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NEW ZEALANDERS IN ACTION.

NEWS FROM FRANCE.

GREAT DAYS WITH THE DIVISION.

(Extract from "N.Z. Chronicle," Dec 6, 1918.)

THE TAKING OF LE QUESNOY.

The storming and capture of Le Quesnoy by the Rifle Brigade was one of the most picturesque and romantic incidents of the war. The old fortress which has stood many sieges is still wonderfully strong with precipitous ramparts of well-preserved bastions crowned with tall trees, and a dry moat fronting the inner ramparts. Many besiegers have had a tilt at it in olden times. In 1793 Austrians stormed it after ten days' bombardment, which laid the town in ruins. Though ultimately it fell to one battalion—the 4th—the credit of its capture belongs almost equally to the other battalions of the Brigade, which fought so gallantly and gradually enveloped the town in the face of determined opposition. The dawn was just breaking as our troops, who assembled overnight in the rain, advanced to the attack behind a magnificent barrage. Mingled with the bursting ordinary shells were shells of the medium and Stokes trench mortar, while, from others, descended a smoke curtain which screened the main advance and protected the flanks from a possibly deadly hail of machine-gun bullets. The fire at zero hour was truly terrific.

A high embankment of the railway fronting the outer ramparts was our first objective. This was strongly held, and gained only after stubborn fighting, during which several Germans were killed and wounded, and others taken prisoner. Approaching the ramparts another battalion—the 2nd—found a 77 mm. gun firing at it over open sights, making advance exceedingly difficult. Meanwhile other battalions were gradually encircling the town to the south and south-west, and the 4th Battalion, whose advance let us now follow, pushed patrols under cover of the barrage and smoke screen right up to the foot of the outer ramparts, and, in places, on to their bastion heights. When the smoke had gradually drifted away, there came the stammering noise of machine-guns, as belt after belt of German machine-gun bullets whistled through the trees at the advancing men. One platoon found itself cut off. Its commander was killed while endeavouring to extricate his men, and, in a hollow between two brick walls, a daring sergeant remained with his men for six hours.

As the sun rose and the bombardment slackened, the civilians saw our men on the outer ramparts and greeted them with distant cheers and the waving of flags, inspiring them to renewed efforts. But it was not till after mid-day that patrols began to mark down machine-guns and snipers, and systematically shifted them from the cover on the enfringed bastions. The positions were bombarded with the only available Stokes mortar, and, one after another, occupied. A narrow 30ft ladder was hauled along, and on this officers and men climbed to the top of the precipitous "W" shaped bastions dominating the line of advance. Messages sent into the garrison to surrender were so far without avail. One dropped by aeroplane told them that they were entirely surrounded. Later, an ultimatum, demanding surrender within two hours, and the opposition perceptibly slackened. But on some of the ramparts the men had apparently not received the news, and maintained a defensive attitude. This was the position when the 4th Battalion decided to scale the great moat and formidable rampart of brick crowned with machine-guns still in action. Only in one place was it possible to reach the bastion by means of their 30ft ladder. This was the spot where the low wall abutted on to the main rampart. In single file the officers led their men to the final attack. The track beaten by their feet leading between the trees and along the top of this narrow wall can still be seen. With Stokes mortar and the machine-guns the men drove the enemy on the reverse slope from the summit of the bastion. Then the ladder was placed against the wall. It barely reached to the top. Two second-lieutenants with three men ascended. Leaving the last rung they found themselves confronted by a few Germans, who, finding our bullets whistling about them, sought safety in flight, down the slope into an underground cavern, where other Boches were sheltering. Following upon

this initial success practically the whole battalion streamed quickly in single file along the lower wall, and up the single ladder. Headquarters, which throughout the day consisted of one signaller with a telephone and battalion commander and was being advanced by slow stages from point to point, now mounted the parapet, men paying out the telephone wire as they climbed. Patrols were pushed down the reverse slope, and the enemy sheltering underground began to surrender freely. Within a few minutes the whole battalion engaged in the vicinity had swarmed up the ladder and were pushing into the beleaguered town, through Rue Caillon, which was first swept with our machine-gun fire.

The inhabitants, realising that at last deliverance had come, rushed from cellars and houses, and soon from every building the tricolour was flying in the breeze. Along the street, thronged with an excited cheering multitude, the Diggers marched, embraced and kissed, and showered with autumn flowers. Enthusiasm knew no bounds. Here and there a rifle still cracked, our men taking no risks when they saw a Hun who had not surrendered. The excited civilians stuck flowers in the men's tunics and in even their respirators, and followed, cheering, to the main square, where the German commander, with a hundred men already drawn up, surrendered to a young captain, whom he formally saluted and to whom he handed his revolver.

Meanwhile other Germans had deliberately fired some of the houses, and dense columns of smoke arose and drifted across the northern ramparts. Two officers were sent with a hundred Germans to fight the flames. Other prisoners were rounded up in the main square. Close at hand was a great barbed wire enclosure, where the French men and women said our prisoners had been left in the rain without food or cover till some of them had died of hunger and exposure. They were surprised that we should treat the Germans so humanely.

The battalion brought its steaming cookers into the town, and the men, after their strenuous fighting, enjoyed a hot meal. The inhabitants pressed upon them the best accommodation their homes could afford. Many a Digger used to damp clay, slept that night in a warm, soft bed.

This morning the Divisional General and the Brigadier formally visited the town. The former, after a brief stay, rode off to the Forest of Mormal to see how his still-advancing troops were getting on. Beyond Quesnoy he established Divisional Headquarters in his motor car. The Brigadier remained to receive the congratulations and a civic welcome. The band of the 2nd Battalion played the "Marseillaise" and our National Anthem, amid renewed publications. Then the battalion, somewhat reduced in numbers, formed up in the square, and, headed by the band, marched past the Brigadier. Swinging down the main street, the little column was showered with flowers and flags. White-haired old men doffed their hats, but younger people, less sedate, followed, cheering and waving their tri-colours. Thus in a cold drizzle, but still in great heart, with band playing and flags flying, and a solitary English gun firing at a distant target, the New Zealanders marched out of the old town which they had delivered from a ruthless enemy.

WORK OF OTHER BRIGADES.

Yesterday and to-day will for ever remain Red Letter days in the history of the Division. Apart from the capture of Le Quesnoy by the Rifle Brigade, the splendid advance of the other Brigades must be regarded as almost unique. In two days the Division has advanced between eight and nine miles, fighting all the way. From west of Quesnoy it has passed through the great Forest of Mormal to within a short distance of the canalised Sambre. Yesterday Auckland and Wellington troops, under cover of a smoke barrage, broke through the German lines to the north of Quesnoy and stormed Rompeneau, Villereau, and Herbinges, through difficult country largely covered with orchards and hedges and dotted with farms. Penetrating right into the enemy battery positions they captured many guns, and by nightfall had established themselves half a mile inside the forest of Mormal on its western side.

Many German dead in the track of these troops and horse teams lie beside the abandoned guns.

The advance was continued to-day by the Otago and Canterbury troops, who gained objectives east of the forest 7,000 yards ahead and within about half a mile of the Sambre. The feature of this fighting was that they had to go the whole day through the forest without artillery support. It was an advance guard action almost the entire distance with only machine-gun support, and the artillery could move only along the outside roads and could not see what was doing in the forest, where the enemy had posted machine-guns at stars formed by the cross-roads. Progress was by no means easy. To-day about 150 prisoners were captured.

ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF LE QUESNOY.

In the telegrams already dispatched I have referred to the work of the three battalions of the Rifle Brigade. It may now be added that the 1st Battalion had a very hard row to hoe owing to the difficulties on their right flank. It was not want of valour of their neighbours, but rather a thin barrage on this part of the line that was responsible for this. In this battalion a commander and no fewer than ten officers were wounded, and though the commander continued to fight, so great was the loss in officers that it was undoubtedly a great handicap. Of all the battalions, the 3rd had apparently the easiest run through. It nevertheless had some extraordinary experiences. It had a few casualties from the enemy shelling about three in the morning in getting ready for the assembly. It followed the 1st Battalion, and in an early stage of the advance got into a dense fog. The fog was so dense that the left company could not be seen, and two runners were sent out to find it. Presently one of these runners came back with three automatic revolvers slung about him, and a broad smile under his tin hat. It appeared that in the fog his mate and he had suddenly stumbled upon a German machine-gun position. "I'm sorry I could not find the company, sir," he said, "but my mate is bringing up the machine-gun and what is left of the crew." Sure enough the other runner soon appeared with the machine-gun and these of the crew that had not been disposed of with revolvers. The runners had rushed the position, and these of the enemy who had not been killed had "kamaraded."

There was another incident that had a touch of comedy about it. The Battalion Commander sent a German officer into Le Quesnoy and three runners advanced their headquarters to an orchard. The Battalion Commander was standing on the road when he saw looming up through the fog a number of men, whom at first he took to be Tommies advancing from his right rear. Taking a second look at them he saw that they were Boche. Most of his men were sitting with their backs against apple trees and smoking cigarettes. Realising the danger, he called to them to prepare for action. They were eight to about eighty, but they sailed into the enemy with their revolvers, a second lieutenant rushing in with such vigour and determination that the Huns were taken completely off their guard and at once put up their hands, actually taking the revolvers out of the hands of the officers. They were Germans trying to get back to their garrison in Quesnoy. Amongst them was the messenger from the 1st Battalion whom they had captured, and he, too, quickly kamaraded, being afraid that his comrades would shoot him. Afterwards it was seen that these Germans had a machine-gun ready to fire. This Battalion Commander sent a German officer into Le Quesnoy with a message asking the garrison to surrender. A platoon officer took him up to the inner gate, before which the German burst into tears, being afraid that his own men would shoot him as a deserter. The Diggers, however, insisted that he should go. They saw no more of him. About three in the afternoon two more Germans were sent in with a message to say that if the garrison did not come out in batches of five at a time the New Zealanders would slaughter the whole lot. These two peace envoys returned and said that the German soldiers were willing to surrender, but the commandant would not agree. Apparently, however, this dire threat had the effect, for afterwards resistance gradually slackened, and the New Zealanders were over the top of the highest wall and into the citadel. One tank that the New Zealanders directed to a machine-gun nest that was holding up Tommies on the flank did really good work.

Two scouts did a very plucky thing. They ran into a party of 20 to 30 Huns, killed 12, and brought in the rest as prisoners. Another thing was the dropping of ammunition by our aeroplanes, a kindly and daring action, though our men were not in need of it.

The advance was so fast that those behind did not know of its extent, and ar-

tillery officers who came up to ask if it was safe to come as far with their guns were told that the line was already so far ahead the enemy running away but could not get at them. The initial barrage was magnificent and even terrorising to our own men, who in some places thought twice before starting after it. The noise and concussion were so great that some of the officers told me they suffered from headaches so severe that they could not sleep for nights after it. During the day several batches of Germans came in under a white flag as our troops advanced.

The German pioneers and transport personnel have been depleted to hold the front line, and generally there is a disinclination in the front line units. The enemy appears to be retreating fast to Mons and Maubeuge line. In the meantime orders have been issued in view of the German emissaries appearing on the front with the white flag to ask an armistice. In the recent fighting we have had losses and many good men have gone under, but never in the history of the Division have the Diggers been in better heart, and the moral is truly wonderful.

NEWS IN BRIEF

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Wellington has been destroyed by fire.

The Government proposals for the new Gaming Bill has been defeated.

Auckland waterside workers refused to handle 800 tons of coal at the Graham Sugar Works, in sympathy with the men on strike.

The contracts for the carrying of mail mails is fixed for a period of 12 months in the meantime. Canada leads in a efficient service and an investigation is made of its methods.

The Railway Department has commenced to pay the latest bonus to all sections of the service, including the locomotive, whose dispute has not been finally settled.

French and Belgian military chiefs have signed an agreement settling the general lines of a defensive alliance between the two countries. Political and economic questions have yet to be considered.

A conference of South Canterbury members of the Protestant Political Association endorsed the action of the Council of Churches in Christchurch in drawing the attention of the Prime Minister to the policy of the "New Zealand Tablet."

Mr David Francis, a former American Ambassador to Russia, has predicted that the Soviet will go to pieces in six months. He said the effect of the recent United States Note would be detrimental to Bolshevik rule.—Aus. N.Z. Cable Assn.

The "National Tidende" states that Trotsky, in a speech at Vilna, said that the solemn reception of Kamenef and Krassin as representatives of the Russian Government in London meant that the Western Powers recognised the Soviet Government. He added that Bolsheviks had captured the whole of Europe.

A great gathering of Freemasons, including New Zealand, British, American, and African delegates celebrated the centenary in Sydney of the establishment of the first Masonic Lodge in Australia.

M. Millerand stated at Le Quesnoy that he recalled the New Zealanders' heroism in delivering the town, and said that France did not contemplate re-commencing the horrors of war. "We have peace," he added, "and we want it to be definite."

A news item states that the church does not desire political martyrdom and that the Pope has telegraphed Archbishop Mannix asking him not to land in Ireland. Mannix denies the truth of this statement.

It is announced that Dempsey and Brennan have signed articles for a boxing match. The place, date, and number of rounds have not yet been determined, but it is understood that the bout will be held before June, 1921.

The Wyndham Horticultural Society has a sound financial body. Its assets in cash amount to £51 7s 11d, and shed and plant are valued at £45, making a total of £96 7s 11d.

The Queenstown folk have enthusiastically taken up the question of erecting a fallen soldiers' memorial. At the last meeting of the committee it was decided to secure designs in concrete from Mr. Auburn, of the Public Works Department, and in masonry from Mr. Fox, of Eiley and Co., Wellington.