

WORLD'S GREATEST WAR DAY BY DAY

WARS AWFUL HAVOC IS SEEN AT SOISSONS BATTLE

Germans Slay Horses and Lame Motor Cars to Avoid Aiding Enemy

FARM LAND IS A WASTE

Chateau Lawn Dinner Left by Retreating Officers Like Sleeping Palace

By Richard Harding Davis

PARIS, Sept. 15.—(Delayed by censor).—The struggle for the possession of Soissons lasted two days. The second day's battle, which I witnessed, ended with the city in the possession of the French. It was part of the seven days of continuous fighting that began September 6 at Meaux. Then the German left wing, consisting of the army of General von Kluck, was within ten miles of Paris. But the French and English, instead of meeting the advance with a defense, themselves attacked steadily.

All of last week at the rate of ten miles a day they drove the Germans back across the Aisne and the Marne and so saved Paris. When this retrograde movement of the Germans began those who could not see the nature of the fighting believed the German line of communication, the one from Aix-la-Chapelle through Belgium, had proved too long and that the left wing was voluntarily retiring to meet the new line of communication through Luxembourg.

Desperate Fight Apparent.

The fields of battle beyond Meaux through which today it was necessary for me to pass to reach the fight at Soissons, showed no evidence of leisurely withdrawal, but on both sides evidence of most desperate fighting and artillery fire that was widespread, desolating. That of the Germans, intended to destroy the road from Meaux and to cover their retreat, showed marksmanship so accurate and execution so terrible that it lasted to render pursuit impossible. The battlefield stretched from the hills three miles north of Meaux for four miles along the road and a mile to either side.

The road is lined with poplars three feet across and as high as a five-story building.

For the four miles the road was piled with branches of these trees. The trees themselves were split as by lightning or torn in half as with your hands you could tear apart a loaf of bread. Through some solid shell had passed leaving clean holes. Others looked as though drunken woodsmen with axes from roots to topmost branches had slashed them in drunken fury. Some shells had broken solid trunks in two as a hurricane snaps a mast.

Proofs of Deadliness.

That no human being could survive such a bombardment I saw many gruesome proofs. In one place for a mile the road was lined with those wicker baskets in which the Germans carry their ammunition. These were filled with shells unexploded, and behind the trenches were hundreds more of these baskets, some as large as lobster pots or umbrella stands, for the shells of siege guns, and other, each of three compartments for scrapnel. In gutters along the road and in the wheat fields on either side the brass shells flashed in the sunshine like tiny mirrors. The four miles of countryside over which for four days both armies had played the earth with these shells was the picture of complete desolation.

The route of the German army was marked by knapsacks, uniforms and accoutrements scattered over the fields on either hand as far as you could see. Red Cross flags hanging from bushes showed where there had been stations. Under these were blood stains, bandages and clothing and boots piled in heaps as high as a man's chest, and the bodies of those German soldiers that the first aid had failed to save.

Bodies Lie Like Scarecrows.

After death the body is mercifully robbed of its human aspect. You are spared thought that what is lying in the trenches, among the shattered trees and in the wheat fields staring up at the sky once was a man. It appears to be only a bundle of clothes, a scarecrow that has tumbled among the grain it once protected. But it gives a terrible meaning to the word "missing." When you read in the reports from the war office that 5000 are missing you like to think of them safely cared for in a hospital or dragging

out the period of the war as prisoners. But the real missing are those I saw today, the unidentified dead.

Some peasant will bury them tonight or tomorrow, but he will not understand the purpose of the medal each wears around his neck. With him will be buried his name and the number of his regiment. No one will know where he fell or where he lies. Some one will always hope that he will return, for among the dead his name did not appear. He was reported only as missing.

Shows Wastefulness of War

The utter wastefulness of war was seldom more clearly shown. Swollen carcasses of horses lined the road sickening the air. Some few of these had been killed by shell fire. Others, worn out and emaciated and bearing the brand of the Germany army, had been mercifully destroyed, but the greatest number of them were still wearing their headstalls or the harness of the plow. That they might not aid the enemy as remounts, the Germans in their retreat had shot them. I saw four and five together in the yards of stables, a bullet hole of an automatic in the head of each. Others lay beside the market cart, others by the canal, where they had sought water.

Abandoned Motors Destroyed

Less pitiful, but still evidencing the wastefulness of war, were the motor trucks and automobiles that in the flight had been abandoned. They had broken down, or the petrol, of which the German army is said to be greatly in need, had been exhausted, and sooner than that they should fall into the hands of the enemy the Germans had smashed the motors or beneath them had lighted fires. Others they had shoved over embankments. In the forest of Villers-Cotterets I counted in one place fifteen 5000-ton motor trucks completely destroyed. A heap of empty gasoline barrels told the story. For twenty miles these automobiles were scattered along the road. There were so many one stopped counting them.

Added to their loss were two shattered German airships. One I saw twenty-six kilometers outside of Meaux and one at Bouneville. As they fell they had buried their motors in the deep, soft earth, and their wings were twisted wrecks of silk and steel. All the fields through which the army passed had become waste land. Shells had re-plowed them. Horses and men had slept in them.

Haystacks Trampled in Mud.

The haystacks, gathered by the sweat of the brow and patiently set in trim rows, were trampled in the mud and scattered by the winds. All the smaller villages through which I passed were empty of people, and since the day before, when the Germans intercepted, none of the inhabitants had returned. These villages were just as the Germans had left them. The streets were piled with grain on which the soldiers had slept and eaten. On the sidewalks in front of the better class of houses tables around which the officers had eaten still remained, the bottles half empty, the food half eaten.

In a chateau beyond Neufchelles the doors and windows were open and lace curtains partly drawn. From the garden you could see paintings on the walls, books on the tables. Outside, on the lawn, surrounded by old and charming gardens, apparently the general and his staff had prepared to dine. The table was set for a dozen, and on it were candles in silver sticks, many bottles of red and white wine, champagne, liquors and coffee cups of the finest china. From their banquet some alarm had summoned the officers.

The place was as they had left it, the coffee un-tasted, the candles burned to the candlesticks and red stains on the cloth where brandy had been spilled.

In the bright sunlight and surrounded by flowers, the deserted table and the silent, stately chateau seemed like the sleeping palace of the fairy tale.

Though the rumor of troops retreating is an ugly one, I saw no outrages such as I saw in Belgium except in the villages of Neufchelles and Varredes. There was no sign of looting or wanton destruction. In those two villages the interior of every house and shop was completely wrecked. In the other villages the destruction was such as is permitted by the usages of war,

such as the blowing up of bridges, the burning of railroad stations and the cutting of telegraph wires.

Not until Bouneville, thirty kilometers beyond Meaux did I catch up with the allies. There I met some English Tommies who were trying to find their column. They had no knowledge of the French language or where they were or where their regiment was, but were very confident of finding it and were as cheerful as at maneuvers.

Road Blocked With Troops.

Outside of Chaudun the road was blocked with tirailleuse, Algerians in light blue zouave uniforms and native Turcos from Morocco in khaki, with khaki turbans. They shivered in the autumn sunshine and were wrapped in burnooses of black and white. They were making a turning movement to attack the German right and were being hurried forward. They had just driven the German rear guard out of Chaudun and said that the fighting was still going on at Soissons. But the only sign I saw of it was two Turcos who had followed the Germans too far.

They lay sprawling in the road and had so lately fallen that their rifles still lay under them.

Three miles further I came upon the advance line of the French army and for the remainder of the day watched a most remarkable artillery duel which ended with Soissons in the hands of the allies.

Soissons is a pretty town of 4000 inhabitants. Since the Romans held it under Caesar it has been continuously besieged. Until today the Germans had held it for two weeks. In 1870 they bombarded it for four days, and there is, or was, in Soissons, in the Place de la Republique, a monument to those citizens of Soissons, who after the siege the Germans shot.

Germans Destroy Bridges.

The town lies in the valley of the river Aisne, which is formed by two long ridges running south and north. Last night the Germans occupied the hills to the south, but when attacked offered only slight resistance and withdrew to the hills opposite. In Soissons they left to protect their supplies a rear guard, who were destroying all bridges leading into the town.

At the time I arrived a force of Turcos had been ordered forward to clean Soissons of the Germans and the French artillery was endeavoring to disclose their positions on the hills. The loss of the bridges did not embarrass the black men. In rowboats they crossed to Soissons and were warmly greeted. This morning Soissons was drawing no color line.

The Turcos were followed by engineers who endeavored to repair one bridge, and in consequence were heavily shelled with shrapnel, while with the intent to destroy the road and retard the French advance the hills where the French had halted were being pounded by German siege guns. This was at a point four kilometers from Chaudun, between the village of Breuil and Courtelles.

Could See Nearly 30 Miles

From this height you could see almost to Compiègne, and thirty miles in front in the direction of St. Quentin. It was a panorama of wooded hills, gray villages in yellow fields of grain, miles of poplars marking the roads, and below us the flashing waters of the Aisne and the canal, with at our feet the steeples of the cathedral of Soissons and the gate to the old abbey of Thomas a'Becket. Across these steeples the shells sang. On both sides of the Oisne valley the artillery was engaged. The wind was blowing forty knots, which prevented the use of the French aeroplanes, but it cleared the air, and helped by brilliant sunshine, it was possible to follow the smoke of the battle for fifteen miles.

The wind was blowing toward our right where the English were, and though we could see the flash of their guns and the rings of smoke as their shrapnel burst, the report of the guns did not reach us. It gave the curious impression of a bombardment conducted in utter silence.

Jar of Cannon Insistent.

From our left the wind carried the sounds clearly. The jar and roar of the cannon were insistent and on both sides of the valley the hilltops were wrapped with white clouds. Back of us in the wheat fields shells were setting fire to the giant haystacks and piles of grain, which in the clear sunshine burned a blatant red. At times shells would strike in the villages of Breuil and Vauxbain and houses would burst into flames, the gale fanning the fire to great height and hiding the village in smoke.

(Continued on Page Three.)

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