

THE GREAT AMERICAN CEMETERY IN THE ARGONNE

THEY ARE NOW reverentially gathering up the bodies of the 26,000 American boys who were killed on the Argonne-Meuse battle-field, and burying them in a great cemetery at Romagne, a little town in the heart of the region where the fighting took place. Here and there all over the big battle-field are stakes, each marking the grave of an American soldier who was buried where he fell. No soldier whose grave on the battle-field is marked in any way will miss being placed in the Romagne cemetery. A careful record is kept of each interment, so that in case the bodies are eventually taken back to the United States each may be sent to a final resting-place at home. William G. Shepherd, a correspondent who has recently been at Romagne, which place in the near future will be visited by hundreds of thousands of Americans, gives a vivid description in the *New York Evening Post* of what is now taking place in the French village. We quote from Mr. Shepherd's article:



Special passes are required for visiting the great cemetery, which is now in course of construction. This is no place for curiosity-seekers or sensation-hunters, and tho the few hundreds of military visitors and civilian workers are carefully sifted out before they are given passes in Paris to visit the American battle-fields, they are, nevertheless, given another sifting before they are allowed a special pass to the Romagne territory. Their battle-field passes, so difficult to obtain in Paris, do not permit entrance to the cemetery district, or even to the town of Romagne itself.

On the outskirts of the town—indeed, on a rolling meadow to the north of it—we saw a camp of dark-brown tents. As we came nearer we saw, among these tents, hundreds of our sturdy negro troops. It was the lunch-hour, and they had come in to the camp from their task at grave-digging.

As we rolled into the camp, having been stopt a second time by a military policeman, who wanted to be sure that we had permission to enter the enclosure, we caught our first glimpse of the great cemetery, to which will be tied the heart-strings that reach out from the 26,000 American homes in which the word Romagne will hereafter be sacred.

On our right, on a hillside, we saw what appeared to be a huge engineering work. I confess that I was disappointed to see that in place of the single graves which I had had in mind I saw before me great excavations, much larger than the cellars of average American homes. The reddish, sandy earth which had been thrown out from these great graves was piled six feet high beside each of the holes.

These giant graves were perhaps eight feet deep, and at least forty feet long. The hillside before us was covered with them. I estimated that there were at least twenty of them, open, and as many more, marked by the great oblong of fresh earth, had been closed.

In the camp itself one had the sense of being in the midst of a great engineering enterprise. There were tools all about, and many of the hundred or more automobile-trucks that are used at the camp were standing about while the negro soldiers and

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drivers took their midday meal. Brown-faced and well-weathered white men, whose eyes had the crowfoot wrinkles common to sailors and men who spend their lives under the glare of the open sky, passed between the various brown-painted wooden office-buildings or conversed in twos and threes regarding the engineering problems that arise from time to time. These men are engineers in the American Army, and their assistants are 3,600 negroes gathered into the Army from many different corners of the United States.



In the tented camp where these colored boys live I found little gardens which they themselves had laid out, soldier fashion, bordered by whitewashed stones. I was told that when they were first given the task of sexton for the American Army, after the battle of the Argonne, they saw much of the gruesome side of it rather than its worthiness, and that in their tents at night they often went without sleep, singing or droning out those weird tunes that are known in the South as "the blues."

In one of the office-buildings a large force of clerks is keeping the records of the dead; no banking firm could be more careful of its accounts than are these clerks (who are white soldiers) and their superiors of their registration of graves.

In the road between the camp and the cemetery I saw great piles of very strong and well-built caskets. These neat and solid boxes have been scientifically constructed so that they will endure indefinitely.

The work of interment, however, is far from being the most arduous part of the task. When it is remembered that the area over which the bodies are scattered is over thirty miles long and

sixteen miles wide, and that every yard of these 480 square miles must be gone over, some idea may be gained of the time and labor involved. Mr. Shepherd's account continues:

As we moved about the battle-field later we saw, in fields, in groves, on hillsides, and even in the yards of what had been the houses of French villages, groups of negro soldiers at their worthy but infinitely slow task of calling the roll of our American dead and gathering them together at the hillside rendezvous of Romagne.

One of the burning pictures of all this war to me was a view of these negro sexton-soldiers working on a hilltop one rainy evening at dusk. They were outlined against the gloomy sky. Their huge motor-truck stood near by, ready to carry their burden to Romagne. I thought of the home back in the United States where this one dough-boy's empty chair held its sacred place; of how the "home fires," of which our dough-boys had so often sung, had been kept burning for him; I thought of how the heart-love in that home would flash across the Atlantic to this bleak French hilltop faster than any wireless message—if the home folk only knew.

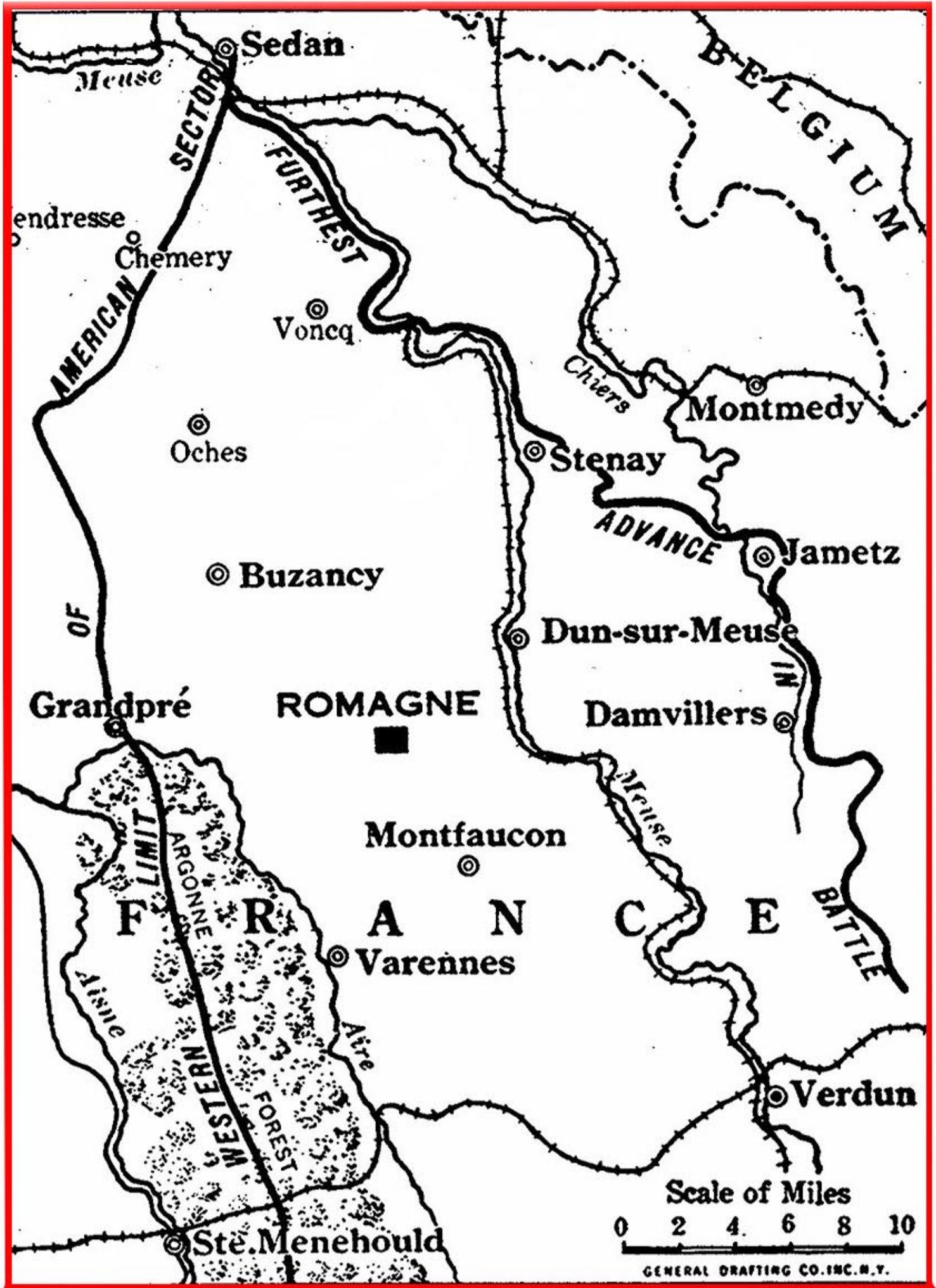
It was good to know that he was being taken from his solitary bed, in the midst of the battle-field desolation, back to the crowd of his buddies at Romagne. This, that I saw on the sky-line, was his second mobilization. Not this time will he sing and romp and play and joke and fight; after this second mobilization at Romagne he will just lie still and rest with all the other thousands of his fellow soldiers, his job well done, until it is time for us he saved to take him back home.

Here to the cemetery at Romagne, on Memorial day, came General Pershing and Marshal Foch and General Degoutte with ten thousand American soldiers representing divisions which had taken part in the battle, to bid *adieu* to the heroic dead. We quote from General Pershing's stirring tribute to the men he had commanded:

Reared in the land of freedom, these valiant men, but partly skilled in arms, came willing to give their lives to the cause without desire for gain. By their energy, their devotion, the tide of war turned, invaded homes were set free, and human liberty was saved from destruction.

The principles which our forefathers

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WHERE OUR DEAD OF THE
ARGONNE LIE BURIED.

fought to establish the heroic dead who lie here fought to maintain, and their ideals have brought our gift to the Old World. But beyond this, our own people, through these sacrifices gained much honor as individuals and as a nation. There is given to us a more lofty conception of the grandeur of human liberty and with it a distinct vision of a better world. To realize this fully, the foundations of society must be laid deeper and the structure more firmly built.

The times demand of us clearness in thought and firmness in action. The solidity of our national institutions must be the bulwark against insidious and destructive tendencies. The glory of our independence must remain the leaven and our flag the emblem of all that free men love and cherish. Strengthened by the practical test of war, and with an abiding faith in the Almighty, let us be steadfast in upholding the integrity of our traditions as a guide to future generations at home and a beacon to all who are oppressed.

It is especially given the soldier to know clearly the price of liberty. Those to whom America pays tribute here today came with us in the full vigor of their youth. They left their homes, encouraged by beloved ones who remained behind. As they went to battle they were united with a holy inspiration, realizing their mighty task and their obligations to their country, and they fought with unparalleled stoicism and determination.

We saw enthusiasm and confidence carry them on with irresistible force. We saw them at Cantigny and again at Château-Thierry, at St. Mihiel, and on this historic field in the decisive battle of the war. We can again see them yonder, moving forward as they steadily

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advanced across the shell-torn field under withering fire. They cheer and gallantly charge the enemy's strong positions. They put him to flight in the shock of arms. Onward, ever onward they go, on to the final great victory.

We weep to-day over their graves because they are our flesh and blood, but even in our sorrow we are proud that they so nobly died, and our hearts swell within us to think that we fought beside them. To the memory of these heroes this sacred spot is consecrated as a shrine where future generations of men who love liberty may come to do homage. It is not for us to proclaim what they did; their silence speaks more eloquently than words. But it is for us to uphold the conception of duty, honor, and country for which they fought and for which they died. It is for us, the living, to carry forward their purpose and make fruitful their sacrifice.

And now, dear comrades, farewell. Here under the clear skies on the green hillsides and amid the flowering fields of France, in the quiet hush of peace, we leave you forever in God's keeping.

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