

THE

27TH

NEW YORK'S GUARD DIVISION THAT BROKE GERMAN LINE

By LIEUT. Col. J. LESLIE KINCAID.
Judge Advocate, 27th Division.

THE 27th Division [New York National Guard] fought in four big battles, two engagements and two minor actions, in the course of the war against Germany. The fighting both in Flanders and in Picardy was directed by Major Gen. John F. O'Ryan, who has the signal distinction of having been continuously in command of the division since it was organized long before America entered the war. General O'Ryan, by the way, is the only General in the American Expeditionary Forces, with the exception of General Pershing, who commanded a division before going to France.

The division had traditions before sailing. Some of the regiments composing it had fought in the civil war and the Spanish-American war. The record made by those war veterans was magnificently sustained by the 27th in this war.

When the division landed in France in June we were assigned to work with the Second British Army. We were immediately put into active training. This training consisted of participation in minor activities, in anticipation of battles or engagements which were to follow. We were stationed in Belgium in the Ypres and Mont Kemmel salient. Our first actual experience was the holding of the East Poperinghe line behind Dickebusch Lake from July 8 to Aug. 30. The action consisted of constructing and occupying the second position opposite Mont Kemmel during a time when the enemy was expected to make heavy attacks. The position was under close observation from Mont Kemmel and was subjected to observed artillery fire by day and continued fire by night, inflicting daily casualties. The enemy opposite the 27th Division consisted of the group of armies under Prince Rupprecht of Bavaria. These were intending to make a determined drive against the northern part of the salient from the Somme to the sea, with the Channel ports as their objectives.

At that time it was felt that the British holding the front line alone would be unable to withstand the shock of such

an assault and that the deluge of Huns would roll up the East Poperinghe line. There, however, it was to stop. Those were the orders from General O'Ryan.

While this was going on at the north of the fighting line, the Germans at the south were making their great drive toward Château-Thierry. This at first met with such great success that the Germans postponed attacking in Flanders in order to exploit to the full their southern drive. As the world knows, the Germans were stopped at Château-Thierry and were driven back. These conditions necessitated the withdrawal of Prince Rupprecht's group of armies from the north to the south, and the drive to the sea was abandoned. During this time, however, the 27th had not only held the East Poperinghe line, but had gone forward, occupying the front lines in the Dickebusch sector. There were some minor actions there in the period from Aug. 21 to Aug. 30. The Dickebusch sector, which is in the vicinity of Dickebusch Lake, was the scene of terrific assaults.

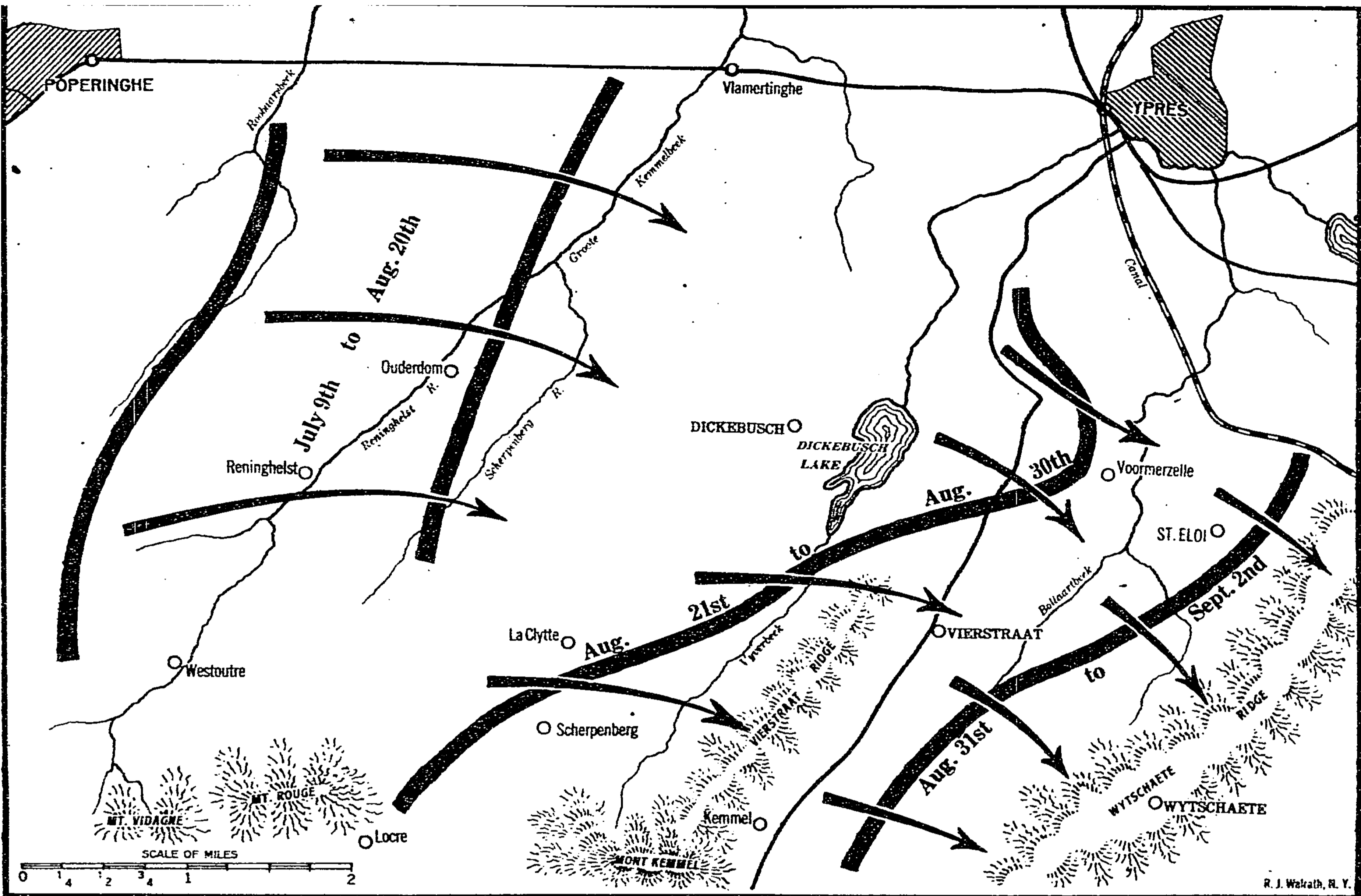
The front line was held intact, however, raids repelled, and continuous harassing raids made on the German lines.

Upon information being received that the German drive to the sea had been abandoned, the 27th Division was selected to attack and capture Mont Kemmel. General O'Ryan, knowing integral parts of his division as an inventor knows the parts of the machine he has invented, set to work to prepare each detail for this operation. This was to be the first real battle of this former New York National Guard division. There was confidence among the men in their own fighting ability, in their officers, and in their General, who, during the time the division had held the line, had given many evidences of his skill and personal bravery. General O'Ryan, formerly an artilleryman, himself devised new and special features of artillery support, and attended even to such details as the preparation of relief maps, so that every phase of the battle might be studied by his officers and every point taken into cognizance.

One effective method of artillery fire

MAJOR GENERAL JOHN F. O'RYAN
27TH DIVISION

Where the 27th Fought in Mont Kemmel Region



The New Yorkers' Chief Fights in Flanders Were the Minor Actions at East Poperinghe and Dickebusch and the Engagement of Vierstraat Ridge, Near Mont Kemmel, [July 9 to Sept. 2, 1918.]

used by the General during this period was the so-called "hurricanes of fire" directed on important crossroads and other avenues of communication. Instead of firing a continuous number of shells during the entire day, he would direct a concentrated fire of all batteries, which gave a terrific burst of shellfire for a period of three minutes. The results created terrific havoc behind the enemy lines.

During the first few days in August the division moved up to the front line of the Mont Kemmel sector, relieving the 6th and 41st British Divisions. At that time No Man's Land was dominated by the Hun, but in three days and nights the 27th reversed this condition of affairs with such marked aggressiveness that the enemy placed opposite us a number of new divisions, among which was the 6th German Division, considered one of the finest in the German Army. This crack organization of the enemy's forces immediately tried to show its mettle by making a raid in broad daylight behind a moving curtain of steel. The barrage fell upon the leading elements of the 107th Infantry, formerly the old 7th of New York, but did not in the least demoralize or disturb the spirit and determination of the men. The raid was a failure. The men of the 27th Division met their assailants, who attacked them behind a barrage with bombs, rifles, and grenades. So fierce was the fighting that some of the squads were almost entirely wiped out, but not one prisoner was taken by the enemy. The enemy left a large number of dead and wounded on the field.

The attack on Vierstraat Ridge, Aug. 31 to Sept. 2, forced the Germans to retreat from Mont Kemmel, as well as from the territory to its south. The enemy was found to be withdrawing his main force to Wytschaete Ridge, but leaving his machine-gun crews to hold the ground as long as possible, and keeping the whole terrain covered with artillery fire. Our

troops continued a following action, meeting strong resistance, including counterattacks by enemy infantry, to the east slope of Vierstraat Ridge. The 30th Division (American) on our left, the 34th British Division on our right, and other corps of the Second British Army further south participated in this engagement. As a result of the three days' fighting, the 27th captured Vierstraat Ridge, Rosignoll Wood, Petite Bois, and Plateau Farm. Many prisoners were taken and a new line established on favorable ground in place of the old line, which for months had suffered under direct enemy observation.

Immediately after this the 27th was



Brig. Gen. H. M. Bandholtz, Former Chief of Staff of 27th Division, Now Provost Marshal General A. E. F.

ordered to a rest area, where for two weeks it went through an intensive training in preparation for the great battle in its history, and in the history of the war. That was the battle of the Hindenburg line.

On the 25th of September the 27th took over the front occupied by the 74th and 18th British Divisions. This was opposite the outpost positions of the Hindenburg line and included the points known as the Knoll, Guillemont Farm, and Quennemont Farm. Three times the British made attacks to break these points, but with no success. Their attempts were repulsed each time with terrific shell fire by the boche. It is



Brig. Gen. C. I. de Bevoise, Commander of 53d Brigade, Formerly Colonel 107th Infantry, [Old New York 7th.]

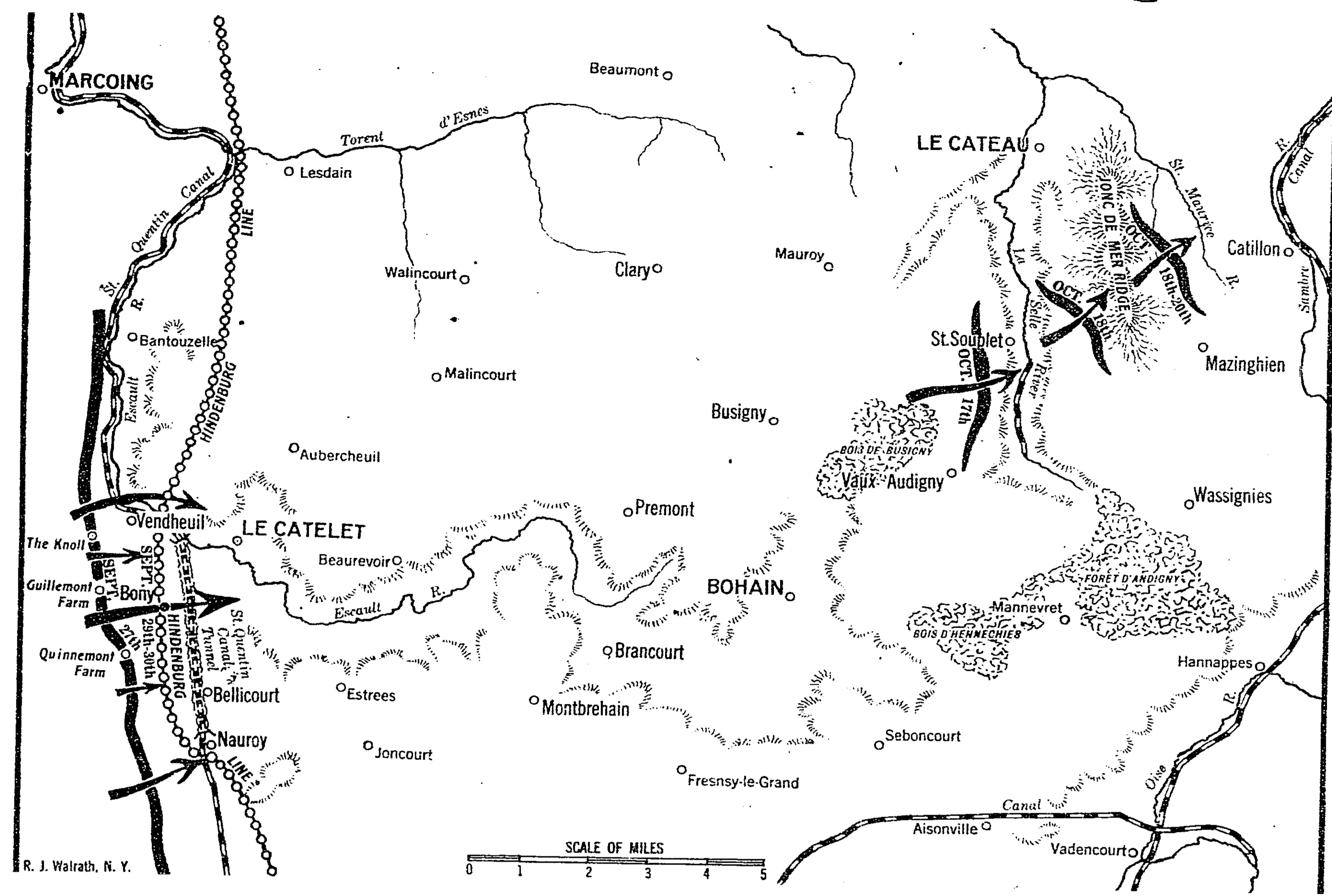
estimated that the total British casualties in these engagements were about 80 per cent. of their attacking forces. Upon our arrival at the sector advanced battle headquarters were established in the chalk quarries at St. Emile.

Our position was opposite the St. Quentin tunnel of the Hindenburg line. We knew that our orders were to take that tunnel if it was humanly possible to do so. Between that tunnel and our position lay the outpost positions of the Hindenburg line. The problem was to capture these outpost positions, put them behind us, and then to concentrate our full force on the breaking of the great Hindenburg line itself. It was an effort to wipe away and clear up any obstacle that might impede or delay the main attack that was to be launched later against these reputedly impregnable German defenses.

Our point was first to clear away the debris heaped up before the wall and then to go at the wall with the force of a monster battering ram. On the morning of Sept. 27 the 106th Regiment began the initial movement of cleaning up the outpost positions of the Germans. The Germans appreciated what we were after; they knew our final objective was not the Knoll, or the Guillemont Farm or the Quennemont Farm, but what lay beyond that.

All the strength and power and morale of the German Army lay behind these points, and their orders were to hold the line at all costs. They fought with every deadly weapon and contrivance known to modern warfare. The 106th, full of the knowledge of what the gaining of the outpost positions would mean to our armies, withstood repeated counterattacks and advanced in the face of counterbarrage and deadly machine-gun fire to their objectives. The Knoll changed hands four times. The fighting was terrific. Both sides were battling for the possession of the ground that would be the great vantage point in the

Scene of First Break Through Hindenburg Line



Outpost Positions of Hindenburg Line at the Knoll and Guillemont Farm and Quennemont Farm Were Taken by the 27th on Sept. 27, 1918. The Battle of the Hindenburg Line, in Which the St. Quentin Tunnel Was Captured, Took Place Sept. 29. Three Later Battles Were at St. Souplet, Oct. 17, Junc de Mer Ridge, Oct. 18, and St. Maurice River, Oct. 19-20.

battle to come. The loss of it to the Germans would mean the laying bare of the Hindenburg line. The gain of it to the Americans meant the opportunity to force the pressure on the great wall. This fact cannot be too greatly emphasized. The night of Sept. 27 saw the Germans occupying a small portion of the Knoll, but Guillemont Farm and Quennemont Farm were in our hands. The 106th had accomplished that which had been the serious stumbling block of former attacks.

That night the 106th was relieved by the 107th and the 108th Infantry, who took possession of the line that had the day before constituted the outpost positions of the Hindenburg line. The 106th, which had earned a well-deserved rest, was held in the rear as a divisional reserve in case it should later be needed. The 105th, which in the course of the battle greatly distinguished itself by helping to stem the tide on the flank attack made on the 107th Infantry at Vendhuille, was placed behind the front lines and held in readiness to fall into action at short notice.

Before us lay the famous Hindenburg line, which, according to the captured documents of the Great German General Headquarters, was invulnerable to attack. It was the rock of Gibraltar of the German morale. The armies of the Allies might gain point after point and victory after victory, but the Hindenburg line would be held intact forever. It was the Verdun of their defenses. It was everything that was strong and powerful and formidable. No allied army could ever pass that.

There was every reason for their holding this belief. The line consisted of three deep trenches with concrete firing steps, each trench protected by a belt of barbed wire entanglements twenty to thirty feet in width. The first belt of wire might be cut, but there was an

other beyond and still another beyond that. These trenches were as strong as human ingenuity and human power and human labor could make them. Behind them, acting as a great warehouse for fresh troops and a haven for exhausted ones, lay the famous St. Quentin Canal tunnel, built by Napoleon in 1811. It was 5.7 kilometers long (about 6,000 yards in our measurement), dug straight through a hill, and constructed of arched brick walls with a broad towpath running along the side. The boche had filled the canal within the tunnel with canal boats, in which men were quartered, and



Brig. Gen. A. H. Blanding, One-Time Commander of 53d Brigade.

had sealed both ends with ferro-concrete walls four feet thick. The tunnel lay from ten to fifty meters underground. Access to the fighting lines was had through passages and galleries cut from the tunnel to the trenches. These had the appearance of underground galleries or avenues. Reinforcements could be brought to the trenches without having them subjected to shell fire or airplane observation. In the same manner the wounded and exhausted troops could be rushed back to the areas behind the fighting lines without suffering additional casualties.



Brig. Gen. Michie, Commander of 53d Brigade Until His Death.

All this was known at General O'Ryan's headquarters before the attack was made. He was fully cognizant of the enormity of the task that had been assigned to his division. Assigned to duty at our headquarters were special liaison officers from the headquarters of Field Marshal Haig and the headquarters of the Commander in Chief of the allied armies, Marshal Foch. There were others besides.

Every one was keyed up, tense. Nerves were taut and lips tight. On the outcome of this attack on the wonderful defense in front of the St. Quentin tunnel lay the outcome of the war. What was almost as important to us was the additional knowledge that the outcome of this battle would gauge for all time the strength and the courage of the American army fighting with the British. General O'Ryan's movements were watched eagerly by all the liaison officers. Any misstep would mean defeat. Any error would mean another opportunity for the Germans to vaunt the invincibility of the German defense.

The 27th Division was that day to be weighed in the balance. It was either to write its victory in history with the blood of the Hun, or it was to go down, man for man, fighting to the death. General O'Ryan made up his mind that, if it was humanly possible to do it, the line before the division was going to crack, and crack hard. Below the calm exterior lay the knowledge of his responsibility and a knowledge of the way in which he had prepared to meet it. If men could do anything with that line, his men were the men to do it!

The 108th Regiment was sent ahead at the southern half of the advancing American line, the 107th at the northern. The heaviest tanks in the British Army ("Mark V Star") carrying 37cm. guns, besides the usual machine guns, preceded our infantry, following the barrage

The 27th Division's Deeds in Flanders and France

laid by the British artillery. Within two hours after the attack had been launched word was received at General O'Ryan's headquarters that the entire squadron of tanks had been wiped out by ground mines and direct hits from cleverly concealed anti-tank artillery. Of the twenty-six tanks that had started out one alone was just about able to limp back in a sorely disabled condition.

The command of the General was to go ahead. The other artillery would give the supporting fire. The men did go ahead. The 108th went through death-dealing fire, and penetrated and held the Hindenburg line from Bony to Bellecourt. There, in spite of constant counterattacks of the Germans, they held on with the grip of bulldogs. The line had been reached at too great a cost to be given up under any circumstances. They were there, and they were going to stay there.

The 107th, equally brave and determined, attacked at the northern end. Machine guns planted along every twenty feet of the Hindenburg line spit the death fire into their faces and bodies, but they went on. Their objective was the tunnel. And there's

from the area of Vendhuille, the 105th Regiment was sent in to stem the tide of the counterattack. This regiment, together with the 107th, finally overcame the enemy. The 105th and 107th went ahead, and, despite the terrific odds they encountered, elements of the division reached the main line and forced their way into the St. Quentin tunnel. Some of the elements of the 107th, when greatly outnumbered and reduced to skeletons of their former selves, retired to the support troops, while elements of the 108th held on, bombing dugouts and positions on the main defensive line and capturing more prisoners than their own strength.

The tunnel was taken and the retreating Germans were spewed out of the ground in hordes. Airplanes flying over the battleground reported that the areas behind the tunnel were thick with running men. Those that we captured were all broken up in body, spirit, and morale. Their rock of Gibraltar, upon which they had pinned all their faith, had failed them. When they were

where the German cunning did more to straighten the lips of our men than anything else. The 107th advanced, tore its way through the hellish barbed wire belts, and was ready to keep on advancing and tearing the way until the tunnel had been reached.

But—and here is the thing that roused the boys to the fiercest anger—no sooner had they conquered one area than fresh German troops would rise out of the ground behind them and fire from the rear. They came up through the underground passages connecting them with the tunnel, and, armed with machine guns and bombs, attacked our boys from behind as they were advancing. The men of the 107th, with the Germans in front of them and the Germans behind them, fought like so many devils. It was a battle against terrific odds. Time and again they made attempts to mop up the line and clear the ground that the advance had gone over, but the constant surging in of Germans behind them made it a grim task.

General O'Ryan at headquarters knew what was happening all this time. He knew the 108th was holding on tight; he knew the 107th was constantly forced to take a defensive position as well as an offensive position. It was impossible to send any artillery fire across to help the 107th, because the men were so interspersed with the boche soldiers who were oozing up out of the ground. It was the most trying position any commander has ever had to face. The liaison officers sat near, nervous and alert. The news of the 108th was good, but they feared for the 107th. But General O'Ryan knew the mettle of the men. When the report came that the Germans were not only fighting the 107th from the front and then from the rear in the captured area, but had also launched a left flank attack



Major Gen. O'Ryan on the Mexican Border Before the Days of the Overseas Uniform.



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Lieut. Col. W. D. Conrow, Commander of 102d Engineers, [Old 22d New York.]

27th had captured seventeen German officers and 1,782 enlisted men, aside from a number of field pieces and hundreds of machine guns. The armies participating in the battle were the 3d British Corps, the 2d American Corps, consisting of the 30th and the 27th Divisions; the Australian Corps, the 9th British Corps, and the Tenth French Army. These were spread out along the line, fighting independently and controlling different sectors.

After a period of about two weeks the 27th once again went into action. On the afternoon of Oct. 14, after a night patrol of No Man's Land, General O'Ryan directed a raid on the enemy in the vicinity of St. Souplet, on the Selle River, for the purpose of identifying opposing divisions. This raid was brilliantly executed in broad daylight, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, by a small detachment of the 108th Infantry, which captured twenty-seven prisoners. Preparations were immediately made for forcing the stream and assaulting the heights beyond. The division headquarters of the 27th were moved to Busigny. It was at that time the furthest east of any divisional headquarters, and also the



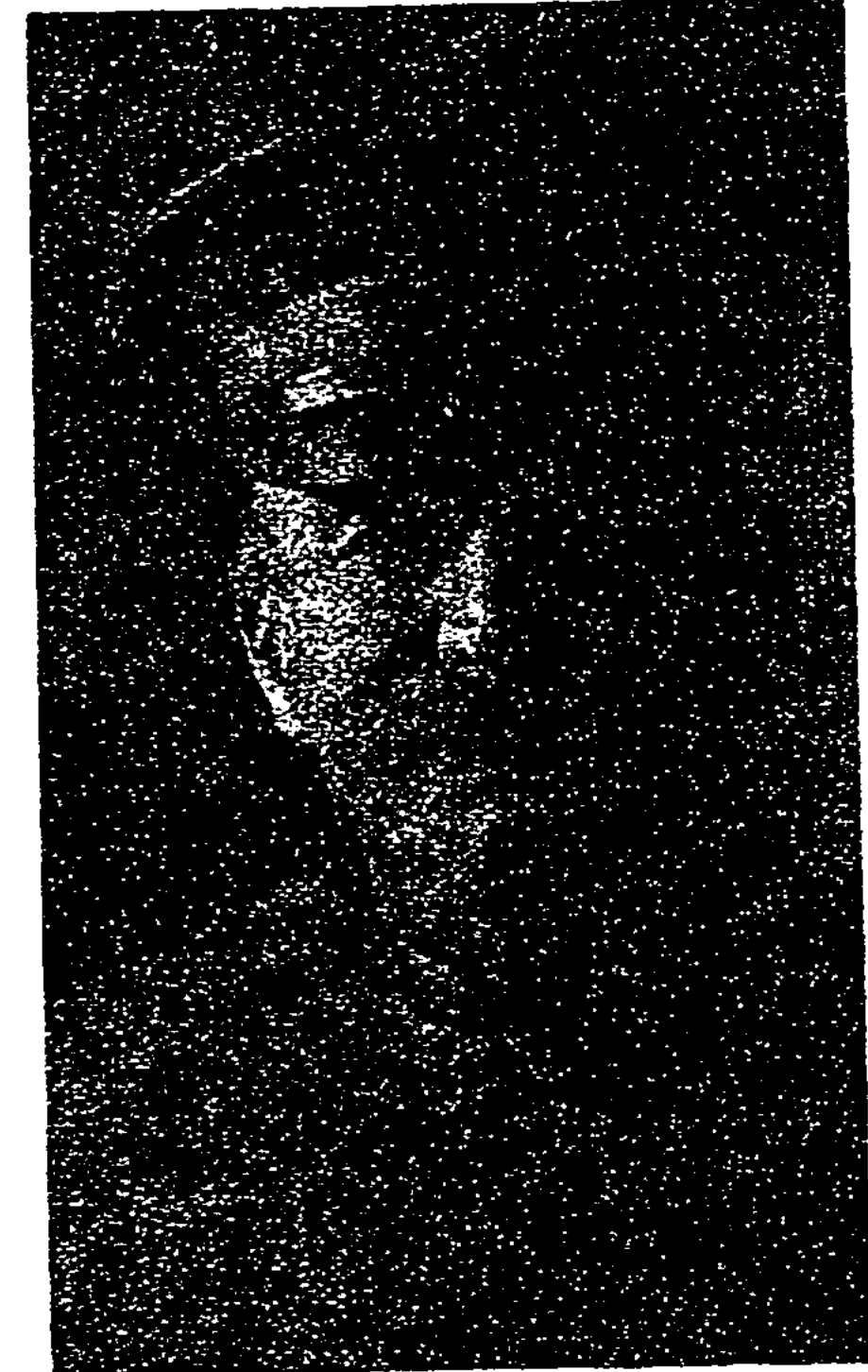
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Brig. Gen. Palmer E. Pierce, Commander of 54th Brigade.

lined up at headquarters they were like so many masses of limp clay—all the fight and the will to war had simply run out of them. The plaint expressed by all of them was, "The war is over. The Hindenburg line has broken."

The setting sun on that September day showed in dim outline that New York's soldiers had paid the price. Closer observation proved that this price was paid in a way that should bring pride to the heart of every American.

This was the most sanguinary battle on the western front. The casualties on both sides were terrific. But the American Army had shown that, young as it was, it had the power to crush the Hindenburg line.

Through the break made by the American divisions the rest of the Fourth British Army pushed and continued to go forward, harassing with terrific fires the fleeing columns of Prince Rupprecht's army. The 27th Division was withdrawn, in order that it might rest and reorganize. During the battle the



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Colonel James Andrews, Commander of 105th Infantry, [Old 2d New York,] 27th Division.



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Colonel William T. Starr, Assistant Chief of Staff, 27th Division.

blown up by the enemy, but the 102d Engineers, advancing immediately behind the first wave of the infantrymen, succeeded in constructing bridges in an incredibly short time. It was necessary, however, for the infantrymen in their initial attack to ford the stream and to climb up the slippery banks on the further side as well as to climb over a railroad embankment which, at that point, just beyond St. Souplet, was forty feet high.



Colonel Edgar Jennings, Commander of 108th Infantry, [Old 3d New York.]

On the 17th of October the 27th captured more than 1,400 prisoners. Fighting in open war character continued for four days, during which the division suffered hundreds of casualties. The results in the number of prisoners, field pieces and machine guns captured were enormous. The enemy was pushed back



Colonel Henry S. Sternberger, Division Quartermaster of the 27th.

- ### TRAVELS OF THE 27TH IN FRANCE.
- May 30—Last elements of division landed at Brest and St. Nazaire. Quartered at base camps until ordered to move to St. Riquier, British training sector.
 - June 8—Arrived at St. Riquier in the Abbeville area. Training under British command begun. Ordered to march to Gamache area.
 - June 20—Arrived at Gamache area. Training given on British rifle range. Ordered to march to Beauval.
 - June 25—Arrived at Beauval (back of Albert). Training continued until ordered to entrain for St. Omer area.
 - July 3—Arrived at St. Omer area. Division headquarters opened at City of Neurllet. Ordered to march to rear areas of Poperinghe sector.
 - July 7—Advance echelon encamped at Camp Douglas, between areas of Abeele and Poperinghe. Rear echelon encamped at Ouderzeele area. Intensive preliminary training given. Ordered to march to East Poperinghe and hold the line.
 - July 9—Arrival at the East Poperinghe line, where first minor action took place. Held line until Aug. 20, then moved on to Dickebusch sector.
 - Aug. 21—Action on Dickebusch sector. Line held until Aug. 30. Advance made on Vierstraat Ridge.
 - Aug. 31—Vierstraat Ridge (vicinity of Mont Kemmel). Battle fought. Advance made on Wyttschaete Ridge Sept. 2. Retired to rear area.
 - Sept. 4—Entrained at Heidebeke for Doullens area. Division headquarters opened at Beauquesnes, near Amiens. Rest, reorganization, and training.
 - Sept. 20—Ordered forward to area opposite Hindenburg line. Headquarters opened at Buire Woods and St. Emile.
 - Sept. 27—Battle of The Knoll, Quinmont Farm, and Guillemont Farm.
 - Sept. 29—Battle of the Hindenburg line (vicinity of Bony). St. Quentin Canal taken.
 - Oct. 1—Ordered to area behind fighting lines for rest and reorganization. Headquarters at Buire Woods, Tincourt, and Prémont. Ordered forward to St. Souplet.
 - Oct. 17—Battle of La Selle River (vicinity of St. Souplet). Headquarters at Joncourt and Busigny.
 - Oct. 18—Battle at Jone de Mer Ridge (vicinity of Arbre Guernon).
 - Oct. 19-20—Engagement at St. Maurice River (vicinity of Catillon).
 - Oct. 20—Moved to Corbie—rest and training camp.
 - Nov. 28—Moved to Le Mans for training, refilling, and inspection in preparation of movements to Brest for embarkation.



Lieut. Col. Edward Olmstead, General Staff Officer of 27th Division.

to the line at the Canal de la Sambre. In the fighting the 27th was opposed by twelve regiments from four different divisions.

The following letter of commendation from the Commander in Chief of the British armies to the commanding Gen-



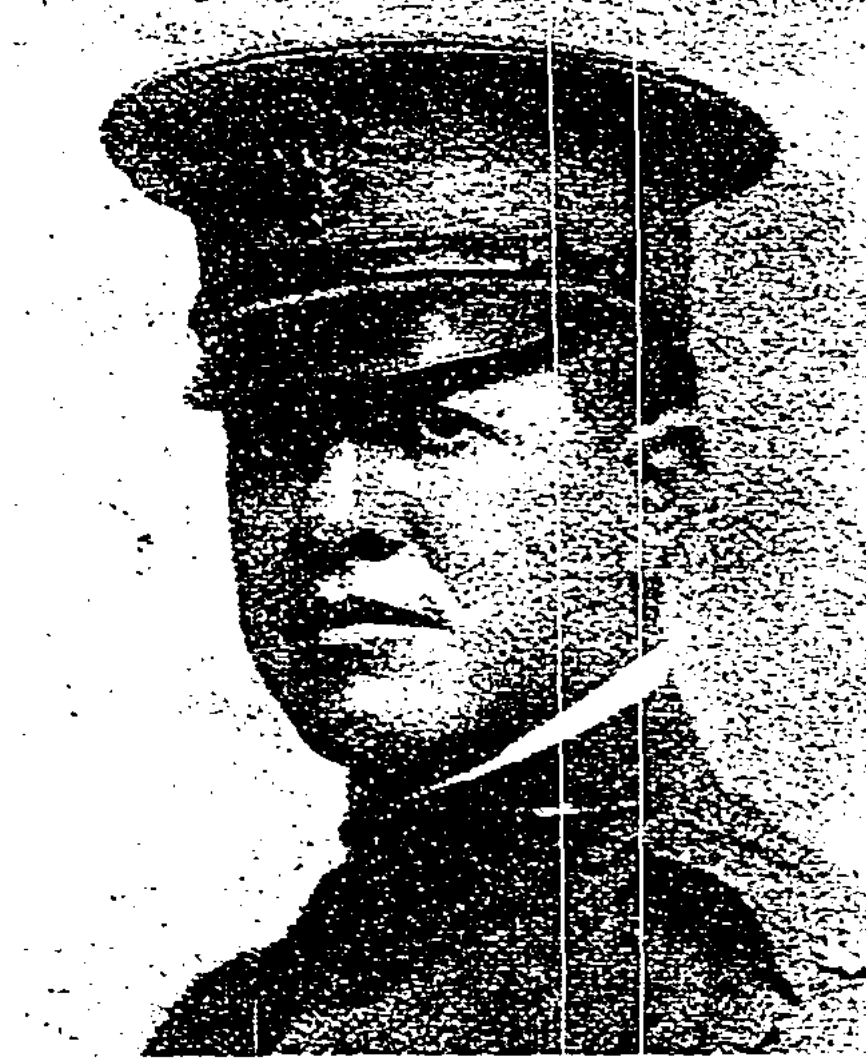
Colonel Mortimer D. Bryant, Commander of the 107th Infantry, [Old 7th New York.]



Colonel F. W. Ward, Commander of 106th Infantry, [Old 23d New York.]

eral of the 2d American Corps shows what was thought of the 27th Division:

"Now that the American 2d Corps is leaving the British zone, I wish once more to thank you and all officers, non-commissioned officers, and men under your command on behalf of myself and all ranks of the British armies in France



Colonel Mortimer D. Bryant, Commander of the 107th Infantry, [Old 7th New York.]



Major Robert Molyneux, Commander of 104th Machine-Gun Battalion, with "Kaiser's Goat."

and Flanders for the very gallant and efficient service you have rendered during the period of your operations with the British Army.

"On the 29th of September you took part with great distinction in the great and critical attack which shattered the enemy's resistance in the Hindenburg line and opened the road to final victory. The deeds of the 27th and 30th American Divisions, who on that day took Bellecourt and Nauroy and so gallantly sustained



Lieut. Col. J. T. Loree, Deputy Provost Marshal General A. E. F., Former Assistant Division Quartermaster of 27th Division.

the desperate struggle for Bony, will rank with the highest achievements of the war. They will always be remembered by the British regiments that fought beside you.

"Since that date, through three weeks of almost continuous fighting, you advanced from one success to another, overcoming all resistance, beating off numerous counterattacks, and capturing several thousand prisoners and many guns. The names of Brancourt, Prémont, Vaux-Andigny, St. Souplet, and Mazinghen testify to the dash and energy of your attacks.

"I rejoice at the success which attended your efforts, and I am proud to have had you under my command.

"D. HAIG, Field Marshal."

The battle of Jone de Mer Ridge in the vicinity of the Arbre Guernon on Oct. 18 and the engagement on the St. Maurice River in the vicinity of Catillon on Oct. 19 and 20 virtually completed the fighting of the 27th. The last engagement was a bitter advance attack on the enemy for the purpose of capturing machine-gun nests. The attack was successful, and further advances were completed by the British forces.