

Death in the Trenches Before Cantigny!

An American Officer's Own War Story

(Continued from page one.)

"For God's sake, James, take it, and I'll bet you a hundred francs you won't light it."

"I'll take the bet," he said, and he took the match and box, and as he did so a 155 landed in the further traverse of our bay. James struck the match the opposite way from the way I had tried, and it lit. Even as it lit there was the fierce noise of a very close 155, and the bay shuddered and heaved under the explosion. James kept the match lit. We looked each other in the eye and lit our cigarettes. We crawled out. In the corner of the traverse crouched the sentry and the reliever, both unharmed. Eight feet or so up the bay, on the opposite side from where the match was lit, was the direct hit of the 155. We grinned at each other and crawled back in the hole, and I delivered the 100 francs. Somehow we both knew that eight feet was as close as we would come to cashing in that afternoon. The spell was broken, and we started to talk again. I have often wondered what would have happened had I not lost the bet.

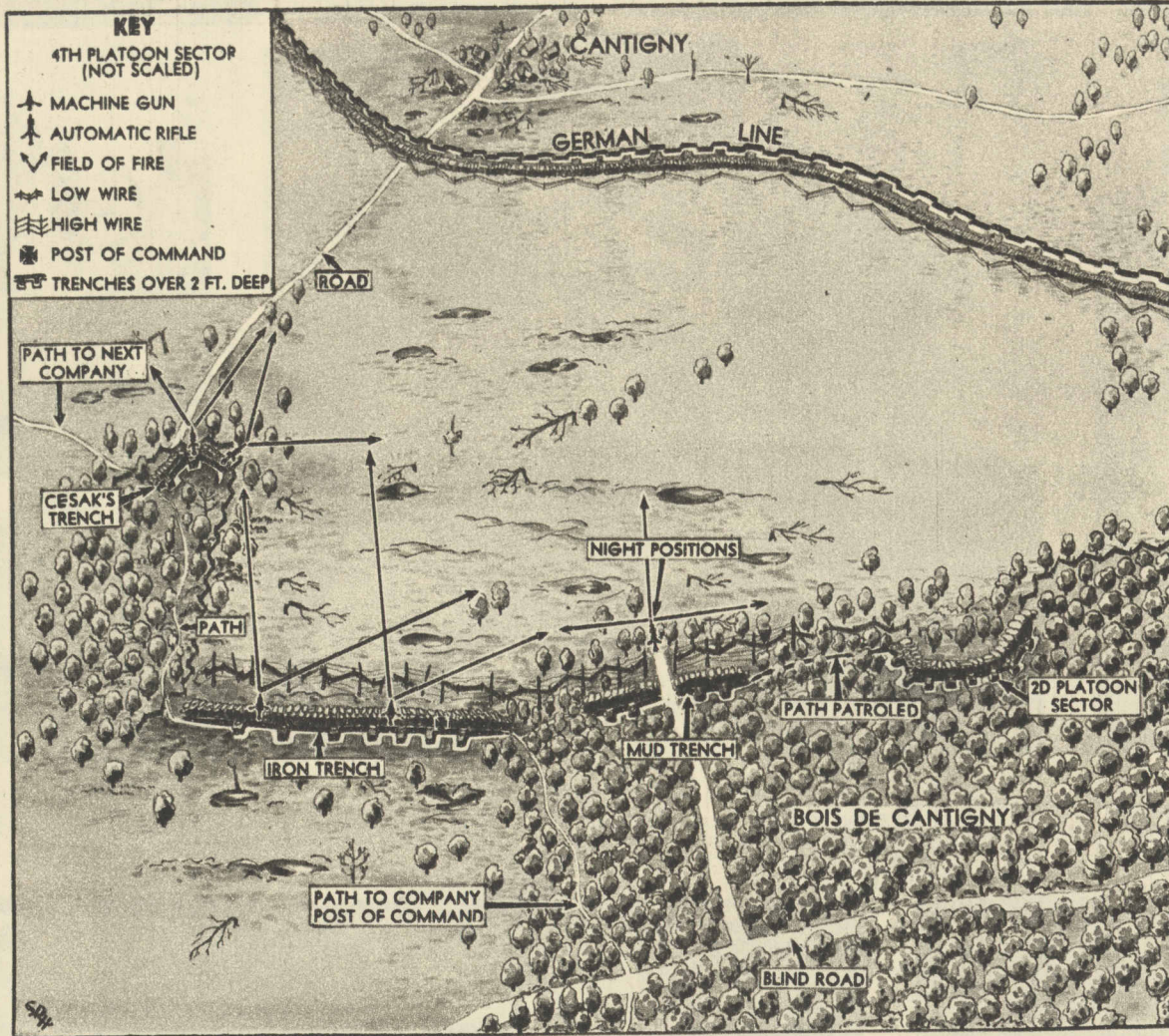
II. JACKSON*

On the afternoon of the 29th or 30th of April, 1918, I was sitting in the little trench on the extreme right of my platoon sector in front of Cantigny. It was a very small trench and lay in the northwest corner of the Bois de Cantigny. It was camouflaged under an old road leading through the bois to the town. The best part about that particular trench consisted of the fact that the Germans did not know of its existence. Otherwise it was not anything extraordinary for comfort, being about three

soldier, and I later made him sergeant. (As such he commanded for two days during the Argonne, where the company maintained its place in the front line of the advance for five days without an officer.) Shea was asleep on the bottom of the trench with the rain drenching him. His helmet was over his face. He was dreaming and moaning, but I could not hear what it was about. The rain had washed part of his dam away, and I fixed it and watched him sleep. There was the usual amount of artillery fire for that time in the afternoon.

Everything seemed unusually dreary, wet, and gloomy. There had been no food the night before on account of its being blown up, and I could only find some soaked and muddy hardtack. I began to wonder whether we wouldn't all get pneumonia—particularly Shea, who looked so thin and white and wet. I speculated on whether Olmstead would make a good corporal for the squad, and while thus engaged I saw some one coming along the path which led from my big trench. It was Sergeant James.

He got down into the west bay and came up to where I was in the east bay. He stepped around Shea without waking him up or hurting the dams and sat down. He looked depressed, but he produced a piece of dry hardtack which he had found and we divided it. I asked him what the news was in the other two trenches and he told me. It was obvious that nothing had happened to cause this visit, but it was equally obvious that something had happened which made him embarrassed and nervous. We discussed the prospects of



Pictorial map of his platoon trenches before Cantigny, drawn from Capt. Jeremiah M. Everts' battlefield map.

wouldn't do to say it, for he and I never talked about our emotional reactions. I thought a while and looked at James and he at me. Both of us were puzzled. Finally I told him I didn't think that Jackson's actions were good reason for evacuating him. James blushed and finally said, "But, lieutenant, the others threaten to shoot him, and I am afraid they will some time when he does it." He was very worried. Then he added, "You can't really blame them, can you, lieutenant?" (It was the first and last time that James even so much as hinted that he felt or understood anything other than

possessing face and figure. He looked scared and his hands shook. I told him to sit down beside me, and then I rather coldly informed him that he was to stay with me at all times except when I told him not to.

Shea woke up drenched, full of rheumatism, and coughing. He looked sharply at Jackson, but made no remark about his unexpected appearance, nor did I. I told Shea what news there was. He inquired about food, finally got up, and went to the further trench of the sector, ostensibly to find food, but probably to talk to James about Jackson on his way. It still rained

makes me feel like lying down there in the mud and crying myself, and that would be a hell of a thing, wouldn't it?" He went on weeping and I hung on to his shoulder. I told him I was just as scared as he was, if not more so. (I think I probably was.) Finally I suppose it penetrated his mind that I had hold of his shoulder and was talking to him. I doubt if he had realized it before in his agony. He went on shaking, but he stopped crying. Finally he answered me, "O, lieutenant, I can't help it, I can't help it!" It was pitiful beyond words. I repeated what I had said before, but he merely moaned pathetically.

The bombardment eased up at last and he shook less. That night I made him go the rounds with Shea and myself. I walked first and Shea last. Poor Jackson was frightened most of the time, and if a shell came within two hundred yards he was flat on the ground. It was still raining, and Shea was greatly annoyed after he had fallen over Jackson several times in the dark. We made the rounds a couple of times to each trench, and of course talked and whispered with the men. Shea loved to talk, and everybody liked him. Every one knew that he was probably making the rounds with me, and when Jackson came along I would hear a whisper, "That you, Shea?" and his answer, "No, it's Jackson," and then the reply, "Humph!" or "What the hell are you doing here?" I soon learned that he didn't have a friend (or at least a living friend) in the whole platoon.

The following morning we had quite a lot of shelling; Jackson shook like a leaf, but he was not crying. There was an unusual amount of shelling between us and the second platoon.

Through Living Hell on Wits and Nerve

He obviously wanted to move, but I knew the German's didn't know the location of the little trench and I wouldn't let him move. We had gotten some food that night, fortunately, and for that reason his nerves, or what was left of them, hung together longer. They broke when a 155 landed about twenty-five feet away toward the second platoon and brought down a tree. He was flat in the water crying. He went through the same performance as the day before, but I thought he stopped crying sooner. We didn't get much sleep during that day, and after the first round that night I left him sitting in the bay and went over to see James about wire. When I came back Jackson was lying in the water crying and asking God to help him. I couldn't see him and stepped on him. He was all alone in the bay. I pulled him up beside me and asked him what the hell had happened, as I knew that no shell had landed within a hundred yards of him. I couldn't get anything out of him. I knew, of course, he was tired to the point of death, like all the rest of us, and I also realized by then that he was lonelier than any of us, but I got no explanation from him.

We got food that night again, and the next day we were not bombarded until the afternoon. It was a great relief. Shea was in the bay with us when it started. Jackson seemed better and didn't get on his stomach, though he still had the palsy. I whispered to Shea if he didn't think Jackson acted better, but he only grunted and grinned, as if he didn't think it possible.

We moved back to the big trench that night. No one occupied the first bay, as it was too dangerous. After the second day I occupied the corner of the traverse at the western end of the second bay. The bay was not particularly safe, and I told Jackson he could use the other corner of the traverse. He was relieved, I guess, because he had been in the second bay when the stone hit him. It was also a relief to me not to have him there. At night when I wasn't busy I would hang a blanket over the entrance to my hole and light a candle and make him sit there with me. We would talk about anything. He was a very uninteresting person apart from his reactions and I don't remember any of our conversations. I do remember that he had given up weeping, and I no longer felt it incumbent upon me to take him on the rounds. The men, I imagine, remained skeptical, but nobody even mentioned his name to me. When any one came to the P. C., and Jackson was there, he was completely ignored except by James.

On the 10th or 11th of May we went into the reserve trenches, and I sent Jackson back to his squad. I was as nice as was possible to him and told him

that he was all right. We were relieved on the 16th of May and returned to our front line sector on the 22d or 23d of May. I had a one-sided talk with Jackson the afternoon before we went up and told him he was going in with his squad and was going to stay with them and that he would be all right and that all he had to do was to realize that everybody else was as scared or more scared than he was. I had previously told the corporal that he was going back to the squad. The corporal did not seem pleased, but I heard no complaints, and Jackson did sentry duty and went on chow parties.

On the 28th of May, Cantigny was taken. We were in support, and on the afternoon of the 30th or 31st we were ordered to go over to Cantigny under the eyes of nine German balloons. (By the grace of God or sleeping Germans, we got over all right.) I went up through the trenches to tell the men we were going over to the town and came to Jackson's hole. I reached in and grabbed him and told him we were going over to Cantigny. His jaw dropped and his eyes bulged. He shook like a leaf again. I thought for a moment and said, "You follow me at eight paces and do just what I tell you to do." We went over and lay for hours in a little sunken road while 240s and larger shells pounded what was left of that poor little village. It was no damned ordinary bombardment, and I watched Jackson closely. It was impossible to talk to him for the noise. He shook, but, thank God, he didn't cry. Of course, he wasn't trapped in a trench, and to that extent he was better off; nevertheless I felt quite proud of him. We were relieved that night, but before we went out James and I agreed that Jackson was all right and that he had acted well that day. Thereafter he stayed with his squad.

On the afternoon of the 17th of July, near Compeigne, I told Jackson we were going to attack the following morning, that I was sorry he couldn't go along with me, but that I would be too busy and that he would go with his squad. I told him to stay by his corporal and that he would get along all right. We shook hands. Separately I told the corporal that Jackson must be within eight paces of him at all times. I did not think the latter and its implications were really necessary, as I was sure that Jackson would be all right. It seemed to me that his heart had been tried enough by that time.

On the morning of the 24th of July I called the roll of the company. Jackson was not present. His corporal told me with tears in his eyes that he had acted well.

NEXT WEEK—What happened to Georgel



The 18th infantry marching up to the front in Ansaucville sector of France.



Officers of the 18th infantry at mess near Menil-la-Tour, France.

and a half feet deep, and, as the ground was soft, one could not dig holes in the side to escape from the rain. It had rained each day for six days. It seemed to me it always rained whenever I was in that trench, and on that particular afternoon it was raining hard. When we slept in that trench we would scrape a place until it was dry as possible and then build small dams at both ends of the area to be occupied to keep the mud and water out. My main recollection of sleeping there is reaching down when I woke up to grab my breeches and pulling in order to bend my legs so that I could get up.

A squad of six men occupied the trench. Corporal Shea's squad had moved in a couple of nights before. I was extremely fond of Shea. He was an exceedingly capable and courageous

food and clear weather. Finally James said, "Lieutenant, do you know Jackson?" "Yes," I said. "Isn't he the man who threw his arms around me about five nights ago, screaming that he had been killed, when that shell landed in my bay and wounded those two so badly? As a matter of fact, the shell threw a stone at him which hit him in the cheek." James nodded and said, "Yes, that's the one." "Well, what about him?" I said. James looked at me and answered: "Well, lieutenant, every time there has been bombardment since then Jackson weeps and prays out loud." I was, to say the least, surprised and had no idea what to answer. It was impossible to say to James, "Well, James, it's a wonder to me sometimes that you and I don't weep and pray out loud." I am sure that James would have agreed, but it just

the physical side of war.) Of course, it was obvious that you couldn't blame them. The bombardment had been severe for seven days, and it had rained every day but one since we came into the line. Naturally you couldn't blame a person even if he did shoot a man who wept and prayed out loud.

It was clear from James' seriousness that something would have to be done about this man right away. If he couldn't be evacuated, which was impossible, there was only one thing to do, so I said, "Sergeant, the only thing I can think of is for Jackson to come over here with me and I will keep him unattached to any squad." James made no comment. I added: "I'm going back to the big trench in two or three days and will take him with me—we might use him for a runner!" The idea of his being a runner was so preposterous that we both laughed. James went off and in a short time came back with Jackson and left him.

It had been midnight when the stone hit Jackson in the cheek, and although I naturally remembered the incident and his actions at the time, I had been too busy since to think much about it, and I had never really observed him before. He still had a welt on his cheek. He was about 19 and stood five feet seven or eight. His face was freckled, sallow, and pale. He was quite thin and had washed-out blue eyes somewhat protruding and a rather unpre-

hard. Shea came back grumbling, without any food. He left us and went to the next bay to talk to Olmstead. The gloominess and wetness were almost unbelievable. I sat and watched Jackson without talking to him and waited for the evening bombardment to commence. Was he completely down and out, I wondered, and if he was, what could one do? I feared the coming bombardment, which was as certain as the rain, but I was interested in seeing what Jackson would do. I knew enough to realize that here was a person who suffered terribly, with nothing to think about (he being a private) to take his mind off his suffering. What would he do and what could I do?

The German artillery commenced according to schedule. It generally lasted from three-quarters of an hour to two hours at that time of day. Jackson commenced to shake badly, and he showed his terror in his face more than anybody I had ever seen. Finally he lay flat on his stomach in the mud and water on the bottom of the trench and wept and wept. He shook all over. It was perfectly terrible, and I was at a complete loss as to what I should do. I waited and watched him I don't know how long, but finally I couldn't stand it any longer, and I reached down, grabbed him by the shoulder, and dragged him up beside me. He was covered with mud and the tears rolled down his face. I held his shoulder and said: "Now, Jackson, what the hell is the use in doing that? It only makes things much worse for you, and it



After a long hike on April 17, 1918, soldiers of the 18th infantry pause beside a small body of water to wash their aching feet. (Photos by U. S. Army Signal Corps.)

*A fictitious name.