

CORRESPONDENCE.

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THE FRENCH CAVALRY—1870.

LETTER No. 4.

My last concluded with the same call for the Cavalry, on the part of the French, which we have seen made upon the previous engagements in this war—and as the battle of Rezonville was almost entirely an affair of Cavalry on both sides, and perhaps the most important one of modern times, I shall go a little more into details in this letter and give you almost Lt.-Colonel Bonie's own words.

The instant the command was given, General de Preuil ordered the first échelon to advance, and they galloped off in good order. The second followed at about 150 yards distance, but as they were going too fast the General ordered them to slacken their pace, and accompanied by his staff, placed himself on their flank. In the meantime the first line, going, as fast as they could, left the second a long way behind. As soon as the enemy's skirmishers saw the French Cuirassiers start, they formed rallying squares as quickly as possible, and in doing so had ceased firing.

The advance accordingly arrived at a good distance, and without much loss, when suddenly they were hindered by various obstacles which lay in their way. These consisted of biscuit barrels, a baggage waggon, and camp equipments, that had been abandoned by the troops in their hurried retreat.

Obstructed in their advance, the 1st line inclined to its left, and the further they went, the greater the pressure became and ended by throwing the two squadrons into disorder, so that when they received at thirty paces distance the terrible fire of the Prussians, they were thrown into hopeless confusion, and rushed forward into the intervals of the Prussian squares. The Lieut.-Col. was badly wounded, the commandant though mortally wounded, nevertheless forced his way into a square followed only by an Adjutant, who was killed dead on the spot. As for the others, obliged in order to retreat to go right round the squares, they received the fire of all four faces, and were annihilated.

The 2nd line was now unmasked; they were received by a file fire, when at a distance of about 300 yards; this made a few gaps in the line, but they continued in good order, for the fire ceased for a moment, but when at 100 yards distance they got the order to "charge" the enemy poured in such a hail of bullets that more than half the line was knocked over. The remainder got entangled in the obstacles that covered the ground, or else fell into a ditch that was dug about ten paces in front of the squares:—

The 3rd line was equally unsuccessful, and was dispersed by the fire like the two preceding ones.

Whilst the Cuirassiers of the guard tried to reform, they were pressed by two regiments of Prussian Cavalry, who passed through the intervals between the Prussian squares; one regiment came through the right centre interval; the other regiment (15th Lancers) came through the other interval, and were received with a sharp fire at a short distance from the French skirmishers, who, not having had time to retire, had lain down in the ditches along the roadside. This fire stopped the pursuit of this regiment. As for the Prussian Hussars, with the greatest daring they pursued so far, that they succeeded in surrounding the Marshal.

The latter, as well as the whole of the staff were obliged to draw swords and join in the *mêlée* when a squadron of the 5th Hussars, and another of the 4th Chasseurs, warned in time by General de Preuil, arrived extremely *à propos*, and rescued the Marshal and his staff. This charge of the French Hussars and Chasseurs was made perpendicularly to the road, and presented their flank to the Prussian squares who were, however, unable to fire, as their own men were between the French and themselves. The French Cuirassier regiment lost in this charge 22 officers 208 rank and file, and 243 horses. As the squares that were charged remained unbroken the result was almost nil. It is to be supposed that had the Artillery opened fire on the line that was to be attacked, as General de Preuil desired, that a different result might have been obtained.

Another conclusion that may be formed is, that the ground ought to have been previously reconnoitred, as had that been done, the charge might have received a different direction.

At the same time that the Prussians displayed their attack on Rezonville, the Cavalry, under the command of Duke William of Mecklenburg; endeavored to overthrow the French 6th Co. ps, and some batteries of Artillery which had been pushed on ahead on the plateau, with a battalion of Chasseurs as an escort. The Prussians began by crushing the French fire by a superior one; then sent forward two lines of Cavalry in echelon at a distance of about 100 yards from each other, the first line was composed of Cuirassiers and the second of Lancers. These two lines charged, overthrow the Chasseurs à Pied, in spite of their well sustained fire, sabred the French batteries as they passed, and endeavoured to annihilate the remnants of the foot soldiers. But they were unaware that the moment of reckoning had arrived, and that they were about to be cut to pieces by the French Cavalry.

I related in my last letter how de Forton's and Valabrégue's divisions at the termination of certain movements had gone and

placed themselves near the wood which borders the Roman road. On arrival, the two front brigades of General de Forton were formed in column of regiments, right in front, and had executed several changes of front, sometimes with a view to facing Rezonville sometimes Vionville. The last time this movement took place, they became inverted not only in each regiment, but in each squadron, and in this formation proceeded to the top of the plateau, keeping the wood close to the Roman road in their rear. On seeing the Prussian cavalry amongst their batteries General de Forton ordered the Dragoons and a portion of the Cuirassiers to advance. They deployed and attacked the advancing lines. In the charge the 9th Dragoons passed through the Prussian Cuirassiers, who opened their ranks without stopping, and inclined to the right and left against the French Artillery, and then pushed on to rejoin the Lancers. Their charge terminated the Lancers wheeled about to retire but were attacked by the French Cuirassiers who charged to the command "Cuirassiers, attention, Go;" as these words indicate no sort of formation, they advanced in a confused mass, the officers being forced to push their horses to the utmost in order to keep a head of the men who were riding with their reins completely loose. A terrible *mêlée* now took place; the 16th Prussian Lancers taken in flank were overthrown, sabred and actively pursued, when suddenly the white Cuirassiers came up to their assistance. Their horses, however, were so blown with their long advance that they were thoroughly done. It was now the French turn, and the Cavalry of General Valabrégue advanced to join de Forton's and engaged the enemy. The fight was now at its height, and was waged with the greatest fury on both sides. The eagerness of the French was so great and the two sides were so mixed up, that in spite of the trumpets sounding the rally, the massacre went on. In a few seconds the Prussian Cavalry was annihilated and the ground strewn with the dead bodies of Lancers and white Cuirassiers. The best mounted and those taken prisoners alone escaped. At this moment the Infantry from the side of Vionville opened fire on the ground on which the 7th Cuirassiers were operating. The retreat was therefore sounded and the French regiments were reformed and proceeded to Gravelotte.

A short time after the charges we have described took place. General L'Admirault who commanded the French right wing, and who had marched to the sound of the canon, found himself opposed by the enemy in considerable force. The divisions of the 4th corps, who had advanced with success as far as the plateau of Grèyère, were now stopped by the Prussian Infantry, preceded by Artillery, debouching by Mars-la-Tour; they were also threatened in flank by a large body of Cavalry.

Large masses of Cavalry are now about to appear upon the scene from both sides, and afford a grand though terrible sight; so my next letter will begin with a list of the Corps engaged in the furious death struggle of 6,000 Cavalry soldiers, which terminated this awful day; (16th), after a fight, lasting for ten long hours

VIEILLE MOUSTACHE.