

Heroes on Many Fronts

The story of the Rainbow Division, of which the 168th Infantry formed an integral part, is boldly written in the annals of American military history. Having successfully beaten off a fierce German attack on March 5, the 168th had launched its own offensive on the German positions on March 9. While these were largely probing attacks they were nevertheless dangerous. The "splendid bravery" of the 168th quickly won the warm praise of the French General Staff.

Their gallantry in action won a much-deserved rest for the 168th in the Rambervillers area in Lorraine. Spring had come almost overnight and the bleak winter days would soon be over. Suddenly word arrived of the disastrous defeat of the British in Picardy. The Allied world trembled at the prospects of impending disaster. Once more it was up to the French and the Americans. For the battle-scarred 168th it meant a return to the trenches for a period lasting (with but few respites) until the Armistice was signed.

A vivid and decidedly unpleasant experience was the endurance march from the Rambervillers area back to the Baccarat sector — made harder because it meant returning to all the misery and strain they had left just a short time before. The 168th spent some harrowing days, both in and out of the trenches. Despite mud and cold, and the constant warning of imminent gas

attacks (until one finally came), the Iowans left Lorraine with mixed emotions. According to John H. Taber, historian of the 168th:

They will tell you in Lorraine, especially in Baccarat, that there is no American division like the *Quarante-deuxième*. They felt it was their own, and followed its progress and its triumphs as faithfully as did our own people far off in Iowa. Rimaucourt, Ormancey, Neufmaisons, Pexonne, St. Amand . . . all claimed us.

But a far more dangerous situation now faced the 168th.

The Commander-in-Chief of the A. E. F. stated in his report that the 77th Division had been sent to the line to release veteran troops. Veterans after four months! — with hardly a taste of what was to follow. One bloody day on the Ourcq was to see as many fall as had fallen before in a hundred. But they had passed the test and were graduates of a bitter school. They knew the shrill of an enemy shell, and could tell from its whistle the calibre and its approximate destination; could distinguish at one whiff the composition of a poisonous gas; from the hum of a motor, what type of plane. They feared danger, as they were human, but had learned to conquer their fear. They knew death in its worst form; yet in view of the horrors they were to meet and experience within the month, they were but novices.

The "veterans" of four months were soon building trenches and dugouts in the Champagne "where more men had fallen for every kilometer of front than at any other place on the Western Front." As the zero hour approached, the Iowans found themselves well-entrenched to meet the enemy and buoyed up by General Henri Gouraud's stirring "Order of the Day to the

French and American soldiers of the Fourth Army."

We may be attacked at any moment. You all know that a defensive battle was never engaged under more favorable conditions. We are awake and on our guard. We are powerfully reënforced with infantry and artillery.

You will fight on a terrain which you have transformed by your labor and perseverance in to a redoubtable fortress — an invincible fortress if all its entrances are well guarded.

The bombardment will be terrible; you will face it without weakness; the assault will be fierce in clouds of smoke, dust, and gas; but your position and your armament are formidable. In your breasts beat the brave and strong hearts of free men.

None shall glance to the rear; none shall yield a step. Each shall have but one thought; to kill, to kill many, until they shall have had enough.

Therefore, your General says to you: "You will break this assault, and it will be a happy day."

This Battle of the Champagne, in which the 168th fought brilliantly, has been frequently called the turning point of World War I. Victory might have proved so for the Germans had they won. But victory was denied them. Instead, a crushing defeat, the "severest defeat" that either France or Germany had suffered on the Western Front in three years. As Taber relates:

First, according to Ludendorff, the Allied bombardment, which had caught them so entirely by surprise, created more destruction among the soldiers massed for the assault than in any other engagement of the war. Two divisions were so badly cut up by our furious barrage that they had to be replaced before the jump-off. Then Hindenburg himself admits that Gouraud's masterly strategy had been too much for him, and that his most effective artillery preparation had been practically without result — a futile pounding of empty trenches.

One artillery incident is graphically recounted by Taber:

In front of L Company, out in the open, a battery of Frenchmen fed their guns and sang *La Madelon*. "*Pour le repos*" — crash! — "*le plaisir*" — slam! — "*du militaire*" — Bang! It was unbelievable. Men singing under the threat of death! It was unreal, fantastic. Perhaps they sensed the fact that their country was saved. But the Germans spotted them, and in the midst of a phrase, a whirring shell wiped them all, gun and crew, from the face of the earth.

Equally dramatic is the scene described by Chaplain Winfred E. Robb as he helped to bind wounds, cheer the suffering, and comfort the dying. His attention had been urgently called to a young soldier who had just been brought in.

I went over and knelt down by his side. A shell had blown his foot away at the ankle. A slug had torn through the left leg above the knee, and he had wrapped a wire about it, twisting in a stick to stop the flow of blood. His left arm was shattered and hanging loosely at his side. He lay there so still and white, with never a cry coming from his lips.

"How are you coming, old chap?" I said. Between his clenched teeth he answered, "All right, I guess. I guess I'll make it." [The look in the chaplain's face told him that there was no hope.]

"Am I going to die, Chaplain?" he questioned.

"Yes, my lad, you've not long." Then I asked him if there was anything I could do for him.

"Yes," he said, "Will you write my mother all about it?" I said I would, and he seemed content. He requested me to pay a few francs to a comrade of his, and then I asked, "Isn't there anything else, lad, that you want to say for yourself before you go?"

"I guess not," he returned, "but have you a cigarette?"

I gave him one and lighted it, and he lay there smoking, drawing the smoke into the lungs, and blowing it out through his nose. He seemed to take great comfort in it. He looked up at me, blew out a puff, and smiled so coolly up into my face. I turned away to hide my tears, and busied myself with some others. After a few moments, I came back. The cigarette was still burning between his fingers, but he was lying there, his pale, boyish face so set, cold in death. Without a cry of pain, without a sob of fear, his life had flickered out.

The list of battles in which members of the 168th participated contain some of the bloodiest and most decisive engagements of World War I. They had received their baptism under fire in Lorraine. They had fought courageously in even more sanguinary battles in the Champagne, on the Marne, and at La Croix Rouge Farm, where death-dealing machine guns had decimated their ranks. Their advance along the Ourcq, the capture of Hill 212 and Sergy, left the 168th with losses fixed by Colonel Tinley at 69 per cent — 9 officers and 226 enlisted men killed and 38 officers and 1,266 men wounded. When finally relieved after ten days of bombardment, an eye-witness described the exhausted 168th as "silent old men, who ten days before were youths with songs on their lips."

But much fighting still lay before them — St. Mihiel, the St. Benoit Sector, the Argonne, the conquest of Hill 288, the struggle and capture of Chatillon. These were followed by the stirring advance on Sedan. By November the collapse of the German Army was imminent. On November 11 Chaplain Robb announced from the steps of the shell-torn church in

Briquenay that an Armistice had been signed. According to Taber:

It really was beyond comprehension, this glorious news — too much to grasp all at once. No more whizz-bangs, no more bombs, no more mangled, bleeding bodies, no more exposure to terrifying shell fire in the rain and cold and mud! It would be difficult to adjust the mind to the new state of things.

Now the Band, silent for weeks, and out of practice — for at the front where silence was something more than golden, there wasn't much opportunity for practice — got out its instruments and blared forth *Over There*. "We won't come back till it's over, over there" didn't seem like an empty boast any longer. The long fight had been won, and now we would see our homes once more. Never had *The Star Spangled Banner* sounded so thrilling, never was it more loudly cheered.

The story of the gallant officers and men of the 168th, whose valor equalled that of the knights of old, is an epic that will be long remembered by all freedom loving Iowans.

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