

THE 91ST INFANTRY IN WORLD WAR I—ANALYSIS OF AN AEF DIVISION'S  
EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE BATTLEFIELD SUCCESS

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Military History

by

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

THE 91ST INFANTRY IN WORLD WAR I—ANALYSIS OF AN AEF DIVISION’S EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE BATTLEFIELD SUCCESS, by Major Bryan L. Woodcock, 92 pages.

The 91st Infantry Division was a National Army Division created prior to World War I. Based at Camp Lewis, Washington, it was composed of draftees from the northwestern United States. Following a train up that lasted less than one year, this division departed for Europe in June 1918.

In France, the 91st Division conducted additional training, but the AEF pushed it to the front lines before it was completed. In its first combat experience, the 91st Division fought on the front lines of the Meuse-Argonne. In the first days of this battle, the 91st Division, although inexperienced, gained more ground than any other American division. However, it paid a heavy price in terms of American lives. The AEF subsequently assigned the division to work under French command in the battle of Ypres-Lys in Belgium.

This thesis examines the division leadership’s ability to execute necessary warfighting functions and combined arms operations in the challenging environment of 1917-1918. The division was tested and accomplished a significant amount, but it also suffered many deficiencies and was forced to learn hard lessons in combat.

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Additionally, I would like to thank my wife Nichole, and three children; Tyler, Marcus, and Harley, for their constant support and understanding throughout this process. I appreciate them also taking the time to read the paper and offer their advice.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to PVT Loran Woodcock, a Great Uncle, who died in the Meuse Argonne on 29 September 1918. As a member of the 364th Infantry, my family never knew what actually happened to him. This research provided some answers and along the way showed what a difficult environment that all of these Soldiers had to endure in this “Great War.”

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## ACRONYMS

AEF	American Expeditionary Forces
BDE	Brigade
BG	Brigadier General
CPT	Captain DOW Died of Wounds
MAJ	Major
MG	Major General
OTC	Officer Training Camp



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The men of the 91st Infantry “Wild West” Division, under command of Major General (MG) William H. Johnston, arrived in France in August of 1918. Organized the previous year at Camp Lewis, Washington, the division was assigned to General John J. Pershing’s American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in Europe to fight the Germans and put an end to World War I. These men were young and inexperienced, but they were eager to get into the fight. In early September, the AEF curtailed the division’s training requirements and ordered it to the battle of St. Mihiel to act as a reserve force. Sensing disappointment in the reserve assignment, MG Johnston told his leaders that General Pershing assured him that “the 91st would not have a backseat at the next show.”<sup>1</sup>

That “next show” turned out to be the Meuse-Argonne—the battle that ultimately helped change the course of the war and contributed to the surrender of the German forces. By far, the Meuse-Argonne was the single most deadly battle for United States forces. This 47 day slaughter claimed the lives of 26,277 Americans and wounded an additional 95,786 out of the 1.2 million who fought.<sup>2</sup> The 91st division fought on the front lines during the initial attack and it advanced further and faster than the divisions on their flanks. Relieved after eight days of fighting, the AEF ordered the 181st Brigade, one of two brigades in the division, quickly back to the front lines where it fought another six

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur R. Whitner, “Operations of the 364th Infantry, 91st Division, in the First phase of the Meuse-Argonne” (Student Paper, The Infantry School, Fort Benning, GA, 1925-1926), 2.

<sup>2</sup>Edward G. Lengel, *To Conquer Hell, The Meuse-Argonne, 1918: The Epic Battle That Ended the First World War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2009), 4.

days. Within weeks, the 91st was again tasked to support the French forces in the battle of Ypres-Lys in Belgium, where it fought until the end of World War I. This chapter outlines the methodology used to determine the level of success of the 91st Division throughout its battlefield engagements in France. Relying on both primary and secondary sources, this paper examines the Wild West division's activities from its training period at Camp Lewis to its experiences on the battlefields in Europe to determine its level of success.

### Thesis Statement

The 91st Division appeared to be very successful on the battlefield. Its leaders maintained morale and led the division to gain more ground than other divisions in an extremely difficult combat environment. However, the division was very inexperienced. Its training and execution of concepts such as command and control, movement and maneuver, and integration of fires lacked proficiency. Although the 91st had impressive gains in the Meuse-Argonne, these gains came at an exceptionally high cost and by the end of the battle, the division had nearly culminated. In the final days of the War, the division would learn from many of its mistakes and show progress, but the unit had been badly damaged as a result of its inexperience and inefficiencies.

### Literature Review

There is very little research specifically on the 91st Division in the Great War. In fact, only recently have researchers written any significant works specifically focused on the battle of the Meuse-Argonne, the primary battle that the 91st was involved in. The research of modern World War I historians including Mark E. Grotelueschen, Byron

Farwell, Richard S. Faulkner, and Timothy K. Nenninger, was used to gain an understanding of the conditions throughout WWI and the Meuse-Argonne. Their description of the many challenges AEF divisions faced in 1917-1918 provided a sound structure to base the evaluation of the 91st Division's training and operations. Many of these books on WWI, and more specifically the Meuse-Argonne, make mention of the 91st Infantry and allude to its accomplishments, but there is no substantial research or detailed analysis specifically on this division or any of its subordinate units.

Edward G. Lengel writes perhaps the most detail on the 91st Division's contributions to the Meuse-Argonne in his book *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918, The Epic Battle That Ended the First World War*. In this book, Lengel gives a narrative of the action of several Soldiers and leaders of the division. He generally portrays the 91st division in a positive light when compared to the divisions on its flanks, but acknowledges that the division was unable to capitalize on many of its gains because it had to withdraw from seized objectives—only to retake them again the next day. When describing the attack on the town of Gesnes, Lengel writes that “although the Wild West Division had shown more grit than its neighbors to the east and west—whose inability to keep pace exposed its flanks to enfilading enemy fire—it had not made any significant progress.”<sup>3</sup> Lengel acknowledges that the division had made gains on the battlefield that other divisions could not, but shows that the tremendous cost of their gains did not surpass the benefits.

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<sup>3</sup>Lengel, 154.

There is even less written about the division's operations in Belgium at the battle of Ypres-Lys under command of the French General Degoutte.<sup>4</sup> To cover these gaps, unit histories of regiments and companies within the 91st provided insight on the performance of the unit throughout its existence. Many of these histories have the potential for bias since they were written by committees who served in the units during the war, but they still provide insight into how the unit executed its mission. This paper also uses several monographs that were completed for requirements at the Infantry school at Fort Benning, or CGSC at Fort Leavenworth. Several officers, using personal experience, wrote of their unit's challenges and actions in the Meuse-Argonne offensive. These monographs generally gave a more critical analysis. However, the authors that wrote about V Corps operations (the corps HQ for the 91st during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive) only briefly mentioned the 91st while concentrating most of their research on problems in the other divisions within the Corps. Captain Harrison, one author of a monograph on V Corps summarizes his description of the men of the 91st Division as having a "never say die spirit," and continues to say that "too much cannot be said in praise of the 91st Div for its splendid achievements during the four days of fighting."<sup>5</sup> This shows the general consensus among researchers that the 91st division seemed to advance well when compared to the divisions on its flanks, but there is little analysis to discover why this was the case.

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<sup>4</sup>Byron Farwell, *Over There, The United States in the Great War, 1917-1918* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2000), 250.

<sup>5</sup>Captain Harrison, "The Operations of the Fifth U.S. Corps in the First Phase of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive" (Student Paper, CGSC, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 1931), 9.

The division leadership did not write extensively on their actions of the division in France. However, the memoirs of General Pershing provided some insight into impressions of the 91st Division, and subsequent correspondence between him and MG Johnston was useful. One regimental commander, Colonel John “Gatling Gun” Parker had previously written extensively on machine gun tactics during a previous conflict in Santiago, Cuba. This work showed his thoughts and feelings towards combined arms tactics and the use of the machine gun that would ultimately aid him in his success commanding a regiment in the Great War. Therefore, much of this research relies on personal accounts of Soldiers who fought in the 91st, which in many cases, gives unique insights that include both narrative and critique.

### Scope

This paper will examine the training and combat operations of the 91st Infantry Division from its inception at Camp Lewis, Washington through its final operation under the French VII Corps in Belgium. Conceptually, AEF divisions should have been fairly equal since they were composed of an equal number of men and allocated (not necessarily issued) the same amount of equipment. In World War I, all divisions looked similar on paper—there were not different unit specialties that are commonly seen in today’s air assault, airborne, or armored divisions. Instead, the only distinctions were made between Regular Army, National Army and National Guard Divisions, with the former including regular, more experienced career Soldiers. However, even these differences became blurred as the Army spread out its experienced leadership across all units and filled them with inexperienced American draftees. The distinguishing factors in an AEF division became the states or cities that the men came from as well as the quality

of leadership at all levels. Due in part to these differences, and perhaps more because of the operational environment they were tasked to fight in, the AEF divisions did not have a similar level of performance on the battlefield. Some began weak, but improved with experience, while others experienced problems throughout their time in Europe. The 91st Division was one unit that seemed to perform better than most, but there has not been sufficient research to determine if this was truly the case. This paper will closely examine key areas that commonly determined success, or failure, of an average AEF division including leadership, movement and maneuver, and integration of fires. By evaluating how effectively the leaders and Soldiers of the 91st trained, executed, and managed these functions, one can determine the level of success it had in World War I.

The first criteria for determining the level of success of the 91st division is examining the quality of its leaders and how well they overcame the challenges of command and control. This is one area where there is a noticeable difference between many of the AEF divisions at all echelons. Inept leadership was commonly documented and many commanders were relieved on the spot. In contrast, the Great War produced many outstanding leaders who are common names today including John LeJeune, George Marshall, Douglas MacArthur, and Harry Truman. To determine how effective the 91st was in managing leaders, the following research questions will be evaluated: How effectively did the division deal with incompetent leaders? If leaders were relieved, was this done at an appropriate time? How well did the leaders in the division sustain a high level of morale within their units? How well did the division train for and conduct liaison operations with units on its flanks and higher headquarters, particularly under French command? How did the division's training environments prepare its leaders and



Soldiers? Was the division able to continuously determine location and status of its troops? Did the division have a problem with stragglers? If so, how did they deal with this? Answers to these questions will help determine how well the division leaders executed command and control.

This research will also cover how the 91st Division conducted movement and maneuver. In 2013, the Army's definition of movement and maneuver is defined as "the related tasks and systems that move and employ forces to achieve a position of relative advantage over the enemy and other threats."<sup>6</sup> Today's definition can be applied to the forces of 1918 when evaluating their tactics to determine if they successfully maneuvered their forces and gained an advantage on the German forces. The issue of how best to train a unit to fight the battles of World War I was the source of much controversy among the AEF and Allied leadership throughout the war. Pershing wanted his leaders to think offensively, and believed that they should focus training on marksmanship, open warfare, and flexible formations. However, many units had difficulty applying these principles in the trench environment, and the allies believed that American units should be taught the concepts of trench warfare that they had learned during the first three years of fighting. Regardless of what type of tactics they emphasized, many units struggled with tactical maneuver almost immediately. Timothy K. Nenner writes that "Rigid plans of attack, lines of infantry advancing over open ground without regard for concealment or cover, little use of fire and maneuver, and improper employment of infantry supporting arms

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<sup>6</sup>Headquarters, Department of the Army, ADRP 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 16 May 2012), 3-3.

were typical of American infantry in the offensives of the summer and fall of 1918.”<sup>7</sup>

This paper will evaluate the 91st Division during the Meuse-Argonne offensive and the battle of Ypres-Lys to determine if it had the same issues. Additionally, it will examine the training of the unit to determine how leaders were trained to conduct movement and maneuver, whether or not they were allowed to be flexible with their combat formations and whether or not this training translated into success on the battlefield if and when it was followed.

Not unlike several other units, the organic fires brigade from the 91st was not the fires brigade supporting them in combat. The 166th Artillery Brigade, assigned to the 91st, had not completed training in Europe required for artillery units. Therefore the division was supported by the 58th FA Brigade in the Meuse-Argonne and the 53rd FA Brigade at Ypres-Lys.<sup>8</sup> This organization presented numerous challenges since the division presumably had to quickly establish procedures to successfully coordinate fires on the battlefield with units they had never worked with before. To determine the level of success in regards to fires, this paper will use the following criteria: how well infantry leaders were taught to coordinate fires, did the artillery units use observed fire rather than points on a map (observed fire tended to be more effective), were there any cases of friendly fire and if so, why?, and was the division able to successfully maneuver its artillery to provide seamless fires when needed? How well did the unit coordinate air

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<sup>7</sup>Timothy K. Nenninger, “American Military Effectiveness in the First World War,” in *American Military Effectiveness in the First World War*, eds. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 145.

<sup>8</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division* (San Francisco, CA: 91st Division Publication Committee, 1919), 20, 61.

support and combine it in the overall fires plan? The evaluation of fires will focus on how well the coordination was with the artillery units and how the unit used any lessons learned to improve operations.

This paper will be chronologically organized in five chapters addressing examples during the unit's train up and subsequent operations that will address the mission success criteria previously described. Chapter 2 will focus on the training the division conducted after organization and prior to combat operations in Europe. This will also include an analysis of Major General Henry A. Greene, a former commandant of the Army Service School at Fort Leavenworth, who was the division commander during the first year prior to deployment of the unit to Europe. Additionally, it will examine the training at Presidio, Camp Lewis, and the multiple locations in France to determine how well relevant training was planned and executed across the division.

Chapter 3 will focus exclusively on the Meuse-Argonne battle. It will also look at the new division commander, Major General William H. Johnston and examine his leadership qualities. Not only will it detail the actions of the 91st Infantry Division throughout the operation, it will focus on the competency of its leadership and how its training prepared the division for combat. By walking through the details of the battle it will not only answer the questions listed above, but also provide an account of specific actions and examples of leadership performance within the 91st Infantry Division.

Chapter 4 focuses on the little known Ypres-Lys battle in Flanders and determines if the division used its lessons learned from the Meuse-Argonne to achieve success under French command. Working under a multi-national force at a time when rumors of an armistice were rampant created significant leadership challenges. Additionally, the

assignment to work under the French was not a popular one. Therefore, this chapter emphasizes how well the division orchestrated the combined arms fight under foreign leadership, using organic and foreign machine guns, artillery, and air assets.

Also important is what this thesis will not cover. Most importantly, this paper is limited to an analysis of the 91st Division. Issues at higher headquarters or within the divisions on its flanks, which ultimately could have contributed to the success or failure of an operation, will not be fully examined. Equipping the divisions is an example. There are numerous reports of the division not receiving its allotted equipment such as machine guns and trench mortars. Aside from failures that can be directly attributed to the leaders within the division, the issues beyond their control will not be addressed in depth. This paper will focus on how well the leadership of the division accomplished the missions assigned regardless of whether it was appropriate to assign the mission in the first place.

Additionally, because the 91st Division worked with artillery units outside of the division in both France and Belgium, this thesis will not focus on the training phase of the artillery units both internal and external. It will focus more on how the rest of the division was trained on the importance of artillery in battle and coordination procedures required to conduct operations with artillery.

This thesis attempts to determine the level of success of the leaders and Soldiers of the “Wild West” Division and attempts to identify those key factors that led to, or detracted from, the success of this unit in one of the most difficult combat environments imaginable. By using numerous sources, the stories of these “Wild West” men may help show how a unit can overcome numerous challenges, and most importantly learn from them to become a better organization.

## CHAPTER 2

### ORGANIZING A DIVISION

The United States officially declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917, but soon found itself completely unprepared to execute a war. In fact, it took leaders months after the declaration to determine what the United States' strategy would be. One large concern was that the United States did not have the manpower necessary to fight the war and quick measures were needed to make up for this lack of preparedness.<sup>9</sup> In May 1917, after much debate, Congress passed the draft act that instituted conscription in order to build quickly an army capable of fighting alongside the allied forces in Europe. As this troop build-up evolved, numerous initiatives followed including the establishment of local boards to determine eligibility and selection of men for the National Army, the establishment of cantonment areas for training recruits, and the establishment of officer training camps to develop an officer corps. One of the first sixteen sites was located just south of Tacoma, Washington—the future home of Camp Lewis. The 91st Division, National Army, was assigned to Camp Lewis and received and trained Soldiers there from September 1917 until it departed for France in June 1918.

This chapter will cover the 91st division's training period from its inception at Camp Lewis, Washington through its training period in France. As a brand new National Army division, the 91st had significant challenges to overcome. Fortunately, other U.S. units were already heading to France, so the 91st had more time to train than many others. The division however, would suffer many setbacks, mostly due to a personnel

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<sup>9</sup>Nenninger, 130.

levy imposed by the War Department. Throughout its training time, these levies would force the unit to continually restart its training, therefore never getting to the desired level of collective proficiency. While the division made great strides in individual skills such as marksmanship, individual leader training, and basic drill, it would not advance past this level. Liaison operations, open warfare, integration with artillery were all things that units were using in Europe, but the 91st would not leave the states at a proficient level in any of these.

Fortunately, local political efforts to acquire enough land for a military training camp in Washington State began in 1916. Once war was declared in 1917 and the land sales finalized, the construction of Camp Lewis was rapidly completed. “The constructing contract was signed June 14, the building plan handed over July 5, and recruits entered the barracks September 5.”<sup>10</sup> For a cost of approximately \$7 million, the military converted “6 miles of barren prairie into a modern city.” The new camp had all the best amenities including structures, water supply, electricity, and roads. By the end of August, Camp Lewis was ready to hold over forty thousand soldiers.<sup>11</sup>

The 91st quickly earned the nickname “The Wild West Division” because the men who formed the unit came from areas across the western United States. The overwhelming majority of the men came from California. However, Montana, Washington, Utah, Idaho, and Nevada each provided thousands of men. Smaller contingents also arrived to the 91st division from Wyoming, Oregon, and Alaska. The

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<sup>10</sup>Alice Palmer Henderson, *The Ninety-First The First at Camp Lewis* (Tacoma, WA: Press of Smith-Kinney Co., 1918), 31.

<sup>11</sup>L. Ross Carpenter, *91st Division, National Army, Camp Lewis* (Seattle, WA: R. D. Clark Co., 1917), 35.

initial manning plan called for four waves of recruits to arrive at the camp over two months. A small number of leaders arrived in late August; they formed individual units and the first sizeable contingent of 2,274 men arrived around 4 September. Just under two weeks later, another 18,185 arrived, with an equal amount arriving at the beginning of October.<sup>12</sup> The division was organized similar to other AEF divisions and its structure centered around four infantry maneuver units: The 361st, 362nd, 363rd, and 364th Infantry Regiments. The full organization of the division is shown in figure 1.

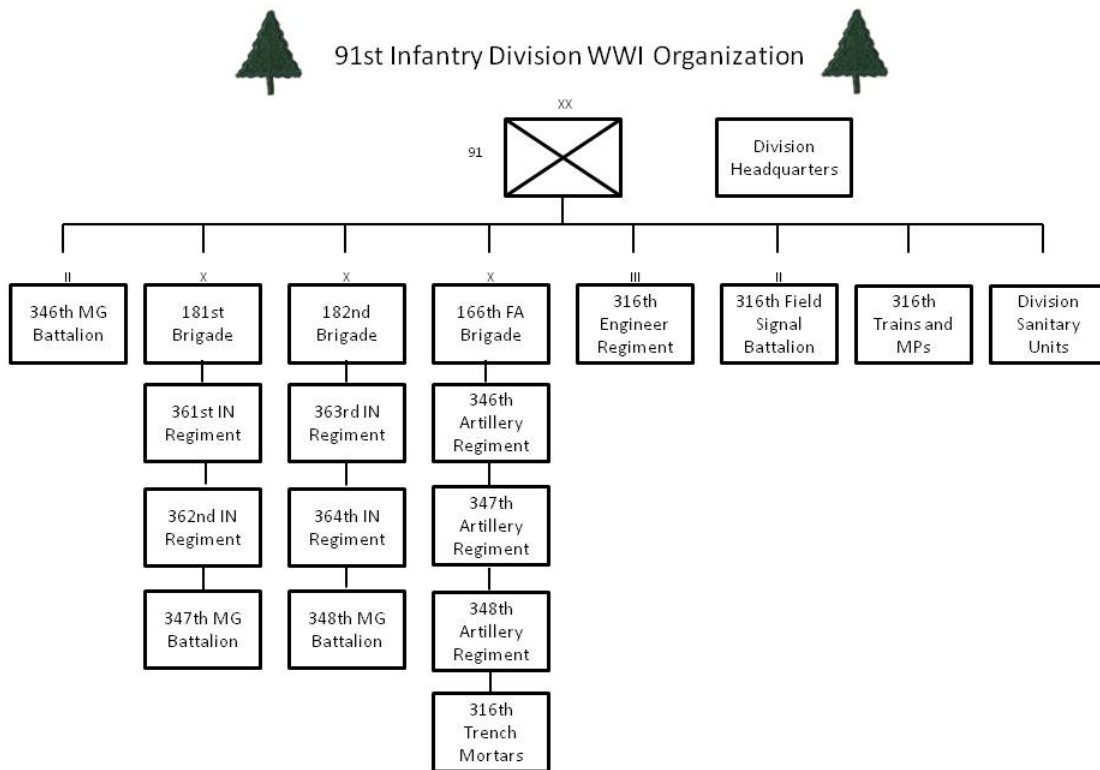


Figure 1. 91st Division WWI Organization

Source: Created by author, data obtained from L. Ross Carpenter, *The 91st Division, National Army, Camp Lewis* (Seattle, WA: R. D. Clark, Co., 1917).

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

Major General Henry A. Greene took command of the division in August 1917. By all accounts, General Greene seemed to be well respected by his men and the members of the Tacoma community. His background was impressive and included combat experience in the Spanish-American War and in the Philippines. He served as the Commandant of the Army Service Schools at Fort Leavenworth from 1914-1916 and held many instructor positions throughout his career.<sup>13</sup> His training, education and experience were appropriate to stand up a National Army division. He was supported by a staff that included many regular army officers, but they faced a stiff challenge to receive, process, and train officers and recruits in a very limited amount of time.

Initially, this small contingent of leadership was unable to closely manage the process of filling units. The men came in large waves to Camp Lewis based on national draft dates. In Company K, 363rd Infantry for example, ten officers were assigned on 7 September 1917 to form the company's nucleus. Within days, the recruits began to arrive: 50 on 10 September, another 79 on the 21st, 25 on the 23rd. Finally, in late October, 112 personnel arrived to complete the fill of personnel in K Company.<sup>14</sup> This was the process that quickly filled nearly all of the units in the 91st division (the other National Army divisions had similar processes). As quickly as the end of October, the division strength stood at approximately 26,000 men, just short of the 27,152 authorization for a standard National Army infantry division.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Carpenter, 5.

<sup>14</sup>*Facts and Figures of K Company 363rd Infantry* (San Francisco, CA: Fred E. Hartman), 5.

<sup>15</sup>Carpenter, 28, 45.



The easiest way to receive the mass quantities of men quickly with the limited staff on the ground at Camp Lewis in September was to push recruits straight into their units. No opportunity existed to identify individuals with certain skills and assign them to jobs or units that could benefit most. Instead, there was more of an attempt to fill units evenly as the recruits arrived, and align men from similar areas to the same units. For example, one group from Seattle arrived at Camp Lewis and found that the men from the city's districts one through nine were all assigned to Headquarters Company.<sup>16</sup> After they were assigned to companies, the Soldiers were screened to ensure they met the initial qualifications for service. Months later, the process became more streamlined as the division routed newly arriving recruits through a depot brigade that was responsible for processing and screening them prior to assigning them into units.<sup>17</sup>

The War Department's manning process as a whole, however, was far from complete in October 1917. The AEF was under pressure to provide combat ready divisions in Europe. If a division was scheduled to deploy to Europe, the War Department transferred men from other divisions into that unit to ensure units deployed at full strength. This troop levy hit the 91st Division hard. K Company, 363rd Infantry began losing men just a month after it was originally filled. The company lost 10 Soldiers in November to the 41st Division and another 38 in March 1918—approximately 20 percent turnover.<sup>18</sup> In March 1918, mostly due to the levy of troops, the 91st Division strength

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<sup>16</sup>*History of Headquarters Company, 361st Infantry, 91st Division* (Unknown Publisher, copy held at the U.S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA), 5.

<sup>17</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 2.

<sup>18</sup>*Facts and Figures of K Company 363rd Infantry*, 6.

was approximately 20,000 men, nearly 25 percent short of its authorized strength.<sup>19</sup> The division later received new recruits to replace these losses, but the turnover significantly affected the unit's readiness.

The troop levy had a significant impact on maintaining continuity of personnel within the units, but other factors contributed to the manning issues that the 91st experienced throughout its training period and subsequent movement to Europe. Individual units began to move personnel around to match jobs with skill sets. Additionally, many men left their units due to disease or sickness that prevented deployment. The division was transferring men as late as the morning of departure from Camp Lewis. Additional transfers were made in New Jersey as the 91st prepared to depart the United States by ship. One random company, E Company 364th Infantry, transferred sixteen men just prior to departing Camp Lewis and another fourteen men in New Jersey. Even in this late stage of deployment, companies like E Company, were still experiencing a turnover rate in excess of ten percent.<sup>20</sup> Personnel turnover, especially this late in the deployment cycle essentially required the units to start over with training. Morale within the units could also suffer as the names and faces changed so frequently.

#### Training At Camp Lewis

Training, based on War Department guidance, began as soon as the troops arrived at Camp Lewis. The Army faced a tough challenge—in less than a year, the cantonment

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<sup>19</sup>Center of Military History, *Order of Battle of the United States Land Forces in the World War, American Expeditionary Forces: Divisions*, vol 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army, 1988), 421.

<sup>20</sup>Adolphus E. Graupner, *War book of "E" Company, 364th Infantry* (Oakland, CA: University of California, 1920), 28.

camps had to transform ordinary citizens from a variety of backgrounds into combat ready soldiers. It was equivalent to combining today's basic and advanced individual training with the collective training a soldier receives upon arrival at their unit of assignment. These recruits were very inexperienced in life let alone war. Historian Byron Farwell describes many of the new Army recruits as "ill-educated and unsophisticated," with "no conception of the size and diversity of the world."<sup>21</sup> Many did not speak English and illiteracy was common.

Additionally, the face of warfare had changed drastically. In the United States, the Army veterans had served in conflicts in the Philippines and the Spanish-American War.<sup>22</sup> Pershing himself had recently led a high level mission to capture Pancho Villa in Mexico. Trench warfare, massing fires, integration with aircraft, and the challenges of command and control were essentially foreign concepts to the U.S. Army in 1917.

The training environment in western Washington State provided the 91st with some unique challenges. In December, Private First Class Ernest W. Hall wrote a letter home describing the weather: "It's raining all the time almost for the last 5 weeks of course we didn't have to be out in it all the time but all the same it makes it miserable."<sup>23</sup> In March, Charles Burton, a Soldier in Headquarters Company, 364th Infantry wrote a similar letter stating:

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<sup>21</sup>Farwell, 62.

<sup>22</sup>Mark E. Grotelueschen, *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12.

<sup>23</sup>Letter from Ernest W. Hall, 364th Infantry.org, <http://www.364thinfantry.org/AlbertHallLetter.htm> (accessed 19 May 2013).

It has been snowing and raining for the last week. It will snow an inch or two then rain for an hour or so and melt it all off then repeat the performance. It is the funniest weather I have ever seen. I wish it would get dry in this country sometime. I think this would be a good country to live in if it would dry off and stay that way for a while.<sup>24</sup>

The weather at Camp Lewis may not have been popular with the recruits, but there could not have been a more realistic training environment to prepare them for what they would soon face in France.

The troop levy affected training the most. Units were forced to continually restart their training cycle whenever they received new recruits. This frustrated many leaders. As Adolphus Graupner, a company commander in the 364th Infantry noted:

Training at Camp Lewis was arduous, monotonous, and discouraging. Time and again, when the ranks of the company would be filled and the men proficient in elementary drill, detachments would be taken away and sent to other units. New and raw recruits would fill the vacated ranks, and it would be necessary to go back to rudimentary drill again.<sup>25</sup>

Since each unit was responsible to train assigned personnel in initial drill, the collective training program was in a state of disarray. As a result, the requirement to be competent in individual drill superseded collective training opportunities and this had a negative impact on the “Wild West” division. Their collective training was limited to mass formation marches around the training areas at Camp Lewis. Leaders in the division were taught how to march troops, but there was little focus on developing skills such as assaulting machine gun nests or coordinating fire missions with the artillery—tactics that were needed to be successful on the battlefields in Europe.

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<sup>24</sup>Letter from Charles A. Burton, 364th Infantry.org, <http://www.364thinfantry.org/CharlesBurtonLetter.htm> (accessed 19 May 2013).

<sup>25</sup>Graupner, 15.

## Leadership and Command and Control

In order to generate combat leaders for the AEF, the War Department established a standardized Officer Training Camp (OTC) system in the spring of 1917. This program called for the establishment of sixteen OTCs at fourteen posts across the United States.<sup>26</sup> The War Department also directed the simultaneous start and end dates of the camps as well as a standardized training plan. Most of the junior officers originally assigned to the 91st Division began their training at the first OTC at Presidio in California. This three month course commenced in May 1917 and future officers received instruction in drill, marksmanship, signaling and many other basic military topics. These officers, once graduated, formed the nucleus of the 91st Division and trained their Soldiers on the same subjects.

In January 1918, the Army established an OTC at Camp Lewis. This third iteration of the national OTC program was focused on providing commissions to qualified enlisted personnel already in the division. The course began on 5 January and any man between 20 and 40 years of age could apply through their commanding officer to attend. The 91st division Commander selected the attendees for Camp Lewis. In this course at Camp Lewis instruction included basic drill and marksmanship, but there were additional courses that show the 91st made improvements to its officer training programs. For instance, this third OTC included courses that incorporated the French method of

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<sup>26</sup>Richard S. Faulkner, *The School of Hard Knocks, Combat Leadership in the American Expeditionary Forces* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2012), 30.

attacking in two lines. Additionally, foreign officers conducted training in several areas including trench warfare, French methods of attack, and the use of the automatic rifle.<sup>27</sup>

This OTC was also very selective and there were many candidates cut, or “benzined.” One of those selected for the third OTC was Corporal Charles Winchester Benedict Jr. He received a recommendation from his company commander and was selected to attend the day before the class began. Benedict completed over ninety days of instruction but was “benzined” on 8 April, less than two weeks before the course ended. The attrition rate in his OTC Company was nearly 50 percent during the final month of the course.<sup>28</sup> This relatively low selection rate is somewhat surprising given the push from the War Department to train and develop more officers, but it indicates the division was focused on selecting the best.

There was some improvement in training and selecting quality leaders, but training leaders to effectively command and control their troops during a battle remained a challenge. Instruction on signaling both at the leader and soldier levels were focused on using old methods that were not applicable to the battlefields in France. The Commander of E Company, 364th Infantry remembered that “The hours spent at Camp Lewis on semaphore training proved to be entirely useless and wig wagging was useful only in that it had trained the men in the use of Morse code.”<sup>29</sup> Additionally, the division did not have

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<sup>27</sup>Diary of CPL Charles Winchester Benedict Jr., 364th Infantry.org, <http://www.364thinfantry.org/CharlesBenedict.html> (accessed 14 May 2013).

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Graupner, 41.

the equipment available to train current communication procedures. Aside from brief lectures, liaison operations were not taught or exercised at Camp Lewis.

This focus on outdated procedures such as the communication techniques is an example of the division failing to introduce innovative training that would be more applicable to its units. While the division followed the War Department guidance, it was not effective at emphasizing some of the items that would be most useful when the unit arrived in Europe. Towards the end of the training, it seemed to be taking advantage of the expertise of the foreign instructors more, but the lack of concentration on items such as liaison operations would be a significant disadvantage to the division. As a result, many of these concepts would not be learned until the division arrived in France, and the time allowed to perfect these skills was severely limited.

#### Movement and Maneuver

In August 1917, The War Department issued a manual, *Infantry Training*, outlining training guidance for all divisions in the United States. This plan outlined sixteen weeks of drill and training concentrated at the individual, squad, and company levels. Upon successful completion of the first sixteen weeks, units were supposed to progress to battalion and higher level exercises. Although the manual briefly mentioned open warfare, it stressed that “training for trench warfare is of paramount importance,” and required each cantonment area to construct a system of trenches to use for training.<sup>30</sup> This implication of a more defensive focus ignited a debate on how to properly train the new Army. Pershing wanted training to focus on the basics of the infantry: the rifle and

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<sup>30</sup>U.S. War Department, *Infantry Training* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, August 1917), 5.

the bayonet. He also advocated for training on open warfare tactics as opposed to a defensive, trench warfare mindset.<sup>31</sup>

Pershing was able to influence a change in the doctrine and in January 1918, the general staff issued another manual titled *The Training and Employment of Divisions, 1918*. The first line stated “All training behind the line must be specially directed towards offensive action.”<sup>32</sup> This regulation stressed three types of warfare that soldiers must train for: the initial attack against well-organized and long established positions, attacks against improvised defenses following successful assaults on the original main positions, and finally, “open warfare.”<sup>33</sup> As United States forces became engaged in battles in France, the doctrine continued to shift further in the direction of open warfare, in large part due to a push from Pershing. In October 1918, the War Department issued Training Circular No. 12 titled *Combined Training of a Division*. This pamphlet continued to push for open warfare tactics and included a discussion on extended order formations—flexible formations characterized by smaller units with increased distance between troops.<sup>34</sup> The extended order formations were proving successful against enemy machine guns by

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<sup>31</sup>Pershing, 152.

<sup>32</sup>U.S. War Department, *The Training and Employment of Divisions, 1918* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, January 1918), 3. Note: This manual had been issued previously under a different cover called *Instructions for the Training of Divisions for Offensive Action*, edited June 1917, and it was listed as a reprint from the pamphlet issued by British General Staff, War Office, December 1916.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup>U.S. War Department, Training Circular No. 12, *Combined Training of a Division* (Washington, DC: The War Department, October 1918), 13.



allowing for earlier identification of machine gun nests and providing fewer troops for the enemy to target.

The doctrine for unit training was evolving, but it is not clear that the training the 91st division executed in the United States ever did. Although the October 1918 regulation was published by the War Department after the 91st had already fought in the Meuse-Argonne, the change in mindset had been addressed in other ways. Greene and his staff went to Europe to view the front and meet Pershing in late 1917, but there did not appear to be any major shift in training when he returned. Training schedules within the division closely mirrored the guidance outlined in the initial 1917 *Infantry Training* manual. In the 364th Infantry, there was some frustration. One company commander recorded that “our field training was altogether along the lines of the old Field Service Regulations. None of the newly developed field service or deployments were taught, or allowed to be taught.”<sup>35</sup> Although there were exercises at the battalion level and above, most of the training at Camp Lewis remained focused on individual skills.

One of the most important individual skills was marksmanship, and the men of the 91st focused much of their training time on weapons proficiency. In December 1917, most of the weapons for the division arrived and the live training at the Camp Lewis ranges began in earnest. Incentives to perform well at the ranges included a badge, extra pay, and bragging rights. Soldiers began on short ranges up to 300 yards, with and without bayonet. Those who did well advanced to the 500 and 1000 yard course. The 91st also focused heavily on marksmanship at night. The Headquarters Company, 361st Infantry memoirs include a description of the imagination and innovation often used in

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<sup>35</sup>Graupner, 19.

the ranges at Camp Lewis: “Different companies were assigned sectors of the range, marched stealthily into the trenches, and as a huge searchlight in imitation of the star shells on the battlefield was flashed for a moment along the targets, a heavy burst of fire came from the alert men in those sectors.”<sup>36</sup> Another range allowed for a small size live fire range where a squad moved through unknown terrain and engaged pop-up targets at various ranges. The leaders of the 91st clearly maximized training opportunities on individual weapons and the proficiency gained through this training at Camp Lewis would benefit them greatly in the trenches of France.

As directed by the War Department, the 91st Division constructed a trench system at Camp Lewis, but the applicability and usefulness of the trenches was not clear to many of the Soldiers. There was a friendly competition between units to complete construction on their assigned trenches first, and the Washington weather led to many repair or reconstruction requirements. However, the focus seemed to be on how fast a trench was constructed rather than how a unit operated from a trench, or even more important, how to attack a trench. Some Soldiers in E Company, 364th Infantry remembered that the trench work was “hard, uninteresting, and as it afterward proved, unnecessary.”<sup>37</sup> The trenches, once built, were rarely used.

In addition to the training above, the officers in each unit taught academic classes on a variety of subjects directed by the War Department. There were also several road marches and drills that focused on moving large formations of men over varying

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<sup>36</sup>*History of Headquarters Company, 361st Infantry, 91st Division, 5.*

<sup>37</sup>Graupner, 19.

terrain.<sup>38</sup> All of these would prove useful to an extent in France, but key elements of movement and maneuver that were needed for success in battle were mostly absent from the training at Camp Lewis. Even after the division leadership returned from touring the battlefields in France, there were no significant adjustments in the training of movement and maneuver. The combat formations exercised were outdated and not used in France. Turnover of personnel caused units to continually focus, and re-focus, on basic individual skills. However, there is little evidence that the leadership tried to train at any higher level, even though many knew the reality of Europe was much more complex. As a result, the division would have even more to learn in France before it could be successful in combat.

#### Fires

Perhaps the most neglected subject during the training at Camp Lewis was the integration of fires. The division's 166th Artillery Brigade deployed to France with the 91st division, but it did not see any action. Instead, the 91st Division was augmented with other AEF and French artillery units during its operations in Europe. In France, the artillery units required more extensive training than the infantry and the 166th remained in training throughout the fall of 1918. Therefore, this paper will focus more on how well the division trained and conducted fires integration within the infantry regiments. At Camp Lewis, this training was extremely limited. Artillery training is rarely mentioned in any OTC training plans or at the infantry unit level. The 166th Artillery received limited training internally, some from foreign officers, but did not have the required equipment to

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<sup>38</sup>Diary of Charles Benedict Jr.

adequately train. In some cases, they trained with wooden cannons to simulate the equipment they would receive later. There was almost no integration with infantry.

Training in the machine gun units was slightly better. Initially, the training of the three machine gun battalions was combined under the division machine gun officer in order to provide uniform training for all. By November 1917, machine gun units received instruction on tactics and formations using dummy machine guns and tripods. Within a month, foreign officers arrived to assist with the training and the officers received more in-depth training. The division built facilities to support the training including a range to practice holding, aiming and grouping, as well as a long distance range to practice more advanced marksmanship skills.<sup>39</sup> However, the combined training with the infantry regiments the machine gunners would support was limited. Additionally, there was a shortage of machine guns to train on. Until April of 1918, the machine gun units trained with only a few outdated colt machine guns. They received some Vickers guns in May, and took part in an exhibition practice with the more modern Browning machine gun just before leaving for France.<sup>40</sup>

#### Departing For Europe

Like other division commanders, Greene went to France to tour the battlefield in November of 1917 for nearly four months. These visits exposed the division commanders to current conditions and also gave General Pershing an opportunity to interview his future combat commanders. Pershing insisted on having the “right type” of commander

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<sup>39</sup>John U. Calkins, *History of the 347th Machine Gun Battalion* (Oakland, CA: Press of Horwinski Company, [1923]), 12.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*

in charge of his divisions, and he had no reservations about firing them if they were not capable. In a letter to the secretary of war, he concluded that “only officers in full mental and physical vigor should be sent here.” He observed “very few British or French division commanders over forty-five or brigadiers over forty. We have too much at stake to risk inefficiency through mental or physical defects.”<sup>41</sup> Despite his urging, Pershing did not feel that the War Department adequately assigned division commanders.

General Greene returned to Camp Lewis in March of 1918 and reportedly passed his physical qualifying him for duty in France.<sup>42</sup> He continued to lead the division through its final collective training and prepared to depart with lead elements on 19 June 1918 for the cross-country train journey to Camp Merritt, New Jersey. From there, the 91st embarked for France. On the day of the departure, Greene was just shy of 62 years old, well over Pershing’s recommended maximum division commander age of 45. General Greene was relieved enroute and assigned to the Philippines as a Brigadier. There is nothing to indicate that Greene had done anything wrong, but his age and associated level of fitness was not in keeping with Pershing’s vision for his combat division commanders. Brigadier General Frederick Foltz, commander of the 182nd Brigade, temporarily assumed command of the division and took Greene’s place with the advance detachment departing for France.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>Pershing, 125.

<sup>42</sup>Henderson, 79.

<sup>43</sup>Harold H. Burton, *600 Days’ Service, A History of the 361st Regiment of the United States Army* (Portland, OR: James, Kern and Abbott Co., [1921]), 24.

It was under these circumstances that the 91st Infantry Division departed for war in Europe. Although many Soldiers arrived nearly ten months prior to departure, there was excessive turnover throughout the training period. The men of the 91st division trained individual skills such as marksmanship relatively well, but the ability to execute more advanced combined arms tactics was severely limited. There was some debate within the War Department about how the Army should focus its training in the United States. One member of the general staff, Colonel William H. Johnston, believed that officers and recruits needed instruction discipline and military drill and tactics at such a basic level that more advanced instruction by foreign officers was unnecessary. He argued that men would be ready to learn advanced tactics when they arrived in France.<sup>44</sup> Ironically, this same Johnston was subsequently promoted to Major General and selected to command the 91st Division in combat. The division would get more training opportunities in France, but the pressure was on to get the AEF into the fight quickly. Johnston's future division was relatively sound on the basics, but it needed a lot more training to be successful on the battlefield.

On 25 July 1918, the 362nd Infantry Regiment would have one experience that immediately forced many of its Soldiers to face the reality of what combat would really be like. While in transit from the port at La Havre, France to the training areas in the east, one of the 362nd troop trains was hit in the rear by another heavily loaded fast moving train. The famous label "Hommes 40-Chevaux 8" on the trains in France meant that they could hold 40 men or eight horses. The AEF generally used all 40 "spaces," and the troops were smashed into the cars allowing almost no room to maneuver. The accident

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<sup>44</sup>Faulkner, 49.

occurred in the middle of the night at the train station in the village of Bonnières, France and resulted in 32 dead and 63 wounded. The amount of men in the train with nothing to secure them likely increased the number of casualties. Descriptions of the horrific scene also portrayed many occurrences of heroism and for the first time the men of the 362nd experienced death as well as true bravery. Men who were dying wrote last letters home and begged rescuers to help their fellow Soldiers first.<sup>45</sup> It was a welcome to France that nobody wanted or expected, but it also trained the Soldiers and their leaders on how to deal with many of the realities they were yet to face.

### Training In France

In July 1918 when elements of the 91st began arriving at their assigned training areas in France, there were already approximately 17 AEF divisions ahead of them in the training process.<sup>46</sup> By this time, the AEF staff had a pretty good idea of the level of training that would be required of each division to get them to an acceptable level of combat readiness. Pershing and his staff had organized three training periods for each division upon arrival in Europe, each lasting approximately one month. The first period involved additional instruction and practice with the various weapons. This stage also included tactical exercises up to division level. The second stage involved a one month tour in the trenches with French units in quiet sectors of the front. The third and final period of AEF driven, collective training, in France involved combined arms training

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<sup>45</sup>The 362nd Infantry Association, *A History of the 362nd Infantry* (Ogden, UT: A. L. Scoville Press, 1920), 13.

<sup>46</sup>Department of the Army Historical Division, *United States Army in the World War 1917-1918; Reports of Commander in Chief A.E.F. Staff Sections and Services* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1948), 25.

with infantry, aviation, and artillery in the training areas.<sup>47</sup> This was the original plan, but few divisions would actually be able to accomplish this all and each would have a different experience. The 91st division would not complete even the first stage before it was called to the front lines.

During this month of training, Soldiers recorded that for the first time, they received training on liaison operations and extended order formations. The division also received the Vickers machine guns and the Chauchat automatic rifle and it was now able to familiarize its gunners with the weapon systems they would use on the battlefield.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, units executed maneuvers on nearly a daily basis at every level from platoon to division. Captain Clarence Minnick recorded a very busy schedule in his diary—there were field problems and training nearly every day.<sup>49</sup>

The overall impact of the training however is questionable. With the exception of the training listed above, the time could have been spent more wisely. In his book, Faulkner argues that the training was largely a repeat of the “basic recruit-type training” that the division had conducted in the United States.<sup>50</sup> Even after over 17 divisions had completed this phase of training, this observation is accurate for the 91st. Its daily maneuvers introduced little improvement to combined arms. The division continued to work without integrating the artillery, they constantly marched, and their largest work

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<sup>47</sup>Pershing, 265.

<sup>48</sup>Burton, 29.

<sup>49</sup>Diary of Clarence Minnick (original held at the World War I Museum, Kansas City, MO).

<sup>50</sup>Faulkner, 153.



seemed to be simulating a large scale relief in place of another division.<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, these were not the skills that the division's leaders and Soldiers would require. The division did not work with artillery, it had little concept of air other than signaling, and it had very little exposure to the concept of massing fires—all very important for successful combat in World War I.

The division never finished its maneuvers and instead of moving to a quiet sector of the front for further training, it was sent to the front to act as the reserve for the battle at St. Mihiel. Throughout its training at Camp Lewis and France, the division was plagued with personnel turnover issues some imposed on it from higher, others caused by internal moves. These personnel issues significantly impacted its ability to focus quality training on its recruits. The leaders in the 91st were trained slightly better, but overall, the lessons being learned by the front line units engaged in combat, were slow to filter to the 91st. Moving to the front lines, the division had never executed liaison operations and had little work with artillery. It had quality leadership and men who were eager to get into the fight, but was that going to be enough to succeed in battle? The division would soon see as it was pushed into the front lines to kick off the largest offensive yet by U.S. forces—the Meuse-Argonne.

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<sup>51</sup>Burton, 30.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE MEUSE-ARGONNE

At a time when the divisions on its flanks were faltering and even falling back, the Ninety-first pushed ahead and steadfastly clung to every yard gained.

— George Cameron, Commander V Corps,  
Relief orders to the 91st Division

After acting as the corps reserve in the St. Mihiel battle, the 91st Division quickly moved to the Meuse-Argonne area where it prepared for the upcoming offensive on the west bank of the Meuse River. Only three of the nine divisions conducting the initial attack had any significant combat experience.<sup>52</sup> The 91st was not one of these. In fact, the 91st only had time to complete the first month of the planned three month AEF training program. Regardless of this fact, the men of the 91st distinguished themselves by pushing forward and being the first unit to reach the Kriemhilde Stellung—the 1st Army objective. Unfortunately, they were forced to withdraw because they were surrounded by enemy on three sides, but it was clear that the division's leaders were able to successfully accomplish the missions given to them. The 91st would be forced to learn through experience in many areas, and its training would assist it in some. By the end of its first test in the Meuse-Argonne, the division still experienced difficulties maintaining command and control of its personnel and executing combined missions with artillery; but the ability of the division's leaders to maintain a necessary high level of morale, while developing tactics centered around the use of the machine gun, would greatly assist the division throughout the battle.

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<sup>52</sup>Lengel, 62.

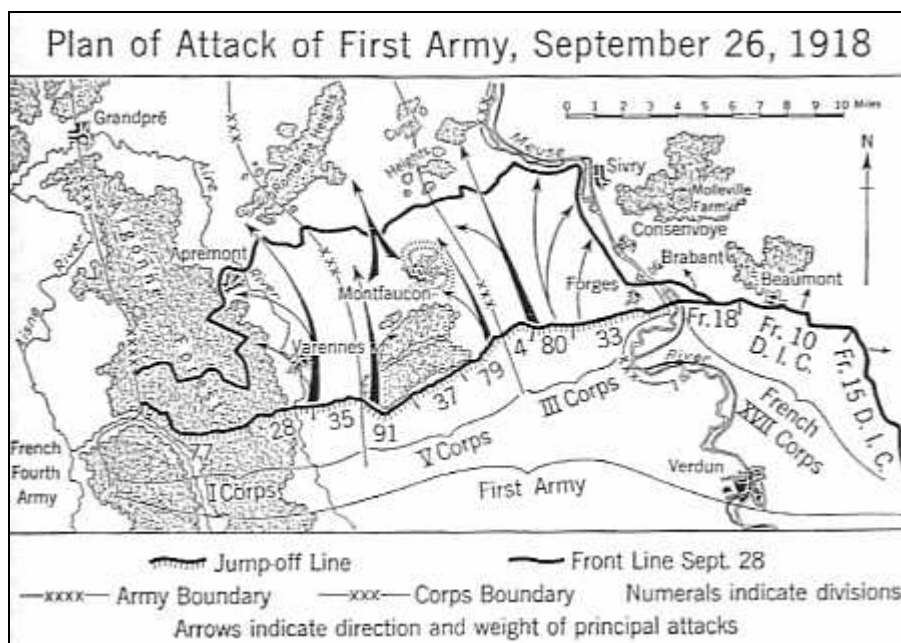


Figure 2. Plan of Attack of the First Army, September 26, 1918

Source: World War 1.com, <http://www.worldwar1.com/maps/usa381.jpg> (accessed 19 May 2013).

In order to properly analyze the division’s operations, a brief narrative of the events in the Meuse-Argonne offensive is required. The 91st division, under the U.S. Army’s V Corps, was one of nine AEF divisions participating in the initial Meuse-Argonne attack. The 37th Division, also under V Corps was to its right and I Corps’ 35th Division was on its left as shown in figure 2. The 91st sector was on a seam between the German Crown Prince’s 1st Guards Division and the 117th East Reserve Division, under overall command of General Von Gallwitz. Shortly after the offensive began, the German Army added the 5th Guard Division in between the 1st and the 117th.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>53</sup>Whitner, 6.

The Wild West Division In The Meuse-Argonne

26 September - Day One—Over the top

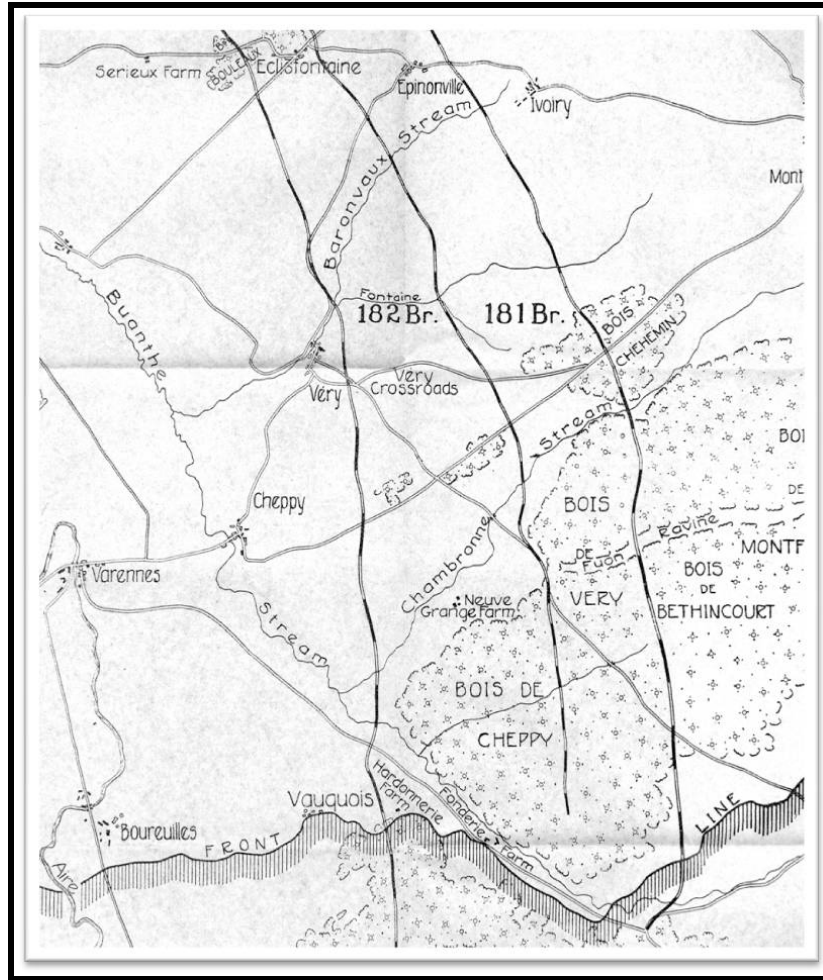


Figure 3. Division Area of Operations in the Meuse-Argonne (Southern Sector)

*Source: The Story of the 91st Division* (San Francisco, CA: The 91st Division Publication Committee, 1919), portion of map titled “Zone of Action 91st Division Argonne-Meuse Offensive September 26th–October 11th 1918.”

The 91st Division’s mission for 26 September was to “outflank the central group of woods from the west [of Montfaucon hill] and in conjunction with the 37th Division,

mop up these woods, pushing on to Corps and Army objectives”<sup>54</sup> The artillery barrage supporting this movement began 6 hours prior to the 0530 H-Hour.<sup>55</sup> The morning of 26 September was especially foggy in the low ground just west of the commanding terrain of Montfaucon hill and east of the Argonne forest. The smoke from the massive artillery barrage contributed to the difficulties seeing and it was reported that troops could see no more than 50 feet throughout the morning.<sup>56</sup> On this first day, the Wild West Division attacked with three regiments abreast: the 363rd, 361st, and 362nd in order from left to right. The 364th Regiment followed in support of the 363rd on the far left of the division sector.<sup>57</sup> The division met its first resistance and maneuvered through difficult terrain in the forests of Bois de Cheppy and Bois de Very reaching the villages of Eclisfontaine and Epinonville.

The German resistance on the first day of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive was relatively light. Although the Wild West men captured several machine gun nests, trenches, wire obstacles and prisoners, the German Army intended to lightly hold their first line of defense and focus their remaining efforts on their second line. The initial artillery barrage (executed by both the Division and Corps artillery units) prior to H-Hour contributed to the light resistance as it destroyed much of the defensive structures and provided additional incentive for the Germans to retreat to their intermediate line of

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<sup>54</sup>Whitner, 8.

<sup>55</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 23.

<sup>56</sup>Burton, 62.

<sup>57</sup>*Operations Journal 364th Infantry* (Unknown Publisher, Copy held at the World War I Museum Library, Kansas City, MO), 6.



Enemy activity over the next few days increased dramatically, and the 91st faced a stiff challenge. Throughout the first night, German forces moved back into the towns of Eclisfontaine and Epinonville and attacked the 91st with machine guns, artillery, and numerous air strikes. The division also received heavy fire from their flanks. In order to assist the assault, the 361st was forced to clear the town of Ivoiry, located outside of their sector.

Vernon Nichols, a soldier in the 363rd Infantry, described the German emplacements near the town of Eclisfontaine as machine gun nests overlooking open areas at ranges from 800 to 1500 yards. He noted, “We couldn’t tell where they were and as we advanced farther and farther in the face of their fire we wondered why we did not come to their emplacements and silence their guns. We never imagined until afterwards that they were firing from such a distance.”<sup>59</sup>

Throughout the two days of heavy fighting, the division also experienced some major setbacks to their operations and morale. First, the artillery barrage that was effectively hitting the town of Eclisfontaine fell short and began to fall onto Wild West soldiers, causing several casualties. Second, there was a significant lack of protection on the division’s flanks. In one case, Soldiers witnessed elements of the 37th division (on the division’s right flank) come under fire and retreat without ever attempting to fight. Third, after the division had secured Epinonville—on the third attempt—an impending corps artillery barrage targeting the road connecting the two towns caused the division to retreat and give up the day’s gains.

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<sup>59</sup>Vernon R. Nichols, “Our Battle of the Argonne,” *Infantry Journal* no. 15 (September 1919): 199.

Following the war, Johnston wrote a letter to Pershing disagreeing with the AEF commander's description of events of 27 September. In a draft of his memoirs published by *The New York Times*, Pershing stated that the 91st could not retain Epinonville due to enemy fire and it was unable to hold Eclisfontaine due to an artillery barrage in the town "the next day." Johnston emphatically disagreed. According to Johnston, the division leadership did not have the time to stop the barrage, or protest the withdrawal order with corps. In fact, Johnston argues that he was given thirty minutes to evacuate these towns, and many of his soldiers were killed or wounded before they could be evacuated.<sup>60</sup> This day shows the communications difficulties that existed in the Meuse-Argonne, particularly between the infantry and artillery (an issue that will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter). Although the division had difficulties communicating with its organic artillery, coordination with corps and higher forces were extremely limited. As a result of their withdrawal, the "Wild West" division ended day two in nearly the same position that it had started.

So, it was not until the third day, 28 September that the division would capture and hold these villages. The line of Eclisfontaine and Epinonville constituted the V Corps objective. Although the original plan had called for the 91st division to reach these areas early the first day of the offensive, it took three days to secure. Additionally, the 91st was the first to reach this objective within V Corps as the 79th division, on the right of the 37th, had just secured the difficult key terrain of Montfaucon hill at tremendous cost.

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<sup>60</sup>William H. Johnston in collaboration with John J. Pershing, "Who Won the War" (Typescript copy held in the Duane N. Diedrich Collection, Clements Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI), 2.



The leaders of the 91st division accomplished some difficult tasks, but at the end of three days of fighting, the division was located in what was essentially a “salient” in their own American lines.<sup>61</sup> These challenges would require the leaders of the division to effectively motivate their men to continue their fight in some of the worst conditions. There was little to no protection on its flanks and were receiving fire from all directions. Thus, it was a surprise when V Corps ordered it to continue to attack forward on Gesnes, independent of movements from the other divisions.<sup>62</sup> The order for the 91st to continue the offensive without regard to losses or movements of other divisions was a desperate attempt to maintain some momentum in the battle. MG Johnston complied and continued to move his units forward.

#### 29 September–Gesnes

The 91st Division received the order to attack the town of Gesnes at 7:00 A.M. on the morning of 29 September. The order specifically stated that “divisions will advance independently of each other pushing the attack with utmost vigor and regardless of cost.”<sup>63</sup> It was here in Gesnes that the division would have its deadliest fight. It was surrounded on three sides and the Kriemhilde Stellung, an intermediate line of defense for the Germans, was positioned just north of the town. After capturing the town and taking significant losses, the 91st division was “four kilometers ahead of the 74th Brigade [37th Division] on their right and about six kilometers ahead of the 70th Brigade [35th

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<sup>61</sup>Lee Sumner, “The 362 Infantry in the First Phase of the Meuse-Argonne September 26-29 (INCL)” (Student Paper, The Infantry School, Fort Benning, GA), 9.

<sup>62</sup>Johnston, 2.

<sup>63</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 32.

Division] on their left.”<sup>64</sup> V Corps then ordered the division to withdraw south of Gesnes that evening, reversing all gains that it had made throughout the day.

The Wild West division was significantly depleted following the attack on Gesnes. The 362nd Regiment, hit especially hard, recorded that: “Captains commanded battalions, lieutenants companies, and sergeants platoons, so great had been the slaughter. One company had eighteen men left of its 179. Few companies ran as high as seventy-five.”<sup>65</sup> A Soldier in the 361st Regiment also recorded on 1 October that “very few present for roll call, as our Company was all scattered out.”<sup>66</sup> This was the state of the 91st division following their first four days of the attack. Some other divisions were in even worse shape. Combat losses, lack of food or clothing and straggling were all taking a toll on the front line divisions and Pershing recognized that he needed to assume the defense and replace weary front line units with fresh ones.<sup>67</sup>

V Corps issued relief orders to all three of its front line divisions. The neighboring 35th division was also replaced. The 91st was the last to be relieved of the four, indicating that it was in better shape than some other units. As they were withdrawing back to the rear on the 5 October, the 181st Brigade was given orders to return to the front lines to fight under the 1st Division.<sup>68</sup> The 181st Brigade returned to the battlefield,

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<sup>64</sup>Ibid, 35.

<sup>65</sup>The 362nd Infantry Association, 38.

<sup>66</sup>Giuseppe L. Romeo, *Diary of Private Giuseppe L. Romeo, Co. E., 361st Inf.* (Kessinger Publishing, 1919), 25.

<sup>67</sup>Farwell, 228.

<sup>68</sup>Johnston, 3.

just two days after they were relieved and continued to fight on the front lines for another six days.

The 91st had done its best to accomplish its objectives throughout the battle of the Meuse-Argonne. It reached the Kriemhilde Stellung first, the 1st Army objective, but there was no way it could continue forward, or hold its position. It was surrounded on three sides and did not have the support from other units to continue. The troops were tired, and they had captured the town of Gesnes at great loss. The 362nd had taken the biggest hit in terms of casualties. It was reported that at 9 A.M. on 30 September that only five hundred personnel were present in that Regiment.<sup>69</sup> Its “lead from the front” commander, Colonel John Parker, had been injured and he would not return. For its first battle, the 91st had proven that it could fight, but the results are only part of the success.

It is clear that the successes of the 91st may have been overshadowed by the failures of other units in V Corps. However, one could argue that comparing the 91st to the divisions on its left and right is not a fair comparison because of the differences in terrain, enemy, and luck. The 91st, as an entire division had really only been tested in battle for five days. There were many gaps in its training, especially training with combined arms. The question remains is what impact did the division’s ability to exercise C2, movement and maneuver, and combined arms operations have on its success on the battlefield.

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<sup>69</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 37.

## Command and Control

The very basic aspect of command and control—simply knowing where their assigned forces were throughout the battle—was one of the most difficult things for unit commanders in the Meuse-Argonne. The 91st arrived on the battlefield with plenty of practice marching troops, keeping accountability, and controlling movements. It had also emphasized liaison operations upon arrival in France. However, these skills had never been practiced under fire where it was difficult to hear or see anything or under a friendly artillery barrage where the timing of movements was critical to success. The first day in the Meuse-Argonne was abysmal for command and control and it was clear that the training the 91st conducted prior to arriving in France neglected some of the real-world aspects that would be experienced in combat. Leaders at all levels improved on controlling their troops after the first day, but the liaison operations of the division continued to suffer as the battle progressed. This problem would manifest itself later when a lack of situational awareness and communications led to problems coordinating artillery.

The division used several methods to communicate including guide wires, pigeons, runners, and signaling, however few of these methods were actually trained prior to arriving in France. The weather, particularly the immense fog on the first morning of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, amplified the problems and ruled out many forms of visual signaling. In the 361st Infantry, the signal section didn't even attempt to establish telephone lines until 27 September as the initial drive during the first day was "too fast."<sup>70</sup> Additionally, compasses were in short supply and many leaders did not have

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<sup>70</sup>*History of Headquarters Company, 361st Infantry, 91st Division*, 41.

them. Although the men were given an azimuth of 009 degrees, they were forced to rely on terrain features since few roads or trails ran parallel to the axis of advance. All of this, combined with the poor visibility, the amount of obstacles, and the fact that these young Soldiers were under fire for the first time created disastrous conditions for exercising combat command and control in the 91st division—especially in the first few days.

There were frequent reports of individual units crossing into other sectors. Units from the 37th Division on the right were located frequently in the 361st sector and re-directed. One company from the 361st Infantry emerged from the Bois de Cheppy at the Neuve Grange Farm located in the center of the 363rd Regiments area of operations.<sup>71</sup> There were many factors contributing to the chaos including divisions being under fire for the first time, lack of proper equipment such as maps and compasses, and the weather. The confusion among the Soldiers was so bad that unit leaders spent most of the evening after the initial assault and the morning of the second day just locating their units, consolidating them at one location and preparing them to move out again. In the case of G Company, 363rd Infantry, there were small groups of Soldiers arriving throughout the morning until complete units were formed.<sup>72</sup> These reconsolidation efforts stalled any attack plans until 0900 the second morning.

If locating their own troops was difficult, successful liaison operations—locating and communicating locations of flanking units - was virtually impossible. It took days for the 91st to conduct successful liaison between its own brigades and regiments, but it was never able to successfully accomplish this with the divisions to its left and right. This

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<sup>71</sup>Burton, 65.

<sup>72</sup>Nichols, 195.

problem was exasperated by the fact that both the 35th and 37th Divisions were experiencing major internal difficulties of their own, and each unit was moving at a different pace. S.S. 135 describes the role of a liaison officer as keeping “his own commander constantly informed of the progress and situation of the unit with whom he is in liaison.”<sup>73</sup> Lieutenant Charles Paul of the 364th Infantry Regiment was unable to even locate his parent unit at most times and he wasn’t provided any communication equipment that would assist him in his task.

In Lieutenant Paul’s situation, his company L was detached from their assigned regiment to act as a combat liaison between the 91st and 35th divisions. This meant that L Company would actually be working with the 363rd Regiment (in the lead on the left during the initial offensive) and the 138th Regiment of the 35th Division, both units that it was unfamiliar with. Lieutenant Paul was sent to find the 35th division only after the artillery barrage preparing the attack had already commenced. Once he found elements of the 138th Infantry, the unit on the right of the 35th Division, he exchanged men with them for “liaison purposes.” However, as soon as the units went over the top, the liaison company lost all contact with each other and became mixed up in the mass of troops moving to the north. Lt. Paul describes his situational awareness as “... I knew in general that the line between the two divisions was to the right of Vauquois hill through Cheppy and to the left of Very and that this direction was about magnetic north—so we marched on north and trusted to luck.”<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup>*The Training and Employment of Divisions, 1918, 71.*

<sup>74</sup>Diary of Lieutenant Charles H. Paul, 364th Infantry, 91st Division (typescript copy held at the University of Washington Library, Seattle, WA).

Due to these conditions, there were never enough men available to conduct successful combat liaison. Lieutenant Paul and his platoon were often not able to locate the elements they were tasked to liaison with, let alone their parent company. On the third day of the offensive, he planned to find his organic unit, the 364th Infantry and rejoin them for the duration of the battle. The concept of combat liaison, at least for LT Paul, had completely failed. What Lieutenant Paul did not realize, was that his company had been relieved of liaison duty after the first day of fighting. He and his platoon had been fighting for almost two full days on their own, without any communication with their higher headquarters.<sup>75</sup>

These failures in accountability and liaison operations had a significant impact on the operations of the 91st division. Attacks were launched late because the units had to spend time finding their troops and reconsolidate. This time potentially gave the enemy a chance to reconsolidate and reinforce their defensive positions. Additionally, there was not always a clear understanding of exactly where all troops were. This hindered artillery operations the most and contribute to friendly fire incidents that will be further detailed later in this chapter.

Another component of command and control was how well the division held its leaders accountable when mistakes were made. In this phase of the war, the timing of any moves was very critical. If there were poor leaders and they needed to be removed, the eve of the battle may not be the best time to do it. The 35th Division commander, on the left flank of the 91st, relieved both his brigade commanders and all four of his regimental commanders five days prior to the Meuse-Argonne Offensive because he wasn't able to

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<sup>75</sup>*Operations Journal 364th Infantry*, 11.

trust them.<sup>76</sup> That radical move in key leadership positions set the division up for an extremely difficult experience.

The 91st Division Commander also relieved key commanders, but the instances were more isolated. Johnston was set on following orders and maintaining a “mission first” mindset. When given orders to advance, he followed—and he expected others to follow. This attitude was reflected in the ground covered by the Wild West Division. When Brigadier General Foltz, commander of the 182nd Brigade ordered a retreat in the first day of battle, he was relieved of duty immediately.<sup>77</sup> Johnston made it clear that he would not allow a retreat mentality in his division. Some argued that the timing of these moves affected the unit negatively, however, Johnston used this power sparingly compared to other WWI commanders, and it is likely he only did it because the status quo could have been worse for the unit. Johnston’s move proved effective. He would give much more challenging orders to his commanders requiring them to attack when they believed the risk would be too great. In both Eclisfontaine and Gesnes, his commanders continued to attack—there were no additional retreat orders given without approval.

#### Movement and Maneuver

During the early battles of 1918, AEF forces failed to live up to Pershing’s expectations in executing the combat formations required for successful open warfare. Combat troops were not spread out enough, there were few attempts to outmaneuver or flank an enemy position, scouts were not being employed properly, and junior officers

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<sup>76</sup>Lengel, 108.

<sup>77</sup>Johnston, 15.



were not taking the situations seriously. In attempt to improve on these deficiencies, the General Headquarters, AEF, issued a pamphlet titled *Combat Instructions* to all commanders on 5 September 1918—just twenty days prior to the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne offensive. This pamphlet detailed the difference in formations required in trench warfare and the formations expected in open warfare. Instead of the trench warfare methods characterized by standard, by the book, combat formations that higher headquarters micromanaged—*Combat Instructions* directed that formations be aligned with the open warfare tactics as follows:

Open warfare is marked by scouts who precede the first wave, irregularity of formations, comparatively little regulation of space and time by the higher command, the greatest possible use of the infantry's own firepower to enable it to get forward, variable distances and intervals between units and individuals, use of every form of cover and accident of the ground during the advance.

It also stressed initiative on the part of junior leaders and soldiers, encouraging innovation when attacking.<sup>78</sup> These smaller, irregular formations had been taught to the division once it arrived in France, and it was able to put it to good use when attacking the enemy—particularly against machine gun nests.

In his 1919 articles for *Infantry Journal*, Vernon Nichols detailed the formations used by the 364th infantry and the resulting success against the enemy in the Meuse-Argonne. Nichols describes the composition of the “combat group” as sections of riflemen, hand bombers, rifle grenadiers, and automatic riflemen all in line behind their section leader. These combat groups were spread out at least five paces behind the person in front of them, and all were lined up behind their section leader, so every front had men

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<sup>78</sup>General Headquarters, AEF, *Combat Instructions*, September 5, 1918, G-5 Document 1348, 1.

with different weapons systems spread thin across the length of the line. When the Americans encountered enemy fire, the soldiers in the combat groups would spread out from 25 to 40 yards between individuals. This extra space was even more important when under attack by enemy artillery fire, reducing the number of casualties from each round. When attacking a machine gun nest, the formation, using cover, would bound in short rushes towards the machine gun nest(s) and use flanking maneuvers to kill and capture the enemy and put the machine gun out of service.<sup>79</sup>

The “combat group” formations were similar to the “extended order” formations that the 91st trained on when they arrived in France. They also represented the flexibility and increased spacing directed by *Combat Instructions*. By the time of the Meuse-Argonne, many AEF divisions using these types of formations to prevent losses from both enemy machine guns and artillery. The cost of lives could still be high however, especially when the enemy had especially advantageous terrain. This led many to try and create even better ways to attack the machine guns to achieve a minimal loss of life and allow the main forces to maneuver more rapidly. In the 362nd Infantry, under command of Colonel Parker, there was another formation developing throughout the first few days of the battle.

Members of the regiment referred to this modified formation as a “gang.” The gangs were small units, normally eight to fourteen men, centered on the machine gun. Rather than keeping the machine gunners separate from the infantry, the 91st learned the lessons of others and made the machine gun a focal point.<sup>80</sup> These formations included

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<sup>79</sup>Nichols, 188.

<sup>80</sup>Sumner, 19.

two scouts, five automatic rifleman, two rifle grenadiers, two hand bombers, and two to six riflemen. The formations also allowed for increased space between Soldiers up to 25 meters. The scouts would lead a platoon of “gangs” by 100 to 500 meters and it was their job to identify enemy machine gun emplacements, mostly by drawing fire. When an enemy machine gun fired, the single Soldiers of the gangs would then move up online and other gangs would flank the machine gun nests. The heavier weaponry remained further behind and the machine gun nests were not rushed.<sup>81</sup> Instead, the 91st trained and employed a calculated method of employing combined fire power of their organic weapons to destroy the enemy emplacements. These formations were noted by the Inspector General of the AEF, and were used in the 3rd division with some success also.<sup>82</sup>

The final order to attack Gesnes was the subject of some criticism. Edward Lengel describes an insistent Johnston who “paid no heed to enemy bullets and shells.” Although questioned by his leaders and Soldiers, Johnston maintained that the order must be followed.<sup>83</sup> In his letters to Pershing, Johnston’s claims support this description. He describes his unit’s reaction upon receipt of the orders from higher as follows:

‘Divisions will advance independently of each other, pushing the attack with utmost vigor and regardless of cost.’ The 91st obeyed such unusual orders . . . General McDonald (181st Brigade Commander) called them the worst he had

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<sup>81</sup>Notes made by the Inspector General, A.E.F., during the Active Operations from 12th September 1918 to 11th November 1918 (RG 120, Entry S88, Box 116), 8.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid.

<sup>83</sup>Lengel, 153.

seen in many years' service. . . . I assumed a desperate situation elsewhere justified such ignoring of liaison and mutual support.<sup>84</sup>

Johnston also records that he requested an additional Brigade to support the attack on Gesnes and he repeatedly requested that the divisions on his flanks be ordered to continue movement forward, but instead V Corps changed their minds and ordered a withdrawal.

In hindsight, Johnston probably wished that he had not obeyed the orders and instead waited for additional support before ordering the assault. From his own accounts, it does not appear that he made any attempts to modify the order with his higher headquarters, even though his subordinate leaders considered it far too aggressive.<sup>85</sup>

Additionally, there is little to indicate that V Corps would have taken much action had he stalled. In fact, when the 1st Division later came into the V Corps sector of the Meuse-Argonne, Grotelueschen writes that it had learned the importance of “commitment to maximize fire support even if it meant holding up the attack.” Additionally, when the 1st Division was ahead of the units on its flanks, the Corps allowed it to hold in place and prepare for the next attack.<sup>86</sup>

Johnston did take internal measures in an attempt to solidify his division's position on the front. He directed his engineer battalion to take up positions on the front line, but it was not enough.<sup>87</sup> Had the flanking divisions moved forward then perhaps the outcome of Gesnes would have been different, but the experience of the previous day's

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<sup>84</sup>Johnston, 2.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid.

<sup>86</sup>Grotelueschen, 136.

<sup>87</sup>*History of the 316th Engineers* (Unknown Publisher, copy held at the World War I Library, Kansas City, MO), 5.

fighting should have shown Johnston that this was unlikely? Instead, Johnston followed his orders exactly as they were given, resulting in a large number of casualties and no gain. This type of leadership had worked for him up until now. However, in this case, Johnston had not maneuvered his force to gain a relative position over the enemy. Instead, he left his unit in a dangerous salient, vulnerable on three sides from effective enemy fire. In the case of Gesnes, Johnston, like many other commanders in the war, could not see that conducting the battle effectively was more important than just gaining ground.

### Fires

As discussed in chapter 2, the 91st had not reached the level of combined arms training that would be required on the battlefields in Europe. At the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne, the 91st Division's organic artillery unit was still completing its training in France, so the AEF attached the 58th Field Artillery Brigade (organic to the 33rd Infantry Division) to the Wild West division along with a battalion of the 65th Coast Artillery and a battalion of French artillery.<sup>88</sup> This brigade under command of BG Henry D. Todd Jr. had not only completed their training, but had already experienced combat supporting the 1st Division at St. Mihiel.<sup>89</sup> However, the 91st and the 58th had not worked together previously which presented a significant obstacle that the leadership would have to overcome. In general, when planned out ahead of time, the artillery

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<sup>88</sup>Captain Don P. Branson, "A Critical Analysis of the Operation of the Fifth Corps in the First Phase of the Meuse-Argonne" (Student Paper, CGSC, Fort Leavenworth, KS, 12 May 1933), 3.

<sup>89</sup>Frederic Louis Huidekoper, *The History of the 33rd Division, AEF* (Springfield, IL: Illinois State Historical Library, 1921), 238.

coordination was good, but the response time was very limited, and the artillery did not always keep up with the infantry. Air coordination was practically non-existent, but by the end of the Meuse-Argonne, the division began to see when all firepower was successfully coordinated and massed, it could effectively execute combat operations.

Planning for the initial artillery barrage was good, however it did not take long after the unit went over the top that the barrage became irrelevant. The artillery barrage was executed as planned, but the infantry troops were not able to keep up. Even though the scheduled barrage allowed for a very slow march forward—nearly three quarters of a mile per hour, within the first five hours, the front line troops of the 361st Infantry Regiment were already three hours behind.<sup>90</sup> The barrage planning did not accurately account for how long it would actually take for troops to move through the wooded areas under enemy fire. Additionally, the 91st was marching under an artillery barrage for the first time. As a result, the attack culminated the first day without additional artillery support. The towns of Eclisfontaine and Epinonville were not held on the first day as originally directed in the Corps plan.

Ineffective liaison and communications would continue to plague the artillery/infantry working relationship. On the second day, the artillery began to shell short of the town of Eclisfontaine and hit friendly forces. Other reports indicated that the lack of artillery support was the reason that it took three times to attack and hold the village of Eclisfontaine.<sup>91</sup> Regardless, the division began to take notice and attempted to fix the situation. The orders received by the 361st Infantry on 28 September show the

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<sup>90</sup>Burton, 63.

<sup>91</sup>Sumner, 7.

emphasis on improving communication, “Arty Commander will maintain close liaison with the leading Regiment and with the Brigade HQ and answer calls for fire direct from the infantry commander. The Artillery Commander’s P.C. will be at the PC 181st Bde.”<sup>92</sup> Following this action, there were no additional friendly fire incidents recorded. The artillery support continued to be a factor in the success over the next few days.

The 91st attempted the attack on Gesnes three times. Captain May, a company commander, recorded that the first advance on Gesnes at 7 A.M. was repulsed. The unit gained similar results during the 10 A.M. attempt. Finally, artillery moved in and the attack was ordered at 3:30.<sup>93</sup> This indicates that even during the final offensive that the 91st conducted in the Meuse-Argonne, artillery was not a major part in the planning. It also shows that when artillery was incorporated, the result was success. Morris Martin records a similar instance at Epinonville two days earlier saying “Every time an attempt was made to leave this shelter and enter Epinonville, the men would be met by a blistering fire from machine guns, and snipers hidden in nearby trees. Without some artillery fire to prepare the way it looked like a hopeless task.”<sup>94</sup> The evidence shows that individual soldiers were slowly realizing the importance of proper coordination with artillery, but the division’s leadership was still willing to order advances without it.

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<sup>92</sup>Burton, 73.

<sup>93</sup>Thomas E. May, “Operations of Company I, 362nd Infantry (91st Division) in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, September 26-October 3, 1918 (Personal Experience of a Company Commander)” (Student Paper, The Infantry School, Fort Benning, GA, 1933), 14.

<sup>94</sup>Diary of Morris Albert Martin, Veteran’s History Project, <http://lcweb2.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.01034/pageturner?ID=pm0001001> (accessed 22 May 2013), 22.

There was another factor preventing continual and seamless artillery support. The road network for the entire V Corps revolved around one road that was nearly impassable and clogged with traffic. One leader in the 58th FA Brigade described the rear area situation that the artillery was required to traverse as “the worst possible roads and only by superhuman efforts was it able to keep up with our attacking infantry.”<sup>95</sup> To assist the artillery brigade, the division tasked the 316th Engineers to support the artillery with road construction to facilitate their movements.<sup>96</sup> While this support likely improved the artillery capacity to move across the battlefield quicker, its movement was still not rapid enough to provide the seamless support to the infantry operations.

This was one of the largest failures of the 91st division. By failing to recognize that without artillery, success on the battlefield was limited, the division may have senselessly caused increased casualties. Artillery preparation had allowed the division to move forward on day one relatively easy. The lack of full artillery support the division experienced on early attacks at the fortified positions of Epinonville should have proven that artillery and massed firepower was absolutely essential to the attack. When the division attacked Gesnes the morning of 30 September twice without adequate artillery support, it was obvious the division had not learned that lesson.

The division had learned many things in its first combat experience. The 91st proved that it had the leadership, morale, and drive necessary to maintain the offensive and successfully maneuver forces on the battlefield. Its leaders at all levels grew tremendously and made great strides in command and control. However, it failed to fully

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<sup>95</sup>Huidekoper, 243.

<sup>96</sup>*History of the 316th Engineers*, 4.



realize the importance of combined arms operations—particularly with artillery support. This proved nearly fatal to the unit when it “advanced at all costs,” to attempt to secure objectives. Next would be its final test—and perhaps it’s most difficult. The division would be task organized under the French VII Corps to take part in the Ypres-Lys battle—this time under a French Commander. The division had proven that it had learned previous lessons in tactics, but could it overcome its command and control challenges as well as its ability to successfully execute combined arms operations between infantry and artillery?

## CHAPTER 4

### THE BATTLE OF YPRES-LYS

On 15 October 1918, the AEF ordered the 91st Division to Belgium to serve under the French Army. Although the majority of the division had in excess of a week to reorganize and rest, the 181st Brigade had been relieved from the Meuse-Argonne front only three days prior. The tasking to work under command of the French Army was unpopular and had proven extremely challenging for other AEF units. Regardless, the division moved immediately by train and motor vehicle to the battlefields of Belgium, and by 31 October, they were involved in their next offensive.<sup>97</sup> The Ypres-Lys Offensive, also known as the Lys-Scheldt, was the division's last combat experience in WWI. The "Wild West" men had learned many valuable lessons in the Meuse-Argonne, but their losses were so heavy that in Belgium they were forced to start over in many areas. Again, the division accomplished its mission in Belgium, but the German forces were beginning to retreat and the armistice was near. This resulted in a large reduction of enemy activity when compared to the Meuse-Argonne, which allowed the division more time to carry out its mission in a more methodical manner.

This chapter examines the many challenges the division faced throughout its fight in Belgium: Reforming the division following the Meuse-Argonne, an influx of new, inexperienced personnel, the difficulties and benefits of working under a foreign command, and the continuous struggle to keep troops motivated under fire. Fortunately for the 91st, the enemy situation was much tamer at this point in Belgium. Because of

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<sup>97</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 52.

this, the 91st would show signs of solid improvement in both liaison and fires that would carry it through to the end of hostilities on 11 November 1918.

General Pershing was clearly against amalgamation (integrating small units of U.S. Soldiers under allied command) and he frequently denied continuous allied requests to place American troops under their command. In his book, *A Fraternity of Arms, America and France in the Great War*, Robert Bruce explains that Pershing had several reasons, both personal and professional, for being so opposed to amalgamation. Bruce states that Pershing believed that the British and French were nearly defeated and were “institutionally incapable of prosecuting the war to a successful conclusion.” Pershing, therefore, wanted an autonomous Army under American command.<sup>98</sup> Pershing made some compromises with the allies throughout the war, but for the most part, individual American soldiers at the unit level served under American command. At the division level and above however, there were several instances where a larger American unit served under an allied commander with mixed results.

In early October 1918, while the 91st was engaged on the Meuse-Argonne front, the American 2nd Division experienced several difficulties under French command during a battle at Mont Blanc. Charged with taking a piece of key terrain named Mont Blanc, the 2nd Division executed the attack successfully, but the French units on their flanks failed to advance. With its flanks unprotected, the 2nd Division, on 3 October, suffered its highest number of single day casualties throughout the war. Subsequent to this offensive, the 2nd Division Commander, General John A. Lejeune, sent a message to

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<sup>98</sup>Robert B. Bruce, *A Fraternity of Arms, America and France in the Great War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 146.

AEF headquarters stating that “he would resign his commission rather than again fight beside French units.”<sup>99</sup>

Regardless, Pershing continued to comply with French requests for single divisions. In mid October, Pershing agreed to send both the 91st and its former Meuse-Argonne neighbor, the 37th Division, to Belgium.<sup>100</sup> Other AEF commanders shared LeJeune’s negative assessment of working under the French. Johnston felt that this assignment to serve in Belgium was a career ender. Several years after the war, Johnston wrote Pershing saying “I had hoped to command a corps some day... my shipment to Flanders prevented that.”<sup>101</sup> Johnston’s frustration was likely compounded by the fact that the 91st was in the company of the 37th once again. Rather than receiving recognition for a strong performance in the Meuse-Argonne, he felt that his division was getting shunned and assigned to Belgium with the low performers. There is no indication why Pershing chose the 91st to go to Belgium, but Johnston alludes to enemies on Pershing’s staff that were trying “to side-track” him.<sup>102</sup> There is also no indication that Pershing felt the 91st had performed badly. Perhaps Pershing, knowing the assignment would be unpopular, chose the 91st because he knew Johnston would give less resistance than other commanders.

In general, the American commanders did not fully appreciate being assigned under the French. However, the French military had been fighting this war much longer

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<sup>99</sup>Farwell, 249.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 250.

<sup>101</sup>Johnston, 3.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

than the Americans. They had equipment and experience that American forces lacked.

Robert McCormick, an artillery officer, stated his opinion about what characterized

successful American military officers:

all the failures who were sent to the rear or to America bitter, disappointed men, belonged to the class which disdained the military advice of the French, while all the successful officers, ranging from those who advanced only a grade or two in promotion, or maybe received only a simple decoration, up to those who rose to the command of corps and of armies, belonged to the class which eagerly absorbed the grim lessons of war as learned by the French.<sup>103</sup>

If McCormick's assertion was accurate, then regardless of the stigma attached to working under the French, the 91st should benefit from its experience in Belgium and be able to use it to continue to improve its operations.

### The Front in Belgium

The terrain of Belgium was distinctly different from what the 91st previously encountered in France. The battle of Ypres-Lys took place amidst muddy turnip fields that were separated by hedges and small villages. A Soldier in the 362nd Regiment described one of the benefits of fighting in the new terrain. "The soft soil prevented heavy casualties, although high explosives and shrapnel were seemingly tearing up every foot of ground and frequently half-burying men where they lay, by geysers of dirt and turnips thrown up by the bursting shells."<sup>104</sup> This "soft soil" also made it much easier for troops to dig in providing cover and concealment from the Germans. On the other hand,

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<sup>103</sup>Robert R. McCormick, *The Army of 1918* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Howe, 1920), 67.

<sup>104</sup>The 362nd Infantry Association, 44.

the buildings in the villages provided the enemy with advantageous locations to emplace machine guns.

There were two areas of note that challenged the 91st during their Belgium offensive (see map in figure 5). The first was the area of Spitaals Boschen, which was described as “a wood of thin and scanty growth approximately 1,500 meters in diameter.” It was less than 500 meters from the division’s starting position. Additionally, the town of Audenarde was on the Scheldt (also called the Escault) River, and required the division to construct bridges in order to move large amounts of troops across. Audenarde was the 3rd and final objective for the 91st division.<sup>105</sup>

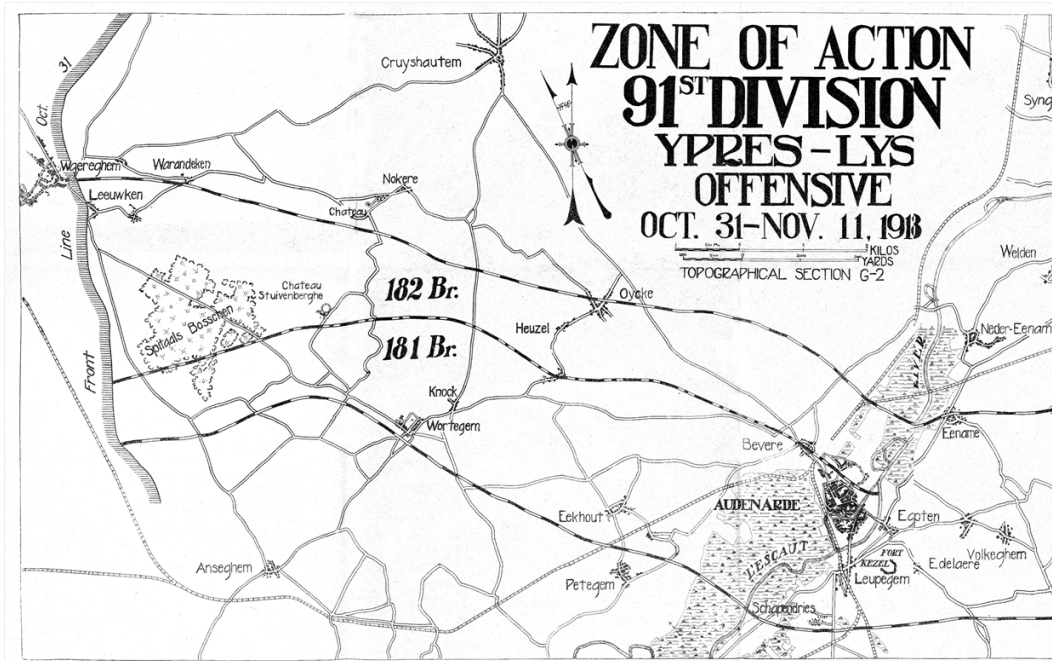


Figure 5. Division Area of Operations in the Ypres-Lys Offensive

Source: *The Story of the 91st Division* (San Francisco, CA: The 91st Division Publication Committee, 1919), portion of map titled “Zone of Action 91st Division, Ypres-Lys Offensive 31 October–11 November 1918.”

<sup>105</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 59.

The Ypres-Lys attack commenced on 31 October with the 182nd Brigade in the northern sector and the 181st Brigade positioned to its south, each brigade led the initial assault with one regiment on the front line and one in reserve. The 91st Division was in the center of the 7th French Army Corps in between the 128th French Division on its left and the 41st French Division on its right.<sup>106</sup> The division fought on the front lines under the French 7th Corps until 3 November when it was relieved and sent to the rear to reset. On 9 November, it was sent back to the front to fight the last few days of the war.<sup>107</sup>

Overall, the enemy resistance in Belgium was significantly lighter than what the division had previously faced in France. Most of the division's casualties occurred on the first day when the division encountered heavy enemy machine gun fire, particularly in the woods of Spitaal Boschen. However, after the division cleared the woods on the second day of the offensive and continued its advance, the enemy ground forces quickly retreated. The 362nd Regiment's description of the enemy situation on the second day was "when the regiment resumed the advance the following morning they found none to oppose them."<sup>108</sup> The most significant threat after the first day was the enemy artillery. By the end of the third day, the division had moved east into the town of Audenarde and conducted relatively minor engagements in the town prior to securing it by the end of the third day.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>106</sup>Burton, 144.

<sup>107</sup>The 362nd Infantry Association, 46.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>109</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 67.

Table 1. 91st Infantry Division Casualties During Combat Operations

<b>91st Infantry Division Casualties during Combat Operations</b>				
		<b>26 Sep-7 Oct 18</b>	<b>7-12 Oct 18</b>	<b>31 Oct-11 Nov 18</b>
		<b>(12 days on front)</b>	<b>(6 days on front)</b>	<b>(7 days on front)</b>
		<b>Meuse-Argonne</b>	<b>181st Bde in Meuse-Argonne (attached to 1st and 32nd Divisions)</b>	<b>Ypres-Lys</b>
91st Division	Wounded	3583	297	664
	DOW	226	27	58
	Killed	821	114	179
	Total	4630	438	901
Attachments	Wounded	87	N/A	30
	DOW	8	N/A	3
	Killed	10	N/A	0
	Total	105	N/A	33
Total	Wounded	3670	297	694
	DOW	234	27	61
	Killed	831	114	179
	Total	4735	438	934

*Source:* Created by author, data obtained from American Battle Monuments Commission, *91st Division Summary of Operations during the World War* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 24, 38; *1st Division Summary of Operations during the World War* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 96; *32d Division Summary of Operations During the World War* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1944), 69.

As a result of the decreased enemy activity, there were also much fewer casualties in Belgium (see table 1). Compared to the enemy forces in the Meuse-Argonne, the German Soldiers in Belgium were retreating quickly, and both sides were detecting an impending peace agreement. This situation, along with reduced pressure from higher, allowed the leadership of the 91st additional time to piece together operations in a more calculating manner than what they had experienced the previous month in France. As a



result, the 91st accomplished their objectives in Belgium, but it would have to start from the beginning in many areas, most notably its leadership.

### Leadership and Command and Control

Just prior to the division's departure from France, the AEF provided replacements to fill the losses incurred in the Meuse-Argonne. Approximately 4,000 men joined the 91st from the 85th Division, which was mostly composed of men from Ohio. Many of these new Soldiers were sick and had to be quarantined from the rest of the division upon arrival. The First Army Inspector General reported that 40 percent of the new arrivals had influenza and "Practically all replacements are poorly trained."<sup>110</sup> Few leaders were among the men that arrived from the 85th Division. In fact, the division history records receiving only 7 officers.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, the division's task organization for Ypres-Lys included the 53rd Field Artillery Brigade. This brigade had previously fought with the 28th Division in the Meuse-Argonne, but it had not served with the "Wild West" division.<sup>112</sup> This new 91st Division required additional training and coordination, and the leadership had less than two weeks to prepare while simultaneously moving across both France and Belgium to reach the front lines. Again, the division required trained and competent leaders to make everything happen, and the Meuse-Argonne battlefield had taken a significant toll on the unit.

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<sup>110</sup>J. G. McIlroy, "Report of Inspection of Portion of 91st Division Entraining at Revigny," Memorandum, 18 October 1918, Inspector General Reports, RG 120, Entry 590, Box 1.

<sup>111</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 52.

<sup>112</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

The division lost many of its key leaders in the Meuse-Argonne. Colonel Parker, the commander of the 362nd Regiment, was so badly wounded at Gesnes that he could not return. Other key commanders were killed or transferred to other units. Colonel Henry Jewett, who stepped in as the 182nd Brigade Commander following BG Foltz's relief on the first day of battle, was moved to the division Chief of Staff position. Additional casualties came from sicknesses such as dysentery or influenza or during the long road marches to and from train depots in both France and Belgium. All of these losses required major adjustments to the officer slating across the division. The 364th Infantry Regiment recorded that "the gaps in the commissioned personnel caused during the fighting in the Argonne were filled by numerous promotions. Among others, two Majors, Major Humphreys and Major Rasch, received their commissions at this time and our Commanding Officer Lieut.-Colonel Lucius C. Bennett became a full Colonel."<sup>113</sup> Units across the division made similar significant leadership changes following during the division's movement to Belgium.

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<sup>113</sup>Bryant Wilson and Lamar Tooze, *With the 364th Infantry in America, France, and Belgium* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1919), 98.

Table 2. 361st Infantry Regiment Officer Strength (Line Units)

<b>361st Infantry Regiment Officer Strength (Line Units)</b>										
		<b>26-Sep-1918</b>			<b>7-Oct-1918</b>			<b>31-Oct-1918</b>		
		Meuse-Argonne			Return to Meuse-Argonne			Ypres-Lys		
		Auth	Assn	% Fill	Auth	Assn	% Fill	Auth	Assn	% Fill
1st Bn	MAJ	1	1	100%	1	0	0%	1	0	0%
	CPT	4	4	100%	4	2	50%	4	1	25%
	1LT	15	10	67%	15	8	53%	15	7	47%
	2LT	9	5	56%	9	4	44%	9	7	78%
2nd Bn	MAJ	1	1	100%	1	0	0%	1	1	100%
	CPT	4	3	75%	4	2	50%	4	2	50%
	1LT	15	12	80%	15	6	40%	15	7	47%
	2LT	9	6	67%	9	4	44%	9	7	78%
3rd Bn	MAJ	1	1	100%	1	0	0%	1	0	0%
	CPT	4	4	100%	4	1	25%	4	2	50%
	1LT	15	11	73%	15	7	47%	15	5	33%
	2LT	9	6	67%	9	3	33%	9	8	89%

*Source:* Created by author, data obtained from Harold H. Burton, *600 Days' Service: A History of the 361st Infantry Regiment of the United States Army* (Portland, OR: James, Kern, and Abbot Co., [1920]), 58-60, 94-96, 137-139.

The status of the officers in the 361st Infantry (see table 2) is representative of the situation that all units in the division faced following the Meuse-Argonne. Even after promoting and cross leveling officers at the beginning of the Ypres-Lys offensive, the entire regiment had only five Captains out of its authorized strength of twelve. Of the five, two Captains were serving as Battalion Commanders. Out of all the commanders, Captain and above, only two—the Regimental Commander and one company commander—were in the same position as they were the previous month—at the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne.<sup>114</sup> All other commanders in the 361st had changed out for one

<sup>114</sup>Burton, 137-139.

reason or another and most companies were now commanded by first lieutenants. This caused a significant continuity issue throughout the Regiment.

This lack of leader continuity showed in simple tasks such as personnel accountability. Although the 91st Division had issues throughout with maintaining control and accountability, the personnel accounting and control seemed to be at its worst in October of 1918. The division history describes the magnitude of the problem:

When the Division transferred from the firing line in the Meuse-Argonne to Belgium, by rail, 3 officers and more than 400 men were carried as missing. This number included some who had been evacuated to the rear through hospitals other than those of the Division; some who had been fighting with other units than their own and who rejoined their companies before moving by rail; but also a large number killed in action who could not be reported as such for lack of evidence of actual burial.<sup>115</sup>

In addition to the numbers of missing men, scores had become sick and were taken into hospitals. The addition of the 85th division men, many of whom were also sick, also made accountability more difficult.

The new leadership was very slowly correcting the problems. Captain Graupner reported that his higher headquarters required him to conduct frequent drill and formations to fully gain accountability and status of personnel, but even these were not completely useful or efficient.

Company rosters had been left in the field desk and were not obtainable and no one knew the number of casualties or how many men were present when the company had “jumped off.” Then the counting started—if the company was counted once it was counted fifty times during the next five days, and each time the total was different. A new roster was made up, but with the men straggling back each day and others being taken to the hospital or placed on special duty, it was almost impossible to tell just what our losses had been.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 91.

<sup>116</sup>Graupner, 77.

This lack of leadership accountability created an environment that allowed Soldiers to easily disappear if they wanted to.

In his diary, Private Guiseppe Romeo described his experience as he left his Regiment behind during its transition to Belgium. After several days of hiking great distances, sometimes up to 18 kilometers, he noted that “lots of the boys too sick to go farther. Leave them a long side of the road.” Romeo soon joined the sick and was sent to various hospitals. He recorded being sick and weak, but also allowed himself time to play poker, visit the Red Cross, and visit the town. After nine days, he was ordered to go to the 91st replacement camp “some place on the front.” Arriving in Belgium on 30 October, the same day his unit was going over the top, Romeo and about 20 fellow Soldiers were staying in hotels, eating and drinking, and trying to avoid the Military Police. They were eventually caught and put into confinement, but they would not see combat again.<sup>117</sup>

While most accounts of the men of the 91st were positive and showed several accounts of valor in battle, Private Romeo’s example shows just how easy it was during this time to take advantage of a lack of accountability and leadership within the division. Fortunately, the enemy that the 91st faced in Belgium was retreating much quicker now that the war was nearly over, and the improvements that the 91st made in other areas would assist its drives in Belgium. Otherwise, the implications of not maintaining adequate accountability could have had a greater detrimental effect on unit morale and cohesion as well as overall performance of the unit.

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<sup>117</sup>Romeo, 27-29.

Instead, the division recorded that the troops “maneuvered with better liaison and under greater control by their leaders than during the Meuse-Argonne.”<sup>118</sup> This was mostly due to better communications. Unlike the Meuse-Argonne, the division quickly established wire communication between all units and it was able to continuously maintain these lines. The 316th Field Signal Battalion now had access to motor vehicles and this, coupled with their experience in France assisted them in maintaining communications between units both internal and external.<sup>119</sup> The division was also assigned 25 French cavalymen whom it used to deliver messages quickly. Additionally, the assigned 72nd Aero Squadron (French) had much more control of the air than friendly air units had in France. This allowed the commanders to have a much greater visibility over the front lines and locations of both friendly and enemy troops.<sup>120</sup>

The improvement in liaison operations was also due to particular emphasis made by both the division leadership as well as the French units on the division’s flanks. The 361st Regimental order issued prior to the beginning of the Ypres-Lys offensive directed the regiment to provide combat liaison detachments to establish continued communications with the French 41st Division. A unique aspect of this order when compared to previous orders was the directive that the commander of any combined liaison detachment (American and French) must be a senior captain.<sup>121</sup> This statement

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<sup>118</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 63.

<sup>119</sup>Irving D. Hubbell, *The Book of Co. “C” 316th Field Signal Battalion* (San Francisco, CA: Ingram-Rutledge Co., 1919), 133.

<sup>120</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 63.

<sup>121</sup>Burton, 145.

showed that the division had placed particular emphasis on this role, especially in light of how short the division was on captains. The French, for their part, were also very engaged with the concept of liaison. The diary of Clarence Minnick, a company commander in the 364th includes several notes from his French counterparts. These notes, written in English, give and ask for specific details on locations, upcoming instructions, etc.<sup>122</sup> After nearly abandoning efforts to liaison with flanking units in the Meuse-Argonne, the accounts of Ypres-Lys show a renewed concentration on this key component of command and control.

Overall, the division showed some improvement in executing command and control after the Meuse-Argonne. Its success was limited due to a loss of quality leadership at the unit level and the resulting decrease in ability to maintain positive control of individual Soldiers. The division's success in Flanders occurred mostly because of support infrastructure like vehicle transportation and a capitulating enemy. However, the experience of the French units on its flanks, including the air units, aided in overall situational awareness and liaison, and improved the division as a result. The division was able to use this to its advantage and effectively execute its mission in Flanders.

#### Movement and Maneuver

In the Meuse-Argonne, the division had proven that it could gain ground. At the platoon and company level, the 362nd Regiment had developed the "gang" formation that improved the Regiment's ability to successfully overtake enemy machine guns. However,

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<sup>122</sup>Diary of Clarence Minnick.

the larger movements at Brigade and Division level continued to lack integration. Operations in the Ypres-Lys battle would change this. Aided by a retreating enemy and more experienced leaders at the division level, the 91st showed that it could effectively integrate with flanking units, quickly respond to areas of concern, and allow units to slow their advance, yet still maintain the initiative.

The first objective the division faced on 31 October was the woods called Spitaal Bosschen. The French VII Corps Commander directed an envelopment of the woods as they were known to be filled with enemy machine gun nests. Johnston tasked the 182nd Brigade to push north of the woods and the 181st Brigade south. Once the leading elements had reached the eastern boundary of Spitaal Bosschen and encircled the enemy, an element composed of the 368th machine gun battalion would “mop up” the woods from west to east. The 362nd Regiment faced stiff resistance in the south and as a result was slower than expected at reaching the first objective. Additionally, the 368th Machine Gun Battalion encountered hostile activity that required additional manpower to defeat.<sup>123</sup> Several actions that followed showed that the division leadership, at least at the senior level, was changing the way they executed battles.

When the 362nd advanced ahead of the 41st French Division on its right flank, it came under attack from the woods on its left as well as the high ground in the 41st sector on its right. The regimental leadership halted the advance until the French Division came back online. When the 368th Machine Gun Battalion encountered stiff resistance, the regiment’s leadership quickly augmented it with a battalion of infantry, as well as heavier

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<sup>123</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 62.



weapons, from the 364th Regiment in reserve.<sup>124</sup> The battle was not progressing as fast as originally planned, but it was moving along in a methodical manner that was completely uncharacteristic of the division's operations in France.

While the division continued to sustain casualties throughout the day, the efforts to conduct large unit maneuvers such as an envelopment showed that it was beginning to master the elements of movement and maneuver. The quick response from the reserves shows that communication between units had also improved. By the end of the first day, the division had successfully reached its first objective. Enemy resistance during the next few days was relatively light, but there were still engagements. The division moved into the town of Audenarde and successfully captured the second largest city (behind Chateau-Thierry) seized by American forces during the war.<sup>125</sup>

On the fourth day of the offensive, the 364th Infantry was ordered to move into Audenarde and conduct a night river crossing in the 37th Division's sector to the north. German forces had previously destroyed all bridges as they withdrew from Audenarde, and the best crossing points that remained were located north of the city. There was a delay in receiving permission from the 37th to enter their sector, so the 364th Regiment did not receive the orders until very late in the evening (2315).<sup>126</sup> The regiment, expecting the order, had adequately prepared its forces to move out, and within 15 minutes it had departed for the river. However, the unit was not able to reach the crossing site before daybreak and reported that:

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<sup>124</sup>*Operations Journal, 364th Infantry*, 34.

<sup>125</sup>The 362nd Infantry Association, 46.

<sup>126</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 67.

There was but one small bridge available for crossing river. After obtaining all information possible decided that to attempt crossing of Escaut (Scheldt) after daybreak would lose advantage of surprise and result in suffering of such losses that regiment would be unable to accomplish its mission. Have placed regiment under cover.<sup>127</sup>

Again, the division allowed the regiment to withdraw. The mindset of “advance at all costs” seemed to have been left behind in the Argonne.

Other factors may have contributed to the division’s seemingly new approach. The French command was not pushing the unit to advance like the American command was and the armistice was coming closer and both sides were increasingly aware of this. However, the experiences of the Meuse-Argonne were still fresh in the mind of many. The 91st Division’s senior leaders had grown and improved. The division was relieved on 3 November, but returned to the Ypres-Lys front on 10 November. The staff planned for another offensive, but hostilities ended on 11 November and the division completed its combat experience in the turnip fields of Belgium.<sup>128</sup>

### Combined Arms

The AEF attached the 53rd Artillery Brigade to the 91st division in order to provide artillery support for the Ypres-Lys offensive. Once again, relationships and liaison procedures would have to be established with another artillery unit. Generally, artillery support was executed as planned throughout the advance in Flanders, but the increased transportation and communications capabilities had a positive effect on fires

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<sup>127</sup>*Operations Journal 364th Infantry*, 38.

<sup>128</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 71

integration. However, the most important concept that the 91st Division improved upon was the integration with air.

There were several references made in various unit histories regarding the improved air support in the Ypres-Lys. An officer in the 362nd described the major difference: “In the Argonne, Boche planes came over at will; here the British and French airmen seemed to control the situation.”<sup>129</sup> There were still air attacks by German airplanes, but they were much less frequent. The increased control of the air was coupled with an increase in the use of aircraft. The 91st division took advantage of its assigned French liaison officers and their access to the aircraft. In one instance, the division history recorded that “the French officer at Division Headquarters frequently called up the commander of this squadron ordering a reconnaissance to the front, and usually within forty minutes a message was dropped at Division Headquarters showing the advance units or giving information of hostile targets.”<sup>130</sup> The division was able to use this timely information for targeting, achieving a level of combined arms integration that eluded many units in the war.

Although the 91st had yet to perfect the artillery operations as a whole, the progress it had made in its month of battle working with three separate artillery brigades throughout its time in Europe was notable. Under French command, the 91st experienced the concept of massing fires that historians such as Mark Grotelueschen argue was missing from Pershing’s open warfare strategy. By working and using both artillery and

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<sup>129</sup>The 362nd Infantry Association, 43.

<sup>130</sup>*The Story of the 91st Division*, 63.

air assets to defeat enemy forces and drive them east of the Scheldt River, the 91st division had advanced to a stage that few other AEF divisions did.

Prior to the Ypres-Lys offensive, the 91st almost had to completely rebuild its organization with new personnel and leaders. Overall, its achievements in Ypres-Lys were assisted by the reduced enemy activity and the equipment and firepower of the supporting French forces. However, the division was still able to improve in several areas including liaison operations and integration with air. Under French command, a new attitude had developed within the division. There was no longer a narrow focus on moving forward regardless of the circumstances. As a result, the division's work on the battlefield was beginning to be more carefully planned and executed. Although the casualties resulting from the Meuse-Argonne nearly crippled the unit, the 91st ended the war as a stronger organization because of the lessons it learned in the battle at Ypres-Lys.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The 91st Division did achieve many difficult objectives in combat operations and it advanced miles ahead of its flanking units in the Meuse-Argonne. However, it failed to realize that the neglect of certain warfighting functions, primarily the integration of fires, could only last so long. In the Ypres-Lys, the hastily re-organized 91st Division used a more methodical approach to battle, but this was facilitated by a retreating German Army and a better supporting structure from the French. The division's successes can be mostly attributed to its leaders and their ability to influence their soldiers and maintain a high level of morale. When the battles ended, the vast majority of these leaders were gone and the lack of leadership continuity forced the division to re-learn basic concepts.

At the highest level, the division maintained continuity throughout the most important battles in France, which most likely aided the division on the battlefield. As division commanders, both Greene and Johnston were different leaders, and they each pushed the division to a different level. Greene was a proven trainer who ensured that the division mastered the individual skills to be a Soldier marksmanship, control of formations, and individual drill. The local community in Tacoma, Washington was fond of him and his leadership, but Pershing felt he was not fit for the job in combat. Greene trained the division well on the basics, but was never able to achieve any higher level of training, omitting current tactics such as liaison and extended order formations that were proving successful in France.

What Johnston brought to the division was a fresh look and a mission first attitude. He seemed to fully embrace Pershing's concept of open warfare and was very

effective instilling it among his leaders. Johnston quickly obeyed the orders to advance at all costs, and gained more ground than any other division in the opening days of the Meuse-Argonne. Within an hour of launching the assault in the Argonne, Johnston relieved one of his brigade commanders for ordering a retreat. Johnston set the tone with his division early and it proved effective. In the same manner that Johnston expected compliance from his commanders, he did not question orders from higher—even when they did not make sense. As a result the division advanced knowing that the flanking units were likely not going to advance with it, and the resulting number of casualties nearly crippled the division. They captured important terrain such as the town of Gesnes, but couldn't hold it without support on their flanks. In Belgium, Johnston was a different commander and seemed to focus more on deliberate combat maneuvers. He experienced a similar amount of success on the battlefield, but the support structure from the French as well as the reduced enemy activity assisted.

Other leaders in the division were generally strong. Regimental commanders and their subordinates tried to make the best of every mission they were given. The lack of quality leadership was noticeable after several junior leaders were lost through combat, sickness or transfers. Following the Meuse-Argonne, the number of missing Soldiers was simply overwhelming and leaders could not gain and maintain accountability. The division did not focus on the importance of liaison operations until they reached France and then had limited time to perfect the skill. There was a noticeable improvement in liaison in Belgium, aided by better communication and transportation assets. Overall, the division's leadership was relatively solid, but the lack of continuity forced it to relearn how to conduct even simple tasks.

In the movement and maneuver function, the division showed continuous progress. Like many AEF divisions, its stateside training focused mostly on individual skills and did not account for the current tactics used in the European theater such as open warfare, artillery coordination and massing fires. The training was constantly interrupted by transfers of personnel, mostly driven by the War Department. In France, the Wild West division began to train on some of these tactics after a push by the AEF to incorporate it in a division's training plan. However, like most AEF divisions, the division's greatest learning experiences occurred on the battlefield.

In the Meuse-Argonne, the division used and modified these tactics. It created a "gang" formation which was smaller, spread out, and echeloned in depth. This formation proved very useful when faced with enemy artillery and machine gun fire. The use of this tactic spread throughout the division and the units successfully employed it for the duration of the war. However, at the higher unit level, the division was unable to gain, and perhaps most importantly maintain, advantageous positions over the enemy. The Corps headquarters issued careless orders for the division to "advance at all costs" and Johnston did not question these. Instead, he and his leaders led the 91st into a dangerous salient, exposed to the enemy on three sides, and it was forced to withdraw because the divisions on their flanks had not kept up.

The 91st was constantly working with different artillery units, and never had a chance to integrate properly with any of them. It also failed to fully train combined arms operations with its organic artillery unit at Camp Lewis. As a result, the leaders attempted attacks without support from the artillery. Even though it was evident that assaults were much more successful with artillery preparation, the division continued to press on

regardless. In the Meuse-Argonne, there was very limited integration or availability of air.

As a result, the lack of fire support and integration combined with the orders to recklessly advance led to the division being forced to nearly culminate at the end of the Meuse-Argonne. The division had lost the vast majority of its leaders. Those that remained were most likely put into higher positions to replace their superiors who were also gone. Large amounts of Soldiers were unaccounted for and there was widespread sickness, straggling and confusion.

The division, received replacement Soldiers from the 85th division to assist with their shortages in manpower. However, they were untrained and sick and the division had to practically start over re-learning basic tasks. Its experience under French command was much different than what the division faced in the Meuse-Argonne. The movements were more methodical, communication and liaison much improved, coordination with artillery and air proved more useful, and the division still managed to meet its objectives. There were several external factors that contributed to this including a retreating enemy, better transportation assets, and decreased pressure from higher.

The 91st Division, therefore, was like most other AEF divisions. It had successful engagements in combat when its leaders demanded action, but it never developed a solid base of knowledge and training that enabled it to do this continuously. The casualties resulting from careless offensive movements nearly caused culmination in France. Fortunately, the division had a much easier task in Belgium and with 4,000 new and untrained men, it was able to re-learn basic concepts in the closing days of the war and still progress on the battlefield.



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