

Commentaries on the Gallic War

- Date** ■ Written in 52–51 B.C.
- Place** ■ Gaul (present-day France and Belgium)
- Type of Source** ■ Eyewitness account (*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, original in Latin)
- Author** ■ Julius Caesar
- Historical Context** ■ Up until this time, Rome controlled just the southeast section of present-day France. Germans and Helvetii (from Switzerland) threatened to migrate into this region. In 58 B.C. Caesar began a campaign to stop these migrations. Caesar proved to be a military genius. By 51 B.C., he had conquered Gaul (see the *Atlas of World History*, page 36).
- Internal Context** ■ *Commentaries on the Gallic War* is divided into eight books (Book VIII was written by Aulus Hirtius, after Caesar's death). This excerpt is from Book II and it describes the Battle of Sabis that took place in 57 B.C. In it, several tribes from modern-day Belgium formed an alliance against the Romans and attacked.

Chapter 20

Caesar had every thing to do at one time: the **standard** to be displayed, which was the sign when it was necessary to run to arms; the signal to be given by the trumpet; the soldiers to be called off from the **works**; those who had proceeded some distance for the purpose of seeking materials for the rampart, to be summoned; the order of battle to be formed; the soldiers to be encouraged; the watchword to be given. A great part of these arrangements was prevented by the shortness of time and the sudden approach and charge of the enemy. Under these difficulties two things proved of advantage; [first] the skill and experience of the soldiers, because, having been trained by former engagements, they could suggest to themselves what ought to be done, as conveniently as receive information from others; and [secondly] that Caesar had forbidden his several lieutenants to depart from the works and their respective **legions**, before the camp was fortified. These, on account of the near approach and the speed of the enemy, did not then wait for any command from Caesar, but of themselves executed whatever appeared proper.

Chapter 21

Caesar, having given the necessary orders, hastened to and fro into whatever **quarter** fortune carried him, to animate the troops, and came to the tenth legion. Having encouraged the soldiers with no further speech than that "they should keep up the remembrance of their **wonted** valor, and not be confused in mind, but valiantly sustain the assault of the enemy;" as the latter were not further from them than the distance to which a **dart** could be cast, he gave the signal for commencing battle. And having gone to another quarter for the purpose of encouraging [the soldiers], he finds them fighting. Such was the shortness of the time, and so determined was the mind of the enemy on fighting, that time was **wanting** not only for affixing the military insignia, but even for putting on the helmets and drawing off the covers from the shields. To whatever part any one by chance came from

Caesar

Julius Caesar was Roman proconsul of three provinces north of Italy and a military leader. He refers to himself in third person throughout this book.

standard
flag

works
structures, such as a bridge or trench

legions
units of the Roman Army consisting of about 3,000–6,000 infantry troops and 100–200 cavalry troops

quarter
station or position

wonted
habit of

dart
a pointed missile, such as a spear or javelin, also called pilum

wanting
lacking

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the works (in which he had been employed), and whatever standards he saw first, at these he stood, lest in seeking his own company he should lose the time for fighting.

Chapter 22

The army having been **marshaled**, rather as the nature of the ground and the declivity of the hill and the exigency of the time, than as the method and order of military matters required; while the legions in the different places were withstanding the enemy, some in one quarter, some in another, and the view was obstructed by the very thick hedges intervening, as we have before remarked, neither could proper reserves be posted, nor could the necessary measures be taken in each part, nor could all the commands be issued by one person. Therefore, in such an unfavorable state of affairs, various events of fortune followed.

Chapter 23

The soldiers of the ninth and tenth legions, as they had been stationed on the left part of the army, **casting** their weapons, speedily drove the **Atrebrates** (for that division had been opposed to them,) who were breathless with running and fatigue, and worn out with wounds, from the higher ground into the river; and following them as they were endeavoring to pass it, slew with their swords a great part of them while impeded (therein). They themselves did not hesitate to pass the river; and having advanced to a disadvantageous place, when the battle was renewed, they [nevertheless] again put to flight the enemy, who had returned and were opposing them. In like manner, in another quarter two different legions, the eleventh and the eighth, having routed the **Veromandui**, with whom they had engaged, were fighting from the higher ground upon the very banks of the river. But, almost the whole camp on the front and on the left side being then exposed, since the twelfth legion was posted in the right wing, and the seventh at no great distance from it, all the **Nervii**, in a very close body, with **Boduognatus**, who held the chief command, as their leader, hastened toward that place; and part of them began to surround the legions on their unprotected flank, part to make for the highest point of the encampment.

Chapter 24

At the same time our horsemen, and light-armed infantry, who had been with those, who, as I have related, were routed by the first assault of the enemy, as they were betaking themselves into the camp, met the enemy face to face, and again sought flight into another quarter; and the **camp-followers** who from the **Decuman Gate**, and from the highest ridge of the hill had seen our men pass the river as victors, when, after going out for the purposes of plundering, they looked back and saw the enemy parading in our camp, committed themselves precipitately to flight; at the same time there arose the cry and shout of those who came with the **baggage-train**: and they (affrighted), were carried some one way, some another. By all these

marshaled
arranged in a line or group

casting
The first attack for legionnaires was to throw javelins, called pila, which forced an enemy to drop their shields

Atrebrates
a tribe from Belgium allied against the Romans; reportedly they had 15,000 armed men

Veromandui
a tribe from Belgium allied against the Romans; reportedly they had 10,000 armed men

Nervii
a tribe from Belgium allied against the Romans, reportedly they were the most warlike

Boduognatus
military commander of the Nervii

camp-followers
civilians who follow an army, often selling goods or services

Decuman Gate
the main gate of a military camp, farthest from the enemy

baggage-train
wagons carrying equipment and supplies of an army

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circumstances the cavalry of the **Treviri** were much alarmed, (whose reputation for courage is extraordinary among the **Gauls**, and who had come to Caesar, being sent by their state as auxiliaries), and, when they saw our camp filled with a large number of the enemy, the legions hard pressed and almost held surrounded, the **camp-retainers**, horsemen, **slingers**, and **Numidians** fleeing on all sides divided and scattered, they, despairing of our affairs, hastened home, and related to their state that the Romans were routed and conquered, [and] that the enemy were in possession of their camp and baggage-train.

Chapter 25

Caesar proceeded, after encouraging the tenth legion, to the right wing; where he perceived that his men were hard pressed, and that in consequence of the standards of the twelfth legion being collected together in one place, the crowded soldiers were a hinderance to themselves in the fight; that all the **centurions** of the fourth cohort were slain, and the standard-bearer killed, the standard itself lost, almost all the centurions of the other cohorts either wounded or slain, and among them the chief centurion of the legion **P. Sextius Baculus**, a very valiant man, who was so exhausted by many and severe wounds, that he was already unable to support himself; he [Caesar] likewise perceived that the rest were slackening their efforts, and that some, deserted by those in the rear, were retiring from the battle and avoiding the weapons; that the enemy [on the other hand] though advancing from the lower ground, were not relaxing in front, and were [at the same time] pressing hard on both flanks; he also perceived that the affair was at a crisis, and that there was not any **reserve** which could be brought up, having therefore snatched a shield from one of the soldiers in the rear (for he himself had come without a shield), he advanced to the front of the line, and addressing the centurions by name, and encouraging the rest of the soldiers, he ordered them to carry forward the standards, and extend the companies, that they might the more easily use their swords. On his arrival, as hope was brought to the soldiers and their courage restored, while every one for his own part, in the sight of his general, desired to exert his utmost energy, the impetuosity of the enemy was a little **checked**.

Chapter 26

Caesar, when he perceived that the seventh legion, which stood close by him, was also hard pressed by the enemy, directed the **tribunes** of the soldiers to effect a junction of the legions gradually, and make their charge upon the enemy with a double front; which having been done, since they brought assistance the one to the other, nor feared lest their rear should be surrounded by the enemy, they began to stand their ground more boldly, and to fight more courageously. In the mean time, the soldiers of the two legions which had been in the rear of the army, as a guard for the baggage-train, upon the battle being reported to them, quickened their pace, and were seen by the enemy on the top of the hill; and **Titus Labienus**, having gained possession of the camp of the enemy, and observed from the higher

Treviri
a tribe from Gaul

Gauls
Roman term for people in central France, also called Celts

camp-retainers
servants of the army

slingers
people who hurl missiles. These slingers were from the Balearic Islands.

Numidians
archers from northwest Africa

centurions
commanders of Roman army units of usually 100 men

P. Sextius Baculus
a Roman centurion. His first name was Publius.

reserve
a fresh, spare fighting force

checked
stopped, restrained

tribunes
officers

Titus Labienus
a professional soldier in the Roman army, one of Caesar's lieutenants, and second in command in the Gallic wars

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ground what was going on in our camp, sent the tenth legion as a relief to our men, who, when they had learned from the flight of the **horse** and the **sutlers** in what position the affair was, and in how great danger the camp and the legion and the commander were involved, left undone nothing [which tended] to dispatch.

Chapter 27

By their arrival, so great a change of matters was made, that our men, even those who had fallen down exhausted with wounds, leaned on their shields, and renewed the fight: then the camp-retainers, though unarmed, seeing the enemy completely dismayed, attacked [them though] armed; the horsemen too, that they might by their valor blot the disgrace of their flight, thrust themselves before the legionary soldiers in all parts of the battle. But the enemy, even in the last hope of safety, displayed such great courage, that when the foremost of them had fallen, the next stood upon them prostrate, and fought from their bodies; when these were overthrown, and their corpses heaped up together, those who survived cast their weapons against our men [thence], as from a mound, and returned our darts which had **fallen short** between [the armies]; so that it ought not to be concluded, that men of such great courage had injudiciously dared to pass a very broad river, ascend very high banks, and come up to a very disadvantageous place; since their greatness of spirit had rendered these actions easy, although in themselves very difficult.

Chapter 28

This battle being ended, and the nation and name of the Nervii being almost reduced to annihilation, their old men, whom together with the boys and women we have stated to have been collected together in the **fenny** places and marshes, on this battle having been reported to them, since they were convinced that nothing was an obstacle to the conquerors, and nothing safe to the conquered, sent ambassadors [sic] to Caesar by the consent of all who remained, and surrendered themselves to him; and in recounting the calamity of their state, said that their senators were reduced from 600 to three; that from 60,000 men they [were reduced] to scarcely 500 who could bear arms; whom Caesar, that he might appear to use compassion toward the wretched and the suppliant, most carefully spared; and ordered them to enjoy their own territories and towns, and commanded their neighbors that they should restrain themselves and their dependents from offering injury or **outrage** [to them].

Source: Julius Caesar, *The Gallic Wars*, Translated by W.A. McDevitte and W.S. Bohn, n.d., <<http://classics.mit.edu/Caesar/gallic.html>> (June 6, 2011).

horse
cavalry

sutlers
camp followers who sold provisions to soldiers

fallen short
didn't reach their target

fenny
marshy

outrage
act of extreme violence