

FAME IS A FLEETING THING



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The quiet darkness of the night was suddenly shattered as a storm of incoming artillery shells shrieked and then exploded with deafening crashes, throwing up masses of dirt and stone. Flares popped and small arms fire erupted along with the crunching detonation of hand grenades. Wild screams and yells — in both German and English — joined the racket. It was 0230, 4 November 1917, and a German combat patrol was attacking the out-post line of Company F, 16th United States Infantry.

The fight lasted about 10 minutes before the German patrol withdrew, reaching its own lines seconds before Allied artillery fire came crashing down just in front of the American position. Minutes later, American officers and noncommissioned officers began sorting out the damage: a sergeant and 10 men were missing, 11 others were wounded, and three were dead. Corporal James B. Gresham's jugular vein had been severed; Private First Class Thomas Enright had been shot through the heart; and Private Merle D. Hay's skull had been crushed by a rifle butt.

Within 48 hours, and for some years afterward, the names of Gresham, Enright, and Hay would be recognized by a generation of Americans that now has almost disappeared. As the first Americans killed in action in World War I, they were accorded heroes' treatment. Today, they are virtually unknown.

Their story really begins on 6 April 1917. On that day the United States had declared that a state of war existed with Imperial Germany. At the time, the 16th Infantry Regiment was in garrison at Fort Bliss, Texas, its ranks far below an authorized war strength total of 3,100. Still, its levels of conditioning and training were probably pretty solid, because the unit had just returned from duty with General John J. Pershing chasing the forces of Pancho Villa in Mexico. Gresham and Enright had taken part in that expedition. (Gresham, who listed his hometown as Evansville, Indiana, had enlisted in the Regular Army at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri, in April 1914. Enright, born and raised in Bloomfield, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Pittsburgh, had joined in November 1915.)

Enright, apparently, had come from somewhat unfortunate circumstances. Both his mother and father had died by the time he was 14, so the elder of his two sisters took him in, and he lived with her until he joined the Army.

Exactly when young Merle D. Hay of Glidden, Iowa, joined the 16th Infantry is not clear. The extant records show that he enlisted at Fort Logan, Colorado, on 11 May 1917. A post-war newspaper account said that Hay and a number of his hometown buddies had volunteered in the initial rush. If Hay was sent directly to the 16th Infantry at Fort Bliss, it is probable that he had been barely uniformed when the regiment was ordered to move by train on 3 June for Hoboken, New Jersey, bound for France.

The move was done with much secrecy, and it was dark on the evening of 8 June when the long line of sleeping cars squeaked to a halt outside the city. If there had been any doubt in anyone's mind as to where the train was headed, it was gone now.

The urgent need to show the American flag, to march units of big, young, eager American soldiers before the eyes of a war-weary, partially demoralized, exhausted France had been recognized early by the War Department. To that end, the Department had hurriedly typed up plans and orders to quickly combine existing Regular Army units into the 1st Infantry Division — the Big Red One — and to ship it to France beginning in June 1917. The division's four infantry regiments were to be the first contingent, since their 12,400 bayonets would be flashing, visible evidence that American combat troops soon would be available to shore up depleted British and French divisions.

As the long troop trains neared Hoboken and then stopped, Gresham, Enright, and rookie Hay, along with their companions aboard the trains, most likely peered from the windows, eyes straining to catch sight of the glimmering lights of New York City in the distance.

With darkness on 9 June, the men were ordered off the cars and into ranks, and then marched along ill-frequented and sparsely inhabited side streets to the docks. By 10 June, all were aboard transports, which, surrounded by puffing and tooting tugs, were soon pulled from the piers out into the river and down into New York's lower bay.

Sixteen days later, on 26 June, the transports backed down in speed and came to a stop off St. Nazaire, France. The word came down that Company K, 28th Infantry would be the first unit to land.

The Americans were slow in getting ashore, because there weren't enough docks available to hold them. In fact, it would take from the 26th till the 30th before all were ashore. The first landings were made, to the surprise of the American soldiers, with little or no fanfare, crowds, or celebrations. The local citizens simply didn't know they were coming!

If Gresham, Enright, and Hay, and the rest of Company F, 16th Infantry, had any ideas about lots of time off to see the sights of Paris and the French countryside, they received a rough shock. A rigid, exhausting training schedule began at once. There was only one short break in the schedule, and that came on 4 July.

TRAINING

The training plan adopted by General Pershing, now commander of the American Forces in France, called for the 1st Division to spend its first month in acclimatization and in training the individual soldiers, many of whom, like Hay, barely had had time to learn how to march before they found themselves in France. Squad, platoon, company, and rudimentary battalion drills also had to be crammed into that first month. During the second month, the battalions would be fed into the lines, under French control, for actual combat indoctrination, and in the third month the division would undergo division-level training.

In that first month, then, much had to be done. The division had arrived not only lacking in training at all levels but lacking in everything except the fine Springfield



rifles the infantrymen carried on their shoulders. In fact, Pershing's entire force, for the rest of the war, would be like a poor, third cousin borrowing for its day-to-day existence from the French and the English.

Not only did men like Private Hay have to be taught the rudiments of drill and rifle marksmanship, he and his corporals, sergeants, and company officers had to learn how to operate and maintain a whole bag of non-American weapons — the heavy French Hotchkiss machinegun that was fed by strip clips, the tinny-looking French Chauchat light machinegun, the British-style Mills bomb or fragmentation grenade, the stubby little 37mm or one-pounder infantry cannon.

New tactics had to be learned: how to dig a trench and defend it, how to survive a pre-attack bombardment, how to clear away barbed wire, how to maintain cohesion in an over-the-top infantry attack, how to wear and use the gas mask, and many other aspects of then-modern trench warfare. Squad leader Gresham no doubt had as much to learn as did assistant squad leader Enright and rookie Hay and the rest of Company F. All suspected they'd be going into the line before Thanksgiving.

To some it came sooner, on 20 October. The first battalions of each of the division's four regiments were ordered into the lines, sandwiched between and supported by veteran French units.

The men of Company F, part of its regiment's 2d Battalion, knew their chance would soon come, probably in a week or ten days. As it turned out, there wasn't that much of a wait: The warning order to the battalion came

down from division headquarters on 23 October; the battalion was to begin moving 1 November and was to replace the 1st Battalion in the line the next night.

The sector had remained quiet during the period the first battalions had held the lines. There had been occasional rifle shots and sporadic artillery exchanges as each side checked and rechecked their gunnery registrations. The first American soldier had been wounded on 23 October, but happily had survived. No German raids or attacks had marred the quiet.

RELIEF

It was unusually dark and cold the night of 2 November as the 2d Battalion moved up through muddy zigzag communications trenches to relieve the 1st Battalion. By midnight, the relief was accomplished.

For the men of Company F, the war was beginning for real. The tiring training days lay behind them; they were now to be tested under fire, even if they were in a so-called quiet sector where battered divisions were sent to rebuild and recover.

Quickly and quietly, Company F deployed onto a small bald hilly salient or bulge in the trench line near the little village of Bathelement. The position was called the "Artois center of resistance." The Americans, when daylight came, would be able to sneak a look at the distant Rhine-Marne canal. But at this moment the men of Company F knew almost nothing of their surroundings.

The first platoon was led into a trench called Est, facing northeast. Fifteen men were singled out in groups of five and assigned to three sentry posts called P1, P2, and P3, which were 100 yards ahead of Est trench. The trench itself was garrisoned by 20 men, divided into three groups. The second and third platoons were placed in trenches called the Boyau Nord position, facing north. Both flanks were covered by French machinegun detachments, and artillery fire support would come from French units with the 1st Division's batteries helping out. Control was strictly French; American tactical command stopped at the company level.

The relief completed and the positions manned, the men began adjusting themselves physically and mentally to their first hours in the trenches. They pulled their long heavy woolen overcoats about their bodies to ward off the cold. Many tried to get some sleep in dugouts or huddled on the firestep at the bottom of the trench. Only those on sentinel duty stayed awake, their eyes straining to pierce the blackness ahead, ears alert for any unusual noise in no man's land out front.

But no doubt many of those huddled in the trench or in the dugouts slept only a fitful sleep, a half-doze, their nerves keyed for instant reaction. Not a man in the trench had ever pulled a trigger at a live German, or had even seen one, for that matter, other than a few prisoners working in the rear areas. Feelings that night were no doubt a mixture of apprehension and anxiety, of fear and determination.

Then, at about 0230, the world seemed to explode about them. Company officers and sergeants yelled to the men to take cover in the deep dugouts; only the men on

guard were to remain above. These hugged the shelter of the trench walls, hardly able to venture a look over the top in the face of the heavy shelling.

The German fire shifted and began falling on the flanks and the rear of the company's position, effectively isolating the American platoon in an intense box barrage. Now different-sounding explosions were heard out front in the protective barbed wire. Perhaps some of the Americans recognized them as coming from explosive charges on long poles that were shoved under the wire supports and detonated — bangelore torpedoes, they were called.

The next thing the stunned Americans heard and saw was a shower of German potato-masher hand grenades landing at Est trench and on the Boyau Nord position. Seconds later, dark forms in huge helmets leaped into the American trenches at the junction of Boyau Nord and Est trench. The few Americans at that point were overwhelmed.

The Germans then broke up into smaller groups and started fanning out right and left, fighting their way westward up Boyau Nord and southward to Est trench. The stunned Americans fell back. The German party working westward came upon an American sentinel, probably Private Hay, and killed him.

By now, though, the Americans were recovering, and rifle-toting Yanks swarmed out of their dugouts in the area directly behind. They stormed forward and the German raiders, not interested in this, began to withdraw.

Out in front, the three sentry parties had taken cover when the shelling began. Now, as the shelling shifted to the flanks and rear, the men came out of their dugouts



and began making their way toward the noise of fighting in Est trench. They stumbled into the Germans who were returning, prisoner-laden, toward their own lines. A flurry of firing broke out — but then it was all over. American and French artillery fire began to crash into the open ground in front, but it was too late. After another ten minutes the night was again black and quiet.

CEREMONY

The next day there was a full ceremony for the burial of the three dead Americans. Later, the French would erect a monument to the men in the village of Bathele-ment.

Word of the deaths had passed with amazing speed. By 5 November, the next of kin had received the news in telegrams from the War Department. Newspapers seized on the story, and there was an immediate outcry to bring the bodies of the three fallen men home for interment.

But it was not until 1921 that the War Department began the repatriation of war dead whose next of kin wished their remains brought home. In the case of Gresham, Enright, and Hay, the choice, unanimously, was to bring them home.

The three bodies were shipped from Antwerp, Belgium, on the U.S. Army Transport *Wheaton* on 19 June 1921. Thirteen days later the ship docked at Hoboken and telegrams were sent advising the next of kin of their arrival and that the remains were being shipped to addresses provided by the War Department. The three caskets were then readied for shipment from Pennsyl-

vania Station, each escorted by a soldier in uniform from Company F, 16th Infantry.

Word of the event had begun to spread. The Governor of Indiana requested that Gresham's body be allowed to rest in state in the State Capitol for 24 hours before the final burial in the Locust Hill Cemetery in Evansville.

Enright's remains were transported to Pittsburgh where the body lay in state at the local memorial hall before being transferred to St. Paul's Catholic Church for services. A grand parade of veteran and civic groups then escorted the hearse to nearby St. Mary's Cemetery. The city of Pittsburgh officially renamed Prema Street — Enright's boyhood address — Enright Street, and a local theater was also given his name. Today, both are gone.

Hay's remains went to his home in Glidden, Iowa. The reinterment service there was attended by veterans of the Civil War, the Spanish-American War, and World War I, following a period of lying in state in the local American Legion headquarters. A wreath of flowers from General Pershing decorated the grave site.

Today there are probably few people who have ever heard of the names of Gresham, Enright, and Hay.

Fame is a fleeting thing. Tragic fame is even more fleeting.



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