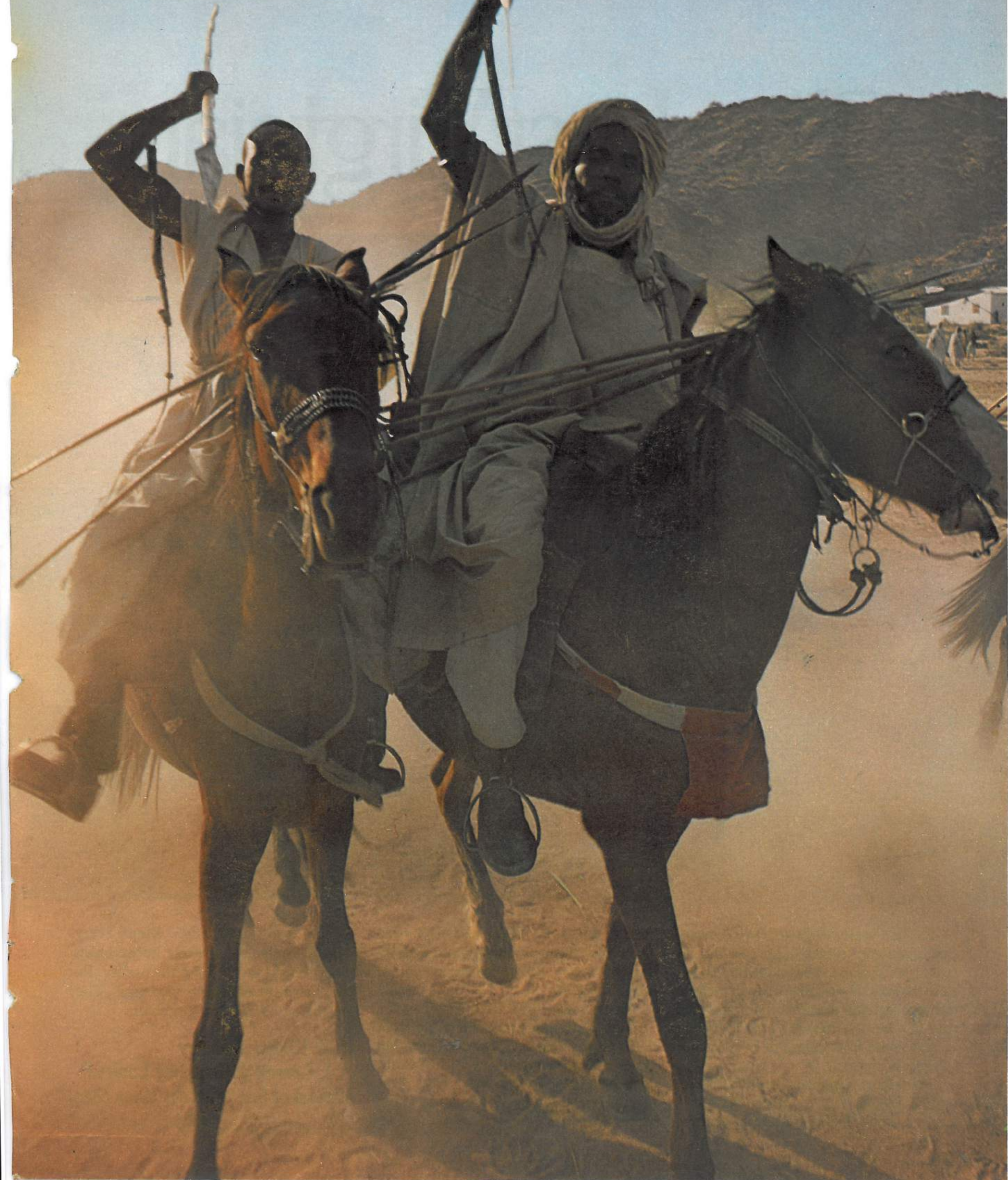


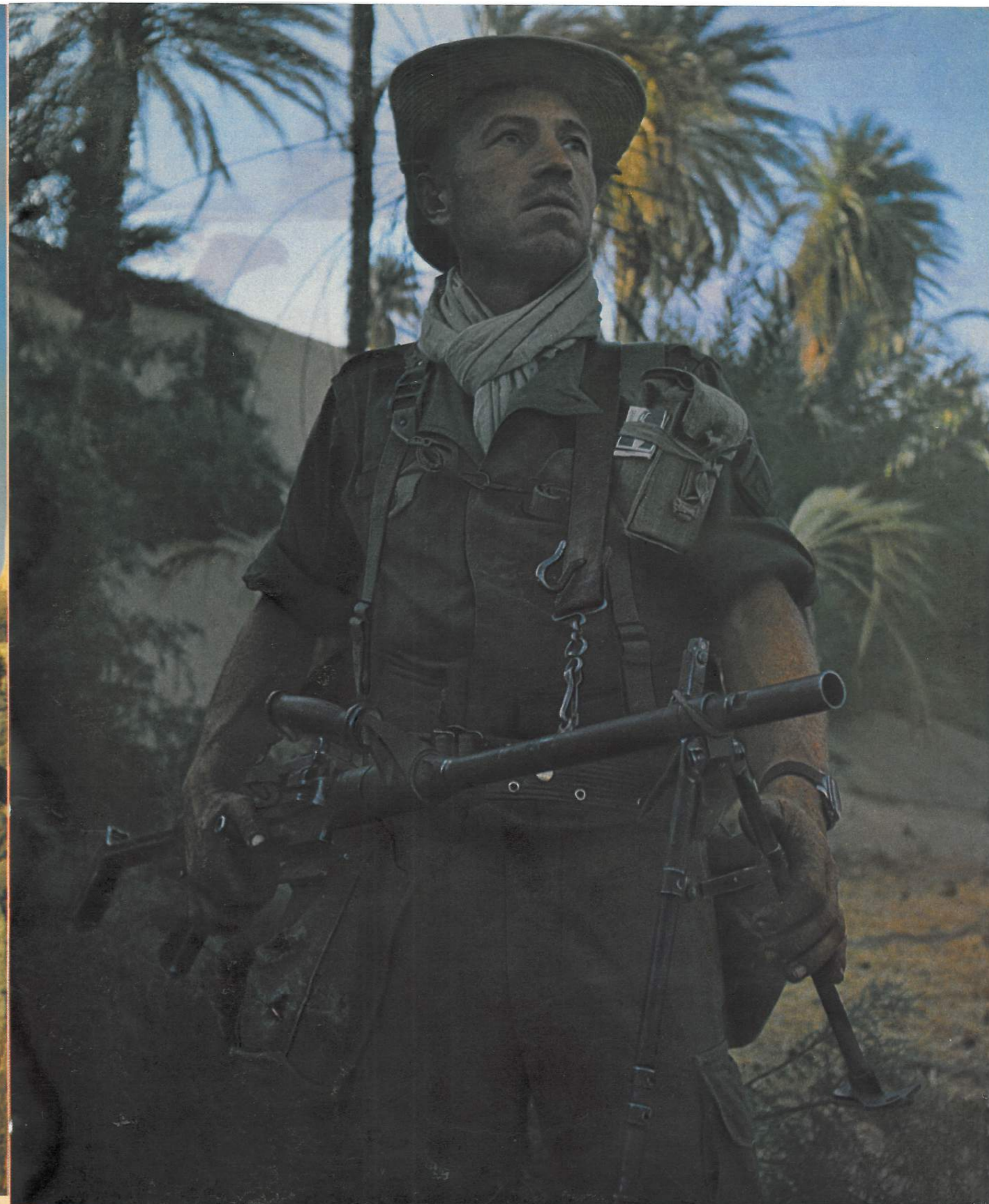
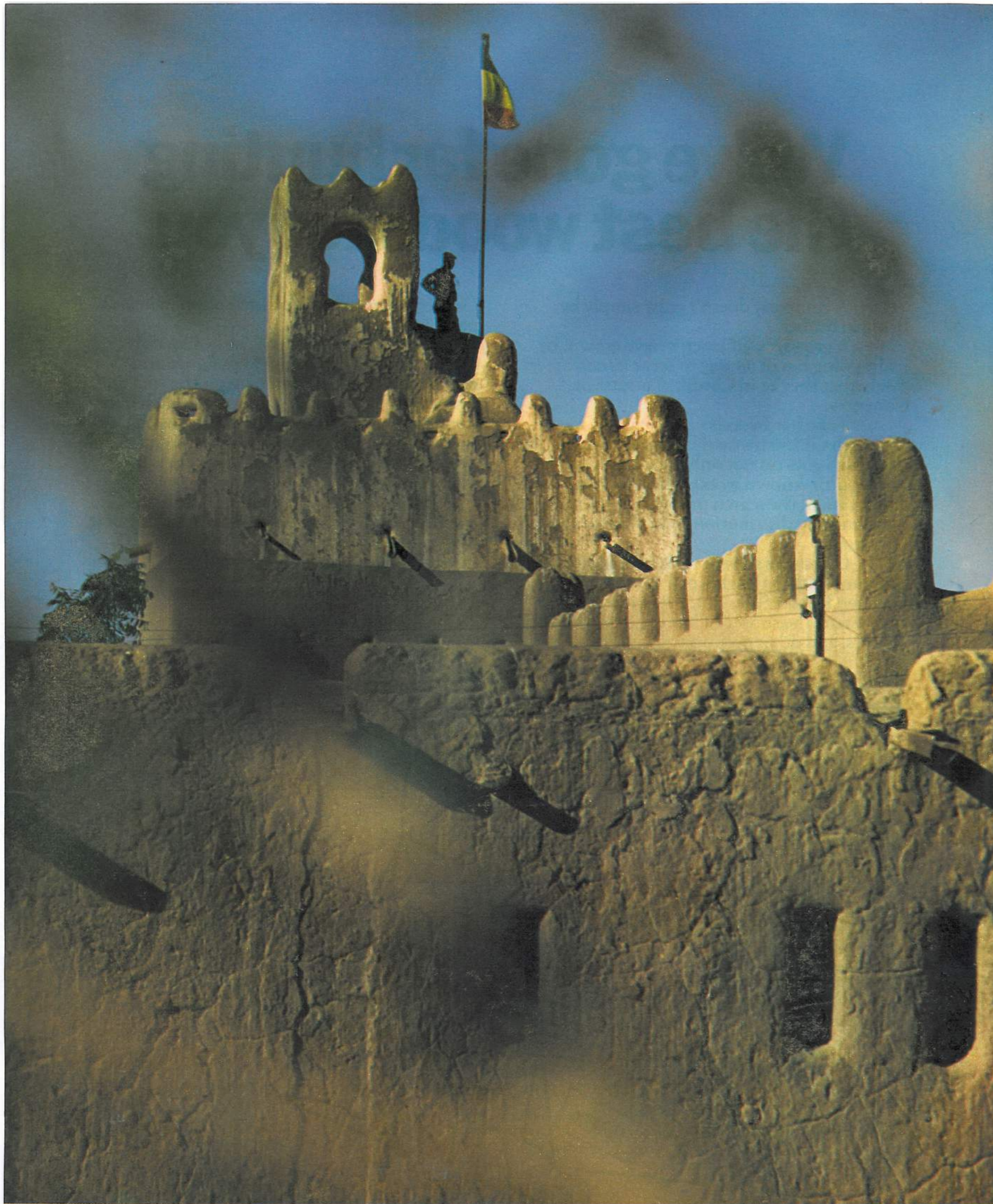
# THE SUNDAY TIMES *Magazine*

**THE UNKNOWN WAR**

APRIL 5, 1970







# 28 THE RETURN OF BEAU GESTE

Since April last year, the Foreign Legion has been fighting a little-known guerilla war in Chad, France's former colony to the east of Nigeria, against rebellious Muslim tribesmen (cover). Isolated in old French garrisons like Fada (above left) in the Sahara, or fighting in sweltering oases, the Legion is doing what it does best – making war. *James Fox* reports on page 39; photographs by *Donald McCullin* 29



Arab nomads haggle in the camel market at Faya-Largeau, provincial capital of the north. Supplies come in by truck and camel over the Libyan desert

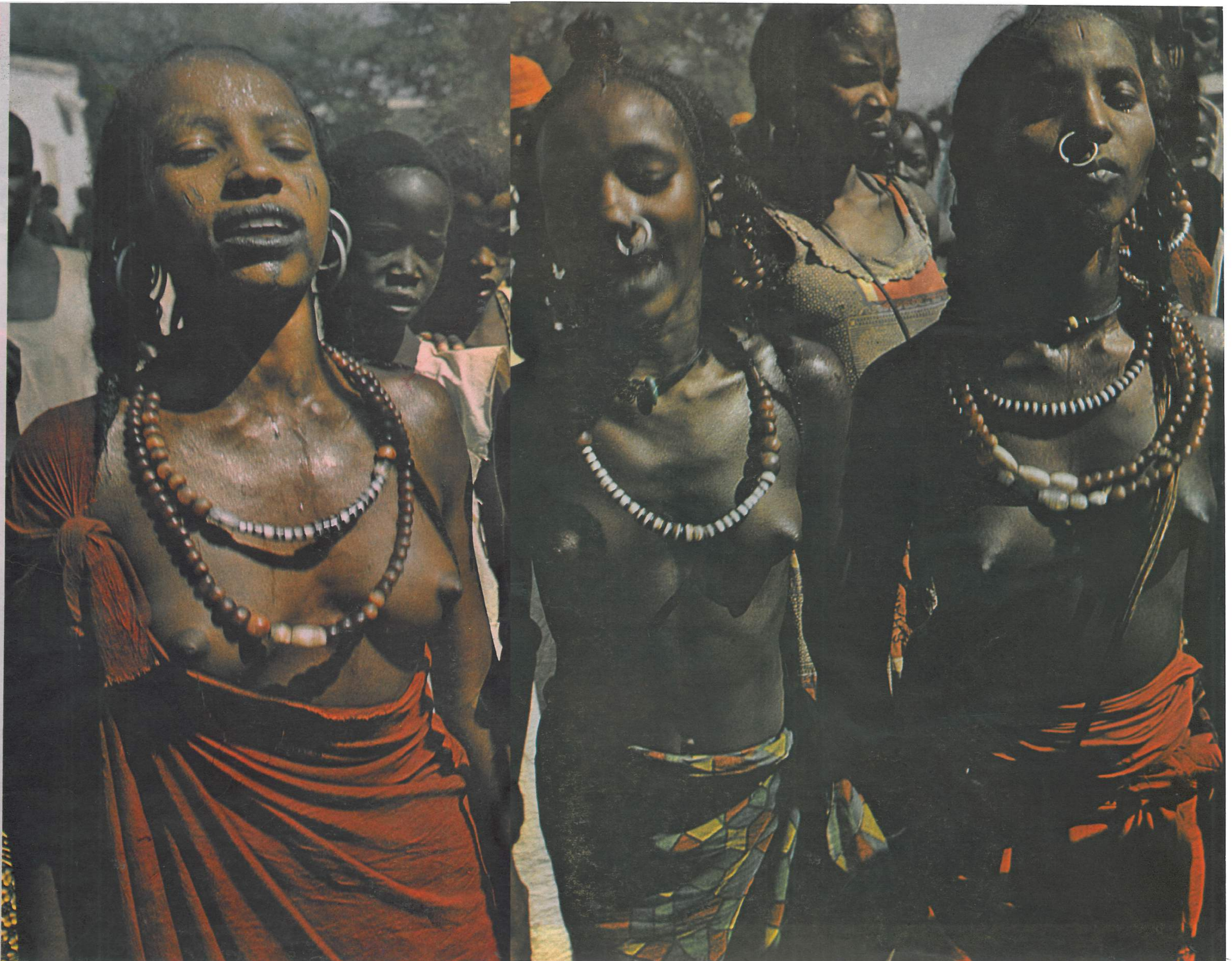
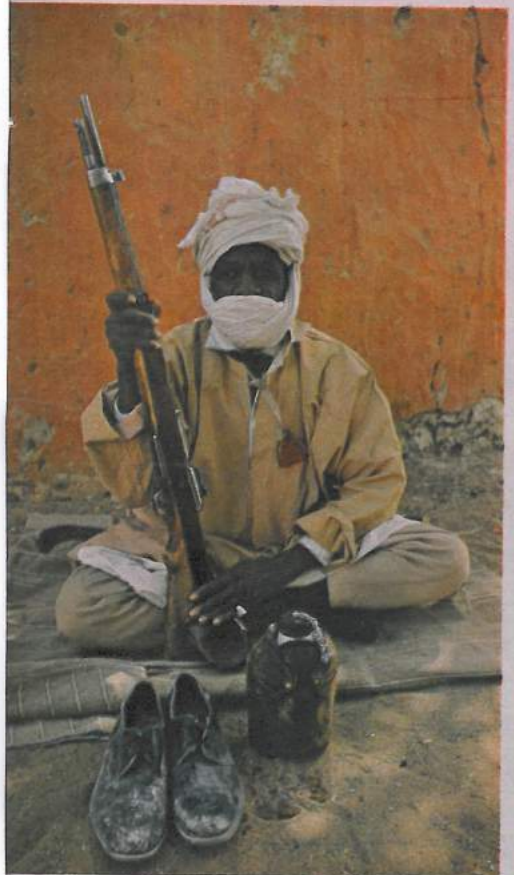




This building, on the outskirts of Faya-Largeau, was destroyed by the weight of a sand dune sweeping in from the Sahara. When a dune passes, the town is rebuilt behind it

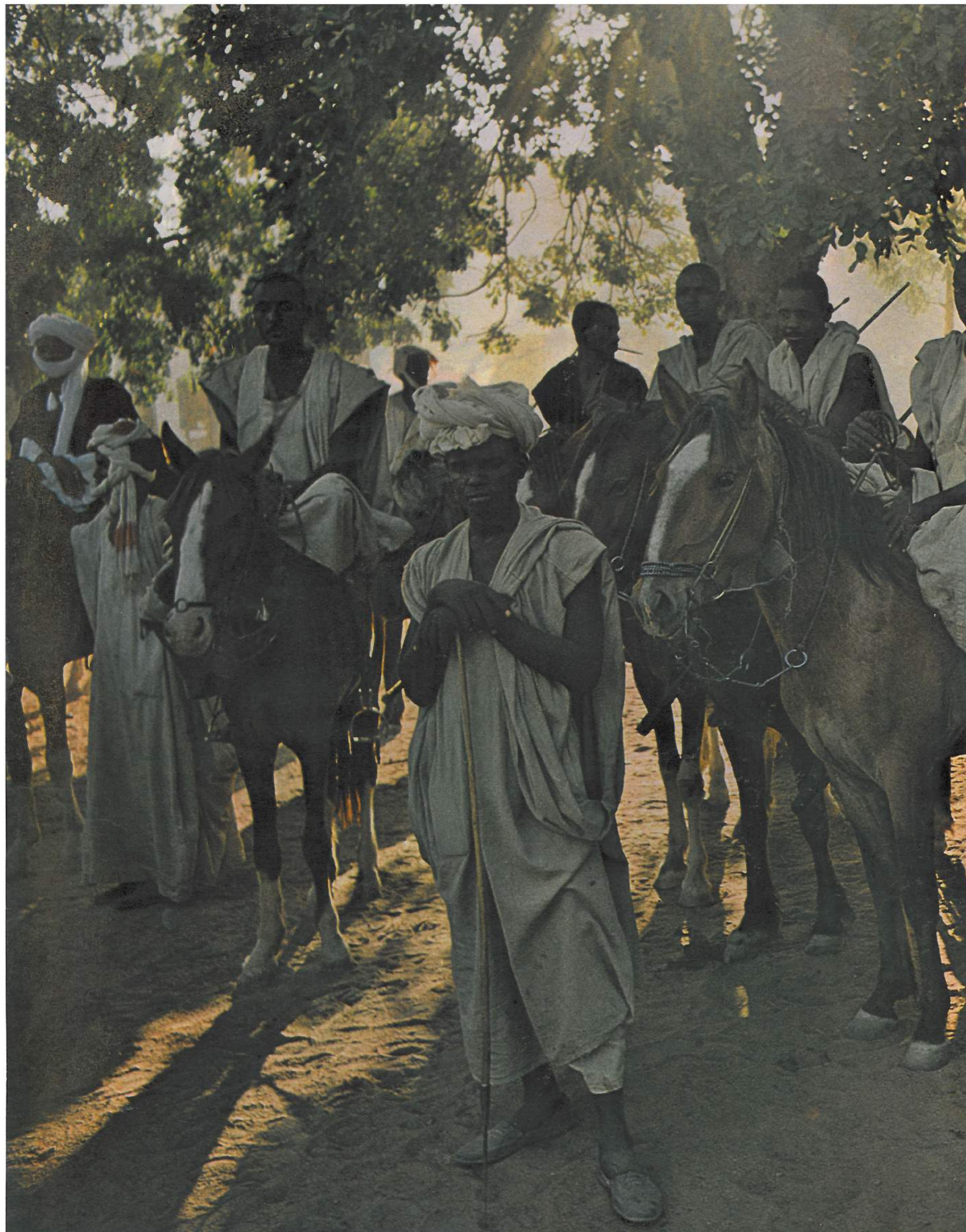






Right: young Arab girls from Guera dancing during the Independence celebrations at Mongo, the provincial capital. It was in Guera that the rebellion began. Top: herdsmen came to the celebrations armed with shotguns and old French cutlasses, their horses' armour made from tin cans. Above: a nomad guard on watch outside the Prefect's office in Faya-Largeau. The Chadians disbanded the guards, but without them they could not administer the desert





36 Arab herdsman mustering for the Independence procession at Mongo, in eastern Chad. The few that came demonstrated their solidarity with the



government by charging the rostrum and shaking their spears at the Prefect; mock battles, camel races, drums and dancing lasted for three days 37



Chad is so poor that the banks in its capital, Fort Lamy, are inclined to shut without warning when the paper money looks like running out. In any other country this might start a demonstration, or a run on assets, but in Chad there is almost no capital at stake, and nobody cares. It is a little known, ramshackle republic which spreads uneasily over half a million square miles of desert and scrub; it is two-and-a-half times the size of France, and produces an average yearly income for its population of a bare £12 a head.

It has been disqualified from any hope of a balance of payments by its chronically landlocked position 1000 miles from the nearest port, but its political boundaries are a cause for even greater anxiety. It lies on the thirteenth parallel, the sensitive boundary between Muslim and black Africa. Its neighbours are the Sudan and Nigeria, both of which have suffered civil wars on an enormous scale.

Racial antipathy between Arab Muslims and black Christians who dominate the Government in Fort Lamy exploded into a fierce and unreported guerilla war in Chad in 1967. It started as a series of local revolts against the corruption of tax officials. Muslim rebels, nomads and herdsmen who had spent much of their working lives rustling cattle and fighting murderous inter-clan wars for the rights to pastures and waterholes, then joined forces to try and overthrow the administration of the corrupt, French-backed Government and its demagogue president, François Tombalbaye.

If the Foreign Legion had not arrived in Chad 11 months ago to prop up the black Government, a civil war on the scale of the Sudan would have broken out in the heart of central Africa. It might have involved the Arab nationalist States surrounding Chad, whose newspapers were taking notice of the Arab 'struggle'. By the time the Legion arrived, the rebels had overpowered the badly-trained and mutinous Chadian army and had paralysed the administration in a large section of the country, so that the Chadian Government could give no information about events in the rebel-occupied areas.

It is an appropriate place for the Foreign Legion to play out what must be the last chapter in the decaying legend of Beau Geste; a forgotten backwater of Africa where the fighting, in and out of Saharan oases, is continually interrupted by wild sandstorms, and where the desert sun cooks the summer temperatures up to 118 degrees. The rebels share on average one gun between 10 people. Most of



Legionnaires on the trail: a dawn raid on an oasis in northern Chad

the guns are captured from the Chadian army and their ammunition is often home-made; but they use spears and poisoned darts with precision and their courage wins glowing praise in the French military intelligence reports. Five of the seven legionnaires so far killed in the fighting have been run through with barbed spears made from old car springs, fighting almost hand to hand in tall grassland.

"It's not a joke fighting these people," said a legionnaire. "I mean we love fighting and it may look as if we have no problems here. We've had very few casualties but we've been miraculously lucky. Whatever a legionnaire tells you, he's not too happy making contact." For the Legion it is the first bout of fighting since Algeria in 1961, and their commanders are glad to have the force back in action.

It's a war everybody plays down as 'selective pacification', especially the French Government, who were worried, before the Mirage scandal diverted political interest, that it might become a major election issue, even France's own Vietnam.

But so far the Legion and the 'red berets' of the 6th Overseas Infantry regiment have killed about 1500 rebels in Chad, bringing the total to nearly 2000. The Chadian army have lost 250 men. The total build-up of military personnel has reached 2500 and 'selective pacification' seems to be jargon borrowed from Vietnam.

The legionnaires love to talk about killing, like the mercenaries in Johannesburg bars who hate civilian life. They doze or shoot off their mouths in the bars and warehouses in Fort Lamy, always truculent and suspicious. "I'll tell you what's going on out there," said a legionnaire on the stool beside me, "I'll keep you informed. But I want a favour in return. I need a 9 mm. automatic pistol." Why? "For killing, for killing. For putting one in the back of the head." Why ask me? "You're in a good position.

You can get one from the American Embassy. Tell them you need to protect yourself if you get into an *accrochage* in the bush. Then I'll steal it off you." Their beer consumption off the battlefield is enormous. Two legionnaires took a case of beer to drink between them at an open-air cinema show, and a sergeant, with a belly the size of a wine butt, told of drinking 20 litres in a single evening.

In the quiet and shady boulevards of the Europeanised sector of Fort Lamy, lined with the enormous bougainvillea-covered houses of the politicians and French advisers, propaganda and special branch activities have suppressed news of the war. Spivvy-looking informers are all over the hotel. President Tombalbaye says the rebels are bandits. Pierre Lami, the head of the French administrative reform mission, which has come to Chad to sort out the mess, calls them "professional bandits". No-one will say that the Arabs don't like Tombalbaye's Government. The French discuss local politics in cynical murmurs, play their *boule* in the sand and dance their tangos and rumbas with earnest melancholy on Saturday nights in the same hotel that Romain Gary described in *The Roots of Heaven*. Its atmosphere has not changed. By his swimming pool, the black American Ambassador, Mr Clarence Todman, has circular neon floodlights with electric fans to suck in the insects and deposit them in a bag behind.

The rebellion was operating on two fronts: the Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti region in the north, a depopulated wasteland of desert and mountain ranges where the nomadic rebels had risen spontaneously against the administration; and the cattle plains to the east of Fort Lamy towards the Sudan border where political exiles from Fort Lamy, who left after an abortive coup in 1963, and local chiefs had organised the discontent into the well structured National Liberation Front - Frolinat.

Political and military leaders often travel between the two areas. Sometimes they are accepted, more often not, but the two operations are profoundly different.

The north is more romantic Legion country. The action against the rebels crosses hundreds of miles of seemingly impassable rocky desert. The French have helicopters and trucks, the Arab nomads have only their feet - camels have been sold for arms, or been killed - and an intimate knowledge of the country, the secret water holes, the unreachable mountain hideouts.

We flew to Faya-Largeau, the largest northern town in Chad, and the centre of the BET operations, in a French Transal troop carrier, packed in with young, nervous-looking 'red berets' and a Foreign Legion padre. In the officers' mess at Faya-Largeau the padre, a tough parachutist with 30 jumps to his credit, talked fast and loud and ate ravenously. Within three days he was lying on a stretcher with several broken ribs after the Dodge truck in which he was travelling toppled head first over the sheer end of a sand dune, almost turning over. It was the truck on which Donald McCullin had tried to hitch a lift before the padre told him it was full up.

**O**n the airstrip at Faya-Largeau, the wind whips up the sand and the 'red berets' are waiting to move on all-night truck rides into the mountains to take up position against the rebels. They are all wearing sand goggles and peaked caps, and look like another Eighth Army or a particularly business-like riot squad. But they look like recruits compared to the bearded, dark-skinned legionnaires whose bodies seem to have grown into their combat uniforms and their shoulders into the slings of their sub machine guns. "We don't have much to do with the French army," said a legionnaire, crumbs of war bread falling from his beard, "we don't have much to do with anyone for that matter."

The Colonel drives us into town past the wrecks of General Leclerc's transport trucks and armoured cars, abandoned during his famous march through Libya with the Free French army in 1943. They are lying sideways in the sand dunes, stripped out. They look as if they have been hurriedly welded together. Leclerc's African *anciens combattants* are a pensioned elite in Fort Lamy. I saw one old man who had sewn on scraps of ribbon to imitate their decorations.

We spent two days in Faya-Largeau before joining the Foreign Legion convoy. It was like walking into a dream of some isolated French garrison in the 19th century, the last of

the great unvisited Arab camel markets in the Sahara. The town is built on a dense oasis that stretches in an arc for 50 miles. The Arab men and women, dressed in white and black, floated in the dust and dazzling light down the long avenue of palms that lined the main street. Two years of drought and rebellion had increased the population of the town, and Arab women sat in the market all day making a few cents out of marginal exchanges; selling precious firewood at high prices, salt, oil, imported millet. The camel exchange was the same, quiet, unhurting ritual that had never changed its pace for hundreds of years. The only indications of the 20th century were the huge Libyan lorries that came rumbling into town from the Tripoli docks, shiny grey Fiats with 5 ft. of clearance for the desert crossing and aeroplane pilots' seats for the drivers. They were making good money; 10 trips from Tripoli to Faya-Largeau paid for the truck. But the trucks travelling southwards between Faya-Largeau and Fort Lamy were beaten-up Citroens, falling to pieces in the struggling business of reselling the already overpriced Fort Lamy goods in an Arab market 500 miles away.

**T**he French were based here, administrating the BET region, for five years after independence. They returned in February 1968, after the rebels had massacred 100 Chadian soldiers in the isolated garrison of Aozou to the north of the Tibesti. A Chadian army contingent who had gone to help them had been surrounded. The Legion relieved them and returned to France. But they were back again in February last year when the rebellion was solidly under way.

After 18 months the officers confined to the headquarters at Faya-Largeau don't hide their boredom. The Colonel appears in the officers' mess in black Arab pantaloons. "When we got here," said an officer, "the Chadians refused to co-operate with us; they were over-sensitive about taking advice. So for three months we slept all day and read detective novels."

In September last year, rebel bands were threatening Faya-Largeau from mountain ambush points 20 miles away, still confident in the memory of the terror and confusion they had inspired in the Chadian army. "When we first started attacking them," said a Legion officer, "they came at us. The first oasis, head-on contact. They retreated and then came back and hit us again. Now they run for it when they get the news we're in the area. We've broken them up."

Sikorsky helicopters took us to their recently-vacated village, where

the Legion had made their headquarters. The rebels had left carpets, jugs, dried dates. They were travelling eastwards, on foot over difficult country, making 20 miles a day. Between this band of 80 men they had two camels, all that was left in the region, to carry a minute water supply. In winter they can go for two days without water, hiding by day and travelling by night. We visited three different companies on our first day in the desert, each one tracking the rebel band from water hole to water hole. "We shot a rebel this morning," a legionnaire told me. "They had left him all alone in the oasis with a gun to try and delay us. He opened fire, miles out of range." A Commandant is licked by a rabid dog and has a stomach injection from a medic, standing up. An Arab on a camel is interrogated. He says he is travelling from northern Libya to Koufra in the Sudan trading dates for salt, to visit a relation.

By nightfall no contact has been made. We eat goat stew and *haricots verts* for dinner. There is no relief from dirt and sweat, and the mosquitoes bite through socks and shirts in swarms, preventing sleep.

At 5.30 a.m. we fumble in the dark for cameras and notebooks, water bottles and boots, drink one cup of coffee which is all we will get until one o'clock, and walk to the Legion trucks for take-off into the desert. The mosquitoes have left us with swollen hands and bleary eyes, but the desert at dawn is the interim period between the mosquitoes and flies and is, despite the cold, almost a substitute for sleep.

We are sitting on ammunition boxes in a truck with a contingent of the Chadian army attached to the Legion convoy, bouncing painfully over rocks at 40 mph. The Chadians inspire little confidence. Their shoes are rotting, their rifles look out of date and they are obviously ill-at-ease in the Arab north. The Legion's weapon-carrying trucks stretch out behind, throwing up dust, and the legionnaires look like a desperate band of mercenaries left over from some private war of plunder. The sun eases up, blood red, the sand and mountains are still grey in the weak light. The area is vast and desolate; sand dunes make repetitive crescent shapes like man-made wind-breaks. We hit an oasis and tumble out of the trucks, the soldiers spread out quickly and crouch in the sand, then creep over the dunes and down among the palm trees. There's a wind blowing through the trees, and no sign of life except a solitary tethered donkey. The oasis has been abandoned and we move on.

A legionnaire is eating his lunch at 9 a.m., from an individual ration pack. "Chocolate and cheese, two desserts.

And sardines for the entrée. War bread. No wonder I'm always hungry." How is the war in Chad? "It's okay. I mean we can make economies here. But it's not really a war. They only attack the Chadian army. We have to go looking for them all the time."

The Chadian truck moves off alone through the sand dunes. There is activity. There is the tension of being ambushed. Four camels are walking alone and ownerless, a figure is running in and out of the dunes. He makes a run for the hill and machine-gun fire follows him up. He stays on the skyline, running freely, his turban billowing out behind, and disappears. Then a whole village comes over the hill, their hands held up, their children to one side, to rally to the Government. The chiefs are bundled into the truck by angry Chadian soldiers. In the nearby oasis, the Legion have found two women guarding the belongings of the fleeing rebels. They burn sacks of dried dates and cut the water skins. The rebels have been travelling fast. Two days later the Legion caught up with them 50 miles away in an oasis and found them reduced from 80 to 25 men. Five were killed and the rest taken prisoner. The others had disappeared.

"These people are good at shaking us off," said an officer, "the harder the country, the better the fighter." During one operation, when the French had sent up helicopters, the Arabs had taken off their clothes to camouflage themselves against the dark rocks.

The character of the Foreign Legion, although not of the soldiers themselves, has changed since its famous headquarters at Sidi-Bel-Abbes in Morocco was abandoned after the Legion rebelled against the French Government during the Algerian war. I heard legionnaires in Chad still singing songs pasting de Gaulle's name with obscenities for switching his policy of *Algérie Française*. Criminals running from the law can no longer be recruited, and the French police can make investigations into the Legion, which was not allowed before. But their anonymity is still sacred - the taking of photographs requires special permission - and there are still deserters. An Englishman stationed in Chad recently stole a jeep and drove the 1400 miles to Douala from the east of Chad. Several have tried to swim the eight mile straits from Corsica to Sardinia and their punishment for attempted desertion, a legionnaire told me, is still enough to turn a man into a psychological wreck.

The rebellion in Chad has greater complexities than the idea of a Muslim-versus-black-Christian struggle for control of the central government. The national boundaries contain no less than 150 ethnic groups. The

French had barely managed the administration before independence, using local chiefs as intermediaries.

**I**n the north of Chad, the Toubbou tribe of the Tibesti had traditional contacts with the King of Libya. They had been threatened for 300 years by white Arabs from the north, black Arabs from the south and the Sudan, and had never been absorbed. They had been occupied by the Turks, the Senussi, the French, and had kept their independence completely intact. They refused, even, to play host to Frolinat organisers from the east, who came up in 1968.

In the east, towards the Sudan, the sultans of the Ouaddai, Salamat and Guera regions and their *chefs de canton* had also ruled themselves by custom and the Koran in the area between the Sahara and the Chari river, which separates the present rebel-held areas from the agricultural land farmed by the Sara tribe, who dominate the politics of Fort Lamy. In the 19th century, too, they were rich in black slaves from the south; the same southerners, the Saras, who turned up after Independence as bureaucrats to run the Prefectures in their areas, according to a system now fashionably known as kleptocracy. For the people of both areas it was as if they had been colonised again, only this time it was worse.

The corruption of these officials is freely admitted by the Chadian Government. "We found ourselves faced with the political problem of the susceptibility of personnel," rationalises Vice-President Antoine Bangui, "and suddenly all the problems became explicit." The officials chose a sensitive area to play pickpocket. They taxed the local people in the east and north four times the book rate and kept the change. In the event of protest or misdemeanour they weighed in with harsh and brutal punishment, shaving the heads of women, beating men in front of their families, and playing the bureaucrat with stamps and forms and delays, never leaving their offices, nor speaking the language, believing in the magic of the administrative presence.

They ignored customs and customary justice. Talking of agrarian reform, they tried to make the Arab herdsmen and nomads work in the fields to grow millet and meal, which turned out to be a gross affront to their dignity.

Then in 1965, at the time of a Government tax collection, herdsmen of Mangalme attacked and killed eight Government officials, including a member of the Fort Lamy National Assembly and a Minister's Private Secretary. The Chadian army moved into the villages, burning, raping,



looting and killing, and the herdsmen took to the bush.

It wasn't until 1967 that the discontent was channeled into an organised liberation front - Frolinat. Its organisers were mostly political exiles from Fort Lamy, who had left after the abortive Muslim coup against Tombalbaye in 1963. One of its organisers, Dr Abba Siddick, now the chief liaison officer who moves between Cairo, Tripoli and Algiers, is a former confidant of Tombalbaye. He was also one of the tiny group of 12 university graduates that Chad could display at Independence. Siddick, says Antoine Bangui, "chose exile instead of nursing his poor parents who have paid for his studies with nothing but the produce of the earth, working with the hoe, not even with the plough". Frolinat's creator, Ibrahim Abatcha, was killed by Chadian troops in 1968. The present leader is ElHadj Issaka, a young Muslim from the Batha region of Chad, known for its high standard of Muslim education. Frightened of being 'cornered' now that rebel bands are on the defensive, he moves back and forth from the Sudan.

But in Fort Lamy the Government denies the very existence of Frolinat. Said Antoine Bangui in the cool of his air-conditioned office: "There are obviously still some unhappy people and some clever people who have Frolinat cards printed somewhere and who promote ideologies, but all that I know, luckily for Chad, is that when you hear of Frolinat, it is something that has been blown up by the French Press and it has no basis in the interior of this country. It doesn't stick."

**B**ut in the field Frolinat's organisation is visible. Before the French killed many of its leaders, El Hadj Issaka had given the freedom fighters battledress with stripes and stars to denote rank; each band had officers responsible for intelligence, logistics and propaganda.

Their communications system, which brought all the leaders in the east to a convention in December last year, and into a French ambush, works by horse and camel. But it also provokes disbelief in Fort Lamy that when the Legion arrived in the east in April last year, and were attacked by rebels on the main road between Mongo and Mangalme, they were intending to take Mangalme, an important Prefecture the next day. Five other towns were surrounded, and Mongo, the administrative capital of the region, would have fallen within weeks. It meant that the whole eastern region would have been in rebel hands, and Chad split in two.



**Chadian security troops on parade in Fort Lamy. They are recruited exclusively from among the Sara tribe and trained by French officers**

The French army plans to pull out of Chad in July this year, leaving behind a long-term administrative reform mission. But many observers close to the programme feel that this will never solve Chad's problem. "You've got to reform the mentality of the Chadians," says Pierre Lami, head of the mission, "so they stop thinking Civil Service is some sort of privileged caste." That's not enough, say more objective observers. One well-informed source told me, "It's gone too far now for the Muslims to be satisfied with a southern government. They have been told by their politicians that Ennedi, for example, should belong to the Ennedians. If reforms are not done from the top, if the Chad army takes over again, it will start up again. And once you've taken a gun, and gone into the bush, it's difficult to come back. The African prefects are very sensitive about co-operating with the French advisers. They're making little headway."

So far no significant reforms have been done that make any concessions to the Muslims. Wide publicity has been given to the fact that three sultans of the eastern and central regions have been given back their customary power to collect taxes and administer justice, but most of the leaders have been discredited by such contact with the Government.

But President Tombalbaye faces as much danger from within his own party as from the rebellion in the country, which will almost certainly reorganise to attack the Chadian army when the French leave.

The Chad security branch, run by a mysterious Frenchman called Capitaine Gourvenec, has sealed off all expression of opposition, but everyone knows that Tombalbaye jailed 100 conspirators after the abortive coup in 1963. He lets them out one by one and offers them Ministerial posts. "The opposition are all there," a Chadian told me, "but they're all in the Govern-

ment if they aren't in jail. But what can they do?" A truly broad-based government might solve Chad's problems, but if Tombalbaye gave an inch to the Muslim leadership - the prediction goes - there would be an anti-Sara bloodbath and perhaps a civil war. The mood of the Government towards their own retention of power was displayed by Antoine Bangui at a Press conference in Paris. Asked why, if the country was divided, Tombalbaye was returned with a 94 per cent. vote in the elections, Bangui replied, "It's strange. Even the Muslims must have voted for us."

**C**onsiderable political speculation centres on Dr Utel Bono, another of Chad's 12 graduates at Independence, who underwent a second jail sentence last year for criticising Chad's economic policy. Tombalbaye railed against him at a public meeting while he was still in jail, accusing him of staining his hands with the blood of his Chadian brothers; but he released him soon afterwards and offered him the post of Minister of Public Health. Bono refused in a gesture of open protest and has been under close observation ever since.

The main opposition theme is Bono's own—the bad management of the economy. Since Independence the cost of living has risen 150 per cent., 50 per cent. in the past year. Prices in Fort Lamy are astronomical and already certain goods are unobtainable in the supermarkets. It's not entirely Tombalbaye's fault. Chad's economy is paralysed by its tenuous contact with the sea. Faya-Largeau, 450 miles south of the Libyan border, is supplied by trucks coming from the Tripoli docks which cross the Libyan desert and then the Tibesti. The southern, fertile regions have their nearest port at Douala, 175 miles east of Port Harcourt. By the time the cotton crop from the south reaches

Douala, the transport costs have cancelled out the market price and incoming goods have quadrupled by the time they reach Fort Lamy, the capital. Cattle, the only other major asset, were driven over the savannah on intimidating expeditions lasting up to three months from Mongo in the east, for instance, to Maiduguri before the Nigerian war. They weighed about half as much as Nigerian stock by the time they reached the market. Economically it is a disaster. In oil-rich Gabon or the Ivory Coast, the per capita income is now about £100 a year compared to Chad's £12, with no trace of mineral resources and a land-locked economy.

But Chad's good relations with her neighbours are vital, and there Tombalbaye has been strangely whimsical. In 1968 he withdrew from the customs union of UDEAC (formed with the Central African Republic, Cameroun and Congo Brazzaville), thinking Chad had been cheated out of its fair proportion of the customs revenue, and regrouped with the Central African Republic and Congo Kinshasa in a new union. It was an unprofitable regrouping, and then CAR left the union and Chad was left without a neighbour State as an economic ally. The borders were shut between Chad and CAR, and the Chad economy was hard hit. Finally, during the independence celebrations at Yaounde in CAR in January this year, there was a spontaneous reconciliation expressed with long embraces and kisses between the three Presidents, Bekassa of CAR, Joseph Desiré Mobutu, and Tombalbaye.

UEAC had been reformed on the spur of the moment to everyone's complete surprise, but it had cost Chad an increase of 50 per cent. in the cost of living in the meantime.

"But why are the French spending so many millions of francs in a rat hole?" said a diplomat in Fort Lamy, "because a rat hole's what it is." Situated at a strategic crossroads in Africa, surrounded by Arab nationalist States, with a border next to the Sudan, where Muslims have been waging a murderous war against black Africans for some time, it seems worthwhile to put Chad on her feet, if only to avoid a civil war. Russian and Israeli military assistance has already been reported in the Sudan. And if Chad became a Muslim State it might affect France's former colonies nearby - the Central African Republic, Cameroun and Niger.

The Americans are not standing idly by. One hot, quiet afternoon I discovered they were making diplomatic contacts with the Chad Government to enlist their signature for the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty●