

Death at Cantigny!



Men of the 18th infantry, 1st division, A. E. F., under shell fire. Photo by U. S. Army Signal Corps.

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CANTIGNY lies about four kilometers north of Montdidier in the beautiful rolling country of Picardy. During April and May, 1918, the sector was very active and scarcely a day passed when the official army communique failed to record "heavy bombardment at Villers-Bretonneux and north of Montdidier" or "heavy drum fire north of Montdidier and at Villers-Bretonneux."

The variation seemed irrelevant to the occupants of the sector. The sector was wholly disorganized. Front-line trenches found their places on the map if "over two feet in depth." There were no dugouts in the front trenches and no communication trenches. My platoon occupied about 200 yards of front in which there were three small trenches. The largest was possibly seventy-five yards and contained seven or eight bays. The ground of that trench was very chalky, and each man experimented in finding cover by digging a hole of some variety in the side of the trench under the parapet. It was better than being rained on. Sometimes a direct hit on the parapet from a 77 would bury the occupant undamaged under a couple of feet of earth. Anything larger than a 77 meant no further worry.

Men lived in that sector the most extraordinary game of life and death ever invented—lived on their wits, their nerves, and that sixth sense which combined all other senses, and were assisted to live once each twenty-four hours—if the chow party was lucky—by a slice of meat, a spoonful of sour mashed potatoes, a canteen of water, a canteen cup of coffee, a half loaf of bread, a beautiful country, and sometimes a sunny sky.

One beautiful morning in the early part of May at about 10:30—the usual time for sleeping—a bombardment from beyond Grivesnes to Montdidier began. It was heavy enough to be unusual, and therefore one awoke. Anything unusual in that sector, such as quiet and peace, would make one

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—R. L. Bullard, Lieutenant General, retired.

Reprinted from the book "Cantigny, a Corner of the War," by Capt. Jeremiah M. Evarts, 18th infantry, 1st division, A. E. F., by courtesy of the author and Charles Scribner's Sons, the publisher.

wake in a state of apprehension. On this particular morning I came to with a start as a 155 ripped out the end of the next bay at the corner of the traverse. I crawled out and moved a sentry to what I thought was a safer position, and saw a volley of 155s make direct hits in the deepest bay in the trench (about four and a half feet), at the extreme western end, next to some woods. I knew there were three men in that particular bay. I met Sergeant James on the way up and we went along together.

The air in the bay reeked of high explosive. Fortunately for two of the men, they had dug their holes exactly opposite the bursts. They seemed so peaceful that one could lift off their helmets and almost believe that they were asleep. The third was wounded beyond all hope, as he told us over and over again while we tried to bind his wounds. But he had more than twenty bad ones, and finally we only tried to talk to him as we gave him water and watched him die under the blue sky. We left the three as they were, and no one ever again even so much as paused in that bay.

Around noon things quieted down, and we lay down to try to sleep or whatever one did, but not for long. About 2 o'clock the bombardment began

again with great intensity. How we survived that afternoon without even a wounded man I never understood. There were ten of us in the trench, and I think it was that afternoon that one man lost the heel of his shoe. I left my place to see if the sentries and the machine guns were all right and managed to get by some 77s and whizz-bangs on my way back, only to find that a 155 had demolished my hole and all my possessions, to my great disgust.

I poked around and finally found a Luger pistol, but I had no great desire to stay in the bay any longer, so I moved westward up the trench, alternately running, falling, pausing in traverses, and looking in holes to see if any one had caught a splinter. I met James coming back from the same errand at the western end. I told him that my place was gone and that I was going to crawl in with him. We crawled in his hole close to the traverse near the east end of the bay, and talked incessantly for an hour about everything in the world. The sentry in the traverse stuck his head in once and shouted that some one, he thought, had been hit, but upon investigation we found that more

shells had landed in the same bay where the three had gotten theirs that morning. The bay had become a gully about five times its former width. The French had wisely built this trench with a slight curve, so that an absolutely perfect range on the extreme western bay would only be perfect on the extreme eastern bay. In the intervening fifty or sixty yards, what was left of us cringed in our traps in a more or less hopeless state of expectancy.

It was now past 3 o'clock, and we returned to James' hole. The bombardment increased. Another battery of 155s came into action on the platoon sector. Now we had two batteries in addition to what seemed an unlimited quota of 77s and whizz-bangs. The ground thumped and shook constantly and the air suffocated. The sentry in the traverse was relieved. He stayed in preference to the solitude of his hole. James and I had now reached the stage where we could only look each other in the eye and give each other what passed for a smile. James had large brown eyes of nice color but not very well shaped. In spite of the shape I thought how grand they were.

Gradually we became almost rigid with expectancy, and silently we waited for the next and the next as the 155s moved up and down the trench. Each second was fast becoming an hour. We smoked incessantly as the odds shifted fast. The battery of 155s that was searching our end of the platoon sector was again moving up the trench for what seemed the hundredth time. We both reached for a cigaret. I had the matches for the two of us in a safety match box and struck one on the box, but the head broke off. I took out another match and noticed to my horror that it was one of two. Again the head broke off. We were both painfully aware that two 155s had either hit near the next west bay or the further traverse of our bay, but there was no cry and the sentry said nothing. I took the last match and looked at it and the box and then at James, and noticed that he was regarding the match and the box with as much interest as I. I shouted at James, (Continued on page three.)