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THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
FOURTH SECTION  
COMMITTEE "H"  
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

ADVANCED COURSE  
1929-30

MACHINE GUN COMPANY, 39TH INFANTRY (4TH DIVISION) IN THE  
AISNE-MARNE OFFENSIVE  
(July 18--August 5, 1918)

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

<sup>h</sup>  
Back, Christian A.

"The Fourth Division"

An excellent history, well written, accurate as to dates and actions of the larger units, but some discrepancies in those of the ~~simi-~~ *smaller* ~~lar~~ units.

Cole, R. B. and  
Eberlin, B.

"The Thirty-Ninth in the World War"

Accurate as to dates and movements and actions of the regiment as a whole. Quite vague as to actions of smaller units.

Poore, B. A.

"History of the 7th Infantry  
Brigade During the World War"

Written in Germany shortly after the war, and contains some inaccuracies.

→ x

American Battle  
Monuments Com-  
mission, File No.  
710.4-D/AM

"Summary of Action of the 4th Di-  
vision, Vesle River Sector August  
3d-11th."

Very general, but accurate as to dates.

Peck, R. H.

"One Infantryman's Experiences in  
France"

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cerning the author's own particular command.

Morrow, G. L.

"Fifty-Eighth Infantry in the  
World War"

A well written book, is accurate, but is  
confined mostly to the actions of one  
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Pollard, J. E.

"Forty-seventh Infantry"

Inaccurate as to certain incidents.

The following books were referred to, but were found to be too  
general to cover the detailed actions of any one regiment or  
division:

Wise, J. C.

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Switzer, J. S.

"American Effort in the Aisne  
Marne Offensive".

\* American Battle Monuments  
Commission, File No. 710.4-B/AM

"Summary of action of 39<sup>th</sup>  
Infantry with The French VI  
Army July 18<sup>th</sup>"

Very General but accurate as to  
dates

MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

Back	"Fourth Division"
Cole and Eberlin	"History of the Thirty-Ninth in the World War"
Poore	"History of the 7th Infantry Brigade during the World War"
ABMC	"American Battle Monuments Commission" (Summaries of Action)

NOTE.- Any statements of fact contained in the following monograph not supported by references, are written from the memory of the author.

## INTRODUCTION

This is the story of the role played by the Machine Gun Company of the 39th U. S. Infantry in the World War. While it relates the experiences of a single machine gun company, it can only be the story of every other machine gun company that went to France and saw active service. That story, it is believed, will always be found to be a tragic one; for certainly where the lives of young men are needlessly sacrificed, is indeed tragic.

In this day with the teachings of The Infantry School in our minds, we find it difficult to realize some of the conditions as they actually existed in our army when the United States entered the great war, which had been raging in Europe for nearly three years.

And perhaps, one of the most astonishing conditions that existed was the limited knowledge of the machine gun and the method of its employment in battle, possessed by the rank and file of the army in general; this in spite of the fact that the machine gun had developed during the three years of war in Europe into the predominant infantry weapon.

No such thing as a machine gun doctrine seems to have existed. The subject of machine gun tactics was something universally unknown and apparently little worried about.

In April 1917 when this nation declared war on Germany, there was included in the organization of each infantry regiment a machine gun company, each of which was equipped with four machine guns of one of four types--the Colt, the German Maxim, the British Vickers,

and the Benet Mercie—the latter being more on the *Sl* machine rifle type. Thus we find the machine gun in the United States Army still in the experimental stage, with no standard type, yet having been adopted for general issue.

*Wagon* Shortly after the declaration of war, it was decided not to adopt as standard for the army any of these four types, and in May 1917, one month after the declaration of war, a standard type of gun was adopted. Not until the spring of 1919 were any of these guns put in the hands of the troops who did the major part of the fighting in France; these troops having used the French Hotchkiss or the British Vickers. In either case it was necessary to supply special small arms ammunition for them.

On this unstabilized foundation of a machine-gun policy, the American machine gunner entered the war.

Considering these facts we should not be surprised at the utter lack of knowledge and consideration of the machine gun on the battle-field shown by regimental and battalion commanders of infantry units and even by the machine gun officers themselves.

It is with a full realization of these facts and with a hope that all other officers of our army also realize them, that this monograph is written, and in so doing nothing is farther from the mind of the writer than any intention on his part to criticize in any but an instructive way, either the part played by himself, or his superior commanders. Certainly no more able or courageous officers commanded troops in the American Expeditionary Forces than the regimental and battalion commanders principally involved in this story.

## NARRATIVE

### Organization and Early Training

An offspring of the Machine Gun Company of the 30th U. S. Infantry, the Machine Gun Company, 39th U. S. Infantry, was organized at Syracuse, New York, in June 1917. Not until January 1918 could it be considered anything but a small cadre of men, its strength up to that time never exceeding eleven enlisted men.

In January 1918 at Camp Greene, North Carolina, where it had moved two months before with the regiment, its enlisted strength had grown to between twenty and thirty and it had just received a full quota of officers consisting of one captain and four lieutenants, none of whom had ever seen a machine gun.

The captain was an officer with a little more than one year's service, nine months of which had been spent behind a desk.

All of the lieutenants had just completed ninety days' training at the Second Officers' Training Camp.

Seven months later when the company saw its first active service in France, the special training in machine guns which had been completed by these officers, was as follows:

The captain--two weeks' course at a division school under a British officer. Twenty other officers of the division took the same course. For this instruction one British Vickers was available.

One lieutenant--thirty days' training at the School of Fire at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Two lieutenants--thirty days' training at Langres, France.

The machine gun equipment of the company at this time consisted of several thousand rounds of ammunition and no machine guns.

Company training during the months of January and February consisted of special instruction for the twenty to thirty men then belonging to the company, with the view of developing them into noncommissioned officers in order to facilitate the training of the company whenever it might receive its full war strength in enlisted personnel.

In December 1917 the Fourth U. S. Division had been organized, its infantry components consisting of the 39th U. S. Infantry and 47th U. S. Infantry comprising the 7th Infantry Brigade, and the 58th U. S. Infantry and 59th U. S. Infantry comprising the 8th Infantry Brigade. (1)

(1) Back,  
p. 17;  
Poore,  
p. 5

In March 1918, troops were sent to the Fourth Division from almost every national army camp in the country and all units completed their full war strength.

The organization of the machine gun company at that time was similar to the one we now have, in that it had three platoons of four guns each.

The months of March and April began the company's first real training for the active service its members were to see only a little more than four months later.

With four Colt machine guns which had been issued to the company, elementary and advance gun drill, and 1,000-inch target practice, consisted of the principal machine gun training over this period.

It was a noticeable fact throughout this early period of training that the machine gun company commander was never interfered with in the training of his

organization. It seemed to be mutually understood that having received a two-weeks' course in machine guns, he was fully competent to assume this responsibility and the job was therefore his alone.

Neither time nor facilities permitted the higher commanders of the division to take any kind of a course in machine guns.

#### Training in France

With the training of the division far from being completed, it left Camp Greene, North Carolina, on April 26th for Camp Mills, New York, preparatory to embarking for France. The rifle companies of the 39th Infantry had not been able to have target practice, and its machine gun company had learned little more than what a machine gun looked like and how it was fired. What little training they had been able to complete had been with a type of gun that was considered obsolete, and left behind. (2)

The company sailed on May 10th and had the good fortune to have on board the same ship Lieutenant Val Browning, a son of the inventor of the Browning machine gun, who was taking the first of these guns (four in number) to France for demonstration purposes.

And so, the trip across was devoted to the company becoming familiar in the mechanical functioning and firing of a second type of machine gun.

Arriving in France, the division was assigned to a training area in the British sector and was attached to the 16th British Infantry Division for training and supply. (3)

In this area all regimental machine gun companies were billeted in the same town and were organized into

(2) Back,  
p. 27

(3) Back,  
p. 52

a provisional machine gun battalion.

Here machine guns of the British Vickers type and equipment, together with transport and animals, were drawn from the British. (4)

Assisted by an officer and two noncommissioned officers of a machine gun company of the 16th British Division, training of the company with a third type of machine gun, immediately started only to be interrupted nine days later. (5)

Due to the success of the Germans in their attack of May 27th against the French positions on the Chemin des Dames which ended in the forming of Chateau Thierry salient, the Fourth Division was rushed to a new training area just north of Meaux where it could be used as a reserve division.

Before departing from the British training area, all British equipment except the transport and animals, were turned back to the British, and again the machine gun organizations found themselves without machine guns.

The move to the new training area started on June 9th. On June 15th with the remainder of the regiment, the company arrived at Acy-en-Multien located about eighteen kilometers northeast of Meaux and about the same distance from the new front line of the new Chateau-Thierry salient. (See Map. No. 1)

At Acy-en-Multien the 39th Infantry as a part of the 7th Brigade was attached to the Fourth French Division for training and defense.

Again the training of the regiment was undertaken. The men of the rifle companies were given their first

(4)

h  
Back,  
p. 57

(5) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 21

(6) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 21

opportunity to fire their rifles. No ranges being available, at first, a long line of tin cans tied to stakes were used as targets. (6)

Not until several days after the arrival of the company at Acy-en-Multien was it able to secure its Hotchkiss machine guns and other equipment from the French.

After having learned the mechanism of three other types of machine guns, the company was at last issued the type of machine gun with which it was to go into battle less than four weeks later.

The 4th French Division to which the regiment had been attached for defense and training evidently considered the defense element much more important than the training element, as the only French instruction personnel the machine gun company saw, was a lone French enlisted man from whom little was learned.

The arrival of the two officers who had been sent to Langres for a course in machine guns facilitated the training of the company considerably. Fortunately their training at Langres had been with the Hotchkiss gun.

Training here, however, was not to be without its interruptions, for on several occasions the regiment was required to march at night to its reserve position just west of La Ferte Milon, some twelve kilometers from Acy-en-Multien, returning the following night. The first time this occurred the machine gun company was still without machine guns or pistols. It was a most peculiar feeling to be in command of a machine gun organization without arms, marching on a dark night

toward the front line which was within both sight and hearing, without the least idea of when<sup>re</sup> the march was going to end.

The training of the company at Acy was almost entirely in technique. A method of extended order drill or how a machine gun squad should advance in an attack seems not to have been thought of; and the only consolation that the company commander could find in hunting an excuse for his apparent stupidity is that no one else seemed to think of it either.

At dusk on the night of July 15th, after a hard day of training the regiment was again ordered to move up to its reserve position. (7)

(7) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 25

#### Aisne-Marne Offensive--First Engagement

The regiment arrived at its reserve position before dawn on the 16th. Not until noon when the regimental, battalion and company commanders were assembled at the Headquarters of the 33d French Division was it known that the regiment was to take over a sector in the front line. (8)

(8) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 25

The regiment had been attached to the 33d French Division which was at that time holding the left of the 2d French Army Corps astride the Ourcq River. It was to relieve the 11th French Infantry Regiment during the night of July 17th-18th.

Nothing in the orders received at the French Division Headquarters conveyed any other impression than that the regiment was to at last experience the usual tour of front line duty on a quiet sector, which, up to that time, had been the custom for American troops <sup>to experience</sup> in order to familiarize both officers and men with actual war conditions.

That night guides were provided for the unit commanders of each battalion, and with their respective battalion commander, were escorted to the position on the front line which their respective organizations were to occupy.

The regiment was to take over a front of about 3,000 meters with its right resting on the Ourcq River, and its left about 300 meters south of Faverolles (see Map No. 2). All three battalions were to be in line in the order of 2d, 3d, and 1st.

The 41st French Division was to be on the regiment's left and other troops of the 33d French Division on its right.

The 2d Battalion was to occupy the area of Troesnes and Silly-la-Poterie with its left resting on the Saviere River.

The Machine Gun Company 39th Infantry was to be attached to the 2d Battalion.

All day of the 17th was spent by the machine gun company commander inspecting the gun positions of the French machine gun company it was to relieve. All these guns had been disposed for defense.

The relief of the 11th French Infantry started shortly after dark on the night of the 17th. Rain and inky darkness made the relief most difficult.

(9) Back, <sup>h</sup>  
p. 70 ✓ (9)

P-69

In the sector of the 2d Battalion the rifle companies were disposed as follows:

Company "E" occupied the eastern edge of Troesnes as the right front line company of the battalion.

Company "H" was on the left of Company "E" prolonging the line to the Saviere River.

Companies "G" and "F" occupied positions in reserve, Company "G" at Les Hureaux and Company "F" in and around Silly-la-Poterie. (See Map No. 2)

The machine gun company had taken over the emplacements used by the French machine gun company. Their guns were disposed as shown in Map No. 2. Their positions and fields of fire looked satisfactory enough to the machine gun company commander for a defensive position. That the machine guns might have to be used on the offense was not considered.

With the relief of the position incomplete at 11:00 PM, the battalion commander of the 2d Battalion was summoned to regimental headquarters, then located in the woods north of Silly-la-Poterie. (See Map No. 2) As the next senior officer in the battalion sector, the machine gun company commander was left in command.

By midnight the relief of all French troops in the battalion sector had been completed. With the French went all means of wire or telephone communications. For a good reason the American regiment was not permitted to install theirs.

At 3:30 AM on the 18th, the battalion commander had not returned. Attached to the battalion was a French lieutenant acting as a liaison officer and advisor. About this time the French officer confided in the machine gun company commander that a great attack was to take place that morning, in which the 39th Infantry was to participate, and that as the zero hour had been set for 4:35 AM he was becoming concerned over the continued absence of the battalion commander.

This was indeed "shocking" news. The anxiety of the French officer was immediately contracted by the machine gun company commander.

Runners were immediately dispatched to regimental headquarters, and as the zero hour of 4:35 AM gradually approached, the passing moments proved to be mighty anxious ones.

Realizing in the meantime that if the machine gun company was to support effectively an attack by the battalion at any such hour, it would be necessary to get forward more machine guns in the vicinity of Troesnes at once. He therefore ordered the section at Les Hureaux up to Troesnes where the other section of its platoon was already located.

This anticipation of the battalion attack order proved costly, for the sections arrived in <sup>the</sup> Saviere Valley northeast of Troesnes, just in time to get caught in the German counter-artillery barrage, two of its personnel getting killed and three others wounded.

Just before the zero hour arrived, the battalion commander returned to his command post, having lost his way en route from the regimental command post. Fortunately the late return to his command post did not interfere with the part that his battalion was to take in the attack of the regiment.

The original plan of attack of the French division commander called for the 39th Infantry holding its position, while the French troops on its right and left attacked at 4:35 AM. The 39th Infantry was not to start its advance until the Buisson de Cresnes, directly to its front, was outflanked on both the north and south by the French. The regiment was given the mission of clearing the woods and consolidating its eastern edge.

(10) Back, <sup>h</sup>  
p. 70; ✓  
Cole and (10)  
Eberlin,  
p. 26

The French attacked as planned, but their progress was slow, particularly that of the 33d French Division

troops on the right. To meet this situation, the 39th was ordered to attack, echeloning its battalions from left to right sending them forward one at a time as ordered by the French brigade commander.

The 1st Battalion on the left attacked at 8:00 AM, crossed the Saviere, and advanced through the northern part of the Buisson de Cresnes to its eastern edge where it halted and reorganized. (11)

(11) A.B.M.C.  
File No.  
710.4-  
B/AM;  
Cole and  
Eberlin,  
pp. 26-27

The 3d Battalion, in the center, attacked at 9:00 AM, advanced against severe resistance in the southern part of the woods, not reaching the eastern edge until

(12) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 29

2:00 PM when it halted. (12)

On account of the slow advance of the French south of the Ourcq and the 3d Battalion on the left, the 2d Battalion did not start its advance from Troesnes until 3:45 PM.

During the entire morning its position had been subject to an incessant artillery shelling and machine-gun fire from the extreme southern portion of the Buisson de Cresnes. This inactivity under fire proved a grueling test of nerves to men who were experiencing their first taste of warfare. It was only with great difficulty that the machine gunners were prevented from wasting their entire supply of ammunition on all sorts of imaginary targets.

The plan of attack of the 2d Battalion called for an advance straight to the front by the two companies in assault ("E" and "H") which were to be followed at a distance of 400 yards by the two reserve companies-- ("G" and "F").

The mission given the machine gun company in the attack order was "to support the attack with fire".

To comply with this rather ambiguous order, the machine gun company commander for the first time in his seven months experience with machine guns, was required to give some thought as to how machine guns might be employed in offensive combat. Fortunately he was given eleven hours to figure it out.

Each of the two platoons in Troesnes were attached to one of the assault rifle companies while the platoon in reserve in and around Silly-la-Poterie, was ordered to fire on the southern edge of the Buisson de Cresnes from the high ground west of the Saviere. The order for this fire was issued from a map. A few hours later a message was received from the platoon leader to the effect that he could not see the Buisson de Cresnes from the position and requested information as to whether the company commander desired him to fire overhead fire. He was ordered to attach a section to each of the reserve companies and advance with them.

The next problem that had to be solved was a formation and method for the advance of the gun squads in following the rifle companies to which they were attached. Strange to say, the formation hastily decided upon was similar to the present squad column now used by machine gun squads. A section was attached to each assault platoon of the assault companies. The rate of advance was to be that of the platoon to which the sections were attached. To advance by bounds never occurred to anyone.

All guns and equipment were advanced by hand, the machine gun carts having been instructed to remain with the combat trains.

The advance of the 2d Battalion met with practically no resistance. When it reached the prolongation

of the line which had been established by the 1st and 3d Battalions along the eastern edge of the Buisson de Cresnes, orders were issued for the 2d and 3d Battalions to continue the advance, the 2d Battalion to seize and organize a slope running southwest from Noroy. The 3d Battalion was to capture Noroy and establish a line on the eastern edge of the town. The 1st Battalion was to follow in reserve. (13)

(13) Cole and Eberlin, p. 29; ABMC, File No. 710.4- B/AM

The 3d Battalion accomplished its mission after some hand-to-hand fighting in Noroy, but again the 2d Battalion reached its objective without being seriously resisted. The lines of the two battalions were coordinated for the night. In the organization of the sector of the 2d Battalion, the machine guns were disposed as shown on Map No. 2.

In accordance with orders issued by the Commanding General of the 33d French Division, the regimental commander issued orders during the night for the advance to be resumed at 4:00 AM the next morning (the 19th).

The 2d and 3d Battalions were to remain in assault, attacking in their present formation. The 1st Battalion was to remain in reserve. (14)

(14) ABMC File No. 710.4- B/AM

The 2d Battalion was to attack on a front of only 550 yards with its right still following the Ourcq River.

The 3d Battalion on the left was to attack also on a front of 550 yards.

The objective of both battalions was the ridge east of Chouy on a front of 1000 meters north of the Ourcq River. The attack was to be preceded by a rolling artillery barrage. (15)

(15) Cole and Eberlin, p. 30

The command post of the machine gun company was

established in a railroad culvert about 100 yards from the battalion command post and in it the company commander spent the night of the 14th. In other words, he went to sleep! About dawn he was awakened by one of his own officers who informed him that the battalion was forming for an attack.

He immediately reported to the battalion commander and was informed by him that the battalion was preparing to attack at 4:00 AM; that the attack order had been issued, and frankly admitted that in assembling the company commanders, the machine gun company had been overlooked.

Receiving a hasty explanation of the situation, the company commander promptly decided upon the only plan of supporting the attack that he was sure of and that was the one he had used the day before, of attaching a platoon to each assault company and a section to each reserve company. The same formation and method of advance were to be used by the gun squads as on the day before.

The plan of attack of the 2d Battalion was the same as it had been the day before, attacking straight to the front with two companies in assault and two in reserve. The formation of the companies remained unchanged. (16)

(16) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 31

At 4:00 AM both battalions started their advance, but the rolling barrage that was to precede the assault units failed to materialize. At 5:15 AM, one hour and fifteen minutes after the regiment had launched its attack, a message reached regimental headquarters, informing the regimental commander that the attack had

been postponed and would not begin until 5:30 AM. Every effort was made to prevent the artillery barrage from being fired in the regimental zone of advance, but it was without avail, for the barrage passed through the assault battalion with almost disastrous results. (17)

(17) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 31

The 3d Battalion fought its way all day from Noroy, passed just south of Chouy which was captured by the French, and finally reached its objective late in the afternoon.

The 2d Battalion, however, was to have the harder time of it on this day. Its advance was over a most difficult terrain, which included marshes, woods, hills, and the winding valley of the Ourcq.

Starting its advance, it immediately encountered serious resistance from the reorganized positions of the Germans.

The attached machine guns immediately began to prove themselves to be both a help and a nuisance. Their presence drew minenwerfer and shell fire and their nearness to the infantry subjected the assault lines to this fire. On the other hand they were able to give some material assistance in aiding the advance by actually firing through the ranks of the infantry just in rear of the assault lines.

The advance of the two assault companies was fairly uniform until the road running south from Noroy was reached. Arriving at the eastern edge of the woods, just east of this road, Company "H", the left assault company, was checked by machine gun fire from the small patch of woods on the nose directly to its front. Here the machine gun platoon attached to

Company "H" played an important part in assisting the company to continue its advance, but at a great cost. Lieutenant Paul Strickland, for whom Strickland Ridge on the <sup>Fort Benning</sup> reservation is named, in command of this platoon, taking a noncommissioned officer with him worked forward in front of the infantry and succeeded in locating the enemy machine gun that was holding up the advance of the company. In attempting to return to his platoon, Lieutenant Strickland was mortally wounded by a ball from a German sniper and was forced to seek cover in the ditch of the road. The noncommissioned officer, however, succeeded in reaching one of the guns, and directed its fire on the German machine gun position, putting it out

(18) Lt. Paul Strickland, of action. (18)  
Sgt. Dennis Curran

In the meantime Company "E", the right assault company, had advanced into the swamp just east of the road running south from Noroy and was being closely followed by Company "G". (19)

(19) Cole and Eberlin, p. 32

The battalion commander with his staff and the machine gun company commander, were all just in rear of the support line of Company "E". No such thing as an organized command post for the battalion existed.

About this time attention was called to the French rolling barrage creeping forward from the rear. It was forcing Company "G" forward into the swamp when <sup>it</sup> ran into Company "E" which was checked by machine gun fire to its front.

As the barrage passed through the swamp chaos reigned, and it was only the presence of the battalion commander who took personal command of both companies that restored order and the companies reorganized sufficiently to resume the advance.

In the swamp the machine gun company lost two of its guns, but the remainder played a big part in helping the two companies finally to reach the battalion objective.

(20) Back, <sup>h</sup>  
p. 74 ✓ Companies "H" and "F" on the left had become completely disorganized by the French barrage and never did succeed in getting forward, a French officer leading them to the rear. (20)

The machine gun section which had been attached to Company "F" got lost and wandered over into the zone of advance of the 3d Battalion and remained with that organization the rest of the day.

(21) Cole and  
Eberlin, <sup>h</sup>  
p. 33 ✓ During the night of July 19th-20th, the regiment was relieved and ordered to return to the Buisson de Borny, just west of La Ferte Milon, where it went into reserve. (21)

In spite of the hard fighting experienced by the regiment, these two days, the total casualties were only two officers and fifty-four men killed and nine officers and 218 men wounded.

For its accomplishments, the regiment was cited by the French Army Commander and its colors decorated.

#### Aisne-Marne Offensive--Vesle River

(22) Back, <sup>h</sup>  
p. 91 ✓ For the next week the 39th Infantry, as a part of the 7th Brigade, remained in reserve of the 6th French Army. (22)

On July 27th orders were received reverting it to the command of its own division, and on the same day the brigade marched to the Foret de Fere where the Fourth Division was assembling as a reserve for the

1st United States Corps. The Foret de Fere is just in rear of the position then being held by the 42d Division, along the Ourcq River just east of Fere-en-Tardenois where its advance had been temporarily checked. Two battalions of the 47th Infantry were attached to the 42d Division and participated in the fighting in and around Sergy. (See Map No. 1)

The Germans had selected the favorable position north of the Ourcq to make a determined effort to check temporarily the Allied advance, while a stronger position was organized along the Vesle, and so the vast amount of supplies and men still remaining in the northern part of the salient could be evacuated. (23)

(23) Back,  
p. 95 ✓

To stem the American wave that had been so successful up to this time, the 4th Prussian Guards were thrown against the 1st United States Corps. From the 28th of July until August 1st when the German withdrawal took place, these troops were successful in performing the mission for which they had been rushed to this section of the Western Front. (24)

(24) Back,  
p. 96 ✓

On the night of August 1st, warning orders were issued by the division for the intended relief on the night of August 2d of the 42d Division. (25)

(25) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 34

In this relief the machine gun company was to be attached to the 1st Battalion in whose bivouac in the Foret de Fere it had been enjoying a rest. About midnight on the night of August 1st-2d, the 1st Battalion with the machine gun company attached, received orders to break camp and move to a more forward position. With the battalion in a column of twos and ready to move out, a German plane flying extremely

low, and almost on a line with the column, dropped a number of bombs into the ranks of the battalion. In the short period of time that it took the plane to fly over, the battalion suffered 27 killed and 94 wounded. The scene was one of death and horror. The head of the column suffered the greater portion of the casualties and as the machine gun company was lined up at the tail of the column, it escaped without injury.

On the night of August 1st the Germans started their retreat from the Ourcq to the <sup>V</sup>Sesle. Discovering this the next morning the 42d Division immediately took up the pursuit and by the night of the 2d had reached a line northeast of Fere-en-Tardinois on the northern edge of the Foret de Nesles. (See Map No.

(26) ABMC,  
File No.  
710.4-  
D/AM

1) (26)

On this line the 4th Division relieved the 42d Division at 4:00 AM on the morning of August 3d.

Making a passage of lines, the division advanced with brigades abreast, the 8th Brigade on the right and the 7th Brigade on the left. The left boundary of the 7th Brigade was the left boundary of the 1st U. S. Corps. French troops were on the left. (27)

(27) ABMC,  
File No.  
710.4-  
D/AM

The 7th Brigade advanced in a column of regiments with the 39th Infantry in assault.

The 2d and 3d Battalions were in assault, the 3d Battalion on the right, with the 1st Battalion in reserve. (28)

(28) ABMC  
File No.  
710.4-  
D/AM

Again the machine gun company was attached to the 2d Battalion.

As the terrain over which the company was to advance was shown by the map to be thickly wooded

for the first six kilometers, and as resistance from the enemy was expected to be encountered from the very start (no information to the contrary having been given), the machine guns, together with the necessary equipment and ammunition, were ordered to be carried by hand and the carts directed to join the combat trains.

The advance of the battalion started in an approach march formation with reduced intervals and distances.

On this occasion, however, the machine gun company commander took advantage of the lesson in control that he had received in the engagement of July 19th, and kept his company intact instead of assigning platoons and sections to the rifle companies of the battalion.

The formation of the company as first planned was a column of platoons, each platoon being in a line of squad columns. Forty paces distance was to be maintained between platoons and twenty paces interval between gun squads. The company was to advance between the assault and reserve companies and its rate of advance to be that of the infantry.

The advance through the Bois de Dole took from 4:00 AM until 2:30 in the afternoon, the delay not being caused by any enemy resistance, for fortunately none was encountered; it was due to the great difficulty that the smaller unit commanders experienced in keeping their organizations in formation and in maintaining direction, so dense was the woods.

Before advancing very far it became necessary for the machine gun company commander to order each

platoon into a column of squad columns changing the formation of the company to a line of platoons, the right and left platoon guiding on the center platoon. Even in this formation the right column lost its direction and it was not until the regiment had emerged from the northern edge of the Bois de Dole that it rejoined the company. The slow rate of advance by the infantry proved a God-send to the machine gunners carrying their heavy equipment.

Before reaching the Mont Notre Dame--Chery *Sh*  
Chartreure road the assault units of the regiment ~~encountered~~ encountered their first resistance of the day, by machine gun fire from the Bois de Bazoches. (See Map No. 3) (29)

(29) ABMC  
File No.  
710.4-  
D/AM

One platoon of the machine gun company was ordered into position on some high ground south of the road, and under cover of its fire the advance elements of the 2d Battalion succeeded in clearing the southern edge of the Bois de Bazoches. (30)

(30) <sup>h</sup>Back,  
p. 107  
*we heard*

At this time orders were received by the division from the corps to form two columns with strong advance guards, take up the pursuit, and push across the Vesle for the purpose of forming a bridgehead on its northern slope. (31)

(31) <sup>h</sup>Back,  
p. 108

To the front line troops, this order was rather difficult to understand, as they were in contact with the enemy for the first time that day, after having advanced for ten hours through thick woods in an approach march formation.

The march was nevertheless ordered by the divi-

sion, the 8th Brigade forming a column on the right and the 7th Brigade forming one on the left.

The 39th Infantry, less the 1st Battalion, was designated as the advance guard for the 7th Brigade Column.

It was not until 10:00 PM that the regiment finally got started. Its route of march was to be northwest on the Mont Notre Dame-Chery Chartreuve road to the Montbani farm road and thence northeast to Saint Thibaut by the unimproved road running northeast.

The 2d Battalion was leading, constituting the support of the advance guard with Company "E" out as the advance party. The 3d Battalion and the machine gun company in the order named, constituted the reserve. One company of the 11th Machine Gun Battalion was to be attached to the support, but it did not get forward in time to join the column before it started.

After turning northeast on the unimproved road toward Saint Thibaut the head of the column encountered artillery fire and automatically halted and here the regiment remained the rest of the night with its right flank exposed to incessant artillery shelling.

The troops were able to find cover but the transport of the combat trains suffered heavily. A heavy rain had started to pour down, and with the heavy shelling and inky darkness all reconneissance proved futile. It was a most awkward position for a commander to find himself in.

In the meantime practically the same thing was

happening to the 8th Brigade Column, its advance guard not having been able to even get on the road.

(32)

At dawn the commanding officer, 39th Infantry, who was the advance guard commander, finding the Montbani Farm--Saint Thibaut road under the direct observation of the heights north of the Vesle, and also still being shelled, ordered his column to countermarch, move eastward across country to the Chery Chartreuve--Saint Thibaut road, and approach the river crossing just below Saint Thibaut from that route.

In executing the countermarch some confusion occurred, for when the column finally got under way, Companies "H" and "F" were in front of the 3d Battalion and Companies "E" and "G" behind it. The machine gun company was still in rear of the 3d Battalion.

Time was not taken to rectify this splitting of the 2d Battalion. Company "H" was sent forward as the advance party, with Companies "F", "K", and "L" being designated as the support and Companies "I", "M", Machine Gun, "E", and "G" in the order named as the reserve.

The Chery-Chartreuve road to Saint Thibaut passes through a deep gulch about 200 meters wide and almost perpendicular to the high ground north of the Vesle River. The exit from the gulch is about 1,000 meters from the southern edge of Saint Thibaut, and in order to get to the town it is necessary to pass over an open area which is under the direct command of the high ground north of the Vesle.

(32) Bach ✓  
P. 108 ✓

(33) Cole and  
Eberlin,

Saint Thibaut is located on a long ~~nolle~~<sup>knoll</sup> sloping northeast toward the river. It proved to be nothing more than a bull's-eye for the direct fire of the German artillery, minenwerfers and machine guns which had taken full advantage of the command<sup>ing</sup> positions offered by the high ground north of the river. (33)

Company "H", the advance party, was permitted to leave the gulch and approach the town without being fired upon. It reached the town at 8:00 AM still on the road in a column of twos.

Part of the support at this time was already well out of the gulch in a column of squads.

It was a sight that must have made the German artillery observers gasp in amazement, for before them lay an artilleryman's dream.

Company "H" was permitted to advance well into the sunken road leading to the bridge, when suddenly the Germans cut loose with a terrific machine gun and artillery fire on Saint Thibaut, and the area in its rear, resulting in enormous casualties.

For awhile the ranks of the support of the advance guard were in great confusion.

Company "H" after some time was reorganized and took a position on the northern edge of the town. Company "K" took up a position on the right of the road about 500 meters south of the town. Companies "F" and "L" deployed to the right and left of the road respectively, and about 200 meters in rear of Company "X".

The reserve, still in column in the gulch, was halted.

The regimental commander, together with the com-

mander of the support, went forward into Saint Thibaut. Here the regimental command post was established with only one rifle company a few hundred meters to the front.

Six patrols were sent forward from Company "H", some of which were successful in crossing the river and returning with the information of the highly-organized defensive position that confronted the advance of the regiment. These patrols were the first Allied troops to cross the Vesle. (34)

(34) Back,  
p. 110 ✓

It was decided to hold the town and for that reason an effort was made to get more troops forward.

With considerable difficulty two platoons of Company "I" succeeded in working forward in small numbers and took up a position on the sunken road west of the town. (35)

(35) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 44

Before noon the machine gun company commander was successful in getting one of his platoons forward, the gun crews crawling almost the entire distance from the exit of the gulch to the town on their bellies.

As the least activity in the town seemed to draw an artillery concentration, it was with considerable difficulty that guns were finally mounted in the approximate position shown on the map. (See Map No. 3)

Movement in the town during the rest of the day proved to be extremely dangerous even for individuals. Not only did the Germans seem able to bring down artillery fire at any point at any time, but certain localities seemed to be within the observation <sup>and</sup> ~~of~~ range of enemy snipers and machine gunners.

The numerous wine cellars (all empty) and basements of the town proved to be excellent dugouts.

Late in the afternoon a steady shelling of <sup>the</sup> ~~an~~ area

in the vicinity in which the building that held regimental headquarters was situated, indicated that German observers had been able to tell what the buildings contained. It was later discovered that the regimental sergeant major had placed the regimental command post flag in a most conspicuous place on the iron gate in the court yard where it could be easily seen by runners.

The machine gun company commander spent most of the afternoon in observation from the ~~hills~~<sup>knoll</sup> on the northern edge of the town, and was unable to locate a single German position to the front in and around Bazoches, so well concealed were the German positions.

In this engagement a sudden realization of the value of machine guns seemed to have come to the regimental commander, for he never rested until machine guns were brought forward into the town, and then wanted to hear them constantly being fired the rest of the day in spite of the fact that he was neither making an attack, or being attacked. Consequently the lack of targets, the question of ammunition supply for the guns and a desire to keep the commanding officer satisfied, seemed to be the principal problem that confronted the machine gun company commander. Late in the day when a German minenwerfer position was located, three of the four guns in the town were fired at it simultaneously; the Germans' retaliation with artillery fire was so severe, that it is believed he was taught a lesson as to one of the disadvantages of having a machine gun position near infantry.

After dark Company "F" and the remaining two

platoons of Company "I" were brought forward, Company "F" going into position in the town just in rear of Company "H" and the two platoons from Company "I" joining the company in its position in the sunken road west of the town. (36)

(36) Cole and Eberlin, p. 44

The night of August 4th and 5th will always be remembered by those who were in Saint Thibaut. Starting at midnight the American artillery concentrated its fire until dawn on the towns of Bazoches and Haut Maison, and all other German positions which had shown to be occupied by German troops. The German artillery replied by concentrating most of <sup>the</sup> fire on Saint Thibaut. The night was kept as bright as day by the large number of flares which were kept constantly in the air. (37)

(37) Back, p. 112 ✓

About midnight of August 4th and 5th, orders were received from the corps for a coordinated attack by the division at 5:00 AM to be made in conjunction with the 32d Division on the right, and the French on the left.

On the right of the 39th Infantry was the 58th Infantry which was the assault regiment of the 8th Brigade.

Of the two regiments, the 39th Infantry had by far the ~~most~~<sup>re</sup> difficult task. It was given the mission of crossing the river north of Saint Thibaut, to seize the towns of Bazoches and Haut Maison, and then secure the high ground to the north. This was to be done by men who already were aware of the skillfully organized defensive position that lay in front of them. (38)

(38) Back, p. 113 ✓

In the plan of attack of the 39th Infantry all permanent battalion organization seems to have been discarded.

Companies "H" and "I" were to form the assault

wave, Company "H" on the right, with Companies "F" and "K" following closely in support, Company "F" on the right. No definite scheme of maneuver seems to have been included in the plan of attack other than an attack straight to the front.

This force was to be commanded by the battalion commander of the 3d Battalion.

The machine gun company was to support the attack by fire from the town, while Companies "A" and "C" of the 11th Machine Gun Battalion were also to support the attack from the high ground to the southwest of the town.

In neither case were any definite targets designated so far as can be remembered.

To comply with his mission in the attack, the machine gun company commander ordered another one of his platoons to come forward. Why he failed to use the 3d Platoon cannot be explained.

When the other platoon came forward it was ordered to take position in battery formation in the sunken road west of the town, from where it was to support the attack of Company "I", after the company had gone a sufficient distance down the hill to permit the guns to fire with safety.

Just before the hour for the attack, all the guns of the other platoons were assembled in a similar formation just in rear of Company "H" with instructions to support that company in a like manner.

At 5:00 AM, when the attack was launched, the American artillery preparation was still being fired.

Almost instantly the German artillery began falling in the area between the town and the river.

Two machine guns in the right platoon were put out of action by the bursting of a single shell after having fired only a few rounds. One of these guns had taken a position behind a remaining brick wall of a building, and the wall was knocked over, crushing the gun and its crew.

When the American artillery fire lifted, the German machine guns began to work.

Company "H" reached the narrow-gauge railroad at the base of the hill and was unable to advance any further. Company "F" which was to follow Company "H" never left the town.

Company "I" reached the river and under terrific artillery and withering machine gun fire, attempted to ford the river. This was found impossible to do as the Germans had filled the river with wire entanglements. One officer and three men were killed while attempting to cut the wire. (38)

(38) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 44

The company commander of Company "I" was wounded, but refused to be evacuated. Seeing the danger of his position, he directed an orderly withdrawal to the cover of the narrow-gauge railroad.

The machine gun company kept up a steady fire on the town of Bazoches. Definitely located targets were very few.

The attack of the 39th Infantry had completely failed. The 58th Infantry, however, had succeeded in getting a foothold on the north bank of the Vesle.

Hearing this, the commanding officer of the 39th Infantry ordered another attack, this time ordering Companies "E" and "G" to reinforce Company "H" and "I". The American artillery again fired a preparation on Bazoches.

During this attack Company "I" taking advantage of the artillery preparation, not only reached the river again, but succeeded in getting one platoon across by the use of logs.

Company "H" reached the river, but was forced to withdraw to the railroad again, where it became intermingled with Company "E", which had been stopped at the railroad track. Company "G" also reached the track.

During this attack the German artillery succeeded in getting the range to the company's machine gun positions, and their crews were compelled to take them out of action and seek cover.

By this time the morale of the companies down in front was at a very low ebb, and when orders for another attack came, it also was doomed to fail. (39)

(39) Cole and  
Eberlin,  
p. 47

It is worthy of note that in none of the three attacks did the infantry ever succeed in reaching a single German position. To witness the fight, it appeared very much like human beings were being pitted against a curtain of artillery and machine-gun fire.

A short while after the last attack had failed, the divisional machine gun battalion, which unbeknown to the troops in Saint Thibaut, had gone into position on the high ground to the southwest, suddenly opened fire with twenty-four machine guns.

The object and target of this intensive fire is to-day still debatable.

What the direct results of the fire of these guns were, is not known, but the indirect results

Suddenly, the realization of the tremendous responsibility that this captain had unconsciously assumed in taking over the command of young men to train for war such as this boy before him, who had blindly trusted himself to his guidance, and realizing how ill prepared they all were, due to his ignorance, this officer felt that "Sister" McKey was right, that he was responsible for getting him into this.

That evening the division issued an order calling for the temporary withdrawal of the regiment from Saint Thibaut in order that an artillery preparation could be fired throughout the next day on the German position preparatory to another attack in the afternoon.

"The general has decided to wipe the towns of Bazoches and Haut Maison and the possible emplacements east, north, and south of these towns, off the map", is an extract from a message sent by the Chief of Staff of the Division to the Brigade Commander.

This proved to be rather an exaggerated idea of what artillery can do, for the preparation was fired as scheduled, but when other troops of the division took over the job of the 39th Infantry both towns and the emplacements, still occupied by Germans, were found to be there where they were able to withstand many more American onslaughts for weeks to come.

The casualties of the regiment from August 3d to August 6th amounted to 11 officers and 204 enlisted men killed, and 42 officers and over 1200 enlisted men wounded.

## ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

In this monograph of a regimental machine gun company, it has been obviously necessary to discuss to a certain extent, the operations of the higher units to which it belonged.

We have covered in a rather hasty manner two distinct engagements of the regiment, fought during the same major operation within sixteen days of one another.

When we stop and analyze these two engagements, we find some startling contrasts in the results of each.

In the first engagement of July 18th and 19th, the regiment has entered the front line for its initial baptism of fire. Being denied the usual tour of duty in a so-called quiet sector that the earlier American divisions to arrive in France had been privileged to experience, it is required to take part as an assault unit in one of the most decisive offensives of the war.

The success that the regiment attains is remarkable. It reaches all objectives and suffers a minimum of casualties; which, after all, should be the main object of every commander in battle.

In the second engagement of August 3d to August 7th, it again enters the front line, but this time with all its personnel having had a taste of what modern warfare was like, yet the results are remarkably different. ~~Failure~~ and tremendous casualties.

This great difference in results is food for study.

In the first engagement the regiment is under the command of French officers, thoroughly trained in the

principles of war and their application by the greatest of all military teachers, war itself.

With the regimental commander and each battalion commander is a French officer of junior rank designated as "liaison officers". Through them the regimental and battalion commanders receive their orders from the higher French commanders.

Consequently, the application of some principles of war are most evident.

On the morning of the attack the Principle of Surprise is applied to a high degree.

Without forfeiting the Principle of the Objective or Offensive, the Principle of Economy of Force is applied by not permitting too hasty an advance of the regiment into the Buisson de Cresnes.

By having the regiment advance in echelonment of battalions from left to right, after the French on the left had outflanked the Buisson de Cresnes, and with the failure of the French south of the Ourcq to advance, we have an excellent demonstration of the application of Cooperation, as well as Movement.

Go<sup>ing</sup> back to the second engagement, we find an entirely different situation.

The regiment is now a part of an American brigade, division, and corps, all commanded by American general officers. The commanders of all three were colonels commanding peace strength regiments when the war was declared.

Their military education had been<sup>as</sup> much as an unprepared nation provided, which was not very extensive.

Their combat experience was limited to the command of small units in the war with Spain and the Philippine Insurrection. Still, they represented the Army's best.

The regimental commander had been promoted to a major just as the war broke out and had just started his career when the nation declared war on Spain.

The battalion commanders were still young men with less than five years' service.

The large majority of junior officers had never shouldered a rifle up to a year before, and had received commissions after ninety days of training.

Is it any wonder that in this engagement against a well-trained and skillfully intrenched enemy we find the Principles of War conspicuous by their violations instead of their applications?

From the very start we find the Principle of Security being violated by a lack of any information concerning the highly organized position of the Germans on the Vesle, with the result that a whole battalion is caught in a compact formation on the road.

In none of the attacks on the Vesle do we find any commanders from the division commander down planning any scheme of maneuver other than an attack straight to the front by all units. This shows a lack of the application in the Principles of Movement, Mass, and Cooperation.

Had attacks in great depth been made to the flanks of Bazoches with a holding attack to its front as the French had done in outflanking the Buisson de Cresnes, the results on the Vesle might have been different.

In discussing the use of machine guns in these two offensives we find a great example of the danger of

losing sight of the Principle of the Offensive.

At the time when the United States entered the war, the Allied nations had settled down to a passive defense. Undoubtedly the stabilized warfare that resulted was largely due to the great development in the use of the machine gun. Consequently, most of their machine gun tactics were of a defensive nature.

Not having any machine gun doctrine of its own, the American army was required to accept the teachings of its Allies with the result that machine gun organizations, hastily trained, learned practically nothing of the offensive use of the machine gun.

Consequently, throughout the early engagements of the American Expeditionary Forces we are bound to find gross violations of machine-gun tactics as they are now taught, which in turn violate certain Principles of War.

#### LESSONS

The lessons contained in these two engagements for the military man are most evident, far too evident to touch on here.

For it is believed that the real lesson learned from any engagement in the World War where American troops participated goes much farther than the army itself. It is a lesson in Security that goes back to the nation as a demonstration of the tremendous price it pays for being unprepared. It should teach the nation that even if we can "raise a million men overnight" as one eminent statesman said, that it means nothing. And it should serve to bring home with a terrible awakening the criminal ignorance of another statesman who said, "It should be our glory that we were not prepared". What a difference the ghost of a "Sister" McKey would make in his ideas of war.

## QUESTIONS

1. When war was declared on Germany, the machine gun organizations of the United States Army were quipped with:
  - (1) British Vickers
  - (2) German Maxims
  - (3) Benet Mercies
  - (4) Guns including four different types. Answer 4
  
2. The basis of machine gun instruction in the United States Army after war was declared was taken from:
  - (1) The experience of the Mexican Punitive Expedition
  - (2) The experience of the Allied Armies during the World War
  - (3) A theory of its own. Answer 2
  
3. After learning the mechanism of four different types of machine guns, the Machine Gun Company, 39th Infantry, was equipped during the Aisne Marne Offensive with:
  - (1) British Vickers Machine guns
  - (2) French Hotchkiss machine guns
  - (3) Browning machine guns
  - (4) Colt machine guns Answer 2
  
4. When the 39th Infantry took part in the Aisne Marne Offensive on July 18th it had:
  - (1) Spent a short period of time in a quiet sector of the front line
  - (2) Already taken part in an offensive operation
  - (3) Was entering the front line for the first time Answer 3
  
5. On July 18th and 19th the right boundary of the regiment was the:
  - (1) Marne River
  - (2) Vesle River
  - (3) Saviere River
  - (4) Ourcq River Answer 4

6. On July 19th, the assault battalions of the 39th Infantry suffered great casualties and became disorganized because of:

- (1) German artillery fire
- (2) A late French artillery barrage
- (3) German machine gun fire
- (4) German infantry bayonet charge

Answer 2

7. On the morning of August 3d the 4th Division started advance to the Vesle River when it made a passage of lines and relieved the:

- (1) 42d Division
- (2) 32d Division
- (3) 28th Division
- (4) 3d Division

Answer 1

8. When the Allies reached the Vesle the Germans:

- (1) Immediately counterattacked them in great force
- (2) Started to fight a delaying action
- (3) Made a determined stand from a well-fortified defensive position
- (4) Retired to the Aisne.

Answer 3