



# Born To Be A Merc

## PART III

### VAN SEEKS ADVENTURES IN SURINAME AND CROATIA ORGANIZING A COUP IN SURINAME, 1983

By Dr. Martin Brass

*Suriname is a country on the north coast of South America, just north of Brazil and sandwiched between Guyana and French Guiana. In the 1980s, a series of military coups eventually led to a dictatorship under Desi Bouterse. Surinamese in Holland began trying to take down this dictatorship, and turned to recruiters of soldiers of fortune like Rende Van De Kamp to help. This excerpt adapted from Rende's Book, *Under Foreign Flag* tells of a coup that never went beyond the planning stage.*

#### A COUP IS HATCHED

Hope grew for the Surinamese of the Amsterdam-based Action Committee in 1983. Apparently, a Dutch Special Forces (*Korps Commando Troepen* or KCT) captain wanted to join their planned coup. The Action Committee asked if we would join him.

He not only offered some well-trained men, but he also had weapons. On top of that, he could use a KCT exercise as cover.

The captain planned to hijack the plane they would use on the exercise and divert it to Suriname. His commandos would parachute into Para-

Rende Van de Kamp during a 1985 exercise in Djibouti with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Régiment Étranger de Parachutistes. Photo provided by Rende Van de Kamp.



maribo, the capital. The whole plan seemed far-fetched to me. If we had a plane available, why would we jump on Paramaribo, instead of landing at Zanderij Airport, just outside the city? We could take a lot more weapons and equipment by landing at the airport than we could carry in a parachute jump. The whole operation would be simpler.

Furthermore, the fact that everybody in the Action Committee knew that we were going in by plane with this captain and his men probably meant that intelligence agencies knew as well. They would certainly try to act against us before we could carry out that plan. Worse, the Surinamese government would also be ready for us. The Action Committee didn't want to hear any doubts.

But that was the last that we were ever informed of that plan. But so many plans had been rumored already, that we were not surprised.

## A REMOTE, SMOKY CAFÉ

Then Stanley Green and Evert Tjon, two prominent members of the Action Committee, came to see us. They tried to be secretive, but couldn't hide their excitement. They only told us that we had to come along for an urgent meeting. Karl—a former corporal from the French Foreign Legion—and I drove with them to the western part of town, and went inside a small Surinamese restaurant. After a long wait, we entered a small room, where André Haakmat, a former secretary in the Bouterse government, sat. After a personal conflict with the Surinamese dictator, he fled to Holland and began working against the government in Suriname.

After a short while, two men, one white, one black, entered the room. The white man wore an Army uniform under his civilian overcoat with the unit distinctions of KCT and the rank of captain. This was the KCT captain the Surinamese had been talking about. His hair seemed a bit long to me. The black man was his friend, not a soldier.

Haakmat's first action was to dismiss Tjon and Green. Then he stood up and shook hands with the two newcomers. The two men noncha-



**Two mercenaries who worked for Surinamese exiles who sought to overthrow that country's dictatorship in 1982. Photo provided by Rende Van de Kamp.**



**Rende Van de Kamp with two other paratroopers in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Régiment Étranger de Parachutistes in Djibouti in 1984. Photo provided by Rende Van de Kamp.**

lantly sat down in chairs and ordered a bottle of whiskey with two glasses.

## JUST ANOTHER CON ARTIST

Later, we learned that the two men were Peter Van Haperen and Hans Chelius. Van Haperen—the “captain”—took a swig of his whiskey and looked around the room.

“And who are you?” he asked us. “What was your rank and where?”

We told him.

“I don't discuss my plans with corporals,” Van Haperen said, taking another swig. Karl and I walked outside and waited with Green and Tjon in the empty restaurant. After an hour or two, Van Haperen and Chelius left, leaving behind an empty whiskey bottle. We never heard anything further about this plan, either.

Years later, it became clear that Van Haperen had been working for Dutch intelligence. He offered military training to the Surinamese resistance



**The logo of the 4<sup>th</sup> section, 4<sup>th</sup> compagnie, 2<sup>nd</sup> Régiment Étranger de Parachutistes, Rende's unit during his service with the French Foreign Legion. Photo provided by Rende Van de Kamp.**

in the Netherlands, for which he received an advance payment of nearly \$150,000, all the money the desperate Surinamese ex-patriates could raise. But after stopping two coups in progress, he disappeared with the money, leaving the Surinamese resistance with no more funds to organize anything.

Van Haperen was subsequently featured on a Dutch television program in 2005. Posing as a financial expert, he talked a lot of retired Dutchmen out of their life savings.

## REACHING A MERC'S HIGHEST DREAM

*Still searching for adventure, Rende Van de Kamp then turned to a traditional avenue for adventurers. The French Foreign Legion, founded in 1831, has become a world-famous elite force. In the following excerpt, Van describes his exciting journey to becoming a Legionnaire..*

With the failed Suriname adventure behind me, I had two more options: The first was the South African Army, the second the French Foreign Legion.

At the beginning of June 1983, I wrote a letter to the headquarters of the South African Army for information on enlistment. I had a reply within two weeks.

“It is with regret that I must inform you that due to limited vacancies in the SA Defense Force at this stage, favorable consideration cannot be afforded to your application for enlistment in the SA Defense Force,”

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the letter, signed by a Captain Logan, said.

Clearly, only the second option remained.

I quickly obtained my driver's license and arranged some other personal business. On the day I left my parents' home, I found a letter on my desk written by my father, who had guessed what I was up to.

"I have suspicions that you want to enlist in French military service. Don't get involved in something too easily, stay away from bars, and choose your friends carefully. There must be something else to do in this world."

I had disappointed him by not getting a good education, not going to college, not finding a job that paid well, and not being a family man. Now I was also going to disappoint him by joining the French Foreign Legion. But I followed my heart's desire, and I was going to do my best.

## A LONG, UNCERTAIN JOURNEY

While sitting in the train on my way to Paris, I was hoping I would be selected for the Legion. Olaf and Karl-Heinz, both former legionnaires, had told me often about the elaborate process that new recruits had to undergo before being accepted by the Legion. I

imagined that in a few weeks I would be sitting in the same train again, but this time moving in the opposite direction.

From Paris, I traveled by subway to Fort Nogent. At a military post, I made it clear that I wanted to enlist for the Foreign Legion. A short while later, I was sitting in a typically French Renault 4 next to a legionnaire, who took me to the military barracks in Fort Nogent.

By the end of the day, I was walking around in an old French army uniform and was assigned to a room with some other candidates. New recruits showed up and departed every day, in about equal numbers. One of the first newcomers I got to know was an Austrian named Andreas K. At least I could talk with him, because at that time I hardly spoke French.

We arose at 5 o'clock every morning, which I considered terribly early. Breakfast, waiting, checking name lists; some people would leave never to return, and other people would leave for all kinds of tests. Checking papers, a very brief medical examination and then mostly waiting again. Our heads were shaven completely on the second day. For some, it was an almost traumatic experience—their beautiful hair fell on the floor. For me, it was quite an improvement. We had to write down our courses of life up to that moment, and for the rest of the day we raked leaves. It was October and the barracks area was covered in fallen leaves. We set out with wheelbarrows, rakes and brooms, and secretly smoked cigarettes behind the trees.

## SHAVED HEADS AND OLD ARMY UNIFORMS

After a week in Fort Nogent, the guys that were left traveled by train to Marseille in southern France, and from there to Aubagne, about fifteen kilometers away. With our shaved heads and old army uniforms, we were recognized by everyone. From the railway station in Aubagne, we were brought by truck to the Legion barracks and there it was: the headquarters of the French Foreign Legion. It was an immense complex just outside town, with a large parking filled with civilian cars. Behind it were whitewashed buildings of one, two or three stories, arranged around a very large square with a great bronze globe in the middle, surrounded by bushes and plants.

Close to the entrance, legionnaires were walking punishment tours with brooms and wheelbarrows. You could see the characteristic white kepi everywhere, as groups of legionnaires marched through the barracks on their way to somewhere. NCOs and officers were distinguished by their black kepis. There was shouting, and from far away we heard the faint sound of bugles.

While the trucks drove through the barracks complex, we quietly looked around. We stopped in a closed compound of several buildings with a fence around it. This was the reception station for newly arrived recruits. After the first transfer was made from the barracks where you had enlisted, it was here that the recruits were tested and selected over a period of several weeks. Recruits arrived here from all over France. Most of them were eventually sent away.

The times of big wars and a massive need for personnel were gone. The French Foreign Legion had become an elite force and could therefore afford to be very selective. Most applications came at the end of the summer holidays, when many young boys were left without money, and the time around Christmas, when people felt lonely.



French Foreign Legion paratroopers training at Calvi in 1984. Photo provided by Rende Van de Kamp.



Paratroopers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Régiment Étranger de Parachutistes in an exercise in Djibouti in 1984. Photo provided by Rende Van de Kamp.

## LOSS OF IDENTITIES

We were billeted in rooms with bunk beds for about thirty guys. Our civilian possessions were secured in the storerooms. If you were accepted, you lost them automatically. Only the guys that didn't pass selection got their belongings back. In the Legion, you didn't have personal belongings. Now a process followed of about three weeks of assembling, roll call, marching together to the dining hall, a lot of *corvee* (fatigue duties), hanging around and going from one test to another.

We received blood tests and went to the hospital for x-rays, sometimes more than once. Every volunteer had to undergo an extensive psychological test; there were IQ-tests, and I noticed that these tests were even administered in foreign languages for men who didn't understand French. Every volunteer had to be carefully screened by Legion intelligence. In a long interview, I was repeatedly confronted with the same questions. When I thought the interview was almost finished, it started again.

## BAD BUT NOT VILLIANS

They wanted to know exactly what kind of people were joining. It was not a problem when candidates had been in trouble with the law for small things, but professional criminals or those convicted of drug-related crimes were not wanted. Alcohol is okay in the Legion, but dope gets you kicked out. And so, we were busy with our tests. Recruits disappeared every day. The ones that survived the last phase of the selection received a red shoulder band and were billeted in separate rooms. One day, my name was read from a list and a red shoulder band was thrown to me. Andreas from Austria was also selected. We felt relieved and proud.

Soon, we stood with our brand-new equipment, ready to go to Castelnaudary for basic training. We traveled to Castelnaudary under command of a French sergeant and a British lance corporal, who had come to Aubagne to pick us up. We expected to arrive after our journey in the middle of the Pyrenees, but around Castelnaudary were only some lower hills.



Rende Van de Kamp with members of the Croatian Special Forces of Bojna Zrinski in 1992. Photo provided by Rende Van de Kamp.



Marines of Mike Company, Task Force Rawhide, and commandos of the French Foreign Legion, 13th Half Brigade, fire each other's weapons during a live-fire training exercise at the French Commando Training Center, Arta Beach, Djibouti. Supporting the Combined Joint Task Force Horn of Africa's mission of detecting, deterring and defeating terrorism in the East African region, Task Force Rawhide participated in training 7-12 September, 2003, with the French Foreign Legion to increase their skills in amphibious operations and physical fitness. Photo by Sgt. Bradly Shaver, USMC.

The barracks in Castelnaudary was an old building constructed around a parade ground in a square that was left open on one side. The "open" side had an iron fence guarded by an armed sentry. It was dead quiet when the trucks that had picked us up at the railway station stopped and we disembarked. The corporal didn't waste any time, and soon everybody had a bed in one of the rooms. Lockers were pointed out, and we were soon standing around the corporal who showed us how to put our equipment in the lockers and correctly arrange our gear. The folding of our clothes, in particular, had to be very precise. The corporal walked with an approving hum through the room, looking at our efforts, and we already felt like we were old hands. When we came back to the rooms after a cigarette break, however, all our gear had been thrown on the floor.

## THE AFFABLE RASCAL

The corporal who had seemed so friendly turned out to be a nasty bastard with much better eyes than us. Every day he saw badly folded gear, badly made up beds, and badly polished shoes. He threw everything on the floor again. We did our best, but the eyes of the corporal stayed much better than ours. Another disappointment was the maintenance of the old wooden floor in our rooms and in the corridors. The corporal had a large jar of wax that he threw all over the floor when he felt they were in need

of maintenance. He appeared to possess remarkable eyesight with that, too. With pieces of old blankets under our feet, we polished the floors. It was called, *patiner*, or skating. We skated during every break, after breakfast, after lunch, before evening roll call. Every time the corporal didn't like something, we had to skate.

After a week, the other half of our training platoon came over from Aubagne. We were billeted with fifty men in a room in bunk beds of two high, with an additional ten men in a smaller room. We were in the Second Company, in the Section of Adjutant Zetic, a small Yugoslav.

Then, we started training: Running, the obstacle-course, weapons instruction, shooting, endlessly marching around the parade ground, tactics, some fieldcraft, bivouacs, and more marches. We also had lessons on French army regulations, the history of the French Foreign Legion, and the French language.

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## THE LEGION CHOIR

We went to a farmhouse—La Jasse—that was in use as a training camp for the Second Company. For four long weeks, our skills would be honed by the adjutant and his three sergeants, *sergent-chef* and corporals. Every day was filled with activities. At the end of the day, we were dead tired, and the following day would bring another busy schedule.

We had special lessons in singing Legion songs. These songs were part of the old traditions of the Foreign Legion and singing them was taken very seriously. There even was an official songbook that every recruit kept with his equipment. Many of the songs were in French. There were age-old sentimental songs about battles in the desert and lost loves: *Eugénie, Annemarie, Contre les Viets, Dans le Djebel, Sous le soleil brulant d'Afrique, La Legion marche vers le front*. But there were also songs in German, a souvenir of the many Germans that had served in the Legion: *Westerwald, In einem Polenstädtchen*.

When we had nothing to do for a few moments, the order was shouted: “*Chanter!*”

Singing! We had to march around singing before every meal, and when it was not good enough, then again and again and again, every day. If we left the Legion one day, we felt we could join the opera. After four weeks, our stay in La Jasse was finished with a two-day march, the *Marche Képi Blanc*. After that, everybody was issued his own white kepi during an official ceremony with invited guests, a festive meal and a lot of booze.

“*Coiffez! Le Képi Blanc!*” and almost sixty *engagés volontaires* (new recruits) put the kepi on their heads in one single movement. Now we were officially legionnaires. I fell asleep that night feeling proud as hell and drunk as a monkey.

After a total of fifteen weeks training in Castelnaudary, one could choose to which regiment he wanted to go. Of the about sixty recruits, I was third on the list of end results. When I appeared in front of the special commission that decided where recruits were posted, I gave as my first choice the paras.

When I was asked for a second and a third choice, I replied, “*2e Regiment Etranger de Parachutistes* and going home.”

The officers of the commission smiled at me, said I was posted with the paras, and called the next candidate. I proudly left the room. Now, I really belonged to the French Foreign Legion, a force with a glorious past that attracted the attention of adventurers, writers, journalists and moviemakers.

## WITH THE CROATIAN SPECIAL FORCES OF BOJNA ZRINSKI IN HERZEGOVINA, 1992

*While everyone saw the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 as good news, there was a bad side to it. Ethnic tensions held in check by ruthless Communist governments now began to boil over into ethnic strife and civil war. One of the ugliest instances, if not the ugliest, was the former Yugoslavia, where a new term would come into use – “ethnic cleansing” – as Muslims, Serbs, and Croats raced to grab and hold as much territory as they could. Rende was there when it started...*

A Croatian border guard with the stiff manner of a communist civil servant gave a signal to stop. The brand-new Mercedes stopped at the border of Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina (or Herceg-Bosna, as the Croats preferred to call it). Croats lived on both sides of the border. The correctly dressed border guard stood next to the Mercedes and peered inside.

The driver said something and the border guard looked at Lieutenant Colonel Milenko Filipovic, who sat in the back seat of the car.

“Lieutenant Colonel Filipovic of the Bojna Zrinski on a mission,” Filipovic identified himself. The guard saluted and pointed at me while he was looking at my new folding-stock AK-47.

“One of my foreign officers!” I heard. And when the man pointed at the driver... “Also one of my officers!”

The border guard nodded and asked who the old man in the back of the car was.

“Mate Boban!” Filipovic said. The guard seemed hit by an electrical current.

“Mate Boban! Mate Boban! Mate Boban!” he said again and again, gesturing wildly to his colleagues, who now approached, their rifles slung on their backs. They started talking amongst themselves and looked at our car. Then they came and stuck their hands inside to touch the old man.

“Mate Boban! Mate Boban!” The guards lighted cigarettes and, when we finally drove away, they followed us with their eyes. They knew that the war in Bosnia had started the moment we drove into Herzegovina.

In the early morning, we drove to a small town called Tomislavgrad, which the Communists had called Duvno. Now the old name, honoring Tomislav, an early Croatian king, was back in use.

## A SLEEPING ARMY AWAKENS

The next day, the driver of the Mercedes and I walked through the town. A sleeping army had awakened. Mate Boban had declared mobilization of all the armed forces of Herzegovina. Reservists stood waiting and more came walking our way. Everywhere in the streets, groups of idle men with ill-fitting uniforms, missing parts of the uniform and holding rifles awkwardly in their hands or slung over the shoulder smoked cigarettes, talked and laughed loudly. In the doorways of a few houses, their wives stood watching. Their eyes said it all: It was war.

We picked up Filipovic at the town hall.

The same day, forces under the command of Zeljko Raznjatovic, the notorious Arkan, crossed the border between Serbia and Bosnia and started massacring the civilian population of the town of Bijeljina.

Mate Boban became the president of the State of Herceg-Bosna. He preferred to cooperate with the Serbs instead of the Muslims. The Americans forced him out in 1994 in the wake of the 1993 Washington Accords. He was one of the hardest fighters against Islam in Europe until he died of cancer in 1997.

Filipovic became a general in the Croatian Army. In 2000, along with six other generals, he was fired by the president of Croatia. 