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(5TH DIV)

OPERATIONS OF THE SIXTH INFANTRY IN THE CROSSING OF THE MEUSE
NOVEMBER 1ST - NOVEMBER 5TH, 1918.

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1

I N D E X .

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MARGINAL ABBREVIATIONS USED.

7 Per.	General John J. Pershing.	"Final Report of General John J. Pershing."
7 How.	Howland, C.R.	"Military History of the World War."
7 M.5th	Monograph, 5th Division.	(Compiled.)
7 S.H.	Statement of Major C.H.Hodges,	Fort Benning, Georgia.

GENERAL SITUATION.

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All along the entire front, from the sea to Switzerland, the enemy was being driven back. However, his resistance was stubborn. (1) The most vulnerable point, his line of communication, was endangered. One of his main trunk lines, the Carignan-Mezieurs-Sedan railroad, ran in a northeasterly ^{westerly} direction from Metz, paralleling the battle line. Cut this line at its southern end and everything west of Meziours-Antwerp line would be bottled up. (2) To the First American Army was assigned the mission of driving through and cutting this railroad line, the battle to begin on November 1st. On that day the First Army, with three Corps in line, held a frontage running from the Meuse to the Bois de Bougogne. (3) The Third Corps composed of the Fifth and Nintieth Divisions, held the right of the line. The Fifth Division acting as a pivot for the entire Army, occupied a line generally from Bois de la Lemont - Briouelles - Clery la Grand - Aincreville. (4) In case of a withdrawal of the enemy the Third Corps was to pursue in the general direction of Stenay. (5) The Fifth Division was to take up the pursuit along the Axial road Dun-Fontaine-Brandeville-Remoiville-Marville road, brigades abreast, the Tenth on the right. This necessitated a crossing of the Meuse River and Canal.

NARRATIVE.

The morning of November 1st, 1918 found the Sixth Infantry holding a line from Bois de la Lemont - Bois de Briouelles, including Briouelles; the Fifteenth French Division being on the right and the Sixtieth Infantry on the left. The Regimental P.C. was in the west central portion of the Bois de la Cote Lemont; the First Battalion in the southeast quarter of Bois de Dannevoux; the Second Battalion occupying the northern and .

October 26th - October 31st, the regiment did nothing more than patrol the river and attempt to instill in the minds of the new men some of the duties of a soldier.

TERRAIN.

To appreciate the seemingly insurmountable difficulties experienced by the regiment in its crossing of the Meuse River and Canal, one should have a mental picture of the terrain, over which the attack progressed. On the west bank of the river, held by our forces, the ground rose gradually to probably an extreme elevation of one hundred feet above the river basin. The country was generally open and rolling. Only on the extreme right of the line did woods appear, to give any sort of cover for the movement of troops. Standing on the western bank and facing to the east into enemy territory, the river could be followed with the eye for a mile north and south, wending its way through a flat basin or plain, as level as a floor, hugging ~~to~~ the foot hills on one side, then the other. The river itself was about sixty feet wide and six to eight feet deep. The plain or basin had an average width of six hundred yards and opposite and north of Brioules was entirely flooded, presenting in itself a formidable obstacle. On the eastern side, close up to the foot hills, lay the canal, fifty feet wide and eight to ten feet deep. The banks of the canal were built up about twelve feet above the level of the basin. The ground on the east side of the canal rose sharply for about thirty feet, then continued to rise gradually for a distance of five kilometers, to a height of two hundred feet above the river. The greater part of these hills was heavily wooded, affording excellent cover for the movement of troops, as well as observation of the west bank. As a defensive position it was almost impregnable. ref

and northeastern edge of the Bois de Lemont, also the northern edge of the Bois de Briouilles, one platoon of "E" Company being stationed in the town of Briouilles. Groups of automatic rifles and machine guns were in position to cover the approach to the town and to sweep the river front. The Third Battalion occupied a position in reserve in the Bois de Sept-sarges. No intrenching was done, the various units merely taking advantage of shell holes and terrain features.

Though this was the day of the general attack, no action on the part of the Sixth Infantry took place, this according to orders. In fact very little was known, to subordinate commanders at least, about the movements outside the regimental limits. The sector seemed very quiet and peaceful compared to the previous experiences. The enemy contented himself with a few bursts of machine gun fire and an occasional shell. Most of the units of the regiment spent this time getting food and equipment up to the companies and instructing the new men in the ways of warfare.

During the evening, patrols, which were ordered out by brigade, reconnoitered the river for information and possible crossings. The patrols gained little or no information concerning the enemy other than that he was on the east side of the river. A little more aggressiveness on their part would have undoubtedly netted a prisoner or two, and information obtained, which would have been of great help in later operations.

Tentative river crossings were selected by the commander of the Second Battalion, just opposite Briouilles. For the Canal crossing, a point was chosen about eight hundred yards northeast of the town near the site of an old iron foot bridge, which had been destroyed. Just opposite this point on the east

bank, a small ravine led down to the canal, affording an initial foot hold as well as protection from flanking fire for the first troops over.

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During the morning and afternoon of the second of November there was no action. (6) However, the regiment received an order from the Tenth Brigade Headquarters to send a strong patrol of not more than two companies, across the river that night. This patrol was taken from the Second Battalion, "E" and "G" Companies were selected and moved out of their position and into Brioules after dark. Here they were joined by a platoon of the Seventh Engineers, who had brought up pontoons and bridge material. The night was black and stormy, intermittent machine gun fire swept through the town, and an occasional shell of large caliber swooped down. To make matters worse, the men were bunching in the column and stopping at the least obstacle, thus losing contact. Since there were few officers and trained non-commissioned officers to keep things straight much time was lost. The companies, with the engineers, advanced quietly to the point selected for the crossing. The enemy apparently was unaware of what was going on. Owing to the exceedingly black night, the work necessarily proceeded slowly. A little before dawn the bridge was completed and "E" Company started across. The head of the column, when it reached the other side, turned and followed the river, which at this point made a loop towards the canal. As the head reached the bend in the loop it pivoted, the tail of the column swinging out into the basin towards the canal. It was beginning to get light, and the company was still about sixty yards from the canal when, suddenly, machine guns on the eastern bank of the canal opened a terrific fire. The men individually made for the shelter of the canal bank. However, five men on the extreme left were killed. The Engineers gained the bank without casualties. "G" Company which

excellent targets, the enemy emplacements on the east side of the canal, and, due to the accuracy of the gun, it could have fired over the heads of the troops under the canal. However, someone had lost the sights and in addition the ammunition was low, so this valuable aid could not perform. Fortunately the supply of rifle and hand grenades was plentiful; a large quantity being sent to "E" Company that night. There was not a great deal of artillery support that day. One battery of the Tenth Field Artillery, was attached to the Second Battalion, but did not get into position until the fourth. The Regimental P.C. remained in Bois de Dannevoux, with the Second Battalion P.C. in the western edge of Brioules.

As soon as night fell, November 3rd, the Engineers built two narrow foot bridges, and threw them across the canal, about fifty feet apart. So little noise was made that the enemy was not aroused. He apparently thought that only a patrol was under the bank and so lay his fire only on the river bridge. When all was in readiness, "E" Company manned the canal bank and opened a heavy rifle and grenade fire on the opposite side and started a rush. One squad had almost reached the far side when they were swept into the canal by enemy machine gun fire. The enemy then kept up a steady fire for about an hour. The attack was suspended for the time being. About 10:00 P.M. upon the cessation of the enemy fire, one officer and eight men moving with infinite caution, succeeded in gaining the east bank of the canal. They had started towards the ravine when suddenly they ran into a small group of the enemy; both were so surprised that the first and only thing they could think of doing, was to get back to their respective positions as quickly as possible. This incident probably spoiled any chance of getting across that night, as the enemy knew what to expect. In the meantime "G" Company crossed the river and deployed in the river basin, though it would have been much safer under the canal bank, where they went eventually.

had just started over the river bridge, was forced to go back and take cover behind the railroad bank on the eastern edge of the town. The enemy was now thoroughly awake and alarmed; they raked the bridge and basin with machine gun fire, both direct and indirect, while mortars and light artillery pounded the town and railroad bank. The Engineers in their hurry to reach the canal had taken only one pontoon forward. The men under the canal bank were defiladed from fire from the east side of the canal, enabling them to move forward until opposite the point selected for a crossing. Here they remained for the rest of the day with nothing other than their reserve ration to eat, and very little water. Nothing could move across the river basin during daylight as the enemy dominated the whole plain. There were several casualties throughout the day due to curiosity on the part of the new men. Enemy snipers kept a sharp watch on the canal bank. It wasn't long before the enemy located the river bridge and from then on tried his best to blow it up, but with little success.

In the meantime the First and Third Battalion and "F" Company remained in position. Guns of the regimental machine gun company and two platoons of Company "B" Fifteenth Machine Gun Battalion, fired on all enemy positions they could observe, but not in any great volume. Sections of machine guns were attached to the various rifle companies and under the system then in vogue, the rifle company commander was partly responsible for their use. However, the weapon was not always used to full advantage. About noon of the third, the one pounders and stokes mortars were brought up into Brioules. A mortar was placed just to the right of the river bridge under cover of the trees, but after firing a few shots it was discovered that the supply of shells was exhausted. The mortar never fired another round. For the one pounder, there were

About 10:00 P.M. the company commander of "F" Company received orders to report with his company to the battalion commander at Brioules. The company being scattered over a considerable area of the Bois de la Cote Lemont, it took some time in the dark to assemble, so it was nearly midnight before Brioules was reached. Here the company commander was told that he would immediately cross the river, join "E" Company under the canal bank, and be ready to attack at 4:00 A.M. Since this company had been a mile or more from the scene of operations, the company commander had had no opportunity of looking over the ground at the crossing points. He was more or less in the dark both figuratively and literally concerning his destination. About 12:00 A.M. the company moved forward led by battalion guides who supposedly knew the way. Upon reaching the railroad bank, the company commander decided to halt the company there while he made a hurried reconnaissance. The enemy machine guns were sweeping the river bridge with monotonous regularity. Taking the platoon sergeants, who were platoon leaders, and several runners, the company commander moved across the river. Here the guides ceased to function as such. The party then followed the river to the right toward the canal, only to find the ground in that vicinity too swampy. A detour was made to the left out into the basin where several groups of "G" Company were found. No information could be obtained from them as to where they were or what they were doing. About this time heavy rifle fire and machine gun fire started on the right front and the company commander decided that the canal crossing must be there. He then returned to the river crossing to bring his company across. The enemy was firing on the bridge with such well regulated bursts of fire that it was a simple matter to rush sections across between bursts. The

pontoons however sunk to a depth of about three feet causing some inconvenience. Two platoons were safely across when the enemy redoubled the intensity of his fire particularly at the canal crossing, making movement of any kind almost impossible. The battalion commander, who had taken personal charge of the attacking forces on the canal bank, then ordered the attack off for the night. The enemy's artillery had also started in and one of the foot bridges across the canal was destroyed. "F" Company then moved back across the river and took position behind the railroad bank. "H" Company had moved into the southeastern edge of Brioules.

For the time being the regiment had failed to accomplish its mission, that of forcing a crossing, but it had learned several valuable lessons and was more determined than ever to drive the enemy out.

On the morning of the 4th, the Tenth Brigade sent out an order to the effect that a crossing would be made that night at any cost. (7) A Brigade order also changed the order of battalions in crossing. The Second was to stand fast, the First to go through, the Second and attack, and the Third to make a crossing about six hundred yards above the first crossing; later this was again changed to the original formation. The enemy throughout the 4th of November bombarded the town and river crossing with both heavy and light artillery, causing "F" Company to leave the railroad embankment, after one officer and eight men were killed, and move back into the town. Our heavy artillery (French) concentrated on the enemy emplacements, and the battery of the 10th Field Artillery, attached to the Second Battalion, used direct fire at short range. The Companies, "E" and "G", under the canal bank, fired a great quantity of rifle grenades and their hand grenades in an attempt to destroy the machine gun nests on the opposite bank. Every preparation

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was made to the end that the next attack would be successful. The Third Battalion was brought up from the Bois de Septsarges to make a crossing about six hundred yards above the Second Battalion. They constructed rafts and lashed telephones ^{poles} together to throw across the canal. At dusk while there was still light enough to see a short distance, "E" Company began anew preparations to cross. Two platoons under shelter of the canal were lined up in single file behind the two foot bridges, a platoon to each bridge. "G" Company and the remainder of "E" Company then lined the canal bank and began a murderous rifle and grenade fire on the enemy position. At the same time our artillery increased its fire and concentrated on the head of the ravine. The two platoons rushed the bridges, reached the far side and immediately deployed to the right and left, taking up marching fire. The enemy gunners were soon overwhelmed. A point was pushed forward and to the flanks several hundred yards, forming a bridgehead. A few minutes after the first units had crossed, the artillery (French) which had been covering the attack, began shooting short, the shells dropping in the midst of the attackers, causing several casualties and destroying both foot bridges. The commander of "E" Company was left on the west bank with about half of his company. It was an hour before the bridges were repaired.

In the meantime the Third Battalion, protected by the action of the Second Battalion, moved over the river opposite Brioules and going up the canal about six hundred yards, crossed the canal undiscovered. The rafts and poles were not used as they borrowed pontoons from the engineers and ferried across. The battalion then moved forward to Hill 252, surprising several machine gun nests, and remained there until morning.

During the night the remainder of the brigade crossed and the Regimental P.C. moved into Brioules. Two companies, "F" and "M", remained on the west bank.

far as Hill 283, but the main line was on the Dun - Vilosnes road, extending from the Third Battalion on the right along the road to a point just northeast of Hill 228.

The Second Battalion remained in position as reserve. Preparations were made to continue the advance the following morning.

In conclusion it is well to review the handicaps imposed in the crossing of the Meuse. No movement of any kind could be made during daylight hours; the nights were dark; the ground unfamiliar; a third of the men were nothing more than recruits; the officers scarce and ignorant of the technique of river crossings; and after the first night the enemy knew where to lay his bands of fire. The enemy's orders were, "The enemy must not get a foothold on this side of the Meuse under any circumstances."

The casualties in the regiment were surprisingly few, three officers and one hundred men killed and wounded. About one hundred and eighty five prisoners and great quantities of machine guns, minenwerfers and etc. were captured.

CRITICISM.

There were a great many things done in the above operation that are open to criticism, some however unavoidable under the circumstances.

The selection of the river and canal crossings has often been criticized, but to my mind the method of crossing only is open to criticism. As far as the regiment was concerned there was not much choice in the selection of crossings. At that, no better plan could have been chosen. The method of crossing though was more or less up to the regiment itself. The principle of the economy of forces and the principle of mass were both violated at the start. For all anybody knew, the east bank was held in force. At any rate that was the supposition, and all the force of the regiment should have struck the enemy at the

Thus after many difficulties the crossing of the Meuse had been accomplished. The enemy had given way and the crossing of the Tenth Brigade, which was of great importance to the Third Corps, had been effected.

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(8) Instructions from the Tenth Brigade on the 4th, were for the regiment upon crossing, to occupy Hill 228 and the Bois de Chatillon, so on the morning of the 5th the advance was resumed. The Third Battalion making an assault in the Bois de Chatillon at daybreak. The method was the usual three or four line formation. However there were no scouts to the front and before the attack had progressed far there was only one line. The advance was rapid, though difficulty was encountered in clearing out the many groups of enemy who had filtered through the lines and were operating in rear of the battalion. By seven-thirty A.M. the entire woods had changed hands. Over one hundred prisoners and many machine guns were taken out of this woods. One enemy plane was shot down by rifle fire during the fighting. Several enemy aviators flew low over the lines, raking our lines with fire, little damage being done however.

While the woods were being cleared out, one officer and eighteen men from "M" Company advanced down the east side of the canal towards Vilosnes to make contact with the French, who as yet had made no advance, being held up by fire from Vilosnes. This patrol coming up on the flank of the enemy, surprised him, killing about thirty-five and taking prisoners some sixty-five others and allowing the French to advance. The patrol turned the town over to the French and returned to their organization. The Third Battalion now had a front of about twelve hundred yards extending from a point seven hundred yards north of Vilosnes, along the Dun - Vilosnes road.

The First Battalion had passed through the Second and occupied Hill 228 without much trouble, its patrols had gone as

point of crossing. This was not done. The destructive fire power of the artillery was not sufficiently used until November 4th. The auxillary weapons were unsuccessful due to lack of ammunition. Lastly, two companies with little support of any kind, attempted a crossing with the remainder of the regiment resting. Simultaneous crossings were effected on the 4th, but that should have been done on the first attempt. ?

Fire superiority is essential in any advance whether it be a river crossing or over terrain. Here again the regiment failed. Up to the 4th of November, little had been done in the way of supporting fire. However the minute all possible fire was brought to bear, results came fast. OK.

The principle of surprise was carried out, but the mass should have been hurled at the enemy to make a successful job.

The principle of simplicity was followed throughout.

The machine guns might have given a greater volume of fire. Sections of machine guns were attached to the rifle companies and the use of sections was almost entirely in the hands of the rifle company commanders, who more often than not, ~~was~~ ignorant of its capabilities, consequently they were not used to full advantage.

There apparently was no excuse for the non-supply of ammunition for the one pounder and stokes. The regiment had plenty of time for getting it up.

LESSONS.

The most important lesson learned was the value of trained men. It is nothing more than legalized murder to send men into battle when they have not had sufficient training to properly conduct themselves on the battlefield. <

Well trained officers are also essential. Lack of thorough training on the part of some officers was apparent in the above operation. The necessity for team work was brought out very forcibly. <

Regardless of the many mistakes made, the operation was successful. Therefore the regiment rightfully deserves the credit it has received.

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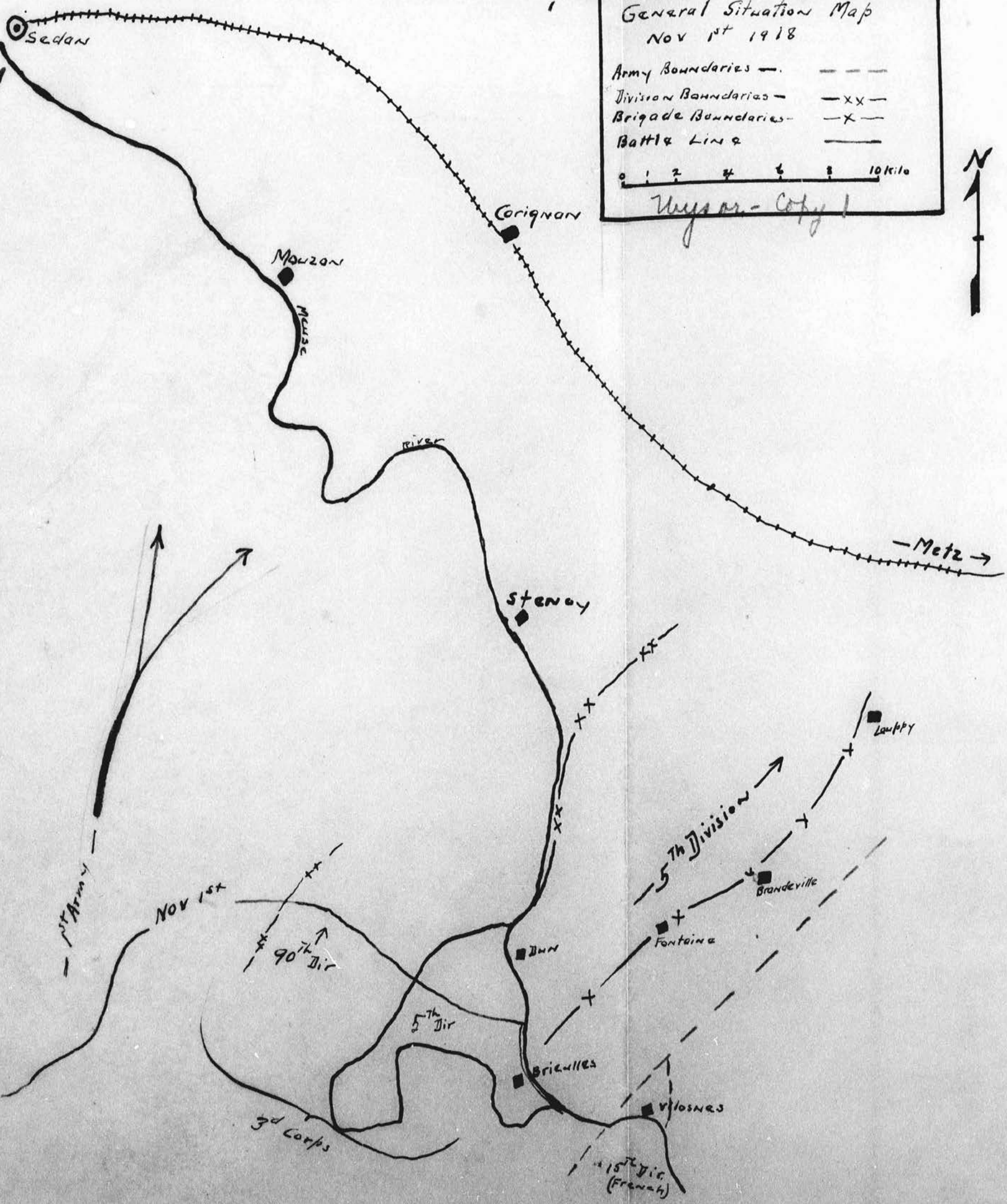
(9) General Pershing in his Final Report, speaks of the crossing of the Meuse as a "Brilliant operation by the 5th Division." It is sufficient to say that the Sixth Infantry led the way for the division.

General Situation Map
Nov 1st 1918

Army Boundaries — — — —
Division Boundaries — xx —
Brigade Boundaries — x —
Battle Line — — — —

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Ungers - Copy 1



Bourgoigne Woods

1st Army

Nov 1st

90th Div

5th Div

3rd Corps

5th Division

15th Div (French)

Metz →

Wagner - copy 1

