

A Meuse-Argonne Study Guide

**Prepared for the 2007 Biennial Tour
Of the Western Front Association
United States Branch**

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Foreword

25 February, 2007
Hotel du Commerce, Aubréville

It's 23.30 and I cannot fall asleep. The countless sites, roads, experiences of the past two days run through my mind.

This area of France has been calling me since my first visits in the early 1990s, yet how do I tell the story of American participation in 1918?

I reenact, but I've never experienced the terror of a real artillery barrage. I left a message for my wife on my GSM world phone. I did not have to worry about a cut in the wire, nor do I have to wait weeks for a reply letter. I drove up the Aire River Valley in the comfort of a 2007 automobile. I was warm, dry and, most of all, not under fire. So how do I tell the story?

Better researchers, writers and historians have told all or portions of the story; each with varying degrees of success. What can I add?

This tour is also operating with several limitations: Time is not sufficient to tell every soldier's or every unit's experience. Traveling by bus, and the age of most participants places severe limitations on the selected route. So how do I tell the story?

In addition to the yet-to-be-written background material, I have chosen a 3-pronged approach. First, I plan to retrace key portions of the battles themselves. Second, we will take advantage of the many restored and recreated sites, museums and cemeteries in the area. Third, I will include a variety of then and now media, such as photographs, trench maps, and letters home.

It is my hope that some portion of this tour will move each of its participants; much as I can almost feel the spirits of the doughboys of I Corps, marching through Aubréville on their way up to the line.

Bon Journeé

Randy Gaulke

Footnote 1: It cannot be under-stated how much of the original battlefields are "off-limits" to a large bus. Participants interested in a specific unit, battle, etc. are strongly encouraged to return on their own with a small car, the unit history, the ABMC book, and the 1:25,000 scale IGN Blue Series maps. American Armies and Battlefields in Europe can be easily purchased from 2nd hand bookstores or websites such as www.abebooks.com. IGN maps can be purchased at local stationary stores in the region or, in advance, from www.ign.fr. For tips and advice, talk to others who have already taken trips, or visit the travel section of my website: www.meuse-argonne.com.

Footnote 2: Because it is generally easier to move North to South in the sector, the tour has been structured to spend two days focusing on the activities of I Corps, one day on V Corps, and one day on III Corps and the troops East of the Meuse River.

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St. Mihiel

Key Dates in 1918 (and Their Significance)

1918

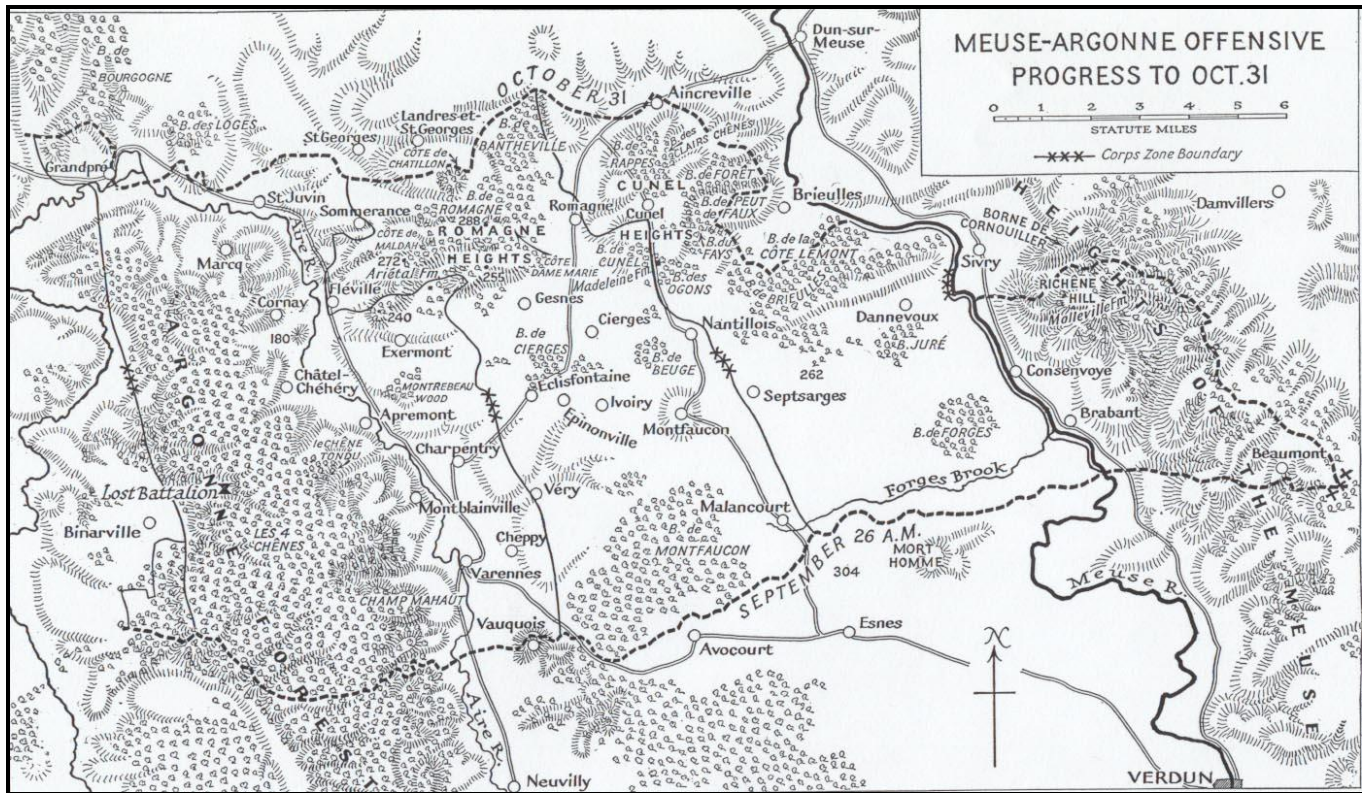
| | |
|-------------|---|
| 21 March | <p>German spring offensives begin</p> <p>General Foch becomes Geranalissimo following threats on Paris and German successes</p> <p>Leads to first full coordination on Allied side of lines</p> |
| Mid July | <p>No clear German breakthrough and high German casualty rate</p> <p>Foch becomes increasingly convinced the war will end in 1919</p> |
| 24 July | <p>Meeting of Generals Foch, Haig, Pétain and Pershing in Bombon</p> <p>Foch proposes a general plan of attack to prevent an orderly withdrawal</p> <p>This includes eliminating the St. Mihiel salient by the American Army ASAP</p> <p>Plan called for two American Armies, one on Marne, one in St. Mihiel salient</p> |
| 8 August | <p>Germany's "Black Day"</p> <p>Major victory of French / British victory at Amiens</p> |
| 9 August | <p>Pershing gains Foch's approval to form one army, in St. Mihiel salient</p> |
| 30 August | <p>General Pershing assumes command of the United States First Army</p> <p>He also retained command of the American Expeditionary Force</p> |
| 30 August | <p>Pointing out Allied successes elsewhere, Foch suggests a new plan:</p> <p>The St. Mihiel operation, scheduled to begin on 10 Sept. would be greatly reduced</p> <p>Four to six U.S. divisions would fight with the Fr. Second Army in the Meuse-Argonne</p> <p>Eight to ten U.S. divisions would fight on the Aisne, west of the Argonne</p> <p>These would assault with the French Fourth Army</p> <p>Significant politics followed, with Pershing objecting to the rapid plan change</p> <p>General Pershing insists that the troops will fight as an independent American Army</p> <p>Haig is apparently credited for suggesting the change:</p> <p>In part, because he is increasingly convinced that the war could end in 1918</p> <p>Also, the splitting of American forces could weaken the post-war bargaining power</p> |
| 31 August | <p>Pershing responds, "stressing the necessity of eliminating the St. Mihiel Salient" and insisting "that the American Army be employed as a whole either east of the Argonne Or west of the Argonne..." (Braim, pp. 66-67)</p> |
| 2 Sept. | <p>Meeting at Foch's HQ to resolve the issue</p> <p>Limits the St. Mihiel offensive to eight to ten divisions</p> <p>Establishes the boundaries for the Meuse-Argonne Offensive</p> <p>Establishes that start date as between 20-25 Sept.</p> |
| 12-16 Sept. | <p>St. Mihiel Offensive</p> |
| 13 Sept. | <p>Pershing's 58th Birthday: He escorts Pétain into St. Mihiel</p> |
| 21 Sept. | <p>First Army Headquarters moves to Souilly</p> |
| 22 Sept. | <p>Pershing assumes responsibility for the area formerly held by the French Second Army</p> |
| 22 Sept. | <p>Marshal Foch fixed the dates and confirmed the objectives for all Allied forces</p> |
| 26 Sept. | <p>French Fourth Army and American First Army</p> |

| | | |
|-------------|---|--|
| | 27 Sept. | British First and Third Armies toward Cambrai |
| | 28 Sept. | Flanders Group of Armies toward the Lys River Under command of the Belgian King |
| | 29 Sept. | British Fourth Army and French First Army toward Busigny |
| 26 Sept. | Start of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive—Phase I | |
| 28 Sept. | Hindenburg and Ludendorff ask the German government to seek an end to the war | |
| 29 Sept. | Clemenceau attempted visit to Montfaucon. Ends in disaster due to traffic jam He complains to Foch, but Foch did not relieve Pershing (directly) | |
| 29/30 Sept. | Pershing orders Army to halt offensive and regroup | |
| 30 Sept. | Major General Weygand, Foch's Chief of Staff, visits Pershing Proposes "allocating" the I Corps to the French Second Army French Second Army would fight in the Argonne, between Fr. Fourth and Am. First Pershing objects | |
| Early Oct. | Prince Max of Baden named new Chancellor of Germany Begins correspondence with Wilson on peace terms | |
| 2 Oct. | Foch writes Pershing withdrawing 30 Sept. proposal, if Pershing resumes offensive | |
| 4 Oct. | Phase II begins; met with strong German counterattacks | |
| 7 Oct. | Liggett (I Corps) begins "oblique attack" with 82 nd and 28 th Divisions against Argonne | |
| 8 Oct. | Assault on the Heights of the Meuse begins | |
| 11 Oct. | Offensive halted temporarily | |
| 12 Oct. | Pershing creates Second Army, for operations from Fresnes-en-Woevre to Moselle General Pershing relinquishes his role as CO of First Army. Remains C-in-C General Liggett is named CO of First Army Creation of the Second Army, with Bullard as CO, | |
| 13 Oct. | Pershing meets with Foch at Bombon Foch approves Pershing's plans, but emphasizes the need for "results" | |
| 14 Oct. | Phase III begins | |
| 22 Oct. | Pershing sacks Clarence Edwards, CO of the Yankee Division | |
| 25 Oct. | Pershing meets with Foch, Haig & Petain to recommend armistice conditions. | |
| 28 Oct. | Offensive was to have resumed, but delayed for three days | |
| 1 Nov. | Phase IV begins, with the French Fourth Army and both American Armies | |
| 4 Nov. | German troops begin a phased, general withdrawal called the Kriegsmarsch The goal was to reestablish a defensive line north of the Meuse River | |
| 6 Nov. | Sedan "confusion" begins | |
| 11 Nov. | Armistice signed at 5:10am; went into effect at 11:00am | |

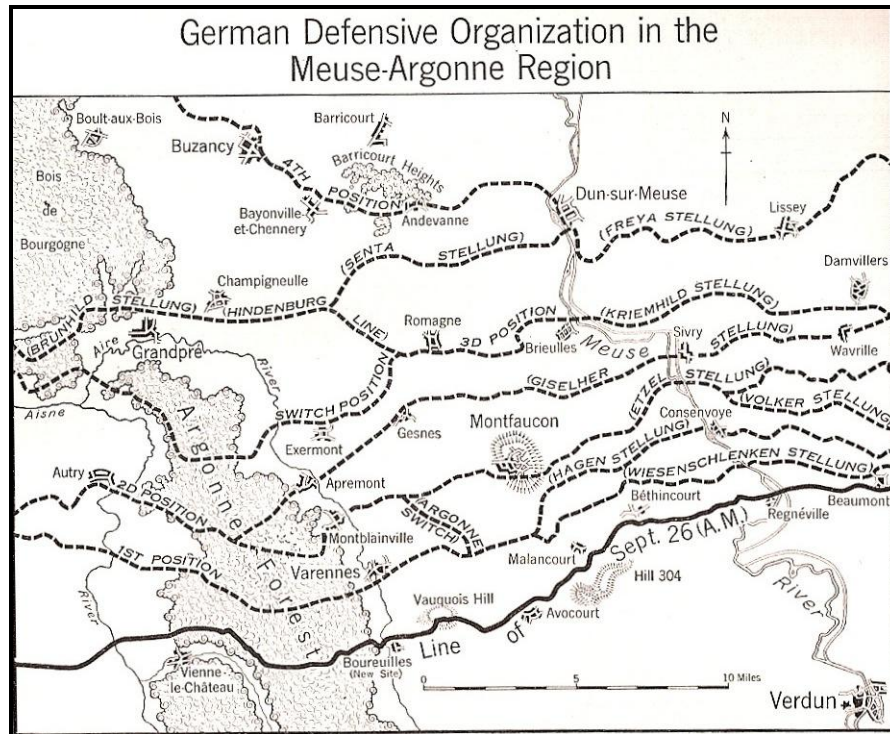
The Meuse-Argonne Offensive: An Overview

“The Meuse-Argonne campaign was the culmination of the American effort. It began with a gamble, continued through days of bloody hammering attacks, and ended with a spectacular breakthrough.” (Coffman, p.299) After spending the better part of a year researching the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and its battlefields, these two sentences sum up the fighting most succinctly. Combine the fighting with the difficulties of coalition warfare, and that is what makes this battle and its leaders so interesting.

“The geography of the Meuse-Argonne sector (about eighteen miles east-west) is ideal for defense, deadly for the attacker...it is apparent that the area is divided by three dominating features: the heights of the Meuse along the east bank of the un-fordable Meuse River, the hills of Montfaucon in the center, with approaches from east and west, and the rising terrain of the heavily wooded Argonne Forest, a plateau in the west of the zone. Moving back east from the Argonne Forest, the valley between the Argonne and Montfaucon is drained by the Aire River (fordable in a few places). The valley is narrow, dominated by the buttes of Vauquois and Montfaucon, and dissected farther north into a maze of ridges and valleys connecting with the Barrois Plateau. The valley east of Montfaucon, is intersected by the east-west parallel ridges and ravines running east to the river. The heights east of the Meuse River, running north-northwest along the east flank of the zone, provide observation over the eastern half of the sector. The wooded hills offer a multitude of concealed locations for machine guns... Montfaucon (Falcon Mountain) dominates the center of the zone...” (Braim, p. 74)



On top of the natural defenses, the Germans built an interlocking network of defensive lines over the last three years. There were essentially four lines of defense, but the strongest, and the one most difficult for the doughboys to break through was the Hindenburg Line, also known as the Kriemhilde and Brunhilde Stellungen. These are shown on the map below:

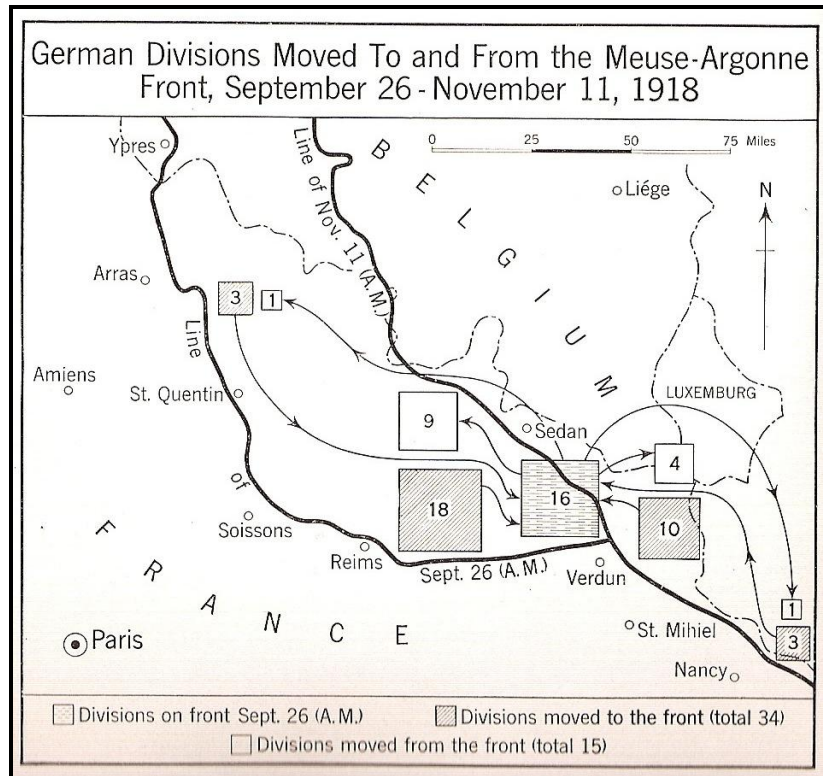


(ABMC, p. 170)

Another factor to consider prior to the offensive is the logistical difficulties of moving the participating American divisions and supplies into and the French divisions out of the front lines. This includes moving the 13 divisions (including reserves) that participated in the St. Mihiel Offensive and gathering other divisions that were in training or serving in the line. "The totals involved were approximately 600,000 men moving in; 220,000 moving out. Also moving into the sector were 3,980 artillery guns and 90,000 horses; these moved in a steady stream, forwarding personnel, equipment, or a portion of the required 900,000 tons of ammunition and supply." (Braum, p. 79) Looking at it from another standpoint, it took an estimated 900 trucks to move the personnel and light artillery of a division, and this required 15km (9 miles) of road space. (Braum, p. 79) On average, each combat division was moved 48 miles. (Coffman, p. 303) All of this had to be completed in the matter of a few weeks, over essentially three good north-south roads and three "farm roads." Also, for secrecy, it had to be moved only at night.

When it was finalized, the plan called for nine divisions (or about 225,000 men, excluding reserves and support troops) to participate in the initial assault. (See map below.) I Corps would drive north along the Aire valley and in the eastern half of the Argonne Forest. III Corps was to advance in the sector on the right. The hard work was saved for V Corps, in the center, which was ordered to take Montfaucon; in part by bypassing it on both flanks, assisted by the 35th Div. of I Corps and the 4th Div. of III Corps. The corps objective was a line running east-west north of Montfaucon. The corps objective was to be achieved in one day. The army first phase line was from Brioules, west-northwest to Cunel and Romagne, then southwest to Apremont and the boundary with the French Fourth Army near Binarville. The army first phase line was to be achieved on the second day—a distance of 10 miles in the center. The artillery barrage would begin at 11:30pm on 25 September. Jump-off would be at 5:30am on 26 September.

U.S. intelligence suggested that the doughboys would be facing five under-strength German divisions (or about 65,000 men), but that they could move fifteen divisions (about 180,000 men) into the sector within three days.



Order of Battle—American First Army, 26 Sept., 1918 Includes Notes on Division Experience

From Left (west) to Right (east)

I Corps (Liggett)

| | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 77 th Division | Veteran of the Aisne-Marne attacks, but 4,000 new recruits just before |
| 28 th Division | Veteran of the Aisne-Marne attacks |
| 35 th Division | Some service in quiet sectors |
| 92 nd Division in reserve. | Green. African American troops. Strong bias against. |

V Corps (Cameron)

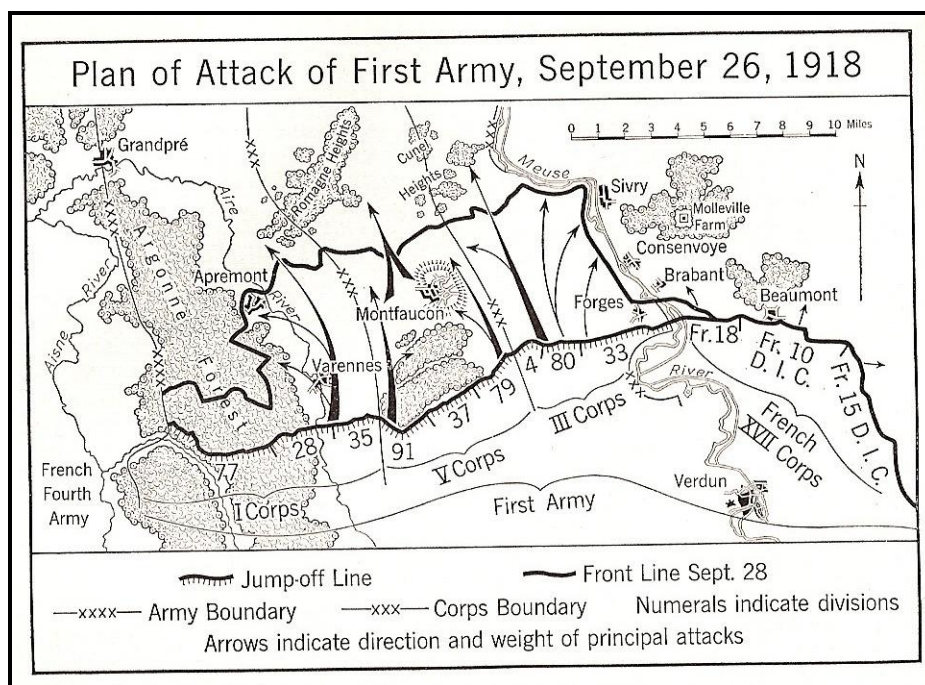
| | |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 91 st Division | Green. |
| 37 th Division | Some service in quiet sectors |
| 79 th Division | Green |
| 32 nd Division in reserve. | Veteran of the Aisne-Marne attacks |

III Corps (Bullard)

| | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| 4 th Division | Veteran of the Aisne-Marne attacks |
| 80 th Division | Some service in quiet sectors |
| 33 rd Division | Service with the British |
| 3 rd Division in reserve. | Veteran of the summer attacks around Chateau Thierry |

Army Reserve

1st, 29th and 82nd Divisions, French 5th Cavalry Division



(ABMC, p. 172.)

Stated succinctly, results from the first phase of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive were extremely disappointing. The biggest disappointment was the Montfaucon did not fall on day 1, as scheduled. But other units, such as the 77th Division found it difficult to advance, and the 35th Division was pushed back following a German counterattack. “After four days of incessant pounding, his (Pershing’s) army had not yet reached the objective set for the afternoon of the first day.” Failures of command and control and transportation were numerous, and individual failures and (limited) successes will be discussed in the other sections of this study guide. Coffman generally outlines two types of command and control failures: The first was strict adherence to Corps objectives and boundaries, when opportunities could have been exploited. The second was a lack of communications from one level to the next. In addition, transportation was becoming the major issue, as the extreme number of inexperienced troops moving over a limited (and damaged) road network just broke down. Finally, German resistance was stiffening, as the shock of the initial advance wore off and as German replacements arrived.

As a result, the offensive was generally halted by 30 Sept. and the next several days were used to replace units and commanders judged ineffective, and to allow units time to rest and regroup. Numerous changes in commanders and units were made.

It was now time for the “days of bloody hammering attacks” that would characterize the fighting throughout October. “Under pressure from Foch, Pershing set 5:25am., October 4, as H hour for a general attack. Its basic purpose was to penetrate the Kriemhilde Stellung and to seize the high ground behind the line.” (Coffman, p. 321) “Pershing instructed his corps commanders to keep smoke on the high “observation points,” and to maneuver so as to avoid flanking fire.” (Braim, p. 108)

Order of Battle—American First Army, 4 Oct., 1918

From Left (west) to Right (east)

I Corps (Liggett)

77th Division

28th Division

1st Division

82nd Division and French 5th Cavalry Division in reserve

Note: 35th withdrawn

V Corps (Cameron)

3rd Division

32 Division

42nd and 91st in reserve

Note: 37th and 79th withdrawn

III Corps (Bullard)

4th Division

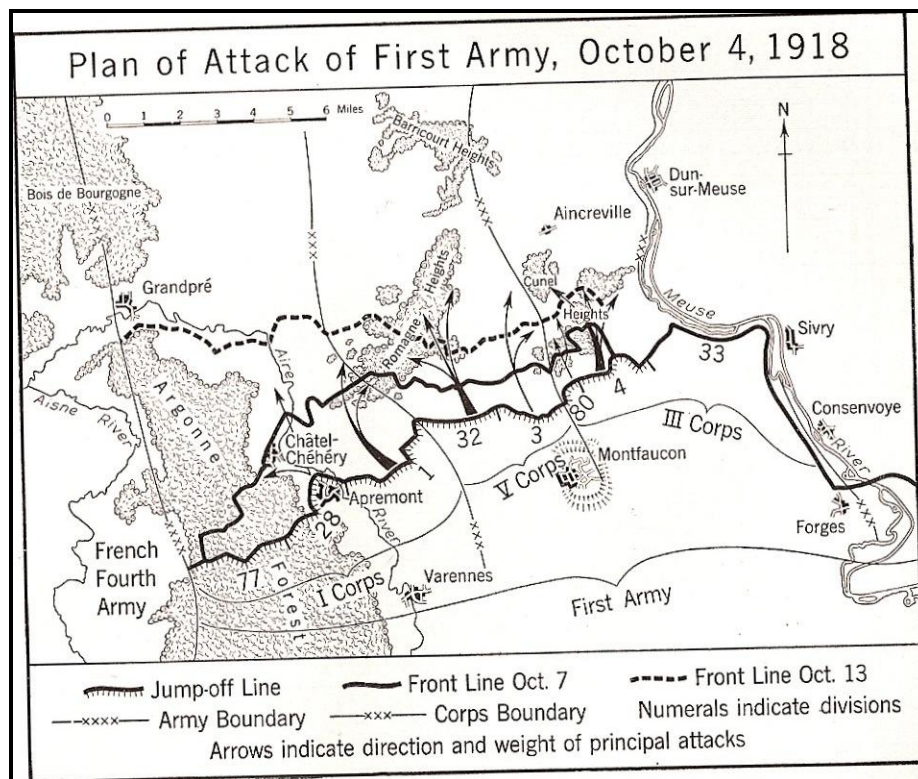
80th Division

33rd Division

No reserve designated

Army Reserve

29th, 35th and 92nd Divisions



Unfortunately, heavy enemy contact was made all along the front, and German artillery from the Heights of the Meuse was not being suppressed by American counter-battery fire. I Corps, especially the 1st Division made the greatest gains. But the Germans made strong counterattacks all along the front on 5 October. Casualties approximated 75,000 up to 6 Oct. (Braim, p. 113) In addition, the Americans continued to suffer from the artillery fire coming from the ridges of the Argonne Forest and the Meuse Heights.

Faced with strong artillery fire from the Argonne plateau and the “Lost Battalion” situation, General Liggett (I Corps) instructs the 82nd Division (reserve) and the 28th Division to launch an “oblique attack” against the Argonne Plateau. The offensive begins on 7 Oct., which does assist efforts to reach and rescue the “Lost Battalion.”

General Pershing (belatedly) addresses the issue of artillery fire from the Meuse Heights. On 8 a combination of French and American divisions assault east of the Meuse

On 11 October, the Army temporarily goes on the defensive, and by about 12 October casualties had risen to over 100,000.

On 12 October, General Pershing creates the Second Army, to expand the zone of attack in the east. General Pershing also relinquishes command of the First Army, while remaining Commander-in-Chief of the AEF, and these changes lead to changes in several Corps commanders, as shown below:

Liggett (formerly I Corps) takes command of the First Army.

Bullard (formerly III Corps) takes command of the Second Army.

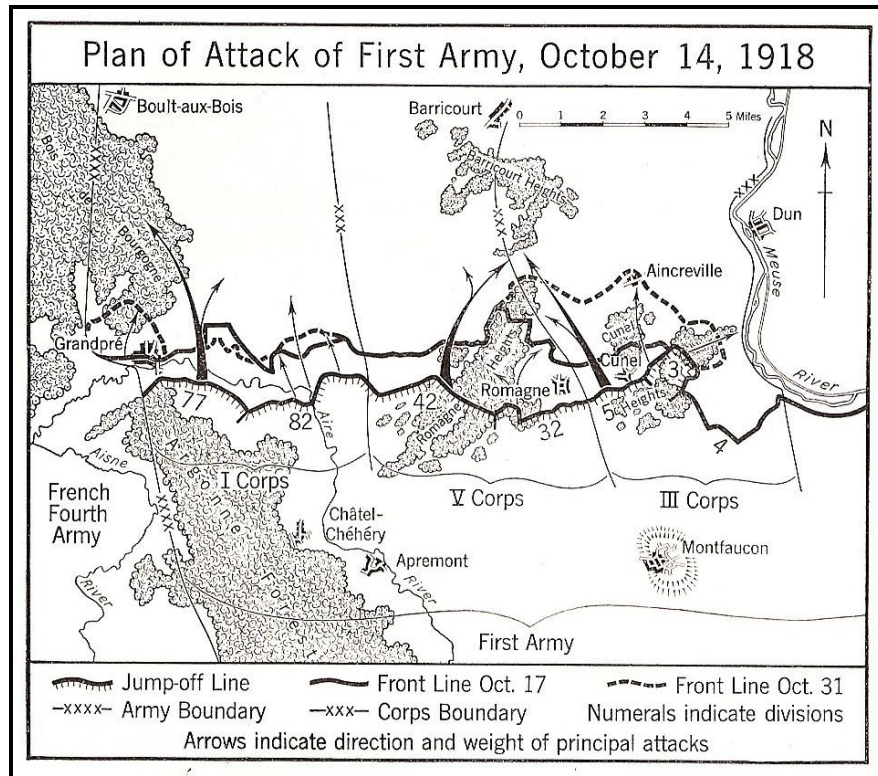
Maj. General Dickman takes command of I Corps.

Major General John Hines takes command of III Corps.

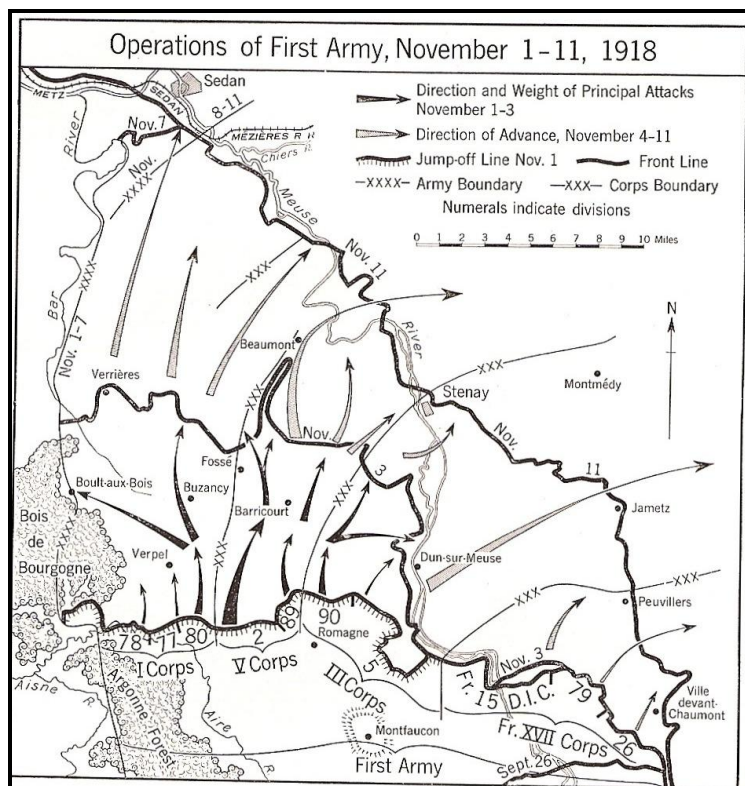
Major Gen. George Cameron steps down from V Corps to return to the 4th Division.

Major Gen. Charles Summerall takes command of V Corps.

Following these changes, phase III of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive began on 14 October. During the last two weeks of the month the Kriemhilde Stellung (Hindenburg Line) was finally breached in several areas. “Ludendorff admitted that the defense of the “Kriemhilde Stellung” had been costly: “Our best men lay on the bloody battlefield.” A general withdrawal plan was adopted, and Ludendorff pinned his hopes on the tenuous defenses of the “Freya Stellung.” No major reserves remained available to the defenders.” (Braim, p. 128)



Phase IV of the Meuse-Argonne offensive began on 1 November. It was conducted by the French Fourth Army and both American Armies. By this time, the exhaustion of the enemy and the experience of the doughboys and their leaders allowed the “spectacular breakthrough” to happen, as shown the map below. On 11 November, 1918, the Armistice went into effect.



(ABMC, p. 186)

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