MEUSE-ARGONNE BATTLE PART OF GENERLAL ALLIED OFFENSIVE

Continued from Page 1

of it constitutes the story of the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne.

Looking, now, more specifically at the last-mentioned main door, we see that in order to assure their hold on the invaded portions of Belgium and northern France, which embraced all the territory of the former kingdom, the manufacturing and coal-mining regions of France around Lille, and the Briey iron basin north and west of Metz, the Germans had constructed, during the four years in which they had been in possession, four successive defensive systems.

The first of these systems which, as early as the spring of 1917, had come to be known as the Hindenburg line, was the longest and also the strongest of the four. Until the latter part of September, 1918, it was never broken, though the Germans themselves had advanced far beyond it on several wide sectors during their gigantic sorties of the spring and summer of 1918. It was the front line of defense from the seacoast to Metz, and its interlacing trench systems were exceedingly strong and organized to depths of from three or four to sometimes as much as ten kilometers.

Second Line from Lille to La Fere

Behind it a second line ran from Lille southward in front of Cambrai to La Fère, thence turning east to the Aisne, behind which it ran to the Argonne forest and across the Meuse to Ornes, immediately north of Verdun, where it virtually merged with the first line down to the front of Metz.

A third line, providing retirement positions in case the Germans should be forced back from the coast, started at the Dutch frontier and followed the track of the Lys river from Ghent to Lille, thence turning southeast by Landrecies and Mézieres to Ornes. The fourth line ran from Ghent to Tournai behind the Escaut or Scheldt river, then on to Valenciennes, where it swung east to the Meuse near Givet and then south behind that stream to Mézières, where it joined the third line.

All of these successive defensive zones were carefully sited to utilize to the best advantage commanding ground and the obstacles afforded by rivers and canals. All were joined together at intervals by switch lines of similar nature to the main lines, designed to safeguard the rest of the German front by providing flank protection in case of an Allied break-through at any point; in effect, an adaptation on a great scale of the method first developed in making a single trench system, whose several lines of firing trenches were knitted together with communication trenches and stiffened by strong points of resistance.

With the exception of the last, all of the defensive zones protected the great lateral railway line between Metz, Mézières and Valenciennes and, with the same exception, all of them depended at their extremities upon the fortified areas of Lille and Metz. But in the importance of these two bastions of the system there was this important difference; if Lille fell the German hold on the seacoast and the French industrial districts would be lost, but if Metz feel or if even the front between Metz and Mézières should be broken clean through, the German army, and with it the German Empire, would be lost.

Front a Gigantic Salient

This was true for a very simple reason. The whole of Germany's western front was a gigantic salient extending beyond German's natural frontier, the Rhine or, if they were to retain southern Lorraine, the Rhine and then the Moselle from Coblenz to Metz. The base of this salient, on a line between Cologne and Metz, was about 200 kilometers in breadth, its depth from this line to the furthest portions of the Hindenburg front, in the neighborhood of Arras, was some 300 kilometers. If, therefore, on the left flank of this great salient near Metz, the attacking force, which was to be the First American Army, should break through as it had recently done on the left flank of the smaller salient of St. Mihiel and should move north toward Cologne, it is obvious that the vast German armies with their impedimenta down in the point of the salient would have a much harder time in getting back to the Rhine before the throat of the salient should be closed against them than the few divisions around St. Mihiel and Aprémont had experienced in getting back to their Michel position.

In such a disastrous event their best hope would lie in falling back first to the line of the Meuse between their front north of Verdun and the Dutch frontier near Maastricht, which would constitute a retired salient, corresponding roughly to the Schroeter zone at St. Mihiel. But, again, the tenability of this position would depend wholly upon its left flank remaining intact between Metz and Mézières.

All the circumstances mentioned go to show why it was that the Germans had expended such prodigious efforts to make this part of their front unassailable, weaving their successive lines together upon it into practically one zone more than 20 kilometers deep. Their confidence in its strength seemed justified by the costly failures which the French had several times experienced in trying to break it. But this was the front which General Pershing's troops were at last to prove not impregnable.

Back on Hindenburg Line

By the last week in September, 1918, the counter-offensive operations of the Allied armies, begun on July 18, had resulted in beating back the enemy from the several salients which he had forced by his spring and summer attacks to his line of departure of March 21—the Hindenburg line.

But, though the battle front was thus back to where it had been six months earlier, there had occurred a radical change in the relative strength and morale of the opposing forces. In March the Germans had possessed an enormous superiority in numbers and their troops were inspired with a high and not unjustified confidence in speedy and complete victory.

In September, on the contrary, after six months of heart-breaking effort and staggering losses, their numbers had been reduced to such an extent that available replacements could not restore them to their original strength, while failures and reverses had reduced their morale to a very marked degree.

The Allies, however, thanks chiefly to the rapid arrival of American troops, had found it possible during the same period not only to replace their losses but actually to increase the numbers they had disposed in March, while success had raised the spirits of all to an enthusiasm of confidence. The feeling had become general that at last the formidable enemy had done his utmost and had been proved not invincible, and the Armies were eager to put to the test of battle their growing belief that he was, in fact, ripe for total overthrow.

When the Allied supreme command, acting in harmony with the universal desire, determined to force the fighting for an early decision, the attack was planned not against one point or on one front only, as had been the practice of Ludendorff and the German General Staff, but against all the main fronts, excepting in Italy, at practically the same time and on a scale for greater than had ever before been attempted in warfare.

To Engage All of Enemy

Every considerable body of the enemy was to be engaged, and there were thus to be left none free to reinforce other hard-pressed fronts. It will be worth while to note once more the order in which the successive attacks were delivered.

On September 21, Gen. Franchet d'Esperey launched the attack on the Macedonian front which at once broke through the line of the Bulgarian armies and speedily annihilated them.

On September 23 the British army under General Allenby assailed the Turks in Palestine with results quite as rapid and decisive. On September 26 General Pershing's First American Army, with nine divisions in line, and General Gourand's Fourth French Army, with 12 divisions in line, struck against the vital portion of the German Western front centering on the portion of the Hindenburg line, though powerful in itself, was built across the comparatively open and level plain of the Champagne, which was less adaptable by nature to improvised defense than the country in the American sector.

In view of these facts, the plans contemplated somewhat greater successive advances on the part of the Fourth French Army than on that of the First American Army, so that the advanced line of the French would convey to the enemy opposing the Americans a constant threat of outflanking. But the successive objectives of both armies were so pre-arranged as always to carry the outer flanks the furthest and to leave the Argonne forest in the point of a salient, or V, between them.

Thus the original objective of the first operation of the attack for the First American Army was, roughly, a line extending from the Meuse through Brieulles, Cunel, Romange and Exermont to Aprémont in the Aire valley on the eastern edge of the Argonne; that of the Fourth French Army, a line extending from the eastern edge of the Bois des Forges, which is west of the forest, through the heights south of Monthiers and along the Liry-Orfeuil-Medeah Farm road.

What line was to be attained by the troops of the American left flank actually attacking in the Argonne forest by the time these objectives were reached was not even stated, but the presumption was held that they would have made and would continue to make some progress, if for no other reason than that the enemy in front of them would have been forced to retire on account of the outflanking operations.

The Combined Army Objective of the First Operation carried the front from Brieulles northwestward to Bantheville and the ridges north of the road from there to La Dhuy farm, Landres-St. Georges and St. Juvin, thence to Chevières, along the Aire river to its junction with the Aisne, then to Vaux and Monthois. In the American sector the gaining of this line would overrun the Kriemhilde Stellung and complete the conquest of the Argonne forest except for the smaller northward extension of it called the Bois de Bourgogne.

Salient 15 Kilometers in Depth

The American Army Objective of the Second Operation curved northwest and then west from Dun-sur-Meuse to Autruche, then sharply southward to Briquenay and Talma; the French Army Objective went from Mouron northwest down the valley of the Aisne to Vouziers, thence west across the Champagne. Here the V-shaped salient in which the Bois de Bourgogne was left was very pronounced, being about 15 kilometers in depth.

The Combined Army Second Objective was designed to advance the whole line to its ultimate objectives, the enemy being thrown completely out of the Bois de Bourgogne in the process. A large part of the mission of the 38th French Corps, the right flank corps of the Fourth French Army, was to assist the American attack in the Argonne forest by capturing successively Binarville, Lancon and Grand Ham, along the western edge of the forest, and in natural sequence would follow the French flank operations down the Aisne to Vouziers.

During the night of September 24-25 most of the American attack divisions occupied the sectors from which they were to advance, either by moving into them, or, if already in front line, by contracting their fronts to make room for the new arrivals, while the French holding divisions dropped out. When finally disposed there were three army corps with nine divisions in line and three in reserve, which, together with three divisions in army reserve, gave a total of 15 divisions for the attack.

From right to left they were: The Third Army Corps, Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett commanding, with the 33rd, 80th and 4th Divisions in line and the 3rd Division in reserve; the Fifth Army Corps, Maj. Gen. George H. Cameron commanding, with the 79th, 37th and 91st Divisions in line and the 32nd Division in reserve; and the First Army Corps, Maj. Gen. Robert Lee Bullard commanding, with the 35th, 28th and 77th Divisions in line and the 82nd Division in reserve. The army reserve consisted of the 1st Division of the Third Corps, the 29th Division of the Fifth Corps and the 82nd Division of the First Corps.

Deep Raids East of Meuse

On the right of the First American Army sector, east of the Meuse, the 4th Corps was to assist the attack by joining the artillery bombardment and by making deep raids along its front. The 2nd Colonial Corps (French), next in line, was to follow the same course of action, as was also the 17th French Corps, except that the latter, which extended to the Meuse, was especially to maintain observation and artillery fire upon the German batteries east of the Meuse, whose fire would be directed upon the American advance.

The extreme right American attack division was the 33rd, under Maj. Gen. George Bell, Jr. This division of Illinois National Guard troops had fought gallantly with the British in July and August at Hamel and Vaire, Chipilly Ridge and Gressaire Wood, along the Somme. Now it lay with its right flank upon the Meuse, and in front of it the village of the Forges and the valley of the Forges brook; a valley wide and marshy and with forbidding memories of the grim battles around Verdun in 1916.

The 33rd was charged with the task of cleaning up the valley of the Meuse as far down as Dannevoux, capturing the large Bois des Forges on the way, and eventually organizing and holding the left bank for a distance of about eight kilometers. It took into the attack the 129th, 130th, 131st and 132nd Infantry Regiments.

The 80th Division, of Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia National Army troops, under Maj. Gen. Adelbert Cronkhite, also had the Forges brook to cross and eventually to reach and occupy the bend in the Meuse between Dannévoux and Brieulles. It attacked with the 319th Infantry on the right, the 320th on the left, one battalion of the 313th Field Artillery as accompanying batteries, and the 317th and 318th Infantry in reserve.

The 4th Division, under Maj. Gen. Mark A. Hersey, was confronted by the Forges brook, the village of Bathincourt, and thereafter a long succession of hills, ravines and woodlands extending up east and north of Montfaucon. The division attacked with the 47th Infantry on the right, the 39th Infantry on the left, one battalion of the 16th Field Artillery as accompanying artillery, and the 58th and 59th Infantry in reserve.

In Front of Montfaucon

Coming now to the 5th Army Corps, we find that the 79th Division, of Virginia and Maryland National Army troops, under Maj. Gen. Joseph E. Kuhn, had directly in front of it the Forges brook and the strongly organized village of Malancourt, but, far more formidable still, seven kilometers beyond these obstacles it had Montfaucon itself, long regarded by the French as impregnable, where a desperate defense was to be expected.

The initial attack was delivered by the 314th Infantry on the right and the 313th Infantry on the left. The 57th Artillery Brigade, of the 32nd Division, had been assigned to the 79th Division for the operation, and both battalions of the 147th Field Artillery of this brigade were designated as accompanying artillery. In reserve were the 315th and 316th Infantry.

The 37th Division, of Ohio National Guard, under Maj. Gen. C. S. Farnsworth, jumping off from the edge of Avocourt, was to go through the Bois de Montfaucon and pass to the west and northwest of Montfaucon tself. The 147th Infantry led the attack on the right and the 145th on the left, with the 146th and 148th Infantry in reserve. The 55th Artillery Brigade and three companies of small French tanks were attached to the division.

The 91st Division, composed of National Army troops from seven of the Northwestern and Pacific Coast States, under Maj. Gen. William H. Johnston, had to advance across the Buanthe River, through the Beu de Cheppy, and take Epinonville and the ridges north to Gèsnes. It went in with the 361st Infantry on the right, the 363rd Infantry on the left, and the 362nd and 364th Infantry in reserve.

From the eastern edge of the abrupt peak of Vauquois, over which the French and Germans had fought so fiercely ever since 1915 that its summit was literally blown off by mines and shelling, to the eastern edge of Boureuilles was the section of the 35th Division, of Kansas and Missouri National Guard, under Maj. Gen. Peter E. Traub. It was charged with advancing down the valley of the Aire with the river on its left flank, taking Varennes, Cheppy and other villages as far as the Kriemhilde Stellung, and then Exermont, beyond it. This division, on the right flank of the First Corps, attacked with the 138th Infantry on the right and the 137th on the left, with the 140th and 139th Infantry in reserve, one battalion of the 139th being attached to the advance brigade to mop up Varennes and the Boies de Rossignol.

To Sweep Slopes Lengthwise

The 28th Division, under Maj. Gen. Chas. H. Muir, advancing from the front between Boureuilles and Pierre Croisée, had probably as peculiar an attack problem to solve as was ever presented to such a large body of troops. It was to advance constantly with its right flank on the Aire River and its left flank on the upper edge of the Argonne plateau, where it would maintain liason with the left flank of the 77th Division, while its front would sweep lengthwise the precipitous slopes, spurs and ravines on the escarpment of the plateau.

Ordinarily, with free room to maneuver, such positions would be attacked from the front. But with 23,300 men rigidly confined to a sector little more than two kilometers wide who would be obliged to maintain a front approximately parallel to those of other units advancing over comparatively level ground on either flank, there would be little room for maneuvering, and tactical ingenuity would have to be exercised. The division attacked with the 110th Infantry on the right, one battalion of the 109th Infantry in the center and the 112th Infantry on the left, the 111th Infantry and two battalions of the 109th being in support.

The 77th Division, of National Army troops from New York City, under Maj. Gen. Robert Alexander, held the extreme left of the First American Army and occupied the longest sector of any division in line, seven and one-half kilometers. On its left flank it was in liason with the right of the 1st French Division, 38th Corps, 4th French Army.

Assisted by Flanking Movements

It was to be the difficult task of the 77th Division to clear the enemy from the wilderness of the Argonne forest, a wilderness comparable in every way with the Wilderness of Virginia, except that its topography was more rugged and that the science of modern warfare had made its natural difficulties infinitely harder to overcome. The only advantage of the 77th Division in attacking a region hitherto regarded as utterly impregnable lay in the fact that the flanking operations on either side of the forest would constantly assist them in forcing their way forward.

Owing to the length of the front, all four Infantry regiments attacked in line, the 305th on the right, then the 306th, 307th and 308th. A regiment of the 92nd Division, the 368th, which was assigned to the special mission of maintaining liason between the 77th Division and the French right, was not successful in accomplishing it.

Thus the vast American assaulting line lay when, at 11 p.m. of September 25, the night suddenly became an inferno of flame and thunder as 3,928 pieces of artillery simultaneously opened the preliminary bombardment, tearing to pieces the solid concrete trenches of the Hindenburg line, leveling the wire and deluging the German circulation and battery areas with the great shells of the heavy guns. For six hours this preliminary bombardment was to continue. At 5:30 o'clock in the morning the assault was to go over.

Forest the Supreme Obstacle

But, formidable as were the positions between the Meuse and the Argonne forest, the latter was in itself the strongest position of all. The forest stands upon a plateau, rising abruptly on its eastern side to heights of about 100 meters above the valley of the Aire, sloping off more gradually on the western side to the valley of the Aisne, into which the Aire flows through the gap of Grand Pré, about 15 kilometers north of La Harazée.

The southern half of the plateau and forest was within the Allied lines, the northern half within the German. Though they made several attacks upon it before and during 1915, the French were never able to break through the German front in the forest, and in the years which had elapsed since the last of these major attacks was made the invaders had greatly strengthened and deepened their zone of resistance by interlacing with barbed wire the dense timber and tangled underbrush which everywhere clothes the precipitous ravines and hillside, and by siting machine gun emplacements and zones of cross fire.

The Argonne forest was, in fact, so strong that the entire scheme of attack of the First American Army and the Fourth French Army west of it was governed by the necessity of forcing its defenders from it by outflanking rather than by direct attack.

According to the voluminous and carefully elaborated plans, the First American and the Fourth French Armies were to attack in unison on D day at H hour on the front from the Meuse river to the Suippe river, the latter being about 40 kilometers east of the American left flank at La Harazée. The stated mission of the attack was to force the enemy from the line of the Aisne; its stated objectives, first: Dun-sur-Meuse, Grand-Pré, Challerange, Somme-Py, and second: Stenay, Le Chêsnes, Attigny, Rethel.

To attain its part of these objectives, the Fourth French Army would have to force the very strong and deeply organized section of the Hindenburg line in its front. But, having forced this, it would not encounter the second line, the Volker Stellung, until it reached the Aisne, some 20 kilometers further north. Moreover, this Argonne forest from the Meuse river to the Suippe river.

On September 27 General Horne's First British Army, with nine divisions in line, and General Byng's Third British Army, with eight divisions in line, following up their counter-offensive operations by which, during the preceding two months, the enemy had been driven back from the proximity of Amiens, attacked the Hindenburg line between Gouzeaucourt and the Sensée River, with Cambrai as the main objective. On September 28 their advance was extended southward as far as the front of St. Quentin by the attack of General Rawlinson's Fourth British Army, with six divisions in line, and from St. Quentin toward La Fère by that of General Debeney's First French Army, with seven divisions in line.

On September 28, also, the Belgian Army, with about four divisions in line, and General Plumer's Second British Army, with eight divisions in line, attacked in Flanders on a front extending from Dixmude to a point southeast of Ypres.

With Increasing Momentum

From the beginning all of these attacks met with success, more or less rapid, according to the difficulties encountered. But all were sustaned with unrelaxing vigor and all drove forward with increasing momentum as time went on and the enemy became more and more exhausted, until the complete victory was achieved. The wisdom of placing the command of all the Allied Armies in the hands of one leader, Marshal Foch, could have received no more impressive vindication than was given by the precision and power with which, in a period of eight days, the successive blows of armies extending from Asia Minor to the English Channel were delivered like hammer strokes upon the vital fronts of the Central Powers.

To come now, specifically to the supreme battle of the American forces, between the Argonne forest and the Meuse, it is to be noted that this battle was opened little more than ten days after the reduction of the St. Mihiel salient, an operation which was completed by the 15th of September. Even before that date much of the Army artillery and many of the corps troops which had taken part in the attack on the salient had been removed to the rear of the sector between the Meuse river and the western edge of the Argonne forest.

About September 20 the zone of the First American Army was extended westward by taking over the whole army sector previously occupied by the Second French Army under General Hirschauer from a point just east of Verdun to La Harazée, in the Argonne. General Pershing then had under his command a front about 115 kilometers in length, from Clemery to La Harazée.

In order to conceal as much as possible the impending offensive on the Meuse-Argonne portion of this front, some of the French troops were left in the front line while the American divisions were massing for the attack. On September 22 the holding divisions were, from the Meuse to La Harazée, the 18th French Division, the 33rd, 79th and 91st United States Divisions, the 73rd French Division and the 28th United States Division.

Opposed to them on the same date were only four enemy divisions, the 1st Austro-Hungarian, astride the Meuse, and west of it the CXVth, XXXVII th and LIIIrd Reserve Divisions, the one last mentioned holding the Argonne-forest line. One division only, the XVth, constituted the enemy's close support.

Formidably Fortified Positions

But the country which was held by the enemy divisions enumerated on the front of approximately 30 kilometers between the Meuse and La Harazée was, as has already been said, perhaps the most formidably fortified portion of the German defensive system in France. It is, moreover, in a defensive sense, extremely strong by nature.

Resting upon the deeply eroded valley of the Meuse river on the left flank and the precipitous and densely wooded hills of the Argonne on the right, all the country between for a long distance northward is furrowed at intervals of a few kilometers by the transverse ravines and beds of numerous small streams which, originating in the watershed that extends northwestward by Esnes, Melancourt, Montfaucon, Gèsnes, Romonville and Buzancy, fall eastward into the Meuse or westward into the Aire.

Between these ravines are a corresponding succession of high and steep ridges and detached hills, dotted with numerous woodlands and villages. Quite aside from the elaborate entrenchments and entanglements with which it had been artificially strengthened, the topography of the country lends itself in a striking degree to that system of defense by the crossfire of machine gun nests which the Germans had developed to a fine art.

The dominating height of the whole region is Montfaucon, which, rising 342 meters above sea level, is more than 30 meters higher than any other eminence between the Meuse and the Argonne on either the German or the Allied side of the old battle line. From a concrete observation post on Montfaucon it is said that the German Crown Prince watched the attack of his troops on Verdun in 1916; and Dead Man's Hill and Hill 304, which figured so prominently in that terrific struggle, are well overtopped by it.

To safeguard this unrivaled point of observation the Germans had covered the seven kilometers which intervened between it and their front line with a multitude of defenses. But still other defenses extended far north of it, the four great zones previously mentioned, though so closely woven together as to seem practically one, being, in fact, first, the Hindenburg line, then the Hagen Stellung, then the Volker Stellung, and last, a little farther back on the line of heights and woods defined by Champigneuelle, Landres-St. Georges, Romagne and Brieulles, the Kriemhilde Stellung.

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