

Death of St Charles de Foucauld, December 1, 1916, Tamanrasset, Algeria

The assassination of Father Charles de Foucauld in December 1916 remains the best-known event of the war that shook the Sahara at the time. A war in which the world conflict that then tore apart the rest of the world was no stranger. But unlike in Europe, it was a movement war where the enemy of French colonial troops, the Tuareg, was as unpredictable as he was elusive.

It was in mid-1915 that the first riots were announced that would put the African desert in blood and fire. The French camels have just completed the conquest of the Sahara and are far from fully explored. Moreover, his rule is still very fragile and is quickly answered by a revolt movement fostered from the Libyan desert by the Turks (allies of the Germans) and a Muslim religious movement little inclined to concessions: the Senusites. However, both sides are adverse because the Senusites seek to rid Libya of Turkish rule. But, for the occasion, they will come to an understanding between Muslims against the colonial companies of Italians and French.

Southern Tunisia received the first impact of the conflict during the summer of 1915. At that time, The Saharan populations of Libya expelled the Italians from Tripolitania and Fezzan. French posts in southern Tunisia are then on the front line. Having gathered some of the defeated Italian troops, they suffered violent attacks from those who did not leave without difficulty.

These first passes of arms, if not all came out victorious for the attackers; however, encouraged their companies and earned them many rallies. Like gunpowder, the movement spread throughout the Sahara, and one after the other, with rare exceptions, Tuareg tribes disagree.

In March 1916, the French post of Djanet, the apple of discord for a long time between the French, Turks and Tuareg, fell after seventeen days of siege. He did not resist the fire of the cannons that the Tuareg snatched from the Italians of Fezzan. Two months later, the place was taken over by a strong French detachment, but a garrison could not be left there. The place, on the edge of the Sahara's French possessions, is too challenging to stock. To do this, it is necessary to travel hundreds of kilometers of tracks, each detour of which is exposed to the ambushes of the Tuareg. And that's a kind of attack in which nomads are good. With a handful of persistent fighters experienced in aid, they undermine the bonds the French try to maintain between their posts. Supply convoys are regularly attacked and looted despite the escort accompanying them. Fort Polignac was, therefore to be abandoned on December 23, 1916, because it could not supply it with food and ammunition. Deprived of fresh food, the garrison was riddled with scurvy and at the end of its resistance ...

The abandonment of Djanet and Fort-Polignac marks a significant withdrawal of French troops under pressure from dissident nomads. And camel detachments are powerless to counteract the action of the Tuareg. Despite unwavering determination and good dominance of guerrilla warfare in the desert, there are very few to control the entire Sahara. They fight a skilled enemy, who must be chased for hundreds of miles in the most arid regions of the African desert.

Clashes multiplied during 1916 throughout the Saharan territory held by the French. Dissent won the Timbuktu region in April 1916 and the Air at the end of the year. Thus, in December 1916, it was the turn of the post of Agades to be taken by several hundred well-armed Tuareg. Against all expectations, the mail withstood eighty-two days before being delivered by a strong zinder relay column. However, the matter cost the loss of several detachments trapped in ambushes around Agades.

Lyautey, then minister of war, is moved by this turbulence in a region that is dear to him. Meet a man capable of taking her down: General Laperrine, the main protagonist in conquering this ungrateful part of the colonial empire. In early 1917, the minister removed Laperrine from the Franco-German front to entrust him with the task of restoring French supremacy over the dunes of the African desert. With his knowledge of the countryside and the support of an important nomadic chief, Moussa ag Amastane, general meharist managed to bring peace to this territory which exerted a real fascination in him. Shortly before his career put him aside, he died there in 1920, during the first Sahara air voyage. (see "The Algerian" No. 74).

It is in this context of guerrilla warfare, at the height of the tumult that the assassination of Father Charles de Foucauld occurs. The monk settled in Tamanrasset in 1905. The place was then only a miserable village where some servants lived who the Tuareg used to cultivate scarce gardens. De Foucauld occupies an adobe house * that sometimes leaves for its hermitage of Assekrem in the heart of the Hoggar Mountains. However, since the beginning of hostilities, he has been aware of the danger that threatens him and never leaves Tamanrasset. His most peaceful attitude cannot, in fact, make people forget that he is French and Christian, qualities hated by the rebels. He ignored it much less because he was aware of the situation and kept his friends, the camel officers, in what he learned through his privileged relationships with the natives. But he refuses to retreat to Fort Motylinski, fifty kilometers from Tamanrasset, as requested by military authorities.

However, at the insistence of the officers who visit him regularly, he accepted the protection of a small fort of twenty-by-twenty meters built near the village for his safety. The construction, carried out by his advice, is almost impregnable in the event of an attack by conventional means used in the Sahara. Apart from the ruse ..., since June 1916, the hermit of Hoggar lives in this all-military residence where some weapons and food were stored.

On December 1, at nightfall, they knock on the door of the fort.

Who's there? asks the suspicious father.

A familiar voice responds. It is that of a "haratine" (as black slaves are called in the service of the Tuareg) that the religious has already had the opportunity to meet.

It is El Madani, open, bring the mail

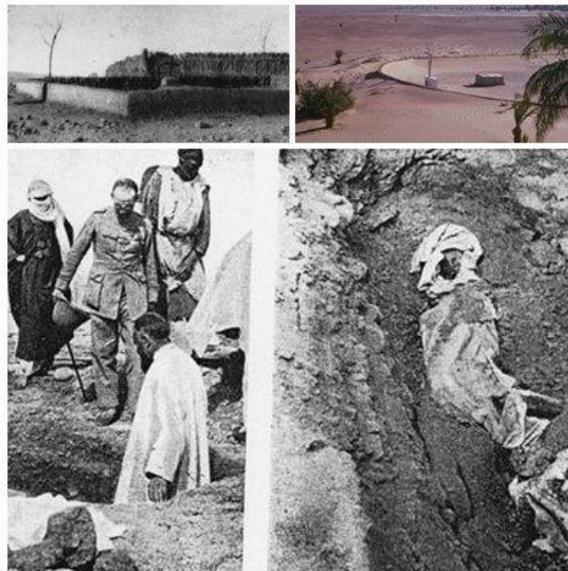
De Foucauld predicted a few moments: this is not the usual time of the post. But his visitor is convincing and does not inspire suspicion. Besides, the religious just opened the door and fell into the trap. Madani is not alone! Thirty Tuareg accompanied him and used him to open the fort. What did they want from

Charles de Foucauld? Get rid of an iconic character? Take him hostage? Delete a source of information for the French? We don't know, *but it seems the goal wasn't to destroy his life.*

The Fort of Tamanrasset in front of whom Charles de Foucauld was murdered. The lower wall hides the front door



The religious is brutally removed from his house and thrown to the ground. He made no gesture of defense, not a word of rebellion, and fell to his knees in prayer at the threat of the barrel of a rifle while the fort and the people were looted. Unfortunately, the nomad holding the prisoner under his weapon does not have the same character strength as him. He is nervous and frightened by the shooting that suddenly erupted a few hundred yards away between his comrades and two camels from Fort Motylinski. Panicked, he unloads his rifle on the man kneeling in front of him and in his custody. The bullet passes through the head of Charles de Foucauld, who sinks into a wall maintaining his prayer attitude. A French patrol buried him two days later in a ditch defending the fort.



On December 15, 1917, a year later, General Laperrine exhumed the body of the monk, who was his friend, to give him a more dignified burial a few hundred yards from the fort. The general did not then suspect that, by a strange return from fate, he would be buried by his side in April 1920, having found death during a last Saharan adventure ...

