

The equestrian encounter at Haelen, 12 August 1914

Introduction

While large German forces, supported by heavy artillery, engaged the Belgian forts at Liège [1](#)), sought [2](#). Cavalry Corps (*Heeres Kavallerie Korps II*) under the command of Lieutenant General von der Marwitz advanced immediately south of the Dutch-Belgian border, with a view to bypassing the forward Belgian lines.

At the town of Haelen, the German cavalry met the Belgian cavalry division, which had been deployed here with the very purpose of preventing an immediate German movement.



From the equestrian encounter at Haelen on 12 August 1914, painted by the French artist Alphonse Lalauze.

From *The Great War in a different Light*.

A deadly skirmish ensued, and 12 August 1914 has since gone down in Belgian history as the date of "The Battle of the Silver Helmets" (*La Bataille des casques d'Argent*) - a term supposed to derive from an analogy with the Battle of Courtrai in Flanders [2](#)), on [11](#) July 1302, which, after the many golden spurs from fallen French knights, gave the battle the nickname "The Battle of the Golden Spurs".

The term "silver helmets" is said to have originated from a belief that German noblemen wore helmets made of silver! The Belgian public desperately needed good news, so with a bit of imaginative journalism, bolstered by the impression of the shiny helmets of the German cuirassier regiments (worn in the field with covers) which must have been left on the battlefield, the story was home.

This article will outline, and as far as my currently available, and Belgian/French, sources go, describe the main impression of the battle and the organization of the participating forces.

In a supplementary article, the Belgian army is mentioned, with the main emphasis on the units that were part of the Belgian cavalry division, see [On Belgian organization and uniforming 1914](#). If you want to know more about German units, refer to my article [On German organization and uniforming 1914](#).

Belgian units

The Belgian cavalry division was under the command of Lieutenant-General Baron de Witte [3](#)), who seems to be the epitome of a cavalry general.



*Lieutenant General
Baron de Witte*

The Belgian Cavalry Division

Division de Cavalerie (*Lieutenant General de Witte*) (*From Source 4*)

Battalion Carabiniers Cyclistes (*Major Siron*)

Groupe Artillerie à Cheval (1st - 3rd Battery of 4 pcs. 75 mm field guns)

Compagnie Pionniers-Pontoniers Cyclistes Section

Télégraphistes de Campagne Cyclistes Corps de

Transport

1^o Brigade de Cavalerie (*General de Monge*) 1^o

Régiment de Guides 2^o

Régiment de Guides (*Colonel Fourcault*)

2^o Brigade de Cavalerie 4^o

Régiment de Lancers 5^o

Régiment de Lancers

4^o Brigade Mixte 4^o

Régiment de Ligne (*Colonel Triest*) 24^o

Régiment de Ligne (*Lieutenant Colonel Gauthier*) 4^o

Compagnie de Mitrailleurs (Captain Rooryck) (6 machine guns)

Groupe d'Artillerie (7th - 9th Battery of 4 pcs. 75 mm field guns)

Platoon Gendarmerie

The 5th Lancer Regiment was presented with its standard at a parade on the morning of August 12, 1914; General de Witte performed this act on behalf of the King.



General de Witte presents the new standard to Colonel Xhardez, commander of the 5th Lancener Regiment, at Loksbergen, 12 August 1914.

Reproduced after a painting by J. Thiriar that hangs in the Museum der Zilveren Helmen in Halen. [4](#)



Belgian lancers defend a road, 1914.

The location could be Haelen.

From *The Great War in a different Light*.

Source 2 mentions parts of the general's speech to the regiment, in which, among other things, he expressed the expectation that the soldiers would defend their standard to the end. The general expected that it would come to battle the same day, and he was sure of victory, but - if Providence would have it otherwise - he would probably have to show the enemy how a Belgian general could die! But it wasn't supposed to go that far...

Source 1 puts the Belgian forces at 2,400 cavalry, 450 cyclists and 12 guns, which must include the cavalry division but not the infantry brigade.

German units



Lieutenant General
von der Marwitz



German
ulan, 1914. 7)

The German 2nd Cavalry Corps (*Heeres Kavallerie Korps II*), under the command of Lieutenant General von der Marwitz 5) (pictured), consisted of the 2nd, 4th and 9th Cavalry Divisions 6). —

Source 1 mentions that 6 cavalry regiments took part - from the 2nd and 4th Cavalry Divisions - as well as 18 guns.

Furthermore, the following hunter battalions are specifically mentioned: Westfälisches Jäger-Bataillon Nr. 7 and Lauenburgisches Jäger-Bataillon Nr. 9.

Source 1 gives the total German force as 4,000 cavalry and 2,000 infantry.

Cavalry Division 2 (Generalmajor Freiherr von Krane) 8) —

Cavalry-Pionier-Detachment 2

Maschinengewehr-Abteilung 4 Garde-

Jäger-Bataillon Garde-

Schützen-Bataillon III. Reitende

Abteilung, 1. Westpreußisches Feld-Artillerie-Regiment Nr.35 Kavallerie-Kraftfahr-Kolonne 2

Nachrichten Detachments: Schwere

Funk Stelle 1 & Leichte Funk Stelle 5 & 6

Cavalry Brigade 2

1. Brandenburgisches Dragoner-Regiment Nr.2
Ulanen-Regiment Kaiser Alexander II von Russland (1. Brandenburgisches) Nr.3

Cavalry Brigade 8

Kürassier-Regiment von Seydlitz (4. Magdeburgisches) Nr.7
Thüringisches Husaren-Regiment Nr.12

Leib Husaren Brigade

1. Leib-Husaren-Regiment Nr.1 2.
Leib-Husaren-Regiment Königin Viktoria von Preußen Nr.2

Cavalry Division 4 (*Lieutenant General Otto von Garnier*) 9) —

Cavalry-Pionier-Detachment 4 Garde-
Maschinengewehr-Abteilung Nr. 2 I. Reitende
Abteilung, Feld-Artillerie-Regiment General-Feldzeugmeister (1.
Brandenburgisches) Nr.3
Kavallerie-Kraftfahr-Kolonne 4
Nachrichten Detachments: Schwere Funk Stelle 18 & 19 & Leichte Funk Stelle 10 & 12

Cavalry Brigade 3

Kürassier-Regiment Königin (Pommersches) Nr.2 2.
Pommersches Ulanen-Regiment Nr.9

Cavalry Brigade 17 1.

Großherzoglich Mecklenburgisches Dragoonier-Regiment Nr.17 2.
Großherzoglich Mecklenburgisches Dragoonier-Regiment Nr.18

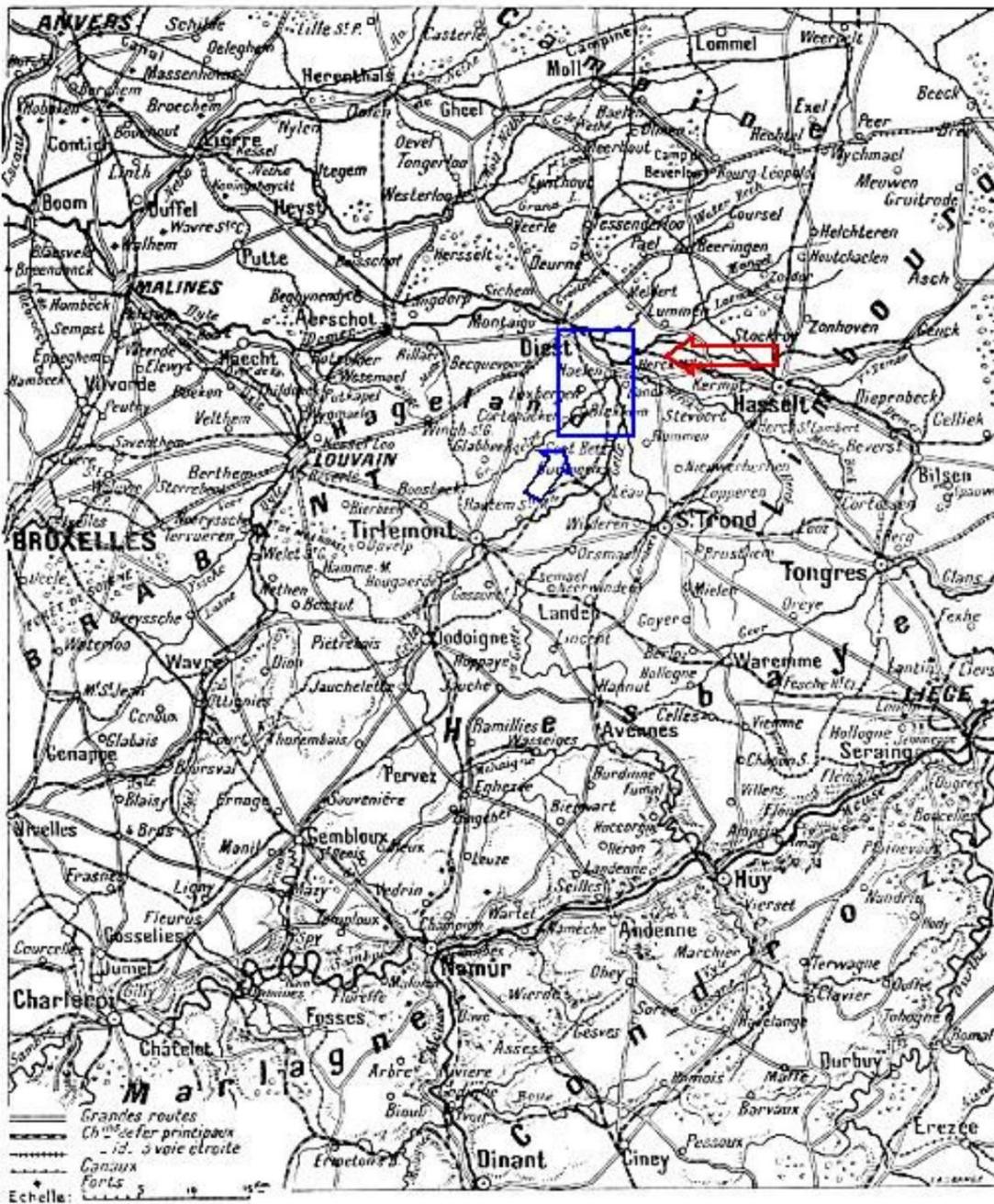
Cavalry Brigade 18

Husaren-Regiment Königin Wilhelmena der Niederlande (Hannoversches) Nr.15
Husaren-Regiment Kaiser Franz Josef von Österreich, König von Ungarn (Schleswig
Holsteinisches) Nr.16

The information is based on *Imperial German Army 1914-18 - Organisation, Structure, Orders-of-Battle* by Hermann Cron, Helion & Company Ltd., Solihull / West Midlands 2002, ISBN 1-874622-70-1 and *Das Deutsche Heer 1914*.

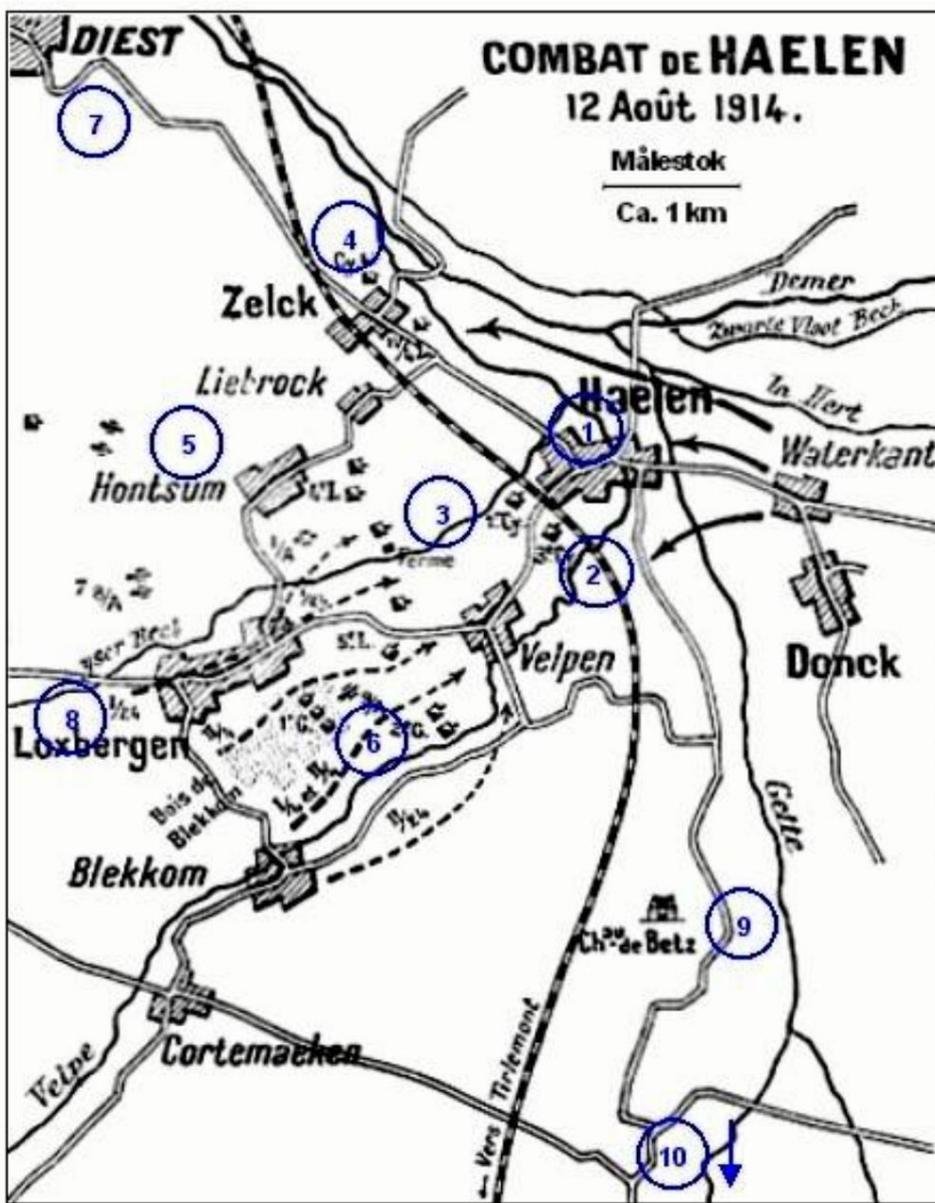
The geography

The blue rectangle is the current battlefield, which is shown on the next map sketch. The blue arrow indicates the exit area of the reserve - 4th Infantry Brigade - Hautem-Ste Marguerite. The red arrow indicates the direction of advance of the German cavalry divisions.



Map sketch 1: The western part of Belgium, 1914.
 From Source 1.

Cavalry Division



Map sketch 2: Haelen, 1914.

From Source 1.

General de Witte had initially (on Sources 1, 2, 3 and 6) disposed of the Cavalry Division as follows:

- 1) In Haelen: 1st Company from the Cyclist Battalion.
- 2) 3rd Company from the Cyclist Battalion.
- 3) About the breeding farm (*Verme*) at the Yser Beck: Three squadrons of the 4th Lancer Regiment and two squadrons of the 5th Lancer Regiment. The force was later reinforced with parts of the Mounted Artillery Division.
- 4) In Zelck: A squadron of the 4th Lancer Regiment and two platoons of the 2nd Cyclist Company.
- 5) At Hontsum: (Height 55) A battery of the Mounted Artillery Division; the other two batteries were initially in reserve. Artillery cover: 1st Squadron of 5th Lancer Regiment 10).
- 6) Between Loxbergen and Velpen: Three squadrons of the 1st Guide Regiment and two squadrons of the 2nd Guide Regiment.
- 7) In Diest: The engineering company.
- 8) In Loxbergen: Divisional staff. Reserve: 2. Squadron of 5. Lancer Regiment.
- 9) At Chateau de Betz: A squadron of the 1st Guide Regiment.
- 10) At Buddingen (immediately south of the map): A squadron of the 2nd Guide Regiment.

The map also shows how the reinforcement - parts of the 4th Infantry Brigade 1st and 2nd Battalion of the 4th Infantry Regiment, 1st and 2nd Battalion of 24th Infantry Regiment and 4th Artillery Division) - are deployed. 3. Battalion of both regiments, believed to have remained in the starting positions about Hautem-Ste Marguerite.

The course of the battle



German Hussars in battle with Belgian Carabiniers in Haelen.

From *The Great War in a different Light*.

At dawn on 12 August 1914, the German cavalry divisions are on the march from Hasselt towards Haelen and the Belgian cyclists in Haelen learn from prisoners that a long column of cavalry and artillery is heading towards them - strength numbers unknown.

Around 08:00, the leading German forces appear in Haelen, but are stopped by fire from the 3rd Cyclist Company.

The German horsemen sit down and record the battle while they await the arrival of the infantry and artillery. These units arrive around 09:00.

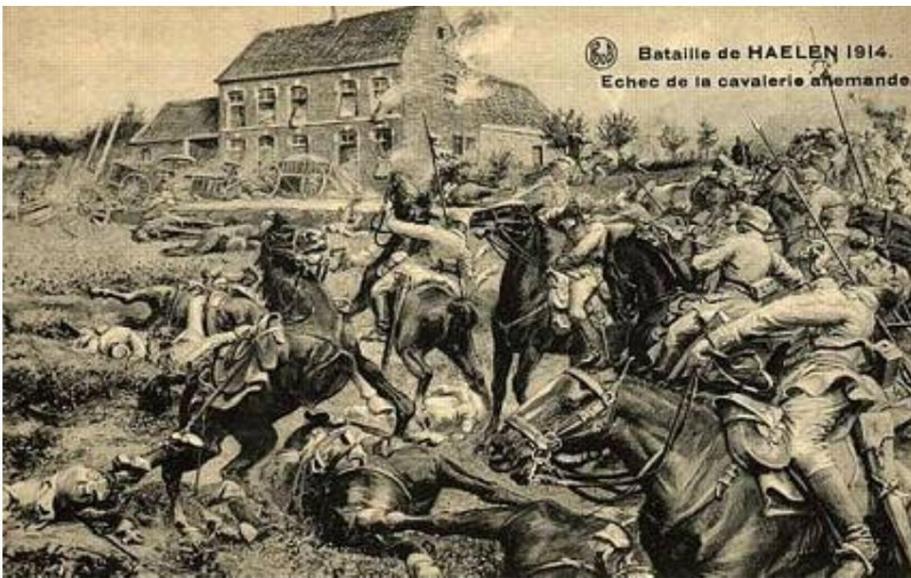
At 10:00, the German artillery begins a fierce bombardment of Haelen. Initially, the cyclists hold their ground, but eventually have to pull out of the town, where they, reinforced by the 1st Cyclist Company, go into position by the railway south of Haelen.



After the games - The outskirts of Haelen.

From Source 5.

At noon, a simultaneous German attack is launched against Zelck and the railway station in Haelen.



German dragoons are fired upon from Haelen.

From *The Great War in a different Light*.

The attack (against the station?), supported by machine guns, succeeds and the bikers fall back to the breeding farm.

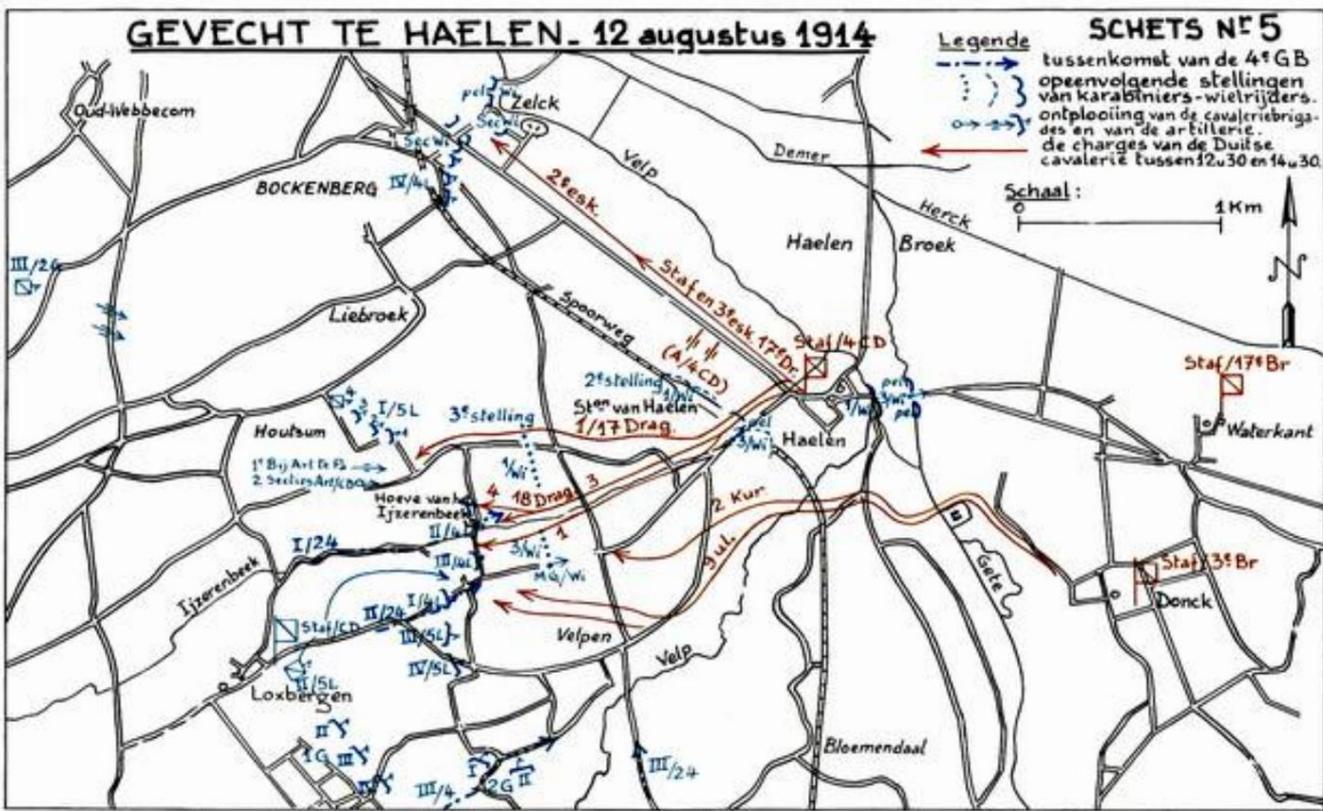
The attack is carried on towards the farm, during which a squadron of dragoons carries out first one, then another, attack. Each time the cavalymen are exposed to a fierce fire, and the area is soon covered with fallen soldiers and horses.

Cavalry Division 4

The German attack stalls, but resumes soon after as reserve forces arrive. The German forces are deployed over a 1,500 m wide front between Liebrock and Velpen. The farm is subjected to heavy machine-gun fire and is captured soon after.

The subsequent sketch that the German attack of the afternoon was carried out by *Kürassier-Regiment Königin (Pommersches) Nr.2* and *2. Pommersches Ulanen-Regiment Nr.9* (Kavallerie Brigade 3) as well as *1.*

Großherzoglich Mecklenburgisches Dragoner-Regiment Nr.17 and *2. Großherzoglich Mecklenburgisches Dragoner-Regiment Nr.18* (Kavallerie Brigade 17), for which units Source 8 provides casualty figures.



Map sketch 3: Haalen, 1914 - The German attacks between 12:30 and 14:30.
 From Ronald Ruysen.

4^o Brigade Mixed

Meanwhile, the 4th Infantry Brigade has reached the rescue of Hautem-Ste Marguerite, where it received marching order from the 1st Infantry Division 09:00.



Belgian Machine Gun Group, 1914.
 From a contemporary postcard found for sale on the Internet.

At 10:00 the brigade sets out on a 25 kilometer long air march and reaches Loxbergen in the afternoon - along sandy and dusty roads and in a burning heath.

Source 2 states that the air march took such a toll on the dogs pulling the machine gun carts that the dogs had to be replaced by soldiers.

4. Artillery division goes into position around the mill in Loxbergen, and around 15:00 the German artillery in Haelen can be taken under fire.

The 4th Infantry Brigade launches a counterattack, with the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 4th Infantry Regiment deployed against Velpen, while the 1st Battalion of the 24th Infantry Regiment attacks the breeding farm.

The 2nd Battalion of the 24th Infantry Regiment is initially in reserve, but is deployed to support the attack against Velpen.



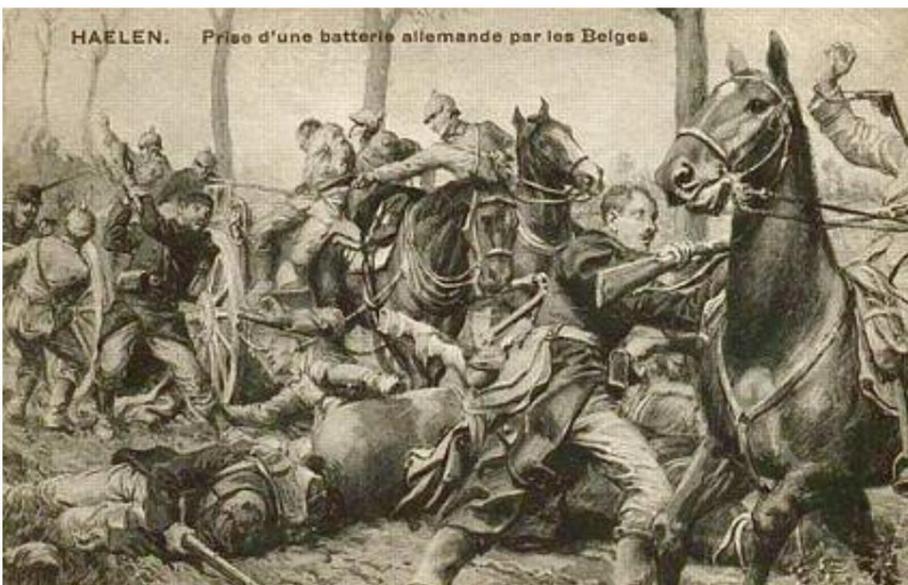
Belgian Field Artillery, 1914.

From *The Great War in a different Light*.

The breeding farm, now transformed into a burning ruin, is conquered first.

Then follows Velpen, who falls after hard fighting, and despite a particularly fierce shelling from German machine guns, which are in position in the houses.

The German troops yield to these attacks and retreat headlong [11](#)) back to [Haelen](#), but the Belgian counter-attack is not carried forward.



Belgian infantrymen capture a German battery at Haelen.

From *The Great War in a different Light*.

Three Guide Squadrons, which have ridden to Zelck at roughly the same time, also find this town escaped.

As night falls, the German units withdraw from Haelen, but are not pursued here either.

Loss figure

Source 1 mentions a possibly exaggerated overall German loss figure of the order of 3,000 - men and horses - as well as a number of guns and one standard 12).



After the match - The road between Haelen and Diest.
From Source 5.

The Belgian casualties are calculated at 22 officers and 1,100 men, covering dead, wounded and missing.

Source 6 mentions the German losses as 150 dead, 600 wounded, 200-300 prisoners in addition to approximately 400 horses, while the Belgian losses are given at approximately 500.

Perhaps the casualty figures in Source 1 derive from information that emerged immediately after the skirmish, where there was a clear interest from the Belgian side in portraying the battle as more significant than it might have been in a larger perspective

Source 6 lists the 5th Lancers Regiment's losses as 5 dead and 27 wounded.

Source 8, which deals specifically with the German 4th Cavalry Division, states the units' loss figures as follows:

4th Cavalry Division's losses at Haelen on 12 August 1914

Officers Crew Horses

2nd Cuirassier Regiment	6	71	270
9th Ulan Regiment	4	100	250
17th Dragoon Regiment	8	159	165
18th Dragoon Regiment	6	138	163
Total	24	468	848

However, it is not clear whether the figures include dead, wounded and missing, or only dead.

As mentioned in the introduction, the report is primarily based on Belgian/French sources, which is why it could be interesting to read about the skirmish from the German side. Should anyone know of such descriptions, I would like to hear about it. The closest I can get to German sources is the information in Source 7, which is based on Major

Becke's studies of German sources.

Source 9 mentions that 111 German and 181 Belgian soldiers were buried in two cemeteries at Haelen. However, in the 1950s, the German soldiers should have been moved to Soldatenfriedhof Vladslos and Langemark respectively.

Thanks



Les Belges - Defense of Liège et ses environs, August 1914.

From a simultaneous postcard.

I am very grateful to lieutenant colonel Benny Bartholomé, who put me in touch with staff sergeant (of the reserve) Ronald Ruysen via the Belgian cavalry's official website, who, among other things, has delivered me Map Sketch 3, as well as given me some additional material in view.

Postscript

Despite the initial success at Haelen, the small Belgian army soon had to give way to the fierce German pressure and retreated towards Antwerp.

On 17 August 1914 the government abandoned Brussels in favor of Antwerp: German troops marched into Brussels on 20 August 1914. Antwerp held out until 9 October 1914, after which only a small part of Belgium was not occupied by Germany.

Sources

1. L'invasion de la Belgique, Histoire illustrée de la guerre de 1914 by Gabriel Hanotaux, Gounouilhou, Paris 1915, Volume 3, pages 265-303. From the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections. The description of the Horsemanship at Haelen is said to be based on a report from Colonel Baltia, who was chief of staff at the Belgian Cavalry Division.
2. Les Braves Gens. I have used some of the information in this somewhat verbose report time indications and starting positions.
3. Le Combat de Haelen, from the 1er Régiment de Guides.
4. Belgian Fronts. (On the organization of the Belgian army.)
5. Großer Bilderatlas des Weltkriegs by F. Bruckmann, Munich, 1915, Volume 1, pages 81-120. From the University of Wisconsin Digital Collections.
6. The Battle of Haelen, 1914, from FirstWorldWar.com.
7. De geschiedenis van het Vijfde Regiment Lansiers, from the official website of the Belgian Cavalry.
8. Nery, 1914 - The Adventure of the German 4th Cavalry Division on the 31st August and the 1st

Per Finsted

Notes:

- 1) See e.g. Brave Little Belgium, Liège, from FirstWorldWar.com.
- 2) Watch The Battle of the Golden Spurs.
- 3) See Lieutenant General Léon Alphonse Ernest Bruno Baron de Witte (1857-1933), from whom the photograph also originates.
- 4) The image is from a booklet published on the occasion of the change of command in the Territorial Regiment der Lansiers, 22 December 2000, kindly provided by Staff Sergeant (of the Reserve) Ronald Ruysen, Belgium. See also the official website of the Belgian Cavalry, whose section Belgian standards contains images of the standards of the two Guide regiments, which include is decorated with the "ribbon" Haelen.
- 5) See Lieutenant General Georg von der Marwitz (1858-1929), from whom the photograph also originates.
- 6) 4th Cavalry Division, see Nery, 1914 - The Adventure of the German 4th Cavalry Division on the 31st August and the 1st September; 9th Cavalry Division, see The First Skirmish Between English and German Cavalry, 22 August 1914.
- 7) From Historic Battles, Haelen, First World War, 1914.
The drawing comes from IT Schick's *"Battledress - The Uniforms of the World's Greatest Armies 1700 to the Present"* and shows an ulan from the Ulanen-Regiment Graf Haeseler (2. Brandenburgisches) Nr. 11.
- 8) Major General Friedrich Franz Theodor Freiherr von Krane (1859-1929).
- 9) Lieutenant General Otto von Garnier (1859-1947).
- 10) The information comes from Source 6, but from a Map Sketch 3, which a very helpful Belgian named Ronald Ruysen has sent me, the artillery coverage appears as 3. Squadron of 2. Guideregiment.
- 11) It must be remembered that my sources are primarily Belgian/French, which is why the expression "head litter" must be understood in this light. Whether German sources will contain a similar expression must remain uncertain for the time being.
- 12) Hugh Gibson, who was the Secretary of the American Legation in Brussels, visited the area a few days after the fighting. With a source in his account (from 1917) it suggests that the standard originates from one of the two Leib-Husaren regiments. See A Trip to the Haelen Battlefield.