

The Campaign Notebook of Sergeant Lefèvre, 1914-1916
Edited by Jules Mazé.
Tours: Maison Alfred Mame & Fils [1916]
Translated by Charles T. Evans
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Translator's Note:

Although the translation is technically completed, I am always willing to reconsider specific translated passages if a reader has a suggestion.

Because of copyright concerns, I have not included any maps as part of this translation, but maps will help you understand the Vauquois terrain, and so you should check those that are on the supporting website: www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Index.html.

Sergeant Lefèvre was a valiant soldier, lost in the heroic mass of millions of French breasts who stood before the enemy, one of the admirable children of France who magnificently and modestly accomplished their duty, unaware that their acts bordered on the sublime, that the glory of the gods paled in contrast to their young glory.

He told me his story while convalescing from his injuries and during some rare and short leaves, aided by his campaign notes, a mud and blood-stained booklet that disappeared with him in the furnace of Verdun.

This story, which is the same as that of so many others--because our heroes live the same life, supporting the same toils, running the same dangers--I have tried to write here simply what Lefèvre told me.

It's, in short, an odyssey, told by himself, as it were, a soldier of the Great War.

Jules Mazé
Paris, July 1916

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THE PROMISED LAND

I: Before the Frontier

On a beautiful morning, in the second half of July 1914, an imposing and serious gendarme gave me an order from the military authorities inviting me to rejoin at Toul, immediately and without delay, the infantry regiment that I had left the preceding year, after finishing my service, for a modest job in Paris.²

That, I have to admit, gave me a bit of a shock.

However, everyone still hoped that war could be avoided, and everyone said, in any case, that if that hope proved to have been false, then the conflict would certainly be a short one.

“Lucky!” My friends said. “You are going to see the country at the expense of the state. It will simply be a promenade, a simple walk in the park.”

When I left the capital, it seemed oppressive there, like the approach of a violent thunderstorm. Everyone living in a sort of anguish
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that was encouraged by many newspapers. At Toul, I fell right into the commotion of war.

It was a strange thing. The contrast made me feel good.

There, in the inflamed atmosphere of the great city, everyone looked to the diplomats who were playing their final card. Here, everyone looked towards the frontier, towards the annexed territory,³ which appeared to everyone as a kind of promised land.

There, it was all about waiting. Here; it was all about action.

I had a lot of trouble reaching the barracks as the narrow streets of the Lorraine village were extraordinarily crowded. Each of the streets had become the bed of a strange river where, pell-mell in the middle of the turbulent crowd, the most diverse vehicles flowed everywhere, from a rickety cart loaded with food for the troops to a luxury automobile in which you could distinguish the silhouette of a general.

When I was finally able to reach the center of the quarter, it seemed to me that all the rivers of the town had deposited their various vehicles and their waves of humans here. Never had I ever seen a similar commotion; never had I ever heard such shouting.

¹(9) refers to the page number in the original printing.

²Toul is located a little west of Nancy in eastern France. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/AlsaceLorraine.pdf>.

³The reference here is to the provinces of Alsace and Lorraine which Germany had annexed from France in 1871.

I stopped, dizzy, flustered, not knowing to where I should direct myself when I received a sharp tap on my shoulder while at the same time a voice that I recognized said:

“Ah! My friend, I’m happy to see you!”

I turned around quickly, very happy to no longer feel isolated in the crowd, and I found myself face-to-face with my friend Bataille, my former corporal now a sergeant.

We warmly embraced, then Bataille, who loves to joke, shouted:

“You know, we’re waiting only for you to depart.”

“What do you mean, to leave!”

“You bet! You think that they sent you here just to cultivate the company’s garden?”

“No, but...”

“Well, my friend, we are the guardians of the frontier. Yes, us. We are the covering force. You, of course, know that. And so, we are going to go cover. It’s simple, and we’ll leave our barracks for those in the rear.”

And so my brave sergeant, not without a bit of comic disdain under the circumstances, said that of the units of soldiers that were

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further from the frontier and so mobilized less rapidly than us. We are supposed to protect the mobilization, and then they would rejoin us a little later.

“Has war already been declared?” I asked emotionally.

“No, not yet, and really I don’t know what’s going on in your Paris, but we all hope that it will be done soon. So, while waiting for the rising of the curtain, we’ll get you some first class lodging.”

“Let’s go! Hurry up and get set up with your equipment, and you know, there is no need for you to beat your brains out about anything else. I’ll put you in my section.⁴ I’ll be your chief, and all that you have to do is rally to my side. I hope that you will bring honor to the company.”

[photo here]⁵

“You there, get moving, and run! It’s not the time to be gossiping with your friends.”

At the moment, the non-commissioned officers (NCOs) did not know where to turn. They rushed around like devils in holy water, harassed by their men who had a thousand things to ask for, caught in passing by the newly-arrived like myself who did not know which man to turn to, made fun of by officers in regard to everything and nothing.

⁴A “section” of approximately ten to twenty soldiers is roughly equivalent to a squad in a U.S. army platoon.

⁵Photos from the original book have not been included in this translation.

At that time, I congratulated myself for being smart enough, in the course of my military service, not to have desired NCO stripes, and, in the middle of the remarkable commotion, it seemed to me best to be just a simple soldier, to only have to follow the herd and to obey.

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The delirious enthusiasm that agitated hearts and fevered heads did little to add to the already natural agitation of the circumstances. However, it did not take me long to see that there was a certain method to the excitement, and that there was a firm hand that channeled everything towards a goal that by all appearances looked incoherent.

In fact, the regiment was ready in no time, and I assure you that I felt proud to belong to this elite unit when we were lined up, before the unfurled flag, as the clear sun of Lorraine shone on the steel of thousands of bayonets.

At that moment, we felt a great surge of heroism, and the salute of the flag was like an act of faith and hope in which we put all of our soul, all of our heart.

In that moving and solemn moment, through which I am glad to have lived, we all swore to die for France.

Many of us had already given our oath, and all those for whom I had the pain to assist at their last moment showed themselves as heroic before death as they had been before the enemy.

It was hot, and the knapsack seemed to me terribly heavy. Where are we going? I didn't know anything, and I didn't really want to know. My neighbors were singing a song while marching, but it was if I hardly heard them.

Pulled suddenly from a sedentary existence and plunged into an agitated and feverish milieu, I felt a bit nervous at the lack of a transition between two states so different.

I thought of my birthplace where my old mother still lived, of the good friends that I had left behind, of my quiet office where the everyday work was light, of the cheerful and gay room that I had arranged with love and from where I could look at the verdure of Meudon.⁶

And all that appeared far away, very far away to me, as if lost in the mists of a dream.

In brief, to use an expression which only lately has entered into use by many others, in military terminology, I had the blues.

That was not surprising, and a number of my comrades who marched along in silence, bent over from the weight of their knapsacks, were probably experiencing the same crisis.

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"Hey, old man, not feeling well?" asked my corporal, a young volunteer, full of fight, who would become one of my best friends.

"Ah, all's well."

⁶A community known for its scenic views and woods, located in the southwestern suburbs of Paris.

“It doesn’t look that way; you look like you are carrying the devil.”

“I am only a little tired; the travel, the commotion of the barracks, the emotion of the departure; all that in quick succession.”

“Yes, my friend, in the covering corps, everything is done quickly; no sooner said than done. But also remember that you will be the first to shoot at the pointed helmets.⁷

[photo here]

Those in the rear are going to shake with jealousy. Let’s go, have some guts! The sky is clear, the road is wide, and life is good!”

Brave kid!

I say that, at the moment, I did not find life extraordinarily attractive.

It’s necessary to state the truth, to show what it’s really like. That at first, among the reservists, there were few who did not suffer from the blues.

For me, the crisis was of short duration. A good night spent on the sweet-smelling straw in a barn restored my spirits. The good humor of Bataille, my sergeant, and my young corporal did the rest.

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In about two days, the cure was complete. I was perfectly adapted, and it seemed to me as if I had never left the regiment.

We lead the existence of a unit on maneuvers, wandering, so to speak, in the beautiful Lorraine countryside, passing through villages where they celebrated us, meeting other units that we saluted with shouts of joy.

Little by little we became more carefree. I spoke with reservists, veterans. The active army troops had left the barracks for a party, and the sole thing that troubled their good humor was the belief that things might not end up as arranged, the belief that they might return to the barracks without having scrapped with the pointed helmets.

In the evening, after arriving at the camp, everyone surrounded the officers.

“So, captain, that’s it for today?”

“Not yet, boys, we’ve got more to do.”

The corporal, the most joyous of men, became irritable; Sergeant Bataille was threatening.

I think that if they had held those that kept talking, when cartridges tinkled so gaily in their pouches, when the bayonets were sharpened, then those men would have had an ugly fifteen minutes.

⁷The reference here is to the German army’s spiked helmet, the Pickelhaube.

I really got to know the regiment in the camp where we stopped for a few days, between the forêt de Champenoux, which would later become famous, the bois Morel and the forêt de Bezange.⁸

We have no doubt that a fierce drama will take place soon at this truly enchanting place. That the nice villages where we go for provisions will soon be in flames. That the farms that welcome us so warmly will soon fall under artillery fire. That rivers of blood will crimson the valleys where we are training.

However, we soon understood that the diplomats had lost a little hope in arranging things. The corporal regained his frenzied gaiety; sergeant Bataille, his color and his good humor.

The officers, in fact, had a serious air. They gave us a thousand recommendations, and a lot of advice. "Advice that reeked of gunpowder," as Bataille said. The number of sentries had been increased, and their orders had become much stricter.

In the company, we had excellent officers. Our captain, young and full of ardor, was constantly looking after our needs and our welfare.

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Before thinking of himself, he thought of his men. He knew each of us and always had a good word for each of us when in his presence; he loved his men, and his men adored him.

"With a commander like that," said the corporal, "you could go to the end of the world!"

Our lieutenant was equally an elite officer, but a bit more reserved. It required some effort to get to know him, and then you understood that his apparent coldness was nothing more than a bit of timidity and a lot of calmness.

I would soon see him, while we were laid out on the ground, standing up amidst machine guns and bullets, calmly lighting a cigar and posing as if on the terrace of a café. Some men told me, "He's an idiot to expose himself like that!" Possibly, but I assure you that word about the famous officer gets back to everyone. It inspires the most frightened, and an officer who the men admire can demand anything from them.

One day, I heard a theory; but one that appeared to me to be true.

A lieutenant colonel who had been seriously wounded in the assault at Vauquois at the head of a regiment of the 10th division was recovering painfully when he learned that his successor had also been wounded. At once he demanded that they restore him to the command of his old regiment.

As he was being congratulated, everyone told him that he should wait longer before returning to action. He responded.

"Don't congratulate me because what you take for heroism is only my ability. They know me in

⁸The forested areas mentioned here are all in the Lorraine region of France. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/LorraineA.pdf>.

the regiment that I have led in six battles; and so I don't have anything more to prove to my men than to be brave. On the contrary, if I wait, then I'll have a regiment in which no one knows me, where I'll be a "rookie", despite my Croix de guerre with three palms,⁹ and I'll have to prove myself all over again, which could cost me dearly."

And the colonel was right; it is necessary that a commander dignify his position and be known by his soldiers. It is necessary that they say of him, "That is a brave man!"

We also had in the company, a very young sub-lieutenant,¹⁰ almost a boy, for whom the threat of war had opened the doors of the École Saint-Cyr.¹¹

Even though very young, our cadet knew his job well and had a sacred, burning fire. Quickly he had conquered us with his

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good grace and his charming way of treating us like older friends. The poor boy is no more; he fell leading us, a victim of his mad bravery. We all wept, and his memory lives forever in my heart.

More and more, we felt that we were at war, and with what impatience we awaited the official declaration. Strange news circulated in the villages and made its way through the camps, rumors often false and certainly always much exaggerated. Sometimes it was suggested that a German reconnaissance patrol had violated the frontier and carried off, bound hand and foot, the entire population of a village; sometimes it was about cavalry that had appeared in the suburbs of Nancy.

We didn't want to stay in place; our rifles were burning our fingers; and we asked why we stayed so far from the frontiers when we had been designated as its guard.

The captain, who understood our state of mind, explained to us that the government, in order to avoid any conflicts before the declaration of war, had ordered us to not station troops right on the border, but to instead put them about a dozen kilometers away.

He was certain that we would be left alone.

"Just a little bit more patience, men," the captain said. "I believe that it won't be very long now!"

Prolonged applause greeted those last words.

⁹The Croix de guerre (Cross of War) is a French military decoration created in 1915 to recognize bravery on the battlefield. Additional pins and palms can be added to the decoration for further citations of bravery.

¹⁰"Sous-lieutenant" (sub-lieutenant) is roughly equivalent to the U.S. army rank of second lieutenant. For a quick understanding of French army ranks, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranks_in_the_French_Army.

¹¹The École Spéciale Militaire de Saint-Cyr is the foremost French military academy.

Soldiers arrived from everywhere. The 11th division took up a position on our left, covering Nancy. It was reported that on our right were the chasseurs à pied¹² and some dragoons from Lunéville. Behind the woods, there was a swarm of men and horses, canons, weapons. At night, when you were on guard duty, you could hear the heavy rumbling of convoys, like a far-off thunderstorm that never stopped.

More and more it felt like war.

For now, however, the Germans do not interfere. We know, from the inhabitants of the villages, that they have undertaken short reconnaissances on our territory.

We began to get mad.

Finally, 3 August, the great news reached us. War had been declared.

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Who told us? I don't know, but everyone knew it at the same time. And it was a happy crowd. People shouted; people danced; people embraced. In my section, we saw some champagne appear, offered by the young sub-lieutenant. Where was he able to find the bottles? The captain and the lieutenant drank with us, and the toast was to the success of our arms and the glory of France.

¹²Chasseurs à pied were the light infantry men of the French army. Once elite formations, by World War I they were armed pretty much like other French infantry.

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II: Cannons

The next day everyone was up well before reveille. We naively imagined that we were going to receive orders to depart immediately and charge the Germans face-to-face without delay and mess them up.

Reveille sounded, and no order came, and various theories appeared to explain that.

It was stupid; war had been declared, and no one moved?

While sipping his coffee, the young sub-lieutenant explained to us that war was a very complicated thing and that we simply played the role of pawns on a chessboard.

“So,” said Bataille, “in this case, there are pawns that are luckier than us!”

And he pointed to a distant road where we could see the artillery filing by in the haze of the sun, and the dominating hill was transformed into an anthill by the passage of a large number of infantry.

With inexhaustible patience, the sub-lieutenant tried to instill in us some vague notions of tactics and to make us understand that one didn't order an advance simply as an adventure, but that it was necessary to secure the flanks and rear and the supply of food and munitions,

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and that any action, so that it doesn't take place in vain, must be combined with those of other units and armies.

Finally, our turn arrived a few days later; we were pushed forward on the human chessboard, towards the frontier, towards the promised land.

Everyone was happy; the officers beamed; and the lieutenant colonel, a veteran of Africa

[photo here]

who commanded us, could not keep still.

In beautiful, hot weather, we were marching towards Athienville, a small, peaceful village surrounded by green hills, and then towards Arracourt, a modest district seat with white houses and green shutters along the road that crossed the frontier less than three kilometers ahead on the road to Moyenvie¹³ in the annexed territory.¹⁴

In this fine countryside, lighted by the radiant smile of the sun, our eyes saw only images of peace and good will.

¹³All are smalls commune in northeastern France not far from the city of Nancy. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/LorraineA.pdf>.

¹⁴Lefèvre is referring to the province of Lorraine that had been annexed by the German Empire in 1871.

In front of the tidy and well-maintained houses, old men smoked their pipes; housewives knitted; children played.

They saluted us as we passed and called out to us, "Good luck!"

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The children took up a piece of pipe [as a make-believe rifle] and tried to march with us.

These charming scenes recalled the large maneuvers of good times, and I never forgot the memory of a young, fresh peasant who calmly washed the laundry in front of a farm door and gave me a bowl of milk as we passed.

However, we felt that despite the calm a storm was gathering.

We knew that our patrols were already undertaking reconnaissances beyond the frontier, and that a peasant told us the following that angered us.

On 6 August, someone had warned the president of the Red Cross in Vic-sur-Seille, a village in the annexed territory,¹⁵ that a French soldier, wounded by the Germans during a patrol, was lying on the ground, near to the entrance of the town.

At once, the president called the young men of the society together and requested that they take a stretcher. The group set off towards the place where the wounded man was, but a German soldier of the 138th regiment knew the information that had been given to the president of the Red Cross. Riding a bicycle, this miserable man went to the wounded French soldier, and coldly, at a distance of ten meters, killed him with three shots.

The poor French cavalier, the first victim of the war in this region, reposes in the cemetery of Vic. His name is Henry (Nicolas), and he was from Reims and belonged to the 8th regiment of dragoons.

"Remember well this story, my friend." Bataille told me, "and when we have the Germans in front of us, think of the dragoon of Vic-sur-Seille."

We stopped right by the frontier, in the vicinity of the village of Juvrecourt, near Arracourt. The moment had still not come for us to engage the enemy; but we were now no longer impatient because we knew that the dance would commence soon and that we would be called to play our role in it.

"Keep your eyes open and be ready!" Our young corporal said. "There are Prussians near here!"

On our left, in the forêt de Bezange,¹⁶ where he would die, we could see other soldiers. In front of us, artillery batteries were in position, and we could see others pass by to be installed along the frontier.

¹⁵Vic-sur-Seille is a small commune in northeastern France north of Arracourt. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/LorraineA.pdf>.

¹⁶The Forest of Bezange is near Vic-sur-Seille.

During the night, our sentries were kept on alert by isolated shots that came from who knows where.

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We hear them also, and no one hardly sleeps. Those were the first shots, and as they say, it's started.

Our sub-lieutenant undertook a voluntary reconnaissance along the line of sentries and beyond. He didn't find anything suspicious but still returned excited; he had crossed the frontier.

The next morning, 14 August, was a day that I will never forget,

[picture here]

we were awakened from our feverish sleep by a tremendous explosion.

We looked at each other, astonished, incapable of saying a word, and I noted that my comrades looked very pale.

Finally, someone said in a weak voice:

“Artillery!”

Our corporal, who was the first to recover, danced about joyously and cried out:

“Bravo! The artillery opens the ball!”

It is difficult for me to describe what I felt. Was it fear? I don't know. I felt horribly dizzy, with a light nervous trembling that I forced myself to overcome; it shook me for a second.

I must have also become very pale because Bataille said to me while hitting me on the shoulder:

“Enough, you'll see, we'll be fine.”

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I was able, however, to practice that day some serious training because my company was designated as support for a battery that operated at the edge of the woods, on the frontier itself, in the vicinity of Champ-Vautrain. Other batteries also were firing, on our right, around Juvrecourt.¹⁷

Soon the German batteries responded angrily, and it was, for hours, a monstrous concert, an infernal music that hammered your head, tautened your nerves and shook you entirely.

An artilleryman explained to me that we targeted the German batteries and trenches in the sector bounded by Juvelize, Blanche-Église and the ferme de Bourrache.

¹⁷Juvrecourt is a commune a little southeast of Vic-sur-Seille. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/LorraineB.pdf>.

The artillerymen were marvelous, and in reality, this was their debut; and if they had often heard cannons firing before, they had never been on the receiving end of live shells.

And I assure you that they received them now, and they were terrible shells that struck noisily, projecting, in a cloud of black smoke, a rain of steel pieces of which the smallest could kill a man, and rocks and earth.

The artillerymen calmly proceeded with their interesting maneuvers, appearing to not hear or see anything. Happily the Germans did not fire very accurately, and there were only a few wounded among the men, and the wounds were rather light.

As for us, we did not have to suffer thanks to our captain's good idea to position us on the slope of the hill. The shells, thus, passed over our heads when the shot was too long and fell in front of us when it was too short.

Still we had a wounded man—not really very bad; a leg muscle struck by a piece of steel about the size of a bean; but still blood ran. It was a wound, a real wound. Everyone wanted to see our first wounded man, to shake his hand, to ask him how he felt. He was very proud and showed his leg that was a little swollen and explained that he felt a shock, like the blow from a stick, but that it didn't do anything bad. According to him it was almost a pleasure to receive such a wound from a shell. And, in fact, the brave boy would not have exchanged the glory of being the first wounded man in the regiment for the stripes of a sergeant.

On the 15th and 16th of August, the artillery duel continued, more and more intense, more and more violent, and we listened, not without a certain amount of angst caused by the lack of being used to it and the thunder of the heavy German artillery,

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which from Mont Saint-Jean, above Vic, sent enormous projectiles in the direction of the ferme Haute-Burthecourt, located in front of the forêt de Bezange, where a lot of soldiers were assembling.

On the morning of the 16th, as even stronger firing took place, we were able to be part of a marvelous spectacle, something still new for us, that evoked shouts of admiration from us.

In the blue sky, under the golden rays of the sun, a French biplane, which flew along at perfect ease, appeared from the direction of Nancy, at first flying directly towards us, then making a turn. It flew straight as an arrow towards the German positions which it surveyed.

Hundreds of shells and thousands of bullets rose towards the French bird while we watched, heart pounding at the thought that it would be hit and wounded to die by our enemies; but it continued to fly with the same ease, letting fall, from time to time, a flare that we saw, its white trail flowing in a light breeze. Then having accomplished its mission, it climbed higher and disappeared in the depth of the blue sky.

Then our artillery intensified its firing, which became truly frightful, and soon the German artillery ceased to roar.

The next day we learned at Vic that the majority of the German artillery pieces had been demolished by our guns, and the men killed or wounded.

The French bird had played its role superbly.

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III: The Battle at the Ferme de Lagrange

We knew that after the declaration of war that French units--happier than us--had met the enemy, and I often asked myself what had our comrades done there, those men who had died in battle

I asked our lieutenant.

"My friend," he responded, "do you know what our artillery is doing at this moment?"

"It's firing shells at the Germans."

"Yes, but why are we firing shells? Simply to ease access to their territory, to clear the ground in front of us. Well, the troops of the vanguard do the same thing in a different way."

That response did not satisfy my curiosity, because it explained why things happened while I wanted to know the details of what had happened.

Some wounded men of the 2nd battalion of chasseurs à pied, as they were being evacuated to the rear, told me what had happened, and their story excited me because it was, for me, like the curtain rising on a grand drama.

I am going to try to explain as clear as possible the events that occurred, on this side [of the border], in our invasion of Lorraine and during the march of our troops on Vic and Mohrange.¹⁸

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I have already told about the assassination of one of our dragoons at Vic. Vengeance for that brave man could not be delayed.

On the afternoon of 7 August, a small column composed of a vanguard of dragoons armed with lances, a company of cyclists from the 2nd battalion of chasseurs à pied and a squadron of the 8th regiment of dragoons, all from the garrison at Lunéville, engaged the enemy, in full force, on the road to Arracourt and reached the frontier.

In front of the cyclists marched the commander of the battalion,

[photo here]

a tall soldier with a fine figure, the heroic Boussat, who fell later in Alsace at the head of a brigade of chasseurs.

At a crossroads, between two woods, there was a stop, some time to kill, the sounds of la Marseillaise being sung, a frontier post; then the small troop rushed towards Vic which the Germans had evacuated two hours previously, and, without stopping, reached there, the gateway to Nancy.

While the dragoons were taking possession of the town hall, the chasseurs went to the post

¹⁸Actually spelled Morhange. Morhange is a commune, a little more than 20 miles east of a line Metz-Nancy. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Carte.pdf>.

office, still led by their valiant and energetic commander.

At the moment when the commander knocked on the door of the office to open it, a man advanced towards him and said something that the chasseurs did not hear. They could see the commander redden with anger and vigorously grab the man, shake him, pick him up off the ground

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and toss him to the chasseurs while yelling: "Remove that!" an order that was executed, one can be sure, quickly and unkindly. At the same time, a window of the office flew open, and our chasseurs, going in through the door, hastened to destroy the telegraphic and telephone equipment.

The crowd that gathered in front of the post office assisted silently at the scene.

Commander Boussat pronounced a few warm and vibrant words, and the emotion was such that it swelled the heart of every French man or soldier. He spoke of the flag, the country, the upcoming deliverance from the enemy, but his words did not appear to have any echo in the crowd which listened to him. As he was surprised and pained, one of the inhabitants of Vic slipped behind him and whispered into his ear:

"Sir, don't doubt our sentiments, but you are not going to be able to stay with us, and there are a lot of spies around. The smallest sign of sympathy could lead to terrible repression for us."

The commander understood and regained his friendliness and smile.

The French took the necessary precautions for the night, foreseeing a return of the Germans, something that Boussat judged to be certain.

"We are undertaking a simple reconnaissance," he said, "and we are not very large. Since there are spies everywhere, the Germans will know that and will return."

So, the next morning, many large columns would be sighted near Château-Salins and near the bois de la Geline above Salival.

The French retreated at once on the road to Arracourt, but our chasseurs are stubborn fellows, and, as we'll see, they did not retreat back over the entire frontier.

Vic and Burthecourt are connected by the highway to Nancy, alongside of which runs the railroad. About five or six hundred meters from the railroad station in Vic, on the side towards Burthecourt, one can see, between the railroad and the highway, an important farm called the ferme de la Grange.¹⁹

On 10 August, about fifty French chasseurs, it hardly needs to be said, that they were resolute and energetic fellows,

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occupied that farm.

¹⁹See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/LorraineA.pdf>.

Towards one o'clock, the man who was standing watch in the attic signaled that a German force, about the size of a company, was marching towards the farm in three columns and following the embankment of the railroad.

Our chasseurs resolved to quit the farm, because they did not want to upset the farmer and also because they did not want to fight behind the walls, preferring to have some elbow room.

[photo here]

They also could not accept combat with an enemy that was four or five times larger, and it was easy for them to reach the forêt de Bezange.

They did not take but a moment to decide.

Desiring to deceive these Germans, who evidently thought that they had the French in a mousetrap, they left quietly and slipped into a field of oats, to the west of the buildings.

When they were only about fifty meters from the farm, the Germans, brandishing their weapons, rushed all at once, but found that the building was empty.

Their captain, happy at the sound execution of his strategic plan,

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was calculating the honors that he would garner for his capture of the chasseurs, at least the iron cross, and the accompanying official congratulations that would facilitate his career.²⁰

He was almost grateful that these Frenchmen had let themselves be played so stupidly because he was sure of his information and he never thought, for an instant, that our chasseurs would have quit their lodging.

But he was completely fooled. After interrogating the farmer and searching from top to bottom, he had to recognize that the devil blues²¹ had disappeared like a dream.

However, not wanting to appear defeated, he decided to search the surroundings and assembled his men, unprotected, in front of the farm.

It was the moment that our brave soldiers were waiting for, and they knew that it was not going to be easy when they saw before them an entire company of the 17th infantry regiment commanded by its captain.

They let the company form; then they heard a quick order, "Fire!" Fifty shots rang out, sounding like a single detonation, and a number of Germans, including the lieutenant of the company fell, never to get up again.

The others had not recovered from their surprise when our chasseurs, executing a splendid charge, fell on them with bayonets.

²⁰Das Eiserne Kreuz (Iron Cross) was a German military decoration for bravery dating back to 1813 in Prussia and later used in Germany.

²¹Reference to the blue uniforms of the French soldiers.

It was a desperate fight, the captain threw away his sword, and the men tossed their rifles and sacks to run faster.

The brave chasseurs could then enjoy an astonishing spectacle, as [the enemy] ran as fast as they could.

However, the Germans had opened the locks of the pond of Dieuze²² to impede the progress of the French, and so the valley of the Seille River²³ was flooded so much that our fugitives waded, bogged down, rolled in ditches filled with water, sank in the salt marsh, executed various maneuvers, all under the bullets of the chasseurs. Some slept in the muddy waters. Others drowned in the overflowing river whose banks were no longer visible.

The small expedition of the company ended in a disaster with more than one hundred and fifty men out of combat.

On our side, we had a sergeant and two chasseurs killed by shots from a machine gun that someone had set up in the bushes behind the Seille to protect the retreat.

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That was, as close as possible, the story that the wounded chasseur told me.

He also gave me useful information about the countryside around Vic where he had undertaken numerous reconnaissances, and about the town and its inhabitants.

He had fond memories and cherished the hope to honeymoon there after the war.

“See you then!” he said.

What ever happened to the chasseur?

Much time has passed since our encounter, and the war has still not ended.

²²Located in Lorraine.

²³The Seille river is a tributary of the Moselle River in the Lorraine region of France.

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IV: Vic-sur-Seille

Throughout the entire day of 16 August, to the rear of our thundering cannons, beyond the forêt de Bezange, near Moncel and the ferme Haute-Burthecourt, soldiers got ready for a serious invasion into the annexed territory.

That day, I could see the smoke and flames of the many fires in the enemy lines that had been started by our guns.

Finally, and this time it was real, we were going to march and enter into the dance, strike blows and receive them, we were going, in sum, to begin the war.

That thought produced a strong impression among us, an emotion that everyone struggled to conceal, but, I am able to assure you that we were enthusiastic and firmly resolved to do our duty right to the final sacrifice, and we were happy to have finished with our maneuvers.

“The quicker that we go, the quicker that it will be finished!” Our sergeant said.

And we all thought the same thing.

Everywhere around us soldiers massed, superb, well-trained men.

France could be proud of its army, proud of its boys who

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are going into battle—to their deaths—with a fervor and cheerfulness as if they had were going to a party.

On 17 August we left early in the morning in the direction of Vic, preceded by the dragoons, lance in hand.²⁴

This time we were in front, and we had the honor of being the first to enter the annexed territory.

The sky seemed to favor us; the morning was superb; and the breeze joyously flapped our flag. I looked with curiosity at the annexed territory, this promised land on whose soil I am finally treading. The countryside was stunning and appeared to me to be very rich.

When we climbed a hill, I saw, on the French side, the somber mass of the forêt de Bezange which ran along the frontier and which merged into the horizon. On the other side there were vast plains, fertile fields, salt works, large farms, then the main highway, the railroad, the Seille River overflowing its banks with waves stirred by the breeze and reflecting the sunlight, and even further on, hillsides covered in vines, vast plateaus and thick forests.

From time to time we heard the noise of a cannon, and a comrade, originally from Nancy who knew the region perfectly well, told me that the pieces had to be firing from the area of Château-

²⁴Vic-sur-Seille is a small commune east on Nancy. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/LorraineA.pdf>.

Salins. He also gave me interesting information about the salt works, the crystal salt mines and the manner in which the salt was exploited, but that has no place in these notes about the war.

At my question, he showed me in the distance the ferme de Lagrange where the combat that I have already talked about took place. I thought about it with emotion, thinking about the heroism of our chasseurs.

Soon we could see, beyond the railroad, the white houses of Vic, a major town in annexed Lorraine that we were going to invade.

Towards 8 o'clock, our dragoons in the vanguard galloped through the gates of Nancy and, as had happened during the reconnaissance carried out by commander Boussat, seized the post office.

Never, as long as I shall live, will I forget our entry into Vic-sur-Seille, [1]7 August 1914. It was a grand scene, which led many of us to shed a tear, as our hearts beat furiously. It was one of those scenes that you just can't describe, that any attempt to retell it would not do justice to the moving splendor of the scene.

At the center of the town stood the statue of Joan of Arc.

When we broke ranks in the square, all of our bugles sounded, and [32]

flags deployed. I could see in front of the statue a group of generals and officers of different units and their staffs who waited on them and before which all the regiments had to file.

An enormous crowd had invaded the streets and the square, and I assure you that day—partly because they saw us in force and partly because the grandeur of the spectacle made them forget all prudence—the inhabitants of Vic did not remain silent.

They cheered us, shouting "Long live France! Long Live the French Army!" They threw flowers to us. The immigrants (that's what they called the Germans there) must have been bursting with rage.

Oh, the brave people! The brave people of Lorraine!

A number of units marched that day in front of the statue of Joan of Arc, including the entire division of Toul, a superb and well-trained division. Others also marched that had a fine appearance. It lasted for hours, and the crowd never stopped applauding and shouting "Long live France" at the passage of flags and throwing flowers to the soldiers.

Our lieutenant colonel had the good idea to go to the cemetery of Vic and visit the graves of the French soldiers who recently fell in this corner of Lorraine and who now slept their final slumber: the dragoon Henry (Nicolas), cowardly murdered, and the three chasseurs killed on 10 August at the ferme de Lagrange: Bonhomme, Franiatte and Lanne.

On the graves we laid the flowers that we had gathered from the population. Then our commanding officer pronounced a moving speech that made him and all the aides tear up. He ended by saying that it was sweet to die for your country and that there was no finer death than

the death of a soldier.

Less than three weeks later, this superb officer would fall while heroically charging at our head.

By his corpse, I recalled the fine words that he had pronounced at the cemetery of Vic and that such a death was fitting for such a soldier.

After the parade, the people gathered and feted us. With open arms, they distributed tobacco, cigars, cigarettes; they embraced us, they pushed us along towards the cafés of the town to offer us beer and the white wine of Lorraine.

Amidst the joy of these poor people, one could understand what they had suffered in forty-four years, treated as suspects in their own country, watched by the immigrants who they detested, obliged to watch

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what they said, to hide their sympathies, persecuted by a despotic and vexatious administration.

And now it seemed to them that it was all over, as if they had awakened from a horrible dream, and they mocked the stares of hatred from the remaining German women.

Naturally, we searched suspected houses and took measures necessary to assure our security; but our soldiers, and do we really have to say this, did not commit the least excess.

[photo here]

And as far as we were concerned, our lieutenant colonel congratulated us for our appearance and our conduct during our short stay in the good and hospitable town of Vic.

All the houses were open to us; we could only but be agreeable, and we felt truly to be among sincere friends.

Alas! We had to leave. We were the first to arrive; we were also the first to leave.

“Return soon!” They called to us.

“Yes, of course!”

We all had heavy hearts, but we consoled ourselves with the thought that we were going to fight to liberate our new friends forever;

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because, this time, we were going to battle, our officers did not conceal that from us.

“Boys,” the lieutenant colonel said to us. “We are going to have the honor of fighting for France against a remarkably well-prepared enemy who has superior training and who is certainly very brave. I want you to know that I am counting on you. I am not going to give a speech because for us that is useless; but I want to tell you this. I know that you have given me your confidence, and I will try to deserve that.”

These words touched us deeply; they went straight to the heart, and, certainly, they were worth all the talk in the world.

In his turn, our captain expressed his sentiments about us, and then he repeated the advice that he had already given us. He gave us wise counsel.

“Above all,” he told us, always smiling. “Don’t forget that being calm is one of the most important military qualities and perhaps the most useful one. Do not waste your ammunition. Only fire deliberately and when you see the enemy within reach. Usually I will be there to guide you, but sometimes, undoubtedly, you will find yourselves alone, and you will have to prove yourself not only with courage—I am sure of that—but also with initiative, energy, elan. Then, without hesitating, go at the enemy. That’s the order.”

In marching order the regiment reached Château-Salins from which our troops—especially the artillery—had already chased the Germans, and we pass through the town where the crowd is just as enthusiastic as the inhabitants of Vic had been. They sing the Marseillaise; the women shed tears of joy; the young girls present bouquets of flowers to the officers; and they all shout, “Long Live France!”

Eventually, towards the north, cannon sound, and we can hear the rattle of a bombardment. Certain units are evidently in contact with the enemy, but we realize that no serious fighting had yet taken place.

We encounter some colonial troops²⁵ who are arriving straight from Nancy and then a regiment of infantry from that city who captured Habondange and had already exchanged fire with the Germans. The lieutenant colonel tells us that we are going to take a position at Marthil, a small village situated to the west of Mohrange.

For a short time we rest in the forêt de Château-Salins,

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[photo here]

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and then we pass some of our own villages where the population greets us.

To the right and the left, especially to the right, we hear sometimes the rattle of a fusillade and the deep voice of cannons.

The march is long and hard enough, and the knapsack grows heavier and heavier as the kilometers go by. We march silently, a little preoccupied by the idea that we can enter the dance at any instant.

However we don’t notice anything, no glimmer of a pointy helmet.²⁶ I overhear the lieutenant colonel say to the commander:

“This calm unsettles me. I think that the Germans are letting us advance too easily. I hope that

²⁵Soldiers from the French overseas colonies

²⁶Reference is to the spiked German infantry helmet.

this isn't concealing some kind of trap.”

Our corps commander was a prudent man who never neglected any precaution. We were perfectly covered, not only in front but also on the flanks.

Good that we took precautions, because just as we came in view of Marthil, we experienced some shots on the right that killed a sub-lieutenant and wounded several men.

If we had not had our guard up on that side, the enemy could potentially have led a serious attack.

Our commander moved at once to deploy a company of rifleman in a field, and behind that company, we waited standing firm for the Boche.²⁷

They did not appear and contented themselves with sending some shells and some bullets at us. That did not much deter us and allowed us, without much difficulty, to reach the positions that had been assigned to us at Marthil.

That day, 19 August, had been horribly tiring.

²⁷A French term of insult for the Germans in World War I. The word was a shortened form of “alboche” which derived from the combination of “al” from “allemand” (German) and boche for “bûche” (blockhead); thus “boche” basically meant “rascal, liar, drunkard, barbarian, etc.”

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V: The Battle of Mohrange

I have, of course, no pretension to describe the battle of Mohrange,²⁸ which, as I learned about later, comprised a series of encounters between French soldiers advancing everywhere between Delme and Sarrebourg, and the Germans, who were waiting for our advance.

I can only tell about what I saw, what a combatant sees, that is to say, what occurs around him and in his company.

The battle has been named Mohrange because that was the most important, the strongest position, of the enemy.

In reality, our lieutenant colonel had a reason to be suspicious; we fell into a trap.

On the border at Mohrange, we had before us a simple line of troops, but those troops did not have stopping us as their mission but on the contrary. We were attracted to their side where a formidable line of defense had been prepared in peacetime and reinforced even more while we held our distance awaiting the declaration of war.

At Mohrange, to talk only of what I was able to see, our enemy had constructed cement blockhouses where he had placed men, machine guns and howitzers, and the terrain was also under the fire of a powerful artillery.

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My company had been chosen because of the location of our camp. We occupied a farm on the edge of the village, and I was able, on the 19th, to sleep in a barn very close by, after having dined on a delicious omelet prepared by the farmer's wife.

The brave woman was very much afraid and trembled not only for herself but also for the herd which constituted her only property.

I pitied her wholeheartedly, her and the others, the poor people of the frontier who were tormented one more time,

[photo here]

who had to bear all the miseries, all the calamities that the war would force upon them.

She told us, while crying, that her only son was mobilized into the German army and was now in a training depot.

The situation was really cruel for those in Lorraine who remained French to the core.

On 20 August, reveille at 4 o'clock, the battalion assembled and then departed.

The artillery fired violently, especially on the right.

²⁸See note 16 re the spelling of the town. The battle at Morhange was part of the larger "Battle of the Frontiers" also known as the "Battle of Lorraine."

"It must be hot along the Dieuze," the sub-lieutenant said to me while holding his map.

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Dieuze? The name didn't mean anything to me. We had encountered men of the 15th corps who rode by there.

I had no time to reflect because during our sortie from the village, shells began to tumble around me, and the commander hastened us to take up combat positions.

Bataille, my sergeant, tells me that we have had two men killed.

My head is spinning, temples throbbing like in a vice, mouth dry. My ears buzzed. It seemed like my heart had stopped beating.

Death is here; it's enveloping us, harassing us, playing with us like a cat with a mouse.

I am afraid; that's incontestable. You bet! I never had the thought of being a hero.

Will I succeed in overcoming this fear?

Boom! A shell bursts very close to me and covers me with dirt. A man falls uttering cries of pain.

The lieutenant appears and recognizes that we are certainly in need of some words of encouragement.

"It's nothing, boys. You'll get used to it quickly, you'll see. Come on! Forward! Have some guts!"

As always, he is very calm; certainly he was not afraid.

The sound of his voice made me feel good. I try to respond and call myself a coward, telling myself that the lieutenant had no more use for me.

Boom! Another shell ten meters away. I feel a violent blow on my knapsack. Instinctively, I scrunch my shoulders. Nothing broken; my sack had received a piece of steel.

Strange thing. I'm not going to try and explain, but I feel that it will be okay. I swallow easier. It doesn't feel as bad, and my head recommences to function again. The lieutenant had to be right; you get used to it. The habit comes more or less quickly. It's just a question of temperament and nerves.

The shells follow us like a cloud of horseflies; they fall in front, in back, everywhere, digging holes into which we stumble.

Soon, amidst the grand rumbling of the cannons, I hear a singular humming.

"The song of bullets!" My corporal whispers into my ear.

We could not have been far from Mohrange.

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The captain has us hide behind a small wall, probably a garden or orchard wall. On our right, a large millstone stops the bullets that hit it with a heavy thud.

I do not know what has happened to the other companies.

Naturally, the shells are always falling, thicker and thicker, sometimes chipping away at the wall behind which we are lying.

Our captain, who is on his knees, gets up from time to time to look over the wall, and I assure you that this simple gesture took a lot of courage.

He comes to tell us what he expects of us.

“Boys,” he said to us. “The moment has come to show that you are good soldiers and good Frenchmen; we are going to enter into the furnace. We must reach the crest that you have seen just now, rejoin the companies who are supposed to be there already and then fall on the enemy at bayonet. The task is tough, and it is worthy of our good regiment. Your captain is counting on you.”

Five minutes later, a liaison brings an order to the captain from the lieutenant colonel.

At once the company forms into sections, not without sustaining some losses. Then we disperse in the fields as riflemen.

It must not be long after 6 o'clock, and the sun's first rays caress the scene of carnage.

The shells fall like a veritable thunderstorm. We march under a blanket of iron and fire, and I make the sacrifice of my life because it seemed impossible to me that a single one of us will reach the crest.

A man from my section is decapitated by an explosion; another falls, stomach opened, and utters piercing cries. Alas! We can't do anything for him; it's necessary to advance as fast as possible.

I note that sergeant Bataille drags his left leg, and I ask him why.

“A bit of steel in the thigh,” shrugging his shoulders, “but that flesh wound is not going to stop me from spitting on the Boche.”

I watch with amazement our section head, the young sub-lieutenant, who dons white gloves, and I think that he had suddenly gone mad.

All at once he is next to me, and I cannot help but say to him:

“With those gloves you're going to be hit by a sniper who can see you from two kilometers away.

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Between two shell explosions, he responds:

“At school we all swore to wear white gloves at the first charge.”

I found that to be very French, but also very imprudent.

We continue to climb towards the target that we had been assigned. The sun began to heat up. Under the blue sky, in the distance, I perceive a small white house that stood out from the foliage of a corner of the woods, and, I don't know why, but this vision affected me and makes me think of my home village.

The explosion of a shell, that kills another one of our men, returns me to reality, and I see that we are approaching the famous crest, on which, we can see people.

I ask what had happened to our comrades from the other companies.

All of a sudden an extraordinarily violent fire from infantry opens on us in front, by soldiers installed in trenches who seem to have designated us for target shooting, and on the flank by machine guns.

This is a really terrible torment. The air seems to be saturated with bullets; it seems like we are breathing them.

We have fallen into the trap so easily prepared, and undoubtedly the Germans hope that not one of use will exit alive.

I say with real pride that at that tragic moment no one had the thought of retreating.

Without an order we threw ourselves flat on the barren round, and, for more than three hours, huddled behind our knapsacks, we endured the rain of bullets, waiting for a calm to rush with our bayonets at the entrenched enemy. But no calm happened, and anger finally overcame us, and we asked the captain to lead us on an assault.

But that was counter to his desires, because, above all, he wanted to execute the order that he had been given, to occupy the crest only if the occasion proved favorable.

Our sub-lieutenant let him know that our losses were increasing rapidly, and that soon the company would not be in a state to undertake an attack with any chance of success.

That decided it, he stood up under the bullets, raised his arms, and we left with savage shouting, similar to furious demons.

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In one bound we arrived in front of the first trench, where the defenders were massacred in less time that it would take to write about it.

I followed very closely my young sub-lieutenant, who had seized a rifle from a dead man and who had already stabbed many Germans, when a bullet, from a neighboring trench, hit him between the eyes.

[photo here]

He fell into my arms murmuring:

“Dead for France!....Happy!...Wallet!”

That was it.

Quickly I opened his jacket and took his wallet; that I would right away send to his family.

His poor body remained in the enemy trench. What became of him?

He had instinctively put one of his gloves, that from the left hand, on his wound, and it was red from the blood.

My eyes filled with tears. I jumped out of the trench to carry him forward with his comrades.

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Alas! We could not go very far; the trap had been well set.

A terrible volley of heavy artillery cut down our ranks. It was necessary to fall back.

On our right, other soldiers were fighting in retreat.

A sergeant of the 79th told me of the attack by his battalion, which, on the 19th, had camped at Conthil. A soldier of the 37th told me of his company towards Pévange, in front of Mohrange.

Their story was our story, with one exception however, they did not have the satisfaction of reaching the enemy.

And so it was a retreat under artillery fire, a retreat that could have become dangerous if not for a brave colonial regiment, of which I regret to not knowing the number, that had sacrificed themselves heroically to stop the strong Bavarian forces that menaced our left.

We experienced chagrin on re-crossing the frontier, abandoning the promised land, Lorraine annexed, where we had invaded so eagerly, so joyously, and where we had witnessed such warm sympathy.

“We will return,” our captain told us. “Have heart, boys!”

Morale remained excellent, despite the cruel deception, despite the painful losses.

At each instant one encountered the wounded spread out on the straw in peasant carts, and I do not get tired of admiring the courage of these poor comrades. They always had a smiling word and saluted us in passing with some pleasantry.

I again see a poor bugger of the 37th, all enveloped in bloody bandages, who cried out to us, and showed us his left arm missing its hand:

“They left me the good one! I’ll return to help you thump the Boche!”

The Germans followed us closely, right on our heels. Many times we had to turn around and face them to halt them, and one day, as we stopped them in the direction of Arracourt, one of our companies, surrounded by a German battalion, had to open a passage at bayonet point.

On 25 August, at Hoéville, we received the order to moved towards Crévic, a village situated on the heights dominating Lunéville, to relieve troops of the 15th corps that the Germans had driven back a little more rapidly since Dieuze.

Our retreat had ended, and we were again face to face with the enemy all along the line.

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THE SACRED BARRIER:

VI: The Assault on Crévic

Before continuing my story, it seems to me useful to explain briefly the march of our armies in the east so that one can take note of our movements, goals and the results.

Of course, I learned all of this later in the course of a stay in the hospital, because a combatant is poorly placed to understand operations, and generally he is concerned with very little, interested only in what happens in his extremely limited sphere

There is only one thing that is important to know, from a general point of view, and that is if one succeeds.

At the start of the war, the Army of Lorraine, commanded by General Castelnau, and the Army of the Vosges, under the orders of General Dubail, operated jointly and as one, and rapidly assumed the offensive.²⁹

The army of Lorraine, as we have seen, advanced in the direction of Mohrange and that of the army of the Vosges in the direction of Sarrebourg.³⁰

Our efforts were broken on the fortified position of Mohrange, the Germans, in turn, took the offensive and threw the larger of their forces

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against the right wing of Castelnau's army, which had to retreat towards Lunéville. The left, obliged to go back in turn, withdrew towards Nancy.

This retreat of the Army of Lorraine completely uncovered the left flank of the Army of the Vosges, and General Dubail was forced, in his turn, to pull back and carry out a movement towards Baccarat, to always keep in perfect contact with the Army of Lorraine.

Castelnau's army stopped on good positions, a line marked by the heights of Mont Saint-Jean and d'Amance, the forêt de Champenoux, Crévic and edge of the forêt de Vitrimont and a part of the course of the Mortagne River.

Dubail's army occupied the heights between the valleys of the Meurthe and the Mortagne rivers.

For three weeks, the German armies of the east rushed with an unprecedented fury against this barrier which closed the routes into France. For three weeks, in annihilating combats that will remain forever famous, they piled up corpses by the thousands at Sainte-Geneviève, before the

²⁹General Noël Édouard Marie Joseph, Vicomte de Curières de Castelnau (1851-1944) commanded the French Second Army during the Battle of the Frontiers. General Augustin Yvon Edmond Dubail (1851-1934) commanded the French First Army.

³⁰See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/AlsaceLorraine.pdf>. Crévic is a commune to the southeast of Nancy.

hills of d'Amance, in the forêt de Champenoux, around the village and in the bois de Crévic, at Vitrimont, at Frescati, to only talk of the front of the Army of Lorraine.

Neither the deluge of steel from their heavy artillery, nor the intensity of their machine gun fire, nor the frenzied assaults of their numerous infantry could break the sacred barrier at which they struck with as much or more rage than their armies in the north battled on the Marne.

Before encountering the unbreakable barrier, the Germans had committed revolting atrocities, hoping, without a doubt, to aid in their victory by using terror.

I will say further that I learned of this during my stay in the region.

On 12 September, the day on which the Battle of the Marne ended, the Germans pulled back along their entire front and retired behind the Seille River.

They had, therefore, failed, despite the atrocities committed and despite the presence of their emperor who hoped to enter Nancy in triumph.

The retreating German soldiers of the 15th corps entered Crévic on 22 August about 3 o'clock in the afternoon.

They were preceded by such a reputation,
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soiled by the blood of so many innocent victims, that the majority of the inhabitants had judged it prudent to abandon the village.

Those who stayed lived through some terrible hours.

The only representative of the municipality, Mr. Royer, assistant to the mayor, was arrested and threatened to be shot. Soldiers, aided by torches and fuses, lit fires at the four corners of the village under the pretext that the civilians had fired on the soldiers.

An old man of sixty-eight, was shot down like a rabbit, without
[photo here]

any reason, by a band of madmen who prowled the streets while shouting: "It's the end Frenchman! Down with Lyautey! Down with Mrs. Lyautey!"³¹

General Lyautey, a native of Crévic, owned a beautiful house there. The Germans sacked it and then set it on fire. We saw enraged soldiers, on the front steps, break luxury items that had adorned the general's study.

The mayor's assistant, frequently threatened and many times stood against a wall before a firing squad, was saved, however, to have to give aid to the wounded German and French soldiers.

An army citation later honored him for his courage and his suffering.

³¹Louis Hubert Gonzalve Lyautey (1854-1934) was a French general who served mainly overseas in the French colonies. He was also briefly minister of war in 1917.

These sickening scenes lasted until the 25th, right until we arrived.

When, from the height of a hill, near the woods of the forest, we
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saw the unfortunate village, enveloped, like a shroud, by the smoke from the fires, a blind rage took hold of us, even more so because we had just become aware of the hateful crimes committed at Nomény.³²

I assure you that it was a great bayonet charge from the small bridge through the street that leads up to the church.

I had fired all of my cartridges and lay sheltered somehow by a cart filled with manure. Around me I saw German and French corpses. A trickle of blood flowed by the wheel of my cart. Behind a closed shutter, very close to me, a woman's voice cried, with an accent of joyous confidence that warmed my heart: "The 20th corps! The 20th corps!" She had recognized our numbers, and her words clearly meant: "Our 20th corps is here, we are saved!"

At that moment, I saw Bataille, who had lunged at half a dozen Germans. Not having any more cartridges, I charged at the group with my bayonet and arrived just in time to nail against the wall of the house a giant sub-officer who was in the process of aiming his revolver at my sergeant. Four of our enemies bit the dust, two others were saved, but they fell into the claws of our light infantry who took care of them properly, right under our eyes.

"Thanks, old man!" Bataille said very calmly. "I thought that you would come and save me. With no cartridges, my bayonet broke in the ribs of one of those men."

And he gave me a handshake, one of those handshakes that you never forget.

I was able to take a few cartridges from the pouch of a dead man. Bataille grabbed his rifle, and we went off to new adventures.

On all sides the Germans were fleeing, our bayonets at their backs. We could see them up the hill, beyond the railroad. I had the occasion to use my cartridges.

Behind the church, we tried to gather a group of them, but the fellows dispersed like a flock of sparrows, not fast enough however to avoid the bayonet of Bataille, and in a stunning blow, he stopped one in mid-passage.

We were the masters of the village.

Soon the habitants of the village risked coming out of their houses and cellars. They surrounded us, shook our hands, embraced us while crying for joy, shouting, "Long live the 20th corps!"
[51]

In the streets, we began to pick up the wounded. Our bugles sounded assembly.

³²German troops shelled and then burned the town of Nomény. The Germans also accused French civilians of having fired on German soldiers and executed seventy-five French citizens.

In front of the ruins of the chateau of General Lyautey, situated at the outskirts of the village, towards Lunéville, I had the misfortune to learn of the death of my poor corporal.

That same evening, I, who had never wanted NCO stripes, was nominated to take his place, at the request of and on the recommendation of sergeant Bataille.

My captain congratulated me on my conduct during the day. I was ashamed because all my comrades had done the same as me.

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VII: The Battles for Hill 316

To the right of Crévic, going towards Dombasle, a main highway rises towards Haraucourt, traversing, between the two villages, a small woods called the bois de la Forêt. Beyond Crévic, to the right of the road to Haraucourt, the terrain rises rapidly right up to the bois de Crévic, with its somber foliage covering a hill that forms a plateau. Between this woods and the bois d'Einville, in the same direction, rises a second, barren hill that cuts the route from Maixe to Drouville and that is separated from each of the woods by a deep and narrow ravine.³³

This hill, between its two wooded brothers, has the look of a bald skull and is named hill 316 on the staff map.

Chased from the village, the Germans scaled the heights, but they could not control the bois de Crévic which was strongly occupied by us and from which came numerous salvos at their position. They installed themselves then on hill 316, that is to say, on the hill that was not wooded with the bois d'Einville housing their reserves and material.

Until 12 September, relentless and deadly battles took place there, between the woods and hill 316. The enemy trying to dislodge us from the woods, and us trying to seize the hill.

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Despite the salvos of the shells that mowed down the trees, and also soldiers, the woods held out, and the enemy finished by yielding.

But we will never see such treasures of heroism as were dispensed in this small corner of the Lorraine countryside; never can one be able to give an idea of the horror of these assaults, of the melees, that showered corpses into that tiny ravine, where the children of the village once came in the summer to pick flowers.

Four thousand corpses, of which 2,500 were German,

[photo here]

were identified at this single point, in front of this part of the Sacred Barrier.

After having done our best to clean up the village, my company rejoined the regiment behind the woods, and we had to dig trenches. For the first time in my life I was transformed into a navvy. I would, in time, become very skilled at this craft, and I believe that very few professional navvies had dug as much dirt as me.

Thanks to our efforts and the goodwill of the brave poilus of my squad, we were soon installed in a fashion, a little comfortable, at least very acceptable; and I had so well chosen my emplacement that not one of my men was wounded by a shell in the course of the battle.

I am not going to undertake to describe all the episodes of this battle of fifteen days, because I would only be repeating myself endlessly, and

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my story would become monotonous. I'll limit myself to recounting later the two most intense

³³See map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/LorraineA.pdf>.

days.

Each day we exchanged bullets with the Germans in front of us, and when they descended into the ravine, despite our firing, a section of my company, according to the number of the attackers, left the trench and fell on them at bayonet.

We heard the shrieks, the yelling, the cries of pain, and then our men came back, not all naturally because you can't make an omelet without breaking some eggs—sweating, panting, their effects disordered, their rifles covered with blood. Then we took count, as well as could be done, of the missing, dead, wounded, disappeared.

At night, with all kinds of precautions and Indian tricks, our stretcher bearers descended into the ravine to retrieve the wounded who often had cried out and appealed for help for hours.

It was necessary for the stretcher bearers to have much courage and sang-froid to accomplish their thankless task and without glory because at the slightest sound—a rock that rolls out from under their feet, a branch that cracks, a wounded man who moans—the Germans fired without pity.

Often they were accompanied by the chaplain of the division—a brave man for whom nothing bothered him—who helped them in their task, encouraged them and did his best to comfort the wounded.

More than one of our stretcher men paid for their devotion with their life.

Each day, the corvees descended to Crévic where they searched for provisions and sometimes some sweets, but the trip was not without danger because the Germans, furious at having been chased from the village, shelled it violently.

For eighteen days, the poor village received shells of large caliber that wiped out the houses that had survived the fires.

The assistant to the mayor, the brave Mr. Royer, actively fulfilled his duties to feed the small group of people gathered around the bell tower, and more than one time I encountered him in the streets during a bombardment when everyone had taken refuge in the cellars. He had seen death up so close that he seemed to no longer fear it.

The morning of 1 September, the artillery sounded stronger than usual, but it was not the sound that gave the signal of alarm, because it no longer alarmed us. We knew that the day would be [55] eventful, because our role consisted especially to harass the enemy, to oblige him not to thin out his line in front of us and not to employ his reserves that he had in the bois d'Einville.

The morning was splendid. The birds, who, without a doubt, had gotten used to the noise of the cannons, sang in the neighboring bushes. The light mist of fall mornings evaporated in the profound blue sky under the first caresses of the sun.

The fighting, which had never stopped since 25 August, to the west of Lunéville, seemed to increase rapidly in violence. This was a great battle that took place that day in front of the forêt

de Vitrimont, at Vitrimont, Frescati, around the village of Anthelupt, the farms de Léomont and Saint-Epvre; a battle in the course of which the division of Nancy, the iron division, covered itself with immortal glory.³⁴ If it was not able to defeat on that memorable day in September an enemy superior in number and powerfully equipped, at least it bloodied it.

One day history will say of the splendid unsurpassed heroism of the soldiers who climbed, under a deluge of machine gun fire, the slopes of Léomont and Saint-Epvre, of the regiment at Frescati, seeing their colonel, the intrepid Courtot de Cissy, fall and be killed, and its lieutenant colonel seriously injured, charged the enemy at bayonet to avenge them.

But returning to Crévic, our action, to be more modest, was nothing more, as far as I am able to judge, than useful.

As soon as our brave cooks had brought us some strange liquid that they pretentiously called coffee, the lieutenant told us, while chewing on his eternal cigar:

“Friends, we are going to bother the Kamarades in front of us.”³⁵

“That will be a godsend!” Said Bataille whose hatred for the Boche knew no limits since they seemed to him as a colony of insects that the best ointments had failed to get rid of.

We begin with some volleys, and soon our artillery enters the act, copiously sprinkling the trenches of hill 316 and the bois d’Einville.

The concert lasts a while, and then our lieutenant has us cease fire. The artillery continues to fire. He looks at his watch and says to us:

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“It is ten minutes to six. At 6 o’clock, we will go into the ravine, and we’ll have a few words with those guys. Get ready.”

The announcement of such an expedition always produces a certain impression, even among the bravest. We know, in effect, that we are going before death, offering ourselves to his blows. We know that all are not going to return, that some of our comrades will be missing at roll call, dead, wounded, disappeared.

The enemy, who guesses our intention, snipes at us vigorously and sent towards us some shells, hoping to nail us in our holes.

Will it succeed?

Our lieutenant believes so, and I see him do something splendid, incredible.

Calmly, he climbs on the embankment of the trench, and there, in full light, under the storm of

³⁴The 11th infantry division, based in Nancy, was called the “division de fer” (the iron division).

³⁵Approximate French version of the German word for “comrade” (Kamerad).

machine guns, he walks back and forth, cigar in his mouth, without taking one step faster than the other.

It is really marvelous; we can not hardly breathe. Then we applaud and beg our officer to return.

"Not worth it," he responds while looking at his watch. "There's no more than a minute left."

And so, transported, electrified by such an example, without waiting for the set minute, we jump out, in turn, and almost immediately, at a gesture from the lieutenant, we tumble into the ravine, heads lowered, bayonets fixed. Badly shaken by the fire of the machine guns which, however, do not stop us, we cross the green ground and reach the trench of our adversary.

A huge devil who had a terrible appearance directs his bayonet towards my chest. Without lowering my gun, I pull the trigger, and he falls. I defend myself again against a young officer who attempts to aim his new revolver at me and who I try to catch with my bayonet. I wondered which of us would win out when a bullet, coming from I don't know where, hits him right in the chest.

That's all that I saw of hand-to-hand fighting of which I pulled myself out of without a scratch.

At the moment when the young Boche officer fell, the order was given to return to our positions, and I learned then that we had run the risk of being cornered and taken like rats in the German trench.

At least our goal had been achieved; we had held the enemy spellbound.

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The same scene repeated itself throughout the day; but my section no longer had to participate. The others undertook the attacks judged necessary.

We had, in the course of our small operation, eight men killed, fifteen wounded and six missing.

Our lieutenant was out of the fight with a deep gash on the right cheek and a large wound on the scalp; but he refused to leave us, even to go to the aid post.

A few days later the Germans, in their turn, attacked.

[photo here]

and under the extreme violence of their assaults, under the weight of their compact masses, under the formidable storm of their heavy artillery, the barrier broke for a moment. But if we were obliged to fall back, they could not break through, and with a furious elan, we retook, at bayonet, all the lost terrain and inflicted on the enemy terrible losses.

They pushed us back towards Rambêtant.

It was a retreat serious enough, but damn! When one bends under such a thrust, it is not easy to stop.

But we did stop and clinging to the ground, we headed off the horde that pressed us.

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Some orders were then given. Liaison aides ran in all directions, and the news spread like a trail

of gunpowder waiting to explode.

It was what we all were waiting for.

“Conquer or die!” Our corp commander shouted simply.

And he saw that he did not have to say more.

Superbly standing under the machine guns, the bugles, at full blast, sounded the charge

It was a splendid charge, fantastic, something so beautiful and so great, that the imagination would not know how to picture it.

We reached the enemy while singing the Marseillaise; all of our bugles continued to sound.

Under the shock, the German mass wavered, then it re-gathered, then it wavered again, and finally it lost its footing and commenced a movement backward.

At first it was slow; but we struck repeated blows. We were drunk on the blood and carnage; life no longer counted for us, neither ours nor theirs.

These Germans were brave--those who say differently have never seen them in combat--and they defended with fury, no longer worried any more than us about their losses. However, their movement back soon deepened. We held on.

In the evening, we had regained all the terrain lost, and we reoccupied our positions.

In the very midst of the melee, while charging at our head, our lieutenant colonel had fallen heroically.

He was mourned by the entire regiment. In him we had an excellent commander who loved and was loved by all his men and who was interested in their slightest needs and knowing how to be obeyed and not to banter with discipline.

Leaders of this caliber are usually worshiped by the soldier who loves, above all, to feel commanded

During many nights after that tough day, we could not sleep, or at least have a restful sleep. We had experienced such an excitement, supported such a nervous tension, that an equilibrium could be reestablished only with difficulty and slowly.

For several days, the Germans showed themselves relatively calm; and I swear, we were not angry, I confess, to unwind a bit.

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We supposed that they were tired, and there was something to that, but along with the fatigue came certainly--we did not know then--the concern of their command about the battle of the Marne.

When they were convinced that the check of their armies of the north on the Marne was definite,

that is to say on 12 September, they moved, without fanfare, back towards their frontier.

Because we were so close to each other, it was a time that their situation in Lorraine and in the Vosges had become difficult and dangerous as a result of the retreat of their armies beaten on the Marne and that of the Crown Prince in the region of Verdun.³⁶ Their line, in effect, was in the air and could be taken from behind if they had tried to maintain it that far from the frontier.

For the region, it was the end of a nightmare, and I was able, a few days later, to take note of the joy of the inhabitants of Lunéville, who had suffered greatly under the German occupation.

³⁶Crown Prince Wilhelm (Friedrich Wilhelm Victor August Ernst, 1882-1951), heir to the German throne, commanded the German Fifth Army.

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VIII: The Chapter of Horrors ³⁷

I went to Lunéville,³⁸ accompanied by some of my men, soon after the departure of the Germans, with the aim of collecting useful information and, if possible, to glean some food.

The poor town was quite damaged, and there were a certain number of victims among the civilian population.

I am going to try and describe what I saw there and to report as exactly as possible that which I heard amidst the still smoking ruins.

Saturday, 22 August, German patrols roamed the streets of Lunéville, and on Sunday, the 23rd, the soldiers entered, preceded by their musicians, their fifes and their drums.

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Until the 25th, all was tranquil, and the Germans contented themselves with pillaging some well furnished houses, but on the 25th they suddenly became enraged.

That day, soldiers of General Dubail inflicted a bloody defeat on the Germans at Rozelieures and, on our side, we had them stopped and turned them back at Vitrimont, Crévic and other places. The Sacred Barrier had stood before the horde who had thought themselves already victorious.

[photo here]

That seemed a bitter pill to them, and as they had under their control peaceful French populations, they decided that they will make them pay the piper.

Under the usual pretext that inhabitants had fired on them, they set fire to the city hall and many houses on the rue Castara and in the suburbs of Einville, and they shot several civilians who were completely innocent, notably one named Crombez who came out of a pharmacy and was beaten on the corner of rue de Viller, and the minister Weil, and his daughter aged sixteen.

That was only the start.

At the Place des Carmes, Mr. Kahn, a café owner, is shot in his garden, and his old mother, aged 97, is killed in her bed by a bayonet.

Further some named Sibille and Vallon are stopped and massacred by bayonet.

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³⁷This footnote appears in the original book: "The majority of the facts reported in this chapter are mentioned in the reports and minutes of the commission of inquiry established in view of the acts committed by the enemy in violation of the rights of men. This commission was composed of: President, Mr. Georges Payelle, first president of the Court of Auditors; Members: Mr Mollard, plenipotentiary minister, Maringer, councillor of state, Paillot, councillor at the Court of Cassation)."

³⁸Lunéville is a commune a little to the south of Nancy. See map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/AlsaceLorraine.pdf>.

A brave man, the father Wingerstmann, left, taking his grandson by the hand, to go gather some apples in his field at Mossus, in the commune of Chanteheux. Near the farm of the chateau, the Germans met him, put him against a wall and shot him.

At the hospital, a nurse named Monteils was in the process of taking care of a wounded German colonel, when he heard shots fired on the street. The colonel occupied a bed to the right of a window. Monteils leans over to see what was happening and receives a bullet in his head that kills him instantly and sprays brains all over the beds of the wounded.

We can also cite, among the victims, an old man, Mr. Colin, a young man of twenty-one who responds to the name of Hamann, and another man of forty, Lucien Dujon.

This list is already long, yet I think that it is largely incomplete.

The artillery also caused a certain number of deadly accidents. A cabinetmaker, Mr. Bain, was killed in front of his door, place Saint-Jacques, on the 22nd of August. On 28 August, a young girl, eighteen years old, Miss Suzanne Gilles, a Red Cross nurse, was cut in two in the school yard which had been transformed into an ambulance post.

Happily the artillery did not produce only French victims.

They showed me, with pride, on the sidewalk of the rue d'Alsace, a hole created by a French shell that according to the inhabitants sent eighteen Germans to a better world, of which there were ten officers and a prince of Bavaria.

If the fact is true, that certainly was a great cannon shot.

The following proclamation, in which the inhabitants are accused of having attacked convoys of the wounded, was attached on the walls of the village. The document does not lack a certain amount of interest.

“German troops have seized Lunéville. The French armies have been beaten all along the front. The English corps is scattered. The Austrians and the Germans are advancing victoriously in Russia. I appeal to the good senses of the population to aid me in the reestablishment of order in the town and return to a normal state. At Lunéville it has happened that convoys of wounded, columns and baggage have been attacked by the inhabitants who are not part of the army and who violate the laws of war. The German army makes war on soldiers and not the citizens of France. It guarantees to the inhabitants

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complete security for their persons and their goods as long as they themselves do not take part in hostile actions. The commander of the city brings to the public's attention:

[photo here]

“1st A state of siege is declared in the territory occupied by German soldiers.

“2nd Will be punished by death all those persons who take up arms against persons belonging to the German army and its support, those who destroy bridges, telegraph and telephone lines

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railroads, supplies or quarters of the soldiers, who render roads impassable, who tear down posters, who watch airplanes and try to make signals to the French troops or enter into

communication with them.

“It is forbidden for all inhabitants:

“Any gathering in the streets; to walk about after 7:00 (French time); to leave the town after 7 o’clock in the evening and 5 o’clock in the morning without a pass from the German authorities.

“Anyone who is harboring French soldiers must denounce them. Whoever has arms and ammunition must turn them over to the guard, Alsace Street, number 39.

“The German authorities intend to supply the needs of their soldiers, as well as those of inhabitants; so in the interests of the well-being of the population, it is demanded that the inhabitants return to their houses, open their doors and shutters, and resume commerce and work to assure regular provisioning.

“All men, the authorities of the town, the police and the gendarmerie will be put at the disposition of the German authority. The inhabitants that have complaints about soldiers should address the commander of the guard as soon as possible. Details about the execution of this article will be published soon.

28 August 1914

Goeringer

General commandant and commander of troops in Lunéville

The general who signed this proclamation would not live to see Germany.

He is interred at Lunéville, and it is claimed that he committed suicide because the kaiser reproached him for not having acted aggressively enough with his troops at Nancy.

On 3 September, another general told the stunned inhabitants of Lunéville that they had “made an ambush against a column of German trains and massacred the wounded, etc.,” and he invited them, as compensation for these acts, to pay an indemnity of six hundred and fifty thousand francs.

Here is the general’s text; it merits an extensive reprint.

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Notice to the Population

“On 25 August 1914, the inhabitants of Lunéville undertook an ambush of German trains and columns. The same day, the inhabitants fired on sanitary units marked with the Red Cross sign. Further, they have fired on German wounded and on the military hospital containing a German ambulance. Because of these hostile acts, a contribution of 650 thousand francs is imposed on the commune of Lunéville. The order is given to the mayor to pay this sum in gold (in silver up to 50 thousand francs) on 6 September at 9 o’clock in the morning, into the hands of the German authorities. Any complaint will not be considered. No delay will be accepted.

“If the commune does not fulfil punctually the order to pay the sum of 650 thousand francs, we will seize all eligible property. In case of non payment, all houses will be searched. Whoever knowingly concealed money or tries to hide items from seizure by the military authority or tries

to leave the town, will be shot. The mayor and the hostages taken by the military authority will be responsible for the exact execution of the above-mentioned orders. The order is given to the mayor to publish immediately these provisions in the town.

Hénaménil, 3 September 1914

Commander in chief
Von Fasbender

I have seen, at Lunéville, a number of buildings destroyed by shooting or by fire: the town hall, the sub-prefecture (the former Hôtel Brissac)—destruction that the Germans claimed from French shells--the ceramic workers quarters, rue de Viller, a group of important buildings that form a side of the place des Carmes behind the statue of the abbe Gregory, almost an entire side of the rue Castara.

And certainly I am forgetting much, because I did not see everything.

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The poor town had suffered much from the invasion, but it is a vigorous city that will be able to rapidly heal its wounds.

Nomény is a beautiful capital of a district in the province of Nancy, situated to the north of the Lorraine capital, on the Seille River, that is to say close to the frontier.

On 20 August, after Mohrange, the Bavarians reached there behind our retreating troops.

The unfortunate town was the theater of terrifying scenes, of which I learned from a young man who succeeded in escaping and reaching our lines.

When the Bavarians arrived, the town appeared empty because all the population was taking cover in the cellars to avoid the bullets and shells.

The doors and the windows were smashed with rifle butts, and the poor people heard hoarse voices crying out: "Raus! Outside!"

They came out, and there was a massacre.

The torch was put to the four corners of the town, and a number of houses burned.

In the inferno, the Bavarians were agitated like a band of demons, screaming insults and killing, without pity, all the people who left the cellars or those that the fire and smoke chased from their houses.

My young man, who had received a bullet in the shoulder and who had fallen between two cadavers in a sea of blood, had the good idea to play dead and was able, when night came, to crawl and leave the hell of Nomény.

He told me that in passing by the suburb of Nancy he had seen, in the sinister glow of the flames, among the many corpses stretched out dead, those of a young boy of ten or eleven years and a young girl of two or three years. Around the bodies, a mother, wounded, cried in misery and demanded her death.

He knew that the children were those of the mother Kieffer and that their father was also located among the victims.

One of his friends also informed him that the next day when the battle recommenced, the Germans took fifty people into the front line in the hope to stop or lessen the fire from the French.

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There were a lot of victims in the area occupied by my regiment, around Lunéville and Crévic and in Crévic itself.

There are few villages, hamlets, farms where the Germans entered that did not become the theater of some kind of crime against humanity.

[photo here]

It is probable that in ravaging everything in their path, in putting everything to the torch or killing, our enemies hoped to scare the people into demanding peace.

Just as certain tyrants reigned by terror, they wanted to win by terror.

They are mistaken.

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FROM THE HILLS OF LORRAINE TO THE PLAINS OF FLANDERS

IX: Goodbye Lorraine!

After the retreat of the Germans, life became almost agreeable for the boys who had passed almost a month under machine gun fire, with, as a distraction from time to time, a bayonet charge.

Obviously we got used to it, but I assure you that we also lost that habit with the greatest of ease, and that it is not disagreeable to sleep without thinking of awakening in the other world.

"It's too good, old man!" The good and brave Bataille said to me sometimes. "You will see that this will not last long."

"I hope so," said the lieutenant when he heard the reflection of Bataille. "We'll eventually get bored and rusty."

While waiting for new adventures, the depot sent us some reinforcements to fill in the missing, and our great regiment was soon back at full strength.

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The "blues"³⁹ did not tire of hearing the story of our exploits, which they had already heard about at the depot, and, of course, we never tire of satisfying their thirst.

We relived the glorious hours for them, reminded ourselves of the comrades who are no longer, and then, as often as possible, we decorated their graves.

Each day I went alone to visit some of these poor graves sewn into the greenery on the side of the hill. They attracted me like a magnet attracts iron, and each of the wooden crosses, topped by the cap of the dead man, seemed to me more beautiful than the most sumptuous mausoleum.

I had known them, these dead! The majority had been my comrades or my commanders. We had lived together through hours of enthusiasm and discouragement; we had suffered; we had fought together.

And before their graves, the tie that had bound us did not seem to me to be definitely broken. I thought that I heard the voice of one or the other of these disappeared sometime, and that voice said to me:

"Courage! Friend, courage! You will have many tests to endure before gaining, like us, eternal rest."

³⁹"Blues" refers to the fact that by September 1914 replacements and new recruits in the French Army had begun to be outfitted in new "horizon blue" uniforms. The color was a light blue/gray that was much better fitted for modern warfare than the official uniform at the start of the war, bright blue overcoats and red trousers.

These solitary visits to the graves on the hillside did me good; they maintained in me a delicious calm, and they especially got me used to the idea of death. They helped me to look death in the eye without trembling.

We were not in battle for a long time, and all that had preceded the cataclysm appeared to me as if it had happened very long ago. My erstwhile existence, my friends of yore, my work, all that seemed to me to belong to a different world.

Without really being able to explain why, before the graves of my friends, I had the impression of feeling even closer to this world.

At present we were keeping guard, so to speak, in front of the Germans, who are encrusted on our soil: a guard duty however that was a little dangerous because the two artilleries often exchanged shells, and if, one ventured too close to the barbed wire of the enemy, there was the sniper fire of excellent marksmen who were always watching.

It became monotonous, and I began to believe that the lieutenant was right in saying that we were getting rusty.

The commander also thought the same and guessed that the older soldiers and the less-trained could replace us

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[photo here]

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in the trenches. One day, I learned from our captain that we should prepare ourselves to go fight in another place.

I wanted to know where they could send us, but the captain told me that he did not know. The colonel received the order to depart. We were to go to the station designated in the order, and only then would someone tell us our final destination.

However, he told us that in his opinion we were going towards the Somme, and he gave us the following explanation:

“The German armies, beaten on the Marne and fallen back, established themselves on the Aisne, and there is every reason to believe that the enemy is going to try something in the west, most likely to turn our left flank, because we know that he is directing strong reinforcements on that side.”

“If my guess is correct,” added the captain, “a hard task awaits us. But I am convinced that the these fellows will not attack where they have already attacked.”

He told us all of this happily, but we felt that he had a somewhat heavy heart at the thought of leaving Lorraine, because he was from Lunéville, married in Nancy, a pure blood Lorraine.

For me, who was not from Lorraine, this departure would have left me a little indifferent if I did not have to abandon the graves of my comrades. Certainly, they would be cared for, but that

care was not as available as mine. It would not be as enjoyable to those who sleep there because I had known them.

We moved towards Champenoux, and that's where the order to depart reached us.

It was fast.

As before in the barracks, there was a formidable helter-skelter, cries, shouts, much apparent bad humor, threats of terrible punishments which terrified everyone. Then, like the wand of a fairy, the crowd quieted, and a superb regiment emerged from the chaos, and everyone regained a smile.

The men, happy to change place, to see the country, joyously asked questions. The officers calmly dealt with the situation.

Finally a bell signaled the departure. The ranks formed.

"Forward!"

We were on our way to the unknown, towards other places and other dangers.

How many of us will meet again this superb region and these fields that we had saved [74] and that we had reddened with our blood, these friendly villages where they loved us?

On the way to the point of embarkation, we noticed the wife of our captain who, accompanied by their three young children, was waiting for our passing.

The poor woman with red eyes stiffened up to try and keep from crying. Our captain was terribly pale and biting his lips.

This scene moved me deeply; my eyes filled with tears; and a tear rolled down my mustache.

War is truly a terrible thing.

We embarked. A bugle sounded, to which a whistle responded, a few cries succeeded by an impressive silence, the train shook.

"Goodbye, beautiful and brave Lorraine!"

The voyage was long, monotonous and painful. The heat transformed the cars in which we were stuffed into an oven. And the majority of the men slept.

At the stations where we stopped, the friendly women, charming young girls either wearing the uniform or simply the insignia of the Red Cross, filled us with treats and served us some beer and lemonade.

On the journey we were acclaimed, and we were happy to note that the reputation of the 20th corps had exceeded the limits of Lorraine. I remember in a station that I heard a worker tell

many people:

"They are the ones from Nancy, the tough guys!"

And that, I say, pleased me.

Yes, those are the tough guys of Sainte-Geneviève, Amance, Champenoux, Frescati, Léomont, Vitrimont, Crévic!

And these names, today hardly known, that designate humble villages or simple farms, shine in history, by the famed soldiers of the Great War who are the equal of those famous soldiers of [Napoleon's] Grande Armée.

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X: The Somme Battles

Our captain was right. It was to the Somme that we were transported.⁴⁰

I believe that they were waiting for us there because we had heard the cannons during our first day's march.

The lieutenant tells us that it had to be firing in the direction of Roye, and he showed me this town on the map. For us, this was just distant music, but it told us that we could not delay entering the dance.

As I expressed this opinion to Bataille, he made the observation to me that we certainly had not been transported this far for the sole goal of a change of scenery.

We had left the region of Nancy in the rain, and here we found the sun.

Despite that, the marching was monotonous and appeared to us horribly long.

What a difference between this countryside, a little bleak, and Lorraine, so picturesque.

We had lost our usual enthusiasm and good humor; and, when we approached Quesnoy, where we were supposed to camp, there were no joyous demonstrations or shouts that ordinarily marked arrival at our lodging.

[76]

My squad was happy to have a good corner in a nice barn and a place to sleep that was filled with well-dried hay, maximum comfort for some poilus on the path to the war. And not an artillery shell to think of!

The splendor of this place and the promise of a good night's sleep was like a little balm on our ulcerated hearts. My rank of corporal imposed on me certain duties.

One of my men was missing at roll call: Billet, the jokester of the squad.

Where in the devil did the animal get to?

We organized to search the camp to find him, and I promised to let him know the importance of being present, when suddenly he appeared before us, a little out of breath.

"Where are you coming from?" I asked him in a severe voice.

He winked, put a finger to his lips and responded in a low voice.

"Don't get angry, I've assured some supper for the squad."

Then, lifting a flap of his overcoat, he showed us a superb rabbit.

⁴⁰See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Artois.pdf>.

I did not care to ask him where he had made his find. It is a case when a NCO should not appear too curious.

And so we had a good supper and good lodging. Billet's rabbit almost made us forget Lorraine.

My friend, Bataille, came to share our supper and gave us some information about the operations that we were going to participate in that he had gotten from the captain.

Map in hand, he showed us that we had in front of us the right of the German armies, that is to say the extremity of the immense line that began in the Vosges. That line reached a little in front of Lassigny, then suddenly straightened out almost at a right angle and went on, almost perpendicularly, right to the suburbs of Péronne.

The enemy had massed troops in this perpendicular wing, and his plan consisted of pivoting around Lassigny, used as a hinge, to extend the line and, as a consequence, push us back towards the south, then outflank our left, turn us and perhaps resume the march towards Paris.

Our role consisted of maintaining, at any price, the right wing of the Germans in its perpendicular position and, if possible, outflanking it to roll up the front line, which would then be taken in the rear.

Bataille let us know that at the same time, the 11th division
[77]

the famous iron division, of Nancy, was located on the side of Chuignes to attack the German wing from above.

That promised us very hard fighting because it promised another setback to our enemy's plans.

We understood what was expected of us, and we were ready.

I have always thought, and I still think that it is useful in modern war to indicate clearly to the soldier the goal to be attained,
[photo here]
and why the effort was demanded of him. That was the method of our captain, and I found it good.

The next day, thanks to the good supper and a good night's sleep, we had regained our spirits and our good humor, and we set off for Fresnoys.

That day, 25 September, our division occupied the line Chavatte-Fouquescourt, and the battle began.⁴¹

There we endured rude attack while the 11th division, battled heroically on the line Chuignes-Cappy, against the German extreme right which had commenced its movement. The 11th

⁴¹La Chavatte, a commune in the Somme department, is located about fifteen miles southeast of Amiens and due south of Chaulnes. Fouquescourt is a commune located a little west of La Chavatte. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Artois.pdf>.

barred the passage and pushed it back.

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When we arrived in the furnace, the 146th is already fully engaged in front of the village of Fouquescourt, and the comrades of that regiment, laying on the ground filled with shell holes and peppered with the bullets from many machine guns, fired relentlessly.

The rattle of the fusillade is uninterrupted and includes the disagreeable clack-clack of machine guns, far more impressionable for those who knew the terrible mowers of men than the far off roar of heavy artillery.

Behind our infantry, we hear the hiccups of our 75s.⁴²

They stop us in back and a little below Chavatte so that, according to the situation, we can go either to the village that the 153rd is attacking or on to Fouquescourt.

Hidden behind a hill, we had no other distraction than to count the shells that pass over us, over the crest, and come down to explode fifty meters from us.

No one reacts; we are used to it.

An hour passes, and we are still there, immobile, seeing nothing, listening to the great noise of the battle that rages.

It's exasperating; bad for the nerves.

Suddenly the lieutenant comes towards us and asks for volunteers for a dangerous reconnaissance mission.

One of my men, Besnard, elbows me and says:

"Let's go!"

Why not? Anything is better than inaction.

We volunteer, Besnard and me.

"You are not married?" asks the lieutenant.

"No, lieutenant."

"Good! Good! And so, let's go. It's necessary to know what is happening at Fouquescourt. Go, look and let us know. Good luck!"

He shook our hands, and we left.

To see, it is first necessary to climb a hill whose summit is a point targeted by the artillery, it

⁴²The 75mm gun was the standard French artillery piece of the First World War.

changes its form every second, like the crown of lava of an active volcano. You could say that it looked like an internal fire bubbling the ground at the summit.

“There is no other way,” said Besnard. “We have to go there; and, once past the crest, we will see the battle like from an orchestra chair.”

How were we going to get past that crest? I do not know.

We were creeping along, our noses to the ground. We hide from time to time in a shell hole [79] pressed to the ground, sometimes, a mine exploded too close to us and we were bruised by the stones that fell on us.

Never had I seen death so close.

In this hell, Besnard did not lose his good humor. I moved forward [photo here] the blood rushing to my head, teeth clenched. He, the brave boy, never stopped with the jokes.

I admired him and said to myself:

“That one there is braver than you.”

At the moment when the shells tumbled down their hardest, my companion approached me and whispered:

“If I die here and you get out, I have in my pocket a letter ready, take it and get it through. I would like only that my poor wife knows my last thoughts and wishes.

“Your wife? But, just a little while ago, you told the lieutenant...”

“Yes, I know, I lied, but he would not have let me go... And so, you know, it’s not a big deal, a lie like that one... My comrades should not be obliged to be killed in my place [80] just because I am married, no?... And besides, one must do his duty.”

Having crossed the ridge, we succeeded in finding on the opposite slope a sort of natural niche where we had a kind of shelter from the shell explosions and where we had a superb view of Fouquescourt.

It was then 9:30.

Our comrades of the 146th advanced in surges towards the village under a formidable downpour of shells, traversing a sheet of bullets from about twenty machine guns and thousands of rifles.

What men!

Truly, at that moment, my heart filled with emotion, and I felt proud to belong to such a division, to be a unit in that phalanx.

With each move forward, some men fell. The ground traversed was covered with dead and wounded; the others continued to advance.

Soon they were about a hundred meters from the village, and I understood that they were going to charge. I saw the commander, lieutenant colonel Mazis, who I knew well, carry himself bravely in front of the line of skirmishers and lead them towards the entrance to Fouquescourt.

Almost at once he fell, and I learned that evening that he died of his wounds.

We reported then the good news, and I learned that we had equally held the farm outside of Chavatte.

The next day we saw the wounded from Chuignes and Cappy pass by, and we were pleased to learn that the 11th division had superbly stood up to the enemy and pushed them back, inflicting on them heavy losses.

A young corporal of the 79th, wounded in both legs, explained to us that he had been at Cappy and what he saw, that is to say what his company had done.

As I already said, a battle takes place in a narrow area, and one sees only a small corner of the action. To talk about a battle in its completeness, it would be necessary to ask the men in each of the units and from them obtain only an incomplete story, imperfect and filled with errors, because, even in one's own area,

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a soldier cannot see everything; in addition, what he did see, he often saw poorly.

The story of the corporal from the 79th, confirmed by the wounded around him, seemed to summarize very clearly the combat of 25 September at Cappy. I noted this with care because this action was intimately tied to ours and concerned the same goal: to prevent the extreme right of the Germans from pivoting and to maintain the line in a horizontal position.

"My battalion," the corporal told us, "the 2nd, experienced a terrible bombardment all day on the 25th. At first we advanced easily, but, towards 3 o'clock in the afternoon, it was impossible to budge."

"To retreat, of course, we never thought of that. We will stay there, crouched against the ground, under a terrible rain of steel. Around me, I sometimes heard the moans of a man who was struck by a fragment of a shell, a shrapnel, a machine gun or a rifle bullet. Above all I remember a poor bugger who had his stomach ripped open and who was calling out, his blood trickling towards me. The red stream reached me; it was horrible,"

"Of course, we were lying down, and we curled up as much as possible."

"The Germans fought hard, but we also fought hard. Our cannons fired so rapidly that you couldn't distinguish the shots."

"Towards 5 o'clock, and I assure you that the two hours seemed to us to last much longer, the fire in front became less violent, and we decided to resume the march forward."

“All at once we get up to move forward. My sergeant receives a bullet in the head and falls, struck down. I take command in his place. I push my men, and we gain about twenty meters of ground.”

“It was necessary to reach a ridge, in front of the village, from which, once on the ridge, we could let loose the assault.”

“Ah! That ridge at Cappy. I will never forget it! It seemed to pull back away from us.”

“Finally, towards evening, after a day of struggle, my battalion occupied it. Seeing that, the Germans executed a backward movement.”

“We were the victors.”

“There was a mad joy in the ranks. The exhaustion, the dangers, all were forgotten.”

“In the morning, at dawn, we approached the village, and then we entered, hoping to find the Boches in front of our bayonets.

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They had not waited for us; but their artillery sprinkled us copiously, and it was at that moment that I was hit.”

“But it’s all the same to me, we had them and the village above the market.”

About eight days later, passing not far from Cappy, we emotionally saluted three large graves where slept two hundred brave infantry of the 79th regiment.

In front of the graves, my thoughts returned to those graves of my comrades in Lorraine and who stand there, an eternal guard, and yet here another Lorraine, a new barrier against the invasion, is formed with their valiant chests.

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XI: The Race to the Sea

The Germans, stubborn people, still struck heavy blows against the barrier, and in a few days the dance recommenced on the line Chavatte-Fouquescourt and in front of Cappy; but the barrier remained unbreakable.

Lieutenant colonel H, commanding the 153rd, was badly wounded in the attack on the village of La Chavatte.

Since our entry into the campaign, this was the third corps commander who fell at the head of this regiment; Colonel de Grandmaison, wounded 20 August before Mohrange; battalion commander Berlin who replaced him on the battlefield, killed 25 August at Crévic, and finally lieutenant colonel H.

Noticing that we were also as involved as them and that they could not pass because of the guys from Nancy and Toul, the Germans tried to play games, and they rapidly extended their right towards the north, trying constantly to drape down on us their monstrous tentacle and envelope us on the left; but we clambered as fast as them, and they always found us there, one or the other, ready for battle.

And so on 7 October, my regiment received the attack at Fricourt, where we had been preceded by the 26th.⁴³

[84]

One more time, despite the expenditure of their shells, despite the rage of their attacks, we barred their route to the west, forcing them to turn, to avoid to being run over and having their flank turned.

I will not recount all the combats which took place in this race to the sea because they all resemble one another. We draw ourselves up before the German octopus as the animal tamer before a wild beast that insists on reaching the door of its cage.

Then the enemy meets the obstruction and tries to force a passage to the west, and we hit hard again. Each time we had the satisfaction of seeing him fall back and growl.

This phase of the war is certainly not the least interesting, and I will be pleased if my modest notes aid future historians of the Great War to better comprehend this picturesque side.

In any case, I can affirm then that to maintain the line to the right where the tentacle of the German octopus advanced to envelope us, the struggle was bitter and fierce.

Alas, how many have fallen and marked this long road!

At Fricourt, I lost one of my best friends, Baudu, and I almost accompanied him to the grave.

⁴³Fricourt, a commune in the Somme department, is located about five miles east of Albert. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Artois.pdf>.

Three of us were doing a reconnaissance in front of our lines, when a large caliber shell explodes less than ten meters from us. The burst struck poor Baudu right in the chest, and another fragment scalped me.

Despite being blinded by the blood that ran from my wound, I took note that I was not seriously wounded.

I ran to Baudu and wanted to take him in my arms, but he groaned in pain.

"There's no point," he murmured. "I've paid my dues. Goodbye friends!"

A choke of blood. He had a couple spasms, and that was all.

It was impossible for us to take back his body, and I was very much distressed; but we saw a strong German patrol, and we did not have the permission to engage in combat because we had to report on our mission, and we did report useful information.

The captain congratulated me and wanted to send me to the rear because of my wound; but I respectfully told him that a scratch like mine should not pass as a wound.

He shook my hand, and I rejoined my squad, where they learned painfully of the death of Baudu.

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Adjutant Bataille, the good and brave Bataille, distinguished himself particularly that day. Surrounded by his enemies and invited to surrender, he responded by striking with his saber the officer who had made that proposition, and he succeeded in getting away by knocking out two or three soldiers and bringing back half a dozen with him.

They told him that because of this and his previous conduct, he will be recommended for sub-lieutenant.

He confided this to me and blushed like a young girl.

[photo here]

"You understand, old man?" This admirable poilu said to me. "I am a little embarrassed because anyone in my place would have done the same thing."

I've said that the 26th preceded us at Fricourt. That superb regiment of the iron division superbly led the fight in the direction of Bécourt, a small village situated immediately above Fricourt on 7-8 October, as evidenced by the following order of the day:

"Colin, lieutenant colonel, commander 26th infantry regiment. In combat on the night of 7/8 October, had, by the good qualities of his bravery and sang-froid, stopped a German attack [86]

in which he inflicted a loss of seven officers and seven hundred men of which three hundred were wounded or killed and four hundred taken prisoner."

There was, in the course of battle, a most picturesque episode.

On a hill, very close to the village of Bécourt, there stands a chateau which we saw as a dark

mass through the green of the trees of a small forest.

Commander W., of the 3rd battalion, occupies the chateau along with his adjutant Feuillot and his quartermaster sergeants. His battalion is located in the trenches of the front line in front of the chateau.

The commander hears a noise from boots. Then violent blows strike the door, and a rude voice cries out:

“Open up! We’re English!”

But the accent is nothing like British. The commander of the guard responds, and the patrol moves away. At once W calls his sub-officers.

“All hands to battle, my friends! We have seen the Boche in our rear!”

Then he sends an order to the cooks, who are not far away preparing food for the poilus, to defend the chateau. They arrive at once—there are about fifty—carrying their cooking utensils and their pots, and they gather inside.

This parade, in the night, of the brave cooks carrying their instruments of work is a comical scene, and the commander could not stop from laughing.

But since he did not want to offer dinner to the Germans, the cooks, apprised of the situation, hasten to abandon their plates and pots to raise rifles. In haste, they form a barricade across the lane, and they wait, fingers on the triggers.

The attempt is not long in coming. The cooks have hardly taken their battle positions behind the improvised barricade when an enemy group appears in the lane in a column of fours.

They let it approach to twenty meters.

“Fire!”

The column stops. There is a stampede, cries, then flight, a wild flight.

About twenty dead and wounded lay on the ground in the lane.

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Soon a second group appears, preceded by two cyclists.

The same scene as before, and this time, our valiant cooks inherit the two bicycles.

But they could not always stay behind the barricade. Our men charge bravely and take off, in small groups, in pursuit of the enemy who flees in all directions.

Adjutant Feuillot, who commands one of these groups, having found in the pocket of one of the dead sub-officers a commander’s whistle, blows it, and what is the amazement of our poilus at seeing about forty Germans come running at the double.

They point guns at them, order them to raise their hands, gather them and send them to the chateau.

The brave cooks had well deserved the praise of the country.

While these scenes unfolded with a little comedy mixed with much heroism, the battles raged around the chateau.

The cooks calmly re-gathered their utensils and returned to their ovens, without worrying about the artillery that shelled the farm.

The order of day on the next day can serve as a conclusion to the episode that I just retold:

“Feuillot, adjutant reservist of the 26th infantry regiment. During combat on the night of 7-8 October, operated in a manner most intelligent and most active in the defense of the village attacked by seven companies of Germans. In the absence of units he himself took command of manned patrols in immediate contact with the enemy and with a detachment of five men, captured 45 prisoners.”

From the Somme, the German tentacle reached the Pas-de-Calais, always trying to grab us; but each time that it moved forward, our furious blows forced it back.

Hébuterne, Gennecourt, Fonquevillers, marked bloody stages on our race to the north.

Then there was the assault on Mouchy-au-Bois, 28 October, a superb affair in which the 11th division added a heroic page to its history. Unfortunately, the brave 69th, that had already seen fall at its head, on 1 September, colonel Carded de Ciesey, lost its commander here, lieutenant colonel Petijean de Marcilly.

I see, for the first time, near Fonquevillers, the firing of our machine guns at a German airplane. [88]

The villain bird was turning, swaying, rising, sinking; it seemed like a gigantic bat. At each moment we hoped to see it tumble. My men, enthusiastically cried:

“Daring, those machine gunners!”

Let me assure you that our brave machine gunners had no need for encouragement and that they turned the crank as hard as they could.

It was a profound disappointment when the plane rose higher and flew away towards its lines.

I learned later that it was very difficult to shoot down an airplane in these conditions. We could, in effect, riddle the wings with bullets without doing much damage, and to succeed, it was necessary to hit its vital parts or kill the pilot. Because the sensitive points are rare, and the pilot is located, especially in the German machine, pretty much protected from any firing from below.

We were all tired because we had marched a lot and only stopped to fight, which could not pass for a rest.

Combat, in effect, even if it is short, completely exhausts you, and the day after an affair, we are generally aching as if we had received blows to the body.

Naturally the shells followed us without stopping, which obliged us to take serious precautions, both during the march and in camp.

I remember that one day I occupied, in a village abandoned by its inhabitants, a superb room, and I was happy to sleep in a bed, something that I had not experienced since my departure from Paris.

In the evening, before going to bed, I went into the bathroom to wash my hands, and I was in the middle of doing that when a well-known whistling reached my ears.

“Well! I thought, another shell!”

All of a sudden, wham! Boom! Boom! The house begins to shake on its foundation; the walls crack; the floor rises under my feet.

A shell had destroyed the roof, and there was no longer a bed, nor the room, nothing but the rickety walls.

I had to go take up a corner in the hayloft.

In war, life is full of surprises.

That same evening, an entire section was buried under the

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rubble of a barn that a 150 shell had hit. By a miracle, there were no victims. Some wounds, some scars, some black eyes, that was not much.

The lieutenant, during the march, tells us a story in which one of our cooks had been the hero the day before.

As night fell, the brave cook was near his stoves installed in the hollow of a ravine and peeling potatoes.

[photo here]

A poilu passes by and smelling the stew exclaims:

“Christ, that smells good!”

Then the cook said:

“Listen, friend, if you want to taste it; you’ll have to help me peel the potatoes.”

The poilu was eager to assist; he sits on the trunk of a tree and eagerly begins the work.

Suddenly the brigade’s ordinance officer comes running up, and he asks the cook:

“Have you seen the general here?”

“No, captain.”

The officer makes a half turn and sees the easy-going poilu. His face expresses a profound astonishment. He approaches, salutes the poilu and calls him “general.”

The head cook, who thinks that he is in trouble, smiles amusingly at the general

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who reassures the brave boy and congratulates him on his ovens and the excellence of his stew.

“He’s a good guy,” the cook then said, “but they should prevent generals from dressing as simple soldiers.”

We continued to move, and our march got faster and faster, and always the tentacle tried to bar our route, to outflank us.

At this speed, it was evident that we would soon reach the North Sea.

Then no outflanking would be possible.

The Germans knew that, and that enraged them; but they did not take that as having been beaten. Those rogues never easily abandon an idea.

It would not be long before we had proof of that.

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THE BATTLE FOR FLANDERS

XII: A Little History

Before talking about our entry into Belgium and the bloody combats of the Ypres salient, it is indispensable to understand the facts and to quickly review the events in Flanders that preceded these combats.⁴⁴

It is by design that I use the word combat, while the word battle will be more accurate, but I use it because the ensemble of combats in the Ypres salient constituted the second phase of the great battle of Flanders.

After having cleared Belgium, with their primary goal upset by their defeat on the Marne and their checks in Lorraine and the Vosges, the Germans wanted, by a great offensive orchestrated on our left, a terrible attack, a virtual torrent, to force the route to Dunkirk and Calais.

For this formidable and monstrous offensive, which was to be carried out without considerations of any kind, our enemy mobilized contingents freshly arrived from Germany, composed of men who

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had not yet seen combat—volunteers for the most part—ardent, enthusiastic and absolutely fanatic, who counted among their ranks the flower of German youth.

The gap necessary for passage of this torrential stream had to be made on the front from Nieupoort-to Diksmuide.⁴⁵

The bridgehead at Nieupoort is held by Belgium troops who protect, on the left, the small Franco-English fleet, and who support, on the right at Diksmuide, our marines under the command of Admiral Ronarch.⁴⁶ The front is screened by our cavalry divisions and some units of infantry to which other troops are successively added.

A bombardment of unheard of intensity, by guns of large caliber, naturally preceded the offensive. Then, when the enemy judged that the defenses had been destroyed, he gave the signal to attack.

The shock was terrible.

We saw German battalions advancing in thick masses. The men, at certain points, linked arms, singing while marching to their deaths.

⁴⁴See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Ypres.pdf>.

⁴⁵Nieuwpoort-Diksmuide (current spelling)

⁴⁶Pierre-Alexis Ronarch (1865-1940) commanded the French “fusiliers marins” (marines) during the war. Later he was chief of staff of the French navy.

In those masses, our artillery open enormous breaches; our machine gunners cut down entire ranks; but at once the breaches reform, and other ranks come to offer themselves to our bullets.

The Prussian grenadiers at Valmy had charged in the same way⁴⁷; but the conditions were not the same; because they had not marched against the terrible weapons of death that modern armies possessed.

It was a butchery unparalleled in history.

Ten times, twenty times, at Nieuport as at Diksmuide, the green battalions marched to their death; you could believe that you were assisting in the suicide of a people.⁴⁸

Towards Nieuport, the Württemberg men succeed in passing through and taking the village of Ramscappelle, the central point of the line defended by the Belgians and the 42nd French division. The railroad that descended from Nieuport to Diksmuide is lost.

Not yet!

In haste the Algerian riflemen arrive. The bugles sound the charge, and our heroic Africans—for whom France will never do enough to recognize them—leap for the enemy at bayonet and yell their terrifying war cries.

In an instant, the German battalions are tumbling rearward, chased from the village
[93]
and thrown into the Yser, whose waters, red with blood, rolled the bodies around as if on a bed.

At Diksmuide, our marines perform miracles. In a single night, under an avalanche of fire that reduced the town to ruins, they repulse four assaults carried out by drunken or inebriated men.
[photo here]

The Belgians, in accord with the French general staff, make the decision to open the Beverdick locks and soon the water protected the Yser line at a distance of more than two kilometers.⁴⁹

They say that the Germans, not understanding the phenomenon, brought shovels, then buckets to take away the water which, sneakily, slowly, rose on the immense plain.
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The bloody fighting at Ramscappelle marked the check of the enemy's offensive on the Nieuwpoort-Diksmuide front.

⁴⁷On 20 September 1792 the French revolutionary army stopped an advance of the Prussian army at the village of Valmy. This preserved the revolutionary regime in France.

⁴⁸The author is describing the alleged "Massacre of the Innocents" (Kindermord) in the First Battle of the Ypres. Young German soldiers were slaughtered as they advanced on entrenched British positions.

⁴⁹With the opening of the sluice gates, water flooded the area between the Yser River and the railway embankment at Diksmuide. This basically brought major military activities to a halt.

The Germans thus had to give up on Dunkirk and Calais and search for something else.

The first phase of the battle for Flanders had ended 28 October. On the 30th, the enemy began the second phase and rushed the Ypres salient of which the general staff had perfectly understood its defects; the convex shape rendered defense difficult and permitted attacks to converge with the flanks exposed to enfilading fire.

Let's see what was called the "Ypres salient."

If you leave Diksmuide towards the south in a straight line, in about twenty kilometers you reach the city of Ypres, then after traveling another eight or nine kilometers you reach Messines.

A good road connects Diksmuide to Ypres and Messines.⁵⁰

Follow this road after leaving Diksmuide just until you reach Bixschoote. Then leave the highway and describe, towards the east, a great curve, passing through Langemark, Poelcappelle, Paschendaelle, Gheluveld, Zandvoorde, Hollebeke and then rejoining the main highway below Ypres at Saint-Éloi.⁵¹

And so we have traveled the front of the famous Ypres salient.

If you take the time to trace the front on a map, you will find that it encompasses a considerable extent of land.

When the Germans first engaged in fighting, we had very few troops there: two territorial divisions, the 87th and 89th; two division of cavalry and the 1st British corps.

Successively, we added troops there: the 9th army corps, the 38th division, the 32nd army corps, the 42 division arrived from Yser and then the 4th British corps.

Our army corps, the 20th was thrown into battle on 3 November.

Let's quickly examine the events that preceded that date.

The Germans easily concluded that the two sides (north of the line Bixschoote-Langemark-Poelcappelle and south of the line Saint-Éloi-Hollebeke) represented the sections most vulnerable. So they attacked them violently, and at the same time they exerted lateral pressure from Bixschoote towards the Yser canal and from Hollebeke towards Messines, to cut the route to Ypres.

As on the Yser, the enemy attacked in mass, after an intense artillery preparation.

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We respond with vigorous and rapid attacks and counter-attacks.

⁵⁰See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Ypres.pdf>.

⁵¹All places use the author's spelling.

In the northern sector, the 9th corps, augmented by the 31st division, engages on the line Bixschoote-Langemark-Poelcappelle and succeeds in advancing despite the furious resistance of the enemy; but the progress is stopped with the loss of Bixschoote which had been defended by a territorial division.

[photo here]

We retake this important point, and then lost it. It would be retaken on 3 November.

In the southern sector, the 1st English corps of General Douglas Haig undertook a serious attack that permitted it to advance a little, but when counter-attacked and not having sufficient means, the general had to stop. Under a violent attack, the 1st English corps evacuated Zandvoorde and Hollebeke.

The front is thus seriously undermined, and the situation becomes even more serious on 31 October with the loss of Messines, which the English cavalry had occupied.

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Our commander then put at the disposition of the English the 32nd infantry division, eight battalions of the 9th corps and some artillery.

The 9th corps stops an offensive at Zandvoorde; the 32nd division marches on Hollebeke, but it is pushed back on 3 November by a violent attack of massed battalions.

That was, in a large outline, the situation as of 3 November.

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XIII: Towards Battle

“We are leaving for Belgium!”

The news spreads like a trail of powder in our trenches to the north and is accompanied by shouts of joy.

Everything seems preferable to staying in the sticky mud and ice in the company of rats..

Bataille arrives in a gust of wind, joyous and bouncy.

“Let’s go, shoo! Pack up and let’s go! The Germans are waiting for us; they’re bored after the 20th corps, the poor devils!”

And he tells us that the 69th is getting ready to leave in vans.

Again there is a bustle, but we begin to be ready.

“Those cursed Germans will force us to go around the world,” says the lieutenant who, very calmly in the midst of the general agitation, casually smokes his cigar.

We roll along across a region horribly monotonous. The green spots are more and more rare; the soil takes on a pale yellow tint; the plains shine with large bodies of water; and the rain falls, a fine rain like a fog. The rain suits the countryside. It seems like the sun was bored here and would appear to be an intruder.

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Travel without any charm.

We shiver; we grumble; we curse.

Crossing the border, by a cabaret, the brave Belgians cheer us and offer us packs of cigarettes.

After a second we hear a violent bombardment on the right; but we don’t even move a muscle.

Only Bataille remarks--he is right--that the sound of a cannon is not the same here as in Lorraine. It is not as clear, not as crisp here.

“By Jove!” Remarks one of the jokers in my squad, “the guns are barking in this dog of a country!”

We stop. We are around a forest for which I no longer recall the extraordinary Flemish name, a name in which the “o” and the “e” are abundant.

But it’s really of no importance.

Our captain profits from the short halt to pay us a visit and say a few nice and comfortable words to us.

What a brave and dignified man!

We calm down, and really his presence animates us; we warm up.

Me, I think of his wife and his children that we had seen along the road on our departure from Lorraine, and as I said that he had to have a very heavy heart, the admirable commander who found good humor to talk with us, to unwind us.

One day, as he came to lead us in a bayonet drill, I saw him take from his wallet his photographs and embrace them.

Along the way, my friend Bataille learns of his nomination for the grade of sub-lieutenant. In sum we are all very happy because the newly promoted one has the confidence and affection of his men. When he himself comes to tell us that he would stay in the regiment and keep command of the section, our joy changes into delirium. Without worrying about hierarchy, I jump around his neck, and Bataille, for whom the announcement of his promotion had strangely affected him, our reactions touch him even more, and he begins to cry.

I assure you that no one ever thought to mock the emotion of that brave man who twenty times has heroically risked his life while leading us.

The scene is infinitely touching, and our captain, who had arrived in the meantime, understood because he embraces Bataille in turn and says:

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“Voilà, some tears from the soldiers honoring you as their leader.”

Then he adds:

“Boys, we will all drink, this evening, to the health of our friend Bataille, the bravest among the brave, who has received just recompense for his courage.”

[photo here]

Then, slapping the shoulder of Bataille, who vigorously rubs a large handkerchief on his reddened eyes, he gaily says:

“Let’s go change the color of your stripes, lieutenant.”⁵²

Having entered Belgium via the south of the Ypres salient, we camp around a village that I believe was named Wulverghem. I say that I think that is the name, because in this country, many of the names sound the same.

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The 153rd is on our left, towards Kemmel; the 146th further still on the left towards Poperinghe.

“What a mouthful of names!” Bataille says to me, “whose head doesn’t spin and who doesn’t turn pale looking at the map that we just distributed?”

We are forming, it seems to him, a second defense line; we constitute the guard, so to speak.

⁵²Refers to the color of the stripes worn on the shirt sleeve cuff indicating rank..

A role that we are sure to merit.

While waiting, we are wet; we are cold; but that does not diminish the gaiety, far from it.

Happily, our brave cooks—who know their duty to their comrades—are already at work, and soon a good hot stew helps us chase away any dark thoughts.

We are not depressed—we do not get depressed in the division—but this country of spleen gives birth in us to a particular spirit, a state of soul, if you want, that the military slang renders as this singular expression, “having the blues.”

I often asked myself just what exactly that meant.

Being depressed does not describe it exactly, because it’s not really an illness such as the measles or typhoid fever; it’s not an affliction.

“To have the blues” is, I believe, as much as I can judge myself, found in a state of mental equilibrium slightly disordered.

In this state, the head no longer commands, or it commands badly; the senses battle themselves, the impressions deform, the sensations exasperate, an agonizing pain extends over you without any apparent reason, you see everything in black.

It’s not an affliction or an illness, but you still suffer all the same.

I have seen my comrades volunteer for dangerous missions to escape the blues. I have seen them throw themselves like madmen at the enemy with the same goal of avoiding the blues.

How many times, when I warned one or the other about exposing themselves too much without reason, they responded to me, “what do you want me to do? I’ve got the blues!”

That evening, in Belgium, we had the blues.

Happily, the hot stew arrived, and then the captain kept his promise
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and came to drink with us to the health of Bataille, after having sent us a few bottles to redden the stripes of our sub-lieutenant.

Our blues, a result of the journey, the rain, the monotony of the regions crossed, lose much of its impact.

On our right, the artillery sounded without stopping, and the battle had to be very extensive, because besides the individual explosions, we heard

[photo here]

in the distance, a continuous rolling, something like thunder than never stopped.

Sometimes a rocket rose on the horizon, and, for a few minutes, its harsh light cut the heavy darkness and the gray cottages, the wet fields and the calm ponds.

In the night, it was not difficult for experienced ears like ours to hear the loud noises of battle and sometimes the crackling of a fusillade or the clacking of machine guns.

Before going to sleep, we were passed by some wounded British. Naturally we questioned them, but, it was impossible for us to understand them.

We could hardly hear anything but their resounding “yes” and their “bong soir camarades.”⁵³ That was not enough to satisfy our legitimate curiosity.

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These English admirably bore their suffering. Even the most exhausted never complained.

They disappeared into the dark night, calling out “bong soir” continuously to us.

This parade made me sad. I felt that the terrible blues would again hit me; and so I hastened to get to my pallet of straw and to stretch out around my comrades, many of whom were sleeping already.

I woke up many times in the course of the night, and each time I heard artillery.

The artillery men did not sleep.

⁵³bonsoir (good evening)

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XIV: The Battle for Saint-Éloi

I have said that the Germans violently attacked the two points where the salient narrowed on the Diksmuide-Ypres-Messines road, that is to say at Bixschoote to the north of Ypres and at Saint-Éloi to the south.⁵⁴

Bixschoote, lost on 28 October, retaken on the 29th, lost on the 30th, is retaken on 3 November.

In the southern sector, the 32nd division, that had made progress towards Hollenbeke on the Saint-Éloi line, had to fall back on 3 November from a furious massed attack.

Fortunately, on 20-21 October, in this part of the salient, on the Zillebeke-Gheluvelt line, something interesting happened.

Three French battalions, attached to General Haig and commanded by General Moussy, were established at Zillebeke, and inspired by the admirable energy of the brave Moussy, they managed to hold the line.⁵⁵

In the morning of the 21st, all seemed lost. The men were exhausted, and reinforcements were lacking. Moussy did not think of retreating. We might die, perhaps, but we were not going to give up any territory.

This general, who fights like a sub-lieutenant, then gathers all the men who fell under his command, cavalry of his escort,

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gunners, cooks, truckers, men from the aid train, and puts himself at the head of this handful of brave men.

His heroic resistance allows the Worcester regiment, in the afternoon, to execute a magnificent charge that cleared Gheluvelt and probably saves the entire southern part of the salient.

The admirable energy of General Moussy—the hero would fall for France in May—had avoided a retreat that would have certainly compromised an already very serious position.

We advance on Saint-Éloi where we rejoin the 69th. The battle raged everywhere; the violence of the German assaults increased without stopping; and we had never heard such a bombardment.

A wounded lieutenant told us that more than four hundred pieces roared in front of his army corps.

⁵⁴Sint-Elooi is a small village about 3 miles south of Ypres. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Ypres.pdf>.

⁵⁵General Jean Baptiste Albert Moussy, 1855-1915, was killed by an artillery shell at his command post at Grenay on 21 May 1915.

We hugged the ground while waiting for someone to put us in line. And the line, that was us, that was the 20th corps.

We felt that the party would be very hard, and the stories of the wounded that we were able to question didn't leave any doubt in that regard.

We waited with a feverish impatience for the moment to march into fire, to enter the melee.

We prepared. Ammunition constantly arrived for us and the artillery. We carefully inspected our weapons. Our officers were always around us. I am not talking only of Bataille, our section head, who, never left us.

"I think, old boy," he said to me, "that we're going to see this time what we have never yet seen. Those buggers there are becoming enraged; they absolutely want to get by."

And as always I responded:

"They shall not pass!"⁵⁶

"Of course!" Bataille said. "I think the same thing; that they will not pass; or if that happens then the 20th corps will no longer be the 20th corps."

"And it still is, lieutenant."

"Corporal, if you call me lieutenant one more time, I will have the honor of sticking you in jail for two days to begin with."

And, to finish it, we shook hands.

In our section, we never had inspections or details. Bataille was so sure of us that he didn't want to give the impression of doubting our eagerness or our good will.

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And he was right, because his orders were executed immediately, completely and willingly. The section was genuinely a family of which he was the loved, respected and admired leader.

When we participated in an action, we worried about him as much as for us.

What would become of us without Bataille?

[photo here]

He begged us not to expose ourselves too much, to think a bit about his children, that is to say about us.

Very concerned, he promised us all that we wanted; but the moment came, and you had to see him go on the attack, rifle in hand, the first to jump into the enemy's trench.

⁵⁶"Ils ne passeront pas." This phrase was most famously used during the Battle of Verdun in World War I by French General Robert Nivelle.

“Anything to get a guy like that!” was what the captain, who often added his prayers to ours, said.

So, the poor Bataille—this hero—blushed like a guilty man and responded:

“I beg your pardon! Do not blame me; it’s not my fault..In those moments, I forget everything.”

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And our brave captain turned away to wipe his eyes.

The modesty of our sub-lieutenant was so open, so true, so fresh, that if you permit me to employ an adjective, sublime, that applies to our magnificent and tough soldier.

One day he told me:

“You see, my man, I should never have accepted the stripes. I was made for striking out, for killing the Boche and getting killed, but not for commanding brave men like you.”

“My good friend,” I responded to him moved. “Stripes are made for men of character. They have certainly added nothing; but you, you greatly honor the officer corps.”

Finally, it arrived, that moment when, with a gesture, the chief transforms the muddy soldiers into heroes; that tragic and superb moment that our English allies call “the mad minute” (la minute folle).

It was 8 November. They had transported us in front of Saint-Éloi in the direction of Hollebeke, on the flank of a large hill with a gentle slope where we received shelling like it was raining, and it was raining. It was like a rainstorm in which each drop contained lightning.

Two men from the section were destroyed.

Bataille, superbly calm, called to us:

“Hold on, we’ll avenge them.”

That wait under fire was truly terrible. At each whistling, at each howl—and God knows if that was whistling or that was howling—we would say:

“That one is perhaps for me.”

And often that was for a neighbor who suffered while crying out in pain.

I will not attempt to describe my sensations because I would be unable; it cannot be described. For sure, someone who has not experienced similar moments will not be able to understand.

All that could ever be done in terms of psychological study on the said topic would just be mere fiction. The combatant himself, someone who has seen these terrible minutes and who knows the terrible anguish, cannot, after battle, recall the sensations he felt.

It is during these hours of being tested that the role of commander is truly important, truly great.

The commander, then, has to be more than a man, he has to be a demigod. If he wants to maintain the strength

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of his soldiers before death, it is necessary that he himself knows that while smiling.

To us, our officers were admirable; they offered themselves to death—who, unfortunately, took many of them—with a perfect calmness. I have seen them laugh and chat under the adversity of machine guns, I have seen them stand up to observe the enemy when we were crouched behind the protection of our knapsacks.

[photo here]

On the hill at Saint-Éloi, I found myself becoming crazy. I reached the point of wishing for death to avoid the agonizing ugliness that tortured me. We were crouched in a freezing mud, and yet I still felt very hot.

A whistle made us perk up our ears. Our captain raised his sword, and the other officers repeated the gesture.

In one leap we were standing up, trembling.

An enemy formation, heavy, massive, was advancing towards us after, no doubt, having broken through the line at Hollebeke.

The German artillery extended their fire so as to not hit their comrades. Our 75s, by contrast, shortened to hit them, and

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we could see the shells fall in the gray mass, which advanced like a wall.

The heads, the arms, the legs jumped like splinters under the axe of a lumberjack. Soon our machine guns will hit the wall in turn.

Nothing could shake it.

We all had our eyes fixed on our captain, who himself immobile and a little pale, awaited orders.

The order comes, and the bugles sounded.

It was a formidable rush.

Without firing a shot, we enter the gray wall. There was a clacking of weapons, then horrible cries, wild screams.

For me, I didn't see anything; I was crazed; I randomly hit, sticking my bayonet in raw flesh while yelling insults. Sometimes, I had trouble pulling my bayonet out. Finally, it was broken. Then I took my rifle by the barrel and used it like a mace. Soon, the stock broke, and only the barrel remained. I still swung it. Before me I could make out, like in a fog, pale and grimacing faces, and I tried to reach them. Around me I heard horrible cries. I was slipping in the bloody mud.

I no longer had any fear of death; I no longer knew where I was; my brain no longer functioned. I

struck out like a machine on automatic.

Suddenly I found myself face-to-face with my captain.

“Bravo, Lefèvre!” He called to me. “Bravo! But you can rest now. The enemy has had enough for today.”

Then Bataille came and shook my hand while saying:

“My old friend, you are as brave as a god and dirty as a comb. You would do well to do some shopping for some new things when you have the time.”

I was covered in mud and blood. I no longer had a hat, nor coat—or so little left of one that you couldn’t hardly speak of a coat—my pants were only a rag.

He congratulated me; it seemed that I had fought well. Certainly I did not deserve any congratulations; because I had acted in a veritable state of madness.

But how many missing in the section!

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In the evening, someone brought me a coat on behalf of the captain, and on the sleeves were the stripes of a sub-officer.

I learned that the colonel was going to name me sergeant to replace a comrade who had been killed.

On the 10th, the Germans attacked everywhere with an unreasonable fury, throwing into the furnace battalion after battalion.

Such a shock should give some results, like any vigorous offensive.

Diksmuide, in ruins, is lost to us. A group of cavalry of General de Mitry,⁵⁷ who operates in the northern part of the salient, is pushed back at Lizerbe. The maison du Passeur⁵⁸ had to be abandoned, and the enemy succeeds in freeing the canal.

The situation became grave.

But, the surprise passed, and we reacted everywhere with energy.

In the night of the 11th to 12th and during the entire day of the 12th, battles take place whose violence could never be exceeded.

The Germans throw against our lines compact masses of infantry supported by a powerful

⁵⁷General Antoine de Mitry (1857-1924) commanded the French 2nd Cavalry Corps.

⁵⁸The Passeur building was the scene of ferocious combat throughout the war. See footnote below.

heavy artillery.

Evidentially they play their final card.

They did not succeed in breaking through our line anywhere, and at many points we oblige them to retreat.

Our cavalymen capture the cabaret Korteker, which had been lost two days before; the 9th corps makes progress towards Zandworde, and other troops gain terrain in the region of Bixschoote.

And that which had most concerns us, we defend victoriously the line Saint-Éloi-Hollebeke and push back the enemy masses that threatened the canal.

That day, we truly won the great battle.

On the 15th, after some last convulsions, the enemy admits defeat, having lost 125,000 men, of which at least 20,000 killed.

On the 12th, in the course of a large attack, I was about to stab an arrogant officer when I see my captain who, exhausted, is going to succumb to the blows of a half dozen of the enemy.

In a quick flash, the road to Lorraine appeared to me, his wife, his children in tears.

All at once I find myself in the group around him, and I succeeded in
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disengaging him when I feel a violent shock then a sharp pain in my right shoulder. I turn my head; my eyes cloud over; I choke. I try to resist, but it is impossible; I fall in a heap.

When I reopen my eyes, I was in the ambulance, and the captain was holding my hand.

“Where am I? What happened?” I murmured.

“You are wounded. A bullet in the shoulder. They are going to evacuate you. In two months you will return to us.”

Then, leaning towards me, the captain added:

“Lefèvre, you saved my life while risking your own. I will never forget that. Thanks!”

Then I vaguely remember.

I was barely able to talk; my language wouldn't obey me. I made an effort and mumbled as if in a dream.

“I am happy. Your family, there, in Lorraine, on the highway. I thought of them...”

I see huge tears roll down the cheeks of my captain. He leaned over to me, embraced me and said something that I did not hear.

I think that I fainted again.

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XV: La Maison du Passeur

My wound was serious. The bullet had reached the lung, and, for a good month, the doctors did not think that I was going to live. Finally, thanks to the good care that I was given, and my robust constitution, I finally got out of this mess.

The hours passed in a hospital or in a convalescent depot are not interesting. I will not talk of it. Also, in this period, I put to rest my campaign notebook.

I often received news from my regiment. Bataille regularly wrote me, and also the captain.

At present, the poor boys! They lived underground like moles, fighting with rats in the underground mire. I would later come to know the joys of this existence.

The wife of my captain also wrote me charming and touching letters in which the children added a few words for "the brave sergeant who had saved their papa."

Along with the letters there were packages stuffed with treats.

That warmed my heart, and I could say that the letters of the wife of my captain did more for me getting better than all the doctors and drugs.

Bataille told me all that happened in his letters:

"Get well and do not be pressed to return. We have no need of you underground.

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We will signal to you when we are back in the light."

I made the acquaintance of a sergeant of the 79th, wounded in Belgium in the course of the attack on the night of 11-12 November at the famous maison du Passeur.

He gave me details about that affair; and, since it takes a certain place in the history of this war, it seems to me interesting to record in my notes the story of my colleague.

"During the day of 11 November," my colleague told me, "we were informed that an operation, in which the regiment would participate, would take place during the night. They did not tell us what was involved; but it was not that difficult to figure out."

"We had in front of us the maison du Passeur which guarded the head of a bridge across the canal."⁵⁹

"After having captured this damn shack, which cost us as much blood as a great battle, we had

⁵⁹La Maison du Passeur was a few miles northwest of Ypres on the Yser canal. It stood on the higher right bank and guarded a bridge across the canal. Because it was on somewhat higher ground and because the left bank was low and marshy, the site was of tactical significance. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Ypres.pdf>.

lost it, and the Germans had turned it into a veritable fortress, stuffed with machine guns and defended by select riflemen who could shoot a man at a distance of a kilometer.”

“Evidently, we wanted to recapture the shack which guarded the canal and from which the enemy observed and machine gunned us.”

“It did not seem like there were any alternatives possible, and in any case, there was not an easier one.”

“The undertaking certainly was not easy, even more so because around the house, to protect it and to protect themselves, the Germans had established trenches from which they could fire from the flanks, and reach all points of access.”

“We were not wrong about our guesses.”

“The men charged to capture the house—about three or four hundred—were volunteers, of which about a hundred were some of our valiant African troops.”

“We had to assault the trenches and capture them. The two tasks were equally difficult.”

“A little after midnight, the attacking soldiers start onto the bridge, marching quietly, in a deep silence; but the Germans are on guard. It is not easy to surprise those boys.”

“Just as our comrades reach the head of the bridge, we hear the firing of machine guns, similar in noise to a dozen housewives beating their carpets.”

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“Forward!”

“Our brave comrades rush through the bullets, and about fifty of them make it to the other bank, leaving behind them, on the bridge, about as many dead and wounded.”

“The German machine guns are then obliged to divide their firing between those who had crossed the bridge and those attempting to cross.”

“In these conditions, the firing loses some of its intensity.”

[photo here]

“This bridge crossing was a superb operation, well conceived and perfectly executed.”

“But the most difficult task remains to be done.”

“In front of the bridge, under fire, the officers reassemble their men, then give the signal to charge.”

“In no time, half of the defenders of the external fortifications, who were awaiting the shock, are massacred at bayonet and knife point. The others take refuge in the interior, pursued by our super-excited soldiers, and the massacre continues on the ground and first floors.”

“We are again masters of the shack, and the comrades exit, dirty, bloody, hideous, yet splendid, pushing before them some distraught prisoners, the sole survivors of the garrison.”

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“For our part, we had charged the German trenches, where we were welcomed by firing from machine guns and rifles.”

“Many comrades fell on the parapets, others penetrated into the trench, and it was a terrible struggle, a nameless carnage.”

“I received my wound in the course of this battle, and it’s a miracle that I am not resting in the trench. My brave soldiers did not want to leave their sergeant in the hands of the Boche and went, at the risk of their lives, to extract me from the shell hole where I had fallen and carry me to an aid post.”

“The captain who commanded my company, the 7th, had been the first to jump into the trenches, and we had followed him. Very few of them returned. Some found a glorious death; others are prisoners of the Germans in a camp such as Salzwedel.”⁶⁰

The brave men who fell in the course of the attack at the maison du Passeur did not uselessly give their lives. The action was important and contributed more than a little to the defeat of the enemy.

I spent the winter in the hospital, and in the spring they sent me to a depot for convalescents.

When I began to feel almost well, I began to feel very bored. Nothing could distract me; none of the letters from my commanders or my comrades, and they just increased my desire to go and rejoin my company, to go and retake my place in the ranks.

Bataille repeated often: “We are not doing anything. The Boche are letting us alone. We are living in our holes like a band of renters.” I said that it’s all the same to me. If there were no longer any fighting under the sun, my comrades were less at risk of their lives at every hour of the day and the night. And I considered it almost like cowardice to lead, during that time, a life of laziness.

Many times I begged the doctor to send me to my depot.

He told me each time:

“My son, be patient a little while longer. You were badly wounded; it is necessary to take precautions.”

Finally the good doctor understood that boredom had taken control of me, that the inaction was killing me, and in the second half of April, he consented, with regret, to sign my medical discharge.

I had just gotten to the depot when I prepared to depart with reinforcements who were going to rejoin the regiment in the trenches to the north.

⁶⁰Salzwedel was a typical German prisoner-of-war camp located between Hamburg and Magdeburg in northern Germany.

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THE BATTLE IN ARTOIS

XVI: The Field of Battle

I rejoined my regiment on 2 May and found it located in very uncomfortable trenches, to the north of Arras, near Neuville-Saint-Vaast and de la Targette, two villages of which I will soon speak.⁶¹

They were awaiting reinforcement with impatience because, as Bataille told me while kissing me on both cheeks: "There is some wind in the sails."

The captain embraced me also. He and all my comrades celebrated my return. Alas. Despite the existence of the replacements that they had received, some were still missing at the roll call.

The preceding week, a vacancy for a sub-officer in Bataille's section had occurred, and the captain had reserved it for me. At present at least it, was a little like his family.

He confided in me that his father-in-law directed an important industry and added that if I wanted to leave Paris a very acceptable situation awaited me in that industry.

How we would not kill with pleasure for such a commander!

Certainly, I wanted to stay in Paris, but I was ready a hundred times to sacrifice

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for an affection like that from the captain and his family.

His wife wrote me:

"When you return over there, my friend, watch out for him. In any case. You know that with you around him I will be less worried."

And I told myself:

"If my life can save his, then I will give it with joy."

I made a light grimace, I swear, in taking possession of my corner of the trench,

[photo here]

but as I would not stay there very long, I'm not going to say anything, this time, of my stay underground. I will have the occasion later to return to this subject and treat it fully.

For the moment, just as Bataille had said, "there was a wind in the sails." And I learn that we are going to attack the German front soon.

Everyone was waiting for this attack.

⁶¹See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Artois.pdf>.

Certainly no indiscretion had been committed by those who knew; but a serious operation is not improvised. It is necessary to prepare very carefully, and a soldier does not hesitate to note certain details that reach his ear and make him say: "Surely something is simmering."

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Since then, I have studied the terrain where our action took place in this corner of Artois which saw so much blood flow in the course of those glorious days of the month of May 1915, and I will try to describe it.

Two roads begin to the north of Arras and go one towards Lens and the other toward Bethune, forming a sharp angle to Lens on the right and Aix-Noulette on the left.

[photo here]

From Lens, the right road falls back on Bethune, where it rejoins the left one.

A main road separates into two parts, each about equal, from south to north, the angle Aix-Noulette Arras Lens and rises to Givenchy after having traversed, about seven kilometers from Arras, the large village of Neuville-Saint-Vaast.⁶²

This village, on the path from Givenchy, goes on for a length of about two and a half kilometers. Another path cuts the first towards the middle of the angle, after having traversed, on the road from Arras to Bethune, the small village of la Targette.

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To the left of the road to Bethune, that is to say, outside of the angle, rises Saint-Éloi, site of pilgrimages and from where you can discover a great part of the field of battle. Of the superb church in Saint-Éloi, where the pilgrims come to pray, there is nothing left but a heap of rubble from which emerge, desolate and shy, the blackened ruins of its towers.

To the north of the Saint-Éloi hill, about four kilometers away, you will encounter the village of Carency, then further north, a little less than two kilometers, the large agglomeration of Ablain-Saint-Nazaire.

To the right of Ablain, on the road to Bethune, is located the village of Souchez, and finally, in the background, the spur of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette.

All of these names are forever famous, and soon many people, sentimental and emotional, will come, from all points of the world to visit this corner of Artois where so many brave men fell heroically for their country.

The sector had been very heavily fortified by the Germans. Each village was a fortress filled with machine guns and with a network of trenches defending access.

Finally, in the angle formed by the roads to Lens and Béthune, a little below and to the right of Neuville-Saint-Vaast, extends the famous underground work known as the "Labyrinth" for a length of about two kilometers.⁶³

⁶²See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Artois2.pdf>.

⁶³The Germans had created a defensive network of trenches, dugouts, shelters, tunnels that covered almost five square kilometers.

This fortification constituted a work of art, and the name that we have given it connotes that admirably.

Imagine a veritable mosaic of deep trenches linked by a series of communication trenches with here and there concrete bastions and artillery located under cupolas. The different paths had been given names like the streets of a town. There were communication trenches called, Kaiser, Von Kluck, Eulembourg, la Vistule, l'Elbe, l'avenue Claudot, les Buissons, etc.

And, in fact, the Labyrinth could pass for an underground town, a town in which the inhabitants even had a hall for celebrations.

I really shouldn't have to add that this original and powerful work was well guarded, and that the machine guns and mortars were abundant. Finally, an entire regiment, the 161st, I think, of the division of Füchs, was the garrison.

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More and more we felt that the storm was approaching. Each day fresh troops arrived in the sector; the number of artillery pieces increased; and the piles of shells grew visibly larger.

Bataille did not feel happy.

"You have come just at a good time," he said to me. "Ah! It is not yet too early that we are going to do something!...Our existence as sewer rats has started to affect my nervous system."

Some of my men, having arrived with me from the depot, had never been under fire. They naturally made an effort to keep up a good appearance, taking the same tact as the older poilus; but I felt that in the back they were waiting for combat with more fear than enthusiasm.

I had passed through that, like everyone. I used myself as an example to reassure them without assuming an attitude while explaining to them what combat was and giving them useful advice on how to conduct themselves.

I should say immediately that these "blues" brought honor to the section and fought just as the veterans did.

The Croix de guerre had just been created. Everyone spoke a lot in the trenches about this new decoration, and everyone wanted to obtain it.

They would offer us the occasion to realize this legitimate ambition, a superb occasion. We are not going to let the chance escape. The divisions of the 20th corps would make a good harvest of the awards, and the distribution had to be difficult because everyone deserved to be rewarded for bravery.

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XVII: Neuville-Saint-Vaast

With the regiments of the 11th division, we must attack the large village of Neuville-Saint-Vaast.⁶⁴ Our front line trenches, oriented towards the southeast, are located about two kilometers from the village.

In front of us, we have four lines of German trenches, and beyond these trenches, on the left, the strongly fortified village of La Targette and on the right, the famous Labyrinth.

8 May, in the afternoon, they told us that the assault will take place the next day at 10 o'clock in the morning after an artillery preparation that would commence at 6. It seemed like a long time to us until tomorrow, and we hardly slept during the night. You must have lived through these hours of feverish waiting to have an idea of our state of mind. We knew that we had to be brave to face death and that it would slay our ranks without pity.

It is good to be brave, but one can not escape the chill that always comes at the prospect of a trip to the other world.

In my section—and it was without a doubt the same elsewhere—my soldiers wrote long letters, some to their wives, others to their mother, a sister, a fiancée, and on the envelopes, they penned a small note say, “Please send this letter if I am killed.”

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Many of us asked for absolution from the priest, and I was one of them.

The poor letters, written by the light of a smoky candle, contained the last wills, the last good byes, the last kisses.

How many tears would fall because of those letters that arrived at their destination covered in blood and mud!

I wrote two, one to my old mother and the other to the wife of my captain, and I swear that my heart horribly tightened up, that my eyes moistened, when I penned the small card.

Happily our sub-lieutenant, the good and brave Bataille, intoxicated by the perspective of a serious combat, comes and picks us all up with his good humor.

“So, boys, you’re done with the letters to the families? Now some butterflies? Tomorrow it will rain Croix de guerre medals, and we will drink to our success. We have seen combat and the real thing is—ask your sergeant—that we are still there, solders at their post, and that’s something that tomorrow the Boches won’t be!”

“Look, my friends, the best way to fight is to charge into the mass and strike our mercilessly.”

“You remember, Lefèvre, the ravine at Saint-Éloi? What a smash up, men! We swam in the

⁶⁴Neuville-Saint-Vaast is located just a little north of Arras. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Neuville.pdf>.

Boche! That animal Lefèvre returned to us almost naked.”

The captain also came to us to address some confident words and made Bataille blush to the ears when he said:

“Furthermore, all you have to do is follow your sub-lieutenant who is one of the bravest and of whom the regiment is proud. He has achieved each of his ranks by an act of heroism.”

And as Bataille protested, not knowing what to say, the captain, took a malicious pleasure and added to his confusion in finishing with these words:

“And I know, my brave Bataille, that tomorrow I will have the pleasure to propose you for the Legion of Honor.”⁶⁵

This time, my sub-lieutenant thought of something to say.

“The captain is not nice,” he then told me, “to joke about me like that in front of the men. I know that he doesn’t mean anything bad for me, but still it’s annoying.”

“But,” my old comrade, “he did not joke about you to the world, and you know that, for the veterans, you have merited the Croix at least ten times.”

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“So,” said Bataille, “you are also joining in, you, my old friend!”

He was so comical, that I was unable to stop laughing.

The next day, 9 May, at precisely 0600, the artillery opened fire.

It was, I assure you, an infernal concert.

For four hours, hundreds of pieces roared without interruption with a violence that increased without stopping. Numerous mortars also sent onto the enemy works their projectiles charged with 25 kilograms of melinite.⁶⁶

The German lines disappeared under a heavy smoke, and in that smoke, hundreds of shells exploded at the same time.

Finally, at the last moment, the mines dug under the enemy trenches, each containing thousands of kilograms of explosives, exploded one after the other. In the trench, we waited, appearing impassive at the action of the artillery, but our nerves were at the breaking point.

⁶⁵The Legion of Honor is the highest decoration in France and comes in five classes with chevalier de la Légion d’honneur being the lowest class. During the war, the decoration was also awarded for bravery in battle.

⁶⁶Melinite was a French high explosive, adopted in 1887, consisting of a mixture of picric acid and nitrocellulose.

I, who knows what's important, ask if the shells had destroyed the barbed wire. If they haven't, as had happened before, and the wire is intact, we would be annihilated in the artificial brambles by machine guns that had been carefully reinforced.

The hour approaches. The captain pulled out his watch and does not take his eyes off of it; his hand does not tremble, but he is very pale.

More than ten minutes.

We fix bayonets. The captain looks at us and makes a friendly gesture. Bataille put his saber in its sheath, grabs a rifle and fills all of his pockets with cartridges. I am sure that he will gain the Croix today or he will not be returning.

Strange! As the terrible moment approaches, I feel myself becoming calmer. Now I feel confident. It seems to me that I will depart this time again into the slaughter, and that death will not want me. I promise to follow the orders of Bataille; to go if wanted and strike out strongly.

I am ready, and I look at my men. They appear pale through the smoke that is gradually enveloping us, and their eyes burn brightly.

Like me, they are ready and resolute. I can count on them. Bataille stands next to me.

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"Let's try not to lose each other in the fray," he whispers to me. "I believe that the section will have the occasion to distinguish itself."

"It will," I say to him. "You can be sure."

The ground, which had been shaking for several hours, suddenly experiences a violent blip.

"Those are the mines that are exploding," said Bataille. "We are going to depart."

Then, turning towards the men, he raises his rifle and cries out:

"Vive la France!"

[photo here]

At such a moment, no other speech would have had the same effect as these three words.

The men straighten up and respond:

"Vive la France!"

It's time; that's it.

The captain and his officers jump first onto the parapet, and we all follow them without the slightest hesitation.

Then we set off at a walking pace, calmly, as if we were just taking a walk.

The bullets begin to buzz, but do not do much damage to us. The Germans, unusually, do

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not fire accurately. Evidently our barrage has affected them. Frankly, it was enough.

We see before us the net of barbed wire. Then, goose pimples. Are we going to get punched in the nose, or, are we going to get beat up?

I exhale. The artillery had done a marvelous job; the wire is in pieces.

A machine gun fires. Some men fall, crying out in anguish.

“Hardy, boys! Forward!” Cries Bataille who certainly shows a little emotion, especially for the new men.

But we continue to march, always pacing. The “blues” are splendid.

We arrive at the first trench, and as the German trenches are not very large, we jump over. Other soldiers behind us are charged with cleaning up.

The machine guns have taken aim at us. There are some gaps in the ranks. You can’t make an omelette without breaking some eggs.

“Forward! Still Forward!” Screams Bataille.

No one gives a thought of stopping.

The other trenches are freed like the first one. Then we scaled a hill, and, at the summit, we saw before us the village of la Targette.

At that moment, we hear some terrible cries from our comrades who are in the process of cleaning up the Boche trenches.

“Watch out!” Bataille says to me. “This is going to become serious.”

So, we are violently sniped at by some machine guns hidden in two large works that the Germans have constructed in front of the village.

Some more men fall. My section loses two for its part.

We await the order to rush at La Targette, but then we are ordered to turn and march rapidly on Neuville-Saint-Vaast.

Others are going to charge the village.

Sooner said than done. We leave the small village, and suddenly we are in front of the first houses of Neuville.

I look at my watch; it is 11:25.

A deep noise, similar to a rumble of thunder a long way off, makes me turn my head.

I cannot help but admit a cry of admiration.

At a fast trot, our artillery men are traversing the plain that is being swept by the bullets of a machine gun,

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climbing the slope and arriving at the limits of La Targette, putting their pieces in battery with a truly calm expression.

Our soldiers enthusiastically applauded and called out:

“Long live the artillery men!”

Already the batteries have opened fire to bar the route of enemy reinforcements.

But the serious part began for us, because the Germans

[photo here]

awoke from their surprise and defend Neuville with fury. Machine guns, rifles, cannon, all enter into the commotion. Bullets whistle; guns fire furiously. We are in hell.

Thanks to the spirited presence of Bataille, we lose only few, and we quite demolish the Boche.

Our sub-lieutenant threw us into a house whose facade, a little slanted, permits us to sweep the road, and I can assure you that we fired with ardor.

In the evening, we are masters of the southern part of the village, and we are going to use the night to get organized.

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Our captain then tells us what has happened on our right.

In the center, our troops have captured the trenches, then clashed at the Neuville cemetery, situated about three hundred meters to the east of the village. Some terrible struggles took place in the cemetery which was strongly defended and that we captured twice, then lost, but that we now held the edge.

On the right, our attack had been stopped by the Labyrinth; but we have penetrated the famous work and hold the southern part.

The captain also tells us that we have captured numerous prisoners, about a dozen cannon, and that at this moment our men are burying thousands of dead Germans.

In sum, a good day.

Those that followed would be terrible.

What a night! The continual explosions tensed the nerves, pounding our heads. Around us, the houses collapsed noisily, and we heard, similar to a wail, the noise of wood breaking up. Rockets, in their sinister glow, illuminated the dead stretched out on the road and the shells that raise them up and sometimes throw them into the air, seemingly regaining life.

Since no infantry attack came, and sure that none would take place under the terrible bombardment, Bataille ordered us to descend into the cellars of the houses that we are occupying.

There I see astonishing things that proved to me the ability of the Germans in organizing a position.

The exterior ceiling of the cellars had been covered by a very thick layer of concrete that turned the underground into a shelter from shells. Moreover, they had hollowed out, under the cellars, protected shelters that underground communication tunnels tied to neighboring houses. And all of this had been done with care, as if the shelters had to last forever.

Bataille was taken in admiration of this fortification.

“Such good work,” he said. “This is beautiful work! For sure all those guys are masons.”

“In any case,” I told him. “We are going to profit from their work.”

Bataille, who understood the situation, shook his head

“No doubt,” he said. “We are in the shelter for this night; but know that tomorrow, we have to seize a bunch of houses fortified just like this one.”

I recognized the accuracy of his observation.

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The next day at dawn we saw appear, at the end of our street, a rather strong German patrol that must have had for their mission to appraise the effects of last night’s bombardment.

At first the Boche advanced with prudence, then, not seeing anything, not hearing anything, not receiving any fire, they supposed either that we had took to our heels or that we were buried under the ruins of the houses.

Bataille had us quickly take up a position behind a small wall about a meter high.

There, on knees, we await our game to arrive.

“Each take a man!” Bataille said, “and don’t shoot until ordered.”

The Germans, completely reassured, approach rapidly. They are thirty meters from us, then twenty, then ten.

Then, with a strong and powerful voice, Bataille commands:

“Fire!”

We fire together so that you only hear a single discharge.

Fifteen Germans hit the dust. The others, who are saved, distraught, throw their weapons away and run fast.

We leave our shelter and follow them because we have the order to gain the village at all costs.

It is one of the hardest things to do.

Two soldiers of the 156th, who had been lost during the night, rejoin us. One of them tells me of the death of a good friend, sergeant Billot, of this regiment, killed the day before.

Each of the houses of the village is a fortress that has to be reduced. We hear everywhere cries and shots. We see everywhere men who are pursuing others, bayonet in the back. You cannot take a step without stepping on a corpse.

For five days we battle around the walls destroyed by the artillery, in the corridors and in the cellars.

The Germans are brave, and they have the advantage of the defensive positions because they occupy the houses that they had fortified.

For five days, hundreds of independent battles take place one after the other in the village of Neuville. In these conditions, the battle appears simply as a series of assuredly painful and deadly actions, but of very limited extent. I am going to recall some of the episodes.

The first day, while pursuing the Germans who had escaped us
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on the street, I enter, followed by two soldiers, the hallway of a fine-looking house, where the fleeing soldier is cornered, like a rat, in front of a closed door.

He begs pardon. I disarm him, search him, and we prepare to take him near to the church where the other prisoners are assembled, when I perceive, in the frame of another door, a great devil of an officer who is pointing his revolver at me. I drop down quickly, and the bullet from the officer strikes my poor devil of a prisoner right between the eyes.

The officer did not have time to fire a second shot. With a vigorous jab, I nail him to the wood.

For a long time I had desired binoculars, and the officer had some. As he no longer had any need of it, I borrowed them from him.

Without a doubt, it was true that I would not enjoy them for long. Five minutes later, on the doorstep to the house, a bullet broke them in my hands.

That day, directed by Bataille, we cleared out many houses around the church.

In a cellar, I took as prisoner a young, good-looking sub-officer who spoke French very well. He gave up easily, and as he showed an extreme politeness, I did not treat him sternly.

He told me that he was happy to have been captured.

“You have saved my life,” he told me. “I had the feeling that I would be killed today, and my presentiments are never wrong.”

That evening, absolutely exhausted by a day of battle, I let myself fall asleep on the carpet of a salon and slept like a soldier conscious of having done his duty.

The next day, at reveille, I perceived, with horror, that I had slept between two corpses.

The 11th and the 12th were certainly the most painful and violent days.

The Germans still held out hope to chase us from the village, and they did everything to achieve that.

On the 11th, we had the misfortune of losing our commander, a brave and superb soldier, and our captain, who was the most senior, took command of the battalion.

The following day, we learned that lieutenant colonel David, commander of the 146th, was mortally wounded.

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Our losses were appreciable, and that was not surprising because we battled in terrible conditions, machine guns on all sides, rifles hitting us from behind walls, obliged to push through solid doors while we are sniped at from all the windows of the house.

Today yet, when I think of the days of Neuville-Saint-Vaast, I ask myself how it is that we all did not end up resting their in that hellish village.

[photo here]

However, we gained ground, freeing, one after the other, groups of houses flanked by dozens of machine guns, at each step of the way taking prisoners that we sent to the rear.

During the 11th, luck, powerfully aided by Bataille, favored the section.

We were laying siege to a large and beautiful house, that was occupied by a relatively important and well-commanded garrison.

Many times we had appeared in front of the door, but each time, we had to fall back by a fire from hell, and it was impossible for us to attack the door with an axe.

This was all useless, and this could not last.

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I had already suggested setting fire to the house, but that was repugnant to Bataille.

Suddenly he approached me and said:

“Don’t let go.”

Then he disappeared, taking two of my best soldiers.

Five minutes later, we heard a struggle and broken windows. Then shots echoed in the house, and a voice, the voice of Bataille, called out:

“Help me, friends!”

The attention of the defenders seemed to turn away from the road.

With one leap we were at the door sill. The door flew in splinters, and we rushed to the aid of our sub-lieutenant and our two comrades who, backed against a wall, held about twenty Germans, angered by the death of many of their friends.

I still see a wounded man who twisted on the floor, pressing his hand against his stomach gashed by a thrust, from which his intestines fell out, and who, in his agony, saying in a monotone voice, in a voice from a dream:

“Kill them!”

The Germans turned around.

We had already knocked many on their butts, and we were disposed to continue when, surprised by our attack and seeing themselves caught from two sides, they raised their hands.

“Empty your pockets!” Bataille ordered.

While they were doing that the sub-lieutenant searched them, and he was right because three of them had kept their weapons, knife or revolver. These were shot by a firing squad on the spot with a simple sign from Bataille.

Our booty was appreciable; two lieutenants, about 15 men, three machine guns and a lot of cartridges.

“Thanks, my friend!” Bataille simply said. “If you had not arrived, all three of us would be dead, but I was sure that you would arrive.”

This feat of arms happily earned for my sub-lieutenant a proposal for the Croix, and for me a proposal for a citation in the order of the army.

It goes without saying that our valiant soldiers were not forgotten; three of them received the Croix de guerre.

That same day, the colonel wanted to know what was happening

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in front of the village on the Givenchy side, and it was our section that he called for. Six of our poilus claimed the favor and honor of accomplishing this dangerous mission behind German lines.

I asked to accompany them, but the captain refused, as did the lieutenant, charged with commanding the company.

“Lefèvre,” the captain said, “do not blame me, but

[photo here]

we need you too much. If something happens to Bataille, it is necessary that you are available to replace him.”

I certainly wasn't thinking of blaming him.

Our brave poilus penetrated right into the German lines by crawling under the barbed wire.

Two hours later, the reconnaissance returned with precious information. Of our six brave men, three had died, but the survivors brought back five prisoners who carried the bodies of our three men.

We are still advancing in the village, and the German shells seem to follow us.

As soon as a group of houses were freed up,

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shells hit them, and so we have no other choice to escape the bombardment than to advance still more.

We were thirsty, a terrible thirst. Fighting thirsty, feverish.

At the entrance to Neuville, in a small square, a fountain attracted us; but, to fill one's canteen it was necessary to risk your life because the place was swept by machine gun fire, and shells cascaded down there.

Around the fountain, corpses piled up, and constantly soldiers climbed over the corpses with their canteen in hand. It was impossible to prohibit it, and the NCOs did not have the heart to punish anyone.

Our men went for the water like the others, and Bataille closed his eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" He said to me. "The poor buggers are dying of thirst!"

A little while later, two of our men collapsed, crying in pain, terribly wounded by the same explosion.

Bataille leaned over and examined them, and then told me while getting up:

"They are damned!"

The poor men, ravaged by fever, cried out:

"Drink! Drink! Drink! Where can we get something?"

At that moment, machine guns and artillery transformed the small square into a hell where the bravest would not dare to risk themselves.

"It is not possible to let them suffer like that," said Bataille, and he picked up a bucket.

"You are not going," I said to him. "Give it to me. Your life is more precious than mine."

"I am the boss," he responded. "It's for me to go there; and I'm lucky."

And he left calmly, as was his habit, because he had it on principle that you should never run under the bullets.

We were frozen by our admiration and our fear.

Our sub-lieutenant reached the fountain, filled his canteen without rushing and returned with the same calmness.

We could not help applauding. I don't think that I have ever seen such a great manifestation of heroism than that promenade of Bataille, who, icily, without being overtaken by the excitation of combat, risked a thousand times his life to comfort the two dying men, to ease their last moments.

Examples like that give courage to those more weak-hearted.

At that moment some more sad news reaches us. Our poor captain had been seriously wounded.

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I experienced an excruciating pain, and, at that moment, I was seized with a mad desire to get killed. I saw Bataille with his eyes filled with tears.

I was able to meet our captain while he was being transported. His left leg was crushed.

"Ah! My good Lefèvre," he said to me. "The doctors say that I will live; but I will have one leg less. My military career is over."

He repeated many times, "Finished! Finished!" and he cried.

I made a superhuman effort to hold back my tears.

"Think of them," I muttered.

It was of them, especially, that is to say his wife and children, that he thought of in that sad moment. I understood that from the way that he shook my hand.

We all had, in the section, lost our good sense of humor. We were all profoundly affected by the accident experienced by our captain.

Without us being given the word, and as if each one of us wanted to avenge him, we all fought very hard, beating furiously all those who fell under our blows. Fierce and silent, teeth clenched, with a terrible look, we rushed straight ahead, not thinking stunned, hitting and killing

Bataille turned red. They called him a mad bull.

In a cellar, he killed five Germans with his hands, and, as we moved into the interior of the building, he said to me:

"You are right now. It is necessary to torture them."

The defenders of the house heard the menacing words, and in fear, they gave up.

They did well to do that because to our sub-lieutenant everything seemed resolved.

During the night, we fought without stopping. We no longer felt tired; we no longer noticed the bodies on which we stepped, or the wounded who twisted on the ground and begged the stretcher bearers to carry them away.

The poor stretcher-bearers were over-worked. Displaying an astonishing courage, they summarily bandaged the wounded while under fire from rifles and artillery, then they carried them.

These stretcher-bearers operated with so much calm that I can not help but think about the peacetime maneuvers of the health service during which, stretched on the ground, we represented the dead and the wounded in an imaginary battle.

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It was just the same now; only the combat was not imaginary.

I remember that in the middle of the night, I perceived with astonishment some small sparks that ran at ground level, a little in front of our lines, in an area terribly dangerous.

“Are the Boche preparing something new?” I asked Bataille.

“No,” he responded. “Those are the stretcher-bearers who are making a harvest of the injured. One night, in Lorraine, I had accompanied them, and, in the course of our searching, we found ourselves face-to-face with the Boche stretcher-bearers.”

“And what happened?”

“Nothing. We made it look like we hadn’t seen each other. In the interest of our wounded, that was preferable.”

While we were laying siege to the houses, capturing one after the other, our comrades, on the right, undertook furious fighting towards the Neuville cemetery.

The terrain to be covered was located on a large open space, swept by the converging fire of the Labyrinth and the cemetery in which the Germans had created a defensive position of the first order.

On 11 May, at the cost of enormous loses, one of our regiments penetrated the dangerous zone under the cross fire of numerous machine guns.

It was superb.

Without hesitating, the deployed companies, officers in front, advanced across the ground on which bullets worked and shells exploded. At each step forward, officers and men fell. Certain companies were soon commanded by adjutants, and, one, I believe, by a simple sergeant.

Nothing stopped our heroic comrades. All had made the sacrifice of their life for the advance.

“You only die once, boys!” The corps commander had told them.

When they had arrived at a good range, they rushed towards the cemetery uttering frightful cries, scaling the destroyed walls at bayonet point and engaging in a ferocious struggle around the graves.

It was a terrible massacre.

The Germans resisted for a long time, and with fury because they
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knew the value of their position. Finally they had to cede, and the cemetery rested in our hands.

Without losing a moment, the surviving officers began to organize, because they knew that the Germans would attempt to retake the position.

They were not wrong.

At night, a horrible bombardment began, announcing the upcoming infantry attack being prepared.

[photo here]

The large caliber artillery shells destroyed the graves and disinterred the bodies whose bone fragments, violently projected out of the holes, wounded—a truly horrible thing—a number of soldiers.

Under the avalanche of shrapnel, our men did not react. Hidden behind the cemetery wall or crouched behind the tombstones, they waited.

Soon a large force was sighted. No one budged in the cemetery.

When the German soldiers took shape like a dark cloud twenty meters from the wall, salvos sewed death in their ranks and forced them to fall back.

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A heroic bayonet charge routed them, and our poilus gathered more than a hundred prisoners, amongst which was found several officers.

This time, the cemetery was definitively conquered.

The attack, capture and defense of the Neuville-Saint-Vaast cemetery was one of the greatest pages in the history of the Great War.

During the attack under a terrible cross fire, we saw some soldiers opening with shears a passage through the barbed wire that the artillery had not destroyed. Severely wounded, some of the soldiers sang the Marseillaise, others encouraged their comrades on the assault by crying out, “Forward! Forward! Avenge us!”

The wounded fired at the enemy until they had run out of bullets or until a new wound made them drop their rifle.

We found some dead with the rifle at their shoulder, the rifle barrel resting on a mound. A young

volunteer had, before dying, scribbled these words on an envelope: "The cemetery is taken... I died happy... Long live France!"

On the side of the Labyrinth and in the Labyrinth itself, our progress was very slow. There, it was a war of siege in the complete meaning of the word, a war even more difficult and painful because the besieged place was underground, and it was necessary to fight in narrow trenches, so to say Indian file,⁶⁷ with knife and grenade.

But we had penetrated into the celebrated work, and despite all their efforts, the Germans could not chase us out.

In all, we captured the strongest points of their line of defense and removed the redoubts that could have served as their base if they wanted to try an attack on this part of the front.

The departure of the captain seemed to be a bad omen for the section.

We fought hard, but we also received terrible blows, and our losses became truly serious. That only served to increase our fury, and we went from house to house, firing at anything that showed, pursuing without respite the Germans that the bullets and bayonets chased from houses in ruins.

I felt myself becoming crazy. The fatigue, the hunger, the thirst, tortured me, gave me a fever, and yet I did not think of sleeping or eating or drinking. It seemed to me that I would never find sleep

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or ever eat or drink again. Everything appeared to me as things from the past, from a very long off past. I no longer had any notion of either time nor space.

If, at that moment, someone had asked me about my prior life, I believe that I would not have been able to respond without a violent effort of my memory, and whether I would have even been capable of that effort?

I saw men and things like in a fog.

Bataille had to be in pretty much the same state of mind. He no longer unclenched his teeth, and his face no longer had any expression.

A man had been killed near to him, and I heard him murmur:

"Another one! We shall all be killed! I'm waiting my turn."

Was that the presentiment of which I have so much talked, and which, it seems to me, is often born in the spirit of a soldier before or during danger? I do not know. Often I heard Bataille say those words that were so astonishing in the mouth of that man so perfectly in equilibrium and whose bravery was proverbial.

⁶⁷In single file.

I do not know if there was or was not such a presentiment in Bataille; but, in all cases, death could not delay in taking my dear friend, who I will always cry about.

It was quick and stupid. We were turning the corner of a small street that appeared to us perfectly calm and where we desired a break with our men, to give them a brief rest before they had another great effort. A machine gun cracked, and Bataille collapsed, hit in the stomach and chest, saying:

“That’s it. That’s my account! Long live France!”

I fell on my knees next to him and held his hand.

“It’s nothing,” I said to him. “Are you suffering?”

“I’m done!” He said to me in a weak voice. “Damn! I don’t regret anything except my old mother, the regiment and my friends. Take my wallet, and, if you can, you will go one day and take it to my poor old mother. You will embrace her for me. She would have been so proud to see me with my sub-lieutenant stripes. Finally! You should tell her that I brought honor to the family and that I died thinking of her. You, take my watch as a remembrance.”

Suddenly a bit of blood flowed from his mouth. He made a start, and that was it.

France had just lost one of her best soldiers, and me, the best of friends.

All the men cried warm tears. As for me,

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gripped by a true crisis of hope, I called out to death with great cries.

The lieutenant who commanded the company, warned by one of our soldiers of the ill that had befallen us, came to bow before the body of Bataille; then, taking my hands, he said to me:

“Courage Lefèvre! Your men need you. You are responsible for them.”

By a violent effort, I tried to react, to overcome my despair.

First we set the corpse of our poor sub-lieutenant at the shelter. He rests presently at the foot of a hill, not far from the village of La Targette, and we re-entered the furnace, eyes red and hearts broken.

Now I was head of the section.

I am perfectly incapable of describing our deeds and gestures from that moment on because I marched as if in a dream, not doing anything to avoid the bullets and the shells.

I remember only having skewered, in a barn, a sub-officer who was going to wound one of my men and to having captured two prisoners in a hollow.

The day after the death of Bataille, I was hit in my turn; a bullet in the left thigh.

“It’s not bad,” the medical aide who examined me at the aid post said to me. “In a month, you’ll be fine.”

This good news left me indifferent. I would have welcomed with the same calm the announcement of death.

I was at the end, both physically and spiritually.

They understood that they had to evacuate me, despite the non-grievous nature of my wound.

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XVIII: After the Storm

I was sent to a hospital in Limoges, in the company of numerous wounded men from Neuville-Saint-Vaast, Carency, Ablain-Saint-Nazaire and Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, chasseurs, infantry, engineers.

My stay at the hospital was short, barely three weeks; and in those three weeks, I stayed in bed.

As my medical aide had said at the aid post, my wound was light; it was not even painful, except during the extraction of the bullet. I keep it, that small pointed bullet, as a precious souvenir.

Due to the good care, the excellent food and the delicious calm that I enjoyed I quickly recovered my spirit.

I then learned that they had amputated the leg of my captain; but that his life was no longer in danger.

His wife, who told me the news, added:

“I am happy, very happy that I have my dear husband as so many others have lost theirs.”

At least, I thought, he is saved. It was bad enough to have to cry for Bataille.

A large number of wounded had been, like me, wounded in the legs; and, if some found themselves restricted in bed for long months, others—I was one of them—could, after some days [140] with help, some with a cane, some with crutches, sit on a bench in the sun in the garden of the hospital.

Naturally, each retold of his adventures and his combats.

Thus I had some information about the fighting at Carency, Ablain-Saint-Nazaire and Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, which were as hot as our action at Neuville to which they were all intimately tied.

The ensemble of these operations form what someone, rather improperly, called the Battle of Arras.

I will not recount here the details because the information that was given to me was too confused and too contradictory.

As I have already said, the combatant sees little, a very small corner of the action, and necessarily he is often tempted to put the facts in accord with what he has seen. Finally—and then it is human to be surprised at things—he is always inclined to a certain partiality in regard to his section, his company and his regiment.

That partiality is not open to critique, on the contrary because it derives from the spirit of the unit. The team spirit brings forth miracles.

I have seen arrive at our division as reinforcements, ordinary men, little instructed in military matters; yet, in battle, these men conduct themselves admirably because they are proud to belong to an elite troop, because they know that with us it is not permitted to stay in the rear.

That results in an esprit de corps.

History tells us later of the heroism of that brigade which, leaving the trenches of Berthonval, between Mont Saint-Éloi and La Targette, captured in one bound the famous ouvrages blancs,⁶⁸ which guarded the route to Bethune, attacking at bayonet, passing entire sections in the communication trenches, climbing the gaps under formidable fire and advancing up to four kilometers in an hour and a half, all after having seen fall their admirable commander General Barbot,⁶⁹ who wore so jauntily the alpine beret, and the major part of the officers.

We celebrate the sublime bravery of those chasseurs, of those infantry who, leaving the trenches where they had spent the winter in mud up to their stomachs, captured the village of Carency, so powerfully fortified that the Germans—and they knew it—considered in as impregnable.

What a scene when, after having conquered at bayonet point
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the underground works of hill 125, our men saw appear a white flag over a house in Carency!

Everyone climbed onto the parapet of the trenches, and loud shouting covered the voice of our cannons while, voluntarily, hands in the air, the Germans advanced towards their vanquishers to be disarmed.

All the wounded who had seen this were not able to hold back their tears
[photo here]

when they spoke of it and their hearts swelled with emotion and pride.

They retained a very active memory of their entry into the village of Carency, something which they had so longed dreamed of in their muddy trenches.

One of them showed me a faded pink rose that he had cut in the ruins of a large house known there by the name of the chateau rouge. Another guarded, as a souvenir of the great day, a German pipe gathered in the underground where the German commander had been installed. In this underground shelter our soldiers could see an escutcheon on which was the head of a woman in a Baden helmet and below which was written the name, Dora Zweifel.

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Then there was the victorious attack, in the middle of the night, at Ablain-Saint-Nazaire, the last combat before the village where the Germans, furious, had just lit incendiaries.

⁶⁸Fortifications. “An ouvrage typically consists of a series of concrete-encased strong points, linked by underground tunnels.” ([Wikipedia](#))

⁶⁹General Ernest Jacques Barbot (1855-1915), commanded the French 77th infantry division

They ceded nothing to the vanquishers of Carency and Ablain, those chasseurs and infantry who led the assault, in May, at Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, completing the work started on 15 March by a heroic battalion of the 158th, who lost its chief, commander Dupont, killed by a shell, and one of its captains, the brave Maire, struck on the parapet of the conquered position.

How much blood ran on that small hill of Notre-Dame-de-Lorette, around that small chapel whose remains now lie only ruins!

Later, another chapel will rise on that hill henceforth celebrated, and the crowd will come here to pay their respect to the heroic sons of France who fell there by the thousands.

On my discharge from the hospital, I obtained leave for a few days.

Before going to see my mother, I wanted to take care of the mission that I had been charged with by Bataille as he died.

What happened at that interview with the poor woman, I'll let you think about it, because I do not have the courage to explain it.

At my house, they gave me a party, naturally. They kind of considered me a hero because I wore the military medal and the Croix de guerre that had been given to me during my stay in the hospital.

I could not but blush at the elegies that were addressed to me, because, in sum, I had simply done my duty just like my comrades.

A hero, me? Ah! No.

What would they say, those brave men of my village, if they had known my captain, if they had known Bataille?

Those, yes, those are our heroes.

As for me, it was because of the kindness of those heroes that I received my decorations.

My captain had thought of his soldiers on his sickbed. He had wanted to formulate his recommendations in their favor, and he had the goodwill to put me on his list.

At my return to the depot, I learned that I was changing corps and units to the 42nd infantry regiment that was garrisoned at Belfort and considered an elite corps.

[photo here]

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I was almost glad for the change, which, in other times, would have plunged me into despair. I much preferred to enter a new situation than to return to my former unit where everyone would tell me about those missing: my excellent captain, my dear Bataille, and others, many others.

Assuredly, they knew me in the regiment. My reputation there had been made, and they even let me know before my evacuation that I will probably, one day, be recommended for sub-

lieutenant; but I had never been ambitious, and even I never thought of that promise, or at least, if I did think, it was without any regret.

I will say that arriving at my new regiment with the decorations that bore witness to my earlier conduct and my attitude in battle, I would not be badly received.

I communicated this change to my captain and explained to him the reasons and asked him to not be worried about the change. He understood perfectly and, while expressing his regrets at seeing me quit our great regiment, he wished me good luck in the other one. He asked me to let him know as soon as I found out the names of my superiors, and as I easily guessed, knowing his character and goodness, that he had the intention to write them on my behalf.

He also told me that he hoped to leave the hospital in a month to go back home, and he invited me to spend my first leave with him.

His wife added a friendly word to the letter and declared that she scolded me strongly if I did not come for the invitation.

A few days later, I wrote him again to announce my departure.

I returned, without regret, to the front, because the boredom was torturing me. But I asked myself a little uncertainly if I would adapt easily to my new existence, because I knew, that this time, I was going for the good life in the trenches.

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IN THE TRENCHES OF THE AISNE (Life and War in the Trenches)

XIX: On the Railroad

I am ordered, while reaching my post, to lead a detachment of reinforcements, composed of "bleus" and veterans of the 42nd who had been wounded in 1914 and were now being returned to service. The latter tell me about my new unit. The colonel is a little gruff but not a bad man; the officers are good guys; it seems that the regiment distinguished itself in Alsace and on the Marne. The new men listen with interest to the talk of actions by the veterans. Their admiration does not lag and manifests itself by the offer of several good bottles of wine.

The guests are not, at least, lacking.

"You know, new men, that the journey will be long. We know that when we board the train, but, when the time comes, it's another matter. During that time you'll be dying of thirst if you do not fill your canteen."

So, if the new guys want to die well for their county, they did not intend to die of thirst. The veterans are tasked with the job of bringing the tins of bully beef and the bread? Isn't it just that the young ones buy the wine?

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I close my eyes to the negotiations taking place but determined to oppose any drinking.

I know the soldier; he's a child that would be spoiled because of his excessive weakness. It's necessary to reign him in, to watch him, to prevent mistakes, to avoid suffering.

I feel happy to have exercised my authority as sub-officer en route to the front. I want to be loved and feared at the same time. That's probably not an easy thing, but is it possible? I think so.

All of my men seem to be brave and honest. One of them however, Walter, a disgraced NCO, needs watching. He talks a lot, too much; he has seen it all and criticizes everything. He is a malcontent, embittered. Could one get him back to a true understanding of things? I will try if he remains under my command. For now, I ask him with good feeling to not make remarks that risk reducing the ardor of his comrades, to weaken their burning fire.

We arrived at the station an hour before the departure of the train, and, as the train was two hours late, we had three hours. That's a long time, especially when you have men to watch over.

It is 1800. We are not leaving any earlier than 2100.

The veterans only see one practical way to pass the time without getting bored; to have a card game at the bar.

I authorize them to go there first, appearing like I was according them a privilege, but, in reality, I act this way to watch the wallets of the blues.

Finally our train arrives. We get on, and we depart. My men sing, eat and drink, then finish and fall asleep. That's the best thing for them to do.

Only the former NCO stays awake and watches me. I take the opportunity to try and make him understand his duties. He evidently detests the authority of the commander and hardly hides the sentiment. He says that he was the victim of the animosity of his adjutant; but he avoids explaining the reasons for his demotion. As he seemed touched by my goodwill, I hope to slowly get him back on the good path. He finishes by going to sleep and soon snores just like his comrades.

I wanted to imitate them, but sleep did not come, and my thoughts turned to the events of the last months, towards my old mother, towards my friends and especially towards my disappeared comrades. Then, the train clanks on, rolling slowly towards the regiment where they await me, towards the unknown.

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Would I have the opportunity to fall in with a good company, under the orders of a captain, a knowing commander, to be obeyed, to be loved?

Up to now I had been spoiled. Would I continue to be?

Towards midnight, our train halted at a station to let pass the innumerable convoys. The night is superb. The moon, with its delicate and tender light, bathes the quiet countryside. Not far from us, a nightingale sings as if to celebrate the sweetness of this beautiful summer night,

[photo here]

We are leaving for the war, and everything here seems to invite us to appreciate the peace.

Walter woke up, and without doubt he has the same impression as me because he exclaims:

"Heh! Sergeant, do you believe that it is a shame for civilization to see men cut each other's throats when we could be living happily under a sky like this one?"

"Yes, my friend, but, as we were treasonously attacked, it is necessary to defend ourselves!"

Walter seems to think a moment, and then he says to me:

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"Sergeant, so I'll try to keep with you. I will do everything possible to satisfy you."

"Understood."

Our train resumed its movement. The car, probably badly hitched, shook us terribly. Walter goes back to sleep, and I do not delay in following his example.

The following day, in the early afternoon, we disembark in a charming, small village, from which we are to reach our regiment on foot. It's the residence of the quartermaster-general. Many officers appeared very busy in diverse and brilliant uniforms. There were many cars with tricolor flags, with police looking morose and suspicious posted at all the crossroads.

There is no reason for us to prolong our stay in this small village, too crowded for us poilus. I will instead ask for my orders at the office. I check on the food and sleeping quarters for my men;

then, near dawn, we are en route for Vic-sur-Aisne.⁷⁰

⁷⁰Vic-sur-Aisne is a commune in the Aisne department in northern France about sixty miles northeast of Paris. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Aisne.pdf>.

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XX: Into the Realm of Moles

What a wonderful path! We traverse the forest of Villers-Cotterets by way of Rond-de-Chartres and Saut-du-Cerf. Here the war had not yet made its mark. We are simply surprised to see, in places, some automobile wreckage in a hole. Some doe, led by a buck with majestic antlers, watch us pass without showing the least fear.

“Sergeant,” said Walter, “can I shoot one for dinner?”

“No,” my friend, “save your cartridges for the Boche.”

Walter confides in me that he is a bit of a poacher and that he had been degraded for having hunted, despite a formal defense.

We halt for a short rest at the small house of the forester of Beaune. There has been fighting here. The traces of shells are still visible on the walls. The chateau de Montgobert, situated nearby, has not suffered any damage. The enemy retreated too fast to think about sowing ruin along its passage.

Towards 8 o'clock, we arrive at heights of the Chat-Embarrasse Inn, which has already been abandoned a long time.

The barren plateau that we have to descend towards Vic is visible by the Boche observation posts; and so it is often shelled when troops, presenting a vulnerable object, are at risk in broad daylight.

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That's not our case because our detachment is little visible as a distance of 8 or 9 kilometers.

However, a few 150s bracket the route, reminding anyone who would be tempted to forget that we entered a dangerous zone.

Instinctively we quicken our pace, and soon we descend into the valley of the Aisne. In the distance, in front of us, the heights of Saint-Victor and hill 150 are held by the Germans.⁷¹

At the base of the slopes, on the right bank of the river, this beautiful village spread out, in the center stands the old chateau de Vic with its tall and massive tower that had been gutted by German artillery.

The bridge on which we crossed the Aisne, was in September 1914, witness to fierce battles when the rear guard of the enemy was under pressure from our infantry. Two of the men in my detachment had participated in that combat and told me that the Germans, in their haste, could not completely blow up the bridge which had been completely mined.

Only half of the decking was destroyed, but the break proved sufficient to allow the retreat of the

⁷¹See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Aisne.pdf>.

enemy and to stopping our attack. The bridge was then rapidly repaired by us.

Since the Germans occupy, since that time, the hillsides of the ferme de Saint-Victor, they do not hesitate to shell at their ease Vic and its surroundings.

For the present, it is calm in these parts. We are thus able to stop for lunch. We rest and check the information on the route that we are to follow.

Judging by what remains of the attractive houses that have not all been completely destroyed, even though the bombardment is pretty much continual, Vic, must have been, before the war, a very nice vacation place. Its chateau, which had a grand air about it, shows serious wounds. Roof half gone, tower gutted, walls tumbling.

A villa organized as an ambulance station has particularly suffered. The enormous red cross that is painted on its roof served particularly, without a doubt, to remind one of the Teuton's savagery.

To the north of Vic we occupy the front line along the heights that are situated on the right bank of the Aisne, but the Germans, thanks to certain elevated points that they hold further away from us, have installed observation posts. The ruins of the ferme de Saint-Victor, for example, has views of certain parts of the valley and allows

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the Germans to shell wherever they saw troops or convoys; thus, it is prudent not to show oneself.

Responsible for the security of my detachment, I scout the safest route. Then we head for Confrécourt.

One of the few inhabitants remaining at Vic tells me of some of the particular details of the countryside.

Last year, Confrécourt, the former abbey, was a superb farm,
[photo here]

worked by a great farmer, Mr. Ferté. It seemed that nothing remained now except the ruins.

Our route goes through the valley of the Aisne by Roche and the hamlet of Vaux.

Certainly, we see here and there houses demolished, walls destroyed, but the fields are cultivated, and almost everywhere we could perceive green and flowers.

It is hard to believe that huge artillery shells explode here.

That quiet ends at Vaux where we are greeted by many rounds of 105s that oblige us to take cover behind the wall of a house that is still inhabited.

The owner did not want to leave his home. He lives there with
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his wife and two daughters, and a deep and spacious cellar provides them a refuge from the bombardment.

We cheered him as he told us that he had retired, in 1914, at Vaux to live quietly, far from the noise and any worries, after he had acquired an honest business position.

Evidently this placid bourgeoisie had been badly inspired when he chose this place for retirement.

But how could he have foreseen events?

To console him, I try to make him understand that he should be happy that he has not established his residence a little further north, because then he and his family would be in the hands of the Germans.

He smiles melancholily and says:

“This war will never end!”

But it is not a moment for conversation. The shelling has stopped. Let's go!

Our path follows a narrow valley with slopes covered, just to about mid-slope, with great trees that have not yet suffered much from the artillery, nor been the subject of disastrous explosions. On the banks of a little stream which serves as a trough, a cow, guarded by a boy, grazes quietly.

We meet an old man who pushes in front of him a wheelbarrow full of freshly cut grass, then a work detail that is going to eat. Here and there the number of holes from large explosions attest to the insecurity of the countryside; but no one seems to be concerned. The permanence of a danger against which we feel powerless makes for a fatalistic philosopher.

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XXI: Confrécourt

In front of us, about a ten minute march from us, the line extends along the heights of Confrécourt.⁷²

The valley of the Vaux divided, at the base of the steep slopes of the rounded rump of Confrécourt, into two ravines: one toward the east and the other toward the west, both with a delicious freshness and both surround their two streams with a towering forest.

What remains of the farm, facing south, dominates the rest, and at a height of about eighty meters, all the valley as well as the greater part of the two ravines.

Some ancient elms, covered with shell damage, persist in not dying, highlighting the lamentable aspect of the ruins that they embrace.

We arrive at the camp at 5 o'clock.

A gong, created with an empty 75 shell casing, announces not our arrival but, dinner.

It could not be better.

My men are immediately redistributed among the companies, and I myself receive command of a section. Walter follows me on my request, as we had agreed.

My comrades make me visit the barracks.

The latter are fitted into deep, spacious caverns, resistant to a 420 shell.

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There we will comfortably sleep on camp beds equipped with a metallic net forming the bedspring and a straw mattress. Light is furnished by acetylene lamps. Everything there is perfectly done; but, despite all that, there are rats everywhere. The dogs disdain them; the cats are afraid of them; the poilus are used to them!

My captain is a brave man and a good man; my lieutenant comes from the cavalry and has been assigned to the infantry to fight. The sub-officers of the company are friendly. According to them, our battalion is the highest rated in the regiment. It goes without saying that our company is the best of the battalion.

We won't go to the trenches until after tomorrow.

And so I will have an entire day to study my subordinates and to examine Confrécourt.

My comrades kindly wish me welcome. The champagne does not flow abundantly; it did not

⁷²Near Vic-sur-Aisne. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Aisne.pdf>.

even flow at all. We are content with the government wine, vulgarly called “pinard.”⁷³

This simple word produces a magical effect on the poilu. Certainly “le jus” (which is also what we call coffee in military slang) has its charm, especially in the morning, but pinard is very much superior.

With no pinard, there is no poilu!

This wine is in no ways nectar, and for good reason. It is of inferior quality, tossed in half-filled barrels of often unwashed grapes.

Once distributed to the companies, it is transported to the trenches in canvas buckets or other uncovered vessels. At the intermediary stops, we can draw some quarts without too much trouble or concern about the questionable cleanliness, the dust or the flies.

Be that as it may, the pinard restores all the strength, especially if, at each rest, the poilu can receive more than a glass.

It is obvious that real pinard should not be white. The best tasting is the dark red wine, often with a high alcohol percentage.

Do not bother to try and make soldiers understand that tea is a more beneficial drink. They don't want to hear anything about that.

Wine, that's the sole French drink; it's an energy food. That idea is so firmly embedded in the soldier's spirit that to diminish the wine ration would lead to serious misconduct.

The military administration, we must recognize, always assured

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service, quite remarkably, judging by the good quality of food and consistency in the delivery of it.

Even on the heights of Confrécourt, everything arrives in good condition.

The quality of the straw for sleeping, however, leaves something to be desired; but it is not too difficult to get by.

We sleep well; we would sleep better if the rats were less commonplace.

[photo here]

My first night in the caves of Confrécourt was not bad. I thought of others, in the trenches, and this comparison lessened my aversion to the rats.

At dawn, I was on the plateau. There is nothing left of the farm but four walls. The one facing north is three-quarters destroyed, but its two towers stand firm. The three others, heavier, strongly reinforced by powerful buttresses, resist the shells of all calibers.

⁷³Pinard or vin ordinaire (local wine). French soldiers were allotted a daily wine ration (one quarter liter in 1914, eventually raised to three quarter liter by 1916).

The eastern facade of the house towards the south also remains standing, but in an unsteady state of equilibrium.

The climbing roses are hanging there and blooming.

In the great court, there is an immense manure pit, some rubble,
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a cement basin half demolished, a scrap heap of broken and burned farm machinery.

About a hundred meters to the north extends a large garden, or what earlier was a garden.

The walls are crenelated. Here and there, are some enormous shell craters, some graves. In the middle of this terrain that has been invaded by weeds and where some flowers resist the devastation, the vestiges of a greenhouse lay.

Everywhere conduits had been developed to divide the water gotten at Vingré and brought up to Confrécourt.

Today the pump is broken and the pipes broken, torn off or destroyed.

The 150s, 210s and 320s have done their work!⁷⁴

The farm is separated from the garden by a sort of semi-lunar, blasted terrain, as there are very large shell craters, many with the rims touching one another.

There was a small and charming park, planted with beautiful trees now damaged. Their great branches broken and strewn about the ground; their thick trunks disemboweled; but everything still growing underfoot.

A touching and strong image of hope eternal!

All these ruins have the appearance of death.

These walls, under the formidable assault of the cannon, finished, perhaps, by collapsing, but the rocks did not die; the mortar which united them is gone, powdered, fertilizing the ground all around. A new cement combines the rubble. Confrécourt is being reborn in its ruins; its barns and stables, reconstructed, will be repopulated; life will be reborn more intense, and the master's house will again dominate the beautiful valley of the Vaux.

I was indulged in these reflections when my attention was attracted by a flight of some pigeons, the last hosts of the farm. It reminded me that nothing could put them to flight; they live in these cracked and crumbling walls. At the first shell, they rise up, swirling above the ruins until the end of the din, then returning they perch in what remains of their former nests, in the corners and recesses where they were born.

⁷⁴These are the sizes of German artillery, howitzer or mortar shells: 150mm, 210mm, 320mm.

Their number has much diminished in this dangerous game. Reds, whites and slate.⁷⁵ There are hardly more than a dozen left.

They will hold out to the last.

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A noble example of courage and fidelity!

On entering the underground camp, I salute the cemetery where our dead sleep their last sleep, under the roses borrowed from the farm's garden.

The graves have been dug and are maintained with the greatest care by the monks, aides and stretcher bearers under the direction of the brigade chaplain. It is a team of brave men, and these brave men have, by their devotion and their kindness, attracted everyone's goodwill.

The chaplain of the brigade, father D., volunteered at the start of the war. Always there when duty calls, never imposing himself if he is not needed, he is the greatest friend of the poilus. His chest is decorated with the Croix de guerre with palm.

⁷⁵Here referring to different breeds of pigeons.

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XXII: In the Trenches

We take the necessary steps to prepare for our departure to the trenches as that night we are supposed to relieve units of the front line.

The movement has to be finished long before dawn.

Trying to understand, at least a little, the terrain that separates us from the trenches, I invite a corporal, who has traversed this ground many times, to inform me.

From the north wall of the garden, we can quite easily have a view of the trenches, and that is sufficient.

The Confrécourt plateau extends to the north to Vingré, to the northeast to Nouvron and to the west up to the summit of the road from Hors.⁷⁶

These three villages are on the reverse slope, and so therefore I only know their direction.

Nouvron is in the hands of the enemy since the beginning of the war of trenches.

It is midnight. Our sections, led by their chiefs, set out. My corporal precedes me. Our load is heavy. The blanket and tent canvas, rolled on the knapsack,

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makes it bulky. On the left side, the musette with bread, cup, and spoon next to some cartridges and other eating utensils; on the right side, the large canteen filled with water. I don't even mention the filled cartridge pouch, canned food, the utensils for the transport of food.

And so loaded down, the soldiers reached such large dimensions that they just barely fit through the communication trenches.

[photo here]

All the vocabulary of the trenches is put to use, but we talk at half voice which produces a strange impression.

The NCOs think that everyone is marching too slowly while the men in the sections think that it is too fast.

As a warning there a warning from the captain.

"Would you all be quiet you gossipers!"

Finally, we have arrived, and we install ourselves.

The night is rather dark, no moon. There is not even that soft light that falls from the stars, even though it is good weather.

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⁷⁶See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Aisne.pdf>.

Here and there are some shots.

On our left, some Boche machine guns crackle, probably to bait us into firing. On our right, far away, there are explosions of Minenwerfer to which our mortars respond.⁷⁷

On our front, calm.

Trench warfare, at night, entails some strange incidents. Sometimes a lively fusillade takes place at some point in time without the least reason. The contagion is rapid. Like a fire in the bush, the fusillade propagates, winning over the neighboring sectors. The trenches of the adversary's front line fire off incessant fire. They say it's the start of an attack.

The phone quickly rings.

"Hello! What is going on in your area? What does the racket mean? Response: Nothing abnormal. No attack on our front; no attack on the two neighboring sectors—The fusillade is coming from the right. I demand information."

However, the noise stops, without any reason, only to recommence a few moments later because the stretcher bearers are mistaken for enemy patrols or the stems of beets waving in the wind and viewed from a rifle slit by tired or fearful men look like strange beings.

It follows that it is very difficult to unravel if the noise is a prelude to an attack, especially when you are, as they say, nose to nose with the enemy.

Certainly, the commander has to keep calm, but he must not be late in taking measures to stop an attack, if any.

And what concerns us, at the moment at least, is that we are not concerned with such difficulties because calm reigns on our front.

Our trenches are comfortable: a good parapet, high, strong, with firing slits conveniently spaced out without being too wide, solid shelters, easy communication, a net of barbed wire, well constructed.

All of this represents considerable work and demands conscious execution, intelligent direction.

At first glance, you feel at home and well-positioned to defy any surprise attack.

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My post has a shell proof roof. I am in the middle of my men; and my surveillance is thus easy and total. Everything is fine.

I methodically organize the work of my men, a third rest, the others guard and work. On what could you possibly be working in the trenches? Not in the making of rings, can openers or other such trinkets. That I don't approve of. While waiting the soldier has many

⁷⁷Minenwerfer is a German short range trench mortar. The usual sizes were 7.58, 17, or 25 cm.

[photo here]

more interesting things to make, but it is more important to work at the maintenance of defensive works, putting back into place the parts destroyed by the artillery and bombs, at the net of barbed wire and repairing the regular net when one is so close to the enemy for that to be always possible. The good soldier always has work to be done.

He is, furthermore, the first interested in working, because his life and those of his comrades could be compromised by the smallest negligence.

“Hello. Sergeant Lefèvre, meeting at your trench. The general and the colonel are doing their inspection turn and will not be long before reaching your section.”

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“Yes, captain!”

Almost immediately, the announced visitors enter my domain. I present myself as appropriate.

“You arrived in the regiment, the day before yesterday. Your detachment conducted itself well in the course of travel?”

“Yes, colonel.”

“I hope that you will be quickly up to speed with the habits and traditions of the regiment, and I am sure that you have brought us a few more brave men. Do you have anything to ask of your corps commander?”

“Yes, colonel. Among the men of my detachment is a former sergeant, demoted for poaching. He is smart, and he regrets his mistake. I believe that he would be better at his place as an NCO than in the ranks.”

“Good, call him.”

“There he is, Walter, an Alsatian.”

“Approach, Walter. My friend, it is up to you to recover your stripes and rapidly too. If, in fifteen days, your commanders propose you for corporal, I will name you immediately. The rest will follow then. I am counting on you. Good bye, my friend!”

Walter salutes and retires. A tear fills his eyes. That man is ready for any sacrifice.

However, our brigade general seems to want to comment on his officers. He does not delay in telling us.

“Your organization is generally good, but nevertheless has a little need of perfecting. You should make more efforts to improve supply, just a little work to impose on your men. You must give me all that I ask of you. Your net is, in certain places, too thin. Make some barbed wire spheres and let them tumble out of the trenches because the proximity to the enemy makes it impossible to set up a regular network. As for your earthen works, they crumble too easily because your men stiffen them too much.

“I’ll return in three or four days; and I hope to find everything perfect. Good bye, my friends!”

Then turning towards me:

“Sergeant, here are some cigars to distribute to some of your soldiers who work the best. Don’t forget to think about what you will do if you are attacked. The enemy can surge from his trenches without warning. It won’t give you time to think

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about how to hold on; and so it’s good to counterattack quickly, and, for that, everything has to be previewed.”

All this was simply said by a commander who wants to instruct without any disagreeable criticism.

I find myself alone with my men.

Walter approaches me.

“Sergeant, I thank you. I understand that you spoke

[photo here]

of me and for me. I will do, I hope, that which is necessary to earn the good words that you have said. Do you think that I will be able to regain my rank?”

“Certainly, my friend. Conduct yourself well and everything will work out. While waiting here, smoke this cigar to the health of the general; it’s he who offered it...”

The captain and the colonel had to accompany the general to the limit of the sector. Returning to the command post, he orders me to put my men to work immediately after lunch so that the orders of the command would be executed without delay.

That will be done.

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The weather is fair. The sun’s rays, like something soft, superheat our deep trenches, where the air circulates poorly and humid, exhaling indefinable odors.

My duty is to research from where they are coming.

The latrines are very clean, neatly kept, not the cause.

I risk a quick look above the trench. No doubt, a few steps away, beyond the barbed wire, between our line and that of the enemy, four or five cadavers are stretched out. The weeds, that have grown, keep me from distinguishing their uniforms.

Horror! For how long have those men been there, face down to the ground?

A light wind, that blew from the north envelopes us sneakily with those macabre emanations. It seems to me that I am completely saturated; that my beard has been impregnated, and death now appears to me in an unforeseen aspect, horrible, disgusting.

A stretcher bearer who was located near me and who had seen me raise my head above the trench, put an end to my reflections.

“Sergeant, what you want to do is dangerous. You could easily receive a bullet in your head.”

“Huh! You’ve seen the stiffs? There are five in front of us. There are some others a little further away, to the right and to the left. They’ve been there a long time. I have always seen them. They say that they are Boche; but I don’t think that any person knows for sure. Or even if there are others! Ah! The poor buggers! One of these nights, I must go and see. While waiting, I believe that we have to do the job. Do not let them refreeze, sergeant.”

That man spoke the truth. A work detail came carrying lunch in large pots and also the famous pinard in canvas buckets. The impression of the poilus, with spoon and bowl in hand, around the squad’s cook, was an amusing manifestation of an excellent appetite.

Life everywhere has strange contrasts.

So let’s go eat.

Beef stew and rice. The rice, baked in the mobile oven, overcooked, is a sort of greyish porridge mixed with lard. The beef is good, very good meat, a sufficient ration. Everything is hardly warm, rather cold. It is brought to us cold, in the middle of summer.

The wine is whatever, but a connoisseur in the trenches declares it splendid.

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In the wink of an eye, everyone is sitting on the trench bench and dipping slices of bread into the bowl filled with stew and comfortably resting between your legs.

It’s the good moment of the day, with the condition that it’s not spoiled by a fusillade done in bad taste.

Such an innocent pleasure does not last long. Usually a soldier eats quickly.

After the repast, an hour of rest was usual, then to work!

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XXIII: Working in the Trench

My good poilus are cautioned that the organization of our work should not require, however, any observation on the part of our superiors. Some go to work on the hill, the firing step, the rifle slits, the parapet. Others go to make everything needed to reinforce our barbed wire network.

I carefully examine that net with a periscope. It has suffered from the enemy shelling. In many places where shells and projectiles have exploded, the wire is broken. The picket stakes have been torn, broken, and the barbed wire partially destroyed.

There are some really dangerous gaps that need to be obstructed. The proximity of the enemy does not allow us to replace the pickets and wire to reconstitute a real network. We can only make a sort of hedgehog and throw it in the gaps.

These hedgehogs are generally composed of an armature, a sort of carcass of wood or large mass of barbed wire, around which one wraps more barbed wire. The hedgehog properly done has a form of a sphere. When it has an ovoid form we call it a zeppelin; if it is cubic, then it's a tetrahedron.

These different names have been given by our poilus. Their accuracy is not open for discussion; it's enough that you understand.

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And so my men are in the process of making the hedgehogs, zeppelins and tetrahedrons.

During the upcoming night they will put them out.

Walter recognized the holes to plug. He directed the operation.

Unfortunately all is not as easy as we were led to believe. To make the defensive accessories, it is necessary, above all, to have the materials, and for these we have to go search in the rear of the front, something that is no small matter. It is necessary to have some pincers, pliers, shears...skilled people. Finally, when everything is ready, we have to put the defenses in place, a very delicate operation because at the slightest noise the enemy will unleash hell fire.

The slightest noise, thus, attracts the lookouts in front. If the night is clear, the maneuver is difficult to carry out unobserved. If it is dark, the rockets, the kind that you use in fireworks, light up, by their indiscrete glow, all movements unusual.

Success depends thus not only on the location and the guts of the ones carrying it out, but also on the circumstances of the hazard.

Walter is one of the best qualified to undertake this job.

While my men are working, looking out or resting, I search to find out an exact idea of the configuration of our defense sector by means of a sketch and examining the terrain.

I note that our two neighboring sectors have their front line trench not as close to the Boche as ours.

Our sector then presents, vis-a-vis the Germans, a convex curve. I deduce that a counter firing of the enemy's artillery of all calibers should normally impact the front of our neighbors, as this action would not be affected by the proximity of the adversary's lines, but those bombs would manifest themselves particularly worse in our sector.

On our neighbors the effects of a bombardment are most impactful; but here it is the firing of lance-bombs from a nearby site, by the German minenwerfer and by the French crapouillots.⁷⁸

These conclusions do not take very long to be confirmed. We see, toward the advanced lines at Vingré, that a series of 105 explosions produce a heavy black smoke and project vertically clouds of earth rocks and flakes.

Our 75s respond vigorously. Their cracking sound is drier;

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their noise more heartbreaking, more strident. At each blast, the air seems to moan, and we say that the bombardment calls out in moans.

However, our sector is not quiet. The crapouillots, whose emplacement have been concealed with care, are always ready to intervene. Their crew is under the direction of a lieutenant of artillery whose activity is truly surprising. Of small size, this officer never ceases to go from battery to battery to check on his pieces, visiting the shelters of men and ammunition, elevating the morale of his men. We call him "the ferret of the trenches."

Today he is exultant because he spotted an emplacement of minenwerfer and had taken measures to blow it up.

"You keep your men sheltered," he tells me, "in the very likely case that the Boche respond. Make sure that they are not stationed in the communication trenches, because they will hinder my movement."

All dispositions taken, each is at his post.

At 13 hours the commotion begins.

A first shot is fired to register the shelling.

The torpedo⁷⁹ rises in the air at a great angle, then, reaching the summit of its trajectory, turns, the fuse on its bottom, and goes on to wipe out a little of the rear of the Boche trench. Two whistles, of which one, that of the descent, is very brief. The explosion is formidable. Debris of all sorts flies in all directions. Some falls near to us.

The second torpedo explodes in the middle of the enemy net. Pieces of barbed wire, torn from

⁷⁸Crapouillot was a French trench mortar that fired a torpedo-like mortar with fins, e.g., 58 mm.

⁷⁹Launched from a crapouillot, this French mortar resembled a torpedo. Here is one [photo example](#).

their stands, are thrown onto our work.

The firing is registered.

Two volleys are immediately executed, and we see, with the aid of our periscopes, many bombs fall directly on the enemy's trench.

Then, on our side, complete quiet for fear of being spotted.

Everyone lay down waiting for the reply.

The question is asked, "Have we destroyed the minenwerfer?"

The Boche is cunning. His minenwerfer emplacements are numerous. After they've fired, he changes places to confuse our observers. We are never sure of success, of the efficacy of our firing, but, generally, we judge by the reprisals, as, at least, how mad the enemy is.

The riposte this time is not delayed.

Many huge bombs are sent at us. The firing, very happily, is very short. One of them explodes in our network

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and creates a large breach that it is necessary to obstruct without losing time when night comes.

Immediately, the artillery lieutenant, who has provoked the response and who observes the counter fire, directs the fire of a new battery of crapouillots on the location from which the Boche shelling has originated.⁸⁰

We see thrown into the air some beams, boards, sand bags and many coats.

[photo here]

A new calm that lasts and allows us to resume our work.

It is not the same in the sector on our left. The cannonade which the Germans have unleashed has progressively acquired the violence of a systematic bombardment.

The shelling follows the front line trench from the right to the left. Then it focuses on a central communication trench before returning to the main trench.

Further, some 77mm shells, fused, explode behind the defenders. The vast majority of the projectiles were 103mm or 150mm that we easily recognize by their heavy black smoke trail.

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We soon notice that the ordinary shells are followed by the tear and gas shells.

For the first, it is not indispensable, at least for those who are relatively far away, to put on masks. If the gas, which is not visible and very subtle, reaches us, and if our eyes tear up and

⁸⁰See the photo at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Images/Page181.jpg>.

there is no other effect, it is very bearable.

As for the asphyxiate shells, that's another matter. The vapors produced by them appear to us greenish yellow. They spread slowly enough at first, then once in contact with the ground, they progressively spread and cling to everything with tenacity. The gas does not reach us. As a precaution, all of our men have their masks in hand.

Our 75 batteries redouble their activity and muzzle the enemy artillery judging by the reduction in its firing, and then it ceases.

These activities slowed our work, without completely hampering our workers. A good number of hedgehogs, zeppelins and tetrahedrons have been created. Now we have something with which to occupy ourselves at the end of the day.

It is night. On our front, no unusual noise. On our right, a few shots. Our listening posts are doubled, ready for any eventuality. About twenty hedgehogs rest in the pit, all prepared, and it is necessary to let them tumble from above the parapet.

Walter has chosen four men from among those who had volunteered to help him. They are small, active, agile, resourceful. Two are former factory workers, the third a university professor, and the fourth a lawyer.

Walter goes first. His comrades follow with careful precautions not to give the alert. All spread themselves out on the ground, receiving the hedgehogs that we slip out of the trench and crawl towards the hole to be obstructed, dragging each hedgehog with aide of a rope.

Suddenly a Boche rocket illuminates the front.

Our men freeze at once. From my observation slit, I survey what I could of the adversary's trench. I ask myself whether this accursed rocket has revealed our maneuver or if a fusillade is going to be unleashed against our small detachment. I tremble for our brave men.

The seconds seem like hours.

Slowly the light diminishes, and the darkness returns.

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Our men have resumed their crawling, but then one of the hedgehogs is caught on one of the stakes and would not move; it blocks the path of the others. What an unfortunate setback!

I hope that this is not going to force one of our soldiers to get on his knees to pick up the hedgehog, that is something that would probably

[photo here]⁸¹

attract the attention of the enemy; but suddenly the march is resumed. All is well.

I make out Walter near the network. He has placed two hedgehogs in the hole, and he is right there in the middle of the barbed wire. The other hedgehogs are put near him and attached one

⁸¹See the photo of a lance-bomb at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Images/Page183.jpg>.

to the other, one put in place at a time.

By the same way, our men return crawling. A new rocket, new light, another stop.

A shot!

Has the Boche sentry noticed something of the maneuver?

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A second bullet hits the parapet. No doubt the alarm has been given.

Have our men understood the danger? I see them get up in one leap, run across all the ground that separates us from them and jump into the trench.

It was just in time. A fusillade pelts bullets into our parapet.

I shake the hands of these brave men, but I only see four. Where is the fifth, and who is it?

Walter is missing; he was in the rear. His comrades did not see him fall. Is he dead? Is he only wounded? No cry has been heard.

I risk raising my head above the trench; but darkness has returned, and I could not see anything. I listen with care, but I do not hear any moaning.

However the Boche continue to fire, but we do not respond.

Little by little our front becomes quiet again.

“Sergeant, would you let me go see what happened to Walter?”

At these words, said in a low bass, I turn and recognize one of our stretcher-bearers, a courageous priest, always in quest of action.

“Yes, but wait until calm has completely reestablished.”

The priest agrees with me that, if he has need of an assistant, he would softly whistle; then, near a traverse in the line, at the point where the trench seemed to be less visible, he jumps the parapet and lays down to begin crawling on his reconnaissance. I am able to easily follow his path because my eyes are used to the darkness, and I could see him, at a few steps further, stretched out next to a corpse equally stretched out and who could be Walter. What happened? I widen my eyes. I can make out only the two forms, both immobile.

Nevertheless, in a few moments, I believe that I could see them, crawling. Both of them, the one after the other.

Soon our two friends are at the base of the parapet.

Walter is wounded in the leg, which he dragged motionless..

It is not an easy thing to get his large body back into the trench, but, with patience and ingenuity

our poilus succeed.

Walter is immediately carried to the aid post.

The doctor could not comment on the severity of the wound.

The tibia is broken, and evacuation to the rear is necessary.

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"I did not believe," Walter said to me, "that I could ever regain my stripes. Decidedly bad luck!"

The captain promises to propose him for a citation in the order of the army.⁸²

Walter smiles, satisfied. We shake hands, and he is carried off towards Confrécourt.

The priest accompanies him to quickly escape our congratulations.

The night ebbs into a relative calm.

On principle, a commander watches the greater part of the night.

[photo here]

He is always on foot, attentive, a hour before dawn. When the sun rises without incident, the commander goes to taste a well-deserved rest.

And so I earn my position of sleep.

My shelter is a little underground, and you go down by six steps. There you would see my bed, a wooden frame containing straw, a small table and a stepladder.

This furniture is modest but sufficient.

The roof of the shelter has a suitable thickness. It is formed from two layers of logs separated by a good thickness of dirt. The stays that supported the roof rest on pads and

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are fixed by good spacers. In brief, the shelter is solid and could survive the 210s with impunity.

I stretch out and slept.

"Sergeant, I brought you some coffee; it is still hot, boiling hot!"

It's my faithful batman; I should say my orderly. I forgive him or waking me up, and I lurch in bed. What a sybarite!

The coffee is a cloudy water, a brownish color, smelling of coffee, lightly sugared, neither hot nor cold. I tear my bread so that the latter, a little hard, can be more easily eaten. Beforehand, I add to the coffee some bits of sugar that I have saved. Decidedly, I am pushing being indulgent.

⁸²Cited in the daily army circular for bravery in battle.

I close my eyes and sleep!

“Drrrr!”

I jump up.

The telephone operator tells me that the captain wants to talk to me.

“Hello! Is that you sergeant Lefèvre?”

“Yes, captain.”

“Good! Don’t forget to send me by 10 o’clock this morning a report about the events of the night. Be sure to clearly state the work executed and the circumstances in which you had a man seriously wounded.”

“Yes, captain.”

I return to my bed. Finally, can I sleep? I hope. I stretch out for the third time, and I firmly close my eyes.

Ah! This time I go to sleep.

On the straw in my berth, the worries, more and more familiar, insist on making merry in my head and sound like a sort of warbler if you prefer that bird if one has the choice. But you accept easily that which you know there is no way to evade.

I impose silence on these unwelcome critters and hit my pillow with blows of my fist. They grow quiet while I hit and then recommence louder than ever as if to make up for the time lost. Better not disturb them.

A semi-darkness reins in my cellar, traversed by only two or three rays of light filtering through the uneven boards of the door.

All ready for rest... except the worries.

I sleep.

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A large explosion startles me awake; it is followed by many others.

What now?

I run for information.

The minenwerfer and the crapouillots have recommenced their concert. Those Boche brutes want to destroy our barbed wire.

Good bye to a nice rest, the sweet oblivion of it all.

How long have I slept, stretched out on my camp bed? Plus, I am no longer sleepy, so all for the best.

The life in the trenches follows its course, you get up, you work, you rest.

The day is split by the meals. The uniformity, anyway simply apparent, of this existence is troubled by projectiles of all sorts that this strange war has hatched and by the accidents that these projectiles occasion sometimes.

Our poilus come and go to each of their tasks, to each function.

While they all once differed by their social situation, they all resemble each other now with their worn clothes, discolored, dirty, cropped hair, beard poorly cut, their necessarily questionable cleanliness.

Certainly, the farmers keep their slow pace, the workers from the city their inexhaustible verve. The intellectuals have something perhaps more special in their appearance; but all carry on their face the same look of confidence immutable in the final victory.

The common dangers, the fatigue suffered for the same goal, among these men belonging to such different social milieus, creates a true fraternity.

During the following days, only one fact is important, and that's without my company having suffered losses it has reached the term of its service in the trench.

We have been relieved without incident, and that morning, before dawn, we are in Vingré.

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XXIV: Vingré

This was a delightful place. Snuggled in a ravine next to forested slopes, where ran a little stream bordered by tall poplars. Vingré was, before the war, a hamlet without pretensions inhabited only by farmers and little-known by city people.⁸³ There they lived quietly, happily.

The Boche had passed there and took everything. Then they passed through again in retreat and destroyed everything, burning houses, shooting people under the usual pretext of treason.

There, in one of the last farms that the vandals had to abandon under the pressure of our infantry, they assassinated the farmer and his wife, and let the young baby without care in his cradle to die of hunger. I think that the farmer was named Amory.

Today there is nothing left of Vingré except the ruins and the stream. The people have almost all disappeared, even the groves adorning the slopes of the ravine are gone.

We hold this hamlet strongly; but, since it is constantly shelled by artillery, we live in dugouts comfortably organized and from where we defy the largest projectiles.

Will Vingré ever regain its smiling aspect?

Alas! Two cemeteries with their number of rectangular tombs sprawl through what were once orchards.

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Death had mowed down those in these parts without pity such that it will be a long time before carefree gaiety manifests itself again.

It is reported to me that one of the graves is that of Sergeant Abeille, secretary general of the prefecture Meurth-et-Moselle, who while married and the father of two children, had enlisted for the duration of the war.

He received a bullet in the forehead at the moment when he prepared his squad

[photo here]

for an assault on the Boche trench. Now brutally thrown in this tomb where today he sleeps his last sleep.

The companies spent a few days at Vingré so that the men could clean their weapons, their effects, be de-verminized, improve the camp's dugouts, sanitize the terrain. It is, relatively-speaking, a rest.

The hygienic measures that we are constantly obliged to take are innumerable: maintain the flow of potable water, incinerate the garbage, organize the latrines, etc.

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A very lively doctor specially directs this work. On this subject, here is an amusing story.

⁸³Vingré was a little north east of Vic-sur-Aisne on a plateau. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Aisne.pdf>.

The doctor captured a spring in Haut-Vingré. A barrel is installed there, and the water is channeled towards this receptacle, which is provided with a tap to allow the poilus to fill their canteens or buckets.

Previously, the doctor had thrown into the barrel a handful of potassium permanganate to disinfect it.

When the barrel is full, it is necessary to empty it by the tap to get rid of the potassium permanganate.

However, some soldiers who were standing around curious saw some reddish liquid pour suddenly from the tap, and cried out, amazed: "pinard!"

Alas! The liquid was not pinard just colored like it. What a disappointment!

As for the incineration of garbage, it is done by ovens built of stones. Each oven has its stoker—a new kind of vestal virgin—taking care of the fire night and day.

The hunt for vermin is perhaps one of the occupations the most laborious and lest effective.

I am not only talking about the rats; they resist dogs, cats, poison, and their race is terribly prolific.

Despite these inconveniences, inherent of course to the life on the immediate front, Vingré offers some very much appreciated advantages, especially thanks to the dugouts that had been built on one of the slopes of the ravine that we called "Camp Maunoury."

That name Has been given in honor of the general who had been seriously wounded right in this Vingré sector.⁸⁴

Here is the story concerning that accident that I got from an authorized person:

General Maunoury, army commander, and General de Villaret, army corps commander,⁸⁵ were inspecting the front line trenches that barred the valley of rû d'Hozien⁸⁶ to the north of Vic-sur-Aisne.

They went from west to east, with many of their staff officers, and ended up on the plateau that extended to the north of the ravine of Berry-Vingré, when General de Villaret, having taking a look through a sniper's slit, saw something, that in his opinion, was interesting for General Maunoury to have a look.

Hardly had the generals put their heads at the same slit

⁸⁴General Michel-Joseph Maunoury (1847-1923)

⁸⁵General Étienne de Villaret (1854-1931)

⁸⁶A small stream

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when the two of them fell backward into the trench, General Maunoury with a serious wound on his face and General de Villaret with the trace of a wound in the front of the head.

General Maunoury, who fainted, was carried by the stretcher bearers of the 42nd, while General de Villaret was able to walk along with some support. The sad procession descended to the road that ran along the rear of Vingré where the automobiles were waiting that had brought the generals. But there it was stated that they needed an ambulance because the wounded had to be laid down.

The stretcher bearers who carried the generals from the fatal trench to the bottom of the ravine received a nice citation in the order of the army corps, which ipso facto carried with it the Croix de guerre.

General Maunoury, very seriously wounded, was evacuated to Paris and was not able to resume command of his army, which was universally regretted.

As for General de Villaret, he could, after some time, resume his command.

A stone mentioning the date of the accident was put in the trench. This rock, has since been touched many times by shells, but our poilus repair the damage at once. They hold the honor and perpetuate in the trench the memory of General Maunoury, appreciating his friendliness and good nature.

The sector of Vingré is one of the parts of the front where the war has left profound and lasting traces.

Under the direction of the brigade general commanding this very important sector, the organization of the terrain there has been completed. It comprises the layout of many positions, each of which includes many lines.

It is a defense made easy even with limited units.

Neither the trenches nor the barbed wire net had been built.

It meant that everyone considered himself absolutely safe and that despite all the shells of different calibers shot by the enemy, Vingré is one of those places where we suffer the least casualties and where our works permit us to inflict constant casualties on our adversaries.

One of the curiosities of the hamlet is the angel building where the division HQ is installed, which forms a truly heroic phalanx. These men are all exceptionally brave, a remarkable cadre from all points of view.

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The commander, Captain Q***, of peerless intelligence, inexhaustible zeal and energy, and a nice swagger, surrounds himself with elite officers that you always see when either duty or danger beckons.

Mine warfare was known by lieutenants D*** and A***. Lieutenant S*** is a grand master in the art of constructing bulletproof shelters and well laid out trenches.

The angel building enjoys a special privilege. Spent bullets seem to rendezvous there to the extent that on the east side, it was necessary to set up screens of solid metal sheets which the bullets could crash into. If someone indiscrete entered by one of the window, they were always met by peals of laughter.

Until now, no shell has destroyed the door.

In a few days we are going back to the trenches, and, while waiting, our officers inspect our weapons, ammunition, and equipment of all sorts. We go through inspection after inspection.

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XXV: An Attack

We are again in our trenches.

It does not seem to me that during our stay in Vingré the occupants of our works labored with much energy. The firing slits are obstructed; the ditches are unclean, and the network of defenses leaves something to be desired. We must therefore add to them.

The captain is little satisfied, and he went to complain to the battalion commander so that the latter, in turn, complains to the colonel.

During this time, we work!

We are not able to do as much as we desire because the Germans direct an intense and continual bombardment on our works.

In these conditions, there is nothing to do but take cover and let the torment pass.

On our side, the artillery is not idle.

Thus we are between two fires, suffering not only from the enemy projectiles but also from ours when they fire too short.

Night is near. The bombardment ceases on our sector of the front, but it grows with an increasing intensity on the fronts of our neighbors. The German minenwerfer send only a few bombs

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to our front line. Their fire is long and hits the communication trenches that link us to the second line. I warn the captain of this situation who informs his superiors and tells us to keep a watch. Suddenly, a lookout from one of our posts notices an unusual movement in the enemy's trenches, and then almost at the same time, the Boche leave their trench and march against us.

Our fire opens up from all areas, and our machine guns commence their good work.

I shoot the signal rocket to warn our artillery. At once the voice of the 75s join the concert.

The din soon reaches its maximum intensity. The Boche artillery rage against our communication trenches to prevent our reserves from hastening to us, and ours execute a barrage fire to nail the Boche in their trenches.

All of our men abandon the firing slits to fire freely over the parapet.

The rush of the enemy occurs especially on the side of the network which has deteriorated in previous days and that our comrades have not repaired. And so it is there that we concentrate our fire.

The first and second ranks of the enemy are cut down before reaching the barbed wire network. The following ranks hesitate, jostle, getting mixed up. We see the Boche swirl under the bullets.

Some, crazed, run from here to there, others, reach our barbed wire and cling to it to cut it with shears; others make a half turn and want to regain their trench, but there the officers or sub-officers, revolver in hand, force them to turn back. Many thus resume the charge and rush, screaming, in our direction.

Some are able to traverse our barbed wire and are shot at point blank range; others, entangled in the barbed wire, could not advance nor go back. Wounded, there they stay, crying out movingly and painful.

The attacked has been checked.

Little by little the firing diminishes. The explosions of bombs and shells are less frequent, and the night soon extends its veil over the sinister field of battle where we hear only the painful moans.

The nights that follow attacks, even aborted ones, are always agitated. Our men, super-excited and worried, cannot be prevented from firing in the direction of the enemy; they suppose naturally that the Boche

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are trying to resume moving, partly to take off their dead and wounded.

As firing attracts more firing, the adversary responds.

And so, no rest.

[photo here]

I hasten to see as dawn breaks to find out if the enemy has suffered heavy losses. Finally dawn appears, and I examine the terrain.

About a hundred corpses lie in all the positions.

Three wounded Germans rest stuck in the wire as if caught in a trap.

They cry out, "comrade," but how to go free them?

One of our men tries to bring them aid, but he is met

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by a storm of bullets and is barely able to make it safe and sound back to our trench.

The bullets, that have not touched our comrade, have, on the other, hit the three Germans, who lay miserably convulsed.

The next day we learn that the brigade is going to be relieved, to go to the rear for rest and training.

And so after several months in the sector, the men have a great need not only for a refresh spiritually, but also to be taken in hand, to be re-educated in marching, the principles of cohesion and the rules of more exact discipline.

We leave unenthusiastically.

We are attached to the sector. We know well what we are leaving, and it is unclear where we are going.

But bah! We philosophize! What will be will be.

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THE CHAMPAGNE OFFENSIVE

XXVI: Before the Attack

We left the valley of the Aisne after more than a month and a half there, and we go from rest camp to rest camp while waiting a return to the front.

Our training is lively, and we are ready to undertake a campaign.

In addition, we have been warned that we will probably be sent to the front in Champagne for an envisioned great offensive.

The informants are always so numerous that we end up by believing it.

However the news was correct, and, a morning in August, they tell us that the entire brigade is going to be transported by rail to a camp near Châlons.⁸⁷

A few hours later, a commotion, embarkment, and voila we are rolling. One more time towards new adventures, and new dangers.

The next day we arrive at our destination, and we learn that we are “in camp.”

But where exactly is the camp?

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I was expecting to find tents set up, some wooden barracks, some kind of shelters; but nothing!

What a country this lousy Champagne. They call a few meager firs a “woods” They call here ‘tracks” that are nothing but miserable rutted trails, and they baptize a “bivouac” as some improper vestiges of a camp.

Our bivouac is only distinguished from the surroundings by the pile of garbage partially incinerated and the destroyed fir trees.

It is necessary to begin by cleaning up before thinking of installing any kind of shelter.

Happily the wether is good and hot, and sleeping under the night sky does not scare us nor displease us.

It's all equal. I will remember the Champagne camp noted in the report.

Be that as it may, the regiment takes up the required formations and installs itself.

The companies line up exactly, and we put together the tent canvas of individuals so as to constitute a shelter for the squad.

⁸⁷See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Champagne.pdf>.

For the officers, offices, the infirmary, the workshops, we organize earthen huts covered with sheets of corrugated metal; then over everything, we spread grass and leaves, so to confuse, by this camouflage, the airplanes of the enemy.

A week is spent at the organization of this bivouac and the training of the reinforcements that arrived, then we go to relieve a brigade that has received the order to be moved to another part of the front.

Our mission consists of preparing the sector in view of the very next attack. The work takes place at night.

We pass the Suippe River between Suippes and Jonchery, close to a destroyed mill, and, at dawn, we occupy the sector that has been assigned to us.

Our trenches, several lines of them, extend along the flank of a hill on the north slope of the valley of the Ain. This small stream is very deep in places.

The bottom of the valley is very swampy, marked by large trees and nice vegetation. Some bridges have been built to allow us going from one side to the other.

The Boche hold the heights in front of us, right to the edge of a meager wood devastated and known under the symbols AE, BE, CE, DE. That dominates our trenches. Their position is very strong.

Our brigade has two regiments: the 35th on the right,
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leaning on the ferme des Wacques, and the 42nd on the left, next to the 27th brigade.

Each of our regiments has only a battalion in the front line. The second battalions camp in the valley of the Ain, and the third battalions in the valley of the Suippe.

Towards the northeast, about a kilometer away, we see what was the Souain mill, of which little but its wings remain, half-destroyed.

[photo here]

In this sector the communication and front line trenches are generally not very deep, and there is a feeling here of insecurity.

How have our predecessors been able to live like this? What unexplainable quiet!

In truth, this sector was always tranquil. For us, we have never been used to calm, and it appears to us extraordinary to not receive bullets in the trench and to not be shooting ourselves. To us the life seems monotonous without this addition, and after all, we are here for that, and our commanders don't intend otherwise.

And so we set out immediately at work to improve the dugouts, because we like it better for our security

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counting on their solidity instead of counting on the inertia of the enemy. It is necessary to always be wary of still water, especially when face to face with the Germans.

The part of the terrain that in an attack presents the most difficulties is that which separates the two enemy trenches. This terrain is perfectly covered by rifle and machine guns. It is also subject to the barrage fire of the artillery. Finally, it is seeded with additional defenses and ambushes of all sort that our adversaries have organized in profusion.

It is thus important for the attacker to diminish, by all means possible, the distance to traverse on this strip of ground, so that you can cross rapidly to the trench that you propose to attack.

To this end we establish parallels to the trenches that we occupy. The number of these vary with the width of the territory to cross. The assault waves are placed in these parallels as well as in the main trench and are held there, huddled up, waiting for the signal to rush forward.

These are the parallels that we are going to dig as well as communication trenches in front to permit access to the main trench. The work is extremely delicate, dangerous and annoying, because all the ground is torn up and it is important to not give the alarm to the enemy.

If the enemy learns of our intentions, it is easy for him to bar the door to us by augmenting his means of defense and multiplying his machine guns and other weapons.

The work is quickly executed in silence. On the completion depends the success of the attack and the limitation of losses. Everyone is interested in that. Our men understand that and work hard.

It is also understood that this ground preparation could only be done at night.

During the day, the men rest and refurbish their weapons and tools. They assure us of a great meal. Oh! When I say great, it is not to be understood as a meal knowingly put together by a great chef in a great restaurant.

The "cooks" reside, with their mobile field kitchens, in the valley of the Suippe. Twice a day, that is to say for breakfast and dinner, these foods are put en route, crossing here and there the hillsides that separate the Suippe and the Ain, from the cooks established on the riverbanks of the latter creek to profit from the great trees of the valley that hide them from the surveillance of the planes.

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There are neither roads nor paths. You follow the trails that are more or less poorly maintained and on which, here and there, the shell holes form deep and dangerous ruts. How are the drivers and the horses able to, often in total darkness, avoid these obstacles and carry their precious and heavy load? How do vehicles, excessively loaded, resist the innumerable and inevitable jolts? Let's do justice to the patience and endurance of some and to the well-built construction of others.

The men on the work detail, provided with receptacles of all forms and sizes, go to search for their repast in the valleys of the Ain and they bring it back to our respective posts.

The most resourceful and the most honest of the men are charged with the carrying of the pinard, a mission of high confidence. The pinard is transported by means of canvas buckets, and it is necessary to chose good men to avoid misguided losses of the precious liquid whose evaporation varied with the degree of honesty of the porters. Who dares to talk about the

disappearance of the wine? You must never have seen soldiers at the front to even think about that idea. You might have to reduce the ration, in case of an accident or emergency, to the soldiers in the rear, but we are careful to never diminish the ration of the soldiers in the front line.

Experience counts more than the hygienic theories of the most learned.

The date fixed for the attack has not been indicated to us. It is held secret, if indeed it is fixed, lest it be changed. Something that I don't think will happen as we are waiting as there are always some unexpected events to modify even the most minutely detailed plans. Of course, it is not necessary for us to know the day in advance. What is important, for the moment, is to know that it is necessary to organize and make preparations for the offensive.

The captain has given me my task for the next 24 hours. I have not only to direct the work, but it is also necessary to raise the morale of my men. What would be the point of all the preparations, if, at the moment of opportunity, my soldiers do not have enough guts to leave with elan their parallel and charge towards the enemy in his trench? In war, in open country, everyone, even the coward, will submit, willy nilly, caught up in the general movement and the intoxication of combat. It is also said that it is as dangerous to not advance as it is to run full upon the enemy. Here, in the terrible war of the trenches, it is often necessary to leave one hole where you are sheltered to cross a zone where

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death will cut down perhaps half of the effectives. One leaves with little hope of returning safe and sound; and this sentiment, made even more real by the hail of bullets that strike the parapet so that it is a risk to even put up a periscope, is not precisely what motivates the courageous

And so the morale of my men has to constantly be maintained at a high level.

None of my men seem to worry me. It's been a long time that they've endured this trench warfare. They want something new, and, in thinking of the future, they foresee a breakthrough on the front, the flight of the enemy, the sacking of Boche shelters where they'll find many objects that will become souvenirs of glory. In brief, they desire an assault; they want to be in battle.

A battery of trench mortars is reported as just having been established in our part of the sector, and my area itself is going to be strengthened by two pieces of this battery. This news generally doesn't bring joy to an infantryman when the pieces are set up very close to him because the heavy mortars, as soon as they open fire, attract violent counter fire from the enemy of which the immediate result is to ruin the portions of the trench where the large shells hit, destroying the considerable work of terracing incumbent on the infantrymen. Then, since the number of artillery men in the trench is justified as needed to service the pieces, it is the infantrymen who have the duty to prepare the firing emplacements and the shelters for the men and ammunition, and to go search for more ammunition.

But the infantryman cannot choose his neighbors. He consoles himself with the thought that the artillerymen will do good work, that their large finned shells, thanks to their considerable size—eighteen or fifteen kilograms, according to the caliber of explosives—are going to destroy the enemy's defenses, make a breach and open the way for the assault waves.

While my men are occupied, I accompany, with the other section heads, our company commander who proceeds to the study of our attack zone.

The 42nd, placed to the left of the 35th, will take care of the woods AE, BE, CE. Our battalion will have for its objective the wood AE, and our company, the salient to the west of this woods. What strange woods! The trees there are not very tall, very sparse, most having been chopped down, and there we can perfectly distinguish three white lines of trenches that resemble walls built of limestone. Right in front, between the Boche and us, runs a line of young birches planted in a hedge that has been reinforced with barbed wire.

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The hedge does not seem to be cut and constitutes simply a passive obstacle, which will be hard to cross if our shells don't breach it beforehand.

The captain is not lacking in his report to the command. As soon as it is possible to judge by an inspection done at a distance and by means of a periscope, it could be seen that the terrain that our brigade has to take forms a wooded hill, hill 150, and dominates our attack sector.

[photo here]

It's a sort of labyrinth, barred by three lines of parallel trenches in an amphitheater, and in the interior of which we can divine the organization of serious defenses.

Evidently, it's a hard nut to crack.

If our artillery does not destroy the obstacles, we don't hardly see how our infantry can progress in this zone. The inspection done; each returns to his post a little anxious. The men do not hardly suspect the extraordinary effort that they will have to produce. They are gay, they chatter, just such big kids.

The brigade general has passed there and distributed, as is his habit, some cigars, some encouraging words and shook hands.

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By his kindness, he has the ability to obtain everything from everyone and to inspire blind confidence in all. He is an energetic and vigorous man, knowing how to make it personal at the moment of danger, knowing and loving his soldiers. The brilliant success that the brigade has achieved under his orders is a testament to his bravery. With a commander like him, there is nothing that he cannot demand from his troops.

In the evening, there is a rumor that our artillery is going to commence its preparation at dawn tomorrow.

And so everything is set. During the night, the infantry prepares on the ground, and during the day, the artillery bombards the barbed wire and the enemy trenches.

At nightfall, our spotters, provisionally armed, observe carefully the front and take preparations for all eventualities, while our teams of workers handle the pick and shovel.

The darkness becomes deep, and as no reaction is produced from the side of the enemy, we obtain a good amount of work without suffering any losses.

Just two more nights that well employed and our parallels will be organized.

At dawn, our artillery, that appears to us to have been established on the southern slopes of the hills that separate the Suippe and the Ain, unleashes the tempest.

Certainly, for the Boche, that has to be an out of the ordinary way to wake up to our music.

The concert is lead by the 75s, the 155s and the 320s to which our trench artillery both 58s and 240s, lend their formidable voices. These last weapons counter fire the portions of the front too close to our front lines that our artillery can't shell for fear of hitting us. All these artillery guns raise at their point of impact a white cloud in the clay soil. The Boche lines disappear in a sort of cloud.

Our poilus are amazed, and all are standing on the firing step of the trench, much of their bodies exposed above the sheltering mass. It is not possible to stay under shelter; they want to watch!

During the entire day of 22 September, the storm continues. Towards 1800 takes place the Trommelfeuer,⁸⁸ that is to say the rapid fire, the drum roll, of the 75s, which generally precedes the assault, but we have been warned about this type of firing. Many times it is executed to fool the enemy into thinking that an attack is imminent with the hope that the enemy

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rushes to reinforce his front lines with reserves among which our projectiles produce sensible losses.

At night, the violence of the fire slackens off, and the firing only takes place at intervals. We also resume our work digging.

Our captain has sent out a patrol to reconnoiter the breaches in the barbed wire network that we have to get through. The damages are not very considerable in front of us,

[photo here]

and the hedge of birches is intact. A report is immediately provided for the artillery to take care of this.

On 23 September, just after day break, the concert recommences with the same intensity. The enemy responds, and enormous projectiles fall very close to us. I have four men buried, and we clear them out. One is dead, two others wounded, the fourth is dazed and goes to rest at the aid post.

The German reaction lacks vigor and energy. Their shells fall here and there, without appearing that they have adjusted the goals to be reached. Relatively few projectiles fall in the back in the valley of the Ain, and, still, that loss in men, horses,

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and material will have to be tolerated because if the Boche sent their volleys of 105s and 150s towards the line of trees that border the Ain, behind which are set up the kitchens, the horses, the support trenches there are hardly shelters barely able to resist a small shell of the 77!

It is to be believed that, equipped with many extremely solid lines of defense, occupying a dominant position and full of excessive confidence in their power and their merit, they neglect

⁸⁸A massive artillery barrage.

their adversaries in front who up til the present have not bothered them very much.

The same evening, just as the day before, the Trommelfeuer resounds over the entire front, but like the previous evening, we do not budge.

The next day, 24 September, at a different hour, the rapid fire of our 75s, truly the prelude of an assault, will be heard, but the order to stay will remain the same.

The enemy will be convinced that we only want to threaten then, and that we don't dare to leave our trenches to seize him by the throat.

However our approach work is almost done. We can affirm that by dawn on the 24th all will be ready.

And so a rest day and all the following night for our infantry.

No one knows if the attack will be given on the 25th, but each feels that it is close. There is something "je ne sais quoi" in the air.⁸⁹ The pleasantries, the laughter of the men is not the same. Certainly, there are always wags who are spirit at the expense of their comrades, but you understand that the note is false.

In general, we have serious faces, almost grave, a resolute air, but cold.

The food is not eaten with our ordinary appetite, on the contrary, we drink more easily, and the ration of Eau de vie--and what an Eau-de-vie!--⁹⁰is received by everyone, even the most sober, with evident satisfaction. Finally, during the night, we know that the attack will take place on the 25th in the morning.

Everyone is pleased to know that. We've had enough.

The waiting period cannot last; it is nerve-racking and affects the character of the best tempers and finishes by creating a hurtful anguish.
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And so for three days and nights we prepare. The spring is wound tight, the hour is come to release it.

The brigade medic and his faithful auxiliaries, the priest nurses and the stretcher bearers, increase in number without anyone forcing them to prepare. Their zeal is reserved, simply loving as appropriate.

Absolution in the trench is no laughing matter. The most skeptical of men experience no desire or pleasantries. It's the liberty of conscience in all of its beauty.

General L., the brigade commander, and lieutenant colonel P, our corps commanders, have

⁸⁹An intangible feeling, "I don't know but it feels like."

⁹⁰Usually refers to a clear fruit brandy/liquor.

inspected the works and have a friendly word for everyone. These two officers live amidst us, and their combat posts are in the same trench. We naturally prefer that because we often have the need to feel supported and encouraged.

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XXVII: The Attack

All night our artillery has fired intermittently. At the break of dawn, it accelerates its fire, and the guns batter our adversary's communication and front line trenches, notably the spots where we suppose the machine guns and Minenwerfer are located.

Our trench mortars try to ruin the barbed wire network closest to us.

Finally, the general assault is fixed for 9 o'clock.

Everyone is ready. Our men carry a sack filled with ammunition and food, a canteen containing two liters of water, two musette bags, some grenades, etc. They are heavily laden; but it is hardly possible to do otherwise given the necessity of having whatever would be needed to fight, eat and drink for at least two days without relying on resupply of either ammunition or food.

Since 8:30, the assault elements are in position, ready to take off.

Three waves are supposed to depart at the same time, each following at a distance of about sixty meters.

The support columns follow the advance, which will be irresistible.

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Bridges are thrown over the trenches to permit passage. Finally, clearance breaches are created from place to place so that the men can leave their foxholes.

All the officers and men are at their post.

Our artillery roars. It's like a formidable rattling of gigantic drums. It has beaten down the barbed wire network

[photo here]

and the front line trench, then suddenly it extends its fire to bar the communication trenches.

It's the moment of the attack. It takes off at 9 o'clock exactly.

The head of the battalion, the captains, the section heads, sword drawn, all rush forward, followed by their men, who march, lined up at the double.

Entire ranks are mown down, but not to matter, we go on. The cursed birch alley that we saw that has little depth and that is in proximity to our trenches, has escaped in the bombardment. We stop an instant. We find a shears. Then we rush towards the edge of the AE woods, precisely at the enemy's salient.

Our losses are already heavy because a Boche machine gun,

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that has not been destroyed, profits from a direct, rapid, murderous fire against us.

My captain has seen the latter and catches it in the rear with one of our squads.

The corporal charged with this mission later told us that this machine gun was fired by a single man, and that the man was attached to his weapon by a chain fixed at his neck, his belt and his foot. This corporal himself killed this machine gunner and kept the chain.

The entire day of the 25th passes in fighting in a sort of labyrinth between the trenches and the communication trenches that had been organized defensively.

So many comrades missing at roll call! There are only a few men left in my platoon. However, I was able to rally about thirty belonging to other companies who now march under my orders.

The enemy dropped back, holding only certain points.

The life-giving smell of victory is everywhere in the air that we breathe. Without anyone saying it, we sense it and only demand to push further to the front, but our commanders are prudent, and they know the trickery of our adversaries.

Knowing that our success could be compromised by a push too audacious and too insufficiently prepared and supported, they capably direct our progression to be slow but sure.

No one thinks of eating, but we have a terrible thirst. Unfortunately the canteens are shot through by bullets, and we often have to take those from the dead.

At nightfall, our regiment holds hill 150, that is to say, the famous wooded position considered impregnable. On our right, the 35th is almost at our height. On our left, the 27th brigade has been held back by the removal of a small Boche fort that has caused serious losses.

Colonel P. passed at this moment near to me, and I hear him say to an officer:

“Oh! If I had reinforcements, I would not hesitate to continue our march forward; but all of my units are mixed up. It is necessary to restore order.”

We pass a part of night reconstituting the companies.

The ground is criss-crossed by communication trenches and trenches half destroyed or encumbered by nets of barbed wire partially destroyed, but still forming some serious obstacles, especially in the dark. Here and there, the dead,

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the wounded or the less seriously hurt demand something to drink and beg us to remove them. A captain passes by. We recognize him by his voice; it's the captain of engineers Q, commander of the 7/3.

“Where is your colonel?”

“Forward, about a hundred meters...”

“Take me there. Expect to resume the advance.

[photo here]

The brigade general has demanded reinforcements. When he receives them, he'll hit the Boche.”

The captain disappeared into the night with his guide.

Here an incident takes place that made us laugh and that deserves to be told.

The telephone adjutant found a Boche wire. He and the men of his team say that by following the Boche wire they could arrive at the telephone post. There they will find some materials, because the capture of the enemy's apparatus always causes the greatest joy for telephone operators. And so our guys follow the wire, groping along in the dark night.

And so they arrive at an enemy shelter occupied by a captain and an artillery soldier.

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They rush in, revolver in hand. The German artillerist resists, and they kill him. The captain surrenders. They spare his life and go to take him away, after having taken the telephone apparatus. Then many German artillery men arrive, who, having heard the noise and the shots, go towards the shelter and assist at the strange scene taking place there.

Their intervention threatens to become annoying for our telephone. They save their captain and want to massacre our audacious soldiers, but generously, the captain says:

"They spared me. Spare them in their turn."

And so, voila, our telephone men are prisoners with their heads lowered.

At that moment, there is a new turn of events. Some French infantry men astray, glorious remnants of a platoon who are searching to find their battalion, while passing by hear the uproar and crying out leap into the shelter with bayonets fixed.

The German artillery men give up sheepishly. The telephone men cry out laughing. Then, estimating that they have had enough emotion for a time, file out carrying the German equipment. As for the astray infantry men, they proudly lead their prisoners, the German captain at the head, to the brigade general's command post.

When the units had been reconstituted as best as they could, we try, during the rest of the night, to progress in the direction of Sainte-Marie-à-Py.

At dawn we find ourselves on the north edge of a wood of firs dominating a small valley that extends about fifteen hundred meters to the south of the valley of the Py.

Our advance could be seen for about three kilometers, but we have not received any reinforcements, and, in addition, at the base of the valley, lay a German trench defended by numerous machine guns and a double row of barbed wire on which the fire of our artillery has produced no destructive effect.

How has this last enemy position which separates the two dominant sides of the Py, escaped so completely our artillery?

We have already remarked that the 75s are somehow to accompany us and follow our progression but the 75s are not sufficient to put holes in a defensive position

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so powerful. The gun excels against personnel; it is less valuable against a passive obstacle when the latter has some strength.

And so the question is; what to do?

About six hundred meters separates us from our adversary's trench and that dangerous barbed wire network that we can see very clearly at certain places and that we can make out at others places, half masked by high bushes.

However the commanders of the units continue to organize their men.

During our advance, which was so difficult in the dark night, the two regiments got mixed up. Next to me are located platoons of the 35th. As movement back and forth will be dangerous in daylight on the front, we decide to re-divide the command of the effectives among the officers, without worrying about the number of the regiment. We know everyone in the 28th brigade, and this knowledge allowed one and the other to reduce the inconvenience of being mixed up.

It's time for a snack. The Boche shelters offer us a remarkable lunch. Those officers gorged on hams, confitures, champagne, etc. The men were not deprived of anything; they abandoned everything, even their canteens, their tobacco, their cigars, their personal papers. One of my men offers me a cigarette case with a silver armorial, that he took for a wallet. I thank him and advise him to send it to his father.

The maps and papers might prove to be of some interest and are carefully gathered and sent to the command.

It is 11 o'clock in the morning.

Very close to us, a few steps away, in a conquered trench, is installed the brigade staff, General K, and his two ammunition officers captains D and D and captain Q engineers. They eat among themselves and talk animatedly. I inch closer, and I clearly hear the conversation.

The general is not in a good humor. They have not sent him any appreciable reinforcements, and he is not able to follow up the brigade's success. Then it's the fact that artillery is not able to level the last Boche position!

He dictates a note for the division general. Without being able to do otherwise, I hear some bits:

"We are, as I have already let you know, stopped about six hundred meters from a German trench that is absolutely intact and protected by a double line of barbed wire equally intact. The trench is defended by many machine guns and an infantry of which I am not able to assess the number.

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My losses are high, especially of officers... Elements disorganized... Need reinforcements and artillery preparation..."

In addition, the general reports that the neighboring brigades have reached their limits and that they also cannot progress more.

Certainly, the success so far is already good. It has cost us dearly, but no one regrets the losses, so cruel when one looks at the ground conquered.

Everywhere there is a thick barbed wire network combined with fir trees chopped down, and the branches of the trees are intermingled with plentiful barbed wire with barbs the size of your small finger. There are enormous rudimentary hedgehogs, but of unproven strength.

How have the Germans set out these defenses.?

It must be that their surprise had been great for them to have left so precipitously, letting in place even their personal papers.

Ah! If the reinforcements had permitted us, this night, to exploit our success and seize that trench, who now would stop us!

While waiting for new instructions from the general of the division, we receive the order to organize the conquered advance position that dominates the German trench. It is important, in effect, to oppose, if appropriate, any return to the offensive by the enemy.

In the battalion, we have lost half of our officers, including the commander. A third of our effectives are missing at roll call.

Our men, visibly fatigued, are surprised that no fresh troops have come to reinforce them; and we have told them that the reserves are in route, but I sense that an element of doubt exists in the ranks.

At 1330, the brigade general, in response to his note, receives the order to attack at 1500. He is warned that our artillery will prepare the ground from 1400 to 1430 with some 75s.

The 75 is not sufficient to effect the breakthrough needed.

This order is immediately transmitted to two colonels, who are in command after the general.

For now, we must attack, and our superb men, after having thrown a glance to the rear, towards the area from which reinforcements should be coming, shout out:

“Bah! We’ll do it without them!”

The general has placed two pieces of the brave artillery captain H in a battery on the edge of woods 28 with the mission to put a hellish fire on the position of the trench to be captured.

These pieces continue

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to fire right up until the moment when the rest of the brigade is at the point of reaching their goal.

At 1500, the waves throw themselves forward, descending the slopes at a walking pace. Some go around a small woods situated mid-slope from where they could not leave as the northern edge was destroyed. The others traverse the barbed wire that they encounter and, despite the fire of the occupants, seize a length of four hundred meters of the German trench.

[photo here]

The gap in the enemy's last position is thus made!

The 28th brigade—or more exactly the glorious remnants of the 28th brigade—is, in the sixteenth hour of 26 September, clinging to the German trench and working to enlarge the breach.

Unfortunately, we have no grenades at hand to defend ourselves, nor barbed wire, nor picks to organize the conquered terrain. Finally, if only we possess some food. We have no more water, nothing more to drink. A number of our canteens, having received bullets or fragments of shells are empty, and there is no source of water, no well, no lake, in the vicinity.

The officers decide that, when night comes, to send a work detail to the rear to search for water. [206]

Our situation in the conquered trench, is not good. The Germans harass us to prevent us from enlarging the breach. If we leave to explore the terrain in front of us, we receive a storm of bullets because the fire of machine guns converged on the breach.

On our right and on our left, the progress has been less rapid so that we find ourselves flanked and at the mercy of a counter-attack a little. Also, since it is night, our general has us retreat to the north edge of the woods.

We profit by that to pick up the wounded that have fallen during our attack.

And so we pass the night in front of the breach that we have made and that we have not been able to hold. Bad luck. We are accommodated in the numerous Boche shelters that we encounter everywhere on the condition that we improve them and turn them around in a way, their openings, which, for the Germans when they used the shelters, are now reversed to face away from danger.

However the Germans seem to be regrouping judging by the quantity of artillery of all calibers that they send towards us, and in these woods, which they know perfectly since they had lived here, their former shelters are perfectly marked and targeted to be axed. At the break of dawn, we find out that three or four companies of a territorial regiment have come to support us. These brave men, armed with shovels and picks, augment the depth of the trenches and communication trenches and help to make the terrain more tenable.

Finally, towards noon, we are warned that we are going to reoccupy the trench that we had conquered on the afternoon of the 26th.

But our men, whose ranks are very sparse, are close to being exhausted.

Strongly, happily, the brigade general and the two colonels are there in the front line in the midst of us. As they are lodged in the same area as the poilus, no one of the latter dares complain.

The resumption of the advance forward is fixed for 1600.

At the given hour, the assault waves set out, as they had done the day before.

Four 75 artillery pieces, installed at the edge of the same woods, aid our progress.

At 1700, voila we are again in the famous trench that the Boche have abandoned for a second [207] time under our rush; but it is again difficult to enlarge the breach because of a lack of trench mortars and notably grenades, which have been asked for in the rear but have never reached us.

The Boche rain on us lachrymose shells that are very bothersome. But despite that, we work all night to enlarge the breach, and we gain about two hundred meters on our left.

Unfortunately our neighbors do not make progress. Our situation remains very delicate. [photo here]

On the hillside that we face, the enemy organizes to oppose our advance. We also hear the moans of our wounded that our stretcher bearers are not able to take away rapidly.

The work is, in effect, rendered very difficult by the size and the encumbrances of the conquered terrain that the stretcher bearers have to traverse, then to the ambulances, and then to the aid post.

If one notes that it takes two men to transport a wounded man and that our advance had been about four kilometers, and that all the ground is dotted with holes and obstacles of all sorts, [208] you would agree that a considerable number of stretcher bearers are needed to take away all of our wounded, who number in the hundreds.

The majority of them rest there in place, moaning, demanding something to drink, begging for someone to get them.

The dawn does not bring us any kind of relief.

The portion of the trench that we hold is dominated everywhere. We are only able to stay there smuggled, tangled up, with one another, prisoners of our own success.

Our neighbors are still at the same place, and, meanwhile, the fire of the enemy's artillery has redoubled in intensity. We are targeted by shells of all calibers.

We are living on cans of conserves that we've taken from the knapsacks of the dead. Water has become more and more rare, almost impossible to find.

Finally a liaison tells us that strong reinforcements are going to arrive soon.

These reinforcements are trying to push forward, while the remnants of the 28th brigade holds the breach and continues to enlarge it.

The day passes with fruitless efforts to win ground on the left and the right.

Suddenly, towards 1700, a bugle sounding the charge is heard and muffles the agonizing pleas

of the wounded. It's a brigade of chasseurs à pied⁹¹ who have been ordered to attack the slopes dominating Sainte-Marie-à-Py, passing by our position.

Alas! The Germans have quite pulled themselves together. They block the relatively narrow opening that we have made in their line. A cloud of lachrymose shells and asphyxiants rain on the gap and on the sides.⁹²

However the chasseurs open the breach more. Some fight on the right and left of it to enlarge it, others continue their progress forward on the slopes. They are all young men with admirable vigor, courage and spirit. Alas! Their waves break against a defense hastily yet solidly organized, and everywhere against a sort of wall of steel created by the avalanche of shells fired from a powerful artillery.

The losses are considerable.

The colonel who commands the chasseurs is wounded, and also wounded is lieutenant colonel P, our commander. The brave colonel T, of the 35th, was killed.

During the night that follows, we receive the order to let our trench in the hands of newly arriving units and
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to retire behind the woods.

In parting, we encounter the soldiers of a colonial division, who have also tried to force passage through the breach, despite the concentrated fire of the enemy.

Our brigade, extremely reduced in size, goes to reform in the rear in valley of the Ain, precisely at the place from which we departed, on the morning of 25 September, to undertake the first attack.

On returning, we note many newly arriving regiments who are, it seems, destined to continue our offensive work.

If only they had come on the 26th!

We would have captured from the enemy a dozen artillery pieces, some machine guns and some minenwerfer; and we would have made more than four hundred of them prisoner.

We are all exhausted, and our nerves are at the breaking point. We have just undergone, from

⁹¹The chasseurs à pied were once elite infantry units in the French army during the nineteenth century. By World War I there was no longer any real difference between the chasseurs and the regular infantry except in terms of uniform and regimental prestige.

⁹²Poison gas (chemical weapons) were widely used by all combatants during the war. Lachrymose shells dispersed tear gas which irritated the eyes, nose, mouth and lungs. Asphyxiate shells dispersed mustard gas, which caused blistering and which could be especially damaging to the lungs

the physical point of view, an effort that we could not have ever imagined—at least I don't believe so. I would never have even felt the same, that the human machine was capable of undertaking such fatiguing work. Decidedly the man is an extremely resilient animal.

During many nights we hardly sleep, or we sleep with a feverish sleep peopled with nightmares.

At each instant men cry out in their sleep.:

“Charge! Watch out! Hit! Yes, they're advancing”

“Some grenades, damn it! Some grenades! Here are some!”

They relive the different phases of the battle.

At reveille, it seems like he is still dreaming. He remains plunged in a kind of stupor or wiped out.

Then we search for the missing.

“So and so?”

“Don't know, sergeant. Disappeared during the night.”

Or:

“He fell close to me. I heard him cry out; but we were moving.”

Or another:

“Dead, sergeant. An explosion in the stomach. He did not suffer.”

Everyone has the blues.

I preserved a very lively impression of the days that followed our action in the great offensive.

Ah! The melancholy of those days after the battle

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when the brain barely reacts, when your arms and legs feel tired, heavy!

Soon arrive letters from bereaved families, poor letters written in pretty much all the same style:

“We are without news for ten days. We know from the wounded that the regiment...Could you please tell me what has happened to soldier X? ... if something has happened to my husband, my son, to my brother?”

The officers receive many of them, of these letters, because they are always making small inquiries relevant to one or another of those who disappeared.

And the responses are not easy to write, What to say? Often we don't know, and if we do know, it is even more difficult. We always want to doubt, always hope, and one doesn't want to remove

hope from poor parents, even if we have no hope ourselves.

You see very little in the course of fighting, and the little that you do see is often very distorted.

It is better, even if there is no more than a millionth of a chance, to not close the door on hope.

I remember how formerly I had seen some comrades fall who I felt were dead, But, when I was evacuated after my first wound, I found them at the hospital and at the depot doing well.

A few months later we had the satisfaction to learn that the two regiments of our brigade were noted in the order of the army for their participation in the Champagne offensive.

I preciously kept the notices. Here they are:

“42nd infantry regiment. Brilliantly led by its commander, lieutenant colonel Petit, with a wonderful élan attacked the German front line and captured it.”

“Then continuing its offensive, in the course of which it seized eleven cannons and numerous prisoners, it took control of the enemy’s second line and held it, despite violent counterattacks and very high casualties.”

“5th infantry regiment. Under the command of colonel Tesson, in an attack, with a magnificent élan, won the German front line, comprising many lines and trenches, seizing it in the most brilliant fashion. Despite the high casualties,
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it pursued its attack and penetrated the German second line, before which its commander fell mortally wounded. Maintained the conquered terrain, despite the most violent fire and the relentless counterattacks.”

In a moving ceremony, the Croix de guerre was attached to our flags. We were very proud of it, an honor the brigade merited.

That was, for all, precious encouragement, and you should never hesitate to encourage the man who bravely risks his life and reward him.

The least word of a commander is already a reward, because that indicates an interest in his behavior and that he is appreciated for his valor. He is happy about it, and it serves to confirm for all a good opinion of the commander.

The creation of the Croix de guerre was an excellent idea. Especially for those who want to possess this outward mark of bravery, and damn, it is not always easy to award, I assure you, because there are so many who merit it!... You have to make a good choice, and there is often a great embarrassment for the commander to have to choose from among the bravest.

You wanted to decorate them all.

One day I heard a superior officer declare that the sole fact of entering into the dance in a violent bombardment and maintaining one’s place under the shell bursts merits all rewards.

And, how true! When one knows what that means, you can't help but find that opinion very just.

.....

Poor 28th brigade! Out of about a hundred officers, barely a dozen still respond at roll call.

Our dead sleep their last sleep in three cemeteries: one on the right bank of the Ain, a little to the southwest of the ferme des Wacques; the other two close to Hill 151, situated on the heights that separate the Ain from the Suippe.

The territorials⁹³ have already commenced cleaning up the field of battle, and the effects and equipment of the dead and wounded, scattered on the ground, are reunited and sent to the rear.

From certain German shelters escapes an odor very characteristic of ether, and, at rest, the vials found in the interior could leave no doubt about this. It is certain that someone had distributed to

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the defenders drugs to better permit them to support the depressing and intense bombardment.

Since our return to the valley of the Ain, life rolls on slowly, horribly monotonous.

The battalion and companies are little by little reconstituted. We are employed in organizing the conquered terrain, constructing shelters, digging trenches and communication trenches, preparing the barbed wire.

Then, after two weeks of these works that we pursue night and day, we go to hold a sector to the southeast of Saint-Souplet.

The defense of said sector was nothing but an outline and it was necessary to organize it in every detail. Work that was particularly annoying and dangerous because we are in close proximity to the enemy, but we have a good view of them, and it does not scare us.

When all is almost done, and we can finally go and rest and profit from the result of our work, we receive the order to report in the rear to become part of the army reserve.

That, as my corporal fairly says, sucks!

In a campaign, you often have to deal with things of this nature that are often just as disagreeable to the poilu as a machine gun.

But for the good poilu, his bad humor does not last. At least it is astonishing how much the war make you philosophical.

⁹³The territorial soldiers were men between the ages of thirty-five and forty-one who had done their active duty (ages twenty to twenty-three) and their reserve duty (ages twenty-four to thirty-five for forty days a year). They were now obligated to still be available, if needed, for military service. They reported for nineteen days of training each year. During World War I, these men were needed.

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XXVIII: Sometimes You Capture What You Intended to Capture

Now I'm going to talk about some events that happened both around me and in our area during the great Champagne offensive. I could see certain episodes of heroes on the same battlefield in the heat of battle and experiencing the joy of success.

The adventure of a brave captain commanding a company in the 248th and of a lieutenant in the 247th made the rounds of the trenches and made us happy at the expense of the Germans.

To start at the beginning of the affair, we'll go back in time, if you wish, to the 248th which is waiting for the signal to attack.

In the departure trench, the men are frozen in diverse positions.

They are the boys of Brittany, already old, in the communication trench dug into the chalky ground of champagne, a trench that they have baptized as the "tranchée d'Armor," the majority have the brave and luminous eyes of their birthplace, from the small house, where, there before the sea where the land flowers, the other dear ones pray for them and hope.

For hours, the rumble of artillery of all calibers

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merges into a single thunder of which the violence seems to increase without stopping, enlarging breaks in the barbed which, at this point, protects the five lines of the German trenches.

The officers have their eyes fixed on the hands on their watches. The Moroccans, who are on the Bretons left, begin to get excited.

All of a sudden lieutenant colonel Dufour, a tall and vigorous officer that all adored even though he has commanded the regiment for only a short time, turns towards the men and puts the watch in his pocket. This simple gesture, under the circumstances, takes on a grandiose and terrible significance. A shiver shakes the line of bayonets, and to add to the silence and grandeur of the scene, the artillery suddenly quiets.

Without a cry, Bretons and Moroccans leapt out of the trench with bayonets fixed towards the enemy. The sun shining on their keyboard of clear steel. Thirty meters behind, other bayonets depart from the ground, and the second assault wave moves out in its turn, soon followed by the third wave.

A crackling suddenly breaks the agonizing silence, and the bullets sweep the plain. The German machine guns have commenced their task.

The men fall heavily with their cries of suffering and anger. We have no time to take care of them, but we are going to avenge them.

In a superb show of élan, our soldiers take the first line, then the second. Behind them, other troops complete the work with their bayonets, and the heavy sound of grenades exploding in underground shelters forms a continuous deep bass to the hail music of the German machine

guns.

However, soon the scene becomes tragic.

Before the third line, undergrowth and the barbed wire that the artillery has not torn stops our first wave in a veritable deluge of bullets, and almost at once the second joins in the hell where the men fall in groups. There you hear through the crackling of the cannonade and the fracas of explosions, the cries of the wounded and the death rattles of the dying.

Lieutenant colonel Dufour is one of the first to die, facing the enemy, heroic and quiet. Around him, a captain is killed, and another captain and seven lieutenants are wounded.

Any advance is impossible in this barbed wire which,
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similar to some octopus, snatches the men, tearing the flesh, maintaining their prey in the bullets that will surely hit them.

Retreat, no one thinks of that.

Under the iron sheet of iron, the heroic Bretons dig into the bloody ground and inter themselves there.

On the right, however, a company was able to progress, flanked by the Moroccans. But the splendid soldiers of Morocco—for whom France has never had enough admiration and recognition—advances through a rain of fire to occupy a communication trench that has been assigned to them as their objective, sweeping everything before them.

Soon the company of the 248th, which is not able to advance as rapidly, found itself in the air, and its elements on the right, hard pressed by the enemy, fleeing in all directions, overwhelmed by the tumultuous flow of those fleeing.

Immersed in the human mass, captain P, who commands the company, is made a prisoner and conducted to the fifth line into the shack of the German major who commands the sub-sector.

There are five or six officers there, all from the reserves, who, without disarming or searching, amicably invite them to sit down and pass them a box of excellent cigars.

As calm as he could be while located in a circle of this small provincial garrison, among his everyday comrades, the captain cut a cigar and lit it. Then he engages in the conversation, aided throughout by a lieutenant who fluently speaks our language.

The captain is astonished when the lieutenant informs him that he lived, before the war, in a commune in the suburbs of Paris, and there he married a French girl.

“You are foolish,” says the lieutenant, “to attack here. Three times since the beginning of the year you have tried to take the Bois Sabot, three times you have been defeated.. It’s idiotic! You are beaten this time again.”

“Not so sure about that!” says the French captain calmly.

“We’ll see! You know that are lines are impregnable...Between us, you will be massacred.”

“I am not so sure about your opinion.”

At that moment the Germans did not believe in a serious attack from us, and the captain did not tell them anything to let them know.

A great lover of cigars, he smoked with unconcealed pleasure that which his hosts had offered him.

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The lieutenant talked about his wife who was in Germany and dying of boredom. The other officers examined his helmet which they found well made but a bit heavy.

“We’ll have a veritable family reunion,” then the captain said, bantering.

The German major, standing in a corner, did not take part in the conversation.

Suddenly a soldier enters and says to the major, “It’s going very badly!”

The major is gone for several minutes, without a doubt to see how things are, then he re-enters and without saying a word, gathers his papers.

A telephonist then breezes in and shouts:

“The enemy has pierced our lines. Communication is cut with the rear..I don’t know anything more”

“But the..., you have made a great attack?” The officers ask of the captain.

The latter smiles a smile that the scars of two former wounds made enigmatic and sarcastic.

“Maybe.” Then he sent an enormous cloud of smoke towards the ceiling.

A new soldier enters, very worried and announces:

“The line is broken! The tirailleurs are coming!”

The word tirailleurs always produces an effect on the Germans.

“Well then,” exclaims the officers, “we will be cut off. It’s a major attack!”

“Yes,” says our captain. “I can tell you now. You are lost, completely surrounded by the tirailleurs, but if you follow me, I will conduct you through the lines to my regiment.”

And, with his strange and troubling smile, he adds:

“That would be the prudent thing to do.”

Then, remaining calm, he lights a new cigar while the officers discuss amongst themselves

animatedly.

In front of the tent, some soldiers have opened fire on our tirailleurs, who, emerging from the woods that the Germans had through impregnable, flank the trench.

One of the lieutenants comes out and orders the fire to stop, saying to the soldiers:

“That’s enough, stop, stop.”

The major, mute, comes out and carrying his papers disappears into the “Boyau du Danube.”⁹⁴
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“We have thought about it,” the lieutenant married in France says. “We have done our duty, we’re going.”

Then, in the communication trenches created by the enemy in the Champagne ground, where the great noise of battle rumbled, you could see the German officers following a French captain hat on head and cigar in his mouth towards our line. And, something more curious, the picturesque cortege increased without stopping as German soldiers, encountered along the route,

[photo here]

follow the steps of their officers. Because at that moment, the two battalions of tirailleurs who are supposed to combine to invest the trench had still not met up, and a German retreat was still possible and probably easy.

In leaving the German shelter with his voluntary captives, the captain was, by chance, witness to a scene that made him smile.

From a nearby hut where he was prisoner, emerged a small group that attracted his attention.

This group consisted of a French officer prisoner, a lieutenant of the 247th, two German soldiers who were guarding the prisoner with bayonets fixed,

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and a German captain with an arrogant air who followed them, revolver drawn.

Some bullets, at that moment, whistled about, striking the parapets or breaking, here and there, the branches of the rare fir tree that the shells had spared.

Furious, and undoubtedly a bit nervous, the German captain raises his revolver in the direction of the head of the prisoner and yells, in making a friendly gesture:

“Stop now you sons of bitches.”

The sons of bitches were our brave tirailleurs who exited from the Bois Sabot and found themselves a hundred meters from the group, showing, behind their terrible bayonets, some upturned noses that seemed to smell the German and white teeth that seemed ready for

⁹⁴Colloquial name given to the communication trench. It was the usual practice of all soldiers to give familiar names to their trenches.

murder.

The French lieutenant turns very slowly round, regards the eyes of the arrogant captain, and says, without raising his voice:

“If you fire, you will all be massacred.”

The captain visibly lost his arrogance.

It is incontestable that our tirailleurs—the best children of the world—do not show themselves merciful towards the enemy.

The German officer renewed his order, and, as if obeying him, his prisoner makes a sign to the brave African soldiers.

The latter understood, and their faces broke into smiles, that showed their white teeth behind the bayonets.

These bayonets ceased apparently to be menacing because the tirailleurs lowered their weapons. Then they adopted the appearance of an inoffensive promenade and advanced easily towards the group.

At a sign from the officer, the lions of the desert seemed to be silent and lamb-like.

But you would never be so proud of such a rapid metamorphosis.

When the boys, who were smiling with all of their white teeth, were no more than a dozen meters from the group, the lieutenant jumps to the side.

The German captain raises his revolver.

Too late!

The bayonets flash in the sunshine; the white teeth grimace; the black devils leap.

And there was, in the great drama of that day in September, one more small drama.

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Our lieutenant, who had showed some admirable courage, calm and sang-froid, could have regained his regiment in the company of some of his soldiers that had also been delivered thanks to the energetic intervention of the tirailleurs. After all the dangers, the exhaustion and the adventures of that rough day, after also having being seen a prisoner of officers infinitely less friendly than those to whom captain P had been a reluctant guest, he was in great need of a rest.

The heroic officer estimated, without a doubt, that he had better stay at the head of the African soldiers that luck had sent him and, with them, accomplish further good work.

The following superb citation that appeared in the **Journal Officiel** of 7 November 1915, is pretty close to the anecdote that I have just told.

“M. Guillois (Désiré-Jean-Marie), lieutenant in the 247th infantry; brilliant officer, completely dedicated. After working, without a break, for seventy hours on the organization of the defensive and offensive preparations in a dangerous sector, took part in attack operations and vigorously led his company on 25 September 1915. First to arrive in a conquered trench, he continued his advance, followed only by several men, who were made prisoner with him. Remained six hours in the hands of the Germans. Our offensive continued with further activity, and he profited from the visible advance of our troops to impose his will on those who held him. With the aid of about fifteen tirailleurs, he immediately took 158 prisoners, of which nine were officers.

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XXIX: Brave Men

I spoke in part of the adventures of our two imprisoned officers because, by their nature, they merited a certain explanation. At present, I'm going to pass on to what I learned or saw during our advance and our incursion into the enemy's lines. Perhaps these are all small facts, but I assure you that their authors were real poilus, heroic soldiers, brave men.

They are the small facts like these that reveal the best physical and spiritual state of the army, that allows, as one of our brigade generals said picturesquely, "to feel the pulse."

It was on the Aisne. The Germans in front had planted before their trench, in their barbed wire, a sign that announced to us a great victory by their soldiers over the Russians.

That sign, we had plastered with bullets, but it was impossible to destroy it.

"It's necessary that we go and tear it out!" Several soldiers said.

The general, who got wind of that, formally prohibits the dangerous enterprise and threatens with prison anyone who tried it.

Our men get angry.

On a beautiful morning, my corporal enters my dugout and tells me:

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"You know, the sign is here!"

"Here, with us?"

"Yes, Germain went last night, and he reported back with, on top of it all, the helmet and the rifle of a Boche sentry who had the rotten luck to be turn up on his path."

"The animal! That's going to get us in trouble with the general!"

It was not long, a half an hour later, and I was charged to conduct the guilty party to the general.

The brave Germain trembled all over, and the look that he received did not reassure him.

"And so you have disobeyed me?" The general shouted. "Disobedience is a formal crime? You have risked 100 times your life to bring this junk back to us?"

"It's not for the thing, general," muttered the unfortunate Germain. "It's because of the Boche who taunted us."

It seemed to me that the general's view softened a bit.

Nevertheless, he continued in the same irate tone.

"Well, my boy, you will be put before the military court. You have no right to risk your life so

stupidly. For this, you'll be given eight days of prison, but that's not very bad. Don't do it again."⁹⁵

We saluted, and we went to leave when I saw the general break into a smile. The commander takes a step towards us. Then looking Germain in the eye, he says in a voice filled with emotion:

"And now we'll embrace. You are one of the bravest. What you have done is magnificent. I love men with your temper."

And, to console him a little, he slips a pack of cigars into his hand.

Germain served his eight days, but the motive for the punishment was really to put a bulletin in the order of the day of the army.

"You can be at ease, my boy," said the captain to Germain, "a punishment like that, it's not a dishonor."

It was such a small rebuke that the heroic guilty party was named corporal a month later.

I lost sight of him a little, because he left the battalion, and he must have been a repeat "offender" because I knew him later as adjutant, with the military medal and a Croix de guerre with three palms.

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On 25 September, as we are passing a unit of the foreign legion (at least I was able to recognize the uniform of the legion) stopped before the intact barbed wire of the German trench, I see leave from a trench a tall soldier covered in mud and blood, a bugler.

He stood before the barbed wire, under the bullets and shells, and sounded the charge himself with a full blast.

His comrades who had hesitated and were perhaps retreating under the volleys of the machine gun, then moved forward in the terrible barbed wire and shouted.

I do not know what happened with this assault, but I saw the bugler fall under the fire of a machine gun, then try to get back up. He did not succeed. He lay on his right side, and, seizing his instrument with the left hand, resounded the charge furiously. He had to be wounded in the face, because I remember that the blood ran onto the brass of his instrument.

What became of that bloody bugler? I do not know.

For me that was a vision of heroism in the smoke of battle.

During our advance, I perceived, not far from a stand of firs, on our left, a company of infantry, or better the remains of an infantry company, that appeared completely encircled.

⁹⁵A conseil de guerre (military council) was a method of dealing with disciplinary issues, less-drastic than a formal court martial.

This company had to have lost all of its officers—that fact was not rare during the Champagne offensive—because a sergeant-major commanded it, a brave man, I assure you. As far as it was possible for me to judge, the majority of the men had to be youngsters from the class of 1915.

A German officer advanced, very stiffly, and spoke with the sergeant-major, most likely about surrender.

Naturally I do not know how the sub-officer responded, but I saw him raise a rifle that he held in his hand, as if he was saying, “Come and take us.” Then he turned to his men, who also shouted as they equally brandished their arms.

Then, in this forgotten corner of the vast field of battle, there occurred a splendid thing.

Ranks formed like magic; all bayonets pointed forward. The sergeant-major raised his rifle, and the small troop—about a hundred men in all—ran towards the Germans, who formed in front of them a compact mass about the size of a battalion.

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My soldiers, without worrying about bullets or shells, stopped to applaud.

From afar we saw the bayonets enter the human mass, then the infantry men followed behind their bayonets.

There were great swirls in the mass, violent leaps. You could say it looked like the ocean that had suddenly been struck by a gust of wind. The small French troop appeared to break the dike and pass through, not all completely of course, because, in war every action has its cost.

But that was not all. When they made the breach, the men who remained—perhaps sixty—a band of heroes scruffy and bloody, squarely made a half turn, and again struck out against the enemy, while singing the Marseillaise.

The wounded, lying on the ground right up to the German ranks, got up and equally sounded the Marseillaise. Some raise towards the sky a bloody stump of an arm.

I have never seen something so moving.

For the second time the bayonets found the human mass, and, this time, we saw it break up, disintegrate, burst, so to speak. Some men saved themselves in all directions, pursued by bullets which succeeded in stopping a certain number of them. The others, more prudent, raised their arms.

The brave sergeant major was always at the head of his unit, but I was able to say that he limped badly.

I heard my commander who said:

“Christ! What brave boys! They should decorate them all!”

Then, with enthusiasm, he cupped his hands and yelled:

“Bravo boys!”

My captain, who however was not very emotional, really showed himself moved.

“Ah! Yes, the brave boys!” He repeated many times, “the brave boys and admirable soldiers!” I never knew to which regiment these magnificent poilus belonged. But I am sure that they would have been astonished and very much confused if someone had called them heroes.

And however, when I reflect, I would say that they were really beautiful, these boys of whom the majority were seeing fire for the first time.

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It was not necessary to search very far to find good and brave people. The species was abundant in our regiment. Among our stretcher bearers was a large boy whose name escapes me. He did not seem very bright and rarely opened his mouth. His comrades baptized him as the “the mute d’Aportici” because of his silence, and his function consisted of transporting the wounded to the doctor.⁹⁶

We amuse ourselves as best we can in the trenches, and the play on words is nothing petty. It was evidently his sole quality.

The big boy seriously and conscientiously fulfilled his duties, but, I confess, I was never able to believe that he was capable of accomplishing an individual act that demanded initiative and above average courage.

I was greatly mistaken, as we will see.

One of our sergeants, in the course of an reconnaissance, fell, hit by a bullet, in the German trenches.

The unfortunate had to be suffering horribly, because, despite his courage and force of character that we all knew, he was not able to stop groaning from time to time.

It was horrible.

But what to do?

The wire was in the cross fire of many machine guns, of which we already had seen the effects. To go and rescue our comrade, it was pretty much going to a certain death.

It certainly did not frighten us, but there was another consideration. If one of us was seen in trying to approach the wire, the machine guns would not lack in turning their crank, and then it was death for our poor wounded man, who was located hooked on the wire in a dangerous spot, a point crossed with bullets.

We felt useless.

⁹⁶A word play on the French word “apporter” (to carry/transport).

All of a sudden, the mute, approached and said to me:

“If you permit it, I will go for the sergeant.”

I was so surprised, that for a moment or two I was unable to speak.

“You?” I finally said.

“Yes, sergeant.”

“But you know you have to be a poilu behind a fagot to try an expedition like that?”

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“It’s my job, sergeant, because I am a stretcher bearer. I will try, and I hope to succeed.”

Then I took the two hands of the big boy, a little heavy, who up until then had always appeared insignificant to me, and I told him, more emotional than I wanted him to see:

“You are going to do a great deed and accomplish a true act of heroism. Go and may heaven protect you.”

[photo here]

At night he crawled across the parapet of our trench and at once disappeared into the dark shadow.

In front, all was quiet, and I no longer heard any groans from the wounded.

“Provided,” I thought, “that the German stretcher bearers don’t arrive first. Because they could also have the intention to profit from the night and gather the wounded Frenchmen.”

That appeared to me to be probable as the inhabitants of the trench in front of us did not have too evil an air.

A neighboring unit to ours was able to bring back the wounded without the stretcher bearers having had to experience a single shot.

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But then, you might wonder, why hadn’t they allowed us to rescue the sergeant?

Simply because our comrade had the bad luck to fall in the barbed wire, and the wire is “taboo.” No one shall approach it, not even a stretcher bearer, under any circumstances. We would be too tempted, you see, to leave there some breaks with the wire cutters.

My heart beat strongly. The slightest noise made me jump. A branch that cracked produced in me the effect of a cannon.

Suddenly, the dry clacking of machine guns broke the air. Several rifle shots sounded from the German trench.

The noise lasted two or three minutes, and then calm returned, but then a rocket rose in the sky, enveloping everything with its greenish light, giving the plain the appearance of a dreamlike countryside.

I thought our courageous stretcher bearer lost, but, in the light of the flare, a guard saw him between the two trenches, crouched on the ground next to the wounded man that he was protecting with his own body.

A half an hour later, we pulled the two into our trench, where the heroic stretcher bearer, exhausted from fatigue, fainted.

As for the sergeant, he had been badly wounded, and, after being bandaged, was evacuated immediately to the rear.

“He’ll get away with it, the poor bugger!” The major confided to me, “but he will surely lose his leg.”

Our poor comrade had received, in the left thigh, about six bullets, and one of the bullets had, it seemed, shattered the bone.

For this adventure, the courageous stretcher bearer, won the Croix de guerre and a reputation for bravery that he maintained thereafter high and strong.

In the course of our operation in September, he also saved the lives of two of our officers and many soldiers.

This story proves, once more, that you should not judge men by their appearance, especially in war.

In critical moments, when my men got unnerved, when they felt that nothing would prevent a retreat and that a retreat could engender a panic, the officer has to show proof of truly exceptional qualities. Not only is it not permitted that he lose his head, not for even a second, not only must he

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rise above all human weaknesses, but he must also, in those moments, find the proper gesture to reassure his men. To an imperturbable sang-froid, to a calm courage, must be added a fertile imagination and prompt decision-making.

I could, in support of what I mentioned, cite many numerous examples, but it is necessary to limit myself. I will be content to recount the following fact, observed in a company of a neighboring regiment.

This company had to free some ground that was totally uncovered and that the bullets literally plowed up and where shells of all calibers tumbled in cascades, without forgetting the torpedoes and other lance bombs fired by trench mortars.

The enterprise seemed a folly, yet however it was necessary to try.

This company was among the most reputable, and it had to its credit superb actions, however the men hesitated to leave the trenches to launch themselves into the storm of steel and explosives. The barrage seemed truly impassable.

In the trench itself, the losses became serious, and it took real courage of the men to even stay

there.

The captain harangued his men, and then he climbed the parapet, offering himself first to death.

The other officers and sub-officers prepared to follow him, when he fell, struck by many bullets and an artillery shell.

The death of the commander aggravated the situation, and the lieutenant, who immediately assumed command--a very young officer--understood that all would be lost if he did not act energetically and rapidly. Not only wouldn't the men go forward, but, they were going to abandon the trench, where the shells were falling more and more.

Threats would not have been successful, and at least, you can't menace the brave as those who were there knew.

The lieutenant didn't think of that. He simply said:

"We cannot abandon our captain, and let him rot there like a dog. Wait for me, I will go and look for him."

"No, no," cried the men. "Don't go!"

And others added.

"We're coming right away!"

But the lieutenant didn't wait to hear anything. He climbed onto the firing step and, calmly, stepped over the parapet.

Behind him, in the trench, the soldiers instinctively saluted.

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Some minutes passed by, some minutes that for everyone seemed to be centuries. There was no longer any question of abandoning the trench. They no longer paid any attention to the shelling.

A sub-officer⁹⁷ surveyed the terrain shelled by the enemy.

"There, near to the captain," he cried. "He has the man on his back..Bravo! There he is. He's returning...Get ready to help him!"

Some men rushed forward. The lieutenant deposited the corpse of the captain on the parapet, that they pulled down, then he returned to the trench as calmly as when he had left, greeted by bravos and enthusiastic cries.

⁹⁷In France, "sous-officier" (sub-officer) was a military rank very roughly corresponding to non-commissioned officers in the U.S. Army. This would include sergeants and adjutants, who often commanded a platoon or section (squad).

“You see,” he said simply. “You can go there!”

“Yes, yes,” they cried. “Let’s go!”

Then, to increase to his advantage the morale of the men, the lieutenant had a genius idea. In the bombarded trench, under the shells, he undertook military honors at the remains of the captain.

While the moving ceremony unfolded, some men fell. Their neighbors did not budge.

When it was finished, the heroic lieutenant shouted:

“Now, my friends, avenge them!”

“Avenge them!” repeated his assistants while brandishing their arms.

Then there was a rush towards the enemy, like a whirlwind traversing the open terrain, hand to hand fighting in the German trench. I learned later that the entire company had been cited in the order of the army.

It was well deserved.

Before finishing with Champagne, I’d like to say a few words about the men that I had the honor of leading in combat, to show how my valiant poilus comported themselves. Some of whom, alas, sleep in the chalky terrain, in the shadow of the fir trees.

The men of my half-section—I hasten to declare it—had a superb attitude, proving, without exception, an admirable courage and witness to a touching spirit of solidarity. If some of them distinguished themselves at first, it was especially because the occasion, the circumstances, favored them and what some did, all were ready to do. Also, I am not going to name anyone and limit myself to stating the facts, or at least some of the facts.

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We drove the Germans back into a conquered communication trench where, recovering, they turned on us, trying to push us back in turn.

The trench was narrow, and so one of my poilus marched at the head of the file and bore the brunt of the shock. The brave boy did not get worried at all, and the first German who advanced to knife him received a grenade that blew him to pieces and that should have refrained some of his comrades because we could all hear the groans.

[photo here]

Our poilu happily had his pockets filled with grenades and also some in his musette. He served them so happily that soon he could hide behind a pile of corpses to escape the bullets.

We threw ours over his head.

Suddenly he shouts to me:

“Sergeant, I have no more grenades but that’s not all. I think that the moment has come to enter the trench!”

And voila my animal climbed over the cadavers, alone, without asking if he was being followed, charges the enemy, his bayonet in hand, letting loose horrible cries, making noise like he was ten.

A sub-officer bars his path, he stabbed him. An officer drawing his revolver met him. He leaps at his throat and strangles him.

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Abandoning the officer, who we pick up, he follows the courses of the trench but finds that he has no one in front of him. The Germans have had enough and abandoned that part.

I demanded the Croix de guerre for my heroic poilu, who, himself, I assure you, did not see anything heroic in what he had just done.

“The Croix de guerre for having thrown a dozen grenades! You’d mock me, sergeant,” he told me.

Here is the same reflection about this other heroic poilu, who, serving as a liaison, traversed more than ten times a zone covered by intense machine gun fire and heavy artillery shells, and, who, not content to risk his life to just assure the liaison, worked for more than two hours under the bullets and the machine guns to clear some comrades buried by the bombardment.

As I told him that I will present him for a citation, he responded: “But sergeant, I have done nothing.. I marched along while the others were hit.”

“Eh, my friend,” I said to him, “there is a walk and then there is a walk.”

The brave boy would all but have described himself.

Another of my poilus, in the course of a charge, got in front of the line and alone penetrated a battery emplacement.

With a thrust of his bayonet, he stuck a man on his piece, then, with an infernal aplomb and a menacing bayonet, he shouted to the sub-officer:

“Surrender or make your last will! The entire division is following me.”

The entire division! Evidently the unfortunate artillery men could do nothing but obey.

And what was my astonishment in seeing return, proud as a rooster, pipe in mouth, and pushing before him a small troop of German artillerymen. It was the brave boy that I had thought lost.

We then just gathered them up.

During an advance while under fire, one of my men whispered in my ear:

“Sergeant, the corporal is wounded!”

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This corporal is a friend, a brave and dignified boy, with a wife and two daughters waiting for

him at home.

I run after him and find him behind a small mound, where they have rapidly dragged some men, swimming in a sea of blood. One of our devoted and courageous stretcher bearers is in the midst of summarily bandaging him.

“Don’t be desolate, go, my poor old man!” I said to him. “It’s nothing.”

His pale lips try to smile.

“Don’t worry about me,” he said with a weak voice. “I know well that I’m done for; but that’s nothing; long live France!”

The poor boy did not die, but he has one less leg.

I could tell for entire days stories about my brave poilus, about the great comrades who I love and who love me. It’s a subject that I hold dear to my heart, and I would, I swear, do harm to anyone who tries to make me stop.

Poor comrades, so gay, so good, so courageous! How many of them have already fallen! How many of those who have fallen have we left behind, on the sides of the Lorraine hills, on the plains of Flanders and Artois, on the trails of Aisne and in the chalk of Champagne.

Others have come to take their places in the ranks, a little younger, but also good and brave, and often, with the new ones, we talk of the old ones.

We don’t forget them, the comrades from the start, but it seems as if they lived a long time ago, that they belonged to a different age.

From where does this strange impression come? Probably because the war ages us rapidly. It is not us that retreat, it’s us that advance.

We have done many things! We have seen so many miseries, so many ruins, so many horrors! We have seen so much blood run! It does not seem to us that all this could have happened in so few months. In the horrible cataclysm, our spirit loses any notion of time and space.

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XXX: Between Two Storms

We leave. Towards what destination, towards what adventures? That's a secret for tomorrow.

For the moment, we are going to become again some muddy vagabonds. We are going to go from village to village, from farm to farm, resting one day in one place, a week in another. Why? That does not concern us, and then what does it matter! Actually we only know one thing, and that is that we are going towards the southeast.

Despite the ennui that we have felt since we learned that we had to leave our sector, the men are happy; they laugh and sing. Damn! We are always happy, in sum, to escape for a while the monotonous existence of the trench. And then, when you leave with all the men an action like that of Champagne we have all sorts of reasons to be satisfied.

Without admitting it, we are equally happy to feel safe, to no longer hear, at every hour of the day and night, the artillery, the torpedoes or the shells that could send you to a better world, to no longer hear the cries of the wounded.

In route, we have received reinforcements, and naturally the brave boys who make them up don't know anything about war.

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It is necessary to get them placed in the ranks, instruct them, inculcate in them the best principles of the struggle underground and above ground.

You see immediately if they have military talent and what that means for us. All sorts of theories, practical exercises for the cadres, various maneuvers, marches day and night, the making of trenches and shelters of all types, opening of communication trenches, attack exercises and the defense of fortifications.

"Damn it!" one of my corporals would say twenty times a day. "When I think that it's called being at rest!"

The poor boy, at least, gave them hell instructing our "blues" and damn, the task was never easy.

"You see," he told me one time with a serious yet comical expression. "Those buggers have such a hard head that it would take a 420 to break through!"

The job of instructor was certainly nothing to rejoice about, especially in the conditions in which we are found. It is not easy to make men understand who have not seen battle of moles or the thousand and one tricks that you have to have in your knapsack, that battle occurs in the most diverse forms and that a counterattack varies with the nature of the attack.

You could say, for the most part, that war is a war of improvisation, imagination and audacity.

A good number of our "blues" neither lacked imagination nor audacity, and I was persuaded that they would become excellent poilus; but it was difficult for us to inculcate in them the things you need to know about attacks where the essential element, that is to say, the danger is lacking.

Also, personally, I especially was attached to them learning how to work, to dig with intelligence. Good trenches, you see, always make good defenses.

That was also, I am certain, the opinion of our general; because he often stopped for a long time before my men, and would not leave without bearing witness and leaving me a few cigars or cigarettes for my workers.

In brief, time passed, and we did not get too bored. In the evenings, I would often smoke my pipe in an inn or sometimes on a bench by a farm door with some inhabitants of the village. The good peasants, for whom the war had not interrupted their daily work, were happy to interrogate me. They asked me thousands of questions to which it was often impossible for me to respond, because I knew no more than they, and they grew heated at the exploits of our poilus.

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For me, I always stated with pleasure that these brave men had complete confidence in our final success, and, that our soldiers ended the conversation by saying in a grave voice: "We'll get them!"

To give us some drills, some review, some work details of all sorts, we learned one fine morning that we were going to exercise our legs.

Once more, we were going to vagabond around, sack on back, only, this time, the vagabondage will be regulated for so many kilometers per day. We were accorded a certain number of days to reach a pre-determined place, but that we were not to know at once where we were going.

After all, it was all the same to us.

For example, the prospect of hiking muddy or powdery routes with sack and weapons, plus the ammunition, that was much less an issue.

It's that while the sack is sometimes a friend in combat, when it serves as a shield, it becomes a terrible enemy on a march.

We do not laugh in the camp when preparing to march. Each time that the men had placed in their sack a new object, they weighed it.

The new ones conserved their smiles. They also weighed their sacks but did not find them too heavy.

"Laugh, my little ones!" Groaned the corporal. "Laugh well, you won't always be laughing!"

The corporal was right. The knapsack never appeared very heavy when you hoist it onto your back, but it is wise to wait to pronounce it light. There comes a time when you have marched many kilometers, when the burden seems, at each step, to weight down your shoulders, and if a little of the march takes place in full sun, ah! Then, I don't have to tell you!

Our poor blues in hearing the bad experiences of the monotonous routes of Champagne, the roads all straight, that cut immense plains where, here and there, a woods formed of small fir trees makes the image of an oasis in the desert.

The blues will certainly no longer have an envy of laughter.

I had a few sacks placed on the cars, with the authorization of the lieutenant, and that allowed me to rest the majority of my men by taking turns removing their sacks, for a small amount of time.

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Now we know the goal of our military promenades, if you could call them promenades, these fatiguing and monotonous marches. That goal, was the camp Mailly. A grimace showed on the faces of veterans when that destination was revealed.

They knew that when you go in a camp, it was generally to do something.

“Camp Mailly! Heh!” My corporal sad. “All hell will break loose!”

I could only agree with his view.

As a result, the march appeared to us even more punishing, the sack heavier, the sun hotter, the rain more annoying.

My lieutenant showed me a lot of friendship; he had known once, at Nancy, my former captain, and the latter had written him about me.

During a break he came to talk with me, and, from what he told me, I figured out that we are going, in the camp Mailly, to return to a process of training from before the war.

That did not seem to please him.

Damn! We are old soldiers now; we have seen trench life, and it does not seem right to us to have to redo training from olden times. And, in fact, that was not agreeable to anyone.

“Damn!” my brave friend, the corporal, said with bitterness. “Look now they are sending us back to school!”

I did not say anything, but I vowed that I would not think like that. Our days, and perhaps our nights, were employed in various tasks that we executed without taste because this was the war, and it did not resemble anything familiar.

I don't pretend, I'll say, that what we are going to do is useless--I don't know anything and it is not up to me to judge things like that--but what I do know is that my poilus have reached the desire to return to the trenches.

In the region, near Vitry-le-François, we found numerous traces of the battle of the Marne. Villages bombarded and burned, a lot of graves.

In a stand of fir trees, I gathered up some poor letters covered in blood, illustrated French and German magazines, torn effects. Here they had fought violently, sometimes at bayonet point. We still saw holes covered with camouflage that had served to hide the machine guns and the ditches, dug in haste, where the combatants sheltered.

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How all that appeared so distant!

And even more to the point, it's been hardly more than a year!

It seemed to us that they belonged to another generation, those who had fought on the fields and in the woods.

I have already pointed out this unique impression. Never had I ever felt it with so much intensity than at the graves of the heroes of the Marne.

And I can report that a lot of others—all or almost all—felt the same way.

Already, we who had been in action, we admired those ancients.

During our stay at camp Mailly, I learn, from the lieutenant, that they have the intention of proposing me for the rank of sub-lieutenant.

I refused, and, when the lieutenant insisted, I responded:

“I am profoundly touched by the goodwill as witnessed by my commanders, but I assure you that I am made to obey and not to command.”

“I am modest, a homebody. I like the calm and tranquillity.”

“You believe that I am brave, but I am not. I fight because it is necessary to fight, and I fulfill my duty to my best because I am conscientious. That's all.”

“Hey, lieutenant. I have a friend in the division of Toul. Bataille. He is worth a hundred thousand times better than me. He was a brave man, a truly brave man, a hero... He was legendary in our superb 39th that was the best in the army. And well! Bataille has more than once been asked if he'd accept the gold stripes.”

My commanders were good enough to not get upset over my refusal and decided that one of the first vacancies for an adjutant would be given to me.

Our stay at camp Mailly came to an end, and we were sent back without delay. Sparks will fly more and more, as my corporal said.

Even the poilus in grand words recalled their trenches which had begun to look like some sort of paradise. Even the old ones speak of their time as a happy epoch of their existence, the poilus talked without ceasing of the good times when they played games with the Boche there while they lived in their holes.

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They had painted such a picture for the new blues of the life underground! They described to them the charms with such enthusiasm, that the latter came to consider the trench like a place of delights where the pinard flows and where the larks all fell from the sky all roasted.

The poor blues were setting themselves up for some cruel delusions.

I had tried to show them trenches more accurately, to tell them that instead of larks, it rained there shells and bullets, but I see that I had on them, without any result, at least, the effect of a wet blanket.

“After all,” I thought, “when they are there, they will be like the others, and they’ll get used to it.”

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VERDUN

XXXI: In the Meuse Valley

More commotion and a new departure. We are getting used to it.

I say goodbye to the camp at Mailly and hope to never return there.

My poilus loudly display their satisfaction at the end of the boring stay in a vast muddy plain where we have done so much training. The officers do not say anything, naturally, but it is not difficult to figure out that they themselves do not regret leaving the camp at Mailly.

This time, we save our legs, and it is on the railroad that they transport us to near Bar-le-Duc.

The trip was not very long and not interesting.

We were now at the beginning of the month of February 1916.

For four days we stay in a modest village that is already occupied by some cavalry, then the order arrives for us to march, in stages, towards Verdun where we are supposed to arrive on 15 February.⁹⁸

The cavalry men call us lucky, and as I ask them what they found particularly lucky for us under the circumstances,

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they explain that the Verdun region is one of the calmest where you hardly ever hear artillery firing.

“You are going to live,” the cavalry men say to me, “as quietly there as in the rear.”

“Well, so much the better! We deserve to be a little lucky because, up to now, we have not known a calm sector, and we are not sure that they even exist.”

“Well, old man,” my corporal says to me, adding to the conversation, “that will be the first time that we will have it soft. We are finally going to be able to get fat.”

We left the area around Bar-le-Duc in sullen weather, and I thought that we would all be in a bad humor if the information from the cavalry did not turn into us finding an Eden at the end of these disagreeable marches.

The sky was gray and low, a fine mist fell from time to time, the roads were bad, and we sunk to our ankles in a gluey mud. To add to our happiness some fast automobiles or heavy trucks forced us all the time to get off to the side of the road and splashed a liquid mud at us of which

⁹⁸See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Hauts.pdf>.

never seemed to miss us.

The poilus became furious, giving the finger to the autos, pouring out their bad humor, understandable enough, in terms with an excessive energy.

The drivers care little. They are armored against the anger of a pedestrian, and the most violent motions do not budge them.

My brave poilus, who have the look of wanting to devour everything, do not hate them in the least, of course. They know, in effect, that the drivers are hardy companions, always ready for dangerous and difficult tasks without weapons, sometimes even in full combat, and without whom we'd go hungry while serving in the trenches.

But what do you want! When we walk along muddy roads, under a threatening sky, shoulders cut by the straps of the knapsack, it soothes one to take out your anger on someone or something else, and that really does not mean anything bad for anyone.

And what concerns me, I try to focus my thoughts to forget the length and monotony of the road. I try to escape from reality through my dream.

And I would succeed if I did not have around me
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my talkative corporal who at every moment brings me back to reality, "Tell me, old man, what are you thinking about?" etc.

Really, the cavalry is not mistaken. Verdun appears to me as the capital of Eden.

We have the thought of living there in perfect quiet, with enough security as if located hundreds of kilometers from the front.

[photo here]

In the streets, there are many officers, charming, well dressed women, luxury automobiles. The hotels are crowded, and they say that you have to make a reservation a long time in advance, something that I willingly believed. The cafes never empty, and their numerous clients do not have the air of melancholy. The stores are superb, and buyers abound.

My corporal is not at ease with the enchanting spectacle. It has been so long since we have had the satisfaction of traversing a city!

"My old Lefèvre," he says to me, "I am beginning to think that this time we have hit the mother lode."

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"But," I respond, "hoping to cool him off a bit, you don't imagine, I hope, that we are going to be garrisoned here and occupy our winter quarters here?"

"My friend, I am not so stupid as that, and I know that a city of this sort is not made to shelter poilus like us. But we are going to its surroundings, and you would think that if the city is calm, the surroundings will be too."

That seemed logical, and I could only agree.

We stayed in Verdun until the next day.

From comrades in other regiments, I learned that this corner of the front had really been excellent up to now.

For months and months, hardly any action of bravery had been cited in this sector that had been named the fortified region of Verdun (RFV), as the staff called it, who, since the start of the war, had begun an immoderate usage of the letters of the alphabet.

At the same time, the comrades let me know certain things that caused me to reflect and cast some shadows on this situation.

For example, they told me that for a month now, a certain unease had begun to manifest itself in the city. Oh! Nothing, just a bit of anxiety! But, all the same, it produced a bit of restraint. The wives of officers, who came to see their husband on the fraudulent pretext of visiting a sick aunt, began to be rarer. The gaiety was no longer as fresh. They say that some prisoners and deserters had spoken of an upcoming offensive and declared that a powerful amount of material had been accumulated by the Germans on the front north of the two banks of the Meuse.

It was, of course, only rumors, and only the commanders had to know what to believe.

But in accord with the proverb, where there's smoke there's fire, the rumors, even vague ones, produced an unease that increased.

The comrades did not let me ignore that a certain activity took place itself on our side in front of the fortified region. We increased the barbed wire, and here and there we dug new trenches.

"Simple precautionary measures without a doubt," they added.

I did not hazard an opinion myself, newly arrived, but these precautionary measures, close to such tenacious stories, did not say anything good to me.

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I had already seen similar preparations, and I knew how things were going to end up.

After all, we were in a war, and one can never hope that a powerful enemy, well provided with men and artillery, would limit themselves to vacationing on our soil.

Let's go! We are bound to not find calm and tranquillity in our new sector.

My corporal, with whom I shared some of the information received from my comrades and my own impressions, did not delay in experiencing the same malaise as the people of Verdun.

"Bloody hell" he cried. "I think that you have bad luck and that you are transmitting it to others. It's enough that we are arrived for sure that things will fail."

"Unless," I responded to him, "we are sent here precisely because things are already bad."

"Faith," he said. "You could be right. Well, we'll fight. So what, it will not be the first time!... But, it's all the same to me, me who here wanted to spend the existence of a good bourgeois and dip

a toe in the Meuse!”

And the brave lad let out a deep sigh while dreaming of a caressing dream, which was likely to vanish in the smoke from the cannons.

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XXXII: At Our Positions

They did not let us vacation for long in Verdun, where, after the trenches and the camp at Mailly, we were enchanted.⁹⁹

“Christ!” My corporal said to me the day before while showing me the cafes and the shops of the city. “I feel like I have returned to civilization.”

Alas! We were there only long enough to leave at once. Something that bothered my corporal.

“Don’t you find,” he said, “that our case reminds you a little of a certain Tantalus.”¹⁰⁰

Yes, I had the same opinion. It seemed to me very agreeable to be able to lounge on the terrace of a café.

But, on the 16th in the morning, it was necessary to hitch up the sack and march anew in the gluey mud.

The population bade us very sympathetic good-byes.

We took the road to Étain to go and establish ourselves at the forts of Vaux, Tavanue and the village of Damloup.

These names, that the entire world knows now, didn’t mean anything to us then. It was very important for us to be there or elsewhere; because, as my poilus said philosophically, to move some dirt in one corner or the other,

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it’s still just moving some dirt.

My corporal was not, however, of the same opinion, and made the observation, not without reason, that the ground is not the same everywhere. He had kept a particularly disagreeable souvenir of the dirt from Champagne.

“This is not really dirt,” he grumbled when he spoke. “It’s a sponge.”

[photo here]

We all regret, in leaving on the road to Étain, to not having been able to rest a little longer in Verdun. That city, of which a good portion of the population had already left and over which hung a serious menace, had appeared fairy-like to us, some rats in the trenches. That proves that impressions are often born of a contrast and are all the more vivid as the contrast is more violent.

⁹⁹See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Verdun.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰Tantalus was a Greek mythological figure, famous for his eternal punishment. “He was made to stand in a pool of water beneath a fruit tree with low branches, with the fruit ever eluding his grasp, and the water always receding before he could take a drink.”

What is happening?

Our brigade has been completely changed. The 35th, put in reserve with the exception of a battalion, is replaced by a territorial regiment [246] which assumes guard over the line going from Fromezey to the village of Dieppe.

These are some brave men, these territorials, who assume their service with a surprising conscience.

We speak with them of the attack which could happen anytime.

“If they come,” they calmly responded, “then they’ll get it!”

They say that without boastfulness, these men of which the majority have gray hair—some even white hair—and you sense that they are ready to do their duty as good Frenchmen, right to the end.

My company camps at Damloup, where our general is located with his staff and the lieutenant colonel who commands the territorial regiment.¹⁰¹

Damloup is a minuscule village. We hang out there as best as we can, but really more badly than good, but it is not difficult for us, as Damloup, as a garrison, seems to us very inferior to Verdun.

The plain that we occupy is dominated by the German observatory called les Jumelles d'Ornes.¹⁰² The enemy observers thus could see everything that happens in our lines, something that seems to me unhealthy.

The lieutenant appreciated the situation the same as me because I heard him mutter.

“Artillery target!”

It appears that the village of Damloup is equally seen by German observers installed on the heights in front of Dieppe.

Let’s go, that’s it. Our resort in the Woëvre promises to become eventful soon enough.¹⁰³

Our camps are located, in sum, under the fire of enemy batteries, and all troop movement taking place during the day could be signaled by observers to their artillery.

¹⁰¹Damloup is a commune about two miles northeast of Verdun, near fort Douaumont. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Hauts.pdf>.

¹⁰²Literally, “the twins of Ornes,” referring to the twin hills 307 and 310.

¹⁰³The Woëvre plain was east of Verdun.

Sweet!

"Enough!" says my corporal. "They, their artillery, know us, right? You have seen thousands and thousands fall, and I too, and we are still alive. Enough! What do you want me to say to you? Eh! I am beginning to become bored, myself, of shells. Dream a bit that we haven't received any for almost five months!"

"I assure you," I said laughing, "that I did not miss them."

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"True, but when I don't hear cannon, I end up no longer being able to persuade myself that I am in a war and then nostalgia takes over. I love the noise, the agitation, the danger, because it prevents me from thinking..."

In front of our front, which is very much extended, there are multiple lines of barbed wire, and that gigantic spider web unnerves many of our blues who believe perfectly in the security behind it.

"It's impassable, right sergeant?" They ask me.

Of course I respond to them in the affirmative, but experience has taught me many things, and I have received hard lessons, and so I could not share the optimism of our young men.

The defensive net of wire exists, but its faults appear pretty large to me.

Finally, I have to say that time will tell.

Each day, some deserters appear at our lines and tell us interesting things. Notably they declare that the attack was to take place on 12 February, but it has been pushed back because of the bad weather and that it will break out soon.

And so it's the first rays of the sun that will give the signal for the massacre.

I suppose that our commander is very much informed and that he really is preparing something seriously because there are numerous movements of troops, and they sent us a pile of recommendations to prepare.

I have known similar moments.

Our blues are excited.

"We are finally going to see the Boche!" They say.

They have not yet seen them, and that seems strange to them.

That's modern war. Often, you shoot or bombard for months without seeing the enemy.

Soon our battalions near the front and certain companies double up with the territorial units.

My company occupies the ferme d'Haraigue.

The big day must be approaching.

Of our installation at the farm, the lieutenant asks me:

“You are sure of your men, Lefèvre?”

“Just like me, lieutenant.”

“The new ones will march?”

“I am especially afraid that they are too eager, and I am convinced that I shall have to stop them rather than push them.”

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“Well, all’s well!”

We neighbor some territorial units, composed of men from the frontier who have no fear in their eyes.

We are on guard because of the numerous alerts. The general pays us a visit at each one and does not hide from us the fact that “this will probably be very hard.”

He estimates that a man warned is much more valuable, and he does not habitually hide the truth from us. He knows, at least, that the task does not frighten us and that he can count on us.

From all that he had told us it meant, in sum, that we have to wait for the enemy’s attack, supported by a shock bombardment, then launch a vigorous counter-attack.

The bad weather continues. The frequent squalls flood the ground in front and, in places, a latrine.

On our left, the village of Dieppe has been organized and constitutes a solid redoubt against infantry. Unfortunately, the few shelters against bombardment have become filled with water and are un-inhabitable. That is a serious concern.

The general does not have time to establish his own command post that offers security, and he inhabits, with his staff, a sort of old slum/hut, which had once been built by some artillery men but which has been abandoned for a long time, and which is situated on the road from Dieppe to Haraigne,

It is certainly not a palace and the smallest shell that hit it would destroy it.

We think that the general is not being very reasonable. He should not expose himself like that.

But go and say this to the devil of a man who runs everywhere, sees all and who cares little for shells!

We easily get used to danger. On the one hand it’s a good thing, but on the other it’s bad.

On 20 February at reveille, we were surprised to learn that the wind had shifted during the night

and that the sky was rapidly clearing. A pretty hard frost froze the abominable mud, and a thick layer of frost silvered the meadows. Was this finally good weather?

And so, if the deserters were right, it will be a battle.

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XXXIII: Artillery Preparation

In the morning, the thunder of cannons begins to rumble to the north.

We listen, nerves taunt. We ask if this bombardment is going to end or whether, to the contrary, it constitutes the start of a serious preparation.

It does not stop. The explosions become more and more frequent, and we hear them more and more distinctively which indicates that the storm is gaining, little by little on our sector. Out of the corner of my eye, I watch my "blues." They are pale, but look okay, trying to laugh and joke.

That fake gaiety does not fool the veterans; they had done that too.

In the course of the afternoon, the lightning reaches our corner, and the great shells tumble with a noise from hell on the road to Étain, on Fromezey, Haraigne and Vaux. Our blues no longer think of laughing and do not have the courage to joke around.

We move around as best we can, which is pretty badly because we do not have a serious shelter.

I impose silence on the veterans, who, without having the intention and only to kill the time, test the blues by telling fantastic stories of the effects of modern artillery,

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stories that have made the rounds of all the trenches and that are false or exaggerated. We have enough subjects for nightmares without inventing some more, and reality is enough for our happiness.

This first bombardment lasts until evening and does not do much damage to us. The blues begin to listen to the artillery and explosions calmly, from the point of view of a trance, the noise of the day has not been useless.

When calm is re-established, we leave our shelters; all happy to be able to stretch a little, and we go to examine the shell holes. There is one that is very large that the water has already invaded and that resembles the pools dug in certain gardens. It only lacks a fountain in the middle and some gold fish.

The night is superb, clear and cold, and the stars shine in the sky the color of green turquoise. To the thunder of the heavy cannons follows a silence almost agonizing. We only hear, similar to the far off rumor of the sea washing its waves against pebbles, the heavy rumble of the trucks that assures the provisioning of the army.

At dawn, the bombardment returns over the entire front, and, this time, there is no gradation. The thunder debuts at its maximum intensity, and the shells fall like the large drops of the most violent storm.

"There is no longer any doubt," says the captain to our lieutenant. "It's the preparation for a large offensive."

The lieutenant supports, with a gesture, the opinion of the captain. The explosions of shells are so numerous that they almost blend together, producing a strange and disorderly din similar to the beating of thousands of drums; a din that envelopes, so to say, the savage noise of the heavy cannon whose shots really merge. And, on top of this noise, this din, our 75s crack hazy notes that resemble the sounds of tambourines.

Never have I ever heard a similar concert.

Those inhabited places, like Dieppe and Damloup, are especially beaten.

A strange thing, the German artillery men, aim, above all, at an old mill between Dieppe and Haraigne, which houses neither men nor material. The 105s and 150s multiply their explosions around its walls, which bore the traces of older bombardments.

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The lieutenant, with whom I share my astonishment, explains to me that the maps seem to attribute to this mill an importance that it certainly does not have. The topographer who revised the map of this region, and who was undoubtedly seduced by the charm of the old mill, hardly suspected that assigning it value because of the partiality of the artist would cost one day for the Germans tons of steel and explosives.

On our front, the bombardment continues under the same conditions

[photo here]

until 24 February, intermittently during the night and continuing with an extreme violence during the day.

In the rear of the ferme d'Haraigne, towards the bois du Nobras, which forms a spot on the plain of the Woëvre and which is under fire from all sides, was installed one of our batteries of a small caliber.

That battery was marvelous, and, during the furious bombardment, the courage of the brave men who worked it elicited more than once cries of admiration.

Firing on the bois Bâti, they evidently exasperated the enemy, because the quantity of the shells sent their way by the heavy German artillery was

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truly unimaginable. They fell in gusts, cascades, whirlwinds, all calibers, all types, explosives, fused and unfused, and even asphyxiates filled with a heavy gas of a greenish-yellow color that descended slowly and without disintegrating.

After each gust, cascade, whirlwind, the Germans stopped, supposing that the small battery no longer existed. And I declare that we thought the same thing, because the ground that they appeared to occupy was found to have been turned over as if by a giant plow.

Ah! Yes!

As soon as the last shell had fallen, our small cannons recommenced their song. Pah! Pah!
Pah!

From where did it come? Where did the artillery men hide to escape the showers of steel and

clouds of gas?

It was a mystery, even for us.

In any case, some tough men, some heroic soldiers, worked that battery.

We learned a little later that thanks to the dispositions taken by its commander—an officer as gifted as audacious—the small battery had suffered fewer loss of men and exited from the struggle with at least half of its material intact.

That seemed miraculous to us, and to those of us who had assisted in the long duel that was so unequal, I could not but think of the fable of the lion and the gnat.¹⁰⁴

Each day, an hour before nightfall, the German artillery executed a vigorous Trommelfeuer,¹⁰⁵ that is to say an intense fire that gives generally the signal to attack for the infantry.

I suppose that the Germans had the goal of unnerving us, to demoralize us by this daily menace, without a doubt, to immobilize a part of our reserves and oblige us, by this demonstration, to keep them in the sector.

Each time we would take all the precautions for a quick counter-attack in case an assault took place, but that did not unnerve us. At least, we would know perfectly that the event was going to happen one day or another, and we would be ready, morally and materially to face it with vigor. [253]

Some disturbing news circulates in our corner, and I can state that the officers have a worried look.

They say that an assault, a formidable assault, is taking place on the north front after a bombardment of unheard of violence, and that the front's defenses have broken under the weight of the heavy mass.

That's how, and by other vague rumors, that we learn in the ranks of the start of the battle of Verdun.¹⁰⁶

[photo here]

The 24th, at midnight, an alert and sacks up!

What's happening? We know nothing, and, as you could think, a certain anguish oppresses us.

This alert has to have a connection to the events that have occurred and that we only barely know about.

¹⁰⁴One of Aesop's fables. See one version of the fable at <http://mythfolklore.net/aesopica/milowinter/37.htm>.

¹⁰⁵A massive artillery barrage first developed by the Germans on the Eastern Front during World War I.

¹⁰⁶See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Verdun.pdf>.

Finally, we are set, and our anxiety increases. We have the order to fall back on the Hauts-de-Meuse, and the movement has to be complete by dawn.

Never had I felt so sad. This departure in the night before something dismal.

“Do not worry, go!” my corporal says to me. “It’s without doubt just a maneuver. Tomorrow we’ll see more clearly.”

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I tried hard not to worry, but I could hardly do it. The news circulating during the day had much affected me, and this retreat at night, arriving after the rest of the news, did not do much to reassure me.

When the first rays of dawn appeared on the horizon, the 25th of February, we were occupying new positions, our right on the road to Étain, our left on the village of Vaux. Our brigade reserves held the battery of Damloup and Fort Vaux.

At the ferme d’Haraigne and at Dieppe, we left some small units that were supposed to, if needed, fight as a rear guard in order to mask our retreat.

But the Germans, who, without a doubt, could not imagine that we would abandon ground without a fight our defense, did not commence their advance until the evening and advanced with a careful slowness.

The Hauts-de-Meuse, we thought of angrily, this plain of the Woëvre that we had to abandon, these barbed wire networks that we had worked so hard to establish, and that now will be turned against us.

Then we learn the reason for our retreat.

It seemed that deep gaps have been produced on the northern front, and that the brigade with which we are in liaison had to pull back its left wing, which was too advanced at Bezonvaux.

“What do you want?” my corporal says to me. “In war there are always the highs and the lows. Do not worry about it!”

He is right, but it is, all the same, still particularly depressing.

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XXXIV: In The Battle

We are trying to organize the terrain, but we needed time, a lot of time, because there is a lot to do, and we can only work at night.

During the day, the bombardment is infernal. The large shells twist through the atmosphere without stopping, producing not only a whistling but a sort of plaintive cry. The explosions are so numerous that their rumbling make you think of a gigantic fireworks display.

During the night we work, but we do not work well.

Firstly, the German artillery does not sleep, and we receive a number of shells that cause serious losses. Then we can't see very well what we are doing, and, naturally, we can't light things up because the slightest ray of light attracts on us the lightning of heavy batteries, and that leads to the destruction of our work and the workers. Finally, it's also necessary to say that the darkness obscures laziness, and there are lazy men throughout, and especially when it comes to digging dirt.

I will never forget these nights at Verdun. I will always have in mind—like a photograph—the sinister vision of the battlefield illuminated by the pink or green signal rockets.

In this light from hell emerge corners of the ground ploughed up by shells, clumps of ravaged trees, pitiful ruins of villages and isolated houses.

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All this was speckled by the bursts of the reddish projectiles that continued, without a break, their work of destruction and death.

In the space between explosions, I heard the curses of workers, the orders of the NCOs, the anguished cries of the wounded, the death rattle of the dying, and then, dominating the noise, enveloping all, so to speak, a strange complaint, continual and dismal, where the thousands of sad voices seemed to join together, rising to the sky, similar to an appeal of the damned.

It was the cry of the numerous dogs abandoned by their owners during the evacuation of the villages and who, each night, howled at death.

My company had received the order to hold at Damloup.

We awaited the enemy with impatience, burning with the desire to show him that if we have been ordered to abandon the plain to him, we are still in his way, firmly resolved to hit him hard and bar his passage.

From afar we have seen his scouts who methodically infiltrate with precaution the village of Dieppe.

A woman accompanied one of the troops serving as a guide. Was she a spy, or has she been forced?

On the morning of 28 February, the enemy is sighted. Finally!

A reconnaissance, composed of about a hundred men, seems to have taken our village as its objective and advances without excessive precautions.

We are careful not to deprive his commander of the gentle confidence which seems to animate him. We have captured the lookout, and we are waiting.

When the enemy troop is in good range, we fire rapidly supported by one of our machine guns.

What a tumbling! Such a stupor and what a flight back to the bank of a small, narrow-gauge railroad situated in front of our line.

They all took cover behind this shelter with the exception of those whom bullets have hit.

The majority of our men want to go after them and dislodge them.

“What good is it to risk ourselves?” Our commander says to the company. “Simply hold the two ends of the bank, which is not very long, and shoot those who try to leave.”

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No sooner said than done!

Soon some of the Germans try to sneak out under our surveillance. They are hit at once, and other attempts of the same nature lead to the same result.

Our poilus are exultant.

The Germans finish by no longer moving and certainly just waiting for night to clear out.

An Alsatian shouts at them to surrender. The officer who commands the troop responded with the famous, “Wacques!”¹⁰⁷

The brigade general, who has been aware of events, sends us a note recommending to end the affair before nightfall and adds that a reward will be accorded if, without suffering any losses, we took the Germans dead or alive. Immediately all present themselves to carry out the attack and charge the enemy.

The lieutenant who commands the company chooses a sergeant and six men. These brave men at once fixed bayonets, and they went off toward the bank, resolute and menacing.

“Surrender or you’re dead!” Shouts the Alsatian.

The Germans hesitate an instant, exchanging among themselves a few words, and then, finally, throw down their arms.

Their lieutenant lay unmoving, his head shattered by a bullet.

¹⁰⁷Reference is to the “Moulin et ferme des Wacques,” which was the scene of intense fighting in the second battle in Champagne, September 1915 and which resulted in very high French casualties suffered by the 28th infantry brigade.

We capture fifty-three prisoners, of which two are sub-officers. The others are dead or wounded.

The general kept his promise. The company was cited in the order of the day; its commander received the Legion of Honor, the sergeant who directed the attack, the military medal; and the six poilus who accompanied him, the Croix de guerre.

The following evening our company was to be relieved and put in reserve in a tunnel.

I left in front to reconnoiter the ground and the lodging. Finally, I came back to search for my unit and serve as its guide.

On my way I pass by the side of the shelter of our brigade general and lieutenant colonel. At that moment, explosions of a 150 and a 210 throw up around me clouds of earth and small stones.

Impossible to advance under such a downpour, for I would certainly not get very far, and without hesitating, I take refuge in the command post of the general.

The shelter is divided into three compartments. One is occupied by the general,
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his ordinance officers, the chaplain of the brigade, liaison agents, telephone operators, etc; another part by our lieutenant colonel and our company men; the third serves as an aid post. Since each compartment has only a narrow door for an opening, it is pretty dark, and it is lighted by an acetylene lamp whose odor stuck in one's throat.

It is hard to breathe there, yet there one enjoys a very relative security because the shelter, which forms the relief, seems to serve as an objective of the German artillery.

If a 210 shell falls directly atop the roof, I ask myself what would remain of the hut and its occupants.

I made this reflection while looking at the general, who, installed in front of a table and attending to some administrative paperwork, appeared the most tranquil in the world and without seeming to hear the fracas of the explosions.

All of a sudden a brouhaha takes place in front of the door. Then a messenger runs in, out of breath, and says:

“General, lieutenant colonel S. and captain D. are wounded!”

The lieutenant colonel is the commander of the territorial regiment; the captain is one of the ordinance officers of the general.

These two men, who had left to order a work detail to take shelter, each had just received a shell explosion. The one bled profusely, having an artery severed; the other fell to his legs, and his wound appeared much less serious.

These men were transported to the aid post, where the number of wounded, packed together

like herring in a barrel, moaned lamentably. The doctor summarily bandaged them, some quick stitches, while waiting for the arrival of the stretcher-bearers who were charged to transport the poor men to a pre-determined place where they will be picked up at night by ambulances.

Not far from me, the brigade cook and that of the colonel meet and gesture at a certain cow that seems to give them a lot of fuss.

To kill the time, I ask them, and they tell me the following story.

At Vaux or at Damloup, I do not remember exactly, a superb milk cow had been abandoned by its owner who had left in haste just as the shells began to fall. The cook of the colonel took the cow while claiming that its milk would be precious for the sick and wounded.

But where to lodge the poor beast?

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In the shelter? Impossible. Around the shelter? Also impossible because the shells fall like hail.

Finally, in a woods situated behind the shelter, or rather in a cluster of broken trees, tangled branches, bushes half burnt that was hardly a woods, was discovered a hut made of branches and grass, and there they installed our poilus' cow.

Alas! The milk cow did not have the warlike attitude of the bulls from Spain or la Camargue. When I was told this story, the two cooks came to say that the frightened cow had lost, not its life—that would have been normal in such a diabolic place—but its milk.

“What will the colonel say!” Said one of the two with a really comical expression.

And the brave cook pointed a menacing finger towards the German line, cursing the German artillery, the authors, involuntarily this time—you have to know to be just—of the abominable crime.

A relative calm occurred, and I hasten to march to the tunnel.

On the path I see an automobile broken by a shell and some destroyed caissons. The mobile kitchens have had their horses killed and had fallen into a shell hole. Some men are trying to clear the road; but the work is not easy because shells are still falling all the time, obliging the men to take shelter behind a bank, that, at least, gives them the illusion of security.

To avoid the destruction, I am forced to detour, and I finally approach an opening of the tunnel, which has two openings, perfectly spotted [by the Germans] and copiously watered with asphyxiating and tear gas shells.

As a result there is a danger when you enter the tunnel and when you leave and, even more of an issue is that the air is almost unbreathable in the interior.

In this infernal lair lives a thousand poilus that we are going to replace. If one does not find comfort here, there is at least shelter from the shells and that is, for the moment, not a minor advantage.

My reconnaissance was finished; I returned on the road to Damloup.

During my absence a counter-order has arrived; we are no longer going to the tunnel but to Fort Vaux. We are exchanging the hole for the summit.

The lieutenant orders me to make a similar reconnaissance to the fort as I had just done to the tunnel.

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I left at once, but this time, I am accompanied by one of my men so that he could replace me in case I am the victim of an accident.

The bombardment has resumed its intensity, and we run from shell hole to shell hole between explosions.

My companion is from the Midi. He is a brave man but also talkative; he talks without end, and, at each explosion, he swears copiously at the Germans.

Suddenly I no longer hear anything. I turn around, surprised, and I no longer see him. What the hell has happened? I stop, wait, then I call. Finally I perceive his head emerge from a hole about forty meters from me.

“Hey, what happened to you?”

“Ah, sergeant,” he says with his well known accent. “I am pulverized.”

“You are wounded?”

“I don’t know anything.”

“What do you mean you don’t know anything! Come on...”

“I can’t get out of this hole.”

I ran towards him and noted that he has nothing broken. The explosion has simply covered him with a blackish powder! And as the explosion was large, our poilu could hardly climb out. I gave him a hand, and he is at once at my side.

“Yes, sergeant, “we are not going to get out of here alive. I really thought that I was sinking.”

“The Midi foundering! Never in life! Let’s go, take a swag of pinard along the way.”

And I pass him my can.

Finally we arrive.

The fort has already been much damaged. Many of its walls have large breeches, and its surroundings have a lunar appearance. The walls of the trenches are partly destroyed, and some seem to me half destroyed,

We only get there at night, and then, by jumping from hole to hole.

What a charming village resort!

But there is no time for reflections, especially since the entrance to the structure is destroyed, which makes entering all the more difficult.

However we have to go there.

No stretching, march! Finally a flat spot behind an excavation, a rest area before leaving, then some time marching

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and voila, we are at the fort, where they furnish me with all the information necessary.

The situation did not appear brilliant, but whatever!

Off you go, poilu!

Above our heads float some greenish clouds that come from the burning of the 105 fuses. Very close to us a 210 shell explodes with a deafening roar.

“Ah, sergeant, what a god forsaken place!” Grumbled my poilu.

[photo here]

“Certainly, my man, it’s not worth the Cannebiere, but what do you want! We don’t have any choice.”¹⁰⁸

Taking the path, I note numerous points of reference because, the next night, I’ll have to guide my company back here.

We arrive without issue in the village. The Germans seem to be focused on demolishing the bell tower and the houses that surround the church. One of these houses in particular attracts my attention because our brigade general had his command post there from 17 to 20 February, and where, many times, I had gone to carry information bulletins.

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The owners were charming people, and they told me, I remember, that they had two sons at the front, both officers of which one was in the marines.

The house was filled with provisions of all sorts, and the soldiers who had served there never left without having drunk a very good wine and without carrying off a treat. Like all the inhabitants of the unfortunate village, the owners should have left when ordered.

The poor people will not find more than a pile of ruins.

When I traversed the village, on the return from my reconnaissance, numerous shells had destroyed the roof. The doors and windows were broken and torn. Everywhere you saw

¹⁰⁸Reference is to La Canebière, the main street in the old quarter of Marseille (the main city of the Midi), once renowned as a center of high society.

dismembered furniture. In a corner of the garden and in front of the house lay the decapitated corpses of two soldiers.

The following night we were on our way to occupy the Fort Vaux sector.

I had a very hard time finding my points of references because we were illuminated by the glow of explosions and signal rockets. For a moment I thought that I had lost the way, something that would have had grave consequences, but my Marseille man reassured me because he located a reference point that he would never ever forget, the hole in which he almost perished buried alive.

Finally we approached the fort, and the commander of the company could give his instructions for occupying the terrain.

I had fulfilled my task, and I felt relieved that a great weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

The night passed without incident, and I was able to rest, something that I really needed.

The next day, a freezing wind blows from the east, and the entire plain to our right, even to the ravine of Vaux—that they now call the ravine of death—disappears in a heavy fog. Fighting is fierce on our left, in the famous ravine that the German batteries have enfiladed.

As for us, the enemy is content to bombard us.

The days, terribly long, succeed the nights, even longer, without any notable changes in the struggle that continues on our front.

The enemy, who held the wooded heights, ended up by throwing some assault infantry units towards the village of Vaux which it has, essentially, overwhelmed.

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The brigade with which we are in liaison defends step-by-step the streets and houses and naturally suffers heavy losses.

Our provisioning becomes more and more difficult, and water is often scarce.

Goodbye to the pinard!

We take up the shovel and the pick without succeeding in improving the state of our bad trenches that the shells upset without ceasing, demolishing in a few seconds what it has taken us hours to build.

At each instant, at one point or another, the ground is a little leveled and some of our rifle men are buried, so that, in the cemetery, which is on our left, all the tombs are shattered, the graves destroyed. The living are interred, and the dead rise from the ground.

The sight is truly diabolic.

Very close to me, an unfortunate small soldier—a young man who volunteered—sings, in a weak and sorrowful voice, interspersed with hiccups, a sort of song to the Virgin Mary.

I lean over to him and I see, near his forehead, a very small hole from which flows a small stream of blood.

I speak to him, but he does not understand and continues his agonizing dream. Finally his voice grows faint, and his eyes open wide.

He's finished; the poor boy sleeps his last sleep.

In the evening of March 2nd, we learn that the division will be relieved the next night to go rest in the rear of the battle.

We hasten to evacuate our wounded who it is necessary to carry to the bois de la Laufée, and we try, despite the bombardment, to bury our dead.

Before midnight, elements of the relief take the necessary information and instructions; and then, in the second half of the night, the relief takes place. At once we leave behind us some NCOs who continue, during the following days, to bring our successors up to speed, and then rejoin us.

Our departure is saluted by the enemy artillery, to which ours responds vigorously.

This march in total darkness, in single files of harassed men, bent under the weight of overloaded packs, entangled in barbed wire, stuck in the mud, falling into shell holes, hanging on to one another so as not to get lost,

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having nothing to guide them but the glow of shells, constitutes one of the scenes indelible that one imagines later only in a dream that is closer to a nightmare.

It takes us more than an hour to reach the road to Étain. That road is filled with vehicles of all sorts, automobiles, trucks, mobile kitchens, artillery pieces, caissons. I've forgotten some also because there are strange vehicles that don't have any name in any language.

It is an incessant rumbling which becomes a monotone with the swearing of the drivers and the numerous explosions of projectiles, because the Germans do not ignore the fact that our supply convoys are put in motion as soon as night came.

We have to give up any semblance of order in our units because the orders and requests get lost in all the noise.

At the break of dawn we reach the village of Dugny around which we are supposed to camp.

Just as you might think, the companies got all mixed up during the night march, but the men rejoin their own companies themselves, happy to find their comrades, and the gaiety, which rarely leaves the french soldier, quickly reestablishes itself.

Unfortunately we have suffered losses, and we tell each other a thousand details at each moment.

"Give me the coffee grinder."

"I don't have it."

"Who was carrying it?"

"A *. The poor bugger is evacuated. A clean wound of the thigh.."

I ask:

"Show me the squad lanterns."

"Sergeant, there is only one."

"Where are the other three?"

"Those who carried them have been killed."

These responses throw off a certain chill, but the thousand and one obligations make it easier to little by little forget the missing.

That's campaign life, and it's necessary that it be like that because there are always sad subjects, and, if the spirit dwells on them, you end up depressed.

From that point of view, the jokester is precious, and if he didn't exist
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it would be necessary to invent him. His inexhaustible verve, his jokes more or less absurd, his infectious good humor, his buffoonery, which he often displays in the midst of danger, are truly salutary.

Our company is installed as good as possible. The men rest, clean their weapons and their effects.

Already they have forgotten their suffering and only remember those
[photo here]
thousand incidents, amusing or tragic, at which they laugh like fools.

What admirable morale of our troops!

Tomorrow we will be even further from the battlefield, further from shells, and probably better lodged.

So all is well.

The weather does not favor us. Storms succeed storms, snow alternates with rain. The roads are nothing more than large muddy tracks where you sink up to your ankles and sometimes even deeper.

Here and there, bogged down trucks are pulled by unfortunate horses covered in sweat, suffering, exhausted.

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Our soldiers, while laughing, push the wheels. The drivers crack their whips and swear as usual and the team gets unstuck and moves forward without a doubt to get bogged down again in a little way.

While we leave Verdun, other troops go there. The men, covered in mud from head to toe, are happy and full of ardor. And although they know where they are going, and they know what awaits them there, they ignore the fact that they will be less numerous when they return.

There will never be enough admiration for such soldiers. We wish them good luck and they respond:

“Don’t worry, we’re not!”

A few bombs dropped from a German airplane fall close to the railroad station in Dugny without causing the least disruption.

The explosions do not make any impression on our men. They have seen better than that.

“It is like another way to greet us,” says our company commander. “The Germans have said their goodbyes to us. Now they are saying, Au revoir!”

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XXXV: "Poilu"

The poilu of which I am going to tell you this very short story was a dog, the general's dog.

Before being called Poilu, that is to say, prior to his assignment by the staff of our brigade, the brave pooch had to bear a very banal name, that I ignore and that he forgot very quickly. He belonged to a peasant from Vaux (Aisne), and he accompanied him to the fields to plow.

Obliged, like so many others, to abandon his home, the peasant gave the dog as a gift to the general, who, in exchange, slipped him a few bottles of wine.

And so that's how Poilu entered his noble career in the army. At once he demonstrated serious qualities and a courage beyond all proof.

A number of dogs have a frightful fear of shells; they put their tail between their legs when they hear the strange whistling and the impact of the projectile and scatter, crying in terror, at the moment of the explosion.

Poilu simply covered his ears at the whistling; then, when the shell has exploded, he threw himself valiantly at the point of the shell, barking with fury, hoping certainly to find there a German to devour.

This excellent animal, little au courant with the benefits of civilization,

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thought of the old formula of man-to-man combat, and evidently could not comprehend that the field of battle now is taken over by a few pieces of steel and some kilograms of explosive.

Poilu adored the general and never left him. Also, when we saw the good dog appear in the trenches you were sure to see almost at once the silhouette of his master à la Henri IV.

That, at least, did not displease us. The general had full confidence in us and only the lazy feared his inspections because he had his eye everywhere—to use the language of the camps—he was known in all corners.

As for Poilu, who was the friend of all, he went from one to the next, tail wagging, not disdaining neither caresses nor pieces of sugar nor chocolate taken from the packages sent by families and used outside of its intention.

Others besides Poilu, belonging to the staff, shared the existence of the general and played on his friendship and also perhaps manifested some pride. Poilu had none of those petty sentiments.

When the parcels were rare and the sugar and chocolate lacking, he perfectly accepted a piece of bread or a bone already worked over by the teeth of a soldier.

He conserved, at least, the memory of his modest origins and was not afraid to show it.

When he saw a peasant behind his plow or some cows eating some grass in a

pasture—something that did not happen often in the regions where we were—he showed his joy by crazy scampers, running in bounces towards the peasant or vigorously charging the cows and nibbling their hocks. “You see, I know my trade; I know how you are supposed to be treated when you are naughty.”

From a military point of view, Poilu was not perfect.

Honorary patroller, he smelled out Germans just as certain animals smell out truffles. In the search for wounded, he displayed proof of a superhuman smell. Finally, if he was present at the moment of a skirmish, he showed a magnificent bravery.

All these qualities made Poilu very dear, and we promised him a superb honorary collar. Only that promise did not have any value until after the war because there was no point in having an object of luxury in the mud of the trenches.

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While waiting, we showed him our sympathy in giving him various edibles that he certainly appreciated better than the most sumptuous collars.

And so it was not surprising that the brave puppy was happy to accompany his master in the trenches.

The war would, alas, takes this good dog from us.

It was at Vaux, where we did our duty according to the formula of the order of the day in the army. Suddenly a sad rumor circulate from mouth to ear: Poilu, our poor and brave Poilu, was killed by a shell near the general.

We were, alas, used to news of this nature, and it was quite often that this short phrase coursed through the ranks, “so and so came to be killed.”

The death of the brave Poilu affected us all, I assure you. This was, for the trenches, a cruel mourning.

In the evening, I heard the general who was saying to the chaplain:

“Alas! I will never again see those beautiful eyes of that brave beast looking at me! He was a friend who has gone...”

By the tone of his voice I understood that he was crying secretly of his loyal companion.

Poor and good Poilu! Born at Vaux, in the department of the Aisne, he had suffered the death of the brave in a village of the same name in the department of the Meuse, in this village called Vaux, and he belongs now to history.

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XXXVI: The Convoy Men of Verdun

Everyone knows the kind of service rendered at Verdun by the convoy men, auto drivers and others.¹⁰⁹

But what's known only by those who contemplate the interminable procession of heavy trucks on the roads transformed into swamps and seeded with bogs by shells, in torments of snow and in torrential rain, is the indomitable energy, the bravery, the heroism of the drivers of these vehicles.

Without them, all would have been as feared. You could say that they were the artisans of our resistance.

They knew it, these brave men. They knew that, there, in the terrible furnace, they are waited for food, ammunition, materials. The roar of cannons, the crackling of machine guns and rifles, seemed to tell them: "Hurry, bring us our food!" And the call of all of these men of steel vibrated in their souls. And they hastened towards the furnace, marching, without relaxing or rest.

A number of them drove their vehicles as if in a dream, face drooping, eyes haggard. Nerves too taut, no longer relaxed. The excessive fatigue had turned these men into automatons.

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They were seen to vanish from exhaustion on the steering wheel, which they had not left for forty-eight hours.

The double file of trucks, some going full, others returning empty, reminded you of a gigantic transmission belt which was putting in motion a formidable death machine.

To fatigue were added, for these audacious drivers, innumerable dangers.

At night, with all lights off, illuminated by the explosions of artillery and by the strange glow of flares, there were, without seeing, muddy holes where one fall would be fatal both for the vehicle and themselves. In front of them, behind them, on their right and on their left, an incessant rumbling of motors made them fear a frightful collision. Some trucks, that the slightest skid throws upon them like a catapult, pass in scolding, nicking their wheels and covering them in mud. Finally, the Germans, who knew from their airplanes our principle supply routes, did not ignore them so that an incessant shuttle took place on these tracks, sprinkling them frequently with some shells, both day and night. The poor drivers could do nothing more than stretch their backs and count on providence.

The same dangers existed during the day, naturally, but as you could clearly see, it was easier to avoid them.

The drivers of Verdun merit, without a doubt, a great page in the history of the great battle. Historians have to remember that those who were in danger had to be also honored.

¹⁰⁹The La Voi Sacrée was the road (about 45 miles) between Bar-le-Duc and Verdun. The French sent supplies and men on this road into the fight at Verdun.

I myself had many occasion to appreciate the courage and the devotion of the admirable drivers of Verdun.

One morning, on a road, we saw a truck, or most of the debris of a truck, behind which other cars appeared to be in some kind of disorder.

We approached, and we found, crouched behind the debris of the truck, a driver who was bleeding from a large wound in his right thigh.

The other drivers gathered around him and wanted to transport him to the ambulance, but the wounded man refused energetically.

“No! A hundred times no!” He said forcefully. “You stopped for me. That’s enough. There is already too much time lost. Think of who are waiting for you. Go and let me here. In a little while some stretcher-bearers will pass by, and then, you know, one man does not matter much at this time,

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“Go, hopefully for the better, and long live France!”

We learned that the accident was the result of a bomb from an airplane.

All told, a small scene like that has little meaning, especially at a time where there is a tremendous expenditure of heroism, but I will assure you that it makes a deep impression when you are a witness, two steps away from the battle field as the ground trembles under the artillery explosions and the shells pass by whistling your head. And it requires that the wounded had a real courage and a profound sentiment of duty to refuse immediate aid that was offered. So, on the one hand, he ignored the seriousness of the wound and any delay that could lead to his death, and, on the other hand, by staying where he was, he ran the risk of being killed by a shell.

Our company commander warned the division stretcher bearers. I hope that the valiant driver will have escaped from the adventure, but I am not really sure that he will escape with his leg. The wound, to me, looked very serious, and I have seen a lot of wounded. I have often bandaged them on the field of battle, and in the trenches, so that I have begun to know a little.

The cars roll on interminably in the darkness of the rainy and cold night. The NCOs scream curses which are lost in the noise of the engines; the drivers cry out and sometimes are injured. In the background, we stir and growl to keep awake.

Below, on our left, a large corner of the sky is a little less black, traversed by rapid beams and where swing, from time to time, similar, from a distance, to spiders at the end of strand of their web, rockets whose light fringes the heavy clouds.

That’s the hell of Verdun.

Suddenly a whistling that changes into a howl, then another whistling and another howl. Two red rockets illuminate a part of the convoy, two violent explosions hit the cars, the brakes squeal, the engines rev.

Two voices cry out:

“Stop! We are hit!”

The head of the convoy, a sub-lieutenant, rides through the trucks on a small vehicle whose motor rages furiously.

This time, there is no great damage done. The shells have fallen by the side of the road, literally covering many vehicles and their occupants with mud.

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“Nothing broken?” shouts the sub-lieutenant.

The men could hardly respond, because they have mud in their mouths, in their nose, ears and eyes.

One laugh, and everyone rolls on!

These men laugh at everything. The slightest incident makes them happy, and their gaiety is not at all forced. There is no feeling of posture—and for whom they would ask? If death comes, she will find them with a smile on their lips.

[photo here]

The sprinkling continues. A shell falls from time to time, but the German artillery fires too short, and the convoy only receives storms of mud.

The sub-lieutenant goes back and forth along his convoy, in his small vehicle with the raging motor, whose rapid tap tap tap and dryness resembles the noise of many machine guns in action. It looks like a shepherd dog policing his flock.

Suddenly a shell falls very close by, on the edge of the road. One of the trucks overturns, riddled with shell splinters. We can hear the cries. Breaks squeal terribly. The sub-lieutenant flies to the site of the disaster.

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Only the vehicle itself is damaged. By a miracle the men are untouched but for some cuts. They push it into the hole, then they return to the march, and the convoy chief rubs his hand and murmurs.

“We are lucky!”

That’s the life of the drivers of Verdun. And the sub-lieutenant is right: this time they were lucky.

Not all of them have that much [luck].

“You can’t make an omelette without breaking some eggs” says an old proverb. One does not throw on muddy or broken wheels, in the middle of the night and often under artillery fire, thousands of heavy trucks without having some broken, without having some accidents or disappearing vehicles and drivers.

But these accidents do not cool the ardor of the remarkable drivers. Here is proof.

If the trucks telescope into one another, if a shell decapitates some, or bombs demolish others, the long ribbon reforms at once, the gigantic conveyer belt continues to transmit its motive force to the machine of death, which, thanks to it, functions without stopping.

I have often seen on the routes, poor trucks mortally wounded, similar to the cadavers of giants, and I never contemplated them without emotion. What bloody dramas have unfolded around their carcasses? How many human lives have been extinguished in the noise of their motor expiring?

And those who have fallen there have never known, like us, the exaltation of combat, the intoxication of battle, the joy of striking a blow, to see the enemy who menaces you perish, the satisfaction, if you succumb, to know that you will be avenged.

They have died with the satisfaction of having accomplished nobly and valiantly their duty.

From the wounded convoy drivers I have sometimes heard details of certain accidents on the route, of certain dramas caused by bombardments, and I can say that I admire the courage of those who fell in the accomplishment of a task eminently useful, who died often as veritable heroes, thinking only of the France who they have served.

It is just that combatants never forget these good workers and their work.

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XXXVII: Before Saint-Mihiel

During the entire first fortnight of March we wander from village to village, passing two days in one, three days in the other, making in the mud, snow and rain, marches that reach sometimes thirty kilometers and others that are never less than twenty.¹¹⁰

Our poilus little appreciate this randomness of which the utility escapes them and something to which, while very painful, it must be agreed. The unfortunate villages where we stay have been visited by the Germans. That is to say that the ruins there are numerous and we camp there in conditions that are generally defective, not always finding a roof to shelter us. But when one arrives at a cottage soaked like a duck and crushed like a dozen barbets,¹¹¹ nothing is more depressing like not finding a dry place where one can forget the rain and the mud.

Little by little the villages repopulate. The majority of the inhabitants—at least those who have a little goods in the sun—return to cultivate their ground. They lodge themselves as best they can, some in cellars, others in houses—when there is one—that has escaped artillery or the incendiary torch. Of courses, they are not much more at home in the houses than in the cellars;

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because it is as tight as possible, an entire family often has no more than a single room.

In some of the villages that we traversed, our territorials, and also, I believe an English or American society built, for the families without shelter, wooden houses that seemed to me smart and cozy enough.

The poor inhabitants have, for the most part, retrieved their land in a poor state, especially if we fought there. They set to work courageously at the task, but the task is difficult and the continual passage of troops does not make the work any easier.

20 March, we find ourselves on the territory of another army, directing us towards Toul. That day, we sleep at Blénod and learn that we are going to be transported towards Commercy in trucks, the front division, it seems, is employed at organizing the second line positions.

They say, however, that my regiment is designated to hold a sector. What is certain is that the brigade general marches with us.

The poilus are happy, after so many marches and counter-marches, to see an officer, a superior authority, on a promenade in an automobile. Even packed in the trucks with a childish joy because, this time, it really will be a promenade.

Until then, when they loaded us into heavy trucks, it was to be transported into combat, to support some units already engaged and generally being strongly tested, or to reestablish a delicate situation. Damn! As brave as possible, voyages of this nature were never agreeable, and they understood perfectly. The travelers showed nothing but smiles.

¹¹⁰See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Hauts.pdf>.

¹¹¹The barbet is a medium-sized French water dog.

I assure you that it is painful to get out of a vehicle under artillery shells, exhausted, and to be thrown into combat all at once where you have not followed the action, on a terrain that you don't know.

Obviously we march without being asked. One goes with a good heart, but you feel a little uneasy, a little disoriented, and it takes some time to get your bearings back.

This time, the rest is during our voyage. At least that's what we suppose, but, in any case, we are sure that there will not be a battle.

They tell us, en route, to find in our new sector
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a territorial regiment already installed and that will pass under the command of our general.

"Provided," thought the poilus, "that the old men have prepared comfortable trenches!"

Evidently, we merited that because, generally we dug trenches for others. When one makes his nest, one prefers to occupy it himself.

[photo here]

The poilus laugh, sing and exchange pleasantries, and their pleasure increases as they taunt the infantry, to see the mud squirt out at the luxury autos that cross the path of the trucks.

An especially funny scene occurs, and I will try to describe it.

The long file of trucks—one after another at a distance of about twenty meters—holds the middle of the road. The heavy vehicles have a horror of the lower sides, where one leans and one bogs down.

Suddenly, behind the last truck, a luxury auto appears and is naturally obliged to adjust his pace to that of the monster which bars passing.

The distinguished driver who holds the wheel vigorously beeps.
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The monster does not deviate from a line because its driver does not hear the horn of the aristocratic siren, whose vagueness is lost in the roar of the motors and the ruckus of the road.

The poilus hear and see, but they do not flinch—it's not their affair.

The chauffeur of the car makes desperate signs to them.

They contemplate him with the breathtaking air of men who don't understand. Inside they are laughing.

The aristocratic siren becomes furious and enraged, lashing out to the four corners of the horizon, appeals without harmony.

Finally, the driver of the truck hears and turns heavily towards the right.

The superb car, roaring, double fast, and utters insults at the common people of the truck, the

driver and poilus. We make out, in the hubbub, the word “stupid.”

The poilus, installed in the rear, remain impassive—in appearance—while laughing inside and holding on to their sides.

The luxurious car is not at the end, and it furiously honks again because the scene is repeated behind each of the trucks that compose the long convoy.

It’s the revenge of the poilu on those autos that so often covered them in mud when they visit the trenches or reach their resting place.

Basically, it does not hurt anyone.

It’s simply a small vaudeville scene in the great drama.

In the course of the afternoon, our convoy reaches Commercy, where we obtain a certain success as a curiosity, and we are obliged to make a stopover to let a group of artillery pass us.

And so we are happy because we have the need to stretch our legs. After having been stuffed for hours in a truck, we are in pretty much the same state as those men who descend from a ship after having traversed a stormy sea.

Those among us who have some money buy some madeleines that they share with their comrades, and we eat them while walking about the main square of the town in front of a sort of large, covered market.

It seems that Commercy is a preferred garrison choice. At least this is what soldiers tell us, that luck has led to an enchanting respite.

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There is a theater installed there where each evening some soldiers put on a comedy in front of their comrades. There they live a little like in peacetime, not badly lodged, not badly fed.

Decidedly, the more we go on, the more it seems to us that we are unlucky, we who never leave the muddy underground, the vermin and the rats only to march into combat.

And very close to us unfolds the most terrible battle, the most deadly

[photo here]

perhaps, that has ever taken place. Very near here one is slaughtered with fury; there they live in the blood and mud!

Astonishing contrast!

It is certainly not my intention, believe it or not, to criticize the comrades in Commercy. I find, to the contrary, that they are perfectly right to distract themselves and they have that right because their time will come to confront death, and, at least, some of them have already faced death more than once.

Despite myself, I envy their gaiety. I feel sad without knowing why. At this time, I see again my young volunteer dying and singing in his weak voice, as if going to sleep,

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the hymn to the Virgin. I am not able to chase away this troubling vision, and I hope to see the trucks quickly start up.

That evening we sleep in our new sector.

The soldiers that we are relieving will leave tomorrow after they have given us their plans, passed the counter sign and furnished useful information.

Where are they going? No one knows.

To Verdun, probably.

We sleep in the woods in well-furnished barracks, but where rats and mice abound. This installation is, at least, provisional. When the relief will have taken place, we will be able to use better facilities.

The next day, there is an early morning assembly. My battalion leaves for the front line. We stay there a dozen days, and then we pass back to the third position.

Before departing, I examine the countryside with binoculars. It is charming.

We are encircled by woods, real woods of which the great trees have been, until now, respected by the axe and the shell. I see some springs from which the water is collected for the men, in some very clean troughs. On the right of the woods, some small wagons that take care of transporting food and material are pulled on rails by the horses from the artillery and machine guns sections.

We are separated from the Germans by only the Meuse, but their artillery does not manifest any activity, probably because many of their cannons have been transported to the front at Verdun.

As for their infantry, it is hardly enterprising, at least for the moment.

Towards the south west, we can make out Saint-Mihiel and its suburbs, where rise up the barracks of Chauvoncourt, then the Camp-des-Romains, from which the enemy's observers can see the entire valley.¹¹²

At the foot of the Camp-des-Romains, on the right bank of the Meuse, lies the remains of what once was the elegant little village of Bislée, once paradise for fishermen of the region.

“Take care of your self! Sacks up!”

¹¹²Also known as the Fort du Camp-des-Romains; it was established as part of the French defensive line along the Meuse River after the French defeat in 1870. It was the highest, at 380 meters, of the forts and tasked with the defense of Saint-Mihiel.

The company is going to take its trench positions in les Paroches.¹¹³

We descend from the wooded heights, and by a long communication trench, we reach the valley, setting on our right the fort des Paroches.¹¹⁴

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In the distance, on the left, we can see the Fort de Troyon.

The rain has stopped falling; the temperature is agreeable, and the countryside is delicious with its shades of pale green, soft tones.

From time to time, we hear a shot from one of our cannons.

No bombardment.

In sum. Absolute calm on our front.

[photo here]

We have never seen a front like this one. It is to wonder whether the war does not come to an end suddenly.

In exiting the end of the communication trench, we see Saint-Mihiel as if we were in the town.

Of the barracks of Chauvoncourt there is nothing left but the walls, but the Germans obstinately cling to it. Living in deep cellars, they have pushed forward some listening posts, and as a result in some places we are very close to each other.

At night, we patrol, and, the two sides are rivals to hide and use ruses to get prisoners from the adversary.

The war becomes almost a distraction.

At Saint-Mihiel, the Germans live in peace.

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Certainly we could bury them under the rubble of the town, but that town is ours. They are using our furniture and our buildings.

And then you also have to think of the inhabitants. There is a large orphanage there that is run by the church and full of children.

Voila, that's the inconvenience of fighting on your own territory.

With good binoculars, you can see the orderlies of German officers who clean the rooms of their masters, brush their effects, beat the carpets.

¹¹³A small commune near Saint-Mihiel. See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Hauts.pdf>.

¹¹⁴Another fort that was part of the French post-1870 defensive line along the right bank of the Meuse River.

For those men, it's garrison life.

An artillery man tells me the following story:

One morning, one of our officers saw a work detail that went to empty into the stream some garbage loaded onto a dumper, and the next day, at the same time, they did it again.

The commander of the battery, warned of this, set up his pieces, and the next day the work detail receives a volley of shells.

The next day, at the same time and place, a work detail appeared anew, but this time, they pushed in front of them a poor woman holding in her hands two small children.

After a tiring march through the communication trench, we finally emerge at the trench.

My section stays in support and will only take the front line in three or four days.

Once my men are installed, my review done, the command post of the lieutenant noted, I examine the village.

The poor village. There is hardly anything left but some ruins. No house had been spared. The roofs are destroyed; the walls holed and broken.

A horse-drawn canteen,¹¹⁵ abandoned by its owner, has not suffered much damage.

Why is that vehicle here?

I am told, and I learn, that before the war one of the lunch canteens of the Chauvoncourt regiment had been set up at Paroches where small households of the sub officers lived.

Everywhere there are empty bottles but not a drop of pinard.

The lack of wine is a black cloud. We are so far from any supply center that the men despair of tasting their daily ration of the famous pinard.

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As compensation, the water is excellent and when you have existed in the hell of Verdun, we can get by without many things, even wine.

At dusk, we begin to patrol and try to ensnare a few Germans. The latter, at least, do the same, so that, as I already said, it's a battle of deception and skill.

The general has promised the Croix de guerre to those who bring back prisoners, and one values this little cross. The poilus are well practiced in the old virtues, and they are infinitely agreeable to adorn their chest with the insignia that attests to their bravery. The Croix de guerre is the principal object of ambition of the true poilu.

¹¹⁵A "voiture de cantinière" was a horse drawn kitchen that usually served a regiment.

In the village all the furniture has disappeared. Where did it all go?

Some has reached our command posts and defense, but the number there is tiny; two or three beds, some tables, a half dozen stuffed chairs. Where are the others?

And concerning me, I do not complain because I in my hut have some good planks to build a very convenient couch. I see, not far from my location, some bales of excellent straw. Everything will be ok.

My men also have what they need. There is nothing to complain about.

Very close to my hut extends the garden of the curator.

Poor curator! If he saw today his garden, that he had taken care of with love, he would hardly recognize it. The walls have been crenellated; shells have caved them in here and here. Some deep communication trenches cut the alleys and the rest that is intact disappears under the weeds and wild grasses. The boxwood borders are hardly seen.

Before night, it is important to recognize the advanced trenches, as much as we can, in case of attack, to rapidly reach the point menaced.

It's easy to do, given the short distance to cover and the good organization of the trenches. However, I must be quick because our installation has taken some time, and we already feel the approach of evening. The outlines are made out while a light mist invades the meadow watered by the Meuse.

When I regain my post, after my reconnaissance of the area, we smell a delicious odor of a stew which increases our already hungry appetite; and so I do the honor of the excellent ragout of beef that is waiting for me.

A delightful little nightingale has selected its domicile in the joists
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of my hut, and my presence does not seem to frighten it.

Evidently it understands that we will do well.

Decidedly the Paroches sector is a charming sector.

I was going to finish my repast when a messenger arrived, carrying a note from my company commander concerning the schedule of patrols for the night.

This messenger, very resourceful, had been lent temporarily for us by our predecessors to indicate to us the paths to follow and the dangerous passages.

He told me that between our front and that of the enemy is located a covered area formed by a half dozen poplars surrounded by some brush where, each evening, some men go to fire on German patrols.

This little game, which did not seem to interest me, cost, each week, the life of a few poilus.

As my company commander gave me complete initiative, I ended the stay in the bushes, and replaced it with a small exploration of the railroad embankment and a strip of dangerous terrain that the embankment hides from us.

I selected a very thoughtful and very prudent corporal, letting him know that he is in charge and that he is responsible for the mission and that he is to designate the four poilus who should accompany him.

The designation is very difficult to do because everyone wanted to go. The poor corporal is harassed, torn from all sides.

“Take me!”

“No, it’s my turn!”

“Me, I’ve never gone!”

After he has designated the first man, a concert of recriminations arose.

“That’s an injustice!”

“It’s always the same that have the luck!”

And that’s not all of the best and especially the most virulent.

“But, for God’s sake!” Exclaims the poor corporal. “Do not be in such a hurry. We may well all be killed.”

At each selection, the recriminations become more ardent. From the moment that we could make the choice, the desire to take part in the expedition grew more and more.

The brave corporal struggles like a devil and, menaced by terrible threats,
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declared that he would rather have in front of him a band of Boche.

That’s our poilus.

Finally, everyone calms down. The patrol, under the envious glances of their comrades, loads their rifles, slides some cartridges into their pockets and receives the password.

Each man in the patrol has to, in effect, know this word because he could be separated from the leader and have to return alone to our lines, and

[photo here]

if he does not know the password, the sentries will not be able to recognize him in the dark and will fire at him.

Our men return around midnight having happily and intelligently completed their mission and bringing back a prisoner.

This German was a very young, beardless man who spoke French very well—just like many other Germans—having worked in many Parisian hotels. He was, at least, happy to have finished with the war and didn't conceal that.

He also told us that his comrades at Saint-Mihiel led a happy existence and that the officers there drank a lot.

I expedited him, under escort, to the company commander.

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A second patrol was ordered to operate in the second half of the night. It is important, in fact, to prevent, where possible, all attacks on our front, while it is dark. The patrol is supposed to return at daybreak, that is to say at the moment when the sentries in the listening posts are able to again see the dangerous terrain.

In war, it is necessary to know how to watch. I do not hesitate to say that it is one of the most important things, and I am sure that any soldier would support me in saying that.

But to guard is not as convenient that you might think because the enemy has a thousand ruses up his sleeve to trick patrols and sentries.

In the war that we are in, you could write volumes, without exhausting the subject, on the art of watching, because it is an art, a great art.

Those who organize guarding a position and those who carry it out must display a lot of qualities, and bravery is not always the first of those qualities. Initiative is especially necessary along with some judgement, a good eye, imagination, spirit, sang-froid, meticulous. You have to know the mentality of the enemy that you have in front of you, to have noted his tendencies. Add to all of that a good dose of courage, and all will be well, the poilus can sleep easily. Often, I've been told: "You must be bored to death in the trenches?"

But no, I assure you. Damn! I do not pretend that one does not sometimes feel the blues, that there is some time to be a little nostalgic, but that is rarer than you think.

In the trenches, you are never unoccupied, and guard duty is one of the most serious occupations. Add to that the work of digging and the thousand and one petty details of daily life. No, I assure you that you never have the time to get bored. We are a little, in the trench, like ants in an anthill.

The second patrol leaves. I can finally get the rest of which I am in great need, and I sleep without being troubled except for concern for the return of our brave patrolmen, who, will have passed the night between the two lines on the lookout, trying to report the slightest noise, risking being shot.

It is already fully day when the corporal, head of the patrol that was assuring our sleep, called to me

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"Nothing new sergeant!"

The brave boy tells me that in the same voice as if he was telling me that it was raining or that

the day will be beautiful.

Nothing new, sergeant! You would never think that this boy just spent long hours at night in the most dangerous area, a few meters from the enemy's works that are guarded by attentive sentries and well erected, exposed to all weather, crouched, often on his stomach, in icy mud without being able to move, even obliged, sometimes to keep from breathing.

This is certainly nothing new for him; he has done it a hundred times. Nothing new, that means that the enemy has not budged. Nothing else matters. It is his trade, and this seems to him very natural.

Note that the corporal was more than thirty and he exercised, in normal times, a very peaceful and sedentary profession--he is a tailor.

He should, perhaps, have been stationed, in that quality, in some store or at least in some unit out of action. It has, it seems, been proposed to him formerly, but he has perfunctorily refused.

The next day we are going to take up duty in the advance trench, and we will stay there two days in a perfect calm.

Surely this sector is ideal.

The company then passes into the battalion reserve. That means that we are going to execute some organizational work. We will be ready to move at the first signal.

It's the situation dreamed of by the poilu; a suitable and safe shelter, moderate work, healthy and sufficient, even abundant, food, but unfortunately the pinard is always lacking, and so they replace it with a double ration of coffee.

Never, truly never, have we known such tranquility.

How long will it last?

There are different opinions about that.

Waiting for events, we delightfully enjoy our present happiness, and we profit from the calm to put in order our effects, our weapons, our ammunition.

We also devote ourselves to training and get the young men ready who have arrived as reinforcements.

This is all the easier for us because our men are involved in the organization of the trenches and networks. It suffices, at present, to give them a task, and you are sure that it will be quickly and surely carried out.

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Not only have our poilus learned to work the ground with intelligence and build networks, but they have understood the utility, the importance of the work. Instructed by experience, they know that their work will save lives.

The weather is suddenly become splendid, not a cloud in the sky, a joyous sun whose warm rays seem to bring forth from the earth the flowers and greenery. At the border of the thickets, violets dominate. The hillsides are filled with an anemone tapestry. Everywhere birds are singing.

Spring surges forth, radiant, like under the wand of a fairy.

From time to time, the sound of a cannon in the distance reminds us that it is war.

You can easily forget in peace the beautiful landscape under the calm of a beautiful sky.

The tranquility which we enjoy is almost unnerving.

One is never satisfied; too much shrapnel or not enough!

When so many shells fall, you are excited by the infernal fracas of the cannon and explosions; but, when you don't hear anything, you ask if, in the calm that appears strange, the enemy is preparing some sort of ruse.

Big anxiety, the ant hill is agitated. The orderlies come to take the report, and, at the same time, they tell us what they know, of course embellishing as much as possible.

The colonel's report includes, it seems, some nominations and citations. The company cook, a well educated boy—retells that the two regiments of the brigade are cited in the order of the army for their efforts in Champagne and are going to receive very soon the Croix de guerre.

The report, in effect, confirms this news, of which I have already spoken, and announces to us, also, that General Dubail, commanding the group, will return tomorrow and award, during a review, the Croix de guerre for our flag and also for some poilus.

A review in wartime is not as bothersome as one in peacetime. Nevertheless, it is all the same to be proper and clean. That is not as easy in wartime as in peacetime. It should be added, moreover, that our chiefs are less demanding.

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Despite that, you have pride, and you want to present yourself properly. Everyone sets forth to brush, wash, polish. There is no need for surveillance. The men do it themselves and work with all their heart.

The poilus who are to receive the Croix de guerre are anxious and modestly accept the congratulations of their comrades.

[photo here]

They are envied, but there is no jealousy because the Croix are well placed and have been earned by admirable acts.

Unfortunately, all the recipients are not present. Some are still lying in a hospital bed. Others are released or on the eve of being so, having lost a limb or the use of a member in the fight.

We also think of those in the trenches, where they retell to those who were not in the fierce combat in Champagne.

We also think of the numerous comrades who sleep there, on the edge of the woods, in the shadows of the fir trees. There are very few soldiers who have not lost a particularly dear comrade, a fellow countryman.

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And when we speak of the disappeared, songs and laughter disappear. The men take a low and grave voice, as if they were before a tomb. And so it seems like the souls of our dear dead beat in the trenches.

A surprise awaited us at dinner, and what a surprise! Towards the middle of the feast, a messenger quietly entered with a profoundly grave appearance, and set on the table, with careful precautions, a misshapen packet hastily tied up, but very solid, stuffed with straw and rags of questionable cleanliness.

Everyone cried out, everyone, except for a colleague, who began to laugh seeing our disgusted looks.

“What is this piece of dirt?” one of us asked the messenger.

“Don’t know sergeant.”

“How do you not know! Who asked you to bring this here?”

“Don’t know sergeant.”

“That’s too much! Ah! You are mocking me. You’ll have two days for that, and I promise you that they will make an example of you.”

The colleague, who was laughing and seemed to be amused, looked injured in respect to his gaiety, which was judged to be untimely. The scourge of insults had no other effect than to increase his joy. Finally, when it was possible for him to talk, he seized the packet while saying:

“I am the sender of this garbage. Did you discover what was in there?”

Many voices cry out: “A rabbit! A chicken! A marshal’s baton! The key to the trenches!”

“You’re not there, my friends; you are not even warm. It’s a surprise for the newly promoted. Collect yourselves and prepare to be overwhelmed.”

“Then it’s a lance bomb!”

He rustled in the packet under the table.

Suddenly he stood up, holding in each hand a bottle of pinard.

It was a delirium. There were such cries that had never been heard like the explosion of a 420.

“Pinard! Pinard!”

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We kissed the resourceful guy who, god knows how, had been able to procure those two

bottles.

“Yes, my friends, some pinard, a pinard from behind the fagots!”

The comrade who had questioned the messenger declared seriously that the punishment still was in effect, but that he will exchange it against the obligation for the delinquent to drink a glass of excellent pinard.

Never was a Croix de guerre so joyously celebrated.

[photo here]

During dinner additional instructions arrive for the review.

The orders and instructions of our lieutenant colonel are always clear and remarkably precise. In the circumstances, as was his habit, he has foreseen everything, instructed all, and we have only too execute—an easy thing since our men are intelligent, resourceful and full of good will.

The lieutenant colonel has to assist at the review, at the head of a battalion that will be an example for all the battalions from the sector. The chosen outfit will be well cared for. We will pass by heads high, ranks correctly aligned, arms in parallel.

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And the order adds: “A supplementary quart of wine will be distributed to the unit that marches the best.”

Our regiment will receive about thirty diverse citations.

New cries of joy accompany the reading of the order. A tempest of bravos salutes the name of each who will receive some reward.

The Germans have to hear us, and they have to think that we are not unhappy.

The night seems long for everyone, and especially for the happy laureates.

Finally, the day appeared, and soon a ray of sun, timid and fresh like the smile of a young girl, makes the droplets of dew that clung on each bush’s leaf shimmer.

We are going to have good weather.

Everyone is standing. It’s the commotion of a great day. Some laugh, some cry, some ask questions, the NCOs get angry—we at least make it look like we are angry—pushing their men.

Sometimes you can hear terrible oaths, that, in the least, don’t frighten anyone. The cries, the swears, the menaces are like obligatory accompaniment to the ceremony that without them would totally lose its character, or as they say, lose its charm.

We are, at last, rapidly ready, and the companies leave their lodging one after the other to form up at the place indicated for assembly where they are to receive the commander.

These units are truly proud looking. How are the men able to be so neat? It’s a mystery. You might say that they just left the barracks and go, for an ordinary review, on the square or the

field of maneuvers of a garrison town.

We bring some lunch to eat, and my cook, who wanted to distinguish himself in these circumstances, stuffs all kinds of good things into my musette.

This cook animal is as resourceful as any one, and I wonder where he can find what he serves us.

But I'm careful not to question him. It is probably preferable not to really know.

0930 everyone is in place

0945, the bugle announces the arrival of two automobiles, one of which bears a pendant.

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"On guard! Present arms!"

A dry noise, and the bayonets align under the blue sky, each reflecting a bit of sunlight. The men are motionless like statues. It is truly an impressive spectacle.

The great commander descends from his automobile, shakes the hand of the division general and then the general of the brigade who presents the regiments to him, then, slowly, he passes in front of the companies.

[photo here]

Finally, a moving minute, he advances towards the flag which is tilted forward, decorates it and kisses the glorious folds of the flag.

We feel our hearts beating with joy and pride. This Croix, it's our reward for all. It will be a witness across the ages—because a flag is immortal—of the bravery of the soldiers in Champagne and at Verdun. And later, when we are no longer here for a long time, generations of young French will contemplate with emotion this small Croix that will tell of great things, that the ancients, the soldiers of the Great War, have paid with their blood.

This war, then, in time, will appear like a fabulous epoch, and the Croix, that, before Saint-Mihiel [294]

the general attached to our flag, will be considered as the most pure, the most sacred of relics.

After the parade of a simple grandiosity, during which we could hear the thunder of guns in the distance, we eat on the ground surrounding the review place. Then we re-man our emplacements in the sector.

The days roll along with a delicious calm. We even find that the enemy let's us be tranquil, and we wish to see an attack on the defensive positions that we continue to work vigorously on.

It will be well received, I assure you; But it does not come..

The weather remains remarkably well. A hot sun caresses the flanks of the hillsides, filling with its radiance the flowered valleys where little streams run like runs of gold.

We are at war, in a corner of this ravishing country, in a truly enchanting calm.

Our poilus pretend that its too good to last.

They are without a doubt right. While waiting, we have to profit from our present good luck, because, in war, the next day is not certain.

I do not know why, but, in the calm that we enjoy, a sort of anguish oppresses me. I should be happy, and I am not. It seems to me that our superb tranquility is going to attract lightning.

In vain I scold myself. And I am not able to vanquish this strange impression, to chase from my head the black butterflies that haunted me.

My comrades had perceived my state of mind and thought me ill.

“You have the blues!” They said.

And unable to find another explanation, I said to myself, “They’re right. I have the blues.”

Alas, my impressions did not leave me. The lightning struck me during our vacation in the Eden of Saint-Mihiel.

One morning, I learn that my poor old mother had died suddenly, evidently killed worrying about me.

That was a terrible blow for me. It was cruel that I was not able to soften her last moments, to not be able to close her eyes.

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My company commander, without saying anything to me, requested leave for me, which was immediately granted.

I would not have thought of asking for this leave, however I accepted it with gratitude. It seemed to me that it would do me good to go and cry at the grave of my mother.

And so I left, profoundly touched and a little comforted by the sympathy shown me by my commanders, comrades and even my soldiers.

This trip to my birth village was for me a painful calvary; and so I arrived easily at the end of my leave.

When I retook my place in the ranks, there was the issue of a departure, and all were sad at the thought of leaving the sector where we had enjoyed some happy days.

For me, I was rather satisfied at the departure and wanted to move on. I had a need to return to action, to forget a bit my sadness.

I did not have to wait very long. A few days after my return, the messengers delivered confidential and urgent orders, and the commanders of the battalion were warned to have their men ready to leave at the first signal.

Where are we going to go? Everyone asks the question, and no one had an answer.

From the Verdun area, the cannon never stopped firing violently, angrily.

Is that a response to the question that we are all asking?

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XXXVIII: Return to Verdun¹¹⁶

The orders have become more exact. We know that we have to go north and that the movement will take place in two days.

The weather has suddenly changed. A fine rain, cold and penetrating, falls without stopping. The underground shelters lose most of their charm. The paths become muddy, gluey, difficult; the ruts that sink and immobilize the wheels of the mobile kitchens, seem to be widening.

The big day arrives. Commotion of the departure, but a commotion less joyous than that of the review.

This departure is a big departure, and the weather does not help to cheer us up.

We wade through the mud. Some men move off to go push the wheels of the vehicles stuck and aid the unfortunate horses. With the help of the poilus, the vehicles get out of the ruts.

We pass before the chateau of Thillombois, situated in a great park planted with old elm trees. Its owner, who serves as a reserve officer in a cavalry regiment, has been wounded

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in a battle along the Somme and later died of his wounds.

The poilus retell this and say that it is unfortunate to die so young when one possesses such a fine chateau.

Today, in the shadow of the trenches, all the social classes are mixed together for the defense of the fatherland. Rich and poor,

[photo here]

intellectuals and peasants, fight side by side, accomplishing nobly and bravely their duty; all supported by the same devotion, inspired by the same faith.

From Thillombois, the regiment marches towards Souilly in order to avoid the valley of the Meuse, and, after hard stages, finally reaches Dugny.

The road disappeared into a liquid mud that runs in a stream traversing the village, and where many horses and mules go to drink.

Poor beasts! Such water, or, more exactly, what a quagmire!

The regiment spends the night and all of the next day in and around Dugny.

During the night, it is routed towards Verdun where it rests for

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¹¹⁶This footnote appears in the book. "This chapter and the following were written, with the aid of short letters from sergeant Lefèvre, and of the account made by one of his soldiers, who was wounded and evacuated."

five days, waiting to be utilized in the defense of a sector or for counter-attacks.

During the night, they sent us to work, on the northern front, on the organization of trenches.

These nights of work are terrible, perhaps more terrible than combat itself.

The terrain to be worked is far from camp, and the shells fall without stopping. Since the road leading to it is easily spotted during the day by planes and observations balloons called "sausages," you have to be en route at nightfall and return before dawn the next day. The trips to go and come back are interminable and horribly tiring.

The only road is so crowded that you can't use it. We have to use the broken paths where the numerous shell holes form seas of mud that sometimes are deep enough that we are obliged to pull out—in such a state!—the men who fall in there.

Naturally, in a march in darkness, the soldiers follow each other closely so as not to get lost. The NCOs guide them as best they can, but with a lot of trouble because they only have vague points to reference that are difficult to make out in the glow of the explosions.

Sometimes the shells explode very close to the right and the left of the file in the black night, causing a little disarray. We growl in a low voice. We curse the Germans. We look around; we call out, and all this produces delay.

After many hours of hard marching, we arrive exhausted at the work area, and we get to work under the bullets.

Of course, the work done is poor, as the men's fatigue is extreme.

Finally, we set back on the route for Verdun, and the return is similar to the going.

The men arrive at the camp absolutely covered in mud, and you would think that we had been pleased to roll around in the marsh.

They hasten to finish with such an existence and reclaim their place in the front line.

At least we'll see the Germans. We can go for their throats, stick them with a bayonet, "do some good work" as the poilus say.

We pay for the tranquility that we enjoyed at Saint-Mihiel, that delicious calm that, evidently, could not last.

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The poilus have not forgotten the Eden of Paroches. They talk of it often while scraping off the mud that covers them, and they sigh,

[photo here]

"It was so nice!"

Assuredly such a calm cannot last forever, but it is necessary to recognize that the transition was abrupt.

“The regiment will take up service in the trenches on 26 April.” The news instantly circulated throughout the camp.

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“My God, so much the better,” say the poilus.

Anything seems preferable to the existence that they have led since their return to Verdun.

The battalion of which Lefèvre’s company belonged will hold the front line to the south of Fort Douaumont.¹¹⁷

Rapidly they get ready. Each carefully inspects his arms, dismantles, greases. These operations, which we are generally reluctant to do in peacetime, take, in these circumstances, an importance that all understand, even the NCOs do not have to intervene. They proceed to work on their own weapons.

Each soldier has, for his rifle, the most minute care—I was going to even say tenderness, and, my god, the word would hardly be exaggerated—that of a mother for her infant.

We also concern ourselves with food because experience has shown that the artillery barrages sometimes make provisioning difficult, even impossible.

As the poilus are very little in favor of prolonged hunger, they fill musette bags and sacks with all that they are able to get their hands on, and, of course, not forgetting drink, the canteens are filled to the brims.

The regiment, without the least regret, quits the camps of Verdun, where the men were too tense and ill at ease and where they often received large caliber shells. It seems preferable to all to risk death in the open air than to run the chance of dying under rubble.

No one wanted to think, seeing the men tranquilly smoking their pipes and trying to close a recalcitrant back pack or closing an overfilled musette that they are getting ready to leave for a hell from which many will not return.

Their morale is truly admirable. No posturing, no boasting in their attitude. None of these bouts of forced gaiety, which often, in times of crisis, serve to hide the disarray of souls or hearts. They are simply superb soldiers, calm, conscious, reflective.

Helmet on the head, rifle on the shoulder, entrenching tool on bandolier, sack disproportionately large, musette bundled, clothes like muddy rags, the infantrymen are set to leave;

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they are going to replace their exhausted comrades and to form an impassable barrier before the enemy.

The movement takes place on the night of 26-27 April. One cannot form an exact idea of such a procession. It is necessary to see it.

¹¹⁷See the map at <http://www.ctevans.net/Lefevre/Maps/Verdun.pdf>.

At dawn, the company of sergeant Lefèvre holds the pond of Vaux where is located the famous "Ravine of Death."¹¹⁸

[photo here]

Lefèvre knew this corner of the battlefield for having seen it at the end of the month of February.

He finds it changed. He said:

"Death seems to have planted here his death flag."

You are not able to better understand in a few words the horror of this place.

It's a hideous charnel house, a corner of hell that the even the imagination of Dante would not have dared to create. Atrocious events have to have taken place there.

The ground is strewn with chopped up, decomposed bodies, the majority of which have been disinterred by shells. Here and there, from a shell hole, emerges a leg, an arm, a body lacking a head.

Projectiles of all calibers have worked over the ground, leveling the communication trenches, destroying the front-line trenches, making enormous holes at the bottom of which are [302] thrown human debris of all kinds enveloped by a gluey mud.

And the shells always fall, never stopping, grinding up the soil, to such an extent that in certain places the ground has no longer any kind of consistency, the corpses interred and disinterred turn by turn. Projecting bones everywhere, sometimes wounding the valiant, the heroic soldiers who, in their turn, mount guard in the dreadful mass grave

Can you imagine how much energy, sang-froid, courage, it takes to stand up under a hurricane of steel and fire that never ceases neither day nor night, in the presence of mutilated corpses on which death works again and again, of the terrible debris that the explosions transform into monstrous projectiles?

In the milieu of this horrible torment, while the soil bubbles under the hurricane of steel, the pond of Vaux extends like a sea dismantled between two bombarded banks with its quiet tablecloth that reflects, in reverse, a wide corner of the sky, shimmering gently, stirred by a light breeze.

A strange and awe-inspiring contrast!

Sometimes, however, a shell pierces the glaucous water, and a violent tempest is born; but the wounds closes up at once, the tempest weakens rapidly and the water returns to its calm state.

It is probable that the dead sleep at the bottom of the tranquil pond, because there were terrible bayonet charges, glorious hand to hand fighting here.

¹¹⁸l'étang de Vaux (the Vaux pond) was the scene of fierce fighting. There are quite a few images of the pond online.

Without a doubt, they are still there.

Indeed, a liaison officer, a courier, arrives during the shelling, risking, with each step, to disappear in an explosion and hands to Sergeant Lefèvre a note from the commander of the company.

This note, scrawled with pencil on a piece of crumpled paper, simply said:

“You should wait for a violent attack. It is necessary to repulse it or die in place.”

Lefèvre shares the note with his corporals and then his men.

“Ah! They are going to come,” says one of the corporals. “Well, good! So much the better! We’re going to prepare a reception for them that they will certainly talk about in Berlin.”

His men applaud.

“Bravo! We’re going to see some Boches!”

The enemy, who has sent so many shells at them, is finally going to present themselves in person

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with a certain number of soldiers.

We are prepared to make them pay with lachrymose and asphyxiates,¹¹⁹ flame throwers and other diabolic and repugnant means that revolt and disgust our poilus.

“Will they be numerous?” asks a soldier.

If only they are numerous! We hope so. The more there are, the better it will be.

“Numerous or not numerous,” says Sergeant Lefèvre, “they will not pass or they will pass over our dead bodies.”

“They will not pass sergeant!” The soldiers cry out as one.

That day a number of poilus sharpen their bayonets on some rocks.

The lieutenant who commanded the company goes to make a tour of the pond’s bank, indicating the dispositions to make, placing the machine guns in good spots and addressing the NCOs and also the men with useful advice. He understood perfectly his position.

¹¹⁹Two of the many forms of gas weapons used in World War I; one affecting the eyes (tear gas) and one affecting the lungs (mustard gas). See note 88.

“Especially men, no foolishness,” he says in closing. “Don’t go and get yourself killed uselessly; you do not have the right. France has need of you.”

“Sergeant Lefèvre, keep a close watch on those fellows there and don’t hesitate to crack down on those who expose themselves recklessly. And there will be those who are incorrigible. When they see the Boche, I believe, they’ll become enraged.”

Are not these reproaches equivalent to the best praise?

Until evening, in the noise of a bombardment whose violence increases without stopping, you can hear the grating of the steel of bayonets on rocks.

A drama was being prepared. Some new corpses are going to be piled up around the tranquil water that has reflected so many horrors already, that has absorbed so much blood.

While sharpening their bayonets and making sure that their rifles are functioning, our poilus laugh and joke.

These men whose exploits will become famous are the greatest in the world.

When he was assured that preparation for combat was completed, sergeant Lefèvre, who perhaps had certain presentiments, called the cook and says to him:

“Cook, my friend, if I am killed, you will take my money and you [306] you will use it to buy some pinard for the section, and if you think that I have earned the honor, you will drink to my health.”

And, when the brave cook responded, he added:

“Damn!” You know that it’s something that can happen to anyone, especially here... If I fall, I will have given my life for France, and there will not be anyone to cry about that.”

“You are not very cheerful, sergeant.”

“You are wrong, my friend. I am, on the contrary, in excellent humor; only that I see this as a serious business. As you know, it is necessary to win or die. We will push back the Boche. That’s certain, but any success must be paid for. You know that from experience, and I might have to pay as well as another. And so, I am taking my precautions.”

Having dismissed the cook, he wrote a long letter to his former captain and confided it, with the request to send it if something bad happens to him, to a man on the medical staff.

The bombardment became terrible. The explosions were so numerous that their noise produced a sort of thunder. You might have thought that the German artillery men were suffering from some madness.

Lefèvre says to his comrades:

“Surely we are going to be attacked tonight.”

The earlier would be the better because the company was suffering losses as a result of the terrible bombardment.

The shells churn up the ground, interring the living and disinterring the dead. Columns of dirt and smoke, in which we can sometime make out a body or human debris, arose from the point of the explosion, reminding you of the geysers of Iceland that you see in children’s books. You heard the cries of agony, the cries for help. You saw in the growing darkness the heroic stretcher bearers passing by. The lungs function painfully, breathing in the smoke and dirt.

Our soldiers seethed with impatience. You could hear them cry out.

“They are not coming, those Boches!”

The Germans can count on a carefully prepared reception.

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XXXIX: The Battle for the Vaux Pond (l'étang de Vaux)

This time they arrived, gliding in the heavy darkness like ghosts. The sentries have signaled us, and at last the trained ears of our soldiers perceived the confused sound always produced by a troop on the march, even when the greatest silence is observed in the ranks.

The bombardment calmed down. Our poilus were at their post, ready to charge.

Suddenly, the reddish glow of a rocket seems to remove the veil of mourning that envelops the field of battle. The Vaux pond takes on the appearance of an enormous blood stain.

It looks like this rocket gave the signal to attack.

Shots crackle on the left, to which is added soon the annoying tap tap tap of some machine guns, then burst out some loud cries.

At the pond of Vaux, we hear, but no one sees anything. The enemy has not yet attacked on this side.

Our poilus stamp with impatience.

Lefèvre works to calm them down.

“Be calm, your turn will come. There will be enough for everyone, and I promise you that we will do good work.”

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The soldiers, who knew him well, all know that his calm hides his energy and never has he been as calm as that night.

Calmness is one of the premier qualities of a commander; Sergeant Lefèvre possesses this quality.

At present a lot of rockets illuminated the field of carnage with their hellish glow. The battle has begun; there is nothing more to hide.

All of a sudden, on the left, Lefèvre perceives a German troop which is slipping behind a slope, probably to surprise one of our sections.

He shows it to his men while saying:

“There are some boys who evidently don't think that we see them. It's a good target. Aim well, take your time, and be right on target.”

The men silently smile. Then, without hurrying, they join the game. Lefèvre saves the officer for himself, a large guy who towered over the heads of all the men.

“Are you ready?” asks the sergeant in a whisper.

“Yes.”

“Then, ready! Fire”

The rifles fire together. You hear a single discharge, similar to the detonation of a trench mortar. Some cries ring out from behind the slope. Some Germans run away and throw away their weapons and seem crazy with terror; the rest are cut down. In the light of the nightmare, we can make out the bodies stretched out. The officer, recognizable by his height, has to also have been hit because he fell on one of his men and didn't budge.

“Beautiful!” says Sergeant Lefèvre carefully wiping his rifle.

A corporal confirms that only three or four were able to flee.

The sergeant warmly congratulates his men.

“For the start of the fighting,” he says, “it's a good start.”

The battle seemed to increase in intensity. The rifle fire is more and more intense, and the machine guns fill the air with their tac tac.

The roar of a violent bombardment envelopes all the noise of the battle; but the shells no longer fall, or almost no longer fall, in the sector. The Germans have to bombard our secondary positions and make a barrage to try and stop our reinforcements that the French command might judge useful to send.

The troops engaged have no need of them. All are excellent troops
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whose admirable tenacity is known and who are fighting a little all over.

The Germans are going to find out about whom we are talking.

Around the pond, the poilus of Sergeant Lefèvre are becoming angry.

“So,” they say, “everyone is fighting except us.”

The enemy, in effect, did not always appear at this spot. Lefèvre reassures them, explaining to them that the Germans are not going to neglect a point as important as the one that they are guarding. Nevertheless
[photo here]
he has to struggle to maintain his men who wanted to go to the aid of their comrades.

Really, the lieutenant is right; it is necessary to keep an eye on the boys.

The sergeant makes them understand that one can never, despite whatever events might happen, abandon his post without having received a formal order.

“You understand,” he says to them, “that if you go missing even for as little as five minutes, you might have the chance to find your place, on your return, occupied by Germans.”

“And further, the units actually engaged have not called for help; so they do not need it.”
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“I’m telling you again that the occasion will present itself for you to fight.”

The artillery continues to thunder. One hears the powerful howl of the heavy German artillery and the howling rage of ours.

Where does it all go? Certainly—the curious—would like to know. Others express strongly the opinion that this bombardment has no importance in what concerns us, because we are no longer receiving any shells.

“And then,” adds a poilu, “the men in the rear do not appreciate their good luck. Some other times, they receive only few shells.”

What the poilu calls the men in the rear implies those who are located, not in the rear but simply more in the rear than him, and those who are not holding a trench.

This shows that words have a very relative value.

We can see in the distance the rapid explosions that escape from the barrels of the cannons at the moment the shell departs, and it looks like crazy fire.

The sergeant imposes silence on his men, and all at once lay down on the ground.

The sergeant has seen something, and they have seen it at the same time as him.

In the German trenches that front them, the men exit crawling on the parapet in the hope that their movement would not be seen.

“Is it finally our turn?” the poilus asks.

They wait for the game, like hunters on the lookout, and the waiting seems to them longer and longer.

Some shots of a 75 would probably have dispersed the men who got out of the German trench, but, this time, our brave poilus want to do the job themselves.

Those artillerymen, everything would be only for them, if they were allowed!

The Germans crossed their parapet without being worried. Something makes them think that there are no more French in front of them. They then hesitate on the direction to follow and finally seem to decide to march towards a hill behind which a serious struggle is taking place because they hear a very lively firing and great shouts.

Lefèvre knows that the rest of the company is hidden behind that hill, and more than once, like his men, he has wanted to come to the aid of his comrades.

There is no longer any doubt. The German troops are directed at the hill

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and the situation could become dangerous for the comrades, who are certainly tired and are going to have to face a new enemy who has not yet been fighting.

Lefèvre's course is set; the comrades must be saved, or, in any case, relieved.

He could perhaps disperse the enemy with rifle fire, but, it is not a patrol like earlier. There are not enough rifles to hope to put it out of action. So, it's not going to work that way; but there is a better way.

Rapidly, on the orders of Lefèvre, the men begin to crawl in the direction of the German trenches. They are going at the front of the enemy that they will attack at bayonet. That's how Lefèvre has decided it to the grand joy of his men. At any price it is necessary to prevent these new assailants from falling on our comrades who are already engaged.

Lefèvre realizes that the comrades have held fast before the German rush as the combat has not moved; but are they still in a state to support the shock of fresh troops?

The Germans march forward pretty much without precautions, not realizing that our heroic poilus, ten times less numerous than them, have come to stand in their way and like a tiger stalking its prey, to leap out at the signal of their sergeant.

When they reached the height of the pond, Lefèvre makes the signal to release the counter-attack.

With élan, our poilus fall on the enemy and let loose some ferocious roars. You can hear a huge clanking of arms, cries of anger, screams of pain. In the glow of rockets, which at that moment trailed upwards, the scene is frightening and grandiose.

Under the extraordinary violence of the shock, the enemy, surprised, falls back; but it did not delay in responding and reacting with great bravery.

Our soldiers accomplish prodigious heroism in terrible hand to hand fighting.

Finally, despite its incontestable valor, the German troop begins to fall back.

"Bravo," cries corporal. "They are turned back!"

The retreat increases soon to the great joy of our poilus who, as they say, have truly done good work.

At that moment, our losses are still light.

But as we approach the German trenches, the enemy still fell back

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under our push in front of our bloody, mangled bayonets.

All of a sudden a machine gun opens fire on our handful of brave men, and many of them fall heavily.

“Forward my friends!” Cries out Lefèvre.

He fell in turn. His men stop and want to carry him.

“Let me be,” he says. “I’ve done my duty... Forward, my friends! Always forward! Avenge me! Long live France!”

Becoming furious, his poilus fell again on the German troop with bayonets while crying out, “Avenge him! Avenge him!”

This time, the enemy retreats in disorder towards the trench, hoping to find there a sure shelter, but our soldiers, drunk with fury and the carnage, penetrate behind them there and seize the position.

The battle was won. Despite their formidable, monstrous artillery preparation, the Germans were not able to pass but had to retreat before the bayonets of our admirable soldiers.

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A few hours after the battle, as soon as day broke, the survivors of the section commanded by Lefèvre, aided by the stretcher bearers, set out to search for their sergeant.

Alas! All the searching was in vain.

Poor Lefèvre has disappeared in the flood, and his companions in arms did not have the satisfaction of rendering him the honors earned by his noble conduct and his great bravery.

He fell very close to the pond. They guessed that he had rolled down into the tranquil water in the course of his agony.

End.

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