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## **Marlborough's Siege Warfare**

Mitchell McNaylor

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Marlborough's Siege Warfare

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of the History Upper Division Honors Program

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## Introduction

This thesis proposes to deal exclusively with fortress warfare in the Low Countries, 1702-11, as conducted by John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, dealing primarily with the siege of Lille, tangentially with other sieges. After arguing for the importance of siege warfare in Flanders in the War of Spanish Succession, the thesis will describe siege operations in as much detail as possible. During the first decade of the eighteenth century, siege warfare formed the primary aspect of the European military experience. The siege of Lille in the autumn of 1708 best serves as a model for sieges of this period. In its complexity it does stand apart from the many brisk sieges of the war, yet that complexity allows it to embrace most of the problems faced by an attacking force. Lille serves as a microcosm for this sort of warfare. From there the thesis shall assess the role both of certain aspects of siege operations and of fortress warfare in the larger framework of the War of Spanish Succession. In examining early eighteenth century siege warfare it will be necessary to maintain a focus on operations, with critical asides to deal with relevant selected topics as they arise within the framework of a narrative of the siege of Lille.

For too long historians have neglected the study of the sieges of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough. While the Twentieth century has seen a general revaluation of Marlborough's career, a turning away from the visceral hatred of Macaulay, in favor of a more positive and, in some cases, a more objective

approach, historians have severely neglected poliorcetics, the art and science of siege warfare, in favor of the study of battles and politics.

While traditional histories of the War of Spanish Succession highlight Marlborough as battlefield commander and the role of the battles of Blenheim and Ramillies, the bulk of his military activities consisted of siegecraft. Warfare 1688-1714, taken on its own terms, presents a period where sieges provided the predominant military activity, both in terms of time involved and in results achieved. Belligerents fought sixty nine sieges during the Nine Years' War and the War of Spanish Succession.<sup>1</sup> Yet many English historians writing about this period neglect or ignore siege warfare in favor of a closer look at battles. Regardless of how bored contemporaries, let alone modern historians are by siege warfare, it remains of the essence in assessing the military activities of the age. Marlborough's four battlefield victories receive a disproportionate share of attention in English historiography when compared with his thirty successful sieges. This failure to address a significant aspect of the early eighteenth century military experience leaves a substantial gap in the historical record.

Existing primary documents offer a great deal for the historian of siege warfare in the War of Spanish Succession. English language sources fall into two categories: Marlborough's

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<sup>1</sup>John A. Lynn, "The *trace italienne* and the Growth of Armies: The French Case," Journal of Military History, vol. 55, no. 3, (July 1991): 326-7.

own correspondence and the sparse writings of his soldiers. The Duke's correspondence is published in three large collections. The first, compiled by George Murray, presents letters written by Marlborough in both English and French to his officers and to government officials. Unlike later editors, Murray corrected the Duke's irregular spelling and punctuation. Two later collections, those of B. Van 'T Hoff and Henry Snyder, present Marlborough's correspondence with Anthonie Heinsius, the Dutch Grand Pensionary and Sidney Godolphin, the Duke's longtime friend and ally at the English Treasury. The latter collection makes available many letters in the archives at Blenheim Palace previously unavailable to historians not directly connected to the Churchill family. As the whole corpus of Marlborough's correspondence proves difficult to sort out, Snyder's editorial includes setting the letters in a proper political and military context. William Coxe's biography, published in the 1840s also contains many of the Duke's letters, including translations of many originally written in French.

The lack of accounts written from the ranks and by serving officers plague the historian. John Millner's journal, originally published in 1733 and often cited by British historians as a source for numbers in Marlborough's army, proves difficult to find in America. Despite chronological confusions, notably the placement of the battle of Oudenarde in 1707, Matthew Bishop's account of his service in the British army preserves a number of interesting descriptions of daily life during a siege and opens a window into that aspect of the early modern military experience.

Likewise the journal of John Blackader offers a detailed account of his participation in an attack on the ouworks at Lille, despite C. T. Atkinson's sneer that Blackader was, "more concerned with the state of his soul than with the doings of the army in general".<sup>2</sup>

David Chandler edited the works of the Comte de Merode-Westerloo and Captain Robert Parker, publishing them in a single volume. This greatly increased the availability of these sources. Also, his 1984 Society for Army Historical Research special publication of a more complete version of Private John Deane's journal offers an important contribution. Previously only the 1708 portion of the journal had been published; Chandler, after discovering other parts of the work, published a more complete edition. This work provides a rare glimpse into the life of the private soldier during the war. This is the only allied narrative recently reprinted to come from so low a point in the ranks. Chandler appended to both works a short essay on siege warfare in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century that differs little from the similar section he printed in the New Cambridge Modern history in 1968.

Secondary sources prove equally elusive in their treatments of siege warfare. Sir John Fortescue, in his History of the British Army, displayed narrow and dismissive views of the siege of Lille, claiming, "a detailed account even of so famous a siege

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<sup>2</sup>C. T. Atkinson, Marlborough and the Rise of the British Army (London: Putnam's, 1921), x.

would be wearisome...but there are a few salient features which cannot be omitted".<sup>3</sup> At least describing Lille, the largest military operation in northwest Europe since William III's attack on Namur thirteen years earlier, Fortescue nodded briefly toward operations. When describing Marlborough's final campaign, Fortescue blithely ignores the siege of Bouchain, the siege regarded by many as Marlborough's masterpiece.

Other writers would perpetuate the neglect of poliorcetics. In an immense paean to his illustrious ancestor, written in the 1930s, Winston Churchill wrote by far the most extensive treatment of Marlborough's life. One could hardly fault Churchill for a lack of interest in military matters, yet like many English historians, he consistently focused on battles, a perennial difficulty that raises a number of problems addressed below. In the first volume of his biography of Marlborough, Churchill condescendingly commented on the role of siege warfare in the Duke's campaigns, stating, "it will be well for the reader to accustom himself at this point to the ritual and routine of siege operations in this period; for unhappily these pages must speak of many".<sup>4</sup> Sieges do receive attention, often far more than other writers are willing to give that topic, yet part of this stems merely from the overall size of the work which extends to six large volumes. Churchill tells more about siege warfare simply

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<sup>3</sup> J. W. Fortescue, A History of the British Army, vol. 1, (London, MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1899), 504.

<sup>4</sup> Winston Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 1, (New York, Scribner's, 1933-37), 90-1.



from the sheer volume of his work, rather than from any particular appreciation of siege operations, or of any realization of its role in the military experience of the Spanish Succession War. The six months of operations receive nothing comparable to the attention lavished on the events on a single day at Blenheim in 1704.

A contemporary of Churchill, G. M. Trevelyan wrote a narrative of English history in the reign of the last Stuart monarch that directs ample attention to the War of Spanish Succession. Trevelyan's purpose in writing England Under Queen Anne stems from a need to advance the Whig view of history first presented by his ancestor, Lord Macaulay. In Trevelyan's work the details of siege warfare fall victim to the greater needs of that interpretation. Following sieges has no special value, save to advance the narrative and display continued British success at arms. Arguably Trevelyan's most significant contribution to the study of fortress warfare comes, not from his own writing, but from his successful attempts to publish Roderick Geickie's The Dutch Barrier.

Winston Churchill and G. M. Trevelyan both wrote partially out of family interests and concerned themselves with broad interpretive history. Also, both works, written over sixty years ago, one by a highly partisan author, present standard, although not definitive works.

Writing with a military and academic background, C. T. Atkinson wrote a number of articles and a book, Marlborough and the Rise of the British Army, on Marlborough's career as a general. His most perceptive comments on siege warfare appear in his 1934 article "Marlborough's Sieges". Atkinson mentions the problems of exploiting success on the battlefield in a theater of war as heavily fortified as the Low Countries and the frequent mention of sieges in primary sources<sup>5</sup>. Unfortunately after four pages of argument, the article shifts focus to deal with the question of battle honors for British regiments dating back to the eighteenth century. Atkinson fails to address the role these and other Allied regiments played in each siege, he fails to describe the military experience of besieging troops and fails to explain Marlborough's continued success as a practitioner of fortress warfare. In the grand tradition of an earlier historian of the British army, Sir John Fortescue, Atkinson omits citations of his sources, in one case referring to a lieutenant in the Scots Fusiliers writing from Lille, without mentioning either the identity of the lieutenant or the source of the quotation.<sup>6</sup> While Atkinson offers stimulating comments on siege warfare, his brevity and his poor documentation hinder the argument, a line of thought not pursued in his writings or taken up by later authors.

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<sup>5</sup>C. T. Atkinson, "Marlborough's Sieges," Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, 13, no. 52 (1934): 195-99.

<sup>6</sup>Atkinson, "Marlborough's Sieges," 198.

David Chandler, for thirty years a lecturer at the Royal Military College at Sandhurst, and a pupil of Atkinson, greatly contributed to the study of the Duke with his works The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough and Marlborough as Military Commander. The former illuminates the mechanics of eighteenth century warfare, examining the role of cavalry, infantry and artillery as well as military engineering. The organization of Marlborough as Military Commander takes a chronological approach to the campaigns, resembling that of Atkinson's book, although Chandler surveys a more varied range of sources and provides a more current view of the subject.

John Childs, currently Lecturer at the University of Leeds and working on a biography of Marlborough, displays interests similar to Chandler, writing works that address the British army of William III on both operational and structural levels. His work The Nine Years War and the British Army, while providing the first modern account of the campaigns of that war in the Low Countries, returns to the oldest form of strict campaign narrative, eschewing any sort of critical approach, in favor of a relentless tide of facts and events, without pause for analysis or reflection. The work neglects important events in Ireland that greatly influenced the course of the war, such as the Battle of the Boyne and the two sieges of Limerick and also actions of interest to the student of Marlborough, the sieges of Cork and Kinsale in the autumn of 1690. When treating sieges, Childs does little to separate them from other operational matters and, while

creating reasonable narratives of them, fails to place them in proper context or assess their significance in any way. Less shallow in the Childs corpus is his social history of the British Army during this period. The British Army of William III offers useful insights into that period, although to date, Childs has yet to cover the War of Spanish Succession.

Only Christopher Duffy has specifically addressed the problem of siege warfare. His three books on siege warfare provide a masterful introduction to the subject and are by far the best general works on the subject. The second volume of Siege Warfare specifically addresses the achievement of the French engineer Vauban, responsible for designing and building many of the bastioned fortifications in northwest France, and also treats the Spanish Succession War.

A more recent author unfortunately continues the trend of British historians to focus on great battles. While discussing Marlborough's wars in his recent work European Warfare, 1660-1815, Jeremy Black fails to discuss Marlborough's role as a practitioner of siege warfare, preferring again, to focus on the Duke's battles and briefly on English finance. Unfortunately, even in his limited discussion of siege warfare, Black fails to extricate himself from the "Flanders mud" of historiography, retaining a focus exclusively defensive and therefore French.

Two more interpretations of the Spanish Succession War and of the role of siege warfare in that conflict are imminent. John Lynn's *The Giant of the Grand Siecle: The French Army, 1610-1715*

awaits publication. Also, the British historian John Childs is currently at work on a new biography of Marlborough.

Observations by John Keegan regarding the place of battle in military historiography are relevant here, especially the tendency of writers to view war in terms of decisive battles<sup>7</sup>. Keegan emphasizes the tendency, particularly of English historians in the manner of Edward Creasy and Sir Charles Oman to treat warfare exclusively in terms of decisive battle. It is clear from an examination of the historiography of Marlborough's Wars that this trend has continued into the twentieth century. The same historical distortion that focuses so much work on great battles also leads to the neglect of siege warfare. This same tendency to look at battles as the main decisive events in warfare, dynamic and vital on the pages of history, also tends to view siege warfare as dull and unworthy of much attention. This distortion of military history has led to an essential misrepresentation of eighteenth century warfare.

Geoffrey Parker, writing about the effects of bastioned fortification during the Eighty Years War in the Netherlands commented,

If their enemies happened to live in towns defended by bastions, as the Dutch did, the towns had to be taken; the improvements in military architecture after 1520 made the

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<sup>7</sup>John Keegan, The Face of Battle (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 55-61.

capture of such towns a lengthy business...there was no way of effecting a quick capture; fighting a battle was often irrelevant.<sup>9</sup>

Parker's comments are equally relevant to Marlborough's wars. Bastioned fortifications still dominated the Low Countries; further developments in fortifications consisted only in refinements of the *trace italienne*. The most significant developments came in the advances of Vauban in attacking fortifications. Rather than a slow victory by blockade, bombardment and storm became viable options. It is important to remember though, that European siege warfare vacillated between periods of offensive and defensive ascendancies. As in the years before the advent of the *trace italienne*, the Spanish Succession War presents an era in which besieging forces enjoyed a degree of superiority over their opponents.

Significantly Parker's statement might be modified to describe the inconsequence of battle in *heavily fortified areas*. The Boyne and Blenheim, arguably the two most decisive battles between 1688-1714 (if the concept of decisive battles still retains any validity, another arguable point) or two battles that produced most decisive results, took place in areas not endowed with an overwhelming number of *trace italienne* fortifications. Sieges proved necessary to secure the results of any battle in a heavily fortified area, as exhibited by Ramillies and Oudenarde. In the first case, the Spanish Netherlands were only brought

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<sup>9</sup>Geoffrey Parker, The Army of Flanders and the Spanish Road (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 20.

under Allied control by a series of four sieges; in the latter case the operations at Lille proved far more significant than those on the battlefield. The French gambled on fixed Vauban fortifications to minimize the effects of battle on their northwest frontier. That gamble paid off; even so skilled a practitioner of the military arts as the Duke of Marlborough, consistently successful in battles and sieges, failed to impose a military settlement on France.

The time has come for a concerted investigation of siege warfare during the period 1688-1714. A examination of how sieges progressed from investment to reduction and of the military experience of siege warfare in the Low Countries during the War of Spanish Succession are necessary to redress a severe historical imbalance. The breadth and complexity of the operations before Lille in 1708 make it an excellent example for a further investigation of siege warfare. More significantly, a further examination of Marlborough's conduct of sieges will contribute to a more accurate view of the realities of early eighteenth century warfare.

Chapter 1 - The Military  
and Political Context

A conflict over the succession to the Spanish throne sparked the war, when in February 1701, the French Duke of Anjou, grandson of Louis XIV, ascended to the Spanish throne, threatening a Franco-Spanish hegemony on the Continent. The Habsburg Emperor Leopold I preferred his own second son, the Archduke Charles, as successor to the throne of Spain. At this time Louis ordered his armies forward and, in violation of the Peace of Ryswick, seized the barrier fortresses in the Spanish Netherlands. These fortresses, constructed in the seventeenth century to guard the French border, were at that time manned by Dutch garrisons from the adjacent United Provinces. In September, the United Provinces joined with England and the Habsburg Empire to form a Grand Alliance against France.<sup>9</sup> England, however, possessed other reasons for joining a war against France; her long rivalry with that nation had seen an outburst the decade before in the Nine Year's War. Additionally, the Stuart Pretender to the throne lurked in France, ready to return to England and seize power if the chance arose.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Corelli Barnett, Marlborough (London: Eyre Methuen, 1974), 17-18.

<sup>10</sup>For more on the causes of the War of Spanish Succession, see England Under Queen Anne, vol. 1 and Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 3.



Hostilities opened in 1702 with John Churchill, first Duke of Marlborough, acting as Captain-General of the Allied forces in Flanders. Six years of war passed before the Allies reached Lille; in that time Marlborough won his place as one of the great Captains of history with his victories at Blenheim and Ramillies.

Marlborough wintered in England, visiting his family and dealing with political problems in London. At three in the morning, 29 March/9 April 1708, he sailed for the Netherlands. He arrived at the Hague two days later. Between his arrival on the continent and the opening of the campaign in early July, Marlborough sought to prepare his army for battle. Secondary sources avoid descriptions of the methods Marlborough used to train his army. In 1968 R. E. Scouller wrote, "no one, as far as I am aware, has written in depth of John Churchill as a trainer, but the skill at arms and handy maneuverability developed in the army of a nation whose forces had been described in only the previous reign as ill-conducted, sickly, listless, undisciplined and disorderly surely call for study".<sup>11</sup> That gap in the study of the Allied army remains. An examination of the tactics employed by Marlborough, however, shows what the troops learned, if not exactly how the information was taught.

The ghost of Gustavus Adolphus hung heavily over the Marlborough's battlefields. The Swedish monarch's fertile mind provided the source for many of the important elements of

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<sup>11</sup>R. E. Scouller, "Marlborough's Administration in the Field, Part I," The Army Quarterly and Defense Journal, 95, no. 2, (January 1968): 197.

Marlborough's tactics: platoon firing, light artillery attached to infantry regiments, and heavy shock cavalry attack. Besides these innovations, J. F. C. Fuller wrote that, "his main contribution to his art was that he was the first general during the modern age who realized that mobility is founded upon discipline, and discipline upon efficient administration and leadership".<sup>12</sup> His methods profoundly influenced Marlborough, who used them to forge the British army into a superb instrument of military power.

Advances in weaponry and in infantry tactics contributed to Marlborough's success in the War of Spanish Succession. The introduction of the flintlock musket and the socket bayonet, significant advances in the implements of warfare, took place in the second half of the seventeenth century. The flintlock musket replaced the matchlock, the predominant firearm of the previous century; it offered a better rate of fire and proved far less cumbersome than the matchlock. The socket bayonet allowed infantry to continue firing with fixed bayonets, a significant advance, for previous bayonets fit as a plug in the end of the musket. Yet, as a pole arm, the bayonet compared unfavorably with the pike, for it lacked the pike's length and capacity to inflict terrible wounds.

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<sup>12</sup>J. F. C. Fuller, The Decisive Battles of the Western World, vol. 2, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1955), 52.

On the continent, Louis XIV's minister Louvois saw to the introduction of the flintlock and the socket bayonet into the French army.<sup>13</sup> Yet while the French adopted the new weaponry, their adversaries across the Channel fully developed the potential of the flintlock and the socket bayonet. Adjusting to new technological developments, the English army developed new tactics as well, designed to best integrate massed firepower of the musket and the shock of a bayonet charge.

Battalions firing by platoon proved the most effective agent for delivering continual fire along the battle line, although it lacked the shock value of well directed volley fire. Regiments, social and organizational units, formed the backbone of the English army, each usually consisting of one battalion, a battlefield unit.<sup>14</sup> The platoon firing system broke the approximately 780 man English battalion, three ranks deep, down into four units, each subdivided into four platoons. In addition to the sixteen platoon front, an additional pair of grenadier platoons accompanied the battalion into battle, one deploying on each flank. During the battle platoons fired according to a previously established order, designed to maintain a constant fire along the line. David Chandler, while thoroughly explicating

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<sup>13</sup>Fuller, Decisive Battles, 118.

<sup>14</sup>David Chandler, The Art of Warfare In the Age of Marlborough (London: Batsford Limited, 1976), 97. The best first hand description of platoon firing in action comes in Robert Parker's Journal during his description of the battle of Malplaquet, pages 88-9 in the 1968 edition.

this system in his work The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough, comments,

there were many variations of platoon firing, and it is clear that the system developed over a considerable number of years rather than appeared all at once. Marlborough and his generals thought particularly highly of it, and actively encouraged its widespread adoption throughout their infantry in place of all other firing methods.<sup>15</sup>

Such tactics, vigorously applied by the talent of Marlborough, proved invaluable during the War of Spanish Succession.

Yet while Marlborough's infantry tactics looked ahead to new military hardware, his cavalry tactics reached back half a century to Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army. Rather than moving in range of the enemy to discharge pistols or carbines, Marlborough's cavalry advanced in an orderly line at a trot, with sabers drawn. Montgomery of Alamein describes, "the English cavalry as trained by Marlborough perfected the tactics of Gustavus and Cromwell, being trained to charge in a line three deep, advancing at a 'full trot' rather than a gallop, and using only the sword".<sup>16</sup> By slowing the cavalry down Marlborough maintained a continuous front and ensured that his charge hit the enemy at the same time all along the line; charges delivered in this manner broke the French army in the final assaults at Blenheim and Ramillies.

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<sup>15</sup>Chandler, Art of Warfare, 117.

<sup>16</sup>Montgomery of Alamein, A History of Warfare, (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1968), 298.

Marlborough's cavalry tactics grew out of a reaction against tactics that prevailed upon the Continent. During this period the French sought to use firepower, rather than shock, to win a cavalry action; riding forward, discharging their weapons and either charging or retreating to reload. The Captain-General of the Allied armies emphasized training and good equipment, seeking to deliver a heavy charge. To accomplish this he reissued the cuirass to his heavy cavalry troops and took away most of their ammunition.<sup>17</sup> Churchill commented on this trend, stating that Marlborough, "did not indeed, discard the pistol utterly, but he allowed his cavalry *three pistol rounds per man for the whole campaign*, the idea being that the pistol was the weapon for individual emergency or foraging duty".<sup>18</sup> *Armes blanches*, rather than firepower, predominated in the army of Marlborough. Consistent victory against the French cavalry on the battlefield illustrates the superiority of Marlborough's tactics and of his army as a fighting force.

If training methods received little attention in works on the War of Spanish Succession, the conditions of the soldier's everyday life proves equally elusive. Camp life comes to the historian rarely; diarists such as Captain Robert Parker, of the Royal Irish Regiment, rarely give as much information as possible on life in the army or on the combat itself. Parker spends much

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<sup>17</sup>Chandler, Art of Warfare, 53-5.

<sup>18</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 3, 110.

time discussing topics related to grand strategy or politics, events beyond the scope of a Captain, an unfortunate fact, since he spent much of 1708-09 in Ireland as a tactical instructor.

Although chroniclers paid scant attention to the men of the ranks, Marlborough proved more attentive. During the month of June he inspected the entire Allied army, finding the fighting force in excellent condition for the coming campaign.<sup>19</sup> The Duke received a nickname similar to that of Napoleon; his troops referred to him as "Corporal John". Marlborough enjoyed success with greater regularity over a longer time than either of these two later leaders, in part due to the care he gave his army. No British or Allied army under Marlborough's care ever suffered the nightmare Napoleon and Hitler both found in Russia; a magnificent early eighteenth century army did meet utter destruction in the wasteland of Russia, but in 1708 Poltava still lay some distance in the future.

Perhaps Marlborough lavished more attention on his troops in June 1708 than on the enemy, for in early July a series of events began that disrupted the Allied war plans for 1708. On 23 June/4 July the French, not waiting for Marlborough to move, launched their own attack, an attempt to regain Ghent and Bruges and sever Marlborough's communications with England. At three in the morning of the next day Bruges surrendered to a light French force. The Belgian citizens hated Allied occupation and they

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<sup>19</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 385.

welcomed the French.<sup>20</sup> Ghent capitulated two days later. The loss of this city greatly threatened Marlborough, for it dominated all the waterways of Flanders, highways vital for the transportation of supplies and siege artillery into Flanders.

Remarking on the capture of Ghent and Bruges the bitter and often unreasonable critic of Marlborough, the Comte de Merode-Westerloo, a Belgian officer who served both the French and the Allies at various times in the war, noted that, "this little contretemps again caused the Duke of Marlborough to begin marching with a vengeance".<sup>21</sup> Indeed in a few days Marlborough's army moved from Assche, where it had covered Brussels, to Lessines, on the banks of the Dender. The stress of the campaign and the loss of Ghent and Bruges took a toll on Marlborough. He collapsed on the evening of 26 June/7 July. Two days later, he wrote a brief letter to Godolphin describing his condition, "the treachery of Gand, continual marching and some letters I have received from England, has so vexed me, that I was yesterday in so great a fever that the doctor would have persuaded me to have gone to Bruxelles, but I thank God I am now better".<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 388.

<sup>21</sup>David Chandler, ed., Robert Parker and the Comte de Merode-Westerloo: The Marlborough Wars (Hamden: Archon Books, 1968), 202.

<sup>22</sup>Marlborough to Godolphin, Assche, 28 June/9 July 1708, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, ed. Henry L. Snyder, vol. 2, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 1022.

Marlborough's true state of health remains unclear, although this and later statements hint that he felt the high blood pressure that would lead to his fatal stroke years later.

Five days after the capture of Bruges the Allied and French armies lay far apart; the French army lay at Gavre on the Scheldt, six miles north of Oudenarde and counted on their ability to deny that crossing to Marlborough, whose army occupied a position fifteen miles away from Oudenarde at Lessines. Prince Eugene of Savoy commanded a large Allied force marching to the Duke's aid. Unfortunately, his cavalry was no nearer than Brussels, while the main body of his infantry remained at Maastricht.<sup>23</sup> While Prince Eugene and his cavalry eventually reached Marlborough's army, the infantry never arrived at Oudenarde, rather it confronted a French force to the south under the Duke of Berwick. Estimates show that the Allied force consisted of about 80,000 men, in 85 battalions and 150 cavalry squadrons; the French fielded about 85,000 soldiers in 90 battalions and 170 cavalry squadrons.<sup>24</sup> The Allies lay divided and confronted by a superior force.

Marlborough won a major victory on 30 June/11 July 1708 at Oudenarde in the Spanish Netherlands. Disorganized in contrast with his earlier victories, the battle nevertheless proved a success. As a result of the battle he gained the initiative

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<sup>23</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 403.

<sup>24</sup>David Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander (New York: Scribner's, 1973), 216.



against the French and stood in good position to use his army to threaten the Kingdom of Louis XIV, either by forcing another battle and destroying the French armies in the field, attempting to invade France and march on Paris, or by advancing through the line of border fortresses separating France from the Spanish Netherlands.

At this time the Duke proposed his most ambitious stratagem for the defeat of France, a cross Channel invasion aimed at outflanking the line of barrier fortresses. The plan counted on seizing the French coastal town of Abbeville by amphibious assault and using it as a marshalling point for troops brought overland from Holland and soldiers ferried from the Isle of Wight. The Royal Navy would maintain the lines of supply. From Abbeville Marlborough, leading an Allied army as nationally diverse as any United Nations force, planned to descend on Paris, either capturing that city or forcing the main French army into battle on unfavorable grounds.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately for Marlborough, in 1708, the French commanders refused to offer battle and Prince Eugene of Savoy, the usually aggressive leader of the armies of the Holy Roman Empire, Allied to Great Britain in the war against France, balked at Marlborough's proposed amphibious invasion of France. A major siege remained as the only option, for the French avoided battle with Marlborough and the Allies refused to countenance the

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<sup>25</sup>Winston Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 453.

amphibious plan, perhaps with good reason, for strategic descents by the English army in the previous century, from Cadiz to Camaret Bay, all failed utterly. This consigned Marlborough to the same sort of warfare he endured in the previous six years of war, creeping through the fortress lines prepared by the brilliant French engineer Vauban in the previous century. In one of his many articles Professor C. T. Atkinson described the role Vauban played in the War of Spanish Succession,

Vauban indeed might claim to have got the better of Marlborough. He had died four years before Marlborough fell from power, but the fortress barrier he had built was a most potent legacy. Disposed in depth on each of the rivers which served as lines of approach from the Netherlands into France, these fortresses could not be disregarded...so limited an area as Flanders was easily covered with a network of fortresses, restricting and hampering movements. To turn a position was impossible; it merely meant running into another fortress...before any line of approach could be opened up several fortresses had to be mastered, and their reduction was always a slow and usually a costly process.<sup>26</sup>

Siege warfare, rather than the large scale battles such as Blenheim and Ramillies for which history remembers Marlborough, formed the basis of warfare in the early eighteenth century. The appendices of David Chandler's Marlborough as Military Commander indicate that Marlborough fought only eight major engagements between 1702 and 1711, while he conducted 26 sieges. While Marlborough succeeded in siege warfare, it slowed the war and prevented his fighting French armies on the battlefield. Hence the brilliance of the abandoned plan to outflank that line over the water, bypassing the fortresses and forcing a decisive battle

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<sup>26</sup>Atkinson, "Marlborough's Sieges", 196.

in the heart of France. Marlborough saw the truth in 1708 enumerated by Clausewitz a century later, that, "*the violent resolution of the crisis*, the wish to annihilate the enemy's forces, is the first born son of war."<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately for Marlborough and the Allied war effort, this truth was inexpressible within the confines of early eighteenth century warfare.

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<sup>27</sup>Carl von Clausewitz, On War, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1984), 99.

Chapter 2 - The Sinews of War: Maintaining  
the Security of the Siege

On 2/13 August 1708 an Allied army led by the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene of Savoy invested the French city of Lille. In a letter to Sidney, Earl of Godolphin, First Lord of the Treasury and a close friend, Marlborough announced his move and detailed his dispositions,

You will know by this post that our cannon is arrived safely to Menin, and that I have reinforced Prince Eugene's army with 31 battalions and 34 squadrons. That with the detachments we have made for Flanders and Bruxelles, makes this army to consist of only 140 squadrons and 69 battalions, with which I am to observe the motions of the Duke of Burgundy's army; that of Prince Eugene army is for the siege and observation of the Duke of Berwick. Prince Eugen's consist of 90 squadrons and 53 battalions by which you will see when we join, which I believe we shall do, the whole will be 230 squadrons and 122 battalions. This day Lisle is invested; I pray God to blesse the undertaking. What I most fear is the want of powder and ball for so great an undertaking, for our inginiers feares we must take the town before we can attack the cittadel.<sup>28</sup>

Typical cavalry squadrons consisted of about 150 horsemen, battalions normally contained between 780 and 930 men.<sup>29</sup> This gave Marlborough an approximate strength of 34,500 cavalry with between 95,000 and 113,000 infantry. Because of the recent battle at Oudenarde and the rigors of the campaign, however, these estimates are probably high. An immense convoy, consisting of 80 siege guns and 20 siege mortars and 3,000 munitions wagons,

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<sup>28</sup>Marlborough to Godolphin, Helchin, 2/13 August 1708, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1058.

<sup>29</sup>Chandler, Art of Warfare, 45, 96.

supported the army.<sup>30</sup> As with all attempts to ascribe precise numbers to an army in early modern Europe, these figures represent only uncertain estimates of the size of the force at Marlborough's disposal. Conversely, wagons and cannon likely received more attention; numbers of Marlborough's available guns are likely more reliable than those of the troops. The last sentences of the letter only hint at the Duke's utter lack of confidence or enthusiasm for the opening of the siege.

The city and fortress of Lille held a vital position in France, both geographically and psychologically. Lille was a large city about 120 miles northwest of Paris, situated on the banks of the Dyle; an enormous citadel, situated on the northwest side, guarded the city. According to Winston Churchill, "after Paris Lille, the capital of French Flanders, was the greatest city of France. It was among the earliest, and certainly the most splendid fruit of Louis XIV's lifelong aggressions. For forty years it had been the monument of his military fame".<sup>31</sup> The English diarist Robert Parker commented, "the defeat at Oudenarde was a heavy stroke to the French Court: but their concern was much greater, when they found that their beloved city of Lille was invested".<sup>32</sup> Commanded by the resolute Marshal Boufflers,

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<sup>30</sup>Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 226.

<sup>31</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 483.

<sup>32</sup>Chandler, The Marlborough Wars, 76.

intricate fortifications and about 16,000 soldiers guarded a city so important to the morale of France, a city of much symbolic value.

It would be tedious to recapitulate every maneuver of the covering army and to examine the progress of every convoy attempting to supply Lille. Churchill, Chandler and others have already reconstructed these intricate maneuvers in great detail. Indeed, supplying the army and covering the siege have both received more attention from historians than operations at the siege. This chapter will seek to examine selected events related to the siege, but taking place in the surrounding countryside, rather than before the city. These events fall into two categories, those aimed at provisioning the besieging force and those attempting to prevent French armies from raising the siege. This chapter proposes to describe briefly these events and discuss their significance in relation to the siege.

Logistics at Lille presented Marlborough with a persistent and vexing problem. The normally bitter and unreasonable critic of Allied enterprises, the Comte de Merode-Westerloo, served both Louis XIV and the Allies at various times in the War of Spanish Succession. In a rare moment of insight in his memoirs, he offered some sharp criticisms of Allied logistics,

they summoned only a single middle-sized convoy from Brussels-albeit with great difficulty and risk-as if they considered Lille to be a fortress of scant significance...

they had recourse to bringing convoys from Ostend for as long as the enemy held Bruges, the supplies having first arrived at Ostend from Zeeland and Holland by sea.<sup>33</sup>

For once, the Comte de Merode-Westerloo made legitimate criticisms of his superiors; the Allies failed throughout the siege to provision their troops adequately. Yet the movement of supplies to Ostend along the Channel allowed Marlborough to bypass French forces attempting to interdict Allied supply lines between Lille and the Netherlands. This unique advantage, derived from the Royal Navy's control of the Channel and reminiscent of the amphibious invasion plan, allowed the reopening of supply lines vital to the continuation of the siege. French attempts at interdiction forced Marlborough to abandon his supply link with Brussels. Having transferred his supply depot from Brussels to Ostend, a city on the coast and much closer to Lille, Marlborough had yet to receive any supplies. Merely investing the city in August had required 16,000 horses to move a convoy of 100 siege guns, 60 mortars and 3,000 wagons the almost seventy miles from Brussels to Lille.<sup>34</sup> The barrels of each large English gun of 24-pounder calibre weighed over two and a half tons.<sup>35</sup> French armies were known to be seeking Allied convoys and successful interdiction might force the Allies to abandon the siege.

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<sup>33</sup>Chandler, The Marlborough Wars, 206.

<sup>34</sup>G. M. Trevelyan, Ramillies and the Union With Scotland, vol 2 of England Under Queen Anne (London, Longman's Green and Co., 1932), 369.

<sup>35</sup>Chandler, Art of Warfare, 180.

Normally, armies depended on supplies from large magazines in nearby towns and fortresses. While ordinance moved from well stocked, if occasionally inaccessible magazines established in important locations, provisions for the troops arrived in camp from alternative sources. In his book Supplying War Martin Van Creveld blamed the lethargic pace of eighteenth century warfare on, "the inability of even the best organized force of the day to do without local supply for practically all of its fodder and much if not most of its provision".<sup>36</sup> Indeed, Marlborough, already beset with difficulty procuring enough ammunition to continue the bombardment of Lille, met also with an inability to feed his army adequately.

Far to the north events were taking shape that would improve allied fortunes. The French Marshals Vendome and Burgundy occupied a position across Marlborough's lines of communication. The French lines ran from Bruges to Ghent, then south along the Scheldt, severing Allied communications with Brussels. This necessitated a shift of supply lines from the overland Brussels-Lille route. Instead, Marlborough brought supplies from England and the Netherlands to Ostend, a city north of Lille, located on the Channel, captured by the Allies in the aftermath of Ramillies in 1706. There the soldiers prepared a huge convoy to resupply the besiegers of Lille.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Martin Van Creveld, Supplying War, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977), 25.

<sup>37</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 502-3.



On the morning of 17/28 September Major-General John Webb, commanding a detachment from the main covering army to protect the supply column moving from Ostend to Lille, arrayed a small force of 24 Allied battalions, about 7000 soldiers, across a narrow clearing at Wynendael. They faced a much larger French force, over 23,000 men including cavalry and artillery, a force larger than the garrison of Lille, advancing perpendicular to the road on which the column marched.<sup>38</sup> Dense woods secured Webb's flanks and served to funnel the advancing French into his disciplined lines of infantry on a front only about 1000 yards wide. The size of the forces used in the British attempt to cover the convoy and the French attempt at interdiction help to illustrate the importance of this engagement, for such large forces rarely operated independently of the main armies.

At two in the afternoon the French, under the command of the Count de La Motte, deployed in a series of successive lines, six lines of infantry in front, then four lines of dragoons followed by two of cavalry. The French artillery pounded Webb's positions, but his troop's musket fire devastated the attacking French, as Allied volleys came from smaller units deployed in the woods as well as the large force at the end of the clearing. Although Webb lacked sufficient forces to score a Cannae<sup>39</sup>, his troops poured a

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<sup>38</sup>C. T. Atkinson, "Wynendael," Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, 34, no. 137 (1956): 29.

<sup>39</sup>In 216 B. C., in the Second Punic War, Hannibal defeated a Roman army at Cannae, in southeast Italy. During the battle Hannibal received a Roman attack in his center and then counterattacked, encircling the Roman army. 50,000 Romans fell in

murderous fire into the French ranks from three sides. Over four thousand Frenchmen went down as casualties; Webb's losses numbered less than a thousand.<sup>40</sup> The concentrated fire of Webb's battalions ended the French threat to the supply column.

For his superb handling of the action at Wynendael, General Webb received great acclaim from the Duke himself. In letters to Godolphin dated 20 September/1 October and 27 September/8 October Marlborough expressed his wish that Queen Anne grant Webb a promotion to Lieutenant-General. The latter letter accompanied Webb to England; in it Marlborough reminded Godolphin,

the uneasy march of this day can't hinder me from repeating againe the obligation the Queen and all the Allyes have to Major General Webb, who will give you this letter, and I beg you will present him to the Queen. And were it not for measures I am obliged, for the Queen's Service, to keep with the States Generall, I should desire her Majesty would declare him a lieutenant generall, which he dose extreamly deserve. But as it must be done with management with them, I humbly desire the Queen will assure him, that when she makes a promotion this winter, he shall be one. And I will be answerable that not only now, but at all times, he shall deserve it from her.<sup>41</sup>

Such words of praise rarely flowed from Marlborough's pen; his accolades went to Webb first for securing the passage of a convoy that allowed the siege to continue and second for scoring an impressive win in the field. In an age when, as R. E. Scouller

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Hannibal's greatest victory, one of the most famous battles of all time. Livy described the battle in Book XXII of his History of Rome.

<sup>40</sup>Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 232.

<sup>41</sup>Marlborough to Godolphin, Tournout, 27 September/8 October, Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1116.

described, "the greatest 'reward' which a commander could give his officers was promotion," such a request sent directly to the Queen shows the value Marlborough placed on Webb's conduct at Wynendael.<sup>42</sup>

Yet Webb's victory offered more than simply another chance for the display of superior English generalship and fire discipline. Two hundred fifty thousand pounds of powder reached Marlborough's lines, along with cannon balls and shells to continue the bombardment of Lille for a fortnight<sup>43</sup>. Such large quantities of powder and ammunition could not be stolen from the local population, nor could they be bought locally, hence the need for direct supply from England and Holland through Ostend. Wynendael was the most dramatic and the most significant of many small actions to keep that line to Ostend open, a conduit of supply essential for the continuation of the attack on Lille.

Feeding the troops proved an equally difficult task. By mid October Marlborough again lacked adequate supplies for the army. In a letter to Major-General Cadogan he directed, "I have given it in orders this morning that the four days' bread, now delivering out, is to serve the men for six days, and the other two be paid them in money".<sup>44</sup> Such orders suggest that the

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<sup>42</sup>R. E. Scouller, "Marlborough's Administration in the Field, Part II," The Army Quarterly and Defense Journal, 96, no. 1 (April 1968): 106.

<sup>43</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 513.

<sup>44</sup>Marlborough to Major General Cadogan, Rousselaer, 5/16 October 1708, Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough, ed. George Murray, vol. 4, (New York:

troops' extra money gave an opportunity to buy supplemental rations from any sutlers in camp and to bargain amongst themselves. Although, since the armies had occupied positions before Lille since the middle of August, the payment suggests an attempt to boost morale rather than the bread ration.

Throughout the operations against Lille in the autumn of 1708, logistics proved a perpetual problem for Marlborough. In a letter to the Earl of Galway on 30 August/10 September, Marlborough attributed these difficulties to a French strategy of attempting to force him to abandon operations against Lille through interdiction rather than battle. He claimed that,

The enemy have assembled all the strength they possibly can, and have been encamped for this week past within less than a league of us, with a resolution, as they give out, to attempt the relief of the place. We offered them battle twice, but they declined it, and their design seems now chiefly to be to distress us for want of provisions, being at a great distance from our magazines.<sup>45</sup>

Despite all of their threats the French never accepted battle with the main covering army commanded by Marlborough. The size of that force and Marlborough's reputation for battlefield success deterred French aggression against the besiegers. The covering army proved vital in the maintenance of logistical links to Holland and England.

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Greenwood Press, 1968), 265.

<sup>45</sup>Marlborough to the Earl of Galway, Fretain, 30 August/10 September, Letters of and Dispatches of John Churchill, vol. 4, 218-9.

Even after the fall of the city logistical difficulties remained. A letter to the Earl of Stair, dated 31 October/10 November, emphasizes the dual need to procure provisions and to maintain order,

having since seen a letter from your quarter complaining of the great looseness and disorderly conduct if the troops that are with you, particularly the horse, in plundering the churches, and all the whole country round about, I cannot forbear sending you this desire that all possible care may be taken to prevent it, and that some examples may be immediately made by execution, and public notice of it given to the country that they shall be indemnified, otherwise I fear we may in a great measure be disappointed of the hopes we had of a good quantity of corn from your parts.<sup>46</sup>

In attempts to feed his army from the surrounding countryside, Marlborough preferred an orderly effort, eschewing wanton plunder. The civilians living in the area still lost most of their food and some of their possessions, but Marlborough's troops appear restrained compared to the armies that had ravaged France in earlier centuries. Indeed, Marlborough himself had used more severe methods against the local population during the so called "Rape of Bavaria" in 1704. This letter shows the need to maintain rigorous discipline throughout the course of the siege; a feature necessary to the integrity of the army and for the continued acquisition of grain from the countryside. Logistics proved a substantial problem throughout the entire siege. Here the Duke's letter testifies to the continued problems even after the fall of the city.

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<sup>46</sup>Marlborough to the Earl of Stair, Rousselaer, 31 October/10 November 1708, Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, vol. 4, 298-9.

Marlborough used over half of his available force as an army of observation; he commanded it personally, seeking a more active means of defense against the French than entrenchments. The Duke mentioned this arrangement in his letter of 4/15 August to Major-General Murray, "you will have heard that the Prince of Savoy has invested Lille. He will lose no time in making his lines of circumvallation and going on with the siege...I am come hither to be nearer at hand to observe their [the enemy's] motion".<sup>47</sup> This division of command maintaining one force as a covering army, another as an investing army was not an arrangement unique to Lille; as far back as the 1702 campaign Marlborough had employed a similar arrangement. According to C. T. Atkinson, this arrangement best suited the talents of Marlborough and Eugene,

it is more than a mere coincidence that when Marlborough and Eugene undertook a siege the division of functions was nearly always the same. To the Prince was assigned the actual siege, to Marlborough the task of covering it. Eugene's dash and energy found plenty of outlets in the breach at Lille; Marlborough's cool-headed adaptation of means to ends, his resourcefulness his almost uncanny capacity for divining his enemy's next move and consequently for parrying it before it could be delivered found equal scope in the work of a covering army.<sup>48</sup>

This force, in most accounts, receives far more attention by historians. When not spent describing the attempts to supply the

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<sup>47</sup>Marlborough to Major General Murray, Helchin, 4/15 August 1708, The Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, vol. 4, 168.

<sup>48</sup>Atkinson, Marlborough and the Rise of the British Army, 506.

Allied army or to praise the glory of Wynendael, historians turn to the maneuvers of the covering army, rather than the attack on the city itself.

Of all the actions by the covering army, the forcing of the Scheldt in November stands as both the most dramatic and significant. Throughout the final weeks of the siege, French armies active in the field, rather than operations at Lille, occupied Marlborough's attention. Vendome and the French ceased to menace Ostend and pushed further west. While Vendome held the line on the Scheldt, a force led by the Elector of Bavaria marched west, intent on capturing Brussels, in an effort to force Marlborough to raise the siege. Such events provide an excellent example of the chess board movements of armies in the early eighteenth century, used to threaten an enemy's rear and force battle on uneven terms. Indeed, this kind of war of maneuver had continued in various forms since the early days of the siege, but took on a new intensity after the capitulation of the city, as the besieging army threatened to capture the citadel.

The following lines left Marlborough's headquarters at Oudenarde for Godolphin 17/28 November: "yesterday morning we forced the Scheldt, and beat the troupes that were posted about this town. Prince Eugene is gone back this morning for Lisle, and I am marching for the relief of Bruxelles".<sup>49</sup> During 15/26 November Marlborough forced the river at three points, Gavre,

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<sup>49</sup>Marlborough to Godolphin, Oudenarde, 17/28 November 1708, Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1151.

Oudenarde and Kerkhoff while Prince Eugene, taking most of the besieging force into the field crossed at Hauterive.<sup>50</sup>

Many of the French slept as the Allied forces advanced, while those conscious withdrew and refused to offer battle. A formidable line of defenses fell without contest; upon hearing of this the Elector hastily retreated from his positions before Brussels.<sup>51</sup> This manoeuvre recalled the passage of the lines of Brabant in 1705 and prefigured the passing of the *Ne Plus Ultra* line in 1711. Lines of quickly prepared field fortifications provided a potentially lethal obstacle to the attacker; in 1709 Marlborough fared poorly before such lines at the battle of Malplaquet. All of this retains greater significance because, by this time, the French defense of Lille depended upon outside relief. Once Marlborough destroyed the hope of French aid to the beleaguered citadel, that force despaired of hope and surrendered.

The action against the Scheldt line, beginning 16/27 November, saw the first time Marlborough moved his headquarters in over a month; since early October he had remained at a camp in Rousselaer, about 20 miles north of Lille. Prior to his long stay in Rousselaer Marlborough had moved his headquarters about every week. By examining the headings of the letters in Sir George Murray's collection of Marlborough's dispatches one can roughly

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<sup>50</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 525-6.

<sup>51</sup>Atkinson, Marlborough and the Rise of the British Army, 363.



reconstruct the Duke's movements throughout the siege. Yet his daily routine and activities remain elusive. In his letters Marlborough issues orders, comments on the progress of the siege and expresses a variety of other thoughts, but largely fails to describe his own activities. The Duke and his staff left no memoirs, leaving his daily life during the siege obscure for the future student.<sup>52</sup> Like siege warfare, which itself deserves further attention from historians, Marlborough's staff and command organization merits further investigation by historians too long fascinated by Wynendael and the maneuvers of the covering army.

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<sup>52</sup>Pages 163-355 of The Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill deal with the siege of Lille, providing letters and dispatches from 2/13 August to 30 November/10 December, the headings of these documents provide indications of Marlborough's movements throughout the period.

## Chapter 3 - The Reduction of Lille

Of all the facets of the 1708 campaign, siege operations have received the least attention from historians; a close analysis of operations at Lille, as of operations against other fortresses attacked during the War of Spanish Succession remains a topic largely avoided by historians. This chapter will examine the means by which the Allies sought to capture the outworks, then the citadel of Lille.

Since the Allies attacked the northern defenses of Lille, those fortifications deserve description in greater detail. John Wright, interpreting a series of maps in his work The Development of the Bastioned System of Fortifications, provides the most complete description of the defenses at Lille. At the northwest corner of the defenses stood the citadel of Lille. From there, the curtain wall ran northeast for about 600 yards where a large hornwork projected perpendicular from the main defenses. From the eastern flank of the hornwork the lines turned gently to the southeast for about another 1000 yards, before another hornworks jutted forth from the main defenses. Hornworks consisted of two long, parallel branches jutting out into the country joined by a curtain wall and supported by other works in the rear. Before the main curtain wall on the northwest defenses, Vauban had positioned a work called the *tenaille*. This low work, positioned very close to the curtain wall, centered between the bastions on

the northwest side of the city, allowed flat trajectory infantry fire to sweep the outworks and helped to secure bridges across the large ditch and to guard the gates.<sup>53</sup>

Centered between the two hornworks and in front of the tenaille sat the tenaillon, a work placed in the middle of the moat to guard the Gate d'Eau, consisting of a ravelin supported by two supporting face covers. These latter works, separated from the ravelin by a wide ditch, covered the front of the ravelin and themselves received covering fire from the main works in the rear.<sup>54</sup> The saliency of the tenaillon allowed its guns to flank any force approaching or entrenched upon the counterscarp.<sup>55</sup> Also, the work guarded the waters of the Dyle that flowed from the fortress at this point. That stream provided a further obstacle to attackers by flowing through the ditch and creating a large, wet moat.<sup>56</sup> Separate ravelins placed in the ditch between the hornworks and the tenaillon offered further support for the main walls.

The elaborate defenses described above give the greatest testament to the value the French placed on Lille. Vauban's defenses allowed for an active defense; in the coming months

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<sup>53</sup>J. B. Wright, The Development of the Bastioned System of Permanent Fortifications, 1500-1800, (Washington, D. C., 1946), 132.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., 133.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>56</sup>Frank Taylor, The Wars of Marlborough, vol. 2, (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1921), 175.

Allies attempts to take the city were frequently harried by sorties from the garrison. Here again, Churchill proves an informative source on Lille, writing of the city's defenses,

all the art of Vauban, unhurried by time, unstinted in expense, had been devoted to the fortifications. Broad double moats filled with water, massive masonry of covered ways and galleries, surmounted by enormous earthworks armed with heavy cannon, and an intricate system of outer defenses made the town itself as strong as a citadel. But, besides the fortifications of the town, a large and wholly independent pentagon-shaped fortress afforded the garrison the means of standing what was virtually a second siege.<sup>57</sup>

All of these defenses extracted a high toll in troops and time as the Allies sought to capture Lille, but one they felt they had no choice but to pay. Heavily fortified and strongly garrisoned, Lille presented a formidable military obstacle to a force seeking to invade France.

Wright also details further measures taken by Marshal Boufflers to support the defenses. The bastions on the northern defenses were retrenched. In the citadel, the southern bastion received a cavalier, or raised interior battery, to further augment defense and the eastern bastion was retrenched.<sup>58</sup>

According to conventional siege tactics, the Allies dug lines of contravallation around Lille to isolate the city and form a basis for further operations against the city. These sat inside the lines of circumvallation, constructed to shelter their

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<sup>57</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 483.

<sup>58</sup>Wright, Development of the Bastioned System, 135.

own lines against a relief force.<sup>59</sup> A writer for the *Dublin Gazette* wrote in late August, "hitherto our time has been spent in viewing and considering the ground round Lille...in making lines of circumvallation and contravallation and in erecting several redoubts".<sup>60</sup> Such an arrangement was, however, hardly new; readers familiar with the writings of Julius Caesar will recognize this system as similar to that employed at the siege of Alsesia in 52 B. C.<sup>61</sup> John Lynn in his article "The *trace italienne* and the Growth of Armies: the French Case" gives the length of the contravallation lines at Lille as over twenty miles, with 35,000 troops being employed directly in the siege against 16,000 defenders, an advantage of just 2.5:1 over the defenders.<sup>62</sup>

Prince Eugene of Savoy, commanding the besieging army, chose to attack the city's northern fortifications. High ground north of Lille dominated the fortifications in this section of the line. A road from Menin, one of the cities captured by Marlborough in 1706 after the battle of Ramillies, offered an excellent approach for the bulky artillery pieces. Also, this

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<sup>59</sup>Christopher Duffy, *Fire and Stone*, (Vancouver: Douglas David and Charles, Limited, 1975), 92-3.

<sup>60</sup>"From the camp before Lille, Aug. 20," *Dublin Gazette*, 24-28 August 1708.

<sup>61</sup>Julius Caesar, *The Conquest of Gaul*, Trans. S. A. Handford, (London: Penguin Books, 1951), 192. Chapter VII, paragraph 74.

<sup>62</sup> John A. Lynn, "The *trace italienne* and the Growth of Arms: The French Case," *Journal of Military History*, vol. 55, no. 3 (July 1991): 306-7, 310.

position gave the engineers the opportunity to control the Dyle and to drain Lille's moat.<sup>63</sup> From this location Eugene sought to press the attack on Lille.

Theoretically, after opening the trenches at a safe distance from the fortification, the Allied forces would advance in a series of saps, or approach trenches protecting the advance. As the lines progressed the besieging force would dig trenches perpendicular to the saps, parallel to the fortifications and bring up artillery to breach the walls. These parallels offered secure firing positions for the artillery, allowing cannon to approach the walls protected from French fire. A final parallel, cut into the counterscarp, would allow besieging cannon to wreak havoc on the city at close range and breach the walls. Finally, continuous bombardment broke down the masonry walls of the fortress creating a breach in the defenses, an avenue of ingress for attacking infantry. Hence the value of the counterscarp for both parties involved.

From this system of approach trenches and parallels, the Allies attacked the outworks on the northern defenses of the town. The difficulty in gaining a lodgement in the French counterscarp greatly retarded the progress of the siege. The counterscarp, the first outwork reached by besieging troops proved "redoubtably" defensible at Lille. That work served to retain the outer wall of the ditch and followed a crooked course,

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<sup>63</sup>Taylor, Wars of Marlborough, vol. 2, 175.

conforming to the works and outworks in the ditch.<sup>64</sup> The covered way, a wide walkway carved into the earth, sat atop the counterscarp forming a position from which infantry could blast away at incoming troops. At Lille, a series of traverses, earthen banks that perpendicularly crossed the covered way, protected the French infantry from enfilade fire and increased the defense potential of the covered way, making it easier to seal off and contain breaches. This feature allowed the French to impede severely the Allied advance at Lille and to contest the counterscarp longer. In seeking to dominate the outworks of Lille, Eugene found that the counterscarp proved a very costly piece of real estate.

Marlborough's precautions against an attack on the besieging army from attack by French field armies occurred simultaneously with Prince Eugene's investment of the city. In a letter dated 22 August/3 September Marlborough described his preparations and the progress of the siege,

As soon as troops came to their ground I went to confer with Prince Eugene and the other generals at the siege. Yesterday morning he came to me, and we rode out to view the ground, and mark the place for the field of battle, in case the enemy should, as they still give out, attempt to succour the town...this morning we seized a spy, who upon examination owns he was sent last night by the Duke of Burgundy to endeavor to get into Lille, and acquaint Marechal Bouflers

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<sup>64</sup>Duffy, Fire and Stone, 60.

that he was marching to his relief. Our siege is so far advanced that the engineers intend to-morrow in the afternoon to attack the counterscarp, wherein if we succeed the town must surrender.<sup>65</sup>

Yet the French failed to attack, although their threats of such an action occupied Marlborough often at this time. The siege of Lille continued unmolested, for a while, leaving operations against the town to proceed without outside interference. During that time Allied cannon bombarded the town, opening a breach in the main wall, filling part of the ditch with debris. Unfortunately for the Allied infantry, the engineers accomplished this without clearing the outworks, leaving a great many defenders in well sited defenses between the trenches and the breach.<sup>66</sup>

By 26 August/7 September Prince Eugene deemed the time right for an Allied assault. At three in the afternoon his batteries opened and fired continuously on the French until seven in the evening. The two assault columns sallied forth to attack the two prominent hornworks on the north side of the city. Severe fire from French artillery, the explosion of a number of mines by the defenders and the fierce close quarter action of the French garrison troops prevented the success of Eugene's endeavor. Corporal Matthew Bishop serving in an English detachment near the

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<sup>65</sup>Marlborough to Mr. Secretary Boyle, Peronne, 22 August/3 September 1708, Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, vol. 4, 203-4.

<sup>66</sup> Andrew Crichton, The Life and Diary of Lieut. Col. J. Blackader, (Edinburgh: H. S. Baynes, 1824), 327.



attack at this time in the siege recalled, "they sprung several Mines and blew up a great number of our Men...it made the Earth tremble, and all that were upon it, or near that place, were blown up, and some torn asunder".<sup>67</sup> In exchange for almost three thousand casualties Eugene gained only small lodgement on the salient angles of the two hornworks. The defenders lost less than three hundred men. Eugene, as unaccustomed to fortress warfare as to defeat, did not attempt another attack on the counterscarp for another month, resorting to further sapping. The French hindered such operations with sorties on 28 August/9 September, 31 August/11 September and 1/12 September.<sup>68</sup> The heavy loss of the Allied troops and the success of the defenders at this point offer testimony to the talent of Vauban.

The day after the last sortie against his lines, Marlborough wrote to the Dutch Grand Pensionary Anthonie Heinsius that,

what has been done at the siege has so little pleased me, that I have not given you the trouble of laite of any of my letters, stil expecting things would go better, which I now hope they will, Prince Eugene having assured me this morning that he will press everybody as much as in him lyes. If we have the town by the 20th it is all we can expect.<sup>69</sup>

Slow progress and heavy casualties took their toll on Marlborough as well as his army. Vauban's masterpiece proved a more difficult problem than Marlborough expected. By focusing on breaching the

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<sup>67</sup>Matthew Bishop, The Life and Adventures of Matthew Bishop..., (London, 1744), 187.

<sup>68</sup>Taylor, Wars of Marlborough, vol. 2, 187-8.

<sup>69</sup>Marlborough to Heinsius, Fretain, 2/13 September 1708, The Correspondence of John Churchill and Anthonie Heinsius, ed. B. Van 'T Hoff, (Utrecht: Kerminck en Zoon, 1951), 401.

walls before attacking the outworks the Allied engineers left the French with positions from which to conduct an active and successful defense. Such a defense included among other things, sending sorties out to attack the besiegers, springing mines and sniping. Marlborough commented, "it is impossible for me to expresse the uneasyness I suffer for the ill-conduct of our ingeniers att the siege, where I think everything goes very wrong".<sup>70</sup>

10/21 September saw a renewed assault and further lodgements in the counterscarp, yet again at fearful cost. Allied casualties numbered in excess of 2000, the defenders less than 400, according to Taylor<sup>71</sup>; Chandler lists Allied casualties as only 1000. Neither cites a primary source for their casualty figures. Most significantly Prince Eugene went down with a light but incapacitating wound to the head, forcing Marlborough to take command of both the covering army and the siege operations.

Unfortunately the large attack on Lille 10/21 September receives precious little attention from English speaking sources, except to mention Prince Eugene's wound and the failure of the assault. Actual roles for Allied (non-British) troops prove elusive. Marlborough seems to have employed them for tasks other than the covering army. Process of elimination allows a guess at their role; since they evidently served with Eugene at the siege

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<sup>70</sup>Marlborough to Godolphin, Lannoy, 9/20 September 1708, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1099.

<sup>71</sup>Taylor, Wars of Marlborough, vol. 2, 195.

itself, likely their roles consisted of manual labor, entrenching and prevention of French sorties and also convoy duty.

Significantly Eugene, a continental officer, commanded the besieging force, indicating that Marlborough detailed most of his Allied troops to serve at the siege. Fortescue mentions that only five British regiments served at the siege; a few British sources mention visiting the lines briefly by troops not serving there for the duration of the siege.<sup>72</sup>

Despite its comparatively large scale, the assault on 10/21 September involving between 13,000 and 15,000 men received little attention in British accounts, primary and secondary. Such a force would have amounted to approximately forty percent of the besieging force. No reasons are offered for the failure of that attack other than fierce French resistance, although likely the incompetence of the engineers during this part of the siege played a role. Paradoxically, a follow up assault a day later (12/23 September) involving only about 400 men secured some gains and also received more attention from contemporaries and historians. Accounts of this attack offer an excellent chance to take a closer look at the storm of outworks in early modern warfare.

Private John Deane summarized the events leading up to the surprise grenadier attack on 12/23 September,

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<sup>72</sup>Sir John Fortescue, A History of the British Army, vol. 1, (London: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1899), 504.

Sepbr. the 11th a detachment of Granadiers was made throughout the army...the 12th another attack was made upon a hornworke, wch. lasted for severall hours very desperate and terrible, what with cannons, granadoes, bombs and small shott, wth. thunder and lightning and vast showers of rain.<sup>73</sup>

Deane's account does possess a certain possible flaw; Blackader, who led the grenadier attack refers to the tenaillon, not the hornwork. This either suggests multiple forces with multiple targets or a mistake by Deane, the more likely possibility, as Deane makes no reference to having seen or taken part in the attack. Most significant is his mention of a combination of grenadier companies forming the strike force. Andrew Crichton, editor of Blackader's journal supports the second suggestion, describes British troops from the covering army sent occasionally to the siege and also lists the target of the attack as the tenaillon.<sup>74</sup> Major John Blackader, of the Cameronian Regiment, describing his part in the attempt to storm the tenaillon offers an account of rare detail.

Commanded to lead a force of 400 grenadiers, very likely the force described by Deane, Blackader arrived in the trenches with that force around noon on 12/23 September. Blackader describes receiving his orders from Prince Alexander of Wirtemberg posting

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<sup>73</sup>John Marshall Deane, A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns During the War of Spanish Succession, 1704-1711, ed. David Chandler (Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research, Special Publication Number 12, 1984), 67-8.

<sup>74</sup>Crichton, Life and Diary, 327.

the troops and giving Blackader his orders around four in the afternoon

Near seven, the signals being given by all our cannon and our bombs going off together, I gave the word upon the right, *Grenadiers, in the name of God attack!* Immediately they sprung over the trenches, and threw their grenades into the counterscarp; but they fell into some confusion. I then ordered out fifty more to sustain them, and went out myself, and in a little time I got a shot in the arm. I felt that the bone was not broken; and all the other officers being wounded, I thought it my duty to stay a-while, and encourage the grenadiers to keep their warm post. About a quarter of an hour afterwards, the fire continuing very hot, I got another shot in the head. I then thought it was time to come off.<sup>75</sup>

The attack was undertaken in a rainstorm and in darkness, a sneak attack, in an attempt to catch the defenders off guard. In gathering a large British grenadier force, Marlborough marshalled the elite troops of his entire army. Sources do not indicate whether or not Marlborough held further troops in readiness in the rear to exploit a possible breach in the defenses. If so, those troops were not employed on 12/23 September 1708.

Despite this detail, much remains unclear. What was the original target of the attack? Crichton lists the tenaillon, Blackader speaks of the counterscarp, Deane of a hornwork. Churchill vaguely states "On the 23rd he [Marlborough] renewed the assault on the fortifications. He directed it himself from the trenches, and after hard fighting a substantial improvement was achieved". Chandler states clearly that, "A surprise attack

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<sup>75</sup>Crichton, Life and Diary, 327-9.

late on the 23rd which resulted in the capture of the left hand *tenaille* and part of the counterscarp did little to lighten his anxiety and anger".<sup>76</sup>

Very likely the *tenaillon* and perhaps more specifically, one of the face covers received the brunt of the attack. Given the relative size of the grenadier force, hornworks would have likely proved too formidable. While two hornworks were targets of attacks during the siege, the other sources indicate an attack on the *tenaillon* and since Deane does not describe himself as present for the attack, an assault on the *tenaillon* and nearby counterscarp seems likely, as it is corroborated by the other sources. Pelet's map shows trenches closest to the left hand or western half of the *tenaillon*. Since this work was originally surrounded by water, we may infer that by this point in the siege, at least part of the moat had been drained. Chandler's mention of the *tenaille* likely confuses that work with the *tenaillon*; maintaining a foothold on the *tenaille*, a low work situated directly under the curtain wall, would have likely been impossible, given the amount of covering fire that could potentially be brought to bear from the flanks of two bastions and the main wall. In addition, the *tenaillon* offered the least amount of masonry on the north face of the defenses, offering a potential weak point to be exploited by an attack. Although the precise target and results of the attack remain unclear, the Allies evidently gained a hold in the outworks.

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<sup>76</sup>Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 231.

The source of the troops used in the attack remains problematic. Both Deane and Blackader speak of grenadiers, although they do not mention regiments. Clearly these were not all Cameronians, for Blackader specifically describes leaving his regiment to lead this force. This leaves three options: that Marlborough consolidated his British Grenadier companies to provide a fresh attacking force after the heavy casualties of the earlier assault, that Allied grenadier companies were formed out of the remnants of the troops that survived the earlier assault or some combination of the two. That a British officer commanded the attack and addressed his soldiers in English offers strong, but not conclusive proof that British grenadier companies formed the strike force. Very likely Marlborough formed an elite strike force of grenadiers from his covering army, supplying fresh, high quality troops for the attack and Blackader held partial, but not complete command of the force. This view is consistent with that of David Chandler, who noted, "the practice of gathering together the regimental grenadier companies into *ad hoc* formations for special operations...was often resorted to by British and other European commanders".<sup>77</sup> Stronger evidence that this force came from outside the army normally stationed in the trenches comes with Blackader's description of forming in the Cloister the night before the attack.

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<sup>77</sup>Chandler, Art of Warfare, 70.

Of the assault itself we may infer that the trenches had advanced fairly close by that time, for Blackader mentions throwing the grenades at the enemy, then going over the top. Likely the explosion of the grenades served as much to disrupt the French defense and to force the defenders to take cover, as to kill them. A night assault, by a smaller force may have been calculated to be more successful in taking a limited objective and potentially less costly than another general assault. After leaving their own trenches, troops likely attempted to gain entry into the French works as quickly as possible. From there each grenadier could employ his weapon of choice to kill or subdue the French. Muskets, after their discharge, held potential for use as a club or as a short pike, provided the bayonet was fixed; an account of the Royal Scots Regiment speaks of troops attacking the outworks at Lille with sword in hand, likely a more convenient weapon in the close quarter combat involved in the capture of an outwork.<sup>78</sup>

Blackader's own behavior illustrates interesting points about the dynamics of such an army. He orders the attack yet does not go in with the first wave; only making his appearance on the battlefield with the second wave in an attempt to encourage the men and regain control of the fight. The division of the attacking force into two waves anticipates the failure of the first wave to capture the outworks; the initial attack served to

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<sup>78</sup>J. C. Leask and H. M. McCance, The Regimental Records of the Royal Scots, (Dublin: Alexander Thom and Co., Ltd., 1915), 103.



distract and disorganise the defenders, allowing a second wave to move in more successfully. Blackader remained behind to press the second wave forward. Blackader's display in combat illustrates the essence of small scale eighteenth century leadership; comments by John Keegan on the battle of Waterloo are also relevant here,

it was the receipt of wounds, not the infliction of death, which demonstrated an officer's courage...officers, in short, were most concerned about the figure they cut in their brother officer's eyes. Honour was paramount, and it was by establishing one's honorableness with one's fellows that leadership was exerted indirectly over common soldiers.<sup>79</sup>

Clearly storms, even on a small scale, required this sort of display from officers to achieve success, as all of the other officers present suffered wounds as well as Blackader.

Marlborough described events of the difficult weekend of attacks in a letter to the Earl of Sunderland,

On Friday last Prince Eugene received a wound with a small shot in the forehead, but is in no danger, and I hope will be abroad again in two or three days. I have been every day since at the siege. We made an attack yesterday in the evening and possessed ourselves entirely of the tenaille on the left, and likewise made a lodgement on a part of the counterscarp. However, I am sorry to tell you our situation is such, through the lateness of the season, the slowness with which the engineers have proceeded in their approaches, and the great difficulty we shall meet with in bringing up a further supply of ammunition, as to make us doubt the success of the siege.<sup>80</sup>

The allies would not make a further assault on the Lille

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<sup>79</sup>Keegan, Face of Battle, 191.

<sup>80</sup>Marlborough to Earl of Sunderland, Lannoy, 13/24 September 1708, Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, vol. 4, 237.

fortifications for almost two weeks. Eugene's wound and the engineer's ineptitude nearly brought Marlborough's operations before Lille to a halt. The frustration expressed by Marlborough in the letter quoted above recurs in his letters to Godolphin during the same period and follows the current of other letters to Heinsius as well. Indeed the crisis of the siege came at this time, as circumstances forced Marlborough to command the covering and the besieging armies, to deal with inept engineers and dwindling supplies.

Between 18/29 September and 22 September/3 October Marlborough launched a series of attacks that made further progress toward the capture of the remaining outworks on the northern defenses. Private Deane described the effect of this on attacking troops,

for what was not killed or drowned were spoiled by their hellish inventions of throwing bombs, boyling pitch, tar, oyle and brimstone wth. scalding water ans such like combustables upon our men from the outworkes, and when our men made any attack. Esspecially the English granadiers have scarce 6 sound men in a company.<sup>81</sup>

Wounds prevented the author of the earlier detailed account of grenadier attacks, Major Blackader, from writing a similar account of these attacks. This is almost as unfortunate for the historian as for Blackader. The French actions described by Deane display a degree of violence and intensity rarely seen in early modern fortress warfare, actions contrary to traditional views regarding the "limited" character of eighteenth century warfare.

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<sup>81</sup>Deane, Journal, 68.

Additionally, Deane's comments regarding the grenadiers allow the inference that Marlborough had continued to use his elite troops to gain further footholds in the outworks, a plan with a very high cost. In early October Eugene returned from his sickbed to prosecute the siege.<sup>82</sup> From 23 September/4 October to 9/20 October Eugene had labored to extend his holdings in the counterscarp, finish draining the moat and erect further batteries against the town.<sup>83</sup> Finally masters of the covered way, the Allied engineers moved their cannon there and by the middle of the month blasted a 350 foot breach in the curtain wall.<sup>84</sup>

Marlborough prepared for a general storm of the city. Writing to Godolphin he stated on 8/19 October, "we hope in four or five days to give a generall storme, if thay will ventur it, which I fear they will. I wish I may be mistaken since it will cost a great many lives".<sup>85</sup> At eight in the morning on Sunday, 10/21 October, Eugene opened fire with fifty-six cannon and thirty-five mortars and howitzers.<sup>86</sup> Overwhelmed by the violence of the bombardment and fearing a storm of the city, Marshall Boufflers beat a parley on 11/22 October.

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<sup>82</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 513.

<sup>83</sup>Taylor, Wars of Marlborough, vol. 2, 222.

<sup>84</sup>Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 235.

<sup>85</sup>Marlborough to Godolphin, Roselare, 8/19 October 1708, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1126.

<sup>86</sup>Taylor, Wars of Marlborough, vol. 2, 223.

On 14/25 October Heinsius received the following note from Marlborough, "this bearer, one of my aide de camps, I send with a letter to the States to congratulate our being masters at last of the town att Lisle; we shall lose no time in taking measures for attacking the citadell".<sup>87</sup> Three days earlier, the French commandant Marshal Boufflers, renowned commander of the defense of Namur in the Nine Year's War, had the honor to surrender the town of Lille to Marlborough and retire with his remaining garrison to the citadel. Of the original garrison of between 15,000 and 16,000 French soldiers, 3,000 laid down their arms upon parole, another 4,000 sick and wounded were evacuated to Douai. Over 4,000 more retreated to the citadel; the remaining 4,000 died before the surrender of Lille. The Allies confessed to suffering 3,632 dead and 8,322 wounded. The mortality rate for the wounded on both sides hovered near 50 percent.<sup>88</sup> These casualty percentages are extremely high, but even considering the inherent unreliability of numbers in the early modern era, they testify to the intensity of operations before Lille. However, the shortening of the contravallation lines freed over half of the remaining besieging force for operations in the field and the shortened lines of defense in the citadel allowed both sides to continue operations with vigor, despite their heavy losses. Fully one quarter of the defenders were killed, an equal number wounded

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<sup>87</sup>Marlborough to Heinsius, Rousselaer, 14/25 October 1708, Correspondence of Churchill and Heinsius, 406.

<sup>88</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 519.

during the fall of 1708; the Allies lost almost one third of their besieging force, extremely high prices to pay for the attack and defense of a fortress.

Five days after the surrender of the town, Major Blackader, recovered from his wounds, returned to the trenches to view the sight of his wounding. "It was by his mercy that I was not killed or wounded...while walking in a street where I did not apprehend danger. The bullett came hard by, and battered upon the wall close beside me. They mark expressly for officers".<sup>89</sup> Stern French resistance continued, despite the loss of the town. Fighting would continue until early December.

Four days after Boufflers surrendered, even before the end of a brief armistice at Lille, Eugene opened trenches against the citadel. Additionally, Eugene, contrary to the terms of the surrender, invested the citadel from the town. These actions, odious to the French defenders, deepened the antagonism between the two forces.<sup>90</sup> At this stage in the siege, French threats against Marlborough's communications prove as frustrating for the historian as for the Duke himself for reasons made manifest in the letter to his Duchess. Marlborough wrote,

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<sup>89</sup>Crichton, Life and Diary, 334.

<sup>90</sup>Chandler, Marlborough as Military Commander, 236.

the next step is the attacking the cittadell. I have fully acquainted Sir Richard [Temple] with Prince Eugene and my intentions, which he is to tell Lord Treasurer, from whome you will know all, for I dare not put it in writting, fearing it might come into the enemy's hands.<sup>91</sup>

Operations against the citadel seem almost passive when compared with those against the town. Sources mention no major assaults; Marlborough speaks of slow, but steady, progress against the citadel. He commented to the Duchess in early November, "our attack of the cittadel goes on very slowly, there being great caution for the saving our men an[d] ammunition".<sup>92</sup> The attack consisted mainly of trenches being advanced onto the outworks of the citadel. By this point in the siege, the citadel's capitulation was only a matter of time. Marlborough and Eugene had merely to knock down enough masonry to open a breach in order to force Boufflers to capitulate as long as he could hold out hope of help. Hence the lessening intensity of the attacks and the shift to more aggressive action by both French and Allied commanders in the field during this phase of the campaign. Even the French defenders fought with lessening intensity, causing Marlborough to note, "we are pressing on the attack of the cittadell, which as yett thay do not deffend with

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<sup>91</sup>Marlborough to the Duchess, Roselare, 13/24 October 1708, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1129.

<sup>92</sup> Marlborough to the Duchess, Roselare, 5/16 November, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1147.

the vigor they did the town".<sup>93</sup> Likely the Allied high command had pressed the attack on the town hoping to capture Lille quickly and advance further into France before the onset of winter. Aware that the citadel would fall eventually, even without a major assault, and that the season was too far advanced for a continued invasion of France, the Allied commanders proceeded with caution. Cautious with the lives of their troops, the besiegers would spring no mine before its time.

Yet another potential reason exists for the conservatism of the attack on the citadel. Marlborough and Eugene, appalled at the performance of their engineers in the early stages of the siege resorted to a very conservative approach to the citadel. The role of engineers in the War of Spanish Succession proves difficult to evaluate. Their training, their behavior and indeed their identity remains one of the great uninvestigated problems of the war, one that requires further research. However, Marlborough had previously expressed significant displeasure at their performance before Lille. Unlike enlisted men whose role consisted of little more than maintaining their formation under fire and in maneuvers and line officers whose tasks required experience and a certain innate courage, for engineers to be successful in sieges they needed a degree of formal education in their profession. Christopher Duffy addressed the problems Marlborough faced in his engineering corps,

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<sup>93</sup> Marlborough to the Duchess, Roselare, 21 October/1 November 1708, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1130.

France owned a whole generation of engineers who had been bred up by Vauban to put the new techniques at the service of Louis's marshals. The Allies, on the other hand, had to rely on a dwindling, overworked and demoralised band of cosmopolitan experts. Marlborough and Eugene had precious little confidence in their ageing Huguenot engineers, but they could not trust themselves to take over in their place.<sup>94</sup>

These non-British engineers oversaw the operations before Lille. The History of the Corps of Royal Engineers, written at the end of the nineteenth century, predictably has practically nothing to say about the Continental engineers or the operations at Lille. Oudenarde and Wynendael receive attention there, but not Lille.<sup>95</sup> Only in the final year of the war would a British engineer, Colonel John Armstrong, distinguish himself by conducting the impressive siege of Bouchain. At the outbreak of the war the Allies had the privilege of the services of the brilliant Dutch engineer Menno van Coehoorn; his death in the spring of 1704 robbed the Allies of their most talented master of the art of siegecraft.

The dilatory performance of the engineers and surprising display of incompetence likely account for the high cost of the outworks and for the conservative approach to the citadel. The Huguenot engineers du Muy and Le Vasseur des Rocques displayed a considerable lack of talent at the beginning of the siege. By the end of the siege, engineer casualties, according to Scouller, exceeded 60. Scouller does not make clear which engineers became

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<sup>94</sup>Duffy, The Fortress, 40.

<sup>95</sup>Whitworth Porter, History of the Corps of Royal Engineers, vol. 1, (London: Longman's, Green and Co., 1899), 114-15.



casualties, nor does he speak of their relative skill.<sup>96</sup> These later operations progressed with substantially fewer casualties. The Allies abandoned large scale assaults in favor of smaller attacks and slowly advancing trenches. Marlborough's reactions toward unsuccessful engineers remains elusive; successful engineers received high praise. John Armstrong, chief engineer before Bouchain in 1711 was painted in a dual portrait with Marlborough, commemorating their capture of Bouchain. Not even Eugene received a similar honor.

Work remains for historians to read the writings of participants in sieges against the writings of famous engineers such as Vauban and Coehoorn to investigate more carefully techniques actually employed against bastioned fortifications in the Low Countries. A thorough investigation is needed to search for an allied siege technique or to articulate more completely charges of incompetence against the Dutch and Huguenot engineers.

A description of operations against the citadel leaves adequate time for an aside on early modern engineering. Indeed all the accounts of the 1708 campaign turn away from the siege at this point. For once, historians ignore siege warfare with good reason. By this stage of the siege Boufflers continued resistance depended upon outside relief. Once Marlborough pierced the Scheldt line and drove off the French army, Boufflers resistance became utterly hopeless.

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<sup>96</sup> R. E. Scouller, The Armies of Queen Anne, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1966), 185.

On 28 October/8 November the Allies gained lodgements on two salient angles in the covered way of the citadel. During the night of 5/16 November the Allies seized a place of arms; three days later they gained two lodgements on the second counterscarp, apparently using similar tactics to those employed by Blackader.<sup>97</sup> Coxe's remarks about Eugene reinforce the importance of display in early modern leadership, even in the context of trench warfare, "the chiefs so lavishly exposed their persons, that Eugene had an aide-de-camp killed by his side".<sup>98</sup> Eugene exposed himself to enemy fire just as he had earlier in the siege and in a manner like Blackader in the assault on the tenaillon. This sort of display by senior commanders continued throughout the early eighteenth century. It also continued to exact a high price; Charles XII of Sweden received a bullet in his brain at the siege of Fredriksten in 1718 and on 16 June 1734, the Marshal Duke of Berwick visited the siege of Phillipsburg, where he lost his head to a cannon ball.<sup>99</sup> Indeed Vauban wrote against allowing Louis XIV to enter the trenches at a siege. When describing the danger of visiting the trenches he stated,

whatever care you may take to construct your trenches carefully, there is never any place in them where you are completely safe from all hazards. You are incessantly

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<sup>97</sup>William Coxe, Memoirs of the Duke of Marlborough, vol. 2, (London: Henry G. Bohn, 1848), 327.

<sup>98</sup>Coxe, Memoirs of the Duke of Marlborough, 327.

<sup>99</sup>Duffy, Fortress, 207, 100.

exposed to the ricochet of the balls which most often-only raking the top of the parapet without being stopped-fall into the trench killing and maiming many poor devils.<sup>100</sup>

Clearly Lille provided ample support for Vauban's assertion, as the siege took a heavy toll in both officers and enlisted personnel alike.

"When we speak of destroying the enemy's forces we must emphasize that nothing obliges us to limit this idea to physical forces: the moral element must also be considered", stated Clausewitz over a century after the siege of Lille.<sup>101</sup> This moral, or psychological, conflict seen in the troops contesting the outworks represents only a small part of the larger struggle between the two forces at Lille. Whatever the fortifications, troops or technology, this battle of wills remains central to any siege. The side that could endure the longest would prevail. And endurance at Lille meant more than casualties, but also boredom, hunger and disease. The will to endure such conditions is another manifestation of the larger moral conflict at work. The continued commitment of the Allies to the siege depended upon this moral element, something Marlborough described in a letter to Godolphin, "considering the looses we have had at this long siege, and the frequent actions with the enemy, yett we are in as good condition as can be expected at this time of yeare, we having very few sick, and both men and officers full of

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<sup>100</sup>Sebastien Le Prestre de Vauban, A Manual of Siegecraft and Fortification, trans. G. A. Rothrock, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1968), 96.

<sup>101</sup>Clausewitz, On War, 97.

resolution".<sup>102</sup> Doubtless savage discipline and a lack of other alternatives played a role in holding the army together, yet this moral commitment to the siege even after almost four months of violent and dull operations was essential, the basis of the Allied capture of Lille. Boufflers will to resist finally crumbled in early December. On 30 November/11 December, two days after surrendering, Boufflers and his garrison marched out for Douai with full honors of war, finally leaving Lille in the hands of the Duke of Marlborough.

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<sup>102</sup>Marlborough to Godolphin, Roselare, 5/16 November 1708, The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence, 1146.

## Conclusion

Winston Churchill termed the 1708 siege of Lille, "the greatest siege in modern history," yet a strategy fixated on fortress warfare doomed the Allies to further war even after the city's capitulation.<sup>103</sup> The slow and difficult travails of fortress warfare, rather than the oft praised battles of Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenarde and Malplaquet characterize the norm of warfare in the War of Spanish Succession. Of Marlborough's sieges, that of Lille in 1708 proved the largest, the most difficult and involved the widest variety of operations. These operations, while largely successful, failed to end the war. Conditions in the War of Spanish Succession made the imposition of a military solution virtually impossible. Despite the symbolic value of Lille and the moral victory at Wynendael, the Allies failed to strike a mortal blow against France. Nor did this create an opportunity to crush France; three years later, at the time of his dismissal, Marlborough had just completed the passage of another fortress barrier and supervised the reduction of Bouchain.

If the siege of Lille encompasses all that Marlborough endured during his time as Captain-General of the Allied armies during the War of Spanish Succession, surely Oudenarde stands as a great irregularity in the campaign and his career. Large scale battles were rare occurrences in the eighteenth century; the

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<sup>103</sup>Churchill, Marlborough: His Life and Times, vol. 5, 502.

circumstances of Oudenarde make it an anomaly even among anomalous battles. Oudenarde in no way resembled Marlborough's classic battles: an orderly battle line wearing the enemy down with infantry assaults on the flanks, causing them to thin their ranks in the center, soon pierced by a heavy cavalry charge, all three branches of the service mutually supportive. Beginning as a disorganized encounter battle, it ended in a limited Allied victory only because of the presiding genius of the Captain-General.

Therefore, the 1708 campaign does present the War of Spanish Succession in microcosm. The long process of reducing Lille shows the norm of slow siege warfare; the battle of Oudenarde proved an exceptionally odd event, in its very occurrence and in its structure. While it fails to show the classic pattern employed by Marlborough it does provide an excellent showpiece for the superb morale, mobility and training of the Allied forces. Above all, the varied events of 1708 demonstrate that only a man of Marlborough's calibre could manage logistics, siege warfare, a major battle and a host of other problems on a massive scale.

Fortress warfare slowed the overall pace of the war. By largely avoiding open battle with Marlborough the French forced the Duke into a slow war for heavily fortified territory. In nine years of war on the Continent Marlborough never failed in battle or in siege warfare, but despite this the war moved slowly and eventually his political enemies removed him from power and deserted the Allies. While battles offered potentially dramatic

results, sieges proved essential for the control of a region.

Vauban emphasized this point, stating,

it may be said that only siegecraft offers the means of conquering and holding territory; a successful battle may leave the victor in control of the countryside for a while, but he still cannot become master of an entire area if he does not take the fortresses.<sup>104</sup>

In creating a heavily fortified border for northwest France, the dead Vauban did defeat Marlborough in the War of Spanish Succession. By sacrificing their mobility and committing to a slow march through the barrier fortresses the Allies prolonged the war and made the mistake of meeting France on a securely guarded front. The siege of Lille did, in a limited sense, fulfill Marlborough's military objective, but the severe delay in its capture destroyed allied momentum in 1708. It was this capacity to lengthen the war and slow the pace of the Allied advance that eventually allowed political fortunes to turn in England, allowing France to emerge from the war without total defeat.

Unfortunately, from a purely English standpoint much of this investigation raises more questions than it answers. Previous historians, in focusing on battles have avoided fundamental aspects of the early eighteenth century military experience, leaving a variety of topics open to further investigation. Grenadier attacks, shown within the work to be of vital importance in capture of the outworks, deserve further attention. While these attacks often receive mention, their form, their

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<sup>104</sup>Vauban, A Manual of Siegecraft, 21.

compostion and the tactics employed remain unclear. Above all, the Allied engineers provide one of the most intriguing mysteries of the study of the Spanish Succession War. A group of men so essential to the conduct of siege operations still remains relegated to the background. As previously stated in this thesis, early modern engineers deserve a thorough assessment by historians. Likewise, the poliorcetics of the war of Spanish Succession deserve more analysis from historians. This renewed investigation is necessary to provide an accurate picture of the realities of early eighteenth century warfare.

Additionally, a broader study of Marlborough's sieges in the context of warfare 1688-1714 would offer a chance to search for Allied siege technique. This could include a comparison of theoretical writing on siegecraft with accounts of the sieges. Clearly Allied operations at Lille, especially in the early stages of the siege, exhibited a marked lack of technical proficiency, a fact remarkable in view of the Allies' continued success at siegecraft throughout the War of Spanish Succession. By focusing on a major early modern siege this thesis has partially illuminated one aspect of the military experience of that age and uncovered possible avenues for further research.



Glossary of Military Terms

ARMY OF OBSERVATION A force consisting of the most mobile units of a besieging army, designed to pin and hold a relief force in the field until heavier reinforcements arrived.

BASTION A four sided work projecting from the main wall of a fortress. Composed of two faces and two flanks, bastions allowed a defending force to bring maximum firepower to bear on an attacker.

CIRCUMVALLATION LINES Lines of siege works surrounding the contravallation lines. Facing outward, they protected the besieging force against any attempted attacks by a relief force.

CONTRAVALLATION LINES Trenches and fortifications constructed by a besieging army to isolate a beleaguered city. These formed the starting point for further operations against the city.

COVERED WAY An infantry position, running along the top of the counterscarp.

COUNTERSCARP The slope or retaining wall on the outer side of the ditch.

CURTAIN WALL The main wall of a fortress, from which the bastions project.

GLACIS An area of gently sloping ground, descending from the covered way to the open country.

**GRENADIER** Originally troops who threw primitive hand grenades at the enemy, these troops eventually evolved into a form of elite soldiers as hand grenades fell out of style. Both forms valued brave troops, tall, with heavy moustaches.

**HORNWORK** An outwork composed of two branches, long stretches of fortification, at the sides with a small bastioned front at the head.

**PARALLEL** A wide and deep siege trench dug by a besieger to run parallel to the defenders' fortifications.

**RAVELIN** A triangular defense work, detached from the main fortifications, placed in front of the curtain wall and usually between two bastions.

**SAP** A narrow approach trench dug perpendicular to the fortress and established by the planting of gabions or sandbags.

**TENAILLE** A low defense work positioned in the ditch in front of the curtain wall.

**TENAILLION** A ravelin strengthened by two face covers.

**TRACE** The ground plan of a fortress.

**TRAVERSE** A bank or wall set at right angles to the main alignment of the work. It served to protect the defenders from enfilade fire.

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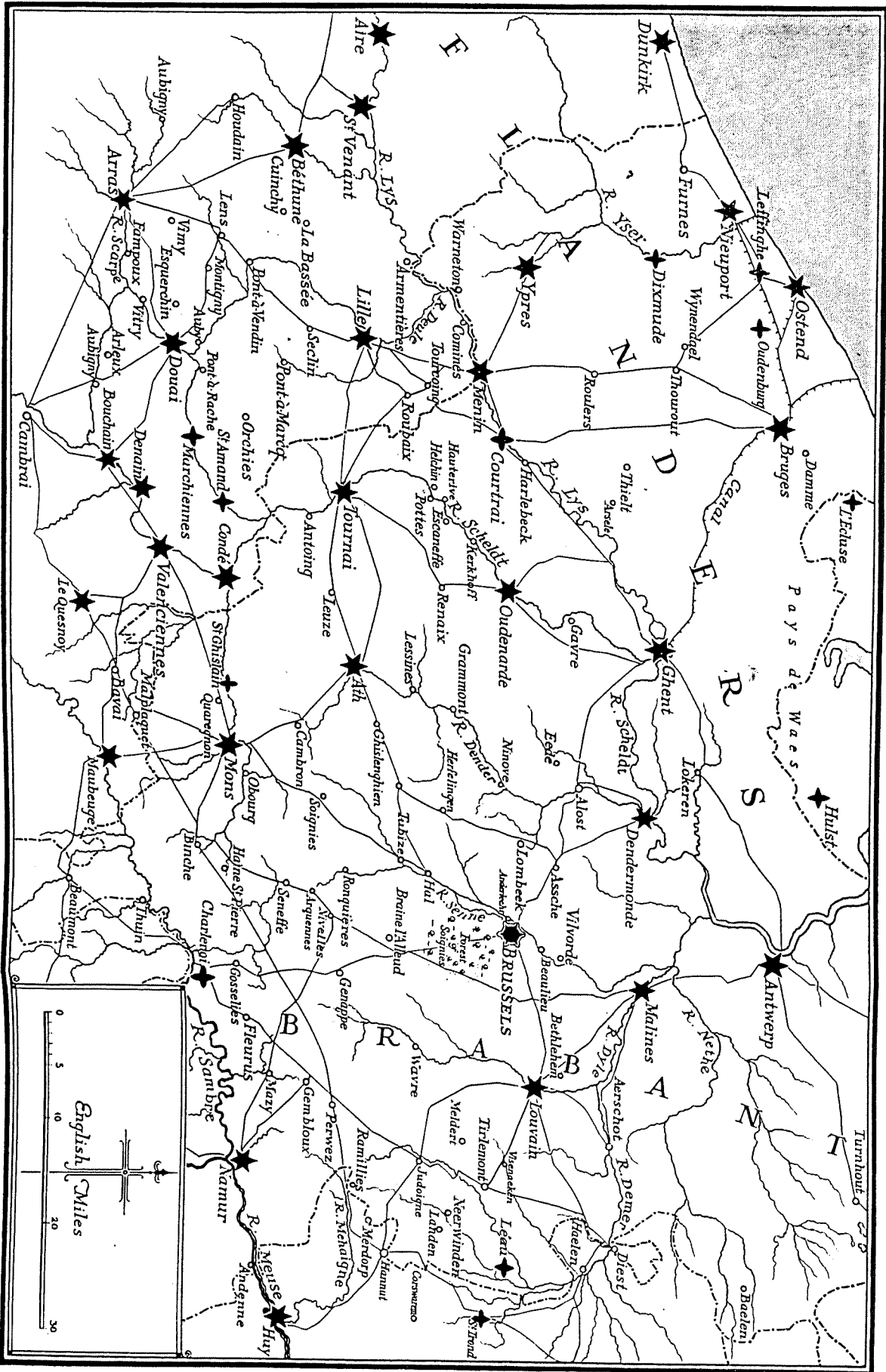
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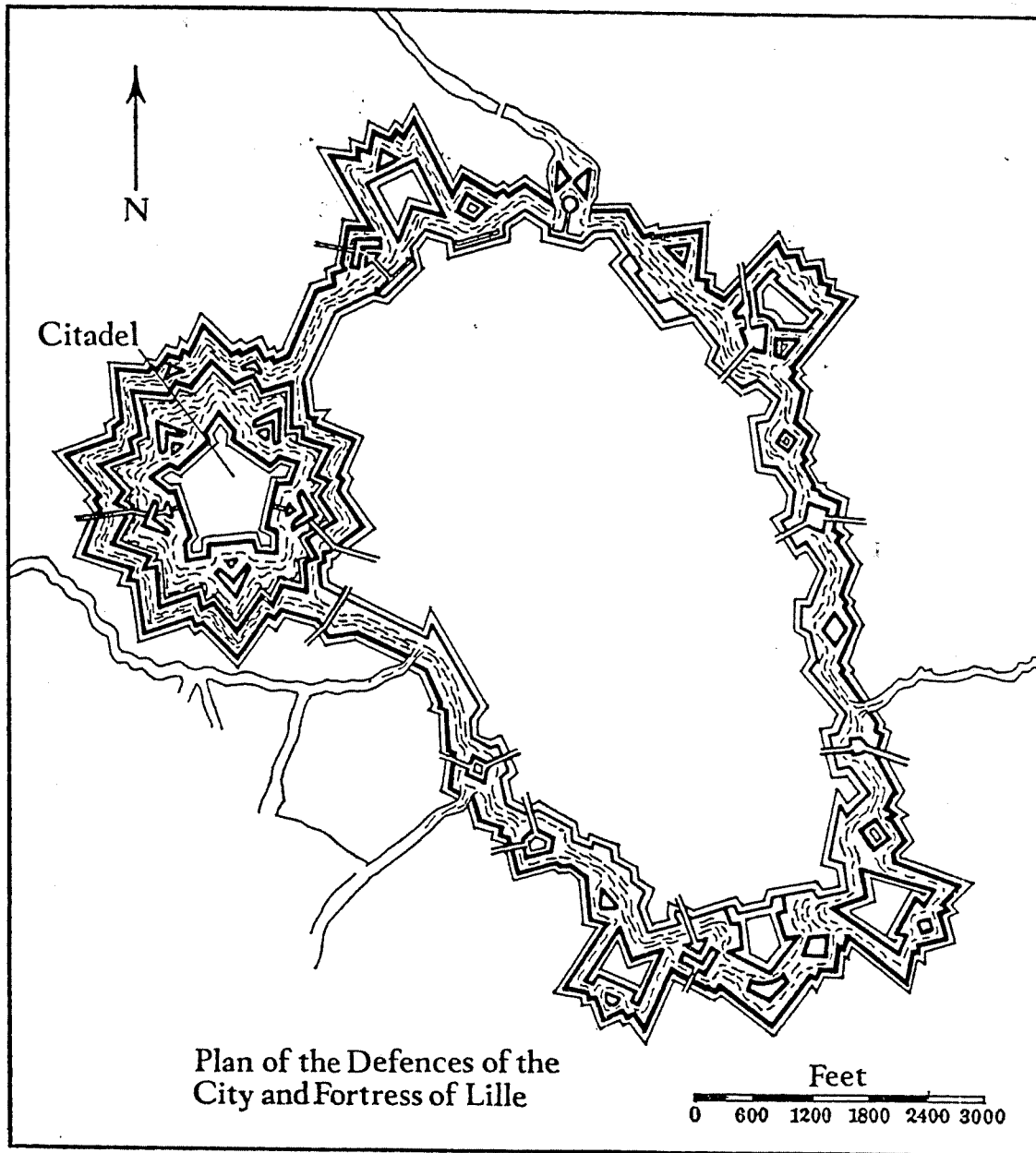
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GENERAL MAP OF THE WESTERN NETHERLANDS





The Attack on the Northern Defenses



