

CHAPTER XIX

THE REST AREA AT CORBIE



IN the Corbie area the 54th Infantry Brigade Headquarters and the 107th Infantry were directed to be billeted at Villers Bretonneux. The Division Commander recalled in a general way the condition of Villers Bretonneux when the division had gone forward for Le Selle River operations, and accordingly hastened to that place by motor for a personal inspection. The place was wholly unfit for occupation by troops. The roofless and demolished buildings not only offered little or no shelter or protection against the weather, but the place was foul with decaying matter of all kinds. Accordingly the regimental billeting officer who had arrived at the place was notified that other arrangements would be made to shelter the units mentioned, which at that time were en route for Villers Bretonneux by rail. By arrangement with the corps, the contemplated change was made and the 54th Brigade Headquarters went to Tronville Chateau and the 107th Infantry to Glisy.

The accompanying map of the Corbie area shows its relation to the city of Amiens, which appears in part on the left boundary of the map. A reference to the towns and villages shown on the map will serve to recall to the readers who were with the division at the time, the incidents connected with the life in this area. The mere mention of such names as Aubigny, Vecquemont, Daours, Bussy, Pont Noyelles, Vaux-sur-Somme, Blangy-Tronville, Hamelet and Glisy, will serve to remind the survivors of Le Selle River operations of the days spent in the damp valley of the Somme.

Division Headquarters was established at Corbie in what had been a very fine residence, surrounded by an attractive garden with large hot houses. The place had been badly damaged by shell fire. During the first few days following the arrival of the divisional units in their several billeting areas, the time of the officers and men was largely consumed with patching up and making as livable as possible the particular buildings which had been assigned them. When the troops arrived there were no civilian inhabitants in most of the villages. However, shortly afterward people began to come in, and it was most affecting to witness the grief of women and children as they looked at the ruins of their former homes.

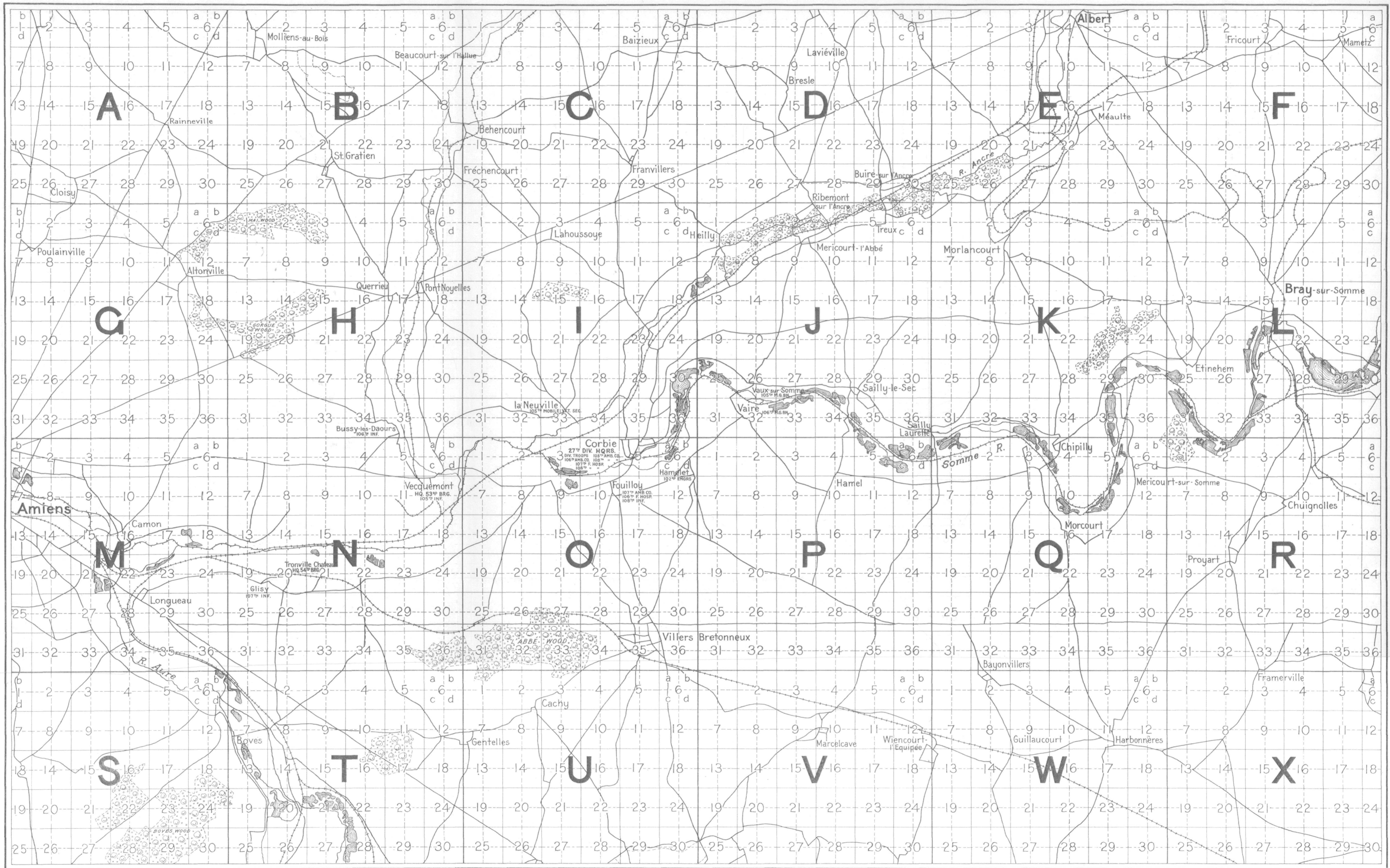
Soon pathetic-looking little stocks of fruit and odds and ends could be seen as they were arrayed for sale to the soldiers, either upon improvised stands on the streets or behind broken windows. Needless to say the soldiers, in spite of their fatigue, were most sympathetic and generous toward these courageous inhabitants who had returned to their native village to begin anew their lives there.



Former inhabitant of Corbie sitting on a pile of rocks that was her home



One of the 27th Division bands entertaining in the Corbie area.

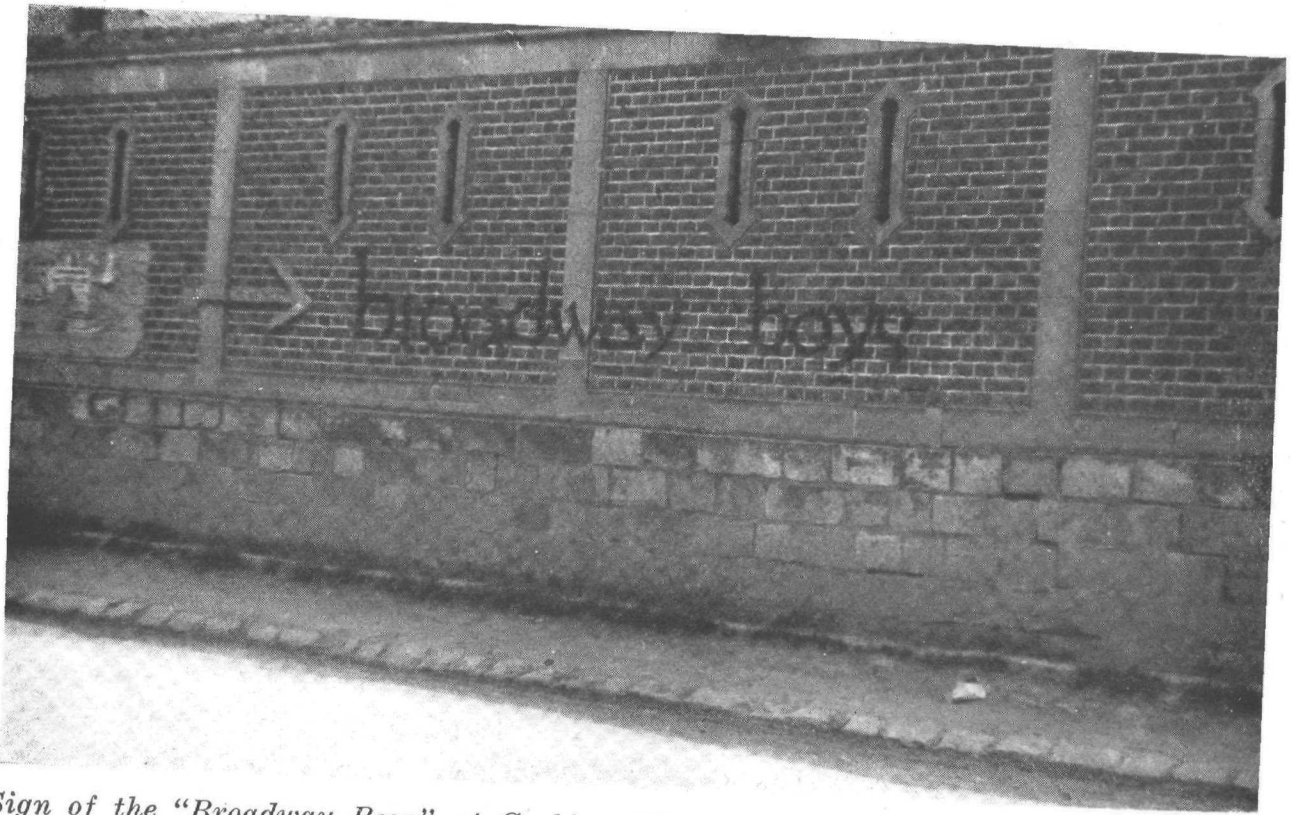


Following so serious a strain as the operations just concluded, it was essential that only the minimum of rest should be allowed the officers in order that they might with the greatest energy devote themselves to the welfare and recuperation of the men. Improvised baths were installed. Every effort was made to improve kitchen facilities and to better the mess menus. Clothing and equipment had to be renewed. Not the least important job was to provide recreation and entertainment for the men, for unless the mind is in healthy and optimistic condition the body does not properly respond. The divisional theatrical troupe was therefore reorganized and new bills of entertainment prepared and produced. An appropriate hall was found in Corbie for use of the theatrical troupe. The roof was patched, the stage repaired, and electric lights, which derived their power from the divisional mobile lighting plant, were installed. A preferred list of detachments was made up so that the men, to the limit of the capacity of the house, might each night visit Corbie and see the show. Preference, of course, was given to the infantry and machine gun units. In order that the soldiers coming to Corbie from other billeting places might readily find the "theater," the various streets leading to it were indicated by directing signs painted on the sides of buildings. As late as the summer of 1920 the writer saw one of these signs while passing through Corbie. This sign is shown on the accompanying photograph.

The theatrical troupe were known as the "Broadway Boys."

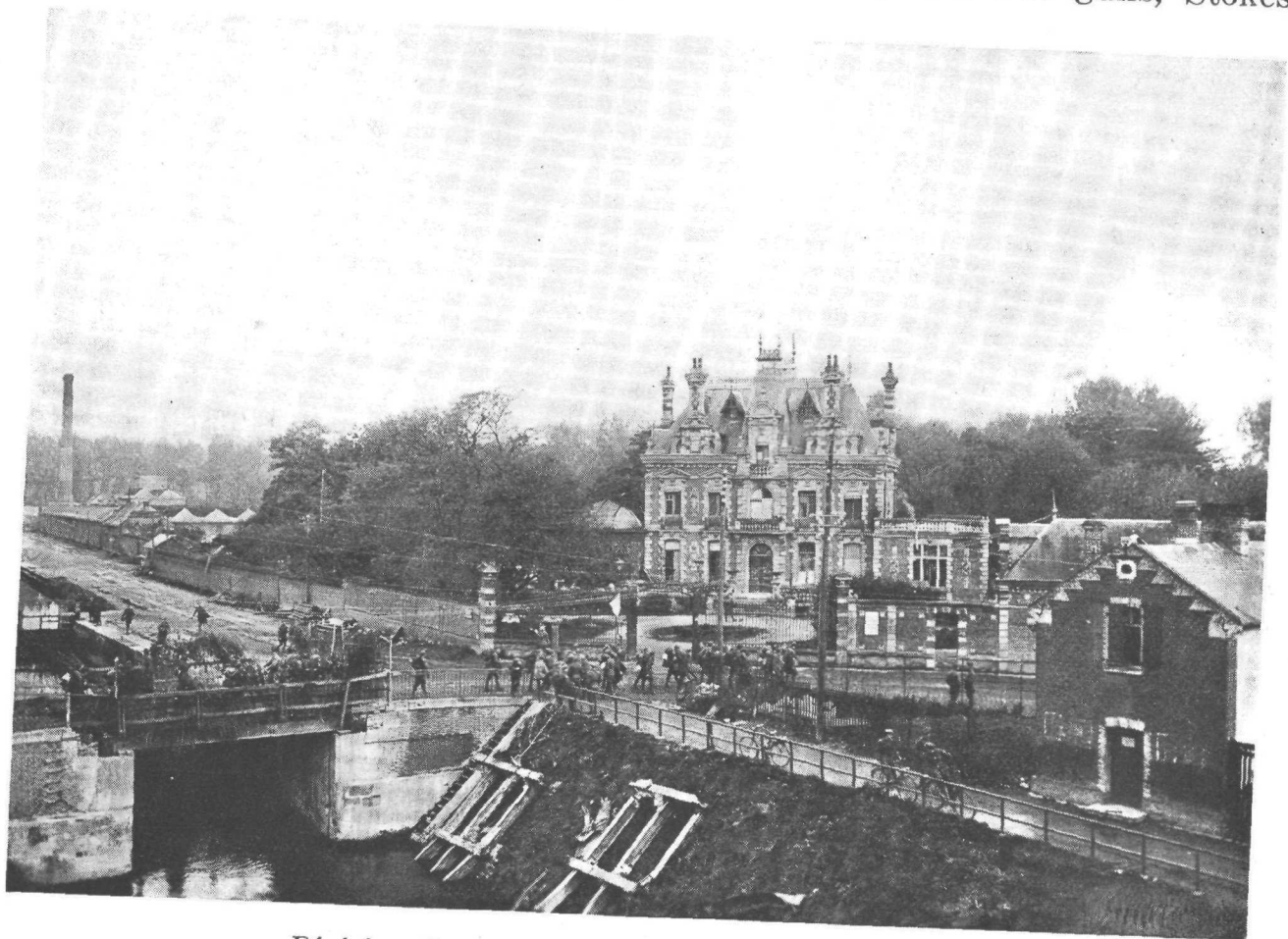
Those who were stationed in Corbie will never forget the clatter of the hobnailed shoes of the throngs of men who each evening walked slowly through the darkened streets of Corbie in the direction of the divisional theater. It was most satisfactory to note the effect of the entertainment upon them. Going to the theater there was little conversation heard on the streets—nothing but the heavy and tired tramp of the hobnailed shoes on the stone paving blocks, accompanied by the blinking glow of innumerable cigarettes. Leaving the show, however, there was much conversation, interested comment, and even some laughter and merriment. Never did the theatrical troupe do better work in rejuvenating the spirit of tired and sad men than during the days of the Corbie rest period. Many of the men were not in humor to attend the divisional theater. Their hearts had been saddened by the loss of intimate friends who had fallen by their side. Indeed in many cases it was necessary to order individual men to accompany the theater detachments. In other cases men went to the theater solely out of a spirit of loyalty to the performers and because they knew that during the period of the battle operations the performers had served as hospital orderlies in the advanced and main dressing stations. But once there they soon fell under the spell of Fallon and Brown, Van Zant, Roche and the soubrettes. The divisional theatrical troupe certainly justified the effort put into its organization and maintenance.

It was during the period of the Corbie days that there was held in each regiment a conference attended by all the available officers. The purpose of these regimental conferences was to bring together the officers from the



Sign of the "Broadway Boys" at Corbie. Picture taken during the summer of 1920

outlying billets in order that they might exchange views, suggestions and comments concerning the recent operations. In this manner, in each regiment, all the officers were made acquainted with the activities of the infantry units composing the regiment, including machine guns, Stokes



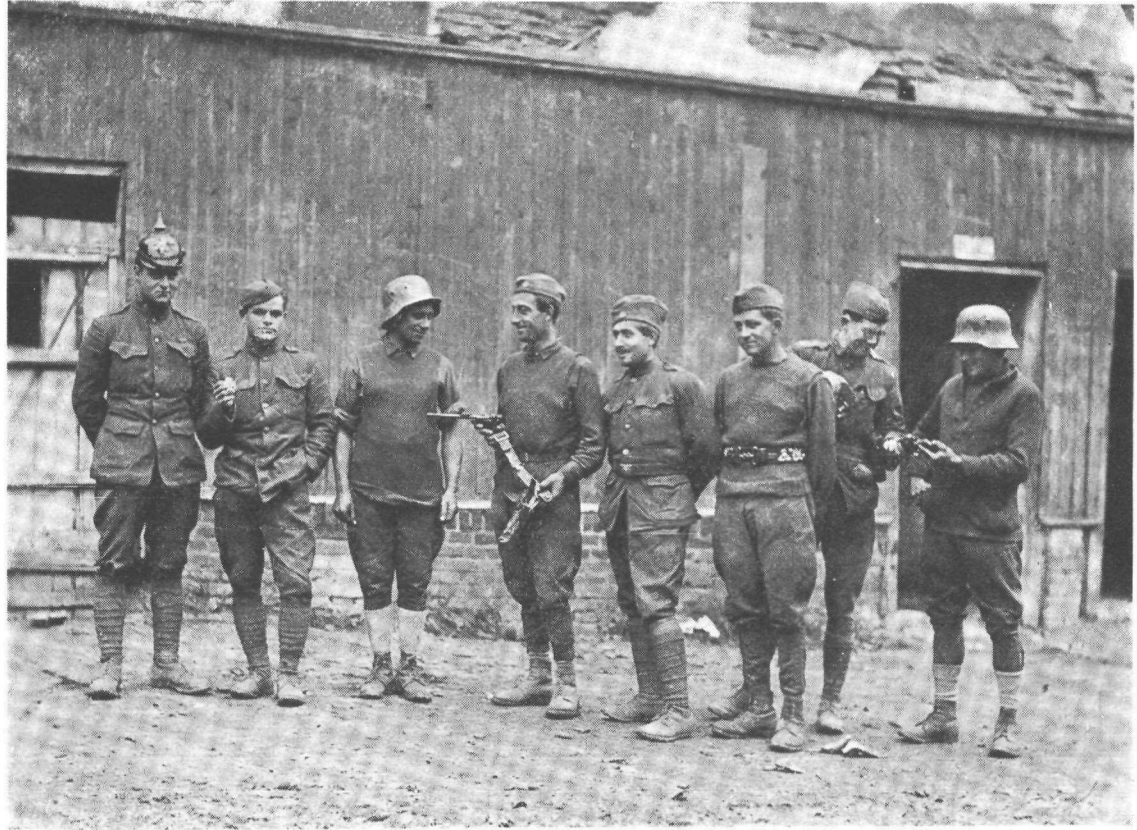
Division Commander's Headquarters at Corbie

mortars and one pounders. Such subjects as artillery support, liaison, and communication were, of course, included. The conferences were presided over either by the Division Commander or the Division Chief of Staff, and were attended by the Brigade Commanders and all other officers interested. Very valuable information was gained on these occasions and very much was done to increase the spirit of team play among the officers. What was particularly noticeable during these meetings was the modesty of all the officers in relation to their own activities and accomplishments.

The Division Commander was most desirous of taking advantage of this period of rest to grant leaves of absence and furloughs to as many officers and men as possible in order that the morale of the division might be stimulated through the opportunity of at least a percentage of the personnel to get into some new environment for a few days. The necessary authority was denied, however, and the men who visited Amiens, a short distance away, were required to leave the town at 4 P. M. This apparently small matter is mentioned here as indicating the survival of the old notion that a soldier is not a soldier unless he is continuously harassed by prohibitions, limitations and penalties. An intensive supervisory attitude is necessary in the early development of soldiers. The men of the 27th Division had received the benefit of such policy during their early training at Camp Wadsworth. Now, however, the conditions were entirely changed. They were not only thoroughly disciplined and dependable in every way, but they had been subjected to "hell's fires" for so long a time that what they needed most was confidence, encouragement, rest and recreation. Our military system, however, never seemed to be sufficiently elastic to meet promptly the swift-moving changes of war. Too frequently it was necessary for the commander of troops by protest, urging, or special plea to secure the needed elasticity. With the good will and cooperation of the Commanding General of the II American Corps changes were secured in relation to the prohibitions and limitations mentioned, and soon authority was given for the Division Commander to grant leaves of absence to officers, and furloughs to enlisted men, which included the right to visit Great Britain.

Some replacements were received during the latter days of October. Most of these went to the 106th Infantry. Preparations went on apace for the return of the division to the line. This was scheduled to take place after another two or three weeks' rest. It was essential, therefore, that during the intervening period additional replacements be obtained, that their training be undertaken in most efficient manner and that all the other work of supplying the division with needed clothing and equipment be pushed.

About this time the Spanish influenza, which had been kept out of the division with singular success, began to make its presence felt. This was, perhaps, due to the run-down condition of so many officers and men. The writer with many others suffered from the "flu," as it was called, during this period.



Men of the 107th Infantry show their trophies



Prisoners at work in the Corbie area

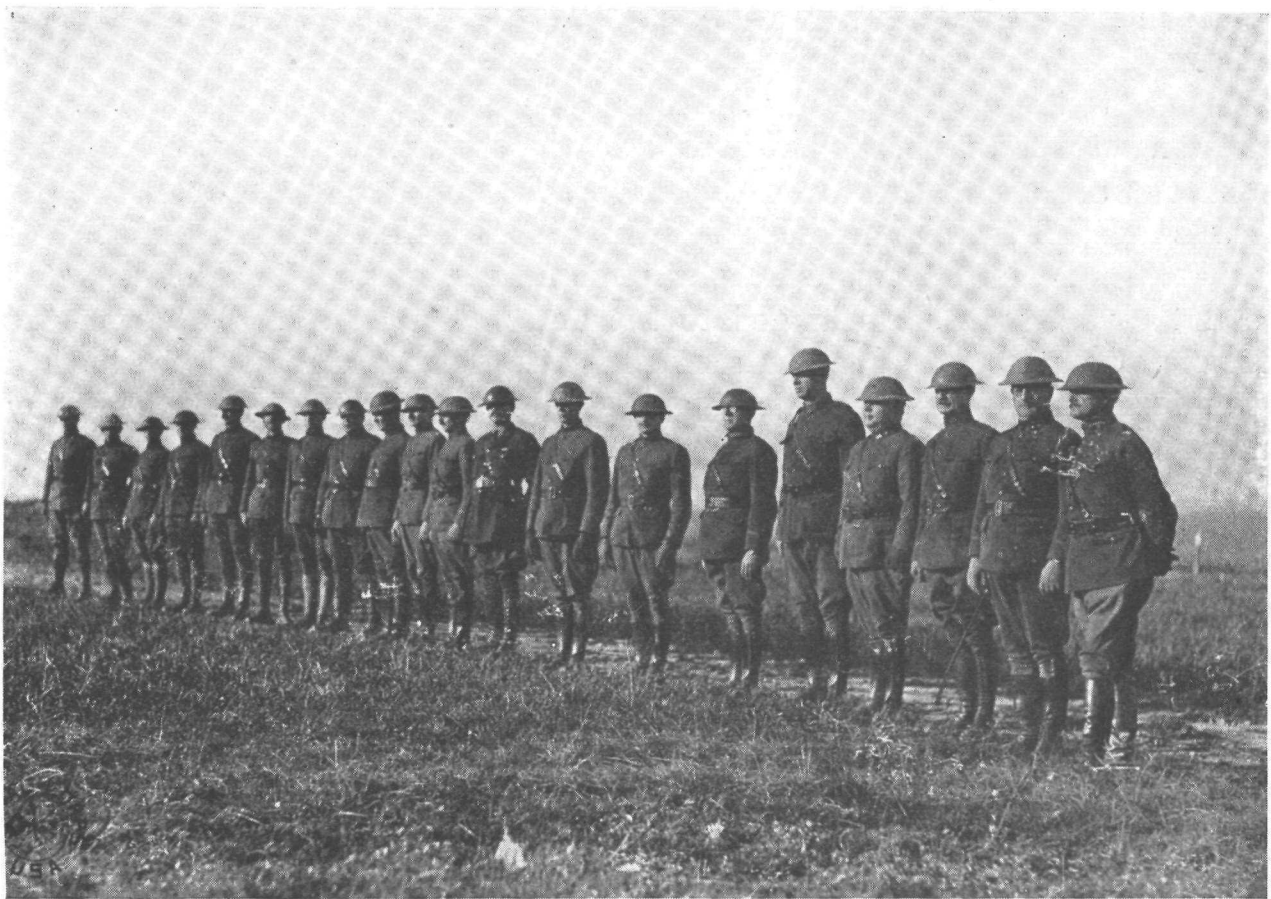
As was always the case in France, a unit as large as a division was necessarily scattered when occupying a billeting area. Due to the greatly reduced strength of the companies, it was thought to be desirable to assemble the division for some appropriate ceremony, so that the picture afforded by their total numbers, and the precision and discipline of their movements, might help in stimulating a return to the former high morale of the men. The Division Commander, therefore, directed that on Sunday, November 10th, there would be held on the plains near Corbie a divisional review in honor of the dead of the division. The orders for this review will be found in the Appendix as Exhibit 44. As is well known by the soldiers of the American Expeditionary Forces at least, the climate in this part of France during the fall months is usually bleak and rainy. The days preceding November 10th gave little promise of good weather for the occasion of the review. However, the weather gods, true to form, gave the division for the occasion of its memorial parade, a day of sunshine and reasonable warmth. The units of the division assembled at Corbie from all over the billeting area. Major General Read, the Corps Commander, who had been invited to take the review, motored to Corbie with his staff and there were provided with horses. The occasion was a most impressive one. The entire division was drawn up in line of masses with the infantry on the right, in accordance with the tradition of the New York Division, which gives the right of line to the infantry and not to the engineers. There stood these fine officers and men of the division who had been through so much fighting, thousands of them wearing one and scores of them wearing two wound chevrons. All were thinking of those whose memory the ceremony would honor.

A description of the occasion would not be complete without some reference to the part played by the numerous company mascots. When the division returned from the battle area it was surprising how quickly homeless dogs attached themselves to individual men and to particular units. It was difficult to imagine whence came all the dogs. However, with the enthusiasm and loyalty so characteristic of dogs, these animals soon acted as if they had always belonged to the units they served. Let even the Division Commander approach a company kitchen and he would be barked at and threatened and regarded as an object of suspicion by the company mascot running out upon his approach.

On the occasion of the concentration of the division at Corbie, the company dogs, as a matter of course, accompanied the units to which they had attached themselves. The playing of the bands and the bustle and stir of so many marching men seemed to stimulate them. They evidenced this by running from the head to the rear of the company columns, driving off other dogs and justifying in numerous ways the pride each dog apparently felt in belonging to the best company in the division. After the division had been formed in line of masses as already mentioned, the ceremony arranged for prescribed that the massed bands of the division would march at the front and play two stanzas of "Nearer, My God, To Thee," during which the division was to stand rigidly at attention and



Major General Read at the Corbie Review



Division Staff, Corbie Review

reflect upon the sacrifices made by the officers and men who had been lost. This was the first occasion since the days of Spartanburg when the massed bands of the division functioned as a unit under Lieutenant Francis J. Sutherland of the 104th Field Artillery. The massed bands marched silently from the right of the division to a position in front and opposite the center of the line. The silence seemed to impress the dogs, for at this time there were at least twenty dogs standing attentively in front of their companies. One little dog opposite the reviewing officer squatted on his haunches for a second or two and then looking at the other dogs to the right and left, and seeming to sense his unsoldierly action, promptly resumed a standing and attentive attitude. It almost seemed as if the dogs had been trained for the occasion. The participation and attitude of the dogs caused no mirth on the part of anyone. On the contrary, their conduct seemed to accentuate the emotions. The comradeship and affection of the dogs served to remind those present of the comradeship and affection of those who were absent.

Major General Read and the Division Commander rode around the division in inspection. The command presented a very martial appearance. Particularly were the visiting officers impressed with the handsome manner in which the horse transport was turned out. The animals were well groomed, and the harness, chains, leather, and the many vehicles, were in faultless condition. Finally, when the inspection was completed and the reviewing party had taken their assigned positions, the division passed in review, the infantry with bayonets fixed, the varnished steel helmets flashing in the sunlight. All who participated seemed stimulated by the satisfaction of having accorded this simple but impressive manifestation of their recollection and regard for the dead, and as well by the impressions conveyed by discipline, cohesiveness and power of the marching troops.

The following afternoon, while the Division Commander was preparing to mount his horse in front of the headquarters at Corbie, two Australian soldiers, quite the worse for wear, were observed passing down the street. Each carried a French flag and called out to the "Yanks" whom they passed, "Why the h—l don't you celebrate? Don't you know the armistice is signed?" We did not know that the armistice had been signed, although we knew that in all probability it would be signed on that day. However, it might be remarked here that the signing of the armistice caused not a ripple of excitement among the American soldiers in Corbie. There were no cheers and there was no excitement of any sort. Everything went on as usual. Some time after the armistice, groups of soldiers were posed by official photographers in attitudes indicating great joy and enthusiasm, and were then photographed. These purported to represent armistice day celebrations. So far as could be learned from conversations with commanding officers of the division, the majority of the men were glad the war was over, but it must be said that there was a substantial number who would have preferred to continue the operations until by combat the army had actually invaded German territory. As stated, however, there was not much discussion one way or the other. One place where real interest and

excitement were manifested was in the city of Amiens. In all probability the underlying cause for the numerous parties that were organized for diversion in that city was not the armistice or any other historical event, but the desire for recreation of that character, after the weeks of fatigue and danger and the hardship of battle.

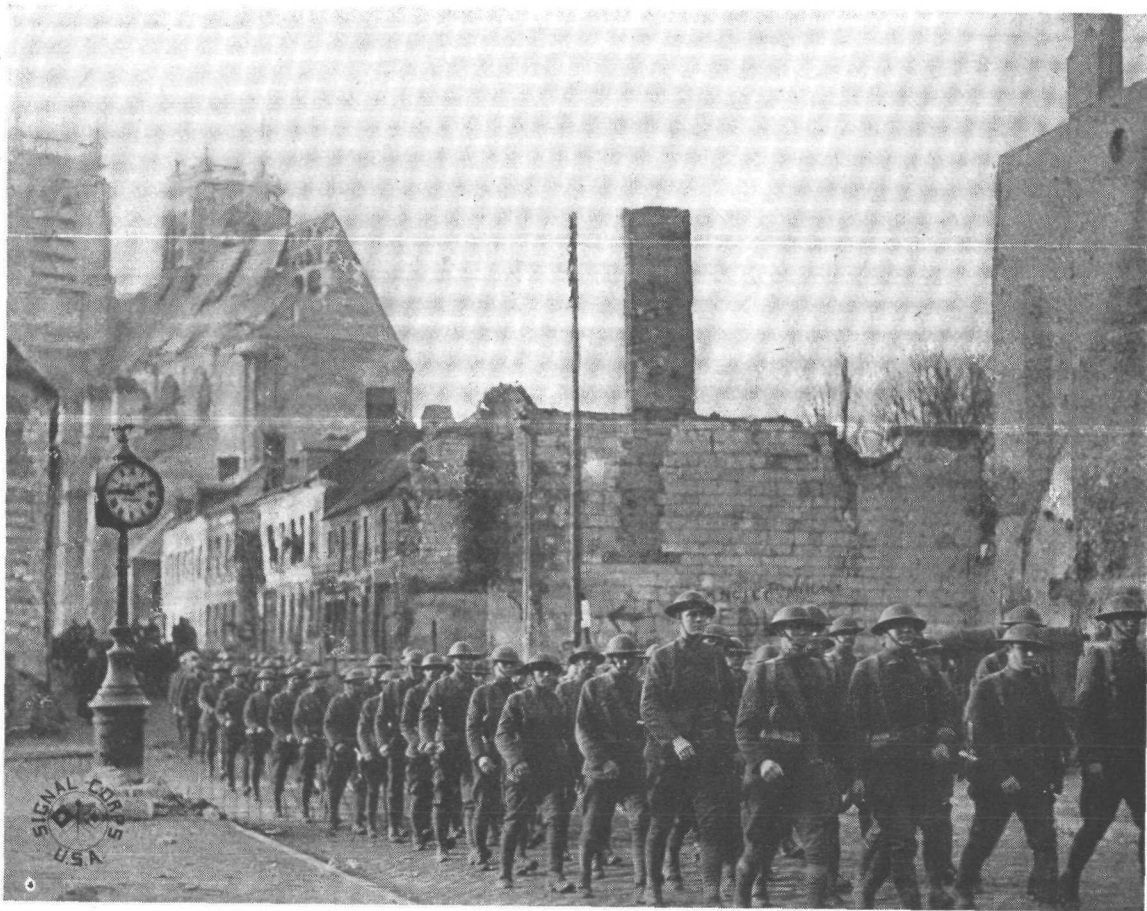
At the time of the armistice more than five thousand men of the division were in hospitals as a result of wounds received in battle. Their exact locations were, of course, not known, once they passed out of the jurisdiction of the division. The loyalty of these absent ones for their division was well understood. Some of the officers who had visited London on leave had gone to the hospitals and had found numbers of our wounded there. The Division Commander felt that these wounded men should have whatever inspiration the division could give them and took up with the proper authorities the matter of being ordered to London, to visit them. This could not be arranged and accordingly a leave of absence for one week was taken. On Wednesday, November 13th, therefore, the Division Commander accompanied by Colonel Montgomery, Division Surgeon, and Captain Eddy, Aide de Camp, left Corbie for Boulogne, and the following morning crossed the channel to Folkstone, thence proceeding by rail to London.

When the Division Commander's party arrived on the dock at Boulogne to take the steamer to Folkestone, they met a very much disturbed detachment of furlough men of the 27th and 30th Divisions, aggregating perhaps 200 men. They had come to the dock prepared to board the steamer for England to enjoy the short period of time allotted them for furlough, only to be told that due to some change in the plan, priority had been given to some British soldiers also on furlough, and they would have to remain over in Boulogne until the following day. The extent of their dejection cannot be appreciated without understanding that the furlough period began to run from the time of the arrival of the train at Boulogne. The thought, therefore, of losing not only twenty-four hours of their precious leave period in this uninviting place, but also of expending from their limited funds the amount needed for this unexpected stop-over, caused them to feel that they had been greatly imposed upon. The eager and welcome glances of the men toward the Division Commander's party were noted but not understood until the situation was explained. When forceful representations were made to the British officer in charge and he had shown his orders prescribing the change which was the occasion of the trouble, he good-naturedly and generously cooperated in securing a revision of the original order. Accordingly, within half an hour the men were told that the former order was rescinded and that they would be allowed to proceed to England without stop-over at Boulogne. Great was the joy of the Yanks in consequence.

The next day, having called on Major General John Biddle, in command of the American troops in England, a program was arranged for visiting the hospitals where our men were located. The party went first to Tottenham Hospital, where several hundred wounded men of the 27th



Site of II Corps Meet near Corbie

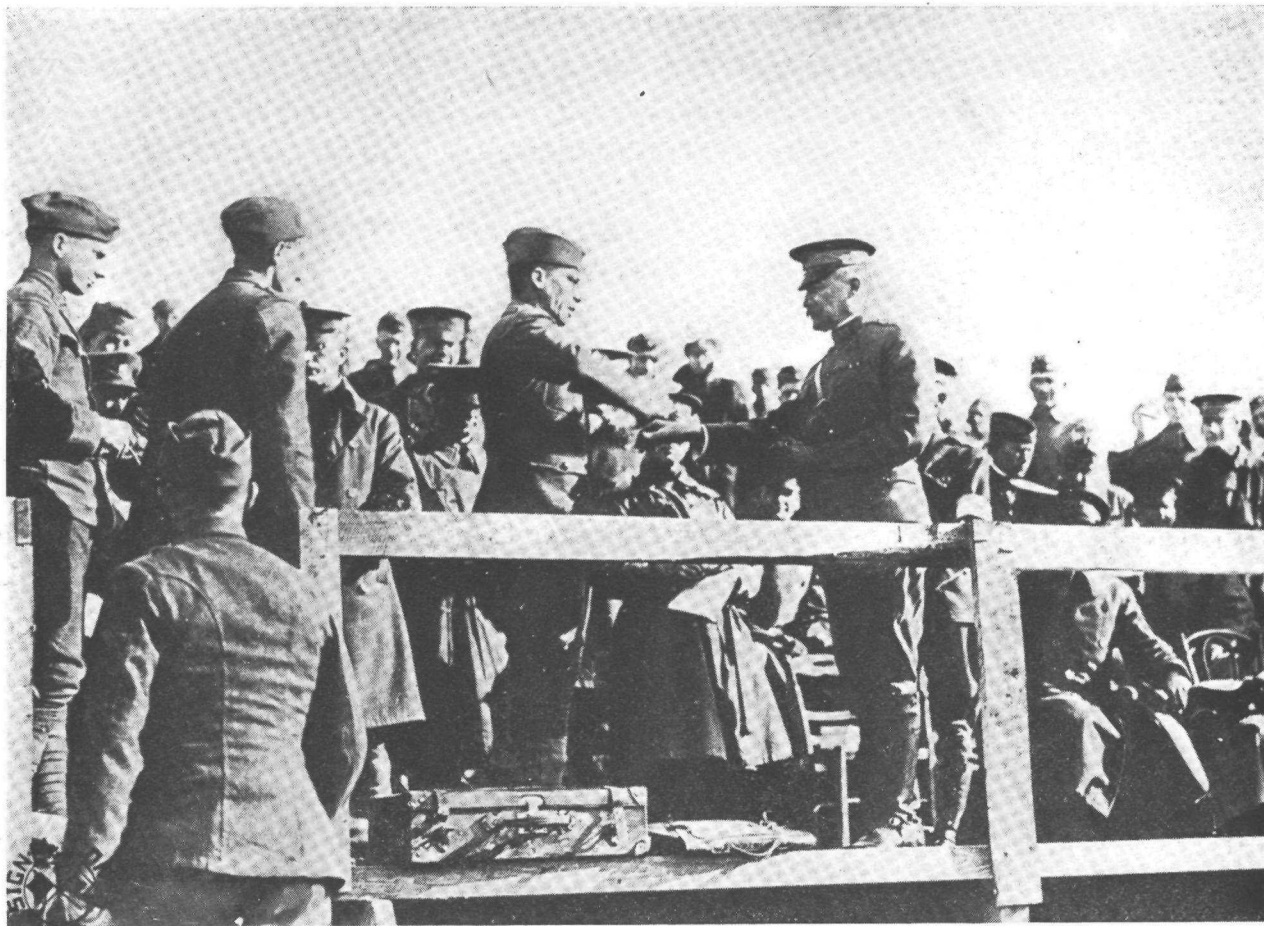


102d Field Signal Battalion marching through Corbie

Division were found. Many of them were walking cases, while scores were confined to bed with most serious and distressing wounds. One who has not actually had such an experience as that afforded by the visits to these hospitals, under circumstances which can be imagined—the background of battle hardship and sacrifice—can understand the emotions of the visitor. Some of these emotions were joyous, some were sad, some were inspiring, others depressing. But through them all there was ever present the realization that these men loved their organization in a degree bordering on fanaticism. In the big hall of the hospital where the Division Commander addressed the walking wounded assembled there in great numbers, not only from the 27th Division, but also from the 30th Division, there was a most inspiring manifestation of the ardor of these veterans to rejoin their units and the companionship of their military family. In the wards men weak from recent surgical operations wept with gratitude for some favorable comment concerning their regiments. Everywhere men given an opportunity to talk, asked with an intensity that was almost pitiful whether there was any doubt concerning their return to their own division when they had recovered from the effects of their wounds. The experience was the same at Base Hospital No. 22, near Hyde Park, London. On succeeding days other hospitals were visited, including the great institution at Dartford, twenty miles from London.

During the week the party was in London, many wounded officers and men called at the Carleton Hotel, seeking reassurance from Captain Eddy that the wounded men released from hospital would go back to the division.

One afternoon toward the end of our stay in London a particularly downcast group informed Captain Eddy that they had received information that all the wounded were to be returned to the States direct. It is interesting, as illustrating the mysterious manner in which soldiers gain authoritative information, to know that such an order had been received by Major General Biddle from General Headquarters, American Expeditionary Forces, a few hours before. This was learned when General Biddle called the Division Commander on the telephone and told him regretfully of the order that had been received. The Division Commander thereupon sent a strong telegraphic personal plea to Major General James W. McAndrew, Chief of Staff of the American Expeditionary Forces, stating that the wounded soldiers of the 27th Division to the number of 4,000 would regard such an order as in the nature of a deportation order. The telegram was a little unusual, first because it was in criticism of an official order, and secondly because it fully and completely indicated the outraged feelings of the wounded and the fact that the Division Commander shared these feelings. The telegram, however, was addressed to an unusual officer, one who possessed the necessary imagination to visualize the situation and the broad-mindedness and fearlessness to rescind the order, should such action be justified. In all probability the order had been prepared in a routine manner by some officer lacking in psychological sense, and who probably believed that he was doing the wounded soldiers in England a



Major General Read presenting prize for mule race to Sergeant Hart, orderly to the Division Commander



Band of the 107th Infantry at lunch at the II Corps Meet

specially good turn by marking them for early return to the States. General McAndrew telegraphed General Biddle the same day that the order was rescinded and that the wounded of the 27th and 30th Divisions who were fit for military duty within a reasonable time would be returned to their own divisions.

On November 21st the 27th Division party returned to the division and in the ensuing days there was a steady stream of convalescent soldiers returning to the division from England. A considerable number of them, taking no chances, had persuaded the hospital authorities with tears in their eyes to certify to their physical fitness for military duty before they really should have been discharged from the hospitals. It was necessary for these men to be given light duty for a time and for supervision to be exercised in relation to their subsistence and care. This, however, was done by the medical officers and by their companies with the greatest willingness, and within a very few weeks more than 2,000 of the wounded had rejoined the division.

On November 4th and 5th an interdivisional athletic meet was held in the neighborhood of Corbie. These games were suggested and planned by Major General Read, the Corps Commander. The games included all the usual field and track events. Motor trucks were made available to transport the men of the 27th and 30th Divisions where they were located at points distant from the field. A great multitude of soldiers of both divisions attended. The weather was satisfactory and the events were contested with sportsmanlike zeal by all the contestants. The games were particularly satisfactory to the 27th Division, as they won nearly all the events.

While we were at Corbie Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig sent to the Corps Commander a letter of commendation referring to the battle service of the 27th and 30th Divisions. The letter was published in a corps order, of which the following is a copy:

HEADQUARTERS II CORPS
AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES FRANCE

GENERAL ORDERS
No. 44

November 18, 1918.

1. The following letter from the Commander in Chief of the British armies to the Commanding General, II Corps, is published for the information of the officers and men of this command:

“Now that the American II Corps is leaving the British zone, I wish once more to thank you and all officers, non-commissioned officers and men under your command, on behalf of both myself and all ranks of the British armies in France and Flanders, for the very gallant and efficient service you have rendered during the period of your operations with the 4th British Army.

“On the 29th of September you took part with great distinction in the great and critical attack which shattered the enemy's resistance in the Hindenburg Line and opened the road to final victory. The deeds of the 27th and 30th American Divisions who on that day took Bellicourt and Nauroy and so gallantly sustained the desperate struggle for Bony will rank with the highest achievements of the war. They will always be remembered by the British regiments that fought beside you.



27th Division National Guard mobile electric light plant, Corbie, France



Chinese coolies in the Corbie area

"Since that date, through three weeks of almost continuous fighting, you advanced from one success to another, overcoming all resistance, beating off numerous counter-attacks, and capturing several thousand prisoners and many guns. The names of Brancourt, Premont, Busigny, Vaux-Andigny, St. Souplet and Mazinghien testify to the dash and energy of your attacks.

"I rejoice at the success which has attended your efforts and I am proud to have had you under my command.

(Signed) "D. HAIG,
"Field Marshal."

BY COMMAND OF MAJOR GENERAL READ:

OFFICIAL:

STEPHEN C. CLARK,
Adjutant General

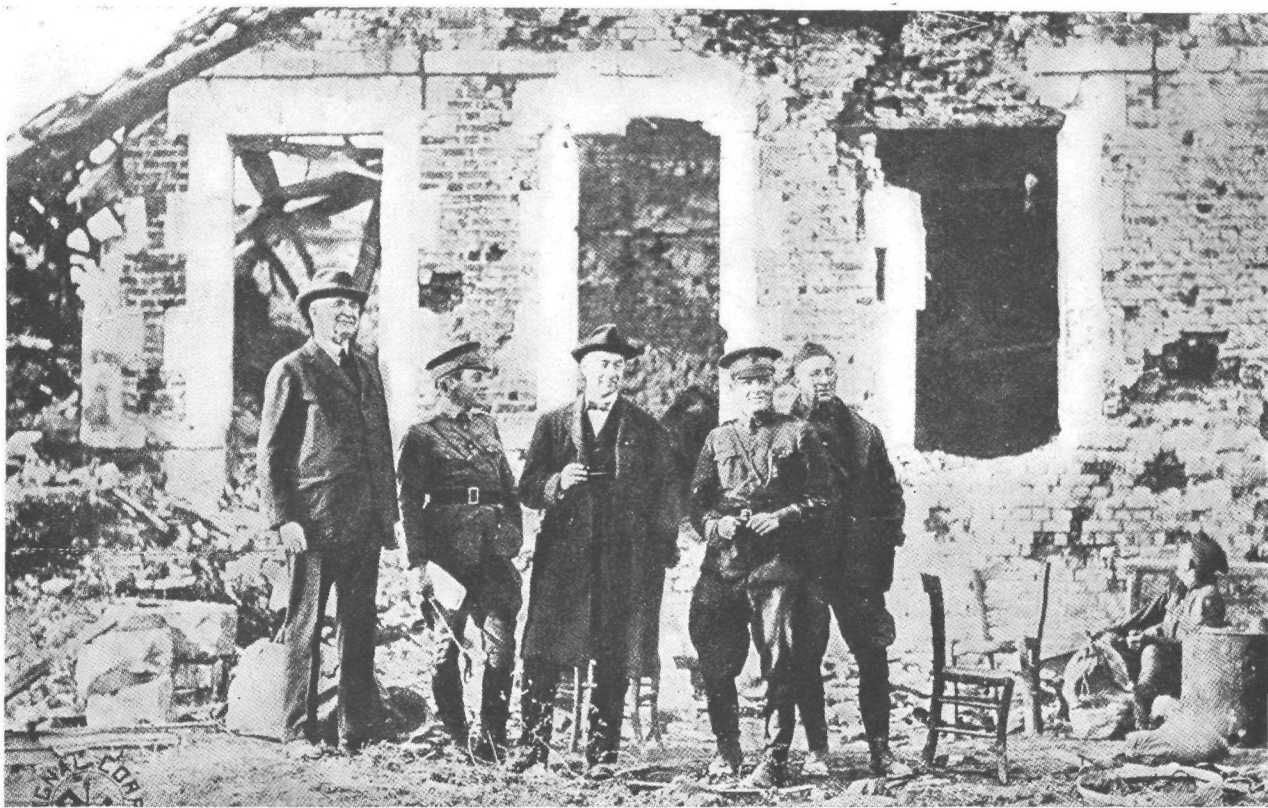
GEO. S. SIMOND,
Chief of Staff.

Finally, the division received orders to move from the Corbie area to an area in and about the city of Le Mans, southeast of Paris, and which had been designated and was being organized preparatory to embarkation of troops to the United States by way of Brest and St. Nazaire.

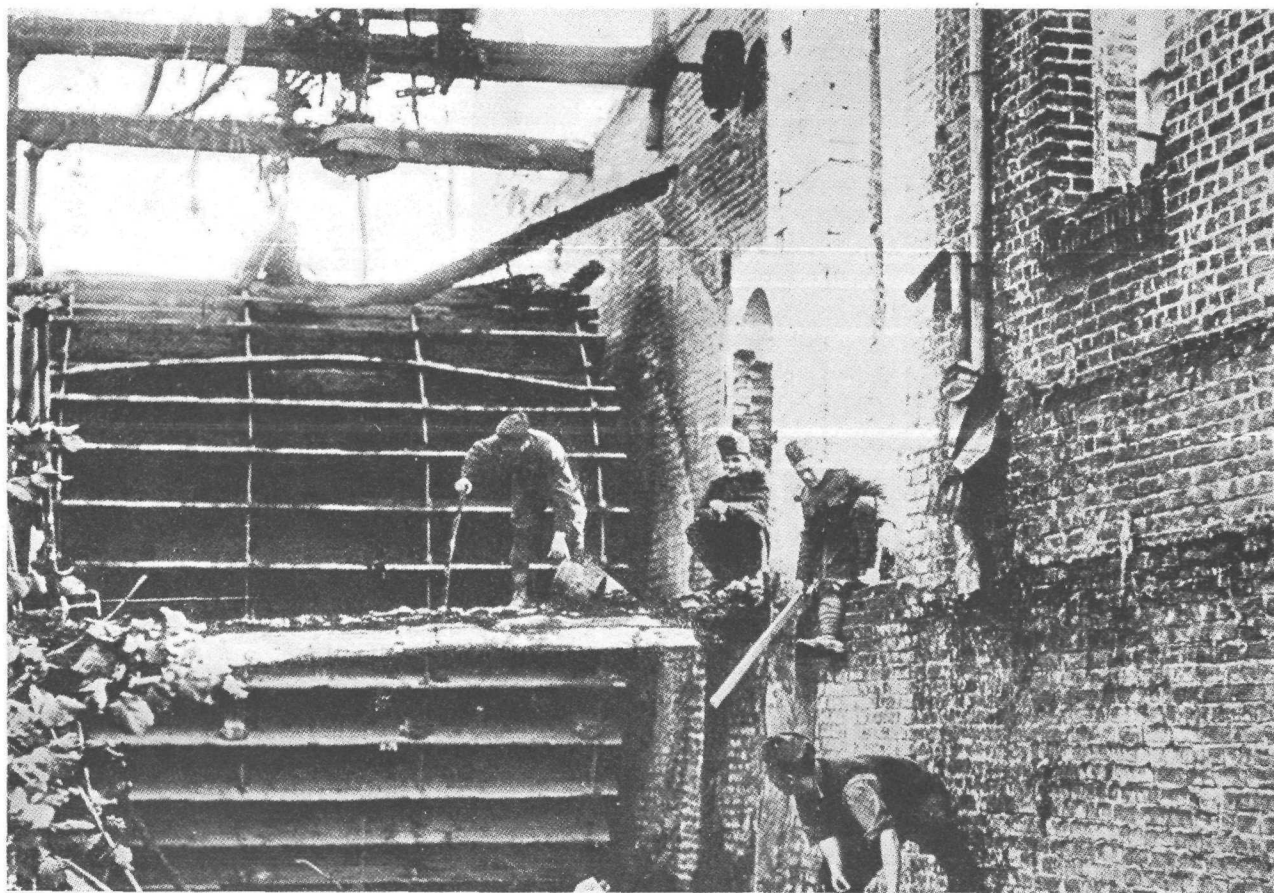
It was directed by higher authority that the British machine guns be turned into the British Ordnance Service. Much other property deemed unnecessary to be taken to the new area was also directed to be returned to the British authorities. All of these details are set forth in Orders No. 121, dated November 19th, which will be found in the Appendix as Exhibit 45.

The rail movement of the division to the new area and the entraining table were prescribed in Orders Nos. 122, 123 and 124, also included in the Appendix as Exhibit 46.

This ended the stay of the division in the drear atmosphere and amid the shattered villages of the historic valley of the Somme. Officers and men were glad to get away from the Corbie area, with its depressing features and the sad spectacles afforded by the constant streams of civilians returning to the ruins of their former homes. The troops now felt that they were on their way not only to a brighter and more comfortable environment, but that in fact the trip to the new area would be the first step towards home. The stay in the new area was for so long a period, namely, from November 24, 1918, to February 22, 1919, that the narrative of the life there will be taken up in the next chapter.



United States government officials visit the 27th Division battle-field at the Hindenburg Line. Left to right: Paul D. Cravath, United States Treasurer for the American Expeditionary Forces; Captain Harold G. Pearson, 53d Brigade Headquarters; Joseph B. Cotton, Representative of United States Food Administration; Lieutenant J. H. Ernst, 53d Brigade Headquarters; and Captain James S. Wadsworth, Division Headquarters



Members of the Headquarters Troop drawing water from an old mill near Headquarters at Corbie

