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

ADVANCED COURSE 1928-1929

EIGHTEENTH INFANTRY IN THE AISNE-MARNE OFFENSIVE July 18-25, 1918 PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF A REGIMENTAL OPERATIONS OFFICER

CAPTAIN JOHN W. CRISSY, INFANTRY 3 -



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MAPS

Aisne-Marne,	south	of	S	ic	8	30	n	S	,
July 18-22	1018						Ŋ.		

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Thomas, Shipley

"The History of the A. E. F."

Based on official records and personal experiences. The writer had many opportunities as a regimental intelligence officer to obtain authentic data. Considered reliable, particularly with regard to the 1st Division with which he served.

"History of the First Division during the World War".

Compiled from official records and experiences related by officers of the division. Thoroughly checked by officers who served in the division, before publication. The general account of each action is considered accurate except for some minor details.

"History of the 2d Machine Gun Battalion, First Division".

A general resume of the activities of the 2d MG. Bn. during the World War. Written by officers who participated in its actions, it is a modest narrative that can be considered accurate.

Society of the

History of the 2d MG. Bn.

Ludendorff's Own Story

"Ludendorff's Own Story".

Well written. Somewhat predjudiced. Of value as a study but accuracy in some cases disputed.

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MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

1st Div.

"History of the First Division during the World War".

2 M.G. Bn.

"History of the 2d Machine Gun Battalion, First Division".

Thomas

"The History of the A. E. F."

18th Inf.

"History of the 18th U. S. Infantry"

INTRODUCTION

(1) 1st Div. p 99.

(2) 1st Div.

p 99.

The German Army in its effort to break
through the Allied lines and reach Paris had driven
a deep pocket between Soissons and Rheims. (1)
This pocket had been widened and deepened until the
town of Chateau-Thierry had been occupied and the
Marne river crossed. Then the arrival of American
troops had strengthened the Allied lines, the defense stiffened and the enemy's forward movement
was halted. Our attacks on Chateau-Thierry and
Belleau Woods were successful and the Germans now
found themselves wedged in a salient that could be
made untenable by closing it or partially closing it
at the upper part.

Marshal Foch decided that the surest way to check a further enemy advance was to attack the enemy flank at the base of the salient, either west of Soissons or east of Rheims. (2) He elected to attack west of Soissons.

General Pershing had tendered Marshal Foch
the services of the American troops for any task that
might be assigned them. The First and Second American
Divisions were chosen to attack with the First
Moroccan Division between them, on the western side
of the salient.

The German High Command was well aware of the sensitiveness of this point and had taken the precaution to place along the Soissons front some of its best troops.

Vol. II Ludendorff's Own Story, p 307-313. "At the most critical point, southwest of Soissons, we had placed a division that had fought with special success in the East, and which had always met the demands made upon it in the West. This division had not taken part in the May battles and therefore was as much rested as could be allowed to any division".

"Our infantry had not stood firm at all points and in particular the division southwest of Soissons that had been considered so reliable, had given way. The gap rapidly widened, especially toward Soissons".

This was the situation on July 15, 1918 when the 18th Infantry entrucked at Juilly and proceeded to the Compeigne Forest, near Palesne, where it arrived late that day.

PRELIMINARY ORDERS AND MOVEMENTS

On the night of July 16-17, the First and Third Battalions marched to the vicinity of Monte-fontaine, and from there marched on the night of July 17-18 to positions in line from which the attack was launched. The Second Battalion marched from Palesne to the line on the night of July 17-18. (3)

(3) 18th Inf.

Orders were received from Brigade Headquarters on the afternoon of July 16th directing that a reconnaissance be made that night by company and battalion commanders. This reconnaissance of front line positions and routes of approach to them was ordered to be completed by daylight on July 17th. The Brigade Order prescribed that company commanders assemble at the Brigade C. P. at eight P. M. where a truck would be spotted to convey them to Coeuvres where guides would meet them and conduct them to the positions they would occupy for the jump-off on the morning of July 18th. The truck did not report and the company commanders waited at Brigade Headquarters until eleven P. M. when the brigade commander's automobile drove up to move the C. P. to a new location in Coeuvres. The senior captain of the waiting group, appreciating the urgency for the reconnaissance, commandeered the brigade commander's car and took with him the company commanders of the 16th and 18th Infantry Regiments whose companies were to make the initial assault. It was several hours later before the remaining company commanders obtained transportation and consequently their reconnaissance was hastily made and not as complete as it should have been.

French guides met the reconnaissance parties at the western exit of Coeuvres and successfully led them in intense darkness through the ruined village

into the areas they were to occupy. From this reconnaissance, hastily made, under many difficulties, the company commanders gained all the information they were to have to aid them in getting their troops into line. It has since remained a mystery to these officers how they were able to retrace their steps the following night. Battalion commanders completed their reconnaissance during the forencon of July 17th.

Before daylight, July 17th, the regimental C. P. had been established at Coeuvres. Owing to a scarcity of maps showing boundaries, objectives, etc., engaged the operations officer was, practically the entire day in making sufficient copies so that all company maps officers could have a copy of the map. These, proved invaluable later in the operation when, after severe fighting, troops of several organization became intermingled, and further attacks were ordered.

MOVEMENT INTO LINE

The long march of ten kilometers into line on the night of July 17-18th will probably never be forgotten by those who made it. (4) A heavy downpour of rain came at dusk just as the troops left the assembly areas in Compeigne Woods. Thunder and blinding lightning accompanied the torrents that fell. Every

(4) 1st Div. p 105; Thomas, p 141. road, every track, and every field was filled with trucks, wagons, artillery, tanks, or columns of men. The congestion and confusion was beyond description. Often the columns of men would be halted by the congestion and it would be necessary to advance through small openings in single file to reform when opportunity permitted. Grim determination kept them going amidst this tangle of humanity, animals, and transportation. Every delay was agonizing to the unit commanders who needed every available minute to reach the line, form for the attack and issue necessary instructions.

Guides met the columns at the western edge of Coeuvres, led them through the ruins, over creeks which had been gassed daily with mustard gas, up the steep slopes, past the regimental C. P. to their jump-off positions. Only one path existed and the rains had made it so slippery that it was with greatest difficulty that the men, laden with their rain soaked clothing and equipment, could negotiate the last four or five feet of the slope, which was particularly steep, and gain a footing at the top.

The operations officer was posted at this point and checked each unit as it passed. As a unit commander arrived with his column the operations officer gave him the correct time which had been obtained at midnight when he was called to Brigade

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Headquarters. This was done to insure a simultaneous attack.

It was exactly 3:55 A. M. when the last unit passed and only forty minutes remained before the attack was to start. There was still a kilometer to march before it reached its position. "H" hour for the attack had been set for 4:35 A. M. (5)

(5) 1st Div. p 111.

The Division Orders prescribed that the attack be launched with brigades abreast, the 1st Brigade on the right; each brigade with regiments abreast.

Each regiment except exterior regiments to be organized with an assault battalion, a support battalion, and a reserve battalion. (6) The 18th Infantry being an exterior battalion, furnished a battalion as division reserve. The regiment had on its right the 1st Moroccan Division; on its left the 16th Infantry.

The 3d Battalion was given the mission of inaugurating the assault; the 1st Battalion was in support and the 2d Battalion in division reserve.

The 3d and 3d Battalions were supported each by a machine gun company of the 2d M. G. Battalion. The 1st Battalion was supported by the regimental machine gun company.

In order to make the attack a complete surprise, the artillery was not permitted to make adjustment shots or to fire a preliminary bombardment.

(7) At "H" hour the rolling barrage was to start and

(6) F. O. #27 Hg, lat Div. July 16, 1918.

(7) 1st Div. p 111. the infantry to follow it. At the same time the heavy howitzers were to place heavy concentrations on the ravines and enemy positions.

The last unit had hardly reached its position for the jump-off when a red rocket went up from the German front line and a heavy defensive barrage fell in front of his trenches. The barrage lasted only a few minutes. Not a shot was fired from our lines.

ATTACK OF JULY 18th

At 4:35 A. M. our barrage fell in front of our lines and as it moved forward the 3d Battalion followed it closely. The infantry advanced to the enemy first line before the enemy realized that an attack was on. Then rockets of all kinds from the German trenches signalled the artillery and in a very short time batteries were firing on our advancing troops.

The ground over which the advance was made offered splendid opportunity for enemy machine gunners to fire from their positions in rear of their front lines and our casualties from this fire were considerable. Their machine guns located in the trenches were kept out of action by our artillery until our infantry was upon them. However, machine guns concealed in trees along the Paris-Soissons road to the right of the 18th Infantry zone of action pured a

withering fire into our troops. Our own machine gunners soon discovered them and in a short time were able to silence them and our advance became more rapid.

(8) 18th Inf.

Just before reaching the Paris-Soissons highway, the 1st Battalion passed through the 3d Battalion, and continued forward. (8) As the leading troops reached the highway the Germans could be seen retiring through the wheat fields to the ravine leading down to Chazelle Ravine.

On the right the Moroccans were halted west Grevancen of Grevancen Farm which was located close to the boundary between the 18th Infantry and the Moroccans. The continued advance of the 18th Infantry permitted it to outflank the enemy at the farm and reduce the resistance which had been holding up the Moroccans. About a kilometer farther to the east the Moroccans were held up west of the village of Chaudum. Again the 18th Infantry assisted their advance. One company of the 1st Battalion entered the village and after severe hand-to-hand fighting cleared it of the enemy who took cover in trenches that were between the town and the Chazelle Ravine. Our troops followed them so closely that before they could organize in the trenches they were all taken prisoners or were killed.

Later that day the Moroccans made two attacks, the last one at 8:00 P. M. (9) Both were stopped by

(9) 18th Inf.

resistance in the Chazelle Ravine. They withdrew a short distance and connected up with the 18th Infantry whose line at the end of the day's fighting extended northwest from Chaudun. The 18th Infantry had reached its objective and now organized its position for defense. Patrols were pushed to the front to prevent any surprise counterattack.

The operations officer was directed to personally check the left of the regiment's line to determine that no gap existed between it and the loth Infantry. Before dark contact had been made with the Moroccans. On such missions the battalion runners were invaluable. It was almost uncanny the way they would start through the high grass in intense darkness and head directly for the unit which one desired to locate. On many occasions failure on their part to quickly find a C. P. might have resulted in attack orders being delayed too long.

Throughout the day telephone communication had been maintained with great difficulty between regimental and brigade command posts. No wire communication was had with the battalions. Radio sets between regiment and battalion were not used. Soon after the attack was launched the regimental commander moved forward with the support battalion. The took with him the regimental intelligence and gas officers. The regimental executive later moved forward and

selected an advance C. P. The operations officer remained with the French liaison officer at the old C. P. until wires were connected with the new one. This method of establishing and maintaining C. P's. was followed throughout the entire operations which lasted for five days. The regimental adjutant remained with the rear echelon throughout the action of this day and for the following days except for daily trips to the front lines at the end of the day's fighting when he sought to determine the casualties.

ATTACK OF JULY 19th

Alarmed by the rapid advance of the Allies, the Germans during the night of July 18-19th, reinforced their lines and strengthened both the artillery and machine gun defenses of the sector.

an officer of the Brigade staff which directed that the attack be renewed at 4:00 A. M. The receipt of this order was not unexpected and the battalion commanders had been instructed to be prepared for the attack. Runners from each battalion were at the regimental C. P. waiting to guide the staff officers who were to deliver the orders to the battalion commanders. The operations officer personally delivered the orders for the attack to the commanding officer of the leading battalion and the intelligence officer took the orders to the other battalion commander. The

regimental orders were penciled on field message blanks, the runner guide carrying a duplicate copy to deliver in case an accident befell the officer.

Passing through wheat fields that were being swept by machine gun fire, in the blackness of night.

and over unknown terrain, with orders for an attack that was to open within an hour or two caused much anguish to the officer for fear he would not be on time.

The ground over which the attack was to be made this day was a rather high plateau which extended from the Chazelle Ravine to Plaisy.

(10) F.O. #28

Hg. 1st Div.

July 19,

1918;

1st Div.

p 409.

The attack started at 4:00 A. M. (10) As on the previous day a rolling barrage preceded the advance of the assault battalion. The success of the attack on the 18th of July was attributed largely to the closeness with which the troops followed the barrage. So, on July 19th the infantry advanced promptly on signal from the battalion commander and "hugged" the barrage.

The high ground in front of the 1st Battalion, which was the leading battalion in the attack, and the ravine on the right were excellent positions from which to pour machine gun fire on our troops, and during the night the enemy had thickened this part of the line with his guns. The advance of the 1st Battalion through this terrific fire was necessarily show. The

most stubborn resistance was overcome and our casualties were very heavy.

Late in the afternoon the 2d Brigade on the left of the division sector attacked in conjunction with the 153d French Division to clear the Plaisy Ravine which had been giving them considerable trouble. The 1st Brigade, which had been compelled to refuse its left flank, conformed to the movement of the 2d Brigade and it soon advanced until by 8:00 P.M. the entire division had reached its objective for the day.

The attack of the 18th Infantry had advanced about one kilometer.

During the night of July 19-20th, the area of the regiment was consolidated. This was a difficult task. During the fighting on this day men of the 1st and 3d Battalions had become mingled and practically all officers had become casualties. Only about 500 men remained of the two battalions. Every effort was made before dark to have the men rejoin their own battalion part of the line. This was partially accomplished, but it was impossible to reform platoons and companies, therefore, the defense organization consisted of placing heterogeneous groups of men under available N. C. O. in depth through the regimental area. Security patrols were sent forward.

Regimental staff officers assisted in the organization for defense.

Overlays showing the approximate disposition and strength of the regiment were prepared and sent to Brigade Headquarters. These necessarily could not be accurate as the information obtained by the staff officers was secured mostly under fire and in darkness.

ATTACK OF JULY 20th

(11) G-3, 721 1st Div. p 410. Commencing at twelve o'clock noon, for two hours, all the division artillery placed its fire for destruction on the town of Berzy-le-Sec. (11) The French troops had been unable to take this town and it had been placed in the sector of the 2d Brigade. At 2:00 P. M. both the 1st and 2d Brigades attacked.

In the 18th Infantry zone of action the remnants of the 1st and 3d Battalions were in the assault
and went forward in groups under N. C. O. rather
than as platoons. The terrain over which the regiment
attacked this day was most difficult. In its path
was the Chazelle Ravine, very deep and with steep
slopes; the valley of the Crise with its thick brush
and boggy sloughs; and the Chateau-Thierry-Soissons
railroad and highway, the latter two of very great
importance to the enemy. On its right front was the
plateau of Buzaaccy.

Moving through the wheat fields on the high ground the troops approached the edge of the Chazelle Ravine. The two machine gun companies supporting the battalions were put into positions which permitted them to fire into the ravine. The effectiveness of this fire soon silenced the enemy gunners. One group of riflemen passed through the ravine while the others skirted its edge.

Berzy-le-Sec had not been taken by the 2d

disastrous machine gun and artillery fire from the knoll to the north on which the town was situated.

(12) 1st Div. (12) This fire caused many casualties, but did not

(12) This fire caused many casualties, but did not halt the advance of the regiment until it reached the

Brigade in its attack and as the line of the 18th

Infantry advanced its left flank was exposed to most

Paris-Soissons railroad late in the afternoon. Here

the men were subjected to direct fire from a battery

of Austrian 88's in position to the left, and to fire from machine guns on the Buzascy Plateau. This made

the task of finding sheltered positions along the

railroad embankment most difficults and the line was

advanced by infiltration a short distance east of it.

Here the men dug in.

The failure of the 2d Brigade to take Berzyle-Sec resulted in its line being halted about 400 yards west of the village. (13) A big gap had been created between the 16th Infantry and the right of

(13) 1st Div.

p 129.

p 128.

the 2d Brigade. This required the 16th Infantry to close the gap and protect its exposed flank. An officer of that regiment ordered troops on the left of the line to withdraw into the gap.

The brigade commander (1st Brigade) had viewed the attack on Berzy-le-Sec from the 18th Infantry observation post. Soon after the attack had stopped he observed men withdrawing over the crest of a small knoll in the left of his brigade sector. Not knowing the purpose or cause of this withdrawal. he directed the operations officer, 18th Infantry, to investigate and, if possible, to halt the troops, reform them and send them forward. The enemy, observing the movement to the rear, placed a heavy artillery concentration on the knoll. The operations officer reached the hill and learned that when the men of the 16th Infantry, who had been ordered to fall back behind the hill and move into the gap, had started to withdraw they had been joined by several Moroccans and some 18th Infantrymen. How these Moroccans happened to be there is not known, but there were about thirty or forty of them. The heavy shelling had pinned the men to the ground on top of the hill. This appeared a fortunate happening as it temporarily halted further withdrawal and made it possible to restore order. The operations officer located a N. C. O. who was commanding the men who were to be the connecting

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group and close the gap. He was directed to gather what men of his regiment he could reach on the hill and then to carry out his mission. Going from one shell hole to another the operations officer made contact with the remaining men on the hill, explained to them the reason that certain men had withdrawn, organized them into groups, and ordered them forward. One Moroccan understood English sufficiently well to realize what was wanted. He explained the situation to Moroccan soldier who apparently was a corporal and they moved forward from the hill with our troops. As soon as the troops left the hill the artillery fire on that spot stopped. The brigade commander was very much relieved when he learned that the line in that part of his sector was still intact.

(14) 1st Div. p 411; G-3, F. O. July 20. 1918.

The division commander ordered what was to be the final attack in the operation for the morning of July 21st. (14) These orders were received during the afternoon of July 20th. It was impossible at this Hg. 1st Div. time to ascertain the number of men remaining in the assaulting battalions. Up to this time the 2d Battalion had been held in reserve, part of the time as division, and part as brigade reserve. Its casualties had been comparatively few.

> The regimental commander believed that the depleted ranks of the 1st and 3d Battalions would not

have sufficient strength to overcome the elaborate machine gun defenses on the plateau of Buzarcy, which had caused so many casualties during the past few days. Also, he knew that before going onto the plateau it would be necessary to pass over several ridges in the Crise valley which were covered with thick vegetation, and to cross a fairly deep stream in the valley. He sent his operations officer to the officer commanding the 2d Battalion, still in reserve, to find out if the battalion commander would give him two companies for the July 21st attack, these two companies to be replaced by the 3d Battalion which now had only one officer and seventy-nine men in the line. The regimental commander agreed to assume all responsibility if the exchange was made. With little hesitation the battalion commander expressed his willingness, and on the night of July 20-21st the relief of the 3d Battalion was made by G and H Companies. What remained of the 3d Battalion then joined E and F Companies as reserve.

ATTACK OF JULY 21st

The attack started, as ordered, at 4:45 A. M. The rolling barrage was placed in front of the lines. The two companies, G and H, which were in the assault, for the first time during these operations, added the necessary power to the attack and, following the barrage closely, reached their objective. The artillery fire was kept in front of this objective for an hour

to protect the organization of the area.

with much difficulty and the heights of Buzarcy reached. On this high ground German machine gunners remained at their guns until our advancing troops, in several cases, were able to charge them with bayonets. This ground was given up only after most severe fighting as it was of particular value to the enemy. Enemy artillery shelled the heights terrifically from the time our troops first gained a footing on them until Berzy-le-Sec was captured by the 2d Brigade at about 10:00 A. M.

Spell

Some men of the 18th Infantry reached the Chateau of Buzaucy and in a deep cave there took about 200 prisoners. This group, of less than a hundred men, representing the 1st Battalion, was now commanded by a first lieutenant who, at the opening of the attack on July 18th, was the battalion intelligence officer.

RESULTS OF THE OPERATION, JULY 18-22.

The advance on to the Plateau of Buzawcy had succeeded in cutting the enemy communications from Soissons into the salient. The 18th Infantry had taken the Paris-Soissons railroad and actually had troops on the Chateau-Thierry highway and to the east of it.

On the night of July 21st the Germans were evacuating the salient. This was apparent from the many fires that they started for the purpose of destroying the supplies that could not be removed in their retreat.

ATTACK OF JULY 22d

Under heavy bombardment our troops spent the night of July 21-22d organizing for defense.

July 22d was devoted to strengthening the position. The enemy air service was active throughout the day and harassed the positions with machine gun fire. Early in the day an advance detail of officers from the Scottish regiment that was to relieve the 18th Infantry arrived to make a reconnaissance. The operations officer gave them the 18th Infantry plan for defense and maps showing the dispositions.

He conducted the operations officer of the Scottish regiment over the area and completed the arrangements for the relief.

About eleven o'clock that night the relief of the regiment was completed and at midnight July 22-23d command passed to (15) the commanding officer of the Scots. On the way out of the area the roads were bombed by enemy planes and shelled by artillery.

(15) 1st Div. p 138.

ATTACK OF JULY 23d

In the early hours of July 23d the regiment arrived in the Villers-Cetterets Woods (16) where

(16) 1st Div. p 139. kitchens had been established in areas set aside for each regiment. At each kitchen only small groups remained of the full companies that, five days previous, ly, had entered the line. Late in the day French trucks transported the regiment to the vicinity of Juilly where a much needed rest was taken until July 29th.

ANALYSIS AND CRITICISM

Throughout five days' offensive fighting, the 37 MM gun and stokes mortar were not used except to be placed in positions when the line had halted and the area was being organized. Many favorable opportunities were presented for use of the 37 MM gun in particular.

The lack of communication between regiment and battalions, except runner, was a serious handicap. Though equipped with other means, they were not used.

Orders from higher headquarters, except on one day, reached regimental headquarters only early enough to be complied with after great effort. More time should have been given for distribution of orders. Attacks can be launched and successfully carried out on very briefly written orders, or when necessary, on verbal orders, however, the danger of misunderstanding them is too great to follow this means as a practice.

Reconnaissance arrangements must be carefully followed up. Only the initiative of a company commander

can be credited with the reconnaissance of the night of July 16-17th. Had he not been alert, serious happenings might have resulted when going into position on July 17-18th.

An assistant to the operations officer appears necessary in combat. Particularly is this true if the regimental adjutant remains with the rear echelon which is believed to be his correct station.

There is little else that can be criticized adversely in these operations. Throughout the drive of the division the 18th Infantry led the attack; it advanced over 11 kilometers and took all its objectives.

LESSONS

The successful advance of the 18th Infantry, particularly on July 18th and July 19th, was to a large degree due to the leading elements following closely to the barrage. This permitted the troops to overrun the enemy in positions before they could recover from the effects of the artillery.

In the outflanking of Grevation Farm and the town of Chaudun, both of which were in the sector of the Moroccan troops, their advance was assisted. Unless they could have advanced, our own troops must have halted to avoid exposing our flank.

PRINCIPLES

The Principle of the Objective was illustrated

in the attack for five days. The Paris-Soissons railroad and Chateau-Thierry highway were the Germans' principal means of communication from Soissons into the salient. This objective was driven at until finally taken and the Germans started evacuating the salient.

The Principle of Surprise

The Principle of Surprise was exemplified by the fact that in the initial attack on July 18th our troops were in enemy positions before resistance was met. Officers were captured in dugouts only partially clothed.

No bombardment or artillery adjustment fire was permitted thereby adding to the surprise.

The Principle of Cooperation

No more outstanding example of cooperation can be found than that of the commanding officer of the brigade reserve battalion giving two of his companies in exchange for a few battle-tired men. This exchange contributed largely to the success of the common mission.

The Principle of the Offensive

The Principle of the Offensive was carried out throughout the operations. For five days in succession the regiment attacked.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

- 1. Why did Marshal Foch attack the salient west of Soissons?
- A. To check a further advance of the enemy.

 Drive him from the salient if the attack could not actually prevent the enemy escaping.
 - 2. W hat was his principal objective?
- A. The Paris-Soissons railroad and the Chateau-Thierry highway.
- 3. In what way did the artillery contribute to the element of surprise obtained in the attack of July 18th?
- A. By firing no adjustment shots or preliminary bombardment.
- 4. What infantry weapons were not used in the 18th Infantry attacks?
 - A. 37 MM gun and Stokes mortar.
- 5. Were all available means of communication used?
 - A. No.
- 6 & 7. Was mutual assistance given adjacent units? If so, where?
 - A. Yes, at Grevaucon Farm and again at Chaudun.

8. Were flanks properly protected throughout the action?

A. Yes.

- 9. How much ground was taken in these operations?
 - A. An advance of 11 kilometers.
- 10. Was there hand-to-hand fighting during the period?
 - A. Yes, at Chaudun.

