

“WITH THE HELP OF GOD AND A FEW MARINES”

BY

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Photograph from the Committee on Public Information

“Berry’s men started through that wheat, but they met with stubborn resistance. The enemy opened up at once and it seemed as if the air were full of red-hot nails”

“One of the most interesting letters I have seen and I offer it in full because it tells the whole story of Belleau Wood from the restricted but intense viewpoint of the man behind the bayonet. It was written by Private Hiram B. Pottinger of the 76th Company, Sixth Regiment, to his mother in St. Louis.”

“I wrote you a card yesterday telling you we had gone over the top. Well, we sure went over the top and we had some battle. I will tell you the story as near as I can.

“It happened early in the morning and before daylight we were all lined up behind our lines. In front of us lay a large open field and in front of that a thickly wooded hill. That was where we were going. We all had kind of a funny feeling, but we laid back there smoking and telling jokes while we waited for the order to form. During all that time our artillery was throwing a barrage into the woods ahead of us, and believe me they were sure tearing things up, too.

“Well, at daylight we commenced to form. Our company was in about the fourth or fifth wave and then the advance started. I would give anything for a picture of those ‘leathernecks’ that morning going across that field, for we were behind and could get a good view of it.

“Across the field we went and up the hill and over, but the Germans never put up much of a fight. I guess the shell fire was too much for them and they retreated. We took positions at the edge of the woods and stayed there all day. The next day was the day of the fighting in which our company took a big part—we took a wood which had formerly been known as the ‘Machine Gun Nest,’ ‘Death Valley’ and all such names as that, and none of the names were too good for it.

“The first sight that struck my eyes when our little platoon started through the woods was a place where the Germans had shot liquid fire and the ground and woods all around were scorched black. In the middle of this were men’s bodies all charred and some of their faces almost burned off. A little farther on I stumbled over the body of a man who must have been killed a month before. I tell you such sights as that gives you a sick feeling if you have seen nothing like it before, but I soon forgot them, for it was then we spied the Boches.



“They were placing a machine gun to turn it on us, but they never did get it placed, for we let out a yell and fired into them, wiping all of them from the gun, and in a second we had the gun in our hands.

“They must have thought from the way we were shooting and yelling that the whole American army was coming through the woods, for they blew a call to either retreat or surrender and they came running out of the woods with their hands up, yelling, ‘Kamerad, Kamerad,’ and we took an awful mob of prisoners right there.

“One of our men could speak German and he got the lay of everything from a prisoner who was scared to death. We then advanced on their flank so as to come up behind them, and that we did. We caught four or five bunches of them in the act of swinging their machine guns on us, but our eyes and rifles were too quick for them and we wiped more than one crew away from their guns. That was our main watch-out, machine guns. We got about half way through the woods and started raising hell in general; we killed Boches like rabbits; they would not fight us hand to hand. Seeing their machine gun was lost, they threw up their hands and yelled ‘Kamerad—mercy.’ One guy threw a whole bundle of hand grenades at us and then yelled ‘mercy.’ He is still laying up there, I guess.

“We took their machine guns and turned them on the Boches as we advanced through the woods, also their grenades and pistols. We had nothing of our own except our rifles and bayonets, but that was enough for them, for the sight of our bayonets made them shout ‘Kamerad.’ It was then that the old saying about your rifle being your best friend came true, for they were sure our best friends that day.

“At last we reached our objective. It was a bunch of great big rocks, but we never stopped. We stormed the rocks, but all we found was a lot of dead Huns. If they would have let us go on we would have gone clear to Berlin, but when we reached our objective we had to stop.

“We then started to dig in. We brought up the machine guns we had captured and put them on the line with us; then in a little while our own guns got up on the line and we were pretty well fixed for the counter-attack we expected. But we were not there two hours until they started shelling us and then, after not losing a single man in the attack, one was killed and two wounded, including one Lieutenant, by shell fire. But it only lasted about two hours. Then it quieted down, but we kept on digging and dug down underneath the rock and made regular dug-outs for ourselves. Everything went well until the next afternoon and then hell started.

“They gave us a bombardment which lasted about five or six hours, which none of us will ever forget as long as we live. It tore the woods all to thunder, the trees looked as though somebody had cut them down with a scythe. All that afternoon the ground just rocked under shell fire, and the gas was so thick at times you could not see two feet in front of you. By night about half the platoon was killed or wounded, and it did not look as if any of us had a chance to get out alive, but we stayed, and the bombardment kept right on, and about midnight it quieted down a little and over they came with a counter-attack, but as you might know, sleeping was out of the question, and we saw them coming, although it was pitch dark.

“As the Lord would have it, not one of our machine



guns had been hit, and when they started over, we crawled up out of our holes and pumped enough iron into them to kill the whole German army. But it only lasted a few minutes, for the Huns threw up a call for a barrage and retreated, and we had to hunt our holes once more, for the shells started dropping by the thousands. The whole end of my rifle was blown off by shrapnel, and my bayonet was shattered into a million pieces. It was pretty tough to lose that rifle, too, after carrying it so far, but I had to hunt another one.

“Until we were relieved the days we spent were days of hell, for the bombardment kept right on, and you were taking your life in your hands when you left your hole. Why, the concussion of the air made by some of those high explosives just knocked the wind out of me, and I was buried beneath the earth three times.

“We never thought much about eating or sleeping, for they tried an attack almost every night. We were gassed so much that we had to wear our masks a good part of the time, but we held our ground and never gave an inch, and drove back every attack they tried to make. I went after rations one night (there were three of us), and coming back through the woods we were caught in a barrage. We threw down our sacks and jumped into a hole, and had hardly done that when a shell hit just a few feet away. A piece of shrapnel about a cubic inch in size went clear through the sack of bread and grazed my hand, knocking a hunk of flesh off, but it never amounted to anything.

“By the time we were relieved our platoon had dwindled down to about twenty-odd men, and we came back leaving our best pals up there. When we came out we brought along the machine guns we had captured, and are sending the finest one to Major General Barnett, commander of the Marine Corps. Our one little platoon captured about (censored) prisoners, and I do not know how many machine guns.

“But we won. We advanced about three miles and held everything we took and found out we were not fighting fighters, but cowards, who have to rely on artillery and machine guns to do their fighting.”

*-from "With the Help of God and a Few Marines",
Chapter XII: "Le Bois de la Brigade de Marine"*

