

Methodists in Battle

BY THE REV. FRANK BAKER

TWO hundred years ago—on May 11, 1745—was fought the Battle of Fontenoy, or of Tournai, as it was called at the time. The Duke of Cumberland, with about 50,000 English, Dutch and Austrian troops, was attempting the relief of Tournai, which was besieged by Marshal Saxe, the commander-in-chief of the French army. Tournai was one of the strongest fortresses in Flanders. At first the British and their Allies seemed to be carrying the day, but finally had to fall back. This was the turning-point of the campaign, Saxe following up his success by capturing Tournai, and during the months that followed many more towns, until the Allies eventually accepted terms in the Treaty of Aix-la-Chapelle.

At first the Battle of Fontenoy was not recognised for the British defeat that it actually was. While news was still coming in, Horace Walpole wrote:

"We don't allow it to be a victory on the French side; but this is just as a woman is not called Mrs. until she is married, though she may have had half-a-dozen natural children in about three hours; I fear, too many of us remain there still! Without palliating it is certainly a heavy stroke. We never lost near so many officers. I pity the Duke, for it is almost the first battle of consequence that we every lost."

He proceeds to give an incomplete list of the casualties, concluding, "So the whole hors de combat is above seven thousand three hundred. The French own the loss of three thousand. I don't believe (there would be) many more, for it was a most rash and desperate perseverance on our side."

IN this "most rash and desperate perseverance" Methodist soldiers revealed conspicuous bravery. The most well known of these men was undoubtedly John Haime, whose rugged old face graces one of the early Methodist Magazines. Almost eighteen months previously, while the army was quartered for the winter in Ghent, Haime had turned up at the English Church one Sunday morning to find neither minister nor people present. Such was his disgust that he and two other soldiers, John Evans and Pitman Stang, rented a room which became a little Talbot House. Here they met for religious fellowship every night, and in plenty, but Haime tells how "some began to listen under the window, and soon after desired to meet with us. Our meetings were soon sweeter than our food." (The food, in any case, was not very good!) In a short time there were twelve regulars. This was the first Methodist Society on foreign soil, and Haime wrote to John Wesley, asking for instructions as to procedure. Wesley wrote a letter of encouragement, and sent over a supply of books for them—the first Methodist "Field Library." The Soldiers' Society made rapid strides. Soon they were meeting two or three times a day, and Methodists could be found in almost every regiment. The house became too small for them.

Even when the winter quarters were left behind for campaigning the Society continued to grow in strength, and there were soon three hundred members, seven of them being preachers. Wherever they camped they built "a tabernacle, containing two, three, or four rooms, as we saw convenient." So considerable had Methodism become in the army that official machinery was set to work to discredit them, and prevent their meetings. But in vain. Haime came through his interviews with Commanding Officers with flying colours, and even found some of them sympathetic. Nevertheless he claimed, "I had at this time three armies against me: the French army, the wicked English army, and an army of devils." The Methodist infection even spread to the Austrian camp, where it seems to have been speedily stamped out. At Bruges Haime managed to procure the English Church for the Methodist services, though against much opposition, both from officers and chaplains. Haime's allotted military duties were often undertaken by his comrades, while he "frequently walked between twenty and thirty miles a day, and preached five-and-thirty times in the space of seven days." This was all very well, said the scoffers. But how would these preaching, praying, psalm-singing Methodists behave in the heat of battle? That was the test! Haime must have realised how much depended on this when he wrote, "On May 11, 1745, we had a full trial of our faith at Fontenoy."

LET Sampson Staniforth, another Methodist soldier-preacher, tell his story of the battle:

"The French before us were entrenched up to the neck, and many batteries of cannon were playing upon us. I was in the front rank, and the left-hand man joining the Dutch. We stood there until the Dutch turned their backs and marched away. (The Dutch retreat was one of the prime causes of the allied defeat.)—I was then left exposed to a battery on the left, and the batteries and small arms in the front. Soon after our regiment, with some others, were ordered to advance and attack the French in their trenches. We marched up boldly.

On approaching Fontenoy, however, they were greeted by a large battery of cannon loaded with "small bullets, balls, and pieces of old iron." In spite

of orders to lie flat on the ground, many casualties resulted to the British from this murderous ammunition. They fought their way at great cost into the French lines, were pounded by artillery from both flanks, retreated, rallied to the attack again, and finally, under cover of nightfall, retreated for good. With death at his feet, and whistling through the air about his ears, Staniforth could nevertheless proclaim, "All the day I was in great spirits, and as composed in my mind as if I had been hearing a sermon." Nor was it a case of fighting on a full stomach, for he adds, "I had eaten nothing that day but a little brown bread, and drank only a little water."

John Haime gives examples of the conduct of other Methodist soldiers, speaking in such matter-of-fact terms that the full grandeur of what he is saying is obscured: "This day God was pleased to prove our little flock, and to show them His mighty power. They showed such courage and boldness in the fight as made the officers, as well as soldiers, amazed." He speaks in particular of John Evans, the co-founder with him of the Methodist Society in Flanders, who had both his legs taken off with a cannon-ball, and of another preacher, William Clements. Clements had his left arm broken by a musket-ball, but refused to be carried off the field, saying, "No! I have an arm left to hold my sword! I will not go yet!" Soon after, his other arm was broken, and he was compelled to leave. Describing his feelings later, in a letter to Wesley, Clements said, "The Lord looked away all fear from me, so that I went into the field with joy," and after telling of his wounds he added, "But I scarce knew whether I was on earth or in heaven; it was one of the sweetest days I ever enjoyed."

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The day after the battle the Methodist soldiers gathered their scattered remnants together. It was discovered that they had lost four of their preachers, and a large number of their other members. But—they had proved themselves. Their religion had stood the test of battle!

READING of the behaviour of the early Methodists in battle is a tonic. True, at first there seems something almost fantastic about their radiant joy. Every account brings in this word "Joy." Yet the accounts are independent, and prove beyond all doubt the genuineness of their experiences. The secret is in Haime's phrase, "I have got Christ." So had they all. Into the cool superficialities of eighteenth century indifference, into the chillwork of brutality of the eighteenth century army, had blown the warming breath of God's Holy Spirit. Religion became a living, glowing thing—an experience which was precious in the delays and discomforts of campaigning, even more precious in the heat of battle. "The wicked English army" was growing a soul. Haime himself said, linking to the spirit of a saint the imagination of a poet, "My faith grows daily as a plant by the water-side." Thousands of soldiers could say it after him.

Years later the influence of Methodism's first soldiers lingered on in the subconscious minds of those who had fought by their side, like the hidden but powerful memory of childhood's hymns, to bear unexpected fruit. John Wesley met with at least one example of this in 1753, recording in his Journal:

"I made an end of examining the Society at Manchester, among whom were seventeen of the Dragoons. It is remarkable that these were in the same regiment with John Haime in Flanders, but they utterly despised both him and his Master, until they removed to Manchester. Here it was that one and another dropped in, he scarce knew why, to hear the preaching. And they now are a pattern of seriousness, zeal, and holy conversation."

The leavening influence of the Christian Gospel has gone out to all the ends of the earth during these more recent years of war. The soldiers of Methodism have borne, and are still bearing, their sometimes unrealised witness to the power of the Christian experience. And who knows with what results?

“Methodists in Battle.” *Methodist Recorder* (May 3, 1945): 9.

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