

The Battle of Neufchâteau (22 August 1914)

The plan of the French Fourth Army on 22 August 1914 was to break through the German army's left flank, which was well advanced in Belgium, by deploying a large-scale attack north of Mercy-le-Haut to Maissin more than 100 kilometres away, while the British were fighting in the Mons region. It was against this backdrop that the 5th Colonial Infantry Brigade, commanded by General Goulet, left Les Bulles with the objective of reaching Neufchâteau by 11:00 a.m. The march was gruelling and was regularly slowed down by German reconnaissance soldiers who did not hesitate to open fire on the column. However, despite the many difficulties, the brigade arrived on time.

The 23rd Colonial Infantry Regiment, in an outpost position, did not expect to encounter many German troops as they left Neufchâteau on the road to Bertrix situated on the far side of Hette hill. Fighting broke out immediately with both sides surprised by the presence of the enemy. Nèple, a French colonel, set up his military HQ in Malome and attempted to occupy the Ospôt wood, but his companies were driven out. The Germans soldiers of the 21st Infantry Brigade cut off all lines of communication until the end of the battle in order to prevent reinforcements and retreat. La Hette had two fronts, which were isolated from one other yet very close by.

General Goulet attempted to take the eastern front with his other regiment, Colonel Aubé's 21st. From Montplainchamps, he headed towards Nolinfaing and Le Sart before turning north and attacking the German-held Ospôt Wood head-on. The aim was also to pave the way for the arrival of the 3rd Colonial Infantry Division on the road from Rossignol, unaware that it had been massacred there. At the same time, the Germans of the 25th Division were already reinforcing their defences and soon the ratio of troops was heavily in their favour: one to six by the end of the fighting. Artillery batteries, including heavy artillery, were also deployed. The French infantry attacks only resulted in more killed and wounded soldiers. Soon, the Germans had the upper hand on all fronts.

After trying to send reinforcements as the situation was critical on both his left and right, and realising that the situation was desperate, General Goulet decided to retreat at around 4:00 p.m. The rearguard, positioned on the edge of Chiny Wood to the south of Grapfontaine, allowed the withdrawal of around half of the 6,000 Marsouins (navy troops) fighting for France. 1050 of the missing combatants died on the battlefield. Some 400 Germans were killed.

The fierce resistance of the French led the Germans to believe that they had fought an entire division and they did not pursue the defeated for fear of further deadly fighting.

The Battle of Neufchâteau was one of around twenty isolated clashes in the Battle of the Frontiers. And like the others, it ended in a French defeat. Some 27,000 French soldiers died on 22 August 1914, making it the deadliest day in French military history.

