

The Gobs Were There with Guns

Denied Battle at Sea, They Dropped Tons of Heavy Stuff on the Hun Along the Western Front

By WENDELL W. HANMER

THE soldiers of the sea were there, and they let the world know it. But what does the same world know of the sailors of the land who fought on the western front?

The mind pictures of the Navy's participation in the Great War are the thrilling chase of the submarine, the stealthy dash of hordes of fighting men across an ocean under the cloak of camouflage and the alert patrol of busy coastal stretches.

The war did not have its Trafalgar or its Manila Bay or Santiago. The Hun hid from it all. Battle would not come to the Navy so the Navy went to battle. But even now, nearly a year after the Hun threw his hands high in the air, the average American has little conception of how the Navy went to the battlefields of France and what it did when it got there.

War's finale found the American blue-jacket at the front. The last shot of the American naval railway batteries excavated enough of the yard of the Longuyeur railway junction for the basement of a skyscraper should the French ever care to build one there. It was fired from the greatest mobile land instrument of destruction yet devised, the fourteen-inch railway battery, the success of which the Navy had proved.

Short as was the period of their activity in the struggle, the history of the five fourteen-inch railway batteries is one of brilliant achievement. The design, manufacture and shipment of guns, mounts, carriages, cars, locomotives and other necessary equipment represented a stupendous task which was accomplished in record time.

Plans and drawings were completed by the Naval Gun Factory, January 25, 1918. In less than a month, February 23, arrangements had been made for material and manufacture, and the monster guns were in the making.

As soon as actual work on construction was started, America's sailors of the land were selected, 500 men and thirty officers. Their training was a period the intensity of which they will not forget. Ninety per cent of the men were training station recruits, land sailors, but of a different sort. Their knowledge of naval guns was limited to rifles with which they had drilled at Great Lakes or Norfolk or Bremerton. They knew practically nothing of weapons of large caliber.

The Navy's new dragon of war emitted its first roar on April 30. It was at the Sandy Hook proving grounds. The gun discharged from a safe distance, a wire of considerable length being connected

The reassembling of the first locomotive and car, for the battery embraced not only the gun but its equipment, for transportation to the front, began at St. Nazaire, July 20. On August 11 the first train was ready for the front.

Over more than 350 miles of French railroads it went to Helles-Mouchy. Its six-miles-an-hour speed enabled it to pass many a troop train, though dough-boys gazed with interest from their *huit-cheveaux*, de luxe coaches at the long train of the railway battery, and their interest changed to envy when they saw the comfortable berthing cars with their uppers and lowers.

"How far do it shoot?" one dusky infantryman asked another of his outfit.

"Man, it shoots a thousand miles and then throws rocks at yuh," his sophisticated brother-in-arms replied.

The French knew of its coming. News had traveled faster than six miles an hour. Cheering throngs greeted the bluejackets at every station as Battery 1 sped on to war. Flowers were showered upon them. Old salts wore blossoms in improvised button-holes in their greasy dungarees, and so did young salts, or "boots," as the Navy calls its recruits.

The French found a new awe and a new joy sweeping them when it was discovered that the wreaths they had made to bedeck the guns were not big enough to encircle the gigantic muzzles

BUT with the arrival of Battery 1 at Helles-Mouchy, August 23, and Battery 2 a day later, the Navy found on land just what it had found at sea. The Hun ran from the answer to his own challenge. The two batteries had come to fire upon the long-range gun which had startled the world with the shells it had dropped on Paris. Before they could get into position the Germans had moved their prize.

Parisians still wonder what caused the cessation of the shower of shells it received at such a tremendous range. The firing stopped as suddenly and as mysteriously as it started. They have the naval guns to thank, although those guns did not fire a shot at the cause of the disturbance. Big Bertha beat it before they had a chance.

When he ran he left Batteries 1 and 2 with nothing in particular at which to throw 1,400-pound projectiles. With



Tin helmets weren't made to wear with the blue but when the Navy takes to land they fit in very well.

to the firing circuit, but the precaution was unnecessary. The sixty-foot weapon threw forth its 1,400-pound projectile, propelled by 484 pounds of smokeless powder, recoiled the prescribed forty-four inches like a crouching animal, and then returned to battery gracefully and safely.

The test was a success that gave navy officials the thrill that is born of accomplishment.

The gun came apart in far less time than it was put together and soon was on its way, with four more, across the ocean in quest of more vital targets.

-the second of two pages-

no immediate mission to perform Battery 1 was to the French proving ground to give demonstrations for French students of artillery.

Battery 2 went on another search for battle. At Rethondes, in the forest of Compeigne, it took another stand, to fire upon the ammunition dump at Tergnier. Again the thrill of action evaded the Navy. Only one shot had been fired when Tergnier fell.

But action did not evade for long. Battery 1 moved to Soissons and took a position near St. Christophe Cemetery on September 11. Battery 2 moved to Fontenoy-Ambley. And they were joined by the other three batteries, which arrived at the artillery base at Haussimont, Marne, on September 26.

When the Germans started their retreat from Laon, September 28, the speed at which Hun legs scurried over the terrain was increased by the frequency with which the fourteen-inch guns dropped enormous and amazingly destructive shells on objectives near the town. About 200 shots were fired by the big guns before the German retreat left the targets in the hands of the French Tenth Army.

It was real action, too. The Germans found the range of Battery 1 on October 5 and opened a spongy retaliatory fire. A shell burst directly over the big gun with no casualties. Shells fell on both sides of the train, but only one direct hit was scored. It sent a bucketful of "scrub and wash" clothes scattering over the landscape. The casualty list contained nothing closer to humanity than navy underwear.

THERE was excitement of another sort, too. There were many French and American nurses at a hospital at Ville-Cotterets, near by. Can you imagine artillerymen in France surrounded by so many girls that they were forced to put a rope fence around the fourteen-inch gun of Battery 1! And you can't tell the members of that crew the nurses gathered there only to express gratitude for the retaliation for the bombing of their hospital, although that's what the

official report says.

Another move sent Battery 2 to Flavy-le-Martel, near St. Quentin, and it gave Mortiers shelling from October 11 through October 13. Batteries 3, 4 and 5 chugged away to Thierville, on the outskirts of Verdun, to fire upon Longuyon and other points of strategic importance. But soon Battery 4 was moved to Charny, where it was joined by Battery 2.

From the forest of Velaine Battery 1 began firing on Bendorf, November 6. Three days later Battery 2 moved up to a point twenty miles east and was given Saarburg as an objective. The two points were minor objectives on the path to Metz, and it is evident that the huge guns would have taken an important part in the big drive of November 14, but again the Hun ran—this time holding aloft a white flag of surrender. The guns were blazing away at the finish. J. A. Koffa, shipfitter, second class, fired the last shot at 10:57.30 the morning of November 11.

The operations in which the five batteries engaged were not many. They fired only 782 shells, Battery 3 leading with 236 and Battery 5 trailing with 112. They were fired on only twenty-five different days. But their fire was effective. Examination of the targets proved it, and German prisoners admitted it. Their ranges of fire at the front were from 30,000 to 40,000 yards.

The batteries suffered only five casualties—one dead, four wounded, all of Battery 4.

They fired only from prepared positions, although fire from the trucks on which they were transported was possible.

LIFE was not easy for the sailors of the land. They were on the go from the moment they landed in France. There was a demand for them everywhere. They changed positions often. When they changed they dug their own gun-pits and prepared their own foundations and laid their own track. They had no assistance.

They were men from everywhere that life walks. Their types were as diverse as their names and addresses. Every trade, every profession was there. Expert engineers and firemen operated the locomotives, skilled electricians cared for the electric firing

Parisians have the naval guns to thank for the cessation of long-range fire on their city. "Big Bertha" beat it when they arrived.



circuits of the guns and for the many electrical appliances in the battery trains. Even an artist was found among the crews who was able to turn his hand to that mechanical form of artistic creation, lettering names on the sides of the train units.

Each battery train consisted of a locomotive, gun car, construction car, construction car with cranes, sand and log car, fuel car, battery kitchen car, two ammunition cars, three berthing cars, one battery headquarters car, battery headquarters kitchen car, and workshop car.

The complement of each battery train embraced a commanding officer, construction officer, orientation officer, medical officer, chief turret captain, two gunner's mates, first class; gunner's mate, second class; two machinist's mates, second class; boatswain's mate, first class; two coxswains; electrician, first class; electrician, second class; chief machinist's mate; eight ship fitters, first class; eight ship fitters, second class; eight carpenter's mates, first class; twenty-three seamen; ship's cook, first class, baker, first class; ship's cook, second class, and four ship's cooks, fourth class.

It wasn't the first time the sea fighter had become land fighter. In the Mexican War General Winfield Scott had the assistance of six naval guns, manned by navy crews in the siege of Vera Cruz. In the Boer War British naval guns, operated by navy crews, were used at Ladysmith, Colenso and Spion Kop. Naval guns were taken far into the interior of China and effectively operated by navy crews against the Boxers during their little rebellion. So the American seaman ashore with his batteries was not like a fish out of water. The sailor is a peculiarly adaptable person. His life afloat embraces many phases of life ashore. He had his land legs every minute, and his shooting eye all the time he served the guns on the western front. Numerically he was a minor factor. In the great sea of olive drab he was only a speck of navy blue. What he lacked in numbers, however, he quite largely equalized by his armament. His sixty-foot weapon and its 1,400-pound projectile aided him materially in becoming an important element in the fighting that finally satisfied the Hun.



The shell craters made by the naval guns might have served for excavations for skyscrapers.