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Fighting in France

Ross Kay

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"Forward!" shouted the captain in a loud, clear voice.
(Page 33.) *Frontispiece.*

"Forward!" shouted the captain in a loud, clear voice.

PREFACE

When the greatest war in the history of mankind rages in Europe it is not only natural but right that every one should be interested. History is being made every day and heroism is displayed, unrivalled in any previous conflict. In this book the author has striven to chronicle some of the valorous deeds and to relate some of the incidents and events that are part of the everyday life of the soldier who is fighting in France. It has been his aim to present the story devoid of sensationalism and to weave nothing of the impossible into the tale. Most of the episodes are founded on fact and while the book is not historical it has its inspiration from actual happenings.

Ross Kay.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"Forward!" shouted the captain in a loud, clear voice *Frontispiece*

Leon whirled swiftly in time to see a big-helmeted German with the butt end of his rifle upraised preparing to strike

The air was filled with smoke and dust from the crumbling plaster

"Let 'em have it!" cried Leon and the three automatic guns spoke almost as if they were one piece

FIGHTING IN FRANCE

CHAPTER I

A DUEL IN THE AIR

"Well, Leon, it looks as if there was going to be a fight around here pretty soon."

"Right you are, Earl. That suits me all right though and from the way the rest of the men are acting it seems to suit them too."

Earl and Leon Platt, two American boys in the army of the French Republic, were seated outside their quarters behind the fighting line. The scene was in Champagne, one of the provinces of France that already had witnessed some of the heaviest fighting of the Big War.

At the outbreak of the great European struggle these twin brothers had been traveling in Europe. Earl was in England with friends and Leon was visiting his aunt and uncle in a suburb just outside of Paris. At the earliest possible moment Leon had enlisted in the French army. Assigned to the aviation corps he had taken part in the great retreat from Belgium to the gates of the French capital. Slightly wounded at Charleroi, he had been in one of the hospitals for a few days.

When his wound had healed he had made his way south, arriving in time to take part in the battle of the Marne which rolled back the tide of German invasion and saved France. Through all these varying experiences and hardships Jacques Dineau, a young Frenchman, had been his inseparable companion. These two boys, for they were nothing more than that, had more than once distinguished themselves for bravery and daring until they had become the favorites of their regiment. Now they were stationed in Champagne, in the trenches, where for weeks and months both sides had been deadlocked, neither able to push the other back.

With the declaration of war Leon's parents had naturally been anxious as to his safety and not hearing from him had instructed Earl to find his missing brother at all hazards. This Earl had en-

deavored to do and after many kinds of adventures had finally been successful. The lure of further adventure however had attracted him and he too had enlisted. Now all three boys were in the same company of the same regiment.

"Yes, sir," exclaimed Jacques, who spoke English with only the slightest suspicion of an accent, "there will certainly be some real fighting soon. It will seem good after all these months of quiet."

"I shouldn't describe them as especially quiet," laughed Earl grimly.

"I mean," explained Jacques, "that we have been in the trenches all the time. Now we will have a chance to get out of them; perhaps for good."

"If we can break the German lines," suggested Leon.

"We will give them an awful bump anyway," laughed Jacques.

"And we'll lose half our men," added Leon soberly.

"We do not think of that," exclaimed Jacques proudly. "We are assigned to the front line, the post of honor. We will lead the charge and I think we are very lucky."

"The other regiments are jealous of us anyway," said Earl. "When does the attack start?"

"To-morrow morning at nine-fifteen sharp."

"And we'll move into the first line trenches tonight I suppose."

"Exactly."

"That's it," exclaimed Leon. "Pierre Garemont told me not thirty minutes ago that he had just been talking with Captain Le Blanc and that was the information he received."

"I suppose everything is arranged," said Earl.

"You may be sure of that," said Jacques heartily. "Our officers are not the kind to send us into a battle without doing everything that is possible."

"Think of the artillery support we'll have," cried Leon enthusiastically. "I don't see how they can stop us."

"How much will we have?" demanded Earl.

"Our guns will drop four shells every minute in every yard of German trenches. Think of that."

"You mean," exclaimed Earl, "that in every space three feet long a shell will explode every fifteen seconds?"

"I certainly do."

"It seems incredible," muttered Earl. "Why, there'll be nothing left of them."

"That is just what we want," cried Jacques. "When we smash their trenches to pieces then we can drive them out of our country and France will be free once more."

"I suppose our batteries will all have the exact range," said Earl.

"You need not worry about that," smiled Jacques. "The exact location of every German trench is marked to the inch on our officers' maps. What do you think our aviators are for? Don't you know that they take pictures of the enemy's fortifications from their machines and that all the pictures are developed and enlarged? Oh, they'll have the range all right. You'll see."

"Look!" cried Leon suddenly. "Here comes one of our aerial scouts now."

Far away in the eastern sky a tiny speck appeared. It approached rapidly and increased in size as it came nearer. At least four thousand feet above the trenches the great mechanical bird flew and the three young soldiers watched it in silent admiration.

Suddenly a puff of white smoke appeared below the aeroplane.

"The Germans are firing at it," cried Earl.

"And there goes one of their machines up after it," exclaimed Jacques as another speck appeared against the horizon. It was lower than the French machine but rose in great circles with amazing speed until it had reached a point above its enemy. At this point it headed west and sped in pursuit of the French aeroplane.

"One of those new *fokkers*," remarked Jacques quickly.

"The German machine, you mean?" queried Leon.

"Yes. They are very fast too."

"He'll never come over our line though," said Earl. "He'll turn back soon."

"There goes another of our machines up to help," exclaimed Leon.

From the aviation field in the rear of their quarters came a great clatter and noise. A moment later a big monoplane came into view and rising rapidly higher and higher set out to the aid of its companion.

Meanwhile the first aviator, pursued by the German *fokker*, had evidently determined to give battle. He dipped suddenly and shot downward at incredible speed. All about him the bombs from the high-angle guns of the enemy were exploding and it did not seem possible that he could escape. The cheering of their comrades in the trenches came faintly to the ears of the three watching boys.

"He'll be hit," cried Leon tensely.

"Wait," cautioned Jacques.

The aeroplane still raced towards the earth. Suddenly it began to rise and up, up, it soared. Higher and higher it went, describing huge circles in its flight. The little white clouds all about told with what zeal its destruction was sought, but still it kept on. Now it had reached a level as high as the giant *fokker*. Meanwhile the other French machine raced to its aid.

"You'll see the German turn back now," predicted Jacques.

"Why shouldn't he?" demanded Earl. "It's two to one."

"His only hope is to disable the first machine before the other comes up," said Jacques. "Otherwise he'll have to run for it."

"How high do you suppose they are now?" asked Earl.

"Five thousand feet," said Leon. "Is that about right, Jacques?"

"I should think so; just about," replied the young Frenchman.

Almost every soldier in the great camp was standing, gazing skyward at the combat going on among the clouds over their heads. These duels in the air were not infrequent but they never lost their power to thrill. To see two huge mechanical birds each maneuver-

ing for a chance to strike a death blow to its rival was a sight to stir the blood of any man, no matter how often he had seen its duplicate before.

"What did I tell you?" demanded Jacques suddenly.

The *fokker* turned at the approach of its second enemy and in full retreat made for the German lines. The two French machines did not attempt a pursuit, but after one or two triumphant circles were headed for home. A few moments later they passed directly over the spot where the three young soldiers were seated, on their way to their respective hangars.

"Why didn't they chase that fellow?" exclaimed Leon. "They were two to one and it seems to me they had a great chance to bring him down."

"You must remember this," Jacques reminded him. "He had a good start on them and, if anything, had a faster machine than theirs. Then that scout of ours may have very important news for headquarters as a result of his observations. He probably wants to report as soon as he can."

"That's true," said Leon. "I had almost forgotten this attack tomorrow I got so excited watching the aeroplanes."

"You started to tell what Captain Le Blanc said," Earl reminded his brother. "Go ahead and finish what you heard."

"Well," said Leon, "he said that everything was ready. He even knew the number of German batteries that will be opposed to us; he also knew just what regiments hold the line opposite. He said that along the whole length of our front line steps had been cut in the trenches so that we can climb out easily. The barbed-wire entanglements have had little lanes cut through them every few feet so we can get through without any trouble."

"Whew," whistled Earl. "It looks as if we meant business all right."

"We surely do," agreed Leon. "We're to carry along bridging to form pathways across the German trenches so we can bring up our guns and supplies quickly. All shoes and extra clothes and blankets are to be turned into the quartermaster; every man is to put on clean underclothes so that if he is wounded he won't be infected. You're

to have your gas-masks ready and every one will receive one hundred and thirty extra rounds, making two hundred and fifty in all."

"When do we move into the trenches?" asked Jacques.

"Ten o'clock to-night."

"And final inspection is when?"

"One hour before that."

"We'd better get ready," exclaimed Jacques. "It's almost supper-time now and we've got lots to do."

Every man who passed their tent seemed, to be unusually business-like. No one seemed nervous or worried, but perhaps a little more serious than usual. But there was not a man among all those thousands who was not glad that on the morrow he was to come up out of his hole in the ground and meet his enemy face to face. An air of quiet confidence pervaded the camp; the air was full of it and one glance at these grim-visaged warriors of France was enough to convince any observer that they were eager for the battle to come.

CHAPTER II

PREPARATIONS

At nine o'clock that evening all arrangements had been completed and the final inspection held. The last letters were deposited at the regimental post-office, a most solemn ceremony. Many a long thought passed through the minds of the soldiers as they mailed what might be their final messages to their loved ones.

"I don't like this business of hanging around," whispered Jacques in Leon's ear. "I'd like to get started."

"So should I," agreed Leon. "It seems sort of weird standing here in the darkness with thousands of men all about you, all waiting for the same order that we are."

The night was clear and the stars were unusually brilliant. Not a cloud appeared and the long lines of troops resting on their arms

looked like misshapen hedgerows in the faint light. The roar of the French artillery came distinctly to the ears of these men who stood and waited. Every man knew why it was that its activity was so greatly increased that night. Their guns were playing a stream of metal death on every yard and foot and inch of the opposing trenches. Not a spot in the German lines but was being searched by these great mechanical monsters.

"Listen!" warned Earl suddenly.

Nearby some man had started to sing the Marseillaise. Soon others joined in and the chorus swelled as man after man lent his voice to that stirring anthem. In a few moments every soldier present was singing and even the roar of the great guns became faint and indistinct as the thousands of throats chanted the great hymn of victory.

A thrill ran up and down Leon's spine. He used to regard the Marseillaise as the national anthem and had often heard it sung without any particular feeling. Since the war had started, however, it had seemed different to him. As the soldiers sang it, biting out each word sharp and short, it had become a battle-cry. He realized how terribly in earnest these Frenchmen were who stood there in the darkness and hurled defiance at their German foes.

At length the order came to move. Slowly the column moved out of the camp and turning to the right marched down the road leading to the trenches. On both the right and left could be seen other columns moving in parallel lines and in the same direction.

"Who are they?" whispered Earl.

"I can't tell," replied Jacques in answer to his comrade's query. "Both regiments are attached to our division though, I think."

Slowly and at the same pace the three columns advanced. The men were unusually quiet and none of the customary bantering was present. Perhaps every man was busied with the thought of what was going to happen to him at quarter past nine the next day.

"This seems like a funeral march," exclaimed Leon in a low voice.

"And I don't like it, either," added Earl.

"Wait," cautioned Jacques. "Everyone's spirits will revive in a few minutes. The strain will wear off soon."

His prediction proved to be correct. A short time later the pace was quickened and the murmur of low-voiced conversations could be heard. The men even began to tease one another and tell jokes. It seemed almost incredible that men preparing to face what they were to meet-on the morrow could be so light-hearted.

"Here we come to the trenches," exclaimed Jacques. "What time is it?"

"Just eleven o'clock," said Earl, consulting his watch.

"An hour so far," murmured Jacques.

One by one the soldiers filed into the trench. All talking ceased and mile after mile they moved forward. In single-file the men marched through the communicating trench. Every little while a lateral trench appeared and as they came closer to the front these trenches increased in number. The roar of the giant guns steadily became louder and louder.

Soon the lateral trenches became very numerous. Every one was filled with soldiers, their arms resting on the ground. They eyed the regiment filing past them enviously and were apparently curious to know why it had been selected to lead the charge in preference to themselves.

"Who are you?" demanded one man.

"*La douzième*," said Jacques.

"Ah," said the man. "I see."

It was a famous regiment to which these three boys belonged and its record for daring and bravery was known by all the army. No wonder it had been chosen to lead the advance. If anyone could get through, *la douzième* was that one. A feeling of confidence pervaded the regiment and the knowledge that the army shared that feeling was a source of satisfaction to every member.

"Look!" exclaimed Leon suddenly. "What place is this?"

"There's not much left of it whatever it is," replied Jacques grimly.

The regiment had suddenly emerged from the trench into the street of a village. At least it had once been a village, but only its ghost now remained. Every house had been bombarded and bat-