

THE INFANTRY SCHOOL  
Fort Benning, Georgia

REGULAR COURSE  
1938-1939

Marches in the Combat Zone:  
British Retreat From Mons, 1914

1st Lt. Charles H. Miles, Jr., Inf.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Cover Page.....	i
Table of Contents.....	ii
Bibliography. Footnote Abbreviations.....	1-9
Text Sequence.....	1-9

I. RETREAT FROM MONS, FIRST PHASE

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Reason for Retreat.....	1
3. March Objective.....	2
4. Hour of Starting--I Corps.....	2
5. Security--II Corps.....	3

II. RETREAT FROM MONS, SECOND PHASE

6. Reason for Continuation.....	4
7. Direction of March.....	4
8. Failure to Reach March Objective--I Corps	5
9. Number and Composition of Columns--II Corps.....	6
10. Security on the West Flank.....	8

III. RECAPITULATION OF LESSONS

IV. MAPS

- Map No. 1: General Map, West Front 1914-1918
- Map No. 2: Retreat from Mons, 1st Phase, Initial  
Positions and Routes of Retreat, August 1914.
- Overlay to Map No. 2: Completion 1st Phase.
- Map No. 3: Retreat from Mons, 2nd Phase, Initial  
Positions and Routes of Retreat, August 1914.
- Overlay to Map No. 3: Completion 2nd Phase.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Abbreviations

### Text

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#### British

Military Operations, France and Belgium, 1914. Volume I, Third Edition  
Based on official documents. Prepared by direction of the Historical Section of The Committee of Imperial Defense. Compiled by Brigadier General Sir James E. Edmonds. Publishers: MacMillan and Co., London, 1933. (Library Classification D521 E4) Pages 91 to 133 and page 499.

A reliable account based on official records. Excellent source material, especially maps contained in special case, without which a thorough understanding of the action would not have been possible.

#### Mimeo 1-120

"Tactical Marches." Conference. Tactics. The Infantry School, 1937-38

#### F.S.R.

Field Service Regulations, U.S. Army, 1923, Pars. 239 and 241

#### B.E.F.

British Expeditionary Force.

#### G.H.Q.

British General Headquarters.

## 1. RETREAT FROM MONS, FIRST PHASE

1. INTRODUCTION.--The retreat from Mons by the British Expeditionary Force during the period August 23, 24, and 25, 1914, serves admirably to bring out several principles that apply to marches in the combat zone.

The British Expeditionary Force, under the command of Field Marshal Sir John French, was an independent command cooperating closely with the French. (1)

The British Expeditionary Force had on the 23rd of August fought the Battle of Mons against a superior force of the German Army and had fallen back from the general line Mons-Conde to take advantage of better terrain, one to two miles to the rear (2) as shown on Map No. 2.

The I Corps consisted of the 1st and 2nd Divisions and the 5th Cavalry Brigade. The 2nd Corps consisted of the 3rd and 5th Divisions. The Cavalry Division and 19th Brigade completed the organization of the British Expeditionary Force.

The 1st, 2nd and 3rd Brigades formed the 1st Division, the 4th, 5th and 6th Brigades the 2nd Division and the 13th, 14th and 15th Brigades the 5th Division. The British Brigade was equal in strength to our present (U. S. Army) regiment.

2. REASON FOR RETREAT.--Shortly after 11:00 PM, August 23rd word was received by Sir John French that General Laurezac, commanding the French 5th Army, had decided on a retirement to a line extending west from

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(1) British, p. 499  
(2) British, p. 91

~~Mauberge, necessitated by the failure of the French~~  
4th Army to get forward, thus leaving the 5th Army's right flank exposed to such an extent that its rear had been attacked from the east. The retirement of the 5th Army would leave the British Expeditionary Force in a precarious position and Sir John French's decision to retire was in accordance with General Joffre's wishes, i.e. that the British Expeditionary Force retire in the direction of Cambrai, delaying the enemys advance between Mauberge and Valenciennes. (3) See Map No. 2.

3. MARCH OBJECTIVE.--Shortly after 1:00 AM August 24, the General Staff Officers of the I and II Corps and Cavalry Division were assembled at GHQ. at Le Gateau and informed of Sir John French's decision.

The Corps were to retire in mutual cooperation to a place previously reconnoitered from La Longueville through Bavai to La Boiserette. (4) Thus we have a march objective embraced in the commander's decision and is in accord with paragraph 5 a (1) Mimeo 1-120.

4. HOUR OF STARTING--I CORPS.--Upon receipt of the order by telephone General Haig, Commanding the I Corps, moved to the 1st and 2nd Division Headquarters, in order to save time, and issued the orders in person for the retirement as follows; March objectives, 1st Division, Bavai, 2nd Division, Feignies; Hours of starting 4:00 AM and 4:45 AM respectively; routes as shown on Map No. 2. A rear guard was designated and charged with making a demonstration at day-

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(3) British, pp. 93 & 94.  
(4) British, p. 97.

light. The main bodies reached their destinations between 9:00 and 10:00 PM, August 24. The rear guard was not pressed. (5) See Overlay Map No. 2.

Haig's decision is in accord with paragraph 5, Mimeo 1-120, particularly subparagraph a (2) Commander's decision embraces.....hour of starting.

5. SECURITY--II CORPS.--The II Corps did not fare as well as the I Corps. Telephone communication was not in to the II Corps from G.H.Q. and as a result the orders of General Smith-Dorrien, Commander of the II Corps, did not reach the 3rd Division until 4:30 AM and the 5th Division until 7:00 AM. Also the Germans were attempting a turning movement in the zone of the II Corps and the retirement was made under pressure. (6)

Orders from II Corps to Divisions specified that a staff officer would be sent to describe the routes of march. (7)

Each brigade detailed a battalion as a rear guard and the main bodies were able to retire without great loss, however, not without great loss to the rear guards who were closely engaged. (8)

The brigades decision as to security is in accord with paragraph 5, a, (5):

"Commanders decision embraces.....security"  
While the rear guardes suffered great losses, their action is exemplified by paragraph 239, F.S.R.

"When necessary to the security of the main body, the rear guard sacrifices itself in the execution of its mission."

The Cavalry Division covered the left of the II Corps and the withdrawal of the 19th Brigade. When

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- (5) British, p. 98
  - (6) British, p. 99
  - (7) British, p. 100
  - (8) British, pp. 100 to 113

the missions were completed the Cavalry Division retired by brigades, fighting continuous rear guard actions.

(9) See Overlay Map No. 2.

Since the 3rd Division was able to make its retirement before the 5th Division, it was ordered to proceed west of Bavai thus shortening the retreat of the 5th Division, permitting it to fall back due south. Hence the divisions exchanged places (10) and the first phase of the retreat ended. See Overlay Map No. 2.

## II. RETREAT FROM MONS, SECOND PHASE

6. REASON FOR CONTINUATION.--On the afternoon of August 24, the Germans were attempting to turn the British left and force the British Expeditionary Force upon the old Fortress of Manberge. The left of the main part of the French 5th Army was already ten miles to the rear of the British right. Sir John French decided to continue the retirement to a position in the neighborhood of Le Cateau (11). See Map No. 3.

7. DIRECTION OF MARCH.--The road net south of Bavai made it necessary that the British Expeditionary Force be separated by the Forest Mormal (Map No. 3) during the retirement. To march the British Expeditionary Force entirely by roads west of the forest would mean a flank march across the front of an enemy superior in numbers and already threatening his west flank. His decision is in accord with paragraph 26, Mimeo 1-120 viz:

".....flank marches in proximity of the enemy are hazardous....."

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- (9) British, pp. 107-113
  - (10) British, p. 114
  - (11) British, p. 119.

To march the entire command to the east of the Forest was impossible due to the proximity of the front.

Therefore, Sir John French ordered the Corps to move out August 25th to a position in the neighborhood of Le Cateau. The I Corps was assigned the roads to the east of the Forest and the II Corps those to the west. Positions at Le Cateau were to be pointed out upon arrival. The march was to begin so that rear guards would clear the Mauberge-Bavai-Eth road by 5:30 AM. The 4th Division, having just arrived from England, was ordered to a position at Solesmes to assist the retirement of the II Corps. See Map No. 3. As security two brigades of cavalry were to cover the movement of the II Corps. Two brigades of cavalry and the 19th Brigade were to cover the west flank. (12)

Sir John French's decision was in accord with paragraph 5, Mimeo 1-120, particularly a (3).

"Commanders decision embraces....routes."

#### 8. FAILURE TO REACH MARCH OBJECTIVE--I CORPS.--

In amplification of the G.H.Q. order General Haig ordered the 1st Division to cross the Sambre at Hautmont and proceed southward via Limont Fontaine, Ecuclin and Monceau to Dompierre and villages beyond. The 2nd Division was ordered to cross the Sambre at Pont Sur Sambre and to billet in the area from Leval southwest to Landrecies. The 5th Cavalry Brigade was to cover the above movement. (13) Map No. 3.

When the 1st Division reached Hautmont it was found that the road to the south was occupied by the 53rd and part of the 69th French Reserve Divisions, flank divisions of the French 5th Army. Hence it was

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(12) British, p. 120

(13) British, p. 121



forced to share a narrow dusty road to Marbais. The weather was extremely hot and due to the number of troops upon the road the march was broken repeatedly by numerous halts, much to discomfort of men already worn from fatigue and want of sleep. (14)

The 2nd Division ran into congestion at Maroilles where it ran into the tail of General Sordets Cavalry Corps, moving on its way to Le Cateau. (14)

The I Corps was in its billeting area by 6:00 PM except for the 5th Brigade detailed to guard the passages of the Sambre from Pont Sur Sambre to Sassegnies. (15)

Q. Do you think General Haig's decision to billet in the area as shown on Overlay Map No. 3, was correct?

A. No. Sir John French had ordered the British Expeditionary Force to march to a position near Le Cateau. Haig ignored his mission by failing to continue the march to the objective set by G.H.Q.

From air reports he realized that the German columns were closing in and ordered a further movement southwest; however, his command was attacked before the movement could commence, at Maroilles and Landrecies about 6:00 PM, by advance guards of the German 5th and 7th Divisions. (16)

9. NUMBER AND COMPOSITION OF COLUMNS--II CORPS.--

General Smith-Dorrien ordered the II Corps to fall to the line Le Cateau-Caudry-Haucourt by three roads. The 5th Division was allotted the road immediately west of the Forest Mormal with the 14th Brigade as rear guard. The 3rd Division, which was closest to the attempted

- (14) British, p. 122  
(15) British, p. 123  
(16) British, p. 133

envelopment by the Germans was to march on two roads as follows: 9th Brigade via Gommeignies--Salesches--Vendegies au Bois. The 8th Brigade via Wargnies Le Petit--Le Quesnoy--Salesches--Viesly. The 7th Brigade was detailed as rear guard. (17)

General Smith-Dorrien's decision is in accord with certain principles contained in Mimeo 1-120 namely:

Par. 5 a (4) "The Commander of an independent force is charged with following decisions incident to a march..... number of columns."

Par. 13 "Multiple columns facilitates evacuation."

The entire II Corps' retirement was delayed by the passage of General Sordet's Cavalry Corps from east to west across its line of retreat, moving to fill in the gap between the British Expeditionary Force and the French 84th Territorial Division, thus blocking the roads to the south so that the supply trains could not move at midnight, the hour fixed by orders. This caused a delay of a full hour. (18) However, the delay was more than offset by filling in the gap between the British Expeditionary Force and the French 84th Territorial Division by Sordet's Cavalry.

The main body of the 5th Division moved at 3:00 AM and the rear guard cleared the Bavai-Eth Road at 6:30 AM and was not pressed. (19) The main body arrived in its position between 3:00 and 5:00 PM. See Overlay Map No. 3. However, the 13th Brigade was held up just outside Le Cateau by the passage of six regiments and a cyclist battalion of Sordet's Cavalry moving

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(17) British, p. 124  
(18) British, pp. 123-124  
(19) British, pp. 123-124

westward. (20)

Further to the west the main bodies of the 3rd

Division moved off at 5:00 AM with the 7th Brigade as rear guard. (21) The rear guard was not engaged and at 7:00 PM the 3rd Division was in its place in the La Cateau position. (22) See Overlay Map No. 3.

10. SECURITY ON THE WEST FLANK.--During the course of the retirement the Cavalry Division and the 19th Brigade continually parried repeated German movements on the west flank. (23) The proper use of cavalry in the service of security as contained in paragraph 5 a (5) in further amplified by paragraph 241 F.S.R.

"Cavalry is especially suitable to detail as flank guard duty....."

### III. RECAPITULATION OF LESSONS.

The criterion of a successful march is the answer to this question....."Did the command arrive at the proper place, at the proper time, prepared to do the thing desired?"

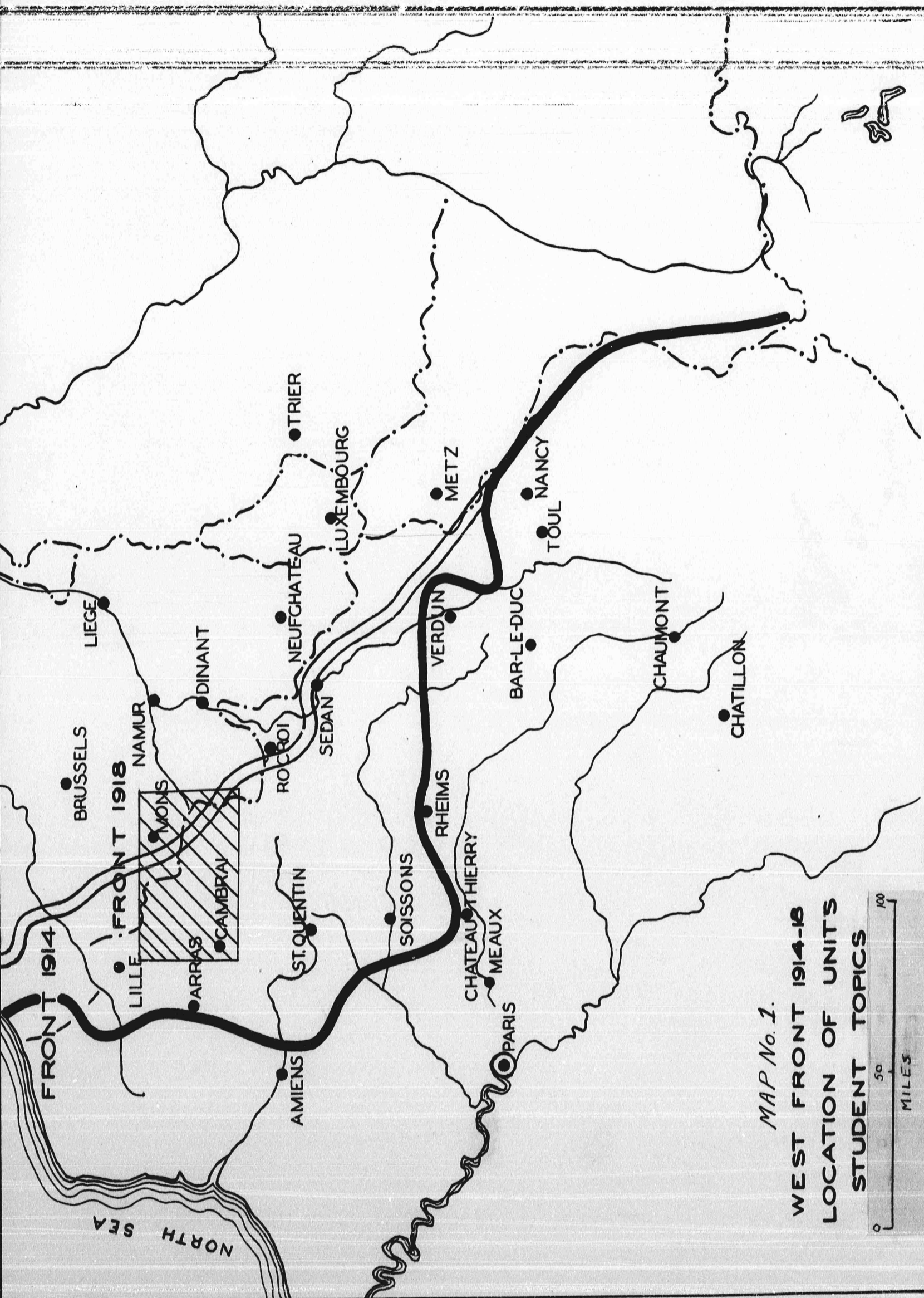
A march to be successful need not only to adhere to march objectives, hour of starting, routes, number of columns and security measures as already brought forth in preceding events but must be a coordination of the above principles plus that all important element-- control; control applied by both command and staff.

Suffice to say that Haig's personal intervention was responsible for a timely and well executed march and a fine example of command control. It may seem that the various collisions suffered in the movements south of Bavai were a poor example of staff control

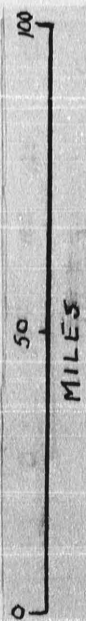
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- (20) British, p. 128
- (21) British, p. 124
- (22) British, p. 128
- (23) British, pp. 125-129

however, the fortunes of war sometimes impose unexpected conditions beyond ones control. It was due mainly to energetic staff control that the British Expeditionary Force completed two successful marches on successive days.



MAP No. 1.  
 WEST FRONT 1914-18  
 LOCATION OF UNITS  
 STUDENT TOPICS



I CAD  
CORPS

17th  
DIV

18th  
DIV

6th  
DIV

5th  
DIV

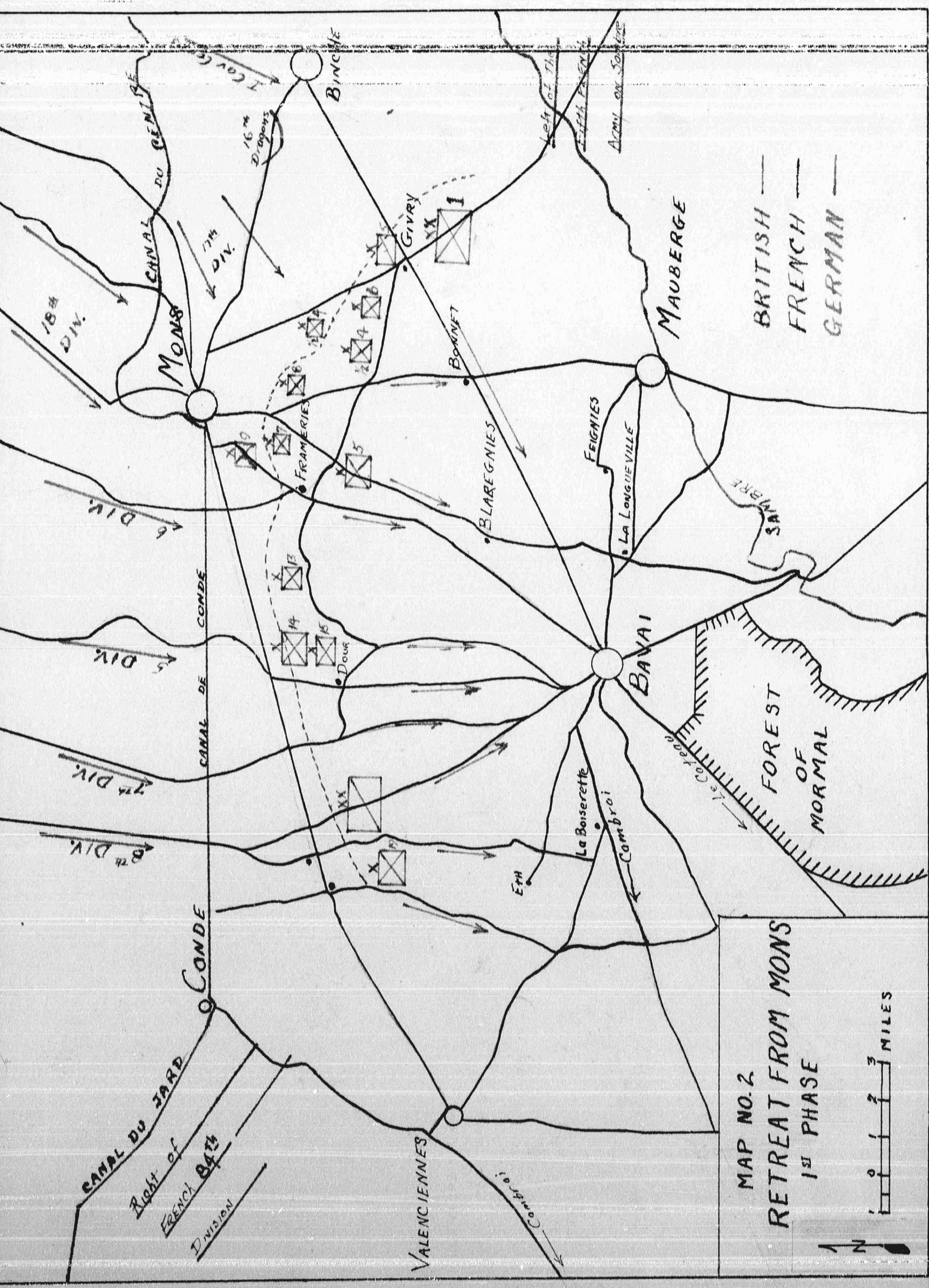
7th  
DIV

8th  
DIV

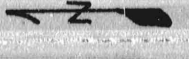
Left of  
II CORPS



OVERLAY FOR  
MAP NO. 2  
SHOWING POSITIONS  
END OF 1st PHASE



MAP NO. 2  
RETREAT FROM MONS  
1<sup>ST</sup> PHASE



BRITISH —  
FRENCH —  
GERMAN —

CANAL DU GEMINSE

CANAL DE CONDE

CANAL DU JARD

Right of  
FRENCH BATH  
DIVISION

MONS

BINCHE

MAUBERGE

BAVAI

VALENCIENNES

GIVRY

BONNET

BLAREGNIES

FEIGNIES

LA LONGUEVILLE

La Boiserette

Combrai

SAMBRE

FOREST OF  
MORMAL

Left of the  
15th Army  
Army of Sambre

18th DIV.

17th DIV.

16th  
Dragons

6 DIV.

5 DIV.

7th DIV.

8th DIV.

FRAMERIES

Dour

Eth

Combrai

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16

XX I

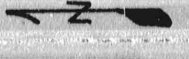
XX

X

XX

X

1 2 3 MILES



17th DIV

18/11

OVERLAY FOR MAP No 3  
SHOWING POSITIONS  
END OF 2<sup>nd</sup> PHASE

4th Res Corps  
32<sup>nd</sup> DIV

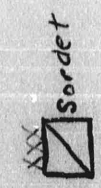
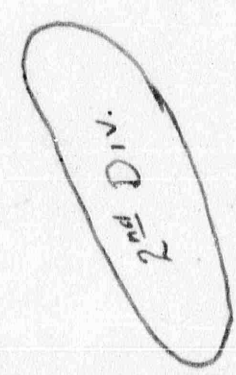
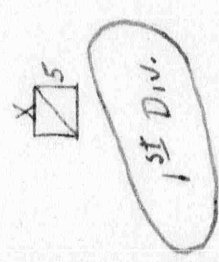
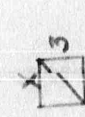
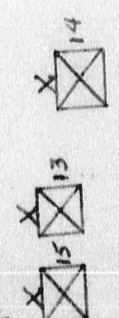
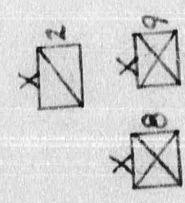
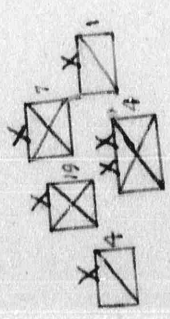
2<sup>nd</sup> COY  
DIV

8<sup>th</sup> DIV

6<sup>th</sup> DIV

5<sup>th</sup> DIV

7<sup>th</sup> DIV

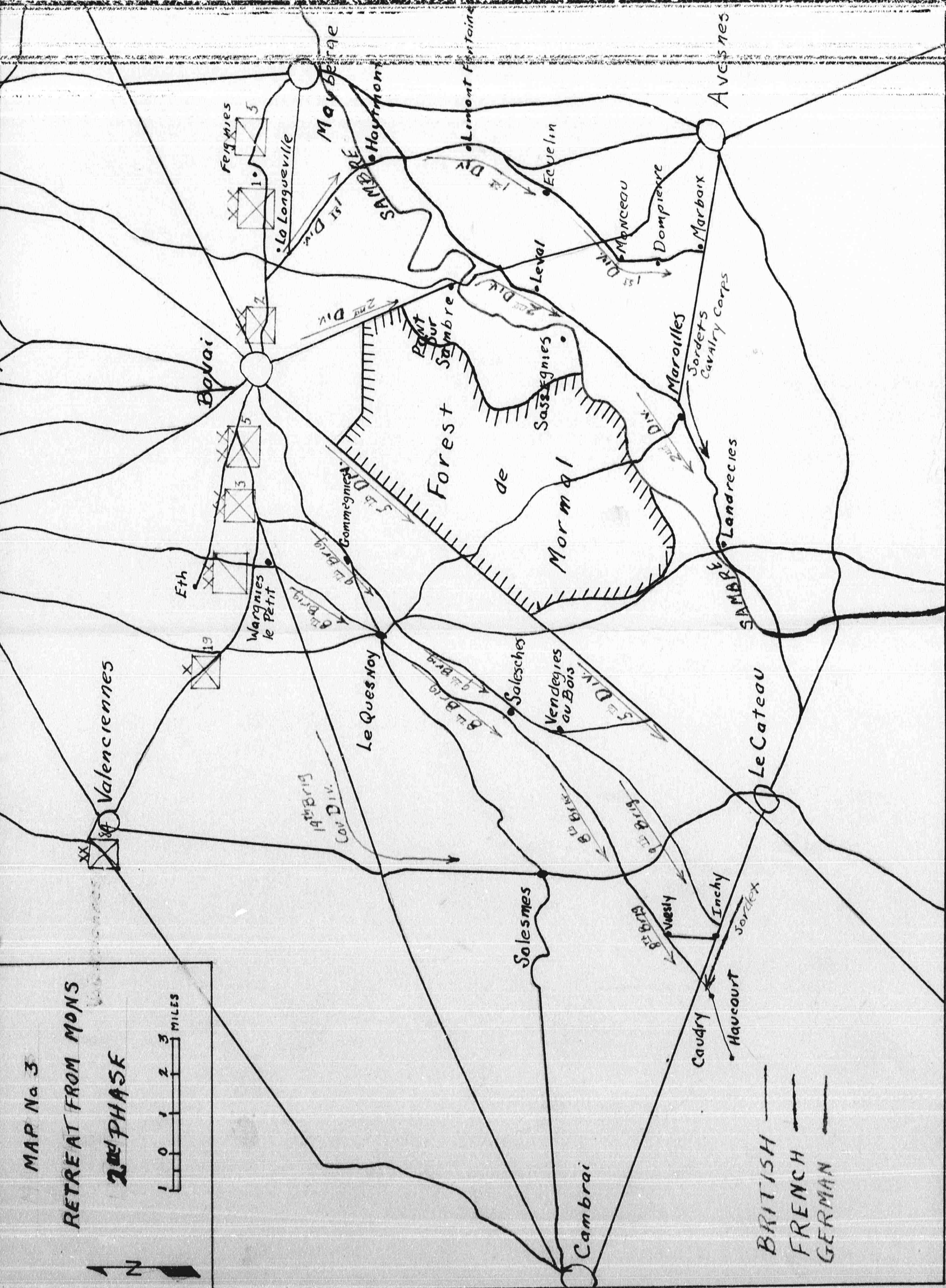
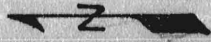
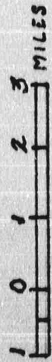




MAP No 3

RETREAT FROM MONS

2<sup>ND</sup> PHASE



BRITISH  
FRENCH  
GERMAN