

SAHARA

ADVENTURE SERIES

29. Death stalks the Brave



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DEATH STALKS THE BRAVE

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Published by:

TREASURE CHEST BOOKS - PUBLISHERS

Strand Mews

Strand

2025

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The cover illustration for the Sahara Adventure Series was generated by AI software, which enriches the narrative. This book is being released for the first time in English in e-book format.

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by Meiring Fouche

Published by:

Treasure Chest Books - Publishers, Strand Mews, Strand 7140
South Africa

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Online Store: <https://panther-ebooks.com>

Website: <https://www.softcoverbooks.co.za>

SUMMARY

The narrative commences in Dini Salam, a garrison town of the French Foreign Legion in the Sahara. Teuns Stegmann, a South African, and his German friend, Fritz Mundt, witness the landing of an unusual aircraft. Shortly thereafter, Teuns is summoned to Colonel Le Clerq's office. He receives orders to fly to Algiers with Colonel La Crosse within two hours. The reason for this abrupt command remains unknown, even to Le Clerq and his second-in-command, Captain D'Arlan. For Teuns, this fosters an atmosphere of mystery and anticipation.

Teuns is taken to Algiers and introduced to General Du Bois, head of the Secret Service. He undergoes intensive training in Arabic dialects, culture, and combat skills. The objective is to prepare him for an exceedingly perilous solo mission: to uncover a mysterious Arab weapon. Teuns's plans include, among other things, infiltrating an Arab conference where he discovers the nature of the terrifying weapon, a biological virus with potentially lethal consequences for the Foreign Legion.

His intensive training and exceptional prowess enable him to penetrate the city of Doetra in the Atlas Mountains. In Doetra, he must brave the immense sheer cliffs by descending them with a rope. Then, he must reach the scientist, Professor Amaroff, to obtain his notebook and secret formula, and eliminate the professor. The slightest misstep on his part will signify the end of his mission, demanding all of Teuns's knowledge, skills, and determination not to yield before achieving his goal. Will Teuns manage to defy all dangers and succeed in his objective, or will he be captured before he can accomplish it?

EXTRACT

He hangs suspended for a moment from the short cord.

Then he takes hold of the long cord and swings it from below with a forceful motion of his hand, sending a kink running up the cliffs to the top where the cord is secured.

With a soft rustle, the upper loop of the long cord jerks free from behind the rock projection around which Teuns had hooked it, and for an instant, it resembles a white serpent writhing through the night.

The upper section of the cord plummets past Teuns, and he laughs aloud.

But what he does not know is that one of his pursuers, at the very moment the kink flew free from the cliff edge above, has arrived at that precise spot.

He reins his horse to a halt. He shouts to his companions some distance away, and moments later, the first torch hurtles down the cliffs.

Teuns turns ice-cold where he hangs.

The torch plummets past, about a foot away from him, and then he hears the cry of triumph from the Arabs lying atop the cliffs, looking down and witnessing what is transpiring here.

Initially, they had teased their comrade, saying he was seeing visions and dreaming dreams, but now, lying there and looking down, they see that the tale he told was not as fantastical as they had imagined.

For down there, against the sheer cliffs, hangs a man.

And as they stare at him, the group of Arabs is fairly certain they have found the man they seek.

A man who had, until now, existed only in the imagination of the Arabs, for they were not even sure that anyone had jumped from that aircraft.

29. DEATH STALKS THE BRAVE

Chapter 1

PERFECT SOLDIER

It is exceedingly rare for an aircraft to be seen at Dini Salam, the southern garrison town of the French Foreign Legion in the Sahara Desert.

That is why, on this morning, shortly after their first drill practice of the day, the men bubble out of the dormitories like red ants and swarm onto the ramparts to listen to whatever droning sound this might be. Most of them are bare-chested, having just been washing after the strenuous drill practice Sergeant Catroux had subjected them to. They were just rinsing off their sweaty torsos, necks, faces, and hands when they first heard the droning.

Just as they reached the ramparts, they saw the smallish aircraft gliding in from the direction of Algiers, making a wide turn around the town, and then landing behind the low, flat-roofed structures of the Arab quarter in a cloud of sand and dust.

“Well, now,” says Fritz Mundt, the large German of the garrison, to Teuns Stegmann, the South African also serving in the garrison, here on the ramparts where they stand side by side. “An aeroplane! Perhaps it brings a messenger to say that all hostilities between the French Foreign Legion and the Arabs have now been called off. Perhaps our career is at an end, Stegmann,” says Fritz, squinting his eyes against the harsh glare of the Sahara sun.

“Yes,” says Teuns good-naturedly, “or perhaps it brings us a few crates of real German beer, old Big Fellow.”

Fritz looks reproachfully at his comrade who always teases him about German beer, something he hasn’t seen in years.

But they both know that something special is afoot. It is a swift, rather

small aircraft they saw land. One of those four-seater models that looks like a large dragonfly.

After the aircraft disappears from view, they pay it no further mind. They turn and walk down from the ramparts towards the dormitory to lie down for a bit, feeling weary after the intensive exercise they have just endured.

In the dormitory, the men chatter excitedly about the arrival of the aircraft.

“You’d better polish your boots, lads,” says Petacci, one of the small group of intimate companions to which Teuns Stegmann and Fritz Mundt also belong. “I think it’s the Inspector-General of the French Foreign Legion coming to see if we can still puff out our chests, if we can still salute, and if we can still march smartly.”

“Nothing else,” says Jack Ritchie, sitting on his hard cot and pulling off his boots.

“If it were the Inspector-General,” says Podolski, the large Pole, “we would have gotten wind of it. They would have told us a few days ago to polish our boots, clean our rifles properly, and wash our ears.”

Thus, the men speculate, whilst the garrison commander, Colonel Le Clerq, and his second-in-command, Captain D’Arlan, race out of the fortress gate in the garrison’s only jeep to see who and what this unexpected aircraft has brought. Even the two officers are uncertain about the aircraft’s sudden arrival. They had no prior knowledge of it and haven’t the faintest idea of its purpose.

Like curious children, the men crowd together at the large barred windows when the jeep returns from the airfield. It stops near their quarters, and to their astonishment, they see a high-ranking officer of the French Foreign Legion jump briskly from the jeep.

“A Colonel,” Teuns says to Fritz.

“A Colonel, indeed!” Fritz answers excitedly. “This must mean something. It’s not for nothing that Algiers would send a colonel in a special aircraft to Dini Salam.”

“Yes, I think things are going to happen today,” says Teuns. “I wish I knew what was behind it.”

Le Clerq, D’Arlan, and the new arrival walk briskly towards Le Clerq’s office. And then the men speculated even more wildly about what was happening now. It wasn’t every day that a high-ranking officer of the Legion just landed here in a special aircraft.

Scarcely ten minutes pass after the colonel alights from the jeep before D’Arlan appears in the dormitory doorway. D’Arlan looks brisk and cool, calm and efficient as always. His alert eyes survey the dormitory, and then his clear, penetrating voice rings through the silence.

“Legionnaire Stegmann!” calls Captain D’Arlan. Teuns Stegmann, the tall, broad-shouldered South African of the French Foreign Legion, springs to attention, although at that moment he is without boots and wearing virtually only trousers.

“Oui, mon Capitaine,” says Teuns briskly.

“Legionnaire,” says D’Arlan, “will you please report to Colonel Le Clerq’s office within five minutes!” With that, D’Arlan turns on his heel, tucks his officer’s baton under his arm, and strides briskly out of the dormitory.

The men cluster around Teuns. They clamber over beds and stumble over chairs standing on the floor. Teuns looks questioningly at them, just as they look questioningly at him.

“And now?” asks Fritz Mundt, “and what do they want with Legionnaire Stegmann now?”

“Perhaps they want to make him a general,” jests Petacci.

The tall, blond South African merely smiles at all the nonsense being

spoken. "Or perhaps they want to marry him off to the daughter of some Arab chieftain," opines Podolski.

"Or perhaps they want to discharge him from the Legion," ventures Jack Ritchie. They babble confusedly, but amidst the chatter, they help Teuns quickly get his full uniform on, because although D'Arlan gave no order regarding it, they know instinctively that Teuns must appear before the high-ranking arrival in his full kit in this instance.

One hands him his boot, another his shirt, yet another brings his kepi closer, and in no time, Teuns is in his full uniform and strides out of the dormitory with long steps, followed by the curious gazes of his comrades, hastening towards Colonel Le Clerq's office.

There is a burning excitement within the South African. His blue eyes are narrowed, and his heart beats faster. Ever since joining the French Foreign Legion to try and find his brother, lost in the Second World War, Teuns has undergone strange experiences in the Sahara. But here, as his boots clatter across the flagstones towards the corridor leading to Le Clerq's office, he has the impression that this might be the beginning of the strangest and most exciting experience he has ever had in the Sahara.

The orderly announces Teuns's arrival. The door is opened for him, and he walks in quickly. He salutes smartly and clicks his heels together as he appears before Le Clerq, the strange colonel, and D'Arlan.

"Legionnaire Stegmann," says Colonel Le Clerq, "this is Colonel La Crosse from the headquarters of the French Foreign Legion in Algiers." Le Clerq's voice is curt, businesslike, and measured.

Again, Teuns salutes smartly, and Colonel La Crosse returns the salute.

Then Le Clerq speaks again. "Legionnaire Stegmann," he says, "you have two hours to prepare yourself to fly to Algiers with Colonel La Crosse."

Teuns has to restrain his curiosity from looking from Le Clerq to La

Crosse. La Crosse says not a single word. He just stands there with his hands behind his back, a picture of military precision and perfection, and does not open his mouth. He merely stares appraisingly at the tall man who has appeared before him.

“Oui, mon Colonel,” Teuns says to Le Clerq.

“That will be all, Legionnaire,” says Le Clerq, and the tall man salutes, turns on his heel, and quickly walks out of Colonel Le Clerq’s office.

This is one of the most incomprehensible things he has ever encountered. This is the strangest interview he has ever had with any officer. All he is told is that he must prepare himself to fly to Algiers with a strange colonel within two hours. Could he have done something for which they want to discipline him? But that is impossible. If he had done something requiring discipline, Le Clerq would discipline him here in the garrison fortress of Dini Salam. What strikes him as most peculiar is that Le Clerq or D’Arlan almost never give a man an order without at least giving some indication of the reason or purpose behind it.

But not today. All he is told is that he must fly to Algiers in haste.

Immediately after he walks out, the door is swung shut behind him, and Colonel La Crosse, the short, darkish man with the perfect military bearing and the perfect military mentality, turns to Le Clerq. “Mon Colonel,” he says to Le Clerq, “do you think this is your most suitable man?”

“One of the very best in the garrison,” says Le Clerq. “I cannot give you a better man.” Le Clerq is just as curious as Teuns. He too knows nothing. He hasn’t the vaguest notion of the purpose concerning Teuns Stegmann. La Crosse simply entered and stated his requirements calmly, composedly, brusquely, and clearly. He wants a legionnaire, strong of constitution, brave, enterprising, with a reasonable knowledge of Arabic dialects and extensive, intensive knowledge of conditions in the Sahara. But above all, he wants a man who can show initiative in

the most dangerous and extraordinary circumstances.

He doesn't merely want a soldier. He wants a man who can adapt in danger. Who can make plans. Who has an enterprising spirit. And above all, a man who is utterly fearless.

"Yes, he is your man, Colonel," says D'Arlan. "He is the perfect soldier. He is the only man in Dini Salam I can think of who meets all the requirements you have set."

"Excellent," says La Crosse. "Excellent. He seems intelligent to me. He is strong of body, and I can see he is strong of spirit too. This is the kind of fellow we want, mes amis."

La Crosse becomes aware of how Le Clerq and D'Arlan are both looking at him with interest and curiosity.

"I regret," he says, "that I cannot disclose the high command's intentions regarding this soldier. It is a military secret of the highest order. I have only one order, and that is to fetch such a soldier from here. A man with practical experience of the Sahara and a man who has endured much in the Sahara. Above all, a man who knows the Arab inside out." He smiles benignly at Le Clerq and D'Arlan, and then he says, "I am afraid, mes amis, you will have to restrain your curiosity until the mission for which Legionnaire Stegmann is intended is successfully completed. Then the whole matter will be revealed to you. But until that happens, I shall be obliged to keep you in the dark."

Teuns returns to the dormitory slightly out of breath and pushes through the men crowding around him to hear what's what.

"I know nothing, lads," says Teuns, "I just received orders to get ready within two hours to fly to Algiers with a certain Colonel La Crosse."

That is enough for the men. They spring into action. Fritz Mundt grabs Teuns's spare uniform trousers and hurries to the ironing area to press them neatly. Petacci grabs his uniform jacket and brushes it until the dust flies. Jack Ritchie grabs Teuns's boots and starts polishing them.

One does this, another does that. Teuns himself hurries to the washing place, shaves his face clean, and washes himself from head to toe.

When he returns, he packs his necessary items, and within an hour, he is kitted out in his uniform, looking like a brand new sixpence. The men treat him like a bridegroom. One adjusts something here, another adjusts something there. He looked sharp enough to be pulled through a ring. He has his spare kepi on his head, and it positively gleams, so white it is. His face is shiny and clean-shaven, his nails cleaned. His boots glitter, and his uniform jacket has been neatly brushed clean by Petacci.

Fritz goes through his things again to see if he has packed everything.

D'Arlan finally reappears to tell Teuns he must come. He quickly shakes hands with his comrades, and then he walks out.

A quarter of an hour later, the men again crowd onto the ramparts and witness the aircraft taking off in a thick cloud of dust beyond the Arab shacks. Then it climbs high and glints in the Sahara sun, its nose pointed straight towards Algiers.

With a strange sensation within him, Teuns Stegmann looks down at the familiar face of this hot, stinking old place, Dini Salam. With a feeling of wistfulness, he sees the men standing on the ramparts. Sees them waving. Sees their kepis swinging through the air. And when he looks ahead again over the endless desert, he wonders what awaits him the moment he steps off the aircraft in Algiers with Colonel La Crosse.

Because before they boarded, La Crosse had not said a single word. As far as La Crosse was concerned, Teuns didn't even exist. And besides Teuns and La Crosse, there is only one other man in the aircraft, the pilot.