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July 18— a Year Ago

When a Historic O. D. Hurricane Swept the Teuton Lines

By Frederic Palmer

"The light of the bursting shells illumined the way for some units who had come up on the run."

THE Allied armies on the Western front had been almost as completely on the defensive for four months as if we were a besieged garrison. In spirit they had been on the defensive since Cambrai in the previous autumn. They had made some sorties, it is true, but with the single exception of the counter-attack on June 11th against the German offensive toward Compiegne they had made no extensive counter-attacks, let alone initial attacks. Although time was to justify the wisdom of allowing the enemy to become over-confident and to over-extend himself—when the failure of any counter-offensive on our part might have meant the loss of a decisive action—the effect of this waiting to receive blows, this continual apprehension lest the next blow should succeed, this yielding of ground as the tribute paid for temporary security, must only confirm us in thinking in terms of the defensive while their apparent successes confirmed the Germans in thinking in terms of the offensive.

After the fourth offensive, which brought the enemy within forty miles of Paris, you might hear military discussions on whether or not Paris should be defended in the event of another German drive bringing it under the German guns. The preparations which the military authorities of Paris had made for any emergency were matters of common talk. We were ready to move our own army officers from Paris; the Red Cross and the Y.

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M. C. A. had arranged for trucks to remove their workers. Lay pessimists saw Paris as already lost; and military pessimists saw its military defenses as impracticable directly it was seriously threatened. All hopes centered on the arriving American divisions. If the Allies could stem the tide until August 1st, then we should outnumber the enemy; and when there were enough Americans and they were organized we might consider an offensive which could hardly take place before spring. Thus, confidence in eventual victory rested entirely upon the Americans; and the spirit of initiative in our men was reflected in counsel by General Pershing in a manner which was to have an important influence in the operations that were to recover the offensive for the Allies in a single brilliant stroke.

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ANY soldier of any age who looked at the German salient after the Marine offensive, could have had only one thought, and that was a drive at the base of the salient to close the mouth of the pocket. Yet one heard talk that salients no longer counted. Neither reports of German strength nor the defensive spirit of the time diverted General Pershing's attention from that inviting bulge in the German battle line. When Premier Clemenceau and General Foch came to American Headquarters June 22nd for a conference, he again pointed to its obvious vulnerability, and vigorously advocated an offensive. He had faith that the German strength was overestimated; and that under a determined attack the salient would crack like an egg shell.

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How far away Manoury and von Kluck seem! How long it seems since I saw the French and the German dead in the Bois de Retz, where

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now our men were to go over the top; how long since I went along that Paris-Soissons road to my first real view of the French army in action, where now American guards were to bring along columns of German prisoners! With this Paris-Soissons road I associated the most exhilarating scenes of the war—the scenes of the repulse and the pursuit of the enemy in his two great efforts to win a decision in the West. There, on July 18th, we did not dash the cup of victory from his lips—we smashed it into splinters in his face.

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The First Division had been relieved from Cantigny on July 8th. After two months in the Montdidier sector it had a few days' rest in billets in the Beauvais neighborhood and again in the neighborhood of Dammartin on the way toward the Marne salient; and had received orders on July 15th to proceed to the Soissons sector under the Tenth French army—a movement that might have been only incidental to a stabilized battle line. On July 16th, the First reported to relieve one brigade of the Moroccan Division in front of Courvres. That night it scouted its positions. On the night of the 17th it went into line. It had moved rapidly, but not under the pressure of sufficient haste to worry or excite anyone in this methodical division, which is never sensational even if it has the opportunity to be sensational. Its guns were up; everything was up. The First was ready.

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OUR Second Division, now commanded by Major-General Harbord in place of Major-General Bundy, who had been given a corps command, was to attack on the right of the Morroccans. It was to be precipitated into action with all the abruptness with which it had been thrown against the German severe casualties

in a month of continuous fighting, which included the taking of Vaux and Belleau Wood, it had had two weeks in rest at Montrieulaux-Lions, recuperating and reorganizing and drilling the replacements who had come to fill the gaps made by its dead and wounded and sick. It was not yet up to full strength when the order came on the night of July 16th for the infantry to embuss and for all horse-drawn and motor transport to proceed overland to the region of the Bois de Retz. The second had "got there" once in a hurry; and it was given another task in keeping with its reputation. It did not know just what was expected of it; but French officers were to give its commanders further orders at the debussing points. Owing to the stress of a rapid concentration and the secrecy involved, the infantry units had tiresome and exasperating marching and countermarching after debussing.

Not until 4 P. M. on the afternoon of July 17th, with the attack set for 5:35 on the morning of the 18th, were the plans for the attack drawn up and instructions given to the artillery and infantry commanders. The infantry was to go over the top from the line through the eastern portion of the Bois de Retz, an immense thick forest

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which had seen fierce work during the battle of the Marne. As fast as detachments arrived they were to be hurried into the forests, as pronounced movements in the open must be avoided by daylight in order to escape aerial observation. When night came all the units were not yet assembled. The commanders must take them through the forest and put them in position before the zero hour for this most important and critical action. There are few roads in the forest. They were a rumbling jam of pressing and varied transport, with the guns

and ammunition and the machine guns on the front demanding right of way. Rain began to fall. This intensified the darkness of the woods under the overhanging tree tops. Within the woods a man was not visible at a distance of a pace.

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The rush to catch the last launch out to the steamer was nothing compared to the hectic rush in that dense forest and dense darkness in the counted minutes of that half-hour whose suspense was the more harrowing, considering the risk of an undertaking in which everything had been subordinated to the element of surprise. We had planned to go the German one better in open warfare. He had always preceded his offensives by artillery preparation, which we were now to forego. By past standards of elaborate jumping-off trenches, arduous assembling of materiel, deliberate plans of infinite detail, and thorough registering of guns on targets, the attack of July 18th should have been annihilated. But this kind of provision informed the enemy of what he was to expect and where he was to expect it. The division artillery which was hurried into position was not to send over a single shell before the infantry advanced. Gunners were shown their programme on the maps; and they were to fire by the map at 4:35. And the men of the Second "got there." When the artillery started its rolling barrage with a crash at 4:35, the light of the bursting shells illumined the way for some units which had come up on the run. They recovered their breath as they proceeded "over the top" in the more deliberate pace of the advance.

And now? Did the enemy know or did he not know that we were coming? He must have realized that the logical point of attack against his salient was toward Soissons. The regimental commanders who had started their troops off in such confusion and haste after they had been all night on their feet might well be fearful of the result; and the feeling of relief when these commanders found that their commands were keeping up with the commands on their flanks, and when prisoners began to appear and our walking wounded said that "Everything was going fine," had grateful reference to providential dispensations which are not taken into account by practical soldiers.

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"It is difficult to think of such creaking, racking, ungainly mechanism as tanks."

THE brief official reports and the map with broad blue lines showing the sectors of our divisions' advance are very cold and official compared to the vision which personal glimpses of the action of July 18th and the following days summon of the sweep of our men across the plateau toward Soissons. Broken by ravines and by villages the stretch of the plateau was comparatively excellent ground for a rapid offensive movement.

When the sorely hurried Second came out of the wood, it found that it was up with the divisions on its right and left. The whole line was advancing without any interruption by the relatively light response of the German guns. Our own rolling barrage could not be as close protection as usual; for our gunners might not "cut it too fine" when they had had no registration. Therefore, the Germans had more time, between the passing of the barrage and the arrival of our infantry, to spring out of their dugouts and pits and man their machine guns. With the accompanying tanks nosing about to look after such details, our early progress was little delayed by machine-gun nests in bushes or farmhouses. It is difficult to think of such creaking, racking, ungainly mechanisms as tanks being heroes; but they are as heroic as many an infantryman and as any knight in armor who ever came to the aid of a foot soldier in distress.

At the end of the first hour all the divisions were on the blue line running across the lines of advance which was the first objective. Three objectives were set for the first day. Others would doubtless be set for the next day if these were taken. The great thing to the men was that they were not to stop here and dig trenches as they had been obliged to do in the Cantigny offensive, but were to continue advancing until casualties called a halt.

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We had taken the Germans com-

pletely by surprise. We had outwitted the German Staff; and every French and American soldier with their quick intelligence knew that we had. The German trenches were scratches in the earth beside the strong defenses on the Somme, in the Ypres salient or in Champagne. They had held to the new system of open warfare, evidently convinced that they would be soon moving on; or if we attacked, that machine-gun nests would soon stay our advance.

Chips before a tidal wave, the Germans in the front line held up their hands in blank astonishment and demoralization. Troops in dugouts in the second line who were to rally in support in the elastic defensive system were hardly elastic enough on this occasion. They were asleep when the earth trembled and the crackling reports of shells broke in a storm on a tranquil summer's morning. On other occasions, German soldiers had gone to their positions in the midst of a bombardment of high explosives and fired through the rolling barrage, taking cover when the barrage arrived and rushing out again to meet the infantry advancing behind it. But here was an attack without any previous artillery preparation, which was not according to the rules.

"I guess the Hun saw we meant business this time," as one of our soldiers remarked. We had numbers, and supported by tanks, we moved with a systematic ardor of purpose which must have appeared most forbidding to an enemy who put his head out of a dugout and had to make up his mind whether he would be taken prisoner or die in his tracks. It is easy to talk about dying in your tracks, but hardly appealing when you are wakened out of a sound sleep in the chill morning air to resist guns and infantry which are perfectly wideawake.

ALL impatience from the months of stalling, all the misery of having to keep on the defensive, all the longing for the day when we should rush our opponent with a rain of blows were in the released spring which precipitated us into the attack. Youthful skill of America and veteran skill of France would not be denied. In the old days, opposing groups of primitive combatants used to choose champions who would decide the issue of battle in personal combat. The First and Second Divisions and the French divisions with whom they fought were, in something the same way, the cham-

pions of all the divisions of the Allies from Flanders to the Adriatic and of every man, woman and child of the Allied countries. Accordingly as these chosen soldiers fought and as they succeeded, the Allied world would feel the next day.

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In all accounts of offensives you read of this or that unit being "held up" by machine-gun fire from some strong point. Until this is cleared the line on either side cannot advance, as it is caught in enfilade. The result is that the unit which finds its flanks exposed as it pushes on when resistance is slight, is impatient, and sometimes thinks that the adjoining unit is not doing its part. We went forward in the usual waves followed by columns, that is, literally with one hand up in guard and the other ready to strike a quick blow. When a center resistance is developed the wave halts, taking what cover it can find, while the columns come up to its support in such a manner as the situation requires. They may be able to take care of the situation immediately with the help of rifle grenades; or trench mortars may have to be brought up; or in the last event, which means delay, an artillery concentration is requested. On July 18th we had the bit in our teeth. We did not bother with too nice details. We charged the machine guns because we found that the machine gunners in the early stage of the battle yielded; and we took the captured machine guns along with us to fight duels with other German machine guns.

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The Germans had been bringing up fresh divisions on the night of the 18th-19th against both the First and Second, and the First Division, when it attacked at four o'clock on the morning of the 19th, was to feel their effect and that of desperate machine-gun resistance, particularly on the left where the Second Brigade had been unable to go beyond the Missy ravine to its third objective on the 18th. General Summerall had moved his headquarters to a great cave at Couevres on the morning of the 18th; and there he was seated opposite his chief of staff, with the rest of his staff at other tables. Everything seemed to be going in as routine a fashion as if the First were in the trenches. The Second Brigade had been able to go only to the Paris-Soissons road, as the French on its flank were held up and it was under a merciless fire, while the

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First Brigade, which had advanced more successfully again, had its flank exposed. The tanks which had gone ahead to blaze the way for the Second Brigade had run into accurate artillery fire that had arrested their progress.

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EVERY battalion of the two divisions had its epic; every company had a story worth telling at length. Scores of incidents revealed coolness, daring, courage, resource and endurance; and more crosses were earned than could be bestowed in an action of such swirt processes that heroic deeds passed without notice. There was one incident which has a peculiarly American appeal. When General Summerall, who likes to see his men in action and talk with them, was down in the front line at night, he came to a company which had only fifty or sixty survivors. He asked who commanded the company, and a private stood up and saluted, saying, "I do, sir!" With such natural leaders as this we shall not want for officers.

When the First and the Second were back in their billeting areas and the men had slept and washed and eaten a square meal for the first time in a week, they were playing with the children as usual, or looking into the shop windows to see if there was anything they wanted to buy. They ate all the chocolate the Y. M. C. A. and the K. of C. had to offer. They smoked a good many cigarettes. And would they have a chance to go to Paris now on leave? They had an idea that they had earned that privilege, and it was agreed that they had, even those who had not won the cross. They wondered what kind of replacements would come to take the place of friends who had fallen. With all the new men the First and the Second would be different. No! The First and the Second had a character established which would mould the recruits into its likeness. The men were not boastful, indeed they were disinclined to talk of their exploits, but there was something in their attitude which said that they had known battle and had proved themselves. As for the glowing compliments of the French and the Croix de Guerre and the Medaille Militaire and the Legion of Honor medals they wished to bestow—well, this was very gratifying.

I HAVE written at length about the part the First and Second Divi-

sions played, because it was influential in cracking the shell of the Marne salient and because it expressed the character of fighting in which other divisions, whose part in reducing the salient may not be given as much prominence, were to give the same gratifying account of themselves.

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At the same time that General Mangin was driving toward Soissons, French and British divisions, in the face of stubborn defenses, were making sturdy attacks at the Rheims base of the salient in order to occupy German divisions with a threat in this direction; and also another American division, the Twenty-sixth, as well as the First and Second, was attacking on July 18th.

(To be concluded next week.)