

GERMAN CAMPAIGN OF 1705

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

1705

In 1705 the army in Flanders was commanded by Maréchal de Villeroi.

The conquests of France now reached as far as the confines of Holland, and resulted in her possession of a chain of fortresses which covered an immense extent of country.

Besides these lines which served to defend the Spanish Low Countries, we had also fortified positions, constructed with all possible care, which formed a second line of defence against any designs that the enemy might entertain on the territory of the two Crowns. Since the beginning of the war neither side had as yet made any attempt to carry on a campaign in Flanders itself; Italy and Germany had hitherto attracted the particular attention of all the Powers concerned.

France, however, fearing a further development of the successes gained by the Allies on the Rhine, sought to create a diversion by raising dissension amongst the Dutch. To this end we had prepared a larger army than any we had had in the previous campaigns, and as soon as Maréchal de Villeroi had mobilised it, he left our lines and invested the little town of Huy....

After this matter was over I had just time to join in the assault of an outwork belonging to the fortress of Huy, called the Red Fort, and commanded the grenadiers told off to carry it by storm. This assault was of a different character to that which usually obtained in such cases, because it was necessary to employ escalading, and I lost many men who were thrown from the tops of the ladders. The lieutenant who had fought with me at Scheremhausen was amongst them; the poor lad was shot while climbing the very ladder on which I was myself, and the ball entered the top of his breast and passed through his entrails. One could not believe his recovery possible, but the care taken of him and the strength of his constitution pulled him through, so that his cure was regarded as a species of miracle. He was rewarded by promotion to captain, and I received as my share many honied speeches from the Court officials. The outwork carried, the town capitulated the next day, June 10th.

After the reduction of the town of Huy the army lay siege to that of Liège by surrounding the place without opening any trenches before the citadel, which is one of the largest existing. Liège is a very large mercantile town, situated on the river Meuse, and almost entirely undefended.

The enemy, whose design was to continue their conquests in the Alsace country, suffered the capture of this town without changing their plan of campaign. Milord Marlborough was on the Moselle with a considerable force, where he awaited the arrival of Prince Louis of Baden with the Imperial army. He then intended to force the frontier at Traerbeck, and drive back our army, which was strongly entrenched in the neighbourhood. France, afraid lest these two allies should invade the Electorate of Trèves and the Comté de Chigni, or even German Lorraine, which is hard by the Metz district, desired rather to draw them in the direction of Flanders, where the country was covered by a chain of fortified towns suitable to ward off reverses, an advantage wanting to us on the Moselle. This was why we pressed the attack upon Liège, so as to force the Dutch to recall Marlborough, which was eventually done. This General, seeing no sign of Prince Louis of Baden, did not give a thought to his non-arrival, though he could not have been ignorant of the allegations made against this Prince. The belief was so general as to the latter's understanding with France that a print had been published in Holland representing him asleep upon a sack of Louis d'or, as an allusion to the sums reported to have been given him by France to keep him inactive. Marlborough was pleased to find an opportunity, such as in the relief of Liège, to leave a country in which his army was beginning to find it difficult to subsist. We had just begun the trenches before the citadel when we heard that he was on the march towards us, and thereby fulfilling exactly the intentions of France. Our generals now decided that it was unnecessary for us to continue the siege; it was abandoned at the enemy's approach, and we took cover behind our lines, near a village called Meerdorp, to observe his movements. These lines, constructed at our leisure, were cannon-proof, with wide parapets and extremely deep ditches, but they covered so great an extent of ground that our army was unable to occupy them throughout.

In order to obviate this defect a detachment of considerable strength, under the orders of a lieutenant-general of the King's army, was posted on the left of our position, a measure which appeared to secure us against surprise. However, Marlborough, whose army was superior to ours in number, formed a plan to attack us. The precautions we had taken rendered the enterprise a difficult one; our lines had all the posts and sentries necessary to preserve communication, patrolling was kept up regularly every night, the main army was at hand ready to reinforce the detached force, and the suspicion of danger was so slight that it was calculated that we should be able to keep the enemy fully occupied there the greater part of the campaign. But, notwithstanding all this, they found a means of entering our lines without any great effort and almost no loss.

Milord Marlborough struck his camp on the night of July 8th, marched his army in several columns, so that no one was able to divine his intentions, and appeared at break of day in front of the force under the lieutenant-general posted on our left flank. Our patrols by this time had returned to camp, which was wrapt in slumber; consequently when he arrived in sight of our lines he could see that we were making no movement or attempt to defend them. He then ordered his infantry to advance, who immediately rushed two of the gates and broke down a length of parapet to allow his cavalry to enter before the lieutenant-general's detachment had the chance of opposing them, or even to warn the army to come to its help. So sudden was this action that the enemy were actually able to form up in our own lines before our people had left their camp, although immediately the news was brought to Maréchal de Villeroi he had had the alarm beaten and marched to oppose them; but it was too late; the enemy had secured the position, and it would have been extremely rash to have attacked them, as the flanking detachment, which was of considerable strength in itself, was now in full retreat. We then occupied the camp at Lierre, a small town near Antwerp, and remained there whilst the enemy recaptured Huy. Then, anxious for the town of Louvain, we marched to take up a position covering it, and encamped along the little river Oberichen, which runs through it. Shortly after pitching our camp, we saw the enemy make their appearance, and post themselves nearly opposite to us. Only the river separated us, and we were so much in view of each other that neither army could make the slightest movement by daylight without the knowledge of the other.

Our position was additionally advantageous, inasmuch as we not only protected the town of Louvain, but many other places as well, because we commanded the passage of the river. The enemy, realising the necessity of crossing it in order to throw themselves on Brussels, or any other place, with the object of obliging us to retire, resolved to attempt the passage by a surprise similar to that which they had already made upon our lines, but experience had now taught us to be more vigilant. Posts of observation were placed above and below the army with sentries connecting the various points; and to see that everyone did his duty, general officers were daily told off to go the rounds by day and night. It is by no means easy to effect the passage of a river by surprise in the face of such precautions; pontoons have to be constructed, and such work could not be carried out in view of our sentries without being perceived. However, the enemy, resolved on making the attempt, chose a very dark night to move up the river a league beyond our right flank. Before them marched a train of copper pontoons, with their platforms and joints for bridging purposes; they brought up batteries of cannon to protect the operation, and got everything ready for the passage of the river at break of day; but if night hid their movements from our eyes it could not prevent us using our ears. Notwithstanding the fact that they created but the minimum of noise, yet the calm of the night rendered the smallest sounds perceptible to the ear, and our sentries becoming aware of something unusual, warned their officers, who, listening in their turn, were convinced that the enemy were on the move.

Ever since we had been at this river, the generals of the day had visited our outposts with extreme exactitude every night. As is well known, "officers of the day" are officers told off for duty day by day, consisting of a lieutenant-general, a major-general, a brigadier, a colonel, a lieutenant-colonel, and a major, whose duty is to parade the guards in front of the camp, supervise their distribution, attend at the relief of the outposts, and be ready to march with the inlying picquets of the army in case of need. On this occasion I was acting in the capacity of officer of the day, and making a tour of the posts on our right conjointly with the lieutenant-general and the brigadier; the other officers on duty were visiting the left, when we received a report from those at the point opposite, where the enemy were launching their pontoons, as to a noise they had heard, and their suspicions as to the reason thereof.

As soon as we had assembled each placed his ear to the ground, so as to hear better, and we were convinced we could detect the sound of planks being placed in position. The lieutenant-general despatched his aide-de-camp to warn the Elector and Maréchal de Villeroi, and as the noise soon got more distinct, he sent me with further information. I arrived at M. de Villeroi's quarters as day broke, and found him mounting his horse; after having made my report, he ordered me to accompany him to the Elector, whom we found mounted in front of the camp. He

was gazing through his glass at the enemy's camp to try and distinguish their movements, and whether they had struck it, when an officer arrived from the garrison of Louvain who confirmed the report of their march.

Maréchal de Villeroi had not wasted a moment in getting the army into movement. It was already in column of route when he came up, and on the march to the point where the enemy were constructing their bridge. This smartness prevented us being surprised a second time, saved the town of Brussels, and perhaps some other places as well.

I was still with the Elector and the Maréchal when the enemy, who by this time had finished their bridges, opened an artillery fire upon two of our picquets who were annoying them. As soon as I heard the first shot I asked permission of the Elector to rejoin my own men, and together with M. de Gassion, lieutenant-general in the King's army, who was also with the Prince, galloped off to the head of the column to rejoin the regiment. The enemy, however, had begun to cross the river by the time the head of our column had arrived on the high ground commanding their bridges, and although it was some distance from this point to the river, they were nevertheless surprised to see us so ready to oppose them, as they thought us to be still in the arms of sleep, so they hurried into battle formation in a little plain between the heights and the stream as fast as they could push their men across. But neither did we lose any time; the leading brigades were ordered to descend, and the main column in rear, which followed in quick time, being at hand, the whole were formed to engage the enemy in front and on the flank, whilst our batteries were brought into action, to open a direct fire upon the exits from their bridges. We were then directed to advance and attack them before a greater number were able to effect the passage. But Marlborough, seeing his efforts checkmated, recalled his troops, who repassed their bridges and retired with a loss of more than a thousand men. They encamped upon the heights on their side, and we did the like on ours, whilst we watched each other with the greatest care.

Our regiment was one of those ordered to attack the enemy's flank. We marched on the extreme left of our column, and in order to arrive at striking distance we had to traverse some fields along the river-bank, so open and exposed to the fire from their batteries that we lost five captains, eight lieutenants, and eighty soldiers before we were able to gain the shelter of a large hedge, studded with thorn trees. The reason why their battery did so much damage was that each cannon was loaded with three shots at a time, a new invention on the part of someone unknown to me, which has not remained in practice, as it shortened the range so much. Our regiment was one of the first victims of this experiment, and suffered considerably, but the others hardly lost a man. However, it appeared to some of us at the time that we received a recompense in the form of a miracle vouchsafed to us by the Almighty at the very place where we had been so maltreated; a miracle which, though it appeared astonishing enough to excite the admiration of the universe, turned out to be but the effect of imagination, as I will now show.

On our way to the attack we passed through a deserted village just before entering the open fields. There a young drummer, who had amused himself by foraging among the rubbish left in the street, found a crucifix stuck on cardboard, which he carried off with him. After we had run the gauntlet of the fields and found ourselves in tranquility behind the hedge, he leaned against an old thorn tree, and either thoughtlessly or on purpose inserted this bit of cardboard into a deep crevice of the trunk, thinking nothing more about it. After the action our regiment was the only one ordered to encamp in the very field where we had been so hotly saluted, the hedge in question forming the front of our camp, and it chanced that one of our men, looking for wood to boil his kettle and finding nothing dryer and more suitable for the purpose than the old trees therein, set to work upon the very one containing the crucifix, and soon split off a supply of chips with his hatchet. This caused the crucifix to jump apparently from the heart of the trunk, as the hacking with the axe had destroyed any traces of a crack. The soldier was so amazed to see this image emerge from the middle of a tree-trunk that he had not the slightest doubt but that it was a manifestation from the Divine Power which should lead to his salvation, and regarded himself as the chosen agent of a miracle, and forthwith gave vent to his excitement in loud shouts of joy. Other soldiers near by who ran up to him were so struck by the story he told that they also proclaimed the miracle as loudly as he, and finally the chaplain of the regiment hurriedly appearing on the scene, was as convinced as the rest of the miraculous nature of the occurrence. The more the matter was gone into the more extraordinary did it appear—a crucifix bedded in a tree-trunk, scatheless, and without a sign of any point of entry!! In the end it was settled by the chaplain that the tree should be regarded with veneration as the matrix which had contained a precious relic for an untold number of years, and that in order to do due honour to both, he would daily celebrate the Holy Mass before it. To this end an altar was immediately constructed against the tree, with a small roof to protect it in case of bad weather, the crucifix was fastened to the altar, and the little chapel was adorned in every possible manner. The soldier never left his crucifix; during the celebration of Mass he took charge of the altar in the sincere belief that he had been selected by the

Almighty to make this miracle known, and he composed his features rather after the fashion of those directors of seminaries who are looked upon as the Elect. The whole day long he remained glued to the tree with a serious look on his countenance, distributing relics to the good souls who came to beseech favours from "Saint Crucifix." These relics consisted of little bits of the tree, which he reverently cut off and passed over the surface of the crucifix with much ceremony, while the devotees remained on their knees at the foot of the altar, then, having wrapped the holy chips in paper, he handed them to the recipients. In return for these each suppliant, according to his means, placed offerings on a plate which lay on the altar, and these were duly shared every evening between the chaplain and the soldier.

This miraculous image produced an immense sensation throughout the army and the neighbouring country, and its wonders augmented day by day. Sometimes it was a lame man, who, having been carried before the tree, had instantly found himself able to walk without his crutches; then the deaf, dumb, and blind, who had heard, spoken, and seen—in fact, all who were infirm received relief according to their faith. There was always a continuous crowd in attendance; the Elector even, and the Maréchal de Villeroi, who were passing our regiment one day, had the curiosity to pay it a visit, and placed a handsome offering in the plate. A fortune might have been made out of this devotion, and would really have come to pass, had not the true origin of the miracle come to light, for the indiscretion of the drummer put an end to the business.

The drummer, who recollected having slipped the crucifix into the thorn tree, confessed the fact to the chaplain with all its attendant details. The devout priest, who was drawing a solid income, thanks to the faith of the populace, exhorted him to be careful lest he should do anything to interfere with the good works which were being done, and warned him that he would be guilty before God if he did not keep silence. He gave him to understand that a pious intention was always acceptable as a means for procuring the salvation of souls, promised to give him a portion of the offerings, and, as a matter of fact, did give him something to hold his tongue. But when our drummer found himself so far interested in the matter, he examined the sum of the receipts more closely, and discovered that the chaplain and the soldier kept the lion's share to themselves, giving him apparently only a dole. He therefore went straight to M. de Mercy, the colonel of the regiment, with whom I was at the time, and reported to him the whole of the mystery. The chaplain was summoned and confronted with the drummer, and a beginning was made by reproaching him with the abuses he had permitted with regard to his image, and his avarice in taking remuneration for the little bits of wood that he gave out as relics. He was told that the receipt of such offerings, the sad result of the credulity of an ignorant and rude people, only went to prove him to be a greedy grasper, and his companion as well. It might have been thought that this would have somewhat disconcerted his reverence, but he kept his countenance, and replied with an air of assurance that he had only followed the example of many famous divines who had perhaps less foundation to work on than that supplied by this crucifix, and that as to the custom of making offerings, the prayers that accompanied them were not the less acceptable to the Almighty, to whom it mattered but little as to the form they took, so long as the souls were led along the road to salvation.

"Very well," said M. de Mercy, "if such is the case the image must be left in the country here, for as we shall be but a short time in this place, and you cannot cart about with us the tree which has brought forth the image and the relics, I shall send it to the Capuchins of Louvain"; which he forthwith did, but the good Fathers received the present and its story with much indifference, and since then nothing whatever has been heard of it.

The two armies remained encamped for some time yet in their respective positions until the enemy marched three leagues up the river, when we did likewise and halted opposite to them, still separated by the stream.

By this time we were not far from Brussels, which lay on our right, and it was believed that the enemy intended to make a dash for this place, but in this case they would have to traverse the forest of Waterloo which was of vast extent; after several attempts, which ended in nothing but the shifting of their camp to no more than a league distant, the campaign came to an end.

France was very lucky in thus being able to stay the enemy's advance both on the Rhine and the Moselle, and the King marked his satisfaction by the present of a hundred thousand crowns, which he made to Maréchal de Villeroi. This General certainly rendered all the plans of the Allies abortive; their only success was a little one in Alsace, to wit, the capture of Hagenau, an almost defenceless town.

The last campaign had been so favourable to France that she became convinced the wheel of Fortune was turning in her favour, and that she should therefore take the opportunity to strike terror in the hearts of her enemies.

To bring this about a battle in Flanders would be necessary; she had in reserve, should a reverse occur, a number of fortified towns which would be a means of defence for the frontier by checking the enemy's advance and giving us time to replace our losses, and in case of success Holland and the German frontier lay open to us. By invading Holland, France could mine the resources of the enemy, for they drew therefrom their chief supplies of money and all kinds of munitions of war.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692–1717. (London: 1904):286–303.