

SIEGE OF CHARLEROI

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

1693

The trenches were begun before Charleroi during the night of September 8th, 1693, and I was ordered as engineer to mark out the angles and distances for the attack on an advanced half-moon battery, which it was decided should be taken in hand at once. This is always an extremely risky piece of work, although conducted at night, for the noise made by the picks and tools is certain to draw the fire of the enemy. Unless, therefore, the trench is begun at a considerable distance from the enemy's works the besiegers lose a number of men to start with, and so it was with us.

The half-moon work was detached and well in advance of the general line of the fortifications, and we, being thus obliged to begin our work closer to it than usual, were, owing to the noise of the picks, soon discovered by the enemy, who showered upon us a hail of fire-pots in the same way as bombs would be thrown. A fire-pot is a kind of globe or large ball filled with old rope well tarred, which burns with a very bright light. This globe—set light to before being thrown—will burn for a considerable time, and lights up a wide area upon which cannon may be directed as effectively as if by the light of day. To prevent an attempt to extinguish it (in itself not an easy task, owing to the tar and composition therein) small pistol barrels are screwed into its surface, loaded with ball, which discharge themselves successively as the fire approaches them. Such were the lanterns sent us by the besieged to light up our work during the night, accompanied with volleys of grape and case, which rendered our position most uncomfortable, and killed two of our engineer officers engaged in marking out the trenches.

Before daylight, however, we got cover from this by means of the work completed during the night. The following nights we continued our approaches in front of the half-moon, finishing them during the days; and having effected a breach in one of the faces, the assault was ordered on the 16th. I found myself attached to the grenadiers, with orders to superintend the construction of a lodgment as soon as the place was taken, consisting of a covered-way from our trench to the breach and an epaulement across the gorge of the half-moon—the one to cover our men during the assault, the other to protect those detailed to occupy the work.

Ten companies of grenadiers were told off for the assault, supported by three battalions of fusiliers, who ere formed up an hour after midday in the most advanced parallels. No time or hour as to their advance was given, but they were ordered to do so on the following signal being made, viz. twelve small mortars would be fired together three times into the half-moon battery, the third time the shells would be loaded with sand only, with long fuses, so as to keep the besieged lying flat as long as possible in expectation of the explosions.

We were then to profit by this, and leaving our trenches pass along the glacis of the two faces of the work and enter by the gorge. The enemy being thus surprised, would not then have time to spring their mines should they have prepared them.

From the wording of this order it was assumed that the signal might be given at any moment, and as there seemed to be no time to lose, each one of us set to work to examine his conscience in a most contrite manner, for it was accepted by all concerned in this assault that nothing short of a miracle could prevent our total destruction. It was necessary, in the first place, to defile the full length of the glacis to get at the gorge, at the mercy of the fire of the enemy occupying the covered-way, who would not be lying in fear of our shells; and, secondly, there were the works of the main fortification supporting the half-moon, which would certainly bring a terrific fire to bear upon us. These difficulties surmounted, there would yet be the garrison itself to be reckoned with, besides mines to send us skywards if we ever got inside. Nature suffers cruelly under such a strain—no one cares to talk, each being occupied with his own reflections and the thought of the death he is courting.

We remained in this painful state till three o'clock in the afternoon, without signal or even information of any sort. A little later the grenades were served out to the grenadiers, who were ordered to light their quick matches. We then had no doubt at all that the time for the signal was near at hand, and this state of tension brought on a renewed access of mental agony, or at all events it appeared so, judging by the faces of all concerned.

After all the signal did not come, and I took it into my head to examine the bearing of those in my immediate vicinity, wishing to see if I could discern their inmost thoughts, and the different degrees of anxiety as shown in their physiognomies. I looked them over most carefully, and the more I examined them the more it seemed to me that they were no longer the same persons I had known previously. Their features had become changed in a most extraordinary manner; there were long drawn-out faces, others quite twisted, others again, were haggard, with flesh of a livid hue, whilst some had a wandering look about the eyes; in fact, I saw but a melancholy set of sinners apparently under sentence of death. I, too, imagined myself as much altered as the others; however, the pains I was always in the habit of taking to acquire a reputation did much to allay my own fear, and perhaps helped me somewhat to maintain an even countenance.

Waiting thus for the signal, not one of us wished for anything better than to see it given, if it were only to be delivered from our mental torment, but it did not appear, and our feelings still had us in their grip.

Six o'clock came, and hatchets were brought and distributed to the grenadiers to use in case of need upon barricades and the like that might lie in our path. M. de Vauban passed about this time, and assured us with a confident air that we should make short work of the half-moon battery, that it was defended only by a rabble, and that he was not at all sure it was mined, and that even if it were so we should so surprise the enemy that they would never have time to put light to the trains. He cautioned us, however, to make a rapid inspection of the work on entering to prove this point, and told us that M. de Luxembourg had promised a reward to anyone bringing him a port-fire or quick match, and that he would answer for this as well. After all, he gave us no information as to when to expect the signal, and thus we lingered till nine o'clock with little or no appetite for our supper.

The fact was that we were kept waiting all this time because it had been discovered to be too dangerous an affair to attempt the assault by daylight, and that the darkness of night would be of great advantage for the surprise of the defenders, tending to minimise the heavy musketry fire from the main ramparts; this reason was good enough, but our troops should not have been ordered out so early in that case. True, suspense made us long the more for the moment of action, which came at last at nine o'clock exactly. At the first volley from the twelve mortars, our troops made a hurried attempt to advance, and while waiting for the third, murmurs could be heard marking the impatience of the grenadiers.

While the shells of the final volley were still flying through the air, our men broke out from their post like madmen, but they were hardly out of the trench and preparing to pass along the glacis when the enemy occupying the covered-way brought a terrible fire to bear upon them. We broke into a run, and so crowded were our ranks that I was carried for some distance clean off the ground, and I thought that I should have been stifled in the press of our own men.

We certainly surprised the defenders of the interior of the half-moon, as had been projected; they never expected the assault at such an hour, and still less to see us enter the work by the gorge, which was their sole line of retreat. In the meantime, under cover of the darkness they became mixed up with us, and made for the main ramparts through the covered-way. They did not, however, gain much by this, for the noise of our assault had drawn the fire of the enemy from all sides, and these unfortunate creatures, thinking to have found a safe retreat, were shot down by their own comrades.

Four good-sized mines were found, sufficient to have blown up the entire work if there had been time to set light to them; but in hope of the promised reward, the leading grenadiers ran in all directions to discover them, and having come upon the miners who were actually preparing to set light to the trains, were enabled to seize them, and thus by their prompt action saved us all from the misfortune of finding ourselves buried in the ruins of the work.

We had scarcely gained the interior of the half-moon before I got to work upon an epaulement across the gorge, to cover our people from the musketry fire. With all our efforts, this took some time to construct. The grenadiers, therefore, were ordered to lie flat upon the ground, with the butts of their muskets in front of them as shelter; but notwithstanding all our precautions many were killed. At last by daybreak our work was finished, and we enjoyed, comparatively speaking, some rest and quiet. The capture of this work was of the greatest use to us, as it enabled us to construct a large battery opposite an entire polygon of the main fortification, where we subsequently made our final attack. We had a very hard time of it the while, I in particular having had so much to do and look after at

night-time. An overpowering hunger now began to overcome me, so I left the work for the trenches, in search of the wherewithal to appease it.

On my way I was lucky enough to find a grenadier captain who had just had his canteen and rations brought to him, and who, to my great joy, stopped and invited me to join him in his meal. We established ourselves in an angle of the trench with our backs to the town for the sake of cover. A grenadier of his company came up whilst we were breakfasting, carrying the clothes and accoutrements of one of his comrades killed during the night. This grenadier was one of those jocular creatures typical of the Royal Guard, and he at once, pipe in mouth, began to tell us how his comrade had died.

“We were,” said he, “lying flat on our faces side by side, like two good comrades, when away he rushes to the other world without giving me any warning. I didn’t think this quite our form, as we never think of parting without a stirrup-cup, so I just stripped him to teach him proper manners.” The poor devil amused himself with this yarn, thinking we were equally diverted, when a small cannon-shot passed from the town above our two heads, struck him through the arm holding his pipe, pierced his chest, and laid him at our feet.

The garrison of Charleroi made a better defence than that of Namur, being more numerous and composed of better troops. The Prince of Orange, seeing the town threatened after the Battle of Neerwinden, had taken care to reinforce it, and thus enabled it to make several sorties at the beginning of the siege, which retarded the progress of many of our works. It took us more than a month from the opening of the trenches to push our sap up to the palisades of the covered-way, and M. de Luxembourg, who had now become impatient and would not wait for any further development, carried them by an assault which cost us six hundred men.

We were then enabled to bring a battery of twelve heavy guns to bear, thanks to two epaulements and a turning-sap made under the direction of two engineers and myself. The breadth of the ditch only separated us from the breach already begun in the polygon, and the besieged, seeing no help for it, hung out the white flag and assented to a capitulation on October 12th, the second day after our battery had opened fire.

The taking of Charleroi was the last feat of the Duke of Luxembourg, one of the bravest and most intrepid generals of the day. The officers who had volunteered for this siege as engineers received through M. de Vauban a small gratuity of fifty pistoles each—not a very great burden on the Government, as very few of us were left to enjoy it.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692–1717. (London: 1904):30–36.