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Americans as Warriors: “Doughboys” in Battle During the First World War

In 1918, more than two million “doughboys” journeyed to France, and almost half of these men experienced combat during their stint “over there.” Americans fought in several key battles in the final year of the war, including Cantigny, Belleau Wood, Chateau-Thierry, Soissons, St. Mihiel, and Meuse-Argonne. The crowning achievement of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) was the immense effort exerted during the forty-seven day Meuse-Argonne campaign that began on September 26 1918 and lasted until the armistice. Nearly 1.2 million soldiers participated in the battle, more soldiers than served in the entire Confederate Army during the Civil War (1). When the guns finally fell silent on 11 November 1918, the American Army counted over fifty thousand dead in what amounted to six months in battle—nearly as many as died in nine years of fighting in Vietnam and three years of fighting in Korea.

Americans entered the war late, but they did not escape its horrors. Many American soldiers initially looked forward to fighting. As one soldier later recalled, he and his friends “. . . were simply fascinated by the prospect of adventure and heroism Here was our one great chance for excitement and risk. We could not afford to pass it up” (2). Once on the front lines, however, American soldiers soon realized that the war was unlikely to be the romantic, heroic interlude that they had imagined while performing bayonet drills in their training camps. On the Western Front, Americans both manned trenches and fought in the sweeping counter-offensives and attacks that slowly pushed the Germans back toward their own border in the summer and fall of 1918. Doughboys, therefore, encountered both the horrors of trench warfare as well as the

difficulties of conducting a war of movement while pursuing a retreating enemy.

In the trenches, American soldiers adjusted to living with mud, rats, human waste, and the stench of decomposing bodies.

Constant artillery barrages and the ever-present threat of an attack frayed the nerves of even the most steadfast. “To be shelled is the worse thing in the world,” Hervy Allen noted. “It is impossible to adequately imagine it. In absolute darkness we simply lay and trembled from sheer nerve tension” (3). Even if one could ignore the noise, the lice crawling on their skin or rats running over their bodies prevented many men from sleeping while in the front lines.

Steady shell fire meant constant casualties, and men on the front lines often had to share their abode with the dead and dying, or the various body parts that remained after a shell explosion. One lieutenant recalled taking the time to bury an assortment of hands, arms, and legs to clear his trench at Chateau-Thierry of human debris (4). Mustard gas attacks that blinded and blistered their victims only compounded the physical and psychological misery of a stint in the trenches. “Those that weren’t scared, weren’t there,” Private Clayton Slack later commented about the experience of

trench warfare (5).

Trying to make sense of their precarious situation, many soldiers developed superstitions or rituals that they felt offered protection at the front. Soldiers often contended that fate had targeted a specific shell expressly for them, a shell with “their name or number on it.” One night, Bernard Eubanks recalled in his memoirs, “I had a strange dream or nightmare really. My company number was 84. During an intense bombardment I saw a huge missile coming my way with my number, 84, on it . . . but



A soldier of the 71st Infantry Regiment, New York National Guard, says goodbye to his sweetheart as his regiment leaves for training. (International Film Service, 1917. NARA NWDNS-165-WW-476 [21])

it passed over and never touched me.” His temperament changed dramatically after this dream, because it “seemed to give me a sense of immunity that stayed with me for quite a while. I lost my jittery feeling.” Just as Eubanks’s positive vision gave him comfort, others believed that poorly chosen thoughts or conversations jinxed them. Corporal Ernie Hilton recalled the time he and his buddies overcame their reluctance to discuss the future, a subject they usually considered taboo, and had a long conversation about what they planned to do after the war. The next day, thirty-four of the forty men in the trench were wounded or killed during a shell attack. “From then on I never spoke of the future,” Hilton said. Others turned to more traditional sources for resolve. “My prayer book gave me courage and comfort when under fire,” Sergeant Stephen Morray recalled (6).

In the trenches, American soldiers lived within a few hundred yards of their German opponents, yet rarely saw them. An array of rumors helped soldiers create tangible images of their unseen enemy, who, according to these “soldier’s tales,” was a particularly clever and brutal foe (7). In a favorite ruse, according to soldier storytellers, German soldiers wore French uniforms or Red Cross brassards, pretended they were wounded, and lay on the battlefield to lure Allied soldiers into direct range of German machine guns. Another German trick began with a group of German machine gunners pretending to surrender by yelling “Comrade” in order to draw the troops who came to collect the prisoners into the open. Equally gory stories of the bloodthirsty revenge American soldiers exacted for such crimes countered these lavish tales of barbaric treachery. Soldiers repeatedly spoke of companies that captured snipers, gave them shovels, forced them to dig their own graves, then shot them.

Once they came into actual contact with dead Germans, many doughboys abandoned their taste for such macabre tales. Coming upon a German corpse in the Argonne Forest, one sergeant surprised himself by thinking that “these Germans didn’t look like such bloody monsters. Quite an ordinary everyday crowd.” A corporal undoubtedly spoke for others when he noted that “in the heat of battle men do not realize that the enemy is only a scared, frightened boy like we are, killing for self preservation and because he has to and hating it as bad as we do” (8).

When Americans left the trenches to actively pursue the Germans, fighting on the open battlefield also disappointed those seeking glory in combat. In the Meuse-Argonne campaign, Donald Kyler found himself going numb as the horrors multiplied. “I had seen mercy killings, both of our hopelessly wounded and those of the enemy. I had seen the murder of prisoners of war, singly and as many as several at one time. I had seen men rob the dead of money and valuables, and had seen men cut off the fingers of corpses to get rings,” he explained (9).

In the closing months of the war, a significant number of undertrained soldiers headed to the front lines. General John J. Pershing had expected these recently arrived replacement troops to receive additional training in France, but with Germany falling back, circumstances forced him to send these desperately needed men into battle. Division commanders complained bitterly about

them, feeling, as one inspector general put it, that sending untrained men into battle was “little short of murder. How we have escaped a catastrophe is a clear demonstration of the German demoralization.” Although aware of their poor preparation, few untrained troops refused to fight. Instead, “when issued rifles they asked to be shown ‘how to work this thing so that they could go up and get a “boche,”” exclaimed the inspector general (10).



Sergeant Alvin C. York standing beside the hill where he helped capture 132 German soldiers. Argonne Forest near Cornay France, 7 February 1919. (NARA NWDNS-111-SC-29191)

The most famous hero of the war was Sergeant Alvin York. Like eighty percent of conscientious objectors, York was persuaded to set aside his religious doubts and agreed to fight. York was an expert marksman, who grew up hunting wild turkeys in the Tennessee Appalachian Mountains. He became the most decorated soldier of the war when he single-handedly silenced thirty-five German machine guns, killed twenty Germans, took one hundred thirty-two prisoners and led his ambushed patrol

back to Allied lines on 8 October 1918.

York’s feat was extraordinary for any war, but his determination to subdue the Germans was not. “The Americans fight like lions,” noted one French soldier, after witnessing American soldiers in battle along the Western Front (11). Most American soldiers fought bravely and tenaciously. Some, however, found ways to avoid the frontlines. In every battle, men lagged behind the advancing column. These troops either straggled intentionally to avoid fighting or were inadvertently separated from their units in the chaos of combat. To bolster the resolve of men to move forward in the Meuse-Argonne campaign, military police followed the line of advance. If caught straggling, soldiers were sometimes required to wear a sign, “Straggler from the Front Lines,” pinned to their backs as punishment (12).

Racist army policies kept the vast majority of African Americans (nearly eighty percent) working behind the lines at menial, noncombatant tasks. “We are real soldiers now,” wrote one of the few African American soldiers to experience battle, a feeling that few black troops laboring in the rear ever shared (13). The Army only organized two black fighting divisions, the 92nd and 93rd. Poorly trained, the 92nd made a dismal initial showing during the Meuse-Argonne campaign. White officers later used the troops’ panicked performance as evidence that African Americans were cowards, conveniently overlooking the fact that some white combatant units with insufficient training had performed poorly as well. The other black combatant unit, the provisional 93rd Division, contained four infantry regiments that served with the French Army. With proper training and confident leadership, these soldiers fought successfully and the French government decorated many African American troops in recognition of their impressive service at the front. The 93rd provided the black community with two genuine war heroes, Sergeant Henry Johnson and Private Needham Roberts, who

fought valiantly when a German raiding party surprised them in their observation post. Despite being wounded, Johnson and Roberts killed four Germans and wounded thirty-two (14). One unit of the 93rd, the 369th Infantry Regiment, served for a record one hundred ninety-one days in the line, the longest of any American unit, white or black, during the war. "The general impression of Americans was that the colored soldier was mainly a comic figure, incapable of undergoing danger over long intervals . . . but the loss of fifteen hundred men in one hundred ninety-one days in the zone of fire was not a laughing matter" for the 369th, Laurence Stallings noted in 1963 (15).

Because they were only three percent of American combat forces, African Americans suffered substantially fewer battlefield deaths and wounds than white soldiers. Overall, black soldiers from the 92nd and 93rd combat divisions accounted for 773 of the 52,947 battlefield deaths sustained by the AEF, less than two percent of all battlefield fatalities. Of American soldiers wounded, 4,408 were black and 198,220 were white. White soldiers, therefore, made up nearly ninety-eight percent of those wounded on the battlefield (16).

Wounded soldiers had to endure a painful trip over rutted roads to the nearest evacuation hospital. Once they arrived at this "chamber of horrors," as one sergeant called it, patients witnessed the "constant flow in and out of the operating room of desperately wounded men, the screaming when dressings were changed on the stump of an arm or a leg recently amputated, a head gashed up, part of a face blown away, or a stomach punctured by a dozen pieces of shrapnel; the insane gibbering, mouthing and scorching profanity of men partially under ether" (17).

Spanish influenza was one horror that front-line troops were likely to escape. For some reason rear-area soldiers bore the brunt of the Spanish influenza epidemic that swept throughout the world in 1918-1919, killing nearly twenty-five million people. This vicious strain of influenza struck the young adult male population, normally the least likely to succumb to respiratory infections, particularly hard. The virus appeared without warn-

ing, within an hour or two victims had raging fevers and severe body aches. Many recovered from this phase of this illness, but ten percent developed pneumonia and died, suffocating from fluid-filled lungs. Between 1 September and 11 November 1918 approximately 9,000 AEF soldiers and 23,000 stateside soldiers died from this mysterious virus. During this same period nearly the same number (35,000) of American soldiers died from combat wounds (18).

All battle accounts include some mention of soldiers collapsing from the strain of continuous artillery bombardments, the sight of bodies blown to bits, wearing tight gas masks for hours, or sheer exhaustion. After morning-to-night bombardments during the three straight weeks the 78th Division spent along the front lines in the Meuse-Argonne campaign, some soldiers "went into shock or coma from which they could not be aroused . . . these shell-shock victims fell down as if they had been hit but actually they hadn't been touched," Corporal Paul Murphy later recalled, "they were completely helpless, mumbling and trembling at each new explosion" (19). Despite these soldiers' obvious suffering, the army did not consider shell-shock a legitimate war injury. According to the chief surgeon of the Medical Department, "the so-called 'shell-shock' patients are no more entitled to a 'wound' chevron than are soldiers who are seized with an acute medical complaint due to exposure in battle, to the elements or to bad water or indigestible food" (20).

Men diagnosed with shell-shock suffered from nightmares and panic attacks. Some could not sleep or speak. Private Duncan Kemerer arrived at the base hospital in such poor condition that the sound of a spoon dropping sent him frantically searching for cover under his bed. After resting and eating well for a few days, however, Kemerer returned to his unit (21). Most soldiers who suffered from shell shock, battle exhaustion, or gas hysteria (a malady in which soldiers described physical symptoms associated with gas but had no actual injuries) voluntarily returned to the front after a few days rest in a field hospital. If rest and food were not enough to convince men to take this step once the tremors had stopped and speech and memory returned, field psychiatrists emphasized to each man that their comrades needed them and that the glory of victory would be lost to them forever if they failed to return to the front.

Men usually responded to these appeals to their honor, masculinity, duty, and ambition. Whether these soldiers were cured is another question. Three out of every five beds in government hospitals were filled in the interwar period with veterans suffering from shell-shock (22). Anecdotal evidence also underscores that many veterans had difficulty forgetting the wartime horrors they had witnessed. Three years after returning home, for instance, Walter Zukowski was not alone in noting that he was still fighting the war in his dreams (23). Many other veterans described themselves as nervous, jumpy, and unstable for years afterwards.

After nearly six grueling months of combat, the war ended for American soldiers. On 11 November 1918 at 11:00 a.m., the Armistice went into effect. Harry Croft noted that "everyone in my outfit wanted to fire the last shot. We decided each of us would put a hand on the



The African American men of the 369th (15th New York) won the Croix de Guerre for gallantry during World War I. (NARANWDNS-165-WW-127 [8])

lanyard and pull at the same time. And that's what we did, at 10:59" (24). A minute later, the guns abruptly stopped firing along the Western Front. "What a wonderful feeling that silence was," recalled one soldier (25). Rejoicing, American soldiers climbed out of their trenches to join in the general celebration with Allied and German troops who shook hands and fired off their last signal flares in an impressive fireworks display.

"I've lived through the war," shouted one American airman when he heard the news of the Armistice (26). Beyond simple relief at having survived, American soldiers returned home convinced that their participation had won the war for the Allied side. How much had American soldiers actually contributed to the Allied victory? German General Erich von Ludendorff dismissed American soldiers' role in the final Allied offensive, claiming that their real contribution came earlier when they took over quiet sectors from veteran French and British units, freeing them to stem the German spring offensives of 1918. When criticized by his Allies for not keeping up with their armies as they made their final push against the German Army in the fall of 1918, General Pershing noted that the heavy German reinforcements sent to the American sector (now twenty-one percent of the Western Front) weakened other parts of the line and made the British and French breakthrough possible. In addition, the German high command knew that the American Army would become increasingly competent and strong in 1919, a realization that convinced Germany to seek an armistice once the Allies threatened German borders. "Although there was little doubt in the minds of the soldiers of the AEF—from General Pershing to the lowliest doughboy—that the Americans had won the war on the Western Front, a more accurate assessment is that the Allies might have lost the war without the American Expeditionary Forces," concludes historian Allan Millett (27). □



A Salvation Army worker writes the folks back home for a wounded soldier. Salvation Army photo, 1917-1918 (NARA: NWDNS-165-WW-566B [23])

Endnotes

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