

# Baltimore In The Great War

Letters from a soldier

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## September 26 & 27, 1918: Montfaucon — “Baltimore’s Own Regiment,” The 313th Infantry Regiment (157th Brigade, 79th Division) Accomplishes An Extraordinary Feat In Its First Combat Experience.

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LETTERS FROM A WORLD WAR I SOLDIER FROM BALTIMORE

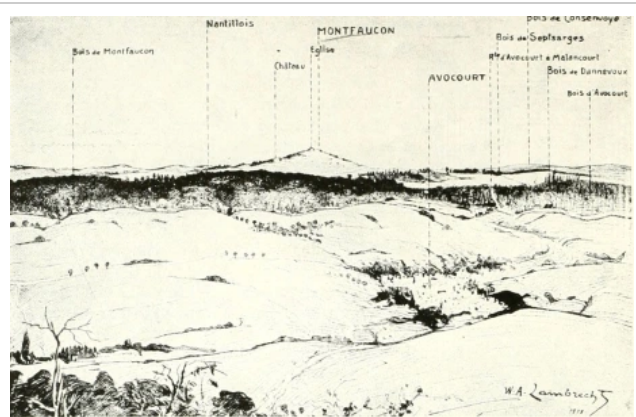
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**View of Montfaucon and its Church Tower.** On September 26, 1918, the 313th started several kilometers to the right of Avocourt, passing through the woods shown at the right. (All photo credits unless other wise noted: [History of the 313th U.S. Infantry "Baltimore's Own,"](#) by Henry C. Thorn Jr. (New York: Wynkoop Hallenback, 1920)



**Montfaucon, a bit closer, about half a mile away.**

“With all honor to... all the other posts, going up San Juan Hill in '98 was like the little 'growler'\* party of Jack and Jill compared to going up the hill to Montfaucon.” — Raymond S. Tompkins, Baltimore *Sun* reporter.

As the 115th was hiking to join the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the Three Hundred and Thirteenth Infantry Regiment, commanded by West Pointer Colonel Claude B. Sweezey, engaged in their first combat ever. It would be remembered in history as one of the most outstanding American victories in the Great War.

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from their current position. Before they could take the hill, however, they had to get there, and the going was not easy.

Baltimorean Henry Gunther, still smarting from the humiliation of his demotion from sergeant to private, was an eager participant. In July, Gunther had been flagged by the regiment’s censor for writing an “unpatriotic” letter urging a friend not to enlist. In this first battle challenge, Gunther was determined to prove that a German name did not make a German sympathizer. He acted bravely as a messenger during these days and he was one of the lucky ones who survived the battle.

At 5:30 AM on September 26, the 313th began making its way through its own barbed wire defenses while artillery, on a precisely timed schedule, pounded the German front line trenches. The men of the 115th, about 36 miles south, heard the roar of the guns.

They were expected to be free of that entanglement in twenty-five minutes, at which time the shellfire on the German position would cease and a rolling barrage would commence, protecting them as they crossed extremely difficult terrain. This ground was pockmarked with deep rim-to-rim shell holes. There was no jumping over them; each must be descended, traversed, and ascended. They were slippery with mud and were strewn with barbed wire, boulders, trees and pools of water. And all this was done in the dark and in a drizzling rain.



Looking out on **No Man’s Land**, difficult ground to cross. This was one jump-off for the 313th.

They planned to advance in a line, 10 to 15 meters between each man and moving one hundred meters ahead every four minutes, covered closely by the barrage moving at the same speed. Because of the rough ground, however, they fell behind schedule and could not keep up with their own cover. In fact, the smokescreen it created hid the regiment from itself. Instead of keeping to a line, the men began to be separated or bunched together.

In the wooded areas, the regiment encountered German snipers and machine guns. Casualties were heavy, yet still the regiment advanced. Casualties mounted as it passed through an open space before the Bois de Montfaucon. Commanders were slain and a platoon on the left was almost entirely wiped out. Captains now led battalions and lieutenants replaced the captains at the head of companies. These losses necessitated a pause



He then received orders to take Montfaucon.

It was a daunting objective. Montfaucon had long been considered impregnable. The Germans had built an observation tower equipped with a powerful telescopic periscope commanding the **view of the countryside all around Verdun**. Machine gun nests, dugouts and other concealed fortifications had held the French Army at bay for three years. As a result, Montfaucon was the jewel in the German crown, a stronghold that had been in their control since the beginning of the war.

The 313th would have to attack it blindly. The road beyond Avocourt was destroyed; difficult terrain for men crossing on foot was impassable for horses pulling heavy guns. Neither were there any roads for ambulances, kitchens or ammunition and supply trucks. They were running out of water. Nevertheless, they decided to try.



View of the ground the 313th crossed, as observed from the observation post on the heights of Montfaucon. It was described as a checkerboard as the men went from wooded area to cleared and then back to woods. They were picked off by snipers and machine gunners in nests among the trees. From here, the enemy had an excellent vantage point and the 313th passed through heavy artillery and machine gun fire.

They started up the hill and had advanced about 200 yards when the Germans opened a devastating blast of machine gun fire, moving up and down the line. Behind the machine guns, German artillery rained high explosives down upon the advancing American line.

But the 313th were now unexpectedly aided by a dense, thick fog, which allowed them to approach unnoticed close to a German pillbox. Here an intrepid American lieutenant captured the entire German crew, compelling them to disclose the locations of 16 other nests. This was a decided advantage.

Meanwhile, at their back, two machine gun battalions had abandoned the trucks on the demolished road and had carried the heavy guns on their own backs up behind the 313th. All night long, a battalion of engineers labored to construct a road to bring in tanks. And fresh ammunition was loaded into the backs of a hundred French burros, headed to the men at the bottom of the hill at Montfaucon.

That night, the 313th bivouacked at the edge of the wood. At 7 AM the next morning, they started toward Montfaucon. They reached the bottom of the hill at the edge of town at 11 AM and, working their bayonets as they encountered opposition, charged uphill, all the while dodging hand



The secret German Observatory, a concrete-and-steel tower inside this manor house, had a periscope at the top. From this vantage, the countryside surrounding Verdun could be surveilled.

They accomplished the extraordinary. By 11:50, they had rooted snipers out of the church cellars and two Germans operating a telephone in the church tower. By 12:15, they had sent a carrier pigeon back to headquarters with the news that Montfaucon was taken.

It was a stellar achievement, especially for a “green” regiment on its first mission.

They were relieved that night, September 27, allowing them a chance to get their first food, water and sleep since the night of September 25. The battle had been won at a heavy cost. Forty-five officers and 1200 men were killed, wounded or missing.

Raymond S. Tompkins described what he saw a few days later. “Around the old boche trenches the ground was splashed yellow with mustard gas stains and an evil smell hung over the land,” he wrote for the *Baltimore Sun*. “German helmets, coveted as souvenirs by the men back of the lines, were strewn about the hillside. A machine-gun corporal invited us into a deep dugout to see his two dead boches... I met a chaplain and a party of litter bearers roving over the hill searching out our wounded... [A] medical major put a gang of the Austrians to work clearing with bare hands a roadway blockaded fifteen feet high with fallen masonry and an ambulance had a path to the trenches in an hour. In a cellar below the ragged walls of Brabant, long an enemy stronghold, a German dressing station equipped with surgical supplies ministered to our wounded, and in these hills and woods, where for four years the Hun prowled and sought Verdun, young Americans now dog his heels and he dies in terror.”



Library of Congress

According to [World Wide Words](#), to *rush the growler* (sometimes to *roll the growler* and other forms) was to take a container to the local bar to buy beer. The growler was the container, usually a tin can. Jack and Jill, of course, took their famous pail up the hill on their growler party.

*Postscript: The ruins of Montfaucon were left as they were, to become another “village détruit” In 1927 amid much fanfare an American*



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