

= Capture of Le Quesnoy (1918) =

The Capture of Le Quesnoy was an engagement of the First World War that took place on 4 November 1918 as part of the Battle of the Sambre . Elements of the New Zealand Division scaled the fortified walls of the French town of Le Quesnoy and captured it from the defending German garrison

Beginning at 5 : 30 am , the New Zealand Rifle Brigade advanced from its starting positions east of the town , aiming to surround it and link up on the far side . By late morning , the linkup had been achieved and other elements of the New Zealand Division moved further west into the Mormal Forest , leaving the Rifle Brigade to capture the town itself . After mopping up outlying outposts , the New Zealanders moved up to the ramparts of the town , but were held back by machine @-@ gun fire . Late in the afternoon , a scouting party located an unguarded section of the walls and the brigade 's 4th Battalion managed to climb the ramparts and move into the town , quickly seizing it . The capture of Le Quesnoy was the last major engagement of the war for the New Zealanders .

= = Prelude = =

By mid @-@ 1918 , the German Army had been fought to a standstill after its Spring Offensive and the Allies had sought to take the initiative . Accordingly , the Hundred Days Offensive began on 8 August , with an attack on Amiens which marked the beginning of a series of advances by the Allies that ultimately ended the war . By late October , the New Zealand Division , commanded by Major General Andrew Russell , along with part of the British Third Army , had advanced to the west of the town of Le Quesnoy .

The Battle of the Sambre , which was planned to begin on 4 November , was the next phase of the Allied advance . The battle was to consist of a series of engagements mounted by the British First , Third and Fourth Armies across a 30 @-@ mile (48 km) front , extending from Oisy to Valenciennes , that were conceptualised to cut off the German line of retreat from the French Army front . IV Corps , with the New Zealand Division and the 37th Division , was to surround Le Quesnoy and its garrison of over 1 @,@ 500 soldiers . The 37th Division was on the southern flank of the New Zealand Division while to its north , 62nd Division , of VI Corps , moved south to shorten the New Zealand front . The New Zealand Division was to extend the front line to and around Le Quesnoy and into the Mormal Forest .

= = = Le Quesnoy = = =

Positioned on high ground between the Ecaillon and Rhonelle Rivers , Le Quesnoy was a medieval town that had been fought over several times in previous centuries . It guarded a natural approach across plains to the north @-@ east and had fortress walls with ramparts designed by Sébastien Le Prestre de Vauban , a 17th @-@ century military engineer . A moat surrounded the town and was in fact two distinct ditches , with 20 ? 30 @-@ foot (6 @.@ 1 ? 9 @.@ 1 m) high fortifications , effectively an outer rampart , separating them . The town could be entered by three roads , guarded by gates . Le Quesnoy had a population of 5 @,@ 000 and had been in German hands since August 1914 . The Germans also held the Cambrai railway line to the west of Le Quesnoy , and had a strong presence in the area around the intersection of the Valenciennes ? Cambrai railway lines , immediately to the north @-@ west of the town .

= = = Plan of attack = = =

On 3 November , the New Zealand Division section of the front line was around 2 @,@ 500 yards (2 @,@ 300 m) in length , running southwards from a level crossing on the Valenciennes railway line . It was 400 yards (370 m) from the Cambrai railway , with the ramparts of Le Quesnoy a further 400 yards (370 m) to the east . The front line was manned by the four battalions of the New Zealand Rifle Brigade , commanded by Brigadier General Herbert Hart .

The ramparts of Le Quesnoy clearly made a frontal attack undesirable and artillery could not be used on the town , due to the presence of the civilian population . Instead , it was intended that under the cover of a smokescreen , the town be enveloped from the north and south , thereby encircling it . Two New Zealand brigades were to be involved ; Hart 's Rifle Brigade was tasked with the capture of the town , while the 1st Infantry Brigade , under the command of Brigadier General Charles Melvill , was to push into the Mormal Forest . The division 's flanks were held by the 62nd Division and the 37th Division , on the left and right respectively and these formations were to make corresponding movements forward .

The capture of Le Quesnoy was to be achieved through a series of advances , covered by artillery , by the battalions of the Rifle Brigade with some of the battalions of 1st Infantry Brigade in support . Beginning from the brigade 's existing positions , the first advance was to involve the 1st , 2nd and 4th Rifle Battalions moving forward to a line defining an arc to the west of Le Quesnoy , including the railway line , which was designated the " Blue Line " . Then the 1st Battalion of the 1st Infantry Brigade would push north @-@ east around the town , while the 3rd Rifle Battalion went to the south @-@ east . The advance westwards would culminate in the establishment of a new front line , designated the " Green Line " to the east of Le Quesnoy , which would be manned by the battalions of 1st Brigade . Once the " Green Line " had been formed , the Rifle Brigade was to move into the town , while the battalions of 1st Brigade were to advance further to the west up to the Mormal Forest .

= = Battle = =

The covering artillery barrage commenced at 5 : 30 am and three battalions of the Rifle Brigade moved off towards its first objective , the railway line , which established a continuous front west of Le Quesnoy . This was captured by 7 : 29 am . A reserve company moved to the railway line to hold it , while the attacking battalions moved forward . A platoon of the reserve company had to deal with 150 Germans , who were retreating from the advance of the flanking 37th Division and quickly secured their surrender . By 10 : 00 am , the battalions of the Rifle Brigade had surrounded Le Quesnoy and established a new front line 1 @-@ mile (1 @-@ 6 km) to the east of the town . The 1st Infantry Brigade moved off to the Mormal Forest , leaving the Rifle Brigade to complete its planned move into the town . The German garrison , despite being surrounded , did not make any indications of surrender .

The 2nd Rifle Battalion probed from the north , while the 3rd Rifle Battalion did the same from the south @-@ east , driving for the Landrecies road which led to one of the entry points into Le Quesnoy . German troops held a bridge on the road in force and were able to keep the New Zealanders at bay in this area . In the north , a small party reached the outer rampart dividing the moat along their stretch of the front . Gunfire from the main ramparts soon drove them off but Lieutenant Colonel Leonard Jardine , commanding the 2nd Rifle Battalion , co @-@ ordinated the movements of his companies , which gradually moved forward . By 4 : 00 pm mortar fire was able to be brought to bear on the main ramparts and this silenced the German machine @-@ guns .

In the meantime , the 4th Rifle Battalion , commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Harold Barrowclough and positioned a distance from the west wall of the ramparts , had carried out scouting expeditions to explore the defences . Gradually , the German posts around the fortifications fell to the attacking platoons of the battalion . As on the northern side of the town , machine @-@ gun fire from the ramparts prevented any further advance . One party reached the outer rampart but became pinned down by gunfire for several hours . By midday , the situation had settled into a temporary stalemate . In the afternoon , some German prisoners of war were sent into the town with an invitation to surrender but this approach was rebuffed , as had been a similar attempt earlier that morning .

Second Lieutenant Leslie Averill , the intelligence officer for 4th Rifle Battalion , continued to investigate the defences . He was able to locate a route to a section of the ramparts that appeared unmanned and was not under fire from the defenders . He was ordered by Barrowclough to force an approach . With the benefit of covering mortar fire , Averill and a platoon of the battalion reserve company , managed to cross the moat and found themselves at the inner ramparts . With the aid of

a 30 @-@ foot (9 @.@ 1 m) ladder supplied by the Divisional Engineers , Averill was able to ascend to the top of the ramparts , closely followed by the platoon commander . With his revolver , Averill fired at two Germans manning a guard post , forcing them to cover , fire and the rest of the platoon joined him . Shortly afterwards , Barrowclough and the rest of the battalion used the ladder and entered the town . At the same time , a party from 2nd Rifle Battalion , seized the gate guarding the road into Le Quesnoy from Valenciennes and began entering the town from the north and the Germans quickly surrendered .

= = Aftermath = =

Over 2 @,@ 000 Germans were taken prisoner by the division , of whom 711 surrendered in Le Quesnoy . German casualties in the town were 43 killed and 251 men wounded and many more German troops were killed during the advance of the brigade to the ramparts . Four 8 @-@ inch howitzers , forty @-@ two 4 @.@ 2 @-@ inch guns and 26 field guns were captured by the 1st New Zealand Brigade . The New Zealand Division operation on 4 November was its most successful day on the Western Front . Of the 122 New Zealanders who died during the capture of Le Quesnoy , the Rifle Brigade suffered 43 killed and 250 men wounded . Other units of the New Zealand Division involved in the battle lost 79 men killed and about 125 wounded .

An advance into the Mormal Forest was continued the next day by the 2nd Infantry Brigade but the capture of Le Quesnoy was the last major engagement of the war for the New Zealand Division . The New Zealanders began withdrawing to the rear area at midnight on 5 November . A few days after the capture of the town , the mayor of Le Quesnoy presented the Rifle Brigade commander , Herbert Hart , with the French flag that was raised over the town on the day it was captured from the Germans .

The town retains links to New Zealand , with some streets named for prominent New Zealanders , including Averill . Since 1999 , it has been twinned with Cambridge . A monument commemorating the liberation of Le Quesnoy by the New Zealand Division is set into the rampart wall , near where Averill scaled them .