



## From Pontifical Zouaves to "Volunteers of the West"

Earth Thought Notebooks

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Histoire & stratégie

...the mutation of a motley, inexperienced corps into an elite troop...

In the previous issue of the Cahiers, Mr. Laurent Gruaz told us the first part of a little-known story, that of these Franco-Belgian volunteers who became Pontifical Zouaves, having initially served under the Pope's banner. He now describes the transformation of this corps into volunteers from the West, fighting in 1870 under the arms of France. Faith in an ideal, esprit de corps, and the training power of the leaders are the key words of this true and original saga.

### The Pope's soldiers from the Papal States to the War of 1870

On 31 December 1860, the Franco-Belgian Riflemen's Battalion totalled 662 registrants. About half of them took part in the battle of Castelfidardo, of which 120 were killed or wounded. Since the end of September and the surrender of Ancona, the battalion has therefore seen the arrival of new volunteers more than ever eager to help the Holy See, and it needs more officers, not only to replace those who have been killed in the field of honour, but above all to supervise the new recruits, who are still pouring in mainly from France and Belgium.

**On January 1, 1861**, the new registration number was opened. The battalion henceforth took its official name of pontifical zouaves, a name that "public opinion and the Piedmontese had already given to the combatants of Castelfidardo". because of their dress[2]. 2] In the months that followed, it grew from four to eight companies plus a section out of rank.

A **week after its** formation, a great ceremony gathers the brand new battalion in Saint-Jean-de-Latran for the solemn swearing in of the Zouaves at Pius IX. All the companies present themselves at the large door and take their places in the nave, forming a square

open on one side. A lectern is placed in the middle with the book of the Gospels. The chaplain, Bishop Daniel, stands facing the troop and its commander, and addresses his men:

"So far you have committed yourselves individually, each one in particular; but today, all together, we want to solemnly swear fidelity to God and his service, to the Church and its clerics, to its august Head, temporal prince, spiritual leader. We promise to God to defend his rights and to die rather than to abandon them cowardly. For me, gentlemen, in the presence of this battalion that I respect and love, in the presence of God and the Church, I swear to remain always faithful to the Church. To the Church, its doctrine and its rights, I add the oath of the most complete fidelity, of the most complete devotion to your service, gentlemen, and to the salvation of your souls. .

**This swearing** in indisputably strengthens the ties between the Zouaves. Far from being a mere ritual formality, it gives the true meaning of their commitment by including them in its religious dimension. It binds them together and allows the "old", as well as the newly arrived, to find themselves within a particular group, almost a kind of brotherhood into which only those who share the same values enter. Common religious values that give each person involved an esprit de corps, further strengthened by the importance of the cause to be defended. Soon, new frameworks are set up. Lieutenant-Colonel de Becdelièvre, who had resigned, was replaced by a Swiss, Lieutenant-Colonel Eugène Allet, from the 1st foreign regiment, who received as his second Athanase de Charette, who was appointed commander. From now on, recruitment was essentially based on seniority: 24 of the 32 officers had had their first military experience with the Franco-Belgians, 21 of whom were French. The others came either from another corps of the pontifical army or from the French army, and entered directly into the pontifical zouaves with their rank. This new organisation of the battalion also included nearly a third of promotions of non-commissioned officers, which was the same principle as that in force in the French army under Louis-Philippe.

**The six years that** followed the training were rather quiet. There were only a few skirmishes on the borders of the Papal States against the king's army and Garibaldi's red shirts, but generally speaking, the soldiers were not very successful. However, in general, the daily life of the Zouaves oscillates between garrison life and military training, participation with their company in the major religious events of the year and, on a more personal level, the discovery of the Eternal City and its surroundings.

- Healing in the mountains

Far from the political and diplomatic tensions that were being played out behind the scenes between France, Italy and the Holy See, from 1865 onwards, a special activity provided the Zouaves with a choice diversion from garrison life: the war on brigandage. This mainly involved capturing or killing the highway bandits who raged in the mountains around Rome, robbing, kidnapping and ransoming passers-by and wealthy villagers. These pursuits do not end in simple clashes between two rival gangs in the heart of the forests and mountain villages that dominate Lazio: they are tough fights fought in a difficult and steep environment that offers multiple refuges inaccessible to an enemy who is often invisible. All company and platoon leaders take part, at one time or another, in these gruelling mountain races. For them, this war had certain advantages, the main one being to train and harden the men. But it also made it possible for detachments that would have gone a long time without meeting each other to find themselves at certain times together in the same camp, and for the men to find each other again. In order to

stimulate the ardour of the troops, the government had attached bounties for each brigand caught or killed: whoever carried out the arrest of one of them was granted a sum of 500 écus, and "if it is a gang leader, the bounty will be one thousand écus". . "There was also a decoration for the man who captured<sup>51</sup> or killed a bandit. The officer received a cross, the soldier or corporal a military medal." . This kind of action could earn officers the cross of the Pontifical Equestrian Order of New Year's Eve in the same way as a wound or any act of bravery in wartime.

On 15 September 1864, France and Italy signed a convention - without the Pope - according to which the Kingdom of Sardinia was to be the guarantor of the integrity of what remained of the papal territory. In exchange, the French troops agreed to leave Rome within two years. In other words, the Papal States enjoyed a short respite before once again being the object of Victor Emmanuel's covetousness. From 1866 onwards, the French flag no longer flew over Rome. The city was defended only by the Zouaves, who, now without outside support, expected an imminent attack. By withdrawing his soldiers, Napoleon III was playing into the hands of the King of Italy. It was at this point, however, that he sent a new French troop to Rome, also raised on a voluntary basis, called the "Roman legion", but which remains better known as the Legion of Antibes because of where it was trained. The Emperor was forced to intervene to defend what remained of the Papal State under the pressure of an electorally indispensable Catholic opinion. As in 1860, an appeal was launched by the committees of St. Peter. Very quickly, the strength of the battalion, which had become a two-battalion regiment on 1 January 1867,<sup>began to</sup> grow to such an extent that by the end of the year it had reached 4,200 men divided for the first time into three battalions .

In September, Garibaldi's Red Shirts crossed the borders of Lazio and settled near Viterbo. General Kanzler divides his army into two brigades: one in the city, the other in the countryside, divided into four military zones:

- 1- Viterbo, commanded by Infantry Colonel Azzanesi;
- 2- Civit  Vecchia, commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Serra;
- 3- Tivoli, by the Lieutenant-Colonel of the Zouaves Charette;
- 4- Velletri-Frosinone, by the Lieutenant-Colonel of the chasseurs Giorgi.

Charette can count on four companies of zouaves; two others are in the area of Viterbo and the rest of the regiment is in Rome with Colonel Allet. The total of the pontifical field column amounts to nearly 3,000 men to which are added about 2,200 French soldiers in support commanded by Brigadier General de Polh s, more than 5,000 men. The Zouaves, as usual, formed the vanguard of this deployment with three companies led by Commander Charles de Lambilly.

Facing them, Garibaldi's troops are not very well equipped, but their numbers are greater and they are more tenacious than the bands of brigands. After many clashes, the Papal army, with the support of the Roman legion and a detachment of the French army, defeated Garibaldi's troops at Mentana on November 3, thus winning its first great military victory over the Kingdom of Italy. This feat of arms crowned more than a month of guerrilla warfare in the Roman campaign during which the Zouaves were particularly solicited. It also demonstrates that this corps of volunteers is now well established, far from the image of the almost amateur troupe that had rushed to attack Castelfidardo seven years earlier. The Pontifical Zouaves have managed to keep the impetus and courage of their elders, the Franco-Belgian riflemen, but in the meantime they have become a real troop, ready for battle on both a human and material level. This can be seen, among other things, in the use of the Chassepot and Remington rifles, innovative and fearsome weapons for the time, which no longer have anything to do with the Mini 

rifle used during the battle of Castelfidardo.<sup>171</sup> However, the respite is short.

**On July 19, 1870**, France declared war on Prussia.<sup>181</sup> Pope Pius IX proposed mediation to the Prussian King William I<sup>to</sup> prevent the conflict. ...but the request was denied. In the Papal States, all permissionaries are recalled and permissions refused. The French officers of the Zouaves and their men were divided: should they remain in Rome to defend the Pope's cause or should they return to France to fight alongside their compatriots and defend their country in danger? At this point in time, this is not a dilemma, but rather a question of principle. All the more so since the French troops stationed in Rome must be repatriated, which potentially leaves the field open for Italy to invade papal territory, although Victor-Emmanuel defends himself against this. The issue becomes more problematic from 1 September with the French defeat at Sedan and the emperor being held prisoner by the Prussians. The morale of the pope's troops was greatly affected. The imperial government had given the French Zouaves the choice of staying or returning, no doubt to compensate for the negative effects of the withdrawal of his troops from Rome. The German states had also allowed their nationals to continue their commitment to the service of the pope if they wished, with the exception of Bavaria, which had recalled them.<sup>19</sup> This raised the question of the relations between French and German Zouaves who were experiencing the confrontation between their respective homelands from Rome. These could have been the object of rivalries, the victories of the ones making the defeats of the others, but it was not the case:

" **Not**once did those of our comrades who had cause to rejoice and triumph sadden us with their joy or hurt us with their triumph. ...] When the dismissal had restored us both to our duties towards our respective homelands,<sup>15</sup> I saw some of them embracing, who were soon to meet each other on the Loire".

**On 20 September**, the Italian offensive on Rome is launched. The first cannon shots are fired at 5 am. Around 9.30 a.m., a breach is opened at Porta Pia for about 30 metres. At 10.10 a.m., the Major de France sounded the cease-fire. Rome has just fallen, and with this fall ends the temporal power of the pope. The regiment of pontifical zouaves will be dismissed the next day.

- The corps is reformed for the French campaign.

The landing, a week later, in Toulon, of a troop deemed reactionary, somewhat embarrassed the government delegation from Tours, embarrassed by the presence on French soil of the cumbersome pontifical zouaves, because if one cannot neglect a seasoned troop, one does not know how to integrate them into the army.<sup>111</sup> Charette pleaded his case with the Secretary General of the Ministry, General Lefort, who agreed with the Lieutenant-Colonel's arguments and, on October 6, without a decree<sup>121</sup> The Council of Europe, in its Resolution of 22 December 1993, authorises the latter to form a corps-franc and to recruit from among the volunteers men who are not subject to conscription into the army or the national guard, that is to say, men who are not subject to conscription into the army or the national guard. This means among those exempted for their status as seminarians, for their marital status as fathers, for their age as those under twenty-one, and those reformed for some physical reason. The authorities find it to their advantage since this troop makes it possible to mobilize men who cannot legally be mobilized, without great expense<sup>131</sup> since, apart from pay and armament, they can be mobilized at no great cost. The costs of equipment, barracks and food remain the responsibility of the body and its patrons, catholic committees constituted or to be



constituted. The name of the unit, however, poses a problem because, for a republican government whose most prominent members make no secret of their secular convictions or their sympathy for Garibaldi, who has just offered his services, it is unimaginable to enlist a regiment of pontifical zouaves. At the suggestion of Crémieux, unless it was General Lefort, the names of the volunteers from the West are retained by reference to the origin of their recruitment in the minds of the ministers, by reference to the place of constitution in the spirit of Charette, but, for all, they will remain the Pontifical Zouaves. For the troop, the filiation between the two corps is ensured humanly by about a quarter of former Italians and, at the officer level, almost all the officers are there.

The arrival of the Zouaves in Tours on 8 October is appreciated. Their reputation has preceded them, which attracts the sympathy of many military leaders who would like to integrate them into their troops. They are placed under the authority of General de Sonis, commander of the 17th corps of the Loire <sup>army</sup>. Recruitment did not pose any problems thanks to a vast network of relations in Catholic circles, but Charette remained vigilant about the moral quality of the recruits. It was not the war as such that attracted new recruits, but Charette's legion and his esprit de corps; it was above all the religious convictions, and to some extent those of the royalists, of his officers and certain non-commissioned officers and soldiers, that rallied these men on the same side. And the number of personnel continued to grow rapidly: from the beginning of November, two battalions of 500 volunteers each divided into six companies were formed. A third battalion is in the process of being created.

On December 1, 1870, on <sup>the</sup> orders of Gambetta, General d'Aurelle de Paladines, at the head of the army, was appointed to the post of General of the Republic of the Loire army, began to march from Orléans on Paris to force the Prussians to lift the siege. General Ducrot's Parisian troops are expected to make a joint breakthrough towards Fontainebleau, the point of convergence of French forces. The Loire army gathered 170,000 men of mixed origins, poorly trained, poorly supervised, poorly armed and poorly equipped, spread out on a line 80 kilometres north of Orléans, facing 140,000 Germans, militarily superior in all respects, occupying the Beauce region some thirty kilometres further north. The troops marched straight ahead in three main columns to converge on Pithiviers, jostling the various enemy corps on both sides. On the left, the manoeuvre, after great success, stalled at the Château de Toury and, on 2 December, the German counter-attack locked up the 37th marching regiment in the village of <sup>Loigny</sup>. The French offensive was locked. To break the lock and save the unfortunate besieged, General de Sonis, on the orders of General Chanzy, launched a rescue attack and, because of the defection of inexperienced and poorly commanded troops, he himself took the lead of a meagre column of improvised assault in which the pontifical/voluntary zouaves of the West figured prominently.

The mediocre vexation of the change of name imposed on the regiment allowed, by a providential chance, that the regiment had to change its name. The mediocre vexation of the change of name imposed on the regiment allowed, by a providential chance, that a stamped banner of the Sacred Heart, bearing the inscription "Heart of Jesus, save France", arrived in Charette's hands: The day before the battle, at 11 p.m., Sergeant Henri de Verthamon was summoned to Charette <sup>16)</sup> and General de Sonis, who had him deliver a spear and charged him with the banner. <sup>17)</sup> a reward for the veteran of Castelfidardo who, the same day, during the march, had asked his colonel to publicly consecrate the legion of volunteers of the West to the heart of Jesus. He then spends the night in prayer in the tent of Captain Henri Wyart, who is studying the topography of the coming battle with his assistant. At 3 o'clock in the morning, he was one of the eighteen men who attended Father Doussot's mass; it was the first Friday of the month, consecrated to the Sacred

Heart, and he took communion. When, at about 3:30 p.m., General de Sonis led the volunteers from the West to the charge, Henri de Verthamon, on foot, between the two waves of skirmishers, in the midst of the mounted officers, raised the banner high: for the first time, the French army displays the Divine Heart on a battlefield. For him, the moment is solemn: "It was sublime, the air was embalmed with valour, we were not walking, we were flying! We all knew we were going to die... For me, it seemed like we were going to heaven..."<sup>[1]</sup> :

"His race stops before the little woods, a bullet tears his bladder, he staggers, straightens for a few meters, a second bullet breaks his spine, the banner is already raised by the Bouillé [...]. At the front of the Pimple Wood, Fernand de Bouillé, the father, is shot in the thumb and then in the chest [...], the banner sways, goes down, rises, falls again, and reappears. Traversay tried to grab it but was hit, Cazenove received a bullet in the arm, Jacques de Bouillé, the son, raises the flag with a tremendous "hurrah!".<sup>[2]</sup> The wood was bayoneted, the frantic race towards Loigny resumed, the first houses were hit, Jacques brandished the banner in the main street filled with flames and smoke. But the position is quickly unbearable, we have to get out of it. As the Zouaves methodically retreat, foot to foot, Jacques is hit by a bullet in the shoulder, he falls, comrades run towards him, he gets up, falls back down, mortally wounded. As best he can, crawling between the wounded and the dead, Le Parmentier recovers the precious cloth.<sup>[3]</sup> ».

The circumstances here are similar to those of Castelfidardo: the panic of the 51st Regiment of March <sup>responds to</sup> the desperate flight of the pontifical troops, the 800 men of General de Sonis still face an enemy ten times superior. Among the 300 volunteers from the West who took part in the attack, many were fighters from Castelfidardo. However, the majority of them were recent recruits with as little training as the Franco-Belgian skirmishers had had in their time. Twice, ten years apart, in two separate armies, for two very different causes and under two diametrically opposed regimes - the monarchy of the pope-king and the reign of the king. The Pontifical Zouaves, starting from almost nothing, quickly formed an elite unit to fight for the only two things that animated them: the Catholic religion and their homeland. Although royalists, the officers and their soldiers made no effort to help Republican France in danger. The very superiority of Loigny over the other battles of the Zouaves is that in Loigny they unfurled the banner. Curiously, this achievement was best expressed, no doubt to his defending corps, by Clemenceau in his speech of November 11, 1918: "France, yesterday a soldier of God, today a soldier of humanity, will always be a soldier of the ideal!"<sup>[4]</sup> . Their commitment was therefore unflinching.

On 13 August 1871, the former Zouaves were demobilized and the regiment was dismissed. This regiment could have continued to exist: it had been maintained when the first tremors of the Commune were announced in early April, and the government turned to the volunteers from the West with the intention of aggregating them to the army and forming a fourth regiment of Zouaves<sup>[22]</sup>.<sup>[22]</sup> But Charette, although promoted to general by Gambetta after the defeat at Le Mans, skillfully wavered from committing his unit to repression and refused to integrate into the French army. The pope's soldier and his officers remained faithful to their principles and, if the fatherland had capitulated to the Germans, the Sovereign Pontiff, for his part, still considered himself a prisoner in his States. So it is to him that they turn, putting their sword at his service if they should be recalled to Rome.

1) Louis-Alphonse de Beccdelièvre, Souvenirs, op. cit. , p. 106.

2) Their dress was reminiscent of that of the Zouaves of Africa: a blue-grey kepi with a red band, a short jacket of the same shade with red soutaches and trimmings, wide grey breeches, a red belt, yellow gaiters and molletières.

3) Diary of Bishop Daniel, op. cit. , p. 26.

4) Edict of Pope Pius IX, op. cit. Article 8.

5) René d'Argence, "[5] René d'Argence, "...Six Months at the Zouaves, or the Last Days of the Papal States" Basel , Swiss Society for Folk Traditions, 2000, pp. 45-46.

6) Numerical statement of the strength of the regiment of pontifical zouaves on 31 December 1867.

7) The Chassepot is the first statutory weapon of the French army to use breech loading instead of muzzle loading. It thus allows shooting and especially reloading lying down as well as an increased rate of fire (twelve shots per minute). In 1866, the range with the rise of combat made it possible to shoot at 150 m and the maximum range with the rise long distance reached approximately 1.200 m.

8) ASV, Archivio particolare di Pio IX. Sovrani e particolari, op. cit, Index n°949, July 22, 1870.

9) As a Badois, the Minister of Arms, General Kanzler, was able without difficulty to remain in the service of the pope of whom he represented the highest military authority. Since August 8, he had authorized all those who wished to do so to return to their country.

10) "L'Avant-Garde" no. 281, September 1, 1902: Chronicle of Captain Henri Derély.

11) Their case was different from that of the Roman legion, purely and simply reintegrated into the army after it was made available.

12) "History of the Regiment", p.1. Such a gap in the regulatory formalities was detrimental to the good administrative functioning of the corps and shows a certain duplicity of authorities.

13) The texts provided that the armament was to be paid for by the snipers, but in practice it was provided by the military administration to regularly formed units. The same was true for certain items of equipment.

14) Many documents, such as leave certificates and certificates of release, are referred to by two names.

15) [ Olivier Tisserand, "[15] Olivier Tisserand. The last cross-references. History of the Papal Zouaves (1860-1870)" 15] Olivier Tisserand, manuscript , La Salle, 1990, p. 253: "Commander Clésinger was asking for them in Besançon to send them to the parades of the Vosges; the inhabitants of Chartres were asking for them to guard their town and the mayor of Fontainebleau had sent a deputy to the government to send them to his town".

16) Pierre-André-Louis Baunard (Mgr), ".General de Sonis" Paris, Poussièlque, 1910, p. 321.

17) M.S.A., "[17] M.S.A., "...The flag of the Sacred Heart and the Zouaves" Saint-Amand, 1889, p. 29.

Anonymous (General de Charette), "Noces d' argent durégiment des zouaves pontificaux", Rennes, Oberthur, 1885 , p. 27.

18) Eugene de Walincourt, "...". Les zouaves pontificaux, Mentana, Rome, Western Campaign" Paris and Lille, Lefort, 1873, op. cit. p. 266, remarks reported by Sister Saint-Henri.

19) Mrs. Jacques de Bouillé, "[19] Mrs. Jacques de Bouillé, "Biography of Jacques de Bouillé" testimony of Maurice de La Valette (unpublished manuscript).

20) Patrick Nouaille-Degorce. Western Volunteers: History and Remembrance, from the War of 1870-1871 to the present day" University of Nantes, 2005, pp. 150-154.

21) Speech by Georges Clemenceau, President of the Council, Minister for War, announcing to the Chamber of Deputies the terms of the armistice agreement signed that morning in Rethondes (Article 34).

22) Alain Pichon, "Les zouaves pontificaux", in Le Colback no. 12, p. II, 89-90.

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