The Stars and Stripes
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 1919.

QUIET REIGNS ON ANNIVERSARY OF VERDUN BATTLE

Scattering Booms from Demolition Units Only Reminders

SOUVENIRS IN ABUNDANCE

Garrison of Douaumont Already Has Own Museum in Tunnels of Famous Fort

Spring will come to France next month, but spring will not come to the field of Verdun. Already the grass is green on the broad stretches of Champagne; in the Vosges the snow patches linger only in the stubborn shelter of rocks that bar the sun; but there is no portent of resurrection in all the stretch of churned gravel marking the line of forts that protect the citadel of the Meuse from the northeast.

Only on the pathless slopes that lead to Douaumont the clay is soft underfoot, and the shell holes are filled with clear water, and between them course new born brooks, sublimating in crystal pools from which no man would dare drink.

Standing on Douaumont, toward sunset of February 21, 1919 — a blustery, squally, though not a particularly cold, day—you could have looked east and west and north through the clear air of the heights of the Meuse and seen, over and beyond Le Mort Homme and Hill 304, the heights of Montfaucon; down into the Voivre and the salient of St. Mihiel; off to the north and the crests of Les Jumelles d'Ornes, the Twins of Ornes, which were inside the German lines when the army of the Crown Prince set out, just three years to the day before, to conquer Verdun, and with Verdun, France, and, with France, the world.

Bones Still Strewn About

Standing there, with desolation at your feet, and with possibilities of more desolation if you tread too firmly on the dud that is sure to lie within a yard of you whichever way you may turn, with bones still strewn roundabout, the white harvest of winter rains, you might have heard, without straining your ears, the dull, resonant boom of an H.E.—yes, even on February 21, 1919—last Friday.

They will tell you in Verdun that those booms are a frequent occurrence; that the ground often shakes with them; that the paper window panes often belly in and out and even break from the concussion. They will tell you that last Saturday the noblest boom of them all set the city quivering and jostled down a few more loose bricks, for an American de-

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molition unit farther up the Meuse on that day set off 50 tons of useless but still potent. explosives, establishing thereby a record for post-armistice destruction that will stand until some other demolition outfit zealously goes out and collects 51 tons.

Standing on Douaumont, on that anniversary sunset, you would have thought those booms singularly appropriate. Verdun has never had a quiet anniversary. Cannon boomed on three sides of it for 52 months; a single frustrate shell landed atop Douaumont on November 9, 1918. Next February, perhaps, you will hear nothing from Douaumont, unless a luckless Meuse farmer strikes something hard with the nose of his plow.

Already Place for Pilgrims

Douaumont is already a place of pilgrimage, particularly for Americans. The members of its little garrison, which is not a garrison at all—a score of poilus, superintended by an adjutant—are glad to act as impromptu guides, although their proper duties are the maintenance of the fort and the upkeep of its machinery.

For the first impression that the visitor to Douaumont has is that he is in a vast underground power house. Entering by the southern portal, along the little ravitaillement narrow gauge, he hears the busy hum of giant motors, whose sole apparent function is to keep the rows of incandescent lamps burning in all the maze of tunnels which can shelter, and have sheltered, two whole regiments.

They have installed their own little museum, those 20 or so French soldiers, and they will show you everything from a Boche trench helmet, punctured in half a hundred places by a shrapnel burst directly overhead, to the tips of the 420's which rained on to the bastion four years ago. One of the garrison last Friday was cleaning a very rusty, very battered, but still workable, Luger which he had found only that noon, and he would not sell it.

For Douaumont is a veritable souvenir hunters' paradise. If a French store window is filled with chased shell cases and other trophies labeled "Verdun," the chances are that they are wholly genuine, for it would be easier to pick them up at Verdun than to turn them out on a lathe.

Rifles, bayonets, shell fuses, shell tips, shell fragments, cartridges, cartridge cases, grenades (which only the most rabid collectors will go after, and be sorry for it if they survive), lie about in desperate profusion, rather the worse for weather, but still tangible mementoes of the death of the German idea. You will find them even on the northern slope of Douaumont's twin sister fort of Souville, for it was on that slope that the German idea died—it was Souville that the massed cohorts of the Crown Prince did not pass.

Hardly a Celebration

The occasional activity of American demolition units was the closest approximation to a celebration which Verdun held in honor of the greatest day in all her luminous history—probably for the simple reason that there are not enough people there to provide a spectacle or an audience.

Coming down into the city from Douaumont, Vaux and Souville after sunset on that day, when the Twins of Ornes were blending into the troubled gray sky, you would have seen, on the left bank of the Meuse, the swift, fiery ascent of flares, red and white and green —or perhaps blue—lingering and lighting up the valley with some of their ancient balefulness. They, too, like the duds, were left-overs in the hands of Yanks at play, and, like the duds, it was only an ordinary coincidence that shot them off on February 21—quite likely there will be far more shot off on March 17.

Thus much, and thus much only, did Verdun observe her anniversary.

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