

Incident at Boxtel

14-15 September 1794

Translated and remarks by Geert van Uythoven

Source: Anonymous, "Ueber den Einfluß der Gemüthsbewegungen auf die militärischen Operationen, mit Beispielen aus der Erfahrung", in 'Neue Belletr. Oder Beiträge zur Kriegskunst und Kriegsgeschichte, herausgegeben von einer Gesellschaft Hessischer und anderer Offiziers', I. Band (Leipzig, 1801) pp. 187-220

Note:

The following is one of the few eye-witness reports of its kind, of this period, that exists. It is an interesting piece, written by a contemporary field officer, about his own experiences in battle. Although the name of the writer is not mentioned, as was very common during this period, because of a number of indications, I am pretty sure that the officer in question is H.P.R. von Porbeck, who wrote much more about this period, other pieces of his hand also available on this website.

Beside writing this piece anonymous, the author also took much trouble to hide where and when the incident took place, at least for outsiders. However, the event coincides with accounts of the combat at Boxtel, 14 and 15 September 1794, and other features of the description of the incident have made identification a hundred percent certain, which took place at the Dommel river, and on the Kovering Moor, north of St. Oedenrode village, and south of Veghel. Until now however, I was not able to identify the unit in question, although most probable it is Hessen-Cassel grenadiers that feature prominently in this incident.

Translation:

"At the time that General Pichegru pushed back the army to Holland, I stood at outpost duty on the other side of the D..... [Dommel river]. We were attacked and driven back [14 September]. Our right wing, at which the main attack took place, suffered badly and had retreated across the river. We were able to hold positions ourselves, but the enemy had pushed back our pickets, and was warming himself at our campfires. During the night at 12 o'clock I received orders, to abandon the outposts on the other side of the A— [Aa river]. I left my position with the silence usual at such occasions. We had marched for about an hour, when I received order to return to the river, to occupy the bridge, and to prevent in any case the crossing of the enemy. What a silence when we turned about! A bad sign. Discipline and tactics, combined with the intrinsic quality of the troops did their job, and we returned to the bridge without any problems, but the reluctance of the rank-and-file was palpable. We reached the bridge [at St. Oedenrode], which we had demolished partially before, and found it still unoccupied. We occupied our positions again.

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At daybreak we were, as was easy to expect, attacked; the enemy indeed did not manage to cross the bridge, he crossed however the river above and beneath us, outside the borders of our defence line, and took us in the flank. We retreated, and just managed to extricate ourselves. Not far from V— [Veghel] we crossed an extensive moor [Kovering Moor], where we found some cavalry regiments which had to support us. We were safe now, and a new order commanded us to halt, to give some dispersed troops and other slows time to find security behind the [Aa] river.

The moor was covered with very short birch-wood. I extended myself [i.e. his infantry], to look bigger [i.e. more numerous]. The enemy came closer, bombarded the cavalry, and engaged us, as had become a general practice in this war, with skirmishers, which did not decide anything. As long as the cavalry stayed everything was all right, however, they retreated and abandoned us on the moor all alone.

The enemy now directed his gunfire at us, and dispatched several squadrons to both our flanks, probably to drive us away. It was our luck however, that he believed the birch-wood made the terrain inappropriate to act with his cavalry, otherwise we undoubtedly would have been lost. I myself however, was not so convinced about the inaccessibility of the small birch, and my men were indeed not less. I did not want to stay much longer now; to pull together the troops which were in extended order was no time for, and by doing so I would become an even better target for the enemy artillery which would have advanced even closer; I decided therefore to retreat in extended order, something I would never do on other occasions. For fifty paces, all went fine, by retiring the ranks alternately, just like on the parade ground. The enemy, which was able to oversee our whole line noticed our retreat, advanced closer, and its flanks changed into a quick trot. We started to retire more quickly, the sign 'slowly' was not obeyed, and the crisis came. It came to a run, and every one ran as quick as he could. I myself and many otherwise brave officers, what could we do? We all ran smart with the men. Our horses had already been send back across the river, and dawdling only a bit would cause dead or being taken prisoner. Everyone yelled 'Halt!' But everyone kept running, until we finally reached some higher thickets, and the run found a target. Several men were caught at their collar by the officers (the way as it seems, is been thought by Wainery [??] pushed in position, and ordered to fire. As soon as some held their ground and had fired, more halted, order was re-established, and the enemy advance arrested. We lost only few men, and the encounter ended. We crossed the bridge [across the Aa river] undisturbed, set it on fire behind us, and gnashed our teeth about the adventure that we had survived."

Remarks:

The account features some interesting things:

- The whole infantry unit fought in extended order.
- The unit retreats in extended order, 'just like on the parade ground'. So obviously, this tactical movement was nothing new for this specific unit, although it must be noted that the commanding officer in question 'would never do this on other occasions'.

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- The officers fought on foot with the rank-and-file, the horses having been send back.

- What then follows, is technically nothing else then a rout (all order gone, the men running, not obeying orders anymore). Remarkably, contrary to popular belief about routs, the unit rallies soon thereafter, and acts like a fighting unit again. Of course this does not mean that all routed units will do so, but nevertheless it is something to keep in mind.