

# Cantigny—A Corner of the World War

## Fly Casting with High Explosive

● This is the fourth instalment from the book "Cantigny, a Corner of the War," by Captain Everts, 18th infantry, 1st division, A. E. F., and reprinted by courtesy of the author and Charles Scribner's Sons, the publishers.

By Capt. Jeremiah M. Everts  
(Copyright: 1938: By Captain Everts.)

THE 28th infantry came into the line in front of Cantigny on the 26th of May. They were to take the town on the 28th. The 2d battalion of the 18th infantry (my battalion) was to act as support and we remained in the line. On the morning of the 27th the Germans pulled a daylight raid on the company of the 28th next north of my platoon.

I went over to Corp. Cesak's trench to watch the raid. Things seemed to be going all right with us. The raiding party was having a tough time of it.

Cesak and Geroux and I stood watching. They had taken a few shots with their automatic rifle, but the artillery had thrown up so much dust and smoke they could not go on. One of us noticed a movement on the hillside opposite us about 200 yards away. The movement proved to be a German sniper. He was in a little trench shaped like an L, each side about eight feet long. He would walk up to one end of the trench and shoot, then he would walk around the corner and down to the other end and shoot. It was like clock-work.

There was a box of rifle grenades and a tromblone in the bay. We had never used any of them in the line, but both Cesak and I had often practiced shooting them while out of the line. The tromblone fitted over the end of the rifle. In the cup of the tromblone you placed a grenade which had a hole bored through it. The rifle bullet passed through the hole and set off a fuse. Then the blast of the rifle discharge propelled the grenade through the air. Its extreme range was about 250 yards. The grenades were quite powerful and it was great fun to shoot them. You knelt on your left knee and rested the butt of the rifle on the ground. You held the barrel firmly pressed against your right leg and got the range by raising or lowering the muzzle.

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Sergt. Herbert S. Freeman, 1st engineers, 1st division, escorting German prisoners captured by American troops. (U. S. Army Signal Corps photos.)

Any one of the three of us could have drilled the sniper with a rifle bullet very easily, but it would be fun to try out the grenades. So we got all set and started. Cesak and I took turns shooting strings of three. Like all snipers the German was a good soldier and he was completely concentrated on his job. We fired several grenades and all went over him. A couple of machine gunners beyond him thought a one-pounder was after them and got up and ran. We commenced to get the range. It was more or less like trying to make an accurate fly cast with a very long line. Finally a grenade landed only a few feet beyond the trench. The sniper stopped shooting and started to look around for his enemy. It was too late. The next grenade was on its way. It landed and rolled into the trench. He went down. We kept on firing in case he was just wounded and finally succeeded in dropping two more in.

Later during the day I learned that Dickie Conover, a school friend of mine, who was a corporal in the machine gun company, had been drilled by that sniper during the raid.

### II.

#### A Relief

It was the platoon's last night in the iron trench in front of Cantigny. The 28th infantry had taken Cantigny on May 28. The platoon and the rest of the company had been in support during the operation and the resulting counterattacks. The afternoon of the 30th we had gone over to Cantigny and later we returned to the trench about 9 o'clock that night.

The 16th infantry was making the relief. As I recall it, the relief was to start at 11 or at midnight. My orders were to proceed to Villers Tournelle and thence along the road to Rocquencourt.

The relief for the front line had started. Part of it had crossed the trench. I remember Duncan Frazer coming along in command of one of the last units. We talked a couple of minutes and then he went over to what was left of Cantigny.

Two o'clock came. The night had been quiet. By half-past two there was still no sign of a relief for us and no orders. There must be something wrong. The rest of the company had gone out.

The Germans knew, of course, that the trench was a support trench. They also knew it was occupied, for their balloons had been in the sky when we had left the trench that afternoon to walk over to Cantigny. Under the circumstances the chances were at least 1,000 to 1 that it would be more than unhealthy to occupy the trench inside of an hour and a half. We knew that only too well. There was only one thing left to do. So James and I laid out a new position some fifty yards in front of our wire and traced it in on the map.

It was after 3 o'clock when we had finished. I sent Bigelow with a message to battalion headquarters that the new position would be occupied and the trench abandoned.

We prepared to move and occupy a string of shell holes

which were the new position. A runner appeared. He carried a message that there was to be no relief but that I was to proceed to Rocquencourt as quickly as possible in accordance with the original relief orders.

Well, it certainly was sensible not to relieve that trench, but it was a hell of an hour to proceed from there to Rocquencourt.

The platoon fell in, in single file at five paces, and I ordered the men to double time. It wasn't easy to carry a pack and a rifle or an automatic rifle and double time when one had been lucky if one had eaten what was called a meal once each twenty-four hours for a week. The platoon cursed and swore



Review of battalion, 18th infantry, 1st division, for decorated men. Paillard, France, June 30, 1918.

as they double timed along the path. It was about 1,000 yards from the iron trench to Villers Tournelle—perhaps a little more. Even if one were tired and weak it was better to double time a thousand yards than to walk down the road from Villers Tournelle to Rocquencourt in daylight.

It was about a quarter of four when we came to a fork in the path. To the right it led to Villers Tournelle. The left path skirted the village and somewhere along that path was a branch which led across wet, open land to Rocquencourt. One night going into the line to reconnoitre I had come in by that path instead of the road from Rocquencourt to Villers Tournelle.

I looked behind me. The German balloons were visible in the sky. The general's orders were to take the road. I had never disobeyed them. But if we took the road how many would get to Rocquencourt? The road was much longer, for it formed two sides of a triangle, while the path was the base. The road was much more likely to be shelled while the balloons might not see us on the path if we hurried. If we took the path and were shelled there might be a court-martial. But it was quarter of four. The bombardment would soon commence.

I turned to the left and hunted for the path. It had been dark the only night I had ever been over it. Now in the half light of early morning I found there was more than one path leading into that long flat on the other side of which lay Rocquencourt. Well, we would have to take one and take a chance. We took one that branched off near a tree. . . . It was the right one—or at least it led to Rocquencourt.

It seemed to be miles across that flat. We moved fast but the going was none too good and every one was tired. About half-way across the bombardment

commenced. The back area was shelled. The road from Villers Tournelle to Rocquencourt was getting its share. Would they see us on the path? Perhaps not, as the visibility was still low. But, my God, suppose they did? I hurried on as fast as possible.

We had almost reached Rocquencourt. I began to feel safe. Suddenly a staff officer appeared from nowhere out of the grass beside the path and questioned me.

"What outfit are you?" I told him.  
"Is your name Everts?"  
"Yes, sir," I answered.  
"I have been looking for you for a long time."

of the platoon. In addition he was quiet, kind, and human.

Part of my duty was to report each morning at the captain's P. C. about 200 yards to the rear in the Bois de Cantigny. A path led from the right hand of the iron trench through the woods. There were no communication trenches. James would sometimes walk down the path with me as far as the support platoon where he would call on Sergt. Gaylor, a friend of his. I would go on and report—then pick him up and we would return together. If possible, I always planned to leave the trench after 9 in the morning and be back before 10:30. Otherwise it was not particularly safe. It was also advisable not

"I only got my orders to clear out at about half-past three!"  
"What are your orders?"

"To proceed from Villers Tournelle to Rocquencourt along the road."

"And you disobeyed the orders?"

"Yes, sir. That is the reason why!"—and I pointed at the shells exploding along the road.

"Did you have any casualties?"

"No, sir."

"That's good, but I shall have to report to the general."

We went on to our billets and to sleep.

Well, I hadn't quite gotten away with it . . . but the platoon was out, and all alive! (There was no court-martial. I received a reprimand. The platoon never saw the iron trench again—neither did any one else. An observer told me that it was blown off the face of the earth by heavy artillery between 4 and 5 o'clock that morning.)

### III.

#### Sergeant James of the Fourth Platoon

James and I knew each other thoroughly. We had been together only six weeks, but for two of those weeks we had lived in front of Cantigny in what the fourth platoon called the iron trench. (The name was caused by its peculiar metallic ring under artillery fire and because shell splinters ricocheted easily off its hard chalk sides.)

We had worked together and planned together for about fourteen days in that open trench. Fourteen years of ordinary life could not have been much longer. It was true that our daily life consisted largely of hunger, thirst, lice, wire, gas, machine guns, and particularly artillery fire. Nevertheless we understood each other as well as any two people ever did. He was the ranking sergeant of the platoon. He was brave and efficient. The men liked him and he led them well. He was proud

to go and return at the same time each day. The Germans knew the path, of course, but they could not possibly see a person walking on it on account of the leaves and underbrush. Still an observer might see you get out of the trench.

I had made the journey every morning down the path for about two weeks. James, I suppose, had gone with me about five times. Nothing had ever happened. Usually on these walks we talked about putting up wire in the field in front of the iron trench. We were supposed to have at least five strands of tall wire and several strands of low wire. Each night we put up the wire and ordinarily by morning it was blown up. It was very exasperating. On this particular morning the previous night's wire had been destroyed. James had gone with me. I had made my report and we were on our way back to the trench. It was a warm spring day and I guess we were both anxious to get to sleep in our little holes in the sun. We were talking about the wire.

The path crossed a blind road and continued again through the woods. James was about six paces in front of me. He had crossed the blind road and was about to step in the path when I felt very queer. If I had been a dog all the hair on my back would have stood on end. Mine tried to. I never had the same sensation before or after during the war, although I often came just as close and closer to getting mine. I spoke sharply: "Halt, James! Don't go up that path!" James turned around and looked at me, his brown eyes surprised. He must have thought I was crazy. "Why, lieutenant! What's the matter? You do this every morning."

"I don't give a damn. Come! We'll get into this shell hole." About ten feet away was the lip of a huge nine inch shell hole. We lay down and had no sooner done so when a volley of 155s landed in the path. They were well spaced and each shell made a perfect hit. James' expression was wonderful. "All right, James, let's go." We got up and walked over to the path. We figured carefully how much time had elapsed between the time James halted and the explosions of the volley. I have forgotten how many seconds now. We took up our original positions, counted the seconds, and walked the distance to the holes. We figured that we would have been covered by the two inside shells of the volley.

Jim never got over it. After that he thought I was closely related to either God or the devil.

#### THE CROSSROADS

It was less than two weeks later. We were in reserve and were going to be relieved that night to rest. We had been in that sector twenty-three days, eighteen days in the front line. During the morning I had looked forward to the relief. During the afternoon I had begun to doubt. By 11 o'clock that night it would have been pleasant not to have been relieved. The bombardment commenced and it seemed as if all the artillery in the world was punishing both sides on that already punished four kilometer front. The night vibrated and flashed constantly under the roar and explosions of the German shells and our own batteries.

Villers Tournelle was directly behind us. We had to walk through it. I knew without seeing it that the road beyond was being shelled to hell and back again. There was a path which might not be so bad as the road, but how could we ever reach the path—for we had to walk through Villers Tournelle and the 210s falling there.

The night passed slowly. The grand crescendo of the bombardment increased—sometimes the air would carry the cries of the wounded men only to be blotted out again by the roar of shells. In a sense it was fascinating. But for God's sake we must walk through that darkness—and that idea was far from fascinating. One knew more or less how to live in the line, but in that darkness to be walked through there existed not only death but the unknown—the unknown batteries shelling one there, the different sound of some of those shells, the unknown danger points, the unknown and countless possibilities—all to be walked through and obviously not a night to walk through them.

But the relief was very late. Our counter battery work began to put out German guns and gunners.

The relief started. I lost my best friend among the officers of the regiment. Wounded men seemed to call from everywhere. It would be our turn soon. We must use our heads.

James was to lead the platoon out through the little village. I walked back of the trench to the edge of the little rise where I could see the road below me pass by the pond and up to the crossroads. I watched the 210s. Ten minutes before I thought there had been four guns firing. Now there were only two. The others must be out of action. One was firing at the crossroads—there were wounded men about to die there. The other was exploding about 150 feet away in the road on our side of the pond. They were exploding regularly but not quite simultaneously. It was a simple matter to tick the intervals off on the watch and estimate the distances. There was a good chance of getting the platoon by both places. Then maybe we could find the path—if we could only get by the crossroads.

Our relief arrived. James started out. The platoon had to make almost a semicircle to get into the road. I went back to the edge of the rise. The nearest 210 exploded and the seconds ticked off to the other at the crossroads. I could see James against the chalky surface of the road. The interval for the nearest shell was almost up. I hoped to God I hadn't let him go too far and that the interval was right. I shouted, "Platoon halt and lie down!" The column halted and lay down by the bank. The 210 roared over and exploded in the road about thirty feet beyond James. We waited two or three seconds and ran for the crossroads. The intervals were O. K. We found the path. I went out with second platoon camion and didn't talk to James that night. The next day he came up to me and said, "By God, lieutenant, whenever you tell me to halt I shall lie down!" I never explained to him how simple it had been.

NEXT SUNDAY—Iron bars and a party.

## VOICE OF THE MOVIE FAN

Letters published in this department should be written on one side of the paper. If you wish a personal reply please inclose a stamped, self-addressed envelope.

Dear Miss Tinée: I am 13 years of age and am able to judge good movies from bad ones. Seems to me that pictures like "A Man to Remember" should be published more. In our city it only ran second billing, but don't you think with a nice cast as it had that it should be noticed?



EDWARD NORRIS  
'Discovered' by 13-year-old fan.

I saw "On Trial" the other day. In the cast I noticed a young man by the name of Edward Norris. He has what it takes! Let's see a lot more of him. And would you

please print a small picture of him? Thank you a lot.

BARBARA ZOECKLER.  
Editor's note: Yes, indeed! Glad to print a picture of Mr. Norris. Come again!

Dear Miss Tinée: I have enjoyed your column for such a long time, but have never had my ambitions stirred enough to contribute until I saw "Dodge City." I made up my mind it would be a flop. Instead I loved the picture.

Honestly, there is no word grand enough to express my opinion of Errol Flynn; he'll always be tops to me. The rest of the cast was well chosen and did excellent work, too. Sincerely yours, MERRY Y.  
Editor's note: Glad you enjoyed the picture!

Dear Miss Tinée: In answering Miss Lillian Lee's question regarding Grace Moore I believe you made a mistake. Grace Moore was born in Jellico, Tenn., instead of Del Rio, and on Dec. 5, 1901, instead of 1903. I read your column every Sunday and find it interesting, and believe it or not, this is the first error I ever discovered in your column.



GRACE MOORE  
Her home town is Jellico, Tenn.

JOCELYN MERRILL.  
Editor's note: Thanks for your interest. You're right!