The Death and Battlefield Burial of Corporal Gordon M. Crothers

Historical Investigation Package

GMC-HIP-005 | Version 1.0 — Approved | July–August 1918 and subsequent burial documentation

Gordon M. Crothers Legacy Project • American Legion Post 15 • Dade City, Florida

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Investigation overview

On August 1, 1918, Corporal Gordon M. Crothers of Company M, 126th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division, was killed during the American advance near Cierges, France, in the fighting associated with Jomblets Woods and Hill 212.

His younger brother, Herbert D. Crothers, served in the same company and survived the engagement. In a letter written to their family on August 9, 1918, Herbert described Gordon's actions during the fighting, the circumstances of his death, and his own efforts to ensure that Gordon received a burial and that his grave was properly marked.

Surviving military records, including the Company M diary, the published history of the 126th Infantry, and U.S. Army Graves Registration documentation, provide additional evidence concerning the battle, Gordon's death, and the subsequent care and recording of battlefield graves.

Together, these sources allow a substantial reconstruction of the circumstances surrounding Gordon's death and burial. They also reveal important limitations in the surviving historical record, particularly concerning the precise location where Gordon fell and the location of his original battlefield grave.

This investigation brings together those records, distinguishes documented events from historical interpretation, and identifies the questions that remain unresolved.

The historical record at a glance

July 30, 1918	The 32nd Division began relieving American units along the Ourcq River front, preparing for operations toward Cierges.
July 31, 1918	The 3rd Battalion, 126th Infantry, supported operations toward Hill 212. Company M participated and suffered seven wounded.
August 1, 1918	At approximately 4:30 a.m., the 3rd Battalion attacked toward Jomblets Woods, Company I left, Company M right, Company L supporting. Gordon was killed during the engagement.

August 3, 1918	Gordon's Graves Registration record lists this burial date; the precise initial location is unconfirmed.
August 6–8, 1918	Company M withdrew and rested near Cierges. Gansser describes burial details in the battlefield area.
August 8, 1918	According to his letter written the following day, Herbert returned to Gordon's grave to make a wooden cross and protective wire enclosure.
August 9, 1918	Company M diary records a detail repairing graves of men killed August 1; Herbert wrote his account of Gordon's death and burial.
Subsequent records	Graves Registration identifies Grave 181, American B/A Cemetery, Sergy, and R.B. Sketch 5867; relationship to the initial grave unresolved.
July 1921	Newspaper coverage documented the return of Gordon's remains to Michigan.

The historical question

What can the surviving eyewitness, military, and Graves Registration records establish about the circumstances of Corporal Gordon M. Crothers' death on August 1, 1918, and the location and subsequent documentation of his battlefield burial?

Related questions concern Company M's tactical position, Herbert's account of the burial, and whether R.B. Sketch No. 5867 can help identify the original grave.

Scope and evidence coverage

This investigation concentrates on the fighting of August 1, 1918, and the immediate aftermath, with particular attention to Company M's operations, Gordon's death, and the initial burial of American soldiers killed during the engagement.

Later Graves Registration activities and archival correspondence are examined where they help explain or potentially identify Gordon's original burial location.

Gordon's broader biography, military service before the engagement, and eventual return to Michigan are addressed in GMC-HIP-004, The Final Years of Gordon M. Crothers, 1917–1921, and are not repeated here except where necessary for historical context.

The investigation relies principally on evidence examined during the August 2026 research session and documented in GMC-HAUP-005, supplemented by subsequent National Archives correspondence. The precise location of Gordon's death, the position of the German machine gun responsible, and the location of his first battlefield grave remain unconfirmed.

How to read this package

Bracketed numbers refer to the numbered source notes. Recorded dates are distinguished from interpretations; open questions remain explicitly identified.

Company M and the Battle of Jomblets Woods

The advance on August 1, 1918

On the morning of August 1, 1918, the 3rd Battalion of the 126th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division, advanced against German positions near Jomblets Woods and Hill 212, in the vicinity of Cierges, France.

According to Emil B. Gansser's History of the 126th Infantry in the War with Germany, the attack began at approximately 4:30 a.m. Company I occupied the left of the attacking formation, Company M the right, and Company L provided support. [1]

As the battalion crossed the Sergy–Cierges road and advanced toward Jomblets Woods, its soldiers encountered heavy German machine-gun and rifle fire. Companies I and M fought their way into the eastern portion of the woods, where German counterattacks threatened to isolate them.

Gansser described counterattacks originating from the direction of Planchette Woods on the American left and the vicinity of Reddy Farm on the right. The fighting was intense, with concealed machine-gun positions, difficult terrain, and heavy casualties.

Gordon and Herbert Crothers in the fighting

Two brothers from Rockford, Michigan, served in Company M: Corporal Gordon M. Crothers and his younger brother, Herbert D. Crothers.

Herbert's letter of August 9, 1918, provides a personal account of their participation in the August 1 engagement. Herbert reported that Gordon took his men on the right of Company M, while Herbert was positioned on the left. This distinction is significant when considered alongside Gansser's description of Company M occupying the right side of the battalion's attacking formation. [4]

Together, these accounts suggest that Gordon's element was operating toward the right portion of Company M during the advance. However, they do not establish a precise geographic position within the battlefield.

Herbert described Gordon and his men fighting through a wooded position and emerging on the opposite side. Gordon was then struck by German machine-gun fire originating from a position described as off to one side and forward of the advancing soldiers. According to Herbert, Gordon was shot through the heart and died immediately.

The description is consistent with Gansser's account of the difficult fighting around Jomblets Woods, where German machine-gun positions inflicted severe casualties on the attacking American units. Nevertheless, the surviving evidence does not establish the exact location where Gordon fell or identify the particular German machine-gun position responsible.

The cost of the engagement

The fighting on August 1 was among the most costly experienced by the 126th Infantry during the campaign. Gansser recorded that Company M suffered one officer and fourteen enlisted men killed, along with forty-six wounded, during the engagement. [1]

Among those killed was First Lieutenant Thomas E. M. Hefferan, who died while leading his platoon during the fighting at Jomblets Woods.

Gordon's death is independently recorded in the Company M diary, which includes a handwritten annotation identifying Corporal Gordon M. Crothers of Rockford as killed on August 1. The regimental roster also records his death on that date, as does his U.S. Army Graves Registration record. [2] [1] [5]

Although Gansser's casualty summary lists fourteen enlisted men killed, the previously completed roster review identified thirteen enlisted men explicitly marked as killed on August 1. That discrepancy remains unresolved and is preserved as a research question rather than silently reconciled.

Historical assessment

The combined military and eyewitness records establish with high confidence that Gordon M. Crothers was killed during the August 1, 1918 fighting involving Company M near Jomblets Woods. Herbert's account provides the closest known description of Gordon's actions and death. Gansser's regimental history supplies the larger tactical context, but the evidence does not permit an exact death coordinate or identification of the fatal machine-gun position.



Figure 1 — Jomblets Woods and a portion of Hill 212, battlefield photograph reproduced in Gansser, History of the 126th Infantry in the War with Germany (1920), p. 105. The original caption identifies American and German dead in the foreground. The photograph does not establish the exact location of Gordon Crothers' death. [1]

Gordon M. Crothers' Battlefield Burial

Herbert's account of his brother's burial

Following the fighting of August 1, 1918, Herbert D. Crothers faced the loss of his older brother, Gordon, who had been killed during Company M's advance near Jomblets Woods.

In a letter written to their family on August 9, Herbert described not only the circumstances of Gordon's death but also his efforts to ensure that his brother received a proper burial. Herbert reported that he located a chaplain and arranged for Gordon to be buried. [4]

The letter also describes Herbert's subsequent return to Gordon's grave. On August 8, the day before writing his letter, Herbert made a wooden cross and constructed a wire enclosure around the burial site. These details establish that Gordon had already been buried by August 8 and that Herbert was able to return to an identifiable grave. The letter does not provide sufficient geographic information to determine its exact location.

The burial date recorded by the Army

Gordon's U.S. Army Graves Registration record identifies August 3, 1918, as his burial date. This is consistent with Herbert's account of a burial before he returned to mark and protect the grave on August 8. [5]

However, the Graves Registration entry does not, by itself, establish that the location recorded in the surviving document was the same location where Gordon was first buried. The available evidence supports the recorded August 3 date while leaving the precise location and subsequent sequence of burial movements unresolved.

Company M's grave-maintenance detail

The Company M diary records on August 9, 1918: "A detail was sent out to repair the graves of our boys who were killed on August 1. Company rested during the day." [3]

This confirms that identifiable graves associated with the August 1 casualties existed and were accessible to Company M personnel. Herbert's separate grave-marking activities and the company detail are complementary accounts; no surviving evidence establishes that Herbert participated in the August 9 detail.

The photograph of Gordon's grave

Among the surviving materials associated with Herbert's August 9 letter is a photocopied photographic composite depicting Herbert and Gordon Crothers together with an image identified by a handwritten annotation as Gordon's grave. The annotation identifies the burial as being in the Château-Thierry area in 1918 and records Gordon's death on August 1.

The composite was found in the same folder as Herbert's letter. Both survive in the research collection as photocopies. The original photograph, photographer, date of photography, and author of the annotation have not been established. The Château-Thierry reference may describe the broader battlefield region, and the photograph cannot presently be identified conclusively as the original grave Herbert marked on August 8.

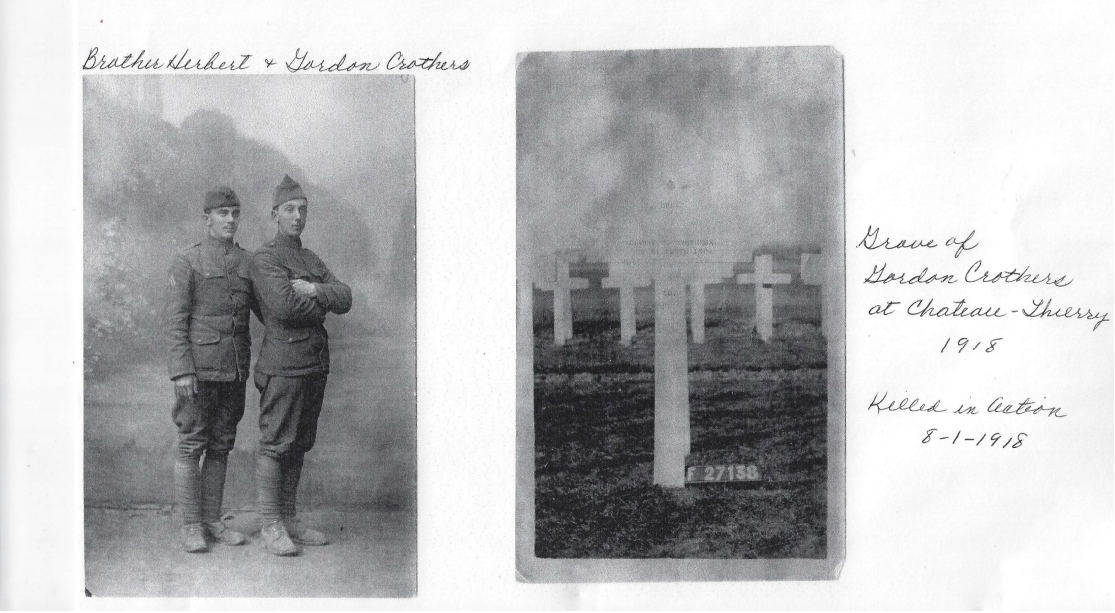

Figure 2 — Photocopied composite of Herbert and Gordon Crothers and a grave identified as Gordon's in France, 1918. Preserved with Herbert's letter; original photographer, capture date, and annotation author unknown. Evidence GMC-E-00032. [10]

The Graves Registration record at Sergy

The U.S. Army Graves Registration record identifies the following information: [5]

Army Serial Number	281373
Organization	Company M, 126th Infantry
Date of death	August 1, 1918
Recorded burial date	August 3, 1918
Cemetery and grave	American B/A Cemetery, Sergy, Aisne — Grave 181
Cemetery/Commune number	565
Authority file	D 9641
R.B. Sketch	No. 5867

The record establishes a documented burial location associated with Gordon's remains, but does not resolve whether Grave 181 at Sergy was his first battlefield burial or a subsequent burial.

The unresolved R.B. Sketch reference

The Graves Registration record references R.B. Sketch No. 5867. Comparison with other WWI records suggested that the same sketch number could be associated with multiple soldiers connected to a burial location. The sketch itself has not been examined, and the meaning of "R.B." has not been conclusively established. [5] [7] [8]

Subsequent National Archives correspondence provided additional guidance about possible archival records, but did not establish the contents or location of Sketch No. 5867. It remains an unresolved documentary reference rather than evidence of a specific geographic location.

Historical assessment

Herbert's letter provides the closest known personal account of Gordon's burial and grave marking. The Company M diary independently documents organized grave maintenance. The photographic composite preserves an image identified as Gordon's grave, while the Graves Registration record documents a cemetery burial at Sergy. What remains unresolved is not whether Gordon was buried, but precisely where his first battlefield grave was located and how it relates to the later records.

Findings and conclusions

Principal findings

1 — Date of death

Multiple sources establish August 1, 1918, rather than August 2, as Gordon's date of death. Assessment: High confidence. [2] [4] [5] [6]

2 — Battle and position

Gordon was killed in the Company M action near Jomblets Woods. His position toward the right of Company M is a strong reconstruction, not a precise location. [1] [4]

3 — Burial and grave marking

Herbert reported arranging Gordon's burial and returning August 8 to mark and protect the grave; the Army recorded August 3 as the burial date. Original grave location unconfirmed. [4] [5]

4 — Grave maintenance

Company M sent a detail August 9 to repair graves of men killed August 1. Herbert's participation in that detail is not established. [3]

5 — Sergy and sketch

The Graves Registration card documents Grave 181 at Sergy and R.B. Sketch 5867, but does not conclusively locate the original grave. [5]

Answer to the historical question

The surviving historical record establishes that Corporal Gordon M. Crothers was killed on August 1, 1918, while serving with Company M during the fighting near Jomblets Woods and Hill 212. Herbert's eyewitness correspondence supplies the closest known account of his death and burial, while contemporary military records corroborate the date, operational setting, and grave maintenance.

The Graves Registration record identifies an August 3 burial date, a recorded cemetery location at Sergy, and R.B. Sketch No. 5867. Together these sources provide a substantial account of Gordon's death and the care of his remains, but do not establish the exact place where he fell, the first grave's location, or the complete burial sequence.

People, places and organizations

People: Corporal Gordon M. Crothers; Herbert D. Crothers; First Lieutenant Thomas E. M. Hefferan.

Places: Jomblets Woods; Hill 212; Cierges; Planchette Woods; Reddy Farm (hypothesis only); Sergy, Aisne; Château-Thierry area (photograph annotation).

Organizations: Company M, 126th Infantry Regiment, 32nd Division; U.S. Army Graves Registration Service.

What remains unresolved

• The exact place where Gordon fell and the wooded position Herbert described.

• The German machine-gun position; a possible Reddy Farm connection remains hypothetical.

• The location and arrangement of Gordon's first battlefield grave.

• The meaning, whereabouts, and contents of R.B. Sketch No. 5867.

• The sequence of burial movements leading to the documented Sergy grave.

• The difference between Gansser's fourteen enlisted fatalities and thirteen roster entries explicitly marked killed August 1.

Related investigations

GMC-HIP-005 supplements, but does not supersede, GMC-HIP-004, The Final Years of Gordon M. Crothers, 1917–1921. GMC-HAUP-005 is already closed; this publication preparation does not reopen archival processing.

Final conclusion

The death of Corporal Gordon M. Crothers on August 1, 1918, is supported by convergent military records, eyewitness correspondence, and burial documentation. Herbert's letter preserves not only his brother's final actions but his efforts to see Gordon buried and his grave marked. Although the exact first burial site remains unknown, these records preserve a meaningful account of Gordon's final hours and the care shown to him, strengthening the documented history of the namesake of American Legion Post 15.

Source notes and photograph credits

[1] Emil B. Gansser, History of the 126th Infantry in the War with Germany (1920). Operations, casualty summary, Company M roster; battlefield photograph printed p. 105. GMC-E-00006. Exact narrative page locators to verify.

[2] Company M, 126th Infantry, unit diary, August 1, 1918, with handwritten death annotation. GMC-E-00007.

[3] Company M, 126th Infantry, unit diary, August 9, 1918, grave-repair detail. GMC-E-00008.

[4] Herbert D. Crothers, letter to family, August 9, 1918, photocopy. GMC-E-00001.

[5] U.S. Army Graves Registration record for Gordon M. Crothers, including Sergy Grave 181 and R.B. Sketch No. 5867. GMC-E-00002.

[6] Grand Rapids newspaper report, July 1921, return of Gordon's remains to Michigan. GMC-E-00009; newspaper title, issue date, and page to verify.

[7] National Archives Cartographic Branch correspondence on initial burial plats and R.B. Sketch No. 5867, August 31, 2026. GMC-E-00010.

[8] National Archives Textual Records Branch correspondence, September 23, 2026, concerning WWI burial documentation. GMC-E-00013.

[9] National Archives Textual Records request concerning R.B. Sketch No. 5867. GMC-E-00011. This catalog record must not be conflated with a separate St. Louis burial-file request; the latter's Evidence ID is not established here.

[10] Photocopied photographic composite of Herbert and Gordon Crothers and a grave identified as Gordon's, preserved in the same folder as Herbert's letter. GMC-E-00032. Original photographs, photographer, compiler, annotation author, and precise grave location unconfirmed; the annotation does not establish the first burial site.

Source review record

This paper compiles the previously reviewed research documented in GMC-HAUP-005 and the subsequent archival correspondence. Source notes describe that inherited research record; the full primary materials have not all been re-examined during this document assembly. Exact bibliographic locators and original-document verification remain outstanding where identified in the notes. The confirmed Evidence IDs have been applied.

Images and rights

Figure 1: Official U.S. battlefield photograph as reproduced in Gansser (1920), printed p. 105; caption checked against original scan. Figure 2: photocopied composite from folder containing Herbert's letter, GMC-E-00032 — included; original photographer, date, annotation author, ownership, and reuse permissions unconfirmed.

Investigation record and curator review

HIP number	GMC-HIP-005
Permanent Investigation ID	To be verified
Version	1.0 — Approved
Research cutoff	September 2026, subject to final verification
Prepared by	AI Research Assistant, Gordon M. Crothers Legacy Project
Curator	Robert McGregor
Research status	Historical narrative reviewed; final curator review
Publication status	Not published
Catalog processing status	GMC-HAUP-005 closed; HIP-005 linkage not verified

Revision history

1.0 Approved — November 12, 2026: assembled approved sections into the v4.0 companion-template structure; final curator-review source corrections applied; approved by curator; approved by curator. Approved.

Curator decision

Decision: Approved. Approval date: November 12, 2026. Website publication: Pending.

Supersession decision

Supplements GMC-HIP-004; does not supersede it.

Preparation check

☑ Historical narrative sections approved
☑ Source inventory structure approved
☐ Verify exact source locators; confirmed Evidence IDs entered
☑ Gansser illustration present; final page inspection completed
☐ Check image provenance and rights
☑ Review all rendered pages
☐ Obtain final curator approval