

## AMERICANS AT WAR: ASSESSING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN THE GREAT WAR

*Jennifer D. Keene*

There are many ways to assess the American military experience during the First World War. One is to explore the impact that raising a mass army had on the American military. Another is to examine how American soldiers themselves interpreted the war and their participation in it. Finally, one can place the American effort in the overall context of the war by considering how the American experience compares with that of other combatant nations and what overall contribution the Americans made to the final victory. These various approaches all help to answer the always present question about American involvement in the war: what difference did it make? Examining how the war shaped institutions and individual lives, reasserting the primacy of combat as an essential American experience during the war, and assessing Americans' role in the final victory leave little doubt that American military involvement had far-reaching significance.

### *Creating a wartime army*

When the United States entered the war in April 1917, the government initially hoped that the nation could limit its involvement to financial and material support of the Allies. Within a month of declaring war, however, it became clear to President Woodrow Wilson that the United States would have to send troops

as quickly as possible to the Western Front. The country now faced the choice of raising this wartime force through volunteers or turning to conscription to fill the ranks. The government hedged at first, allowing men to volunteer for the army until December 1917, but then relied almost exclusively on conscription to raise the bulk of the wartime force. The decision to conscript the majority of the wartime army was a pivotal one for American society. Conscription had a long history in the United States. Until the First World War its main purpose was to spur voluntary enlistment as individuals sought to avoid the tainted label of conscript, a category of soldiers the public viewed as unpatriotic and the army considered untrustworthy on the battlefield. The government justified the decision to institute a mass draft with the argument that in total war the nation needed to allocate its manpower resources wisely. In 1917, the government renamed conscription 'selective service' and successfully convinced the American public that the draft was an equitable, efficient and honourable way to ensure that neither the civilian economy nor the army suffered from the impulsive decisions of individuals. The promise to match the right man with the right job in either the military or civilian workplace earned the draft general acceptance as a manpower management technique suitable for the modern age. Overall, 72 per cent of the four million troops raised during the war were drafted, representing a dramatic, if temporary, expansion of the federal government's power to make life or death decisions for individual citizens.<sup>1</sup>

In the end, however, solving the riddle of how to bring men into the military proved less significant than what happened once these civilians entered its ranks. The war forced the US Army to reinvent itself almost overnight from a relatively inconsequential force of 300,000 active service and reserve troops that fought small wars close to home and maintained peace into a modern military capable of sending millions of men thousands of miles overseas to fight in a heavily mechanised and tactically difficult war. The challenges were staggering: raising and training infantry soldiers, selecting and instructing officers, recruiting the engineering, communication and medical troops required to support combat operations, building training camps, equipping these troops and then transporting them overseas where they would finally confront the reality of fighting a war that had stymied the best military minds for three years.

How the American military chose to assign, train, officer and discipline its

citizen soldiery to meet these challenges influenced more than how the United States fought the war. These decisions also affected the type of institution that the modern American military became. American citizen soldiers proved less malleable than many army officials had hoped, contesting a whole host of army policies and practices while they served. Their sheer numbers and the army's clear dependence on them largely explain officials' subsequent willingness to make concessions to their wartime force when formulating a host of manpower, leave and punishment policies. Reformers within the top echelons also played an important part in carving out an official place for soldier opinion in the policy-making process by urging the army to establish a more co-operative and less coercive relationship with its new recruits.

Perhaps the most important transformation that took place over the course of the war was the changing meaning of obedience. Army officials no longer simply commanded obedience: they negotiated it. Such negotiations took place in other Allied armies along the Western Front, as troops set limits on the amount of violence they would accept in raids, daily shelling rituals and pitched battle. Within the American army, however, much of this negotiation over the meaning of obedience occurred behind the lines. This was partly because of the changing structure of the American military, which was transformed during the war from a force in which the vast majority of soldiers fought into a large bureaucratic organisation that assigned 60 per cent of its troops to non-combatant duties.<sup>2</sup> Important to the war effort, yet often disappointed with their stint behind the lines, these troops proved difficult to discipline. As crucial, however, was the right that all American soldiers asserted as citizen soldiers to change or challenge offensive or unpopular policies from the very first day they stepped into a military training camp. In their quest to mould army disciplinary doctrine along more acceptable lines, citizen soldiers did not hesitate to enlist help from their families, outside agencies or their political representatives to sway army decisions in their favour.

The power of public opinion to shape disciplinary policy was evident throughout the war. The modified use of the death penalty provides just one example of how outside civilian concerns intervened to influence disciplinary policies. In May 1918 President Wilson began reviewing the death sentence convictions of two soldiers who fell asleep on sentry duty in a forward trench and two others who refused to drill after being up all night on guard duty.

Secretary of War Newton Baker urged the President to commute the sentences in these well-publicised cases after receiving hundreds of letters from concerned mothers 'whose general anxiety for the welfare of their sons is increased by apprehension lest exhaustion or thoughtlessness may lead their boys to [similar] weaknesses'.<sup>3</sup> American Expeditionary Force (AEF) commander General John J. Pershing, however, recommended that the sentences be carried out to 'diminish the number of like cases that may arise in the future'.<sup>4</sup> In the end, the President decided that the American public would accept executions only for mutiny, desertion, espionage, rape and murder and commuted the sentences. Wilson's decision dramatically curtailed the use of executions as a disciplinary tool in the wartime army, and the 11 AEF soldiers executed during the war were all convicted of murder or rape, crimes that often received the death penalty in civilian society as well.

The vast majority of wartime disciplinary struggles, however, occurred far from the eyes and ears of concerned civilians and involved much less than the death penalty. Throughout the war, American officials struggled to keep unauthorised absences, racial rioting and work slowdowns among rear area troops to a minimum. Behind the lines, the army adopted an array of persuasive and manipulative techniques intended both to convince and trick soldiers into conformity. To prevent soldiers from spending too much money on alcohol, for instance, the army set up mandatory savings accounts that effectively reduced the monthly pay given to each soldier. Giving soldiers less money preserved the façade of compliance with otherwise unenforceable orders regulating soldiers' visits to French cafés. Persuasion was another popular technique, as camp officers undertook a massive propaganda campaign to convince enlisted men that saluting their officers was simply a sign of respect and not a symbol of subservience. AEF officials quickly curtailed the practice of punishing disobedient non-combatants by sending them to hard labour along the front lines after officers noted a drop in morale among combatant troops who began to wonder whether it was an honour or punishment to serve at the front.

By far the most successful way for a white soldier to disobey an order was to give a racial reason for doing so. White soldiers could walk by black guards without showing a pass, assault black troops, refuse to salute black officers and even destroy army property or kill black soldiers with little fear of punishment

from white authorities.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, the tendency of officers to look the other way when enlisted men committed these offences seems to reveal little more than shared racial prejudice. But the ramifications of letting racial prejudice serve as a legitimate reason for soldiers to disobey legally given orders or ignore an officer's rank undermined the entire basis for command authority. Letting enlisted men choose which orders they would obey set a dangerous precedent that the army increasingly tried to avoid by carefully orchestrating how white and black troops came into contact with one another. The Washington-based General Staff explicitly saw how white soldiers' racial prejudices were circumscribing the army's authority when it rejected a plan to assign black soldiers primarily as cooks for white units. Advocates of this plan pointed out the importance of freeing up white men for infantry training, and claimed that having black men perform these menial duties within white units would both maintain the racial status quo and quicken the pace of readying white infantry troops for deployment overseas. The General Staff immediately recognised, however, that if the army embraced this plan it would subsequently be impossible to use kitchen duty as a punishment or legitimate assignment for white troops. 'There is at present widespread objection in the service to the performance of duties of a menial nature, but to admit their menial quality by assigning such duties exclusively to an inferior race would make it well nigh impossible to persuade white men to ever again resume these duties,' wrote one General Staff officer.<sup>6</sup> The gain in training time was not enough to counter-balance the further erosion in army authority that would result from this policy, even though it complemented the army's decision to use black troops primarily as non-combatant laborers.

Besides problems with obedience and race relations, army officials also soon realised that American soldiers did not have a strong ideological commitment to the larger national purpose for declaring war. One soldier poet put it best:

'Made safe for democracy seems mighty fine,  
but high-soundin' politics ain't in our line.  
'Tain't that made us chuck up our jobs and enlist  
For givin' the Kaiser the taste of a fist,  
But this is the notion stowed under our lids:  
We're makin' it safe for the Missus and kids.'<sup>7</sup>

After listening to the men in his unit, one second lieutenant concluded 'that nine out of ten of our enlisted men do not know what they are fighting for, the idea is simply to kill the Boche'.<sup>8</sup> Throughout the war, the vague dedication that American soldiers exhibited to the goal of killing Germans and saving France troubled officials who believed that troops would need stronger ideological motivation to continue fighting into 1919, the earliest date that American officials envisioned the war ending. Pershing remained steadfast in his conviction that political education and building morale remained the responsibility of unit officers. Stateside officials, however, deemed political indoctrination to be as important as marksmanship training for the modern soldier, and introduced systematic political education into the training camps.

Officials at home and overseas disagreed over whether troops needed a sophisticated understanding of the war's causes and goals to perform well on the battlefield, but they agreed that soldiers' views mattered to those at home. Throughout the war, officials tried to resolve the logistical problems that prevented most troops from voting. In their arguments for collecting the soldier vote, high-ranking officials expressed complete faith that soldiers in the field would remain loyal and supportive of the war, even if civilians balked at the anticipated high casualties and began to clamour for a negotiated peace in 1919 or 1920. 'It is not unlikely that the time may come when our soldiers in the field, in the aggregate, may be able to see more clearly what the necessities of the situation require than do the voters at home,' argued the head of the War College Division. 'In such an event, they should not be deprived of their right of suffrage, not only because it is their right, but because their deprivation, at such a time, might seriously endanger the interests of the nation.'<sup>9</sup> The faith that American officials placed in their troops' commitment to fight until victory proved well founded.

### *The soldiers' war*

For good or ill, the wartime experience established the principle within the modern American military that soldiers' preferences mattered and diluted the concept of unquestioning obedience to orders. For individual soldiers who served, these institutional legacies were less important than the personal impact of the war. For many soldiers, the war became a pivotal moment in

their lives because of the memories or disabilities they brought home, the opportunity it offered to take part in an historic event or the post-war financial hardships that many in this veteran generation blamed on the government's mismanagement of the war. For the individual veteran, therefore, the war had an intensely personal meaning that sometimes, but not always, mirrored its larger political significance. In a letter home in the fall of 1918 to his local newspaper, Sergeant Judson Hanna tried to prepare his Pennsylvanian community for the changes that they would certainly notice in those who had fought on the Western Front. 'Some men who went through the big barrage still show the effects of it. Let a door slam, and a big healthy man will jump as if stung.' But, as Hanna explained, general nervousness was the least of the combat veteran's problems: often their experiences under fire had reshaped their entire personalities. To support this contention, Hanna described the changes he noted in a friend after he was covered with dirt from exploding bombs during an artillery barrage. As he hugged the ground, this friend felt a shell fall right beside him. 'The soldier waited in this makeshift grave for the bomb to explode, knowing the uselessness of trying to escape, and trying to prepare his mind for the bumping off of his body. Those seconds of agonized waiting for an expected tragedy may change a whole man's character. This bomb was also a dud, but the man today goes around with a strained face and seems always listening for something.'<sup>10</sup>

Other soldiers returned home with more visible scars of their time in combat. When word came that Private Joseph Maleski's unit would soon enter the line, 'I knew I felt good. This is what I had enlisted for. This is what I came for. I was going to get a crack at the Germans.' As his unit charged successfully across an open field and into the woods around Château-Thierry, he and his comrades began laughing about their good fortune. 'One would say "That fellow can't spell our names" and another would answer "Yes, his shells can't hit us unless they have our names on the cover."' This banter reflected the common superstition among soldiers that dying or surviving had more to do with fate than luck. Unfortunately, the shell with Maleski's name on it soon found him and shattered his leg. 'Are you in much pain?' asked a surgeon at the field hospital. No, Maleski replied, but then admitted that he could not feel his toes.

When I woke up the surgeon asked me how I felt. 'All right.'

'Any pain?'

'No sir.'

'Can you feel your toes now?'

'Yes sir.'

He laughed and went on to the other men. The third day I was there he asked the same questions and I gave the same answers. Then he didn't laugh any more. His face became very serious and he said: 'I guess my boy I'll have to tell you now. You haven't got any toes. We had to cut your leg off about the knee to save your life.'<sup>11</sup>

The story of one African American veteran, Horace Pippin, gives some additional insight into the effect of combat on an individual life. Pippin was a self-taught artist who carried a sketchbook with him throughout the war. Like other members of the 369 Infantry Regiment, a unit that served with the French, Pippin's life revolved around the routine of 20 days in the trenches followed by 10 days in the rear. Soon, he was a seasoned veteran who 'had seen men die in all forms and shapes'.<sup>12</sup> Pippin's war came to an end during the assault by 369 on Sechault in late September 1918. On the second day of the advance, Pippin was hit in the shoulder as he dived for cover into a shellhole. Another soldier bound his wound before leaving Pippin there to fend for himself. Pippin tried several times to climb out of the hole and head for the rear, but each time shots from a German sniper drove him back down. Finally, Pippin was too weak to do anything more than wait for help to arrive. The first sign of hope came later in the day when a passing French sniper discovered him. Before Pippin could warn him to stay down, the German sniper shot the French soldier through the head without even knocking off his helmet. 'He stood there for at least ten seconds before he slipped down and when he did, [he] slid down on top of me. I had lost so much blood by this time I couldn't even move him.' Pippin lay immobilised with the dead French soldier over him for several hours, thankful for the water and bread that the man carried.<sup>13</sup> Finally, a rescue party arrived and put him on a stretcher by the side of the road. Pippin waited in a steady, cold rain for another 12 hours before an ambulance transported him to a field hospital.

Returning home with a steel plate in his shoulder and a nearly useless right

arm, Pippin only worked sporadically after the war. His family survived on his \$22.50 a month disability allowance and his wife's work as a laundress. Pippin was not a recluse, however. He took an active interest in his community and served as commander of his local black American Legion post in West Chester, Pennsylvania for several years. Yet despite his normal outward appearance, Pippin experienced bouts of depression and was haunted by his memories of combat. He tried writing about and sketching his experiences, but was unhappy with the results. He finally decided to try painting, using his left hand to guide his right. Pippin spent three years working on *The End of the War, Starting Home* (1930–3), trying to get right the image that he had been carrying around in his head since returning home. In these early years, his friends and family were supportive of what they saw as nothing more than a harmless hobby and Pippin sometimes used his paintings to settle outstanding bills. In 1937, however, Pippin was discovered by the Philadelphia art community and soon received national recognition as a true primitive much like his better-known contemporaries Jacob Lawrence and Grandma Moses. Although this rags-to-riches tale seemingly provided a happy ending to Pippin's story, his physical pain, taste for alcohol and mounting family problems made this success bittersweet. In 1946, Pippin died of a stroke.

The war, Pippin wrote, 'brought out all of the art in me'.<sup>14</sup> His paintings offer an unflinching glimpse of the harsh, brutal and sometimes poetic aspects of modern warfare. Pippin painted the terrifying moment when mustard gas descended on troops scrambling for their gas masks, the desolate terrain left lifeless by constant artillery bombardments, the fearless feats of aerial pilots engaged in a dogfight, the isolation that each man felt even while surrounded by his comrades and the final moment when German soldiers came out of their holes in the ground to surrender. For Pippin, combat in the First World War was the defining moment of his life, and his paintings are among the best, if not the best, by any American artist of the conflict.

For all the pain and horror that many American soldiers witnessed, they took solace in the sense of having participated in a great historic event. 'I wouldn't have missed it for anything,' exclaimed one soldier to his wife, content that he and his comrades had passed the test of courage in their first sustained encounter with the Germans.<sup>15</sup> American soldiers' romanticism and enthusiasm about the

war were particularly striking to Allied troops, especially the French who often remarked that the Americans reminded them of themselves in 1914.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the truly disgruntled soldiers within the AEF were those assigned to labouring or specialist tasks behind the line. Whatever crisis of morale existed in the American army during the war took place, not at the front, but in the training camps and dock facilities where non-combatants laboured unloading boxes, building roads or transporting supplies. It was not so much that these troops wanted a chance to die for their country, as that they wanted the recognition and respect that naturally went to combatants. Private Paul Maxwell entitled his post-war memoir 'Diary of a Dud', a conclusion that many non-combatants reached about their military careers.<sup>17</sup>

It is perhaps worth pointing out, however, that the front-line combat soldier did not have a monopoly on witnessing horrific scenes during the war. On 5 July 1918, over 40,000 white troops and 3000 black troops in Camp Dodge, Iowa were marched before a scaffold to watch the execution of three African American soldiers who had been convicted of raping a white woman. Critics called these hangings a 'legal lynching', and the execution earned a prominent place in the wartime memories of these unwilling observers. 'It was a very hot day with no wind,' one officer present at the scene later recalled. 'Thus the voices of the condemned men really reached the thousands of soldiers surrounding the scaffold. It was a horrible event. Most of us were not experienced soldiers, just ordinary young guys.... I was concerned that my recruits facing the scaffold might even panic.... I saw some of them weaving in ranks trying to stand at attention.'<sup>18</sup> The first intentional death that these troops encountered came at the hands of their own army rather than the enemy's and remained as traumatic a memory as anything they later witnessed along the Western Front.

### *The American way of war*

These life and death experiences provided the most tangible evidence for soldiers that control over their own destinies had largely been taken over by forces greater than themselves. Indeed, as in all wars, commanders made a host of decisions that shaped the contours of the American fighting man's experience. In retrospect, the American decision to retain the national integrity of its army and to take over its own sector of the Western Front probably increased the

number of casualties in the AEF, exactly the outcome Pershing was trying to avoid when he insisted on keeping American troops under American command. American military leaders felt that by developing a unique American approach to combat, they could avoid the mistakes, as they saw them, of the Allied armies on the battlefield. If Pershing had been able to complete his initial plan of fully training 3 million men to make a decisive attack against Metz in 1919, the American commander may have fulfilled his goal of restoring a war of movement onto the battlefield that lessened the human cost of battle along the Western Front. Instead, the quick pace of events in the wake of the failed German spring offensives in 1918 forced American troops into battle much sooner than Pershing intended. As he hoped, his troops fought aggressively and, as he feared, they died copiously.

Despite Pershing's ultimate intention to go it alone, throughout 1918 the AEF depended on French and British aid to train, transport and arm their force. Pershing successfully deflected the French demand that the Americans simply provide fresh infantry troops for French divisions. Nonetheless the majority of American troops spent a substantial amount of time training with French units and until the fall of 1918 most American divisions fought as attached units to the French army. Several divisions also fought and trained with the BEF. One American regiment even served for a short time with the New Zealand Division, where they succeeded, according to a unit historian, in 'winning the hearts of the New Zealanders and making a name for ourselves'.<sup>19</sup>

American troops arrived in France brimming with training camp lectures about how American initiative and enthusiasm would reintroduce a war of movement onto the Western Front. 'The sole idea of the American Army,' one soldier recalled, 'was to attack, to push forward.'<sup>20</sup>

Feeling that the Kiwis shared this sentiment, members of the 317 Regiment were pleased to learn that they would receive their baptism of fire while serving with the New Zealand Division because 'they made it their business whenever entering a new part of the line, to start right in with their aggressive spirit letting the Germans know at the beginning that they could expect no rest,' wrote First Lieutenant Edley Craighill.<sup>21</sup> The Americans were duly impressed with a New Zealand chaplain who presided over the front-line burial of the first casualty from an American company despite the fact that 'shells from both sides

were whizzing over head ...'<sup>22</sup> During his first stint alongside New Zealand troops, Joseph Morris, as instructed, studiously watched the saps along the front line for any sign of enemy infiltration and at one point through the rain became convinced that he saw the enemy approaching. Morris fired off a few rounds, then retired certain that he had successfully downed a German infiltrator. An investigation the next day uncovered two neat bullet holes in an empty black petrol can, the 'soldier' that Morris had stopped the night before. On a less humorous note, novice nervousness resulted in this company's first casualty when a corporal returning from a stint guarding a work party in no man's land did not hear a command to halt and was shot and killed by a man in his own outfit.<sup>23</sup> Initially, American soldiers interpreted Allied lessons about using caution in the trenches as a clear sign of the defeatism they had heard so much about from their officers. Over time, however, American soldiers learned to mimic Allied soldiers' survival strategies and to admire their staying power. One of the major annoyances that French soldiers expressed about Americans by October 1918 was their extreme eagerness for the war to end. 'They are waiting for the peace with a lot more impatience than us, which is very strange,' noted one French soldier in a letter home. 'They haven't even been fighting for that long. What would it be like if they had four years to their credit!'<sup>24</sup>

Although common soldiers came to respect the accomplishments of their Allied counterparts, commanders continued to make less favourable comparisons between the armies under their command and those that were not. From the American perspective, wartime comparisons between their army and the Allies tended to focus on the unique contribution that American initiative and aggressiveness could make to the final victory, while Allied commanders targeted the tremendous manpower resources going to waste owing to poor leadership within the American military. Once victory was assured, the war of words between the Americans and the Allies sharpened dramatically. "We won the war", you don't hear anything else when you talk about the peace with them,' complained one French soldier in a letter home.<sup>25</sup> In January, the AEF General Staff sent the American Commission to Negotiate Peace a comprehensive analysis of the US Army's pivotal contributions. Army officials expected this information to help the commission secure a prominent role in the peace negotiations. GHQ claimed exaggeratedly that the US war effort had dwarfed

those of France, Britain and Germany in size, scope, and quality. This report downplayed the US Army's dependence on Allied supplies and instead detailed the transportation infrastructure the Americans would eventually leave for the French. The authors of this report gave the American troops who had fought under French command during the German 1918 spring offensives full credit for stopping the German march to Paris at Château-Thierry in June and for the success of the Allied counterattack that summer. AEF staff officials, however, saved their most illustrious praise for the operations they had conceived and commanded themselves. They based the US Army's claim to have single-handedly saved France on its troops' success in overcoming the Germans in hilly, densely forested terrain during the St Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives. 'It is notorious that while we were fighting to the limit in the Argonne, the French Army was doing little more than observing the enemy with a view to taking over positions abandoned by the enemy. The British were doing little more ... But the American divisions in their ranks were given the most difficult enterprises, suffered the heaviest casualties, and by their energy and dash were in a very large measure instrumental in pushing forward the Allied lines.'<sup>26</sup>

Today, there are few historians who would venture to paint the American contribution in such stark and nationalistic terms. The consensus now is that although the Americans did not single-handedly win the war in 1918, they did make a valuable contribution on the battlefield that extended beyond the sheer promise of fielding a larger and more perfectly trained army in the future. At key moments in the German spring offensives in 1918, American troops helped to stop the Germans from taking Paris. Newly arrived American divisions added key strength to the French-led counter-offensives over the summer, and in the fall American-commanded assaults pinned down large numbers of German troops, helping to make possible British and French advances to the north. Yet, in the process of muting the initial over-enthusiastic appraisal from participants about their role in the final victory, First World War historians have perhaps swung a bit too far in the opposite direction, to the point that the extensive suffering and sacrifice on the Americans' part has been dropped from consideration altogether.

When one compares the American experience with that of the French or British, it is not hard to see why the significance of American participation seems

to diminish rapidly. The country entered the war quite late, took more than a year to field an independent army and lost comparatively few men – nearly 53,500 from combat, as compared with 1.3 million for France and 900,000 for Great Britain. Fully engaged from the opening days of the war, France and Britain lost an average of 900 and 457 men a day, respectively, over the course of the war. For the Americans, the bulk of the fighting came in the last six months of the war, with the first year primarily given over to training and transporting troops overseas. The overall American average of 195 deaths a day reflects this lag between the American declaration of war and heavy involvement on the Western Front.

These figures are often used as evidence to dismiss the war as a quick adventure for American troops. Yet phrasing this comparative question somewhat differently suggests another conclusion. Once American troops became fully engaged along the Western Front, their losses mirrored those of their Allied counterparts. When the Americans began fighting in earnest in the summer of 1918, deaths averaged 820 a day, not too far off the French figure and almost twice as many as the British.<sup>27</sup> This comparison helps us to begin recovering the ferocious nature of the fighting encountered by the 1.2 million American soldiers who found themselves on the front lines in the fall of 1918.

As in other armies, American casualties were unevenly spaced among the moments when the Americans took part in maintaining the trench deadlock and when they participated in the 1918 counter-offensives and offensives that halted the German spring offensives and pushed German troops toward the Rhine. Soldiers' own words offer the best evidence of their front-line experiences, and American soldiers filled their diaries, letters and memoirs with vivid descriptions of the agony of combat. 'To be shelled is the worse thing in the world,' noted one soldier. 'It is impossible to adequately imagine it. In absolute darkness we simply lay and trembled from sheer nervous tension.'<sup>28</sup> Clayton Slack privately concluded, 'Those that weren't scared, weren't there.'<sup>29</sup> After he was wounded during a raid, James Reese Europe, a famous musician serving overseas, wrote a signature jazz composition 'On Patrol in No Man's Land' that mimicked the sounds of falling bombs and the rat-a-tat of machine-gun fire. His collaborator Noble Sissle vividly remembered walking through the gas ward of the hospital to visit a wounded soldier in France. 'As you walked down the aisle by the rows

of cots,' Sissle recalled over 20 years later, 'you could see how the different ones were suffering. Some of them in places where their eyes were, were just large bleeding scabs; others, their mouths were just one mass of sores; others had their hands up, and there were terrible burns beneath their arms, where the gas had attacked the moisture there.... I had often heard of the horribleness of the torture, but... these scenes are generally kept from the soldier in order to keep from lowering his morale.'<sup>30</sup> In the trenches, American troops confronted the familiar challenges of rats and lice. 'We soon became tired of killing them ...,' noted one combat veteran. 'I have often wondered why there were so few rat bites. Probably the rats felt that it was not worthwhile fooling with live humans when there were so many dead ones around.'<sup>31</sup>

Although there was no American repeat of the 20,000 men lost on the first day of the Somme, in the autumn of 1918 the Americans began fighting in the dense and heavily fortified Argonne woods. The Meuse-Argonne campaign cost 2550 casualties a day and left 26,000 dead in a mere six weeks. In this battle, the Americans succeeded temporarily in breaking out of the trench deadlock to resume a war of movement, only to find themselves digging in once again as the army encountered problems resupplying its troops in the field and refining original battle plans in light of actual circumstances along the front lines.

The rapid pace of the Allied offensive forced Pershing to commit a significant number of undertrained troops to battle, and the combat performance of these troops varied tremendously. AEF generals complained of widespread straggling and estimated that close to 100,000 of the 1.2 million men committed to the battle either purposely or inadvertently lost contact with their units. Perhaps more surprising than the cases of undertrained troops who fled when confronted with machine-gun bursts and artillery explosions were those who, according to one inspector general, when issued rifles asked to be shown 'how to work this thing so that they could up and get a "boche"'.<sup>32</sup> Sending these untrained men into battle, wrote another inspector, was 'little short of murder. How we have escaped a catastrophe is a clear demonstration of the German demoralization.'<sup>33</sup> By early November, infantry-artillery co-ordination improved, night assaults began and aerial bombing and gas attacks supported troops' advance – all signs that the AEF was still learning in the field when the war came to an end.<sup>34</sup>

Even if we are satisfied that the American combat experience deserves

consideration alongside that of other combatant nations, another comparative question still remains. How did American soldiers react to their serious losses within such a short time? In the Meuse-Argonne campaign, the Americans contended with poorly trained replacement troops, heavy casualties among line officers, straggling and traffic jams that prevented supplies from reaching the front. There was never, however, any large-scale demoralisation within the army even after the high cost of the offensive became apparent to most soldiers. Over the course of the war, the AEF experienced its share of discord within the ranks, but always over issues related to defining the place of a citizen soldier within the army of a democratic nation – namely struggles over the meaning of discipline, race relations, the legitimacy of non-combatant work and post-war fraternisation with the Germans. At the front, soldiers proved capable of absorbing the personal trauma of participating in combat without losing faith in their leaders or the justness of the war. As Donald Kyler recalled,

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. Those things I had seen, but they did not affect me much. I was too numb... [but nonetheless] I had the determination to go on performing as I had been trained to do – to be a good soldier.<sup>35</sup>

### Conclusion

At the end of the war, American officials had reason to be proud of their success in turning a small professional force of 300,000 into a modern mass army of over 4 million in little more than a year and a half. At the time of the Armistice the Americans still could not match the tactical and logistical sophistication of their Allies. Yet, overall, these faults are less surprising than the speed with which the Americans fielded an army that could fight well enough to help secure victory for the Allies. Rather than single-handedly winning the war, the United States more than likely prevented Britain and France from losing it. This was a worthy enough accomplishment that allowed millions of men on both sides to survive.



Whether considered from the perspective of creating a modern American military or the lives of individual soldiers, American participation in the war also had tremendous importance for the nation and its citizenry. Conscription and combat defined the domestic significance of the war for the United States. For the first time in its history, the country raised a mass national army and its citizen soldiers used their collective influence to mould internal manpower, disciplinary and racial policies. The United States suffered severe losses during its major combat operations, experiencing the full scope of horrors associated with combat along the Western Front. Within the annals of the history of the war, the domestic history of the nation and the personal narratives of individual soldiers, therefore, American participation in the First World War was a pivotal moment after which nothing was the same.

## CAGING THE PRUSSIAN DRAGON: NEW ZEALAND AND THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE 1919

*Richard Kay*

We are proud that our Dominion has been privileged to take part in liberating the world from the dragon of Prussianism. (*New Zealand school children to British Colonial Secretary, 19 November 1918*)

The historical literature concerning New Zealand's role at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 is virtually non-existent. New Zealand historians have failed to fully appreciate the contribution made by New Zealand's Prime Minister William Massey and his Liberal coalition partner Sir Joseph Ward.<sup>1</sup> This is a remarkable oversight given the recent avalanche of academic writing on the First World War and the fact that Paris was the first time, apart from purely technical conferences, that New Zealand appeared as a separate entity at an international gathering.<sup>2</sup> The outcomes of the Paris Peace Conference also had significant consequences for New Zealand's external relations, particularly with the British Empire, the Pacific and the emerging power of the United States of America and Japan.

More than 80 years after Massey signed the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 1919, it seems timely to reconsider the role he and Ward played. This chapter examines what results their actions had for New Zealand and intra-imperial relations. In