

Tomorrow to be Brave: A Memoir of the Only Woman Ever to Serve in the French Foreign Legion

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It was early spring 1942, and under the pitiless sky of the Libyan desert the climax of the great siege of Bir Hakeim was about to begin. General Koenig, the commander of the Free French and the Foreign Legion in North Africa, and his two thousand troops had been surrounded for fifteen days and nights by Rommel's Afrika Corps. Outnumbered ten to one, pounded by wave after wave of Stuka and Heinkel bombers, the general and his men seemed doomed. Though their situation was hopeless, they chose to reject the Desert Fox's demand for surrender. Instead, one moonless night, the French made an audacious and suicidal bid for freedom by charging directly through the German lines. Leading the way was Susan Travers. The only woman ever to serve officially in the French Foreign Legion, there was the indomitable Englishwoman, speeding across the minefields of 'no man's land' directly towards Rommel's deadly Panzer tanks, her foot hard on the accelerator, doing her job: driving the general's car. That it was leading two thousand men in one of the great military exploits of the Second World War, the legendary mass break-out from Bir Hakeim, that it would see her hailed as the heroine of the night and eventually earn her both the Military Medal and the Legion d'Honneur, was not on her mind as the night exploded around her and German artillery lit up the desert sky. Her only thought was this: she was trying to save the life of the man she loved.

"Tomorrow to be Brave" is the story of Susan Travers's extraordinary life, from her privileged childhood in England through her rebellious youth partying her way across interwar Europe, to her rash decision to join the Free French forces at the outbreak of World War II. In search of adventure -- and a break from her stifling upper-class world -- she could never have dreamed the pivotal role she would play. From her part in the North African campaign through her time after the war serving in the French Foreign Legion as a regular officer -- the only woman ever to have achieved this -- there was enough adventure and passion, heartbreak and heroism, to fill a hundred lifetimes. This, in her own words, is her story. It is a tale of exceptional courage against overwhelming odds and of an epic love affair played out against the backdrop of war as she risked everything for the country -- and the man -- she loved.

Tomorrow to be Brave: A Memoir of the Only Woman Ever to Serve in the French Foreign Legion Details

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Carrie says

This was an amazing read. Susan Travers lived an amazing life, and the story is fascinating. It was a surprise that noted (and excellent) chick-lit author Wendy Holden was the co-author on this book, and the book was eminently readable and well-paced. This would be a great choice for a reader during women's history month.

Anna says

I bought this book in Cheap Book Warehouse as I was looking for engaging story to read. As I'm a little bit interested in French Foreign Legion, I took it immediately. And I didn't regret that.

Great story of a brave woman, who didn't fear anything. She served in one of the best and the toughest military formation in whole world. The only woman that was enlisted as French Foreign Legion soldier and in a rank of officer. First legionnaire that married a legionnaire and gave a birth to a child.

Jim says

The modern military member will probably be doing a lot of head-shaking while reading this autobiography. This is definitely not your typical war story as it is written by the only woman to enlist in the Foreign Legion. In this capacity, Ms Travers was not actually involved in combat except dodging the odd shell and, through blind luck, she managed to drive her General/lover through the encircling German armour at Bir Hakeim. For much of her time in Africa Travers lived in relative luxury as the General's paramour, a situation that would call for courts-martial all round in this day and age. Still, full points to Travers for honesty as she didn't try to gloss over her involvement in this and several other affairs of the heart. Full points to her for answering the Legion's call for troops (you cannot say her country's call as France was ruled by the Vichy regime at this time), and for turning out a war story that manages to be interesting in spite of the mushy stuff.

Kelly says

This woman sounds absolutely amazing: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/ma...

Kay says

Definitely a book worth spending time and attention to for its unique historical value! I was gripped by the

story of this lady's life, from her self confessed frivolity of the 1920's and 30s to her entrance into the war and the French Foreign legion. Her honesty in describing her life, love and war experiences is very obvious and the fact she waited until no one could be affected by this candid portrayal of her life shows dignity, tact and sensitivity.

Highly recommend reading this and finding inspiration from her.

Anne Marie Sweeney says

You want a story about a badass woman who you can hope to aspire to be only 1% badass as she—read this book.

Femke says

Dit is zeker geen boek dat ik zelf zou kiezen in een bibliotheek of boekenwinkel. Maar wanneer enkel de beperkte selectie boeken beschikbaar is van mijn vader, dan grijp ik al snel naar de enige niet-thriller in heel de stapel. Een boek met vergeelde bladeren en een oude, gestoffeerde groene kaft, met op de eerste pagina de krullende lettertjes van de initialen van mijn grootvader. Op zich prikkelde dat genoeg mijn nieuwsgierigheid om dit boek open te slaan.

Normaal houd ik niet zo van biografieën, maar het verhaal van de eerste (en toen uiteraard enige) vrouw in het vreemdelingenlegioen is er ééntje dat direct fascineert. Over hoe een kokette rijkeluisdame zich losrukt van haar ouders, beslist om alle luxe op te geven en zich aan te melden om ten strijde te gaan met het legioen, tijdens WO II in Afrika. Wat begon als een job als verpleegster, groeide snel uit tot chauffeur van één van de belangrijkste generaals. Een boeiend verhaal over een moedige vrouw.

Bruce says

As time passes it seems more works on women during World War Two are appearing. This is an exciting, easily read memoir by the only woman to become a member of the French Foreign Legion. Much of the book is about her time "attached" to the legion as an "ambulance" driver as the legion saw action in the Middle East and North Africa. She recounts her parts in some of the battles and in the resistance of and then breakout from Bir Hakeim.

Strivetoengage says

I posted my review on my blog: <https://strivetoengage.wordpress.com/...>

Jon Wort says

A remarkable account of a remarkable woman. Serving with the French Foreign

Legion and surviving the battle of Bir Hakeim she capture both the hardship, her love for General Koenig and life on the front line.

It is a moving book in parts with some very emotional chapters tinged with sadness. However, throughout it shines with her zest for life, her bravery and her enduring I love for the Legion and General Koenig.

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/8...>

As a book it is easy to read and I had no trouble in reading it in a very short time. I would recommend it to anyone as a “must read” book.

Jo says

An easy and enjoyable read about an unconventional women in less permissive and extraordinary times. She doesn't make herself out be a hero, despite her obvious courage and provides a rare level of insight into the mindset and emotional states of both herself and her fellow soldiers in the midst of battle. I found it thoroughly enjoyable and quite relatable.

KOMET says

This is a FANTASTIC and poignant memoir, one of the best that I've read for a long while.

When I first picked up this book and read its flyleaf, what it described seemed too incredible to be true. Susan Travers, born in England from a materially comfortable (albeit not affluent) background, with parents of Victorian sensibilities not well-matched for each other, went to live in France with them in the early 1920s. There, after finishing school, she learned to live life to the full, feeling more French than British. She was an accomplished tennis player on the amateur level and an avid skier.

Upon the outbreak of the Second World War, Susan offered her services to the French Red Cross. There she learned the rudiments of nursing and in early 1940, was sent with her unit to Finland, where she spent several months helping wounded Finnish soldiers from the recently concluded Russo-Finnish War to recuperate and convalesce. But with the Fall of France in June 1940 and the withdrawal of French forces from Scandinavia, Susan found herself back in England. Determined as ever to make a meaningful contribution to the war effort, she offered her services with the Free French then being formed under the leadership of General de Gaulle from various elements of the French military who rallied to his call to continue the fight against the Germans. Thus began her relationship with the French Foreign Legion, which took her to Dakar (where Free French forces suffered a bloody repulse later in 1940 after trying to establish a toehold in Equatorial Africa against the Vichy French), East Africa, and the Levant (where the Free French won their first battles in Syria and Lebanon, assisting the Allies in wresting both protectorates from Vichy control in 1941). It was also in the Levant while Susan was recovering from jaundice that she found love with one of the high-ranking Free French officers. A man who would play a pivotal part in her life throughout the war.

Later, after the Foreign Legion was sent to North Africa to assist the British and Commonwealth forces in holding the line against Rommel's Afrika Korps and Italian forces, Susan earned herself a special place in the Legion for staying at Bir Hakeim, a vital strongpoint in Libya, which Rommel needed to capture in order to

push forward to Egypt and control of the Suez Canal, without which the Allies could not expect to maintain its precarious hold over North Africa, and by extension, the Middle East. At this time, she was the official driver for this officer, K, (promoted to General), who commanded the French forces at Bir Hakeim. Rather than stay safe in the rear area far from the front, Susan opted to return to Bir Hakeim, where German and Italian forces outnumbered the Legion by 10 to 1.

Despite a personal ultimatum from Rommel himself requesting that all French forces surrender Bir Hakeim or face annihilation, General K resolved on a plan to breakout with his troops under cover of darkness after having received approval from his British superiors to do so. It was a bold gamble as Susan bravely drove the General and one of his junior officers through a minefield and 3 lines of defense firmly held by the enemy. Several hours later, when it seemed that all hope was lost, they found safety upon reaching a British forward position. Gradually, those troops who survived the mines and vicious attacks from Italo-German forces, were able to reassemble in British controlled territory. This battle helped to further bolster De Gaulle's claim to be the "real leader" of Free France, and lend credibility to the Free French military.

For a variety of reasons, Susan had to sever her ties with General K (who later came to occupy one of the highest positions in the French military, earning De Gaulle's deepest respect and trust), and continued to serve with the Legion in Italy and France, seldom far from the frontlines.

With war's end in May 1945, Susan was a bit of a loss as to what to do with her life. With the help of some officers she had known in the Legion, Susan was able to be officially admitted into the Legion --- as an officer. Service in Indochina followed, where she found love and marriage with a fellow Legionnaire. (Susan Travers went on to live with France with her husband and 2 sons. Her husband predeceased her in 1995.)

Liz Neale says

This is the memoir of Susan Travers the only woman to serve in the French Foreign Legion. Very interesting book.

Ria says

A totally absorbing and moving book, I read this in one read through until the early hours of the morning. Susan Travers left her privileged, somewhat frivolous life in Europe to join the Free French forces at the outbreak of World War II which she spent mostly in Africa. This book was educational, inspirational and a heartbreaking love story.

Anna says

What an amazing lady. Susan Travers was (and has been) the only woman to (be allowed to) join the French Foreign Legion. A lot of people asked to write her memoir, but she chose to wait until she was over 90, and

her husband and all previous lovers (that have their part in the memoir) were dead. She was on active duty during the WW II, but tells about her life also before the war.

War, fights (even though she wasn't on the frontline but a driver and sometimes a nurse), exotic locations (in war-time Africa, so accommodations more like tents and sleeping in a hole on the ground than anything even remotely resembling resorts), love (yes, that too). She doesn't spare the details. Definitely not your typical WW II book. I hugely admire this lady.
