

FIRST AMERICAN ARMY ATTACKS IN MAJOR OPERATION IN TANGLE OF ARGONNE FOREST

Americans Strike Between River Meuse and Great Tangle of Forest—New Divisions in Battle—Yanks Who Push Ahead Northwest of Verdun Never Knew Rigors of Winter in France

The following very interesting and graphic account of the battle of Argonne Forest is given in "Stars and Stripes," issue of October 4, 1918, and was handled up by Hanson Hughes. Corporal Riley Judy, who participated in this battle, sent the clipping over from France.

At dawn on September 26, 1918, the First American Army, flushed with its first success at St. Mihiel, struck its second blow on a wide front west of Verdun—attacked and drove the Germans from many a town and village, and from many a hill and valley they had held since the first weeks of the world war.

All that region the night before had been blasted by such a concourse of guns as had had no precedent in American history, and by sundown of the second day the Infantry, which swarmed forward through the mist of Thursday morning, had fought its way far into the wild forest of Argonne, had carried by storm the forbidding height of Montfaucon, had restored village after village to France, and had sent more than 4,000 prisoners trudging back through the chill September rain to the waiting pens behind.

The attack was made on a 20-mile front. The commander of the first two days announced that troops from 12 States—Pennsylvania, Kansas, Missouri, Iowa, New Jersey, Maryland, Virginia, Oregon, Washington, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana—were participating in the action.

In all that battle-line there was not a gambler at his layard, not a cook straining to push his kitchen forward, not a doughboy crawling on hands and knees, and did not know—and who was not immensely heartened by the knowledge—that in his own way's left the French were fighting victoriously in Champagne; that to the north the British, Belgians and Yankees were forging ahead.

News Flashed by Wireless.

He knew that he and his were taking part in the largest military movement in Western front had ever known—that they were taking part in a battle which, with intervals of quiet and rest, extended, stretched from Lorraine to the North Sea.

The impression of a rain of blows under the enemy's stupified head was conveyed through the air from the high wireless station on the Eiffel Tower in Paris, which sped to the uttermost reaches of the tingling front not only the latest progress, in other sectors of France, but also the calls of German Messager in far Mesopotamia and the Holy Land.

The proof of intense fighting could be read on every slope and crest on the Argonne front. It could be noted in the feebleness with which the German artillery made an effort to our own during the first two days of the battle. It could be noted in the scramble with which reserves came to the rescue on the third and fourth days and in the nature of these reserves.

Here was part of a division of which the other part was mixed up with the French in Champagne. Here was another division that had been caught and thrown into the gap on its way from Alsace to some part of the German line in Flanders that had been striking for help.

On Memorable Ground.

And in all that battle-line from Verdun to the other side of the great forest there was not a Yankee who did not know he was fighting on ground hallowed far beyond our power to add or detract; that he was starting out from Hill 304 and Le Mort Homme of tragic memories; that he was advancing from blighted fields immortalized by those dead soldiers in horizon blue who stood fast there throughout the bitter months of 1916 and said of the invading horde: "They shall not pass."

Ahead of the doughboys, and he leading to them, loomed Montfaucon, that village on a hilltop which is the highest point between the Aisne and the Meuse, and from whose church steeple, one visible for miles and miles around like a finger pointed to Heaven, the Crown Prince watched in 1918 the vain slaughter of his countrymen.

Now that watch tower is but crumbled stone—crumbled stone of which some has been spread and packed to make a road over which American kitchens are trundling with slum and coffee for American doughboys.

Never Knew a French Winter.

But to those Americans whose prayer every morning and every night of their lives is that this young Army shall do the home folks proud the factor in this battle of greatest interest is just the fact that the initial attack on the whole 20-mile front was launched by divisions of which not one could tell what a

slight to carry with him to his grave—out from under the edge of the mist, swarming like a multitude of busy bees from some giant hive, out and on and up the hill the lough-bored went.

In an instant, the wires hummed with the news. Signals flew from the hill tops, pigeons sprang into the air with the tidings and overhead the hovering aircraft paused, woeled and started back. Soon from each of them would drop to some open field a gleaming cylinder, traceable in its passage through the air by its fluttering streamer of white, messages from the air to the waiting commanders in the rear.

"Over on the Minute."

The burden of all these messages was pretty much the same along the whole 20 mile front. Take one flashed back by a corporal, squatting, telephone in hand, at his look-out station. He may have tried to keep his voice level and military. His report, as it was caught on the typewriter in some message center far behind, will some day gather dust in the archives of the War Department at Washington. It read: "Troops over the top with a yell on the minute."

It meant that the line—which had held at least that much ground for four long years and which had not moved an inch either way for more than a year—the line was moving at last, and toward Germany.

Then, as the Infantry rushed forward, smothering or passing by the rear guard machine gun nests and rounding up the unorganized German troops whose retreat had been cut off by the barrage, every other arm of the service took up the strain of moving forward. At the end of the second day, the counter attacks began, came thicker and faster in the days succeeding as the resistance stiffened, brought with them fierce, close hand-to-hand fighting as the battle line swung back and forth. But for the first two days, it was a matter of pursuit, and for all the Army, the sleepless task of keeping up with the Infantry.

Moving Up Starts Early.

That movement had begun at midnight the night before. At midnight some battalions of 75's had fired a few rounds and then packed up to start forward through the mud and darkness, starting so early that before sundown they were pitched on new hillside and, without waiting for camouflage or good emplacements, were firing steadily into the retreating German lines.

The pace set for them can be gauged by the fact that one regimental aid station, after patching up the first wounded at its old stand until 9 on Thursday morning jumped forward eight kilometers and was at work in Cotsy by noon of the first day. By sundown of that first day the Infantry lines in some places had gone forward more than five miles, and through the maze of traffic which clogged the crazy roads, the urgent message ran back: "Guns before all else, and then food for the gunners second, ammunition first."

To get the guns up, meat and coffee must wait. Everything—except ambulances—must wait. If horses dragging the 75's through the mud should be killed or, having done their level best, should drop from exhaustion, men human muscles must push the guns on their way. If a big gun should capsize in some bad hole and desert of moving on its assigned position, then it must make that hole, hole its position and get fire from there. More than once here things happened.

The problem of moving up the guns and the other supplies was made both supremely important and supremely difficult through the first three days by the nature of the terrain over which the Americans were fighting—one of the most difficult battlefields in Europe—and by the condition in which four years of battle had left that terrain.

Here was a stretch of French country-side all little hills and valleys. In the summer of 1914 it was beautifully carpeted with green, field after field of well husbanded farms, with here and there a golden wheat crop embroidered with scarlet poppies, and here and there a village of stone homes with red-tiled roofs.

Now it looks as though the hand of some grotesquely gigantic leper had reached out of the East and touched it. It is a dead country. There are no homes, no life, no verdure. Here and there some crumbled stone where a house once stood, here and there the blackened stump of a blasted tree. For the rest there is only a scorched, bleak countryside, pitted with shell holes and mine craters like the face of the moon.

From these shell holes German rear-guards turned their machine-guns on the backs of the advancing Yankees. From them, as the mists of the first morning cleared away, Germans emerged in batches large and small, to be taken into custody by the mopping-up parties and sent to the rear to swell to thousands the number of prisoners captured on the first day.

Still the Prisoners Come.

Not only that first morning, but off and on through Thursday, Friday and Saturday, little groups of them would trickle out of the underground hiding places whither they had taken

refuge when the shelling began and whence they had been afraid to come out, so deep-rooted was their conviction that Americans were accustomed to boil their prisoners in oil. There they would be found by Yanks on a still hunt for souvenirs.

Two famished Boches emerged as late as Saturday from a deep dugout that was not more than a good rifle shot from the dugout of a general commanding an American reserve battalion.

Aside from these shell holes and remnants of abandoned trenches, the waterless, foodless land for several kilometers in depth offered not a vestige of shelter, not a hedge or even a clump of green behind which a gun might hide, or in the great protection of which a line of trucks might move unobserved.

One Wall for a Village.

As for the villages which the first few days recaptured, some are so completely obliterated that runners passed through them in broad daylight, never once dreaming that a village had stood there.

One messenger, knowing that a general's P. C. had been set up in a certain town which looked imposing enough on the map, found when he came to the place that only a part of one wall of one house remained to identify it. Against this wall a telephone was placed.

"Where is the divisional P. C.?" the runner asked of the officer at the telephone.

"You're in it now," replied the officer with a grin.

Of other towns, such as Cussy and Montfaucon or Bethincourt, more is left, but not enough on which to build anew, and sometimes you can recognize the church, where weeds grow rank through the stones of the floor, only by the remnants of painted angels littering a heap of stones which was once an altar.

But it was neither in terms of battle nor in terms of restoration that this terrain presented its most serious problem during the first few days of the battle. It was in terms of traffic.

Roads over which no vehicle had passed since the summer of 1914, roads recognizable after four years only as serpentine paths weaving disconsolately among the shell holes, roads in which mine craters yawned past all hasty bridging, these had to receive and bear during the first three days a volume of heavy, ceaseless traffic that would have worried a dozen Lincoln Highways.

In Terms of Traffic.

That is why the pioneers—both Engineer and Infantry—went for days and nights without stopping to sleep or eat. That is why the clink of pick and shovel working ahead of the trucks, working under the trucks, will ever be music in the ears of the American Army. There was the task of getting the guns up, and get them up they did, faster in some places than in others, but still the guns moved on through the rain, and the ammunition followed.

Even had the roads been perfect from the start, the traffic problem would have still been enormous, and those who went through it will never forget the paralyzing congestion. Every one helped. Every one had to help. The sight no one could stand was the spectacle of a long train of ambulances stalled in the rain, the drivers raging, the onlookers cursing, only the wounded within silent and uncomplaining save when one of them might reach out and ask for a smoke or a pull on a passing canteen.

Road Built in Twinkling.

Then down from the trucks, out from under tarpaulins, emerging here from a hastily made bed beside the road or there from a roadside kitchen, the volunteers would come. The improved road would be made in a twinkling, the litters would be carried across its torturingly bumpy surface, the ambulances would trundle after and a little later the train of wounded would be creeping on its way to beds and warm food and expert, compassionate hands.

In such traffic jams, when an occasional ill-advised cart full of officers' baggage would be shucked ruthlessly to the side, and when stubborn drivers must be coerced to breed in them then and there the right community spirit, the strong-armed M. P. was the king of the road and the hero of the hour.

Every cross road clamored for him over the wires. Things went best where the M. P. at the corner was a square-jawed, hard-boiled Yankee who, when a truck seemed disinclined to do his bidding on the instant, would waste no words but draw his gun suggestively and say: "You do what I tell you or I'll blow what little brains you've got to the other end of Hell."

At the End of the Sixth Day.

With roads laid under and in front of the moving traffic, with such M. P.'s to straighten out the tangles, slowly through the mud and rain the guns moved up.

By the end of the sixth day the Yankees in the Argonne had pushed on in some places to a depth of 12 kilometers, and everywhere held fast their new won territory, despite an ever stiffening resistance which took the form of repeated small-scale counter-attacks and the turning loose on the Americans of all the German tricks in machine guns, shrapnel, hand grenades, minenwerfers and gas.

On the extreme right the troops working up along that curve in the meandering Meuse, which fairly pocketed the enemy, had pushed through the troublesome woods above Septsarges and reached almost as far as Briceulle. Toward the center the lofty height of Montfaucon was serving American observers as a watchtower, and the battle line had passed Clerges.

Most difficult of all had proved the Forest of Argonne itself, but into this treacherous woods the New York troops had fought their way foot by foot for a distance of over five miles. Fought their way? Hewed their way, rather, for the Forest of Argonne is such a wild tangle of ancient trees, rank underbrush and barbed wire as no American doughboys have had to face since the first troops went into the trenches.

Chopping a Way Through.

The path would baffle a rabbit, and the machine guns are strewn through the woods like snakes in the grass, but somehow the Infantry have pushed and fought and cut and chopped their way through.

Ahead of our line on the sixth day, the Germans had retreated to that third retirement position which they left last constructed in the late autumn of 1917, a position strong in its natural defenses but reinforced to no such extent as the Hindenburg line, with which it cannot be tactically compared. It is rather a continuation of the retirement position to which the Germans were driven when the Americans sliced off the St. Mihiel salient. This retirement

line in the Argonne they have named the Kriemhilde line, in honor of a bouncing lady who figured large in the Nibelungen Lied.

Herbert Walbridge came in on Thursday last from Camp Lewis. He spent a short furlough here visiting his mother, Mrs. Elizabeth Walbridge.

BOTH HEROINES DESPITE WEALTH



Carrying on in their war bit until asked to discontinue, Mrs. Vanderbilt Astor and Mrs. W. K. Vanderbilt Sr., two of America's wealthiest and best-known social leaders, have just returned from France. Both "tended tables" in the autumn of 1917, a position strong in its natural defenses but reinforced to no such extent as the Hindenburg line, with which it cannot be tactically compared. It is rather a continuation of the retirement position to which the Germans were driven when the Americans sliced off the St. Mihiel salient. This retirement



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