

THE BATTLE OF BLENHEIM

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

13 August 1704

It was, however, at this point, by the corporal's advice, that the enemy appeared and made their attack—pernicious advice for our cause and for the many brave men who fell in the action.

As soon as I learned that the enemy were upon us, I did my best to let Boismorel know the state of the case; but as the posting office had no horses to spare, the General having requisitioned them all to keep up communications with the Elector, I could do nothing; and, after all, it would have been useless, as the enemy hardly even gave us the chance to get together.

The Imperialists, whose first object was to lose no time, formed up their army as fast as its units arrived at the point along the edge of the wood where they were sheltered from the fire of the fortress. Having planted a battery of ten guns, they began by cannonading us high and low, with the idea of smashing our feeble parapet, shaking the courage of our troops, and covering their deployment.

Maréchal d'Arcko, who had flattered himself when they first appeared that they would hardly be in a condition to attack us that very day, and that the army from Augsburg would have time to send us reinforcements, now realised from the prompt action of this battery that they had resolved to make short work of us before this could happen, and that it was upon the defenceless flank that the enemy were about to deliver their assault.

He also saw that the fire from the town must oblige them to keep so close to the wood that their front would be narrowed to the width of two battalions; he therefore massed his force opposite the side of the wood, and brought up eight pieces of cannon to reply to their battery. As soon as he had disposed the infantry along the parapet, he posted my grenadiers at a most dangerous point, fifty paces in rear, in order to have them ready at hand to despatch to the actual locality chosen by the enemy for their assault. My regiment thus found itself, owing to the slope of the ground, so much above the crest of the parapet that it was actually fact to face with the muzzles of the Imperialist guns. Maréchal d'Arcko, when posting us, told me that his reason in so doing was the great confidence he had in us, and as he expected an attack from the direction of the wood, we were there so as to be in touch with either the flank or the extremity of our oval-formed position, and that he left it to my judgment to lead the regiment to whichever point I thought fit when the assault was made. He added that he did not believe the wood itself to be practicable for troops, or that they would make a serious attack at this point, but that it would be a feint at most, which, however, might develop into a real attack should they find our resistance to be but slight. He thought that appearances were all in favour of their advancing close alongside the wood, and then throwing all their force directly upon the angle of the flank, as it was hardly possible that they would extend in the direction of the glacis.

"M. de —, brigadier in the King's army," said he, "is in command in the town, and has without doubt taken every care in lining the glacis with his infantry, therefore I have decided to concentrate my force at this angle, and disregard the ground covered by the town; however, to be on the safe side, I ordered him to place a battalion in position there, and he has sent the regiment of Nectancourt, but it will be much spread out. I leave the supporting movement of your regiment," continued he, "entirely in your hands." He then left to give orders elsewhere.

I was still mounted when I received my orders from Maréchal d'Arcko, as I had had much ground to cover in carrying out his orders in connection with the works he had given me to superintend. As soon as he had left I dismounted, but did not discard my heavy boots, which, being soft, did not seem likely to incommode me; I then gave over my horse to a drummer, whom I ordered to get under cover as near as possible, in case I had need of him.

Maréchal d'Arcko's orders gave me serious cause for reflection, as I should have to decide hurriedly, in a moment of time, the fate of the regiment, and this moment would be one of the gravest importance; I knew further the difficulties that arise in disposing of a regiment to mot advantage when pushing it into the turmoil of an attack, and therefore I made a point of impressing upon my men the necessity of attention to orders, and of prompt obedience in carrying out any manœuvres during the action with courage and in good order. I assured them that herein lay our safety and, perhaps, victory.

I had scarcely finished speaking when the enemy's battery opened fire upon us, and raked us through and through. They concentrated their fire upon us, and with their first discharge carried off Count de la Bastide, the lieutenant of my own company with whom at the moment I was speaking, and twelve grenadiers, who fell side by side in the ranks, so that my coat was covered with brains and blood. So accurate was the fire that each discharge of the cannon stretched some of my men on the ground. I suffered agonies at seeing these brave fellows perish without a chance of defending themselves, but it was absolutely necessary that they should not move from their post.

This cannonade was but the prelude of the attack that the enemy were developing, and I looked upon the moment when they would fling themselves against one point or another in our entrenchments as so instant that I would allow no man even to bow his head before the storm, fearing that the regiment would find itself in disorder when the time came for us to make the rapid movement that would be demanded of us. At last the enemy's army began to move to the assault, and still it was necessary for me to suffer this sacrifice to avoid a still greater misfortune, though I had five officers and eighty grenadiers killed on the spot before we had fired a single shot.

So steep was the slope in front of us that as soon almost as the enemy's column began its advance it was lost to view, and it came into sight again only two hundred paces from our entrenchments. I noticed that it kept as far as possible from the glacis of the town and close alongside of the wood, but I could not make out whether a portion might not also be marching within the latter with the purpose of attacking that part of our entrenchments facing it, and the uncertainty caused me to delay any movement. There was nothing to lead me to suppose that the enemy had such an intimate knowledge of our defences as to guide them to one point in preference to another for their attack.

Had I been able to guess that the column was being led by that scoundrel of a corporal who had betrayed us, I should not have been in this dilemma, nor should I have thought it necessary to keep so many brave men exposed to the perils of the cannonade, but my doubts came to an end two hours after midday, for I caught sight of the tips of the Imperial standards, and no longer hesitated. I changed front as promptly as possible, in order to bring my grenadiers opposite the part of our position adjoining the wood, towards which I saw that the enemy was directing his advance.

The regiment now left a position awkward in the extreme on account of the cannon, but we soon found ourselves scarcely better off, for hardly had our men lined the little parapet when the enemy broke into the charge, and rushed at full speed, shouting at the top of their voices, to throw themselves into our entrenchments.

The rapidity of their movements, together with their loud yells, were truly alarming, and as soon as I heard them I ordered our drums to beat the "charge" so as to drown them with their noise, lest they should have a bad effect upon our people. By this means I animated my grenadiers, and prevented them hearing the shouts of the enemy, which before now have produced a heedless panic.

The English infantry led this attack with the greatest intrepidity, right up to our parapet, but there they were opposed with a courage at least equal to their own. Rage, fury, and desperation were manifested by both sides, with the more obstinacy as the assailants and assailed were perhaps the bravest soldiers in the world. The little parapet which separated the two forces became the scene of the bloodiest struggle that could be conceived. Thirteen hundred grenadiers, of whom seven hundred belonged to the Elector's Guards, and six hundred who were left under my command, bore the brunt of the enemy's attack at the forefront of the Bavarian infantry.

It would be impossible to describe in words strong enough the details of the carnage that took place during this first attack, which lasted a good hour or more. We were all fighting hand to hand, hurling them back as they clutched at the parapet; men were slaying, or tearing at the muzzles of guns and the bayonets which pierced their entrails; crushing under their feet their own wounded comrades, and even gouging out their opponents' eyes with their nails, when the grip was so close that neither could make use of their weapons. I verily believe that it would have been quite impossible to find a more terrible representation of Hell itself than was shown in the savagery of both sides on this occasion.

At last the enemy, after losing more than eight thousand men in this first onslaught, were obliged to relax their hold, and they fell back for shelter to the dip of the slope, where we could not harm them. A sudden calm now reigned amongst us, our people were recovering their breath, and seemed more determined even than they were before the conflict. The ground around our parapet was covered with dead and dying, in heaps almost as high as our fascines, but our whole attention was fixed on the enemy and his movements; we noticed that the tops of his standards still

showed at about the same place as that from which they had made their charge in the first instance, leaving little doubt but that they were reforming before returning to the assault. As soon as possible we set vigorously to work to render their approach more difficult for them than before, and by means of an increasing fire swept their line of advance with a torrent of bullets, accompanied by numberless grenades, of which we had several waggon loads in rear of our position. These, owing to the slope of the ground, fell right amongst the enemy's ranks, causing them great annoyance and doubtless added not a little to their hesitation in advancing the second time to the attack. They were so disheartened by the first attempt that their generals had the greatest difficulty in bringing them forward again, and indeed would never have succeeded in this, though they tried every other means, had they not dismounted and set an example by placing themselves at the head of the column, and leading them on foot.

Their devotion cost them dear, for General Stirum and many other generals and officers were killed. They once more, then, advanced to the assault, but with nothing like the success of their first effort, for not only did they lack energy in their attack, but after being vigorously repulsed, were pursued by us at the point of the bayonet for more than eighty paces beyond our entrenchments, which we finally re-entered unmolested.

After this second attempt many efforts were made by their generals, but they were never able to bring their men to the assault a third time. They remained halted half-way in a state of uncertainty, seeking an opportunity of extricating themselves and improving their position. They had all along feared the effect of the fire from the covered-way of Donauwört, and this was why they had narrowed their attack along the edge of the wood; having failed, therefore, to penetrate our particular angle of the entrenchments, they sent off a lieutenant and twenty men in the direction of the town to reconnoitre it closely.

This officer, who fully believed he had received his sentence of death, was agreeably surprised to find the glacis deserted, and his party only received a few shots from the loopholes in the old walls of the town.

The town commandant, upon whom Maréchal d'Arcko had relied so much, instead of lining his covered-way with his bet troops, had withdrawn them all into the main works; he seems to have considered that the best way of ensuring the safety of the place was to shut up his troops and lock the gates, and the result was our ruin. It is quite certain that if he had occupied the covered-way, as was naturally to be expected, the enemy would never have been able to get into our entrenchments, for they would have found it impossible to do so under the flank fire from the glacis, against which they could have in no wise protected themselves. I am of opinion even, that had they cared to run this risk we should have had notice of their line of advance from the resistance offered by the garrison, in time to have afforded support in that quarter by filing to our left along our entrenchments. As it was, we were not in a position to know anything of this, owing to the formation of the ground which hid their movements from us; and at the same time it seemed clear, owing to the resistance maintained against them at every point and the great loss they had suffered in their repulse, that their chance of success in a third assault was as hopeless as the two first. Besides this, the day's failure apparently spelt ruin to them; reinforcements from Augsburg were on their way to join us, and certainly would have had time to arrive by nightfall, when the enemy would find themselves in a very awkward position owing to the demoralising effect of the woods and defiles to be repassed in the retreat. France would have then been able to carry out her original plan of campaign, particularly as the enemy had already lost nearly fourteen thousand men, as I learned from themselves later on, a number that would, as far as could be judged, be largely increased during a forced retreat. But as it happened, matters had a different ending.

When the enemy found themselves safe from attack on the town side, they hastened to make the most of the daylight left to them. It was nearly seven in the evening when they began their movement to turn this flank, which they did without making any change in their order of battle. They had merely to turn their column to the flank, and by reason of the fall of the ground, succeeded in changing their position to their right, near the glacis, without meeting any obstacle, or being seen by us. If we only could have been informed of this movement, we could have moved to any place at which they might have presented themselves, but we never believed it possible that they would approach from this direction; on the contrary, we had been absolutely assured of the safety of this point, and seeing no signs of a renewed assault, as the day waned, looked upon the victory as ours, and, in fact, never was joy greater than our own than at the very moment when we were in the greatest danger.

We pictured to ourselves all the advantages produced by our successful resistance, and the glory of the action itself, perhaps the most memorable in the history of the world; for after all, although the enemy might in the end, as I shall show later on, find themselves masters of our entrenchments, it could not diminish the glory due to our ten

battalions, for having sustained, unbroken, two determined assaults of a formidable army, which after five hours' fighting no longer dared to make even an appearance.

If this action had been described in detail by a practised hand, it would be the subject of the admiration of the century, but however good my own intentions in making a vivid and touching description of it might be, I could not give effect to them, because my literary powers would not be equal to the task. I shall content myself, therefore, by remarking that our ten battalions, with hardly the pretence of an entrenchment, held their own at Donauwört against the violent and reiterated efforts of a whole and powerful army, which five weeks later defeated, on the plain of Hochstett, the combined forces of France and Bavaria, in which battle none of our battalions took part. I leave the appreciation of the valour of our troops to those who read these memoirs, and those more curiously inclined who have studied the subject in other histories, to draw their own deductions. I should not know how to set about it, for I declare, before God and man, that I have never read any treatise on this war except one regarding the Belgrade affair, in a book entitled *The Campaigns of Prince Eugene*, which one of my friends brought my wife, as it contained a paragraph or so concerning me. I would go further by saying that owing to the dislike I have always had of speaking of war itself, I wrote these memoirs under a species of compulsion, and would never have done so had I had my own way in the matter.

The enemy then, having found means to change their position and their line of attack unobserved, formed up on a broader front than before, and advanced to attack part of the entrenchments guarded only by the regiment of Nectancourt. This regiment, which was strung out in single rank, was in no wise in a position to offer a serious resistance, and retired into the town on their approach without giving the slightest information of their movement to our ten battalions. Our dragoons, who saw all this going on, came into action, but a volley from the enemy killed so many of them that they were obliged to retire without any possibility of their approaching the angle we were holding. Maréchal d'Arcko and Major-General M. de Liselbourg, who were at this point when the enemy broke through, were also cut off from us, and never doubting but that our ten battalions had already retired, made their way to the town, which they had some difficulty in entering, owing to the hesitation of the commandant to open the gates.

We, however, remained steady at our post; our fire was as regular as ever, and kept our opponents thoroughly in check. But while we were thus devoting our attention to our own part of the field, the enemy had possessed themselves of all the entrenchments on our life, and shut us off completely from any communication with the town, which ought at least to have served us as a haven of retreat. I was the only commanding officer left among the ten battalions, and I had a far from pleasing prospect before me.

Maréchal d'Arcko and Major-General Liselbourg had vanished, and Count Emanuel d'Arcko, who had just been wounded, was drowned during the retreat. He was colonel of the Prince Electoral's regiment, and his lieutenant-colonel, M. de Mercy, had been sent to Italy; the latter's brother, the Chevalier de Mercy, lieutenant-colonel of the guards, was also wounded, as well as the officer commanding the Liselbourg regiment. Thus I was left alone at the head of a body of men full of pluck and confidence, but about to be deserted by Fortune.

Although the enemy were in possession of all the entrenchments on our left, they took, out of respect for us, every precaution when advancing to attack us. As fast as the infantry entered the position, their generals formed them up four lines in depth, and although we now were lining our parapet and had our left flank at their mercy, we had inspired them with such fear of our powers that they advanced upon us in slow time with shouldered arms, either as if to warn us it was time to retire, or because they still felt that our aspect was too dangerous a one to risk anything rash.

What made our position still more trying was that taking us thus in flank they caught us, as in a trap, between their main line of battle and the entrenchment which faced the wood on our right. However, to our great good fortune, they never thought of dividing their force when they had got into the entrenchments, and sending one portion to cut off our retreat, whilst the other pressed us on the flank.

They arrived within gunshot of our flank, about 7.30 in the evening, without our being at all aware of the possibility of such a thing, so occupied were we in the defence of our own particular post and the confidence we had as to the safety of the rest of our position.

But I noticed all at once an extraordinary movement on the part of our infantry, who were rising up and ceasing fire withal. I glanced around on all sides to see what had caused this behaviour, and then became aware of several lines of infantry in greyish white uniforms on our left flank. From lack of movement on their part, their dress and bearing, I verily believed that reinforcements had arrived for us, and anybody else would have believed the same. No information whatever had reached us of the enemy's success, or even that such a thing was the least likely, so in the error I laboured under I shouted to my men that they were Frenchman, and friends, and they at once resumed their former position behind the parapet.

Having, however, made a closer inspection, I discovered bunches of straw and leaves attached to their standards, badges the enemy are in the custom of wearing on the occasion of battle, and at that very moment was struck by a ball in the right lower jaw, which wounded and stupefied me to such an extent that I thought it was smashed. I probed my wound as quickly as possible with the tip of my finger, and finding the jaw itself entire, did not make much fuss about it; but the front of my jacket was so deluged with the blood which poured from it that several of our officers believed that I was dangerously hurt. I reassured them, however, and exhorted them to stand firmly with their men. I pointed out to them that so long as our infantry kept well together the danger was not so great, and that if they behaved in a resolute manner, the enemy, who were only keeping in touch with us without daring to attack us, would allow us to retire without so much as pursuing. In truth, to look at them it would seem that they hoped much more for our retreat than any chance of coming to blows with us. I at once, therefore, shouted as loudly as I could that no one was to quit the ranks, and then formed my men in column along the entrenchments facing the wood, fronting towards the opposite flank, which was the direction in which we should have to retire. Thus, whenever I wished to make a stand, I had but to turn my men about, and at any moment could resume the retirement instantaneously, which we thus carried out in good order. I kept this up until we had crossed the entrenchments on the other flank, and then we found ourselves free from attack. This retreat was not made, however, without loss, for the enemy, although they would not close with us when they saw our column formed for the retirement, fired volleys at close range into us, which did much damage.

My men had no sooner got clear of the entrenchments than they found that the slope was in their favour, and they fairly broke their ranks and took to flight, in order to reach the plain that lay before them before the enemy's cavalry could get upon their track. As each ran his hardest, intending to reform on the further side, they disappeared like a flash of lightning without ever looking back, and I, who was with the rear guard ready to make a stand if necessary against our opponents, had scarcely clambered over the entrenchments when I found myself left entirely alone on the height, prevented from running by my heavy boots.

I looked about on all sides for my drummer, whom I had warned to keep at hand with my horse, but he had evidently thought fit to look after himself, with the result that I found myself left solitary to the mercy of the enemy and my own sad thoughts, without the slightest idea as to my future fate. I cudgelled my brains in vain for some way out of my difficulty, but could think of nothing the least certain; the plain was too wide for me to traverse in my big boots at the necessary speed, and to crown my misfortunes, was covered with cornfields. So far the enemy's cavalry had not appeared on the plain, but there was every reason to believe that they would not long delay their coming; it would have been utter folly on my part to give them the chance of discovering me embarrassed as I was, for as long as I was hampered with my boots, a trooper would always find it an easy affair to catch me.

I noticed, however, that the Danube was not so very far away, and determined to make my way towards it at all risk, with the hope of finding some beaten track or place where there would be some chance of saving my life, as I saw it was now hopeless to think of getting my men together. As a matter of fact, I found a convenient path along the bank of the river, but this was not of much avail to me, for, owing to my efforts and struggles to reach it through several fields of standing corn, I was quite blown and exhausted and could only just crawl along at the slowest possible pace. On my way I met the wife of a Bavarian soldier, so distracted with weeping that she travelled no faster than I did. I made her drag off my boots, which fitted me so tightly about the legs that it was absolutely impossible for me to do this for myself. The poor woman took an immense time to effect this, and it seemed to me at least as if the operation would never come to an end. At last this was effected, and I turned over in my mind the best way to profit by my release, when, raising my head above the corn at the side of the road, I saw a number of the enemy's troopers scattered over the country, searching the fields for any of our people who might be hidden therein, with the intention, doubtless, of killing them for the sake of what plunder might be found upon them. At this cruel prospect all my hopes vanished, and the exultation I felt at my release from the boots died at the moment of its birth. My position was now more perilous than ever; nevertheless I examined under the cover afforded by the corn the

manœuvres of these cavaliers to see if I could not find some way out of the difficulty. A notion came into my head which, if it could have been carried out, might have had a curious ending. It was that if one trooper only should approach me, and his comrades remained sufficiently distant, I should keep hidden and wait until he got near enough for me to kill him with a shot from my pistol, for I had two on my belt; I would then take his uniform, mount his horse, and make my escape in this disguise, a plan which would be favoured by the approaching darkness. But not seeing any chance of being able to carry out this idea, I thought of another, namely, to get into the river up to my chin in the water under the bushes on the bank, wait for nightfall and the return of the troopers to their camp, and then to escape in the dark. But there were more difficulties to contend with in risking this even than in the other case, and as a last resource it struck me I might save myself by crossing the river, for happily I knew how to swim, although the risk here was very great owing to the breadth and rapidity of the Danube. I hurriedly determined on this plan, as I now saw a number of troopers approaching ever nearer to my hiding-place, who were refusing to give quarter to the unhappy wounded they found hidden in the corn, whom they ruthlessly despatched the more easily to despoil them. There was no reason to suppose that they were likely to show any more mercy to me, particularly as I was worth more in the shape of plunder than a private soldier, nor was there time to lose in making up my mind, so I then and there determined to swim the river. Before taking to the water I took the precaution of leaving on the bank my richly embroidered uniform, rather spoiled as it was by the events of the late action. I scattered in a similar manner my hat, wig, pistols, and sword, at one point and another, so that if the troopers came up before I had got well away, they would devote their attention to collecting these articles instead of looking in the water, and it turned out just as I thought. I kept on my stockings, vest, and breeches, simply buttoning the sleeves of the vest and tucking the pockets within my breeches for safety; this done, I threw myself upon the mercy of the stream. I had hardly got any distance when up came the troopers, who, as I had hoped, dismounted as quickly as they could to lay hands on the spoil lying before them; they even set to work to quarrel over it, for I distinctly heard them shouting and swearing in the most delightful manner. Others apparently got no share, and they amused themselves by saluting me with several musket shots, but the current of the river which carried me on my way soon put me out of their range. Finally, after a very long and hard swim, I was lucky enough to reach the other bank, in spite of the strength of the stream.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692–1717. (London: 1904):180–195.