

# AT THE REAR, ON THE VESLE'RIVER

**January 1915, may 1918**

From the top of **balloons called sausages**, we were constantly keeping a close eye on each other whether to point the firing in the right direction or to spy the enemy's set up.

**Even in the 2dn or 3rd line trenches**, life was often difficult.

**The French or the Germans** were never shielded from the artillery shootings of the opposite camp.

**Camouflage** of the Reims road near Muizon.

A camouflage workshop has operated in the "Garenne de Gueux"

**African village in Muizon**: name given to the the encampments of the troops located behind the lines.

**From the aid station to the hospital**, including the ambulance: medical care to the wounded.

**Pigeon service** : a dovecot car

**April 1917, a 320 battery** near Muizon

## **The April 16, 1917 offensive**

In 1916, the offensives in La Somme or Verdun didn't allow the Allied forces to have the upper hand. At the end of 1916, General Joffre, commander in chief, is replaced by General Nivelle. A new plan is finalized. The Aisne and the "Chemin des Dames" are chosen to break through the front.

### The setup:

General Nivelle had gathered the third of the French forces south of the Aisne : 1 500 000 soldiers, 150 000 horses, 5 300 canons, 80 tanks. Everything had been conscientiously prepared: Weapons, equipment, transport services, aid stations etc Our region and particularly the Vesle valley west of Reims, had become a huge construction site. It would play an important strategic role as it would resupply the troops and bring medical care to the injured. A failure seemed inconceivable. Within 3 days, the French troops had to be north of Laon.

### The lines of communication

The transport services had to bring new troops to the front as well as ammunitions, food supply and bring back the injured and the troops needing rest to the rear.

The existing roads were widened and strengthened. Some new roads were built.

Railways had to be used for food supply, the transport of artillery and ammunitions and for the evacuation of the injured to the rear.

The 0.60 meter-large rail network which reached the first lines was extended.

The other rail network was also extended. At the beginning of 1917, apart from the line Soissons-Reims in the Vesle swamps and the line Bazoches – Château-Thierry, no other railway was really active. In preparation for the offensive the sappers installed 2 secondary lines, one north of the Vesle, from Fismes to Muizon, the other more to the south, in the Ardre valley to serve the different hospitals under construction and the four new storage stations: Courlandon, Montigny, Prouilly, Les Marais de Neuf ans between Trigny and Muizon.

### Medical care to the injured

The health services set up several orientation and evacuation hospitals called H.O.E ,each one with a capacity of 3000 beds, in Bouleuse, Prouilly, Montigny, Courlandon, Saint-Gilles and Mont Notre Dame. Theoretically the wounded process had to be done in several stages.: first the aid station, premises for first aid only as close as possible from the combats. Then the army corps ambulance, the small hospital which had to follow the progression of the front, then the H.O.E which was composed of an evacuation section and a hospitalization section. After the sorting out, the evacuation of the wounded had to be done to the rear, out of Paris and by sanitary trains.

#### A disastrous offensive

The offensive of April 16 1917, first presented as decisive turned out to be a disaster. Within a few days, the best infantry units were wiped out.

The excessive number of injured soldiers couldn't be dealt with and looked after in the best conditions. The Prouilly H.O.E in particular was unable to fulfil its assignments. On April 16, from 10 o'clock am, the wounded started coming from everywhere in great number, some walking, some in ambulances. They had to wait for hours, even days to be looked after. Some of them were even forgotten for several days in a shack...

On the site of the H.O.E, along the road from Jonchery to Pévy, a memorial stone recalls these painful events.

On May 17 1917, General Pétain came after General Nivelle.

Resting time, a pleasure jointly shared, **washing by the river Vesle** or bathing in the Moulin de Courmont pond.