

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

ADVANCED COURSE
1930-1931

COMPANY D 47TH INFANTRY, 4TH DIVISION
NEAR SERCY, IN THE AISNE-MARNE OFFENSIVE,
JULY 29--AUGUST 1, 1918

(Personal Experience)

CAPTAIN JOHN W. BULGER, INFANTRY

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MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

Amerine	"Alabama's Own in France"
Bach	"The Fourth Division"
Van Every	"The A.E.F. in Battle"

INTRODUCTION

A brief summary of the operations immediately preceding the engagement mentioned in the title of this paper is necessary, especially so since the 1st Battalion 47th Infantry was detached from its own regiment and fought, in this battle, under the orders of the Commanding Officer, 167th Infantry, 42d Division.

On July 18, the 1st American Corps had attacked on the western face of the Chateau Thierry salient and had reached the line: Beuvarde-la-Croix*~~Rouge~~ Farm--le Charmel on July 24. (1)

The Germans were fighting a carefully planned and well coordinated rear guard action with the main purpose of delaying the allied advance while evacuating the large stores of materiel in the sector. (2)

(1) Van Every
p. 137

(2) Van Every
p. 143

On July 25, the 42d Division took over the whole 1st Corps front. (3)

(3) Van Every
p. 150

The Ourcq River was crossed on July 28 and the division encountered a strongly held line extending through Fere-en-Tardenois, Seringes-et-Nesles, Sergy and Clerges. (4)

(4) Van Every
p. 159

The 167th Infantry crossed the stream and, after attacking the enemy position on the hill between Sergy and Meurcy Farm, withdrew to the sunken road 200 yards north of the Ourcq. (5)

The regiments of the division were, at this time, attacking abreast, in the order, from left to right: 166th, 165th, 167th, 168th. (6)

(5) Van Every
p. 159

(6) Amerine
p. 158

The enemy troops in this front were the

Company D, I was ordered to report to the forward^{command} post of the 167th Infantry which was located on the ravine and near the Ourcq.

Orders were issued, orally, by the battalion commander, for an attack the following morning at nine AM. Our battalion was designated as the assault battalion of the 167th Infantry.

The objectives were the Chateau de Nesles, Foret de Nesles, les Bons Homme Farm.

East boundary: Sergy (exclusive)--Nesles (exclusive)--Les Bons Homme Farm.

West boundary: From a point 500 yards east of Meurocy Farm parallel to east boundary.

Line of departure: The line along the sunken road 200 yards north of the Ourcq, then held by the 2d Battalion, 167th Infantry.

Assault companies: B on the right, C on the left.

I do not remember, and have no record of, the assignments of support companies, which were changed later.

The attack was to be preceded by an artillery barrage. The assault companies were to capture the hill in their front, the Chateau and Foret de ^NNesles, and reorganize on the line of Les Bons Hommes Farm. My understanding regarding the rate of advance was that continuous and fairly rapid progress was essential, as the attack was being made in conjunction with advances by troops on our right and left. I did not, and do not now, consider that these instructions were intended to prohibit halts for

hasty reorganization at the first, or any other, position taken. The order did not mention supporting fire other than artillery.

Details regarding supply and evacuation were omitted, due, I believe, to the fact that these details had not yet been worked out by the 167th Infantry.

The battalion command post was to be in rear of the approximate center of the assault line.

Upon receipt of this order I returned to my company and explained the situation to the platoon leaders.

About 2:30 or 3:00 PM I received an order to report to the battalion commander. I was informed that the company commander of Company C had been wounded, by shell fire, and that the attack order had been changed so as to designate Company D as the left assault company, Company A as the left support company, and Company C as the right support company. In compliance with orders I took a patrol from the company and conducted a reconnaissance of the ground in front of the line held by the 2d Battalion, 167th Infantry. From this we gathered much valuable information of the method of defense employed by the enemy, and a fairly good idea of the locations of some of the machine guns.

While out on the hill we could see American soldiers walking around in an area on the left which was observed to be in the hands of the enemy on the following day.

The 167th Infantry had some machine guns in the front line, with crews on the alert, watching for possible enemy attacks.

We took over the front line at 8:30 or 9:00 PM.

EVENTS OF JULY 30

At 8:50 AM, July 30, the battalion commander informed us that no barrage would be fired; that artillery fire would be used for protective barrages only.

The platoons of the company were assigned as follows:

Left assault: 3d, 2d Lt. E. ^{L.}~~X~~ Knecht, commanding.

Right assault: 1st, 1st Lt. E. A. O'Malley, commanding.

Left support: 2d, Sgt. J. S. Yandell, commanding.

Right support: 4th, Sgt. Geo. Stanton, commanding.

The instant the first line started over, the enemy put over a barrage. Lt. O'Malley was wounded before he had gone ten paces and was succeeded in command by Sgt. Henry Collins. About ten of the men of the assault sections were killed or wounded at this time.

Company headquarters went forward about 100 yards in rear of the assault sections. After going about 250 yards the assault line received some machine-gun fire and men could be seen going forward by short dashes and by

crawling.

A few minutes later a report was received from Lt. Knecht, saying that his platoon was held up by machine-gun fire from the front and both flanks, and that he was having a lot of casualties. He was ordered to work around the guns on his left, using his support section. (It was believed that the fire from the left came from guns on the east side of Ru Du Pont Brule. In fact, it came from high ground west of Meurcy Farm, which, we thought, was in the hands of friendly troops.) Later I learned that it was not possible to move a man around the flank at that time.

The left of the 1st Platoon was at the western edge of a thin wheat field, the edge of the field running, generally, in the direction of our advance.

The company headquarters was scattered about from near the men farthest forward in the 3d Platoon's front to the support sections' line, and slightly to the left of the edge of the wheat field mentioned.

The enemy had one gun trained down a small draw which ran along the edge of the wheat field. One man was killed and another wounded trying to cross this draw near us, and runners going to our right had to crawl well to the rear before attempting movement to the flank.

Since the 1st Platoon had more favorable ground in their front than the 3d it was ordered to push forward. A report was made to the

battalion commander about this time, and a message received from Captain Jared I. Wood, commanding Company B, saying that machine guns in front of Company D were holding up his advance, and requesting that we clean them up.

After a considerable wait for some signs of advance on the right, a report came from the 1st Platoon, saying that they were held up by riflemen and machine guns in the wheat field. The platoon leader was then ordered to send two automatic rifles forward 75 yards just within the left edge of the wheat field, to open fire to their left front, whether or not they saw anything to fire at.

The enemy riflemen in contact with the 1st Platoon were out in front of their main line, and some were seen, by these two automatic riflemen, crawling back to their line.

The 3d Platoon was ordered to be ready to rush when the fire of the automatic rifles began.

Anyone who has ever heard the Chauchat fired knows that the sound is unmistakable and can be heard above almost any other noise when within a distance of 100 yards. The command "Follow me" was unnecessary, as every man was up and going at the first sound of this firing. The distance of 100 or 125 yards was covered at a run. If machine guns were firing then, nobody noticed it in the excitement. The enemy in sight were busy throwing grenades and firing the pistol. Only a few made any

attempt to use the rifle and bayonet. There was no wire in front of the position.

The men were greatly elated over getting some action after being tied down by machine-gun fire for three hours, watching their buddies being picked off right and left. The bayonet and the pistol were the only weapons used by our men after the charge was started. Most of the enemy did not signify intention to surrender until it was too late to save their lives. About 15 or 20 were sent back as prisoners from the left assault platoon. 1st Sergeant Charles Maisen, who talked and understood German, tried to take an officer prisoner. This officer declared that he would not be taken prisoner, and fought and called on the men to continue fighting until he was killed. There were over 30 dead on the front of the 3d Platoon.

On the front of the right platoon, some of the enemy ran away at the time of the charge, there was more rifle firing by our men, and less enemy killed. Only 3 or 4 prisoners were taken there.

As it was evident that the enemy would put down all possible artillery fire on this hill as soon as its loss became known, a continuation of the advance was ordered by me, with the intention of getting into the Foret De Nesles at once.

Of course, the support sections of the assault platoons were in the front line at

that time, and the line started forward with about three squads to the platoon, on the left. Just at this time the left support platoon came rushing up, and we offered a fine target for two or three minutes. However, no fire was received. With the help of three noncommissioned officers, this platoon was held back and gotten down on the ground while the 3d Platoon went on. The assault line had arrived at a point about 500 yards from the Seringes-et-Nesles-Nesles road when a line of enemy troops was seen, behind the road, holding up their hands. Then heavy machine-gun fire was received from the left and front (evidently some of this was fired over the heads of the enemy holding up their hands). Progress was not possible, so the line was withdrawn. The 3d Platoon lost about 16 men here, including Lt. Knjecht, who was killed. About 10 men of the platoon were left, digging shallow trenches within 50 yards of the line of farthest advance. The lack of supporting fire of machine guns and the howitzer-platoon weapons was sadly felt here. We had two automatic rifles firing for about 30 rounds each, but one was hit by shell fire and the other failed to function after dirt was thrown into it by explosion of shells. One gunner was killed and the other wounded. The platoon on the right did not lose many men here and continued trying to advance by crawling and firing to the front.

Some stray Germans were still scattered around in holes near us, especially on the left. A runner who crawled up from the rear with a message was wounded by one of these free lands^{ces}. This man said that Lt, Knecht had been killed by German prisoners, but this was not true. He was on my left and far beyond all prisoners just before we received the machine-gun fire which killed him. Of this I am sure, though I did not notice him at the instant of his falling. An indefinite period of time occurs here during which I was disabled by concussion from a shell which was reported by a man on the hill in rear to have made a direct hit.

About 3:00 PM, the situation was unchanged. Further progress was not possible, so the line was withdrawn behind the crest of the hill. A few men were kept out in front to observe. Company A had a platoon on the left of Company D, with its flank sharply refused.

At this time, American troops could be seen fighting on the hillside south of Seringes-et-Neeles.

The most advanced troops were some distance southwest of where American troops had been seen the evening before.

About 4:00 PM or a little later, a report was made to the battalion commander at his command post. He approved of the dispositions made, and very kindly tried to dissipate the feeling of discouragement resulting from the

great losses with so little gained. The position of this officer, tied down to the telephone by higher headquarters, and trying to get fire support, supplies, and reasonable orders for his command, was not an enviable one. A short stay at the battalion command post, and one returned to the front line with greatly improved morale.

A battalion staff officer went up to the line and marked the position on his map, but put it too far to the rear, causing us to suffer some artillery fire on our line by friendly artillery that night.

The observers in front of our line came in, about 9 or 10 PM, reporting the enemy coming in on the left and front. Artillery fire was requested, by rocket, and a very pretty barrage was put down, with most of the shells barely clearing our line, and a great many falling within it. The left edge of the barrage was out sharply to the rear and crossed our line. Only two of the appropriate rockets for requesting discontinuance of the fire were found, and these did not work very well and were not seen by the artillery observers. Battalion headquarters sent our request back by telephone.

In the meantime, we had done considerable firing with two Maxim machine guns which had been taken that day, and the attackers did not come in close, much to the disgust of the men, who were yelling to each other that they hoped

the Boche would come on.

Two patrols were sent out to a distance of 300 yards to the front and they reported that there were no signs of further enemy activity.

EVENTS OF JULY 31

On the morning of July 31, everything was very quiet, except for continual machine-gun fire from Bois Brule, on our left front. This fire was reported as being an obstacle to any further advance by us, but nothing seemed to be done about it.

A Lt. Spellbrink, who said he belonged to the 166th Infantry, offered to place some trench mortar fire on Bois Brule. He was shown positions from which he could reach this place with his fire, and went to get his organization. He did not come back. Two officers were assigned to the company on this morning. 2d Lt. George F. McDonald was placed in command of the platoon of Company A, which was functioning under the command of Company D; and 2d Lt. James G. Elder, while being shown the position of the left platoon of Company D, was killed by a shell which landed a few feet from us. 2d Lt. Charles M. Chamberlain was assigned to the company during the day, and was placed in command of the left platoon, now made up of the original 3d and 2d platoons.

An order was received for an attack at 6:00 PM. Scouts were to be sent out 500 to 1000 yards to the front of the leading platoons.

On the right, the scouts crawled out a considerable distance, through heavy machine-gun fire. On the left, no movement forward was possible. Lt. Chamberlain started out with his scouts and he and two men were promptly wounded.

A few minutes after 6 o'clock an order was received to discontinue the attack.

Troops on the left took Meuroy Farm at this time and were, later, reported to have taken Bois Brule. (8) Bois Brule must have been taken after our attack was discontinued, as we received fire from there after 6:00 PM.

(8) Van Every
p. 175

EVENTS OF AUGUST 1

Between 2:00 and 3:00 AM, August 1, very heavy enemy artillery fire was placed on our position and the area in rear. This was a prelude to the evacuation of the artillery, which was not suspected until later in the day.

During the day, attacks by our troops on the right could be seen going forward and back on our right, between the Sergy--Cierges road and Hill 220.

During the afternoon a single battery did all of the enemy artillery firing, and it could be easily seen that the Germans were through fighting on that line. (General Brown, commanding the 84th Infantry Brigade, riding on horseback, was the first man to enter the town of Nesles on the morning of August 2.) (9)

(9) Amerins

Orders were received for the relief of

Company D by a company of the 167th Infantry, effective at 11:00 PM. Company D was ordered to rejoin the 47th Infantry in the Foret de Fere.

Difficulties of finding the relieving company commander and inducing him to take over the forward line delayed the relief until 2:15 AM, when the company left to rejoin the regiment.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

(1) PLANS, DECISIONS AND COORDINATION.--

Though no other course may have been open to higher commanders, the method of reinforcing the front line regiment, by attaching our battalion to it, was inherently faulty. Quite a different ^{might be told} story, could our regiment have taken over the zone of advance and attached machine guns and howitzer weapons to the battalion.

Nothing even remotely resembling courtesy or a spirit of helpfulness was exhibited by the unit we relieved and were relieved by. Misleading information was received upon arrival at the front line. Unpleasant incidents were necessary before relief of Company D could be secured. Supplies of food and ammunition were totally lacking. The reserve ration carried on the person was the only food consumed between the afternoon of July 28 and the morning of August 2. The orders issued by the battalion commander for the attack of July 30 permitted the desirable latitude to the company commanders in

carrying out their missions.

The enemy position on the hill was taken skillfully and without excessive losses. The use of the bayonet as a morale raising factor on our side and a depressing factor on the side of the enemy was clearly demonstrated.

The question of the advisability of a halt for reorganization at the first position taken comes up. Continued advance, at once, appeared (at the time) to be the only logical and common-sense action. To stop and take the inevitable artillery fire upon discovery by the enemy that the hill had been captured and to allow time for further organization of enemy machine-gun fire to meet the changed situation was considered undesirable. To attempt to penetrate the enemy line through the Foret De Nesle and deprive the enemy of his great advantage in having machine-gun fire dominate the ground over which we had to go to get at him, by following up our success quickly was considered desirable. The lack of supporting machine-gun and howitzer fire was more serious if we halted than if we continued at once.

The line of enemy troops at the edge of the Foret de Nesle signifying their desire to surrender would help to show the logic of the decision.

The company commander allowed himself to become tied down to the 3d Platoon line after passing the first position, and thereby probably lost an opportunity to have fire from more

.favorable ground on the right directed on the enemy in front. The men were inclined to forget to fire in their eagerness to get forward. Also, the opportunity to make effective use of the support platoons was lost through this mistake.

The retirement to a position in rear was logical when it became certain that further advance could not be made. We controlled just as much from our new position as we could from the forward position. The loss of this hill as a position from which to fire on the troops on our left was serious to the enemy, and made progress on our left by friendly troops comparatively easy.

The failure to provide artillery fire was a mistake along psychological as well as material lines. Among less well-disciplined troops the question might arise "Just how hard do they expect us to push when, with the artillery of two divisions back there, we get no supporting fire?"

If artillery ammunition is available, certainly it should be expended where it will assist an attack at a vital point. The enemy was known to be fighting a delaying action and was not liable to counterattack, except locally; so the saving of ammunition for "defensive barrage only" was inexcusable.

Machine guns, 37-mm guns, and trench mortars were available and did not support the attack with a single shot.

(2) EQUIPMENT.-- The Springfield rifle, the bayonet, and the shovel were the most important and dependable weapons of the soldier in this action.

The all-around confidence acquired through ^{bayonet} training was of inestimable value.

Some men got in ⁿ five rifle shots at quick - moving targets. Confidence in this respect was not so general, and many opportunities were neglected. Some of the men carried the issue intrenching shovel on the pack, and a larger German shovel on the belt for a few days after coming out of action, showing their appreciation of the value of that implement.

(3) SUPPLY.-- There was a complete lack of arrangements for supply of food and ammunition. Certainly the facilities for supply existed, and the responsibility for failure in this respect did not lie with the battalion commander.

(4) LOSSES.-- The company lost two officers killed and two wounded, and twenty-six enlisted men killed and sixty-eight wounded.

LESSONS

It was demonstrated that movement, unless accompanied by fire, is next to impossible when facing a force equipped with modern weapons and occupying a position especially selected with a view to making the most effective use of those weapons.

Surprise was entirely lacking in the

original attack. It was employed in the advance after the first position was taken, but the effect was nullified by other adverse circumstances.

In the first attack, cooperation between the platoons and with the other assaulting company was demonstrated well, though working out slowly. In the advance after the first position was taken, the cooperation which was necessary to assure success was that of units providing rapid fire, or that of units firing high explosive ammunition, or both. Failure of application of the Principle of Cooperation in this respect was disastrous.

CONCLUSION

In the larger sense, this operation was unsuccessful because the enemy held his position along the Ourcq River until he was ready and willing to retire from it.

The local success deprived the enemy of a position from which he could hold back the units on the flank. The morale of the enemy must have suffered as a result of this demonstration that the American soldier could face the greatest odds and still retain the spirit of the offensive--more properly, at this time, it should be called the spirit of the American Infantryman.

Finally, and most important, is⁶ the attribute of mutual confidence. Troops which have not confidence in the intelligent leader-

ship and unfailing support, by every means at hand, of their commanders, will not succeed where the issue is doubtful; and those commanders who lack confidence in the American soldier's willingness and ability to go anywhere, even under the most adverse conditions, who accept defeat as foredoomed and fail to furnish support to the utmost of their facilities and ability, are unfitted to be entrusted with that soldier's training and direction in battle.

QUESTIONS ON AISNE-MARNE OFFENSIVE

1. The retirement from the Chateau-Thierry salient was planned by the Germans prior to July 15, 1918.

A. False

2. The advance in the Chateau-Thierry salient was planned by the American General Staff prior to July 15, 1918.

A. True

3. The allied advance was a complete success, accomplishing the main object of preventing the evacuation of troops and material from the salient.

A. False

4. The Germans, in their retirement, relied mainly upon the organization of machine-gun fire for defense.

A. False

5. The Ourcq River was a formidable obstacle in the way of the enemy advance.

A. False

6. The town of Sergy was of importance to both sides as a tactical strongpoint.

A. False

7. The town of Seringes-et-Nesles was of importance to both sides as a tactical strongpoint.

A. True

8. German troops had superior morale in this engagement when the fighting was hand-to-hand.

A. False

9. The combat efficiency and morale of German troops at this time was higher than they were at the time of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

A. True

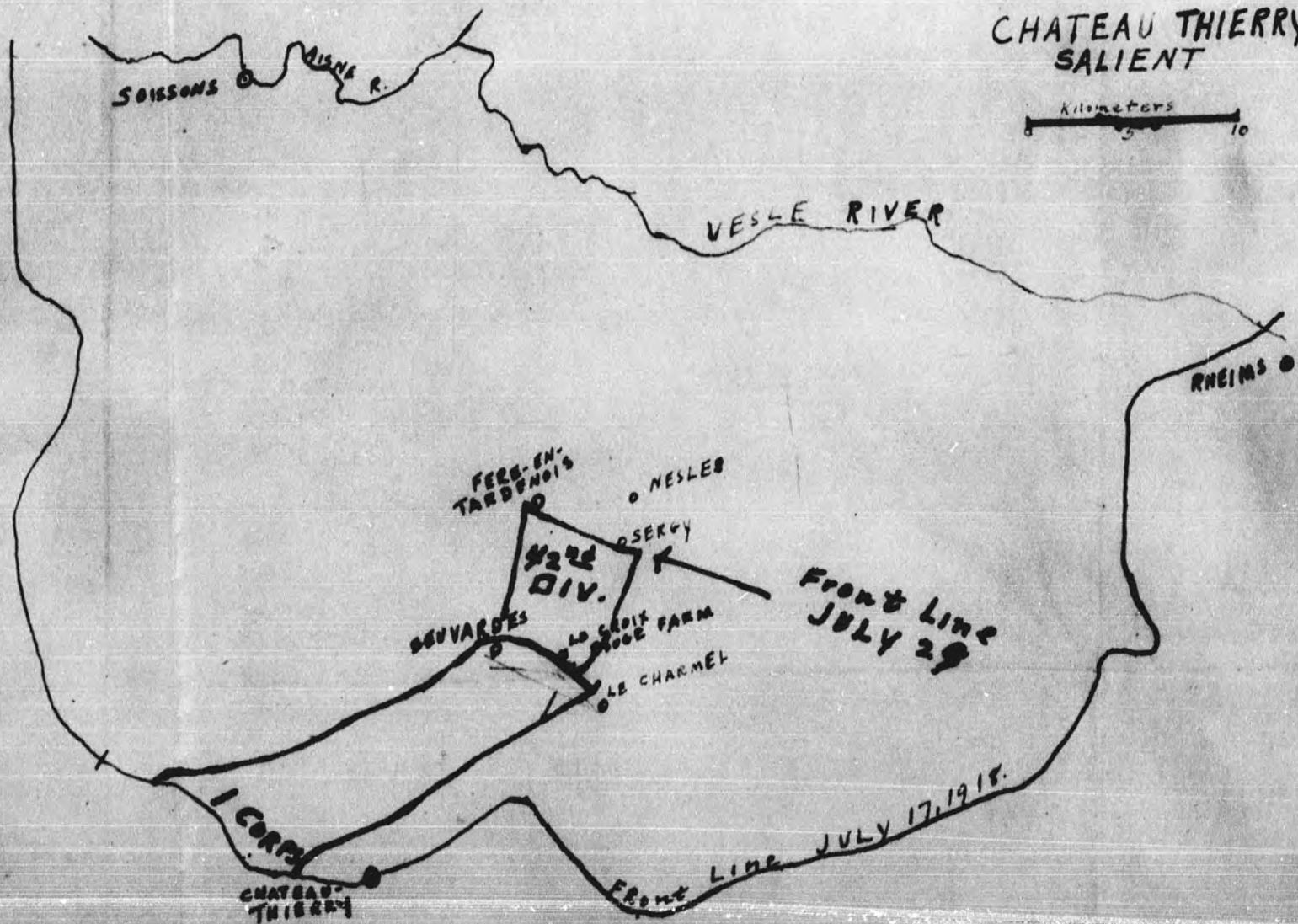
10. Patrols and observers noted and promptly reported the German preparations for retirement from the Ourcq River.

A. False

Special Map
No. 1

CHATEAU THIERRY
SALIENT

Kilometers
0 5 10



Special Map A

277

Enemy position
JULY 30-31

Line of farthest
ADVANCE of Co. D
1:00-3:00 PM JULY 30

Enemy position
9:00 AM JULY 30

47
CO. D
CO. B
Assembly
Area
12:00 Noon July 29

Line of Departure
9:00 AM JULY 30

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Overlay
Special Map No. 2

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2

Enemy Line
July 31-Aug. 1

△ △ △ Observation Line

Co. D Line
4:00 P.M. July 30-
2:15 A.M. Aug. 2

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