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### The Battle of Malmaison ~ 23~26 October 1917 'A Masterpiece of Tactics'

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**Abstract:** This occasional paper explores the background, planning, conduct and aftermath of the Battle of Malmaison in October 1917. The Battle of Malmaison was not a large battle by the standards of the First World War; however, it was of crucial importance in the development of French military thought during the war and it was a significant moment in the process of restoring morale within the French army.

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## Abbreviations

AFGG - *Les Armées françaises dans la grande guerre* - French Official History

ALGP - *Artillerie Lourde Grande Puissance* – High-power (i.e. long-range) Heavy Artillery

AS - *Artillerie Spéciale* - Special artillery, the French tank service

BCP - *Bataillon Chasseurs à Pied* - Light infantry battalion

CA - *Corps d'armée* - Infantry corps

DI - *Division infanterie* - Infantry division

GAN - *Groupe d'armées du Nord* - Northern Army Group

GPF - *Grande Puissance Filloux* - High power artillery, named after its inventor

GQG - *Grand Quartier Général* - French General Headquarters

ID - German Infantry division

IR - German infantry regiment

RI - *Régiment infanterie* - Infantry Regiment

TSF - *Télégraphie sans fil* – Wireless telegraphy

## Background to the Battle

With the replacement of the French commander-in-chief Robert Nivelle by Philippe Pétain in May 1917, a wholesale examination of the operational and tactical methods of the French army was set in place by the latter. Much of Pétain's initial work was taken up with improving the conditions of the front-line troops to diffuse the serious drop in morale that the Nivelle Offensive's failure had engendered in the army. He also began a rearmament programme that would see a significant increase in the numbers of tanks, heavy artillery and aircraft available to the French Army in the coming year.<sup>1</sup> Although these measures were to prove very effective over time, there was also an urgent need to modify the way military operations were conducted, primarily to restore confidence in GQG within the army. It was also clear in mid-1917 that Pétain's rearmament programme would not see fruition before the spring of 1918 and therefore it was considered prudent to maintain military activity in the interim. Pétain thus began to issue a series of operational and tactical instructions, starting with *Directive No. 1*, on 19 May 1917.<sup>2</sup> This was an important statement of Pétain's operational intentions; he conceded that it was not possible to envisage, 'for the moment,' a rupture of the front, followed by a strategic exploitation.<sup>3</sup> The solution was to be the undertaking of offensives with strictly limited objectives, the primary aim being to cause heavy enemy casualties while minimising those of the French. The opportunity would also be taken to readjust the French front line by eliminating those German positions that presented the most danger. These limited objective operations would thus leave the French in a better position to both defend against any German offensives and to launch their own in due course. These results were expected to be mainly achieved by a change in artillery methods; rather than diluting the French artillery preparation by attacking the whole German position in depth, only the first German position would be hit but with devastating force.<sup>4</sup> This approach had the advantage of allowing the French batteries to remain in situ throughout the operation, thus bypassing the considerable difficulties that moving artillery forward entailed. Even more importantly, by reducing the artillery preparation, in duration if not intensity, an element of surprise could be returned to major operations, both because the enemy would expect a lengthy preparation and because the artillery and supplies needed for shorter preparations could be moved across the front more quickly.

These ideas needed to be tested in practice. A four corps attack using the new methodology on 20 August 1917 at Verdun was successful on a number of levels. It helped to begin to restore faith in the troops that operations could be both successful and less costly than in previous battles, the French suffering fewer than fifteen thousand casualties over the five main days of the battle.<sup>5</sup> It also confirmed to Pétain that his tactical premises were correct, particularly in relation to *Directive No. 1*.<sup>6</sup> Another operation was necessary, both from the view of morale and to continue the tactical experimentation.

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<sup>1</sup> Guy Pedroncini, *Pétain, Général en Chef, 1917-1918* (Paris: Publications de la Sorbonne, 1974), pp. 40-62.

<sup>2</sup> GQG, *Directive No. 1*, AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, 235.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

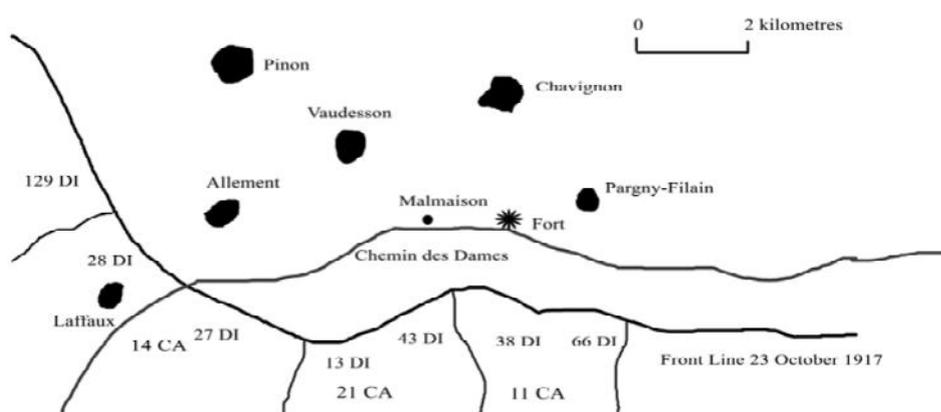
<sup>5</sup> Pedroncini, *Pétain*, p. 97. Fighting continued in a minor key until 7 September.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100. Good military account of the August Verdun operation in Frédéric Hellot, *Histoire de la guerre mondiale: Le commandement des généraux Nivelle et Pétain 1917* (Paris: Payot, 1936), pp. 183-200.

## Planning for the Battle

General Franchet d'Espèrey, commander of GAN, was pressing Pétain for permission for an operation to clear the Chemin des Dames since June and it was agreed that he and General Paul Maistre, commander of VI Army, would develop a plan to achieve this. D'Espèrey emphasised to Maistre the central importance of the Moulin de Laffaux, it being the key to the whole position, and said that the operation should be centred on this area.<sup>1</sup> Initially, Pétain was only prepared to agree some minor operations on VI Army's front, although he agreed in late July that 'active preparation' could be undertaken for what was to become the Malmaison operation.<sup>2</sup>

After much discussion over several months, mainly about the quantity of artillery needed for the operation, the plan for the attack was finally settled in September. Maistre's army duly received the following order, which stated the operation was to have a limited objective (*'objectif limité'*) in line with the formulations of *Directive No. 1*.<sup>3</sup> Three corps, from left to right 14, 21, 11 CA, were to advance and occupy the plateau containing the Malmaison fort (decommissioned before the war) and the villages of Allemant, Vaudesson, Chavignon and Pargny-Filain.<sup>4</sup>



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This plateau had the Ailette River running around its north and east edges, with the Oise- Aisne canal alongside. It rested on a layer of hard clay, with layers of sand over this,

<sup>1</sup> GAN, *Le général de division Franchet d'Espèrey, commandant le groupe d'armées du Nord, au général commandant la VIe armée*, 18 May 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, 229.

<sup>2</sup> GQG, *Note pour le général commandant le groupe d'armées du Nord*, 12 July 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 2, 698.

<sup>3</sup> VI Armée, *Ordre général no. 2103*, 15 September 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 2, 1084. This was a modification of the 26 August plan, which was itself a modification of the original operation plan of 22 July 1917; VI Armée, *Ordre général no. 2053*, 26 August 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, 978 & VI Armée, *Ordre général no. 2002*, 22 July 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, 782.

<sup>4</sup> VI Armée, *Ordre général no. 2103*.

and was topped with a thick layer of chalk.<sup>5</sup> This geological structure caused the plateau and surrounding area to be cut through with valleys that were long and wide, with gentle sandy slopes.<sup>6</sup> There were numerous chalk quarries in the area, many as deep as twelve metres, offering varying degrees of protection for troops. Some were vulnerable to field-artillery fire, whereas those of Fruty and Montparnasse were immune to all but the French 400mm railway guns.<sup>7</sup> The plateau was in most places over 100 metres above the surrounding terrain and thus dominated the valleys and the plain around it.<sup>8</sup> Capture of the plateau would give the French army an enfilading position over the Ailette River valley and allow effective flanking fire on the enemy positions on the eastern part of the Chemin des Dames, as well as removing the ability of the German artillery – largely by removing its observers – to fire on the French artillery positions in the Aisne valley. There was also the possibility that the Germans would feel obliged to mount a serious operation to retake this area, which would then give the French, in a commanding defensive position on the plateau, the opportunity to inflict disproportionate casualties on them.

On the section of the front between Malmaison farm and Malmaison fort, where the German lines were closest to the French ones, the first objective was to be taken in one bound. The advance on either side of this would be made in two bounds, with a halt at an intermediate objective. Once the first objective had been taken across the whole front, the three corps would advance on the second objective, under the protection of a strong barrage on their front and flanks. In principle, this advance would start four hours after H-hour, the exact time to be determined by Maistre during the course of the operation.<sup>9</sup>

Each corps would attack with two divisions abreast (*accolées*) and two divisions in reserve. In particular, the quarries that littered the attack zone made a methodical clearing of the areas advanced over essential. A detailed plan for clearing the trenches was thus to be made by the divisions, *Schilt* detachments (flamethrowers) being attached to assist them. The formation that 13 DI used for its infantry for the attack was typical and thus will be used here as an example of how the divisional attacks was arranged. On the right flank, in the first line there was a battalion of 109 RI reinforced with a Senegalese company and half a *génie* company (engineers). There was a second battalion from 109 RI behind it in support. In the centre, there was a battalion from 21 RI in the first line, reinforced by a Senegalese company, half a *génie* company and a flamethrower detachment, with another battalion from 21 RI in support behind them. On the left, most of 20 BCP was in the first line, similarly reinforced by a Senegalese company, half a *génie* company and a flamethrower detachment. Two companies of 20 BCP and its machine-gun company were behind them in support. The *ID* commander had a battalion each from 109 and 21 RI as his reserve.<sup>10</sup> The division commander had as his reserve 21 BCP, half a *génie* company, the divisional cavalry squadron and an infantry regiment from 170 DI.<sup>11</sup>

Once the final objective was taken, the line was to be immediately organized and communication with the French lines established. The attack would be supported by a dense field-artillery rolling barrage, as well as by fixed and semi-fixed barrages of field and

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Ferré, *Batailles et Combats des Chars français. L'Année d'Apprentissage 1917* (Paris: Lavauzelle, 1937), p. 137.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Ferré, 1917, p. 136.

<sup>9</sup> VI Armée, *Ordre général no. 2103*.

<sup>10</sup> *ID – Infanterie Divisionnaire*, the level of command that replaced brigade command, when most of the infantry divisions were reduced from four regiments to three, over the course of 1916-17.

<sup>11</sup> Laure & Jacottet, *Les Étapes de Guerre d'une Division d'Infanterie* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1928), p. 13.

heavy artillery, the latter being directed by the corps artillery commanders.<sup>12</sup> The reserve divisions were not to be engaged until the end of the operation, when they would only be used to relieve the attacking divisions and occupy the ground taken. The attacking corps were to be supported on the right by 67 DI from 39 CA, which was to seize the Church at St-Berthe, and on the left by 129 Division, the left division of 14 CA, which was to occupy the first German trench line along the Bessy to Ailette ravine. Across the rest of their front, the supporting corps was to create a strong diversion, with a trench mortar barrage and trench raids.<sup>13</sup>

The French were attacking German positions that were well thought-out and established. The German defence consisted of a first position, with three trench lines, two to three hundred metres apart. The German trenches were three to four metres wide and were protected by belts of barbed wire up to ten metres in depth.<sup>14</sup> A second position was between one and two kilometres behind this and consisted of only two trench lines.<sup>15</sup> These contained numerous shelters but with shallower barbed wire coverage than on the first position.<sup>16</sup> Between the first and second positions, there were numerous machine-gun nests and several sheltered areas for the housing of reserves.<sup>17</sup> The majority of the German batteries were placed one or two kilometres behind the second position. Around the plateau were further German positions on the north banks of the Ailette River and the Oise-Aisne canal.

The French attack required the elimination of most of the German batteries able to fire across the plateau and the destruction of the extensive German defensive positions and trench lines. To achieve this, a short but very heavy artillery preparation was ordered. How much artillery was going to be needed was the subject of some debate amongst the French generals. The difficulty that the planners of the operation had in relation to artillery was that they wanted a shorter preparation than had been usual in previous operations but also wanted to guarantee extensive destruction of the German positions and artillery. It was thus clear that the artillery preparation, both in terms of duration and the numbers of guns needed, had to be calculated on a different basis from that of previous offensives but, naturally, this left considerable room for debate. Maistre was very concerned that he would not have enough artillery and this was the cause of much friction between him and both GQG and d'Espèrey. His initial request for artillery, in August, was so large that Pétain observed that it would give Maistre more artillery than I and II Armies had combined.<sup>18</sup> Although Pétain made it clear that, there would be limits on the extra artillery that VI Army would receive, Maistre continued to demand more. In September, he wrote to d'Espèrey complaining that the artillery he was to receive was based on the experience of the Somme, Verdun and the Aisne and thus not sufficient for this operation, particularly in relation to heavy artillery.<sup>19</sup> D'Espèrey wrote back pointing out that Maistre was simply not correct; the quantity of artillery to be used was based on the experience of the recent and successful battle of Verdun. He also drew Maistre's attention to the fact that each of VI Army's corps

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<sup>12</sup> VI Armée, *Ordre général no. 2103*.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Perré, 1917, pp. 138-40.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* Perré refers to this as the 'intermediate' or 'stopping' position, with the true 'second position' being on the north bank of the Ailette. As the latter German position was not attacked on 23 October, I have used the term second position to refer to what Perré calls the intermediate position for the sake of clarity.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> Pedroncini, *Pétain*, p. 103.

<sup>19</sup> VI Armée, *Le général de division Maistre, commandant la VI<sup>e</sup> armée, à M. le général commandant le GAN*, 9 September 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 2, 1064.

would have twice the amount of artillery that the two central corps of II Army had been given at Verdun in August.<sup>20</sup>

In the event, a considerable amount of artillery was brought to VI Army for this destructive, but comparatively short preparation. For example, 21 CA (at the centre of the attack) received twenty *groupes* of field artillery, thirteen *groupes* of 155C howitzers, four *groupes* of 155L guns, eight batteries of trench mortars, along with nine batteries of heavy artillery (from 95mm to 270mm guns). It also received two *groupes* of the latest high-powered artillery, the 270 ALGP guns.<sup>21</sup> The mass of artillery attached to VI Army included some of the gigantic new St Chamond 400 mm railway guns, in position at Sainte-Marguerite.<sup>22</sup>

It was determined that the daily artillery expenditure during the artillery preparation would be the maximum laid down by GQG in December 1916; 300 shells per gun for the 75s and 150 shells per gun for all but the heaviest artillery pieces.<sup>23</sup> In fact, the guns usually fired rather less than this; the history of 6 *groupe*/118 RAL, equipped with 155C St Chamond howitzers, says that the unit's three batteries (twelve guns) fired 2928 shells over the course of the preparation.<sup>24</sup> Munitions were to be stockpiled so that on the evening of the first day of the battle there would be a reserve of three days' worth of ammunition for the field guns and one and a half days for the heavier pieces, with a two day reserve in the Army depots.<sup>25</sup>

Some indication of the scale of the artillery preparation and the subsequent attack can be gauged by the logistical requirements this placed on the railway service. The field guns needed 64 train-loads carrying ammunition, the heavy artillery needed 180 trains, the trench mortars 20 trains, the infantry requiring three train-loads for their rifle ammunition and a further six trains for their grenades.<sup>26</sup> 285 trains were needed to move all the required equipment for the offensive, with an additional ten trains per day bringing in ammunition during the artillery preparation.<sup>27</sup>

Between 17 and 22 October, VI Army's artillery fired just over 1.5 million shells at the German positions, including over 200,000 gas shells.<sup>28</sup> The high-powered 155 GPF guns used nearly 9,000 shells, with the giant 280mm mortars firing over 3,000 shells during this period.<sup>29</sup> It was not just artillery fire that the French poured onto the German defences; machine guns were also extensively used in an indirect role. For example, 140 RI detached two machine-gun platoons on 14 October to begin fire on the German positions,

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<sup>20</sup> GAN, *Le général de division Franchet d'Espèrey, commandant le groupe d'armées du Nord, au général commandant la VI<sup>e</sup> armée*, 10 September 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 2, 1068.

<sup>21</sup> VI Armée, *Note relative à répartition de l'artillerie entre les corps d'armée*, 15 September 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 2, no. 1085.

<sup>22</sup> *Le 140<sup>e</sup> Régiment d'Infanterie pendant la Guerre 1914-1918* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, undated), p.

41. Hereafter referred to as *140 RI RH*.

<sup>23</sup> See *Instruction on the Offensive Action of Large Units in Battle* for table of authorised artillery expenditure, translated from the French edition of 31 October 1917, HQ AEF, January 1918, p. 175. This ammunition expenditure was originally specified by Joffre in *L'Instruction du 16 Décembre 1916* and was not changed in the new instruction.

<sup>24</sup> *Historique des 118, 318 & 418 Régiments de l'Artillerie Lourde pendant la Guerre* (Paris: Bosc & Durivault, undated, circa 1920s), p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> FLL Pellegrin, *La Vie d'une Armée pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1921), p. 163.

For a detailed discussion on the logistical preparations for the Malmaison attack and the various depots set up for supply, see: Pellegrin, *La Vie*, pp. 161-74.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 172-3. However, Ferré says that the French artillery fired 2 million 75mm shells and 800,000 heavy-artillery shells, see: Ferré, *1917*, p. 144.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

the platoons being placed in front of Nanteuil la Fosse.<sup>30</sup> However, both the machine-gun fire and the artillery preparation was hampered to some extent by very bad weather on 18 and 20-21 October, most days having only two or three hours of 'mediocre visibility.'<sup>31</sup> This forced Maistre to extend the artillery preparation beyond the originally planned four days.<sup>32</sup>

There were also aggressive trench raids made right up to the day of the offensive, primarily in order to keep field intelligence as up to date as possible.<sup>33</sup> For example, 140 RI sent in a platoon-sized raid, in combination with 75 RI, on the morning of 22 October, capturing seven Germans and discovering that the elite German 13 Division had entered the line in front of them the previous day.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, all this French activity gave notice to the Germans that an attack was imminent in the sector. From 15 September to 15 October, a further seven German infantry divisions were moved to the area along with 64 new artillery batteries, of which 40 were heavy artillery.<sup>35</sup> The latter brought the total of German artillery in the area to around 180 batteries, of which 63 were heavy.<sup>36</sup> On 23 October, the Germans had six divisions in the first and second positions, from west to east; 37, 14, 13, 2 & 5 Guard, 47 Reserve divisions. Each held a front of between two and three kilometres in length.<sup>37</sup> Just behind these divisions were three others (52, 43, 9) and available as a reserve were another three (10, 6, 3 Bavarian).<sup>38</sup> Most of these divisions had been classified by French intelligence the previous year as good but heavy fighting during the earlier part of 1917 had reduced their quality; only 14 and 5 Guard divisions were to perform well on 23 October.<sup>39</sup> The German artillery put down regular barrages with gas shells, both tear and toxic gas, to disrupt the French preparations.<sup>40</sup>

The French tank force, the *Artillerie Spéciale*, was to play a major role in the battle. On 25 July 1917, its commander, General Jean-Baptiste Estienne was instructed to send an officer to GAN to make plans for a tank attack on the front of VI Army.<sup>41</sup> On 25 August, it was decided to attach five *AS groupes* (companies) to VI Army, each *groupe* (12-14 medium tanks) to be attached to an infantry division, the *groupes organisés* in two groupements (battalions).<sup>42</sup>

Considerable effort was made to ensure the tanks would avoid the difficulties moving around the battlefield that had been encountered during the Nivelle Offensive. Detailed plans from *groupement* to battery level were made in relation to the approach routes, once again in close liaison with the infantry officers. In order to keep as fully informed as to the state of the battlefield as possible, VI Army's Intelligence Section (2e

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<sup>30</sup> *140 RI RH*, p. 41.

<sup>31</sup> AFGG V/2, note 2, p. 1015.

<sup>32</sup> Pellegrin, *La Vie*, p. 163.

<sup>33</sup> See: VI Armée, *JMO*, 17 October 1917 onwards.

<sup>34</sup> *140 RI RH*, p. 41.

<sup>35</sup> Perré, *1917*, p. 139.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *German Divisions*, p. 52, 81, 106, 120, 169, 182, 227, 238, 424, 457, 476, 502, 567.

<sup>40</sup> For example, see: VI Armée, *JMO*, 19/20 October 1917.

<sup>41</sup> GAN, *Note pour le général commandant le groupe d'armées du Nord*, 25 July 1917. AFGG 5/2, annexes 2, no. 802.

<sup>42</sup> GAN Artillerie d'Assaut, *Rapport au Sujet de la Participation de l'Artillerie d'Assaut aux opérations de la VI Armée du 23 et 25 Octobre 1917*, 5 Novembre 1917, p. 1. 16N2120. (*AS 6.682* hereafter). Only 66 DI, whose front was between le Panthéon and les Bovettes on the right flank of the zone of operations, was left without tanks because of the state of the ground that it would be fighting over.

Bureau) passed to the *AS* commanders, on a daily basis, new aerial photographs of the battlefield, which, one young *AS* lieutenant remembered, were the subject of ‘interminable discussions.’<sup>43</sup> These photographs were closely examined for changes in the ground caused by the shells from the heavy artillery, as well as checking the roads and other routes for damage. This is a good example of how meticulous the French planning was for this operation.

The great benefits of attaching a dedicated infantry unit to the tanks in advance of the attack had been shown during the Nivelles Offensive.<sup>44</sup> In particular, it was clear that the work making a passage for the tanks was too difficult for troops without specialised training. It was subsequently agreed that two dismounted cavalry battalions would be attached to the *AS*, well in advance of the attack. The first battalions of 9 and 11 *Cuirassiers à pied* moved to Champlieu on 27 August to begin training with the tanks.

It was also necessary for the attacking infantry regiments and battalions to have detailed training in conjunction with the tanks.<sup>45</sup> To familiarise the infantry with the tanks, 14 infantry battalions undertook training with tanks at the *AS* base at Champlieu between 27 August and 5 October. They spent from five to seven days there, engaging in daily exercises with one or two batteries of tanks.<sup>46</sup> This gave the infantry an insight into both the limitations and strengths of the tanks. In particular, the infantry learnt how to direct the tanks to fire on targets that were blocking them. It was also emphasised to the infantry officers that there was to be no modification made to normal infantry tactics because of the presence of the tanks.<sup>47</sup> The tank officers also visited the infantry in the trenches to see for themselves the ground they would advance over and to familiarise the tank and infantry officers with each other.<sup>48</sup>

However, no amount of training could really compensate for the fact that battlefield communications at this stage of the war remained largely rudimentary. For example, the troops accompanying the tanks had to signal that the route was ready for the tanks by having an NCO hold up a helmet on a rifle, although it should be noted that there was no real alternative to this.<sup>49</sup> Speaking tubes had been fitted to the rear of the tanks to enable communication between the infantry and the tank crews, these giving ‘great service’ during the battle, it was subsequently reported.<sup>50</sup> The tanks were supplied with a white and red panel, which could be used from within the tank, to indicate to the infantry that they should advance.<sup>51</sup> The infantry were to call tanks to their aid by displaying a white panel (supplied for the purpose) or any other white object. They were then to communicate with

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<sup>43</sup> Maurice Gagneur and Marcel Fourier, *Avec les Chars d’Assaut* (Paris: Hachette, 1919), p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> AFGG 5/2, annexes 2, 957. See, for example, VI Armée, *Note pour le 21e CA*, 21 May 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, 266.

<sup>45</sup> Maistre wrote to D’Esperey that he had been advised by *AS* Capitain Lefebvre of the need for extensive training of the infantry with the tanks. He requested that it began immediately. VI Armée, *Le général de division Maistre, commandant la VIe armée, à M. Le général commandant le GAN*, 12 May 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, 191. The training was initiated quickly; for example, see: VI Armée, *Note pour le 21e CA*, 21 May 1917, AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, 266.

<sup>46</sup> By comparison, the British infantry units working with tanks at the Cambrai operation in the next month received a maximum of ten days training with tanks, see: Bryn Hammond, *Cambrai 1917; The Myth of the First Great Tank Battle* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), p. 70.

<sup>47</sup> *AS 6.682*, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> Binet-Valmer, *Mémoires d’un engagé volontaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 1918), pp. 222-5.

<sup>49</sup> This was also used as a means of communication by the British at Cambrai, although there were also coloured discs and pigeons carried on the British tanks, see: Wilfred Miles, *Military Operations France & Belgium 1917; The Battle of Cambrai*, (London: HMSO, 1948), Appendix 9b, p. 357.

<sup>50</sup> Chaubès, *Rapport sur les Incidents de Réparation et Dépannage des Chars pendant les opérations du 23 Octobre 1917*, 1 November 1917. 16N2162.

<sup>51</sup> Perré, 1917, p. 147, note 1.

the tanks by voice if possible or by waving objects in the direction that they wanted the tanks to attack in.<sup>52</sup> Of course, these methods required good visibility to work effectively and were quickly rendered ineffective by the cloud of smoke and dust that was thrown up during a First World War battle. The *TSF* tanks were able to provide communication between the relevant divisions and corps.

Considerable care was taken to keep the Malmaison operation a secret. For example, when *AS* Major Pérrinelle gave his *groupe* commanders their ‘ultra-secret’ orders for the attack, these were written in his own hand for extra security.<sup>53</sup> Nonetheless, the Germans were well aware that tanks might be used in the coming attack. Their success in repulsing the French tanks during the Nivelle Offensive had led the German high command to believe that ‘by reason of their slow and heavy movement, the tanks are excellent targets; they are very vulnerable despite their armour. There is no place for fear if the defence is well organised; experience proves this.’<sup>54</sup> Thus German anti-tank defence in the Malmaison sector was largely left to indirect artillery fire; the tactic of using forward single field guns was abandoned and there were few anti-tank obstacles installed.<sup>55</sup> To assure accurate indirect fire, the German artillery observation positions were carefully sited and all the German batteries were given orders to immediately switch their fire to any tanks seen within their fire zone.<sup>56</sup> The German infantry’s only close defence against the tanks remained the SmK armour-piercing round, although extra detachments of machine-gunners, armed with SmK ammunition, were drafted into the area before the attack, specifically to engage the tanks.<sup>57</sup>

The French artillery preparation caused mounting concern for the *AS* commanders, as the battleground was becoming more and more broken up. This was despite the fact that VI Army commander had ordered the trench artillery on 25 September to stop firing on areas where the tanks would advance. When tank officers Lieutenant Fourier and Captain Calmels reviewed aerial photographs of their sector on 19 October, they were taken aback at the extent of the artillery damage; the ground was ‘chaos.’<sup>58</sup> The heavy rain made the ground even worse; of particular worry to the tank officers was that many of the shell holes from the heavy artillery had filled with water and merged into one another, creating areas the tanks could simply not traverse. Of course, this would severely hamper the infantry’s movement around the battlefield as well.

At midday on 22 October, Maistre set the attack for 05.45 the next day but new intelligence forced a change to his plan. A radio-intercept indicated that German 7 Army was already alerted that the French would launch an attack the next day and had ordered its artillery to launch a counter-preparation at 05.30. Maistre changed the jump-off time to 05.15, which had the disadvantage of increasing the amount of time that the troops would be fighting in darkness, as sunrise was not until 06.20.<sup>59</sup> By 17.00, all the units of VI Army had been informed of the new jump-off time.<sup>60</sup> The bad weather continued; it rained almost continuously, except for a brief respite between 17.00 and 19.00, and the wind

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<sup>52</sup> Ferré, *1917*, p. 147, note 2.

<sup>53</sup> Gagneur & Fourier, p. 186.

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Ferré, *1917*, p. 142.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>58</sup> Gagneur and Fourier, p. 198.

<sup>59</sup> AFGG 5/2, p. 1021.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

remained strong all day.<sup>61</sup> The rain helped further churn up the ground, already extensively damaged by artillery fire, and made French artillery observation difficult.

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<sup>61</sup> AFGG 5/2, note 2, p. 1022.

## The Battle

On 23 October, the first wave of French infantry mostly set-off on time in the dark and thus missed the German artillery barrage, with the exception of 39 CA and 66 DI on the right flank that were severely hit. The infantry were supported by powerful artillery rolling barrage, as well as continuing French interdiction fire on the German positions. For the most part, the French infantry were extremely successful and, for example, 38 DI had taken Malmaison fort by 06.30. One of its regiments (RICM) had captured 950 Germans while losing only 91 killed and 362 wounded.<sup>1</sup> In another case, a chasseur battalion from 43 DI (1 BCP) captured seven officers and 700 men from three different German divisions as well as 18 cannons and 65 machine guns, its advance elements getting as far as Chavignon.<sup>2</sup> In some areas, the French infantry were unable to prevail against a spirited German defence, this happening to 129 DI, which was subjected to a fierce German counter-attack and pushed back to its jump-off position. Most French troops, however, reached their first objective on schedule and by 09.15 were advancing on their second objective. This advance was almost completely successful, with only elements of 66 DI failing to reach their objective.

The French tanks had great difficulty on the overturned ground, with many failing to get into action because they were stuck in shell-holes. Nonetheless, the battlefield was littered with German machine-gun positions that had not been destroyed by the French artillery and the tanks were an invaluable help to the French infantry in eliminating these, thereby considerably reducing the infantry's losses.<sup>3</sup> On parts of the front where the infantry had no tank support, infantry casualties were heavy; 64 BCP (66 DI) had no tanks attached and suffered severe losses; all of its company commanders and most of the section commanders became casualties.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, the commander of 21 BCP drew attention in his report to the 'relatively light losses' that his battalion had suffered, due to the support he had received from the tanks.<sup>5</sup>

24 October was occupied with organising the conquered positions and bringing forward the French artillery.<sup>6</sup> The Germans had pulled back from positions in front of 129 DI during the night and this was the only area where French troops advanced during the day. The next day saw the final phase of the operation as the French infantry pushed forward as the Germans pulled back behind the Ailette River. There was even less fighting the following day and by 26 October, French infantry were by the banks of the Ailette.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> RICM, *JMO*, 23 October 1917.

<sup>2</sup> *Historique du 1e Bataillon de Chasseurs à Pied 1914-1918* (Wissembourg: Akermann, 1920), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> This is highlighted in VI Armée, *JMO*, 23 October 1917.

<sup>4</sup> *Historique du 64e Bataillon de chasseurs à pied pendant la Guerre 1914-1918* (Paris: Berger- Levrault, undated), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> 21 CA, 13 DI, 21 Bataillon de chasseurs à pied, *Emploi et Utilité des Chars d'assaut au Cours des Combats du 23 au 25 Octobre 1917*, 15 November 1917. 16N2162. 21 BCP lost one officer and two men killed, with two officers and nineteen men wounded. The battalion captured 110 Germans, six machine guns and 21 cannons.

<sup>6</sup> VI Armée, *JMO*, 24 October 1917.

<sup>7</sup> VI Armée, *JMO*, 26 October 1917.

### Aftermath of the Battle

The Battle of Malmaison may not have quite been ‘a masterpiece of tactics,’ as one French writer claimed after the war, but it was certainly effective, fully achieving its limited goals. Major Auguste-Emile Laure (GQG liaison) arrived on 24 October at Maistre’s headquarters to find the general very satisfied with the operation.<sup>1</sup> Although there was to be subsequent criticism within the army that the attack at Malmaison should have been further exploited, Maistre and Pétain were in firm agreement that an extension of the attack would have run into serious difficulties.<sup>2</sup> In particular, the French troops would have had difficulties crossing the swampy area around the Ailette and would then have run into the substantial German reserves south of Laon.<sup>3</sup> It was more important, in the commander-in-chief’s view, to have a successful but limited battle, with its immediate benefits to morale and the opportunity to experiment with tactics, than risk repeating the over-ambitious offensives of the past.

It is also worth noting that many of the French infantry regiments that fought in the battle had been involved in serious disorder during the period of the mutinies and yet had performed well at Malmaison. By the time the operation was finally over on 26 October, the French had advanced in some places nearly six kilometres and had captured over eleven thousand Germans, along with significant amounts of material. This had been achieved with casualties of just fewer than twelve thousand men, comparing favourably with the thirty thousand casualties suffered in this area during the Nivelle Offensive in April and May.<sup>4</sup> A widely circulated GQG report drew attention to the lower percentage of overall casualties suffered at Malmaison, when compared with those on the Aisne in April-May 1917 and at Verdun in August 1917; the losses at Malmaison being 8.45%, on the Aisne 17.7% and 18.4% at Verdun (the majority of these casualties being from the infantry).<sup>5</sup> The French gains forced the Germans to pull back to a more tenable position and, perhaps most importantly, re-established a measure of confidence in GQG within the French army. By 1 November 1917, the Germans had evacuated the whole of the Chemin-des-Dames position and retreated behind the Ailette.

The German divisions on the front line had all been badly mauled in the battle. Fourteenth ID lost the majority of its artillery and over eighteen hundred prisoners, leaving it with only fourteen hundred effectives by 26 October.<sup>6</sup> Thirteenth ID lost a similar number of prisoners and it was reported that many of its units had ‘surrendered *en masse* with their officers.’<sup>7</sup> Even divisions that had previously fought well, such as 2 Guard ID, were ‘completely defeated’ at Malmaison, although 5 Guard ID put up a credible fight and only left three hundred prisoners with the French.<sup>8</sup> The French captured in total 11,500 prisoners, including 240 officers, 200 cannon, 220 trench mortars and over 700 machine guns.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Laure, *Au 3ème Bureau du troisième G.Q.G (1917-1919)* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1921, 8th Edition), p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Although it should be noted that both Maistre and D’Esperey later regretted the lack of a plan for further exploitation, in the light of the success of the operation, see: Robert Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory: French Strategy and Operations in the Great War* (London: Harvard University Press, 2005), p. 389.

<sup>4</sup> Doughty, *Pyrrhic Victory*, p. 389.

<sup>5</sup> GAN, *Note sur les attaques à objectif limité*, 15 December 1917, AFGG 6/1, annexes 1, 187.

<sup>6</sup> *German Divisions*, p. 238.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3, 106.

<sup>9</sup> Frédéric Hellot, *Histoire de la guerre mondiale: Le commandement des généraux Nivelle et Pétain 1917* (Paris: Payot, 1936), p. 207.

## Conclusion

Although the Battle of Malmaison was a success, in terms of morale and confidence building within the French army, the general methodology of the 'limited offensive' could only be a temporary solution to the French problems on the Western Front, as had been originally noted by Pétain in *Directive No. 1*.<sup>1</sup> In many respects, it was not at all innovative, being a variation of Nivelle's method of using artillery to smash a corridor through the enemy positions for the infantry. This had worked for Nivelle at Verdun in 1916, due to a much narrower front than in the disastrous Aisne battles of April-May 1917, and the limited operation at Malmaison was well suited to this approach. One French officer wrote after the war that Malmaison was 'a vast and powerful artillery operation' rather than a battle and this is for the most part true.<sup>2</sup> The three French corps at Malmaison had been supported by such a mass of guns that there was one 75mm gun per 16 metres, one howitzer per 25 metres, one piece of heavy artillery per 30 metres, one high-powered heavy artillery gun per 60 metres and one trench mortar per twenty-five metres.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the disparity between the French and German artillery at Malmaison had been considerable, the former had 41 batteries per kilometre whereas the latter only had at most 12 batteries per kilometre.<sup>4</sup> Thus, it might appear that the operation was essentially just a refined version of previous artillery practice. To some extent, this was inevitable, as the primary German positions had to be devastated in order to keep the French infantry casualties as low as possible.

However, the artillery plan for the Malmaison operation had some important innovative elements, which made a significant difference to the effect of the artillery preparation than that of earlier offensives. The first three days of the artillery preparation had undertaken normal missions of destruction but after the third day, there was a shift away from this type of mission. A larger proportion of smoke and gas shells were used and more interdiction fires were made, with the primary aim of disrupting, rather than trying to destroy, the German artillery and infantry reserves moving into the area.<sup>5</sup> An important lesson from this battle for GQG was that the neutralisation fires had just as badly affected German artillery fire as it had been by the fires of destruction, possibly more so.<sup>6</sup> The success of this second phase of the preparation illustrated to GQG that, with sufficient air superiority, it was not necessary to physically destroy German positions, as they could just as effectively be neutralised instead.

This approach would help address another problem; the time it took to bring large quantities of material (guns, ammunition etc...) into position on the front. Pétain was well aware that a long delay between offensives, such as the two months between the battles of Verdun and Malmaison, would prevent any meaningful exploitation of a general offensive. In addition, as long as there was an artillery preparation of any duration prior to the infantry attack, surprise was simply impossible. As has been noted above, the Germans had plenty of time during the French artillery preparation to bring in reinforcements and prepare their defensive positions. Surprise was beginning to be a key element in Pétain's thought and therefore some way would have to be found around this problem. The need for

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<sup>1</sup> AFGG 5/2, annexes 1, no. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Laure, *Étapes de Guerre*, p. 26.

<sup>3</sup> Lucas, *L'Évolution des Idées tactiques en France et en Allemagne pendant la Guerre de 1914-1918* (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1925, third edition), p. 187. Slightly different figures in Pellegrin, *La Vie*, p. 162. Ferré, 1917, p. 143, says there was one artillery piece per six metres of front.

<sup>4</sup> Ferré, 1917, pp. 140-43.

<sup>5</sup> Lucas, *Idées Tactiques*, p.193.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

the French heavy artillery to have some form of strategic mobility was thus clear, as was the useful role that the medium tanks could play as a substitute for much of the field artillery, when attacking the enemy's second and third positions. In addition, the new Renault light tank coming into service offered the possibility of an armoured force that possessed a strategic mobility, through the speed with which it could be moved from sector to sector along the front.

The battles of Verdun (1917) and Malmaison gave GQG enough information to produce the key-stone document *L'instruction sur l'action offensive des grands unités dans la bataille*, dated 31 October 1917. This encapsulated the lessons drawn by GQG and Pétain from the failure of the Nivelle Offensive and the successes at Malmaison and Verdun. The *Instruction* was to prove an important step towards the final iteration of Pétain's military thought, *Directive No. 5* (12 July 1918), which would be the methodology used in the successful French offensives in the summer and autumn of 1918. Thus, although the Battle of Malmaison was not a large battle by First World War standards, it was of crucial importance in the development of French military thought during the war and it was a significant moment in the process of restoring morale within the French army.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> See: Laure, *GQG*, p. 49.

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