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Dry Champagne

THE STORY OF THE 36TH. By Capt Ben. F. Chastaine, 142d Infantry. Harlow Publishing Co., Oklahoma City, Okla.



HE 90th rather staked out a claim to the name of the Texas-Oklahoma Division, and made good its claim in every respect. But the 36th was equally Texas and Oklahoma, and has an equal right to the name. It was made up of the National Guard of these two States—of organizations which had already been on duty for months along the border. When war was declared, they were called out again and sent back there for five months more, until the new division was organized at Camp Bowie; and it was not until twelve months later—August, 1918—that they reached the area of Bar-sur-Aube. The 90th Division is the better known of the two—it was given more of a chance and was perhaps a more finished organization. But in its short and lively career in action, the 36th showed unmistakably the fighting quality which Texas and Oklahoma would expect from their men, and with one or two more innings at the bat would have gained an unquestioned place among the American divisions that were known as hard hitters. Even in its one go, it left its mark on the map of the campaign of 1918.

The 36th has a little corner by itself in the general field covered by the A. E. F. It was not brought into either of the American major operations or into any American sector. Off by itself, under French command, it came into line in Champagne—taking over from the Second Division and taking on, so to speak, the second round of the great fight that division had put up at Blanc Mont. This round lasted twenty days, from October 8th to 28th, and thus covered most of the period in the Champagne operation which corresponded to the second phase of the Meuse-Argonne. It consisted, as far as the 36th was concerned, of a sharp attack at the outset, followed by three or four difficult days of holding to the ground gained, then of a rapid pursuit when the Boche retired to the Aisne, and finally of a short and brilliantly successful attack just as the division was to be relieved.

The story of the 36th is interesting (among other ways) as an example of the way inexperienced and unfinished American troops could come up to the scratch under peculiarly difficult circumstances, and hold on and make good in spite of slips and shortcomings and general confusion. These troops came bang into the middle of the hardest fighting, without any quiet sector preliminaries, and without a relatively easy initiation like St. Mihiel. The division staff was newly organized; a large proportion of the officers were newcomers in the outfit, and, except for its Browning guns, the division had little more than odds and ends of equipment such as it could pick up from the French on the way up to the front.

On coming into line, one brigade was sent forward to relieve the Marines; instead, the whole Second Division pulled out and presented its sector to this lone brigade. The maps issued to it did not even indicate the front line. The guides sent up by the Second Division arrived late or not at all, reported to the wrong units and on the way back lost their road and mixed up the whole brigade. (The failings of French



guides are only too familiar, but evidently to misguide is human.) The front line reported by the Marines varied in important respects from the reality. St. Etienne they announced in their hands, and so the barrage for the attack of the 36th next day was laid down beyond it. Attacking, the 36th found all the Boche in the world between them and the village, and what had been reported as their own outpost line became their first objective.

A first attack made under such conditions by green troops naturally resulted in extreme confusion; but confusion or not, the 142d regiment took St. Etienne, held it against a counter attack on an open flank, and then maintained it during three or four lively days as the most advanced point in the French line in this region.

Two weeks later, this same brigade (the 71st), after having been pulled out of line to be sorted out, was sent in for another attack, to drive the enemy out of the loop of the Aisne, east of Attigny. The Boche position was strong, and strongly organized, and two French attacks against it a few days before had been stopped dead with heavy losses. This time the Texcklahomans did the job in style, and showed that they knew how to put two and two together from their first experience. This time there was no mistake about the front line; the troops crept up to the Boche wire and lay there waiting for H hour. This time the barrage fell in the right spot, and the assaulting battalions followed it so closely that they could step over the wire undisturbed by Boche machine guns. Once across, they made short work of it. Moving with perfect precision and absolutely according to schedule, they cleaned up the whole German force in the position; on checking things up afterwards, it appeared that every German not taken prisoner was a casualty on the ground. Although in itself a small affair this attack had a very important effect on the general situation. The 36th had not only cleaned up an ugly corner in the French line, but also, by driving the Boche from his last foothold south of the Aisne, had greatly helped the French toward following up the great American attack east of the Argonne a few days later.

There could be no better demonstration of the way a green American organization could learn the game under fire. The 36th, in its twenty days of the World War, managed even to add a new point to the game by sending telephone messages in Choctaw over wires known to be tapped by the Boche.

"The Story of the 36th" is a straightforward, matter-of-fact narrative, not smoothed over or officialized, but frank and explicit. The author is a newspaperman who served with the division, and his book is a revision of articles which appeared originally in the *Daily Oklahoman*. If the articles were as good as the book, they must have been in a class by themselves. The narrative is careful, thorough and precise; very clear and very good reading. The author has an eye for the lay of the land and a grasp of the general geography of this part of the front that is none too common amongst military writers. Amongst other things, the book gives the impression that the author got his information on the spot—from life—rather than second-hand from records and reports. In every way it is an unusually good story. The book lacks the tables and appendices usually provided in divisional histories, and has only two maps. But these two maps, it is true, are intelligently drawn up, and give pretty much everything needed to make clear the long advance of the 36th from St. Etienne to the Aisne.

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