

# AMERICANS PLAYED VITAL PART

## THE U.S. SOLDIERS PROMINENT IN THREE DEFINITE ACTIONS

In German Drive Between Soissons and Rheims  
Uncle Sam's Boys Performed Gallant Service in  
Assisting French To Beat Down Vicious At-  
tacks.

(By Milne Bell.)

Author of "Elements of the Great War" and Britain's Most Dis-  
tinguished Military Critic.

London, June 14.—The striking and novel feature of the increasing resistance which checked and stopped the German advance in the great salient between Soissons and Rheims was the work of the American contingents who were brigaded with the Allied forces. At least three definite actions stand out in which the Americans have played a vital part, and they are highly significant of the wisdom displayed by the American military command and the American political authorities when they allowed their troops to be thus brigaded by comparatively small units during the strain which was suffered at the beginning of the great offensive last March.

The enemy always calculated that a very much longer space of time would elapse before any appreciable American force could appear against him, for he thought of it only in terms of a separate army under the united command. The policy of brigading their first units after this fashion has already begun to modify the numerical position on the Western front and has proved of the utmost service. It is of interest, therefore, at this moment to study the three actions in which the work of Americans has been distinguished. The most important of these apparently was the German attempt to force the passage of the Marne at Jaulgonne on Monday, June 3, which was defeated by the Franco-American force on the southern bank of the river. It was an action in which the Americans' use of machine guns was, if I am not mistaken, particularly effective.

### The Crossing at Jaulgonne.

The choice of Jaulgonne by the Germans as a place for forcing the obstacle of the Marne River will appeal to all who have studied the history of war. A river obstacle is most easily crossed under these two combined advantages: First, a bend in the course of the river, convex toward those who desire to cross and concave toward the defenders, because upon such a bend you can bring a converging fire to bear from all around its outer border upon the defenders who are cramped within its recesses, with high ground dominating the river as much as possible from the side of the attack and flat or lower ground only in the hands of the defence within the bend of the river.

Both of these conditions were present at Jaulgonne. The Marne here is rather over 200 yards wide and though it is not fordable it makes a sharp bend forward, that is, with the outside of the bend toward the Germans in the shape of a capital U. The bend is so pronounced that the base of the land enclosed is only 250 yards across, while the depth is very nearly the same. All the southern part of the land within the bend is, the part toward the point at which the Germans attempted the crossing, is flat, but at the base of the curve you get ground rising through the village of Varennes up to the woods, which are well back from the river and about 300 feet above it (the river here is at a level of about 200 feet above the sea). The northern bank, on the contrary, is rugged everywhere by very steep hills higher than those on the southern bank. The village of Jaulgonne lies right on the northern bank and immediately upon from the houses of the town and from the river bank both above and below them stands up a steep bluff which at its highest point is more than 400 feet above the stream. The flat land within the bend is therefore completely dominated from the northern bank, which was held by the Germans.

### 2,000 Bayonets Get Across.

The enemy unit which was chosen for this work of forcing the river was the 17th Regiment of the line, numbering, it may be presumed, 2,000 bayonets and the usual complement of auxiliary arms. It was of course, only the active head of a larger force which would have crossed immediately once the bridge had been established by the regiment.

There is a curious old-fashioned little suspension bridge at Jaulgonne uniting the village to the main Paris road and railway which runs on the southern bank of the river through the flat land within the curve. This bridge had, of course, been destroyed. The Germans succeeded probably by night in throwing across a number of very light bridges—that is, bridges extensible like an extensible ladder pulling out—making a roadway just large enough for two men and resting upon the small floats by the way of pontoons where the water is too deep or the time and security from fire are too limited for driving piles. They threw no less than twenty-two of these across the river and got the equivalent of a battalion, or rather under a thousand men up to the railway line 600 yards from the water. They had crossed just where the northern bank most deeply dominates and masters the flat land of the southern bank. They seemed to have thrown some sort of temporary work around the railway station, which they garrisoned with a company of men and a half-dozen machine guns.

The creation of this bridgehead was very serious matter, and though the troops which could be brought up to meet the German pressure at this point were still very scanty the French determined upon a counter attack. They

number were killed in the open ground as they ran for the river. About one hundred prisoners and six machine guns remained in the hands of the French and Americans at the end of the action.

The whole affair, though on a small scale, was of a significant character. It proves that the enemy even as late as June 3 intended if possible to force the obstacle of the Marne, it proves that he had all the material ready for such an effort and at the same time that he did not know that even a small force mustered against him could appear so early. On the significance of the combined action of the French and Americans I need not insist.

Already, three days before, that is, on May 31, American troops had come into action on a larger scale and helped to prevent the main effort to cross the Marne which the Germans made while their victorious march from the north was still in full swing. The attempt was made at Chateau-Thierry itself, where the cover of the town, the fact that a good stone bridge had not yet been destroyed and the narrowing of the stream at this point gave the enemy great chances of success. All during the night of that Friday and of Saturday, June 1, up to the evening, the French Colonial infantry and the American machine gunners, who were necessarily gravely inferior in numbers, maintained their defence. But before it was dark on Saturday, about nine o'clock, a great mass of the enemy under cover of a smoke screen and protected by a very violent bombardment reached the town and the bridge and began crossing the latter.

U. S. Machine Gunners Decide the Result.

In addition to the Americans who were working on the north bank of the river on the outskirts of the town there was also a large force of American machine gunners on the southern part across the river and it was these who, by support of the French Colonial troops, decided the result. The French engineers had, of course, mined the bridge, and when a considerable part of the enemy's force had crossed, and when a dense column was actually on the bridge, it was blown up.

But the small Franco-American force which was containing these great numbers which had already crossed and at the same time trying to keep under its fire the German column, was largely due to the excellent performance of the American machine gunners under the very difficult circumstances of street fighting and also under the handicap of a smoke screen which they had not hitherto experienced that the Germans failed. In the final result every man that crossed was either killed or taken prisoner and by June 2 the German attempt to effect the main crossing at Chateau-Thierry had completely failed. Hence came the second attempt of Jaulgonne the next day.

Where American Advance Took Place.

A third point where the American troops came in during the week's fighting with the greatest effect is the region between Chateau-Thierry and the Oure, where the enemy had most enlarged his salient, giving himself the

most elbow room just south of Torcy. The action was fought through several days beginning on the morning of June 1 and should be memorable as a starting point. It is the first occasion during this campaign in which the American lines have effected an infantry attack on any considerable scale and have gone forward.

The Allied line here runs nearly east and west but with a lift a little northwest and southeast along a tumbled piece of high ground broken by a few small woods. The front of the Allied soldiers here as they look downward and northward is a shallow valley carrying the light railway between Villers-Cotterets and the Chateau-Thierry. This valley is marked by villages the names of which are now so familiar to our newspapers—Bourches, Torcy, Bussières, Veully and Le Poterie.

It was almost in the centre of this line, among and between the small woods that diversify the sloping fields above Torcy, that the American advance took place.

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