

Americans at the
Second Battle of the Marne
by a German Officer

Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society
Vol. VII, No. 2 (April 1922)

Digital Antiquaria

PDF © 2005

Morristown, NJ

www.digitalantiquaria.com

Digital Antiquaria

The Second Battle of the Marne

by a German Officer

THE FOLLOWING eye-witness account, by a German Officer, of that part of the second Battle of the Marne in which he personally participated, was obtained, with some other similar papers of German origin, and sent to Major W. I. Lincoln Adams, of Montclair, by a young relative of his, who is an Intelligence Officer, now stationed with our military forces on the Rhine. The narrative describes, from the German point of view, of course, the first appearance of our soldiers in action in the Great War, and is of particular interest because it gives an apparently sincere and truthful account of the impression the American soldiers made upon their German adversaries.

The account begins with a graphic description of the advance to the River Marne, and then proceeds as follows:

"We cross the river comparatively quickly. We look at our watches: 'For heaven's sake, the barrage is already advancing!' 'Form ranks!' New objectives are given the companies, since everything has turned out differently than was planned.

"The railway is crossed, the station of Varennes taken after a short combat, across the Moulins-Varennes road - we are already 1000 meters south of the Marne - and up the southern slope of the valley. Sharp firing and cries come from the right. In the early fog, raiding parties in brown uniforms are seen advancing through the high cornfields, - Americans! They stand still now and then, and fire. Our soldiers run toward the rear. The situation is extremely critical. Where are our neighbors, the 6th Grenadiers? Their attack must have failed. Does the artillery see nothing? They are continuing their rolling fire 'according to plans.' That lasts until 11 A.M., and then they are ready for other tasks. But even then they probably would not have been able to accomplish them, because the observation of the battle is very difficult; the mist on the ground renders the view indistinct; the corn is high; movements are made invisible by the numerous small woods and orchards. The leaders of the 2nd and Fusilier Battalions, Captains von Plehwe and Eben, who are at the front of their companies, recognize that there is grave danger in delay. Everyone who knows how to shoot turns toward the right flank of the enemy. We must admit that he is tremendously courageous. Only after the hail of the machine guns and the desperate firing of the infantry have reaped a bloody harvest in his ranks does he come to a standstill. We feel relieved. But everyone realizes that our own attack has failed. We must see that we hold the positions gained with our weak forces, numerically inferior to the enemy.

"The railway seems well-adapted for defense. It is somewhat elevated and also affords shelter against fire, but, on the other hand, it is naturally a good target for the enemy's artillery. The units farthest advanced are methodically withdrawn to this point. The right flank, which is exposed, is strongly protected. Connection with the neighbor on our left is established about 11 A.M. His advance was somewhat easier, but he is having a hard time fighting now. Strong elements of Grenadier Regiment No. 6, which had been placed to our right for the attack, crossed the stream, but then met a too-powerful enemy and were destroyed. Great numbers of the regiment are marching off as prisoners through the Surmelin Valley, through which we were to have made the attack. One of our companies - the 6th, under command of 2nd

The Second Battle of the Marne

by a German Officer

Lieutenant Oberg - which, strangely enough, had penetrated the enemy's lines, takes them to be advancing German troops and goes forward 4 kilometers on the eastern slope of the Surmelin Valley, straight towards the enemy. Below, to the right, American infantry columns are marching; above, to the left, the enemy batteries are firing incessantly, until at last the small group is noticed. It is having a hard time now, but holds out courageously until evening. Its brave leader and a few men fight their way back in the night through the enemy's lines to another German unit and rejoin us. That was a bright spot, but the only one during this operation, and that is why I mention it.

"On the afternoon of July 15th [1918], we succeeded in improving our line somewhat, as the enemy withdrew his a little, probably for fear of a double flanking movement. But that changed nothing in the final result of the day, which was the worst defeat of the war. It was only necessary to descend the northern slope of the Marne Valley. I have never seen so many dead, never such fearful scenes of battle. The Americans had annihilated two entire companies of ours in close combat on the opposite bank. They had lain in the corn in a semi-circle, had permitted them to approach and then, at a distance of go to 50 paces, shot down almost all of them. It must be admitted that this enemy had good nerves. 'The Americans are killing everybody!' was the cry of horror on July 15th, which long remained in the memory of our men. But people at home scoffed at the insufficient training of the enemy, at the American 'bluff' and at other things! That we left, in dead or wounded, on the battlefield, more than 60% of the troops which had been led into battle, is chiefly due to the Americans."

The name of the German Officer who wrote this interesting account is not given; the young American officer who procured and sent it to Major Adams is Captain John Cheney Platt, Jr., U.S.A., a member of the Montclair Chapter, Sons of the American Revolution.