

La Grande guerre du XXe siècle
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Councillor of State Collignon, soldier in the 46th infantry)
(died 16 March 1915)

We have announced the death on the field of honor of Mr. Collignon, former prefect, former secretary-general of the office of president of the republic, volunteer in the 46th infantry, the Tour d'Auvergne regiment.¹

It was decided that the 46th would honor him posthumously just like La Tour d'Auvergne, the first grenadier of France.² Here is the published announcement.

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The 46th infantry regiment, inspired by the memory of La Tour d'Auvergne, has just lost a soldier of which it is proud.

Councillor of state Collignon, former prefect, former secretary-general of the office of president of the republic, 58 years old, volunteer in the 46th regiment. He had refused the stripes of a sub-lieutenant³ and took part in the entire campaign as a simple soldier.

The colonel appointed him as flag bearer, and everyone loved to see with the tricolor, this trooper with a white beard and a rosette rouge⁴ on his overcoat.

On 16 March, the regiment was occupying the ruined village. The men had sought shelter in the cellars of the ruined houses. In the rain of artillery shells, Collignon went out to help carry a wounded soldier.

An explosion of a shell severed his carotid artery, and he died almost instantly.

He was buried on 18 March at Aubreville. All of his companions-in-arms mourned his death.

To commemorate the memory of Collignon, no less glorious than that of the first grenadier of France, at roll class of the 46th regiment, his name follows the name of La Tour d'Auvergne. According to tradition, everyone will respond, "Died on the battlefield!"

¹Henri Paul François Marie Collignon (1856-1915) held the office of secretary-general. The position in the French Republic meant that he was the closest collaborator of the president and often called the "vice-president" because of the office's powers.

²The reference is to Théophile Corret de la Tour d'Auvergne (1743-1800) a French officer whom Napoleon named "first grenadier of France" because of his legendary courage. He was also a volunteer in Napoleon's army and died in battle in 1800.

³A sous-lieutenant (sub-lieutenant or second lieutenant) is a junior lieutenant, usually commanding a platoon of soldiers.

⁴Indicates that Collignon was a recipient of the French Legion of Honor (Ordre national de la Légion d'honneur).

(Bulletin des Armées, 21-24 March 1915)

His colonel, later promoted to general, rendered the following tribute:

Last 6 August, I came to review the mobilized regiment in the center of the barracks at Reuilly.⁵ I heard the soldiers stirringly sing the Marseillaise. I gathered my officers and my sub-officers in the hall of honor, in front of the bust of La Tour d'Auvergne. And after I addressed the necessary words to them, we drank fraternally a toast of champagne in honor of the upcoming victory.

It was announced that a gentleman wanted to speak with me. I saw enter a tall man with a grey beard, wearing in his buttonhole the rosette of the Legion of Honor.

"Colonel," he said as he approached me, "I am Mr. Collignon, councillor of state. I would like to ask a favor of you. Would you do me the honor of allowing me to enter your regiment?"

A little surprised, I responded to him that I was touched by his request, but that I didn't see any way to be able to do that on the eve of our departure, and that even if he was able to volunteer, I could not take him as such, without having the time to equip him and place him in the ranks.

He insisted,

"Permit me, colonel, to tell you that someone higher up has authorized me

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to introduce myself to you, and it will be rather easy to change my status. I want so much to be able to leave and take part in the war! I am already equipped. I have my rifle and my knapsack. I am ready to follow you. You will never hear a complaint from or about me."

I wanted to make one last objection.

"But why have you chosen my regiment over any other?"

"Because," he told me with his shining eyes, "it's the regiment of :La Tour d'Auvergne, and they assured me that you would understand."

"Well, so be it," I responded to him, "I'll take you. The regiment departs tomorrow at 1400; and it loads at 1700. We'll find you at the barracks or at the station. Don't ask me anything and leave with us."

I again saw his emotion. His eyes filled with tears. He embraced my hands and repeated to me in a choked voice, "Thanks, colonel." and he left.

The next day, at the station, before the train left, I inquired about Collignon. I searched for him in the cars, but no one had seen him. I smiled wryly in noting his absence.

Five days later, I was in the Woëvre near Etain.⁶ I was no longer thinking of Collignon. Suddenly, towards noon, I saw a group in the village street, and I recognized Collignon, now a

⁵Reuilly is a commune in the valley of the Loire River in France.

⁶In northeastern France, along the right bank of the Meuse River.

soldier of the 46th. He came up to me smiling. We eagerly embraced. He explained to me that having missed me at the barracks, they wouldn't let him go to the station, but that he was able to leave on the next train. Badly informed, he had searched for the regiment for two days. A station officer forced him to return to Fontainebleau. What an adventure that he told to me with the good humor of a child. Finally he arrived, after having signed his enlistment papers. He had been conducted to my camp by an army corps staff officer.

That's how Collignon joined the 46th. I put him in charge of the flag, but he warned me that he was going to frequently demand to quit that post of honor to be in combat because he wanted, above all, to fight and kill Germans.

We then lived in close contact with one another, and I was able to appreciate his great heart and intelligence. Nevertheless he remained a soldier and fully participated in the life of a soldier. If he accepted, from time to time, the opportunity to dine with me, he still refused any privileges, and without exception he slept on straw and marched at his place near the flag. Before long he was well known by the entire regiment. The companies vied for him; soldiers surrounded him and saluted him. The councillor of state had disappeared; he was now just an old brave soldier who made a great example for everyone and commanded their respect.
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On the morning of 22 August, he crossed the Belgian frontier with one of my companies; but the order to retreat arrived quickly. That company and many others missed a chance, to my regret, at the German artillery batteries and had to withdraw while crossing through the woods with great difficulty.

The next day I found Collignon exhausted and unhappy.

He made amends on the 24th by fighting.

Then there was the retreat with daily engagements.

Absorbed in my work as commander of my regiment and my brigade, I saw him less and less, but I knew that he was always there, and I could have, on numerous occasions, helped him, if he had not been able to bear up, under the hot August sun.

On 9 September, before Vassincourt⁷, I looked for him. I was told that he was out hunting for partridges. That evening, I was wounded, and I never saw him again.

General Malleterre

Petit Journal, 3 April 1915

⁷A commune in the Meuse department southwest of Verdun

from the Journal Officiel (30 April 1915), among the citations for the order of the day:
Collignon (Henri), soldier 1st class in the 46th infantry regiment ⁸
Councillor of state, officer of the Legion of Honor, volunteer for the duration of the war, fifty-eight years old, since the beginning of the campaign has always given everything to everyone, the absolute best example of heroism and duty, was killed under an intense bombardment while carrying out a dangerous mission on his own initiative.

⁸A soldier first class (roughly equivalent to a private first class) was not a defined rank in the French army, but it was a step before reaching the rank of corporal. There were usually two soldiers first class in a squad.