

Krisztián Bene¹

Changes in the Composition, Equipment and Tactics of the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment of the French Foreign Legion during the Indochina War²

For nearly a hundred years after its creation, the French Foreign Legion consisted exclusively of infantry units, supplemented only temporarily by “mounted” infantry units, depending on the needs of the theatre of operations. These units did not exceed the size of a company, and their members used their mounts (horses, mules, camels) only to move around, and continued to fight their battles on foot. Based on this positive experience, the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment was created in 1922, and was then successfully deployed in Syria and Morocco between the two World Wars, and with varying effectiveness in France, Tunisia and Germany during the Second World War. The First Indochina War broke out in 1946 and the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment joined the conflict in Southeast Asia in 1947, only to leave in 1955 as one of the last French units. During the war, the ranks of the troop, composed mainly of foreign nationals, were reinforced within a short time by a significant number of local soldiers to alleviate the permanent shortage. In addition, depending on local geography, the unit was equipped with armoured and amphibious vehicles, and sometimes ships, which were used to develop new tactics and operate effectively in these new and very different circumstances. In view of its successes, the unit was greatly improved, originally consisting of 7 squadrons, and by the end of the conflict it had grown to 18 squadrons.

Keywords: French Foreign Legion, Indochina War, cavalry troops, tactics, equipment

Introduction

The French Foreign Legion was traditionally composed of light infantry units representing French interests in the colonial territories. However, the difficult terrain and long distances required the deployment of cavalry units in these theatres of war on many occasions. Consequently, the Foreign Legion headquarters had already established small cavalry units in the 19th century to enable them to operate effectively and with high mobility against enemy forces. The experience gained with these units was convincing, and they gradually took on an increasingly important role in the ranks of the Foreign Legion.

Drawing on the military experience of Central and Eastern European volunteers who joined the Foreign Legion after the First World War, the cavalry units played a decisive

¹ Dean, University of Pécs, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. E-mail: bene.krisztian@pte.hu

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role in all the major campaigns in which the Legion took part in the first half of the 20th century. The most significant of these units is the 1st Cavalry Regiment, which was created in 1921 and is still active today. Its longest deployment in its more than a century of existence was during the Indochina War, in which it fought continuously for nearly eight years. During this campaign, the size, composition, equipment and combat procedures of the regiment were changed significantly – adapting to local conditions. The aim of the study is to review the development and transformation of the Foreign Legion's cavalry corps during the first half of the 20th century, with reference to the Indochina War period, which was particularly decisive in the unit's history.

The birth of the cavalry units of the French Foreign Legion

The French Foreign Legion, created primarily to participate in colonial operations, played an important role in the expansion and defence of the French colonial empire on several continents. Although it was not originally intended to play a greater role, it has been called upon to represent French interests on the European battlefields on several occasions during its existence. In the 1830s, it was deployed in the Spanish Civil War,³ in the 1850s took part in the Crimean War⁴ and the Second Italian War of Independence,⁵ in 1870–1871 in the Franco–Prussian War⁶ and in the First World War in France and the Balkans.⁷

Participation in the latter came at a particularly high price. The Foreign Legion had only 8,800 members before the outbreak of the Great War,⁸ but this number grew rapidly when the French Government authorised foreigners living in the country to enlist for the duration of the war in 1914. As a result, volunteers of various nationalities turned up en masse at the recruiting offices, and by the end of the war 42,883 of them – 32,000 before 1 May 1915 – had passed the medical examination and were able to start military service.⁹ However, the losses suffered in the field were so great that the four marching regiments formed at the beginning of the war and deployed in France were merged on 11 November 1915 into a single corps. The regiment remained in combat until the end of the war, its losses were being replaced on a permanent basis by fresh recruits.¹⁰ These losses were heavy: by the end of the conflict, the Foreign Legion had lost some 35,000 men, of whom 11,000 were killed and 1,200 missing.¹¹ However, the Corps not only made sacrifices but also achieved significant combat achievements, which were rewarded with numerous commendations from the command. As a result, by the end of the war, the Foreign

³ Blond, Georges (2008): *Histoire de la Légion étrangère*. Paris: Perrin. 43–52.

⁴ De Gmeline, Patrick (2016): *Nouvelle histoire de la Légion étrangère*. Paris: Perrin. 105–113.

⁵ Bergot, Erwan (1972): *La Légion*. Paris: Balland. 69–71.

⁶ Mahuault, Jean-Paul (2013): *Engagés volontaires à la Légion étrangère pour la durée de la guerre (E.V.D.G.) 1870–71, 1914–18, 1939–45*. Paris: Grancher. 17–70.

⁷ Porch, Douglas (1994): *La Légion étrangère 1831–1962*. Paris: Librairie Arthème Fayard. 395–446.

⁸ Comor, André-Paul (2013): *La Légion Etrangère. Histoire et dictionnaire*. Paris: Robert Laffont – Ministère de la Défense. 323.

⁹ Bergot, Erwan (1984): *Régiment de marche de la Légion*. Paris: Presses de la Cité. 13.

¹⁰ SHD GR 26 N 862/2. 2^e régiment de marche du 2^e régiment étranger: J.M.O. 1^{er} janvier – 11 novembre 1915.

¹¹ Porch 1994: 444.

Legion's marching battalion was the second most decorated unit in the French armed forces, an exceptional achievement considering the number of units in the French army.¹²

This attitude also contributed to the fact that, after the conflict, the French General Staff gave the Foreign Legion a greater role in colonial conflicts than before. Despite the large number of units in the French colonial forces, the Legion's performance in the war led them to seek a wider deployment. The first condition was to increase the number of units. Accordingly, in addition to the existing permanent units (1st and 2nd Foreign Infantry Regiments), the 3rd Infantry Regiment was formed in Morocco in 1920 from the members of the marching regiment which had fought in France during the World War,¹³ and in 1922, building on the 1st Battalion of the 1st Infantry Regiment and supplemented by the large number of volunteers, the 4th Infantry Regiment was created.¹⁴ In 1930, the 5th Infantry Regiment was formed in French Indochina in Southeast Asia by merging previously independent battalions,¹⁵ and in 1939 the 6th Infantry Regiment was established in Syria.¹⁶

At the same time, the need arose to supplement the corps, which had previously consisted mainly of infantry units, with cavalry units, which would allow for more agile and therefore more effective warfare in the large colonial territories, which often lacked any infrastructure. The Foreign Legion had already met this need early on in its operations and had tried to find an appropriate solution. In 1866, during the Mexican campaign, a "mounted" company was formed, all of them on foot, but with the help of the horse and mule corps assigned to them, they were more mobile than usual and could be quickly deployed to the far reaches of the vast theatre of operations.¹⁷ This experimental innovation proved to be a success, and over the following decades several such units were created within the Foreign Legion, but they were exclusively company-sized units and continued to fight on foot. Consequently, they were not yet true cavalry units, but merely infantry troops with above-average mobility due to the use of load-carrying vehicles, which fought their battles on foot.¹⁸ It seemed logical, therefore, to create a separate cavalry unit within the Foreign Legion, with an excellent supply of men from the volunteers from Central and Eastern Europe, mainly Russians, who were unable to return home because of political changes in their countries, but who had considerable experience in light cavalry warfare. It is estimated that in the early 1920s as many as 20% of the legionnaires were of Russian origin, and among them were many former cavalry officers and non-commissioned officers whose expertise was essential to the new corps being planned.¹⁹ There were also disagreements within the political and military leadership about the way it was to be

¹² Bergot 1984: 98.

¹³ Montagnon, Pierre (1999): *La légion étrangère. De 1831 à nos jours*. Paris: Pygmalion. 182.

¹⁴ SHD GR 12 P 81. Dossier 1. 4^e Demi-Brigade de la Légion Étrangère. Historique, 6.

¹⁵ Thoumelin, Pierre (2013): *L'ennemi utile. 1946–1954. Des vétérans de la Wehrmacht et de la Waffen-SS dans les rangs de la Légion étrangère en Indochine*. Zwickau: Schneider Text. 75.

¹⁶ SHD GR 4 H 257/3. Dossier 3: Groupement de légion étrangère, devenu 6^e régiment étranger.

¹⁷ Comor, André-Paul (2007): Aux origines de l'infanterie portée et de la cavalerie blindée: les compagnies montées et la cavalerie de la Légion étrangère en Afrique du Nord (1881–1939). *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 58(1), 38.

¹⁸ Porch 1994: 372–394.

¹⁹ De Gmeline 2016: 295.

implemented, as not everyone trusted the Russian soldiers because of the revolutionary events. This is illustrated by an episode in Syria, where a cavalry regiment of Russians was formed in March 1919 and disbanded by order of the General Staff in early April.²⁰

Following this precedent, the creation of an independent legionary cavalry unit began in Algeria in August 1920 and continued in Tunisia, resulting in the creation of the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment (*Régiment étranger de cavalerie – REC*) in 1922.²¹ The officers were transferred from the existing legionary infantry regiments, while the non-commissioned officers and crew were mostly volunteers of Russian nationality. For example, of the 156 members of the first squadron of the regiment, 128 were of Russian origin, 22 of them Cossacks, 30 former officers (including a general and a colonel), 14 former non-commissioned officers and 11 former cavalry soldiers.²² This confirms the summary statistics that the proportion of Russians in the unit was still 82% in 1925, therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that the Legion's first cavalry unit drew heavily on the traditions and fighting methods of the Russian light cavalry.²³ At the same time, it is worth mentioning that members of other Central European nations also strengthened the corps, and thus Hungarians were also present in significant numbers in the ranks of the cavalry regiment.²⁴ The new unit chose its motto partly in reference to the traditions brought by the volunteers and partly to the traditionally aristocratic nature of the cavalry: *Nec pluribus impar* (There is no match for it). This also contributed to the fact that the unit was soon known within the Legion as the Royal Legionnaire (*Royal Étranger*), a name that suited the regiment perfectly.²⁵

The Legionary Cavalry Corps(es) between the two World Wars

The original mission of the unit, which was made up of four squadrons and a training squadron, was to provide reconnaissance and to maintain order in Tunisia, but the difficulties that arose in the French colonial empire soon made it necessary to use it for other purposes.

The first crisis zone was Syria, which came under French control as a mandate area at the end of the First World War. Even the establishment of French sovereignty in the early 1920s had been difficult, but the situation took a serious turn in July 1925 with the outbreak of the Druze uprising, which spread throughout Syria in a matter of months.²⁶ The French command redeployed a number of troops to deal with the situation, including the 4th Foreign Infantry Regiment, reinforced by the 4th Squadron of the 1st Foreign

²⁰ SHD GR 4 H 40/6. Dossier 6: Effectifs de la compagnie montée russe, procès-verbaux de formation et de dissolution.

²¹ Szečko Tibor (1994): *La Légion. Une légende en marche. 1^{er} étranger de cavalerie*. Paris: Editions Atlas. 9.

²² De Gmeline 2016: 300.

²³ Porch 1994: 450–451.

²⁴ Montagnon 1999: 181–182.

²⁵ Comor 2013: 757–759.

²⁶ See more about this Ferwagner, Péter Ákos (2017): A francia gyarmati uralom megrendülése a Közel-Keleten. Az 1925–1927-i szíriai felkelés. *Világtörténet*, 39(4), 545–573.

Cavalry Regiment, which was engaged in operations against the Druze up to 1927. It was a complete success, as the Squadron distinguished itself several times.²⁷

The other serious problem was in Morocco, where in April 1925 Abd el-Krim's Rif forces launched a major offensive against French troops after the defeat of the Spanish army. The Foreign Legion, alongside the 1st Foreign Infantry Regiment, was represented by the other companies of the 1st REC in the major engagements here. The uprising was finally suppressed in 1926 by a joint force of French and Spanish troops, with substantial reinforcements from the mainland, but the complete crushing of the resistance and pacification of Morocco lasted until 1935, with the Legionnaires playing their part.²⁸ In the process, the cavalry regiment, which was entirely dedicated to this theatre of operations, proved so successful that its numbers were increased to six squadrons, and in the early 1930s it began to be equipped with transport vehicles and armoured reconnaissance vehicles (initially the 4th and 5th Squadrons).²⁹

Subsequently, the different squadrons of the regiment were assigned in Tunisia and Morocco to garrison and policing duties, a distribution which proved so definitive that in 1939 the 2nd Foreign Cavalry Regiment was formed from the units stationed in Morocco.³⁰ The creation of the new unit was also a recognition of the effectiveness of the cavalry arm, proving that the cavalry, well adapted to changing circumstances, had clearly proved its worth within the Foreign Legion.

The Foreign Legion Cavalry in the Second World War

After the outbreak of the Second World War, the Legion could not be officially deployed within the borders of the mother country, only the newly created formations could be used to defend it – but there were many Legionnaires transferred from the permanent units. From the point of view of the legionnaire cavalry units, the 97th Reconnaissance Group is the most interesting. On 1 December 1939, the French command ordered the creation of the so-called 180th Reconnaissance Group, using personnel from the existing legionnaire cavalry regiments and recruits who had completed their training. The 1st Squadron of the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment formed the basis of the new unit, supplemented by recruits, while the 2nd Foreign Cavalry Regiment replaced the officers and non-commissioned officers from its own cadre. The unit, consisting of 23 officers and 650 legionnaires, arrived in Marseille on 21 March 1940, where it was given a new number (97th) and transferred to the 7th North African Infantry Division.³¹ During its short stay in the south of France, it also received new means of transport, so that the four squadrons of the detachment were equipped as follows in the spring of 1940: the 1st Squadron continued to travel on horseback, the 2nd Squadron received solo and sidecar

²⁷ Blond 2008: 339–341.

²⁸ Soulié, Pierre (2010): 1901–1935: la Légion étrangère au Maroc. *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 60(1), 18–24.

²⁹ Comor 2007: 44–45.

³⁰ Porch 1994: 515.

³¹ Montagnon 1999: 214.

motorcycles, the 3rd Squadron, equipped with heavy machine guns and anti-tank guns, was fitted with trucks, as was the command squadron.³²

The unit, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Paul Lacombe de La Tour, was engaged on 17 May to the Montdidier area, about 100 kilometres north of Paris, to help stop German armoured forces advancing inland.³³ This small but well-trained unit performed particularly well compared to other French units: between 18 and 25 May, it successfully stopped the heavily outnumbered German armoured units in its sector with good manoeuvring and bold attacks.³⁴ The severity of these losses is illustrated by the fact that, at the time of the armistice, the unit had only 12 officers and 250 legionnaires.³⁵ The troop, originally tasked with reconnaissance missions and accordingly equipped with light weapons, was recognised for its exceptional performance with a palm-medal decorated War Cross,³⁶ and 359 of its personnel were individually decorated for their conduct in combat, many of them posthumously. At the end of the campaign in France, the unit was disbanded on 30 September and its survivors were reassigned to the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment.³⁷

The defeat in 1940 also had a serious impact on the Foreign Legion. Its units deployed in the mother country were either destroyed or suffered such heavy losses that they had to be disbanded, and volunteers who enrolled for the duration of the war had to be withdrawn after the armistice, reducing the size of the corps by about half.³⁸ The numbers were so critical that two of the units stationed in the colonies were disbanded: the 4th Infantry Regiment and the 2nd Cavalry Regiment,³⁹ whose members were transferred to other units to maintain their combat value.⁴⁰ This was also necessary two years later when, following the landing of Allied troops in North Africa, the French colonial forces stationed there joined the fighting against the Axis powers in December 1942. The most rapidly deployable and well-prepared units were brought together in the 19th Corps, under the command of General Louis Koeltz,⁴¹ which was subordinate to the U.S. Army in the Tunisian campaign.⁴² These included the 3rd Infantry Regiment, formed largely from subunits of the 1st and 2nd Infantry Regiments, and a separate detachment of two squadrons of the 1st Cavalry Regiment. The legionary units had a good fighting spirit, were eager to take part in the war after a long period of inactivity, and most of their

³² Képi blanc (2008): Le GRD 97, première unité de reconnaissance. *Képi blanc*, 52(6), 22–23.

³³ Gandy, Alain (1985): *Royal Étranger. Légionnaires cavaliers au combat 1920–1984*. Paris: France Loisirs. 65–67.

³⁴ Roumiantzoff, Nicolas Pierre (2018): « Le Roum ». *Le spahi du général de Gaulle*. Paris: Cherche-Midi. 62–63.

³⁵ Blond 2008: 371.

³⁶ Képi blanc 2008: 23.

³⁷ Comor 2013: 437–438.

³⁸ Porch 1994: 559–563.

³⁹ Also, on 31 December 1941, the 6th Foreign Infantry Regiment was disbanded after fighting against Allied forces in Syria. De Wailly, Henri (2006): *Syrie 1941. La guerre occultée. Vichystes contre gaullistes*. Paris: Perrin. 451.

⁴⁰ Montagnon 1999: 232.

⁴¹ De Gouberville, Michel (1971): Le corps franc d'Afrique (1942–1943). *Revue historique des armées*, 27(4), 50–51.

⁴² Broche, François (2002): *L'Armée française sous l'Occupation. La métamorphose*. Paris: Presses de la Cité. 358–369.

members had considerable combat experience, but their equipment, especially heavy weapons, was incomplete and outdated.⁴³

Despite this difficulty, their mission in early January proved successful, as they took 235 prisoners with negligible casualties, while capturing a considerable number of heavy weapons. However, the German counterattacks that began on 18 January inflicted heavy casualties on all the French formations that were affected. In particular, the Foreign Regiment was badly hit by the offensive, losing about half of its personnel in the fighting.⁴⁴ The cavalry regiment played an important role in helping the French to break out of the encirclement of the German troops, who were outnumbered and outgunned (Tiger heavy tanks were used here for the first time).⁴⁵ Nonetheless, its losses were so heavy (two-thirds of its original strength) that it was withdrawn to Morocco at the beginning of March, where it was disbanded on 31 March and its members returned to their parent unit. However, the French command also recognised their efforts by awarding them the War Cross with a palm.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, it became clear that courage and good training without proper equipment were not enough in a confrontation with the armed forces of a major European power, and it became time to modernise the entire armament of the Foreign Cavalry Regiment, together with the other French units in North Africa, which in practice meant the installation of American weapons and vehicles. This changeover took place in Morocco from September 1943, during which the unit was trained as a reconnaissance regiment of the newly created 5th French Armoured Division.⁴⁷ The division, which included a similarly reorganised and reinforced Foreign Legion Marching Regiment,⁴⁸ landed in southern France in September 1944, from where it advanced northwards in pursuit of German invaders retreating from Allied troops. The last German resistance foxhole in the Colmar area was cleared in February 1945, after which the legionaries crossed the Franco–German border in March, crossed the Black Forest to take Stuttgart and from there pushed on to Austria, where, after further fighting, the war ended.⁴⁹ The 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment lost 30% of its personnel during the campaign, but earned its third Military Cross in World War II.⁵⁰

The beginning of the Indochina War

In the aftermath of the Second World War, the French colonial administration faced a very serious crisis in Indochina. This territory of the French colonial empire in the Far

⁴³ Compagnon, Jean (1981): La Légion étrangère dans la campagne de Tunisie (1942–1943). *Revue historique des armées*, 37(1), 193–194.

⁴⁴ Porch 1994: 569.

⁴⁵ SHD GR 12 P 81. Dossier 1. 4^e Demi-Brigade de la Légion Étrangère. Historique, 3.

⁴⁶ Szciesko 1994: 10–11.

⁴⁷ De Gmeline 2016: 383–384.

⁴⁸ Hallo, Jean-Pierre (1981): Le régiment de marche de la Légion étrangère (1943–1945). *Revue historique des armées*, 37(1), 225.

⁴⁹ Gandy 1985: 113–118.

⁵⁰ Comor 2013: 759.

East was officially called the Indochinese Federation and included Cochinchina, Annam, Tonkin, Laos and Cambodia. Having suffered a crushing defeat in Europe, France was forced to give in to the demands of the Japanese Empire. As a result, under pressure from Japanese diplomacy, the French authorities signed agreements (on 30 August and 22 September 1940) with Japan that allowed the latter to install its troops north of the Red River and to use three airfields in Indochina.⁵¹ From July 1941 onwards, agreements were signed allowing Japan to station its troops throughout Indochina, thus making the territory a strategic starting point for Japanese conquest operations. In 1945, fearing an Allied landing in the region, the Japanese decided to take control in Indochina. On 9 March 1945, Japanese forces attacked the French garrisons by surprise. Despite the fierce resistance of the encircled French garrisons, the Japanese vanquished by occupying all the strategic points of the colony.⁵²

In 1945, the French Government intended to re-establish its authority in Indochina. To achieve this goal, the French Expeditionary Corps in the Far East was set up under the command of General Leclerc. However, the realisation of this project was prevented by the action of Ho Chi Minh because the communist politician launched a call for general insurrection on 13 August. His troops, the communist Viet Minh forces, disarmed the Japanese army on the territory of Indochina, which did not show much resistance. As a result of these successful operations and the capture of many weapons and equipment, on 2 September 1945, he declared the country's independence in the name of the provisional government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.⁵³ At the same time, the French authorities started negotiations with the local powers to keep Indochina within the newly created French Union (in October 1946). However, diplomatic negotiations were interrupted in November 1946 when French army artillery bombed the port of Haiphong. This incident provoked an insurrection in Hanoi on 19 December which was led by Ho Chi Minh. As a result, war broke out against French sovereignty by the Viet Minh attacking French troops.⁵⁴

The 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment during the Indochina War

The French High Command tried to redirect all its mobilisable units to the remote theatre of operations, and most of the airborne units were therefore deployed in the conflict. Accordingly, the 2nd, 3rd and 5th Foreign Infantry Regiments, the 13th Demi-Brigade of the Foreign Legion, the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment, the 1st and 2nd Foreign Parachute Battalions, as well as several smaller transport, repair and engineering units, fought in Indochina.⁵⁵ Despite the fact that the legionnaires represented a smaller part of the

⁵¹ Sergent, Pierre (1977): *Les Maréchaux de la Légion. L'odyssée du 5^e Étranger (1940–1945)*. Paris: Fayard. 145–149.

⁵² Broche, François (2003): *L'Armée française sous l'Occupation. Le rassemblement*. Paris: Presses de la Cité. 369–371.

⁵³ Windrow, Martin (1996): *French Foreign Legion Infantry and Cavalry since 1945*. Oxford: Osprey. 3.

⁵⁴ Bonnacarrère, Paul (2006): *Par le sang versé. La Légion étrangère en Indochine*. Paris: Perrin. 57.

⁵⁵ Montagnon 1999: 309–312.

French Expeditionary Force (about 15% of the personnel), the Foreign Legion is the real spearhead of the French forces that is deployed in difficult situations.⁵⁶

The Cavalry Regiment arrived in Indochina from Algeria in February 1947. At that time, it consisted of seven companies without any vehicles, so the first missions were carried out on foot against the Viet Minh forces around the city of Huế.⁵⁷ The arrival of conventional vehicles – American and British made – allowed the participation in the protection of supply convoys, which was a priority for the outposts. 4 squadrons received combat vehicles and 2 were further deployed as mechanised infantry. The regiment was subsequently deployed in Annam and Cochinchina. These vehicles enabled the regiment to contribute as a rapid reaction force to support infantry units and guard posts in emergency situations. The unit's primary tasks were patrolling, maintaining the security of routes, escorting transports and reconnaissance, while its high mobility meant that its subunits were deployed several times in various offensive operations to clear a particular area. The corps therefore initially performed classic cavalry tasks.⁵⁸

From 1948, the regiment underwent a major transformation. Its original staff began to be supplemented by local commando units of soldiers, whose fighting style differed from regular warfare, as they basically fought the insurgents using guerrilla methods. The number of local soldiers within the corps steadily increased, a process of yellowing introduced by the French High Command.⁵⁹ At the same time, this increase in numbers also allowed the regiment to expand, with the gradual creation of new companies, which by 1954 had grown to 18, almost three times as many subunits serving in the regiment as at the start of the war. This development also allowed the regiment to take on a greater role in operations, as the new units increased its combat strength.⁶⁰

At the same time, the equipment of the corps was also significantly modified. To adapt to the local geographic conditions, part of the unit was equipped with American-made M29 and LVT-4 amphibious vehicles, which provided the airmen with considerable mobility in terrain with rivers and rice fields. In 1951, the regiment was equipped with amphibious vehicles as well as tanks, and then with armoured patrol boats to improve its operational capabilities in the river-rich regions of Annam and Cochinchina.⁶¹ To ensure the transport of supplies, an armoured train was also assigned to the regiment, which the Legionnaires worked to reinforce and then to command and protect. To operate not only inland against enemy forces, but the regiment also deployed a junk to patrol the waters off the coast to prevent arms smuggling, and to transport supplies and troops to support larger military operations.⁶² The change in numbers and equipment also had an impact on the

⁵⁶ Porch 1994: 608.

⁵⁷ Bodin, Michel (2007): La cavalerie en Indochine, 1945–1954. *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 58(1), 65–66.

⁵⁸ Szecsko 1994: 12.

⁵⁹ Bodin, Michel (2010): Le jaunissement de la Légion en Indochine, 1950–1954. *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 61(1), 69–70.

⁶⁰ Comor 2013: 760.

⁶¹ Gandy 1985: 121–126.

⁶² De Gmeline 2016: 426–428.

operational use and tactics of the unit. As the regiment gained considerable mobility in Southeast Asian conditions, which were very different from the European (and African) theatre of operations due to the amphibious vehicles and the heavy firepower provided by the tanks, it was able to carry out major offensive operations, either alone or in cooperation with other units, to completely clear a sector of insurgents.⁶³ As a result, the regiment achieved several successes in the central (Annam) and southern (Cochinchina) parts of the colony, leading to the deployment of some of its units in Tonkin. However, the terrain in Tonkin was not conducive to the use of amphibious vehicles, and the unit proved less successful in operations here than it had been in the south of the country.⁶⁴

The general deterioration of the military situation was accompanied by a reduction in the number of cavalry regiments on the battlefield. They won one of the last victories of the French expeditionary force in the summer of 1954, but this was achieved only at great cost. After the decisive defeat at Dien Bien Phu, the local soldiers were transferred to the Vietnamese army and the regiment's numbers rapidly dwindled,⁶⁵ with the companies created during the war being disbanded one by one until only four companies were left. The regiment was among the last to leave Indochina, sailing for Africa in January 1956. The unit lost 400 men (including 25 officers) and 500 wounded during the war, a heavy price to pay for its achievements in the battlefield – in a war that was lost.⁶⁶

Summary

A little-known episode in modern military history is the process by which the cavalry formations of the French Foreign Legion were created and then constantly adapted and evolved to changing circumstances. Among these units, the 1st Foreign Cavalry Regiment stands out, which has been involved in the activities of the Legion since its creation in 1922. The regiment has participated in all the major campaigns of the Legion, but its longest deployment was in the Indochina War, where it fought for nearly eight years.

This was a crucial period for the regiment, which underwent a fundamental transformation in the face of new circumstances and new challenges. It took advantage of local recruitment opportunities to significantly increase its numbers and then the number of deployable units. It then deployed these units with equipment better suited to the terrain, often using creative tactics, and was able to fight the insurgency with great success. As a consequence of this adaptability, the regiment was always successful in the tasks assigned to it, as it is shown by the fact that it was one of the last French units to leave Indochina, only to be sent back to Algeria to fight in another colonial war.

⁶³ Blond 2008: 450–451.

⁶⁴ Szecsko 1994: 13–14.

⁶⁵ Bodin 2010: 71.

⁶⁶ Cadeau, Ivan et al. (2021): *La guerre d'Indochine. Dictionnaire*. Paris: Perrin – Ministère des Armées. 777.

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