

## Der Deutsch-Französischer Krieg 1870

1 Aug On this day the French corps held the following positions from right to left: 1st corps . . Hagenau 2nd corps . . Forbach 3rd corps . St Avoird 4th corps . . Bouzonville 5th corps . . Bitche 6th corps . . Chlons 7th corps . . Belfort and Coimar Guard . . . near Metz The French 2nd corps was directed to advance on the following morning direct on Saarbrücken, supported on the flanks by two divisions from the 5th and 3rd corps. The order was duly carried out, and the Prussians (one battalion, two squadrons and a battery), seeing the overwhelming numbers opposed to them, fell back fighting and vanished to the northward, having given a very excellent example of steadiness and discipline to their enemy. The latter contented them- Action of selves by occupying Saarbrücken and its suburb St brücken. Johann, and here, as far as the troops were concerned, the incident closed.

2 Aug Troops of the French 2nd Corps defeat a small garrison in the German border village of Saarbrücken

4 Aug Battle of Wissembourg

The 2nd division (Abel Douay's) of the French 1st Corps is defeated by the German Third army under Crown Prince William Frederick

The opening engagement of the campaign, fought August 4, 1870, between the advance-guard of the Third German Army, under the Crown Prince of Prussia, and a portion of Marshal Macmahon's army, under General Abel Donay, who fell in the battle. The Germans carried the French position, and captured the town of Weissenburg, at a cost of 91 officers and 1,460 men. The French lost 2, 300 killed, wounded and prisoners.

6 Aug Battle of Froeschwiller (Woerth)

The French 1st Corps along with 1 division of 7th Corps under Marshall MacMahon is defeated by the German Third army under Crown Prince William Frederick in a hotly contested battle

Battle of Worth

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia.

The Battle of Worth, also known as the Battle of Reichshoffen or as the Battle of Fröschweiler, occurred on 6 August 1870 in the opening stages of the Franco-Prussian War. Troops from Germany commanded by Crown Prince Frederick fought against the French under Marshal MacMahon near the village of Worth in Alsace, on the Sauer, 6 miles north of Hagenau.

During 5 August 1870 the French concentrated in a selected position running nearly north and south along the Sauer Bach on the left front of the German III army which was moving South to seek them. The position is marked from right to left by Morsbronn, the Niederwald, the heights west of Worth and the woods northeast of Fröschweiler. East of the Sauer the German III army was moving south towards Hagenau, when their cavalry found the French position about noon. Thereafter the German vedettes held the French under close observation, while the latter moved about within their lines and as far as the

village of Worth as if in peace quarters, and this notwithstanding the defeat of a portion of the army at Weissenburg on the previous day. The remnant of the force which had been engaged, with many of its wounded still in the ranks, marched in about noon with so soldierly a bearing that, so far from their depressing the morale of the rest, their appearance actually raised it.

About 5 P.M. the French watered some horses at the Sauer, as in peace, without escort, though hostile scouts were in sight. A sudden swoop of German hussars drove the party back to camp. The alarm sounded, tents were struck and the troops fell in all along the line and remained under arms until the confusion died down, when orders were sent to fall out, but not to pitch the tents. The army therefore bivouacked, and but for this incident the battle of the next day would probably not have been fought. A sudden and violent storm broke over the bivouacs, and when it was over, the men, wet and restless, began to move about, light fires, etc. Many of them broke out of camp and went into Worth, which was unoccupied, though Prussians were only 300 yards from the sentries. These fired, and the officer commanding the Prussian outposts, hearing the confused murmur of voices, ordered up a battery, and as soon as there was light enough dropped a few shells into Worth. The stragglers rushed back, the French lines were again alarmed, and several batteries on the French side took up the challenge.

The Prussian guns, as strict orders had been given to avoid all engagement that day, soon withdrew and were about to return to camp, when renewed artillery fire was heard from the south, and presently also from the north. In the latter direction, the II Bavarian corps had bivouacked along the Mattstall-Langen-Sulzbach road with orders to continue the march if artillery were heard to the south. This order was contrary to the spirit of the III army orders, and moreover the V Prussian corps to the south was in ignorance of its having been given.

The outpost battery near Worth was heard, and the Bavarians at once moved forward. Soon the leading troops were on the crest of the ridge between the Sauer and the Sulzbach, and the divisional commander, anxious to prove his loyalty to his new allies - his enemies in 1866 - ordered his troops to attack, giving the spire of Froschweiler, which was visible over the woods, as the point of direction.

The French, however, were quite ready and a furious fusillade broke out, which was multiplied by the echoes of the forest-clad hills out of all proportion to the numbers engaged. The Prussian officers of the V corps near Dieffenbach, knowing nothing of the orders the Bavarians had received, were amazed; but at length when about 10.30am their comrades were seen retiring, in some cases in great disorder, the corps commander, General von Kirchbach, decided that an effort must at once be made to relieve the Bavarians. His chief of staff had already ordered up the divisional and corps artillery (84 guns in all), and he himself communicated his intention of attacking to the XI corps (General von Bose) on his left and asked for all available assistance. A report was also despatched to the crown prince at Sulz, 5 miles away.

Meanwhile the XI corps had become involved in an engagement. The left of the V corps' outposts had overnight occupied Gunstett and the bank of the Sauer, and the French shortly after daylight on 6 August 1870 sent down an unarmed party to fetch water. As this appeared through the mist, the Prussians naturally fired upon it, and the French General Lartigue (to whose division the party belonged), puzzled to account for the firing, brought up some batteries in readiness to repel an attack. These fired a few rounds only, but remained in position as a precaution.

Hearing the firing, the XI corps' advanced guard, which had marched up behind in accordance with the general movement of the corps in changing front to the west, and had halted on reaching the Kreuzhecke Wood, promptly came up to Spachbach and Gunstett. In this movement across country to Spachbach some bodies appear to have exposed themselves, for French artillery at Elsasshausen suddenly opened fire, and the shrapnel bursting high, sent showers of bullets on to the house roofs of Spachbach, in which village a battalion had just halted. As the falling tiles made the position undesirable, the major in command ordered the march to be resumed, and as he gave the order, his horse ran away with him towards the Sauer. The leading company, seeing the battalion commander gallop, moved off at the double, and the others of course followed. Coming within sight of the enemy, they drew a heavy shellfire, and, still under the impression that they were intended to attack, deployed into line of columns and doubled down to the river, which they crossed. One or two companies in the neighbourhood had already begun to do so, and the stream being too wide for the mounted officers to jump, presently eight or ten companies were across the river and out of superior control. By this time the French outposts (some 1500 rifles), lining the edge of the Niederwald, were firing heavily. The line of smoke was naturally accepted by all as the objective, and the German companies with a wild rush reached the edge of the wood.

The same thing had happened at Gunstett. A most obstinate struggle ensued and both sides brought up reinforcements. The Prussians, with all their attention concentrated on the wood in their front, and having as yet no superior commanders, soon exhibited signs of confusion, and thereupon General Lartigue ordered a counterattack towards the heights of Gunstett, when all the Prussians between the Niederwald and the Sauer gave way. The French followed with a rush, and, fording the Sauer opposite Gunstett, for a moment placed the long line of German guns upon the heights in considerable danger. At this crisis a fresh battalion of the XI corps arrived by the road from Surburg to Gunstett, and attacked the French on one flank whilst the guns swept the other. The momentum of the charge died cut, and the French drifted backwards after an effort which compelled the admiration of both sides.

In the centre the fight had been going badly for the V corps. As soon as the 84 guns between Dieffenbach and Spachbach opened fire the French disappeared from sight. There was no longer a target, and, perhaps to compel his adversary to show himself, von Kirchbach ordered four battalions to cross the river. These battalions, however, were widely separated, and coming under fire as soon as they appeared, they attacked in two groups, one from Worth towards Froschweiler, the other from near Spachbach towards the Calvary spur, east of Elsasshausen. Both were overpowered by infantry fire. A

fraction of the southern party maintained itself all day in the elbow of the Hagenau chaussee, which formed a starting-point for subsequent attacks. But the rest were driven back in great confusion. Once more the dashing counter-attack of the French was thrown into confusion by the Prussian shell fire, and as the French fell back the Prussian infantry, now reinforced, followed them up (about 1 P.M.). The commander-in-chief of the German III army (the Crown Prince Frederick) now appeared on the field and ordered Kirchbach to stand fast until the pressure of the XI corps and of the Württemberg division could take effect against the French right wing. The majority of these troops had not yet reached the field. Von Bose, however, seeing the retreat of the troops of the V corps, had independently determined to renew the attack against the Niederwald with such of his forces as had arrived, and had ordered General von Schkopp's brigade, which was then approaching, to join the troops collecting to the east of Gunstett. Schkopp, however, seeing that his present line of advance led him direct on to the French right about Morsbronn and kept him clear of the confusion to be seen around Gunstett, disregarded the order and continued to advance on Morsbronn. This deliberate acceptance of responsibility really decided the battle, for his brigade quietly deployed as a unit and compelled the French right wing to fall back.

To cover the French retreat Michel's brigade of cavalry was ordered to charge. The order was somewhat vague, and in his position under cover near Eberbach, General Michel had no knowledge of the actual situation. Thus it came about that, without reconnoitring or manœuvring for position, the French cavalry rode straight at the first objective which offered itself, and struck the victorious Prussians as they were crossing the hills between the Albrechtshäuserhof and Morsbronn. Hence the charge was costly and only partly successful. However, the Prussians were ridden over here and there, and their attention was sufficiently absorbed while the French infantry rallied for a fresh counterstroke. This was made about 1:20 P.M. with the utmost gallantry, and the Prussians were driven off the hillsides between the Albrechtshäuserhof and Morsbronn which they had already won. But the counter-attack soon came under the fire of the great artillery mass above Gunstett, and, von Bose having at length concentrated the main body of the XI corps in the meadows between the Niederwald and the Sauer, the French had to withdraw. Their withdrawal involved the retreat of the troops who had fought all day in defence of the Niederwald.

By 3 P.M. the Prussians were masters of the Niederwald and the ground south of it on which the French right wing had originally stood, but they were in indescribable confusion after the prolonged fighting in the dense undergrowth. Before order could be restored came another fierce counter-stroke. As the Prussians emerged from the north edge of the wood, the French reserves suddenly came out from behind the Elsasshausen heights, and striking due south drove the Prussians back. It was a grave crisis, but at this moment von Schkopp, who throughout all this had kept two of his battalions intact, came round the northwest corner of the Wald, and these fresh battalions again brought the French to a standstill. Meanwhile von Kirchbach, seeing the progress of the XI corps, had ordered the whole of his command forward to assault the French centre, and away to the right the two Bavarian corps moved against the French left, which still maintained its original position in the woods northeast of Fröschweiler.

MacMahon, however, was not beaten yet. Ordering Bonnemains's cavalry division to charge, by squadrons to gain time, he brought up his reserve artillery, and sent it forward to case-shot range to cover a final counter-stroke by his last intact battalions. But from his position near Fröschweiler he could not see into the hollow between Elsasshausen and the Niederwald. The order was too late, and the artillery unlimbered just as the counter attack on the Niederwald alluded to above gave way before von Schkopp's reserve. The guns were submerged in a flood of fugitives and pursuers. Elsasshausen passed into the hands of the Germans. To rescue the guns the nearest French infantry attacked in a succession of groups, charging home the bayonet with the utmost determination. Before each attack the Prussians immediately in front gave way, but those on the flanks swung inwards and under this converging fire each French attempt died out, the Prussians following up their retreat. In this manner, step by step, in confusion which almost defies analysis, the Prussians conquered the whole of the ground to the south of the Fröschweiler-Worth road, but the French still held on in the village of Fröschweiler itself and in the woods to the north of the road, where throughout the day they had held the two Bavarian corps in check with little difficulty. To break down this last stronghold, the guns of the V and XI corps, which had now come forward to the captured ridge of Elsasshausen, took the village as their target; and the great crowd of infantry, now flushed with victory but in the direst confusion, encouraged by the example of two horse artillery batteries which galloped boldly forward to case-shot range, delivered one final rush which swept all resistance before it.

The battle was won and cavalry only were needed to reap its consequences, but the Prussian cavalry division had been left behind without orders and did not reach the battlefield until late at night. The divisional cavalry squadrons did their best, but each pursued on its own account, and the results in prisoners and guns fell far short of what the opportunity offered. Under cover of darkness the French escaped, and on the following day the cavalry division was quite unable to discover the direction of the retreat.

MacMahon received no support from the neighbouring French troops. The battle was won by over-powering weight of numbers. The Prussian general staff were able to direct upon the field no fewer than 75,000 infantry, 6000 cavalry, and 300 guns, of which 71,000 rifles, 4250 sabres and 234 guns came into action, against 32,000 rifles, 4850 sabres and 101 guns on the French side. The superiority of the French chassepot to the needle guns may reasonably be set against the superior number of rifles on the German side, for though the Germans were generally, thanks to their numbers, able to bring a converging fire upon the French, the latter made nearly double the number of hits for about the same weight of ammunition fired, but the French had nothing to oppose to the superior German artillery, and in almost every instance it was the terrible shellfire which broke up the French counterattack. All of these attacks were in the highest degree honourable to the French army, and many came nearer to imperilling the ultimate success of the Germans than is generally supposed.

One other point deserves special attention. As soon as the fighting became general, all order in the skirmisher lines disappeared on both sides, and invariably, except where the

Prussian artillery fire intervened, it was the appearance of closed bodies of troops in rear of the fighting line which determined the retreat of their opponents. Even in the confused fighting in the Niederwald, the mere sound of the Prussian drums or the French bugles induced the adversary to give way even though drums and bugles frequently appealed to nonexistent troops.

The losses of the Germans were 9270 killed and wounded and 1370 missing, or 13%; those of the French were about 8000 killed and wounded, and perhaps 12,000 missing, and prisoners, representing a total loss of about 41%. Some French regiments retained a semblance of discipline after suffering enormous losses. The 2nd Turcos lost 93%, 13th hussars 87%, and thirteen regiments in all lost over 50% of their strength.

Fought August 6, 1870, between the Third German Army, under the Crown Prince of Prussia, and the French, under Marshal Macmahon. After a closely contested engagement, the French were driven from all their positions, and made a hasty retreat beyond the Vosges. The Cuirassier division of General Bonnemain was completely cut to pieces in charging the German infantry, near Elsasshausen. The German losses amounted to 489 officers, and 10,153 men, while the French lost 10,000 killed and wounded, 6,000 prisoners, 28 guns and 5 mitrailleuses.

#### 6 Aug Battle of Spicheren

The French 2nd Corps under Frossard is forced to retire after a day-long battle with the Prussian First and Second armies

Fought August 6, 1870, between the Germans, under Von Alvensleben, and a superior French force, under General Frossard. After an obstinate encounter, the French were driven from all their positions with heavy loss, and compelled to retreat on Metz. The Germans lost 223 officers and 4,648 men. The battle is remarkable for the storming of the Rote Berg by 1 company of the 39th Regiment and 4 companies of the 74th Regiment, under General von Francois, who was killed. These 5 companies maintained their position throughout the afternoon, in face of a vastly superior force. This action is also known as the Battle of Forbach

The Metz Campaign :

#### 14 Aug Battle of Colombey (Borny)

French rearguard action before Metz turns into a battle with the advancing Prussians. The action ends as a draw, but holds up the French withdrawal from the fortress of Metz

Fought August 11, 1870, between the retiring French army, and the advance guard of the First German Army Corps under von Steinmetz. The French maintained most of their positions, but two of their divisions were overthrown, and Bazaine's retreat on Verdun was seriously delayed. The French lost about 7,000 ; the Germans 222 officers and 5,000 men.

#### 16 Aug Battle of Vionville-Mars la Tour

Attempting to cutoff the French retreat from Metz, elements of the German Second Army unwittingly attack numerically superior French forces west of Metz Battle ends in a draw after the French fail to recognize their advantage and advance too slowly. Results in Prussians cutting off the French retreat route

Fought August 16, 1870, between the French, under Marshal Bazaine, and the 3rd and 10th German Army corps, under Von Alvensleben. The Germans, though at times very hard pressed,

succeeded in holding their ground, and prevented the French breaking through to the westward. The battle is chiefly remarkable for the desperate charges of the German cavalry, and especially of Von Bredow's brigade, against the French infantry, under cover of which the shattered German infantry was enabled to reform. The losses were about equal, amounting to about 16,000 killed and wounded on each side. The action is also known as the Battle of Vionville

#### 18 Aug Battle of Gravelotte - St. Privat

The French Army of the Rhine under Marshall Bazaine arranged in a strong defensive position is attacked by the First (Steinmetz) and Second (Prince Fredrick Charles) German armies along a front from the town of Gravelotte to the village of St. Privat

The Battle of Gravelotte (August 18, 1870), was named after a village of Lorraine between Metz and the French frontier.

The conflict was between the Germans under King William of Prussia and the French under Marshal Bazaine. The battlefield extends from the woods which border the Moselle above Metz to Roncourt, near the river Orne. Other villages which played an important part in the battle of Gravelotte were Saint Privat, Amanweiler or Amanvillers and Sainte-Marie-aux-Chnes, all lying to the north of Gravelotte.

After bloodily repulsing the Germans along the entire front during much of the day the French right flank at St. Privat is finally turned from the north causing the French army to retreat back into Metz during the night. It would remain there until its surrender in October

Fought August 18, 1870, between the French, under Bazaine, and the combined German army under the supreme command of William of Prussia. The battle was most hotly contested, but while the French held their ground in the neighbourhood of Gravelotte, the Germans turned their right flank at St. Privat, and they were eventually obliged to abandon all their positions, and retire into Metz, where they were subsequently blockaded. The German losses amounted to 899 officers and 19,260 men killed and wounded. The French losses were somewhat less. This battle is also known as the battle of St. Privat

#### 18 Aug 1870 - 27 Oct 1870 Metz

This fortress was invested by the Germans after the defeat of Bazaine at Gravelotte in August 18, 1870, and after several fruitless attempts to break through the German lines had been repulsed, Bazaine surrendered to Prince Frederick Charles on October 26, with 3 marshals, 6,000 officers, and 173,000 men.

#### The Sedan Campaign :

29 Aug Engagement at Nouart is indecisive between the French 5th Corps and Saxon (XII) Corps

#### 30 Aug Battle of Beaumont

The French 5th Corps is suprised by the Prussian IV Corps and other elements barely making good its escape

#### 1 Sept Battle of Sedan

The French Army of Chalons commanded by Marshall MacMahon is surrounded and cut off by the two German armies (Third Army and Army of the Meuse). After a desperate, but unequal struggle the French are defeated

2 Sept The French Army of Chalons capitulates to the Germans at Sedan

This battle, the most decisive of the war, was fought September 1, 1870, The French, under Marshal MacMahon, who was wounded early in the action, were driven from all their positions by the Germans, under the King of Prussia, and compelled to retire into Sedan, where they laid down their arms. The Emperor Napoleon III was among the prisoners, and one of the results of the surrender was his dethronement and the proclamation of a republic in Paris. The battle is remarkable for the charge of the Chasseurs d'Afrique, under General Marguerite, in the neighbourhood of Floing. The brigade was cut to pieces and the general killed. The Germans lost in the action 460 officers and 8,500 men ; the French 3,000 killed, 14,000 wounded, and 21,000 prisoners, while 83,000 subsequently surrendered in Sedan. The Germans took 419 guns, 139 fortress guns and 66,000 rifles

30 Sept Chevilly

Fought September 30, 1870, when a sortie from Paris under General Vinoy was repulsed by the Sixth German Corps under Von Tumbling, with a loss of 74 officers and 2,046 men. The Germans lost 28 officers and 413 men killed and wounded

7 Oct Bellevue

Fought October 7, 1870, when Marshal Bazaine attempted to break through the lines of the Germans investing Metz. He was unsuccessful, and was driven back into the city with a loss of 64 officers and 1,193 men. The Germans lost 75 officers and 1,703 men

27 Oct 1870 Le Bourget

A determined sortie by the French from Paris, October 27, 1870, in which they carried the village of Le Bourget. They held their ground there until October 30, when they were driven out by the Prussian Guard Corps, leaving 1,200 prisoners in the hands of the Germans, who lost 34 officers and 344 men.

9 Nov Coulmiers

Fought November 9, 1870, between 20,000 Germans under Von der Tann, and a largely superior French force under General d'Aurelle de Paladines. After maintaining their position for the greater part of the day, the Germans were driven back, having lost 576 killed and wounded, 800 prisoners, an ammunition column and 2 guns. The French losses were about 1,500.

27 Nov Amiens

Fought November 27, 1870, between the French under General Faure, and the Germans under Manteuffel. The French were compelled to abandon the city, but the Germans failed to secure a decisive victory. The French lost 1,383 killed and wounded, and 1,000 missing; the Germans, 76 officers and 1,216 men

30 Nov 1870 Villiers

A determined sortie from Paris, under General Ducrot, on November 30, 1870, directed against the Wurtembergers. The operations lasted till December 3. The French, who had at first gained some successes, were finally repulsed, with a loss of 424 officers and 9,053 men. The Germans lost 156 officers and 3,373 men.

23 Dec 1870 - 24 Dec 1870 Hallue

Fought December 23 and 24, 1870, between 40,000 French, under General Faidherbe, and 22,500 Germans, under Manteuffel. The French lost heavily in the village lying in front of their position, but the Germans were unable to carry the entrenchments on the heights. After their attack had been repulsed, the French assumed the offensive, but with no decisive result. The Germans lost 927 killed and wounded; the French over 1,000, besides 1,300 prisoners

3 Jan 1871 Bapaume

Fought January 3, 1871, between the French under General Faidherbe, and the Germans under Von Goeben. The result was indecisive, and though the French gained some tactical successes, the result strategically was an advantage to the Germans, as General Faidherbe was compelled to desist from his attempt to raise the siege of Peronne. The Germans lost 52, officers and 698 men; the French 53 officers and 1516 men killed and wounded, and 550 prisoners

10 Jan 1871 - 12 Jan 1871 Le Mans

Fought January 10, 11, and 12, between the Germans, 50,000 strong, under Prince Frederick Charles, and the French, numbering about 150,000, under General Chanzy. The French army was completely routed, and the whole force so completely demoralised as to be no longer an effective fighting unit. The Germans took 20,000 prisoners, 17 guns, and great quantities of war material, at a cost to themselves of 200 officers and 3,200 men.

19 Jan Buzenval

A sortie from Paris under General Trochu on January 19, 1871. The French, advancing under cover of a fog, established themselves in the Park of Buzenval, and occupied St. Cloud, where they maintained their position throughout the day. At other points, however, they were less successful, and, on the morning of the 20th, the force at St. Cloud, finding itself unsupported, was obliged to retire, and all the captured positions were abandoned. The Germans lost 40 officers and 570 men ; the French 189 officers and 3,881 men. This sortie is also known as the Battle of Mont Valerien

19 Jan 1871 Saint-Quentin

Fought January 19, 1871, between the French, 40,000 strong, under General Faidherbe, and 33,000 Germans, under Von Goblen. The French were decisively defeated, with a loss of 3,500 killed and wounded, 9,000 prisoners, and 6 guns. The Germans lost 96 officers and 2,304 men.

28 Jan Paris

Paris was invested by the main German army, under the King of Prussia and von Moltke, September 19, 1870. The garrison, under the command of General Trochu, made a gallant defence, many serious sorties taking place, but the Germans gradually mastered the outer defences, and finally, being much straitened by famine, the city surrendered January 28, 1871.

Forts

When after Sedan the German armies reached the environs of Paris, secure rail communications with Germany were essential. The major route was at this time still blocked by the French-held fortresses at Toul, and the two branches after it divided at Rheims by Soissons and La Fere, and the reduction of these places now became a priority for the Germans.

The Bombardment of Toul

The fortress of Toul with nine major bastions lay in the valley of the Moselle. The garrison comprised 2,300 men with 71 guns. Outside the fortress there was higher ground overlooking the fortifications in all directions, particularly to the north where Mont-Michel was 125 metres higher than the works and came to within 1400 metres of them.

On 16<sup>th</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> August the Germans bombarded Toul unsuccessfully with field guns.

Subsequently 19 guns were set up in batteries at a range of 1600-1700 metres from the fortifications, and on 25<sup>th</sup> August a further bombardment using 1,550 shells was again unsuccessful.

Then on the 26<sup>th</sup> two *Festungsartilleriekompagnien* (fortress artillery companies, in wartime used to man siege guns in the field) were mobilised at Mainz, they brought 25 French guns with ammunition to Toul from the captured French fortress at Marsal. In the meantime the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg had been ordered to take Toul and for this purpose a further 3 *Festungsartilleriekompagnien* were mobilised at Mainz and Magdeburg, and they arrived at Toul with 26 rifled Prussian guns. These units now built eight batteries for 26 Prussian and 14 French siege guns, and 24 Prussian field guns. *Oberstlieutenant* (Lt.Col.) Bartsch was in command of the siege guns.

These 64 guns opened fire at 6AM on September 23<sup>rd</sup>, and the fortress surrendered at 3PM after 2,433 shells had been fired.

The walls were still fully defensible and the town itself had suffered very little damage, and it was rumoured later that the white flag was hoisted because the population wanted to go into the vineyards around the town for the harvest (large numbers of townspeople went into the vineyards immediately after the surrender).

The siege batteries were dismantled in the days following the surrender and the guns ordered to Verdun and Soissons.

### The Siege of Soissons

Within a few days of Toul falling the railway had been opened to Chalons-sur-Marne, and it was intended to use the line from Chalons through Soissons to Mitry near Paris for supply purposes. This required the taking of Soissons, and the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg was ordered to do so.

Soissons lies in the valley of the Aisne, and in 1870 was fully fortified, with ten bastions. To the south, two areas of higher ground at a distance of 2,300 and 1,500 meters respectively gave a direct view into the fortifications from a height some 80-90 metres above them. As a consequence the walls could be taken under direct fire at long range, which the Germans proceeded to do. The garrison comprised 4,800 men with 143 guns.

*Oberstlieutenant* Bartsch received orders on 28<sup>th</sup> September to take three *Festungsartilleriekompagnien* and the 26 Prussian rifled guns to Soissons from Toul. This number of guns was not sufficient, so 10 French mortars were also brought from Toul. After travelling by rail to Rheims the guns and ammunition had to be transported to Soissons by road, an operation requiring 800 vehicles. After various difficulties and delays the guns arrived at Soissons between 6<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> October. A fourth *Festungsartilleriekompagnie* arrived from Sedan, where it had been on occupation duties. 2 reserve field batteries also took part in the siege.

On the night of 11<sup>th</sup> October 8 batteries with 44 guns were established on the two heights south of the fortress. The intention was to breach the wall at a range of 1,650 metres. On the morning of the 12<sup>th</sup> the Germans opened fire at 6AM and the well-prepared French immediately replied with fire from 30 guns. By

midday the French had lost 8 guns, but they continued the battle, with intervals and with a slowly declining rate of fire, for four days. The breaching of the main wall was almost accomplished on the 14<sup>th</sup>, and fully completed by the afternoon of the 15<sup>th</sup>. Several French sorties during the encirclement and bombardment were driven back by the besiegers.

An eye-witness inside Soissons described the situation there on the 15<sup>th</sup>: there was a 33-metre wide breach in the curtain wall, morale among the infantry was weak, and the town in a terrible situation. The streets were deserted. The bombardment over four days and three nights had affected the civilian population such that they had developed a kind of "siege fever" and believed that resistance had continued to the utmost limits possible and the time had come to surrender. A group of citizens approached the head of the civilian authorities in the town and asked him to urge the military authorities to end the suffering. The commander of the fortress was subsequently informed that 500 ill and wounded were lying in the cellars of the town, and a further 500 were in the crypt of St. Leger's church, there was no shelter for the families that had been driven out of their homes, and fires were burning in the town.

The fortress itself was in a bad state as well, the troops had no accommodation, the commander of the infantry was wounded, the half-burned down Arsenal had no more material for the artillery, and the magazines had been destroyed.

The commander of the fortress held a meeting to decide on what to do, at which only two men were in favour of continuing the struggle. The artillery commander, Major Roques-Salvada, favoured surrender and reported to the meeting that the artillery went into the battle with 50 guns and after four days losses had been significant and there was no possibility of any replacements, the breach was in progress, and the condition of the infantry made it unlikely that they would stand and hold it. There was no accommodation for the wounded. He then called for surrender.

The fortress commander decided to surrender, and negotiations with the Germans opened on the evening of the 15<sup>th</sup> and were concluded within a few hours. The attackers had fired a total of 8,310 rounds, and suffered losses of 3 dead and 27 wounded. The German official despatch of 21st October reported the capture at Soissons of 99 officers, 4,633 men, 128 guns, 3,000 *centner* (metric hundredweight) of powder, 70,000 shells, a war chest of 92,000 francs, a magazine with sufficient supplies for a division for three months, large stocks of clothing, etc.

After the siege the Germans found the bombarded fortifications to be badly damaged and indefensible. The breach could be climbed easily. The 4 *Festungsartilleriekompagnien* stayed at Soissons with their guns for the time being.

### The Bombardment of La Fere

The small fortress of La Fere, in the Oise valley, lay on the railway line which came from Rheims through Laon. It was particularly important for the Germans to take the fortress because a few kilometres to the west of La Fere there was a railway junction at Tergnier, with one line heading south-west towards Compiègne and Paris, and another heading west-north-west to Amiens. These lines were important for the German armies around Paris, and for the Prussian First Army which at the time that the attack on La Fere began had just commenced an advance from the Oise valley towards Amiens, where the newly-formed French XXII. Corps had been gathering.

The fortress was fully prepared for action, with ditches full of water and surrounding land inundated. The garrison comprised 2,400 men with 113 guns. The commander issued a proclamation at the beginning of the action, in which he announced that the era of cowardly surrenders was at an end, and that he would fight to the last shell and the last piece of biscuit.

The 4. *Infanterie-Brigade* under General von Zglinitzki arrived before La Fere on 15<sup>th</sup> November. The 4 *Festungsartilleriekompagnien* which had besieged Soissons and 2 more from Strasbourg were allocated for the attack. 20 Prussian guns and 6 French mortars were brought from Soissons, and in addition a field battery with 6 guns was deployed.

On 20th November a French attempt to relieve the fortress, with 6 companies of infantry and 4 guns, was beaten back with heavy losses by a battalion of *Infanterie Regiment nr.5* on the right bank of the Oise. Shortly afterwards a sally from the town was driven back with losses.

The terrain around the fortress was generally higher than the works, and to the east it provided concealed battery positions at a range of 1,500 metres. The batteries were set up on the night of 24<sup>th</sup>-25<sup>th</sup> November and firing commenced at 7.30AM on the 25<sup>th</sup>. The first shell hit the French artillery commanders house and destroyed his piano. The French were apparently taken by surprise and only started to return the fire after 31 minutes. The Germans bombarded the fortifications until 11AM, then turned their fire on the town where large fires soon broke out. The bombardment continued slowly during the night, and then on the next morning in dense fog.

At noon on the 26<sup>th</sup> the French began negotiations, and the terms of surrender were agreed on the 27<sup>th</sup>. Of the 6 *Festungsartilleriekompagnien* engaged at La Fere, three remained there as a garrison, the other three went on to Paris.

On November 27th the French fortress commander sent telegrams at 11.35 PM from St. Quentin to his superior at Lille and the War Minister at Tours describing the action. He reported that after an encirclement lasting 15 days, during which everything possible was done whether with artillery fire or by sallies, to disrupt the enemy, the fortress was attacked with mortars and siege guns and endured a bombardment lasting thirty hours. The enemy had opened fire against all the rules of war, without warning and without first calling on the fortress to surrender, at 7 o'clock in the morning thereby causing the maximum shock and fear in the town. After the first few hours the defending batteries, taken in rear from the surrounding heights, had been silenced. However resistance continued through the whole day and night and then on into the next day. The town was knocked down by a rain of shells and bombs. A large proportion was burnt down, and much of the available supplies were destroyed. Neither cellars nor casemates were available for shelter. He stated that he had no choice but to surrender, with the guns silenced he was powerless and could not justify sacrificing the troops and population in the town. French losses were heavy.

## Conclusion

A good number of French-held fortresses remained behind German lines after Sedan, and in view of their limited resources the Germans had to proceed such that one was reduced after another, with guns and troops being sent from Germany or moved from one siege to the next as necessary, and with the use of field batteries and captured French guns. Limited German resources were to a good extent offset by the speed with which the fortresses fell in the face of rifled guns.

The French worked hard in the years after 1871 to modernise their fortresses, and by 1914 there was a chain of fortresses in North-Eastern France which had a ring of smaller forts around the fortified town in the centre, eg. Verdun, Toul, Epinal. There were smaller works at some places between the large fortresses also. Even at a time when artillery was far more numerous than before and guns existed which could smash the strongest fortifications, the modern fortresses posed far greater problems to an attacker than did those of 1870.

Siege of Belfort November 1870-February 1871

The low-lying area between the southern slopes of the Vosges and the north-eastern section of the Swiss Jura, which is known under various names- "Burgundian Gate", "Alsatian Gate", "Belfort Gap" (*trouée de Belfort*)- has always provided an easy route from Germany into the Franche-Comté and beyond, and vice versa. Over long periods of history it was on routes between Northern Europe and the Mediterranean, and from Eastern Europe along the Danube Valley through this area to the west. The town of Belfort had for long played a role in controlling traffic through the area, and beginning in 1687 it was fortified, along with Besançon on the Doubs to the south-west, by Vauban in his so-called second style. In 1870 the town became important after the fall of Strasbourg to the Germans, and was the scene of a hard-fought siege which lasted for 103 days from early November 1870 until mid-February 1871. The article describes the siege, and includes an overview of field operations in Eastern France from the end of September onwards as these set the scene for the Siege of Belfort

#### The War in Eastern France until early November 1870

After Strasbourg surrendered on 27th September the whole situation in Eastern France changed, with the siege corps (set up on 23rd August under *Generallieutnant* von Werder) and the large siege train now available for operations elsewhere. On 30th September the *Grosses Hauptquartier* ordered the formation of a new corps, the *XIV. Armee-Corps*, to be commanded by *General der Infanterie* von Werder; the *Garde-Landwehr-Division*, although on paper part of the corps, departed for Paris and spent the rest of the war in the siege lines there; the *1. Landwehr-Division* was initially to act as garrison of Strasbourg, and after being reinforced by *Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 67 (4. Magdeburgisches)* it went under its former title of *1. Reserve-Division*. The Germans now needed to clear and disarm Southern Alsace, this would be done by taking the small French fortresses of Neuf-Brisach and Schlettstadt to prevent their being used as a base for field and *franc-tireur* operations, and by flying columns operating from Colmar. This task was to be carried out by the *4. Reserve-Division* under *Generalmajor* von Schmeling which at the end of September was assembling in Southern Baden, and siege artillery from Strasbourg.

At the end of September the Germans had no detailed knowledge of the level of French activity on the far side of the Vosges, although it was known that large bodies of *franc-tireurs* and *gardes mobiles* were in the area of St. Dié, Raon-l'etape and Rambervillers; although they were still in the process of forming, these forces might at some point threaten communications between Germany and the armies around Paris, in particular along at that point the only usable railway line, from Wissembourg through Lunéville to Nanteuil. The *Generalgouvernement* of Lorraine had already asked for support at the end of September, and on 2nd October General von Werder sent two columns through the Vosges to clear the Upper Meurthe Valley of *franc-tireurs* and to secure the exits from the mountains for the corps. The *XIV. Armee-Corps* left Strasbourg on 5th October. Its orders were to advance as soon as possible to the Upper Seine in the direction of Troyes and Châtillon-sur-Seine for the purpose of covering the armies before Metz and Paris from the south; to disarm the *départements* of Vosges, Haut-Marne, and Aube; to prevent

any attempt to form units; to see to the repair of the railway line Blainville-Epinal-Faverney-Chaumont; to bombard the fortress of Langres and possibly take it by *coup de main* as it blocked the aforementioned railway line; to observe Belfort in conjunction with the *4. Reserve-Division*; and to secure the corps communications. The *XIV. Armee-Corps* left Strasbourg on 5th October, and marched through the Vosges in several columns. During the advance there were a number of actions, the largest being at La Bourgonce on 6th October when a force of some 10,000 French, the First Vosges Army under General Dupré (this was an advance detachment of the forces being built up in Eastern France under General Cambriels, who had his headquarters at Besançon) was defeated and fled in some confusion southwards. The Germans entered Epinal on 11th October.

The size of the forces the French were building up in the region surprised the Germans, and the *Grosses Hauptquartier* changed the orders for the *XIV. Armee-Corps* after the capture of Orléans on 11th October appeared to make the situation of the armies around Paris much more secure. The corps was now ordered to attack the nearest available enemy, which were the forces withdrawing towards Besançon. On 18th October the corps reached the line Vesoul-Lure, and all indications were that the French would not stand outside the fortress of Besançon and also would be in no condition to threaten the German communications for some time. On 18th October a telegram from Versailles authorised Werder to continue the pursuit up to Besançon, then to march westwards via Dijon to Bourges. Werder at this point regarded the first task as accomplished, and concentrated his forces for the march to Bourges.

The rapid German advance through the Vosges caused dismay in the French population and government; Southern France appeared threatened and there seemed to be little available to defend it, and on 18th October Gambetta arrived at Besançon to personally review the situation, to organise a more effective resistance and to raise the patriotic mood. At this point the troops under Cambriels numbered some 30,000 men, and at Dôle Garibaldi had begun assembling a new Army of the Vosges. In the Saône Valley and the Côte d'Or conscription and organisation of units was under way; Gambetta pointed to this and promised further reinforcements and deliveries of arms and equipment, however Cambriels refused to mount any offensive operations until his forces were better trained and prepared. On the 19th Gambetta returned to Tours. On the 19th also Werder had become aware that the French forces in the area were increasing in numbers and the situation might allow a further effective blow to be struck. Thus *XIV. Armee-Corps* advanced to the Ognon where after some fighting on the 22nd and 23rd October it became clear that the main French forces would not be leaving the protection of Besançon and that little more could be achieved in this area, and Werder decided to march to the Saône Valley, then via Dijon to Bourges

On 26th October the bulk of *XIV. Armee-Corps* was at Gray on the Saône, where the troops had a brief and badly-needed rest. Cavalry patrols covered the area to the north and north-west towards the fortress of Langres and Châtillon-sur-Seine. At this stage Werder could only maintain the connection with Epinal with flying columns. On the French side Cambriels had kept his best troops at Besançon and at Dijon had formed a

corps of some 18,000 *gardes mobiles*, the *armée de la Côte d'or*, without any cavalry or artillery. This corps was divided into two detachments, of 10,000 and 8,000 men, and was holding the approaches to Dijon on the Vingeanne and Tille Rivers. On the 26th French advanced elements were thrown back by the Germans, and on the 27th in a general attack the Germans inflicted heavy losses in killed, wounded and prisoners on the poorly-led French. A nighttime withdrawal accompanied by a very heavy storm completed the disintegration of the *armée de la Côte d'or*. On the 28th the German main body stood along the Vingeanne.

At this point *General der Infanterie* von Werder faced difficult decisions. Any further advance to the west would open his lines of communications to attack, Dijon was strongly-held and being fortified, French outposts had appeared on the Ognon near Besançon and there were signs of increasing French strength all around. New directives now arrived from Versailles, where the situation on the Saône had become clearer. These orders had been on the way since 23rd October, and indicated that in light of the imminent fall of Metz the *II. Armee* under Prinz Friedrich Karl would soon be marching to the Loire via Troyes, and as such the task of *XIV. Armee-Corps* had changed. The *I.* and *4. Reserve-Division* were being put under Werders command, and Schlettstadt, Neuf-Brisach and Belfort were to be encircled and besieged as soon as possible; the *XIV. Armee-Corps* was to protect Alsace and cover its own line of communications; it was to maintain contact with the *Generalgouvernements* of Rheims and Lorraine; and it was to cover the left flank of the *II. Armee*. Enemy forces in front of the corps were to be held there. As long as the French maintained strong forces at Besançon, Vesoul appeared to be the best base for operations, with a strong garrison at Dijon and observation maintained towards Langres. The French were to be attacked when clearly weaker. Belfort was to be observed and held in check sufficiently to prevent its being used as a base for the development of an insurgency in the Vosges until the *I. Reserve-Division*, at this stage still at Strasbourg, arrived at the fortress. The *4. Reserve-Division* took Schlettstadt on 24th October.

Werder now set about concentrating his forces at Vesoul, from here to observe Belfort and possibly to encircle it, to secure the line of the Ognon and to hold Gray on the Saône with two brigades; an attempt to take Dijon would be made when the two reserve divisions were nearer. Then on the 29th news came that the French had evacuated Dijon and given up any idea of defending it; the possibility of taking such a wealthy and significant city, an important road and rail junction, which would be important politically and which had many resources of use to the German troops was worth a risk and on the morning of the 30th Werder ordered two brigades to approach the city; if they found it occupied they were to take it by force only under the most advantageous conditions. He then marched off with the main body towards Vesoul.

On 27th October the newly-arrived French commander at Dijon, Colonel Fauconnet, had ordered his troops to leave the city on the 28th as a result of the fighting on the Vingeanne. On the 28th many of the inhabitants angrily objected to this, and telegrams from Tours demanded energetic resistance; the authorities were forced to reverse the decision, the *garde nationale* were rearmed, and the departed troops were recalled. By the

30th some 4,000 troops were available to defend the city, along with *gardes mobiles* and *gardes nationales* from the Côte d'Or. On the 30th itself fighting developed to the east of Dijon, and the Germans pushed into the city itself; heavy street fighting took place until nightfall, when the Germans withdrew from Dijon intending to renew the attack on the 31st. Very early on the morning of the 31st the city authorities began negotiating over the surrender of the city, and the Germans occupied Dijon at 1300hrs that afternoon. The capture of Dijon made a considerable impact on the French authorities, who now felt that Lyon was threatened; as a consequence the bulk of the troops at Besançon were withdrawn to Chagny in the Saône Valley, and Garibaldi's forces moved from Dôle to Autun. (The troops at Besançon were now under General Michel, who had replaced Cambriels; Cambriels had originally been captured by the Germans at Sedan but had suffered such a severe head wound that they released him, and after rejoining the service and being given command at Besançon he had now been obliged to resign because of the effects of his wound.) Beginning on 16th November the bulk of Michel's troops were transported west to join the Army of the Loire. These movements immediately put Belfort much further away from large organised French field forces. Another result was that the *XIV. Armee-Corps* now concentrated more on Dijon than Vesoul; the *4. Reserve-Division* arrived in the area later in November, and was given the task of protecting communications from Gray on the Saône to Vesoul and beyond.

#### The War in Eastern France from early November 1870 until February 1871

The capture of Dijon by the Germans set the framework for the war in Eastern France until its end. The Germans used Dijon as a base for a large number of small advances to the west and south-west as far as Autun and to the south and south-east, which resulted in frequent smaller battles with Garibaldi's troops and various French forces. At the same time Werder had to observe the fortress of Langres, which was held by some 15,000 men, to the north. The French, despite assembling large numbers of troops in the region, were unable to achieve any successes against Werder and his numerically much-inferior forces, for one thing the French commanders failed to organise a co-ordinated attack using all available forces. At the end of November the *VII. Armee-Corps* (minus one infantry division) under *General der Infanterie* von Zastrow was ordered to Châtillon-sur-Seine from the area of Metz, with orders to move on to Troyes. This brought a second German army corps into the area; they were to operate independently of one another, and on 8th December orders arrived for them- they were between them to protect the communications of the *II.* and *III. Armee* and fully pacify the southern areas of the *Generalgouvernements* of Rheims and Lorraine; this was to be done using mobile forces which were to attack the enemy at every opportunity. Werder's primary tasks were to contain Langres which was a base for frequent small operations by the French, to cover the siege of Belfort, and his attention was also drawn by Moltke to the area between Dôle and Arc et Senans south-east of Dijon, where his troops had previously mounted smaller operations. Zastrow initially deployed part of his corps along the railway line Chaumont-Châtillon-Troyes, with the remainder in the area Châtillon-Tonnerre-Nuits. On 15th December he was ordered to advance to Auxerre as a precaution against possible activity by the Army of the Loire based at Bourges. His troops arrived at Auxerre on 20th December and detachments were sent on towards the Loire.

As a result of the new orders Werder now dispatched a brigade under *Generalmajor* von der Goltz to Langres, there they inflicted some loss on French *gardes mobiles* outside the fortress, and took up a position north of the fortress which allowed them to protect German communications to the north and north-west and respond to any French attempt to march south from the fortress. At the same time in response to reports of increasing French strength to the south of Dijon Werder sent the bulk of the *badische Feld-Division* towards Beaune from Dijon, this led to a violent clash with some 20,000 French troops under General Crémer at Nuits St. Georges on 18th December, which ended in victory for the Germans who lost around 940 men to the French losses of 2,000 dead and wounded and 650 prisoners. The French used many modern American breechloading rifles and 18 English guns in this action. There were several other clashes over a wide area at this time. There were clear signs that the French forces south of Dijon were becoming stronger and more effective, and Werder now began to concentrate his forces more closely around Dijon.

Soon after this there were signs of the arrival of large French forces in the Doubs Valley, with many transports along the railway leading to Besançon. This eventually led to Werder evacuating Dijon and Gray and concentrating at Vesoul, as it became clear that powerful French forces including possibly elements of the Army of the Loire were moving into the area.

On 19th December the French decided to send elements of the Army of the Loire that had retreated to Bourges earlier in the month after the battles around Orléans to Eastern France. This army was put under the command of General Bourbaki and consisted initially of three army corps (two from Bourges, the *18<sup>e</sup>* and *20<sup>e</sup>*, and a new unit, the *24<sup>e</sup> corps d'armée* which was still forming at Lyon) and the Division Crémer which had been operating south of Dijon. A third corps from the Army of the Loire (*15<sup>e</sup>*) was added later. This was an attempt by the French to achieve significant results without having to face the German armies around Paris, by mounting a strategic attack on their communications in Lorraine. The prospects seemed promising, as the French would be able to deploy greatly superior numbers against the German *XIV. Armee-Corps*, which at that stage had less than 40,000 men, and which had to cover the whole area from Dijon to Belfort.

It was the end of the month before Bourbaki was able to begin his advance from the area south-west of Besançon, by which time many of the troops were cold and hungry after the mismanaged rail transport from Bourges. It took some time before the German command became fully aware of what the French were doing; initially Werder had evacuated Dijon and Gray and on 30th December his forces were concentrated at Vesoul, with one brigade in an advanced position at Villersexel. On 5th January in bitter winter weather, with deep snow covering the fields, the roads covered with ice and winter fog limiting visibility, strong French columns appeared in the area and in a number of smaller clashes some 500 French prisoners were taken who revealed to the Germans that Bourbaki's army was in front of them. The situation was now clear to the *Grosses Hauptquartier* and on 6th and 7th January Moltke issued appropriate orders: Werder was to cover the siege of Belfort under all circumstances; the *VII. Armee-Corps* was ordered to concentrate at Châtillon-sur-Seine, the missing infantry division of the corps which

was en route to Paris from Northern France was diverted to Châtillon; the *II. Armee-Corps*, which had shortly before arrived at Montargis south of Paris was ordered to march rapidly to Nuits; a new army, the *Süd-Armee* was to be formed, consisting of the *II.*, *VII.*, and *XIV. Armee-Corps*, to be commanded by *General der Kavallerie* von Manteuffel; in view of the poor organisation of the French supply system and its reliance on the railways, preparations were to be made to destroy the railway lines running from Langres to Chaumont, from Epinal to St. Loup, and from close to Belfort to Mulhouse. The War Ministry in Baden was to despatch suitable *Ersatztruppen* (training units) to southern areas of Baden to observe the Rhine and to prevent possible attempts to cross the river by French raiding parties at a later point.

On the French side there was some confusion over the objectives of the operation. The initial phase was to have involved an attack by Bourbaki, Garibaldi and Crémer to take Dijon, Gray and Vesoul, this plan was confounded when the Germans evacuated Dijon and Gray; Crémer occupied Dijon on 29th December, and when Garibaldi arrived there he moved his division to Gray. The condition of Paris, which was nearing surrender, called for an advance via Langres and Chaumont in conjunction with operations by other French armies, the relief of Belfort would require a vigorous advance to the east, and an assault on German communications in Lorraine would require an advance to the north. Bourbaki now assembled his three corps south-west of Besançon, and the French Minister of War, Freycinet, ordered a further corps, the *15<sup>e</sup>*, to be brought to the Doubs from Bourges; this began its rail journey on the 4th, and the movement was mismanaged such that its arrival in the Doubs Valley caused confusion and delays to French supply, and the last troops only arrived on 16th January when the Battle of the Lisaine was at its height (the troops were to be unloaded at Clerval, in response to fears of possible German advances in the area of Blamont to the south-east of Montbéliard).

Bourbaki began his advance at the beginning of January, with his initial objective being to relieve Belfort. Intending to isolate the besieging force, he faced Werder south of Vesoul from the 5th, but did not attack, even though his far greater numbers would more or less have ensured victory. Instead he began manoeuvring against Werder's left wing in an attempt to cut him off from Belfort; Werder now began to march to the Lisaine, and on the 9th there was a battle at Villersexel on the Ognon which only briefly slowed the German march. Already on the 9th French advanced elements came into contact with outposts of the German siege force to the west of Montbéliard, and at this stage a rapid advance by French troops in the Doubs Valley would probably have reached Belfort before Werder could arrive. There was no French advance and on the 11th Werder reached the Lisaine and had time to thoroughly prepare his defences. At the same time he had to reorganise his supply lines, previously his line of communications had followed the route from Epinal to Vesoul and then on to Gray and Dijon, at very short notice he had to move his supply and other rear-area units to the area Belfort-Montbéliard with a new supply line being established via the railways in the southern part of Alsace (the whole process was only possible through extensive use of the telegraph to make the necessary arrangements). This reorganisation was not complete when the French attacked on the 15th, and the German troops on the Lisaine were short of food for much of the battle. The supply columns of the siege corps at Belfort made non-stop trips to and from

their depots in Alsace to help the *XIV. Armee-Corps*, with the result that they came close to disintegration under the strain.

The French movements were hampered by a shortage of officers in the army, the supply system was disrupted by confusion on the railways to the rear, there was a shortage of supply columns, and the columns coming from the Doubs had to make their way up steep ice-covered roads to reach the army, with many wagons carrying only half a load and with double the number of draught animals normally required; it was only on the 15th that Bourbaki was in a position to attack on the Lisaine, and in a three-day battle he failed to break the German defence and ordered a retreat. The retreat became a disaster when the two German corps under Manteuffel, which had started their march on the 14th, and had advanced to the Sône without anything other than some fighting in front of Langres and some skirmishes in their flanks and rear to hinder them- neither the garrison of Langres nor Garibaldi at Dijon made any attempt to interfere- cut the rail links between Besançon and the rest of France. He could perhaps have held a position based on Besançon, however the *Intendant* there informed him that there were only enough supplies there to feed his army for a week (a later investigation found that there were sufficient supplies to feed the army for six weeks in the fortress and around the railway station; this is a typical example of the kind of inefficiency that plagued the French effort for much of the Franco-Prussian War), and he then attempted to march through the Jura Mountains only to end up attempting suicide, with his army being forced to cross into Switzerland.

The advance by Bourbaki was the only time during the siege when there was any prospect of relief for Belfort from outside. In the event the only effect on the siege was the delay imposed by the removal of troops including a number of siege artillery units to strengthen the defences at Montbéliard and along the Lisaine, once the battle was over they quickly returned to Belfort. It still took one month after the Battle of the Lisaine to bring the fortress to the point of surrender.

What if Bourbaki had relieved Belfort?

Had Bourbaki broken the German defence on the Lisaine and relieved Belfort, Werder would have been able to fall back towards Mulhouse into the area where his new supply base was being developed. The French would probably have captured the great majority of the German siege guns with their ammunition at Belfort. The French supply system was in a state of some confusion at this time, but assuming that they would be able to bring the railway line from the Doubs Valley to Montbéliard and on towards Belfort into use their situation would have improved very quickly. A further advance into Alsace and towards the Rhine by Bourbaki would have been unlikely, as the two corps under Manteuffel were rapidly approaching the Sône from the north-west and as such he would have been obliged to move a large part of his army back down the Doubs Valley after reorganising and seeing to the defences of Belfort and the surrounding area. Politically it would have given an enormous boost to French morale generally, however with Paris heading for surrender it would have done nothing to change the outcome of the

war other than to give the French a slightly better position in any ceasefire and peace negotiations.

### The Fortress of Belfort in 1870

In 1870 Belfort had a population of 8,400. Railway lines from Paris via Vesoul from the north-west, from Lyon via Montbéliard from the south-west, joined the line coming from the east from Mulhouse at Belfort (the Mulhouse line also connected Belfort to Basel and Strasbourg). A result of the siege was that the Germans were denied the use of all these lines for the duration of the war. The old town occupied an area of higher ground on the left bank of the Savoureuse, and stood inside a five-sided fortification, with towers redoubts at three of the corners. On the northern side a powerful hornwork stood in advance of the main line, and on the southern side the former *chateau*, developed into a citadel by Vauban, stood on a cliff overlooking the town. The citadel was covered by three lines of walls with bastions to the south and south-east. In 1814 the town stood on the line of operations of Schwarzenberg's army, which advanced from Basel towards Troyes and Paris. Although Belfort was encircled and at one stage bombarded by Bavarian artillery it did not fall during the campaign. Beginning in 1817 the French strengthened the fortifications of Langres and Belfort in an effort to strengthen the defences along this route into France. Work at Belfort was directed by General Haxo, the one time commander of the engineers (*génie*) of Napoleon I.'s Imperial Guard. At Belfort he constructed a number of casemates for artillery and accommodation. Work was carried on at Belfort until 1842.

After the town had been fortified by Vauban, suburbs eventually developed outside the walls- on the right bank of the Savoureuse the Faubourg des Ancêtres, the Faubourg de France and the Faubourg de Montbéliard, and to the north-east the Faubourg de Neuf-Brisach (along the road running between the Forts of de la Justice and de la Miotte). To the north-east of the main fortress the two forts of de la Miotte and de la Justice stood on rocky ridges, the slopes of which fell away steeply from the fortifications. These forts were connected to each other and to Belfort by fortified lines, and the area enclosed by these formed a large entrenched camp (*camp retranchée permanent du vallon*). These forts were very strong, and blocked any view of the citadel from the north-east. The Savoureuse flowed along the foot of the fortified higher ground, in places flowing through the valley in numerous channels. On the right bank of the Savoureuse stood the Fort de Barres, built by Séré de Rivière in 1867 in expectation of a war with Prussia. In the form of a crownwork and with a number of casemates it covered the Faubourg des Ancêtres and the Faubourg de France. To the south lay Fort de Bellevue, an irregularly-shaped and less powerful work. On a ridge to the south-east of the town stood the Fort de Basses-Perches and Fort des Hautes-Perches, both in the shape of lunettes; these were constructed after war was declared in 1870, initially by troops of Douay's 7<sup>e</sup> corps *d'armée* which stood at Belfort for a time in July and August, and after they left work was continued on these fortifications by the garrison. This ridge was the weakest part of the defences, as it gave an attacker a covered approach to the fortress through the woods

to the south, and any attacker on the crest of the ridge dominated the citadel of Belfort 1,000 metres away and could fire into the fortifications on the right bank of the Savoureuse from the rear. As well as building the forts on the Perches the French brought the villages of Perouse, Danjoutin and Andelnans, and several woods into the defensive perimeter to cover the approaches to them from the south.

In 1870 the fortress was under the command of Colonel Denfert-Rochereau of the *génie* (he was appointed commander on 19th October). The garrison had a strength of 17,637 men- 13,000 *gardes mobiles*, 3,000 line infantry, 800 *Gardes nationales*, 240 *garde nationale mobilisée*, 357 officers, 240 customs officers and gendarmes. The fortress had 1,900 gunners with 341 guns, howitzers and mortars available (the defences required 329), and a stock of 186,000 artillery rounds. Many of the guns were sited in well-protected positions. Some of them were mounted such that they could fire at ranges of 4,000-6,000 metres, which allowed the defence to delay the Germans from establishing themselves in areas closer to the fortress.

There were ample supplies of food in Belfort. When it became clear the enemy were approaching the inhabitants were ordered to obtain food supplies for 95 days for themselves. In addition there were substantial stocks in reserve- there was sufficient flour, rice, vegetables, biscuit, etc for 180 days; the meat supply consisted of a large quantity of salted meat and a herd of 1,000 cattle; there were stocks of salt, coffee, wine etc. for 180 days; there was fodder for 180 days for the horses, but rather less hay.

Colonel Denfert-Rochereau did everything possible to obstruct and delay the Germans. He had engineers strengthen the works, trees and houses that might help the enemy to approach were cut down or demolished, on the west bank of the Savoureuse a deep, wide ditch was dug which curved through the Faubourg des Ancêtres, the Faubourg de France, the Faubourg de Montbéliard and ended at the Savoureuse thus providing a second line of defence on the western side, the approaches to each suburb were covered by an earthwork with one gun, on the eastern side of the Faubourg de France a redoubt with two guns covered the approaches to the new ditch, a similar redoubt on the western edge of the suburbs covered the approaches to the railway. In order to reduce the effects of enemy artillery fire barracks, magazines and other military buildings were covered by trees and earth, and places of refuge were set up for all troops in advanced positions. All works were connected by telegraph wires. He also set up a workshop for manufacturing cannon balls. Outlying woods, farms and villages were fortified and garrisoned with the intention of holding the Germans away for as long as possible.

Many German commentators regarded Belfort as being stronger than Strasbourg. It was a strongly fortified and garrisoned mountain sector with room for an army of 30,000 men, with ample supplies and an energetic commandant. **Map 2** shows the fortifications as they were at the time of the Franco-Prussian War, and many of the outlying works constructed by the French after war had broken out. It shows the situation at the time of the Battle of the Lisaine in mid-January 1871, by which time the village of Danjoutin and the woods to the south, and the village of Andelnans off the southern edge of the map, had been taken by the Germans.

### The *1. Reserve-Division* arrives at Belfort

The advance of the *XIV. Armee-Corps* to the Sône made Belfort an important and urgent problem for the Germans; its large garrison and its position in Werder's rear made it both a potential threat to his communications and also a potential focal point for *franc-tireur* operations in the Vosges. On 28th October the *Grosses Hauptquartier* issued orders for it to be besieged and taken, a task given to the *1. Reserve-Division* and whatever parts of the *4. Reserve-Division* at Neuf-Brisach could be spared. At the end of October troops arrived from Silesia to garrison Strasbourg, and on the 31st the *1. Reserve-Division* under *Generallieutenant* von Tresckow I. set out for Belfort. Including detachments from the *4. Reserve-Division* he had for the moment only eleven battalions, seven and three quarter cavalry regiments, and four batteries, as there were still many detachments out in various areas of Alsace. On approaching the fortress the Germans became involved in numerous actions against *franc-tireurs* and (from 2nd November) outlying detachments of the garrison, for example at Les Freves, Rougemont, and Petit Magny. On 3rd November the fortress was blockaded on the northern and western sides, but for the moment only by a fairly loose line and at some distance. On the same day Tresckow made contact with *XIV. Armee-Corps* at Vesoul, troops from which then occupied Lure as a contact point to the forces around Belfort. Trains were able to leave Belfort until midday on the 3rd, the train leaving for Besançon at 1400 was the last one. Once the various detachments arrived from Alsace Tresckow was able to complete the full encirclement of Belfort, and over two weeks after the 3rd the task was completed after a number of actions, with the German line running on the line of the villages of Cravant, Essert, Bavilliers (finally cleared of French troops on November 27th), and Prouse. The French defence was active and energetic, with something being undertaken every day. Small sorties on 7th and 10th November were driven back by the Germans. No village or locality on the approaches to the fortress was given up without a fight. In particular the repeated battles for Bavilliers, which the French defended with great determination, imposed delays on the Germans.

Measures were taken by the Germans to secure the approaches to Belfort. On 9th November the town of Montbéliard at the junction of the Lisaine, Savoureuse and Allaine rivers was taken. The *chateau* was garrisoned and acted as the main outpost to the south of Belfort for the purpose of observing French activities in the direction of Besançon; the *chateau* overlooked the Rhône-Rhine Canal which followed the Allaine Valley and also the railway line from Switzerland which joined the Lyon-Belfort line at Montbéliard. Detachments covered the area between Montbéliard and the Swiss border at Delle. During these operations Tresckow was able to send detachments to the south-west in support of Werder's advance. On 13th November Tresckow's troops took Clerval and L'Isle sur Doubs after two small actions, with the French *gardes mobiles* withdrawing to the south; explosives were removed from a bridge, and there was no sign of any *franc-tireurs*. In his report on the action Tresckow stated that snow had been falling for two days.

### Development of the German Artillery Attack

Once the Germans had completed their encirclement, Tresckow saw at once that the strongly-held fortress would not yield either to a blockade or to a bombardment, and he decided on a combination of bombardment and formal siege. He initially asked the *Grosses Hauptquartier* for 100 siege guns. At this stage all that was available were the guns which had been used at Neuf-Brisach, and these were now ordered to Belfort. At the same time Tresckow lost all the units he had at Belfort from the *4. Reserve-Division* (except for one battalion and one squadron); the division had completed its task in Alsace and was on its way to the Sône Valley, reaching Giromagny on the 15th. The first guns and *Festungs-Artillerie-Kompagnien* arrived on 18th November, and preparations for a formal siege began immediately. The engineering works were under the direction of General von Mertens, who had directed the engineering works at the Siege of Strasbourg, and the artillery operations were directed by *Oberst* (Colonel) von Scheliha, who had also been at Strasbourg. The overall shortage of siege units at this stage of the war meant that the numbers of artillery and *pionier* units at Belfort increased only over time, most of the units arriving later were from the South German States.

The Germans faced a number of problems from the outset. The numbers of troops available barely allowed a full investment. Many detachments were needed to protect communications and to observe French activities in the Doubs Valley, from where the French made numerous efforts to disturb the siege. The rocky ground hindered the construction of earthworks, and the early arrival of a severe winter added to the strain on the troops. In view of the problems, Tresckow decided to begin the attack with a bombardment from the heights at Essert and Bavilliers to the south-west of Belfort, although it was clear that a formal assault would eventually have to be made from the south towards the citadel via the Perches. In the face of lively French resistance and in freezing weather 7 batteries were established at Essert on the night of 2nd-3rd December. These had 20 guns which were to fire at a range of 2,000 metres against the town and citadel and at 1,700-2,200 metres against the fortifications. When the Germans opened fire on the morning of the 3rd, they were surprised to receive fire in return from 60-80 French guns, and although the town was bombarded for several days and several large fires resulted the French artillery could not be silenced and the defenders made several sorties. The French guns fired with some effect on Essert and Bavilliers, and the Germans were forced to withdraw some guns. Tresckow realised that this approach would not succeed, and with the formal assault still some way off due to insufficient resources, he decided to continue the artillery bombardment and new batteries were to be built such that they would be of use later when the formal attack began. As more guns became available more batteries were built, outside Bavilliers and north of Andelnans.

As new batteries were built more guns entered the battle as follows:

Date	No. of Guns	Range (metres)
25/28 December	20	1250 - 3500
7 January	24	1300 - 2400
21 January	16	1400 - 2400
7 February	32	400 - 1200

The batteries of 25th and 28th December at Bavilliers fired on the Perches; those of 7th January on Danjoutin; of 21st January on the citadel; of 7th February on the Perches; and those of 9th/10th February (set up in the captured forts on the Perches) fired on the citadel. As new batteries came into use some of the older ones went out of use. From 10th-20th January a total of 34 siege guns with 7 *Festungs-Artillerie-Kompagnien* marched away to the Lisaine and the chateau at Montbéliard to help in the battle against Bourbaki's army. On 9th January 50 guns were in use, on 21st January 66, on 8th February 65, on 11th February 55. Batteries for 40 more guns were under construction, so on 13th February 1871 97 guns were ready to fire on the town and citadel at a range of 1,100-1,400 metres when a ceasefire halted operations. By the end of the siege the Germans had built 55 batteries and set up 185 guns in very difficult weather and ground conditions. The German guns fired a total of 98,552 rounds. The German artillery lost 50 dead and 346 wounded during the siege. One French bomb had landed in the magazine of a battery leaving 1 officer and 12 men killed or wounded.

The French artillery fired 86,200 rounds, and had 56 gun barrels and 115 gun carriages damaged.

#### Effects of Terrain and Weather

Terrain and weather in the area of Belfort made the siege even more difficult for the Germans than it was anyway. On 3rd December, when the artillery opened fire, there was frost and snow; on 10th December the temperature stood at  $-10^{\circ}$ ; on the 13th a thaw, then rain until the 21st; then frost returned with the temperature falling as low as  $-18^{\circ}$ , and continued until 5th January with snow at times; then there was a thaw until 14th January, then again frost, after several days a thaw, then until 1st February alternately rain, heavy snow, and frost, then until 11th February heavy rain and snow. The roads were at times covered with snow or mud, and over a period of time their condition worsened until they were impassable at times. The horses could not cope, and many died, the lightest wagons sank into the fields and could not be moved, the men's boots were often sucked off their feet and left behind in the mud. The equipping of the batteries and the bringing up of supplies of all kinds- food, ammunition, clothing- often faced insuperable difficulties. At times batteries could not fire for lack of ammunition, food supplies were inadequate, inside the batteries the ground would be covered first with snow, then with water, the breastworks would collapse and the gun platforms become unusable. The ground would at times freeze up to a depth of 35 cm, and work with picks and shovels would be slow and arduous. The men were under great strain. They would be on duty for 36 hours- 12 hours in the batteries, 12 hours working, 12 hours marching to and from the distant and often poor quarters and resting there. Many men became ill with frostbite and because of the cold. At the end of December the companies had an average of 15-16 percent of their men ill, by the end of January 30 percent or more were ill. Morale would be reduced further by the effects of French shells landing in the batteries- the heavy shells often caused extensive destruction, and several men would be killed or wounded, often suffering terrible injuries.

## Progress of the Siege

From an early stage the Prussians began the construction of parallels at various points around the fortress. When they began to attack Fort de Bellevue with parallels the French mounted several sorties in an attempt to destroy the works; the Prussians drove them back after heavy close-quarter fighting in the trenches. Colonel Denfert-Rochereau commented; "*Les prussiens se tinrent trop bons*". At the same time the Germans did not have the resources either in guns or men to pursue a formal assault until the end of the year.

A feature of the siege were the battles resulting from French sorties and German attacks intended to take ground. The main actions were as follows:

16th November: In the morning there was a sortie by 3 battalions with 6 guns towards Bessoncourt. It was driven back, with the French losing 22 dead and wounded, and 58 prisoners. Colonels Chapelot and Journet were wounded, and the commander of the *gardes mobiles* of Haute Saône, Colonel Lanoir, was killed. The Germans permitted the French to collect his body the next day.

23rd November: A similar sortie ended with the French being driven back and the Germans securing important positions nearer to the fortress. The French suffered heavy losses in these actions, but German losses were significant as well as Denfert-Rochereau successfully drew them into heavy small-arms fire.

3rd December: Regiment *Ostrowski (Landwehr)* took new positions and fought *mit bravour*.

16th December: Tresckow reported that the fortress was continuing an energetic defence, with many sorties. The Germans had taken Bois Bosmont, le grand Bois and Andelnans. German losses- 1 officer, 79 men; the French loss in prisoners alone was 1 officer and 90 men.

8th January: The Germans stormed Danjoutin on the night of 7th/8th December, *Landwehr-Bataillon Schneidemühl* under *Hauptmann* von Manstein which made the attack distinguished itself. French losses were heavy and included 2 staff officers, 16 officers, over 700 men captured unwounded. German losses were 1 officer and 13 men dead, 65 wounded.

16th January: A sortie by 7 French companies towards Essert during the Battle of the Lisaine. They were driven back after being taken under direct fire by two siege guns.

21st January: On the night of 20th/21st January the Germans took and fortified the village of Perouse and the woods of le haut Taillis and Bois Bailly, capturing 5 officers and 80 men unwounded. German losses were "not insignificant".

Towards the end of December Tresckow received reinforcements from the *4. Reserve-Division* and *Generalgouvernement Elsass* which brought his strength to 20 battalions, 7 squadrons, 6 batteries with 18 *Festungs-Artillerie-Kompagnien*, and 6 *Pionier-Kompagnien*. These forces would have been sufficient for a formal assault, however there was now a delay for the Germans due to the threat of the fortress being relieved from outside, as Bourbaki's army appeared in the Doubs Valley (the reinforcements had been sent in response to the French advance). Tresckow deployed more than half of his infantry and cavalry to cover the approaches to Belfort, from Croix on the Swiss border south of Delle to the Rhône-Rhine Canal and from there to the left wing of *XIV. Armee-Corps* at Villersexel-Rougemont. Nonetheless work on the siege continued and by 26th December preparations were under way for the formal assault across the Perches towards the citadel. By 9th January three groups of batteries were ready: three of the original batteries at Essert, five by Bavilliers, six in the woods south of the Perches; one individual battery was in support from the south at Andelnans, another from the east at Bessoncourt. The 50 guns firing from these batteries quickly gained the upper hand over those in the forts on the Perches. However before an advance could be made on the Perches the strongly-held and -fortified village of Danjoutin to their south would have to be taken. This was done on the night of 7th January with a surprise attack by 7 companies of *Landwehr* under *Hauptmann* von Manstein. The French garrison had been severely shaken by a bombardment from a new German battery on the edge of the woods to the south of the village. The loss of Danjoutin was the first heavy blow for Belfort. The continuing heavy bombardment was depressing morale, disease was increasing among the population, however Colonel Denfert-Rochereau was determined to continue resistance. Shortly afterwards news was smuggled in from Switzerland of Bourbaki's advance and morale at once improved.

Immediately after the Battle of the Lisaine the siege corps was reinforced. The capture of the village of Perouse and the woods nearby by the Germans on 21st January allowed them to begin work on the first parallel, 1,800 metres long, a difficult job which was not disturbed by the French. On 27th January an assault on the Perches seemed feasible. At 0900 the *2. Bataillon* of the Pomeranian *Landwehr-Regiment nr. 14* attacked in three columns, and suffered very heavy losses. The two forts, with deep ditches excavated from solid rock and bombproof blockhouses, were well defended; French artillery and infantry reserves were ready to the rear of the forts, and guns from the other forts supported the defence. The Germans lost more than 350 men, many of whom were captured when they could not climb out of the deep ditches around the forts. An infantry attack by the French down the slopes of the ridge completed what was a rout for the Pomeranians. The formal siege was now resumed. On 1st February the second parallel was established, halfway to the Perches. The forts now came under fire from new, nearer batteries.

By this stage the terrain and cold weather was making enormous demands on the Germans. For some time the siegeworks had been manned by only 8 to 9 battalions, so the men had very little rest. Heavy losses among the *pioniere* led to the despatch of two fresh companies from Strasbourg. On 3rd February a thaw set in, the trenches filled with water, and the new batteries could only be completed with the greatest difficulty due to

the wet roads. This had all affected the health of the troops and often the battalions were able to field only 300 men.

In the meantime the German artillery silenced the guns on the Perches, and on 8th February the two works were taken without a struggle after Denfert-Rochereau concluded that any attempt to defend them would be hopeless and evacuated them (only at the Basses-Perches did the French put up some resistance as they were withdrawing). Prior to the German attack Denfert-Rochereau asked for permission to send Captain Châtel to Basel to get instructions from the French Government, and for a ceasefire. The Germans allowed Captain Châtel to pass through their lines but refused a ceasefire and the attack went ahead. The guns in the other forts made it difficult for a time for the Germans to establish their artillery in the captured forts. However four Bavarian batteries, each of 4 24 pound guns, were eventually established on the Perches and did good work firing on the citadel. On 13th February a trench of 624 metres connected them; this made the third parallel, and a sap was under construction from the Fort de Basses-Perches towards the town.

### The Surrender of Belfort

The Germans were now able to begin the attack on the citadel. The arrival of reinforcements and the return of freezing weather improved the situation for the attackers. The defenders had also suffered dreadfully. Almost all the buildings in the town were damaged, many were burnt down, the fortifications including the citadel had suffered some damage. The garrison had lost some 4,700 men, 336 civilians had died, and disease was increasing the suffering. Typhus was spreading, also smallpox was present- in mid-November smallpox had appeared among the French troops holding a position close to the village of Cravant during the period when the Germans were engaged in closing the ring more tightly around Belfort (smallpox although endemic in parts of France was not present in Germany at the beginning of the war, and as a result of its being taken there by French prisoners of war and German troops some 80,000 people died from the disease in Germany and elsewhere); this disease spread to the town, and a number of troops and civilians died from it during the siege. The prospect of sustained resistance was gone, as was any hope of relief from outside.

Negotiations, with Swiss help, between General von Tresckow and Colonel Denfert-Rochereau had gone on at various times during the siege, over such matters as the cessation of the German bombardment, or the possible evacuation of the women, children and old people in Belfort, but nothing had come of them. Now however the end was in sight and Captain Châtel sent the following telegram to the French Government from Basel:

Basel, 6th February 1871, 4PM. For the Minister of War

*Since the rumours of the capitulation of Paris and the declaration of a ceasefire in some areas of France have reached Belfort, the Governor has sent me to Basel to clarify the situation and to seek orders from you. Yesterday, 5th February, the enemy had still not*

*taken any of our advanced forts. However, since 26th January, when he made an unsuccessful attack on Les Perches, he has commenced and very actively continued works approaching these positions, and on 5th February he had come to within roughly 80 metres of them. A new attack is imminent, and may even have taken place during the past night. The Governor will resist it, but does not expect to be able to defeat it. One must assume that from one day to the next the enemy will come into possession of the Perches, and will then dominate the citadel and attack the Forts des Barres and de Bellevue from the rear. The enemy fire is significant, through both the numbers and the nature and dimensions of the projectiles fired. The fortress can only answer weakly and in an unconvincing manner with 16 pound balls and bombs, as the remaining long 12 and 24 pound shells (altogether some 10,000) are being saved for the day of the attack. The forts Château, Juit (Justice?), Miotte and Barres, especially the former, have suffered damage, although none as yet has a breach. The ditch sides quickly get repaired, except at Barres, where a supporting wall has collapsed. Belfort can still offer resistance, as it still has supplies of cartridges and provisions. The commandant is determined to carry out his duty to the end, although he cannot predict the length of time over which the fortress can offer resistance, particularly in view of the impact of recent events on the garrison and population. If the Government feels that the current situation makes further sacrifices pointless and that it would be appropriate to surrender the fortress, the Governor wishes that the Government should negotiate the terms of the surrender itself, and ensure that in light of the fortress` continued ability to offer resistance the papers and archives, especially those of the génie, should be brought out from it, and the garrison be permitted to march with arms and baggage to the nearest French outpost.*

Châtel, Captain of the General Staff

The Government in Paris received the telegram on the 7th. After negotiations in Versailles a telegram reached General von Tresckow which ended the siege:

Versailles, 13th February, 11AM. To General von Tresckow, Commander of the forces at Belfort.

*In view of the circumstances the commandant of Belfort is empowered to surrender the fortress. The garrison will march out with military honours and take with them the fortress archives; they will march to the nearest French outpost.*

For the Minister of Foreign Affairs. Picard. Bismarck.

Colonel Denfert-Rochereau still refused to surrender, asking for a direct order from the French Government to do so; this came when the armistice which had been agreed on 28th January at Versailles and which covered all of France except the *départements* Doubs, Jura and Côte d`Or, was extended to these areas on 15th February; with this came the formal confirmation of the surrender of Belfort. Negotiations for the capitulation took place at Pouse on the 16th, and on the 18th the garrison marched out, leaving 1,200 sick

and wounded behind. The Germans were surprised at the extent of the destruction they found in Belfort, with the strongest casemates wrecked by the heavy siege guns.

### Conclusion

The Siege of Belfort saw the best-prepared French defence of the Franco-Prussian War encounter the least well-prepared German attack. Certainly the presence of a full siege train from the start and more troops would have brought victory somewhat earlier to the Germans; however the action is one of the few bright spots of the Franco-Prussian War for the French in an overall very depressing picture.

After the Franco-Prussian War Belfort saw a rapid expansion of its population and industries, with many people moving there from Alsace and Lorraine who refused to live under German rule. As part of the programme of fortifying the eastern fortiers, the town became the centre of a major fortified zone intended to block access through the Belfort Gap from the east, with extensive construction of fortifications from the Swiss border to the area of Giromagny to the north of Belfort; north of there further fortifications linked the Belfort fortified area to the fortifications built around Epinal at the same time. The work, carried out by the engineer Séré de Rivières, saw the modernisation of the existing works around Belfort and the construction of numerous new and powerful works at various sites around the town and to the north, west, north-east, south and south-east.

During the First World War, in 1914 there was some initial fighting as the French advanced into Southern Alsace, but the area quickly became quiet and remained so for the rest of the war. The Germans would have needed massive resources to break through the fortified zone, and there were no objectives in the region that would have warranted the effort.

### *Siege of Neuf-Brisach in November 1870*

Following the capture of the French fortress of Schlettstadt in Alsace in October 1870, German troops moved to invest and besiege Neuf-Brisach. This is a classic Vauban fortress (built in 1699), standing near to the Rhine with the German town of Breisach on the far bank. In 1870 there was a small French redoubt, Fort Mortier, very close to the bank of the Rhine some 2,400 metres from Neuf-Brisach and directly opposite Alt-Breisach (see Map 1).

Neuf-Brisach was fully encircled by German troops by 27th October, and the German *Festungsartilleriekompagnien* who had reduced Schlettstadt arrived with their siege guns before the fortress on 1st November. The fortress was held by 5,500 men with 111 guns, and was fully prepared for battle. Fort Mortier had 7 guns.

It was clear to the Germans that they could not begin a regular siege of Neuf-Brisach until Fort Mortier had been neutralised first, as it could pour flanking fire into any siege

works. On 2nd November 3 batteries (1 each of Prussian long and short 15cm guns, and 1 battery with captured French 15cm guns) began firing on Neuf-Brisach from Biesheim and Wolfgantzen. At the same time 12 guns began firing on Fort Mortier from Alt-Breisach, these were joined by 8 more on the 3rd giving a total of 20 guns in 4 batteries (2 batteries of Baden siege artillery from Rastatt with 12cm guns, 1 battery of 9cm guns and 1 mortar battery). Fort Mortier suffered heavy damage during the bombardment, although the garrison were able to shelter in casemates and suffered few casualties, and surrendered on the night of the 6th after negotiations had begun in the evening. Initially the Germans had some difficulty calibrating the fire onto Fort Mortier, this was resolved when they installed a telegraph line from the observation post in Alt-Breisach Cathedral to the firing positions. The German official report on the action at Neuf-Brisach and Mortier stated that 3,300 shells were fired at the fort (another source speaks of 3,514).

As soon as the fort surrendered the Germans were able to begin work on the first siege parallel facing Neuf-Brisach (Map 2 shows the area from which the siege works would approach the fortress). The battle for the fortress was quite violent. Initially the French were able to bring superior fire to bear onto the three batteries the Germans initially had firing on the fortress, so on the night of 7th November the besiegers built two more batteries, for heavy mortars, which began a very heavy and effective fire on the morning of the 8th. An eye-witness inside the fortress reported that the mortar bombs went through the houses to the floor and blew pieces of the walls onto the fortifications and into the ditches. The bombs also left large craters. Fire from the fortress gradually weakened, and according to German sources discipline in the garrison was badly affected- the commandant was forced to disarm the *Garde Nationale* and the *Franctireurs* on the 9th- and at 1.30PM on the afternoon of the 10th the white flag was raised. The Germans occupied the fortress at 10 o'clock on the morning of the 11th.

The town had been extensively damaged by the bombardment, although the fortifications were still fully usable. A total of 5,730 rounds had been fired by the besiegers at the fortress. The German artillery lost 5 dead and 22 wounded. The German official despatch reported the capture of 100 officers, 5,000 men as prisoners of war and 100 guns. One *Festungsartilleriekompagnie* remained as a garrison at Neuf-Brisach, the remainder moved on to Belfort.

German sources claim that there was a mutiny by some elements of the garrison which was partly responsible for the surrender. After the war in response to allegations regarding the behaviour of the garrison during the siege the French authorities held an enquiry into the matter. Statements were taken from a number of officers and men, although many of the former officers of the *garde mobile* of Haut-Rhin (part of Alsace) were unable to attend as they were now living in Germany and felt some bitterness at not being able to clear their names.

After 1871 the Germans rebuilt Fort Mortier and integrated it into their defence system. It became the headquarters of the Neuf-Brisach bridgehead (built between 1888 and 1914), and a 60cm. gauge fortress railway connected it with other areas of the bridgehead

France declared war on 19th July 1870. The war ended for most theatres on 28th January 1871 with the capitulation of Paris, and for the remaining theatres on 16th February. The war therefore lasted for 210 days.

During the opening period until 26th July the armies of the North German Confederation and the South German States were mobilising, and the full strategic deployment on the line Trier-Landau took 13 days.

In view of the period of mobilisation and deployment and the beginning of negotiations at Versailles on 28th January 1871, some 30 days need to be deducted from the total of 210, leaving a period of 180 days during which the German armies achieved their great victories.

During this period of 180 days the German armies were involved in 156 more or less significant smaller actions, fought 17 major battles, took 26 fortresses, captured 11650 officers and 363000 men, over 6700 guns, and 120 eagles or flags.

Therefore during each of the 6 months of the actual operations the German armies fought on average 26 actions and 3 battles, took 4 fortresses, captured 1950 officers and 60500 men, 1110 guns and 20 eagles or flags.

There was a smaller action on average nearly every day, a major battle every 9 days, a fortress captured every 6 days. For each day there was an average bag of 65 officers and 2070 men, and 38 guns, and 1 eagle or flag for every 2 of each 3 days.

#### Actions, Battles and Fortresses taken by Month

Up to the Capitulation of Sedan- 13 actions, 8 battles (Wissembourg, Wörth, Spicheren, Courcelles, Vionville, Gravelotte, Noisseville, Beaumont-Sedan); 4 fortress were taken- Lützelstein, Lichtenberg, Marsal, Vitry.

September- 13 actions; 4 fortresses were taken- Sedan, Lyon, Toul, Strasbourg.

October- 37 actions; 3 fortresses were taken- Soissons, Schlettstadt, Metz.

November- 15 actions, 2 battles(Amiens, Beaune-la-Rolande); 7 fortresses were taken- Verdun, Montbéliard, Neuf-Brisach, Ham, Thionville, La Fère, the Citadel of Amiens.

December- 30 actions, the battles around Orleans and on the Hallue; 2 fortresses were taken- Pfalzburg, Montmédy.

January- 48 actions, 3 battles (Le Mans, Montbéliard, St.Quentin); 5 fortresses were taken- Mézières, Rocroy, Péronne, Longwy, Paris.

February- the fortress of Belfort was occupied by German troops.

Paris was encircled from 19th September until 28th January, a total of 130 days, during which 22 larger actions were fought as the French sallied out. These have been added to the total of actions, although from their size and extent several of them might be included in the list of major battles. 22 actions in 130 days gives an average of 5-6 per month, and they actually took place as follows- September- 3, October- 8, November- 2, December- 4, January- 5.

The Germans also captured vast amounts of equipment, uniforms, transport, etc. of all kinds. The figures presented give a good idea of the extent of the French military defeat.

### **The Fate of the French Garrison of Vitry-le-François August 1870**

Vitry-le-François is a small fortress on the Marne some twenty miles south-east of Châlons-sur-Marne. In August 1870 it was held by a garrison of some 1,100 *Gardes Mobiles* and artillerymen. This article is based on reports in German and French newspapers, and shows what happened to the garrison as it was swept up in the events following the encirclement of Bazaine's army in Metz. It also illustrates very well the condition and state of readiness for war of the French *Gardes Mobiles* in the early stages of the Franco-Prussian War. These units had been set up in 1868 in an attempt to make more use of the available French manpower so as to allow the fielding of a large number of second-line formations in wartime. They were to consist of men who had not been conscripted, with two weeks of training each year; officers were appointed by the Prefects and ncos by the army. It was hoped that the *Garde Mobile* would provide 500,000 trained troops in wartime. In the event little was achieved before war broke out, as there was enormous opposition to the project and very limited funds were available. As a result when war was declared in July 1870 the *Garde Mobile* had had very little training, and little was available in the way of arms and uniforms. It was only later in the war that the *Garde Mobile* was able to take the field and face the Germans in open battle, even then they did not have either the discipline or the endurance of regular troops.

On 28th August the Berlin newspaper *Preussischer Staats-Anzeiger* reported on the capture of a large proportion of the garrison of Vitry:

*The garrison, a battalion of around 1,100 men, abandoned the fortress on 25th August as they felt they had no chance of holding out against the Prussians, and rather than wait for them to appear they marched out and set off for Châlons in an attempt to reach MacMahon's army. However cavalry of the Prussian 4. Kavallerie-Division caught up with them near the village of Espense between Verdun and Châlons on the 25th and after a brief struggle captured 800 men. The cavalry under the command of Herzog (Duke) Wilhelm von Mecklenburg was marching westwards, when a column estimated at 1,500*

*men was spotted on the heights outside the village. It was noticed that the column was marching in an orderly fashion, officers were in uniform, and the men, although not wearing uniforms were armed. The column was moving away rapidly and when it failed to stop several shells were fired at it and the 15. Uhlan-Regiment (Schleswig-Holsteinsches) then charged. The column formed square and met the uhlans with heavy fire. The resistance quickly crumbled, with some men firing their rifles into the ground, others threw them away, and some fought on. After a brief struggle the cavalry had taken 800 men prisoner.*

*The prisoners were marched away under the escort of a squadron of the 16. Husaren-Regiment (Schleswig-Holsteinsches), and these had considerable difficulties on the march as the column passed through villages where many of the prisoners had lived before the war, and they attempted to escape with the help of the inhabitants.*

The French newspaper *Progrès de la Marne* reported:

*On the night of Wednesday to Thursday the town of Vitry was evacuated by the Gardes Mobiles and the artillery. The town administration feared a possible Prussian bombardment and compelled the commandant to give up the defence of the town, and by one o'clock in the morning the guns on the walls had been spiked and thrown into the ditches. The Gardes Mobiles then marched out of the town in several detachments under the command of the commandant Duval and his officers. A person who came from Vitry last Thursday told us that packs, bread, cartridges etc. had been seen lying around near the village of Gravelines and there were fears over the fate of the young soldiers. It is possible that at this point the Gardes Mobiles had been gripped by some sort of panic and headed off across country, as we know that they passed through the villages of St. Quentin, Bassuet, Bavray, and Banauld-les-Dames, where they had halted for a time. At the latter village Prussian skirmishers had appeared and attacked them. The commandant was captured here. The companies of Mobiles were surrounded, shots were exchanged and a number of these young people were killed, wounded or captured. We also know that another detachment of the Garde Mobile was captured by the Prussians; when they marched through Passavant, some of the women who recognised their sons among the prisoners rushed to untie their bonds and help them escape; the Prussians responded with their sabres and the inhabitants in turn responded with gunfire, which forced the soldiers to withdraw briefly and enabled the freed prisoners to escape. Experience leads us to fear terrible reprisals for Passavant.*

*Serious errors appear to have been made during the withdrawal from Vitry. Instead of an orderly withdrawal the evacuation was a true flight, and this attempt to march 50 kilometres through a region known to be held by the enemy and without an advance guard or outposts and in detachments, suggests a level of inexperience which could only lead to disaster. The outlying sentries at Vitry, who had taken up their positions on Wednesday evening, did not learn of their comrades' departure until Thursday morning.*

Shortly after the cavalry overran the detachment of *Gardes Mobiles* near Espense, Württemberg troops marched into the area of Passavant. The newspaper *Schwäbischen Merkur* published an eye-witness account of this in a report dated 26th August:

*We Württembergers are in the country where champagne is grown, but with what impressions we have entered this paradise! A hard march was behind us, and heavy thunderstorms had gone down over our heads and soaked us to the skin. The sun at last broke through the clouds at three o'clock as we gazed down at the golden wine country, which smelling fresh from the rain was spread smiling and green before us. With glad hearts we descended into the garden-like plain; our objective, the beautiful village of Passavant, lay before us surrounded by vineyards. The wealth of the country is shown by the fact that one village follows close on another. As we approached the village hoping for good quarters, the orderly officer appeared and it seems brought serious news, as immediately all the commanders of the regiments were assembled and briefed. Outposts and patrols were put sent in all directions. For the first time we felt that we were among bitter enemies. We learnt so much that on the day before a battle had taken place between Prussian hussars and French civilians (some 800 in total) in which 33 of the civilians had been killed and some 100 wounded. After we had carefully entered the village and taken up our quarters, I decided to have a look at the battlefield, where a dreadful spectacle greeted me. On the green grass were 33 handsome young men, covered with wounds and dead. They must have defended themselves bravely. They were wearing blue shirts, and the French cockade. Here lay their leader, a young member of the nobility, with his teeth biting into his lip and his fists clenched. Beside him lay another, with his head split open. A third was tearing the shirt open over his heart, where the fatal wound is, at the moment he died. A fourth has one hand pressed on his heart, the other is raised. It is frightening to see all the positions in which death has left these youngsters, who it seems, were carrying arms out of blind fanaticism. As I left the scene deeply moved a gravedigger had begun digging a mass grave for them.*

*In the schoolhouse I found many wounded, some 90-100. I expected to find one or other German among them, but there were only Frenchmen. I heard from the doctors and priests who were attending them that on the day before the *Gardes Mobiles* of the *Département de la Marne* had attempted to march to Châlons, when the Prussians suddenly appeared. When the Prussians had called on them to surrender they had immediately done so, but then some of them had attempted to flee and had been killed or wounded during the pursuit. This story did not tally with the fact that the dead had been wounded in the front, on the head or the chest. If they were recruits marching to join their units they would not have been carrying weapons. They were carrying *Chassepots*, were wearing the cockade and as such would have to be regarded as prisoners of war or *franc-tireurs*. For our troops this experience is beneficial in that it shows them what they can expect in the event of a defeat. Everywhere we find weapons and embittered Frenchmen. Yesterday at Andernay the 2. Regiment captured six peasants in a wood; shots had been fired at a Prussian ambulance column. It is of course painful for us to have these experiences, as it compels us to act forcefully against the population, who have until now been treated with mildness and consideration.*

In a report from St. Menehould dated 28th August the *Preussischer Staats-Anzeiger* described how a number of wounded *Mobiles* from the Camp of Châlons and the Vitry garrison were found in the town, and the complaints they made about the conditions the *Garde Mobile* was operating under (much of the report concerns the opinions of those from Châlons, but is interesting as it gives a good picture of the state of the *Garde Mobile* at this time). Most of those from Châlons were 18 or 19 years of age, some only 16 or 17. They had been brought to Paris from their homes in Central and Southern France. There they were held in barracks for two or three days before being taken to the Camp of Châlons, where they were to be fully trained. They told how they had arrived at Châlons at a time when the French High Command was still of the opinion that Châlons was to be used as a base for blocking a German advance on Paris. The facilities at the camp were according to the wounded very good indeed; however the outer defensive works still required a good deal of work in order to be effective in a possible defence of the camp, and the *Mobiles* were put to work on these. They were still digging when the French command decided to mount an attempt to link up with Bazaine, who had been encircled in Metz, as a result of which MacMahon's army marched out towards Rheims. The *Mobiles* had been used primarily for building the camp defences, and there was no question of their having had proper military duties. The wounded at St. Menehould stated that in the two to three weeks since they entered military service they had only from time to time been assembled for a few hours of drill or training. Most had only a very incomplete knowledge of using firearms. The majority in fact claimed never before to have had a weapon in their hands. Their poor appearance the lack of uniforms, and their poor diet suggested that their complaints were fully justified. The correspondent felt that a quick end to the war would be an act of humanity for this class of the French armed forces, for the French Government must accept that in the state the *Gardes Mobiles* are in at present they represent nothing more than crowds of disordered soldiers who, having been brought into war service without any training or preparation, could in the event of their meeting regular German troops in battle expect nothing other than complete destruction. The ignorance of these troops of the most basic rules of war is shown by the circumstances of the capture of the Vitry garrison. The larger part was withdrawing to Châlons when it was caught by the *avantgarde* of the German cavalry, dragoons and uhlans of the 4. *Kavallerie-Division*. They did not intend to resist, but they were so ignorant of the customs of the battlefield that they did not throw their weapons down as troops normally would who are surrendering, with the result that there was a melee in which the cavalry attacked the *Mobiles* with sabres, thereby causing many casualties.

The reports give different impressions and interpretations of events. It seems clear that at least a part of the detachment attacked by the uhlans fought hard. What does stand out is the fact that the *Mobiles* went into the field with virtually no training, and with very little in the way of uniforms, something that put them at risk of being dealt with as *franc-tireurs* if captured. The garrison was easy prey for the Germans once it left the fortress (there were many occasions when German troops encountered *Mobiles* in smaller incidents, and such actions tended to end very quickly with the Germans victorious). German losses in the whole affair were minimal. The official despatch of 26th August states that in the fight between the cavalry and the detachment at Espense, one officer (*Major* von Friesen) was seriously wounded and three men lightly wounded. It also stated

that 16 guns were found in the fortress, and that the garrison had consisted of two battalions of *Gardes Mobiles*.