

The American Marines at Verdun, Chateau Thierry, Bouresches and Belleau Wood

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Paris Island, S. C., was alive with khaki clad young men, when I arrived at the Marine Training camp shortly after war had been declared. Our instructions emphasized the use of the rifle and a knowledge of the traditions of the Marine Corps, which we were so soon to be called upon to uphold on the field of honor.

From this station I was transferred to Quantico to join the Ninety-Sixth company, Sixth regiment, which was then undergoing an intensive training, preparatory to its departure for France. There the days were spent in long marches through the Virginia hills, interspersed with detailed instruction in the use of machine guns. We had profited from the experience of the English, and every man was forced to qualify as an expert gunner. For there had been a time on the British front when hundreds of these valuable weapons lay scattered on the battle fields, for want of men who knew how to use them.

After weeks of impatient waiting, at last the hour of our departure came. Early one morning under cover of darkness we were assembled at the railroad station and quietly entrained. We were sent to the Philadelphia navy yards, where we found our ship waiting in the offing. We went aboard immediately and that night slipped silently down the bay. Our trip across was uneventful save for raids on the kitchen. While one man regaled the cook with stories, nimble fingers searched the larder for dainties.

In the cold gray dawn of early morning, life belts adjusted, we entered the submarine zone. A heavy fog enveloped the ship. Standing on the quarter deck, one could hardly see across the rail. It was almost noon when the sunlight dispelled the murky fog and revealed the presence of our expected destroyers. The long arm of Uncle Sam had reached out across the sea to protect us in our need and convoy us safely to port. It was evening when we sailed up the broad waters of the Loire river into the port of Saint Nazaire, Peasants working in the fields stopped to look, and, discovering the khaki clad lads on the decks, dropped their hoes and leaped with joy; waving their arms with a warmth of welcome that made up for the lack of any demonstration at our departure. The early spring sunlight through the clear air brought out the vivid coloring of the landscape. There in that valley of the Loire we saw France in all her verdant beauty.

Our trains were ready and we had our first experience of riding as cattle in a French box car. The sign, 40 Hommes-8 Chevaux," amused us at first until we realized what it meant to travel three days and nights across France with 40 men in a space ten by twenty feet. Fortunately, it was warm and we escaped some of the hardships others had undergone who had preceded us. Men stood until they became so exhausted they were able to lie down and sleep despite that the others occasionally walked upon them. The floors were alive with "cooties," and while we didn't see the front for some days, we never spent another idle hour.

But after all it was quite endurable and we enjoyed the trip in a way. It was a beautiful ride across the heart of France, and the way the villagers shouted "Americans," warmed our hearts and made us happy to feel we were there to help them.

Our destination was the little town of Damblain, in the foothills of the Vosges, close to the birthplace of Joan D'Arc. There we detrained. And there one of the men almost caused a stampede as he ran through the crowd shouting that one could buy wine for twelve cents a gallon. "This is some town," exclaimed an old sergeant with a row of campaign bars across his breast. But one swallow was enough. It

tasted like varnish. The French thought it inconceivable that we should drink so much water, but it was always a source of wonder to us how they could drink their "vin ordinaire." On the day following our arrival we marched to the little villa of Blevencourt, where my company was billeted. We slept in barns for the most part and there in the highlands it was not unusual to wake up in the morning beneath a blanket of snow.

It was here that we had our first experience with the German spy system. Four gypsy girls entered the town, apparently for the purpose of selling small trinkets to the soldiers. They visited the various billets, but no one suspected they had any ulterior motives until an aeroplane landed in a field close to the town late one night and flew quickly away when approached by the guards. One of the gypsies was found in the field and she with her companions was immediately arrested by the French authorities, who said later they had found sufficient evidence to justify their being interned. Incidents of this kind soon taught us the value of absolute secrecy in all our movements.

We were only there a short time until we were sent to the front. We went in by train to Fort Dugny, one of the ring of forts surrounding Verdun. Evidently our movements had been observed, for when we arrived at the railroad station the Germans began to bombard it. We escaped with only the loss of the Fifth regiment's band instruments. The country in this section was as barren as a desert. The long column moved hurriedly on to the road and we marched thirty miles in to the protection of the Verdun highlands.

Hidden away in the woods of Camp Massa we rested. There we came into our first intimate contact with the activity on the front. An anti-aircraft battery was located near us. Whenever a German plane appeared in the sky the battery went into action. To us it was always an amusing sight. Every Frenchman looked like he was trying to do all the work himself, while all talked so fast and furiously you wondered who was in command. When the aeroplane came into range they would open fire and it was a wonderful sight to see the balls of shrapnel bursting close to the plane, following it in its

efforts to escape and leaving a long trail of little white puffs of smoke across the sky.

The roar of the guns on the front rolled up about us and vibrated through the valleys. An occasional shell fell near enough to make us uneasy. It was here while walking in the woods one Sunday morning with some comrades that we were attracted by the sound of music. We listened, and above the rumble of the guns there floated through the trees the sound of a church service. There in the midst of all that great destruction of human life, only a little distance from the red ruin of the front line, was a padre and a group of French soldiers at prayer. We stopped, knelt beside them and prayed with the feeling that one can only experience when he is standing on the brink of eternity.

Nearby were several little graves on the roadside with their wooden crosses marked with the tri-color. We wondered how long it might be until we would be occupying one. There are many of these little wooden crosses on the roadsides of France, and when the marches were unusually long and hard and we were very tired and sleepy, we used to envy those sleeping there in the peace and silence of the forest, and death did not seem such an enemy after all, if only we could lay down our heavy packs and rest forever.

The American army had been assigned the section of the lines from Verdun eastward to the Swiss border, the reason being that their lines of communication would lie to the south and not interfere with those already established by the French and British. The Marines were placed on the right bank of the Meuse, the lines extending from Verdun eastward. We moved in, one night. Early in the evening while patrolling the roads we saw a small balloon, such as is often seen on the Fourth of July, float up from a woods where a high wind caught it and sent it sailing away towards the German lines. It was carrying a message from some German spy, telling them that we were going in to relieve the French. As we wended our way along the road we were held up by some unexplained delay, when suddenly out of the inky darkness of the sky came a salvo of shells that completely destroyed the

road just ahead of us, and which would have annihilated all had we continued our march.

These trenches which we were to occupy had been dug by the French Colonial troops in the early part of the war. They were in a very bad condition and there was plenty of work to do in repairing them. The dugouts swarmed with vermin; huge rats ran across the men as they slept, and wrought havoc with the emergency rations. This section had been an inactive one since the great Verdun offensive of 1916 and was being used at the time by the French as a rest sector under what seemed to us a tacit agreement that, "if you don't shoot at me, I won't shoot at you." Our instructions were to keep our heads down and not to permit the enemy to see that the Americans had entered the lines.

But they didn't know the Marines.

When the dawn came our men climbed onto the parapets and when they saw some Germans down by a creek washing their clothing they promptly opened fire on them. This not only brought down the wrath of the French but a raid by the Germans. Now came our long waited chance for action. The Germans after a preliminary bombardment, came over on us in force. When they reached the barbed wire entanglements in front of our trenches, we opened up such a heavy rifle and machine gun fire that we held them in the wire until the American artillery, which had only moved in an hour before, got into action, and the barrage they poured upon them sent them back with a heavy loss of life. We had been successful in our first encounter, and a wave of such pride and enthusiasm swept over the line that it silenced all criticism and dispelled any doubt in the minds of the French that we could fight.

Resistance became more stubborn and raids more daring as our first feeling of nervousness wore off. Encounters with the enemy patrols were eagerly sought as the clashes grew more frequent, for we invariably exacted a heavy toll. The Germans infuriated at the appearance of this new foe, bombarded our positions and resorted to every device to make our stay in the trenches as uncomfortable as possible. Every trick known to trench warfare was resorted to and sleep soon

became impossible. There they first conferred upon us the name of "Devil Dogs," and as there had been only two other units named by the Germans during the entire war: The Scottish troops, called "The Ladies from Hell," and the Alpine Chasseurs, the "Blue Devils," we felt that we had been very highly complimented. When we left the trenches General Harbord was placed in command. General Pershing told him at that time he was placing him in charge of the finest body of troops in France. We now took our position in the Allied armies as an equal, for we had been tried by fire and surpassed their expectations.

On the Somme the great German offensive was at its height. The Boche was slowly driving a wedge between the French and British on the Oise. Ameins, Perrone, and Montdidier hung in the balance, when word came to rush the Second division to the Picardy front. I looked for the last time down over "No Man's Land," the long winding brown lines that marked the network of trenches spreading over the valley. An ominous silence broods over this shamble; danger ever threatening. The grass had turned to a brilliant green, the few trees that had escaped destruction were sending forth their leaves, and the little birds sang on their branches. Nature seemed in tune; only man was discordant.

Our march to the Somme was a forced one. The French line was bending to the breaking point. It was a question as to whether we would arrive in time to give them the needed assistance to hold it. For four days and nights we hiked down the long dusty Dieppe road. It was hot and sultry. Water was scarce. The horses and mules in the artillery train died on the roadside—walked to death. There we demonstrated that there is no limit to human endurance as long as there remains the will to do.

In the villages we saw the evidence of the shocking cruelties committed by the Germans in the early part of the war. Little children, with their arms cut off, trudged alongside the column that we might see for ourselves their misery. If we had ever had any doubts as to the truthfulness of the stories of Hun atrocities, they were dispelled then and there.

Scarcely had we arrived on the Picardy front when word came that the Germans had broken through the line on the Chemin des Dames, and were advancing on Paris at the rate of twenty-five miles a day. The most dramatic moment of the war had come. General Pershing had told Marshal Foch, "The American people would be proud to be engaged in the greatest battle of all history." Foch gave his consent. The Marines were ordered to Chateau Thierry. We moved immediately. After an all night march to Serans we were placed in French automobile trucks and started across France in one of the most famous rides in history. The French people along the road had received word of our coming and at every cross roads and village groups stood to see us pass. They realized the Americans were going into battle. They pelted us with flowers and strewed the roads with daisies from the fields. "Good luck," they cried, while little groups of maimed children held up their arms in mute supplication.

Tears came into the eyes of the men, vengeance into their hearts, and a feeling of exaltation swept over the long caravan, blazing forth in their faces and causing the French to call us "Crusaders." We passed through Meaux, and the main body of the French army in full retreat. All semblance of formation had disappeared. Soldiers mingled with civilians in a mad rush to safety. Beyond Meaux the road was filled with refugees. A motly looking mass of men and women and children and cattle and carts. Toothless old women and aged men struggling under heavy burdens. Young girls dragging little children scurried along the edge of the fields. They watched us pass, without emotion, pausing only to cry, "Tue Le Boche," and draw their hands across their throats, suggesting this method as the most effective means. Sad and sullen with despair, hatred flashing in their eyes, they trudged along. As we sang snatches of songs an old woman shook her head and inquired how we could sing when we were going up to be killed.

Full thirty hours we rode. The boom of the cannons came to our ears. Enemy avions droned over our heads, dropping occasional bombs. Night fell and we finally drew up in a

small village where we bivouacked, just behind the battle lines.

This was the darkest of the dark hours of the Allied cause. The French and British armies lay stunned from the heavy onslaughts of the past month. France had abandoned all hope. In Paris trains waited at the stations to evacuate the civilian population. The Germans were on the outskirts of Chateau Thierry. Only a miracle could save France from disaster.

This was the crisis the Marines faced when we advanced down the Metz-Paris road on June 1, 1918. The French rear-guard, which had been fighting for more than a week against a foe vastly superior in numbers and equipped with a preponderance of artillery, filtered slowly through our lines. As we passed a clump of trees near the Triangle Farm, a French officer at the head of a company of horsemen dashed up to my section and shouted, "Go back while you have the opportunity. There are many Boche!" "Many Boche," I answered, "why that's just what we came over here to see."

Near the southern limits of the Bois Belleau the Germans encountered a stone wall of resistance. They advanced through a wheat field in their famous mass formation, confident of victory. Bayonets flashed, machine guns burst forth and a heavy rifle fire raked their ranks. The Boche recoiled, came on. Our men took careful aim before they shot. The Boche wavered and broke, crawling off through the wheat to shelter in the woods. A French colonel witnessing the fight declared it was the first time in the history of European warfare that men ever sighted their guns and fired with such precision.

Many difficulties were experienced as we advanced through the wooded areas. The tree tops were infested with machine gun nests. This meant work with the bayonet, hand to hand with an enemy we had already found we could master. We took no prisoners and the only Germans we left behind were dead Germans. They were quick to perceive this and changed the whimper of "Kamarad" to the plea, "La Guerre est fini." But the thoughts of those maimed children and

the menace to our own homes only made us sink our bayonets the deeper.

Then followed days and nights of heavy bombardment. Sleep was impossible. Food was scarce. Even the red embalmed Argentine beef, called "Monkey Meat," was A. W. O. L. (absent without leave). There was only excitement to live on. My company was sent down to take the town of Bouresches, a tactical position which the Boche had already seized. To reach the town it was necessary to cross a wheat field more than 200 yards wide. The German artillery opened up point blank upon us, supported by a withering machine gun fire, the bullets running like a river of lead through the tops of the wheat. Captain Donald F. Duncan stepped forth from the woods, calmly smoking his pipe, and swung his cane over his head as a signal to advance. He was shot down instantly. The first American officer to fall at Chateau Thierry, he left an example of coolness and bravery under fire that was an inspiration to all who knew him.

Advancing by short, quick rushes and then down to the ground for cover, we swept forward in the old American style of fighting. In the screen of trees directly before Bouresches, the foliage and branches rattled and vibrated with the put-put-put of the concealed machine guns. As my section advanced, eight of the twelve men were killed before we had gone a hundred feet. We pushed on. The bullets whipped and cut our clothing and clipped the ammunition from our belts. Men fell fast upon that field. Out of one hundred and fifty who started across that field but twenty-four reached the town itself. A fierce hand-to-hand struggle ensued. Bouresches was occupied by 300 of the enemy. Every street had its fight; sticking—slashing—banging. Machine guns in the doors of the buildings, in the church steeple, behind piles of rubbish, and sharpshooters in every coign of vantage. I ran down one street with a lieutenant who had the bars shot off his shoulders. A high explosive shell burst above us, denting our helmets, but we were spared. In a cellar a number of the enemy hid with a machine gun. I tossed a hand grenade into their midst and it was "Fini La Guerre" for them. We soon found we were in advance of our

lines, as the German artillery began to pound us on three sides. The Second Engineers rushed in to our assistance. Some carried only picks and shovels, but, full of fight, those brave fellows made it possible for us to hold our gain against the immediate counter-attack. Replacement men came in to fill our decimated ranks under cover of darkness. Five of them assigned to my section were killed the same night before the poor chaps had a chance to see a German. Few houses in the town escaped the destructive fire of the artillery that hammered us incessantly. In the cellar of one we found an old man and his wife. Urged to go to the rear, they refused. Later the place was found deserted. The man had left. The body of the woman was hanging to a rafter, where she had sought escape in suicide.

The capture of Bourseches was the preliminary step to the fight in Belleau wood, now named by the French "The Forest of the Brigade of the Marines." Our artillery arrived. Four hundred guns moved in at night. Information had been obtained that the Germans were filtering into the wood in force preparatory to making another thrust. Just before daylight the American artillery opened up and a perfect hurricane of shells fell upon it. The Bois became ablaze with the lights of bursting shells. The drumfire of a hundred cannon was terrifying, as the heavy barrage swept back and forth through the trees.

The Marines charged. They rushed into the impregnable mass of tangled underbrush with blood-curdling yells. Falling naturally into the Indian style of advancing, they crawled from tree to tree. The Boche gave way. He had had enough. From the wood into the road poured hundreds of the men in gray. We turned our machine guns into them and piled them up in heaps until they sought another outlet. It was American pluck against the German mass formation. The tide turned. American spirit triumphed. The Boche was beaten, his morale destroyed and Paris was saved.

Eight thousand Marines were pitted against thirty-five thousand Prussian Guards, the crack troops of Germany. These divisions had been resting for almost a month behind the lines near Noyon, held for just such an emergency. They

were sent in to make the final dash to Paris a success. Is it any wonder that we were as surprised as the German General Staff, when they received the news of their retreat?

Just what the losses were on the German side we have never heard, but we do know that there were less than two thousand Marines surviving when we finally withdrew. With no greater number than eight thousand Marines in the lines at any time our losses in the war were over twelve thousand. Only twenty-five Marines were taken prisoners by the Germans. With us it was kill or be killed.

In a service of less than three months, the Marine Corps received eleven citations for bravery, this being the highest number given to any unit during the war.

From this sector we were sent to a woods just in the rear of the lines on the Soissons front, where we rested and received replacements. Early on the morning of the following day we moved forward under orders to capture the town of Lucy de Bruges. When we swept into the town we discovered it was then held by Americans, so we withdrew into a woods on the east to await further orders. The German observers, in a huge sausage balloon, saw us enter the woods. They took a few sighting-in shots at us during the afternoon. That night their artillery opened up with one of the most vicious gas attacks recorded during the war.

When the shells began to fall, a lieutenant ran over to me and gave orders to move the men in our platoon out of the woods and onto a road a hundred feet distant, where they might find some protection from the shells. He had scarcely shouted the order when a shell burst near him and I never saw him again. It was very dark in the woods, which made it necessary for me to remove my gas mask and summon the men to me by the sound of my voice. The shells were falling on the path to the road about every six seconds. This obliged us to time the shells by counting off the seconds and sending the men through the barrage on the run, starting them while pieces of the exploded shells were still flying in the air. In this manner I succeeded in passing through in safety about forty men. The others had shifted for themselves. Gunnery Sergeant Fred W. Stockman, an old-time member of the

Marine Corps, walked back and forth through the woods that night, driving the men out of their fox holes and making them get up and go to me, as all were loath to leave the shallow holes which provided at least a little protection. The woods was a mass of crashing shells and falling trees as the gas, mingled with high explosives, swept through the branches. But the brave sergeant never stopped until he had made every man he could find move out to the road. Poor chap; he voluntarily gave up his life that he might save others. Such deeds are immortal.

When I reached the road I found that the men, unable to see in the darkness and seriously hampered by their gas masks, had stretched themselves out in the center of the roadway instead of under the shelter of a low bank on the side of the road. I had not as yet put on my mask and so was able to see their predicament. I walked down the long line, ordering them to crawl over to the bank. While doing this I found that a German spy, a member of our own organization, was continually passing the word up to the men to take off their masks, endeavoring to deceive them by saying that there was no gas; that the odor was that of the high explosives. I sent several men in search of him, but in the great confusion we were not able to locate the guilty one. By this time I had put on my gas mask, but it was blown from my face by a shell a few minutes later. There was no escape from this terrible situation. We could only lie quiet and take the "strafing." When daylight came, the woods which we had been in were completely destroyed, and there was an inch coating of pieces of shrapnel and shells over the roadway.

Then began the evacuation of the wounded. The gas, while I was inhaling it, did not feel so disagreeable. It made me feel quite sleepy, but aside from the burning sensation in my eyes, I experienced little pain. I endeavored to carry some ammunition down to the line just beyond us, when a sudden weakness came over me. An officer, noticing me stagger, ordered me to the rear. I took about twenty men with me, all suffering from the effects of the gas. We walked about two miles against the wind, after removing the greater portion of our clothing, in order to escape the severe body

burns that follow mustard gassing. Nine of these men died on the way.

We were sent through to Paris. When we arrived we had all become blind, and it was ten days before we again saw daylight. The damage to my throat and lungs held me in the hospital for eight months. Only two men out of my original company of 250 survived this encounter, and practically all of the men who had composed the original members of the Fifth and Sixth regiments had been wiped out.

The Second division, of which the Marines composed one-half, sustained the highest number of casualties, captured more prisoners, guns and territory than any other division, and wrote into American history one of its most brilliant pages.

War is a crucible through which men pass into larger and nobler lives. It brings out the courage to die for one's ideals; it overcomes the fear of death and leads us into a higher appreciation of all that is good and true, a more exalted patriotism and a firmer faith in God.