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The Armistice Day Battle

What Was the Actual Situation on the Advancing American Front When the Final Curtain Was Rung Down on the War?

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A CONGRESSSIONAL committee of investigation has recently been treated to a scathing arraignment of the General Staff because military operations on the front of the Second Army were continued up to the hour of the signing of the armistice on November 11, 1918. Members of the operations Section of the Staff, particularly the chief, Brig. Gen. Fox Conner, have been accused of slaughtering men on the last day of the war in order to satisfy their personal ambitions.

These are serious charges which should not go unanswered. It is perhaps easier for one no longer hampered by an Army uniform to reply than for any of the officers accused. But it is not to take up the cudgel for either side that I write these lines, but merely to set forth the exact situation of the closing days of the war, particularly because, being attached to the staff as an information officer, I had unusual opportunities of knowing the real situation.

It is unfortunately true that the fighting on the front of the Second Army on November 10th and 11th cost about 150 lives—but it is the question of whether these lives were sacrificed needlessly and rashly that must be answered.

WE must first lay aside all sentiment. Sentiment does not and cannot have any place in the plans of a commander of large forces of men. His vision must needs be too broad and too general to take the individual soldier into account. We must look at the question, therefore, from the point of view of the Allied Commander in Chief, Marshal Foch, who was responsible for the order that sent these men to their death. This, then, was the situation:

Long before the enemy gave any sign that he was on the point of demanding an armistice, Foch had his plans laid for a telling blow in Lorraine in the general direction of Metz. This blow was struck as soon as the First American Army had succeeded in capturing the great Longuyon-Mezières railroad, thereby cutting the whole German army into two parts. This blow was to fall with telling force on both sides of the great Lorraine fortress, the Americans striking north toward Conflans and the French Tenth Army, under General Mangin, striking in the direction

of Château-Salins. The object was to isolate Metz and roll up the enemy forces west of the upper Rhine.

The German front from Sedan to the Swiss border was denuded of all reserves. Even the troops in line were mostly landwehr, and therefore it was fairly certain that such an offensive would meet with overwhelming success. The Second American Army was to attack on November 11 and the French Tenth Army on its right three days later, on November 14.

Preparations for this new offensive were well under way by November 7, when the German armistice commission crossed the Allied lines. But that Foch still feared treachery on the part of the enemy is shown by the following official telegram, dated November 7, to all forces:

"It can happen that the enemy may spread the rumor that an armistice is signed in order to deceive us. There is none; let no one cease hostilities of any sort without information from the Marshal Commander in Chief."

THAT is to say, all plans already made for attack were to be carried out in full regardless of armistice rumors, which were flying in all directions. Foch supplemented this order with a dispatch two days later, on November 9, to General Pershing urging him to start the Second Army attack immediately, instead of waiting until November 11.

The reason for this was very plain. The enemy was falling back in great disorder along the front of the First American Army as well as farther west. His withdrawal on the Second Army front (from Frèsnes-en-Woevre to Pont-sur-Seille, a short distance east of the Moselle), could not be long delayed. Sudden pressure by the Americans on this front would hasten this retreat and throw him into further confusion, possibly resulting in a rout.

We now come to the situation on the Second Army front, which I shall sketch in not too great detail. The Second Army had only been formed on October 15, for the purpose of holding the line established after the termination of the St. Mihiel battle. General Bullard had at his command only troops which had been worn out and in most cases decimated in the fighting on the Meuse-Argonne front.

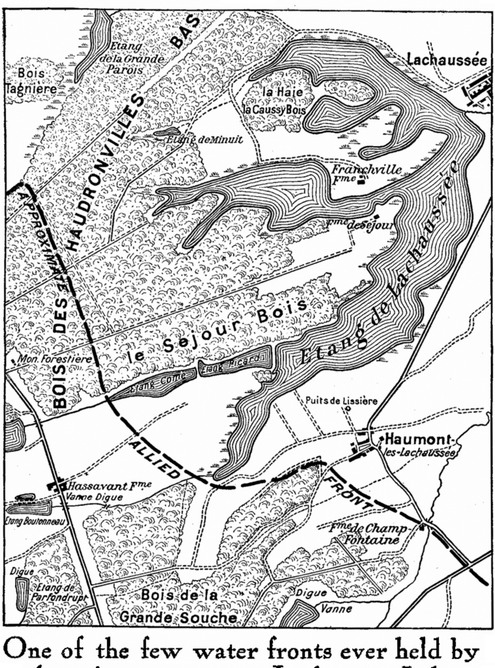
On November 9 he had a front of 50 kilometers to hold with only 43,000 men, or four divisions which at full strength would have numbered 112,000 men. These divisions were, from left to right, the Thirty-third (Illinois National Guard), the Twenty-eighth (Pennsylvania National Guard), the Seventh (Regular), and the Ninety-second (negro).

In reserve were the Fourth (Regular) and the Thirty-fifth (Missouri and Kansas National Guard), while one brigade of the Eighty-eighth Division (Minnesota and North Dakota National Army) had just arrived at the front. Both the Thirty-third and the Twenty-eighth had seen much hard fighting in the Meuse-Argonne battle, while a regiment of the Ninety-second had been engaged for a short time in the Argonne Forest.

It will be seen from the foregoing that General Bullard had a long front to hold with only a thin screen of infantry. The question of how to make a general attack was a serious one. It was determined

to make a strong raid on each of the three corps' fronts for the purpose of feeling out the enemy line. Should any of these raids find a weak spot, all available troops were to be concentrated at this point for the possible break-through.

The attack was set for November 10th, one day ahead of schedule. Beginning on the right, let us take up the divisions in turn.



One of the few water fronts ever held by American troops was Lachaussee Lake, which the Twenty-Eighth Division was skirting as hostilities ended. It is 20 kilometers northeast of St. Mihiel

One regiment of the Ninety-second Division, on the right bank of the Moselle, went over the top at 7 a. m., November 10th, attempting to drive in the re-entrant salient in the line just east of the river. The troops pushed forward a little more than a mile before meeting serious opposition. The small woods of Fréhaut, Voivrotte and Cheminot were occupied. The German resistance, however, soon stiffened, and before nightfall the negroes were suffering heavily under a hail of high explosive and machine gun fire. The operation netted six prisoners and a slight advance. Casualties numbered 285. Another regiment of the division, west of the Moselle, was unable to advance because of the failure of an attack by the Seventh Division.

On the front of the Seventh Division, a Regular unit which was under fire for the first time, two companies of the Fifty-sixth Infantry took by assault the formidable Preny Ridge, a key position. Owing to a raking machine-gun fire and the enemy's heavy wire, our troops were unable to mop up the position and ultimately they were driven down the slopes again, suffering heavy losses. On the division's left better progress was made. Here the Americans got as far forward as Mon Plaisir farm, about one mile from Charey. These positions they held at eleven o'clock, November 11th. The Seventh Division had 236 casualties, the majority of which were suffered on Preny Ridge.

The battle plan laid out for the Twenty-eighth Division was a direct assault on the formidable Hindenburg positions in the region of Dommartin. The Germans at this point were strongly entrenched, with their line liberally protected by barbed wire and tank traps. Bear in mind that after the St. Mihiel battle the enemy took up his line in a series of defences of unusual natural strength, extending across the base of

the salient. These positions had long been prepared and therefore our men had a very difficult task ahead of them.

The troops of the Twenty-eighth went forward to the attack at 5.50 on the morning of November 10. The village of Dommartin was too strongly held and resisted all attack, but we succeeded in occupying the small wood of the same name southwest of the village, as well as the strongly fortified point of Marimbois farm. In the afternoon, after a strong artillery preparation, a new attack was launched, but it made no progress. Nineteen prisoners were taken.

THE center of the division met with better success. Advancing along the southeastern shore of La Chaussée Lake, the Americans captured the village of Haumont and pushed forward nearly a mile. On the other side of the lake the extreme left of the Twenty-eighth moved forward in conjunction with the advance of the Thirty-third Division.

It soon became evident that the enemy's line was weakest on the front of the Twenty-eighth, and during the night of November 10th troops were concentrated north of Haumont to follow up the early success.

Word of the signing of the armistice was not received until after 9 a. m. so that the advanced troops were well launched on the new attack by eleven o'clock. The word to cease firing reached the outposts well inside the Bois de Bonseil. Runners sent out from regimental headquarters with the glad tidings had great difficulty in some cases in finding the outposts owing to the general confusion of battle, and there is no doubt that casualties did occur in the last few moments. The division's total casualties for the two days' fighting numbered 245.

By far the heaviest casualties, however, were suffered by the Thirty-third Division, on the left of the Twenty-eighth. Troops of this outfit, which was operating under the orders of the Second Colonial Corps (French), made a strong raid on November 9th to clear two small woods, known as Les Hautes Epines and Wavrille, in the Plain of the Woevre.

With these woods in our hands the way was cleared for the larger and more important operation. This began on the morning of November 10th, one regiment attacking and penetrating the Harville wood, east of St. Hilaire, but later being forced back to the southwestern edge.

On the extreme left the other attacking regiment carried all the German trenches from Saulx-en-Woevre northeast to Marcheville, including the latter village. Stung by this reverse, the Germans retaliated with a strong counter attack. Bitter fighting ensued and the Americans were forced back as far as the edge of the village. There they made a determined stand and notwithstanding heavy losses held their ground.

On the front of both regiments the fighting was renewed on Armistice morning, and our troops had succeeded in occupying Butgneville, St. Hilaire and the Château d'Aulnois when the order to halt was received. One hundred and fifty-seven prisoners had been taken, most of them in the Marcheville fighting. Casualties suffered by the division numbered 614, more than twice those of any other unit.

The fighting on the front of both the Twenty-eighth and Thirty-third Divisions was developing rapidly into a major operation, and in spite of the stiff resistance encountered—much more serious than had been expected—our troops had pierced the Hindenburg line on both

sides of La Chaussée Lake. None of our divisions was fully engaged, while the two reserve divisions and one brigade of the Eighty-eighth, just detraining, had not yet entered the fight.

ALTHOUGH I have dealt here exclusively with fighting on the front of the Second Army, this article would be incomplete without some mention of the remarkable performance of the Eighty-first Division (Southeastern States and Porto Rico National Army), which held the line from Eix to Frèsnes on the immediate left of General Bullard's troops.

This division, fresh from the United States, was sent into active fighting on November 9th without the usual course of preliminary training. It fought up to the last minute on November 11th, and although its fighting days were brief, they were nevertheless full of excitement.

On the morning of November 9th both flanks of the division made successful attacks. The division left took Moranville, a heavily fortified village, while the right occupied the woodlands of Les Claires Chênes and Noire Haïe. Renewing the attack on the morning of November 10th, the left regiment captured Grimaucourt in conjunction with the Tenth French Colonial Division on its left and was well into the enemy's main line of resistance by 11 a. m. the next day. In these three days' fighting the Eighty-first Division had suffered 1,032 casualties.

All along the front of the First Army more or less severe fighting continued up to the last hour of the war. This was due in great measure to the fact that the enemy was retiring, depending upon machine-gun nests and long-range artillery to hold up our advance. On the front of the Thirty-second Division enemy guns caused some casualties among our men in the village of Peuvillers after the Armistice hour. Our artillery retaliated with such vigor that the German High Command lodged an official protest with Marshal Foch.

At 11 a. m. on November 11th the following divisions held the front of the First Army, from left to right: Seventy-seventh, Second, Eighty-ninth, Ninetieth, Fifth, Thirty-second, Fifteenth French Colonial, Seventy-ninth, Twenty-six, Tenth French Colonial, Eighty-first.

OUR troops who so gallantly laid down their lives in these last few hours of the World War were obeying the orders of none other than Marshal Foch. They had their share in winning the victory, even though their sacrifice came too late to affect the result. They obeyed without question the orders of the directing genius. And he knew too well the perfidy of the enemy's word to be easily convinced that the time had come to cease hostilities.

Knowing this, he first warned all troops against German treachery and later ordered Pershing to hasten his projected attack which, had it been carried through to completion in conjunction with the French on our right, would certainly have resulted in the greatest military triumph since Waterloo.