

Major Marbot

submitted by Dan Murphy

This is one of those rare gems you run across in reading someone's memoirs. Marbot was a major on Marshall Messina's staff serving in Spain. At the time of this entry he was a ten year veteran having fought with Napoleon at Marengo, Austerlitz, Jena and Wagram. He went on to lead a regiment of Chasseurs to Moscow - and back. Needless to say they picked the wrong guy to call out....

"So, being sure that the orders had been conveyed, I was about to return, when a young English light infantry officer trotted up on his pony, crying, 'Stop, Mr. Frenchman; I should like to have a little fight with you!' I saw no need to reply to this bluster, and was making my way towards our outposts, 500 yards in arrear, while the Englishman followed me, heaping insults on me. At first I took no notice, but presently he called out, 'I can see by your uniform that you are on the staff of a marshal, and I will put in the London papers that the sight of me was enough to frighten away one of Masséna's or Ney's cowardly aides-de-camp!' I admit that it was a serious error on my part, but I could no longer endure this impudent challenge coolly, so, drawing my sword, I dashed furiously at my adversary. But just as I was about to meet him, I heard a rustling in the wood, and out came two English hussars, galloping to cut off my retreat. I was caught in a trap, and understood that only a most energetic defence could save me from the disgrace of being taken prisoner, through my own fault, in sight of the whole French army, which was witness to this unequal combat. So I flew upon the English officer; we met; he gave me a slash across the face, I ran my sword into his throat. His blood spurted over me, and the wretch fell from his horse to the ground, which he bit in his rage. Meanwhile, the two hussars were hitting me all over, chiefly on the head. In a few seconds my shako, my wallet, and my pelisse were in strips, though I was not myself wounded by any of their blows. At length, however, the elder of the two hussars, a grizzled old soldier, let me have more than an inch of his point in my right side. I replied with a vigorous backhander; my blade struck his teeth and passed between his jaws, as he was in the act of shouting, slitting his mouth to the ears. He made off promptly, to my lively satisfaction for he was by far the braver and more energetic of the two. When the younger man found himself left alone with me, he hesitated for a moment, because as our horses' heads were touching, he saw that to turn his back to me was to expose himself to be hit. However, on seeing several soldiers coming to my aid, he made up his mind, but he did not escape the dreaded wound, for in my anger I pursued him for some paces and gave him a thrust in the shoulder, which quickened his speed. During this fight, which lasted less time than it has taken to tell it, our scouts had come up quickly to set me free, and on the other side the English soldiers had marched towards the place where their officer had fallen. The two groups were firing at each other, and I was very near getting in the way of the bullets from both sides. But my brother and Ligniville, who had seen me engaged with the English officer and his two men, had hastened up to me, and I was badly in want of their help, for I was losing so much blood from the wound in my side that was growing faint, and I could not have stayed on my horse if they had not held me up. As soon as I rejoined the staff, Masséna said, taking my hand, 'Well done; rather too well done! A field officer has no business to expose himself in fighting at the outposts.' The wound in my cheek was not important; in a month's time it had healed over, and you can scarcely see the mark of it along my left whisker."