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on the Fearless encounter

B RITISH Ministers are extremely cautious about the outcome of the Fearless encounter between Harold Wilson and Ian Smith at Gibraltar. No easy, cut and dried formula has been worked out in advance, and meetings on ships have a habit of getting nowhere.

But one thing is different from the climate of the fated HMS Tiger talks of December, 1966: there is a distinct impression that Mr. Smith is now much more the master of his regime than he was then, and his attitude has shifted enough to justify this new round of talks.

The confrontation was clinched by an exchange of messages between the premiers during the past few days, and it is believed that Mr. Smith insisted that nobody but Mr. Wilson would do at the conference table.

Success or failure of the Fearless talks must depend on agreement about Rhodesia's future constitution.

Britain will insist on voting rules which will eventually allow Rhodesia's 4,000,000 Africans the majority of their own people in Parliament. There would also have to be a cast-iron guarantee that any interim white minority government could not change these rules once independence had been granted.

Mr. Wilson is also expected to demand that Mr. Smith should widen the basis of his government to include representatives of liberal opinion.

● IF Mr. Smith can give such guarantees, Britain would probably not insist on going through with its previous declaration of "No independence before majority African rule."

On the other side, Mr. Smith would have to give up his long-standing insistence that there can be no African majority rule in his or his children's lifetime.

On board the Fearless with him will be Mr. Desmond Lardner-Burke, Rhodesia's Minister of Justice, and one of the regime's tough men.

The presence of Mr. Lardner-Burke should at least ensure that Mr. Smith does not make an agreement which is subsequently overthrown by his Cabinet.

Standing quietly in the sidelines is South African Prime Minister John Vorster. He has been giving economic support to Rhodesia since the imposition of sanctions.

But Vorster is believed to be in favour of a peaceful settlement. A quiet, settled Rhodesia could be a useful buffer between white South Africa and independent black Africa.

VICTOR KNIGHT



Rolf Steiner, Death's-head truck and Biafran boy soldier.

AS ADVANCING Nigerian troops whittle away what is left of Biafra, the breakaway State appears to be banking entirely on French aid to avoid defeat.

However hopeless the Biafrans' cause may seem, Paris is not letting them down. Arms are pouring in (mainly from Libreville, capital of the former French colony of Gabon) and their fire-power has increased dramatically. Moreover, French mercenaries are the backbone of their commando brigade spearhead.

Overall boss of these commandos is Rolf Steiner, a tough, fair-haired former sergeant in the French Foreign Legion who fought in Algeria.

Within a few months of joining the Biafrans at the beginning of the year, the German-born mercenary had been promoted to colonel—despite his complete lack of command experience.

Steiner is something of a mystery man. His wife, Odette, lives in Grenoble. The first she knew of his presence in Biafra was from a French TV film. Her husband left home a year ago and vanished.

"It was an awful shock to me," she said. "He had finished with the Army for good and I can't understand his being in Africa, as he had a serious operation on both lungs for tuberculosis just a few years ago." Mme. Steiner has been told that her husband was paid £70,000 to command the Biafran commandos.

She believes her husband was recruited by a Lyons businessman who trades with West African states and had a country house near Valence, 65 miles south of Lyons.

The last Mme. Steiner heard of her husband was when he was seen in Valence—a town where

THE STRANGE AFFAIR OF A CRASHED CAR AND THE MAN AT MADONNA HQ

by Peter Stephens

Head of the Mirror Paris Bureau

some odd things have happened recently.

It was near Valence that an apparently routine car crash last weekend took on sinister undertones when the French counter-espionage service was given documents found in one of the wrecked cars.

A geophysicist from Angola lost control of his car which hit another carrying Friedrich Herz, a former German Army captain and now a Biafran mercenary, and Captain Godwin N'Soku, of the Biafran Army.

The French took the unusual step of announcing yesterday that the injured men would be able to leave hospital when they are fit because no arms had been found in their car. They also said the documents handed by police to the counter-espionage people concerned orders for arms from German firms.

In some quarters, however, it is whispered that the documents may have referred to orders for French arms. It is also thought that the two soldiers were in the region because there is a hidden mercenaries' training camp not far from Valence to which the French Government is turning a blind eye.

If there is one it would not be the first. A few years ago police raided a camp in the same area of the Ardeche Department and

rounded up French mercenaries who were training to serve in the Congo.

De Gaulle was bitterly hostile to Frenchmen serving in the Congo—hence the crackdown. But he is openly backing Biafra, so if the local authorities know anything about a training camp it is doubtful that they would take action.

Officials deny that there is a mercenary camp near Valence, in the same way they deny that French arms are being shipped to Biafra. But there is no doubt that considerable supplies of French arms and ammunition are getting through to Biafra, according to reliable French and African sources to whom I have spoken.

At least six plane-loads of arms are being flown into Biafra every day in unmarked aircraft—mostly from Libreville 600 miles away. There are also dropping zones where supplies are parachuted to Steiner's commando force.

The French Government is not handling the operation openly but it would be naive to think it knew nothing about it. Libreville is seething with observers, officials, arms dealers, and secret agents. Last week Steiner paid one of his frequent visits to the capital—ostensibly to have dental treatment.

The airlift has been considerably stepped up of late. Less

than two months ago, Steiner said: "I have only 1,000 rifles for 10,000 men and very few cartridges." Now his units have automatic weapons—which surprised Nigerian troops in a recent attack by their heavy fire-power—and seem liberally supplied with ammunition.

How many men he commands is something of a mystery. In August he mentioned a figure of 8,500 but he was also training another 15,000 soldiers, including 14-year-old boys, for guerilla warfare. Now there are claims that he is leading a force of 50,000.

Many of his men are deeply religious and one of Steiner's favourite stories is about "the last shipload of supplies to reach Lagos from Britain." This, he says, included 127 tons of ammunition for the Federal forces and 30,000 bibles for the Biafrans.

Steiner's men are deeply proud of their religion and that is why his HQ, a former mission tucked away in the bush thirty-five miles from Umuahia, is named Madonna. But somewhat paradoxically they throw their holy fervour into a battle for survival under Steiner's skull-and-crossbones insignia, which is reminiscent of the Nazi's Death's-head divisional sign in the last war.

How long Steiner and Biafra will survive is problematical. De Gaulle obviously intends helping all he can to preserve Biafra as a separate State. This is not only to protect French business investments in the Port Harcourt area: it is also part of his policy of trying to penetrate former British African territories.