



IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF COLONEL ÉMILE DRIANT

by Ian R Gumm MSTJ TD VR

Émile Driant was born on 11th September 1855 at Neufchâtel-sur-Aisne in the Champagne region of France. He was the son of the Justice of the Peace, who would have liked to see Émile follow his father into the law. Émile had other ideas and decided to follow a military career, following the defeat of France at Sedan in 1870.



Colonel Émile Driant.

In October 1875 Émile Driant entered École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr, the French Military Academy, and two years later joined the 54th Infantry Regiment on his graduation. With that regiment he largely carried out cartographical work and spent some time serving on the eastern borders of France, learning the life of a soldier in the frontline.

In March 1883, he was posted to the 4th Regiment of Zouaves at Tunis where he became staff officer to General Boulanger who was then commanding the Occupation Division. When General Boulanger returned to Paris as the Minister for War his aid Émile Driant went with him and in 1888 he married the General's younger daughter, Marcelle. By the time Émile Driant was promoted to Captain in 1892, he was already well known through his position as Boulanger's assistant in the War Ministry, his marriage and his first literary works.

Between 1892 and 1896 Émile Driant was an instructor at Saint-Cyr and from 1899-1905 commanded the 1st Battalion of Chasseurs. In 1906 Émile resigned his commission, as he was banned from achieving higher rank due to his controversial father-in-law and his strong nationalist and Catholic sentiments.

Émile Driant had always been lively and intelligent and in 1888 he began writing under the pseudonym of *Capitaine Danrit*. The first of his war novels was *La Guerre de demain* (The War of Tomorrow) and comprised of three stories which told the tale of: *La Guerre en forteresse* (Fortress Warfare), *La Guerre en rase campagne* (War in Open Country), and *La Guerre en ballon* (Balloon Warfare). The action began with the Fortress War, as reports arrived of a surprise German attack upon France. He gave his readers heroic and patriotic stories that told of great victories over the Germans, and in his *Guerre fatale: France-Angleterre* (The Fatal War: France-England) published in 1902 the total defeat of the British by the French. His aim was to restore patriotic feeling among the young and his heroes were always motivated by a love for France and devotion to duty.

Following his 'retirement' from the military Émile Driant devoted much of his time to journalism and politics. In 1910 he was elected to the Chamber of Deputies as a representative for Nancy and worked tirelessly to strengthening France's defences. He also had a keen interest in the latest scientific and technological inventions (e.g., ballooning and the bicycle) and their application in the military.

On the outbreak of World War I in 1914 Émile Driant was recalled to the Army in the rank of Captain. He was quickly promoted to Colonel and placed in command of the 1,200 men of the 56th and 59th Chasseurs Reserve Battalions. He still retained his seat in Parliament and was involved in the drafting of the legislation to create the *Croix de Guerre*.

In December 1915 he criticised Joseph Joffre for removing artillery guns and infantry from fortresses around Toul and Verdun to strengthen other areas of the now-deadlocked Western Front. Despite the support of the Minister for War Joseph Gallieni, no troops or guns were returned. What were supposed to be formidable defences were reduced to a handful of guns and soldiers to man them. Émile Driant claimed that the area was threatened, but General Joffre denied this. In the end Émile Driant was proved right when on 21st February 1916 the German Army launched a massive attack on French forces in the Verdun sector. During the German assault Colonel Émile Driant's Chasseurs

held the line valiantly for two-days buying time for their countrymen further back towards Verdun. They bought time for the Frenchmen in the Verdun Forts to prepare an effective defence, but at what a price.



Colonel Émile Driant during the First World War.

After two-days of fighting the remnants of Émile Driant's two Battalions conducted a fighting withdrawal and picked their way back through the shattered tree stumps. During the withdrawal, Colonel Driant paused to give a field dressing to a wounded soldier, Chasseur Papin. Nearby Pioneer Sergeant Jules Hacquin leapt into a shell-hole just ahead when he heard the colonel cry out, '*Oh La! Mon Dieu!*'. Hacquin quickly went back to where the Colonel had fallen, but Émile Driant was already dead.

Émile Driant sacrificed himself and his battalions to gain that time and is deservedly dubbed a 'Hero of France'. It is worth noting that Émile Driant's Chasseurs were not the only ones to resist the German onslaught and several other regiments fought with the same dogged determination and the Germans made little progress that day or the next day.

Colonel Driant was initially buried by the Germans; a senior German Officer also wrote to his widow (via Switzerland) to assure her that he had been accorded full military honours. He was later exhumed and re-interred by the French at the place where he fell, the site of which is now a memorial to him and his men. Every year on 21st February Émile Driant and his men are still commemorated at a ceremony at these memorials.

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