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**Foundation**  
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one Soldier at a time*

# Voices of the Past

## WORLD WAR I

### Highlights:

- After four years of war the Allies hoped to push the Germans out of France with the help of the newly arrived American Expeditionary Force.
- Most of the American forces participating in the offensive lacked combat experience. Their determination and excellent leadership proved to be a decisive factor on the battlefield.
- In two months of intense fighting the Americans succeeded in defeating the veteran German forces despite taking heavy casualties.
- The AEF's success in the Meuse-Argonne ultimately brought about the end of the war and signing of the armistice.

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[info@armyheritage.org](mailto:info@armyheritage.org)

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## Blood, Mud, Concrete, and Barbed Wire: The Meuse-Argonne Offensive

**(France, 1918)** The Meuse-Argonne Offensive in September 1918 was part of a large Allied effort to attack the Germans along the entire front to force them out of France and back into Germany. The plan sought to take advantage of the arrival of the American Expeditionary Force under General Pershing. After four years of fighting, European soldiers were exhausted, but the arrival of the U.S. Forces gave the Allies fresh troops and numerical superiority.

The 600,000 man strong U.S. 1st Army planned to attack northward with nine divisions in the line and five in reserve, supported by 2,700 pieces of artillery, 189 tanks, and 821 aircraft,

along a fifteen to twenty mile wide corridor bounded by the impassable Meuse River on the east and the dense Argonne Forest and the Aire River on the west.

The Germans had occupied the area for years and had developed an elaborate defensive system of four fortified lines with a dense network of wire entanglements, machine-gun positions, and concrete fighting posts. In between these trench lines, the Germans had a series of strong points in the woods and knolls. With five divisions on the line and another seven in reserve, French General Philippe Petain believed that the German defenses were so strong that the

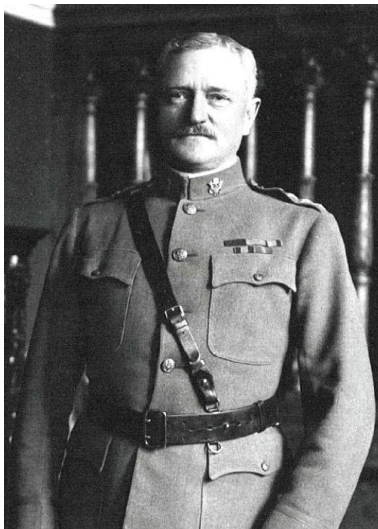


American Soldiers taking Montfaucon. The Doughboys of the 79th Division had only been in France for seven weeks when they were given the critical task of seizing Montfaucon, which they did on the second day of the offensive. Petain had told Pershing that he would be lucky to get that far before winter.

Photo courtesy of the USAHEC.



General Robert Bullard was appointed by General Pershing to command the newly created 2nd Army. Photo Courtesy of the USAHEC.



General John Joseph "Black Jack" Pershing, leader of the American Expeditionary Forces. Photo Courtesy of the USAHEC.

Americans would do well if they managed to reach one of their first objectives, the town of Montfaucon, located a few miles behind enemy lines, before winter.

At 5:30 A.M. on September 26, 1918, after a three-hour artillery bombardment, Pershing launched his attack. Despite heavy fog, rugged terrain, and the network of barbed wire, American Soldiers quickly overran the Germans' forward positions. For the rest of September, the 1st Army plodded forward. Heavy rains turned the terrain to mud, which bogged down tanks and artillery and slowed resupply efforts. The Germans used the delay to bring in reinforcements, and German artillery rained down fire from the heights of the Meuse and the Argonne Forest. The advance became a continuous series of bloody, hard-fought engagements.

Of the nine U.S. divisions in the initial assault, only three had significant combat experience. The 79th Division had only been in France for seven weeks. Heavy fog, rain, and the broken terrain sorely tested the inexperienced troops. Many divisions suffered from a lack of coordination, and the infantry and artillery often failed to work together effectively.

Despite these problems, the 1st Army advanced eight miles into the German lines by the end of September, fighting through some of the strongest positions on the Western Front and capturing 9,000 prisoners and large amounts of supplies and equipment.

As the battle progressed, Pershing began to reorganize the 1st Army, rotating three battle-hardened divisions into the line to relieve some of the less experienced units. The Germans also strengthened their position, adding six new divisions, bringing their total to eleven.

On October 4, the 1st Army renewed the attack. The fighting was especially severe. The American infantry launched a series of frontal attacks to penetrate the German lines and to exploit the exposed enemy flanks. The Americans made some gains against their objectives, but critical high grounds remained in German hands. As new American divisions were rotated into line, the Germans continued their reinforcement efforts; and by October 6, they had twenty-seven divisions in the area.

By the third week of October, the 1st Army had penetrated the third German defensive line and cleared the Argonne. Pershing reorganized the AEF, creating the 2nd Army under General Robert L. Bullard. Pershing later placed General Hunter Liggett in charge of the 1st Army, in order to focus his own attention on larger strategic issues.

To prepare for the second phase of the offensive, Liggett ordered a series of limited attacks to keep the pressure on the Germans while his battle-weary men reequipped and recuperated. By the end of October, the 1st Army was ready for the next general attack.

On November 1, Liggett's 1st Army attacked north, toward the Meuse River. Over the next several days, the 1st Army advanced as fast as it could move artillery and supplies forward. At one point, the advance was so rapid that it ran off the AEF headquarters' maps. By November 4, the Americans had achieved their objective.

Liggett's careful preparation of the 1st Army paid off. Infantry and artillery coordination was superb. Instead of stopping to deal with fortified positions, regular troops pushed through and around them while special assault troops remained behind to deal with them. Under Liggett's tutelage, the American units had finally developed



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into a well-trained, well-organized fighting force.

One week later the Armistice was signed, and World War I was over. The fighting ended at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month—November 11, 1918. When it ended, the Meuse-Argonne Campaign was the greatest battle that the U.S. Army had ever fought. Almost 1.25 million American troops had participated during the course of the 47-day campaign. American casualties were high—over 117,000—but the results were impressive. The 1st Army had driven forty-three German divisions back about thirty miles over some of the most difficult terrain and most heavily fortified positions on the Western Front, while inflicting over 120,000 casualties. While credit for victory belongs to all the Allied nations, there is little doubt that the success of the American forces during this offensive was a major factor in Germany's surrender.

## Adapted From:

Stewart, Richard W., ed. "Chapter 1: The U.S. Army in World War I, 1917-1918." American Military History Vol. II: The United States Army in a Global Era, 1917-2003. Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2005. pgs. 43-49. <http://www.history.army.mil/books/AMH-V2/AMH%20V2/Chapter1.htm#b9>.



Doughboys in a camouflaged position, somewhere in the Meuse Valley, September 1918. Photo Courtesy of the USAHEC.