



## Adapted from a Presentation by Major Walter C. Short, Infantry

*All divisions achieved brilliant successes, with the exception of the one division on our right wing. This encountered American units! Here only did the Seventh Army, in the course of the first day of the offensive, confront serious difficulties. It met with the unexpectedly stubborn and active resistance of fresh American troops. While the rest of the divisions of the Seventh Army succeeded in gaining ground and gaining tremendous booty, it proved impossible for us to move the right apex of our line, to the south of the Marne, into a position advantageous for the development of the ensuing fight. The check we thus received was one result of the stupendous fighting between our 10th Division of infantry and American troops...*

Erich von Ludendorff, Quartermaster General

### Editor's Introduction

The American troops referred to above by General Ludendorff were from the AEF's 3<sup>rd</sup> Division. Other than a small regimental marker in front of the *mairie* in the Marne-side village of Mezy, there is nothing in the area today to indicate that an epic battle was fought in the vicinity in 1918. The description of that notable AEF action, known as the Rock of the Marne episode, presented here was delivered as a lecture in the 1930s by an instructor at the U.S. Army Infantry School at Leavenworth, Kansas. The author's name carries many negative connotations today. But before 7 December 1941, when he was the Army's commander at Pearl Harbor, Walter Short was considered one of the most outstanding officers in the U.S. Army. In the Great War, he had performed

brilliantly, having been in charge of machine gun training for the AEF. In the interwar period he became the army's leading expert on mechanized warfare, a favorite of George Marshall, a standout in war games, and, potentially, the first in line for the job that fell to Dwight Eisenhower instead. Such are the fates of men and nations. Nevertheless, in this article he gives an excellent professional soldier's analysis of the action on the Marne.

### Overview

Beginning 21 March 1918, in Picardy, the Germans launched a series of great offensives, supplemented by minor operations and engagements, which were to culminate in two

### Identifying the Battles

In Short's reckoning, the fighting near Château-Thierry in the Marne Salient in mid-1918 divides into three phases:

1. The **Aisne-Marne Defensive**, between 27 May and 10 July;

[This is sometimes called the Battle of Château-Thierry, and it includes the Marine action at Belleau Wood, the captures of Vaux and Hill 204 by the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division, the defense of the Marne River line by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and later involvement of other U.S. divisions sent to the sector. These actions were in response to the third German offensive of the spring, Operation Blücher, Map 1.]

2. The **Champagne-Marne Defensive**, opposing the fifth offensive, Marneschutz-Reims, (Map 1) between 15 and 18 July; and

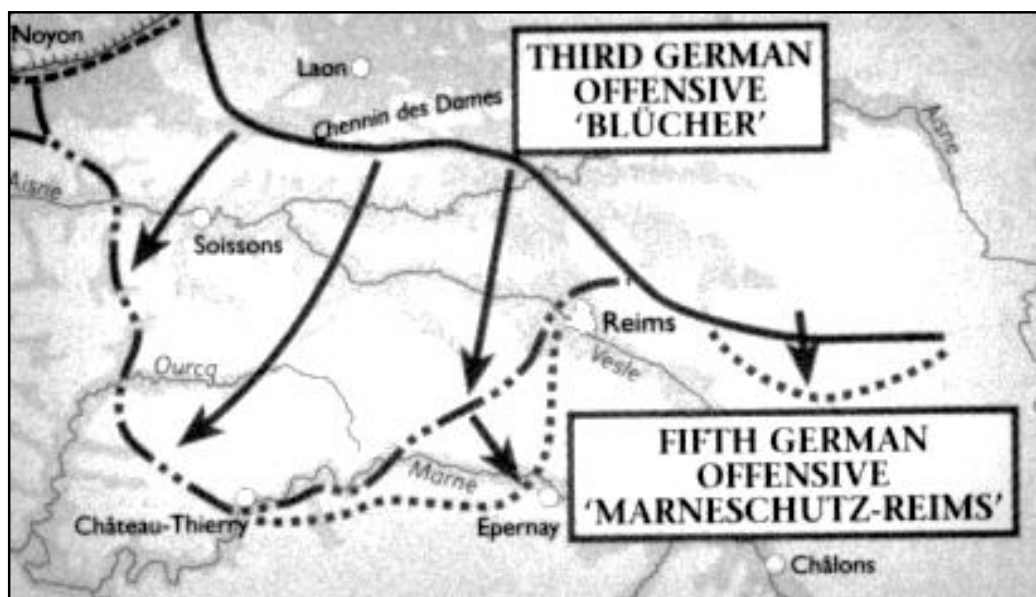
3. The **Aisne-Marne Offensive**, between 18 July and 6 August.

[Collectively, steps 2 and 3 are known today as the Second Battle of the Marne. This article focuses on the action of 15 July, the opening of the second phase, when the German Army launched its last offensive of World War I.]

great offensives, closely associated, sometime in July [and August]. These offensives were for the purpose of straightening of the German lines in preparation for their so-called *Friedensturm* ("peace drive") on Paris, which was counted upon to win the war. [Short here shares a popular misconception of the time. The final and decisive German offensive was to be directed against the British Army in Flanders, with the intention of eliminating one major opponent, and isolating a second, the French, before the Americans arrived in full force. See end note.]

The enemy drives of March, April, and May succeeded in gaining ground but failed in obtaining decisive results. The May offensive by the Germans extended the theater of battle to the Marne River, forming the Marne Pocket. (Map 2) This salient took the shape of a huge triangle, with its apex at Château-Thierry, the other angles being formed by the cities of Soissons and Reims. The sides of the salient measured approximately 45 kilometers.

The terrain of the Marne Salient is generally wooded and hilly, cut by numerous ravines and valleys, and traversed by three principal rivers, the Aisne, Ourcq, and Vesle. All of these rivers have deep and narrow valleys. The



Map 1

principal railroads are those paralleling the river basins. They connect the towns of Soissons, Fismes, Fere-en-Tarardenois, and Reims, with branch lines in various localities. The main highways conform to the routes of the railways. There is one road, however, joining Soissons and Château-Thierry, which lay along the western border of the salient just within the enemy positions.

[Continuing their offensive momentum] the Germans decided on an offensive out of the Marne Pocket [in mid-July] more powerful than their previous ones. The woods [north of the Marne would conceal] the preparations of the Germans for the attack. By a frontal attack, the Germans aimed at separating the Allied armies of the north from those of the east. (Map 2)

The results hoped for were:

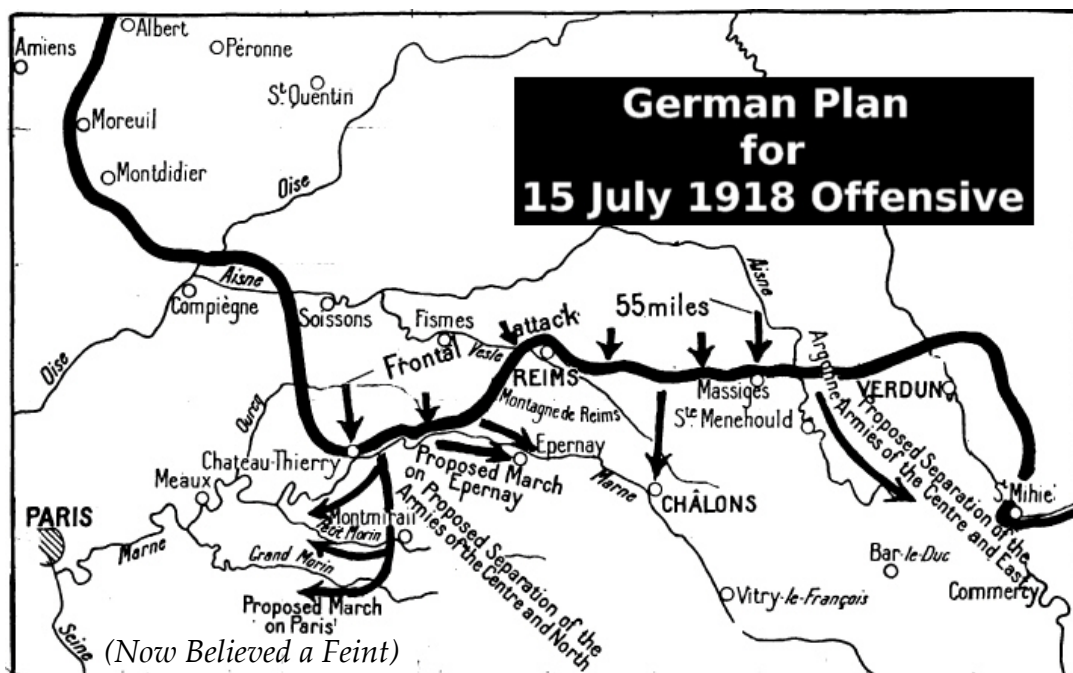
- (1) Rolling up the French armies at Verdun in the east.
- (2) The fall of Verdun proper, and of Reims.
- (3) The separation of the French V and French VI Armies.
- (4) Formation of German Armies for a final march upon Paris, from the east, down the Marne valley. [See comment above.]
- (5) Elimination of the Marne Salient and the possession of valuable railroads.

Ludendorff makes the following statement of the plan of attack:

*The Seventh Army was to effect a crossing of the Marne east of Château-Thierry and then advance on both sides of the river in the direction of Epernay, while the First and Third attacked from the east of Reims to Tahure. These armies were to bring their right wing past the Forêt de Montagne de Reims to Epernay, and make Chalons-sur-Marne their principal objective.*

To carry out this prodigious scheme, the enemy concentrated all the means at his disposal. All preparations were made at night and with every possible precaution to preserve secrecy. Before the preceding offensives, both raiding and artillery activity had been practically nil in the sector of intended operations, but attempts were made to attract attention to other parts of the front by means of intense raiding and artillery activity. Originally the attack was to be carried out on 12 July, but in order to make thorough preparations possible it had to be postponed until the 15<sup>th</sup>.

The attack would extend from Château-Thierry to Massiges. The front attacked was about 80 kilometers wide; 44 enemy divisions were actually engaged. The French defensive line faced them with three armies, arrayed from west to east: the VI, V, and IV.



Map 2



Four American divisions were operating under French command in the area of the Marne Salient at the time of the attack:

- The 42<sup>nd</sup> Division under IV Army was in the second line defensive positions in and around Suippes in the Champagne, on the eastern flank of the German attack.

Under VI Army U.S. divisions included:

- The 26<sup>th</sup> Division in line west of Château-Thierry near Vaux, having relieved the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division on 8 July on the far western flank.
- In the middle, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division under the 38<sup>th</sup> French Corps was in the front line in the sector of the Marne between Château-Thierry and Jaulgonne.
- On the right flank of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, the 55<sup>th</sup> Brigade of the 28<sup>th</sup> Division was attached to French 125<sup>th</sup> Division and was in support. In a similar manner the 56<sup>th</sup> Brigade was on the left of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division attached to the French 39<sup>th</sup> Division and was in support.

Marshal Foch had gained such definite information of the plans of the Germans that reserves had been placed at the disposal of the French IV, V, and VI Armies and the line reinforced where necessary. The plans of the IV and V Armies were to withdraw from the advanced positions, avoiding the bombardment and initial attack, and to make the defense on the intermediate position. The plan of the VI Army [along the Marne River] is perhaps best expressed by the words of General Degoutte that he *fought with one foot in the water*. This intention of making the defense at the Marne itself was emphasized by General Pétain during his inspection of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division preceding the attack. He recommended that the combatants should take up their eventual fighting positions before the beginning of the attack and that there should be no maneuvering under fire.

The German artillery preparation began along the whole front, from just east of Château-Thierry to Tahure, [near the Argonne Forest], at midnight of 14 -15 July. Fully warned, the French counter-preparation began a few minutes earlier. At 3:50 A.M. on 15 July the [enemy's] rolling barrage started and their infantry advanced.

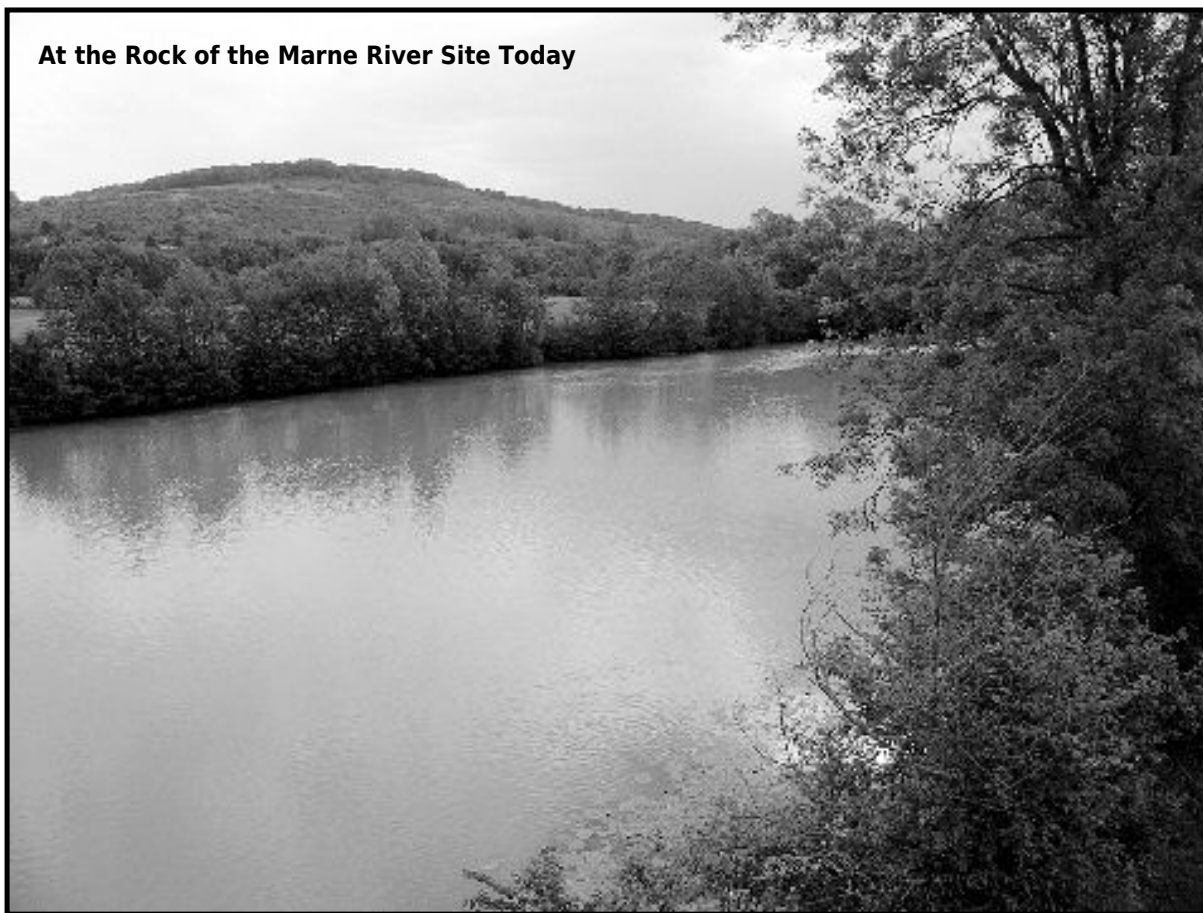


**Nighttime Artillery Barrage**

East of Reims, General Gouraud (IV Army) withdrew from his advanced positions, avoiding the bombardment and the initial attack, and made his defense on his intermediate line where he held the enemy throughout the front of his army. The U.S. 42<sup>nd</sup> "Rainbow" Division had five [infantry] battalions and their divisional artillery engaged in the fight.

Between the Marne and Reims, the Germans had their greatest success in the assault. Their 7<sup>th</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> Armies drove back the French V Army, gaining a marked success the first day. Near Marfaux, where two Italian divisions were in line, a large gap was made. The two Italian divisions retreated in disorder, suffering heavy losses. On the 16<sup>th</sup> the Germans launched a powerful attack in the direction of Epernay and succeeded in reaching the Chene-la-Reane to Villesaint front. French and Italian counterattacks on the 17<sup>th</sup> were unsuccessful, the German gain in this section averaging about ten kilometers.

**At the Rock of the Marne River Site Today**



### **French VI Army Sector**

On the right of the French VI Army were the 51<sup>st</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> Divisions. Of 28<sup>th</sup> U.S. Division units attached to the French 125<sup>th</sup> Division two companies (Cos. L and M, 109<sup>th</sup> Infantry) were in the front line. The French 125<sup>th</sup> at an early hour fell back about five kilometers. These two companies were left behind by the French and had some severe fighting in withdrawing, taking heavy casualties. The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 109<sup>th</sup> Infantry attempted a counterattack, in conjunction with the French, at 12:00 noon, 16 July, from Hill 192 toward Evry and St. Aignan. The battalion was stopped after advancing about 300 yards.

The units in reserve were hit as hard as the units along the river. A future best-selling novelist was there that night.

The German artillery had our trench cold; the place was full of dead and wounded. Three direct hits had accounted for 15. I was so frightened myself, I could scarcely get the men together.

Lt. Hervey Allen, 111<sup>th</sup> Inf., 28<sup>th</sup> Division

### **The Rock of the Marne**

We now come to the sector occupied by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division in which occurred the severest fighting participated in by American troops in this defensive action.

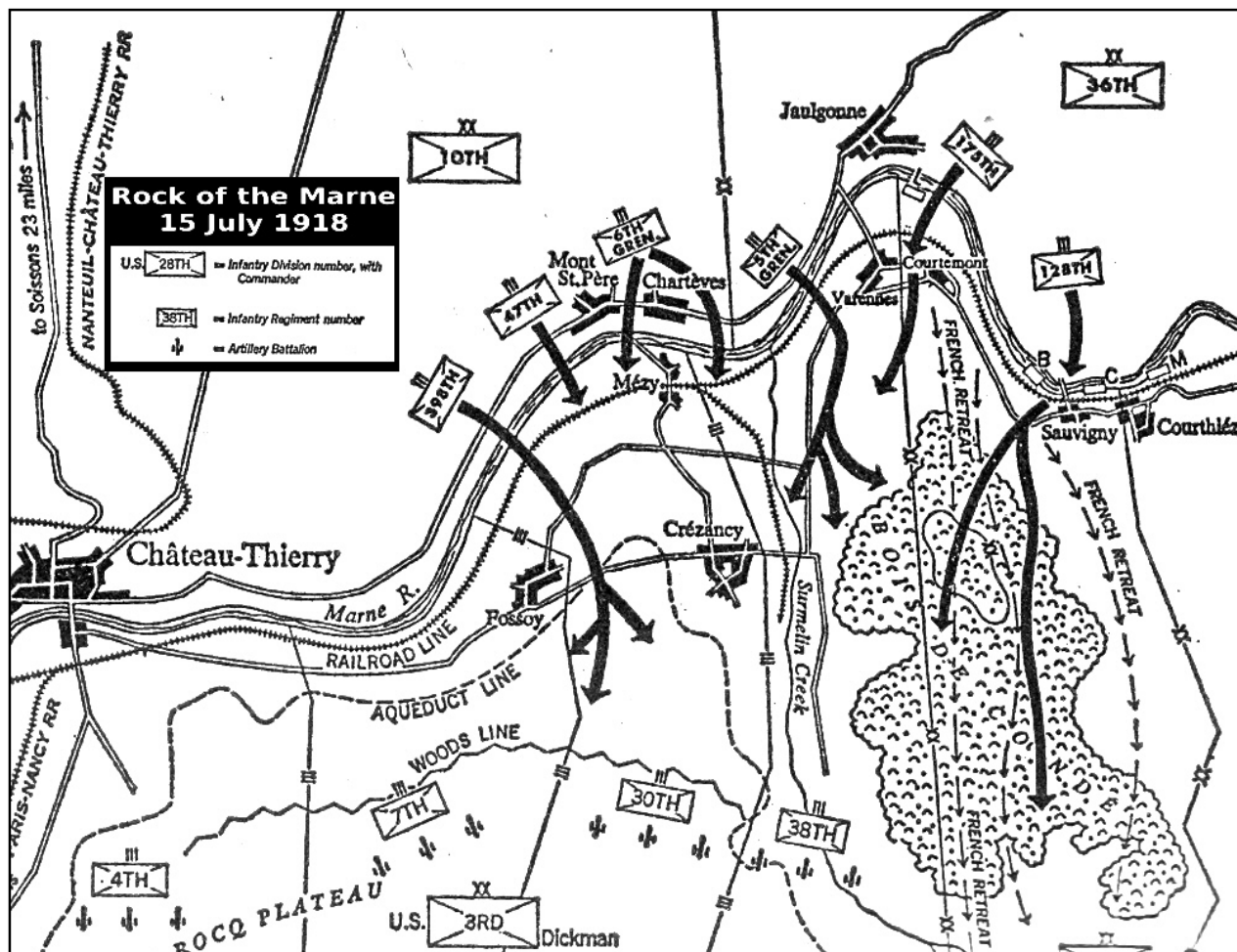
When the enemy launched his third spring offensive in late May, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division, commanded by Major General Joseph Dickman, was dispatched to the Château-Thierry area. On 31 May the 7<sup>th</sup> MG Battalion reached Château-Thierry and went into position in support of the French. On 1 June the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Brigades began to arrive and were assigned to positions in the vicinity of Château-Thierry operating under the French 10<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Divisions to defend the Marne River line. Later the east boundary of the division was extended 12 km along the riverbank to the village of Varennes (Map 3). From west to east the subsectors were held by the 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 30<sup>th</sup>, and 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments, respectively, with one battalion in the front line, one battalion in support, and the third battalion in reserve in each.

The Marne River at this point is 30 to 40 yards wide and altogether too deep to ford. A bridge at Passy had been destroyed, and there was no other in the vicinity. The forests of Barbillon, Fere, and Ris [across the river] offered excellent concealment for the enemy preparations. The best-concealed approaches to the Marne were at Jaulgonne, Chartèves, and Mont St. Pere opposite the 30<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> Regiments' positions.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division's position also left it guarding the main vantage point desired by the enemy, the Surmelin valley. The Surmelin River [a creek by American standards] flows from near the town of Montmirail in a northwesterly direction into the Marne opposite Jaulgonne, whose heights on the northern bank command the entrance to the valley. It is the best inroad to both the south and east between Château-Thierry and Reims, from either a tactical or strategic point of view.

Map 3 shows that the Germans planned to attack with four regiments, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Grenadier Guards and the 47<sup>th</sup> and 175<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments, the sector held by the 30<sup>th</sup> and 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry while their 398<sup>th</sup> and 128<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiments attacked on each flank. The objective for the day was a line about three miles beyond the river.

Four general lines of defense had been organized, but the defensive works constructed were in rather elemental stages, due to several circumstances, the most important of which were the more or less open character of the recent fighting, the lack of engineer personnel, and the constant shifting of units in the early stages of organization and the continual changes in the sector limits, occasioned by the army or corps organization and reorganization.



Map 3



The first of these lines, consisting of isolated pits and machine gun emplacements along the river bank, was intended to serve principally as a line of observation. Close in rear of this line a more strongly garrisoned defensive position providing a more or less continuous line of rifle fire (in compliance with orders of French 38<sup>th</sup> Army Corps) had been established along the railroad track. The so-called main line of resistance extended along the slopes of the first hills south of the Marne and was known as the Aqueduct Line. Although this line was supposed to be continuous eventually, the main reliance was placed upon certain groups or strong points fairly well organized. The fourth line, known as the woods line, followed the slopes about the crest of the second ridge to the south of the Marne, extending into the Surmelin Valley on the east. Machine gun emplacements as a rule were in the open and well camouflaged with an alternative emplacement in the edge of the woods. Eight thousand rounds of ammunition had been placed at each gun and a company dump of 100,000 rounds established by each company.

On 14 July a gas-shell attack on the enemy's positions north of the Marne had been ordered by the 38<sup>th</sup> Army Corps, to begin at 8:00 P.M. Shortly after the shelling commenced, telephone orders were received by the division directing that general counter preparation fire be delivered, to commence at 11:30 P.M.

At midnight the enemy commenced a violent bombardment with gas and high-explosive shell. Bombardment was especially violent on the rear line of defense and in the wooded areas. Between 3:00 and 3:30 A.M. the enemy placed a heavy destructive fire on the riverbank for about 15 minutes. At 3:30 A.M. the enemy began his attempt to cross the river.

When the German bombardment began the artillery of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division opened destructive fire on all approaches to the river and on the Foret de Fere and Bois de Barbillon. They continued to fire their counter-preparation fire for 24 hours. Much of the fire was directed at

pontoons and boats crossing the river and was very effective. Upon the receipt of the SOS signal at midnight the machine guns also all opened fire and fired intermittently until morning. The guns of the 9<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion and Machine Gun Company, 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry did especially good work in covering the river and in defending the right flank of the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

### **Action in the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry's Sector**



**U.S. McAlexander,  
Commander, 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry**

In front of the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry the enemy set out in boats for the southern bank. These boats were attacked by rifles, auto-rifles, and hand grenades. In front of Companies E and H no boat ever reached the southern bank. The

regiment attacking at this point gave it up after three attempts and moved to the east. After about an hour a few Germans succeeded in reaching the southern bank in front of Company G. This company had a more difficult task in that the enemy had succeeded in making a crossing in front of the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry, and the company was enfiladed by machine guns. One platoon of Company G, on the river bank, was completely wiped out. Another platoon of this company had only one or two survivors. The company, however, managed to maintain itself at the railroad and with the assistance of two platoons of the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry beat off an attack of about 300 Germans. Between the railroad and the river in the area defended by this company and two machine guns of the 9<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun battalion, 357 Germans were buried.

#### A Company Commander's Account



Newly captured prisoners began to give real information—a grand offensive was to be made [where] the Marne was only about 50 yards wide. We had 600 yards of [this] front all to ourselves. . . [When it began] it seemed [the Germans] expected their artillery to eliminate all resistance. French Officers attached to our Brigade stated positively there was never a bombardment to equal it at Verdun.

At 3:30 am the general fire ceased and their creeping barrage started—behind which at 40 yards only, mind you, they came—with more machine guns than I thought the German Army owned.

The enemy had to battle their way through the first platoon on the river bank—then they took on the second platoon on the forward edge of the railway where we had a thousand times the best of it—but the [Germans] gradually wiped it out. My third platoon [took] their place in desperate hand to hand fighting, in which some got through only to be picked up by the fourth platoon which was deployed simultaneously with the third. By the time they struck the fourth platoon they were all in and easy prey.

It's God's truth that one Company of American soldiers beat and routed a full regiment of picked shock troops of the German Army. At ten o'clock the Germans were carrying back wounded and dead [from] the river bank and we in our exhaustion let them do it—they carried back all but six hundred which we counted later and fifty-two machine guns. We had started with 251 men and 5 lieutenants. I had left 51 men and 2 second lieutenants.

Capt. Jesse Woolridge, Commander,  
Company G., 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry

By 5:00 A.M. the French on the right of the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry had been driven back and Companies F, B, and D took up a position on the high ground east of the Surmelin, facing east. Fortunately regimental commander Colonel McAlexander had ordered the construction of trenches at this point two or three days previous so as to be prepared for the defense of his flank should the French withdraw.

As the French withdrew, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion also took up positions on the hills northeast of Connigis. By the middle of the morning this battalion had attacked and defeated the Germans trying to reach the valley of the Surmelin. On the succeeding days this battalion, sending patrols, gathered in a considerable number of prisoners.





**Railroad Defensive Line—Scene of Heavy Fighting on 15 July 1918**

The penetration of the sector of the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry also exposed the right flank of the 7<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The Germans attacked Co I from both the north and the east. They made little progress here, however, as a new line was hurriedly organized north of Fossoy by platoons of Companies E, F, and I. At 1:00 P.M. Companies A, B, and C attempted a counterattack from Bois d'Aigremont through Fossoy and against Chailly Farm. Coming under heavy shellfire, the counterattack broke down, Companies A and C reaching only the Paris-Metz highway south of Fossoy and Company B remaining in the Bois d'Aigremont. Later in the afternoon patrols succeeded in entering Chailly Farm and found that the Germans had withdrawn.

#### **A German Officer's Impressions**

I have never seen so many dead. I have never seen such a frightful spectacle of war. On the other bank the Americans, in close combat, had destroyed two of our companies. Lying down in the wheat, they had allowed our troops to approach and then annihilated them at a range of 30 to 50 yards. "The Americans kill everyone," was the cry of fear on July 15—a cry that caused our men to tremble for a long time.

Lieutenant Kurt Hesse, Adjutant,  
German 5<sup>th</sup> Grenadiers

#### **Further West**

In the sector of the 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, Major Fred L. Walker commanding, was holding the front line. Here, the enemy effected a crossing by means of a footbridge. The two companies holding the railroad line suffered heavy casualties and a very considerable disorganization. Two platoons of Company C succeeded in joining up with Company G, 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry and continued to offer resistance to the enemy. The enemy infiltrated between the other groups and many succeeded in reaching the high ground north of Crezancy, but none crossed the Fossoy-Crezancy road.

At the time that the bombardment began [midnight] the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, 30<sup>th</sup> Infantry, was on the way to the front to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion and was caught in Bois d'Aigremont where it suffered considerable casualties on account of lack of shelter. On the night of the 15<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup>, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was pushed forward to clear the bank of the Marne and the line was reestablished on the river.



**German Dead Piled Near the Marne River**

At 4:30 P.M. the 38<sup>th</sup> Regiment was ordered to withdraw to Aqueduct Line. This effectively stabilized the situation, halting any further enemy advance in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division sector.

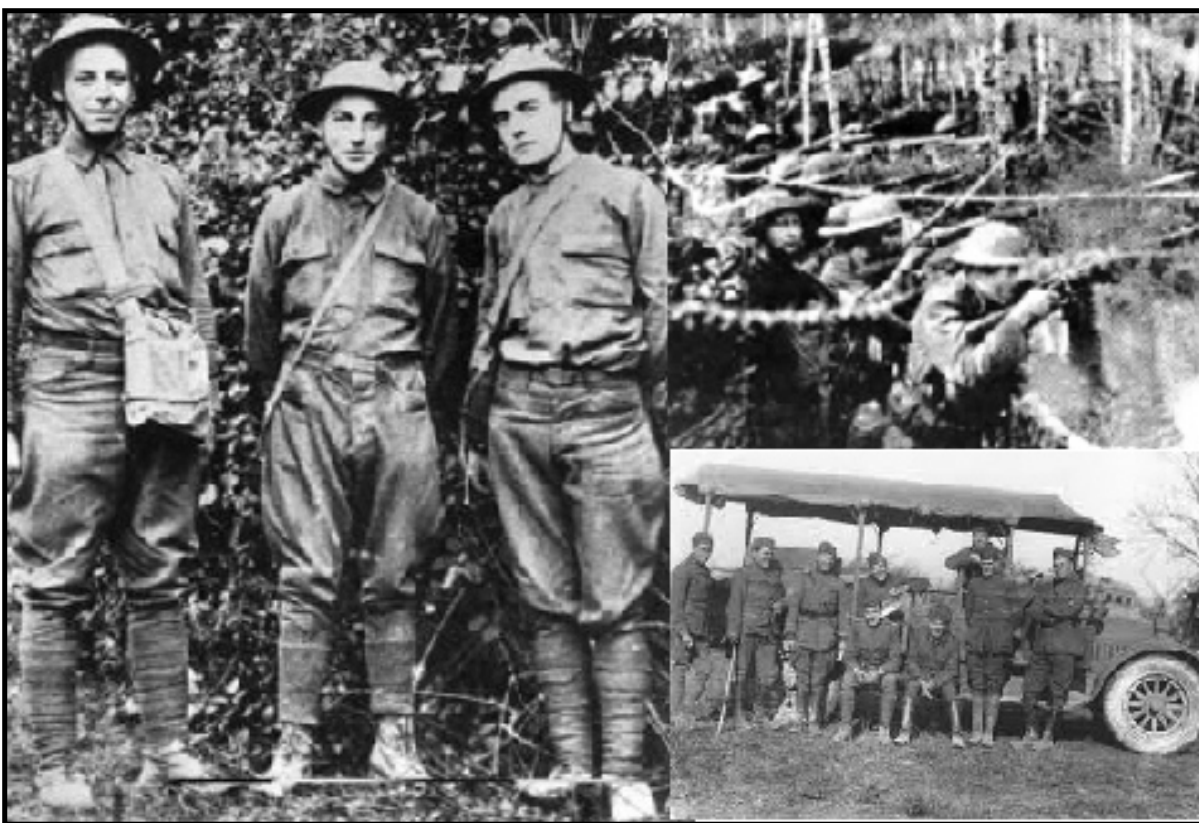
By the end of 15 July the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had not only stopped the two attacking enemy divisions, they had blocked the important Surmelin Valley and thereby halted the entire German advance. Ludendorff later reported: *By noon on the 16<sup>th</sup> General Headquarters had given order for the suspension of the offensive. . . A continuation of the offensive would have cost us too much.* Thus, the last German Offensive of the Great War ended. On 18 July Marshal Foch launched his own offensive against the Marne Salient and the German high command would

find itself on the defensive for the rest of the war.

General Pershing, in his report, especially praised the work of the 38<sup>th</sup> Infantry at the Marne:

*A single regiment of the Third Division wrote one of the most brilliant pages in the annals of military history in preventing the crossing at certain points of its front, while on either flank the Germans, who had gained a footing, pressed forward. Our men were fighting in three directions, met the German attacks with counterattacks at critical points, and succeeded in throwing two German divisions into complete confusion, capturing 600 prisoners.*

### **Men of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division: Before, During, and After**



### **It Wasn't Really About Paris**

To this day it remains an article of faith in far too many history books [and Major Short's presentation] that the Germans were attempting to attack Paris in July 1918. [A major objective of the operation] was to once more try to force the Allies to pull the French reserves out of Flanders by making it look like the real objective of the German attack was Paris. All the German operations plans and attack orders, [however], make it crystal clear that. . . the main effort of Marneschutz-Reims was on the left flank of the Seventh Army, which was supposed to envelop Reims from the west, while the First Army attacked to envelop the city from the east.

Major General David Zabecki, USA, Ret., *Relevance*, Winter 2011