



**DYING
FOR
FRANCE**

EXPERIENCING AND REPRESENTING
THE SOLDIER'S DEATH, 1500-2000

IAN GERMANI

DYING FOR FRANCE

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Ian Germani

Dying for France

Experiencing and Representing
the Soldier's Death, 1500–2000

Ian Germani

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DYING FOR FRANCE

For Karen

Introduction

Adjutant Gaëtan Evrard was not anticipating trouble as he struggled up the steep hillside outside the village of Sper Kunday in the Uzbin valley on the afternoon of 18 August 2008. Evrard and the thirty men under his command from the eighth regiment of the marine parachute infantry (*8^e régiment parachutiste d'infanterie de marine – 8^e RPIMA*) were on a reconnaissance mission, their third since they had arrived in Afghanistan on 5 August. Supporting Evrard's section (Crimson 2) were a section of the Chad Regiment of Foot (*régiment de marche de Tchad – RMT*) (Red 4), two sections of the Afghan National Army (ANA), a dozen American "specialists" in air support, and four Afghan interpreters: a total of three hundred men. Evrard's section advanced painfully up the slope, each man sweltering beneath the burden of a flak jacket, helmet, Famas assault rifle, and six magazines of ammunition. Some also carried first-aid kits, radios, or snipers' rifles. The difficult terrain meant they had to leave their four armoured vehicles behind with Red 4. Suddenly, at 3:45 p.m., as they neared the summit, the French paratroops came under sustained fire. Scrambling for cover and returning fire as best they could, Evrard's men found themselves caught in a crossfire between two enemy detachments, while Red 4 was prevented by a third from coming to their aid. The machine guns of the armoured vehicles were at the limit of their range. Evrard radioed to the Forward Observation Base at Tora, pleading for help: "Hurry, Captain," he urged, "Nobody is able to support me ... I am pinned down by steady fire. It is like Bazeilles here, Captain, like Bazeilles!"¹

Help was forthcoming. The Quick Reaction Force from Surobi was first on the scene, with eighty men, including paratroops and an 81-mm mortar unit. Air support, provided primarily by American A10 and AC-130

1 Merchet, *Mourir pour l'Afghanistan*, 34–5.

gunships, enabled the survivors of Evrard's force first to break contact with the enemy and then, as they were joined by further reinforcements from Kabul, to turn the tables on their assailants. By 4:30 a.m. the next morning, the French had retaken control of the hill. In the meantime, Evrard's section had suffered heavy casualties. One man after another was felled by enemy fire and then their comrades were hit as they sought to lend assistance. A paratrooper who had tried unsuccessfully to resuscitate a wounded colleague was struck by several bullets as he brought Evrard a radio set. "He put himself in front of me," recalled Evrard, "as if to protect me."² Of the thirty-one men from Evrard's section, ten were killed and seventeen wounded. Eight of the ten were killed by enemy fire, one by an edged weapon. The remaining death was caused when one of the French armoured vehicles rolled over, crushing the occupant of its turret and severely wounding two other men.

Adjutant Evrard's representation of his situation at the time of the Uzbin ambush is remarkable. Under extreme duress and without reflection, he instantly equated his situation with an event from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 immortalized by a painting of Alphonse de Neuville entitled *The Last Cartridge* (fig. 0.1). That event was the defence of Bazeilles by the men of the Blue Division, who fought on without hope of victory until their ammunition was exhausted. Memory of this heroic defeat became a founding myth for the French marines, as well as an important means to salvage national pride in the wake of defeat. By recalling that battle, as men died around him, Evrard gave a meaning to his experience and to the deaths of his comrades: like the soldiers of Bazeilles before them, they were dying for France. That understanding was echoed in the official discourse during the days that followed, as the dead were honoured and as their compatriots sought to make sense of their deaths. The immediate response of President Nicolas Sarkozy was to fly to Kabul to meet with soldiers of the French contingent. Back in Paris, on 20 August the president paid his respects to the dead in the courtyard of the Invalides – "in this shrine of military memory" – before ten tricolour draped coffins, each bearing a newly awarded medal of the Legion of Honour. His speech recognized the soldiers' service to the nation, affirming that the "price of blood" they had paid was the cost of France fulfilling its international obligations as a great power: "They gave their lives far from their homeland for the sake of their duty, for the freedom of the Rights of Man, for the universal values that are at the heart of our Republic." Their deaths, said Sarkozy, were honourable: "I know very well that the word honour may

² Ibid., 37.



o.1. Alphonse de Neuville, *The Last Cartridge*. 1873.

sound contemptible in front of the body of a twenty-year-old man. And yet to give one's life with honour, is to fulfill that life."³ The president's words were calculated both to explain the French army's mission in Afghanistan and to give meaning to the deaths of the ten French soldiers who had been killed in the ambush.

The official discourse that emerged after the ambush at Uzbin, embodied in symbol, ritual, and word, was redolent of references to the nation, to history, to political ideals and even to values – duty and honour – that had a longer lineage than the nation itself. From 2008 on, French soldiers who died in Afghanistan were accorded dignities that had been denied to those killed on similar missions overseas, in Indochina, Algeria, Chad, Lebanon, the Ivory Coast. Previously, the public had greeted soldiers' deaths with relative indifference. Bodies had typically been quietly repatriated without ceremony.⁴ Not everybody was convinced the change was a good thing. What better way to persuade the enemy that his strategy was working than to respond to an attack by immediately sending the president to the battle front or by insisting upon the emotional impact of the hurt

3 Speech of Nicolas Sarkozy, 20 August 2008, <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/171909-declaration-de-m-nicolas-sarkozy-president-de-la-republique-en-hommage>.

4 Marchal, *L'hommage politique*, 33–40.

inflicted? The political instinct to intensify the emotions engendered by such occasions ran the risk of creating the impression of a lack of resilience.⁵ Nor did the official discourse necessarily prevail. The press was generally sympathetic in its references to soldiers who died in Afghanistan, but it tended to represent them as victims rather than as heroes. The circumstances surrounding their deaths were referred to as tragedies comparable to air or road accidents, rather than as an essential and unavoidable aspect of waging war, however repugnant. Not even the official discourse was immune to this tendency. Prime Minister François Fillon referred to “tragic events,” in a speech of 2011, President Sarkozy to “victims of the most cowardly crimes” in another of 2012.⁶ Furthermore, the focus on the bereaved families – the families of the soldiers who died at Uzbin were flown to Afghanistan less than a month afterwards to learn more about the circumstances in which their loved ones had died – contributed to a “privatization” of the soldiers’ deaths, to the detriment of narratives emphasizing national or collective interests. The logical outcome of this tendency has been for the soldier’s death to be perceived as a tragedy to be avoided at all costs and to hold those in authority to the same standard of responsibility as in civilian life. Thus, in a process that has been described as the “judicialization” of warfare, the families of two of the soldiers killed at Uzbin, Julien Le Pahun and Rodolphe Penon, filed a legal challenge in 2009 claiming that the soldiers’ lives had been deliberately placed in danger by their commanders, who were therefore criminally liable.⁷ The legal claim was dismissed, but it was a sign that in the early twenty-first century the soldier’s death had become unacceptable.⁸

The responses of government, media, and public opinion to the deaths of the eighty-nine French soldiers who died in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2012 demonstrate the extreme unease attached to the idea of the soldier’s death in contemporary French culture. In recent years, not only has there been manifest a tension between the official discourse and public attitudes concerning the soldier’s death, but public opinion itself has been conflicted. At the same time as it has come to view the soldier’s death as an unacceptable tragedy, the public has also viewed it with growing

5 Ibid., 113; Merchet, *Mourir pour l’Afghanistan*, 153–4.

6 Marchal, *L’hommage politique*, 112.

7 “Peut-on juger un soldat?” *Le Petit Journal*, 3 Nov., 2009; Samuel Duval, “Soldats français tombés en Afghanistan: Rendez-nous nos héros!,” *Le Monde*, 11 March 2010; Barthélemy, *La “judicialisation” des opérations militaires*.

8 For an insightful analysis of the “schizophrenic” attitude of contemporary opinion concerning the soldier’s death, see Gauthier Dupire, “Il faut achever le ‘zéro mort!’,” *Le Monde*, 13 April 2012.

indifference, as if battlefield death were nothing more than a workplace accident, an occupational hazard for those who choose the soldier's trade.⁹ By privatizing the soldier's death, by treating it primarily as an individual and familial tragedy, French society has detached it from the narratives – above all the narrative of citizens dying for the nation – that gave it a collective meaning.¹⁰

This loss of meaning attached to the soldier's death is striking in a country where the narrative enshrined in the phrase *mourir pour la patrie*¹¹ has been extraordinarily potent for many centuries. This narrative reached its apogee during the First World War and is physically represented in 30,000 French communes by the monuments to the dead erected in the aftermath of that conflict. The unease generated by the ten deaths in a single day at Uzbin, of eighty-nine over an eleven-year period in Afghanistan, contrasts with the collective response to the experience of 27,000 deaths in a single day on 22 August 1914, 1.4 million over a four-year period from 1914 to 1918. Collective commitment to the cause of national defence enabled French society to endure the unprecedented loss of the Great War. The soldier's death was terrible to bear and doubts grew, particularly after the war, but the narrative of sacrifice for the sake of the nation made it meaningful for most French people. Clearly, public perceptions and attitudes have undergone a sea change in the hundred years since the First World War. This book seeks to understand that change by considering the history of the soldier's death in France over the long term, from the Renaissance to the present.

The subject of the soldier's death in French history is vast, with as many different dimensions as there are varieties of history. It is connected obviously to military history, but also to the histories of mentalities, emotions and culture, gender and masculinity, art and literature, economies and populations. Its parameters were first explored in a seminal article by André Corvisier, published in 1975. This identified three fundamental problems to be considered in relation to the soldier's death: "In the first place, the problem is one of sensibility and ethics: the attitude of the soldier confronting death. Nor can one escape the quantitative problem of the weight of military death in relation to general mortality. From these two problems

9 Dupire is particularly insightful on this "schizophrenic" public attitude. See *ibid.*; see also Marchal, *L'hommage politique*, 113–15.

10 For an important commentary on this theme see the interview between Jean-Dominique Merchet and Danièle Hervieu-Léger, in Merchet, *Mourir pour l'Afghanistan*, 155–8.

11 "To die for the homeland."

derives a third, that of the representation of the soldier's death and its place in the life of a society."¹²

Since these words were written, many historians have taken up the gauntlet thrown down by Corvisier to examine these problems relating to the soldier's death in specific periods of French history. Although there has been no survey of the problem as broad as Corvisier's, which extended its scope from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, several innovative works by cultural and military historians, although not necessarily focusing either on the soldier's death or on French history, have helped to broaden our understanding of the three problems defined by Corvisier. The present work seeks to build upon the work of these historians as well as upon the insights of scholars working in the many different fields identified above to provide an understanding of some of the changes and continuities in the way the soldier's death has been experienced and represented in modern France.

Of fundamental importance to this investigation is the work of John Keegan, the British military historian whose book, *The Face of Battle*, brilliantly deconstructed conventional battle narratives as a prelude to his own, far more convincing reconstructions of the battlefield experiences at Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme.¹³ By reflecting on weapons technology and tactics, battlefield topography, and on the evidence provided by soldiers and surgeons, Keegan gave new insight into how soldiers gave and received death in battle. Keegan's study showed that the incidence and the experience of death in battle have varied considerably over time, as weapons systems, forms of combat, and methods of medical evacuation and care have evolved. His work has inspired a plethora of studies focused on battlefield experience and "the sharp end" of war, which are admirably synthesized by Michael Stephenson in *The Last Full Measure: How Soldiers Die in Battle*.¹⁴ In France, Hervé Dréville, Yann Lagadec, and Stéphane Perréon are among those who have applied Keegan's approach to the study of battles from the French past.¹⁵ Like the work of these historians, this study emphasizes the central importance of death in battle, but it also places emphasis upon the striking fact that until the First World War the proportion of soldiers who died of illness while on campaign far exceeded the numbers who died of wounds received in combat. One of the arguments of this book is that soldiers themselves helped to propagate a positive

12 Corvisier, "La mort du soldat," in Corvisier, *Les hommes, la guerre et la mort*, 368.

13 Keegan, *The Face of Battle*.

14 Stephenson, *The Last Full Measure*.

15 Dréville, *Batailles*; Lagadec and Perréon, *La bataille de Saint-Cast*.

view of battlefield death because they lived perpetually in the shadow of other deaths that, from their perspective, were even less appealing.

The “battle studies” of Keegan and his successors depended heavily upon the evidence provided by soldiers themselves, in their letters, diaries, and memoirs. Historians have understandably been wary of these sources. Memoirs, sometimes written long after the events to which they refer, are far from the unadulterated vectors of “truth” their authors often claimed them to be. Matilda Greig writes that we should be “deeply wary of treating memoirs as the straightforward testimony of eyewitnesses.”¹⁶ In addition to depending upon their own, ever more unreliable, memories of the past, writers sometimes incorporated “memories” that were not theirs, but which derived either from stories they had heard or from other books or histories they had read.¹⁷ Their writings sometimes echoed propagandistic representations and sometimes resisted them. Memoirists often had ulterior motives in writing, whether it was to set the record straight, to honour former comrades, or simply to make money. Often, relatives and editors were heavily involved in curating veterans’ memoirs, pruning them of anything that might be perceived as disreputable.¹⁸ War memoirs tell us at least as much about the times in which they were written or published as they do about the times they describe. Writers sought to portray themselves in a sympathetic light according to contemporary standards. They were therefore selective in their choice and interpretation of events. According to French war memoirists who campaigned in Italy, from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, they were unfailingly both chivalrous and irresistible to Italian women! Nor are more immediate sources, such as personal correspondence, necessarily more reliable. Letters to wives and parents commonly sought to provide reassurance; they therefore made light of or ignored altogether war’s horrors and dangers. Despite these shortcomings, soldiers’ stories, whenever and in whatever form they were communicated, are invaluable for the insights they provide, sometimes unwittingly, into how their authors came to feel about past events. This book relies heavily upon them, as well as upon the stories of nurses, doctors, chaplains, and other witnesses to French soldiers’ experiences of death and dying in war.¹⁹

Soldiers’ stories, particularly war memoirs, are the source material for Yuval Harari’s study of *The Ultimate Experience*, which considers how soldiers

16 Greig, *Dead Men Telling Tales*, 141.

17 Dwyer, “Public Remembering, Private Reminiscing,” 248.

18 Greig, *Dead Men Telling Tales*, 172–3.

19 Philip Dwyer convincingly makes this argument with respect to the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in “War Stories,” 561–85.

made sense of the battlefield experience over more than five hundred years, from 1450 to 2000. Harari argues that the period from 1740 to 1865 marked a fundamental cultural transition in the understanding of the battlefield experience, as that experience came to be perceived as a revelatory one. Prior to the mid-eighteenth century, soldiers' memoirs were laconic and indifferent in their references to battlefield encounters with death, whether these involved the killing of others, their own near escapes, or the deaths of comrades. "Most memoirists, if they bother to narrate the death of close friends and cherished commanders, do so matter-of-factly, without consecrating it to any high ideals, without redeeming it by patriotic and heroic slogans [...] without lamenting war's cruelty, and apparently without learning anything from it."²⁰ With the rise of the eighteenth-century cult of sensibility, however, says Harari, "bodies begin to think,"²¹ and "the extreme bodily experiences of war [...] [become] a sublime gateway to otherwise inaccessible truths and realities, which *change* the warrior instead of merely testing him."²² Inflicting or witnessing death became key experiences, prompting memoirists to describe in detail the emotions they inspired.

For all its brilliance, Harari's interpretation has been challenged. Brian Sandberg, in a study of seventeenth-century French military memoirs, shows not only that they had substantial emotional content but that their authors were also deeply affected by their experiences.²³ Louis de Pontis, rushing to the bedside of his mortally wounded friend, Jean Zamet, said that he "could not utter a word because my heart had ceased beating."²⁴ He also commented vividly upon his own near-death experience, buried alive by an explosion: "I found myself so unwell at having been crumpled and buried beneath the earth [...] that I remained shaken for a month, which left me inconsolable."²⁵ While Harari is undoubtedly correct that we should not expect early modern warriors to view their experience through the disenchanting eyes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they were clearly often more affected by those experiences than they sometimes cared to admit, even to themselves. Similarly, while it is also true that greater significance was assigned to it by its participants as warfare became more clearly defined as an extraordinary or distinct realm of human activity, many soldiers continued to relate their experiences in a way that was

20 Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 71.

21 *Ibid.*, 129.

22 *Ibid.*, 197.

23 Sandberg, "His Courage," 133-4.

24 *Ibid.*, 141.

25 *Ibid.*, 139-40.

matter-of-fact, even indifferent. As this study will demonstrate, in all periods of modern warfare the soldier's death has been perceived as both transcendent and as utterly banal.

Harari's study also addresses the third of the problems defined by Corvisier, relating to the cultural representations of the soldier's death. In this respect, the visual arts provide an important body of evidence. Considering that evidence, Harari argues that just as soldiers began to describe in detail the extreme physical and emotional sensations that came from the encounter with death, artists too bore witness to the importance of that experience as a moment of revelation. Their paintings of dying generals did not fail to include the stares of other soldiers as witness to that moment: "Their stares register the experience of combat; and the message to the viewers is that the soldiers are undergoing a deep experience, that the soldiers know they are undergoing a deep experience, and that we viewers are in an inferior position to understand and know what they experience. Death in battle is no longer just heroism. It has also become 'an experience.'"²⁶ Battlefield pietas such as Benjamin West's commemorating the death of Wolfe (1770) and John Singleton Copley's representing *The Death of Major Peirson* (1783), in Harari's view, were prime exemplars of this changed representation of death in battle, focusing on "the knowing stare" of the soldier-witnesses.²⁷ The present study considers some French counterparts to these eighteenth-century British images. It was during that century when images celebrating the heroic deaths of common soldiers first began to proliferate, a trend that culminated during the French Revolution, when the crisis of foreign invasion prompted an unprecedented effort to mobilize the nation for war. Images of youth heroes like Bara and Viala who died fighting to defend the revolution proliferated alongside those of political martyrs of liberty. Images representing the deaths of ordinary soldiers did not disappear once the revolution had passed its most radical phase, although increasingly they were replaced by images of generals who also died fighting for the republic. Even under Napoleon, prints and paintings depicted the deaths of ordinary soldiers or junior officers, such as Latour d'Auvergne and Captain Auzouy. Art critics were uneasy about paintings that depicted the violence and bloodshed of war. Painters of Napoleonic battles had to respect contemporary taste by refraining from too realistically representing the soldier's death.

In the nineteenth century, important changes occurred in printing technology and in media production that greatly increased not only the speed at which images of war were reproduced but also the extent of

²⁶ Harari, *The Ultimate Experience*, 225.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 224.

their diffusion. First, the technique of lithography, whereby chemical processes were used to make prints from limestone templates, represented a significant advance on traditional techniques of copperplate and wood-block engraving: good quality prints could be produced relatively quickly, cheaply, and in large numbers. Even more important was the advent around mid-century of the illustrated press. This depended upon a new technique for producing engraved images whereby they were first drawn and then carved in relief on boxwood ends. These rivalled metal engraving plates for detail and durability and they facilitated the simultaneous printing of images and text. Cheap illustrated newspapers such as *L'Illustration* or *La Guerre Illustrée* brought images of war from the battle fronts to a mass audience in a matter of days. Accompanied by detailed reports from war correspondents, these images helped to create a new awareness of war's realities. Images of the dead, especially, were shocking to contemporary sensibilities.²⁸

Although the Franco-Prussian War inspired a trend toward greater realism in military painting, most artists continued to shy away from the wounded body. This trend was accentuated during the First World War. The advent of front-line photography led to a steep decline in the production of *images d'Épinal*, the naive, idealized representations of war that had been produced since the seventeenth century. It also undermined the authority of war art more generally. To represent the soldier's death in an age of industrialized warfare was problematic for both traditional and modernist painters. All the same, several did so in memorable ways.

Harari's book says little about the second of Corvisier's problems, concerning the relationship between military death and the general mortality within society. A book that does address this issue is Hervé Dré villon's *L'individu et la guerre: Du Chevalier Bayard au Soldat inconnu*. In this masterly survey of the changing demands placed on the individual as modern warfare has evolved, Dré villon reflects upon the social and psychological impacts of military death. Comparing the military deaths sustained by France in the War of the Spanish Succession (310,000), the wars of the French Revolution (458,000) and the Napoleonic wars (900,000), Dré villon calculates that the Napoleonic wars, particularly in their final years, were characterized by a significant escalation in military mortality by comparison with the two earlier conflicts.²⁹ He argues that because the War of the Spanish Succession occurred at a time when society was still afflicted by great demographic crises, such as those of 1693 and 1709, the overall demographic and psychological impact of military losses was less significant

²⁸ Brown, *Mass Violence and the Self*, 177–9.

²⁹ Dré villon, *L'individu et la guerre*, 182–3.

than during the revolutionary and Napoleonic periods.³⁰ The implication is that battlefield death was perceived to be less terrible at a time when the ravages of death from epidemic disease, famine, or the endemic violence of civil society were essential facts of life. Building upon these insights, and taking into account demographic and cultural trends in modern France, particularly attitudes toward death, the present work argues that as death has been pushed to the margins of modern life, the deaths of young men on the battlefield have come to seem increasingly anomalous and unnatural.³¹ The massive and enduring psychological impact of the First World War is to be explained both by the enormous scale and intensity of the slaughter – a similar number of Frenchmen lost their lives in the four years from 1914 to 1918 as throughout the entire twenty-three years of the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars – as well as by the fact that in the years surrounding the war the Western experience of death was profoundly transformed. The war itself came at the end of a half-century of medical advances that brought about a massive decline in infant mortality. This helped to set in stark relief the terrible fate of the generation of 1914. During the war itself, the established conventions surrounding death were sorely tested, their impracticality amid so much death contributing to their progressive abandonment following the war. It was in the postwar period that the most disenchanted images of the soldier's death appeared, in both art and literature.

Although there have been important changes and turning points in the representations of the soldier's death, most notably those associated with the First World War, the continuities in those representations are also striking. The values of "honour," and "homeland" have been universal referents in the discourses surrounding the soldier's death from the Renaissance to the present. They were as central to the funeral eulogies given by Archbishop Bossuet at the court of Louis XIV as those given in the courtyard of the Invalides by President Sarkozy. Yet the meaning of those words is fluid, their relationship to one another uncertain. They have meant different things to different people in different times and places. The chapters that follow show how understandings of honour and patriotism as well as their significance in motivating soldiers to risk their lives in battle have evolved over time. Most chapters begin, like this introduction, by providing an account of one or more soldiers' deaths. This is used as a vehicle to embark upon a broad analysis of the experiences and representations of the soldier's death during specific periods of French history.

30 Ibid., 184.

31 On the Western denial of death, see especially Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, 559–601.

Broadly speaking, the book divides the history of the soldier's death into three periods. During the first period (chapters 1–3), extending from the Renaissance to the French Revolution, the aristocratic ideal of an honourable death was challenged by both the changing realities of warfare and the rise of the modern state. Honour as the prime justification for military death was first adapted to the needs of the absolute monarchy and then rejected altogether during the most radical phase of the French Revolution, which elevated devotion to the homeland in its place as inspiration to the citizen-soldiers of the new, revolutionary armies. Honour enjoyed a revival under the Directory, however, providing an essential element of the Napoleonic synthesis of old regime and revolutionary values. Patriotism remained in the ascendant throughout the second period (chapters 4–6), extending from Napoleon's rule to the First World War. During the long nineteenth century, war became progressively more destructive at the same time as soldiers' lives became more valuable. Explaining and justifying the destruction of those lives required elevating the cause of the homeland to new heights as well as insisting upon both the necessity and the rewards of sacrifice on its behalf. This logic was evident in representations of the soldier's death inspired by the Franco-Prussian War and the First World War. The tremendous slaughter of the First World War was a shock to this system of representations. That shock conditioned the third period (chapters 7–9), following the end of the First World War, which was characterized by growing uncertainty about the values of patriotism. While those values were upheld in the culture of commemoration that emerged after the First World War and was renewed under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle after the Second, disenchanting representations also manifested themselves. These representations are considered here in relation to art and literature of the interwar period, to the changing attitudes concerning the fates of colonized soldiers in the Second World War, and in the conflicted responses of French soldiers to the war in Algeria.

Chapter 1 recounts the death of the Prince of Talmont at the Battle of Marignano in 1515. It focuses upon the primacy of honour as a motivating force for the military aristocracy at the time of the Renaissance and the Italian wars, considering the "fine death" that was the aspiration of knights such as the Chevalier Bayard. It also shows how contemporary chronicles representing the death of Bayard evolved to insist increasingly upon the association of the warrior's honour with the values of service to God, king, and country. Chapter 2 jumps ahead to the eighteenth century, following the lead of André Corvisier in considering the death of the Chevalier d'Assas at the Battle of Clostercamp in 1760. This chapter demonstrates not only the tremendous changes that occurred in warfare and society as the experiment of monarchical absolutism evolved under the Bourbon

dynasty, but also the increasing emphasis placed upon service to the state and upon the utility of the soldier's death. The eighteenth century also witnessed a democratization of the soldier's death, as "subaltern heroes" were celebrated in images and verse. Chapter 3 begins by considering the death in the Nancy mutiny of 1791 of Lieutenant Desilles and examines the unprecedented ideological mobilization of France during the French Revolution, which elevated the sacrifice of heroes like Desilles as the duty of every citizen. During the radical phase of the Terror, the revolutionaries contrasted the civic devotion of ordinary citizens with what they perceived to be the corrupt notion of aristocratic honour. Honour retained a powerful allure, however, and it made a comeback during the later years of the revolution, when eulogies of revolutionary generals reprised those of Louis XIV's marshals. The harsh conditions of revolutionary warfare, amply revealed in soldiers' writings, gave the lie to propagandistic images of battlefield death.

Chapter 4 begins with the death of Marshal Lannes following one of the deadliest of Napoleon's battles, the Battle of Aspern-Essling in 1809. It shows how Napoleonic propaganda synthesized old regime and revolutionary models of military heroism and how, in the bulletins of the Grande Armée, it was increasingly the emperor rather than the nation that justified the soldier's sacrifice. This chapter considers the social and psychological impacts of the increase in the scale and intensity of warfare and of the concomitant rise in military mortality. The battlefields of Napoleonic Europe temporarily reversed the trend toward the physical separation of the living and the dead as well as the increasingly sentimental attitude of society toward the dead. Napoleonic propaganda celebrated military triumph rather than commemorating the dead, and its ultimate legacy was a cult of military glory that laid its burden upon subsequent generations.

Glory is difficult to reconcile with defeat and French armies have not always been victorious. The Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71 shocked contemporaries by the suddenness and completeness of Prussia's victory. In its aftermath, images of French soldiers sacrificing their lives without hope of victory became a means to salvage national pride as well as to model the attitudes required to achieve *revanche* in the future. Under the old regime soldiers' deaths were only considered meritorious if they were useful; under the Third Republic the more futile they were, the more they were admired. Chapter 5 considers the death of Henri Regnault at the Battle of Buzenval in January 1871 in this context. The war generated a new awareness of war's horrors and an unprecedented determination to provide sepulchres for all soldiers who had died. The tendency toward a more realistic representation of the soldier's death was limited in both degree and duration, however, giving way to increasingly propagandistic images.

The First World War inevitably occupies a central place in this study. It was the costliest of all France's modern wars in terms of human life, and the great majority of the lives lost were those of soldiers. The war generated a vast amount of contemporary testimony that continues to expand as collections of letters and other writings come to light. Historians of the First World War have taken the lead in exploring war cultures, and there are fine studies not only of soldiers' and civilians' attitudes toward death and dying but also of the commemorative culture that grew out of the war. Chapter 6 begins with the death of Eugène-Emmanuel Lemerrier at Les Épargnes in the spring of 1915 before considering the tensions between idealized representations of the soldier's death and the harsh realities that began to emerge in the writings of soldiers, surgeons, nurses, and chaplains during the war. Chapter 7 considers the aftermath of the war and the disenchanting view of the soldier's death that emerged in art and literature within the broader context of the commemorative culture that was beginning to take shape.

The ideal of patriotic self-sacrifice did not die with the First World War, although it was seriously called into question. Chapter 8 considers its revival during and after the Second World War as a means for recovering national self-respect in the wake of the defeat of 1940. This chapter begins by considering the death of Charles N'Tchoréré, one of many colonized Black troops murdered after surrendering to German forces in 1940.³² This acknowledges the importance of these troops in the French army and underlines the radicalization of warfare during the Second World War, a trend that France did not escape. While patriotic representations insisted upon the willing sacrifice of colonial subjects grateful for the benefits of French civilization, the reality was that many fought because they had little choice. In their homelands and in France itself they have increasingly been represented as victims of an ungrateful *mère patrie*. The ninth and final chapter considers the soldier's death in the context of the Algerian war of independence of 1954–62. This was the last war France has fought in which young conscripts fulfilling their obligatory national service were compelled to serve. Their attitudes and feelings toward the prospects of dying in this unacknowledged war reflected the contradictions of a society that was experiencing significant social and cultural change. The Algerian war was also fought by professional soldiers, however, such as Marcel Bigeard and the

32 I have generally followed the lead of Claire Miot in using the adjective "colonized" rather than "colonial" to refer to soldiers from the French overseas empire, since it describes the status of those soldiers in a colonial system that subjected people as well as territories. Occasionally, depending upon context, I have retained the more traditional adjective. Miot, *La première armée française*, 21.

“paras” who were idealized in the novels of Jean Lartéguy. These men, some of whom became implicated in the rebellion of the OAS,³³ insisted upon their obedience to a concept of honour that was at odds with their obligations to the authority of the established government. They also sought to preserve and revitalize traditional notions of the soldier’s sacrifice. Aided by his photographer, Marc Flament, Bigeard idealized the soldier’s death as a transcendent experience.

The Algerian war, which pitted Algerian against Algerian and Frenchman against Frenchman, was in many respects a civil war. Certainly, it was fought with the bitterness and cruelty on both sides that are commonly perceived to be intrinsic to civil wars. It is one of four major civil wars experienced by France that are touched upon in this study. The others are the French Wars of Religion of the sixteenth century, the war in the Vendée at the end of the eighteenth century, and the war ending in the defeat of the Paris Commune in the nineteenth century. In these conflicts soldiers were sometimes perpetrators and sometimes victims of acts of extreme violence. Historians and theorists have reflected at length on the reasons for the exceptional brutality of civil wars. Stathis N. Kalyvas identifies four categories of explanation, emphasizing respectively: 1) political breakdown; 2) ideological polarization; 3) transgression of established norms of behaviour; and 4) security dilemmas arising from disparities in warfare technology.³⁴ It is beyond the scope of this study to choose between these arguments, all of which have some merit in relation to France’s civil wars. In all four cases considered here, however, acts of extreme cruelty were facilitated by both circumstance and ideology. The circumstances attending siege warfare, as well as rural and urban insurgency, broke down the distinction between combatants and non-combatants at the same time as they fostered the anxieties and frustrations that spilled over into violence. Ideologically, in all four cases it was the perceived “otherness” of the enemy, who was both dehumanized and denied legitimacy as a combatant, that fed the fear and contempt that in turn led to torture and massacre. What is also notable in all four cases is the impulse not just to kill but also to desecrate the bodies of defeated adversaries. This desecration, the very opposite of the sanctification of soldiers whose deaths occurred in other contexts, served to demoralize enemy soldiers by denying them even the consolation of an honourable death. Profaning the body of the enemy was not exclusive to civil wars, as we shall see, but occurred in any context where the perceived illegitimacy or alterity of the victims was seen to justify such treatment. In

33 “Organisation armée secrète.”

34 Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 3.

such situations, the last resort of the defeated was to affirm their dignity as soldiers and as human beings by dying bravely.

The episodes considered in this study reveal some important changes and continuities in the realities and representations of military death since the Renaissance. The discourse surrounding the soldier's death, with its referents of "honour," "glory," and "homeland," has preserved a remarkable continuity over time, despite significant changes to both the content and contexts of those words. In recent years, however, that discourse has struggled to maintain its hold. A variety of factors have contributed to this, including a relatively more peaceful international situation since the unification of Europe and the ending of the Cold War, a declining sense of belonging to the nation, the professionalization of the armed forces, and changing attitudes toward youth and individual self-realization. Most importantly, death has beat a retreat from everyday life: medicalized, marginalized, denied. The soldier's death has become as unacceptable as any other. Yet for as long as modern states require armed forces to defend their interests, they will need to find ways to digest the fact of the soldier's death. As Pierre Chaine wrote in his classic 1917 work, *Mémoires d'un rat*, "War for the historian is just a synchronicity of movements and dates; for the leaders it represents a formidable labour and for the observer an interesting spectacle. But for the soldier who fights in the ranks, war is only a long encounter with death."³⁵

35 Chaine, *Les mémoires d'un rat*, 82.

Dying for Honour: The Renaissance

THE DEATH OF THE PRINCE OF TALMONT

Charles de la Trémoille, Prince of Talmont, received sixty-two wounds, according to contemporary sources, during the Battle of Marignano, which was fought on 13–14 September 1515, and died three days later.¹ We do not know the nature of his wounds, although five of them were described as mortal and we can presume, since the prince had been in the thick of the fight between the French advance guard and the Swiss heavy infantry, that they were mostly cuts and penetrations caused by edged weapons, principally swords, pikes, and halberds. The number of wounds was important to contemporaries as a measure of valour and for that reason may have been exaggerated. Nevertheless, they may reasonably be taken as an indication of the battle's ferocity. Martin du Bellay described how the two sides had fought themselves to exhaustion by the end of the first day's fighting: "and such was the confusion, in the darkness of night, that in many places French and Swiss slept beside one another, ours in their camp and theirs in ours; and the king slept all night in his armour (except for his helmet), on a gun carriage [...] Recognizing one another at the break of day, each returned to his own flag; and the battle recommenced more furiously than the evening before."² Du Bellay estimated that of the 35,000 Swiss soldiers who fought in the battle, 14–15,000 were killed, including many of the most experienced leaders.³ While not enumerating French

1 Bouchet, *Panegyrique*, 178.

2 Bellay, *Mémoires*, 265.

3 *Ibid.*, 267. Jean Bouchet estimated 15–16,000 Swiss casualties. Bouchet, *Panegyrique*, 178. Didier Le Fur, in a recent study, states that of 21,000 Swiss soldiers who left Milan before the battle only 13,000 returned, of whom 1,500 were seriously wounded (many of these were later massacred following the surrender of Milan to the French). Le Fur estimates that the French army suffered 8,000 dead and over 1,000 wounded. Le Fur, *Marignan*, 116–17.

casualties, he acknowledged that these were far from negligible. Like other chroniclers, du Bellay listed some of the principal Italian and French nobles who were killed in the battle, including the son of Count Petilano, “a young man who had long wanted to find himself fighting for the king,” who led a charge against the retreating Swiss, “in which he was killed, and many others with him.”⁴ Jean Bouchet, a chronicler to whom we owe most of what we know about the death of Charles de la Trémoille, stated, “This meant the loss of many worthy men of France, and even the majority of a band of young French princes and lords who were in the advance guard.”⁵ The French may have lost as many as twenty prominent captains at Marignano.⁶

Charles de la Trémoille was therefore one among many who died at Marignano. We know virtually nothing about most of those who were killed. The deaths of common soldiers – as opposed to noblemen – were unrecorded and uncommemorated, their bodies unceremoniously piled into mass graves. We can safely presume many of them suffered extremely unpleasant ends. We know that the French artillery – “seventy-four large pieces” – was used to deadly effect against the close formations of Swiss infantry, causing them “a marvelous discomfort.”⁷ The musketry of French and German infantry fighting in French employ also caused the Swiss “great harm.”⁸ Pressing forward to the attack, the Swiss pikemen exacted a heavy price in return. The pike, several metres in length and deployed in dense thickets, was an effective weapon against the famed French heavy cavalry. Meanwhile, Swiss halberdiers slipped between the ranks of pikemen to disembowel horses and hack at the French infantry and dismounted men-at-arms; swords and daggers sought the unprotected joints and visors of protective coats of armour. Not all the victims were killed by firearms and edged weapons. Such was the press of battle that many must have been trampled or crushed to death. This is at least suggested by the experience of a young squire, who was praised by the chroniclers for using his body as a shield to protect his master and who was pulled from the fray, an action “of which he had great need, as much because of the blows he had taken, as for the number of men who had passed over him, so that he barely had the strength to breathe.”⁹ Some soldiers were even burned to death. The Lord of Florange claimed responsibility for the deaths of eight hundred

4 Bellay, *Mémoires*, 266–7.

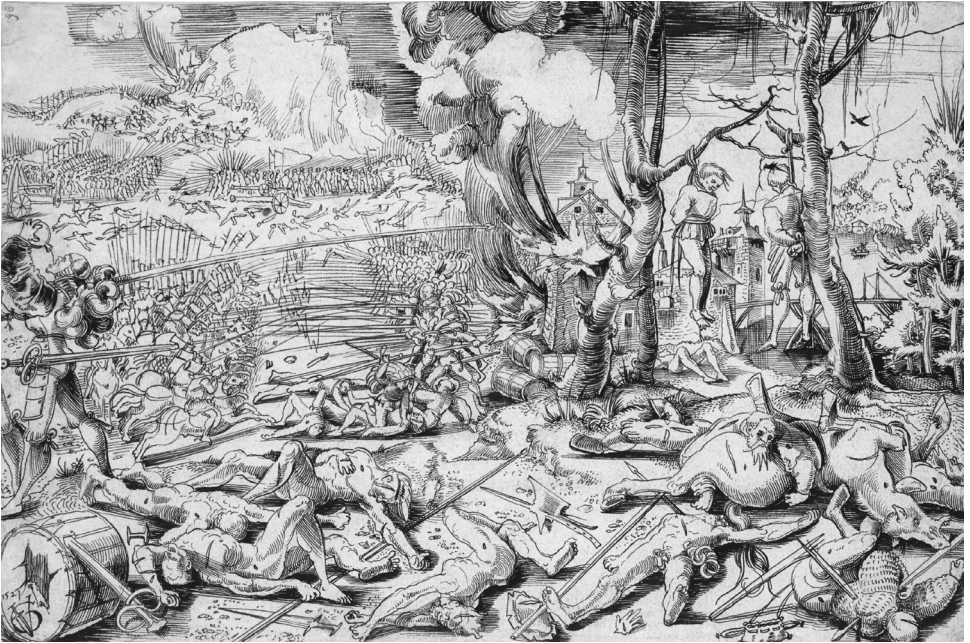
5 Bouchet, *Panégryque*, 178.

6 Potter, *Renaissance France at War*, 209.

7 Florange, *Mémoires*, 193.

8 *Ibid.*, 196.

9 Bellay, *Mémoires*, 266.



1.1. Urs Graf, *Schlachtfeld*. 1521.

Swiss soldiers after he set fire to the house in which they had sought refuge.¹⁰ The violence of the battle inspired one of the few early modern artworks to dwell on the atrocities of war. This was *Schlachtfeld*, engraved by the Swiss artist Urs Graf in 1521 (fig. 1.1). Graf was a Swiss mercenary who was in all likelihood present at Marignano; his famous engraving showing the battlefield strewn with dismembered corpses may have been his way of exorcising the traumatic memories of the first great defeat suffered by the Swiss in the Italian wars.¹¹ Another contemporary work of art that conveyed a sense of bodies crushed in the melee was a bas-relief sculpted in 1551 by Pierre Bontemps for the funerary monument of Francis I in the basilica at Saint Denis (fig. 1.2).

Amid all the anonymous deaths that occurred at Marignano, Charles de la Trémoille was relatively well favoured. The circumstances surrounding his death were amply documented by Jean Bouchet in the panegyric he

¹⁰ Florange, *Mémoires*, 231–2.

¹¹ On this topic see Roeck, “The Atrocities of War,” 129–40. On Graf’s engraving see Bächtiger, “Marignano: Zum ‘Schlachtfeld’ von Urs Graf.”



1.2. Battle of Marignano in 1515. Relief on the base of the funerary monument of Francis I (1494–1547), by Pierre Bontemps. 1550.

wrote in honour of Louis de la Trémoille, Charles's father, who also fought at Marignano, but who survived his son for a further ten years before meeting his own end at the Battle of Pavia in 1525. Carried wounded from the battlefield by his childhood mentor, the knight Regnault de Moussy, the younger La Trémoille was tended by physicians in his tent, who at first gave the father hope of his son's survival. These hopes were not at first dispelled by King Francis, who was made aware by the surgeons of Charles's impending death but who sought to soften the blow by evoking examples from ancient Rome of fathers who had been happy for their sons to die in battle. For his part, the dying youth declared a stoic acceptance of his fate. "I die in the prime of my life, but I have no regrets, since it so pleases God, and He has granted me grace to die in the service of the king and of the public interest."¹² The father was no less stoical. "I knew my son could die young in war or elsewhere," he said. "And did not hope he would live forever; but, seeing him drawn to the place of danger where men of good heart put themselves for the public good, I looked upon him as already dead." Louis de la Trémoille expressed satisfaction at the manner of his

12 Bouchet, *Panégyrique*, 178.

son's death, "after receiving sixty-two wounds, for the maintenance of the public good and in a just war."¹³

Such satisfaction was not shared by all. Charles de la Trémoille's embalmed body – save for the heart and entrails which, along with those of other French nobles killed in the battle, were to be interred in a memorial chapel to be built on the battle site – was returned to the family home at Thouars, in France, for burial. There it was received by the young man's mother, Gabrielle de Bourbon, who was inconsolable, despite the best efforts of those around her to raise her spirits. The Bishop of Poitiers delivered a funeral oration in which he directly addressed the mother, reminding her of death's ubiquitous, unpredictable, and arbitrary nature and insisting that, of the many deaths her son might have had, that which he experienced was one to envy.

Consider, Madam, that my late cousin and your son did not die of any of these terrible accidents, but as a man of virtue, alongside people of merit; not among the beasts, but with humans; not among brigands and pirates, but in a just war; not from the bites of wild animals, but by a martial blade; not by cannon, but by blows of the lance; not in a cowardly way, but bravely; not alone, but accompanied by his father; not in the service of tyrants, but in that of his king; not shamefully, but honestly, covered with honour, wrapped in renown and in the love and grace of God.¹⁴

After all, concluded the Bishop, it was better for Charles to have died in the prime of his youth, bestowing upon his family a legacy of "perpetual glory," rather than living another thirty years, "and then to die in his bed or elsewhere of a horrible illness."¹⁵ The bishop's words were unavailing, however, and despite a pious exchange of letters with her husband, the mother went into a decline from which she did not recover. Louis de la Trémoille was left to rail against death, which had deprived him of a wife and son, both of whom should naturally have outlived him: "I have lost one to the sword, the other to sorrow, and I will lose myself to anguish."¹⁶

Jean Bouchet's account of the death of the Prince of Talmont no doubt contains a fair amount of invention in its idealized representation of the noble and pious sentiments expressed by all concerned. It is nonetheless revealing of contemporary attitudes toward the soldier's death at a

13 *Ibid.*, 181–2.

14 *Ibid.*, 189.

15 *Ibid.*, 190.

16 *Ibid.*, 203.

particularly important time of historical change. Talmont's death at the Battle of Marignano occurred at the time of the Italian Wars, during which the institutions and conventions of medieval warfare were transformed by new weapons and new methods. During the years from 1494 to 1559, Italy became a crucible into which were poured the disparate military traditions that had been developing in various parts of Renaissance Europe. German and Swiss mercenaries brought the discipline and tactics that made them the most feared and sought-after heavy infantry. Invading French armies brought the artillery that had blasted the English from their castles in the Hundred Years War, as well as a heavy cavalry, organized in *compagnies d'ordonnance*, that was the preserve of the French nobility.¹⁷ The Spanish brought infantry armed with the new firearms, principally the arquebus, and were the first to develop an effective combination of heavy and light infantry, mixing pikemen with arquebusiers.¹⁸ Light cavalry, equipped with bows or firearms, came principally from the Balkans. Italy itself provided a tradition of professional generalship represented by the *condottieri*, or mercenary captains. The merger of these traditions marked both the "twilight of chivalry" and the birth of modern warfare.¹⁹ These changes, which rendered warfare more lethal and undermined the battlefield dominance of the armoured knight, profoundly affected the culture of the military nobility to which the Prince of Talmont belonged. The representations of the soldier's death from this epoch were shaped by the need to adapt medieval traditions to modern conditions. Those representations have haunted subsequent representations down to the present day. The heroic model of a "fine death" – such as that of the Prince of Talmont – had tremendous purchase in a society where the military nobility enjoyed social and political pre-eminence, where the basic facts of life were

17 The French cavalry was organized into "lances." At the time of the Italian wars, each lance comprised one man-at-arms, a *coutilier*, two archers (occasionally still equipped with bows, but increasingly armed in similar fashion, although more lightly, than men-at-arms: a sort of medium cavalry), and a couple of pages. The fighting strength of a lance was therefore three or four men. See Potter, *Renaissance France at War*, 70–85.

18 The arquebus, developed in the 1420s and 1430s, was the first effective hand-held firearm. Fired by means of a slow-burning match, the arquebus was the antecedent of the heavier matchlock musket developed in the 1520s, which required a fork rest because of its weight. See Black, *European Warfare, 1494–1660*, 70, 87.

19 Nicolas Le Roux, *Le crépuscule*; Mallett and Shaw, *The Italian Wars*, 177–97. The army commanded by Francis I at Marignano comprised approximately 2,500 lances (15,000 men), plus about 30,000 infantry, approximately half of whom were *landsknechts*, including the "Black Band," a unit that fought in the black clothes of mourning. In addition to seventy-two heavy guns, mounted on wheeled carriages, the army possessed approximately 3,000 "light artillery" weapons, including the principal infantry firearm, the arquebus. Le Fur, *Marignan*, 70–3.

harsh and death – often violent – a familiar presence. As those circumstances changed – as the military nobility declined in importance; as lives became more comfortable and society safer; as individual identities took on greater importance than collective ones; as death was banished from everyday experience; and as war itself came to be perceived as an extraordinary rather than a normal state of affairs – so that model has lost its traction. Many of these changes were either slow or late in coming, however, with the result that variations of the heroic model, adapted according to regime and circumstance, have had remarkable staying power. Already, as early as the sixteenth century, we can see evidence of this adaptability and durability as the aristocratic ideal of a beautiful death was subtly altered in the interests of the French monarchy. During the second half of the century, however, the authority of the crown reached its nadir as the kingdom was torn by civil war. Religious hatreds threatened to undermine combatants' respect for the rules of war defined by the chivalric code and heroic images of the noble warrior were displaced by unheroic representations of soldiers as agents in the massacre of innocent civilians.

BEAUTIFUL DEATHS – AND UGLY ONES

The Bishop of Poitiers's funeral oration for the Prince of Talmont provides us with a good sense of what French nobles of the sixteenth century imagined constituted a fitting death: one that was the result of a fair fight in a just cause in the service of one's legitimate monarch. Given that noble identity was still pre-eminently associated with military service, it was taken for granted that the most appropriate end for a noble was to die in combat. Indeed, so determined was one ailing noble to die such a death that, learning from his doctor that he had only hours left to live, he insisted upon being caparisoned, "from head to toe," in his finest armour to take leave of his retainers. Brantôme wrote approvingly of this next best thing to a *belle mort*, that it was "the finest death one has ever heard spoken of since kings wore crowns."²⁰ Death in combat, by exhibiting his courage, enhanced the warrior noble's personal reputation as well as the honour of his lineage. Honour was a complex commodity, incorporating notions of virtue, dignity, and reputation, but not exactly synonymous with any of these. In a society where transactions of all kinds depended upon trust, honour was paramount, to be preserved at any price, even at the cost of one's life. Pertaining to all layers of society, honour was a collective possession that might belong to a corporation, an institution, or a family. An individual

20 Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 314–15.

could add to the honour of his relatives and descendants by behaving in ways that were deemed appropriate to his or her place in society. Alternatively, he or she might lose honour by behaving inappropriately. For the military aristocracy, appropriate behaviour meant adhering to the values of chivalry, encapsulated in the notions of virtue, courage, piety, courtesy, and loyalty, which were modelled by the heroes of *chansons de geste* and chivalric romances.²¹ Courage was foremost among these values. Honour depended upon acting fearlessly on the field of battle. Hence, the most famous knights, including Pierre Terrail de Bayard and Louis de la Trémoille, were given the title “without fear” by their admiring contemporaries.²² It was considered far better to die on the battlefield than to endure the shame and dishonour incurred by behaving in a cowardly way. In the words of Boyvin de Villars, “It is better to lose one’s life gloriously than to live in infamy and misery.”²³ Blaise de Monluc advised that soldiers should never be afraid when going into battle: “If you die there, you will dishonour neither yourself nor your posterity, and so you will be buried with an immortal reputation, which is all that men who bear arms should desire.”²⁴ Louis d’Ars, motivating his men before an attack on an Italian town in 1503, declared: “Better to die here honourably under the shield of virtue, than to live shamefully, under the shadow of cowardice.”²⁵

The military memoirs and chronicles of the sixteenth century were therefore filled with accounts of soldiers’ deaths that exemplified this readiness to die for honour and reputation. Brantôme, writing during the reign of Henri IV, cited the example of Charles III, Constable of Bourbon, who supposedly declared his willingness to die as he exhorted his men before leading the imperial attack on Rome in 1527. Referring to an astrologer’s prediction that he would die in the capture of a town, Bourbon declared “I swear to you that this is the least of my worries, and it bothers me little to die, if, in dying, my body remains with everlasting glory, renowned by all!”²⁶ According to Brantôme’s account, the constable proceeded to match his words with deeds, leading the assault in a distinctive white tunic and suffering a mortal wound as he mounted a scaling

21 For a useful summary of the discourse on chivalry, see Lynn, *Battle*, 78–85. For a helpful definition of honour, distinguishing it from associated concepts such as “renown” and “dignity,” see Nassiet, *La violence*, 178–206; see also Le Roux, *Le crépuscule*, 19–55.

22 “Sans peur et sans reproche” – “without fear and without reproach” – was the formula famously applied both to Bayard and to La Trémoille. Germa-Romann, *Du “bel mourir,”* 29.

23 Cited in *ibid.*, 70. For the criteria that defined a *belle mort* for contemporaries, see *ibid.*, 136–7.

24 Monluc, *Commentaire et lettres*, vol. 2, 119.

25 Auton, *Chroniques de Louis XII*, vol. 3, 6.

26 Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 266.

ladder. As he lay dying, his final request was that his body be covered and quietly removed, to avoid any discouragement to the attacking force. “And just as he uttered these words with a brave heart,” wrote Brantôme, “as if he had suffered no harm, he came to the end of his final days as a mortal.”²⁷ Brantôme made clear that the constable’s fearless words and deeds were an inspiration to his men, who, once they heard of his fate, “fought even more fiercely to avenge his death.” A Spanish standard bearer, struck fatally by a bullet as he entered the breach, passed his flag to his superior, declaring, “Captain, I give my honour to your safekeeping, for I am dead.” Finally, the captain himself performed his own feats of courage. Knocked senseless in a struggle with French soldiers, he lost the flag with which he had been entrusted. Returning to the fray, however, he recovered another “and going forward fighting like a lion, was so successful that he led the chant, *Victoria, victoria! Imperio, Imperio!* [...] with the result that the city was taken.”²⁸

Brantôme’s account of the attack on Rome is reminiscent of Jean d’Auton’s earlier description, from the reign of Louis XII, of the attack by German and Burgundian forces on the French defenders of Novara in 1500. On this occasion, it was the courage of a mortally wounded French nobleman, the “Bastard of Amezay,” that received praise. Engaged in hand-to-hand combat with a Burgundian standard-bearer, Amezay was wounded by numerous gunshots:

But, for all that, he did not release his grip [on the enemy flag] and by sheer force tore it from the Burgundian’s fist, wrapping it around his arm in spite of his enemies [...] Like another Epaminondas, the Duke of Thebes, who, joyously, while dying, kissed the shield with which he had so vigorously defended the public interest, so did the Frenchman, notwithstanding the extreme sobs that racked his body [...] similarly, without showing any sorrow at his impending death, carry the standard to his lodging, knowing that happy Fame embellished by virtue after temporal death, bears the triumph of eternal praise.²⁹

D’Auton, like Brantôme, insisted upon the complete absence of fear – the joyfulness, even – of the soldier as he went to his death.

Even from these few examples of representations of the soldier’s death from the Italian Wars, we can see that reality had to be forced to fit the

27 Ibid., 268.

28 Ibid., 269–70.

29 Auton, *Chroniques de Louis XII*, vol. 1, 210.

chivalric mould. This is apparent in the simplest of terms. If we return to the Bishop of Poitiers's funeral oration, one of the oppositions the bishop emphasized in his definition of a good death was that between a death caused by gunfire (cannon) and one caused by edged weapons (blows of a lance). Firearms were widely perceived to be associated with cowardice, undermining the essential chivalric principle of a fair fight and denying their victims a truly honourable death. "Would to God that this unhappy instrument had never been invented," wrote Blaise de Monluc of the arquebus, condemning it as a weapon used by "the most cowardly and villainous, who would not dare to look in the face those they bring down from afar with their miserable bullets."³⁰ Yet, of the deaths we have so far considered in this chapter, only that of the Prince of Talmont was caused by a "martial blade." The others, from the Constable of Bourbon to the Bastard of Amezay, were all caused by gunshots. The accounts do not dwell on this, as both Brantôme and d'Auton contrive to emphasize the element of hand-to-hand combat in the struggle for control of standards on the ramparts of besieged cities. The fact remains, however, that even these exemplary deaths fell short of the ideal standard in a significant way. Indeed, what was arguably the most exemplary death of all, that of the Chevalier Bayard, also fell short given that Bayard was himself the victim of a gunshot wound, received during the retreat from Robecco in 1524. This is apparent from the account of the *Loyal Serviteur*: "The good knight, as confidently as if he had been in his own house, got the men-at-arms marching, withdrawing at a good pace, his face always toward the enemy and, sword in hand, inspired more fear in them than a hundred others; but by the will of God, a gunshot was fired, the bullet from which struck him in the vitals, and severed his spine. When he felt the blow, he cried: 'Jesus!' and then said: 'Alas! My God, I am dead.'"³¹ Once again, the inconvenient fact that Bayard was killed by a firearm is relatively unimportant in a narrative that emphasizes the formulas of chivalry. Nothing must be allowed to spoil the image of a noble death. Hence the insistence upon Bayard's constantly facing the enemy, sword in hand, even though this cannot have been literally true given that he was managing a retreat.

Although it is easy for us to see in accounts such as this evidence that the age of chivalry was passing, the military and social dominance of the military aristocracy undermined by the democratizing effects of the infantry and firearms revolutions, that is not how contemporaries like Brantôme, d'Auton, and the *Loyal Serviteurs* saw things. Rather, they sought to assimilate to the discourse of chivalry the realities of the new warfare that emerged

³⁰ Monluc, *Commentaires et lettres*, 52.

³¹ Mailles, *Très joyeuse, plaisante et récréative histoire*, 413.

from the Italian Wars. Their purpose was to insist that despite the new, ever more deadly environment of the modern battlefield, heroic exploits and beautiful deaths were still possible. Their best efforts, however, could not mask the reality that death now came to the soldier not in an equal, face-to-face test of his skill and strength, but from afar, unperceived, as a matter of chance. The memoirs of Robert de la Marck III, Lord of Florange, recounting his campaigns in Italy, provide a litany of noble lives suddenly ended by artillery or arquebus fire. From 1511, he recalled accompanying a commissar of artillery to survey the ground prior to laying siege to the town of Concordia. The commissar was hit in the head by a shot fired from an arquebus and died eight days later.³² Florange wrote with rather greater relish of the death shortly thereafter of a Spanish captain, Gabriel de Peralta, decapitated by a French cannonball as the two armies shadowed one another before Bologna. Peralta was known to wear a gold chain around his neck, “and afterwards, a French adventurer went to look for both the chain and the head.”³³ Florange’s description of the Battle of Ravenna (1512) included an anecdote concerning two French infantry captains who, after enduring three hours of artillery bombardment, sat down together to refresh themselves, “and while drinking, a cannon shot carried them both off, which was a great shame.”³⁴ In describing the siege of Novara (1513), he wrote that “the artillery of the castle and town wrought great murder upon the landsknechts³⁵ and foot soldiers and killed many of them, and there was one landsknecht close by the Young Adventurer [La Marck habitually referred to himself this way, in the third person], who had both legs carried away, and many others were badly wounded.”³⁶ In describing the siege of Milan in 1522, Florange noted the death of Antoine Colonna, whose leg was torn off by a cannon shot fired from the city and who died six hours later. This death was particularly poignant because the city was defended by the victim’s brother, Prosper Colonna, “who was extraordinarily sorrowful and had his [Antoine’s] body carried to Rome in the greatest triumph possible, and his burial was fine and honourable.”³⁷ At the siege of Pavia in 1525, Florange again witnessed a young companion, Claude de Longueville, Duke of Orléans, killed by an arquebus shot as they surveyed the town together. The shot, wrote Florange, “went right through his heart.” Longueville “said only three words: ‘I am, I am dead!’; and was carried off

32 Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 67.

33 *Ibid.*, 74.

34 *Ibid.*, 90.

35 *Landsknechts* were mercenary soldiers from Germany.

36 Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 127.

37 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 59.

quite dead.”³⁸ The account of Longueville’s death is one of relatively few passages where Florange emphasizes the tragedy of a young life prematurely cut short. “Never were people so afflicted,” he wrote, describing the feelings of the noble entourage who gathered around the young man’s body, “and, upon my faith, they were right, because he was the most courageous prince, and the finest person in a thousand, aged eighteen years, well loved by the king and by everyone.”³⁹

Throughout this narrative of lives ended by firearms, Florange expresses a sort of amazed incomprehension at the way in which combat and death in battle had been transformed by the new weaponry. In describing the failure of an assault on a breach in Pavia’s defences, he emphasized the effect of the enemy’s artillery: “And in the attack a standard-bearer who entered the breach [...] and fully three hundred men were killed and as many wounded, the majority of whom died of artillery strikes, without a single blow by hand. And Monsieur Bussy lost seven captains in the attack; and eight hundred men were killed there, from the king’s side and from the Swiss, [including] those who were wounded and died later, without a single blow by hand.”⁴⁰ The repetition of the phrase “without a single blow by hand,” underlines Florange’s sense of awe that such a combat, almost entirely dominated by firearms, was possible. For other writers, such incomprehension amounted to denial. Witness Jean Bouchet’s account of the French defeat at Pavia, during which his hero, Louis de la Trémoille, was killed by a shot from an arquebus:

The French certainly had the worst of it, more by misfortune than because of the prowess and skill of our enemies; because, as they themselves have written and confessed, their army was less well ordered than ours; also, the arquebuses carried by their cavalry (whom the French feared not) did more harm to the French than their prowess and valour: and if the whole French army had acquitted themselves as well as the king and the princes, captains and gentlemen surrounding him, it would have won, because in the first charge involving the king and the said Lord de la Trémoille, who was wounded in the face, above and below the eye, were accomplished many great and fine feats of arms that, by the strength of blows and without artillery, killed two or three hundred enemy men-at-arms.⁴¹

38 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 175.

39 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 176.

40 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 188.

41 Bouchet, *Panégyrique*, 231.

Bouchet's ill-concealed scorn not just for the enemy's tactics but also for the failure of the bulk of the French army to live up to the example set by Francis I and the flower of French chivalry constituted a refusal to admit that the age of chivalry was coming to an end.

There were many other ways in which the facts of the noble deaths reported by the writers of memoirs and panegyrics were at odds with the discourse of chivalry that contained them. It is true that the discourse of chivalry influenced the conduct of war, inspiring celebrated occasions when knights challenged one another to single combat. On such occasions, the reality of warfare was made to conform to an ideal. The legend of the Chevalier Bayard was celebrated precisely because of his participation in these chivalrous interludes. In 1503, during the French campaign in Naples, Bayard had reportedly overcome illness and the strength of the Spanish knight, Sotomayor, killing the latter in single combat and thereby cleansing his honour of Sotomayor's insults. He also supposedly fought in a contest between thirteen (some say eleven) French knights and an equal number of Spanish ones, in which the combatants were eliminated from the field as soon as they were unhorsed. On this occasion, the Spanish had the advantage, but Bayard and one other French knight manoeuvred behind a rampart composed of the bodies of dead horses until a draw was declared and honour deemed to have been satisfied.⁴² Generally, however, the ideals of chivalry characterized less the reality of warfare than the alternative reality of jousts and tournaments.⁴³ The celebration of Bayard's chivalrous exploits masked a much harsher reality. Contemporary descriptions of sixteenth-century battles, despite the way they are framed within the discourse of chivalry, are often more evocative of the slaughterhouse and of grim, frenzied massacres than they are of the tournament or joust.

Once again, the memoir of Florange is instructive on this point. The Prince of Talmont may have held the unenviable record for the number of wounds received in a battle, but Florange must have run him a close second. After the Battle of Novara (1513), he wrote, his father had searched the battlefield for his two sons. He found Florange among the dead. The "Young Adventurer" was unrecognizable, "because he had forty-six really bad wounds, the least severe of which took six weeks to heal."⁴⁴ Multiple wounds were worthy of note as a badge of honour. Of course, it was

⁴² For analysis of the various versions of these events, see the biography by Jacquart, *Bayard*, 132–3; see also Potter, *Renaissance France at War*, 92.

⁴³ As John Lynn explains, the tournament or joust had developed because even during the Middle Ages the reality of warfare had failed to live up to the ideals of chivalry. See Lynn, *Battle*, 73–109.

⁴⁴ Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 128.

important those wounds should be on the front of the body, indicating the recipient had not dishonourably turned away from the fight. Gaston de Foix, the French commander killed at the Battle of Ravenna (1512), “was wounded by so many blows,” wrote Brantôme, “that, from chin to forehead, he had fourteen.”⁴⁵ But we might also take multiple wounds as evidence that combat was sometimes fuelled by irrational passions, by the urge to wound and re-wound long after the enemy’s capacity to resist had been overcome. Certainly, many of Florange’s battle accounts suggest that mercy was rarely shown, even to a defeated foe. His description of Agnadello, where the Venetian army was defeated by the French in 1509, stated that thousands of dead bodies were piled in a heap that reached two pikes’ lengths (over ten metres) in height. Many of the victims had been asphyxiated, he said, and afterwards, “more than thirty thousand were buried in five ditches.”⁴⁶ Most historians agree that Guiccardini’s estimate of 8,000 casualties for the battle is a more plausible calculation than that of Florange, but there is no disputing that the French refused to take prisoners or that the Venetian army was traumatized by the defeat.⁴⁷ As for Novara, the battle in which Florange was so severely wounded, his claim that there was only a handful of survivors from the three or four hundred men in the front rank of the landsknecht formation that bore the brunt of the battle with the Swiss is entirely plausible. A recent study estimates that the French army suffered 40–50 per cent casualties in the battle (5,000 to 6,000 dead) and that two-thirds of the landsknechts, abandoned to their fate by the French cavalry, were killed by their implacable Swiss foes.⁴⁸ The slaughter may have been as great at the Battle of Ceresole (1544), where the Swiss soldiers, this time fighting on the French side, were once again determined to take no prisoners. On this occasion, Monluc demonstrated that he had no compunction about exploiting to the full the deadly effectiveness of the arquebus he so deplored. In his account of the battle, Monluc took credit for putting arquebusiers in the second rank of the French infantry formation, with the object of killing the captains in the enemy’s front line. The tactic, which depended upon the arquebusiers holding their fire until within a pike’s length of the enemy, worked to perfection. “There took place a great killing,” wrote Monluc. “Not a shot missed.”⁴⁹

45 Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 14. The Loyal Serviteur estimated fourteen or fifteen: Mailles, *Très joyeuse, plaisante et récréative histoire*, 327.

46 Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 130–2.

47 Le Roux, *Le crépuscule*, 152; Mallett and Shaw, *The Italian Wars*, 89–90.

48 Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 128; Le Roux, *Le crépuscule*, 154; Olivier Bangerter, *Novare (1513)*, 100.

49 Monluc, *Commentaires et lettres*, vol. 1, 278.

Although firearms were clearly a great leveller on the battlefield, the chances of surviving such massacres were at least slightly better for men of rank than they were for ordinary soldiers. Indeed, it is important to note that most battle narratives, written by noblemen for other noblemen to read, expressed scant interest in common soldiers; the latter were there merely to make up the numbers. Bartolomeo d'Alviano, the commander of the Venetian army at Agnadello, was one individual who, because of his rank, was given quarter by the French and therefore escaped the slaughter that was the fate of the men under his command. In Florange's account, Alviano exchanged courtesies with King Louis XII, apparently more conscious of honour gained than of lives lost. "Notwithstanding that he had lost," said d'Alviano, "there was still sufficient honour to be won from a battle in which a French king had fought against him in person."⁵⁰ An anecdote recounted by Brantôme concerning the Battle of Pavia (1525) provides an unwitting insight into the ways social inequalities were reflected on the battlefield, sometimes making the difference between life and death. François de Bourbon, the Count of Saint-Paul, wrote Brantôme, "fought so valiantly that he was found among the dead hovering on the brink of death. And, feeling the pain as a soldier was beginning to cut off a finger to remove a valuable ring, he cried out and identified himself; hence the soldier picked him up and took him to Pavia, where he was so well cared for that he escaped death."⁵¹ Furthermore, once recovered, the fortunate Count evaded his captors and returned home without paying any ransom. Clearly, Saint-Paul owed his survival entirely to his social status and to the perception of a battlefield scavenger that he was of more value alive than dead. That men of high rank might be ransomed undoubtedly was an important factor in saving them from the fate of so many common soldiers who lay wounded on the battlefield, to be stripped and left to die, or perhaps mercifully dispatched. Thus, Alisprand Madruzzo, discovered lying naked among the dead after the Battle of Ceresole, "having seven or eight wounds," was recognized and rescued by a light horseman.⁵² Not that there were any guarantees. Another anecdote from Brantôme about the Battle of Pavia told the story of Jacques de Chabannes, Lord of la Palice, who was taken prisoner by the Spanish Captain Castaldo. Another Spaniard, "the cruel Buzarto," envious of the "prize and honour" of such a capture, simply fired an arquebus into the French knight's cuirass, killing him outright. Despite such a shocking end, contrary to all the principles of chivalry, Brantôme did his best to provide a positive conclusion: "So died

⁵⁰ Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 32.

⁵¹ Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 203.

⁵² Monluc, *Commentaires et lettres*, vol. 1, 278–9.

this good captain and honourable lord, who could not have died differently: because whoever begins well has a good ending.”⁵³

At times, the refusal to take prisoners for ransom was deliberate policy. Florange notes that when Peschiera fell to French troops after the Battle of Agnadello (1509), the garrison was massacred, save for the captain and two other officers. On this occasion, not even their rank and wealth were a protection for the three captives. Despite the offer of a ransom of 100,000 ducats, and despite the entreaties of his own officers, Louis XII ordered the prisoners to be hanged. The point of the executions, according to Florange, was to terrorize the citizens of other Venetian cities, which were thereby cowed into delivering their keys to the French.⁵⁴ A similar motive prompted the French to hang from the battlements all two hundred soldiers from the garrison at Garigliano following their surrender, which they had delayed until after the French army was forced to bring up its siege artillery. According to Jean d’Auton, the only ones to escape were the Captain, whose wife – “marvelously beautiful” – pleaded successfully for his life, and one soldier from whose neck the noose slipped, with the result that he fell into the moat, breaking a leg but preserving his life.⁵⁵ Otherwise, the capture of besieged cities provided the most notorious instances of massacre, where various motives, including greed, lust, and desire for revenge might lead to the slaughter not just of the garrison, but also of civilians, including women and children. Following the capture of Brescia in 1512, wrote Florange, “Forty thousand men were killed and the whole town pillaged and put to sack.” On this occasion, greed appears to have been a motivator: “And there were some men-at-arms who did so well out of it that they and their children felt it for the rest of their lives.”⁵⁶ Another combatant from the Italian wars, Blaise de Monluc, attributed the slaughter of the inhabitants of Ascoli in 1529 to the desire of his soldiers to avenge him after he had been wounded in the siege: “Note that I was so liked by the soldiers of all the companies, that they all agreed to kill and not to take any prisoners, for which reason they killed all the men, women and children, even those in the crib, and then set fire to the town.”⁵⁷

Monluc proved himself to be a pitiless combatant on occasion, particularly during the French Wars of Religion. Waging war against the Huguenots in the southwest of France, he described how his men hunted them through the vineyards, “like when one shoots at game.” In a civil war, he said, one

53 Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 1, 379.

54 Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 34.

55 Jean d’Auton, *Chroniques de Louis XII*, vol. 2, 44.

56 *Ibid.*, 82.

57 Monluc, *Commentaires et lettres*, vol. 1, 82.

should not take prisoners. "It is not like in foreign wars, where one fights for love and honour [...] in civil wars one must be master or valet, given that we live under the same roof; and so it is necessary to resort to rigour and cruelty."⁵⁸ Capturing sixty or eighty Huguenots at Gironde, he had them all hanged, "on the pillars of the market, without any ceremony." He left the signs of his passage, he wrote, hanging from the trees that lined the roads.⁵⁹

These accounts demonstrate that the soldier's death was often ignominious, sometimes deliberately so. The account of his voyages by the renowned French military surgeon, Ambroise Paré, provides abundant testimony to the grim circumstances in which many soldiers died. In describing the capture of Turin in 1536, Paré stated that, having defeated the enemy, the French trampled on the bodies of the dying as they rode into the city, "which caused me great compassion in my heart."⁶⁰ Although Paré's prejudice against Spanish soldiers requires that his accusations of cruel behaviour on their part be treated with some skepticism, it is worth noting his claim that Spanish troops assigned to collecting the wounded following the siege of Metz simply tossed the dying out of their carts, "and buried them in the mud and the mire, saying they had no orders to bring back the dead."⁶¹

At times, the death meted out was deliberately calculated to deprive its victims of honour by subjecting them to an undignified form of execution. Noblemen, normally accorded the privilege of execution by decapitation, might instead be subjected to the indignity of hanging. Paré provided an example of this from the aftermath of the defeat of a Spanish garrison by French forces at Villane. The attacking force had endured heavy losses as the result of an accidental explosion that had revealed the position of its guns to the defenders during a night-time attack. They were therefore disinclined to show mercy once they had created a breach. The town's defenders were slaughtered, except for "an extremely beautiful, young and strapping Piedmontese woman, whom a great lord wanted to keep him company at night, for fear of the Bogeyman." Finally, the captain and ensign commanding the garrison were "hanged and strangled" from the battlements over the town gates as a warning to all enemy troops not to be "so bold and so foolish" as to defend such places "against such a great army."⁶² Equally callous was the slaughter of twenty or thirty enemy soldiers who were taken prisoner following the siege of Château le Comte in 1552.

58 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 425.

59 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 442.

60 Paré, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 689–90.

61 *Ibid.*, 708.

62 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, 690.

According to Paré, the Army Council ordered all soldiers who had taken prisoners in the hope of exchanging them for ransom, to kill them immediately upon pain of death, “which was done in cold blood.”⁶³ Among the cruelties of which Paré accused the Spanish following the surrender of the French garrison at Hesdin was that of pulling on a rope tied around their victims’ genitals, “as if they had wanted to ring a bell,” causing them “to die cruelly at their hands,” or at the very least to lose their genitals. “There you have their great cruelty and perfidy,” he concluded. “Believe it if you will.”⁶⁴

Paré’s memoir bears witness to acts of extreme cruelty, but also to at least one that, although he described it also as a “great cruelty,” was in fact a mercy killing. Following the capture of Turin in 1536, Paré came across four dying enemy soldiers. An old soldier, realizing that nothing could be done for them, proceeded to cut their throats, “gently and without anger,” saying only that he hoped someone would do as much for him should he find himself in such a plight.⁶⁵

It was not only enemy soldiers who were subjected to harsh, degrading treatment. Military executions were common and an accepted means for keeping order in unruly armies.⁶⁶ The biographer of François de Vieilleville, recounting the latter’s actions as Governor of Metz, detailed the exemplary executions whereby he sought to impose discipline on the city’s garrison. A soldier who had killed a comrade in a quarrel was condemned to decapitate the body of his victim before suffering the same fate himself. “This brave example of justice,” affirmed the writer, “humiliated the soldiers marvelously.”⁶⁷ Similarly, he praised de Vieilleville’s “great justice” in ordering three soldiers to be broken on the wheel and seven others hanged for stealing from local merchants, stating that it caused “a marvelous tremor in the garrison.”⁶⁸ Particularly significant was the deliberate stripping of a corrupt sergeant-major of the trappings of nobility before his execution, as well as the subsequent display of his body in the public square, dressed in the clothes of a common peasant. This was described as “a spectacle worthy of great pity, to see such a man, dead and stiff, stretched on a table, with a faded, tattered old hat [...], old gaiters and clogs, who for twenty years wore nothing but silk stockings and velour slippers, and was always

63 Ibid., vol. 3, 700.

64 Ibid., vol. 3, 712.

65 Ibid., vol. 3, 690.

66 Potter, *Renaissance France at War*, 197–9.

67 Carloix, *Mémoires de la vie de François de Scépeaux*, 194.

68 Ibid.

covered in gold chains.”⁶⁹ Strangled to death in his prison, the disgraced nobleman was deliberately refused the noble death of decapitation.

DEATH FROM ILLNESS AND WOUNDS

Some deaths were therefore rendered deliberately ignoble. Indeed, a key component of a “fine death” was “courtesy,” involving expressions of respect from both friends and foes.⁷⁰ To withhold such respect or to express its opposite was to diminish the worth of the person concerned. But deaths could also be perceived as ignoble without a deliberate intent to make them so. If death on the battlefield itself seems a far cry from the chivalric ideal, how much further away from that ideal were deaths that occurred away from it. For certainly that was the fate of the great majority of soldiers throughout the early modern period. Although precise figures do not exist before the eighteenth century, certainly far more soldiers died of disease than of wounds. One calculation is that for every soldier who was killed in battle, three died of accidents or wounds and six died of illness. To calculate the overall mortality of early modern wars, it is therefore necessary to multiply battle deaths by a factor of ten!⁷¹ Plague, typhus, yellow fever, malaria, pleurisy, smallpox, even apoplexy and gout, all took their toll on soldiers on campaign.⁷² Florange recounted that his uncle died in Italy after falling into a river and contracting a fever. On this occasion, insult was added to injury, since the victim’s troubles began when he was struck on the nose by a snowball containing a stone: a doubly undignified way to die!⁷³ At times, whole armies melted away from disease. Such was the fate of Lautrec’s army that laid siege to Naples in 1528, ravaged by typhus. Brantôme wrote that nine-tenths of that army perished. Lautrec was one of those who died, although Brantôme sympathetically attributed his death less to illness than to the bitterness and despair he felt because of his army’s plight.⁷⁴ Blaise de Monluc returned home from that campaign badly wounded, having refused to allow surgeons to amputate his arm, but also “wishing for death a thousand times more than for life; because I had lost

69 Ibid., 215.

70 Germa-Romann, *Du “bel mourir,”* 136.

71 Jacques Dupâquier, “Guerres classiques et démographie,” in *La guerre à l’époque moderne*, Bulletin de l’association des historiens modernistes, no. 3, 1979. Cited in Cornette, *Le roi de guerre*, 290. André Corvisier notes that during the Napoleonic wars, for every soldier who died of wounds there were three or four who died of illness. He argues that the imbalance was probably even greater during earlier centuries. See Corvisier, *Les hommes*, 380.

72 Hélène Germa-Romann, *Du “bel mourir,”* 256–7.

73 Florange, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 63–5.

74 Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 30–2.

all the lords and friends who knew me, who were all dead.”⁷⁵ Eight years later, Monluc helped to inflict similar suffering on an imperial army that had invaded Provence by destroying the mills it needed to grind grain. The hardship that resulted, he wrote, “put their camp into such a disorder of maladies and funerals, particularly among the Germans, that I doubt a thousand of them returned to their homeland.”⁷⁶ Another imperial army, this time laying siege to Metz in 1552, was estimated by Ambroise Paré to have lost twenty thousand men principally to “hunger, plague and cold.”⁷⁷ Paré painted a grim picture of soldiers covered in snow and up to their knees in mud, lacking either boots or shoes. François de Vieilleville’s memoirs recorded that the frostbitten imperial soldiers begged the French to put them out of their misery.⁷⁸

While nobles may have enjoyed an advantage over commoners because of their easier access to adequate nutrition and medical care, illness nonetheless took a high toll of noble casualties. For all his expertise at treating wounds, Paré’s ministrations did nothing to prevent Marshal de Montejan from dying of a “hepatic flux.”⁷⁹ To the military aristocracy deaths from illness were deplorable. Du Bellay and Brantôme both wrote regretfully of the death of Bartolomeo D’Alviano, “surprised by a flux of the bowels [...] which was a great shame, since he was in his time a great warrior and a good captain.”⁸⁰ In describing the death of François de Daillon, killed at Ravenna, Brantôme explicitly condemned death caused by illness as “hideous” and “unworthy.” Explaining that Daillon had nearly died of illness while serving as governor of Legnano, he wrote, “But the God of arms did not wish that the hideous and frightful death from illness in bed should overcome him, a death certainly unworthy of his [Daillon’s] valour, led him to recover, rise from his bed and die more gloriously at the Battle of Ravenna, fighting very valiantly.”⁸¹ Bayard himself, stricken by a fever while between campaigns at Grenoble, was not too pious to address “the most piteous complaints” to God, asking why the latter had not allowed him to be killed alongside the Duke of Nemours at the Battle of Ravenna (1512), rather than leaving him to die “in my bed like a flea.”⁸²

75 Monluc, *Commentaires et lettres*, vol. 1, 104.

76 *Ibid.*, 124–5.

77 Paré, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 707.

78 Carloix, *Mémoires de la vie de François de Scépeaux*, 184.

79 Paré, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 3, 692.

80 Bellay, *Mémoires*, vol. 1, 79. See Germa-Romann, *Du “bel mourir,”* 257.

81 Brantôme, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 417–18.

82 Mailles, *Très joyeuse, plaisante et récréative histoire*, 336–7. See also Germa-Romann, *Du “bel mourir,”* 144–5.