

The Stars and Stripes

December 13, 1918

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CHATEAU-THIERRY FIRST GREAT TEST OF YANK AND BOCHE

Americans Sent to Meet Foe at Apex of Thrust for Paris

2ND AND 3RD IN BIG FIGHT

Villages of Belleau, Bouresches and Vaux Write Themselves in Our History

From a strength reckoned by the Allies at about 80,000 men on the front between Coucy-le-Chateau and Reims on the evening of May 26, 1918, to a strength which they soon knew to be at least 145,000 men on the same front the following morning and over 200,000 on the 28th—such was the surprise effect of superior numbers quickly concentrated which the Germans, owing to their possession of the initiative, were able to inflict upon their opponents in the third of their great offensives of the spring and summer of 1918.

By the break in the Allied line which they thus accomplished, particularly along the famous ridge of the Chemin des Dames, the VIIth German Army, under General von Boehn, operating toward Soissons and to the east and west of it, and the 1st Army, under General F. von Below, advancing to the eastward of the VIIth Army with the left wing of its attack near Reims, were able, to pour swiftly southward, forcing back before them the weary and outnumbered French and British divisions, most of which had been sent to this "quiet sector" to recuperate after their desperate fighting in the battles of April and May in Picardy and Flanders.

For a few days following the 27th, the situation looked dark enough from the Allied standpoint. The German tidal wave, constantly reinforced by fresh divisions, continued, in spite of stubborn resistance to move southward toward the Marne, overrunning Soissons and Fère-en-Tardenois, leaving the devoted city of Reims in a salient which became daily more difficult to hold, and at last, by tremendous pressure, beginning to spread distinctly toward Paris along the comparatively open and level country between the Marne and the Ourcq rivers.

75 Kilometers from Paris

By the last day of May the advance of the Germans at the nearest point was scarcely 75 kilometers from the French capital and although the speed of their rush had been considerably slackened by the resistance of the French divisions thrown in against them, they still possessed all the advantages of the initiative and could elect their own points for driving their line ahead anywhere on the 40 kilometers of front between the vicinity of Soissons and that of Château-Thierry, which constituted the western face of the salient they had created.

Although the French army and people, with the gallantry and moral heroism which have characterized them in every previous crisis of their national history, refused to become panic-stricken

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at this third great success of their arch enemy within a period of ten weeks, the situation was obviously one of extreme gravity.

The Allied Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Foch, was obliged to keep in hand sufficient reserves to meet any blow which the Germans might direct at any other point on the long Western battle front; at the same time he must utilize enough of his available strength to halt the formidable attack actually under way. That his forces were inadequate for such a crisis only adds to the brilliancy of the success with which he met it.

Among the reserve troops available for the disposition of Marshal Foch were the 2nd and 3rd United States Divisions. These, with the 1st Division, already engaged in its splendid battle at Cantigny, contained all of the American troops which were at the moment yet seasoned by experience for major operations, out of all the vast host whose coming was so eagerly and anxiously awaited by the French and British Armies.

"All That We Have Is Yours"

Relying once more upon General Pershing's devoted declaration, made on behalf of America during the days of the German offensive in March, that "all that we have is yours; use it as you wish," and with a faith in the valor of the Americans which was the best incentive to their utmost efforts, the Marshal ordered these two divisions to a place of the greatest danger and, therefore, of the greatest honor—to the banks of the Marne near Château-Thierry and to the great Paris-Metz national highway where it crosses the rolling hills northwest of that city, there to throw themselves across the apex of the German invasion and bar the road to Paris.

The 2nd Division, Maj. Gen. Omar Bundy commanding, was in rest billets at Chaumont-en-Vexin, northwest of Paris, and had just finished its observances of Memorial Day, May 30, when the order came for it to entrain as soon as possible and move immediately to the vicinity of Château-Thierry. During the ensuing 24 hours the troops were making the tiresome journey, and by the early morning of June 1, most of them had detrained and advanced beyond Montreuil-aux-Lions, where division headquarters was established, a hamlet some 10 kilometers west of Château-Thierry, on the Paris-Metz road.

As they went forward, the news became steadily more disquieting. French troops were fighting a few kilometers to the northeast, but they were badly outnumbered and exhausted by long fighting and marching, and the Germans were pushing on so steadily that it would be necessary for the Americans to establish defensive positions at once.

By dark that evening that work had been, at least, begun. The 9th Infantry was in line from Bonnell, near the Marne southwest of Château-Thierry, to Le Thiolet, on the Paris-Metz road, whence the 6th Marines extended to Lucy-le-Bocage and the 23rd Infantry, operating temporarily under the 43rd French Division, continued the line to the Bois de Veully.

Out in front of this position, which was about 12 kilometers in length and faced toward the northeast, the direction whence the Germans were coming, lay the crests and slopes of a ridge of hills, some of them heavily wooded, descending to the valley of a little creek, the Ru Gobert, along which lay scattered the villages of Bouresches, Belleau, Torcy and Bussières; all names soon to become famous in the annals of the American Army.

On the other side of the creek the hills rose much more steeply and the enemy was already in possession of them, with his artillery, further back,

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sweeping the American positions with a heavy fire.

To the right of the 2nd Division was the 164th French Division, which was holding the southern part of Chateau-Thierry, on the left bank of the Marne, with the assistance of some troops of the 3rd United States Division, whose superb work here will be described a little further on.

To the left of the 2nd was the 43rd French Division, parts of which were also still clinging to positions in the valley of the Ru Gobert near the villages mentioned above, but with the distinct understanding that as soon as the American defensive line should be organized they were to fall back through it from their own indefensible temporary line.

Having felt out this Franco-American front and found it strong, the Germans did not attack it in force until June 3, when, pursuing their purpose of pressing on toward Paris, they drove against the line from Montcourt, near the Marne, clear up to Chezy-en-Orxois, five kilometers northwest of the Bois de Veully, trying to dislodge both the 2nd United States and 43rd French Divisions at once.

But the rest of the combat units of the former were now up, including the 5th Marines and the three regiments of Brig. Gen. William Chamberlain's 2nd Field Artillery Brigade, the latter reinforced by six groups of French field artillery. The enemy was stopped everywhere; on the American front, for the time being, in the valley of the Ru Gobert.

Attack on Junction Point

That night the French outposts retired through the American line, and about dusk of June 4 the Germans made a concentrated attack on Veully-la-Poterie, at the junction point between the 2nd and 43rd Divisions. It was repulsed north of the village. At 10 p.m. they attacked again, and were repulsed, with a loss of about 200 men, by one American battalion, gaining only one point, the little Hill 123, from which they were ejected next day by the French.

During the evening they also attacked Hill 142, south of Bussiares, but were dispersed by the artillery. The fighting had been violent and more or less confused, and the 2nd Division had suffered losses of between 200 and 300 men, but everywhere the line had held, and it is safe to say that the struggle of the night of June 4 marked the tactical end of the German push for Paris in this section, as it was marked at practically the same time a little further east by the repulse inflicted upon the enemy in Chateau-Thierry.

That night the situation all along the front was improved by the relief of the tired 43rd French Division by the 167th Division, on the left of the 2nd, and that of the 164th Division by the 4th Cavalry Division, on the right, while the 2nd itself was strengthened by having its left flank drawn in several kilometers, from the Bois de Veully to the road between Bussiares and Champillon, and by the introduction into the line of the 28rd Infantry. The division front, shortened to about nine kilometers, now stood, from right to left: 9th Infantry, 23rd Infantry, (constituting the 3rd Infantry Brigade, under Brig. Gen. E. M. Lewis); 6th Marines, 5th Marines (constituting the 4th Infantry, or Marine, Brigade, under Brig. Gen. James G. Harbord).

Third at Chateau-Thierry

In the meantime, scarcely more than five kilometers east of the 2nd Division, in fact, so near that liaison was soon to be established between the two American organizations, troops of the 3rd

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United States Division were making for themselves in the streets of Château-Thierry a name worthy to stand beside that of Berden's Sharpshooters in the streets of Fredericksburg, Va.

The 3rd Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Joseph T. Dickman, was stationed in the vicinity of Châteauvillain and La Ferte-sur-Aube, far to the rear, when its orders came on May 30 to move at once to the battle front. Less fortunate than the 2nd Division, it was not from the first to do its fighting as a body. Its instructions, which were carried out practically unmodified by later developments, were that the 5th Infantry Brigade, under Brig. Gen. Fred W. Sladen, consisting of the 4th and 7th Infantry and the 8th Machine Gun Battalion, should be attached to the 6th French Army, commanded by General Degoutte, and assigned to the defense of the passages of the Marne from Château-Thierry to Dormans.

The commander of the 6th Infantry Brigade, Brig. Gen. Charles Crawford, was given one of his Infantry regiments, the 38th, and half of his Machine Gun Battalion, the 9th, and instructed to hold the crossings of the Marne from Dormans east to Damery, under staff direction of the 10th Colonial Division (General Marchand) of the 5th French Army. The remainder of the 6th Brigade, namely, the 30th Infantry and half of the 9th Machine Gun Battalion, was placed in support of the 5th Brigade, while the divisional Machine Gun Battalion, the 7th, was ordered to march at once, on May 30, for Château-Thierry, the rest of the troops starting next day by rail for their destination.

Machine Gunners in Thick of It

As it happened, except for a heavy engagement in the Jaulgonne bend of the Marne, where the enemy was halted north of the river, the intense fighting of most of the divisions was not to come for a time, but the 7th Machine Gun Battalion was in it from the moment it reached the front. With 180 kilometers of weary road march behind it and 36 hours without sleep it plodded into Château-Thierry at 6 o'clock on the afternoon of the 31st under bursting shells. Before it the tired French troops were struggling with the enemy's advancing infantry in the streets north of the Marne—those streets in which Jean de la Fontaine played as a child and over which have frowned, ever since the year 120, the battlements of the castle of Charles Martel, "the Hammer" that once broke another barbarian invasion of France. Was it a portent?

Hastily finding positions for the guns which enabled them to sweep the main bridge in the center of town and the river banks both up and down stream, the men of the 7th Battalion went into a battle which continued for 96 hours. Time after time the Germans swept down on the river in determined effort to carry the bridge or to effect a crossing elsewhere which would permit them to spread into the open country beyond the Marne.

But like the defenders of Verdun, the American machine gunners set their teeth and said, "They shall not pass," and for the second time in four years they made the Marne the high tide of Hun invasion.

First Lieut. John T. Bissell, with 14 enlisted men of his company, held a position on the north side of the river for 30 hours, and when at last obliged to retire he advanced in face of the guns of his own battalion beyond the bridge until he could make the gunners stop firing, thus enabling his own detachment, as well as about 300 French troops who were also north of the river, to cross the bridge to safety.

Behind the unbroken barrier maintained by these men and their equally

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devoted comrades in the French ranks, the Army command was enabled to dispose of other troops of the 164th French and 3rd United States Divisions in strong defensive positions along the Marne on both sides of Château-Thierry and to effect, through the 30th Infantry, complete liaison with the 9th Infantry, on the right of the 2nd Division, near Montcourt, west of the river.

Enemy Delays Six Weeks

When the exhausted 7th Battalion was at last relieved at 3 o'clock on the morning of June 4, it marched to the rear knowing that its hard-held positions had been left in strong hands, and that if the Germans were ever to cross the river they would have to smash through a whole French division and through the two regiments of French troops and two regiments of the American 3rd Division, which, on June 5, were constituted, under General Dickman's command, as the Reserve Group of the 38th Army Corps. It was to be more than six weeks before the enemy would make up his mind to that desperate endeavor; when he did, the dawn of his undoing was at hand.

We may return now to the 2nd Division. It has been said that in the struggle of the night of June 4, between Montcourt and the Bois de Veully, the German advance on Paris was definitely stopped. But though it was stopped, probably neither the Germans nor their opponents fully realized it as yet.

The German airplanes were constantly over the American lines, 89 flights being noted on June 5th, when 10 enemy observation balloons were also up; the German artillery was raking every part of the front and rear areas with a terrible fire of high explosive and yperite, and it was only because the Paris-Metz road, the American line of communication and supply back to La Ferté-sous-Jouarre, was providentially hidden from the enemy's view behind the hill crests, that the troops could depend upon a certain supply of food and ammunition.

Germans Angrily at Bay

It was not sufficient that the enemy had been stopped. Now that a firm line of defense was established, it became imperative that he be pushed back from the observation posts and strong points which he had seized on the left side of the Ru Gobert, so that the Americans could dominate at least the valley of that stream.

On June 4 the best information available indicated that the enemy was employing not less than 33 divisions, about 300,000 men, on the whole front of this offensive. Of these, the 197th Division was confronting the 2nd United States. It had tried to smash through the latter, had suffered bloody repulse and was now standing angrily at bay. Could the Yanks do better in a line plunge? Could they keep it up longer? The time had arrived to find out.

At 5 o'clock on the morning of June 6, in conjunction with the 167th French Division on the left, the 1st and 3rd Battalions of the 5th Marines swept out through the broken woodlands that clothe the hill crests north of Champillon in an assault whose objectives were the edges of these woods and crests looking down into the open valley about Torcy and Bussières.

They were met by an intense machine gun and rifle fire, but pushed on, and at 7:10 a.m. had obtained all their objectives and were in command of the valley at this point. It was during this advance that, among many other deeds of valor, 1st Lieut. Albert P. Baston, shot through both legs, earned for himself a D.S.C. by refusing to receive treatment until he had seen to it that every man in his platoon was under cover and in a good firing position. The

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dash of the 167th French Division gained for it like success, and at 7 o'clock it also was firmly established on the dominating heights, west of the 5th Marines.

In Command of Valley

But the very fact that the left of the 2nd Division had now advanced made it necessary that the center should be brought up also, in the direction of Belleau village and Bourèsches. Accordingly, at 5 p.m., the 5th and 6th Marines and the 23rd Infantry assaulted for an objective line extending along the valley from a point a little distance east of Bussières to the eastern edge of Bourèsches.

It was the bitterest struggle that had yet occurred, for the Germans were now thoroughly on the alert and prepared for a desperate resistance. Throughout the night, among the thickets and tumbled boulders of the Bois de Triangle and the Bois de Belleau, the lines surged back and forth in as ferocious a conflict as that between the men of Grant and Lee in the Wilderness of Virginia.

Nest after nest of German machine guns was taken in savage hand-to-hand combat, while the ground behind the lines was torn with bursting shells and the night sky was lit by the hectic glare of flares and rockets.

At 8:30 o'clock the next morning, though the left of the line had been able to add little to its great gains of the previous day, the right was in possession of Bourèsches and had pushed into the Bois de Belleau as far as the northeastern summit of Hill 181, placing the Marines there on higher ground than the enemy, who still occupied the greater part of this tangled woodland to the north.

But the German machine gun nests in the village and in the woods had exacted a terrible toll. In its two battles, the Marine Brigade had lost 24 officers and 300 enlisted men, killed or wounded, and the 9th and 23rd Infantry had lost 377 officers and enlisted men killed or wounded, the 23rd suffering most during the repulse of a German counter-attack on the night of the 6th.

From that day forth for several weeks a battle almost without lull continued along the American front, especially around Bourèsches and southeast of it, toward Vaux, and in the Bois de Belleau. The ability of the Americans to advance at these points or of the Germans to prevent them from advancing became so obviously a test before the audience of the whole world, of the relative moral stamina of the two races, that the contest took on an importance far greater than was represented by the tactical value of the mere territory involved.

And in this vital test the Americans consistently maintained the upper hand; not always and at every point for, as in a bout between two mighty and well-matched wrestlers, so American and German swayed back and forth more than once.

But time after time fiery attacks carried the American front forward greater or less distances, as when the 9th Infantry on June 7 advanced north of the Bois de la Morette at the same time that French troops and Companies E and F of the 30th Infantry, 3rd Division, took the southern slopes of Hill 204 and the village of Monneaux; as on the early morning of June 10, when the Marine Brigade lunged forward 800 meters and carried all the southern half of the Bois de Belleau, and the next morning, when, behind a rolling barrage, it took all the remainder of the woods except a few northward reaching spurs, together with 300 prisoners and 89 machine guns and trench mortars; and as on June 25 when, at last, all of these places were cleared out by a su-

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perb advance which did not halt until it was far out in the valley toward Torcy and had netted over 300 more prisoners and 24 more machine guns and automatic rifles.

Similarly, time after time the German attempts to recover lost ground were beaten back. They failed on the night of June 7 and again on that of the 8th to wrest from the 23rd and the 9th Infantry any part of the ground around Bourèsches and north of the Bois de la Morette, from which they had just been expelled, and they failed again, always with sanguinary losses, on the early mornings of June 11, 14 and 15, when their violent assaults on both Bourèsches and the Bois de Belleau were hurled back by the combined efforts of Infantry and Marines, despite the devastating preliminary bombardment of German gas and high explosives.

What the Second Met

During these weeks the 2nd Division had opposing it at different times on various parts of its front the following German divisions, wholly or in part: the 197th (which was relieved about June 9); the 237th (relieved about June 11); the 10th (relieved about June 15); the 28th (relieved about June 21); the 5th Guard; the 231st, and the 87th, of which the last was known as "the Aluminum Division."

In the meantime, the only relief enjoyed in the 2nd Division was by three battallions of the Marines, whose places were taken for five days, from June 18 to 21, by the three battallions of the 7th Infantry, 3rd Division. It was small wonder that the Germans thought, as one of them expressed it in a captured letter, that "the American divisions are still too fiery."

Up to July 1 this American division, against the most powerful opposition that the German army could exert, had advanced its front by dogged, unrelaxing pressure an average distance of over two kilometers and had taken more than 800 prisoners and more than 90 machine guns, minnenwerfers and automatic rifles—and this at a time when Germany was exultantly proclaiming to the world the impending overthrow and dissolution of the Allied armies.

As a matter of fact, it was precisely at this time and on account of this fighting that the German High Command had borne in upon it the iron fact that the scale was swinging against them, slowly but surely.

One more feat of arms, and this to the combined credit of the 2nd and 3rd United States and the 10th French Colonial Divisions, as though to set the seal of union upon their common struggle, remains to be recounted before the great counter-offensive of mid-July.

The Attack on Vaux

In the creek valley between Hill 204, taken by the French and Americans on June 7-8, and the positions north of the Bois de la Morette, taken by the 9th Infantry at the same time, lay the village of Vaux, a tiny place but deadly. Its stone houses were fortresses armed with German machine guns, its cellars were bomb proofs sheltering hidden swarms of infantry, its streets were covered ways filled with ghastly surprises for the enemy.

It thrust out, a menacing salient, into the American line, sweeping with its fire Monneaux and the communications of Hill 204. It had to be taken.

The 9th Infantry, for the 2nd Division, and troops of the 3rd Division, in liaison near Monneaux, prepared to take it. Every particle of available data on the subject of Vaux was carefully studied. Maps and old picture postcards were gone over and refugee inhabitants described in minute detail the construction of its cellars and the intricacies of its streets.

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Cellar for Every Squad

On July 1, every platoon and squad leader who was going into the town had a map showing in red ink the particular cellar which he was to capture and how he was to get to it.

At 5:30 p.m. on that day an intense artillery bombardment began which quickly reduced the village to ruins, and at 6 the assault went over the top on a front of about two kilometers, the 9th Infantry being supported on the left by an advance of the 23rd Infantry, and the troops of the 3rd Division acting in concert with those of the 10th Colonial Division.

In 15 minutes the first wave was in the outskirts of the village, and by 6:25 p.m. it was completely taken and the front had gone forward a thousand yards from its jumping off points.

23rd Takes Bois de la Roche

Meantime, the 23rd Infantry took the Bois de la Roche, immediately to the northwest of Vaux, while on the right the Allied positions on Hill 204 were materially improved. Over 60 machine guns were captured by the Americans and 500 prisoners, most of them Poles of the Aluminum Division, and it was estimated that for every man killed or wounded in the American ranks, two of the enemy were captured and one was killed.

Indeed, so badly demoralized were the Germans that the regiment in line had to be withdrawn and another substituted to make the counter-attack, which was not attempted until 4 o'clock on the afternoon of the next day—22 hours later. When it did come, it miscarried; the troops detailed to retake the Bois de la Roche did not start; those that attacked Vaux were repulsed and then cut off from their retreat by an American machine gun barrage and 150 of them taken prisoners. Vaux was never recaptured by the enemy.

In Château-Thierry, in the Bois de Belleau, in Bourèsches and Vaux and on Hill 204, the Germans had now faced the men from across the seas in fair combat; before the audience of the world they had met with them the moral test, and the result was a foretaste of what was soon to come. By the first day of July, 1918, men of discernment in Germany could trace the word defeat written across the setting sun of "Der Tag."

DERE MABLE

Love Letters of a Rookie

By Lieut. EDWARD STREETER
Pictures by Corp. "BILL" BRECK

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