

THE STORY OF THE BELEAGURED BATTALION

It is part of the shining record of the American battalion which was surrounded for five interminable days in the Forest of Argonne, as narrated in these columns last week, that, on the fifth day, when hope was at its faintest, there came to the weak and famished garrison of that wild ravine a beguiling offer to surrender. The offer was contemptuously ignored.

It came at 4 o'clock on the afternoon of October 7, came when the strength of the besieged garrison was almost spent. Since the night of two previous attacks this battalion, drawn from a regiment that likes to call itself "New York's Own" and commanded by Major Charles Whitteley, had held its position against daily attacks. Since then they had watched the vain efforts of the aircraft to reach them with instructions and rations, heard the vain but unrelenting efforts of companion regiments to fight a way through the strong force of encircling Germans.

Little Hope Left
Now, late on the fifth day, there was no reason to suppose that help was any nearer. And there was every reason to suppose that they could not hold out many hours longer—hold out, that is, against death from hunger and exposure. Certainly they were no longer in any condition to fight off another such attack in force as had been made at the end of the first day. Then a formidable enemy detachment had been thrown against the isolated battalion only to recoil in the face of such a blast from our machine guns, such a shower of hand grenades, such a cool, keen-eyed fire from the automatics that they never tried it again, but settled down to starve the stubborn Yankees out.

Another such attack on the last day would have carried the ravine. By that time the munitions were almost gone. The stock of hand grenades had dwindled to a few. Of the gallant machine gun detachments that had sustained the flanks the commanders had been killed. Of the eleven machine guns themselves, all but three had been put out of business. Of the boxes of machine gun ammunition, only five were left.

One Day's Iron Rations
But it was the weakness of the men themselves, that had so reduced the force of that gallant little garrison. To begin with, they had brought with them only enough iron rations to see them meagerly through the first day. Many had not eaten them, so willingly and so thirstily they were husbanding the food supply for the wounded. Then all the bread and chocolate dropped from the airplanes had fallen within reach of the Germans.

Now, on October 7, they were chewing leaves and washing them down with water brought at night from the little spring at the bottom of the ravine. Lack of food, and the long days and nights spent in the damp, chill forest without coats or blankets had so told on them that the outposts could not keep awake, and on the 6th and 7th the dead had to lie unburied at their side. There was no finding a burial squad with enough strength left to do the work.

Bid for Surrender
It was to such a battalion that the bid for a surrender was made. It was brought to the major by a German command who had been taken prisoner. This soldier was one of nine who, without orders and with out telling any officer of their intention, had gone forth on an independent effort to break through to the main American force in the forest below. Of this luckless nine, five were killed outright. The other four were wounded.

The least seriously wounded was embraced by the Germans, stuffed with warm food, cheered with beer and cigarettes and sent back to the ravine as an envoy. He was led there blindfolded, led by a circuitous route and pushed toward his own lines with a white flag in one hand and a letter in the other.

This letter, composed in English and neatly typewritten on a sheet of good paper, was addressed to the commanding officer of the isolated battalion. It read: "Sir: The bearer of the present has been taken prisoner on October 7, and returned to the German intelligence officer every answer to his questions and is quite an honorable fellow, doing honor to his Fatherland in the strictest sense of the word. He has been charged against his belief, believing it doing wrong to his country in



This used to be a grove in the great forest of Argonne. Doughboys rest in the mopping-up process

carrying forward this present letter to the officer in charge of the second battalion—infantry, with the purpose to recommend this commander to surrender with this force, as you would be quite useless to resist any more in view of the present situation.

The suffering of your wounded men can be heard in the German lines and we are appealing to your human sentiments. A white flag shown by one of your men will tell us that you agree with these conditions. Please treat—as an honorable man. He is quite a soldier. We envy you.

The Legend of the Argonne
This is pure legend. He sent no such answer. He sent no answer at all. What he did do was to send some one out, to take immediately from their place on the hillside the white cloth panels which served to signal to the friendly aircraft the exact location of the battalion. The American commander did this lest the German commander should mistake them for a white flag of surrender and think for one moment that his proposition had been accepted.

That was at 4 o'clock on the afternoon of October 7. At 7 that evening while the exhausted men lay crouched in waiting for an attack they knew in the bottom of their hearts would finish them, the word flashed from dugout to dugout like electric sparks leaping in the darkness, that a brother regiment had fought its way to their side; that this time the attack, which had been faintly heard in the gathering dusk, had succeeded; that relief had come at last to New York's Own.

A few moments later the men of that brother regiment were stripping the iron rations from their own backs and rushing them along by jubilant, grinning runners to the men of Major Whitteley's command.

Could Have Cut Way Back
The full beauty of this chapter in American history cannot be felt till it is realized that when, on the morning of October 3, the tidings from the runners showed that he was surrounded, Major Whitteley could easily have cut his way back. It is probable that at any time during the first two days he could have cut his way back, though each hour the task would have become more difficult, so steadily was the surrounding force reinforced. Later, the battalion was far too weak to have attempted such a move. But, while it was still quite feasible, the idea, never seriously considered, was rejected for two reasons.

In the first place, the commander of the battalion had been ordered to advance rapidly and at whatever cost through more than a mile of treacherous jungle; to station himself in that ravine by the Charlevoix Mill, not far from Binerville, and to hold it until the division line until such time as elements could come abreast of him on either side.

Met With Heavy Resistance
It did not matter that these elements had obviously met with unexpectedly heavy resistance. It did not matter that later and possibly contradictory instructions had failed to reach him. There he was on the northern slope of a ravine that protected him from the German artillery and that kept the greater part of his position shielded from an industrious trench mortar which had opened up at the side.

From there, and so reporting, he had sent up all the pigeons he had brought, and he had not let a day go without making vain efforts to send runners through the German lines. No word from the division or regiment had reached him, no word of any kind, though he knew by the message cylinders seen falling from the airplanes, only to be lost like needles in a haystack, that an effort was being made to send instructions to him. So he had by his original orders. By those he must abide.

That was the first reason. The second reason, the one that appealed to all the men and hushed every dissenting voice, was the fact that in the advance 30 men had been wounded. To fight their way back would have meant deserting the 80 men who were left. Then each hour added fresh names to the list of wounded, each name a fresh reason why the battalion must hold the ravine at all costs.

Brotherhood of the Besieged
Among the men who came alive out of that ravine was visible a fraternity that had not, and could not have, existed when they went in, the brotherhood of the besieged. Approach any one of them today and their first and last word on their experience is always a word in devoted praise of "our major," the officer around whom they rallied and whose steady, dauntless spirit saw them through.

"Our major"—he is Lieutenant Colonel Whitteley now—is a product of Plattsburg, a Williams College man, who, in the days forgotten days before April, 1917, lived at 136 East Forty-fourth Street, New York, and practiced law down at 2 Rector Street, where the Sixth Avenue L thunders by on its way to the Battery.

It is of the stamina of the men that Colonel Whitteley speaks—speaks in wonder and admiration. He has known them first at Camp Upton, an unpromising miscellany of youngsters, going forth to war from Fifth Avenue and from the lower East Side, truck drivers, collegians, dressmakers, sweatshop workers, actors, clerks, idlers, all the

stuff of which New York is made. How one and all they proved true, steadfast, honorable American soldiers—that is their commander's story.

And, Godhille though he is, you may be sure he does not fail to withhold some of the praise from New York, but insists fiercely that it be shared with certain rangy replacements from Oregon who leavened the lump.

He speaks particularly of a New York broker who was in command of one detachment. Though wounded slightly in the leg the first day, and though later so outstanding a target that a German potato masher caromed off his shoulder before exploding, this officer was always up and at them every time the German hand grenade throwers came steading down over the crest through the underbrush nor did he collapse till long after the relief had come and he had been able to see every last one of his men attended to.

Colonel Whitteley likes to tell, too, of one cheery lieutenant who, until he was killed, displayed always an infectious cheerfulness, always smiling, always until the very last, as bright and shining as if he had just prepared for inspection.

Caring for the Wounded
Above all, he likes to tell how the little food stock was scrapped and hoarded for the wounded and how cheerfully the few coats and blankets that had been carried forward through the forest were heaped on those who lay hurt on the hillside.

He has a warm place in his heart for three runners, one a little stenographer from New York who was killed in his course on the fifth night, and two others who, in the last hours, though the forest was as black as midnight, did somehow manage to work their way through to the relieving force. They were Clifford E. Brown, of Asheville, New York, and Stanislaw Kozitowski, of Mazepeth, L. I.

But perhaps the warmest place of all is for two young privates of the Medical Department, who, in the absence of any surgeon, took charge of the wounded, working with them night and day so faithfully that when the relief came at last they dropped feebly in their tracks and had to be carried out on stretchers. To name these few is just to give in

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stances from a heroic chapter in the story of the fight which made the Argonne Forest part of America, a fight which began at dawn on September 26 and did not end until October 11, when the last living German had been pushed out of the forest. By then, under steady fire from the German guns, Yankee engineers were pushing bridges across the swift waters of the Aire, which runs along the northern fringe of the woods. The Americans had moved 17 kilometers through an almost impassable jungle, a bewildering succession of steep hills and deep ravines covered with heavy underbrush, above which rises here and there the skeleton of a dead tree, stray remnants of an earlier forest which, when even in silhouette along the successive crests, look like teeth in a broken and shattered comb.

In the Glory of Autumn
Through mile after mile of this jungle the Americans worked their way through the interlacing strands of barbed wire and despite the snare of machine guns, some of them so planted that the advancing platoons would come within a few feet of them before they were discovered.

It was still the old Forest of Argonne which has played so big a part in the story of France, the same dismaying forest which a century and a quarter ago, proved the undoing of a proud Prussian host which marched against the untired soldiers of the newborn French revolution, marched to defeat at the Battle of Valmy.

Quite suddenly the other day it flung forth its autumn colors. Indeed, to those watching from the nearby hill-sides, it seemed as if it was on that historic October 7 that the Forest of Argonne blazed all at once into russets and golds and purples, and here and there a scarlet tree, as though its roots had drunk deep of young American blood spent freely for an eternal cause once more defended on those hills.

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XMAS LABELS GO OUT

Christmas package labels are now in the hands of virtually every one in the A.E.F. This conclusion is based on the fact that the week saw their delivery to organizations quarters more or less permanently in certain civilized centers—so far as permanency goes in this or any other army's location—and also to units recently arrived in some of the most out-of-the-way corners of the Western front, including the American troops fighting with the British on the war-worn stretches beyond the Hindenburg line.

The package plan, has not, however, been received with unqualified approval. A cook in a certain Artillery outfit says of the way he thinks the idea will work out: "In a nutshell, the way it's going to be is punk." The punk, says Cooke, consists in the fact that he supposes "whoever made the order didn't stop to think that sending home these said labels is like asking for a gift."

A French Girl's Suggestion
Exactly. That's the whole idea. But this is war, and the only alternatives to the one-man-one-package plan are (1) as many packages as your friends care to send, and (2) to send a package if so to a man and the holding-up of several boatloads of ammunition for the guns of the cook's Artillery regiment, or (2) no packages at all.

"A French girl" has this suggestion: "Reading your paper of Friday last, I saw that a soldier in the A.E.F. was to receive a package from home for Christmas, and that those who had no family would receive their packages from the A.R.C."
"Why should not French people take the place of the A.R.C. and send packages to these soldiers? Those unlucky boys having no folks at home would mind their packages being sent from America or from France, and they have done so much for us, and we can do so little for them."

The inference is—and a very kind inference, too—that "a French girl" would be glad to send a package if she knew whom to send it to, and that there are many more like her. Unfortunately, she does not sign the letter or give any clue to her address.

Ideal Suggestions Come In
Suggestions as to the ideal Christmas package, requested from the whole Army last week by THE STARS AND STRIPES, have come in with a swiftness which indicates that the A.E.F. is thinking deeply about the package situation, or, rather, the package contents, before it commits itself.
Food is so far the headliner on all the

lists. Food—including candy, if Dr. Wiley and Mr. Hoover don't object—appears to be the Army's great standby. The great demand for food from the Army's Christmas package recipients is not, however, a slur on the Cooks' and Mess Sergeants' Union. The food desired is of a sort which organization, no matter how skilled and generous its members, cannot supply.

Cake, with special emphasis on the fruit variety, will occupy every air-space in many 9x13 packages, if the folks back home live up to specifications. Candy, particularly the kind that lasts longest, such as the well-known chocolate-coated caramel, will be crammed into the three-pound limit in many more.

There is a consistent demand for wrist watches, but whether a wrist watch will be included in the ideal package suggestions which THE STARS AND STRIPES is going to cable home in three or four weeks depends on how unanimous that demand becomes in the interval.

Many Want Surprises
Many soldiers, of course, are simply sending their coupons home with the request that the resultant bundle be strictly a surprise affair. This proves that even a rowdy Army has not forgotten its fireplace and stocking days.

Photographs of the family and friends, as groups or individuals, have a large place in many suggestions. Writes one officer to his wife:

"Please send a box full of tooth paste (a lot of it), two or three sticks of shaving soap, and a triple lot of our family doctor's celebrated cold capsules. Add a new picture of each one of you."
Some enterprising photographers—a whole lot of them, in fact—should be able to reap a harvest anywhere and everywhere in the U.S.A. by getting out a mount that will fit conveniently in a 9x13 package. Millions of photographs are certain to be included in those Christmas bundles.

The plan of THE STARS AND STRIPES, as announced last week; is simply to make up, from the lists sent in by members of the A.E.F., several ideal packages to guide home selection. These suggestions are to be cabled home for publication in due time to be acted on before the closing date for delivery to local postmasters—November 20.

"What's on for tonight?"
"I'm going to call on the wife of a Dutch general."
"Whosit?"
"Madame Van Blank."

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