

The Greatest Battle Never Told:
The Meuse-Argonne Offensive, 1918

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From 26 September to 11 November 1918, American Expeditionary Force (AEF) launched an attack in the Meuse-Argonne against the Germans. This paper intends to answer the largely unanswered question of how necessary were the losses that made the battle the bloodiest in U.S. military history. To address the topic, the U.S. Army's training, or lack thereof, is analyzed. Each of the offensive's six phases is assessed in detail, too. Although there is slightly more detail on the American side, the Germans' role in the battle is discussed, with primary documents from the U.S. National Archives cited. Throughout the battle the First Army, through trial and error, improved its tactics, even though this effort was impeded by green replacements that increasingly brought units closer to authorized strength. In the end, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was instrumental in ending the war on 11 November 1918.

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was the largest and bloodiest battle in U.S. military history. For forty-seven days (26 September to 11 November 1918), 1.2 million doughboys of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) tried to wrest virtually every hill, town, and wood in the region from their determined German foes, suffering 26,277 killed and 95,786 wounded. The question—unfortunately one of many for the largely unexamined battle—remains whether those losses were truly necessary. While there were clear instances of unnecessary carnage, particularly after the armistice had been signed in the last five hours of the war, the casualties on the whole were requisite to ending the war when it did.

To properly weigh the necessity of those losses, it is important first to understand the quality of the AEF. Basically, it was the product of the United States' unpreparedness upon entering the war on 6 April 1917. At that time the Regular Army numbered only 127,588 men, while the new National Guard had 181,000 troops, of whom 66,594 were in Federal service. The United States had the world's seventeenth largest army, with Portugal's right in front of it. With the onset of war, the vast influx of volunteers and draftees overwhelmed the industrial and military capacity of the country. Equipment shortages were the norm, with wooden sticks issued in lieu of rifles. Major Charles M. DuPuy, tasked with training machine gunners in the 79th Division, found his trainees' weaponry inventory to be far from impressive: "ten or fifteen Krag Jorgensen rifles, and a few old Krag carbines, which were not much longer than a boy's Flobert rifle, the rest carrying wooden guns, which they had sawed from boards."¹ DuPuy had the Krags sent back to the depot, the wooden guns thrown into a bonfire, and satisfied himself with training them without any weapons at all. Indeed, most instructors had to placate these deficiencies with a regimen drilling and marching. Samuel E. Moore, 37th Engineers, described "the usual training: 5:15 A.M. first call, roll call, detail assignments, setting up exercises, a run around the drill

¹ Edward G. Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (New York: Henry Holt, 2008), 33.

ground, then breakfast. After breakfast, drill till noon, more drill and/or hike.”² While drilling and marching helps to instill discipline, it is not enough. At least they had plentiful bayonets. Thus, the only combat training most doughboys underwent stateside was constant bayonet drill—sometimes with the bayonet tied to a wooden stick—and, once they had finally received real rifles, marksmanship.

The training regimen in the states, historian Douglas Johnson has noted,

produced infantry that attacked in linear formations of the decades gone by. It produced infantry that only knew how to attack straight ahead. It produced infantry unfamiliar with its normal supporting arms. It produced infantry willing to be killed in straight-ahead attacks because it knew no better.³

Against modern weaponry such as the Germans had, this training was wholly inadequate.

Training in France was little better. In theory, each AEF division, having completed its training in the United States, was to receive a month’s training in small unit tactics on a simulated Western Front, another month’s training under the mentorship of a British or French division in a relatively quiet sector, and one more month of training in open warfare—fighting out in the open as opposed to in trenches—and largescale maneuvering. In practice, due to the series of offensives the Germans launched in the spring and summer of 1918, no division ever finished this program.

The AEF’s doctrine exacerbated these training deficiencies. General John Joseph “Black Jack” Pershing, the AEF commander, embraced the concept of open warfare. The *sine qua non* of this warfare, he believed, was the rifle and bayonet. Hence, the emphasis on bayonet drilling and marksmanship in stateside training. Unsurprisingly, he downplayed the role of firepower. To

² Ibid.

³ Douglas V. Johnson II, “A Few ‘Squads Left’ and Off to France: Training the American Army in the United States for World War I” (PhD diss., Temple University, 1992), 247, quoted in Mark Ethan Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 44.

him, machine guns, artillery, and tanks were of secondary importance. Pershing and his acolytes repeatedly referred to the “self-reliant infantry”—in other words, infantry that did not rely much, if at all, on the supporting arms.⁴ Granted, open warfare had its uses, as the British, French, and Germans recognized. However, “whereas European forces chose only specific times, places, and situations for employing open-warfare methods, American officers were encouraged to initiate open warfare and to employ open-warfare methods anywhere and everywhere.”⁵

Pershing never got to fully implement his doctrine, though. Along with bayonet and rifle practice, trench warfare was emphasized in camps across the United States. It was not until the beginning of 1918 that Pershing got the War Department to make the stateside training program conform to his concepts. Additionally, the doughboys, in both Europe and the United States, frequently had French and British instructors, whose curriculum had long come to terms with the reality of the modern battlefield. “I consider some of the instruction which we have received from the British to be a positive detriment,” Pershing wrote in his diary on 25 August 1918.⁶ Major General Robert Alexander, who would command the U.S. 77th Division in the Meuse-Argonne, was more forceful in his memoirs: “The yielding of our then chief of staff and his principal advisers to the heresy of the trench warfare cult merely meant that invaluable time was wasted in nonessentials.”⁷

The result of this disjointed training program was that U.S. divisions learned a mixture of open and trench warfare doctrine, and were unsatisfactorily trained in both. Indeed, in his study of AEF’s doctrine and combat experience, Mark Ethan Grotelueschen notes that “despite GHQ’s [General Headquarters’] efforts to ensure that troops both in Europe and in the United States

⁴ Ibid., 32.

⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁶ Ibid., 42.

⁷ David R. Woodward, *The American Army and the First World War*, *Armies of the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 74.

received sufficient training in open warfare, all AEF divisions ultimately received much more training in trench-warfare techniques than in the skills supposedly so necessary for open warfare.”⁸ They had to learn what worked on the job. Most of the AEF’s divisions learned in the Meuse-Argonne, and it cost them needlessly in blood.

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was a part of the larger Hundred Days or Advance to Victory—the series of Allied attacks, waged across the Western Front, that defeated Germany in the Great War. Marshal Ferdinand Foch, general in chief of the Allied armies, tasked the French Fourth Army, commanded by General Henri Gouraud, and the U.S. First Army, under Pershing, with attacking in the Meuse-Argonne. Fourth Army’s objective was the key railroad hub of Mézières, one of two for the German army on the Western Front (the other was in Liège). For the First Army, Pershing designated the interdiction of the rail line between Carignan and Sedan as its ultimate objective. To his credit, Pershing rightly recognized the front assigned to the AEF as “second to none on the Western Front”—“the most sensitive part of the German front being attacked.”⁹

Pershing envisioned an advance in three phases. The first involved a drive up the Aire River valley on the left, compelling the Germans to evacuate the Argonne Forest, while in the center Montfaucon (Mount Falcon) was to be seized before the advance proceeded to the Heights of Cunel and Romagne. The ultimate objective for the first phase was a line stretching from Dun-sur-Meuse in the east and Grandpré, along the banks of the Aire, in the west. It was to be reached within thirty-six hours. Therefore, speed was crucial to success.

⁸ Grotelueschen, 39.

⁹ Nick Lloyd, *Hundred Days: The Campaign that Ended World War I* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), 152; David F. Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warmaking, 1917-1918*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 122.

In the second phase, First Army would advance ten more miles to a line stretching from Stenay, along the banks of the Meuse River, to Le Chesne. This movement would threaten to flank the German defenses on the Aire, enabling the Fourth Army to seize Mézières and Sedan.

The third and final phase would have First Army cross the Meuse River, clearing the Heights of the Meuse of German artillery once across. Finally, they would cut the Carignan-Sedan railway line. By doing so, the Americans, along with the French and British, would compel the Germans to withdrawal all the way back to their Fatherland.

This plan was fit for supermen, or a highly mechanized army of a later period, if not an army adequately trained in the Germans' *Stosstrupp* tactics. It failed to consider the limitations of the AEF, especially its inexperience, doctrinal weakness, and more or less mediocre training. Indeed, out of all the initial attacking American divisions, only the 4th, 28th, 33rd, and 77th had any prior combat experience. Obviously, AEF GHQ placed an excessive amount of faith in the doughboys' willpower. Pershing indicated as much in his final report: "In my opinion, no other Allied troops had the morale or the offensive spirit to overcome successfully the difficulties to be met in the Meuse-Argonne sector."¹⁰

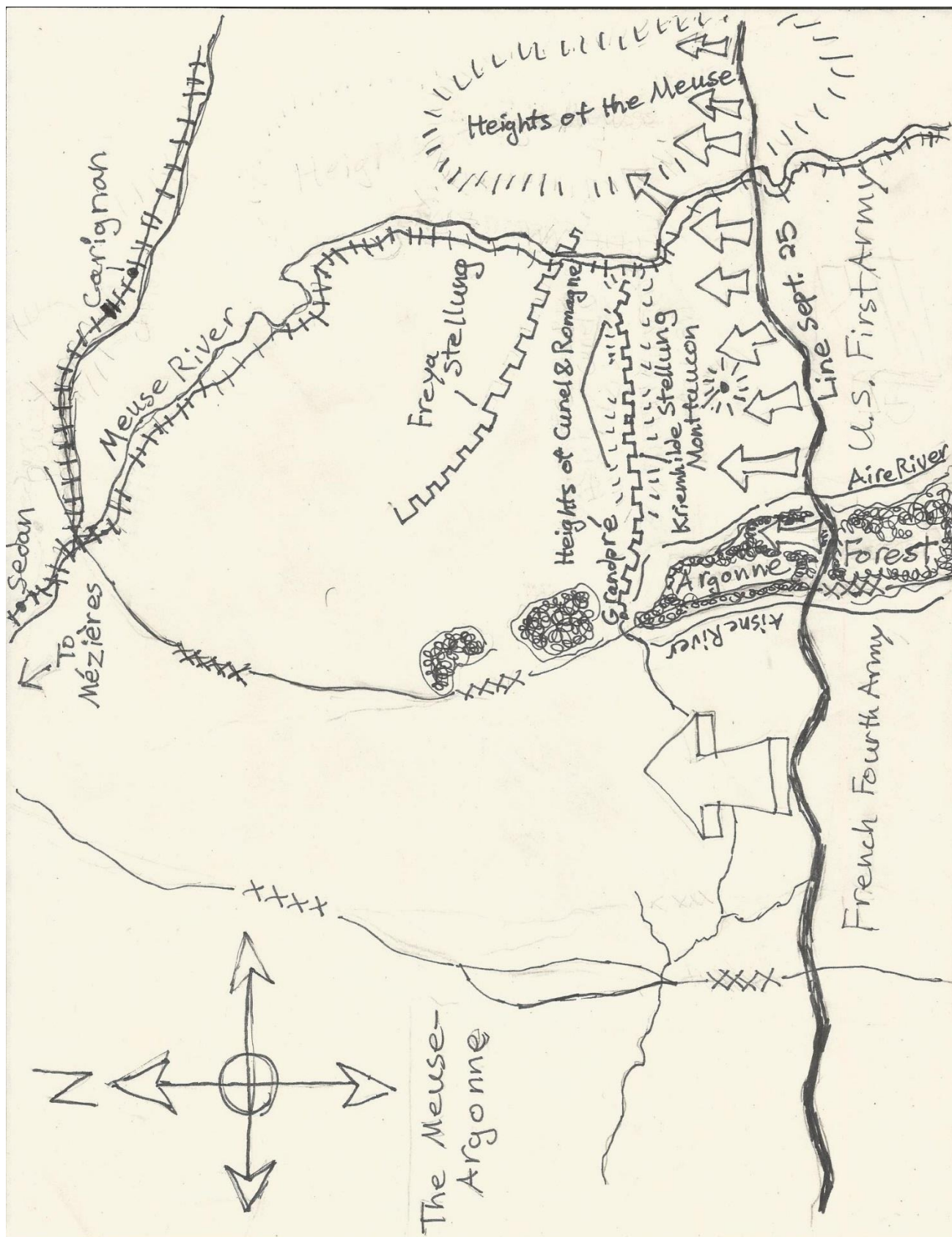
Other than to plan the attack as predominantly a frontal assault, Pershing also failed to take into account the terrain. Encompassing the Meuse River, the Argonne Forest, and everything between them, the Meuse-Argonne is a region of woodland, hills, farms, and quiet villages in northeastern France. At its starting point, First Army's frontage spanned maybe eighteen miles from the western edge of the Argonne to the west bank of the Meuse. Beyond the fighting front, with its customary devastation that is so often associated with imagery of the Western Front, the Argonne Forest, or six of those more or less eighteen miles, was a genuine northwest European jungle of brooks, knolls, and ravines teeming with undergrowth. It was

¹⁰ Woodward, 330.

eerily similar—and often compared—to the Wilderness battlefield of the American Civil War. The Argonne, with the Aisne River to its left and the Aire flowing above it and to its right, stretched in a rather straight northerly direction for twenty-two miles (the Western Front roughly cut through its midriff, so the doughboys fortunately had to only worry about its upper half). Conversely, the Meuse wound its way northwesterly, narrowing the frontage for the Americans and thereby hindering their maneuverability, which was so crucial to open warfare. This ground culminated in the Heights of Cunel and Romagne. Beyond them, to the north, lay a mostly flat and open plateau—perfect for open warfare. Simply put, it was ideal terrain for a defender.

The defensive nature of the ground was not lost on the Germans. They had set up several fortified lines, naming the three most important ones after witches in Richard Wagner's operas: the *Giselher Stellungen*, three miles north of the front lines and incorporating Montfaucon; the *Kriemhilde Stellung*, a part of the larger *Siegfried Stellung*—the Hindenburg Line to the Allies—and the strongest of the *Stellungen*, encompassing the village of Grandpré and the Heights of Cunel and Romagne; and five miles further north in the less defensible plateau, the *Freya Stellung*, weaker compared to the others and consequently fit only for the most desperate of circumstances. This series of defenses were a web of trenches, with barbed wire as thick as the region's woodland undergrowth, mutually supporting machine gun nests, redoubts, and concrete pillboxes. To these fortifications the Germans applied their doctrine of elastic defense.

In elastic defense, the defender would allow the attacker to overrun his lightly manned front line, only to stop him cold before his stronger second line. Then, using the reserves stationed in a third line to the rear, the defender would counterattack at the first evidence that the attack had overextended itself and that its momentum was beginning to ebb, regaining the lost ground. The obvious solution for the attacker would be to launch limited attacks designed to



seize little more than the first line of defense then dig in to repel any possible counterattack. There would be no overextension. The British Second Army had used this tactic to much success in the Battles of Messines and the Menin Road the previous year. In contrast, Pershing's plan called for deep penetration—precisely what the Germans wanted.

Pershing's failure to acknowledge the Meuse-Argonne's terrain, the German defenses, and the Germans' defensive tactics in his planning condemned many doughboys to unnecessary deaths. More than anything else, what made him disregard these factors was his irrational overestimation of the AEF's fighting capabilities. In his mind, his overconfidence canceled out any deep, thoughtful, intellectual consideration of them. As he saw it, all his men needed to surmount these obstacles were willpower, a rifle, and a bayonet, artillery, tanks, machine guns, and aircraft being mere accessories.

The advance commenced at 5:30 A.M. on 26 September 1918. The Germans, stretched thin, were taken by surprise. Suffice it to say the doughboys made decent headway for the most part. However, even on that first day there were foreboding signs of things to come.

Montfaucon was the primary objective for the first day. At 1,122 feet (342 meters), that limestone butte, on which rested the remains of a village and church with a steeple, dominated the surrounding countryside. It had to be taken. In Pershing's plan, while the untested 79th Division assaulted it from the front, keeping the Germans occupied, the veteran 4th Division, advancing past Montfaucon, would conduct a turning movement from the east, taking it from behind. Unfortunately, each division belonged to a different corps—the 4th the III Corps, the 79th the V Corps. Worse, their commanders had a far from ideal working relationship. Major General George H. Cameron, commanding the V Corps, was “mild and unimposing.”¹¹ Major General Robert Lee Bullard, commander of the III Corps, thirsted for glory and was not interested in

¹¹ Lengel, 96.

sharing any of it: “I am not going to help George Cameron win any battle laurels,” he allegedly declared that night.¹² He also derided the “Leavenworth clique,” graduates of the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, for having “Leavenworthitis,” the symptom of which was adherence to “exotic envelopments and complex coordination.”¹³ Moreover, Bullard was not above disobeying orders to get his way, and the attack on Montfaucon was no exception. He simply rescinded the order. The forebodings Major J. A. Stevens of the 47th Regiment, 4th Divisions, sensed that afternoon were quite justified: “We had an uneasy feeling that, despite the local success in our own sector, something had gone wrong somewhere; and there was a tendency to blame the division on our left, the 79th.”¹⁴ Thanks to the stiff defense at Montfaucon, General Max von Gallwitz, commanding the army group opposing the Americans, recalled, “Already in the evening the danger was averted by the bringing up of reserves.”¹⁵

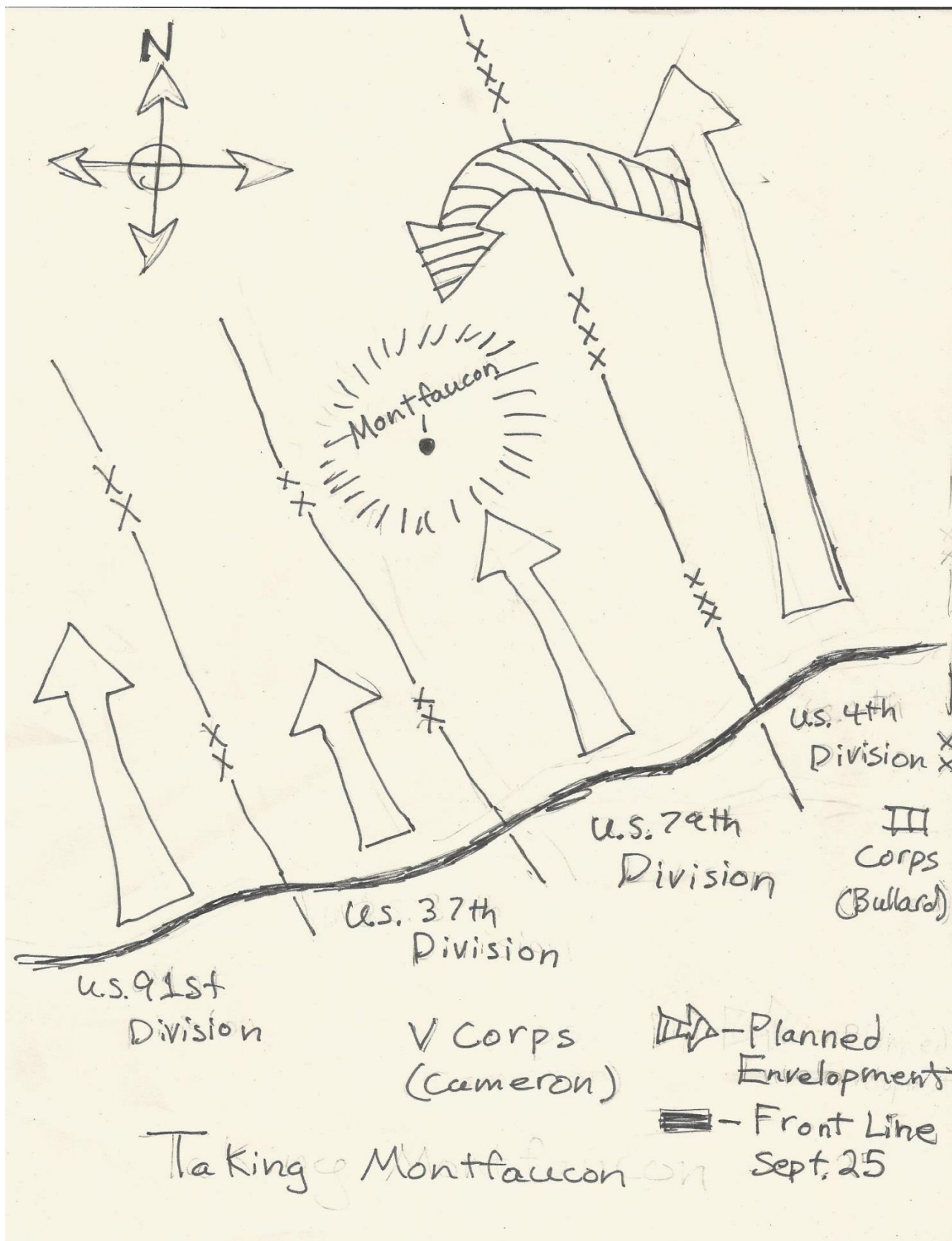
A few divisions to the left of the 4th and 79th stood the 35th Division. Although it advanced three miles on the first day, its fortunes boded ill for the rest of the offensive. Two infantry regimental commanders, in command for only five days, became so fatigued to the point of collapse: the 137th’s Colonel Clad Hamilton and the 138th’s Colonel Henry Howland. Virtually leaderless—Howland was evacuated, but Hamilton laid motionless in a shell hole—their commands were paralyzed for the remainder of the morning. The 139th Regiment became entangled with the 137th Regiment. Significant portions of the division’s leadership were out of touch with each other. The division commander, Major General Peter Traub, wandered aimlessly about. His decision to replace his infantry brigade commanders and their regimental commanders was bearing bitter fruit indeed. The division was a mess by the end of the day.

¹² William T. Walker, Jr., “The Chance of a Miracle at Montfaucon,” in *A Companion to the Meuse-Argonne Campaign*, ed. Edward G. Lengel (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁴ Drum Papers, 4th Division files, box 16, United States Army Heritage and Education Center (USAHEC).

¹⁵ Walker, 45.



Even though planners had made allowances to the Argonne Forest's terrain by having the 77th Division and the 112th Infantry Regiment, 28th Division, advance deliberately through it, the forest still proved to be troublesome. Worse, the 77th's commander, Major General Robert Alexander, envisioned the use of open warfare in the Argonne—despite the fact that it could hardly be considered open. He insisted on the application of open warfare even though he could not locate any features on his front of “outstanding tactical” value.¹⁶ Instead, he ordered “a straight push forward of the whole line.”¹⁷ He was counting “upon the initiative of the subordinate commanders, specifically the platoon and company commanders, for the proper manoeuvre of their units when the necessity for such manoeuvre became apparent.”¹⁸

The doughboys could not find such necessary circumstances on the first day. The trees and their canopies retained the morning fog longer. Captain Walter Kerr Rainsford of the 77th's 307th Infantry Regiment recalled that “as morning began to lighten I found myself, with my striker and two runners, adrift in a blind world of whiteness and noise, groping over something like the surface of the moon.”

One literally could not see two yards, and everywhere the ground rose into bare pinnacles and ridges, or descended into bottomless chasms, half filled with rusted tangles of wire. Deep, half-ruined trenches appeared without system or sequence, usually impossible of crossing, bare splintered trees, occasional derelict skeletons of men, thickets of gorse, and everywhere the piles of rusted wire.¹⁹

Private John Nell succinctly described the situation by dusk: “Everything was confusion, and everybody seemed to be lost.”²⁰ The doughboys advance did get past parts of the German second

¹⁶ Grotelueschen, 313.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ James H. Hallas, ed., *Doughboy War: The American Expeditionary Force in World War I* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2000), 244.

²⁰ Lengel, 120.

line of resistance, they did not get very far. Most of what they gained that first day the Germans let them have.

“Alexander’s delegation of the Argonne battle to his subordinates”—caused by his adherence to open warfare—“complicated any effort by the division to coordinate attacks and mass firepower,” observes Grotelueschen. “Only he, as the division commander, had the staff and command capability necessary to coordinate the brigade’s attacks and develop detailed and mutually supporting fire plans.”²¹ True, such intense barrages might have caused “the most amazing tangle imaginable”—the result, according to Alexander, of the preliminary bombardment—to be increased in size, but at least the doughboys would have had to negotiate more with the landscape than the Germans, suffering fewer casualties as a result.²² Consequently, the only relevancy he would have in the coming days would be his insistence on continuing the advance.

The situation in First Army’s rear also carried a foreboding for the AEF. What few roads that led to the front, all of whom were narrow and in disrepair, soon became jammed with traffic that first day—and the jams kept getting longer and longer. A military policeman (MP) named Edwin James Tippet, Jr., recalled the chaotic scene:

All about, cursing, lashing mule-skinners, straining mules and eager horses. M.P.’s keeping the lines from tangling. Excited staff-officers tangling things up and cursing everyone else. All this thru seas of mud. Wagons miring, breaking; horses struggling. Trucks and wagons, stuck in the mud, unceremoniously turned over in the ditch.²³

Part of the problem had to do with the fact that there were too few MPs, and all of them were green. It did not help that officers—the products of Central Officers’ Training Schools (COTS) and Officer Training Camps (OTCs) that paid little attention to logistics—kept disregarding the

²¹ Grotelueschen, 317.

²² Ibid., 316.

²³ Lengel, 123.

MPs. The point was that no supplies and hardly any artillery were making it to the front lines where they were sorely needed.

Considering the aforementioned circumstances, Pershing would have been prudent to dedicate the following day, 27 September, to very limited attacks on sections of the front, if any, and straightening out the logistical and organizational messes. It was not to be: “The Commander-in-Chief commands that division commanders take forward positions and push troops energetically, and the corps and division commanders be relieved of whatever rank who fail to show energy.”²⁴

Unsurprisingly, the First Army made little headway on 27 September. The 79th Division captured Montfaucon around noontime, courtesy of the German withdrawal, but could not advance beyond it, thanks at least in part to Bullard. The 35th Division, inserting the fresh 140th Infantry Regiment that had hitherto been in reserve, took Charpentry. There was little in the way of artillery support, and what support that was given came largely from German artillery pieces captured the previous day. “From that point on,” Major Charles Dupuy of the 316th Infantry Regiment, 79th Division, wrote, “we began to realize what artillery really meant.”²⁵ The day after that one (28 September) was much of the same.

Because of the mess to their rear, increasingly the doughboys suffered from hunger and thirst. On the evening of 28 September, Sergeant Edward Davies of the 315th Infantry, 79th Division, wrote in his diary, “I’m all in. Hungry and thirsty, I haven’t eaten since yesterday morning.”²⁶ His situation had worsened by the next morning: “I am so weak I can hardly stand. None of us have [had] any food or water for days now. My throat and tongue feel like sandpaper.

²⁴ Ibid., 124.

²⁵ Ibid., 130.

²⁶ Ibid., 150.

I have discarded my pack, I haven't the strength to carry it any further."²⁷ He was far from alone. His colonel protested that the 315th Regiment was "too weak for further advance without food," but to no avail.²⁸ If the doughboys ate anything, it was in scraps and therefore insufficient nourishment, and almost always cold. Slightly easier to obtain was water; the frequently rainy weather enabled them to collect fresh rainwater in tins and raincoats. However, sole reliance on the weather for water became impractical in light of the doughboy's desperation. Carl E. Haterius, an officer serving in the 137th Infantry, recalled that the men of the 35th Division

drank water wherever they could find it—in shell holes, crevices, and in fact any place that water was obtainable. The eating of cold rations out of unwashed mess kits, this drinking of foul water, and the exposure and strain, caused every man to suffer from dysentery.²⁹

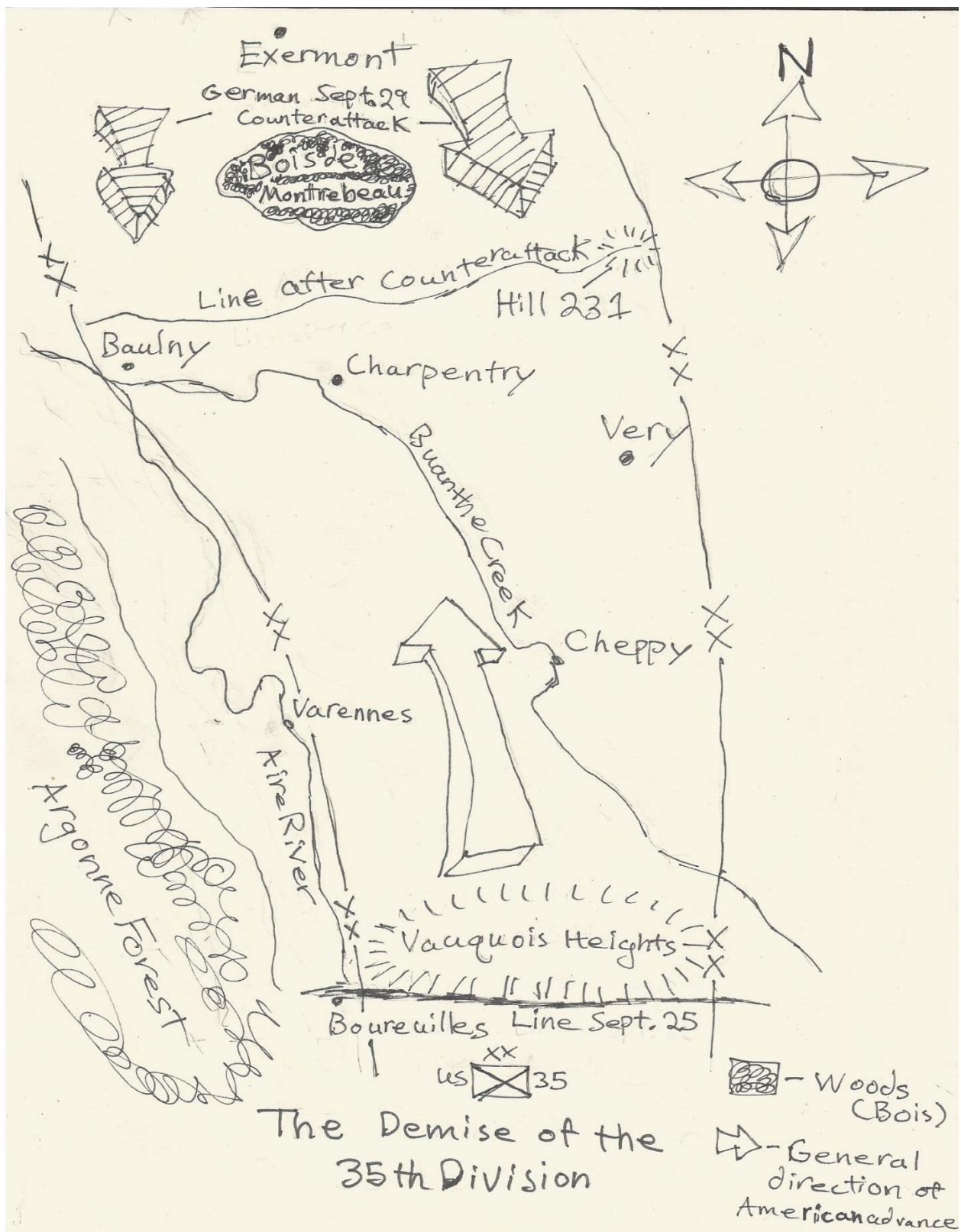
These men were the ones whom Pershing ordered to press on. Their lack of energy and hydration meant that they were not up to their full combat potential. To have such men continue to attack virtually unsupported was a waste of manpower.

Pershing's demands to keep pushing had catastrophic consequences for the 35th Division. Disorganized, its regiments one incoherent mass of humanity and its men fatigued, the division attacked once more on 29 September 1918. Elements of the 140th Regiment, under its commanding officer Lieutenant Colonel Channing Delaplane, advanced through the village of Exermont and a couple hundred yards beyond. Then, at 11:00 A.M., the German 5th Guards and 52nd Divisions counterattacked, exploiting the many gaps in the 35th's line. The doughboys broke, sowing panic as they fled. "The attack proceeds as well as if on a maneuver," claims the regimental history of the 111th Regiment, 52nd Division. The Germans rolled the Americans up through Montrebeau Wood, which the doughboys had seized the previous day, all the way to Hill

²⁷ Ibid., 164.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Richard Shawn Faulkner, *The School of Hard Knocks: Combat Leadership in the American Expeditionary Forces*, C. A. Brannen Series, no. 12 (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 308.



231 and another promontory right in front of Baulny to the south, where their advance was brought to a halt by the 35th's 110th Engineers and 128th Machine Gun Battalion. The machine gunners and engineers saved their division from complete collapse. Pershing's persistence got the division needlessly wrecked and mauled.

It is estimated that the first phase of the Meuse Argonne Offensive (26 to 30 September) cost the U.S. First Army 26,000. Since 26 September, the 37th Division suffered 3,060 casualties; the 79th, 3,591; the 91st, nearly 4,700; and the 35th, 6,006—the highest casualty rate of all the nine divisions that participated in the first phase. However, such calculations do not count the stragglers and shell shocked, or the troops lightly gassed or with recoverable wounds. Neither did they account for the pathetic condition of the troops. The administration officer (G1) of the relieving 3rd Division thought

that the 79th Division was the most demoralized outfit that he had ever seen; that the men had thrown away a great deal of their equipment and that the 3rd Division has equipped a complete Machine Gun Company with the machine guns thrown away by the 79th; that the men are dejected and demoralized and apparently not the subject of any discipline. From his talk with different men of the 79th he was convinced that they were utterly unfit for any further operations.³⁰

Straggling was endemic. Field kitchens, the YMCA, and other canteens proved to be potent magnets for stragglers. "Dozens of front line doughboys came to our kitchen to mooch some hot coffee and a handful of willy," recalled Lieutenant Robert Casey, 124th Field Artillery.

None of them seemed to belong to any outfit, nor seemed anxious to do anything but sit and watch the artillery. I questioned one, trying to find out whether GHQ had decided to send in reinforcements one man at a time or what the what.

"We ain't replacements," he said. "I don't know about the rest of this gang. They ain't in my outfit. But me, I came back to get some coffee and a night's sleep. All our officers is gone and we more or less shift for

³⁰ Ibid., 310.

ourselves. I think I'll try a new sector the next time I go in. I was up at Eclis Fontaine and it's too damned hot."³¹

The soldier's explanation was unfortunately typical for the stragglers. Pershing had worked his troops beyond their means. Indeed, he worked some of them literally to death. True, First Army, the debacle of the 35th Division notwithstanding, was now closer to its vital objective. However, the attacks from 27 to 29 September made for an unnecessary expenditure of lives.

Of course, more than questions of Pershing's competence were involved in the first phase. The losses bear testimony to the tenacious resistance on the part of the Germans opposing First Army—specifically, their Fifth Army plus their Third Army's Group Argonne in its namesake forest. They knew what the stakes were. "The French attack in the Champagne and the American attack between the Argonne and the Meuse were the beginnings of the great critical battle in the west which we are to believe will bring the war to an end," General Karl von Einem, commanding Third Army, informed his groups on the evening of 28 September.³² He also directed that "every single man be told that this battle will save the cause of the Fatherland."³³ The Germans were pouring as many divisions as could be spared into the Meuse-Argonne.

The second phase began on 4 October. In place of the green 35th, 37th, 79th, and 91st Divisions were the 1st, 3rd, and 32nd—all veteran formations. In what was perhaps the most significant event that day, the 1st Division gained around a mile and a half, regaining ground the 35th Division had lost—at the hefty price of 2,057 men. On the other hand, the 4th Division to its right took the Bois de Fays. Sergeant Major James Block described the experience of holding it:

It is said that the Bois de Fays means "Woods of the Fairies." Were I to name it, I would call it "The center of Hell." Any man who ever spent

³¹ Hallas, 264.

³² Gen. Karl von Einem to "Four Groups," 7:00 P.M., 28 September 1918, National Archives at College Park (NARC), Record Group (RG) 165.

³³ Ibid.

any time in those woods from the 4th to the 17th of October, knows that even that term does not adequately express the true situation.

The shell torn woods were wet and muddy; everything was wet and damp, raw, cold and clammy. Not a breeze blew to clear the gas laden air. The sun never shown, it was always dark and murky. Down the sides of our fox holes, water trickled or seeped through the walls. From all sides came the odor of death or decay, mangled bodies of men everywhere. Our bodies ached from the cold and wet. The foul surroundings made one sick at heart. We were hungry, yet unable to eat but little of the food which came up. For hours at a time we were forced to be without water, for to go after it was to gamble with death. The mental strain was maddening, the physical strain exhausted us, yet we had to be alert. Sleep was impossible. The enemy counter-attacked time and again, but was repulsed each time.³⁴

“When the Boche were not counter-attacking,” Block added, “they were shelling our positions. We had to lay there and hold. We had to take all the punishment with our hands tied.”³⁵ General Robert Bullard, the III Corps commander, did nothing to alleviate their suffering. He had only words: “You are there. Stay there.”³⁶ “The enemy had been ‘sapping’ hell out of us for days,” Block grumbled. “We had to like it and call it good. How much better it would have been if those last words had been changed to this—‘Attack the enemy and tear him to shreds.’”³⁷

Bullard kept pushing the 80th Division, too. It could not take the Bois des Ogons, an outpost of the *Kriemhilde Stellung*. Its attacks kept getting repelled. The division commander, Major General Adelbert Cronkhite, asked him to rescind the order for a third attack, but Bullard was unrelenting: “Give it up and you are a goner. You’ll lose your command in twenty-four hours. Make one more attack. This time you’ll take the wood and throw the enemy out.”³⁸ Cronkhite’s desperation can be sensed in the messages he sent to his troops on 4 and 5 October:

³⁴ Lengel, 201.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 235.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Robert H. Ferrell, *America’s Deadliest Battle: Meuse-Argonne, 1918*, Modern War Studies (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 102.

“The reputation of the Division is at stake. The Bois des Ogons *must* be taken!”³⁹ Actually, more than one attack proved necessary before the woods fell to the 80th on the evening of 5 October. Even then, the Germans let them have it.

Meanwhile, by the end of 5 October, the 1st Division had gained three miles. Its advance created a gap as wide, since the 28th Division to its left had failed to keep pace, so the left flank of the 1st was in the air. In other words, the 1st Division was doing the job of the 28th, outflanking the Argonne Forest from the east. Amazingly, the Germans did not exploit this gap. However, its potential was not lost on Major General Hunter Liggett, commanding the I Corps. He planned on inserting the green 82nd Division and having the right half of the 28th Division swing westwards into it. It was to be a flanking movement aimed at blocking the line of retreat for the Germans facing the 77th and the left half of the 28th in the Argonne. It would also enable the Lost Battalion—actually, elements of the 307th and 308th that had gone further than the troops on the right and left, and had as a consequence been surrounded since 3 October—to be relieved. The flank attack was scheduled for 7 October.

The second phase proved crucial to opening the door to further success. Part of the reason had to do with the presence of experienced divisions, particularly the 1st, in place of the green, less trained divisions they had relieved. The advance of the 1st Division finally presented the opportunity to outflank the Argonne Forest. However, it was a different story with the III Corps. Bullard, like Pershing, impetuously kept demanding attacks with little preparation, and when, in the case of the 4th Division, they gained ground, he neglected to order counterbattery fire, let alone try to deal with the German control of the air over the front. Moreover, First Army as a whole did not have much to show for the second phase. “The attacks collapsed, in general, under the brave and obstinate resistance of our infantry and the performance of our artillery,” Army

³⁹ Lengel, 236.

Group Gallwitz noted with pride in its war diary on 4 October. “Wherever the enemy succeeded in effecting local penetrations, they were eliminated by powerfully executed counterattacks.”⁴⁰ Even the 1st Division, on 6 October, was stopped cold in front of Hill 272 by elements of the German 52nd and 37th Divisions. “The whole Fifth Army felt in the best of humour,” Gallwitz recalled, “on account of having completely repulsed a superior opponent.”⁴¹ The second phase was successful in promising future successes in the third.

Nevertheless the *Frontschwein* were as tired as the doughboys. The commander of the 111th Infantry, 300 strong, atop Hill 272 reported to the headquarters of the 52nd Division at this time that he rated his regiment’s combat effectiveness as “zero.”

The troops were in position or in combat since July with no significant break. They were psychologically worn down; physically exhausted by their efforts and bad nutrition; and they barely knew one another anymore. The new replacement troops were never, or rarely, under fire. They were poorly trained and one could not depend on them. As a result, they would run from any artillery fire in spite of the vigorous efforts of the leaders. The whole weight of the battle was carried on the few leaders and the old Badeners.⁴²

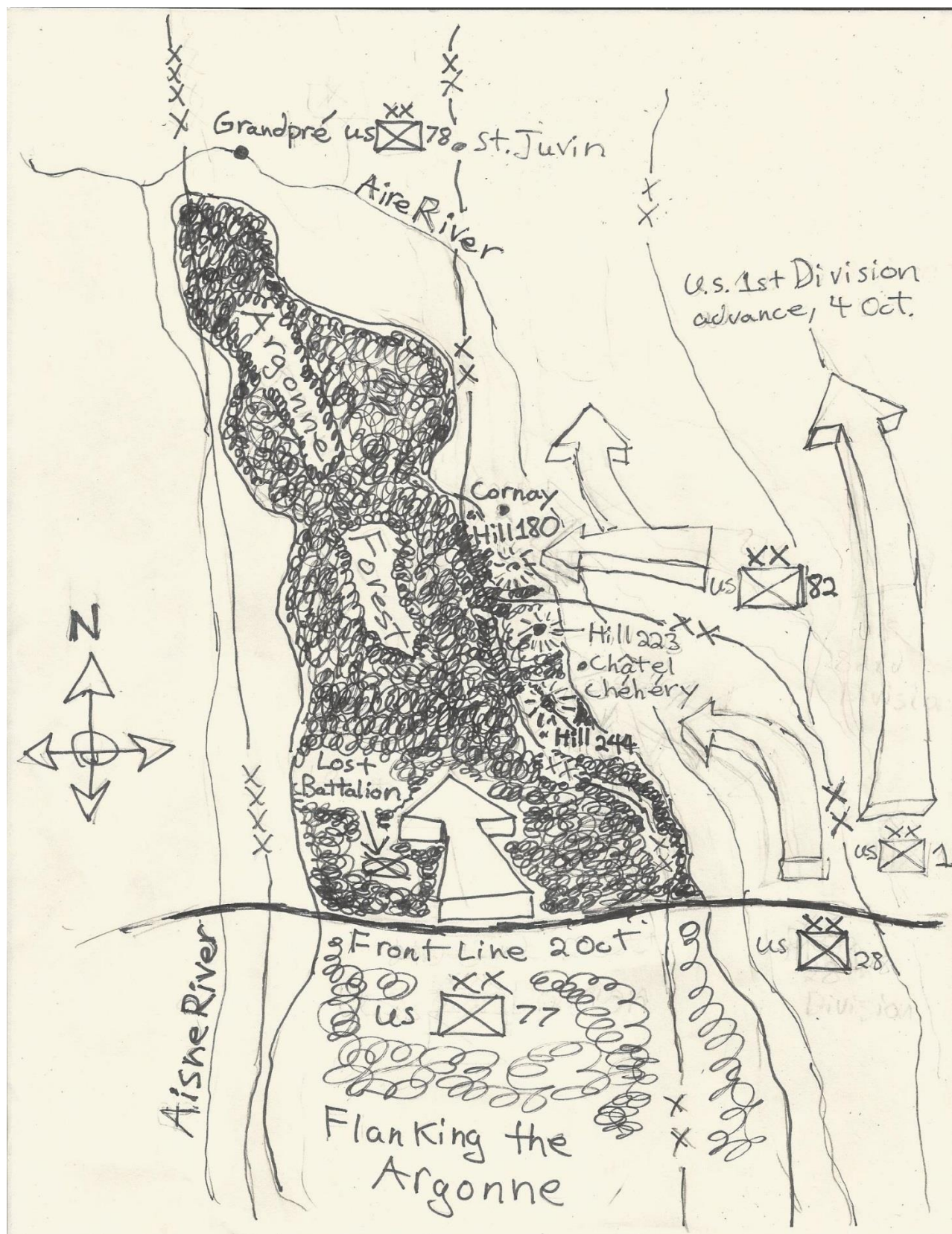
It was becoming the same story as the Americans’. Thanks to the terrain, the tactics some of the doughboys employed, and the drive of AEF commanders, not to mention the Allied attacks elsewhere on the Western Front, First Army was winning the battle through attrition. Unlike the Germans, the Americans still had vast pools of manpower, however insufficiently trained.

The third phase (7 to 11 October) began with great success before becoming bogged down like the others. The 82nd and 28th Divisions attacked through the gap on 7 October. The 82nd took Hills 180 and 223, both of which were unoccupied, while the 28th took Châtel Chéhéry

⁴⁰ *United States Army in the World War, 1917-1919* (USAWW) (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1948), 9: 536.

⁴¹ Lengel, 234.

⁴² Randal S. Gaulke, “The 111th (German) Infanterie-Regiment by Exermont,” in *A Companion to the Meuse-Argonne Campaign*, ed. Edward G. Lengel (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 240.



and reached Hill 244. The attack might not have cut off the Germans' retreat, but it did cause the abandonment of the Argonne Forest and the consequent relief of the Lost Battalion, then on its fifth day of being surrounded. The rest of the 77th relieved it that evening.

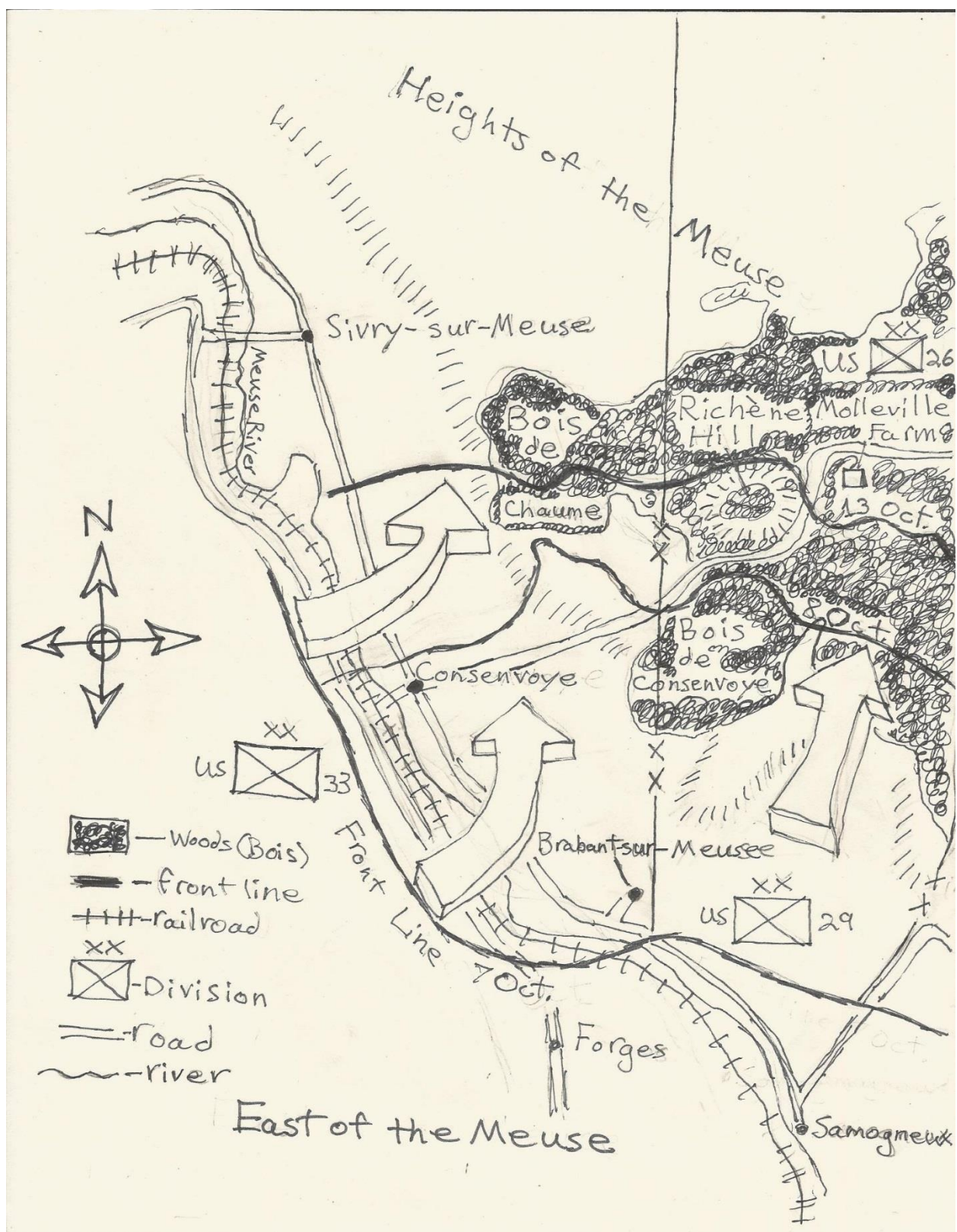
The battalion would not have been in such a predicament had not General Alexander insisted that his division attack "without regard to flanks or losses"—two tenets of open warfare.⁴³ "Rescue, hell," Major Charles Whittlesey, the leader of the Lost Battalion, told a captain of the relief force, "if you had come up when we did, you wouldn't have put us in that fix."⁴⁴ Of the perhaps 554 men of Whittlesey's First Battalion and Captain George McMurtry's Second Battalion, 308th Infantry Regiment, plus Captain Nelson Holderman's Company K of the 307th, that entered the Charlevaux Valley, only 194 were able to walk out, while 144 had to be carried on stretchers. The rest were dead. These losses were the price of Alexander's faith in open warfare.

On 8 October, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was expanded to the east of the Meuse River. Pershing recognized that the German artillery from the Heights of Meuse was wreaking havoc on the 3rd, 4th, and 80th Divisions and hindering their advance to the Heights of Cunel. Hence, the object of this attack east of the Meuse was to seize the heights and silence those guns. The French XVII Corps, under First Army's command, was tasked with this job. Like the opening assault on 26 September, the *poilus* of the French 26th and 18th Divisions and the doughboys of the U.S. 29th and 33rd Divisions enjoyed great success. The 29th and 33rd advanced two and two and a half miles respectively on the first day. They sent the Austro-Hungarian 1st Division "hell bent for Vienna."⁴⁵ The next day, 9 October, was a different story for the

⁴³ Richard Slotkin, *Lost Battalions: The Great War and the Crisis of American Nationality* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 308.

⁴⁴ Hallas, 263.

⁴⁵ Lengel, 276.



doughboys. While the 29th did nothing, the 33rd gained ground only to lose all of it in an enemy counterattack. German reinforcements arrived that day as well. Like the days following 26 September, XVII Corps' gains of the subsequent days were miniscule.

Another reason why Pershing wanted to expand operations to the east of the Meuse was to “increase the fighting front of the army and thus engage and consume the maximum number of enemy divisions.”⁴⁶ In this respect, XVII Corps' attack was an unqualified success. Army Group Gallwitz made this fact clear in its war diary on 9 October: “Fighting east of the Meuse was particularly violent today. It almost forced the Fifth Army to employ its last reserves on the battle front. The situation was serious. There were no reserves available worth mentioning.”⁴⁷ The doughboys were not completely dying in vain east of the Meuse.

In the center, V Corps made some headway. On 9 October, the 3rd Division seized Bois de Cunel, Hill 253, and Mamelle Trench, an important part of the *Kriemhilde Stellung*. Elements of the division even infiltrated Romagne ahead and to the left, returning with German prisoners. In the end, Romagne remained in German hands, but it was still a spectacular success. Even though the two leading battalions of the 38th Regiment, captors of Hill 253 and Mamelle Trench, had been whittled down to the size of companies, the sacrifice was worthwhile.

Although less impressive the other V Corps division, the 32nd, to the left of the 3rd had some successes that day, too. They can partly be attributed to the division's veteran status, and partly to the competence of the division commander, Major General William Haan. The 32nd had to take Côte Dame Marie—a collection of ridges known as Hills 258, 287, and 286 in the shape of a crescent facing the Americans, and the most formidable position of the *Kriemhilde Stellung*. Thus, Haan was justified in confiding to his diary, “I am inclined to think we are going to have a

⁴⁶ Ibid., 282.

⁴⁷ USAWW, 9: 547.

very hard day. The 32nd Division is going up against a very hard proposition—a thoroughly organized position which is reported well-armed and has good artillery behind it.”⁴⁸

Consequently, unlike General Alexander of the 77th, Haan made sure his division would launch a coordinated attack, distributing a “special maneuver map” to every officer down to company commander.⁴⁹ Suffice it to say the division made it all the way to the slopes of Côte Dame Marie, although it still had plenty of fighting to do. Nevertheless, Haan’s assessment of the attack in his diary is justified: “Our troops fought fine, and although we had rather heavy casualties we nevertheless had small casualties for the work we accomplished.”⁵⁰ With an experienced division under a competent commander who understood that the situation called for limited attacks, such a success was feasible.

The following day (10 October), the Argonne Forest finally fell. The Germans, least of all Gallwitz, were not particularly concerned, though. Still, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, in spite of the suffering the doughboys underwent, was yielding results.

The biggest success the doughboys had, however, regarded attrition. The troops of the Fifth Army were increasingly becoming exhausted. At 7:30 on the evening of 9 October, Gallwitz composed a plea to First Quartermaster General Erich Ludendorff, who for all intents and purposes ran the German army:

Sharp enemy attacks continue against Group Argonne, Meuse Group-West, Meuse Group-East and right flank of Group Ornes. Troops have fought superbly in most instances, but those in the front line are almost exhausted. Reserves have been committed and they are, likewise, weakened. Only 123d Inf. Div. remains available. It is feared that line of the Fifth Army cannot be held much longer without further support. In view of the importance of the mission of this Group of Armies which is acting as the fulcrum for the operations of all of the armies fighting to

⁴⁸ Lengel, 290.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 291.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 292.

the west and north, I request that additional forces be brought up from Nehin in the near future.⁵¹

Gallwitz was writing the letter more as a symbolic nod to authorized practices. Ludendorff did not disappoint. His reply came in at 8:00 P.M. the next day (10 October):

I share the concern of Your Excellency to the fullest extent. The Group of Armies German Crown Prince and Duke Albrecht will help as much as possible. However, in view of the lack of troops, of which Your Excellency is well aware, Group of Armies Gallwitz must put into the fighting front every unit which is at all fit for employment in battle.⁵²

Army Group Gallwitz was on borrowed time.

The continual successes of the Allies all along the Western Front, of which the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was a part, factored into Germany's decision to begin corresponding with U.S. President Woodrow Wilson about the possibility of an armistice. "It was plain the situation could not last," explained Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the German chief of the general staff. "Our armies were too weak and too tired. Moreover, the pressure which the American masses were putting on the most sensitive point in the region of the Meuse was too strong."⁵³ "The papers are in the street now saying that the Central Powers have asked for peace," Captain Harry S Truman, commanding Battery D, 129th Field Artillery, 35th Division, wrote elatedly to his fiancée Bess, "and I was in the drive that did it!"⁵⁴ He was indeed.

Thus far, the talks left nothing definitive. The war still on, as Hindenburg made clear:

The weapons are not yet quiet, nor can we yet perceive the time of cessation of hostilities and of the war. Though we have declared ourselves ready to evacuate the occupied area in Belgium and in France to bring about the end of the war, we must nevertheless, summoning all our strength and ready for further sacrifices, be on the defensive until the

⁵¹ USAWW, 9: 546. Group Argonne had been transferred to Fifth Army on 5 October.

⁵² Ibid, 9: 549.

⁵³ Joseph E. Persico, *Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918, World War I and Its Violent Climax* (New York: Random House, 2004), 290.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 289.

enemy is inclined, on his side, to enter into the negotiations which we have proposed and until these have led to a positive result.⁵⁵

Pershing's fourth phase (12 to 15 October) called for a relative rest period from 12 to 13 October before the main attack commenced on 14 October. New players entered and old ones exited: The 42nd and 5th Divisions replaced the 1st and 80th Divisions respectively. While the 42nd was a veteran outfit, the 5th had yet to participate in any severe action.

The 14th of October was a very significant day. The 5th Division, although only gaining half a mile, took Cunel—at the cost of having its frontline strength depleted to the size of a brigade. Captain Emil Gansser of the adjacent 32nd Division witnessed how inexperienced the 5th Division was in the attack that day:

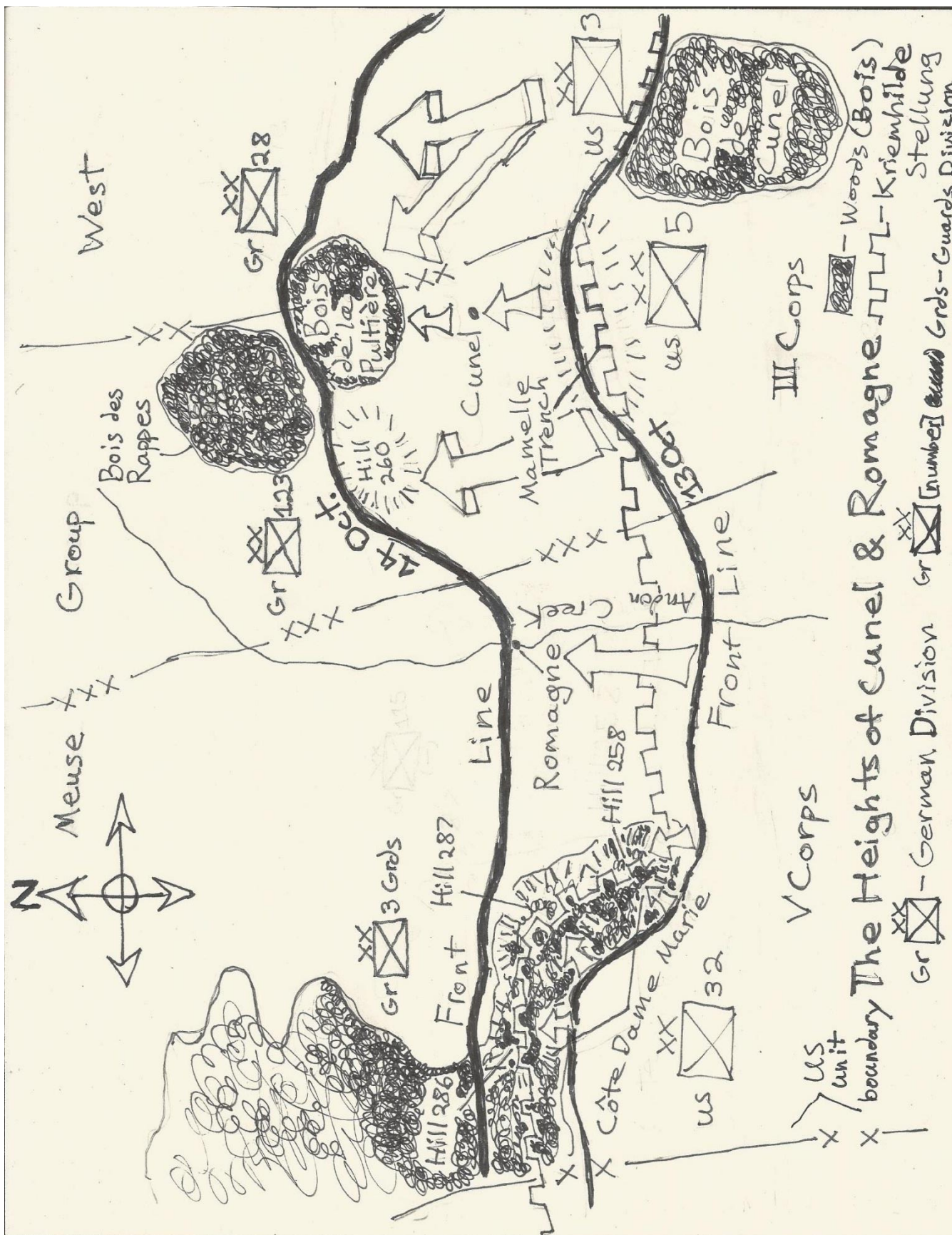
When they approach within gunshot range of the enemy in the trenches, fingers of flame spurt from the muzzle of mausers and automatics. Men are falling to the ground by the score. The deplorable carnage is appalling, yet the thinning waves come walking on without firing a shot in return. Not until the survivors of the leading waves reach a dry creek bed midway to the trenches, do these intrepid doughboys drop into shell-pits or hastily dug foxholes and end their costly advance which could have been attained after dark with scarcely any losses. They are learning the technique of advancing into battle the hard way, the same as we had to do.⁵⁶

Worse, even though its plan of attack called for a prodigious amount of artillery support, the division received hardly any. The capture of Cunel compensated somewhat for the division's copious casualties.

The day also saw the 32nd Division's capture of Côte Dame Marie and Romagne. Again, General Haan was under no illusions: "Our troops are up against the wire and will have a hard job, but I hope it goes O.K. I have impressed with all my force on Brigade and Regimental Commanders the fact that the position can be carried if they can impress their men in the same

⁵⁵ Fifth Army, Operations Section, Order No. 241, 14 October 1918, NARC, RG 165.

⁵⁶ Lengel, 335.



way, and get them into the full spirit of the matter.”⁵⁷ In its attack, the division got to show how much it had learned. Aided by a few companies from the 125th Regiment, the 128th outflanked the German trenches before Romagne, entered the village, and then pressed onward for half a mile. The 126th and 127th were able to take Côte Dame Marie, thanks to the heroic efforts of Captain Edward B. Strom and the seven men under him. When heavy machine gun fire prevented the 126th from exploiting a gap in the barbed wire, Strom and his men cut through the wire elsewhere, silencing ten machine gun nests and capturing 15 Germans, with the loss of not a single man. The feat of this detachment enabled the 126th to rush through the gap, causing Côte Dame Marie to fall to the Americans.

At last, the most critical point on the *Kriemhilde Stellung* was now in American hands.

Haan was elated:

I consider this the best day's work that the 32nd Division has yet done. A German officer, who was captured today, stated that the attack of our Division was the best planned and best executed of any division's, British or French, that he had come in contact with except one Scottish Division, who wore kilts and they don't count.⁵⁸

Haan was completely justified in his joy. He, along with the division's experience, made the position's capture possible. The fall of Côte Dame Marie and its significance made the losses seem worthwhile.

To the left, the 77th and 82nd Divisions, also on 14 October, both captured the town of St. Juvin—the 82nd took the eastern half, the 77th the western. That night, a few doughboys of the 308th managed to cross the Aire north of Chevières. Two pillars blocking the path to the open country to the north—St. Juvin and the Aire River—had fallen. The doughboys, through hard experience, were getting somewhere.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 339.

The aforementioned successes, however, should not obscure the cost they entailed. “The optimistic reports of yesterday have gradually given way to more pessimistic ones,” Major General John Leonard Hines, who had replaced Bullard as the III Corps commander, noted in his diary on 15 October.⁵⁹ That day, he also inspected the 5th Division, finding it “jumpy” and with perhaps 2,500 stragglers.⁶⁰ Concluded Hines, “It appears that the entire 5th Div. has been used by piling in all remaining reserves, elements are disorganized and crowded in Bois de la Poultiere beyond which they cannot advance.”⁶¹ Indeed, Pershing relieved two division commanders, effective 18 October: Major General Beaumont Bonaparte Buck of the 3rd, and Major General John E. McMahon of the 5th.

“Although I am experienced in judging men under battle conditions,” reported the 3rd Division inspector general on 15 October, “I wish to state that those officers and men whom I saw of the 38th Infantry appeared to me, to use a slang term, ‘all in.’”⁶² The next day military policemen would catch more than 500 stragglers belonging to the division in its rear. On 14 October, while the 5th and 32nd Divisions were attacking successfully, the military police of the 32nd caught many stragglers from the 5th. The MPs returned them to their units, but found them straggling again shortly afterwards.

Stragglers straggled for a number of reasons: the lack of food reaching the front lines; the breakdown of authority following an officer’s death, since many green and poorly trained NCOs failed to fill officers’ shoes, let alone assert their authority even when officers were in command; separation from their units, sometimes because officers neglected to keep their men well-informed about their intentions; and simply to avoid combat, or in the words of Lieutenant

⁵⁹ Ibid., 347.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Faulkner, 310.

Joseph Douglas Lawrence of the 113th Infantry, 29th Division, to get “a few minutes of relief from the hell on the line.”⁶³ If the training of officers was abysmal, the training of NCOs was far worse. The officer’s themselves had received little training in logistics, and consequently too many of them insufficiently attended to the welfare of their men, including keeping them supplied. Major Merritt Olmstead, 5th Division, complained that had “commanders been more interested in the welfare of their commands and given some personal attention to the supply of food, their men would not have gone hungry throughout 12-13 October.”⁶⁴ Another problem was that while the logistical situation had eased, it had done so only slightly. Private L.V. Jacks and his comrades of the 119th Field Artillery, 32nd Division, “tightened their belts, for downright starvation seemed imminent,” despite the exertions of the unit’s cooks.⁶⁵ No rations reached Company H, 126th Regiment, between 12 and 15 October. Even when, on 16 October, the company commander sent ration details to the rear, the carriers proved to be “too tired, wary, and weak to carry the marmite cans of hot food thru the back area brush and shell holes.”⁶⁶ It was thus “the pangs of hunger” that induced Private Horace Baker, 128th Infantry, to embark “on an exploring trip” to the rear.⁶⁷

The divisions were shadows of their former selves. The 32nd Division, conqueror of Côte Dame Marie presented a particularly sorry picture. For example, by 17 October the division’s 127th Infantry had 216 men in its First Battalion, 160 in its Second, and 139 in its Third.⁶⁸ Of the 139 men in Third Battalion, it had two officers and 32 men in I Company, three officers and 21

⁶³ Hallas, 282.

⁶⁴ Faulkner, 307-308.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 306.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 306-307.

⁶⁸ Ferrell, 101.

men in K Company, three officers and 60 men in L Company, and two officers and 16 men in M Company.⁶⁹ The 89th Division relieved the 32nd from 19 to 20 October.

Compared to the other phases, the fifth (16 to 31 October) was a relative interlude. On its first day, two important things happened: (a) First Army finally reached all of its objectives for 26 September, and (b) Hunter Liggett, now a lieutenant general, assumed command of it, as Pershing had decided to promote himself. Liggett, the former I Corps commander, was cut from a different cloth from Pershing. He was deliberate and more realistic, understanding that Pershing's brand of open warfare did not work and that casualties had to be minimized. To deal with straggling, Liggett as army commander augmented the military police, had stragglers' posts established along every roadside, and ordered troops to patrol the rear areas searching for "strays and hideaways."⁷⁰ Moreover, he understood the reasons for straggling: "Such endless hammering in bad weather was a terrific strain on young troops. There was serious need for rest and reorganization."⁷¹ Liggett deemed it "essential to gather up the army as a team" so "our full weight might be felt in once concerted blow"—a prerequisite Pershing reluctantly accepted.⁷²

First Army was going to lick its wounds, but it was not going to be completely inactive. Liggett envisioned limited attacks to gain springboards for when the big offensive resumed. His expectations were consistent with the state of many of the divisions. For the offensive to go right, it required about two weeks of thorough preparation—similar to the kind that had made possible First Army's gains on 26 September.

As a parting gift, the 77th Division presented the relieving 78th with the lower half of Grandpré—a key strongpoint of the *Kriemhilde Stellung*—up to the town's main street stretching

⁶⁹ Ibid., 101-102.

⁷⁰ Lengel, 360.

⁷¹ Ibid., 361.

⁷² Ibid.

from east to west. What the Germans still held—the upper half nestled against the northern ridge of the Aire Valley, plus a ridge with a château that bulged out into the center of town that the Germans had fortified—needed to be taken. From there, particularly the ridge, the Germans had command of the surrounding landscape. Suffice it to say the ridge was seized on 23 October, meaning that First Army had finally surmounted the western half of the *Kriemhilde Stellung*.

There were other limited successes elsewhere along the line. The relatively fresh 90th Division, from 23 to 25 October, managed to seize Bantheville and woods in the vicinity. The 5th Division—after resting and recuperating in the rear for nine days—took Aincreville, one of the few strongpoints of the *Kriemhilde Stellung* left, on 30 October. On 23 October, the 89th Division, three days at the front, took the Bois de Bantheville. These attacks caused little in the way of unnecessary casualties.

It was during this period, the second half of October, that the doughboys could discern without a doubt that the German army's morale was nearing the breaking point. On 22 October, doughboys of the 104th Regiment, U.S. 26th Division, which had relieved the portions of the 29th and French 18th Divisions, allowed the Germans to leave a note, written in poor English, right in front of their lines at about noon: "In the night not shooting," it read.⁷³ Soon after another German approached, leaving German newspaper and another note: "If we must shoot, we shoot high. What will you make?"⁷⁴ On 20 October, some "Saxons of a Landwehr regiment" facing the division's 102nd Regiment "came out of their trench and began to make gestures to our men to come over."⁷⁵ Eventually, two German speakers in the 102nd, a Sergeant Major Wax and Mechanic Rechen, went over. Asked Wax, "What did you want?"⁷⁶ "We want you to stop

⁷³ Hallas, 297.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

shooting at us,” replied one of the Saxons. “We are Saxons here. We know that the war is over. There is no use in going on fighting; we are not barbarians and we don’t want to kill unnecessarily.”⁷⁷

The Germany army noticed, too. On 14 October, Field Marshal Hindenburg commanded that predominantly “army Hq. and the heads of all units” dissuade talks of peace and an armistice “at its inception.”⁷⁸ He added, “The organization created for patriotic teaching is to be called upon freely for the purpose.”⁷⁹ Four days later, General Georg von der Marwitz, the Fifth Army commander, observed, “Increasingly numerous cases have occurred lately in which the men have shouted out expressions contrary to good order and discipline to officers passing them by in automobile, without the unit commander intervening.”⁸⁰ Marwitz’s solution was to order that those officers slow down the speeds of their automobiles so they could observe traffic regulations: “When such shouting occurs, officers in cars have to identify the men concerned and report them for punishment. Superiors who, in any instance, do not deal with the men under their command will be brought to account and will be punished themselves.”⁸¹ Like the fight against the Americans in front of him, Marwitz was fighting a losing battle. On 19 October he ordered “that only those political incidents whose transmission has been expressly ordered by higher authorities be given out to the troops. I shall deal vigorously against misuse of the telephone in the above sense.”⁸²

⁷⁷ Ibid., 297-298.

⁷⁸ Fifth Army, Operations Section, Order No. 240, 14 October 1918, NARC, RG 165.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Fifth Army, Operations Section, Order No. 322, 18 October 1918, NARC, RG 165.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Fifth Army, Operations Section, Order No. 357, 19 October 1918, NARC, RG 165.

The logistical situation, already strained thanks to the Allied blockade of Germany, had collapsed, making indiscipline rife in the Fifth Army. First Army's supply problems were child's play by comparison. "Lately there have been increasing cases of combat troops temporarily withdrawn to rear areas appropriating hay and corn supplies stored in local barns and sheds," Marwitz noted on 28 October, adding a few sentences later,

The supplies at hand belong to the community. Unlawful appropriation is prejudicial to others and a gross lack of discipline. I demand that through the energetic support of the town majors, through the troop commanders, through officers intervening personally and through the appointment of watches and patrols everything be done to prevent such occurrences so damaging to discipline.⁸³

The problem was: From where would the manpower to enforce this policy come? Most of the troops were busy resisting the Americans. Indeed, Marwitz requested that Fifth Army withdraw behind the Meuse River, but Gallwitz forbade it. Fifth Army, Gallwitz understood, was defending a vital rail artery, and consequently could not afford to concede ground voluntarily. The Americans would have to force them off.

Liggett was determined to do so. Believing that to designate the I Corps to make the main thrust between Grandpré and Landres-et-St. Georges was "certain to entail frightful losses," he decided to have V Corps, now under Major General Charles Pelot Summerall, should launch the predominant assault in the center. V Corps' objective was Barricourt Ridge, whose capture would breach the central portion of the *Kriemhilde Stellung* in its entirety. I Corps was to just "threaten furiously." The efforts of the 26th and 78th Divisions had made this plan look attainable, as their attacks had drawn Fifth Army reserves from the center, as Liggett had planned.

Perhaps the biggest difference in the attack's execution was to be the role of the United States Army Air Service (USAS). Up to that point, it had been fighting a completely different

⁸³ Fifth Army, Operations Section, Order No. 503, 28 October 1918, NARC, RG 165.



battle in the sky, concentrating on the Germans' rear areas—and allowing the German *Luftstreitkräfte* (Air Force) to control the skies over the front lines. Now, American aviators were to cooperate with the infantry.

The final phases of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive began on the early morning of 1 November. The 89th Division seized the crest of Barricourt Ridge by 4:00 P.M., while the 2nd and 90th took the western and eastern slopes respectively. The Fifth Army reacted just as Liggett had predicted: It fled to the north.

Private Rush Stephenson Young of the First Battalion, 318th Infantry, 80th Division, bore witness to the death and destruction inflicted on Fifth Army:

As we advanced, the roads and fields were strewn with dead Germans, horses, masses of Artillery, transports, ammunition limbers, helmets, guns, and bayonets. The whole earth had been gassed by shells from our artillery. The small streams were flowing red with blood from the dead bodies of German soldiers and horses. They had been trying to take cover along the banks of the roads and streams. All along the road were bodies that had been half buried, some with their feet sticking out of the ground.⁸⁴

The Germans were dissolving into a rabble. When, on 3 November, the 306th Field Artillery, 77th Division, entered Marcq, one of its officers found an enemy officers' letter to his wife: "The Americans are here," a part of it translated read. "We can kill them but we can't stop them."⁸⁵

The Americans did indeed seem unstoppable. In fact, with the *Kriemhilde Stellung* behind them, they entered into the kind of country that enabled them to apply what parts of Pershing's open warfare recipe they had gleaned from training. Even though the V Corps was now encountering logistical problems and stiff resistance, it was still advancing, although not as rapidly as the I Corps to its left, which by 2 November had gained six miles. Beginning with the 5th Division near Brioules on the night of 2-3 November, First Army's division started reaching

⁸⁴ Lengel, 391.

⁸⁵ Hallas, 302.

the banks of the Meuse to the north in echelon: the 89th at Pouilly on the night of 4-5 November, followed by the 77th at Villers prior to dawn on 6 November. By 4 November, First Army had covered 13 miles.

A week later, at 5:10 A.M. on 11 November, German delegates representing the government in Berlin signed the armistice, effective at 11:00 A.M. In other words, the Allies could spend the last five hours and 50 minutes of the war fighting it, and they did, especially Pershing. He was not satisfied with the armistice. He either wanted Germany to unconditionally capitulate or sign an armistice so Carthaginian that Germany had not a chance of fighting again. When he received word that the armistice had been signed, Pershing acted to make the most of the war with the little left. He had Liggett push the First Army all the way to the last minute. The 320 doughboys—the most conservative estimate—who died in the war's last six hours died for nothing.

Captain Bozier Castle, commanding B Company of the 325th Regiment, 82nd Division, asserted, "The military government of the United States has nothing to be proud of because of victories won on the Meuse-Argonne Front, but because of the courageous and unskilled heroic efforts displayed by her soldiers, and that her numerical strength was greater than the effective bullets of the enemy."⁸⁶ Castle was right—to a point. There had been unnecessary casualties inflicted throughout the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, particularly in its first phase. The level of tactical sophistication depended on how much training a division received, and how much combat it had experienced. Naturally, the most veteran of the divisions, and thus the ones who participated in intense fighting prior to the offensive, did better upon first attacking in the Meuse-Argonne than the hitherto untested ones. Gradually, however, the doughboys learned how to fight a modern war as the battle progressed.

⁸⁶ Lengel, 373.

However, the doughboy's tactical adaptation should not be overstated. It came at the cost of many dead and wounded. The replacements, both enlisted men and "90-day wonders," were blank slates who had to learn what the veterans they had joined already had. "Here was one of the AEF's fundamental dilemmas," observes historian Richard Faulkner. "The AEF's junior leaders were caught in a vicious cycle in which inexperienced officers and NCOs were being killed and wounded only to be replaced by other inexperienced officers and NCOs." The doughboys did improve their tactics overall, but only a little. As late as 1 November, the German 102nd Infantry Regiment noted that the American's

attack is carried out not in firing lines but in little groups in rows or packs, moving unskillfully over the terrain offering lucrative targets for machine guns and infantry. The American soldier is brave and bold, lacks the proper junior leadership and often shows himself to be improperly trained. If our artillery and machine gun fire comes into effect properly, the opponent is thrown into confusion and the attack comes to a halt.⁸⁷

Part of the reason for the Americans' ineptitude can be attributed to the United States' being unprepared for war in 1917, resulting in equipment shortages and impeded training of both officers and men. It is hard to imagine the U.S. Army, under the circumstances, not fighting, in one form or another, clumsily. However, the open warfare Pershing had in mind for the AEF did not help this situation. The rifle and bayonet were passed their prime by the time of U.S. entry. If Pershing had been a proponent of an open warfare that at least equally embraced, alongside the nearly irrelevant rifle and bayonet, newer technologies and other arms like tanks, aircraft, machine guns, and artillery the doughboys' training might not have been as flawed, resulting in a slightly lesser toll in battles such as the Meuse-Argonne. The doughboys would probably still have been tactically inept, but they would have less so.

⁸⁷ Faulkner, 277.

In a sense, even the unnecessary losses were, in the end, necessary. The objective Pershing assigned to First Army—severing the German rail line between Carignan and Sedan that helped to supply most of the German army on the Western Front—was far from strategically and operationally insignificant. The Germans recognized that the results would be fatal if they ever reach it, and fought tenaciously to keep the Americans as far away from it as possible. “After all,” wrote Gallwitz, “it was the astonishing display of American strength which definitely decided the war against us.”⁸⁸

The biggest tribute, however, came from Hindenburg himself soon after the armistice:

The American infantry in the Argonne won the war. I say this as a soldier, and soldiers will understand me best... The Argonne Battle was slow and difficult. But it was strategic... From a military point of view the Argonne Battle as conceived and carried out by the American command was the climax of the war and its deciding factor. The American attack continued from day to day with increasing power but when two opposing divisions had broken each other, yours were replaced with ten thousand eager men, ours with decimated, ill-equipped, ill-fed men suffering from contact with a gloomy and despairing civilian population. I do not mean to discredit your fighting power. I repeat: without the American blow in the Argonne we could have made a satisfactory peace at the end of a long stalemate, or at least held our last positions on our own frontier indefinitely—undefeated. The American attack won the war.⁸⁹

A part from his assertion that the sole cause of demoralization in the German army was influence from the home front, his assessment was valid.

The AEF did not win the war by itself. However, its attack in the Meuse-Argonne, in conjunction with attacks by the French and British, helped to significantly shorten the war. The losses, it is true, were horrendous, but generally speaking they were necessary to getting the armistice signed on 11 November 1918. Otherwise, the many divisions the Germans poured into

⁸⁸ Douglas Mastriano, “Changing Views on the Meuse-Argonne Offensive,” in *A Companion to the Meuse-Argonne Campaign*, ed. Edward G. Lengel (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 453.

⁸⁹ Woodward, 379.

the Meuse-Argonne to stop the Americans would have been used against the French and British.

The war may well have been prolonged in such an instance.

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