

Dying for excitement

PARIS. Gentlemen: Your image too bland? Looking for profile and panache? Just watch jaws drop when you tell your friends you're running off to join the French Foreign Legion.

First, rent the 1939 classic movie *Beau Geste*, swagger to the mirror and wink at its star, Gary Cooper. Maybe also try the 1926 original with Ronald Coleman. Or the 1966 second remake with Telly Savalas. Even Marty Feldman's 1977 *The Last Remake of Beau Geste*. As heart-tugging heroism, the Legion has shelf-life.

Then Google your way onto the seven-language Legion website, and marvel at your future. In its mythic overseas force, France has 7,662 well-trained, ever-ready legionnaires from 136 countries. The Legion fuses these nationalities into a potent, elite force. It's one of the world's toughest, most reliable outfits – in Afghanistan, Kosovo, Chad, Ivory Coast and any other hotspots France likes.

The deal? Between age 18 and 40, you need to be sane (applying may be prima facie evidence to the contrary), be able to do 30 push-ups, 50 sit-ups, eight chin-ups, climb a seven-metre rope without using feet, run eight kilometres with a 12-kilo rucksack in under one hour. A modest criminal record is OK, but nothing awful, please.

A rich anthology of legends, sayings and songs commits men to “honor,” “fidelity” and “courage” – indeed to death for France. Legionnaires' religion is comradeship, their identity whatever they say on the way in, their homeland the Legion itself. It's an awesome ethos for young men hungry for ideals and adventure.

The “brotherhood” guarantees them lifelong pals, even special holiday spas to meet them. Every man going in, whether married or not, is declared a bachelor. When you hear their ribald songs and jokes, you realize this is a heartfelt truth.

The Legion is more about mates than misogyny. Women, in Legion culture, are not warriors; they're the “warrior's rest” -- soothing, off-the-field girl-friends. Frenchwomen, always practical, seem content to let the men do those 30 push-ups and die for France. “Surreal,” sniffs a woman I know about female Legionnaires, “we are not interested in last-stand grandstanding.”

Every year on Bastille Day, you sense the Legion's cachet. Legionnaires slow-march down the Champs-Élysées among faster-moving traditional units, thrilling the crowds with their stern, manly style. Their beards, white kepis (short, stove-pipe hats), red epaulettes on crisp white jackets, and axes on shoulders make them a commanding sight.

But let's look further. France has devised a magnificently trained, all-volunteer force with passionate ideals of service. A small, fast-moving standing army that can do almost anything from stopping massacres and insurrections to starting evacuations and humanitarian relief. All in the most lethal conditions.

Isn't there another place where such a standing international force might prove useful: the United Nations? Instead of begging time and again in crises for often ill-prepared national contingents, why wouldn't the UN recruit only individuals -- as “soldiers of fortune for peace?”

From the UN's founding in 1946, experts have fantasized about a permanent 'world' army to defend peace and security. Great Power disagreements always torpedoed such dreams. With few exceptions, sending UN troops has remained messy, panicky, and/or agonizingly slow. Waste in lives (through delay) and UN money (through perpetual improvisation) is staggering

In late 2003, over 90 countries were contributing 40,000 soldiers and police to 25 UN peacekeeping or peace-building situations. But each time, the UN had to reinvent the wheel. It went out to individual states with begging-cup for soldiers and equipment.

Over and over, the UN has had to race to patch together a plausible, tailored-to-fit force. These rarely fit. Offered troops may be the wrong kind, or lack training and suitable equipment – one group had neither guns nor boots. Officers may lack experience in separating combatants, in anti-guerrilla tactics, or even in providing food.

Reforms based on the excellent 2000 Brahimi Report have improved things. But not enough to make the UN all it could be. Increasingly, and self-damningly, it is subcontracting missions to NATO, Coalitions of the Willing, or regional-power mandates (UK in Sierra Leone, Australia in East Timor).

Something like the French Foreign Legion might meet a multitude of UN needs: speed, specialization, commitment, professionalism, economy. And political convenience: even the go-it-alone U.S. might find a "UN Legion" a handy rescue brigade, perhaps a fig-leaf for Iraq-style failure.

Such a force, with a powerful peace-and-security ethos, decent pay and a clear career path, could attract the world's best soldiers. Motivated, skilled professionals who wouldn't run from danger, as at Srebrenica, but would put their lives on the line for the UN. Pride and prestige could save lives.

Joining the Foreign Legion, as former Canadian member Evan McGorman put it, confers "an unmistakable celebrity status." When you star in Beau Geste, just watch your friends' faces. Why not Gary Cooper in a blue helmet?