

A Brevet

for the

Guillotine

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By Martin J Dougherty

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Author's Introduction

The 1780s and 1790s were a time of great upheaval in Europe as the forces of revolution did away with the monarchy in France and proclaimed that they were going to do the same to all monarchies. Even as Revolutionary France fought for its life against the rest of Europe, power changed hands with great frequency.

With such turmoil within and without the nation, opportunistic men were presented with an opportunity to make their plays for power, wealth or whatever else they sought. Corruption and intimidation was rife, and fear was a powerful weapon.

Among those who seized their chance for power and glory was a young artillery officer with the right combination of charisma, daring and arrogance, coupled with a position near to those in power. His name was Napolone di Buonaparte, though he adopted a more French version of the name during his rise to power.

It is said that the victors write the history books, and so the first great Italian Campaign of General Bonaparte is generally thought of as a series of masterstrokes. The reality is somewhat different. A series of mistakes, gambles and last-minute changes of plan almost led to disaster.

But only almost.

In the end, General Bonaparte did achieve his victories in Italy and Austria. He had gained the confidence and belief of the common French soldier and inspired him to fight fiercely. He was also at his most brilliant when forced to respond to a crisis with desperate measures.

Bonaparte set out with a half-starved, ragged mob but eventually returned to France at the head of a well-fed, experienced and confident army that idolized him. This was the beginning of his meteoric rise to power, and that power changed the face of Europe forever.

But by taking command of a major undertaking, the young general was placing himself at great risk. So many senior commanders had been executed for failure that it was said that 'elevation to high command is a brevet for the guillotine.'

This did not apply only to senior officers. Anyone who was seen to fail, or was suspected of being politically unreliable, or who was saddled with the blame for someone else's chicanery, risked summary execution.

It was a time of great opportunity for those daring enough to seize it – and for those who had no option.

French-Spanish Border;

January 1796

Captain Victor Hevry flinched as a musket ball struck the boulder by his head, showering him with sharp chips. He hunched down, squatting in the snow. He tucked his saber in tight against his body, the weapon useless in a musket skirmish. His pistol also lacked the range or accuracy for return fire.

Victor pointed out into the snow flurries, gesturing in the vague direction of the advancing rebels. "Shoot back, for God's sake!" he yelled at his men. He was very young, his grenadier moustache a scrubby half-grown affair. His coat was as threadbare as those of his men, his knees visible through worn trousers. Only his sword marked him as any different from the men of the company.

A grenadier rose from cover and took careful aim, unimpressed with the rebels' shooting. His thick moustache was white with snowflakes, his tattered blue uniform coat soaking with meltwater, but his hands were steady.

The grenadier fired, his musket roaring. A great cloud of white smoke billowed from the barrel. He took the time to watch the royalist marksman crumple before ducking back into the tumbled rocks that served the French grenadiers as inadequate cover.

Victor nodded his satisfaction to the grenadier, who favored him with a harsh half-smile before biting another cartridge open and beginning the task of reloading his stubborn, powder-fouled weapon.

The grenadier's cartridge-pouch was almost empty, Victor knew. It was the same for all the men of Victor's company. In the damp of the snowstorm, misfires were becoming more common and they had no ammunition to waste. They had to break out, and soon.

Or they wouldn't get out at all.

Victor glanced around at his command. The grenadiers huddled into their tattered blue uniform coats, shivering as the light wind drove a scattering of

snowflakes into their faces. Men pulled down their soaking bicorne hats to keep the wind off their faces, without any useful effect.

Victor's own hat had been carried away by a near miss that had all but burst his heart with fear. He didn't show it – grenadier captains, even those as young as Victor, did not give in to such emotions – but he felt weak and shaky with more than the cold. He licked dry lips as he raised his saber, waiting for the right moment.

“Ready!” Victor yelled, wishing it had come out deep and manly instead of thin and shaky. The grenadiers rose from cover, weapons coming up to aim. Among the rebels there was a sudden movement backward, a seeking of cover from the volley that was to come.

Victor grinned, a feral snarl of triumph as his enemies quailed. Fresh courage flooded through him, warming his limbs. He raised his long, curved saber, dull winter sunlight glinting from the blade.

“Fire!” The saber swept down and a ripple of aimed shots crashed out in reply. Among the attackers men went down, blood suddenly bright against the snow.

“Charge!” Victor yelled, leaping forward. He was playing his last card, he knew. A desperate charge through powder smoke and snowfall to scatter the rebels and escape from the trap. They would punch though, or die trying. Hiding in these rocks was slow death, and royalist rebels were not likely to be merciful to captives.

Behind their captain, the grenadiers rose from cover with bayonets ready. Cries of “Vive la Revolution!” mingled with a wordless yell of released tension as the grenadiers plunged forward.

The nearest rebels edged back nervously, fumbling to reload their weapons. “Forward! Give them the bayonet!” Victor exhorted as he led his men forward, dispensing with the usual deliberate advance in favor of a headlong charge. Like his men, Victor was chilled to the bone. He had neither washed nor shaved for several days, and he was both tired and hungry. But like his men, Captain Victor Hevry could still fight. He was a captain of grenadiers, commander of a company of the finest infantry in the young French Republic. He was made of iron, immune to mere weather. He was going to make these royalists and their Spanish brigand allies pay for his recent suffering. He ran forward through the snow flurries, whirling his saber around his head and cheering with his men.

The charge slammed home, scattering rebels before it. In the snowy twilight, Victor saw his subordinate, Sous-Lieutenant Ellede, trading saber cuts with a scarred Spaniard. From the corner of his eye, Victor saw the moment when the young lieutenant's foot slipped on a snow-slicked rock. A Spanish saber slashed through Ellede's guard. He staggered back, clutching at his side. His assailant

stepped in, thrusting hard downward with the point. He yelled in triumph as Ellede slid off his blade.

Other grenadiers were down, but their comrades were getting the best of the exchange, their discipline and superior élan making up for the disparity in numbers. The royalists began to fall back, driven by bayonet and musket butt.

Victor smiled thinly. His command might yet escape the trap. He still did not understand how or his company had walked into the ambush, but he put the thought aside. All that mattered was survival and escape, avoiding the horrible fate rumored to befall any soldier of the Revolution captured by royalists.

Victor blocked a bayonet thrust and drove his assailant back with a flurry of huge cuts learned during Victor's initial training as a cavalryman. The brigand turned to flee. Victor let him go. All around the fight was thinning, the enemy fleeing. They had been steady enough exchanging shots with the trapped grenadiers, but now that the French had brought the fight to them it was a different story.

Over the sound of cheering grenadiers, Victor heard hoofbeats behind him. He turned, peering through the light snowfall. Unable to see the horsemen yet, but suspecting he knew who they were, Victor glanced at the body of a nearby brigand. The fellow had been bayoneted as he tried to fire his coach pistol. It was a fearsome weapon, its twin foot-long barrels spraying shot in a wide cone. Victor stooped and picked it up, looping its lanyard to his belt. Around him, the grenadiers began to loot the corpses.

Deep down, some part of Victor was offended to see his men stealing coats as well as ammunition from the bodies. But if the Revolution could not adequately equip its soldiers, they must do what they could for themselves. He was rifling the corpse for shot and powder when the first horseman cantered into sight.

As Victor had expected, the horseman wore the shako and blue dolman of the 1st Hussars. Victor nodded in relief even as the chill air made him begin to shiver again. Laval's light horse had found them. Now all that remained was to march back into France with the loot they had recovered from the rebels, to return to barracks and get warm for the first time in a week.

Other horsemen came into sight, cantering along the track in a rough double file. Victor felt a pang of envy and annoyance, partly for the vagaries of fate that had seen him transferred from the cavalry training school to the infantry, but mostly because the hussars wore heavy cloaks of dark cloth. The grenadiers had been unable even to obtain an adequate supply of coats and footwear, yet the hussars were gloriously equipped. In their hands they carried carbines or curved sabers. They looked as tired as Victor's own men but they made a fine sight in their colorful uniforms and fashionable Light Cavalry braids.

The lead hussars parted to let their commander through. Without a word, Captain Jean Lavallo halted his mount in front of Victor and gazed down. His contempt for the infantry officer was obvious.

After a moment's awkward silence, Victor spoke up. "Glad to see you, Captain Lavallo. And just in time."

Victor had meant to play to Lavallo's vanity, but the hussar was unimpressed. "As always, Captain, the cavalry come to the rescue," he said coldly. "What was it you couldn't handle this time?"

Victor refused to be baited into a response. He knew that Lavallo treated every officer who had served the Monarchy with an equal and impersonal hatred. The hussar hated and envied the gentlemen who could afford a commission under the old regime.

Lavallo was a child of the Paris gutters who had taken advantage of the Revolution and its opportunities to better himself. Victor saw nothing wrong with that – indeed, his own family had fallen upon hard times until the Revolution began to change their fortunes – but Lavallo's success was due to more than simple merit. He had not entirely left his background behind him.

Rumors of bribery, corruption and intimidation surrounded the hussar officer. Such talk was dangerous since Lavallo was popular with his superiors, but many honest soldiers had come to resent Lavallo's rise.

In the space of a few short years, Lavallo had risen from a common trooper to an officer in the Revolutionary Volunteers, to a captain of dragoons and now a Squadron Commander in the 1st Hussars. He still wore his dragoon helmet and a cloak of scarlet with his hussar uniform, deliberately flouting regulations for the sake of his image. It was a sign of the times, Victor reasoned. Others besides Lavallo wore the red of the revolution to show their fervor. Many of them got promoted for no better reason, too.

Men like Macaud, an illiterate bear of a man, or Dunsene, who was so old that he could not see a horse fifty feet in front of him and could not ride in any case, commanded cavalry brigades. Yet Victor Hevry, son of an old military family, had been transferred from the cavalry school and into the infantry. For a lack of suitable mounts the French cavalry lost many other prime recruits. How many had gone into service with other nations, Victor wondered. How many had become disaffected and joined the rebels fighting to restore the Monarchy? He gazed back at Lavallo, refusing to become angry.

Lavallo broke the silence first. "Got yourself ambushed, I see. Careless, Captain, careless. What else?"

Victor restrained his temper and tried to report calmly. Lavallo had seniority, and would make trouble over a breach of the protocol he himself held in contempt. "Sir, we made the forced march as ordered, and were able to intercept the raiders,"

Victor said, gesturing at the two farm wagons standing nearby. His company had recently used them as cover, as well as the rocks nearby. “As we thought, they were French royalists working with common brigands – mostly Spaniards. They broke after a short fight and we recovered the loot they’d taken. We were then ambushed but were able to fight free and regain control of the wagons.”

“And this loot?” Lavalley demanded. Victor was almost sure he saw the glint of greed in the hussar’s eyes.

“Must have come from several sources, sir. There’s rather a lot of coin and silverware. I think they must have raided a couple of rich country houses. Or maybe a church.”

Lavalley frowned. “I don’t care what you think, Captain. What else?”

Victor managed not to sigh. “An assortment of less valuable items: paintings and such. And fifty muskets.”

“Muskets?”

“Yes sir. Standard infantry-issue, 1776 pattern. Straight from the armory by the look of them. Still in their crates. Perhaps they...” Victor left his speculation at that.

Lavalley was rubbing his thick black moustache thoughtfully. “Muskets, eh? Powder and ball as well, I assume?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you should have bloody well said so! I shouldn’t have had to assume anything! You country gentlemen are all the same, so used to lording it over your peasants that you forget you have superiors! I won’t have it, you hear? I am senior to you, and I will have the respect that is my due. Do you understand, Captain?”

“Yes sir. Perfectly,” Victor replied. He understood well enough. Born to poverty, Lavalley’s greatest desire was to rise above the old gentry and lord it over them. Not that the Hevry family were noble, or even rich. Generations ago some ancestor had won a minor title for his military exploits. Over the years, the family traditions as Nobility of the Sword had slowly eroded, along with their wealth. Now all that was left was a military tradition that had led Victor’s father to Virginia and a series of failed adventures in the British colonies. The family had a small vineyard near Dijon, the last of their fortunes spent bribing local officials to keep the Terror from their doors.

Lavalley pointed to the two wagons. “My hussars will guard the wagons. Form up your rabble and get them moving. If you can manage that.”

Victor seethed, but gave his orders as calmly as he could. He considered it a minor victory over Lavalley that his wounded were able to ride in the wagons. The grenadiers formed up again to resume their interrupted march. A grenadier appeared through the snowfall leading Victor’s horse. He nodded thanks, too weary to ask where the beast had wandered to or how it had been found.

As the company tramped through the snow, Victor rode up and down the double file, ensuring that his hundred and twenty-seven surviving grenadiers were in their places. A better than average horseman, Victor still felt out of place riding beside the cavalrymen. He urged his mount off the path to close with one of the flanking hussars.

Most of the horsemen were at the rear of the column, clustered around the wagons. A few were flanking the column as if Lavalley did not trust his security to any but his own men. The trooper glanced around at Victor as he rode up, then looked away. Just under the brim of his shako, the hussar had an old saber scar. He looked tough, experienced, vicious.

Victor decided not to make an issue of the man's insolent attitude. "I notice you've only half a squadron here," Victor said to the side of the hussar's head. "Where are the rest?"

Still the trooper did not look at Victor, instead making a show of having a more important duty, that of scout, than talking to mere infantry officers.

"The rest of the company are dispersed. Scouting," the hussar said flatly, then added, "Sir." His tone was not respectful.

"Scouting for what? We found the rebels, recovered the loot. What else is there?"

Victor received no answer but a shrug. After a moment, he decided that he was too cold and tired to argue with Lavalley about his troopers' insolence. Instead, Victor trotted to the head of the column.

Corporal Guillaume led the column, a model grenadier of twelve years' experience. Victor swung down from the saddle beside him and fell into step, leading his mount with his numb left hand. His right he tucked into his coat, using the gap where a button was missing. "Looks like Captain Lavalley will be claiming the credit for this, too," Victor observed to the corporal. "You know, something still strikes me as strange."

"The ambush sir?"

"That's part of it. How did they know which way we were headed? They managed a fine ambush, as if they knew exactly where we were and where we were going. That implies that they had cavalry out scouting for them. If that's the case then why didn't Lavalley's men run into them? Or for that matter, how did a half squadron of hussars fail to notice a mob of royalists and Spanish brigands setting an ambush? They arrived quickly enough afterwards!"

"I don't know sir," replied Guillaume.

"I don't understand it either, but something's not quite right here. We could have that entire force of bandits right behind us up the trail, yet Lavalley's not sending out scouts to the rear. Then there's the muskets. What're they doing here?"

"I've heard tell that there's some renegade lord leading a pack of rebels in the mountains, fighting for the dead King sir. Maybe the muskets were for them. Bought from some crooked quartermaster."

Victor nodded, not surprised. There were plenty of royalist renegades at large, and dishonest quartermasters were nothing new to him. "Perhaps. It would explain why there are so many ambushers. But it still doesn't explain what Lavalles doing."

"Perhaps he's in league with this lord," suggested Guillaume softly.

"Definitely not!" Victor said dismissively, "Lavalles as anti-royalist as they come. He hates the old system. No, I suspect he's just overconfident. After all, that's a common trait among hussars."

Victor remounted, riding alone with his thoughts for a while. The grenadiers tramped eastward towards a darkening sky. The column made poor time, slowed by the wagons.

As twilight gathered, a hussar trooper galloped up from the rear of the column, braids flying. "Where's the officer?" he demanded of the nearest grenadiers.

"Here!" Victor called. The trooper spurred his horse closer.

"We're being overtaken by a body of men on foot, all armed. The scout estimates about a hundred. Captain Lavalles orders you to deploy your men to repulse them. The hussars will skirmish and cover the wagons. Sir."

How convenient that the infantry are here to do the dying for you, Captain Lavalles, Victor thought bitterly but simply nodded. "Sergeants! Get the men off the track! Deploy to volley line once the wagons are past!" The grenadier captain ordered. He was proud to watch his command respond with practiced efficiency. The double line formed as the wagons passed. A wounded man called out encouragement from the nearest wagon.

Minutes passed. Victor's grenadiers waited with loaded weapons, checking flints and seating their bayonets more firmly while a few of their number ran back up the path to act as scouts. The wagons with their escort drew off a short distance and halted. Victor looked around once more.

There was little cover here on the open hillside. If the rebels chanced an attack, it would be against the massed muskets of the grenadier company. Unable to fight in their chosen manner, they would be easy to repulse. That in itself bothered Victor. Why would they make another attack? They had been driven off once, and now the grenadiers were reinforced. Victor shrugged mentally. He could only wait and see.

The scouts returned. Victor spurred his mount over to the nearest. "Any news?" he asked needlessly.

"Sir, there's a lot of men coming up the path. They're not far behind me. I think about a hundred."

“Organized?” Victor asked.

“Not very. More like a great mass of skirmishers sir.”

“Sergeants!” Victor raised his voice. “Enemy approaching! Make ready!”

As the sergeants passed the word, Victor observed the enemy as they appeared through the twilight gloom. Scattered across the open hillside, using what little cover there was available, the enemy approached. At about two hundred yards the first shots rang out.

“Hold your fire!” Victor ordered. The brigands were too far away for effective musketry. Returning their fire would only waste ammunition.

The enemy crept closer, showing little inclination to close with the grenadiers. They had already been bloodied in close combat and were not anxious to repeat the experience. Instead they contented themselves with long range skirmishing. There were few casualties among the grenadiers as the minutes passed.

Victor considered sending a runner to Lavalley's hussars, to recommend that they charge and disperse the attackers. The grenadier captain was fairly sure that Lavalley would refuse his request, but it was the correct thing to do.

As he turned to beckon a runner, Victor's eyes fell on a small group of horsemen cresting the ridge above the path. They paused for a moment about four hundred yards away and were joined by others, until there were thirty or forty men sitting their horses on the ridgeline.

Victor peered at the figures. His first thought was that they might be more of Lavalley's command, returning from their patrol. Sure enough, a few of the men wore French uniforms, but they were not Lavalley's hussars. Some were dragoons, some cuirassiers, hussars or chasseurs. Others wore civilian clothing.

The horsemen began to trot down the hill. Victor's eyes fell on their leader and suddenly the ambush made more sense. The lead horseman wore the dark green of a French dragoon, an immaculate senior officer's uniform topped by the same style of helmet that Lavalley himself affected.

Reports of this man had been circulated among the officers of the border garrison. The Chevalier d'Alleigne, a senior officer of the old Royal Guard Dragoons. The Chevalier had refused to accept the legitimacy of the Revolutionary government. Instead he had crossed into Spain with what followers he could gather and fought against the Revolution. The bounty for his capture was monumental.

The mounted party started down the hill, weapons ready. Victor hastily ordered the end of the grenadiers' line to pull back, forming an 'L' shape to cover the flank. He glanced across to Lavalley's position.

The hussars had halted, as had one wagon. The other continued to roll down the hillside. Its cargo was still loaded, but the wounded grenadiers had been left behind for some reason. As Victor watched, the hussars trotted out to block the advancing royalists.

In front of the grenadiers, the enemy crept closer. A few men fell here and there in the ranks, but the range was still too great for effective fire. Seeing that his flank was covered, Victor decided to take the offensive and finish the engagement before his company took any more casualties.

Finally drawing his saber, Victor pointed the way forward and called out, "Company advance!"

The grenadiers marched forward, intent on repeating their earlier success. On the left, the flank guards doubled to catch up. If Lavalley's hussars fought as well as Victor expected, this should be over quickly.

The royalists gave ground, a few men shooting on he move without much effect. Their fire dwindled to nothing. If men halted to reload, they would be caught by the grenadiers. Victor led his men forward with the coach gun he had looted in his right hand. His reins were wrapped around his left arm and clutched in numbed fingers.

Another shot cracked out from the retreating royalists. Victor grinned. His grenadiers were rapidly catching up with their foes. It would be all over soon. Shots sounded from Victor's left. They were followed by shouts of dismay. The grenadier captain turned, and froze in horror.

Lavalley's hussars were nowhere in sight. The left flank was wide open, and bearing down on the disorganized flank guards came the mounted royalists. Their leader was cantering off to one side, alone. The rest came on, sabers glinting in the poor light.

Victor heard himself shouting, "Rally Square! Form Rally Square!"

As he frantically looked about, Victor tried to understand what was happening. The Chevalier d'Alleigne cantered towards the wagons. One wagon was still moving, surrounded by Lavalley's hussars. Lavalley himself was riding towards the rebel dragoon, saber drawn.

The grenadiers fell back, making a creditable effort at the maneuver. Hours of drill paid off. Even disorganized, the company fell in rapidly. The rebels halted their retreat and began to reload. Victor knew that his command was in trouble. Pinned in square by the threat of cavalry attack, they could not reply effectively to the musket fire that would pour in.

As the square formed around him, Victor saw Lavalley and the Chevalier d'Alleigne still closing. They both slowed to a trot, then a walk. Both halted their mounts, just out of saber reach. Victor's first thought, that this was to be some form of single combat was dismissed when he saw the two exchange words. They were arguing, yes, but they were not fighting.

Lavalley's men were making off with half of the loot. The other half, that containing the muskets, was in the wagon left behind. Suddenly it all made sense. Lavalley, despite his supposed Revolutionary ideals, had sold them out for profit.

The grenadiers were witnesses to the treachery, but how many would survive the onslaught? Victor swallowed his fear and directed running men to their places, trying to hold his command together by force of will alone.

The rally square was almost formed when the cavalry hit. The bayonet hedge that might have kept the horses at bay was incomplete. The charge burst in among the unformed grenadiers in a fury of sabers and point blank pistol shots.

The grenadiers fought back, shooting and stabbing with their bayonets. For a moment, as Victor forced his horse through the press, it looked like the charge might be repulsed. Then the royalist infantry reached the grenadiers. They had paused only to draw breath and came on in a shouting mob. They were not a disciplined force but a collection of rebels, bandits and mercenaries. They fought each man for himself.

In the melee that followed, it was the only way.

Victor discharged both barrels of the coach pistol at a rebel who was intent on bayoneting Corporal Guillaume. The royalist flopped back into the snow, his chest and face one bloody mess. The corporal lunged over the falling body, stabbing another.

All around Victor, the grenadiers were being forced together, unable to fight effectively in the press. As the French were pushed back, they left a trail of casualties composed more of grenadiers than royalists.

Victor let the coach gun drop on its lanyard and drew his saber, leaning from the saddle to slash a royalist who was too slow to block. A musket used as a club caught the captain on the backswing. He swayed in the saddle, parried a bayonet thrust and riposted with a downward hack. His left hand sought the butt of his pistol and clumsily drew it pushing the lock against his thigh to cock it.

A mounted royalist in the remains of a light cavalry uniform came at Victor, curved saber slashing. The grenadier blocked in Tierce, began a thrust then aborted it in favor of a second parry. His assailant made no defense but bored in, slashing wildly. Victor parried again and again, waiting for an opening. Finally the attacker overextended, but Victor's killing thrust had to become a low parry as a footsoldier tried to bayonet him. Then he was alone as the melee swept both enemies away.

The captain looked around for a target. His eyes were met by the royalist leader. A path opened in the melee between them. Victor urged his mount forward, trying to gather momentum for a charge. The Chevalier d'Alleigne came on, heavy blade raised not in a guard but a salute.

As the Chevalier acknowledged his gallant foe, the more pragmatic Victor leveled his pistol and fired. The ball took the dragoon in the left arm. He jerked in the saddle. Victor's saber slashed out in a cut to the cheek. The dragoon somehow

swayed aside. Then they were past, Victor dragging his mount around and the Chevalier disappearing into the melee.

Victor cantered back to the fight, pausing to impale a royalist from behind. The captain grinned at the incongruous thought of what his naive cousin Pierre, just halfway through his training and still possessed of a child's sense of fair play, might say to that or to shooting a man in mid-salute. But then Pierre had never fought for his life against desperate odds.

The Chevalier reappeared. He had cut his way out of the melee, which was now breaking up into a desperate straggle of individual fights. The ex-draagoon was bleeding from Victor's pistol shot, but there was also blood on his saber. Despite the wound, he rode straight at Victor.

No salute this time. Victor thought as they closed. He extended his own blade, intending a point thrust as recommended by his instructor. The dragoon swept his blade out wide for a cut, keeping his elbow straight to avoid exposing the forearm or elbow. Victor lunged in, hoping that the old axiom of the point being faster than the edge was true.

To Victor's surprise, his thrust was delicately parried. He barely deflected the riposte, a cut at the ribs. The dragoon guided his horse to collide with Victor's. Neither horse was traveling very quickly as they clashed, but the dragoon's mount was heavier. Victor barely kept his seat as his mount staggered sideways. The straight sword came in again, an overhead cut in Quinte that somehow became a thrust. Victor ducked sideways. The blade slid over his shoulder. Both horses circled, pushing against one another.

Victor straightened, punching the guard of his weapon at the dragoon. Too close to parry or evade, the dragoon lowered his head and took the blow on his helmet. He cut again as the two horses moved apart a little. Victor parried in Tierce, sparks flying from the rasping contact of blades.

The dragoon came in again, making heavy cuts that tired Victor's arm as he parried. Even though his weapon was lighter and theoretically faster, Victor was unable to make an effective riposte. He barely blocked a cut to his left cheek.

The dragoon made a great looping cut to the head. Victor blocked high in Quinte. His light saber was slammed aside, but the cut was deflected to graze Victor's horse. Blood trickled from a cut on the animal's neck. It pranced nervously.

The dragoon cut again, to flank. Victor saw the cut change line, saw it become a thrust to the heart. He started to change parries. The dragoon's heavy riding boot smashed into Victor's knee. He flinched at the sudden pain and the thrust slid through. Partially deflected, the saber tore into Victor's left side under the ribs. He gasped as it came out and went back for another thrust.