

The **AMERICAN** LEGION *Weekly*

January 13, 1922: p. 5

And Then the War Began—

A Man Who Was There Tells the Story of the
First German Raid upon American
Trenches in France

By Frank Coffman

SCATTERED throughout the land today are a few men on whose tablets of memory the night of November 2, 1917, is indelibly inscribed. Those men are the First Division survivors of Company F, Second Battalion, Sixteenth Infantry, for it was on the night of November 2d, a little over four years ago, that Company F wrote the opening chapter in a history of glorious achievement of which the First Division is jealously proud. It was on that night that Company F took over its first front line position, received its baptism of fire, bore the brunt of the first German raid against our lines, and lost the first American troops killed and captured in the World War.

About the three men killed, Corporal James Gresham and Privates Thomas Enright and Merle D. Hay, a number of articles have been written. The writer, however, who was corporal of the squad to which Enright and Hay were attached, believes this story will lift the curtain on the actual happenings of that memorable night. For a better understanding of the circumstances attending our entrance into the lines, a brief history of the First Division's preparation for the front seems necessary. After landing at St. Nazaire on June 26, 1917, the division, consisting of the 16th, 18th, 26th and 28th Infantry regiments and a Marine detachment, moved by successive stages into the Gondrecourt training area, arriving at its final destination on July 6th. We remained at Gondrecourt about two months, receiving instructions in modern warfare under a picked corps of Alpine Chasseurs, the best-trained and most courageous soldiers in the French Army.

After completing the course in combat training we moved on to Demange-aux-Eau, where we remained until October 29th, drilling constantly in close order and extended formations. In the meantime the First Battalion of the Sixteenth Infantry had been sent into a quiet sector north of Toul for a ten-day tour of duty to familiarize the men with the actual conditions of trench warfare.

Receiving orders to relieve the First Battalion the Second left Demange on October 30th. We were hauled up to Valhey in trucks, from which point we hiked on foot to Bathlemont, where on the evening of November 1st we met the First Battalion coming out of the

lines. Nothing had happened especially during their turn in the trenches, the sector living up to its French reputation of being perfectly quiet, although the fellows tried to kid us with a lot of cock-and-bull stories of the things that would happen to us. Little did they dream how true their predictions would be.

We remained all night in Bathlemont, and prepared all day of the 2d for our entrance into the lines that night. Darkness came early, and by five o'clock we were ready to start, each man loaded down with extra ammunition and equipment weighing probably a hundred pounds. It was pitch-dark and raining hard. With French guides to lead us we started in. Over broken duck-boards and shattered trenches half-filled with water we stumbled along through the mud and darkness, finally reaching our position at ten o'clock. It had taken us just five hours to hike that one mile.

The first platoon of Company F, consisting of forty-six men including four extra automatic riflemen from the fourth platoon, was assigned to the company front position. This position was about one hundred yards wide. The German lines in front of us were probably five hundred yards away. Both their position and ours lay on rising ground with a low valley between.

As we moved in, the French, who were holding the line temporarily, filed out and our men took their places in the observation posts in the wire out front, and the automatic riflemen took their stations on the fire step. Privates Hay and Enright of my squad were posted as sentries while Corporal Gresham had charge of a firing squad slightly further up the trench. Both Enright and Gresham were old timers, having been in the service several years before America entered the war. Hay was a rookie, having enlisted a short time before the division left Texas.

I was assigned to day trench patrol, and all assignments being completed by midnight, retired with the five remaining men of my squad to a traverse dug-out a short distance in the rear of the front line trench. Four of the men and myself crawled into the dugout to get a little sleep while the fifth was left on guard at the entrance.

All was quiet except for an occasional rat-tat-tat from some nervous machine gunner further down the line, or an inquisitive Very light from the enemy trenches across the valley. So, lured on by exhaustion and a sense of safety, we wrapped our blankets around us and prepared for a few hours of restful slumber. False hope.

At three o'clock in the morning the Germans turned loose on our comparatively small position what the French observers afterwards declared to be the most intense bombardment they had ever witnessed. Sixteen batteries of ninety-six guns varying in size from one-pounders to six-inch, threw over in forty-five minutes, according to French estimates, several thousand shells. The only thing that prevented our platoon from being entirely wiped

out was the fact that our trenches were deep, and the ground soft and muddy with no loose stones.

After the shelling had lasted three quarters of an hour the range was suddenly lifted in a half circle box barrage in our rear to prevent our support from coming up, and two hundred and extra automatic riflemen from the fourth platoon, was assigned to the company front position. This position was about one hundred yards wide. The German lines in front of us were probably five hundred yards away. Both their position and ours lay on rising ground with a low valley between.

As we moved in, the French, who were holding the line temporarily, filed out and our men took their places in the observation posts in the wire out front, and the automatic riflemen took their stations on the fire step. Privates Hay and Enright of my squad were posted as sentries while Corporal Gresham had charge of a firing squad slightly further up the trench. Both Enright and Gresham were old timers, having been in the service several years before America entered the war. Hay was a rookie, having enlisted a short time before the division left Texas.

I was assigned to day trench patrol, and all assignments being completed by midnight, retired with the five remaining men of my squad to a traverse dugout a short distance in the rear of the front line trench. Four of the men and myself crawled into the dugout to get a little sleep while the fifth was left on guard at the entrance.

All was quiet except for an occasional rat-tat-tat from some nervous machine gunner further down the line, or an inquisitive Very light from the enemy trenches across the valley. So, lured on by exhaustion and a sense of safety, we wrapped our blankets around us and prepared for a few hours of restful slumber. False hope.

At three o'clock in the morning the Germans turned loose on our comparatively small position what the French observers afterwards declared to be the most intense bombardment they had ever witnessed. Sixteen batteries of ninety-six guns varying in size from one-pounders to six-inch, threw over in forty-five minutes, according to French estimates, several thousand shells. The only thing that prevented our platoon from being entirely wiped out was the fact that our trenches were deep, and the ground soft and muddy with no loose stones.

After the shelling had lasted three quarters of an hour the range was suddenly lifted in a half circle box barrage in our rear to prevent our support from coming up, and two hundred and forty Bavarians, the widely advertised cut-throats of the German Army, hopped down on us. The first raid on American troops was in full swing. They had crawled up to our wire under cover of their barrage and the moment it lifted were right on top of us.

Corporal Gresham was standing in a dugout entrance when a man in an American uniform came running by and said to him, "Who are you?" to which Gresham replied, "An American, don't shoot." The man replied, "You are the one I'm looking for," and immediately

shot him through the eye. Private Hay was also shot through the head by a man in a dark uniform whom he thought was one of his own comrades.

The body of Private Enright was found next morning on top of the parapet. He had evidently been captured and, refusing to accompany his captors, put up a hard fight before he was killed, as the ground was torn up and trampled down for some distance around his body. His throat had been cut from ear to ear, and his chest ripped open. The medical officer also reported finding twelve bayonet wounds in his body.

The Germans retired after a period of probably fifteen minutes carrying all their dead and wounded, and eleven of our men as prisoners including Platoon Sergeant Edgar M. Halyburton and Corporal Mulhall. They cleaned the trench of every piece of our equipment they could lay their hands on, and left none of theirs behind as evidence of the unit to which they belonged. Our wire patrol, however, two mornings later found several pieces of their equipment which they dropped on the rush back to their trenches.

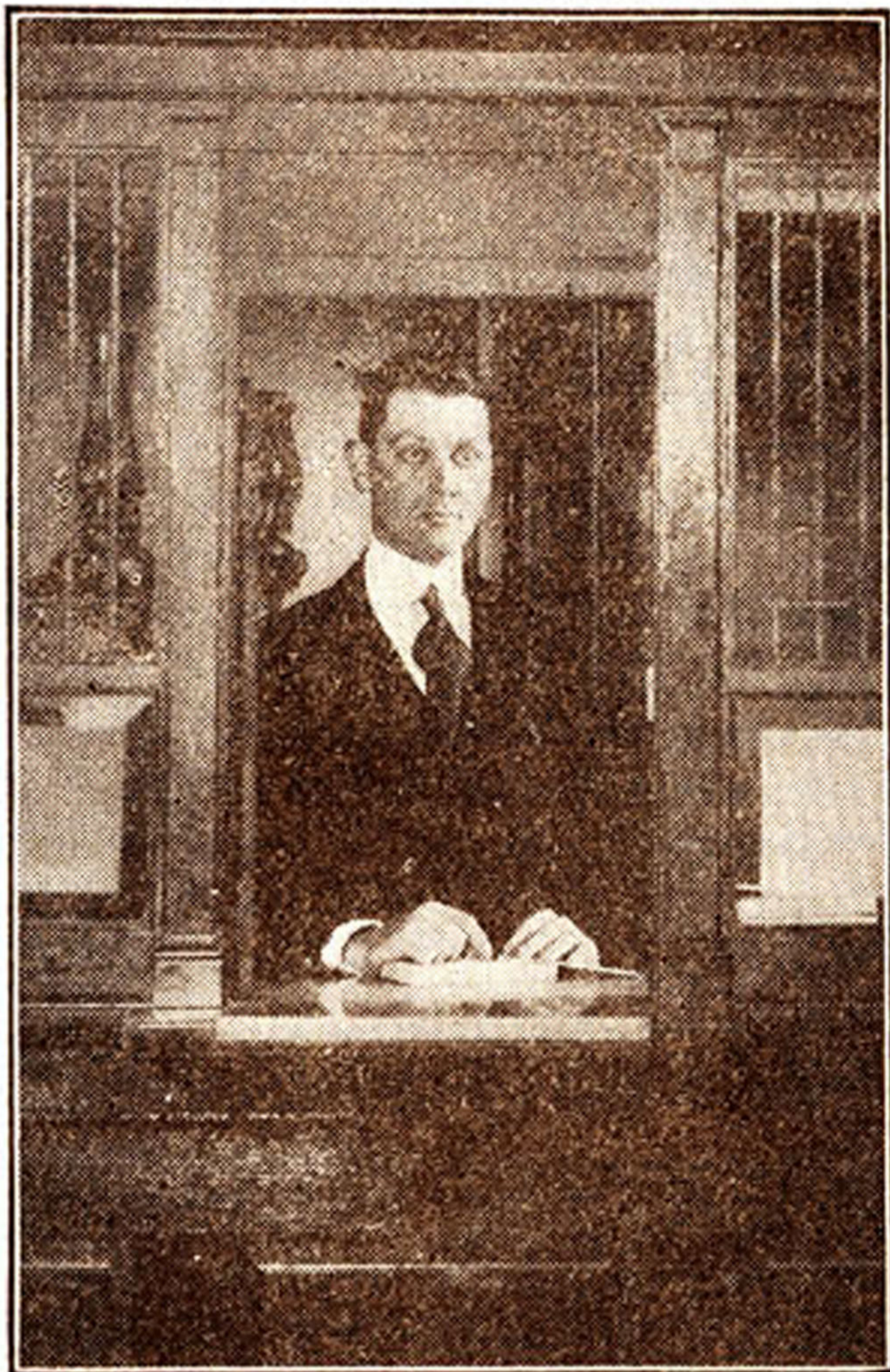
In checking up our casualties we found we had lost eleven men as prisoners, had seven badly wounded, and three killed. Twenty-one men, or practically fifty percent of our platoon, were eliminated for further duty by that first raid.

Entering that sector but four hours previously as green troops, most of us having been in the service a short time prior to our leaving the States, day-break brought to us all the reality of the horror and cruelty of the work we had to do, and changed us from callow youths to grim and silent men with a lust for revenge. Instead of breaking down our morale as he had tried to do, the enemy only succeeded in making us more determined than ever to whip him at his own game.

Next morning we carried our three dead comrades back to the rear and buried them with simple military honors. The French General commanding our sector, in a short speech of beautiful sentiment, expressed the wish that the bodies of those three boys should forever remain in the soil of the country which they came so far to protect and for which they gave their lives; that their graves should always be a shrine of hallowed ground to which his people could go in a spirit of gratefulness and sorrow.

Our division later participated in many stirring scenes of battle, but in the minds of those of us who remain from Company F, the memory of that first night's raid will ever be as vivid as the lightning's flash on a summer night. Nine days later, utterly fatigued, grimy, unshaven and covered with mud, we were relieved by the French who once more took their places in the "quiet" sector.

And Then the War Began—



Frank Coffman, corporal of the American squad which suffered the first casualties of the war, looking over the parapet of the bank at Elkhart (Va.) in which he is now assistant cashier

The AMERICAN LEGION Weekly

OldMagazineArticles.com