

A MAP HISTORY OF OSCAR BURTON THOMAS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE GREAT WAR 1917-1918

Previous sections of this memoir narrate how O. B. Thomas enlisted in the Fourth Alabama Infantry in mid 1917. That became the 167th Infantry of the 42nd Rainbow Division.

After training in Alabama and in New York, he sailed for England in late 1917. Soon afterward he, along with others of the Rainbow Division, moved over to France.

The American forces did not have the intensive kind of training and battle experience that the British and the French armies had. Thus the British and the French wanted the American forces to be used in small groups as replacements under their commands.

General Pershing refused this approach and insisted in maintaining the U.S. forces as integral units.

The following series of maps provide a visual narrative of O. B. Thomas' involvement until he was wounded in the Aisne-Marne {Chateau Thierry} Battle in late July, 1918

I can't recall that he ever even mentioned any of the intense, often hand to hand, fighting that he experienced .. first in the Champagne-Marne Battle and then in the Aisne-Marne Battle. From widespread reading in the preparation of this memoir I now can understand that the fighting and the loss of life must have been beyond description.

He often told of some experiences in the training and then in the Defensive Sectors during their early months in France.

... He disliked the Red Cross and said that they "sold" things to the ordinary soldiers, but would socialize only with the officers.

... He relished a story about how his platoon hijacked a wagon load of Red Cross goodies and then gave them away to the other troops.

... On the front lines in the Defensive Sectors he said that the US and German trenches often were so close that they could shout insults at each other, and throw rocks. He did not mention that in those areas the troops also threw hand grenades at each other's trenches.

... He told about how he and others would scout in "no man's land" between the trenches, crawling on their stomachs thru the mud. They would carry wire cutters to cut through the barbed wire. It was necessary to put a rag around the wire and the wire cutter so that the "snip" sound would not be heard by the Germans.

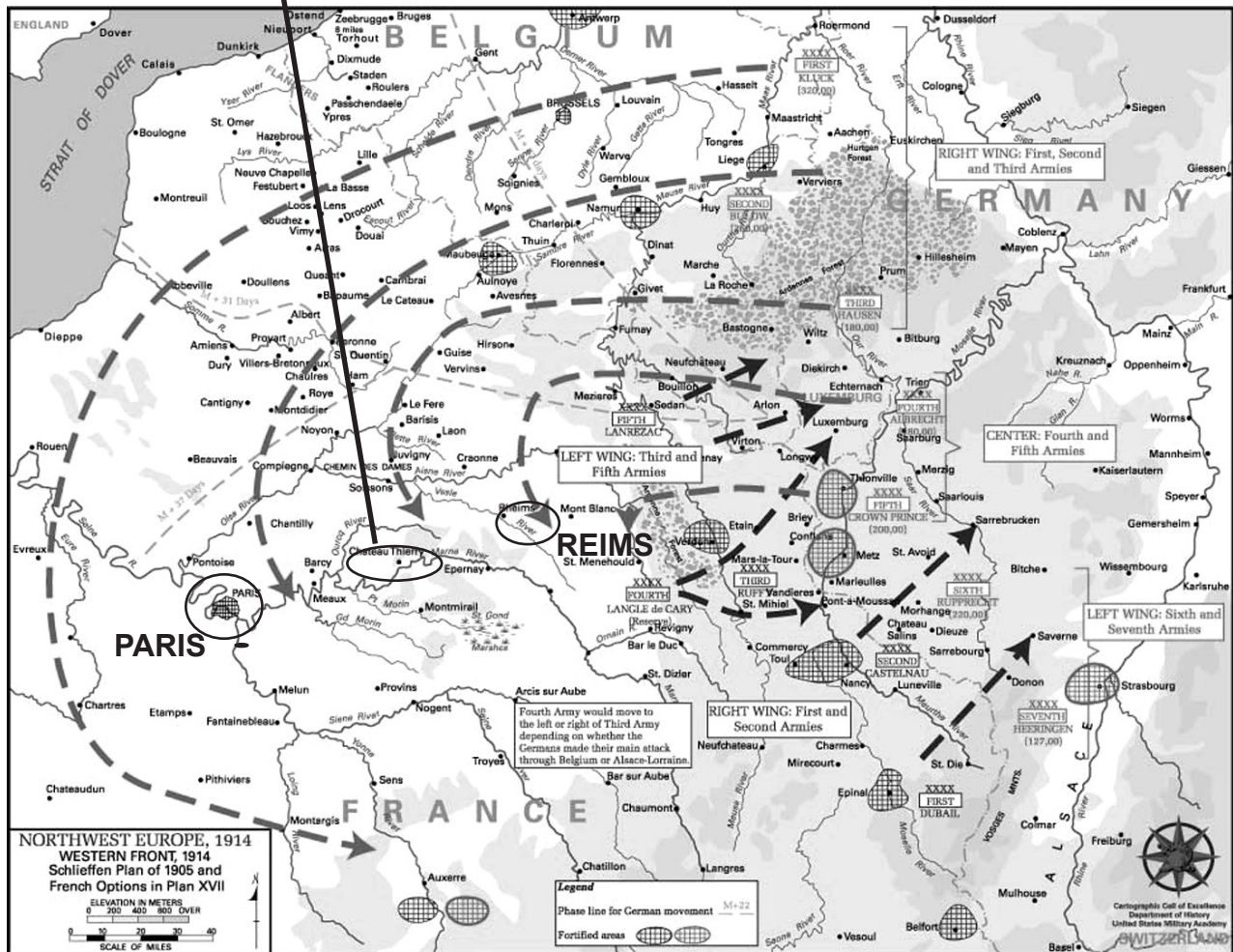
... Living and sleeping in the trenches ... often in water up to their knees ... was an awful life. The trenches must have stunk because of having latrines in small niches off the main trenches. Soldiers often were afflicted with "trench foot", a kind of fungal decay arising from the conditions.

After he was wounded by a gunshot in the jaw, he was taken to a medical facility some where in the rear. He did tell how it was necessary to wire his upper and lower jaws together until the shattered bones healed. During that time he had to always carry a small wire cutter, fastened to his waist by a light chain. That was so he could cut away the wires in his jaw if he should become nauseated or choked on food or liquid.

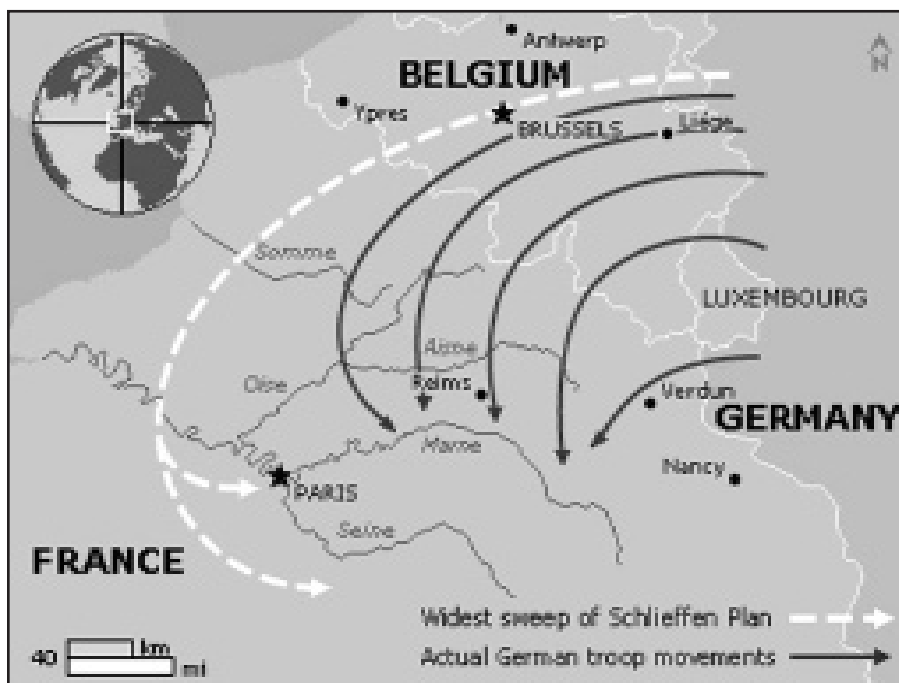
A photo, made in a studio at Vichy, France, is in the preceding section. It shows his lower jaw still bandaged. The date is unknown, but shortly afterwards he returned to the U.S. for further medical treatment.

MAP-8

CHATEAU THIERRY



MAP-9



Northwest Europe, 1914.

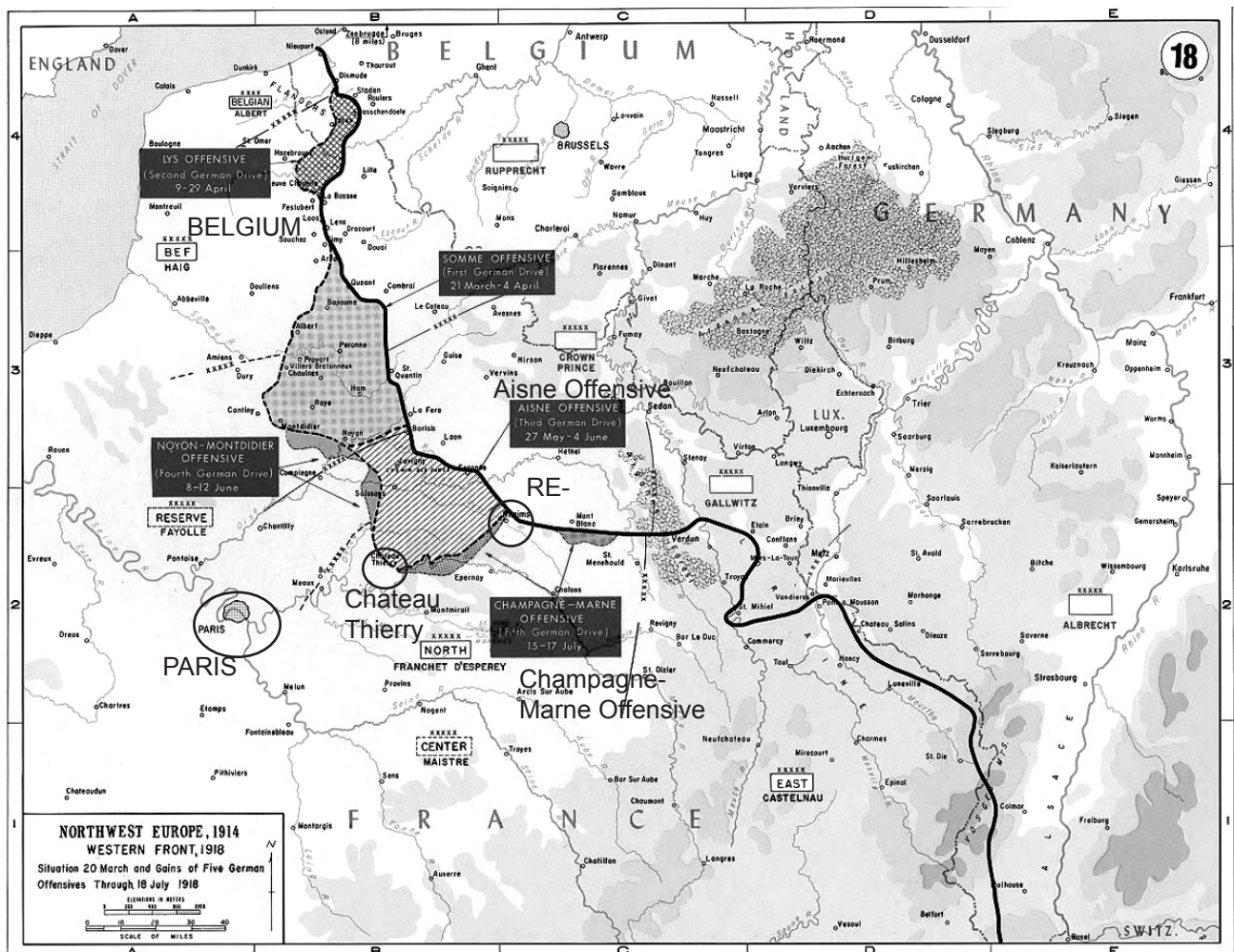
The arrows above and at the left indicate the general idea of the German Schlieffen Plan of 1905 for the invasion of France. It involved a sweep through Belgium, then south to the Marne and the Seine Rivers to envelop Paris. The most westward part of that plan never materialized.

Belgium was again victim of a similar military maneuver in the Second World War.

Reims, an old cathedral city northeast of Paris was near the center of hostilities. in both wars. Verdun and Ypres, the locations of two major battles in The Great War are shown on these maps.

NORTHWEST EUROPE 1914

MAP-4



The war in Europe was concentrated primarily in the shaded bulges shown in the map above. Most of it was in the area of the German flanking movement through Belgium, as shown generally in the Schlieffen Plan on the preceding page. This was an area roughly 150 miles wide and 50 miles or so deep with other activities to the side, such as the Champagne-Marne Offensive to the east of Reims. Within this very small area the armies of Germany, France, England, and later the United States managed to inflict an incredible slaughter on each other.

There were other areas of conflict: i.e. the Middle East in the area of what now is Iraq and Saudi Arabia, in east Africa, along the frontier with Italy, and for the Germans an eastern front with Russia.

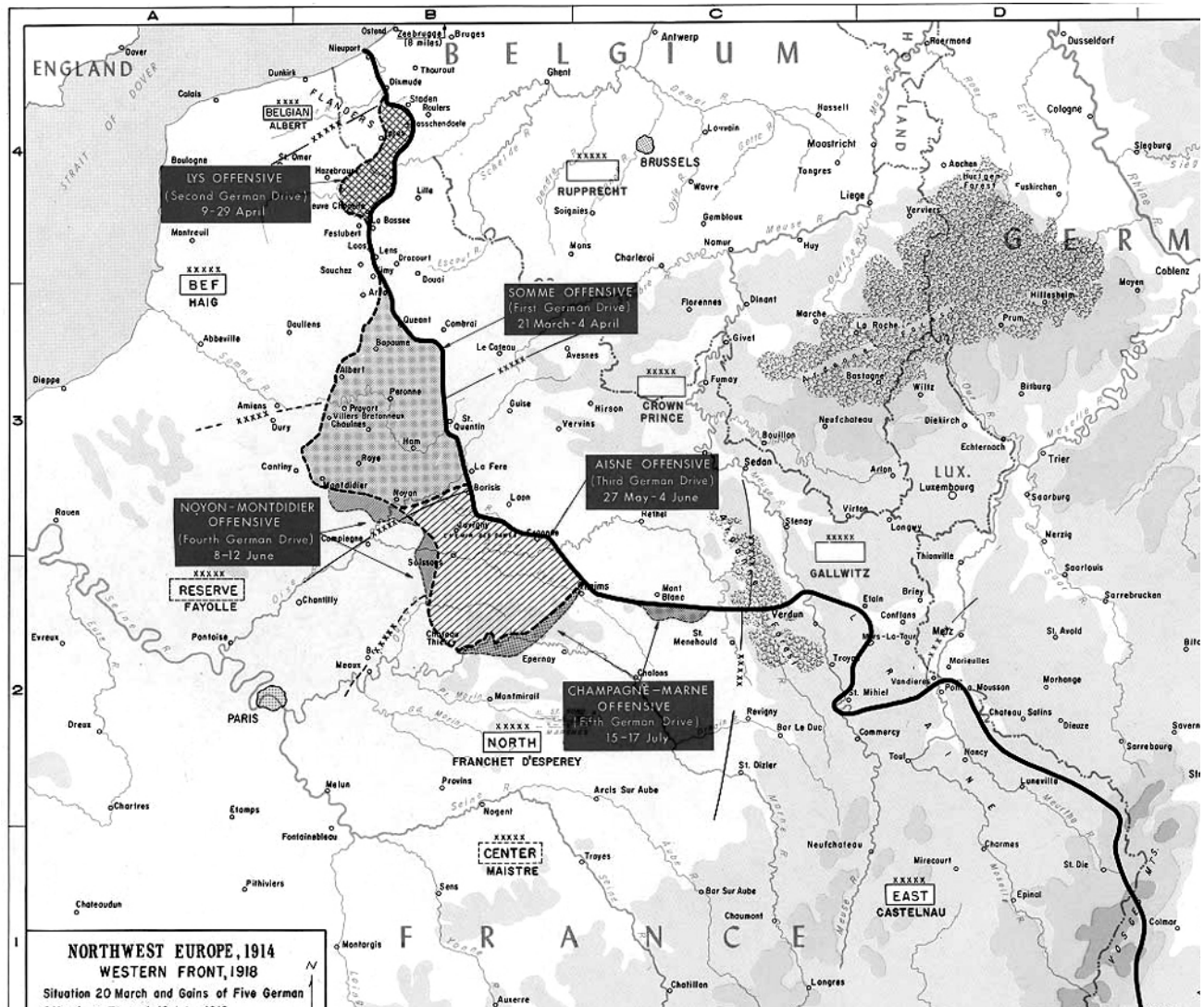
That led to the collapse of the Russian government so that in 1918 the German Army was able to shift a large number of troops to the same general area shown above in a final and desperate effort to break through to Paris.

In between 1914 and 1918 the war stagnated into trench warfare - - with very little movement more than a few miles one way or another - - but still with immense slaughter in a number of pitched battles.

BATTLE OF VERDUN

WAR MAPS-4

MAP-4



The Battle of Verdun was in 1916. The location is about 20 miles east of Reims and can be placed in relation to the total front line by reference to the preceding maps.

Verdun was one of many famous pitched battles during which there were enormous losses on both sides, but little physical movement ... often no more than a mile or so in either direction.

More details about those fruitless battles can be found in a separate four-volume set I have prepared about the 42nd Rainbow Division during The Great War.

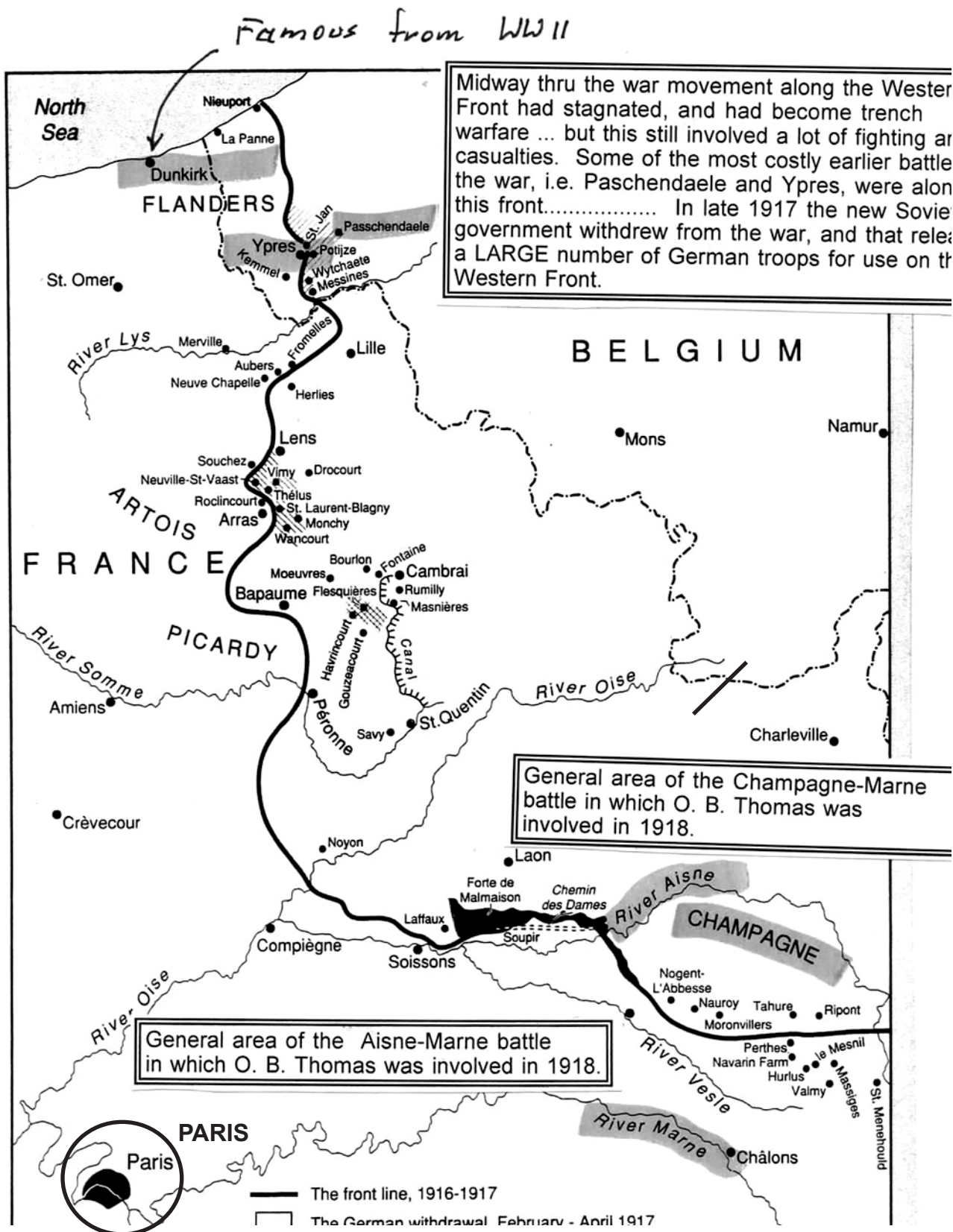
Notes and maps here are much briefer, since they are oriented toward the involvement of Oscar Burton Thomas in The Great War.

WESTERN FRONT 1916-1917 {West side of Germany}

WAR MAPS-5

The US Army began arriving in France toward the end of 1917. The war was still more or less bogged down into static trench warfare.

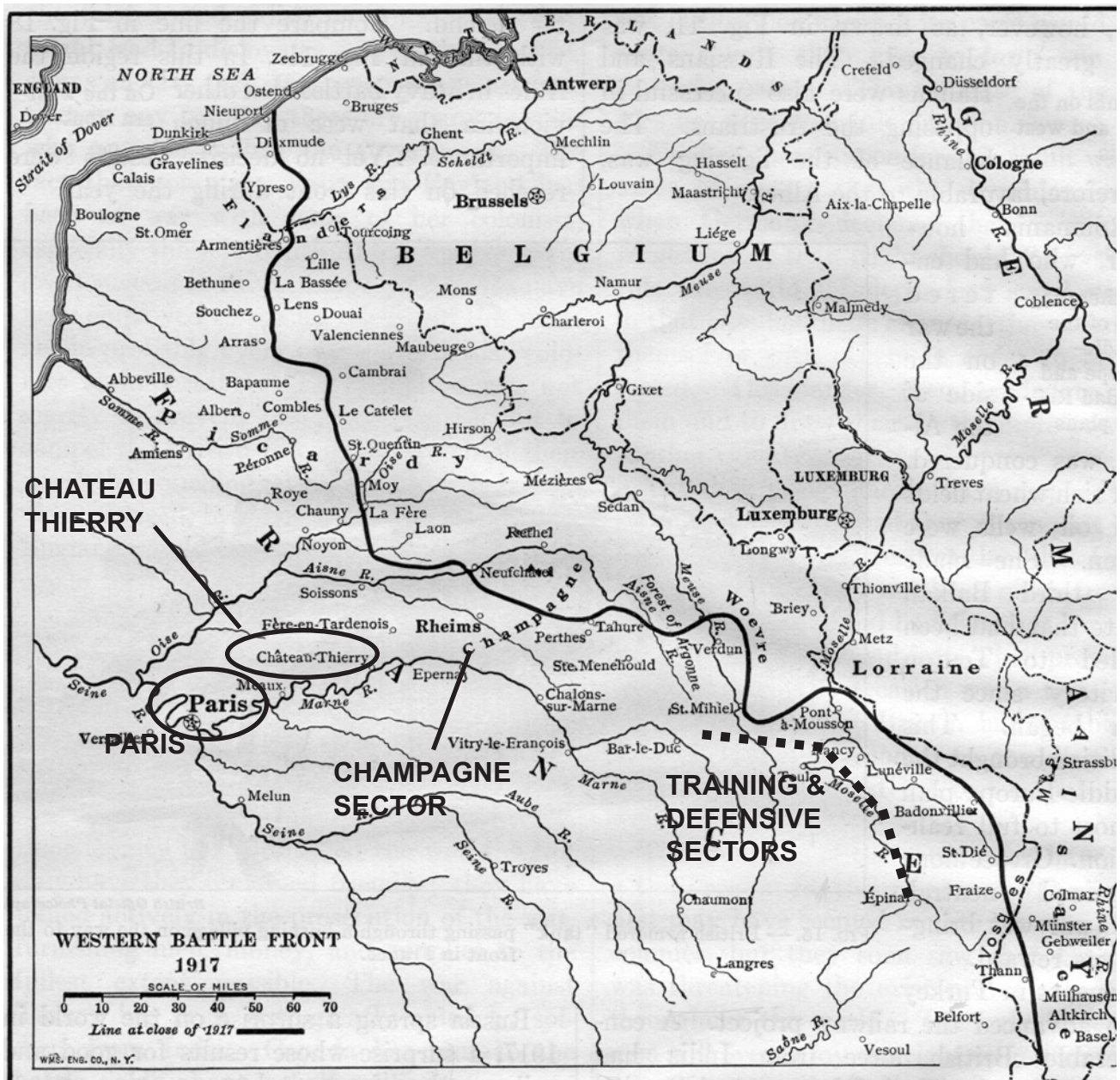
MAP-16



WESTERN BATTLE FRONT at close of 1917.

WAR MAPS-6

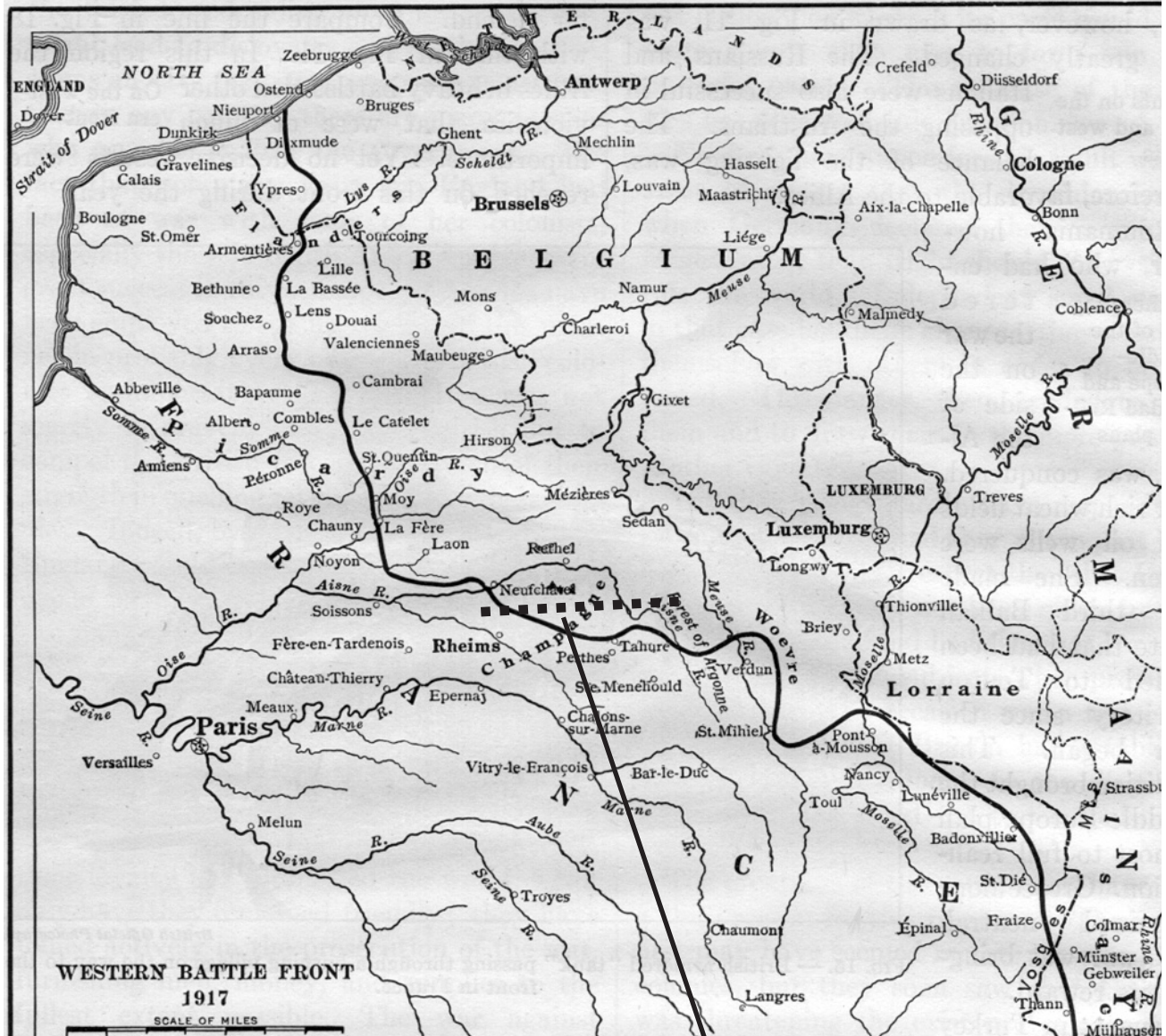
This was about the time that the U.S. Army forces began to arrive in France.



MAP-3 Compare with the preceding map to illustrate how little actual movement there was along the Western Front during 1916-1917. In fact a famous novel arising from The Great War was "All Quiet On The Western Front," although to the troops it certainly was NOT quiet.

Initially both the French and the British wanted American units to be distributed and blended in with their forces as replacements. General Pershing refused this approach, insisting that the U.S. forces fight as American units. Since the arriving American forces had insufficient training, they initially were moved into quieter areas behind the front lines, in the southeast corner of this map ... toward the Swiss Border.

As their training progressed they were moved into front line positions along one of the quieter and more stable parts of the front lines, generally east of St. Mihiel and south of Lorraine, as shown by the dashed line above. In the early summer they were moved westward into much more active fighting in the area of Champagne. Eventually they were moved even further west to help stop the German drive in the vicinity of Chateau Thierry.



MAP-5

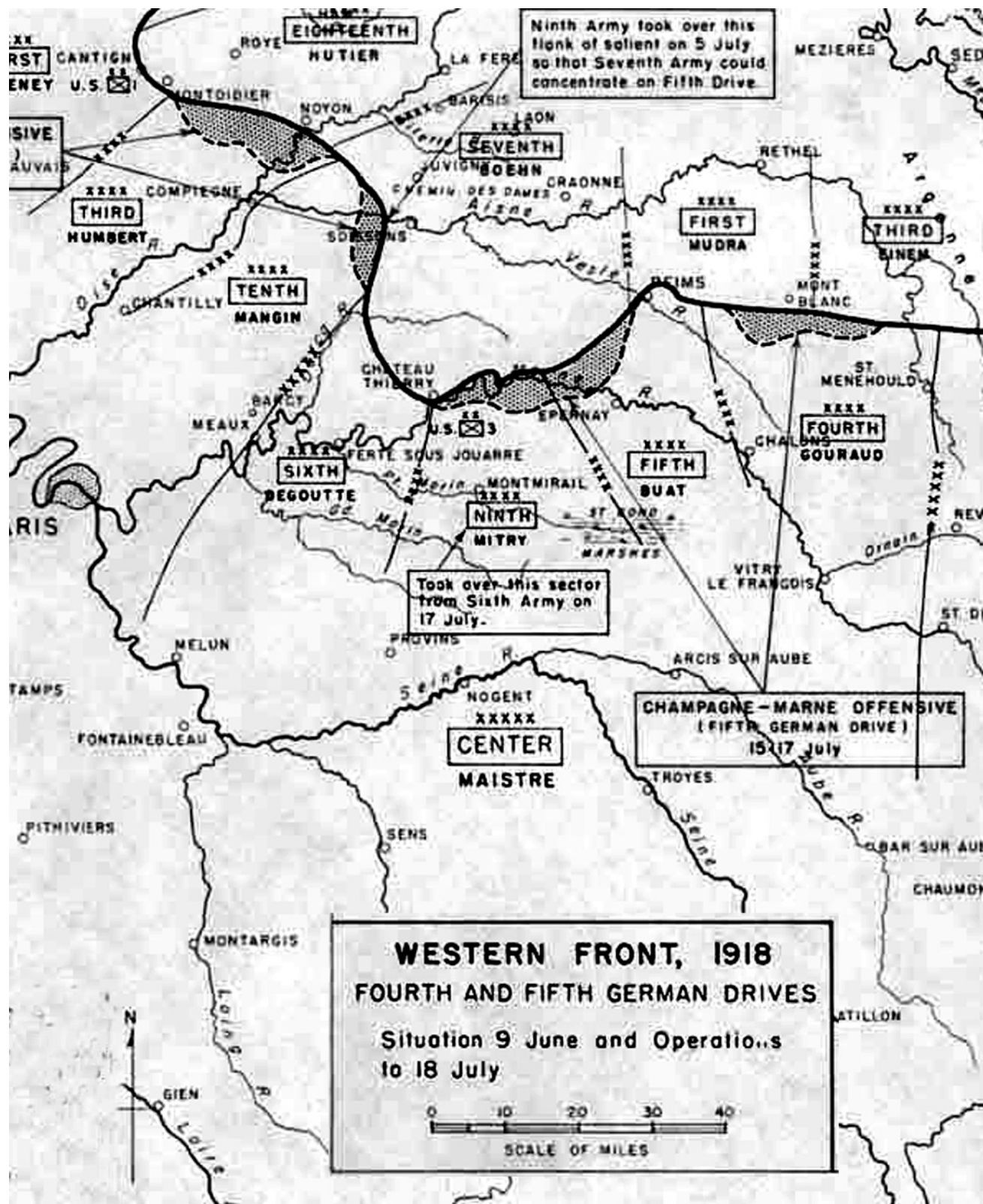
Champagne-Marne Sector

Compare with the front lines shown on the preceding map, which were at the close of 1917. By June-July, 1918 the German army was trying to consolidate its strengths, moving troops away from the Eastern Front with Russia and into the Western Front with the European allies.

The intent was again to try to break through to Paris and thus end the war with a German victory, ending what had been a war of attrition.

The evolution of those events is shown here and in the remaining maps of this Appendix.

As part of the effort to stop the German drive, the 42nd Rainbow Division along with other US divisions was first moved a bit to the west to face the Germans in what became known as the Champagne-Marne sector. See the heavy dashed line above and the following maps.



WAR MAPS-9

KEY MAP
CHAMPAGNE-MARNE DEFENSIVE
JULY 15-18, 1918

The map illustrates the defensive positions and German attacks during the Champagne-Marne offensive in July 1918. Key features include:

- Rivers:** Aisne, Vesle, Aube, Ourcq, and Marne.
- Locations:** Soissons, Reims, Chateau-Thierry, Suippes, and Châlons-sur-Marne.
- Armies:** French Sixth Army (July 15-17), French Ninth Army (July 17-18), and the German Army.
- Attacks:** German attacks are indicated by arrows pointing towards the French positions.
- Occupied Areas:** Areas occupied by the American Division are marked with diagonal hatching. Areas covered by Operation Shown on Summary Map are marked with red.
- Front Line:** The front line is indicated by a dashed line.
- Legend:**
 - Area Occupied by American Division (hatched)
 - Area Covered by Operation Shown on Summary Map (red)
 - Front Line (dashed line)
 - Circled numeral indicates American Division
- Scale:** 0 to 10 miles and 0 to 16 kilometers.

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COMPREHENSIVE VIEW AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN THE ALLIED OFFENSIVE OF 1918

WAR MAPS-10

MAP-12



The above map provides a summary view of the Allied army movements in 1918 that finally broke the back of the German army, thus leading to the end of the war and the Armistice of November 11, 1918

The Rainbow Division had been moved westward to engage the German army near Chateau Thierry. O. B. Thomas was seriously wounded in that Aisne-Marne battle. After he was wounded and moved to the rear, the Rainbow Division again moved to the east for further engagements in the Meuse-Argonne and near St. Mihiel.