

OVER THE TOP

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Decision in Champagne:
“It Will Be a Happy Day”

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Decision in Champagne: 15 July 1918

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"It met with the unexpectedly stubborn and active resistance of fresh American troops." So wrote General Eric Ludendorff after the Armistice of Germany's last offensive of the Great War. That attack was both launched and effectively smothered on 15 July 1918. Applying a double-swinging-door maneuver at either end of a 48-mile assault line, its immediate objectives were to envelop and capture the major rail junctions at Reims, Epernay, and Châlons. As fate would have it, American units were placed directly in front of the swinging doors at both ends. In the west near Château-Thierry was the 3rd Division of regulars that was prominent in last month's issue of *Over the Top*. Their actions on 15 July are immortalized through an enduring U.S. Army tradition—the "Rock of the Marne."

Far to the east, in the Champagne, the 42nd "Rainbow" Division, composed of National Guardsmen from across the nation, was deployed. Their task and level of challenge were the same as those faced by their fellow Doughboys to the west, but their story is less known. In this issue, we are going to remedy that. Our contributor, Stephen Harris, has written about both episodes in his series of AEF histories. In this issue he focuses on the Champagne and the effort of the Rainbow Division's most famous regiment, "The Fighting Sixty-Ninth" of New York, which was re-designated the 165th Infantry in the AEF system. Their effort was romanticized a bit in a famous pre-World War II movie, but make no mistake about it, they were a first-class fighting outfit and would prove it that decisive day.

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Location of the Regiment's Deployment

“It Will Be a Happy Day”

Decision in Champagne: 15 July 1918

By Stephen L. Harris



Company K, 165th Infantry on the March
They Would Be in the Heart of the Coming Action

Before embarking for France, Jim McKenna of the Rainbow Division's 165th Infantry, now a major, had warned his father that the former New York 69th was going to be in the “thick of the scrimmage and court death over and over again for their country's flag” and that he counted on playing a big part in the bloody scrimmage. Now on the eve of the Second Battle of the Marne, the new leader of the 3rd Battalion was anxious to get into the fight. To Father Francis Duffy and other officers, he seemed distressed that the regiment was losing its Irish heritage before it had a chance to uphold its Celtic warrior traditions.

“Bide your time,” the chaplain cautioned. “Our boys will have their innings. Don't be impatient.”

McKenna, who had a shamrock nailed over the door of his headquarters and ordered his runners to wear green armbands with shamrocks on them, was quiet for a time before answering his priest. “We must show the whole world where Irishmen stand, Father. We must show that we are in this fight for liberty—heart and soul.”

Yet the world knew—at least the people who kept tabs on the old regiment knew. When it had marched out of Baccarat on a moonlit June night a number of its men sported medals, the *Croix de Guerre* on most of them.

The French award for bravery had been pinned on the Americans for their work at Rouge Bouquet, the first raiding party into no-man's-land, and for their valor during the frightful gas attack. When Maj. Bill Donovan had heard that he was to receive a medal, he shot off a letter to his wife. “Orders have gone through they tell me, citing me for the Division Croix de Guerre, which they say is to be presented at a big review in a city near here. I do not relish that part of it very much.”

Among the other recipients had been Sergeants Danny O'Connell, Spencer Rossell, William Moore, Abe Blaustein and Cpl. Alf Helmer for their action to free the entombed E Company soldiers. First Lt. John Norman had received the medal posthumously. At first, Blaustein had been passed over for the medal because he was Jewish. Discovering the slight, Donovan said he would not accept his medal unless Abe got one. “They finally decided that Blaustein was as worthy of that cross as Dan and I, and he got it,” he told a newspaper reporter.

In mid-June the 42nd Division slipped quietly out of the Lorraine sector, with the 165th Infantry departing Baccarat on the 18th, as Duffy put it, “on our hunt for new trouble.” Col. Frank McCoy explained to his mother that “War is movement. . . And we do move.”

The first night out the Rainbows marched past replacement troops. These were the 77th, a division of draftees known as “New York's Own,” a moniker the Irish regiment resented. When these New Yorkers, almost all of them from Manhattan, tramped by, McCoy felt struck by the “great” sight. A full moon cast an eerie glow upon the soldiers, those on foot and those riding in automobiles, motors transports, and mule-drawn wagons; there arose the grinding of gears, the crack of whips, the steady crunch of boots on a chalky white road that had once felt the marching feet of Julius Caesar, Attila the Hun, and Napoleon Bonaparte. McCoy sensed his own men tense up, now “feeling and marching like veterans passing and chaffing the green division hiking cheerfully too.” Insults were slung back and forth, most in Irish brogues.

Shouted one of the 77th's drafted Doughboys, “We're going up to finish the job you fellows couldn't do!”

“Look out for the Heinies or you'll be eating sauerkraut in a prison camp before the month is out!” Duffy recalled the back-and-forth banter.'

“The Germans will find out what American soldiers are like when we get a crack at them.!”

Then big Mike Donaldson's voice roared out, “What are you givin' us? We was over here killin' Dutchmen before they pulled your names out of a hat!”

Shot back a draftee, “Well, thank God we didn't have to get drunk to join the army.”

Another 77th man yelled, “Hell, I thought the 69th had all been gassed!”

“D'Boche tried to, idiot, but we smelled `em first. They'll get you sure!”

Other voices called out in the silvery night. “Anyone there from the Bowery?”

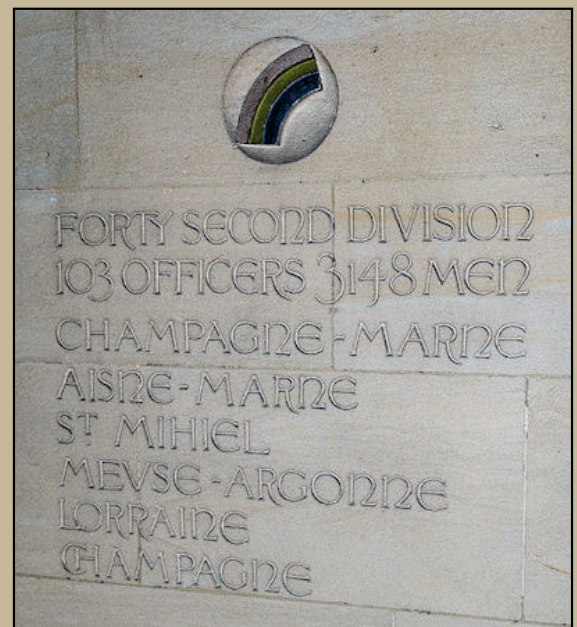
“Hey there, d'ya live on 83rd Street?”

More voices sought out brothers and cousins. McCoy saw that brothers “met by calling out for each other as they went along.”

“It was a noisy game of blind man's bluff,” a soldier wrote. From both sides of the road the New Yorkers sang to each other.

*East side, West, side,
All round the town,
The tots sang ring-a-rosie,
London Bridge is falling down.
Boys and girls together,
Me and Mamie O'Rourke,
We tripped the light fantastic
On the sidewalks of New York.*

A few days later McCoy sent his terrier, Bert Williams, away and recommended 1st Lt. Elmer Basil for captain. Hearing he had been recommended for a captaincy, Elmer felt “very happy indeed”—so that the war did not seem to bother him one whit. The early summer weather had been perfect, and he wrote to his parents, “I must say that I cannot complain of either temperature or climate, however, in as much as I neither hike nor ride horse-back when we move now. I ride in the colonel's automobile, which to say the very least, makes this the best war I have ever fought in. They can keep up the conflict along these lines, if it takes all summer, as far as I am concerned.”



**42nd Division Section, AEF Memorial,
American Cathedral, Paris**

The newest officer in the regiment, chocolate-loving Lt. William Spencer, agreed. “This war isn't half bad after all,” he wrote to Loi, a girl he had been dating while at Princeton. “I wish you could see me now—seated under a tree in a cool breeze, a 5# box of Reymers beside me, some excellent letters to read and Erie

Dispatch at hand, and not much to worry about. What more could a man want to complete his happiness.” Moments earlier, Spencer had climbed out of bed and seen the red morning sunrise “over a forest in a clear pink sky, and just above the sun were bunches of little white puffs of smoke from bursting shrapnel, fired at an enemy plane.” He told Loi, perhaps trying to make her jealous, that in the home that served as his billets lived a handsome girl named Marie. One night he had tried to put the make on her. “The sad part was when she rebuffed me—I tried to kiss her goodnight but nothing doing and I went to bed kissless. Tough isn’ it? Gosh, she was pretty.” He tacked on that he always let Van S. Merle-Smith and Charles Baker read her letters. And “they read every single word in them. . . [It was Charlie Baker’s] sister who saw you in a canoe at the Millstream, and told me afterward you were one of the most beautiful girls she had ever seen. Those were the days, were they not?”

The war soon changed for Spencer and Elmer so that they would long for the bright, peaceful summer days in the French countryside, especially in the part of France where they now were—the picturesque province of Champagne. Flowers filled the countryside. Elmer saw them in blues and poppy reds and picked some and gently tucked them into a letter. “I enclose some of these flowers not from the garden, but from a wild field alongside a road where I went on horse-back yesterday out in the country.”

However, the more the regiment moved, the more the countryside transformed itself into a landscape that reminded the veterans of 1916 of their Mexican border days. It was as if they were in the desert again. The heat rose. The flowers and trees disappeared. First Battalion Adjutant Oliver Ames reported to his wife that on “the hottest day yet, they won’t even let us take off our blouses marching about, which almost makes me insubordinate.” He said he now knew how his men suffered and the “next time will let them remove blouses.”

The Châlons plains set all of us old Border veterans going again. The first comment was “Just like Texas.” A broad expanse of flat brookless country with patches of scrimpy trees that surely must be mesquite. But I delight in it. There is a blue sky over it all, and the long reaches for the eye to travel are as fascinating and as restful as the ocean.

Father Duffy’s Story

The chalky earth choked the troops as they kicked up dust on the trail. When it rained, the chalk turned into a gooey white paste that sucked feet into the ground—sticky, thick, and slippery. At night the air was still and breathless and the men perspired freely while the cooties bit into their flesh.

“Wearily we trudged along and as the spires of a town hovered in view we thought that possibly this was our destination,” one boy wrote. “But on we went.”

“Oh! What a hike!” complained F Company’s Nathaniel “Nat” Rouse.



**Nathan Rouse of F Company
Kept a Diary of His Time in France and Survived
a Serious Head Wound Late in the War**

Because the regiment was always on the move, Chaplain Duffy joked to his father, “When I get back am going to look for a job managing a circus.”

On the 24th, McCoy celebrated an anniversary, reminding his mother that it had been 20 years ago that he had his first “fight” in Las Guasimas, Cuba. “And we’re on our way to the biggest fight of all.”

The 42nd arrived at Camp de Châlons, part of the Marne salient. They were attached to the French Fifth Army Corps, preparing for a push against the Germans on the symbolic date of the Fourth of July, American Independence Day. But the French high command soon realized that the Germans were not going to wait

—instead, they were gearing up for another major assault, the year's fifth crack at the Allies. Thus the division went on the move again, although this time it did not travel far. Now part of the French Fourth Army, it was commanded by one of the great heroes of the war, a one-armed general who knew how to fight and backed down to no army.

Chain of Command in the Champagne 165th Infantry (Formerly NY 69th)

French Fourth Army (General Gouraud)

French XXI Corps (General Naulin)

U.S. 42nd Division (MG Menoher)

U.S. 83rd Infantry Brigade (BG Lenihan)

U.S. 165th Infantry (Colonel McCoy)

At 51, Henri Gouraud had seen enough bloodshed to last a hundred lifetimes, much of it his own. For most of his military career, he had served in the French Colonial Army. His exploits in the jungles and deserts had become legendary and had earned him the title "Lion of Africa." At the start of the Great War he had commanded the Tenth Infantry Division and taken a bullet in the shoulder in the Argonne Forest. In another battle he was struck by a shell that ripped apart his body: he lost an arm and nearly lost a leg. But those wounds had never slowed him down. In December 1915, he took command of the French Fourth Army.



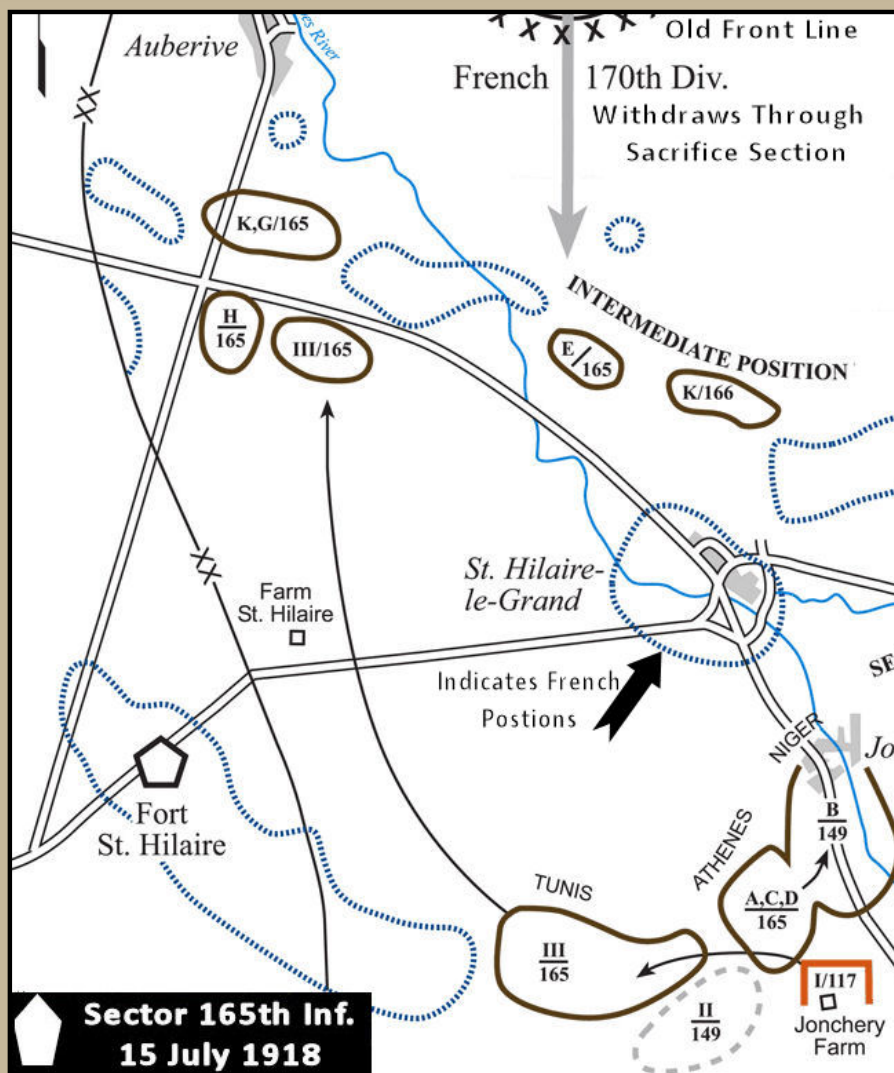
General Henri Gouraud, Commander Fourth Army

Duffy thought Gouraud a remarkable military figure. One of the things that made him so in the chaplain's mind was the "touch of distinction from his empty hanging sleeve and stiff leg." Douglas MacArthur, now a brigadier general, had been equally struck by Gouraud. Although he knew of the general's reputation, MacArthur wrote, "I was not prepared for the heroic figure to whom I reported. With one arm gone and half a leg missing, with his red beard glittering in the sunlight the jaunty rake of his cocked hat and the oratorical brilliance of his resonant voice, his impact was overwhelming. He seemed almost the reincarnation of that legendary figure of battle and romance, Henry of Navarre. And he was just as good as he looked."

Under Gouraud, the Rainbow Division reported to the French XXI Corps and was ordered to take up positions along the front between Rheims and the Argonne. The crafty general believed the main thrust of the German attack would be aimed at the center of this front, in the sectors of Espérance and Souain. Here he placed the 83rd Brigade west of the strategic road to Châlons-sur-Marne and the 84th Brigade east of it. Behind the 83rd he positioned the 150th Machine Gun Battalion from Wisconsin. If the Germans broke through here and captured Châlons, the way to Paris would be wide open. The 165th and 166th Regiments moved up to the Suippes River, which ran through the village of St. Hillaire, Brig. Gen Michael Lenihan set his brigade headquarters at a place called Suippes Farm, close to Gouraud's headquarters.

Closer to the front, McCoy located his regimental command post at Camp Bois de la Lyre, deep underground. One to two miles northwest of St. Hillaire, holding down the division's left flank, the colonel deployed to the front line the Second Battalion of 29-year-old Maj. Alexander Anderson. He kept in reserve Donovan's First Battalion and McKenna's Third. East of the regiment the Ohioans from the 166th Infantry dug in. Then came the 84th Brigade's Alabamians of the 167th and further to the east the Iowans of the 168th.

Gouraud's plan was to have a token French force greet the German attack in the advance trenches, making them think his full army was there. When the enemy reached the near-empty trenches he would pull back his token force and, once the Germans were out in the open, counterattack with a tremendous artillery bombardment. And the rout would be on.



Battalion and Company Deployments 15 July 1918

Gouraud knew the German offensive was set for about midnight on 14 July, the date of France's national holiday—Bastille Day. In his famous order of 7 July, which went to all men, the general warned of the imminent attack. He warned, too, of the horrible bombardment, of an assault so fierce the battlefield would be engulfed in clouds of smoke, dust, and gas. But he believed in his men, telling them:

"In your breasts beat the brave and strong hearts of free men.

"None shall look to the rear, none shall yield a step.

"Each shall have but one thought: to kill, to kill, until they have had their fill.

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

McCoy sent a follow-up order to his officers. After outlining the plan of resistance, he stressed the number one mission: "To defend [the] position. . . in every event and at all costs."

As the days passed and the words of Gouraud still rang in the ears of the Rainbow Division, Ames learned that 12 July was truly a happy day for him. He had received a cablegram from Boston. His wife had given birth to their first child, a daughter born on the 3rd. Now all he could think about was his baby and how happy she made him. "Swell-headed," he admitted to his wife. "My natural inclination is to go around boasting about my child, but so far I have contained myself pretty well, but how long I can do it I don't know. I hardly wait for your next letter." The first soldier he told was Elmer. He said that because he was a father he had new responsibilities to worry about. Elmer was happy for him. On the 14th the intelligence officer got around to writing his parents. Before he mentioned Ames he declared that all day there had been an "air of expectancy" about the coming night. "Why and what it is I can't say, but there is a bit of thrill in the atmosphere." He closed, "By the way, Ames has a daughter, the lucky kid."



Typical Terrain in the Sector

On the afternoon Elmer wrote home, Gouraud dined at his headquarters with his French generals and colonels and their counterparts in the 42nd Division. Red and white wine flowed and the dinner, although simple, was deliciously prepared by French chefs. It was only natural, Gouraud explained to his Americans guests, that on the eve of battle the commander and his officers sit down to a friendly meal.

Duffy knew the natural place for him was up front, with Anderson's battalion. He told McCoy his spiritual duties demanded it. He left for the front lines right after reading Gouraud's orders. For five days he slept in Anderson's command post, a crude "elephant hut," a five-foot hole on the ground fortified with sandbags and a corrugated iron roof. He walked among the soldiers at all hours. "They will have need of all their courage," he wrote, "for if this general attack is made it's going to be a tremendous one."

Last night he and I made the rounds of all the trenches. General Gouraud had picked it as a probable night for the big attack, so we started around to get the men in right spirits for it. [Major Anderson's] method was characteristic. As the bright moonlight revealed the men in their little groups of two or threes, the Major would ask, "What are your orders here?" The answer always came, quick as a flash, though in varying words, "To fight it out where we are, sir." "To let nothing make me leave my post, sir," and one, in a rich Munster brogue, "To stay here until we're all dead, sir." "Then, will you do it?" "Yes, sir."

Father Duffy's Story

After a week, the chaplain needed to report back to the regimental command post. McCoy's motorcycle dispatch driver went to get him. Pvt. James Wadsworth, who had transferred into the 165th with Donovan, roared up, excited to be at the front. Duffy climbed into the sidecar and away they went. After dining with McCoy and providing him with the latest news on Anderson's battalion, the chaplain walked back to the front.

At eleven o'clock on the night of the 14th, Duffy closed his diary by noting, "Everything that can be done for the men has been done. There remains the simplest task in the world, though often the hardest—waiting."

While G Company, Second Battalion, awaited the upcoming battle, the colonel of the French 116th Infantry, who commanded that sector of the front lines, sent a message to Capt. John Prout. He ordered him to arm his most trusted noncommissioned officers with pistols and place them in the back of his troops. If anyone tried to run away the noncommissioned officers were to shoot them on the spot. Prout tore up the order, flung it on the ground and stomped on it. To the chaplain of the 150th Machine Gun Battalion, he said, "That French colonel must think that my men are a pack of cowards!"

Shortly after midnight, the waiting ended.

Sergeant Richard O'Neill of D Company recalled, "Shells dropping all around, gas and shrapnel and high explosive."

Rouse wrote, "Oh God, what a night!"

The French opened up first, firing artillery shells toward the German lines. Caught off guard, the Germans responded. Shells fell like a blizzard. The ground shook violently. In Paris, 100 miles away, citizens felt and heard the shock of the great eye-for-an-eye bombardment. "The world bucked like a mule," recollected Charlie MacArthur of the 149th Field Artillery. Col. George Leach of the 151st Field Artillery observed from his dugout behind the lines how "the whole country lit up with bursting shells, flares and all kinds of German rockets, so that it was almost as light as day."

To Bill Spencer it seemed as if every gun in the world had gone off at the same time. "It was a steady sound of terrific pounding—almost a hum, the shells so fast," he recounted to Loi. "They sent 150's at us, and they are wicked. But you can always hear them coming and have plenty of time to duck. Just before they land, when about 50 feet in the air, you can actually see them. It is fascinating—the terrific speed and then the explosion."

Clinton Bushey of Yonkers, barely 17 years old, had been caught out in no-man's-land stringing wire with 66 other boys from H Company when the shelling started. Those who were not struck down in the initial explosion ran for their lives. They streaked across the churned-up earth with the "shells dropping, a foot apart from each other." Even after they reached the trench, the concussion of the shells knocked Bushey flat twice. "I certainly did think I would never see dawn," he later wrote from a hospital. "The fragments from the shells and pieces of shrapnel would swish over the trench and spent and hot pieces would drop into the trench and smolder there. Great luck (luck was the only thing that I could see) saved us from being wiped out."

Toward dawn, with no let-up in the artillery bombardment, Bushey poked his head above the parapet. "The trees were laid low, and charred stumps stuck up all over the ground. It looked as if some big giant had swept the whole woods with a big scythe." The surviving H Company boys huddled together, lit cigarettes, and waited out the barrage. Bushey heard the swish and roar of an incoming shell and then the sudden, horrible boom. Ten of his companions were killed instantly. He felt like he had been struck in the right side by a sledgehammer. "I don't see how I escaped. The man on my right and one on my left and the one directly across from me were killed, and I only got a piece in the side." The survivors dropped back to a French dressing station and were led to a field hospital which was shelled as they were being treated.

"I certainly am the luckiest fellow on two feet. I don't want to come so close to death again as I did up there when the Germans began their drive." Bushey's wounds were so serious that, unknown to any of his company's officers, he was sent to Base Hospital Number 20. While recovering, his parents in Yonkers received a telegram from the War Department informing them that their son had been killed in action.

One of the shells smashed into Prout's command post, burying him, his first lieutenant, Charles Grundy, and several others. The concussion blew off their helmets and gas masks and covered them from head to foot with white chalk. By the time they dug their way out and surfaced, "we looked more like ghosts than humans."

The heaviest part of the bombardment roared until near dawn before seasoned veterans of six German divisions moved forward behind a rolling barrage, passing through three other divisions held in reserve.

These soldiers knew the terrain well. They expected to push the Allies back and take the Suippes River by noon and to be sweeping through the streets of Châlons by four the following morning. As the German infantrymen advanced, dozens of airplanes buzzed along the American trenches like deadly birds of prey, raking the bewildered doughboys with machine gun fire. General MacArthur reported, "Bombs were dropped on roads and towns and the enemy planes fired with machine guns on moving troops and convoys."

15 July 1918

It was 12:04 midnight [sic] by my watch when it began. No crescendo business about it. Just one sudden crash like an avalanche; but an avalanche that was to keep crashing for five hours. The whole sky seemed to be torn apart with sound of the roaring B-o-o-o-m-p of the discharge and the gradual menacing W-h-e-e-E-E-Z of traveling projectiles and the nerve racking W-h-a-n-g-g of bursts. Not that we could tell them apart. They were all mingled in one deafening combination of screech and roar, and they all seemed to be bursting just outside.

Father Duffy's Story

Duffy claimed the “German planes for two days had complete mastery” of the skies. Tanks crawled forward, too, inching across the torn-up ground. And far behind the Allies' lines, long-range shells hit Châlons, collapsing buildings and ripping up cobbled streets.

“The Dutchmen shelled far back of the line and those big Bobbies were landing all over the fields and screaming overhead,” Herbert Gross of Headquarters Company grumbled. “Hundreds of planes were battling above us.”

Wounded in the head and foot, F Company's Hugh Haggerty was astonished at the airplanes. “When the dawn was breaking they sent up about fifty airplanes,” he later wrote home. “They shot machine guns at us and dropped bombs in our trenches. Well, Mother, I just prayed hard, saying an act of contrition and asked the Blessed Virgin to help me. My prayers were answered and I kept fighting and got away lucky.”

Another wounded soldier, Pvt. C. M. Taylor, described how “The German planes came over by the score and flew so low you could almost see the aviators. They would play their machine gun up and down and one of our infantry boys brought one down with an automatic rifle.”

The sharpshooter who brought the plane down, Pvt. Mike Foody, was cited in several dispatches. Foody, from Morningside Heights, had heard that a country boy from Alabama had plucked a German aviator from the sky the day before. Foody, a known crack shot at the Coney Island shooting galleries, asked Capt. James Archer if he could try to duplicate the Alabamian's feat. Archer nodded and Foody jumped to the parapet. He took aim at a plane, snapped off a shot and brought it down. When Archer commended him for his marksmanship, Foody looked at him through bloodshot eyes. “Sir, there ain't nothing them country jakes can do that we can't do in the big town.”

Wadsworth, McCoy's motorcycle dispatch rider and cousin to U. S. Senator James Wadsworth, had a harrowing race against an airplane. Wadsworth's motorcycle had been giving him trouble and when he was not delivering messages he would tinker with his machine outside the regimental command post, trying to get it to run more smoothly. But when the colonel's phone conked out, Wadsworth leaped onto his motorcycle and sped toward Anderson's 2nd Battalion to get the latest report. He made it without incident, although artillery shells fell around him. Anderson gave him a message and young Wadsworth was off again, roaring over the pitted road, weaving around exploding gas shells and *Minenwerfers*. Within moments, an

enemy airplane bore down on him, chasing him back to McCoy. The daring motorcyclist, at last, eluded his pursuer and skidded into the dusty white ground that surrounded the command post, his machine sputtering. He reported to his colonel, who ordered him to get something to eat. The exhausted, chalk-spattered private grabbed a tin plate of food from the camouflaged mess tent and, chatting with Cpl. Lawrence Flynn, who stood nearby, strolled out into the open where he had left his motorcycle. Three shells crashed close by; hot shrapnel flew across the open ground and tore into Wadsworth. He fell as Flynn ran to catch him. Drifting into unconsciousness, the 20-year-old former aide to Wild Bill Donovan worried about his motorcycle, then his parents, and then died.

Covered by their deadly airplanes, the attacking Germans passed over the sparsely held advance trenches and pressed on to meet the untested Americans.

To their surprise, two companies of frenzied Alabamians on the 83rd Brigade's right flank poured out of the trenches, hacking away at the enemy with Bowie knives. The Germans countered with stick grenades. When the melee was over, 50 Germans had been killed and 25 taken prisoner.

In Anderson's 2nd Battalion, holding down the left flank, the New Yorkers fought with a fury that stopped the enemy.

“I must say, mother, it was a terrible day for the Germans,” Private Haggerty described. “They attacked us about 6 o'clock and we just heaped up a dozen high. There were a number of our boys wounded and killed but the number did not compare with that of the Germans. Their dead were heaped up so high they could not advance.” Private Gross penned home, “Our orders were to stick to the guns and, believe me, we did it. A shell would finish one gun crew, but in a minute the dead were piled and another crew in place.”



Men of L Company After the Fight

In front of G Company, Prout looked on as the Germans came at his men with bayonets. His 1st Platoon commander, Lt. Kenneth Ogle, ordered everyone to fix bayonets and then led them out of the trenches, pell-mell into the onrushing Germans. Prout said that the bayonet charge had been their only chance and "Ogle took that chance." The charge drove the enemy back, he said, and his company held its position. MacArthur cited this battle in his summary report that night, describing how a raiding party of 21 Germans had attacked a platoon of the 165th Infantry. "Our men went over the top to meet them and killed the entire party with the bayonet without a loss to themselves."

A squad in E Company led by Alf Helmer fought off a pack of Germans with rifle grenades and small-arms fire; the enemy scattered through the underbrush. No sooner had they disappeared than Helmer heard a German crying "Father, Father." The pitiful wailing lasted for hours. Finally, without a word to each other, he and Patrick McCarthy, also upset by the cries, went in search of the wounded soldier. Helmer called it a "sort of spiritual understanding we had both long enjoyed." They climbed the parapet, worked themselves through the tangled wire and found the boy. "Near him lay killed an older German soldier, a handsome man with snow white hair and goatee. Pat and I could not determine then and never did whether the older man was the boy's father or whether the boy had been calling his spiritual 'Father'." They carried the boy back to their own lines and gave him to a stretcher bearer.

Joe Jones also recorded the bayonet fight, as well as all of the events of the day in his swift, staccato style. "2nd Batt. Hold first line of attack against the Prussian Guard. 3rd Batt. Move up. German plane shot down. Shelter tent ripped by shrapnel. 1st Batt. Suffer loses [sic]. Germans take 3 kilos from French. Our 2nd Batt. Holds the line, killing with the bayonet. ATTACK."

Over in the 3rd Battalion, Martin Hogan, a runner for McKenna, watched the fury of the combat. "Clubbed rifles were splintered against skulls and shoulder, bayonets were plunged home, withdrawn and plunged home again; automatics spit here and there in the line; grenades exploded; while a man occasionally shot his dripping bayonet free from his enemy's body."

To confuse the Americans, a number of Germans donned French helmets. A platoon leader with a French helmet atop his head, approached an American machine gun crew, yelling not to shoot, he and his men were French soldiers. When he neared the machine gunners he tossed a stick grenade into their midst. The explosion wounded the triggerman, but his teammate sprang to the unmanned gun and put the enemy to flight. The ruse disgusted Vivian Commons. "Here is one of the dirty tricks the Huns tried to pull over on the boys," he related to his parents. "They came over in French uniforms, some with Red Cross bands on their arms and stretchers and on the stretchers they had machine guns. They received the same deal the rest of them get so they didn't get away with their trick."

O'Neill described how four Germans with Red Cross armbands carried a stretcher up to the lines. "When they got close enough to us, they threw the blanket off the stretcher and opened up with a machine gun."

"The morning the Germans made the attack on us was the worst of all," wrote Pvt. C. Irving Levin of I Company. "The artillery on both sides hammered away and just as it was getting to us, we opened up and the noise was the worst you ever heard. We were hammering them with grenades, machine guns, auto rifles and infantry. The earth all around us was quaking just as in an earthquake."





**Alf Helmer of E Company
Would Serve in Both World Wars**

Pvt. Harry Rubin from the Lower East Side, whose comrades in the Irish regiment had changed his name to Mike O'Brien, remembered how "the Germans started from their trenches, six hundred yards away. They came on in mass formation. Shoulder to shoulder. For miles, it seemed, their thick, gray lines were visible." The Germans had not gone far when the artillery hit them. "They just rained the iron on the Heinies and made those in the rear climb over heaps of dead as they advanced. The attacking party was practically annihilated after coming halfway across no man's land. A thin remnant crawled back to their trenches. Their dead fairly covered the ground they had traversed."

Spencer wrote, "The Germans pulled off a local attack about 100 yards to our right against our second battalion, coming down through the bayous. Ten times they attacked, but ten times they were driven back by our counterattacks. Our men fought magnificently and quite swept the Huns off their feet. Any number of them were killed, and naturally, we suffered too, a little. Many prisoners were taken also, and nearly all of them were boys, 16 to 20 years old. They themselves didn't put up much of a fight, but their officers fought splendidly, quite contrary to what I thought of the German officer."

In the endless bombardment, explosive powder, fine as early morning mist, hung over the raging fight and over the road leading to Châlons and shrouded the

leafless trees in black. Shelled ammunition dumps on both sides burned like pyres, black smoke swirling skyward. Farmhouses and stone barns and outbuildings, some used as barracks, were aflame. Maddened, shrieking farm animals raced wildly across the fields, going nowhere. Wounded and dying horses littered the roads. The bodies of soldiers blotted the plain of battle. And the chalky earth of the Champagne province rose in puffy white clouds.

As early as 5:00 in the morning, casualties were being hauled off to the ambulance station. By 6:20, two men had been reported killed, three severely wounded. At nine there still had been no news from Anderson's 2nd Battalion. At the end of his desperate motorcycle run, Wadsworth had been carrying bad news: 23 of Anderson's men had lost their lives, one was missing, and 103 were wounded. The heights in front of Anderson swarmed with Germans. What was happening there was unknown for most of the afternoon, but as evening closed in, the fighting tapered off along the entire front, and it looked as if the Rainbows had held.

At least Gouraud felt so. He wired congratulations. Brigadier General Lenihan, now that he could see the Germans withdrawing, passed on the congratulations to his colonels. But at 10:45 he got a sobering report from Anderson. "Will make an earnest effort to get you a complete list of the casualties before morning. . . Request that 6 M. C. [Medical Corps] men be sent out as early as possible for dressing wounds. Many slight wounded have been returned to duty. Will use every effort to keep you posted as to changes in situation." He informed the general that his counterattack had succeeded, "killing all." Anderson was not sure of the number of enemy casualties.

The major himself had almost been one of the casualties. In the earliest bombardment, a powerful crash outside his command post knocked him out of his chair. A soldier near him wailed to Duffy, "Oh, Father, the major is killed." Anderson got up with a slight cut on his knee. The chaplain smiled and said he had "gotten a right to an easy wound stripe."

Outside, however, two men had been killed and others wounded. One of the dead, Pvt. Homer Hunt, had tucked into his pocket a cablegram from his wife letting him know that she had given birth to their first child. The other dead soldier was Edwin Jelley. Later the priest heard that Joseph Dunnigan, at whose marriage back at Camp Mills he had assisted in, had also been killed.

Realizing his place was at the front line comforting his men, Duffy stayed throughout the worst of the shelling and the harrowing hand-to-hand combat. Maj. Tom Reilley saw the chaplain constantly exposed to enemy fire as he tended the wounded and carried them on stretchers to the nearest dressing stations. "His religion consisted of a cheery word, a smile and a slap on the back," Reilley recalled. "He made himself dear to many a doughboy by handing out cigarettes just at the right time."

In the 3rd Battalion, held in reserve, however, Hogan observed, "One look into Father Duffy's face was good for jaded nerves; for his face radiated a cheerful calm which made the hell around us seem unreal. He might just as well have been walking down the silent aisle of some majestic cathedral for all his face told of heeding danger or wrought-up nerves. He spoke little personal things to each of the men; it was as though his thoughts were not on the battle, as though no battle were going on."

When the fight was at its worst, Anderson asked the chaplain if he wanted some grenades. The priest said no. "Every man to his trade. I stick to mine."

Anderson then took hold of his battalion flag, stroked it as if it was the most cherished thing on earth. "Well here, then, this is my battalion flag. If things break bad in the battle you will see that it don't fall into the hands of the enemy. Burn it up if it is the last thing you find time to do before you go."

"All right," replied Duffy, "I shall look out for your flag. That is a commission that suits my trade."

When the first day of fighting had closed, Lt. Col. Harry Mitchell personally trekked to the 2nd Battalion and from Anderson's command post sent a note to McCoy. He informed him that Anderson's men were in excellent spirits and "there is no question about their fighting to the last." He said that the dead would be buried that evening under the chaplain's supervision. "Much to the joy of everyone concerned," he ended, "Father Duffy remains on the job."

Although the Germans had withdrawn, they regrouped during the night. The next morning they stormed back, again mostly with artillery and airplanes. They had been cheered by the fact that even though the Allied line had held the day before, more than 13,000 prisoners had been rounded up. On the second day the Germans made sporadic infantry assaults. Each time they were repulsed.

Private Rubin, a.k.a. O'Brien, later recollected, "We were to stand and meet them—no retreating or surrendering. . . We just waited for the Fritzies. The

artillery was dropping them, but now increments would come up quickly and fill in. Their advance men got within grenade-throwing distance of us, and it became a battle of infantry to infantry, with grenades as the chief weapons. For three hours the fighting continued, the Germans retreated. That is, a few of them did, because dead men do not walk."

Jones entered in his diary, "Bavarian Guard attack. Germans attack twelve times with tanks, but fail to break our line. 2nd Batt. Goes over the top at once."

In F Company, Donnie King, a replacement soldier from Comanche County, Oklahoma, carried an American flag, folded and placed inside his uniform next to his heart. The flag had been a gift from a fellow Oklahoman King had met while on his way to New York to board the troop ship *Tuscania*. "Mail the flag back to me when you reach France," the Oklahoman had requested. A German U-boat torpedoed the *Tuscania* and 200 soldiers had drowned. King and his flag survived. Now, on the 16th, a shell fragment tore open his chest. Evacuated to a base hospital, he stayed there for four months. Before he had gone down, he had killed a bunch of Germans—at least he said so in a letter from the hospital. "Papa, tell the boys if they want to know that I'm getting my share of [Dutchmen]. It is like hunting rabbits in the snow." While recuperating, King mailed the flag back to Oklahoma—stained with his own blood as well as sea brine from the north Atlantic.

Communications between Anderson's battalion and the regimental command post were cut off again, and two in the afternoon McCoy sent Mitchell cross-country once more to find out what was going on. The lieutenant colonel was unable to use any of the roads because of heavy shrapnel fire. While he worked his way forward, McKenna met up with Anderson and reported back to the division, "All quiet on front now."

Mitchell then surveyed the damage of two days' fighting and sent a runner back with a list of casualties, including the death of 1st Lt. Thomas Haldane Young of F Company. Witnesses said that Young, a graduate of the Plattsburgh Camp, was leading his men in turning back a violent attack when one of his soldiers suffered a wound. He scooped up his rifle, shot three Germans, and yelled that he was satisfied with that. He was racing off to plug up another hole in the line when a grenade got him. His last words to Anderson were, "Our men have got them licked to a standstill, but they have got me." Then he yelled at his men. "Get after them, boys!" Mitchell warned McCoy that the number of casualties, now at more than 100, would go higher.



**The Best-Known Veterans of the Regiment
Colonel William Donovan and Father Francis Duffy**

He recommended that "an additional surgeon be sent here and could use litter bearers if you have any men available." McCoy played down the bad news to Lenihan. "All very satisfactory. . . Men in line tired, resting, full of spirit and ready for the next fight."

But he also sent several surgeons up front, Austin Lawrence among them. At dusk they started out on foot for Anderson's position. In the darkness, Lawrence got separated from the others. He was soon lost. "Wandered up & down awhile & then turned back," he scrawled in his diary. "After fussing around an hour or so started again. I felt badly & stayed back with Wilson & the boys with cart. Some weird night way out in the open fields. Shells bursting on all sides & whistling over our head. Flares & signal rockets by the hundreds. Will never forget this night."

Although rivers of blood soaked the white chalk along the trenches of the 2nd Battalion, the second day ended quietly. When Private Taylor, waiting for the next assault, looked out across the battlefield, he was sickened. "The bodies lay around in such numbers you could not go out in no man's land without stepping on them," he wrote to his brother "The smell after two days was something fierce."

"I was in hell for 6 hours," wrote Private Rouse. "I haven't had any sleep or anything to eat for 50 hours. I don't know how I stand it."

Emmett Gordon of L Company (who had two brothers in C Company, one of whom was missing in action) made sure his parents in Long Island City knew that at least he was okay. "We came out all right, thanks to the prayers of those at home," he wrote, "for there wasn't anything else in God's world that helped outside of a little shelter of a truck which was about as good as the service on the Vernon Avenue line."

At 10:30 that night, Donovan wrote to Ruth, filling sheet after sheet of paper meant for field messages. Reune Martin, one of his lieutenants, was off to the states to be a captain, and Donovan wanted him to carry the letter home and mail it. "He leaves tonight so I have little time," he explained. He told her the last two days had been warm in weather and excitement. He described how he had gone up on a little knoll to watch the fireworks, a "tremendous spectacle."

When it was over, "Dawn came and with it the dead and wounded." The destruction of the land was "like we know Buffalo after a heavy storm. Broken trees and unstrung wires and a general air of a terrific beating." He told of the "jumble of dead horses" and bodies that "once were human." Such death and destruction might have seemed remote to Ruth until he added, "Young Wadsworth was killed in front of the regimental P. C."

He had been doing good work. He died without suffering. He was hit in the head with a piece of shell.” Near the end of his letter, he said that on the “16th I buried some of the men, acting a chaplain, and burying them in the little roadside French cemetery while Boche shrapnel broke around us.”

Donovan had almost lost his adjutant in another close encounter with a motorcycle. Ames had commandeered a motorcycle and driver from the 117th Engineers and, riding in the sidecar, barreled into the 1st battalion command post. He hopped out moments before a shell struck the motorcycle. The remains of the machine and driver were never found.

On the start of the third day, Elmer—his intelligence team keeping an eye on any German movement— noted that the enemy was not returning fire. As the day wore on, each regiment sent back news that all was quiet. McCoy hiked down to visit Anderson. “Men tired but able to continue,” he wired back. “Morale splendid.”

A report on casualties came next. “Killed Off. 1: E. M. — 36. Wounded: Off. —3; E. M. 175. Missing — Off. 0; E. M. — 6. Total: Off. — 4. E. M. 217.” Not part of any report was the number of dead horses in the division. More than 100 had been gunned down or blown up.

McCoy felt that the men in his command post had been fortunate because the German artillery shells landed either far back of it or on the lower ground along the Suippes River. “Anderson and his noble battalion,” he reported, “put up a great fight in the front lines. Time and time again the Germans got into the lines, but not one of them ever left, and at the end of the attack the 2nd Battalion, though battered and suffering from heavy losses, retained their spirit and morale.”

Around midnight we were told that we would be relieved by morning. Why? No one knew. Where were we going? No one knew. The French were to take our place. They were slow in coming. We wanted to be away before sunrise or the enemy would have a fine chance to shell our men as they made their way over the plains. I waited the night there in Kelly's shack, impatient for the relief to come ere dawn. Finally the Poilus, their blue uniform almost invisible by dark, began to appear. I started off with Mr. Jewett down the road to St. Hilaire.

Father Duffy's Story

Sixty Irish soldiers had been killed in the three-day fight, almost 25 percent of the total killed in the division, and back in New York, their families would soon mourn them. Anderson's battalion suffered 47 dead. His H Company, caught out in no-man's-land stringing wire had been hit the hardest, with 28 “gone west,” as the Doughboys said of those killed in action.

Cpl. Samuel Forman of the Machine Gun Company had written to his wife, Loretta, boasting that although he had been wounded earlier, no hospital was to keep him out of the fight. The ex-detective of the New York Central Railroad bullied the doctors at the base hospital and left before his wounds had properly healed. Shell fragments killed him on his first day back. In Brooklyn, his widow promised she would try not to go into mourning because her husband had told her not to. “If I did,” she had said, “Sam would come back and haunt me.”

In his last boast to his folks, F Company's Pvt. Jimmy Kane, a Hell's Kitchen truck driver, vowed he would get ten Germans before they got him. He was killed on the 15th.

Private 1st Class George Patrick McKeon never uttered a boastful word. He had rarely written to his eldest sister, Daisy, but left his death benefit to her and the family, and it kept them going through the 1920s. He had been hit by a shell while holding off the enemy with an automatic rifle. When being taken back to the dressing station he had seemed fine; he had even chatted with the litter bearers, but he had died there. In his pocket, Lt. John Connors, his platoon commander, found a small prayer book that Duffy had put together for the men. It was in French and English and enabled dying soldiers to make their confession to French padres if their own chaplain was elsewhere on the battlefield. It contained the “Act of Contrition,” “The Our Father,” and “The Hail Mary.”

“I am over here. . . doing my bit—a good, brave soldier and not afraid to die a martyr for a just and worthy cause,” Cpl. Walter Reilly, one of the many H Company boys killed, had written his aunt in Brooklyn. “From the very beginning there has always been a struggle between right and wrong, and still the struggle goes on. I am lucky to be fighting for humanity and democracy, although war is cruel and we did not believe in it. It was forced upon us. Let us all be patient and persevere for a little while and in doing so we will conquer in the end.”

The sternest test of the regiment's defensive proficiency came in mid-summer, near St. Hilaire, where the 165th Infantry Regiment, as part of the Champagne defense, stood like a stone wall and smashed the assault of two crack German divisions. At the operational level, this victory broke the German Army's offensive capability and enabled the Allies to transition to the offense. At the tactical level, the 165th Infantry Regiment's stand near St. Hilaire was the zenith of its tactical effectiveness in the defense, combining flexibility; a detailed plan; and the deadly combination of artillery, mortars, cannons, and machine guns.

2004 U.S. Army Study, "Tactical Effectiveness of the 165th Infantry, Rainbow Division"

Another Brooklyn lad, B Company Sgt. Henry Kiernan, in his last letter home, had urged his brother: "If you ever hear anybody praising or talking in favor of the Germans, don't hit him with your hand, but get the biggest baseball bat you can find and crack his skull, because the only fellow of that type who is any good is a dead one."

The death of Kiernan's comrade in B Company, Pvt. Arthur Viens, had hit Duffy hard. Viens had been one of the first boys to show up when the priest opened Our Savior parish in the Bronx.

Two of the H Company boys to go down were first cousins, Sergeants Bill O'Neill and Bernard Finnerty. Bill had two brothers in the company as well as his cousin Bernard. They all lived at 212 East 19th Street. The brothers were Danny, also a sergeant, and Jerome.

Their family, which hailed from the Irish seacoast town of Bantry, was so close-knit that Jerome, who carried an Irish flag with him at all times, sought a reduction in rank from first sergeant to sergeant so that Danny could have a chance at being first sergeant. On the first day of fighting, Bill was wounded by a shell fragment.

He was wounded again by machine gun fire but refused to quit. Finally, he was killed in a charge against a strong enemy position. Bernard single-handedly took on a squad of Germans, driving them back. Duffy later recalled how he had rushed the foe, hurling grenades until he was brought down. One account said he had been hit in the head by shrapnel; another claimed that a sniper had taken him out. Pvt. Bill Halpin from Astoria picked up his body and then "I laid him down again and his body was not removed until three days later. There was constant fighting, but we held the ground." The chaplain buried Bernard close to his cousin Bill and close to Sam Forman, near where they had fallen, on the road to Châlons-sur-Marne.

Our contributor, Stephen L. Harris, is not only an award-winning historian of the summer Olympics, but is one of the finest and most prolific chroniclers of the American Expeditionary Forces in the Great War. He specializes in studies of highly active regiments, which allows him to focus on the soldiers and their experience in combat. This month's selection is from his 2006 work ***Duffy's War: Fr. Francis Duffy, Wild Bill Donovan, and the Irish Fighting 69th in World War I***. His other studies feature the 107th New York Silk Stocking Regiment, the 369th Harlem Hell Fighters, and the 38th "Rock of the Marne." All are highly recommended and in print.

