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Cutting the Marne Pocket

*New England in the Fighting a
Year Ago Today—By Frederic Palmer*



Boche Prisoners Went to the Rear Steadily

THE Twenty-sixth had had a hard two months in the Toul sector, where it had held more front than the First which it had relieved; and, I may mention in passing, that it had met at Seicheprey in this sector the first serious attack which our army had received.

Seicheprey lies on a flat which is a swamp in the spring rains, under full observation from Mont Sec. The German "traveling circus" had played a "one-night stand" here on April 20th. This circus consisted of veteran storm troops, with excellent artillery support, for making sudden thrusts which should prevent the Allied line from losing its respect for German valor. Applied to us, it was probably meant as a bit of frightfulness which would have a demoralizing effect upon our morale.

Under a welter of artillery fire sufficient for a grand offensive, picked storm troops broke through our trenches and into the village and having done what damage they could they withdrew. Seicheprey was an old story in July, though important in April; and it should be mentioned as a primary exhibition of courage on the part of junior officers and men in face of a concentrated and well-planned effort.

After a short rest, the Twenty-sixth had been sent to the Marne salient to take over the sector where the Second Division had won its spurs in conquering Vaux and Belleau Wood. This sector was still active enough to be very wearing on its occupants. The

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Chateau-Thierry

Twenty-sixth had experienced two weeks of its vexations when it was ordered to attack on July 18th as the pivot of the movement toward Soissons. Its right resting at Vaux on the Paris-Chateau-Thierry road, it was to take the villages of Torcy and Belleau and advance its line on the left of Bouresches. Thus, the Twenty-sixth had to be content with a strictly limited objective in the counter offensive when months of stalling had made it no less impatient for a real stride than the First and Second.

AFTER the Twenty-sixth had taken Belleau and Torcy and a hamlet beyond Torcy at the foot of the commanding Hill 193 in good fashion, some units, in their enthusiasm, forgot that they were a part of a pivot and started up the ascent. They were pushing along valiantly when they were recalled because this hill was not in their sector. There was something very appealing in their initiative, even if it were contrary to orders. One likes to dwell on the spirit of men who want to master any height. The Germans did not fail to make prompt use of "193" by establishing machine guns there to harass the Twenty-sixth's positions with plunging fire.

As the Twenty-sixth was to press against the lower side of the pocket while the divisions to the north were to take stitches in the mouth of the pocket, it was due to mark time on July 19th. That is, it was to mark time with the exception that the enthusing word came that "193" was to be taken. After the machine-gun fire which they had endured from that direction, the troops as-

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Consolidating the New Line

signed to the attack went in with the kind of determination that means success. They were well started and felt absolutely sure of their goal when once more they were recalled, owing to the tactical situation which concerned other divisions and other plans. The High Command did not want them isolated on the summit without support from the left. The men, who for the second time had charged up "193" only to be marched down again, had not a favorable opinion of grand tactics at that moment. Their disgust was simple and human. Evidently, the Twenty-sixth meant that the hand was off the collar of the dog of war, but he could only go to the end of the leash. But patience is the great thing for all who chafe at restraint in war. The Twenty-sixth was to be given the leash and a free field later.

THE German's first answer to the Soissons drive was to close the fatuous incident of crossing the Marne by the withdrawal of his troops from the south bank of the Marne, which he accomplished by returning as he had come, on bridges and passeroles, on the night of the 19th-20th to the north bank, where he kept up machine-gun fire to hold back the patrols of the Third Division from following immediately; but they were active enough to ascertain the situation. Now, as we applied the pincers to the point of the salient, both banks of the river were to be ours again; and Chateau-Thierry was to be ours again.

On July 20th, our Third, Twenty-eighth and Twenty-sixth Divisions were to know something of the exhilaration that the First and Second had known on the 18th. They were to drive ahead; but before them was no sweep of plateau with objectives in a straight line, but a river with all its bridges down for the Third and Twenty-eighth, while all the region around Chateau-Thierry forming the walls of the Marne consists of high hills, irregular in contour, of ravines and forests

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*Town Near Rheims,
After the Boche Had Left*

and patches of woods and roads under observation.

The Twenty-sixth had its left at Torcy and its right at Vaux in the valley before the rise in the Paris road over the crest, where it turns to the right in a sharp ascent toward Chateau-Thierry. On July 20th, the Twenty-sixth attacked and met with a wicked and galling resistance from machine guns which were in position to cover the German retreat from Chateau-Thierry and the Marne. Our line was held up in places; that was the German intention at any cost, until a certain amount of time was gained; but in face of the certainty that the defending force must break under renewed pressure, as soon as we brought up reserves and made new dispositions.

When the Twenty-sixth started to attack on the early morning of the 21st there was nothing to attack. The German was going; and the Twenty-sixth was to give chase. Its pursuing and watchful patrols were followed by the troops in columns as they passed by positions which had vomited fire at them for the last two weeks, passed abandoned German ammunition, discarded German helmets and all the evidences of hasty withdrawal, including one nine-inch gun as well as field guns, which the Germans could not bring away. It was a march clear past the Chateau-Thierry-Soissons road, before the patrols called a halt in face of the next line of resistance; a march, yes, but in fact a complicated maneuver along poor country roads up hill and down, keeping liaison with the French troops on the right and left and requiring extreme sensitiveness on the part of the feeling fingers ahead, and care lest any unit should fall into some trap which was laid under the flanking fire of hidden machine guns and a concentration of artillery fire.

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CHATEAU-THIERRY was a good-sized town. Its bridges bestrode the Marne. Town and river together were a talisman of victory. I confess that as I rode into its streets something which rose from the region of my heart was fast in my throat. Chateau-Thierry would not be taken again by the enemy. The tag on the rope of the four years' tug-of-war had finally been drawn to our side to remain. French poilus were moving about in the town in their same characteristic supple, utterly un-German fashion. I think that the Lord made a Frenchman in order to have a contrast with a Prussian. The few residents who had not flown before the enemy were visible through the open doorways of the deserted city; and they suggested undemonstrative watchmen who had kept its altar fires burning during the alien occupation.

A column of soldiers of the Twenty-eighth Division was halted in the streets leading north to the Soissons road, on its way to join the Twenty-sixth Division. The German artillery began a bombardment. Shells were falling on both sides of the streets with the usual muffled crashing report of shellbursts in buildings.

"I guess it's better being in the streets than in billets," said one of the men. "Probably the Boche are shooting at the streets"—which was good philosophy.

Along the roads toward Epieds, where the Twenty-sixth was operating, you had the coagulated effects of the pressure of men and transport to the front in its most baffling aspect to commanders. The Twenty-sixth had not enough roads for its purpose. It had had to change front in the course of its movement, adapting itself to different tactical requirements as well as different terrain. Its units were still somewhat mixed after their rush from Torcy, when on the morning of the 22d it kept faith with orders and the demands of the situation, which required that no time be lost by attacking.

THE Germans had four days in which to prepare for our reception and the full nature of it now developed. The villages of Epieds and Trugny were hives of machine guns; and machine guns were cunningly hidden in the wheat fields awaiting targets that had to move across the open in full view. There are things that brave men can do and things that they cannot. The Twenty-sixth could not take these villages that day. Some

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intrepid units miraculously entered the Trugny woods in face of machine-gun storms in a daring effort to flank out the village of Trugny, but this was not the practicable way, as they found.

We had revealed the enemy's hand; we had information. He in turn rested and relied upon his artillery which sent over gas where he thought it would be most effective, and shrapnel and high explosives where he thought that they would be most effective. Our wounded, earth-stained and good-natured, crawling through the wheat and out of the woods, went filtering back through the ravines away from the glut of the roads. The tall figure of Major General Edwards was seen going from command post to post, to keep in touch with the situation. His own headquarters were at Grand Picardie Farm, where a big shell hole through the thick walls let in the light on the table where he worked, and his staff officers had their offices in the stalls of the stable, while our 155 (long) guns were barking nearby.

Of course the attack was to be continued. The enemy must go. The next night a regiment rushed Trugny Wood, breaking down machine-gun opposition, and driving through the thickets almost to the other side of the wood, but it was flanked by machine-gun fire which neither artillery fire nor rifle grenades nor automatic rifles nor sniping could overcome. The engineers of the Twenty-sixth made an equally audacious supporting movement toward Trugny, in which the leadership of one officer was conspicuous; and they held tenaciously to their ground. We had made the enemy pay; we had silenced many of his guns, but not enough. We must try again.

HOWEVER tired the New Englanders and Pennsylvanians were they would keep at it until they had the wood and the two villages. As the result of our attacks and our persistent fire and our preparations the Germans withdrew and the spring was in tired legs again as we took up hot pursuit. The motor machine-gun battalion of the Twenty-sixth, taking the place of cavalry, was given the right of way through the troops by Major General Edwards. Disregarding everything but speed, it hurried on to the Jaulgonne-Fere-en-Tardenois road, where it posted itself in face of the enemy's machine guns and held its position—a very brilliant stroke with all the romance of any cavalry charge.

THAT night the pushing Twenty-sixth was in touch with the next

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line of defense of the Germans and it and the brigade of the Twenty-eighth were relieved by the Forty-second Division, which had come from its successful resistance to the German offensive of July 15th. The taking of Epieds and Trugny and Jaulgonne, as a part of the operations of the other Allied troops, closed the first stage of the fight for the salient.

THE Marne salient was no longer a pocket. It was a bow. The next stage in the advance would be the River Ourcq. For eight days now the Twenty-sixth had been actively engaged, always under fire. When it was not attacking it was in pursuit or preparing for attack. There had been no rest for officers and men; all New England wanted was to wash off the accumulated dust of those eight days and to sleep. But in the tired eyes of gaunt figures staggering with fatigue there was the gleam of victory.



All censorship in connection with the A. E. F. ceased on July 2, four days after the treaty of peace had been signed.

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