

CANTIGNY'S TEST OF YANK FIGHTER WAR'S VITAL POINT

Proof to Allies That Balance of Arms Was in Their Favor

GERMANY'S BEST REPULSED

Two Harrowing Days for 1st Division Write Glorious Chapter in American History

It is possible that in those ancient years when Rome was crumbling before the attacks of the barbarians from beyond the Rhine, or when western Gaul was trembling beneath the armies of Attila, the civilized world of the time may have felt itself as gravely threatened with destruction as did modern civilization during the months of April, May and June, 1918, when once again the Huns, as always through the ages the assailants of the higher types of human development, were making their supreme effort to crush the armies of the Allies upon the soil of France. But never in past eras, certainly, was the stake involved for humanity so vast, so world-embracing, and never did the outcome of a supreme struggle seem to hang more perilously in the balance.

On the one hand was a German army on the Western front, reinforced to nearly twice its former proportions by the collapse of Russia, armed and trained to the last degree of perfection and animated by a hope of success, which, because it was based upon such almost immeasurable strength, amounted to conviction. On the other hand were the armies of France and England, doggedly determined still, but sorely-tryed through nearly four years of ceaseless battle and cruelly battered by the gigantic plunges of the enemy in his spring offensive.

The Unknown Factor

What factor could furnish to one side or the other the balance of weight which might turn the scale? The only factor in view which might accomplish this result was on the side of the Allies, but it was one so new, so untried and so incompletely developed that in those days of early spring, when the German battering ram had driven a wedge between the British and French armies nearly to the coast west of Amiens, and another deep into the vitals of the British front at Kemmel Hill, that its ability to turn the tide of battle could only be hoped for, not certainly relied upon.

This factor was the Army of the United States, which had been in the war theoretically for a year, but which was as yet represented in the zone of the armies by only a few insignificant divisions, and these few trained only

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for the terrible ordeal of modern warfare by experience in quiet, stabilized sectors. It was, of course, necessary that they should eventually be subjected to the supreme test, but, though Americans themselves might feel perfect confidence in what the results of that test would be, it could not have been without some misgivings that the French high command ordered the 1st Division, U.S.A., Major General Robert Lee Bullard, commanding, to occupy the divisional sector fronting Cantigny, in which it took position on April 25, 1918.

The Hope of the Allies

The sector of Cantigny was not merely an important one in the Allied line of battle; it may be said to have been almost supremely important. Lying a few kilometers northwest of Montdidier, which, like Cantigny itself, was in the possession of the Germans, and about 25 kilometers southeast of Amiens, it was at the very apex of the salient which the enemy had gained in their March offensive, when they had come measurably near to severing the British and French armies. Upon the troops holding the line here rested the chief responsibility for the safety of Amiens and the vital railways and other lines of communication, now necessarily crowded close to the coast, by which the British supplied all of their line north of the Somme from Le Havre and other ports of the Channel coast.

Could the Americans be relied upon to hold this vital point as well as the French, who had here stopped the German advance a few weeks before? The Germans sneered at the idea, vowing that the untrained and self-indulgent Americans could never be made into first-class soldiers. The French and the British believed that they could, and, if the event should prove that they could, moreover, when the opportunity came, make head offensively into the German lines opposite to them, it would be to the wearied armies and peoples of the Allied nations like the first flush of daylight after the stormy night. Millions more of American troops, potentially as good as those of the 1st Division, were coming, and if the 1st Division could stand the supreme test, no doubt would remain that eventually the war could be won.

Tit for Tat

After a period of righteous training behind the lines, the 1st Division had first occupied a quiet sector in the region of Toul about the middle of January, where, through three months of almost constant service, they had learned the complicated lessons of defensive warfare, which had been brought to such a high state of perfection during three and a half years of war. It was from this sector that they were transferred to Cantigny, where, from their arrival on April 25, they experienced an intensity of defensive warfare vastly greater than that which had prevailed in their former positions.

The Germans, constantly threatening to resume their push toward Amiens and the coast, harassed the American lines night and day with artillery fire of all calibers, while trench raiding was frequent and formidable. The American raiding, however, was quite as spirited as the German, and patrols had soon secured information showing that the enemy's lines opposite the 1st Division were held by the 271st and 272nd regiments of German infantry, whose companies had an average strength of

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160 men; better troops and larger companies than the average in the German army at the time.

Cantigny's Strategical Importance

Difficult though the American position was to hold, it soon became evident that merely holding it would not suffice. The village of Cantigny, strongly organized and defended by the enemy, was on rising ground, affording admirable observation points overlooking the American lines and rear areas toward Amiens and Breteuil, and, moreover, presenting an excellent jumping-off place for a further great assault if the Germans should determine to resume their advance toward the coast. To safeguard the position and to place the line favorably for an Allied counter-offensive, if the chance for one should come, it was necessary that Cantigny should be taken and held. Preparations for the operation were begun at once.

The troops detailed to make the attack were the 28th Infantry, Colonel Ely; one battalion of the 26th Infantry, Major Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., for support, and detachments of French tanks and flame throwers. A section of terrain behind the American lines very similar in natural features to that occupied by Cantigny and its defenses was selected for maneuvering, and trenches in replica of the German ones were dug upon it. Sand tables showing the topography, woods, lines of change of the barrage, objectives, strong points, and all houses in Cantigny which might be expected to be organized as machine gun nests were prepared and minutely studied. Exact and detailed orders were prepared by the staff and the Artillery arranged accurate time tables for the preliminary bombardment and the rolling barrage.

Three Days of Rehearsal

For three successive days the troops which were to participate in the assault rehearsed it in detail upon the selected terrain, until every officer and man knew perfectly the part which he was to perform, the route by which he was to advance, and the objective which he was to reach. This preliminary training being completed, every company commander, together with one other company officer and two non-commissioned officers, made a daylight reconnaissance to study the sector and select objects upon which to march when the assault should go off.

At length, after every conceivable preparation had been made and every precaution taken to insure success came the momentous night of May 27-28. Probably the troops did not yet know it, but on that very morning had occurred an event which was to give to their own comparatively small undertaking even greater moral significance than it would otherwise have possessed.

That morning the Germans had gone over the top along the Chemin des Dames in the last of their successful great offensives; an offensive so successful at the beginning that it was perhaps more disquieting than any of those which had preceded it, carrying the enemy's lines down to the Marne at Château-Thierry and seeming for a time to threaten Paris with imminent attack. In the next day's news to a dismayed world, telling of the armies of the German Crown Prince striding southward across the Vesle, the electrifying success of the 1st American Division at Cantigny was the only bright spot; but it was a spot of exceeding brightness.

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Zero hour was set for 5:30 a.m., May 28. The designated Infantry units entrusted for the front lines at 12:30 a.m. and at 3 a.m. they were in position in their jumping-off trenches. Twelve French tanks and the French flame throwers were in position, the squadron of French airplanes detailed to make observations was ready to perform its part of the complicated task, and a detachment of United States Engineers was on hand for pioneer work. About 250 pieces of artillery, American and French, ranging in caliber from 75mm. to 280mm., stood prepared to open the bombardment at the appointed second.

Each Infantryman carried a shelter half, his rifle with 220 rounds of ammunition, 2 hand grenades, 1 rifle grenade, 1 Bengal flare, 4 sand bags, 2 days' rations, 2 canteens of water and either a pick or shovel.

At 4:57 a.m. every unit was in position and every arrangement completed. The night was calm and starlit, admirably suited to the work in hand. Promptly at zero hour, 5:30 a.m., the Artillery bombardment began with a roar and the hail of missiles crashed down upon Cantigny and its stone walls began to crumble and fly into splinters.

The terrific fire paralyzed the Germans and when, at 6:30 a.m., the bombardment was suddenly pulled back to the initial line of the barrage and the Infantry went over, advancing at the rate of 100 meters every two minutes and following the barrage at a distance of 50 meters, the enemy was so bewildered that he could not offer effective resistance. Mastered by the bayonets of the American Infantry and terrified by the tanks and flame throwers, the Germans surrendered in clusters, those who attempted to fight being shot down or captured as the rush of assaulting troops mopped up the town and its covering trenches. In an incredibly short time the objective line beyond Cantigny had been reached, with remarkably few losses.

But now came the far more difficult task of consolidating and holding the captured positions. The German counter artillery fire had come down promptly, and it was withering. It was necessary promptly to make the new line secure against the counter attack which was certain to be launched very shortly.

Consolidating the Positions

First, a line of shell holes was consolidated and, with the help of the Engineers, connected with hasty, shallow trenches, capable of being defended mainly with automatic rifles. Under a galling artillery barrage and a constant hail of machine gun and rifle fire, the men then wired these positions in front, while the third wave of the assault, close behind, was busy, under quite as difficult conditions, in consolidating three strong points immediately behind the front line; one in the woods 200 meters east of the smoking ruins of Cantigny one in the woods to the northeast of it, and one in the cemetery north of the town. Each strong point was garrisoned by one platoon of Infantry provided with automatic rifles.

Under cover of a vigorous machine gun barrage in which one captured German machine gun was participating, the Americans awaited the German reaction. For two hours after the capture of Cantigny the enemy's artillery fire continued with unabated intensity, in spite of the powerful response which the American and French guns were making to it. Telephone wires all along the American front were constantly cut, and it was during this period that one young American sergeant earned from the Germans the nickname of "the

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black snake of Cantigny" because of his success in wriggling over the top to repair cut wires.

Though they had lost their front line in the overwhelming rush of the American attack, the Germans were confident of their ability to retake it. Indeed, one German captain who had been taken and turned over to an American officer, upon finding himself held prisoner for a time in the front line, had the assurance to remark:

The First Counter Attack

"If you expect to keep me much longer, you had better send me to the rear; my men will retake this place within two hours."

True to expectations, just two hours after the capture of the town, the enemy's counter-attack was seen coming over from his reserve trenches in Lalval Woods, protected by a barrage whose accuracy was carefully checked by experienced German aviators flying overhead. The attack fell upon the 2nd and 3rd battalions of the 28th Infantry. But, gallantly though they advanced, the enemy made the error of following the barrage at a distance of about 200 meters instead of 50 meters. The artillery fire passed over the American front line and gave the Infantry a chance to get into action before the assaulting line was upon them. Waiting until the latter was within 100 yards, the Americans opened fire with one burst of flame, and in a moment the Germans were fleeing toward Framcourt Wood, leaving upon the ground not less than 500 killed and wounded.

But, though the attack was thus decisively repulsed, it was only the first of six successive counter-attacks which were launched within the next 48 hours. As each was repulsed, the enemy became more exasperated, more desperate in his efforts to retake the lost positions.

Repulsing Germany's Best

It was not only that they were of value to him in themselves; the accumulating evidence of the dash and doggedness of the American troops as they continued to maintain themselves triumphantly against the utmost efforts that their adversaries could make was giving the lie so plainly to the German thesis that the American troops were no good and never could be made good; that it was impossible for the American effort ever to become a decisive factor in the war, that the enemy dared not let them retain their advantage. If they did retain it, the news was sure to leak out to the German army and people and to strike a chill of foreboding to their hearts as they thought of the millions of other equally sturdy Americans who were on their way to France, in fact or potentially.

So, for two harrowing days the enemy continued to smother Cantigny in shell fire and gas and to hurl the best troops he could gather upon the stubborn American line. But, from colonels to privates, the men who had come 3,500 miles across the sea to fight for human freedom and their own outraged rights upon a foreign soil stood firmly to their task, and it was here that such men as Lieut.-Col. Maxey, who, mortally wounded, continued to direct the movements of his men until he died; Corp. Robert Finnigan, who, also mortally wounded, concealed the fact and encouraged his squad and fired his automatic until exhausted from loss of blood, and Lieut. Clarence Drumm, who

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walked up and down the lines to encourage his men under the terrific fire until he was struck by a shell, gave to their own names the immortality of heroism and to American history fresh examples of the valor of the race to place beside those of Lexington, the Alamo and the Wilderness.

The Lesson of Cantigny

At length, after 48 hours of nightmare, the German attempts relaxed. Convinced by the loss of about 800 men killed, 500 wounded and 255 prisoners captured, and the loss of several pieces of light and heavy caliber artillery, many machine guns and rifles and a great quantity of ammunition and material that no sacrifice would recover their lost positions, and that the moral effect of the situation upon their own troops and people must be discounted by other means, if possible, the Germans settled back into their new lines, which they continued to hold until finally forced from them by the great Allied counter-offensive of mid-July.

Opposite to them, the 1st Division also remained on the ground its arms had won until the night of July 8-9, when it was at last relieved by French troops and went back for a few brief days of rest before going into a sector where it was to win for itself fresh and even greater laurels on the fields of the Marne salient, between Soissons and Château-Thierry.

But at Cantigny it had taught to the world the significant lesson that the American soldier was fully equal to the soldier of any other nation on the field of battle. Who can estimate the extent of the subtle influence which this proof exerted upon the gigantic armies locked in battle along the Western front, heartening the warriors of the Allies, dismaying those of the Central Powers, as they struggled literally for the mastery of the world upon the fields of the Marne and Picardy and Flanders through the weeks of June and July, 1918—perhaps the most momentous weeks in all history?

[This is the first of a series of articles designed to tell the A.E.F., concisely, clearly, dispassionately, and accurately the part it played in bringing about the common victory over the German Empire and its allies. The second article, dealing with the American effort at Château-Thierry, will appear in an early issue of THE STARS AND STRIPES.—EDITOR.]

IN THE GUARDHOUSE

Offending Buck: Say, how about it? Don't I get released pretty soon?

Sergeant of the Guard: The skipper hasn't said anything about it yet.

Offending Buck: Well, Sarge, just slip him the tip that the release of Allied prisoners is one of the terms in the armistice.

AS IT IS WRITTEN

First Casual Company Top: That new man must be a hell of a bad actor.

Second Casual Company Top: Yes, he's only marked "Good" on his service record.

The Stars and Stripes