

TOWN MEETING

By W. E. Hill

Copyright, 1939, by Chicago Tribune-N. Y. News Syndicate, Inc.



A. W. O. L., with Honor

Cavalryman Turns Foot Soldier

By JOHN A. MENAUGH

HOW AN American trooper abandoned his horse, absented himself from his regiment without leave, joined up with a company of doughboys, and took an active and perilous part in one of the bloodiest episodes of the World war is the story of an adventure that led to a citation and decoration for Private Allen P. Wescott.

Drab, drizzling day was breaking over the shell-ruined village of Chevieres, on the near bank of the River Aire, on Oct. 16, 1918, when Company G, 311th Infantry, 78th division, in the American lines just to the right of the village, sent a patrol of eight men to reconnoiter the enemy position across the river. In this patrol, led by a sergeant, was Private Wescott, A. W. O. L. from Troop C of the 2d cavalry.

With rifles, pistols, and two Chauchat automatic rifles, but with no hand grenades, these eight advanced to the river and followed its bank to the right until they came to a bend of the stream, where shallow water, screened by a grove of trees, permitted them to cross with no difficulty and little danger.

They came out into an open space, however, where they were easily visible to the Germans who occupied a hill about a thousand yards away and parallel to the river. This open space or clearing was being shelled by the enemy, so in order to work across it the Americans spread out in open formation about ten yards apart, with the sergeant in command on the extreme right and Wescott on the extreme left.

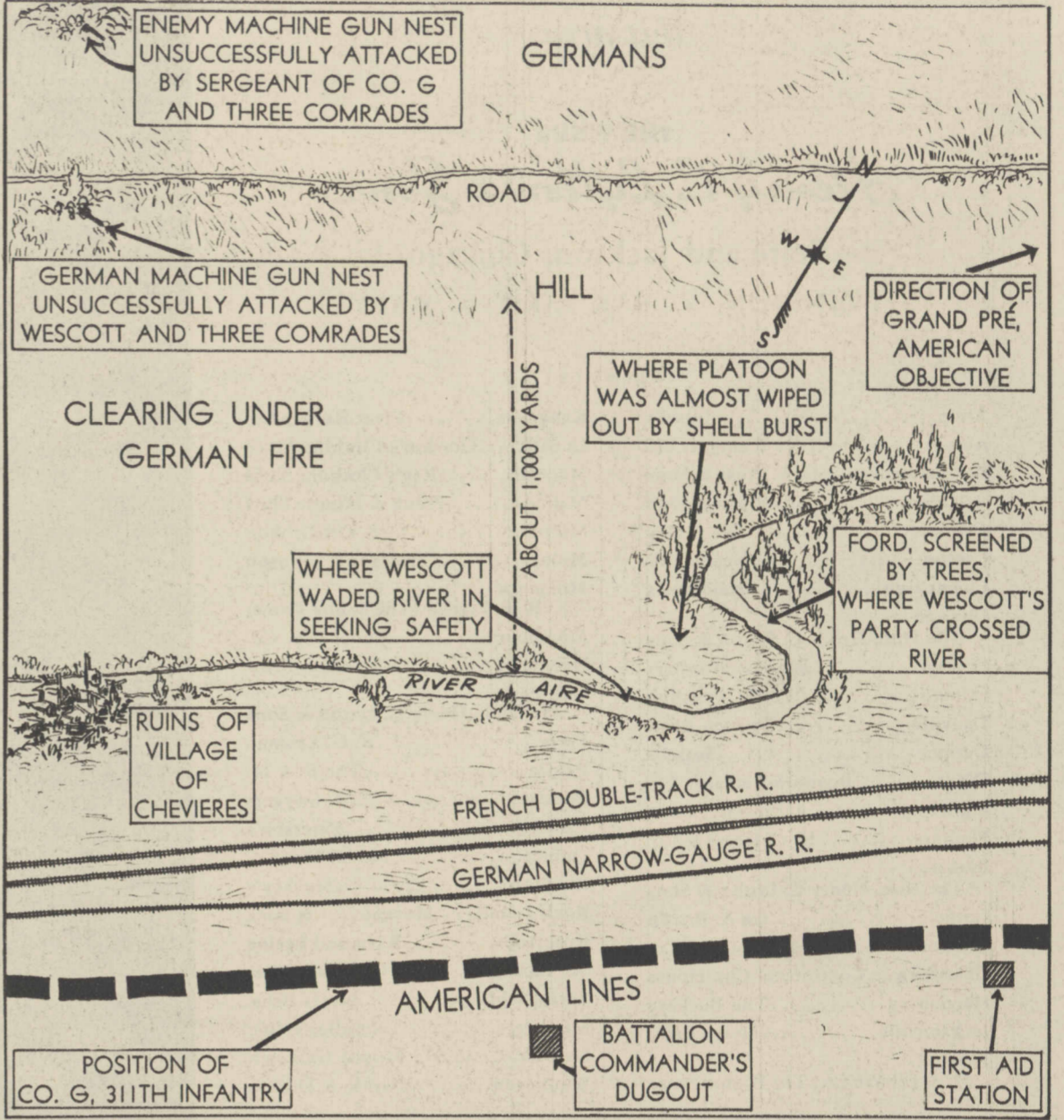
Almost immediately a German rifleman off to the left began sniping at Wescott, but his aim was poor. Then two machine guns began working on the group of advancing Americans. One of the guns was in a depression on the hill and somewhat to the left. The other was some little distance beyond and almost back of the first gun. The patrol divided into two groups of four men each. Wescott, with three of the men, one carrying a Chauchat, started for the nearer gun nest, while the sergeant, with the other three men, advanced straight toward the hill with the object of cutting into the second gun by turning to the left.

Wescott's group had gone only a few yards when a burst of shots from the near machine gun killed the man who was carrying the automatic rifle. Wescott laid down his own rifle and picked up the automatic weapon, but, as he was not familiar with its use, it immediately jammed in his hands. He dropped it, recovered his rifle, and began crawling on his hands and knees toward the machine gun nest. He heard an exclamation from one of the two men still left behind him and knew that the man had been wounded.

"I was highly excited," says Wescott in recalling his reactions at the time, "but up to this moment my courage had stood up well. I could see the painted helmet of the German operating the machine gun, but, as the ground ahead of me was uneven, I could not see any part of his body at which to aim. Bullets from the machine gun were missing my back by inches, and I tried to flatten myself into the earth as much as possible."

In order to permit himself to get closer to the ground he unstrapped his gas mask, which he had been wearing at the alert position on his chest, pushed it to one side, and crawled ahead, the mask with its carbon canister bumping along beside him.

The machine gun ahead of him suddenly went silent. Wescott thought that it had jammed, so he leaped to his feet and started toward it on the run. As he ran he noticed a bullet hole through the canister of his gas mask. He thought that he had been shot through the abdomen, forgetting for the moment that the mask had lain at his



Map of the adventure in which Wescott found himself while A. W. O. L. from his own outfit. His action won him a distinguished service cross.

side instead of in front of him. He was frightened. A feeling of faintness came over him. With visions of his insides spilling out, he stumbled on. Was this to be the end?

Then the machine gun began firing again, and Wescott dropped into a hole to get away from its crackling bullets.

A shot from the machine gun shattered Wescott's rifle in his hands. Another bullet tore through his left arm. Two more entered his left hip. It looked bad for him.

"I felt that I might as well be before a firing squad as crouching in front of this German machine gun, for all the chance I had," he says.

The machine gun bullets were cutting the grass all around him. The sergeant proceeding against the other gun nest shouted to Wescott to inquire

the company commander sent him to the battalion command post to report the positions of the two machine guns that had proved so destructive to his patrol. He found the major in command of the battalion in a dugout before a large-scale battle map. He located as well as he could on the map the positions of the guns.

Wescott by this time was bleeding badly, but he returned to the company commander with orders from the major to send a platoon to attack the troublesome machine guns. Barely able to limp along, Wescott went with the platoon, eighteen or twenty men under the command of a lieutenant by the name of Newell, to act as guide.

Following the course taken by the original patrol, the men

through the village shells exploded around them and walls tumbled down perilously near. Finally, however, they got outside the zone of fire and carried their wounded man about two miles to the rear, where he was picked up by an ambulance. Wescott made his way back in a truck, was sent to a hospital at Bar-le-Duc, and eventually went to Paris in an ambulance train. From a hospital in the French capital he was sent to a convalescent camp at St. Aignan, which he describes as something like Andersonville prison, a notorious Confederate hell-hole of the Civil war.

In the following April he was sent to Brest, where he boarded a transport for America. His regiment, the 2d cavalry, never bothered about doing anything to Wescott for being A. W. O. L. In fact, he became the regimental hero by winning the distinguished service cross. He was the only man of the regiment, so far as he knows, to get a D. S. C.



why the Chauchat was silent. Wescott called back that the gunner had been killed and the weapon had jammed.

"Can you run?" the sergeant cried.

"I can try," was Wescott's reply.

"Then get back to the company as fast as you can," came the order from the patrol leader. Wescott jumped to his feet and scurried away like a frightened rabbit, despite the wounds in his hip. He could not find the ford in his haste to cross the stream, so he waded across in water up to his neck.

Wescott was the only one of the original party of eight to get back safely across the river. He believes that all of the other seven men, including the sergeant, were killed. He ran along an old double-track French railroad that paralleled the river, crossed a German narrow-gauge railway that paralleled the French tracks, and reached the company position from which he originally had set out.

crossed the river at the tree-screened ford. Wescott then pointed out to the lieutenant the locations of the machine guns. He stepped back a few paces from the officer as a preliminary to his return across the stream. And then a German shell exploded squarely in the midst of the platoon. Lieutenant Newell's head was blown off. A number of the other soldiers were killed or wounded. Wescott made his way back to a first-aid station located near the railroad tracks and to the right of the major's dugout. There he enrolled four stretcher bearers with two stretchers and led them part of the way back to the ford where the platoon had been almost wiped out by the shell burst.

Tagged for a hospital because of his three wounds, Wescott started for the rear by the way of the ruined village of Chevieres, assisting a couple of gassed first-aid men in carrying on an old door a badly wounded soldier. As they trudged

Wescott, who now resides in Chicago, following the profession of a consultant in civil and criminal cases involving firearms and ammunition, was born in Portland, Me., in 1897. He got his schooling at North Castine, Me., to which town he moved as a small boy. He was working in Boston when the World war began, and in 1915 he went to Liverpool and enlisted in the British army. He served in a Lancashire brigade of the Royal artillery but did not go to France as a British soldier. On obtaining his discharge in 1917 he returned to America and joined the United States army.

Wescott was at Les Islettes when the notion suddenly hit him that he would like to see more action. So one night he gathered up his rifle and a few extra bandoleers of cartridges and departed afoot for the front. The next morning, which was some time early in October, he came upon the 311th infantry concealed in a woods. Just where that was he does not know. At any rate he joined up with the regiment's Company G at mess time.

The soldiers of the company feared he was a spy—there was a lot of talk then about Germans in American uniforms—so one of the sergeants took him to the company commander. Wescott told a cock-and-bull story about being separated from his outfit, was permitted to go along with the 311th to the front, and finally saw the aforesaid action at Chevieres. He is certain that it occurred on Oct. 16, although his citation for valor says it was Oct. 21.