Chapter 4

Attack in the Charlotte Valley

Shortly before Christmas I was released from the hospital, but my wound had not healed and hampered my walking. Service in a replacement battalion was distasteful so I returned to my outfit.

In the middle of January 1915, I joined the regiment in the western part of the Argonne. The bottomless road from Binarville to the regimental CP was indicative of conditions in the Argonne Forest. I assumed command of the 9th Company which needed a commander. A narrow, corduroy footpath led forward from the regimental CP for a distance of about half a mile. Occasional rifle bullets flew through the winter woods and a few shells whistled overhead, forcing me to dive for cover in the deep clayey communications trench. By the time I arrived at my company CP my uniform had lost the telltale marks of the soldier returning from leave.

I assumed command of about two hundred bearded warriors and a 440-yard company sector of the front line. A French reception committee greeted me with a concentration of "Whiz Bangs." The position consisted of a continuous trench reinforced by numerous breastworks. Several communication trenches led to the rear. Shortages in barbed wire prevented the erection of obstacles out in front. In general the position was poorly developed, and surface water had kept the trench depth to three feet or less in some places. The dugouts, built to accommodate from eight to ten men, were of necessity equally shallow, and their roofs stuck out above the ground level making them excellent targets. Their roofs were nothing more than a couple of layers of thin logs which at best were only splinterproof. During the first hour of my

command a shell landed smack on one of them and severely wounded nine men. My first order was that whenever artillery opened on us all dugouts would be vacated and the men would take cover in the trench proper. I also issued orders that the dugout roofs would be strengthened so that they could at least withstand field artillery fire. This work started at dark. Several large oak trees near our position proved to be dangerous to our safety. Whenever shells burst against them they deflected the fragments straight into our trenches; so I ordered several of them chopped down.

Stimulated by my new command, it was not long before I was my old self again. For a twenty-three-year-old officer there was no finer job than that of company commander. Winning the men's confidence requires much of a commander. He must exercise care and caution, look after his men, live under the same hardships, and—above all—apply self discipline. But once he has their confidence, his men will follow him through hell and high water.

Each day brought plenty of work. We lacked boards, nails, clamps, roofing paper, wire, and tools. The headquarters dugout which I shared with a platoon commander was four and a half feet high and contained a table and cot made of beach sticks tied together with wire and string. The walls were bare earth, and water trickled down constantly. During wet weather, water also leaked through the roof, which was made of two layers of oak trunks and a thin layer of earth. Every four hours the dugout had to be bailed out to prevent flooding us out. We built fires only at night, and in damp winter weather were cold all the time.

We could not see anything of the enemy position across from us because of the thick underbrush. The French were in better shape than we. They did not have to cut trees for lumber, for they received all the necessary materials from their supply dumps. Their location in extremely thick woods and our shortages in artillery ammunition limited the amount of harassing fire to which they were subjected. The enemy positions were some three hundred yards away on the other side of the small valley. To hinder our work parties, the enemy frequently sprayed us with small-arms fire. Unpleasant as this was, we disliked the "Whiz Bangs" even more because of the short time interval between their discharge and

impact. Whoever was caught in the open by one of these shells hit the dirt immediately if he hoped to avoid being hit by the shell fragments.

Toward the end of January 1915 it rained and snowed on alternate days; and from January 23 to 26 the company went into reserve about five hundred feet behind the front line. There the dugouts were still worse, hostile artillery fire more troublesome, and daily losses equal to those up front. The company was used for service work: *i.e.*, transport of materials, construction of dugouts, improving communication trenches, and laying out corduroy footpaths. We were glad when the time came for us to go forward again. Morale was high and officers and men alike were willing to endure any hardship in order to defend our native land and achieve the final victory.

On January 27 two of my men and I went on reconnaissance which took us up a trench leading toward the enemy from the left of my company sector. At this time we were located in an old French position which had been taken on December 31, 1914. After removing some obstacles in the trench we proceeded cautiously; and about forty yards down the trench we came upon some dead Frenchmen who had probably been lying unburied between the fronts since the attack. To the left of the trench was a small graveyard and, at the end some hundred yards from our own position, a deserted medical aid station which, located in the deepest depression between the lines, was well dug in, well sheltered, and capable of holding twenty men. During the tour we saw nothing of the enemy although he delivered his usual harassing fire against our positions. Judging from the sound of his weapons he was about five hundred feet away on the other side of the valley. I decided to turn the dugout into an advanced strongpoint, and we started work that same afternoon. From this position we could even hear the French talking across the way. I did not believe it wise to send any scouts forward, for they would have had too hard a time getting through the dense underbrush without being seen, and they would have been shot before obtaining any worthwhile information.

In order to pin a maximum of the enemy strength in the Argonne, small diversionary attacks were ordered for January 29, 1915; and all regiments of the 27th Division were to participate. Following the blow-

ing of a French mine shaft, our regiment was to conduct a heavy raid in the 2d Battalion sector. While the raid was progressing, artillery would open up and pin the enemy in front of the 3d Battalion. For this purpose a howitzer battery from the 49th Field Artillery was made available and given time to complete its registration fire. During the operation the 10th Company would have to shift, while the 9th Company was not to advance but to cut off all enemy attempts to escape on the flanks.

January 29 dawned cold with the ground frozen. At the start of the operation I was up forward in our new strongpoint with three rifle squads. We were a hundred yards ahead of our positions and heard our own shells whistling overhead, some striking the trees, others landing to our rear. Then they blew the mine; and earth, sticks, and stones rained on the landscape. Hand-grenade blasts from the right and intense small-arms fire followed the explosion. A lone Frenchman ran up to our position and was shot.

A few minutes later the adjutant of the 3d Battalion came up, reported that the attack on the right was going well, and said the battalion commander wished to know if the 9th Company cared to join in the fun. To accept was a distinct pleasure.

I realized that I could not move my company from our trenches in deployed formation, for enemy artillery and machine guns had our range and any advance on our part would be reported by his treetop observers. To avoid this I had my men crawl up a trench that extended to the front from the right of our position. After they reached the end of the trail, they deployed to the left; and after about fifteen minutes the company was assembled in an area a hundred yards in front of our position and on the slope leading down to the enemy. Carefully we crawled through the bare underbrush toward the enemy; but before we could reach the hollow he opened on us with rifle and machine-gun fire that stopped us cold. There was no cover, and we could hear the bullets slam into the frozen ground. Up ahead a few oak trees sheltered a handful of my men. I could not locate the enemy even with my binoculars. I knew that to remain where we were would cost us dearly in casualties, for even though the enemy fire was unaimed, it made up in volume what it lacked in direction. I wracked my brains to find a way out of this mess without suffering

too great losses. It is in moments like this that the responsibility for the weal or woe of one's men weighs heavily on a commander's conscience.

I had just decided to rush for the hollow sixty yards ahead, since it offered a little more cover than our present location, when we heard the attack signal far off to the right. My bugler was right beside me and I had him sound the charge.

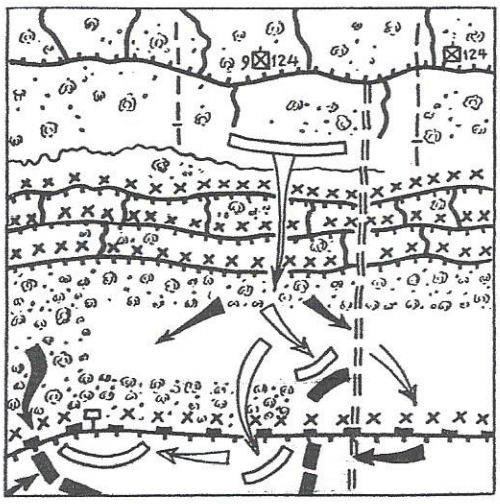
In spite of the undiminished volume of fire directed at us, the 9th Company jumped up and, cheering lustily, dashed forward. We crossed the hollow and reached the French wire entanglements only to see the enemy hurriedly abandon his strong position. Red trousers flashed through the underbrush and blue coat tails were flying. Totally oblivious of the booty left behind in the abandoned positions, we rushed after them. By sticking close to the enemy's heels we managed to smash through two other defensive lines which had been well provided with wire entanglements. At each position the enemy ran before we got to him. As proof of the meager resistance, we had no losses whatever. (See sketch 9.)

We passed over a height and the woods began to thin out. We could see the enemy running before us in a dense mass, so we pounded after him, shooting as we went. Some of the company cleaned out the dugouts, and the rest of us kept going until we reached the edge of the woods six hundred yards west of Fontaine-aux-Charmes. At this point we were half a mile south of our initial position. Here the terrain sloped down again, and the fleeing enemy had disappeared in low undergrowth. We had lost contact on both flanks and to the rear and on both sides we heard the sounds of a bitter struggle. I assembled the company and occupied the edge of the woods west of Fontaine-aux-Charmes and then tried to reestablish contact with the adjacent units. To the accompaniment of general laughter, a soldier brought some articles of feminine wearing apparel out of a dugout.

A reserve company arrived, and after giving it the job of reestablishing contact, we moved off down hill to the southwest through the light shrubbery of this sector where the terrain had been largely cleared of troops. My unit advanced in a column behind strong security elements. We had just crossed a hollow when strong fire from our left

forced us to the ground, but the enemy could not be seen. In order to maintain our impetus, we moved off to the west, by-passed the hostile fire, and then resumed our advance to the south through open woods.

At the upper edge of these woods, we ran into a wire entanglement the like of which we had never seen. It was more than a hundred yards wide and stretched out to the flanks as far as the eye could see. The French must have cut down the whole forest here. I could see three of my men waving at us from the far side of the wire, and I concluded that the enemy had yet to occupy the strong position. That being the case, the smart thing to do was to hang on until reserves came up.



Sketch 9. The attack against the "Central" position, January 29, 1915.

I tried to move on down the narrow path that led through the wire, but enemy fire from the left forced me to hit the dirt. The enemy was nearly a quarter of a mile away and certainly could not see me because of the density of the wire, yet ricochets rang all around me as I crawled through the position on all fours. I ordered the company to follow me in single file, but the commander of my leading platoon lost his nerve and did nothing, and the rest of the company imitated him and lay down behind the wire. Shouting and waving at them proved useless.

This position, constructed like a fortification, could not be held by three men alone, and the company had to follow. By exploring the west, I found another passage through the obstacle and crept back to the company where I informed my first platoon leader that he could either obey my orders or be shot on the spot. He elected the former, and in spite of intense small-arms fire from the left we all crept through the obstacle and reached the hostile position.

To secure the position, I had my company deploy in a semicircle and dig in. The position was called "Central" and was constructed in accordance with most recent design. It was part of the general defensive system which ran through the Argonne and consisted of strong blockhouses, spaced some sixty yards apart, from which the French could cover their extensive wire entanglements with flanking as well as frontal machine-gun fire. A line of breastworks connected the individual blockhouses, and this wall was so high that fire from the fire step could reach any part of the wire entanglement within range. The wall was separated from the entanglement by a ditch some fifteen feet wide which was water-filled and, at this time of the year, frozen over. Deep dugouts were provided behind the wall, and a narrow road ran along some eleven yards from it. The height of the wall was such as to offer concealment and defilade to any vehicles using the road.

From the left we were subjected to considerable small-arms fire, while over on the right the installations appeared to be unoccupied. Around 09:00 I sent the following written message to my battalion:

"9th Company has occupied some strong French earthworks located one mile south of our line of departure. We hold a section running through the forest. Request immediate support and a resupply in machine-gun ammunition and hand grenades."

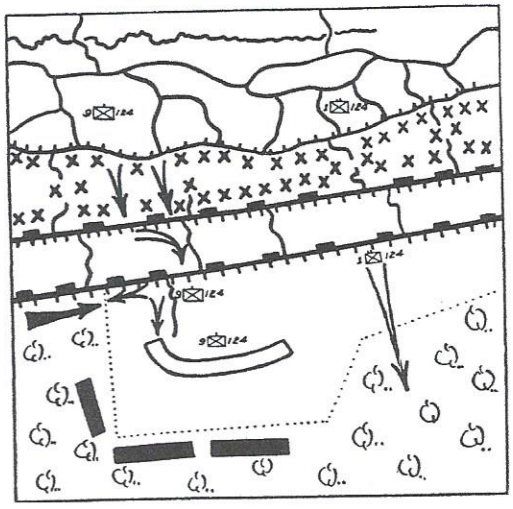
Meanwhile the troops were trying to make an impression on the frozen ground with their spades, but it was only by using the few available platoons and crowbars that we made any progress. We had been working for some thirty minutes when the left outpost reported that the enemy was retiring through the wire some six hundred yards to the east in closed column. I had one platoon open fire. Part of the enemy headed for cover, but others who were still north of the obstacle turned farther to the east and apparently reached the covered road behind the works, for very shortly after our opening fire we were attacked from that direction.

Our digging had produced meager results, and, in studying the situation, I noticed a bend in the position in the vicinity of Labordaire. This bend would make an excellent strongpoint to hold if we were to retain our foothold in the enemy position. My company fought its way to this new position where we quickly found shelter behind tree trunks and

began returning the enemy fire in sufficient volume to keep him some three hundred yards away, and he soon began to dig in. Shortly after this the fire slackened and soon died.

My foothold included four blockhouses, my company being deployed in a semicircle with a platoon of fifty men in concealed reserve between the wire entanglement and the position. Here another narrow zigzag passage led through the wire field. Time passed and we began getting anxious about our reinforcements and supplies. Suddenly reports from the right indicated that more French were retreating through the wire some fifty yards from us. The platoon leader wanted to know if he should open fire. What else was there for us to do? We were about to get into a nasty scrap, and there was no use allowing the French to start it free from casualties. If we fired at once, then the French would turn to the west and get into position through the next passage; it was also possible that they might get across our line of communication and so surround us. I opened fire.

From the high French breastworks rapid fire struck the nearby enemy, and a bitter struggle developed, with the French fighting bravely. Fortunately most of the new enemy, estimated as one battalion, turned off to the west, traversed the wire entanglements 350 yards away, and moved toward us from the west on a broad front. The ring about the 9th Company closed leaving but one narrow path through the wire to connect us with the battalion. Even that lifeline was swept by enemy fire from the east and west. On the right our heavy fire kept the enemy pinned to the ground, but the enemy on the left had made progress and was getting dangerously close. Ammunition was getting



Sketch 10: The attack against the "Central" position.

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Sketch 11: The att
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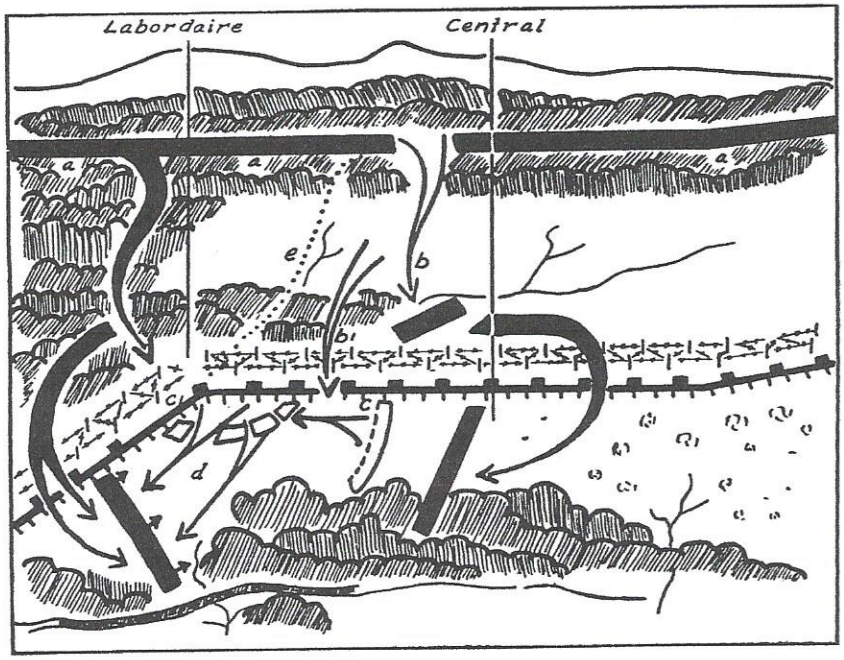
scarce, and I stripped the reserve platoon of most of its equipment. I decreased the rate of fire in order to conserve ammunition as long as possible, but the enemy on the west kept crawling closer. What was I to do once my ammunition was exhausted? I still hoped for help from the battalion. Minutes seemed like hours.

A fierce battle raged around the blockhouse on the extreme right, and we expended our last grenades in its defense. A few minutes later, about 10:30, a French assault squad succeeded in taking it and used its embrasures to pour rifle and machine-gun fire into our backs. This report reached me at the same moment that a battalion order was shouted across the entanglement by a runner: "Battalion is in position half a mile to the north and is digging in. Rommel's company to withdraw, support not possible." Again the front line was calling for ammunition, and we had enough for only ten more minutes.



Sketch 11: The attack against the "Central" position, January 29, 1915. View from the south. (a) Third French position. (b) 9th Company exploits the breakthrough and penetrates as far as the "Central" position. (c) 9th Company holds portions of "Central" and Labordaire positions. (d) Attack prior to breaking off combat. (e) Route followed during retirement.

Now for a decision! Should we break off the engagement and run back through the narrow passage in the wire entanglement under a heavy cross fire? Such a maneuver would, at a minimum, cost fifty per cent in casualties. The alternative was to fire the rest of our ammunition and then surrender. The last resort was out. I had one other line of action: namely, to attack the enemy, disorganize him, and then withdraw. Therein lay our only possible salvation. To be sure, the enemy was far superior in numbers, but French infantry had yet to withstand an attack by my riflemen. If the enemy in the west were thrown back, we would have a chance of getting through the obstacle and only have to worry about the fire of the more distant enemy on the east. Speed was the keynote of success, for we had to be gone before those we had attacked could recover from their surprise.

I lost no time in issuing my attack order. Everyone knew how desperate the situation was, and all were resolved to do their utmost. The reserve platoon drove to the right, recapturing the lost blockhouse and carrying the whole line along with its impetus. The enemy broke and ran. With the French running away to the west, the proper moment to break off combat had come. We hurried eastwards and negotiated the wire entanglement in single file as fast as possible. The French on the east opened up on us, but a running target was not too profitable at a range of three hundred yards. Even so, they got a few hits. By the time the enemy on the west had recovered and returned to the attack, I had the bulk of my outfit on the safe side of the wire. Aside from five severely wounded men who could be taken along, the company reached the battalion position without further incident.

The battalion, with my company on the left, was established in the dense forest directly south of the three occupied French positions. The 1st Battalion was having trouble and was out of direct contact with our left, but by means of liaison squads we managed to keep in touch with their right. My company dug in some hundred yards from the forest edge. Digging in the frozen ground was no fun.

So far the French artillery had devoted its entire attention to our old position and to the rear areas; and during the attack we had been spared its attention, probably due to poor infantry-artillery liaison. This had been

remedied now, and we were subjected to a very heavy volume of retaliatory fire which interfered with our digging since the forward edge of the forest received particular attention. I prepared my report of the morning's activities on a message blank and accompanied it with a sketch.

Late in the afternoon, following a heavy artillery preparation, the enemy counterattacked. Masses of fresh troops stormed through the underbrush only to be met by our small-arms fire. They fell, sought cover, and returned our fire. Here and there a small group tried to work its way closer, but in vain! Our defensive fire smothered the attack with heavy losses, and large numbers of dead and wounded lay close to our lines. Under cover of darkness the French withdrew to the edge of the forest one hundred yards away and dug in.

The infantry fire died down, and we too began to dig, for our own trenches were only twenty inches deep. French artillery again interrupted this work and sharp-edged shell fragments whistled about our ears, struck, and destroyed trees as if they were matches.

Our positions offered inadequate cover for the harassing fire which, with few breaks, kept up all night. Wrapped in overcoats, shelter halves, and blankets, we lay shivering in the shallow trench. I could hear the men jump as each new concentration hit near us. During the night we lost twelve men, which was a heavier loss than we had sustained during the entire attack. No rations could be brought up.

At dawn the hostile artillery activity slackened and we began to work on deepening our positions; but we were not allowed much time. At 08:00 artillery fire forced us to quit, and the fire was followed by a strong infantry attack which we threw back with little difficulty. The same fate met succeeding attacks, and by afternoon our positions were deep enough so that we could stop worrying about the effects of artillery fire. We had no communication trenches to the rear; so we had to wait until dark for our first hot meal.

Observations: The attack on January 29, 1915, showed the superiority of the German infantry. The attack of the 9th Company was no surprise, and it is difficult to understand why the French infantry lost its nerve and abandoned a well-prepared defensive position lavishly protected by

wire, three lines deep, and well-studded with machine guns. The enemy knew the attack was coming and had tried to stop it by means of heavy interdiction fire. The fact that we were able to resort to offensive action and break from the encircled Labordaire position is ample proof of the combat capabilities of our troops.

It was unfortunate that neither the battalion nor the regiment was able to exploit the 9th Company's success. With three battalions in line, inadequate reserves were available. Shortages in small-arms ammunition and hand grenades increased our troubles in the defense of Labordaire. Several things happened simultaneously to render our situation most critical: First, the enemy seized the blockhouse on the extreme right; second, we received the battalion order to withdraw; third, we were short of ammunition; and, finally, our way back through the wire was swept by enemy fire. Any decision, other than the one made, would have resulted in terrific casualties if not total annihilation. Above all, it was impossible to wait for darkness; for the last round would have been fired well before 11:00. Attacking the weaker enemy force on the east would not have paid dividends, for the more aggressive attack came from the west; and attacking to the east would have given the western force an excellent opportunity to strike us in rear. Breaking off the fighting in Labordaire confirms the statement in the *Field Service Regulations*: "Breaking off combat is most easily accomplished after successful offensive maneuver."

In making our hasty preparations for the attack, we gave no thought to heavy entrenching tools. The solidly frozen ground made our light tools almost useless. Even in the attack the spade is as important as the rifle.

Although there was a better field of fire from the edge of the forest, the new position was one hundred yards inside the woods. We had no intention of exposing the troops to a repeat performance of the Defuy Woods bombardment, and still had a field of fire good enough to repel several French infantry attacks with heavy losses.

The losses from hostile artillery fire during the night of January 29–30 were so heavy because the troops did not dig in to a proper depth.