

CHAPTER 6 – AMERICA BREAKS THE STALEMATE

By the time that the Great War's guns fell silent on the late morning of November 11, 1918, Americans had seen Western Front action for about a year, in thirteen battles, great and small. They suffered 114,000 killed and 205,690 wounded, many very critically, with limbs amputated, bodies and faces disfigured, hearing and eyesight ruined. After tallying the toll, history can ask: Did they make a difference?

And history's answer is: Yes, they clearly did.

In shorthand, the difference made by the American Expeditionary Force can be encapsulated in a single large number: "One Million." This was the staggering combined British and French losses as their armies in spring 1918 were pulverized by, reeled from, regrouped and then began throwing back five massive, blitzkrieg-like German offensives. This also was the number of German losses. And, most relevant, this too was the number of American doughboys who had landed in France by mid-July 1918, when the last of the German thrusts had been halted. This number dramatizes how decisively the Americans transformed the Western Front's arithmetic by making up in full the horrendous Allied losses. For Germany, there was nothing to make up its losses, no prospects of manpower replenishment, no way to rebound. "America became the deciding factor in the war," later said General Erich Ludendorff, Germany's most important commander and architect of German battlefield strategy.

And the million doughboys were just the start. They were to keep coming and keep coming, pouring from America's seemingly bottomless manpower reservoir at the very moment when Britain, France and Germany were running out of men and had begun calling up fifty-year-olds and even sixty-year-olds. In short, the AEF's arrival sharply tipped the Western Front's balance of forces and ensured Germany's defeat. "Rare are the times in a great war," writes World War One historian John Keegan, "when the fortunes of one side or the other are transformed by the sudden accretion of a disequilibrating reinforcement." The year 1918 was such a time...

Perhaps nothing more graphically testifies to America's game-changing role in the war than a snapshot of the Western Front on the war's last day. The Americans, formally in the war for only nineteen months and actually on the battlefield for only thirteen, nonetheless on the final day of the Great War manned positions stretching eighty-three miles along the front; this was longer than the British Army's seventy miles. And those doughboys were fresh and itching to fight ("straight and tall and vigorous," in the words of *New York Times* military editor Hanson Baldwin), while the British and French soldiers were tired and worn down.

It was the AEF's continued streaming onto the battlefield and its combat successes that propelled the Germans in October 1918 to seek an armistice. And it was the mounting masses of doughboys that emboldened the British and French, in the three-week-long armistice negotiations, to turn the screws ever tighter on the Germans. It thus is thoroughly inconceivable to imagine a German defeat without the AEF on the battlefield. The Germans, of course, still would have been exhausted and their ranks depleted, but so would the British and French. And exhausted, it takes but little speculation to envision, they all eventually would have trudged reluctantly to a negotiating table for the kind of compromise peace that had ended every Europe-wide war for the previous three centuries. Instead, exploiting the AEF, London and Paris imposed a Carthaginian armistice on Berlin.

Strangely, to acknowledge America's central and decisive role in defeating Germany is not to recognize an obvious truism but to wade into a century-old controversy. No sooner had an armistice been declared than did erupt the debate over how much the AEF actually contributed to victory

over Germany. The British and the French, who for so long had been begging America to come to their aid in the war, almost immediately began dismissing (“dissing,” in today’s argot) the AEF and Pershing. Since then, five generations of military historians and analysts of warfare have picked apart and dissected every aspect of the AEF’s training, organization, weaponry and performance in battle. Often analysts have focused on AEF failings: flawed tactics, fumbling green officers, raw doughboys, shortage of American-produced tanks, artillery and planes and Pershing’s stubbornness. There are strong whiffs of truth in all of the fault-findings, as will be seen below. But in the end, in the final analysis, the analysis that history counts most, the AEF did far more right than wrong, succeeded far more than failed. In the end, America transformed the Western Front and so doing won the war against Germany...

What the United States did, and what no other combatant could do, was to dispatch by mid-1918 such huge numbers of new, eager troops to the Western Front that Foch’s risky counterattack against the exhausted Germans by the equally exhausted Allies was conceivable and then, more important, that it could accelerate and explode into the counteroffensive that quickly ended the war. The arriving doughboys were, writes John Keegan (correctly, though a bit floridly), “an army whose soldiers sprang, in uncountable numbers, as if from soil sown with dragons teeth.” A senior German officer, whose troops had just fought the doughboys, ranked their enthusiasm equal that of 1914’s exuberant German volunteers. Ludendorff would agree, marveling (after the war) at the doughboys’ “tremendous superabundance of pent-up, untapped nervous energy.” And to a British nurse at the front, quoted by Hew Strachan, the young Americans were “so god-like, so magnificent, so splendidly unimpaired in comparison with the tired, nerve-racked men of the British Army.”²⁷

Such assessments were no exaggerations; they were true. If during the war’s last 100 days German armies were smashed by a steamroller, as they were, it was the AEF that was the steam powering the machine and keeping it rolling. And this exactly was how Ludendorff saw it. To a September query from Berlin about why his armies were faltering, he answered: “The sheer number of Americans arriving daily at the front.”...

Just days after the 1st Division’s Cantigny victory, the AEF 2nd Division, which included a U.S. Marine Corps brigade of about 10,000 men, was on the attack eastward, at Belleau Wood. A one-square-mile forested plateau, with huge boulders offering defenders extraordinary cover, the woods were near the tip of the German third offensive’s furthest thrust into France. The AEF’s ferocious twenty-day battle there became of the stuff of legends and lessons. For one thing, it was an important and still honored Marine Corps and Army victory (though the Marines, for reasons still sparking controversy, garnered most of the publicity). For another, it was at Belleau Wood where that Marine captain, cited above, issued that well-quoted rejoinder to the French officers urging him to join their retreat: “Retreat? Hell no; we just got here.”

At Belleau Wood, too, the bravery and tenacity of the AEF’s Army and Marine units earned Allied and German respect, showing for the first time that the doughboys just perhaps were as good as the Germans. In fact, a German Army post-battle intelligence report describes the doughboys as “very good” soldiers, “healthy, vigorous and well-developed,” who carry out attacks “with dash and recklessness” and whose nerves “are still unshaken.” Military historian John Terraine describes the Marines as “tall men, strong and fit, relaxed but disciplined, mostly good shots, good marchers,” while a German intelligence officer marveled at doughboy spirit, admiringly quoting a captured doughboy as proclaiming, “We kill or get killed.”

But it also was at Belleau Wood where Marines demonstrated how much the AEF still had to learn and appreciate about the special deadly nature of Western Front combat. At the wood, the “inexperience [that] dogged the Americans” (as David Trask puts it) was all too painfully on display, leading to towering casualties. Typifying this hands-on experience deficit was Brig. General James

Harbord who led the Marines in that battle; he admitted that before he took command of the Marine brigade he “had never commanded more than a squadron of cavalry.”

Initially the 2nd Division, along with the 3rd Division, hastily had been dispatched to the Chateau Thierry area, of which Belleau Wood is part, to help the French blunt the German advance. (The Marines were hurried to the front in trucks of a French colonial transportation unit driven by Vietnamese from, among other places, Danang and Hue in Viet Nam. In and around these cities a half-century later, in one of history’s moving moments of poignancy, the descendants of the drivers were to be defended from communist attack by the descendants of the Marines.)

The AEF units arriving at Chateau Thierry immediately ran into French troops heading the opposite direction, fleeing the front, shouting, “The war is over.” Clearly, of course, it was not. The AEF’s arrival greatly bolstered French resistance. So much so that by June 6, the 2nd Division’s mission changed from defense to offense: to drive the Germans from Belleau Wood. At dawn that day and again that evening, waves of Marines attacked. Drilled in Pershing’s open warfare tactics, they marched determinedly toward the dense woods in disciplined ranks in an open field waist-high with wheat and bright poppies.

The results, after the years of Western Front combat, should have been anticipated. Huge numbers of doughboys were mowed down, slaughtered in neat, ordered rows by German machine guns firing 1,000 bullets a minute. American military historian Edward Coffman describes the advance as “lines of infantry, dressing right as if on parade.” To Rod Paschall, the attacking Marines “in waves of four ranks” was “little different from an American Civil War assault.” And to German machine-gunners, startled (though surely appreciative) by the easy targets the Marines were making of themselves, it seemed a flashback to the war’s early years, when they easily had obliterated similarly-advancing well-ordered British infantry. Some Germans even pitied the doughboys, horrified, as Paschall writes, “by their careless confidence and the lack of tactical proficiency...of their officers.” It was to World War One chronicler Laurence Stallings, himself a Marine severely wounded at Belleau Wood, “the hardest day in American military history since the Civil War.”

The outcome was ugly. “Nearly everywhere men crumpled and sprawled,” Coffman writes, “when the enemy machine guns crisscrossed the formation.” Whole AEF platoons were isolated and wiped out. One battalion lost two-thirds of its men. Marine Maj. General John Lejeune, 2nd Division commander, acknowledged that “the reckless courage of the foot soldier with rifle and bayonet could not overcome machine guns well-protected in rocky nests.”

Yet the doughboys kept pushing forward, often fighting the German defenders hand-to-hand. And by day’s end, their tenacity had managed to seize a tiny foothold in the woods. For nineteen days more the battle raged, with the Marines attacking the woods six times, fighting parts of four German divisions, gaining yard after yard at great cost. It was agony, with officers at times informing headquarters that “the situation is intolerable.” Some AEF units suffered sixty percent casualties. But they didn’t stop fighting. Finally, on June 26, Belleau Wood was cleared of the enemy, giving the AEF its second victory in a month. The cost was huge; doughboy casualties totaled 9,777, of which 1,811 were dead. On June 6 alone, the battle’s opening day, 1,087 Marines were killed or wounded, making it the worst day in U.S. Marine Corps history, a grim marker which stood until November 1943 when Marines attacked the Japanese on the Pacific’s Tarawa Island.

Big battles, however, always inflict high costs; it rests with the military historians to rule whether such battles’ gains merit the lost lives and lasting injuries. While such a debate over Belleau Wood continues, what is beyond dispute is that the 2nd Division victory, on an admittedly strategically marginal piece of the Western Front, boosted Allied and AEF spirits enormously and dented German morale. Ludendorff personally had made defeating the AEF at Belleau Wood a high priority, to stall, he had hoped, the creation of an actual American Army. He had failed.

More important, for many experts Belleau Wood was a game-changer. Its message was that America now was assuming a big part of the fighting—a role certain to grow. John Mosier sees it as “the turning point of the war,” while S.L.A. Marshall compares it to Lexington and the Alamo in changing “the face of history.” Characteristically sweeping in his style, Marshall adds that “within a few fleeting days, morally and numerically, the whole situation had been reversed.” Hyperbole aside, he is close to correct. Just ten weeks earlier, having reckoned that time was running out for his armies, Ludendorff had launched his risky offensives. Against the doughboys at Cantigny and Belleau Wood, Ludendorff and Germany, concludes John Terraine, “lost their race against time.” The Americans had begun fighting, while the British and French had remained undefeated.