

THE FIRST BATTLE OF THE MARNE

September 1914

The battle of Thillois

During the night of the 11th September, the 3rd army corps from the Vth Army (General Hache) received the mission to head the following day towards la Vesle in the direction of the Saint-Thierry Fort and Thillois. On the 12th September, the two divisions started marching. Pétain's 6th infantry division, on the left, was on its way to Rosnay, Muizon, Châlons-sur-Vesle and Saint-Thierry's fort. General Mangin's 5th infantry division headed towards Méry-Prémecy, Gueux and Thillois.

The 5th division marched without any trouble until the 204 hill, 2km south-west from Gueux. Around 10 o'clock, the news broke: Gueux had just been evacuated and the road from Gueux to Thillois was cut by trenches full of enemy infantry.

Two battalions from the 39th infantry regiment were sent towards Thillois and Gueux's La Garenne. They were under the protection of two batteries based next to the 204 hill.

Around noon, the enemy, who had evacuated the trenches between Gueux and Thillois without combat, was resisting in Thillois. The cavalry notified trenches on the north of Thillois, towards Champigny.

Around 3 o'clock in the afternoon, the 39th infantry regiment attacked Thillois while the 74th infantry regiment attacked Gueux's La Garenne. At 5 o'clock, the battle was frozen. The direct attack did not achieve anything.

At this point, the artillery entered the battle and set aim for Thillois. The 74th Infantry Regiment, positioned on the East, and the 39th Infantry Regiment began the assault again. Thillois was liberated at 6 o'clock.

Sadly, it was a gloomy picture that could be seen the following day, the 13th of September. The corpses of German soldiers were found torn to shreds in their trenches, as well as those of 120 French soldiers. Amongst these, 40, including Sub-Lieutenant Louis Dumoutier, will be buried in the village's cemetery. Louis Dumoutier was found dead next to the village's first house. The day before, he was commanding the 10th company of the 39th Infantry Regiment. Several other members of the 39th and 74th Infantry Regiments are laid to rest in Champigny's cemetery and in the military cemetery of Cormicy.

The first bombs were dropped on Reims and its cathedral on the 4th September. Shortly after, the German troops will enter the city.

By the 13th September, the French army won back the city. However, the German troops took refuge in the immediate countryside surrounding Reims and bombings resumed on the 14th.

On the 19th September 1914, 25 bombs hit the cathedral.

In total, 350 bombs had been dropped on the cathedral. They destroyed the nave's vaults and damaged 70 statues, including "L'Ange au sourire".

The 5th of October 1914, right here, above the Vesle, an Aviatik B2 plane was downed by a Voisin biplane. The Aviatik was flown by 23-year-old Wilhelm Schlichting and his 31-year-old observer, the Oberlieutenant Fritz von Zangen. The biplane was piloted by Sergeant Joseph Frantz and Caporal Louis Quénault. This event is now considered History's first aerial battle.

The miracle of La Marne

By September 1914, the soldiers were exhausted. The battles at the borders on the 21st and 23rd of August were already responsible for 150,000 casualties. The French were beaten at Charleroi in

Belgium and since then, were continually pushed back while trying to contain the Germans. On the 29th of August, after the victory at the battle at Guise, they were forced back, again, beyond la Marne.

From the 6th September onwards, General Joffre, who's operating, orders a counterattack. This battle, which was called "the Battle of the Marne" lasted 3 days. The battle field is spread out over 200km, from l'Ourcq to Verdun and beyond. Nearly all French available armies are involved.

The Germans wanted to circle the French armies in a large military movement. General Joffre's idea was to attack them on the side in order to stop this turning movement. 100,000 men were transported by train from Lorraine to the west of the Ourcq. Paris' garrison was brought by the famous Parisian taxis.

The Germans were surprised; they were not expecting a counterattack. According to them, the armies on the west of the Ourcq were negligible. Two battles occurred - one around the Ourcq and the second in Saint-Gond' swamps. In the middle, the British and the Vth French Army, commanded by Franchet d'Esperey went through, thanks to a breach between the German armies. Even the violent battles of Escardes, Courgivaux or Montmirail didn't stop them. To their astonishment, they didn't find anything in front of them and they were able to carry on.

This created terror among the general staff, who were far behind, in Luxembourg! It was decided to withdraw 100km behind, in Aisne, and to hold the hills of Brimont and Spigneul.

According to an account by Pierre Miquel

"From the 23rd August 1914 onwards, more newspapers, loads of Belgium emigrants, coming from Ardennes, are crossing with cars packed with clothes, chickens, veils, rabbits, horses, cows, etc.

Consternation is spread along, as they tell about the atrocities the Germans are committing. The prefecture ordered the requisition of sheets and mattresses, so that they can be disposed in the town hall and in Merfy Castle, in case wounded people would be brought here.

Since the 1st September, people are more and more worried as the enemy's troops are coming forward. Several families are leaving the region...."

Extracts from Abbot Godin's diary