

CHATEAU-THIERRY AND BELLEAU WOOD SEEN IN ANALYSIS

Lapse of One Year Gives Perspective Whence the Significance of These Actions Can Be Judged; America's Big Contribution Was Participation That Made Possible Counter Attack of July 18.

By Frank H. Simonds
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In the month of June one year ago there was going on north of Chateau-Thierry and about Belleau Wood that desperate fighting which marked the first considerable intervention of the United States forces in the world war. Through the courtesy of the American army I have been able to visit the battlefields, talk with the generals engaged, and reconstruct something of the history of that action which has become for Americans at least temporarily the most interesting single detail in the war. In the present article I am going to try to set forth facts as contrasted with the legend of Chateau-Thierry on what may be regarded as the anniversary of the struggle.

To start at the beginning, Chateau-Thierry is a name rather loosely applied to a series of operations which took place between the Marne and the Vesle rivers between June 1 and the first of August. These operations may be divided into four phases: First, that which was comprehended in the American share in pinning down the German advance of June 1 and the days immediately following; second, the offensive about Belleau Wood of the second division, which began on June 6 and came to an end about June 25, so far as the Marines were concerned, with a complete clearing of Belleau Wood, and so far as the Ninth and Twentieth divisions were concerned with the capture of Vaux in the first days of July; third, the contribution of the Third division south of the Marne to the general resistance to the great German offensive of July 15; and fourth, the participation of nine American divisions in the counter offensive of Foch, which began on July 18.

LUDENDORFF'S MAY OFFENSIVE.
On May 27 Ludendorff broke the allied line held by tired French divisions and remnants of the British Fifth army which had been beaten at the Somme and transferred to the Chemin des Dames for rest and refit. The German attack was successful substantially all the way from Soissons to Rheims, and in the next few days German forces moved southward as far as the Marne, took Soissons and entered the outskirts of Paris. The German advance was checked by the French Fifth army, but on that day orders were changed, the Second division was directed to move eastward to meet the German advance which was coming towards Paris on either side of the Paris-Metz road in the neighborhood of Chateau-Thierry while a similar order was sent to the Third division in billets a considerable distance south of the Marne. The objective of the Third division was the south bank of the Marne, facing Chateau-Thierry where it was to prevent the Germans from crossing the river.

On June 1 the Marine brigade of the Second division reached Montreux aux Lions, a dozen miles west of Chateau-Thierry, and at 1 o'clock of that afternoon, at the urgent request of General Degoutte, commanding the French corps, the Sixth Marine regiment moved out on the Chateau-Thierry road and took a position some six miles west of Chateau-Thierry in Clerbault Woods. French troops were in line still further to the east, but the Sixth machine gun battalion was used effectively on that day. At the same time the Seventh machine gun section of the Third division, brought up to the south bank of the Meuse in automobile trucks arrived in time to cover the retreat of the French infantry from the north and prevent the Germans from crossing the river.

MARINES DELIVER FIRST ATTACK.
In the days immediately following the whole of the Second division took up positions on either side of Clerbault Woods the French troops in front retired on June 4 and thereafter the Americans held this sector. They were not, however, attacked.

In the same fashion the Third division arrived and took over from the French the south bank of the Marne. They, too, were not attacked, although several companies of one regiment attempted the French in an unsuccessful attempt to hold Hill 204 just west of Chateau-Thierry and dominating the town. This was the first phase of the Chateau-Thierry operation.

On June 6, at daylight, the Marines north of the Chateau-Thierry road delivered the first offensive, taking the village of Bouches and entering the southeastern edge of Belleau Wood. From that time onward the Marines were heavily engaged up to June 25, Belleau Wood passed completely into their hands, and the Germans retired to the hills north and east, maintaining outposts in several small villages. Early on July 9 the Second division south of Chateau-Thierry was relieved by the Twenty-sixth New England division. This ended the second phase.

GREAT OFFENSIVE LAUNCHED.
On July 15, Ludendorff launched his great offensive, which included a main attack between Rheims and the Argonne, and a secondary attack to force a crossing of the Marne and a move eastward across the base of the Rheims salient. The Third division south of Chateau-Thierry was on the extreme left of the allied line of attack. On the morning of this day some German troops did cross the Marne and drove the advance elements of the Third division out of their trenches. Later in the day they counter-attacked, regained the lost ground and drove the Germans eastward. But the main contribution of the Third division to this phase of Ludendorff's offensive lay in maintaining its connection with the French troops to the eastward, who were driven from the bank of the Marne several miles southward. Skillful and gallant fighting on the part of the Third division prevented the Germans from opening a gap in the allied line. This marks the third phase.

Finally on July 18, Foch delivered his great counter offensive. The main blow was struck by the French Moroccan division and the First and Second American divisions entering from the forest of Villers-Cotterets, a dozen miles south of Soissons. Subsequent attacks were made by the Twenty-sixth division, which advanced northeast from Belleau Wood, and the Fifth division which was broken up and intermingled with the French troops.

This counter offensive was one of the great successes of the war. In it the American divisions, and particularly the First and Second, played an extremely brilliant part, advancing until they crossed the Soissons-Chateau-Thierry road and, in company with their French comrades took positions which made evacuation of the whole Chateau-Thierry salient inevitable. As the German retreat began other American divisions were brought into action. The Forty-second Rainbow division which had shared in the successful defense of the line east of Rheims replaced the Twenty-sixth division. The Twenty-eighth relieved the French division and the 31st relieved the Third. Finally the Seventh-seventh came into action when the general retreat had reached the Vesle very early in August, just as the operation came to a standstill. This is the fourth phase of Chateau-Thierry.

NAME IS MISLEADING.
It remains now to estimate accurately the value of the American participation. It will be seen at the outset that Chateau-Thierry is a very misleading name, unless one applies it to the whole salient between the Aisne and the Marne created by the German victory on the Chemin des Dames of May 21, since, save for the action of the Third division through its machine gun detachment on June 1, no fighting took place in the immediate vicinity of Chateau-Thierry itself. The fighting of



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the Second division in and about Belleau Wood was six or eight miles away from Chateau-Thierry, while Foch's main thrust in his great counter offensive took place nearly 30 miles north of Chateau-Thierry on the eastern edge of the forest of Villers-Cotterets.

When the Second and Third divisions arrived on June 1, the great German advance was almost at an end. The victorious Germans had been advancing for six days. They had outrun their artillery and their supplies. The best proof that the advance was about at an end is found in the fact that the Americans were never attacked on the lines they took up, save as the Third division participated in the general German offensive six weeks later.

It is therefore inaccurate to assert that the intervention of the Second division on the Chateau-Thierry road or the Third division south of Chateau-Thierry saved Paris, stopped the great German drive or did more at the moment than to support and to relieve the exhausted French divisions and conceivably halt the Germans a mile or two short of the position they might have reached before they were compelled to abandon their advance.

SITUATION LITTLE CHANGED.
Of the fighting at Belleau Wood, the truth is that it was brilliant, magnificent, but a highly localized affair in which the Marines and the Ninth and Twenty-first infantry gave a splendid indication of the fighting qualities of our new troops. The capture of Belleau Wood did not materially change the situation, nor did it supply a vantage point of any particular value, in the later offensive. Seen as a local engagement fought for a limited objective, it possesses merit which should make Belleau Wood and the villages of Bouches and the places of American pilgrimage for many years. The best proof of the intensity of the fighting is shown by the fact that of the Second division lost 1250 killed, 3225 wounded and 281 missing—that is nearly 10,000 out of a fighting strength of about 25,000 in six weeks. It is a glorious page in American military history, this Belleau Wood engagement, but it is easy to exaggerate its relative importance.

Of the contribution of the Third division south of the Marne, it is sufficient to say that it was a useful addition to the general resistance of the allies, but it was itself a detail in secondary circumstances of the enormous battle. The German success or failure in the whole operation depended upon breaking the French line between Rheims and the Argonne. French resistance was predicated on defeating this attack. The French were prepared to give up more ground than they did south of the Marne if necessary. After the German defeat between Rheims and the Argonne, the great counter offensive of July 18 promptly forced a German retreat south of the Marne.

FOURTH PHASE CONSIDERED.
It remains now to consider the fourth phase, that of July 18, and the share of the Americans in this turning point of the campaign and of the war. On this score we say at once that no offensive would have been possible had American troops not been available, since Foch had no other reserve. We may say that he would probably not have risked this great gamble even with American troops had they not already in previous fighting at the Chateau-Thierry salient revealed qualities which gave him confidence in them which was not mistaken. In the counter offensive more French than American troops were used, and as it developed, British and Italian troops were also used, but many of the French troops which were employed, particularly in the first days, could not have been put in had not the American troops replaced them in other sectors of the front.

We did two things, then. We supplied Foch with a strategic reserve which enabled him to make his great counter offensive, both by contributing four divisions to that attack and by releasing French divisions whose places were taken by other divisions of the reserve.

In that attack, the First and Second divisions fighting on either side of the French-Moroccan division, the best shock unit of the French army, surpassed all expectations. As a result of this attack southwest of Soissons out of the forest of Villers-Cotterets, the Germans were compelled to abandon the Chateau-Thierry salient, they lost the initiative which they never recovered during the war, and they began the retrograde movement which carried

THE PEN IN REPENTANCE

them to the French frontier before the armistice, and was still in progress then. To sum up, Chateau-Thierry, so far as it was a decisive phase of the war, must be regarded as an action which began on July 18, and ended in the first

days of August, when the Germans had retired behind the Vesle. In the opening phases of this battle, four American divisions, the First, Second, the Third and Forty-second, had already played useful parts in the defeat of the German offensive of July 18. Three more divisions, the Twenty-eighth, the Thirty-second, and at the end the Seventy-seventh, were used. These nine American divisions, amounting to something more than 200,000 men, gave decisive weight to Foch's supreme stroke. They fought under French army and corps commanders, the strategy was French, but without them there could have been no offensive, and had they not fought magnificently, the offensive might have failed.

NOTION IS WRONG.
I have found in France as in America a general notion that in some fashion or other the Marines saved Paris in the June fighting in the Belleau Wood engagement generally described

as the battle of Chateau-Thierry. Already many Americans go to Belleau Wood and Chateau-Thierry under the impression that on this ground American troops saved Paris, the war. This is the legend of Chateau-Thierry. It finds no support either in the records nor in the opinion of Americans in high command.

On the other hand, I have found a general lack of appreciation of the really stupendous and decisive contribution made by the American army on July 18, and the successive days, but I do not think there can be any question as to the accuracy of the statements which I have made here, and particularly the following:

First, that fighting in the immediate vicinity of Chateau-Thierry in the last days of the German advance was insignificant, and relatively unimportant.

Second, that Belleau Wood, where the Marines fought, and the village of Vaux, which was taken by the Ninth

infantry of the same division, were local and limited offensives without general value.

Third, that American participation in the great counter offensive of July 18 alone made the operation possible. That fighting contribution of American troops in that offensive was a great factor in its success, while no one will deny that the success itself marked the turning point of the war and the beginning of the end.

Probably Americans will continue to call this whole series of operations Chateau-Thierry. Actually, however, our first participation was in the closing phase of the German exploitation of the victories on the Chemin des Dames, while on July 18 we merely participated in what the world will probably know as the second battle of the Marne.

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