STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF FORESTS IN THE WAR

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"Woods are an ornament in peace and a fortification in war," wrote Cicero two thousand years ago. Was he thinking at the time of the barbarian invasions which menaced the Roman world and which destruction of the forests of Gaul by the legions of Caesar succeeded only momentarily in arresting? Certainly in uttering this aphorism, eternal and true and now more than ever justified, the prince of Latin orators could not foresee the war in which we have been engaged for more than four years, and in which the woods and forests of France have perhaps played as vital a role as our cannon. It is to wood—wood in all its forms, utilized behind, within, and in front of our trenches—that we owe our ability, in spite of inferior numbers, to hold in check the barbarian hordes invading our native soil.

No one could have anticipated that modern war—prepared for, in fact, as a war wholly of movement—would have become for long months a war of position, transforming our front, from the North to the East, into a vast entrenched camp, and demanding wood in the most diverse forms, from entanglement stakes or telephone pole cross-arms, to timbers buried several feet below ground, from the smallest coppice pole to the most majestic veteran of the forest. Our French forests were fortunately very rich. Thanks to the conservative foresight of our foresters since the organization of the present conscientious and devoted forest administration, they have been able to satisfy all needs in spite of the important and more and more numerous demands of the army.

While this is not the chief role which foresters and military men have believed the forests would play if war, always menacing, should unchain its ravages on our country, can anyone say that they have failed to measure up to all the expectations which the facts of history, classic through repetition since the most remote times, might arouse? By no means; our woods and our forests have not only given us unreservedly of their riches to enable us to hold our own against the invader, but they have also played a no less glorious part in the episodes of this unforgettable war, which will unquestionably remain the most terrible and most monstrous war of modern times.
In the days now far distant when we sat on the benches of the Forestry School at Nancy, our comrades will recall that we were taught that our woods and forests would play a dual role in war. In proportion to their extent they could have, on the one hand, a tactical influence as points of support in particular corners of the field of battle, while on the other hand, when affording a continuance screen, they could play a most important and valuable part as a mask for widespread movements and for important maneuvers of large masses of troops.

It is considerations of this sort that for four years we have expounded to our pupils at the National Institute of Agronomy. How many of them have been able to verify in person the truth of these theories; how many have unhappily wet with their blood the soil of a wood our men who fought to the death under the shade of these unfortunate woods—which are now themselves gone and for so long a time—appreciated too well their tactical value!

Can we minimize the strategic value of our more continuous forests, any more than we can deny that the smaller patches, often only a few hundred acres in extent and without a name until baptized with some title suggested by their shape—"square," "triangular," "star-shaped woods"—have played a truly military role in the defense of our front? Let no one be so deceived. Our great French forests, from the Vosges to the sea, have often stripped the invader of his offensive powers.

In 1914 the German armies of the East are held up on the crest of the Vosges from Mulhouse to the forests of

Photograph by Underwood and Underwood

NORTHERN FRANCE—A BATTLE-SCARRED AREA, AS IT APPEARS TODAY

A scene at sunset on the National Road between Soissons and Chaumont, once the very center in the turmoil of battle. These skeletons—mute and pathetic witnesses—are all that remain of the once magnificent avenue of trees which lined the road.

the tactical importance of which they fully understood, and which it had been their mission to defend at any price?

This conception of the military role of forests, based as it is upon the numerous and exact data of history, should not and cannot be minimized when we consider this latest war. Is it necessary to recall the names, forever celebrated, of the woods of le Pretre, of la Grurie, and of Mortemart, where thousands of our soldiers were cut to pieces by shells in defending the approach against the repeated attacks of the infamous Boche? Those of Parroy before Luneville. The great forests of Alsace, of the Vosges, and of Lorraine permitted us to regroup our forces. Epinal was saved. At the same time the defense of the Grand Couronne of Nancy succeeded in supporting itself in the important forests of Champenois and of the plateau of Haye.

When, after having jumped the defiles of the Islettes and of the Chalade in the Argonne, the victorious hordes tried to menace our lines of communication in the rear while themselves advancing on the Marne, it was again the great forests of Trois-Fontaines, in front of Saint-
Dizier, which saved this important nucleus of roads and railways and enabled us to prevent the Boche from reaching the Marne from above Vitry-le-Francois.

To the west the army of von Kluck, seeking to isolate the bulk of the French army in front of the capital and thinking to enter Paris without striking a blow, appeared to forget the dense defensive screen constituted by the forests of Villers-Cotterets and of Compiegne. Thanks to this the army of Manoury accomplished its rapid movement and fell upon the left flank of the German army. Paris, one can say without exaggeration, was saved the first time by its forests.

It is thanks to these again in July, 1918, that Marshal Foch, supporting himself on the projections of the forest of Villers-Cotterets and of Compiegne worked out the offensive that later developed into the brilliant victory that we admire today, and that gave our arms the decision in this unforgettable campaign. The great forests of Retz (Villers-Cotterets) and Guise (Compiegne)—advanced bastions in the defense of the entrenched camp of Paris—permitted the Generalissimo and his lieutenants to mass fresh divisions and important groups of artillery out of sight of the enemy’s aviators. The latter sought to jump the gap at Soissons between Compiegne and Villers-Cotterets. From the forests of Compiègne, of Pierrefonds, and of Villers-Cotterets our counter attacks issued in force, consciously supported by artillery well secreted from all indiscriminate reconnaissance. Paris was saved again! The capital may well be grateful to the forests that surround it.

If we look at things from the point of view of the enemy, we see that the important forests of Saint-Gobain permitted him to retard the victorious advance of our troops and to defend the important stronghold of Laon, which made a deeper and deeper pocket in our steadily advancing line. In front of Mangin’s army the German retreat was favored by the wooded nature of the country which is covered by a dense screen of forest. The movement of transportable material and of enemy units was well protected by the shade of our forests, behind which the Boche found a protective shelter. And if one stops to look at the map, without which one may easily go astray, he will find between the Sambre and the Moselle the immense screen of forests which succeeded in 1914 in masking the concentration of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th German armies.

According to General Mallister: “North of the Oise, the Serre, and the Aisne, the forests of Mormal, Nouvion, Richeval, Signy Mazarin, Saint-Pierre-Mont, and Dieulet, the woods of the northern Argonne to the north of Grandpré, then to the east of the Meuse the forest of Woëvre, the woods of Danvillers and the forest of Moutyevre, surrounding Brécy, form an almost continuous cover on the accentuated hills. The great wooded region of the Ardennes shows itself in the north, between the Sambre and the Meuse, as an extended mass of sombre woods—the forests of Trelon and Saint Michel. East of the Meuse the forests spread out indeﬁnitely over the vast plateau of the Ardennes up to Moselle. Mons, Maubeuge, Mazeres, Sedan, Montmedy, Langwy,
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and Briey mark the vast and undulating line of forest in Belgium and France."

It is in this great zone, and under the protection of the immense forests of our northern frontier, that Ludendorff tried to direct the retreat of his armies when once forced to abandon the forest of Saint Gobain, the central bulwark of the Hindenburg line. As was foreseen, the forests of the Ardennes offered to Ludendorff a favorable ground for the establishment of a new center of re-
time, the forests have played a glorious and momentous part in the campaign.

This should not be forgotten when we now think of repairing the immense disasters and the bleeding wounds suffered by these majestic forests. As evidence of our gratitude for the part the forests have played, let us leave to nature, intelligently aided by the work of foresters, the task of patiently reconstructing them. Nature is a good mother; she knows how to do things quickly

FOREST DESTRUCTION ALONG THE FIGHTING LINE

This before the war was a well wooded ridge, the famous Mesmea Ridge from which the British drove the Boche by terrific shell fire. The photograph shows what is left of the trees after the several torrides of shell, machine gun and rifle fire which swept over the ridge.

sistance around which the German right wing could pivot. The resumption of our offensive in the north surprised him. Von Hutier received the order to vacate the pocket of the Laon and to abandon the precious support of the forest of St. Gobain. He concentrated all his forces on the plateau which follows the canal from the Oise to the Sambre, supporting himself in the rear on the forests of Mormal and the Nouvion—that immense green block which the map shows us to the north of the Cateau. The forest of Mormal, more than 9 miles long and about 6 miles deep, constituted for the enemy a point of solid support and a formidable obstacle to the advance of the Allied armies. It was necessary to make the Boche evacuate this dangerous obstacle by well planned turning movements. The British thought that this would be too long a piece of work, and audaciously resolved to force the issue. The army of Rawlinson turned at the same time the powerful defense formed by the forest of Andigny, which the troops of the army of Debeney occupied. On November 4 the great green block on which the Boche had counted to retard our offensive fell into our hands. Far from disproving the strategic importance of the forests, these facts confirm it. Only the heroism of our poilus kept it from being of great and prolonged value to the enemy.

What more powerful demonstration could be wished of the strategic importance of forests in war? Appreciated in time of peace by the tourist and the hunter, who find in their charming walks an easy and agreeable pas-

and well. Let us assist, no; hinder her, in her work.

It is not necessary to ask these forests—already bled white, to furnish wood of every nature for our front lines, torn by shot, often devastated thoughtlessly by troops—to furnish in increased quantity the necessary materials for the reconstruction of our liberated regions. The Boche must pay back in kind the wood which he has forced us to spend without stint in opposing the fury of the invader. Our French forests, and particularly our beautiful forests of Ile-de-France, ought to enjoy a long and well merited rest from the devastating ax and, above all, let us not give aid to their enemies by allowing the hunting of game, which the war has stopped. The natural balance in the animal life of the forest has been re-established by the war itself. Let us not favor the return of the rodent under the pretext of restoring hunting, often so harmful to the regeneration of our high forests. These massive stands, after the long and hard campaign, need a long and well earned rest! They have had their long months of suffering; let us leave them to refresh themselves in perfect peace. By their strategic importance, which our great military chiefs have not forgotten, they have saved France. In return let us permit them to recover themselves. Failure to aid them in healing their numerous and glorious wounds would be not only a crime of treason against the country, it would show how poorly we understand the real interests of the nation.

"In the depth of the wood the country has its heart." This should never be forgotten.
Spring In Maryland

The valleys call to the mountain tops and the mountains to the plain,
The east wind whispers to the Bay and Kent hears the refrain.
The whip-poor-will lends a mystic thrill to the chanting of the marsh,
And the lonely loon stills the insects' croon with a summons loud and harsh.

The tang of the Severn calls to the rose and the Bluebird hears the cry;
In Talbot's lanes the cardinal sings, and is answered from the sky.
A magic dew wakes the lilac, too; the daffodil answers the thrush;
The burnished moon sets the swamps in tune, till the willows bid them hush.

And the shattered dreams of the winter are soothed in the cedar's balm;
The blue sky beams on a fairy land, and reflects the Chesapeake's calm.
The sky and flowers of Nature's bowers, the hills and the eastern strand,
The birds, the sun, and Man as one, greet the spring in Maryland.

—By John Ferguson.