

THE PERIOD OF STABILIZATION

THE period of stabilization from September 16 until the relief by the 7th Division on October 10 was one of the most trying in the Division's history. A short time before the relief took place every one was beginning to settle down fairly comfortably, but the organization of the new sector, which took the name of "Puvenelle" from the huge forest, was by no means a simple task.

In the first place, the defense of the sector had to be prepared. Colonel F. A. Pope, the Division engineer, immediately sited the main line of resistance, which was to run from the western boundary of the Division along the south bank of the ravine which cut through the middle of the Forêt des Vencheres, thence along the north edge of the Bois de Friere to La Poele, the maze of German trenches which had become famous in the fighting on September 12, here connecting with other German trenches, the Tranchée de la Combe and the Tranchée de Plateau, which were faced in the opposite direction. This work was supervised by the engineers, but most of the manual labor had to be done by the doughboys, who were already exhausted after four days' fighting. Colonel John J. Kingman, chief of staff, personally took much interest in this work, and his engineer training was of great value in drawing up the plan of defense.

Even more difficulty was experienced in the outpost zone. The men had not yet learned that digging a hole and crawling into it was just as important a part of modern warfare as shooting the enemy. They were perfectly willing to go out on patrols, or make a new advance, if necessary, but trench digging did not appeal to them as the soldierly thing to do. The consequence was very serious, as all the front areas were very heavily shelled, and the men were without adequate protection from shell fire. The Germans were well acquainted with every path and lane through the Bois des Rappes, and were very clever in calculating just the right hour to plaster them with high explosives.

The line of resistance of the outpost zone first ran through Les Huit Chemins, but about September 20 it was pushed further forward nearer the edge of the woods. These positions were finally completed and wired, and before the Division left the area the northern part of the Bois des Rappes, with its innumerable "fox holes" looked like a gopher community.

The 357th Infantry had considerable trouble on its left flank due to the fact that the 78th Division, which had relieved the 5th Division, found difficulty in crossing the open ground north of Hill 361.4. The Bois du Trou de la Haie was held by the enemy, and it was very easy for patrols, with machine guns, to slip into the Bois des Rappes under cover of the strip of woods, less than 100 meters wide, connecting the Bois du Trou de la Haie and the Bois des Rappes.

Every effort was made by the Division staff to give the men who had gone through the fight a bath and clean clothes as soon as possible. The main baths and delouser were located at Griscourt. G-1 also established supplementary baths at Gezoncourt, Jezainville, and Camp Jonc Fontaine, securing underwear by sending to the big United States laundry at Nancy, where worn garments were exchanged for clean ones. The policy was adopted by G-3 of making battalion reliefs weekly, the reserve battalion of the 180th Brigade going to Griscourt and the reserve battalion of the 179th Brigade taking station at Gezoncourt. But, at best, there was a long wait for the majority of the men. During the fighting many officers had lost their bedding rolls and had no clothes except the ones which had been torn to shreds by barbed wire. Before the men went over the top, their packs were assembled in dumps. G-1 transported these packs to points near the front line as fast as possible, but in many cases the rain and mud had rendered the blankets and overcoats unserviceable.

The battalions at Griscourt and Gezoncourt spent most of the short week allotted them resting, getting a bath, and procuring new clothes and equipment. However, G-3 took this opportunity also to introduce a short program of training emphasizing through close order drill the restoration of discipline and smartness, on which the Division had prided itself in the training areas, but which had badly suffered during the period of fighting. Liaison problems with aéroplanes were conducted also.

DIVISIONAL SECTOR WIDENED

THE divisional sector was twice widened: first, to the right, by taking over from the 82d Division, on the night of September 16-17, all territory to the Moselle River. The night of September 18-19, the 82d Division was relieved by the 69th (French) Division. On October 4 the 78th Division, on the left, was withdrawn from the line, and its sector was divided between the 89th and 90th Divisions. This relief was effected by withdrawing the 358th Infantry from line and moving the regiment to the west to relieve the entire 156th Brigade, while the 357th Infantry and the 359th Infantry closed in and made connection, each of the latter two regiments taking over a part of the old 358th Infantry's line. This relief extended the Division front to a point about a kilometer and a half south of Rembercourt, approximately eleven kilometers on a straight line from Vandieres, the right flank (and much more than eleven kilometers if all the bends in the line were considered).

With this extension, the Division sector included the town of Viéville-en-Haye and the Bois d'Heiche and Bois la Haie l'Evêque. The 358th Infantry moved to the new area and made the relief during the daytime, the men filtering in small numbers across the open space north of Viéville.

The night of the 4th the 153d Field Artillery Brigade was relieved so that it could join its division, the 78th, and proceed to the Meuse-Argonne front. Its mission was taken over by the 5th Field Artillery Brigade, most of the young officers of which were from Texas. The 19th Field Artillery Regiment was in liaison with the 180th Brigade, and the 20th Field Artillery Regiment supported the 179th Brigade.

On September 29 and October 6 the depleted ranks of the organizations were partially filled by replacements, approximately 1000 men arriving from depot divisions on each of those dates. On three other occasions the Division had received replacements, once at Aignay-le-Duc (300 on August 2) and twice at Villers-en-Haye before the attack (255 on August 30 and 400 on September 5).

TROUBLE FROM RIGHT FLANK

THE greatest source of trouble during the period of stabilization was the German artillery located on the east side of the Moselle. Owing to the fact that the divisions to the right of the 90th had not advanced during the St. Mihiel offensive, our flank was "in the air" and open to enfilading fire. In fact, German guns on the east bank could be located further south than our positions in the Bois des Rappes and shoot our men in the back, as it were. Our supporting artillery was several times accused of firing "shorts" before the nature of this enfilading fire was understood. Despite the hardest efforts of the 153d Field Artillery Brigade at counter-battery, this fire against our right flank, directed by German observers on the heights at Vittonville, continued to cause casualties as long as the Division remained in the sector. Lieutenant Fred H. Morgan, Company C, 357th Infantry, was struck and killed by a 77-mm. shell the day after he returned from school. His battalion was in the outpost position, but he had stopped on the line of resistance, as a relief was to take place the next day. Lieutenant Benjamin E. Irby, 3d Battalion gas officer, was shot through the shoulder while on a patrol.

This continual shelling made the question of supply very difficult. All transport was forced to cross what was known as "Death Valley" through Vilcey-sur-Trey or Villers-sous-Preny, which was under constant observation during daylight. On the morning of September 16, the Supply Company of the 357th Infantry, which had kept well up with the advancing infantry, was caught in shell fire near St. Marie Farm, and many horses were killed and wagons knocked out. A new road built from Montauville through the Bois-le-Pretre, and then by way of Villers-sous-Preny into the Bois des Rappes, was used by the 359th Infantry. In crossing "Death Valley" eight horses of the Supply Company were killed, and twelve more were lost in the Bois des Rappes.

The kitchens were located near springs in order that water might be had. For example, those of the 358th Infantry were near the large spring in the southwest corner of Bois de Villers, and the 359th's in the Bois de Chenaux. These spots were well known to the Germans, who correctly guessed that our men were making use of them, and they were constantly shelled, especially with gas, thus running up the number of casualties among the "kitchen police."

PATROLLING AND ARTILLERY ACTIVITY

WITH the advent of the American army in force, Marshal Foch had decided that there would be no more "quiet fronts." This momentous decision on the part of the Allied Generalissimo was quite in keeping with the opinion of even the humblest private, who had no desire to sit down in foreign trenches and wait for something to happen.

The divisional front was far from quiet. Every opportunity to harass the Germans was seized. Almost nightly patrols, often in strength, went out from each regimental front with the mission of penetrating as far as possible into the enemy lines, securing information about their defenses, and capturing prisoners. A total of eleven Huns were bagged during this period of stabilization by these small patrols.

Seven of these prisoners were captured by the 359th Infantry. The aggressive spirit of the officers composing these nightly raiding parties is illustrated by the action of Lieutenant (later Captain) James A. Baker, Jr., who never failed to bring back a prisoner. One morning, about 3 A. M., after an unsuccessful patrol had returned to our line, Colonel Sterling directed that another patrol be sent out. Lieutenant Baker was given this patrol and returned before daylight with prisoners.

Patrols using the short shotguns also succeeded in inflicting casualties on German outposts. The majority of prisoners were taken by surrounding outposts in front of Preny and along the Ravin Moulon, which flowed into the Moselle south of Pagny-sur-Moselle. The town of Pagny itself was an object of curiosity. It was known that a garrison of considerable size was sheltered in its cellars. Some daring adventurers worked their way up the Tranchée de la Remise, an old German trench running almost due north from Côte 327, and reached the very outskirts of Pagny, where they could see and hear what was occurring within buildings.

The artillery was as aggressive as the infantry, and kept up the spirits of the latter by harassing the Hun. The men remained cheerful, despite the enfilading fire which continually jeopardized their lives, as long as they could count just as many shells going over their heads in the direction of Bocheland. The intelligence personnel of the regiments worked in coöperation with the artillery, the forward observers, particularly on Côte 327 and Croix des Vandieres, spotting many targets. Direct telephone connection with the artillery made it possible to notify the batteries in time to lay the guns and open fire on moving troops and transport which appeared within range. The observers of the 360th

Infantry, under the direction of Lieutenant Prescott Williams, intelligence officer, became expert at this. Unfortunately Lieutenant Williams was evacuated on account of sickness before the regiment left the sector. The Division observation station, under Sergeant Owen Covell and Sergeant Arthur C. Stimson, which had become famous under the code name of "Dottie," worked first from Côte 327 and then returned to Mousson Hill, an eminence just east of Pont-à-Mousson, from which the spires of Metz can be seen on a clear day.

On October 2 the north edge of the Bois des Rappes, particularly in the zone of the 2d Battalion, 358th Infantry, was saturated with mustard gas. That day 150 men were evacuated from the 2d Battalion. Notwithstanding these losses, the battalion continued to hold the line. The effects of the gas were horrible beyond description, some being blinded for life, others disfigured by the effects of the acid on parts of the skin which the liquid had touched. In addition, practically every man in the battalion, although continuing to do duty, was weakened by inhaling the fumes. On October 4 the 2d Battalion moved over to the west, going into the front line in the sector taken over from the 78th Division. As a result of the gas the men could not refrain from coughing, sentries on outpost duty sometimes giving away their position as a consequence.

The evil effects of this gas bombardment were felt even after the Division moved into the Meuse-Argonne sector. Major Earl T. Brown, regimental surgeon, claimed that the battalion was unfit for duty, and upon examination, on October 18, three officers and 130 men were evacuated as post-gas cases. This made a total of approximately 300 men who were put out of action by the gas attack, not to mention many others who were rendered unfit for the arduous duties of a soldier.

RAID OF SEPTEMBER 23

IN order to impress upon the enemy the offensive spirit of the Allied forces, the army planned a series of raids all along the front. The date for the 90th Division raid was set for the night of September 23-24. It was decided that this raid should be staged in the 357th Infantry sector, as here the opposing lines were closest together and the point of the Bois des Rappes furnished an excellent forming-up place.

The raid was successfully executed by the 1st Battalion, 357th Infantry, under command of Captain Aubrey G. Alexander, supported by the 153d Field Artillery Brigade. The raiding party crossed two bands of wire, reached the second line of trenches, captured five prisoners, and came back intact with valuable information regarding the famous Hindenburg line. The battalion suffered twenty-four casualties, only a few of which were serious, none being killed. The majority of the casualties were received from artillery fire in the vicinity of Les Huit Chemins as the battalion was going into position.

In this operation the trenches Grognon and Pepinieres were penetrated and a section about one kilometer long of each of them mopped up. There was no artillery preparation, but a box barrage protected the raiders until two green V. B. rockets fired by Captain Alexander gave the signal that all our men had returned to our lines. Companies B and D, 344th Machine Gun Battalion, put down a barrage, lasting one hour, with twenty guns. A dummy raid effected by artillery and machine gun fire on Preny furnished a diversion which kept the enemy guessing as to where the blow would fall.

DEMONSTRATION OF SEPTEMBER 26

WHILE the 90th Division did not enter the Meuse-Argonne front until October 22, it played a part in the offensive on September 26 the first day of the big attack – which will long be remembered. The 1st Army decided that simultaneously with the attack west of the Meuse, demonstrations would be made by

the divisions between the Meuse and the Moselle. In addition, all divisions east of the Meuse under the 1st Army command were to be held in readiness to attack or take up the pursuit in case the enemy showed signs of weakness or withdrawal.

On the night of September 24 the order of the 4th Corps was received directing the 69th (French) Division, east of the Moselle, and the 90th, 78th, 89th, and 42d Divisions, west of the Moselle, to make raids simultaneously, starting on D day at H hour, and penetrating through the enemy's zone of outposts to the hostile line of resistance. In a conference with the brigade commanders that same night at Villers-en-Haye. General Allen decided upon the plan for the 90th Division raid.

It was decided that the raiding party should be made up of troops from each brigade. The 179th Brigade's quota was about 500 men. For this operation Companies B and D of the 358th Infantry were raised to full war strength of 250 by attaching men from other units to fill up the depleted ranks. The raiding party of the 180th Brigade consisted of Companies F and H, 359th Infantry, under the command of Captain Fred N. Oliver, Company E, and Companies E and F, 360th Infantry, commanded by Major Charles E. Kerr. Lieutenant-Colonel R. T. Phinney, 359th Infantry, was in command of the entire 180th Brigade detachment.

That the Germans had anticipated with uncanny shrewdness the nature of our operations was proved in the preparations they made to forestall the attack, and was later further verified by the statements of German officers of the 123d Infantry Division, which held the line at this point. The German outposts had been doubled by bringing up an additional battalion, and a half hour before midnight of September 25-26, while the raiding parties were moving to their assembly positions, a terrific barrage came down upon our lines. The companies of the 360th Infantry suffered especially, and were unable to reach their position until 4 A. M. The enemy also started out early in the night to test out our positions with patrols, which undoubtedly carried back information as to our dispositions and intentions. For the purpose of the raid, the companies of the 359th had taken up a position in front of the 358th sector, about 100 meters beyond the edge of the Bois des Rappes. They reached their places about 9:30 P. M. and were almost immediately attacked by a large German patrol. Later in the night their position was again strongly assailed. The 179th Brigade detachment encountered German patrols in the Bois des Rappes, and were forced to drive them out in order to reach their jumping-off place near the point where the road from Huit Chemins to Grange-en-Haie Farm debouches from the woods. They were in place about a half hour before midnight, Captain George B. Danenhour, commanding the two companies, making his P. C. in the hospital at the edge of the woods.

Just at the zero hour, 5:30 A. M., another violent barrage fell between the attacking and support companies of the 180th Brigade. And no sooner had the assaulting waves debouched when they were swept by a withering machine gun fire.

The plan for the raid contemplated that the raiders would strike due north until the road from Sebastopol Farm to Pagny was reached, the men from the 179th Brigade then turning west and returning by the light railway, while the detachment from the Texas Brigade was to turn east along the valley south of Bois de Beaume Haie and circle Preny. In keeping with this scheme of march, the artillery barrage was also to execute a "column right" or "column left." For six hours prior to the attack, army corps and divisional artillery harassed circulation and assembly points with gas and high explosives. The 37mm. platoon of the 359th Infantry fired 600 rounds on Preny. The barrage was timed to advance at the rate of 100 meters in 2½ minutes. The infantry found it impossible to keep up with this speed. This fact enabled the German machine gunners to crawl out of their concrete pill-boxes after our artillery had passed over and set up their guns to catch the advancing infantry.

The enemy defenses which the raiding party encountered were all that the name "Hindenburg" implies. In the walls of Preny itself were several concrete machine gun emplacements, and dugouts in the town were capable of accommodating a large garrison. There was a row of concrete pill-boxes at intervals of one hundred yards along the ridge running west from Preny. Machine guns from these positions, as from the woods to the north and west, completely dominated open space across which the raiders were forced to pass. There were two lines of trenches: the first, Tranchée des Grognons, and the second, Tranchée des Pepinieres, each defended by bands of wire. The men were not able to get beyond Tranchée des Grognons, and only a few reached this position. None who reached it came back to tell the story. Captain David Vanderkooi, Company F, 359th Infantry, sent a message that he had reached this trench, and was not seen again, being wounded and captured.

The leading companies, after suffering severe casualties, retired to the jumping-off position, and at 9: 50 A. M. orders were given to hold this position against counterattack, as the enemy had followed up our withdrawal aggressively. The 343d Machine Gun Battalion had been moved to Côte 327 to lay down a barrage on Preny and vicinity, and to be in readiness to meet this anticipated counterattack. The battalion suffered from artillery fire, Lieutenant Walter B. Dryson being killed.

Every company officer of the 359th Infantry going into the action was a casualty, and during the day the 2d Battalion, 359th Infantry, had five commanders. Captain Fred N. Oliver was wounded by shrapnel fifteen minutes after the action began. He sent word to Captain Vanderkooi to take command, but Captain Vanderkooi probably never received the message. Lieutenant F. B. Ferrais held the command a short time, remaining on the job despite a wound in his neck by a machine gun bullet. After the action, Captain Merlin M. Mitchell, Company M, was sent to take command of the 2d Battalion, but on his arrival a shell burst directly in front of him and he was sent to the hospital badly gassed and shocked. Captain B. M. Whitaker then commanded until the battalion returned to Griscourt for rest, where Captain Tom G. Woolen was placed in command.

Five officers of the 359th Infantry were missing after the action. Two of these, Lieutenants John C. Boog, Company F, and Oscar Nordquist, Company H, were later known to have been killed. Captain Vanderkooi, Lieutenant Walter J. Wakefield, Company F, and Lieutenant James B. Morgan, who commanded Company H, were discovered in a German hospital at Metz after the armistice. Captain Vanderkooi was shot through the right arm and shoulder; Lieutenant Wakefield had a bad wound in his lungs, and Lieutenant Morgan had been so badly mauled by high explosive that it was necessary to operate on him five times. Lieutenant Oscar C. Key, Company C, was killed, and Lieutenant Lewis J. Hennessey, Company A, was wounded. Both of these officers had been attached to the raiding companies for the operation. Lieutenant Clifford Clower received a wound which later made the amputation of one leg necessary. In addition, Lieutenant Leland F. Zilman, who was in command of the combat patrol between the 359th Infantry and the 358th Infantry, was shot in the leg. Lieutenant Claude W. Fisher, adjutant, 2d Battalion, and Lieutenant Peter E. McKenna, battalion intelligence officer were lucky enough to return with only slight scratches.

The raid also robbed the 358th Infantry of one of its best officers, Captain Herbert N. Peters, who was killed while commanding Company D. Lieutenant Robert E. Gilbraith, Company A, attached to Company D for the raid, was wounded and captured. Lieutenant T. J. Devine, Captain Danenhour's adjutant, received a fractured shoulder from machine gun fire.

In the 360th Infantry, Lieutenant Raymond C. Campbell, Company F, was very severely wounded and captured. He died of wounds in a German hospital, according to reports.

Lieutenant E. R. Warren, commanding a platoon of Company C, 315th Engineers, attached for the operation, and ten of his men were wounded.

Such was our part in the initial phase of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. The mission was to make a demonstration which would lead the enemy to believe that an attack was impending, thus causing him to hold reserves which he could not spare from the real point of attack. The Division succeeded in this mission.

The Germans retaliated by heavy shelling, particularly with gas, the afternoon and night after the raid. There were many casualties in the outpost position of the 357th Infantry. The next day there was a mustard gas concentration on the line of resistance of the 359th Infantry, Company B, 345th Machine Gun Battalion, suffering very heavily. The positions became so bad that it was necessary to move out of them into new ones. Owing to the persistency of this type of gas, it was never possible to occupy the gas-saturated trenches during the time that the Division remained in the Puvenelle sector.



View of Bois des Rappes (on the left) and camouflaged road (on the right), being a portion of the ground over which the raid of September 26 took place.



One of the concrete machine gun emplacements which were a part of the defenses of the Hindenburg line west of Preny. Similar emplacements were constructed at intervals of about 100 meters along the Tranche des Grognons behind the camouflaged road running west from Preny.

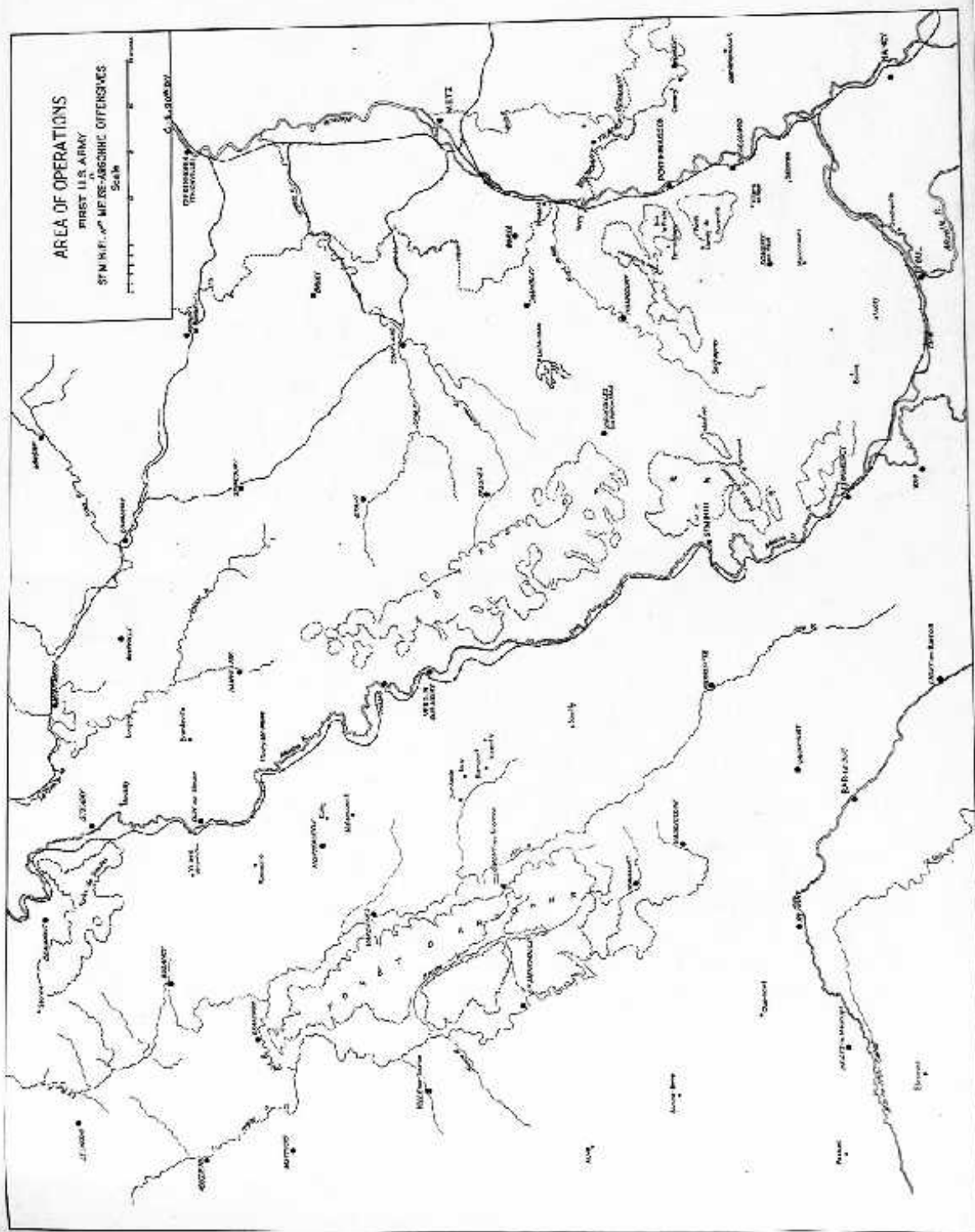
AREA OF OPERATIONS

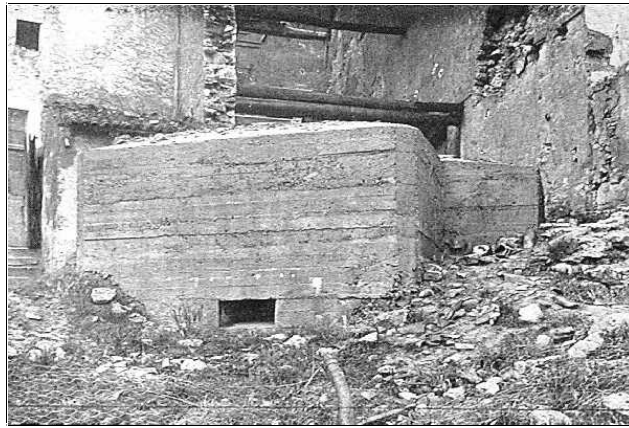
FIRST U.S. ARMY

STRENGTHENING THE DEFENSE

4100

1





Two views of concrete machine gun emplacements built into the wall around Preny.
There were a number of similar emplacements in the wall as well as loopholes constructed in the walls of the buildings so as to cover the valley south of Preny.

RELIEF BY THE 7TH DIVISION

THE 7th Division relieved the 90th Division during the period of October 8-10, the command passing at 11 P. M., October 10. The 14th Infantry Brigade took the place of the 179 th Brigade: the 34th Infantry, of the 358th Infantry; the 64th Infantry, of the 357th Infantry; the 13th Brigade, of the 180th Brigade; the 55th Infantry, of the 359 Infantry: the 56th Infantry, of the 360th Infantry; the 5th Engineers, of the 315th Engineers: the 10th Field Signal Battalion, of the 315th Field Signal Battalion; and the 19th Machine Gun Battalion, of the 343d Machine Gun Battalion.

The area to which the Division moved on coming out of line was practically the same as that which had been used for staging purposes on moving from Aignay-le-Duc into the line. Battalions were billeted in practically the same towns as before: Division Headquarters, the 315th Engineers, the 315th Field Signal Battalion, and the Headquarters Troop, however, went to Lucey. The distance from the front line to the new area was so great that the troops staged two nights en route, stopping the first night at the camps in the Puvenelle woods or around Martincourt, the second night being spent in the half-way towns at Avrainville and Francheville.

Intimations that something was in store for the Division were conveyed by the corps order that the relief must be completed and all units assembled in the billeting area by noon of the 12th. In order to

carry out these instructions, it was necessary to send trucks to Griscourt the morning of the 12th to move the personnel of Company C, 345th Machine Gun Battalion, the last unit to be relieved. This company was doing duty in the front line with the 359th Infantry, and was not relieved the night of October 11, as was intended, owing to the fact that the corresponding unit from the 7th Division became lost in the woods. Hence it was necessary for the company to get out in the daytime. However, they safely filtered across "Death Valley" before night, and went into billets at Griscourt.



View showing French tanks passing through Rampont.

MOVE TO BLERCOURT AREA

UPON coming out of the Puvenelle sector, every one eagerly looked forward to an opportunity to rest, wash, clean up, and obtain badly needed clothes and equipment. The men who stumbled along, half asleep after nights of front line duty, down the smooth Dieulouard road, which extended straight as an arrow, but apparently for an interminable distance toward Toul, heard the sounds of the guns gradually becoming fainter, and they dreamed of soft beds of straw in some French barn at Domgermain or Pagny-sur-Meuse, where they could stretch out and sleep forever.

But this was not the time to rest. The American High Command, fully acquainted with the factors which were rapidly weakening the enemy resistance, had determined not to lose a minute, and were pressing the attack in the Meuse-Argonne sector with every available resource. The 90th Division, which had proved its capabilities in the St. Mihiel attack, had been withdrawn, not to rest, but to take station at the "post of honor" on the Meuse. Therefore, before the last units had reached the staging area west of Toul, orders were received to move by "bus" to a region west of Verdun.

A bus is a sort of truck fitted with two long benches, and is designed to carry fifteen men. The busses were formed in a long train, which moved from station to station under orders of the French C. R. A. (Automobile Regulating Commission), exactly similar to a railway. On October 13 the 179th Brigade was moved to the new area, passing over the famous Verdun-Bar-le-Duc highway, one of the best roads in France, which was the sole route for supplies in the Verdun defense after all railways were

cut by Boche artillery.

Sudden changes in the military situation brought about three different changes of orders regarding the destination of this brigade during the period of eight hours that it was en route. But the busses finally came to a standstill near Blercourt, new division headquarters, on the Verdun-Chalons road, twelve kilometers west of Verdun, where the troops “debussed” – that is, climbed off the trucks as fast as their stiff legs would allow them. As this entire region is crowded with barracks constructed by the French during and after the fight for Verdun, accommodations for the brigade were found in the Bois de Sivry, just north of Blercourt, and every man was able to sleep dry, despite the fact that the rain, which had already lasted for weeks, was still coming down in torrents and the entire region was one sea of mud.

Then there came another change of orders. Busses first intended to move the remainder of the Division were diverted to transport the 91st and 37th United States Divisions to the French front in Belgium, to follow up the successes there, and it was not until October 16 that the 180th Brigade arrived and was billeted in barracks at Jouy, Rampont and neighboring camps. In the meantime, the motor and horse transport of the Division, which had come overland in two separate convoys, had arrived on the scene.



View of Esnes, showing blocked traffic moving at the rate of only two 2 miles per hour.