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THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

ADVANCED COURSE
1933-1934

MILITARY HISTORY

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF A
MACHINE GUN PLATOON COMMANDER
OCTOBER 17TH-20TH, 1918.

Battle of the L& Selle River.

W. H. WELLS,
MAJOR, INF.

1

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Monograph
II Corps

An excellent official volume on the operations of the 2nd Corps from August, 1918, to the end of October, 1918. This monograph contains copies of authoritative reports, orders of all types and summaries of intelligence.

O'Ryan, J.F., "History of the 27th Division". Written by the Division Commander. The two volumes cover all actions of the Division in detail. With its maps, orders and unit reports, this is an excellent publication.

MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS.

Monograph.

A general Service School mimeographed publication.

INTRODUCTION.

The fog of war, isolation, fire superiority, necessity for initiative, numerical weakness, and difficulty of overcoming mental and physical inertia in both officers and enlisted men, are a few of the expressions found frequently in military text-books. Much has been written on these subjects. Until an officer actually encounters them on the battlefield they lack vitality. But when the action starts, each point takes life. Startling, intensive and direct hostile interditory actions then recall the dry studies of peacetime.

This account of an inconspicuous machine gun platoon commander's experiences while serving with Co. D, 106th Machine Gun Battalion, 27th Division, in the Battle of the La Selle River, and succeeding operations, is designed to bring out points mentioned in the opening paragraph.

CONDITION OF AMERICAN TROOPS

As part of the 4th British Army, the 27th Division had participated in the attack on the Hindenburg Line September 27th-29th. Heavy losses had been sustained, and by October 12th, when the Division again took over a front line sector, only 2,377 rifles were available to take the place of the more than 12,000 of full war strength. (1) But, according to Major General G. W. Read, Corps Commander, the troops were highly trained and active. In a report to G.H.Q., A.E.F., dated December 18th, 1918, commenting on the Corps operations, General Read wrote:

(1)
O'Ryan
Vol.1,
p.358

(2)
Monograph
Final Report
pp.18-19

"The 2nd Corps was in the pivotal position of the successive attacks of the Army, and, through this period it was continually in the nose of the salient and in advance of the flank Corps." (2)

SECTOR

On October 16th, the Division sector was south of Le Cateau. Rear Headquarters of Co. D, 106th Machine Gun Battalion was at La Sabliere Bois near Busigny. Warning orders of an impending attack were received. Capt. C. N. Morgan, Company Commander, immediately held a conference with the platoon commanders and sergeants. The situation, as well as the company's part in the attack, was outlined by him.

PREPARATIONS FOR ENTERING THE LINE

After the conference, the almost innumerable articles of equipment which four years of position warfare had saddled on machine gunners, were gone over carefully, with a view toward elimination. The 27th Division had been equipped by the British and followed their tables of allowances. It was known that after leaving initial positions in the pending attack, practically all advances would be made by hand. At the conference of the company officers it had been decided to dump all materiel not absolutely necessary. The essentials were the machine guns, spare parts case for each gun, ammunition, water and a pick and shovel for each platoon. The platoon leaders also stuck a clinometer and prismatic compass in the capacious pockets of their trench coats. Fancy periscopes, range finders, signal pistols, together with many other articles, were placed in a large pile which probably was salvaged later.

THE MOVE FORWARD

The next morning the move forward started. Most of that day was spent at Busigny, where the Company and Platoon Command Post was established. The 2nd Platoon was ^{THE} in line. During the day Capt. Morgan received orders for

Map 23

the attack and made his reconnaissance. Just before dusk the Platoon moved forward about 3000 yards to a position on the eastern edge of Escaufo^{rt}, arriving in the twilight to avoid observation. It was joined by the 2nd Platoon. While on the march, orders were given for the firing of a barrage and attack at 5:20 A.M., the next morning, the 17th.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE ATTACK.

Barrage positions of the 1st Platoon were situated behind a high hedge with the other companies of the Battalion extending the line to the right. Work on emplacements started at once. The Platoon Command Post was established in a nearby farm house. Intermittant shelling by the enemy did not interfere with the work, and by midnight all positions were complete, barrage charts prepared for each gun, and supper served. Then a final conference took place at the Company Command Post in another building in Escaufo^{rt}.

Aerial photos, both vertical and oblique, covering the area of the advance, were studied, and orders were issued for the advance across the La Selle River to the high ground to take place immediately after the completion of the barrage. At 4 A.M. another hot meal came up, and by 4:30 the men were in position. Enemy shelling was light, and while the village of Escaufo^{rt} received some attention from the Germans, no shells fell near the barrage position.

Zero hour approached. The Platoon commander after a final check-up of his guns, went to his position, a shell hole which had been deepened. 5:19 A.M. and Number 2 at each gun was intently watching the Lieutenant. Now only

out on the bridge. Two other officers, all that were with the Company, followed. The Engineer officer jumped into the stream and started pulling the wires. In spite of the efforts of the officers on the bridge to blow it up by stamping on each cross-piece, nothing happened. The Company crossed the bridge and other units used it all day.

The mistake of all Company officers collecting on this bridge is evident. A wiser solution would have been to have called for volunteers. If the mine had been effective the Machine Gun Company assigned to support the 54th Brigade, which held the left of the Division sector, would have lost all its officers.

Having crossed the La Selle, the machine gunners proceeded a short way and then were stopped by a steep embankment covered with wire. The transport could go no further. Loads were removed from the limbers, the embankment scaled, and after a brief march the Company went into position on the high ground along a dirt road about 600 yards east of St. Souplet. This position covered the front as well as the left of the Division which at that time was in the air.

THE FIRST HALT

Information was scarce. To the left rear the English could be seen approaching on the other side of the River. That flank for the present was obviously in the air. Perhaps the right was also unprotected. For some time no one could be found who had any knowledge of the situation. German shelling had increased. Eventually, Lt. J. J. Roos, 108th Infantry, who was killed later that day, came back

ten seconds before zero. Occasional shells from our artillery rumbled overhead. A quick glance along the line in the murky dawn disclosed each Number 2 with his hand behind the back of the gunner.

THE BARRAGE.

The Lieutenant's hand was raised as he checked closely the passing seconds. Zero. As the officer's hand dropped to his side the barrage crashed down on the German positions about 2500 yards to the east. The hostile reply was not delayed. The roar of our artillery and machine guns drowned the sound of the German guns, but the fountains of black earth suddenly gushing from the ground were sufficient evidence of enemy resistance.

CROSSING OF THE LA SELLE

The barrage was a short one, lasting only nine minutes. A long blast of the whistle and our machine gun fire ceased. The Company limbers were waiting nearby on the road. Guns were dismounted quickly, packed in the limbers, and in a few minutes the Company started down the road to St. Souplet, 1500 yards to the east.

Map 3 Arrived at that village, all bridges over the La Selle were reported down. Capt. Morgan, unwilling to abandon his transport so early in the day, made a quick reconnaissance, and succeeded in finding a bridge. An Engineer officer stated that it was mined. Wires could be seen leading to it and the bridge gave every appearance of being a death trap. But Morgan's comment was: "I don't think it will blow up", and he proceeded to walk

and stated that Bandival Farm had been captured. Morgan decided to advance the 1st Platoon to the Farm, leaving the 2nd in support. Additional information obtained about this time gave our front as being 1800 yards to the east along the ^RAbre Guernon - Le Cateau Road.

MOVE TO BANDIVAL FARM AND ITS OCCUPATION

Because of the shell swept area to the front, the Lieutenant commanding the 1st Platoon decided to go around the dangerous area by moving on the road from St. Souplet to ^RAbre Guernon. In a long, single file the Platoon moved out. After proceeding the proper distance, as the Lieutenant thought, the Platoon turned north and marched across country toward its objective. A few minutes more and the farm buildings were seen, a typical French establishment, with the farm house and barns arranged in a quadrangle. American troops were also noticed on the left. Dough-boys were lying in shell holes. All their rifles pointed to the front. "What outfit?" "Where's the front line?" was shouted at them. "30th Division. You're blocking the front", one of them retorted. Double time was impossible because of the heavy loads the men were carrying but the pace was increased. The shelter of the hedges, trees and shell holes around Bandival Farm was reached before the Germans could bring fire on the machine gunners.

Map 3

Men flopped into shell holes hugging the ground. The Germans had a decided fire superiority. When the fire finally diminished, the Platoon leader was able to organize the Position. Guns were sited in shell holes and targets assigned. A line of telegraph poles on the sky line to the front afforded an excellent division of the sector for

long range S.O.S. fire. Each gun was given about four poles as its front. Close up defense was also arranged to cover the front with bands of fire. This allotment of targets was made hurriedly as rumors were rife that the Germans were about to launch a counterattack.

MOPPING UP

Capt. Morgan, who had been reconnoitering the front line, now established the Company Command Post in a nearby fold in the ground. The officers assembled there, studied maps and conferred. At almost regular intervals a single bullet would zip by. A sniper was in the vicinity and Morgan decided he must be located in Bandival Farm. "Lieutenant", he directed, "get some men and mop up that place."

The Lieutenant selected four of his men for the mission. Rifles and bayonets were found without trouble, and the building was entered. Mopping up, either positions or buildings, was something entirely new to both the officer and the men. They found that the buildings had suffered considerably from artillery fire but were still habitable and completely furnished. Poking around the rooms, with their ornate drapings, into capacious closets and through strange passages was mean work. Nothing was found until the barn was reached, when some noise was heard behind a door. The patrol closed up, the Lieutenant gave the door a mighty kick and the Americans piled into the room, their trigger fingers itching. Five Germans laid on the floor. The nerves of the members of the patrol were on edge. They had been looking for Germans, and on finding them, had almost fired. A quick inspection of the enemy disclosed that all were suffering from abdominal wounds and could not move. The sniper

seconds of this delay a German shell came over and exploded in the courtyard. While none of the men were killed, all suffered wounds, and it was necessary to evacuate them the next morning.

ORDERS FOR ATTACK OF OCTOBER 18TH

Soon after the casualties had been removed to the cellar and bandaged, orders for the next day's advance came in. The gist of those given the Commanding officer of the 1st Platoon was: "To accompany the first wave of the attacking Infantry and assist in consolidation. Direction of advance 45 degrees. Zero hour 5:30 A.M." Another visit was immediately made to the guns and full information concerning the attack was passed on to each member of the unit. A few minutes before zero the guns were dismounted and the squads closed in to about 20 yard intervals, taking cover in shell holes.

Promptly at zero our artillery barrage opened, and with a "Let's Go", the machine gunners moved out in squad columns. At first the advance was rapid in order to catch up with the attacking infantry which had about 100 yards start.

While our artillery was using considerable smoke, a heavy fog was even more effective. Together they limited visibility to about twenty yards. It was necessary for the squad columns to close in in order to maintain contact. Two or three doughboys of the attacking infantry could be seen, dimly, to the front. In a short time the smoke barrage thickened so that only a single man was visible.

escaped. The wounded men were given water from the American canteens.

As a result of this visit to Bandival Farm, Company and Platoon established headquarters in the cellar of the farm-house which that morning had been a German Headquarters. The remainder of the day was spent in strengthening the gun positions.

ENEMY MORALE.

(3) Monograph
Orders Oct 17th
54th Brigade
p.209

Although Brigade orders (3), seen recently, state that the enemy were demoralized, those orders did not come down as far as the Platoon whose movements we are following. It had advanced almost 2000 yards that day and should have interpreted that fact, together with the large number of prisoners captured, as sufficient evidence of the enemy morale. But German machine guns and artillery were inflicting heavy losses and putting up a stubborn defense. It is believed that front line troops, while engaged, seldom have time or inclination to interpret any signs other than the effect of hostile fire.

All night, the Lieutenant's first experience in open warfare, was spent in repeated visits to the gun positions. Bursts of rifle and automatic rifle fire, punctuated by the slower distinctive tat, tat, tat of the German Maxims, kept everyone on the alert. On one of these inspections two men who had strayed from their organization, accompanied the Lieutenant back to the Farm. When about to enter the cellar, the Platoon Sergeant stated he had something to do and would be right down. The two lost men, as well as the Platoon runner, also remained outside in the court-yard. In the few

HOSTILE BARRAGE

The German artillery barrage fell soon after ours opened and their bursting shells could readily be recognized by a distinctive darker cloud. The enemy machine gun barrage, while heavy, was ineffective in the sector of the advancing platoon. If the smoke and fog had not concealed the advance it is certain that the enemy would have depressed his guns slightly and inflicted severe losses. A constant stream of bullets sounded as though they were passing only a few inches overhead. The machine gunners pitied their comrades in the support who undoubtedly were receiving all the fire. Soon the Lieutenant noticed the white shell bursts of the American artillery barrage. He signalled halt. Promptly each man hit the ground. The Platoon Leader watched with tensivity the white explosions. Suddenly they disappeared. He realized that the barrage had lifted. While lying on the ground, the German machine gun barrage sounded as though it was barely clearing the tops of the head of the Platoon. The Lieutenant rose, braced himself and turned to signal his men to move forward. To his surprise and pride, every man was on his feet ready to advance. Obviously the men had been watching their leader and when he rose to continue the advance, they did likewise.

In the mail which had been received at Bandival Farm the Lieutenant received a box of cigars. It had been stuck in his musette bag. At the next halt he opened the box, lit a cigar, and gave the Platoon runner a handful to pass around to the men. Most of the men "lit up". The strange spectacle was presented of soldiers "going over the top" smoking cigars. This insignificant incident,

although not so intended, probably had a desirable effect on the men's morale. The military reader easily can visualize what would happen if, in a peacetime manoeuvre, an officer permitted such unmilitary behaviour.

ISOLATION OF ADVANCING TROOPS

About this time a Trench Mortar Platoon joined the Machine Gunners. Its leader inquired if there was any objection to the mortars following the platoon. ~~AN~~^{THE} intense fog and smoke barrage, while effectively concealing the attack, also had its effect on the leaders of the various attacking forces. Each unit felt itself to be completely isolated and sought company, if company could be found without abandonment of its mission.

This very human behaviour can readily be appreciated but should be guarded against. The result might well be the massing of all supporting units in one place instead of distribution along the entire line.

Continuing the advance, the Platoon had covered considerable ground. That the attack was meeting with success was evidenced by the number of Germans who appeared from the Front, hands over heads, and running pell-mell to the rear. These men were ignored, as orders had stated that units in the rear would gather in such prisoners.

ANNIHILATION OF HOSTILE MACHINE GUN NEST

During one of the halts, on reaching the American barrage, the deadly tat, tat, tat of a Maxim was heard. Looking off to the left the Lieutenant could discern faintly a German machine gun nest. Because of the smoke the American advance had been concealed and now, with the

passing of our barrage, the Germans had manned their guns and gone into action. They were probably laid on an S.O.S. line which, in this case, ran parallel to the prone Americans. With the exception of the Lieutenant, Platoon Sergeant, and runner, each machine gunner was carrying a load. Necessity for immediate action was apparent and the three men without loads charged, firing their pistols at the enemy as they ran. A few seconds and the hostile machine guns were out of action. Unfortunately, as it developed, the doughboy whom the Platoon had been following heard the shooting, turned back and joined the fight.

COMMENTS ON THAT INCIDENT

This incident serves to illustrate the value of initiative. The two soldiers and officer instinctively had taken the proper action. Had it been necessary for the Lieutenant to yell orders they might have attracted the attention of the enemy, who could have switched their fire to the almost helpless platoon. Actually, the first information the Germans had that Americans were so close was the heavy slugs from forty-fives plunging into their position. Their surprise was complete. The incident also serves to emphasize the necessity for attacking troops to keep^{as} close as possible to their barrage.

RESUMPTION OF ADVANCE

Scarcely a minute was lost in cleaning up the machine gun nest, yet when the Lieutenant turned to resume the advance, he had no one to follow. The sole doughboy who linked the Platoon with the attacking infantry had disappeared. Recalling the azimuth of the attack, the Lieutenant

could be seen. The cover of this road had just been gained when the Germans opened a heavy machine gun fire. Shells fell, also. Pinned to the slight cover afforded by a stretch of about 50 yards of sunken road, the Lieutenant appreciated the true meaning of fire superiority. A steady stream of lead swept over the position. While the expenditure of ammunition was high, the enemy machine guns effectively prevented all forward movement and observation. As a result the attack, at that moment, lost its impetus.

Map 3

A hasty survey of the position showed that both flanks were in the air. On the left and front a clear, level field extended for about 600 yards. It was dotted with dead Americans, whose zone of advance had laid in that area. The Lieutenant decided that his left flank was fairly secure, and could easily be covered by fire. The front and left were different problems. In the immediate foreground, some fifty doughboys, the remainder of the assault Battalion, were under cover in shell holes. Because of the hostile fire these men were pinned so tightly to the ground that even observation was impossible. The right rested on the edge of a thick orchard. Old trees with low hanging branches restricted visibility to fifteen or twenty yards. A slight fold in the ground on the left afforded meagre cover.

POSITION ORGANIZED

But a few seconds were needed for this brief survey of the situation. Orders now were issued to set up the tripods of two guns on the left flank. The tripods were raised into position cautiously, but the frequent "ping" of bullets glancing off the mounts indicated the impossibility

determined the direction by compass and had his runner move ahead as a point to the limit of visibility. With this advance guard of a single man, the march continued.

The Lieutenant had no idea how many men were in front of him, if any. It might have been wiser for him to have directed several men to abandon their loads of ammunition, draw pistols and make a stronger advance guard or covering detachment. However, he relied on the protection of the smoke and fog and saved the ammunition which might be invaluable later in the day when the attack was stopped.

LOST UNIT DISCOVERED

The march forward continued. Suddenly another organization appeared out of the fog, marching at right angles to the proper direction. A few questions and this unit was discovered to be a Machine Gun Platoon attached to the right assault Battalion. Its officer and sergeants had become casualties. A Corporal had taken command, but lacking full information, had become confused. This Corporal had displayed initiative and fixed determination to get his organization ^{FORWARD} But he lacked a map, compass and knowledge of the direction of the attack. The lost unit was attached to the Lieutenant's Platoon.

ADVANCE STOPPED

Abruptly the machine gun units came out of the smoke. The transition from the unknown into a clear October morning was startling. The various units proceeded down a gentle slope into a sunken road where some Infantry

The important principle of depth had motivated the Lieutenant in seeking positions in the rear for at least half his guns. But the German fire prevented such movement. On the battlefield it will be found that the enemy often forces leaders to make decisions which entail the violation of the iron-bound principles laid down on the drill field.

CONFERENCE WITH INFANTRY COMMANDER

For the first time the Lieutenant now conferred with the Infantry Commander. Machine gun dispositions were discussed and approved by him. At first there was considerable uncertainty regarding the exact position of the Americans. No one could recall crossing an unimproved road which showed on the map, 800 yards northwest of the jump-off position. Eventually, our position was determined to be on the dirt road 500 yards southwest of La Roux Farm. Information was then sent to the rear by runner. This soldier, on his return, brought with him a gunny sack filled with bread and corned beef - enough for a meal for the Platoon.

A PATROL

The Infantry Commander, desirous of securing some information as to what was in the orchard, decided to send his Intelligence Officer to reconnoiter. Because of the possibility of locating some suitable targets, the Machine Gun Lieutenant was asked to accompany him. The two officers entered the orchard with its low hanging trees. Pistols drawn, they advanced cautiously. After proceeding some distance, the Machine Gun Lieutenant discovered a German lying in a shell hole, his rifle

of setting up the guns. The crews were directed to mount the guns at the first sign of a diminution of enemy fire. Two directions of fire were given-one across the front to meet a frontal attack, and the other toward the left to cover that flank. German fire prevented the pointing out of targets, but the Lieutenant knew his men would take the proper action if an attack developed. The Platoon commander now hurried to the right where, with the exception of one crew, he found the guns set up in the best possible positions.

"Put that gun~~s~~ here", the Lieutenant directed the leader of the exposed squad, pointing to a shell hole. As the men moved a "whiz bang" scored a direct hit, killing two men instantly. A third man started to crawl, but neglecting to keep close to the ground, was shot through the buttocks. The wounded man was pulled into a shell hole and the Vickers Gun which had not been damaged, taken from the dead man.

EFFORTS TO OBTAIN DEPTH

With the front line along the sunken road covered by four guns, the Lieutenant now decided to get depth to the position. The clear, gentle slope to the rear afforded an excellent field of fire, as well as observation. So, taking advantage of what slight cover was available, the officer started back to select the rear positions. The Germans permitted him to move some ten or fifteen yards, and then opened fire. Instantly, the Lieutenant realized the impossibility of a depth move. He turned and dashed to the road, deciding that for the present all guns would remain on the forward line.

advanced. It was obvious that the man was on guard. Instinctively, the Lieutenant covered the German, who was wholly unaware of the proximity of the Americans. For a long second the situation remained static. Then the Lieutenant yelled: "Hey, you ----!" The German turned instantly. His hands shot upwards. The American, beckoning with his free hand, motioned for the German to come in. He climbed out of the shell hole, but as he approached his captors, a machine gun opened fire, shooting down a lane in the trees. All three men, Americans and German, dropped to the ground to escape the fire. The German pointed at the flicks of dust which the bullets were raising. Sympathetically the Americans motioned to the rear. The last seen of "Jerry" he was loping to captivity, his head jerking back at every few steps for a look at his captors.

The two officers continued their reconnaissance and found several large Minnenwerfers. Firing pins had been removed, but otherwise the guns were in perfect condition. Because of the numerical weakness of the Americans, the Machine Gun Lieutenant doubted their ability to withstand a counter-attack. He did not appreciate the extent of the enemy demoralization. So, grabbing a pick left by the Germans, he started to work on the mortars, trying to fracture the recoil chambers. The other officer worked with him for a time and then decided to continue on the original mission of the patrol. That officer disappeared into the orchard. Suddenly the machine gunner heard a yell: "Come in, you Jerries!", followed by a burst of fire. He looked in the direction from which the fire was coming, and saw the Intelligence Officer lying on the ground. German machine guns were still firing, though it

was obvious that the officer was dead. Fixing the approximate position of the enemy, the Lieutenant got back to the main position as rapidly as possible. On reporting to the Infantry Commander, a patrol was sent out which effectively dealt with the enemy.

For an officer, responsible for seven machine guns, to leave his men and go off on a minor patrol, is most reprehensible. Certainly some enlisted member of one of the machine gun platoons could have been spared for this mission.

By this time the Lieutenant was beginning to feel tired. He had been up all of the two preceding nights and the morning had been an active one. He sat on the side of the road. Pistol in hand he half twirled the heavy weapon on his finger while considering the situation. As the pistol spun, something strange about it attracted his attention. He examined the gun. It was empty. At that moment he experienced a new type of fear. To have participated in an attack, to have gone looking for Germans, and to have found one - all with an empty gun - was too much. The Lieutenant realized that after emptying his gun into the German Machine Gun nest while "Coming over" early that morning, the fresh clip had failed to engage.

EFFORT TO LOCATE HOSTILE POSITION

After a time the hostile fire quieted until at length only occasional bursts came from what was considered to be a single position. One of the Machine Gun Corporals, Clemishire, suggested to the Lieutenant that "it would be

RIGHT FLANK COVERED

The arrival of the right Battalion now solved that problem. The Lieutenant decided to send his own Platoon to this Battalion rather than the organization originally assigned. This was done because an excellent Sergeant was available to take command, and the Lieutenant decided he, personally, would have better control over the strangers than the non-commissioned officer. The Brigade front line machine gun disposition was therefore changed by placing a platoon of Company D on the right, and a platoon of Company C on the left, a disposition ~~very~~^{EXACTLY} opposite to that which had been ordered.

Capt. A. C. Platt, Machine Gun Officer^r commanding Company C, 106th M.G.Bn., also came up and advised us of a hostile machine gun nest located just over the brow of a hill a short distance to the front. Platt thought that a machine gun could be pushed forward quietly and from the crest, fire directly into the Germans. While the idea did not appeal particularly to the Lieutenant, he decided to make a personal reconnaissance, taking with him the Corporal who would have the job should it prove feasible.

HOSTILE MACHINE GUN NEST CAPTURED

They advanced cautiously, crawling up the rise. As they approached the crest they heard the Germans go into action, their guns firing steadily. The fire was not coming toward the Americans, so they accelerated their pace. On reaching the crest they could plainly see the enemy position some fifty or sixty yards away. About 700 yards to the left a British Platoon was advancing to the attack. Its men were deployed over a wide area, some firing as the others advanced. The German position contained two guns under an officer who, quietly, was directing

observation on our positions the moment we left the cover of the road .Also, it gave added proof of the impossibility of locating machine guns by sound when fire comes from several different locations .Although Haskins had half his thumb shot off ,the morale of the Platoon did not suffer because of the effort .In fact ,the men seemed delighted that their movements had attracted so much attention and been responsible for the expenditure of considerable ammunition.

B ritish Arrive ¹

At about 8:30 A.M. the exposed right flank was covered by the arrival of the British .In a short time an English Machine Gun officer visited the American position. Having heard much of mutual support, cooperation and flanking fire the American Lieutenant approached him ,sal^uted and said :

" Lieutenant ,will you please tell me something about your machine - - - " ?

" Colonel,if you please " ,he interrupted ," don't you worry about my guns.Look after your own ."

The Lieutenant apologized for his breach of etiquette thinking about the importance of rank and the " behind-the-lines teachings on cooperation ".

One of the problems which had concerned the Lieutenant since taking command of the Machine Gun Platoon attached to the right assault Battalion was how to get that organization back in its proper sector. He realized that those guns might be needed badly.That their absence might account for the delay of the right Battalion in coming up abreast with the left Battalion. It was his duty to have them rejoin that Battalion as soon as possible.Also higher authority might be wondering what had happened to the guns and perhaps be forced to deplete the meagre reserve by sending up another platoon. The Lieutenants own front was covered adequately by his own guns.

a good idea to rush a gun over the top, set it up in a shell hole and then have some one draw fire." This would permit the gun crew to locate the hostile nest and shoot it out. The Lieutenant liked the idea but thought that two guns should be used. Clemishire asked for one gun and Corporal Haskins volunteered to handle the other. It was decided to separate the guns about fifty yards.

Clemishire, with the gun and an assistant carrying a box of ammunition, dashed out first. They drew a little fire but reached a suitable position safely. After the fire ceased, Clemishire shouted back that he was ready. Then Haskins moved out. His rush attracted more attention. The firing lasted considerably longer. When all was again quiet, the Lieutenant, his field glasses ready, climbed out of the sunken road. Immediately he attracted the attention of various German machine gunners. With his glasses the Lieutenant searched the area to the front. For a few moments he withstood the hostile fire which came from a number of points, none of which could be located. But when the Germans honored him with a battery of "whiz bangs", he lost all further interest in his project. The shooting was so accurate that the shells were bursting on the other side of the road. The Lieutenant dropped to the ground and tried to dig a hole with his nose. When the enemy finally decided that no major effort was under way, the fire died down. The machine gunners were delighted to regain the cover of the road.

This minor incident may have been foolhardy, but it established conclusively that a number of hostile machine gun nests were covering the front effectively with direct

the fire. The two Americans watched this scene for an instant, then the Corporal let out a loud yell and they charged forward, firing as they ran. Surprised, and taken in the flank by a force of unknown strength, the Germans surrendered. Fortunately, the British Platoon saw the attack, promptly ceased fire and advanced. On checking over the prisoners the Lieutenant discovered that neither the fire of the British nor the fourteen shots fired by him and the Corporal had inflicted a single casualty; while on the Allied side the British Platoon leader had been wounded. It is doubtful that the direct attack would have been successful. The ground over which the Infantry Platoon was advancing was level and clear. No cover was available, nor were any supporting weapons in position to render assistance.

COMMENTS ON ITS REDUCTION

The action of the Americans indicates the necessity for initiative, and how, through fatigue, that important requisite may completely disappear. Capt. Platt, in comparison with the Lieutenant, was fresh. The machine gunners knew that the Germans were in front, but had lacked a driving force to overcome their physical inertia. This force and initiative was furnished by Platt. The action of two Americans in charging the enemy was not attended with any great risks. They had the advantage of position as well as full knowledge of the immediate situation. The enemy was confronted with the unknown, was surprised and had also an enemy on their flank. It is not strange that as one man the Germans raised their hands and changed in an instant from determined defenders to prisoners.

As the new position was in advance of the American line, the Lieutenant asked the Sergeant, who had taken command of the British Platoon, to occupy it until he could arrange for American Infantry to take it over. The Sergeant agreed to do this, but in a few minutes changed his mind and moved back to his own sector.

BEHAVIOUR OF PRISONERS

The prisoners were taken to the rear by the two Americans, where the enlisted men were turned over to a guard, who was directed to have them carry our wounded to the rear. While this was being arranged, the Lieutenant had the German officer searched and tried to question him. No information was obtainable. Surly, and with disdain, the prisoner declined to answer all questions. His attitude suggested that he deemed it a great humiliation to have been captured by only two men and they Americans. As the questioning of the German officer terminated, the guard detailed to handle the other prisoners called out: "Lieutenant, the Jerries won't carry Kelly and Huggins." The Lieutenant snatched his pistol from its holster and started toward the little group. The Germans had been watching. Without further delay they lifted the wounded and soon the party was moving to the rear.

PART OF ANOTHER UNIT JOINS THE PLATOON

A part of the Machine Gun Company of the 107th Infantry was found to be serving with the Infantry as riflemen. That organization had been so depleted by losses that its machine guns had been stored in the rear. These men were attached to different machine ^{GUN}squads to fill in our losses. One of them had a Lewis gun. He was attached to the Machine Gun Platoon with the right assault Battalion,

which was so weak that it could not furnish the necessary flank protection for the guns. Throughout the remainder of the advance that Platoon was able to furnish its own covering detachments.

AIRPLANES

Hostile airplanes were next to require the Lieutenant's attention. One of his men shouted the alarm, and looking to the front, the Lieutenant saw six enemy planes approaching rapidly. They were flying very low and were headed directly for the position. "Duck!" he shouted, "Don't look up!" and the planes continued over the Platoon without molestation.

Perhaps some of the American machine guns should have been mounted for anti-aircraft work. Even though they had been mounted, it is doubtful that the Lieutenant would have engaged the enemy aircraft. He had four machine guns to the enemy's six, also the Germans probably had small demolition bombs.

VISIT TO DETACHED PLATOON

Soon after dark the Lieutenant learned that the right assault Battalion, to which a machine gun platoon had been attached, was preparing to move forward. In order to give Sergeant McDonough, in command, some last minute instructions, the Lieutenant decided to visit them. Wilson, the Platoon runner, had been badly gassed, although he remained at the front doing duty. The Lieutenant decided to go alone, contrary to orders that at the Front men always go in pairs.

He proceeded up the road looking for an indistinct track which led across the fields to the position. Suddenly, just ahead and to one side of the road, he saw a

small group of men, their heads partially silhou²tted against the skyline. The Lieutenant recognized the helmets, and after dropping to the ground, called out quietly, "American Machine Guns". On being recognized, he approached the detachment and found it to be an outpost of the 107th Infantry, with orders to fire on anything coming down the road. The Lieutenant promptly decided to retrace his steps. He soon discovered the proper track, but on reaching the Battalion position, found it deserted. While wandering around, hoping to find someone with information of the new position, the Lieutenant saw two figures. Instantly he dropped into a shell hole. The two figures similarly disappeared. After considerable cautious feeling out, it developed the two men were from the support Battalion. One was Captain Merrill, the other his runner. Merrill was looking for the troops he was supposed to support. He, too, knew of the order to advance. The two officers decided to join forces and locate the new line. They proceeded straight toward the front, taking a star as a guide. After an advance across country of about 1500 yards, the missing organization was found on the Mazinghien-Basuel Road. Another fifty yards to the right, and the two officers would have missed the advanced troops, and might have walked straight into the German lines.

This midnight walk of the Lieutenant was both dangerous and unnecessary. Furthermore, he should not have left his unit for such a long time. The visit to McDonough's Platoon, as first planned, was proper, but he should have taken a man from one of the squads with him.

After finding that the move forward had already occurred, he should have returned to his Platoon and there awaited a message from McDonough giving his position.

MESSAGES

On returning to his Command Post, the Lieutenant learned that the whole line would advance at dawn. The objective was the ridge just south of Basuel, approximately 2000 yards from the present position. He sent a message to the rear, requesting that his transport be made available for the move. The hour the pack mules were desired was given in the message, which also included several things he might do. The reply to this message was that the transport would report as desired, but that the Lieutenant should make up his mind what he was going to do, do it, and then advise Headquarters. In the situation report of the day which also was sent back at this time, no mention was made of the machine gun nest which had been mopped up during the advance that morning, or of the other machine gun nest which had been captured later. In writing the report the Lieutenant's mind was concerned with the future. The past he considered of no importance.

In sending information to the rear there is a great temptation to tell either too much or too little. Certainly, the listing of a number of actions which might be taken by a front line commander should be omitted in field messages sent to the next higher superior. Such a message indicates vacillation. It is apt to weaken confidence. The officer on the ground is bound to have better

information of the situation in his immediate front than his superior a thousand or more yards to the rear. The mopping up of the machine gun nest during the morning advance was important. It should have been mentioned in the first message sent to the rear. Higher authority may have known of this position and positive information that it had been eliminated may have been valuable. The capture of the second nest should have been reported also. Again, positive information that a particular hostile position had been reduced would have been of interest to both Brigade and the Infantry Regimental Commanders. When incidents of this nature arise, the matter of credit is of no importance. Later, however when the final reports are made, they are of interest.

ADVANCE OF OCTOBER 19TH.

Map 3
Early on the morning of the 19th, the transport arrived. While loads were being made up for the pack mules, the Lieutenant completed his plans for the occupation of the new position. He decided to take a man from each squad, move forward for a personal reconnaissance, select the sites for each gun and to have the transport proceed across country to the St. Bennin-Basuel Road, and then march along that road to a point where it is crossed by the Jong de Mer Brook, where it would await orders.

This crossing was in the British sector, but was selected by the Lieutenant as the most prominent and easily recognized point to the front. He realized that only direct and simple orders could be carried out and that any trouble caused through his leaving the American sector would be more than counter-balanced by the advantages.

RECONNAISSANCE.

The Lieutenant moved out first, located the new positions which were on the crest of the ridge, and left the guides for each gun under cover just behind the ridge.

TRANSPORT LOST

He then started back to locate the Transport and remainder of his Platoon. The road was located without delay, but neither the stream nor the bridge could be found. The Lieutenant had lost his unit. Worried inquiries to British soldiers, lying under cover to escape the German shell fire, revealed that an American outfit had gone up the road toward Basuel. That town was still held by the enemy. The Lieutenant hurried up the Road, occasionally taking cover from the shell fire. Finally, a welcome shout, "Here we are, Lieutenant!", and the Platoon was found off the road and behind a high bank which afforded shelter. The non-commissioned officer in charge, discovering that he was getting too close to the front line, and that he had missed the stream, had wisely halted and had posted a guard to watch for his commanding officer.

This point serves to illustrate that in war even the simplest move may be attended with unexpected difficulties. The map which had been corrected to Sept. 30th, clearly showed a stream. The point which the Lieutenant missed, though, was that the weather had been dry and that he was close to the source of the brook. Complete confidence must never be placed in a map.

MOVE TO FINAL POSITION

Because of the fatigue of the men who had been under fire for nine days, and were now beginning their fourth day in the front line, the Lieutenant decided to move the pack mules direct to the crest of the ridge in the center

of the new position. This decision exercised considerable influence on the men's morale. The situation was outlined to them. They were informed that a member of their squad would meet them, and that on the Lieutenant's order they were to seize their equipment and dash to their position. The man from their squad would guide them.

As the Platoon approached the crest directly from the rear, the guides were met. The pack mules were led individually to the approximate rear of their positions, while the men marched on both sides of the animals. When the Lieutenant shouted: "Now!", the men grabbed their equipment and dashed to their shell holes. The mules were galloped to the rear, and in a few seconds the crest was again clear. When the German artillery opened, the hill-top was swept with an intense concentration of fire.

The Platoon suffered one casualty from this fire, a severe case of shell shock. That soldier had already been gassed, and should have been evacuated. However, he was a gunner, and one of the best men in the Platoon, so, on his own request, he had been retained. Excessive fatigue, coupled with the gas, probably contributed toward making him more than ordinarily susceptible to the shelling.

At the start of the attack it would have been most unwise to move the transport in the open. At that time the German resistance was more persistent and well organized. Four days' advance had broken this organization, and it was probable that the enemy dispositions for the defence of the new line had not yet been completed. Furthermore, the machine gunners were extremely tired. But the mules could have been halted immediately in rear of the crest under cover and from that point the men could have moved quietly to their positions attracting the minimum of attention. This would have been wiser.

Maps cannot be trusted literally. Maps covering the area of the attack were issued on or about October 4th, with corrections up to September 30th. Yet a stream clearly showing on the map could not be found on the ground in the daylight.

Men are always scarce on the front line. Even though a unit were to start at full strength - details, sickness, casualties and stragglers soon take their toll.

Even though an officer may know the principles of fighting his unit, and make every effort to follow those principles, the enemy may, through fire, observation, or a combination of both, force a violation of them.

Fire superiority, in addition to preventing movement, likewise prevents observation.

The temptation for junior officers to wander away from their commands is great. In the foregoing account the Lieutenant, on two occasions, left his unit, performing work which should have been done by a subordinate.

Confusion and uncertainty predominate on the battlefield. They combine to curb initiative.

The experience of the battlefield is invaluable to both the officer and soldier. Members of the Platoon involved in this account were familiar with position warfare only. All felt, after the experience of open warfare, that in the next attack they would be considerably more effective.

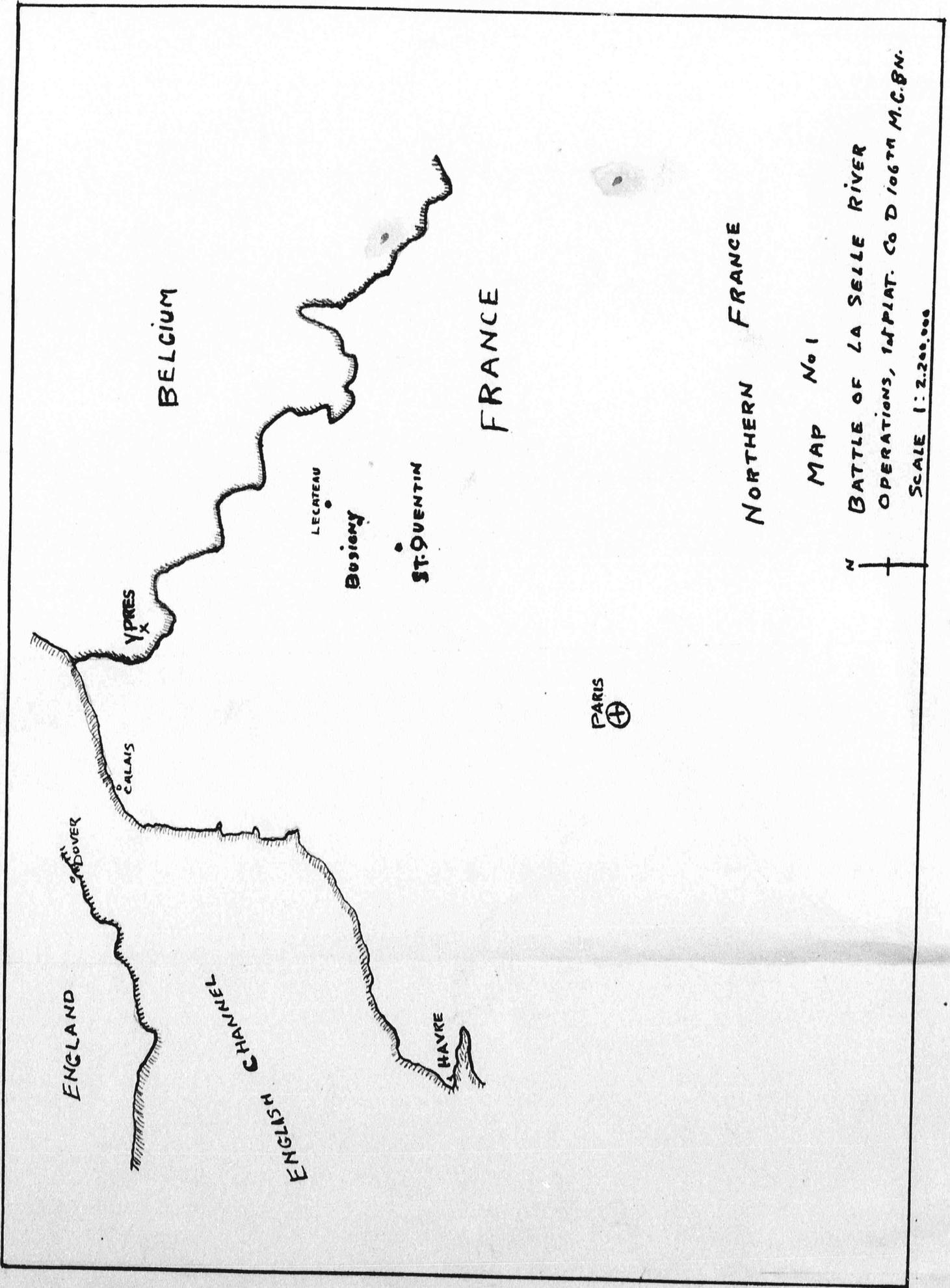
MORALE AND RELIEF

For the next thirty-six hours the Platoon remained in position. Shell holes were improved, but there was little activity. Both the Germans and Americans appeared to be satisfied to remain quiet. Machine guns were not fired, although occasionally individuals could be seen in the enemy lines. Although tired, morale remained high, as evidenced by the behaviour of the men when the rum ration was distributed each night. On approaching gun positions, the Lieutenant would inquire: "What will you have?" Invariably, the men would call for their favorite drink. The issue rum, in addition to its medicinal qualities, was a strong factor in maintaining their morale.

Finally, word was received that the British would relieve us. Guides were assembled at the Platoon Command Post, and when the English machine gunners arrived our guides led them to the gun positions. The English officer taking over the sector did not appear pleased with the dispositions. The guns were in the front line where their fire power replaced missing riflemen. The Command Post was a small dugout, faced the wrong way, and four years of position warfare had accustomed the English Lieutenant to many comforts which open warfare did not permit. The only stores which the American Lieutenant was able to turn over to him were two stubs of candles and a pile of German overcoats populated by a particularly active type of cootie.

C O N C L U S I O N S

Fog and smoke provide the best possible protection or cover for the attack. They also add materially to the difficulty of control, direction and liaison of attacking forces.



ENGLAND

BELGIUM

FRANCE

NORTHERN FRANCE

MAP No 1

BATTLE OF LA SELLE RIVER
OPERATIONS, 14th PLAT. CO D 106TH M.C.B.N.
SCALE 1:2,200,000

DOVER

CALAIS

YPRES

LE CATEAU

BUSIGNY

ST. QUENTIN

HAVRE

PARIS

ESCAUFFOURT

BUSIGNY

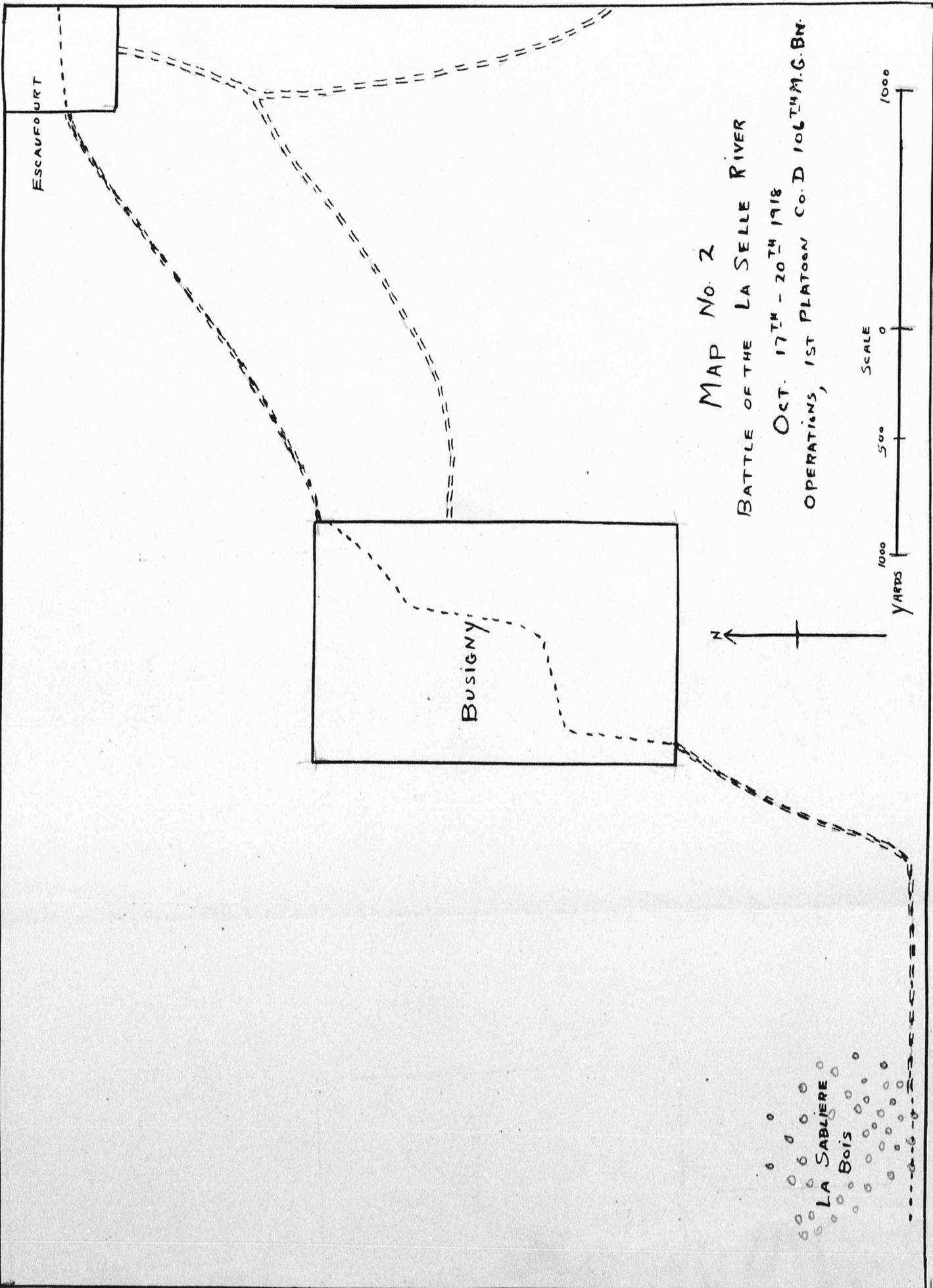
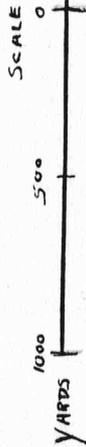
LA SABLIERE
Bois

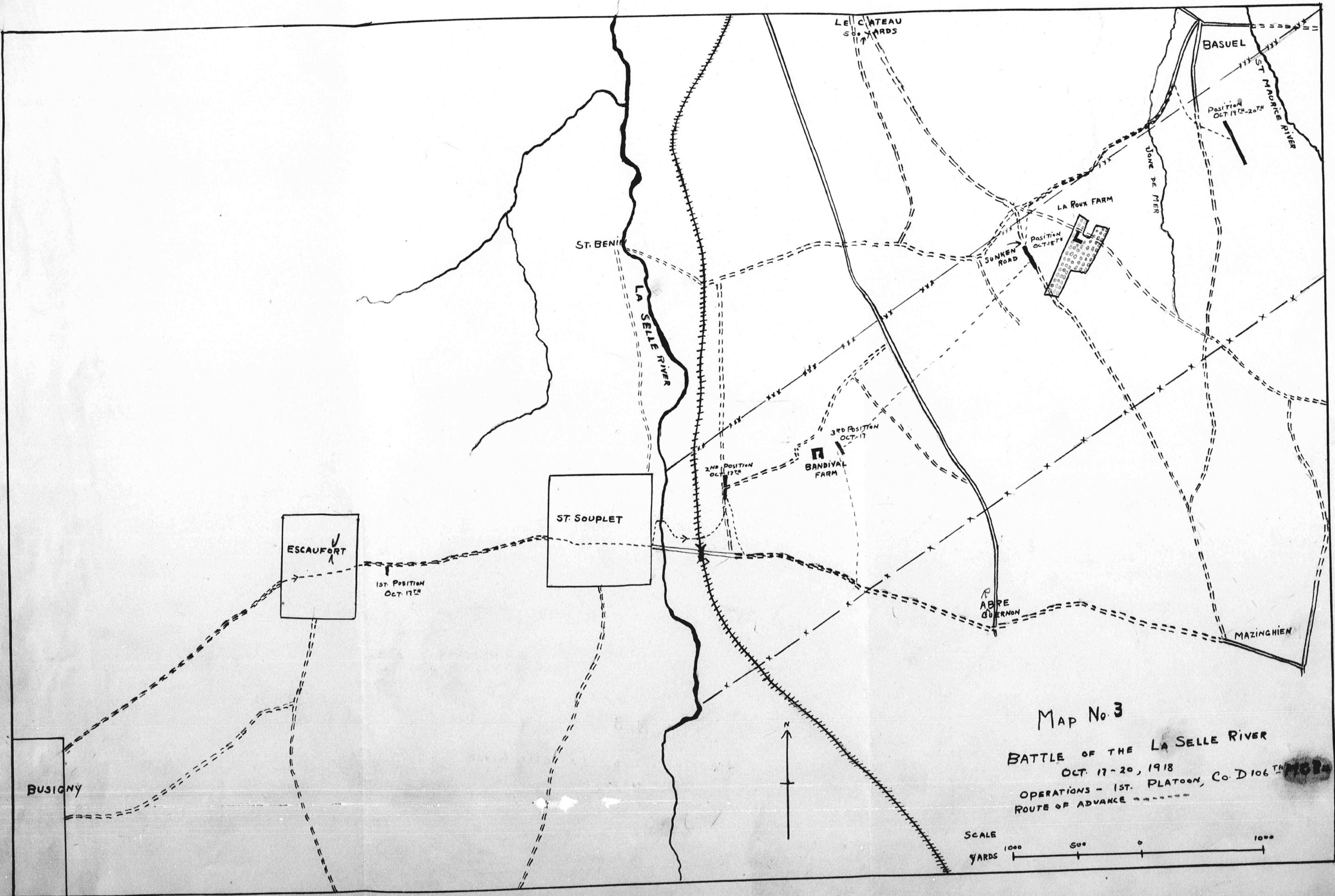
MAP No. 2

BATTLE OF THE LA SELLE RIVER

OCT. 17TH - 20TH 1918

OPERATIONS, 1ST PLATOON CO. D 106TH M.G. BN.





MAP No. 3
 BATTLE OF THE LA SELLE RIVER
 OCT. 17-20, 1918
 OPERATIONS - 1ST. PLATOON, CO. D 106TH INF.

