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-By WALLGREN



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CANTIGNY FIRST REAL TEST OF AMERICAN ARMY

Continued from Page 1
160 men; better troops and larger companies than the average in the German army at the time.

Cantigny's Strategic 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 admirably 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 was placed 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 counter-offensives; an offensive so successful at the beginning that it was perhaps more disquieting than any more than they 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 West, the surprising success of the 1st American Division at Cantigny was the only bright spot; but it was a spot of exceeding brightness.

Over the Top

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 French planes 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 240mm, 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, 3 days' ration, 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.

By 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 hastily 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 such 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 north-east 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 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 soon 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 Framocourt 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 en-

couraged his squad and fired his automatic until exhausted from loss of blood, and Lieut. Clarence Drumm, who 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 night-mare, 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

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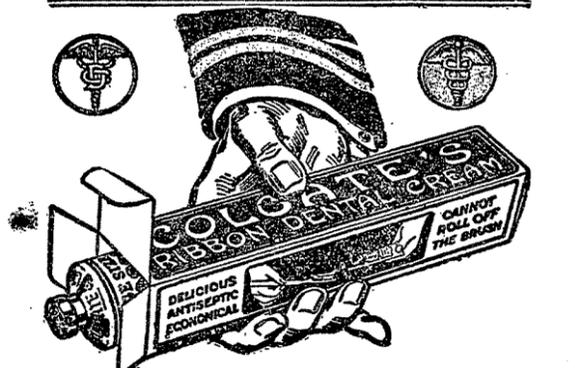
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