

THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
Fort Benning, Georgia

REGULAR COURSE
1936--1937

HISTORICAL TACTICAL STUDY

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE FRENCH INFANTRY DIVISION
With special emphasis on the Infantry component

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

Leavenworth Translation

"Organization and Tactical
Employment of a French
Division, 1931".

A compilation of available French sources dealing with the tactical employment of their division. Carefully assembled and discriminatingly edited it substantially exhausts its subject. Like all similar works the reader is at a disadvantage because of his inability to evaluate the relative authoritativeness of the sources drawn upon.

Attache' Report

"Combat Estimate, France,
July 1, 1936".

Intelligence report dealing with the entire subject of French defenses, Army, Air and Navy. Detailed and timely and an excellent example of its type. It has, however, the unavoidable limitations of such a document---minor ambiguities, gaps in the assembly of detail and the willingness to accept French point of view in an uncritical spirit.

Departmental Report

"Modernization of the
Organization of the Army".

Report of the War Department committee charged with enquiring into and recommending certain changes in our present organization, particularly the infantry division. Valuable as a factual source for drawing of comparisons with French organization.

FOOTNOTE ABBREVIATIONS USED

OTE Organization and Tactical Employment of a
 French Division - 1931.

CEF Combat Estimate, France, 1936.

MOA Modernization of the Organization of the
 Army.

and the large scale employment of colonial troops to reach ~~numerical equality with Germany.~~ Indirectly, they have striven to achieve effective equality regardless of their disparity in number by a complete reformation of their national defense. Both courses have met with a measure of success. France still has numerous allies although their degree of attachment is variable and their active assistance will be dictated by their own national interest in any future conflict. The colonies are capable of providing large numbers of excellent troops but the extent to which France may go in raising and employing such formations without danger to herself is a very real and most controversial question. However, it is the indirect means of attaining equality that concern us most since it directly affects French divisional organization. These include rigid economy in the distribution of personnel, definite reliance upon the advantages of a defensive mode of warfare and the augmenting of the defense by the construction of the Maginot Line of frontier fortifications. (2) The first of these is indubitably sound and could be applied by any army with happy effect. The second and third are equally logical if we agree to their implied premise, that defensive means and weapons will continue to prevail over the offense. These measures all have the common purpose of conserving manpower but it is interesting to note that the frontier defenses have in a sense aggravated the very condition they were intended to alleviate for the garrison requirements are a heavy drain on the field forces, reducing them to the point where, if the line itself should not prove an insurmountable barrier, the consequences to France might be incalculable. (3)

(2) CEF 4109-q.r.

(3) CEF 4109-n

ORGANIZATION OF THE FRENCH INFANTRY DIVISION

1. INTRODUCTION.-- To be of value, an appreciation of a foreign division should include certain matters extraneous to the central subject itself for the reason that a nation's military organization can seldom be disassociated entirely from factors touching the nation as a whole. Industrial, political and geographical considerations always affect the composition and may sometimes reach the proportions of controlling factors. Each nation has its peculiar problems. For the British the expanse of their empire and the ubiquitous character of their service render it inadvisable for them to adhere too closely to a set form of organization. For the Italians, the topography of the Alpine frontier creates a special difficulty. For the Russians, industrial poverty presents a problem in the fields of equipment, munitions and supply. For the French it is a social problem, a declining birth-rate and a diminishing supply of man power. It has affected profoundly the entire field of French military outlook and if our analysis of their scheme of organization is to result in a fair, intelligent, and rational appraisal, we must constantly bear their particular problem in mind. (1).

In estimating their requirements for defense the French think, of course, in terms of an attack by Germany. Their populations are forty millions and sixty millions respectively and, consequently, the French see themselves out-numbered in any future conflict along the Rhine. The French accept this as an inescapable reality in their military scene and have devoted themselves to countervailing measures. Directly, they have sought by a system of alliances

(1) C.E.F. 4109-p.

These are the principal factors underlying French organization and they should not be dropped from view in studying their infantry division.

2. GENERAL COMPOSITION.-- (Chart No. 1) The French division comprises 450 officers and 16,500 men. (4) Three regiments of infantry and two of artillery are its primary combat units. These are supplemented by an organic reconnaissance squadron operating under division which, likewise, exercises immediate control over the divisional services, quartermaster, engineer, and communications. (5) The division does not include tanks or aircraft, and its motorized element is confined to the vehicles of the reconnaissance detachment and the cargo trucks of the supply agencies. (6) For general transportation the division relies on its 5900 animals. Casual inspection of relative strength of combat and service agencies discloses at the outset a striking contrast with our own organizations: the combat units are extremely large, the servicing units extremely small. By way of comparison, in our new proposed division we have some 400 men assigned to a noncombatant organization for every 1000 men who belong to a fighting unit; the French find it possible to provide the same support using only 150 men per 1000. In other words, they have reduced the divisional overhead to about one third of our own. This is illustrative of the French effort to dispose their manpower in a manner calculated to provide the greatest possible number of organizations of maximum combat strength. Carrying this policy of retrenchment still further they will use native colonials in such positions as truck drivers and laborers. (7) By this practical expedient they are able to utilize the

(4)CEF 4109-a.b.(5)OTE 6

(6)CEF 4109-a.b(7)CEF 4109-e.

services of colonials not of good fighting stock, such as the Indo-Chinese, to replace Frenchmen for duty in the line. (8) We receive at the very outset then, a definite impression that the French infantry division is characterized by combat units of tremendous strength, rigid economy in the distribution of personnel and that it is essentially an animal-drawn organization.

3. THE INFANTRY COMPONENT.-- The divisional infantry is divided among three regiments notable for their large personnel and strength of weapons. Regimental strength is 2975, sufficient personnel for three battalions, a weapons company, and a reconnaissance group in addition to the usual agencies of command and supply. The reconnaissance group consists of a platoon of cavalry assigned as an organic part of the regiment, an arrangement found in the French service alone. (9) Its role is that of close-in reconnaissance and liaison. (10) The weapons company has a strength of 128 and its mission is perfectly familiar to us. Its armament is six infantry mortars and three thirty-seven millimeter guns. As a measure of anti-mechanized defense the latter are being replaced by a twenty-five millimeter anti-tank gun. (11) The French battalion is similar to the one formerly found in our service. It has three rifle companies and a heavy machine gun company of 16 guns which represents the greatest numerical assignment of machine guns found in any battalion. (12) The infantry has no motor transportation, even its trains being horse-drawn. In combat the infantry has attached to it a labor battalion of 1000 men employed, presumably, for purposes such as the construction of field fortifications. (13) This fact, considered in connection

(8) CEF 4109-q (9) C.O. (10) OTE 33 (11) CEF 4109-j (12) C.O. (13) CEF 4109-a

with the large size of units, their unusual strength in heavy machine guns and the lack of motor transport implies that the French place supreme emphasis upon defensive warfare. Infantry such as this would seem far more effective, let us say, in filling the interstices in the Maginot line than it would be in an offensive thrust into Germany. (13a)

4. ECHELONS OF COMMAND.-- Turning from the minutiae of organizational detail to a consideration of organizational principles we note the ~~absence~~^{absence} of a brigade organization between division and regiment. This point is of more than passing interest since in the new U.S. division, we have adopted the same feature which represents a marked departure from our former practice. The question involved is many-sided and goes to the very fundamentals of military organization. It is this. How many subordinate echelons of command should intervene between division and battalion, the ultimate and primary combat units? Do we require both a regimental and a brigade organization or will efficiency be promoted by dispensing with one or the other or even both? These are the problems which confront the military organizer at the outset in his design of a new divisional structure. The tremendous size of the 1918 American division undoubtedly made both brigade and regimental subdivisions necessary but, nevertheless, our old two-regiment brigade was an awkward tactical unit. For example, there was no convenient way of providing a divisional reserve without seriously impairing the tactical effectiveness of the brigade furnishing the reserve and thus causing a lack of balance between the two. Likewise, the necessary decentralization of control to brigade commanders was often inconvenient particularly at times when

(13a) CEF 4109-s.t.

the division commander's tactical ends could have been attained with much greater facility had immediate control of the regiments been possible. On the other hand the excessive centralization of command which would follow if we abolished both brigade and regiment would be equally productive of evil results for normally the division commander could not exercise effective control over a large number of battalions without the assistance of some intermediate agency. The French scheme of grouping three regiments immediately under division seems the best solution. It preserves the highly desirable triangular formation, permits the retention of a homogeneous divisional reserve without affecting the strength of remaining units and affords opportunity for a reasonable degree of decentralization of command.

5. THE INFANTRY COMMANDER.-- Occasion may arise, however, when the lack of a brigade organization will be keenly felt, as when a local crisis develops which is of such size or so situated as to preclude its assignment to a single regiment. In such cases, where special coordination of a part of the action is needed a brigade organization would be invaluable and it is here that the division commander avails himself of the services of his infantry commander.

The infantry commander is a peculiar personage and "Sui Generis" to the French service. Originally intended by regulations to command the infantry component of the division his very title has become a contradiction. (14) The organizational defect inherent in the original plan is manifest. Obviously, for the infantry is in essence the division and he who controls it effectually commands the division. Plainly this can be none other than the division commander himself if we are to avoid an absurdity.

(14) O.T.E. 69

The infantry commander is a general officer and within the organization is second in rank only to the division commander. (15) He has a small staff and is described as being "at the side of the division commander". (16) He is not, apparently, a chief of staff or an executive nor does it appear that orders to the regiments regularly go forward through him. From the nature of his normal functions it would be more descriptive of his actual status to call him a special infantry commander. He succeeds the division commander if the latter becomes a casualty. (17) He does not command the line although he regularly supervises its disposition in defense and on occasion may lead a counterattack. (18) In the attack he will often command the troops making the main effort particularly where these are drawn from different regiments. (19) In pursuit he may be logically entrusted with the command of a temporary grouping of combined arms operating at a distance from the main body. (20)

From the foregoing random examples it would seem that the infantry commander is at times a staff officer and at times a troop leader. In the latter role his functions approximate those of a brigade commander and it is in this capacity, which is occasional rather than habitual, that his presence lends to the French organization its peculiar quality of elasticity. This, in effect, permits the division commander to form a brigade organization whenever the tactical situation indicates a need for it; yet an organization so provisional in structure that the normal order may be quickly restored as soon as the circumstances which made the transition necessary have passed.

(15) OTE 193 (16) OTE 150 (17) OTE 70 (18) OTE 69,108
(19) OTE 169 (20) OTE 185

The infantry commander is of unusual interest to us for we are apparently to have a parallel personage in our new division, the chief of the special staff. In the report recommending the adoption of the proposed division he is described as,

"A brigadier general, whose normal duty should be to serve as a tactical and training inspector and as an infantry adviser and assistant to the division commander if the latter is a casualty. He is available for assignment to command, temporarily, part or all of the infantry component, or any special grouping of the combined arms such as an encircling force in a pursuit." (21)

This is a succinct description of the French infantry commander and, found in one of our own reports, indicates that we are to determine for ourselves whether his office is a logical feature of divisional organization or merely an ingenious expedient, resorted to by the French as a tactful correction of an entirely fore-seeable error in their original organization.

6. SUPPORTING ARMS AND SERVICES.-- With the exception of the divisional reconnaissance squadron no particular innovations appear in the organization of the remaining divisional forces. The battalion of engineers is essentially created for technical and construction purposes particularly field fortifications. It is but lightly armed and receives no tactical training as its use in combat will be exceptional. (22)

(21) M.O.A. 16

(22) C.E.F. 4109-k

The communication troops which consist of a telegraph company and a radio detachment are, likewise, engineers as the French do not have a separate signal corps. (23) The divisional staff, including service and headquarters troops, number 50 officers and 260 men. In addition there are some 23 officers and 613 men, distributed among the quartermaster, trains, medical and veterinary service. As previously explained, the necessity for economy of personnel has served to ~~keep~~ ^{Keep} these organizations at a minimum strength consistent with probable requirements of the combat elements. This disparity in strength is alleviated to some extent by assigning to these units the bulk of the division's slender stock of motor transport.

7. THE RECONNAISSANCE SQUADRON.-- The reconnaissance squadron is something not heretofore found in our organization but since it is embodied in our new proposed division an account of its elements and purpose will prove worthwhile. It has a strength of 26 officers and 643 men and includes a troop of horse cavalry, a troop of motorcyclists, and a machine-gun troop. The latter is the only completely motorized unit in the French division although it is the present intention to motorize the entire squadron. (24) Tactically it is employed for distant or independent reconnaissance to the front or flanks of the division and to protect the advance guard when contact becomes imminent. (25) Our own squadron will be similarly constituted although much reduced in size possibly because of the fact that we enjoy a more lavish distribution of motors in the other combat units. (26)

8. THE DIVISIONAL ARTILLERY.-- The divisional

(23) CEF-4109h (24) CEF-4109c (25) OTE 33,23 (26) MOA Chart IV
C.O.

artillery is organized into two regiments but with no brigade organization. One of these regiments is of 75-mm guns organized in three battalions of three batteries each giving a total of thirty-six guns. The other employs the 155-mm howitzer and has two battalions of three batteries each, making an aggregate of twenty-four 155-mm guns. Like the other combat units the personnel of the artillery regiments is large; the 75-mm regiment has 70 officers and 2,100 men, the 155-mm regiment 45 officers and 1,650 men. (27) The artillery relies entirely upon animal transportation except for a few divisions in which the 75-mm guns alone have been motorized. (28). In general the artillery organization resembles our own and this is likewise true of the doctrine prescribing its tactical employment in support of the infantry.

9. WEAPONS.-- Like our own division the French is equipped principally with weapons which were in service before the armistice. Its basic arm is the old Lebd rifle which is now provided with improved ammunition. (29) Their light machine gun is the Chatellerault automatic rifle model of 1924 which has apparently replaced the much maligned Chant-Chant originally supplied by the French to the lower numbered divisions of our A.E.F. When used with a spade rest it is said to be capable of effective automatic fire at ranges up to 1300 yards. (30) The machine gun is the Hotchkiss of 1914, air cooled, heavy, and complicated and by no means the equal of the Browning or Vickers. The infantry mortar is a modern Stokes Brandt model of 1928. It has a practical range of 2200 yards which would indicate that it is about as effective as our own. (31) The 37-mm gun, the

(27) CEF-4109a (28) Report of (29) CEF 4109-j (30) OTE 207
(31) OTE 207, 8 Chief of Field
Artillery, USA, 1936

75 and the 155 are for all practical purposes identical with those found in the American service. Like ourselves, the French are experimenting with more modern weapons. The list of these includes a motorized Stokes-Brandt, a motorized 37-mm gun, and a 25-mm gun to replace the 37 as an anti-tank weapon. This is described as a rapid fire cannon of 10-shot magazine capacity. (32) It has a range of 9000 yards and fires an armor piercing, tracer, projectile at a cyclic rate of 100 shots per minute. (33) Another step toward mechanization has been the evolution of a low relief tractor as an ammunition carrier. It is called a Chenillette and its prototypes appeared on the hillsides around Verdun in 1916.

10. COMPARATIVE STRENGTH OF WEAPONS.-- (Chart No. 2)

An interesting comparison of fire power can be had by contrasting the strengths in the various categories of weapons found in the French and our own proposed division. This can not be done directly with accuracy as the figures require to be weighted because of variations in size between the divisions. But by using a strength of 1000 infantrymen as a basis of comparison and ascertaining the weapons support they receive in each division, an estimate of their relative fire power is possible. The comparison discloses that we are superior in mortars, anti-tank guns and light machine guns, but that the French enjoy a preponderance of artillery and a tremendous superiority in heavy machine guns.

11. SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS.-- Having covered in a general way the distinctive features and some of the details of French organization a brief summary may not be out of place. Considering the division as an instrumentality created for all-purpose warfare on a modern battlefield it

(32) C.E.F.4109-j (33) Foreign Mil.News-Digest, ANJ 10-24-36

creates a distinctly unfavorable impression through its lack of balance. It possesses tremendous strength, efficient distribution of forces and a logical organization of command. Thus it continues to do certain things well but opposed to these is its fatal lack of mobility and coordination of movement. Strategically, it must move as it did in 1918 in dismembered sections of rail and motor transport. Tactically, it is still linked to the hybrid gait of the man, the mule and the motor. Considering this division as created essentially for defense we are bound to accord it a more favorable rating. In place, where its fire power can be developed to the utmost, its defensive powers would seem capable of prevailing over any conceivable attack by an organization of like strength. But, formidable though they may be, these powers have as their condition precedent the dangerous assumption that the enemy will allow the time and space needed for their full development.

12. MOBILIZATION.-- (~~Chart No. 5~~) Built as a means of augmenting French man-power the Maginot line has in a sense produced quite an opposite effect. Such a line must be garrisoned and the necessary troops had to be drawn from the field forces, and assigned to a fixed theatre of operations. (34) Garrison requirements absorb ^{eight}~~light~~ divisions of a heavily reinforced type and to maintain these the field forces, excluding expeditionary troops, have been reduced to twelve under strength divisions. (35) Six of these can be brought to strength in three days to form the first contingent of the field army. The remainder will require a period of training. (36) The French Commander in Chief must begin the war, then, with no field force at his disposal except some odd scrapings of

(34) C,E,F, 4109-n (35) C.E.F. 4109-p (36) C.E.F.4109-n

expeditionary troops. It will be several days before he receives the first echelon of the field forces and a much longer time before the stream of reinforcements is appreciably swelled. (37)

13. PERSONAL ESTIMATE.- To an American flanked by weak or amiable neighbors and inured to a chronic state of unpreparedness this situation would not seem serious, but if I were a Frenchman I should feel somewhat alarmed over it. An attack by Germany is reasonably fore-seeable if not imminent and in the beginning the French must rely on their static frontier defenses with a gambler's confidence. It is during this period that the lack of mobility in the French infantry division will manifest itself for when troops are few they must expect to make long and rapid marches in support of threatened points along an extended front. As presently constituted this is the thing which the French division is least able to do and you may be assured that the opportunity presented by such a weakness will not be overlooked by an astute German general staff.

For in Germany where mechanization is not a matter of blue prints and staff talk but an accomplished fact, they have the present means of concentrating against any given point on the Maginot line with overwhelming force. If they attack at all it will be with the well calculated certainty that they can create a gap sufficient for the passage of a mechanized column bent on havoc. Using only a part of their known force of three thousand modern tanks they would find it entirely within their power to sever the vital arteries in rear of the line, disrupt communications in northeastern France and dislocate mobilization before it

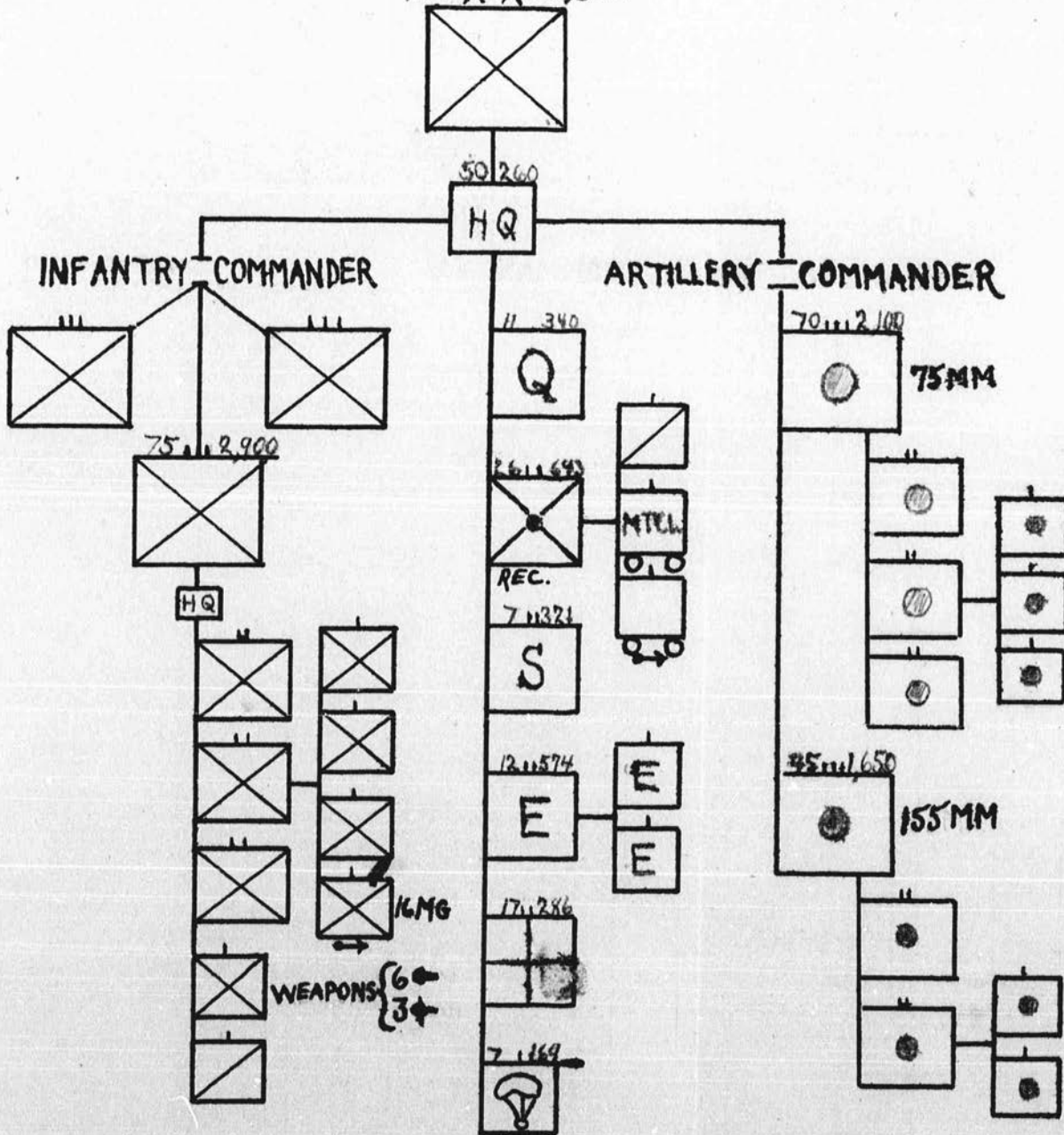
(37) C.E.F. 4109-r.

had well begun. The available French division would be a feeble force to counter such an operation as they lack both the means and the mobility. Aggressively exploited such an attack might well bring about the early collapse of the Maginot line and find the French once more entangled in a booby trap of their own designing---at a hopeless disadvantage before the bulk of their forces had become fairly engaged.

The French general staff envisages just such an attack but as yet has made inadequate provision to meet it.

(38) In the light of to-day's realities their division needs motorization and mechanization before it can cope successfully with the type of opposition it is bound to encounter. These reforms, likewise, would definitely solve their ~~personnel~~^{personnel} problem, for mechanization and motorization mean multiplication of manpower. Some progress is being made but, whether through sheer official complacency or governmental parsimony, the rate is far too slow. Until these steps are taken the French will continue to stand within measurable distance of a first class military disaster.

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FRENCH INFANTRY DIVISION

CHART 1

COMPARISON of WEAPONS STRENGTH

U.S. and FRENCH DIVISIONS
ON BASIS OF 1000 INFANTRYMEN

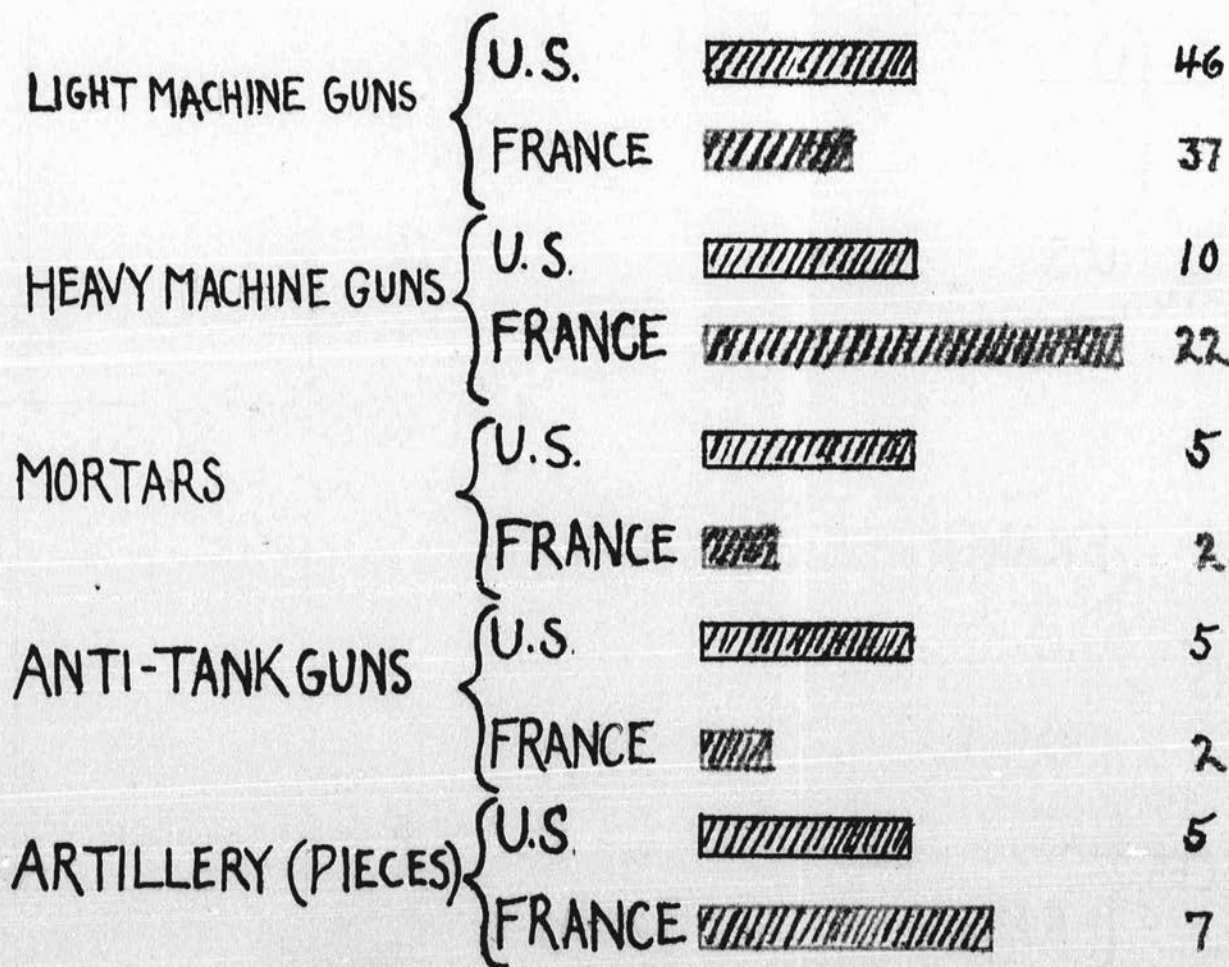


CHART 2