

BATTLE OF MALPLAQUET

Sous-Brigadier de la Colonie

11 September 1709

Our position was a peculiar one but advantageous withal. On our front lay these two woods, separate the one from the other, forming a kind of broad avenue, wide enough for twenty battalions to pass formed up side by side, which gave upon the plain we were occupying. Maréchal de Villars ordered the infantry to occupy the end of this avenue and the edges of the woods, so as to create a sort of blind alley and to prevent entrance to the plain. The cavalry remained in the plain, the Household troops in the centre, in rear of the infantry posted across the alley, and the rest on the right and left of our line in rear of the woods. The enemy could only attack us by advancing up this avenue, and we thought this was going to take place on the day of our arrival, for we saw a body of cavalry appear at its entrance. It turned out to be Prince Eugene, who merely wished to reconnoitre our position, so as to avail himself of every precaution in readiness for making his attack when the rest of his army joined him from Tournai.

As soon as we realized that we were not going to be attacked that day, the whole of our infantry set to work to entrench themselves in the best way possible, reckoning that the crisis would come on the morrow; those out in the open opposite the end of the avenue constructed cannon-proof parapets with gaps here and there to facilitate an advance in case of need, whilst those on the borders of the woods did likewise, so that in a short time our position was well fortified. The only infantry that were without any cover at all from the enemy's artillery was the Bavarian Brigade, which was in reserve in rear of the Garde Française, who held a portion of the parapet, whilst in the rear of us again were the Maison du Roi, who were equally exposed.

The Allies, not being in a position to attack us formally on the day of our arrival or on the following day, placed batteries of artillery which opened fire on every point, but specially on the Household cavalry, and as we were posted exactly in front of these, many shots intended for them constantly carried off someone in our brigade. On the afternoon of September 10th, the enemy began to construct a battery about half-way up the avenue, and during that night armed it with thirty cannon of large calibre to breach the entrenchments in the wood on our left, on which they intended to make their main attack. Thus we awaited them, lying that night in battle formation, whilst our patrols and those of the enemy kept up a constant fire whenever they came across each other. Next morning at break of day the battery of thirty cannon opened fire, and by its continuous volleys succeeded in breaching the entrenchments in the wood on our left, and the head of the enemy's infantry column made its appearance. They came on at a slow pace, and by seven o'clock had arrived in line with the battery threatening our centre. As soon as this dense column appeared in the avenue, fourteen guns were promptly brought up in front of our brigade almost in line with the regiment of Garde Française. The fire of this battery was terrific, and hardly a shot missed its mark. I could not help noticing the officer in command, who although he seemed elderly was nevertheless so active that in giving his orders there was no cessation of action anywhere, the cannon shot continued to pour forth without a break, plunged into the enemy's infantry and carried off whole ranks at a time, but a gap was no sooner created than it was immediately filled again, and they even continued their advance upon us without giving us any idea of the actual point determined on for their attack. At last the column, leaving the great battery on its left, changed its direction a quarter right and threw itself precipitately into the wood on our left, making an assault upon that portion which had been breached. It sustained the full fire of our infantry entrenched therein, and notwithstanding the great number killed on the spot, it continued the attack and penetrated into the wood, a success which it owed as much to being drunk with brandy as to martial ardour. If all our regiments had behaved equally well the enemy's infantry would have been entirely destroyed in this fight, and would never have been able to force their way over our entrenchments, but some of our best dressed troops did not think proper to hold their ground, doubtless not so much that they were afraid of being killed as the fear of the embarrassment they might cause the State by the difficulty that would be created later on in having to replace them!! They therefore made off to a safer quarter, leaving the position open to the enemy, and they actually during their retirement, having come across the horses of the dragoons of Notât, who had been dismounted to come to their support, mounted thereon to take the better care of them while the dragoons themselves looked after the fighting business for them.

Although the enemy had forced their way into the wood, this success did not involve their winning the battle, and if our cowards had only rejoined the brigades that they left still fighting, it would have been quite possible to have repulsed them. The nature of this wood-fighting gave no particular advantage to either side, but their only notion was to keep themselves intact to shine at the reviews to which they are such an ornament. The fighting which now

went on in the woods was extremely stubborn and murderous, and victory hung in the balance. Our generals perceived that there was a lack of infantry in the wood on our left, owing to these regiments having abandoned their position; so to supply this need the Irish Brigade, which had hitherto lined the entrenchments at the end of the avenue abutting on the wood, was ordered to move into it, and we, to our great content, were directed to take its place. I say to our great content, because since the enemy's great battery had ceased firing upon the wood it had directed its attention to us and the Maison du Roi, and we had had to stand and see ourselves knocked over without any possibility of returning the compliment. By the time the Irish Brigade had got well into the wood it was considered to be hardly sufficient as a reinforcement by itself, and an order came for us to follow it, although there was no one else left to fill our place which would be left open to the enemy. They would not fail to seize it, as they could then attack the Maison du Roi with a great chance of success by simply lining the outside of our entrenchments, a manoeuvre quite possible for them to carry out. When the first order was brought to the brigade-major, who reported it to me, I refused to obey it, and pointed out the absolute necessity that existed for our maintaining the position we were holding; but a lieutenant-general then arrived on the scene, and ordered us a second time to march off, so sharply that all our remonstrances were useless. We abandoned our post and marched into the wood to join in the fusilade with the others. What I have just related here will be found to agree with the criticisms that have been made on the affair of Malplaquet.

It is admitted that, had the Bavarian Brigade not left its position to enter the wood, we should not have been obliged to leave the field of battle in the hands of the enemy, and as none of the critics were aware whether it took this action on its own initiative or not, M. de Villars a year later called an inquiry as to why we had abandoned such an important point in the line. We deputed M. de Quemin to represent us, who assured him in the name of the whole of the corps of the remonstrances we had taken the liberty to make at the time to the lieutenant-general who had given us the order; he also gave him his name, and added with perfect truth that we should never have left our position had not the latter emphatically ordered us to do so in the name of the King.

Whilst events were passing thus on the left, the wooded country on our right was also attacked by a column of the enemy's infantry, which had followed the advance of the first. The woods there were neither as thick nor as high as those on the left, but as the ground was much more cut up by hedges, it was on this account the more advantageous to our troops. Our right withstood the enemy's attack with admirable firmness, disputing every foot of the ground in the same manner as on our left. From the Regiment of Navarre, which happened at that time to be composed of very short men, nearly in rags, who held our extreme right, and who behaved none the less marvellously well, to the Regiment of Alsace, which extended thence to the centre held by the Garde Française, everything went always in our favour.

It was now midday, and our right and left still held their own, with no decided advantage either to the enemy or ourselves. The tangled nature of the ground intersected by woods on which the principal fighting took place had this advantage about it, that it was impossible to spread a panic; each brigade fought, as it were, independently, without being in the least aware of its neighbours' movements. As far as those who occupied the centre were concerned, it would have been a pity to have exposed them; everything went on well without them, and a victory even might have resulted had not the enemy thought of feeling their way towards the entrenchments that our brigade had just left. They had noticed that neither smoke nor fire came from them, and then their hussars, by cantering around, approached little by little until they at last discovered that we had no one left in occupation. Then, profiting by the chance thus given them, they caused their infantry to advance, who in turn protected the passage of many squadrons through the intervals in the parapet; these formed up at the mouth of the plain to charge the Maison du Roi, who had previously retired somewhat to avoid the infantry fire.

When these battalions advanced to seize our entrenchments the fine infantry holding our centre, who so far had not suffered from a single hostile shot, had every opportunity of deploying to cover the gap made by our empty entrenchments, but then they would have run still more risk of spoiling their beautiful uniforms, their most noticeable characteristic, and they therefore retired to try and find a quieter spot where they would be safe from any such rough handling. The result was that the cavalry were at liberty to pass through all the intervals in the entrenchments, and having reformed in the plain beyond, they moved straight upon the Maison du Roi, who likewise advanced to give them battle. The Scotch Guards of the Queen of England, most excellent troops, led the charge, which was a most violent one; and then the two sides, after the confusion of the first shock, disentangled themselves. They came on a second time to the charge, just as we learned that Maréchal de Villars had been dangerously wounded and incapacitated by a bullet through the knee. M. de Boufflers, who had joined the army the evening

before simply, as he told Maréchal de Villars, as a volunteer, now sent us an order to beat a retreat. It was after one o'clock in the afternoon when this order reached us, and we were still holding our own as well as ever in our wood, where the enemy had lost very heavily without scoring any further advantage than that of sharing its occupation with us. Had Maréchal de Villars not been wounded, it is quite certain that we should never have given up the fight, for the enemy's cavalry, which had entered the plain and then become engaged with the Household troops, could have easily been repulsed, as we had all our cavalry posted right and left, who up to then had not had an opportunity of even letting off a pistol. It would have been perfectly feasible to make them converge upon the centre, and so wipe out those of the enemy, the more so as our infantry had lost next to no ground, and were by no means so broken as to be likely to lose their grip of what they held. In short, although the enemy ultimately found themselves at liberty to undertake the siege of Mons, they owe it entirely to him who happened to wound Maréchal de Villars. As far as the battle itself is concerned, it would be impossible for them, if they impartially considered the matter, to say with truth that they really gained anything by their victory.

When we began our retreat, none of our infantry brigades were at all broken, always excepting the two famous regiments who held the centre of our line, and whose behaviour in quitting the field I have already remarked upon. Our cavalry were in excellent trim. The Maison du Roi and the gendarmerie alone had been engaged, and were not much disordered thereby. Our march was as undisturbed as if there were no enemy in the country. Our right retired on Quesnoy and our left on Valenciennes. It is true that as soon as our line of retreat was determined upon, and our columns began their retirement, the enemy sent out a number of squadrons to keep us under observation, but they neither dared approach our rear-guard nor even make a pretence of attacking us, and there is no doubt whatever that they were filled with astonishment at seeing us thus quit the field of battle. There was no doubt, at any rate, as to Maréchal de Villars being no longer at our head.

We marched for all the world as if we were merely changing our camping-ground, without any hurry or confusion. I was with the left wing which retired by the road to Valenciennes, which for three leagues passed through a fine open country, where we met with neither stream or defile which could afford an opportunity for the enemy's squadrons to attack our rear-guard. A little further on we did reach a village, where we were obliged to cross over a fairly wide stream, which checked us for a while, but the enemy also halted, and there was some reason to fear they might attack the tail of our column during its passage. To meet this case, infantry were required, as our rear-guard consisted solely of cavalry. As it was, the whole of our infantry had already crossed, and we continuing their march, with the exception of our regiment and my French grenadiers, who held the honourable post of rear-guard to the whole of the infantry. As I crossed the stream, the cavalry who followed me had noticed the necessity of infantry support to cover the passage, without which our rear-most squadrons would have been destroyed. I met with the Chevalier de Rosel, lieutenant-general in the King's army, who was asking for infantry, which by this time was a considerable distance off; for as soon as each regiment had passed over it marched away, without waiting for the next, with the result that they were at least a quarter of a league distant the one from the other. Seeing that the Bavarian regiment was the only one to hand, and which he regarded in the light of a foreign corps to which he dared not give a command, I begged him to give us whatever orders he thought fit, and he forthwith gave me his instructions. I then recrossed the brook, and posted my men in the gardens round the village, by which means I covered the cavalry rear-guard and prevented the enemy approaching. I might say that when I took up my position I asked the Chevalier de Rosel to wait for me, so that my infantry could retire in company with the cavalry, which he had the politeness to do, for there were yet two more leagues to march before reaching Valenciennes, over open country in which my men would have been much exposed if the enemy had followed us up, but they did not even dare to cross the stream.

M. de Boufflers took over the command of the army in the absence of Maréchal de Villars. He directed us to pitch our camps next day, the right wing near Quesnoy and the left at Valenciennes; we were thus in a secure position between these two towns, especially after we had constructed a strong line of well-flanked entrenchments along our front. The enemy, who had lost nearly twenty thousand men in the battle, hardly so much as dreamed of following us up; their only desire was to be allowed to carry on their siege of Mons undisturbed, and as we were yet quite in a position to interfere with their enterprise, they were reassured when they found we were hard at work piling earth in front of us. Some time after we had settled down in our encampment, Maréchal de Boufflers held a general inspection of the whole army, which he found in a most satisfactory state, and in a condition to give battle at the first moment he judged necessary. It was said that this was the King's own intention, and that orders had already been prepared for the same.

de la Colonie. The Chronicles of an Old Campaigner, M. de la Colonie, 1692–1717. (London: 1904):336–345.