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

ADVANCED COURSE
1929-1930

THE OPERATIONS OF BATTERY "A"
7TH FIELD ARTILLERY
in the
AISNE-MARNE OFFENSIVE OF JULY 18-25, 1918.
(PERSONAL EXPERIENCE)

CAPTAIN SOLOMON F. CLARK, FIELD ARTILLERY.

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- First Division Historical Section "World War Records: First Division, A.E.F., Regular, 1918." Now published to include Volume XIII.
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P.

"Notes on the First Division in the Battle of Soissons, with special reference to the employment of Field Artillery". (Field Artillery Journal, July-August, 1920).

A comprehensive and detailed account of the whole action, written by the division commander.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF FORMER OFFICERS

Rogers, Captain Ellery W.
(Executive Officer)
Battery "A" 7th Field
Artillery

A personal conference was held with this officer in Boston on January 16, 1930.

Sands, Major, A.L.P.
(Regimental Commander)
7th Field Artillery

Personal conference at Army War College, January 20, 1930.

Woodall, Captain, Harding
C.
(Adjutant, First Battalion,
7th Field Artillery)

Personal conference in New York City, January 19, 1930.

MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

Butler	"Personal Notes of Captain A.B. Butler, A.D.C. to Division Commander".
Craig	"The First Field Artillery Brigade at Soissons".
Personal	Personal recollection of the writer.
Woodall	"Personal recollection of Captain H.C. Woodall, Adjutant, 1st Battalion, 7th Field Artillery".

Field Orders, Operations Reports, etc., are quoted directly.

PREFACE

This monograph deals with the detailed operations of a single battery of light artillery in the great counter offensive of July 18, 1918. There are no works of general historical interest bearing directly on the case, and few contemporary records or documents are available. Most of the material used has been obtained by personal conference, during the past few weeks, with the officers who served with the battery at the time, and from the memory of the writer. However, the important elements have been checked and rechecked and it is believed that they are a very close approximation of the truth.

Being as it is, the narrative of the operations of a very small unit, no attempt has been made to describe, except in barest outline, the general situation existing at the time. It is assumed that the reader is familiar with the gigantic German drive of June and July 1918, when his lines were pushed forward on a front extending from Compiègne to Reims, and was only stopped by heroic American resistance on the Marne, three days before this story opens. On July 18th, was launched the attack of the XXth French Corps, the first of a long series of counter thrusts by the Allies which at last broke down the German machine and terminated the war. It is with this attack that we are concerned.

*Misstatement
of Facts.*

INTRODUCTION

At eight o'clock in the evening of July 14th, 1918, the Seventh Field Artillery was marching through the streets of the little town of L'Isle Adam, on the outskirts of Paris. The streets were lined with townspeople, laughing and singing, and cheering the soldiers, for it was Bastille Day, and the people were making what holiday they could after four years of warfare in France. As the carriages rumbled through the streets, children decorated the guns with flowers and presented tiny tricolors to many of the soldiers.

The morale of the men was very high. The regiment was en route to a rest area near Paris, and rumor had it that it was to remain in this beautiful region for some weeks. In fact billeting areas had already been assigned at Mousseux-le-Neuf, in the Dammariville area, just northeast of Paris. Everyone looked forward to a long rest, with visions of leave in Paris, and a respite from the monotony of the last two months at the front. (1)

(1) F.O. #26,
Hq. 1st Div.
July 18,
1918

If the men of the regiment could have been permitted to peer behind the scenes at this moment, these pleasant dreams would have been rudely shattered. Although the division was then in process of carrying out the march order to the Dammariville area, it had on that day passed to French control, and staff officers were even then halting or diverting all elements of the division, in preparation for a new march.

At 10:00 P.M., two hours out from L'Isle Adam, the Seventh was halted at a crossroad by a division staff officer. At the head of the column was a "carrefour" or road fork: to the right lay Paris and the rest

area and to the left stretched away the road to the front. Within a few minutes the command was given "Column left" and the regiment was off on its new mission. The battalions billeted for the night a few miles farther on, in the towns of Monsoult and Maffliers.

(2) Personal (2)

THE ROAD MARCH

Next day, the 15th, warning orders were received for a forced march, destination not given. In the early afternoon further orders were received to the effect that guns and gun crews would be sent forward in motor trucks, while caissons and limbers would follow, drawn by the horses. (3) In accordance with these orders the batteries were quickly subdivided. Guns and cannoneers, with reconnaissance details, were assembled at the entrucking points, and the horse-drawn elements were formed into one column, with orders to clear the railway east of Monsoult at 10:30 P.M.

(3) Memo G-3
#690 Hq
1st Div
July 1~~4~~5
1918

EMM.

The memory of that march will not soon fade from the minds of those who took part in it. In Battery "A", the caissons and limbers were formed up first, and turned over to the executive officer, Lieutenant Bedsole, who forthwith started on what proved to be the severest road march that the First Division ever experienced. The rest of the battery, separated into headquarters, firing battery, and reconnaissance details, then awaited the arrival of the trucks. (4)

(4) Personal

They were a queer sight when they came in. Mud-be-spattered French trucks, driven by exhausted sleepy eyed Annamite drivers, they had been on the road practically continuously since the German attack on the

Marne had started. As the column formed and headed northeast, bumping over the war worn roads, it became evident that the drivers were too exhausted to keep awake, and time and again trucks narrowly avoided running off the road. Traffic was also increasing, though not in the terrific proportions of the following days. In the early morning the train halted for the day at Fresnoy-la-Riviere, and the battery commanders assembled their details for reconnaissance. (5)

(5) Personal

It was at this time that the general situation was outlined to the battery commanders and their officers. At that time they knew nothing of the heavy fighting that had been going on around Chateau Thierry, and in fact were in complete ignorance of the sector into which they were going. Information was released on the 16th to the effect that the First and Second U.S. Divisions with the Moroccan Division would come under the XXth French Corps, and would attack on "J" day--"J" day as usual not being stated. From the congested condition of the area, however, and the general undercurrent of excitement, it was evident that the day was not far distant. Very little more information was given until the actual ground was reached.

While the truck train carrying the guns remained under cover in Fresnoy during the day, battalion commanders, with battery commanders and their reconnaissance parties, went forward by automobile to the new front, a distance of some 25 kilometers. Every effort was made for secrecy. The cars were sent individually, and after arrival, the parties were scattered as much as possible. (6)

(6) Personal

RECONNAISSANCE

A study of the attached map will reveal the situation that confronted the battalion and battery commanders on arrival in the ruined town of Coeuvres, on the morning of the 16th. The 6th Field Artillery was to support the First Brigade on the right of the division zone of action; the 7th, the Second Brigade. Our battalion was to support the 28th Infantry, which was the left regiment of the Second Brigade. The 5th Field Artillery, which was the heavy regiment of the First Artillery Brigade was to fire concentrations on towns and strongpoints in advance of the barrage of the 75's, and particularly to neutralize enemy resistance to the Missy aux Bois ravine. These were in general the missions; positions were to be selected and staked out; more detailed instructions were to follow. Absolutely no registration or firing of any kind was to be permitted; the essence of the whole attack was to be surprise. (7) The initial missions are shown on the attached overlay.

(7) FO # 27,
Hq 1st Div
July 17, 1918

Now let us examine the situation for a moment from the viewpoint of the battery commander of "A" Battery. The frontage of the division was about 2800 meters. Available for barrage fire were the 12 light batteries of the 1st Artillery Brigade, which gave each a frontage of a little more than 200 meters. This distance was about the maximum that a battery could cover; however, superimposed upon this in the initial stages of the attack was the fire of three groups of 75's from the 253d Regiment d' Artillerie de Compagne, and one group of 105 howitzers. Altogether an artillery force of 84 light guns, eight 105 howitzers, and twenty-four

155 howitzers. The French batteries were engaged throughout, but after the first day only one battery was seen by the writer.

Examination of the ground soon showed that there were few positions east of the Coeuvres ravine. This deep ravine, reported to be full of mustard gas, extended to the east to a point 600 yards from the jump-off line. Since its slopes were too steep to permit firing by flat-trajectory guns from within the ravine, it became necessary to select positions on its western edge. These were undesirable, the range being too great for attack positions, but no others were available. Accordingly, gun positions for all batteries of the 1st Battalion were staked out and carefully marked in the vicinity of Riverseau Farm, and after dusk the reconnoitering parties returned to Fresnoy.

The 155 howitzers belonging to the 5th Field Artillery were to go into the ravine south of Coeuvres, practically in a continuous line, while the 6th were to be placed on the west slope of the ravine, 800 meters southwest of the town. (8) During the night of the 16th-17th the guns were brought forward by the trucks, and hidden in ruined buildings in Coeuvres.

(8) Craig ✓

In "A" Battery, a field range was set up, although this had to be done with caution, and hot meals were served the next day to the gun crews, who remained in hiding until dusk. At this time great anxiety began to be felt as to the arrival of the limbers and ammunition. Here were the field guns, in the bottom of a deep ravine, half a mile from the battery emplacements, with no ammunition and no means of pulling them up the hill into place. This situation so annoyed Lieutenant

(9) Personal

Rogers, the battery executive officer, that he went out and commandeered a couple of passing French limbers and moved the guns up two at a time. The situation then, about midnight, was that the battery was in position and ready to fire, but without transport and without a round of ammunition. (9) It is understood that the other batteries of the 7th were put into place by borrowed French trucks.

At this juncture the "A Battery luck", which was destined to become proverbial in the regiment, made itself manifest. Wandering along the road in rear of the battery came a French combat train, with a full load of ammunition under command of an aged adjutant. He had been unable to find his own organization; moreover, he was firmly convinced that his present location was a highly undesirable one, and his one object at the moment was to return to the rear areas. He was only too glad to seize upon the battery commander's suggestion that he drop his ammunition in rear of the emplacement, and "A" Battery found itself at that time the only battery in the brigade with a full supply of ammunition. (10)

(10) Personal

The early morning hours of the 18th of July presented a spectacale perhaps unparalleled in the history of the war. The roads were jammed with traffic of all kinds, columns of infantry, heavy artillery, ammunition trains, tired horses, and men dragging forward limbers, caissons, and guns. All were mud-be spattered and weary, but all were pushing forward with relentless energy toward the front. A rain storm of almost tropical intensity had raged during the night,

and the countless thousands of troops and vehicles on the road had been forced to struggle forward in it, through all the traffic and confusion. The final dramatic touch was added by the appearance of the tanks, clanking through the darkness, guided by the gleam of phosphorus on the hands of the scouts preceding them.

good!
(11) Personal

(11) These tanks incidentally had torn down most of the telephone wires at division headquarters and practically wiped out communication with the troops. (12)

(12) Notes
Lieutenant
Butler

During the night the final barrage chart was received, and all data was computed for the beginning of the attack. The zone of action of the 28th Infantry was clearly outlined on the map. This zone was divided into three equal lanes, the right lane being given to Battery "A". There was to be no registration fire of any sort. On this account it was not considered safe to place the initial barrage line too close to our own troops, and accordingly the initial line was placed three hundred meters in front of the jump-off position, where it was to rest for five minutes before creeping forward. The reason for this, of course, was to allow for minor variations in the artillery fire, due to changes in weather conditions, map errors, etc., and still allow the infantry time to catch up with it in case it happened to fall a little too far out. After that the barrage was to move forward at the rate of 100 meters in two minutes to the first objective (see map) where it would stand for twenty minutes. It was then to move again at the same cadence to the second objective where it would stand for forty minutes, to permit reorganization by the infantry. It was then to move forward to the third objective and lift. The

(13) FO 27
Hq 1st
Div
July 16,
1918

in part

signal to lengthen the range was to be a caterpillar rocket. "H" hour was set at 4:35 A.M. (13)

This barrage allowed for more flexibility in its execution than had been the case in previous situations. It was provided that "after 15 minutes on 1st objective, all available artillery will cover the advance". Also, since the initial ranges were long, the superimposed batteries were to assist while the divisional artillery moved forward. All 75's were to cease firing at H plus 122, and all artillery at H plus 248, except on call from the Infantry. At each halt, a defensive barrage was to be immediately prepared, to assist in breaking up counterattacks. Two batteries of the 7th were to be held back under brigade orders, and all batteries of the 5th Field Artillery were to go forward only on order of brigade headquarters. (14)

(14) FO (77) Hq
1st Div
July 17,
1918

in hand

Of the French regiment, two groups (battalions) were to assist the 6th, and one, the 7th, under the assumption that the right of the zone was the most important. While it was true that the main effort of the division was on the right, still the exceedingly difficult terrain in the zone of the Second Brigade, and the lack of support on the left, rendered this assumption doubtful.

All the data had been carefully worked out and checked during the early part of the night. The guns were laid with the gun crews in readiness nearby. Telephone wires were installed; liaison detachments had gone to their respective headquarters, and all was ready in the light artillery, except that the combat trains and gun limbers had not yet arrived. Scouts had been sent out in all directions to guide them in, and finally

Thus "H" hour found the light artillery with every element in position, and ready and eager to do its part in the attack. The batteries of the 7th were along the west slope of the Coeuvres ravine, in the vicinity of Riverseau Farm: (see map) the 6th was similarly placed on the south of the division zone. The three groups of the French 253d Artillerie de Compagne were along the same general line, except for one or two forward batteries on the east side of the ravine. These batteries were to fire special missions deep in the enemy lines, and remained in their initial positions after the first stages of the attack. There were also two batteries of 105 howitzers in the ravine. This brought the total of guns in the division sector to 84 light and 32 medium caliber. Some of the batteries of the 5th Field Artillery (155 howitzers) did not arrive in time for the jump-off, but all were in action 30 minutes afterwards. (17)

(17) Craig

And now we come to an order, issued in the liaison annex to FO #27, Headquarters 1st Division, which had a great deal to do with the handling of the artillery during the operation. This order stated definitely that the artillery commander would personally accompany the commander of the infantry whom he was supporting. This was to be in addition to the ordinary liaison officer. Whereas in past operations the artillery commander had tried to keep in close touch with the infantry, still he had never before been tied down in the actual location of his P.O., and the result was that in large measure he lost control of his own battalion or regiment. The practical working out of this scheme will become apparent

(15) Personal

about an hour before the attack, the "A" Battery limbers rolled in. (15)

The appearance of these men was remarkable. "Tired but keen" had been the comment of the division commander's aide when the troops passed the division headquarters. They had every right to be tired, as a glance at their march table will show. Beginning at Maffliers, at 8:00 P.M. on the 15th when left behind by the truck train, this column had marched till 3:00 P.M. on the 16th, a total of nineteen hours. At 7:00 P.M. on the 16th they had marched again for fifteen hours ending at 10:00 A.M. on the 17th. At 3:00 P.M. on the 17th, all secrecy as to road movement having been abandoned, they marched again, arriving at the gun positions about 3:30 A.M., and into action practically at once. (16) The horses were, of course, almost completely exhausted. Due to the fortunate windfall from the French, "A" Battery caissons did not have to be refilled, but many other batteries had to send them back, tired as the men and horses were, to refill at Taillefontaine and then return to accompany the guns when they moved forward.

(16) Craig

Many times the question has been raised as to whether the traffic delays in this movement were preventable. The long hours on the road were not due to tremendous distances but to constant stops, road blocks, troops on intersecting crossroads, and the like. However, when we consider that the heavy fighting on the south was not yet over, and also that many divisions were being concentrated for a series of counter-attacks, it is perhaps debatable whether any other condition would have been possible.

(18) Woodall as the action develops. In the case of the 1st Battalion of the 7th, the battalion commander, Major Ruggles, had gone forward with a small party, to the P.C., of the 28th Infantry. (18) The message center and radio section were left behind in the woods east of Riverseau Farm. Since there was no executive officer provided for in the artillery organization at that time, and since it was obvious that most artillery messages would come to this rear echelon via radio or wire, it became necessary to detach the senior captain from his battery to act as executive in the absence of the battalion commander. Accordingly, shortly before "H" hour, the commander of "A" Battery was ordered to take over this function. It may easily be seen how this virtual division of command was unsatisfactory. Messages from the infantry came through the battalion commander: messages, orders, fire charts, etc., coming down from the artillery brigade invariably came direct to the battalion P.C. near the batteries. In brief, this procedure practically deprived the artillery battalion commander of the ability to control his unit, and resulted, in the cases where it was entirely carried out, in command being assumed by junior officers for considerable periods of time. It was an experiment not later used in the division, at least in units as small as the artillery battalion.

THE BATTLE

Good
This then was the situation at 4:30 on the morning of the 18th of July. A few final whispered tests by telephone operators, the clicking of breech blocks as the guns were loaded all along the line,

and everything was quiet. At 4:35 sharp the batteries opened, and as one observer in the front line later described it: "The barrage came down like petals from a rose". No caterpillar rockets were seen, which led to the belief that this time at least the batteries were not shooting short. Our liaison officers reported promptly that the barrage was satisfactory, and it was so later reported by the division. The initial barrage line of Battery "A" may be seen from the map.

The first indication that came to the battery of success in the front was the number of prisoners to come back. They began to arrive about 5:30 AM, in large numbers, escorted by souvenir-loaded M.Ps.

At 6:00 AM the forward movement of the batteries of the 7th began. "A" Battery moved out first, advancing 5000 meters to a new position south of the Raperie, where it immediately took up the barrage again. In crossing the Goeuvres ravine "A" Battery of the 8th Field Artillery was seen approaching, and a race took place for precedence over the bridge, resulting in defeat for the 8th. In Cutry, the battery found itself following a winding, narrow street lined with high stone walls. Past shelling had knocked a large number of heavy stones into the roadway, and for a moment our progress was blocked. The road was too narrow to turn about and the stones too large to go over. Happily, at this instant a detachment of M.Ps. driving about a hundred German prisoners came into view, and their services were promptly requisitioned to clear the road. They appeared to be entirely pleased

with the idea, and the road was cleared in record
(19) Personal time. (19)

For the first time in many weeks the guns were on the way forward at a trot and gallop, though the old enfeebled horses bequeathed us by our French comrades were not able to do much of the latter. Several times Bosch planes swooped down on the column, firing machine guns but the "A Battery luck" held good, and not a man or horse was touched. On the way forward a runner from the liaison detachment met the battery bearing a message to the following effect:

From: Liaison Officer

To: B.C. Battery A.

The liaison detachment has captured a Bosch 77 battery at (coordinates given). They are marked "Battery A 7th Field Artillery". Please have the limbers take them out.

(Signed) McVickar,
2d Lieut,
Liaison Officer.

The actions of this liaison detail are perhaps worth studying, as an illustration of what often happened to liaison details in actual practice. Lieutenant McVickar, who was a very capable officer, and a man of almost reckless bravery, had gone with one of the assault companies of the 28th Infantry, accompanied by his detail of half a dozen men, in the fighting in the vicinity of the Missy ravine, the platoon to which he was attached became separated from the others, and soon the platoon commander found himself out of contact with his right and left. They had advanced some distance through the tall wheat be-

yond the ravine, when the enemy fire became so intense that the platoon was forced to retreat. The liaison detail found itself fighting side by side with the infantry; Lieutenant McVickar, never having fired an infantry rifle, engaged in a duel with a Bosch sniper, and was promptly winged in the arm. It may easily be imagined that liaison under these conditions practically ceased to exist. When it is considered that the other platoons were in like circumstance, the extreme difficulty of keeping the artillery informed as to the position of the front line may be realized, especially when the line is continually changing.

The position on the road running southeast from the Raperie was covered with dead and wounded Germans. It was necessary to remove some of them before the guns could be put into place. Later they were removed, and the wounded attended by the battalion surgeon.

(20) Woodall After "A" Battery was in position, "B" came forward, and later "C" Battery. (20) The forward movement by echelon of batteries in each battalion was designed to allow one battery to be in movement while the other two were firing, while the superimposed batteries were supposed to assist in keeping the fire continuous. Limbers were kept near the guns at all hours, so that the battery could move at a moment's notice. In the afternoon "C" Battery and later "B" went into position just west of Missy aux Bois, the battalion P.C. moving forward under the adjutant to the P.C. of the 28th Infantry near Missy aux Bois. The positions of the batteries of the 1st Battalion of the 7th at daylight of each day are shown on the accompanying

map.

In the late morning of the 18th occurred an incident which is perhaps typical of the mistakes that crop up in the locating of our own front lines. The artillery brigade commander came into the "A" Battery position, and stated with considerable emphasis that the infantry had far overrun the artillery fire, and were even then in the vicinity of Berzy-le-Sec, and that the front line was much beyond our maximum range. In other words, the old tale: the artillery was shooting behind the infantry. He ordered "A" Battery to limber up and go forward immediately. Fortunately for the battery, a burst of fire from enemy 77's which killed one man and wounded several others of the battery, caused him to modify his orders to the extent of holding the battery in place until a definite reconnaissance had determined the exact front line. The battery commander was quite sure the infantry were not in Berzy-le-Sec, unless they had taken wings, for the distance was entirely too great to have been negotiated on foot. A hasty trip to the front found Major McCloud of the 26th Infantry in his P.C. in a ravine just short of the Paris-Soissons road, and the front line a couple of hundred meters farther on. The infantry, of course, did not enter Berzy-le-Sec until three days later. It is interesting to note that this same mistake appears in a report of General Berdoulat, commanding the XX Corps d'Armee, in his description of the battle. He states that the infantry entered Ploisy at 9:00 A.M. of the first morning, an obvious error. Under the new circumstances, the battery was ordered to remain in place until night. (21)

(21) Personal

During the afternoon a regiment of French cavalry (Lancers) was drawn up in rear of the "A" Battery position, a very fine looking outfit. While standing at ease in a mass formation they were attacked by machine-gun fire from enemy planes, and many were shot from their saddles. They dispersed in quick order, in all directions. Later they were seen to reform and go forward, though later reports were to the effect that they had been able to accomplish nothing. They were withdrawn on the night of the 19th.

As a matter of fact the battery remained in the Raperie position till the night of the 19th, the battalion P.C. being at that time with the 28th Infantry P.C. in the Missy ravine. "A" Battery was thus the rear battery of the regiment at this time. From this position it supported the attack of the 28th Infantry on the morning of the 19th, in conjunction with "B" and "C" Batteries, which were then west of Missy aux Bois (see map). The circumstances were very similar to those of the first day. Again the ranges were quite long, except for the forward batteries. The terrain was a long forward slope, much exposed, leading to the deep Missy ravine, on the eastern edge of which were our front lines. "A" Battery's range was not too excessive to permit firing throughout the whole of the next day's

(22) Personal advance, so the position was retained. (22) It is possible that the battery was being held back under the brigade order referred to above, though the battery commander did not know of this at the time.

On July 19th the attack was renewed at 4:00 A.M. The light artillery fired the usual rolling barrage. This attack was only partially successful, for the 2d

Brigade was held up by strong resistance from the difficult country on the left, while the 1st Brigade advanced straight through on schedule to its objective. In this connection it should be noted that the 1st Brigade had on its right the Moroccan Division, with the Foreign Legion, the 8eme Zouaves, 4eme Tirailleurs, famous regiments all; while the 2d had only a Colonial division (the 153d) on its left, a division which apparently was unable to advance at all. In addition, the deep Missy and Ploisy ravines were in the zone of action of the 2d Brigade. It was a remarkable thing that they were able to progress as well as they did.

At any rate, the line as held at 9:00 A.M. on the 19th was considered unsatisfactory. A second attack to straighten the line was accordingly ordered, and at 5:30 the usual barrage was fired to precede the 2d Brigade in its attack. This local action was successful, and at 8:00 P.M. (about dusk) the line ran straight across the sector through Ploisy. The orders for this barrage did not reach the batteries until a few minutes before the attack began; in fact "C" Battery did not begin firing until fifteen minutes after the start. Battery commanders feverishly computed the data at the executive's post, and issued out the data sheets for the next few minutes firing, while the barrage was rolling along. In this afternoon attack all 75's of the division were in support of the 2d Brigade, necessitating some displacements by the 5th and 6th Regiments. (23) The heavies fired concentrations on the Ploisy and Chazelle ravines.

At 10:00 P.M. "A" Battery was moved forward to the Paris-Soissons road, due east of Missy aux Bois.

On the way up it was repeatedly bombed by night flyers from low altitudes but no casualties resulted. It seems remarkable that this should be the case, for on the while roads, under the brilliant light of parachute flares dropped by the enemy aviators, the column must have been very visible. In each case, on the approach of a plane, the column was halted, with instructions to remain motionless. It was quite a trying task, but apparently successful.

On the Paris highway were concentrated half a dozen batteries of both the 6th and 7th Regiments (see map). They were placed in line, in position on the near side of the road, with the road serving as an embankment in front of the pieces. On the next morning, there was no general attack, and the only missions assigned "A" Battery were registration, and some interdiction fire on Berzy-le-Sec. (24)

(24) Operations Report,
Btry A, 7th
F.A., July
27, 1918

During lulls in firing at this position the men amused themselves by firing at enemy airplanes. They had collected eleven machine guns, both Hotchkiss and German, and some Chauchat rifles, and though not particularly skillful in their use, they at least succeeded in firing a lot of ammunition.

Shortly before 2:00 P.M. the order came down for an attack on Berzy-le-Sec. (25) This strongly organized town had been originally in the sector of the 153d Division on the left, but on the morning of the 20th it was turned over to the 1st Division by order of the corps. "A" Battery's mission in this engagement was a two-hour preparation on the town, beginning at 12:00 o'clock. This fire was followed by a rolling barrage, covering the town and ravine, in which our battalion

(25) Memo G-3
Hq 1st
Div,
July 20,
1918

Cont'd

took part. This attack, though reenforced by a battalion of the 18th Infantry from division reserve, did not succeed, and at night fall the 1st Brigade was again far ahead of the 2d. The line then ran through Saconin Farm, refused on the left, and then across the 2d Brigade zone west of Berzy.

In this attack practically every round of artillery fire was directly observed. The observation posts on the hill top just east of the Paris-Soissons road afforded a superb view of the entire battlefield. It was a sort of natural amphitheatre, the terrain sloping gently downward to the Ploisy and Berzy ravines, and then up again to the heights of Noyant and Buzancy. From here the infantry formations could be plainly observed; in fact with field glasses each individual soldier was plainly visible.

The battlefield in the vicinity of the Paris-Soissons road was strewn with disabled tanks. It was said that by the end of the second day every tank of the seventy-five which had entered the engagement, under command of the No. 1 and No. 11 Groupments, had been destroyed or disabled. In view of the very elementary antitank defenses which had been developed at that time, perhaps a lesson can be drawn from this as to the vulnerability of tanks to short-range artillery fire.

Just before dusk a German battery, evidently retreating, had stopped to fire a few parting rounds from a position near Courmelles, plainly visible. Its shells were falling on our reserve position in the vicinity of Ploisy. This was the one time during the war when an enemy battery was seen in action from an "A" Battery O.P., and the one and only chance to test the French

theory that "A battery seen is a battery lost". In this case the theory proved incorrect, for although "A" Battery obtained a quick neutralization with shrapnel, darkness intervened and no fire for destruction could be carried out. Doubtless the Bosch withdrew a few minutes later without suffering serious loss. The silencing of this battery was noted by the observer at the division O.P. near by.

During the late afternoon and evening of this day, General Summerall visited all the units of the front line. Though fired at with shells, machine guns, and rifles, he visited elements of every regiment, talking with the men, joking with an old solider about the riding hall at Fort Meyer. They told him that they were going to take Berzy-le-Sec, and asked for an artillery barrage, which he promised they would have, and upon his return at 1:00 P.M., to the division P.C., it was arranged for. (26) Before leaving the front, General Summerall visited the 2d Brigade P.C., where the brigade commander, infantry regimental commanders, and artillery regimental commanders were assembled. He informed them that the attack would be renewed in the morning, and told them that he expected them to take the town without fail. With regard to the artillery side of this operation, it is interesting to note that General Summerall desired every fourth round from the 75's to be smoke shell. Due to the congested road conditions, the smoke did not arrive, and no screen was put down in the entire engagement.

The attack on Berzy-le-Sec was resumed at 4:45 A.M. on July 21st. The scheme of maneuver was for

(26) Butler

(27) FO #29
July 20
Hq 1st
Div ✓

the 1st Brigade to advance under a rolling barrage, assisted by the French 87th Division, which had relieved the Moroccans. On the left the 153d Division was to advance. The 2d Brigade was not to move forward until 8:30. (27) Thus the town was to be outflanked on both sides before the frontal attack started. In accordance with this, the 5th fired concentrations on Berzy and nearby ravines, and also counterbattery. Just prior to the advance of the 2d Brigade, a strong preparation fire of forty minutes' duration, in which "A" Battery joined, was put down on the town. Although the 153d Division did not advance, our own attack was successful, and our infantry led in person by brigade and regimental commanders, captured the town at 9:15 A.M. A protective standing barrage of one hour's duration was immediately computed, to fall just in front of our lines to the east of Berzy-le-Sec. That night our line ran from just east of Berzy through the Sucrerie, to Buzancy (exclusive).

(28) Butler (28)

There was no general attack on the 23d. During the day the battery fired harassing and interdiction fire on the enemy lines and in the vicinity of Noyant. This intermittent fire was kept up throughout the day. It was rumored that the infantry would be relieved during the night, but that the artillery would remain to support the 15th Scottish Division which was to effect the relief. This rumor proved true, and at midnight of the 22d/23d, command of the sector passed to General Reed, of the 15th Scottish Division. (29)

(29) Butler

Early in the night, the horizon to the east was lighted by many fires, where the Bosch was burning all stored that he could not take with him in his retreat. SA

During the afternoon of the 23d, the reconnaissance parties of the 71st Brigade, R.F.A., arrived to prepare for the artillery relief. It was their first experience in a French sector, and they were considerably puzzled by the coordinate system used in the French "Plan Directeur". Apparently they were quite casual about the topographic operations which we worked out so carefully, and depended largely on getting direct observation for their fire. Their preliminary dispositions made, a group of officers dropped in at "A" Battery and after a bit of casual conversation, requested a cup of tea. It was with the greatest amazement that they heard that the Americans had never learned to take time out for the tea hour, and had to be content with hard tack and coffee from the rolling kitchen.

Some of the guns of this brigade arrived late in the afternoon of the 23d, and went into position east of the highway. Their horses and equipment were beautiful to see. In comparison with our war-worn old veterans, inherited by us from the French recuperation hospitals, they were magnificent. It made many an artilleryman angry to think that the 1st Division had to operate with worn out old animals while the newer divisions were coming in equipped with large American horses of the type these Britishers had. This did not prevent cordial good feeling, however, between the Americans and the British, and a little later the major commanding the battery relieving "A" of the 7th, sent an orderly over to the "A" Battery commander to join him in a cup of tea and a whisky and soda. Unfortunately this kind invitation had to be declined.

During the night the forward batteries were heavily shelled, and those on the Paris highway fired upon by enemy 210's from the northwest. At one time the enemy had a perfect bracket on the "A" Battery position, and the men were drawn off a hundred yards to the flank. In the midst of it however, a barrage rocket went up, and the normal barrage had to be fired at once. These huge shells tore craters large enough to hide a 75 all about the position, but no direct hits were obtained.

On the morning of the 23d the Scotch attacked, under the combined fire of the Scotch and American artillery, but were unable to advance. A second attack the next day on Rosieres was checked by two counter-attacks, and it was here perhaps that the American batteries were of their greatest assistance to the British. General Reed stated that these were completely broken up by our counterpreparation fire. We also fired on a number of SOS calls (normal barrage). The last of the Scotch artillery was in place at 2:00 A.M. on the 24th, and the American artillery formally relieved at 4:00 P.M. (30)

(30) Butler

At 2:00 A.M. on the 25th the battery was formed and marched back to the rear echelon at Coeuvres, via Domniers. Here the regiment assembled, and started on the rearward march to the Dammartin area. Needless to say, the morale was high. For nine days the batteries had been either marching or firing. During that time, even when the batteries were not firing, the horses were almost constantly in motion, hauling ammunition, or moving the guns forward. Although our losses were, of course, slight in comparison with the infantry, the

physical labor of handling guns and ammunition was tremendous, and the men were exhausted. The horses perhaps had suffered the most. During the days at the front, horses attached to the limbers were practically never unharnessed.

Supply during the operation was satisfactory, except for some shortage of food during the last day or so. In "A" Battery the rolling kitchen was always carried near the guns, and even when the ration cart failed to arrive, there was always hard bread and coffee to be had. Those batteries which failed to take the rolling kitchen out of the combat train when going forward were not so fortunate. This simple precaution served "A" Battery well in many a subsequent engagement.

CONCLUSIONS

Of course the paramount question to be studied in this operation is the time worn one of how to best keep in touch with the situation in the infantry front lines. While liaison officers were always with the assault battalions, and the artillery commanders always in close touch with the supported infantry commanders, still it must be admitted that the batteries were not always in possession of accurate information as to the location of the front line. There were times when the telephone lines were out (though there were also other times when the infantry had communication with their own higher units through the artillery lines).

So long as the telephone is the only practical means of communication, it is a question whether quick and certain transmission of messages from the front to the batteries can ever be carried out.

When we consider that the 1st Division at that time had been in the lines for more than six months, and had been in training in France for more than a year, is it reasonable to expect that the average division can do better?

The two possible solutions appear to be the development of radio for artillery communication and the use of infantry cannon for their own immediate defense, pending heavier fire by the artillery.

One regimental commander in this action advocated the use of forward observers, of artillery personnel, whose function it would be to observe and report direct to the artillery battalion information of targets, front lines, etc., somewhat after the fashion of the British. The trouble about this method is that such an observer can usually see only a very limited sector, and the difficulties of communication would be practically as great as with the liaison officer in the front line.

In the Soissons operation, it is possible that the infantry were too zealous in their attack; in their anxiety to go forward, they may not have been willing to wait the necessary time for artillery support to arrive. In witness of this, the classic example of the Foreign Legion, in the same attack, is a good illustration. When held up by machine-gun fire, they waited for some three hours for an artillery concentration, and when they did go forward, it was practically without loss. At that, they arrived at the final objective almost as soon as the Americans did. It would appear that a little more coordination and a little less impetuosity would result in a considerable saving of life.

Another point to be commented on is the fact that practically all fire at Soissons was done by map and unobserved. The present tendency, in our effort to encourage young officers to be aggressive in searching for direct observation, is to disparage unobserved fire. While this attitude is praiseworthy in its object, it sometimes causes an entire misunderstanding of the possibilities of fire with an accurate map. A skillful artilleryman with the aid of a good map can place his fire within a surprisingly short distance of the target.

It will be noted that throughout the whole affair the role of the light artillery was one of rolling barrage. This form of support had been handed down from attacks on more highly organized sectors, and had usually been preceded by a bombardment lasting for hours, or even days. Its sole purpose had been to pin the enemy down so that the infantry following close behind the barrage, could come to grips with him before he could rise up and defend. From the artilleryman's point of view it was the simplest and easiest kind of fire. Once computed, and adjusted on its initial line, its execution was a purely mechanical process. It simply rolled along, incapable of control or modification, until the attack either succeeded or failed. Doubtless it was very effective when applied to attack against strongly organized positions. However, in open moving situations its employment would seem to be a very wasteful form of fire in contrast with skillful and scientific bombardments of enemy centers of resistance or assembly areas. However, to quote one regimental commander "The employment of a rolling

barrage at this time was most fortunate. Progressive concentrations are placed upon points where enemy resistance is expected, but since this was not encountered where anticipated, the barrage covered the area to much better advantage."

LESSONS

The lessons to be learned from this operation of a small unit are naturally ones of technique. Closer cooperation with the infantry; careful selection of the best form of support and similar questions are the most important. Many of the roles played at the time of this engagement are being taken over by the new infantry cannon. The object to be sought now, as then, is the perfect coordination of the infantry-artillery team.

QUESTIONS

1. What was the form of support for Battery "A" in this engagement, barrage fire or successive concentrations?

Answer: Barrage.

2. Why was the light artillery fire ineffective in the Missy-aur-Bois ravine?

Answer: The slopes were too steep to permit shells to fall in the ravine.

3. Was the three-hour delay of the Foreign Legion in waiting for its artillery support justified?

Answer: Yes, due to great saving in human life.

4. How much French artillery was used in conjunction with the divisional artillery?

Answer: 3 battalions of 75's
2 batteries 105 howitzers.

5. What was the principal role of the 155 Howitzers?

Answer: Concentrations on ravines and towns.

6. Why was the 1st Brigade able to progress faster than the 2d?

Answer: Easier terrain, better support on right.

7. What is meant by a superimposed battery?

Answer: A battery whose fire is placed on that of another.

8. Was the severity of the road march due to distance covered or traffic delays? *Sh*

Answer: The latter.

9. How much frontage can a battery cover in a rolling barrage?

Answer: 200 yards.

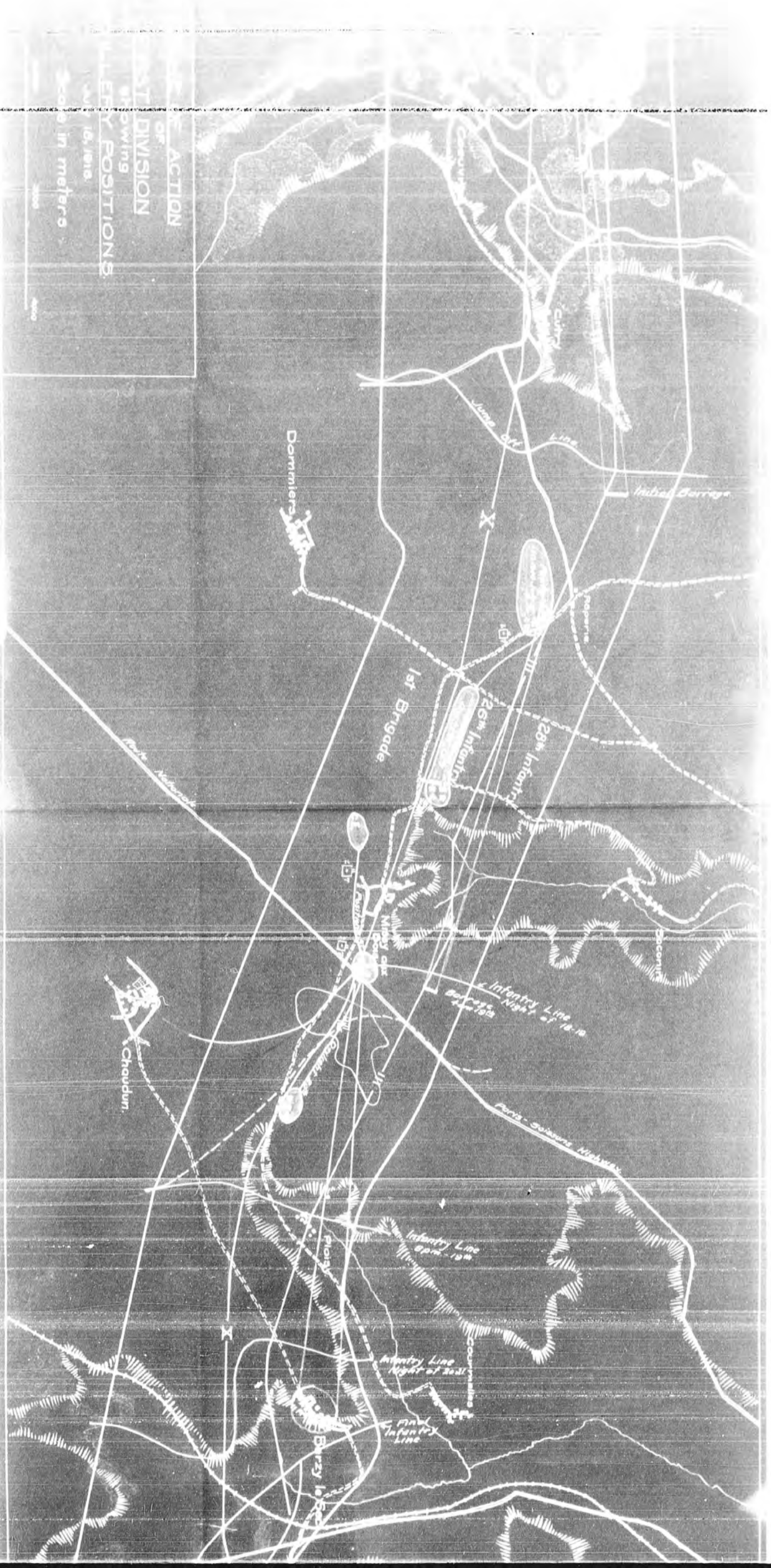
10. Why were the initial gun positions only moderately satisfactory?

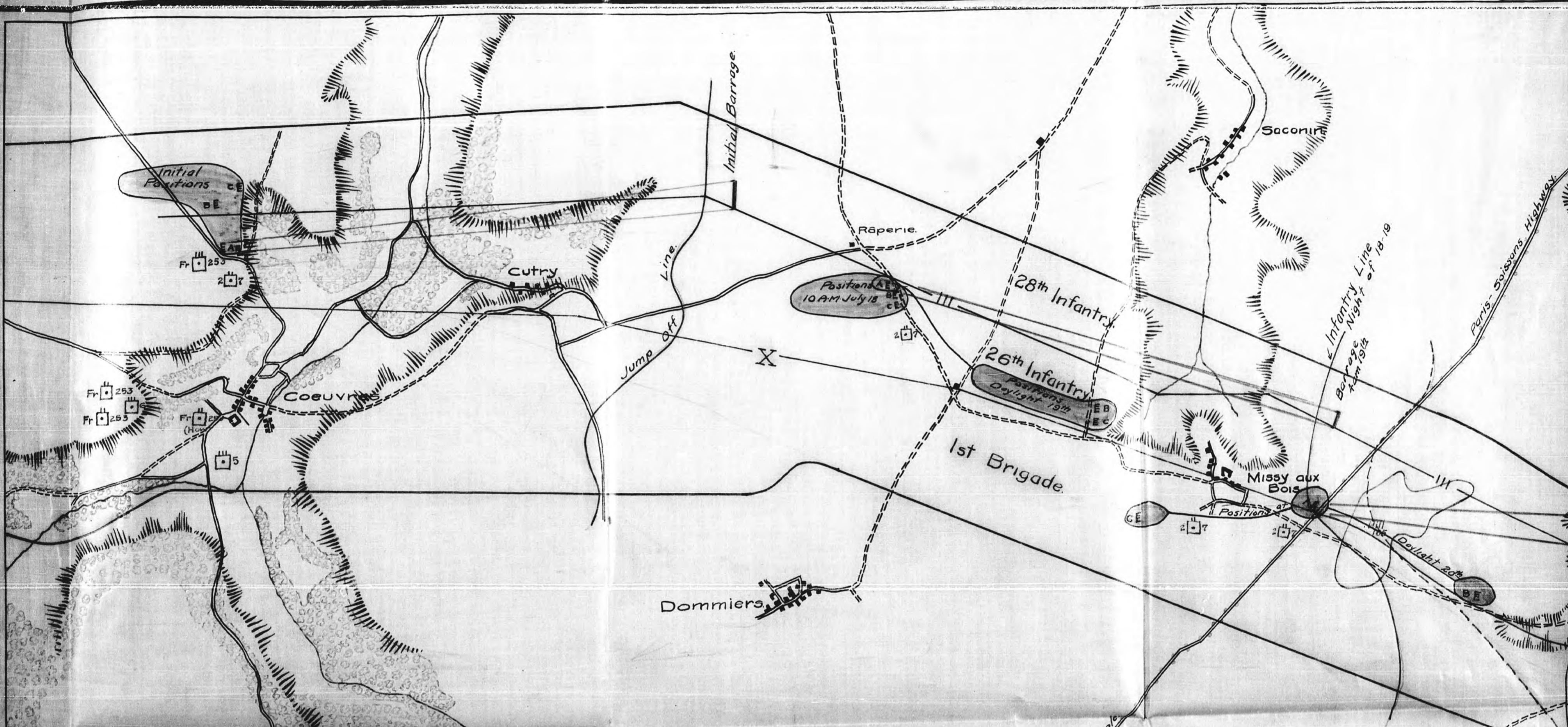
Answer: Range too long.

ACTION
 of
 1ST DIVISION
 showing
 GUNNER POSITIONS
 July 16, 1916.

Scale in meters

0 1000 2000 3000 4000





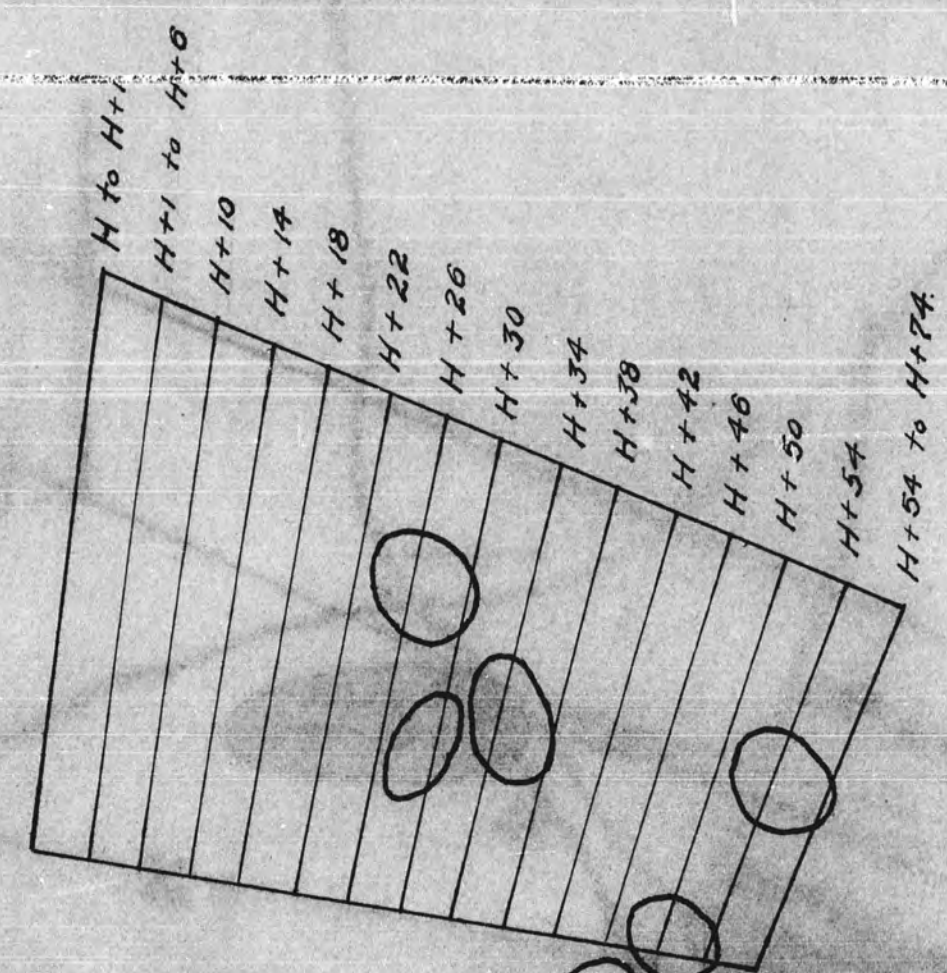
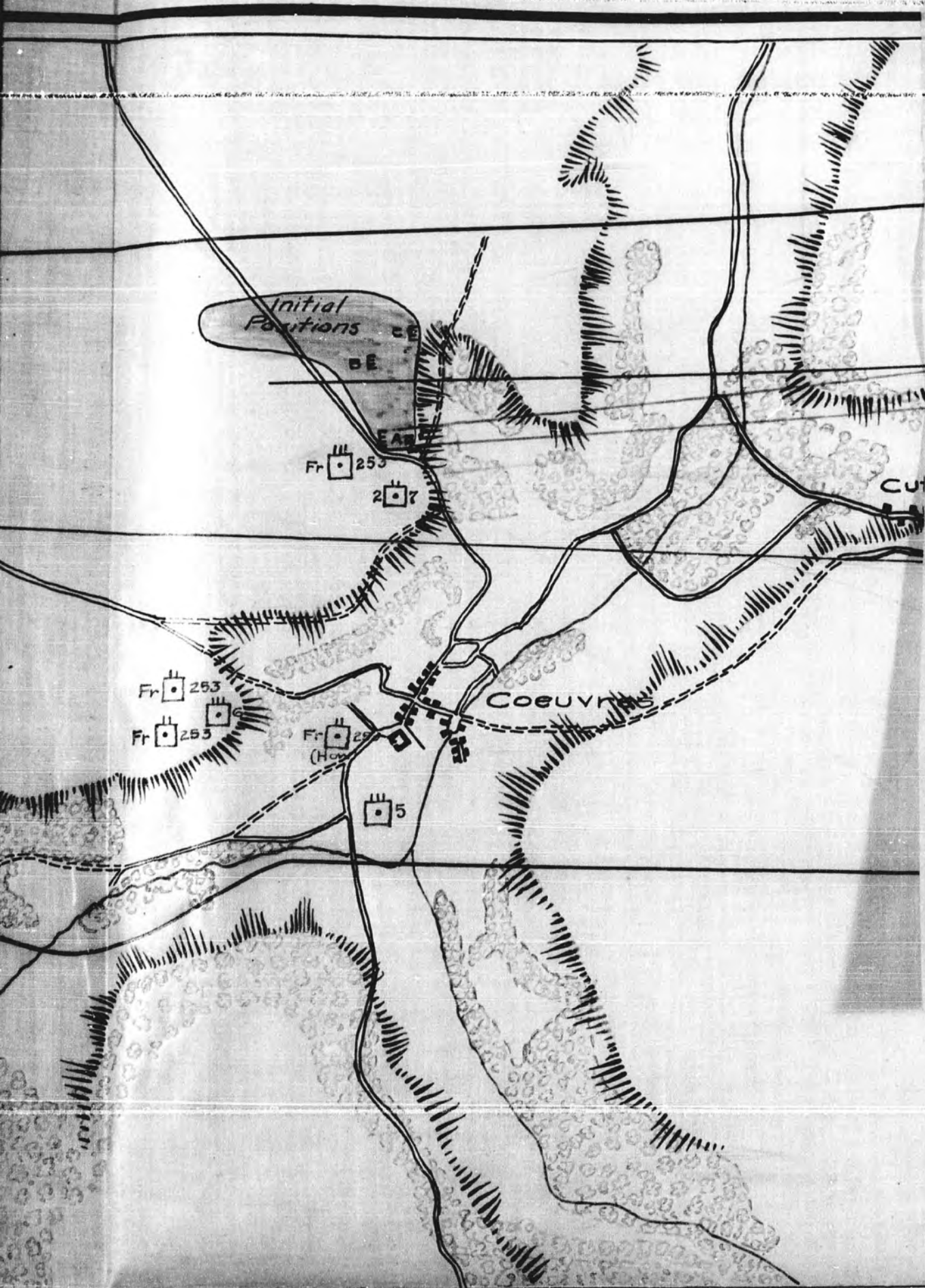
ZONE OF ACTION
OF
FIRST DIVISION
showing
ARTILLERY POSITIONS.

July 18, 1918

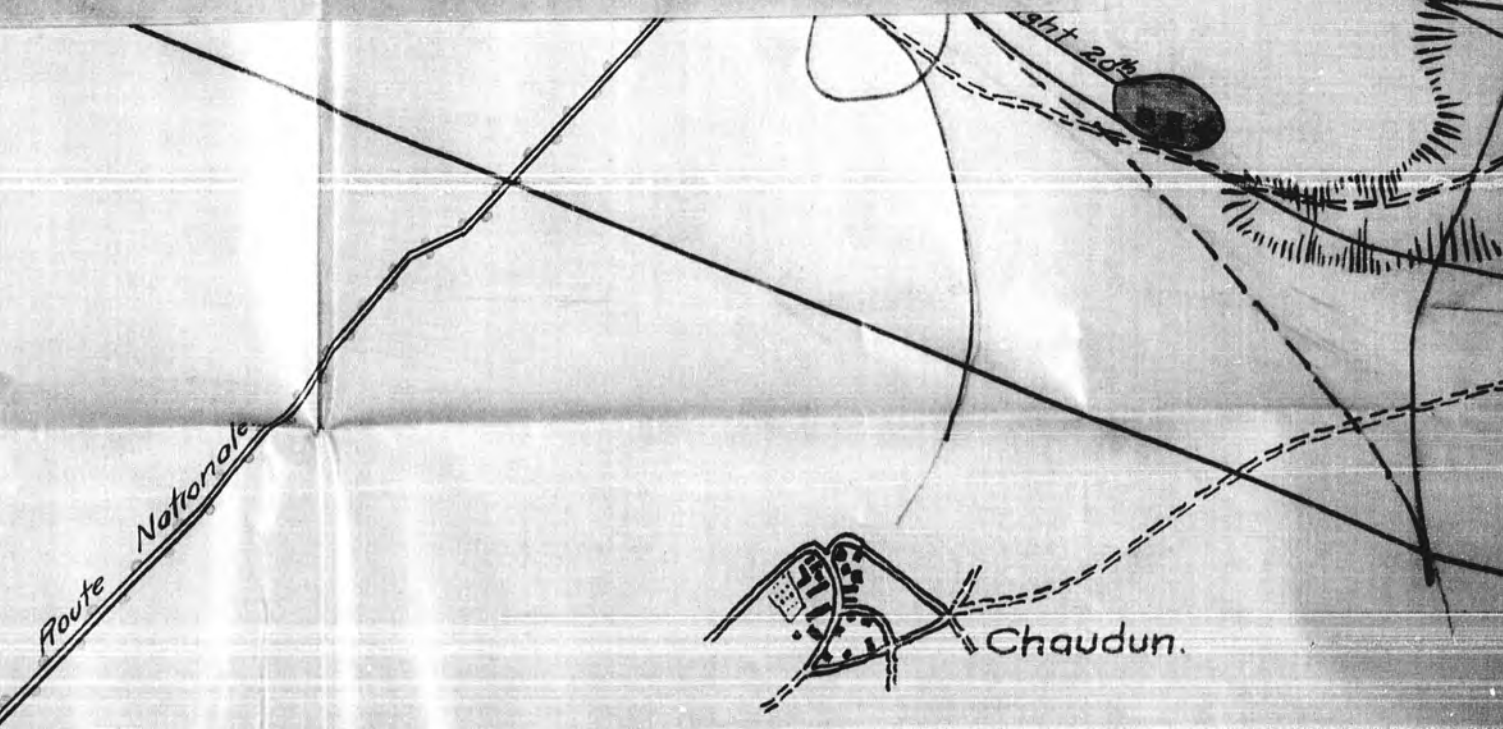
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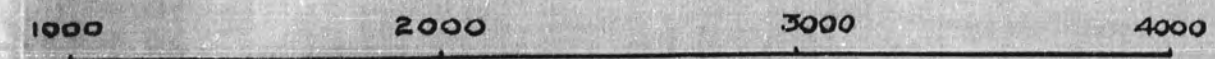
Clark



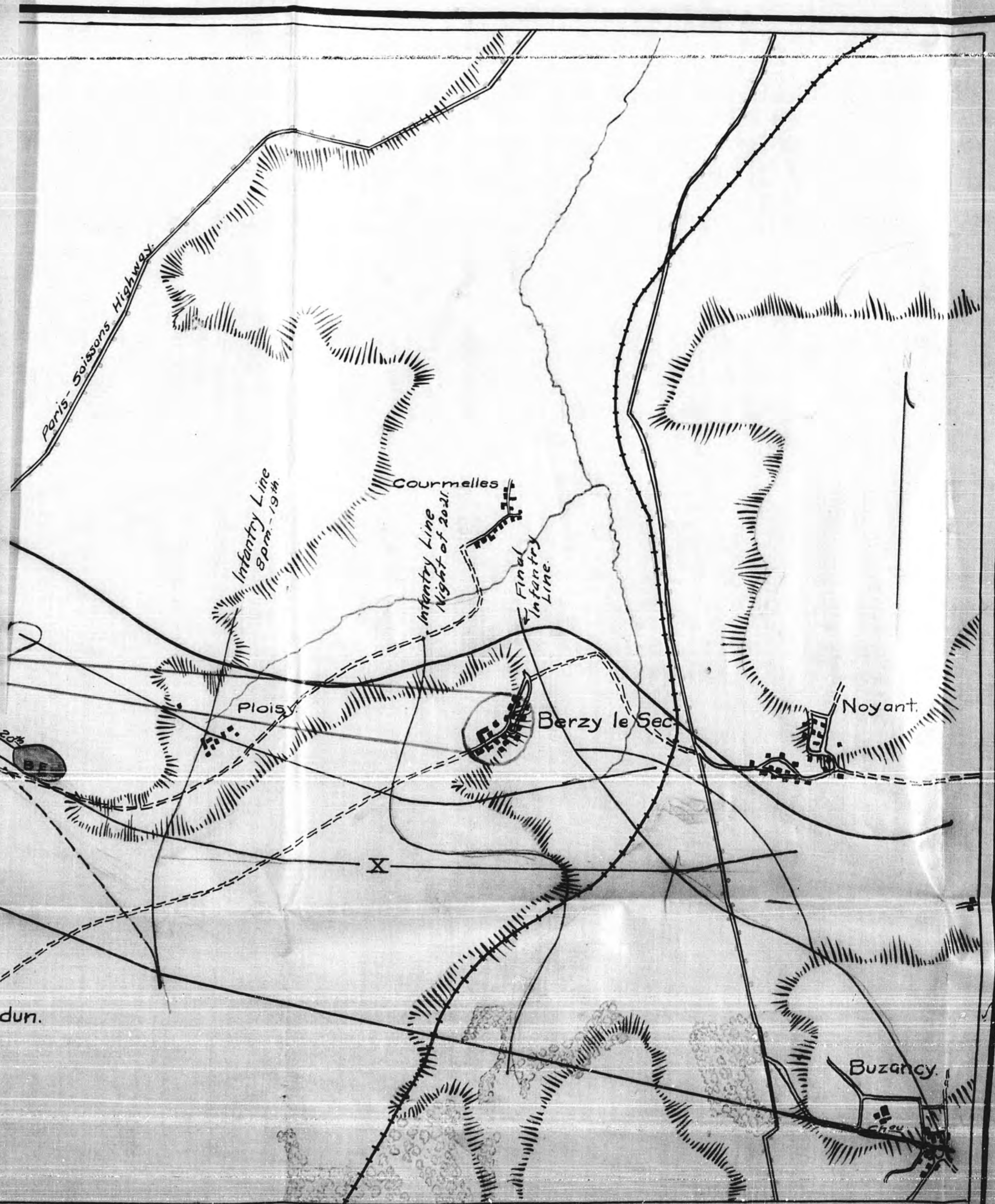
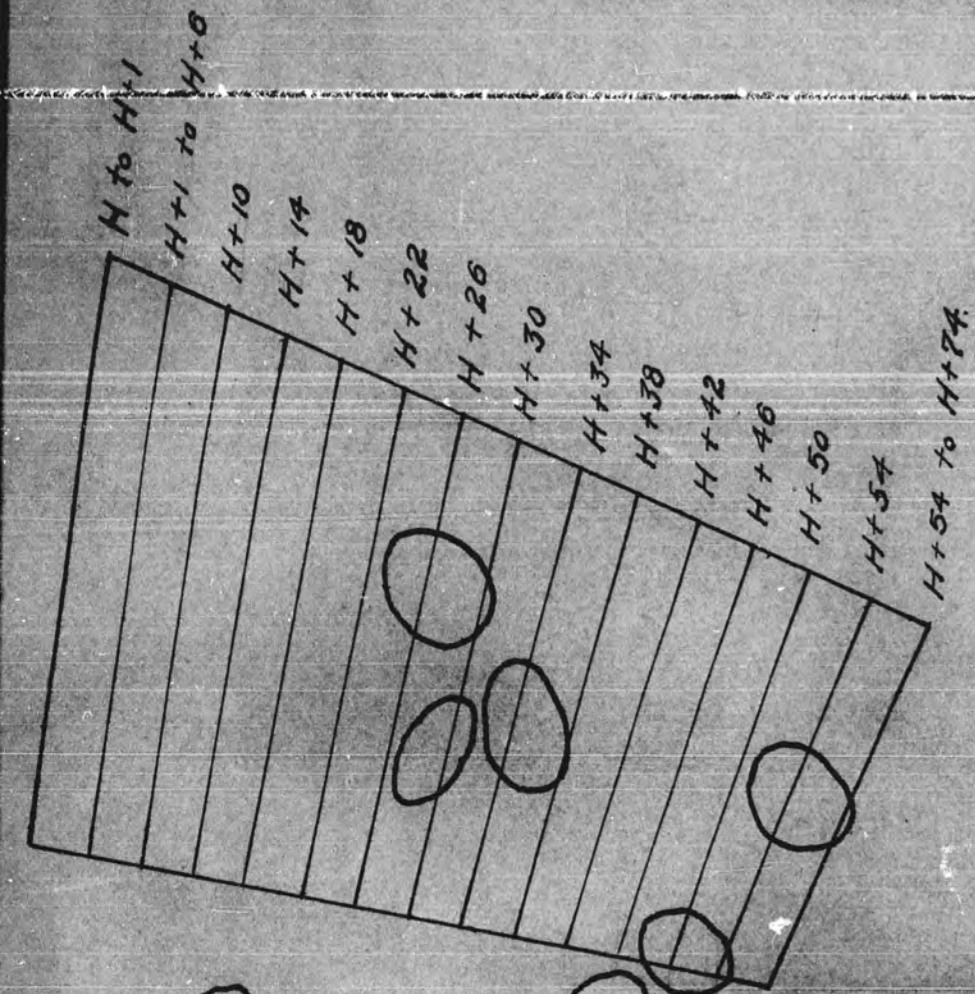
Initial Barrage Chart
and
Concentrations
for
Medium Howitzers.
July 18th.



ZONE OF ACTION
OF
FIRST DIVISION
showing
ARTILLERY POSITIONS.
July 18, 1918.
Scale in meters



*Initial Barrage Chart
and
Concentrations
for
Medium Howitzers.
July 18th.*



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Route Nationale

Paris - Soissons Highway

Infantry Line
8pm - 1914

Infantry Line
Night of 20st

Final
Infantry
Line

Courmelles

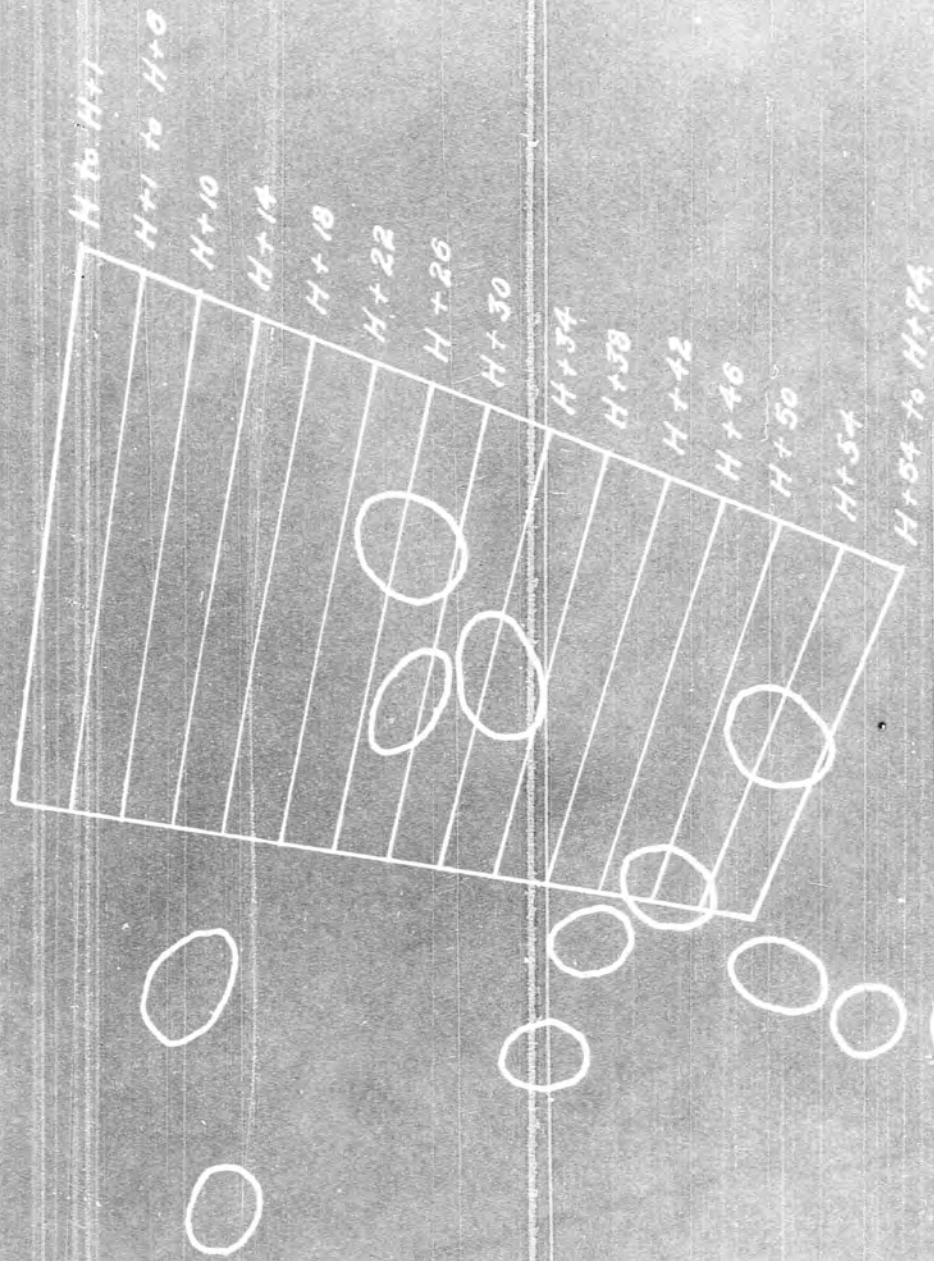
Ploisy

Berzy le Sec

Noyant

Chaudun

Buzancy



*Initial Barrage Chart
and
Concentrations
for
Medium Howitzers
July 18th.*