

Henri Langie

For Henri Langie, “Kleine Bompā” (“Little Grandpa”).

Henri Langie

From War Volunteer in WW I to
Honorary Major in WW II

Tom Langie

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Preface

Even though I've never actually met my great grandfather, Henri Langie, there's still a strong bond between us. This may be because he is kept alive by the many stories I've read and heard from the rest of the family. Especially my father, Eric Langie, passed on the fire of Little Grandpa.

Inspired by these countless stories about my great-grandfather and the respect and enthusiasm with which he was spoken of, I decided to record my great-grandfather's life story in this book. He makes me proud to bear the name Langie.

The basis for the stories and what makes all this possible are the meticulously kept diaries, documents and photographs by Henri and the Belgian army, the various interviews and conversations I had with the family, as well as various other sources. Special thanks to Anne Langie and Rik Cappoen for providing the many documents, items and photos of Henri!

The original writings of Henri will be in a **different font** as to be easily identifiable.

The distance between us all is both far and near, and it would be a shame not to record our rich family history.

- Tom Langie

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We hope that for all that we have done for you during our lives with care and love, you will not forget us and will preserve our memory.

- Henri Langie and Leontine Van Nieuwenhuyze

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Henri Langie

On March 29th 1893, a boy named Henri Langie is born in Ronse, East Flanders, Belgium. Henri is the fourth child in the family of Edouard Langie and Marie-Thérèse Van der Gheynst. Father Edouard and mother Marie-Thérèse work as farmers on the fields they own around the Dammekensstraat in Ronse. Before Henri was born, the family counted three children: Marie-Clémentine, Marie-Leonie and François Xavier. Unfortunately, both Marie-Leonie and François Xavier died in 1891. Two years later, Edouard and Marie-Thérèse are therefore delighted with the arrival of their healthy and robust son, Henri. Henri is followed by two more healthy children, son Leon and daughter Emma.



Edouard Langie



*Marie-Thérèse Van der
Gheynst*

The story of Henri's first bicycle shows what a lively boy he is. At first, he attempts to construct a carriage by fabricating wheels from a loom. But after several attempts and glorious failures, it turns out that this isn't such a good idea after all. Eventually, he manages to get hold of a bicycle. Henri is highly enthusiastic. The danger, however, has not yet passed. In the past, you had to brake with your feet when riding a bicycle. And anyone familiar with the Dammekensstraat can picture little Henri hurtling down that street. He keeps shouting 'MOVE, MOVE!' on his way down. Then, at the last minute, he narrowly misses the Lord's cross at the bottom of the bend, and, panting with excitement, comes to a halt in the 'den Hoaze' neighborhood.



Henri in 1903

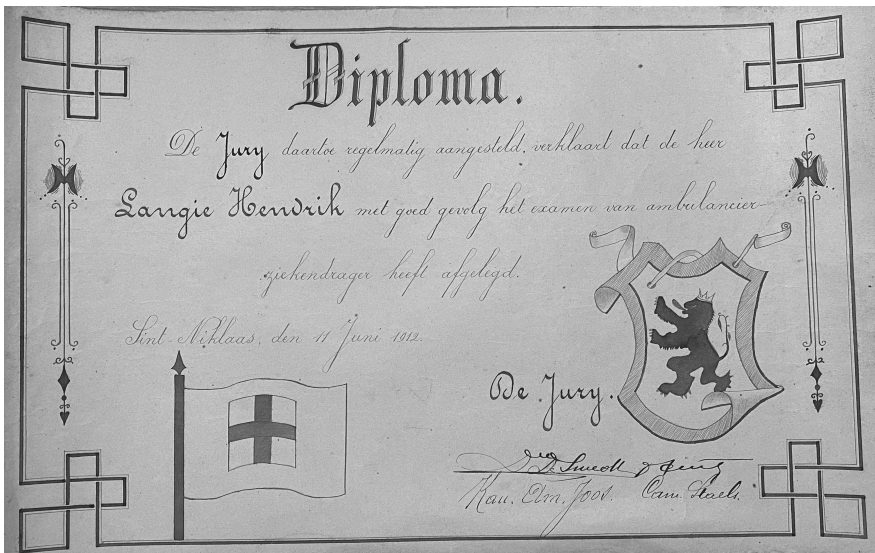
Henri is not only lively, but he is also very intelligent. As was customary in the past, children were seen as cheap labour. The value of education was not immediately recognized. Therefore, Edouard initially wanted Henri to stop studying and immediately start working after completing primary school. After much insistence from Henri's primary school teacher, Edouard finally agrees to let Henri go to secondary school. A decision well made, because for years to come, the prizes that Henri received for being top of his class could be admired in the living room.



Honorary card first in class

Recognition of superior results

After college, Henri attends a college of education in Sint-Niklaas, where he studies to become a teacher. In the summer of 1912, Henri passes the stretcher-bearer exam at the Belgian Red Cross as part of his militia classes. After completing his training in 1913, Henri is accepted into the administrative troops as a militiaman. But because of the prevailing peace at the time, Henri gets exempted from military service.



Henri's stretcher-bearer diploma

At the age of 20, Henri graduates on 31 July 1913. He gets appointed as a young teacher at his former college in Ronse. However, the start of the First World War on 28 July 1914 prevents him from teaching there for long. Henri enlists as a war volunteer. His younger brother Leon takes his place as a teacher.

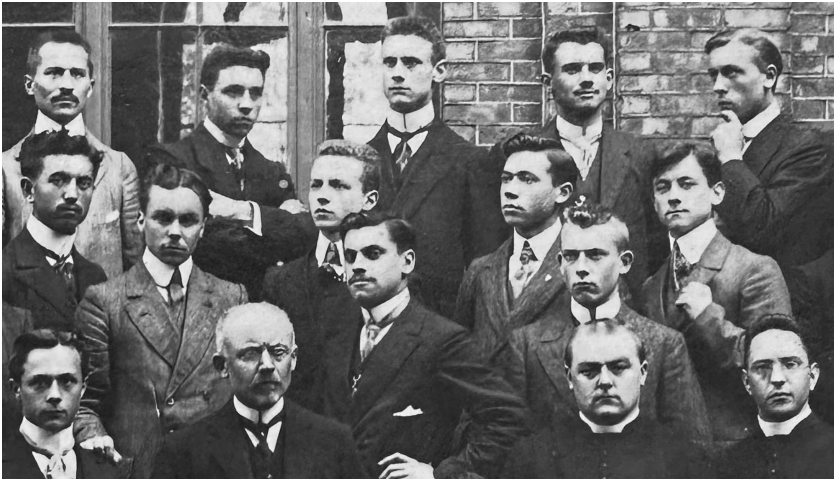


Photo of the graduation year 1913 - Henri in the middle, with his hand on his hip

The First World War

On the 28th of June 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Countess Sophie Chotek, were assassinated in Sarajevo. This brutal attack resulted in the start of World War I, only a month after the attack took place. World War I took place on an unprecedented and unimaginable scale. Approximately 65 million soldiers went to war, where 10 million were killed and 20 million were irreparably wounded, either physically or mentally. The war stretched from the coasts of America to the coasts of Asia.

Numerous countries became involved in this conflict. As a result of Serbia's refusal to accept the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia and mobilized its forces. Due to the support that the Germans had promised to Franz Joseph, the emperor of Austria-Hungary, Germany, led by Emperor Wilhelm II, became involved in the conflict as well. Based on an existing treaty, Serbia received support from Russia. Both countries mobilized. This declaration of war and massive mobilization triggered existing military treaties, drawing most European countries into the conflict. Germany issued Belgium with an ultimatum, demanding, among other things, that it guarantee free passage through Belgium. By refusing the ultimatum, Belgium gave up its neutrality. Belgium mobilized and asked for support from the Allies – including the Triple Entente of France, the United Kingdom and Russia – and joined them in the fight against the Central Powers.

The baptism of fire - Halen

On 1 August 1914, Henri, along with 20,000 others, voluntarily enlisted in the Belgian army. He was assigned to the 3rd Company of the 2nd Regiment of the Ambulance Column of the 1st Army Division in Ghent and then sent to the front, where he served as a stretcher-bearer. His baptism of fire follows on 12 August at the Battle of Halen, also known as the Battle of the Silver Helmets.



Stretcher-bearer Henri Langie (right)

Henri recounts the story of this legendary battle:

On 11 August 1914 at 6 p.m., the situation at Belgian headquarters in Leuven was assessed as follows:

"There is reason to believe that an enemy cavalry force is moving from St. Truiden and the surrounding area towards Hasselt, and will then head north of Diest."

The information from headquarters was correct: the 2nd and 4th Cavalry Corps under the command of General von der Marwitz had been in front of the Belgian front since 10 August. Everything pointed to General von der Marwitz attempting to bypass the left wing of the Belgian army. Meanwhile, the 2nd Cavalry Corps had moved towards Hasselt and, on 11 and 12 August, had encamped between Hasselt and Kortesseem, while the 4th Cavalry Corps had moved to Herk-De-Stad and encamped in Borgloon. It was these 2nd and 4th cavalry divisions that would carry out the attack on Halen, with an estimated strength of 12,000 fighters.

On the Belgian side, we had three companies of carabineers-cyclists and four cavalry regiments with a total of approximately 2,800 fighters. These were provided by the 4th Mixed Brigade, consisting of roughly 3,000 fighters. In total, the ratio was approximately 6,000 Belgian fighters to 12,000 German fighters.

The battle began with resistance from the three companies of carabineer-cyclists against the attacking troops. This was followed by a battle between both armies' cavalry regiments. Reinforcements from the 4th Mixed Brigade were called in. This brigade left Sint-Margriete-Houtem at 10:30 a.m. The men were ordered to leave their backpacks behind in the camp. Camp equipment, mobilization bags, small kettles, and extra

ammunition, as well as provisions for three days, had to be taken along.

At 12:20 p.m., the commander of the 4th Mixed Brigade received the following message at the Glabbeek exit: "Bring the artillery of the 4th Mixed Brigade to Waanrode immediately." Therefore, the artillery had to quickly pass the infantry along sandy and difficult paths. The three batteries, 7 km long, trotted without pause and entered the battle immediately upon arrival in Loksbergen, without even taking the time to rest.

The commander of the Belgian armed forces had been given a dual mission:

1. Blocking the mouths of the Gete and Demer rivers

The enemy's frenzied attacks in Yzerebeek and the occupation of Liebroek clearly demonstrate that the enemy's intention to attack was definite. Less than 6.000 men, supported by 24 cannons, blocked the road for the opponent, armed with 12.000 men and 40 cannons, without taking into consideration the machine guns!

At a certain point, however, there was a weakening among the troops of the II/24th, operating in the area of the Yserbeek stream. These were minor incidents, regrettable perhaps, but isolated and attributable to several causes:

a) New, untested troops, experiencing their first combat in one of the bloodiest battles of the campaign.

b) The sight of death, the cries of the wounded, the smell of gunpowder and fire, the horrible stench of the hundreds of horses exposed to the scorching sun.

c) The awe-inspiring rollout of the cavalry squadrons, which retreated when approached by II/24 from the positions they had occupied, had a disastrous effect on morale.

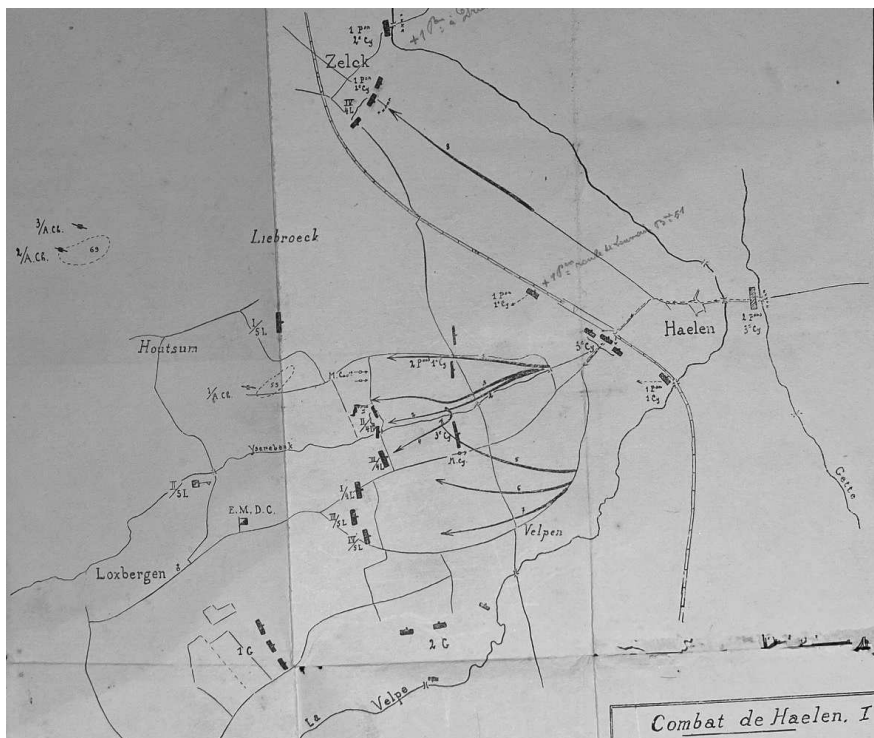
d) Withdrawal order! By who?

e) Loss of personnel: officers killed: 15%, officers wounded: 20%, non-commissioned officers killed and injured: 15%

Everyone tried to prevent the fighting troops from retreating. General De Witte ordered the Kunnen platoon to advance with the flag of the 4th line towards the Yzerebeek farm to bring isolated soldiers back into the fight. This platoon suffered 8 casualties! The second group of weakened soldiers that Captain Colpin and other officers had gathered left for the battle line with the flag of the 24th line at the front.

2. Drive the enemy back to the right bank

The enemy was stopped by our troops under circumstances in which he felt he had lost the battle. He stopped fighting around 6 or 7 p.m., just as exhausted as our men. Still, he had used this respite to retreat freely behind the Gete, evacuate Halen and the foreground where he had dug in so clumsily. If our troops had not dealt him a few good blows at this critical moment, which could have killed him, it is true that the enemy was deeply shaken and that the victory was complete.



Map of the battle of Halen

The losses suffered by the troops involved were as follows:

Carabineers-cyclists: 2 officers and 28 soldiers killed: 15%

4th Mixed Brigade: 6 officers and 116 soldiers killed: 4.5%

Lancers Brigades: 3 officers and 9 soldiers killed: 1.5%

Guides Brigades: 0 officers and 3 soldiers killed: 0.5%