

A Very Murdering Year: The Duke of Marlborough's 1709 Campaign and the Experience of Battle at Malplaquet.

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A NOTE ON DATES

All dates in the main text of this thesis use the New Style dating format with the year beginning 1 January. During the eighteenth century the Old Style calendar was still in use. When an Old Style date has been used in a Primary Source I have inserted the new Style Date immediately afterwards in the form [20 July N.S.].

INTRODUCTION

Malplaquet

The battle of Malplaquet, fought in 1709 during the War of the Spanish Succession, was the largest battle of the eighteenth century. The War of Spanish Succession commenced in 1701 after the death of Carlos II of Spain, when the throne was offered to the French Bourbon grandson of Louis XIV, who became Philip V of Spain. The Maritime Powers of England and the Dutch Republic, along with Austria, opposed this and fought for the Austrian Archduke Charles to succeed to the throne. The conflict was to last until 1714 and the major Allied commanders, the Duke of Marlborough and Prince Eugene of Savoy, fought numerous engagements against the French forces, with great success, as victories were secured at Blenheim (1704), Ramillies (1706) and Oudenarde (1708). Malplaquet was Marlborough's fourth major battle of the war and 190,000 men fought in the action. It was also the bloodiest battle of the war. Historians estimate the total casualties at around 32,000.¹ It is puzzling then that so little has been written about the battle. Malplaquet is explored in most of the books focusing on Marlborough as a general. However, these often seem to be cursory examinations and are hardly sufficient for a battle on such a scale. One explanation for why Malplaquet has been somewhat downplayed is that it arguably represented the nadir of Marlborough's generalship and, therefore, it has

¹ R. Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain's Greatest General*, (London, 2009), p.433.

not proved a popular topic among historians who wish to preserve his legacy as 'Britain's greatest general'.²

Hilaire Belloc wrote the last major English language work on Malplaquet in 1911.

Belloc viewed Malplaquet as a stunning success, 'It is with justice that Malplaquet is counted as the fourth of those great successful actions which distinguish the name of Marlborough, and it is reckoned with justice the conclusion of the series whose three other terms are Blenheim, Ramillies, and Oudenarde.'³ This view appears at odds with the losses sustained by the Allies compared to the French, who managed to withdraw the bulk of their forces intact.

Even scholarly articles have paid little attention to the battle. Ó Hannracháin's article 'The Battle of Malplaquet' 11 September 1709', in spite of the promising title only focuses on the Irish contribution to the battle and even this is largely limited to the officers who took part and their conduct. Even as purely a study of the Irish involvement it appears inadequate, there is no mention, for example, of the combat between Irish troops in English and French pay described by Robert Parker.⁴ The article is littered with examples of the heroics of Irish troops, and particular attention is made to compare this to the French Guards who fled during the battle. Ó

²C. Barnett, *Marlborough*, (London, 1974), pp.236-240; I.F. Burton, *The Captain-General: The Career of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, from 1702-1711*, (London, 1968), pp.151-161; D. Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, (London, 2000), pp.252-273; J.R. Jones, *Marlborough*, (Cambridge, 1993), pp.175-184; Holmes, *Marlborough*, pp.422-434.

³ H. Belloc, *Malplaquet*, (London, 1911), p.22.

⁴ D. Chandler, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough*, (Staplehurst, 1990), p.120.

Hannrachàin also appeared to suggest that the French were on the verge of victory but became undone by Boufflers' fear of being enveloped.⁵

As a case study for warfare during the period Malplaquet is extremely interesting: it had combined arms combat, effective use of artillery, bravery in the face of fire, heroic leadership (both Villars and Eugene were wounded), cavalry engagements as well as frontal and flank attacks. The campaign also included a major siege in Tournai and thus serves as a microcosm of warfare during the period. This thesis will provide an in depth look at the operational history of the 1709 campaign, it will explore the formulating of plans for the campaign before focusing on the decisions and actions the Allied forces took. While looking at this the thesis will analyse Marlborough's conduct during the campaign with particular attention paid to the siege of Tournai and the battle of Malplaquet and its subsequent impact. The thesis will also study the experience of battle at Malplaquet for the three major arms that took part: the infantry, cavalry and artillery, in order to assess the impact of the decisions made by the Allied high command on the common soldier as well as analysing the performance of the Allied troops compared to their French counterparts.

European Warfare

Prior to focusing on the 1709 campaign in detail it is important to analyse the general historiography of European warfare during the period. In *The Art of Warfare*

⁵ E. Ó Hannrachàin, 'The Battle of Malplaquet' 11 September 1709', *Irish Sword*, 26:106, (2009), pp.375-391, p.381

in the Age of Marlborough David Chandler stated his belief that eighteenth century warfare was a much-neglected period of history.⁶ He agreed with J.U. Nef's argument that 'no age is more in need of re-examination than the 100 years which began in England with the outbreak in 1642 of the Civil War.'⁷ He believed that while Marlborough, Eugene and De Saxe, have all had their careers analysed extensively it is vital to have an understanding of the military background they came from. He argued that the era between 1688 and 1792 laid the tactical foundations for the succeeding, Napoleonic, period of warfare.⁸

Chandler's thesis was that warfare was 'limited' in nature due to pragmatic and ideological reasons. He stressed that conflicts such as the War of the Spanish Succession and the Nine Years War were much less devastating than the Thirty Years War and argued that this was due to humanitarian concerns for the well-being of soldier and civilians. He also believed that the seasonal nature of campaigning, crushing logistical difficulties and the difficulty of provoking a field battle meant that sieges were preferred. This was aided, he contended, by sieges being predictable, economical in casualties and resources as well as offering a tangible bargaining chip when it came to making peace.⁹ Nef argued that warfare became less serious between 1640 and 1740 due to a 'growth of the will to peace amongst western

⁶ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.11.

⁷ J.U. Nef, *War and Human Progress*, (Harvard, 1950), p.147.

⁸ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.11.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.13.

people'.¹⁰ He argued that this had far reaching consequences for civilisation including having a positive effect on the growing industrialisation of society.

Hew Strachan's *European Armies and the Conduct of War* largely supported this view and introduced further economics based reasons for the limited nature of warfare in the period. He argued that mercantilism meant that warfare moved to Europe's peripheries and noted that conflict was the single most costly state activity, which in turn led to calls for greater representation in the period.¹¹ As a result of the growing expense of warfare and the lack of workers in society states were forced to recruit from an increasing pool of mercenaries.¹² Strachan insisted that the large armies operating during the eighteenth century were unwieldy, and supported Maurice De Saxe's view that armies should have a maximum of 34,000 infantry and 12,000 cavalry. Furthermore, he argued that the use of such large, blunt armies caused massive casualties during the era.¹³ The Battle of Malplaquet witnessed over 200,000 troops taking the field, far exceeding De Saxe's ideal, and therefore serves as a useful case study in addressing the claim that the large forces on display were counter-productive from a command and control point of view. Accordingly this thesis will assess how effective Marlborough was at directing his force by looking at the experience of the Prince of Orange's troops on the Allied left wing.

¹⁰ J.U. Nef, 'Limited Warfare and the Progress of European Civilization: 1640-1740, *The Review of Politics*, vol.6, no.3, (1944), pp.275-314, p.312.

¹¹ H. Strachan, *European Armies and the Conduct of War*, (London, 1983), p.10.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.15.

Chandler chose to review the era mainly by looking at the tactical developments in warfare. However, his work appears limited in detail when compared to Nosworthy's study on tactics. The latter argued against the idea that units were simply 'neutral elements, to be governed and manipulated in the upcoming battle purely by the orders received on that occasion.'¹⁴ He believed that this approach, devolving warfare into a game of chess, distracts from the minor processes important to winning a battle. He instead attempted to study the doctrine of armies and argued that, given the technology available, eighteenth-century tactics probably presented the optimal solution to the problems faced during battle.¹⁵ Chandler wrote in detail about one of these doctrinal developments, platoon fire. He argued that it was the most effective firing system of the era, and that it went a long way to explaining the superior performance of Anglo-Dutch infantry compared to their French counterparts.¹⁶ David Blackmore's recent work *Destructive and Formidable: British Infantry Firepower 1642-1765*, extensively charts the development of British fire-systems. He maintained that the platoon fire employed by British troops had advanced from that described by Chandler as part of an ongoing process of improvement within the British ranks.¹⁷ However, he does agree that the system was far superior to that of the French, a view supported by Nosworthy.¹⁸ The evolution of

¹⁴ B. Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory: Battle Tactics 1689-1763*, (New York, 1992), p.xiii.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.xv.

¹⁶ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, pp.117-8.

¹⁷ D. Blackmore, *Destructive and Formidable: British Infantry Firepower 1642-1745*, (London, 2014), p.90.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.94; Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory*, p.344.

platoon fire and the extent to which the system played a key role in fire fights between Allied and French infantry, or was theoretical and not overly practical amid the chaos of battle, is an interesting debate and is addressed in chapter three. The extent to which the improvement in the performance of French infantry at Malplaquet can be ascribed to the adoption of platoon fire, or whether it was down to other factors such as holding an entrenchment, will also be analysed.

Nosworthy and Chandler both ascribed the comparatively poor performance of French cavalry during the War of the Spanish Succession (as compared to the Nine Year Wars) to a reversion to the 'German fashion of firing their carbines before closing with the enemy', in contrast with the tradition in England of closing rapidly with cold steel.¹⁹ The effectiveness of cavalry during the period has been the subject of debate amongst historians. Jeremy Black, while accepting that cavalry played a major role in some battles, such as Blenheim and Rossbach, argued that cavalry as a force was much less useful than it had been in previous eras. He attributed this decline to an increase in infantry firepower.²⁰ Blackmore supported this view and stated that confidence in their firing system allowed the British infantry to engage and defeat French cavalry forces without having to form square, thereby, improving tactical flexibility.²¹ Similarly, Michael Howard used the term 'elegant anachronism' to describe cavalry as an outdated force.²² Chandler, however, argued that cavalry

¹⁹ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, pp.51-53; Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory*, p.344-5.

²⁰ J. Black, *Warfare in the Eighteenth Century*, (London, 2002), p.170.

²¹ Blackmore, *Destructive and Formidable*, p.94.

²² M. Howard, *War in European History*, (Oxford, 1976), p.16.

remained the force of decision on the battlefield as without a cavalry breakthrough a victory could never be truly complete, as a rout would not occur thus allowing a defeated force to escape intact.²³

Historians, writing about the seventeenth century, have also debated the usefulness of cavalry. Parrott argued that cavalry was the decisive arm in warfare post-1632.

However, he stated that it was most useful when used to get around the flanks of an already engaged infantry arm and that any attempt to pair cavalry with infantry for a combined arms approach hindered the effectiveness of the more-mobile arm.²⁴

Parrott was discussing Gustavus Adolphus' tactics during the Thirty Years war. It would appear possible, however, to level the same criticism at Marlborough's consistently utilised tactic of combining infantry and cavalry as a shock force in the centre of a battle.²⁵ English cavalry doctrine differed little from the shock tactics of Cromwell's cavalry, which in turn were based on Gustavus' Swedish model.²⁶ Roberts described this as an imperfect solution to cavalry use on a changing battlefield.²⁷

Malplaquet witnessed a significant cavalry clash at the end of the battle and, therefore, it serves as a useful case study for analysing the performance of cavalry on a contemporary battlefield, as well as the effectiveness of infantry in combatting the threat of encroaching cavalry forces. This will be explored in chapter three.

²³ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.54.

²⁴ D.A. Parrott, 'Strategy and tactics in the 'Thirty Years War'' in C.J. Rodger (ed.), *The Military Revolution: Readings on the Military Transformation in Early Modern Europe*, (Oxford, 1995), pp.227-247, p.236.

²⁵ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.55.

²⁶ J. Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine 1702-1711*, (Barnsley, 2014), p.107.

²⁷ M. Roberts (ed.), *Essays in Swedish History*, (London, 1967), p.69.

A slightly different framework for reviewing the era is in exploring how decisive battle could be in the early-eighteenth century. A decisive battle can be defined as a victory that results in rapid and sustainable gains following the action. Parker argued against conflict becoming more decisive at the end of seventeenth century and instead insisted that 'wars eternalised themselves' in spite of seemingly decisive battles such as Rocroi, Poltava and Ramillies. He ascribed this to an increase in army size, prodigious firepower and new methods of fortification.²⁸ Chandler, however, argued that more aggressive commanders could restore decision to the battlefield, and cited Marlborough as the prime example.²⁹ Strachan agreed that some commanders retained a preference for battle throughout the period, but believed that the defensive still held a significant advantage.³⁰ Jeremy Black, in response to Parker, argued that battle could be decisive and pointed out that 'Turin (1706) drove the French from Italy, French victories at Almanza (1707) and Brihuega (1710) won Spain for the Bourbon dynasty, and Poltava (1709) was followed by the Russian conquest of Livonia.'³¹ Childs stated that warfare was constrained by the 'unimaginative and conventional approach of military minds', seemingly implying that a different approach to warfare could result in greater results.³² Perhaps the

²⁸ G. Parker, *The Military Revolution, Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*, (Cambridge, 1988), p.43.

²⁹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.141.

³⁰ Strachan, *European Armies*, p.11.

³¹ J. Black, 'Britain as a Military Power, 1668-1815', *The Journal of Military History*, Vol.64, No.1, (2000), pp.159-177, p.167.

³² J. Childs, *The Nine Years War and the British Army 1688-1697: The Operations in the Low Countries*, (Manchester, 1991), p.326.

most convincing treatment of the subject came in Ostwald's article "The 'Decisive' Battle of Ramillies, 1706: Prerequisites for Decisiveness in Early Modern War".³³ He stated that historiography has not moved on from Churchill's faith in battles' potential for decision and points out that of Marlborough's four battles only two can really be deemed decisive. He argued this was the case for Blenheim due to the nature of the theatre, but in the Spanish Netherlands it was rare for battle to be decisive. He asserted that Ramillies was an exception to this. He pointed out that this was due to the fortresses gained after the battle being in a state of disrepair and that the allies benefited from the poor morale of the Spanish troops defending them.³⁴ Furthermore he maintained that the advance stalled upon confronting more formidable fortresses, therefore, showing that the limitations of the period could only rarely be overcome by battle.³⁵ The 1709 campaign and the resultant fighting at Malplaquet were not decisive in regards to the war and the reasons behind this will be explored in chapters one and two.

Marlborough

The person of Marlborough has dominated the British scholarship around the War of the Spanish Succession. The most expansive biographical treatment of the Duke is undoubtedly Winston Churchill's four-volume *Marlborough His Life and Times*, published between 1933 and 1938. Churchill's work largely defined scholarship on

³³ J. Ostwald, 'The 'Decisive' Battle of Ramillies, 1706: Prerequisites for Decisiveness in Early Modern Warfare', *The Journal of Military History*, vol 64, no.3, (2000), pp.649-677.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.667.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.677.

the subject throughout the twentieth-century. It is a work that is unlikely to be matched in terms of detail due to the unprecedented access he received to the Blenheim Papers. The historical orthodoxy he created, of Marlborough as a heroic figure and inspirational statesman is yet to be fully challenged.³⁶ Many biographies of Marlborough have dispensed with studying the man and focused instead upon his military campaigns. David Chandler's *Marlborough as Military Commander* has influenced the orthodoxy surrounding the Duke's career as a soldier. Chandler's work is certainly expansive, however, he sometimes appears to be far too lenient when dealing with Marlborough's reputation. An example of this is how he attempted to portray Marlborough as a battle-seeking general. Chandler implied that he was ahead of his time in this respect. However, somewhat contradictorily, in his final assessment of Marlborough he stated that his 'attritional' strategy in France could have worked without the distraction of the Spanish peninsula.³⁷ As Ostwald writes, 'In one page Marlborough is transformed: from a decisive battle-seeker too often forced into sieges by his allies, he changes into a conventional strategist who recognized the potential for victory through attritional siege warfare.'³⁸ Chandler paints a picture of Marlborough as an infallible military commander.³⁹ Correlli Barnett's *Marlborough* is a very readable analysis of the Duke's campaigns but largely repeats Chandler's views.⁴⁰ It must be noted that this consensus within the

³⁶ W. S. Churchill, *Marlborough His Life and Time*, (4 volumes, London, 1933-1938).

³⁷ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, pp.323-4.

³⁸ Ostwald, 'The 'Decisive' Battle of Ramillies, 1706: Prerequisites for Decisiveness in Early Modern Warfare', p.653.

³⁹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, pp.325-327.

⁴⁰ Barnett, *Marlborough*, pp.262-264.

literature may be due to the inaccessibility of the Blenheim Papers until recently. This meant that commentators largely had to draw information from the same narrow selection sources or rely upon Churchill's work for details of the campaigns. Undoubtedly this has contributed towards many accounts of his career being extremely similar and makes it difficult to challenge embedded historical views of Marlborough's generalship. J.R. Jones, writing in the 1990's, is one example of a historian who relied upon the readily available correspondence of Marlborough. He largely subscribed to Chandler's views but is slightly harsher when it comes to analysing the Duke's battlefield skills. One example of this is how he noted that by the time of Malplaquet (1709) the French appear to have worked out Marlborough's battle-plans, a factor contributing to the high casualties during the battle. He argued that this resulted in Marlborough adopting a far more conservative operational strategy during the 1710 and 1711 campaigns, as he shifted away from his decisive battle doctrine.⁴¹ Ivor. F Burton's *The Captain-General: The Career of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough from 1702-1711* also presented a more-balanced account of the Duke's conduct during war of Spanish Succession, as opposed to merely repeating the views espoused by Churchill and Chandler. However, despite levelling more criticism at Marlborough than most, he does conclude that Marlborough was a formidable general: 'the experienced and dedicated professional rather than the brilliant amateur'.⁴² Marlborough's generalship during the 1709 campaign will be explored in chapters one and two, to attempt to understand how effective his

⁴¹ Jones, *Marlborough*, p.183.

⁴² Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.199.

operational and tactical manoeuvres during both the campaign and battle were, and whether he truly was a battle seeking general or was content with the strategy of reducing French fortresses.

An illuminating study of how Marlborough attempted to combat the logistical difficulties of early-modern warfare can be found in I.P. Phelan's article "Marlborough as Logistician". Phelan argued that too often the historiography surrounding the subject has placed an emphasis on Marlborough's tactical and strategic skill at the expense of recognising his ability as an organiser and supplier of troops. He believed that this is due to the 'isolation' of the twentieth century general from the discipline of logistics. Recent commentators have, as a result, been more inclined to attribute the skills of a modern commander to Marlborough (manoeuvre being a prime example), when in reality mastering logistics was vital to any successful early-eighteenth century operation, and was an area in which Marlborough thrived.⁴³ The piece is an interesting response to the all-to-often narrow studies of Marlborough's campaigns.

A more general, but influential, work on logistics is Martin Van Creveld's *Supplying War*. In this he explored the magazine system and its effect on warfare throughout the period. He praised Marlborough's march to the Danube, claiming that it was the logistical equal of Napoleonic marches. He argued that the reason that such marches

⁴³ I. P. Phelan, 'Marlborough as Logistician', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 67, no. 272 (1989), pp.-253-257 vol. 68, no. 273 (1990), pp.36-48. 103-119, p.118.

were a comparative rarity was due, 'not to their impracticability but to their ineffectiveness in an age when the state's main strength consisted in its fortresses'. He argued that Europe's population was sufficiently dense and agriculture was sufficiently developed that it was 'perfectly possible to feed an army as long as it kept on the move'⁴⁴. Due to escalation in army size, during the Thirty Years War, forces had become too large to remain in one place. As a result, any siege conducted was a race against time, which in turn led to the development of Louvois and Le Tellier's magazine system.⁴⁵ Finally he argued that while a burden, logistics in the eighteenth-century was not the initiative crushing deadweight some would believe. Indeed Van Creveld can only cite the French failure in 1705 to besiege Landau as an example of a commander blaming logistics for his inability to carry out a plan.⁴⁶ Marlborough was clearly an ambitious general with regard to logistics, he was not afraid to take risks to achieve results, as the march to the Danube showed. However, his Allies were often reluctant to share the same risks and the effect of this on the 1709 campaign will be explored when looking at the abortive plan to attack the Channel coast in chapter one.

Jamel Ostwald, contributed an essay titled, 'Marlborough and Siege Warfare' to the historiography.⁴⁷ Previous studies of Marlborough's campaigns have often focused

⁴⁴ M. Van Creveld, *Supplying War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton*, (Cambridge, 1977), p.33.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁴⁷ J. Ostwald, 'Marlborough and Siege Warfare' in J.B. Hattendorf, A.J Veenendaal, Jr., R. van Hövell tot Westerflier (eds.), *Marlborough: Soldier and Diplomat*, (Rotterdam, 2012), pp.123-142.

heavily on his four major battles, therefore, it was enlightening to see attention shift towards the Duke's performance when fighting the predominant form of eighteenth-century warfare. Ostwald argued that Marlborough was an adept of the 'vigorous' method of conducting a siege, rather than the 'efficient' method espoused by engineers such as Vauban. Marlborough was a successful siege commander, but this often came at the expense of many lives. Ostwald concluded that Marlborough was an average commander during sieges but not a 'master' due to his lack of early-career experience compared to his Dutch counterparts. He was more suited to leading the covering army and allowing his more experienced allies to conduct the siege.⁴⁸ Ostwald's *Vauban Under Siege* expanded further on the scientific versus aggressive approach to siege warfare.⁴⁹ As will be explored in chapter one, the siege of Tournai took up a large part of the 1709 campaigning season and thus the conduct of Marlborough, and that of his troops and engineers, will be analysed in order to see how effectively he performed when commanding a siege.

The idea that his Dutch counterparts held Marlborough back from fulfilling his strategic objectives is a common view held by the Duke's biographers.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, revisionist works are few and far between. Douglas Coombs' *The Conduct of the Dutch* is essential to the historiography but is more a history of Anglo-

⁴⁸ J. Ostwald, 'Marlborough and Siege Warfare', p.143.

⁴⁹ J. Ostwald, *Vauban Under Siege: Engineering Efficiency and Martial Vigor in the War of Spanish Succession*, (Leiden, 2007); C. Duffy, *The Fortress in the Age of Vauban and Frederick the Great, 1680-1789*, (London, 1985); *Fire and Stone: The Science of Fortress Warfare, 1660-1860*, (London, 1996).

⁵⁰ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.322.

Dutch political relations during the war and British public opinion, rather than being a thorough study of the Dutch contribution to the war effort on a campaign-by-campaign basis. Coombs' argued that the British were fickle in their affections, 'When its [the Dutch Republic's] conduct seemed to be in keeping with what was required from a good ally it came into favour; when it did not it speedily fell out of it.' This was problematic, Coombs argued, as there was no single British policy on fighting the war, the conduct required of a good ally was constantly evolving, 'at one time it would be to participate wholeheartedly on a war waged primarily at sea; at another to fight great land-battles'. He pointed out a similar discrepancy in the British attitude to peace talks.⁵¹ In his article "The Augmentation of 1709: A Study in the Workings of the Anglo-Dutch Alliance" Coombs reassessed the attempt to raise troops for the 1709 campaign, an episode that he stated had been the victim of 'ill-judged attempts to impose upon them the conventional pattern of Dutch backwardness, delay and obstruction.' Furthermore, he called for 'a wholesale reassessment of the history of the alliance' in response to reputable English historians accepting a clearly biased version of events. Unfortunately a revisionist view has not been forthcoming in the fifty years since.⁵² While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide such a thorough history of the Grand Alliance, Dutch pressures certainly influenced Marlborough throughout the campaign and this will be analysed to see the impact it had on his conduct.

⁵¹ D. Coombs, *The Conduct of the Dutch: British Opinion and the Dutch Alliance During the War of the Spanish Succession*, (The Hague, 1958), p.382.

⁵² D.S. Coombs, 'The Augmentation of 1709: A Study in the Workings of the Anglo-Dutch Alliance', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 72, No. 285, (Oct. 1957), pp.642-661, p.643.

Popular accounts of Marlborough's campaigns largely focus on the battles of Blenheim and Ramillies. Oudenarde and Malplaquet are somewhat underrepresented in this form of history perhaps due to Oudenarde arriving after the operational failure in losing Ghent and Bruges, and Malplaquet being very much a pyrrhic victory (if it can be termed a victory). Examples of popular accounts include Charles Spencer's underwhelming *Blenheim: Battle for Europe*, which draws many ideas from Churchill's work. The same can also be said for Hussey's *Marlborough: Hero of Blenheim*.⁵³ James Falkner has written five books on Marlborough's campaigns, largely coinciding with the three hundred year anniversary of the events.⁵⁴ They are similar to those published by Chandler and provide little in the way of new research. One of his works, *Marlborough's Sieges*, does attempt to explore a different facet of Marlborough's generalship, but it falls well short of the other studies of siege warfare by Ostwald mentioned earlier.⁵⁵ These books are mainly narratives of events, written for a popular audience, and draw heavily upon from the scholarship of Chandler and Churchill. As a result the works suffer from the same problems as scholarly historiography: an Anglo-centric view, unsupported criticisms of the Dutch war effort, and a view of Marlborough as an infallible

⁵³ C. Spencer, *Blenheim: Battle for Europe*, (London, 2005); J. Hussey, *Marlborough: Hero of Blenheim*, (London, 2004).

⁵⁴ J. Falkner, *Great and Glorious Days: The Duke of Marlborough's Battles, 1704-1709: Schellenberg, Blenheim, Ramillies, Oudenaarde, Malplaquet*, (Staplehurst, 2002); *Blenheim 1704: Marlborough's Greatest Victory*, (Barnsley, 2004); *Ramillies 1706: Year of Miracles*, (Barnsley, 2006); *Marlborough's Wars: Eyewitness Accounts 1702-1713*, (Barnsley, 2005).

⁵⁵ J. Falkner, *Marlborough's Sieges*, (Stonehouse, 2007).

commander. This thesis will attempt to challenge some of these orthodoxies in order to present a more balanced view of Marlborough as a commander.

The Army

Studies of the British Army during the period are few and far between and those that exist often deal with campaign history. Interest in the subject appears, however, to be growing. Blackmore provided an excellent history of the development of British infantry tactics throughout the eighteenth century compared to their counterparts in other European armies.⁵⁶ Falkner, breaking away from his campaign-driven narratives, has recently produced *Marlborough's War Machine, 1702-1711*, in which he credits Marlborough for the improved performance of British troops during the war.⁵⁷ He detailed how the army was recruited, fought and was supplied during the War of the Spanish Succession, which should hopefully lead to a renewed interest in the historiography of the British army and the development of more scholarly studies of the subject on a par with Lynn's, all-encompassing, treatment of the French army in *Giant of the Grand Siècle*.⁵⁸ Duffy's *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* is an engaging short account of the wider characteristics of European armies, what set them apart from each other and what they had in common. Unfortunately, however, the usefulness of the book does suffer from the breadth of the topic and the time-period he covered, with most of his case studies centred on

⁵⁶ Blackmore, *Destructive and Formidable*, pp.5-7.

⁵⁷ Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine*, p.186-187.

⁵⁸ J. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715*, (Cambridge, 1997).

the mid-to-late eighteenth century.⁵⁹ Scouller's *The Armies of Queen Anne*, despite being written almost fifty years ago, still stands out as the foremost work on army structure and organisation with detailed chapters on governmental control of the army, the internal hierarchy, establishments and troop strengths amongst others.⁶⁰ However, Scouller was not able to study the Blenheim Papers and as a result it sometimes appears that the model he describes is representative of a theoretical ideal of army structure as opposed to what actually occurred during operations.⁶¹

John Childs' series of books on the political and social history of the British army of the later Stuarts forms an integral part of the historiography surrounding the subject. His work on the army of William III especially stands out, and it is a great shame that he has never completed a similar piece on the Marlburian army. Nevertheless some of the points argued in *The British army of William III, 1689-1702* can be carried over to British forces during the War of the Spanish Succession. His work is far less intensively focused on the organisation and structure of the army (although this forms an important part). Instead it looks at the experience of officers and men during the period and at areas such as civil-military relations and military law.⁶² Furthermore, it sheds some light upon the political nature of the army and the British standing-army debate. It is indeed a valuable work. His later piece, *The Nine*

⁵⁹ C. Duffy, *The Military Experience In The Age of Reason*, (London, 1998).

⁶⁰ R.E. Scouller, *The Armies of Queen Anne*, (London, 1964).

⁶¹ S.A. Stansfield, *Early modern systems of command, Queen Anne's generality, staff officers and the direction of allied warfare in the Low Countries and Germany, 1702-1711*, (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, 2010), p.8.

⁶² J. Childs, *The British Army of William III, 1689-1702*, (Manchester, 1987), p.1.

Years War and the British Army 1688-1697: The operations in the Low Countries at first appears to be just a campaign narrative but offers far more than that to the historian. Childs effectively dealt with how the army operated in the field and how events were influenced by factors beyond campaign strategy.⁶³ It provided an excellent example of how to blend political, social and campaign history into one insightful package, and this thesis will attempt to do this within the narrow lens of the 1709 campaign.

One area that has also been rarely covered is the difficulties the Allies had in recruiting soldiers. However, Burton's article on the supply of troops for the war in Spain is far wider in scope than the title suggests. For a start he provided compelling estimates for the actual size of battalions in the field. He also showed the level of attrition the army had to deal with was somewhat amplified by naval commitments and multi-theatre warfare.⁶⁴ Finally, he proved that some of the charges of corruption levelled at early modern officers are slightly exaggerated, in this case he argued that the Almanza scandal (1708), where it was discovered that the government paid for 29,395 troops of which only 8,660 fought in the battle, was more due to an inability to recruit forces for the peninsula and an over-ambitious grand strategy than to 'scandalous conduct' on the part of recruiting officers.⁶⁵

⁶³ Childs, *The Nine Years War*, p.3.

⁶⁴ I.F. Burton, 'The supply of infantry for the war in the Peninsula, 1703-7', *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol. 28, 1955, pp.35-62, p.47.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.35

The historiography surrounding the British Army of the period is missing a grand-overarching work taking in aspects such as administration and supply, command, recruitment and army composition, civil-military and social relations, as well as its doctrine and motivation for fighting. Childs' series probably comes closest to achieving this in the preceding period and Scouller's work, though dated, is of immense value to the historian. Unfortunately, however, nothing has been written with the same depth and breadth of Lynn's *Giant of the Grand Siècle* a colossal modern study of the French army from 1610-1715, which analysed the topics listed above commendably.⁶⁶ Lynn's *The Wars of Louis XIV*, is also absolutely vital for understanding the War of the Spanish Succession from the French perspective.⁶⁷ Older contributions such as Sturgill's *Marshal Villars and the War of the Spanish Succession* provide much needed biographical insight into Marlborough's greatest enemy.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, however, in general English language translations of French studies on the war are few and far between. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to fully cover all of the elements missing from the literature listed above, however, it will analyse the experience of the individual soldier during the battle of Malplaquet, framed within the case study of a long and casualty heavy campaign. The thesis will, through personal memoirs and letters, attempt to show how decisions made by commanders on the strategic and operational level impacted the troops fighting during the campaign.

⁶⁶ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*.

⁶⁷ J.A. Lynn, *The Wars of Louis XIV, 1667-1714*, (London, 1999).

⁶⁸ C.C. Sturgill, *Marshal Villars and the War of the Spanish Succession*, (Kentucky, 1965).

Strategy

The bulk of this thesis lies within the borders of what modern historians would term the operational and tactical levels of war. While it may be tempting to categorise warfare into strategic, operational and tactical it is important to remember that each level influences the others. Tactical reality is a limiting factor in operational art while this planning must also be linked with overall strategic war aims.⁶⁹ To study one or even two levels of war without having a firm grasp on the influence of the others would result in an incomplete study. To address this issue this section will explore in brief the strategic and geopolitical situation of Europe in 1709, outside of the Flanders theatre.

Colin S. Gray held the somewhat Clausewitzian view that, 'Strategy is a bridge between military power and political purpose.'⁷⁰ He believed policy must always dominate military power. The extent of this link will vary, but without a political aim driving it forward, a strategy will be neither coherent nor workable. It is, therefore, essential to analyse whether a divide existed between Britain's foreign policy and her military capacity. Furthermore, it is important to judge whether there was a clear strategic aim upon the commencement of the 1709 campaign, or if the conflict in Flanders was being extended due to a lack of imagination when pursuing the war in

⁶⁹ B. Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present*, (Cambridge, 2010), p.5.

⁷⁰ C.S. Gray, *Strategy and History: Essays on theory and practice*, (London, 2005), p.2.

other theatres. Marlborough, apart from the 1704 march to the Danube and a failed attack on the Moselle in 1705, fought exclusively in Flanders. Despite this the Duke had considerable influence in multiple theatres. The British political parties also played a large role in deciding the prevailing strategy with which to conduct the war against France. The British political system was a far from a stable place with consistent shifts in pre-eminence between the Whigs and the Tories. Indeed, the rivalry between the Whigs and the Tories was one of the key reasons why Marlborough was stripped of the command of British forces in 1712.⁷¹ Both parties appear to have been in favour of the war, if for different reasons. Bough argued that the Tories were supportive of the war effort due to the perceived danger of France gaining exclusive access to the trade of the Spanish Empire combined with the increased ability of France to cut British trade links to the Mediterranean.⁷² This meant that, in spite of their hatred of Williamite continental policy the Tories would generally support the conflict, at least until this perceived threat subsided.⁷³ The Whigs, on the other hand, saw a war with France as an essential pre-requisite to maintaining a 'balance of power' as well as ensuring the continuing liberty of Europe from the threat of universal monarchy, personified by Louis XIV.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Barnett, *Marlborough*, p.262.

⁷² D. Bough, 'Great Britain's Blue Water Policy, 1688-1815' *International History Review*, 10, (1988) pp.33-58, p.48.

⁷³ H. Richmond, *The Navy as an Instrument of Policy, 1558-1727*, (Cambridge, 1953), pp.276-281.

⁷⁴ Bough, 'Great Britain's Blue Water Policy, 1688-1815', p.43.

Seeing the war as a primarily commercial conflict, Tory policy throughout appears to have subscribed to Corbett's view of 'limited war' whereby the nation would primarily use maritime power to fight a continental enemy, operating on the peripherals away from the enemy's main strength, so as to not force the continental power to defend itself by mobilising to fight an 'unlimited' conflict.⁷⁵ Certainly Tory actions support this. As Lyons argued, throughout the war the party attempted to open distant fronts away from the Flanders theatre. As early as 1702 Admiral George Rooke made an attempt to capture Cadiz, during the period when the Tory party was at the forefront of domestic politics. Furthermore, Lyons maintained that the pursuit of this Tory policy pre-1704 enabled Britain to become 'a member of the first rank of European powers, owing to its political assertiveness and increased financial and military might'. He did, however, stress that Nottingham's policy differed from that of his counterpart Rochester in that it was balanced and combined naval operations with those on land, albeit in Italy, Spain and the Americas as opposed to Flanders.⁷⁶

Childs on the other hand, discussing the Nine Years War, is scathing in dealing with Tory maritime policy. He argued that the naval option was 'strategic nonsense in terms of winning the war'.⁷⁷ He viewed maritime strategy as a concession to the country gentry to ensure continuing funding for the war in Flanders.⁷⁸ He further

⁷⁵ J.S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, (London, 1911), p.55.

⁷⁶ A. Lyons, *The 1711 Expedition to Quebec: Politics and the Limitation of British Global Strategy*, (London, 2013), p.7.

⁷⁷ Childs, *The British Army of William III*, p.210.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.211.

pointed out that after the failure of the 1694 Brest expedition maritime operations ceased and this bore 'considerable fruit' in the concentration of resources for the 1695 campaign in Flanders.⁷⁹ Bough, however, argued that Williamite continental policy was a Dutch imposition on British 'blue-water' thinking, and that the object of the maritime strategy was not to win the war but to achieve a relatively favourable outcome and reduce the financial burden of warfare on the landed classes. This meant gaining a relatively favourable settlement in Europe while retaining acquisitions made overseas. He argued that this was the reason why Britain, between 1688 and 1815, emerged from warfare stronger than ever (if with an increased national debt) while European powers generally emerged weakened, if not in total destitution.⁸⁰

Chandler was even more hostile to Tory 'blue-water' thinking than Childs. He distanced Marlborough from 'blue-water' thought and maintained that his views were a continuation of Williamite policy.⁸¹ Furthermore, he blamed the Tory-inspired intervention in the Iberian Peninsula for the failure of an attritional strategy in Flanders, arguing that Spain acted as a 'counter-attraction' negating Allied efforts to 'bleed the French white' in the Spanish Netherlands.⁸² Lyons pointed out that Marlborough realised that a Mediterranean presence was 'crucial to divert French

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.238.

⁸⁰ Bough, 'Great Britain's Blue Water Policy, 1688-1815', pp.57-8.

⁸¹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.322.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.324.

attention'.⁸³ This suggests that the Duke's own strategic views were a synthesis of Whig and Tory ideas on how the conflict should be fought. Indeed, in his own correspondence he at times occupied himself with the Spanish theatre, at one point even suggesting that he or Prince Eugene should command there.⁸⁴ Marlborough's support for maritime efforts can also be shown by his absolute support for the 1707 combined forces assault on Toulon,⁸⁵ as well as his pre-occupation, following Blenheim, on hiring 8,000 Prussians to serve in North Italy during 1705.⁸⁶ Chandler's Whiggish interpretation of Marlborough's generalship appears therefore to be far too narrow, and it could even be said that his distancing of Marlborough from events in Spain and 'blue-water' policy was an attempt to disassociate the Duke from a course of action that simply did not work. It appears that Marlborough wholeheartedly supported a 'Double Forward Commitment', whereby the Army and Navy were both fully supported.⁸⁷

For the British the Iberian Peninsula was the second most resource-intensive theatre of the war.⁸⁸ Spain had seen notable Allied successes early in the war. 1704 had witnessed the British capture Gibraltar, which they held for the remainder of the

⁸³ Lyons, *The 1711 Expedition*, p.7.

⁸⁴ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.362.

⁸⁵ K.A.J. McLay, 'Combined Operations: British Naval and Military Co-operation in the Wars of 1688-1713', (University of Glasgow Ph.D. thesis, 2003), p.270.

⁸⁶ B.R. Kroener, 'The only thing that could save the Empire' Marlborough, the States General, and the Imperial States: Diplomacy and Military Strategy in the War of the Spanish Succession and the Great Northern War, 1700-1711' in J.B. Hattendorf, A.J Veenendaal, Jr., R. van Hövell tot Westerflier (eds.) *Marlborough: Solider and Diplomat*, (Rotterdam, 2012), pp.216-247, p.237.

⁸⁷ D.W. Jones, *War and Economy in the Age of William III and Marlborough*, (Oxford, 1988), p.16.

⁸⁸ J. B. Hattendorf, *England in the War of Spanish Succession: A Study of the English View and Conduct of Grand Strategy, 1702-1712*, (London, 1987), p.306.

war. Barcelona and Valencia were taken in 1705. In 1706 the Allies briefly occupied Madrid. The Allies faced a major issue in Spain. Philip V was far more popular than Charles III. This was shown in 1706 when the people of Madrid organised passive resistance, which forced Charles to withdraw from the city. It can be argued that this action marked a turning point.⁸⁹ The retreat from Madrid handed the initiative to the Bourbons. A year later at Almanza (25 April 1707) the Allies suffered a decisive setback. Lord Galway's 15,000 man army was heavily defeated by the Duke of Berwick's 25,000 strong Franco-Spanish force.⁹⁰ In 1708 an attempt was made to recover by the Allies when Galway was recalled to Britain and Marlborough's protégé, Stanhope, was given command over British troops in Spain. Stahremberg was also brought in to take command of Imperial reinforcements. Unfortunately for Stanhope's operations, there was a notable diminution in the size of the Allied force as Marlborough held back 6,000 troops under General Erle for use in a planned cross-Channel raid.⁹¹ The descent never materialised. In 1708 Stanhope did not attempt a significant offensive in Spain. Instead he attacked the lightly defended Mediterranean islands of Minorca and Sardinia. He captured both after relatively bloodless sieges yet on the mainland the war continued to go poorly for the Allies.⁹² The exposed garrisons of the Allies were attacked by Bourbon troops. Tortosa was

⁸⁹ J. Lynch, *Bourbon Spain 1700-1808*, (Oxford, 1989), p.31.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁹¹ J.A.C. Hugill, *No Peace Without Spain*, (Oxford, 1991), p.271.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp.280-281.

taken in July followed by Denia in November. Another blow to Allied hopes came when the town of Alicante fell in December.⁹³

Spain in 1709 was a strategic *cul de sac* for the Grand Alliance. Philip V had the support of the populace, therefore, any attempt to remove him would have required the use of exceptional force. The Allies seem to have realised this during the peace talks of 1709. The condition inserted whereby the Allies demanded Louis XIV use force to remove Philip V seems to have recognised that he was firmly entrenched in Spain and would be difficult to expel. Allied caution appears to have been wise. Philip's forces had been growing in size and quality every year since 1705.⁹⁴ The logic of maintaining a British presence in the theatre is hard to justify. One factor behind a continued involvement in Spain is that placing Charles III on the throne was a clear British war aim. British politicians were therefore extremely reluctant to abandon the theatre as they feared it would encourage French resistance on other fronts.

In spite of all the evidence to the contrary Marlborough appears to have seen promise in a 1709 campaign on the Iberian Peninsula. His spies had reported that the French had considerably weakened their presence in the theatre in order to reinforce Flanders. Thus, it seems he felt that the time was ripe for another Iberian offensive. Significantly, however, in the same letter Marlborough stated that only Imperial reinforcements should be sent to Spain. He wanted British troops to

⁹³ H. Kamen, *Philip V of Spain, The King who Reigned Twice*, (London, 2001), p.61.

⁹⁴ Lynch, *Bourbon Spain 1700-1808*, p.31.

concentrate entirely on Flanders.⁹⁵ This opinion could well have stemmed merely from a desire to have his best troops by his side, although it appears more likely that Marlborough was expressing his frustrations over the Austrian war efforts.⁹⁶

In fairness to the Allies it is important to note that fighting a war in Spain was something neither the Dutch nor Austrians wanted. Intervention in the theatre was a British-driven exercise. They had sought an alliance with Portugal in order to defeat the Franco-Spanish via the backdoor while, at the same time, gaining favourable trade rights from Pedro II.⁹⁷ Marlborough's suggestion to send Imperial troops into Spain despite the unpromising strategic position was unlikely to have been an attempt at turning the situation around but was rather borne out of a hope that he could keep some French troops pinned down. During the early part of 1709 he was clearly worried about the scale of French build-up in Flanders and probably believed that a trickle of Imperial reinforcements in the area could stop any further French troops moving into the Spanish Netherlands.⁹⁸ Clearly the Duke had decided that the war would be won and lost in the Spanish Netherlands. His letter to Sidney Godolphin, his major ally in domestic politics, on 31 January stated, 'if we received an affront in this country [Flanders], no success in other parts can make amends for it.'⁹⁹ The 1709 campaign in the Iberian Peninsula was uneventful, Galway attempted

⁹⁵H.L. Snyder, (ed.), *The Marlborough Godolphin Correspondence Volume 3*, (Oxford, 1975), pp.1195-1196.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.1218.

⁹⁷ A.D. Francis, 'John Methuen and the Anglo-Portuguese Treaties of 1703', *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 2, No. 60, (1960), p.122.

⁹⁸ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol. 3*, pp.1209-1210.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1204.

an invasion of Estremadura but was defeated on the Portuguese border. Bourbon forces, rather than following up on the success of the previous year, avoided any aggressive action in order to encourage a peace settlement.¹⁰⁰

With the exception of the 1704 campaign very little has been written, by British historians at least, on the German theatre of the war. This is most likely due to the Marlborough-centric view historians have taken when discussing the war.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that the German theatre appeared to be but a sideshow in British strategic thinking.¹⁰¹ Marlborough had shown in 1704 that it was logistically possible to maintain a major force in the area. Furthermore the French border along the Rhine and Moselle was considerably weaker defensively than Flanders.¹⁰² Additionally a significant proportion of Allied troops had been hired from German princes and thus it would be relatively easy to concentrate troops in the theatre.¹⁰³ It appears, however, that Marlborough's experience in the Moselle valley during the early part of the 1705 campaign convinced him that Germany was not a theatre through which to achieve a breakthrough. During 1705 he had been easily countered by Villars' defensive posture in this theatre, resulting in a stalemate.¹⁰⁴ Marlborough was subsequently forced to withdraw due to a lack of supplies.¹⁰⁵ The failings of the early part of 1705, combined with Marlborough's success when

¹⁰⁰ Hattendorf, *England in the War of Spanish Succession*, p.126.

¹⁰¹ Holmes, *Marlborough*, pp.369-370.

¹⁰² Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.154.

¹⁰³ Kroener, 'The only thing that could save the Empire', p.237.

¹⁰⁴ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.311.

¹⁰⁵ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.155.

switching to Flanders later in the campaign appear to have convinced the Duke that the bulk of campaigning should take place along the northern French border. During 1709 the German theatre was fairly quiet, with an Austrian invasion of Franche-Comté being defeated in August at Hüningen after crossing the Rhine at Basel.¹⁰⁶

Savoy-Piedmont, on France's southern flank, was a theatre that offered much but delivered little. Prior to 1706 the French invasion of Piedmont was a cause of great worry to the Allies. Piedmont was strategically significant to Louis XIV. He was determined to prevent Milan falling to the Habsburgs. Situated between France and Milan, Piedmont was vital to guaranteeing communications throughout the Bourbon territories. To secure this link the French attempted to occupy Savoy-Piedmont. This was not a merely diversionary campaign, as previous French invasions of the area during the Nine Years War had been.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, throughout the early years of the war, maintaining Savoyard independence was seen as vital in order to prevent French hegemony over North Italy. To strengthen Savoy handsome subsidies were being consistently paid to Victor Amadeus, the Duke of Savoy.¹⁰⁸ The French invasion of Savoy in 1703 proved successful. In May 1706, Turin, one of the few remaining Savoyard strongholds, was besieged.¹⁰⁹ The siege was eventually broken on 7 September 1706 when an Imperial-Savoyard army led by Victor Amadeus and Prince

¹⁰⁶ Hattendorf, *England in the War of Spanish Succession*, p.125.

¹⁰⁷ G. Symcox, *Victor Amadeus II: Absolutism in the Savoyard State 1675-1730*, (Berkeley, 1983), p.144.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.148 .

¹⁰⁹ Symcox, *Victor Amadeus II*, p.150.

Eugene defeated the French outside the walls. The battle of Turin was arguably the most decisive of the war. Savoy was freed of French influence and no further incursions occurred. Furthermore, with Bourbon forces in the area routed, Milan and Mantua passed into Habsburg hands soon after.¹¹⁰

Following the battle of Turin British politicians could turn their attention to the offensive. This was part of the reason why they had paid such extensive subsidies to Victor Amadeus. Since the 1690's British strategists had believed that a thrust into Southern France through Savoy could bring Louis XIV to his knees. They believed that any attack would be even more successful if backed by French Protestants in the Cévennes.¹¹¹ The abortive attack on Toulon in 1707 was an attempt at employing a strategy of 'descents' on the southern coast of France.¹¹² The assault on Toulon was ultimately unsuccessful and the Duke of Savoy's ineffective leadership has often been blamed for this. However, one contrary opinion is that Prince Eugene held more responsibility for the failure of the attack. Victor Amadeus appeared to have been very respectful towards his illustrious relative and largely deferred to his judgement on military matters. Eugene was unsure of the operation from the start and felt that the troops employed in Toulon would be better employed elsewhere. Furthermore, when in front of Toulon he appears to have been unable to comprehend the advantage the fleet gave him when dealing with superior French

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.152.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.145.

¹¹² C. Storrs, *War, Diplomacy and the Rise of Savoy 1690-1720*, (Cambridge, 1999), p.60.

land forces. This culminated in a somewhat humiliating withdrawal by the Allies, although the embarrassment was lessened by the scuttling of the French fleet.¹¹³

1708 was a more successful year for the Grand Alliance in the Savoyard theatre.

Victor Amadeus captured Exilles and Fenestrelle and reclaimed the Vaudois valley.¹¹⁴

For the rest of the war, however, an expedition as extensive and ambitious as the assault on Toulon would not be attempted again. In early 1709 Marlborough believed that France's southern front was her weakest. In spite of this, however, his correspondence clearly shows that he had little faith in the Duke of Savoy's desire to press his advantage. On 26 January, for example, he wrote 'we can expect little or no assistance from the Duke of Savoy, though H.R.H. could never have a more favourable opportunity of doing us very great service while the enemy have drawn their greatest strength from all parts this way.'¹¹⁵ Marlborough was correct in this assumption as for the remainder of 1709 Victor Amadeus refused to take the field.

Flanders then became the main theatre of the war due to the three major members of the Grand Alliance all having an interest in the theatre. The Dutch wanted a guarantee of their territorial integrity in response to an aggressive neighbour by the restoration of a barrier in the Spanish Netherlands, as well as effective civil rule over

¹¹³ McLay, 'Combined Operations', p.284.

¹¹⁴ Symcox, *Victor Amadeus II*, p.155.

¹¹⁵ G. Murray, (ed.), *The Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill Volume 4*, (London, 1845), pp.409-409.

the area to facilitate their commercial interests.¹¹⁶ The British wanted to prevent French control of Flanders as it brought with it the threat of trade strangulation and a potential invasion, an objective linked to continued French support of the Stuart claimant to the throne, a position which was untenable to British politicians.¹¹⁷ Additionally the area had long been under Habsburg control.¹¹⁸ Warfare in Flanders, however, had a long tradition of becoming a grinding stalemate. France had won numerous victories in the theatre during the Nine Years War without decisively winning the conflict.¹¹⁹ Additionally, the Eighty Years War between the Spanish and the Dutch rebels had dragged on for generations without a clear outcome. If the British aim was to defeat France quickly then Flanders was far from the ideal battleground. The theatre was more suitable for waging an early modern form of attritional war and the impact of this will be explored within the context of the 1709 campaign.

Economic Reality

It will not be possible, due to the limits of this thesis, to delve into great detail into the finances of the Alliance, however, a revealing aspect of British attitudes to the war and the strategy they attempted to implement are the economic concerns of Marlborough and Godolphin. As early as 6 January 1709 Godolphin was worried

¹¹⁶ R. Geike and I.A. Montgomery, *The Dutch Barrier, 1705-1719*, (Cambridge, 1930), p.xv : Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession*, p.4.

¹¹⁷ W.S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times Volume I*, (London, 1933), p.530: Geike, *The Dutch Barrier*, p.47.

¹¹⁸ M.A. Thompson, 'Louis XIV and the Grand Alliance, 1705-10' in R.H Hatton and J.S. Bromley (eds.), *William III and Louis XIV: Essays 1680-1720 by and for Mark A Thompson*, (Liverpool, 1968), pp.190-212, p.191.

¹¹⁹ Jones, *The Captain-General*, p.14;

about financial matters, 'But I am much afraid our supplies will be more backward this year, than they were the last. There is only the land tax passed hitherto and the money does not come in upon that so fast as it used to do in former years.'¹²⁰

Likewise, Marlborough appeared concerned with how levy money was being spent. Levies were subsidies paid by the Allies (mainly Britain and the Dutch) in order for largely German princes to contribute troops to the war effort. In his letter to Lord Raby, discussing the augmentation of Prussian troops, he stated 'I was sorry to see any mention in that letter of levy-money, since both England and Holland have agreed not to allow any such thing.'¹²¹ It appears then that Britain was beginning to grow tired of financing her Allies' war efforts. By 1709 they were almost completely funding the Austrians, and were providing bread and forage for Imperial troops in winter-quarters.¹²² It appears, however, that Marlborough and Godolphin's cost-cutting measures were not entirely successful. The Grand Alliance needed troops and Britain would often give into the financial demands of the supplier.¹²³ The spiralling costs of the conflict are shown in the funds voted by Parliament at the start of each year. General war expenditure in 1701 was £3,313,025 by 1704 this had risen to 3,893,630, and in 1706 it was £4,961,837. The consensus is that 1704 and 1706 represent the epoch of British success during the conflict. However spending continued to grow, 1707 was a frustrating year for the Allies yet cost Parliament £5,771,776. The 1709 campaign was even more expensive, costing £6,369,905 and

¹²⁰ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol. 3*, pp.1195-1196.

¹²¹ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol. 4*, pp.385-386.

¹²² Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol. 3*, pp.1198-1199.

¹²³ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol. 4*, pp.418-420.

was again relatively unsuccessful. By 1711 war expenditure had reached an astonishing £12,663,952.¹²⁴ Given the increasing cost of the war, and the somewhat limited success of its later years it, it would appear that the forces driving British strategy had underrated French resilience. This is a mistake they should not have made, as during the Nine Years War, France had been able to carry on fighting in spite of economic collapse between 1696 and 1698.¹²⁵

Primary Sources

There have been numerous printed editions of Marlborough's memoirs and by far the most wide-ranging of these is George Murray's, *Letters and Dispatches*.¹²⁶ This five-volume work collects a vast range of letters from Marlborough's campaigns, from matters of grand-strategy to military miscellany. The sheer versatility of the correspondence printed has meant that this is the foremost source of primary letters used by twentieth-century historians of Marlborough. Snyder's *The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence* is a three-volume work with a more specific purpose.¹²⁷ He focuses on the letters between the two men and Sarah Churchill. This results in a very detailed look at how warfare was conducted on a strategic level and the developments of domestic politics during the period. The same can be said for Hoff's collection of letters between Marlborough and Heinsius, the Dutch Grand

¹²⁴ Hattendorf, *England in the War of the Spanish Succession*, p.304.

¹²⁵ Jones, *War and Economy*, p.5.

¹²⁶ G. Murray (ed.), *The Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill, First Duke of Marlborough, 1702-1712*, (5 volumes, London, 1848).

¹²⁷ H. Snyder (ed.), *The Marlborough-Godolphin Correspondence*, (3 volumes, Oxford, 1975).

Pensionary.¹²⁸ Both works lack day to day tactical and operational detail, but do provide an excellent source of information when dealing with matters concerning the Allied high command. These collections have proven very useful to this study and are widely available, however, they cannot compare in scale to the relatively recently opened Blenheim Papers in the British Library, which only become available in the 1990's. This contains information pertinent to all levels of warfare, with details on how the army functioned on campaign, letters from Marlborough to his leading generals and all correspondence that went through his secretary Cardonnel.¹²⁹

There are other primary sources from the period. The selection of Lord Orkney's letters printed in *The English Historical Review* provide firm insights into some of the key actions of the war. Not least his letters providing details of the battles of Blenheim and Malplaquet are very useful when studying the events and have been used extensively. Orkney is understandably a proponent of Marlborough as he would have benefited from his patronage, however, he was not averse to criticising his commander when he believed that a mistake had been made.¹³⁰ Other soldiers, generally from the higher levels of command, published accounts of the war. David Chandler collated a collection consisting of the memoirs Robert Parker and Mèrode-Westerloo. Parker was a great admirer of Marlborough, which he claimed was not

¹²⁸ B. van 't Hoff, *The Correspondence 1701-1711 of John Churchill and Anthonie Heinsius*, (The Hague, 1951).

¹²⁹ Add Mss 9094-9113, *Marlborough's Correspondence*, (British Library).

¹³⁰ H.H.E. Cra'ster (ed.), 'Letters of the First Lord Orkney during Marlborough's Campaigns', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 19, No. 74, (April, 1904), pp.301-321, p.318.

influenced by any form of patronage he received in a possible case of protesting too much, while Mèrode-Westerloo offered a unique perspective on proceedings having fought for both forces during the period, although his critiques of Marlborough need to be treated with caution due to the personal antipathy that appears to have existed between them.¹³¹ De La Colonie, who commanded a battalion of Bavarians alongside the French, produced one of the most useful memoirs of the period. It is rich in detail and is often insightful when pointing out the flaws in French battle plans. Richard Kane and John Blackadder authored further accounts, although Blackadder sometimes appears to have only written his work to express his devoutness.¹³² All of these provide key insights into the conduct of battles during the period although the view of the common infantryman is largely missing. The lesser ranks are, however, represented with memoirs from Corporal Matthew Bishop, Private John Marshall Deane, and Sergeant Millner providing further detail.¹³³ Peter Drake's and Donald McBane's memoirs are very interesting reads and often informative especially when describing combat, but their claims must be looked at extremely critically as the works seem to lean towards the dramatic at times.¹³⁴ One

¹³¹ D. Chandler (ed.), *Military Memoirs of Marlborough's Campaigns, 1702-1712 by Captain Robert Parker and the Comte de Mèrode-Westerloo, Field Marshall of the Holy Roman Empire*, (London, 1998) pp.115-116, 225.

¹³² R. Kane, *Campaigns of King William and Queen Anne; From 1689, to 1712. Also A New System of Military Discipline, For A Battalion of Foot on Action; With the Most Essential Exercise of the Cavalry*. (London, 1745); A. Crichton, (ed.), *The Life and Diary of Lieut. Col. J. Blackadder*, (London, 1824).

¹³³ M. Bishop, *The Life and Adventures of Matthew Bishop of Deddington in Oxfordshire*, (London, 1744); J.M. Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns During the War of the Spanish Succession*, in D. Chandler (ed.), *Society for Army Historical Research: Special Publication No. 12*, (1984); J. Millner, *A Compendious Journal of all the Marches, Battles, Sieges and Other Actions of the Allies in their War Against France in Holland, Germany and Flanders, 1701-12*, (London, 1733).

¹³⁴ S. Burrell (ed.), *Amiable Renegade: The Memoirs of Captain Peter Drake*, (Stanford, 1960); D. McBane, 'Expert Sword-Man's Companion' in M. Rector (ed.), *Highland Swordmanship: Techniques of the Scottish Swordmasters*, (Union City, 2001).

source that has not been extensively cited in this thesis are the memoirs of the Duke De Saint-Simon. The memoirs are rich in detail describing the political intrigues of the French Court, but being mostly situated in Versailles during the campaign his account of events are mostly second hand in nature. Moreover, Saint-Simon's account of Malplaquet is very biased against Villars, against whom he seems to have borne a grudge, and he attempts to pin the blame for the defeat on his 'bad positioning', a sentiment not shared by any of the sources that I have encountered.¹³⁵

Methodology

As has been made clear in the review of the secondary literature surrounding Malplaquet, the battle is in vital need of reassessment, especially when compared to the extent that Blenheim and Ramillies have been covered by historians.

Furthermore, in assessing the historiography it appears that, while much has been written on the strategic and operational level of warfare during the era as a whole, there has been no real attempt made to explore the experience of individual combatants at various levels on the battlefield. John Keegan's work, *The Face of Battle* has been extremely influential in establishing this as an area of study.¹³⁶

Indeed it has been credited with invigorating what has been termed 'new military history'.¹³⁷ One of the best examples of creating a history taking into account all

¹³⁵ F. Arkwright (ed.), *When Madame De Maintenon Was Queen 1707-1710: An Abridged Translation of the Memoirs of the Duke De Saint-Simon Volume III*, (New York, 1915), p.334.

¹³⁶ J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, (London, 1991), p.78.

¹³⁷ S. Morillo & M. F. Pavkovic, *What is Military History*, (Cambridge, 2006), p.41.

levels of warfare is Peter Englund's *Poltava*.¹³⁸ This work provides a balance between traditional campaign history, as well as a newer 'face of battle' model. It is a multi-faceted study of all aspects surrounding Poltava (1709) and this is a framework that I hope to work from, a top to bottom approach to writing history. It is similar to the synthesis in historical writing implemented by John Childs, studying the conduct of an army when fighting, while at the same time not neglecting analysis of higher level events.¹³⁹ Chapter one will examine the course of events during 1709, the plans, sieges and manoeuvres leading up to the battle of Malplaquet. Chapter two will provide an analysis of the manoeuvres immediately prior to the battle, before providing an overview of the battle itself and its impact, before reviewing the remainder of the campaigning season. Chapter three will focus on the experience of battle from the perspective of the common soldier. Malplaquet will be looked at using Keegan's 'face of battle' model in order to attempt to shift the debate away from the 'great-captain' historiography that has dominated the era. In dealing with the strategic and operational levels of warfare this study will draw heavily on the wide range of published sources and first-hand accounts of participants in the events. In terms of researching the experience of combat the limited amount of sources available on the battle of Malplaquet are simply not enough to give a rounded view. To achieve a comprehensive analysis of the conditions experienced on the battlefield, this paper will draw upon sources from a variety of actions

¹³⁸ P. Englund, *The Battle of Poltava: The Birth of the Russian Empire*, (London, 1992).

¹³⁹ Childs, *The Nine Years War*, p.3

throughout the age of horse and musket centred as far as possible on those that took place during the War of the Spanish Succession.

CHAPTER ONE: THE 1709 CAMPAIGN PRE-MALPLAQUET

Introduction

This chapter will explore Marlborough's conduct during the 1709 campaign, which began late in the year due to the ongoing peace talks, from the preliminary planning stages through to the eve of the battle of Malplaquet. It will begin by analysing Marlborough's preferred plan, which was an attack along the Channel coast. The risks and benefits associated with this method of advance will be explored in order to evaluate why it was never implemented. The political tensions within the Allied high command will also be analysed in order to see what impact this had on forcing Marlborough to abandon this plan. The chapter will then go on to discuss the actions the Allies eventually decided to take, centred on the siege of Tournai. The operational implications of the siege will be examined in order to analyse why the decision was made and what the Allies hoped to achieve from investing the town. Marlborough's conduct at the siege of Tournai will be then be explored, in order to see if he really was a master of siege warfare as historians, such as Chandler, have argued.¹⁴⁰ Once Tournai fell the Allies found themselves in the middle of an operational crossroads. The chapter will weigh-up the options available to the Marlborough, in order to analyse whether the eventual decision to assault Mons was the most profitable venture that he could have engaged in or whether he was pressured into the venture by his political Allies. Finally the chapter will look at the actions Marlborough took in order to avoid Villars' nearby army in order to reach

¹⁴⁰ D. Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, (London, 2000), p.326.

Mons and will analyse whether this was achieved merely by luck or due to his ability to out-manoeuvre enemy forces, as heralded by Chandler.¹⁴¹

Prelude - Domestic Politics & Peace Discussions 1708-9

The winter of 1708 was one of the coldest ever experienced in Europe and the relationship between Queen Anne and Sarah Churchill appears to have grown just as frosty. Anne was 'subjected to almost ceaseless bullying by Sarah'.¹⁴² At the same time Marlborough made the first of three requests to be appointed Captain-General for life in March 1709, with the intention of protecting his political and military position. This was an ill-timed manoeuvre and appears to have significantly impacted Marlborough's relationship with Anne, who had lost her husband in October 1708.¹⁴³ Marlborough's request appears to have been a response to the growing difficulties in domestic politics he was experiencing and was an attempt to cement his position in the face of Tory opposition.¹⁴⁴

After the fall of Harley in 1708 Marlborough had been forced to become ever closer to the Whig Junto.¹⁴⁵ This further weakened his relationship with Anne, who was incensed by Whig demands that she remarry immediately following Prince George's death. Anne refused Marlborough's request, which was without any precedent in

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.324.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.241.

¹⁴³ R. Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain's Greatest General*, (London, 2009), p.409

¹⁴⁴ H.L. Snyder, 'The Duke of Marlborough's Request of his Captain-Generalcy for Life: A Re-examination' in *The Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, vol. 45, (1967), pp.67-83, p.69

¹⁴⁵ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.413

English history.¹⁴⁶ Pressure on Marlborough at home had certainly increased by 1709. The Tories had sought every opportunity to discredit the Duke, making much noise in praise of their own Major General Webb's victory over the French at Wynendaele in late 1708.¹⁴⁷ Marlborough, then, was in a much more tenuous position domestically at the start of the 1709 campaign than he had been during any previous year of the war. He could feel the powers of his office, and that of Godolphin's, waning due to their association with the Whigs.¹⁴⁸

Marlborough's difficulties, however, pale in comparison to what was happening in France. While the Maritime Powers had sufficient corn reserves to meet the winter shortage France was in the throes of famine. Attempts to alleviate the shortage by shipping supplies from North Africa were blocked by Allied squadrons operating in the Mediterranean. This also meant the French were not able to supply or pay the army, prompting a flood of desertions. Mounting a successful defensive campaign in 1709 seemed unlikely.¹⁴⁹ With the *ancien regime* at its lowest ebb, peace appeared to be closer than ever. This scope of thesis is too limited to go into great detail over the 1709 peace talks. Mark. A. Thomson's *Louis XIV and the Grand Alliance, 1705-10* offers reconstruction of events and provides a good insight into why they failed. The salient points are that the French ambassador Torcy accepted everything the Allies demanded: 'He yielded much to the Dutch and to the Habsburgs; he eventually

¹⁴⁶ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.242

¹⁴⁷ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.413

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.414

¹⁴⁹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.242

relinquished any demands for an establishment for Philip; he met England's wishes about the Protestant succession'.¹⁵⁰ The Allies however pushed too far. 'No peace without Spain' proved to be the undoing of the negotiations. Louis XIV could not accept articles four or thirty-seven of the Allied preliminaries which stated that if Philip V did not give up Spain within two months then the war would be renewed or Louis would have to use French arms to expel him, which he could never agree to as he would be making war on his own grandson.¹⁵¹ Louis instead 'issued a proclamation to his subjects stressing the enormity of the Allies' conditions.'¹⁵² Marlborough and Eugene realised, after the fact, the mistake the negotiators had made. They had thought that it would only take a word from Louis for Philip to give up his throne, yet the latter had become much more independent than when the war began. In spite of this with Louis out of the war conquering Spain would have been a much simpler task than otherwise. Yet by pitching their terms too high the Allies had dragged the costly multi-theatre war on for another, unnecessary, year.¹⁵³ Furthermore, Louis' proclamation served as a rallying cry for the people producing a response, Holmes argued, on par with the support for the 1792-3 Revolutionaries.¹⁵⁴ The failure of the peace negotiations meant that Marlborough had to commence campaigning in 1709.

¹⁵⁰ M. A. Thomson, 'Louis XIV and the Grand Alliance, 1705-10', in R. Hatton & J.S. Bromley (eds.), *William III and Louis XIV: Essays 1680-1720*, (Liverpool, 1968), pp.190-212, p.206

¹⁵¹ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.410

¹⁵² Thomson, 'Louis XIV and the Grand Alliance, 1705-10', p.207

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.208

¹⁵⁴ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.411.

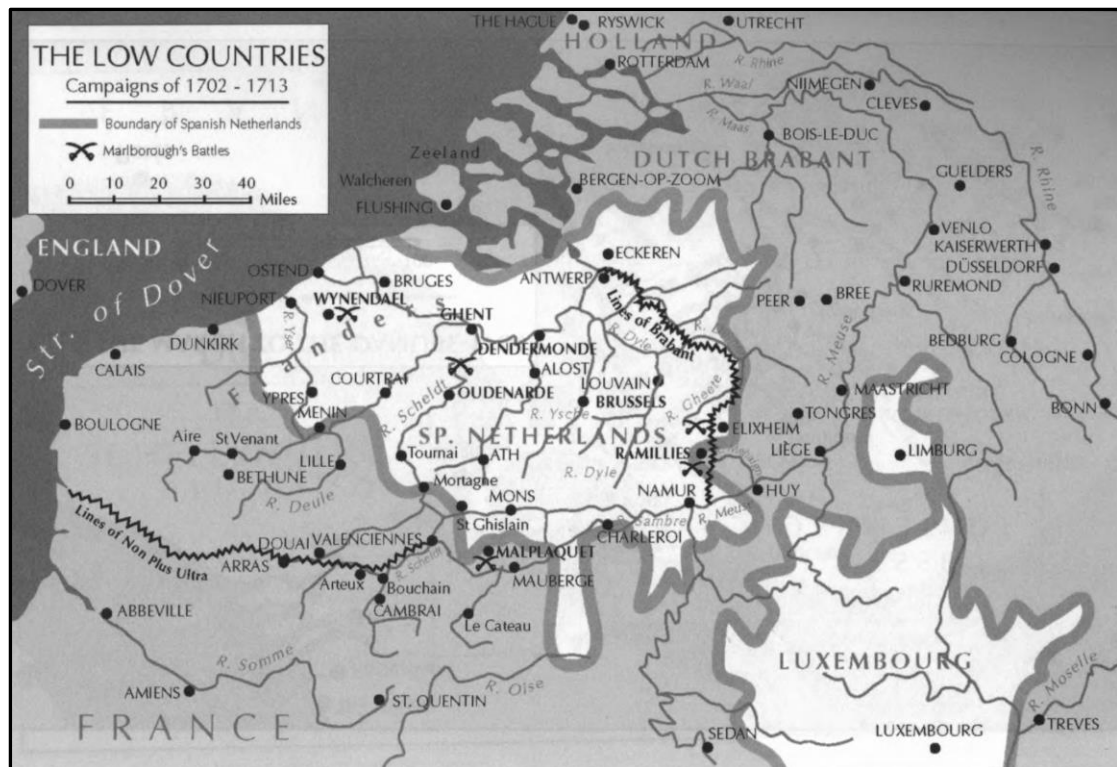


Figure 1 A map of Northern France and the Spanish Netherlands showing the positions of the towns of Ypres, Tournai and Mons (Source: J. Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine, 1702-1711*, (Barnsley, 2014), p.ix.)

Planning

Marlborough's initial plan for the 1709 campaign appears to have been to take advantage of his superior numbers, achieved due to the French need to heavily garrison their 'great towns', as well as the superiority the Grand Alliance had achieved at sea by this point.¹⁵⁵ By using this advantage Marlborough wished to march towards Ypres and breach the French defences near Dunkirk. This would be covered by a feint inland by a considerable force. Once the defences had been pierced the army would launch an offensive along the River Somme to Amiens and from there towards Paris. The offensive would be supplied by sea.¹⁵⁶ As this was

¹⁵⁵ H.L. Snyder, (ed.), *The Marlborough Godolphin Correspondence Volume 3*, (Oxford, 1975), p.1271.

¹⁵⁶ W.S Churchill, *Marlborough His Life and Times Volume IV*, (London, 1938), p.108.

going on a detachment of troops would be landed in Picardy, bypassing key fortresses in the area. Marlborough hoped that this plan would force Villars into giving battle.¹⁵⁷

Godolphin was supportive of the plan to march to the Channel coast, indeed it was he who appears to have broached the idea.¹⁵⁸ He believed that this would alleviate the supply problems faced by Marlborough's force: 'if you find it practicable to march the whole or a part of your army to the sea coast, wee could certainly furnish you with bread from time to time for 40,000 or 50,000 men for a month, at very little warning[...].'¹⁵⁹ Godolphin further explained that an assault on the sea coast would, if successful, allow Marlborough to march into an area better stocked for forage than that surrounding Lille, which had been stripped bare by French forces throughout the winter and spring.

Marlborough was clearly worried about his own supply situation at this point of the campaign, 'I am sorry to find that stockes fall, that will incorage France.'¹⁶⁰ To further compound his misery he believed that the French forces were adequately provisioned for the coming campaign, having spent the months of peace talks restocking their depots. On 20 June he described his thinking to Godolphin: 'There people are in great misery, but by what we hear from Paris, all the monys that thay

¹⁵⁷ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.247.

¹⁵⁸ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol. 3*, p.1271.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.1280-1281

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.1279-1280

have will be employed for the subsisting of their armies.' He expanded, 'And I think it is plain by the intrenching of Monsieur de Villars' arm, that they will be on the defensive, which they would not do, were they not sure of subsistence.'¹⁶¹

This situation would have deeply troubled Marlborough especially considering his experience when operating under similar conditions in 1705. During his abortive attack through the Moselle valley, an effort to exploit the strategic advantage gained after Blenheim by invading France via a less fortified route, Marlborough's force had been effectively stifled by a well-supplied defensively positioned French force led by Villars and the failure proved to be his last offensive outside of Flanders.¹⁶²

Marlborough clearly did not appreciate being out-thought by Villars and it is highly likely that a desire to secure adequate forage to avoid a stalemate would have informed the thinking behind his plan. Additionally, Marlborough would have seen the secure supply route offered by a march along the sea coast as beneficial for any attempt to exploit a victory.

Marlborough desired a battle, but he knew that without proper exploitation a victory was worthless. After Blenheim the forces of the Grand Alliance had advanced all of the way to the Moselle taking Ulm, Ingolstadt and Bavaria as a whole.¹⁶³ The exploitation after Ramilles had been even more impressive, with the whole of the

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp.1279-1280

¹⁶² Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.157.

¹⁶³ I.F. Burton, *The Captain-General: The Career of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough from 1702-1711*, (London, 1968), p.77.

Spanish Netherlands falling, and the victory at Oudenarde had led to the fall of Lille.¹⁶⁴ In June 1709, however, Marlborough doubted that similar successes would follow a victory if a different plan was chosen, 'If we be so fortunate as to have an occasion of beating them, we could not for want of forage and provisions enter into France but by the sea coast [...].'¹⁶⁵

The plan to march on the Channel coast was certainly bold by the standards of the time. On reflection, however, it may have been too ambitious. Essentially, Marlborough's aborted 1709 plan was the same as the one he had proposed prior to the siege of Lille the previous year, whereby Major-General Erle, with his 11 battalions on the Isle of Wight, was to launch a descent against Abbeville in order to secure a naval base in France.¹⁶⁶ On that occasion his plan had met with unanimous resistance from the Dutch Deputies and Prince Eugene, 'It will be impossible owing to the objections of our Allies, to take our joint measures for seconding General Erle's design upon Abbevill till we are masters of Lille'.¹⁶⁷ Marlborough had been forced to delay the plan until Lille had been taken. However, he still advocated adopting it once the matter had been resolved, 'Now after all this project must depend on our success at Lille; and then shall it be thought practicable, and can be executed, we must certainly reap a very great advantage by it, by joining them with a

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.106.

¹⁶⁵ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol. 3*, pp.1279-1280.

¹⁶⁶ Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.135.

¹⁶⁷ G. Murray, (ed.), *The Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill Volume 4*, (London, 1845), p.147.

good body of troops in the spring and carrying the war into the heart of France.’¹⁶⁸

Eventually Lille took far too long to take to make the plan for a descent practicable.

Furthermore Webb’s troops had been called into action to defend Ostend from a French attempt to cut Allied supply lines and, therefore, resources were no longer available to launch such an attack.¹⁶⁹

Marlborough’s plan was once again voted against in the council of war in 1709.

Goslinga, one of the most prominent of the Dutch Deputies, described the second council when this took place:

‘The Duke voted for the siege of Ypres, the Prince [Eugene] for that of Tournai. Our people, as well as Count Tilly, ranged ourselves with the Prince. The principal reasons which led us to this choice were, first, the extreme weakness of the garrison [of Tournai]; second the importance of the place; third the convenience and security of the convoys; and, fourth, the lay of the land [around Tournai], which made the raising of the siege by a battle almost impossible; and finally the protection of the Brabant, which we could cover while making the siege.’¹⁷⁰

Chandler argued that the plan the previous year had been rejected due to appearing too unconventional for the Dutch to abide. He also criticised Eugene: ‘For all his bright genius, Eugene never fully understood the possible interaction of land and sea forces- as the fiasco before Toulon in 1707 had already shown [...]’¹⁷¹ The Allies showed the same caution in refusing to adopt the 1709 proposal.¹⁷² In making this

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.147.

¹⁶⁹ H.L. Snyder, (ed.), *The Marlborough Godolphin Correspondence Volume 2*, (Oxford, 1975), p.1095.

¹⁷⁰ Goslinga, *Mémoires*, (1857), p.104 cited in Churchill, *Marlborough Volume IV*, p.108.

¹⁷¹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.224.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p.247.

judgement, however, Chandler appears to have been far too dismissive of the dangers involved in following such a bold plan. Amphibious operations in the eighteenth-century were notoriously difficult. This was due to a lack of experience in undertaking such operations, which enhanced the technical problems involved in communication between land and naval forces during the era. One of the key issues that has been cited as a reason for notable failures in combined operations was the difficulty in obtaining accurate intelligence on an intended target.¹⁷³ This was less of an issue for the naval forces. Operations would usually be targeted at areas where naval dominance had been achieved. Furthermore, pilots and sailors would have had a good knowledge of the coast in their area of operations and, therefore, could ensure that any attack took place in a suitable location.¹⁷⁴ As Britain had been at war with the French on-and-off for twenty years by 1709 it is highly probable that the area around Abbeville would have been sufficiently scouted by the Royal Navy and thus would have been a suitable area for Marlborough's proposed landing.¹⁷⁵ However, sailing along a coast is very different from knowing the conditions inland. For the Army, which would have had to conduct the landing, the lack of intelligence was a severe disadvantage. Sources of information, such as prisoners of war, were unreliable and the forces would often be committed without a good idea of the layout of the ground they were attacking. Furthermore, once the army had landed, it

¹⁷³ R. Harding, 'Sailors and Gentlemen of Parade: Some Professional and Technical Problems Concerning the Conduct of Combined Operations in the Eighteenth Century', *The Historical Journal*, vol.32, No.1 (Mar, 1989), pp.35-55, p.45.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.45.

¹⁷⁵ Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.135.

would have to attempt to take a fortified town to act as a base from which it could be reinforced and to harass the surrounding countryside. If the element of surprise failed an amphibious force could find itself outgunned once it moved out from under the effective range of naval firepower, due to the logistical difficulties of unloading artillery.. Taking even a minor fortified point could, therefore, be a major task.¹⁷⁶

In addition, as McLay has pointed out, the campaign would have to be led by the right man, 'the leaders of combined operations had from the outset to establish and maintain a cohesive joint operational momentum of the land and sea forces.

Moreover, it was rare for these commanders to be afforded a unitary command structure [...] it was customary for them to have to accommodate a Council of War of diverse opinions.'¹⁷⁷ The long list of failures during the period points to how difficult a task this was, with the seven successful descents of the Nine Years War and the War of Spanish Succession generally being in relatively weak areas such as Mediterranean Islands or Ireland, with perhaps Gibraltar (1704) an exception, and the eight failures included two directed at France: Brest (1694) and Toulon (1707).¹⁷⁸ Marlborough himself may have been able to achieve a successful amphibious operation, as he had in Ireland in 1690.¹⁷⁹ However, there was no guarantee that his

¹⁷⁶Harding, 'Sailors and Gentlemen of Parade: Some Professional and Technical Problems Concerning the Conduct of Combined Operations in the Eighteenth Century', p.47.

¹⁷⁷K.A.J, McLay, *Combined operations: British naval and military co-operation in the wars of 1688-1713*, (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, 2003), p.364.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.362-363

¹⁷⁹ Holmes, *Marlborough*, pp.169-170.

deputies would have been able to match this and indeed it had proven beyond even Eugene at Toulon.¹⁸⁰

Clearly then, a descent on Abbeville would have been operationally difficult, but it appeared to have also presented a major personal risk in the event of failure.

Marlborough and Godolphin's positions at home in 1709 were weakening and, as had been stated, Marlborough's influence on the Queen was waning. In this environment one major embarrassment could have had a major negative effect on his position as the leader of British and Allied forces in Flanders. Given the risks and history of failure of combined operations, especially at Toulon only two years before, it would have been very risky for Marlborough to put his reputation at stake for a descent on Abbeville.

Alternatively, an assault on Ypres could still have been made without attempting a descent on Picardy and a subsequent attempt to link up with this force via a march along the coast. Burton has pointed out that this was still Marlborough's preference, as is evident from Goslinga's description of the council of war. However, he argued that this was now not due to wishing to use Ypres as a base for a further campaign along the coast. He believed that this strategy would require a preliminary battle to defeat the French field army or at least drive it from the strong position that it had occupied around La Bassée and along the length of the Scarpe. Given the late start to

¹⁸⁰ Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.112

the campaign, he argued that any plans for such a preliminary battle had been abandoned in favour of a siege strategy.¹⁸¹

Godolphin encouraged Marlborough to pursue decisive operations, 'if your army bee superior to the French in number as well as quality, which I hope they will bee, because they must needs be obliged to leave great garrison in their great towns, I should hope, in that case, you would avoid as much as possible not to amuse yourselves in any siege, but either march into France, or at least send a good detachment towards to sea coast [...].'¹⁸² Godolphin evidently wished for a rapid, dramatic campaign that would bring France to its knees and, therefore, force Louis XIV to accept a disadvantageous peace at the next round of negotiations. However, Godolphin, while he had a good grasp of strategy, was not an operational general. He was well informed but he was not present on the ground. An advance into France would have been very difficult to achieve, as garrisons operating out of Tournai and Ypres would have played havoc with the long supply lines that the Allies would have been forced to utilise. Offering continual supply from across the Channel could have worked in theory but such an enterprise would have been at the mercy of the wind and the strong French-backed privateering element still operating out of Dunkirk. Such an advance would have also been reliant on achieving a significant victory over the French field army. Marlborough had secured victories over the French at Blenheim, Ramilles and Oudenarde, but a further victory was by no means certain.

¹⁸¹Burton, *The Captain-General*, pp.146-147.

¹⁸² Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1271.

Godolphin's thoughts also appear to have neglected one of the key factors in early-modern warfare. It was almost impossible to bring an enemy to battle if they did not wish to fight, as shown during the 1705 campaign in the Moselle and Marlborough's incredibly frustrating 1707 campaign during which, as the French official history put it, 'without a major action and without the spilling of blood, M. le Duc de Vendôme succeeded in disconcerting the vast projects of the enemy, and also in fulfilling all the objects that the King prescribed for him [...].'¹⁸³ Despite Villars' constant requests, Louis XIV was by 1709 very risk averse and would not countenance battle. The chances of Marlborough being able to induce the French to battle were also lessened by the strength of the position that Villars had taken up. The French had constructed a great line of strong defences running from the fortress of St. Venant, thirty miles from the Channel, to Douai on the Scarpe.¹⁸⁴ Godolphin may also have had another reason for proposing this plan, as his own position in government was under severe threat, it is possible that he was encouraging Marlborough to pursue a decisive battle due to his own desperation, as he may have viewed a quick victory as the only way that he could keep his grip on power.¹⁸⁵

The strength of the French defences meant that a frontal attack against the line was impractical. Throughout his career Marlborough never attacked an enemy in such a

¹⁸³ J.J.G. Pelet and F.E. de Le Vault, *Mémoires militaires relatifs à la Guerre de la Succession d'Espagne*, Volume 7 (Paris, 1848), p.37 : Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.199.

¹⁸⁴ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol. 4*, p.102.

¹⁸⁵ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.413.

position, as the campaigns of 1705 with the refusal to assault Villars' position on the Moselle, and 1711 when confronted with the Ne Plus Ultra Lines show.¹⁸⁶

Marlborough expressed his frustration to Godolphin on 20 June 1709, partly blaming the weather for making it impossible for him to attack Villars' force before the lines had been completed, 'We have rain every day, which gives us the spleen, and is of great advantage to the Marishal de Villars, since it gives him time to finish lin[e]s, which he is working at the head of his army.'¹⁸⁷ A few days later it was clear that Marlborough had given up hope of achieving success through a frontal attack due to the strength of the entrenchments.¹⁸⁸ The only practicable option was to attempt to turn the flanks of the French position. The fortress of Tournai protected the inland flank and Ypres covered the Channel side. One of these positions would have to be taken. Of the two targets Ypres appears to have presented the more valuable long-term strategic target for Britain given her long-standing commercial and military interests on the Channel coast.

The Dutch reasons for being opposed to the siege of Ypres and instead following Eugene's idea of attacking Tournai seem to have been due to the anticipation of further peace talks. Ypres could have been used by the Allies as a base to attack Dunkirk and thus oust the privateers who operated in the port. The Dunkirk privateers were certainly a nuisance to both Dutch and British shipping in the

¹⁸⁶ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.156; Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.181.

¹⁸⁷ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol. 3*, p.1280.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.1283.

Channel. However, for the Dutch, who it should be remembered had fought three naval wars with the English in the previous century, the thought of Britain maintaining a base in Dunkirk as a permanent possession, as they had between 1658 and 1662, was perhaps a greater threat.¹⁸⁹ Goslinga stated, 'I believe, however, that his principal motive [for besieging Ypres] was to get nearer the sea, and once Ypres was taken to begin another siege on the coast, preferably that of Dunkerke, in order to put it in the hands of England [...].'¹⁹⁰ The barrier being proposed by the Dutch was not only a defensive measure against further French aggression, it was also an attempt to create a commercial hegemony over the Spanish Netherlands. The British feared this would end free trade in the area and either wished for a continued French presence in the port, albeit with its fortifications destroyed, or the establishment of an English outpost. The worst case scenario for the British was Dunkirk and Ostend being added to the Dutch barrier.¹⁹¹ It is understandable then and perhaps a wise decision to avoid a potential fracturing of the Grand Alliance for the Dutch to have sided with Eugene's plan of moving inland to attack Tournai.

Attacking Tournai rather than Ypres, however, appears to have been an operational mistake by the Grand Alliance. Ypres was acknowledged as a weak point by the French, and presented a much softer target. As Chandler pointed out, 'Tournai, although isolated and undermanned, was a very strong and reasonably-supplied

¹⁸⁹ J.R. Jones, *Marlborough*, (Cambridge, 1993), p.175.

¹⁹⁰ Goslinga, *Mémoires*, (1857), p.104 cited in Churchill, *Marlborough Vol. 4*, p.108.

¹⁹¹ L. Frey and M. Frey, *The Treaties of the War of the Spanish Succession: An Historical and Critical Dictionary*, (Westport, 1995), p.141.

fortress of modern design.’ Furthermore it had a garrison of 7,000 men commanded by the competent Marquis de Surville-Hautfois.¹⁹² Marlborough, however, appears to have been confident of an easy victory at Tournai. Writing to Galway on 4 July 1709 he described how he caught the French by surprise by marching on Tournai, a manoeuvre that will be discussed in detail later, and as a result: ‘This [the investment] they so little expected that there are but twelve weak battalions and a regiment of dragoons in garrison, which is not thought sufficient to make a vigorous defence both of town and citadel, so that we flatter ourselves, though the place is very strong in of itself, of an easy conquest.’¹⁹³ In contrast, the French appeared to have been confident that Tournai would hold out for an extended period of time. The court at Versailles believed that the siege would take so long that the allies would be unable to exploit any potential victory prior to the winter. Louis wrote to Villars on 2 July 1709: ‘We count for much that by your wise dispositions and the precautions that you have taken, all the vast project of the enemy has been reduced to the single enterprise of the siege of Tournai [...].’¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.248.

¹⁹³ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol. 4*, p.531.

¹⁹⁴ *Archives...de la guerre*, tome 2146, Pt I, Sect I, No.56 cited in Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.248.

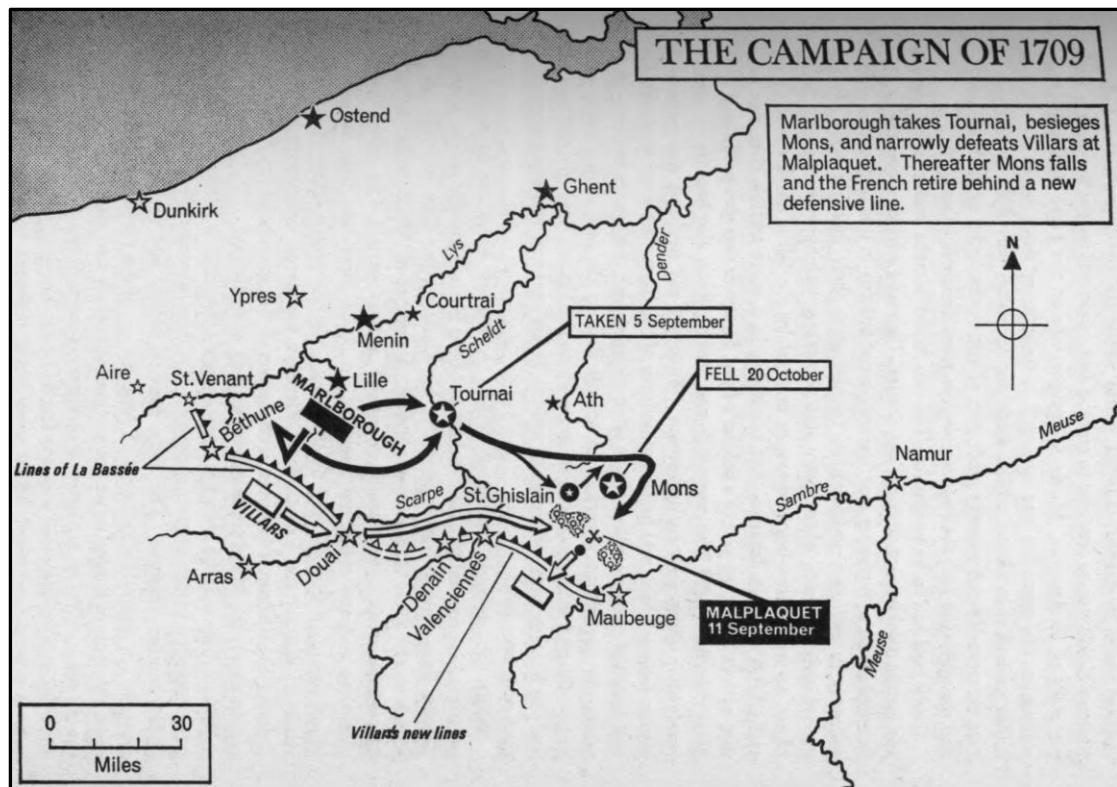


Figure 2 Map showing Villars' defensive line linking St Venant to Douai and Marlborough's investments of Tournai and Mons. (Source: D. Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, (London, 2000), p.249.)

The Siege of Tournai

The decision to assault Tournai was made on 24 June 1709. Marlborough had travelled to Lille on 16 June 1709 and had ordered his field army to make for the city in order to assemble on the plains outside. Positioned at Lille the Allies could have still attacked in either direction, therefore, Villars would have remained unaware of the decision that had been reached. At this point Marlborough was clearly worried about how he would sustain his army now that shipping supplies from the Channel coast was not an option: 'to form the army as soon as possible on the plains of that place [Lille], from whence we have a dismal account of the scarcity of the forage on the ground, besides that the French ravage and destroy the little there is before

them to distress us the more when we approach them.’¹⁹⁵ The slow moving siege train was missing from this muster. Marlborough had previously ordered his siege train to advance to Menin. Only ten miles separate Menin from Ypres, whereas it is around thirty miles to Tournai. Marlborough stated in his correspondence, shortly after the fact, that this was an intentional ruse in order to encourage Villars to reinforce his garrison at Ypres at the expense of Tournai: ‘The bringing of our battering canon to Menin has had the success we wished, for the French took it for granted that we intended the siege of Ypres, and accordingly put 16 battalions in that place, and drew to their army ten battalions from Tournai.’¹⁹⁶ This scenario is not implausible as Marlborough was not averse to attempting to trick his opponents by clever manoeuvring, however, it may also be the case that he had ordered his siege train to Menin in order to facilitate the siege of Ypres that he had desired.¹⁹⁷

Whatever the reason for moving the siege train to Menin it is clear that the Allies benefited from reduction of the Tournai garrison. This move by Villars had the effect of reducing the garrison to 7,000 men, which was some thousands fewer than would be required to mount a full defence of the town.¹⁹⁸ In comparison to two of the other sieges conducted by the Allies during the latter years of the war this was indeed a less than formidable garrison. During the protracted 108 day siege of Lille,

¹⁹⁵ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol. 4*, p.507.

¹⁹⁶ Snyder, *Marlborough-Godolphin Vol 3*, pp.1285-1286.

¹⁹⁷ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.110.

¹⁹⁸ J. Ostwald, ‘Marlborough and Siege Warfare’ in J.B. Hattendorf, A.J Veenendaal, Jr., R. van Hövell tot Westerflier (eds.), *Marlborough: Soldier and Diplomat*, (Rotterdam, 2012), pp.123-142, p.139.

which had taken place in the previous year, the French garrison led by Boufflers had numbered 16,000 men,¹⁹⁹ while when besieging Bouchain in 1711 the Allies faced 5,000 men in a much more compact fortress than Tournai, with the added difficulty of having a vast French field army in close proximity.²⁰⁰

The reduction of the garrison should have aided the Allies in the ensuing siege. As well as moving the siege train to Menin further manoeuvres by the Allied field army appear to have been designed to keep Villars unaware of its true intentions. On 24 June the Allied force advanced from Lille with six days rations toward the Lines of La Basseé. Villars evidently believed either that he would face a frontal attack, or more likely believed that the Allies would attempt to turn his left flank. His subsequent manoeuvres appear to support this. The troops taken from Tournai were relocated to his field army and the fortresses of Saint-Venant and Aire on the Channel coast and he personally led 500 men to Béthune, also positioned on his left flank.²⁰¹

On the night of the 26 June events came to a head. In order to cover his true intentions, and to prevent Villars from potentially intersecting his line of march, Marlborough ordered Orkney to:

‘march wth. a strong detachment and make a motion towards
Douay ; which occasioned Monsr. Villars to look about him, he
knowing that our bores had just before been cutting roads for our

¹⁹⁹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.226.

²⁰⁰ J. Hussey, *Marlborough: Hero of Blenheim*, (London, 2004), p.219; Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, pp.293, 338-339.

²⁰¹ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol. 4*, pp.110-111.

armys marching. Soe that he could think no less but we ware coming to attack them there and at that time.’²⁰²

It was at this point that Villars strengthened his line and reinforced the flanks to avoid the Allies from turning his position. However, Orkney’s movement was a feint and the rest of Marlborough’s force advanced to Tournai. As Deane wrote:

‘June the 15th [26 June N.S.] at taptoo time we ware ordered to strike our tents the which being done the whole army marcht all that night; but they that lay on the left so near Tournay [within a league] soon accomplished our Genlls. Designe [General’s design], and the army marching from the left they soon invested it; and the rest of the army on the right marching 5 hours before they came to there ground[...].’²⁰³

Marlborough was clearly pleased by the success of his manoeuvring: ‘we have resolved on the siege of Tournay, and accordingly marched last night, and have invested it when thay expected our going to another place, [so] that thay have not half the troops in the town thay should have to defend themselves well[...].’²⁰⁴

The manoeuvre had indeed been a success. Villars had begun reforming his army at La Gorgue intending to cover a siege of Ypres while the Allied forces had been able to advance unimpeded to Tournai,²⁰⁵ he thus appears to have been caught out, but, it would seem that he was not too downhearted by the Allied success. It would have been extremely difficult for him to have guessed in which direction the Allies would strike and in his opinion the siege of Tournai, which he felt could hold out until

²⁰² J.M. Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough’s Campaign During The War of The Spanish Succession 1704-1711*, p.80.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.80.

²⁰⁴ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1286.

²⁰⁵ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough’s Campaigns*, p.81.

October, was preferable to having to defend Ypres. His view was that he had defended his weaker flank effectively and forced the Allies into a long arduous siege that would take up much of the rest of the campaigning season.²⁰⁶

The Allies decided that sixty battalions of foot, seven of whom were British, and 60 squadrons of horses should undertake the siege, out of a total force of 152 battalions and 245 squadrons.²⁰⁷ The besieging army started to dig trenches before Tournai on 30 June.²⁰⁸ Marlborough had left his heavy artillery in Menin in order to move swiftly on Tournai. However, this was not particularly novel by standards of the time as armies often invested towns before waiting for the siege train. By 1 July 1709 the artillery was being shipped up the Scheldt to Tournai.²⁰⁹

The town of Tournai eventually surrendered on 29 July 1709. Marlborough was by this point clearly frustrated by the amount of time being taken up by the siege in an already short campaign, and hoped the citadel would follow soon. This is evident from his letter to the Queen of the same date:

‘The governor of Tournay having yesterday in the evening hung out a white flag and desired to capitulate for the town, hostages were thereupon exchanged on both sides; but it being very late before those from the town arrived at our quarters we deferred entering upon the treaty for the surrender till this morning. We are now going to assemble in order to settle the articles; in the mean time I thought it my duty to lose no time in acquainting Y.M.[Your

²⁰⁶ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, pp.113-114.

²⁰⁷ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns*, p.81; Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.245.

²⁰⁸ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns*, p.81.

²⁰⁹ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol. 4*, p.522.

Majesty] with this good news by express, and hope it may not be long before it is followed by that of the surrender of the citadel.’²¹⁰

Marlborough’s desperation to end the siege quickly was understandable. Valuable months of campaigning had been lost due to the hard winter and the protracted peace talks in the spring. Additionally, the difficult winter also meant that the magazines were running low of supplies. Marlborough recognised this fairly early on in the campaign, as he wrote to Godolphin on 24 June, ‘It is not to be imagined the misery the poor country people are in, and as all the wheat is killed everywhere that we have yett seen or hear of, I know not how we shall be able to keep the field in the month of October.’²¹¹ Marlborough had a very short campaigning season in which to attempt to achieve decisive results.

The siege of the town itself had not taken long. The artillery train of 180 cannon and 50 mortars were placed in batteries and began the bombardment on 13 July, while sorties from the garrison were beaten off on both the 20 July and 21 July.²¹² Allied attacks would have been consistently launched once the bombardment had begun. Marlborough was notably impatient when it came to siege operations, relying on vigour and fire-power as opposed to the highly technical art of operation that Vauban had espoused. Marlborough valued speed although these rapid assaults often proved more expensive in terms of casualties.²¹³ On the night of the 26 June a

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.556.

²¹¹ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1283.

²¹² Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough’s Campaigns*, p.83.

²¹³ Ostwald, ‘Marlborough and Siege Warfare’, pp.131.

breakthrough was achieved as Marlborough's three prongs launched themselves at the defences of the town. Deane described the ensuing action, 'On the 15th [26 July N.S.] at dusk in the evening our bombardiers and cannoneers and cohorns [small-handheld mortars] and hand grenades was workt to a miracle, and fiercer fighting was never heard since that sort of musick was invented, & abundance of men was killed on both sides espetially of the enemy who manfully stood itt.'²¹⁴ Deane goes on to explain that the Allied troops were beaten off three times before successfully taking the sluice. Further successes followed during the next evening with Allied troops taking a hornwork and counterscarp.²¹⁵ With his position weakened, and the possibility of a general storm of the town to come, the garrison commander offered terms and a capitulation was agreed.

The surrender of the town, however, proved to be a false dawn for Marlborough's hopes of a quick resolution to the siege. The Marquis de Surville-Hautfois' defence of the town had been little more than a token effort. He recognised that he did not have enough troops to mount a meaningful defence and was content to withdraw his troops into the more compact citadel.²¹⁶ The citadel at Tournai was very modern and Surville had retreated with an intact force of 5,000 men, into a place described by Deane as: 'an invincible strong place for mines.'²¹⁷ Furthermore, the advantage Marlborough had been able to gain by attacking three separate, widely spaced, areas

²¹⁴ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns*, p.83.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.83.

²¹⁶ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.419.

²¹⁷ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns*, p.84.

of the town required greater numbers in order to achieve local superiority and spread the French garrison thinly. With the smaller perimeter of the citadel the French would have found it far easier to rush troops to endangered sectors, negating any advantage that the superior numbers of the besieging army would have given.

Soon after the surrender of the town, Marlborough moved his camp to Orchies, situated three hours march away from Tournai, leaving the command of the siege in the hands of his Dutch engineers.²¹⁸ It appears that this was done in order to make it easier to provision his forces and also to secure a stronger defensive position, with his right flank anchored on Pont à Marque and his left on Rumegies. Clearly he felt a detachment of troops under his command that had previously been part of the besieging army would be better utilised aiding Prince Eugene's covering army. By moving his camp to Orchies it is evident Marlborough felt that his time would be better spent away from the day-to-day minutiae of the siege to instead focus on a more operational role, keeping an eye on Villars' manoeuvres, protecting the trenches of the besieging army, and ensuring a steady supply of forage to his men.²¹⁹ This appears to have been a fairly sensible move. Marlborough's intelligence network was effective and he was very much aware of Villars' movements, as his letter to Boyle on 8 August 1709 demonstrates: 'The Maréchal de Villars has been in continual motion since we made this march [to Orchies]. He has recalled the Chevalier de Luxemboug with the corps he commanded between Valenciennes and

²¹⁸*ibid.*, p.85.

²¹⁹ Ostwald, 'Marlborough and Siege Warfare', p.142.

Mons: he is likewise fortifying the passage of the Scarpe, and had his quarters last night at Wazieres near Douay.²²⁰ Given Marlborough's efforts the previous year in successfully defending the Allied trenches at Lille from no fewer than three French armies, and his efforts at Bouchain in 1711 in doing the same against a field army of 110,000 men, the manoeuvring required to prevent a covering army from interfering with the siege was a facet of warfare in which he was adept.²²¹ It is, therefore, understandable that he would choose to leave the vicinity of the siege to take up this role. Additionally, it was very rare in early-modern warfare for a town to withstand a siege. Therefore, it is understandable that Marlborough would have felt the continuing assault on the citadel did not warrant his personal attention. Yet in moving his camp he did surrender effective control of proceedings, which was to create difficulties.²²²

As early as 5 August, only a few days after the fall of the town, negotiations for the surrender of the citadel were in progress. Surville offered to observe a ceasefire until 5 September and then give up the citadel, unless it had been relieved before that period. Marlborough was agreeable to this proposal and allowed a messenger to pass through the lines to seek validation for the agreement from Versailles.²²³ Villars, however, believed that it would be preferable to force the Allies to expend

²²⁰ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, pp.569-570.

²²¹ J. Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine, 1702-1711*, (Barnsley, 2014), p.157; Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.457.

²²² C.T. Atkinson, 'Marlborough's Sieges', *Journal of the Society for Army Historical Research*, 13, (1934), pp.195-205 cited in C. Carlton, *This Seat of Mars: War and the British Isles, 1485-1746*, (London, 2011), p.175.

²²³ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1283.

ammunition and lives on taking Tournai and advised Louis not to consent to the ceasefire. Louis in turn offered a counter-proposal that a full ceasefire on the Flanders front would be observed during the period.²²⁴ Marlborough wrote, 'I came hither this morning with the Prince of Savoy to expect the result of the project I sent you by the last post for the surrender of the citadel. The gentleman [...] brought us another proposal for a cessation of arms as well between the armies as the citadel to the 5 September, when it should be delivered up [...].' Marlborough, however, clearly believed that this was a step too far, 'We told him we had no authority to make any such treaty, and thereupon sent him back to the citadel, and shall carry on our attacks with all possible vigour, in hopes of being masters of it at least within the time it was to have surrendered.'²²⁵

French counter-mining was a source of particular frustration to the Allies throughout the siege of the citadel. Mention of this however, is notably played down in Marlborough's own correspondence, further strengthening the view that he was leading the siege operations in name only and was delegating much of the responsibility to his Dutch engineers such as Des Rocques and Du Mée.²²⁶ One of Marlborough's letters in which French mining operations were explicitly mentioned paid far more attention to a successful discovery of a French mine rather than the damage done when another was exploded:

²²⁴ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.119.

²²⁵ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, pp.569-570.

²²⁶ Ostwald, 'Marlborough and Siege Warfare, pp.139, 142.

‘We continue to push on the siege with all the caution that may be. Yesterday a new battery of fifteen mortars began to fire at M. Schuylembourg’s attack. Our miners had the good fortune the day before to discover a mine under this battery, out of which they took eighteen barrels of powder, the enemy deffering to spring it till we should begin to fire. On Tuesday they sprung a mine which did us some damage.’²²⁷

John Wilson’s diary provides a graphic account of the difficulties encountered by the engineers and infantry in this subterranean war,

‘for in my opinion, of all the horrid schemes of war, this of bringing of mines and sapping to finde out was the most dreadfull, for it was with great reluctancie that even the boldest men in the Army then on this service have turned their backs and given way. Nay even those who had seen death in all its shapes above ground was struck w’th horror to stand (as he supposed) on top of a mine in danger of being blown up every minute. And those who went under ground into the sapps had a co-equall reluctancie, if not more, they being in danger every minute either of being suffocate or buried in the rubbish in the like nature.’²²⁸

In one letter, however, Marlborough expressed dismay at the effect the French mining was having on his troops’ morale, yet he again played down the physical damage done, ‘We are obliged to carry on our attack with great caution, to preserve our men from the enemy’s mines, of which they have already sprung several with little effect.’ The Allied troops were struggling to deal with the innovative measures employed by the French engineers underground, ‘Our miners have discovered one of their galleries at each attack, but dare not advance to make the proper use of this discovery because of the enemy’s continual fire of small shot under ground.’ The

²²⁷ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, p.577.

²²⁸ J. Wilson, ‘The Journal of John Wilson’ in D. Chandler (ed.), *Military Miscellany II, Manuscripts from Marlborough’s Wars, the American War of Independence and the Boer War*, (Stroud, 2005), p.75.

Allies responded by rolling bombs into the tunnels to dislodge the small artillery pieces. However the difficulties continued.²²⁹ As a further measure the French would sometimes fight over a mine that had been discovered before withdrawing to detonate a deeper mine in the midst of the seemingly victorious Allied troops.²³⁰

Given the nature of the fighting the engineers suffered considerable casualties during the siege of Tournai. In early-modern sieges this was certainly not uncommon. Specialist sappers were relatively few in number and would be dressed distinctively. They would often wear armour on their head and shoulders to protect themselves from sniper fire from the fortress, which contrasted with the unarmoured infantry who wore the tricorne or grenadier hat. This had the effect of making the engineers a target to be picked out by enemy troops.²³¹ At Tournai, however, the danger to sappers was increased due to the frustrations of many infantry officers at the success of French counter-mining, which was then vented on the engineers, often in the form of physical violence.²³² The frustrations appear to have been, somewhat, warranted and Schulemberg was particularly scathing in his criticism of the performance of both the engineers and lower-ranking sappers on the ground, 'Mr. Du Mee has few engineers and what is worse not one of them is good, the miners cause me more trouble than I can possibly say, the sappers make so

²²⁹ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, p.572.

²³⁰ Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine*, pp.162.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.151-152.

²³² J. Ostwald, *Vauban Under Siege: Engineering Efficiency and Martial Vigor in the War of Spanish Succession*, (Leiden, 2007), p.149.

many mistakes that I must personally go check everything they do, which requires me to be in the trenches all day long.’²³³

John Blackadder also complained about the slow nature of the siege, ‘The progress of the besiegers was much retarded by being obliged to adopt the slow and laborious method of sapping; the enemy having wrought all the ground into mines, which rendered it unsafe to approach from the hazard of explosion.’ He went on to express the difficulties faced by the troops and the scale of damage that fighting underground inflicted on the Allied force, which is somewhat downplayed in

Marlborough’s correspondence::

‘In counter-mining, it frequently happened that adverse parties met and fought with their shovels, spades and pick-axes. In these subterraneous attacks the besiegers had to contend with new and appalling dangers. They were sometimes crushed by the falling in of the earth, or destroyed by the springing of the mine [...]. Above 400 were killed in a single explosion.’²³⁴

With this type of fighting and scale of casualties it is unsurprising that the engineers quickly became scapegoats. The subterranean fighting carried on throughout the period that Tournai was under siege and the French continued to have the upper hand. Even as late as 29 August, just five days before the garrison surrendered, the Allies were still suffering considerable casualties from the mining.²³⁵

²³³ BL Add MSS 61245, f.106-106b, Schulemberg to Marlborough, Tournai August 1709. Cited in Ostwald, *Vauban Under Siege*, p.178.

²³⁴ A. Crichton, (ed.), *The Life and Diary of Lieut. Col. J. Blackadder*, (London, 1824), p.160.

²³⁵ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough’s Campaigns*, p.87.

In order to encourage the troops in the face of such fighting Marlborough regularly travelled from his camp at Orchies in order to inspect the besieging force. He conducted a five-day tour of the besieging troops between 14 and 19 August in order to strengthen the resolve of his men.²³⁶ However, In the face of such stubborn resistance and effective counter-mining the siege dragged on. In his letter to Boyle of 19 August Marlborough was despairing of success, 'I am returned this evening from Tournay in order to begin the review of the army to-morrow, and am sorry to tell you that as the siege goes on, I dare not give any guess when we may be masters of the citadel.'²³⁷

Marlborough may have been in a stronger position to give an estimate of how long the siege would take had he been more direct in the conducting of siege operations, rather than leaving it to his deputies. It is clear that the Duke was uncomfortable commanding the day-to-day process of conducting a siege, and his move from Tournai to Orchies once the town had been taken shows this. Marlborough's apprenticeship prior to the War of the Spanish Succession, mainly served in Ireland, did not prepare him well for the sophisticated fortress belt that Vauban had erected in Flanders. This was also true for his most trusted, mainly English advisors, such as Cadogan. The English engineer establishment was only created in 1696, and was

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.85-86.

²³⁷ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, p.575.

staffed mainly by Huguenot exiles, who were placed with the artillery rather than in a single administrative unit.²³⁸

The view expressed here that Marlborough was not proficient in conducting the actual siege operations does run contrary to the myth that the Duke was a master of all aspects of warfare, which was espoused by Parker, one of Marlborough's subordinates, and reasserted by Chandler.²³⁹ During the siege of Tournai Marlborough certainly underestimated the time that it would take to take the fortress, which had an impact on the time he had left in the campaigning season to exploit the victory. However, the fact that he recognised that subordinates were more accomplished than him in this particular facet of warfare does show that he was a leader who could acknowledge his own shortcomings as a commander and take measures to negate the impact of these.

It is important to note, however, that moving his camp to Orchies and delegating to his subordinate and often more experienced Dutch colleagues, should not disassociate Marlborough from some of the notable failures that took place during the siege operation. The example mentioned earlier of infantry officers assaulting engineers is a situation that should have been dealt with promptly but he does not appear to have been done so. This is a criticism of Marlborough's proficiency at siege

²³⁸ Ostwald, 'Marlborough and Siege Warfare', p.130.

²³⁹ D. Chandler (ed.), *Military Memoirs of Marlborough's Campaigns, 1702-1712 by Captain Robert Parker and the Comte de Mérode-Westerloo, Field Marshall of the Holy Roman Empire*, (London, 1998), p.127; Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, pp.323-326.

warfare, the officers and engineers under his command struggled to work together as a cohesive unit. Schulemberg's despair at the performance of his sappers is hardly an isolated incident from the period. Marlborough himself criticised his own sappers during the sieges that followed the victory at Ramilles in 1706 and at the siege of Lille in 1708. This was thus an ongoing problem that the Duke does not appear to have made any meaningful attempt to fix.²⁴⁰

Furthermore, Marlborough should have made sure that the infantry officers listened to the advice of artillery officers rather than ignored them and thus they wasted powder and shot by firing at unsuitable targets. This was made clear in a letter from Goslinga to Heinsius which, while not openly critical of the Duke, does reflect on his inability to ensure effective cooperation between the infantry and artillery even after almost ten years of continuous siege warfare:

'The good of the service demands that we appoint a general of artillery; subordination is not very great in this corps, but it is above all necessary in order to prevent further squandering of our munitions; we have preached this need over and over to the [infantry] generals, and they follow it as long as we are there, but once we leave, things return to how they were before. Each general, low-ranking or high, competent or ignorant, acts as if they were generals of artillery. If the colonel [of artillery] or his subalterns don't obey them, the generals quarrel and accuse them of sparing ammunition at the expense of the lives of soldiers; they even say such things in the troops' presence, which can only have a very bad effect on their morale. These reasons will convince you, as they have me, that we must fill the vacancy [...].'²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Ostwald, *Vauban Under Siege*, pp.178-180.

²⁴¹ Veenendaal, Jr., (ed.), *Briefwisseling Heinsius*, 9:94 #190 cited in J. Ostwald, *Vauban's Siege Legacy in the War of Spanish Succession, 1702-1712*, (Phd Thesis, The Ohio State University, 2002), p.170.

As Albermarle noted during the siege, 'order and good conduct are lacking', and Marlborough as the officer in charge of the siege must bear responsibility for these failures.²⁴²

Perhaps the most inexcusable moment during the siege came during the night that Marlborough moved his camp from Orchies, when in the confusion siege operations continued without a single general present to provide direction.²⁴³ The Allies were fortunate that a major sally was not launched that night. While distancing himself from the daily operations of the siege in order to allow the expertise of his Dutch colleagues to shine through was perhaps wise given his inexperience, it does not negate the view that these are all examples when Marlborough could, and indeed should, have taken a more active role in ensuring that the besieging army operated in a cohesive manner rather than succumb to inter-service infighting.

The siege of Tournai was quickly turning into a costly operation for Marlborough, in terms of both time and casualties. Fortunately for the Allies, Surville's garrison was experiencing severe supply issues, despite Villars' reduction of the garrison prior to the siege commencing. The garrison had been using a tunnel from the church in the town of Tournai in order to bring in rations. This supply route was discovered by the Allies and blocked up on 15 August, and the troops also managed to sever some of the pipes that were supplying the garrison with water on the same day. Deane

²⁴² Ostwald, 'Marlborough and Siege Warfare', p.142.

²⁴³ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, p.571-572.

hoped that this would force the French forces to capitulate as the attacking troops were by this point disheartened and believed that the mines were making the fortress impregnable.²⁴⁴

Marlborough, writing on 25 August, despaired of the lack of progress being made and, although he still believed that the citadel could be taken by storm, he appears to have recognised that the garrison surrendering due to supply issues was by now more likely.²⁴⁵ On the 31 August the chief engineer of the defending forces offered a parley. His terms, however, were rejected by the Allies. As Marlborough stated, 'We considering what had passed, and the certaine knowledge of their want of provisions, would allow them no other capitulation but that of prisoners of war.'²⁴⁶ The reaction of the garrison was to declare that they would now fight to the death. Marlborough however recognised their desperation and believed that they would surrender within seven or eight days. The difficulty of the French supply position was confirmed to the Allies the same day. Desperate to preserve what little supplies he had, and wary of the fate that men who had turned their coat to join France would face upon surrendering, Surville ordered those deserters in his ranks to attempt to save themselves by any means necessary.²⁴⁷ Finally, on 3 September terms were agreed and the surviving troops of the garrison were taken as prisoners of war and

²⁴⁴ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns*, p.85.

²⁴⁵ 'Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, p.582.

²⁴⁶ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin*, p.1351.

²⁴⁷ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns*, p.87-88.

allowed to return to France under the condition that they not take up arms again until an equivalent number of Allied prisoners had been exchanged.²⁴⁸

Blackadder estimated that over 4,000 of the Allied forces became casualties during the siege, while Chandler put the number at 5,400.²⁴⁹ The siege lasted 69 days. Lille in comparison had twice the garrison of Tournai and had held out for almost twice as long with Allied casualties estimated at 15,000. At Bouchain Marlborough suffered a similar amount of casualties as at Tournai, but, he had sacrificed lives for speed even more so than usual, with the siege lasting only 30 days.²⁵⁰ What is clear is that the siege would have been even more costly and lasted longer had the French garrison been properly provisioned. In the face of counter-mining the Allies had made little headway against the citadel. This was despite the imposing superiority in firepower the Allies had possessed, somewhat squandered due to the lack of coordination between the artillery and infantry arms, which one source in the garrison stated was: 'the most frightful artillery ever seen before a place'.²⁵¹ The Comte De Mérode-Westerloo in particular put the eventual surrender of the town down to good fortune, 'We would not have won it so cheaply had not the garrison been so short of powder and other necessities – and there we might well have lost our entire army, no matter how formidable in appearance, had the place been properly

²⁴⁸ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1351.

²⁴⁹ Crichton, *Blackadder*, p.160; Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.251.

²⁵⁰ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.339.

²⁵¹ Murray, *Letters and Dispatches Vol 4*, p.571-572.

provisioned.²⁵² Nevertheless, in spite of seemingly poor management of the siege the Allies were successful in taking Tournai. The counter-mining by the French troops was effective. However, the town did not hold out for as long as Villars had predicted. The Allies, for their part, now had very little time left in the campaigning season in which to achieve a decisive victory.

Investment of Mons

Churchill wrote that, 'The fall of Tournai was followed by an explosion of war-fury strangely out of keeping with the policy and temper in which the campaign had hitherto been conducted.'²⁵³ Throughout the campaign, despite his enthusiasm for battle, Villars had been forced, by Louis and his counsellors, to operate a safety first approach. During the siege of Tournai Villars finally gained approval to fight a battle if either Valenciennes or Condé were threatened.²⁵⁴ This order was extended to a general freedom after the fall of Tournai.²⁵⁵ Quite why Villars was finally allowed off the leash is open for debate. Certainly giving an aggressive commander the authority to venture a battle was a risky move by Louis. The French position at the ensuing peace-talks would have been further undermined by suffering a significant reverse. This was a calculated risk, however, as the terms offered by the Allies in 1709 had been viewed as being overly harsh, hence their rejection when France was already

²⁵² Chandler, *Military Memoirs*, p.215.

²⁵³ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.127.

²⁵⁴ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.248.

²⁵⁵ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.127.

on its knees. It is difficult to see how much further the Allies would have been able to push the French in any 1710 peace talks even had they won another victory.

In addition, given the lateness of the season, it is unlikely that the Allies would be able to significantly exploit any victory by taking a series of French fortresses.

Admirers of Marlborough point to the fall of the fortresses in the Spanish Netherlands after Ramillies (1706) as an example of a 'decisive battle' in early-modern warfare and as proof that a single battle could allow the victorious army to achieve major gains.²⁵⁶ The chances of Marlborough being able to replicate another Ramillies and hence make significant gains on the French fortress belt by virtue of a single battle, however, were limited. The situation in 1709 was very different to that of 1706. For a start, Ramillies had been fought on 23 May 1709, leaving the entire summer for the Allies to exploit the victory.²⁵⁷ Tournai did not surrender until 5 September. Even if they defeated the French field army the Allies would only have around a month given the lack of forage due to the hardship of the previous winter to achieve decisive gains. Furthermore, the fortresses taken after Ramillies were mainly of an older Spanish variety. On those occasions when the Allied advance reached a relatively modern fortress with a determined garrison, as at Dendermonde in 1706, the pace of gains slowed somewhat.²⁵⁸ In the event of a victory, and supposing Mons fell extremely quickly, given the lateness of the season

²⁵⁶ Barnett, *Marlborough*, p.171.

²⁵⁷ J. Ostwald, 'The 'Decisive' Battle of Ramillies, 1706: Prerequisites for Decisiveness in Early Modern Warfare', *The Journal of Military History*, vol 64, no.3, (2000), pp.649-677, p.667.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.670.

Marlborough's options would have likely been limited to besieging the relatively strong towns of Valenciennes or Bouchain situated 20 and 40 miles away from Mons respectively. Given the nature of early-modern warfare he could not simply bypass these fortresses without exposing his supply lines to the garrisons.²⁵⁹

Louis then could gamble. He was already in a weak position prior to the next round of peace talks. A further defeat would not really dent this position much further due to the lateness of the season, unless of course Villars lost the entire field army, which was very rare in early-modern warfare. On the other hand a victory would have dented the confidence of, and possibly created rifts within, the Grand Alliance who were at this point engaged in tense internal negotiations over the Dutch barrier, which could feasibly have escalated considerably if the Allies were confronted with a resurgent France.²⁶⁰

With Tournai captured, and unaware of the change in French policy regarding offering battle, the Allied high command now had to decide how to proceed for the rest of the season. Marlborough, for his part, appeared at this stage reluctant to venture a battle. In his letter to Heinsius of 18 August he outlined his opinion, 'we shall neglect no opportunity of undertaking what we can judge practicable [...] I think our affaires are in so good a posture, and that of the Enemy in so very ill condition, that I shou'd think wee ought not to venture, but where in reason we shou'd hope

²⁵⁹ G. Perjés, 'Army Provisioning, Logistics and Strategy in the Second Half of the 17th Century', *Acta Historica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 16, (1970), pp.1-52, p.45.

²⁶⁰ Snyder, *Marlborough-Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1341.

for success [...].’ This would appear at odds with the decision Marlborough took at Malplaquet, when he attacked despite the formidable strength of the French defences. However, it appears that Marlborough’s Dutch advisers, as well as Eugene, wished to adopt a more aggressive strategy, as he continued: ‘that the temper of your people are such, that they will not be satisfied unless there be action, we must then take our measures agreeable to that; for whatever is in my power You [Heinsius] may command[...].’²⁶¹

This letter runs contrary to the view espoused by Chandler, that Marlborough was a battle-driven general who was held back by the initiative crushing military conservatism of his Dutch allies.²⁶² The letter also appears to show a different Marlborough to the man who had marched to the Danube in 1704 in face of considerable opposition from the Dutch.²⁶³ The Marlborough of 1709, if he was truly being pressured into fighting a battle seems to have been a less domineering figure in the Grand Alliance. He had already abandoned his preferred plan of attacking Ypres earlier in the year, and now appears to have been heavily influenced by the Dutch to give battle: ‘I have assured him [Heinsius] that we will do all in our power to bring them to a battle.’²⁶⁴

²⁶¹ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.128

²⁶² Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.324

²⁶³ Holmes, *Marlborough*, p.255

²⁶⁴ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1326

After the fall of Tournai the Allies had a number of options on how to proceed. It was far too late in the year to consider an invasion of France, therefore, a more limited objective was needed. The Allies could still feasibly have advanced towards Ypres, however, the terrain to the north was judged as difficult to campaign in during the autumn months. Furthermore, it would be difficult to take the strong fortresses of Ypres or St Venant on the Lys in a quick siege, while an advance between the Lys and the Scarpe would have to overcome Villars' defensive line. This had not been practicable in summer and would be made even more difficult due to the casualties taken at Tournai. Another option was advance on Condé or Valenciennes in the hope of taking one in order to facilitate a further campaign down the Sensée towards Bouchain and Cambrai in 1710.²⁶⁵ Cambrai was the last bastion of Vauban's fortress belt in the area and the fall of the town could have served as a springboard for an offensive towards Paris.²⁶⁶ However, it was likely that only one of these fortresses would fall in the time remaining meaning the Allies would face a difficult task in 1710 campaign of taking the other, while facing an intact French field army.

The reasons why the Grand Alliance abandoned this plan is unclear. Instead it opted to attack the strong but strategically relatively unimportant fortress of Mons, positioned about 30 miles south-east of Tournai. Situated right on the flank of the campaigning area the fortress was not especially vital to maintaining the security of Allied supply lines. Neither could it have served as a base from which to launch a

²⁶⁵ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.129.

²⁶⁶ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.292.

wider-campaign the following year, as any advance out of the Mons area could have been countered easily by French troops manning positions of the high ground that overlooked the valley of the Sambre. As a military target the town lacked value, as it did not control a river-junction, which makes the bloodletting that took place over it at Malplaquet all the more difficult to comprehend.²⁶⁷

The capture of Mons made more sense from a political point of view, as the town would have completed the Dutch barrier in the area.²⁶⁸ Fewer concessions, therefore, would have to be required of Louis XIV in subsequent negotiations, which would have strengthened the chances of the negotiations being successful.

However, an advance towards Bouchain and Cambrai would have been likely to worry the French more than the loss of a strategically insignificant town on the outskirts of the theatre. Furthermore, this viewpoint that Mons was a politically important target is somewhat contradicted by the fact that the Dutch also wished to include Condé and Valenciennes in their barrier, two towns that the Allies could have opted to besiege instead of Mons. Thus the fall of such towns would have conferred similar political benefits to that of Mons.²⁶⁹

Once the decision to attack Mons was taken the Allies faced a difficult situation that would have to be overcome in order to invest the town. The River Trouille runs

²⁶⁷ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.129.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.130.

²⁶⁹ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1243.

through Mons and out to the south of the city. Positioned behind the river was a strong French line. This was undermanned at the time, however, if Villars was able to reach it and reinforce the position before the Allies crossed the river then it would have been impossible for the Allies to surround the town, and the siege would have been over before it had started. Villars, operating on interior lines of communication had a shorter distance to travel to the town, therefore, if he pre-empted the plan then he would have been well placed to significantly disrupt the Allies. This advantage could be alleviated if the Allies were able to take the fortress of St Ghislain on the Haine, positioned 5 miles from Mons. If this was taken the Allies could cross the Haine and cut off Mons from the west without having to skirt around the town and approach it from the east. Accordingly, Orkney was dispatched with a small force of twenty squadrons and the entirety of the army's grenadiers to invest the small fortress. He arrived just after midnight on 3 September and was reinforced by a further four thousand infantry and sixty squadrons the following day.²⁷⁰ Speed was of the essence during this operation. However, the fortress had been reinforced by this point and Orkney's detachment met fierce resistance. Unable to achieve a breakthrough, Orkney re-joined the Allied army at Sirault and the march parallel to the Haine continued.²⁷¹

The Allies were extremely fortunate that Villars appeared not to have valued Mons as a strategic target. Indeed, as Burton pointed out, this may have been a reason

²⁷⁰ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaigns*, p.88.

²⁷¹ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.131.

why the Allies selected the town,²⁷² but his view is somewhat unconvincing given Villars history of shadowing Marlborough as closely as possible when they faced each other on campaign.²⁷³ Villars, however, did not pre-empt the Allied advance towards Mons, as a result the Allied skirting movement around Mons was successful and met with little resistance.²⁷⁴ The Prince of Hesse-Cassel, leading the vanguard of his army received widespread praise for his part in the success of the operation.²⁷⁵

Deane described the fall of the French line outside Mons on 6 September:

‘On the 27th he ordered the Prince of Hess to advance wth. his detachments. The which he did, the enemy was there alsoe; and as soon as ever they see his forces advance they marcht away with great precipitation, not firing one shott; and the Prince of Hess marcht wth, his detachments and secured the ligne and some partyes, of the enemy, who ware skulking ip and down towards the wing of our army, and falling upon them killed and took above 400 of them [...].’²⁷⁶

The speed at which Hesse-Cassel was able to overcome the French defences outside Mons was indeed vital for the success of the Allied manoeuvring as Villars was by now closing in on Mons. Indeed on the 7 September he advanced with some strength towards Hesse-Cassel’s vanguard. Marlborough rushed his forces forward to reinforce the vanguard and Villars’ retired to await further reinforcements.

Barnett referred to this manoeuvre as a feint.²⁷⁷ Yet, if he had been able to displace the Prince’s small force from the lines on the Trouille, Villars could have occupied the defence line and prevented Marlborough besieging the town. It appears more likely,

²⁷² Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.150.

²⁷³ Barnett, *Marlborough*, p.236.

²⁷⁴ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough’s Campaigns*, p.89.

²⁷⁵ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.132.

²⁷⁶ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough’s Campaigns*, p.89.

²⁷⁷ Barnett, *Marlborough*, p.236.

therefore, that it was the speed with which Marlborough was able to reinforce the vanguard which convinced Villars not to strike at Hesse-Cassel's troops, nevertheless, by 8 September both armies had reached the area around Mons, the impact of which will be explored in the following chapter.

Conclusion

In conclusion it would appear that Allied planning during the early stages of the 1709 campaign suffered severely from the nature of coalition warfare. Marlborough and Godolphin's initial plan, to launch a descent on Abbeville while simultaneously taking Ypres in order to link up and invade France while being supplied from sea, was undoubtedly ambitious and fraught with difficulty. Amphibious operations during early-modern warfare suffered due to the difficulty in combining land and sea forces, as well as the major issue of the landing force being inevitably outgunned once it advanced from under the protection of formidable naval artillery. However, the more limited idea of attacking Ypres was clearly practicable. The British favoured attacking Ypres and it would have served as a base from which to drive privateers out of Dunkirk, thus protecting her naval interests. Furthermore, Ypres would have also served as a base for a subsequent 1710 campaign advancing along the relatively unprotected coastline. The Dutch, however, were clearly worried about wider-British objectives. They did not want the British to establish a base in Ypres, as this would be detrimental to their aim of economic hegemony over the Spanish Netherlands. Britain and the United Provinces were economic rivals as well as political rivals. Faced with opposition from the rest of the council, Marlborough abandoned his

plans of an offensive on Ypres. Despite the three victories he had already achieved for the Grand Alliance he appears to have been much more submissive and cautious at this point of the war especially when compared to his bold march to the Danube in 1704. He was not able to impose his will on the council and as a result an offensive in the Ypres area, which had promise, was not implemented. Instead the less strategically significant, but incredibly resolute fortress of Tournai was chosen. Marlborough's manoeuvres to reach Tournai before the French could reinforce it demonstrated his foremost skill as a general: the ability to out-think and out-manoeuver an enemy consistently, as had also been shown during the march to Danube and subsequently when passing the Ne Plus Ultra lines in 1711. In this field of operations Marlborough was certainly far ahead of his peers, and he has been deservedly praised for this. The siege of Tournai was, as a result of this skill, opened without resistance from the French field force. Yet, the French were pleased with this compromise the Allies had taken. They clearly believed that Tournai would be able to hold out for the remainder of the campaigning season, and were relieved when Ypres was not assaulted.

The conduct of the Allied forces at the siege of Tournai was notably disappointing. Marlborough's limited experience of siege warfare during his formative years meant that he often delegated control of sieges to his Dutch engineers, which resulted in a haphazard approach to the operation as the effective defence of the fortress by French forces and the mounting losses faced by Allied forces in subterranean warfare resulted in significant tensions arising between officers and engineers.

Marlborough, based at the camp at Orchies, was unable to resolve these disputes and the siege dragged on. He had anticipated a rapid fall of Tournai so that he could press on in the campaigning season but was fortunate the citadel was so poorly stocked, otherwise the siege may have been even more protracted than it eventually was. His underestimating of French defences certainly had an impact on the siege being drawn out and by the time the citadel fell the Allies did not have enough time left to launch an effective exploitation. Marlborough, when pursuing siege operations, strove to achieve speed but this only was at the expense of casualties, which may have been reduced had he taken a more methodical approach to siege warfare as espoused by Vauban.

Once Tournai was taken one option available for the Allies was to attack one of the fortress on the Seneffe. If successful this could have facilitated a campaign towards Cambrai, the last town in Vauban's fortress belt, the following year. The reasons for not pursuing this are unclear. Mons was a militarily unimportant target as it was positioned on the edge of the theatre, it was not situated on a vital river line, and any further advance from the town could be easily countered by the French establishing a defensive position on the high ground to the west of the fortress. Politically, especially, for the Dutch the assault on the town makes more sense. It would seem that Marlborough was, by this point in the war, sensitive to Dutch public and political opinion, reflecting his lack of control over the council. His letter to Heinsius, when he stated that he would give battle if it was deemed necessary by the

Dutch, supports this view.²⁷⁸ Ultimately, as will be seen in the next chapter the decision to besiege Mons would have serious consequences for many of the Allied field army. The Allies appear to have settled on besieging Mons due to the wider problem of not having an agreed plan for conducting the campaign, and this would lead directly into a pyrrhic victory at Malplaquet.

²⁷⁸ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.128.

CHAPTER TWO: THE BATTLE OF MALPLAQUET

Introduction

The battle of Malplaquet took place on 11 September 1709, and was the most costly action fought by the Allies during the War of the Spanish Succession. The Allies suffered an estimated 25,000 casualties during the course of the battle with the French sustaining about 12,000 dead, wounded or taken prisoner.²⁷⁹ To put these figures in context the battle of Blenheim (1704) had cost the Allies an estimated 12,000 men with the French suffering about 34,000 casualties of whom 14,000 were taken prisoner, while at Ramillies (1706), the Allies had suffered only around 3,600 casualties with the French losing 18,000 men including 6,000 taken prisoner.²⁸⁰ It is important to note that the bulk of the casualties sustained by the French during Blenheim and Ramillies would have been incurred during the rout that followed the Allied breakthrough.

Malplaquet was viewed as a victory for the Allies, albeit a pyrrhic one. Marlborough wrote to the Duchess after the battle, 'I am so tired that I have but the strength enough to tell you that we have had this day a very bloody battle; the first part of the day we beat their foot, and afterwards their horse.' The Duke clearly viewed the battle as a success, although this was not a victory he wished to have to face more than once, as he continued: 'God almighty be praised, it is now in our powers to

²⁷⁹ D. Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, (London, 2000), p.265.

²⁸⁰ D. Chandler, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough*, (Staplehurst, 1990), pp.303-304.

have what peace we please, and I may be well assured of never being in another battle[...].'²⁸¹ This chapter will seek to explore why this victory was so costly to the Allies, and whether the result of the battle was worth the sacrifice. It will begin where the previous chapter finished with an outline of the events immediately prior to the battle. This will be followed by a summary of the events that took place during the course of the battle, noting that the following chapter will go into more details on the tactics used and the experience of the individual soldier. Finally, this chapter two will explore the remainder of the 1709 campaigning season and the reasons why Mons was besieged post-battle.

Planning and Manoeuvre

After the decision to besiege Mons had been taken, the Allied army marched for two days to reach the River Haine just to the east of Mons. The army arrived on 5 September. Villars, now resolved to give battle unbeknownst to the Allies, marched his force from the defensive position he was holding and crossed the River Scheldt at Valenciennes before marching to the area of Quevrai, twelve miles south-west of Mons. Both armies were now operating in a quadrilateral area bounded by rivers: the Haine in the North, the Trouille to the east, the Scheldt to the west and the Sambre to the south-east.²⁸² Mons was positioned in the north-eastern corner of the area Marlborough's army was situated to the west of Mons, having reached the

²⁸¹ W.S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times Volume IV*, (London, 1938), p.171.

²⁸² I.F. Burton, *The Captain-General: The Career of John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, from 1702-1711*, (London, 1968), p.150.

town first, and was positioned to block any approach by Villars from that direction. The area between the armies was dominated by dense woodland, 12 miles in length, which represented a formidable obstacle for an eighteenth-century army. A limited number of relatively narrow gaps allowed access through the woods but they were littered with small villages and hamlets which presented further difficulties. Villars marched his forces forward aggressively, crossing the Hogue on 7 September. He positioned his 80,000 strong force to the rear of the woodland, 8 miles away from the Allied positions with the dense treeline to cover his movements.²⁸³ In eighteenth century warfare flanks which rested on a forest were generally deemed secure, therefore in response the Allies split their force between Marlborough and Eugene each covering one of the major gaps in the area. The Trouée de Boussu, which linked the Haine in the North to the woodland, was covered by Eugene and the Trouée De D' Aulnois, which linked the wood of Taisnières to the wood of Lanier, was covered by Marlborough. This latter area contained the village of Malplaquet.²⁸⁴ Villars' force was at this point fairly stretched out, but the nature of the terrain meant that he could contest any Allied march westward. The Allies, due to their rapid manoeuvre from Tournai, also benefitted from the good defensive country and could, therefore, effectively block any attempt by Villars to contest the siege of Mons. The situation was one of stalemate, yet from an operational view the Allies appeared to hold the advantage. Their main objective was to besiege and take Mons. As they were positioned between Villars and the fortress they could have dug in, constructed a

²⁸³ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.252.

²⁸⁴ W.S Churchill, *Marlborough His Life and Times Volume IV*, (London, 1938), p.133.

line of circumvallation covering the gaps, and proceeded with the siege,²⁸⁵ strategy response that had proved effective when confronted with a similar situation during the siege of Lille in 1708. The siege could then have been conducted relatively unopposed, as Villars would have been unable to intervene unless he was willing to sustain heavy casualties, which at this point in the war France could ill-afford to incur. There would have been some risk to the Allies if the siege was protracted as the communications to the supply depots in the North were not as strong as desired. However, Marlborough had been able to conduct sieges from more difficult positions before, such as at Lille, by utilising his skill at manoeuvre warfare when surrounded by French armies, and would do so later at Bouchain in 1711 when significantly outnumbered by Villars' force.²⁸⁶

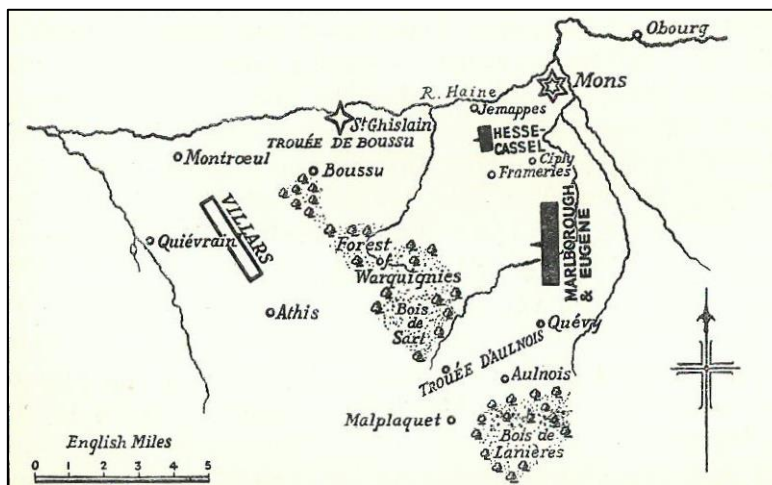


Figure 3 Position of the Armies prior to Malplaquet. (Source: W.S. Churchill, *Marlborough: His Life and Times* Volume IV, (London, 1938), p.133).

It appears, however, that Marlborough and Eugene's primary objectives had now advanced beyond merely capturing another French fortress. The Allies, it seems,

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.134.

²⁸⁶ Burton, *The Captain-General*, pp.142, 182.

wanted to entice Villars into an attack. They believed that if drawn into open battle the French army could be defeated in the field, thus paving the way for more fruitful peace talks than those that been held the previous spring. This is clear from the manoeuvres conducted by Marlborough and Eugene. If their ambitions halted at the seizure of Mons then they would have done as suggested earlier: dug in at both passes and dared Villars to attack strong entrenchments. However, on the 8 September Eugene's force fell back from the gap at Boussu and joined with Marlborough at Aulnois. This action left the road to Mons open to Villars.²⁸⁷ The Allies clearly wished that he would march through this gap to try to cut them off from Mons. If Villars advanced Marlborough and Eugene could attack his troops and try to drive him back into the Haine, thereby destroying the last major field army of France. However, this plan underestimated Villars, who was too experienced a commander to fall for such a ruse. Instead he merely occupied positions on the edge of the Boussu gap before marching the rest of his army south to face the combined Allied force at the gap at Aulnois. He advanced into this gap the following day and began to dig considerable lines of defences facing the bulk of the Allied army. While this was going on the Allied army stood by and watched, while attempting to impede the French with only a light artillery bombardment.²⁸⁸

By now it was clear that the French would not advance to meet the Allied forces.

Therefore, every hour the French had to dig in made the Allied hopes of securing a

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.134.

²⁸⁸ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.253.

decisive victory through an attack, as Eugene and Marlborough somewhat optimistically hoped to do, less likely. Given this situation it appears to have been a mistake for the Allies to spend an entire day on 10 September watching the French dig in while merely exposing the defenders to a relatively small cannonade. Chandler, one of the most prominent of Marlborough's admirers, does not dwell on why it was that Marlborough did not attack, when the French defences were only half complete but it is clear that he thought it was a mistake:

'It is true that the Mons detachment of 1,900 men was still on the road, and that Wither's 19 battalions and 10 squadrons [...] still had to make an appearance, but Eugene had joined his colleague, the guns were in position and the Allies clearly enjoyed numerical advantage over the French, whose positions were still only half complete; but another day passed with only the exchange of artillery fire whilst detailed reconnaissances of the French position were carried out.'²⁸⁹

Certainly, if the Allies were insistent on attacking then not doing so on 10 September was a mistake on the part of Marlborough and Eugene. They may have gained 10,000 extra troops by waiting a day but the advantage the French had received by having an extra day to dig in appears to have been greater. The Earl of Orkney, with the added benefit of hindsight, recognised this:

'I really believed, since we had not attacked all Tuesday, there would be no battle at all. For indeed as we have found and seen since, I don't believe ever army in the world was attacked in such a post [...] I am fully convinced that there was an absolute necessity for us to attack them, and, though it had been better to [have] done it early [on] the Tuesday, yet people judge twenty battalions

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.253.

that came up that night were well worth staying for one day longer.²⁹⁰

The French adopted a purely defensive plan. They positioned troops in the woodland at either side of the gap, which was seen as impassable, and thus they reckoned the main Allied thrust would come through the centre. The redoubts constructed in the centre arched back considerably from the positions in the woods, which meant that cannon stationed in the woods would be able to enfilade attacking infantry. This grapeshot, combined with the resolve and musket fire of troops positioned in the central redoubts, would weaken the Allied attack and cause confusion. The French cavalry could then advance through gaps in the defending infantry formation and deliver the *coup de grâce* to drive off the attacking forces.²⁹¹ The French also took advantage of the Allied delay to dig in further and develop an extensive line of redoubts that would have to be breached in order for Marlborough and Eugene to achieve the war-winning victory they appear to have, under pressure from the Dutch, desired.

The Battle of Malplaquet

The Allies assaulted the French positions on 11 September 1709, taking up their positions prior to eight a.m. A morning fog covered the build-up of troops, but this had lifted by the time Eugene began his attack on the right flank, toward the waiting

²⁹⁰ H.H.E. Cra'ster (ed.), 'Letters of the First Lord Orkney during Marlborough's Campaigns', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 19, No. 74, (April, 1904), pp.301-321, p.318.

²⁹¹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.256.

redoubts of the French forces.²⁹² The Allied plan appeared to be to assault both French flanks in order to oblige Villars to weaken his centre. A main thrust by Orkney's infantry and majority of the cavalry would then be launched through the weakened French centre. The day, however, got off to a bad start for the Allies. In the woods to the north of the gap Eugene's forces, led by Schulemberg and Lottum, met with fierce French resistance when attacking a strong defensive position set up within a small triangular shaped area of woodland, which allowed French troops to subject the attackers to enfilading fire. The fighting was desperate, and at one point Orkney had to divert some troops from his centre in order to see off a French counter-attack in the area. After three hours of fighting and very heavy casualties the Allies succeeded in taking the redoubts on the French left.²⁹³

On the French right, however, the Allies fared worse. The Prince of Orange attacked at 8 a.m. with 30 Dutch battalions. The assault was initially successful in taking the two French lines, before being driven back by a French-counter attack. A second attack was launched but this was again unsuccessful. During the course of these attacks Dutch forces had advanced through enfilading cannon-fire. Incredibly heavy casualties ensued, with the Dutch suffering 5,000 losses within thirty minutes of opening the attack.²⁹⁴

²⁹² Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.155.

²⁹³ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.260.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.259.

Some admirers of Marlborough claimed that he never ordered such a full-blown attack. They state that the attack was meant as a feint and the Prince of Orange, unhappy with his subordinate role, had decided on an all-out attack. However, there is no real evidence for this view. Marlborough was in command, and ultimately responsibility for sending the Dutch into such a heavily defended area in limited numbers (only 30 battalions to the 97 used to attack the French left flank) must rest with the Duke.²⁹⁵ Eventually, it was decided that no more attempts would be made on the formidable defensive positions on that side of the field for the remainder of the battle.²⁹⁶

The attacks had largely been costly. However, the attack on the French left had achieved its objective as Villars had been forced to transfer 12 battalions from his lines in the centre in order to reinforce the 77 already combating the Allied attack in the woods. Furthermore, once the French had been driven from this position, they were forced to draw yet more battalions away from the centre to combat any further attack from the successful Allied troops. This significantly reduced the number of troops facing Orkney's infantry in the centre as in total Villars had removed 62 battalions from his centre to combat the Allied right-flank leaving his defences in this area almost completely unprotected.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.156.

²⁹⁶ Both of these actions will be discussed in more detail when the experience of battle is analysed in the following chapter.

²⁹⁷ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.260.

Concurrently to these events, Marlborough had attempted a bold flanking manoeuvre through the heavy woodland on the right flank of Eugene's line of advance. This force was made up of late-arriving reinforcements from Tournai and consisted of 19 battalions and 10 squadrons led by General Withers. Its mission was to outflank and roll up the French redoubts, thus significantly aiding the infantry battle Eugene's force was engaged in, centred around the triangle of woodland on his right flank. This was an innovative move and if successful could have resulted in much lower casualties on the right. However, it was also very ambitious as the woodland to the left of the French position made it very difficult to maintain command over the infantry and cavalry. The attack, however, was not successful. Withers's force took two hours to traverse the forest and when they reappeared on the French right flank the fighting there had already been brought to a successful, if bloody, conclusion and consequentially his command took a very limited direct part in the action. However, indirectly the presence of so many troops massed on his left flank, did force Villars to further reinforce that flank thus aiding Allied attempts to break through in the centre.²⁹⁸ In this sense the innovative approach was successful although the troops used may have been put to better use in reinforcing the hard-pressed Dutch on left flank, as Chandler believed had originally been intended before a change in orders was issued due to Withers late arrival.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.261.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.256.

Around midday Orkney's 15 battalions duly advanced and captured the French redoubts in the centre. Resistance was minimal and the mainly-British infantry then occupied the French trenches allowing their own cavalry to pass through the gaps. A major cavalry battle then developed between the two relatively untouched forces, with the French consistently gaining the upper-hand before being driven back by the firepower of Orkney's infantry.³⁰⁰ Had the Allies achieved a breakthrough in this area they could have rolled up the flanks of the remaining French forces. Boufflers, who had taken over command after Villars was wounded by a musket-ball and thus quit the field, recognised the danger and began withdrawing his infantry forces. This retreat was successful. Covered by a rear-guard action by the French cavalry the bulk of the Army escaped to fight another day. The battle was over, with the majority of the French force quitting the field, at about 3 p.m.³⁰¹

³⁰⁰ Orkney, *Letters*, p.319.

³⁰¹ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.171.

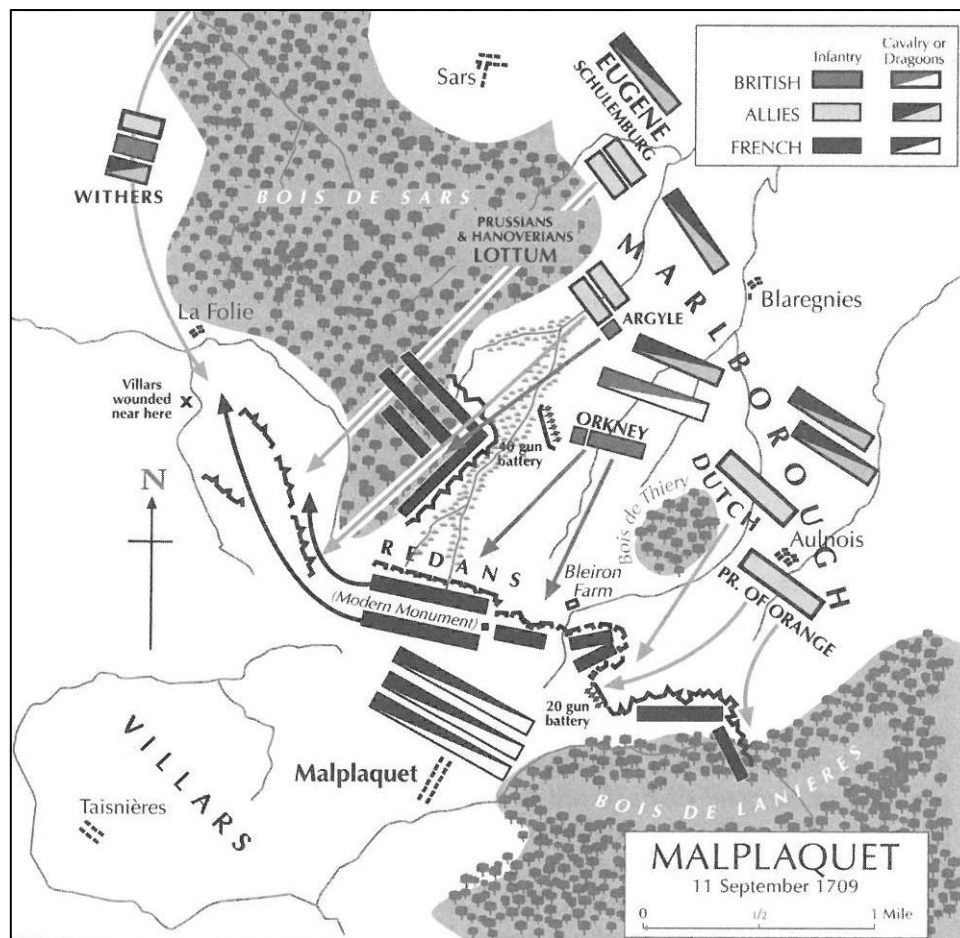


Figure 4 The Battle of Malplaquet: Showing the advance of Orkney's troops that turned the tide of the battle and the heavily defended triangle of woodland on the French left flank, which Villars had to reinforce over the course of the battle. (Source: J. Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine, 1702-1711*, (Barnsley, 2014), p.xv.)

Aftermath

The 25,000 casualties suffered by the Allies at the battle of Malplaquet was a high price to pay for victory, especially over a town as strategically insignificant as Mons, and compared to the French losses of 12,000.³⁰² Marlborough and Eugene began the manoeuvring around Mons intending to draw Villars' into a trap and defeat his army in its entirety. However, they had attacked Villars in a strong defensive position and by the evening of 11 September had lost one-fifth of their army, including many

³⁰² Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.265.

veterans. The decision to attack the French in such a strong position was a definite mistake. Throughout his career Marlborough avoided battle when confronted by difficult positions such as that he experienced at Malplaquet. It is quite possible that in his frustration at how the campaign had gone to date, with his plan to assault Ypres being abandoned, the difficulties experienced during the siege of Tournai, and under pressure from his Dutch allies, Marlborough had decided to throw caution to the wind to secure a war-winning victory, despite the fact that exploitation would be difficult given the lateness of the season. His decision may have also been motivated by his weakening position at home and pressure from his economically crumbling Dutch allies. However, it was a mistake he should not have made.

Malplaquet was called a victory by the standards of the day. The Allies had won the field and Marlborough appears to have believed that he had won the war, 'I hope it [the battle] will conduce to the putting a speedy and happy issue to the war, to the general satisfaction of the Allies.'³⁰³ He was to be mistaken. The French held a different view of the strategic situation post-battle, Boufflers summed it up, 'The enemy losses were three times ours, and they won no advantage other than the occupation of the field of battle; and I think I can assure your majesty that this unfortunate victory will not bring them one extra yard of territory when they decide to make peace. On the contrary the enemy will now respect Your Majesty's troops

³⁰³ G. Murray, (ed.), *The Letters and Dispatches of John Churchill Volume 4*, (London, 1845), p.595.

and be perhaps more subdued, however puffed they are now with the advantages due only to their good fortune [...].'³⁰⁴

Malplaquet then was a bloody battle fought over an insignificant strategic objective. Not only was the idea of giving battle flawed but Marlborough's conduct can be seen as lacklustre. His decision not to attack on the 10 September and instead wait for reinforcements was a costly mistake especially considering the relatively minor role these troops played in proceedings. Delaying the attack for a day allowed the French defenders to build up redoubts and meant that Allied troops advanced into well-prepared positions, with the Prince of Orange's battalions on the left especially suffering devastating losses. The plan to assault the French flanks in order to weaken the centre was one that had been used by Marlborough at Blenheim and Ramillies. Again it was successful. Villars was forced to move most of his central infantry to combat the victorious, if bloodied, Allied right flank in the wood of Sars. However, far from representing a grand-tactical vision, this method was successful merely due to the Allied army outnumbering the French. It was an attritional battle-plan rather than an inspired one. Orkney's fifteen battalions were able to secure the French line, yet, the Allied cavalry were unable to beat off their French counter-parts in sufficient time to cause a rout of the retreating forces.

³⁰⁴ J.J.G. Pelet, (ed.), *Mémoires Militaires Relatifs à la Succession d'Espagne sous Louis XIV, Volume 3*, (Paris, 1842), cited in Burton, *The Captain-General*, p.158.

Marlborough explained the reasons behind not following the French retreat, centring on the heavy losses his troops had sustained due to the attritional nature of the fighting:

‘As to out not pressing them in there retreat [...] it is good you should know the treu reason the Prince of Savoye and I had, for it was that we had not foot, and we feared our being beaten back if we had pursued them any farther, our foot of the right being at a great distance, and our Dutch foot of the left, which was the nearest, we were afraid to make them advance, thay having been twice repulsed.’³⁰⁵

Chandler, for his part, stated that ‘[Marlborough’s] plan had been generally good’, although he admitted that the Allied command and control process at Malplaquet left much to be desired. He blamed this not on Marlborough’s ability as a commander but because, ‘there were paradoxically too many men to permit the full exercise of his generally superb battle control.’³⁰⁶ However, little sympathy can be given for his view as Marlborough was commanding an army of veterans with a superb officer corps, Orkney and Cadogan for example had fought consistently by his side since 1702, as had many of the other generals present at Malplaquet.³⁰⁷ By 1709 the Allied army should have been a smoothly functioning machine and responsibility for the losses suffered on the left flank must surely rest with Marlborough. If the Duke had doubts about the Prince of Orange’s ability to lead his troops effectively then he could have taken measures to ensure that a more experienced commander was supervising him, especially considering that the most experienced military

³⁰⁵ H.L. Snyder, (ed.), *The Marlborough Godolphin Correspondence Volume 3*, (Oxford, 1975), p.1377.

³⁰⁶ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.266.

³⁰⁷ J Falkner, *Marlborough’s War Machine 1702-1711*, (Barnsley, 2014), pp.73-76.

commander of the age, Prince Eugene, was present at the battle and appears to have been considerably underused.

Chandler once again appears to excuse Marlborough stating that he would often not reveal the full extent of his plans to his officers, especially if their role was secondary in the battle, in order to ensure they attacked with vigour. Even if the Prince of Orange's role was secondary, which is debatable given that the plan appears to have been to focus on the flanks in order to strip troops from the French centre, this lack of transparency backfired as Orange, clearly not recognising this, launched a second attack on the French positions on the left which once again resulted in heavy Dutch casualties.

Admittedly Marlborough's force was larger than any he commanded in previous years, but this does not excuse the fact that he wasted the lives of his veterans against a strongly fortified position to win a battle that did not need to be fought, especially so late in the year. Moreover, the attritional nature of the action is extremely at odds with the image of Marlborough as an expert in manoeuvre warfare. Indeed he recycled a plan that he had used with considerable success at Blenheim and Ramillies, in a very different situation namely attacking a strong defensive position. Moreover, the resulting loss of life and escape of the French field force showed that he had significantly underestimated his enemy.

The lack of inspiration shown during the battle of Malplaquet combined with the inability to seize the initiative and attack on 10 September suggests an off-form general desperate to secure a decisive victory, but not willing to take the necessary risks to achieve such a feat. If Ramillies was the high-point in Marlborough's career as a general then Malplaquet surely represented the nadir. This is perhaps reflected in his letter to Godolphin eleven days after the battle, where he laments the fact that peace was not achieved earlier in the year and mourns the loss of life endured by his army, 'In so great an action it is impossible to get the advantage but by exposing men's lives; but the lamentable sight and thoughts of itt [the Battle] has given me so much disquiet [...] for to see so many brave men killed with whome I have lived these eight years, when we thought ourselves sure of peace.'³⁰⁸

Post-battle

The 1709 campaign post Malplaquet was somewhat of an anti-climax. The lateness of the year meant that there was not really any time to make any bold operational manoeuvres. Furthermore, the Allies did not have the advantage of the wintry conditions of the previous campaigning season, which had turned the ground hard and allowed for an extended campaign with the Allies not entering winter quarters until 5 January 1709.³⁰⁹ Instead, they would be faced post-October by wet rather than cold conditions typical of Flanders in autumn, which made campaigning

³⁰⁸ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1381.

³⁰⁹ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.237.

difficult. Marlborough clearly anticipated this as he planned to enter winter quarters no later than the end of October.³¹⁰

Marlborough's primary objective for the remainder of the campaign, having captured Mons, was to take the town of Maubeuge, which would have opened up the line of the River Sambre and, therefore, facilitate a potential assault on Quesnoy, Valenciennes and if successful possibly Bouchain the following year,³¹¹ and it is worth noting that the taking of Bouchain in 1711 left Cambrai as the only fortress between Marlborough and Paris. Therefore, the taking of Maubeuge could have been a considerable coup if followed up by a successful 1710.³¹² However, taking two fortresses in the time left in the year was extremely ambitious, and Marlborough was dispirited by the chances of success. He wrote, clearly feeling the impact of years of campaigning on his body: 'My feaverish and aguish distemper is turned to loosenesse, by which I had to be cured. At present it disperitse mee. I should after the battle have preffered the siege of Maubeuge but it was wholly impossible til we were first masters of Mons.'³¹³

Faced with few options, and unable to besiege Maubeuge with the Mons garrison to his rear and thus threatening his supply lines, the Allies settled down for a rather predictable siege of Mons. There has been some debate as to whether the Dutch

³¹⁰ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1378.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.1381.

³¹² Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.292.

³¹³ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1381.

leadership wished to pursue the siege given the casualties endured by their troops on the left flank at Malplaquet, but it is clear that in Marlborough's mind the siege of Mons was essential.³¹⁴ Malplaquet had been fought to enable Mons to be besieged. Correspondence from the front had stated that Malplaquet was a victory, if hard-won: 'We [The Allies] have had this day a very murdring battel. God has blessed us with a victory, we having first beat their foot and then their horse.' Had Mons not been besieged that battle would have been seen as a defeat, as Villars would have succeeded in his objective of stopping the town being invested. This would have had an extremely negative impact on the reputation of Marlborough at home, especially considering the damage that had already been done by his request earlier in the year to be granted the Captain-Generalcy for life.³¹⁵ In order to maintain his grip on his position at home and that of supreme commander of the Grand Alliance Marlborough duly opened the trenches before Mons on the night of the 25 September.³¹⁶

In order to reinforce his depleted army Marlborough brought in 30 battalions who had previously been involved in garrison duty. Boufflers, now in command in the theatre in place of the wounded Villars, dissipated much of his force to strengthen the garrisons in the area surrounding Mons. The remainder of the army, which had withdrawn behind the River Rhonelle, began to build an extensive defensive position

³¹⁴ Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.179-180.

³¹⁵ R. Holmes, *Marlborough: Britain's Greatest General*, (London, 2009), p.415.

³¹⁶ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1377.

west to east from Valenciennes along the line of the Sambre, in order to defend Maubeuge in the event that Mons fell quickly.³¹⁷ Boufflers was also able to send three battalions through the Allied cordon of Mons and into the town itself on 19 September.³¹⁸ It was clear to both sides that another pitched battle would not be fought during the remainder of 1709.

Mons was taken relatively quickly, on 20 October 1711, after a siege costing the Allies 2,000 men, much less expensive in terms of time and casualties than Tournai earlier in the year.³¹⁹ However, despite the relatively quick fall of the town, Marlborough was not able to capitalise on the surrender and advance on Mauberge, despite the unseasonably mild and dry weather. The deprivations and freezing conditions of the previous summer had finally caught up with both the Allied and French armies. Due to a lack of good forage for the horses Marlborough was obliged to send his troops into winter quarters at the end of October, with Boufflers doing likewise, signalling the end of the 1709 campaign.³²⁰

³¹⁷ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1381; Churchill, *Marlborough Vol 4*, p.181.

³¹⁸ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.267.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.268.

³²⁰ Snyder, *Marlborough Godolphin Vol 3*, p.1396.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE AT MALPLAQUET

Introduction

The previous chapter provided a detailed analysis of the the 1709 campaign immediately prior to Malplaquet as well as the aftermath, while only summarising the major events during the battle. This chapter will provide a close-up analysis of individual actions that took place in order to build up a picture of the experience of battle, and why this particular action was the bloodiest fought during the long war.³²¹ Topics to be discussed will include how the soldiers would have been armed, what tactics they would have used, and how different arms would have interacted with each other. Personal accounts will be consulted to try to convey how these men would have acted when engaged in combat. .

The Experience of Infantry at Malplaquet

The latter half of the seventeenth century had seen a major attempt by all Western European armies to standardise their infantry forces. The pikeman, a mainstay of European armies throughout the previous century, continued to be used during the Nine Years War. Over the course of the seventeenth century, however, other European theorists started to advocate including fewer pikemen in infantry formations. One of the factors that prompted this change was the increasing

³²¹ J. Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, (London, 1991), p.78

potency of infantry firearms.³²² The value place on greater firepower resulted in a gradual reduction in the number of pike carrying troops, and by the time the War of the Spanish Succession had begun pikemen had virtually disappeared from the battlefield. Both the French and English had phased them out for all but ceremonial purposes by the winter of 1703.³²³ On the battlefield of Malplaquet only the short-pikes held by sergeants in British battalions remained as a vestige of the formerly dominant battlefield weapon.³²⁴ However, as will be discussed later, the French infantry tactics used throughout the war varied only slightly from the era when the pike's dominance was at its epoch as they were still very much based on shock and cold-steel.³²⁵

Another reason why the pike disappeared from the battlefield at the turn of the eighteenth century was development of an effective 'socket' bayonet. A 'plug' bayonet had been introduced as early as 1640.³²⁶ By the 1670's these were, according to Puységur, 'straight, double edged blades a foot long with tapering handles also a foot long'.³²⁷ However the plug bayonet's disadvantages were clear: infantry could not fire while the bayonet was attached and therefore every bayonet fixed reduced the firepower of the infantry unit while the method of plugging in the

³²² Vauban to Louvois, 21 December 1687, in A.R. d'Aiglun, *Vauban, sa famille et ses écrits*, 2 vols, (Paris, 1910), 2:286 cited in J. Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle: The French Army, 1610-1715*, (Cambridge, 1997), p.457.

³²³ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, p.458.

³²⁴ D. Chandler, *The Art of Warfare in the Age of Marlborough*, (Staplehurst, 1990), p.82.

³²⁵ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, p.456.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.457.

³²⁷ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.83.

bayonet was also inefficient, thus compromising the operational effectiveness of a battalion. The answer to the deficiencies of the plug bayonet was to develop a version of the weapon that allowed an infantryman to fire while retaining the capability to defend himself in close combat. The socket bayonet which was developed around 1687, and has been attributed to both Vauban and Mackay, solved these issues.³²⁸ Mackay explained the advantages of the new bayonet, 'the soldiers may safely keep their fire till they pour it into their breasts, and then have no other motion to make but to push as with a pick.'³²⁹ It did not take long for the socket bayonet to replace its predecessor. By 1709 almost all of the line infantry present at Malplaquet were armed with the socket bayonet. The most common form of the weapon was a 16-inch blade with a triangular cross section.³³⁰ The adoption of the socket bayonet certainly had a major influence in increasing the amount of firepower a battalion could unleash, and proved to be an effective deterrent against cavalry forces.

In 1709 almost every infantryman would have wielded a sword in addition to his fusil and bayonet. In general these swords were made for function rather than beauty with officers carrying more personalised and ornate variants.³³¹ During combat the sword was mainly utilised as a reserve to the bayonet. However, during sieges the

³²⁸ A. Crichton, (ed.), *The Life and Diary of Lieut. Col. J. Blackadder*, (London, 1824), p.37: Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, pp.464-465.

³²⁹ H. Mackay, *Memoirs of the War Carried on in Scotland and Ireland 1689-1691*, (Edinburgh, 1833), p.52.

³³⁰ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.84.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p.81.

sword was used more widely and proved an effective weapon. Donald McBane, who began his career as a grenadier, wrote about the use of the sword when attacking a fortified French position in 1702, 'His Grace made a detachment out of every battalion, with several pieces of cannon and hoppits, in order to attack a strong shottoe [chateau], a French garrison. It had a morrash of water about it. We took it in four hours time with sword in hand.'³³² Lord Orkney described the defensive positions encountered at Malplaquet as being 'nothing so much as a counterscarp from right to left'.³³³ The fighting around the French redoubts was bloody and hard fought. If their musket was lost, or their bayonet fixed into an opponent, troops would have reached for their swords. When fighting was face-to-face, whether climbing a breach or fighting over a redoubt, the sword could be a brutally effective weapon against unarmoured troops, albeit it would have lacked the range of the musket and bayonet combination.

The firearm used by infantry had also seen major developments. Throughout the seventeenth century the matchlock musket had been the premier infantry firearm and the efficiency of the weapon slowly developed. Prior to 1650 the matchlock generally had to be used in conjunction with an awkward rest, later on the development of lighter muskets meant that it could be abandoned. This development, and other general improvements, meant that the rate of fire of the

³³² D. McBane, 'Expert Sword-Man's Companion' in M. Rector (ed.), *Highland Swordmanship: Techniques of the Scottish Swordmasters*, (Union City, 2001), p.32.

³³³ H.H.E. Cra'ster (ed.), 'Letters of the First Lord Orkney during Marlborough's Campaigns', *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 19, No. 74, (April, 1904), pp.301-321, p.320.

musket improved throughout the century. Gustavus Adolphus and Maurice of Nassau, who fought during the early seventeenth century, believed that loading a musket took six times as long as firing. Accordingly they positioned their musketeers in ranks six deep. As the musket became more efficient, however, these ranks decreased. By the end of the seventeenth century most armies lined up their infantry only three ranks deep. The matchlock muskets had become twice as efficient. Despite these improvements the musket still suffered from major issues, largely centring on the poor performance of the match in adverse weather conditions.³³⁴

The continued development of the flintlock eventually solved these difficulties. Early versions were developed at the end of the 16th century, although the flintlock did not supersede the matchlock as the premier battlefield infantry weapon until the late 17th century. Mork explained how the weapon worked, 'To fire the flintlock the soldier only had to cock the tightly sprung hammer containing the flint and release it with the trigger. As it sprang forward it struck the steel of the battery creating sparks and knocking the battery forward to expose the pan, so that the sparks might ignite the priming powder.'³³⁵ The flintlock had numerous advantages over the matchlock: it was easier to load and the process of firing was reduced from 44 movements to only 26, additionally the rate of misfires reduced from one in four to around one in

³³⁴ G.R. Mork, 'Flint and Steel: A Study in Military Technology and Tactics in 17th-Century Europe', *Smithsonian Journal of History*, 2, (1963), pp.25-52, p.42.

³³⁵ *Ibid*, p.43.

three shots.³³⁶ The flintlock could also be carried or slung once loaded to be picked up again and fired instantly without worrying about finding and lighting a match, which proved a significant advantage when surprised by an opponent. The introduction of pre-packaged cartridges also added to these advantages. Rather than have to measure out his powder a musketeer could now simply bite the top off of the greased paper cartridge keeping the ball in his mouth, he would then pour the powder down the barrel, spit the ball in after it before using the remaining paper as a wad, which would be forced down with the ram-rod. This was certainly a more efficient technique than earlier, although it was not adopted by French troops until 1738.³³⁷

The matchlock also, generally, used smaller calibre balls although the British persevered with the one-ounce balls they had previously used. The flintlock did suffer from a few disadvantages, however, and these factors in addition to cost go some way to explaining why the last matchlocks were only withdrawn from service with the French militia in 1708. Firstly, the range and accuracy of the flintlock was generally no better than the matchlock and in some cases the flints could easily come loose from the cock. Furthermore, if the flints were not the right size there could be difficulties as a long flint could snap and a small one might not produce a spark. Additionally the flint needed changing after every 10 to 12 shots. The continued use of the wooden ram-rod also remained a problem throughout the War

³³⁶ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.77.

³³⁷ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, pp.459-460.

of the Spanish Succession.³³⁸ Eventually, however, all armies realised that the flintlock was the superior weapon. Adoption was slow in some units but broadly the Imperials adopted it *en masse* in 1689, the English a year later and the French just before the turn of the century.³³⁹ During the battle of Malplaquet infantry would have been almost exclusively equipped with flintlock muskets, albeit of a wide range of styles and calibres.

During the War of the Spanish Succession armies were certainly not uniform in the modern sense of the word. The tactical doctrine that troops used often varied from unit to unit and region to region. Richard Kane's 'A New System of Military Discipline for a Battalion of Foot' sets out the British method. In its most basic form the system was to engage in a series of fire fights while moving ever closer to the enemy line. A British battalion would advance until the enemy opened fire on them. Providing this had occurred within 100 paces the battalion would be ordered to fire by the colonel. The method they used was the much vaunted platoon fire. The battalion would be divided into 18 platoons for firing. These platoons would then be divided into six separate 'firings' interspersed along the line. When ready to fire upon the enemy the six platoons of the first firing along with the entire front rank would fire at the enemy, this would produce a strong wall of shot along the whole frontage. The first firing would then reload while the second firing would discharge their muskets. The third firing would included the two platoons of grenadiers on the flanks who would

³³⁸ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.77.

³³⁹ Mork, 'Flint and Steel: A Study in Military Technology and Tactics in 17th-Century Europe', p.46.

angle their fire towards the enemy centre. A well trained battalion could complete this process twice in a minute.³⁴⁰

It was possible that the opposing infantry might flee in the face of this first firing although generally this would only occur only if the battalion was within 50 yards of the enemy when they began firing or if confronted by inexperienced or demoralised troops. In this scenario the British would cease firing and pursue the enemy as a unit at their colonel's behest.³⁴¹ In the event that the enemy did not break after sustained fire the battalion would advance before halting at very close range to the enemy force and then begin to employ the system once more. The colonel would keep the battalion firing until the enemy broke or withdrew out of range. The cavalry would pursue a broken enemy as it was key to British doctrine that the infantry remained a cohesive unit and did not break ranks to chase a routing or withdrawing opponent.³⁴²

Dutch tactics appear to have been extremely similar to those employed by the British. This is hardly surprising given the influence William III's Dutch troops and generals had on rebuilding the English and Scots armies after the overthrow of

³⁴⁰ R. Kane, *Campaigns of King William and Queen Anne; From 1689, to 1712. Also A New System of Military Discipline, For A Battalion of Foot on Action; With the Most Essential Exercise of the Cavalry.* (London, 1745), p.119.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.118

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p.120.

James II, combined with the number of English troops who had fought in Dutch service since the 1670s.³⁴³

French infantry tactics were very different and this goes some way towards explaining the poor performances they often gave, especially during the early engagements of the War of the Spanish Succession. The French fire by ranks system had been admired throughout Europe in the late seventeenth century. In this system the battalion would stand in five ranks with the rear rank standing while the four in front knelt. The fifth rank would then discharge its fire and the fourth would stand, this would repeated until the first rank had fired at which point the four front ranks would once again kneel and the process would be repeated. If necessary the first firing could be a double volley with the rear rank standing and the fourth rank stooping to achieve a particularly devastating result.³⁴⁴

The French system was effective for a period. However, once platoon fire had been adopted by the Dutch and British its suitability diminished. Stung by the performance of their infantry in the early battles of the war the French attempted to reform the firing method they employed. A new form of volley was developed by Villeroi in 1705 and became standard practice in 1707. This was a poor imitation of platoon fire, however, with only a one in twelve muskets in a battalion involved in a firing at any

³⁴³ D. Blackmore, *Destructive and Formidable: British Infantry Firepower 1642-1765*, (London, 2014), p.74; A. Carswell, "'Mercenaries': The Scottish Soldier in Foreign Service, 1568-1860", in E.M. Spiers, J.A. Crang, M.J. Strickland (eds.), *A Military History of Scotland*, (Edinburgh, 2014), pp.248-275, p.266.

³⁴⁴ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, p.485.

one time in contrast with the much heavier barrage of one in three employed by the British and Dutch.³⁴⁵ It was fortunate for the Allied troops at Malplaquet that the French had not developed an effective replica of the platoon fire system as it was proven to have been a very effective system when fighting defensively. This had been shown by the ease at which General Webb's infantry held off French assaults at Wynendaele a year previously losing only 950 men compared to losses of 4,000 by the French,³⁴⁶ a four to one ratio compared to the approximately two to one inflicted by the French on the Allies at Malplaquet.

Perhaps the reason why the British and Dutch were able to create and effectively employ a superior system was due to the difference in doctrine between the combatants. As has been seen the British and Dutch preferred to close on the enemy, stopping to deliver a barrage at ever-closer ranges. The French, in contrast, seemed to prefer to fire either at the last moment before an attack or not at all depending on the whim of the colonel who was in command. French commanders, rather than lay down a withering hail of fire preferred to use the charge *à prest* which relied on speed and cold-steel to break through the enemy line. Marshal Villars was one the advocates of this method and stated, 'In my opinion, the best method for the French infantry [...] is to charge with the bayonet on the end of the fusil.'³⁴⁷ While this tactic was clearly fairly unimaginative it was, at times, successful

³⁴⁵ B. Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory: Battle Tactics 1689-1763*, (New York, 1992), p.61.

³⁴⁶ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.232.

³⁴⁷ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, p.485.

throughout the period. Presumably this was due to the moral effect a charging mass of troops had on the defending infantry. De la Colonie described the fighting during the battle of Heyzempirne (3 March 1703) between Bavarian and Imperial troops as follows:

‘the [Bavarian] infantry quickened their pace, in order to dash upon the enemy without firing, reserving this until they were in very close contact [...] our infantry did not experience the same resistance [as the cavalry had]: they stood the first effect of the enemy’s fire, charged home with bayonets fixed and crushed all resistance.’³⁴⁸

However, it is worth noting that at Heyzempirne the Bavarians would not have been facing troops using platoon fire, whereas if they had been it would have somewhat reduced the likelihood of the charge being successful.

Robert Parker’s description of a fire-fight that took place during the battle of Malplaquet between the Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland and a battalion of, similarly experienced, Wild Geese in French service is a much cited example of the superior British firing system in action.³⁴⁹ The description is one of the best of the period and is worth citing in full:

‘We continued marching slowly on, till we came to an open in the wood. It was a small plain, on the opposite side of which we perceived a battalion of the enemy drawn up, a skirt of the wood being in the rear of them. Upon this Colonel Kane, who was then at the head of the Regiment, having drawn us up, and formed our platoons, advanced gently toward them, with the six platoons of our first fire made ready. When we had advanced within a hundred paces of them, they gave us a fire of one of their ranks: whereupon we halted, and returned them the fire of our six platoons at once;

³⁴⁸ M. De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner 1692-1717*, (London, 1904), p.131.

³⁴⁹ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.120; Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory*, pp.109-110.

and immediately made ready the six platoons of our second fire, and advanced upon them again. They then gave us the fire of another rank, and we returned them a second fire, which made them shrink; however, they gave us the fire of a third rank after a scattering manner, and then retired into the wood in great disorder: on which we sent our third fire after them, and saw them no more.’³⁵⁰

Even when faced with troops of a roughly even calibre to themselves the superiority of the platoon fire system was proven. This is even more evident when you look at the casualties sustained during the engagement, ‘We had but four men killed, and six wounded: and found near forty of them on the spot killed and wounded.’ It is worth noting, however, that Parker does not attribute the discrepancy in casualties purely to the superior platoon fire system. He also believed that the higher calibre of bullet used by the British was a major factor in determining the victor of the firefight.³⁵¹

Proportionally, musketry appears to have accounted for a high number of casualties sustained in early-modern warfare. According to Corvisier of the veterans wounded at Malplaquet who were admitted to Invalides (a French military hospital) in 1715: 71.4% of wounds were caused by firearms, 15.8% from swords, 10% from artillery fire and 2.8% on account of the bayonet.³⁵² Corvisier also looked at the admittance for 1762 and found: 68.8% had been wounded by small arms, 13.4% by artillery, 14.7% by swords and 2.4% by bayonet.³⁵³ Looking at these figures on their own, it

³⁵⁰D. Chandler (ed.), *Military Memoirs of Marlborough's Campaigns, 1702-1712 by Captain Robert Parker and the Comte de Mèrode-Westerloo, Field Marshal of the Holy Roman Empire*, (London, 1998), p.88-89.

³⁵¹Chandler, *Military Memoirs*, p.89.

³⁵² A. Corvisier, ‘Le moral des combattants, panique et enthousiasme, la bataille de Malplaquet,’ *Revue historique des armées*, 4, no.3 (1977), p.24; Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, p.489.

³⁵³ C. Duffy, *The Military Experience In The Age of Reason*, (London, 1998), p.245

would be easy to reach the opinion that musketry was far and away the most effective instrument of death on an early-modern battlefield. However it is worth noting that these figures only include men who escaped death but were sufficiently maimed enough to warrant entering a permanent military hospital. The data cannot be said to be an accurate reflection of the spread of casualties incurred on a battlefield. For example, a sword or bayonet wound is far more survivable than even an indirect hit from a cannonball and, as a result, these wounds may be over-represented among those admitted. Additionally, it could be argued that a musket ball would be more likely to cause lasting damage than a stab wound and thus the impact of firepower could be overstated compared to those wounds caused by a sword or bayonet.³⁵⁴

However, despite the superior system employed by the British and Dutch, relying on musketry was an inefficient way of winning a battle. Even during the Napoleonic wars when superior weapons and fire-systems were utilised if one side was not willing to break the deadlock a battle of attrition was sure to develop. It seems sensible that the same would apply to fighting during the War of the Spanish Succession. Morale was the crucial factor in combat and it is no surprise that after years of victories the Allied troops generally had more staying power in firefights than their French counterparts.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ R. Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*, (London, 1999), p.46

³⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.84

The type of action fought between the Royal Regiment of Foot of Ireland and their countrymen in French service would have been a rarity at Malplaquet. It can perhaps be argued that the superior musketry of the Allies at Oudenarde had been key to that victory, having kept superior numbers of French infantry at bay.³⁵⁶ In general, however, Malplaquet was a much messier affair. French infantry had been largely used defensively on the Flanders theatre. However, in fairness French troops had performed effectively when attacking on other fronts.³⁵⁷ At Malplaquet this defensive posture was taken to its most extreme form. Villars appeared to have had one operational aim: he would block the road to Mons. Marlborough and Eugene, for their part wished to clear it. In attacking these defences it is likely that platoon fire would not have been utilised extensively across the battlefield, although it clearly proved effective when used by Orkney's troops to deter the French cavalry counter-attack late in the day as will be seen later. Allied attacks on the redoubts would have been far more akin to the Franco-Bavarian tactics discussed earlier.

One of the characteristics of eighteenth century warfare that the primary sources show is the difficulty troops had trying to hold a position that they had taken by storm. The Earl of Orkney described the attempt by the Dutch to take the French right flank:

‘The Dutch who had not above 30 battalions, were attacking their retrenchments, which they found to be 3 or 4, one after another; but their attack was not so much in wood as ours. They beat the

³⁵⁶D. Blackmore, *Destructive and Formidable: British Infantry Firepower 1642-1745*, (Barnsley, 2014), p.87

³⁵⁷As at Calciante (19 April 1706) cited in *Nosworth, Anatomy of Victory*, p.105

enemy from their retrenchments, but still they regain them again,
with such a butchering that the oldest generall alive never saw the
like.³⁵⁸

The fact that the Dutch were able to gain the entrenchments at the first attempt is extraordinary in itself as they had suffered horrific casualties from enfilading artillery fire during their advance. Once they had reached the French close quarter fighting would have ensued. Visceral examples of this kind of fighting are detailed later, however, in short when infantry became locked in close-quarter combat order tended to be lost fairly rapidly and the fighting degenerated into a chaotic brawl and troops with forward momentum usually held the initial advantage. However, once they had seized their objective the enemy would often send fresh reserves into the mix. These more orderly troops would then benefit from the forward momentum the attacking forces had previously possessed, and the Allied infantry would not have had time to effectively form their lines to implement platoon fire in this chaotic situation. As a result the fighting over defensive works often became back and forth contests.³⁵⁹

The fighting on the French centre-left flank, at the junction between the woods and the plain also showed the fluid nature of fighting. The attack in this sector was led by a British brigade under the Duke of Argyll, supported by another brigade of Prussians and Danes. John Marshall Deane was present and described the three hour action in detail, showing the ebb and flow of this combat over the redoubts. The initial

³⁵⁸ Orkney, *Letters*, p.319

³⁵⁹ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle in the Age of Napoleon*, p.88

attempt to storm the entrenchments in the wood was unsuccessful, 'At length a brigade of Prussians and Danes marcht in and was most shamefully beet of[f] and runn quite back againe out of the wood.' Perseverance in the attack was key to taking a position and thus the Allies sent more troops into the wood:

'And so it fell out that the brigade of English that the Earl of Orkney heads was just ready, drawne up by the wood side and fit for service. Who, seeing the afforesayd brigade runn, was soe inflamed with madness that instead of being any way frightened there at, they by a general consent gradually wheeled into the wood and formed the brigade in noble order, and with a full cry gave a general huzzae and boldly marcht up to the second intrenchment in the wood.'³⁶⁰

De La Colonie described how this British infantry was able to continue the advance in the face of French musketry, 'At last the column, leaving the great battery on its left, changed its direction a quarter right and threw itself precipately into the wood on our left, making an assault upon that portion which had been breached'. The French then unleashed their volley, 'It sustained the full fire of our infantry entrenched therein, and notwithstanding the great number killed on the spot, it continued the attack and penetrated into the wood [...]'.³⁶¹

It was very rare for infantry in open terrain to come into physical contact with one other, as one side would normally break before the opponent made contract.³⁶² For the infantry involved in the fighting over the barricades, however, this was not the

³⁶⁰ J.M. Deane in D.G. Chandler (ed.), *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaign During The War of The Spanish Succession 1704-1711*, (JSAHR), 1984, p.91.

³⁶¹ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.338.

³⁶² Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory*, p.111.

case. The fixed bastion gave the defenders a tangible objective to hold and troops tended to be far more steadfast when defending entrenchments. This resulted in action that was bloody, desperate and fluid in nature. Sergeant John Wilson described the assault on French positions in the triangle of woodland on the Allied right flank, '[We] attacked the Enemy in the wood afores'd with a great deal of courage and resolution but were received by the Enemy with as great bravery. Wee beat them from that post and they beat us back again with as great courage and resolution as wee had them [...].' At this point a stalemate occurred as both sides fought over the parapet for two hours during which, 'there was a great effusion of blood on both sides; the Armys firing at each other bayonett to bayonett. And after came to stabb each other with their bayonets and several came so close that they knocked one another's brains out w'th the butt end of their firelocks.'³⁶³ The ferocity involved in fighting over a parapet or entrenchment was not unique to Malplaquet. De la Colonie's description of the fighting that took place when the Allies attacked the Schellenberg is particularly visceral,

'The English infantry led this attack with the greatest intrepidity, right up to our parapet, but there they were opposed with a courage at least equal to their own. Rage, fury, and desperation were manifested by both sides [...]. The little parapet which separated the two forces became the scene of the bloodiest struggle that could be conceived [...]. It would be impossible to describe in words strong enough the details of the carnage that took place during this first attack, which lasted a good hour or more. We were all fighting hand to hand, hurling them back as they clutched the parapet; men were slaying, or tearing at the muzzles of guns and the bayonets which pierced their entrails; crushing under their feet their own wounded comrades, and even gouging

³⁶³ J. Wilson, 'The Journal of John Wilson' in D. Chandler (ed.), *Military Miscellany II, Manuscripts from Marlborough's Wars, the American War of Independence and the Boer War*, (Stroud, 2005), p.78.

out their opponents' eyes with their nails, when the grip was so close that neither could make use of their weapons.'³⁶⁴

Deane stressed the importance of seizing and maintaining the initiative in order to blunt the effect of counter-attacking troops. He described the events that took place at Malplaquet once his brigade had marched to fill the gap left by the Prussians and Danes, 'And just as they came there Monsr. Villarr, there general, was marching doun with 5 regiments of Irish and French to relieve those trenches. But our bridgade, being to[o] nimble for them, mounted the breast work and jumpt into there intrenchements before they could get to it.'³⁶⁵

What followed was one of the most decisive points during the battle. The French fired a volley into the British troops occupying the entrenchments. Rather than reform and trade volleys with the French, Argyll ordered his troops to unleash one volley at what must be assumed to be very close range, and charged at the French and Irish troops with sword and bayonet. Without an entrenchment to hold the five counter-attacking regiments were put to flight by the ferocity of this close range volley and charge, and Villars was hit in the knee by a musket ball, a wound that put him out of action for the rest of the day.

The French forces then withdrew to the third entrenchment. The British rapidly reformed with their superior experience, drill and training giving them a distinct

³⁶⁴ De La Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.338.

³⁶⁵ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaign*, p.91.

advantage over the withdrawing French. Argyll then once more pressed the attack, 'our brigade followed them up so furiously that they gave them noe time to draw up or forme in any order'. This was clearly a key moment as by not allowing the retreating troops to reform Argyll ensured that the enemy could not bring the level of firepower that could have halted the attack and driven the British back to bear, as had happened to the Dutch on the Allied left flank.

The British continued on to the third trench and, 'imediately mounted thatt breastwork alsoe, and the enemy run like lusty fellows, throwing in some loose scattering shott amongst us [...]. In short, we drove them cleare out of the wood, and there, some of our forces, being drawne up, fell upon them and broke them confusedly.'³⁶⁶ The action threatened to turn into a rout, as the French infantry were fleeing in disarray, but the presence of the French cavalry forced the pursuing British troops to halt, reform and occupy the three entrenchments they had taken. From which position they were able to inflict damage on the cavalry by virtue of the two small 2-pounder cannon present within each battalion.³⁶⁷

Analysing the performance of the two sides who fought in the wood, Deane was dismissive of the French infantry he had faced, 'the French doth really think that they have no business to stand against us in the field except they have eyther a ligne or

³⁶⁶ *Ibid*, p.91.

³⁶⁷ Chandler, *Military Memoirs*, p.239.

breastwork, a wood or wall, before them to cover them.’³⁶⁸ Deane was clearly proud of British military prowess. De La Colonie, however, held a different view of the action. He observed that the success of the British attack, ‘owed as much to [the infantry] being drunk with brandy as to martial ardour.’ The Marshal also praised the heroism of the common French infantryman, and felt that they were let down by, ‘some of our best dressed troops [who] did not think proper to hold their ground’. Somewhat caustically he added that this was doubtless not due to their courage being at fault but rather due to ‘the embarrassment they might cause the State by the difficulty that be created in having to replace them.’³⁶⁹

De la Colonie felt that had these troops stood then the Allied infantry attacking the triangle would have been entirely destroyed and he may have had a case. High casualties were sure to follow whenever infantry had to attack a strong barricade in the face of obstinate defence, the fighting that took place over Blenheim village (13 August 1704) being one example of this. Lord Rowe’s attack on the village was met with firing at thirty metres, and the brigade suffered 33 percent casualties in the process.³⁷⁰ A further four attacks took place on the village but the defenders could not be dislodged, although this was not have an effect on the battle as the victory was secured elsewhere.³⁷¹ Despite Deane’s disparaging remarks about the French forces he faced the fighting for the 600 yard triangle of woodland was some of the

³⁶⁸ Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough’s Campaign*, p.91.

³⁶⁹ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.338.

³⁷⁰ J.C.R. Childs, ‘Marlborough’s Wars and the Act of Union, 1702-14’ in E.M. Spiers, J.A Crang & M.J. Strickland (eds.), *A Military History of Scotland*, (Edinburgh, 2014), pp.326-347, p.334.

³⁷¹ Orkney, *Letters*, p.310.

most bloody experienced by Allied forces during the war, and it has been estimated that of the 22,000 casualties suffered by the Grand Alliance at Malplaquet 7,000 occurred in that area.³⁷²

Facing Artillery at Malplaquet

Before reaching the forest to launch their attack Lottum's twenty-two battalions had to withstand a torrent of artillery fire.³⁷³ Throughout the early modern era, facing artillery gun-fire could be one of the most hellish experiences in warfare. Gunners loading the cannon had options as to which projectile they could fire. If infantry were standing over 200 yards away then they would be targeted by round-shot. This was generally fired directly at the target but was much more useful in knocking down defences than dispatching scores of men.³⁷⁴ Nevertheless coming under fire from distant batteries could be a very stressful experience for the common infantryman. Chronicling the action at Donauwörth (2 July 1704) La Colonie left a graphic description of what it was like to come under fire from distant artillery:

'I had scarcely finished speaking when the enemy's battery opened fire upon us, and raked us through and through. They concentrated their fire upon us, and with their first discharge carried off Count de la Bastide, the lieutenant of my company with whom at the moment I was speaking, and twelve grenadiers who fell side by side in the ranks, so that my coat was covered with brains and blood.'³⁷⁵

It is unlikely that this would have truly been the first salvo, the initial few shots of a barrage were often used as range finders, and it often took three of these barrages

³⁷² Deane, *A Journal of Marlborough's Campaign*, p.91.

³⁷³ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.338.

³⁷⁴ Chandler, *Art of Warfare*, p.183.

³⁷⁵ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.182.

to successfully target the stationary infantry.³⁷⁶ The infantry thus would have had warning that a barrage was coming, which in itself must have been a nerve shredding experience. Once the guns established the range thirteen comrades being mangled by a single salvo of ten guns firing at long range would have come as even more of a shock. This however was just the beginning of an ordeal that was to cost De La Colonie, 'five officers and eighty grenadiers killed on the spot before we had fired a single shot [...].'³⁷⁷ At shorter ranges grape shot would be used. This was the eighteenth-century equivalent of a machine gun, as a canister containing fragments of metal was loaded into the barrel of the piece. Once fired, this would burst open at the muzzle and would launch a shower of shot at attacking infantry. Coming under fire from grape shot was invariably devastating. At the battle of Kolin (1757) a Prussian battalion lost every single one of its lieutenants under a barrage of canister shot.³⁷⁸

The deployment of artillery was paramount to its success on the field. Gunners could be impressively accurate but if they were unable to see a target then they would not hit it. As Nockhern de Schorn stated:

'On the defensive they [gunners] sweep extensive areas of ground, and beat and defend the approaches and avenues along which the enemy must advance. There is a second maxim which is no less important namely to take up positions from where you may take the

³⁷⁶ Duffy, *The Military Experience*, p.235.

³⁷⁷ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.183.

³⁷⁸ Duffy, *The Military Experience*, p.217.

enemy in enfilade, and in the rear so that you take them under oblique fire and torment them from every side.³⁷⁹

The French artillery at Malplaquet was positioned extremely well. Almost all of the batteries were placed on the flanks or in front of defensive redoubts. In order to take the French frontline Allied troops would need to attack these redoubts. This meant that almost all attacking troops would be entering clear avenues of fire, which was to prove particularly devastating to the 30 battalions of Dutch and Scottish troops, commanded by the Prince of Orange, who were tasked with routing the French left flank. In this section of the field a hidden French battery of 20 guns was positioned in such a way that it would take the advancing troops in flank. This resulted in horrendous casualties being suffered by the attacking troops. The battery held its fire until the regiments were around 100 yards from the French position. Once the cannon opened the effect was murderous, hundreds of officers and men fell rapidly. Chandler placed the casualties at 5,000 after thirty minutes, which represents a significant portion of the total losses suffered by the Allies over the course of the battle.³⁸⁰ Despite the massive casualties the Dutch kept attacking and the elite Blue Guards suffered horrendously. A second attack was launched but this was no more successful, and once again resulted in severe casualties. It is worth noting, however, that a bombardment by canister shot did not automatically mean an attack would fail even if the fire was enfilading. The Dutch did manage to reach and briefly take the French

³⁷⁹ Nockhern de Schorn, *Idées raisonnées sur un système general et suivi de toutes les connaissances militaires*, (Nurmemburg, 1783), cited in Duffy, *The Military Experience*, p.234.

³⁸⁰ Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, pp.258-259.

positions. On the Allied left the troops also managed to successfully assault through enfilading fire, as De La Colonie witnessed:

‘They [Allied Infantry] came on at a slow pace, and by seven o’clock had arrived in line with the battery threatening our centre. As soon as this dense column appeared fourteen [French] guns were promptly brought up in front of our brigade almost in line with the Regiment de Garde Francaise. The fire of this battery was terrific and hardly a shot missed its mark.’

The bombardment of the Allied infantry was unrelenting as they advanced but it did not break the assault,

‘the cannon shot poured forth without a break, plunging into the enemy’s infantry and carried off whole ranks at a time, but a gap was no sooner created than it was filled again and they continued to advance upon us without giving us any idea of the actual point determined on for their attack.’³⁸¹

Long range bombardments, despite not being as physically devastating as close range canister fire, had a very draining effect on morale of the infantry forced to endure them. Keegan writing about the ‘Grand Battery’ at Waterloo stated, ‘the arrival of their solid cannon-balls was so frequent, the effect of the balls on human flesh so destructive, the apprehension of those spurred so intense that the cannonade came as near as near as anything suffered by the British at Waterloo to breaking their line.’³⁸² Keegan’s analysis is certainly consistent with De La Colonie’s account of the fighting at the Schellenberg in 1704. His main frustration was that he was unable to act to stop his men being hit, ‘So accurate was the fire that each discharge of the cannon stretched some of my men on the ground. I suffered agonies at seeing these

³⁸¹ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.338.

³⁸² Keegan, *The Face of Battle*, p.160.

brave fellows perish without a chance of defending themselves, but it was absolutely necessary that they should not move from their post.’³⁸³ This sense of helplessness in the face of long range artillery fire and the frustration of not being able to strike back at the enemy appears to have been the most difficult part of standing up to a barrage. Troops moving to engage the enemy would have believed that they could influence events and somehow get their revenge, but standing in the open there would have been no such relief. Morale and cohesion, therefore, was bound to suffer accordingly.³⁸⁴

At Malplaquet, however, the effect on Orkney’s battalions in the centre was not devastating, ‘It was about one o’clock that my 13 battalions got up to the retrenchments, which we got very easily; for as we advanced, they quitted them and inclined to their right. All this while, from 7 o’clock, we were under the fire of their cannon [...].’³⁸⁵ Orkney’s battalions were able absorb a sustained bombardment for six hours before launching a successful attack. Troops with high morale such as the British, who had experienced notable successes throughout the war, could be effective even after suffering from an intense bombardment of round-shot. A further example of this is the behaviour of De La Colonie’s Bavarians at the Schellenberg. They were successful in driving Allied attacks back, despite the casualties sustained in the bombardment described earlier,³⁸⁶ and were only pushed back from the Schellenberg

³⁸³ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, pp.182-183

³⁸⁴ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, p.47.

³⁸⁵ Orkney, *Letters*, p.319.

³⁸⁶ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, pp.184-185

due to a flanking attack rendering their linear position untenable.³⁸⁷ Clearly, however, round-shot was effective at dealing damage to troops from behind prepared defences. The troops at the Schellenberg had the advantage of being situated atop a hill, which would have limited the effectiveness of the Allied bombardment. However, at Malplaquet the French troops were positioned on flat ground and in forests. The defences they had prepared provided some shelter from the Allied bombardment but it is clear that a significant portion of damage was done to these entrenchments, which provided a significant boost to the troops attacking the formidable positions on the French left and gave them a fighting chance of capturing them. De La Colonie was once again active in this sector with his Bavarians and described the bombardment: 'Next morning [11 September] at break of day the [Allied] battery of thirty cannon opened fire, and by its continuous volleys succeeded in breaching the entrenchments in the wood on our left, and the head of the enemy's infantry column made its appearance.'³⁸⁸

De La Colonie suggested that his stern leadership was crucial to ensuring that his regiment did not break under bombardment, 'I would allow no man even to bow his head before the storm, fearing that the regiment would find itself in disorder when the time came for us to make the rapid movement that would be demanded of us.'³⁸⁹ This method of urging the troops to remain still, rather than duck or weave, appears

³⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.188

³⁸⁸ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner* p.337.

³⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.182-183.

to have been more theoretical than practical. Muir stated that it was a maxim of Napoleonic leadership but was never actually successful as it is human nature to duck and weave in the face of an incoming missile. It is entirely possible that De La Colonie told his troops to remain still under fire, but it is very unlikely that they did so.³⁹⁰ Veteran infantry units could often tell when to expect a cannon shot, it could be seen as a black spot in the air or by the quivering in the air.³⁹¹ De La Colonie, a veteran, would have known this. He would have expected his men to try and evade the cannon balls. By ordering his men not to duck, however, he was showing his own disdain for enemy fire. He hoped that they would heed the example of his own personal courage.

Displays like De La Colonie's were a feature of warfare during the period and do appear to have been effective in helping men to endure lengthy bombardments. Indeed three generals died in the Prince of Orange's disastrous attack on the French right-flank, and the Prince himself was positioned in an exposed position throughout the fighting, much to the consternation of his staff.³⁹² De La Colonie expressed his respect for an officer leading troops under fire at Malplaquet during Lottum's advance, and attributed the continuation of the advance in the face of heavy fire to his leadership, 'I could not help noticing the officer in command, who although he seemed elderly was nevertheless so active that in giving his orders there was no cessation of action anywhere [...].'³⁹³

³⁹⁰ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, p.48.

³⁹¹ Duffy, *The Military Experience*, p.218.

³⁹² Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, p.259.

³⁹³ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.338.

This penchant for displaying personal leadership also goes some way to explaining the disproportionate number of generals decapitated by cannonball during battles and sieges a long list including such figures as the Marquis de St Ruth at Aughrim (1691) and the Duke of Berwick at Phillipsburg (1734). Indeed the list of higher ranking officers killed or wounded at Malplaquet is extensive, precisely due to the fact that the officer class was expected to expose themselves to danger. Orkney described the French losses, 'I hear they have three general officers killed and a great many wounded, amongst which is the Marshal Villars, Duke de Guiche, Albergotty and many officers I can't name.' The Allies also suffered, 'There is hardly any general that either is not shot in his clothes or his horse. I am sure mine had such raps that I thought he would have thrown me down; but it was upon an iron buckle, so my horse was saved; but many has had 8, 4 and 5 horses shot under them.'³⁹⁴

As well as personal leadership it seems that a belief in providence was responsible for men standing firm under fire.³⁹⁵ John Blackadder, an extremely devout man, certainly believed that God was watching over his troops,

'They raised batteries and played upon us with their cannon. There was not a place in the whole line so much exposed as where our regiment, and two or three more stood: and we had considerable loss. Many a cannon-ball came very near, but He gave his angels charge over me. *Thou art my shield and buckler*. This I trusted in, and thought; but in the goodness of God let none of them touch me.'³⁹⁶

³⁹⁴ Orkney, *Letters*, p.321.

³⁹⁵ M. Snape, *The Redcoat and Religion: The Forgotten History of the British Soldier from the Age of Marlborough to the Eve of the First World War*, (London, 2005), pp.39-42.

³⁹⁶ Crichton, *The Diary of Col Blackadder*, p.162.

A belief in providence and the theory that every bullet had its billet was held extensively. It was certainly reassuring for troops to believe that God would keep them safe, but it did not mean that they would stand idly by while cannon pointed at them without proper cause. Indeed, officers throughout the period realised that even small movements would relieve some of the pressure on their troops. Therefore, rather than have battalions constantly standing in the face of fire, they would be marched around to some extent. This meant that soldiers would have some small relief from the bombardment.³⁹⁷

The Experience of Cavalry at Malplaquet

Armies of the period still continued to have a strong cavalry element. Cavalry often made up around 25-30% of a force's total strength,³⁹⁸ and it remained the most prestigious arm throughout Marlborough's campaigns as well as being the most expensive. Indeed the Marquis de Santa-Cruz estimated in the 1730s that maintaining 1000 cavalry cost as much as 2500 infantry.³⁹⁹ This section will explore the role played by cavalry during the battle of the Malplaquet in order to explore how effective it was on the battlefield, and will attempt to collate the experiences of soldiers from the era of the battle in order to build up a picture of what it was like to be a mounted soldier during the War of the Spanish succession.

³⁹⁷ Duffy, *The Military Experience*, p.219.

³⁹⁸ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.31; Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, p.105.

³⁹⁹ M. le Blond, *Eléments de Tactique*, (Paris, 1758), pp.217-8, cited in Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.29.

Two distinct types of cavalry appear to have operated within the forces fighting at Malplaquet: heavy cavalry and dragoons (who fought as dismounted infantry in battle).⁴⁰⁰ The most common type of heavy cavalryman, would have been the cuirassier. It is difficult to find a precise description of a cuirassier's weapons as they varied from squadron to squadron and army to army. The armour worn by cavalry units also varied. Heavy cavalry in the French and Imperial armies retained the back and breast plate throughout the war, although Villars attempted to introduce a *démi-cuirass*, possibly to avoid against unnecessary retreats as it did not protect the back, making a cavalryman more vulnerable when in flight. This was often worn with leather gauntlets, a thick leather coat and leather riding boots, double folded at the knee to protect against sword slashes. British cavalry had abandoned the breast-plate prior to the Nine Years War. Marlborough, however, saw the value of armoured cavalry and ordered his cavalry to wear the breast-plate underneath their redcoats in 1707. Armoured helmets had fallen out of fashion during the seventeenth century for the majority of forces, although Imperial armies still used them. The tricorne hat was extensively worn. A metal pot was often worn in the crown in order to defend the head from slashes.⁴⁰¹

In terms of weaponry a heavy cavalryman would be armed with either a straight sword or a curved sabre, the latter of which was more common amongst French

⁴⁰⁰ Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine*, p.101.

⁴⁰¹ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.34.

forces. The advantage of the sabre was that it was more effective for slashing downwards at infantry. Wounds inflicted by the Cuirassier's armament, whether sword or sabre, appear to have been less deadly than those of musketry. During the Napoleonic Wars many cavalryman expressed dissatisfaction with the killing power of their weapons, with one British officer declaring 'A Light Dragoon's sabre was hardly capable of killing'.⁴⁰² Their French counter-parts also complained about the effectiveness of their 'long cumbersome swords'.⁴⁰³ It appears reasonable to assume that the killing power of such weaponry would not have suffered an extreme dip in quality during the century between the War of the Spanish Succession and the Napoleonic Wars. Indeed, one of the main reasons why cavalry caused far less serious wounds than musketry was due to a cavalryman having to undertake multiple tasks in combat as he would have to protect both himself and his horse, as well as the controlling his horse and ensuring that his blows hit home.⁴⁰⁴ Additionally, a cuirassier would have been armed with two pistols. By the time of the War of the Spanish Succession the unreliable wheel-lock had been replaced by the superior flintlock. Finally a significant number of cavalrymen would have been equipped with a musketoon, a type of blunderbuss or a carbine.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰² A.E. Clark-Kennedy, *Attack on the Colour! The Royal Dragoons in the Peninsula and at Waterloo*, (London, 1975), p.79 cited in Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, p.108.

⁴⁰³ D. Johnson, *Napoleon's Cavalry and its Leaders*, (London, 1978), p.16 cited in Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, p.109.

⁴⁰⁴ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, pp.108-109.

⁴⁰⁵ Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.33.

Cavalry combat was often a fluid affair with squadrons charging, routing the enemy, but then being driven back themselves by reinforcements or by the fire of supporting infantry units. The charge of the *Gendarmerie* at Blenheim is an example of this. The battlefield at Blenheim was ideal cavalry terrain, 'here was a fine plain without hedge or ditch; for there were but few foot to interpose, these being mostly engaged at the villages.'⁴⁰⁶ The *Gendarmerie* were seen as Tallard's elite troops and thus he fully expected his eight squadrons to break through Marlborough's five English squadrons before Blenheim village. The *Gendarmerie* advanced toward the five English squadrons who, wary of being caught stationary themselves moved forward towards the oncoming enemy. The *Gendarmerie* then 'made so bold and resolute a charge, that they broke through our [the British] first line [...].'⁴⁰⁷

Cavalry would often pass through each other when charging before engaging in a melee then reforming to repeat the process again. De la Colonie described this at Schmidmidel (1703),

'The cavalry on both sides, after having driven its way through the opposing forces, whilst there infantry were still engaged, retired, re-formed and actually met once again in the charge; but after a long and hard fight each side retired for a second time to their own part of the field, both losing a great number of men.'⁴⁰⁸

Nosworthy called this 'threading' the enemy line and pointed out that this could not have occurred had cavalry charged 'knee to knee' as, had this been the case, the two

⁴⁰⁶ Chandler, *Military Memoirs*, p.41.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.41.

⁴⁰⁸ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.138.

bodies of horsemen would have collided, rather than 'threaded', assuming one side did not break. It would seem then that cavalry charging during the era left gaps of at least a horse width between individual troopers. In terms of pace the cavalry would have charged at the trot often slowing down before collision in order to engage in individual combat, it was only when they did not slow down that this threading would occur.⁴⁰⁹

Cavalry doctrine had been subject of much change in the proceeding centuries, especially with regard to how the pistols should be used. Falkner put forward the view that around one hundred years prior to Malplaquet cavalry had abandoned the advantages of momentum as rather than charge the enemy in a shock action cavalry would instead seek to engage the enemy, whether fellow horseman or infantry, with pistols. The most popular method of achieving this in the early-seventeenth century was the caracole. Cavalry would approach an enemy force several ranks deep, each rank would then ride up to the enemy in and fire before wheeling to the rear of the formation to reload.⁴¹⁰ The intention of this was to blow a hole in an enemy formation in order to charge through. It was, however, distinctly ineffective as cavalry using the formation would be very evenly matched and cavalry pistols were outperformed by infantry musketry, which had a longer range and muzzle velocity and thus were more powerful. Gustavus Adolphus was credited with the restoring

⁴⁰⁹ Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory*, p.126.

⁴¹⁰ Falkner, *Marlborough's War Machine*, p.107.

the status of cavalry as a shock force on the battlefield.⁴¹¹ Lynn, however, has pointed out that he was not the first to emphasize cold steel over firepower and that the French seem to have adopted such tactics from around 1600.⁴¹² There is a consensus in the historiography that from the 1670's until the end of the Nine Years War French cavalry would have charged in with cold steel only, abandoning the pistol in the charge.⁴¹³

Nosworthy stated that after the Nine Years war the French generals, somewhat inexplicably given the success of the previous twenty years, became split between charging without use of a pistol and once again attempting to unleash a volley of pistol fire while on the charge. The second option he argued came at a huge cost to the momentum of the charge and, as a result, the Anglo-Dutch cavalry began to have much more success against French cuirassiers during the War of the Spanish Succession, citing the charge of the *Gendarmerie* at Blenheim as evidence of this, 'The Eight squadrons of Gendarmerie initially advanced as if they were going to charge the English; however, to the latter's astonishment, they halted when they advanced to within pistol range and discharged a feeble volley. This was noticeably ineffective and, worse, still interfered with the momentum of the charge, nullifying any advantage derived from the slope.'⁴¹⁴ Unfortunately Nosworthy does not

⁴¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁴¹² Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, pp.496.

⁴¹³ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, pp.496; Chandler, *The Art of Warfare*, p.50; Nosworthy, *Anatomy of Victory*, pp.127-128.

⁴¹⁴ Nosworthy, *The Anatomy of Victory*, pp.128-129

provide a source for this evidence, although Falkner seems to agree with his view. However, looking at both Parker's earlier statement and Mérode-Westerloo's account it would seem that Nosworthy's analysis of the effectiveness of the French attack is flawed. As Mérode-Westerloo pointed out, 'our [the French] charge went well and the Gendarmerie flung their first line on to their second.'⁴¹⁵ The French charge clearly did have momentum. It was only after the initial shock that the five squadrons of British horsemen gained the upper-hand. This means that either the Gendarmerie did not engage with pistols prior to charging or firing a pistol prior to engaging did not have the huge negative impact on the force of a charge. On balance it is likely French cavalry tactics varied from unit to unit, as Lynn stated, 'It would be foolish to expect uniformity during the *grand siècle*'.⁴¹⁶

In contrast the Anglo-Dutch cavalry are credited with being more uniform in that they would only use cold-steel in the charge, as General Kane attested, 'The Duke of Marlborough would allow the horse but three charges of powder and ball to each man for a campaign, and that only for guarding their horses when at grass, and not to be made use of in action.'⁴¹⁷ However, the effectiveness of this order is open to debate. In battle the horse would have used every advantage during a melee and it appears that they would have fired their pistols, as Peter Drake attested to when facing an Allied attack at Malplaquet, 'Most of the front rank of the [Allied]

⁴¹⁵ Chandler, *Military Memoirs*, p.42.

⁴¹⁶ Lynn, *Giant of the Grand Siècle*, p.499.

⁴¹⁷ Kane, *The Campaigns of King William and Queen Anne*, p.110.

squadron, if not all, fired a volley at the same time, so that I had eleven shot fairly marked on my cuirass, or breastplate, and two through the skirts of my coat.'⁴¹⁸ That Drake, who it must be admitted was prone to exaggeration, was able to survive so many hits once again casts some doubt on the killing power of the cavalry armament and it is not surprise that many combats were prolonged stalemates.

Given the similarity in tactics and equipment used by cavalry during the era it would appear that the key factors in determining the outcome of an extended combat between two opposing bodies of horsemen would have been the quality of the horses that were being used by both sides, as well as the morale of the troops fighting. If the initial charge did not break the enemy cavalry completely, then combat would often devolve into a series of withdrawals, rallies and counter-charges, which often proved exhausting for the horses involved. This stalemate could continue indefinitely. As De la Colonie observed during the battle of Heyzempirne: 'The first shock was a very sharp one, and gave one the impression that animosity between people of the same nation was more obstinate than if they had been strangers to one another.' After the initial shock of the charge however the combat soon settled into a stalemate, 'Victory hung for a long time in the balance between the opposing cavalry, so stubborn was the fight.' In the end it was only the victory of the Bavarian infantry against their Imperial counterparts which brought an end to

⁴¹⁸ S. Burrell (ed.), *Amiable Renegade, The Memoirs of Captain Peter Drake*, (Stanford, 1960), p.167.

the cavalry combat, 'Soon afterwards the enemy's cavalry gave way and the route became universal.'⁴¹⁹

Prior to the battle of Blenheim, the British cavalry in particular were in excellent shape, as Prince Eugene attested to when inspecting the British cavalry. He told Marlborough, 'I never saw better horses, better clothes, finer belts and accoutrements; yet all these may be had for money; but there is a spirit in the looks of your men, which I never yet saw in any in my life.'⁴²⁰ Confidence among the British was clearly high, and this would have only been enhanced following the successful pursuit of the Franco-Bavarian regiments holding the Schellenberg. In contrast Tallard's horsemen at Blenheim had endured a much more draining march. French troops had fought constant skirmishes with German peasants in the Black Forest.⁴²¹ Furthermore Tallard's horses had suffered from a bout of glanders (a debilitating equine disease) on the march, a key reason why the two Franco-Bavarian armies had to be kept separate on the battlefield.⁴²²

The British cavalry therefore clearly had an advantage. The fighting between the Gendarmerie and the five British squadrons, however, still took the best part of a morning to resolve itself. The counter-attack by the British successfully stemmed the

⁴¹⁹ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.131

⁴²⁰ G. E. Gask, 'A Contribution to the History of the Care of the Sick and Wounded During Marlborough's March to the Danube in 1704, and at the Battle of Blenheim.' *Journal of the Royal Army Medical Corps* 38, no. 4 (1922), pp.274-288, p.280.

⁴²¹ Chandler, *Military Memoirs*, p.160.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p.157.

tide of the French advance, 'and now our squadrons charge in their turn, and thus for some hours they charge at each other with various success, all sword in hand. At length the French courage began to abate, and our squadrons gained ground upon them, until they forced them back to the height on which they were drawn up.' The British cavalry, however, could not effectively pursue the defeated Gendarmerie, as the '[French] foot interposed'. Confronted with this formed body of infantry the attacking horsemen were obliged to retire.⁴²³

The cavalry combat at Malplaquet followed a similar pattern to the two actions discussed. Given the wooded nature of the battlefield the only area that was truly suitable for combat was a section in the centre of the French line. The French expected an Allied assault on that section of the line and thus, as with the rest of the line, it was heavily fortified, 'those out in the open opposite the end of the avenue constructed cannon-proof parapets with gaps here and there to facilitate an advance in times of need.'⁴²⁴ For the troops manning it, this fortification proved to be an effective counter to the Allied artillery. However the French cavalry, including the *Maison du Roi*, had no such protection from Marlborough's guns and were targeted with fire throughout the day.⁴²⁵ This was not a rare scenario for cavalry, who during the Napoleonic period would often spend the day of a battle, 'sitting quietly on their

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 41-42.

⁴²⁴ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, pp.336-337.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.337.

horses or lounging beside them, perhaps under distant artillery fire waiting for orders to move forward.'⁴²⁶

These strong parapets at the very centre of the French line should have been a difficult obstacle for Orkney's infantry, only 13 battalions strong, to take. Had the French in this section stood firm it is highly likely they would have won the day. Certainly there would not have been so great a cavalry combat. The two bodies of horsemen would have simply been unable to get to grips with one another but the fighting on the French left flank was to open the door to massed cavalry combat. Despite the high casualties described earlier the Allies had been slowly winning the attritional fighting in the triangle of woodland. Wary of his flank being turned by the Allied infantry Villars was forced to reinforce the left. To do this he first sent the Wild Geese into the wood. De la Colonie then explained what happened, 'By the time the Irish Brigade had got well into the wood it was considered to be hardly sufficient as a reinforcement by itself and an order come for us to follow it, although there was no one else left to fill our place which would be left open to the enemy.' Perhaps trying to distance himself from the eventual cause of the French having to leave the field De la Colonie continued,

'When the first order was brought to the brigade-major, who reported it to me, I refused to obey it, and pointed out the absolute necessity that existed for our maintaining the position we were holding; but a lieutenant-general then arrived on the scene, and ordered us a second time to march off, so sharply that all our remonstrances were useless.'⁴²⁷

⁴²⁶ Muir, *Tactics and Experience of Battle*, p.113.

⁴²⁷ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.340.

The movement created a gap in the centre of the French line and Orkney's infantry were not slow to exploit this situation, 'It was about one o'clock that my 13 battalions got up to the retrenchments, which we got very easily; for as we advanced, they quitted them and inclined to their right.'⁴²⁸ De la Colonie was just as scathing in his description of the troops in the centre as he had been of those who withdrew on the left as the entire French centre gave way with barely a shot being fired:

'When these battalions advanced to seize our entrenchments the fine infantry holding our centre, who had so far not suffered from a single hostile shot, had every opportunity of deploying to cover the gap made by our empty entrenchments, but then they would have run still more risk of spoiling their beautiful uniforms, their most noticeable characteristic, and they therefore retired to find a quieter spot where they would be safe from any such rough handling.'⁴²⁹

Confronted with the elite French cavalry force the *Maison du Roi*, Orkney's infantry wisely decided not to press their attack and instead held the entrenchments while providing covering fire to allow the main body of Allied horsemen to pass through.⁴³⁰ Determined not to let the Allied forces exploit this gap Boufflers, who was now in command, charged at the head of the *Maison du Roi*. De La Colonie described the consequent action, 'having reformed in the plain beyond, they [The Allied Cavalry] moved straight upon the *Maison du Roi*, who likewise advanced to give them battle.

⁴²⁸ Orkney, *Letters*, p.319.

⁴²⁹ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, pp.341-342.

⁴³⁰ Orkney, *Letters*, p.319.

The Scots Guards of the Queen of England, most excellent troops led the charge, which was a most violent one [...].'⁴³¹

Orkney described the intensity of the initial contact, 'Before we got 30 squadrons out they came down and attacked; and there was such a pelting at another that I never really saw the like.'⁴³² The Allied cavalry should have held had the initial advantage. The *Maison du Roi* had been under a heavy cannonade since the morning whilst the Allied cavalry were comparatively untouched, due to the French artillery targeting Orkney's unsheltered infantry. Orkney continued, 'We broke through them, particularly four squadrons of English. Jemmy Campbell, at the head of the grey dragoons, behaved like an angell, broke through both lines.'

If the Allied cavalry could have kept up this momentum Malplaquet could have proved to be an extremely decisive battle, as they would have been behind the French army's line of retreat. However, as in the previous two case studies, the initial contact did not decide the outcome of the combat. The French cavalry were able to disentangle themselves, once again showing the fluid nature of cavalry combat during the period. The *Maison du Roi* reformed and charged again, and this time they beat back the Allied forces to such an extent that, 'they pushed back our horse again so much that many of them run thro' our entrenchments.'⁴³³

⁴³¹ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.342.

⁴³² Orkney, *Letters*, p.319.

⁴³³ *Ibid.*, p.319.

The Allies kept feeding more squadrons into the combat hoping to use numbers to achieve the decisive outcome that they hoped would ensure a full rout of the French army. The Allied horsemen, however, did not manage to repeat the success of the initial contact, and indeed Orkney believed that they would have been driven back had his infantry battalions not been present in the entrenchments to prevent any exploitation taking place.⁴³⁴ Like the combats described earlier the cavalry fighting at Malplaquet took place over an extended period of time. The Allies passed more and more horsemen through the gaps in the entrenchments, and six times they were driven back by Boufflers only to rally once Orkney's troops opened fire. Eventually Boufflers was forced back by sheer weight of numbers, and the Allied cavalry were able to deploy properly. However they could still not force their French counterparts from the field and the fighting continued for a further hour.⁴³⁵ Eventually, the superior numbers of the Allied cavalry was decisive, along with the fact they were able to keep committing fresh troops to the fight against the tired men and horses of the French cavalry. As Deane described:

‘our men maynteynd ther ground until such time as the rest of our horse had got over the moross and made an a body and could up and sustaine them. The wch. they did in noble order, and gave them gennll. onset and broke them at a great rate [...] and forced them to turn tayle and runn.’

Deane goes on to explain that 40 squadrons of the Allied horse were then sent to pursue the fleeing French forces. This pursuit carried on for three or four leagues

⁴³⁴ Orkney, *Letters*, p.319.

⁴³⁵ Chandler, *Marlbrough as Military Commander*, p.265.

allowing the cavalry to inflict heavy losses on the retreating force, 'giving but very few quarters, and made a very great slaughter'.⁴³⁶ It is likely that far more losses would have been sustained in the flight of the French cavalry than in the extended mêlée as men who had previously been pre-occupied with controlling their horses and defending themselves were presented with a clear sight of the enemy's backs.⁴³⁷

One of the key features of the massed cavalry combats discussed was the impact that the close support of infantry had in preventing a retreat turning into a rout. The pursuit of the Gendarmerie by the five successful British squadrons at Blenheim was halted by a battalion of French infantry while Orkney's infantry occupying the entrenchments at Malplaquet played a key role in bolstering d'Auvergne's cavalry who had suffered at the hands of the *Maison du Roi*. Orkney stated, 'I really believe had not ye foot been there, they would have drove our horse out the field'.⁴³⁸ At Heyzempirne the infantry had broken first and thus the entire force suffered heavy casualties in the retreat that followed, as the pursuing Bavarian force could get in among cavalry and foot soldiers alike.⁴³⁹

The French withdrawal at Malplaquet was very well carried out and losses to the French infantry were not heavy, indeed they 'marched for all the world as if we were

⁴³⁶ Deane, *The Journal of John Marshall Deane*, p.92.

⁴³⁷ Muir, *Tactics and the Experience of Battle*, p.126.

⁴³⁸ Orkney, *Letters*, p.320.

⁴³⁹ De la Colonie, *Chronicles of an Old Campaigner*, p.131.

merely changing our camping ground, without any hurry and confusion.’⁴⁴⁰ Boufflers’ constant attacks at the head of the *Maison du Roi* kept any Allied cavalry pursuit at bay. Once the *Maison du Roi* broke, however, the danger of a lack of infantry support was immediately evident. The retreating French forces came upon a wide stream which slowed the retreat and there were fears that the victorious Allied cavalry would cause further damage to the retreating French horsemen. De la Colonie’s Bavarians were therefore ordered to cover the retreat, ‘I then recrossed the brook and posted my men in the gardens round the village, by which means I covered the cavalry rear-guard and prevented the enemy approaching.’

When withdrawing combined arms tactics were clearly essential and the rear-guard of French cavalry returned the favour for the Bavarians, covering them while they retreated from the Allied forces. As De la Colonie explained, ‘for there were yet two more leagues to march before reaching Valenciennes, over open country in which my men would have been much exposed if the enemy had followed us up.’⁴⁴¹

Conclusion

During the infantry combat at Malplaquet it is clear that the morale of the Allied troops, having emerged victorious over their French counterparts since 1704, was

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.343

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.344

key to taking the French defences on the right flank, which ultimately allowed Orkney's troops to advance into the French centre with little difficulty.

While earlier in the war the platoon fire system was key to winning victories on the Flanders front, the conditions at Malplaquet did not allow the Allies (with a few exceptions such as Kane's regiment meeting the Wild Geese) to use this particular advantage as the Allied officers would have wanted to seriously limit the time that their forces were subject to artillery fire during the advance on the French redoubts. Instead the infantry combat at Malplaquet resembled a melee. Troops would have unleashed a volley at close range and then engaged the French with bayonet, sword and musket-butts during the constant flow of attacks and counter-attacks over the redoubts. The nature of the fighting certainly meant that the Allied infantry had lost their major advantage over the French, but they still emerged victorious in the fighting on the right flank and the advance on the left also achieved initial success. The reason for this appears to have been the high morale of the troops. The Allied infantry had emerged victorious at Blenheim, Ramilles and Oudenarde and were, therefore, confident in their ability to win the day. This confidence meant that they did not break even when faced with the formidable French defences and resolutely kept attacking until the French right had fallen. The way that the Allied infantry was able to keep up the pressure in the face of stern resistance is the hallmark of a well-honed veteran army. However, this came at a cost as Marlborough's veteran infantry kept attacking even when other forces would have broken sustaining heavy casualties in the process.

The French infantry certainly put on a much improved display at Malplaquet compared to previous battles in the war. However, the reason for this appears clear. They found it easier to hold their ground against the Allied troops when defending a tangible objective, as indeed they regularly achieved during sieges earlier in the war and during the fighting in Blenheim village as early as 1704. The nature of the terrain and the fact that Villars had been given time to build up his defences at Malplaquet by Marlborough and Eugene appears to be the reason for the improved performance by the French troops rather than any doctrinal shift. Indeed, had the French troops been able to develop an effective firing system by this point in the war it is difficult to see how the Allies could have taken such a strong defensive position.

On the French right flank too the Dutch attack was pursued with vigour. The damage inflicted by enfilading grape-shot, however, was incredibly devastating. Artillery when positioned well presented a formidable obstacle to advancing infantry. That the Dutch were able to press ahead in the face of this firepower twice, once again demonstrates the good morale of the veteran Allied army. The Artillery used at Malplaquet inflicted heavy losses on both forces. However, on both flanks it was not able to stop the Allied advance despite the heavy casualties it inflicted. Artillery was an important element in a combined arms strategy but was not yet powerful enough to halt an advance on its own. However, it was a very useful component during battle as demonstrated in the heavy bombardment by the Allied artillery of the French left flank. This bombardment significantly softened up the first line of French redoubts and would have reduced the difficulties faced by the infantry upon

reaching the positions, giving the troops a fighting chance of achieving success in the sector, which they eventually did at a significant cost.

The performance of the French cavalry undoubtedly saved the army at Malplaquet once the decision to withdraw had been made. Throughout the war, despite differences in doctrine, which appear somewhat overstated, French and Allied cavalry had performed fairly equally. The main threat of a cavalry force came once an opponent had been routed, as they had a free rein to inflict heavy casualties on retreating infantry forces. At Malplaquet, however, aided by the fact that the Allied cavalry had to advance through gaps in the line that Orkney's infantry had taken, the French cavalry performed admirably to stop the Allied forces rolling up their infantry thereby reducing the effectiveness of the Allied cavalry when compared to battles such as Blenheim or Ramillies. Indeed the French cavalry succeeded in pushing back their Allied counterparts several times before the fighting developed into a stalemate, as was common for the era. The French did have a number of opportunities to break this stalemate, but due to effective firing from Orkney's troops manning the centre they were unable to rout Allied cavalry, thus showing the value of mounted units operating with close support from the infantry, and they were eventually driven off by the fresher Allied reinforcements.

CONCLUSION

The 1709 campaign has mainly been viewed through the lens of Marlborough's wider career. English language works surrounding Marlborough have mainly been written by his admirers, who have often downplayed the battle in favour of focusing on the major victories of Blenheim, Ramillies and, to a lesser extent, Oudenarde. This thesis has attempted to readdress this imbalance of the historiography and has focused almost entirely on the 1709 campaign as a case study for Marlborough's generalship. A wider critical reassessment of Marlborough's military career would be a welcome addition to the literature as would further attempts to link the actions of the 'great captains' of the age to the effects these had on the experience of the common soldier during battle in order to get a multi-level view of warfare during the period.

The early plans for the campaign do show a certain level of innovation on the part of Marlborough. The suggestion to launch an assault on Ypres before linking up with an amphibious force that had descended on Picardy was novel by the standards of the area, at least with such a large army. Had this plan been successfully implemented it could have bypassed the fortress-belt on the French frontier leaving the French interior open to attack. However, it would appear that the plan was rejected with good reasons as combined operations were inherently risky. Furthermore, Marlborough would have still had to induce and win a decisive battle against a large field army to have a free rein within the French interior and his army would have to

have been supplied via the Channel. The operation would have been a huge gamble and was perhaps too ambitious for the era given the logistical difficulties involved.

While it was sensible for the Allies to reject the risky strategy of descents, one area in which a major operational mistake was made was the decision not to attack Ypres and instead to focus on Tournai. Ypres appears to have been the more strategically important of the two towns, positioned as it was near the Channel. The French, for their part, clearly felt that the Allies would attack Ypres and were certainly worried by the possibility that it would fall. Villars, in particular, did not appear troubled by the eventual decision taken to attack Tournai as he was confident it would hold out for a long time. The decision to attack Tournai then appears to have been the point at which the Allies accepted that the 1709 campaign would conform to the 'attritional' siege warfare so prevalent during the era.

Marlborough was certainly a gifted strategist and recognised the value of Ypres. However, once again he was overruled during the council. The internal politics of the Grand Alliance specifically over the Dutch Barrier and commercial concerns, appear to have been the key drivers in this decision to focus on Tournai. Coalition warfare certainly caused frustration amongst the Allies and it is perhaps understandable that Marlborough backed down in order to avoid friction between the parties, but was perhaps mistaken not to have taken advantage of his reputation to pursue a wider course of action.

Once the decision was taken to besiege Tournai, Marlborough commanded the operation with skill and vigour. Indeed, this appears to have been his major skill as a general throughout his career. Marlborough had successfully outmanoeuvred opponents consistently throughout the war and was to do so again, even when facing Villars. It would, therefore, be unfair to downplay this aspect of his generalship. In terms of moving men from one location to another without being caught out by enemy forces and in bypassing strong enemy lines he was certainly very talented.

In contrast his conduct during the siege of Tournai appears to have been less effective. Marlborough had not been blessed with the siege education received by his peers and thus left much of the organisation of his attacking forces to his Dutch engineers, whom he pressured into using a 'vigorous' approach rather than the more casualty limiting 'methodical' approach espoused by Vauban. This meant the siege of Tournai was perhaps unnecessarily costly to the Allies. They had incurred casualties, in the interests of speed, but struggled to make progress as the stout defence of the strong citadel dragged on in an already short campaigning season. Indeed, they were fortunate that the garrison ran out of food and had to surrender as they had struggled to make any headway against the citadel, in spite of numerous attacks. Overall the conduct of the siege lacked cohesion. Faced with a largely absent general there was discord between the officers and engineers, which had a negative effect on command and control. The fact that Marlborough captured every fortress he besieged seems to stem more from the nature of warfare during the era, as sieges

were generally successful, rather than from any particular genius at conducting sieges on his part. This runs to contrary to the view presented in the historiography, by Chandler in particular, that Marlborough was a master in all facets of warfare.⁴⁴²

The battle of Malplaquet was fought to cover the siege of Mons, itself another relatively unimportant fortress strategically. Marlborough and Eugene's initial plan seems to have been only to risk a battle if the French advanced on them. They were also attempting to draw Villars into a trap. However, when Villars did not take the bait they went on the offensive. This was the costliest mistake of the campaign. Mons was already besieged, the Allied force was between Villars and the town, and it possessed relatively secure supply lines. Moreover the siege could have been conducted without fighting a battle. The terrain surrounding the area was always going to be a benefit to a defending force due to the limited gaps through the forests. Marlborough must have realised this but chose to give battle anyway.

One of the questions raised in the historiographical review was how far Marlborough deserved his reputation as a battle seeking general. The 1709 campaign provides a somewhat contradictory view. On the one hand it could be argued that fighting a battle that he did not necessarily have to engage in, at the very end of the campaigning season, demonstrated that he was indeed a general who pursued a decisive battle with vigour. However, reviewing the 1709 campaign as a whole this

⁴⁴² D. Chandler, *Marlborough as a Military Commander*, (London, 2000), p.331.

does not appear to be the case. Marlborough vacillated throughout the year as to whether a battle should be fought and once his initial plan for a descent on Picardy was vetoed he appeared to have been content with pursuing a siege based strategy. Indeed, despite the historiography often presenting the Dutch as blockers, it appears that it was pressure from Heinsius (and to a certain extent Godolphin) that drove him to give battle at Malplaquet.

Marlborough, therefore, does not appear to have been a purely battle seeking general but rather a pragmatic one who was well aware of the constraints he was operating under. During the early years of the war French forces were far more likely to give battle, as they did at Blenheim (1704) and Ramilles (1706). However, after these defeats Marlborough recognised that they would be reluctant to risk another battle and that he could not force an enemy force into a decisive encounter unless they also elected to fight, which Villars did at Malplaquet due to his strong defensive position. As a result of this Marlborough altered his strategy and focused on stripping France of her fortress barrier. This is not to say that he would not venture a battle if the opportunity presented itself, but seeking a decisive battle was not the cornerstone of his strategy.

In terms of the conduct of the battle the advance of the Dutch Guards on the French right flank was a major disaster, partly due to the lack of reinforcements in the area as Withers' battalions had instead been selected to partake in an innovative, but ultimately vain, flanking move through the forests on the French left flank. The

Dutch suffered heavily in the first attack and were beaten back. Somewhat inexplicably, however, despite the small chance of success a further attack was launched with similar results. Marlborough as commander on the day must take the blame for this. Either he ordered the Prince of Orange to undertake a futile attack, or he struggled with command because of the size of his army and thus could not countermand the Prince's orders. It is worth noting that these casualties may have been significantly less had Marlborough opted to attack on 10 September, before the French had time to strengthen their positions.

The French infantry in general performed better than they had during any of the Marlborough's earlier battles and the morale of the French troops certainly improved when holding a tangible barrier, which led to the bloody and fluid fighting witnessed at Malplaquet. This type of fighting meant that the contest was a fairly even one, as the Allied troops were unable, with one notable exception, to use their much vaunted platoon fire system. Instead they used the French method of advancing to fire at very close range before charging with bayonets in order to minimise the time they were exposed to enfilading artillery fire. That the Allies were successful in this situation, refusing to break when confronted with such strong French positions, had much to do with the high morale of the infantry. This force had been with Marlborough throughout successive campaigns, and was used to the sort of brutal fighting experienced at Malplaquet by virtue of the amount of sieges that they had successfully undertaken. The casualties suffered by the Allies were staggering and that they continued to attack the French positions until they were

taken shows the hallmarks of a veteran army. This view is supported by the example of Orkney's infantry successfully advancing to take the French centre and defeat determined attacks from the *Maison Du Roi*, effectively turning the tide of the battle, despite having been subject to artillery fire for the majority of the day.

The eventual success at on the Allied right flank had been dearly bought and judging from his post-battle reaction it is hard to believe Marlborough expected to incur the level of casualties that he did. Nevertheless, his plan had worked and the French were in a dangerous position with their army split in two. From this position Boufflers wisely withdrew, and if this had turned into a rout, the destruction of the French field army may have been worth the casualties that the Allies had incurred. However, the *Maison du Roi*, led in person by Boufflers, proved a match for the Allied cavalry. Certainly the French cavalry's supposedly inferior doctrine of firing with pistols did not prove a disadvantage as they drove back the Allied cavalry time and time again in a long struggle. Indeed, it was at this point that platoon fire proved its worth as Orkney's battalions were able to cover retreating Allied cavalry allowing them to rally and eventually turn the tide of the combat with the French cavalry with aid of fresh troops. However, the effectiveness of the French cavalry and the time they bought allowed the rest of the army to withdraw in an organised manner, limiting the casualties sustained during the retreat.

Overall then Malplaquet was an extremely bloody battle fought for a relatively minor strategic gain in Mons. Malplaquet was a victory by the standards of the time but it

was incredibly damaging to the Allied forces and it is perhaps no surprise that it was the last major battle Marlborough undertook during the war. However had the battle, and the resultant capture of the town, pressured France into accepting a peace the action could have been viewed as a success in spite of Marlborough's flawed campaign. The Duke, in the immediate aftermath of the battle, certainly believed that France would concede to the Allies terms of the previous year, 'I hope and beleive it [Malplaquet] will be the last [battle] I shall see, for I think it impossible for the French to continu the warr.'⁴⁴³ Godolphin, for his part, seems to have agreed with this viewpoint, 'I can't help being of the opinion that this victory ought to have some present consequences in relation to the peace.' Godolphin goes onto explain in his letter that France would be expected to agree to the same terms as had been demanded the previous year, including giving up Spanish towns.⁴⁴⁴

Despite this positive feeling in the immediate aftermath of the battle the peace talks, which had been ongoing since June 1709, did not end the war. The defeat at Malplaquet far from shattering French morale instead restored pride in her military reputation and galvanised the war weary populace.⁴⁴⁵ As Pelet described the situation at the close of the campaign: 'although forced to give way before the superiority of his foes, he [Villars] was able to stop the exploitation of their victory and the execution of their vast projects, by denying them entry into the kingdom,

⁴⁴³ H.L. Snyder, (ed.), *The Marlborough Godolphin Correspondence Volume 3*, (Oxford, 1975), p.1364.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.1365.

⁴⁴⁵ W.S Churchill, *Marlborough His Life and Times Volume IV*, (London, 1938), p.183.

and reducing them to the capture of two towns that did not belong to France.⁴⁴⁶

This attitude was reflected in the negotiations and no compromise was reached with the war dragging on until 1712 for the British, and 1714 for the other parties. It would perhaps be too harsh to say that the 1709 campaign reduced the chances of a peace however it is clear that it did not improve the Allied negotiating position. The cost in terms of time, lives and material had been vast for very little gain and as the commander of the Allied forces Marlborough must take overall responsibility for what was a largely failed campaign, which perhaps represented the beginning of the end for his distinguished military career.

⁴⁴⁶ D. Chandler, *Marlborough as Military Commander*, (London, 2000), p.268.

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