

THE OSS AND THE MAGINOT AND SIEGFRIED LINES

Leonard C. Courier

On 8 September 1944 it began to look to many of us at General Patton's Third Army Headquarters, bivouacked in a field near Chalons sur Marne in France, as if the war was rapidly coming to an end. Paris had been liberated on 25 August and Brussels on 3 September. The forward elements of the US Third Army had reached the Moselle River. Everywhere the German armies were retreating in disarray toward the German frontier.

In May 1944 I had been transferred from Army G-2 in England to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) and assigned to the Third Army OSS Field Detachment. In anticipation of the Normandy landings both the US First and Third Armies had received an OSS detachment, consisting of about twenty men each, to support Army G-2 as well as OSS agents parachuted into France prior to the invasion. Since the Normandy breakout on 1 August, we had been much on the move. In early September the work load of the OSS Detachment had slowed considerably as France was almost completely liberated and most of our agents had been safely recuperated.

Late in the afternoon of 8 September, I was informed by the commander of our detachment, Colonel Vanderblue, that he had a mission for me. I was to leave for Paris with a Third Army G-2 staff officer to try to locate a set of the original plans of the Maginot Line. Colonel Vanderblue explained that General Patton expected to reach the Maginot Line fortifications in the next few days, and that there was a possibility that the Germans might decide to defend some of the Maginot forts and bunkers before falling back on the Siegfried Line, which ran along the German border. To the dismay of Third Army G-2 there were no available plans or information on the Maginot Line, and Third Army maps did not even indicate the location of the Maginot Line fortifications.

General Eisenhower's Supreme Headquarters Allied Expeditionary Force (SHAEF) had no information either. A French liaison officer at SHAEF had said that the French High Command in 1939 had given the British a set of the plans, but inquiries in London had drawn a blank. Colonel Vanderblue added that French liaison had suggested that the old cartography office of the French Army in Paris, known as the Service Geographique de l'Armee (SGA), might be able to help. We were to start our inquiries there. The colonel concluded by stressing that, as the Third Army G-2 officer did not speak French, I would have to deal with the French authorities.

Early the following morning we took off for Paris, our jeep driver skillfully dodging the two-and-one-half-ton GMC trucks of the endless convoys of the "Red Ball Express" bringing up supplies from the Normandy beach-heads to the front line. We were elated at the prospect of enjoying, even if for

only a few hours, the pleasures of Paris and spending at least one night in a comfortable bed, a luxury that had been denied to us since landing at Utah Beachhead in June.

An Irascible Old Man

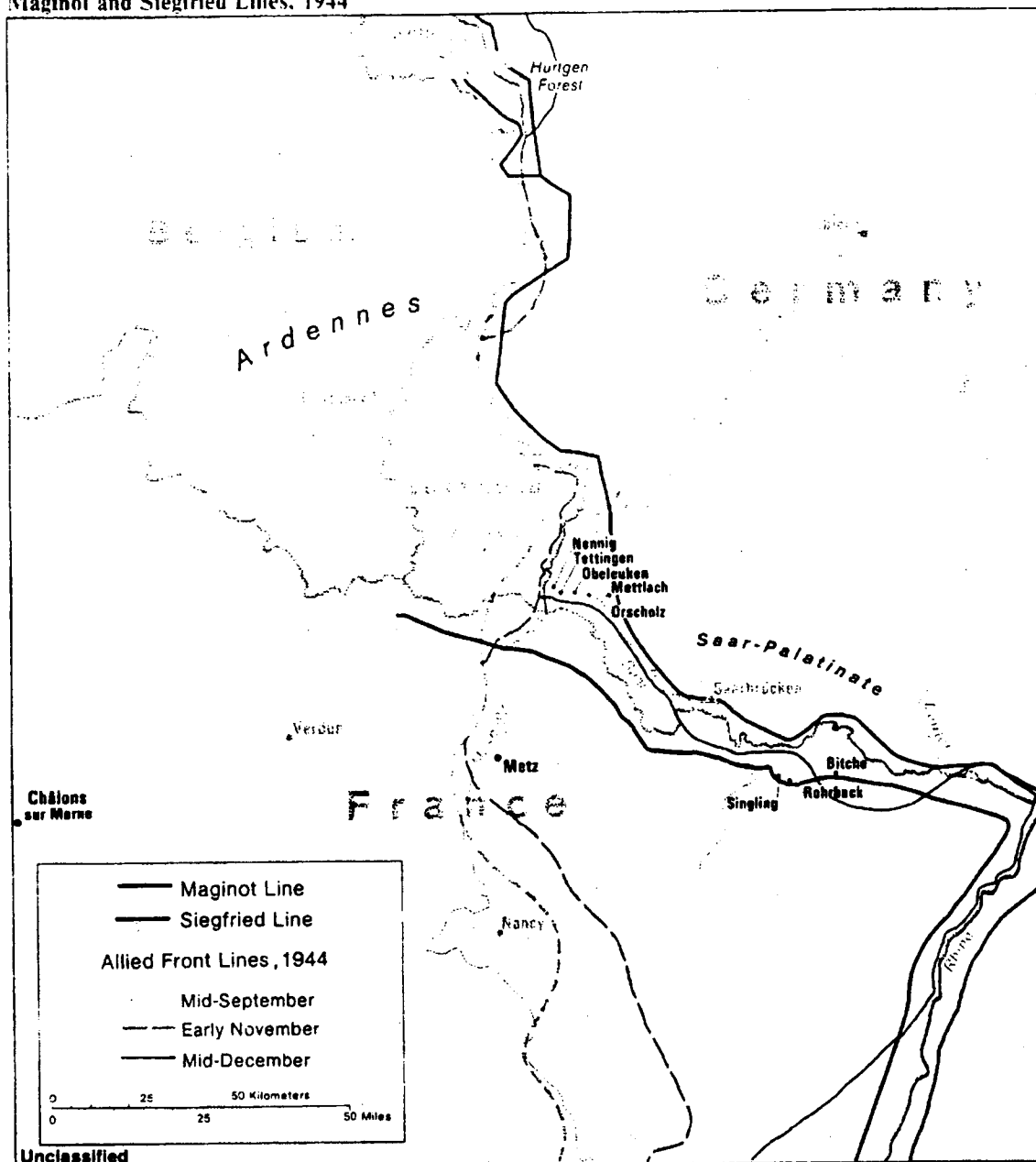
Upon arriving in Paris we were billeted in the Hotel des Deux Mondes on Avenue de l'Opera, and with the aid of a phone book discovered that the SGA was located on the rue de Grenelle in the 6th Arrondissement. When we arrived there, that late afternoon of 9 September, every house on the street appeared shut. The SGA was housed in a magnificent Seventeenth Century building with a large inner courtyard. The large double doors were closed and the building seemed unoccupied. We rang the door bell, but nothing stirred. I banged on the door with the butt of my M-1 carbine for about five minutes. Finally we heard the sound of feet shuffling across the inner courtyard, and a small window was opened by an irascible old man, who informed us that the office was closed. He told us to stop hammering on the door and to come back on Monday. I explained to him that we were Americans and had come from US Army Headquarters in the field to see the commanding officer of the SGA on a matter of urgent national importance. He peered through the window and realized that we were in muddy combat uniforms and meant business. He told us to wait, shut the small window, and disappeared.

A few minutes later we heard the shuffling feet again, and this time the old concierge opened the door and beckoned us to follow him. He led us across the courtyard, up two flights of stairs, and ushered us into a dark office where a small superannuated officer, in a faded horizon-blue French uniform of World War I vintage, was seated behind a large desk. He got up, and I noticed general stars on his sleeve. We introduced ourselves and saluted. He stared at us coldly and said stiffly: "I am General Hurault. Nobody has notified me of your presence in Paris. What can I do for you?" I explained that we had driven from Third Army Headquarters in Chalons sur Marne with orders from General Patton to ask for his assistance in a matter of importance to both our countries. He thawed when the name of General Patton was mentioned. He had heard of the general, he said, and of his successes in North Africa and Sicily, and was aware that his army had liberated Paris. The atmosphere relaxed and we were invited to sit down and to state our business.

I repeated to General Hurault what Colonel Vanderblue had told me, and expressed hope that he would be able to help us. He listened attentively and when I had finished said: "There are only three copies of the plans of the Maginot Line, France's most closely guarded military secret until 1940. One copy was given to the English in 1939, and the other two were buried in a safe place, and the Boches never got their hands on them." He had a look of satisfaction as he said this. A small triumph over the hated Germans. The fact that the Germans had physically occupied the Maginot Line and stripped it of its armament for the Atlantic Wall, and therefore had little need for the plans, did not diminish his feeling of gratification.

I asked him if he had the two remaining copies and whether we could borrow one of them. "Absolutely not" the General replied. "They are the

Magenot and Siegfried Lines, 1944



Unclassified

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property of France. I know where they are and I can let you see them, but I cannot let you take them, as they are in my trust." We had reached an impasse. As convincingly as possible I repeated the urgent need that General Patton had for this vital information, which could save the lives of many Allied soldiers and bring about the quicker defeat of our common enemy. After reflecting for a few moments, General Hurault stated: "Do you have American Army maps of the Maginot Line area?" I confirmed that we had

brought a set with us as well as charts to convert French to British and American military symbols. "If that is the case," he said, "I have a staff of old experienced civilian cartographers who could transpose all of the information from our Maginot maps on to yours. There is one condition, however. My men have been virtually without food for the past few weeks. If you can arrange to feed them, I guarantee they will work for you twenty-four hours a day until they finish the job."

"General," I told him, "we shall be back tomorrow morning with the supplies." The general promised to have the plans available in the morning.

Rations and Plans

We spent the rest of the day and night scrounging supplies from various US Army depots in the Paris area, and succeeded in loading our jeep with dozens of cases of "Ten-in-One" rations. The following morning, Sunday, we were back at the SGA; this time the old janitor opened the door and smiled broadly when he saw the cases of rations. We drove into the courtyard, where about ten of the cartographers were waiting. They expressed their gratitude when we handed over the food supplies, and we had made instant friends. For the next two days they worked without a break, and produced a magnificent professional set of plans with the complete information transposed on to our maps.

Before leaving the SGA, as an afterthought, I asked General Hurault whether he had any information on the Siegfried Line. He checked in his files and came up with a copy of a typewritten five-page intelligence report, classified secret, and prepared on 20 November 1939 by the G-2 section of the General Staff of the French High Command. He handed it to me, and said we could keep it with his compliments. By the evening of 11 September we were back in Chalons.

The report on the Siegfried Line failed to interest Third Army G-2, probably because it was five years old, and I kept it as a souvenir. In retrospect I think Third Army G-2 was mesmerized at that time by the potential strength of the legendary Maginot Line, with its underground railways and lavish forts, and somewhat contemptuous of the makeshift Siegfried Line of small pillboxes and dragon's teeth antitank obstacles, doubting that it could stop the victorious Allied armies of September 1944 facing a demoralized enemy.

The Maginot Line information we had obtained proved useful in the subsequent months. General Patton underestimated German resistance on the Moselle River, and it was not until 22 November that Metz was captured. The reversed fortifications of the still-formidable Maginot Line, designed for all-around defense, and capitalizing on the wooded and compartmented terrain of Lorraine, were overcome only after deadly day-by-day slugging. In December 1944, the 4th US Armored Division of Third Army broke through the Maginot Line in the Singling-Rohrbach-Bitche area. One hopes that General Hurault's information contributed to this success. The Siegfried Line or "West Wall" was to prove an even more formidable barrier for the Allied armies; it was to cause their heaviest casualties in World War II in fighting that lasted from September 1944 to March 1945.

Siegfried Line Report

The French G-2 intelligence report on the Siegfried Line of November 1939, given to me by General Hurault, is professionally done. The information it contains, of the so-called "Phony War" period, was undoubtedly obtained from German prisoners, as well as aerial reconnaissance and French infantry patrolling. Although dated 20 November 1939, it was distributed to the front-line units as late as 3 January 1940, as is attested by my copy which was that of the French 306th Infantry Regiment.

The report is entitled, "The First German Position between the Rhine and Moselle rivers and the Activity of the Different German Service Branches." It is divided into four parts covering the German Infantry, Artillery, Cavalry, and Engineers, with a concluding statement. The Infantry part is subdivided into six sections:

- A. Battalions in contact.
- B. Battalions of the Second Echelon.
- C. Reserve Battalions.
- D. Attitude of the German Infantry.
- E. The Life of the Infantry in the bunkers.
- F. Impressions produced on the German Infantry by the first combats.

The report states that, as of November 1939, the German line was defended, between the Rhine and Moselle, a distance of about 150 kilometers, by some fifteen divisions. The defense line between Neuburg (Rhine) and Mettlach on the Saar River consisted of permanent fortifications. In front of the fortifications was an observation line in the Lauter and Hardt regions, where the first line battalions occupying the bunkers were hidden by wooded areas and surrounded by zones of minefields and booby traps. The second line battalions were in support, preparing a line of defense with antitank obstacles in the Nennig-Tettingen-Oberleuken-Orscholz region,* between the Moselle and Saar river at Mettlach. The reserve battalions were billeted in villages about ten to fifteen kilometers behind the front line.

The report describes in detail the active attitude of the German infantry, their aggressive patrolling and raids at night by the specially trained "Stosstruppen" equipped with the new machine pistols (Schmeissers). The German fortifications are then depicted as offering few comforts to the occupants, as the pillboxes were designed only for combat and not for living purposes, with the communications between the bunkers left in the open. The bunkers were without running water and cots, and lacked air. The defenders received no hot food. The command posts were in special bunkers designed for observation but which also could be used for firing.

* By coincidence the Nennig-Orscholz area, known as the Siegfried Line Switch position, was to cause in January 1945 heavy casualties to the attacking US 94th Division, which was the newly activated division to which I was assigned when I first joined the Army in 1942.

BRUNEL QUARTIER GENERAL

Le 20 Novembre 1939

ST-MAURICE GENEVE 1

SECRET

L. SIEGFRIED

Base Bureau

N° 1761/2 - P.T.

SEUL LA FORME DE L'OCCUPATION DE LA PREMIERE POSITION
ALLENANT, SUIVANT LEUR ET MOUVEMENTS EN L'INTERIEUR DES DIFFERENTES
LIGNES

Le dispositif allemand entre BRUNEL et MOSELLE comprend actuellement, en première ligne, une quinzaine de Divisions, dont au moins huit de formation, sur un front de 100 Kilomètres.

NO 1761/2

A la date du 20 Novembre, le dispositif allemand est donc défensif. Il est traversé de BRUNEL à METTLACH par un système de fortifications permanentes sur le sol de l'Alsace.

I- **PREPARATION** - Dans toutes les divisions, le dispositif de l'infanterie apparaît uniforme: trois régiments accolés ayant chacun un bataillon en contact, un bataillon en deuxième échelon et un bataillon en réserve.

La largeur des sous-secteurs varie entre 2 et 4 km.

Le relèvement a lieu par roulement entre les bataillons, à des intervalles de temps compris entre huit et quinze jours.

A- **BATAILLON AU CONTACT**

Si les fortifications permanentes sont suffisamment rapprochées de la ligne de surveillance, (HAUTER et BAKT) le bataillon de 1^{er} échelon occupe tout simplement les "bunkers". Dans le cas contraire, il forme les avant-postes de la position fortifiée. L'organisation de ces avant-postes varie selon le terrain et peut être selon l'implantation particulière de la division dans certains secteurs. Le bataillon en contact forme le sol, l'installation des emplacements de tir, des observatoires, des P.C. etc... reliés par des tranchées et boyaux, et couverts par des défenses accessoires; la position à défendre est soigneusement observée, facilement repérable. Ailleurs les installations sont confuses, réparties irrégulièrement sur une grande profondeur. Ailleurs enfin, il est très difficile de distinguer une adresse quelconque de la position: le bataillon est invisible, dissimulé dans les bois, et les localités sont si petites que les compagnies s'y occupent pas toujours les mêmes emplacements, qu'elles nomment à l'intérieur de sous-secteur; mais c'est vraisemblablement que ces lignes ne paraissent pas, que les troupes doivent attendre à rencontrer le plus de mines et de pièges.

Il est à signaler à ce propos que l'écoulement de l'eau n'est pas sans danger pour la circulation des patrouilles et des convois, les accidents causés aux Allemands par leurs propres mines sont assez nombreux et leur inspirent une appréhension particulière.

Il n'est pas douteux que les bataillons de 1^{er} échelon aient reçu la mission d'opérer à toute tentative ennemie une résistance ferme qui ne doit céder qu'au moment d'un échec définitif.

Les éléments de réserve sont projetés en avant des mines aux, selon les circonstances, une distance, peuvent aller jusqu'à 5 Kilomètres. Ils s'organisent en postes assez espacés (400 à 500 mètres).

Ces postes sont très vigilants. On doit admettre que, de l'un, aucun mouvement de progression, même de leur propre observation de leur échappe.

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Les sapeurs se comportent alors comme des fantômes, capables de servir, entre les armes habituelles de l'infanterie, des engins spéciaux: lance-flammes, appareils émetteurs de fumée, charges d'explosifs, etc... A ce titre, ils entrent souvent dans la composition des escouades.

Une de leurs fonctions consiste à disposer rapidement des mines dans les tranchées, observatoires, abris etc... momentanément évacués par l'ennemi.

A plusieurs reprises, les sapeurs allemands ont fait, par leur intrépidité, l'admiration des fantassins, devant lesquels ils tiennent à passer pour des soldats d'élite.

CONCLUSION

Le mode d'occupation du front de la SAAR et du PALATINAT est caractérisé du côté allemand, par la densité très faible de l'infanterie en ligne.

La solidité du dispositif n'est cependant pas douteuse.

Elle tient non seulement à l'existence de fortifications permanentes et d'ouvrages de campagne, mais aussi aux qualités manœuvrières et au moral des troupes.

On doit signaler en particulier chez celles-ci, la **soif de la recherche du renseignement** (Aufklärung), qui se traduit par:

- la soif constante de l'observation,
- l'activité des patrouilles,
- l'exécution fréquente de coups de main minutieusement préparés.

Le commandement allemand démontre ainsi qu'à ces jours, l'ennemi allemand est indispensable aux troupes, même lorsqu'elles ont à remplir une mission défensive.

Pour distribution
Le Colonel GAUCH
Chef du 1^{er} Bureau
Signé: GAUCH

Pour le 64^{ème} Commandant en chef les forces
terrestres, pour le Major-Général, 1^{er} Vice-Major-Général
Signé: HOFFER

306^{ème} R.I.
CERREX COMPLEXE MOULIN pour Information
à M.M. Les Commandants des:

I - II - III/306 - C.B. 1

ten Armes, le 5 Janvier 1940
Le Chef de Bataillon HOFFER, Commandant p.i.
le "OS" d'Armement d'Infanterie

The report also stresses the effective fire of German light and heavy mortars, even without the support of divisional artillery. Except for a few antitank guns in bunkers, the fortifications had virtually no fixed artillery pieces. The report expresses surprise that German engineers attacked as front line infantry, using flame throwers, smoke screens and demolition charges.

It concludes: the enemy occupation of the Saar-Palatinate front is characterized by the presence of only a few infantry units. The strength of the defense line, however, is not to be doubted as it depends, not only on the permanent fortifications, but on the morale, aggressiveness, and the maneuvering ability of the German infantry.

The document is signed by Colonel Gauche, Chief of the Deuxieme Bureau. Gauche was a remarkable intelligence officer. In December 1938 he predicted with extraordinary precision that Germany would soon overcome Poland and, with its eastern frontier secure, turn against France. He correctly estimated that the Germans would use massed tanks with close air support in the attack. He forecast, moreover, that the Nazis' final objective would be Russia.

One begins to understand in reading this report why the French Army of 1939-40, indifferently trained and equipped, had little enthusiasm for an assault on the Siegfried Line, despite the vast French numerical superiority, while the German Army was subjugating Poland. The spartan aspect of the Siegfried Line was obviously a source of wonder for the French used to the luxuries of the Maginot Line with its underground barracks, hospitals, mess halls, and movie theaters. The few half-hearted attacks in the Saarland met with complete failure, and until the German assault of May 1940 in Holland, Belgium, and the Ardennes, the French chose to observe the Siegfried Line and avoid provoking its defenders.

After the German victory over France in 1940, the Siegfried Line was abandoned until the British and American armies arrived at the German frontier in September 1944. The Germans hastily reoccupied the line, at first mainly with second-rate troops: teenagers, old men, and battalions formed of men suffering from the same ailment, such as stomach ulcers. The Americans found the Siegfried Line very much as described in the 1939 report: small pillboxes in depth, well sited in wooded terrain surrounded by antipersonnel mines. Even second-rate troops proved to be formidable opponents, firing from the protection of their concrete bunkers. The Allied infantry had to capture the pillboxes one by one, often more than once, as German counterattacks succeeded in temporarily reoccupying them. The effectiveness of the spartan Siegfried Line was never better demonstrated than in the bitter and bloody struggle for the Hurtgen Forest, where the US Army suffered 33,000 casualties, virtually decimating some of its finest veteran divisions.