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M I L I T A R Y   H I S T O R Y

OPERATIONS OF COMPANY I, 362D INFANTRY (91ST  
DIVISION) IN THE MEUSE-ARGONNE OFFENSIVE,  
SEPTEMBER 26--OCTOBER 3, 1918.

(Personal Experience of a Company Commander)

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MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

A.B.M.C.	"American Battle Monuments Commission: Guide to American Battlefields in Europe".
History	"The Story of the 91st Division".
Orders and Reports	"Meuse-Argonne Orders and Reports; First Army".
Johnson	"Without Censor--New Light on our Greatest World War Battles".

## INTRODUCTION

Let our attention be directed to the operation of Company I, 362d Infantry in its participation in the greatest conflict in which our American Army was ever engaged, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. (1)

(1) Johnson,  
pp 132-133

Let our minds go back to September 25, 1918, the day before the First American Army was to take off in this great battle.

At this time we find Company I with its battalion in the Rendez Vous de Chasse approximately 2,000 meters back of the front lines which are held by the French.

## COMPOSITION AND TRAINING

Approximately twelve months have elapsed since the members of the company, both officers and men, left their civil occupations and assembled at Camp Lewis, Washington, to become a part of the National Army.

Practically all of the men in ranks are from the wilds of Montana where they were generally engaged in ranching and bronco riding.

The officers are youngsters, products of the first training camp at the Presidio of San Francisco. None have had previous military training.

During the short period of training no job has been so insignificant but that an officer had it to do. Noncommissioned officers have had practically no training in leadership. Platoon sergeants have had to assume no responsibility, they have looked to the officers for directions.

## COMBAT EXPERIENCE

With the exception of three days in Army Reserve, during the St. Mihiel Offensive, the company has had no combat experience. The organization is thoroughly green and untried. (2)

(2) Johnson,  
p 148

## MORALE

Knowing but little as to what warfare is all about the men appear anxious for combat. In spite of the constant rain and ankle-deep mud, the spirit and morale is extremely high. (3)

(3) Johnson,  
p 148

## SITUATIONS AS KNOWN BY THE COMPANY

Orders which will start the attack have been issued. (4) It has been made known that two battalions of the regiment are to take over front-line positions after dark tonight and that the 3d Battalion will constitute the brigade reserve.

(4) Orders  
and Re-  
ports

Verbal instructions have been received from the battalion commander. The reserve position to be occupied under cover of darkness and the routes to this position have been carefully reconnoitered during the day.

Except for the first and second in command each company has been stripped of its officers. All platoon officers have been attached to assault organizations. Otherwise Company I is at full strength with 250 men.

## SITUATION AT 10:00 PM

The assault battalions have moved forward, guided into position by French guides from organizations being relieved.

The battalion commander has assembled his



few remaining officers for last minute instructions before moving to reserve position. It is raining and extremely dark. The major has just informed his officers that zero hour is 5:30 on the following morning.

A runner appears with a message directing Captain Thorpe, commanding Company I, to report to brigade commander at once.

#### ORDERS FOR COMPANY I

(5) History,  
p 20

At brigade P.C. the company commander received verbal orders about as follows: Your company, supported by a platoon of machine guns from the 34<sup>7</sup>th Machine Gun Battalion (5) will form the combat liaison group between the leading elements of the 91st and 37th Divisions. This group will make and maintain contact with the right flank units of the 91st and the left flank units of the 37th Division. The boundary between divisions is as shown on this map. (One map supplied company commanders.) You will be in position by 3:30. You will keep brigade informed by runner as to <sup>your</sup> progress and <sup>the</sup> situation at the front.

#### COMMENT

Here we find an organization going into battle for the first time poorly prepared to carry out an extremely important mission.

The company was expecting to function in brigade reserve. It had reconnoitered its position and planned accordingly. Suddenly without warning, the company commander found himself confronted with an entirely different situation, with little time

for reconnaissance, with little time to acquaint himself and his subordinates with the problem at hand.

With his platoon officers gone he suddenly realized the seriousness of the lack of training of his platoon sergeants.

Such a situation is inexcusable.

#### LESSONS

1. Higher command should anticipate need of combat liaison groups. He should allow commanders of such units time to acquaint himself and subordinates with the situation.

2. Noncommissioned officers should be given training and responsibility during the training period sufficient to insure confidence in battle.

3. Maps and ability to read maps are essential in battle. Each platoon leader should have a map in sufficient time to make a study of the terrain if we are to expect correct functioning.

#### COMPANY COMMANDERS ESTIMATE OF THE SITUATION

##### HIS FIRST MISSION

To get the company into position, a distance of about 2,000 meters, without a guide, over unknown terrain, on a rainy dark night.

##### PLAN

Two plans presented themselves: First, to start immediately with his company of 250 men and one platoon of machine guns, finding the way as he went along. Second, to send his second-in-command with patrol to locate the position, then to return and guide the unit into place.

### DECISION

Having about four hours' time he decided on the latter plan. The company was in position on time.

### FORMATION ADOPTED

In order not to be vulnerable to artillery fire and because of narrow trails through the woods, the organization was moved to position in single file at low speaking distance.

### COMMENT

The choice of plans was well made. A slow moving column at night where there is sure to be much stopping and starting, closing and extending is bad for morale. Such is likely to cause troops to feel there is lack of decision on the part of leaders.

### SEPTEMBER 26TH

#### ESTIMATE OF SITUATION AT JUMP-OFF

A gap of about 400 yards between flank units existed at the jump-off position.

Enemy activity, except for occasional artillery and machine-gun fire was not noticeable. Our supporting artillery fire was terrific. (6)

With a cloud of smoke and fog over no-man's-land it was evident that visibility would be extremely difficult. Orders directed the initial advance be made behind a rolling barrage at the rate of 100 meters every four minutes. (7)

### DECISION

The company commander decided to make personal contact with adjacent unit commanders and

suggest the gap be closed during the initial advance. He decided to fill the gap at the jump-off by having his leading wave deploy at ten-pace intervals and follow adjacent flank units at a short distance.

#### FORMATION AT JUMP-OFF

Two platoons as skirmishers at ten paces in assault line with second-in-command leading the advance and being guided by compass bearing.

Two platoons in line of squad columns in support. Headquarters group with support. Machine-gun platoon in rear. Bayonets fixed. Agent runners exchanged with adjacent units.

#### INITIAL PHASE

Following closely the rolling barrage through a cloud of smoke and fog the first enemy trenches were taken on scheduled time.

By this time the gap was closed and considerable confusion existed because of intermingling of troops.

The leader of the assault wave dispatched a runner with verbal message to inform the company commander of the situation.

This runner returned shortly, very much excited and out of breath, just as the leading wave was entering the Bois de Cheppy, with information that the company commander, together with the headquarters group, had come under the fire of a machine gun on the flank, two runners had been killed, the company commander wounded, the first sergeant and

support platoon was apparently lost.

ESTIMATE OF SITUATION BY SECOND-IN-COMMAND (NOW  
COMPANY COMMANDER)

No gap existed. The lines were advancing with flanks in contact. Reorganization of company was necessary.

DECISION

It was decided to make a hasty reorganization and continue the advance.

With this in view a runner was sent directing the machine-gun officer to report. Two runners sent to locate the lost platoon and guide it forward. The reorganization was soon accomplished. A map was obtained from a sergeant of the machine-gun platoon. The position on the ground was checked with the map. The advance resumed, contact with the leading elements was soon established. Runner was sent to inform brigade.

A DISTURBING SITUATION

In addition to finding himself (myself) in command of a disorganized company, there appeared in the company area, about this time, the commanding officer of the 361st Infantry, the left assault regiment of the 181st Brigade. This regiment I knew should be about 700 yards to our left. The Colonel asked what position the company occupied. Upon being told he questioned the correctness of its location.

WHAT TO DO?

Either the company was out of position or the Colonel was lost.

## DECISION

Upon observing the actions of the Colonel and upon checking with the machine-gun officer, it was decided the company was in the proper position.

NOTE.- The Colonel remained with the company during its advance through the Bois de Cheppy, Bois de Bethincourt, and Bois de Very, finally leaving the company about noon passing out of sight down the Rau de Chambronne.

## SITUATION AT 5:00 PM

After overcoming heavy machine-gun and rifle fire and capturing large numbers of prisoners from a trench system about 1,200 meters southeast of Epionville the 181st Brigade advanced on Epionville encountering but little small arms fire. It was, however, subjected to much artillery fire from the heights around Montfaucon. The brigade reached Epionville about dusk on September 26th.

The left of the 37th Division meeting heavy fire from vicinity of Ivoiry and artillery fire from both front and right was stopped at crest of ridge south of Ivoiry.

The failure of the 37th to keep abreast, exposed the right flank of the 91st.

Quoting from Johnson: "The greenest division in that green corps, the 91st, had done best. The Pacific Coast men had gone farther than the more experienced 28th and 35th, farther than any of our nine divisions. It had gone seven miles, carrying forward also the left of the 37th. But the 37th's right and practically all of the 79th Division were checked some two miles south of Montfaucon." (8)

Because of its open flank the 362d Infantry, right assault regiment, withdrew, under cover of darkness, to the Crocodile trench system about 1000 meters south of Epionville where it remained for the night.

The 37th's left withdrew to a position on the reverse slope of the same ridge to the Aligator trench system, thereby leaving the 91st right exposed for the night. (9)

(9) A.B.M.C.

#### ACTION OF COMPANY I

A position in the gap between divisions was taken by the company. The machine guns were placed well to the front in desirable positions for protection during the night.

#### ACTIVITY DURING THE NIGHT

Expected counterattacks during the night did not develop.

Runners sent with messages to brigade failed to return. All communication to the rear appeared to be lost. No one at the front seemed to know what was to happen on the following morning.

Finally during the early morning word was passed that the attack would be resumed at 5:30 AM.

(10) Johnson,  
p 169

(10)

#### SEPTEMBER 27TH

#### SITUATION AT 5:30 AM

Apparently no contact was made with the enemy during the night. It is doubtful if patrols were sent to the front.

Right units of the 91st were moving forward. No instructions from brigade had been received by the company.

The left of the 37th about 500 yards to the right rear was not moving.

ESTIMATE BY COMPANY COMMANDER

The right of the 91st was open. It was a duty of the company to protect this flank from possible flank attack from direction of Ivoir.

TERRAIN

The ground to the front and flank was open. The Rau de Baronvaux, a small creek lying in the valley immediately to the front was easily crossed at any point. Except for darkness and a light fog, concealment was poor. Overhead fire by the machine guns to the front and flanks, from their night positions was possible.

DECISION OF COMPANY COMMANDER

It was decided to echelon the company to the right rear and move forward with the 91st Division.

FORMATION ADOPTED

Company in column of platoon columns echeloned to right rear with oblique intervals and distances of 50 paces between platoons with extended distances within platoons. Company commander with leading platoon. Machine guns to remain in night positions until company had crossed ravine to the front.

SITUATION AT DAYBREAK

The fog had cleared, vision was good.

As the leading platoon was ascending the slope southeast of Epionville and the three platoons in rear were strung across the valley to the right rear, suddenly terrific rifle and machine-gun fire broke out on the right at distances from 200 to 500 yards.



The company was caught in platoon columns in heavy fire from close range.

#### PLAN AND DECISION

In this sort of situation there was no time to maneuver and further deploy. With only one thing to do a signal was given to face the enemy and open fire. The situation was so obvious even untrained troops who had a desire for combat needed no directing.

The machine guns opened overhead fire. Within five minutes white rags ascended from scattered clumps of brush in the enemy area. Two hundred and eight prisoners, including a Major, were taken.

At this time the front lines of the left of the 37th Division appeared in sight and soon moved onto a line with the 91st.

As Montfaucon had not yet been taken we were subjected to considerable shell fire from that position. (11)

(11) Johnson,  
p 169

Upon reaching the Epionville--Ivoiry road both divisions were stopped by heavy machine-gun fire from the ridge beyond, particularly from Cote 256 and 265. Finally both units withdrew, the 91st to the reverse slope just to the south of Epionville, the 37th to the position occupied the night before.

It was in these positions that units spent the night of September 27th. (12) Company I was again placed in the gap for protection to the open flank.

(12) A.B.M.C.

#### SEPTEMBER 28TH

The attack was resumed at 5:30 AM. Soon after daybreak Epionville was taken by the 91st Division and Ivoiry was taken by the 37th. Company

I moved forward, took a position along Epionville--Ivoiry road, astride the division boundary. The company was in two lines with two platoons deployed latterly behind the embankment of the road and two platoons in line of squad columns in support on the slope to the rear. There was no gap between divisions.

Leading units had advanced about 300 yards north of the road when suddenly extremely heavy machine gun fire opened along a wide front.

Yelling, panicky voices to the front attracted my attention. Looking up I observed a disorganized mob of 37th troops retreating in great confusion. As this mob crossed the road through the right platoon area an officer leading the retreat yelled "Get the hell out of here".

Considerable difficulty was experienced in preventing a break in my right leading platoon. To the right I observed what appeared to be the entire front line of the 37th retreating in great confusion. Glancing to the rear, I observed my right support platoon going to the rear apparently out of control.

#### ACTION OF COMPANY

Expecting an attack at any moment and having a strong position on the road, it was decided to hold this position if possible.

The left support platoon was swung to the right and placed in position on the right flank facing the right front.

Control of units on the right was finally gained after they had gone at least 1000 yards to the rear and by noon leading units were back in position.

In the meantime most of the enemy guns were silenced by our artillery fire.

#### COMPANY I REJOINS ITS BATTALION

During the afternoon the company was ordered to rejoin the 3d Battalion which had moved forward from brigade reserve to relieve one of the assault battalions.

#### COMMENT

Company I during the first three days of action failed completely in its most essential duty, that of keeping the brigade commander informed of the situation at the front. When runners dispatched to brigade with messages failed to return indicating no contact had been made, the company commander should have exerted every possible effort to make contact.

Communication to the rear was generally very much overlooked. Larger unit commanders generally had but little, if any, information from the front in this particular operation.

It has been said, although I can find nothing of record to verify the statement, that the brigade commander of the 181st Brigade received absolutely no information from any one of his line organizations until 11:00 PM, September 26th. Such a condition is intolerable.

During the nights of September 26-27, and 27-28, the principles of security were constantly violated, not only by Company I, but by larger units on either flank.

No contact was made with the enemy at night. Patrols to the front were not sent out. The enemy

was permitted to move to and strengthen positions each night to such an extent that it caused a great sacrifice of human life and time each morning in renewing the attack.

#### LESSONS

1. Higher command must be kept informed about the situation at the front.
2. In open warfare contact with the enemy must be maintained.
3. A great deal of training in night maneuvers is essential to success in open warfare.

#### SEPTEMBER 29TH

#### SITUATION AT DAYBREAK

During the night the 3d Battalion 368d Infantry relieved the 1st Battalion 361st Infantry and is now in position just west of and on line with northern edge of Bois de Cierges.

Orders have been received directing an attack on Gesnes at 7:00 AM. The regiment is attacking with two battalions abreast. The 361st Infantry is in reserve.

The battalion is disposed with Companies L and M in front line, Companies I and K in reserve.

#### TERRAIN

The ground to the front for a distance of about 2000 yards is open rolling terrain. There are no woods or brush for concealment.

Enemy positions north of Gesnes are well concealed on high dominating ground. Fields of fire for the enemy are excellent.

#### THE ATTACK

An attempt to advance at 7:00 AM was repulsed

by heavy machine-gun and artillery fire.

Another attempt was made at 10:00 AM with the same result.

Considerable artillery has moved into close position during the morning.

At 3:00 PM orders were received directing a determined attack be launched at 3:30 PM with instructions to take Gesnes and the heights beyond at all costs. (13)

(13) History,  
pp 32-33

The attack started at 3:30. By 4:00 PM about half the distance had been covered. Organizations on both flanks of the regiment had either failed to start the attack or had very soon given up the effort.

As a result the 362d was subjected to deadly machine-gun and artillery fire from the front and both flanks. Casualties were extremely heavy.

Organizations became badly mixed. Company L in front of Company I virtually disappeared. There was extreme disorganization everywhere. There appeared absolutely no coordination within the battalion, between battalions or within the regiment. There seemed to be only one thought in mind and that was to reach the assigned objective regardless of what happened.

By 5:00 PM Gesnes was taken. The advance was continued and Hill 255 reached in a short time.

(14) History,  
p 34

(14) At this point a hasty reorganization was made and the position organized. Company I started this attack at 3:30 with 178 men and reached the position with 74.

### SITUATION AT NIGHTFALL

The 362d Infantry alone had advanced to the army objective. With its right flank open for a distance of about two miles and its left nearly as badly exposed one of the two things had to be done. Either flank units would have to be advanced or the regiment would have to give up the ground taken at a terrible sacrifice.

Higher authority decided on the latter plan.

(15) History,  
pp 35-36

(15)

### WITHDRAWAL

Instructions were received to withdraw under cover of darkness. The entire night was spent in carrying back and assisting wounded off the battlefield.

### COMMENT

In this attack we see the result of lack of teamwork or coordination between units. Great loss of life was suffered by the 362d in taking ground which was, almost immediately given up. The great sacrifice was made for naught. The morale of the organization was lowered greatly in having to give up such a dearly acquired position.

### LESSONS

1. Teamwork and coordination within units and between adjacent units are most essential to successful combat.
2. Battle conditions present vastly different problems than we experience in our training maneuvers.

### SEPTEMBER 30TH TO OCTOBER 3D

Company I with the 3d Battalion was placed in brigade reserve and moved to the Les Epinettes Bois

where it remained until the division was relieved.

#### SUPPLY

Because of congested traffic and limited roads, kitchens were not moved forward from the Rendez Vous de Chasse until the night of September 29th. (16)

(16) History,  
p 36

Company I received its first warm meal since September 25th during the afternoon of September 30th. Being five days without warm food and warm clothes or blankets, with practically no sleep, exposed to inclement weather and the strain of battle, the organization was in poor condition. More than fifty per cent of the company was suffering from diarrhea.

#### CONCLUSION

The experiences of Company I are not exceptional but rather the normal things to expect in battle. Mistakes made by the company commander are the normal mistakes one may expect of untrained officers in any future engagements.

The lack of communication and liaison, the lack of information, the vagueness of understanding, the confusion almost constantly existing, and the prevailing feeling of uncertainty is, I believe, not exceptional. It is a normal condition of battle.

Any success which may have been attained by Company I and the entire 91st Division was due, I believe, to its high degree of morale and to its fighting spirit and aggressiveness.