

**DIXMUDE, THE EPIC OF
THE FRENCH
MARINES (OCTOBER
17-NOVEMBER 10, 1914)**

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Dixmude, the epic of the French marines (October 17-November 10, 1914) by Charles Le Goffic

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CHARLES LE GOFFIC

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FRENCH MARINES MARCHING OUT OF THEIR DÉPÔT AT THE
GRAND PALAIS, PARIS

DIXMUDE

THE EPIC OF THE FRENCH
MARINES

(OCTOBER 17—NOVEMBER 10, 1914)

BY

CHARLES LE GOFFIC

TRANSLATED BY FLORENCE SIMMONDS

With Maps and Illustrations

LONDON



WILLIAM HEINEMANN

INTRODUCTION

PRAISE, they say, is stricken dumb by the greatest names, and also, we may add, by the greatest deeds. It is only by the bare simplicity of faithful narrative that we can hope not to belittle these.

But yesterday the public had no knowledge of the great, heroic things accomplished by the Brigade of Marines (*Fusiliers Marins*). They were hidden under a confused mass of notes, *communiqués*, instructions and plans of operations, private letters, and newspaper articles. It has been no easy task to bring them to light—the discreet light permitted by the censorship. Everything seems simple and obvious to those who can look at facts in their logical order and regular sequence. The historian who has to handle new matter knows what a labour it is to introduce, or rather to re-establish, such order and sequence. History

has to be written before the philosophy of history can be evolved.*

Our readers must not be surprised, therefore, to find here only such considerations as are in direct relation to events. We have been concerned with facts rather than with ideas. And in the result nothing will be lost hereby, for we provide materials ready for use in the establishment of that war mysticism which the sombre genius of Joseph de Maistre presaged, which Vigny showed at work in certain souls, and which is marked out as our national religion of to-morrow. It is obvious that such an immense effort, such prolonged tension, such whole-hearted sacrifice, as were demanded from the handful of men with whom we are concerned, could not have been obtained by ordinary methods. A special compact was required, a peculiar state of grace; the miracle was only possible as the outcome of a close communion, and, to use the proper

* We may perhaps be allowed to note that *Dixmude* appeared in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, March 1 and 15, before any other study on the subject.

word, of a true spiritual fraternity between men and officers.

True, this fraternity has been manifested in every branch of the service and on every battlefield during the course of the present struggle ; but nowhere perhaps has it been so absolute as among the Marines. They had, no doubt, been well prepared. The sea is a perpetual battlefield, and a trench is hardly more of a prison than a ship. Community of danger soon creates community of hearts ; how otherwise can we account for the fact that the most turbulent and individualist of men become the most perfectly disciplined on board ship ? This is the case with the Bretons. At Dixmude under the command of their own officers, retaining not only the costume, but the soul and the language of their profession, they were still sailors. Grouped with them were seamen from all our naval stations, Bayonne, Toulon, Dunkirk, etc., and the battalion of Commander de Sainte-Marie, formed at Cherbourg, even contained a fair sprinkling of natives of Les Batignolles.

I had opportunities of talking to several of these "Parigots," and I should not advise anyone to speak slightingly of their officers before them, though, indeed, so few of these have survived that nine times out of ten the quip could be aimed only at a ghost. The deepest and tenderest words I heard uttered concerning Naval Lieutenant Martin des Pallières were spoken by a Marine of the Ruc des Martyrs, Georges Delaballe, who was one of his gunners in front of the cemetery the night when his machine-guns were jammed, and five hundred Germans, led by a major wearing the Red Cross armlet, threw themselves suddenly into our trenches.

"But why did you love him so?" I asked.

"I don't know. . . . We loved him because he was brave, and was always saying things that made us laugh, . . . but above all because he loved us."

Here we have the secret of this extraordinary empire of the officers over their men, the explanation of that miracle of a four weeks' resistance, one against six, under the most

formidable tempest of shells of every calibre that ever fell upon a position, in a shattered town where all the buildings were ablaze, and where, to quote the words of a *Daily Telegraph* correspondent, it was no longer light or dark, "but only red." When the Boches murdered Commander Jeannot, his men were half crazy. They would not have felt the death of a father more deeply. I have recently had a letter sent me written by a Breton lad, Jules Cavan, who was wounded at Dixmude. While he was in hospital at Bordeaux he was visited by relatives of Second-Lieutenant Gautier, who was killed on October 27 in the cemetery trenches.

"Dear Sir," he wrote to M. Dalché de Desplancs the following day, "you cannot imagine how your visit went to my heart. . . . On October 19, when my battalion took the offensive at Lannes, three kilometres from Dixmude, I was wounded by a bullet in the thigh. I dragged myself along as best I could on the battlefield, bullets falling thickly all around me. I got over about five hundred