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# Whole Villages Levelled by Fire of French Guns

**Correspondent Who Visited Scene Draws Vivid Picture of the Battle of Picardy—So Terrific Was the Deluge of Shells That the Plains Looked as if Played with by Some Uncouth Monster—Cannon Cut Path for The French Soldiers.**

By FRED PITNEY.

PARIS, Aug. 16—I returned to-day from a visit to the French front in the Somme offensive and part of the front extending south toward Soissons from the actual scene of present operations. It is probable this southern sector will be the next part of the German lines to fall before the methodically advancing French forces.

In this visit I saw all the details of the gigantic organization that goes to make up a modern victorious offensive. I crossed the ground captured in the first days of the great attack and crept slowly forward into the centre of the bombardment which the huge organization in the rear feeds unremittently night and day. If you will lay out a parallelogram thirty miles deep by fifty miles long and put at the north-eastern corner a building arc with a chord twelve miles long and a curve of twenty-six miles, you will have approximately the ground covered by the field of battle and the services of the rear that feed the fighting lines.

### Shell Ruined Village

Again, near the front, we halted in a narrow road while an ambulance coming from just behind the firing line passed. As it scraped by our cars its back curtain was lifted and a man with his head bandaged and his arm in a sling looked out.

"There is a wounded officer on the road back there," he shouted. The picture of the hospital train was still in my mind when I started our drive from the north into the battlefield. We came out of the shell-ravaged village, and began to climb the gentle slope to the plateau dominating the Somme and Peronne. Above the noise of our motors could be heard the persistent boom of big guns which increased in volume and intensity with each yard of progress. Overhead a long line of twenty-three captive balloons were guarding the arc and vigilantly watching the enemy signalling to the artillery, while still above them circled and swept the protecting aeroplanes.

We descended, put on steel helmets for protection against shrapnel burst in the air, hung gas masks at our sides to be ready for what ever form the German welcome might take, and walked on into battle. We were on the arc. Ten miles straight into the east was Peronne; on the right, Estrees, Soyecourt, Deniscourt, Vermandvillers. On the left, Maurepas, Herbécourt, Hill One Hundred and Thirty-Nine. Overhead was the steady buzz of wireless in a captive balloon, while from every side the constant unremittent boom of cannon and the furious roar of exploding shells pressed in upon us. The huge semi-circle of the battle front was towering wall of black and uncolored clouds and smoke and earth thrown high in the air. Never did it lighten at any point, but fresh shells fell and rebuilt them.

**On the Battlefield**  
All roads from the parallelogram lead into the arc. They approach the chord of the arc as sticks of a fan lead down to the handle, and crossing the chord, spread out again fan-wise to touch every point of the first lines.

We came into the battlefield from the north. Leaving Amiens, we hurried in a small group of military automobiles down a long straight road to St. Quentin. (Sentences missing.) I have seen battered remnants of many French and Belgian villages left after beginning with thumb screws and chain a German bombardment, but progressively rack and wheel to never was destruction so complete as that which was wrought by the French cannon preparing the path for their soldiers. Later in the day I looked down from the heights of Vaux which went by with all the windows and doors open to catch the least stirring of the dust laden, superheated air.

The "sitting cases," were in a piece of wall four feet deep, and in bunkers on the sides of the trench three deep, we saw row on row of feet—no hands, not bodies, no arms or legs, but only row after row of feet of wounded men. The last car of the train was an operating car and as it passed us a white aproned surgeon stood in the doorway minutely examining the blade of an instrument. I remembered the train later as it stood at night in the un-

lighted streets of Amiens, and saw the ambulances pass carrying the wounded from the railroad station to the hospital. Through a hole in the canvass side of the ambulance an arm in the horizon blue of the French uniforms projected stiffly. No groan, no sound of any kind came from the ambulance. There was almost no noise of the motor as the car glided through the streets, but in the shadows of the night I could dimly see the Red Cross half severed by the projecting arm.

### Caught Under Fire

It was though some uncouth monster was playing with the plains of Picardy. As a child plays with sands of the sea shore, building up, tearing down and rebuilding walls of sand, and from time to time catching up a shovelful and throwing it high overhead. And all the time a stupendous roar pressed in upon us, and by some mysterious force pulled us forward into the vortex where we could most acutely feel our own minute helplessness to stay the resistless tightening that band of steel and fire. We were caught as in the relentless vise of the famous "Iron Maiden" of the torture chambers of the inquisition. We crossed the chord of the arc where the French first line trenches had been on the morning the attack began. The trenches were intact, untouched by the fury of the battle, and the barbed wire entanglements still stood.

Just behind and to the left of the trenches was a small patch of woods where the French Colonel, commanding the attack on Dompiere had had his post of command for the battle. In forty square miles of territory it was almost the only piece of woods remaining untouched.

### Nothing of Village Left

A hundred yards beyond the French trenches were the remains of the German first line defences. They were now merely a collection of shell craters. There was nothing resembling a trench among them, but only what might be a crazy pattern of furrows ploughed by a drunken farm hand for last year's planting. Of barbed wire entanglements there are only a few broken strands scattered indiscriminately over the ground.

In one place there is the remnant of an armored shelter for a machine gun. Its walls of reinforced concrete a foot and a half thick lie in hopeless confusion while a small section of a flight of steps leads to a cavern filled with water by the recent rains. This was on the edge of Dompiere and we asked where the village was.

### Level With Ground

On my right was an angle section of what had been the wall of a house. It was less than four feet high by twice as long. On my left was a row of eight tree trunks standing about seven feet high. They had been cut off cleanly as though by a steam saw and the ivy still wound around the stumps. That piece of wall and these stumps are what remains of Dompiere. It had been a German fortress before July and the French guns had wiped it out of existence to save the lives of French soldiers. The village is now level with the ground. It cannot be distinguished from the fields that surround it.

I have seen battered remnants of many French and Belgian villages left after beginning with thumb screws and chain a German bombardment, but progressively rack and wheel to never was destruction so complete as that which was wrought by the French cannon preparing the path for their soldiers. Later in the day I looked down from the heights of Vaux which went by with all the windows and doors open to catch the least stirring of the dust laden, superheated air.

### Only a Patch of Dust

Before the war, Vaux was a larger village than Dompiere. To-day Dompiere has a piece of wall four feet deep, and in bunkers on the sides of the trench three deep, we saw row on row of feet—no hands, not bodies, no arms or legs, but only row after row of feet of wounded men. The last car of the train was an operating car and as it passed us a white aproned surgeon stood in the doorway minutely examining the blade of an instrument. I remembered the train later as it stood at night in the un-

erately shelled Vaux for no apparent reason, and now only the shell of the village is left. Shells still fall on it occasionally, but I saw a French soldier unconcernedly fishing while two others were duck hunting in a marsh. At this part of the Somme is a wide marsh with a narrow stream meandering through it and low hills rising abruptly from its borders. From here I saw one of the few movements of troops which I observed in all my long trip to all sections of the front.

### Troops Well Concealed

The French have their troops so wonderfully concealed that it is hard to believe there is an immense army as well as the most powerful concentration of artillery ever known operating in the region. In visits to other parts of the front I invariably have seen troops in far greater numbers than one finds them visible on the Somme. The difference is that on the Somme the art of concealment of large bodies of men has been studied to the last detail. But here I saw a regiment going forward to take positions in trenches. They first appeared apparently from nowhere, and I watched them through glasses, marching under the cover of a hill; but they soon turned at a right angle to cross the hill and then in the single file at intervals of thirty feet and disappeared in a great hurry over the crest. Not far beyond the crest lay a black wall of battle line, and out of a cloud came a roar of bursting shells and the sharp rapping of mitrailleuses.

### The Moncau Farm

From here I saw the Moncau Farm for which such a desperate struggle had been waged. The French lines are now well beyond it and the farm remains only a small white spot on the reverse slope of the last piece of high ground before the marsh is reached. Its walls are reduced to powder, and it is now only a name and a touch of white in a vacant field. Clery Mes close to the river, too low to be seen, but Mount St. Quentin, with its white church on the highest ground of the region is a shining target. To the northward are Hardencourt and Hill 139, the limit of the French part of the offensive.

### Behind the Lines

We left the battle front to go back and study the huge organization that feeds shells and munitions into the fighting line and made possible the great French advance. A few months ago when I was on my last visit to this part of the line, Amiens was the centre from which radiated the armies operation. One of the things that most impressed me on this visit, with a certainty of the advance continuing, was that the centre has now been moved eastward, and well to the east. Amiens has become one of the rear posts of the war. It is on the distant edge of operations. One no longer leaves Amiens to plunge into the fighting line but makes of it a rest spot in the rear, far away from the turmoil. It is east of Amiens that lies the parallelogram in which the victory is organized. It criss-crossed back and forth over this region, covering innumerable miles, in an automobile, and found every square foot given over to the purposes of the offensive. This organization is that of a great business and it is conducted on purely business lines by business men.

I talked to the commander of one big supply station and asked him what he was sending most of to the front for the moment.

(Continued on page 5)

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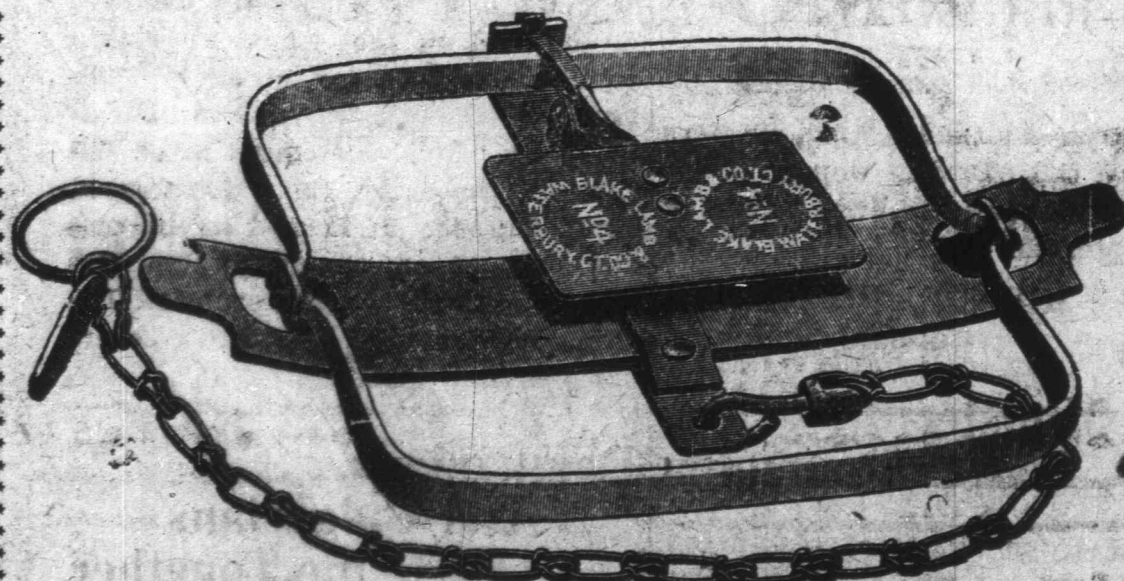
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