

304th Tank Brigade: Its Formation and First Two Actions

U.S. tank units were first committed to combat 70 years ago at St. Mihiel and the Argonne

by Robert E. Rogge

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BG Samuel D. Rockenbach took command of the U.S. Tank Corps in France Dec. 23, 1917, reporting directly to GEN John J. Pershing, commander-in-chief, American Expeditionary Force. Eight months later, 304th Tank Brigade formed at the 302nd Tank Center at Langres, about 20 miles south of Chaumont, site of Pershing's headquarters.

CPTs Sereno Brett and Ronulf Compton became commanders of 326th and 327th Tank battalions Aug. 18, 1918. The battalions lacked tanks, trucks, motorcycles – every kind of equipment needed for armored warfare. They had only the men, all volunteers from other branches.

The Langres area was close to ideal for tank training (Figure 1). The town of Langres and the villages of St. Geosmes, Bourg, Cohons, Brennes and Longeau, and the Bois d'Amour (Wood of Love) comprised the area. It was on rising ground crowned by woods, and flanked by two good roads and a railroad. Troops were billeted in the nearby villages.

Shortly after its formation, 304th Tank Brigade redesignated as 1st Tank Brigade, although it retained its 304th title in the St. Mihiel offensive.

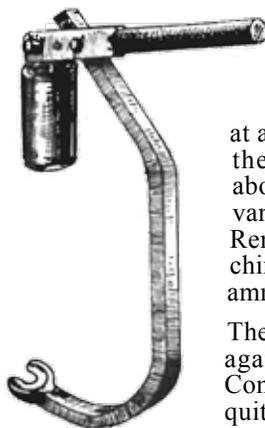
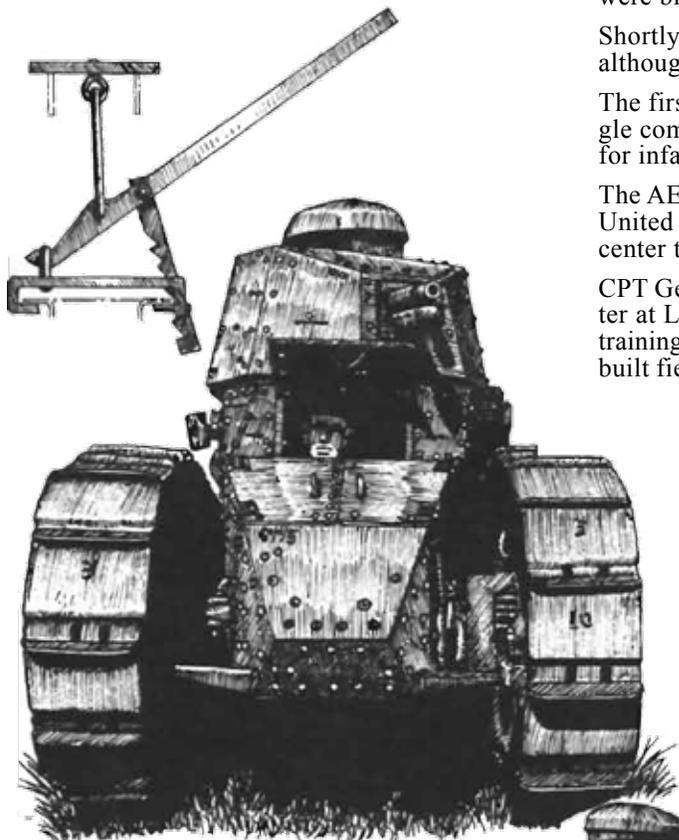
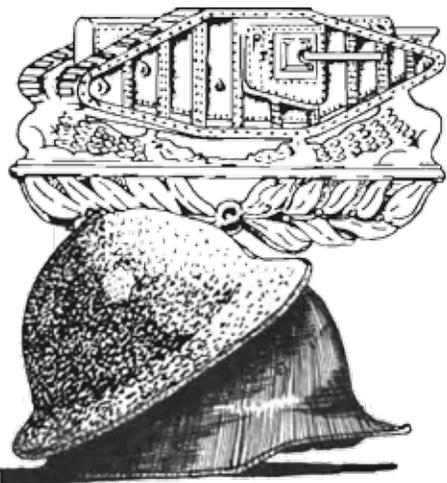
The first armor shoulder patch appeared at this time. It was an equilateral triangle composed of the three colors of the arms involved: yellow for cavalry, blue for infantry and red for artillery.

The AEF tank corps was a separate and distinct entity from the tank corps in the United States. LTC Dwight D. Eisenhower commanded the main tank-training center there, at Camp Colt, PA.

CPT George S. Patton Jr. became the first commander of the 1st Light Tank Center at Langres Feb. 14, 1918. Shortly after Patton took command of the 1st, tank training began with French-built Renault tanks. The AEF used French- or British-built field artillery, tanks and airplanes. No American-built tanks and only a few American-built airplanes saw action in that war.

The Renault tank was a two-man machine with a four-cylinder gasoline, water-cooled, 35-horsepower engine that drove it at a top speed of not quite 5 mph. Cross-country, the odd-looking little vehicle could manage about 1.5 mph – faster than the infantry could advance, as was proved time and again in battle. The Renault was armed with an 8mm Hotchkiss machinegun in the turret, and carried 4,800 rounds of ammunition and 26.5 gallons of gas for the engine.

The heaviest armor was only 16mm thick, proof against machinegun bullets and shell splinters. Combat loaded, the vehicle tipped the scales at not quite seven tons. The driver was in front, and the commander stood in the turret. Crew communication was by yelling and kicks from the commander's foot.



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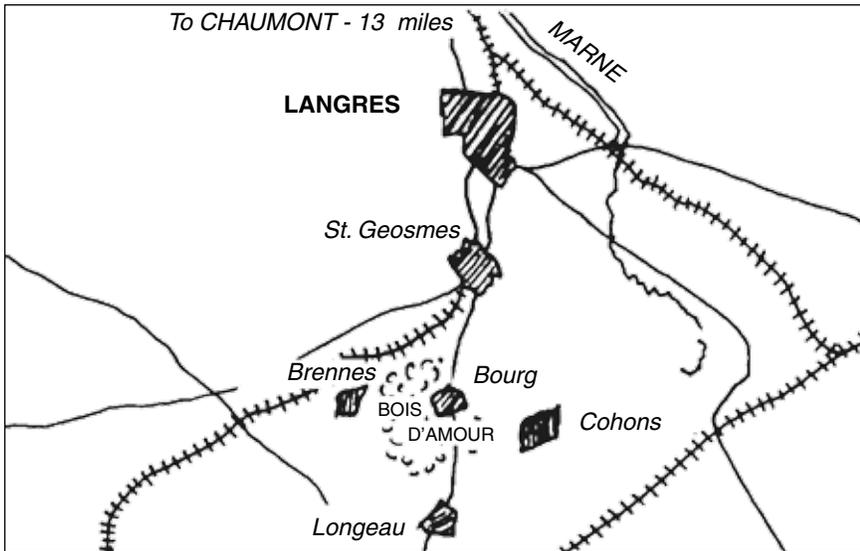


Figure 1. The area around Langres, France.

There were other American tankers in training with the British in England, but they did not figure in the two great American offensives that closed World War I. Those tankers did, however, go into action with the British armies to the north, in Flanders, and served well in the larger and heavier British tanks.

Patton, a stickler for discipline, soon had his raw men whipped into shape as acceptable tanker trainees. He began his preparations for the first great American offensive, the St. Mihiel drive to cut off that great German salient that had bulged deep into French territory since September 1914. The salient had seen no serious fighting since 1916, and the German high command regarded it as a kind of "rest front" for German troops savaged in Flanders by the British. The French high command saw it in much the same light for the survivors of the Verdun debacle. The American attack would change all that.

The St. Mihiel salient was some 32 miles across its base and ran 16 miles deep (Figure 2). A "live and let live"

atmosphere prevailed along its front, as Patton discovered on a night patrol with the French. Patton, a cavalryman, appreciated the benefits of personal reconnaissance and held to that principle for the rest of his life. In France, he personally viewed the territory his tanks were to fight over and then, whenever possible, took his tank commanders to see for themselves. Such advance knowledge was to work to his benefit during the final offensive in the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

On the patrol noted, Patton and the French soldiers were crawling across no man's land toward the German barbed-wire entanglements. When they reached the wire, Patton was surprised to hear several Germans in the trenches ahead whistle at them. He was even more surprised to hear a couple of Frenchmen return the whistles, and the patrol turned around and crawled back to its own trenches. There Patton learned that the Germans felt the Frenchmen were quite close enough and had whistled to warn them that any further advance would have to result

in some shooting. The experience was typical of the whole salient but, in the event, Patton got a good look at the ground.

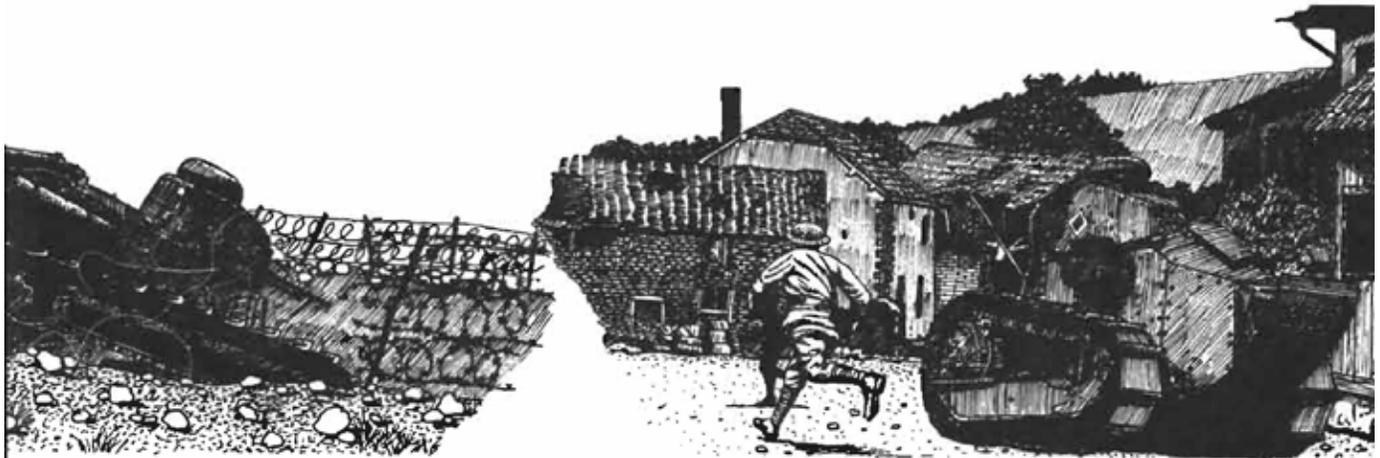
The St. Mihiel offensive would be the Americans' first big battle on their own, and Pershing would be in command of three U.S. Corps (I, IV and V), and several French divisions. He moved his headquarters from Neufchateau to Ligny-en-Barrois, about 25 miles southwest of St. Mihiel.

The U.S. deployment for the battle was as follows: IV and I Corps were on the south flank of the salient with Pont-a-Mousson on their right flank. V Corps was on the east flank, near Verdun. The French divisions were between the U.S. V and IV Corps. The battle plan, like all good battle plans, was simple: the U.S. I and IV Corps would drive north and meet the U.S. V Corps driving east. When they met, they would wipe out the salient.

During his several personal reconnaissances of the ground, Patton determined that the soil would support his tanks – if it didn't rain. But all his careful pre-battle planning and reconnaissance of the battle area were wasted when Headquarters First U.S. Army decided his tanks would operate with IV Corps, rather than with V Corps as originally planned.

After the change in plans, Patton again went out on patrols to reconnoiter the ground, and again he decided it would support his tanks, provided the weather held. It didn't, of course. On the night the artillery bombardment began for the attack, the rain came down in sheets. But the tanks went into action as scheduled.

Among the major planning problems that faced Patton was getting enough fuel and lubricants for his tanks. He managed to establish a 10,000-gallon gasoline dump but was unable to secure any oil or lubricants. A fatuous



staff officer said that the French mud would lubricate the tanks' tracks. Such was the general caliber of staff planning by officers who had never worked with tanks and who either could not or would not take into consideration the special needs of the fledgling armored force.

Such asperity did not hold back Patton; he went right on with his planning and his training. He was lucky in one respect, however. The deep mud his tanks would face in the shell-battered landscape made the installation of track grousers and hull-mounted tow hooks imperative. Patton sent off a telegram to CPT Joseph Viner, commandant of the training school at Langres, for the needed equipment, and Viner sent a thousand sets of grousers to Patton within the week.

Rockenbach saw to it that there would be a good representation of armor in the St. Mihiel offensive. He laid down that three U.S. heavy tank battalions then under training in England would be there with 150 heavy British tanks, along with three French brigades with 225 light (Renault) tanks, the two U.S. tank battalions (326th and 327th) with 144 Renaults, and three battalions of the French 505th Tank Regiment with heavy tanks, plus 12 more St. Chamond and 24 Schneider tanks. As noted, the American tank units in England did not arrive in time for the offensive, and Rockenbach asked the French for another heavy tank battalion. He got the 36 additional heavy tanks.

The French heavy tanks were truly monsters when compared with the little two-man Renaults. The Schneiders weighed in at 13.5 tons and had a 75mm cannon, two Hotchkiss machineguns and a six-man crew. Each had a 70-horsepower motor and carried a maximum of 11.5mm armor plate. They had a top speed of nearly four mph, stood nearly eight feet tall and were almost 10 feet long.

The St. Chamond tanks were equally large and had a nine-man crew. They weighed 23 tons and were armed with a 75mm gun and four Hotchkiss machineguns. Their armor was 17mm thick and their 90-horsepower engines drove them at 5.3 mph. They were almost 26 feet long and nearly eight feet high.

However, the great weight and size of these tanks was a hindrance in the gluey mud of the salient, and the lighter Renaults fared much better in the trench fighting.

Rockenbach and Patton hoped to concentrate their untried (except for the French units) armor formations to give them more punch and to better support

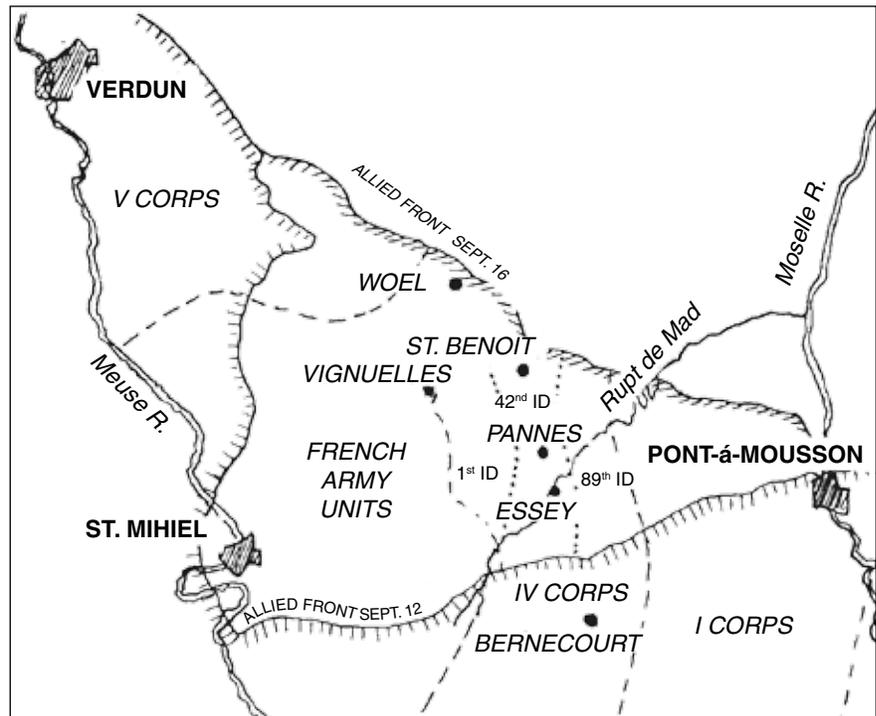


Figure 2. The St. Mihiel salient.

the infantry. The three French battalions, plus six St. Chamond and 12 Schneider tanks, were to fight in the VI Corps area in immediate support of 42nd Infantry Division (BG Douglas MacArthur) in the center of the IV Corps' zone, with 1st Infantry Division on the immediate left. The 327th Tank Battalion (Compton), less 25 Renaults in brigade reserve but augmented by 18 French heavy tanks, was attached to 42nd Division, and 326th Tank Battalion (Brett) was attached to 1st Infantry Division.

The actual tactics were admittedly of the try-and-hope variety, although some study had been made of British tactics. But the Renaults were smaller and lighter than the British behemoths, the attachment of the tank units to the infantry was different from that practiced in the British army, and there were the French units to be considered as well.

As Patton finally laid it out, Brett, on the left flank, with the support of the Renaults in brigade reserve, was to cross the Rupt de Mal (river) and lead 1st Infantry to its objectives. In the center, the French heavy tanks were to follow the infantry. Compton, on the right, would initially stay behind the infantry, then accelerate and pass through them and lead them to their objectives, the villages of Essey and Pannes. It didn't quite work that way in battle.

The planning stages were a nightmare of trying to mass men, supplies, equipment and tanks, and the French railway system compounded Patton's

administrative problems as he strove to bring all his tanks together at one detraining point. He finally succeeded, but the last of his Renaults did not leave the flat cars until 3 a.m. Sept. 12 – D-Day – and the attack was scheduled to begin at 5 a.m.

Among his other paper-war battles, Patton tried in vain to convince the G-3 of 42nd Division that he needed smoke included in the preliminary barrage to protect his tanks from direct-fire anti-tank guns. The G-3 refused his request, and the volatile Patton complained bitterly to Rockenbach – and got the smoke laid on.

Other problems faced Patton; the greatest of these was tank-infantry training. Up until this time, only 1st Infantry Division had had any experience in fighting with tanks, and that had been at the Battle of Cantigny May 28. The 1st was eager to learn more, and the 42nd was eager to learn anything, but time restrictions prevented more than a few briefings for company commanders and platoon leaders. The troops never got the chance to train with the tanks that were to support them in battle, and this led to many problems.

Another difficulty facing the fledgling tank corps in its first battle was that of communications. Contact with the tanks would be lost when they advanced, except for runners – and pigeons! Patton compounded this vital communications problem when he

Continued on Page 28

abandoned his brigade headquarters and went forward with his tanks into the thick of the fight. Rockenbach read him the riot act for this after the battle.

D-Day for the first great American offensive was set back five days to Sept. 12 for a number of reasons, including Patton's difficulties with the railroads. The last tanks to detrain immediately marched eight kilometers to the start line and, although their crews had not slept in two days, went straight into action in heavy rain and high winds. The artillery barrage opened at 1 a.m., and at 5 a.m. the attack began. At once, the lack of training between infantry and tanks showed itself. By 5:30 a.m., Brett's tanks were beyond Xivray, and by 9:30 a.m. Compton's tanks had taken Pannes, but an hour later they were recalled because the infantry would not follow up.

Throughout the entire offensive, the tanks consistently outran the infantry and often found themselves fighting alone against determined German machinegunners and infantry. During the following Meuse-Argonne offensive, tank-infantry cooperation was somewhat better, but not all that much. Perhaps it was only natural that the unprotected infantry soldiers declined to face the machinegun fire that rattled harmlessly off the tank's sides and therefore did not struggle hard enough in the mud to keep up. On the other hand, the tankers, from their noisy, smelly, bullet-hammered machines, should have noticed what was happening to the infantry and should have slowed their own advance.

Irresistibly drawn into the vortex of the battle, Patton left his brigade headquarters observation post and went forward on foot into the fight. He saw his tanks leading the infantry on both the 1st and 42nd Division fronts. At 9:15 a.m., he got word that Compton's tanks and the infantry were delayed by "bad ground:" interlocking shell holes, gaping trenches – and mud.

As he made his torturous way to the spot on foot, Patton passed the French tanks halted in a pass (railway cut) where they were under moderate shell-fire. He went straight to the firing line and stood there and talked with MacArthur while a German creeping barrage advanced up to and over them. Patton then went on to Essey, where he ordered five of Compton's tanks across the bridge into the town – and he led them on foot. That, and his example of standing under fire with MacArthur, had a great morale effect on his men, but Patton had violated one of the principal

tenets of higher command: stay in contact with your higher headquarters.

When the groaning, grinding Renaults began their advance on Pannes, all but one ran out of gas. Patton's supply problems had caught up with him. One tank got into the town with Patton sitting on top, and with a lieutenant and runner on the back plates. When they dismounted hurriedly under machinegun fire, the tank went on, and Patton had to chase it on foot and bring it back.

Five tanks finally assembled in Pannes and went forward in line abreast to Beney to the north. They took the town, along with four field guns and 16 machineguns. Meanwhile, 25 tanks had taken Nonsard with the loss of four men and two officers, but they were now out of gas. Patton walked back seven miles to get gas for his tanks. That night, gas drawn on sledges by two tanks from Bernecourt refueled the dry Renaults.

Casualties for the first day's action were five men killed, four officers and 15 men wounded, and five tanks, two by direct hits from artillery and three with engine trouble. Two of the French heavy tanks had stalled with track problems. Forty tanks had been stuck in the trenches and ditches, but all were recovered and ready for action Sept. 13. Eighty U.S. and 25 French tanks were on hand for the next day's battle.

The heavy French tanks had great difficulty in crossing the trenches (some of which were eight feet deep and 10-14 feet wide), and they never succeeded in getting ahead of their infantry. U.S. tanks, on the other hand, were recalled because they had often outrun the infantry and were vulnerable to AT guns and counterattacks.

U.S. tankers, who called themselves the "Treat 'Em Rough" boys, had acquitted themselves very well in their first action. The primary difficulties they faced were the lack of fuel and the congested roads in the rear areas that delayed the fuel trucks. Two gas trucks, for instance, took 32 hours to drive 14 kilometers, and Patton quickly saw the need for tracked supply vehicles that could keep up with the armor and avoid the congested roads.

The tanks accomplished little on the 13th, primarily because of the lack of gas. Some of Compton's tanks were able to drive from Pannes to St. Benoit that morning, and later a few more tanks got that far. About 20 French tanks also reached St. Benoit but were stopped there by the lack of fuel. When gas for Compton's tanks finally

arrived, he rolled through Nonsard and Vigneulles, where 50 tanks assembled that night.

On Sept. 14, the tanks moved out of Vigneulles toward Woel to the north. Brett's battalion, unable to contact Headquarters 1st Division, moved out with 51 tanks toward Woel, hoping to contact Compton's 327th on the Woel-St Benoit road. On the way, just short of Woel, they learned that the Germans had evacuated that town, and that French infantry now held it.

A patrol of three tanks and five infantrymen was sent into Woel with orders to proceed down the Woel-St. Benoit road in hopes that it would contact American troops. They made no contact, but on the return trip, the tanks met a German column with eight machineguns and a battery of 77mm field guns. Five tanks hastily came forward to assist the three, and the eight tanks, unsupported by infantry, attacked and drove the Germans toward Jonville, destroying five machineguns and capturing the 77s. An attempt to tow the captured guns was cut short when shrapnel fire wounded two officers and four men. Two mechanically disabled Renaults got a tow to safety from a third, and all the tanks then withdrew toward St. Maurice.

At 9 p.m., word came to withdraw all the tanks to the Bois de la Hazelle, back near the original start line. By the night of Sept. 18, traveling at night, all the tanks, except three hit by artillery fire, were in the assembly area. The fighting was over for the tanks.

In his after-action report, Patton stated that the enemy's failure to react strongly to the tanks deprived them of any real opportunity to display their fighting powers. However, he continued, the tanks had almost always been in position to help the infantry and had, in fact, entered the towns of Nonsard, Pannes and Beney ahead of the foot soldiers. The tanks had also captured Jonville without infantry support.

Rockenbach laid down the law about brigade commanders who abandoned their posts to go forward into the battle. He said: (1) The five light tanks in a platoon had to work together, had to be kept intact under the leader and not be allowed to split up; (2) when a tank brigade was allotted to a corps, the commander was to remain at the corps headquarters, or be in close telephonic communications with it; and (3) tank crews are not infantry and are not to fight as infantry if their tank is disabled. If a tank is disabled, the irate

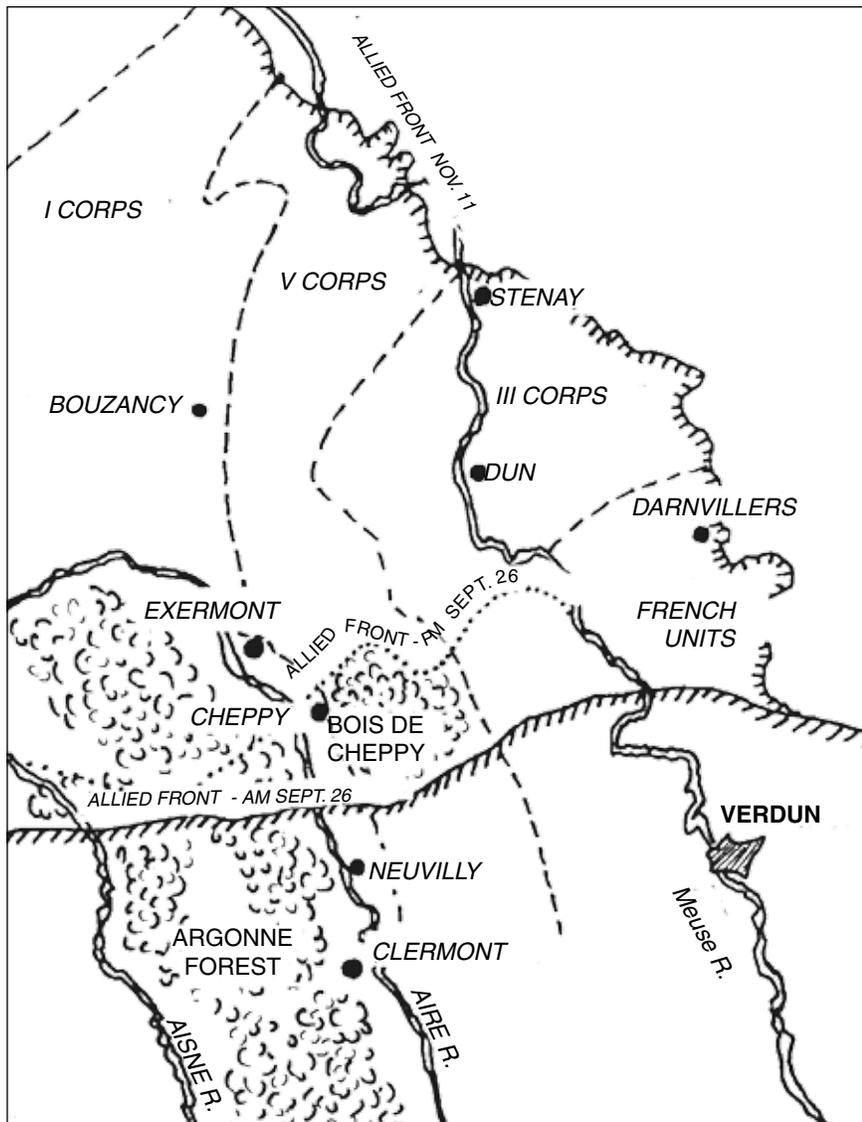


Figure 3. Map of the Meuse-Argonne sector.

general wrote, one man is to stay with it and the other is to get help.

Pershing sent a congratulatory letter to Rockenbach Sept. 16 on the successful and important part played by the tanks at St. Mihiel. Plans were already underway for the next American offensive in the Meuse-Argonne sector.

The same tank formations that had fought at St. Mihiel were to be under Patton's command in the Meuse-Argonne offensive: the U.S. 326th and 327th tank battalions, and the French 14th and 17th groupements. In this battle, however, they would fight with I Corps. Work on movement orders began Sept. 15, one day after the St. Mihiel offensive closed down, and Patton was already poring over maps of the new sector (Figure 3).

The French heavy tanks detrained at Clermont and moved into cover, and on

Sept. 20 the American light tanks arrived at Clermont. Brett's battalion was now designated the 334th, and Compton's the 345th.

The Meuse-Argonne offensive was part of a joint American-French offensive, with the French army on the left from the Suippes River to the Aisne River. Here the Americans took over and extended the front to the Meuse River. The American sector included the Argonne Forest.

Pershing took command of his front Sept. 22 and placed his three corps in line, right to left: III, V and I. I Corps had three divisions, right to left: 35th, 28th and 77th. The tanks would fight with the 35th and 28th divisions on the eastern edge of the Argonne Forest. The 77th Division's sector included the Argonne Forest, impassable for armor. The whole area had been fought over long before and was going to be difficult

for tanks. It was liberally laced with old trenches, ditches and dugouts, and was filled with shell holes.

In his pre-battle planning, Patton envisioned a long-range penetration by his tanks *en masse*, followed by a pursuit – the classic cavalry maneuver. But the terrain forced him to fight otherwise. He would mass his armor in the relatively narrow corridor between the Argonne Forest and the Bois de Cheppy.

Because of terrain features, including the Aire River, Patton proposed committing one tank company with the 28th and one with the 35th divisions, even though the 35th's ground would have enabled him to have used two tank companies there. After another look at the terrain, Patton changed his mind and placed Brett's battalion up front with two tank companies with the 35th Division and one with the 28th Division. Compton's battalion would be immediately behind in the same tactical formation, and the French tanks would bring up the rear.

Patton planned for Brett's tanks to support the infantry to its first line of objectives, then Compton's tanks would go forward and lead the attack to the second line of objectives. Once on higher (and drier) ground, the heavy French tanks would come through and pave the way to the final objectives.

As in the St. Mihiel campaign, supply problems continued to plague Patton. For instance, he received 100,000 gallons of gasoline in railroad tank cars, but no pumps. On the other hand, based on his St. Mihiel experience, Patton ordered that each of his Renaults was to carry two two-liter cans of gas on its back plates, regardless of the danger of fire. Four liters of gas wasn't much, but it would keep a tank moving in a difficult situation.

The Renaults marched six miles to the line of departure on the night of Sept. 25. At 2:30 a.m. Sept. 26, the three-hour preliminary bombardment began, and the attack went in at 5:30 a.m. Patton had about 140 tanks under his command.

The attack began in a heavy mist, and the tanks with the 28th Division came upon a German minefield, but the warning signs were still in place, and the tanks avoided the trap. By 10 a.m. the mist had risen, German fire became intense and accurate, and some of the infantry panicked.

Patton, furious at Compton for not advancing when he was ordered, went forward himself to sort out the tangle at the front, and was wounded near



Patton, at center, looking to the left, and MAJ Sereno Brett, also looking left, prepare to review tankers of Brett's 326th Tank Battalion. Note camouflage on the unit's Renault tanks, lined up in the background.

Cheppy. As he was carried to the rear, he left Brett (now a major) in command of the tank brigade. Serious German resistance near Cheppy and Varennes forced the use of all the tanks during the first day's fighting. Tanks fighting with the 28th Division ran into concrete pillboxes for the first time and silenced them by firing straight into the gun slits. Tankers with 35th Division helped capture a strongpoint at Vauquois and also one at Cheppy. The 304th Brigade lost 43 tanks that day.

On the second day of the battle, 11 tanks went to the Aire River (with 28th Division) and advanced north along the edge of the Argonne Forest, clearing out machinegun nests. The tanks on the Aire's east bank spent the day answering calls for help from the infantry, which, in effect, seriously degraded their shock potential in the battle. The fighting all along the front was serious, and by the third day, only 83 U.S. tanks were in running order. Even so, the brigade took the town of Apresmont five times before the infantry could come up and consolidate the position.

At the end of Sept. 26, Rockenbach withdrew all his tanks for an intensive repair and maintenance session. The men worked all night and had 55 tanks ready for action the next morning.

After hard fighting with the infantry, the tankers withdrew to reserve positions for several days. Men and machines were worn out, but by Oct. 1, 89 tanks were back in action, and 59 of them were lost that day.

The survivors were pulled back once more, and on Oct. 5, the 304th Brigade

committed its remaining 30 tanks to action and lost 13 of them. Rockenbach pulled back the 17 survivors.

The tankers' final action came Oct. 16 when a provisional company of 20 tanks with 30 officers and 140 men supported the 28th Division. Ten tanks reached the objective, but again the infantry failed to follow up and consolidate, and the tanks had to withdraw.

The war ended Nov. 11.

Shortly after the war, Patton drew up a list of nine major tactical conclusions on the use of tanks in battle. A number of these 1918 conclusions have long since been corrected, but some remain valid. They were:

- Infantry officers lacked understanding and appreciation of tank capabilities, for tanks needed infantry operating with them at all times to be successful (which subtly, probably unconsciously, foreshadowed a shift in doctrine from the use of tanks to support infantry to the contrary conclusion that infantry should be used to support tanks; but this idea would remain obscure until clarified with terrifying suddenness by the German blitzkrieg in World War II.)
- A lack of liaison between tanks and infantry hampered efficient operations.
- Infantry should act as though tanks were not present, and not expect tanks to overcome resistance and wait, expecting tanks to attempt to consolidate a success.
- Tanks were too valuable because

of their strengths in firepower and mobility, and too weak in mechanical reliability to be dissipated in reconnaissance missions.

- The distance between readiness positions and the line of departure should be reduced for "tanks cannot sustain a prolonged march without being overhauled and put in order."
- A thorough preliminary reconnaissance on foot of the terrain to be used by tanks was absolutely indispensable.
- The enemy artillery is the most dangerous adversary of the tanks. Therefore, strong supporting artillery, ready to deliver counter-battery fire, as well as screening smoke, was terribly important to ensure tank success.
- The value of tanks as attacking units and as a fighting arm had been demonstrated.
- Some slight changes in tactical employment were necessary: a better use of tanks in mass and in depth.



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ACRONYM QUICK-SCAN

AEF – American Expeditionary Force
AT – antitank