



26TH DIVISION

CHEMIN-DES-DAMES
TOUL
CHATEAU-THIERRY
ST. MIHIEL
MEUSE
ARGONNE
VERDUN

BY
JOHN NELSON

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Co. K. 104 U. S. INF.

26th DIV. D.

1277-43rd ST.

BROOKLYN N.Y.

A BRIEF HISTORY
OF THE
FIGHTING
YANKEE DIVISION

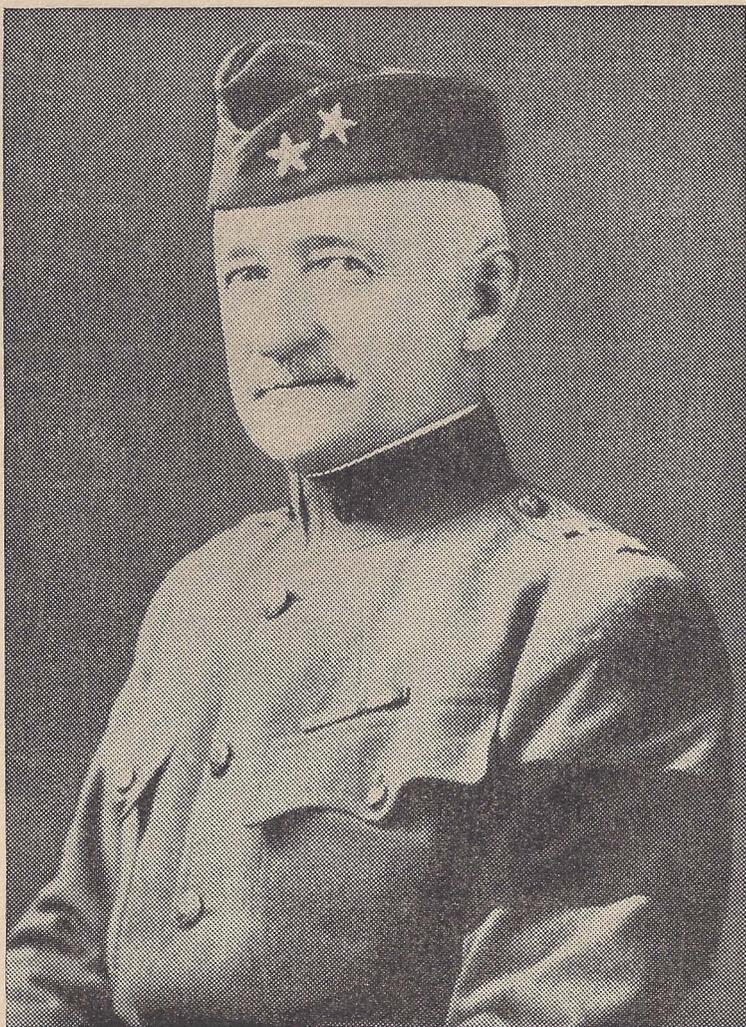
A. E. F.

ON THE BATTLEFRONT
FEBRUARY 5, 1918—NOVEMBER 11, 1918

BY
JOHN NELSON

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(Photo by Marceau, Boston)

MAJ. GEN. CLARENCE R. EDWARDS,
Commanding 26th Division, July 25, 1917-October 25, 1918.

THE 26TH DIVISION

"SAVIORS OF PARIS"

The record of the New England Division, the 26th Division of the United States army, will live forever as one of the most glorious in American annals. No division in any army has ever fought with greater brilliancy and gallantry and skill in all its arms; with greater endurance and grit and bulldog tenacity; with greater cheerfulness and height of morale, than the Yankee Division, the Sacrifice Division, the "Saviors of Paris," to use the full-hearted sobriquet bestowed by the grateful French people; "the pick of the shock troops" to use the expression of great French generals.

The 26th is the Worcester division. More than 2000 of the lads of this city have fought in its ranks. All have been gallant soldiers, many have individually distinguished themselves, as proved by citations and decorations; many bear the scars of battle, and, alas, many have laid down their lives for the cause of Liberty,

No Worcester heart can help but leap at the thought of these splendid representatives of American manhood who were chosen by Gen. Pershing to march on the Rhine with Gen. Foch as a part of his Army of Triumph. For, the Armistice signed, Pershing named for that army the ten divisions of the American Expeditionary Forces which had fought longest and endured most and contributed the greatest share to the Victory of Peace, and the Y. D. is of the foremost among those ten in the honor it has won.

But the gallant regiments could not respond. Cut to pieces in the frightful battles on the Meuse, in the Argonne, at Verdun; 10,000 men lost in the very last days of the fighting; the remnants worn out by the cumulative fatigue of months of incessant campaigning, their horses exhausted or dead, their clothing reduced to rags—the spirit willing but the flesh weak, they were compelled to relinquish this final task. But the honor and the glorious fame of it remained theirs.

THE Y. D.'s CITATIONS AND DECORATIONS

The 26th Division has to its credit nearly 150 citations from the great French leaders. Fully 7000 of its men have been cited for bravery, and many more than half a thousand have won the Distinguished Service Medal of the American Army or the Croix de Guerre of the French.

The 104th Infantry, with its Cos. A, C and H of Worcester—the Light Infantry, the City Guards and the Wellington Rifles, as they used to be called—was decorated as a regiment with the Croix de Guerre, the only American regiment thus honored by the French. The 101st Infantry, including Co. G, the old Emmet Guards, has likewise covered itself with glory and has won citations for gallantry, and, as with the 104th, a large number of its men wear the ribbons of decorations bestowed for valor. So, too, has signal honor come to the Worcester batteries, B and E of the 102nd Field Artillery, for brave and effective work on many a bloody field, and the same may be said of the 101st Engineers, the 101st Field Artillery and every other unit of the division.

Gen. Clarence R. Edwards and the Yankee Division will ever remain in intimate and loving association. This fighting general of the regular army organized the Division and took it overseas. He conducted the training which moulded it into a combat division of the highest class. He commanded it at Chemin-des-Dames, at Toul, at Chateau-Thierry and the Second Battle of the Marne, at St. Mihiel, and on the Meuse and at Verdun, until the final fortnight which preceded the Armistice. He was more than a friend, he was a father to his boys, and they knew him as such and as a leader of rare military skill. His going was a great grief to them. Although he was relieved of the command, among the men of the Y. D. he will always remain "Our General."

Gen. Edwards was succeeded on October 25 by Brig. Gen. F. E. Bamford, who in turn, on November 19, was relieved by Maj. Gen. Harry C. Hale.

THE FIRST N. G. DIVISION IN FRANCE

The 26th was the first National Guard division, and, in fact, the first full division to arrive in France. Of fighting men it was preceded only by a part of the 1st Division of regulars. Its men are numbered in the first 50,000 of the American Expeditionary Forces. No other American division has seen so long and continuous service on the front. None has sustained such a total of casualties, and, for that reason, none has had so many names on its rolls. When the armistice was signed and the guns ceased to

roar, the Y. D. had had nine months of incessant fighting, interrupted only by passage from front to front, always in its travels, as it happened, under the most adverse of weather conditions. Back and forth across northern France the regiments were shunted, always promised rest but never getting it, for no campaign could begin without them. Fully 1200 miles have the Yankees traveled in France, always on grim business, never on pleasure bent.

The Division was the first to take up a sector at the front, as a division. They fought at Chemin-des-Dames, at Toul, at the Second Battle of the Marne, where they delivered the blow that sent the Hun reeling back from the salient, the apex of which was Chateau-Thierry; they fought at St. Mihiel, where they were given the most difficult sector, and they fought in the bloodiest of battles, in front of Metz, and on the Meuse, in the Argonne country and at Verdun.

Always the 26th was given the most difficult task to do, for they were certain to do it right, as shock troops should. The post of honor was always theirs, and in war the post of honor is where the hardest, most resolute, most desperate fighting is to be done. The Y. D. earned the name given it by the Allied armies, the Sacrifice Division. Its men never complained. Incessant, nerve-straining danger, the terrible sufferings from exposure to cold and rain, hunger and thirst, and endless want of sleep, the disappointment of promised rest and pleasure again and again deferred—none of these affected the cheerfulness and fighting spirit of the Yankee lads. One has but to read their letters home to know this. When the full history is written of the Minutemen, as they came very near being called, there will be no more inspiring tale for red-blooded men of future generations to read.

The 26th Division was made up entirely of the National Guard of New England. When it left the United States every man was a volunteer. Tens of thousands of replacements were made from the National Army, but most of these men were from Western states. And of course many of the new officers hailed from other parts of the country. But every one of those New England boys who went overseas with the Division was a volunteer. When hostilities ceased hardly 15 per cent of them remained. The names of most of the others are in the casualty lists.

The Division was called into service July 25, 1917. The infantry mobilized at Framingham, Worcester, Westfield and other camps, the artillery at Boxford. The old National Guard regiments had to be consolidated and readjusted to some extent in

order to get the full strength of four infantry regiments on the new basis of organization, and to expand the artillery from fractions of regiments to three full regiments of six batteries each.

The Rainbow Division was organized to go over first; its composition of National Guard units of 38 states had that end in view. But it was not ready and the Yankee Division was ready and beat the Rainbows overseas by several months.

MOULDING A GREAT COMBAT DIVISION

The training progressed rapidly until, early in September, 1917, the first contingent, consisting of the 101st Infantry and the 101st Field Artillery, left camp for Hoboken, the port of embarkation, and sailed to Liverpool, the transports stopping at Halifax to pick up the convoy. Without delay the regiments crossed England to Southampton and immediately embarked for France, landing at Brest about Sept. 20. The other regiments of the Division followed in quick succession.

The infantry training camp was at Neufchateau, in eastern France, while the artillery units were stationed at Coetquidon, near Rennes in Brittany, an ancient artillery training camp, established by Napoleon. The work was severe, relentless, but the results showed the wisdom of the hard, well-directed training, in which French officers played important parts as instructors. The infantry is as highly skilled as any in any army of any nation in all France. The artillery had won a name for itself for rapidity and accuracy of fire even before it left Coetquidon.

As most people know, the American army guns had been left at home, and the task was to master the French 75s and the heavier 155s, and to equal the French standard of fire. No greater accuracy than that of the French could be achieved, but for speed the Yankees went them one better, by mastering the difficult and dangerous, but speed-increasing method of loading on the recoil, which is held to account for the oft-encountered illusion of German officers that the Americans were using a 3-inch machine gun. The artillery of the 26th won high encomiums from the officers of all the Allied armies with which they fought, but best of all from their own infantry, whose saying is: "We'd charge into the jaws of hell behind a barrage from our batteries."

The engineering contingent, the 101st Engineers, has won enduring fame, not only for its specialized work, but for its fighting ability, as well, and so the training resulted with the other branches of service represented in the division.

ON TO CHEMIN-DES-DAMES

Four solid months the training proceeded, until, at the request of Gen. Edwards, the 26th was moved up to Chemin-des-Dames, leaving camp about February 1, the infantry from Neufchateau, the artillery from Brittany. On the afternoon of February 5, the guns of Battery A, 101st Field Artillery, took position on the line, and at 3.45 o'clock one of its 75s barked forth for the Division the first shot fired by the National Guard in the war. The shell case is at the Massachusetts State House as a memento of that event. That night the 101st Infantry went through the artillery lines and was the first National Guard contingent to enter the trenches. There was plenty of fighting at Chemin-des-Dames, though none on a large scale.

While on this sector the Yankee division was associated with the 11th French Army Corps and Gen. Edwards issued an order stating that he was pleased to consider the 11th Corps the godfather of the 26th Division. Gen. Maud Huy, commander of the 11th, and after the Armistice made commander of the fortress of Metz, wrote in reply: "The 11th corps feels proud of the marked honor, being sure that, wherever he may be sent, the godson shall do credit to the godfather."

After 46 days at Chemin-des-Dames the Division entrained at Soisson under heavy shell fire, and proceeded to Rimaucourt, in Haute Saone, not a great distance from Neufchateau. Much of the journey from Soisson was over the road, and it was still winter, with almost continuously rainy weather and exceedingly muddy roads. But the Division was not unhappy, for a rest period was promised, and the men needed rest and a little play. But they got neither.

THE FORCED MARCH TO TOUL

The great German drive of March 21 had just started, sweeping over the very positions that the 26th had just vacated, and which the Hun might not have taken quite so easily had the Y. D. been there to help their French comrades to receive them. The division had hardly arrived at Rimaucourt when orders came to proceed to the Toul sector, to relieve a French division, which, it was understood, was needed to help break up the German advance. The Toul sector was comparatively quiet but vitally important. Good troops were needed to hold it against the possibility of serious German attack.

With scant warning the men started on a 10 days' march, northward, through Neufchateau, 125 miles as the crow flies, and,

THE Y. D. TURNS THE TIDE OF WAR

The artillery of the 26th was placed with orders that an attack in force against their positions was inevitable; that they must meet the onslaught with the most intense fire possible and keep firing until about to be engulfed in the advancing masses, then blow up their guns and retreat. The attack did not come on the moment, as expected, but finally a dense body of Germans was discerned preparing to attack. Before the Huns had fairly started the guns of the 101st and 102d F. A., aiming with open sights at 2000 yards, began a drumfire of such intensity and accuracy that the enemy was thrown into complete confusion. It was the expiring effort of the Hun; at that moment the tide turned, and then the gallant infantry of the 26th went over the top and at them. That was on the 18th of July. From that instant to the 25th the Yankee division chased the Hun northward, licking him time and again.

As Gen. Edwards stated in general orders:

“In those eight days you carried your line as far as any part of the advance was carried. Torcy, Belleau, Givry, the Bouresches Woods, Rochet Woods, Hill 190 overlooking Chateau-Thierry, Etrepilly, Epieds, Trugny, and finally La Fere Woods and the objective, the Jaulgonne-Fere-en-Tardenois Road, belong to your arms.”

And this fighting was against the picked troops of the German army, the famous Prussian Guards and the Bavarians. They could not withstand the doughboys from New England. No troops could have withstood them. They suffered heavy losses but they kept going. At times the artillery, racing after, could hardly keep up with them.

On the 25th the Rainbow Division went through the infantry of the Y. D., who had done their stunt, but artillery can fight longer than infantry; they don't have to work so hard. And the New England artillerymen with Batteries B and E of Worcester in the thick of it, went right on fighting, for their guns were needed for clearing out German machine gun nests by the simple process of shelling. When the Rainbow infantry went out the guns of the 26th kept on with the 5th Division of regulars, and in an interim with a French division, until they were overlooking the Vesle River at Fismes, and were sweeping the German positions on the plateau beyond. The artillery had fought so far that it took them two days to get back to the Marne where they arrived August 5.

Gen. Degoutte, commander of the 5th French Army, issued general orders in which he said:

"The operations carried out by the 26th American Division from July 18th to July 24th, demonstrated the fine soldierly qualities of this unit and of its leader, Gen. Edwards.

"Co-operating in the attack north of the Marne, the 26th Division fought brilliantly on the line Torcy-Belleau, at Monthiers, Epieds and Trugny and in the forest of Fere, advancing more than 15 kilometres in depth in spite of the desperate resistance of the enemy.

"I take great pleasure in communicating to Gen. Edwards and his valiant Division this expression of my great esteem, together with my heartiest congratulations for the manner in which they have served the common cause. I could not have done better in a similar occasion with my best troops."

THE BITTER CUP OF DISAPPOINTMENT

The division had done its share, and much more, in the Second Battle of the Marne, and the men went into camp in the little villages of the Marne valley, for they were tired, fagged out lads when they left the battlefield, and their horses were in pitiable shape, those that had survived the terrible strain of the battle. Then the regiments moved to the vicinity of Chatillon, on the headwaters of the Seine. First in pup tents, then in billets in the villages, the boys rested a little while, in preparation for their furloughs, promised twice before, and of necessity withheld. It was a jubilant camp for each man was to have seven days all his own, away from exacting commanders. But again there was the slip twixt cup and lip. Imperative orders arrived to proceed to the front again. Furloughs were cancelled, the soldiers said "C'est la Guerre," and the 26th started on its way to take a vital part in the sudden snapping off of the St. Mihiel salient.

ST. MIHIEL

The preparations for this campaign were conducted with the utmost possible secrecy. The last stages of the advance were made entirely at night. It rained night and day. In the long dark hours of the northern autumn the companies and batteries plodded along in the rain, freezing cold, sometimes hungry, for in active warfare there must be at times long gaps between meals; and forbidden to smoke, because of the betraying lights. And when each day dawned the men slept, somewhere, anywhere, wrapped in soggy wet blankets. Finally they were in the forest on the western side of the salient where in 1915, 30,000 French soldiers laid down their lives in stemming the German tide, which in its onrush engulfed 15 French divisions.

Troyon, as the French called it, the New England Sector, as the 26th called it, is about half way between St. Mihiel and Verdun, on the heights of the Meuse, and was regarded as the most difficult section of the line of attack which eliminated the salient. After an artillery bombardment of almost unprecedented ferocity the Division went over the top on Sept. 12, and in 24 hours the salient had ceased to exist and the 26th had its full share of the vast numbers of prisoners and enormous booty which fell to the American army.

The Yanks at St. Mihiel took 2400 prisoners, many cannon, much ammunition and stores, of every kind; released hundreds of civilian prisoners and occupied a score and more of towns to the great delight of the inhabitants. The gratitude of the liberated people is expressed in the letter from the Catholic priest of Rupt-en-Woevre after the boys had gone in there and the Huns were on the run, in which he says:

“Sir, your gallant 26th American Division has just set us free. Since September, 1914, the barbarians have held the heights of the Meuse, have murdered three hostages from Mouilly, have shelled Rupt, and on July 23, 1915, forced its inhabitants to scatter to the four corners of France. I, who remain at my little listening post upon the advice of my bishop, feel certain, sir, that I do but speak for Monsigneur Ginisty, Lord Bishop of Verdun, my parishioners of Rupt, Mouilly and Genicourt and the people of this vicinity, in conveying to you and your associates the heartfelt and unforgettable gratitude of all.

“Several of your comrades lie at rest in our truly Christian and French soil. Their ashes shall be cared for as if they were our own. We shall cover their graves with flowers and shall kneel by them as their own families would do with a prayer to God to reward with eternal glory these heroes fallen on the field of honor and to bless the 26th Division and generous Americans.

“Be pleased, sir, to accept the expression of my profound respect.

“A. Leclerc.”

Of the 1st Battalion of the 102nd infantry Gen. Blondiat, commander of the 2nd Colonial Army Corps, asked that it be cited for the heroism of its men at Bois de Chauffor to Mesnil, stating: “The spirit of sacrifice and magnificent courage displayed by the troops of the 26th United States Division on this occasion were certainly not in vain; they seem to me worthy of recompense.”

THE BATTLES OF THE MEUSE

Following St. Mihiel the 26th had little rest, and what it had was under shellfire. On September 25 the New England boys were in the thick of the fighting again, and they stayed in the thick of it until the clock struck 11 on November 11. Their first task was to create a diversion, in conjunction with French units, the purpose being to befog the enemy as to Gen. Foch's real intentions in this section of the battleline and to keep as many German divisions as possible away from the sectors where the great American drive was to be staged.

So the Yankee Division and its French comrades made a feint in the vicinity of Dommartin, out on the plain of the Woivre. The action of September 25, the day before the 1st Army started on its victorious drive northwest of Verdun, was a battle of a magnitude which would have attracted world-wide attention had it not been coincident with bigger doings on other parts of the French-Belgian front. Harassing attacks were carried on for some days.

Then the Germans began massing troops to stay the northward rush of the American army west of the Meuse, and the Yankee Division was ordered to the region of Sivry-sur-Meuse, 15 miles north of Verdun and just east of the river, where it arrived October 8, and two days later took over the sector from the 18th French Division and a part of the American 29th. The fighting there was serious enough, but it was child's play, as was all the fighting that preceded it, when compared to what was to follow.

The Division set out from Sivry October 21, advancing southeast through a hill and valley country, covered with what once had been forest but now reduced to a wilderness of scraggly chunks of trees which rose from a honeycomb of shellholes; a ghastly waste which includes the German point of departure for their drive against Verdun in which they sacrificed more than half a million of men. Bois Haumont, Bois de Ville, Bois Belleau and Bois d'Ormont are names that will live forever in the battle records of the Yankee Division.

THE BLOODY CLOSING DAYS

On November 7 opened that phase of the battle which can never be remembered without a shudder and a tear. In the four shorts days of war that remained before the last shot was fired, there fell more than 10,000 splendid lads of the 26th, killed and wounded. Swinging sharply from southeast due east the regiments headed straight for the Briey coal fields. Here, near

Belleau Woods, the Division was the pivot of the attacking armies, just as it had been the pivot at the Belleau Woods of Chateau-Thierry.

This time it was the Hun who cried, "They shall not pass!" But the Yankee boys did pass. Division after division the German commanders threw into the battle, the best troops they had, in desperate effort to check the onrush of the irresistible 26th. The odds were all against the Americans. They went forward against thousands of machine guns, massed artillery of every calibre, a numerical superiority of infantry, carefully prepared defenses. The Briey coal fields must be saved, whatever the cost. Germany could not endure without them. But the Yankees carried on, surely, relentlessly.

They sustained a shellfire that no soldier present had seen equalled. From the time they left Sivry they were under continuous savage cannonading. But the climax of war was reached between Bois d'Ormont and Bois Belleau where a bombardment of indescribable ferocity raged for two days. The forward lines and gun positions were deluged with high explosives combined with gas. The ravines behind were filled with gas, and kept filled. The woods were literally hidden in the clouds of mud and dirt thrown up by high explosive shells. An inspection of the territory by officers following the armistice proved that not even the many months of intensive shelling of Douaumont, in front of Verdun, had wrought so complete a destruction as that of the few days at Belleau and d'Ormont, while the brave men of the 26th were there.

There were Hellish frontal charges, in jungles of trees and barb wire entanglements, through hurricanes of shrapnel, into the muzzles of thousands of machine guns. Four days this continued. Each day won a mile. The cost was terrible. In those hideous hours the division lost thousands and thousands of men. Those others of whom neither shell nor bullet, grenade nor gas had taken toll were almost dead with fatigue and lack of sleep and intolerable nerve strain, and hunger and filth. It was thus that the Yankee Division completed "doing its bit."

Gen. Bamford, on November 18, the day he was relieved of his command, issued the following order:

"Officers and enlisted men of the 26th Division, I congratulate you upon your success in the war which has been fought to a victorious end.

"From your entry into the battle line on Feb. 5, 1918, at Chemin-des-Dames, as a division of recruits, until the cessation of

hostilities on the 11th of November, 1918, when you laid down your arms fighting in the front line as a veteran division, you have shown yourselves worthy sons of the country that gave you birth.

“Bois Brule, Xivray-Marvoisin, Torcy, Belleau, Givry, Bour-esches, Hill 190, Epieds, Trugny, St. Mihiel salient, Bois d’Hau-mont, Bois Belleau, Bois d’Ormont, Bois de Ville, are indelibly written on your banners.”

And so the Army of Occupation march away, without the 26th Division. Certainly that army would not be on German soil today had it not been for the patriotic, self-sacrificing men, who, at the drop of the hat, when the United States went to war, hurried to the recruiting offices and offered themselves to Uncle Sam for his army. They went early and therefore were trained early and because they were ready, stepped into the breach whenever there was a breach, until the days when they themselves made the breaches. The 26th Division, as much as any division serving in any army in all the war, has had full share in bringing the German beast, crawling and whining, praying for mercy and peace.

It was fitting that the Yankee Division should celebrate, as it did, the announcement of the armistice in the ruined city of Verdun, around which are buried half a million soldiers—the city which symbolizes for France the sacrifice and the victory.