32nd FOUGHT WAY TO HEIGHTS OF OURCQ, THENCE TO VESLE

Continued from Page 1

night in the right of the sector, the 63rd Infantry Brigade, in consequence of the progressive narrowing of the front and squeezing out of divisions, was relieving the 28th Division on the left, thus extending the front of the 32nd Division across nearly four kilometers. Ahead of it lay now, to the right, Cierges and the creek valley in which it lies and, to the left, the long, open slopes of the Ourcq valley reaching up to the small wood of Les Jomblets, on Hill 212, a spur of Hill 220.

Across Open Slopes

By the fire from this wood the right of the 42nd United States Division was being held up and severely punished in Sergy, about a kilometer to the west. Consequently, by order of the 38th (French) Corps, another methodical artillery preparation began at 1:30 p.m., and at 2 o'clock the 63rd Brigade proceeded northward across two kilometers of open, sloping ground and drove the enemy out of the Bois de Jomblets, with the 42nd Division, now able to leave Sergy behind, well up on the line.

On the right Cierges was taken promptly and the troops went far up the hillside northeast of it. But unfortunately the 4th French Division, on the right, had been as yet unable to take the Bois Meunière, while in the center of the sector of the 32nd Division, at distances northeast of Cierges respectively of one and two kilometers, the enemy had two exceedingly strong centers of resistance in the fortified walls and buildings of Bellevue Farm and Reddy Farm. So the 64th Brigade, by driving forward, merely got itself further and further into a salient swept by cross fire, and was obliged to fall back early in the night to a position between Cierges and Bellevue Farm.

By this time the German positions to the west, immediately along the Ourcq itself, were pretty well shaken. But on the fronts of the 42nd and 32nd Divisions the strongest parts of their line, along the hill crests north of the valley, were still securely held—Hill 230, Bellevue and Reddy Farms, the bits of woodland called the Bois de Planchette and the Bois Pelger, the village and chauteau of Nesles, and the Foret de Nesles.

Struggle for Watershed

If these places could be taken—and all of them were now within two kilometers of the American front line—the height of land between the Ourcq and the Vesle rivers would be reached and it was not probable that the enemy could offer so strong a resistance on any other line for some distance northward. General Haan accordingly ordered an attack on the entire divisional front, the outer flanks of both Infantry brigades to advance on given objectives while the right companies of the 63rd Brigade should echelon to the rear just west of Bellevue Farm and the left of the 64th Brigade should endeavor to envelope this strong point.

The maneuver was started early on the morning of August 1. The enemy resisted desperately. About 9 o'clock a fierce counter-attack drove the troops on the left out of the Bois de Jomblets to their positions of the previous afternoon and, at the same time, the troops on the right, after once capturing Hill 230, were obliged to give it up again on account of the machine gun fire from Bellevue and Reddy Farms.

Furious artillery fire covered all the American areas, hostile airplanes were using machine guns on the front lines, and observers reported such large concentrations of German infantry and tanks in the vicinity of Nesles, moving in the direction of the 32nd Division front, that the corps command placed all the infantry of the 28th United States Division under the orders of General Haan to prepare and hold a defense line in case the attacking 32nd Division should be stopped and driven back.

Bois de Jomblets Retaken

But the 32nd kept on, largely because of many such acts as that of Machine Gun Sergeant Dougold Ferguson, 126th Infantry, who, when the infantry near him was held up by a German machine gun, seized a rifle, rushed around the enemy's position, bayonetted two of the gunners and shot the third, and so enabled the infantry to advance. A barrage was laid on the Bois de Jomblets behind which the 125th Infantry moved forward and shortly after noon again occupied that woodland under heavy shell fire.

Between 2 and 3 o'clock the 127th Infantry worked ahead and engulfed Bellevue Farm and Hill 230, leaving Reddy Farm, with its terrible circle of fire, still in the enemy's possession but in a steadily closing salient. Not long after, the 125th Infantry again lunged forward on the left and took the Bois Planchette and the Bois Pelger, of which they held the former but were obliged to relinquish the latter before nightfall. It was in the Bois Pelger that Pvt. H. J. Devereaux, Co. M, angered because a German machine gun, after wounding his corporal continued firing on the latter, strode forward with his rifle and put gun and gunners out of business.

The situation was now such that the command of the 6th French Army deemed it probable that a concerted advance could break through, and such an advance on the part of the 1st United States and the 38th and 3rd French Corps was ordered, to begin at 4:15 o'clock on the morning of August 2.

General Attack Begun

During the night the 4th French Division, right of the 32nd United States, which was slightly behind, cleared out the strongest position in its front, the hill crest of the Courteaux Farm, and flanking from there toward the left, strangled out the woods of the Patis de Charmery and came up in the line with the Americans on Hill 230.

At the hour set, the attack began, the advance battalion of the 63rd Brigade being supported by the batteries of the 119th Field Artillery and those of the 64th Brigade by the 174th Field Artillery, while each battalion also had a machine gun company and a number of 37mm. guns and Stokes mortars for clearing out machine gun nests.

The movement progressed rapidly, and it soon became evident that the enemy, despairing of further effective resistance on that line, was retreating. Reddy Farm was passed, and by 9 a. m. the attack had become a pursuit, which, pressed with all possible vigor and delayed only occasionally and for short period by bursts of machine gun fire, pushed on northward through Chamery, Coulonges, Villome and Cohan, over great stretches of abandoned trenches, while ahead the smoke, flames and explosions of burning supplies, ammunition dumps and bridges indicated the haste of the German retreat. By midnight the front line was north of Dravegny, more than six kilometers beyond its starting point, and French cavalry patrols were still beyond.

Artillery Ordered Forward

So rapid was the advance that during the night two batteries of the 147th Field Artillery, each accompained by two trucks of the 107th Ammunition Train, were ordered up to join the Infantry advance guards and give immediate rapid fire with open sights if machine gun opposition was encountered, while battalions of the 119th, 121st and 147th Field Artillery were also echeloned in advanced positions so that the Infantry, in going forward would at no time be without prompt artillery support.

Directing its march upon the small town of Fismes, on the south bank of the Vesle, about halfway between Soissons and Reims, the 32nd pushed on, and at 10 a.m. the advance of the 127th Infantry, leading the 64th Brigade, was nearly into St. Gilles, and the 63rd Brigade was at Resson Farm, at which points both were overcoming machine gun resistance, while the men of the attached battalions of the 107th Engineers were working at top speed to repair the broken bridges and roads and permit the supplies to come up.

But the congestion of the traffic of several divisions advancing in close proximity to one another and the conditions of the roads after several days of heavy rains made the supply problem a very hard one, and often the tired troops had to go hungry.

Overlooking the Vesle

Before 6 p.m. the front line was on the bluffs overlooking the Vesle, having advanced nearly eight kilometers, and it was ordered to reach the river, capture Fismes and at once organize means for crossing the river. But this was more easily directed than accomplished. The Vesle here was 15 meters wide, very deep and rapid, and as later developed, lined on both banks and also in the bottom of the stream with masses of barbed wire.

Fismes itself, a solidly-built manufacturing town of normally, about 3,500 people, so ancient that its very name is a corruption of the old Roman name, Fines Suessionum, as well as every other village, farm and natural strong point in the southern half of the river valley, was held by the enemy in force, while, as for the northern half, it was a maze of machine gun nests from the shore to the hills, where the emplacements of the serried batteries of artillery began.

For two nights and two days the exhausted men of the 32nd Division struggled, first, to obtain a footing on the bank of the river, and then to cross it.

The 128th Infantry, attacking Fismes in the night of August 3-4, but repulsed with heavy losses, was relieved by the 127th Infantry, which, late on the afternoon of the 4th, led by such officers as 1st Lt. Roy C. Dickop, who, after being mortally wounded, gave the order, "Charge," and led the assault of his company until he fell dead, succeeded in getting one battalion through the town. It dug in on the river bank and stayed there under an unceasing storm of machine gun fire and an artillery bombardment which was also sweeping all the roads in the rear as far back as Dravegny.

Patrols Reach River

Meantime, the 125th Infantry, in the left sector, was held to the bluffs by the enemy's fire, except for a few patrols which reached the river. Through the gallantry of officers like 2nd Lts. G. W. Kuhlman and J. S. Colton, and Sgt. W. A. Hartman, and the other enlisted men who accompanied them, the 107th Engineers had already thoroughly reconnoitered sites for pontoon bridges at Fismes, and by the morning of the 5th they had bridge material ready to lay, but as no wagons could live in the town, and the north bank of the river was not secured, the material was not sent up too close.

During the 5th the French division on the right succeeded in occupying the southern bank in its sector in force, while Col. Langdon of the 127th Infantry, and Gen. Robert Alexander, who had succeeded Gen. Conner in command of the 63rd Brigade, labored to build up a line on the north bank by gradually passing individuals and small groups across the river.

By that evening the losses in the long battle had been so severe that the 127th Infantry had less than 400 effectives left, and the other regiments were not in much better case, while the state of exhaustion of the whole division was such that the Third United States Corps, since August 4 commanding in place of the 38th French Corps, ordered it relieved by the 28th United States Division, and it retired for rest to the area between Dravengy and Cierges, the commanding general of the 28th Division taking command of the Fismes sector at daylight, August 7.

Attack on Juvigny

There remains to be mentioned to the credit of the 32nd Division one more engagement, and this a very important one, previous to the battle of the Argonne—namely, its attack on Juvigny.

Early in August the British and French armies began pounding in the head of the enemy's Amiens salient. Pressure also continued, but without much success, on the Vesle front, with the object of eventually pushing across the Aisne and recovering the old French positions on the Chemin des Dames.

About the 20th of the month, in order to aid the progress of both these attacks, the French began driving a wedge into the German front between Soissons and the Oise river, which by the 28th had developed a salient, the left side of which flanked the enemy's Hindenburg line near the Oise, while its right side was moving eastward squarely across the flank of his defensive systems between the Aisne and the Ailette.

The Germans knew that if this flank attack could not be stopped promptly, their Vesle, Aisne and Chemin des Dames positions were all doomed, and perhaps Laon as well, and they fought fiercely to retain their foothold. From the vicinity of the Oise to Soissons, the 18th, 7th, 30th, 1st and 20th French Corps, constituting the 10th French Army, were pressing the attack, and on August 26 the 32nd United States Division, its strength to some extent, though by no means completely, restored by replacements, was ordered up from its rest area near Dravegny to the 30th French Corps, where during the night of August 27-28, it relieved the 127th French Division in the front line.

Holding Up Army Front

To its left lay the 64th French Division of its own corps and to its right the 59th French Division of the 1st Corps. In front of it, at a distance of about a kilometer down a gradual, open hill slope, the embankment of the railroad from Soissons to Crecy-au-Mont crossed the divisional sector nearly at right angles, and about a kilometer beyond the railroad, in the middle of the sector, the solidly-built village of Juvigny nestled in the bottom of a ravine, one of whose wooded branches extended southwestward toward the right flank of the 32nd Division and the left flank of the 59th Division.

The enemy's position here, to which he was clinging with all his power, was holding up the Allied advance all along the 10th Army front, and the 32nd Division had been brought in specifically to smash through.

Without time for previous reconnaissance, the 32nd Division, with the 63rd Brigade in front, the 126th Infantry on its right and the 125th Infantry on its left, moved forward early on the morning of the 26th, in conjunction with the 59th French Division and seized the line of the railroad where, however, the troops were so exposed to the enemy's raking fire that eventually resort had to be had to distribution in great depth, leaving a few men in shell holes at the extreme front, while most of them lay back of the hill crest.

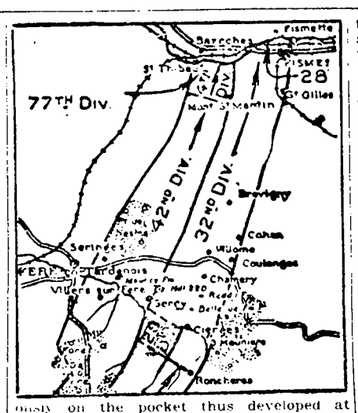
Assault Stopped in Tracks

A violent enemy counter-attack down the branch of the ravine above mentioned was readily repulsed, and early the following morning, simultaneously with the whole 10th Army, the 32nd Division attacked toward Juvigny, accompanied by two companies of French tanks and company of cavalry, preceded by a 25-minute artillery preparation and covered by a rolling barrage.

But it was all to no purpose. The German machine gun emplacements in the ravines were so well covered that the artillery fire did them little damage. On the whole front the assault was stopped in its tracks and at evening the 32nd, having suffered severe losses, lay practically where it had lain in the morning, west of the railroad. Undeniably the Germans had scored.

But their defensive success was not long-lived. During the night of the 29th, the 63rd Brigade, to the command of which Brig. Gen. Frank R. McCoy had that day succeeded Brig. Gen. L. C. Covell, gave up the front line to the 64th Brigade, which went in with the 127th Infantry on the right and the 128th on the left. Before noon of the 30th, the 59th French Division began pushing ahead slowly against Chavigny and the ravines in its front, and at 3:30 p. m. a general advance of the 32nd Division commenced, the right of the line pressing northeast through the ravines toward Juvigny, while the extreme left was obliged to echelon back to the railroad grade to keep liaison with the division on its left, which could not advance against the machine guns ahead of it.

The Germans counter-attacked vigor-



ously on the pocket thus developed at the division left, but to no avail; the 127th Infantry and the right of the 128th, closely supported at every step by the artillery and the troops of the 63rd Brigade, reached the southern, then the western, and finally the northern edges of the village.

With the place thus surrounded, at about 7 o'clock two reserve companies of the 127th Infantry passed into it and in the course of about two hours of hard fighting mopped it up, some 160 prisoners being taken.

Crazy American Barrage

The enemy, who had anticipated an attack from the northwest and arranged his defense accordingly, was surprised by the attack from the southwest, and the Americans escaped many casualties by reason of the fact that a large proportion of the machine guns were blanketed in that direction.

Except on the left, the north-and-south road just east of Juvigny was now the American front line. General Irwin, who now had under his orders not only the four regiments of his own 57th Artillery Brigade but also the artillery of the 1st Moroccan Division, in the morning opened a terrific artillery preparation of four hours' duration covering all the ground from this road eastward for about three kilometers along the plateau to the village of Terny-Sorny.

At 4 p.m. the artillery fire, whose intensity may be judged from the fact that it involved 32 batteries of 75mm. and nine batteries of 155 mm. howitzers, or about one gun to each 12 meters of the 2,000-meter front, dropped back and formed a triple barrage in front of the Infantry, which at that moment advanced, supported on the front line by French tanks and, as previously near Dravegny, by two sniping batteries of the 147th Field Artillery.

Resistance to such an attack was simply impossible. Dazed and shaken, the enemy generally fled or surrendered, for as one of the prisoners said, "no matter where you turned, you were met with the fire of the artillery. The Americans were shooting all over the terrain. Their fire was certainly crazy."

It was a sort of insanity, then, which was better than reason for, although in spots, as at Beaumont Farm and in the Bois d'Alsace, some spirited opposition had to be overcome, the advance was rapid, and before 8 p.m. the troops were in Terny-Sorny, 555 unwounded prisoners had been started back to the cages, and observers reported that everywhere to the eastward German artillery and transport was fleeing toward Margival and other remote hamlets.

Machine Gunners Take 80

By brilliant maneuvering, one unit, the machine gun company of the 125th Infantry, on the left of the advance, succeeded in capturing 80 prisoners and two 105mm. field guns with ammunition. Immediately afterward the enemy began firing incendiary shells in an attempt to blow up this lost ordnance, but Pvt. E. C. Dressell, of the machine gun company, going in among the bursting shells, put out the fires and saved the ammunition and his comrades' lives.

In the ravines and network of trenches and wire beyond the limits of the barrage the enemy at length made a stand, chiefly to protect his arrangements for further retreat. September 1 was spent by the 32nd Division in cleaning out remaining machine gun nests and in improving the positions won, the front line occupying approximately the north and south road just west of Terny-Sorny, with patrols covering the ground in front of it.

That night the 32nd was relieved by the 1st Moroccan Division, behind which it remained in support position until the following night, when it was finally withdrawn and transported to the area near Toul, where the First American Army was now beginning to assemble.

In the five days of its active work around Juvigny the division had lost 13 officers and 265 enlisted men killed and 65 officers and 2,397 enlisted men wounded or missing. It had advanced about five kilometers and had captured 937 prisoners, including nine officers, these men coming chiefly from the VIIth, CCXXIInd, CCXXVIIth and CCXXXVIIIth German Divisions.

It had also taken four field pieces, 128 machine guns, minenwerfers and trench mortars, 700 rifles, 44,000 rounds of artillery ammunition and 270,000 rounds of machine gun ammunition. But, more than all, it had broken one of the strongest props of the German defenses between the Aisne and the Ailette, and when it departed those defenses were tottering to their fall.

(The part of the 4th Division in the July counter-offensive will be described in next week's issue.)

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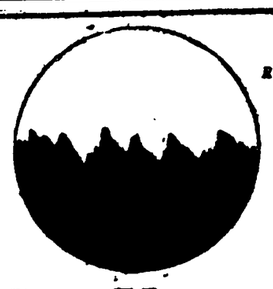

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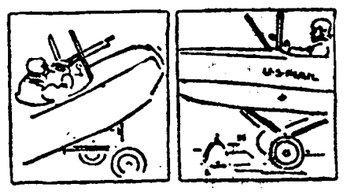

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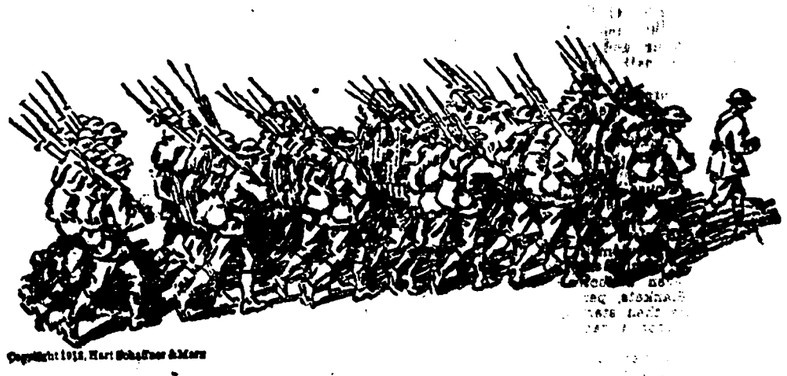

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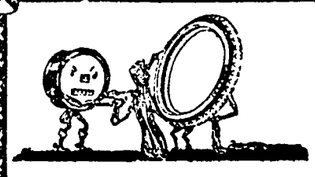

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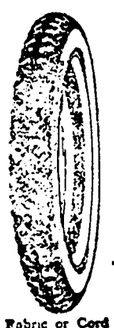

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