

WHOLE BATTALION, BOCHE ENCIRCLED, RELIEVED AT LAST Troops Caught in Argonne Rescued After Six Foodless Days

NO THOUGHT OF SURRENDER

(written by staff reporter)

Major Who Shaved Regularly Passes Grub Around When Bearded Yanks Come Out

One of the great adventures of this war reached a happy ending in the early hours of Monday evening when relief came through the rain and darkness to a battalion of American soldiers that for six unforgettable nights had been surrounded by German forces in that blighted jungle which is known as the Forest of the Argonne.

The story of that siege, the story of the dreadful suffering borne with a high and undaunted spirit, the story of the defense and rescue when it can be told in full, will take its place in history alongside the relief of Lucknow and will quicken American heartbeats for centuries to come.

From the night of Wednesday, October 2, to the night of Monday, October 7, that battalion was isolated on the northern slope of a bleak, unsheltered ravine with the German army on a cliff above them and with a powerful German detachment deeply entrenched on the other side of the ravine, so close that the doughboys burrowed into the hillside could hear the calls and orders of their enemy, could be reached by German machine guns and German rifles if they showed themselves in the open.

When night settled over the forest on Monday last their situation was desperate. What little food they had had with them was spent on the second day. For three days they had been eating plugs of tobacco and chewing on leaves of the underbrush. For water they had to depend on a muddy stream at the bottom of the ravine and on one clear, grateful spring that bubbled there invitingly; but each rip to it meant exposure to snipers. More than one doughboy fell in fetching water. What few blankets and overcoats had not been discarded in the first rush which carried the ravine had long since gone to wrap around the wounded. For

their dead and wounded lay with them on the hillside.

Three Attacks Fought Off

They were drenched to the skin and weak from hunger and long exposure to the chill of the October wind. They had fought off three savage attacks--fought them off with their own machine guns, their own rifles and bayonets, their own hand grenades--but by the sixth night their store had so dwindled that there was little chance of their resisting successfully another attack.

They knew in their hearts and knew by their senses that the rest of the Americans, not more than 1,200 meters below them in the forest, were trying to reach them. They had seen planes come looking for them in the interminable fog. They had seen planes shot down in the effort to reach them. They had heard from time to time the sound of heavy firing nearby. They knew that the effort to reach them had been and would be unremitting, but there had come to the stoutest heart there doubt that relief would come in time. Yet in all that besieged battalion there was none who thought for one moment of surrendering to the encircling enemy.

The battalion waited its fourth attack without much hope, for its stock of ammunition had run low and the men were so weak they could hardly drag themselves to their feet. Some had written little letters of farewell to their folks and in these last hours each was entrusting his to some pal on the chance that the pal might get through alive. There were some thanks whispered shyly for little unchronicled deeds of kindness the week had witnessed. Here and there men promised to kill each other if it came a question of capture.

Rations for the Boys

Then suddenly out of the darkness voices could be heard calling, "Major Whittlesey."

The boys along the line could hear him answering from his hole in the ground.

"Major, we've got here." The whispers were exultant. "We're up on your right. We're here!" Then a pause. "And--and we've brought some rations for the boys."

There was a moment of absolute silence, and then all along the side of the ravine could be heard gusts of hysterical laughter. Relief had come.

The besieged battalion had gone forward on the night of the 2nd and taken up its position with orders to hold it. Into some strongly fortified German trenches just in the rear there filtered a powerful German force, how powerful can be guessed from the fact that when that trench was finally carried, a colonel, two majors, and their entire staffs were among the prisoners.

Major Whittlesey, when the dawn of October 3 showed that he was cut off, sent back runners with a report on his position. The runners fell in their courses, He sent up pigeons, and it was these couriers of the air who carried the tidings to the other Yanks in the forest.

Attack after attack was then made by companion regiments. Relief and instructions were rushed through the air. Airplanes went over again and again to drop munitions, bandages and that best of all iron rations, chocolate.

Such was the lay of the wounded ravine, such was the fog that the airmen had to work as though blindfolded. One great package of supplies did come near its mark, but the doughboys who tried to crawl out and get it were killed by watching snipers from across the ravine. Several planes were brought down, one pilot was killed and two observers were wounded in the effort to carry aid through the air to the surrounded battalion.

Obedience to Orders

Not once did that battalion try to fight its way back. It had been ordered to take the position and hold it. The battalion obeyed the orders.

Afterwards, when the men had been relieved and came out white, emaciated, unrecognizable in their black growths of beard, the talk among them was all of Major Whittlesey. Sixty-nine officers and men had been left dead on the hillside, and of the 304 soldiers to leave the ravine alive, 150 were wounded. Those too badly hurt or too weak were carried eventually to a sorting station on the edge of the forest, a beautiful abbey reared by pious hands 900 years ago.

There, huddled in blankets under a candlelit statue of Jesus of the Sacred Heart, they looked like

figures in some immemorial pageant of suffering. But their proud talk was all of their Major. How he had kept up their spirits by his hourly message of "Keep cool, men," and still more by his unflinching serenity. How the very sight of him shaving himself regularly each day was a calming spectacle. How, though it was perilous to move along the ravine, he managed somehow to see each man each day. That was the story the wounded told. One doughboy, cradling a bandaged arm, put it this way: "We held out because he did. We was all right if we could see him once a day."

Somebody to See the Major

There was more food at 10 o'clock Monday night, and corned willy never tasted so wonderful.

The next morning the Major's orderly – he was in the dressmaking business on Fifth Avenue before the war – was trying with his wounded hand to comb the mud out of a newly acquired beard when he heard a gruff voice demanding, "Major!"

"Everybody wants him; who is it now?" he answered wearily, and then scrambled to his feet when he saw that the inquirer wore two stars on his shoulders.

"Oh sir, he's down the line handing out food with his own hands. I'll bring him to you."

"Bring him nothing," said the general. "I'll go get him."