

A LUGER'S Story



A machine gun battalion of the 91st Division prepares for inspection at Fort Lewis, Wash., in February 1918. **Inset:** Sergeant Gilbert C. "Red" Moore of Company B, 348th Machine Gun Battalion (National Archives; Inset: Courtesy of H. Lon Henry).

**Amid the Argonne offensive, the paths of two
brave men, a German major and an American
sergeant, converged in what came down
to a pistol duel.**

BY H. LON HENRY

For the U.S. Army, the Meuse-Argonne campaign of September-November 1918 was an agonizing meat grinder that devoured divisions one by one. The 91st Division, undergoing its baptism of fire there, suffered 4,936 casualties during 17 days of hell characterized by intense hand-to-hand combat in the ravines, underbrush and maze of trenches crisscrossing the Argonne Forest.

A tiny incident in that bloody World War I battle involved an American sergeant and the decorated German officer he encountered amid the savage struggle. It also involved a special weapon that exchanged hands after combat. The American, Sergeant Gilbert C. "Red" Moore of Company B, 348th Machine Gun Battalion, 91st Division, was my grandfather.

On September 5, 1917, Moore, the 23-year-old foreman of California's Terhune Ranch in the Santa Inez Valley, had been among the first volunteers entrained for Fort Lewis, Wash. Promoted to sergeant, he was promptly assigned to Company B of the 348th Machine Gun Battalion, 182nd Brigade.

The German Major Rainer Volbrecht, 1st Prussian Guard Division,



was on temporary assignment to the 157th Regiment, part of the *Landsturm* Battalion "Reutlingen," attached to the 117th Division. A recipient of Germany's highest military honor, the *Orden Pour le Mérite* (whose enameled cross earned it the nickname of "Blue Max"), he had been personally decorated by German Crown Prince Wilhelm during the Battle of the Marne in 1914. His assignment in September 1918 was to act as liaison between the crown prince and General Maximilian Karl Wilhelm Gallwitz von Dreyling, commander of the German Fifth Army at Verdun.

Major Volbrecht proudly carried on his hip a 1917 Artillery Model 9mm Luger pistol, a personal gift from the crown prince. That weapon, a magnificent presentation model complete with accessory rifle stock, switchable barrels and 800-meter sights, is known to have been used to kill two men and wound one more.

The 91st was one of the nine American divisions participating in the pre-dawn assault that launched the Argonne offensive on September 26, 1918. Dubbed the "Wild West" Division, it was made up mainly of volunteers from California, Oregon and Washington, none of whom had ever seen combat. Its commander was Maj. Gen. William H. Johnston. Brigadier General Henry B. Styer commanded the 181st Brigade, comprising the



Above: The 9mm 1917 Artillery Model Luger presented to Major Rainer Volbrecht by Crown Prince Wilhelm (H. Lon Henry). **Below:** An American machine gun position at Le Grande Woevre in the Meuse-Argonne sector.

361st and 362nd Infantry regiments and the 347th Machine Gun Battalion.

The front assigned to the American advance extended from the Argonne Forest on the west to the Meuse River on the east, a distance of some 18 miles through heavily wooded, hilly, broken country. The 91st Division's specific action corridor extended up the open valley of the Aire River, commencing at Allieux farm in the Forêt de Hesse, moving north through the towns of Cheppy, Very,

Epinonville and Eclisfontaine. The route passed the Serieux and Tronsol farms on the west, and La Neuve Grange farm and the town of Gesnes on the east. American forces would smash almost due north up this narrow corridor, starting between the towns of Avocourt and Vauquois. The 91st's battle corridor would be halved, with the 182nd Brigade advancing up the west half and the 181st up the east. The assault would continue on through the tangled Bois de Cheppy and across broken country to Eclisfontaine, Epinonville, Gesnes and the densely wooded hills beyond.

Facing these First Army groups were the army groups of Crown Prince Wilhelm to the west and that of General von Gallwitz to the east, five divisions in all. On either side of the 91st's battle corridor lay a German divisional sector. The eastern one extended from about the south tip of the Bois de Cheppy east to



Malancourt. The western one encompassed the west half of the Bois de Cheppy, the Aire Valley and the eastern border of the Argonne Forest.

The two sectors opposite the 91st Division's front were held by the German 117th and 1st Prussian Guard divisions. From information obtained on the morning of September 22, the Germans learned for the first time that American troops were massing for an offensive. As a consequence, the Germans brought up the resting battalions of the 3rd Guard Regiment to points south of the Very-Montfaucon line, to serve as a reserve.

Rated as the best of the second-class divisions in the German army, the 117th had distinguished itself in the successful 1916-17 Carpathian campaign. The 1st Prussian Guard Division, which had seen service both in Russia and in the Marne sector, was considered one of the German army's elite shock divisions. In reserve, behind the 1st Guard Division, was the 5th Guard Division, and behind the 117th were attached the *Landsturm* battalions, Reutlingen and Göttingen.

The defenses were composed of four major lines that the Germans called *Stellungen*. The first, the Hagen *Stellung*, ran along the south edge of the Bois de Cheppy, then northeast at La Neuve Grange, following a flat-bottomed gully called the Ravine de Lai Fuon. Farther to the west, on higher ground, lay the formidable *Trenchée de la Salamandre*, a continuation of the Hagen *Stellung* that dominated the entire Chambronne Ravine from the Bois de Chemin to the Aire Valley.

The second main position, known as the Volker *Stellung*, lay along a high ridge nearly four kilometers to the north. To the east it encircled the fortress of Montfaucon and the town of Ivoiry. It also protected the towns of Epinonville and Eclisfontaine.

The formidable Giselher *Stellung* fortress commanded the high ground of Montfaucon, providing a sweeping view of the entire district. That third position was the headquarters of the German crown prince. The fourth and last organized position, the Kriemhilde *Stellung*, was five to seven kilometers farther north, and like all German rear positions possessed superb natural advantages.

In addition to those four main lines, the entire countryside had been heavily equipped with subsidiary defenses in the form of minor defensive lines, parallel and flanking switch trenches,

concrete dugouts, fortified farms, barbed wire and isolated machine gun positions sited to rake and cross-rake all approaches to the major positions.

The 91st Division's battle plan called for the 182nd Brigade to attack, with the 364th Infantry in the van and the 363rd 500 meters behind it. Companies of the 348th Machine Gun Battalion were attached to the different infantry battalions, thereby becoming integral parts of the regiments.

In parallel with that effort, the 181st Brigade to the west was to attack with its two regiments side by side. Companies of the 347th Machine Gun Battalion were also attached to its different infantry battalions to accompany the advance. The 91st's advance center of information (ACI) was established on Hill 274 (La Cigalerie Butte). Wire communications were set up between the ACI, the divisional post of command (PC) on Hill 290 located between the Fôret de Hesse and the advance lookout posted at the Very crossroads.

On September 23, an order arrived from V Corps headquarters, dated September 21, 1918. It said in part: "The First American Army attacks from the Meuse to La Hazarée; Fifth Army Corps attacks at H hour on D day on the front Malancourt (incl.)—Vauquois (Excl). The advance will be pushed by all divisions with the greatest vigor."

At 11 p.m. on September 25, the Argonne drive began with an artillery bombardment that reached its peak at 2:30 a.m. on the 26th, when all 3,928 guns of the corps and divisional artillery joined the action. Sergeant Red Moore and the men of Company B, at that point temporarily attached to the 3rd Battalion of the 363rd Infantry, lacked trenches sufficient for protection and had no choice but to lie low in the open while projectiles from their own as well as from retaliating enemy batteries passed overhead. They endured a bombardment so vast, so stunning that none could comprehend the whole. Unable to hear or communicate, they clutched the earth to their chests, seeking any shelter at hand.

The barrage finally lifted at 6 a.m., and at 6:30 the 182nd Brigade gathered at the jumping off line. Crossing over La Cigalerie Butte, the leading waves of the 363rd entered the valley of Buanthe Creek, striding into a cloud of smoke and ground fog that almost completely concealed them from the Germans on



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Left: American troops prepare to advance from their trenches near Verdun in the Meuse Valley on October 26, 1918. **Right:** German soldiers weather a gas attack—and sustain two casualties—during the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

A view from La Cigalerie Butte, 300 meters south of Vauquois Hill, shows the terrain over which the 91st "Wild West" Division had to advance during the American Meuse-Argonne offensive.



Vauquois Hill.

Advancing through thick mist, the platoon to the left of Company B was suddenly stopped by heavy fire from two machine guns. Sergeant Chester H. West, of Company D, 363rd Infantry, dashed forward alone through intense fire and in a fierce hand-to-hand encounter killed two enemy machine-gunners, allowing the advance to continue. West was the first member of the 91st Division to be awarded the Medal of Honor in the Meuse-Argonne campaign.

At 7 a.m., when the 2nd Battalion, headquarters and machine gun companies with brigade headquarters reached the valley of the Buanthe more than 500 meters behind the 363rd, the smoke and mist had risen. Those units suffered heavy casualties from the German gunners on Vauquois Hill before reaching shelter in the Bois de Cheppy.

The infantry and the 348th Machine Gun Battalion engaged German machine gun positions at La Neuve Grange and along the Ravine de Lai Fuon that were supported by snipers and grenade throwers. By noon, they had finally overcome the fierce resistance, and the leading elements of the 182nd Brigade entered the demolished town of Very.

Moving on to secure the high ground north of Very, the

brigade dug in. The line occupied by the 91st Division now extended just south of Epinonville around the head of the Ravine des Balonvaux (Plank Road Hollow) and along the western slope of the ravine north of town. The division PC was reestablished at Very crossroads.

The first day's fighting had broken two German lines and penetrated part of a third, for an overall advance of eight kilometers. During those engagements Sergeants Phillip C. Katz of Company C, 363rd Infantry, and Lloyd M. Seibert of Company F, 364th Infantry, both earned Medals of Honor.

Three separate assaults were made on Epinonville on September 27, but accurate and persistent fire from the Germans repulsed them all. By noon the division's advance on the right had been checked, and the men fell back under severe shelling to positions behind the 181st Brigade's right flank.

The 182nd, now under the command of Lt. Col. J.J. Mudgett, 364th Infantry, crossed the Varennes-Eclisfontaine road and advanced toward the Serieux farm. With the aid of artillery support, at about 4:30 p.m. the battalion managed to break through the broad belts of wire and machine gun nests to capture Eclisfontaine and Les Bouleaux Bois. The total day's advance had reached a line running through Epinonville, Eclisfontaine and

Les Bouleaux. Since the advance on the 91st's left had been checked, however, its forward position on the right was precariously exposed to possible enemy counterattack.

On the 28th, Major Oscar F. Miller of the 361st Infantry led the advance battalion against entrenched positions south of Gesnes. Although they were met by heavy machine gun fire from both flanks and direct artillery fire from the front, Miller's personal gallantry inspired his men to press forward in a charge that carried the position. Wounded three times before he fell mortally wounded, Miller was posthumously awarded the last of four Medals of Honor earned by men of the 91st in the Argonne.

Despite heavy fire from the Serieux farm on its left and from Les Bouleaux Bois, where the Germans had returned during the night, the 182nd doggedly advanced, securing the Serieux farm at about noon. Next they took the Exmorieux farm, a strong center of resistance. Pressing relentlessly onward, the 364th Infantry took the Bois de Baulny, the Tronsol farm and the slopes north of that objective.

That drive, coupled with the disturbing loss of contact with the 35th Division on the left, generated great concern about the 91st's ever-lengthening exposed flank. Thus at nightfall the 363rd Infantry's troops, in contact with the 364th in the neighborhood of the Tronsol farm, found themselves facing almost due west and reaching out, so to speak, to the southwest for contact with the 35th Division. Dangerously exposed on the west at the Serieux farm and on the east at the southern edge of Bois Emont, the 91st prepared for the counterattack that was sure to come.

At that point, heavy rain fell on the sector, increasing as darkness closed in. Sergeant

Moore and the men of Company B had no blankets to ward off the chill that September night, nor had they eaten any hot food since before the jump-off three days earlier. Having moved to Epinonville in the late afternoon along with the equally exhausted division reserve, they dug in for the night at the orchard southwest of the town.

The Germans, too, had suffered heavy casualties in the past three days, limiting the availability of experienced field officers. General von Gallwitz now required a successful, battle-hardened veteran to lead the 157th Regiment in a counterattack against the Americans. Major Volbrecht, to whom the crown prince owed a favor, became his man.

Volbrecht accepted his temporary command of the 157th Regiment of the 117th Division with eager anticipation and reviewed the soldiers at his disposal. "Lots of fresh faces, perhaps too many considering their assignment," he wrote in his daily log. "Thank God [von Gallwitz] had experienced Sergeants."

Checking his Luger on the morning of the 29th, Volbrecht decided to forgo the snail drum magazine. This was not a day for sweeping fire; precision was required. He attached the shoulder stock and inserted the seven-shot magazine containing the

hand-loaded 9mm magnum cartridges. The *Deutsche Waffen und Munitionsfabriken* had provided him with a special 8-inch barrel and shoulder sling for that adaptation. He was pleased with the new weapon and his new command. He hoped both would serve him well this day.

Volbrecht chronicled his thoughts, writing of his pride in being selected to command the surprise attack on the vulnerable American left flank. As a career soldier, a true army professional, he knew that from opportunities like this generals were made.

A successful assault would smash the enemy's western flank. When joined by a similar pincers assault from the east, it would cut off the head of the American advance and drive a wedge down the middle, splitting the American front. His charge could perhaps stop the offensive altogether. This attack must not fail—certainly Rainer Volbrecht did not intend to fail.

During the afternoon, conditions on the 91st Division's exposed left flank worsened. A great concentration of German troops was reported at Exermont, and at about 2:50 p.m. the 35th Division on the 91st's left had fallen farther back toward Baulny. As a precautionary defensive measure, they repositioned the machine guns of the 348th Machine Gun Battalion south of the Tronsol farm.

Moore supervised the repositioning of Company B's emplacement from the top of the Mayache Ravine across the front of the Tronsol farm. As was then customary, the machine guns were not set to fire frontally, but rather placed to rake the front of adjoining 348th emplacements and other natural obstacles with flanking fire. The resulting crossfire would be deadly to an enemy unable to determine its true source.

Satisfied their crescent of fire properly intersected with adjoining emplacements, he ordered his men to eat their cold rations and get some rest. He decided to speak briefly with a group of newly arrived engineers settling in at Company B's rear.

As the American 181st Brigade resumed its advance on Gesnes, at 3:30 its advance battalion was pummeled by a fierce artillery counterbarrage, accompanied by intense machine gun fire from the front and right flanks. Major George W. Farwell, leading the 361st Infantry, was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for his heroism during this attack.

Driving grimly forward, the 361st reached Gesnes, its momentum hurling it beyond to Hill 255. Consolidating that position with the 362nd Infantry, the regiment covered the division's exposed right flank.

At 3:50 p.m. German forces emerged from a heavy screen of artillery smoke and poured from the woods to the left of the 348th Machine Gun Battalion's position. Crossing below the Mayache Ravine and the 348th's new fields of fire, they fiercely charged the American left flank.

Sergeant Moore instantly recognized the peril his men were in. Risking his life, he climbed atop the embrasure in front of his guns. From there he calmly ordered a new deployment of Company B's field of fire and requested covering fire from the equally shocked engineers nearby. His heroic action made him a conspicuous target for advancing enemy troops.

From the German side, Volbrecht realized he had caught the Americans out of position and could barely believe his good fortune. Eager to press his advantage, he personally led his troops in an assault on the machine guns.

To gain higher ground, Volbrecht raced to the top of the May-



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ache Ravine, from where he shot one machine gunner dismounting his Browning, then downed another who was in the act of swinging the gun mount to its new position. Turning to his right, he spotted an American sergeant directing troops from a rear position forward to provide covering fire for the machine gunners. Volbrecht shifted his feet for a better shot but stumbled as he fired, and his round missed its target.

Standing fully erect to better direct the repositioning of his machine guns, Sergeant Moore was in full view of the oncoming Germans. Volbrecht dropped to one knee, took careful aim and fired.

At that same instant, Moore turned and stepped down behind the embrasure. The bullet struck him high in the left shoulder, passing cleanly through without striking bone. The shock of the bullet spun him around, and he fell on his back.

He felt no pain yet, but waves of nausea immediately swept through his body, and his mind struggled to comprehend what had happened. A private nearby stared, mesmerized by the red stain spreading over the sergeant's left shoulder.

"Sh—!" Moore cried out. "He shot me, some Kraut SOB shot me! Anybody see who?"

"There," answered Private Stewart Kinch, a *Croix de Guerre* recipient in Company B, pointing to a German officer running in a zigzag route toward their position.

Stunned but rapidly recovering his senses, a very angry Moore peered over the top of the embrasure and spotted the weaving German. Drawing his own .45-caliber Colt pistol, Moore took careful aim, inhaled deeply and squeezed the trigger. His third shot staggered the advancing German major. Shots four and five spun him to the ground. With two shots remaining, Moore holstered his weapon.

The guns of the 348th now hammered the approaching Germans. Moore, in spite of his serious wound, coolly directed Company B's defensive fire. The enemy advance wavered, shuddered and reeled backward under the unrelenting crossfire. Moore signaled, and the 348th ceased fire. With fixed bayonets the engineers counterattacked, driving the retreating Germans back into the woods.

They had secured the 91st Division's western flank. Sergeant Moore was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. During the first four days of its drive into the Argonne, the 91st Division had lost eight field officers and 125 company officers and more than 3,000 enlisted men dead, wounded or missing.

Before withdrawing for medical treatment, Moore inspected



Corporal Howard Thompson of Company F, 167th Infantry, holds a Luger he retrieved on March 7, 1918, for Sergeant James W. White (left), who had killed its German owner the night before.

the battleground and discovered the body of the German major he had shot, still holding his prized Luger in his hand. Moore decided to keep it as a remembrance of the firefight that had nearly cost him his life. As he removed the holster, he became aware of an unfamiliar decoration at the officer's throat. Mistaking it for an unusual Iron Cross, Moore decided to keep that as well. Only then was he persuaded to accept medical aid.

Shortly after the successful counterattack by the engineers, the troops of the 182nd Brigade pushed forward to the north. Patrols crossed Gesnes Creek, reaching the southern edge of the Bois de la Morine, close to the extreme left of the 362nd Infantry. Advance elements of the 91st Division were now four kilometers ahead of the 4th Brigade on their right and

six kilometers ahead of the 70th Brigade on their left. It was not until October 4, 1918, the ninth day of the offensive, that the four elements of the 363rd Infantry and 348th Machine Gun Battalion, still holding the lines of surveillance in front of the Bois de Baulny and the Tronsol farm, were relieved.

Shifted from the Argonne to Flanders, the 91st Division went on to play a major role in the Ypres-Lys offensive in Belgium. At the war's end on November 11, 1918, the division was positioned on both sides of the Scheldt River near Oudenaarde.

After surgery and a brief recuperative stay in a Belgian hospital, my grandfather rejoined the 348th Machine Gun Battalion. He was demobilized at the Army Presidio in San Francisco on May 3, 1919. He later became an executive of the Luer Packing Company. An avid outdoorsman, he was also a devoted family man who eventually had four grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. He retired in Yucaipa, Calif., where he died on March 18, 1985, at age 91.

My grandfather always regretted his decision to remove the decoration from the body of the German officer he had killed, especially after learning of the high honor it represented. During the 1980s, when I was serving as an executive for a German-based firm, I was finally able to act upon his request to locate Major Volbrecht's surviving relatives in Magdeburg, Germany. In February 1985, I was privileged to return the Blue Max to his family.

As for the Luger, it now rests in my gun cabinet. Under the circumstances, I felt my grandfather had earned the right to keep that. **MH**

H. Lon Henry writes from San Diego, Calif. For further reading, try The Story of the 91st Division: A 1919 History, now available on the Internet at www.ls.net/~newriver/books.htm.