*Battle of Sedan* (September 1st, 1870).—During the course of the 31st of August (see Franco-German War) the retreating French army (1st, 5th, 7th and 12th corps) under Marshal Mac Mahon assembled in and around Sedan, watched throughout the day by the German cavalry but not severely pushed by them. Sedan is a small old-fashioned fortress, lying in a depression between two ridges which converge in the plateau of Illy about 2½ m. north-east of the town. The only part which its defences played, or might have played, in the ensuing battle lay in the strategic possibilities contained in the fine and roomy bridge-head of Torcy, covering an elbow bend of the Meuse whence the whole French army might have been hurled into the

gap between the German III. and Meuse armies, had there been a Napoleon to conceive and to execute this plan. But MacMahon seems to have been too despondent to contemplate anything further than a battle for the honour of the army, and though communications with Mezières, where Vinoy’s corps (13th) was gathering, lay open throughout the day, he neither sent orders to it nor made any arrangements to meet the coming danger.

The troops received food and ammunition, the disorders consequent on the successive days’ fighting in retreat were remedied, and the men themselves got what they needed most of all, an almost unbroken day’s rest. Locally their positions were strong, particularly to the east, where the stream flowing through the Fond du Givonne, though fordable, presented a serious obstacle to the tactical handling of the German infantry. But as a whole it was far too cramped for the numbers crowded into it; it could be completely overlooked from the heights of Frénois, where the king of Prussia’s headquarters took their stand, and whence in the afternoon the German artillery fire

began to cross over the town itself. At nightfall on the 31st the leading German infantry were approaching. The Army of the Meuse on the right bank of the river, with the II. Bavarians moving towards Bazeilles to reinforce it, and the III. Army, consisting of the V. and XI. corps with the Württemberg division, was heading for Donchéry to cut off the French from Mezières, and only a weak cavalry screen closed the gap between them.

During the night of the 31st of August the Bavarians threw a pontoon bridge across the Meuse below Rémilly, and soon after daybreak, in a fog which lay thickly over the whole country, they began their advance towards Bazeilles, held by Vassoigne’s division of the 12th corps and fairly prepared for de­fence. The firing called all troops within reach of the sound to arms, and before

5 A.M. the Meuse Army was marching to the battle-field, the Guards on the northern road via Villers-Arnay, the Saxons and IVth corps to the south along the river.

Vassoigne’s division con­tained a number of Marine battalions, and their stub­born resistance completely disconcerted the Bavarians. Deprived of all artillery co­operation owing to the fog, the latter spent themselves in fruitless and disconnected efforts in the gardens and streets of the village, and reinforcements were soon urgently needed. About

6 A.M. the fog lifted, and the German batteries at once took part in the struggle. One of the first shells wounded Marshal MacMahon. The next senior officer, General Ducrot, at once assumed command (7 A.M.). But it happened that General Wimpffen, who had only joined the army from Algiers on the night of the 30th, brought with him a secret commission to assume command in the event of the death or dis­ablement of MacMahon. Of this power he did not

at first avail himself, since he was a stranger both to the army and the country, whilst Ducrot possessed the confidence of the one and the knowledge of the other in the highest degree. But when about 9 a.m. he learnt that Ducrot proposed to move the whole army under cover of rearguards to the west towards Mezières, he produced his commission and countermanded the movement, being himself convinced that eastward towards Bazaine at Metz lay the road to salvation. Orders once issued on a battle-field are not easily recalled, and the result of this change of command was dire confusion. The French troops northward of Bazeilles, along the Fond du Givonne, were already commencing their withdrawal, when the leading troops of the Saxon XII. corps began to arrive about Daigny, and being only opposed by a weak rearguard, easily carried the ridge south of the Givonne-Sedan road, thus threatening the retreat of Vassoigne’s division in and about Bazeilles, which then fell into the hands of the Bavarians between 10 and 11 a.m. At the same moment the Guard corps had begun to form up between Daigny