

THE HOME SECTOR

February 28, 1920: p. 11

Father Duffy Tells What Happened

The Chaplain of the 165th Infantry Describes
How the Regiment Was Mauled in Two
Battles and Hints That Somebody Blundered



FATHER DUFFY

THE dark chapters in the story of the 165th Infantry's battles overseas are now open for the judgment of historians. The circumstantial record of two hopeless fights is presented in the words of the regiment's chaplain, Father Francis P. Duffy, in his book, "Father Duffy's Story."

The old "Fighting Sixty-Ninth," like the Gallant Six Hundred at Balaklava, was sent charging an enemy so strongly entrenched that the attack was foredoomed to failure. In fact, the regiment was sent twice on such forlorn charges within ten weeks. And Father Duffy's book intimates in plain prose, as Tennyson did in verse, that "somebody blundered."

The story of each of these charges is the story of a battle in which battalions were hurled prematurely against German positions, sent dashing over long stretches of terrain under tempestuous artillery, machine gun and rifle fire, only to wither before reaching the enemy defenses, handfuls of men surviving while the dead and wounded lay compactly over the whole path of the dash.

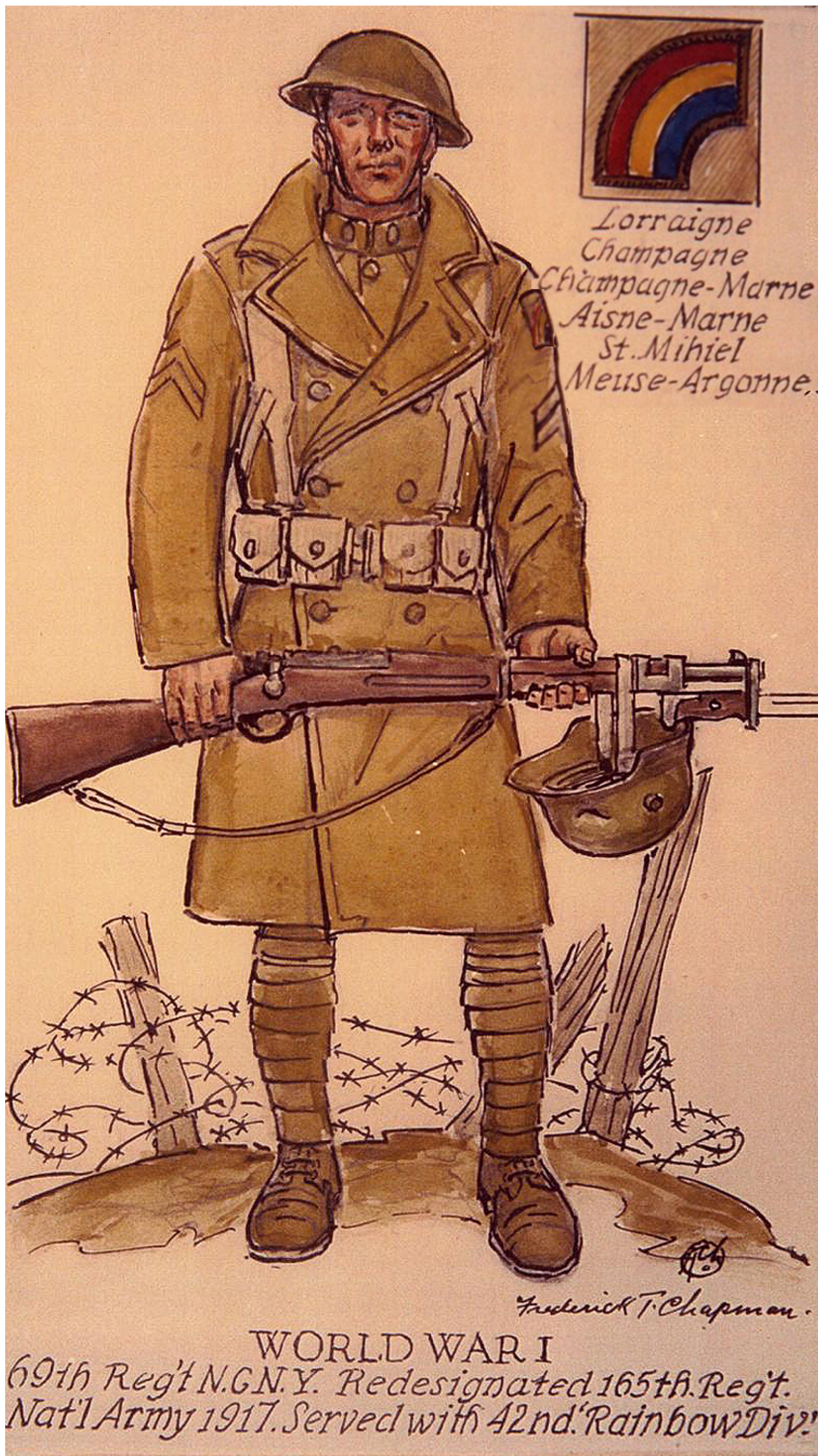
Father Duffy saw the things which he writes about, for he went overseas with his regiment, composed almost entirely of New Yorkers of Irish birth or descent, and he stayed with the regiment until its survivors came home.

OldMagazineArticles.com

Somebody Blundered

THE first Balaklava of the 165th came in the battle of the Ourcq, at the end of July, 1918, when the regiment was following up the Germans, who were being pressed from the Château-Thierry salient and who, having been dislodged from the Marne, were expected to make their stand at the Vesle or the Aisne. The story of this battle is the story of a wild charge across the Ourcq, in spite of a belated order intended to call off the attack, of hopeless fighting past Meurcy Farm and in front of the Forest of Nesles, where the Germans were so strongly organized that only artillery could have availed against them—and the artillery was lacking.

Equally as desperate and hopeless and costly was the forlorn effort ten weeks later to break through the Kriemhilde Stellung at Landres-et-St. Georges in the Meuse-Argonne operation. Here, again, the regiment was sent forward with rifle and bayonet to take a position impregnable under the conditions, and the failure was deadly and heart-breaking. This attack was made on orders of the corps commander, and, according to Father Duffy's book, its failure was followed by the removal of General Lenihan, commander of the 83rd Brigade, Colonel Mitchell, commander of the 165th Regiment, Captain Merle-Smith and Lieutenant Betty, all of whom later were vindicated by appointments to commands equal in responsibility to their old ones.



Father Duffy's story of the Battle of the Ourcq is the narrative of an eye witness. Standing at the wall of an orchard or cemetery beyond "Dead

OldMagazineArticles.com

Somebody Blundered

Man's Curve," or "Hell's Corner," in the town of Villers-sur-Fère, one can look down on the whole battlefield of the Rainbow Division on the Ourcq. Villers-sur-Fère is on the crest of the valley slopes south of the Ourcq. A mile and a half to the left lies the town of Fère-en-Tardenois. About the same distance to the right and across the narrow river lies Sergy. To get the Ourcq straight across the line of vision, one faces to the northeast. The eye traverses a downward slope for about eight hundred yards and takes in two small bridges, one to the right and one to the left of the center point of vision.

"Straight ahead beyond the river is a valley," writes Father Duffy, "and up the valley a thousand yards north of the river is a house and outbuildings with connecting walls all of stone, forming a large interior courtyard. It is Meurcy Farm. About two hundred yards west of the farm is a thick square patch of woods, the Bois Colas. North of the Farm is a smaller woods, the Bois Brulé." He continues:

The whole terrain slopes naturally toward the Ourcq. But tactically the slopes that were of most importance in our battle were those that bound the brook and its valley. Facing the farm from the bottom of the valley one sees to the left a gradual hill rising northwestwards till it reaches the village of Seringes-et-Nesles, which lies like an inbent fish-hook, curving around Bois Colas and Meurcy Farm half a mile away. To the east of the brook the rise goes up from the angle of the brook valley and the river valley in two distinct slopes, the first fairly sharp, the second gradual. Six hundred yards or so north of these crests is a thick green wall across the northern view. It is the Forest of Nesles.

The difficulty in attacking up this little valley toward the farm lay in the fact that it made a sort of trough, both sides of which could be easily defended by machine guns with a fine field of direct fire, and also by flanking fire from the opposite slope as well as from Meurcy Farm and Bois Colas, which lay in the northern angle of the valley. And when the attackers got to the top of the eastern crest there were five hundred yards of level ground to traverse in face of whatever defences might be on the edge of the forest.

With plenty of artillery to crack the hardest nuts, and with regiments moving forward fairly well in line so that the advance of each would protect the flanks of its neighbors, the problem would not have been a terrific one.

But nobody knew for certain whether the enemy would make more than a rear guard action at the Ourcq. It takes time to get artillery up and in place. And the Germans might slip away scot free on account of our too great caution in following him. Miles to right and left Allied troops, mainly French, were hammering at both sides of the salient. It was the duty of those who followed the retreating enemy to see that his retirement with guns and other property

Somebody Blundered

should not be too easy a task.

AFTER telling of the disposition of the Rainbow's units, Father Duffy goes on:

For two days the situation had been changing from hour to hour. On Friday morning came a Corps order for the Forty-second Division to attack on Saturday morning. It was then arranged between General Menoher and the French division commander to have two battalions of ours, Donovan's and McKenna's, relieve the French that night. As we have seen, the order to attack was recalled and the relieving battalions were sent back. But the two division commanders decided that the relief should be effected and that these two battalions should take the front line with Anderson in support and the 166th (Ohio) in reserve. . . .

On Saturday morning came General Order 51. "Pursuant to orders from the Sixth (French) Army, Forty-second Division will attack at H hour under cover of darkness, night of July 27-28." The four Infantry regiments were to attack abreast, a battalion of each being in line. "The attack will be in the nature of a surprise, and consequently troops in the attack will not fire during the assault, but will confine themselves to the use of the bayonet."

At 1 p. m. Saturday, July 27th, the order was given to execute the relief and await further instructions. . . . An hour after midnight General Lenihan received a message from General MacArthur containing an order from our First Army Corps, that the attack be made before daylight and without artillery preparation, reliance being placed chiefly on the bayonet to drive the enemy from his position. Cavalry were to be in reserve to follow up. General Lenihan ordered all of our three battalions to take part in the attack.

Colonel McCoy was sent for and the order given him. Major McKenna expressed his opinion of the order in a manly, soldierly way. Captain Hurley of Company K had felt out the enemy resistance during the night and had found machine gun nests just across the river, the enemy artillery being also very active. The assumption of a retreating enemy against whom infantry bayonets and charging cavalry could be effective was not justified by what the front line could detect. It was a case for artillery preparation and careful advance.

Colonel McCoy was already of the same opinion, which he expressed with proper vigor. They were three good soldiers, Lenihan, McCoy and McKenna, and they all felt the same way about it. But it was a Corps order, an Army order, in fact commanding a general advance.

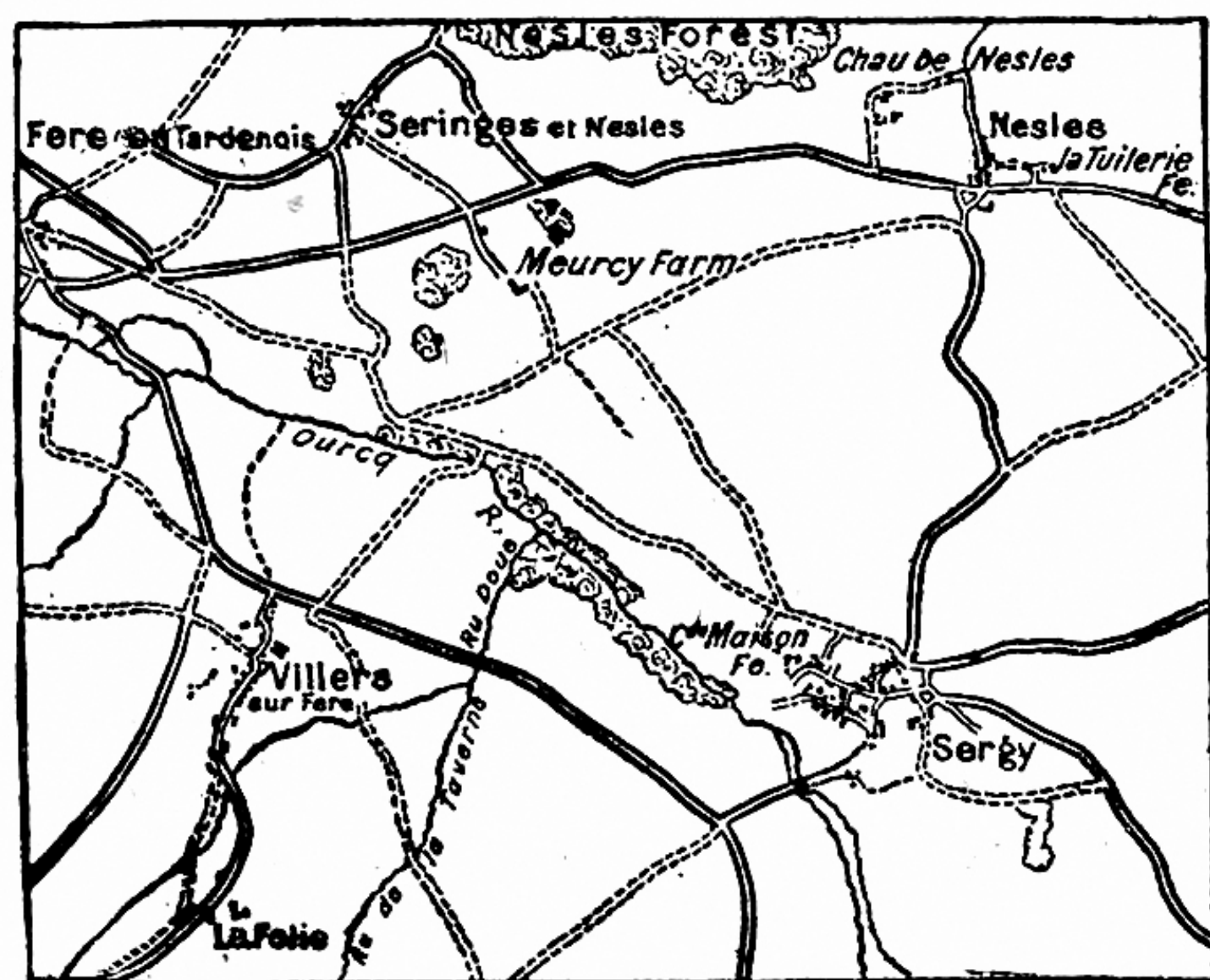
So when the hour arrived, the Colonel gave the order to advance, which order was communicated by Major McKenna to Hurley, Ryan and Merle-Smith, Meaney being in reserve. Orders were also sent to Colonel Donovan on the right to move his battalion to the west, taking advantage of the woods, and then to cross the river. Lieutenant Colonel Mitchell brought orders in person to Anderson to bring his battalion forward and cross the Ourcq on the left of McKenna, which would bring him to the slope on the west of the little brook leading toward Bois Colas.

Somebody Blundered

MEANWHILE General Lenihan, at 3:20 a. m., had received word from General Brown of the Eighty-fourth Brigade that he could not be sure of having his regiments in line in time for the assault. As a matter of fact, the Iowans, under Lieutenant Colonel Tinley, were already abreast of Donovan; and the assault battalion of the Alabamas, under Lieutenant Colonel Baer, was rapidly coming up behind. About 5 a. m. General Lenihan received word that the French were not in Fère-en-Tardenois. He decided it was too hazardous to push the attack and word was sent at 5:15 o'clock to Colonel McCoy to suspend his advance temporarily pending the advance of the neighboring organizations.

But the old regiment had a reputation to live up to: "Never disobeyed an order, never lost a flag." McKenna had given his orders to his captains, who all knew just what it meant—and the men under them knew it. Many of them, most of them, as it turned out, would be dead or wounded up that pleasant little valley and along its eastern slopes before the sun rose at mid-heavens. But no man was daunted by the thought.

The first wave was to be Company K. . . . Their leader was Captain John Patrick Hurley. . . . At his command they moved forward in admirable formation with intervals all perfect at a walk, a trot, a run, down to the Ourcq. . . . In that short advance Sergeant Frank Doughney and Corporal Raymond Staber found their way to heaven, and a number of good men were wounded. But they swept on over the Green Mill bridge and across its dam and through the waters of the river with Captain Hurley and Lieutenant Pat Dowling in the lead, and did not stop till they had gained a footing under the bank of the road beyond the river.



The Battlefield of the Ourcq

Right on their heels came Company I under the Boer War veteran, Captain Richard J. Ryan, in the same perfect formation. They, too, swept across the Ourcq (Eddie Joyce being the one man killed), and took up their place with Company K under the bank. The two captains reformed their men and were looking over the situation. Their objective was Meurcy Farm. But that lay in the valley and was impossible to take until at least one of the slopes was cleared to its summit, as a direct advance would expose them to enfilading fire. Even where they were, one group of enemy machine guns could fire direct on their flank. . . .

The line was scarcely straightened out when the men were given the word to advance. The left of Company K moved out on the lower slopes along the little

Somebody Blundered

valley toward Meurcy Farm, the right of K and all of I at an angle straight up the bare, smooth slope toward the machine gun nests that were spitting fire from that direction. . . .

The line swept on. The slope to the right ran through a wheat field and then with a gentle rise to the summit. In the lower portion there was a group of machine guns manned by good men. But they had to deal with better men. The line swung around the guns in a semi-circle, the men crawling on their bellies like Indians now. The rifles were cracking all around, their sharp bursts of fire drowning at times the incessant pop, pop, pop of the machine guns.

Many of the German gunners were killed, and the others found it nigh impossible to lift their heads from their holes to work the pieces. Not one of them offered to surrender. Most of them died at their posts. A few sought safety in flight and some of these managed to slip back up the hill to safety. We met some of these men long afterwards. They spoke of the sweep of the battalion across the Ourcq and said they thought Americans were crazy.

Meanwhile big, gallant Merle-Smith with Company L had crossed the river and had fallen into line on the hill to the right of Company I. Major McKenna, anxious to extend his flanks as far as possible, had thrown in Company D, half of it on the right of L, and half to the left rear of K, up the valley toward the farm.

The men who had the farm for their objective fared best. At that moment it was not very strongly held and the shoulder of the hill protected them from fire from its summit. . . . There was a sharp fire under the stone walls of the old building. . . . Finally rifles were thrust through the windows and the last of the Germans retreated across the courtyard and out the other side. . . .

The main attack had harder going. Near the crest of the hill was a new line of German machine guns much stronger than the first and with a magnificent field of fire that swept almost every part of the slope. Now that their own men at the base were out of the way, the German artillery, too, had more freedom to act, and shells began to drop along the slope, carrying destruction. The whine of bullets was incessant and the quick spurts of dust spoke of imminent death. But still the line kept crawling forward, each man keeping his resolution to the sticking point with no exhilaration of a headlong charge nor even a friendly touch of a shoulder. . . .

The machine guns were the worst—and not alone those in front. The main attack was up the slope on the east of the brook valley. Across the narrow valley along the edge of the Bois Colas until Anderson's men cleaned them out, and outside Seringes, the Germans had other guns which kept up a galling fire on our third battalion. And from their right on their unprotected flank more guns were at work. Before the hill was half won many were wounded or killed. . . .

FATHER Duffy then gives details of the struggles of the different companies up the hill and names the numerous killed and wounded. Telling of Company I in the middle of the line, he goes on:

Somebody Blundered

It was at the top of the hill that the captain was wounded, a bullet going through his left side. Before he fell he had looked the situation over. . . . In front the terrain stretched over perfectly level ground for five hundred yards to the edge of the Forest of Nesles, where one could detect the prepared emplacements and regularly wired positions. It was useless to advance in that direction; not a man ever could cross that stretch alive. To the right a company of the Alabamas had come up, but they, too, had been swept to pieces by the German fire and no more managed to reach the top.

To the left, across the valley, our second battalion had begun to work its way up the opposite slope toward Seringes. Their firing could be detected as they wormed their way forward.

Looking back down the hill the sight was discouraging. The ground was littered with the bodies of the brave, and the slopes of the Ourcq were dotted with the wounded, helping one another to the dressing station across the river at Villers-sur-Fère. Half the battalion was out of action. . . . All three commanders decided that the position on top of the hill was untenable. When they had swept over the last emplacements of the German guns on the hill they not only found that their own advance was impossible; they had also left the German artillery free to act, and the shelling began with terrific vigor.

So the main body drew back a little below the crest, leaving automatic gunners and sharpshooters to keep the Germans from venturing forward from the woods. Our own machine guns, the Wisconsin lads manning them, had followed the advance, the gunners fighting with desperate courage. The ammunition was carried up by their men and ours at fearful cost. Five feet or so a man might run with it and then go down. Without a moment's hesitation some other soldier would grab it and run forward to go down in his turn. But the guns had to be fed and still another would take the same dreadful chance. Death was forgotten. Finally the guns were put out of action by shellfire at the top of the hill and there they stood uselessly, their gunners lying dead around them.

AFTER naming more of the killed and wounded, Father Duffy continues:

And still the remnants of the battalion held their ground, though that ground was being ploughed by shells. They had the hill; and if a general forward movement was on, as they had been told, it was their place to hold that hill till the other organizations could come up, even though the last man amongst them should remain there for his long sleep. . . . Reinforcements arrived, but reinforcements only added to the slaughter. What was needed was artillery fire and strong supporting movements on the flanks.

Lieutenant Connelly had tried to remove Captain Ryan from the field. But the captain threatened to shoot anybody who would attempt to take him away from his men. Finally, about noon, Captain Merle-Smith came to him with the information that the order had come to withdraw through the first battalion, which had already occupied the lower slopes of the hill.

The survivors were a sorry remnant of

Somebody Blundered

the splendid battalion that had so carried out a soldier's task.

Their's not to reason why,
Their's but to do and die.

Disputes may arise about the orders that sent them in but they will not affect the place in the martial annals of their race and country which was made on that day of tragic glory by the Shamrock Battalion.

It was on October 14 in the Argonne offensive that the 165th Regiment found its second Balaklava. Filled with green replacements, its old personnel having been worn away tremendously since the fighting at the Ourcq—killed, wounded and missing totaling 2,600 men—the 165th Regiment, together with the 166th, found itself taking up the advance near Landres - et - St. Georges where First Division troops had left off. First of all it was to capture the German main line of defense, the Kriemhilde Stellung, which in this sector was a well-prepared and strongly wired position consisting of three lines of wire and trenches.

The first rows of wire were breast high and as much as twenty feet wide, all bound together in small squares by the customary iron supports, so that it was almost impossible for artillery to destroy it unless the ground were beaten flat. Back of this were good trenches about four feet deep with machine gun shelters carefully prepared. Behind this front line, at thirty yards intervals, the Germans had two other lines with lower wire and shallower trenches.

TELLING of the part of the 165th Regiment in the attack by the whole division, Father Duffy writes:

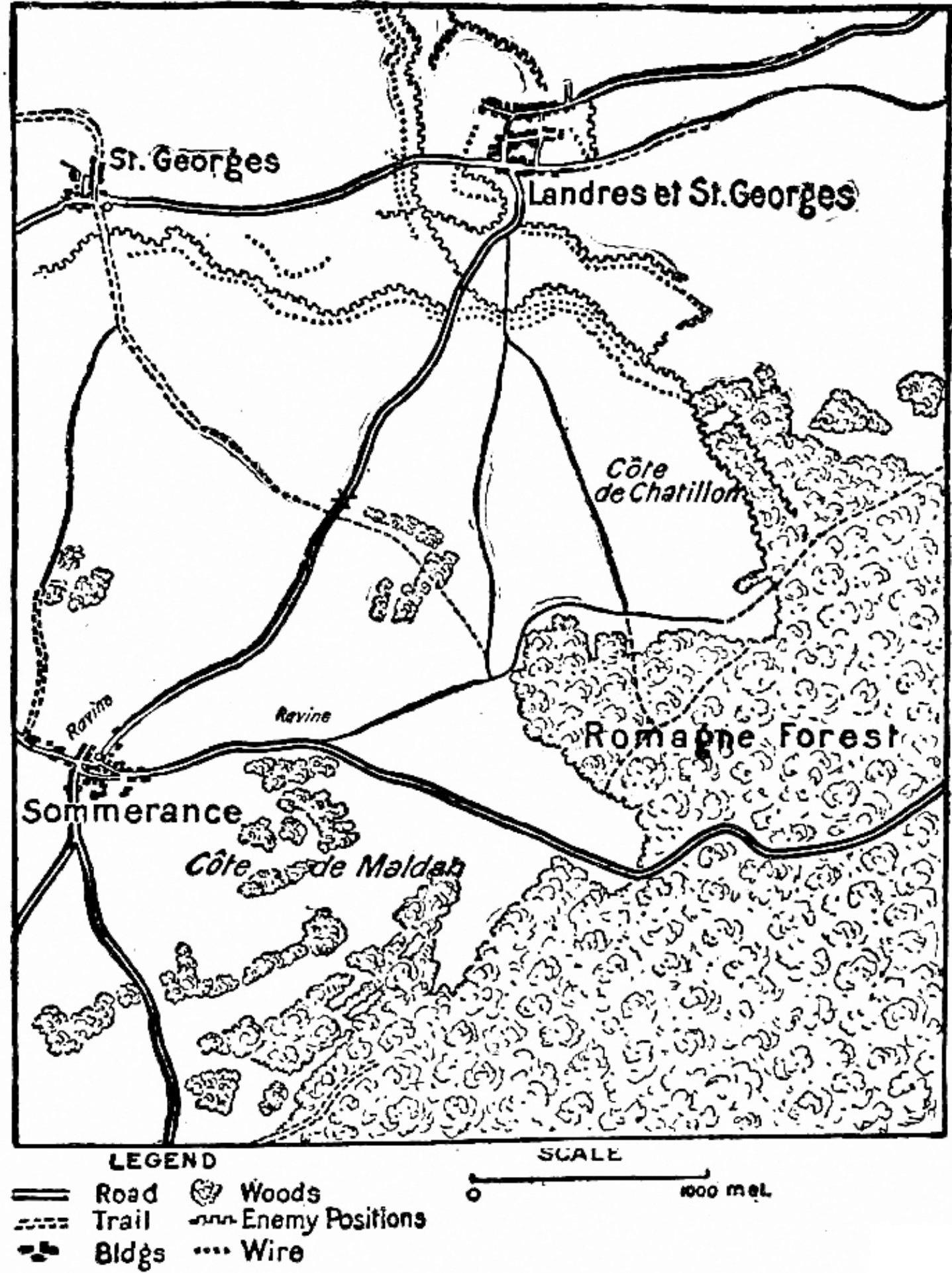
Our attack had to be made over open ground with the purpose of carrying by direct assault wired entrenchments. It was the warfare of 1916 and 1917 over again, and everybody knows from the numerous French and British accounts of such action that it can be accomplished only by tremendous artillery preparation, and that even then gains must be made at a great loss of infantry.

But a glance at the map showed that we had greater danger to fear than the resistance which would come from the front. The enemy wire ran straight down the right of the Ohio front and all of ours, and then swung in a southerly direction for a kilometer or more. This prophesied eloquently to anyone who had the slightest knowledge of war that our main danger was to come from our right flank unless that hill could be taken first.

After telling of the plans for having tanks and wire-cutting Engineers go forward to clear the path for the Infantry—plans that never got under way—Father Duffy relates what happened:

Our artillery preparations for the assault were begun at 3:30 on the morning of October 14th. Our brigade, in touch with the Eighty-second Division on our left, jumped off at 8:30 in the same morning. . . . The front wave had not gotten well started before it was evident that the enemy were expecting an attack, and from the beginning our men went forward through steady shell fire which increased as their purpose became more clearly manifested. Two enemy airplanes flew along the lines of our division discharging machine guns and no doubt

Somebody Blundered



Where the 165th struck the Kriemhilde Stellung

keeping their own artillery posted on the results of their fire. But in spite of losses, our men kept going forward. . . . They had about two miles to go before reaching the enemy's wire. . . .

The amount of time assigned to the 84th Brigade to capture Hill 288, the Tuilerie Farm and the defenses at the base of the Côte de Chatillon was not sufficient for the magnitude of the task that was given them to accomplish. By noon their line had passed Hill 288 and was close to the enemy outposts, but at that time our brigade (the 83rd) was already at their second objective.

From the outset the most destructive fire we had to undergo came from the machine guns firing from this côte to our right and enfilading our whole line; and the further forward we got the more destructive it became. By one o'clock half of the third battalion had been killed or wounded. . . .

There is no tougher experience than advancing over a considerable distance under fire. The trouble is that the men are being shot down by an enemy whom they cannot see. They reply with their rifles and machine guns, but have only the vaguest hope that they are accomplishing anything more than disconcerting their opponents. When a soldier gets where he can see the foe he develops a sort of hunter's exhilaration. His blood warms up and he actually forgets that the other fellow is shooting at him. Advancing in the open against trenches he has only the sensations of the hunted. . . .

But their task was more than any division could accomplish. The conditions on the right made it impossible to reach the wire in front with strength enough to break through it. The 84th Brigade was doing heroic work, but it was to take two days more of tremendously hard fighting for them before the Côte de Chatillon could be reduced. The nature of the fighting turned their front obliquely in a northeast direction, while our brigade was advancing due north. . . .

In the afternoon, after six hours of battle, Donovan reported that the third battalion, which had gotten up to the slopes under the German wire, was too badly shot up to be able to push through. He requested an artillery barrage of an

Somebody Blundered

hour and a half to keep the Germans distracted while he withdrew the third battalion, carrying their wounded, through the first battalion under Major Kelly, who would take their place.

At dusk Kelly made his advance by infiltration. . . . The men stole forward, losing heavily. . . . Toward the right of our position a rough wagon road led through a draw between two gradual slopes and just before it reached the main road between Sommerance and Landres it passed through a deep cut, in some places eight feet deep, part of which was included in the enemy's wire defenses.

The battalion fought its way right up to the enemy's wire, only to find it an impassable barrier. Our artillery fire had not made a break in it anywhere, as for lack of airplanes to register the effect of their work they had been shooting entirely by the map. Groups of our lads dashed up to the wire only to be shot down to the last man. Some ran through a passage made for the roadway, the only possible method of getting through, but this of course was absolutely covered by German machine guns and every man that went through it was shot and, if not killed outright, taken prisoner.

Soldiers of ours and of the Engineers with wire-cutting tools lay on their faces working madly to cut through the strands, while riflemen and grenadiers alongside of them tried to bear down the resistance. But they were in a perfect hail of bullets from front and flank, and every last man was killed or wounded. Further back was a concentration of artillery fire, of bursting shells and groans and death, that made the advance of the support platoons a veritable hell.

The attackers finally fell back a short distance to the deep cut in the road. Our second attempt to break through had failed.

FATHER DUFFY then describes the third attack, in which every man who reached the wire was hit and losses were heavy among the elements farther back. The tanks did not appear. Colonel Donovan was struck in the leg by a rifle bullet which shattered the bone and left him helpless. He refused to allow himself to be removed, and lay in a shell-hole directing the battle.

The men in the sunken road were shelled by trench mortars, and shell fire on the open ground to the rear from enemy guns which had the exact range caused terrible slaughter. Finally the tanks appeared, but under artillery fire they turned about and rumbled down the road to the rear. Then the enemy counter-attacked but were beaten back after more losses by the 165th and 166th Regiments.

"The situation was a stalemate," says Father Duffy, resuming his story.

We had made an advance of three kilometers under desperate conditions, but in spite of our losses and our sacrifices we had failed to take our final objective. Well, success is not always the reward of courage. . . .

Since 1915 no commanders in the older armies would dream of opposing to strongly wired and entrenched positions the naked breasts of their Infantry. They take care that the wire, or part of it at least, is knocked down by artillery or laid flat by tanks before they ask unpro-

Somebody Blundered

tected riflemen to try conclusions with its defenders. When the wire is deep, and still intact, and strongly defended, the Infantry can do little but hang their bodies upon it.

Whatever the mature judgment of history may decide about it, the opinion of our Corps commander, General Summerall, was the one that counted most. . . . On the evening of the 15th he came to our brigade and made a visit to our P. C. in Exermont to demand why our final objective had not been taken.

He was not well handled. Colonel Mitchell is a good soldier, and one of the finest men in the world, but he is entirely too modest to say a strong word in his own defense. . . . General Summerall was in no mood for argument. He wanted results, no matter how many men were killed, and he went away more dissatisfied than he had come.

As a result, by his orders, the division commander removed General Lenihan, Colonel Mitchell and also Captain Merle-Smith and Lieutenant Betty. . . .

I do not wish to adopt too critical a tone with regard to the action of the Corps commander. . . . But speaking as a historian, I think that his decision was wrong. . . . The worst blow to our morale that we ever received was inflicted by the order relieving our colonel.

