

# HISTORY OF THE 79TH

## Division Captured, Among Other Posts, Crown Prince's Bomb-Proof Cellar Observatory at Montfaucon

The 79th Division, from its organization until the end of the war commanded by Major Gen. Joseph E. Kuhn, U. S. A., was made up of drafted men from Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, West Virginia, and the District of Columbia. The division insignia is the Lorraine Cross, superimposed on a blue shield, the insignia being selected because of the fact that in all of its major operations the division fought in Lorraine. The casualties totalled 2,389 killed, died of wounds, missing and prisoners (the prisoner total was only 15), while its minor casualties exceeded 5,000.

The following narrative of the battle operations of the 79th was prepared by direction of General Kuhn:

ENTERING the lines for the first time on Sept. 14, 1918, the 79th Division took part in two phases of the great American offensive known as the Meuse-Argonne. The division went over the top on Sept. 26, when the offensive was launched, and advanced nine and a half kilometers, over most difficult terrain, before it was relieved by the 3d Division on Sept. 30. After a few weeks, spent on a quiet sector near St. Mihiel, it again started active operations east of the Meuse River, and advanced ten kilometers in eight days before the armistice intervened.

The first offensive operation for the division took place on what was known as Sector 304, a few kilometers to the northwest of Verdun. The western limit of the divisional sector was Avocourt; the eastern, Esnes, both these small French towns long since demolished by shellfire. About a half kilometer away from the division's sector, within the allied lines, was the famous Dead Man's Hill. Directly in front, about four kilo-

meters away, was Montfaucon, a strongly fortified town on a high hill. It had been held by the Germans since 1914, save for a few hours of one day, when the French had taken it but could not hold it.

On the night of Sept. 25 the 79th began preparing for the offensive which was coming. The division sector was contracted slightly, more troops having come into the line, and the brigades put in their places. The 157th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. William J. Nicholson, and consisting of the 313th and 314th Infantry Regiments, occupied the front line, and the 158th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. Robert H. Noble, and consisting of the 315th and 316th Infantry Regiments, acted as reserve.

### Over the Top!

At 5 o'clock the next morning, after a terrific barrage on the part of both American and French artillery, the division went over. Little serious opposition was encountered until the town of Melancourt, some two kilometers away, was reached. Here deadly machine-gun fire from the slopes around the town, and the difficulty of "mopping up," slowed the division down so that it was impossible to drive into Montfaucon that afternoon, as had been planned. The 313th Infantry, commanded by Colonel Claude B. Swezey, made a desperate effort to take the town just before nightfall, but the Baltimore soldiers were driven back by heavy machine gun and shell fire.

The division spent the night on the slopes before the town preparing to take it first thing in the morning. The attack was organized with the 157th Brigade leading and the 158th in reserve.

About 7 o'clock the attack was launched. Heavy opposition was encountered. The doughboys of the 313th Infantry fought their way foot by foot up the slopes in front of the town, and

the 314th, on their right, had equally hard going in the woods of the Fayel Farm. But progress was steady, and shortly after 11 o'clock the town had been practically cleared of the boche and the 314th had brought the division line well forward on the right.

By now the division was exhausted. The one road that had been assigned to the division had been blocked with traffic, and little could be moved on it except guns and ammunition. Front-line troops, therefore, were out of food, and there was none coming up to them.

The advance was resumed the next day, however, and the town of Nantillois, two kilometers past Montfaucon, was taken. The 313th Infantry was "all in" by this time, and its relief was effected by the 316th. At the same time the 314th was relieved by the 315th, so that the 158th Brigade was now leading, with the 157th in reserve.

### Hospitals Bombarded.

In this order the advance continued, but the division had now reached a point where it was exposed to heavy artillery fire from the heights east of the Meuse River, and the boche did not neglect his opportunity. High explosive, gas, and shrapnel were poured into the advancing troops. Not content with this, the Germans opened up on one of the division's field hospitals, killing a large number of men and inflicting injuries on the wounded being cared for in the tents. This in spite of the fact that the hospital was marked with large red crosses which had presumably been noted by a boche airplane which flew over it a few minutes before it was shelled.

Though the enemy was offering terrific resistance it was necessary that the advance be continued. The two leading regiments were insufficient for the work, and it was necessary that one of the regiments that had been relieved that morning, the 313th, be called into the lines again. It was not thought that the regiment could get going in less than an hour, but Colonel Swezey, after signaling to his battalion commanders, had the regiment moving forward as a unit within fifteen minutes after receiving the order to advance. This performance was one of the finest illustrations given during all the fighting of the splendid organization of the units of the 79th Division.

By straining every nerve the division maintained its advance, and reached the

Madeleine Farm. The boche was driven back across this, and then the leading units of the division fell back to the protection of a woods on the southern edge of the farm. Here, as the troops were incapable of further advance, it was thought best to hold them until the relief by the 3d Division, which had already been ordered, should take place the next day. The division had advanced nine and a half kilometers, had taken hundreds of prisoners, and large quantities of German supplies.

### Crown Prince's Lookout.

In Montfaucon, after its capture, were found some highly interesting things. There was a house with a periscope through its roof, running down into a concrete, bombproof cellar. The periscope gave a view of all the allied lines on that side of Verdun, and had been used as an observatory by the Crown Prince during his siege of Verdun in 1916. With characteristic boche ingenuity, it had been arranged so that it could not be turned backward to be utilized against their positions. Dugouts were found in the town, with luxurious lighting systems, large quantities of beer and wine, fresh cabbages, and everything to make life easy at the front.

The division hiked back, and after one or two days' rest was ordered to the Troyon sector, near St. Mihiel, which had been taken by the Americans but a short time before. This was supposed to be a "quiet sector," but during the time the 79th was holding the lines the boche sent over large quantities of high explosive and gas, so that the division did not have an easy time of it even here.

On Oct. 20, after having hiked over from St. Mihiel, the division relieved the 20th Division on what was known as the Grand Montagne Sector, east of the Meuse River, a few kilometers northwest of Verdun.

On this sector, instead of placing one brigade in advance and the other, in reserve, each brigade was given half of the divisional sector. The 158th Infantry Brigade, commanded this time by Brig. Gen. Evan M. Johnson, occupied the left of the sector; the 157th Brigade, with General Nicholas again in command, the right.

### Taking an Impregnable Post

Directly in front of the 158th Brigade's sector, about a kilometer away, was the famous Hill 378. This was a high, jagged eminence, gashed by shell fire,

and wooded in spots. It had been considered by French military experts as impregnable. Three strong attempts had been made to take the Borne de Cornouiller, as it was known—the 79th doughboys speedily Americanized the pronunciation of this to "Corned Willie Hill"—but all had failed. The 158th Brigade had a job on its hands not to be reckoned lightly.

On Nov. 3, after careful reconnaissance, the brigade launched its attack against the hill. The 316th Infantry stormed up its slopes, and on this day finally reached a point within 500 meters of the crest. Here, however, it became subjected not only to deadly machine-gun fire from the emplacements directly ahead, but to flanking fire from the hills off to the left. With no chance of gaining the crest this day, they fell back to the cover they could find on the slopes they had just gone over.

Another attack was launched the next day. Again the 316th fought its way doggedly up the hill. For a time it seemed as though it would have to fall back before reaching the crest; but it kept on, and finally reached the coveted spot.

By now the fire from the left flank had become terrific. It would have been suicide to try to hold the hill in such circumstances, so, though they had taken the hill, the 316th had to fall back to the point where they had been stopped the day before—about half a kilometer down the slope.

### Regiment Reinforced.

The two attempts to take the hill had exhausted the 316th, and, in addition, many had been killed and wounded, so that the regiment was not up to its full strength. A battalion of the 313th Infantry, which was in the right of the division sector, with the 157th Brigade, was ordered over to assist in the assault. The battalion had to hike to get into position, and arrived on the afternoon of the next day. No attempt was made to take the hill that day, but both the 316th and the battalion of the 313th got ready for the assault that was coming the next morning.

After a heavy barrage the attack was resumed the next day. The 313th men led the attack, with the 316th acting as reserve. Within two hours the top of the hill had been taken, and the men of the 313th had started past it. The 316th mopped up and kept on with the advancing troops of the other regiment. A French division on the left, which

had been ordered to advance, had been held up for three days because the defenses on Hill 378 prevented its advance. As soon as the hill had been taken this division got under way, and succeeded in putting out of business the machine guns that had driven back the 316th two days before. The French realized, however, that it was due to the men of the 79th that their advance was made possible, for they conferred the Croix de Guerre on General Johnson, the 158th Brigade commander, for his masterly handling of the attacks on the hill. Later on, in their citation of Major Gen. Kuhn, commander of the 79th, on the occasion of his being made a Commander in the Legion of Honor, they expressed their gratitude for the work of the division on that occasion.

With Hill 378 captured the most difficult task of the division had been accomplished. The subsequent fighting was difficult, but the division steadily progressed.

By now American troops, moving eastward, had crossed the Meuse River at Dun-sur-Meuse, a few kilometers north of the 79th sector of advance. More troops were coming into the line, therefore, and it was possible to contract the 79th sector. This was done. Orders were then given to change the line of advance to go eastward—toward Metz. The 79th, therefore, was in position to take up its advance with no more reorganizing than to return to the 157th Brigade commander the units that had been loaned to the 158th Brigade during its advance. The units of the 313th hiked over in a side-stepping movement, and the division took up its advance eastward with a perfectly formed front. It had taken Waville, Gibercy, and several difficult hills before the armistice went into effect on Nov. 11. On this day the units on the extreme left were half way up the Cote de Moriment, and units on the right had taken Ville-devant-Chaumont. The total advance eastward was five kilometers, making a total of ten for the drive.

The 79th Division was organized in August, 1917, and was trained at Camp Meade, Md. It is composed of drafted men from Maryland and Pennsylvania, with about a thousand each from West Virginia, New York, and the District of Columbia. It went overseas in July, 1918, and underwent a training course at a training area near Dijon. It began leaving France for the United States on May 13. The whole division has now returned.