

The 69eme Demi-Brigade in the Orient:

Egyptian and Syrian Campaigns 1798-1801

Part Three

Expedition to Syria

Returning to Suez Bonaparte prepared his expedition to Syria. The 1st and 2nd battalions received orders to return to Alexandria from Cairo into Lannes' Division.

Siege of Cairo

The 3rd battalion stayed at Cairo under Dupas, to be named chef de brigade of 69e.

During the Syrian expedition, he had to hold up, during the revolt, the siege of the Citadelle with next to no means of defence and with a garrison of sick and wounded (amputees). For the next thirty four days, he held out against more than 10,000 Osmanlis that had entered into the town to support the uprising. The trophies he collected were to later adorn the Dome at les Invalides.

Combat at El Arich

The expeditionary column of four divisions, 900 cavalry, and artillery crossed the desert towards El Arich. The march was a terrible one; provisions did not keep up; the men found little in the way of water and wells. The night was bitter cold. The registers of the 69e say 10 men suffered from conjunctivitis. Add to this scorpions and fever, well you get the picture of the state of their health.

After several days the village of El Arich was taken with the bayonet and the nearby fort pounded into submission in 48 hours.

The Taking of Gaza.

25th February, sixty leagues later, the army arrived to take up positions in sight of Gaza city. They received a deputation from the city welcoming the French army and they moved in to take advantage of considerable goods and provisions.

The Siege of Jaffa

The enemy gathered its forces near to Jaffa. Siege works started on the 5th March.

The following day, Bonaparte was nearly caught by the Turks. He was saved by Lieutenant Meignan, of the 2eme battalion; who was commanding on the left of the army an advanced guard of forty men from his Company; Bonaparte was carrying out a reconnaissance on foot, at about eight o'clock in the morning, the besieged saw him and carried out a sortie and came quickly bearing down on upon him; they were just about to reach him, when Meignan running with his guard, charged the Turks and was able to, despite the loss of a dozen of his

men, save Bonaparte. The nearby pickets, alerted, forced the enemy to return from where they came.

On the 7th March, Bonaparte, summoned the besieged garrison.

In response, Abou Saab cut off the head of the French spokesperson.

It was thus decided to attack; Lannes' division was chosen to carry out the assault; three grenadier companies of the 69eme and 13eme climbed first under the orders of the Adjutant-General Rambaud. A feisty and murderous skirmish occurred on the ramparts, in which women and children took part. A hail of stone balls, and flaming materials fell upon the besieging forces; the Commandant Baille, and the Capitaine Grasset of the 1er battalion, helped by several grenadiers, were able to, despite the cross-fire and embrasures of the towers, pull up a canon on a mound and direct it against a tower occupied by 300 Osmanlis, soon the latter were laying down their arms.

The drummer of the grenadiers, Beaudoin, one of the first on the breach, caught sight of a small fort on his left, from where the Turks were directing an enfilade fire on the French.

Beaudoin put his drum on his back, picked up his musket, ran up to this small fort with fifteen or so of his comrades; they climbed on the terrace, and got about the task of digging out the enemy. Efforts were in vain, they next rolled a nearby timber, using it to sliding it into the courtyard (of the fort), and under the stupefied eyes of General Robin shoot the occupants. The latter, confused by such audacity, started to abandon their corners where they were firing on the troops, and escaped into the town. The column followed them into the town where an even more furious fight took place; the Capitaine Rolland of the 2eme battalion; who just arrived to the corps; penetrated with thirty men along the port road, the main thoroughfare of the town; he became master of it after a hard skirmish; he made the men kick in the doors of the shops which constituted so many little redoubts.

At five in the evening, Lannes was at last master of Jaffa; they found there sugar, coffee, provisions of all sorts, as well as a considerable quantity of pelisses, cloaks, silks; the soldiers saw an opportunity here to enrich their wardrobe, and golden a little their tired clothes. From thereon, their martial appearance now carried a pinch cachet of the Orient.

The Tambour-Maitre Noblet, called Bel-Air, magnificently dressed in Islamic fashion, with his five feet and four inches looked very impressive.

After having rendered Jaffa a base for the artillery for the army, and waiting for the munitions to arrive from Damiette and from Alexandria, without even taking the necessary rest, the four divisions took up the march again towards St. Jean-d'Acre.

Battle of Qaquoun

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On the 15th March, the advanced guard discovered not far from Zeitah, the body of Abdallah-Pacha's cavalry, which had taken position on the heights of Oaquoun, backing onto the mountains of Naplouse. The battle started, The divisions of Bon and Kleber, formed squares, approached the enemy and put it to flight, the but Lannes' division, facing the Naploussians, got carried away by their ardour, imprudently advanced into a gorge. Bonaparte was obliged to reiterate the order to pull back. The brave Capitaine Bertrand, instructed by the Adjutant-General Rambaud, to carry this order to the 1er battalion of the 69eme which was in the most compromised position, had a horse killed under him in carrying out this mission. The division finally obeying, the Turks encouraged turned round and profiting from the rocks on which they were spread opened up on the retreating lines without risk to themselves. The 69eme having lead the movement forward and consequently then was the last to withdraw; it lost fifty or so of its most intrepid men and amongst them their Colonel, the chef de brigade Barthelemy; who fell to a musket ball to his head. His command was replaced the following day by Eysseautier, chef of the 2eme battalion.

Occupying the battlefield, the army bivouacked at the tower of Zeitah and established itself the following day at Caiffa, at the foot of Mont Carmel.

Next Part is the famous siege of Saint Jean d'Acre