

4-1-2018

## Our Doughboys, Part III: Death at the Caesar Position

Arley McCormick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review>



Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

McCormick, Arley (2018) "Our Doughboys, Part III: Death at the Caesar Position," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 43: No. 1, Article 3.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol43/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by LOUIS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Huntsville Historical Review by an authorized editor of LOUIS.

# **Our Doughboy's Part III Death at the Caesar Position**

*By  
Arley McCormick*

In the fall of 1917 the German high command analysis was grim. All the belligerents were war weary, like boxers in the final round of a draw; they were swinging, but lacked the strength to end the fight. But the Germans saw an advantage if they could get to the ports on the North Sea. The British would be defeated and the French would pursue peace. The manpower America was bringing to the Continent altered their outlook and the attrition of supplies and manpower were affecting unit strength and sustainability. Their encouragement came from the collapse of the Russian front. Now they could allocate their combat power to the Western front and leave old men and walking wounded to watch the Russian border. The conclusion: launch a decisive punch, a "Peace Offensive." The launch of the offensive was repeatedly delayed but the strategic objective remained consistent - defeat the British and reach the sea ports. On March 21, 1918, the offensive began.

In January, 1918, the American Expeditionary Forces were still training under the supervision of the British and the French Army. But the operational situation was such that General Pershing allowed American units to operate under the command of

British and French forces. Americans were not individual replacements but neither did they operate in their own sector.

In February when the 167<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry Regiment entered the fray, the German Army was entrenched casually observing and accommodating the silence and serenity of the Luneville sector. The terrain was rough, and until the time the Americans arrived, the harsh reality of war had been replaced by a universally accepted silence. Both the Entente and the Germans were respecting the silence and had settled into a diligent watch. They used the sector as a rest and recuperation area, i.e., pulling units out of the trenches to refit, rest, and relax before returning.

The Americans were rested and wanted to fight, win, and get home. A British officer on the flank of an American Battalion observed a cigar chomping captain marching his unit in parade formation down a dirt road. As the Yanks approached, the captain inquired regarding the location of the “little shooting gallery they had going on here.” The British officer advised him to disperse his troops because the front line was only a few hundred yards ahead and where they were marching was bracketed by German artillery.

The Americans were on the ground in Europe with 250,000 troops and more on the way. The American success on the battlefield bolstered the Entente decision to respond with a counter offensive in June. It would become the final thrust of the war. History records it as the Hundred Day’s campaign, the war of

maneuver that General Pershing perceived would guarantee victory.

The Luneville sector was a rehearsal for future action and as the 167<sup>th</sup> entered the foxholes, they began improving defensive positions and conducting reconnaissance. On the evening of March 4, 1918, Corporal Edgar H. Freeman of Company D was participating in a small patrol when they encountered a German patrol. Corporal Freeman's patrol was outnumbered more than two to one, but when attacked, they defeated the German patrol and captured two of them. The French Commander responsible for the sector happened to be present when the patrol returned with the prisoners. On the spot, he awarded Corporal Freeman, of Huntsville Alabama, the Distinguished Service Cross. It was the first award for the Alabama Regiment.

It was not all recreation, patrols, and rehearsals. On March 11, Private Herman D. Gentry was caught in the open and died on the field, the first soldier from Huntsville to leave his life in France.

On March 21, 1918 the German "Peace Offensive" began with the expected success. The Kaisers' army broke through the trench lines of the British Expeditionary Force and the French Army until they were on the outskirts of Amiens, a rail center on the Somme River. It was a rich prize but it had taken over 30 days, 230,000 German lives, and their supply line could not keep up. Their Army had to kill their horses and loot to survive. The German high command decision to capture Amiens rather than hold and

reconstitute their forces to exploit their success may have decided the war.

The “Peace Offensive” was foiled officially on July 15, 1918, and the Rainbow Division took part in the defense that stopped the Germans. The Boch ran out of momentum, but was yet to retreat to their supply lines. When they began to withdraw, they executed a defense in depth and repeated it often during the next five months.

A defense in depth included three major elements: a lightly manned but well-armed infantry force, a second but stronger line of infantry well-armed and each lined supported by artillery. The first line would hold until the entire Allied force was deployed in the attack and the artillery, with previously bracketed distance and elevation mapped, would engage the attacking forces second or third wave. The first German positions would give way and withdraw to the second position and by that time, and during the third phase, the machine guns and artillery the attack would halt the Allies and the Germans could commence a counter attack.

On March 31, the 167<sup>th</sup> was pulled out of the Luneville sector to reposition in the Baccaret area. As they were conducting a passage of lines, a tactical maneuver ensuring the front was covered as they departed, a German aircraft buzzed the formation and dropped a note bidding the 167<sup>th</sup> goodbye and welcoming the replacing regiment. German intelligence was very good.

On July 23, after 135 days on or near the front, the 167<sup>th</sup> Regiment took a swim in the Marne River. In this sector the German line seemed to fade away and the Doughboys from Huntsville, Corporal Dock Hill, Private First Class Kirk Satterfield, Privates Percy Crunk, Hope and Roberts knew the campaign was not over. They anticipated another maneuver soon but now they washed the remains of their clothes, and lay in the grass for a much needed rest.

There were two events the soldiers of the regiment understood without a word being spoken. When the brass woke them up with a hot breakfast and coffee, they would be attacking somewhere by 10:00 a.m. In addition, an order to load onto trucks meant a long ride and an attack immediately after dismounting. July 24<sup>th</sup> was no exception to the rule. The brass ordered them to load onto trucks.

The companies were formed, equipped, and ready to move at 4:00 p.m. No trucks were present. Their sergeants took the extra time for an equipment check, directed them to clean their weapons, and as they cleaned they were free to smoke cigarettes and reminisce about their girlfriends and home. At 1200 a.m., 225 trucks arrived, enough for the remnants of three battalions. A French officer translated for the Annamite drivers. The Annamites were from Indochina, a location later named South Vietnam. Each Vietnamese driver guided a group of 16 soldiers to their truck.

It was approximately 14 miles as the crow flies to their destination, but to avoid the Boch air and

artillery, they took the long way and the rest of the night was spent in the trucks. The battalions arrived at Epieds before noon on July 25<sup>th</sup>, and without delay, they formed their companies and departed at 2:30 p.m. It was approximately six miles to their objective and they made the trek the old fashioned way - on foot.

They were not the first Americans to pass this way. The 26<sup>th</sup> Division was there for two weeks and now they were withdrawing at less than half strength. It cost them 400 casualties for every mile of terrain they took and they didn't make it to the objective. The Alabamians soon learned why. As the regiment marched off, Colonel Screws was reportedly asked where they were going and his response was, "I don't know but we are on our way."

The retiring division was mauled and their reports were incoherent. The 167<sup>th</sup> had to learn the hard way. Just ahead, the Croix Rouge (Red Cross) Farm was centered in a huge clearing and a classic illustration of a killing zone. Well in front of the German defense lines of the farm but within range of the Bosh 77's artillery. Digging shallow foxholes or taking advantage of pits created by artillery, the Americans surveyed their situation.

Snipers camouflaged and placed in fortified positions to cover the tree lines and trails began producing casualties and random artillery explosions splintered the remaining trees naked. American scouts studied the large farmhouse that dominated a slight rise from which fire could be delivered in all directions. A large

number of German soldiers were in trenches on its west and north and trenches running east-west 100 yards in front of the farmhouse was lightly manned, but well-armed with water-cooled 7.92mm machine guns serviced by a five-man crew. Machine guns were the heart of the German defense. The automatic weapons on each flank had interlocking fields of fire with red paint marked on the remaining trees at chest level and the distance was calculated. The scouting reports indicated the Germans could project 10,000 rounds a minute with killing accuracy up to 1,000 yards. It was certain death for soldiers of the previous infantry division that had retired after repeatedly failing to breach the zone.

German snipers began engaging targets as soon as the 167<sup>th</sup> passed through the lines of the retiring division. They targeted leaders and produced casualties.



**The Caesar Position**

The Alabamians were facing the Caesar Position, it was named by the German Army high command and portions of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, and 10<sup>th</sup> Landwehr Divisions were holding it. The defending divisions were reduced in strength by the Spanish Flu and the casualties of previous combat but they were confident, after all, they had defeated an American Division and only a brigade was at their front.

The German machine gunners were expected to engage the American troops committed to the attack



when they were seen in or near the tree line, or in the open ground, and the artillery could eliminate the second echelon of the attack effectively ending any assault in the killing zone. Their implementation always worked.



**Colonel  
Screws**

The 167<sup>th</sup> command group headquarters was situated nearly 1500 meters behind the lead companies southwest of the farm and all the reports filtering in were pessimistic. The exact objective was yet to be identified.

It was not uncommon for soldiers in France to be wet, muddy, and miserable and July and August were supposed to be the driest and warmest months of the year. This year it was unseasonably cold with a steady drizzle and chill that penetrated every item of clothing and did not seem to stop at the skin. The rain and drizzle would not stop. The ground was muddy and slick and everything stuck to their boots, hands and body. Walking was impossible with snipers effectively playing the part of the grim reaper. Crawling may be safer but a man could collect 40lbs of mud on his body slowing any intent to charge. Gray skies and cold rain waited above them while death was at their front.

Under the cover of night, Colonel Screws arrayed the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion on the left of the line, adjacent to the French Brigade, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion at the center. The 168<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade (the Iowans) was on the right of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion and south of the farm. On July 26,

the sunrise was only a light spot in a gray sky and the rain and drizzle never stopped.

Orders arrived at 3:40 pm and deciphering it took a

**General Pershing' Order Policy**

- Keep it Simple
- Limited Objectives
- Provide Overwhelming Fire Power
  - Aviation
  - Artillery
- Support Maneuver with Machineguns

few minutes. Their orders were to attack at 4:50 pm. Colonel Screws's deputy delivered the order to the battalion commanders and was delayed getting to the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion by the carnage created by the German artillery and weather. They received the order at 4:45 p.m.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion objective was the tree line northeast of the farm house

with an implied task of securing the tree line farther north and that was complicated by a Bosh counter attack on the French Brigade, center right, affecting casualties in the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion orders were to secure the forest between it and the farm, take the farm house then turn northward and occupy the woods.

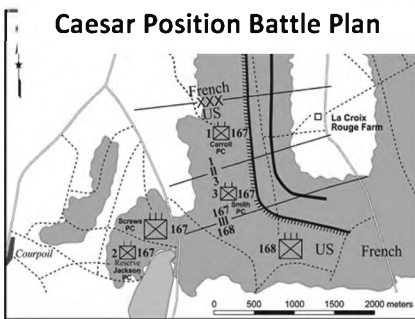
While they waited, the troops cleaned their boots and equipment again as best they could in an attempt to leverage speed against the horde of machine guns that awaited them. This was open warfare, the type of combat General Pershing had promoted: fire, maneuver and eliminating targets with accurate and suppressive fire. But accompanying and normally

preceding the maneuver element was artillery support. The Alabamians had no artillery. The French were designated to provide the artillery support and there was none. The Alabamians' machine gun battalion did support the flanks.

At the time designated to attack, the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion was late. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, with platoons leading from Company D and C charged. The Hun snipers did their job and eliminated two leaders at almost the same instant. But there was no hesitation on the part of the Alabamians, they knew their orders. (Much later the lowans would swear they heard the Rebel Yell above all the noise of combat.) The German machine guns took their toll. The first charge fizzled short of the German trenches and Private Ben Hope was hit in the head during the charge. In that frantic charge, Ben probably did not notice that Opal Roberts died, but Ben recovered his composure quickly and rallied the troops around him to continue the attack. When the objective was

nearly assured, he was hit again and again and he never knew the satisfaction of victory. Percy Crunk, it was learned later, was killed very early in the fight. There were others.

The farm house and the German killing zone, after two hours of fighting, were full of dying German and American soldiers and the Alabamians could not take



the time either to rejoice in victory or mourn the loss of their comrades. They dug foxholes and prepared to defend against an expected German counter attack and wait for their next order.

## **Epilogue**

The 167<sup>th</sup> succeeded where other American formations had failed and at considerable cost, particularly to Huntsville. In a single fight Huntsville and Madison County lost Percy Crunk, Doc Hill, Ben Hope, Opal Roberts, and Kirk Satterfield. Corporal Edgar H. Freeman survived the fight and the ones that followed. He returned home safe and sound.

It is customary that after nearly every action, leaders talk to the soldiers about the fight if they have the time. They ask questions that could lead them to identify distinguished soldiers, understand tactical errors, or some overlooked oddity that could have changed the outcome or simplify the next mission. From those discussions, Ben Hope was recommended for and awarded a Distinguished Service Cross for his leadership and sacrifice on the Croix Rouge Farm battlefield. Previously he was mentioned in dispatches and recognized for his bravery in a fight and along with Edgar H. Freeman, they would be the two soldiers from Huntsville that were awarded the medal.

## Private Ben Hope Citation

*The Distinguished Service Cross is awarded to Private Ben Hope (Army Serial Number 96503), Company D, 167<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 42<sup>nd</sup> Division, American Expeditionary Force:*

*For extraordinary heroism in action with the enemy north-east of Chateau-Thierry, France, July 26, 1918. After he had been wounded in the head, Private Hope continued to advance against the enemy until he had been wounded three more times. He later died as a result of these wounds. His conduct was at all times of a highly inspiring character. Alabama Archives*



**Kirk Sutterfield  
French WWI  
Military Cemetery**



**Private Opal  
Roberts Maple Hill  
Cemetery Huntsville  
Alabama**



**Private Ben Hope  
Maple Hill Cemetery  
Huntsville, Alabama**

The battle of Croix Rouge Farm (the Cesar Position) merits little attention by historians of WWI. July 26, 1918 is seldom referenced and never mentioned as a

significant event, not even a casual footnote. But it was a significant event to the men who fought and died there. Yet, even as the survivors reflect on their war it may not merit anything more than a casual comment. After all, it was what they were trained for and they did something similar again and again until the war was finally over. Even to their families the event is shadowed as Ben Hope's mother wrote "*Then on July 26<sup>th</sup> 1918 he was in battle at Chateau Thirey.*" It is a familiar saga that every soldier understands and keeps somewhere in his soul.

*July 26, 1918*

*...the 167<sup>th</sup> Alabama assisted by the left flank of the 168<sup>th</sup> Iowa had stormed and captured the Croix Rouge Farm in a manner which for its gallantry I do not believe has been surpassed in military history. It was one of the few occasions on which the bayonet was decisively used.*

*Douglas MacArthur*

The war did not end at Croix Rouge Farm. In the few months that remained in the war, Turner Mayes of Huntsville was killed on October 16, 1918 and Milas A. Payne also of Huntsville was killed on November 10, 1918, the day before the cease-fire. Each soldier paid the dues for their Gold Star Mother's entry into a club no one would choose to join.

... *“The Great War could no more have been avoided than an earthquake or any other cataclysm of nature’s unknown forces. On the one side loomed the German character of strength and patience, of selfish caution in adversity, and vain and reckless arrogance of power. On the other glowed the sunlight of democratic civilization, which encouraged all peoples to aspire toward equality, and to prefer death to slavery. Given these opposing forces, and their clash was inevitable. The marvel now is only that we were all so slow to see the ominous approach of the disaster.”* Charles F. Horne 1923

All of President Wilson’s political objectives were not fulfilled by entering and ending the war, but it is certain that for ever more all Americans, regardless of the state of their origin or the color of their skin, would be referred to by Europeans as “Yanks.”

### **167<sup>th</sup> Alabama Infantry WWI Battle 1918 Timeline**

- Feb 21 to March 23: Luneville sector, Lorraine
- March 31 to June 21: Baccaret
- July 4 to the 14: Esperance-Souain sector, Champagne



Complements of the Foundation du  
Memorial de la Ferme de la Croix Rouge

- July 15 to the 17:  
Champagne-Marne  
defense
- July 25 to Aug 3:  
Aisne-Marne offensive,
- September 12 to the  
16: St. Mihiel offensive
- September 17 to the  
30: Essey and Pannes  
sector Woevre
- October 12 to the 31:  
Meuse-Argonne offensive
- Nov 5 to the 10:  
Meuse-Argonne offensive

\*\*\*

**About the Author:** Arley McCormick is a former soldier and active with organizations that contribute to the history of Alabama.

### References:

- ☛ Axelrod, Alan. *Selling the Great War; The Making of American Propaganda*. Palgrave McMillian, 2009
- ☛ Beckett, Jan F. W., *The Making of the First World War*, 2012, Yale University Press, New Haven and London



- ☛ Beckett, Jan F. W., *The Making of the First World War*, 2012, Yale University Press, New Haven and London
- ☛ *croixrougefarm.org/history-42nd/*
- ☛ Emmerson, Charles. *In Search of the World Before the Great War*. Public Affairs, 2014.
- ☛ Engen, Rob, “Steel Against Fire: The Bayonet in the First World War”. *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Spring 2006, Vol.8, Issue 3.
- ☛ Evans, Martin Marix. *Victory on the Western Front; the Decisive Battles of World War One*. Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2013
- ☛ Fivecoat, David, “Fine Conduct Under Fire: The Tactical Effectiveness of the 165<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment in the First World War”. *Master of Military Art and Science, Dissertation*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 2004
- ☛ Heller, Maj(P) Charles E. Heller, USAR. *Chemical Warfare in World War I: The American Experience, 1917-1918*. Combat Studies Institute U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas 66027-6900 September 1984
- ☛ *Infantry In Battle The Infantry Journal Incorporated*, Washington DC. 1939
- ☛ Lloyd, Nick. *Hundred Days; The Campaign that ended World War I*. Perseus Books Group, New York, 2014.
- ☛ *Military Report: Lieutenant-Colonel WALTER E. BARE*
- ☛ *Montgomery, Alabama, May, 1919. 167th U. S. Infantry*

- ☛ Order of Battle of the United States Land Forces in the World War: American Expeditionary Forces: General Headquarters Armies, Army Corps Services of Supply Separate Forces Volume 1, 2, 3, Center of Military History United States Army Washington, D.C. 1988.
- ☛ Record, James. A Dream Come True; the Story of Madison County and Incidentally of Alabama and the United States, Volume II, 1970 John Hicklin Printing Company.
- ☛ Rubin, Richard. The Last of The Doughboys; The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company, New York, New York, 2014
- ☛ Tindall, George B. The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945. Louisiana State University Press, 1967.
- ☛ Tooze, Adam. The Deluge: The Great War, America and the Remaking of the Global Order 1916-1931. Viking, Penguin Group, New York, New York, 2014.