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, Château-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 November 11, 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 adventure 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 stoic. “To be shelled is the worst thing in the world,” Harry Allen noted. “It is impossible to adequately imagine it. In absolute darkness we simply lay and trembled from sheer nervous 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. Stinky shell fire meant constant casualties, and men on the front lines often had to share their shroud 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 Château-Thierry, while a German soldier (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 Babcock 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
it passed over and never touched me.” His temperament changed dramatically after these dreams, because “it seemed to give me a sense of immunity than anything I could have got out of my silly feelings.” Just as Rubak’s positive vision gave him comfort, others believed that poorly chosen thoughts or conversations jinxed them. Corporate Emile Hilot recalled the time he and his allies thought their reluctance to discuss the future, a subject they usually considered taboo, had a long conversation about what they planned to do after the war. The next morning, they discovered that all the trench were wounded or killed during a shell attack. “From then on I never spoke of the future,” Hilot said. Others told more to more specific visions. “My prayer book gave me courage and comfort when under fire,” Sergeant Stephen Morley recalled (6).

In the trenches, American soldiers lived within a few hundred yards of their own army’s lines. A network of tunnels, dug by them. An array of rumors helped soldiers create tangible images of their unseen enemy, who, according to these “trench monsters,” was “particularly well-armed and well-protected.”

In a favorite tale, according to soldier storytellers, German soldiers were French uniforms or Red Cross brassards, pretended they were wounded, and lay on the battlefields to lure Allied soldiers into direct range of German machine guns. Another German trick began with a group of German machine guns pretending to surrender by yelling “Comrades!” 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 jaded tales of barbaric trench warfare. Soldiers repeatedly spoke of comrades that captured sniper, gave them shovels, forced them to dig their own graves, shot them.

Once they came into actual contact with dead Germans, many soldiers described how they felt. “Upon a German corpse in the Argonne Forest, one sergeant surprised himself by thinking that “these Germans didn’t look like much,” but more importantly (6). A corporal undoubtedly spoke for others when he noted that “in the least of battle men do not realize that the enemy is only a scared, frightened boy like we are, killing for self-preservation and because life has to end and living as if he had.

When Americans left the trenches to actively pursue the Germans, fighting on the open battlefield also disoriented those seeking glory in private memoirs. Donald Kyler found himself being gored by hussars the marching of crowds. “I had seen mercy killings, both of our hopelessly wounded and those of the enemy, who received no mercy, literally 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 replacements troops to receive intensive training before sending them into battle. But, in the face of an overwhelming German army, quick training 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 undertrained men into battle was “little short of murder. How have we escaped a catastrophe is beyond me.” (8)

Pershing realized that this problem was not unique to the American army. Although aware of their poor preparation, few American soldiers refused to fight. Instead, “when issue rifles they ask to be allowed to fight, ‘we have to work this thing out so that they could go up and get a ‘boche,’” explained one officer.

The most famous hero of the war was Sergeant Alvin York. Like eighty percent of casualties in the Argonne Forest near Champagne, France, 7 February 1919. (NARA NWSNS-H11-SC-29191)

Sergeant Alvin C. York standing beside captured 132 German soldiers.

York’s feat was extraordinary for any war, but his determination to subdue the Germans was not. “The Americans fight like hell,” noted one French soldier, after witnessing American soldiers in battle along the Western Front. “Most American soldiers fought bravely and tenaciously. Some, however, found ways to avoid the frontline. In one account published shortly before the armistice, the author described the trench lines of the American 101st Division as “a living hell. Conditions were so terrible that many of the men became insane. (12)

Racist army policies kept the vast majority of African Americans (nearly eighty percent) working behind the lines at menial, combat-support tasks. “We are real soldiers now,” wrote one of the few African American soldiers to experience battle, a few years after that few black troops laboring in the rear over shared (13). The story was repeated in the African American division, 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, conversely overlooking the fact that some white combat units with insufficient training had performed poorly as well. The other black combat units, the Provisional 303rd Division, consisted of four infantry regiments under the command of the French Army. With proper training and confident leadership, these soldiers fought successfully and the French government decorated many African American troops with French medals. These soldiers had provided the black community with two genuine war heroes, Sergeant Henry Johnson and Private Needham Roberts, who

The African American men of the 369th (15th New York) won the Croix de Guerre for gallantry during World War I. (NARA/WNONC-105-KW-127 (8))

bought 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. Lawrence Sturges 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 73 of the 52,947 battlefield deaths sustained by the AEF, less than two percent of all battlefield fatalities. Of African American soldiers wounded, 4,408 were black and 198,220 were white. White soldiers, therefore, comprised ninety to ninety-one 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 stream of an arm or a leg was recently amputated, a head gashed up, part of a face blown away, or a stomach punctured by a dozen pieces of shattered, the terror gripping, mounting and scourching profanity of men as death seemed to be overpowering them. Spanish influenza was one horror that front lines 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 male soldier population, normally the least likely to succumb to respiratory infections, particularly hard. The virus appeared without warning, within an hour or two had raging fever and severe blood poisoning. The death rate of this illness, with about ten percent developed pneumonia and died, suffocating from fluid-filled lungs. Between September 1 and November 1918 approximately 9,000 AEF soldiers and 23,000 overseas soldiers died from this mysterious virus. During this same period nearly the same number (35,000) of American soldiers died from combat wounds (17).

Men and women 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 their exhaustion and nightmares. 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,” according to Donald Rayfield, who interviewed them as late as 1971 (8). Actually they hadn’t been touched.” Corporal Paul Murphy later recalled, “they were completely helpless, mumbling and trem- bliing. They would just stare at the soldier. It was the 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 were no more entitled to a ‘wound’ than were soldiers who were 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 Kenemer arrived at the base hospital in such poor condition that the doctors initially mistook his rubbish of hallucinations for cover under his bed. After resting and eating well for a few days, however, Kenemer returned to his unit (21). Most soldiers who suffered from shell shock, battle exhaustion, or gas hysteria (a milder shell-shock disorder) described their symptoms associated with gas but had no actual injuries) voluntarily returned to the front after a few days rest in a field hospital. 10 They and food were not enough to keep the men in the trenches where their bodies had stopped and speech and memory returned, field psychiatrists emphasized to each man that their complained needed them and their glory of being a soldier to 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 black or white, soldiers. On 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 band on the
lensward 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 at arms 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? 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 veterans French and British units, freeing them to stem the Ger man spring offensives of 1918. When criticized by his Allies for not keeping up with their allies 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 least 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).)

Endnotes
6. Jennifer D. Keene, Doughboys, the Great War, and the Remaking of America (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), 49.
8. Shaffer, 162.
10. Keene, 41.
11. Ibid., 31.
12. Coffman, 337.
17. Shaffer, 171.
19. Keene, 58.
20. Ibid., 31.
21. Shaffer, 204.
24. Meigs, 66.
25. Meigs, 89.

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