be for a few

centuries.” Jean nodded thinking he had got off lightly this time. “But before you will die the death of a thousand deaths.” He ordered Capulet and Jones to fetch bamboo he had seen growing around the pond. While they were gone Steele, let loose all his pent up anger and frustration on Jean. Raining down blows on Jean Steele eventually felt his knuckles hurt. Capulet rushed into the room with an armful of bamboo. “Great thank you, men, break the bamboo into slivers.”

One by one Steele hammered the slivers into Jean’s body ending with his eyes. “I don’t know if that was a thousand, but it was pretty damn near that.” Steele panted, lost for breath. Capulet and Jones had, up until now stood aside watching the torture session. “Seems like you are finished, Sarge. Can we get the hell out of this creepy place now?” Jones asked.

“We are almost ready to leave boys. Search the place for explosives.” Darting down a narrow corridor, Steele entered the armoury. Searching through the crates of weapons and ammunition Steele held his breath when he discovered blocks of plastic explosives. Returning to the dungeon, he whistled for the other two. “Set up the explosives at the doors and then keep the rest for the exterior.” He said priming the detonators.

After they had placed the explosives, Steel punched Jean one last time on the bamboo sliver at the base of Jean’s neck then ordered Jones and Capulet to retire to the gates of the temple. Checking the wiring one last time Steele made his way down the dark tunnel. He heard movement behind him. An arm flashed past attempting to grab him around his neck. Instinctively Steele blocked the arm with one hand and withdrew his dagger stabbing backwards. He heard a loud gasp as steel pierced flesh. Taking a firm grip on the arm of his assailant Steele bent forward throwing his attacker onto the ground. In the darkness, Steele moved like an agile beast stalking its

prey. He thrust with the dagger feeling it penetrate twice as they made their way toward the tunnel's exit.

Blinking in the bright sunlight Steele looked down on Capitaine Bastien-Thiry clutching his stomach, blood gushed from a deep wound. "I am finished, Steele. I have been around long enough to know that a wound like this means a long and slow death." Steele bent down cradling Bastien-Thiry's head in his arm. "Don't speak Mon Capitaine we will get you out of here and into a hospital," Steele said. Bastien-Thiry managed to chuckle. "We are miles from any hospital Steele, leave me and get out of here. I chose my path. Give this to my son if you will please." He lifted the black robe and dug into his combat vest underneath in his blood-soaked fingers held out a battered diary and a tattered photograph of his wife and son. "Go now, Steele. Leave me to my destiny. Options flashed through Steele's mind. He thought of carrying Bastien-Thiry to the town on the lake down the mountain and into a boat and the first aid tent in Jinning. Another a split second later was a dagger in his hand slitting Bastien-Thiry's throat. He decided on the third option. "As your family members were descendants of Templar Knights I will honour your request. I will see to it your son receives your diary. I will never let him know of your treason." He left Bastien-Thiry in the hands of fate or karma as they say here in the Far East.

"Ready to go, Sergeant, you may have the honour of setting the explosives off." Jones smiled as he handed the plunger to Steele. Taking a last look at the temple, Steele turned the handle and pushed the plunger down hard. For a split second, all remained quiet then an ear-shattering explosion swept over the three men huddled on a rocky outcrop. Weighed down by the gold coins in their packs Jones and Wallace talked en route about their imminent discharge as they had served longer than anticipated due to the war. "Come

to my island Jones. It is a life of sun, beaches, beautiful women and siestas at midday.” Caplet laughed.

Hanoi 1954

Chapter 26

The ceiling fan whined rhythmically in the now empty café dispersing the cigarette smoke. It was almost closing time, but the two Legionnaires were still drinking, locked in conversation. Judging by the sombre mood the men were in the café owner decided to quietly withdraw to the small room in the back serving as an office. From experience, he knew that one wrong word or glance could set the Legionnaires off. He did not need his café wrecked tonight. Claudine would handle them in her usual charming way.

Stale cigarette smoke mingled with the scent of expensive perfume and beer. Claudine polished down the bar counter watching the last of the Opera clientele getting into their chauffeur-driven motor cars. A young couple decided to slum it by catching a rickshaw home instead. Light rain left a glistening sheen on the on the now wet roads and colonial style buildings. Under the streetlights, vendor’s food plied their wares while the women of the night smoked cigarettes in the shadows waiting for their clients.

Smiling politely at Claudine, Christophe Bastien-Thiry pointed to the two empty beers on their table. She flashed a pleasant smile then turned to the bar fridge reaching for two cold ones.

“What happened in Jinning, Steele? That was the last entry in my father’s diary. The cover and final pages were blood smeared. Were you the one who sent the diary and my father’s tattered photograph of my mother to us and me in France?” For a moment Steele hesitated, looking at the young Lieutenant, he decided on which course of action to take. Claudine placed

the beers on the table then returned to the bar to make herself a coffee. A dark luxury car pulled up outside the café. Stepping swiftly from the driver's side the chauffeur walked to the bar and ordered two bottles of Cognac. Claudine was about to protest knowing that the law stated all alcohol was to be consumed on the premises only. Slipping a bundle of notes into her hand, he insisted on her keeping the change. Glancing at the wad of money Claudine realised she had the equivalent of two months' salary in her hand even after the bill for the two bottles of Cognac were deducted. "It would be a pleasure Monsieur. Thank you very much." She placed the two bottles in a brown paper bag before handing them over to the Chauffeur. "Please be so kind as to offer this bottle to the Legionnaires sitting at the table over there. It is with the compliments of a fellow Legionnaire." He returned to the car where he slipped the remaining bottle of Cognac through a narrow gap in the back door window. The occupant in the rear seat wound up the window. Sitting in the driver's seat, the chauffeur smoked cigarettes while the car remained parked outside the café.

"We left Kunming at midnight packed into a small boat. There was never any intention of marching back into Indochina. Your father and I went in search of Jean with the help of the mercenary Klaus who had a rough idea of where Jean's lair was situated."

Three French Infantrymen burst through the doors. Laughing drunkenly they lurched toward the bar. "Pardon Monsieur's, but we are closed. Try the bar on the corner. They are open all night." Claudine said pleasantly. "You are not going to refuse three heroes a drink now are you mademoiselle?" The tallest soldier sneered slamming his hand down hard on the counter.

"She said the café is closed Blue." Steele called them "Blues" on purpose, a derogatory name in the French army for green recruits. Turning menacingly toward Steele the three men stared at the veteran. Steele pushed his chair

back slightly, the wooden legs rasping loudly against the floor in the now silent café. The expression on Steele's face sent shivers down their spines. "This place is a dump anyway. Let's go somewhere else, boys." They stumbled out of the door muttering about how they could have easily taken out the two men in the café. "Thank you, Monsieur. There are always drunks like them at this time of night. By the way, this bottle of Cognac is from a fellow Legionnaire in the car outside. That is all I know." Claudine pointed to the luxury car mysteriously parked outside. Christophe Bastien-Thiry reached for the bottle and poured two glasses of Cognac. Toasting the secretive occupant of encapsulated behind tinted windows, they sipped at their drinks wondering who was in the car.

"I do not want to disappoint you Christophe, but there was no desperate last stand, no final great resistance against overwhelming odds." Steele continued. "We marched along a rough jungle track up a hill. There we came across a pagoda. It appeared to be deserted although Jean had definitely recently occupied the main building. The walls had been fortified as had most of the buildings." He poured another Cognac.

"Photographs and paintings depicting Jean hung from the walls. We searched every nook and cranny but found no-one. We were heading toward the nearest village when we walked into an ambush. I do not know if it was Jean's men or Communist guerrillas from China or the Viet Minh who were at the time training in Yunnan province."

He leant closer to Christophe. "As you know when caught in an ambush the only chance of survival is fighting your way through the killing zone. Your father, Capitaine Bastien-Thiry led the charge. Machine gun fire cut into our men, I saw your father hit in the chest. Seconds later a bullet grazed my head, I lost consciousness. When I came to, I was lying in a ditch next to your father. He must have died instantly. I buried your father on a hillside in

Jinning overlooking the lake. I knew the photograph of you, and your mother meant the world to him. I thought that you were entitled to your father's diary, so I took them intending to post them on to you at the first opportunity."

Christophe poured another Cognac. Knocking it back in one gulp he poured another, Steele noticed the young Lieutenant's hands shaking. And what happened to the others in your group? Do you think Klaus led you into a trap?" Pausing for a moment, Steele continued. "Possibly but I was never convinced that he was responsible for leading us into the ambush. Capulet and Jones were missing, and Klaus lay dead in the kill zone. I spent a week looking for the missing men but eventually returned to Kunming. The incident was never fully investigated as we were never authorised to conduct military actions on Chinese soil. I was sent to Calcutta eventually after the Regiment regrouped and refitted we returned to Indochina to fight the Viets."

Claudine placed a record on the gramophone. "Mon Legionnaire" by Edith Piaf drifted through the melancholy ambience in the café. Christophe watched Claudine out of the corner of his eye. She sipped at her coffee glancing over at Steele. "Mademoiselle we would be honoured if you would join us for a drink." Christophe invited her politely. She looked around then seeing the office door closed willingly accepted. Steele stood as she approached the table pulling out a chair for her. "Why thank you, gallant Legionnaire." Claudine chuckled. "Here's to your good health Mademoiselle and to your's Steele, my dear friend." Christophe knocked back the drink then slammed the glass down on the table. "I am feeling a little tipsy. Tomorrow I will feel like shit when we do the early morning run at 06h30, but then who has not done it at least once while still drunk?" He laughed and stood up. Shaking Steele warmly by the hand he then bowed

and kissed Claudine's hand. "Thank you, Steele, for all you have done for my father and I. Rumour has it we are shipping out soon. North Africa, again I hear. Enjoy the pleasures of the Far East while you can my friend." Steele and Claudine watched him leave as the café owner walked out of his office. "Is everything all right Claudine?" He enquired jealously glaring at Steele. "It could not be better Monsieur. We were just about to leave."

Steel reached into his pocket for his wallet. He touched on the letter from Capulet telling him how he was now head of all the families in his region. He was well off as were the rest of their team thanks to Jean's gold. That he was the Godfather in the region and had brought long-standing vendettas to a close, except for the bastard who had insulted him saying that his young wife's tits were big enough that they would be millionaires if he could milk them. He said that the individual in question would be sleeping with the fishes soon. He also added that Jones and Wallace were enjoying the beach and sunshine on his island and that they tossed Santos an occasional bone. He mentioned later in the letter that Santos had recovered and was enjoying the beach, the sunshine, and women as much as any man.

Picking up the half-full bottle of Cognac Steele held out his arm. Claudine linked arms with the battle-hardened Legionnaire, and together they walked out of the café and into the rain-soaked street. Passing the mysterious luxury car still parked outside the café Steele glanced at the rear door window. A dark silhouette of a man raised his glass. Steele could not see who the person was but decided to leave it at that. He snapped off a quick salute before setting off arm in arm with Claudine toward the Ngoc Son Temple two blocks down, sitting down on the lush green grass in the cool morning air filled with the scent of tropical flowers they watched the sunrise. Mist shrouded the small lake beside the temple. Claudine melted

into Steele's arms. For a while, Steele forgot about the horrors and heartbreak of war.

Outside the café, the mysterious occupant of the luxury car lay back in the leather seat. Tonight had been a good night. He struggled with his emotions. He felt incredibly proud of the man his son had become. Capitaine Bastien-Thiry cursed his decision to make a pact with the devil all those years ago. It had cost him dearly. His wife and son, his career in the Legion, everything he held dear. The riches and power bestowed upon him by Jean and the Brotherhood meant little to him when he was forced to watch his son from afar. He tapped on the glass partition of the driver's seat. Slowly winding their way back to the luxurious apartment in Hanoi's affluent quartier Capitaine Bastien-Thiry slumped in the back seat. With a heavy heart, he walked down the long passageway and into the lounge, his footsteps echoing around the quiet apartment. He lit an expensive cigar with a gold lighter encrusted with diamonds. Pouring a glass of vintage Napoleon, he began making plans to travel to North Africa. He knew of a suitable villa close to the Legion's famed Head Quarters in Sidi Bel Abbès. Perhaps if good fortune smiled upon him, he might catch a glimpse of his son.

The End.