

SCRIBNER'S

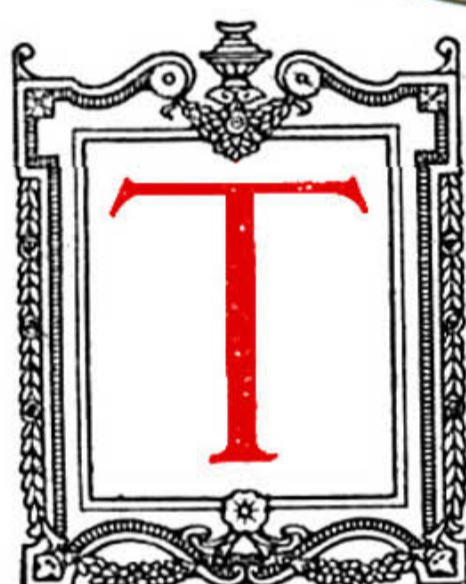
January, 1919: p. 94

FIGHTING IN FRANCE WITH THE MARINES

BY

LIEUTENANT NEWTON JENKINS

Infantry, U. S. A.



TRUE to their tradition of ever being the first to fight, the Marines made up, in part, the first fighting unit of the A. E. F. to reach foreign shores. Doing various duties from the ports forward, along the lines of communication, it was not long after their arrival in France before they found themselves called upon to go into the line.

Having finished a course of training in an American Corps School in France, I, along with a few other officers, was sent to serve with the French army in the front-line trenches. When the big offensive started on the morning of March 21, 1918, I was in sight of the cathedral at Rheims on the right and Fort St.-Thierry behind, with the Germans but sixty metres in front.

After the initial successes of the big push, we were hustled out of the line and despatched back for assignment to American units that were pressing across France to take their places in the line against the Teutons. It was my fortune to be assigned to the Marines and my privilege to go with them into the front line for their first hitch. It was in the evening when I reached my company headquarters. The company commander, glad-eyed, greeted me warmly, adding that I had come just in time to leave with them for the line, and that I should be in charge of the third platoon.

We had done a turn or two in the line, together with corresponding shifts in rest-camps. It then fell to our lot to take over a sector due east of the memorable city of ——. The afternoon of the day before the relief was to take place, I went up to reconnoitre my platoon sector. It left me depressed, for it was a miserable position. It was under heavy intermittent German artillery-fire. My sector was to be on the brow of a hill that was shelled by the enemy every day.

OldMagazineArticles.com

In France with the Marines

The little dugout I was to occupy seemed to be a favorite spot for the shells to light. Three shells that week had been direct hits, the officer in charge told me. The nose of a six-inch shell that had fallen on the roof an hour before, tearing away all the earth covering, had tumbled down into the door of the dugout. I asked the officer to see that some earth was thrown back on top of the dugout before we took over the position.

The night of the relief found us moving into the trenches in good order. The relief took place promptly and without incident. Toward morning I called my orderly to make the three-o'clock run to company headquarters. He had barely returned when a frightful bombardment opened up. Shells began falling at once all around us. I never heard such crashing, and all so close. Each shell seemed bound to be the last one. The dugout was only a surface one, with some five feet of soft earth thrown over the top. It was well timbered, however. The concussion of the near ones snuffed out the candle-light. It kept us busy lighting the candle. They soon were striking so fast that it was useless to attempt to keep it lighted. I feared they were mixing gas with the high explosives. The sentry gave the gas-alert warning once. After each close shell I asked Wade, the orderly, if he could smell gas. Each time he said he could not, and appeared to be but little alarmed. We expected the fury to cease at the end of half an hour, but there was no let up. Time after time they landed so close that dirt was alternately thrown upon us and away from us. It would seem that the little dugout could not stand another shock. The timbers would groan under the concussion of each explosion. The projectiles, falling on top of the dugout, jarred the supports as a heavy mallet does when driving a crooked stake. Instead of being crushed in, the timbers resisted stubbornly. Part of the door had been blown in, and I feared pieces of

In France with the Marines

- the 1905 Eagle, Globe and Anchor cap device worn on their helmets

shrapnel would shower us through the door. Shortly one smashed right into the doorway, closing it up with earth. I asked Wade if there was gas. He thought there was; so did I. The fumes of the burnt powder filled the dugout. We slipped into our masks, and I tried to get outside to the men's dugout to direct them into their masks. But the door was broken and jammed, with the earth piled over it. I failed to get out. We both pressed against the door and forced an opening. The orderly dashed out in my place and gave the men the order. The bombardment lasted fifty-five minutes. Seven times the little old shelter was struck, and yet neither of us was hurt within it. The instant the barrage lifted we all were out at our fighting stations. But the raid was over. They had put down the barrage upon us while they raided two other platoons. Runners were despatched in every direction on their various errands. Word came in at once that we had suffered some casualties.

The land at this point consisted of a series of tongues of higher ground reaching out into a lowland with wide coulées between. Our company held one of these tongues and the French held the tongue next to us on the left. Instead of the front-line trench crossing the coulées, a gabion was generally built up across, from one stretch of high ground to another. Automatic rifles were trained upon this area from the combat groups on either side. But this particular coulée was at a vulnerable place, and the trench curved back around it, keeping on the fringe of the higher ground. This coulée, therefore, afforded a place into which the Germans could advance between the two tongues and strike half-way back on the side of the tongue. The plan of attack that night was to strike at the side of the tongue. Here the raiders would divide into two parties: one party was to move into the middle, where two dugouts were located, and then down the centre line to the tip of the tongue. The other party was to course around the edge to join the first party at the tip of the tongue. This latter party was to kill all the sentries posted around the fringe of the tongue.

This raid had been carefully and methodically planned. The enemy front line at this point was half a kilometre away. Our own front line turned around

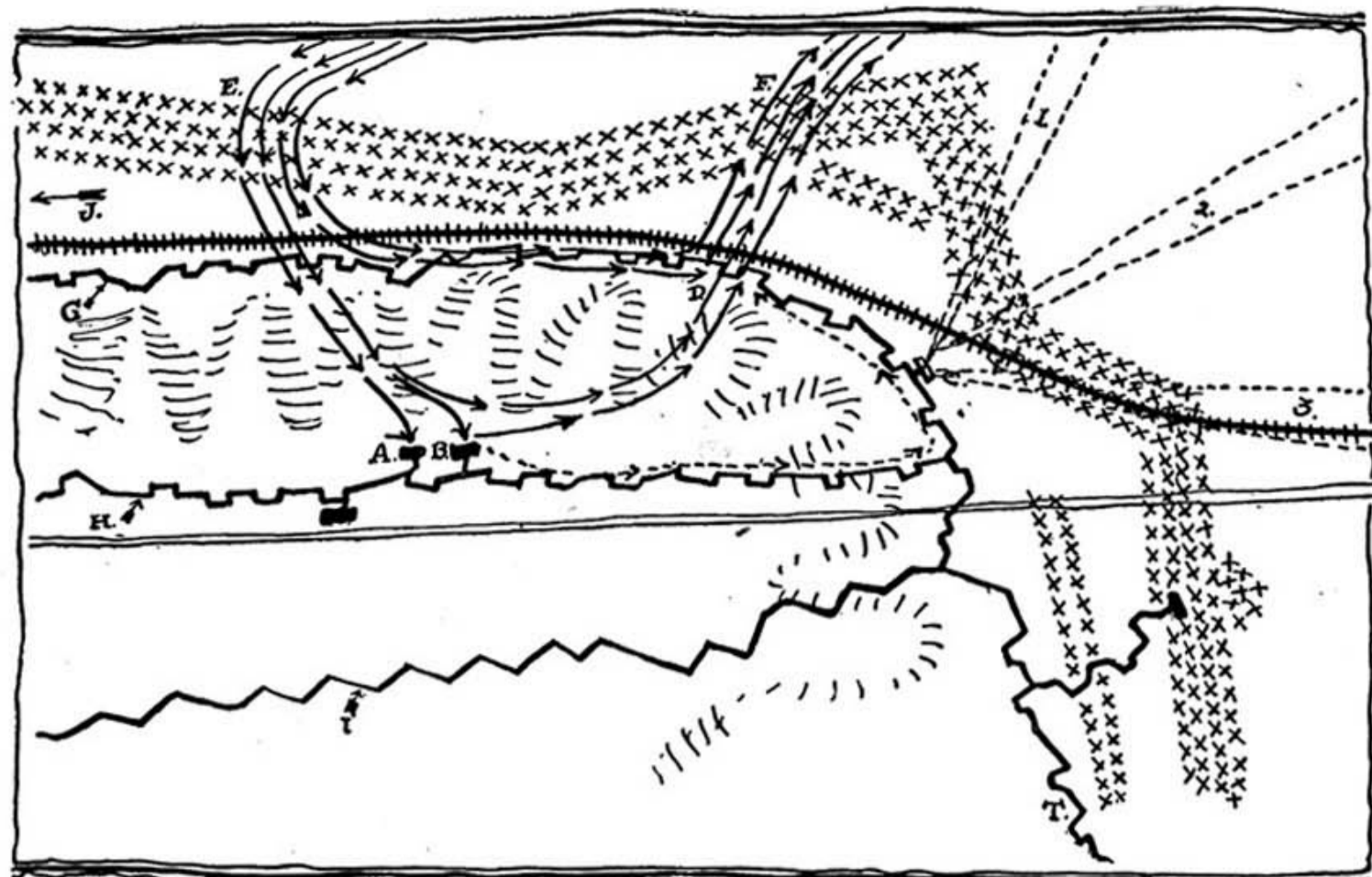
In France with the Marines

the hill at a right angle. The plan of attack was to cut off the corner and take as many of our men prisoners as possible, including those in two dugouts, that were to be raided and destroyed. The entire raiding-party was to come through the wire at *E*. One group was to follow the Balzac trench to *D*, where the wire was to be blown up, affording a passageway out. The other group, after destroying the dugouts at *A* and *B*, was to pass through the Tunis and Rozelle trenches, following the course indicated by the dotted arrows, taking a dozen sentries prisoner en route.

The raiders, about one hundred strong, crossed No Man's Land under the cover of darkness. With great stealth they approached our wire. They cut through the wire, with secrecy and skill, at a point indicated at *E*. One party of hand-bombers was detailed to mop up the Balzac trench. Another party, under two German lieutenants, had the dugouts *A* and *B* as objectives. Both parties were to go out through the wire at *F*, sweeping all the sentries before them as prisoners. If these two parties should succeed in their respective missions, the raid would be successful. It is to be presumed that careful reconnoissance of the position had been made by the enemy. He discovered that a relief was to take place that night, making it, therefore, a favorable time to raid. [Diagram, page 96.]

The first thing confronting the enemy was to get across No Man's Land undiscovered. Otherwise, the raiders would have been cut up by our artillery and machine-gun fire. They had succeeded in this. The next difficulty was to cut through the barbed wire without being detected. This was a long, tedious job, delicately dangerous. Our machine guns swept that hillside from emplacements stationed in the direction indicated by the arrow at *J*. If these guns had opened rapid fire, the Germans would have been riddled to pieces. But the raiders had succeeded in getting through the wire unheard. From all outward appearances, the raid would have been successful right from that point. Had it been a practice manoeuvre, the umpires would have given the raiders the victory. To have allowed them even to come into the position through all the obstacles would have de-





- A. Dugout.
 - B. Dugout.
 - C. Automatic-rifle emplacement.
 - D. Point of exit.
 - E. Point of entry.
 - F. Point of exit in wire.
 - G. Balzac trench.
 - H. Tunis trench.
 - I. Communication-trench.
 - J. Points to machine-gun post.
 - T. Rozelle trench.
- 1, 2, 3 are fields of fire of automatic rifle.

cided the contest. Then, in addition to all this, other circumstances piled up to make the case overwhelming in favor of the enemy. We scrambled for flares to light up the ground. We made haste to send up rockets and signals to summon machine-gun support and to bring our artillery into action. If we could have brought these powerful weapons into play at once, we could still have cut many of the raiders up, who had not yet come through the wire, and the artillery would have cleared No Man's Land, directly in front of our position. The big guns would have also produced a tremendous moral effect, both upon our own men and especially upon the enemy, and would probably have killed many of the latter on their way home.

It was our first night in that position. It was the first night the platoon commander of one of the platoons attacked had ever been in any front line. He had just come back to us from the hospital and had never been in the trenches before. There was not a flare to be found. We looked for artillery signal-rockets and found one. It was sent up but was not seen by the artillery observers. We were in the dark and without support from behind. The enemy had got into the trenches. The Germans had superior numbers. The Americans were strangers to the position. They were un-schooled in this new war. What a perfect setting for a complete German victory!

Let us see what happened. The Balzac trench was not occupied, as the Germans calculated. Their mopping-up party started down through it, throwing dozens of their potato-masher grenades. But there was nobody in the trench to kill. An automatic-rifle team was stationed at C, with a field of fire covering the three directions indicated. When he heard all the commotion in the Balzac trench, the gunner moved his rifle so as to fire into that trench to meet the advancing Germans. He kept the stream of fire on them as he would a hose. They could not face the music. The leader of the party had a hundred holes in him. That party did not reach its objective.

The other party, led by the two lieutenants, had a desperate bit of business to get done. Each lieutenant carried a high-

In France with the Marines

explosive infernal machine, made by arranging twenty sticks of powerful explosive, like dynamite, into a bundle wrapped securely in burlap. Inserted in the charge was a detonator with fuse attached. The lieutenants, surrounded by their men, were to crush their way to the tops of the dugouts. With wires fastened to the bundles, they were to hang them from above, down into the dugouts, and set them off. It was a piece of high-class stuff and required an officer to carry it out. It is only by the use of some such powerful explosive that a dugout can be destroyed and everybody killed. A grenade will not do it. It will not destroy the dugout, and some of the occupants may survive. The dugouts were not full of men, as the enemy anticipated. There was one man in one of them. The others were all out in the *mêlée* that was now growing desperate. That one man was getting ready as fast as he could to get out. The German first lieutenant stood on the top of the dugout. He was peeling off his silk gloves, ready to dangle that frightful piece of mechanism in front of the door of the dugout into the hands of the German corporal, who was at his appointed place to carry it inside. The American inside saw the German in the doorway. With a forty-five he scored a perfect hit. A hole the size of a quarter was put into the front of the helmet and a similar one behind. Some one from somewhere saw the two lieutenants. There was one lying on top of each dugout. This ended the party. It was time to go. There was a mad, wild rush back through the wire, where it was cut and where it was not cut. They ran off without their gas-masks, rifles, grenade-sacks, pistols, knives, and shields, leaving them strewn around in our trenches.

The barrage had been put down all around the position attacked. There was no artillery preparation to announce to the attacked that a raid was about to take place. The artillery was used solely to keep reinforcements from reaching the units being raided, either from the rear or the flanks. The raid was being managed entirely for the enemy by the lieutenant in charge. Instead of being controlled by the company or battalion commander back in their lines, the raiders themselves governed the action of the artillery and machine guns. Instead of a zero hour, allowing the raiders a given number of

In France with the Marines



minutes to get through the wire, and so forth, there was a more flexible scheme adopted. The raiding-party was to take all the time it needed to get through. Once it was through and ready to proceed, a signal was given the waiting artillery to put down a barrage. This barrage was to continue while the raiders were in the trenches and to cover their return. It is obvious that such a plan is preferable, under certain circumstances, to a raid preceded by artillery under the cover of which the raiders would advance. The other side could put down a barrage immediately in front of its trenches before the attackers could get into them. This is especially true where the opposing lines are a considerable distance apart. Another advantage of a raid of this kind is that the artillery of the side attacked is apt to be responding with a barrage in front of its infantry front line, which the returning raiders can see and therefore avoid. The shells already falling will mark the place where the barrage is being put down, and the returning attackers can go around the area.

For the first few minutes all was bewilderment for the Americans. Many of them were not sure what was happening. There was some doubt whether the approaching forms were Germans or not. The French were on one flank. Other Americans were on the other flank. It was the first night in the sector, and nobody knew the exact position of our other units. The night was black. One very young soldier, who happened to be near his officer, sidled in close and said: "Them's Huns, Mr. Conroy, them's Huns." With these words he forgot his immaturity.

A gunnery sergeant in command of a half-platoon that was just outside of the zone attacked started through the belt of fire to the assistance of his platoon commander and was killed by a direct hit from one of the enemy shells. Corporal — and five men went through the shower of shells from behind, all the way up to the attack, to see if they could help. None of these was injured. One man in the line was killed by a grenade. A dozen others were slightly wounded. Our aeroplane observer said the Germans were carrying back their dead and wounded throughout all of the next day.

The Germans are effective, machine-like fighters. They can dash over in mass with all their devices and weapons, put down a fierce pommelling upon those attacked, and rush back again. The French are adroit fighters; keen to sense



the designs of the enemy and able to decide quickly and correctly whether to stand fast or withdraw, and to follow that decision forcefully. The English are stubborn fighters who never admit defeat. The resistance of this fierce attack by the Americans had in it the essence that characterizes the Americans as fighters. Every man as an individual, without command or suggestion, turned in to defend his post and resisted the approach of every force that came to threaten that position. When the smoke of battle clears away, an American is found at his post or near his post. He is chained to his position with links, not of steel, but forged out of courage, conviction, and character.

While others were caring for the injured, an order came down from the major directing me to gather in and take charge of all dead and wounded Germans and all captured equipment. The trenches were full of the night's wreckage. We picked up two hundred of their unexploded grenades. Picking up enemy grenades is a delicate undertaking. We had heard all about the Germans putting instantaneous fuses in hand-grenades for the Allies to experiment with. This was an old joke that we would not bite on. The grenades must be handled gingerly. Perhaps the button which, when plucked, sets off the grenade has been tramped into the mud. To pick up the grenade, failing to notice the button, is all that is needed to set off the grenade in one's hand. We collected the potato-mashers, the egg-grenades, and the gas-bombs. There were rifles and Luger pistols. The latter promised to make popular souvenirs. Helmets, musette-bags, Very pistols, and material of every description were gathered in. Some of the Germans had carried shields and lost them. These were made of pieces of sheet steel hinged together and hung from the shoulders like a baseball catcher's chest-protector. A wounded German lay in the trenches, cared for by a couple of men. His name was Otto. He was a pale, thin-faced, middle-aged man. He was pale, for he was near death. He was thin-faced because he had gone through the ravages of years of war. He could neither give nor withhold any valuable information. An automatic rifle had sprinkled its fearful spray upon both of his legs. One could not gauge anything about the morale of the Germans, their food supply or manpower, from this broken, hurt thing. He had been badly wounded. He was carefully and quickly taken to the first-aid station and treated; but he later died, murmuring: "Kalt, kalt."

In France with the Marines

On the body of the corporal killed in the doorway of the dugout was found a handful of passes for the men of his squad, to go on leave to a certain rest-camp located at a stated place behind the German lines. It was valuable for us to know just where that rest-camp was. But to the men interested the loss of the passes was, no doubt, more important than the loss of the raid. The top of the corporal's head had been blown off into his helmet. We wrapped a towel around his head and pressed on his helmet. The body was then sent back for burial.

There was not a line of information upon the officers. They carried only their names written on little pieces of paper with indelible pencil. We found but one officer at first. He was a second lieutenant. He had fallen on his face on top of the dugout that he sought to destroy. He had been run through from side to side. Some one peeped over the parapet near the entrance to the other dugout. He saw a foot and announced that there was another German up there. We climbed up and found a dead German officer. He was a first lieutenant. There had been just enough mist to keep his face and eyes fresh. In taking the body down from the parapet, I stood it up against the side of the trench. The boots and uniform were close-fitting, and the body stood up perfectly normal. There was not a visible scratch on the body, and on a casual examination it looked like a live German officer taken. The two officers had come through to their objectives but had been killed before carrying out their missions. Neither of the dead officers seemed to be over nineteen, and they looked enough alike to have been twins. They appeared to be of the aristocratic class. They were beautifully dressed and wore black, polished boots. The first lieutenant wore the highest decorations within the gift of his country. There was not a mark on his body that would indicate how he was killed. All the remains were carefully taken back and given decent burial.

In France with the Marines

When we had done nineteen nights in this position, a reconnoissance party came up to look over the trenches preparatory to relieving us. This is always gladsome news. We are always at home to parties that promise us relief. I was down at the end post, pointing out the usual paths of the evening patrols to the lieutenant that was to relieve me, when a runner came down with the news that I had been appointed an instructor to return to the United States. This was indeed gladsome news, and yet it was tinged with sadness by the thought that the brave men around me could not come out with me, but they must remain out yonder.

That night, before going out, I visited each sentry-post and wished Godspeed to every man. I did not then realize that they were within a few days of being pulled out of the line at that point and sent against the onrushing horde of Germans at Château-Thierry. The Germans were stopped. Paris was saved. The turning-point in the war was reached. The Marines made themselves immortal. They galvanized their lives into history at Château-Thierry!



SCRIBNER'S

OldMagazineArticles.com

*All illustrations by Belleau Wood veteran
John W. Thomason (1898 - 1944)*