

II. OPERATIONS ALONG THE MEUSE

THE “POST OF HONOR” ON THE WESTERN FRONT

WHILE the St. Mihiel operation contained many elements that appeal to the imagination and probably will remain longer in the memory of the participants, and although it was the first great attack of the 1st American Army and was filled with all the eagerness and enthusiasm of the long-hoped-for American offensive, the battle of the Meuse-Argonne is much more important from a strategical standpoint and more interesting from a purely military angle of view.

The battle of St. Mihiel was definitely concluded by September 15, ten days before the opening of the second big offensive. Before that date General Pershing had started moving artillery and corps troops to the area in the rear of the French line between the Meuse River and the western edge of the Argonne Forest.

The American operations were a part of Marshal Foch's plan, which contemplated “no more quiet fronts,” but continual attacking all along the front from the North Sea to Asia Minor. By the last week in September, the Allied counter-offensive, begun on July 18, had succeeded in driving the Germans back to their line of departure on March 21 – the Hindenburg Line – and in retaking the ground lost during the spring and summer. Then, on September 21, General Franchet d'Esperey launched an attack on the Macedonian front which resulted in an armistice with Bulgaria within eight days; while the operations begun by General Allenby in Palestine on September 23 were so successful that Turkey was soon eliminated.

Between the North Sea and Verdun there were several centers of pressure. One was in Flanders between Dixmude and a point southeast of Ypres, where the Belgian army and the British Second Army attacked. Others were the points of attack of the British and French armies against the Hindenburg Line, particularly on September 27, between Gouzeaucourt and the Sensée River, and on September 28 by the British, for the purpose of continuing the attack down to St. Quentin, and by the French from St. Quentin to La Fère.

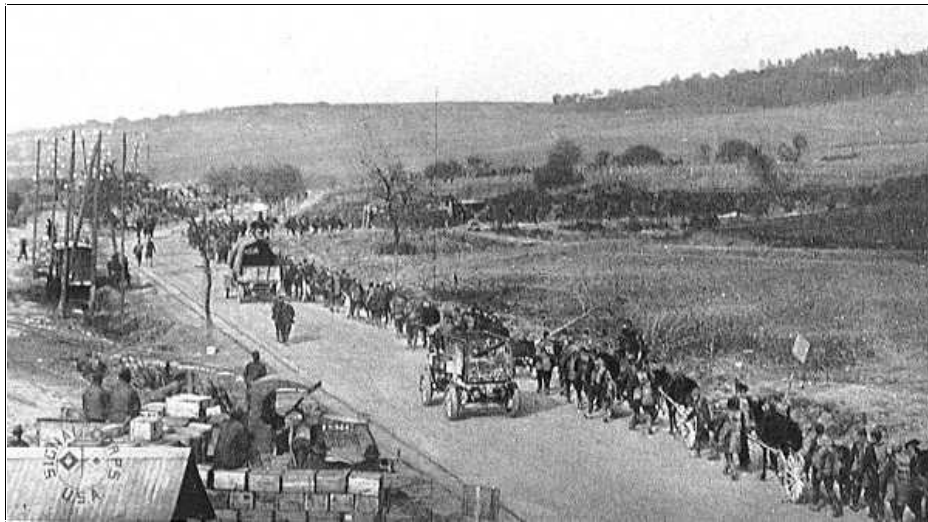
On September 26 the 1st United States Army was to attack between the Meuse and the western edge of the Argonne, and the French Fourth Army was to extend operations in eastern Champagne to the Suippe River.

The 1st United States Army held the “Post of Honor” in that opposite it were the strong German positions which covered the Metz-Longuyon-Mézières-Lille railway, one of the most important lines of communication for supplying the armies in France. This position was also the hinge for the German retirement; for, should this point give way too soon, the gap south of the Ardennes would be closed, and the German armies and materials which had not been withdrawn in time would be lost. One look at the enemy order-of-battle map at this time will show that the Germans appreciated this situation, for there was no greater concentration of troops at any other point of the front except at Cambrai. A total of forty-two German divisions were used against the 1st Army, and among them were such first-class units as the First and Fifth Guards divisions.

The battle of the Meuse-Argonne may be divided into three phases: Big advances were made on the first day, but after that the advance slowed down. The second phase began on October 4, when the army collected itself together, put in fresh troops, and at 5:30 A. M. attacked anew all along the line. No

spectacular result was achieved. From that time on to November 1, individual divisions and corps were allowed to straighten out their lines and advance accordingly as the local situation would permit. During this period, on October 10, General Pershing turned over the immediate command of the 1st Army to Major-General (later Lieutenant-General) Hunter Liggett, who had commanded the 1st Corps in the battle of St. Mihiel. The third and last phase opened on November 1, when the army drove through to a decision.

The part which the 90th Division played on September 26 has been described in the account of the raid on Preny. But the Division did not enter the Meuse-Argonne sector until during the second phase of the battle, and it rendered its greatest service during the third and last phase.



Machine Gun Company, 359th Infantry, going up into the lines in the Argonne sector.

90TH DIVISION IN 3D CORPS RESERVE

AS soon as all units of the Division had arrived in the Blercourt area, the Division was transferred from Army Reserve to 3rd Corps Reserve. This was on October 17. That night the 315th Engineers were marched to the vicinity of the former site of the historic village of Malancourt to build a road under orders of the corps.

The next night the 179th Brigade moved forward to bivouac in the Bois de Cuisy, just west of Malancourt, taking advantage of such protection from aerial observation as the shattered trees and tangled underbrush afforded. On the 19th the 179th Brigade filtered still further forward, the 357th Infantry manning the 3d Corps main line of resistance from Nantillois to Drillancourt, and the 358th Infantry the second line of resistance between Fayel Farm (on the eastern out-skirts of Montfaucon) and Béthincourt. The brigade was thus in a position of readiness either to defend the position in case of a German counterattack, or to relieve the American troops in the front line. This move into position was one that will long be remembered. The positions of the two regiments had been indicated by red and blue lines on a map. But to find these lines on the ground was a different story. Villages, woods, roads – in fact, every conceivable landmark – had been virtually obliterated. The rain continued steadily and

a particularly vicious variety of mud weighted down the feet of the infantrymen and clogged the wheels of the regimental trains. Scattering shell fire was incessant, a direct hit dropping on a rolling kitchen and its tell-tale queue of soldiers lined up to receive their allowance of “slum.” More times than once in the history of the Division enemy planes spotted this line of flashing mess kits, and sent a wireless flash to a waiting battery, which, by means of the code coordinates of the map thus transmitted by electricity, was able to locate and scatter the dinner party very effectually.

This same day headquarters of the Division moved to Cuisy. The desolation of this region defies description. As for the ancient village of Cuisy itself – well, even Fey-en-Haye was a metropolis in comparison. The only possible simile for the town might be a community of prairie-dog holes out on the Llanu Estacado, for the Cuisy of buildings and streets and homes had ceased to exist, and in its place was a scattered collection of dugouts. The underground shelters in this area had one peculiar virtue: they were Boche and all faced the wrong way for American tenancy, so that a direct hit from a shell was sure to find its way down the entrance passage into the dugout itself. To carry the prairie-dog figure of speech still further, if the busy staff officers at Cuisy may be compared to that industrious rodent, further likenesses may be found. It is well known that the prairie dog shares his hole with the rattlesnake. While this Texas reptile is not known in France, the Division staff soon found that they were sharing their bunks with equally unwelcome guests – a German breed of cooties, which had remained behind when their former masters left this region in great haste.

But there is one point on which the comparison broke down: the Great Plain is dry, but all this area into which the Division was now moving was a lake of mud, churned into slush by shell fire and traffic.



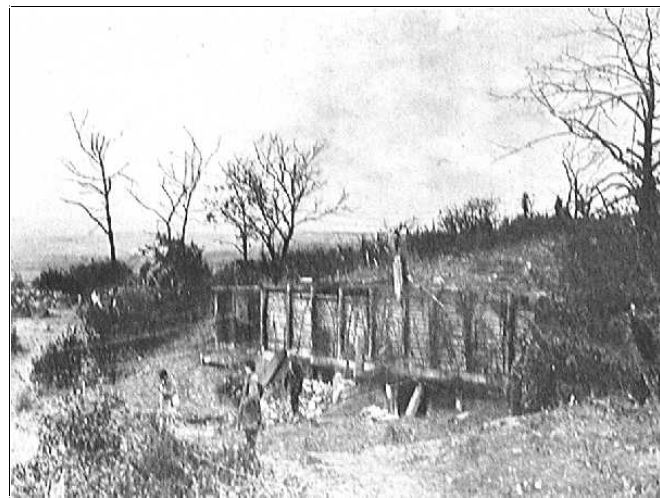
Main street of Blercourt. This town was the headquarters of the 90th Division from October 13 to October 19, when the Division was moving into the Meuse-Argonne sector.



Signal Corps men stringing wires in Malancourt, October, 1918.



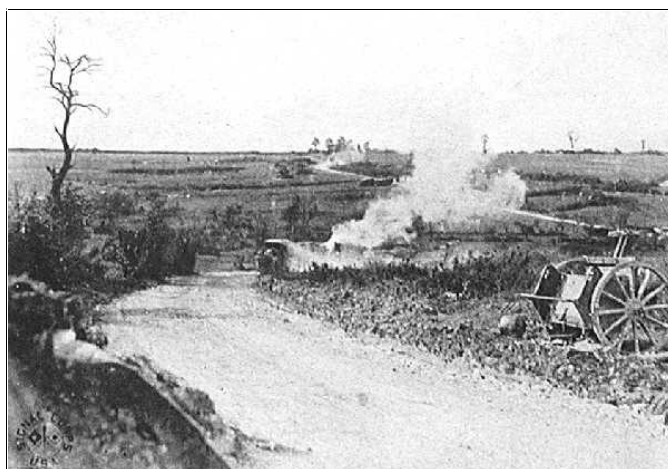
View from hill looking down into the shell-ruined town of Cuisy.



Dugouts at Cuisy occupied by part of Division Headquarters



View looking from Cuisy across the valley toward Septarges. This view shows an American field hospital in the middle of the picture, and a canvas red cross can be seen on the ground to the left of the hospital.



Shells bursting near Cuisy.

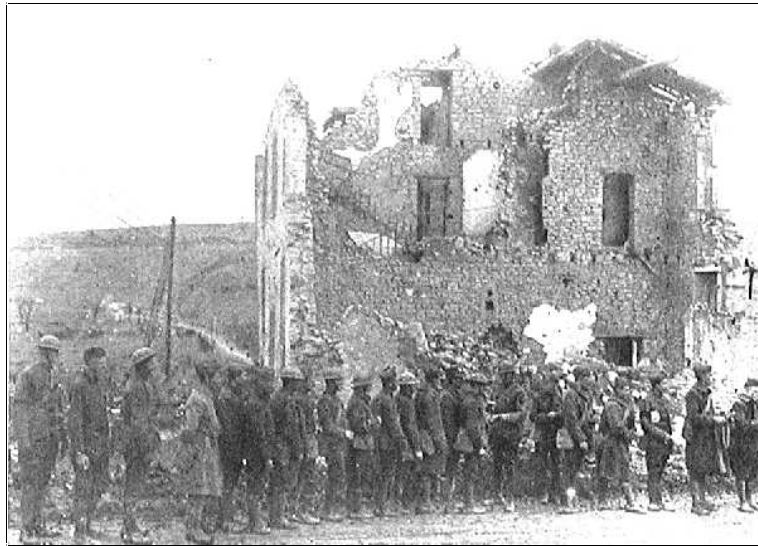
THE HISTORIC SITE OF “LE MORT HOMME”

IN moving to Cuisy it was necessary to pass over the scene of some of the fiercest fighting that took place during the German attempt to take Verdun, beginning on February 21, 1916. Of special interest were Hill 304, on the right of the road from Esnes to Malancourt, and Le Mort Homme, a hill to the right in going from Esnes to Béthincourt. These positions had been the objectives of a fresh attack on April 10, 1916, which was launched with great strength for the purpose of driving out the French batteries which had very cleverly upset the German attacks on the right bank of the Meuse. The Germans succeeded in taking both hills, as well as the height of Forges and the woods of Avocourt. From this vantage-point, the enemy could reach with gun-fire the railway line from Verdun to Ste. Menehould. Not until more than a year later was this situation relieved. After six months' preparation, a counterattack against Avocourt, Hill 304, and Le Mort Homme was launched on August 20, 1917; all of these objectives were taken and passed, and the French line brought back to the point whence the Germans started in 1916.

When the 1st American Army attacked on September 26, 1918, the German line was just in front of Malancourt and Béthincourt. A bird's-eye view of the progress of the American operations

before the 90th Division entered the sector will be of interest.

The 4th Division, on the left of the 3d Corps, passed Cuisy and entered the Bois de Septsarges by 12:40 P. M. of the first day. The 80th Division, on its right, had gone beyond that and even reached the Meuse; while the 33d Division, the extreme right of the 1st Army, cleaned out the region between the right of the 80th Division and the Meuse.



Scene in Cuisy showing Y. M. C. A. Secretary giving chewing-gum to the men on duty.
In the background is the road that leads from Cuisy to Septsarges.

CAPTURE OF MONTFAUCON ON SEPTEMBER 27

MONTFAUCON was in the sector of the 79th Division of the 5th Corps. The town was situated on a hill which rose 342 meters above sea-level; this was thirty meters higher than any other eminence between the Meuse and the Argonne on either the Allied or the German side of the old battle line. From this eminence in a concrete observation post built in a house which later served as the P. C. of the 3d Division, the German Crown Prince is said to have witnessed the Verdun battle.

The town of Montfaucon was located on the axial road leading to the front; it was over this road that all of the traffic of the 90th Division passed, and it was therefore familiar to every driver in the division. This formidable height was taken by the 79th Division, after a spectacular attack, by noon of September 27.

After the deep advance on September 26, the progress of the 1st Army slowed down on the succeeding days. The German command rushed up three of their best divisions. The American infantry was also handicapped on the second day by the lack of artillery, which had not been able to cross No Man's Land, despite the fact that the 4th Engineers had built a complete road from Esnes to Malancourt by using 40,000 sandbags. The problem of supplying the army as it advanced over this desolate area was also a very serious proposition, as the officers and men of the 315th Supply Train, who later hauled food and ammunition over this ground, can readily appreciate.



The town of Montfaucon, situated on the highest point of the region, was one of the best observation posts on the Western front. In the Chateau on the left was an exceedingly valuable telescope used by the Crown Prince during the Verdun operations.

STRUGGLE FOR MADELEINE FARM

AFTER the first days rush, the taking of every patch of woods and the capture of every shattered village meant a bitter struggle. On September 28 fresh regiments of the 79th Division took Nantillois and Bois de Beuge, and pushed up toward Madeleine Farm, which was organized as a part of the Kriemhilde Stellung. Despite a terrific artillery bombardment of the farm and the surrounding woods on the night of September 28-29, the 79th was able to make but a very slight advance, and fell back to the Bois de Beuge.

No further strong effort was made to take Madeleine Farm until the renewal of the attack along the army front on October 4. In the readjustment which preceded this big attack, the 80th Division, after a week's rest, was set opposite the farm. After fighting two days and a night, under cover of darkness the evening of the 5th, the division took the Bois des Ogons. On October 6 and 7 the division fought desperately for the German positions east of the farm, but the attacks were not successful until the 9th. The farm itself was in the sector of the 3d Division, on the left of the 80th Division, and was captured on the 9th.

On October 14 the 1st Army ordered an attack by the 3d Corps to drive through Grand Carré Farm, and by the 5th Corps against Bois d'Andevanne. The 5th Division, which attacked for the 3d Corps, advanced with the 9th Brigade on the right and the 10th Brigade on the left, The 9th Brigade succeeded in reducing Cunel and capturing the Bois de la Pultiere, but the 10th Brigade was badly cut up and demoralized by cross-fire from Bantheville and the valley of the Andon brook in attempting to advance across the open. The 3d Division, in covering the right flank of the 5th, advanced a kilometer in the Bois de Forêt and the Bois de la Pultiere. From October 14 to 20, the 3d and 5th Divisions had difficulty in keeping control of units, due to the dense underbrush and the severity of the artillery and machine gun fire. In some organizations the number of men reported for duty was as small as ten

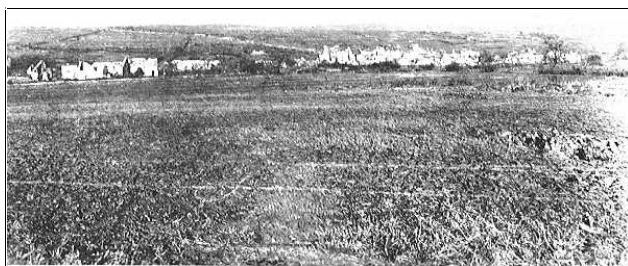
per cent of the strength, and all efforts were devoted to collecting the men and returning them to their organizations.

On October 19 the 1st Army ordered local operations all along the front for the purpose of developing the Freya Stellung, the last organized German defensive position opposite the army's front. Pursuant to these instructions, the 3d Corps again attacked on October 20. The 5th Division gained about 200 meters in the Bois des Rappes, and the 3d Division attacked Bois Clairs Chêne, just east of the Bois des Rappes. The 3d Division was so badly depleted by this time that engineers, kitchen police, and odds and ends from all units of the division were used in the fighting. The little wood was taken, but was lost to a German counterattack. A second advance was ordered by Brigadier-General Preston Brown, commanding the division, and this attack, personally led by Colonel Morrow, of the 7th Infantry, recaptured the wood by 6 P. M. The 5th Division succeeded in cleaning out most of the remainder of the Bois des Rappes on October 21, although there was still some mopping up to be done when the men of the 179th Brigade entered the line that night.

Pursuant to the army order for the 5th Corps to operate against Bois d'Andevarine, the 32d Division attacked on October 14 and succeeded in capturing Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, where the headquarters of the 90th Division were located from October 30 to November 2, and penetrating deeply into the Bois de Bantheville. The 89th Division entered the line here on October 20.



BRIGIDIER-GENERAL JOSEPH P. O'NEIL, U. S. A.
Commanding the 179th Infantry Brigade



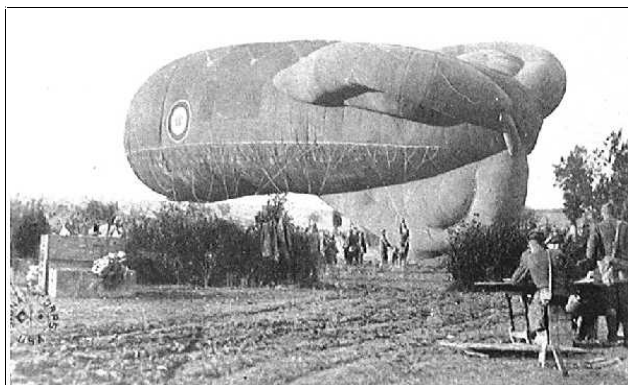
General View looking north, showing part of town of Nantillois



View showing Ferme de la Madeleine, headquarters of the 179th Brigade upon entering the Meuse-Argonne sector.



View looking northeast from Madeleine Farm, showing Bois des Ogons and shell-pitted terrain.



Type of balloon observing for the 90th Division.