

SIEGE OF NAMUR

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

1692

The King, who wished to conduct so important an operation himself, left Versailles on May 10th, 1692, followed by Monseigneur and all the Court, and placed himself at the head of his army. He fixed his own quarters within the actual lines of circumvallation which were made around the stronghold, and Madame de Maintenon with the principal ladies of the Court who had followed him were lodged in the little town of Dinan, three leagues off, on the river Meuse.

Besides the army of the King, which formed the besieging force, there was another under the Marèchal de Luxembourg which acted as a covering body against any attempt on the part of the enemy to succour the town.

Namur is only seven leagues from Charlemont; consequently all the siege train and apparatus passed before our eyes, and nearly all our engineers were detailed for duty. I was sorely disappointed to find that I was not included in their number, and said as much to my friends the mathematical professors. To satisfy me they asked M. de Cladech (commanding our own engineers, and who was to command a brigade during the siege) to obtain permission from M. de Refuge for me to go as a volunteer engineer. He expressed his pleasure at my request and granted it. I thus had the honour of serving with one of the most important corps connected with this enterprise.

This fortress, without being at all regular in its designs, is by reason of the situation of its citadel one of the strongest of all on the frontiers of Flanders. The irregular design of its fortifications, and the number of works which cover it and each other, form a complication of difficulties nearly insurmountable to the besieger. These difficulties were greater then than now, because, as the place had never been taken, no one knew its weak points, and much had to be left to chance. This ignorance was a serious disadvantage to us, and if Fortune had not come to our aid after the reduction of the town, it would have been necessary either to break a treaty which we had made, or to raise the siege altogether, simply for want of knowledge as to the vulnerable points.

The treaty in question was made between the besieged and ourselves on the capture of the town, and expressly provided that on the one hand the garrison should not fire upon it, and that the King's troops and the citizens should be as safe in the streets as they had been before the siege; and on the other that the King should not attack the fortress directly or indirectly from the town side. It was through ignorance of the true state of the fortifications that these articles were agreed to, as it is only from the town side that the fortress could be taken, the rest being almost impregnable.

We began by laying siege to the town before undertaking the greater matter of the fortress, and opened our trenches on May 29th. We constructed several of the best manned and equipped batteries that were ever seen; the presence of the King excited such emulation that all ranks sought to surpass themselves in their duties. During the first few days of this attack the enemy appeared on their ramparts in good fettle, as though they had but little anxiety as to the result of our efforts, and later on made a small sortie from the Iron Gate side to reinforce a half-moon battery which covered the main town. This sortie met with so little success that they never repeated the attempt. It is true the garrison was not a strong one, as the enemy never imagined the King would begin the campaign with so important an undertaking. Most of their battalions were Spanish, weak and in a very poor condition; the better part of the garrison was composed of several Brandenburg and Landgrave regiments, but even they were not strong in numbers.

So it happened that we were not kept waiting long in front of the town, for it surrendered June 5th, and the garrison retired into the fortress according to the above-mentioned treaty.

Reducing a place of so much importance within so short a time encouraged us to hope that we should make short work of its citadel. The garrison had offered but a feeble resistance, and, moreover, had not now the same opportunities for making sorties as had occurred in the defence of the town, so that we hardly expected anything very serious from them. But we were not then aware that on the side that we were obliged to attack we should meet with numberless fortifications of extraordinary strength, besides the difficulties brought about by the most detestable weather. For three weeks it rained heavily and continuously; the camp roads became impassable to such a degree that it was nearly impossible to transport the necessary ammunition and supplies from the river up to the batteries.

The citadel is most favourably situated high above the town in the angle formed by the junction of the rivers Meuse and Sambre. The town lies just outside the point of the angle, separated from the fortress by the little stream of the Sambre, the two being connected by a fine stone bridge. The weakest sides of the fortifications—of the fortress—are along this stream, and are commanded by the town ramparts, whence they can be breached with the greatest ease. Again, there are garden plots adjacent to the ramparts which also command the fortifications in which many batteries could be placed; in fact, this section is the most advantageous in every way for the besiegers, but our hands were tied by the articles signed at the surrender of the town.

The section of the fortress overlooking the river Meuse is on a rocky height, scarped, inaccessible, and impossible to attack. The only part against which we might range our batteries was the section on the opposite side to the town facing the open country, and although this is situated on high ground, the approach to it was fairly level and open but for certain woods and ravines.

It was fortified, beginning first with the centre, by a keep with many earthworks covered by two good demi-bastions connected with a curtain and its ditch. This keep had another ditch in rear. In front of all this was a large and important horn-work furnished with an excellent and very deep dry ditch, counterscarp, and covered-way, well palisaded; the curtain was again covered by a fourth work, which, by reason of its shape, was called the Priest's Cap. It also had counterscarp and covered-way, but was not of great importance. Beyond this fourth work came a large and very deep ravine, and then a new fort, complete with its ditch, covered-way, and glacis, called Fort William, named after William of Orange, afterwards King of England, who constructed it. It was at this point, then, that we were obliged to begin the siege of the citadel.

The rains had begun when we attacked this fort, but the roads being still practicable, we had little difficulty in breaching it, and we carried it by assault on the 12th of the month. It served as a position in which to place our battery for the attack on the Priest's Cap, and also on one of the faces of the half-bastions of the horn-work. The rest of our batteries were in the open also opposed to the horn-work, but our artillery here was of small account owing to the difficulty of transporting the ammunition. The fields had become so sodden with the rain as to render cartage impossible, and all that could be done was to carry a few bombs and cannon balls on the backs of the bât-horses and mules. Even these animals had the greatest labour in extricating themselves from the bad places, and had constantly to make fresh tracks.

Owing to these difficulties our batteries were perforce silent, and everything took a leisurely turn. The cavalry, too, lacked forage; the country, chiefly woodland, was unable to provide supplies for any length of time, and so much was this the case that the men were obliged to feed their horses on leaves and branches, with the result that a great number perished. Such was our condition towards the end of the month of June. The King became very uneasy, and the first engineers of the kingdom who had the conduct of the siege had come to the end of their resources. The ill-success of our efforts, owing to the combination of elaborate defences and the increasingly bad weather, could not have been foreseen. Things being in this parlous state, M. de Vauban ran the risk of applying to the King for his permission to disregard the treaty and to attack from the town side. He represented to His Majesty that it would be less disgraceful to do this than to raise the siege—a contingency that would inevitably occur if the attack was continued in the present direction. On the other hand, if he was permitted to operate from the town ramparts and adjoining gardens, he could assure His Majesty of the capture of the fortress—firstly, because the weakest point in the defence lay there; secondly, because the ammunition supply could be properly maintained, the boats being able to land it at the very gates of the town. He therefore very humbly prayed of His Majesty to consider all these points and to grant his petition.

The King was moved by the prayers of M. de Vauban and the general state of our affairs, but would do nothing rashly; and with extraordinary prudence sanctioned only the digging of trenches on the town ramparts along the river Sambre in preparation for the batteries and the construction of epaulements across such streets in the town as were enfiladed from the fortress to ensure safety and cover. He gave an order that the guns should not be moved there until he himself gave the directions to this effect.

I was detailed for duty on these works, which were singular in their nature, in that their construction was entirely free from interruption on the part of the besieged, who did not dare to open fire upon us, fearing to give us an excuse for ignoring the treaty. They could not understand what our intentions really were when they saw us setting hastily

to work in a manner contrary to the articles of the treaty granted by the King himself. So far as we were concerned, we were so pleased by the permission granted by the King to M. de Vauban that we worked with the greatest diligence, assuming that the guns would be placed in position, and the breaching of the works overlooking the Sambre taken in hand at once.

But the Almighty decreed that the King should not perjure himself, and instead brought about one of the most unexpected and lucky chances, by means of which we became masters of the place, and that without the further construction of any more large works or the loss of any great number of men. Our works on the ramparts were completed, and as the King had nothing to fear from that side, he made up his mind to attempt the assault of the Priest's Cap. This work had been breached, but it was almost inaccessible on account of its excessive steepness; our last parallel, too, was yet some distance from the covered-way. The order was, however, given, and on the 29th of the month the assault was successfully delivered without much opposition; the defenders abandoned the work after their first volley and retired into the horn-work.

The breadth of the ditch only prevented the completion of the breach in the horn-work, but the transport of cannon and ammunition was still impossible. All this time we lived in the captured work in order to make what preparations we could, and so as not to remain idle until the weather would permit us to resume operations. We made a quantity of fascines intended for the ditch at the foot of the breach, which had an extremely steep ascent. These fascines were intended to check the fall of earth caused by the bombardment, and thus to produce quickly a ramped approach to the breach practicable for the assault. The next night, which was luckily a very dark one, the fascines were thrown into the ditch, the besieged making no sign of their existence.

This only excited us to make the most of the occasion, and a number of workmen were sent into the ditch itself to arrange the fascines at the foot of the breach, and to work the earth so as to form a suitable ramp. They worked in silence, fearing to draw the fire of the enemy, who might easily have sent bombs and grenades amongst our men. Nothing of the sort, however, took place. This extraordinary quiescence on the part of the enemy excited the curiosity of a grenadier belonging to the party covering the workmen in the ditch, and he clambered cautiously to the top of the breach in order to see if anything was going on. He had no easy task in getting there at all, but at last after many efforts he found himself on the top and lay down to listen. When he had rested a little he raised his head, looked well about him, and then set to work to creep further along on his hands and knees. He stopped now and then to reconnoitre, until he saw a solitary soldier seated on the ground and half asleep. The discovery of this man incited him to closer examination, and he pursued his way still further in without finding a trace of anyone else. He then silently returned to report to his officer. As a matter of fact, we afterwards found that there were not above ten men all told, under a sergeant, in this great work, and that they were in the habit of retiring into a kind of underground passage for shelter from the rain and bombs, keeping only one man as sentry over the breach, the man whom our grenadier had seen.

This want of precaution on the part of the besieged was no doubt owing to their belief that the breach was not sufficiently advanced to cause them to expect anything in the nature of a surprise attack. Besides, the garrison was so worn out by the bad weather, and the numerous posts that they had to occupy during the day, that they were obliged to withdraw at night-time every man they possibly could to get rest and repose.

Such was the case when the grenadier made his discovery. This was duly reported to his officers, who at first could hardly believe it; however, the matter was considered to be so important that no time was lost in putting it to the test. There was certainly the fear that it might be a ruse on the part of the besieged to draw our troops within the work, and then to blow them into the air by means of mines laid beneath it. It would be hard to say, however, what would be gained by this, some certainly would have been blown to pieces, but the remainder would have been able to hold their own and effect a lodgment in the work. After consultation, a lieutenant, a sergeant, and twenty grenadiers were detailed to follow the soldier, who would act as their guide, with orders to seize the enemy's sentry noiselessly and to make him tell what he knew of the situation. This little detachment began the climb, and it was not without some considerable difficulty that it attained the summit of the breach. Once there it crept on its way well within the work in order to cut off the retreat of the sentry; this done the sergeant and four men advanced to seize him. The former pointed his sword at his throat and threatened him with instant death if he attempted to cry out, but promised him his life if he answered the questions put to him.

The coward to save his life allowed himself to be taken without saying a word, and conducted the party to the underground passage, where the guard were found and at once slain in their sleep. He then led them to the two mouthpieces of the mines intended to blow us up, when we should have entered the work on assaulting it. Our grenadiers took care to remove the quick matches, which they brought back with them on their return as a proof of their discovery, and then by the aid of this guide explored the whole work without seeing anything or anyone to prevent our taking immediate possession of it. The officer ordered the party to remain in observation under the sergeant, and taking four men as escort to the prisoner, reported full details to the general officer on duty in the trenches.

All the troops at hand, together with the working parties, were immediately pushed forward, and helping one another, clambered up the breach; they then set to work to such purpose that before break of day our works and lodgments were in a fit state to prevent any efforts on the part of the enemy to dislodge us. But they were not in a condition to attempt this; on the contrary, as soon as day broke, we found that they had retired from the ramparts of the keep, and seeing our new lodgments with our standards flying on the reverse side of their works, they ran up the white flag and sounded their trumpets for a parley. The King was at once awakened without much ceremony, but he was more than content, as he never expected to hear such good news. The articles of the capitulation were signed the very same day, and the garrison marched out of the fortress at ten o'clock next morning by way of the breach. It numbered thirteen battalions, and it was remarked that the weakest and the worst conditioned were those from Spain.

In this way, then, we mastered this important stronghold, a fact which was much noised abroad and which occasioned so much rejoicing in the kingdom. NO history, as far as I am aware, has gone so fully into the details of this siege as I have. The difficulties which we had to surmount, and the number of works with their variety and complications, were for me full of information. I applied myself zealously to making notes thereon to serve me later on in case of need, and I could not possibly have studied under better masters than Messieurs de Vauban and de Marigny, the most famous engineers in the kingdom, who conducted the operations. Their salutary lessons have stood me in good stead on many occasions since. But what a perilous profession it is that I had now entered! There were sixty of us engineer officers at the siege of Namur. Twenty-two came out alive. The rest died in the trenches.

After the surrender I rejoined the company, and thanked M. de Refuge for the leave he had granted. He carefully questioned me on all that had happened, and appeared pleased with my conduct. He assured me at the same time that he would soon give me a commission in a good regiment; and in fact, in less than three months, the colonel of the Vexin Infantry Regiment having applied to him for a second lieutenant, I was appointed, and the papers forwarded me.

Most young men who have lived away from home for a length of time are anxious to return there at the first opportunity; but immediately I got my commission my one idea was to join my regiment, for I looked upon such a cross-country journey as merely an opportunity for spending more money than I could well afford. The pay that I had received as a cadet and during my appointment on the Royal Works enabled me to set myself up with my little equipment, and I felt as much satisfaction at being able to spare my father the inconvenience of contributing to my advancement as another would have had in squeezing a large sum out of the family purse.

When I joined the Regiment of Vexin, which lay only four leagues from Charlesmont, I was most graciously received by the colonel, to whom M. de Refuge had kindly written a letter of introduction. Owing to this good, and even exaggerated, recommendation, he gave me plenty of work and took me under his protection. True, "the Service" was my first consideration; I never waited for duty to call me, but endeavoured to forestall it whenever possible, so as to merit my colonel's kindnesses. I felt, moreover, that my actions alone could win these for me, and I naturally felt as strong a wish to do what I could to deserve his praise as I have a repugnance to do anything that would lower me in his estimation.