

FISMES: Where the Line Stiffened



You can't convince a practical Frenchman that war ruins are picturesque. Above is a view across the market place in Fismes taken soon after the town was captured by American troops in August, 1918. Below is a view, taken from a slightly different angle, of the buildings surrounding the market place as they appear today

IT was at the town of Fismes and its suburban neighbor across the Vesle River, Fismette, that the last small bulge in the Allied line where had been the Marne salient, threatening Paris, was straightened out by American troops in the summer of 1918. Practically squeezed out of this salient, which had extended southward in the territory between Soissons and Reims, the Germans, nevertheless, made a determined stand along the north bank of the Vesle and held on with particular tenacity to the town of Fismes on the south-bank.

On the night of July 30th-31st, the 32d Division (Michigan-Wisconsin National Guard troops) relieved the Third Division just east and south of Ciergy for its first tour of duty on an active front. The forward movement of the division was rapid until August 3rd, when it was seen that the Germans had entrenched themselves on the high ground north of the Vesle and still held the town of Fismes. On the afternoon of August 4th the 127th Infantry of the 32d Division moved toward Fismes and on the following day was in the town, which was still occupied by enemy snipers. The 128th Infantry relieved the 127th on August 6th and continued mopping up the town. An effort to cross the Vesle at this point was unsuccessful.

It was clear that an organized attack would be necessary to establish bridge-heads on the north bank of the river, and so the 28th Division was moved

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into line, relieving the 32d, on the night of August 6th-7th. The 112th Infantry and the 109th Machine Gun Battalion of this Pennsylvania National Guard division entered Fismes. On the night of the 6th a pioneer platoon hastily constructed a pontoon bridge over the river, but due to the activity of enemy machine-gunners on the north bank a crossing was impossible. The following evening at seven o'clock the Second and Third Battalions of the 112th, after an intense barrage, made an attack and the Third Battalion succeeded in getting three companies across the river two kilometers to the west of Fismes, at Le Grand Savart. The morning of August 8th found the First and Second Battalions in Fismette, the crossing having been made on the shelled stone bridge and on a new foot bridge. Here the men of the 28th participated in real hand-to-hand fighting, advancing yard by yard through streets swept by enemy machine-gun fire.

The 112th Infantry lost in this engagement 41 killed, 168 wounded, 128 gassed and 59 missing. All but a small part of Fismette was occupied by the 112th, when the regiment was relieved by the 111th during the night of August 9th-10th. When the 112th again moved into the town on August 18th-19th, the enemy troops had again filtered into Fismette. The 28th Division was not relieved from this sector until the night of September 10th. During part of this advance the 42d (Rainbow) Division was on the left of the 28th, French troops occupying the sector on the right.

FISMES and Fismette also stand out vividly in the memories of men of the 77th Division. Through these shell-wrecked towns, companions in ruin to Bazoches some miles to the west, 77th Division men on September 4th began their drive to the Aisne.

The names of these two towns of Fismes and Fismette were particular stumbling blocks to the American soldier without any knowledge of French. Fismes was usually given two full syllables—Fizz-meez—and Fismette suffered an even worse mauling. When you go back, pronounce Fismes as if it were spelled Feem and Fismette as if it were Feemet.