

ATTACK ON ULM

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

1702

After M. de Ricous had given me full instructions on all he thought most important, he presented me to the Elector in such a favourable light that the Prince received me with all the grace of manner which to him was so natural. The latter had the kindness to converse for a long time with me, and appeared pleased with the frank nature of my answers. I lost no opportunity of attending his Court during my stay in Munich, though this was but a short one, as I was obliged to join my regiment to make the acquaintance of my company and make ready to start on the famous raid on the town of Ulm. This was one of the boldest and best arranged affairs ever seen, and was absolutely vital to the proper execution of the treaty. To lay siege to a fortified town of this description was a doubtful business, the best means, therefore, to attain our end was to surprise it by some stratagem, for though the Elector's army was strong, it was not strong enough to invest the town and at the same time provide against the relieving force that the Empire would certainly send. An immense siege train—necessary in an affair of such importance—would have had to have been prepared far from its objective, and, under the circumstances, would have demanded much thought and work. Moreover, it was impossible for the Elector to make such preparations so secretly that the Viennese Court, which watched all his movements, should not discover his purpose and take measures to prevent it. On the other hand, should the attempt fail, a formal siege could be undertaken as a last resource, so it was decided to be less dangerous at attempt a surprise.

The plan was designed by the Sieur de Beckmant, lieutenant-colonel of the Elector's Guards, a most intelligent as well as brave man, who was placed in command. All those connected with the expedition preserved an inviolable secrecy, and preferred the glory of such an enterprise, however dangerous, to the rewards with which the Empire would have recompensed those who might have betrayed it.

The Elector of Bavaria was admirably served, but the enterprise cost poor Beckmant his life. A townsman having attacked him, one of our people in trying to rescue him wounded him accidentally. From the effects of this he died some time after.

The town of Ulm was garrisoned by its inhabitants with as much care and precision as if they were regular troops. All the guard-houses in the fortifications and out-works were properly provided with fusiliers, organised in regiments and companies, and the same order and attention was paid to all duties as would be observed by the most efficient garrison. Ulm is a Hanseatic town and independent; hence its defence was in its own hands.

Beckmant had selected a hundred officers of approved fidelity to second him.

They dressed themselves up as sheep or cattle dealers, corn and beer merchants, and sellers of salt and tin ware; others, again, as Savoyards, and each was accompanied by attendants and boys.

They entered the town by different gates, and lodged in pre-arranged quarters, only armed with small pistols and daggers. They agreed not to recognise one another should they meet in the streets, and held themselves prepared to act on September 8th, the day of Our Lady, this being the date fixed by the Elector for the execution of the enterprise.

By early morning, according to the Elector's plan, all were to converge by different roads upon the bridges and march up to the outermost barrier on the glacis of the gate whose capture had been determined upon. As soon as this barrier had been opened and the keys brought to the main guard, they were to seize the arms of the guard and cut the throats of all who attempted any resistance.

It was arranged that at this juncture fifty other officers, disguised as peasants carrying chickens, eggs, hay, and other things, should enter and join their comrades. Whilst these hundred and fifty officers thus secured the interior gate, the bridges, and outside barricades, three regiments of dragoons, concealed during the night as near as possible to this point, were to leave their horses at the instant the signal was given, enter the town, and occupy the two bastions flanking the gate itself. They were to entrench themselves securely until the arrival of the infantry, and thus effect the surrender of the burghers and the keys of the town to the Elector.

I therefore left Munich to join my regiment, which was detailed for this expedition and then quartered on the frontier of Swabia, twenty-five French leagues from Ulm, the two other regiments being not much less distant. The distance had to be covered in a single night, in order to find ourselves close to the gate before daybreak.

The commanding officers only knew the object and the roads to be taken, as there was always the fear of some deserter carrying the news. The regimental orders for September 7th were simply to saddle the horses at six p.m. to be ready to march fully armed, carrying only a few oats. Half an hour later the start was made. We took different roads, to avoid checks in the defiles, and rode at a fast trot all night. A grenadier had been ordered to ride behind each dragoon, but it ultimately became impossible to carry them as far as the rendezvous.

We were lucky enough to arrive close to Ulm well before daybreak. We reconnoitred the ground, and posted ourselves noiselessly in a convenient spot by the river Danube, which runs near the walls of the place, where some rising ground afforded us a capital shelter.

Notwithstanding all our precautions, the sentries on the ramparts would have seen us when day broke had we not been favoured with a thick fog, which rose from the river and increased with the daylight. The burghers would not open the last of the glacis gates until it was light enough to distinguish objects in the country beyond, and our three regiments of dragoons occupied too much space to be altogether covered from the view of the rampart sentries. In fact, all our designs would have been upset had it not been for the fog, which is an ordinary occurrence on the Danube at this season; not only on account of the sentries, but also because we should have been discovered by the peasants on their way to the market which took place that day, notwithstanding it being a holiday. These people are Lutherans, and make no distinction between one day and another.

Daylight appeared, and the burghers opened the outer most gate, and perceiving nothing to raise their suspicions, returned their arms to the guard-house and handed in the keys. Then our people lost no time; some threw themselves upon the burghers, and despatched with poignard and pistol those who offered resistance, while others held the bridges and gates to facilitate the entrance of our dragoons, to whom the pistol-shots had served as signals.

We at once abandoned our horses and made a dash for the bridges and gates, though it was by the merest chance that the whole business did not miscarry just at the moment when everything seemed in our favour. Two of our disguised officers luckily overheard a burgher tell another to run quickly and let down the portcullis of the principal gate, but they followed and killed him. Otherwise all our efforts might have been in vain, and we should have been obliged to retire rather more quickly than we should have liked, for this passage once closed, the burghers would have been under arms in an instant, and the artillery on the ramparts would have opened fire upon us.

Our people were still struggling with the burghers, whose numbers were increasing, when our dragoons entered. They succeeded in clearing out the guard-house and its neighbourhood, gave chase to those who were inclined to oppose them, and they soon manned the two bastions right and left of the gate.

We cut a trench in no time across the street abutting thereon, and entrenched ourselves without delay to resist any efforts made by the burghers to turn us out and retake the gate we had just captured; in fact, so quickly was this completed, that we were entrenched before the inhabitants were enabled to rally and reassemble.

They were astounded at what had happened, and ran about in utter confusion, without knowing what to do or where to stop. However, they closed the other gates, and after they had pulled themselves together and saw the works we had just constructed, came to the conclusion that we were not of sufficient force to render ourselves complete masters of the town. They wished to make the most of their position to turn us out; they stretched chains as barricades across all the streets which led to our entrenchments, placed in position there a number of pieces of cannon, and when they had completed these preparations, and so secured the safety of the inner part of their town, they occupied the attics and roofs of the houses which commanded us, and opened fire from loopholes made among the tiles. Immediately this began we lost quite a number of our men, including several in my own company, and it was a mere chance that I was not amongst them myself, for a ball passed through the brim of my hat and killed a dragoon standing behind me.

So bad was our case that we were obliged to set about the construction of epaulements to provide cover as quickly as possible, and my previous experience in fortification here proved of the greatest use to me. Notwithstanding our

efforts, however, the position we were in became so critical that I really do not know how matters would have turned out had not our commanding officer, Count de Feldz (a lieutenant-general and colonel of one of the dragoon regiments), bethought him of warning the burghers that if they did not cease their fire upon us he would instantly set light to the town at every point of the compass, and that the Elector, whose arrival he momentarily expected, would put them all to the sword, not excepting even the women and children. These threats (and that of the fire was no mere threat) completely terrorised them, so much so that they laid down their arms and begged for mercy. Nay, they even sent us provisions, of which we stood in great need, and assured us that when His Highness did arrive they would surrender, present him with the keys, and in every way behave as if they were his own subjects.

Thus we reduced the principal fortress in Swabia, a most important factor in the designs of the King and Elector, which finally sealed the treaty drawn up between these two Powers.

Three days passed before the Elector with his army appeared before Ulm. The town delegates met him with the keys, and took the oath of fidelity. They were grieved to see their territory handed over to the horrors and chances of war, but they were no longer in a position to make terms, and could only yield to force. In the town was a fine arsenal, provided with all sorts of munitions of war, which proved very useful to the Elector in carrying on his subjection of the province, and facilitating the junction of his army with that of France. It was found necessary to disarm the burghers, and after a good garrison and magazines of provisions had been established in the town to ensure its possession, the Elector continued his march with his army.

To complete our line of communication it became necessary to lay siege to several towns lying between the Black Forest and Ulm, such as Lauingen, Illingen, Munderkingen, Riedhausen, and Biberach, the last of which only offered any resistance. It made a show of sustaining a siege, but a few volleys of cannon shot caused it to see things in the Elector's light.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692–1717. (London: 1904):96–102.