The Assault in the Argonne and Vauquois with the Tenth Division, 1914-1915
Georges Boucheron
Preface by Henri Robert.
Paris, 1917

Translated by Charles T. Evans

Translator's Note:

Although the translation is technically completed, I am always willing to reconsider specific translated passages if a reader has a suggestion.

Brice Montaner, adjunct assistant professor of history at Northern Virginia Community College, has been of invaluable assistance in completing this translation.

Because of copyright concerns, I have not included any maps as part of this translation, but maps will help you understand the Vauquois terrain, and so you should check those that are on the supporting website: worldwar1.ctevans.net/Index.html.

To my comrades of the 10th division fallen in the Argonne and at Vauquois, I dedicate these modest memoirs.
G. B.

(7)[1]
To the reader.

This is the name of a brave man.

I am proud to be the friend of Georges Boucheron, and I thank him for having asked me to write a preface for his memoirs of the war.

Is it really necessary to tell the public about those who fought to save France? Isn't it enough to say a word or two about their suffering and their exploits for them to receive our sympathies?

Boucheron has done well, so to speak, to write each day of his impressions. Like many other lawyers and like all other young Frenchmen, he has lived through the anxieties and dangers of this terrible war that was desired by Germany.

Every night he noted facts, actions, words.
(8)
When hindsight allow future writers to write the definitive history of the Great War, it's books such as the one by Boucheron, written by the combatants themselves and signed with their own blood, that they will be able to draw on for precious information.

Boucheron evokes the enthusiastic departure for war in August 1914–the entire nation, united and reconciled rising to repel the aggressor–then the monotonous long months in the trenches, often marked by the death of a close friend, of a companion in the struggle.

Death has visited every family.

The law courts were especially cruelly hit.

In our library, a table decorated with palm fronds, catches your eye. It is our pride and also our sadness. Those who died for our country are inscribed there.

The young members of the bar were decimated. I will not cite the names here because it would be necessary to name them all. They have all pled the cause of France. Each equal in his sacrifice; they are all also equal in their glory.

Of this heroic phalanx, Boucheron has been able to evoke the memories of his companions in battle.

In the dark days of the retreat when discouragement could (9) have reached into the hearts of even the most devote men, young men stepped forward and offered their lives for the country.

Artisans, workers, bourgeoisie all rushed to sacrifice themselves.

---

[1](7) refers to the page number in the original printing.

Among the volunteers from the Paris Bar, two names are particularly glorious: Richard de Burgue and Frédéric Clément who have died for France.

Others have been wounded like my friends Campinchi and Boucheron.

The author of this book had been declared unfit for military service because of his extreme near-sightedness.

At the end of August 1914, having volunteered, he arrived at the training camp. By the end of September, he was at the front as a simple soldier. After the assaults on Vauquois at the end of October he became a corporal and then a sergeant after the terrible months in the Argonne, and second lieutenant after the capture of Vauquois.[2]

Plagued by rheumatism, the deprivations and suffering of being at the front, he was moved to the division's staff. Just barely recovered, he demanded to be transferred and volunteered to be part of the assault artillery (the tanks).

On 16 April 1917, he was wounded by a shell fragment in the thigh, an instant after his commander Bossut was killed.
(10)
While Boucheron was convalescing, his friends, who were proud of him, convinced him to publish this book. On the first page there should be an inscription of the two army citations awarded to the valiant officer while waiting for the Legion of Honor to be placed on his chest.

A great leader who had seen the book and who was able to judge its worth wrote to Boucheron, "I know everything that you suffered and I know the spirit of sacrifice with which you volunteered. You have shown the very best qualities of a soldier."

Military leaders should certainly know the qualities of a good soldier.

This barrister is pleased to attest here to my deep respect for and friendship with Georges Boucheron.

Henri Robert
Head of the Bar of the Court of Appeals, Paris

[2]In France, a sub-lieutenant (sous-lieutenant) is the most junior commissioned officer in the army

(11)
I. The Engagement

The last session of the Caillaux trial[3] had just finished resonating through the halls of the Palace of Justice, but attention was already turning away from the criminal court. Outside there were rumors, muted but so much more powerful, that were beating upon the walls and reaching into the chambers of justice.

The black-robed lawyers left the criminal court in large numbers and gathered in the galleries. The grand tragedy in which the existence of ten people will play out has been overtaken by a new Parisian drama.

It's war. The robes are hung in the coat room; there are warm handshakes; good-byes are brief. (12) At the Palace of Justice, there are many reserve officers. Quickly they leave for their posts.

The first days of August pass slowly. In the corridors, only the aged whose age makes them immobile, or those who the recruiting board had declared unfit for service, still showed a bit of animation.

The Palace of Justice is now much too big for our small group. Along the white walls, just a few black robes slip silently by and make the place seem even more deserted.

The most fantastic projects are hatched. The government has postponed all cases for the month, and so we get impatient. One of us proposes to delegate the President of the Bar Henri Robert to meet with the mayor of Paris and demand that we receive rifles so that we can practice. That proposal was rejected.

A few days later uniforms start to appear. A few colleagues who were mobilized in Paris or its suburbs return bringing news and gossip.

Some bad news reaches us about the first soldiers. Lévy Fleur is killed, and others have already fallen in Belgium or in the course of the retreat. There are now missing spaces in the ranks of our professional fraternity.
(13)
The review board finally began to accept volunteers.

My determination, from the very start, to enlist lasted the mandatory one month delay before volunteering. Nothing stopped me, not the walk to the town hall to get my birth certificate, not the visit to city hall to return my certificate of exemption, not the trip to the enlistment office to volunteer. I finally had, in my hand, the notice to report to the board of review.

On the appointed day, accompanied by hundreds of others, I presented myself. The crowd,

---

[3]In March 1918 Henriette Caillaux, wife of Joseph Caillaux, a former prime minister and then minister of finance, shot and killed Gaston Calmette, the editor of the newspaper **Le Figaro**. The trial in July 1918 was a cause célèbre and drew the attention of French society.

which besieged the door of the bureau, was bizarre: a man in a jacket next to one in a blouse, the kid of eighteen next to a man of fifty–all these different appearances but all with the same spirit. Groups of twenty-five are introduced one after the other. Individually, the men are sorted out. The happy ones are those who are "good"; the others with the crest-fallen faces are those who have been "refused."

My turn came; I entered a small room and quickly undressed; no high council, no brilliant uniforms. Behind a counter rather than a table, there was a young, lively major assisted by a sergeant and several scribes. That's all, yet it was enough.

"Your reason for exemption?"
(14)
"Very severe nearsightedness."

"Take off your glasses and read."

"That's useless. I can't see without them. With them, I see good enough. I'll put on my glasses. One goes to war more with his heart than with his eyes."

"Try to read."

The last few lines of the card are foggy. Some letters stand out, and I read them. The "V"s become "U"s. The major smiled.

"You would like to go?"

"Yes, I am resolved on that."

"OK, I'll fix it." "Good for army service."

"Thanks."

Quickly I put my clothes back on, thinking, what does the future hold for me?

Close to me a kid of seventeen lowers his head so that I don't see the tears which are tenderly streaming down his face. The major did not allow him to offer his life; his physique did not quite match his spirit. I took his hand.

"You will be able to come back. The war will last long enough. You will be much stronger in a little while."

He looked at me incredulously then shook my hand.

"Thanks and good luck."

I think about the runaways and deserters; those who a few days before were saying: (15) "France is dammed." So, then, you are scum, but there are others, the unbeaten, unyielding, with young children crying because we do not allow them to go to war and die for France.

France will live. It will live because of those who are here, just like those who have already left for the front to fight so that France will live.

I go up a floor. There is an office with a few secretaries where I leave my papers.

“You should return in three or four days,” one of them tells me.

The following days, I continue my visits: to the recruitment office to remove my certificate of physical incapacity; to the town hall with two witnesses to sign my recruitment; then a new visit to the recruiting office. The scribe there can’t find my records.. My file has been misplaced. I grumble that this is my thirteenth visit, and I demand to speak with the chief of recruitment. One of the secretaries raises his head; it’s Manual, the photographer. We recognize each other and shake hands. On my information and without the file, he fills out the required forms.

While this is happening, the secretary who couldn’t find my file complains about the inconvenience while seated in front of a locker full of files, of which he is careful not to get up and check any of the files to verify my name.
(16)
I headed towards the door, but I am called back. Someone made a little bit of an effort and pulling the first file from the pile, noticed that my file was next.

I’m off. It’s finished. Thirteen visits to get my transport order “for a man without luggage and without horses.” Good enough.

The next day at five in the morning I walk through the deserted streets of Paris on my way to the Lyon train station and then on to the barracks at Fontainebleau.

(17)
II. The Depot

On 2 September 1914, I reached the depot of the Tour d'Auvergne regiment[4] at Fontainebleau. The barracks are full of men. The companies are at full strength of eight to nine hundred men. The officers that remain there are not the best and look panic-stricken. It is not a favorable impression; everyone is shouting or yelling orders.

I am settled in a barn as there is no longer any space in the barracks. I am a little homesick and make acquaintances with others like myself. My squad is almost complete.

One man, an ex-sergeant of the Zouaves, still looks like one with his wide pants and salt-and-pepper goatee; later he was a captain, wounded twice, cited four times, knight of the Legion of Honor.[5]

There is an old man from Normandy in good physical condition, an architect of the Barbizon style, a little wild like the forest next to us, about fifty years old. Two months later, the day after (18) being promoted to second-lieutenant,[6] he will die at Vauquois while doing a reconnaissance mission.

Scherr, a former notary clerk and a mechanic, had been declared unfit for service, but he was resourceful and adroit like a monkey. He quickly initiated us into the tricks of life in the army.

Michaud was a cocky Parisian, a little blackguard with a stormy past, but he could be counted on all the time to help us out. He had no equal when it came to starting a fire with green wood or finding us some roast meat when we had nothing else to eat.

Cazeneuve, our oldest man at age fifty-four, had left the Opéra-Comique[7] to join his son in the forty-sixth regiment.

The two of us quickly became friends. Novices at the start, we eventually became part of the assault company. I sewed on his first corporal stripes, and he did the same thing for me. He was promoted to sergeant and I to adjutant at the same time, but then our paths diverged. He took the road to the small cemetery at Aubréville, killed at Vauquois after the assaults [of February-March 1915].

---

[4]The Tour d'Auvergne regiment aka the French forty-sixth infantry regiment was part of the tenth infantry division.

[5]The Legion of Honor is the highest decoration in France and comes in five classes, chevalier de la Légion d'honneur, being the lowest. During the war, it was awarded for bravery in battle.

[6]"Sous-lieutenant" (sub-lieutenant) is roughly equivalent to the American rank of second lieutenant. For a quick understanding of French army ranks, see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ranks_in_the_French_Army

[7]L'opéra-Comique is a an opera company in France founded in the early eighteenth century.

The kids are barely eighteen, some bourgeois, some workers. They will be mowed down by death without any concern about their social status, and they will experience the extreme equality of battlefield.
(19)
Quickly, we all get along. The novices are aided, instructed, initiated by the veterans. Our barn serves to bring us all together. A few days later, in uniform, we all looked the same.

For two days we didn't do anything. It was enough to respond to roll call in the morning and afternoon. The rest of the time the streets of Fontainebleau were filled with idlers, with more and more arriving every days.

Around a bend in the road I ran into a second-lieutenant.

"Ginisty?"

"Yes, Boucheron? What are you up to?"

"Forty-sixth regiment. And you?"

"Evacuated from Toul with my unit. I'm waiting my departure for the front."

We chat for a while, but the time to be back at the barracks approaches quickly.

"Good bye, my friend, good luck."

"Same for you."

I walk away towards the barn.

Unfortunately my good luck wish was not to be realized, and poor Pierre Ginisty was killed Christmas day 1914, felled by a German bullet.

The following day a rumor spread, at first rather vague but then more precise.

"The Germans are approaching."
(20)
The depot received an order to furnish men to dig trenches in front of the town of Melun. The captain assembled us in two rows in the street as night fell. At the front were the men fully equipped and armed; then there were the men in uniform but not yet armed; and finally at the end of the line were those who had just arrived, still dressed in their civilian clothes. They were armed with their suitcases, packages and bundles.

We looked at each other a little bewildered. We were ready to go to fight but not with all the suitcases and stuff. That same thought must have finally occurred to an officer who ordered us all to stop after we had gone a couple of hundred meters. Only those soldiers armed and fully equipped should proceed. We envied them. They joined the army of [General] Maunoury and

fought on the Marne.[8]

The following morning, the order to depart was given. The depot was being evacuated because of the German advance. We got on the train at the Fontainebleau railroad station. We were disappointed. We were hoping to go into battle, but instead we were falling back. The Battle of the Marne was beginning, and we were not going to be at the dance.

The train left but we had no idea where we are going. We arrived only eight days after we had left.
(21)
Here, we learn to appreciate the beauty of Lozère and Marvéjols.[9]

Eight days in cattle wagons. By the second day, our backs, in constant contact with the wooden benches are sore. The wagon in which forty-two men eat, drink, sleep, etc is impregnated with a smell that is no way resembles the Bagatelle rose garden.[10] The menu hardly varied. In the morning a can of sardines packed in tomatoes; in the evening a can of tomatoes with sardines. Not knowing about our departure ahead of time, we were not able to prepare to bring any other necessities.

Despite that, a general good mood presided at our scanty meals; songs resounded from one train car to another; everyone adapted to the needs of the moment.

We met people all along the way. The train was forced to stop all the time because of congestions on the line, and every time it did the people who lived alongside the railroad would come and look at us. A good woman brought us a basket of delicious peaches. She mumbled, “Poor children, they are going to the butcher.” We ate the peaches, thanked her, but no one dared to tell her that we had turned our backs on the battle. We bought some eggs and built a fire near the track at the rear of the train and were carefully cooking our eggs (22) in the oil from the sardines when the train’s whistle brought us back to reality. It was a disaster, having to abandon the eggs after three days of sardines in tomatoes. Someone expressed the thought for all of us.

“Let it go, we’ll catch up.”

We quietly ate our eggs, and with our utensils, we rejoined the train which had stopped about four kilometers away.

---

[8]At the end of August 1914, General Michel-Joseph Maunoury’s army was redeployed to the defense of Paris and renamed the sixth army. It fought the first Battle of the Marne against the German First Army.

[9]Marvéjols is a town in Lozère, a department in the south of France.

[10]The Bagatelle rose garden is part of the Château de Bagatelle in a district of Paris and the site of an annual rose competition.

On Saturday we got off the train at Mende[11] where we were housed in deplorable conditions. We were confined to some large schools and forced to sleep on marble floors but without a sprig of straw. After eight days on the wooden benches, we would have preferred a meadow. The complaints were continuous; nothing to eat, hard to sleep. I recalled the proverb, "Help yourself, and God will help you." And despite our orders, I wandered off and found a nice dinner in a restaurant that is off limits to civilians, even though they are as hungry as the officers. The cellar was filled with straw which allowed me to take a short rest.

The following day we finally arrived at Marvéjols. The main part of the regiment stayed at Mende.

The two garrison towns were filled not only with soldiers but with people from Paris who had come to join them.

In the uniform of a simple soldier, I met (23) Lemeury, a deputy, driving around in an automobile; Jacques Richepin, a reserve officer of the forty-sixth regiment at Mende, Mademoiselle C* L* followed by Parisians all sorts. Everyone seems to be on an outing or fishing.

We are preparing to leave with the first reinforcements.

The life of the depot begins: clothing, organization, the classification of the nine hundred men of the twenty-ninth company.

Our officers are very important.

The captain, an indispensable officer in armies, had to set up a daily routine, watch the supplies, and finish the classification work which the sergeant and aides had not finished in days. The volunteers are his bête noires. He cannot understand how people of whom nothing had been asked and who could have stayed quietly at home, had the evil idea to come and bother him and make him work when he wanted nothing more than peace and quiet. But he is also an exception, and his colleagues rarely work with him. We have only one fear; that we will be sent into battle under his orders.

But God and his superiors have watched him and his career (24) and happily decided that he could be of most use staying at the depot.

The sergeant, a former retiree recalled to active service, didn't spare neither his time nor effort to train the group of men entrusted to him into an armed unit ready to go to the front. He could hardly walk anymore, but modestly carried out his work.

If one day he reads these lines, then he will know that in the middle of combat, we always remembered the best of him. A number of his pupils fell on the battlefield, and many who survived to earn their officer's stripes did not forget that they owed him for the first bits of advice and useful notes.

---

[11]Mende is the capital of Lozère, a department in the south of France.

Each morning, in the shade of the main street of Marvéjols the company assembled. One day, those who did not have their canteen are taken out of the ranks and counted; the next day, they counted those who had their canteens, the third day they took all the canteens; the fourth day, they gave them back.

They divided us into categories: fit, unfit, volunteers, active soldiers, reservists, uniformed, not uniformed, trained, not trained,(25) armed, and finally, those who were trained, equipped, qualified, armed and ready to depart.

That fraction left, the smaller part of all of us that constituted the most desirable since they were truly trained; but equipment and arms, at first not available in adequate amounts, finally arrived. The backpacks and canteens were distributed on the eve of our departure. Buying from the shops in town, we were able to buy forks and plates, which were the only utensils left in the shops of Marvéjols two days after the arrival of the regiment.

The captain, after some drills that the reserve sergeants had us practice in his absence, intervened to command some maneuvers at top speed; “the taking and the defense of a ravine and a bridge.”

The defense numbered about forty men, and the attackers about the same. The latter had the difficult task to occupy the hill tops and snipe at the defenders who, on the orders of the captain, were supposed to hide in the shadows. The soldiers were not allowed to use the road. The captain told us that hilltops must be treated with the utmost caution, but only someone with a twisted mind (26) could have come up with the idea of tiring men out to climb up to the ridge tops while taking the road would get us to a point near the defenders without tiring us out.

Our military instruction was completed with a march of about fifteen kilometers in which both men who were armed and trained marched with those who were still in civilian clothes. Our column was pretty weird; the guns lack straps so we used string, clean civilian suits were side-by-side with dark, military coats. We had somewhat the appearance of the national guard. Only our good will is in perfect shape.

The spirit of improvisation would later, in just a little time, transform these disparate elements into a solid troop. Out of a shapeless mass of men lacking material, equipment or arms, France made armies. Everything was not exactly perfect, but those who saw us at the start can look back at it all with a feeling of satisfaction. We were ready, but how many other reservists remained unused at the start of the campaign?

(27)
III. The Departure

On 30 September 1914 the company gathered on the esplanade. Reinforcements were needed, and we are going to depart.

The captain asks each one of us, “Do you want to leave?”

“Yes, captain.”

“This is serious business. Are you sure?

“Yes, captain.”

One hundred twenty answered yes, not a single no.

Some groups form around us, and a few come up and approach the captain. One timidly asked, “Captain, I would like to go.”

“I require one hundred twenty men, and I already have that number.”

But, captain. X* has three children, while I am not married, yet he is going. Can I replace him?”

Despite the protests, the replacement takes place. (28) A brief order and the other petitioners are ordered back to their places. The kids of eighteen cry at not being able to go. One of them snuck into the truck a little later despite orders, and he will be shot after three days at Vauquois.

Our equipment has finally arrived. For the first time, on the eve of our departure, my shoulders are acquainted with what we call “the infantryman’s armoire.” I find it a bit heavy, but for the moment my enthusiasm takes over. We receive our cartridges, and we complete our equipment from the local stores.

The captain brings us together and gives us his last bit advice as one old soldier to the new ones. We take his speech a little as a joke because we always criticized him, and we were happy to leave him.

We are going to fight, yes; remain in the barracks, no.

I’ll summarize what he said, respecting, as much as possible, the exact terms that he used.

“You are leaving, and that is a very serious matter. Before your departure, I would like to give you some important advice. You are pretty much equipped; you may lack a few small things, but they are not essential items. (29) You have an excellent rifle and some cartridges. You must conserve them. They can be very useful to you. If you fire them off too quickly, then you’ll be left with a stick in your hand that is worth nothing. Preserve your cartridges.”

"They tell me that at the time of the Revolution, the soldiers were less well-equipped than you. Some wore a frock coat; others had nothing but a chemise; nevertheless they were victorious. They wore sabots; you are in fine boots.[12] Never forget that a good solider takes care of his feet. Grease your feet. I have given you some fat for your feet; it is for you to use."

"So, you have good feet with a good rifle and good cartridges. You will be good soldiers."

This speech was not worthy of one like Bonaparte to his army of Italy,[13] but then again our captain's only the desire was to be guardian of the depot after thirty years of barracks life in the lower ranks. And we in no way resembled the soldiers of the First Republic.

Our farewell letters go in the mail in the afternoon. We shakes hands with our comrades who are staying; and we (30) pass the remainder of the day resting, impatient for tomorrow to arrive.

We were up at dawn. Scherr initiated us into the mysteries of packing up. We learn to fold our blanket, put it under the tent cover and then stuff it neatly into our pack which is already full of cans of food, jam, necessities and even some useless things.

There is a call, and it is not for exercises. We descend on the esplanade with all of Marvéjols awaiting us.

The musicians move to the head of our column playing not just normal peacetime march music but real wartime music. The regimental musicians are in front. The firefighters who have not been mobilized offer their support, and all available instruments have been collected and entrusted to either a civilian or a soldier of the depot. The assembly had kind of a strange appearance, and yet, when the first notes of the "Le chant du départ" rang out,[14] no one was smiling. Many had tears in their eyes.

The entire civilian population accompanies us to the train station. Our guns and our belts are decorated with flowers that have been given to everyone. The cheers sound; the farewells are noisy. (31) It is just one small corner of France that is filled with emotion. It's the departure that we have known would happen for the last two months. One after another, each of our towns experience the same moments of intense hope for victory and salute those who go to defend our country and who will fall.

The train station. A last goodbye from the commandant, simple and moving and a shout, "Long Live France," roars from everyone's mouth. The locomotive is taking us to what destination?

---

[12]Sabot is a type of wooden shoe.

[13]In 1796-97, Napoleon Bonaparte commanded the Army of Italy during the French revolutionary wars and won a series of brilliant victories over his opponents. Napoleon's army bulletins were well-know for their inspirational and propaganda values.

[14]Chant du départ is a French revolutionary war song from 1794.

We don’t know.

Toward combat, toward our destiny.

(32)
IV. Clermont-en-Argonne

The following day in the early morning a German airplane circles our convoy in the bright blue sky. A broken wooden table thrown on a half-destroyed wall, the shell holes that surround the railroad, the many unforms that crisscross the countryside, the military trains, the car parks, all indicate the proximity of the front.

From the names of the stations we figure out our destination, the Argonne.

Sainte-Menehould has barely disappeared behind our train when Les Islettes appear in a great clearing.[15]

A distant rumble surprises us, cannons, and not those of exercises or maneuvers either, but cannons that kill.

A hospital train, filled with wounded, passes us, and we can see through the windows heads either bandaged or pale from suffering.
(33)
We remain silent. Fearful? No, but serious, reflective, even more resolute with the approach of danger and the sight of the pain and horrors of war. All of our thoughts are now on the future? What will happen tomorrow?

A little further along, and we arrive. We jump down onto the loading dock and nosily form squads.

The train continues on its way towards Verdun, carrying to our soldiers their daily bread which we can see shining through the windows of the train cars and, in other heavily sealed cars, munitions and other military equipment.

The Argonne forest, dark and mysterious, extends towards the north and a little eastward. I can just make out the forest of Hesse,[16] the same sad color of autumn, and between the two of them, like a ray of sunshine filtering between two somber clouds, the green valley of the Aire River.

We turn and cast one last glance at this spectacle of rural peace, and then it is back towards the scene of war and anger that is offered us. Our fists tense; our mouths a grimmace of hatred, from all of us there is one word that sums up what we are thinking,

“The bastards!”
(34)
It’s Clermont-en-Argonne, or better, it was.

---

[15]Both are towns in north-eastern France in the Argonne region.

[16]la Forêt de Hesse

A mountain spur about two hundred meters high dominates the valley, it's top crowned by a forest of pines that gives it a savage look. At the foot of the ridge the road towards Metz appears as a white line. On each side of the road and on the steep flanks of the ridge there is a horrible site, Clermont.

The delightful town, filled with beautiful villas and riches, was nothing but an immense ruin. The piles of stones and bricks were dominated by towering blackened chimneys. Unbowed by fire they seem to raise their large arms to the heavens, calling forth a curse of revenge. Monuments of despair, silent yet eloquent, the whitewashed walls mournfully speak of the horror of the devastation.

This was not destruction by artillery shells, nor was it a military necessity. A fire systematically, scientifically ravaged everything. The Oswald incendiary,[17] devised by German culture, has not created but destroyed. It is a hallmark of the horror of German culture.

In places the facade of a house has not been damaged, the gaping holes of the windows open like wounds onto the emptiness that was the interior. Here a metal ornament remains; there (35) some blackened and ruined machines indicate a former workshop. Further along, a broken wall reveals a pretty azure wallpaper but no floor or ceiling.

On the outskirts of the town, a few houses remain, probably preserved because the name "Nordmann" appears on one of the shops and at whose door the arsonist probably stopped. Opposite the store, the hospital, filled with wounded French and German soldiers was also spared at the time of the German retreat.

The church seems to hang from the side of the ridge, and from afar, looks to have not been reached by the fire. I went in and had to stop at the entrance because of the fallen plaster and rubble. The burned roof had fallen into the interior. The gutted walls of the choir had sagged onto the altar, and the benches had all been thrown against each other. It was a poignant spectacle of ruin and destruction.

On one of the blue pillars, to complete his work of destruction and to make some kind of morality statement, one of the arsonists traced out in large letters using chalk the words, "GUTT FUR ALLES."[18]

Was it the church, his faith, or religion that he wanted to recommend, or was it simply the opinion of the arsonist? He may simply be thinking (36) that it was agreeable to an old German god to burn down a French church.

Suddenly in the devastated church, there is very softly the sound of the organ, two or three chords, a few notes, of the organ pass into the abyss. Then, seriously, powerfully, at the hand of Lenormand, thunders the Marseillaise. Instinctively, everyone uncovers the heads. At first,

---

[17]The Germans used various incendiary devices in World War 1. Most are described by Francis Marre, **La Chimie meurtrière des Allemands** (Paris, 1915).

[18]"God for all" or something to that extent in German.

more a whisper, the song sounds as an act of supreme patriotic faith. It rises towards the sky in a kind of prayer and then it stops. Our hands silently reach for Lenormand. And as we return to the reality of our surroundings, lit by the last rays of the sun playing on the ruins, there is a glimmer of hope that everything can be repaired one day.

(37)
V. The New Soldiers

“Knapsacks up, ready, march.”

The whitened road linking Clermont and Neuvilly is surrounded by a carpet of green in which there are a lot of shell holes with their brown circles of earth. The corpses of horses, killed either by enemy fire or finished off by their drivers after they had reached their physical limits, spread a nauseating smell. After about a month, the stomach inflates, the legs stiffen, and the corpse becomes a source of food for thousands of flies that don’t even bother to fly away at our approach.

Little by little night gradually extends its veil of mystery and silence over us.

Everyone watches, observes, reflects; there is little chatter. Everything is unknown to us.

The column, just before reaching Neuvilly, turns off the road towards the east. We quickly understand the reason for the change of direction.
(38)
Suddenly, from far off, a low thunder rolls towards us, and a whistling sound approaches very quickly. About three hundred meters from us an intense cloud of smoke rises towards the sun. In the center of the cloud, tongues of fire spread and then disappear quickly. An explosion tears the air, a shower of stones and earth falls not far from us; a sound like bees buzzing continues for a moment; and then slowly the cloud of smoke rises towards the sun and dissipates, born away by the wind.

A shell, then two, three explode without reaching us. We look at each other a little surprised, having only one fear, that someone might think that we were scared. No one budged, and then the column continued on its way. Like anyone who sees the explosion of a shell for the first time without seeing either dead or wounded, we did not exactly understand the danger.

For several hours we march. Reaching the forest of Hesse, we form into single file to follow the trail. Finally, we stop; we’ve arrived. Our legs are completely exhausted, but we get no real rest as the rain falls continuously. The night envelopes us completely.

A few meters away I see a hut of branches, and I go in. The occupants, without saying a word (39) shake hands and let me sit by the small fire that flickers and then we start talking.

“Reinforcements?”

“Yes, four hundred. Where are we?”

“Below Vauquois.[19]”

---

[19]The butte de Vauquois (Vauquois hill), is about two hundred ninety meters high and maybe ten miles to the northwest of Verdun.

“And how far way are the Germans?”

“About six hundred meters.”

“Where is the regiment?”

“All around you. It’s in the front line.”

“But there is no one to be seen.”

“Do you think that we’d all be walking around in the rain? Everyone is in their dugouts.”

That’s it. No one spoke anymore. Indifferent to everything, the occupants were only concerned with the soup which the cook had brought.

My comrades are still waiting in the rain. After an hour and a half of standing there, we learned that the second lieutenant Monnier who had brought us there, had installed himself in a cabin and was celebrating his return to his comrades. He had forgotten about us in the rain. Vidal, who made the discovery, returned.

“Knapsacks ready.”

A new stop after about four hundred meters. We find ourselves in a clearing, and it is difficult to see anything in the dark. A voice growls from a hut. (40) This is idiocy. We can’t be off again at this hour, among companies only six hundred meters from the enemy, but at least if there is an attack we would be fresh.

A large man gesticulating like a devil emerged from a hut, the commander Darc.

“Enter the thickets on the left and right, but not ahead. Do not go too far. Eat your food and mange as best as you can. We’ll see you tomorrow.”

The order is executed quickly. No one is hungry as we are soaked to the bone, shivering. We dine on our impressions. With five companions I cut some hazel branches. Thrown in the mud, they serves as insulation. Above us we attach two blankets that form a roof. On the ground, over the branches another blanket, and against each others, like herrings in a cask, head and chest protected with the rest of the body in the mud, the new poilus[20] of 1914 try to get their first sleep of glory.

And the rain continues to fall.

---

[20]“Poilu” (hairy one) was the colloquial term for French infantrymen who were often portrayed as short and bearded. A “tommy” was a British soldier and “doughboy” was an American soldier.

(41)
VI. First Day at the Front

At three o'clock in the morning, we find ourselves standing, numb, wet, muddy, stamping our feet, hands in our pockets to warm our frozen fingers. Our coats, stiff like cardboard, bang against our legs.

And the rain continues to fall.

Around five o-clock, it finally stops raining. A fire of damp, green wood that took two hours of our work to get it lit, gives us some hot coffee which comforts us.

At seven o-clock, captain Demenencq, deputy commander of the regiment, puts us in a line two ranks deep on a path. The Boche[21] probe the woods with shells and shrapnel. At some distance from us, it sounds like walnuts being knocked from trees. We are and remain very alert.

Then captain Demenencq, in a couple of short phrases, (42) attempts to make us feel welcome with a speech that has nothing to say about how the regiment should be your family, but that sounds more like what you might imagine a cannibal saying to his special victims.

We ignored the speech just as we ignored the shrapnel.

About fifteen of us gathered with sergeant Vidal of the twelfth company. In single file, behind the guide, we reach our place towards the front.

Suddenly, emerging from the bushes, a charred hut made of tree trunks appears before us. Around it was a think copse of large trees and in front of the hut a magnificent oak tree that had been damaged by a shell; its fresh wound shown a few meters above the ground. At the base of the tree a horse was peaceably eating the leaves from the broken tree.

Captain Piot received us very calmly. In a few quiet, yet firm words he spoke of the need to strictly observe discipline, of our mutual and fruitful collaboration and of his willingness to never expose a single soldier to danger without it being necessary. He calmed us and put us at ease. Michaud summarized all of our thoughts when he said, "He looks like a nice guy.

He would prove that right away, (43) and when the company lost him on the day of his injury in the Argonne, the company lost a little of its spirit.

A new walk through the thickets to join the first section[22] of the twelfth company, Cazeneuve, Brossard, Michaud, and myself have to go.

---

[21]A French term of insult for the Germans in World War I. The word was a shortened form of "alboche" which derived from the combination of "al" from allemand (German) and boche for bûche (blockhead); thus "boche" basically meant "rascal, liar, drunkard, barbarian, etc."

[22]Roughly equivalent to a platoon of forty to fifty men.

What a welcome!

A small man comes down the path by which we arrived. He was about one and a half meters tall, dressed in German gray pants, a dirty, soot-colored jacket, with a woman's brown blouse sewn with white dots. On his head was a hat that the owner had sat on more often than he actually used as a hat. The cords of the hat dangled by his nose without him paying the slightest bit of attention to them. A ladle served as his sword and completed the image of the most important person of our small group, the cook Berthelot.

Our conversation starts.

"Are you the new poilus?"

"Yes, we are the new poilus."

"Well, it's about time that we get some civilized gentlemen here." And he sets to work.

"What are you doing in the rear? There is no place worse than back there for the dammed gas." (44)

"Don't be worried, I see them well."

Addressing Cazeneuve, "And you, old papa. What are you doing here at your age?"

"You'll see, and so will the Germans!"

"Ah, so you are curious. If you want to see if you are lucky, they are always watching us, and you can't see them because they are almost always lying down."

"But that's not all. You'd warn of your arrival. We're not going to do anything for you. You have to carry your own weight."

"Finally, we'll see. You seem like decent guys, and we'll divide you all in two."

The introductions were completed. Maugas, a gentle boy with blonde hair and blue eyes, always smiling, a little timid with his hat perched on the corner of his ear giving the appearance of a national guardsman of the (1870s) from the region of Neuville, commands like a sergeant his small section.

The twin brothers H*, both corporals, small, sickly, redheads, similar to the point that we couldn't tell them apart. They had the same pace, the same features, the same accent. They were born near the Loire. We told them apart by the different colors of their ties.
(45)
Pelé was a Parisian plumber that we always saw as calm in the midst of combat and that never seemed to be worried about bullets or shells. He handled his gun as if it were one of his tools. He had only one worry, to eat. It was as if he had replaced his jaws with mandibles that were continually grinding away. He would go under fire to find the smallest bit of extra food.

Pausselle was a nice boy, a Parisian kid from the suburbs, always happy, smarter than the others, very observant, sympathetic. He had an infinite concern for the welfare of his comrades.

The cook Berthelot already described and a few others completed the section decimated by the September fighting.

The Ile-de-France, especially Paris, and the departments bordering the middle Loire River provided the men that made up the regiment.

It was going to take a little bit of time for us to get to know one another. The welcome was friendly. Under most conditions, friendship develops slowly between people of different social backgrounds, education and upbringing, but in the face of danger we become equals quickly.

The opening of our knapsacks brought joy to their faces. The supply of all sorts of objects was pretty much impossible in the middle of the woods. The veterans offered fifty centimes (46) for a packet of cigarette paper and regarded with an envious eye the jars of preserves. The thought of sausages was a taste that they had pretty much forgotten. Letter paper was priceless.

We pay for our arrival by distributing everything, except for the food which is pooled together for the squad's common good. The cook looks at us with a tender and philosophical look. He sums up his thoughts and tells us:

"You are suckers to give us all of your food."

He seemed to have forgotten that just five minutes ago he had offered us half of his food.

After examining the men, let's look at the place.

A forest road crosses the forest of Hesse from west to east on the border of the sector that our small unit was charged with defending. The men are situated along the embankment that formed along the road and that protected everything but our heads.

In front there was a clearing about two hundred meters deep, further beyond were the woods which hid the Boche. Our position was a salient, to the left we were in contact with some mountain troops, and on the right with the rest of the company.

There were no unbroken lines, no trenches like later. (47) We just dug in. The battle for the Marne was yesterday, and everyone is still in movement with no stopping.

A little behind us is our kitchen. In the middle of a thicket are two stones. Between them is the hearth The pots and the master cook complete the installation pending the arrival of a field kitchen that only arrives months after we had.

The bedrooms are basic. Above the location of each shooter, against the embankment, is a roof made out of straw and supported by two branches. The walls are made out of the same material. Some plants, more or less dry, are the bed. While it may have been charming, at

night the men have no protection from the rain, but no one had much concern about improving what were seen as temporary installations.

Since we are in the woods, there were strong fumes, reminding one of the strong smell that one meets near the operations of the company Richer on the old streets of Paris.[23] The forest stank. In a few days, thousands of men, stricken with dysentery, are camped without worrying about hygiene. Near just about every tuft of grass and at the foot of every bush and tree (48) men had left a trace of their passage. It was impossible to take a step without first looking, to sit down without worrying about where you were sitting, to eat without having that odor rising from all around you, and there were the thousands of flies flying around and landing on the bread and meat.

The hospitals were full of cases of typhoid, and many men had been evacuated. War is not beautiful. The storyteller or the journalist always forget to show the reality of things. The truth is much more beautiful; war shows both the heroism and abnegation of men.

The poilus who read me will find the portrait a bit weak; the reality is more painful than that depicted by journalists. We never exactly analyze human suffering, and those who have not been personally in the trenches, like a soldier, can never have a real idea of the life of the poilu.

Combat and its sufferings only last a moment. Life without a roof, in the rain, in the snow and mud, in the dirt, without the possibility of getting as clean as you want, without a corner of a table to eat or write; this savage life is there all the time.

In ten degrees frost, frozen food, brought from three kilometers in the rear, white rice (49) frozen, often sprinkled with dirt from the trenches, a rosé[24] and the eau-de-vie[25] spilled before reaching us, that was the usual situation during the winter of 1914-1915. And meat was often thrown away because we were not allowed to light a fire to cook for fear of letting the enemy know where the trenches were.

The relief troops were like men climbing calvary, with their difficult march of hours en route through water and zig-zagging trenches, with the sticky mud everywhere and the sacks always too loaded, blistered feet, heavy loads that made it impossible to breathe. They usually arrived in such a state that they fell wherever they were, having only one desire, a bit of rest. Bullets and shells are really not the main concern; that is the weight of the packs that they carry.

The work is barely finished, when it begins again. The departure is usually at night to cross the

---

[23]La compagnie Richer was the main firm charged with cleaning the cesspools of Paris in the early twentieth century.

[24]Pinard or vin ordinaire (local wine). French soldiers were allotted a daily wine ration (one quarter liter in 1914, eventually raised to three quarter liter by 1916).

[25]Gnôle, basically moonshine made from a variety of local ingredients, was often distributed to soldiers before an attack or when conditions at the front were really bad.

trenches and supply lines. Work stops at the well-know tic-tac-tic sound of enemy machine guns, and then starts right back. The carrying of materials and ammunition to the front lines often gave the impression that a man's efforts were not always useful. Rest in the rear turns into nightmares so haunting that a man demands to leave as fast as possible (50) for the danger of the trenches where he can deal with the shells and not have to deal with his dreams.

That's what takes a toll on a man, not combat.

Despite this, he marches; he always marches; he grumbles. It's the French temperament, but in the most serious crisis, he laughs in the face of danger.

But there is nothing that annoys men at the front more than the tales of writers back home who depict war as a pleasurable party or as a succession of acts of heroism.

Of heroism, there is always some; of pleasure, there is rarely any. It is a struggle at all times, a struggle in which combat is a part but not the greater part, and soldiers are much better than actors who fall in a play with a smile on their lips. The soldiers fall as men, suffering men.

There is dirt against which you have to struggle all the time. That is neither gay nor heroic, and yet it is painful to bear. There are lice to deal with, and the rats that scramble in front of us after eating from our food bags, and the water that falls from the ceilings of our dugouts; the mud that is everywhere; the frozen feet, the shoes and leggings that are (51) too tight and that get tighter when the foot and legs swell in the cold and wet.

Our men have gone to the most extreme limits of human endurance. They have been calm to the horror of it all, magnificent in combat, and superb in dealing with the material suffering.

But I would be mistaken if I didn't say that is not what we have always shown about war. Instead it has been the cheap medals, the dreams, the decorations, the joyous marches, or the marching displays that please the eye. One must also recognize the daily suffering in the muddy trenches, not those visited by deputies in a certain grand city nor those where no fighting occurs, but those of the Argonne, the Vosges or Les Éparges,[26] where each shovelful of dirt covers a corpse, and where when seen in the light of all the suffering, the desire arises to visit a place of delight for all of whom we are speaking.

That afternoon Captain Piot kindly allowed us to accompany him. Cazeneuve and I together had the opportunity to have a look at the (52) strongly fortified position of the entire company.

At the extremity of the grassy slope that rises towards Vauquois, I could see the village perched at the summit of the hill and barring our route. A few distant silhouettes, just barely visible, signaled the presence of the Germans.

There were a few canon shots that night, and we learned from the report that of the four hundred men who had arrived the day before at the Buzemont farm, a few hundred meters nearby, twenty-nine had already fallen.

---

[26]All were French battlefields of the war.

(53)
VII. First Guard Duty

The first day passes without incident. We get used to our new life, do some work and settle in.

Our dugout is quickly built at the base of a giant oak tree. Dried brooms[27] form the roof and walls; some grass covers the ground and forms a bed a little less hard than the ground.

For the most part of the day, the whistling of shells animates the air. The German artillery bombards Neuvilly [en-Argonne] or Forimond.[28] The first projectiles surprise me a little, but after a couple of them, I go back to what I was doing.

Our artillery doesn't respond. The empty supply caissons from the Marne have still not been resupplied by our industry; and so the artillery men are saving their ammunition. We see from time to time, and not every day, (54) some 75mm artillery pieces[29] set up in batteries to the rear of Aire River, or on the approaches to Neuvilly, fire rapidly their hundred shells on a reported convoy or on the German defenses of Boureuilles.[30] Then they harness up their carriage and leave before the Germans reply, which never takes long.

A few 90mm shells are fired every once in a while, but they do not destroy much as the proportion of misfire rates is still quite high. Newspapers speak only of the German heavy artillery.

Our artillery is undeniably dominated by the German artillery. We are inferior both in regard to the number of pieces and to the supply of ammunition. Our heavy artillery is only represented by a few 90mm guns in a battery in the forest of Hesse.

The Germans have more soldiers than us. Despite the addition of territorial troops,[31] later removed, in active regiments in October 1914, we still had less soldiers.

We kept on asking ourselves. Why after the Battle of the Marne, have the Germans not pushed on? We were eighteen men guarding five hundred meters of trenches. All of our

---

[27]Brooms are a type of evergreen shrub that grow in Europe.

[28]Les côtes Forimond [Fourimont] is about two km south of Vauquois.

[29]The 75mm gun was the main artillery piece of the French army in the war. It could fire between fifteen and twenty rounds per minute at a range of up to eight thousand five hundred meters.

[30]These are all locations in the Argonne region of France.

[31]The territorial soldiers were men between the ages of thirty-five and forty-one who had done their active duty (ages twenty to twenty-three) and their reserve duty (ages twenty-four to thirty-five for forty days a year) and were now obligated to still be available if needed for military service. They reported for nineteen days of training each year.

companies were at reduced strength. Three waves of reinforcements of men from the Île de France, Brittany and the territorial men were still not enough to bring us up to full strength.[32] (55) And we have, despite this, held on against an adversary superior in number and material. Often, despite such deplorable conditions, we have attacked.

The day after our arrival, Michaud and I were chosen for our first guard duty at night, face-to-face with the enemy. Our hearts were beating a little heavily because we had the lives of our comrades in our hands.

“Halt, who goes there!”

“France, your relief.”

“Advance and give the password.”

“Montereau”

“Ok.”

All this was done silently. Quietly we took over the guard emplacement. Our comrades, without haste, took off their bayonets and passed them to us, and we adjusted them on our rifles.

“Good night.”

There was a rustling and crumpling of leaves, and our comrades disappeared. We were alone.

The large clearing opened in front of our eyes. I am in the middle of one of the sides, (56) behind me is a stand of trees, then the road. The trees are about forty meters deep. In front, the clearing, bordered on the left and right by stands of trees. In the back there was another stand of trees, but heavier, interspersed with brooms that form a dark veil and that can easily hide the enemy. It is necessary to keep watch not as much with the eye as with the ear. The sound of a branch breaking or dead leaves rustling as someone marches are an even more revealing sign of the approach of the enemy than the sight of him.

The bright moon cleans the clearing like washing away a large stain. Near the broom shrubs four or five horse cadavers take on the appearance of giant beasts, imprinting a dark and somber spot on the lighter colored meadow. The paleness of the last cadaver is broken by a large stream of blood that runs from the heard along the chest to the legs. The bullet that put an end to the suffering of the exhausted beast has stained its coat. The beasts were on their way towards the small, murmuring stream in the clearing.

---

[32]Typically a French infantry regiment at the start of the war in 1914 drew its men from a specific location. As replacements were added over time, the localized focus of the regiment changed dramatically.

Not a shot, nothing, a silence that extends and impresses as much as the white immensity and brightness of the clearing.

Beyond the thickets of trees, the tops of two trees shelter me from the rays of the moon (57) which pass through the spaces between the leaves and leave on the ground a mosaic of light and dark patches.

I am immobile. My eyes and ears alert, shifting about without stepping on the empty shell casings at my feet. The shadows hide my presence and disperse the rays of light reflecting from my bayonet.

Michaud, following the thickets, comes and goes without a sound. At irregular intervals, he returns, and then goes, probing the woods, stopping and going again, hiding at the slightest noise.

The hour of guard duty is over. He takes my spot, and I take his. Nothing breaks the silence of the night. How disturbing are these nights that are sometimes broken by a cry of alarm, "to arms." Frightening because of the unknown that hides in the thickets waiting to attack.

But the first night is so calm that little by little one's thoughts could wander freely. Without trouble I revisit my previous life, and I think about my privacy abandoned. Then, suddenly, a cracking. A branch that falls returns me to the present situation. My thoughts wander, and the minutes pass by. Two hours is so long
(58)
There is a rustling in the leaves behind me.

"Halt or I'll shoot."

"French, your relief."

"Advance."

"Montereau, anything new."

"No, you should wake us for coffee."

"Understood."

"Good night."

The rustling of the leaves occurs again. Two men disappear into the woods. My first guard duty is over. Behind me, as almost in a theater set, Cazeneuve leaving behind his stage career, is taking his first watch, in front of Vauquois, where he will fall later, just at the moment when our men were chasing out the Germans.[33]

---

[33]Here Boucheron uses the term "feldgrau" for the Germans, referring to the gray uniforms that the German soldiers wore.

My guard watches were not all later imbued with the same poetry of a wonderful night. There were some that were dark and tragic. But none left quite as intense an impression as the first one.

(59)
VIII. First Attack on Vauquois

On 5 November 1914 we were philosophizing in a trench in front of Boureuilles. Breakfast, which consisted of a piece of beef and two spoonfuls of potatoes, was quickly finished. My comrades struggled with their cigarettes which they had made with some logs of tobacco kept in their pockets and with a paper that didn't have the slightest resemblance to regular cigarette paper.

Our trench cuts the valley of the Aire River in two along its length. It connects the forest of Hesse with the Argonne.

Boureuilles, which has been turned into ruins, with piles of stones and carts piles filled with debris, is very close. Captured by us, then lost, it again hides the Germans who don't dare show their faces. A profound silence, like a feeling of deep reflection hovering over a cemetery, extends over the many corpses strewn close by.
(60)
Nature was peacefully putting on its fall makeup before going to sleep for the winter.

The Argonne appears against the blue horizon with its black-veined branches laid bare by cannons. A little closer, the sun on the autumn leaves sparkles with its golden rays. Under the interplay of sun and shadow, here the forest is rather pale, but a little farther off it is darker and more mysterious. The dying leaves frame the still green carpet of the valley.

Not a living thing is visible, not a movement. Silence and death seem to be the only inhabitants. The adversaries gather their thoughts quietly after fighting.

Towards the evening, behind us, a hum, far off and vague, is heard. It becomes clearer and louder as it gets closer. One of our airplanes is flying over us to examine the Boche.

A liaison officers pulls me from my reverie. The military manual indicates that corporals should have their stripes on the outside of their sleeves, that these stripes should only be three centimeters long, and that they should, prior to applying them, be soaked in coffee to attain their proper reddish color.
(61)
This is the sixth set of regulations this month. The communiques say that we are making progress in the Argonne.

During my reading, the shells, which had not visited us since the morning, began to fall again. But there is no infantry action taking place, and I take up my notes where I had left them.

At the end of October, we were at Clermont for a few days of rest. On the twenty-sixth, we received a double dose of the typhoid vaccine. Time was lacking for us to do two injections because we had to return to the trenches on the twenty-ninth.

Suddenly on the twenty-seventh, at 1030 we received the order to move out. With lunch gently simmering on the fire, and since we did not know when we will have out next meal, I swallowed the carrot juice from the pot, and we each took a piece of meet with our fingers and

ate the still bloody meat. We satisfied our hunger while getting into ranks. The restaurants of Paris are a long way off, and there are no finely dressed waiters. It is memories of old and moments like this that are of so little importance. Man returns to a primitive state pretty quickly. (62)
We move rapidly along the route to Avocourt.[34] The heavy knapsack was even heavier now on our shoulders which were hurting from where we were vaccinated. The legs wobbled a bit from the bouts of chills. Nevertheless the route was soon behind us and, at night, we arrived at the forest of Hesse and take up positions in the second line of trenches.

We dine on our memories, of course.

From nine to ten in the evening, I am on guard alone in front of the trenches. It is impossible to see anything beyond about five meters. A few isolated shots ring out in the night, both French and German. One is able to tell the difference between the two pretty easily. The German sounds like a breaking hazelnut, and the French sounds like a long crack of a whip.

My guard duty is over, and Jouen replaces me. I wish him a good guard duty, and I go to the shelter just as the rain begins to fall. It is a rough shelter at that. The trench has no roof but the sky, but my tent canvas covers my head and body and allows me to get some sleep through the rain shower without feeling the effects too much.

I wake with a start; millions of shots are exploding; it's infernal. We jump for our guns. A black mass falls outside of the trench (63) We do not have time to recognize the intruder before we hear the voice of Jouen.

"The bastards, they're trying to wound me."

The balls rain down by the thousands on the parapet of the trench, against the tree trunks in front of and behind us, hitting the branches, and at each strike there is a brilliant flash the size of a two-franc piece. There are flashes of light everywhere; it's eerie. Suddenly, we recognize that we are shooting at the Boche. With the explosion of shots, it is so loud that you have to yell in the ear of your neighbor to be heard.

That completes my recollection, and later we find evidence of the dumdum bullets[35] used by the Germans.

We are waiting in the downpour from the sky and watching the hill in front of us, but nothing happens. It is the classic case of a panic that breaks out among nervous troops with little discipline who believe that they are under attack. After a quarter of an hour, the firing slackens off. Everyone falls asleep on the wet ground of the trench. In effect, millions of shots were fired, but no one is wounded.

---

[34]Village north of the Forest de Hesse, about ten kilometers west of the Meuse River.

[35]Hollow-point or dumdum bullets, which expand on contact with the body, were outlawed by the Hague Convention of 1899. There were claims from both sides during the war that the other side was using them.

At daybreak, we fold up our covers and tent canvases soaked with water. (64) Frozen to the bone, we leave without having had any coffee. It's an attack. We sense it without anyone having given us any indication of it.

This is the usual situation for all troops sent to attack instead of going into reserve or work. Someone forgets to tell them that the pick axe is being replaced by the bayonet.

It's my first attack. I confess that my heart was a little excited. I do not fear death. I know that death could visit me, but almost always the thought arises that it will be closer to my neighbor than to me. I fear the unknown, something vague that I can't define. My nerves were tense. I am afraid of being afraid.

I look at my comrades. It seems to me that the impressions of them that I feel are different. Here's how I look at a man who has already been under fire or a novice.

The novices think, not saying anything, waiting, doing only what they have been commanded to do, nothing else.

The veterans, those who have been under fire, take precautions, throwing away extra cans. Soon they form a pile at the foot of a tree. If they return, then they'll retrieve them. If they don't return, then they'll be like us, remnants of the battle (65), and they'll be abandoned. We fix our shovels and pickaxes to our belts. We check the magazines of our rifles and the strings and papers for our packets of bullets. Bayonets are affixed to the gun barrels. Everyone goes to urinate. It will help if there is a kidney injury. Packets of bandages are in the pockets.

We are ready

"Forward!"

We traverse the woods in single file and approach the Vauquois ravine. The Germans, installed on the slope in front of us, hear the noise made by the breaking branches by the marching of hundreds of men and by the clash of arms and suspect our approach. Shots ring out. Through the trees you can hear the bullets whizzing.

Psst, pssss, psss, p....

The shooters can only fix their fire on paths or on places where there are no trees. We do not get much worked up about it.

At the head of our column is our friend Scherr, our guide and a corporal signed up for the duration of the war because the Germans had burned his house in the Ardennes.

There's the crest of the ravine. The point easily seen by the Germans. Scherr (66) reaches it. The fusillade is raging. He turns around and calmly tells us

"Boys, it's too dangerous. Don't come this way but go to the left."

He had barely finished that phrase when he staggers and leans against an oak tree. A red dot

grows bigger at his left temple. He slumps down without a sound. He's finished. Of our group of close friends, he is the first to fall. He showed the way.

A friend sleeping gently now.

"Forward."

Four days later, on passing by the grave before its covered we present arms. The war now begins to reach us and our friends.

We move to the left and descend into the ravine. The firing has stopped.

We take up a position about twenty meters from the edge of the woods. At this spot, the thick trees conceal us completely from the enemy. In front of us the ravine extends onward. Towards the left it gets larger and widens out, and a couple of hundred meters further it meets up with the valley of the Aire River. On the other side of the ravine, uncovered terrain rises up a very steep slope from the farm de la Cigalerie (67) right to the village of Vauquois.[36] On the right, the Buante[37] separates us from the forest of Cheppy that is swarming with Germans and artillery. From Bourreuilles[38] the humpback ridge of Vauquois climbs gently to the west of the village.

A fortress surrounded by open ground provides extended fields of fire for machine guns; the walls of the houses on the border of the village are crenellated. On the slopes leading up to the village are concealed trenches, and there are lookouts installed behind the chimneys. The entire position is supported and flanked by fire from the forest of Cheppy, Montfaucon and the Argonne. That's the position that Vauquois presented, and to capure that position, two battalions were put in line.

To get to the foot of the slopes, we have to cross a swampy ravine that holds us back in certain places as much as a network of barbed wire.

We look a little bewildered. But since we cannot pretend to have any knowledge of military science--after all just two months have gone by as a second-class soldier--we think that all the precautions have been taken for a successful advance

The orders have been issued, so we go.

The day of the twenty-eights, despite our feverish attempts, (68) nothing happens; our turn has not yet come.

---

[36]The village of Vauquois was on top of the butte; the Cigalerie farm, comprised of a series of buildings, was on the south slope of the butte.

[37]A small river.

[38]Boureuilles is a commune in the Meuse department in Lorraine in northeastern France

On our left, from the forest to the north, two companies are engaged on the slopes, marching towards the west of Vauquois. The sections form in lines of riflemen, alternating their short runs so that they could fire their rounds and making their way towards the open space. At each run, the line is reduced by the enemy's fire; nevertheless, it still rapidly approaches the Boche, but despite the admirable courage of the men, they were too few. The defenders of Vauquois, which the French artillery had not bombarded, shoot out of the gun slits from their sheltered trenches. Our men keep advancing, like on maneuver, but suddenly there is a huge noise, followed by a whistling. There is an explosion, then others, and on the slopes great black clouds. These are the heavy German shells that fall exactly on the position occupied by our men. Groups of men are struck and quickly wiped out. Some men want to escape, but one after another they are picked off by shells or by the machine guns which, in front and on the flank, greet them. They fall, and just a few minutes after their first arrival, we now see (69) on the green grass the somber blue greatcoats or red pants along with the shell holes. Everything quiets.

The attack lasted a half an hour. Our men were admirable. Without artillery preparation, with their rifles and their bodies, they tried to capture a fortified position, defended by machine guns and heavy artillery.

It will be our turn tomorrow, in the same conditions. The example that I have just seen with my own eyes will help me. It is infinitely more dangerous to fight in retreat than to march at the enemy.

During the night, the wounded return. We bandage them as they pass by. Then slowly they are taken to the aid station. One of them, however, can't walk, and we take care of him in our shelter, and all night I could hear his plaintive groans.

On 29 October, the order to attack reaches us at about ten o'clock. We must go in about a half an hour. On the left and right other companies prepare.

Our captain is worried. From the start, he has seen the operation. To him there is nothing about it that you could call good. To everyone, it looks so badly prepared. The crenellated walls[39] still stand. The work of our adversary has not been attacked by our artillery. (70) We also, on the other hand, have a disadvantageous position.

Hastily, the companies take their positions. Before us, at the edge of the clearing, a machine gun was set up to fire over our heads. Another was set up on the right. Our sections join together.

The one that I belong to will be the reserve. The order is given to rest lying on the ground. I stretch out on some ivy. A few moments pass. We advance a few meters, and I see that I am covered from my feet to my chin with some kind of yellowish, nauseating stuff from the ivy. This will bring me good luck, but I feel bad.

---

[39]"Crenellation" refers to a wall with alternating embrasures, or gun slits, that allows the defender to fire and then be protected.

Silence. Then behind us there is a cannon shot. It's the signal. The shell arrives over Vauquois, and there is an explosion. A few others follow, a burst of four. The preparation, if one can call the shots from a few cannon as preparation, ends quickly.

The Germans, now warned, send a rain of bullets at the woods. The machine guns enter into action. An infernal music quiets us. Instinctively, I hide behind an oak.

I hear the clatter of a bayonet being affixed to a rifle. (71) I do the same, and around me, the others do the same, and the clacking sound multiplies. Everyone is prepared. I regain my sang-froid. The first nervous moment has passed.

"Fix bayonets," cries a voice.

Already done.

A shrill whistle rings out.

"Bayonets, forward, forward!"

Shouts resound everywhere. We bound forward. I no longer feel fear, fatigue, nor my pack. I run. I am the first to arrive at the edge of the woods.

Stop. A meter from the edge there is a trench full of men that bars our passage; they are fixing bayonets. We jump over them. Again, elan! I run from the woods in broad daylight, and I fall into a hole filled with water in which I fall up to my waist. It's freezing. On all sides, dark blue coats go forward. All fall at their first steps. The Germans, who dominate us from above, are constantly firing. Almost all the bullets hit the head. Successively, groups gather around me.

I am suddenly splashed. It's P*. Stopped, liked me, by falling into the hole (72) that half submerges us. I pull out the rest of my body to see what is happening. The bullets are raining down in such numbers that they were striking the ground and splattering it on us, covering us with mud.

The German shells hit the edge of the woods with precision. On our left, the earth trembled with the explosions.

This entire scene lasts only a few moments.

I ask P*.

"This is impossible, my friend, let's not stay here. Forward."

I had barely finished my phrase when I saw, at the back of his hat, in his very back hair, a drop of blood beaded up, and some whitish matter appeared. A small breath exhales from his chest, very softly, "ahhh." His head fell forward; the body turned to the earth and fell forward to the ground, his nose in the mud. He's finished.

I jump up on the edge of the hole, and I leave with all of my strength. At the same time a new group breaks from the cover of the woods. I run like a fool. My legs feel paralyzed, and I stretch out along my entire length. Before me, a man tumbles. To my left and right, everyone is falling, a pile forms

There is no longer anyone standing. The fusillade rages on. (73) My legs feel like they have a very heavy weight on them. Before my head a body falls back on its legs and no longer moves. On my right, three soldiers are stretched out; on my left, one that was shot is almost touching me. A big guy, the bullet had penetrated the top of his head. Like a stunned cattle, the man falls, and a grunt comes from his chest; and then, slowly, from his whitish brain, streams of blood run, flowing and almost touching my cheek.

I turn to see what has paralyzed me, and it's another body that has fallen with the head facing forward. I was struck and fell to the ground. I move my legs. I sense nothing, but I should not be hurt.

All my sang-froid returned. I was a little afraid before combat, a fear mostly of the unknown, just a fear of not exactly knowing what was going to happen. I had an indefinable anxiety, impossible to analyze. Since our departure, the rush forward, and now, crouched among thousands of cadavers, I think over all of my impressions. I regained my composure and in the tiniest detail, the scene is engraved in my mind.

I barely had time to take account of the situation when I hear a voice cry out from the woods. (74)
"Stop! The attack is stopped."

Indeed, no one else came out of the woods.

I take shelter behind the corpse. All the wounded who move or try to get back into the woods are shot by the Germans.

I take my pick from my belt, but to do that, I have to move my body a little, and the movement was noticed. A soft impact warns me that the Germans are firing at me. However, I don't feel any pain in my back where the bullet struck. In the evening I find the remnants of the bullet, which traversed my pack and was lost between my legs after having cut through my letters and my notebook.

I stick my pick into the ground. I raise my head and look back expecting a bullet, checking to see if I need to make an effort to preserve myself. I would never have thought that I could escape the bullets that are reserved for my comrades and that I could return from the adventure unscathed. That would be too good.

My thoughts drift far away from everything around me; my past life appears. Fleeting and evocative, the dear images of those who are left behind and who could not even begin to imagine the situation of their loved ones at this moment, pass rapidly. They are a last tender memory. (75) One would like to say a last goodbye to them. Meanwhile, death strikes and touches you. The impressions of those past times are deeply-etched, but the impressions seem petty when compared to the current incidents of daily life.

The waiting continues. The bullet is not coming for me, and the instinct for self-preservation reappears. I consider the chances that I have to escape.

The fusillade, little by little, weakens. The French no longer come out of the woods.

Everyone seems to be dead in the ravine; only cries continue to rise up, but in the woods, behind me, life resumes, and voices are heard

Thirty meters away, on the other side of the ravine, some men who have passed by first and are now in a shelter formed in a blind spot hidden by the Cigalerie farm are looking around checking out the place. Two or three shake fruit trees; one calmly smokes his pipe while turning towards us; two others dig a shelter.

I hear the conversation of a high voice at the edge of the woods.
(76)
“Cazeneuve is killed. I saw his yellow shoes,” says someone.

I listen and hear something, a breath. About two meters from me, I see a hand that moves.

“Is that you Cazeneuve?”

“Yes.”

“Wounded?”

“No, and you?”

“Ok.”

Then, to the side, I see Jouen who moves a bit.

“Jouen, you ok?”

“Nothing, because of my small medal.”

The Breton reappears and I forget, in that moment, my skepticism.

“Good. Make sure that you take care of that small medal.”

Then, pitiable, in front of me, a voice cries out from one of the wounded men who is suffering.

“Help me, I’m wounded.”

“Where?”

“In the kidney.”

“Take a piss.”

The voice is silent. It is impossible to raise one's head to see where the wounded man is. The cries and the responses come from all sides.

Regrettably, the voice resumed.
(77)
"I cannot get unbuttoned."

"Piss in your pants."

"Millerand[40] will buy you another pair."

"Let me alone."

"No, my friend, but above all don't move. Wait for the night and someone will come and find you."

The voice from the woods resumes.

"B... is dead."

I protest, "don't bury me yet."

Then, clear as day, the voice of adjutant Vidal is heard.

"Do you want some advice, B*?"

"Of course, go ahead."

"Don't move. We will dig a trench out from the woods. We should be able to also reach Cazeneuve and hide ourselves with shields as we dig.[41] As for you, wait for the night."

"Thanks."

I want more advice. Should I listen to the opinion of Vidal? Should I try to get back to the woods right away?

It is about noon; the sun beats down on our heads. Night isn't going to cover the ravine until a lot of hours from now, and it is necessary to remain motionless in the mud for all that time, completely soaked, and with a nauseating odor that reaches my nose. My arms are already numb because of the position they are in.
(78)
On the other hand, to get up and try and reach the woods by running, means for me, as for those who have tried it, death.

---

[40]Alexandre Millerand (1859-1943) was minister of war in 1914 and 1915.

[41]A bouclier is a portable steel shield often used by snipers.

I was at that point in my reflections when F* comes out of a shell hole near me. Wounded simply on the hand, he tries to reach the woods. His departure is met by a murderous fusillade. He falls, restarts and seemingly is hit again. His example does not encourage me.

I am going to try and crawl back, without turning around.

Slowly, raising my right leg little by little I am able to get it past the head of the corpse that fell between my legs. I disengage my left arm to bring back my pick. The other hand holds the gun which I do not want to part with. And during the long minutes, sliding through all the corpses, I imperceptibly cover the ground towards the woods. But it is so long. From time to time I rest. The creeping has loosened my belt, and I lose my cartridges.

Cazeneuve is free, and I hear the voices of my comrades expressing their satisfaction.

They follow my progress. My feet get caught on something that is stopping them. I push; the obstacle resists. I take a side glance. (79) It's the head of P*. I move to the left a bit. Finally, a light lapping warns me that I'm over the pit.

The most dangerous moment has arrived. I reflect a moment. My hand grips my rifle. I regain my spirit. I tear my body out of the mud; I jump to the side; and I land in the hole. Then, just as quickly, I jump behind a bush. I am in the woods. I am saved with my weapons and equipment, and I did not let go of my rifle. That was a point of honor.

I had the impression of returning to another world. I shake the outstretched hands and see the figure of captain Piot. He smiles a bit and extends his hand.

"My poor fried B*. I thought damn you; you've come a long way."

"Yes, captain. I am drenched. Would you permit me to change in your dugout?"

"Go."

Ten minutes later, I had changed my clothes, made sure that I was intact, but my pack was hit, from top to bottom, by a bullet that struck while I was laying down and that tore my coat and my pants. I do not feel quite smell like a rose.
(80
From experience, you can say that with death...you get lucky.

My first combat is over. It was serious because of the many losses. My section was the most proven of the company. But my comrades lay unnecessarily in the open for an operation that could never lead to a successful result.

(81)
IX. The Evening After

Our hearts raging, we wait for the night, hoping for a German counter-attack that would allow us to shoot the Boche.

Quickly we dig trenches inside the edge of the woods. Two or three fields of fire complete the system. It's not very solid, but the enemy does not seem inclined to leave its shelters and pay us a visit.

Profiting from the calm after the battle, I am curious to find out what happened to our neighboring units in the battle.

It's lamentable. Through the trees I make out bodies stretched out; a few hundred litter the open field. Almost all of the men had fallen facing forward in a position of rushing to their death–many were struck in the head. Machine guns had done their task. Not destroyed by our artillery they shot the groups of men from in front and from the flank. In certain spots (82) the attackers were resting still in line, like a military exercise. They sleep their last sleep; still looking at the enemy.

On the left of my company, the men emerged from the woods when the enemy shells hit the edge of the trees in the middle of the groups of men.

The spectacle was horrible in places where the explosions occurred. The bodies were terribly mutilated. I involuntarily hit a foot, a mass of mud and blood. There's a shoe from which emerges a leg cut off in the middle. A little further on is a corpse half undressed, the belly slit open. Other corpses are stretched out here and there. Debris of bloody flesh, accompanied by shreds of clothing, were hanging from the trees; bodies piled against one another in a disorder bloody and horrifying. Brains were flowing out of their skulls.

Silently, their comrades took part in a terrible "death" work detail. The bodies were placed side by side, forming a sinister line in the forest.

With caution, a man unbuttoned the coat, took the papers and cut the cord of the identification medal. When the body was too damaged, no one dared to touch it. It was interred without being examined.

The equipment, packs, rifles, musette pouches, were put on piles. (83) They will be taken away later, when they can. There was just about nothing remaining in the packs for the ever present crows.

Quickly, about a hundred bodies, those which could be gathered without leaving the woods, were set out under the great trees.

What a sinister review to pass by them. However, I became hardened. Habit chases away any repulsion, and then my composure allowed all of my observations. After some time, it became natural to live close to dead bodies. They were part of the usual spectacle of the war, and they were placed next to the road so that they did not interfere. And the work details for water,

food, cartridges go on as if the corpses were not even there. Yet, no disrespect is intended. A salute is given to what remains of the man who was a friend yesterday and who, today, is no longer.

The waxen figures reflect the emotions of the man at the moment that death found him.

This one seems peaceful; his eyes clear, a young Breton, recognizable by the bright sweater that they all wore at the moment of their arrival as reinforcements. His eyes rest clear as the sky. (84) He died in a moment of quiet reflection that fixed a smile on his bloodless lips.

Others had sensed the approach of death and had made a mechanical reflex to protect themselves.. Numerous are those who raised their arms to their head in a gesture of protection. For one, his head had been scalped, and the skin had fallen down in front of his eyes. His hand seemed to be trying to remove the bloody veil. Death came very quickly, and his gesture was fixed forever in place.

The men and their clothes were covered with blood and mud.

In my soul, a feeling of hatred towards the Boche rose, a feeling that is set, that became part of me and accompanied me all of my life, because all of my life this scene remains in my thoughts.

You who, in the rear, have never suffered in the war. You who have not had the flesh or mind of your friends and comrades damaged in combat. You who still talk, despite the cries of the dying, the tears of the widows and orphans, about brotherhood and peace and not about those who have suffered on our side but you talk about peace with those assassins, come and see the real lessons of the war. You who talk about the war (85) from your corner by the fire or while sitting in your plush chairs, respect the dead and shut up. Only we have the right to talk, we who have been there.

I remained dreaming for a long time. Night falls.

The darkness allowsed an attempt by our doctors and stretcher-bearers to operate on our wounded. The night is greeted by a fusillade that the light of the Red Cross does not stop. The Boche violate, one more time, international conventions and human rights.

The cold descends on the ravine, guiding death to certain, exhausted wounded men.

The moon is veiled. Shadows creep from the woods, quietly, crawling, examining the bodies stretched out. The stretcher-bearers return with their burden of sadness. The wounded grit their teeth so that they do not moan and, after such a combat, the struggle with death continues.

I have not yet slept, but my time for guard duty has arrived. Accompanied by Lebris, we pass by the barbed wire and, with our fingers on the triggers, at the edge of the woods we look out. It is necessary to get rid of any nervous impressions and not shoot either the wounded or the stretcher bearers who are returning, which would signal to the Boche that they are there.

Suddenly, in the silence of the ravine, (86) a voice rises, tragically, chilling to the marrow.

“Help, forty-sixth, don’t abandon me.”

Everywhere, voices are heard.

“Help me.”

“I’m cold. Don’t let me here.”

“Over here.”

Even weaker, a young voice rises from the ravine.

“Mama, mama.”

It seems as if the first voice has awakened the entire field of carnage. The cries grow in number. The calls mix with the groans.

How terrible, even more so than combat. Lebris’ eyes have a glimmer of terror; mine must have looked the same. Our fists are clenched behind our butts. We cannot do anything. I want to cry out, to encourage them, but it is necessary that we say nothing and remain stoic in the face of the pain of our friends.

The voices grow louder and then quieter. The silence that returns is broken again, but each time, less strongly. The cries, little by little, are less strident, fewer. Death closes their mouths.

The nurses and our comrades come back fewer and fewer times; everything calms down. Our guard duty is over. (87) A light noise behind us signals that our relief is here.

I return to my hut. The night before the battle there were nine of us in it; now there are three.

The night allows the slightly wounded the opportunity to get back to the woods without help. We go from hut to hut to see who the survivors are.

Our sergeant Maugas has fallen on the grass of the ravine. The shot which wounded our cook, Berthelot, killed him [Maugas], courageously facing the enemy.

The brothers B*, two teachers, territorials,[42] just the day before one was made sergeant and the other a corporal, both fell. The one killed instantly; the other slowly, agonizingly with a bullet in the kidney. With a kind of maternal instinct, we hide the death of one brother from the other brother.

Our liaison, V*, shot with a bullet in the head.

---

[42]See footnote 31.

We are exhausted. We sleep with our heads on our packs and our feet in the mud. A heavy sleep comes over us, but before that we cinch our belts a bit; our food reserves are gone.

I am waken from my sleep by my two comrades calling.

“Hey. Over there!”
(88)
“What? Who is there?”

“It’s me, Pelé.”

Pelé is a courageous man, but he has one defect, he eats, he eats all the time. Nature endowed him with a remarkable stomach. He doesn’t just eat breakfast or dinner, but he eats all the time. Doesn’t matter what he eats either. In the trench, he conscientiously takes a mouthful, then puts a cartridge in his rifle, then another mouthful, then another cartridge, and so on. When soup is distributed, he is the first in line. At seconds he is again first and doesn’t leave until there is not the slightest spot of food left.

“What do you want?”

“Do you know where P* fell?”

“Yes, in the pit, near the crossing where I came out.”

“He had the squad’s bottle of oil and vinegar.”

“What do you want me to do? Leave me in peace.”

“One could go search for it.”

“You can go if you want. Me, I am not moving.”

“Do you know where Maugas fell?”

“Yes, you’re annoying me, in a shell hole to the right.”

“He has at least ten francs worth of canned preserves (89) in his knapsack, some sardines, some lobster. One could prepare them with P’s vinegar. There’s nothing else to eat.”

“Fuck off. Are you going to let me get some sleep?”

“Ok, if you don’t want to go look for them, you’re not smart.”

“My friend, I don’t want to risk getting shot for a can of preserves.”

“Oh well, there’s got to be someone who wants to go. You’re not smart, there are others. M* told me that if he is wounded he will give me everything that he has, and you know that there is also some chocolate. They are our friends. We cannot leave their packs to be taken by just

anybody."

"You are annoying me. I would go if he was hurt, but he is killed, and it is only the pack that you are interested in. Now give us some peace."

Curses are heard all around us, and Pelé leaves us. In the morning we find him heartbroken. The packs were found empty. The chocolate and lobster were stolen. The only thing left were some letters, and you can't eat letters. He claimed from the section's cook some of what had been stolen.

The next day, the work detail for the dead continues. We wait anxiously. There is no way that we want to recommence the assault under the same conditions. We would rather listen while the artillery participates in the dance.
(90)
We are prohibited from firing because the Germans would know our positions. The distribution of food was done far away from the front line, and the work details have difficulty arriving. We breakfast on a can of sardines for every five people, the same in the evening, and the next day a cheap bar of chocolate and a little alcohol constitutes our meal. The meat, very nice looking, is buried as it is impossible to cook it.

We haven't washed for five days. The circulars issued in the rear are rarely observed. The dead, who are always near us, give off a nauseating odor. Each breeze of wind brings us the scent of corpses in a state of putrefaction. The flies, by the millions, cover then and swarm around us. We wait impatiently for our relief.

The next night the few men of our company who were on the other side of the ravine at the Cigalerie farm rejoin our lines. What warm handshakes on their return! The battle's equality and danger has erased any social, educational, upbringing differences. Comrades in battle all wear the same greatcoat.

We were happy to see the head of our cook Berthelot. He arrives with (91) his arms bandaged. A bullet had entered his wrist and traversed his forearm. He smiled before going to the aid station. He just stopped by to say his goodbyes.

"Good evening, soldiers, you know that it won't be me making your soup tomorrow. I am messed up now. I am getting the hell out of the camp. I retrieved the pail, the coffee and sugar, and since Michaud does not have a blanket, I gave him mine. I can no longer carry my pack because of my wound."

I shook his good hand. I wanted to kiss him, this man so painfully wounded who while leaving thinks of coffee for his comrades and who, not thinking of himself, gives his blanket to a comrade so that he doesn't get cold.

We let him go, moved. Later, he will come back and take his place in my section and fall by my side at the capture of Vauquois, hit by a shell, less lucky than the first time.

Nothing remains of these acts of courage, which grew in number, not even in citations. It seems that in the infantry where death and courage are daily encounters it is not possible to

have a large enough number of citations to be earned by all, (92) and so they are reserved for those in the rear or the military staff.

But I digress. Each time that I see an infantryman without a medal on his chest, his uniform indicates to me that he should probably have a hundred medals.

In the morning, I was thirsty, and I headed for some water in the woods a couple of hundred meters away, and under the clear stream of water I put my bowl. The sound of a voice caused me to raise my head.

“Hurry up!”

“Two exclamations are heard simultaneously.

“De Burgue?”

“You are here?”

“Yes, my friend, in the three hundred thirty-first as liaison. This fits in with the spirit of the times at the palace of justice and in politics. I am happy to find you. You are the first colleague that I have met.”

I examine him. He is as dirty as me, his balaclava[43] covered with dirt and a coat spotted with mud. We sat down on a fallen tree trunk, and he took from his musette a sausage and a Camembert. I had hardly eaten in two days, and we shared the food.

A whistle from my company interrupts us; I raise my rifle and bowl to my shoulders.
(93)
“Goodbye my friend. Thanks for your food. I will repay you in Paris. Don’t get hurt.”

“I will try.”

I only ever saw him one more time, at Verdun, the following month in a half-open carriage harnessed to a nag that could barely walk. He was shopping for his company in the Rue Mazel, now destroyed. He is now sleeping in his grave, after having won his stripes for second lieutenant on the field of battle. At the palace of justice, we were not always in agreement, [but] a few moments passed side by side in the forest of Hesse amidst all the trees destroyed by the German artillery after a battle in which de Burge was awarded a citation as liaison officer and in which I was awarded corporal’s stripes was sufficient to wipe away the memory of some frostiness so petty compared to the dangers that we had to endure for the same cause and seal a friendship that would have lasted if death had not intervened.

A few moments later, the order to depart was given. In single file we traversed the woods rapidly. We approached the small crater where Scherr had fallen. A command was transmitted all along the column.

---

[43]A kind of ski mask.

“Present arms.”

And in front of the grave of Scherr and two comrades, which was still open, (94) the survivors presented arms to the dead; the last salute for those who had fallen

Two days later, in the trench in front of Boureuilles, I took up my notebook, after sewing on my sleeve and on Cazeneuve’s the red stripes won in battle.[44]

[44]Stripes, which were sewn on the sleeve indicted a soldier’s rank; stripes on other sleeve indicated the number of times wounded.

(95)
X. The Argonne

At the end of October, we left the Vauquois sector. A painful trip brought us to the center of the Argonne not far from Four de Paris.[45] We would stay there in the forest for a few months. We rest for awhile and then always return, and here, as at Vauquois, to oppose the powerful army of the Crown Prince[46] as a barrier protecting the people of Paris, the gas industry of Yonne,[47] the tributaries of the Loire River, and Brittany.

In the brief communiques of the winter of 1914-15, every day, monotonously for the readers, one sees the names La Gruerie, (for soldiers known as le bois de la Tuerie)[48], Four de Paris, la Chalade, la Harazée, des Courtes Chausses, des Meurissons, la Haute Chevauchée, la Fontaine-Madame, etc.[49] Each of these names recalls not a battle, but a series of battles. A struggle, ardent and incessant, the attack or defense of woods, (96) the hiding in bushes, a guard behind a wall, bestial, anonymous death from the ricochet of millions of bullets, always suspended in the air, the waiting in fear of a mine [that will explode] and send you into the air, a night of anxious guard duty in which the darkness doesn't allow you to see the enemy even at three meters, and I add, for my memoirs, the lack of sun, the work details, the frozen food for weeks, the stay in the snow, or the rain, with no other shelter than a tent cloth thrown over your shoulders, your coat transformed by the mud into a cardboard sheath, the feet frozen and painful because of the bite of leather and cold to the point of having tears in your eyes right up to the moment when, not being able to take it anymore, you cut open the shoes, while saving the soles, to free up the toes. Marching then is pretty much impossible, and despite all this, not for a second did the barrier weaken. The opposition to the enemy persisted. Our defense was relentless, and the enemy remained contained.

The Argonne was a real sector of the war, never peaceful, always a battle, a furnace where the battalions of the fifth corps, there since September 1914, had to be on guard.

This was a terrible war, relentless, ceaseless, never any rest. (97) A man returns to a primitive state, almost like a stone. He came, slept and suffered. He fought under a sky filled with moving bullets, which dismally and without stop, made a sinister whistling in the trees.

Valmy evokes nothing more than the image of an outpost, and the tombs of the Argonne are

---

[45]A village in the Argonne Forest on the Biesme River, a tributary of the Aisne Ruver

[46]Crown Prince Wilhelm (1882-1951) was heir to the Hohenzollern throne of Germany, and commander of the German Fifth army in the Argonne region

[47]This is a department of France (chief city is Auxerre).

[48]Can be roughly translated as "slaughterhouse woods."

[49]All are villages or sites in the Argonne.

more numerous than those of Kellerman.[50]

The corps of Metz, of von Mudra,[51] left the flower of German youth in the forest's thickets. Hessian chasseurs are sleeping near our kids of the class of 1914 in the thickets of the Meurissons. North of la Chalade, mail addressed to inhabitants of the province of Lorraine allowed us to identify other [German] victims. Near the brave Garibaldians,[52] but a bravery a little less disciplined, rest the cadavers of Pomeranians and Brandenburgians[53]; and among us, a resolute, disciplined, courageous, former soldier of the German guard, who became a French sergeant, killed German engineers with the blows of his Lebel rifle.

Our barrier remained intact. German blood flowed like ours, and the forest became a great cemetery, but at the Islettes, (98) the railway from Châlons to Verdun remained in our hands.

The Boche, after September 1914, tried to restart their forward march, which had been stopped at the Marne. They wanted to breach the French barrier by their attacks from trench to trench in local operations. Beaten back, they used in January 1915, then June and July 1915 a larger attack along an extended front. These attacks broken, they returned to their previous system, and tirelessly, like a rat that eats away at the wall surrounding it, they sought to weaken the strength of the obstacle in front of them.

By the same methods, the French barrier is maintained. You reinforce where you lose some positions, consolidate immediately newly won positions in the valley of the Aire and at Vauquois and later after some months of combat, the Germans and French find themselves in the same positions as at the start.

The French position, after October 1914, was established along a line running from north of Neuvilly in the valley of the Aire River, traversing the Argonne along its length to the north of Vienne le Château.

The part of the Argonne situated to the south of the line is supplied by the route going (99) from Les Islettes to Vienne la Ville following the valley of the Biesme River. To this central waterway flow an infinite number of creeks from wooded ravines, and the French lines of resistance follow both the ravines and the ridge tops, sometimes going across hills,

---

[50]In the battle of Valmy (September 1792), the French army, representing the revolutionary regime, defeated an invading Prussian army at a cost of just a few hundred casualties. The French victory ensured that the republic would survive. François Christophe Kellermann commanded he French army.

[51]Bruno von Mudra (1851-1931) had been the German governor of the Metz region before the war and then assumed command of the German sixteenth corps fighting in the Argonne. He skillfully established a formidable German defensive line and carried out repeated localized attacks against the French.

[52]See page (146) below.

[53]Units from different geographical regions in Germany.

descending and ascending the slopes, almost tangling with the German line, but never straight because of the arbitrary meandering of the creeks. All this, in a word, defines combat and its successes and reverses.

The war in the Argonne was very special. The field of fire never really permitted one to see the attacker. The dark thickets and wooded ravines hid, in their mystery, the approach of either us or the enemy. The hunter of men slips away searching for the beast, the enemy.

Le Perroquet pour us, Fritz for them,[54] perched in the oak trees, sends his murderous bullet flying through the trees' canopy. Spotted himself, and hit by a shot, his body falls from branch to branch like a ripe fruit, a bird of prey killed, and sometimes, remains hanging in the branches as a sinister sign.

The trenches are concealed, covered with logs and earth during the night, (100) then with dead leaves and grass. In the morning, eyes search in vain for the traces spotted yesterday. Germans and French, separated at times by less than one hundred meters, miss the exact spot where their adversary is located. Some light smoke that rises, almost imperceptibly, the glow of a cigarette illuminating a niche in a trench wall, and at night a fusillade breaks out, brutal, spreading from ravine to ravine.

The positions, in the shape of a horseshoe and almost surrounded by the enemy, receive at the same time, because of their situation, murderous German and French bullets.

Even the days without attacks have their share of losses. A bullet, at any moment, can pass through a niche in the wall and accomplish its work of death. Ricochets off rocks can get men even in the back of trenches.

Outside of combat, holidays were harsh. Because of the rain, the snow, the mud, sleep was hardly possible below a niche in the wall, as a comrade continued to fire. The rice was always frozen. Nights were passed beating the soles of your feet with your head in your helmet and hands in pockets yet still a joke on one's lips. No shelter, no hot coffee, only rarely some terrible hooch[55]; and, in spite of all of that, the infantryman holds on.
(101)
They have reached the extreme limit of human physical and moral forces, and I am sorry not to be able to trace, as it should be, the description of their existence. Those who, with me, experienced these days will be able, with their own memories, fill in the details that my inexpert pen writes about too weakly.

---

[54]The "perroquet" was slang for a French sharpshooter; "Fritz" was slang for a German sniper.

[55]"La gnole" is basically local home-brewed alcohol. French soldiers received a daily alcohol, or wine, ration.

(102)
XI. The Relief

In a village a few kilometers from the front line, barns, stables, cellars, granaries are full of men. Houses contain the company's offices, messes and the officers' lodging. Many installations spring up outdoors. It is the regiment's rest area.

Twelve families have remained. Greed has made them set their prices more or less illegally. Risking the dangers of living close to the enemy, they are at their pleasure to fleece soldiers and accumulate the money that had been painfully amassed by soldiers' women back home.

Relief is next. The profiteers, in foreseeing the departure of the regiment, and the arrival of another, have filled their cupboards. The door is carefully closed. No one can enter into the house, but by a half-open window, a kid (103) of fifteen or sixteen, or a woman, old sometimes, young often, always after a profit, holds in one hand the object demanded, and in the other, before letting it go, receives the money. The soldier, grumbling, pays double or triple the value. The woman, used to it, doesn't hear anything and turns to the next buyer. They are numerous. They have a need for a change, for an improvement of the ordinary. They especially want cheap wine and will pay any price for it. Competition doesn't exist. Wine and preserves are never around in enough quantity, and so there is no need for the seller to be friendly or to limit his profit. The soldier is always available to fleece.

How many are there who have built their fortunes on the misery of the women and children of the rear and their privations, and tomorrow, like a truth of war, they will demand indemnities for damages caused by the war?

There are thousands, who all along the front, have grown like poisonous mushrooms.

And they've never seriously been dealt with. The Assembly has heard the scandalous cries about the Marseille bistros, but never serious protests against the vultures at the front.
(104)
Our departure was set for the afternoon. The morning was spent buying provisions, the packing of sacks, as the period of rest had resulted in the acquisition of a number of packages. Mail is readied. Awkwardly, on one's knees, the use of a table and pen have been forgotten over the months, ink pen in hand, a man writes to all of his relatives. He is set up for another stay in the trenches.

The soup is eaten at a more normal time than usual.

The exchange [of units] will be difficult as it is always done at night to avoid losses and to prevent the enemy from firing at us or attacking during the relief.

A meeting takes place in front of the quarters. Arms are stacked. A command puts everyone in motion.

"Knapsacks on."

There is a general commotion, shouts, then order returns.

“To the right by fours.”

“Forward, march.”

The regiment moves on as if on parade after six, eight sometimes thirty days in the trenches.

Everyone jokes around. It’s the departure. No one is tired, (105) but as the kilometers go by, little by little silence falls over the column.

The backpack, little by little, weighs on the shoulders. They often talk about making it easier for the infantryman, but his load increases indefinitely.

The inside of the pack does not have a cubic centimeter unused. To the required contents are added wool clothing, balaclava, sweater, gloves, socks, dickies (shirt fronts), knee pads. The spare food, coffee tablets, sugar, rice, soup bread and biscuits, are supplemented by chocolate (indispensible), some sausage, some cheese, cans of pate, an alcohol stove, some letter paper and letters received. The cartridges which used to be eighty are now two hundred and fifty; and not having enough places in the cartridge belt they are stuffed in the pack and musette. One should not be surprised that a man, crushed under his burden, abandons them in camp or along the route, assured that he will find some more in the front line.

The exterior of the pack is not in any way less equipped. Under the flap is the pot, and under the tent cloth is the blanket attached with a strap, a sheepskin, boot repair parts, a shovel tool, ten meters of barbed wire with a wooden stake, since whoever ordered this probably hadn’t noticed that there were trees in the Argonne forest (106). But, since it is the order, you had to carry it.

Under all this weight, the infantryman does not march as much as he rolls. The lifting of the foot is followed by the body bending forward under the weight, and during the entire march, it remains the same way.

The road is the hardest part of the load. The stay in the trenches, instead of strengthening a man, actually weakens him. He is not used to walking which is made even more difficult because of the unseen obstacles in the road at night.

The “mise-en-place” (putting-in-place) of a regiment often requires many hours, and leaving camp at 1600 a man is usually not in position until about 0300 in the morning and sometimes even later. During this entire period of march or waiting in the communication trenches, the knapsack weighs more and more on shoulders that become weaker and weaker.

The route from the camp to the lines does not offer any difficulties. It’s the easy part to cross. A man grumbles about the artillery caissons or the staff car that splashes him. He steps aside more or less quickly, usually less than more, but it is not really of any importance to him.

Night has fallen. Well before arriving in the danger zone (107), the road disappears. Just the trace of a path appears, and in single file the regiment follows it. Soon the regiment breaks up. The different units go to the different sectors of the front that they have been assigned and where their officers have been to reconnoiter yesterday or the day before.

The columns sink into the shadows. A man doesn't see anything but the back of the person in front of him, a tree trunk lying across the path leads to a quick warning passed along the column. But you still hear a muffled curse, then a metallic noise caused by a falling rifle striking a rock and a body falling. The narrow passage is momentarily obstructed, and when it is again clear, the column has been cut in two.

A call is heard in the night.

"The column is cut; not so fast, catch up."

The men start up again. The muffled calls, exclamations, "Keep quiet! Keep quiet!" but the noise continues, "You idiots, they'll be able to locate us."

The column sections split again as we move on.

Further on, a shell hole filled with water sparkles in the night. A man, more near-sighted than others or not paying attention, misses his step and falls into the water, his hands in front. (108) The others pass rapidly by so that they are not cut off from the front of the column. He gets up soaked. His clothes will dry if the weather is nice. If it rains, he will stay wet until he is relieved.

A new stop.

"Advance, advance!"

No one budges.

In the distance, the pounding, sometimes slow, sometimes fast, announces the approach of the front lines. Stray bullets whiz through the air. From time to time, a sharp crack is followed by the noise of a falling branch.

There is a murmur along the column.

"Get ready, a wounded man."

The man passed before his colleagues who are pressed against the walls of the communication trench so as not to interfere. Arms outstretched, from the head to the very end of the column, supporting him until the arrival of the stretcher bearers.

"Who is it?"

"No one knows."

A wounded comrade, and for everyone he is sacred. The solidarity of combatants is natural and spontaneous. Tomorrow, their turn could come.
(109)
The column is rejoined. The fusillade, because of our approach, becomes more intense. More bullets whiz by. The heads bend lower to be sheltered by the parapets. Sometimes the cannon

join the party, and the men wait for the explosion and then move on.

The communication trenches run along the ravines, crossing the ridges, embracing all the curves of the ground, sometimes carved out of the earth or cut out of crumbly rock. Many falls occur, and one arrives at the front line, bruised, unable to go further, and having, for several hours, seen nothing but the walls of the communication trench.

At last, you reach the trench. In the entrances, at the firing slits, on the firing step, the men are impatiently waiting for relief, gun in hand often; the lookouts immobile.

With the squads in their places, the orders are brief.

“The first three at the firing slits and watch.”

While the soldiers being relieved get their packs ready, conversations rapidly pick up with the new arrivals.

“Tell us, old man, is there a hut nearby?”

“About three meters, on the right.”
(110)
“The enemy is here; are there a lot of Boche?”

“Not many but you’ve got to keep your eyes open.”

“About how far away are they?”

“About one hundred and twenty meters in front, a little closer on the right. Nothing to fear at night because the slopes are steep. They will dislodge stones if they try to climb.”

“Watch out. There are two gun slits that need to be blocked up. That one there and this one.”

“No mines?”

“No, but they are digging a trench that is advancing here.”

“Good, thanks”

“Good luck friend, it’s not too early to get some rest. Is there any wine here?”

“Yes, it’s increased in price by two sous.”

“The bastards.”

Until morning, no one is calm. One doesn’t know the location or the Boche position. We fire from time to time, right in front of us so the Germans do not suspect the relief. During the day everyone examines the position.

Usually, the regiment that had just left didn't do anything. It was supposed to work, dig the communication trenches, deepen the trench, make a firing step, equip the huts. The more that one changes sectors, the more it is the same thing.
(111)
The regiment to which one belongs works better than the other; fights better than others; it is always the best.

The relief is not always so incident free.

In December 1914. Not far from the Bolante [in the Argonne]. The plateau was continually filled with bullets.that caused, in a single day, the deaths of numerous liaison officers and the wounding of colonel J*. Our captain received the order to go and replace a unit weakened by the losses. Our packs were quickly adjusted, and we organized in single file in the woods. At the head was captain P*. At his side was the liaison officer who was to guide us.

It was very dark, and the fog enveloped us. The column descended into a ravine. The firing, which continually pounded away, hardly affected us, but suddenly the bullets struck quite close. We could clearly see the flames from gun barrels. The shots passed around our ears, leaving no illusions about where we were. The guide had made a mistake and had led us to a hilltop occupied by the Boche. The enemy had heard the branches breaking and had started firing at what it thought was a patrol.
(112)
We automatically hit the ground. The fusillade eased, but it was necessary to get away and not get into the Boche lines or arouse them.

The march resumed with a thousand precautions. One by one, we filed away. We crossed a small creek by a sapling thrown across it. It was neccessary to get around a small hill, and it was impossible to return to the rear.

Suddenly, a whistling, which we knew well, came from the Boche trench. A flare. We were fucked if the enemy saw anything. Before it went off and lit everything up, two hundred and fifty men flattened themselves and mingled with the trees and the earth, holding their breaths.

We moved on. Another flare, and each time, the same maneuver commenced. A rumbling is heard on the slope. The Germans started to roll large stones down the slope to make sure that there was no one there. Some men were hit by the blocks of stone, but not a groan, not a word, not even a curse. A few shots were also fired by the Boche to be on the safe said, and then all was silence.

Two hours later we arrived at our spot, having crossed about a kilometer. The Boche were about a hundred meters in front of us and twenty meters to the right.
(113)
The position just conquered in the evening was not yet fitted out. At dawn, it must be taken care of. In the rain, we pile up stones, one after another, avoiding use of the pick to avoid giving the alarm, and by 0400 we had a serious wall. We breathe easy. We can rest for awhile.

The storm's intensity increased. The rain ran down the slope in veritable rivers, flowing under

our stone wall, weakening it little by little, and then the wall suddenly collapsed. Heartfelt rage, hungry and with rain everywhere, we started all over again. In the early hours of the day, we tried our guns, which were covered with mud, while the Boche must have realized that the wall strengthened with every minute.

A relief is often more painful than combat. It is one of the anxieties of a soldier. Many of them are stronger morally than physically. How many times, in the middle of a shelling, have I heard my friends joke, yet the same men are silent under the weight of their packs, destroyed by the load, the length and difficulty of the route, and after arriving, how many fall into the mud, not able to take another step.

The return to rest area is supported more cheerfully. The hope of finding a hut (114) and seeing something other than a corner of the sky from the trench stimulates the effort.

The column forms at the exit from the war zone. The uniforms have turned either a milky white or brown, depending on whether the stay at the front took place in chalky ground or brown earth. The dirty faces, laced with muddy or blackened stripes, washed by the rain and mud, make their figures appear haggard. Faces are emaciated, but energetic. Lips appear red. Feverish eyes give an active appearance of life in a face covered with mud. The men march bending over, leaning on canes cut from the forest. They are thinking of a night of rest on some straw under a roof without hearing any shells.

Of course, a few days after arriving at the camp, grumbling is heard, and equally so from both men and officers, especially this exclamation, “At least in the trenches we found some peace.”

The rest, if one can call the stay in a village is, in effect, not really a period of tranquility, but that of reviews, work details, and all the exercises connected with peace time. And a man dreams of a time, never achieved, of quiet that permits him to regain his moral spirit from a physical point of view.
(115)
The military command finally reached a more accurate understanding of the needs of the man, discipline and spirit.

I declare that the immoderate love of many men for alcohol was often the determining cause of the annoying orders that were applied to the good as well as to the bad.

(116)
XII. The Stay in the Trenches

Our relief is going to be made at night. Everyone is at their post; the firing slits are occupied, the stretcher bearers are ready and during this time their comrades install themselves in the places left by the unit being relieved.

The night of the replacement is a dangerous night. The terrain in front of us the extends out mysterious and unknown. The Boche are in front, but where?

One hundred meters or twenty meters or one thousand meters?

Tomorrow will let us know, and it is important to wait without any incidents.

A fine rain falls continually, chilling to the bone. Our hoods are like cardboard, stiffened by the moisture. Our feet are sore and numb and remind us at every instant of their existence. Rhythmically we tramp the ground to heat ourselves up. Masked by the darkness, our eyes can only really make out some bushes. The ears hear thousands of noises (117) amongst which they try to distinguish the march of one or many men.

Our attention is heightened in the hour immediately preceding dawn. Timidly a ray breaks the horizon. Then little by little, the veil of the night lifts, illuminating the shapes of trees and gradually reaching the depths of the woods and revealing to the watch guard the terrain of battle.

Out there, in front at a distance of about four hundred meters a small mist seems to rise from the ground, hardly perceptible through the denuded thicket. Make no mistake about it, that is smoke rising from the enemy's trench that also winds through the ravine like ours. On the right it gets closer, and for a few dozen meters it forms a straight line, making a kind of horseshoe shape. Then the positions come together, almost meeting at certain places. Men struggle with the earth. It clutches them to her breast; it protects him from bullets, and it seems to spit at the moment of an attack to immobilize the enemy's charge.

Dawn, like sunset, is the time for an attack. Objects are murky, and an advance less clear. Bodies merge with the trunks of trees; it is the most critical time for guards.
(118)
When it is past, the trench takes on its daylight appearance.

Life in the trenches is monotonous, but different, of course, in each sector of the front.

If the enemy is near, there is always activity and fighting.

If the Boche are further away, then more difficult enemies to kill present themselves: time and his inseparable companion, the cockroach.

Some write on their knee or on their pack. Others philosophize. The most diverse discussions take place. Many sleep waiting their turn on guard duty.

In the morning, a shadow emerges from the trench, and then another and another, into the communication trench headed towards the rear. They disappear, and an hour later the well-known call is heard,

“Coffee’s ready.”

The guards turn around; arms emerge carrying a quart; the tent canvas is pulled back; and the men who are less lazy gather around the bucket and obstruct its passage. A friend passes a quart to the guard who is waiting impatiently for it to warm his hands and body.

“And the brandy?”

It’s the eau-de-vie that even the most sober are happy to receive after spending (119) a night in a hole or at a gun slit. Like a treasure, it is entrusted to the squad’s corporal. Discussions ensue. Some want it in their coffee; others want it later; and some want to keep it for the evening. Suspicious eyes examine their neighbor’s portion. They could have a little bit more.

Regularly grumbling is heard.

“That’s a bit thin; it won’t hurt us; they all gave.”

“They don’t care about us.”

“Those over there on the right have half a bottle.”

“Who reported that?”

The Bretons among us had convinced themselves that they were always at a disadvantage.

The work detail man arrives, and he is greeted by a volley of insults.

“I gave out what I was given. The cook took his part, and then I firmly stopped up the bottle, and the bottle was put away. I’d like to drink something myself.”

No one is convinced, but there is no way to get booze by yourself. If you change the work detail person, it ends up being the same thing.

The booze is always spilled, and the cheap wine is always watered down.
(120)
The work details depart: one for wood, one for cartridges, others for food, water.

It is necessary to equally share in the work on the trenches and shelters, and sometimes a man has hardly two or three hours of sleep in twenty four hours.

Mornings in the Argonne often made us forget the war, even in winter. The splendid rays of the sun surprise us in our trenches and stop us from firing; our heads turned towards the wooded ravines.

The fog, which extends its veil over the forest, allows the ridges, at first light, little by little, to emerge from the silver sea that crawls slowly, and it suddenly tears away the cottony veil to reveal here a clearing, there a strip of forest. Then the gap grows, and the sun's rays reveal the mysteries of the woods and the ravines. Crossing through the trees the rays descend right down to the creeks, scattering golden flakes. Between the light and the spectacle of nature it makes us forget about the war.

But in the very atmosphere of rest and dreams the sudden bursting of shrapnel sows its murderous particles and chases away any reverie.

At my gun slit, I look out for about two hours, (121) firing every once in a while. The Boche are working, and from time to time one sees the rise and fall of a pickaxe or a shovelful of dirt thrown over the parapet. With each movement there is a corresponding shot. Woe to the man who is not under cover because as the working continues all around there are sentries who protect their friends and keep firing at the enemy.

Bullets rain down continuously, often ricocheting off the stones of the trench wall. About twenty meters away a corporal and a soldier were talking. They were down below, protected by over a meter of dirt, and suddenly the man staggers. The corporal caught the man in his arms, and I go to see what has happened.

It's the end for him. There's a small red hole and a thin trickle of blood, a little bit of foam at the mouth, and then a quiver.

"A French soldier has died on the battlefield."

The Boche, irritated by the shooting, and probably by a few well-placed shots, put down their shovels and pick up their rifles. The fusillade grows in intensity. Carriou, a good shooter, quickly jumps aside to take cover behind a sniper's shield[56] that had been placed in front of him for his protection, but it was pierced by a special armor-piercing bullet. (122) There is an angry pounding against the shield which is soon pretty much riddled with holes. There is nothing more to do than prevent anyone from passing behind it and being killed. Michau quickly hangs a sign that he has written on a board:

"Dangerous passage, get down."

When evening came it was necessary to take down the bullet-pierced sniper's shield and replace it with a mattress stuffed solid with earth and rocks and pierced with a longer gun slit.

The shooting subsides, and then it resumes in a few seconds. Gun barrels become hot.

I go to see the cadaver blocking the trench.

---

[56]A sniper's shield was made of steel and has a gun slit for firing. The shields came in different shapes, sizes and thicknesses. See, for example, this discussion: 1914-1918.invisionzone.com/forums/index.php?showtopic=56871&hl=sniper

Without the fever of an assault, without the enthusiasm or exhilaration of battle, without elan, without the possibility of defending himself, a man falls. His comrades throw a look at him for tomorrow it will be their turn. Almost always a question comes from a neighbor who continues to fire away.

“Is he married? Does he have any kids?”

And the firing continues to rage, better focused, fierce, with a desire for vengeance.

The sergeant arrives.

“Who is it?”

(Not recognizing the poor man whose face is covered with blood.)

“Dupré, killed by a ricochet.”
(123)
“The poor man, undo his coat and empty his pockets. Where is his pack?”

The inventory is done fast, a knife, a tobacco pouch,[57] a pipe, a handkerchief, a money purse. In the coat were some remembrances, a wallet with photographs yellowed and crumpled around the edges, some letters from his wife, a postcard with a baby on it, representing the childlike image of a pink baby sending a kiss to a soldier who appears to be charging with his bayonet in a cloud.

Everyone had a look of sadness in thinking about themselves and standing in front of the tent where the stretcher will betaken to the small clearing where an always open pit awaits the daily contingent of the dead. They draw themselves up and salute as the dead man passes, then they go back to their gun slits.

Suddenly the shooting redoubles in intensity. One can no longer distinguish individual shots; a huge crash tears through the air.

“To arms, everyone to their shooting positions.”

Men stick their cartridges into the ground by their firing slits so that they can get them faster. The non-commissioned officers go along the trench checking to see that all of the firing slits are occupied.

The cannon make their loud voices heard, and the sky (124) above our heads is filled with white flakes of shrapnel. Suddenly, there is a stronger explosion, and others are heard in front, behind, alongside. The earth trembles, and from her breast rise great black clouds.

Our eyes scrutinize the terrain. Hands fasten our caps more tightly and make sure that the

---

[57]French soldiers were also issued a ration of tobacco, which they usually kept in a waterproof pouch that was supposed to hold the gas mask.

bayonets easily slide in and out of their sheathes.

The noises increase in violence, in intensity, in number. Bullets rain down all along the parapet, throwing up earth, rocks, branches. It's infernal, and one gets nervous not seeing anything.

Then the Boche cannons fall silent. The shooting diminishes, and it's the critical moment, a sortie from our adversary's trenches and the rush towards ours. Our artillery enters the dance, strident, angry. On the enemy's positions, communication trenches, and trenches, it pours its projectiles. Our fusillade is off, and as it gets its bearings on the Boche trenches, it forms a barrier of death. The attack, destroyed at its very start, does not budge.

The shooting diminishes. The cannon cease to roar, and the thundering is broken. One can still make out a lot of shooting, but then less, then just a few isolated shots, and finally silence reigns.
(125)
In the trenches, there are wounded, often dead, but sometimes there is nothing after a rain of shells. Was that a repulsed attack or just panic fire? Often one doesn't know. The mistrust on each side is clear, and everyone has his finger on the trigger.

The snipers return. A comrade is sitting on the firing step; his figure is pale; his face drawn with pain.

"You are wounded."

"Yes, in the shoulder."

"Its nothing, my friend, wait, I'll give you a bit of alcohol or eau de mélisse.[58]

The alcohol penetrates the whitened lips of the man giving him enough strength to get to the aid station.

"Can you walk?"

"Yes."

There were two or three who go off through the communication trench; the weakest supported by the less wounded; one painfully bent over, hardly getting along; the others laughing.

"My friend, a bullet in the arm, a vein injured, a hospital and a month of convalescing. You say it's nothing big. You'll get to see Paris."

Looks of envy follow him.

"B*, give the casualty information to the captain."

---

[58]Carmelite water is an alcoholic tonic created by Carmelite nuns in France.

(126)
“Ok sergeant.”

I stack my rifle and proceed. The communication trench is narrow, and at each encounter we press against each other to be able to get by.

A tent canvas forms the door to a hut, the command post. I enter; it’s almost spacious. Some logs covered with dirt form the roof. The rain penetrates through the saturated dirt, and someone hung a tent canvas under the logs. At the edges of the canvas a bowl receives the water. When it is full, it is emptied, and every other time it is spilled on us; so we end up getting wet all at once instead of drop by drop. The hut is separated in two. One side is the personal lodging of the commander; the other is the office of the company.

There are tree trunks for the seats. The sergeant-majors and the quartermaster write on their knees. Some cardboard is laid across, and all day they note the state [of the company]. Even in the middle of combat; the staff often demands, at a moment’s notice, whether the men are vaccinated. How many shovels, picks, there are. If the recipients in the trenches have received their allotment of bleach or thiosulphate[59] and if the latrines have been installed.

In a corner some leaves or small branches covered by some tent canvas and blankets; (127) it’s a bed. A small fire in a hole lets the smoke escape; the place is princely.

I file my report, and my mission ended, I pick up the mail.

My return is greeted by the cry, “letters!”

In the blink of an eye the whole squad is around me, except for the guards who watch on from their posts, and the name call begins.

“Mine, mine.”

The hands extended almost tear the awaited letter.

The group decreases in size. Those who didn’t receive anything move away. The happy ones silently isolate themselves, wanting to savor the news at their own pleasure.

Everything that one held dear and that one left behind comes to mind. Those who are absent tell us of their worries then express their affection, their tenderness. How much the spirit is comforted! But sometimes, one receives a letter where much of the letter is a bit childish or seems like that to us. Thousands of tiny incidents of every day life are related that someone in the rear considered important but to us seem so petty, so negligible in comparison to the risks that we run each day. But it still permits us to understand the intimate lives of those who are dear to us.
(128)
The letter in the middle of battle or during a stay in the trenches. It’s a rainbow in the clouds;

---

[59]An antidote to exposure to cyanide.

the ray of light through a prison window.

Finished reading, on a knee or on a pack, a rough answer follows. It is cold. The numbed fingers can hardly hold the pencil, but it is always written anyway.

Save our war letters, written on all kinds, types and colors of paper. One day they will remind us of all our sufferings and our sorrows, our hours of struggle, the misery and combat, obscure glory; and if the lesson of the war fades, the surviving pages of our sufferings will revive the memory, and we will reread them with emotion. If we are no longer there, then they will be relics for our children, so that they never forget us.

The letter is finished; lunch has arrived. Rice, corned beef, or refrigerated meat with potatoes. A supreme luxury, a bloody steak accompanied by round golden french fries.

The meat is always in abundance and served to us, but sometimes it is thrown away--the prohibition on making a fire only permits us to look at it, but in general the food is sufficient.

The rain, the snow, the mud were our faithful companions. (129) Hands in pockets, we stand prancing at our posts. Runny nose, frostbitten toes, the stomach and body always cold, death around us and in the midst of us, and despite all of that, a laugh on the lips and a joke on our lips.

We held, and the Argonne became a vast cemetery; the line where the Boche were stopped is marked by crosses.

The nice, pastoral names of de la Gruerie, la Chalade, Bolante, les Meurissons, le Four de Paris, la Houillette or Fontaine-Madame have become names of battles,[60] written in streams of blood.

One day seems the same as yesterday and is identical to tomorrow. The form of combat changes from sector to sector, different depending on if the trenches are close together or further apart.

In early 1915 mortars and mines[61] entered the scene, and the struggle became even more terrible, stretching the nerves and causing large losses, acting on the morale of the men as much as on their physical well-being. But like the other genres of combat, one got used to it, and when the bombardment had ended, the jokes resumed.

Serious discussions began on the value (130) of generals, and especially on their visits, frequent or infrequent, to the trenches.

The real officer, for the poilu, is not the someone with the shiny, impeccable spotless boots,

---

[60]All located in the Argonne.

[61]Underground explosive mines and trench mortars added a new dimension to warfare during 1915.

who waits in his quarters ten kilometers from the front line when it becomes muddy to change the position of his gun. But the one who deigns to put on coveralls and wade through the mud to view the heroism of the front. The authority of such a commander is infinitely larger. A solider understands that a general can't expose himself all the time, but he understands less that he can stay away from all danger.

We also learn about thousands of other interesting subjects.

Duché concerns me. A Parisian scrap dealer, he continues to exercise each day in the trenches, and each day even at the height of action I've heard him say to his neighbor, his thoughts about the war, all the while that he is firing.

"Hey, man!"

"What?"

"Do you have any idea how much iron or copper is in the air at this moment?"

"No, and I don't care."

"You're wrong, you would have a fortune (131) if you were given what they waste in a day.

"Copper is so much, and iron is equally valuable. It is scary that it is all spoiled. Let me show you the latest prices."

While he goes to his dugout, the listener flees, but the flow of information doesn't stop because the demonstration continues.

Further on, Prosper, the cocky Parisian kid, is always talking about the quality of the territorial units.[62]

If he is ordered to a work detail, "me, I'm a territorial. It's the active army men who should do the work."

For guard duty, it is the territorial who stands out. When it comes to the distribution of supplies, he wants the same amount as those in the regular army, but increased by virtue of his age.

He is the bête noire of the adjutant, gifted with military values equal to those of a neighborhood dog, but lacking in the ability to repartee.

At les Meurissons, an alert had sent us all to the gun slits. The soup got cold because everyone was on guard. Prosper, always phlegmatic, was not going to leave his bowl for the probability of a German attack; and he warned his neighbor.

---

[62]See footnote 42.

“You warn me when you see the Boche. I’m going to eat my soup while it is hot.”

The adjutant arrives.[63]

“Eh, lieutenant,” says Prosper, “I though that the war was going to be gay. It’s done me in. (132) We have more than pillow fights here. I’m probably not going to be able to go back to making anything.”

“Good God! What the hell! What a guy! What would you do if the Germans came?”

“Lieutenant, I would offer them my soup so that they surrender. I learned this stuff in newspapers, not at the front.”

The lieutenant, not knowing how to reply, just walks away.

A few days later Prosper is wounded in the leg by a Boche bullet and is transported to the captain’s hut where he downs a quart of booze. Then he demands to wound the other leg for the same price.

But night arrives quickly in the trenches, and the hours are filled with deadly boredom, nervousness and waiting.

The soup hardly finished, the sentries are increased in number. No one is afraid of the Boche, but they are afraid of surprise. The Boche are equally nervous. The sentry fires often, without seeing anything, to warn everyone that he is there, and that the adversary will do better not to come close. The Boche do the same thing, and no one sleeps.

The sentries prick up their ears. They hear, or believe that they hear, the noise of a branch (133) that someone breaks or leaves that rustle when someone marches. Sometimes it is a tentative attack. Other times it is a patrol that has imprudently advanced too close. The cans attached to the barbed wire rattle; shots quickly ring out, increasing in number; the enemy responds, the shooting increases. The ear perceives a special noise from a fuse, and a trail lights up the sky then illuminates and transforms into a strong glow, both white and green or red, and this glow illuminates the ground and the trenches.

These are the flares.

In the middle of the woods, on a carpet of snow, the light gives a fairy-like appearance to all that is lit up. Through the gun slits one rapidly examines, while the light lasts, the terrain that extends in front of the trench, and if there is something suspect out there the shooting regains its intensity right up to the end of the attack or the easing of nerves of the enemy.

And in the months, all the nights are the same, some rainy, some calm and nice, some pass with snow and cold, many under a fusillade, some with attacks, some with preparations for

---

[63]In the French army, an adjutant often had same responsibilities as a lieutenant, acting commonly as executive platoon leader in the infantry.

attack on our side, it’s a monotnous life day after day.

(134)
XIII. School for Corporals and Sub-Officers

The class of 1914[64] made its debut. November saw its appearance in the trenches, arriving at a difficult time of the year. It was not as good at resisting privations, at night guard duty as the older men–but it brought the regiments that were under strength up to full strength.

The months of November and December are particularly painful. The food is almost always frozen. The alcohol stoves are still not widely used. Insulated pots and mobile kitchens are still unknown.

We tormented ourselves to try and rewarm ourselves. One of us had a genius idea, in an open sardine can we stick four candle tips, an appartaus of barbed wire supports a beaker, completing the installation.

The candles lit and protected against the wind, heads wrapped in a balaclava, (135) hands in pockets, the body leaning forward to get a closer look, we follow the progress of the cooking. Carefully, as the candles melt, we refix the wicks, and dip in other wicks drawn from a lighter, into the tallow liquid. Eventually a quart of water is boiling. An empty tin of bully beef with holes punched into it serves as a colander. Looks of envy observe our quart of coffee, immediately divided into four parts using a spoon so as to not lose any. No one gets more than his share for contributing a part of a candle. It's a treat that we would not give up for anything in the world.

The charcoal that is supposed to be distributed to us in the trenches so that we can light a fire without a flame or or smoke, never makes it up to the trenches.

When the fingers are numb with cold, a soldier jumps onto the parapet and, at the risk of being shot, picks up the fallen branches. Another lights a fire, and at night the trees are lit up.

These fires in the trenches are picturesque. In a wider place, a person crouching is illuminated by the burning twigs, adding more and more, the figure becomes clearer in the glow of the embers. He breathes with caution, not too hard, so that he doesn't blow out the flame, (136) but enough to burn the green or damp wood. Nonetheless, the fire grows. Some shadows approach little by little and soon form a circle of a dozen men packed tightly against each other. Some hands extend toward the fire; others are in their pockets. Shoes are raised to the fire; others stomped on the ground, and everyone in the reflection of the fire has the look of a bandit. Head enveloped in a faded balaclava, and cap on top of that, a muffler covering the lower part of the face, the figure silhouetted by yellow rays of light or black shadows, covered with a mixture of earth and rain, with a shaggy beard that has lost any knowledge of a razor; mustaches from which icicles hang or are frosted; and in the middle of such a face feverish eyes shining with insomnia.

The dark blue of the greatcoat disappears in a whitish layer of mud in places where it is dry, earthy in other spots; the pants which are red for some, black, gray or blue velvet for

[64]The men who turned twenty-one and were mobilized in 1914.

others are uniformly muddy grey now. The wiry legs, looking large in the puttees[65] and covered further with leather, are protected, but the shoes impregnated by a stay in the water are frozen and lead to painfully sore feet from the contact with hardened leather.
(137)
The group shares a joke, a word, sometimes some grumbling, rarely a discouraging word. The suffering is endured as if it was natural. The men mount guard, battle against the Boche, the cold, the suffering, the privations, and die without glamour, without fanfare, without speaking, always humanly, with regrets, but with the consciousness of having done their duty.

If you talk to them of glory, they will look at you curiously. They haven't gone to war for that. You are needed; you went. There long enough to know that if they want us, then they'll find us.

Scherr enlisted because his small house in the Ardennes was burned by the Boche in the first weeks of the war.

M, because having an irregular existence, he wanted to make his mother and father regret putting into his head the idea of doing one's duty and dying beautifully in the night.

Lebris, a small Breton unskilled laborer, learned about the declaration of war while in Canada. He took his three hundred francs of savings and naturally came to defend the country.

And my kids by age, but men by their courage, Tissier et Sautereau, two bourgeois sons, (138) for whom life offered all its pleasures, they came because their social situation gave them the duty to show a good example, and like a peasant or a worker, they put a pack on their back, their high schooling barely finished.

The first fell, facing the enemy, gravely wounded with a bullet in the chest. The second, the only son, would have at Vauquois the supreme decoration, a small wooden cross among the many on Mont des Ailleux.

Cazeneuve, my old comrade, in order not to let his son alone in the forty-sixth, has come to rejoin the regiment. A beauty now in the theater of war and no longer in a opera set, he will fall in the ultimate moment of French victory.

There are so many others that I could continue on about in these pages; their acts of courage multiplied and yet seem natural.

The men fall one after another and not happily. You die happily only in books and papers, but in combat, under a shell or by a machine gun, one dies with regret. The last word of a kid is "mama"; of an old man, it's "my wife, my kids." It's always sad.

But if men have a word of regret on their lips when they die, they still die magnificently, and all these deaths, all this pain, (139) all these sufferings engender hatred. The hatred of the

---

[65]A puttee was a cloth strip wrapped around the leg from ankle to knee, widely used in World War 1.

Boche forever, something that we instill in all around us, to our children, and to those who've make a pact with the murders of our comrades.

Enough philosophy. If peace finds us still alive and we will have won the war, we will hate it and also hate the Boche.

In the system of trenches there are often local attacks that have a deep impact on our staff, and it is necessary to form them anew. Recruitment is relatively easy despite the losses. Our resources have no limit, and the degree of intelligence, the ability to mix in, are very high among our men.

A selection takes place and the best, those capable of becoming officers, are sent to the division's rear to a camp about ten kilometers behind the lines.

The instruction of the group of non-commissioned officers is very practical. The command seeks to give to the men selected, having already many months of apprenticeship in the trenches, the knowledge necessary to command a half-section or a section.[66]

No barracks instruction (140), just a training in war, and after three weeks of instruction the first are ready to receive their seargeant's stripes and carry out the duties of a head of a section or half section.

We pass in review before General Gouraud who is leaving the division.

Polished, in a column of four, we head towards Les Islettes under the comand of Captain Campbell, who is an example to all, and lieutenants Michaud et Jeanne Julien. The kid of eighteen in the platoon is next to a veteran of fifty-four. The territorial, the reservist, the volunteer, who three months earlier didn't know how to handle a rifle, all went side by side. It is a friendly rivalry between them.

On the porch of his villa, the general appears. He has just been wounded a few days ago in the Argonne and his angular figure, emaciated, a little, pale, but a spirited face with sparse black beard, his arm in a sling, and the star of the Legion of Honor on his chest, he spoke slowly, encouraging us, telling us to do our duty and wanting to shake hands with our commander. Cazeneuve advanced. The contrast produced between the black beard of the general and the white hair of the fifty-four-year old corporal was striking. The handshake that they exchanged was not one of a superior and an inferior, (141) but of man to man. The corporal did not display less patriotism than the general and when my old friend Cazeneuve came to retake his place in the ranks next to me--he who never flinched among all the bullets--I saw him furtively wipe away the teardrop from the corner of his eye.

Tomorrow the regiment returns to its everyday life in the trenches.

---

[66]We might more normally call a "section" a squad of a platoon, ten to fifteen men.

(142)
XIV. Les Meurissons

It's a wild ravine, typical of the Argonne. For nearly a month the regiment occupies it and the surroundings in the middle of the forest. The men are exhausted by a stay in the mud, moisture, and snow and can do no more. The feet are frozen by the cold ten degrees below zero,[67] and that has eliminated some of combatants. The young men of the class of fourteen, a bit less physically fit, are evacuated in large numbers.

The enemy, reinforced with fresh troops, is aggressive, and he increases his approach works. The French lines are not as solid, and the soldiers who occupy them are less numerous.

On the morning of 7 January, a small German attack is beaten back. Captain Cuvillier-Fleury, wounded in the face, is evacuated. He will lose an eye as a result of his wound.

Everyone is anxious. At eleven o'clock, the company of captain Courtés, which had been placed in reserve, receives the order (143) to come to the plateau and dig trenches which will constitute a last fallback position. It is the final defensive position in the ravine where the colonel's command post, the aid station and the kitchen are located.

The air is filled with bullets which whistle by and strike the trees over our heads. The work is not even interrupted for a second by the arrival of General Gouraud, who, in the company of Colonel Levannier has come to examine the defensive position and works, which are behind schedule. Captain Courtés serves as the guide for the group.

The sounds of the picks attracted the attention of the enemy who try to stop the work, and the tic-tac of machine guns resonates deep in the silence of the forest. Above the group the sinister whistling of bullets continues. No one really cares, but suddenly General Gourad staggers and falls. A projectile has hit him in the shoulder and thrown him to the ground. Aided by Captain Courtés he gets back up, and slowly the group goes back to the aid station. The captain then goes to resume his command; the general is transported to Les Islettes.

The day and the night pass without alert but in pouring rain. (144) The men without shelter shiver under a tent in January's temperature.

The first rays of dawn had hardly appeared when a hail of shells fell on the trenches; it's the preparatory bombardment before an attack. Commander Darc, the soul of the regiment, is killed by a shell explosion.

At 0730, through the bushes and the undergrowth, the Boche rush reaches the front lines. Fresh troops attack almost from the take-off point. A gap exists in the French line; a company is pressed into action; and the Boche are able to take the first and second French lines from the rear. Some elements resist right up to their last cartridges while others, surprised in the rear, can only put up a desperate resistance, quickly suppressed by the large number of the enemy.

---

[67]About fifteen degrees Fahrenheit

The eleventh company occupies an unfinished trench on the plateau and is facing the enemy. Only ten meters in the rear, Captain Courtés, hidden by a bush, watches and controls, his four liaison officers by his side.

The waves of Boche are broken by the hellish fire of the company. They cannot or dare not approach with the bayonet, but they outflank the position to the right. Behind each bush, behind each tree trunk a Boche (145) on the lookout fires at the last defenders of Les Meurissons. Anyone outside the trench is at risk and immediately shot. The cartridges are lacking. Crawling fifty meters back, liaison officers return with a small amount of ammunition that the captain himself throws to the shooters.

The hours pass, alternating fierce and then easy. A large number of men are wounded. Nobody knows what has happened to the regiment or how much of it remains.

The Boche that infiltrated the ravine are beaten back near the command post of Lieutenant Colonel Rollers, his deputy Captain Demenink and Lieutenant Monnier.

The wounded and the cooks had picked up their rifles and fired at the ridge under the trees.

The men listen anxiously for cries among the bushes, shots, pleas, rattling, reverberations. The men of the eleventh company hold but wait impatiently for reinforcements. Finally, suddenly near 0930, on the right, the notes of a French bugle ring out over the fusilade. It's the relief.
(146)
Elements of the eighty-ninth Garibaldean regiment charge through the thickets. It is a savage slaughter in the forest. The losses are high, but the reinforcements succeed in freeing what remains of our regiment and containing the enemy.

The lieutenant-colonel is wounded; commander Darc is killed; commander Peyronnet, fallen from a bullet in the stomach, dies the next day at Les Islettes; commander Guinard has disappeared. Captain Courtés passed command of the company to adjutant Boisseau who, from the beginning of the attack, supported valliantly the efforts of the commander of the company.

Captain Courtés took command of the regiment. Without resupply, the remnants of the forty-sixth clung to the ravines of the Argonne until 9 January at 1800, having repulsed every attack.

On the evening of 9 January, at la Pierre Croisée, we are assembled as a regiment before going for a rest. A captain, an adjutant and one hundred and thirty eight men form the column.

The twelfth company was less weakened because it had not experienced the strongest attack. The injured and the cooks rejoined a part of the tenth company a few days later.

The losses were serious. (147) Lieutenant-colonel Rollers, the medical officer Gerbault, Captain Cuvillier-Fleury, lieutenants Colin, Visconti, the second-lieutenants Latapie, Lallemand wounded. With a total of twenty-six officers killed, wounded or missing, the regiment had lost four-fifths of its effectives.

We headed to Saint André[68] to be restaffed and left in a month, not for the Argonne but for the assaults on Vauquois.

[68]Small village south of the Argonne.

(148)
XV. The Decorations

Aubreville, our rest area, is a small village in the Aire River valley which occupies the extremity of the loop formed by the railway between Clermont-en-Argonne and Verdun. It is bombed frequently.

Almost every day, the sharp whistling followed by the explosion of a bomb reminds us that the Boche have not forgotten about us in their distribution of shells. The deaths, the injuries and our “rest” all continue in the same place.

The railway that supplies Verdun preoccupies them. They are much more concerned with that than the village, and as the railway traverses the village, there are only a few stray shells. The smoke from a locomotive is the signal for the Boche. Immediately a far off and heavy sound is heard. The house of the guard keeper loses all of its windows, but the railroad crossing is never touched, the railway hit by a shell is repaired in two hours, sometimes faster.
(149)
In the barns we work, some with an old scrub brush, some with a knife, to scrape the whitened mud from the trenches stuck on our greatcoats. A review, the nightmare of any soldier coming from the trenches, will be held. It is useless to try and write letters. The captain orders, the platoon officer cries out, the corporal and the men groan... working, but despite their good will they will not be able to look like a proper clearn peacetime soldier.

A whistle!

“Assemble!”

“Damn, my pack is not packed!”

“Who took my tent cloth?”

“Hey old man, scrape me down, I can’t”

“My rifle, who has changed my rifle? It was polished. Someone put a disgusting one here.”

The assembly forms. Always the same ones are late, someone buckling a belt or someone adjusting a pack.

The grumbling ceases, and then the rain bursts. It will be necessary to go back to the trenches with a rain hood.

The section is formed, aligned and counted.
(150)
“Forward by fours!”

The column in which we are mixed marches towards Clermont, and after having passed the railway, the regiment masses.

The brass band, more or less those who remain, plays the Marseillaise, a soft Marseillaise, by exhausted musicians not having the necessary instruments. In the distance, the whistling and the explosions of shells replace the beating of a bass drum. The orchestra is truly a military one.

The rain falls on our faces.

In this war setting, like on parade, the regiment presents arms, impeccably. The bayonets are still a little rusty, twisted, the rifles not very neat, the men soaked and dripping.

The bugle calls.

The flag is unfurled in the cloudburst, its folds heavy with water.

A tall man carries it, a superb face framed by a wonderful white beard, impeccably dressed with a dark blue greatcoat. In the middle of the dark blue, a red spot at the end of which shines the star with its light brilliance.[69]

Collignon, solider first class, presents the colors.
(151)
In the center of the square is Commander Peyronet, who will be killed at Les Meurissons. The general advances towards him and the official formula sounds shrilly over the background noise.

“Commander Peyronet in the name of the President of the Republic in virtue of the powers that have been conferred upon me, I award you the Legion of Honor.”

The embrace of the two men is moving.

“Flourishes.”

The Sambre-et-Meuse march[70] accompanies the parade, but the emotion is fleeting, and it does not long take hold of us before someone launches into a joke.

Muddy and soaked, we march through the downpour. Not far away the murderous gunfire continues is bursts. Though grumbling a little, we spiritually feel a little better.

---

[69]The Croix de Guerre is a French military decoration of the First World War. It was awarded for bravery in battle.

[70]French military march dating to the 1870s.

(152)
XVI. Captain Courtés

St-André near Verdun is a small village on a road, boarded on both sides by houses and barns. A pale sun is shining at the end of January. A line of soldiers enliven the only street. Some have old dark blue coats, some red pants, at least they once were red. Others are black, brown. green or blue; most are made of velvet. It's a critical time. The old uniform has been left in pieces on the fields of the Marne and on all the bushes in the forest of Hesse and the Argonne. The new blue gray uniforms[71] had arrived at depots but were still not reaching the front lines. Serious cleaning, with as much vigor as possible, could not remove all traces of mud. White, black or red thread, randomly stuffed in kits and crudely employed, is used to sew the tears in the coats made by bullets, shrapnel, German bayonets, barbed wire or branches.

The weapons, like the uniforms, carry the traces of combat. (153) Here and there a rifle carries the mark of a bullet.

A few hundred men returned out of the twenty-eight hundred who left for Les Meurissons thirty-five days earlier.

With the colonel wounded, and other officers killed or wounded, the losses leave two companies incomplete, and combined with the remnants of other units constitute the regiment commanded by Captain Courtés.

Some trumpets sound, and the survivors start the parade.

The bodies clatter at a command, and the whole line stops.

A car arrives; rapidly, another follows behind. A man, rather fat, gets out of the first car with a white and very thick mustache. Snow white hair falls from under his kepi adorned with oak leaves. He had the appearance of a good bourgeois, calm, paternal, distant eyes, hands behind his back, not in military dress, he looked like a good old solicitor.

He passes slowly before the regiment, accompanied by General Valdant and Colonel Simon who had just arrived.

A name is whispered along the line.

"Joffre."

Curious, turning our heads despite orders, we watch him (154) Doe he see us? I don't know. He passes, his eyes distant.

---

[71]The French uniform at the start of the war consisted of a red cap, blue coat and red pants. In fall 1914, a new uniform was issued that was "bleu horizon" (horizon blue), which when covered in mud, was better suited for camouflage. Only in September 1915 was a steel helmet introduced.

Suddenly, at the end of the line, the group stopped before Captain Courtés. On the old coat, General Valdant has attached a red ribbon at the end of which dangles and shines a star.[72]

His sonorous voice rises with emotion. I only heard a few words which reached me.

“Captain Courtés was the spirit of the resistance.”

Accompanying the medal, the citation which follows, does not fully reveal the heroism, the abnegation and the courage of the men of the company and particularly Captain Courtés, who had been the heart and the soul of the company

“The 8 January 1915 held with his company and by his stubborn resistance permitted a counter-attack to push back the enemy.”

“All the senior officers of his regiment having been put out of action he assumed command of the forty-sixth regiment in a manner worthy of praise.”

The pale sun of January illuminated the group, and our thoughts turned to those who had died. We look for them in the lines that are barely filled out. In this scrap of a regiment (155) the faces are tough. Tomorrow we leave.

“Rest arms.”

The vision fades away along with the gray automobile that carries the generalissimo.

A few days later with the regiment reconstituted, we leave for battle but not in the direction of the Argonne but for the conquest of Vauquois.

Will the pointless assaults of October be repeated? Or, will we be able to avenge our dead?

We are resolute, and we have a new leader.

[72]The Croix de Guerre

(156)
XVII. Vauquois

Two sets of reinforcements have completed the regiment. Two marches, some exercises, work details and the communal life of the rest camp have allowed us to get to know the new elements.

I locate the acquaintances made at the depot in September 1914 and the wounded of October, now recovered. We make friends quickly. Battle rapidly glues together everyone.

Towards mid-February the departure takes place. We look back at St-André and little by little the clock tower disappears. That same day on the route south of the main route to Verdun we stop at Brocourt. The village clings to the slopes of a small valley and dips to the bottom of a large watered basin.

I am on guard duty with my section, a cordon of sentries around the village, placed twenty meters apart. They have the strict orders to not let either soldiers or civilians pass. (157) It no longer appears as simply a military march, but a serious operation. We are well informed.

As night falls, the order is given to us to arrange our packs by section in the barns. Those who don't get killed or wounded will be able to return and search for their property that will be guarded by an incapacitated soldier.

We first extract everything from the packs, cans of conserves, letter paper, photographs, all the many things precious and useless to a soldier. The piles of packs grow larger; everyone casts a last look at his faithful companion.

Will I be able to retrieve it?

A few men lie down. No one knows when it will be possible to sleep once engaged. The majority write letters to their wife, their mother, their fiancé, The grocery stores are besieged by men who have little confidence that they will be fed while under artillery shells.

The distribution of food reserves is made.

Kneeling in the straw, we roll up our blankets, tent covers, and insert them in the inside of a roll with food, preserves, and chocolate.

The rifle shells that overfill the rifle belt are in the mussette bags. A la russe, a covering bandoleer is fixed. The entrenching tool or trench shovel (158) hangs from the belt. The field dressing is hanging with a safety pin on the inside of the coat. The grease gun works wonders and the bayonets are solidly fixed on the gun barrels. Frayed shoe laces are changed. We're ready.

We leave on the path as night falls. In the distance a pounding is heard. The noise gets closer. It's the familiar noise of a large troop on the move.

It's the seventy-sixth regiment which precedes us. The men pass by equipped like we are.

Following them, for the first time we see the small new vehicle models that replace the mule carts for the machine guns. We will not be alone on the assault.

The other sergeants rejoin Cazeneuve and myself. We joke a bit, and then our preoccupations return.

“My friend, would you verify that you have my address? In case something happens, you will write.”

“Yes, and for me the same.”

The notebooks are opened. Ten times the addresses are exchanged. They will always be there if needed in the future.

“Assemble!”

Everyone jumps over the packages. Covers, equipment bags are adjusted in the wink of an eye. (159) In front of the barn, the line forms with grumbling, then silence.

“Align right!”

“Count off by fours!”

The captain’s horse snorts. The section heads turn on the flashlights to verify that everyone is there.

“March!”

The black line extends along the white road. It reaches Brabant en Argonne,[73] traverses the main road which is lost in the distance towards Verdun, and it is soon ensconced in the somber thickness of the forest of Hesse.

We are in a recognizable area. Here, through openings in the foliage, we received our baptism of fire. We abandon the route that leads to Avocourt and go to the left. The forest is filled with diverse noises, the cracking of broken branches, bushes rustling, neighing, groans or grunts from animals and men. After hours of marching, with some stops, we reach a clearing. The day which was weakly breaking reveals the frost. The columns of infantry pass rapidly by. A lot of vehicles with the Red Cross sign are gathered behind a slope. (160) Ammunition caissons are rapidly being unhooked in all parts of the forest.

“Stack arms. No one move away.”

The fog lifts, and the view clears up close by and further away. We are in a high grove, facing Vauquois, which is quite close.

---

[73]Small village near Verdun.

Boom, boom, boom, the firing starts; the dance begins.

It's not just one or two shots that start, but dozens that follow without interruption. Soon it is no longer possible to count the individual shots. We are in the center of an uninterrupted bombardment. We can distinguish between the caliber of the different artillery pieces.

The dry, shrill voice, furious of the 75mm that despite its repeated firing never seems to fire quickly enough.[74] The more powerful 95mm, 150mm and 155mm and finally the deep base voice of 270mm, which, with its deep rumbling dominates all the other steel voices of steel. It's firing is followed by a powerful, yet diminishing whistling. At each instant the shell seems to hang in the air, then it regains its strength and restarts, or rather slows down and starts up again, right up to a terrible explosion, (161) when we learn of its arrival at its destination.

We get up, impatient. Under the avalanche of shells, it is not possible that the Boche can resist. We are far removed from the assault of October. Without even receiving orders we prepare. We are in haste to leave the woods, to see and act. We want to be at the party; it's our turn.

The bombardment continues for hours. Our enthusiasm wains. It's necessary to wait. We become melancholic. We are frozen to our bones. The wet ground sticks to our clothes. Our feet are wet and frozen. The cannons continue to sound, and I rest and reflect during the hours rocked by their regular and powerful pounding. I have the impression that a giant blacksmith is at work, consciously, methodically, without pressing too fast, but equally without stopping, crushing, piercing, ploughing, working the hill. We just have to wait to see the result of his work.

The company is ordered to undertake the resupply of the thirty-first regiment, which is in front of us. With some men, I remain guarding the rifles and the tents. I stay, under the trees, turning from one side to the other, trying, without success, to eat a little, but the bully beef[75] sticks to my fingers. I have recourse to the most practical food for a soldier in the field, (162) chocolate. The cold penetrates to my bones. We are in February, and to warm up I have only one option, the bear dance.[76] All the poilus know it well. It lacks elegance. With your two hands in your pockets, you jump from one foot to the other, sometimes for hours.

On all sides groups pass through the grove, some towards the front, some towards the rear. There are work details with tasks, wounded, mules, men of all arms. The sun does not show. The fog has become heavier. A feeling of depression that makes me feel as if I'm wounded sets in. I am not really depressed, just nervously waiting. There is nothing to do. I can't see anything or know anything that is going on.

---

[74]These are all the different calibers of French and German artillery pieces. As the author is noting, each gun had its own peculiar sound, from the "bark" of the French 75mm gun to the "rumble" of he French 270mm howitzer.

[75]Canned corned beef (spam). The French called it "singe" (monkey meat).

[76]"La danse des ours"

A brutal tearing sound is herd over our heads. A shower of nuts is followed by a persistent buzzing sound like a bee. I hear something fall with a metallic noise. It's the Boche's shrapnel which has started to reach us.

The first is followed by a second, then a third, then others. Finally, on the left and the right, the explosions mix their dark and dirty smoke with the fog. I wait, standing without protection. Behind me a cry is heard.
(163)
"Sergeant, you will be wounded."

"I don't give a shit, either now or later."

"Well, no joke, this is not the time to be leaving us."

It's true, I have to stay. I pulled myself together, and the next burst happens at the moment that I throw myself behind a giant oak tree. The shell explodes tearing a large gash in the trunk of the protector. One second more and I would have been struck.

The whistling stops quickly. After a while of waiting we collect our few wounded and those not seriously injured or dead. It's all been for nothing.

Towards the middle of the day, our artillery suddenly seems to have gone mad. The shots increase. The steel voices are more furious. Then it suddenly stops. Clearly, heard from afar, a trumpet call makes me pick up my ears. It's a charge. The notes sound fast like a race that the attackers must run. It sounds again, seeming to expand and communicate with others that respond. The artillery, having extended its firing range, resumes the bombardment, but in the midst of the infernal noise we perceive the chattering of the German machine guns and the nutcracker sound of the German Mausers.[77]
(164)
We are only a couple of hundred meters from the action, and we know nothing. I interrogate each man who passes. The most contradictory news circulates. Boureuilles is attacked at the same time that Vauquois is occupied. The thirty-first had reached Vauquois and penetrated as far as the church. We are probably going to go and help out.

Other news arrives. The colonel of the thirty-first regiment received a bullet through the throat while charging forward at the head of his regiment. There were heavy losses. Under fire from the batteries of the Argonne and Montfaucon and the machine guns at Cheppy, the thirty-first had to fall back.

To learn just that little bit took hours. The shooting stopped, and then the artillery resumed its bombardment. That's a bad sign.

The stretchers pass in greater numbers. The ambulances carry away rapidly their loads of suffering.

---

[77]The "Mauser" (aka the Gewehr 98) was the German, bolt-action rifle used in World War I. It used a five-cartridge clip.

Night surprises us in the same positions that we were in since morning, without precise information.

The order arrives: “We will spend the night in the same place.” We eat a piece of bully beef and some cheese. Under our small tent canvas, blown by the wind, made heavy by the dampness, we slide and roll around under our thin blankets. Having the mud for a mattress, we sleep as we can, (165) having not slept the night before. We can’t light a fire or even candles for fear of being spotted by the enemy’s artillery.

The work details have returned. Some men who sampled the wine and eau-de-vie and who were responsible for their transport are drunk. We’d give them a balling out, but it is pointless.

At three o’clock in the morning, we are awake, frozen, stamping our feet in the dark, tramping, dancing the bear dance. The cook is towards the rear and in a heavy thicket, and has prepared some coffee for us that comforts us and warms us up. More abundant than usual some alcohol gives us the necessary boost after those cold nights spent almost without sleep. The bombardment has ended its regular firing the evening before. Only some solitary shots are heard now and then. The lull is a bad sign.

At daybreak we learn that the attack succeeded at first, but having suffered serious losses of men and especially officers, it then was stopped. They had to descend from the plateau of Vauquois.

For two more days we stay in our tents, waiting for orders from the commander, in case of a Boche counterattack, but nothing happens.
(166)
We are furious at the wasted effort, but nevertheless we have the impression that with a well-prepared attack we will be close to achieving our goal, and that a new, stronger effort would succeed. We did not have the demoralizing feeling that we experienced following the October attacks.

We also learn that mistakes have been made in the artillery preparation, and punishments have been taken. That reassures us.

(167)
XVIII. Capture of Vauquois

We are rested, ready to go. Comments on the reasons for the failure of 17 February are going on. Everyone proposes a solution. Accurate information has confirmed the bravery of the attacking troops. Only the physical barriers that could not be overcome easily with just bodies allowed the opponent to maintain his position.

The division's losses have been made up, and reinforcements have arrived that have filled the empty spots. The command does not seem to want to give the Boche time to prepare for another attack.

About a dozen days after the first attack, we are summoned to meet with the captain. In front of him a magnificent plan was spread out. We see big pink squares, the blocks of houses, indicated by white lines appearing on the roads. It's Vauquois before the war, and if we had never seen it, even remotely, the map permits us to situate the church, the cemetery, the roads, everything indispensable (168) in an operation of this type.

The role of each company is exactly determined. Each sector of attack is assigned. A direction of attack is given, and everyone should not alter their goal. After the explanations, we have the impression that we are proceeding with a methodical operation. Ordered, serious, and not a tragic comedy like that of October during which we attacked crying out "fix bayonets!" without ever reconnoitering the terrain or destroying the obstacles.

Of course, we were not going to be able to find the streets. The blocks of houses have disappeared. The village appears to us like a field that has been tilled by an immense plough.

The captain added that we were the reserve company at the disposition of the commander. We know our specific role in the assault and will be used according to the situation.

At this news, I hear N* murmur between his teeth:

"Well, we've got to do it, and we know that reserve company means a dirty trick, that we'll get stuck with all the nasty tasks."

That's pretty much everyone's opinion. We'll see when we get there.
(169)
Supplies are distributed, cartridges, food, crackers, explosives. Looking at them we see appear the first kind of hand explosive.[78] The explosive is affixed in the middle of some barbed wire on a wooden stick, and at its end is a tarmac wick. We also get a box of matches, that will be used to light the small wick under the explosive. It's February, and it will be damp, and while under fire, we will have to cut a new dry wick for the explosive.

We put them on our belts. Many men look at them with distrust, and for a large number of men they will use them as fishing poles later.

---

[78]Earliest form of a hand grenade.

In the evening we start assembling. Men are equipped with a bottle of hooch for four men and each with a bottle of wine. The two hundred and fifty cartridges weight down our march a bit. The column disappears into the night. We are going to fight, not joyously, but resolutely. Our letters have been sent. We have a tranquil spirit. We reach Mamelon Blanc during the night.

The first light of day has barely appeared when a cannon shot gives the signal for action. In the air a terrible ripping passes back and forth from hill to hill. The Argonne, and the forest of Hesse light up. (170) Steel monsters, tree murderers, so many, they prepare the way, and the more that the shelling redoubles in intensity, the happier we are knowing the Boche are getting it.

The 75mm guns were hauled up to the top of the hill facing Vauquois. The supply of ammunition to the guns is done on the backs of men, and the single file leads up the sides of the hill without leaving the guns out of ammunition for a single moment.

The magazines dug into the ground have their doors open wide, and I can see the supplies through the openings.

For hours the bombardment continues. The Boche reply from the Argonne, the Bois de Cheppy, Montfaucon, their shells fall on all sides. No one moves except to aid the wounded.

The artillery increases the intensity of its fire; everything seems to be unleashed; the assault companies finish their preparations.

Piercing the noise of the explosions, the Marseillaise arises from the back of the ravine. The musicians commanded by deputy commander Laty play through the machine gun fire. The assault waves ready themselves to leave.

There are fifteen musicians in all. Soon the baritone Mogny, his arms cut by shrapnel, departs. Tillocher wounded, stops a moment, and then begins to play again.
(171)
Delaitre, the flute player, has his carotid artery cut. The staff doctor Vincent operates quickly to suture the artery. Then he leaps over a few steps to help a wounded officer. He had hardly the time to get away when a shell carries away Delaitre's head. Another killed Engels, the viola player.

Tillocher is again wounded, and he stops playing for good.

But the waves have left. The survivors charge to the terrible accompaniment of the rattle of machine guns.

Laurent, clarinet, falls with a bullet in the stomach. Blanchard receives a bullet in the cheek. Regnier, flutist, shot in the hand. Meunier, Prevost fall in turn. Gastel falls, shot in the heart.

The music fades gradually. Of the fifteen musicians, five remain unharmed, but the leading companies climb the slopes.

At the division's observation post, General Valdant turns towards his officers and raises his

cap,

“Salute the men...”

It is an energetic leader who spares the blood of his men. One who his subordinates love and value, he has merited the best possible compliment for a leader, “he is one of those who love the army.”
(172)
An order arrives.

“Up, we are leaving.”

Through the gun bursts, we pass over the top of Mamelon Blanc, and in the whirlwind we quickly descend the wooded slopes facing Vauquois. We quickly reach our former positions in front of the ravine in front of the hill on which Vauquois is situated.

The trenches have turned into canals with mud up to our knees. Bullets rained down through the forest, but the Boche do not see us and do little damage. Many of the shells are strays. No one stops. The wounded are attended to by the medics.

We have no precise orders. I don’t know any more than the others exactly what we are supposed to do or where we are supposed to go. The new captain who replaced our brave captain Piot runs, and we follow him.

We are now at the emplacement where in October we charged with bayonets. A few meters in front, the marshy ground will probably stop us, and we still do not know anything. We look like a crazed band. I'm starting to find out that the military plans are not always drawn up with clarity or logic. I see the captain on some flat ground. (173) He has exited the trench. I do the same, and the men follow. The captain calls to corporal A* and orders him to cut the barbed wire that protects the French trenches. The corporal executes the order. The captain passes by, and the corporal suddenly falls with a bullet to his body. It is increasingly idiotic, but it is the order. I go, and the men follow. A few meters in front of us we see a line of gabions[79] that protect us from the bullets and that allow us to follow it from its start for several meters to our point of departure so that we don’t suffer any more losses.

I understand less and less. We march quickly along the gabion wall. In front of me a man tumbles, a bullet to the head. He breathes his last gently as he stretches out, his rifle next to him. Small streams of blood flow across his face and cover the ground around him.

The ruins of the buildings of La Cigalerie[80] rise in a deadly angle formed by the slope of the hill. About mid-slope I see French uniforms. The men seem to be hanging onto the flanks of the position.

---

[79]A gabion is a kind of retaining wall made out of baskets, or cages, that have been filled with stone.

[80]A farm house and accompanying buildings on the slope of Vauquois.

We are still running forward. I reach the dairy, a small building of La Cigalerie. Four gutted brick walls, a corner of the roof, that's all that remains. (174) In the destroyed room, the stretcher bearers and medics cared for the many wounded, whose cries rise into the sky.
.
A communication trench that climbs towards the summit has its start at the dairy. Perpendicular trenches join it. They are filled with French, and further ahead, at the summit, are the Boche.

What should we do? I try to resolve the question. I have no orders.

Should we advance in the communication trenches?

We do not know.

Should we climb onto the rampart and charge the French trenches.

We do not know.

The Boche artillery and machine guns fire at us.

A charge signal sounds, and I turn. It's the company bugler who is standing close to the captain about fifty meters behind us who is sounding the charge. We look at one another. Who are we to charge?

I get angry. The machine guns continue, "tap, tap, tap," and I order:

"Everyone into the communication trench."

We move along in the communication trench. If we leave, then we'll leave when we know what we are supposed to do or when someone who wants us to do something (175) actually directs us.

It's an indescribable disorder. The trenches are crammed; units mixed up thanks to our messy and untimely movement.

I looked back to the rear just as a shell landed close to the group composed of the captain, the bugler and the adjutant. The latter two are mown down, and they are not going to be getting up. The captain is wounded in the thigh. He rises and following the trench receives information from the officers of the seventy-sixth and tells us to stay where we are.

He was brave and has exposed himself, but remember that the regulations prescribe that men of all grades should be aware of the purpose and details of the operation.

His wound resulted in his evacuation, and lieutenant F* took command of the company.

This is just one disagreeable episode, quickly forgotten. New impressions rapidly occur.

We remain hanging on the slope with the other companies. The Boche's shells and bullets sprinkling us. We struggle for each meter of ground.

Towards the evening the company retires from the position it has occupied (176) and returns to the bottom of the hill, near the dairy. We profit from a moment of calm to open a tin of bully beef that we eat on a piece of bread.

The attack, though stopped repeatedly, continues. We are sent as reinforcements to the eighty-ninth. Twice already the plateau has been reached by the French advance which slowly progresses from shell hole to shell hole. Finally we are in the village.

At midnight, I am ordered to put myself and my platoon at the disposition of the commander during the night attack.

Midnight, the moon is shining weakly. Rapidly, I jump out of the trench, rifle in hand. An explosion followed by a bright light stops me for an instant, not scared but surprised. It's a thunderclap followed by lightning. I laugh to myself. Shell explosions no longer surprise me, but lightning stops me and surprises me for an instant. The elements are decidedly in favor of the Boche. Their "Bon Vieux Dieu"[81] does not spare us. At first the rain, and now the snow falls lightly. The ground is muddy and frozen.

Towards the central communication trench a team of engineers stops us for a moment. The flank of the hill (177) offers a shelter at this place because of an indentation in the slope. An aid station had been set up.

From everywhere the wounded are carried in. The medical officers dress their wounds, and those who can walk file directly back across the ravine trying to avoid the shots of the barrage. The severely wounded have no other shelter than the sky and the depression in the slope. The stretchers and then the ground itself are crowded with men. The privileged have a blanket, but those are very few. Many men have nothing but their great coat. And it was cold enough to freeze the healthy to the marrow. From this scene of men stretched out on the ground, plaintive cries arose, groans, the rattles. It's gloomy, and then lightly the snow falls, little by little covering the bodies. The forms are even more alive in white clothes, and everything becomes a uniform color.

Lamentably the complaints arise.

"I'm cold. I'm cold."

"Oh how I'm suffering."

"My wife, my children."

A young kid cries,

"Mama, mama."

---

[81]"Gott mit uns" (God is with us) was a rallying phrase in widespread use in the German army in the First World War. It was even found on German helmets.

A little later another voice arises, “Finish me off, I’m suffering too much. Don’t you have any pity?”

We all just remain quiet, ashamed, and lower our heads, powerless.
(178)
From time to time, without conviction, some encouragement comes from the group.

“Courage old man, we will soon take you away.”

Some mules arrive, snorting, rushing about. They are replacing the vehicles that can’t pass through the barrage of shells. And on the mule carriers the medics put the wounded.

The voices rose anew.

“Take me, it’s my turn. You can’t let me here.”

“Oh, ugh, you’re hurting me, my leg, my leg.”

Once hoisted onto the mules, they are silent. Stiffened against the pain, they depart towards hope. The file sinks into the dark hole of the ravine, moving towards the woods and evacuation. Occasionally we see them illuminated by the explosion of a bomb. It is unforgettable.

“Forward!”

I don’t have the time to dream. Crossing the communication trench, from shell hole to shell hole, we reach the summit, the bullets whistling by always. One can distinguish the clacking of the Lebels[82] or the nutcracker sound of the Mausers. Despite the night, there are shadows everywhere, some rising, some falling. Here a work detail carrying cartridges climbs. Some sections are like mine, (179) reinforcements. The wounded, leaning on their rifles, or dragging themselves along and moaning, reach the aid post. The stretcher bearers stumble over the obstacles with their load of pain. Our fingers, stiff with cold, clench our files.

We arrive.

In the trench, which has been barely dug, protected by a section of wall about a meter high, the commander has installed himself, about half protected. Liaison officers next to him await his orders.

I present myself.

“Commander, I have been ordered to you. I am at your disposal.”

“Ah, it’s you B*, good. Do you know where the church is?”

---

[82]The Lebel Model 1886 rifle was the basic French infantry rifle of the war. As noted here, it had a characteristic sound that differed from the German Mauser.

“No, sir.”

“Two hundred meters, on the left, you will see a tree trunk silhouetted against the sky. When you see that make a quarter turn to the right, and it will be right in front of you.”

“Understood, sir.”

“Two companies are engaged at the church. You should put yourself on the left and await orders.”

You’re a smart man. Good luck. Bye.”
(180)
“Goodbye sir.”

I immediately think that we’ve bitten off more than we can chew.[83] This is pretty bad.

I paused a second. Let’s go. Of course I’m not happy. This will be hard, but I’ll return. I’ve a feeling about that.

“Bayonets fixed. Everyone behind me. Forward.”

I distinctly see the tree, black, with no branches or leaves, against the sky. From shell hole to shell hole we reach a piece of wall near the tree. At our arrival, some shadows move.

“Who is there?”

“Eighty-Ninth, we are in reserve.”

“Where are the companies engaged near the church? Where is the church?”

“We don’t know. We are in reserve.”

“Where are the Boche?”

“About one hundred and fifty meters in front, very close.”

There is no trace of the church. Everything is razed to the ground. There is no more village. Blind as a bat, I don’t see anything but the blackness of the trampled earth and in some places a little snow.

Behind me, the muffled voice of Michaud is heard replying to my concerns.
(181)
“Sergeant, we are all following, none missing.”

“Good, thanks.”

---

[83]“il y eu trop de sauce...”

My brave corporal Marly, class of fourteen, approaches,

“Sergeant, I see some shadows.”

“Where?”

“Two hundred meters in front and a little to the right.”

“Forward.”

We file through the middle of the village, or better to say the place that was the village. The ground is completely black, craters succeed craters. I don’t see a single house, not even a wall. Some piles of bricks, stones, dirt and that’s it. Black holes everywhere; some made by shells, others in a kind of regular line, the gutted cellars.

Not being able to see the obstacles, I frequently fall. I am stopped from time to time by a comrade, just before I walk into a well whose missing edge I can’t see. The bullets are always whistling by. They seem more numerous the further that we progress, but they pass above us.

“Halt, who goes?”
(182)
“Twelfth of the forty-sixth.”

”Is that you Boucheron?”

I see at the entrance to a cellar Lieutenant Picard standing, observing everything while talking to me.

“Where are the Boche?”

“In front, very close, and equally on the left. You should put your section on the left of mine, twenty-five meters from here. You should wait here for orders that someone is supposed to bring us.”

I managed to get my section set without anyone getting wounded. The men are placed one next to the other. Orders don’t arrive. I travel along the line on my stomach. It is set up in shell holes immediately behind what remains of the church, a wall a meter high with, on the left, a piece that is three meters high and around two wide. We are on one side, and the Boche on the other. Each head that shows above the wall from one side or the other jumps immediately, hit at point blank range.

A man moans at the end of the line. I drag myself to him. His head, covered in blood, is unrecognizable. He is lying on his back, (183) a little bloody foam on his lips, and then he quietly died.

I ask Marly.

“Who is it?”

“Don’t know.”

“Everything ok?”

“Yes, up to now.”

“Stay here, we don’t have any orders to move.”

The surveillance of the wall continues. The fingers go numb in the biting cold. The night unfolds slowly. In front and on the left, hundreds of shots tear through the darkness. We reply, bullets spin and whistle blindly and deadly through the night.

I again leave the shelter of the wall to return to the cellar to see if orders have arrived. In the entry the silhouette of Picard continues to stands out. Nothing yet. I stand beside him watching the line of my section; the bullets whistle by in increasing numbers, several crashing on nearby rocks. I take a step backward searching for the shadows. My feet feel a soft mass. I feel about and find a lump of something soft. Quickly, I turn on my flashlight. It’s a German corpse, already decayed, and I hold in my hand the arm which has become detached. I throw it away. (184)
A second time I return, crawling on my stomach along the line.

The day begins at dawn; it’s a bad time for us. The Boche are going to see that there is only a very small number of French in front of them. The fusillade redoubles in intensity.

Captain Gauthier arrives to replace the commander of the battalion who has been wounded. With him we depart forward and to the left. I hear an explosion that is a lot more violent that any rifle shots. The Boche, who haven’t been able to clear us away, are launching enormous mortars, and all we have are rifles. The bombs fall into the shell holes in which we are sheltered and a large number of men are killed or wounded. We don’t have anything with which to reply.

At the left of the line we are stuck between the fire from the French and the Boche explosions in neighboring shell holes.

Moulec, a marvelous Breton solider, catches many of the German projectiles with his hands and throws them back to their owners. One of them went off, and Moulec crumbled. His belly pierced like a sieve. From shell hole to shell hole we fall back. Many are hit while we move back, but in reaching the first French line (185) our friendly firing located there welcomes the Boche who are advancing through a hell of fire.

Captain Gauthier, without concern for his personal safety, walks along the line of men. Leaning on his cane, he indicates to groups of riflemen the places where the Boche are. The regiments are mixed up. Some groups are formed and rush to meet the Boche each time that they advance. Here a machine gunner, at the point of being captured by a wave of the enemy, flees with his gun on his shoulder. A group of men inserts itself between the enemy and him, and twenty meters further on, the machine gunner installs himself anew and recommences his murderous song while the bayonets stop the rush forward.

The enemy is out of breath and strength, and he stops. We rapidly organize a defense. A line of skirmishers is set out. The men who are available pile up the corpses, bricks, stones, and form a first entrenchment on which the German bullets strike less murderously.

I look to take account of our losses, as the wounded rejoin our lines all the time. Others rejoin us at night. I see at the crest of a crater the red sweater of Moulec and the bodies of some friends. (186) We stumble over bodies at each step. About twenty men of the fifty who started out are all that remain of my section.

The other sections of the company sent as reinforcements after mine are near and we reunite. Little by little order is restored, the elements of each regiment are regrouped together, without ceasing to fight. The shooting remains, in effect, intense although the smallest losses are important during the period of reorganization.

The Germans who have had to stop are furious at the loss of the plateau, and at any price they want to throw us back down the hill. Their artillery rages. The 105s throw their shells; explosions of all calibers occur by the dozens; it's now our turn to suffer the hell of the bombardment. Our first line, since it is so close to their line, does not suffer much. But methodically behind us, the slope, the ravine, the positions farther in the rear, the communications trenches, are hit to prevent the arrival of reinforcements or the resupply of ammunition or food.

For four days and four nights without interruption, we are shelled. Without sleep, almost without food, we can't do much more. We go on out of habit. How much resistance the body and spirit (187) can offer. It's almost unimaginable.

The food is gone. We are all hungry. Taking turns we leave and search the bombed cellars and their garrisons of corpses. Some return with German sausages, others with some cigars.

In the cellar that I enter under a half collapsed roof I discover a huge Boche body, almost two meters tall. Beside him lies a sack of ammunition. The body is disturbing, smooth, the face bloodless, the hands alongside the body. Laying stretched out on his back, he seemed to be taking the standard position of a soldier on guard duty. One arm torn away by a shell has disappeared. The corpse is emptied of its blood, and the ground is damp around him.

I open the pack. The sausages don't interest me. I take out from the middle of his linens his papers, notebook, letters from his wife, and finally a letter started that the assault interrupted. It is full of arrogance and insults towards the French. Vauquois is the hill inviolate where the Germans will never leave. I refold the letter. Henceforth the corpse will guard the hill. I send the papers to the commander, and I keep a collection of illustrated postcards representing the villages of the Meuse (188) burned by the Germans and then photographed in their state of ruin. It's Montfaucon, Cuisy, and Longwy with its imposing mass of collapsed and burned houses. We collect German guns by the hundreds, clips by the thousands.

A liaison officer finds me and gives me an order from the captain: "Take a dozen men and go into the ravine and look for some cartridges." I am in agreement. The Boche fire in burst on the slopes.

I gather my men, and we reach the start of the communication trench that descends to the foot of the hill.

Shells succeed shells. At each instant the parapets are shaken by the explosions and in the air the 105mm guns are even more dangerous. The rain of bullets and shrapnel shakes the trench which is filled with dead and wounded during their passage through the trench. At each step you have to step over a body. Almost all the wounded have been hit in the head, the face covered in blood, the grisly mass of brains falling out of their heads. Many in a gesture of protection have raised their arms to their heads as a kind of wall. The groans come from everywhere. There are too many to be rescued in time. (189) The bodies sag into the bottom of the trench.

At each shell burst that hits we crouch against the walls, then are on again. Two steps further another burst forces us to repeat our maneuver to the right or to the left. We don't meet either a work detail climbing up nor a man descending. It's almost a feeling of solitude amidst the carnage. We are surprised when we hear a comrade give a piece of advice between explosions.

"Warning an injured man!"

"Stay to the left!"

Our movement is fast, despite our tiredness. At last I see the end of the trench and the opening to the ravine. The spectacle is even more poignant. A trench perpendicular to the one that we are in leads to La Cigalerie. It is barely a meter deep and has turned into a canal of liquid mud. It's February. In order not to get wet, the men left the protection of the trench and wanted to follow the path. Surprised by the artillery, they fell one after another. The red pants extended right up to la Cigalerie. In certain places a group has been mown down and the bodies seemed to be embracing each other.

I choose not to follow the path but instead went into the water, and we all followed it. We squatted down at each shell burst with our butts and stomachs in the mud. (190) It's freezing, but it's what allowed us to reach our destination, teeth chattering, without a loss.

With a last effort, I get out of the trench and present myself at the dugout of the colonel.

"Colonel, I have an order from Captain G* to come and find some cartridges."

I had to be looking hideous. My balaclava, my body, my coat, my pants were the color of the trenches. The colonel didn't recognize me at first.

Then it struck him.

"It's you, Boucheron. How many men do you have?"

"Twelve, colonel."

"How is it going up there?"

“A little better, colonel, the firing is diminishing in intensity.”

“Your men?”

“Exhausted, colonel.”

“Replace them with a fresh section. You and your men rest. Notify lieutenant F*.“

”Thanks, colonel.”

I transmit the news to my men who were unable to go any further, and after explaining to those who are taking our place we took a spot in the support trench.
(191)
We are in a trench protected in front by a fold in the ground. Dug into the slope, it has little protection towards the rear because of the slope. About twenty meters behind us there is a small cemetery with some crosses still not destroyed. A number of corpses lie around the graves. Brought from all over, they wait for a calm period to sleep their final sleep away from the shelling.

We don’t get any sleep. The bombardment is terrible. The shells tumble raging and numberless.. They fall all over the entire second line and the ravine. We have covered the bottom of the trench with our bodies. Our feet on the parapet, our backs to the parapet, we follow the phases of the artillery preparation. We feel very small, very weak. Rabbits being attacked in their own burrows probably feel like us. When, how will we be hit?

The bravest wait without any reaction. Neither intelligence nor will nor bravery can provide anything other than the moral force to wait it out, and that’s enough. The combat environment has disappeared. Like hunted animals we reach the limits of our nerves. It is necessary to stand guard, and we’ll stand guard up to our death or up to our relief.
(192)
At first a small bit of anxiety takes hold of me. I don’t have a fear of death but the vague fear of the unknown. How will I be hit? I was also afraid that my comrades or other men, might have the impression that I was afraid. Behind us the shells continued to fall, The explosions shake the ground on which we are leaning and which tumbles from the parapet at the back of the trench.

In front of us the wooded slopes of Mamelon Blanc are streaked with the flames of explosions. The hill seemed to change into a crater from which black and white clouds escape, starting from the ground and then rising into the sky and dispersing in the wind created from new explosions. The illuminated trees crash to the ground. The woods seem to have sinister, human-like cries.

At the summit, two French artillery pieces fire across the ravine at the Boche’s positions on Vauquois, and only a few hundred meters away they can cause enormous enemy losses. The enemy artillery, which is searching for them, ranges onto the woods, battering, exploding, returning fire more furiously and in greater numbers. Through the smoke from the explosions, the long, straight flames of a shot from the French guns pierce the smoke. The pieces continue their murderous work.

(193)
The ravine, which expands into a plain in the direction of the Argonne, is full of water. Its grass is dotted with numerous brown holes. Grass is really not visible except for a few small places.

The shelling gets closer to us. It slowly quits Mamelon Blanc and focuses on the slope where we are. It reaches the cemetery behind us with the graves and the stretched out bodies. The shelling seems to want to kill the dead over and over again. Heads, limbs, fragments of flesh fly up along with stones and the explosions and fall back around us. We remain stunned, and mostly resigned. The limits of horror seem so often to be attained and yet often we have seen even seen worse. The terror that we felt at the start has given way to a certain feeling of resignation. We believe that there will not be one of us who survives when our tour ends. There is nothing that we can do to prevent death from visiting us if it wants to visit us.

Night has fallen. Not one word said. Our thoughts fly to all our loved ones that we will probably never see again. I sense now the beauty of our existence, the price of life, the mistakes made, the years and even the minutes wasted, the magnitude of what we enjoy and that we have never appreciated. (194) What yesterday was our concern appears to me petty. The preoccupations of peacetime seem minimal compared to those of these intense minutes. You embrace a desire to experience the extreme horror but equally an intense desire to live.

Amid the din of explosions, one closer almost lifted us up, shook us. The debris fell like rain on our heads. I feel myself, but I have no wounds, but in the darkness cries ring out very close. Anguished then more plaintive, they turn into groans. Shadows appear in front of the parapet, two, then three, then four bodies come down almost on top of us. It's the men who occupied the neighboring trench.

A sinister cry rises in the night.

"Oh! Oh! Oh! Help me! It's T*! Please, have pity! Save me! My foot, my foot! How I am suffering."

Some arms seize him and lay him on the ground.

"Where are you hit, my friend?"

"Oh, my foot."

The foot is almost torn off and is held to the leg by just a few strands of flesh and cloth. The blood spurts out. The cries change into a rattling sound. We don't dare touch him, and we hardly know what to do. One of us more experienced makes a dressing (195) and stops the flow of blood. Another goes to the aid station, but all the medics are gone. There is not even a stretcher available.

P* who has been lightly wounded tells us. The shell fell behind the firewall that we built. Four men who came back with me were there. The poor little cook B*, so courageous, who I had tried to spare, was literally quartered and killed at once. The other was not hurt. Two others were wounded.

The pleas of T* continue pitifully through the night. We give him a little bit of hooch. I would rather listen to the most violent explosions than have to listen to the pitiful sinister cries of a comrade.

“My wife, my kids, my poor kids! How I suffer. Nurses. Don’t let me stay here.”

We try two more times, but there is nothing we can do without having either medics or stretchers.

We all pack around T*. He’s not an anonymous wounded man that one pities and that one aids but one for whom the memories of combat, the guard duty and the common suffering have bonded us all together. Death does not frighten us, but the thoughts that everyone will be sent (196) to the humble house in Montmartre where we will see the family table lit by a small lamp, the humble housewife, and the kids hanging on her apron demanding news of their father or playing while the latter lies dying without care, without help, suffering in agony. Our teeth are clenched as we think of this and hatred shines in our eyes, hatred of the Boche rises in our hearts. I hope that our hatred will never be completely sated, and the hatred arises from the thought of the wife and the innocent children, their affection and their support.

The night deepens even more, and in the flames of the explosions we are able to see each other’s pale faces, clenched jaws, the looks of hate and fury. In a word, we had all withdrawn morally into ourselves. The bombardment continues.

Five hours and then six hours pass without relief. Of course, it is impossible at that time.

At last, towards eight, first one and then two and then others, finally some officers from the colonial infantry reconnoiter the position. The first who crosses our trench, bowing low, we question.

“Damn, it’s hot here. It’s not easy to get here.”
(197)
“No, where is your regiment.”

“Very close, we’re waiting for a break to move.”

The observation of the terrain is quickly ended. Information is passed on rapidly.

About 1100, we see behind the gabionade some shadows. At a run they cross the ravine. A few seconds later after running bent over and jumping into the trench, some others arrive. It’s the relief.

“Finally, it’s not too early to reach the camp.”

“Yes, you deserve your rest. It looks pretty hot here.”

We gather our sections, or better to say what remains. The medics have still not come and for many hours T* suffers. He understood that we were going to leave, and his pleas became even more pitiable.

“Don’t leave me. Take me with you.”

It’s terrible and poignant. I ask lieutenant F* permission to stay until he is removed.

“You are the head of your section. You owe it to your men. I cannot sacrifice a man for a wounded man. All I can do is let you stay until the last man and then turn over T* to those who replace you.
(198)
The first file away. Between each salvo, four or five shadows jump through the ravine, run along the gabionade, rise up when the explosions pass and disappear in the shadow of the woods.

There are only three of us left, it’s time to go, I shake the hand of T*.

“Goodbye my good friend, courage. I’ll recommend you to the officers of the colonial infantry. As soon as it is possible to evacuate you, you will be evacuated.”

“Adieu, write to my wife in Paris, rue X, number *.”

“You can count on it. Besides, you will see her. “

I’m not very sure about that. I jump rapidly away and behind me, in the night, the lamentable voice of T* follows me.

“Don’t forget to write my wife. My poor kids.”

Some shells explode. I jump into the woods and leap into the protecting communications trench. The men are paying their tribute on arriving here. We step over the corpses. Shells hammer the parapets; the telephone wires hang cut. Around a bend in the trench, there is a big black hole. A bunch of corpses dressed in dark blue lie there; we step over them.

The slope is rapidly crossed. Here’s the crest. A last look at Vauquois ablaze, (199) and now between us and the enemy there is the protection of Mamelon Blanc which allows us to move along more slowly.

We no longer looked human. We are dazed, dirty, torn, almost without pants, having torn them on the barbed wire, on rocks, on the ground, shreds of clothing. We fall from lack of rest, food and especially sleep. The legs mechanically step one after the other, eyes closed. Finally we reach some straw on which we fall like beasts, out of strength, and in some hours we forget the suffering, the losses, Vauquois and the fighting.

Oh, sleep! Sleep! Sleep!

(200)
XIX. Holding the Position

The next day we stretch a bit. We are less fatigued. The human machine has need of so little to be put back in action.

The mind is more lucid. I look at the barn, the empty places. Two thirds of my section is missing. The distribution of letters and packages more subtly reveals the losses suffered. The responses, killed, wounded, missing, are frequent.

We share our impressions and anecdotes. The circumstances of battle fly from mouth to mouth. Fond memories focus on the absent friends. Then since we need to forget, more than physical rest, we need moral tranquility. We absorb ourselves in our daily occupations.

First, a serious cleaning. The river, despite the cold of March, allows for some washing. Then we think about our clothes. My pants, which came from my civilian clothes, don't really exist anymore, so to speak. (201) The corps store is empty. No velvet pants, no blue horizon pants. I pull together the torn ends, except on the knees where there is a piece missing, and stitch them together. The white, black or red thread leaves a trace in the now brown hunting pants.

We have a real need for feeling refreshed. However, it is impossible to think of anything approaching anything but a simple meal. Dishes that are not sardines or bully beef or paté seem to us to be a feast for a king.

Moreover, we have a palace as a dining room. A partly demolished house, but one that still has a roof, shelters our mess. Two barrels and a door across them give us a table. Some bricks and a board make a comfortable bench, and the white tin dish is not even changed for the soup, the main dishes or dessert. Good humor replaces what is missing, and many things are missing.

Everyone manages to find something in the village. One brings eggs sold at forty centimes each; another some Camembert at a franc fifty; the third found an old hen for twelve francs because it is for non-commissioned officers said the old witch who surrendered it. For the officers it would cost at least fifteen. (202) A salad completes the menu with a sparkling wine that only bears a slight resemblance to champagne.

After an allusion to our pour adjutant L*, gaiety reigns. We are selfish and celebrating our return to life. It so good to be alive. Tomorrow we will be again exposed in battle, and it may be our turn.

If after each combat, each painful and dangerous period, we had a spiritual rest, if we had a change of atmosphere, the command could ask any effort of us, and we would be able to accomplish it. What is depressing is not so much the combat itself, but the existence in abnormal conditions, without a bowl for washing, a table for writing, a dining area. It would be better with some food healthy and hot and a little less of the work details of which many of us are not used to it. Ordinary conditions re-established as often as possible, the soldier having regained his physical and moral force, almost like being reborn, will be able to give an effort more decisive and more powerful than ever before.

Our lunch is finished, and we are reclaimed by the army. It's necessary to change our damaged weapons, clean them. Draw up statistics, the losses, the missing cartridges, (203) food reserves, promotions, all accompanied by reports, and then distribute supplies.

I had hardly any time to write some letters.

Two days after our relief, some reinforcements arrive to bring our reduced companies back up to strength. The men are not from our recruitment year and have never seen fire. To throw men so little experienced into a furnace like Vauquois seems imprudent to us. We spread them out among the companies as much as possible.

The fourth day had hardly ended when we are warned that we will depart at 1800. The infantry that had replaced us had suffered serious losses, and it is necessary to relieve them.

The faces get long. I hear the grumbling that two-thirds remain up there, and the remaining third must also end up buried up there.

"For months, the Argonne, then after the Argonne, Vauquois, no rest. To the right and to the left one cannot record anything. In Lorraine or in front of St. Mihiel, no one has fired a shot for months. At Reims it's the same thing. And us, always us, it's necessary to march. Doing one's duty should be for everyone, and not just the same few."[84]

I check my friends, and they have the same sentiments.
(204)
"Let's go, the attack is over. It's just necessary to hold on. That won't be as hard."

But the grumbling continues.

I have a lot of Parisian friends, veterans, admirably doing their duty, and they will do it tomorrow just like they did it yesterday, but everyone desired to change sectors, even for one more dangerous because they don't want to revisit the places where so many comrades had fallen.

How many times did I also feel this desire to change. Here each trench, each communication trench, reminds us of a battle. A tree branch, a small cross reminds us that a dear friend has fallen.

The Argonne and Vauquois are cemeteries of memories for us. Our life, our thoughts, our actions are buried in the ravines, trails and graves. Here our friends from the start of the war fell. They remind us of the enthusiasm of our arrival. Our formations were mowed down under machine gun fire, and every blade of grass appears to us to be stained with the blood of a friend. Each bush is identified with the name of a friend. Later this area saw the Boche flee under our blows and the drunken thrill of killing in our victory.

---

[84]Here Boucheron is reflecting the sentiment that at other points on the Western Front, such as in Lorraine, near the city of Reims, or at the St. Mihiel salient south of Verdun, all is quiet, while his unit continues to go into action.

This road, it's the calvary of a relief force replacing the exhausted, forces left in tatters with each kilometer, the hard boots bruising the frozen feet, (205) the falling to the ground, tired, exhausted, unable to do more.

This high forest fills up with people. We see through the snow a single file in profile through the whistling bullets, a scene of murderous poetry in the incomparable spectacle of a night winter forest. It is the recollection of a soft shock very close, and the fall of a comrade hit. This ravine, our slow passage, in the shadows, noiselessly, under the shots that fire from the ridges that dominate the area. This winding communication trench, a fierce, resolute resistance, in the rain, the snow, with the usual companions of frost, and, of course, death. Further, it's the departure for the attack. This gun slit, this passage, it's the dead body of a comrade hit and joking.

We walk between the armies of crosses, and we silently pray for the missing. Our resolve is strengthened, but we still want to fight in other places. Having around us these crosses, we demand vengeance, saying that may be our fate tomorrow, that's war. But we want to leave and forget about those reminders of the dead.

The command realized later that the division had been in the same place for two years. (206)
The relief takes place with the usual incidents. I have the same emplacement that I occupied at the end of the last battle. The positions were taken under a terrible fusillade. We are in place by dawn. There are hardly any changes in the disposition of lines.

Our entrenchment is behind a wall of piled up stones, earth, debris of all sorts. A soldier can stand up behind the wall, and some simple gun slits provide our defensive power. Behind the riflemen there is no protection, neither against the explosions of Boche artillery nor from the shots that are too short from our own artillery, which happens frequently enough.

On the right a small, advanced watch post has been created. Surveillance there is easier.

Behind us the command post occupies a collapsed cellar.

On the left, bordering our small sector, a wall, all that is left of a Vauquois house, forms the border. The rest of the company is located on the parapet to our right. All day the firing clatters without respite. The men in the neighboring section, more exposed because of the elevation of their position, are trying to create a wall of boxes filled with pebbles. (It's a system advocated by a staff officer.) The bullets quickly break open the boxes, and (207) the pebbles fall out everywhere. Unflagging, the men carry up sandbags. These are also sometimes punctured, but they hold their materials better, and with all the debris from the boxes, the sandbags, the ground, the pebbles, from which emerge the rifle barrels, Boche swords or French bayonets, boots, coats, a protective wall against the enemy's fire is created. One man works; one man shoots, and so on.

On our side, we try to create a real trench, that would protect us in back as well as in front. A thud is heard with the first blow of the pick. Continuing there is a coat, then hair, and nothing more that we can do. Further on, it's the same thing. Corpses are everywhere, covered with a thin layer of dirt. We trample and fight over them. Hundreds already lie in shell holes, on the

parapets, wherever death has mown them down. We live with them, in the middle of them; we sleep by their side. A few meters from me in a crevice, the head of a neighboring section halted the construction of a dugout because of the number of corpses. One of them lies in the center of the section, half uncovered, miserably hanging legs, and under those legs, Cayla sleeps, exhausted, as if in his own bed and (208) leaning against the mound of dirt. Above the heads of the lookouts at my small post, a corpse is embedded in the ground, an arm and a leg hanging out.

Happily we are in March, and it doesn't smell much, which is a plus for the moment.

The men in the trenches fire while others work as much as it is possible, trying to create a passage connecting shell holes. From time to time the voice of cannon mix with those of the rifles.

We install our rudimentary mortars, our first attempt at trench artillery. A casing of a German shell is fixed to a piece of wood. A fuse is put in the shell with ten, twenty or thirty grams of black powder. We can shoot a hundred a hundred and fifty meters a projectile formed from a melted or cast tube closed at the two ends with wooden plugs, and containing an explosive and dirt, nails, bullets, pieces of iron and glass. To fire the explosive, we light a wick to the interior. Five or six seconds later after firing, the explosive detonates. It was not expected to be a precise device, but it does make some noise and produces a serious enough moral effect. Men hit are rarely (209) killed, but are frequently put out of action.

The bomb is inconvenient. The wooden plugs dry out and crack. The powder sometimes goes off from a misfired fuse, and the men are then wounded. This happens especially at night as the darkness makes it impossible to choose the right projectile.

Since the beginning of my stay I've had two men wounded by our mortar.

The reinforcements are disoriented, looking around, standing around. We have all the trouble in the world to get them to remain at their post. They lack sang-froid.

It's the normal action at Vauquois, and that means the continual shooting of a variety of murderous projectiles, continuously, at more or less intensity.

Suddenly, a man shouts and points into the air at a huge projectile that flies almost vertically a hundred meters into the air. It turns a little, tumbling sharply, and descends with a very sharp whistling. Our eyes follow its trajectory as it descends to the right of our position. It hits the ground, and a tremendous explosion is heard, far exceeding those heard previously and having the intensity of a very large mine.
(210)
A cloud of powder rises up at the spot of the explosion. Debris of all sorts is thrown into the air and then rains back down. It's terrifying.

A deadly silence reigns over the plateau; our guns fell silent; a crater has opened that is filled with bodies, rocks, the beams of a shelter.

"To the parapets."

Everyone is in place. An attack will probably occur because of the surprise produced by the explosion of the new bomb. What kind of dirty weapon have they invented now?

A second projectile, then others follow, destroying all the defenses, ripping apart the shelters, killing clusters of men because we are not protected. No real trenches exist anymore. We follow the trajectories, and we move a little right or a little left to avoid them.

We are in the presence of the first "mortars."[85] Half of my effectives are on the parapet facing forward. The others stand, their necks outstretched while their eyes search for new mortars. Barely a quarter of an hour had passed, and it was necessary to organize a surveillance of the air. When the necks get tired, and the raised heads sag, some new men take over the watch. (211)
A shout.

"At us."

The projectile falls whistling right at us. It is impossible to move to the left or right. The explosion occurs, and we are hit with an enormous force, thrown to the ground or against the parapets, covered with debris. Numerous cries arise. The bomb has struck on the edge of a small wall which serves to protect us. The reinforcements, grouped together, are hit in the middle of their circle. Eighteen lie in all sorts of postures. It's horrible. Some try to flee and fall again. In the middle of the immobile corpses is an unfortunate one with back and legs broken, lying face downwards, head hanging into a hole, trying to rise with the two hands buried in the ground. He falls back after each effort, and from his nose and mouth blood runs and impregnates the earth. I raise him by his chest. He looked at me with a look of horror, a rattle in his throat, and he falls back. He's done for.

A corpse is transported from the commander's dugout thirty five meters away, thighs and rump naked. The clothes torn away; head down to the ground; feet torn off and the stubs pitifully hanging and bleeding (212); blood tracing a path through the doorway of the shelter.

At the impact point, the bodies are tumbled together in sinister ways. Sometimes a dying spasm shakes the bloody and muddy ground as someone dies.

We all have the idea that we are condemned to death, and that we'll never get out, but no one thinks of moving, we must stay. The lookouts at their gun slits are a little pale. Some remove the bloody debris and even rather large pieces of flesh that have fallen over the parapets, including clothes, musette bags, rifles. Hands rub their unkempt beards, whose coarse hair retains shreds of human flesh. The stack of bread has fallen over and is itself stained. A man, with his knife, carefully cleared away the debris on the crusts and restacked the pile. He adds grumbling,

"It's going to be pretty ugly for dinner."

---

[85]Boucheron uses the German term "minen," short for "minenwerfer." This was a short range trench mortar, usually 7.58, 17, or 25 cm .

He comforts us that it's his philosophy, come what may.

The mortars now tumble in our rear. Finally, the angry burst of our 75s, the requested artillery, fires at the Boche locations that fired the mortars, That's the best remedy.
(213)
The first shadows fall, and we take this opportunity for a work detail that is painful for us.

"The death detail."

Usually it is volunteers who do it, but other times there are too many dead, and so entire units are ordered to do it. Men, in the growing darkness, pull from the parapets, the ground in front of the trench, collapsed cellars, the corpses which are then piled up. The men have to pull them by their legs or their clothes to not dig up too much ground or to not be shot. We pile them in shell holes. What a sinister review, and with what sadness do we have to search the corpses often already half decomposed. Sometimes the body is so decomposed that there is little that we can do but put the pieces in some tent canvas or a sack. Fortunately it is not hot yet. We succeed in taking away the most troublesome and the ones closest to us, or those that our in our lines. The others rest where they are and decompose. The rain and the explosions disperse them and do not allow their identification.

The major who was sent to clean up was killed on his arrival on the plateau (214) by a Boche mortar. Lime is spread in front of the parapets. Despite the poor hygiene conditions, sanitation is not that bad.

We have no lunch or dinner, but we get by with our preserves that supplement everything, even a lack of sleep. From time to time someone opens a can of bully beef, and we share it on small pieces of bread. Then there will be something from someone else. The supplementary cans, that we purchased, disappeared a long time ago. We don't get to eat anything hot Two times a say a water detail descends to the ravine. Men carry back up full bottles, and we parsimoniously measure it out. We have forgotten the welfare needs of even a rudimentary cleaning of our body or our hands. To keep them from getting dirty we wear gloves. Our heads in our helmets are covered in mud and dirt give us the appearance of bandits.

The days that follow resemble one another. The routine is always the same. Fight, work and keep watch. The nights are a little different than the days, as the watch is more active. We are so close to the enemy that a moment of inattention could bring disaster. I do not close my eyes at night, (215) sitting on a chair of dirt, legs and knees wrapped in tent canvas, blanket over my shoulders, I watch the guards. They merge with the trench in the darkness.

On the ground, squatting, lying, with loaded rifle within reach, the men rest however they can, covered with blankets and tent canvas they form somber masses mingled with the dirt. A little apart, near the parapet, there is a metal mass lit by some moonlight. It's our reserve of grenades. The grenadiers sitting on or near the grenades sleep by their weapons. Gunshots are spaced out; then stop; then start again. They take the place of the warning cry of the sentries, and warn the enemy just as good guards warn us of the enemy from all sides. The hours pass on interminably. Our thoughts fly away, very far away, leaving behind the battle ground for more restful subjects. These long hours aren't really sad. They have their charm, which we remember, forgetting the cold, the suffering, the danger.

A stronger burst of fire and a rocket that goes up on my right brings me back to reality. There is a cannon shot.

“To the parapets!”

The cry rings out along the line. (216) The men are already at their posts. Blankets and canvas thrown off are trampled underfoot.

Rifles and machine guns crackle to life on our right. The artillery opens a barrage. Quickly, grim, angry, the long whistling of the shells is heard, missing or hitting with each shot. The men who move the firing around are very clever. One of the shells falls on the pile of grenades, and a lookout throws it over our parapet where it explodes violently. In the air, the mortars trace a serpentine path of fire. The explosions of the mortars, shells, bombs and grenades succeed one another. The concert of noise is appalling; the entire plateau is lit up as if it was the middle of the day. Debris of all kinds falls continually on all of our groups.

Is it an assault?

The riflemen take the cartridges stuck in the ground around the gun slits and fire back as much as possible.

Behind the riflemen all available men fix their bayonets to their rifles, without even being ordered; a wall of spikes is ready to stop any onrush. The grenadiers form a continuous barrier in front of the trench.

It’s terrible, but magnificent. It’s a grandiose and impressive spectacle.
(217)
The groans, moans, shouts, pass away. Cannon shots are spaced out more; the chattering of the machine guns dies away; shots become isolated, and then there is nothing but the cries of the wounded.

In the next day’s communique we will once more read, “attack repulsed.”

The guard retakes its positions on the parapet. Groups of men squatting together reform. I cover myself with my blanket, but I have no desire to sleep. My ear is attentive to the slightest noise while I dream, and the night passes slowly.

Each night it’s the same thing, the same scenes, the same dangers. One man, then two, and so on disappear, and others come and fill the gaps.

And the watch continues.

The next day there is an alert, and an artillery barrage responds to our request. The 75mm guns fire, chopping up the ground. We get stuck in a hell fire as the shells fall too short and land on our own trenches. The men who are not protected in the rear get nervous. Death arriving at the hands of the Boche is accepted, but at our own hands, in the back, is very disagreeable. Some men crouch low to avoid the shells. Some shells clip the parapets and pass over our heads. (218) That which I was expecting happens. It explodes on my right, and I

am thrown against the parapet. I have the impression of receiving a tremendous slap. I recover my balance and shake myself. I hear a groan on my right. The man crouching near me slowly drops his head into the mud; it's the end.

His brother-in-law, next to him, watches him with tear in his eyes. Shell shrapnel had hit him on the right side, cut the belt and passed through the hand and passed between my legs and wounded two men on my left. Two of my corporals were also wounded by the same shell. They go to the aid post; that's five less men.

The watch continues.

But the position is no longer tenable. It is necessary to either enlarge it or fall back. We attack.

Everyone prepares. The troops of the seventy-sixth who are charged with the attack have arrived. They take their place in the sectors, not yet organized or that we have not yet reached, but wherever the parapet might given them some shelter.

The first line resembles a hive. Here the men are preparing to march forward; there others enlarge the trench to be able to place ladders.[86] (219) Ammunition stores are set up.

The hour of the attack will come soon; the artillery makes it preparations.

A section head who must pass through comes to find me.

"We are going to attack from your trenches. Will you show me the sector?"

"Willingly."

"Don't fire in case of counter-attack. Don't forget that we are in front."

"Don't worry, they are veterans. No one will fire without my order."

On my left the ladders are set up. At the foot of each one there is an officer or a sub-officer. The men gather around them.

The captain checks his watch. Two minutes more! He tightens his belt and secures his cap, With one hand he takes a rung of the ladder, all the while holding his revolver. In his other hand is his walking stick; his foot is on the first rung.

A whistle sounded and the first sound had hardly died away when, standing up on the parapet which serves as a pedestal, I see the officer, his stick pointed towards the enemy, and he yells out,

"Forward men, long live France!"
(220)

---

[86]Ladders were needed to be able to climb out of the trench for an attack.

Without waiting to see if his order was obeyed, he leapt forward. A crackling responded to his cry; the firing raged. I see him stop after a few meters. He had to be hit. He restarts and then falls down in a heap, nose in the ground, hat a few feet away.

There is a moment of hesitation at the base of one of the nearby ladders. The sergeant whose body was half out of the trench fell backwards with a bullet in the head. The man who followed him made a movement to retreat, but following that he jumps forward followed by everyone else.

A storm of bullets is whistling by. The men leave and jump out, shouting. It's a flight towards the enemy. Through the gun slit I see the bodies that fall, and the others that continue forward. I hear screams. The regular and sinister tic-tack of the machine gun is suddenly stopped. The trench is taken at certain points and still resisting at others. New groups of men depart. The bursting of grenades becomes more intense and dominates as the shooting slows. Men crawling on their stomachs bring orders while we anxiously wait.

On the plateau are the dead, but also the numerous wounded, who crawl or run through the rubble trying to rejoin our line. Some are picked off by death on their route back; others manage to get back
(221)
"Here, on the right."

One of my men jumps on the parapet and on his stomach helps the unfortunates into the trench. The first can hardly see, blinded by a stream of blood trickling down his face and putting a red curtain in front of his eyes, his hands groping. Ten arms lift him gently, and two men rapidly guide him to the aid post. The other wounded who can walk unaided make their way there.

No reaction from the enemy who is surprised that the trench is taken. Our losses were useful.

At work, everyone is using their tools. The communication trench starts inching forward. By the next day at breakfast, the trench is consolidated and linked into the network. The night and the communication trench allow us to gather the wounded who are unable to get back themselves.

The artillery restarted to pound the Boche positions to prevent a counter-attack.

The days resume their monotone. The promised relief does not happen. The cans of bully beef are empty, and on all sides men take off scrounging for abandoned food. The resupply of food is impossible because of the German artillery.

In the evening we pick up a body (222) in the clay ground above the small post. I checked the musette and distributed the food that I found. I gave his new helmet to a soldier who didn't have one, and his cigarettes went to those who wanted them. It must be said, and it hardens you, that his death actually aided us as if he was still alive.

At last, the next day the soldiers who are to replace us arrive. Without any notable incidents, we returned to our rest area after this most recent stay that had been harder in privations and physical suffering than the period of combat. Losses were added to our first stay. The capture

of Vauquois was definite; the position had been consolidated; and every day it will be ours. We are happy with the result, but equally satisfied to have the battle ended and to enter a period undeniably painful but infinitely less perilous.

We can count our dead.

(223)
XX. Collignon

From the beginning of the campaign, Collignon[87] volunteered and served with the forty-sixth infantry. First it was the hard calvary of marching in the heat of August to reach Arlon and the Belgian frontier, then the retreat and the fighting after Belgium. The marches followed marches, and Collignon, a man of fifty-eight, did the same as the younger active classes, without preparation or training. His will was stronger than his physique. With his feet bruised, bloody, wounded by the marching, Collignon changed his shoes for sneakers and continued.

Then it was the Marne. For the forty-sixth that meant the battles at Vassincourt, Mussey, Bar-le-duc and the victory movement northward as far as Monblainville and Varennes, then the short pull back to Neuvilly, then stalemate and the trenches.[88]

It's the stay in the village of Aubréville, (224) Neuvilly, Clermont en Argonne, les Islettes during rest, la forest of Hesse, the Argonne and Vauquois for combat.[89]

I still see, as if the scene was yesterday, Collignon in the streets of the rest village, large, strong, taller than most men, impeccable in his blue coat, dark and worn almost like a reading coat, no trace of mud on his uniform, healthy and tanned most of the time. In the middle of his chest the Legion of Honor casts a bloody[90] note. His handsome face framed by his white beard that projects kindness, inspires respect and although you did not have to salute him, one was inclined to bow towards his example.

The soldiers looked at him a little astonished, this grand old man who, looking like he was in a salon, politely said in passing in front of them:

"Pardon, comrade."

More than one raises his cap. Unconsciously they recognized that Collignon is more than a soldier; he's a model, a bit of France. He seemed to personify the numerous volunteers of the forty-sixth who ranging in age from seventeen to sixty-four volunteered at the first appeal of the country in danger.

Despite his age, duties, situation, (225) his upper social status, he led by example.

---

[87]Henri Collignon (1856-1915), a lawyer by training, held numerous posts at the local and national levels in France before the war, eventually becoming secretary-general of the office of president of France and a state councillor.

[88]These engagements, fought by the forty-sixth regiment, were all part of the larger Battle of the First Marne, 5-12 September 1914.

[89]All locations in the Argonne region.

[90]Because of the red color of the ribbon.

As a flag-bearer, he stood taller than anyone else. He himself was a symbol carrying another symbol.

A little detached from the unit because of his duties as flag bearer, he entered the trenches with the regiment and stayed with the rest of the color guard near the colonel. It was at the front that he was killed 16 March 1916.

The summit of Vauquois, captured the last days of February and relentlessly contested from that date, was the center of a fierce battle that engulfed its surroundings and did not cease day or night for twenty days.

The small farm, la Cigalerie, clung to the slopes. Its red roofs, piles of bricks, rocks and debris mark the place. Under the rubble, the cellars protected against artillery shells and in each shelter clean-shaven faces, drawn by the lack of sunlight, await the end of the bombardment which has pounded the ground for hours. The rocks and the pieces of shrapnel fall like rain on the bricks and tiles. The ravine is strewn with dead, the paths and communication trenches have garrisons of corpses.

The small opening of a shelter (226) opens and closes suddenly. Like a rabbit that flees its pursuer, a man from the seventy-sixth jumps inside.

“Help, my friend has fallen seriously wounded about twenty meters away.”

In an instant silence reigns. Outside the shelters, bursts of 105s bark, packed together, numerous, hurling death.

Collignon gets up.

“I’m going, who will go with me?”

The man from the seventy-sixth follows.

Bodies bend and break outside, and death arrives in bursts. When it has passed, a body, the largest is laid out. The second man gets up and jumps back into the shelter.

Someone tries to pull Collignon back from death, but it’s useless. He expires a few seconds later.

His body is pierced by shrapnel and bullets and the staff bulletin expresses his death in a simple eloquence:

Collignon is hit.

Wound on the right thigh by the abductor muscle of the hip; hemorrhage from the femoral artery.

Multiple wounds to the left leg.

Wound to the left wrist.
(227)
Wound to the right forearm.

Contusion to the right shoulder.

Wound to the right eyebrow.

Only the wound to the right thigh was mortal. The hemorrhage led to his death very quickly.

The next day Collignon's body is taken to Aubréville, and in a small cemetery that had been shelled, his comrades and his officers paid him their final respects.

There is no need for any legend connected to the name of Collignon; the truth suffices. Let the example that he wanted to set be followed by many. Beyond the grave, that will be his greatest reward.

(228)
XXI. Cazeneuve

Collignon remains, for those who knew him, an image of kindness, of courage, of self-denial, before his grave all bow respectfully and admire his example.

Cazeneuve was more modest, simpler, humbler and closer to the average poilu. He was a true poilu, a real soldier–in the ranks, supporting anyone who was tired; in the trenches experiencing all the miseries, all the suffering; and in combat experiencing every danger. I cannot see his face without thinking of a soldier of the empire.

Cazeneuve was a spiritual beacon, a heroic torch, jingoistic, loud, laughing, a soldier of Napoleon's Old Guard in every sense of the term. He was the people who fight, a Parisian who dies for the tricolor, for an idea, who fights while singing and laughing, and who thumbs his nose at death when it knocks at the door.

When I evoke his memory, I do not have the idea of thinking tender thoughts (229) but instead think of my comrades in battle and their families, and give the order while passing before his grave,

"Present arms!"

For Cazeneuve, it's a salute from one soldier to another. One doesn't cry for men like him; one avenges them.

All Paris heard him at L'Opera-Comique. By 1914 his age had tempered his success, and his latter roles allowed him to finish up his theatrical career honorably.

The call to mobilize resonated sharply in his ears of forty-five winters. He had never fired a gun or carried a rifle if it wasn't on stage. But the years had hardly dimmed his vigor. He had resisted them like an oak; he did not bend. His legs were stronger than those of kids twenty years younger. And he put them to the test. His son was in the forty-sixth regiment, and he joined it.

I saw him the first night at Fontainebleau; we were sheltered in a barn. Having never served, our inexperience and our volunteering brought us close. We were not like the rest, and we ignored the possibility of sleeping in the town.

I shared my bale of straw with a military policeman. (230) Cazeneuve was nearby, and all evening gaiety reigned. In this atmosphere of uncertainty and anxiety, he displayed good, French humor, and in the morning he had a band of comrades gathered about him. We both became better than that, two brothers in battle.

After the departure from the depot of Marvéjols,[91] Cazeneuve is outfitted and equipped. What was important for us was to leave for the front and then outdo each other. In a corner of the

[91]Very small village in the south of France.

courtyard, a friend helped us perform the basic movements of being a soldier. We were both caught up before leaving in a couple of days.

Reinforcements are needed. We march and on arriving at Vauquois we are put into the same squad.

The assault on Vauquois in October 1914 finds us side by side. We set out together; around us the bullets flew, and I fell to the ground when I tripped, and I looked up and saw Cazeneuve standing, surrounded by bodies tumbling to the ground. The bullets were falling like rain, but calmly he fired his rifle. His shot propelled his bayonet forward as it had not been affixed properly, as it was for all who lacked manual dexterity. (231) He quietly picked his way through the bullets, the only one standing, until he was ordered to get down.

Under machine gun fire he makes jokes, curses and waits calmly for his comrades who are digging a trench to save him.

During the stay in the Argonne, he was always courageous. Named corporal after the attack on Vauquois, he raised the spirits of everyone by his good humor. He bore all the suffering, the privations, the work details, and the fighting without a frown, better than a young kid.

I tried to perfect his military training, without success. He mixed up the squads, the sections, ignored their number, their composition, commanded while singing and had an artistic design for everything military. He was a model maverick, courageous, admired by everyone for his bravery and good humor. He aggravated the nearby Boche by his laughter, not respecting either the silence rules, nor anyone else, and we laughed at the bullets as if we were at some kind of party.

The painful war bulletins were enlivened by his adventures. He stumbles, falls, gets up, loses the column, then leaves out without warning, and when someone asks him where the head of the column is (232) that has disappeared into the darkness of the night and the depth of the forest, he swears like a pagan that it's somebody else's fault. The column after it, on the left, the line bogged down, Cazeneuve takes the right, falls into a thicket or a hole, and we are obliged to go retrieve him, and we are greeted always by the same grumbling,

"We are led by the king of c*."

Then he amicably asks

"What's in there my friend c*? That's no good."

"Me, and I've never been better!" is how he replies.

And the laughter and the joking start again.

Named sergeant, he is aided and replaced by his corporals, who write up the notes and take account of the picks and cartridges, preparing his command.

In combat, no one could replace him; he was always first.

At Vauquois, the first mortars panicked and frightened us. Groups of men ebbed to the right and left following the menace. He standing at his full height, standing on an elevated trench, dominating all of us with an impassive look, not budging a step, and I am ashamed of having made a movement backwards to have dodged a projectile.
(233)
Sentimental in the highest degree, the slightest attention touched him

At Les Islettes, General Gouraud, who had just been wounded in the Argonne, had the company where we had done our apprenticeship as sub-officers pass in his review. The commander presented our elderly doyen Cazeneuve to the general. The general complimented him, shook his hand and gave him a superb souvenir, a cigar superbly decorated with an image of the king of Spain, and our old friend Cazeneuve returned completely moved, a tear in the corner of an eye that never got upset.

He died a soldier, but the result of a stupid accident. Eight days before his death he had a premonition. Despite his moral and physical strength, he was, just like everyone else after Vauquois, somewhat depressed. He did not support with impunity the months of the campaign in the mud, the snow, malnourished, never warm, hardly any sleep, always fighting. He never went anywhere but on foot. Suffering from a serious sore throat, his temporary evacuation to a rest area seemed imminent. He wanted to climb to Vauquois one more time, because he had just been named adjutant of a new company and the changing of the stripes on his sleeve was required.[92]

The regiment occupied Vauquois, and the enemy, for some time, had been quiet, and the guards (234) had relaxed a little. The captain had installed his command post in a former cellar whose roof, destroyed by artillery, had been supported by iron beams. A hot lunch was being prepared, and the company's section chiefs were present. Cazeneuve was one of them. The lunch was not interrupted by anything, and just a few meters from the enemy all were joking, coffee in hand. It was almost like a rest area.

Suddenly a crack was heard, the roof seemed to sag, the iron beams bent, and everything collapsed on top of the men. Cries and groans were heard; help was organized; everyone near by was focused on freeing their comrades.

The supports, had been placed on ground already mined and saturated by days of rain. Shaken by explosions, they had given way as a result of the movement of the soil.

After a long effort, the bodies were removed. The captain was seriously wounded, and many were killed.

Cazeneuve appeared in the middle of the rubble. He was still weakly breathing. An iron beam compressed his chest; another hit him in the neck as it fell and still weighed heavily on him. (235) He had whiplash and was stunned.

The medics tried everything in vain to revive him. Neither shots nor attempts at artificial

---

[92]The stripes sewn onto the sleeve were an indication of rank.

respiration worked, and he died shortly after having been removed from the rubble.

His body was transported to Aubréville, and out in a barn I give him my last, and supreme, good bye. His manly and energetic visage, crowned with cropped, graying hair, had not withdrawn. There was no trace of suffering. He seemed to be sleeping.

The folds of the tri-color flag covered him. I take off my cap before the body lain between two piles of hay bales. My friend Cazeneuve died beautifully, superbly. The curtain had closed for him on the greatest and most tragic stage. It seemed to me that a part of me had died. The two of us were the last of the reinforcements of October 1914. We had seemed to be rocks. Death, wounds, sickness, had successively touched all our companions from the group of reinforcements. The penultimate, the best had finally left.

In the same barn, a few minutes later his son arrived who, like me, had come to say his final goodbye. The next day, as the coffin was taken to the cemetery in Aubréville, the Boche, (236) trying to pursue him whose death had already been claimed, shelled the procession

We did not just put a body in a coffin; we put a piece of the soul of immortal France.

I wanted to throw a flower of regret and remembrance on his grave, as on the grave of Collignon. To my flowers others will be added and the bouquet of the thoughts of former combat comrades will embrace their names with the perfume of our admiration.

Later, before his grave, the men of the forty-sixth presented arms. His name is worthy of inclusion in this book of memories along with those of La Tour d’Auvergne and Collignon.

{237)
XXII. Frédéric Clément

Rumors have spread in the small village of Saint-André. In the distance, on the road leading to the village, a long line of men in blue horizon appears and approaches.

Reinforcements.

The line orders up, advances and enters the village. Groups form. The men break ranks and mix with the inhabitants who are waiting for them. There are many acquaintances renewed. A number of men were wounded at the Marne and at the first assaults at Vauquois.

A hand rests upon my shoulder. I turn and see a large sergeant with graying beard, a pipe at his mouth, his hand extended to me.

“Frédéric Clément, you are here?”

“But yes, does that surprise you?”

“A little”

At the courthouse, we often saw each other, but were never friends, but that nevertheless created a common bond (238) of our professional comradery. Our life in the small family of people at the court united us together. My faded blue cap and his blue horizon cap now carry the same number. He tells me of his departure, leaving behind his loved ones, and his desire to do his duty. Actually it was more than his strict duty as belonging to the territorial reserve he still took his place in an active regiment.[93]

He is very quiet, constantly smoking his pipe, not getting carried away, with a cold resolution to follow the path that his courage and selflessness have set for him.

He was my superior at the courthouse; I am his superior in battle and worried about his lack of agility because of his weight and age. I give him some advice. I have a bad feeling. The slopes of Vauquois were so steep even for the young. One has to escape the shell bursts, to move at an opportune moment, both things for which agility is indispensable. Courage cannot simply take the place of everything. And also, Clément’s lack of experience was clear, and his debut was going to be in a terrible battle.

Almost every day after his arrival, we met each other to talk.

The assaults on 17 February were undertaken by the thirty-first regiment, (239) but on 28 February we were sent against the previously untaken hill. The losses were heavy and numerous, and on my return I went looking for Clément. His company had reported him as missing. I ask his comrades about him, and contradictory information circulates but nothing

[93]Clément could have remained in territorial reserve but instead volunteered for an active duty regiment.

absolutely precise.

The battalion was part of the assault on the slope. Machine guns and rifles decimated the ranks. Some men saw him fall. He had gone forward, but no one knew what happened next or what had become of Clément.

At the colonel's command post there is no trace, and he does not turn up at an aid post. In the days that follow, there is no sign of him and no trace of his body.

The missing are numerous. The back and forth flow of the assault waves of French and Boche led to a lot of missing, all on the same ground. Some wounded of the enemy were collected by some but not many.

The great grave digger, the cannon, had operated on the slopes of Vauquois. The bodies once recognizable he turned into debris, buried some under explosions, disinterred others, and threw into the air bloody pieces that no longer had any appearance human. (240) Families never had the consolation of even going to the grave of their lost ones.

Frédéric Clément, I believe, is one of them. I will add to his memory my recollections of a friend from the court and the war. Perhaps then I can revive a little his memory in the thoughts of all who knew him.

Frédéric Clément, after studying law and political science and barely of legal age, was embroiled in the midst of the political battles at the time of Boulanger. Clément was encouraged and supported by the Liberal Union of Barboux and Leon Say and by the Republican Association of Jules Ferry and Spuller.[94]

The unrest of Bolulangism passed, and he became a peaceful solicitor. He was admitted to the bar and named second secretary of the Molé conference of Paris thanks to a eulogy of Gambetta that he delivered to the conference.[95]

As president of the Molé conference, he then succeeded Viviani as secretary in the firm of Bertin.[96] At that time he divided his time between the courts, editor of the Journal des Débats

---

[94]Georges Boulanger (1837-1891) was a French general who appeared to be preparing for a coup d'état in 1889, but the movement did not succeed. Léon Say (1826-1896), Jules Ferry (1832-1893), and Eugène Spuller (1835-1896) were all leftists, republicans, opposed to Boulanger

[95]According to Professor Brice Montaner, Conférence Molé was one of a number of French "conferences" that were similar to the English debating societies but which were far more involved in politics than the English societies. The French conferences, like the Conférence Molé, were "a breeding-ground for future politicians and also a pool of talented men that would later influence the politics of France."

[96]René Viviani (1863-1925), a French politician, independent socialist, prime minister June 1914 to October 1915. Bertin was a lawyer at the prestigious Court of Appeal in Paris.

and of La République Française and politics.[97]

He was candidate for election as a deputy many times, but he lost each time, notably in the département de la Seine-Inférieure.[98]

A few years before the war, Frédéric Clément married (241) Miss Secrétan, daughter of a Swiss colonel who, in the Gazette de Lausanne,[99] is presently still writing in favor of France.

At an age at which his situation in the courts was set, he quit his family, his job, friends and left to nobly accomplish his duty. He has fallen for France, facing the enemy.

---

[97]**Journal des Débats** and **La République Française** were major, daily French newspapers.

[98]A department of France now known as Seine-Maritime. France is presently divided into ninety-six departments for elections.

[99]A daily newspaper, written in French, published in the Swiss city of Lausanne from 1798 to 1991.

(242)
XXIII. The Doctors of the 46th ,

The sound of boots coming down the staircase leading to the first floor of the house under construction at the camp at Clermont en Argonne affected us. We are startled.

“Provided that no one comes and bother us,” says Michaud, “we will be here.”

It’s a stuffy room with the eight of us; two bales of straw provide soft bedding. It’s almost paradise for men who have inhabited the forest of Hesse for two months, living under the sky, wracked by dysentery. Some of the men are feverish and hold on only by a sense of duty and inner force.

At the sound of the boots someone exclaims,

“The infirmary will be set up here; you all must clear out.”

The faces drop. Sleeping in a barn open to winds from all directions hardly makes us smile. I go out and find myself in the presence of a young major with two stripes. (243) My meager status as a second-class soldier are not likely to weigh heavily on his decisions.

“Sir, there are eight of us in a part of the house. All in a pretty bad state, and all peaceful. Let us stay. We will be quiet and in no way interrupt the work of the infirmary.”

My conversant looked me over from head to toe, appreciated our set up and then responded

“Ok, stay, but don’t make any noise at the moment of visits, and I recommend to your comrades the use of leaves, there are too many walkers through the garden.

His suggestion was logical enough. The French soldier is often dirty, and like some domestic pets, he goes to the bathroom wherever he is. The previous night we had been awakened by a stream of water. We went to the upper story and found a guy too lazy to go down into the garden. A short boxing session with the disgusting character ended with no damage to us.

With a rapid step, the major was gone, and we were left masters of the place. That was my first meeting with the medical officer Vincent of the third battalion of the forty-sixth regiment. (244) The man who would later clean up the psychology center in Tours and force all those there who were shirking their duties to go back to the front. The doctor, attacked for his treatment by certain deputies and certain of his colleagues, had the support of his combat comrades who learned to appreciate him under fire and who knew him as infinitely more courageous than his detractors.

The example of courage and self-denial originated, of course, with the head of the forty-sixth medical unit; doctor Gerbault, the chief medical officer, who showed everyone what he believed was the duty of a doctor in battle. With his aides and stretcher bearers right up to the front lines and under fire, he treated the wounded, and when he had finished with those most in need, he moved on to the terrible duty of moving the dead. Many French families are able to find the tombs of their family members at the front at Vauquois thanks to him. He stayed with

his active regiment right up to 8 January 1915 when he fell from a German bullet that broke his leg while he went to retrieve from the Germans the body of his old friend, commander Darc

Behind him, or rather always at his side, Doctor Gabrielle did everything from the start of the campaign. On 28 August 1914 his horse was killed under him, and he was wounded. (245) Cited in the army orders and evacuated, he later resumed his post with a battalion of chasseurs.[100]

With them, there were Fouchy and the others whose names I've forgotten and who performed their military medicine as a veritable priesthood, with no concern for themselves and who experienced the same dangers as we did.

There's Luizy, doctor's aide, small, almost beardless, timid like a young girl when in conversation, marvelously calm during the most intense bombardments when he continued to dress the wounds of the men sent to him while around him men fell or threw themselves to the ground to avoid the shell explosions.

Wounded the first time on 28 February 1915 he refused to be evacuated, rested a few days, resumed his post and was seriously wounded in a bombardment at the camp at Aubréville.

Decorated with the military medal[101] and cited twice in the army orders, no one more deserved these awards and none are more worthy.

The courage of Dr. Vincent at Vauquois earned him the Legion of Honor. His aid post, installed in a sunken road at Vauquois, received numerous wounded. The medics were obliged to put some outside, around the post. (246) Soon the artillery started ranging on the sunken road. The musician Delaitre received a shell splinter in the jaw, and his carotid artery collapsed. Dr. Vincent operated right in front of the aid post. A few meters away, a dugout collapsed, hit by a shell. An officer, his foot hit, calls out for help. Dr. Vincent jumped to him. Behind him a new shell explodes tearing the head of the musician and the clamp on the carotid; the wounded keep arriving.

The reserve companies suffer losses under the bombardment that hammers the ravine, including all their officers. It's necessary to get them to the crest. The NCOs lead them, but some men hesitate. Doctors Vincent and Foucher lead them and take groups large enough so that captain Liédos can continue the attack.

The next day the same situation occurs, and each time he must climb the hill to bring relief he leads some hesitators and stragglers, as the assault companies penetrate to the west of Vauquois

As of a result of these action, Dr. Vincent was the subject of the following report by his superior Dr. Rouffiandis:

---

[100]French light infantry that differed from the regular infantry mostly in name only.

[101]Awarded to soldiers for bravery in battle.

(247)
Mr. Vincent, Clovis Julien, doctor of the Parisian hospitals, first assigned to a group of stretcher-bearers, then assigned to the forty-sixth infantry where he displayed exceptional qualities. On the thirtieth of October when our front line trenches were on Mamelon Blanc, he went, alone, to bring back our wounded from the slopes of Vauquois. On 28 February while the battalion was in standby position and experienced a violent artillery bombardment and suffered serious losses, he knew to immediately organize, in a part of the sunken road less exposed, an aid post that functioned without interruption. This he did with the utmost energy. He lavished care on the many wounded that he went out and found amidst the shells. He himself stopped and rallied men who were retreating and accompanied them superbly, right to the firing line.

On 1 March during the second attack in support of the forty-sixth the commander of his battalion told him that he had been among his most important collaborators in helping to get groups of men, which he himself led under fire, forward.

All night without taking a minute of rest he directed stretcher-bearers in their search for (248) wounded not returning to the aid post except to devote to their care.

I have the honor to propose Doctor Vincent for the Croix de chevalier de la Légion d'honneur[102] for the following reason:

“Admired by the entire regiment for his bravery. In the days between 28 February and 1 March 1915 after having, under a bombardment particularly violent, dressed the wounds of the severely injured, one of whom was killed by his side from enemy artillery, followed the troops on an assault of a strong position and took control of the sections that had been decimated and entered the position with the assault troops.

Along with the report Dr. Vincent was named chevalier de la Légion d'honneur.

It was not only that the medical service had to deal with the wounded, but it also had a considerable number of dead, buried under rubble or exposed to enemy fire. The clearing up of Vauquois could not take place until long after the firing had eased. Since the first days of the occupation of the plateau, the assaults having ceased, losses were, in just a few days, hundreds of men.

[102]This is the lowest level of the Legion of Honor, France’s highest award.

(249)
XXIV. Some Leftover Thoughts

The Captain of Le Bateau lavoir[103]

The courtyard is crowded by volunteers that keep arriving. The captain commanding the depot walks around and grumbles. He doesn't really like all these people, of whom nobody asked him anything. All that they had to do was to stay at home, and instead they come and clutter up the depot. There are already enough men to annoy the officers of the depot left behind because of their fighting skills.

Did someone ask him to go to war? No, and yet he is a military professional. So what are the reasons that all these people have come to give him trouble?

In which century are we living? People ask to be beaten up when they are not even required to report.

He stopped his monologue, more upset by the arrival of a new group that is distinguished from the others by its banality.
(250)
Led by an old man, dry, thin, dressed in a frock coat, white sailor's cap, followed by a man of about forty who appeared strong enough and a well-built kid of about seventeen.

With jerky movements, the old man approached the captain, salutes, stands at attention and presents arms.

"Captain, I am at your disposition. I have volunteered, and I brought my son and my grandson."

"How old are you?"

"Sixty-four. My grandson is seventeen."

It was comical, the general appearance of the old man. At first I smiled, and then I had the wish to embrace the old man, ridiculous and sublime at the same time. The captain dared not grumble. The old man had something in his heart to offer so magnificently just like the kids.

"Good, we'll see. Let's get you outfitted."

We corner the old man who tells his story to everyone. He is from Clichy or Levallois,[104] very old, his son-in-law retired from military service, his grandson too young to be drafted. He took

---

[103]Le Bateau Lavoir (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Le_Bateau-Lavoir) Is a building in the Montmartre district of Paris, a gathering place for artists. Supposedly, its name derived from the fact that during storms the building swayed and creaked, "reminding people of washing-boats on the nearby Seine River."

[104]Both are in the northwestern suburbs of Paris.

them both to the recruiting bureau, and they took all three.
(251)
The kids make fun of his shortcomings a bit. Because of his white cap they immediately called him the wash boat captain,[105] but he pleases everyone. He tells everyone who will listen that his concierge has asked for a German sword; the first floor domestic wants a lance; his next-door neighbor a helmet, etc. The kids flatter his mania.

As part of the October reinforcements he left with his son and grandson.

We aged a month after the arrival at the front. The grassy ravine resounded with noise of the fusillade, the click-clack of machine guns, the thunder of exploding shells. The French infantry, mowed down by the machine guns are lined up everywhere. It's their last parade. Bodies stretched out, blood, cries and groans.

From the wood we clearly see the phases of the unequal struggle that is deadly for us. Only the thicket that shelters us allows us to be so close.

In the middle of the line of troops, in the center of the ravine, a skinny soldier suddenly stood fully erect, facing the enemy. He leans on his gun, and I hear a quivering voice that seemed to challenge the dead with the supreme order
(252)
"Forward, long live fr...."

A burst shut him up. The washboat captain crumpled in the middle of the dead, facing the enemy.

The Replacements

The shooting and ragged explosions followed one after another; men fell, like mown wheat, and lay strewn everywhere on the ground.

Vauquois is taken. In counter-attacks against the victorious division the enemy throws troops of fourteen units.

Our attacks during the night have succeeded. It is now necessary to either go back down the hill or dig in. Men mostly in groups rather than in any military formations cling to shell holes, piling up debris from destroyed buildings, bricks, stones, the dead. But to use the pick to dig in, one has to let go of the rifle and work through the firing. The enemy has not admitted defeat and redoubles its efforts.

In front of the entrenchments that are taking shape, some men, only partly under cover, shoot at and bring down the Boche who are trying to advance.

Two shooters, who are behind a small piece of wall that covers about thirty men at work, (253) are hit at almost the same time. In the noise of the shooting, one of them who was wounded,

---

[105]le capitaine de bateau lavoir. See footnote 103.

had the strength to warn the sergeant who was a few steps away supervising the work,

“Two more forward,”

Two men let go of their pickaxes, pick up their rifles and, without saying a word, leap forward and leave behind the unfinished trench to take their place.

The sergeant watches and a little later,

“Two more forward!”

It’s certain death, but there is not a murmur, hardly a word.

“Bye, friend.”

A handshake, and, in turn, like heroes of old, without waiting for their names to be called, ten men, ten unknown men, went to their death to assure the conquest of this piece of ground.

Carriou

Accompanied by some other Bretons, Carriou arrived at the front with some reinforcements, a man the size of Hercules, solid as a rock, a little lost in a division of Parisians, not understanding the joking. And so in front of all the guys he was like a timid girl, and one could see in his eyes the anxiety of a child lost far from home. (254) But in battle he was a marvelous soldier.

Over the months, in the woods, like a wolf, he hunted the Boche. Winter came, and it was very cold. From the morning on he fired, protected by a sniper’s shield hidden by a bush. The sentry in a position a little in front of him was wounded, and no one in full daylight went to help.

The cold deepened and penetrated to the marrow. Carriou hid his sore feet, the socks are cracked, while his leggings stuck to wounds never cared for.

In the evening the small post was relieved. The sergeant found a wounded man and a great Breton who was still firing, with legs and feet naked, the pus and the blood congealed in the most painful wounds.

But the order was to hold.

Ten sous coins[106]

Concern exists in the ranks. The reinforcements are in a deplorable state. The men are not seasoned, not worth the former men who remain or those who fell in the difficult battles of the preceding days.

---

[106]The sou (plural “sous”) was a small French coin roughly equivalent to a cent.

“Will we be able to hold on to them?”

Physically the newcomers were solidly built and the equal of two small Parisian weaklings from the suburbs that formed the basis of the regiment.
(255)
In the less important positions a new man is put under the surveillance of a veteran.

In the middle of the night shooting is suddenly triggered attracting to our position diverse projectiles that fall by the thousands.

Worried about the small outpost, the sergeant sets off. The two men are there.

The weakling Parisian fires calmly, cooly, just like in training.

At the bottom of the trench, the second is crouched like a hunted animal.

The muffled scream of the sergeant gets the kid to return to his place next to the other.

“Sergeant, don’t say anything, he is just picking up some ten sous coins.”

The Last Guard Duty

The dense thickets of the Argonne enclose our lines. The dark night makes us redouble our vigilance. The Boche is just a few meters away. A surprise and we’d be bayoneted. Like wolf packs, the patrols crawl around searching the bushes, ready to pounce.

In front of the trench, in a small sentry post connected by a trench, the father and his son R* are on guard, always together at their request. Behind them, confident, their comrades rest.
(256)
Looking through the gun slit, the father watches, ears alert. During the night chance shots from a neighboring trench rip through the dark. A cry, a bullet in the head of a soldier who drops his nose into the dirt of the gun slit.

The son quickly fires back in the direction of the enemy. He listens, then nothing, silence. After a moment of watching, he stacks his rifle. The son hugged the body of his father and carefully laid him out in the trench, like on a bed. For a long time he observes at the gun slit, nothing.

It was an anonymous bullet, just shot off, that found its mark.

The son took some quick steps back to the opening of the dugout of the sergeant at the corner of the communication and firing trenches, and calmly calls out:

“Sergeant, they’ve killed my father. He must be replaced.”

When the sergeant arrived, the moon dimly lit the scene.

The body of the father rested on his last bed, the mud, rifle clenched in his fist. Eye at the gun slit, the son watches out.

He holds on.

The end.