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HISTORICAL TACTICAL STUDY

THE MEUSE-ARGONNE OFFENSIVE--FIRST PHASE

SEPTEMBER 26 TO OCTOBER 3, 1918

(General Operations)

An Attack of a Defensive Zone

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"Our Greatest Battle." Dodd, Mead, and Company, New York, 1919.

An account of the Meuse-Argonne written by an officer in charge of press relations, who had the opportunity to visit the whole front. It is based on personal observation and information obtained from other officers.

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"A Guide to the American Battle Fields in Europe." Government Printing Office, Washington, 1927.

A volume written to be used as a guide for the many Americans that visited France after the war. The historical data it contains was obtained from official records.

Hoyt, Charles B.

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An authentic history of the 35th Division compiled from official records and men who served in and with the division.

FOOTNOTE ABBREVIATIONS USED

- ME "My Experiences in the World War," Volume II,
by John J. Pershing.
- FR Final Report of General John J. Pershing.
- OGB "Our Greatest Battle," by Frederick Palmer.
- GBF A Guide to the American Battle Fields in Europe.
- HA "Heroes of the Argonne," by Charles B. Hoyt.

THE MEUSE-ARGONNE OFFENSIVE--FIRST PHASE

(September 26th to October 3d)

1. INTRODUCTION.--(Map No. 1) The Meuse-Argonne Offensive opened on the morning of September 26th with force and enthusiasm characteristic of the American troops. (1) The various troops were finally assembled in the new sector and distributed in their position. In spite of the shortage of transportation during the move all units had arrived intact except for some artillery. The secrecy of the movement of such a great number of troops was accomplished by the cleverly arranged raids and confusion created by the units on both flanks of the American sector. However, the Germans had learned that some American troops were in the sector. A man from the 79th Division was captured on the afternoon before the start of the attack. (2) But the Germans did not learn of the other two divisions in that Corps sector, although, no doubt, they surmised something was amiss for the sector up to this time had been occupied ~~by only French troops. On the evening before the attack~~ could be seen the French blue uniforms scattered indiscriminately among the khaki.

The night of 25 September was calm, beautiful, and the stars were shining brightly. (3) All was quiet except for an occasional shell from the German artillery or the low mumbling of a soldier. Everyone was trying to get some sleep except the gunners and

(1) FR pp 46. (2) OGB pp 196. (3) HA pp 69.

truck drivers or a staff officer, who was completing some necessary work. The final orders had been issued. There was nothing to do now but wait for the jump off time. The plans as issued had to stay, for it was too late now to do any changing. Suspense before this battle was greater than before any previous one that our troops had been in. The veteran French and British were used to this sort of thing, but the inexperienced Americans were tense and found it difficult to sleep.

2. GENERAL ATTACK.--At 2:30 AM the artillery preparation began. (4) The fire continued for three hours at full capacity. Our three thousand guns threw 78,000 shells into the German lines during the entire drive, of which a majority of them were fired during the initial preparation. The stars disappeared and fog began to appear, growing thicker as the hour for the jump off approached. At the first streak of light the observation balloons ascended and planes took off to gain what information they could. The Army had 821 planes; 604 of which were piloted by Americans. (5)

At 5:30 AM the preparation ended and the troops moved forward, out of the trenches, across no-man's-land, towards the German lines, following the artillery barrage at the rate of 110 yards in four minutes. (6) Coordination of units was very difficult; the fog grew thicker, the ground which had been barren for four years was spongy from being torn by shells. Our artillery fell dangerously close at times because of inexperienced gunners and the fact that no registration fire had been permitted because of the surprise effect

(4) HA pp 71. (5) FR pp 46. (6) HA pp 72.

desired. The going was hard--heads could be seen bobbing against the horizon because of the uneven ground and shell craters. The wire was extremely thick in places and it could not be hoped that the artillery would destroy all the wire so that the troops could advance evenly. Men had to depend on wire cutters and tried to avoid the wide areas of wire which were probably marked targets for the enemy to fire on the attackers. The advancing line broke as the men found a lane through the wire made by the artillery. The nine divisions in line for the opening attack were given 189 tanks of which 142 were manned by Americans. This was a greater number than could be used in the sector due to the nature of the terrain. The Germans had no tanks. (7)

At 7:40 o'clock the artillery barrage ceased and men were left to cut their way through the wire as best they could. (8) The sun came out and drove away the heavy mist. This was the only time it appeared during the entire drive and it was heartily welcomed by the medics and wounded. The theatre of war was no longer still as it had been for four years; it was now a moving theatre and moving fast. The artillery and machine-gun companies were beginning to move forward to new positions to support the attack. Roads to the rear of the French trenches were now vacant while roads to the front were crowded. The roads across no-man's-land had long been out of use. In places there was no trace of a road. The Germans had relied on rail transportation even behind their lines because of the rubber shortage existing in Germany. (9) The engineers had to use trench timber

(7) FR pp 46. (8) HA pp 72. (9) OGB pp 136.

and stones because of lack of repair material. The bad roads proved more of a barrier than the trench system to the advancing troops. The veteran French looked on and smiled at our enthusiasm and inexperience. By 9:00 o'clock our troops were out of the wire and trenches, except for a few strong points, and advancing rapidly. The farther the troops advanced the greater the confusion. The few roads were congested with the supporting units and supply trains moving forward and the wounded moving back. Units had difficulty maintaining direction; wire communication was very bad; maps were misread, some commanders had no C.P.'s and some tried to command every squad.

3. THE ADVANCE OF THE III CORPS.--(Map No. 2) The III Corps under Bullard were to pivot on the bank of the Meuse until its front was secure on the Meuse. In order to accomplish this by noon it was necessary to cross Forges Creek, the trench system, and Forges Wood on the right or Jure Woods on the left. On the extreme right the 33d, according to schedule, charged through no-man's-land in 57 minutes, reorganized in 20 more, and continued the advance. (10) The enemy yielded easily and the objective was reached by noon. They had taken 1450 German prisoners, seven 6-in howitzers, two 110-mm guns, 20 pieces of artillery, 57 machine guns, some trench mortars, a light railway, and a well stocked engineer depot. (11)

The 80th under Cronkhite were also to swing toward the Meuse about the 33d as a pivot. According to the Army plan they were to have one day of intensive fighting and then be squeezed out because of the narrowing front. The initial going was comparatively easy. The engineers

(10) OGB pp 150. (11) OGB pp 151.

had bridged the Forges Creek by 9:00 o'clock and the supporting artillery was advancing. By noon they were stopped by increasing machine-gun fire from the second belt of woods in their sector. The attack was resumed at 3:00 o'clock but was met by still greater resistance-- the Germans had had three hours to prepare the reception. The Germans could afford to lose no more river bank and realized the seriousness of the situation. Supporting fire was received from the 33d but the advance moved very slow. By nightfall their right was in contact with the 33d on the Meuse but the left flank was far from its objective. To the immediate front was Borne de Cornouiller, a bald hill dominating all approaching terrain. The American troops were easily spotted in the approach. If fire could not be brought down on them from the front the Germans from Montfaucon Heights were notified and the result was enfilading artillery fire. German reinforcements were put in Briulles to defend the river bank. At 1:00 o'clock on 27 September, under cover of an artillery barrage and aided by mortars and machine guns, the attack continued, when all but the left flank against Briulles gained their objective. The Germans' counterattack the next morning was easily repulsed and the American attack resumed at 7:15 AM. The Briulles defense was too strong; it was necessary to get more supporting fire and use a different plan of attack. After the third day the 33d took over the sector; the artillery and one regiment of the 80th remained to assist the 4th. (12) The 80th sent in for one day had stayed three. They had advanced six miles,

(12) OGB pp 161.

taken 850 prisoners and 16 guns, and had lost 1064 men from sick and wounded. (13)

The 4th Division, the only regular division, realized what was expected of them. They were to cause evacuation of the Montfaucon heights and take part in the swinging movement, then hold the Meuse from Briuelles to Sassy. There were no roads in their sector. All transportation had to get across the trenches in the 79th sector. Having reached the Corps objective by 12:30 they waited for the 79th on their left to catch up. At 5:30 PM they continued, but without artillery. By dark they were beyond the heights of Montfaucon, but had to withdraw out of the heavy fire. With still no artillery they attacked again the next morning but with little success. During the next four days they cleaned out the Briuelles Woods under the cross fire from both flanks. (14)

4. THE ADVANCE OF THE V CORPS.--The Germans did not expect a main attack from the V Corps sector because of the extremely thick underbrush in that sector. On the first day the 91st gained five miles and was ordered on the next day regardless of whether or not they were ahead of the units on their flanks. They entered Epinonville on 27 September and took Epinonville and Cierges Wood on 28 September. (15) With the aid of a battalion of engineers on 29 September they passed through Gesnes and gained a footing in woods to the north. The cross fire became too great so they withdrew to their morning positions. It was impossible to advance farther without some support on the left; the 35th were held up at Exermont. The next day the 91st organized a defensive position. This division had advanced eight miles and had held seven.

(13) OGB pp 161. (14) FR pp 46. (15) OGB pp 201.

The 37th had more experience than any other division in the Corps. The four miles of dense Montfaucon Woods was taken with some difficulty and the advance on Montfaucon heights began. The tanks which were of no use in the thick woods arrived by evening but were out of fuel. One battalion of artillery got part way through the woods by using snatch ropes. The engineers worked all night cutting trees and making corduroy. The attack on 27 September was without artillery support. Troops took Ivoiry by 10:30 AM and Montfaucon by 11:00 by using every available man. (16) The troops were wet, hungry, tired, and scattered; but the Army plan called for a supreme effort on 28 September. During the day they advanced up to within one-fourth mile of the Cierges-Nantillois Road. Almost completely exhausted, the effort on 29 September was very weak. The 37th was relieved by the 32d on the night of 30 September. (17) During the drive they had had 3460 casualties and had taken 1120 prisoners and 23 guns. (18)

On the right of the V Corps the 79th Division was checked by fire from Guisy Woods; but with the aid of tanks and the 37th Division they took the woods after three hours. When the heavy mist began to rise, one young officer found himself in the midst of a machine-gun nest. He captured the crew and forced the gunner to point out the location of sixteen other nests. They took Nantillois by noon of 28 September. The transportation could not advance beyond Montfaucon so carrying parties had to carry food three miles to the leading troops. The 79th were relieved by the 3d Division on the afternoon of 30 September. (19)

(16) OGB p 208. (17) FR pp 47. (18) OGB pp 213
(19) FR pp 47.

5. ADVANCE OF THE I CORPS.--On the extreme left of the Army sector the 92d Division, colored, was to maintain contact between the French IV Army and the 77th Division. The 92d were soon relieved and contact was maintained by the 77th. (20) If the original I Corps plan had worked the 77th would have had little more to do than "mop up" the Germans that had failed to evacuate the Argonne. But the plan had failed. The forest was held by the Landwehr troops who had been there for months. They had all the comforts of home, and had theatres and hospitals. It was a general rest camp for battalions that had been in active sectors. The occupants had been firing only enough to let the Allies know they were still there. If the French shelling annoyed their leisure and beer drinking they had only to retire to an electric-lighted chamber deep in the ground, safe from fire of any caliber. The woods was very thick and artillery could not be used by the 77th; control was difficult. They gained the first day's objective on time, but were slowed up on the second. By 1 October they had advanced to a point northwest of Binarville. (21)

The 28th Division, astride the Aire River, suffered heavy casualties from flanking fire, but advanced as far as Apremont by 1 October.

6. THE ATTACK OF THE 35th DIVISION.--(Map No. 3)
A few days before the initial attack General Traub, commanding the 35th Division, notified the commanders of both the 69th and 70th Brigades that they were relieved

(20) OGB pp 168. (21) OGB pp 175.

and replaced them with commanders unknown to the units.

(22) The plan was to attack with a column of brigades, with the 69th leading. The regiments of the two brigades to be abreast and each regiment to have one battalion in the front lines, one in support, and one in reserve. The 69th Brigade led off in the fog; men barely being able to see more than ten yards. The 137th and 139th went to the left of Vauquois Hill and the 138th and 140th to the right. The 137th came under fire about a mile and a quarter southeast of Varennes; but they continued to advance. The 139th came under fire about a mile and a half beyond Varennes after encircling it to the east. With the aid of tanks the 137th took Varennes and continued, to be pinned down later by machine-gun fire north of Varennes at 2:45 PM.

A battalion which had been left to "mop up" Vauquois Hill accomplished its mission in 45 minutes--a task which the French said would take at least 72 hours.

(23) As the attack advanced the opposition became greater. The 139th moved east towards Very hoping to contact the 138th. The 137th had become badly mixed with the 28th Division. They tried to reorganize and then dug in for the night.

The 138th had little resistance until they reached Cheppy; but they took it with the aid of some tanks, then advanced to Very. The 140th advanced about a half mile behind the 138th. Very was taken about 3:00 o'clock, after which the brigade was ordered to dig in for the night. Because the 137th was held up, the units got switched. (Plate No. 4)

(22) HA pp 66. (23) HA pp 77.

General Traub consulted with the artillery commander and then issued the order to attack at 8:30 AM the next morning. Shortly after midnight the Corps order arrived stating the attack would begin at 5:30 AM. It was then necessary for General Traub to change his order, which he did by personally seeing as many of his commanders as he could find. There was no supporting fire, but the attack finally began at 6:00 with the 70th Brigade in the lead. The 139th advanced behind tanks, but soon the enemy artillery and anti-tank fire became too strong and the tank turned back leaving the foot troops to dig in.

At 5:30 PM on the second day a new attack was launched toward Charpentry and Very. The regiments became badly mixed and control was lost; but the men did not stop advancing until they reached a line north of Baulny. The right units, 138th and 140th, gradually drifted west during the attack until contact with the 91st Division was lost and a large gap existed. (24)

Colonel Ristine with some men of the 139th surged far ahead of the rest of the division and found himself near Drachen surrounded by Germans. They took to a shell hole. Trying to return to his regiment he lost his direction and went further into German territory. In the gray of morning he found an abandoned German overcoat and helmet which aided him in a safe return. He brought information of two ammunition dumps and several batteries which were quickly destroyed by American artillery. (25) During the day the 35th had advanced about a mile and three quarters. The greatest losses had been felt in the reserve regiments from cross fire.

(24) HA pp 89. (25) HA pp 90.

On the next day the attack against Montrebeau Woods seemed futile. There seemed to be no formation--all regiments seemed to be grouped together. The gap between divisions had not been closed. The Americans were on the edge of the woods; but the Germans were in the woods fighting from behind trees as the American Indians did.

At 3:25 PM an attempt to reorganize the brigades took place. The brigade commanders were put in command of the leading regiments hoping that the troops would be more effectively handled. The Division Commander had not stayed with his headquarters any of the three days, but had been absent on long personal reconnaissance.

At 6:30 AM 29 September the division started again in a column of regiments against Exermont which the Germans were determined to hold. They tried several times during the day to take it and finally got in the town. General Traub went forward to see what the situation was; saw how depleted the organizations were, how strong the enemy was, and ordered the division back to a line along the heights of Baulny Ridge. (26) Some of the units had already started to turn back.

The next day was used for whatever reorganization could be done and strengthening their defense. The Germans made feints at the outpost line; but of no consequence. Late in the afternoon orders arrived that the 1st Division would relieve them. (27) The 1st Division slipped into position at 3:00 AM 1 October. The artillery remained until 2 October to aid the 1st Division and the Sanitary Train continued two days longer.

(26) HA pp 112. (27) FR pp 47.

What remained of the 35th started toward the rear exhausted, hungry, and crippled.

The entire line of the Army did very little except hold what they had gained until the attack on 5 October, which is part of the 2d Phase of this great offensive.

7. CONCLUSION.--The 35th Division had made a great advance, but its losses were extremely heavy, amounting to about 50 per cent. Many mistakes had been made. The failure to maintain any system of communication except by runner was probably due to the poor telephone equipment furnished. Some units had not brought their equipment to the front in their rush to get to the new position. Wire communication^{that} was finally put in between the brigades and division headquarters worked only intermittently.

The many changes made in commanders on the eve of the battle were very unfair to both the commanders and the units. The units had no especial confidence in their commanders and the commanders did not know their subordinate officers. During the fight some of the commanders left their old command posts without determining where the new ones would be, and left no personnel at the old command post to inform higher headquarters.

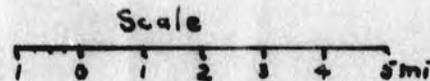
The attack should have been made with brigades side by side, instead of in column. During the beginning of the attack the brigade was naturally split by Vauquois Hill. This was later corrected when commands were switched. After 26 September orders usually did not reach the troops in time for proper execution. Liaison with and support from the artillery was poor--due chiefly to the problem of getting the artillery up within supporting distance.

The plan of the whole attack was sound, and although the troops were unable to keep up to the schedule as planned by higher headquarters, they did some courageous fighting in their attempt to keep up to schedule. The rapid gains the first day show clearly the effect of a surprise attack. The enormous casualty list of American troops shows the great power of flanking fire as used by the Germans in their defense. If the Americans had not had such a majority of troops, as well as being very aggressive, the attack would have moved much slower or may have been stopped indefinitely.

The method of attack used showed how penetrating the line on both sides of an enemy strong point generally causes a withdrawal from the strong point. This was clearly shown in the advance on Vauquois Hill and Montfaucon Heights.

MEUSE ARGONNE OFFENSIVE

FIRST ARMY



Buzancy

Sgny

Brioules

Grandpre

AISE RIVER

ARGONNE FOREST

Gegnes

Exermont

Georges

Nanfillois

Epinayville
Iviry

Montfaucon

Guisy

Jure Woods

Bois de Fergas

Boulay
Charpentry

Vezzy

Chuppy

Vauquois

91

35

91

35

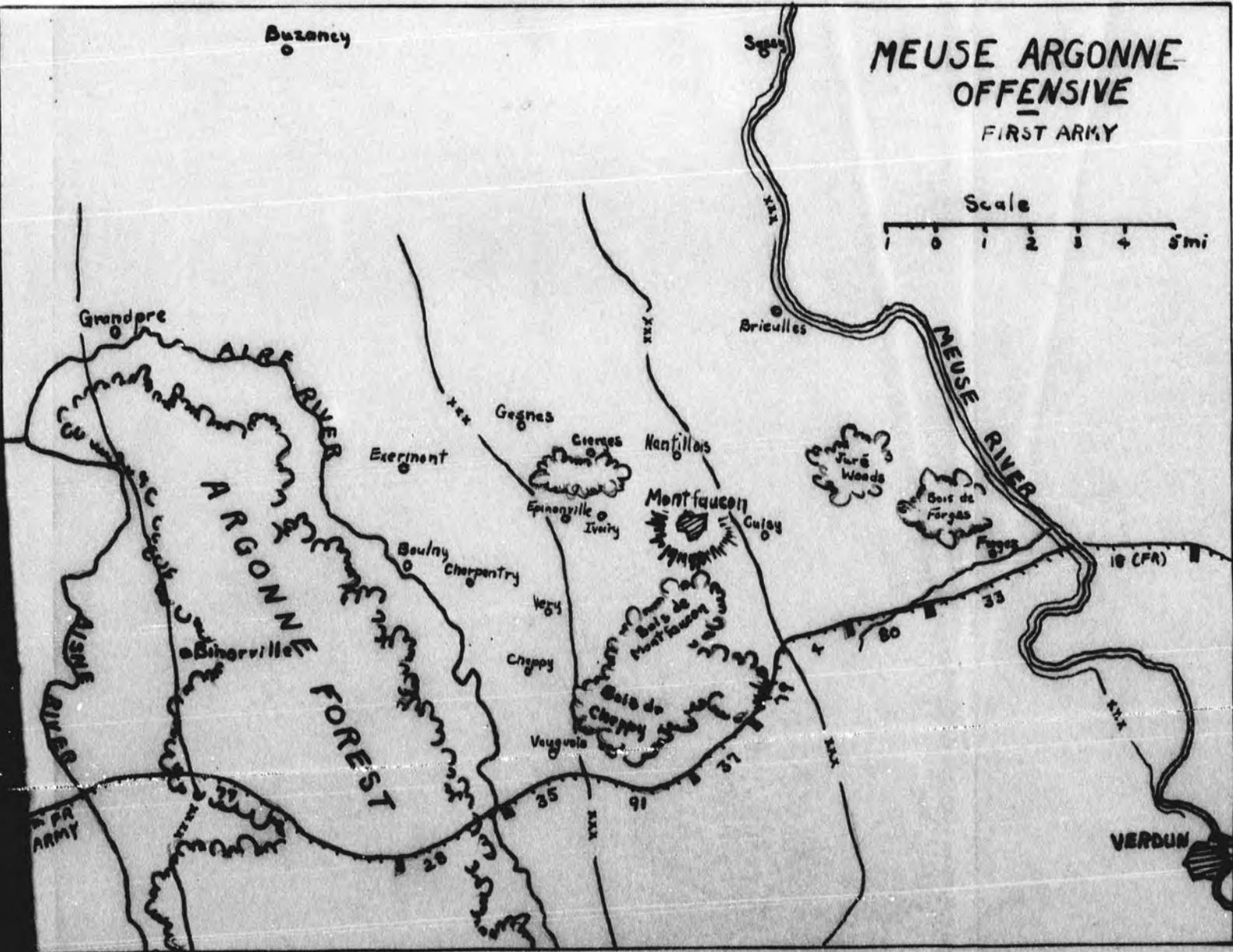
80

35

18 (CFA)

VERDUN

1st PA
ARMY

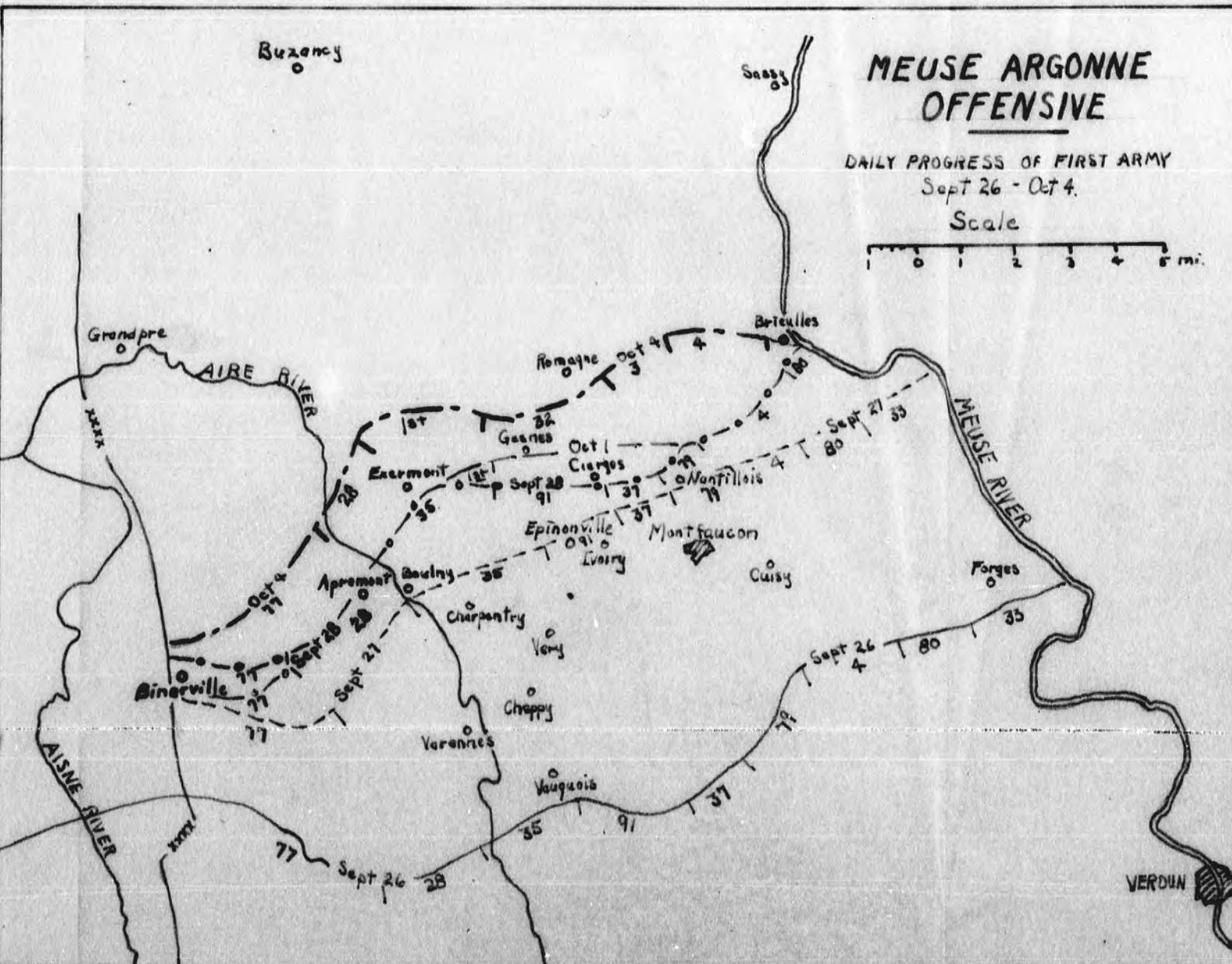
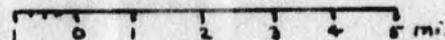


MEUSE ARGONNE OFFENSIVE

DAILY PROGRESS OF FIRST ARMY

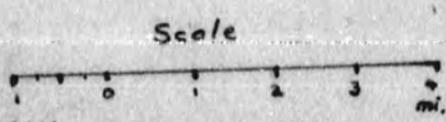
Sept 26 - Oct 4.

Scale

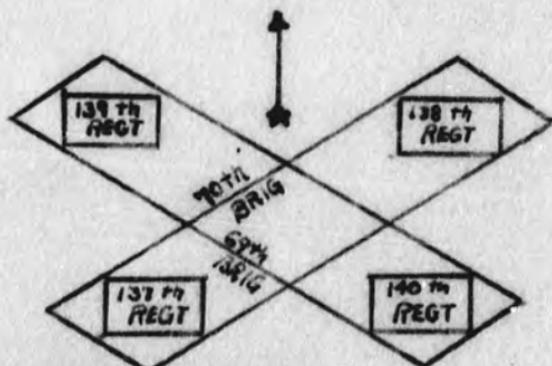
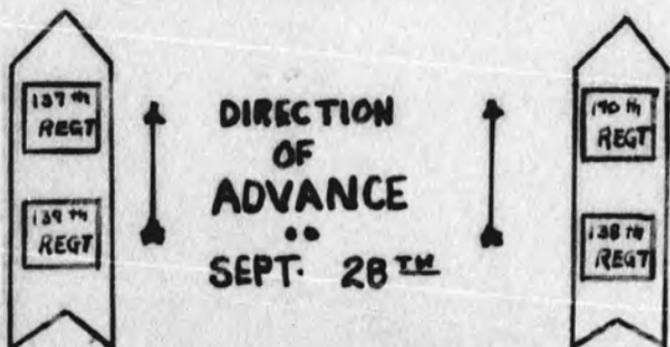




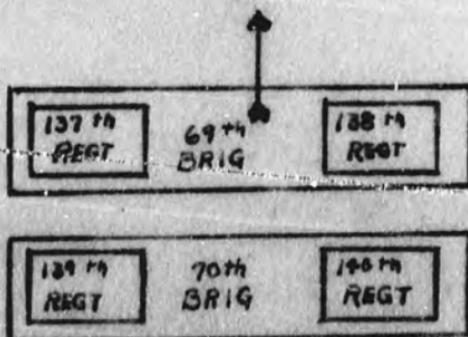
OPERATIONS
of the
35th DIVISION
in the
MEUSE ARGONNE



35TH DIVISION FRONT



NIGHT OF SEPT. 26TH



MORNING OF SEPT. 26TH
FIRST DAY IN THE ARGONNE