

BATTLE AT HEYZEMPRINE

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

1703

The Imperialists only realised what was taking place after our force had started on its road from the town; they then advanced to the attack, but our dragoons appeared on the scene and obliged them to retire after the exchange of a few shots, which resulted in trifling loss. We covered the retirement of the garrison for about three leagues, and then moved on Scharing, where we rejoined the regiment.

The whole army was paraded the next day on the plain outside this town in expectation of an immediate advance on the enemy, who were but four leagues distant. This fourth night was no pleasanter for me than the three preceding ones. New reasons were found for putting me on duty, so that I had to remain nearly all night under arms without the luxury of a fire, and my only means of keeping at all warm was by stamping my feet and winging my arms.

Next morning, at break of day, the army was formed into column of march, and the order to advance given so as to take the enemy unawares. Twelve squadrons of dragoons formed the advanced guard; after them came the mass of the infantry, supported by forty squadrons of cavalry, which also covered the rear. When we approached the village forming the enemy's advanced post, the sky became overcast and down came the snow, so thickly, in fact, that their sentries could only distinguish the leading files of our column of dragoons. This they took for a reconnoitring party, and as their commanding officer determined to cut it off, he concealed a part of his infantry in a cemetery, the walls of which bordered on the single street which ran the length of the village, and the rest in the houses opposite, so as to bring us under a cross-fire. He also caused his cavalry to mount at once and take up a position outside the village, opposite the mouth of the street, so as to cut off any dragoons who might push on in order to make their escape; and waited patiently, until Fate and our impatience to get on before General Schlick could receive information of our advance should draw us into his trap. We had no particular reason to mistrust this open village where there was no sign of advanced picquet or sentry; our dragoons entered and filed up the street without taking any precaution, and the enemy seeing this, made up their minds that they had them in the hollow of their hands.

They withheld their fire until all our men had advanced towards their cavalry, but happily they waited until too late to take good aim; nevertheless, a great number of our people were killed, and the rest thrown into confusion. As it was, we hurried to gain the end of the village, where we found their cavalry, which added to our surprise, but we pulled ourselves together, dismounted our dragoons, and threw ourselves into the houses right and left at the end of the street, where we soon found ourselves under cover and in a state of defence. My company with the rest had fallen into the ambuscade, but we were lucky enough to get off with a loss of twelve killed. Duchâtel, who commanded our advanced guard, was killed, and much blamed after his death for having entered the village without previous reconnoissance.

So far the enemy's commandant had reason to be satisfied with the success of his manœuvre, but his elation was not destined to last long, for on the news of the surprise our main body was speedily brought up, and invested the village on all sides, the enemy's cavalry being thus completely surrounded. A strong body of our infantry then entered and cut down these unhappy creatures to the last man.

This prelude to the general engagement which followed shortly afterwards excited our Bavarians to such a pitch of fury that they begged to be led at once to the attack. Schlick, however, had news by this time of what had taken place, and without knowing the actual number that we could bring into action, got his men, a little hurriedly perhaps, into line of battle.

We found he had posted himself in front of the village of Heyzempirne, and as the country was extremely open, it was not difficult to see the strength of his force and its position. The Elector was soon ready, and both armies opened a desultory cannonade whilst deploying. Our force scarcely had time to get into battle array before the Elector set us moving at a steady pace and with well-closed ranks, due regard being given to the maintenance of an equal pace throughout. When we had moved thus a sufficient distance, our two wings, consisting of cavalry, advanced at a rapid trot, whilst the infantry quickened their pace, in order to dash upon the enemy without firing, reserving this until they were in close contact. The first shock was a very sharp one, and gave one the impression that animosity between people of the same nation was more obstinate than if they had been strangers to one another.

Victory hung for a long time in the balance between the opposing cavalry, so stubborn was the fight, for the Emperor's cuirassiers are really among his very best troops. Our infantry did not experience the same resistance: they stood the first effect of the enemy's fire, charged home with bayonets fixed, and crushed all resistance. Soon afterwards the enemy's cavalry gave way and their rout became universal. Schlick escaped with the débris of his army, leaving more than five thousand dead on the field. He abandoned all his artillery and train, a number of copper pontoons, anchors and cordage, of which he had made provision against the crossing of the Bavarian rivers, counting upon being able to invade and devastate the country, and thereby give the Elector reason to repent of his disobedience to the mandate of the Court of Vienna. I put to the test at this battle a small frame of well-tempered iron, which the cavalry officers, not in the cuirassiers, were in the habit of placing in the crown of their hats. It certainly saved me from the effects of two heavy sabre cuts which I received in the *mélée*, to the extent that I got off with merely a few bruises. I had for my share in this day's work the honour of going through two important engagements, the one as perilous as the other, and to crown all I was again, the fifth night in succession, ordered on duty to protect the artillery and baggage left on the field by the enemy, which for the want of teams could not be removed before the evening of the following day. Nevertheless, although the snow lay very thick, I did not suffer so much from cold as on the four preceding nights, because the enemy had in their flight set fire to the village, so that we had plenty of opportunity of warming ourselves. The artillery was moved rather late in the following day, when I was directed to take up my quarters in a little village eight long leagues from the battlefield; and thus my sixth night was passed in a long and toil-some march. I got at last to this wretched village, and the comfort in finding there a cover to my head in so distant a land was all I had to console me for the impossibility of again seeing my sovereign lady.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692–1717. (London: 1904):129–133.