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War Blights Neighborhood of Soissons

Richard Harding Davis Describes Effects of Battle on City

Witnesses Terrific Effect of Artillery

Fire So Fierce on Second Day No Human Power Could Oppose It

Landscape Shows The Grim Effects

Beautiful Region a Scene of Carnage, with Horrors Marked Even on Vegetation

Paris Sept. 13 (Delayed by censor).

The struggle for the possession of Soissons lasted two days. The second day's battle, which I witnessed, ended with the city in the possession of the French. It was part of the seven days of continuous fighting that began on September 6 at Meaux. Then the German left wing, consisting of the army of General von Kluck, was within ten miles of Paris. But the French and English, instead of meeting the advance with a defense, themselves attacked. Steadily all of last week at the rate of ten miles a day they have been driving the Germans back across the Aisne and the Marne, and so saved Paris.

When this retrograde movement of the Germans began, those who could not see the nature of the fighting believed that the German line of communication, the one from Aix-la-Chapelle through Belgium, had proved too long, and that the left wing was voluntarily withdrawing to meet the new line of communication through Luxembourg. The fields of battle beyond Meaux through which today it was necessary for me to pass to reach the fight at Soissons showed no evidence of leisurely withdrawal, but on both sides were was evidence of desperate fighting and of artillery fire that was widespread and desolating. That of the Germans intended to destroy the road from Meaux and to cover their retreat, showed marksmanship so accurate and execution so terrible as, while it lasted, to render pursuit impossible.

The battlefield stretched from the hills three miles north of Meaux for four miles along the road and a mile to either side. The road is lined with poplars three feet across and as high as a five story building. For the four miles the road was piled with branches of these trees. the trees themselves were split as by lighting or torn in half as with your hand you could tear apart a loaf of bread. Through some, solid shell had passed, leaving clean holes. Others looked as though drunken woodsmen with axes from roots to topmost branches had slashed the in crazy fury. Some shells had broken solid trunks in two as a hurricane snaps a mast.

Beyond Human Endurance

That no human being could survive such a bombardment I saw many gruesome proofs. In one place for a mile the road was lined with those wicker baskets in which the Germans carry their ammunition. These we filled with shells, unexploded, and behind the trenches were hundreds more of these baskets, some as large as lobster pots or umbrella stands, for the shells of the siege guns, and others each of three compartments for shrapnels. In gutters along the road and in the wheat fields on either side these brass shells flashed in the sunshine like tiny mirrors.

The four miles of countryside over which for four days both armies had ploughed the earth with these shells was the picture of complete desolation. The rout of the German army was marked by knapsacks, uniforms and accoutrements scattered over the fields on either hand as far as you could see. Red Cross flags hanging from bushes showed where there had been dressing stations. Under them were blood stains, bandages and clothing, and boots piled in heaps as high as a man's chest, and the bodies of those German soldiers that the first aid had failed to save.

After death the body is mercifully robbed of its human aspect. You are spared the thought that what is lying in the trenches among the shattered trees and in the wheat fields staring up at the sky was once a man. It appears to be only a bundle of clothes, a scarecrow that has tumbled among the grain it once protected. But if gives a terrible meaning to the word "missing." When you read in the reports from the War Office that five thousand are "missing" you like to think of them safely cared for in a hospital or dragging out the period of the war as prisoners. But the real missing are those I saw today, the unidentified dead. Some peasant will bury them tonight or tomorrow, but he will not understand the purpose of the medal each wears around his neck. With him will be buried his name and the number of his regiment. No one will know where he fell or where he lies. Someone will always hope that he will return. For among the dead his name did not appear. He was reported only as missing.

The utter wastefulness of war was seldom more clearly shown. Carcasses of horses lined the road. Some few of these had been killed by shell fire. Others, worn out and emaciated and bearing the brand of the Germany army, had been mercifully destroyed, but the greater number of them were the farm horses of peasants, still wearing their headstalls or the harness of the plough. That they might not aid the enemy as remounts, the Germans in their retreat had shot them. I saw four and five together in the yards of stables, the bullet hole of an automatic in the head of each. Others lay beside the market cart, others by the canal, where they had sought water.

More of War's Waste

Less pitiful, but still evidencing the wastefulness of war, were the motor trucks and automobiles that in the flight had been abandoned. They had broken down, or the petrol, of which the German army is said to be greatly in need, had been exhausted, and sooner than that they should fall into the hands of the enemy the Germans had smashed the motors or beneath them had lighted fires. Others had been shoved over embankments. In the forest of Villers-Cotterets I counted in one place fifteen great motor trucks completely destroyed. A heap of empty gasoline barrels told the story. For twenty miles these automobiles were scattered along the road. There were so many one stopped counting them. Added to their loss were two shattered German airships. One I saw twenty-six kilometers outside of Meaux and one at Bouneville. As they fell they had buried their motors deep in the soft earth, and their wings were twisted wrecks of silk and steel.

All the fields through which the army passed had become waste land. Shells had reploughed them. Horses ad men had slept in them. The haystacks, gathered by the sweat of the brow and patiently set in trim rows, were tramped in the mud and scattered to the winds. All the smaller villages through which I passed were empty of people, and since the day before, when the Germans occupied them, none of the inhabitants had returned. These villages were just as the Germans had left them. The streets were piled with grain, on which the soldiers had slept, and on the sidewalks in front of the better class of houses tables around which the officers had eaten still remained, the bottles half empty, the food half eaten.

In a chateau beyond Neufchelles the doors and windows were open and lace curtains were blowing in the breeze. From the garden you could see paintings on the walls, books on the tables. Outside, on the lawn, surrounded by old and charming gardens, apparently the general and his staff had prepared to dine. The table was set for a dozen and on it were candles in silver sticks, many bottles of red and white wine, champagne, liqueurs, and coffee cups of the finest china. From their banquet some alarm had summoned the officers. The place was as they had left it, the coffee untasted, the candles burned to the candlesticks, and red stains on the cloth where brandy had spilled. In the bright sunlight and surrounded by flowers, the deserted table and the silent, stately chateau seemed like the sleeping palace of the fairy tale.

Though the humor of troops retreating is an ugly one, I saw no outrages such as I saw in Belgium. Except in the villages of Neufchelles and Varreddes there was no sign of looting or wanton destruction. In those two villages the interior of every home and shop was completely wrecked. In the other villages the destruction was such as is permitted by the usages of war, such as the blowing up of bridges, the burning of the railroad station and the cutting of telegraph wires.

Saw Artillery Duel

Not until Bouneville, thirty kilometers beyond Meaux, did I catch up with the Allies. There I met some English Tommies who were trying to find their column. They had no knowledge of the French language or where they were or where their regiment was, but were quite confident of finding it and were as cheerful as at maneuvres. Outside of Chaudun the road was blocked with tirailleurs, Algerians in light blue zouave uniforms and native Turcos from Morocco in khaki, with khaki turbans. They shivered in the autumn sunshine and were wrapped in burnooses of black and white. They were making a turning movement to attack the German right and were being hurried forward. They had just driven the German rear guard out of Chaudun, and said that the fighting was still going on at Soissons. But the only sign I saw of it were two Turcos who had followed the Germans too far. They lay sprawling in the road, and had so lately fallen that their rifles still lay under them. Three miles further I came upon the advance line of the French army, and for the remainder of the day watched a most remarkable artillery duel ,which ended with Soissons in the hands of the Allies.

Soissons is a pretty town of 4,000 inhabitants. It is chiefly known for its white beans, and since the Romans held it under Caesar it has been besieged many times. Until today the Germans had held it for two weeks. In 1870 they bombarded it for four days, and there is, or was, in Soissons, in the Place de la Republique, a monument to those citizens of Soissons whom after that siege the Germans shot. The town lies in the valley of the River Aisne, which is formed by two long ridges running south and north.

Last night the Germans occupied the hills to the south, but when attacked offered only slight resistance and withdrew to the hills opposite. In Soissons they left a rearguard to protect their supplies, who were destroying all bridges leading into the town. At the time I arrived a force of Turcos had been ordered forward to clean Soissons of the Germans and the French artillery was endeavoring to disclose their positions on the hills. the loss of the bridges did not embarrass the black men. In rowboats they crossed to Soissons and were warmly greeted. This morning Soissons was drawing no color line. The Turcos were followed by engineers, who endeavored to repair one bridge and in consequence were heavily shelled with shrapnel, while, with the intent to destroy the road and retard the French advance, the hills where the French had halted were being pounded by German siege guns.

This was at a point four kilometers from Chaudun between the villages of Breuil and Courtelles. From this height you could see almost to Compiegne and thirty miles in front in the direction of Saint-Quentin. It was a panorama of wooded hills, gray villages in yellow fields of grain, miles of poplars marking the roads, and below us the flashing waters of the Aisne and the canal, with at our feet the steeples of the Cathedral of Soissons and the gate to the old Abbey of Thomas a Becket. Across these steeples the shells sang, and on both sides of the Aisne valley the artillery was engaged. The wind was blowing forty knots, which prevented the use of the French aeroplanes, but it cleared the air, and helped by brilliant sunshine, it was possible to follow the smoke of the battle for fifteen miles. The wind was blowing toward our right, where the English were, and though we could see the flash of their guns and the rings of smoke as their shrapnel burst, the report of the guns did not reach us. It gave the curious impression of a bombardment conducted in utter silence.

From our left the wind carried the sounds clearly. The jar and roar of the cannon were insistent, and on both sides of the valley the hilltops were wrapped with white clouds. Back of us in the wheat fields shells were setting fire to the giant haystacks and piles of grain, which in the clear sunshine burned a blatant red. At times shells would strike in the villages of Breuil and Vauxbain, and houses would burst into flames, the gale fanning the fire to great height and biding the village in smoke. Some three hundred yards ahead of us the shells of German siege guns were trying to destroy the road, which the poplars clearly betrayed. But their practice was at fault and the shells fell only on either side. When they struck they burst with a roar, casting up black fumes and digging a grave twenty yards in circumference.

But the French soldiers disregarded them entirely. In the trenches which the Germans had made and abandoned they id from the wind and slept peacefully. Others slept in the lee of the haystacks, their red breeches and blue coats making wonderful splashes of color against the yellow grain. For seven days they have been fighting without pause, and battles bore them.

Late in the afternoon all along the fifteen miles of battle firing ceased, for the Germans were falling back upon Laon, and once more Soissons, freed of them as fifteen hundred years ago she had freed herself of the Romans, held out her arms to the Allies.