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The Battle of the Meuse-Argonne, 1918: Harbinger of American Great Power on the European Continent?

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Standing on Governor's Island, just south of Manhattan, Elizabeth Coles Marshall watched her husband George board the *SS Baltic* with 190 of his fellow US Army officers. They were the vanguard of the new American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) command system, led by Gen. John Pershing. In order to maintain secrecy, the men were directed to come to Governor's Island in civilian clothes, although many wore their Army shoes and a few even carried swords on their belts. The secrecy was a wasted precaution in any case as journalists were on hand to report on the departure and crates carrying the words "General Pershing's Headquarters" had sat on the dock for days. There was even a cannon on hand to give the party an official sendoff. In retrospect, it is amazing that no German spy got word to a prowling U Boat commander of the exact place and time of the departure of the senior leaders of the US Army.

As she watched this odd assemblage board the *Baltic* to head overseas, Mrs. Marshall thought that "Dressed in antiquated civilian clothes, coat collars turned up in the absence of umbrellas or raincoats, such a dreadful looking lot of men could not possibly do any good in France."¹ She had good reason to worry. The American Army was headed off to the deadliest war yet known without appropriate doctrine, weapons, leadership, or staff system. And they were about to go into battle against the powerful German Army on the most dangerous terrain in the world.

Despite this inauspicious start, the AEF showed its mettle on the battlefield. The Americans needed a great deal of help from the French, British, and Australians, but they proved to be eager learners. Veteran soldiers from those armies taught the Americans how to fight a modern, combined-arms battle and provided the heavy weapons and modern staff systems that the Americans lacked. Driving French-made tanks and flying mostly French-made airplanes, the Americans learned that the war on the western front bore scant resemblance to the war they had trained for in the United States.²

Working within an overall Allied command structure the Americans slowly began to find their way. The French Marshal Ferdinand Foch set overall Allied strategy, but American generals commanded American divisions. This arrangement allowed the Americans to prevent their soldiers from being sent in small pieces to French and British divisions but it also allowed the Americans to make maximum use of Allied corps and army staff systems.³ Pershing persistently demanded the creation of an

¹ George C. Marshall, *Memoirs of My Services in the World War, 1917-1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 3.

² See, especially, Mark E. Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³ The Americans made one important exception in giving the French Army the 93rd Division, composed of African American National Guardsmen.

American First Army, with all of the AEF's troops under his direct command, as soon as possible. Foch agreed in principle, but he did not want to make major changes to the Allied system until the series of German offensives in 1918 had been stopped.

With American help, they were stopped. The AEF participated in small-scale (by 1918 standards) but critical operations at Cantigny and Château-Thierry. In both cases, the Americans had made serious mistakes but had shown both a willingness to fight and an ability to learn. They gained the respect of their British and French allies and of their German foes as well. In July, American divisions had played a decisive role at the Second Battle of the Marne, which put a final stop to the German offensives and allowed the Allied counteroffensives to begin. Foch determined shortly thereafter to create a First US Army on a dedicated American section of the western front.⁴

That section was centered on the St. Mihiel salient which jutted into Allied lines southeast of Verdun. Heavily defended and protected by favorable defensive terrain, the salient had sat there for the better part of four years. Foch gave Pershing the chance to eliminate it and Pershing leaped at the opportunity, finally concentrating the mass of his American divisions in one place. Mistakes and difficult terrain notwithstanding, the Americans accomplished the mission with the help of tanks and what was then the largest air armada ever assembled. Mrs. Marshall would have been proud at how much good her husband and his fellow Americans had managed to achieve.

With the St. Mihiel salient cleared by mid-September and with French and British armies advancing across the western front, Foch set his eyes on the main lateral railway that ran just behind, and roughly parallel to, the western front. That railway fed and moved the German armies. If the Allied armies could cut it, they would force the Germans out of their fixed defenses and into open country where the Allied advantages in armor, mechanization, and aviation would give them an insurmountable advantage.

Foch wanted the AEF to move northwest from St. Mihiel to the area bounded by the thick Argonne forest in the west and the mostly impassable Meuse River in the east. This movement would pressure and then cut the main railway link between the key rail depots of Mézières and of Sedan. The Meuse-Argonne region was, however, heavily defended. German artillery on the heights of the eastern bank of the Meuse dominated the valley below and the forest canalized American movements, making surprise difficult to achieve. The region was defended, moreover, by three strong belts of defensive works, each named for a witch from German mythology. The Meuse-Argonne would be a very tough area for the still inexperienced AEF to conquer.

Pershing had preferred instead to attack to the northeast toward the railway junction at the historic town of Metz. From there, the AEF could advance to Thionville, another critical rail juncture. The terrain would also be more favorable to the kind of war Pershing wanted to fight and would not require the Americans to execute a major repositioning of their forces from St. Mihiel. Despite these arguments, Foch overruled Pershing because the proposed American movements would take their army away from those of the Allies, thus sacrificing the military principle of concentration of force. Foch, sensibly enough, wanted to keep the Allied armies moving in the same general direction. He used logic and not a little bit of flattery to convince Pershing, telling the American commander that only the Americans could accomplish so glorious a mission.⁵ Pershing then quashed a proposal, supported by Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur and Colonel George Marshall, to attack in both the Meuse-Argonne and Metz sectors simultaneously.⁶

Foch's conclusions were strategically sound, but they did not make the operational task of the AEF any easier. AEF planners had less than two weeks to prepare for what was destined to become the largest and bloodiest battle ever fought by an American army. George Marshall and his staff had to redeploy and reposition a vast army of 600,000 men, 4,000 artillery pieces, and one million tons of supplies more than sixty miles in a region with primitive roads—and all without giving the upcoming offensive away to the Germans.⁷ The result was a traffic jam of epic proportions. Even the French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, could not move through it.

These problems notwithstanding, Pershing remained confident. He planned to break the German lines in three stages. In the first, the AEF would advance through the German first line and outflank the dominant central heights of Montfaucon. He unrealistically expected to advance as many as ten miles in 36 hours in order to seize critical high ground before German reinforcements could rush into the area. Then in the second stage American forces would advance another ten miles toward the high ground around the town of Romagne. Once past Romagne, American troops could easily outflank German positions and open a clear route to the rail junctures of Mézières and Sedan that were the campaign's operational goal. Finally, the AEF would cross the Meuse river, silence the German artillery batteries there and move into Mézières and Sedan themselves.

⁴ Michael S. Neiberg, *The Second Battle of the Marne* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008) and Douglas V. Johnson and Rolf Hillman, *Soissons, 1918* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1999).

⁵ Edward Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (New York: Holt, 2008), Kindle Edition, location 1036.

⁶ David Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 112.

⁷ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, Kindle edition, location 1314.

The plan was far too ambitious, especially for such green troops. Only three American divisions slated for the attack had seen serious fighting and two of those would ideally have been given a rest instead of being sent into the attack. Still, Pershing's doughboys had 2,800 artillery pieces to support their attack, an average of 156 guns per mile of front. They also had 821 airplanes (most of them French and many piloted by French airmen) and 182 French-built Renault tanks.⁸ It represented an impressive accumulation of firepower. The French Fourth Army, commanded by the talented and pro-American Henri Gouraud, would protect the left flank of the American advance.⁹ Pershing's staff drew even more confidence from reports suggesting that most German divisions in the area were under strength by as much as two-thirds and of generally poor quality.

The initial attack produced some impressive gains. The American divisions took much of the first German defensive line on day one and made serious progress toward outflanking Montfaucon. But the much stronger German defenses near Romagne proved to be too much and, as Pershing had feared, the Germans rushed five infantry divisions worth of reinforcements into the Meuse-Argonne sector within five days. German aviation and artillery kept up a steady harassment of American troops and German machine gunners used the forested terrain to deadly advantage. German soldiers expertly booby trapped any position that they had to yield and they used all of the cunning learned in four murderous years on the western front to make the Americans pay dearly for each and every inch they captured. The German practice of faking surrenders in order to draw Americans out of their trenches then firing on them with hidden machine guns turned this campaign very nasty very quickly. By the end, most American units had stopped taking prisoners.

As the fighting began to grind down to a halt, the weaknesses of the AEF became evident. Training was both inadequate and inappropriate to the actual conditions on the front. Pershing's emphasis on individual marksmanship and his doctrine of open warfare was much more suited to 1914 or even 1863 than it was to 1918; comparisons to Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg were commonplace.¹⁰ Equipment was, in the words of the battle's chief historian, "wretched," and staff work primitive.¹¹ American soldiers were mentally and materially unprepared for the horrifying conditions of combat like this. Unknown thousands suffered mental breakdowns and as many as one in ten simply walked away, creating a straggler problem that the Army never did find a way to solve.¹²

Symbolic of American failures and shortcomings was the episode of the Lost Battalion. Commanded by Major Charles Whittlesey, the First Battalion, 308th Regiment was filled with new and untrained men. On October 2, they attacked amid massive command confusion and ended up in a thickly wooded ravine with no support on either side. They were soon surrounded, with no hope of food, ammunition, or reinforcements, but they fought on. At one point, confusion in AEF ranks even led to their own artillery firing on them. By the time they were rescued they had just 194 of their original 554 men, and the survivors were in deplorable shape. Although reporters and the Army news bureau tried to make the episode heroic (the Army gave the battalion three medals of honor), it had clearly shown the inefficiencies and limitations of the AEF.¹³

Of course, many American soldiers fought well and led well. Among the most famous were Sgt. Alvin York, a reluctant soldier and deeply religious man from Tennessee who single-handedly killed 28 German soldiers and captured 132 others near the town of Chatel Chéhéry. Another was John Lewis Barkley, who broke up a German counterattack by himself when he climbed into an abandoned French tank and operated the machine gun. His actions saved an entire American battalion and earned him a medal of honor.¹⁴

Despite the best efforts of York, Barkley and thousands of others, however, by mid-October the Meuse-Argonne front had stagnated. Pershing responded by effectively promoting himself out of immediate command of the operation and turning over control to General Hunter Liggett. A distinctly portly and unmilitary looking man, Liggett was nevertheless a dedicated professional who had made a lifelong study of his profession. He was well-respected in both the American and French

⁸ Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking*, 123.

⁹ Gouraud was later named an honorary commander of the US 42nd "Rainbow" Division.

¹⁰ See, especially, Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War*, for a solid critique of American tactics. For the comparisons to Pickett see Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, Kindle edition, location 2187.

¹¹ Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, Kindle edition, location 3958. He is especially critical of American aviation.

¹² See Richard S. Faulkner, "Disappearing Doughboys: The American Expeditionary Forces' Straggler Crisis in the Meuse-Argonne" *Army History* 83 (Spring, 2012), 6-25. Faulkner is skeptical that the problem was quite as bad as one in ten soldiers, but it was certainly a serious crisis.

¹³ Whittlesey went on to be a reluctant hero and was at the unveiling of the Unknown Soldier memorial at Arlington Cemetery. Shortly afterward, however, he committed suicide by jumping from an ocean liner bound for Havana.

¹⁴ His story is now retold in a new edition of his memoirs edited by Steven Trout. See John Lewis Barkley, *Scarlet Fields: The Combat Memoir of a World War I Medal of Honor Hero* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2012). A 1930 edition of these memoirs appeared under the title *No Hard Feelings*.

armies.¹⁵ Liggett rotated tired units out of the line and brought in divisions that were relatively fresh, if usually inexperienced. The increasing number of German prisoners of war, many of them very young or very old, showed that the tide was at last turning. The sheer weight of American divisions combined with the tactical improvement of many of their companies and platoons were starting to show. The Germans, by contrast, were quickly reaching the end of their manpower. Successful French and British attacks on other parts of the line made the AEF's task in the Meuse-Argonne region easier by tying down German reserves and overloading the German logistical system.

The AEF made a final push on November 1 amid rumors that armistice negotiations would soon begin. That night, realizing that they were fighting a losing battle, the Germans abandoned the west bank of the Meuse, leaving the strategic heights of Romagne and Cunel safely in American hands. The Germans did, however, continue to defend the Mézières to Sedan rail line, which remained in their hands until November 7.

The American Expeditionary Forces fought in the Meuse-Argonne region for 47 days. According to official figures, they suffered 117,000 casualties and inflicted just under 100,000 casualties on the Germans. This figure included 26,000 prisoners of war taken. The Americans also seized 874 artillery pieces and 3,000 machine guns.¹⁶ Given the enormity of the task and the strength of the Germans defenses, Pershing and his staff were proud of the AEF's achievements, even as they recognized their own shortcomings. Allied generals, however, were quick to criticize the amateurish nature of American staff work. Still, had the armistice not come, it was evident to all that the Americans would have played the leading role in any 1919 campaign.

Today the Meuse-Argonne region is home to many monuments that commemorate what was then the largest battle in American history. Particularly noteworthy is the massive, but crumbling, monument to the Pennsylvanians who seized the key town of Varennes and the American monument that towers triumphantly over the ruins of the old town of Montfaucon. Tucked into the woods of the area are some intact German defenses, including one that sheltered the German Crown Prince, that give a sense of the strength of the German defensive lines. But the most important and impressive of them all is the American military cemetery at Romagne. It contains the remains of 14,200 American soldiers who fell at the Meuse-Argonne. The largest American cemetery in Europe, it is a beautiful and haunting reminder of the sacrifice of the generation who hoped that the World War would truly be the war to end all wars.

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¹⁵ For a brief and flattering biographical sketch see Edward M. Coffman, *The War to End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 249-251.

¹⁶ *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1938), 186. This book also serves as a guide to monuments and key locales. Much of the writing and research was supervised by an Army major who did not see action in the war named Dwight Eisenhower.