

THE U.S. ARMY  
CAMPAIGNS OF WORLD WAR I



MEUSE-ARGONNE  
26 SEPTEMBER–11 NOVEMBER 1918

THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF WORLD WAR I  
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Cover: *Firing a 155-mm. howitzer during a gas bombardment*  
(National Archives)



**MEUSE-ARGONNE**  
**26 SEPTEMBER–11 NOVEMBER 1918**

*by*  
*Richard S. Faulkner*



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Center of Military History  
United States Army  
Washington, D.C., 2018





# INTRODUCTION

A century ago, the great powers of Europe became engulfed in what was then called the Great War. It signaled a new age in armed conflict in which mass armies supported by industrial mass production brought an unprecedented level of killing power to the battlefield. By the time the United States entered the war in 1917, the combatants were waging war on a scale never before seen in history. The experience defined a generation and cast a long shadow across the twentieth century. In addition to a tremendous loss of life, the war shattered Europe, bringing revolution, the collapse of long-standing empires, and economic turmoil, as well as the birth of new nation-states and the rise of totalitarian movements.

The modern U.S. Army, capable of conducting industrialized warfare on a global scale, can trace its roots to the World War. Although the war's outbreak in August 1914 shocked most Americans, they preferred to keep the conflict at arm's length. The United States declared its neutrality and invested in coastal defenses and the Navy to guard its shores. The U.S. Army, meanwhile, remained small, with a regiment as its largest standing formation. Primarily a constabulary force, it focused on policing America's new territorial possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific as it continued to adapt to Secretary of War Elihu Root's reforms in the years following the War with Spain. It was not until June 1916 that Congress authorized an expansion of the Army, dual state-federal status for the National Guard, and the creation of a reserve officer training corps.

In early 1917, relations between the United States and Germany rapidly deteriorated. The kaiser's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare threatened American lives and commerce, and German meddling in Mexican affairs convinced most Americans that Berlin posed a danger to the nation. In April 1917, the president, out of diplomatic options, asked Congress to declare war on Germany. But the U.S. Army, numbering only 133,000 men, was far from ready. The president ordered nearly 400,000 National Guardsmen into federal service, and more than twenty-four million men eventually registered for the Selective Service, America's first

conscription since the Civil War. By the end of 1918, the Army had grown to four million men and had trained 200,000 new officers to lead them. As it expanded to address wartime needs, the Army developed a new combined-arms formation—the square division. Divisions fell under corps, and corps made up field armies. The Army also created supporting elements such as the Air Service, the Tank Corps, and the Chemical Warfare Service. The war signaled the potential of the United States as not only a global economic power, but also a military one.

In June 1917, the 1st Division deployed to France, arriving in time to parade through Paris on the Fourth of July. The first National Guard division, the 26th Division from New England, deployed in September. By war's end, the American Expeditionary Forces, as the nation's forces in Europe were called, had grown to two million soldiers and more than forty divisions. During 1918, these American “doughboys” learned to fight in battles of steadily increasing scale: Cantigny, the Marne, Aisne-Marne, St. Mihiel, and Meuse-Argonne, adding thirteen campaign streamers to the Army flag. Overall, in roughly six months of combat, the American Expeditionary Forces suffered more than 255,000 casualties, including 52,997 battle deaths (as well as more than 50,000 nonbattle deaths, most due to the influenza pandemic). The war that the United States entered to “make the world safe for democracy” ended with an armistice on 11 November 1918, followed by a controversial peace. American soldiers served in the Occupation of the Rhineland until 1923, before withdrawing from Europe altogether.

The United States will never forget the American soldiers who fought and died in the World War. America's first unknown soldier was laid to rest on 11 November 1921 in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, where soldiers still stand guard. The United States created permanent American military cemeteries in France, Belgium, and Britain to bury the fallen. To this day, memorials to their sacrifice can be found across America, and the date of the armistice has become a national holiday honoring all those who serve in defense of the nation. The last surviving U.S. Army veteran of the war died in 2011. It is to all the doughboys, those who returned and those who did not, that the U.S. Army Center of Military History dedicates these commemorative pamphlets.

JON T. HOFFMAN  
Chief Historian



# MEUSE-ARGONNE

## 26 SEPTEMBER–11 NOVEMBER 1918

On 26 September 1918, the American First Army launched a massive attack between the Argonne Forest (Forêt d'Argonne) and the Meuse River northwest of the storied French town of Verdun. By the time that the Germans agreed to an armistice forty-seven days later, the Meuse-Argonne Campaign would gain the distinction of being the largest and most costly military operation in American history. Over a million American soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines, as well as 135,000 French soldiers, participated in the offensive. Although the First Army had committed to this battle long before most of its doughboys had mastered the skills required to fight a mass industrialized war, the Americans persevered and gradually ground down the German units opposing them. Unfortunately, this approach came at a high price: 26,277 men killed and another 95,786 wounded as the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) learned how to wage a modern war against a skilled opponent. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the most important American military contribution to the Allied effort during the war. The AEF's hard-won victory materially contributed to the collapse of the German Army and achieved President Woodrow Wilson's strategic goal of securing for the United States a major role in crafting the peace that followed the Armistice.

### STRATEGIC SETTING

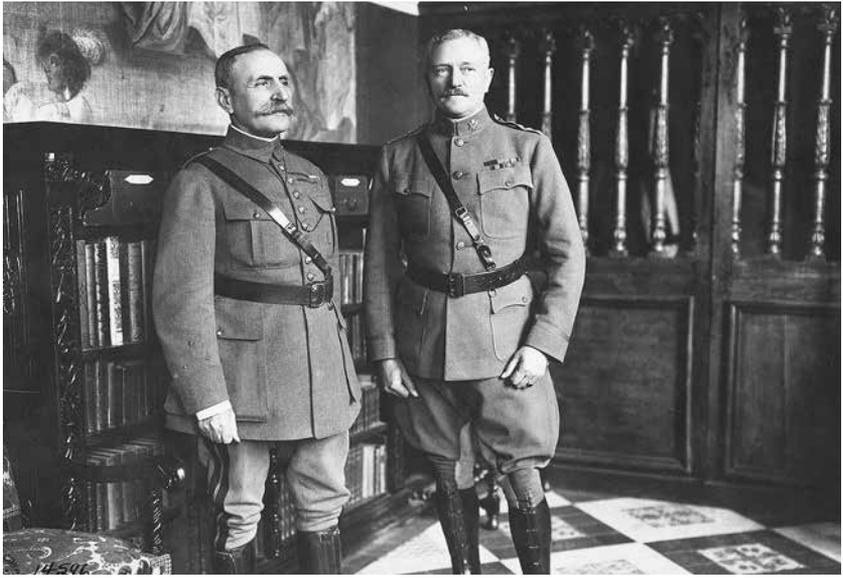
The entry of the United States into the conflict and the Russian Revolution in 1917 dramatically changed the dynamics of the Great War. Russia's descent into civil war offered the Central Powers their long-desired relief from a two-front war, but the imminent arrival of hundreds of thousands of fresh American troops convinced General Erich Ludendorff, the orchestrator of the German war effort, that Germany must win the war in 1918 or face certain defeat. On 21 March 1918, the Germans launched a major offensive that broke through the Allied lines on the Somme. By the time the German attack lost momentum, it had

pushed the British Expeditionary Force over fifty-six kilometers, back to the outskirts of Amiens. The success of the offensive sparked a crisis in the Allies' ranks that led to the appointment of France's General Ferdinand Foch as a General-in-Chief of the Allied Armies, or "generalissimo," to coordinate all Allied Army operations on the Western Front. After the conclusion of the Somme effort, Ludendorff embarked upon four more major offensives in the spring and summer of 1918, striving to retain the initiative and force the Allies to a negotiated peace.

When the last of these operations sputtered to a close in mid-July, the Germans had suffered nearly a million casualties, and Foch had begun to sense that the tide of the war had turned in the Allies' favor. On 24 July 1918, Foch issued a directive to AEF commander General John J. Pershing and the other top French, British, and Belgian military leaders that laid out his vision for the Allied war effort for the remainder of the year. Foch's first goal was to seize the initiative from the Germans by launching counterattacks against several salients along the Western Front, regaining as much territory as possible and securing critical rail lines that the Allies would need to sustain a war-ending offensive in 1919. While the French continued to reduce the Marne salient, the British would prepare for an attack near Amiens, and a multinational force would undertake an offensive near Ypres in Belgium.

Foch also intended to utilize the Americans in his operational plan. Earlier in July, he and Pershing had agreed that it was time to grant the AEF its independence by giving it a sector of the front and a major role in implementing Foch's operational vision for 1918. The key questions were where the Americans would operate and what mission they would undertake. Since the AEF's arrival in France, Pershing had slowly assembled its support and logistics infrastructure in Lorraine with the ultimate intent of carrying out operations against the Germans in St. Mihiel and Metz. That focus fit nicely within Foch's initial intent, as the reduction of the St. Mihiel salient would open the Paris-Avrucourt rail line and give the Americans a positional advantage for further advances in 1919. With this goal in mind, Pershing established the U.S. First Army on 10 August 1918.

As Pershing began planning for an attack against St. Mihiel, successful Allied counterattacks at Soissons in July and at Amiens in early August led Foch to reconsider his plans. On 30 August, Foch met with Pershing to deliver revised guidance for the newly



*Foch (left) and Pershing (National Archives)*

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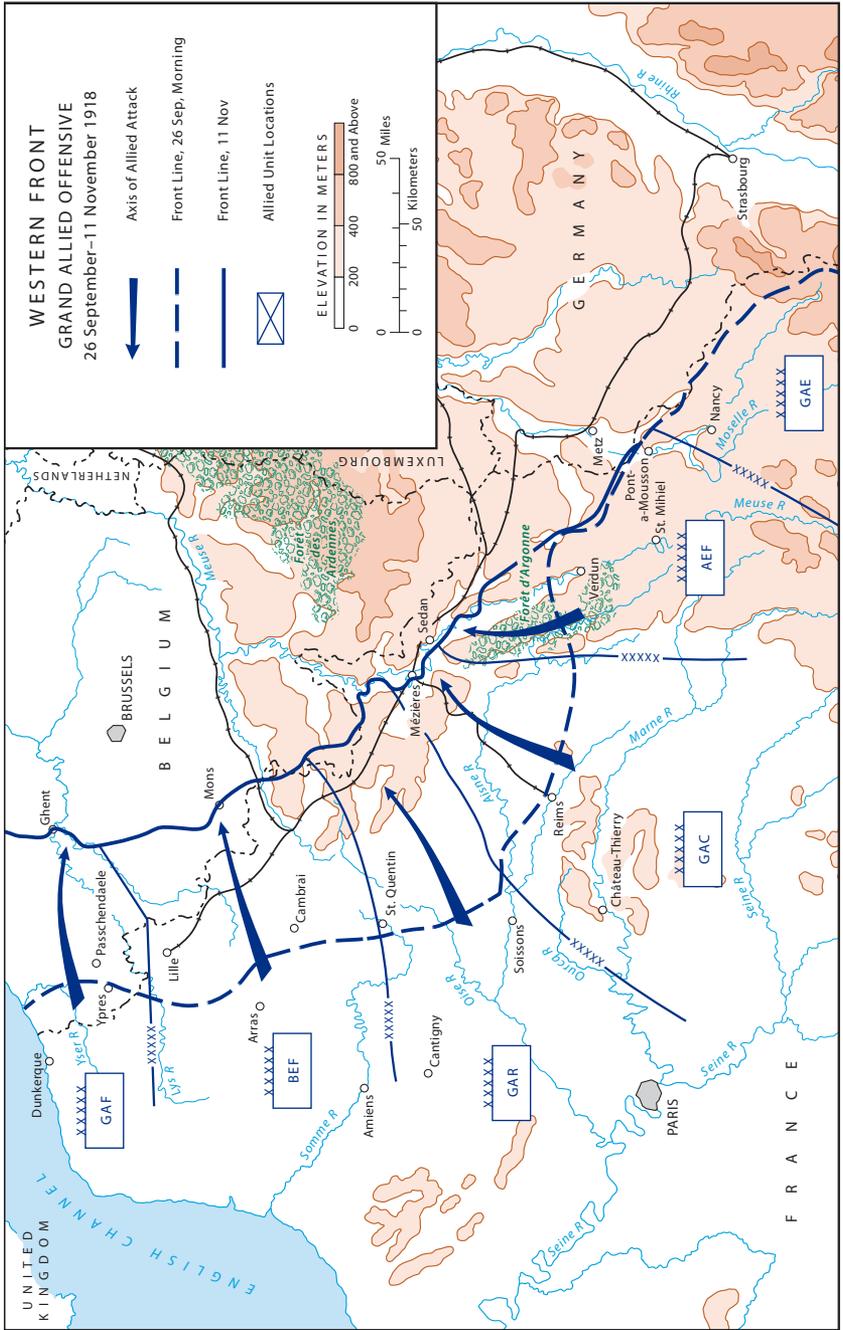
formed First Army. Foch believed that recent Allied achievements had weakened the German Army to the point that the Allies might win the war in 1918. As such, the generalissimo's new plan was for a massive pincer attack in September—one thrust in the Somme and the other in Champagne-Argonne—while the remaining Allied armies launched simultaneous sustained offensives across the Western Front. This concerted assault would deplete the German Army's manpower to the point of collapse. Under the new plan, the Americans would attack in concert with the French Fourth Army between the Meuse and Suippe rivers with the intent of cutting the rail lines at Sedan and Mézières. This attack would form the right wing of the Allied envelopment of the German forces along the central portion of the Western Front in northern France. As an attack on the German positions at St. Mihiel would divert the AEF from the main Allied effort and drain too much of the Americans' focus and strength, Foch directed Pershing to abandon his planned operation against the salient. Furthermore, fearing that the Americans lacked the training and experience to plan and execute such a large-scale operation in the Meuse-Argonne, Foch intended to strip Pershing of several of his divisions to reinforce

more seasoned French units and to split the American front into two segments with a veteran French army wedged in between.

Pershing viewed Foch's move as a blow to the AEF's independence and as a diminution of America's part in the conflict. He argued that shifting the location of the joint initiative to the Meuse-Argonne would hobble his operations, since it was far from the logistics bases that the AEF had established farther south in Lorraine. The meeting grew so heated that Pershing later confessed that he considered punching Foch in the jaw. In the face of mutual intransigence, the conference broke up without resolution.

In the battle of wills between two determined and stubborn men, both ultimately had to compromise for the good of the Allied cause. Pershing understood that he had President Wilson's full support in forming an independent American army and that the president expected the AEF to play a major role in the war effort. He also knew that Foch needed fresh American forces to bring his plans to fruition. For his part, Foch was certain that Pershing desperately wanted to get the American Army into the fight and knew that the AEF still needed French artillery, tank, and logistical support for any operations. After contentious wrangling, Foch grudgingly consented to Pershing conducting a limited attack at St. Mihiel, but insisted that the Americans be ready to launch their main attack in the area between the Argonne Forest and the Meuse River between 22 and 26 September. Foch also relented on the issue of a unified American sector and gave the AEF independent control over a significant portion of the Western Front's eastern flank. However, his goal for the Meuse-Argonne operation remained unchanged; the American First and French Fourth Armies would attack toward Mézières to break through the German defense in the region and cut the vital Metz-Montmédy-Charleville rail line. Foch further intended that the Franco-American attack would draw in and destroy the enemy's strategic reserves and turn the Germans out of their defenses in northern France, thus setting the stage for the Allied forces to defeat the enemy in open battle. Foch believed that the combined effect of British attacks on the Somme, French attacks in the Oise, and the Franco-American attack in Champagne and the Meuse-Argonne would stretch the German Army past its breaking point. In the end, the simultaneous Allied offensives would annihilate the encircled Germans, or at least force the enemy to abandon the occupation of France and Belgium (*Map 1*).

Pershing's insistence on going forward with the St. Mihiel Offensive greatly complicated the planning and execution of



MAP 1

the Meuse-Argonne operation. The AEF commander viewed the St. Mihiel attack as an opportunity to test his army's command, logistics, and other operational systems, as well as a chance to prove to the world that the Americans were capable of fighting a modern war. To ensure the First Army's success in its first independent action, Pershing decided to use his most experienced divisions for the St. Mihiel operation. Although this move helped to ensure that the reduction of the salient went smoothly, the absence of these veteran units in the opening phase of the Meuse-Argonne Campaign would have grave consequences for the AEF. Furthermore, Pershing's decision to fight at St. Mihiel also meant that the First Army would have to engage in one major battle while simultaneously planning for a much larger and more complicated operation for which the army would have to move its forces and logistics infrastructure over sixty-four kilometers to the northwest. The Americans would have only ten days between the close of the St. Mihiel battle and the start of the Meuse-Argonne Campaign to accomplish this feat.

### *The German Army in the Meuse-Argonne Region*

By the time the Americans began their attack in the Meuse-Argonne, their German foes had occupied the region for four years. The area had been the scene of fierce fighting in 1914 and 1915, and the Germans used the region as the staging area for their attack on Verdun in 1916. To that end, the Germans had constructed fortifications and artillery shelters throughout the sector, and built a light rail line and other logistics nodes to support their operations in the region. After suffering an unsustainable rate of loss during the fighting at Verdun and the Somme, in September 1916 Ludendorff ordered a review of German defensive tactics and the establishment of a new series of fortifications, collectively known as the Siegfried Stellung (or the Hindenburg Line to the Allies), along the Western Front. The new German doctrine used a defense in depth to husband Germany's declining manpower resources and to counter the growing effectiveness of Allied artillery and offensive tactics. The Germans planned to use skillfully sited field fortifications and interlocking defensive firepower to exhaust Allied attacks and serve as a base for timely, powerful counterattacks that would prevent the Allies from gaining any major foothold.

Although the Germans had dedicated less effort to engineering the defenses in the Meuse-Argonne than they had on the western



*Members of the 77th Division viewing the Argonne Forest*  
(National Archives)

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sectors of the Hindenburg Line, nature provided them with ample defensive advantages to compensate for this shortfall. The western boundary of the U.S. First Army's sector encompassed most of the Argonne Forest. The forest itself sat on a plateau bounded by the Aisne and Aire rivers. The Argonne was crisscrossed by a range of hills and draws running in a generally east-west direction; these features, along with dense vegetation, presented grave challenges to the mobility, command and control, and artillery support of the American attackers. To the east of the Argonne was the valley of the Aire River—a natural movement corridor for the Americans, but one dominated on the west by the hills of the Argonne and on the east by the large buttes of Montfaucon and Vauquois and other heights. The center of the American sector was the Barrois Plateau, a series of hills and highlands that started in the south at Montfaucon, ran to the northeast to Romagne-sous-Montfaucon and Cunel, and ended at the Barricourt Heights. East of the Barrois Plateau was the Meuse River valley, another natural movement corridor flanked by high ground on both banks. As Lt. Gen. Hunter

Liggett, commander of the U.S. I Army Corps, mused, "The region was a natural fortress beside which the Virginia Wilderness in which Grant and Lee fought was a park."

To this "natural fortress," the Germans added their own skills at defense to present the Americans with a formidable set of obstacles to overcome. Within the sector, the Germans had constructed four major defensive belts arrayed over a depth of fifteen to twenty-four kilometers. Most of their engineering efforts had gone into strengthening the third position, composed of two lateral sections of the Hindenburg Line, the Brunhild Stellung and the Kriemhilde Stellung. In the area of the main American advance, the line ran from Grandpré on the west across the heights of Côte Dame Marie, Romagne, and Cunel, to Brioules on the Meuse. It consisted of warrens of concrete-reinforced shelters and machine gun nests, earthen strong points, and support and communications trenches. These defensive positions made adroit use of terrain and barbed-wire belts to canalize attackers into a web of interlocking machine gun fields of fire and preplanned artillery targets. The other belts in the sector followed a similar design but made less use of hardened fortifications (*Map 2*).

The German high command had split the defense of the Meuse-Argonne region between the *Third Army* under General Karl von Einem and the *Fifth Army* under General Georg von der Marwitz. Each reported to different army group commanders, which would hamper German unity of command and effort in the opening days of the American offensive. The German *Third Army* was responsible for the Argonne Forest and the area running west into the French Fourth Army's sector, while the German *Fifth Army's* area of operation extended from the Aire Valley to east of St. Mihiel. The *Third Army's Group Aisne* placed the *76th Reserve Division* on the extreme left of the American sector, while the *Group Argonne* had the *2d Landwehr Division* and the *1st Guards Division* in line. The corps was responsible for the defense of the Argonne Forest and the area around Varennes. Although the *Landwehr* units had been stripped of most of their youngest troops to fill the ranks of the assault divisions for Ludendorff's Spring Offensives, they had been stationed in the Argonne since September 1914 and early 1915 and were well acquainted with the terrain that they would defend. The *1st Guards Division*, meanwhile, was an elite unit, but it had been worn down by four years of fighting and by being actively engaged in operations since March 1918.



The *Fifth Army's Group Meuse West* placed the *117th Division* and the *7th Reserve Division* in the line facing the Americans. The AEF rated both of these as second-class divisions, and the *117th* was still recovering from the heavy losses it had suffered at the Battle of Amiens in early August. When it became clear to the German high command that a major Franco-American attack was looming in the Argonne region, it sent two more divisions, the *5th Guards* and the *5th Bavarian Reserve*, to reinforce the sector. The *5th Guards* was an excellent but battered unit that had seen action against the American 2d Division north of Château-Thierry in June. The *5th Bavarian Reserve Division* had been spared much of the fighting in 1918, but the AEF still considered it to be only a second-class unit.

Although all of the German divisions that the U.S. First Army would face in the opening days of the Meuse-Argonne were understrength, tattered, and tired, their core of experienced veterans and leaders intended to make the Americans pay heavily for the ground that the Kaiser's army defended. They also had a massive array of firepower. When the German *123d Infantry Division* entered the Meuse-Argonne sector at Cunel on 11 October 1918, it had been hammered by fighting the Americans at St. Mihiel and was down to only 89 officers and 1,705 men. However, the division could still field 198 heavy and light machine guns—one gun for every nine soldiers. The German defenders of the Meuse-Argonne were likewise well provided with artillery, leading one doughboy to bitterly note that it seemed as if “every goddamn German there who didn't have a machine gun had a cannon.” Given the daunting terrain and determined enemy in the Meuse-Argonne, the doughboys would face a rough fight.

### *The First Army Plans the Campaign*

Pershing's insistence on conducting the St. Mihiel Offensive while preparing for the Meuse-Argonne Campaign gave the AEF and the First Army's staff only twenty-three days to plan and organize the largest military operation in American history. The AEF was fortunate to draw on the talents of Brig. Gen. Fox Conner, Col. Walter S. Grant, and Lt. Col. George C. Marshall for this monumental task. The most important challenge was moving and staging the massive number of troops required for the operation and for relieving the French forces operating in the sector (*Map 3*). The relief in place of the French Second Army by the U.S. First Army would be a



armies of Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee in 1864. Despite the phenomenal growth of the SOS, the Supreme War Council's decision to give priority to shipping infantry and machine gun units to France in the spring of 1918 meant that the SOS was still short of the men and special units it needed to properly execute its missions. The AEF's logisticians persevered against great odds to establish nineteen railheads; thirty-four evacuation hospitals; and fifty-six ordnance, quartermaster, ammunition, petroleum, gas warfare, and engineer depots to supply the Meuse-Argonne drive. In the seventeen days before the offensive began, the SOS also pre-positioned 40,000 tons of shells to support the first five days of artillery fire.

The First Army's operational plan was ambitious. Pershing envisioned that the American offensive would occur in four phases (*Map 4*). In the first phase, three American corps would attack on a thirty-kilometer front stretching from the Argonne Forest to the Meuse River. On the first day of the battle, 26 September, these corps would drive sixteen kilometers through the first three German defensive belts. After breaking through the enemy's main defenses, the Americans would reconnect with the other arm of the Franco-American offensive, the French Fourth Army, north of the Argonne Forest at Grandpré. Pershing's decision to devote most of his veteran divisions to the St. Mihiel Offensive meant that five of the nine divisions slated for the Meuse-Argonne's initial assault had little to no previous exposure to combat. Right from the outset, Pershing expected a great deal from his inexperienced soldiers.

The First Army anticipated that the second phase of the operation would begin on 27 September with another sixteen-kilometer drive to push the Germans back beyond the line of Stenay to Le Chesne. In the third phase, the French XVII Corps, under American command, would attack east of the Meuse River to clear the Heights of the Meuse and protect the right flank of the First Army's drive north. The last phase of the operation would carry the combined Franco-American attack to the rail heads of Sedan and Mézières.

During the first phase, General Liggett's I Corps would attack down the Aire Valley on the army's left flank. Working with units from the French Fourth Army, the I Corps would clear the Argonne Forest. In the center, Maj. Gen. George H. Cameron's V Corps would seize Montfaucon and the other heights of the Barrois Plateau. On the right, Maj. Gen. Robert L. Bullard would push the III Corps





*A procession of tanks going into action (National Archives)*

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through the valley of the Meuse and rout the Germans from their sector up to the town of Briulles-sur-Meuse.

In carrying out this phase, the V Corps faced the most difficult tactical challenges. The German defenses on Montfaucon loomed above the corps' front and had withstood several French attacks in 1914 and 1915. To make matters worse, Cameron would have to rely on three green units, the 91st, 37th, and 79th Divisions, to storm the high ground in his sector. The First Army planners recognized the V Corps' dilemma and gambled that the rapid advance of the I and III Corps on Cameron's flanks would turn the Germans out of their defenses on the Barrois Plateau and thus aid the V Corps' advance.

To help its corps accomplish their missions, the First Army dedicated 419 tanks to support the 26 September attacks. Lt. Col. George S. Patton Jr.'s 1st U.S. Tank Brigade, with 127 American-crewed Renault FT light tanks reinforced with twenty-eight French-crewed Schneider tanks, was directed to support the 35th Division in the I Corps' sector. The First Army also assigned 250 French-crewed tanks to the 3d U.S. Tank Brigade to assist

the V Corps. General Cameron attached a French regiment of light tanks and two groups of St. Chamond medium tanks to the 37th and 79th Divisions and assigned another French light tank regiment with two groups of St. Chamonds to assist the advance of the 91st Division.

The First Army planned to ease the way for the doughboys by using the fledgling U.S. Army Air Service to shape and support the assault. It had 840 aircraft and 13 observation balloons at its disposal, giving the Americans a three-to-one advantage in the air. Brig. Gen. William L. "Billy" Mitchell, the planner and orchestrator of the air offensive, sought to use this advantage to gain and maintain American air superiority over the front throughout the campaign. Mitchell's fighter squadrons were to ensure that the Americans had unhindered aerial reconnaissance and artillery spotting while denying the same capabilities to the Germans. American bomber squadrons would attack German supply dumps and command posts and seek to interdict the flow of supplies and reinforcements into the battle area by striking convoys, road intersections, and rail stations in the enemy's rear area.

The First Army's planners also staked much on the Americans' ability to achieve operational surprise and to maintain the speed of the initial assaults to seize the initiative and keep the Germans off-balance. American intelligence officers estimated that once the First Army's attack started, the Germans would be able to rush four divisions to the threatened sector on the first day, two more on the second, and as many as nine by the third. If the Americans could sustain their momentum, these enemy reinforcements would not be able to form a cohesive defense. Furthermore, Pershing hoped to achieve surprise by conducting most of the unit moves into the Meuse-Argonne under the cover of darkness. The First Army's units east of the Meuse River, the French XVII Corps, French II Colonial Corps, and the U.S. IV Corps would carry out raids and artillery strikes in the days leading up to H-hour to draw the enemy's attention away from the area of the main attack. To aid in this deception, the First Army detached 16 tanks from Patton's tank brigade to conduct two demonstrations and feints east of the old St. Mihiel battlefield at Pont-à-Mousson. The First Army's fire support plan also was designed to deceive the Germans. Six hours before the attack, the corps east of the Meuse would begin intensive bombardments of the enemy positions with the intent of diverting the Germans' attention, and their reserves, away from the area of the First Army's attack.

Unfortunately, the First Army's deception plan was only partly successful. Although the Germans did focus on French operations to the west of the Argonne and on American activities around St. Mihiel, the Americans could not hide their massive concentration in the Meuse-Argonne. By 25 September, the Germans had divined that a major American offensive was in the offing and were moving reserve divisions to the Argonne region.

## OPERATIONS

### *Initial Phase of the Battle: 26 September–1 October 1918*

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive began at 0230 on 26 September 1918 when the 2,711 artillery guns supporting the attack between the Argonne Forest and the Meuse River began three hours of preparatory fires. The First Army's fire plan was to pave the way for the infantry by obliterating barbed-wire obstacles, suppressing artillery batteries, crushing field fortifications, and killing or neutralizing the defenders. The bombardment was impressive. Future U.S. president Capt. Harry S. Truman, an artillery battery commander in the 35th Division, admitted to being awed by the sight of the barrage, noting that, "the sky was red from one end to the other from the artillery flashes." The continual firing was so intense that Truman and his artillerymen were rendered temporarily "deaf as a post from the noise."

At H-hour, 0530, the infantry assault began. The day's fighting was a mixed bag for the First Army. Some divisions performed well in battle, while others brought to light the many shortcomings in the U.S. Army's mobilization and training. The First Army experienced its greatest success on the first day of the battle in the III Corps' sector. Here, the artillery preparation disrupted the German defense. That morning, fog blanketed the front. Although the poor visibility hindered the Americans' command and control, it also provided vital concealment from the German defenders as doughboys slogged across the marshlands of the Meuse valley to reach their objectives. Despite the artillery support, the infantry still had to overcome the surviving enemy machine gun nests in the Bois de Forges, Bois Jure, and Septsarges.

On the army's right, Maj. Gen. John L. Hines' veteran 4th Division made the III Corps' greatest gains of the day, pushing eight kilometers into the German defenses before halting on the corps'



*Soldiers relaxing in a captured German trench (National Archives)*

objective line. The division's western brigade even advanced nearly a mile past Montfaucon and was in a position to envelop the German defenses holding up the V Corps by sweeping into Nantillois. At approximately 1400, Hines requested permission from the III Corps headquarters to cross into the 79th Division's sector and attack the vulnerable flanks of the German *117th Infantry Division*. But it was here that the friction of war intervened. To better manage the advance of its green units, the First Army attempted to impose strict control over the operation. According to the army's orders, once its corps reached their intermediate objective phase lines, they were to obtain permission from First Army headquarters before moving any farther. Furthermore, the army directed that the corps boundaries should not be crossed. (*See Map 5.*)

In response to Hines' request to cross the corps boundary, at approximately 1530 the III Corps Chief of Staff, Brig. Gen. Alfred W. Bjornstad, directed the 4th Division to "send out strong patrols to the west to seize strong points" in the 79th Division's sector. This push might force the Germans to abandon the defenses that were holding up the 79th Division's advance. By 2000, Hines moved his 8th Infantry Brigade into position to launch an attack to the west early on the morning of 27 September. Unfortunately, as streams of often incomplete or inaccurate reports from the front buffeted headquarters at all levels, confusion and uncertainty hobbled commanders across the sector. Shortly after midnight on 27 September, the III Corps ordered Hines to cancel the 8th Brigade's attack, and the opportunity to outflank the German defenses quickly passed.

The V Corps needed all of the help that it could get. All three of its assault divisions experienced their first taste of battle on 26 September. The 79th Division faced the difficult task of taking Montfaucon. The approach to the heights was covered with thick undergrowth, fallen trees, and shell holes from the previous years of fighting in the sector. The Germans had added to these obstacles by emplacing barbed wire, pillboxes, and dugouts on the heights. The 79th Division would have to carry these defenses in a frontal attack. This was much to expect from a unit that had arrived in France only in late July 1918. The 79th had been rushed by the AEF General Headquarters (GHQ) through less than a month of unit training and only ten days of service in the trenches of the quiet Avocourt sector before the V Corps committed the division to the initial assault in the Meuse-Argonne. Soon after the start of the operation, the green unit lost touch with its rolling barrage while picking its way through wooded slopes, and its regiments were caught in the open when the early morning fog lifted. A storm of German fire soon assailed the 79th Division's men. One of the division's officers, Maj. Charles A. DuPuy, discovered that his efforts to outflank the German positions only led his doughboys into the path of another well-concealed enemy machine gun. He confessed that "it was necessary a great many times to simply charge a gun from the front and both flanks, and take it regardless of our losses, which, per gun captured, averaged ten to twenty men." Early on, the shell holes, bogs, and woods of the sector had stalled the French tanks intended to support the infantry. Without effective artillery or tank support, the 79th Division's strength ebbed over the course of the day.

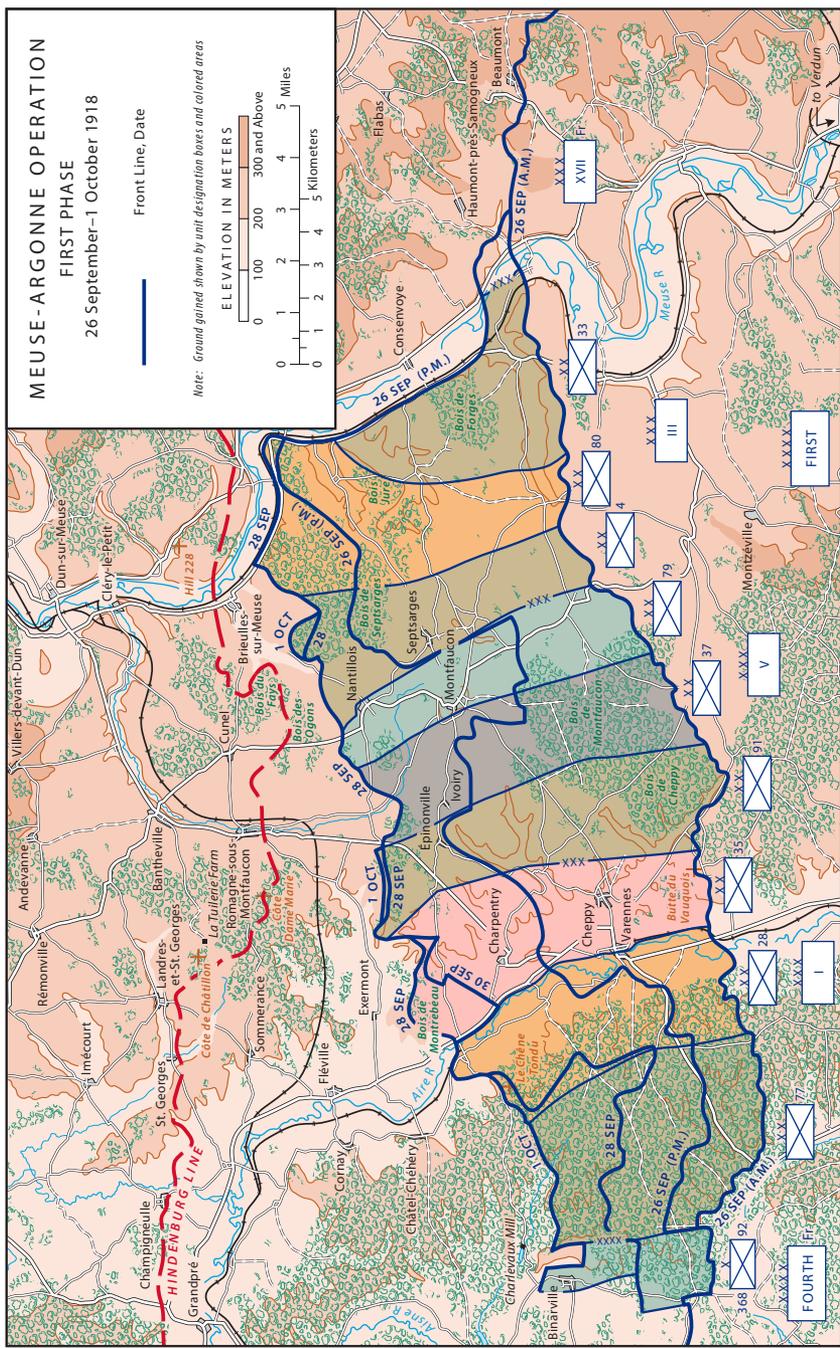
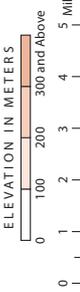
# MEUSE-ARGONNE OPERATION

## FIRST PHASE

26 September–1 October 1918

Front Line, Date

Note: Ground gained shown by unit designation boxes and colored areas



MAP 5

The corps' other two divisions made better progress. The 37th Division managed to clear the Bois de Montfaucon and pushed to the southern outskirts of Ivoiry and the western slope of Montfaucon itself by the afternoon, but exhaustion and the disorder of battle prevented it from offering assistance to the beleaguered 79th Division. In the west of the V Corps sector, the 91st Division advanced eight kilometers, fought through the Bois de Cheppy, and briefly took Épinonville before being pushed back by enemy counterattacks. Despite these accomplishments, by nightfall Montfaucon remained in German hands, and the V Corps was far short of its objectives for the day.

In the First Army's left sector, the I Corps also experienced a day of mixed success. On the corps' eastern flank, the 35th Division captured Cheppy and the formidable mine-cratered Butte du Vauquois after fierce fighting. Throughout the day, tanks from Patton's brigade aided the division's attacks. Patton himself was wounded during the action around Cheppy while organizing an attack on a group of German machine gun nests. After taking Cheppy and Vauquois, the 35th Division pushed on to the southern environs of Charpentry before nightfall; heavy casualties, and leadership problems halted its advance. Five days before the battle, the division commander, Maj. Gen. Peter E. Traub, had relieved all of his infantry regimental and brigade commanders. The replacements were virtually unknown to their soldiers and officers when the battle began. To make matters worse, in the midst of the first day's fighting, two regimental commanders were incapacitated during the battle. Col. Clad Hamilton of the 137th Infantry was found immobile in a shell hole while Col. Henry Howland of the 138th—who had been appointed to command the regiment only the day before—was injured by German shellfire and spent much of the morning sheltering in a crater before being evacuated. Both units were essentially without direction for much of the day. The desperate fighting had undermined the division's effectiveness, and ultimately its morale.

On the corps' left flank, the 77th Division slowly and painfully fought its way through the labyrinth of ravines, tangled vegetation, and German defenses of the Argonne Forest. By nightfall, the division had progressed less than two kilometers, lagging far behind the other units in the corps, and it had lost contact with the French Fourth Army to the west. Liggett had planned that the advance in the corps' center of the veteran 28th Division down the Aire Valley would force the Germans from their defenses



*Soldiers from the 92d Division moving to the front*  
(National Archives)

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in the Argonne and allow the 77th Division to quickly clear the forest. However, while the 28th Division overran Varennes, it faced stiffening enemy resistance north and west of the town as the day progressed. German artillery fire from positions hidden in the hills and draws of the Argonne slowed the division's advance to a crawl and dashed Liggett's hope for a rapid maneuver down the valley.

Just west of the I Corps boundary in the French Fourth Army sector, the U.S. 92d Division's 368th Infantry was also fighting to break the German hold on the Argonne. This regiment, like the rest of the division, was composed of African American enlisted men and junior officers, and white field-grade and general officers. Liggett had detached the regiment to the French to plug a gap in the Franco-American line and to maintain liaison between his forces and those of the French Fourth Army. The remainder of the 92d Division served as the I Corps reserve. Although far removed from the regiment, the 92d Division still had to provide logistical support to the unit while it was under French command. The division also suffered from Army policies and prejudices that had hampered its effectiveness from the outset. Unlike other American divisions, the 92d's units had been spread across several camps while it was undergoing mobilization and training in the United States.

This hindered instruction and the development of unit cohesion while the division was in its formative stages. Furthermore, the command's white senior officers often held the racial prejudices of Jim Crow-era America, with obvious negative effects on morale.

The French ordered the 368th Infantry to maintain contact with the U.S. 77th Division and to seize Binarville as part of the French 1st Dismounted Cavalry Division. Much of the zone of the regiment's attack lay within the Argonne Forest. As with the 77th Division, the 368th Infantry faced a determined enemy entrenched in difficult terrain. Unlike the 77th Division, however, the 368th Infantry's operation in the Argonne was the unit's first true exposure to combat. During its four-day struggle in the Argonne, the regiment's logistics and command and control structure broke down under the strain of combat and the unit became ineffective in the fight. The French returned control of the regiment back to the U.S. First Army on 30 September. Although the four African American infantry regiments (the 369th, 370th, 371st, and 372d) of the U.S. 93d Division fought with distinction with the French Army throughout the war, the AEF leadership used the perceived failure of the 368th Infantry as an excuse to keep the 92d Division out of the fighting for the remainder of the Meuse-Argonne Campaign.

At the end of the first day, Pershing knew that the American attack had fallen well short of his expectations. The First Army's staff was still pondering how to control and support a huge force engaged in a complex operation. At this point, the frustrated Pershing could do little more than to exhort his corps and division commanders to redouble their efforts in the coming days to get the operation back on track. To drive home the need to press the attack, he threatened his subordinates with relief if they failed to accomplish their tasks or did not show the degree of aggressiveness he expected.

As the Americans prepared to renew the offensive on 27 September, the Germans moved to prop up their wavering defenses. The *1st Guards Division* had taken a beating on the first day of the battle, and Einem had been forced to commit his reserve, the *5th Guards Division*, to restore the front of *Group Argonne*. Further to the east, Marwitz likewise had found it necessary to push the *5th Bavarian Reserve Division* forward to stabilize the front of the battered *117th* and *7th Reserve Divisions*. Although the Germans' situation was dire, they had been able to prevent the Americans from reaching their objectives and had bought enough time to rush reinforcements into the beleaguered sector. By the



*Ruins of Montfaucon with destroyed abbey in background  
(National Archives)*

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morning of 27 September, three full enemy divisions and part of a fourth were on their way to the Meuse-Argonne front.

As the Americans and Germans adjusted their forces, flaws in the First Army's original plan continued to hinder its operations from 27 to 30 September. Repeating German General Erich von Falkenhayn's mistake during the opening phase of the battle of Verdun, Pershing had not seen the necessity of clearing the Heights of the Meuse of enemy artillery. Instead, the First Army commander expected that counterbattery fire from the French XVII Corps would neutralize the German guns on the high ground east of the river. During the first two weeks of the offensive, the XVII Corps failed to accomplish this mission, and, in the absence of any threat of a ground attack the German artillery on the heights pounded both the III and V Corps sectors, helping to stall the American advance. The failed assumption that the French Fourth Army and the U.S. I Corps would unhinge the German defenses in the Argonne also hobbled the American drive. The Germans massed thirteen artillery batteries in the hills of the Argonne, and fire from those guns constantly interdicted the American advance through the Aire Valley.

In the face of stiffening enemy resistance, the First Army continued to grope forward in the waning days of September in an attempt to break through the German lines and reach its initial objectives. The 79th Division finally captured Montfaucon, and the 35th Division took Charpenry and briefly held Exermont before a strong German counterattack pushed it back to the Bois de Montrebeau. Unfortunately, both divisions suffered heavy casualties in the first three days of the offensive and lost much of their cohesion and combat effectiveness in the process. Although the I Corps continued to make a slow and costly advance through the Aire Valley and the Argonne, the V Corps made little headway against the German defenses on the Barrois Plateau. In the east, the missed opportunities of the first day of the battle now came back to haunt the III Corps. The Germans had taken advantage of the pause in the III Corps' advance to restore their defenses and reinforce their wavering units. When the American attack resumed, the commander of the 80th Division's 320th Infantry observed, "The enemy intrenchments [*sic*] afforded every advantage in position, concealment and for enfilade fire. Time and again rushes were made from the front and flank against the nests only to be met by a curtain of lead that was absolutely impassable. . . . Here lives were needlessly lost in trying to rush through this curtain of lead." As the III Corps' divisions battered their way through the Bois des Ogons and the Bois du Fays, the fighting, as in the other parts of the First Army's front, assumed a seesaw nature as American advances ran into heavy artillery fire and German counterattacks.

Across the front, the American infantry routinely did not receive adequate support from artillery and tanks. The artillerymen had difficulty providing responsive fires given the limitations of the era's tactical communications and the fluid and confused nature of the fighting. In the case of the tanks, the absence of support was the result of their own vulnerabilities. By the end of the first day's fighting, the 1st Tank Brigade lost over a third of its strength to enemy action and mechanical breakdowns. The French tankers suffered similar losses in the V Corps sector.

All was also not well in the First Army's rear area. The Meuse-Argonne region had an underdeveloped road network, and after four years of fighting and constant traffic the few existing roads were cratered and ill-maintained. Heavy rains throughout September and October exacerbated the problem. Each corps had only one major road artery in its sector to move and sustain

its massive formations. Poor road discipline, few military police units, and inadequate staff work added to the problem, resulting in monumental traffic jams behind the front that nearly brought the First Army's logistics operations to a standstill. As a result, the frontline soldiers often complained of being short of rations and water, and the wounded faced long and torturous waits before receiving medical attention. American medical personnel estimated that it took ten to twelve hours for the wounded to arrive at the field hospitals. The 79th Division's inspector general reported that it was taking his unit's ambulances fifteen hours to make the five-kilometer trip to the division field hospitals, which resulted in "hundreds" of unnecessary deaths.

*Reorganizing While in Contact: 1–4 October 1918*

With the advance stalled and the First Army's rear area in disarray, by the end of September it had become clear to Pershing that he must make adjustments in his organization to reinvigorate the First Army's offensive. His first act was to replace many of his corps' tattered and combat-ineffective divisions with the veteran units that had redeployed and recuperated from the St. Mihiel drive. The V Corps underwent a short tactical pause while all three of its attack divisions were relieved by the 3d and 32d Divisions. In the I Corps, the 1st Division replaced the 35th Division. Only the III Corps' organization remained unchanged.

Pershing planned to resume a general attack across the First Army's front on 4 October. While the reorganization of the army and the planning for the 4 October advance were underway, the I and III Corps continued to launch attacks within their sectors. The Germans, however, also had used the lull in the fighting to replace their worn divisions and send reinforcements to the Meuse-Argonne. Even though they were under attack along virtually the entire Western Front, by 4 October the better part of twelve German divisions would confront the Americans. In the face of this hardening resistance, the I and III Corps attacks made little headway.

This slow advance was doubly the case with the 77th Division as it continued to grind its way through the Argonne. During the fighting on 2 October, Maj. Charles W. Whittlesey's 1st Battalion, 308th Infantry; companies from the 2d Battalion; and elements of the 307th Infantry and the 306th Machine Gun Battalion found a seam in the enemy lines and pushed deep into the enemy defenses

toward Charlevaux Mill. Whittlesey had followed orders from his regimental commander, Col. Cromwell Stacey, to press the attack with vigor and not to worry about his flanks. Unfortunately, the units on his battalion's flanks had not kept pace with his advance, nor had other elements of the division followed up behind Whittlesey's drive. After Whittlesey halted his attack on the evening of 2 October, the Germans infiltrated around his men and cut them off from the rest of the 77th Division. By the morning, Whittlesey and roughly 550 doughboys were isolated in a small pocket surrounded by the enemy. The men of what would come to be known as the "Lost Battalion" dug in on a hillside to hold their ground and wait for relief.

*The Attack Resumes: 4–12 October 1918*

In the waning days of September, Pershing was under immense pressure from Foch to show more results in the Meuse-Argonne. After the impenetrable traffic jams in the First Army's rear area prevented him from visiting the American front, French premier Georges Clemenceau concluded that Pershing was not up to the challenge of commanding an army. He pressed Foch to relieve the American commander in chief and even threatened to write to President Wilson to request a new leader for the AEF. Although Foch managed to dissuade Clemenceau from taking such a drastic step, he also held reservations about Pershing's ability to manage such a massive undertaking. On 30 September, he proposed to Pershing that the U.S. I Corps be placed under French command for clearing the Argonne region. Pershing, unsurprisingly, rejected the scheme out of hand, but he also understood Foch's warning. The somewhat rested First Army would redouble its efforts in the Meuse-Argonne with a broad frontal attack beginning at 0530 on 4 October with the goal of cracking the Hindenburg Line.

The First Army's plan for the resumed attack was clear-cut and uncomplicated. Clearing the hills of the Barrois Plateau was the key to breaking through the main German defense line. The V Corps again received the most difficult mission. The corps was to take the Romagne Heights and the high ground in the Bois du Moncy and Bois du Romagne. The I and III Corps would assist the V Corps in its endeavors by threatening the enemy's flanks on the plateau while also clearing the enemy from their own sectors. The I Corps would continue to push through the Argonne and the Aire Valley to seize the hills in the vicinity of Cornay,

Châtel-Chéhéry, and Exermont; clear the forest of troublesome enemy artillery; and establish unbroken liaison with the French Fourth Army. By taking the hills north of Exermont, the I Corps would weaken the German defenses that the V Corps faced on the Romagne Heights. At the same time, the III Corps was to capture the heights northwest of Cunel and move on to assist the V Corps in seizing the hills north of Romagne. Pershing hoped that the infusion of hardened and proven units, such as the 1st and 3d Divisions, would provide the impetus that the First Army needed to jump start the offensive.

What followed were two of the bloodiest weeks in American history (*Map 6*). Faced with a nearly unbroken line of German defenses strengthened by the arrival of fresh reinforcements, the American assault degenerated into a series of costly frontal attacks. The Germans contested every American advance and often deprived the doughboys of their hard-won gains with counterattacks that were well supported by artillery. American drives in the I and III Corps sectors continued to be hamstrung by German artillery fire from the Argonne and the Heights of the Meuse. Bullard later described the struggle as “an exhausting, heart-breaking, discouraging, ever-continuous operation that lasted all the time.” Losses in the back-and-forth fighting were heavy. In the first week of October, the First Army suffered 6,589 battlefield deaths. By the end of the second week of October, over 12,600 Americans had been killed since the offensive began. These losses were greater than those suffered by both Grant’s and Lee’s armies in the first two months of the Overland Campaign in 1864, and were nearly double the nation’s combined losses in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2001 to 2017.

Although the Germans stymied the III and V Corps’ attacks by tenaciously clinging to the Romagne and Cunel heights, the I Corps made steady if painful progress in its sector. In savage fighting from 4 to 7 October, the 28th Division took the high ground of Le Chêne Tondu and Châtel-Chéhéry. During the same period, the fresh 1st Division drove five kilometers into the German defenses and captured Exermont. Unfortunately, the 77th Division remained stalled in the machine-gun-swept thickets of the Argonne Forest.

The success of the 1st Division’s attacks presented Liggett with an opportunity to change the fortunes of the I Corps and the First Army. The division had driven far enough down the Aire Valley to carve out sufficient maneuver space for Liggett to wedge the corps’ reserve, the 82d Division, into a position south



of Fléville and north of the 28th Division's positions at Châtel-Chéhéry. Liggett's plan was to use the 82d Division to drive due west into the northeastern edge of the Argonne Forest at Cornay and Hill 223. At the same time, the 28th Division would shift the direction of its attack from the north to the west to seize Hill 244. Liggett's goal was to threaten simultaneously the eastern flank and the rear of the main German defenses in the Argonne. If the plan succeeded, the Germans would be forced to abandon the forest or face the eventual encirclement and destruction of *Group Argonne*. In either case, the I Corps attack would relieve enemy pressure on the 77th Division, reestablish an unbroken line with the French Fourth Army, and aid in the relief of the Lost Battalion. However, the plan was not without its risks, as the right flank of the 82d Division would be exposed to enemy fire and counterattacks throughout the operation.

The I Corps gave the 82d Division less than a day to plan the assault and move the division's roughly 28,000 soldiers nearly thirteen kilometers through the congested roads that led from its assembly areas to its attack positions. (*See Map 7.*) Although the unit had to make the difficult move at night during a steady rain, the 82d was in position to launch the attack at the designated time of 0500 on 7 October. Both the 82d and the 28th Divisions faced the daunting task of assaulting across the open expanse of the Aire Valley to capture high ground defended by a resolute, well-entrenched enemy. The assault units lost hundreds of men as they slogged across the bottomlands to reach the heights of the Argonne, but by the end of the day the 28th Division had claimed Hill 244 and the 82d had taken Hill 223.

In the midst of this terrible contest, a smaller drama played out in the little pocket defended by the Lost Battalion. For nearly five days, Whittlesey's encircled men had endured both American and German artillery fire and fought off a series of enemy attacks. Fortunately, Liggett's assault into the German flank had the intended effect of unhinging the enemy's position in the Argonne. For the Lost Battalion, the Germans withdrew just in the nick of time: when the enemy abandoned their siege of Whittlesey's position on the afternoon of 7 October, 107 of the 550 men in the pocket had been killed and another 249 were wounded or missing in action. For their courage and leadership during the battle, Major Whittlesey, Capt. George G. McMurtry, and Capt. Nelson M. Holderman were awarded the Medal of Honor. Two American aviators, 1st Lt. Harold E. Goettler and 2d Lt. Erwin R. Bleckley,



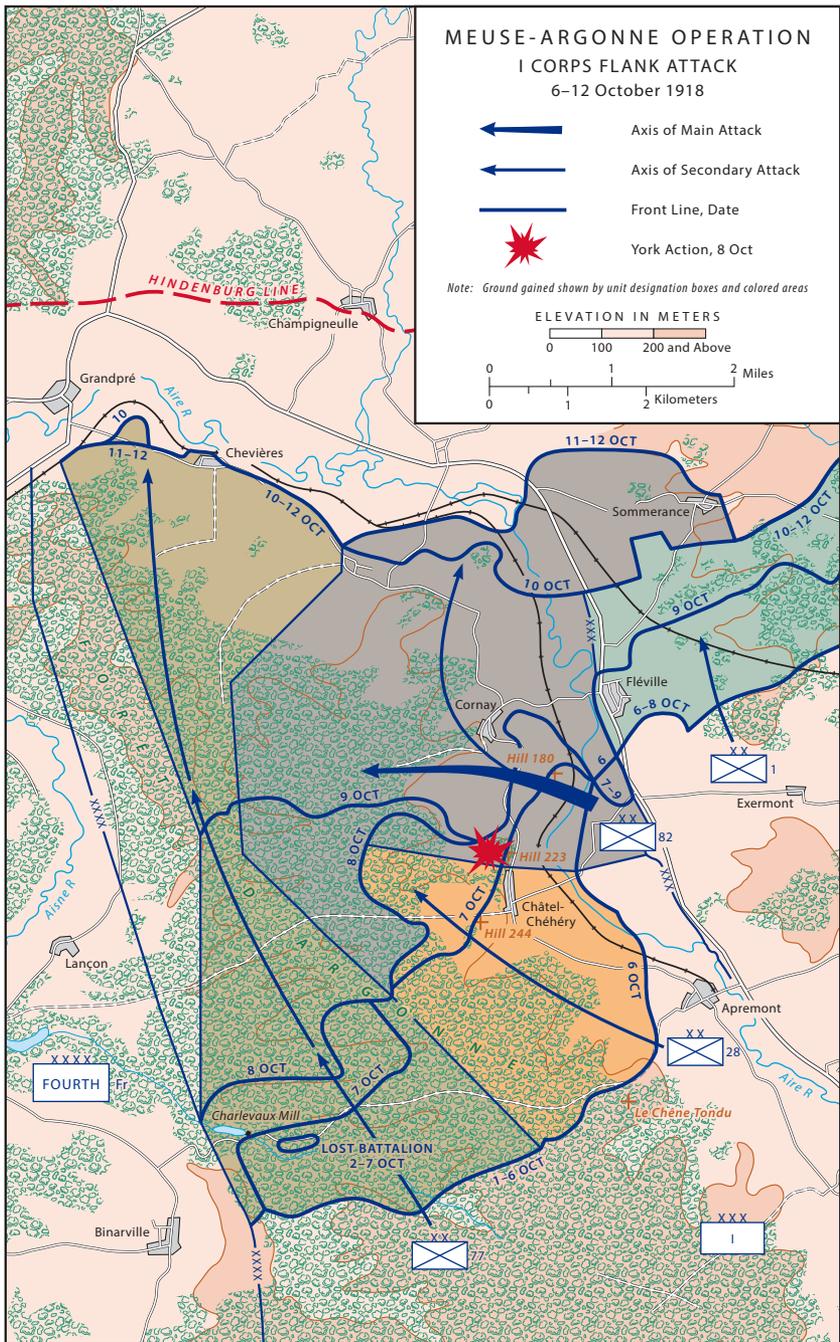
*Members of the Lost Battalion* (National Archives)

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also received posthumous Medals of Honor after being shot down on 6 October while attempting to resupply the pocket from the air.

The relief of the Lost Battalion was a welcome development, but the I Corps' attack had not yet run its course. By nightfall on 7 October, the 82d Division still had not taken Cornay or cut the light rail line that supplied the Germans in the southern portion of the Argonne. Although the division fought off repeated German attempts to recapture Hill 223, the enemy was still able to use heavy machine gun and artillery fires to pin down the Americans on the hill and in the lowlands east of Cornay.

When the 82d resumed the attack on the morning of 8 October, the soldiers were met with a torrent of fire. To eliminate some of the machine gun nests holding up his advance, the commander of Company G, 2d Battalion, 328th Infantry, Capt. Edward C. B. Danforth maneuvered to attack the German positions. In the confusion, the commander of Danforth's 1st Platoon, Sgt. Harry M. Parson, lost contact with the company and on his own initiative ordered acting Sgt. Bernard Early to take a reinforced squad of three corporals and thirteen privates to flank the enemy machine guns. Initially, Early successfully surprised and captured a number of Germans, but an alert enemy machine gun crew spotted the Americans and opened fire. When the German fusillade killed one corporal and severely wounded Early and another corporal, the command of the small detachment



**MAP 7**



*Alvin C. York in 1919*  
(National Archives)

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fell to Cpl. Alvin C. York. Under intense machine gun and rifle fire, York ordered his surviving squad members to remain under cover while he crawled to a position where he could enfilade the German defenders. The Tennessee marksman managed to kill fifteen to twenty-five of the enemy facing his squad before leading his detachment back to the American lines. Along the way, York's squad forced the surrender of additional enemy units and the Americans returned to their regiment with 132 German prisoners. York also captured or destroyed thirty-five of the enemy machine guns that were holding up the advance of his battalion. For these actions, York was awarded the Medal of Honor and soon became the most famous doughboy in the AEF.

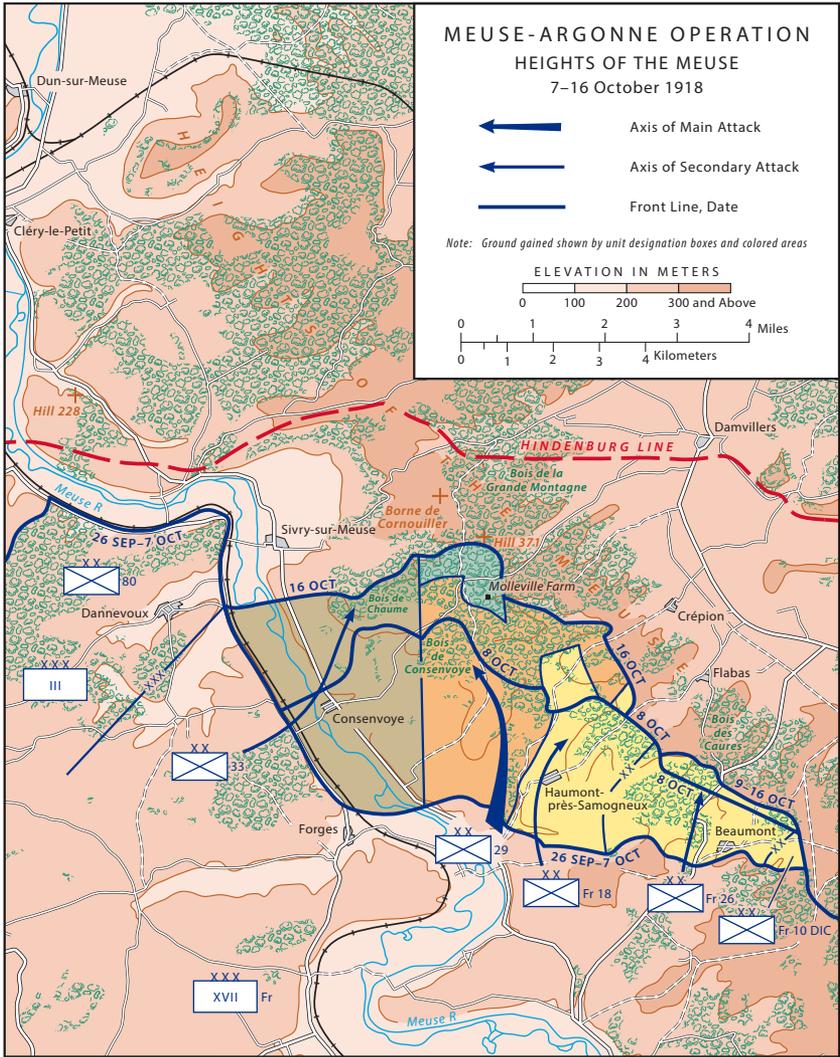
Similar acts of valor and perseverance by the soldiers of the I Corps began to pay off. Faced with the growing threat of being cut off by the advance of the 28th and 82d Divisions, and under increasing pressure from the French Fourth Army to the west, the Germans began to withdraw from the Argonne on the night of 8 and 9 October. On 10 October, Liggett relieved the battered 28th Division and ordered the 77th and 82d to redouble their attacks. Liggett wanted to exploit his success in the Argonne by pressing his divisions to rapidly pursue the retreating Germans, but the enemy's rearguard defense and his own men's exhaustion thwarted his desires. Pvt. Fred Takes, an infantryman in the 82d Division's 325th Infantry, recorded that his company went into the Meuse-Argonne Campaign with 250 men, but nine days of continuous combat had reduced the unit to three five-man squads. Despite these challenges, the I Corps continued to push back the Germans, and by 11 October, Liggett's doughboys occupied a line running from Sommerance in the east to the southern outskirts of Grandpré in the west.

## *The Attacks East of the Meuse: 8–16 October 1918*

After the III and V Corps endured weeks of heavy shelling from German artillery located on the Heights of the Meuse, Pershing ordered the French XVII Corps to launch an attack east of the Meuse River to clear the enemy from the hills (*Map 8*). Général de Division Henri Claudel, a decorated and respected officer with four years of experience battling the Germans, commanded the corps. Claudel committed two French divisions, the 18th and 26th, and two American divisions, the 29th and 33d, to the assault. Their mission was to attack on line at 0500 on 8 October from just west of Consenvoye on the left to Beaumont on the right, seize the Heights of the Meuse, and push the enemy back roughly eight kilometers to Sivry-sur-Meuse and Flabas. Facing this Franco-American attack were the Austrian *1st Infantry Division* and the German *15th Division*. The Austrians' morale was shaky, but shortages of manpower on the front had left *Group Meuse East* with no other option than to keep the unit in the line.

At first, the French XVII Corps' attack went well. Under heavy enemy shellfire, the 33d Division crafted bridges across the Meuse and moved across the river to take Consenvoye. The division then pressed northeast nearly four kilometers toward the western tip of the Bois de Consenvoye and the Bois de Chaume. The 29th Division also rapidly advanced north three kilometers toward the center of the Bois de Consenvoye. The concerted attack by the American divisions all but crushed the Austrian division. The veteran French divisions east of the Americans moved much slower. The Americans would later complain that their French comrades failed to cover the doughboys' flanks and left the hard fighting to U.S. divisions. The soldiers themselves failed to appreciate that four years of fighting with heavy losses had taught the French to be more cautious and judicious than the Americans in their attacks. Even so, the French 18th Division took Haumont-près-Samogneux and moved forward to Ormont Farm, while the French 26th Division gingerly advanced through the Bois des Caures.

In the afternoon of 8 October, the Allied attack began to slow as the troops entered the hills and woods of the Heights of the Meuse. The German commander rushed his only ready reserve, an infantry regiment reinforced with two battalions, to steady the wavering Austrian line with a counterattack on Hill 371. The *Group Meuse East* commander also began moving three more divisions toward the threatened sector of the front. After German



**MAP 8**

resistance stiffened, the fighting in the Bois de Consenvoye and the Bois de Chaume quickly came to resemble the vicious fighting in the Argonne.

For six more days, the French XVII Corps battered away at the German defenses on the Heights of the Meuse. Gains by the 29th and 33d Divisions at Molleville Farm, the Bois de Consenvoye,

the Bois de Chaume, and the Bois de la Grande Montagne were met with fierce German counterattacks and heavy enemy artillery and gas barrages. By 16 October, both American divisions were exhausted and the corps' attack ground to a halt well short of clearing the heights and taking Sivry-sur-Meuse. Three years after the war, the chief of staff of the German *XVI Corps*, Maj. Hermann von Giehl, argued that the French *XVII Corps*' attack "was much too slight to have any influence on the situation on the western bank." Although Giehl's assertion had much truth to it, the Franco-American drive nonetheless forced the Germans to displace some of their batteries from the heights, redirect the fires of many of their remaining batteries east of the Meuse against the French *XVII Corps*, and devote more of their dwindling reserves to the battle.

### *A Change of Command for the First Army*

By the middle of October, the First Army's bloody assaults still had not carried the Americans to their initial first-day objectives. No one felt the stress of this perceived lack of progress more than Pershing. Not merely under immense pressure from Foch to show more gains in the Meuse-Argonne, Pershing also desperately wanted to show the world that the AEF was a competent and capable force that was worthy of a true world power. In what was perhaps his wisest decision as the AEF's commander, he admitted that commanding the large and far-flung AEF while also directing the operations of the First Army was too much for one man.

On 12 October, Pershing ordered the reorganization of the AEF. He relinquished direct command of the First Army and divided it into two smaller armies. Pershing turned over the First Army, which would continue to direct operations in the Meuse-Argonne sector and the area of the French *XVII Corps*, to Hunter Liggett. The new Second Army, under Robert Bullard, would be responsible for the eastern end of the American sector from Fresnes-en-Woëvre to Port-sur-Seille. Pershing was now free to oversee the larger business of the AEF and to direct its combat operations through his two trusted army commanders. The elevation of Liggett and Bullard led to the transfer of Maj. Gen. Joseph T. Dickman to command the I Corps and the promotion of General Hines to command the III Corps.

Pershing also used the reorganization to conduct a house cleaning of the AEF's senior commanders. He believed that

the V Corps' lack of aggressiveness in the opening phase of the operation had contributed to the First Army's doleful situation, and thus sacked General Cameron. Pershing hoped that Cameron's replacement, Maj. Gen. Charles P. Summerall, would bring to the V Corps the same drive and tactical acumen that he had exhibited as the commander of the 1st Division. Cameron was not the last general to fall. Pershing had established a reputation for not suffering fools or failure lightly. As early as 28 December 1917, Bullard noted in his diary, "He is looking for results. . . . He will sacrifice any man who does not bring them." Within four days of the AEF's reorganization, Pershing removed 3d Division commander Maj. Gen. Beaumont B. Buck after Buck nearly battered the division to pieces in six days of ill-supported attacks against the Bois de Cunel and its adjacent heights. Similarly, he dismissed 5th Division commander Maj. Gen. John E. McMahon, who had mishandled assaults on the Bois des Rappes and the Bois de la Pultière. On 22 October, Pershing also relieved the commander of the 26th Division, Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Edwards, with whom he had long had a contentious relationship. These removals helped to create a climate of fear within the AEF's senior ranks that sometimes led commanders to push their attacks long after the hope of success had passed.

*Breaking the Hindenburg Line: 14–27 October 1918*

When Liggett took command, the First Army was in crisis. The grinding attritional struggle to clear the Argonne, capture the Heights of the Meuse, and break through the German defensive belts had cost the Americans nearly a hundred thousand casualties. Liggett estimated that another hundred thousand men were straggling behind the lines. Although some of these men had deliberately removed themselves from the fighting, most of the straggling resulted from systemic problems with the army's training, mobilization, and organization. The huge 250-man infantry companies proved difficult for the army's inadequately trained officers and noncommissioned officers (NCOs) to control in the region's challenging terrain. The failure of the AEF's logistics system all too often meant that the soldiers in combat subsisted on a diet of hard bread, corned beef, or canned salmon. Many of the soldiers who left the line did so to search for food after they had eaten all of even these meager rations. Adding to this misery, in early October the weather had turned cold and rainy,

and increasing numbers of doughboys came down with influenza and dysentery. For example, during the month of October, the 82d Division's chief surgeon reported that an average of 700 soldiers from his unit were being hospitalized per day due to influenza, diarrhea, or exhaustion.

To make matters worse, the AEF's unexpectedly high casualties in the summer and fall of 1918 led the army to ship large numbers of soldiers to France before they had completed their instruction. An officer of the Army General Staff Training and Instruction Branch was shocked to report on 2 October, that "enlisted men have had to be placed in overseas units before being trained; many of them receive only three weeks' training," which included one week spent in the detention camp for quarantine. It is no surprise that officers and NCOs in France often complained that their replacements lacked the basic skills to fight, much less survive, in battle. The commander of the 307th Infantry informed the First Army's inspector general in October that 90 percent of the 850 to 900 replacements that his unit received just before going into the Argonne had never fired a rifle or thrown a grenade. Several officers reported that they had to teach their new men how to load their weapons and don their gas masks just before the novices went into combat. The poor preparation of replacements often led directly to tactical failure and unnecessarily high casualties.

In addition to the issues with the infantry, the fighting in the Meuse-Argonne also revealed problems with the AEF's supporting arms. At the end of the St. Mihiel Offensive, the French reassigned many of the air squadrons that they had attached to the Americans for that operation. This left General Mitchell with far fewer aircraft to cover the much larger region of the Meuse-Argonne. Mechanical problems quickly pared the aircraft available for the operation from 840 down to 670 planes. The departure of the French further meant that three-fourths of Mitchell's planes were flown by Americans. Many of these men were novices to flying, let alone combat. Throughout the campaign, poor weather and rugged terrain further hampered air operations. American air observers found the weather clear enough to accurately spot or target the enemy on only ten of the forty-seven days of the campaign. These issues meant that Mitchell's decision to focus most of the American air operations against targets in the enemy's rear area met with only limited success and drew the ire of many American soldiers. Although the airmen had some success in air interdiction, they could not prevent German air attacks on American ground forces.

This is not to say that the American pilots did not try to ease the doughboys' burdens. In the ten sorties flown between 12 and 29 September 1918 over the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne sectors, 2d Lt. Frank Luke Jr. shot down fourteen German observation balloons and four enemy airplanes. As observation balloons were heavily defended and dangerous to destroy, his accomplishments were no mean feat. On his last mission, Luke shot down three balloons near Dun-sur-Meuse before being wounded and forced down behind enemy lines. After landing, he reportedly used his pistol to hold off a party of Germans advancing to take him prisoner before dying from his wound. For his skills and bravery in the air, Luke became the first American aviator to win the Medal of Honor.

Luke was not the only American aviator to gain fame in the skies above the Meuse-Argonne. Capt. Edward "Eddie" Rickenbacker, the commander of the 94th Aero Squadron, entered the campaign with eleven aerial victories to his credit. Between 28 September and 30 October, Rickenbacker shot down five additional German balloons and ten airplanes during his flights over the Meuse-Argonne. His twenty-six total kills made him the highest-scoring American ace of the war. However, despite the valor of aviators such as Luke and Rickenbacker, the Air Service obtained mixed results from its air operations throughout October.

The First Army also experienced problems with some of the new weapons of ground warfare. Although the army's tankers had provided needed support to the infantry from time to time in the opening weeks of the campaign, their lack of training and experience in infantry-armor cooperation hobbled their efforts. Few infantry commanders understood the new vehicles' capabilities and limitations, or how to work with them to overcome German resistance while providing mutual protection for both types of units. The fact that many of the American divisions had been supported by French tank battalions in the first week of the battle only exacerbated these difficulties. American infantrymen could at least communicate with their countrymen in an ad hoc form of coordination, but the language differences between the Americans and French made this almost impossible. High losses and mechanical breakdowns also limited the effectiveness of the tanks. When Liggett took over the First Army, half of his tanks were inoperable, a circumstance not uncommon in those early days of armored warfare.



*Street fighting in Exermont* (National Archives)

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The tankers' inability to advance put even greater pressure on the artillery to support the infantry. Unfortunately, many divisions continued to wrestle with the challenge of properly coordinating artillery fires with infantry attacks. This often meant that while the AEF's guns were able to suppress the Germans with preplanned fires, the time lag between the bombardment and the American infantry attacks generally gave the enemy enough time to emerge from their shelters and reestablish their defenses. When faced with unexpected enemy resistance, the infantry had difficulty communicating with artillery and arranging needed fire support.

Liggett and his staff worked hard to overcome these problems by sorting out the American logistical tangle and by putting divisions rotating from the line through hasty training programs intended to correct shortcomings in the AEF's tactical skills and doctrine. The AEF GHQ also attempted to rectify some of the Americans' shortcomings by publishing *Notes on Recent Operations* to pass on the army's tactical lessons. The *Notes*

on *Recent Operations No. 3* that the AEF GHQ released on 12 October offered unit commanders from the platoon to the division level directions on how to best employ their tanks, artillery, machine guns, and logistical assets based upon the experiences at St. Mihiel and the first week of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. For example, it noted that much of the army's difficulties in tank-infantry coordination stemmed from the fact that infantry commanders had failed to give their tanks specific objectives that would support the infantry's operations. Some of the pamphlet's advice, however, demonstrated that the AEF high command was still far too wedded to the notions of war that had dominated the tactical thinking of 1914. The publication chided commanders for being too concerned with avoiding casualties and too reliant on artillery fire to destroy enemy machine guns when they should have been using rifle fire to overcome this menace. Reflecting Pershing's belief that the Americans needed to be more aggressive, it stressed, "It is seldom wrong to go forward. It is seldom wrong to attack. In the attack it is much better to lose many men than to fail to gain ground." Given the pace of the First Army's operations, it is unclear how many commanders had the opportunity to read the *Notes on Recent Operations* series, but combat experience and Liggett's efforts to fix what he could in his army's training and operations did lead to slow and steady improvements in how the Americans fought.

Despite Liggett's best efforts, some of the army's problems remained intractable. By early October, Foch's decision to redirect the AEF to the Meuse-Argonne was beginning to have a negative impact on the First Army's operations. Even though the men in the SOS worked diligently to keep up with the supply demands of combat units, the First Army's railheads were still too far removed from the fighting. It was difficult to move supplies, ammunition, and units to the front, and the autumn rains and heavy traffic continued to overtax the region's limited road network and to reduce logistical operations to a crawl. Most of the army's supply wagons and artillery were horse-drawn, as were many of its ambulances. By 8 October, the First Army was short 50,000 horses and mules. Sickness, enemy action, and the exhaustion caused by pulling heavy loads through muddy roads and difficult terrain added to this shortfall in draft animals as the campaign dragged on.

Unfortunately, the First Army could not pause while it worked out these issues. Liggett understood that he must get the American



*Observing for the artillery* (National Archives)

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offensive back on track by breaking through the Hindenburg Line (*Map 9*). The army's renewed attack began on 14 October. The objective was to rupture the German lines between St. Georges and the Romagne Heights in a double envelopment conducted by units of the V and III Corps. After the corps pierced the German defenses, they would exploit their success by pushing on to seize the Bois de Bantheville. Pershing and Liggett believed that taking the heights in the center of the enemy line would render the remainder of the Hindenburg Line within the sector untenable for the Germans. The I Corps' mission during the attack was to protect the left flank of the V Corps by driving the Germans back to a line running from Imécourt in the east to the high ground in the Bois de Bourgogne in the west.

The left wing of Liggett's envelopment was the V Corps' seasoned 42d Division. The "Rainbow" Division was to advance through the Bois du Romagne and take the heights running from St. Georges to the Côte de Châtillon, and then swing east into the Bois de Bantheville. On the right wing of the envelopment, the III Corps' 3d and 5th Divisions were to clear the Germans from the heights of Cunel and the hills east of Romagne before moving to the northwest to assist the V Corps in seizing the Bois de Bantheville. The 32d Division was positioned at the center of the envelopment. Its mission was to attack the Côte Dame Marie to prevent the Germans from shifting forces to block the wings of the main assaults. To draw attention away from the main attacks and ensure that the Germans remained in place, the 32d Division was to launch its attack three hours prior to the assaults of the 5th and 42d Divisions.

The attack did not go off as planned. To reach St. Georges and Landres-et-St. Georges, the 42d Division's left flank unit, the 83d Infantry Brigade, had to cross a mile of open ground and work its way through belts of uncut barbed wire. Repeated surges against the enemy line soon decimated the brigade. Even with the desperate valor of its soldiers, the German defenses of Landres-et-St. Georges proved too strong for the 83d Brigade to overcome.

On the 42d Division's right flank, Brig. Gen. Douglas MacArthur's 84th Infantry Brigade managed to fight its way to the base of the machine-gun-studded slopes of the Côte de Châtillon and La Tuilerie Farm by the end of the first day's fighting. MacArthur later claimed that on the eve of the attack the V Corps commander, General Summerall, had warned him, "Give me Châtillon, or a list of five thousand casualties." Although MacArthur may have exaggerated this exchange, he understood



the importance of taking the high ground in his sector. Between 15 and 16 October, MacArthur's men painfully clawed the hill out of the grip of its resolute German defenders.

The 42d Division's attack had secured Liggett an opening in the Hindenburg Line, but this success had come at a great price. In three days of fighting, the division suffered 2,895 casualties. A further indication of the intensity of the fighting was the fact that in those three days, three soldiers of the division won Medals of Honor. One famous recipient was Lt. Col. William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, a battalion commander in the 165th Infantry and the future head of the World War II Office of Strategic Services. During his regiment's fight to take Landres-et-St. Georges, Donovan personally led repeated sorties against enemy positions. Despite being wounded below the knee by a machine gun bullet, he refused to be evacuated, and he organized the withdrawal of his remaining troops from their precarious forward positions.

On the right wing of the First Army's envelopment, the 5th Division also encountered grave challenges in carrying out its mission. The unit's march to the front and its relief of the 80th Division occurred under constant German artillery fire from the high ground around Cunel and Romagne and from the still-unconquered Heights of the Meuse. Worse yet, poor planning and the confusion of battle resulted in the 5th Division's 14 October attack lacking sufficient artillery support to cover the infantry's advance. The absence of any meaningful suppressive fires allowed the Germans to rain machine gun and artillery fires down on the Americans from the front and from both flanks. Yet even in the face of this galling assault from above, the division managed to capture Cunel and push into the southern edge of the Bois de la Pultière.

During the attack, one act of heroism stood out. A soldier involved in the 5th Division's assault, 1st Lt. Samuel Woodfill, had served for over sixteen years in the Regular Army's enlisted ranks and had fought in the Philippine Insurrection before earning a commission in 1917. Before the division's main attack, Woodfill led his company on a reconnaissance patrol to Cunel. After his unit came under fire from multiple machine guns, Woodfill used his marksmanship skills to kill the crews of one gun after another. He proceeded to methodically clear the area of Germans, all while suffering from the effects of mustard gas. In taking out the last machine gun nest, Woodfill killed two gunners with a pick after his pistol jammed during the melee. For his conspicuous act of valor, Woodfill was awarded the Medal of Honor.

The bravery of men like Woodfill, however, could not rescue the 5th Division from its dilemma. On the morning of 15 October, the division resumed its attacks, but again the artillery failed to adequately support the infantry's advance. The division managed to fight through the Bois de la Pultière and, after hard and costly fighting, its 9th Infantry Brigade reached the northern edge of the Bois des Rappes by nightfall. Unfortunately, later that night the division commander, General McMahon, received a false report that panic had swept the troops of the 9th Brigade, sending the unit into a full retreat. McMahon ordered the division to abandon their gains and pull back to the Bois de la Pultière without bothering to confirm the veracity of the report. Hundreds of soldiers would fall over the next four days as the 5th Division battled to take back what McMahon had so easily surrendered on 16 October. By the time the division pulled out of the line on 22 October, it had lost 779 men killed in action, 3,108 wounded, and 562 gas casualties.

On the 5th Division's left, the 32d Division's attack on 14 October highlighted the fickle nature of war. Although the unit's advance was intended only as a holding action, its attack succeeded beyond expectations and the division cut another breach in the Hindenburg Line. Despite being repulsed in several attacks on the Côte Dame Marie between 9 and 13 October, strokes of good luck accompanied by acts of bravery and tactical good sense allowed the 32d Division to not only capture the deadly hilltop on 14 October, but also surge ahead to seize Romagne. Although the 14 October attack initially stalled on the left flank and in the center, on the right the 128th Infantry, supported by effective artillery fires, outflanked the German positions at Romagne and allowed the Americans to seize the defenses that had long held up the First Army's advance. The 128th Infantry's attack unhinged the German defenders in the division's sector and caused a domino effect along their lines.

In the division's center, a small party of eight soldiers from the 3d Battalion, 126th Infantry, discovered a gap in the enemy defenses at Hill 258 on the Côte Dame Marie ridge. This detachment, led by Capt. Edward B. Strom, skillfully used the terrain to flank the German positions and captured ten machine guns. Here, the fog of war worked to the Americans' advantage. Unaware of the small size of Strom's force, and fearing that they had been surrounded by the advance of the 126th and 128th Infantry, many other Germans facing Strom's detachment surrendered or abandoned their positions. The slackening of the enemy's fire on the ridge allowed



*Road congestion during the campaign* (National Archives)

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the rest of the 126th Infantry to surge up the hill. The 126th and 128th Infantry's successes in weakening the German defenses also allowed the stalled 127th Infantry to move forward on the 32d Division's left flank. The division exploited these successes and pushed over two kilometers farther into the German lines before the end of the day. Subsequent attacks on 15 October cleared most of the Bois de Chavignon and secured the division a lodgment for later attacks against the Bois de Bantheville.

Although Liggett now had his breach in the Hindenburg Line, much fighting remained to clear the enemy from the rest of the line and finally secure the objectives that the First Army had intended to reach on 26 and 27 September. To continue the attack, Liggett's first order of business was to rotate fresh units into the fight. The 4th, 33d, and 77th Divisions had been in the line since the beginning of the offensive and were in desperate need of relief. Furthermore, hard fighting had reduced the 3d, 5th, 32d, 42d, and 82d Divisions to under half their authorized strength of combat soldiers.

While these units were rotated out of the line for rest and refit, the First Army launched a series of local attacks both east and west of the Meuse from 18 to 27 October to gain relative positions of advantage across its area of operation. (*See Map 10.*) In the I Corps' sector, the fresh 78th Division fought its way into Grandpré, the Bois de Bourgone, and the Bois des Loges. At the same time,

the V Corps battled to expand its breach of the German line by launching a series of local attacks to clear the Bois de Bantheville, the Bois du Romagne, and the Bois de Chavignon. Along the Meuse, the III Corps fought a brutal series of engagements to capture the Bois des Rappes and Les Clairs Chênes. East of the Meuse, the French XVII Corps attempted to restart its stalled effort to capture the Heights of the Meuse by launching attacks between Sivry-sur-Meuse and Crépion from 23 to 28 October. Despite these efforts, the corps' doughboys and poilus made little headway against the area's stubborn defenders.

*Preparing for the Final Push: 27–31 October 1918*

By 22 October, it was evident to Liggett that heavy casualties, troop exhaustion, and tangled supply lines had taken their toll on the First Army's momentum. As he recalled:

The condition in the First Army was such that it was imperative to rehabilitate our divisions, get necessary replacements into condition for action, gather up a mass of stragglers and return them to their proper commands, and while keeping up pressure on the enemy, prepare for a powerful, well-coordinated effort . . . we needed rest and refit.

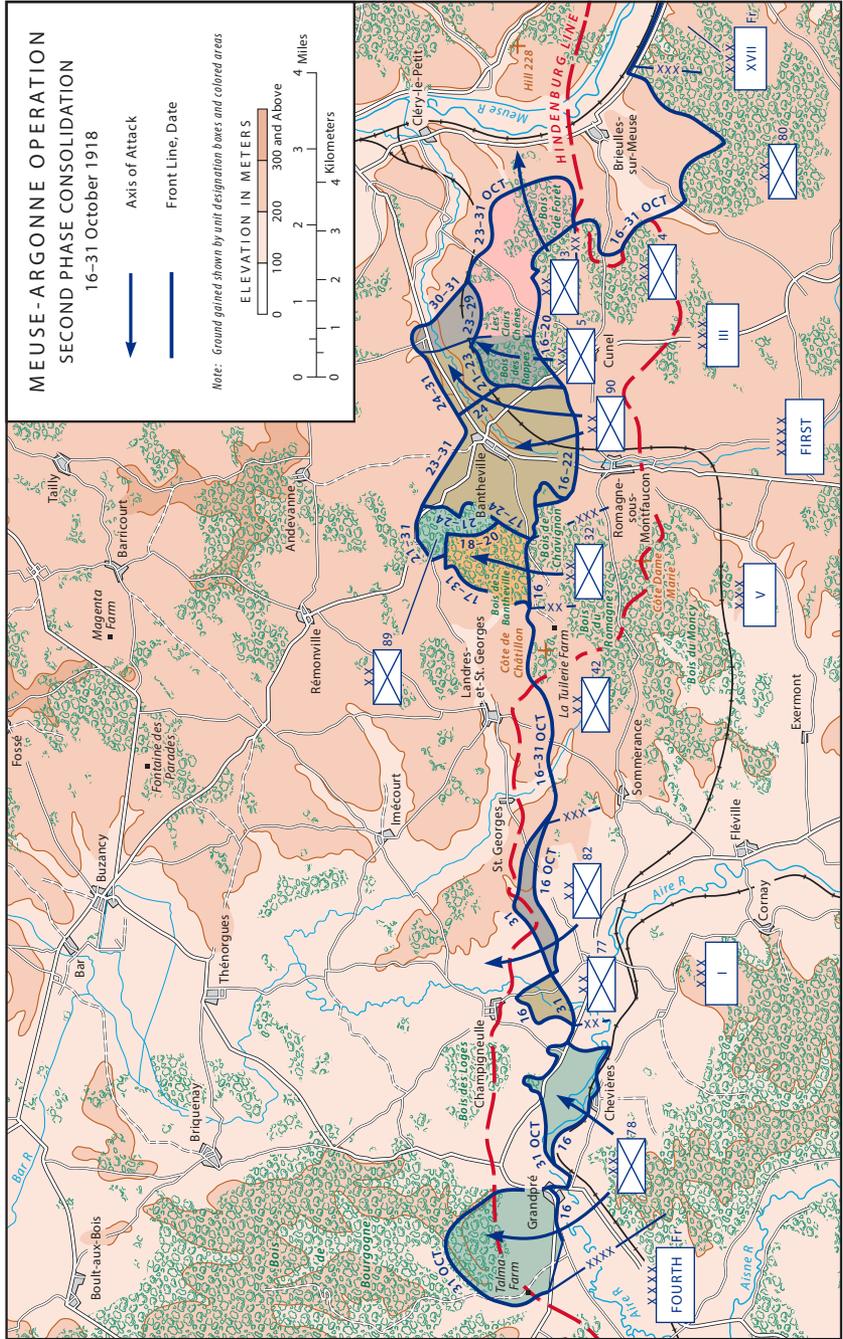
Reports from Liggett's staff and commanders supported this observation. During its first two weeks fighting in the Meuse-Argonne, the 1st Division had suffered over 9,000 casualties. As the storied division's inspector general noted, "the morale of the unit is not nearly as high as it formerly was. This is shown by the general demeanor of the men and the lack of snap and spirit which formerly prevailed in this unit." Liggett was convinced that his army needed a short operational pause to sort out its problems and to prepare for a renewed and redoubled attack on the Germans. He originally planned to begin the assault around 28 October, but as General Henri Gouraud's neighboring French Fourth Army also needed rest, Pershing and Liggett agreed that the Americans and French would resume their coordinated attacks on 1 November. This gave the First Army four days to replenish and retrain its depleted ranks and to plan and coordinate its all-important artillery and supply operations for the upcoming attack.

During this pause, the army's engineers feverishly labored to build new roads and light rail lines and to improve the existing

supply routes throughout the army's sector. Likewise, First Army logisticians devoted much of their energies to moving forward the mountains of shells that the First Army would need for the coming attack. To aid in these efforts, Pershing directed the AEF chief of staff, Maj. Gen. James W. McAndrew, and the AEF chief of operations (G-3), General Conner, to focus their attention on ensuring the smooth flow of supplies from the SOS to the front and to correcting the army's previous lapses in communications and in its command and control system.

Although the First Army's operations greatly slowed during the last week of October, they did not stop. Liggett planned for a set-piece battle on 1 November and worked to give his forces every possible advantage on H-hour. This meant that the army's corps continued to conduct local attacks to secure the best possible terrain for launching the main assault. The American front on 31 October ran from roughly a kilometer north of Grandpré on the army's western boundary along a line extending east from just south of Landres-et-St. Georges and continuing through the northern edges of the Bois de Bantheville, the Bois des Rappes, and the Bois de Forêt near the left bank of the Meuse. East of the Meuse, the French XVII Corps occupied a line that ran roughly a kilometer south of Sivry-sur-Meuse, east through the Bois de Chaume and the Bois de la Grande Montagne, to just north of Beaumont.

Although the Americans had lost over 22,000 dead and well over 100,000 wounded since the beginning of the campaign, Liggett believed that the First Army was bleeding the enemy of his last reserves of strength. By the end of October, the German *Fifth Army* was in fact struggling to rotate its depleted units out of the line. On 31 October, the Americans faced ten German divisions west of the Meuse and nine more in the French XVII Corps' sector east of the river. These numbers did not tell the whole story. Major Giehl admitted that "the disintegrating influence of numerous forest combats" and increasingly heavy losses had sapped the combat power of most of these units. Sensing that the war was coming to an end, the German high command directed its subordinates to hold ground at all costs to try to win Germany a stronger negotiating position at the peace table. This forced commanders in the Meuse-Argonne to launch counterattack after counterattack to try to accomplish this task or to stave off tactical calamities. These counterattacks hammered the doughboys and often deprived them of their hard-won gains, but in doing so the Germans continued to hemorrhage their combat power. By the



MAP 10

end of October, the German *Fifth Army* had already lost nearly 25,000 men and had no reserves left to throw into the battle. Most of its frontline infantry regiments had been reduced to well below 50 percent of their authorized strengths. To fill the growing gaps in its ranks, the *Fifth Army* had to return its exhausted divisions to the battle before they had sufficient time for rest and refit. To make matters worse, the news that Austria-Hungary was seeking a separate peace led General Marwitz and General Max von Gallwitz to remove all their Austrian units from the front line. Simply put, the Germans were caught in an unsustainable exchange rate of casualties with the Allies.

The Americans were doing their best to unbalance the attritional scale. In the first month of the campaign, they had failed to adequately coordinate artillery support with infantry assaults, but nevertheless the First Army's French and American artillerymen took a devastating toll on the Germans in the Meuse-Argonne. Learning by doing was hard-going in the AEF, but it was learning nevertheless. As American officers such as Summerall, and the First Army's chief of artillery, Maj. Gen. Edward F. McGlachlin, came to master the iron hammer of artillery, the Germans could muster no response. In late October, an officer in the German *102d Infantry Regiment* bewailed the "monstrous amount of artillery" that the Americans were able to employ against his positions, and other German officers lamented the devastating effect that the American artillerymen had on the strength and morale of their formations.

The First Army's plan for the 1 November attack sought to capitalize on its strengths and the experience the Americans had gained since the start of the offensive. As the First Army began its preparations for a renewed assault, Foch pressed Pershing to focus the American efforts on the left of their sector in a combined attack with the French Fourth Army to clear the Bois de Bourgogne. Liggett rejected this approach, as the experience of slugging through the Argonne had convinced him that fighting in forests was too slow and costly to achieve any decisive results. He instead argued that the key terrain in the First Army's sector was the Barricourt Heights. The heights, which ran from Villers-devant-Dun northwest to Fossé, were the linchpin of the remaining German defenses south of the Meuse River. If the Americans broke through at Barricourt, the Germans would be forced to conduct a fighting withdrawal with their backs against the Meuse River. Liggett convinced Pershing to support his plan, but the new First



*Engineers repairing a road at dusk* (National Archives)

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Army commander understood that taking the Barricourt Heights would be no easy matter. The high ground dominated the American avenues of approach and offered the enemy good observation and fields of fire for the artillery and machine gun positions that studded its hillsides.

To crack this tough position, Liggett planned for an initial set-piece battle that would maximize the First Army's advantage in manpower and firepower over the Germans. The V Corps was to spearhead the American effort. It had the mission of capturing the Barricourt Heights and breaking through the Freya Stellung, the last prepared German defensive belt south of the Meuse, by nightfall on 1 November. The III Corps would support the V Corps in overrunning the Barricourt Heights by seizing the hills north and east of Andevanne and by protecting Summerall's flank from German counterattacks. On the First Army's left flank, the I Corps faced strong German defenses running from Talma Farm through the Bois des Loges and Champigneulle to St. Georges. Given the strength of the enemy's positions, Liggett ordered Dickman to launch only limited attacks with the goal of protecting the V Corps' flank by capturing the high ground south of Thénorgues and fixing

the German defenders in place. Liggett also directed the I Corps to prevent German artillery on the heights of the Bois de Bourgogne from hindering the V Corps' attack. The First Army commander believed that if the V Corps succeeded in taking the Barricourt Heights, the Germans facing the I Corps would have to withdraw from their defenses and Dickman could then drive on to capture Boulton-aux-Bois.

Most of the First Army's efforts in the last week of October were devoted to ensuring that the V Corps' attack would achieve the desired results. At long last, the Americans had recognized that tactical success on the Great War's battlefields rested largely upon the ability of the attacker to crush the defender under the weight of artillery fire. This was a decisive rejection of Pershing's focus on an "aggressive offensive based on self-reliant infantry." In fact, Summerall went so far as to state in the V Corps' attack order, "It is essential that fire superiority rather than sheer man power be the driving force of the attack." To ensure this superiority, the First Army massed 1,576 tubes of artillery on the front, including three batteries of 14-inch railroad guns manned by crews from the U.S. Navy. To compensate for the loss of some of the First Army's French artillery units since the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Liggett's planners increased the daily shell expenditure for each gun. For the 1 November assault, the army would have roughly one gun per twenty meters of front and each piece would fire 235 shells on average per day.

Liggett also changed the First Army's tactical approach. He rejected the AEF's previous pattern of setting unrealistic objectives. Instead, he planned for relatively shallow advances by the V and III Corps on 1 November that would keep them well within the range of army, corps, and divisional artillery. The First Army's initial attack would be preceded by a two-hour-long "hurricane barrage" designed to paralyze the German command and control and fire support system as well as to destroy the enemy's machine guns and strong points. After these preparatory fires, the American artillery plan focused on providing maximum support to the infantry by maintaining a steady rolling barrage that kept within 1,000 meters of the advancing doughboys throughout the attack.

For the first time in the war, the Americans would also make maximum use of their chemical warfare assets and better coordinate their air effort to support ground operations. Liggett specifically directed that heavy concentrations of mustard gas be dropped on German artillery units on the Heights of the Meuse,

the Bois de Sassey, and on the hills of the Bois de Bourgogne to neutralize the enemy's ability to bring flanking fires on the American advance. In the last piece of the "firepower puzzle," the First Army ordered the Air Service to change its approach. The doughboys had long complained that American aviators had not provided the infantry with enough air cover and direct support during the campaign. In response, the AEF's pilots would now refocus their efforts in support of the troops by attacking German defenses and artillery in the direct path of the advance and by keeping enemy aircraft from harassing the ground troops.

This firepower-centric approach to war also permeated the V Corps' preparations. Summerall planned to lead his assault with the fully rested and veteran 2d and 89th Divisions. These units would attack on line in a concerted push to overwhelm the Germans on the Barricourt Heights. To accomplish this, Summerall intended to crush enemy resistance by massing the overwhelming firepower of army, corps, and divisional artillery. He attached the field artillery brigades and machine gun units from his reserve divisions (the 1st and 42d Divisions) to the 2d and 89th Divisions for the initial phase of the attack. While the artillery blasted the German defenses and artillery positions, Summerall ordered all of the corps' machine guns to join in with direct and indirect fire to pin down the enemy. As the V Corps commander noted, "The barrage plan was so constructed that throughout the advance, the entire corps front of more than eight kilometers would be covered by a sheet of shell, shrapnel, and bullets to a depth of twelve hundred meters." Lastly, Summerall was to use the First Army's remaining fifteen available tanks to assist the 2d Division's advance.

Although Summerall had done everything possible to tip the scales in favor of his assault units, he was well aware that attacks in the Great War often bogged down as the strength of the attackers waned during the course of the battle. To prepare for this eventuality, he ordered the V Corps' reserve divisions, the 1st and 42d, to follow close behind the lead divisions. If the 2d or 89th Division attacks stalled, the reserve divisions would maintain the tempo of the operation by passing through the forward units and resuming the attack.

### *A Triumph of Set-Piece Battle: 1 November 1918*

At 0330 on 1 November, the First Army's guns began their planned devastation of the German defenses. When the

doughboys moved forward at 0530, they found that the hurricane bombardment had largely worked as planned. As one infantryman exclaimed, "What a battlefield! The *Kriemhilde Stellung* had been torn to shreds by the American guns. Upon the fields, along every approach, and in the trenches, still lay the [German] dead." The doughboys also noticed a dramatic decrease in the enemy's fires. In prelude to the battle, the Americans dropped over forty-one tons of mustard gas on German positions in the Bois de Bourgogne, a chemical assault that destroyed or displaced nine of the twelve German artillery batteries in the wood. All along the line, soldiers noted that they overran enemy machine gun nests and artillery batteries whose crews had been killed by the opening barrage. Those Germans not killed by the shelling were often so pinned down by the American fire that they could not offer much resistance. As the V Corps reported, "Many of the prisoners captured on the 1st stated that the reason that they were taken was that artillery concentrations were so effective as to confine them to shelters and to isolate them in small groups. Artillery prisoners stated that they were unable to leave their shelters to serve their guns." To a great extent, the Americans had successfully put into practice the French military dictum that "artillery conquers, infantry occupies."

The advance in the V Corps' sector demonstrated that the AEF had finally come of age. The 2d Division overcame all resistance to its front, and by the close of the day the unit's marines and soldiers had captured the redoubtable German defenses at Landres-et-St. Georges and pushed the enemy back over eight kilometers to a position just south of Barricourt and Magenta Farm. The division was led by the skilled and aggressive Maj. Gen. John A. Lejeune, one of only three Marine Corps generals to command a U.S. Army division and the only marine to lead one in battle. On the corps' right, the 89th Division strove to keep pace with the fast-moving 2d Division. By the end of the day, the 89th had advanced over six kilometers, captured Rémonville, and, in close cooperation with the III Corps' 90th Division, seized the Bois de Barricourt (*Map 11*).

In the III Corps' sector, the 90th and 5th Divisions also accomplished their allotted tasks. In fact, both units went beyond the objective line set by the First Army. On the left of the corps sector, the 90th Division advanced nearly four kilometers and kept pace with the progress of the V Corps. Their success prevented German flank attacks against the army's main effort.





*Firing a 14-inch naval gun converted to a railroad gun*  
(National Archives)

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On the army's left, the I Corps launched limited attacks from Talma Farm to St. Georges. Despite heavy enemy resistance, the 78th Division still managed to push into the Bois des Loges and the 77th Division advanced to a position southeast of Champigneulle. The I Corps' greatest success came on its right with the 80th Division, which took advantage of the 2d Division's disruption of the German defenses to take Imécourt and push as far north as Fontaine des Parades.

The success of the 1 November assault bore immediate results. Capturing the Barricourt Heights placed Sedan and the vital German Metz-Montmédy-Charleville rail line within the range of the American heavy artillery. As Liggett expected, the breaking of the Freya Stellung placed the Germans in an untenable position. With no more prepared defensive positions south of the Meuse to compensate for the waning strength of their infantry, on the night of 1–2 November the German *Fifth Army* ordered its units to abandon their remaining defenses in the Freya Stellung between Grandpré and Buzancy and begin a fighting withdrawal to the north. The

actions of the U.S. First Army and the French Fourth Army proved to be mutually supportive. The French gains eased the burden on the I Corps while the success of the V Corps ultimately aided the advance of the French Fourth Army by forcing the German *Third Army* to retreat behind the Bar River to prevent a gap from opening in the line between it and the German *Fifth Army*.

*Exploitation and Pursuit: 2–11 November 1918*

The success of the 1 November attacks gave Pershing and Liggett the opening that they had longed for since September. The Germans' wary and weary retreat had, at long last, provided the Americans with the opportunity to achieve a breakout into open country. Sensing the change, Liggett ordered his corps to pursue the enemy with all possible vigor to prevent the Germans from recovering from their defeat and reestablishing a coherent defense.

In the V Corps sector, the 2d and 89th Divisions needed no encouragement to continue their assaults. On the evening of 1–2 November, the 2d Division launched night attacks and infiltrations of the enemy line to keep pressure on the Germans. Night operations were a rarity in the AEF, but the division's initiative and drive kept the enemy off-balance. Unfortunately, inexperienced staffs and the friction of war temporarily halted the 2d Division's advance on 2 November. The V Corps' accomplishments on 1 November convinced Summerall that his unit could accelerate the First Army's progress by changing the boundary between the I and the V Corps to allow the 2d Division to seize Buzancy. This plan did not sit well with Dickman, and Liggett ultimately rejected Summerall's request. However, while this high-level wrangling was in progress, the V Corps headquarters issued orders to its subordinates to redirect the attack and to shift the corps' reserve forces for the assault on Buzancy. By the time that Liggett's directive reached Summerall, the 2d Division was moving its units into place to launch the attack specified in the V Corps' earlier orders. The resulting counterorders to stop this move essentially paralyzed the 2d Division for much of the day. Despite this confusion, the 89th Division was able to push forward three kilometers to capture Taily and outflank the Germans in Barricourt.

While the V Corps sorted out its command tangle, the I Corps was quick to capitalize on the Germans' discomfiture. On 2 November, the corps surged forward over nine kilometers. On the right, the 80th Division captured Buzancy. In the center of

the corps' advance, the 77th Division rushed north against weak German defenses to take Champigneulle, Thénorgues, Harricourt, and Bar in quick succession. On the corps' left, the 78th Division had slower going as it maneuvered to avoid German positions in the Bois de Bourgogne. By the evening, however, the division had advanced six kilometers and pushed the Germans out of Briquenay. The day's success put the I Corps in a good position to continue its pursuit of the Germans over the next two days. More importantly, the corps' gains came with relatively light losses. On 1 and 2 November, the 80th Division lost 866 men killed and wounded while the 77th Division suffered only 291 casualties. From 1 to 5 November, the 78th Division lost a total of 680 soldiers.

On the afternoon of 2 November, Liggett issued orders that changed the direction of the First Army's attack from the north to north-northeast with the goal of widening the breach in the German lines by crossing the Meuse at points all along the army's front and pushing toward the Germans' vital logistics link, the Mézières-Sedan railroad. To prevent the Germans from establishing another strong defensive line, Liggett urged his corps commanders to aggressively pursue the enemy and seize the heights north and east of the Meuse. He ordered the I Corps to seize the high ground running from Vaux-en-Dieulet to St. Pierremont. The V Corps was to take the heights of Beauclair and Le Champy-Haut and then press on toward Stenay and Beaumont. Liggett ordered the III Corps to capture the hills overlooking Halles-sous-les-Côtes, Sassegy-sur-Meuse, and Dun-sur-Meuse. Once across the river, the III Corps would push the Germans from their positions on the Heights of the Meuse that had long bedeviled the French XVII Corps.

The French XVII Corps would aid the advance of the III Corps by fixing the German defenders in place through local attacks on Hill 370 and on the Borne de Cornouiller. On 6 November, the French XVII Corps also would turn over the control of its sector to the headquarters of the French II Colonial Corps. Only two of the French II Colonial Corps' units were French (the 10th and 15th Colonial Divisions); the bulk of its organization consisted of the U.S. 26th, 35th, and 79th Divisions in line, and the 81st Division in reserve.

With new orders in hand, the First Army's pursuit gained momentum on 3 November. Over the next four days of fighting, Dickman's I Corps surged forward to the outskirts of Sedan. The 77th Division exacted revenge on the Germans for the pounding it



*Machine gunners advancing through woods* (National Archives)

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received in the Argonne by driving its foes over twenty kilometers between 3 and 7 November. Not to be outdone, the 42d Division returned to the fight on 5 November and pushed back the Germans over seventeen kilometers in just two days of fighting. The advance in the V Corps sector slowed due to stiffening German resistance and continued logistics tangles behind the lines, but despite these obstacles the 2d and 89th Divisions managed to reach the southern bank of the Meuse River by the night of 7 November.

The III Corps faced the army's greatest challenge in carrying out Liggett's new directive. Its eastern border sat on the Meuse River and the First Army's order required the corps to immediately launch contested assaults across the water obstacle. The burden of this mission fell to the 5th Division. German positions on the Heights of the Meuse loomed over the river, and the division had to not only attack across the Meuse, but also cross two segments of a canal that ran just east of the river between Briouilles and Dun-sur-Meuse and from Sassey to Mouzay. On the night of 3–4 November, a detachment from the 7th Engineers forded the Meuse at Briouilles and began building a footbridge across the river. At daybreak, the Germans discovered what the Americans were up to and promptly began inundating the area with machine gun

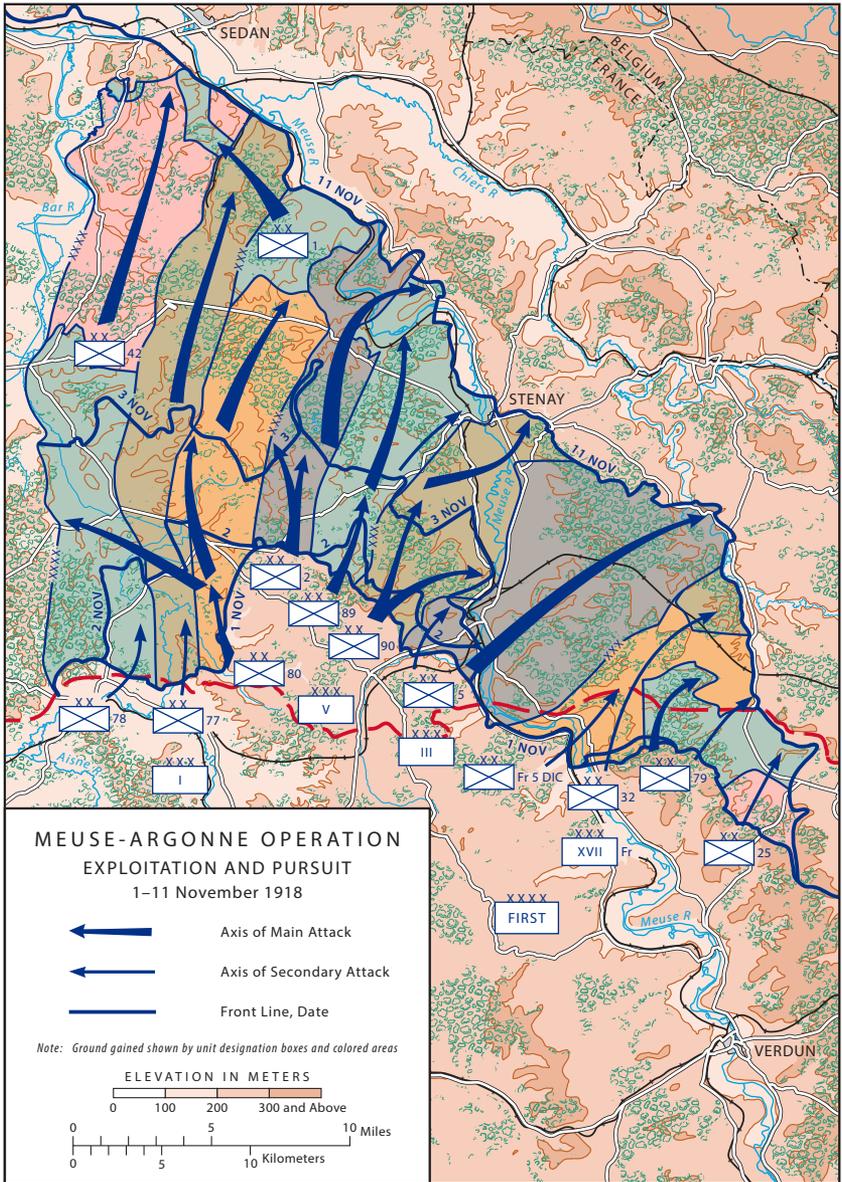
and artillery fire. The American engineers were undaunted and quickly moved their operations to a more protected location 600 meters farther north. After nightfall on the 4th, the division's 10th Infantry Brigade began to cross the Meuse in force. The next day, the brigade seized the high ground at the Bois du Châtillon and Hill 228.

The river crossing in the 9th Infantry Brigade's area proved much more difficult. On the night of 3–4 November, the division's engineers laid a pontoon bridge across the Meuse at Cléry-le-Petit, only to have it shot to pieces by the Germans shortly after the sun rose. One of the division's soldiers recorded that "the whole area was drenched with seemingly inexhaustible fire from the height." Despite the enemy's best efforts, the American engineers kept to their task, and by nightfall had bridged the river and the canal, allowing the 9th Brigade to cross to the east bank and move on to the heights beyond.

With their bridgehead secured, and the subsequent seizure of the Heights of the Meuse, the 5th Division's soldiers broke through the German defenses east of the river. Between 4 and 10 November, the division advanced over 18 kilometers in depth and liberated 160 square kilometers of French territory east of the Meuse. The success of the 5th Division also allowed the III Corps' other lead unit, the 90th Division, to cross the Meuse. Heavy enemy fire and the need to maintain close liaison with the V Corps stymied the 90th Division's earlier efforts at a river crossing, but on 9 November the division bridged the Meuse at Sasse-sur-Meuse and Dun-sur-Meuse and moved to capture Mouzay and Stenay (*Map 12*).

As his men continued to advance, Pershing believed that the First Army's success in the first week of November vindicated his tireless crusade to form an independent American Army. However, he still smarted from the criticism leveled on the AEF by Britain's Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and other Allied leaders that the American offensive had been too sluggish and costly for the gains it had made. Pershing's desire to burnish his and his army's reputation ultimately led to one of the most controversial episodes of the Meuse-Argonne Campaign: the 1st Division's effort to capture Sedan.

Sedan was the site of the humiliating surrender of the Emperor Napoleon III and a large French army in 1870 during the Franco-Prussian War. Taking Sedan would remove any lingering Allied doubts about the AEF's fighting abilities. On a visit to the I Corps



MAP 12

headquarters on the afternoon of 5 November, Pershing expressed to Dickman his desire that the Americans seize the opportunity to take the historic city. Later that day, General Conner arrived at the First Army headquarters to direct Liggett to execute Pershing's guidance. As neither Liggett nor his chief of staff, Brig. Gen. Hugh A. Drum, were at the command post at the time, Conner and the First Army's operations officer, Col. George C. Marshall, drafted the following order:

General Pershing desires that the honor of entering Sedan should fall to the American First Army. He has every confidence that the troops of the I Corps, assisted on their right by the V Corps, will enable him to realize this desire.

Marshall, however, did not want to issue the order before Liggett or Drum approved it. When Drum returned to the headquarters, he accepted Marshall's original text, but then added two further lines to the order: "In transmitting the foregoing message, your attention is invited to the favorable opportunity now existing for pressing our advantage throughout the night. Boundaries will not be considered binding." The edited order was then transmitted to the I and V Corps commanders.

The trouble started when Summerall chose to use the last sentence that Drum added to the order as a license to grab additional glory for the V Corps and the 1st Division. Using the very loosest interpretation of the order, Summerall directed the 1st Division to conduct a forced march through the night of 5–6 November to capture Sedan, fully realizing that the division would have to cut through the I Corps' sector to accomplish this mission. The debacle that followed not only hindered the operations of the I Corps' 42d and 77th Divisions when the troops of the Big Red One cut across their lines of advance and supply, but also caused ill will with the French when several 1st Division units advanced so far west that they strayed into the French Fourth Army's sector. Liggett did not learn of Drum's order until 7 November when the French complained about the American incursion into their sector. He admitted that the news led to "the only occasion in the war when I lost my temper completely." Liggett angrily directed the 1st Division to vacate the French and I Corps sectors with all dispatch. Summerall's escapade resulted in confusion and embarrassment among the American ranks, and undermined Pershing's goal of demonstrating to the Allies that the AEF had evolved into a smoothly operating machine.

In the end, the Americans' machinations were all for naught as the French would not be denied the honor of capturing Sedan. After their complaints about the 1st Division's incursions stopped the American advance toward Sedan, the French IX Corps entered the city on 9 November.

As the Americans continued to press forward in the second week of November, the German war effort collapsed. In October, the German government had sent out peace feelers to the Allies. By the end of the month, the Germans' quest to end the war was accelerating due to events inside Germany and the withering away of their allies. Bulgarian resistance had collapsed on 29 September, the Ottomans sued for peace on 30 October, and the long-suffering Austro-Hungarians reached a separate peace with the Allies on 3 November. On 26 October, German chief of staff Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg dismissed Ludendorff, thereby removing the last senior German officer opposed to peace. On 29 October, sailors in the German *High Seas Fleet* refused orders to put to sea, and their mutiny fueled civilian labor strikes and opposition to the government across Germany. On 7 November, a delegation from the German government crossed the lines to begin negotiations for an armistice. The abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II on 9 November further hastened the peace process.

Foch knew that the end of the war was near and wanted the Allies to be in the strongest possible position when the armistice talks began. On the afternoon of 9 November, he implored Pershing and the other Allied senior commanders:

The enemy disorganized by our repeated attacks is withdrawing along the whole front. It is important to maintain and hasten our action. I appeal to the energy and initiative of [the] Commanders-in-Chief and their armies to secure decisive results.

Pershing needed little prodding; in fact, he argued that to secure a lasting peace, the Allies needed to push the Germans back across the Rhine and crush the remnants of their army on German soil. On 5 November, he had ordered Liggett's First Army and Bullard's Second Army to press the American attacks with maximum force "with the ultimate purpose of destroying the enemy's organization and driving him beyond the existing frontier in the regions of Briey and Longwy." Pershing's message was clear: the AEF would not let up on the enemy until the moment the Armistice went into effect.

Pershing's directive for the AEF to keep fighting right up to 1100 on 11 November was not without controversy. His orders meant that hundreds of American and German soldiers would be killed and wounded in the final hours and minutes of the war. Over the last two days of the fighting, the V Corps' 2d and 89th Divisions drove across the Meuse in the face of determined German resistance, while doughboys in the I and III Corps sector moved forward to wrest one last hill or forest from the enemy. The experience of the 89th Division bears witness to the intensity of the fighting that occurred in November. The division lost 2,391 soldiers between 1 and 11 November. During the same period, five of the division's soldiers won Medals of Honor, with three of these men receiving the award for volunteering to swim across the Meuse to locate enemy positions and places where their units could cross the river.

The death of American soldiers in the waning hours of the war was tragic. Pershing, however, deemed these losses to be a sad necessity of war. Both he and Foch maintained that the Armistice on 11 November was merely a cessation of fighting and not a formal end to the conflict. The Germans could resume combat operations at any time. As such, every German soldier that the Americans killed or captured in the last days of the war was one less potential enemy combatant that they might have to face if the Armistice broke down. Given what the Allied commanders knew at the time, they had a cold-blooded rationale in their decision to order their soldiers to keep attacking to the stroke of the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of November. The men did their duty, and the fighting continued to the very end. In one tragically fitting episode, artillery officer Bob Casey witnessed thirty-four men killed and another thirty-nine wounded around him in the last twenty-three minutes of the war.

## ANALYSIS

Despite the losses and the doctrinal, logistical, and leadership challenges that the AEF faced during the campaign, when the Armistice came into effect the doughboys had achieved their commander's operational mission and their president's strategic goal. In the forty-seven days of the Meuse-Argonne Campaign, the Americans pushed the front back over forty-eight kilometers at the farthest extent of the First Army's advance, and caused the Germans to commit forty-six of their divisions to the region in a vain attempt to stem the American drive. In the process,



*American and French soldiers shaking hands* (National Archives)

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the Americans inflicted approximately 100,000 casualties on the Germans and captured over 26,000 enemy soldiers. The doughboys also captured 874 German artillery pieces, over 3,000 machine guns, and thousands of tons of other war materiel. More importantly, the American First Army had materially contributed to achieving Foch's strategic goals for the fall offensives, by accelerating the attrition of German combat power and furthering the decline of the enemy's national will. As Ludendorff had feared at the beginning of 1918, the wave of fresh, young, and determined American soldiers had turned the tide of the war decisively against the Germans.

This success came at a heavy cost. From 26 September to 11 November, the First Army lost 26,227 soldiers killed in action and another 95,786 men wounded or incapacitated by poison gas. This casualty rate gave the Meuse-Argonne the dubious distinction of being the costliest campaign in American history. To put the losses of the Meuse-Argonne into perspective, in the forty-one days of the Ardennes Campaign of December 1944 and January 1945, the Americans lost approximately 61,000 wounded and 19,276 killed in action. In the eighty-three days of the campaign to take Okinawa in 1945, the U.S. military suffered the loss of 12,281 dead and 36,361 wounded.

The Meuse-Argonne Campaign did not go as Pershing had envisioned. Rather than achieving a quick breakthrough that would force the Germans north of the Meuse River and position the Americans to drive them back to the Rhine, from the first day of the campaign the fighting in the Meuse-Argonne degenerated into a grinding battle of attrition. Five major reasons created this reality. First were the systemic flaws in the nation's wartime mobilization. Although the United States pulled off a prodigious feat in raising a force of four million men in just nineteen months, this was accomplished by shortchanging the training of the Army's officers and soldiers. Most of the AEF's line officers were products of hastily established three-month-long Officer Training Camps. The instruction in these camps was generally too ill-focused and incomplete to properly prepare the AEF's junior leaders for the realities of the Great War's battlefields. Senior U.S. and German officers both noted that American lower-level leaders had great difficulty employing their weapons and tactics to their best advantage in ever-changing combat situations. These officer training problems often resulted in high casualties, eroded the Army's tactical initiative, and bogged down the American attacks.

The AEF's enlisted soldiers had equally haphazard training. The instruction of the NCO corps was even more ad hoc and deficient than that of its officers. The NCOs generally possessed only slightly more technical and tactical knowledge than their privates, and often were unable to assist their officers with unit training or to assume effective command when their units lost their officers in combat. As junior officers became their units' primary trainers, the deficiencies in officer training compounded the problems in soldier training. These systemic training problems only worsened when the German Spring Offensives committed the AEF to battle before its leadership could correct the shortcomings

in its soldiers' martial education. The AEF's unexpectedly high casualties in the spring and summer of 1918 further exacerbated this problem, as officer, unit, and replacement training in the United States had to be shortened in order to expedite the shipment of fresh divisions and troops to France. To their credit, those soldiers and officers who survived combat gradually developed into skilled fighters.

The second major reason that the Meuse-Argonne devolved into a "wearing-out" battle was the nature of the enemy and the terrain that confronted the AEF. The German forces and commanders in the region had long mastered the art of the defense in depth. Although the German Army was in precipitous decline in the fall of 1918, it remained a cohesive and professional force to the bitter end, and used all of the remaining resources at its disposal to strike the Americans at every opportunity. The regional terrain helped them accomplish this deadly purpose. The heights, forests, and waterways of the Meuse-Argonne were well-suited to the enemy's defensive doctrine, and created substantial problems for the Americans' maneuver, logistics, fire support, and command and control systems. Even well-trained and experienced soldiers would have had difficulty fighting in the region, and the AEF was short on both of these.

Poor command decisions were a third factor that hindered the AEF's operations in the Meuse-Argonne. John J. Pershing should be lauded for his efforts in bringing the AEF into existence, but his actions in the opening weeks of the campaign demonstrated that he had not fully understood and mastered the realities of modern war. Although the Meuse-Argonne Campaign was not conducted at a time and place of Pershing's choosing, his conception of the operation from 26 September through 12 October was wildly optimistic and unrealistic. He discounted the lessons that the Allies had learned so painfully since 1914 about defensive strength, and he overstated the American forces' ability to wage "open warfare." Pershing also was far too prickly about the reputation of the American Army, which led him to "stack the deck" at St. Mihiel while allocating far too many green divisions to the initial phase of the Meuse-Argonne. Furthermore, Pershing failed to see the need to clear the Heights of the Meuse of enemy artillery during the opening stage of the battle. These decisions all but ensured that the Meuse-Argonne Offensive would be frustrated from the beginning by allowing the Germans the time needed to bring up reinforcements and to blunt American attacks with artillery fires.

Fortunately for the AEF, Pershing also possessed an eye for talent and the strength of character to know when to admit that he was out of his depth. His most courageous command decision was when he recognized that he was not suited to command the AEF and the First Army simultaneously, and turned the authority of the latter over to General Liggett on 16 October. Liggett had a far more sophisticated understanding of the realities of the Great War battlefield and was better at harnessing the material advantages that the Americans held over the Germans. Liggett's elevation, and Pershing's ruthless removal of commanders who did not produce results, likewise led to the elevation of men such as Summerall and Lejeune, who also grasped the fact that the path to tactical victory in the war would rest more upon firepower than manpower.

The fourth difficulty that the First Army faced in achieving quick and decisive results in the Meuse-Argonne also stemmed from the unalterable realities of that time and place in warfare. When field fortifications mated with magazine rifles, machine guns, and quick-firing artillery, the scales of war tilted in favor of the defenders. To overcome this defensive advantage, the attacker had to employ massive amounts of artillery to support its infantry units. In this intricate infantry-artillery coordination, the Americans tried to learn in months what it had taken the Allies years to master. Because of technical limitations in communications, artillery fires and infantry maneuvers had to be synchronized with elaborate planning that left little space for the fog and friction of combat. This degree of planning worked best in a limited set-piece attack, such as the AEF's maneuvers on 1 November, but infantry-artillery cooperation generally broke down for all of the war's combatants when their overstretched tactical communication lines failed and the artillery had to reposition its guns forward to support deeper infantry advances. This time lag often gave the Germans the opportunity to counterattack to retake their lost ground or to reestablish a coherent defense.

Finally, logistical constraints also hobbled the attackers in the Great War. The armies of the First World War consumed an unprecedented amount of ammunition and other supplies. Most of these items, especially artillery ammunition, were heavy and bulky, and tactical logistics still rested mainly on horse-drawn wagons bringing supplies to the front. The fact that artillery dominated the war meant that vast swaths of the battlefield were a cratered morass that hindered the flow of traffic through the area. Roads and supply points were also prime enemy targets for frequent artillery and air



*Soldiers reacting to news of the Armistice (National Archives)*

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attacks. All of the war's combatants found that logistical constraints limited the range and power of their offensive operations, but the Meuse-Argonne's underdeveloped transportation infrastructure and the AEF's equally underdeveloped SOS magnified these problems. In fact, as SOS commander Maj. Gen. James G. Harbord admitted, "It is certain that if the Armistice had not come when it did, there would have been a suspension of hostilities and movement until the supply and troop program could be brought back into balance."

There is little doubt that the Meuse-Argonne Campaign was far costlier for the results achieved than Pershing or the other leaders in the AEF anticipated. The Meuse-Argonne was a case of "winning ugly," but it was still victory. In the brutal calculus of war, the Americans could endure a level of attrition that their enemy could not match. The campaign hastened the defeat of imperial Germany by bleeding away the enemy's last manpower reserves. Without a doubt, the AEF had been committed to the

crucible of modern industrial age warfare before it was ready. It learned painful lessons at the hands of its unforgiving German teachers, yet it gained vital skills and knowledge through its harrowing experience. The success of the attacks in November 1918 demonstrated that the Americans had started to understand how to use their firepower and manpower superiority to their best advantage.

The U.S. Army entered the Great War as a small constabulary force and ended the war in the Meuse-Argonne as a force relatively capable of waging a modern industrialized war. The sacrifices the doughboys made during the campaign achieved President Wilson's ultimate goal: securing a major role for the United States in crafting the peace that followed. In evaluating the Americans, German officer Hermann von Giehl credited the AEF's victory in the Meuse-Argonne to the fact that the naïve and inexperienced American soldiers "willingly accepted the hardest losses as something quite natural," and their numbers made the campaign "a disproportioned struggle, which turned more and more to the disadvantage of the defender." Although this appraisal has some merit, it overlooks the fact that by mid-October 1918, most of the soldiers in the AEF had lost whatever naïveté they may have had about combat. They had gained experience and displayed increasingly impressive tactical ability. In spite of the casualties they endured, they continued to attack and ultimately defeated the Kaiser's veterans. In a larger sense, the soldiers, marines, sailors, and airmen who fought and died in the Meuse-Argonne also ushered in the "American Century." The campaign demonstrated that the United States had the ability and will to project its power across the globe to protect or further its national interests. Despite the high costs of the offensive and the AEF's occasional tactical and operational missteps, the Meuse-Argonne showed the world that the U.S. Army could wage a large-scale modern war.



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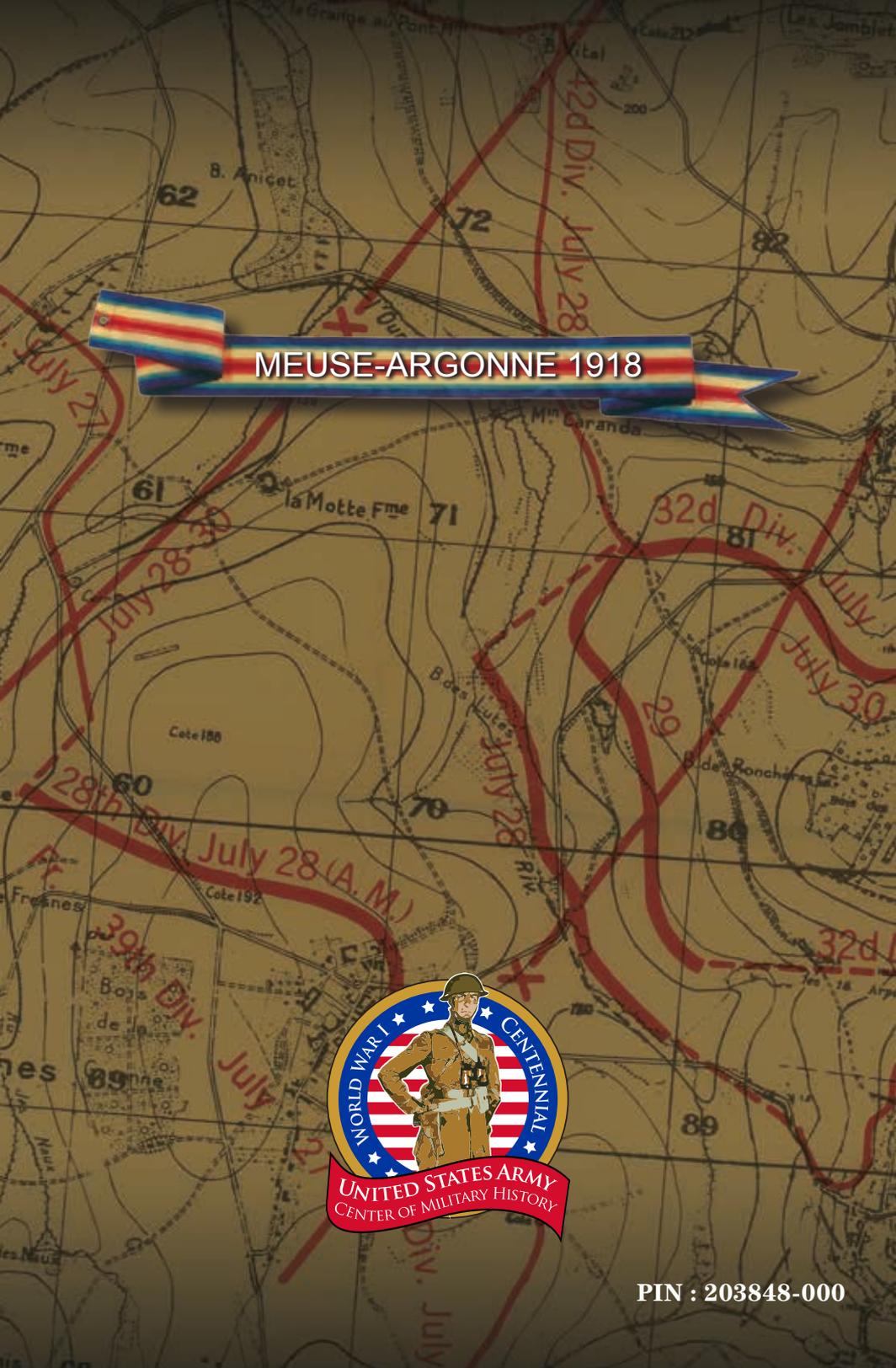


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For more information on the U.S. Army in World War I, please visit the U.S. Army Center of Military History Web site ([www.history.army.mil](http://www.history.army.mil)).



MEUSE-ARGONNE 1918



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