



# Learning the ropes abroad:

## a re-creation of the Battle of Ramillies, Belgium, 1706



Top left and right: Soldiers fight in the re-enactment of the 1706 Battle of Ramillies, Belgium.  
Above: Marching to battle

Above: The official ceremony and laying of the plaque (see picture below).

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Photography by **Phil Thomason**

Last year I wrote a little piece about re-creating the events of Waterloo on 16th August 1705, (*Explosives Engineering*, December 2005) and rain figured large in my text. You'd think we'd have learnt that lesson wouldn't you?

Back in 1705, the Dutch commander called a virtual strike action, and blocked the passage of Marlborough's forces, preventing the main body engaging the French. The grand strategy failed with the Allies falling out, but Marlborough seized the opportunity to rebuild relationships, which effort laid the foundations for the Battle of Ramillies, an unexpected Allied victory.

During previous years skirmishing with small defeats and victories, Dutch and English engineers had surveyed the narrow strip "perhaps some 1200 paces" of high ground between Ramillies and Autre Eglise, which led past the marshes of the Mehaigne and Petit Gheete Rivers. To the north by Autre Eglise the ground was

broken up and boggy; to the south past Ramillies it grew drier and then became a good area of plain for cavalry operations, towards Taviers.

The grand strategy of the War of the Spanish Succession encompassed the whole of Europe, and armies recruited from across it. One strategic plan in Winter 1705 had been to take the war into Italy, but after the dramatic victory of Blindheim in 1704, with Anglo Dutch forces marching all the way east to fight on the banks of the Danube, the initiative had faltered. By 1705 it seemed to the Dutch that Louis XIV had rebuilt his shattered armies, regained confidence and this edged their democratically managed armies back onto the defensive. Marlborough seemed determined to engage Villeroi in a full scale field battle, and Louis's instructions to his general were that he should when possible, give him just that satisfaction.





Re-enactors from USA and from Eire.



Top: The battle rages again in 2006.

Above: An original cannon ball, possibly from the 1706 battle, presented to the author.



The campsite.

French confidence was high – Colonel Jean-Martin de La Colonie wrote “we were able to march on as broad a front as we desired and the result was a magnificent spectacle – France has surpassed herself in the quality of these troops.”

Villeroi disposed of 60,000 troops with 62 guns and an engineering bridging train – against Marlborough’s 62,000 allied troops with 90 pieces of artillery and 20 mortars and howitzers, and with their own train of 42 pontoon bridges. So while equally matched, despite the muddy roads from rain in May, Villeroi arrived first from the west, at the crucial ground on 22nd May 1706. When Marlborough came up from the east it became a contest of skill at command and control and tactical use of the ground. A comment of De La Colonie to a companion is telling: “if defeated now, we would never again hope to withstand them.”

Marlborough’s artillery fired upon the French occupying the ridge between Ramillies and Offuz, stretching some 4 miles to Tavers. Thirty 24 pounders opened the engagement on Marlborough’s order at 2 pm on Whit Sunday, 23rd May.

Perhaps the key aspect of this battle is that Marlborough’s determined attack on Autre Eglise to the north of the line, in the rough ground considered impenetrable by Villeroi and his staff, drew the French reserves in at a critical point. When Marlborough withdrew Lord Orkney from engagement and sent even more resources into Ramillies and south to Franquenay and Tavers (where the open ground suited the disciplined Dutch and Danish cavalry squadrons), Villeroi’s extended line hampered his speed of reaction. Marlborough had started on a narrower front, risking being outflanked by

Villeroi; but this general seemed not to fight aggressive battles, preferring the Allies to come onto his presumed secure position. When steady resolute defence turned to retreat and rout, and the cry went up, “sauve qui peut”, casualties mounted horrifically. Thus while the Allies had 3,663 killed and wounded, the French and Bavarians lost more than 12,000 killed, 9,000 prisoners and 52 artillery pieces – and left their entire pontoon train behind. The allies counted 80 regimental colours captured. Of note is the loss of Marlborough’s Aide de camp, whom, it is said – and it is the subject of a period cartoon on a playing card – “while helping his general remount his horse, a cannonball passed between the general’s legs and took the Aide’s head clear off”.

Villeroi never commanded another French army; Vendome replaced him and for the rest of that summer the remnants of the Flanders army reappeared over several months straggling back to French lines; only Dendermonde resisted Marlborough effectively, and held the French supply lines intact. Meanwhile Prince Eugene of Savoy succeeded in defeating and killing Louis’s Marshall Marsin and relieving the siege of Turin (this is being re-enacted from September 6th to 10th this year). So 1706 became “the glorious year” for the allies.

Colonel Holcroft Blood’s men were abroad for most of their service, in “Flanders, Portugal and Spain” as in the song “Over the hills and far away”. He was wounded at the siege of Carrickfergus in August 1689, but died at Brussels on 20th August 1707 from other wounds.

And so on the 23rd May 2006 we recreated the flanking move of Blood's artillery at the battle of Ramillies - in utterly period conditions - it was noted in 1706 that the ordnance were unusually late in coming up, as they had sunk to their axles in mud and could not be moved. So we were quite authentic. It is not a pleasant thing to be accurate and authentic to the verge of trench foot, I can assure you. On the Saturday afternoon and Sunday lunchtime of the following weekend we staged a public display for a well wrapped and enthusiastic audience

I watched Pascale Bertrand, the Belgian organiser, lead her team through the downpour for a week to make the event happen. They worked harder than many organisers I have been alongside; I have to say, I nearly had a migraine such as Marlborough regularly suffered when working with the Dutch, but we all won through in the end. Pascale and I both spoke French and both spoke English which led to some misunderstandings. My TV interviews in French did not put off the visitors, they arrived in sufficient numbers to make the event financially viable.

It was particularly bad weather, a steady drizzle for a week that decays morale and threatens the best of powder packaging. The SNPF powder proved to be well packaged and reliable, and indeed very few musketeers had problems firing. We did experience problems on the Tuesday evening commemoration as the heavens opened just as we had loaded the main charge, and doused the priming powder. After three attempts it went, nearly taking out the windscreen of the local Belgian Police car injudiciously parked closer than we'd requested. Fortunately the officer had retreated to the safety of the crowd barrier.

Phil Thomason recorded the event photographically for us and his images are quite stunning. The photograph below shows the flame and power of a mere blank black powder charge and the abrasive potential of 42% particulate just ahead of that flame !

Attendance by re-enactors was slightly disappointing; Swedes, French and Germans arrived in small numbers. The British, the Dutch and two Yankees whose tall grenadier caps visibly wilted in the downpour, stayed on campsite and received an enthusiastic and friendly audience with genuine interest in learning more about the life of a soldier in 1706, and mud!

Our biggest pitfall was that despite five years lead-time there is no culture of sponsored/concession funded outside events in Belgium. The Napoleonic period of Waterloo is the exception; the re-enactors flock there to re-enact 1815 and all the site needs is powder for an average 3,000 on the field each year, frequently many more. When we re-enacted Waterloo of 1705, last year, we had 40 participants on a pocket handkerchief, posing its own safety risks and the solutions were inventive. Audiences for the Napoleonic period are massive and more than fund the event, which has acres of room and a well deserved reputation.

We had nearly 100 participants on a very large field so we were able to move around easily. As a result the Ramillies event had to try to sell concessions into a new market. We were paid despite having NO written contract with them and no certainty of recompense - it is not a normal way of doing your business as Explosives Engineers, but much of the re-enactment world

has to rely on good faith and trust. And Pascale's team even paid extra without being asked, for some breakages, which made up for the mud.

The event was a success - it broke new ground in Belgium by focussing more on 17th and early 18th century life and times, than mere bangs and manoeuvres seen at a safe distance. The spectators loved being close to the camp and watching period weaponry being prepared, before we stepped away to our firing line. They found original period artefacts and brought them to be explained - the peak of my weekend was a local family whose house was on our firing line, who produced an original cannon ball found in the cellar - it is now to be found in the local museum, and is pretty certainly a three pounder ball, and very likely from the battle.

Explosives management was so much easier than I had anticipated - we had insisted on all signing for and returning powder, so we were able to balance our books. This is not normal practice in all European countries yet, and needed explaining in six languages of which I had but two; but all were very tolerant and I have to record my thanks to Kendal Leaske for his help on this, as my Clerk to the Ordnance. Sadly he was also our only casualty; no, not blown up - he slipped in the mud and his knee went ! You see, the rain gets to you in the end .

I do expect it to be raining on me again by the time you are reading this, as we are privileged to be invited to a Battle of the Boyne commemoration event, a unique opportunity to help interpret a very sensitive event. Then Alamanza in Valencia, Spain April 2007 (we lose) does anyone have a lorry going that way please - small cannon to transport ! Possibly Montauban France in 2007 and then Oudenarde 2008 (we win) and Malplaquet 2009 (we lose) and possibly Ramillies 2011 - I actually look forward to that.

Any endeavour in a foreign country requires us to learn the local ropes and perhaps to have some disagreements but not to get defeated; we have a common aim in the re-enactment of commemorating the battles of the past with our "enemy". Then have a drink or several with them in the beer tent after putting the weapons and powder to bed with a story of course.

But first find a common language - re-enactment!

*Photography courtesy of Phil Thomason*

*<http://www.tbomason-photography.net>*

*<http://asapassion.free.fr/ramillies>*

*Further information: <http://www.bolcroftbloods.co.uk>*

