

3-47

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

ADVANCED COURSE
1931-1932

OPERATIONS OF THE 20th COMPANY 5th MARINES
(2d DIVISION) AT BLANC MONT IN THE CHAMPAGNE OFFENSIVE
October 1-4, 1918

(Personal experience of a company commander)

Captain Gilder D. Jackson, Jr., USMC

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Howland, C. R.

"Military History of the World War."
Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, The General
Service Schools Press, 1923.

A brief and concise statement of the importance of the sector which we were charged with taking.

LeJeune, John A.,
Major-General

"Reminiscences of a Marine."
Dorrance & Company, 1930.

A wonderful description by the Commanding Officer of the 2d Division at Blanc Mont, and one which shows the type of man who led us. He gives credit to the splendid troops that composed his division and also shows the great responsibility of a Division Commander in battle.

Mattfeldt, Clyburn
O. (compiler)

"Records of the Second Division."
(Regular) 1924.

The compiler of these records, Captain C. O. Mattfeldt, deserves great credit for the way in which each step of every unit of the 2d Division is shown. These records are the most accurate and reliable of any data that I have read.

Otto, Ernst,
Lt.-Col.

"The Battle at Blanc-Mont."
United States Naval Institute.
Annapolis, Maryland, 1930.

This is the best description of the battle of Blanc Mont obtainable. Written impartially by a German staff officer who was present, it presents a picture of the engagement day by day as it affected both sides. The details are carefully worked out and each movement has been successively put in at the proper place.

MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

Howland	"Military History of the World War."
Lejeune	"Reminiscences of a Marine."
Second Division	"Records of the Second Division."
Otto	"The Battle at Blanc-Mont."

INTRODUCTION

On September 28, 1918, I was ordered to assume command of the 20th Company, 5th Regiment, U. S. Marines, 2d Division, A. E. F. We were, at this time, in the small town of Courtisol - and we all knew that we were on our way to another fight.

It was with some misgiving that I left my old battalion - the 2d of the 5th Marines - to which I had been attached since my arrival in France. I had successively gone through a defensive sector near Verdun, through the engagements at Bois de Belleau, Soissons, Marbache Sector, and St. Mihiel with this battalion, and had been with it practically entirely since its initial baptism of fire. All of these battalions were inclined to be clannish, and any officer coming from another battalion to take command of a company was apt to be looked upon as an intruder.

I knew but one officer already attached to the company of which I was to assume command. And I was entirely ignorant of the type of men I would find, and of their morale, or their manner of responding to my orders in battle. The day following my assuming command - September 29 - an incident was forced upon me which I believe gave me a greater hold on my men than days of drilling and training might have done. Upon receiving the order to "roll packs and stand by" to move closer to the front lines, I proceeded alone from my company office to a farm-yard where my company was having its evening meal. I had not, until then, ~~seen the entire company assembled, as I had not expected~~

such orders so soon. As I turned around the wall, which partially inclosed the farm-yard, I noticed a slightly intoxicated man, under the care of several of his "buddies". He was a large individual, and it was apparent that it required the efforts of these friends to keep him in the "chow line". As I came up to this group, I overheard someone say to this man: "Pipe down! Here comes the new company commander"; and his reply was of such forceful vulgarity that I was required to show them all my future policy then and there. I walked over to him, and without saying a word, I hit him on the jaw with my closed fist, knocking him down. I then ordered his friends to take him to his billet, put his pack on him - and return him to me. Then, after giving the noncommissioned officers their orders, I went to my office. It may be of some interest to insert here the fact that this same private who I hit is now a lieutenant in the Marines, and has recently brought both to himself, and to the corps, great honor through his excellent work in Nicaragua.

I have tried so far to show my state of mind before going into a fight with a brand-new company, who was as strange to me as I was to them, and we were to have ahead of us a very difficult few days. These days constituted the Battle of Blanc Mont, which proved to be one of the most decisive, and trying battles in which the 2d Division was engaged.

BLANC MONT

October 1 - 2, 1918

The following order was published to the several units of the 2d Division by its commanding officer on October 1:-

"(1) The greatest battles in the world's history are now being fought. The Allies are attacking successfully on all fronts. The valiant Belgian army has surprised and defeated the enemy in Flanders; the English, who have been attacking the enemy without ceasing since August 8, have advanced beyond the Hindenburg Line between Cambrai and St. Quentin, capturing thousands of prisoners and hundreds of cannon; the heroic Allied army of the Orient has decisively defeated the Bulgars; the British have captured 50,000 prisoners in ~~P~~Alestine and have inflicted a mortal blow on the Turk; and our own First Army and the Fourth French Army have already gained much success in the preliminary stages of their attack between the Meuse and the Suipe Rivers.

"(2) Owing to its world-wide reputation for skill and valor, the Second Division was selected by the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied armies as his special reserve, and has been held in readiness to strike a swift and powerful blow at the vital point of the enemy's line. The hour to move forward has now come, and I am confident that our division will pierce the enemy's line, and once more gloriously defeat the enemy.

(Signed)

(1) LeJeune.

John A. LeJeune." (1)

pp 346-347

This was the first inkling that we had had of what the coming days might hold for us. This order served to carry out one of our superstitions peculiar to the Marine Brigade; as we prepared to get into the camions we noticed that they were being driven by French Colonials, and it had been our previous experience that on each occasion of these men conducting us to the Front, it had proved to be always to a very tough sector. So none of us were surprised at the general tone of our commander's order, and the men, in particular, commented on their "hunch".

On the night of October 1-2, we moved into a position just south of Somme-Py, relieving a battalion of the 219th French Infantry. The relief was completed at 3:30 AM, October 2, 1918. (2) (Special Map No 1)

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The day of October 2 passed very quietly, except for intermittent shelling. It was at this time that we learned a little something of the nature of the sector over which we were to fight; and we took this opportunity to impress upon our men that we must attain our objectives no matter what the cost.

"General Gouraud's army had been stopped just north of Somme-Py. In its immediate front were the last and strongest trench lines of the position through which they had been advancing, and farther to the north was the high ground for which the French had spent so many lives in 1917. The wooded height, Blanc-Mont, just northwest of Somme-Py, was a part of that high ground and the key to the German defense system."

(3) Howland,
p 389

(3)

(4) Second
Division,
(Vol. VII)

At 6:30 PM on this date the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines had taken position in the trenches Essen and Elba facing north. (4) (See Special Map No 1) The weather up to this time had been excellent, and the morale of my company was very high. As in former engagements, the men were anxious to get into battle and be done with it. The food supply was none too good, and before nightfall, we were ordered to fill our canteens and to conserve this supply as much as possible.

During the night a few shells fell in our area; the sky all along our front was lighted up with signal rockets, and the occasional glare of an ammunition dump going up.

OCTOBER 3, 1918

At 5:00 AM my battalion was ordered to take position west of Somme-Py, south of railroad tracks, being the second battalion in line of the 5th Regiment.

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(5) (See Special Map No 1) We then learned of the plan of attack of the 6th Regiment, its boundaries and its objectives. (6) (Special Map No 1). The 6th Regiment was to "jump off" at 5:50 AM, preceded five minutes earlier by a barrage, and were to advance at the rate of a hundred metres in four minutes. The 2d Battalion was to lead, followed by the 1st and 3d.

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(7) Second
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(7)

From our position we could see the 6th Regiment advancing over a rolling country, and it was plain to be seen at the very start they were being subjected to heavy artillery and machine-gun fire.

Seeing their comrades go down under this fire made our men all the more eager to be off to help them. After what seemed ages, our battalion followed the 2d of the 5th Regiment at a distance of five hundred yards. (8)

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As we approached the Py River (see Special Map No 1), I cautioned my platoon leaders to keep their platoons well in hand, as I had observed the battalions ahead of me having difficulty in getting over the foot-bridges, and we were already under artillery fire. My company was the second in line on the left flank of our battalion, which was likewise the left flank of the 4th Brigade. We were to follow a bearing of three hundred and forty-five degrees, and to keep our left flank on the line from point 266.9 - 276.7 to point 265.6 - 280.5. (9) (See Special Map No 1)

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When the leading battalion of the 5th Regiment came abreast of the place where the 6th Regiment had "jumped off" (see Map No 1), I saw them take up a different formation, and saw that they eased off to the right. By the time that my battalion arrived at this same place we were subjected to machine-gun fire, and also heavier artillery firing. On my own initiative I deployed my company into section columns, and sent word to my left flank platoon to try and discover from what spot this machine-gun firing was coming. I likewise gave way to the right, and sent word to my battalion commander that the left flank seemed to be "up in the air", and that I did not believe the French had advanced along with us, as they were supposed to do.

It later developed that the battalion following us was compelled to send a company over to the spot, from which we had been fired on, on our left flank - and they succeeded in reducing these machine-gun nests, and were able to "hook up" with the French at that point. (10)

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Upon reaching the Bois de Somme-Py (see Special Map No 1), our battalion halted, due to the fact that the fire on our left flank was becoming so intense that I thought that an attack from that direction might be expected. I faced my company due west and "hooked up" with the 55th Company of the 2d Battalion who had done likewise. While in this position some French troops came through my lines, retreating towards the rear. I had lost contact, by this time, with my right flank company, and I decided to go and find Battalion Headquarters to make a report, in person, of what I had done - and also to report the fact of certain elements of the French coming back through my lines.

While wandering through the woods I came upon a German dug-out, and for no other reason than a "hunch" I decided to look into it. About half-way down the steps leading into the dug-out, upon hearing a noise, I stopped and called out. My "runner" who had accompanied me, dashed down ahead of me and reappeared almost immediately with two German soldiers. We took them to the top of the steps and questioned them. They stated that our artillery barrage had been so intense that they had not been able to get back through it; and that our attack had followed it so

closely that they had neither time, nor the courage, to come out, and that they had been waiting for the darkness to try and return to their own lines. They further stated that they had come into the lines the preceding night, and that they had no idea of where they were, nor which direction they should take to get back to their own outfit. They were well clothed, seemed to be in splendid physical condition and from what I could gather, they belonged to one of the better German regiments. I proceeded with them, on to Battalion Headquarters to make my report, and turn over these prisoners. My "runner" had been of much assistance, as it was he who had served as interpreter - and I give him full credit for the capture of these men. This pleased him, and no doubt gave him a chance of "sounding off" to his comrades, with graphic descriptions of subduing these Germans in "hand-to-hand" combat.

I finally located the Battalion Commander at A:93 (see Special Map No 1), and found that the battalion had become somewhat scattered. One company was facing due east; one north; that which had started ahead of me was north, and my own was facing due west.

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(11) (See Sketch No 1) These positions had to be taken because of the fire on our left flank, and it was impossible to tell whether or not the Germans were trying to get around and hit us from the rear. While at Battalion Headquarters I was informed that it was the intention to have us attack through the 6th Regiment that afternoon, as they had reported that they

had attained their objective. (See Special Map No 1) We were at this time about a mile and a quarter from their front lines, and I expressed my doubts to the battalion commander as to the advisability of pulling our battalion from its present position, and increasing the size of the gap which I knew existed on our left flank.

I went back to my company and about 6:00 PM I was ordered to return to Battalion Headquarters, and there found the regimental commander. The latter informed us that we were to move with all possible speed to the rear of the 6th Regiment, and be prepared to "jump off" immediately. I again voiced my objection, and was backed up in this by the other company commanders of my battalion. We had had a hard enough time getting this far in the daylight, and it was easy to see with darkness coming on, and a woods to go through, that it would require infinite care to keep the companies from becoming scattered.

We returned to our companies and started to our positions, which were to be just in rear of the front line battalion of the 6th Regiment. I moved my company into a trench along the east of the road that runs along the east side of Blank Mont. (See Special Map No II - point N.) I arrived there about 10:00 PM and spent the rest of the night running back and forth to Battalion Headquarters. (See Special Map No II - point L.) I have never spent a more miserable night in my life. We were cold and hungry, and there was a feeling of uneasiness that we were more or less "out

on a limb." On my last trip to Battalion Headquarters I had been informed that we would "jump off" at 6:00 AM, and up until 3:00 AM our support battalions were pretty well scattered. The 2d Battalion had one and three-quarters companies, and the 1st Battalion had two companies. As far as I could learn the 6th Regiment was scattered all around us. The French had not, as yet, come up on our left, and if our attack proved to be a success we would only be lengthening our left flank; and it looked like a simple matter, if the Germans had reserves to throw in, for them to come in on our left and capture the whole Marine Brigade.

OCTOBER 4, 1918

We "jumped off" at 6:00 AM in the same formation we had used the day before, from in front of the east and west road running from Blanc Mont to Medeah Ferme, with the left flank of my company resting at point (265.6 - 280.75) (see Special Map No II), and immediately came under heavy machine-gun and artillery fire. We managed to cross the narrow-gauge railroad in our immediate front (see Special Map No II), and finally gained what I thought was some shelter at point S on Special Map No II, at the right of a road which marked the left flank of my company, at a distance of about 800 metres beyond the railroad track. Here we halted, and I sent a "runner" to Battalion Headquarters to report my position, and to tell them I had no contact with the company on my right, and that I thought the company ahead of me had jumped off to its right, as we were getting heavy fire on our left. The Germans, at this time, were putting down a very heavy artillery barrage. (12)

While in this position a machine-gun on our left flank had been particularly bothersome, and I sent Lieutenant Martineau with a couple of men to see if he could put it out of action. He returned sometime later, and reported that he had killed two of the crew and the others had gotten away. (I have neglected to state that the original 20th Company had been composed mainly of University of Minnesota students. After the war Lieutenant Martineau returned there, and was later selected as a member of the All-American foot-ball team.) I also saw, while in this same position, one of the greatest demonstrations of the service man's love for animals. Out of one of the dug-outs our men had captured a sheep dog, which had evidently been a pet. I looked up to discover they were playing with this dog, and throwing sticks for it to bring back, utterly oblivious to all the dangers and horrors of war being enacted around them.

Not being able to advance because of the heavy fire from our left, and knowing that the 2d Battalion of my regiment was somewhere to the rear of us - and to save time, too - I sent a "runner" to the commanding officer of that battalion requesting that he come up on my left flank. He evidently had watched my progress, and upon receipt of my message sent a request to the regimental commander that our artillery be instructed to play on this point, stating at the same time that my company was held up. (13) Having seen the company ahead of me move to the right, and being desirous of maintaining contact, and also to get my company out of

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this field of fire, I followed it - and finally came to a halt at the point X on Special Map No II. My battalion commander had at this time moved his headquarters to point H on Special Map No II, and had sent back the report that I was on his left, the 16th Company ahead of me, and that all of the companies seemed to be losing liaison with each other.

Before leaving point X an enemy plane came over, flying quite low and strafing us with his machine gun. I immediately ordered two of my accompanying machine guns set up and we opened fire on him. (14) This act nearly proved fatal for me, and did prove so for a number of the machine-gunners attached to my company, as we were not aware, up to that time, of the presence of a "77" which had evidently been kept concealed until such time as it could fire at "point-blank" range. Had we had any observation from the air they might possibly have discovered this gun, and informed our artillery of its location. Hardly had we started firing at this plane when this "77" opened up on us from our left flank, and scored direct hits on our guns, killing and wounding 22 men. I then decided to get out of the line of sight of this gun, as they were firing from the point G on Special Map No II and Map F of Otto. (15) I detailed an automatic rifleman to open up on him and endeavor to keep the enemy crew from the gun until we could swing around to the right rear of this battery. Had we been given an artillery barrage prior to our "jumping off" things would have been a great deal easier. The fighting spirit of Americans

(14) Otto,
p 111

(15) Otto,
p 38

was most aptly demonstrated on this day, because we knew that the Infantry had to do it all alone. I have never yet had it explained to me why we were forced to "jump off" into such a strong German position with no artillery preparation.

(16) Otto,
p 89

I then moved into a position as shown on Sketch II - and on Map N of Otto, (16) and reported this position to my battalion commander, who, by this time had collected the other companies and had formed them in line facing north as shown by this sketch. I still marvel at the courage that these men displayed in reaching this point. Prior to the fight at Bois de Belleau the men had received much inspiration from seeing the old French peasants coming along the road with what was left of their worldly possessions in wheel-barrow, baby-coaches or by any other means they might have - and had been instilled with the desire to give the enemy just retribution - and much more. But in this instance, at Blanc Mont we found a striking contrast, as the thrill and novelty of war had worn down, and we were now fighting over a ground that had been previously destroyed and churned to a great depth by the vast number of exploding shells that had been constantly fired here for two years. The key-point, Blanc Mont, for which we were fighting, derived its name from the chalky ground of which it was composed. The men coming out of their fox-holes in the early morning light looked like ghosts.

(17) Otto,
pp 74-79

(18) Otto,
p 75

(19) Otto,
p 71

This last position we had gained made a perfect target for enemy guns of all kinds, and our casualties were becoming very heavy. Outlined as we were, the Germans had little difficulty in getting excellent results from their fire. (Map J, Otto) (17) They had been putting down an overwhelming artillery bombardment in this area since 9:00 AM. (18)

At this point I sent a message to the Battalion commander to either send help or permit us to withdraw to our "jump off" positions, as the company ahead was being forced back on me, and our left flank was still "up in the air." (19) I was lying on the ground, in which I took to be the center of my company, endeavoring to keep it together as much as possible - when to my rear someone yelled for me, and without thinking, I got up, and discovered a platoon of the 18th Company of the 2d Battalion coming up to our assistance. I had by this time managed to get my company moved to the point W. (See Special Map No II) I pointed to my left flank and called to them to take up a position there, at the same time pointing in the direction I wished them to go with a trench cane held in my right hand. The next recollection I have is of lying on the ground with the feeling of a broken right wrist. I called to two of my officers to crawl over to me, and they found I had been shot through the right fore-arm. I turned over the command of my company to my second-in-command, and started to make my way to a dressing-station, accompanied by my faithful "runner".

The first part of this trip was made as fast as I was able to run, under the circumstances. I evidently afforded the Germans a good **target**, as bullets from three directions started flying about me. My "runner" and I dropped to the ground just as a machine gun opened up on us. They probably thought that they had hit us, as in a few moments the intense fire, concentrated over our heads, stopped. We gradually made our way, at a slower pace, to where Captain Larsen, our battalion commander was located, at point H. (See Special Map No II) I gave him my estimate of the situation which resulted in the following message:-

"From: C. O. 3d Bn.

AT: P. C. Ravine

Date: 4 Oct. Hour 1:00 PM. No 33

To: C. O. 5th Reg't.

How sent -

Runner.

Cannot hold front line longer: that is, my position S.E. from position as indicated for 23d Inf. this morning. Have evacuated 3 company commanders and many officers. Having hard time to hold men together. Am sending this request to 1st and 2d Bn. to come up and help hold. Am being shelled heavily and M.G. fire from 270° of compass.

Situation is critical. I sent word back with your liaison officer that Boche was preparing for counterattack from our left front.

Position attached. (Sgd) Larsen." (20)

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Our casualties at this time were estimated to be sixty per cent; and as I passed the regimental commander on my way back and he asked me for my opinion I summed it up in the following words:- "Things up there are in a hell of a mess!"

CRITICISM AND COMMENT

From the viewpoint of the writer I consider that this battle was by far the hardest and most trying that the 2d Division encountered during the war. There was a difference between our first big fight at Bois de Belleau where we met a confident and victorious enemy, and this enemy at Blanc Mont making its dying gasp. This engagement was entered into with no knowledge, at least on my part, of the enemy strength, the disposition of his troops, or of the terrain over which we were to fight. The only information I had of the situation was of the importance of taking our objectives which would relieve the pressure upon Rheims, and also to compel the German army at our front to withdraw.

More time should have been given our division commander to acquaint his subordinates with the seriousness of our mission. The attacking regiment on October 3 received verbal orders only, and the written orders were not read by the regimental commander until they reached their objective. (21)

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I believe that the artillery preparation on October 3 made it possible for the first day's objectives to be taken. And had we been given the same help on the following day our casualties would have been less, and the units would have been more easily maneuvered.

The attack on October 4 should not have been made until the French had come up on our left flank; and if the German army had had sufficient reserves at hand they could have attacked us on the left, and probably turned the tide of battle to themselves. One thing in our favor was the fact that our enemy had been fighting four years, and we were comparatively fresh troops; also, the spirit of adventure had not entirely worn off from the American soldier.

The morale of troops in a crisis depends upon the personality of their leaders and the success of the 2d Division reflects the type of leadership with which we were blessed.

Later, when our division commander, Major-General LeJeune was discussing this battle with General Gouraud he stated he had not wished to make too much of a salient on the ridges. The battalion and company commanders had been of the same opinion, as it appeared to be unsound tactics to force this point so far into the German lines, without having first an artillery preparation, and without having the French division on our left flank when we "jumped off". General Gouraud explained to General LeJeune the necessity of pressing this attack, inasmuch as our success would force the retreat of the whole German army east of Rheims, and push them back of their last line of resistance.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I agree with the summing up made by Lt.-Colonel Otto of the German army, that our offensive at Blanc Mont was skillfully executed, but that we were also favored by good luck. (22)

(22) Otto,
p 191

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ON THE BATTLE OF BLANC-MONT

1. If you were in command of the leading battalion of the support regiment and were fired upon from your left flank when you arrived abreast of the "jump off" of the leading regiment, what would you have done?

Answer: I would have halted, and faced one company in direction of firing, and sent word to the commanding officer of the regiment through commanding officer of support battalions and tried to effect liaison with troops that were supposed to be advancing on my left.

2. If you were in command of a support regiment of a regiment making an attack, what formation would you take in following the attacking regiment?

Answer: I would place battalions in depth, each battalion in platoon columns.

3. What is the advantage of such a formation?

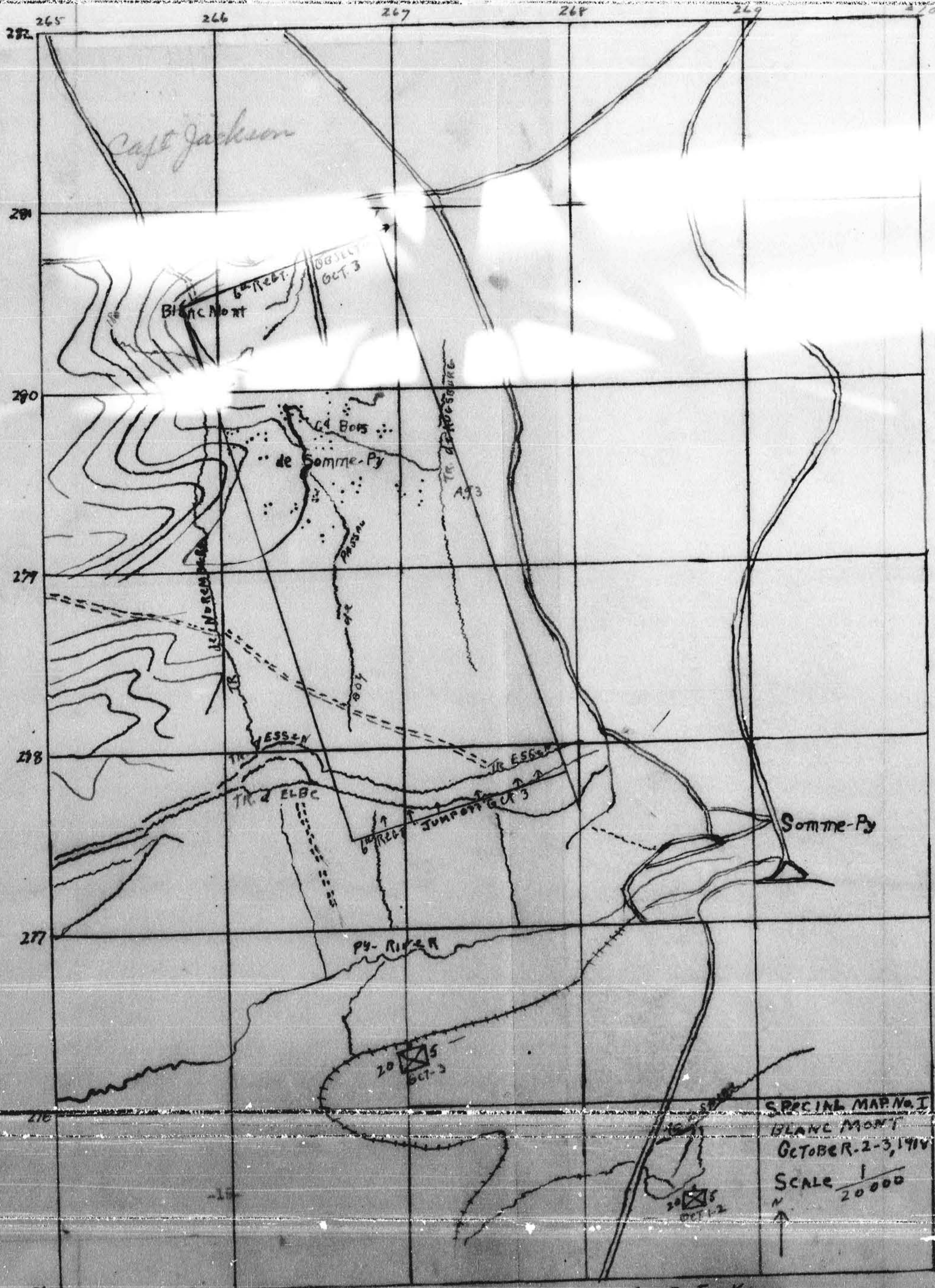
Answer: It reduces casualties, makes employment to flanks easier, and it is easier to maintain liaison and control.

4. Knowing your left flank was "up in the air" would you have ordered the attack on October 4, as the division commander did?

Answer: It would depend entirely upon the situation.

5. Instead of attacking straight ahead on October 4, wouldn't it have been better to have used the 5th Regiment to make an attack to the west?

Answer: Inasmuch as the French seemed to be holding the Germans in place on our left it was apparently our best move to go ahead, as it proved the enemy did not have sufficient strength to break through and at the same time keep the French from advancing.

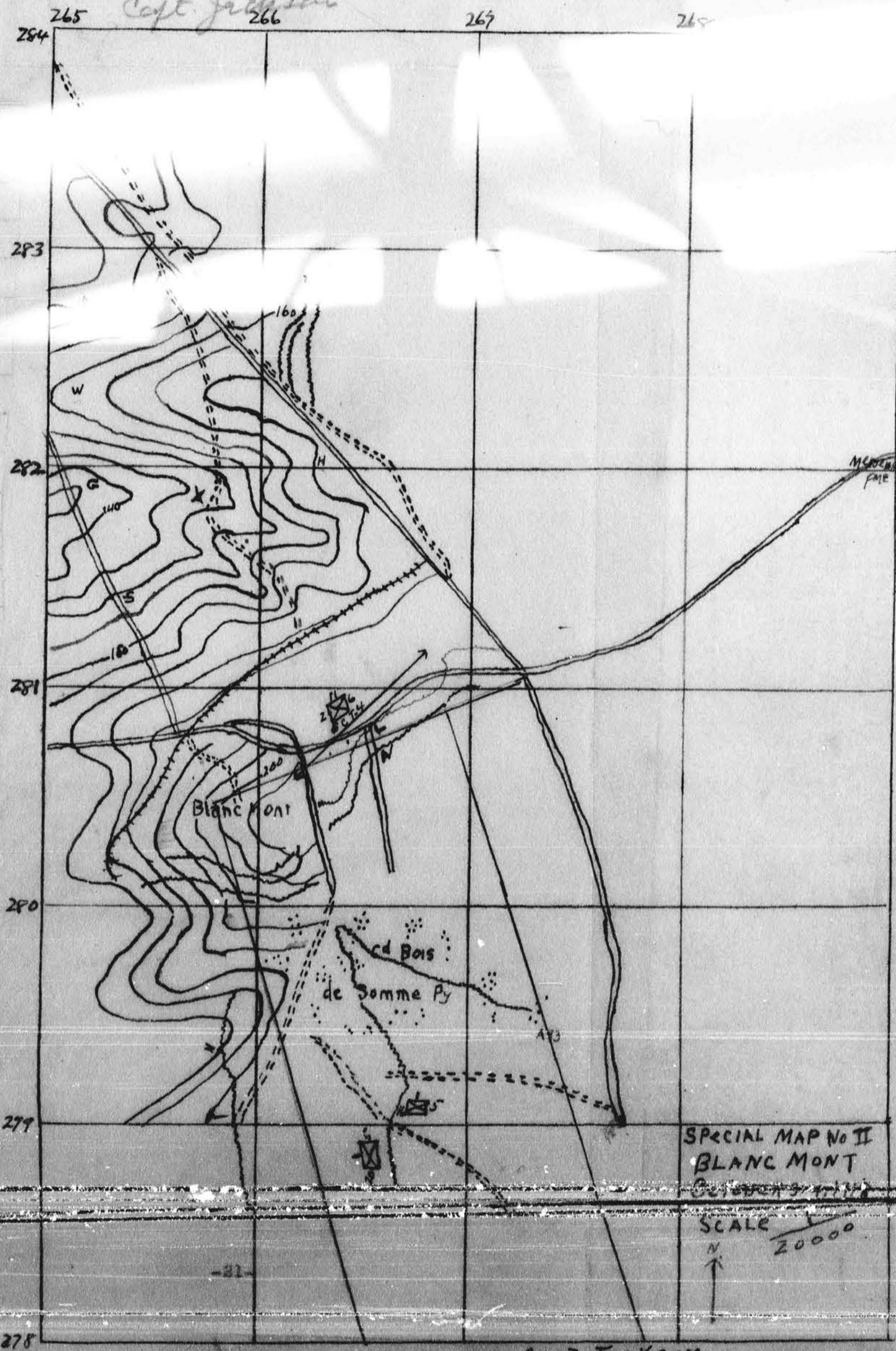


Capt Jackson

SPECIAL MAP No. I
 BLANC MONT
 OCTOBER. 2-3, 1918
 SCALE 1/20000
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Capt. Jackson

Capt. Jackson

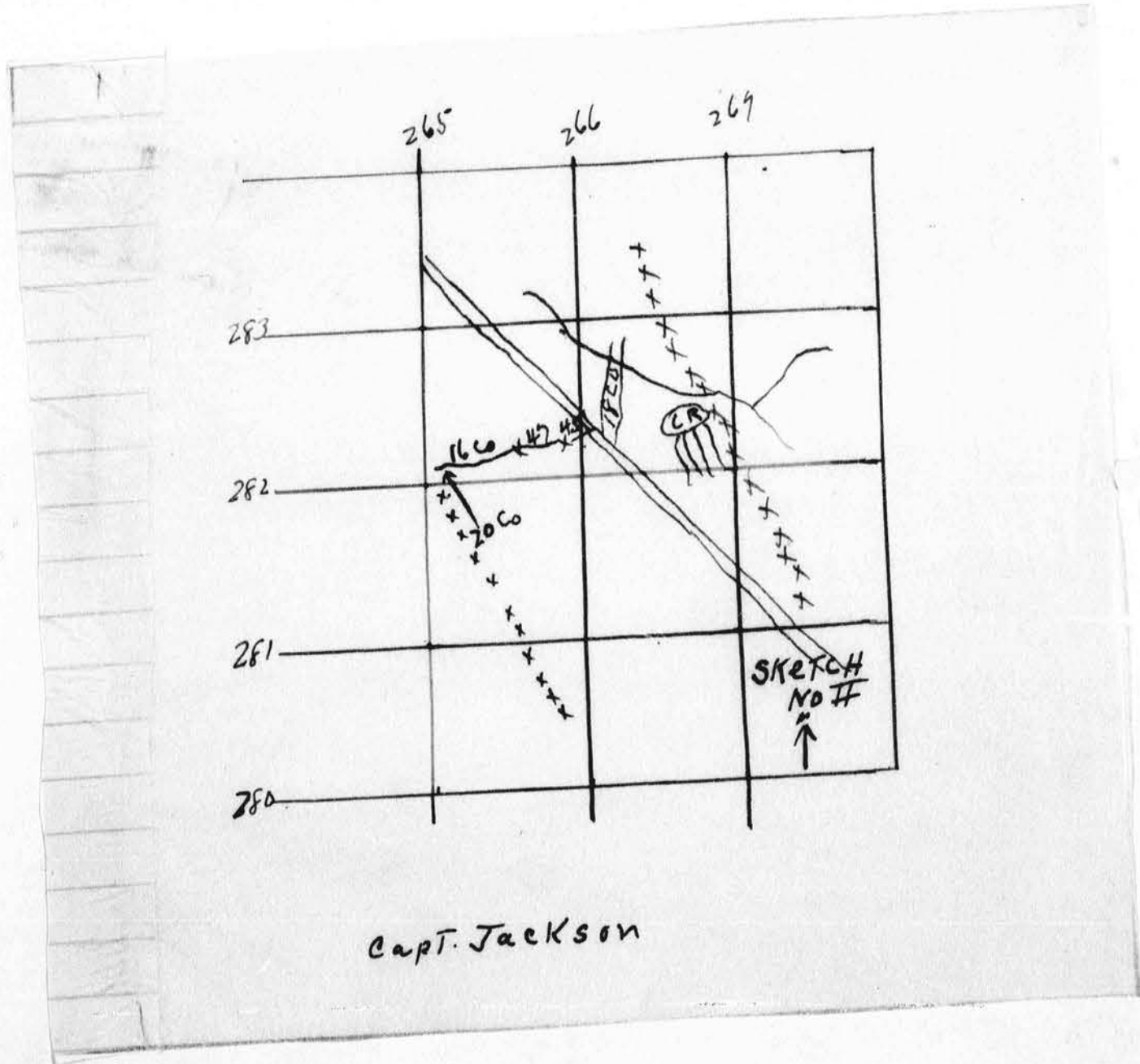


SPECIAL MAP No II
BLANC MONT

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CAPT. JACKSON

Capt Jackson



Capt. Jackson