

In 1914, World War One was about to start between France and Germany. My grand father Lucien was turning 18 and was drafted to serve his country. He was over six feet tall, red hair, well built and eager. After his indoctrination he quickly moved up the ranks and became a sergeant.

In the 1800's France had colonized many African countries but had trouble maintaining border control between Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia. The Sahara desert was an immense hostile territory run by the Touareg, the Berbers and many other tribes. The French foreign legion was already based in North Africa but was assigned to protect the colonizers' plantations around the Moroccan and Algerian coast. In those days it took a week by truck to go from Oran on the coast of Algeria to Adrar (a town in the middle of the desert) approximately a 1200 kms journey. The convoys had to stop at night in oasis to get fresh water, rest and fix flat tires punctured by jagged rocks that peppered the "road". During these stops they were frequently attacked by the Touareg and robbed. To resolve this problem France decided to create a new branch of the military called the Méharistes. This regiment would be led by French officers who would recruit local men knowledgeable in riding camels through the desert for days, without getting lost, and who would be able to fight. My grandfather decided to join this regiment and moved to Adrar, his first posting. Lucien was amazed by the rugged beauty of the place. The fort was made of ocher clay (that turned magenta at sunset), a few palm trees and a minaret in the centre of town. All of it was surrounded by flat roof clay houses interlocking into each other forming a labyrinth of streets and stairs. Walking in the evening through those streets he could smell mutton stew cooking with cumin and dried fruits, orange flower blossoms, almonds and honey pastries. From the top wall of the fort all he could see to the horizon was rocks and sand.

He was training the Bedouins in combat and without knowing it the Bedouins were training him to survive the Sahara's excruciating temperatures, sand storms, handling his camel and surviving on sweet mint tea, dry dates and olives. At some point he ended up patrolling a region in southern Algeria where a solitary monk named Charles De Foucauld lived. The French military knew him well and were looking out for him. They occasionally brought him food, as Charles was once a captain in the cavalry. My father used to tell me that after spending a night out in the Sahara he was a transformed man. Apparently there are millions of stars lighting up the sky and thousands of falling stars. The silence was so deep that all you could hear was your heartbeat. His recollection was that it was magical and frightening at the same time. Perhaps it was during one of these nights that Charles found God. De Foucauld was living in a small house made of rocks, he named it l'hermitage. He lived as a recluse monk, a modest humble life and in all likelihood sharing his meagre meals with travelling shepherds. He had become very fond of the Tuaregs... he learned their language and their culture and wrote books about it. They most likely looked up to him as some sort of shaman and they came to him to fix their ailments, which must have provoked the ire of the Arab Sheiks. Perhaps out of resentment, jealousy or other motives the Sheiks ordered Charles' execution. That particular day two Méharistes were patrolling the area, they heard the shots, went to check what was happening and they too were murdered. My grandfather and his men were dispatched to the scene and they took care of the site. Lucien picked up Charles' bell, a small hand made bronze bell crafted by local artisans. The bell has a very distinct sound, almost metallic but with a ring to it. You need to shake it hard to get the right sound... Lucien decided to keep it.

My grand father continued his military career in the Sahara. His wife Helene joined him in Adrar and she was the first European woman to have lived in the region. The bell was now on their sideboard in the dining room. My father was born later on in Oran and was raised there by his aunt. One day a sandstorm started while my grandfather was out on patrol, the storm lasted for days. Unfortunately he and his men never returned. They sent search parties out to look for them but they soon realized they must have gotten lost and died somewhere in the Hoggar.

My father Gerard moved back to France just as the Independence war started between France and Algeria. In his suitcase were a few personal belonging and De Foucauld's bell.

Moving forward 55 years...

After retiring from the airlines my wife and I decided to move to the Comox Valley, I began volunteering at the Oyster River Enhancement Society, joined the board of directors and met father Charles Brandt. Charles was an interesting man and we shared some similar interests. By the time I became ORES's President, Charles had difficulty coming to our board meetings so we eventually named him Director emeritus. That way he was still involved without having the responsibilities. He read our minutes meticulously and often asked me to clarify some of our decisions. One day he invited me to his house, l'hermitage, where he was in the middle of restoring a book. As he was showing me around my eyes caught a familiar picture on the wall. I was surprised to see pictures and articles about de Foucauld, he even had a piece of his cassock. Of course I had to tell him the story of my grandfather and the bell. Father Charles became very interested and wanted to see the bell. Unfortunately the bell was in France with my father. On my next visit to France I asked my dad if I could have the bell to show a monk back home, but he was unwilling to give me the bell and was adamant about the fact that it must remain in our family.

In 2015 my father passed away, I had to make numerous trips to France that year and on one trip I brought back the bell. I informed Father Charles that I had the bell with me and he told me to come to his house immediately. When I arrived he looked at the bell from every angle, weighed it, felt it and told me to follow him to his chapel where he began ringing the bell as loud as he could with a smile on his lips and a spark in his eye. He then said that was how Charles de Foucauld used to call his followers, I thought he must not have had many followers in that region. Charles asked me if he could keep the bell for his chapel. I hesitated and said I was willing to lend it to him but that when he passed on to please make sure I got it back. He agreed and was thrilled.

Today the bell is back on display in my house, with more memories attached to it and more stories to tell. What were the chances of me reconnecting the bell from Charles de Foucault through my grandfather to Father Charles 100 years later and thousands of miles away.