

US Artillery in World War I

By 1st Sgt. (ret.) Scott Cortese

Editor's note: This article is part three of three articles highlighting U.S. field artillery operations in World War I.

By autumn of 1918, four years of war had taken a toll not only upon the Allied armies but, more importantly, the German as well. With just a figment of what they were when the war first started, the tattered German divisions typically were down to 50 percent of their original strength. Units comprised of elderly and under-age Soldiers were placed towards the front, deemed expendable, with the best troops in more fortified positions towards the rear. The morale of the Germans varied from division to division but at the core of each division were those who still held strong to the cause. With the addition of fresh Soldiers from the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), the time was never better for the Allies to mount a final offensive and deliver a crushing blow.

There was some infighting amongst the top Allied commanders leading up to the next offensive. Unwilling to bend to the French commander, Gen. Ferdinand Foch, American Gen. John Pershing was incensed that Foch demanded that the AEF be split apart and sent to various areas for this coming battle. Mediated by a third party, the two generals finally decided that the AEF would first support a French attack by eliminating the German defenses around St. Mihiel and then shift their focus to the Argonne Forest,

located northwest of the town of Verdun. The AEF would become part of the main thrust in this bitter and bloody fight which would become known as the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

The Germans had spent the last four years fortifying their defenses in this area named the Kriemhilde Stellung which was part of the infamous Hindenburg Line. Sixteen AEF infantry divisions along with 10 field artillery brigades, consisting of American and French units, would be hurled against this wall. The main objective of the AEF was to capture the German railroad hub at the town of Sedan, which supported the German army by transporting weapons, ammunition and supplies to the western front. But to get to Sedan meant that the AEF would first have to clear the Argonne. To provide the necessary artillery support for such an attack, the AEF artillery had grown considerably in the last few months to a total of approximately 2,775 guns. This equated to one artillery piece every 26 feet on the front line or 156 guns per mile.

Upon completing their objectives around St. Mihiel, the AEF marched about 50 miles to the edges of the Argonne Forest and prepared for their assault. Incessant rain over the previous days had turned the roads into a quagmire of mud making movement extremely slow and difficult. On the morning of Sept. 26, the rain was replaced by the sound of hundreds of firing artillery guns.

The AEF infantry waited patiently for several hours with thoughts that, "...every one of the shells, big and little meant the less Germans on the advance." The barrage increased in ferocity in its final 20 minutes and at precisely 5:30 a.m. the call was made to move out. As the AEF advanced behind the rolling artillery barrage they encountered a shocked, and in some cases retreating, German enemy. This situation would not last long because in several areas the rolling barrage had outpaced the infantry as they advanced over terrain which was difficult for them to cross. No longer covered by their artillery, the Germans seized upon the opportunity as their machine-gunners and snipers emerged and fired into the flanks and the rear of the advancing infantry. By late in the day, Pershing sensed that the offensive was becoming bogged down and issued orders that "There should be no delay or hesitation in going forward... All officers will push their units forward with all possible energy." To further complicate the situation, a logistical nightmare developed as the artillery batteries attempted to relocate to new firing positions. Due to the massive traffic jams on the few roads at the front, some AEF units had to continue attacking while their artillery floundered in the road traffic.

After spending the night trying to catch a few moments of sleep in between shivering in the cold and the explosions of German

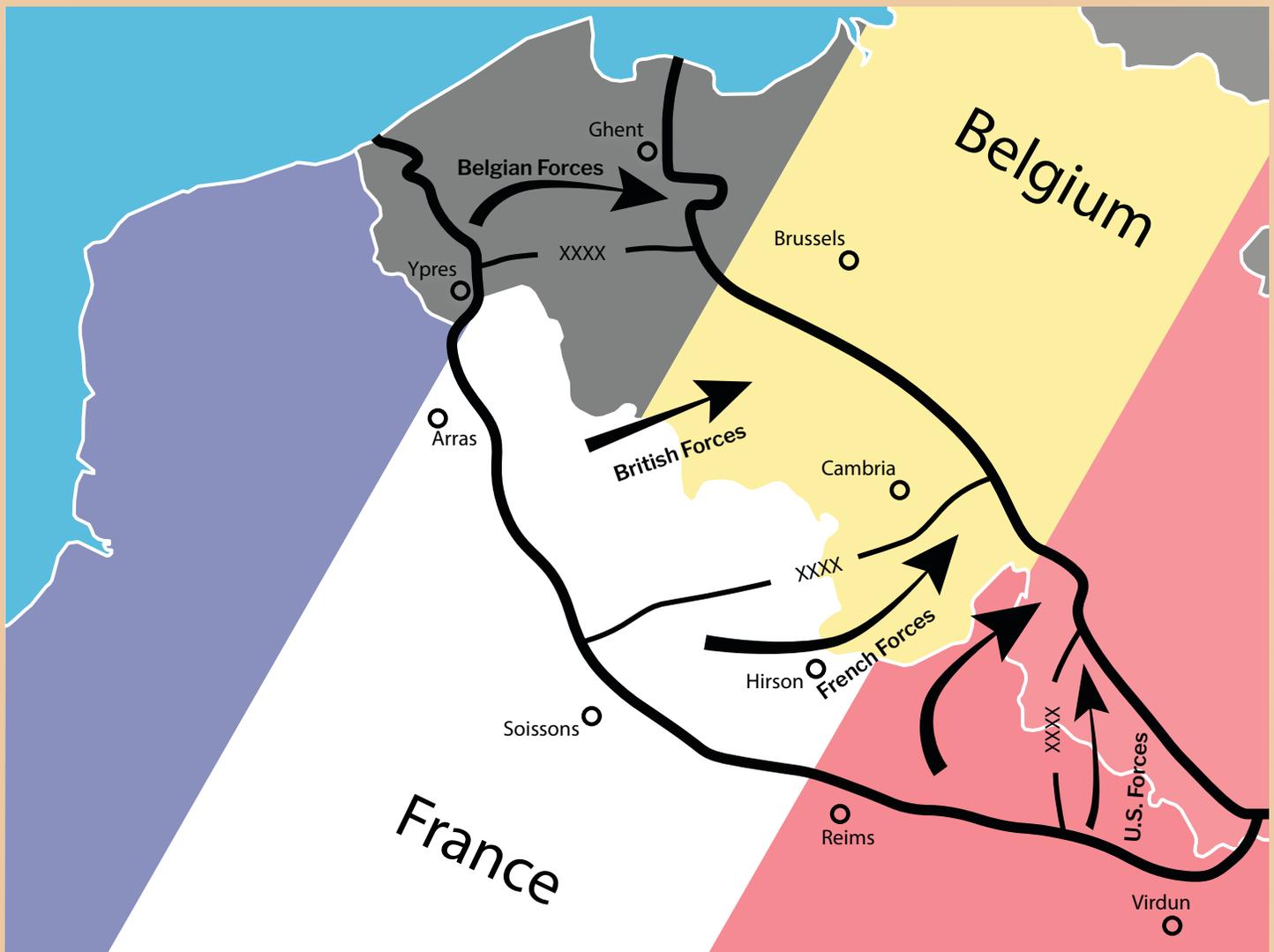


Figure 1. Allied and U.S. military forces advances from Sept. 26 to Nov. 11, 1918. (Rick Paape/ Courtesy information)

artillery, the AEF resumed the attack in a torrential downpour. Except for one infantry division, the AEF received no artillery support that day due to their guns being caught up on the congested roads. Flying over the front, American Brig. Gen. Billie Mitchell found the log jam to be, “worse...than I had ever seen on a battlefield.” The sides of the road were littered with vehicles, bumper to bumper. This unintended lull in the battle allowed the Germans to bring their reserve forces forward and fortify their positions.

By the end of the third day the primary line of the German defenses remained intact and untouched despite Pershing’s plan which called for it to be breached by that time. He felt that the inability of his divisions to secure

their objectives lie with “inefficient officers” rather than the loss of essential artillery support. He immediately ordered three battered and torn divisions whom he regarded as being the problem to be replaced by three other experienced divisions.”

The first phase ended poorly for the AEF on Sept. 30. After a gain of only a few miles, unofficial casualty estimates state the AEF losses at approximately 75,000. During this brief pause, the AEF assumed defensive positions and prepared for the second phase as Pershing came under increasing pressure from the French for the Americans to perform. He went to extreme measures to portray the AEF’s situation in more positive manner, even as far as denying the existence of the traffic jam which

hampered the ability to move its artillery and transport supplies. After witnessing the road congestion personally, French Premier Georges Clemenceau went back to Paris and sought the removal of Pershing as the AEF commander. His command would survive this episode but it was apparent that the Americans were indeed struggling.

Phase two was delayed a few days until Oct. 4 while all the original assault divisions in the first phase were replaced. The tasks of this phase were to clear the rest of the Argonne Forest of German resistance and to also secure the surrounding heights of Cunel and Romagne. The French impressed upon an indignant Pershing by insisting that the “...attacks start without delay and that, once be-

gun, they be continued without any interruptions such as those which have just arisen.”

A pre-arranged artillery bombardment, once again, preceded the attack. As the Americans moved out at 5:35 a.m. on Oct. 4, some infantry units experienced another obstacle inhibiting their advance. Accurate German artillery fire forced the Americans to take cover, causing them to again lose pace with their rolling barrage. Only the AEF’s 1st Infantry Division achieved any measure of success on that day moving around the east of the Argonne while the remainder of the AEF made no real progress in securing the Cunel and Romagne heights. Finally on Oct. 10, after an enormous physical toll, the AEF cleared the Argonne Forest all the way to the southern banks of the Aire River. Observing the remnants of one of these units leaving the front, one Soldier said, “I thought you were the worst bedraggled, worn out, broken up and disheveled bunch of men I ever saw at any place or at any time.”

A dramatic turn of events happened on Oct. 16: Pershing divided the AEF into two armies, the 1st and 2nd Army, and relinquished his command. He appointed Lt. Gen. Hunter Liggett as commander of the 1st Army and Lt. Gen. Robert Bullard to command the 2nd Army. Another significant change in command was the promotion of Maj. Gen. Charles Summerall to command V Corps. Summerall, a career artillery officer, was one of the foremost advocates for the close integration of artillery in support of infantry advances. The AEF would soon benefit greatly from the combined leadership and battlefield ingenuity of these men.

Being one who understood the current physical state of the AEF Soldiers and wanting to preserve what morale was left, Liggett insisted that, “It was essential to gather up the army as a team.” Liggett’s pause for rest and resupply at the end of October helped the 1st Army penetrate the Ger-

man defenses at Cunel and Romagne, crumbling the western part of the Kriemhilde Stellung. Now the AEF was finally in a position to shatter the remaining German line.

Summerall was given the task of being the focal point of this attack by rupturing the center of these defenses. To counteract previous setbacks that occurred during the first two phases, he developed an artillery fire plan which featured four distinct tactics: Rolling barrages tailored to the terrain, backwards rolling barrages, counter-battery fire and the use of artillery as the primary weapon system for attacking enemy strong points. This artillery fire plan was the most elaborate to date which also included, for the first time in AEF

history, the heavy use of poison gas.

The morning of Nov. 1 broke with a tremendous artillery barrage of both high explosive and gas shells at 3:30 a.m. as all guns fired at their maximum rate for the next two hours. Moving out from behind a smoke screen at 5:30 a.m., the pace of the rolling barrage was designed to match the type of terrain that the infantry had to traverse. If the infantry lost contact with their barrage, a specific set of signals were designed to communicate back to the artillery batteries to slow the barrage’s forward movement. To eliminate German machine gunners and snipers infiltrating the rear of the American advance, the barrage rolled over the German lines and then rolled back

Two U.S. Soldiers run past the remains of two German soldiers toward a bunker. (Library of Congress)



200 yards to kill those who had remained. To further protect the infantry's advance, the AEF's larger 155 mm guns focused their attention on German artillery by providing counter-battery fire so that "every enemy battery was taken under fire by two guns of the counter-battery firing at the maximum hourly rate." Finally, enemy strong points such as concrete-reinforced bunkers were taken under fire by the artillery which allowed the infantry to bypass them without suffering needless casualties.

The AEF still sustained high casualties but unlike the previous phases, they advanced at an astonishing rate. Taking stock of the carnage that they encountered, Maj. Jennings Wise exclaimed, "The Kriemhilde Stellung had been torn to shreds by the American guns. Upon the fields, along every approach, and in trenches, still lay the dead. The whole country had been drenched with gas." Pvt. Rush Young echoed the same scene, "As we advanced, the roads and fields were strewn with dead Germans...The whole earth had been gassed by shells from our artillery."

The defenses disintegrated as the Americans had gained 14 miles by Nov. 4. This time it was

the Germans who were in retreat! Taking advantage of this opportunity, Bullard's 2nd Army gave chase while Liggett's 1st Army continued to push the Germans back toward the northern Meuse River as the spires of the town of Sedan could be seen in the distance. As a matter of national pride, the French were given the opportunity to be liberators of Sedan.

Not wanting to let up on the pressure, French general Foch issued orders that, "It is important to maintain and hasten our action. I appeal to the energy and initiative of commanders-in-chief and their armies to secure decisive results." The Allies didn't intend to simply beat the Germans; they wanted to annihilate them. Despite the pivotal role that the artillery had played during the final phase of this offensive, the overall American casualty count was immense at an estimated 122,000 and of those, over 26,000 were killed.

On Nov. 9, German delegates met with the French to negotiate terms of an armistice. The Kaiser had fled Germany for Holland on Nov. 10 and at 5:10 a.m. on Nov. 11 the German government directed its delegates to sign the armistice upon which all hostilities would

cease at 11 a.m. The war was finally over!

Today, the U.S. Army field artillery fights as an integral part of a combined arms team. With the advances of technology in electronics, satellite and digital communications, laser range finders and designators, self-propelled howitzers and GPS-guided artillery shells, the artillery is more than prepared to provide the support required to assert itself as "The King of Battle."

Scott Cortese resides in Harrison Township, Mich., and retired at the rank of First Sergeant from the Michigan Army National Guard in 2015 after 23 years of service. His MOS was 13F and he served with the active duty Army, the Army Reserve and the Army National Guard. He is also a veteran of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Cortese earned a Bachelor's in History from Wayne State University in Detroit.

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The 1st Americans are presented with a streamer for bravery under fire during World War I. (Library of Congress)



A U.S. Soldier surveys the battlefield during World War I. (Library of Congress)

