

Historique des compagnies 5/1, 5/51 et 5/71 du 1er régiment du génie  
Source gallica.bnf.fr  
Campagne 1914-1918  
1er et 21e Régiments du Génie  
Historique des Compagnies 5/1, 5/51 & 7/51

[6]

Vauquois

At the end of November, company 5/1 was sent to Vauquois, where it would shine, partly due to the intense war of mines that it conducted until the end of July 1916, and partly by its participation in all of the attacks of the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> infantry divisions, and then later by the fortification of the position.

It was there that it was attached to the 10<sup>th</sup> division.

One could say that captain Laignier, who was the commander, was the soul of the defense of Vauquois.

With the 9<sup>th</sup> division, it prepared for the attacks of the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> December 1914.

On 8 December, the company's four sections marched with the assault columns and immediately organized the conquered terrain on reaching the south slopes of Vauquois.

During the night of 9-10 December, the sappers used special equipment to make four breaks in the enemies network of barbed wire with special shears and with the aide of explosives.

The company lost about a third of its effectives in the attacks.

The surprise attack did not achieve the results expected, and it was decided on a more methodical attack.

Company 5/1 surveyed the terrain for the attack and immediately began to create mine shafts to make breeches in the enemy's first line.

At that time the 9<sup>th</sup> infantry division left the Vauquois sector to occupy a sector in the Argonne. Company 5/1 stayed behind to assure the continuity of the work.

[7]

That's how company 5/1 passed into the 10<sup>th</sup> infantry division, changing the order of battle with company 5/2.

With new preparations for the attack completed, company 5/1 participated with the 10<sup>th</sup> infantry division in the attacks of 17 and 18 February and that of 1 March which led to the capture of Vauquois. The village was put into a state of defense, and mine warfare began immediately

This mine warfare was particularly hard and painful given the narrowness of the Vauquois plateau, the nearness of the enemy lines and the precarious communications with the rear.

200 kg explosive charges were placed together as mines of 30 tonnes<sup>1</sup>, the mine galleries were

---

<sup>1</sup>A tonne = 1000 kg.

at a depth of 30-35 meters. The cracked ground, dislocated by the numerous explosions, allowed gas to stealthily affect the miners underground as they worked.

The shafts to access the galleries where the mines were laid were often obstructed and demolished by bombardments and grenades.

The number of sappers became insufficient to assure the defense of Vauquois from the mines. It was necessary to rely on auxiliaries gathered from the infantry regiments of the division.

On 1 October 1915 company 5/51 was created under the command of Lieutenant Bourdoire with some men that were partly furnished by companies 5/1 and 5/3.

Despite all the difficulties and despite the heavy losses suffered, the officers, sub-officers and sappers of companies 5/1 and 5/51, redoubled their energy and courage and thanks to their tenacity, held their adversary in check and affirmed their superiority.

At the start of 1916 when the attack on Verdun started, the sappers of [8]

the division worked, in their short rest periods, on the construction of bridges and approaches over la Cousance, the creek at Vadelincourt, on the Aire and also La Buante.<sup>2</sup>

There will never be enough tribute to the superhuman effort provided during these few weeks by the sappers. While their comrades were working on the war of mines, some NCOs and sappers continued to work tirelessly on the organization of the important points of the sector: Vauquois, Mamelon Blanc, la Maize, the Bois Noir and Florimont.

In this period of the war, the hardest, the most bitter, the darkest, the conduct of the engineers of the 10<sup>th</sup> Division, of which it is right to include Company 5/3 commanded by Captain Zobel that worked in close coordination with the two companies, was absolutely admirable.

There are many examples of dedication and bravery, and many have already appeared in the literature of the war.

All those who have spent some time in Vauquois remember Lieutenant Montazeau, who learning that we had just breached an enemy branch mine shaft, guarded the shaft alone with his revolver while others sought out some explosives to camouflage the mine gallery. When two Boche appeared Lieutenant Montazeau killed them and then exploded the mine.

Among the numerous acts of devotion one could cite: Captain Laignier and Lieutenant Rousselet who at the risk of their own lives went to search for sappers who were unconscious at the bottom of a shaft next to an enemy mine.<sup>3</sup> The latter, who was strongly intoxicated during the attempt to save them, could not later ever recover his health.

[9]

Lieutenant Bourdoire, who on 10 November 1915, descended many times into a gallery full of gas to save those sappers buried there.

---

<sup>2</sup>All streams in the surrounding area.

<sup>3</sup>Camouflet n. m. Fourneau de mine destiné à agir contre une galerie souterraine ennemie, en asphyxiant ses défenseurs

And in addition there are examples of sub-officers and sappers who are not the less brave, one could cite:

In company 6/1 Seargeant Pascaud, legendary for his bravery. On 11 February 1916 he crossed the lines three times in the hope of freeing a prisoner.

Corporals Blanchot and Hunalut who each saved one of their comrades buried by a mine.

The master-worker who carried his sergeant Billaudot out alive.

Rescues operated under bombardments and the threat of harmful gases released by the explosions.

In company 5/51 the sapper Branche who saved his lieutenant in the same kind of conditions on 14 November.

Sergeant Salmon Gabriel who died because of his devotion in the course of a similar rescue attempt.

Sergeant Bataille, also legendry for his bravery and sang-froid, who rescued two buried sappers on 27 December 1915.

The list is long of these acts of courage and solidarity, as evidenced by the many beautiful citations obtained in the two companies.

They wrote a beautiful page in the history of the war at Vauquois that is summarized with brutal eloquence in the number of the losses.

#### Company 5/1

##### Killed

Officers	4
Sub-Officers	11
Sappers	94

##### Wounded

Officers	2
Sub-Officers	11
Sappers	151

[10]

#### Company 5/51

##### Killed

Sub-Officers and sappers	39
--------------------------	----

##### Wounded

Officers	2
Sub-Officers and sappers	66
Missing	3

Company 5/1 was also cited in Order #234 of the 3<sup>rd</sup> army of 24 June 1916 with the following distinction:

“Company 5/1, under the command of captain Laignier. An elite unit that has been fighting for more than a year in a sector of constant mine warfare. By its tenacity, its sang-froid and its

courage was able to stop the advance of the enemy and organize, in a remarkable fashion, the fortification of the sector while under continual bombardment.”

On 1 August 1916, Company 5/74, under the command of Lieutenant Tarrette, took its place in the battalion of engineers of the 10<sup>th</sup> infantry division that was relieved of the Vauquois sector, 3 August, to take a well-earned rest at the Camp of Mailly.