

SIEGE OF NAMUR

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

1695

The campaign of 1695 was not favourable to France. The enemy opened the campaign on the Flanders frontier with a very large army; and it would seem they wished to profit by the death of the Duke of Luxembourg in daring to lay siege to the town and fortress of Namur. It was a bold stroke, and more brilliantly conducted than in our case. It is true that we were at a disadvantage, as we were ignorant as to the best point of attack, but then it had an inferior garrison. They, on the other hand, had to contend with excellent fortifications and a complete little army of fine troops commanded by a marshal of France. In this case the advantages on our side were such as to inspire an enemy with the fear of having ignominiously to raise the siege, and, in fact, we looked upon this result with perfect confidence. But what a terrible scourge is war! Human life counts for nothing when such an enterprise is determined upon. Given a wish to go right through with a certain design, ten thousand men more or less are not counted in the cost of the affair; and this is just what happened in this case. The more the Allies grasped the fact of our having reinforced Namur, the more they increased their forces at this point; and the great precautions we had taken regarding the defence of this place only brought about the loss of a greater number of brave men, and in the end the place was captured.

Our dragoon regiment was one of those sent to assist in the defence, and all of us had plenty of opportunities to distinguish ourselves during this long and tedious siege. Maréchal de Boufflers, who had plenty of troops to spare, made numerous sorties upon the besiegers, especially when their attack was developing upon the town itself. Its vast extent, with its many gates, lent itself to the purpose, and we succeeded for some time in keeping the works of the enemy at a distance; all the same, we often had to retire with loss and even precipitation. When I was in command of one of these sorties, our detachment having pushed well to the front and destroyed several lengths of the trenches, a strong force of the enemy advanced to cut us off, whereupon we were obliged to retire promptly. Just then I had the misfortune to have my horse killed under me, and if I had not learnt to vault or had been less active, I should undoubtedly have been killed or, at all events, taken prisoner, but whilst running at full speed, I vaulted up behind a dragoon and just saved myself.

The town held out for fourteen days, when it became necessary to come to some arrangement. Maréchal de Boufflers did his best to bind the Allies to the same articles that had been signed when we took the place, *i.e.* not to attack the fortress from the town side; but this they would not listen to, and preferred to run the risk of any loss we might cause them to that of having to raise the siege. They were, therefore, at liberty to make their attack from whatever quarter it pleased them, and they knew well enough how to profit by this. What was really strange was the antipathy displayed by the inhabitants towards our nation. To oblige the enemy to abstain from attacking us through the town was in their interest and tended to the preservation of their houses, effects, and even lives; but they were quite determined to meet any peril they might be exposed to rather than associate themselves with a treaty by means of which the capture of the fortress would certainly be retarded, and the chance of their remaining under French rule promoted.

They had always been treated with every consideration, and it would seem to have been more to their advantage to have a French garrison than a Dutch one. The former represented a large consumption of food and merchandise, whilst the Dutch imported all theirs, and spent no money. Again, the latter had little or no politeness or society among themselves, but doubtless this did not render them less agreeable to the citizens of Namur, who are themselves gross and brutal in their habits.

They preferred the drowsy air of the Dutchman to the wide-awake Frenchman, who, they said, turned their brains with his flighty movements and eternal chatter, and who found everything bad that was not to his own way of thinking. They added that we thought too much of ourselves, despised the rest of the world, and considered it beneath us to conform to the customs of the country in which he had to live.

The enemy being in possession of the town, made their principal attack on the fortress on this side. They ranged three large batteries, two in the gardens above the Church of St. Aubyn and in the ramparts near the Brussels Gate, the third between St. Jean and St. Aubyn. Thence they battered a breach between a ravelin “en Bec de Moineau”

and a work “à Pâté,” which abutted on the river Sambre, and razed the “cordons” of other works which might trouble them, besides dismounting the cannon on the parapets.

We found ourselves entirely restricted to the fortress, and the nature of the ground no longer enabled us to make sorties as we had done when occupying the town. The 1st chance to hold out and give time for Maréchal de Villeroi to send us assistance was to defend each work foot by foot; we did our best to this end, and each night worked hard to repair the breaches made during the day, but the enemy’s batteries were so numerous and well served that they soon laid them open again.

The work “à Pâté,” and the “Bec de Moineau,” both now breached, were chosen by the enemy for their first assault. M de Boufflers took every precaution to strengthen them. We dug good entrenchments in rear of the breaches connected with epaulements, from point to point, to give cover to our troops during their retirement should they be driven out of the works. The enemy chose the evening for their assault, which was delivered and received with equal vigour, but after a very heavy loss on their part, our opponents were forced to retire. They returned to the attack next morning with considerable reinforcements, and such energy that, after a long resistance, our people were driven out by superior weight and numbers. The besiegers thus effected their lodgments, under cover of which they brought up their guns to batter in one of the sides of the large horn-work; as this was hardly more out-flanked than any of the other works on this side, we merely cut a new entrenchment to strengthen it in case of assault, and for the purpose of communication.

The enemy also took Fort William after two separate assaults, one on the covered-way, the other on the main work; it was stoutly defended, and they lost many men. They also attacked the “Priest’s Cap,” but the principal attack of all which forced us to capitulate on August 4th was that on the face of the horn-work opposite the work “à Pâté.” I was lucky enough to be present at two different assaults delivered by the enemy, and did not receive a scratch; on the other hand, my friend was unfortunately carried off by a cannon-ball, to my greatest possible grief.

The Elector of Bavaria and the King of England commanded the Allies, who lost more than twelve thousand men at this siege.

Maréchal de Villeroi could give us no assistance, as the enemy had taken up a position so favourably situated that they were enabled to hold our army of succour in check, and at the same time entirely cover their besieging force. The general being therefore unable to act in our direction, bombarded the city of Brussels and burned an entire quarter. The inhabitants have since rebuilt it in modern style, so that now it is quite an ornament to the town. Our loss in the defence of Namur was very severe, but the King seemed well satisfied with the resistance we had maintained, and rewarded many of our officers. Our colonel was made major-general, selling the regiment to the Marquis Descorailles. I also got a step, being made full lieutenant.

I will here relate a joke concerning one of our captains in the dragoons, who always caused us endless amusement, although usually the besieged have no excessive desire for mirth. He was the Sieur de Vigouroux, a native of Rodez, the capital town of Rouergue, and known throughout the army by his eccentric habits. Vigouroux during his career had never experienced any serious danger, and the sensation of finding himself ordered to take command of one of the sorties had such an extraordinary effect upon him that he brought back miraculous reports of feats of valour, giving himself the credit of being the principal performer.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692–1717. (London: 1904):39–44.