

1521790

X

The Infantry School
MAILING LIST

A Semi-annual Publication
Containing the Latest Thought
on Infantry

VOLUME X—JUNE 1935

*Prepared by the
Academic Department of the Infantry School
under the supervision of the
Assistant Commandant*

DISTRIBUTED BY THE BOOK SHOP
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL, FORT BENNING, GEORGIA

CHAPTER II

An Advance Guard in 1914

(HISTORICAL MAP PROBLEM)

On the 20th of August, 1914, the French armies from the Sambre River to the Vosges Mountains were not only ready but eager for battle. And to the French high command it appears that the opportune moment to unleash these valiant armies is at hand. For the Germans, in order to augment their large forces now swinging west through Belgium, directly across the front of the French Fourth Army, must have weakened their center.

To make the decisive thrust, the Fourth Army is to march north from the line of the Meuse, crush the supposedly weak German center, and strike in flank and rear the whole German movement through Belgium. The Third Army, echeloned to the right rear, is to protect the right flank, while the Fifth Army and the British Expeditionary Force on the left are to conform to the general advance.

With but one thought—battle to avenge Sedan—the Fourth Army sprang forward. Advancing in a staircase formation, its six corps were echeloned to the right rear in order to provide flank protection on the right.

By the evening of August 21st, the locations of the corps of the Fourth Army were as shown in Figure 14. During the advance that day German cavalry patrols had been encountered. Nevertheless, all ranks, discounting this indication, believed that no German forces of importance would be met on the 22d. This firm belief was based on reports of French aviators that there was no important assembly of German troops in the vicinity.

Therefore August 22d is to be a march day, not a battle day; a day of quickly brushing aside hostile advance elements while each column drives rapidly forward to pierce the side of German main forces.

But the days and nights immediately preceding the 22d have been hard on infantry units. During the night of August 20-21 the 5th Colonial Brigade, a separate brigade of the Colonial Corps, had marched 19 miles, and by 7:00 AM on the 21st, was in the area Gerouville—Margny. This brigade consisted of the 21st and 23d Colonial Infantry Regiments; and, in addition, some artillery and engineers, and a platoon of Reserve Dragoons (heavy cavalry).

These were elite troops, of high morale, led by officers with much war experience in the colonies. Most of the personnel were familiar with the crack of bullets, and the troops called themselves the "masouins" (the ugly, dirty ones). Only the cavalry, old reservists on requisitioned and unsuitable horses, was not up to its job.

During the afternoon of August 21st, Colonel Neple, commanding the 23d Colonial Infantry at Gerouville, received an order attaching the cavalry platoon (25 dragoons) and a battery of artillery to his regiment, and directing him to push north to Jamoigne. Upon arrival there he was to gain contact with a detachment of the 3d Colonial Division, Colonial Corps, at St. Vincent, and with detachments of the XII Corps at Izel.

This movement began at 2:00 PM in a torrential rain. And owing to a tie-up in the distribution of rations, the regiment had to leave Gerouville without a hot meal. German cavalry patrols were encountered throughout the march, and when the regiment reached Jamoigne at midnight, the men were soaking wet, tired, and hungry.

By daylight (4:00 AM) the 22d of August, no orders for the day had reached the 23d Infantry. Nevertheless Colonel Neple decided to move to Les Bulles (See Figure 15, map in pocket at end of the book), leaving two

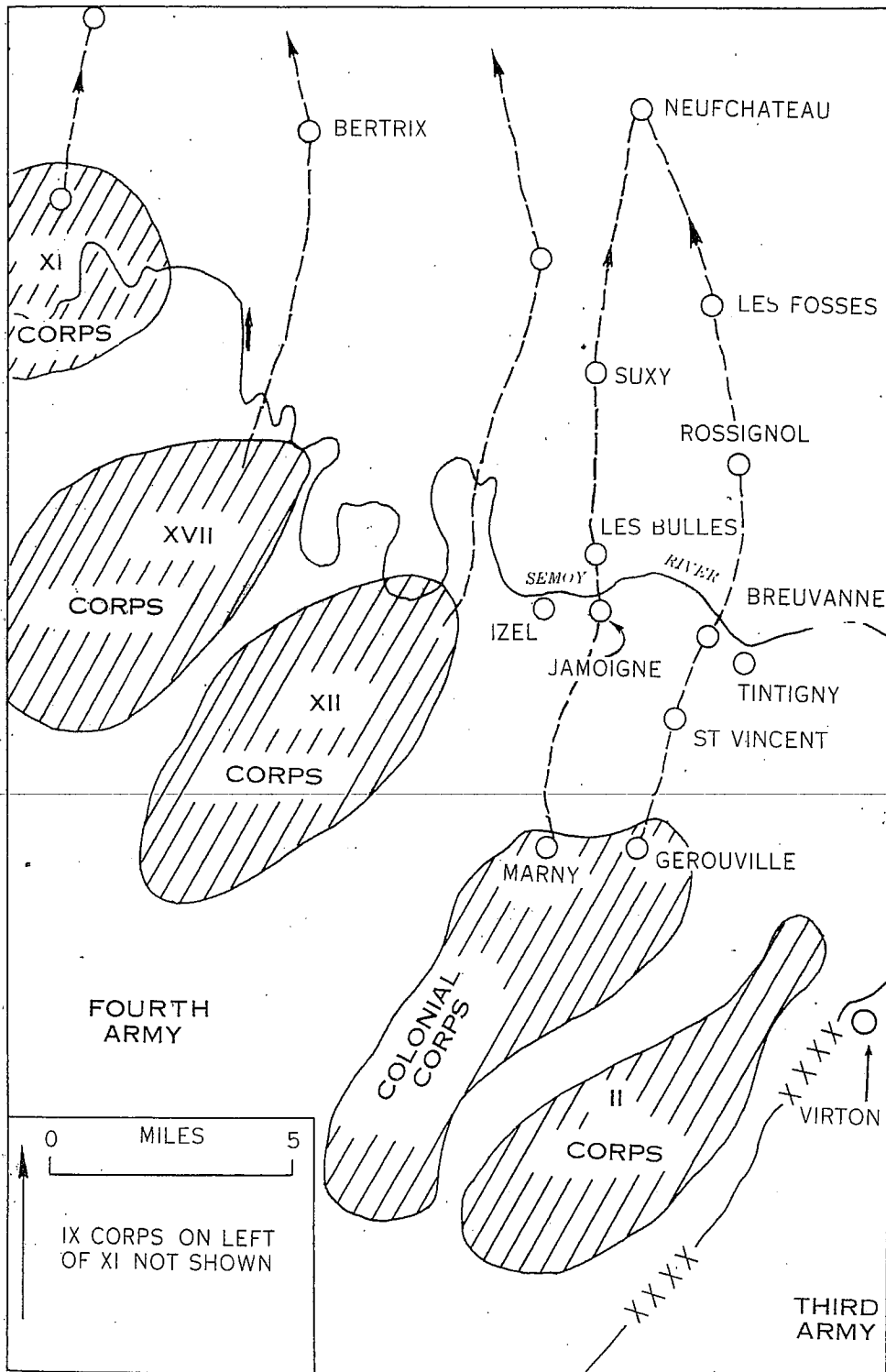


FIGURE 14

companies at Jamoigne to protect the town and the brigade against hostile cavalry. As the regiment was entering Les Bulles, a brigade staff officer arrived with operations orders for the day. These directed the regiment to continue the march, though the troops had not had breakfast and had but little rest during the night.

In compliance with the operations orders for August 22d the whole Colonial Corps is now moving on Neufchateau in two columns, as indicated in Figure 14 and will "attack the enemy wherever he is encountered". The right (east) column consists of the 3d Colonial Division and corps artillery and will march via Rossignol and Les Fosses, while the 5th Colonial Brigade, forming the left (west) column, moves by way of Les Bulles and Suxy.

The 23d Infantry (less the 3d Battalion), with the platoon of dragoons attached, forms the advance guard of the 5th Colonial Brigade. The 1st Battalion (less two companies) and the 25 reserve dragoons, under Major Geoffroy, battalion commander, will be the support, and the remainder of the advance guard will constitute its reserve.* platoons.

No time for breakfast, only hard bread! Move out!

FIRST REQUIREMENT

So much of the plan of Major Geoffroy as relates to the initial formation of the support and the missions of its various elements.

*In 1914, the French infantry battalion consisted of four rifle companies and a section of machine guns. Each rifle company was about 250 strong and had four platoons.

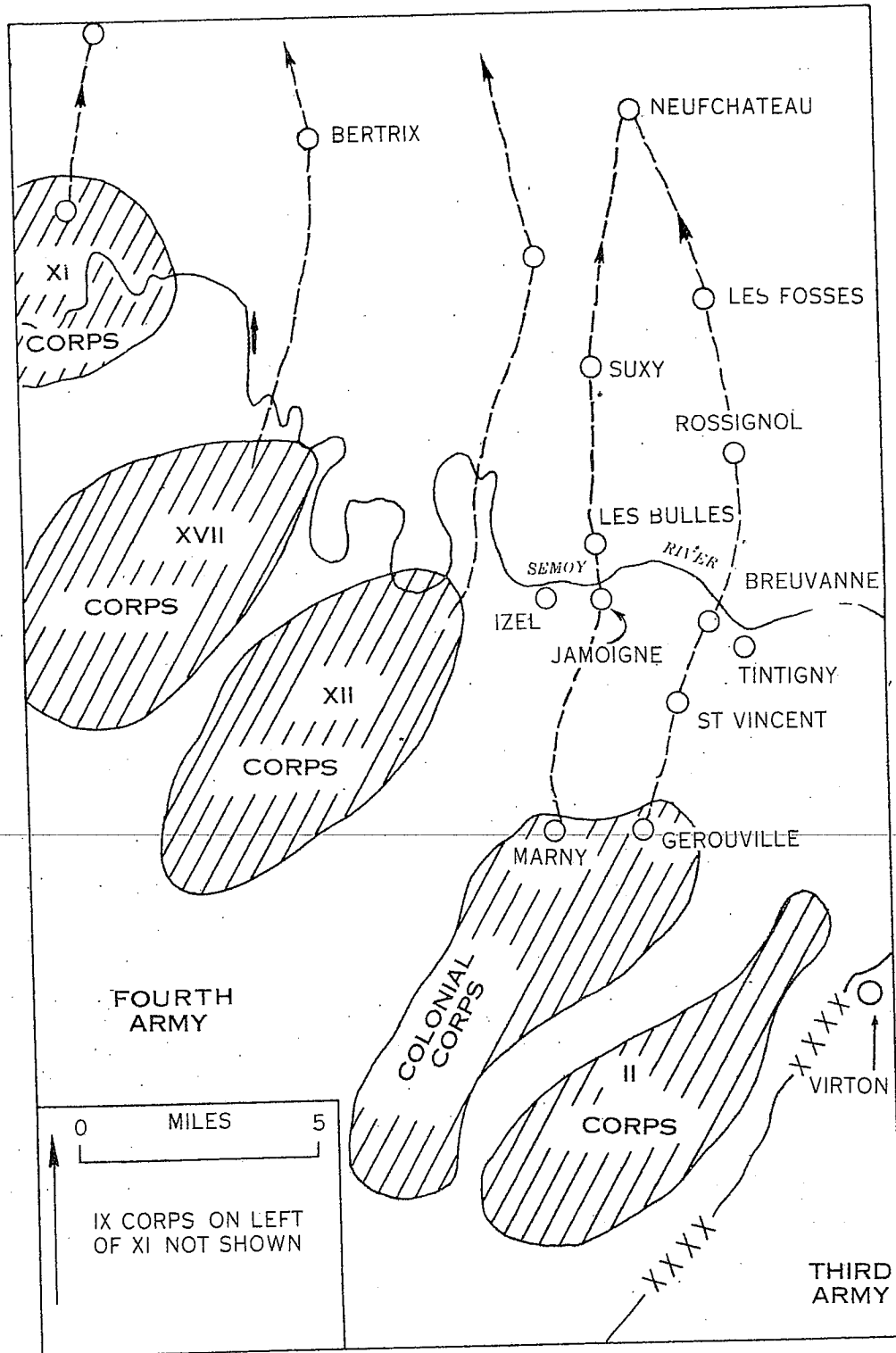


FIGURE 14

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The 25 reserve dragoons moved out on their slow horses in front of the infantry. The 1st Company (less one platoon), formed the advance party, with a few scouts preceding it at a short distance, as a point. The scouts, moreover, were only a few hundred yards behind the dragoons. The advance party marched on the road and about 200 yards behind it came the support—one platoon of the 1st Company, the 2d Company 23d Infantry, and the two machine guns—, all on the road. Major Geoffroy was with the advance party. (See Figure 16 for initial formation of the advance guard.)

DISCUSSION*

Higher headquarters had expressed the belief that the march on the 22d of August would be made with little opposition from the enemy. Although this might prove true enough from the point of view of the high command, the opposition could nevertheless be formidable for the smaller units in front. During its march the night of August 21/22, the 23d Infantry had been constantly harassed by German cavalry patrols. Therefore the least that could be expected for the 22d was increasing activity by the hostile cavalry.

If, then, the support of the advance guard was to clear the way so that the march of the reserve would not be continually interrupted, the advance party should have been strong enough from the start to drive off

*The solution contained in this discussion and those that follow are based on the teaching and instructions under which advance guards operated at the time. The general discussion, concluding this chapter, considers what should have been the action of advance guard elements if higher commanders had decided that contact was imminent, and directed advance guards to move forward in contiguous zones.

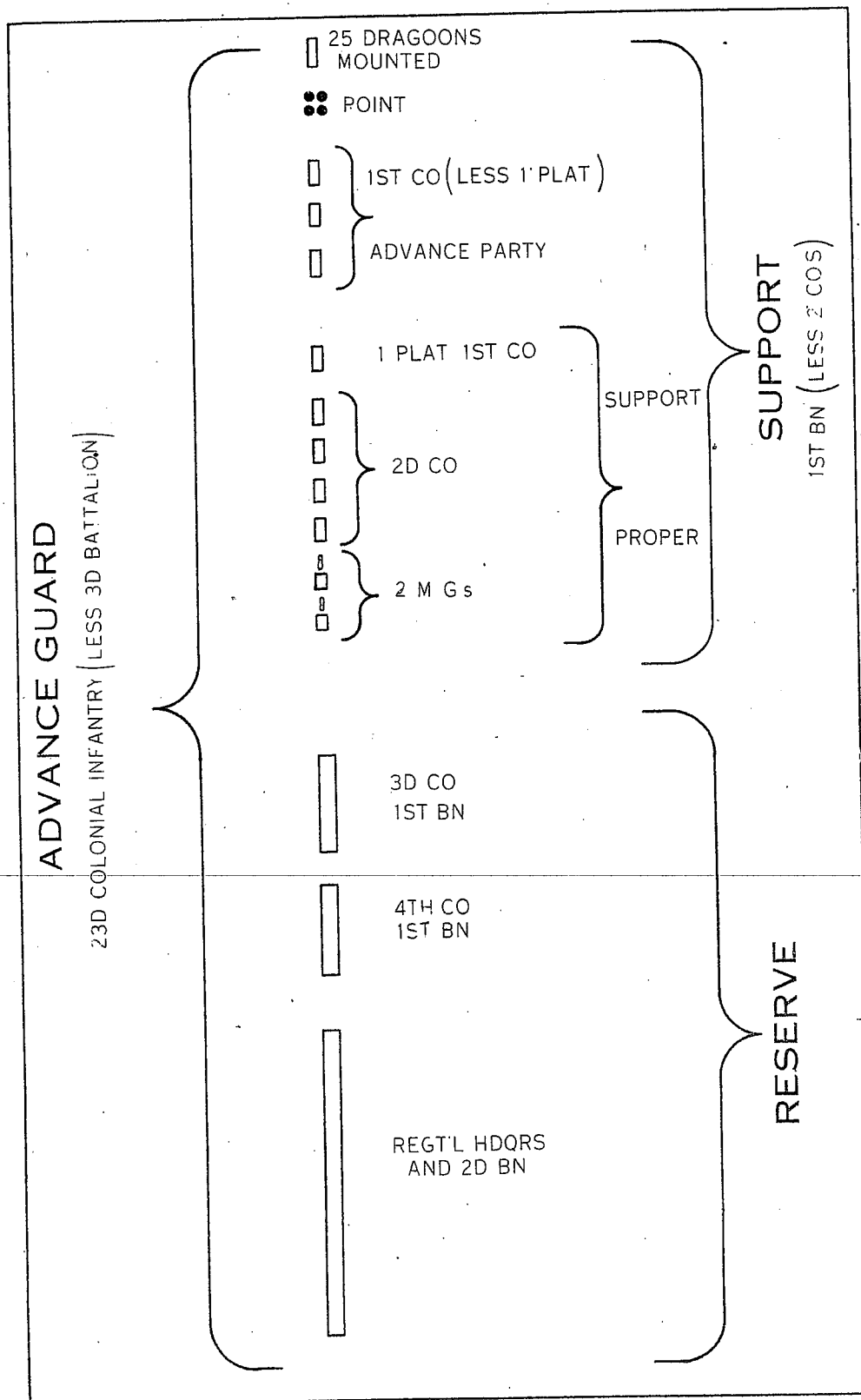


FIGURE 16.—Advance-guard formation (not to scale).

promptly any small patrols that might be met. Moreover the distances between elements of the support should have been great enough to allow time for this to be done and for the elements to resume their places in the formation without too great reduction of the distances.

About a mile and a quarter north of Les Bulles the road enters Chiny Forest and, except for a short distance south and north of Suxy, continues through woods to a point approximately two miles south of Neufchateau—the day's march objective. Thus the ground to be traversed was not particularly favorable for enemy cavalry action.

Although these troops, with the exception of the 25 dragoons, were veterans, they were far from fresh the morning of August 22d. They had made a 19-mile march the night of 20/21 August, and had had no hot supper the 21st. Then that night they marched nearly 10 miles in a pouring rain, under constant harassment from German Uhlans. At daylight the 22d, they again moved out, marching still a few miles more from Jamoigne to Les Bulles. The troops had expected breakfast at the termination of this last march but before the meal could be served they were again en route to the north with no prospect of a hot meal for at least five hours. Such circumstances are sufficient to dampen the ardor of the finest troops.

The following plan seems to meet the situation as it was known to the battalion commander about 6:00 AM:

The dragoons to proceed at once to Chiny Forest and, operating one mile in front of the advance guard, clear the route of march—the mile distance, of course, to be merely a guide.

One rifle company, less one platoon, to form the advance party. This company to clear the northern exit of Les Bulles at such time as will enable the support proper to follow it at 600 yards, and then to approach and move through the forest partially deployed. One rifle platoon, one rifle company, and the two machine guns, in that or-

der, to constitute the support proper and follow the advance party at a distance of 600 yards.

The support commander to march initially at the head of the support proper.

The support commander might have marched with the advance party. However, no German infantry had been seen and, in the situation as known, none was liable to be encountered in Chiny Forest. It seems probable that the advance party could take care of any cavalry patrols it might meet. The support commander could ride forward to the advance party in two or three minutes at any time. Therefore, there appears to have been no particular reason under the circumstances for the support commander to leave the support proper. He might well have directed the advance-party commander to act aggressively whenever he met resistance, and then have left the execution to him.

As the dragoons approach the southern edge of Chiny Forest, they receive heavy small-arms fire from the woods. The advance-party commander, marching near the head of his party, hears the firing to the front and sees the dragoons falter and show signs of breaking and running to the rear.

SECOND REQUIREMENT

Orders issued by the advance-party commander at this time.

A SOLUTION*

Here the advance party was on the road. Fortunately for the French, German cavalry at this time was not equipped with machine guns or machine rifles, or both the point and advance party might have suffered heavy casualties.

The advance party should deploy at once astride the road, and then advance to the woods as rapidly as the hostile fire permitted.

*Not the historical solution.

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

When fired on, the dragoons dashed back to shelter behind the advance party, which was then about 650 yards south of the woods. The advance-party commander deployed one platoon to the right and one platoon to the left of the road, while the third platoon formed in single file in a ditch alongside the road. The three platoons then moved forward.

In a few minutes about twenty Germans just inside the forest, are seen to leap on horses and gallop to the north. No other enemy can be seen.

THIRD REQUIREMENT

(1) Should the dragoons be ordered to the front again or not? Why?

(2) What change of formation, if any, should the advance-party commander now order?

A SOLUTION*

(1) Yes. The dragoons do not promise to be of much value in a real fight; but by locating the next position taken up by the Uhlans before the French infantry arrive and then informing the infantry commanders of this location, they can enable these commanders to act promptly and with a minimum of casualties.

(2) Since it can be expected that small hostile cavalry groups will continue their efforts to delay the French march through the woods, the point and the advance party, as soon as the near edge of the forest has been taken, should partially deploy and advance astride the road. Of course, if underbrush is so thick that movement is slowed down to less than the normal rate of march, this formation is not practicable. But if the ground is neither extremely rough nor covered with vegetation or heavy underbrush, individuals or small groups in squad column can march across country at two and a half miles per hour with little more fatigue than when marching on roads.

When troops are moving in the immediate presence of the enemy, as they were in this case, fewer casualties and more rapid action against resistance result if the forward elements of the advance guard take up a partially deployed formation, instead of marching in column of squads or column of twos along the road. However, the exact formation depends to a considerable degree on the terrain. With one of our rifle squads as point and one of our rifle platoons, less one squad, as advance party, a formation similar to that shown in Figure 17 is suitable when the enemy is as liable to appear on the flanks as to the front.

*Not the historical solution.

(NOT DRAWN TO SCALE)

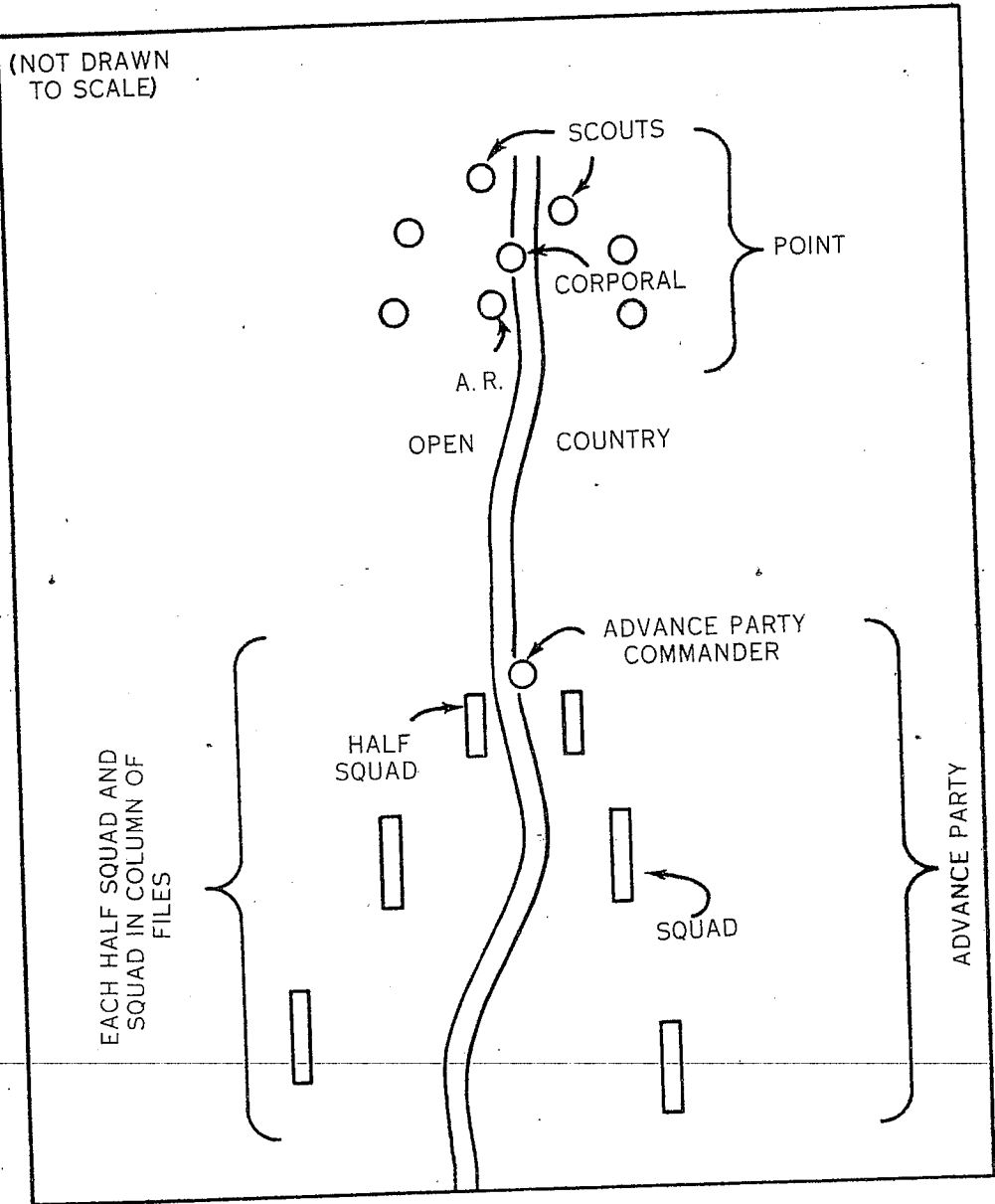


FIGURE 17

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The dragoons resumed their place ahead of the infantry.

The inhabitants of a house at the southern edge of the forest reported that Suxy was occupied by German cavalry, and during the march through the forest, German cavalry patrols continued to be encountered frequently. By their audacity they clearly showed the contempt that the Germans felt for the French. Some of them, in positions in a ditch along the side of the road, allowed the dragoons to approach quite close, emptied their magazines at them, then, jumping into their saddles, galloped back a few hundred yards to repeat the operation. Some small patrols even galloped across the road between the advance guard and the main body.

A German plane, which had been observed near Les Bulles at the beginning of the march, flew at frequent intervals over the column.

As the French dragoons arrived, about 8:30 AM, at road junction A (Figure 15), on the high ground 1100 yards south of Suxy, they were fired on by riflemen. But being unable to locate the source of the fire, they dropped back behind the advance party.

The point of the advance guard is now approaching the crest of the hill overlooking Suxy from the south. The advance party is 100 yards in rear, and the support proper only 225 yards back of the advance party.

FOURTH REQUIREMENT

- (1) Orders issued by the advance-party commander regarding the advance north of this high ground.
- (2) Plan of the support commander at this time for use of the support proper.

A SOLUTION*

(1) When riflemen undertake to advance without concealment or cover in the face of fire from modern weapons they must expect to suffer excessive casualties. Hence a commander should not order his riflemen to advance under such circumstances unless his mission makes it imperative to do so. Such exceptions will probably occur more often in advance-guard actions than in any others.

The situation under consideration, however, does not appear to warrant such a risk by the advance-party commander. The terrain north of the hill is open and, therefore, offers neither cover nor concealment. The location of the hostile resistance is indefinite. But as the dragoons had been fired on when they reached the crest of the hill, this resistance must be so located that fire can be brought to bear on it from the hill. Accordingly, part of the advance party should be placed in position on the hill to cover the rapid maneuver of the remainder towards Suxy.

(2) The support proper, including the battalion's two machine guns, is only 225 yards behind the advance party. In a few moments the support will have to halt or go into action. Just as soon as the support commander learns of the situation in his front he should move his machine guns into position on the high ground south of Suxy with the mission of covering the advance over the open ground north of the forest. The support proper, less a small reserve, should be deployed into small columns and moved forward rapidly toward Suxy, and the small reserve halted under cover of the hill where it will be available for further developments.

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The advance-party commander placed his leading platoon on the crest, astride the road, ready to open fire. He ordered one platoon to move down the slope at the double time and turn the village on the right, and the remaining

*Not the historical solution.

platoon to move similarly and approach it from the left.

As this maneuver is under way, a platoon of field gray cavalry mounts up in the vicinity of Suxy and, before the French can intercept it, gallops off by way of the ravine to the east.

The platoon of the advance party that is in position on the crest south of the town then moves forward promptly.

Some inhabitants say that a German cavalry squadron (about the size of our troop) had been billeted for the past eight days in a chateau one kilometer to the east.

The German plane is still observing the column.

About 11:00 AM the point of the advance guard emerges from Lower Heveau Woods on to the plateau southwest of Neufchateau. The dragoons, listening, report to the advance-party commander that they can hear, from the direction of Neufchateau, sounds quite different from those normal to a small town. It sounds, they say, like a large column of vehicles moving on the Neufchateau—Bertrix Road, going from east to west.

The dragoons push on. But at the bridge about 1650 yards north of Montplainchamp they are fired on by riflemen, apparently in or near the two houses 500 yards beyond the bridge. At the same time the officer command-

ing the dragoons sees what he believes to be part of a German column moving westward from Neufchateau. However, the hill north of the bridge obstructs his view somewhat, and he is not sure. Just then a noncommissioned officer, two privates, and several horses are hit, and the detachment whirls and gallops back to the cover of the advance party. The leader of the dragoons reports to the advance-party commander what has happened and what he has just seen.

The advance party continues forward on the road. But as the point crosses the bridge it also receives a few scattered rifle shots from the vicinity of the houses northeast of the bridge. The billeting detail of the 23d Infantry, eager to locate food and beds in Neufchateau, arrives at this moment at the head of the advance party. They say, when asked, that nothing has been heard from the column on the right—consisting of the 3d Colonial Division and Corps Artillery—that was to move on Neufchateau via Breuvanne, Rossignol and Les Fosses.

The Neufchateau stream is fordable.

FIFTH REQUIREMENT

- (1) The plan of the advance-party commander for continuing the advance.
- (2) The plan of the support commander for continuing the advance.

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The support commander heard the firing and went forward to join the advance-party commander. He arrived at the head of the advance party and got in touch with its leader just after the billeting detail arrived. The support commander believed that there was "only cavalry" in the vicinity, and he therefore decided to have the advance party cross the bridge at the double and in one bound go on into Neufchateau.

He ordered the leading platoon of the support proper to leave the column at the bridge and climb the hill to the north.

DISCUSSION

(1) The high ground to the north commands the surrounding terrain and the bridge. Consequently it is vital that the French secure this high ground immediately.

A squad or two of the leading platoon can take position near the bridge to cover the crossing of the remainder of the advance party. The leading platoon, less the covering force, should then cross the stream rapidly and drive out the riflemen near the two houses. At the same time at least one squad of the advance party should go to Ospot Woods, then follow the northern edge of the woods to Neufchateau. When the resistance near the houses is reduced, the remainder of the advance party can cross the stream and move northwest with the mission of securing the high ground overlooking the bridge. The covering troops south of the bridge should rejoin their platoon, and this platoon then continue on to Neufchateau along the road.

Of course, if unexpected developments arise while this plan is being put into operation, it may be altered to meet them. Thus the resistance at the houses might prove to be more than a few riflemen, requiring more troops to overcome it. The plan adopted, however, must provide for

reducing the resistance encountered and securing the high ground north of the bridge.

(2) Beginning at the bridge the route of march passes through a wide defile, flanked on the north by the hill and on the south by Ospot Woods. If the enemy occupies either or both of these places, the march will necessarily be stopped until he is driven off. Consequently the support commander should be particularly concerned about them.

As soon as he learns of the firing near the bridge, the support commander should go forward to look over the ground and learn the plan of the advance-party commander.

Assuming that he did this, he should then order the dragoons to move at once to Ospot Woods, and, proceeding along the northern edge, cover the movement north of the bridge. The fourth platoon of the advance party company should now rejoin its company. With this added strength the advance party can secure the hill north of the bridge and cover the movement into Neufchateau. One platoon of the remaining company (2d Company) of the support proper should proceed to Ospot Woods with the same mission given to the dragoons. And the two machine guns should undoubtedly go into action at once in the nearest available position to cover the crossing of the stream. The 2d Company, less the platoon sent to Ospot Woods, should cross the stream as soon as practicable, and move to the two houses northeast of the bridge. If no resistance develops by this time, this company, less the platoon, can partially deploy and move astride the route of march on Neufchateau. The machine guns, of course, should displace to the high ground north of the bridge as soon as the situation permits.

Any plan the support commander adopts at this time should provide for holding the high ground north of the bridge and for reconnaissance of Ospot Woods, so close is it to the line of march.

As the advance party clears the bridge it deploys in a line of skirmishers with three platoons abreast—one platoon astride the road, the other two on its left. The intervals between men are wide, so wide in fact that the left of the advance party, after deployment, is almost on the crest of the hill.

The two houses northeast of the bridge are found sealed and locked. Inhabitants and enemy are both gone.

The firing now ceases. But as the platoons deploy and advance a rumbling is heard, as though a large number of vehicles were moving on the road north of the hill. The advance-party commander joins the left platoon and moves to the crest of the hill. From there he sees the town of Neufchateau. Its streets are deserted. But about 900 yards away, on the road running west from Neufchateau, he sees the tail of a column of vehicles moving west. Near it he sees a German cavalry squadron resting.

SIXTH REQUIREMENT

Plan of the advance party commander to meet this situation.

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The left and center platoons of the advance party, moving on Neufchateau, suddenly changed direction and moved rapidly towards the crest of the hill to the north. In a few moments these platoons opened fire on the resting cavalry. Only the third platoon of the advance party continued toward Neufchateau, deployed astride the road.

The action taken by the advance party commander here shows that he fully recognized the importance of the high ground north of the hill and that he appreciated the necessity of driving the German cavalry away and holding the hill. The sudden and heavy fire of the two platoons of the advance party proved very effective, for the German cavalry made their getaway with speed and considerable confusion.

Apparently the fire of the two platoons on the hill to the north is not being returned.

The support proper—now only one company (the 2d) and two machine guns—is under cover near the houses 500 yards northeast of the bridge. No word has yet been received from the 3d Colonial Division on the right or the XII Corps on the left. The support commander is in the vicinity of the two houses and has just witnessed the action of the advance party.

SEVENTH REQUIREMENT

Actions, messages, and orders of the commander of the support proper at this time.

A SOLUTION

The support commander should realize by now the importance to his brigade of the high ground to the north, and reinforce the troops there. One rifle platoon and the two machine guns are sufficient reinforcement until he learns what is north of the hill. The support commander should immediately gallop to the hill to see for himself what is taking place, and then promptly inform the advance-guard commander of the situation and of the action he has taken.

It is probably too late now for the support commander to concern himself about the Ospot Woods, for his whole force is north of Neufchateau stream, nearly all of it strung out along the road. But the presence of a long column of vehicles moving west towards Bertrix ought to attract his attention to the area west of the hill, and he should immediately provide for reconnaissance in that direction.

When he has personally learned of the situation north of the hill, the support commander should promptly push the company near the houses on towards Neufchateau. Neufchateau is the march objective for the day and, unless directed otherwise by the advance-guard commander, the situation does not seem to warrant his failure to try, at least, to get troops on into the town. The one platoon that was advancing on Neufchateau seems hardly sufficient for this.

It is not known what the support commander did in the situation just presented. However, by 12:00 noon, a half-hour after the platoons on the hill west of Neufchateau had

opened fire, the situation, as known to the support commander, was as follows:

When the platoon moving on Neufchateau arrived within a few hundred yards of the town, a German rifle company debouched from the town, quickly deployed and opened an accurate and effective fire on the platoon. Within a few minutes other riflemen moved into position on the right and left of the German firing line and joined in the fire fight with the French platoon. Soon the French platoon was forced to withdraw a few hundred yards to the west.

The other two platoons of the advance party, and the platoon of the 2d Company that the support commander had sent to the hill, are still there; and the two machine guns are moving to join them. Firing there has ceased. The exact location of the dragoons is not known, but they are thought to be somewhere near Neufchateau.

German infantry with machine guns is in the western edge of Ospot Woods. Firing is heard way to the south of that woods. And a German battery apparently located in White Stone Woods is firing on the bridge over the Neufchateau stream.

The remaining company (the 2d) of the support proper is still under cover just east of the two houses 500 yards northeast of the bridge.

All that is known of the reserve of the advance guard at this time is that it has not yet reached the bridge.

The support commander is in the vicinity of the two houses.

EIGHTH REQUIREMENT

The plan of the support commander for the use of the support proper (2d Company) in this situation.

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The support commander directed the 2d Company, which was under cover just east of the two houses, to take up a position on the right of the platoon that had been driven back from Neufchateau.

He urgently requested the advance guard commander to send forward the other two companies of the 1st Battalion which were marching at the head of the reserve of the advance guard.

DISCUSSION

The support commander was now in a difficult situation. Machine guns known to be in the Ospot Woods swept the ground over which his remaining company would have to pass either to reach Neufchateau or the high ground north of the bridge. More than a German rifle company held the western edge of Neufchateau. Somewhere to the west artillery was firing on the bridge. Apparently a fight was taking place south of the Ospot Woods. In all probability the reserve, in whole or in part, was engaged there. The presence of machine guns indicated at least a German regiment; for in the German army the machine gun was a regimental weapon. Artillery to the west indicated considerable cavalry or infantry. The situation on the hill seemed satisfactory because firing there had stopped.

If he puts his 2d Company in against Neufchateau it will have to have heavy fire support not only on the German riflemen defending the town but on Ospot Woods. The machine guns there, if not kept down, can seriously interfere with any movement towards the town. On the other hand, if the company is held under cover pending developments in the situation, the Neufchateau Germans, covered

by fire from Ospot Woods, may advance and, in conjunction with troops coming from the west, cut off that part of the battalion north of the Neufchateau stream.

More troops are needed north of the bridge.

A solution that seems to meet the situation as it was known to the support commander is to have the advance party commander, who is on the hill, place the two machine guns in position to fire on the Ospot Woods; under cover of their fire to have the rifle company near the houses send three of its platoons to join the platoon that had fallen back from Neufchateau, and dig in; to have the advance-party commander immediately send one of the platoons now on the hill to the vicinity of the two houses northeast of the bridge, and have him continue to hold the hill and also reconnoiter White Stone Woods west of it; to hold the platoon of the 2d Company and the platoon of the 1st Company that is to report to the houses, as a reserve; and to request that the other two companies of the battalion be sent forward at once.

About 12:20 PM one of these companies reports to the support commander at the houses 500 yards northeast of the bridge. The company commander states that the other company of the 1st Battalion, which was with the reserve, had turned out of column about a mile to the south; he does not know why.

Firing south of Ospot Woods is increasing. There is no firing north of the stream except that of the artillery firing on the bridge.

NINTH REQUIREMENT

The plan of the support commander for employing the company that has just reported to him.

HISTORICAL SOLUTION

The support commander sent the company, less one platoon, directly to the high ground north of the two houses. He ordered the remaining platoon to take position as a local reserve in rear of the left of the line that faced Neufchateau.

As these units moved out, they came under heavy small-arms fire from Neufchateau and Ospot Woods. Although losses were severe the units managed to reach their objectives.

DISCUSSION

Assuming the dispositions to be those actually made by the support commander—he had held out no reserve—the bulk of the company that reported to him about 12:20 PM should be held near the houses for the time being. It is now apparent that at least part of the reserve of the advance guard is being engaged somewhere to the south. Therefore, it cannot be counted on for assistance in the near future. The immediate problem seems to be to hold the hill north of the bridge. At any moment it is liable to be attacked from the east, the north, or the west, or from all three directions simultaneously. The failure of the Germans west of Neufchateau to advance may mean that they are not going to advance or that a maneuver to cut off the troops north of the stream is under way. Because thus far no German infantry has appeared from the west does not mean that none is on the way. Prompt reconnaissance towards the White Stone Woods by a platoon of the company that has just reported would help to clear this up.

Consequently, one platoon should be given this mission and the company, less this platoon, should be held under cover near the two houses. Lacking, as the French did, any intelligence agencies with the battalion, the support commander might well use a few of the scouts of this

company to establish battalion observation posts on the roofs or in the upper stories of the houses and on the hill.

Since he is still ignorant of what is taking place south of the Ospot Woods, he should send an officer back to ascertain the situation there.

EPILOGUE

What actually occurred at Neufchateau? The advance guard of the 5th Brigade had unexpectedly collided with

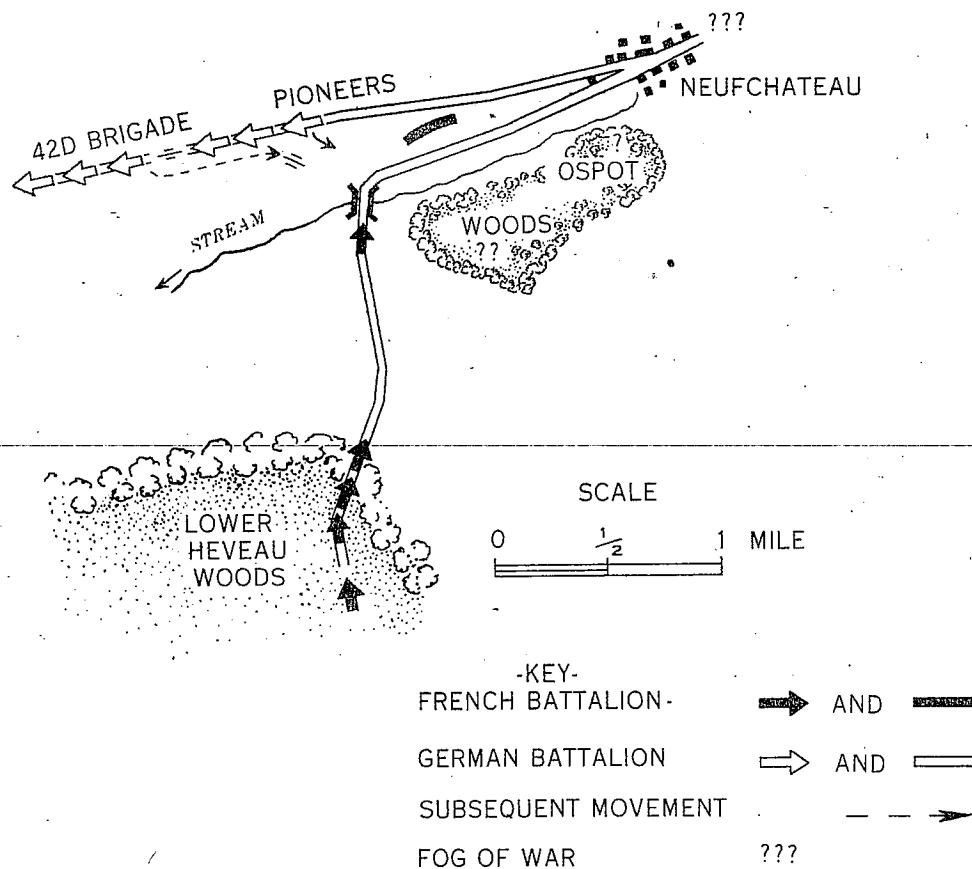


FIGURE 18.—Situation 11:30 AM

the German XVIII Reserve Corps moving west through Neufchateau. By about 11:30 AM, the situation was as

depicted in Figure 18. The French advance party had fired into the rear of the German 42d Brigade. A German pioneer battalion of this brigade halted in White Stone Woods and the artillery with it turned out of column. The remainder of the German brigade continued westward, and a short time later bumped into the French XII Corps.

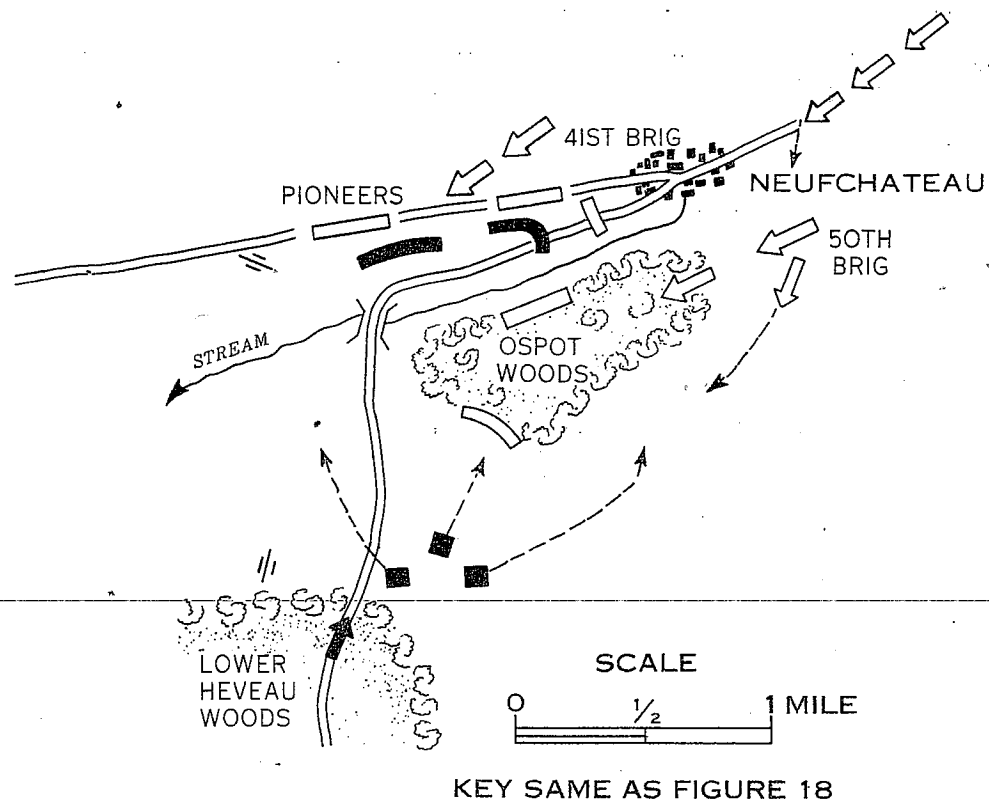


FIGURE 19.—Situation 1:00 PM

The 5th Brigade's advance guard then pushed toward Neufchateau but by 1:00 PM found itself surrounded on three sides by the remaining three brigades of the German XVIII Reserve Corps. (See Figure 19.)

The 1st Battalion of the French 23d Infantry was wiped out and only a small fraction of its 2d Battalion was able to pull back. Although the Germans succeeded in almost annihilating the French advance guard and in

driving the main body of 5th Brigade back to positions shown in Figure 20, the French held on until about dark. Then, after having lost about fifty percent of their effectives they withdrew during the night to Jamoigne, just south of the Semoy River, but "not owing to any

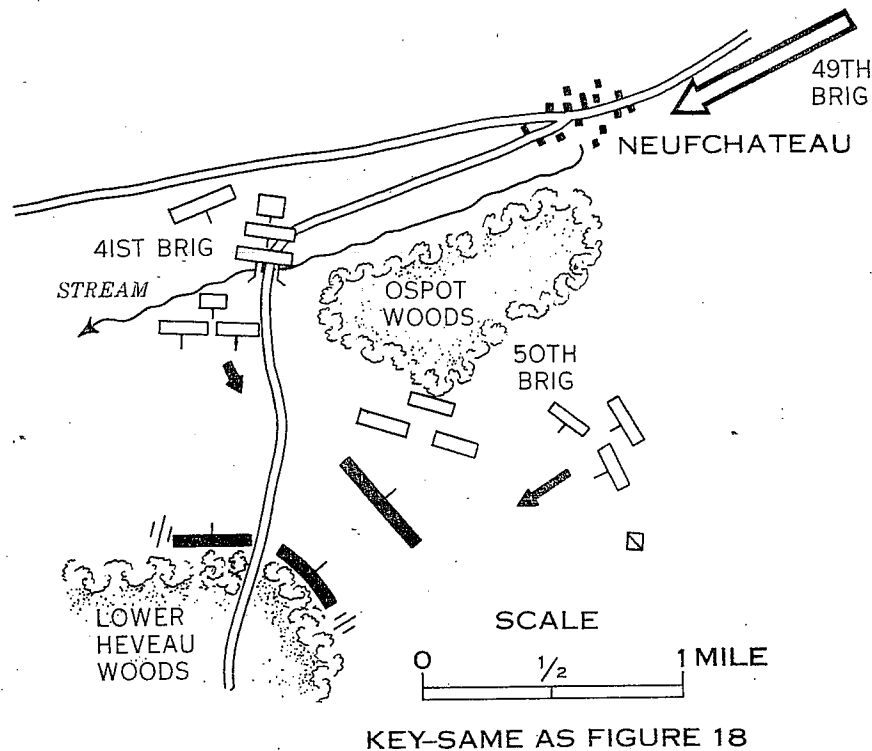


FIGURE 20.—Situation 5:30 PM.

enemy action, (The Germans failed to exploit their success.) but because the XII Corps on their left had gone back and the 3d Division on its right was not coming on".

The 3d Colonial Division—the right column of the corps—was not coming on because it was engaged in a desperate fight in and about Rossignol.

This division and the Corps Artillery were to march

on Neufchateau via the St. Vincent-Breuvanne-Rossignol-Les Fosses road. All went well until the head of the column entered the forest about a mile north of Rossignol. (See Figure 21.) There it was stopped by Germans deployed astride the forest road. While the advance guard was endeavoring to clear the way through the forest, the Germans, advancing south in several columns, encircled the flanks of the leading brigade. The greater part of this brigade was either destroyed or forced to surrender. The rear half of the 3d Colonial Division was prevented from coming to the assistance of its leading brigade by the destruction of the bridges over the Semoy at Breuvanne. This was due to the cooperation of the artillery of still another column of Germans. This artillery seized the opportunity to assist a neighboring column advancing south on the Rossignol-Breuvanne road. It opened fire on and destroyed the Breuvanne bridge at a most opportune time. The story of the 3d Colonial Division at Rossignol is, from the French viewpoint, one of the most tragic of the war.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

This action around Rossignol, coupled with the action of the 5th Colonial Brigade, as brought out in this problem, clearly demonstrates a complete failure on the part of the French high commanders to properly use their mobile reconnaissance agencies. This neglect caused them to fail to establish the fact that contact with the enemy had become imminent. On the morning of August 22d, contact with the enemy was indeed imminent, yet the French believed that the march that day would be made with but little opposition.

It is true that the high commanders had at their disposal only a small cavalry force, very little aviation, and no armored cars or combat cars. (Nevertheless there was enough information at hand to indicate clearly that the enemy was close.) It is true, also, that aviation

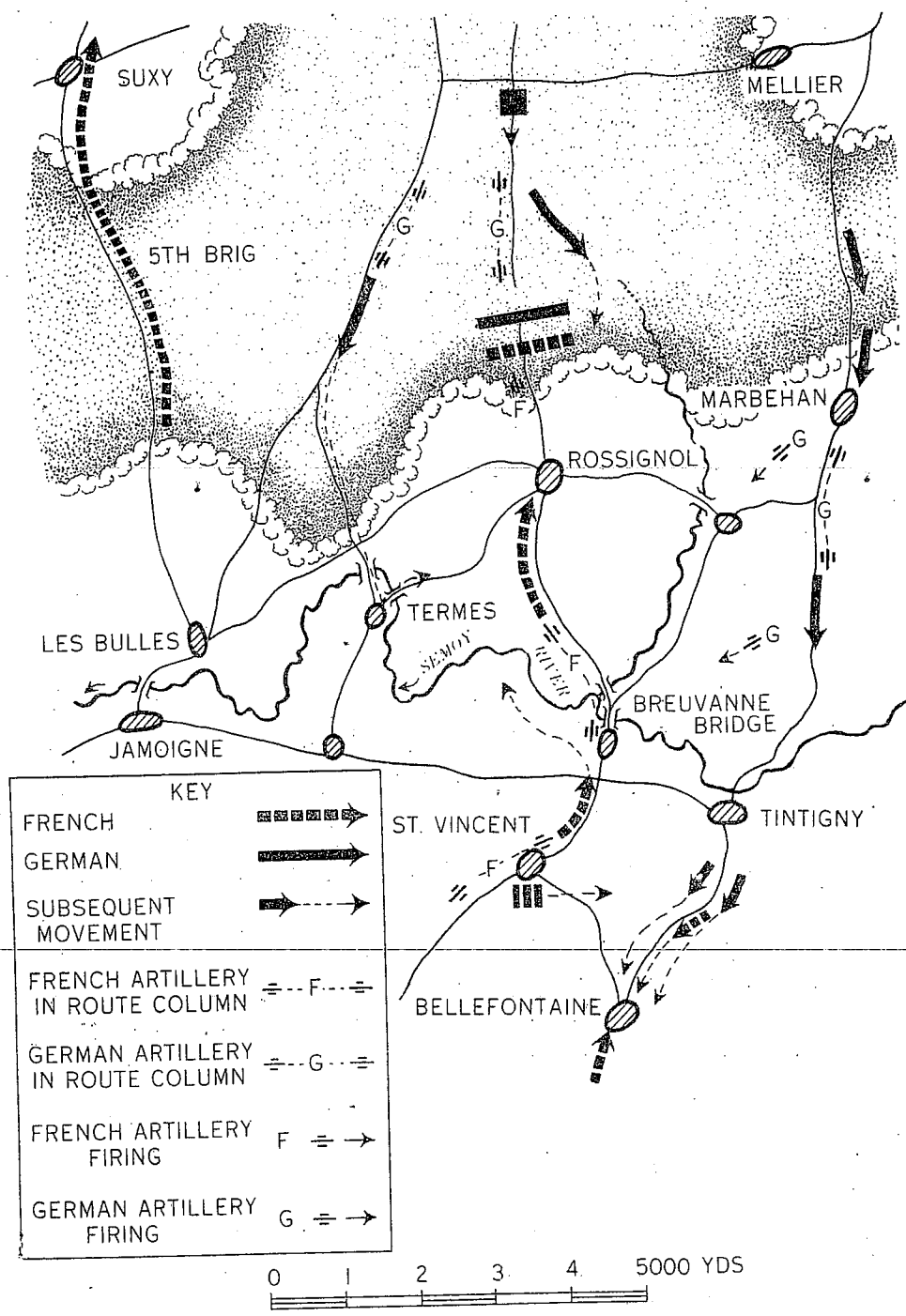


FIGURE 21.—Situation 9:30 AM

was new and that its reconnaissance capabilities were not realized.

These conditions are not likely to exist in a future war. With present day aviation, air reconnaissance would have been at least two day's march ahead of the Fourth Army. Likewise, motor reconnaissance would have been at least one day's march ahead of the marching troops. The information gained by these agencies would probably have prevented the French from going blindly, headlong into strong German forces.

On the other hand, the Germans used their cavalry and at least one airplane to locate the French. As a result they established the fact that contact was imminent; and at both Neufchateau and Rossignol they met the French columns with partial deployment. This resulted, as we have seen, in the defeat of the French at both places. The same thing was happening, on the same day, all along the frontier. These initial reverses brought on the first French retreat to the Marne River.

Had the French Third and Fourth Armies advanced in parallel zones with partially deployed advance guards and met German deployment with French deployment, the initial reverses would have been averted, or at least would have been far less serious in their consequences.

Let us study the terrain as shown on the map, Figure 15, as it might have been used under the conditions existing on August 22, 1914.

Suppose that the Colonial Corps (3d Division and 5th Brigade) in its advance on Neufchateau had advanced in three parallel brigade zones, the left boundary of the left zone being the Vierre River and the right boundary of the right zone being a line from near Tintigny to the vicinity of Offaing.

This would center the right zone on Rossignol, the center zone on Termes, and the zone of the 5th Brigade on Les Bulles.

Successive phase lines could have been designated:

(1) The Semoy River.

(2) Southern edge of forests about a mile or more north of Rossignol and Les Bulles.

(3) Series of hills running east from the hill a little more than a mile south of Suxy.

(4) The spur just north of Suxy to Les Fosses.
Others to be designated later.

Had the advance been coordinated within the corps so that each advance guard would reach and leave each phase line at approximately the same time, it is hard to believe that the disaster at Rossignol could have occurred.

The center brigade would have been able to turn the Germans from the west by occupying the high ground to the west of the town. It is entirely probable that Rossignol would have been a French victory, with the Germans driven to the east to positions in front of the II Corps, which was moving north echeloned to the right rear. And in all probability, too, the entire Colonial Corps would have been able to reach Neufchateau as planned.

Even if the French had not won at Rossignol and the battle had been a draw, the 5th Brigade would certainly have been warned that Germans in force were in close proximity. But owing to the complete lack of coordination between advance guards, the 5th Brigade, completely unaware of the utter defeat of the 3d Division at Rossignol, continued on to Neufchateau where the same fate awaited it.

Let us return to the advance of the 5th Brigade, and particularly its advance guard action, under the assumption that it was to advance in a zone partially deployed.

As the advance guard left Les Bulles, it should have been partially deployed until it reached the southern edge of the forest. Here, although contact is imminent, the advance guard may be forced to revert to column formation because of dense underbrush. But

this does not mean to a column on the road. (See "A Solution" of Third Requirement.)

As it arrived at the edge of the forest south of Suxy, the advance guard should again adopt a partially deployed formation to cross the open space to the edge of the forest north of Suxy. At this point it may again be forced to revert to a less dispersed formation. But when it arrived at Montplainchamp it should again partially deploy astride the road to Neufchateau, covering a zone of approximately 900 yards on each side of the road. This formation would cover the nose running generally southwest from Neufchateau and the high ground in the western edge of the Ospot Woods.

Such an advance on Neufchateau would have uncovered the German resistance in Ospot Woods. The advance-guard commander could then have taken steps to drive it out or at least develop it for the main body. It would have developed, also, the situation to the north of the road. And the brigade would have been able at least to hold, with far smaller losses, the high ground south of Neufchateau stream, even if it were not able to capture Neufchateau, its "march" objective for the day.

CONCLUSION

While the Colonial Corps was being torn asunder at Neufchateau and Rossignol, other French advance units were fighting desperately at Etthe and Virton to the southeast, and at Bertrix to the northwest. All these classic meeting engagements resulted in French disasters; for in each case the French were suddenly and unexpectedly struck by large German forces better developed for combat.

What were the causes of French defeat. It was not lack of gallantry, for in many instances the French

sustained the shock of the German divisions through sheer tenacity and determination. It was not numerical inferiority, because on some battlefields the French outnumbered the Germans.

Why failure, then? "Although there were several causes for the disastrous results of that day (August 22, 1914) the French attribute the defeat in large part to the inefficient manner in which their advanced guards carried out the missions of security and reconnaissance. The failure, they insist, was not primarily due to lack of training or experience on the part of advance-guard commanders and their troops, but to the advance-guard *formation* itself. The advance guards were still in column when contact with the enemy took place. But when they endeavored to develop the opposing forces, they found themselves already outflanked on one or both sides; . . . The French columns were separated, utterly confused, and well nigh routed."

Therefore, it behooves a commander by all means to determine the area of imminent contact. When he enters that area, his advance guards should not be in the convenient point-advance party-support formation but should be advancing in adjacent zones, each advance guard partly deployed and covering the entire width of its zone. Thus lateral communication, so vital to success, is maintained and the advance of all columns coordinated; and when hostile resistance is encountered the force necessary to counteract it can be promptly employed.

Designated zones of advance and coordinating phase line would have kept the 3d Colonial Division from being caught astride the Semoy and would have averted the retreat of the 5th Brigade from Neufchateau.

*Chapter VII, Volume VIII, The Infantry School Mailing List.

FIGURE 15, VOL X
THE MAILING LIST
THE INFANTRY SCHOOL
FORT BENNING, GEORGIA
1934-35 .



