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M I L I T A R Y H I S T O R Y

OPERATIONS OF THE 1ST PLATOON CO B, 309TH MG BN (78TH
DIVISION) IN THE MEUSE-ARGONNE OFFENSIVE, OCTOBER 15-
NOVEMBER 5, 1918. (PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF A PLATOON LEADER)

CHESTER C. WESTFALL, CAPTAIN, INFANTRY

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MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED

- Personal From my personal recollections refreshed by the reading of several accounts of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, division orders effective at the time and from information contained on my personal map used at the time.
- Div. Hist. "History of the 78th Division in the World War, 1917, 1918 and 1919" by Thomas F. Meehan.
- Palmer "Our Greatest Battle; The Meuse-Argonne" by Frederick Palmer.
- Harpers "Pictorial History of The World War". by Harper & Bros. publishing Co.

Brigade in the east or right subsector facing the important enemy strong-hold of the Bois des Loges. My brigade, the 156th, occupied the west or left subsector with the important enemy strong-hold of Grandpre in its front. (3)

(3) Div Hist.
pp 93&107

THE TERRAIN

Now a word about the terrain in this sector. The valley of the Aire River is a wide, low and level plain, dominated by the heights to the north and east, which of course were in the hands of the enemy. Running through the valley generally east and west was a standard gauge rail-way line extending through numerous cuts and fills. At the Grandpre Station there was a goodly sized railway yard and several large freight warehouses. There was also a narrow gauge railway traversing the area with a branch running to the north. This narrow gauge was built entirely on a fill running from about twelve feet high to four or five feet high. The road from the station to Grandpre crosses three branches of the Aire River over good sized wooden bridges. The Aire River was unfordable except for the branch nearest town. (4)

(4) Personal

THE STRONGHOLD OF GRANDPRE

not shown
The stronghold of Grandpre was formed by three important points, Talma Hill to the west, Hill 204 and the citadel of Grandpre situated on a long narrow ridge ending in a cliff thirty feet high, in the north central part of the town. This citadel commanded the surrounding country for a radius of about a mile. Strongly constructed machine-gun nests were built in it, on it and below it, and without possession of this ridge Grandpre was but a death trap. (5) One writer

(5) Div.Hist.
p 107

INTRODUCTION

I have selected this subject not because my personal experiences were so startling, or because my machine-gun platoon played such an important part in the war, but on the contrary, as I look back from our present-day teachings, I can recollect many times when we could have been used to much greater advantage than we were, and this is the point that I desire to stress in this talk.

In reading my own division history, and other works in connection with the preparation of this talk, I find that the brigade machine-gun battalions were barely mentioned at all. This has led me to believe that we were given but little consideration by higher authority, as shown also by the fact that in many attacks by the battalions in our immediate front, when many guns were available, we were given no jobs whatever.

October 15, 1918 found my company and platoon in the northern extremity of the Argonne Forest facing the low level valley of the Aire River with the city of Grandpre in the distance. (1) We had reached this point two days prior to this after a three weeks tour in the Saint Mihiel Sector and a forced march of three days and three nights with but occasional halts of a few hours for rest. (2)

RELIEF OF 77TH BY 78TH DIVISION

On the afternoon of October 15th, orders were received for our division to relieve the 77th Division in the Grandpre - St. Juvin Sector as indicated on the map. Relief was made that night with the 155th

Map #1

(1) Personal

(2) Div Hist.
p 93

Map #1

No page
(6) Palmer

likens the place to Gibraltar. (6) The position was made still stronger on the east flank by a loop which

St
(7) Div.Hist.
p 107

the Air River makes to the north and back again. (7)

1st Plat Co B 309th MG Bn ENTERS THE LINE

Orders for the relief did not reach us until after dark so it was impossible to make any day-light reconnaissance of routes and positions. During our two days rest at this point however, we had explored the vicinity, and the road around our right flank and the narrow gauge as far as the railway station. My platoon was ordered to the vicinity east of the station.

Overlay #1
position #1

Section
We moved in on carts at about 10:00 PM and established a battery position on the narrow gauge fill between the railway triangle and the switch just west thereof. Was quiet at that particular time so we moved up the road in column of squads well closed up on account of the darkness and other troops that were on the road moving in both directions. We made one extra trip with the transportation to insure a goodly initial supply of ammunition at the position. The animals were returned to La Noue Le COQ where the rear echelon of the company was well established in the shelter of an old quarry wall.

The guns were immediately mounted and laid by indirect means on the northern part of Grandpre with ranges from 1200 to 1500 yards. The night was spent in loading ammunition, *drying* ~~driving~~ belts and turning the rounds in belts already loaded. We had an excellent dry place to do this work under one of the freight houses, the floor of which was considerably above the ground forming a regular basement. (8)

(8) Personal

ATTACK OF OCTOBER 16, 1918

(9) Div Hist.
p 109

Orders were received early in the morning for a six o'clock attack by the rifle companies (9), who were about 400 yards to our front. There we were with a tremendous amount of fire power available, in an excellent position with but little movement, to enfilade the entire front of the attacking battalion and the lower streets of the town, but we were given no job. My company commander personally arranged with the commander of the 2d Bn 312th Inf in our front to support the battalion in this attack. The Bn Commander was glad to have this help and we gave it to him by moving about 500 yards north on the narrow gauge and going into battery position. I bring this out to show that in order to get into action it was sometimes necessary to go out and ask for the opportunity. Before we had the data figured for laying by indirect means, it became sufficiently light to lay and fire directly. The attack started as scheduled, but after a few minutes firing by us, the riflemen could be observed entering the town and it became necessary to switch our fire to the north. We had attracted considerable enemy machine gun and 37-mm fire by now from the heights north of town, and found it necessary to dig well in on the east side of the fill which was about four feet high at this point. Artillery fire was falling in and around the farm to our rear. Whether or not they were after us I do not know. By about 7:30 AM we were running low on ammunition, we did not know where the rifle troops were, so after staking out this position and recording our firing data for future use, we withdrew to our original

Overlay #1
position #2

- (15) Div Hist. ✓
p 131 part of it was however, that the citadel was taken (15)
in spite of that fact, so it might be argued that good
(16) Personal use was made of the machine guns after all. (16)

October 24th, 25th and 26th were spent in
gaining the remainder of the high ground to the north
to include the southern portion of the Bois de Bourgogne
and Hill 204. (17) All this time my machine gun
platoon and several other machine gun platoons were
resting back along the narrow gauge. (18)

Map #1

- (17) Div Hist. ✓
p 131

- (18) Personal

ORGANIZATION OF BRIGADE FRONT

The 312th Infantry suffered severe casualties in
this fighting before Grandpre, and on the 26th was
ordered into division reserve. It appears to me that
the casualties might have been less had more use been
made of the fire power that was available. The 311th
Inf supported by the 309th MG Bn organized the brigade
front in preparation for the big drive that we knew
was coming. (19)

Overlay #2

- (19) Div Hist. ✓
pp 131&135

My platoon moved by hand across country crossing
the Aire River by plank foot-bridges as all the road
bridges were blown out. On reaching the heights we
were amazed by the manner in which the enemy had them
honey-combed with deep dug-outs of more or less per-
manent construction, shelter for large bodies of troops
and loop hole openings on the eastern cliff which were
of considerable use to us later. (20)

- (20) Personal

PREPARATION FOR LAST BIG DRIVE OF WAR

During the last few days of October large
quantities of ammunition, pyrotechnics and all sorts
of material were issued. (21) Most of our time was
utilized in loading belts and preparing range cards
and other data for the attack which was coming, and

- (21) Div Hist. ✓
p 135

(10) Personal position. (10)

That day the 312th Infantry succeeded in taking the western portion of the town and after five days of continual house to house fighting and with heavy losses, they gained the entire town except the citadel.

(11) Div Hist.
p 111

The brigade on our right had gotten up ^{into} ~~onto~~ the Bois des Loges. (11)

INACTIVITY OF FIRST PLATOON

Overlay #1
position #3

During this five days my platoon was given no missions whatever. The citadel was surrounded on three sides and offered a splendid opportunity for the use of our guns and the other guns that were idle in the vicinity. Our activities were limited to harassing fire upon the heights from the two positions already mentioned, and from the railway cut where the narrow-gauge crosses the standard gauge a few hundred yards to the north.

(12) Personal

It is of interest at this time to find that in most of our activities in this area, we were using the sight defilade method of laying our guns but never knew it until we heard about it a month or two ago in this class. (12)

THE FALL OF GRANDPRE

(13) Div.Hist.
p 119

There was a pause in operations in our front on the 21st and 22d of October to permit of making new plans and necessary reconnaissance. This resulted in a new attack of the morning of the 23d from the west and south, assisted by heavy artillery concentrations, gas and smoke (13) but no machine guns outside of the regimental guns of the 312th Infantry. We had about 36 guns in the area that were forgotten about as far as

(14) Personal

their use was concerned that morning. (14) The peculiar

for which orders were being secretly received. By October 31st we were familiar with the entire situation except for the day and hour of the attack.

(22) Personal (22)

Briefly the plan was as follows: In our front was the Bois de Bourgogne extending about five miles to the north, the direction of attack. These woods were to be saturated with mustard gas and to be avoided by our troops except for the 311th Infantry which was

(23) Div. Hist. p 144 Map #1 ✓ to attack across the southern edge of the woods clearing them at the southeastern corner. (23) The 155th Brigade on the right had been withdrawn to the St. Juvin road.

(24) Div Hist. p 115 ✓ (24) It was to attack north through the Bois des Loges, supported and protected on their left by our

(25) Div Hist. p 144 ✓ brigade. (25)

Shortly prior to 5:30 on the morning of November 1st we received word that the attack would start at that time. We were all prepared and had little to do but man the guns. We now had the first definite mission that had been assigned to us during our part of the war. We had four barrages to fire in support of the attack of a neighboring brigade and on a definite time schedule in accordance with the rate of advance of the rifle companies.

Our guns were sighted by indirect means. Although we could see the woods we were firing into, the weather had been so wet and the ranges were so great that we were unable to get any observation even in the open at the edge of the woods. (26)

(26) Personal

ATTACK OF NOVEMBER 1, 1918

The 155th Brigade jumped off on time preceded by a rolling barrage. It was to take thirty minutes

(27) Div Hist.
p 146

for their attack to reach the southern edge of the Bois des Loges. (27) At H plus 15 minutes my platoon controlled as a battery opened fire on target number one and engaged it for 13 minutes. We then switched to target two for 6 minutes, and targets three and four for 10 minutes each, after which we were to engage any suitable targets we could locate.

Overlay #2

In all this firing the noncommissioned officers actually fired the guns in order to release additional men for the reloading of belts. We burned up the ammunition very rapidly and all the spare numbers worked frantically reloading belts by machine and by hand. We also had two reserve guns for this occasion which were used as replacements. We were equipped with the old Vickers guns and although they functioned very satisfactorily, we found it necessary to replace some parts. Our ranges in this firing were about the extreme as used at that time, from 1700 to 2400 yards.

Overlay #2

After firing target number four, we switched our fire to the draws northwest of Bois des Loges. This firing was done by indirect means from data already recorded on our range cards. We now diminished our rate of fire by using but one section at a time, and firing only at irregular intervals. All were busy however reloading belts as we had expended about 30000 rounds by 7:30 AM. (28)

(28) Personal

Overlay #2

The Infantry objective that day was to be an east and west line joining the Bois de Bourgogne with the northern edge of Bois des Loges. (29)

(29) Div Hist.
pp 144&147

The 311th Infantry in my front gained its objective in the afternoon after hard fighting. The brigade on the right was held up all day in the Bois

des Loges along the east and west unimproved road.

- (30) Div Hist. ✓ (30) My platoon fired at irregular intervals all
pp 147&149 day on targets three and four and the draws and
Overlay #3
(31) Personal ridges northwest thereof. (31)

ATTACK OF NOVEMBER 2d

The night of November 1st a new attack was planned for 5:30 the next morning. The 312th Infantry that had been in division reserve, moved up that night to the vicinity of Farm des Loges. They were to attack the woods from the west, while the 155th Brigade continued its attack from the south.

- (32) Div Hist. ✓ (32)
p 149

Overlay #3 My platoon moved forward to the ridge north of Bellejoyeuse Farm and spent the night there. We moved by hand, the 311th Infantry helping us with our ammunition.

My orders called for fire from H to H plus 8 minutes on targets three and four of the day before, and then switch to the draws and the road to the northwest. The attack started as scheduled, but it was not long before the 78th Division was given the greatest surprise of its life. (33) Where yesterday every inch of ground was bitterly fought for, this morning there was no opposition whatever, the enemy having retreated during the night leaving great quantities of material and supplies behind. (34)

- (33) Personal

- (34) Div Hist. ✓
p 149

PURSUIT OF THE ENEMY

- (35) Div Hist. ✓
p 149

The pursuit was immediately taken up. (35) My platoon was attached to Co "F" 311th Infantry. My transportation was at Grandpre, and a runner was sent for it with orders to guide it up the road to the north until they found us. It was necessary

to move by hand so we had to leave a great deal of ammunition and our two reserve guns behind. Every man that did not have a gun or tripod on his back carried two boxes of ammunition. Morale was very high in spite of the fact that but little sleep had been had for the past two days and nights. Again the rifle troops carried some ammunition for us.

We advanced steadily but slowly that day. Co "F" was in a formation of echeloned section columns and we conformed to them. Our route was cross country just east of the road to the north and paralleling it. Sometimes we were on the road.

Map #1

Overlay #3

We were halted just beyond Le Morthomme that night and outposted the slopes to the northeast. We put a running guard on the guns and every one was enabled to get some rest. During the night Co. "F" was moved forward but we were left in position. We were routed out at 4:30 next morning, Sunday, November 3d and marched up the road in column of twos to Briquenay where we rejoined Company "F".

Map #1

After a two hours halt and a hot breakfast the advance was resumed. As we advanced over the high ground north of Briquenay, we could see individuals of the German rear guard blowing up the culverts and fleeing to the north. We received some machine-gun fire from Germont which caused some deployment in our part of the line. My platoon immediately went into action and presently observed white flags in some of the buildings. They proved to be flags of the French who had lived here under German rule since early in the war.

As we advanced on Authe we were ordered into action on Hill 213 against small arms fire coming from Farm de Gineau. At about this time the French who had advanced around the west of the Bois de Bourgogne appeared and swept on past the farm.

Division
We advanced to Briouilles - sur- Bar without further action. Was late in the afternoon and the units appeared to be billeting in the town. The town was full of troops and we were sent to Chatillon-sur-Bar, about a mile and a half to the left where we were told that we could get billets. We had covered about nine miles during the day and with side trips over ten. Had been raining a great deal, the nights were freezing, colds and dysentery had attacked many of the troops and they were pretty well exhausted that night. All this movement had been by hand as our transportation had never caught up to us. Had billets for all. Every-one slept under cover and had a well deserved rest.

RELIEF BY 42D DIVISION AND END OF WAR.

Division
Moved back into Briouilles-sur-Bar on the morning of November 4th. Found the remainder of the battalion there with kitchens, transportation and much mail. Had a hot breakfast and went into billets expecting to be moved forward at any time. Remained there all that day and night and were relieved by a platoon of our own Co. "A" on the morning of the 5th. (36) That same day the division was relieved by the 42d Division. (37) We started to the rear for a rest not knowing that the war would be over in six days hence. (38)

- (36) Personal
(37) Harpers
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p 91
Div Hist.
p 155
(38) Personal.

Capt. Westfall.

BUZANCY 60. Groupe des Canevās de Tir.

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500

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1/20000

94

92

93

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95

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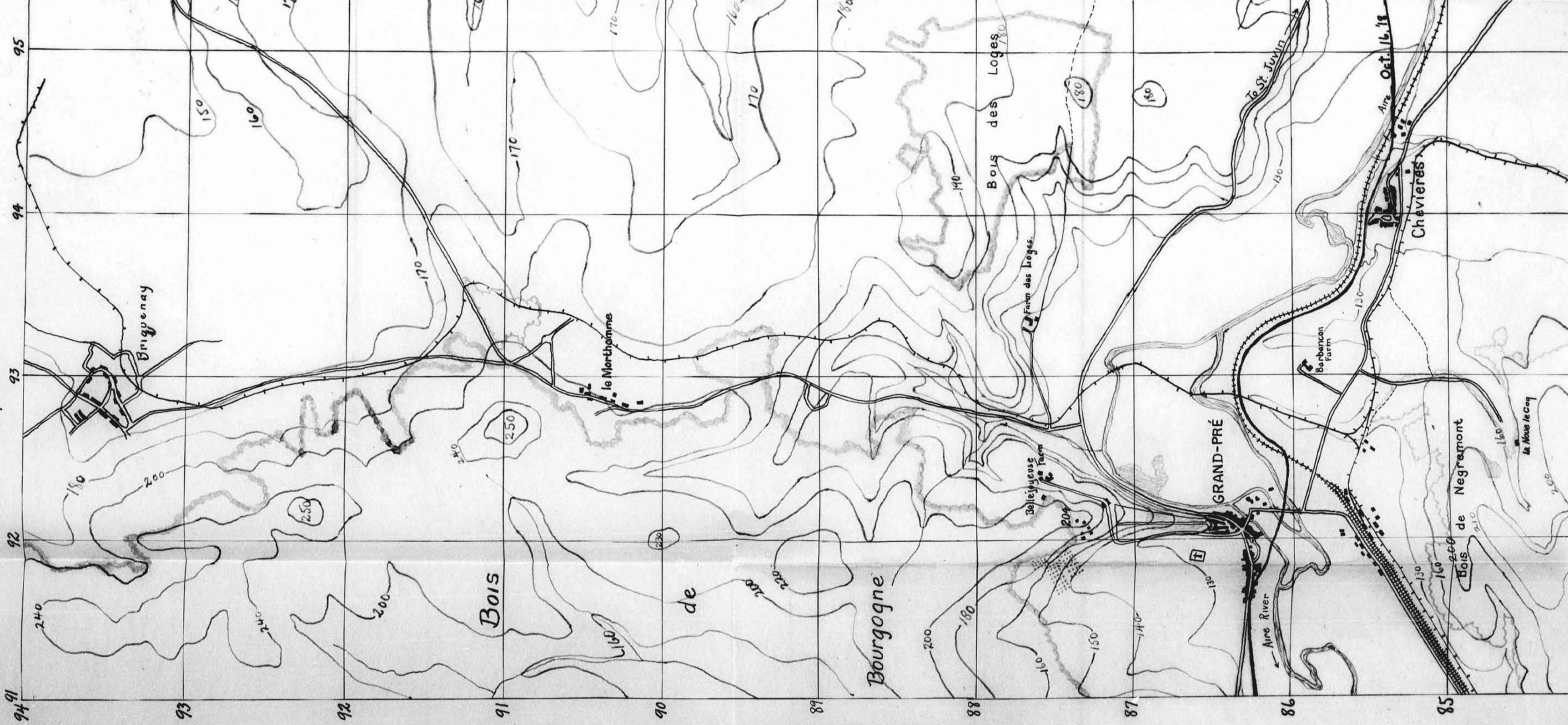
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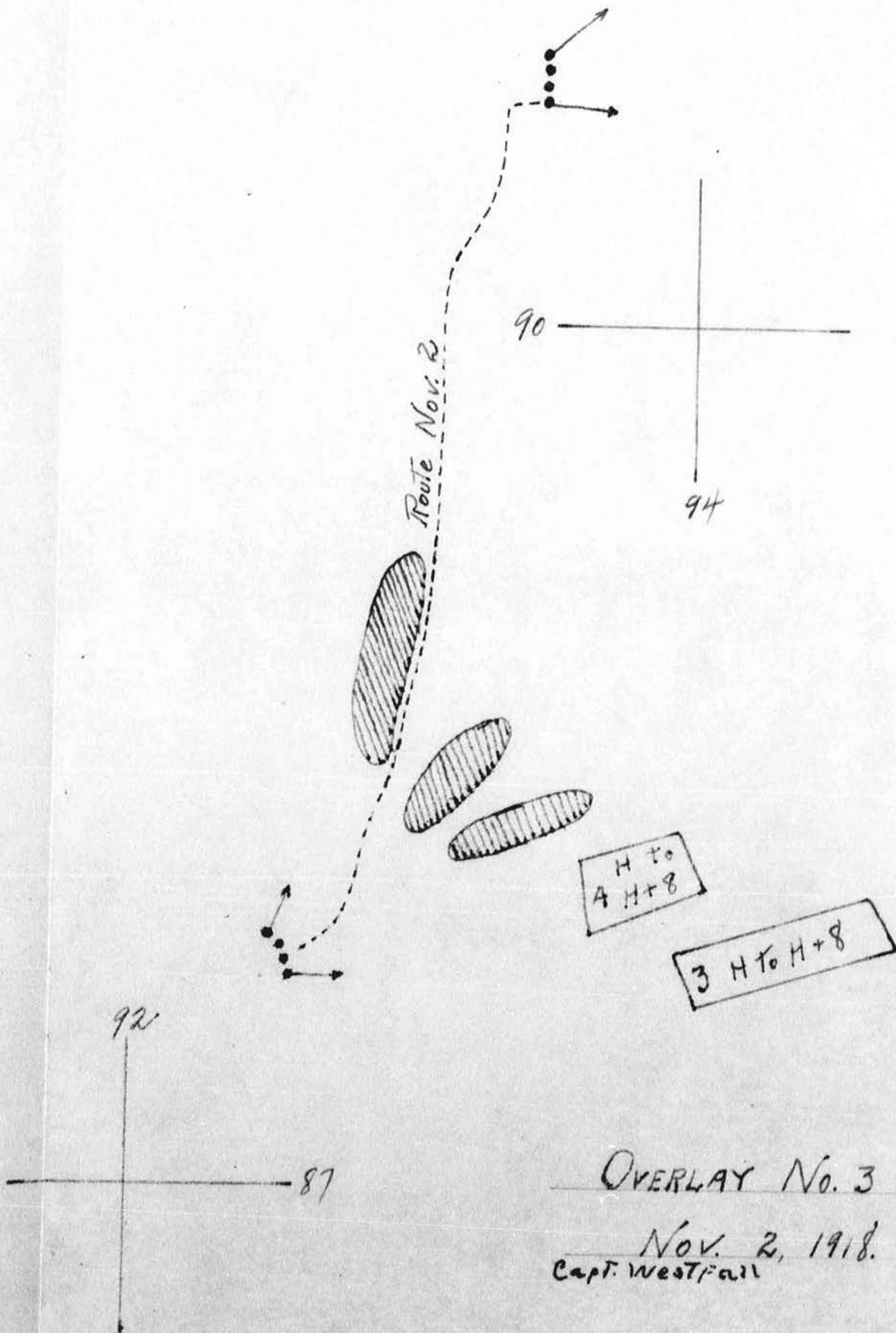
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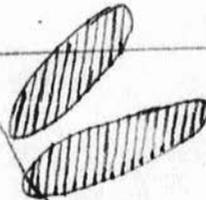
OVERLAY No. 3

Nov. 2, 1918.
Capt. Westfall

94

89

Objective Nov. 1st



Night of Nov 1

H+44
H+54

3 H+34 - H+44

2 H+28 - H+34

1 H+15 - H+28

Jump Off Nov. 1st

E

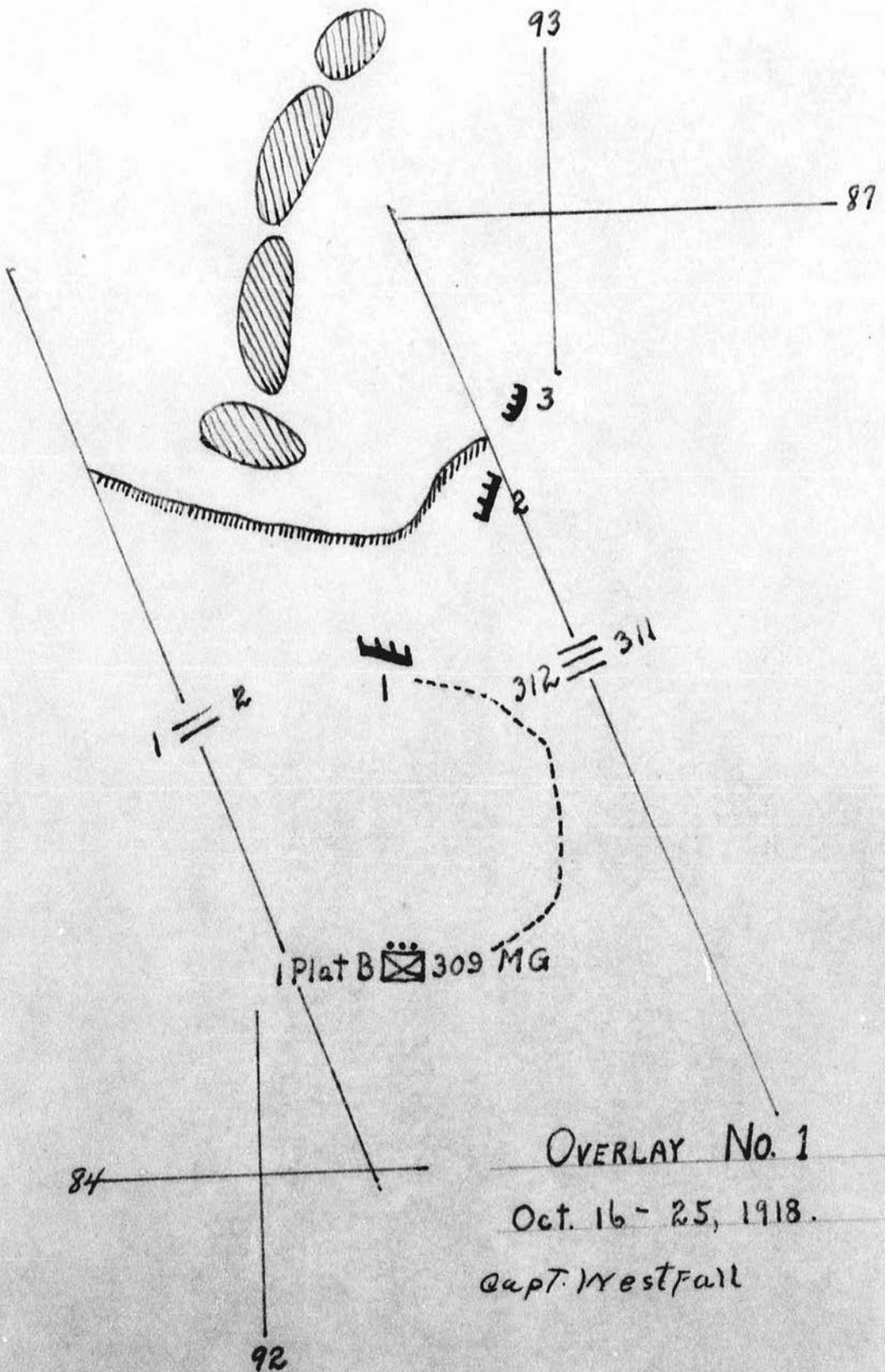
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86

OVERLAY No. 2

Nov 1, 1918.

capt. Westfall



OVERLAY No. 1
 Oct. 16 - 25, 1918.
 Capt. Westfall