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The Germans Concrete Trenches

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BERGEN-OP-ZOOM.

AT the kind invitation of General Longchamps, German Military Governor of the Province of Namur, I spent two days with him going along the country in and behind the firing line in Northern France from near Rheims to the small village of Monthois, near Vouziers, on the Aisne.

About five miles out of Monthois we came to the artillery positions of the Germans. We could see the flashes of the guns long before we reached the hills where they were placed, but when we came up and dismounted the position was most cleverly concealed by a higher hill in front and the heavy woods which served as a screen for the artillery. I noticed many holes where the French shells had burst, and the valley to the north looked as if some one had been experimenting with a well digger. One 21-centimeter shell had cut a swath about 100 yards long out of the woods on the hill where we dismounted. The trees were twisted from their stumps as if a small cyclone had passed, and one could realize the damage the shells could do merely by the displaced air.

We went on forward into the valley on foot and stopped about two hundred yards in front and to the left of where the German guns were firing. There, although of course we could not see the French position, we could hear and see their shells as they exploded. They were firing short, one of the officers told me, because they thought the Germans were on the forward hill. He could see one of the French aeroplanes directing their fire, but I could not make it out. We stayed there listening to the shells and watching the few movements of German batteries that were taking place. A party of officers hidden by the trees were taking observations and telephoning the results of the German fire and, no doubt, of the French fire in the German trenches. There was no excitement; but for the noise the whole scene reminded me of some kind of construction work, such as building a railroad.

After about an hour, when nothing had happened, one began to realize that even such excitement may become monotonous and be taken as a matter of course. One of the officers told me that the Germans had been there since the beginning of October and that even the

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trenches were in the same position as when they first came.

Certainly the trenches seem permanent enough for spending many Winters. A number of them have now been built of concrete, especially in that swampy part near the Aisne where they strike water about three feet underground. The difficulty is in draining out the water when it rains.

Some of the trenches have two stories, and at the back of many of them are subterranean rest houses built of concrete and connected with the trenches by passages. The rooms are about seven feet high and ten feet square, and above the ground all evidence of the work is concealed by green boughs and shrubbery.

With the noise and the fatigue, the men say it is impossible to sleep naturally, but they become so used to the firing and so weary that they become oblivious of everything even when shells are falling within a dozen yards of them. They stay in the trenches five days and then get five days' rest. In talking to the men one feels the influence on them of a curious sort of fatalism—they have been lucky so far and will come through all right. One sees and feels everywhere the spirit of a great game. The strain of football a thousand times magnified. The joy of winning and boyish pleasure in getting ahead of the other fellows side by side with the stronger passions of hatred and anger and the sight of agony and death.

We talked to some of the little groups of men along the road who were going back to their five days in the trenches. Of course all large units are split up so as not to attract attention. They were all the same, all sure of winning, and all bearded, muddy, and determined. I could not help thinking of American football players at the end of the first half. These men seemed all the same. I have no recollection of a single individual. The "system" and its work has made a type not only of clothes but of face. Their answers to the usual questions were all the same, and one felt in talking to them that their opinions were machine-made. Three points stood out—Germany is right and will win; England is wrong and will knuckle under; we hate England because we are alike in religion, custom, and opinion, and it is the war of kindred races. Everywhere one met the arguments and stories of unfairness and cruelty in fighting that have appeared in the English papers, but with the names reversed. English soldiers had surrendered and then fired; had shot from beneath a Red Cross flag or had killed prisoners. The stories were simple and as hackneyed as most of those current in England.

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Most of them have furniture made from trees "to amuse us and pass the time." Both officers and men use the same type of house, though discipline forbids that the same house be used by both officers and men. The light in these houses is bad and the ventilation not all that it should be, but they are extremely careful about sanitation, and everywhere one smells disinfectants and sees evidence of scrupulous guarding against disease. Oil and candles are scarce and the "pocket electric" that all the men and officers carry does not last long enough for much reading. There are always telephone connections, but in most cases visits are impossible save by way of the underground passages and the trenches.

One officer described the life as entirely normal; another said, in speaking of a Louis XV. couch which had been borrowed from a near-by château and was the pride of a regiment, "Oh! we are cave-dwellers, but we have some of the luxuries of at least the nineteenth century."

The Major Commandant at Rethel showed me a letter from a friend demanding "some easy chairs and a piano for his trench house," and the Major said, "I hear they have music up on the Yser, but the French are too close to us here!"

All that I saw of the German Red Cross leads me to believe that it is adequate and efficient. At Rethel we saw a Red Cross train of thirty-two cars perfectly equipped. The cars are made specially with open corridors, so that stretchers or rubber-wheeled trucks may be rolled from one car to another. The berths are in two tiers, much like an American sleeping car, and each car when full holds twenty-eight men. There is an operating car fully equipped for the most delicate and dangerous cases; in fact, when we saw the train at Rethel it had stopped on its way to Germany for an operation on a man's brain.