

# Notes and gleanings

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Accordingly, a column of four companies of the 2nd/25th light demi-brigade started off in the middle of the night, and, early on the morning of the 14th of August, Fahner led it across the Bögell-

einsbrücke to the right bank of the Aar, near the Kurzentännlen. From there he led the way up the gully which runs up to the Gersten glacier. Meanwhile, the remainder of Gudin's Column followed with its two guns and reached the little plain of the Raeterichsboden. After a skirmish at a bridge, the French formed a line facing the Austrian position on the Nollen.

When the little column which Fahner was leading reached the Gersten glacier, he turned to the right and started on a traverse to the Nägeligräthli, which is the ridge descending on to the Grimsel pass from the north east. The column reached the little lake on this ridge after five hours' scrambling, during which the French troops, unaccustomed to such exercise, more than once suspected Fahner of tricking them and leading them to ruin. The officers had difficulty in preventing their men from putting their murderous threats against Fahner into execution. However, they reached the Nägeligräthli in safety and unseen by the Austrians, in whose flank and rear they now stood.

Gudin had directed two more companies of the 2nd/25th light to make another flanking movement to the right of the Nollen, and the combined attack from both flanks and from in front settled the fight to the total discomfiture of the Austrians. Not only that, but the column which Fahner had led had now descended from the Nägeligräthli and reached the little lake known as the Todtensee, and thus cut off the retreat of the Austrians down the path on the Maienwang to Gletsch and to the Furka pass. The only way open for their escape lay down the path to Obergestelen.

For the reasons already mentioned, Strauch was unable to support the defenders of the Grimsel with more than two companies, and these arrived too late to achieve any object. They collected the fugitives and took up a position at Im Loch, at the mouth of the Eigginental, opposite Ulrichen.

With regard to the name of the Todtensee, the legend which attributes it to this battle, on the supposition that the dead were thrown into the lake, is devoid of foundation. The name is found in Gruner's description of the Grimsel, published in 1760, and refers to the fact that the lake is often frozen even in the height of summer.

After their capture of the Grimsel pass, the French descended into the Rhone valley, in which Strauch now found himself hemmed in from both ends. He sent urgent orders for the remainder of his Brigade (which as already seen was engaged further down the Rhone valley) to concentrate on his position at Im Loch. But this was no longer possible, for by now (15th of August), the French had occupied Münster and had thus got in between Strauch and the rest of his troops, and his Brigade was cut clean in two. Rohan could give him no assistance, for on the same day (15th of August) he was attacked by Turreau and driven off the Simplon pass, whence he retreated to Domodossola.

There was nothing left for Strauch but to retreat with the few troops with him over the Nufenen pass (8,005 feet) to Airolo, and thence down the Ticino valley to Bellinzona which he reached on the 17th of August. Meanwhile, the other portion of his Brigade was led by Colonel Carneville out of the Binnental in which it was hemmed, over the Albrun pass (7,907 feet) into the Val Formazza, and thence over the Furka del Bosco (7,946 feet) into the Val Maggia, eventually reaching Locarno.

The days of the 14th and 15th of August had thus been just as fortunate for Lecourbe's Division in the Haslital and Rhone valley as elsewhere. Not only was the Grimsel pass in French hands, but the Austrians were cleared right out of the Rhone valley, and there was nothing to prevent Gudin from crossing the Furka pass (7,975 feet) and completing his allotted task. This he did on the 15th of August, leaving the 2nd/25th light in the Rhone valley, and bivouacking at Realp in the Urserental. At that time the Rhone glacier extended a mile further than it now does.

Next morning (16th of August), Gudin advanced along the Urserental, and at Hospenthal he detached the 2nd/67th over the St. Gotthard pass (6,936 feet) to Arolo. In front of his advance, Simbschen's Austrians evacuated Andermatt and the Devil's bridge, and retreated to the Oberalp pass. And so it was that Lecourbe and Loison, who had been held up at the Devil's bridge on the night of the 15th, found on the morning of the 16th that the Austrians had vanished and that Gudin had appeared in their place. The Devil's bridge was repaired, and Lecourbe's Division thus found itself concentrated again at the very place which he had set out to capture: the cross roads of the Urserental.

All that now remained to be done was to drive the remnants of Simbschen's Brigade off the position which it had taken up on the Oberalp pass. Just to the east of the Oberalp lake, this pass forks into two: the Pass da Tiarns (7,068 feet) on the north, and the Surpallix (or Oberalp pass proper, 6,732 feet) on the south, separated by a hill called the Calnot. Both these

sub-divisions of the Oberalp pass lead down into the Rhine valley, and they were defended by two battalions of regiment Kerpen.

On the 16th of August, Lecourbe ordered the 1st/67th to descend the Reuss valley to Gurtellen and then to turn up the Fellital so as to attack the Austrian position on the Pass da Tiarns over the Fellilücke (8,170 feet). Another detachment is reported to have been directed to turn the Surpallix by going over the Badusberg. The remaining troops attacked the Austrians in front. The attacks were repulsed and repeated several times, until at length the French formed up a column of grenadier companies and charged with the three generals, Lecourbe, Loison, and Gudin, at their head. This attack succeeded, and the Austrians were driven down into the Rhine valley along which they retreated to Chur.

In this manner, on the 16th of August, three days after the outset of the operations, Lecourbe obtained possession of all the passes in the St. Gotthard massif. Of the soundness of the operations from the military point of view this study does not intend to say much, and it has already been discussed by expert strategists. It has been said that Lecourbe's plan was too hazardous and complicated, that his columns were too widely dispersed, and that the double victories which were expected of the reserve Column on the left (at Brunnen and at Flöelen) and of Gudin's Column on the right (on the Grimsel and in the Urserental) argued an excessive optimism. It may, however, be noted that Lecourbe's plan was in perfect agreement with the principles formulated by Pierre de Bourcet in a work called *Principles de la Guerre de Montagnes*, written about 1775, but not published. Extracts from this work are given by Spenser Wilkinson, and one passage may with interest be quoted here. Speaking of the splitting of the army into little packets, he says: "but this method, which would be dangerous in any other type of country, is essential in mountainous regions and forms the science of this kind of warfare when the general who uses it has the means already prepared of reuniting his forces at the necessary moment." At all events, the chief impression which the present study is intended to convey is one of a successfully accomplished alpine exploit.

Lecourbe's operations were not conducted on so large a scale as those of Kao Hsien-Chih in the Pamirs and Hindukush in A.D. 747, which have been so admirably traced and described by Sir Aurel Stein. They have, nevertheless, several features in common, such as the dispersal of the force into a large number of separate columns for the approach, and concentration for battle. It may also be mentioned that at the time of Lecourbe's attack, when the country had been devastated by a year's warfare, the valleys of the St. Gotthard region were almost as barren as those of the Pamirs.

The effect of Lecourbe's success on the fortunes of the war was not unimportant. The Austrian Minister Thugut's incorrigible liking for intrigue was not calculated to help the Allied armies to bring the war to a successful conclusion. In the first place, the entry of Korsakof's Russian Corps into the Swiss field of operations (which was largely due to English influence) was most distasteful to Thugut, for he would have preferred it to remain in observation of Prussia and of the new Elector of Bavaria, who was looked upon with grave suspicion by Vienna. As a result, Thugut forbade the Archduke Charles (who had just beaten Jourdan at Stockach) to cross the Rhine into Switzerland for the purpose of attacking Masséna. Next, Thugut was by no means pleased that it should be by Russian troops under Suvorof that Piedmont should be taken from the French. Still less did he like Suvorof's proclamation to the Piedmontese that it was the intention of the Allies to restore King Charles Emmanuel to his throne in Turin, for Austria had other views concerning the future of that monarch's dominions. The result was that Suvorof was directed not to follow his good fortune while it was warm, and grievous misunderstandings arose between him and the Austrian court under whose orders he nominally was.

Meanwhile, the military results of the campaign suffered. A plan, which is said to have been of English origin and which was approved by the Tsar, required the concentration of all the Russian troops in Switzerland for the purpose of freeing that country. This plan was accepted by Thugut, and so it was that Suvorof was directed to march over the Alps into Switzerland to join Korsakof, while the Archduke Charles' Army left Switzerland for Germany and for operations on the Rhine. The latter marched out of Switzerland on the 1st of September, and on the 21st of the same month Suvorof's Army was at Bellinzona in the Ticino valley, preparing to cross the St. Gotthard pass. But as a result of the operations of Lecourbe which have just been described, the way was not open, and it was only by dint of continual fighting that Suvorof was able to crash his way through to Altdorf on the 26th of September, only to learn that he was too late and that on the previous day Masséna had completely routed Korsakof's Corps at the second battle of

Zürich. Headed off by the French at the lake of Lucerne at Schwyz, and at Glarus, and so prevented from debouching into the plain of Switzerland to help his countrymen, Suvorof who had led his Army over the Kinzig Kulm and Prager passes, turned back over the Panixer pass to the Rhine valley. Eventually he reached Chur, complaining bitterly that his Austrian allies had let him down, as indeed they had, for the support given to him by Jellachich's and Lincken's Brigades was very lukewarm. The Tsar was offended at the way in which his army had been used, and Russia withdrew from the Second Coalition. Masséna and Lecourbe had between them saved the French Republic.

In conclusion, it is not without interest to turn a little attention towards the lives of some of the persons involved in the foregoing operations. The name of Loison is not unknown to British ears, for he was to measure himself (to his disadvantage) with British troops in the Peninsula. It is doubtful whether Gudin's name ever came much to the notice of this country, and the name of Lecourbe himself is hardly likely to have attracted much attention on this side of the Channel either. And yet, it might have been very different but for the irony of fate. Shortly after conducting these operations in the St. Gotthard region, Lecourbe was promoted to command the Army of the Rhine. In 1800 he contributed to the success of his friend Moreau, under whom he was serving, in the campaign which led to the triumph of Hohenlinden.

Lecourbe had now reached the zenith of his career, and he enjoyed the esteem of Napoleon, who even considered him as a possible husband for his sister Pauline. But that was not to be. The conspiracy in which Cadoudal and Pichegru were involved, and Moreau was implicated, resulted in a still closer cementing of the friendship between Moreau and Lecourbe, and the estrangement of Lecourbe from Napoleon. From this moment Lecourbe became suspect to Napoleon, and not only was he retired from active service, but he was actually banished to his native village and later on to Bourges, under conditions which closely resembled detention.

And so Lecourbe was compelled to remain in disgrace and enforced idleness while the Grande Armée performed one prowess after another, and the officers who (like Ney) had served under him as juniors became Marshals of France.

(To be continued.)

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