

## Charles Victor André Laffargue

You were born, on 24 September 1892, in the tiny village of Ligardes, in the south of France. (A census conducted the previous year counted 470 inhabitants.) Your father, who practiced veterinary medicine, was sufficiently prosperous to be able to send you to the preparatory school in the town of Agen, some 40 kilometers away.

As an adolescent, you devoted your leisure hours to the study of the obsolete military manuals and the memoirs of military officers that you found in the local flea market. Of these, your favorite is *Lessons of the Russo-Japanese War, Impressions of a Company Commander*. Published in 1906, this little book, described both the murderous effect of Japanese rifle and artillery fire upon the author's regiment and the enthusiasm with which the Siberian riflemen of the company in question employed their bayonets.



In the autumn of 1911, having achieved high marks in the competitive examination for admission to Saint Cyr, the military academy for infantry and cavalry officers, you began a three year program designed to prepare you for a career as a commissioned officer. (This program began with a year in the ranks of an ordinary infantry regiment and ended with two years of formal study at Saint Cyr.) In January of 1914, with your diploma in hand and the braid of a second lieutenant upon your sleeves, you reported for duty with the 153rd Infantry Regiment.

The commanding officer of the 153rd Infantry Regiment is Louis de Grandmaison. Well known for his writings about military history and theory, Colonel de Grandmaison advocates what he calls the “attack to excess.” Aggressive tactics, operations, and strategy, he argues, are not only well-suited to the temperament of French soldiers, but also the best way to win battles, campaigns, and wars in the shortest possible time, and thus at the lowest possible cost in human life.



Located in the fortress city of Toul, near the border with Germany, the 153rd Infantry Regiment is one of the four infantry regiments the 39th Infantry Division. Informally known as the “Iron Division,” the 39th Infantry Division, is one of the handful of formations charged with guarding frontier regions while the rest of the French Army mobilizes for war.

## Mobilization\*

The idea underlying all modern Continental armies is universal military service, that compulsory instruction of every able-bodied citizen, which has resulted in the "Nation in Arms."

How does this work out in practice? The first step is self-evident. Every year all the able-bodied young men of twenty are called to the colors and pass a certain length of time (generally two or three years), in acquiring their military training. Thereafter they return to civil life. It is obvious that in course of time millions of trained men may be available in case of war. But it is equally obvious that they should be recalled for war-service not en masse but by degrees, with due regard for maximum military fitness and minimum disorganization of the social and economic fabric of society.

In wartime these [reservists] join their old regiments of the peace-army at once, and since these regiments always possess an abnormally large proportion of officers and under-officers, the army which takes the field immediately after the outbreak of war is automatically doubled without being diluted, since the framework is fully equal to the increase in the ranks, while the reservists have not had time to lose the knack of their military duties.

Having thus organized and classified a nation's trained citizenship, the next step is to assemble it in the hour of peril. This process is known as "mobilization." Applying as it does to millions of individuals scattered over a whole country, mobilization is naturally an extremely complex and delicate affair, yet rapid mobilization is absolutely necessary, for since modern warfare has become more and more a matter of initial crushing blows followed up relentlessly to the end, it is quite plain that the nation which mobilizes more quickly and smoothly than its opponent is already half assured of victory.

The key to the riddle was found by the Prussians in their "regional army corps" system, whereby the army is divided into army corps, each corps permanently located in a certain region and recruiting therefrom. This works well in both peace and war. The youth does his military service near home, mobilization generally finds the reservist within call of his barracks, and everyone goes to war surrounded by comrades of his own kind.

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\*The paragraphs on this page were extracts from Theodore L. Stoddard "How Europe's Armies Take the Field", *American Review of Reviews*, Volume 50, Number 3 (September 1914)