

THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

ADVANCED COURSE  
1932-1933

MILITARY HISTORY

OPERATIONS OF THE 3D PLATOON COMPANY A, 301ST AMERICAN  
TANK BATTALION IN THE ATTACK ON THE HINDENBURG  
LINE--SEPTEMBER 26--SEPTEMBER 29, 1918

(Personal Experience)

JOSEPH J. GUTKOWSKI,  
CAPTAIN, INFANTRY.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Cover sheet.....	(Unpaged)
Table of contents.....	i
Bibliography.....	ii-iv
Marginal abbreviations used.....	v
Introduction.....	1
General plan for action on September 29, 1918..	3
Reconnaissance.....	5
Approach march.....	6
Air force.....	7
Weather condition.....	7
Ground.....	7
Operations.....	8
Tanks.....	9
Anti-tank defenses.....	11
Casualties.....	11
Results.....	12
Comments and criticisms.....	12
Lessons.....	13
Conclusions.....	14

MAP

Operation Map.....	16
--------------------	----

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Warden, H. W.

"Acotank", Philadelphia, E. A. Wright Company.

A history of Company "A" 301st Tank Battalion, written by 1st Lieutenant H. W. Warden, commanding the 1st Platoon of this company. Accurate, detailed and unbiased. Contains copies of the Official Reports on all actions in which the company was engaged.

Montgomery, E. A.

"Story of the Fourth Army in the Battles of the 100 Days, August 8th to November 11th, 1918", London, Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1920.

Compiled by members of Army Corps and Division Staffs of the Fourth Army, and from the records of the Fourth Army.

An accurate general account, but with little detail.

The author states that the brevity of accounts relating to the II American Corps was due to inability to get any more information from the Corps.

O'Ryan, J. F.

"Story of the 27th Division". New York, Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford, 1921.

Written by the general officer who commanded the division in France. Very detailed. Generally accurate but inclined to favor the division. He makes no unfavorable comment on the actions of any members or organizations of his division. His references to the 301st Battalion are brief "rehash" of the battalions own reports.

Price, Jack

"Tank Actions A.E.F.", Kansas City, Publishers unknown.

A verbatim copy of the Official reports submitted by Tank Battalions and Brigade Commanders on the actions in which their organizations were engaged. The complete story of the Tank Corps' participation in the war. Accurate and authentic.

Harrison, R. B.

"301st Tank Battalion Commanders' Notebook".

A notebook kept by the battalion commander in which data was constantly recorded. The official reports of the battalion were compiled mainly from the data recorded in this book.

Unbiased and accurately detailed. Made  
"in the field at the time".

Fuller, J. F.

"Tanks in the Great War". New  
York, Dutton and Company, 1920.

A general history of the development of  
the tank and its use. It is accurate but  
very lacking in details.

The following publications were consulted but proved to be  
of no assistance.

Rarey, G. H.

"American Heavy Tanks with the  
British Offensive". Infantry  
Journal, Volume 31.

A general accurate summary of the offi-  
cial reports of the 301st Tank Battalion.

Brown, D. G.

"Tanks in Action". London,  
William Blackwood and Company, 1920.

A very interesting account of the exper-  
iences of a tank commander in the British  
Tank Corps. His only mention of the 301st  
Battalion was taken up with an expression  
of his disapproval of the lack of trained  
"batsmen" personal servants, which the  
battalion lacked.

Laffitte R.

"Tank Corps from 1916-1918".  
Paris. Henri Charles-Lavauzelle  
et cie, 1921.

~~A very brief history of the French Tank~~  
Corps and of the American battalions that  
were equipped with French tanks. It  
contains no mention of the 301st Battalion.

Stern, A. G.

"Tanks, 1914-1918; the Log Book  
of a Pioneer". New York, Hodder  
and Stoughton, 1919.

The story of the difficulties of the  
organization of the Tank Corps and the  
trials of development and production of  
the machines themselves. Very brief men-  
tion is made of the battles in France.

Woolnough, F. G.

"Brief History of the Royal Tank  
Corps". London, Gale and Polden,  
1925.

General account of tank actions during  
the war. Accurate but too brief to be  
of any aid.

Williams-Ellis,  
Clough

"Tank Corps". New York, Doran  
and Company, 1919.

An accurate, general history of the  
British Tank Corps in which the 301st  
Battalion is mentioned. It is too general  
to be of value.

Boraston, J. H.

"Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches  
(December 1915--April 1919)". New  
York, Dutton and Company.

Verbatim copies of the despatches which  
are brief and concise.

Maurice, F.

"Last Four Months. How the War was  
Won". Boston, Little, Brown and  
Company, 1919.

A very general summary of the last four  
months of the war. It touches only the most  
salient points.

Doyle, A. C.

"History of the Great War; British  
Campaign in France and Flanders,  
July to November, 1918." New York,  
Doran and Company, 1920.

The general story is there but many details  
are inaccurate.

Thomas, Shipley

"History of the A.E.F." New York,  
Doran and Company, 1920.

Compiled from official sources and accurate  
as to dates and facts but too brief.

MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

Acotank	"Acotank"
4th Army	"Story of the Fourth Army in the Battles of the 100 Days, August 8th to November 11th, 1918."
Harrison, R. B.	"Notebook of Major R. B. Harrison, 301st Battalion, Tank Corps."
O'Ryan	"Story of the 27th Division."
Tank Actions	"Tank Actions A.E.F." Jack Price.
Fuller	"Tanks in the Great War". Fuller, J. F.

## INTRODUCTION

Tanks had demonstrated their worth<sup>th</sup> as an offensive weapon sometime before the United States entered the Great War, and it was essential that steps be taken to provide our army with this weapon to aid the infantryman in his forward steps.

To equip the United States Army with tanks was somewhat of a problem, and although our nation was most advanced in automotive engineering, it found itself lacking in material which could be easily converted into tanks in a short period of time. In fact it took America almost two years before it was prepared to construct tanks in quantity, and this was only possible with the aid of her Allies. Hence it was necessary to accept anything our Allies had to offer to form a nucleus of the United States Tank Corps in France and America.

~~The mission of recruiting and organizing of the~~ United States Tank Corps in America was given to Colonel Harley B. Ferguson, C.E., U. S. A., a capable and worthy officer of the pre-World War days, who had distinguished himself in the Spanish-American War and by raising the Battleship Maine, fourteen years after its sad ending. This mission consisted of selecting commissioned and noncommissioned officers for the framework of this new arm. So, late in February, 1918, and under the designation as the 65th Engineers, the organization that was to become the 301st Battalion, U. S. Tank Corps was assembled at Camp Meade, Maryland.

(1) Acotank  
p 32

(1)

On April 9th, 1918, this battalion reached the British Tank School at Wareham, Dorset County, England, (2) where it was to be trained in tank technique and tactics, and here it remained until August 24th, 1918, when it was sent to France to be attached to the British Tank Corps for a tour of

(2) Acotank  
p 42

(3) N.B. R.B.H. service at the front. (3)

It was contemplated that the battalion was to be trained and equipped by the British and remain with them as part of the British Tank Corps until conditions for tank operations became unfavorable on the British front, or American Tanks were available, at which time it was to be returned to the American

(4) N.B. R.B.H. Army. (4)

After the battalions' arrival in France, the first two weeks were spent in drawing equipment and tanks. On August 30th a detachment of officers and noncommissioned officers left the battalion to join the British Tank Battalions, which were about to support the Canadian Corps east of Arras, for the sole purpose ~~of~~ observ<sup>ing</sup> tanks in action, supporting the infantry. (5) This indeed was of great value to the inexperienced American officer.

(5) Acotank  
p 40

On September 4th, all British Tank Battalions were withdrawn from armies and placed in G.H.Q. reserves for refitting and reorganizing. (6) And with this change, the 301st Tank Battalion found itself a part of the 4th British Tank Brigade, (7), and it was informed that its first assignment would be to lead the 27th American Division of the II American Corps in its assault on the Hindenburg line on September 29, 1918.

(6) Fuller,  
J.F.C.  
p 266

(7) Fuller  
p 266



GENERAL PLAN FOR ACTION ON SEPTEMBER 29, 1918

Map No 1

The II American Corps attached to the Australian Corps, was to resume the offensive in a general northeasterly<sup>ly</sup> direction from their present front line and it was to attack with both divisions abreast, the 30th Division on the right and the 27th Division on the left. After breaking and taking the Hindenburg line, the Corps was to push on to capture the first objective which included Nauroy and Gouy. When this objective was taken, the 3d and 5th Australian divisions were to pass through the 27th and 30th American Divisions, respectively, and capture the second objective.

(8) N.B. R.B.H. (8)

(9) 4th Army  
p 152

On the left of the II American Corps, was the III British Corps, which was to advance with the 27th American Division as far as the canal, (9) where the 27th American Division would be passed by the 3d Australian Division. After this the 27th Division was to exploit to the left with one regiment (105th Infantry) to assist the III British Corps in crossing the canal. (10)

(10) 4th Army  
p 152

Headquarters 4th British Tank Brigade allotted the 301st Tank Battalion to the 27th American Division with orders to allot one platoon (5 tanks) to each battalion of the assault regiments and two platoons to the regiment detailed for flank offensive.

(11) Tank  
Actions  
p 6

(11)

In compliance with these instructions, the companies were assigned as follows:

Company A--15 tanks to 108th Infantry on the right.

Company B--10 tanks, to 105th Infantry for flank exploitation, 7 tanks to 4th British Tank Brigade Reserve.

Company C--15 tanks, to 107th Infantry on the left. (12)

(12) Tank  
Actions  
p 6

From the above instructions the platoons of Company A were allotted as follows:

2d Platoon on the right.

3d Platoon in the center.

1st Platoon on the left.

The 3d Platoon Company A, in this case, was assigned to destroy all strong points, with the center No 3 tank to cover the approximate battalion boundary line, while tanks numbers 1 and 2 were to extend into the 2d Battalion sector, and tanks numbers 4 and 5 to extend in the 3d Battalion sector. Although this platoon had separate objectives, it was still thoroughly understood that its primary mission was to assist the infantry. All this preparation was made on the assumption that the tank battalion commander had a conference on this subject with the Commanding General, 27th Division, (13), but nothing was accomplished. The division commander had very little <sup>ith</sup> ~~face~~ in tanks and did not care to have them lead his troops due to the moral effect their getting blown up would have on his infantry. Although nothing else was accomplished in this conference at least the division commander did concede to the idea that the tank officers be allowed to get in touch with the infantry regimental and battalion commanders with whom they were to work. (14) ~~and~~ This was to take place on September 26th, but this

*Not clear*

(13) N. B.  
R.B.H.

*dictated*

(14) Tank  
Actions  
p 9

*Wf clear*

~~was only possible for the tank company and platoon~~  
commanders, and battalion and company reconnaissance  
officers. The tank commander who was to be the sharp  
edge in the support of the assault infantry, got only  
the theoretical knowledge of what to expect of each  
other, no time was available for any training with  
infantry so that both the infantry and tanks could  
feel the respect and confidence in each other's  
ability, which is so necessary for perfect teamwork.

#### RECONNAISSANCE

*History*

One of the most essential pre-requisites was  
omitted in the preparation of tanks supporting the  
infantry in this case, that is, the tank commanders  
were deprived of the opportunity to observe the ground  
they were to **operate** on in supporting the assault  
units, this was due to lack of transportation, and,  
if time was available, which was in this case, the  
tank commander stood a chance to lose the information  
that the company, platoon and the reconnaissance  
officers had to offer. This chance would not only  
cause him to lose valuable information but <sup>would</sup> ~~it~~ required  
a hike of something like 22 miles, 11 miles to the  
front line and 11 miles back, so instead of this  
valuable information, four substitutes were offered as  
follows, three maps to be taken into action with him.  
These maps showed his route and objective, all known  
and probable obstacles, such as sunken roads and wide  
trenches; the location of land marks to help him keep  
oriented; and an abbreviated barrage table for his  
particular area. In addition to these maps, each  
tank commander carried oblique air photographs of  
the area he was to cover. (15)

~~Routes to the front line were to be taped by~~  
the company reconnaissance officer but the entire detail was either killed or wounded by a shell while laying the tape, so this route was not completed, the tanks being led to the "jump-off line" by members of the reconnaissance staff.

#### APPROACH MARCH

The battalion was approximately eleven miles from the front line at the time it received its orders to move forward and join the 27th Division.

For secrecy, all movements were made under cover of darkness and, on the night of September 27-28, the tanks were moved to the vicinity of Villers Faucon, a distance of 11,000 yards. All tanks completed the move on schedule and were camouflaged before daylight. (16) The tanks were given final adjustments at this place and were completely filled with gas, oil and grease and, in addition, carried one-half fill to be used just before reaching the start line.

*not shown*  
(16) Tank  
Actions  
p 9

*not shown*  
The distance of the approach march from Villers Faucon to the start line was about 8500 yards and was a very different affair from that of the preceding night. The latter part of the route was constantly shelled with high explosive and gas, which made it very difficult for the drivers to handle their tanks in the dark, <sup>especially since</sup> ~~while~~ gas masks had to be worn.

All five tanks reached and actually crossed the start line at H-hour.

AIR FORCE

The 8th Squadron, Royal Air Force was assigned to the Tank Corps. Arrangements were made with this organization for noise planes to cover the last stages of the approach march and for contact planes

(17) N.B. R.B.H. during the operation. (17)

WEATHER CONDITION

*Section*

On the morning of D-day, a slight mist hung in all the valleys in the areas of operations and made visibility especially from a tank impossible, however, this cleared by 7:00 AM and for about an hour it remained fair.

The wind was very much in the platoon's favor, in that, it carried the smoke (40% of the barrage) toward the enemy, this lasted until about 8:00 AM. From then until about 10:30 AM the wind changed its course toward our troops, which made it as bad as the mist in the valleys at H-hour and, due to this, it was impossible to see the infantry and cooperation was practically nil. (18)

(18) Tank  
Actions  
p 11

GROUND

Ground conditions were excellent and offered no serious difficulties for tanks. Although the Hindenburg line was expected to be a serious obstacle, tanks numbers <sup>4</sup>~~1~~ and <sup>5</sup>~~2~~ crossed it without difficulty, and ventured as far as the tunneled canal. The only difficulty encountered was as follows: tank number 1 developed mechanical trouble, broken track; Tank <sup>3</sup>~~1~~ ran on to a mine field and <sup>was</sup> put out of action. Tank <sup>2</sup>~~number 2~~ was hit by an artillery shell and <sup>was</sup> put out of action. (19)

(19) Tank  
Actions  
p 16

OPERATIONS

Map No 1

Before the attack could take place it was considered essential that the high ground along the general line Quennemont Farm--Guillemont--The Knoll be captured and the entire battle was planned on the premise that this line would be in our hands prior to D-day. (20) This was the proposed line of departure with the artillery start line two hundred yards in front of it.

(20) O'Ryan  
p 251

Although the III British Corps made several efforts to capture this line and reach their objective, they were unable to hold this ground in face of the counterattacks that followed each of their efforts. (21)

(21) O'Ryan  
p 252

This line when taken over by the 27th American Division, varied in depth from the line of departure proposed for the attack on September 29th. This depth consisted from four hundred yards at 30th Division boundary line to one thousand yards at the III British Corps boundary line (22) and, due to the fact that the area between the proposed line of departure and the line held by the 27th Division was the desired ground and held by the enemy, the 106th Infantry assisted by twelve tanks from the 4th British Tank Battalion, was ordered to capture it. Although this regiment made a very determined attack on September 27th and, while small parties reached their objective, their efforts fared little better than those of the III British Corps before them and the front line remained practically as before, if not worse. (23)

(22)  
Not given

(23) O'Ryan  
p 283

The situation on the 108th Infantry's front was similar to that of its sister's regimental front on its left, but with better possibilities. To reach the proposed line of departure at H-hour, <sup>it</sup> ~~was necessary that~~ <sup>pro-</sup> ~~viding had~~ this regiment carried <sup>y</sup> out orders to start its assault at H minus one hour and work <sup>its</sup> ~~their~~ way up to the designated line of departure. As some resistance was expected the tanks were to cross the present front line at H minus one hour and assist the infantry

(24) N.B. R.B.H. in reaching the start line. (24)

#### TANKS

The platoon commander 3d Platoon Company A 301st Tank Battalion established contact with the unit commanders with which his platoon was to operate and informed them that the platoon was ready to support the advance of their units at H-minus one hour, in order, to reach the designated line of departure and that the platoon was practically deployed. This was in accordance with instructions he received from his company commander and communicated this to his tank commanders on the night of September 28th. (25)

(25) N.B.R.B.H.

In return for his efforts in easing this regiment's problem he was informed that the 108th Infantry would not start from its present position until H-hour. (26)

(26) Tank  
Actions  
p 10

With this in mind the platoon commander had to select the best plan to assist the infantry and still be within bounds of carrying out his orders.

To this platoon commander, only three plans were possible.

First: To start as originally planned and let the infantry catch up after the platoon tanks <sup>had</sup> ~~have~~ past the designated

line of departure, but this would leave a gap approximately from four hundred to six hundred yards between the tanks and infantry.

Second: To start from the present infantry line and cause all the damage to the enemy and, ease the infantry's progress to the line of departure and join the infantry there, although the platoon stood a chance of losing part of the barrage.

Third: To disregard his orders and join the infantry in their present position and start approximately six hundred to eight hundred yards in rear of the protective barrage.

In his decision he chose the second plan, this was mostly due to the heavy mist present and poor visibility. With this in mind he informed his tank commanders of the new plan that was to be carried out. Although the best of intentions and efforts were exerted by each tank crew to make contact with the infantry and at the same time clearing wire entanglements, destroying machine-gun nest<sup>s</sup>, the platoon fared very poorly. Tank number 1 <sup>IN</sup> ~~on~~ the <sup>center</sup> ~~right~~ developed mechanical trouble. Tank number <sup>3</sup> ~~2~~ in clearing wire entanglements ran <sup>into</sup> ~~to~~ a mine field and was destroyed. Tank number <sup>2</sup> ~~1~~ on the <sup>right</sup> ~~left~~ got into line of direct artillery fire and was destroyed. Tanks numbers <sup>4</sup> ~~3~~ and <sup>5</sup> ~~4~~ were more successful, in that they passed the Hindenburg line and reached the tunnel<sup>ed</sup> canal but were of little assistance to the infantry that far forward.



The report of the tank commanders were unanimous in stressing the difficulty of vision on this occasion. The dense smoke made it impossible to orient themselves; gunners could not use their guns effectively because targets beyond fifty to one hundred yards could not be seen.

#### ANTI-TANK DEFENSES

The Germans were well prepared for the advance of tanks over this area.

In order of their effectiveness we met the following:

(a) Field and anti-tank guns.

Firing with direct laying over open sights at Tank Targets. These guns exacted one tank from the platoon.

(b) Tank mines.

Although planted by the British prior to their withdrawal in the spring of 1918, they were well preserved by the enemy, two of these mines exacted one tank from the platoon.

(c) Anti-tank rifles.

Numbers of these were found on the battlefield and they had no difficulty in penetrating the tanks. However, the German soldiers had no desire to fire them due to their heavy recoil. No casualties were caused by these rifles to the platoon.

#### CASUALTIES

Casualties in this operation were very heavy, both in personnel and tanks of this platoon, are as follows:

Tanks	Sixty per cent
Officers	Forty per cent
Enlisted men	Thirty-five per cent.

Of the five tanks in the platoon, two reached the Hindenburg line, one developed mechanical trouble after crossing the line of departure.

One received a direct hit from the artillery.

One was blown up by a British mine field of which no information had been given to the platoon.

#### RESULTS

On the right of the 108th Infantry's zone of attack the line had been carried forward by the success of the 30th American Division. It then bent sharply backward to the left through the 108th Infantry's zone where it rested on what was to have been the line of departure that morning. (27)

Both from the tank and the infantry point of view the attack, coordination and, cooperation was a failure.

#### COMMENTS AND CRITICISMS

It is obvious that certain principles were violated. The principle of simplicity was violated by the 4th Army commander, by designating a proposed line of departure, which was in the midst of the enemy's strong hold and required a major operation to capture the position. ~~and~~, after several attempts failed to hold it, as a result two start lines were used for the infantry, but still placing all of his artillery <sup>barrage</sup> two hundred yards in front of his imaginary line of departure.

The result of this was that the infantry followed its protective barrage from four hundred to one thousand yards.

The principle of cooperation was violated in that the infantry failed to take advantage in starting

*Insured*  
(27) 4th Army  
p 167

*Final line  
not shown*

*detail*

their attack at H minus one hour, in order to have the support of the tanks and the cover of its protective barrage.

Orders for the attack <sup>were</sup> ~~was~~ received days in advance, before any information could be obtained from the infantry, with whom the platoon was to work, hence no time was available to coordinate, and time for training with the unit to be supported was lost.

Through ~~the~~ sad experience, the enemy by this time learned that tanks could be used only over favorable ground, such as the 27th Division <sup>zone</sup> ~~sector~~ presented, ~~and~~, In <sup>this case</sup> ~~which~~ they were well prepared to defend against tanks. Surprise, in this case, was only relative, not only due <sup>to</sup> ~~the~~ favorable ground, but ~~due~~ to the prolonged bombardment which lasted for 48 hours prior to the assault on September 29th, <sup>This</sup> ~~which~~ informed the enemy that <sup>an</sup> ~~the~~ attack was eminent, but the intensity and duration of the bombardment was such as to give the enemy little indication of the hour of attack.

#### LESSONS

The lessons learned by all officers and tank crews of this platoon were <sup>as follows</sup> ~~these~~:

(a) Tanks and Infantry must train together prior to any operation in which they are to cooperate, to secure the best results and instill confidence in each other's ability.

(b) Constant contact between tanks and infantry must be maintained. This is the responsibility of the tanks. In order to assist the infantry, tanks

should constantly be in touch with units they are supporting in order to overcome any or all resistance offered by the enemy to the infantry, not only to keep up the scheduled program, but to insure success.

(c) Tanks ~~may~~<sup>are</sup> be able to capture enemy infantry positions, and force them to take cover into dugouts, but the infantry must mop up<sup>" "</sup> the enemy and hold the position, a quality which the tanks do not possess.

(d) It is also the infantry's duty to assist the tanks in destroying anti-tank weapons within their power, and in locating ~~whenever possible~~ and informing the tank crews of their locations.

(e) Tanks should seek cover whenever possible and, operate below<sup>the</sup> sky-line, in order, to avoid observation and direct artillery fire.

(f) Smoke screens have proven to be a great aid to tanks, especially the best protection against anti-tank weapons while these weapons are being put out of action. <sup>It should</sup> and only ~~to~~ be used with a favorable wind, which is toward the enemy.

(g) And last but not least, if good results are to be expected from tanks supporting infantry, it is most essential that tank commanders as well as tank platoon ~~commanders~~<sup>leaders</sup> be allowed to reconnoiter the area, over which they are<sup>to</sup> operate and properly and safely lead the infantry.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The tanks with all<sup>their</sup> ~~its~~ abilities ~~is~~<sup>are</sup> not as yet an answer to the infantry's<sup>vs</sup> prayer, as a solution to all of its problems in offensive combat. The tank crews must not only be properly trained to man the tank

<sup>they</sup>  
but ~~it~~ must also be trained to cooperate with the  
infantry and this applies to the infantry as well  
to insure success. Confidence in each other's  
ability can only be obtained by combined training.  
~~and~~ With this accomplishment, tanks will prove an  
invaluable aid in enabling the infantryman to reach  
his objective.

It is obvious that tanks will play a prominent  
part in the next war and <sup>any</sup> nations well equipped with  
this weapon will find itself without a handicap,  
especially at the beginning of hostilities.

# OPERATION

(TRACED FROM 301<sup>ST</sup> BN. COMMANDERS' BATTLE MAP)  
FOR GROUND FORMATION ONLY

