

# WHERE AMERICA TURNED THE TIDE

by HAMILTON HOLT



*"I do not see how the most beautiful and impressive monuments that a loving country can erect to the memory of its sons can touch the heart as these simple scattered graves dug where the boys fell and only marked by a simple wooden cross, the American ensign and steel helmet." This is the little wire enclosed graveyard near Belleau Wood.*

**S** EICHEPREY, Cantigny, Chateau Thierry, St. Mihiel and the Argonne are the five imperishable French names that must remain forever engraved on the hearts of all true Americans. They mark the successive milestones of the advance of the American troops from the time they took over the first front line trench in the spring of 1918 to the final victory in November that sealed the doom of Germany. Seicheprey was the town where on April 21 the Twenty-sixth (New England National Guard) Division under General Clarence Edwards held the line and repulsed Germany's first onslaught upon our troops. Cantigny is forever memorable as the first village taken by American soldiers in an advance attack. This feat of honor belongs to the First Division of the Regular Army commanded by General Robert Lee Bullard. Chateau Thierry was Germany's Gettysburg. There the Second Division with the famous marines and the Third Division first stopped Germany's great drive for victory. The wiping out of the St. Mihiel salient was the first army maneuver planned and carried out exclusively by the American High Command. It broke all records during the war for ground gained and prisoners captured in one drive. The Argonne forest was the head of the snake which America was pounding while the French and the English to the north were pushing back its body and the Belgians its tail. The capture of the Argonne, as General Pershing has said, made possible the cutting of the enemy's main line of communication and nothing but surrender and the armistice could have saved Germany from destruction then.

Of these five battlefields of imperishable glory I have already described two, Seicheprey and Cantigny, in The Independent of August 3 and 10, 1918. But tho the marines had taken Belleau Wood before I left Europe for home,



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I was in America when our troops began the advance at Chateau Thierry on July 17 that marked the turn of the tide of war.

Accordingly, no sooner had I arrived again in Paris last January than I betook myself to the familiar G 2 at 10 Rue St. Anne where the section of the American General Staff that had to deal with censorship, the gathering and disseminating of information, preparation of maps, and the like had its offices. I found that the press section had been moved to 37 Rue Bassano, just off the Champs Elysees in the region of the American Embassy and General Pershing's headquarters. Over there I found none of the old familiar faces. My friends of last May had all been scattered to the four corners of France, but Lieutenant Reynolds was most gracious, and General Parker, a young West Pointer who had done valiant work on the field in action and who was the first American to lead our forces into Luxembourg after the armistice, readily arranged for Mrs. Holt and myself to visit Chateau Thierry, St. Mihiel and the Argonne as the guests of the American Expeditionary Force. The Chateau Thierry trip could be made in one day as it was within easy motoring distance of Paris. So on January 30 we took an early breakfast and found ourselves a few minutes thereafter in a familiar coffee-colored Cadillac car with U. S. A. painted in large white letters on the side, and red, white and blue bands on the wind shield. Besides ourselves there were Chester M. Wright, the well known American journalist, and Captain E. T. Miller, who acted as escort.

A light blanket of snow had fallen the day before and by the time we passed beyond the environs of Paris into the open country it was evident that we would not have as realistic a view of the battle-torn landscape as if the mantle of white had not covered the scarred earth. How different was this trip from those I took last spring from Paris to the front. Now there were no sentries at the cross roads to challenge us and read our passports. No longer did we pass the never-ending lines of heavy trucks lumbering to the front laden with ammunition and supplies and coming back empty, their drivers covered from top to toe with the thick white coating of the dust of France. We honked thru the familiar towns and villages, but except for an occasional stray soldier, evidently just demobilized, there was not a uniform to be seen. Occasionally we passed batches of German prisoners leisurely mending the roads. They stared at us with idle curiosity. We spun thru Meaux, La Ferté, Marigny, and the great bare hills and the checkered patches of wood.



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land between and at last arrived at the battle area. The destruction and devastation were nothing compared to those parts of France where the lines had been mostly stationary during the war, but there were shell craters here and there and an occasional great gash in a farm building where a shell had torn thru. The spectacle, however, was thrilling to my wife, who was getting her first sight of war's devastation. We left the main road at Lucy and in a few minutes drew up at the side of a broad field where we left the car. The field ran up into the wooded hill on its further side and there we saw the immortal Belleau Wood, now rechristened by the French "The Wood of the American Marines." Except for the shell holes everywhere and the splintered trees it was a typically New England looking scene with its patches of wooded hills, open cultivated fields, little green valleys and winding streams.

The sight that first attracted our attention was a little square graveyard a few yards to our left surrounded by a wire fence stretched from wooden posts. In this yard, buried shoulder to shoulder, were four rows of American boys, perhaps a hundred altogether. They must have fallen in the woods beyond and been brought here by their comrades after those furious five days of fighting in June, where the marine corps was almost annihilated, and doubtless would have been completely annihilated save for the reinforcements of the New England boys of the Twenty-sixth Division and the Lumberjacks of Michigan and Minnesota of the Thirty-second Division. We now know that 5199 marines were killed or wounded on this battlefield before they were relieved. At the head of each grave was a little wooden cross with the soldier's name painted on it and above the intersection of the cross a circular tin disc on which was stamped the red, white and blue colors of America. Three sets of weather beaten rusty rifles were stacked down the center of stocks. rested several faded wreaths of flowers. On some of the bayonets still dangled khaki colored steel helmets, each perforated by bullet holes. I started to read the names on the wooden cross pieces thinking possibly that I might come on some one I knew, but there were two million American boys who came over to France and I soon realized the chance of finding a friend was infinitesimal. I noticed also along the roadsides, by the brink of the little stream



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and even scattered haphazard here and there thruout the open fields little isolated American graves, and almost always the steel helmet of the boy who lay beneath hung from the top of the cross. In due time the United States proposes to erect fine enclosures about the graves of her sons who have died in France and to put suitable monuments of a permanent character in all of them. This is as it should be, but I do not see how the most beautiful and impressive monuments that a loving country can erect to the memory of its sons can touch the heart as these simple scattered graves dug wherever the boys fell and only marked by a simple wooden cross, the American ensign and the dead soldier's gun and steel helmet.

We walked up the edge of the hill. Our boys had come over from the other side of the woods and we could see the fox holes where the Germans had furiously dug themselves in to escape the deadly bombardment of our artillery. In one of these holes there was still to be seen a gruesome human skeleton—whether of friend or foe I could not tell.

Altho, as I have said, an inch or two of snow covered the ground and a great deal of the debris of the battle was therefore concealed from our view, we found everywhere the earth strewn with military equipment and clothing and torn bits of khaki hanging on the brambles and underbrush. Here and there were to be seen dud bombs and boxes of live hand grenades. We were told to be specially careful not to touch any of these with our canes or our feet. Captain Miller, who had been over the top again and again in the Argonne fight and who had miraculously escaped without a scratch, said that it would doubtless be safe to touch most of these bombs but that he had got thru the war alive and he was not going to risk being ingloriously blown to bits at this late date, simply to gratify idle curiosity. He told me that we had whole troops of engineers salvaging the various battlefields, and as we walked along we could hear them on the distant hills blowing up the bombs and munition dumps that could not be carted away. Everywhere we went the wood was in-

tersected with dugouts and numerous trenches. It was a miracle how men could fight in such a tangled jungle.



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for the approaching game. It had been riddled by our batteries, and when we entered it we picked up a bayonet as a souvenir in the bottom of the fireplace. The scarred walls of the lodge were already covered with the names of soldiers and visitors in accordance with our American custom of disfiguring historic places. I noticed the names of a score of Massachusetts boys pencilled on the wall and among these I read, "for the glory of the world," signed by the name of Samuel Gompers. On leaving this tower we plunged into the center of the The destruction was a great deal more complete than I had supposed from my first view at a



distance. Almost every tree was splintered and many of them were completely mown down by the shell fire. The trunks had fallen about in every direction so that it was impossible to go straight thru the woods without an ax. Nothing except a tornado or war could accomplish such ruination.

As we came out of the wood again we could see the roofs of the houses on the hill beyond Chateau Thierry a mile or two to the north. Between us and the city all was desolation. Two or three villages intervening were razed to the ground and at the base of one of the hills we saw some workmen erecting wooden barracks which we were told were for the refugees who were driven out of the region in the third German drive and who were now about to come back and prepare their farms for the spring plowing. The love of the French farmer for his acre of land is probably unsurpassed by that of any man in the world.

We then entered our car and in a few minutes found ourselves in Chateau Thierry. The city still bore many marks of its recent bombardment, but as the inhabitants had returned it seemed a normal French city. Chateau Thierry marks Germany's farthest advance toward Paris. It is only within a two hour automobile run from the capital and is bound to be for all time to come a shrine for American pilgrims. It is very important, therefore, that the



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American or French Government gets possession of Belleau Wood and some of the surrounding battlefields and keeps them as nearly as possible as they were when our boys went thru on those terrible five days last June. Our Government already keeps the battlefield of Gettysburg as it was in '65.

We motored about Chateau Thierry, saw the shell holes and shrapnel nicks in almost all the houses, and then went out to the little town of Vaux—now a complete ruin—which our Ninth and Twenty-third Infantry took on July 1, after a terrific bombardment and a most gallant charge. As we came back we saw several groups of American naval officers and Red Cross nurses walking about the battlefields. They had come out to spend a day on the historic spot, before returning to the United States.

We motored back to Paris along the Marne, that sacred river which has twice stopped the Germans. We followed the old battlefields of 1914 and saw the now almost obliterated scars where the French made their famous taxicab attack on the German army and accomplished its rout. In 1914 it was France that saved the day at the Marne. In 1918 it was America.

