

THE PORTUGUESE

ON 24 February 1916, at the request of its old British ally, Portugal inspected 36 German merchant ships anchored in its ports. On 9 March 1916, Germany declared war on the young and still fragile Portuguese republic. On 17 January 1917, The Portuguese Expeditionary Corps (Corpo Expedicionário Português or CEP) was officially established, taking its orders from British military HQ. From 2 February 1917 to 28 October of the same year, some sixty thousand men left Portugal for France.

Three long days at sea, accompanied by the fear of submarine attack before reaching Brest... followed by an 800km journey of a similar duration to the train station in Aire-sur-la-Lys. The 1st Division, led by General Gomes da Costa, established its headquarters in Théroutanne, while the 2nd, under the command of General Simas Machado, based itself in Fauquembergues. The CEP's command post was in Roquetoire in the Château de la Morande (whose grounds were the setting for the Croix de Guerre ceremony on 13 October 1917 in the presence of the President of the Portuguese Republic). The Portuguese troops got on well with the local population, attending processions, funerals, and festivals such as the Feux de la Saint-Jean summer solstice celebration, where they played the cavaquinho, an instrument resembling a guitar. On a more serious note, the military education of these troops gathered momentum in early 1917 at Mametz, Clarques and Audinethun. From 11 May to 5 November 1917, their units took up position on the front line; the Portuguese sector formed the shape of a trapezium around Neuve-Chapelle, Laventie, La Couture



resisted as best they could

Portuguese soldiers fought with great bravery at the Battle of the Lys, an area where they left a significant legacy...

and Saint-Venant, where the Manoir de la Peylouse became the official residence of Fernando Tamagnini, the commander of the CEP, in June 1917.

“Georgette” and the sacrifice

The winter was a terrible one in the trenches with snow and hard frosts, plus the soldiers hated the British rations. Enemy raids were devastating and there was a revolution in the Portuguese ranks. Reinforcements stopped arriving and moral was at its lowest ebb, with the CEP already having lost over five thousand men, a fifth of whom had been killed. The British military authorities decided to relieve the troops on the 6 and 9 April 1918. Luck was not with them, however, as the Germans were readying an attack. Operation “Georgette” started at 4.15am on 9 April. The horror of

the Battle of the Lys speaks for itself: 100,000 super-trained Germans and an artillery barrage against 20,000 powerless Portuguese soldiers. “*They resisted as best they could, fighting with great bravery*”. At 11am they found themselves at the village of Laventie, holding La Couture until 11.45 the following morning. Slaughter ensued: close to 400 dead, 6,500 prisoners and 35% of the CEP's troops out of action. The Corpo was unable to survive this cataclysm, and withdrawal to Ambleteuse and the coast followed... and then the Armistice. On 1 December 1918, a final military parade was held at the Trézennes aerodrome near Aire, from where the first train carrying four hundred Portuguese soldiers left for Cherbourg. On 18 January 1919, a Portuguese delegation took part in the Versailles Peace Conference, and on the following 14 July, a contingent of

four hundred men from the CEP took their legitimate place in the victory parade in Paris. Legitimate, but what a sacrifice: 2,160 dead, 5,224 wounded, and 6,678 prisoners. Established in 1935, the Portuguese military cemetery in Richebourg-l'Avoué contains the graves of 1,831 men. Opposite the cemetery stands the Notre-Dame-de-Fatima chapel, built in 1976. Inaugurated on 10 November 1928, the monument to Portuguese heroes in La Couture depicts a soldier fighting a skeleton armed with a scythe. Aire, Roquetoire, Marthes, Saint-Venant, Laventie, Richebourg, La Couture: names which serve as a reminder of Portugal's involvement in the Great War. “*Portugal didn't deserve this*”, wrote Manuel do Nascimento in a recent book on the Battle of the Lys, which official British historians still refer to as the Battle of Estaires or the 4th Battle of Ypres.

FOR a long time tucked away in the footnotes of history, or else completely forgotten, Portugal's far from insignificant involvement in the First World War is finally attracting the attention it deserves from Portuguese, French and British researchers, military history enthusiasts and genealogists, in addition to the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those soldiers from Lisbon, Oporto and Braga who remained in France, in particular in the Pas-de-Calais, after the Armistice. Nowadays, it is easy to follow the experiences of the Corpo Expedicionário Português (CEP) in the region, in places such as Aire-sur-la-Lys, Laventie, La Couture, Roquetoire, Mametz etc.

Portuguese troops arrived in Mametz in the spring of 1917 for additional training in the use of gas masks and the handling of grenades and bayonets in the camp in the hamlet of Marthes. “*A camp whose location is impossible to find today*”, adds Matthieu Fontaine regretfully, but not for a lack of trying by 30-year-old Matthieu, who has questioned many of the village's older inhabitants. A great fan of oral history, he has been able to deduce that “*the 1914-18 war was an introduction to the 20th century for villagers who witnessed the arrival of the British, Indians, Portuguese etc*”. For the past ten years he has continued

his research into the Portuguese, trying to put a face to a name – that of his own very own great-grandfather. A story of war and love at first sight!

On 14 October 1919, Hélène was born in Crecques, another hamlet in the area around Mametz. Olga, the mother, was eighteen; the father a Portuguese soldier. “*His name had been frenchified: Matthieu Lérias. A bachelor. Brown wavy hair. He could read and write and take care of horses. Olga's father had refused to let her go to Portugal with him. And that's just about all we know*”. Olga was not ostracised by her family. She just changed her life, writing regularly to Matthieu; until 1949 at least, when a letter was delivered to Mametz announcing the death of the soldier. “*She then burnt everything*”, sighs Matthieu Fontaine, the grandson of Hélène, who passed away at the beginning of 2008. Since 1999, along with his sister, Matthieu has been trying to find out who this other Matthieu was. Up until 2005 he found nothing. Portugal's military archives remained silent on the matter: “*Nothing was filed. The Great War is a difficult period in Portugal's history*.” Nothing in France either. Given the time that he had already spent, Matthieu, a doctoral student in modern history, was not about to give up the ghost. Finally, in 2005, a letter arrived from the very same military archives in Portugal enclosing photocopies of the file of Hélène's father: Matheus de Matos Lérias, born in 1895, originally from Mação (in the



centre of Portugal), a soldier in the 8th artillery regiment. A birth certificate followed in 2006. After that, the information dried up. “*Historians aren't familiar with the 8th artillery regiment!*” So, Matthieu Fontaine followed closely all the events relating to the 90th anniversary of the Battle of the Lys, and made useful contacts with Portuguese associations in France, as well as with Portuguese TV, with the aim of finding out even more about Matheus. “*I'll definitely be heading to Portugal and Mação*”. Although he may face disappointment and disillusionment, Matthieu Fontaine will never give up!