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Out of Our Depth: Americans in the Meuse-Argonne, 1918

By way of introduction to this paper, I would say this: In a saner or more thoughtful society than any I know about, the stories in this book would be engraved into public walls and spaces and made part of our American race consciousness so that future generations would know these soldiers' stories as part of the structure of our culture and honor their collective sacrifice by not repeating events like these again. I say that in full knowledge of how naïve it sounds, but stand by it as a morally defensible point.

From the beginning of the book, it is clear that American leadership – specifically from Pershing, but certainly also from other links in the chain of command – not only have no idea what war they're fighting or how to fight it, but in addition, seem also to have an extremely murky idea of the character and skill of the enemy. Added to this, the idea from command that any obstacle, including the lack of training, resources or a discernible plan can be overcome by simply hurling spirited Americans at it, and that if they die or fail, well – then the rationale is that they must not have been spirited enough. This leads the reader to resent the commanders – again, specifically Pershing. There is, in the first section of the book, a clever narrative move by Lengel (11-19) to give us a background story about Pershing, during which our hearts go out to him as

he loses most of his family in a fire, we come to respect his military achievements and experience, and we admire his (we feel) distinctly American drive and individualism as he is pushed, somewhat into the command of the AEF. It is, as I say, clever on Lengel's part to do this, since it the last time the reader will likely have a kind thought about Pershing.

So much of the book is dedicated to the details of the various battalion and division movements, and I freely admit, though I valued immensely the level of detail (especially the personal first-person narratives) I was overwhelmed by the action and would have trouble regurgitating all of it in order. However, the initial point that is effortlessly made is that of the extremely disparate nature of the AEF versus its opposition as it hurled itself headlong against the Germans in the Meuse-Argonne from September to November in 1918.

From the very beginning of the American offensive, described as “the biggest logistical undertaking in American Army history before or since” (Lengel 69) we get a picture of new recruits, fresh off the farm or from the American heartland (Lengel 69) and who are given little to no training to the point that many of them do not understand basic military phrases like “to fix bayonets” or how to load, point and shoot their weapons. They are called up, thrown together and shipped overseas to fight while being stripped of extra rations and equipment under the presumption of a quick offensive. (Lengel 79) The men are continuously lectured and harangued about American willpower and spirit at the expense of any kind of real intelligence about the enemy. (Lengel 61) In fact, much of this cheerleading about American military spirit overcoming obstacles not only serves to create a void of expectation regarding “the Bosche” (who, truthfully, they know next to nothing about) but also an unrealistic sense of confidence. This last will be tragically short-lived.

The German army, their opponents in the Meuse-Argonne, is an entirely different animal than anything these men (or their commanders) have faced. The German soldier has been fighting this war for four years, and while that has thinned their ranks, the men that are left are “dug-in” behind barbed wire and contained in ruthlessly efficient defensive line machine gun nests (Lengel 59) and in “god-spot” sniper positions (Lengel 99) on land that they have held since the beginning of the war. These are serious people who have named their defensive line positions after witches from Wagnerian operas, (Lengel 58) and they do not shoot at the first things that stick their heads up; they typically wait until soldiers are deep in their territory before cutting them to ribbons with a brutal assault. (Lengel 109) That is a tactic born of experience that the newly-minted American recruit simply does not have. The German soldier is not intimidated by tanks on the battlefield, either, they have “fought the steel monsters for 2 ½ years” (Lengel 178) and are jaded about their presence while Patton is still running them off the road trying to get them moving. (Lengel 111-112)

Motivated by their commanders, millions of men line up to fight the war from four years ago against the people who have had four years to adapt that warfighting into something that moves and breathes and acts entirely differently. Worn out from marching and sleeping in mud with inadequate food and water before they even start fighting (Lengel 89), the American soldier in the Meuse-Argonne goes over the top with an unrealistic timeline (Lengel 102) for achieving his objective and some platitudes about “getting the job done” ringing in his ears until German machine gun chatter and artillery wipe the sound away entirely. Once on the field of battle, if they are lucky enough to survive the machine gun enfilade across their straight line bayonet charge, they have poor manuals and instructions to rely upon (Lengel 118-119), terrible

communication (which is sometimes tied to the leg of reluctant Passenger pigeons) (Lengel 131), and even if all else goes well, there is the grim and impenetrable fog (Lengel 120) and heavy pouring rain to contend with – it is no wonder, surrounded by all of this and the death and horror of war itself that so many men compared this bleak and ruined landscape to Hell itself.

Gas attacks (and their omnipresent threat) serve to jangle and disorient the Doughboy all the time; even when there is no attack, the scares happen often, so one must always be on guard. Even when one is braced for the attack, the masks limit visibility to near nothing, and that's before they fog up from the inside. (Lengel 76-77) Adding to the already destroyed nerves of the American soldier in the field is a German tactic of “false surrender” (Lengel 194) where a unit or squad seems to surrender only to have the AEF soldiers cut to pieces by hidden German guns in the process. The end of September is nightmare for these new soldiers; in a strange land, surrounded by relentless pushing forward, and confronted by astonishingly different methods and without proper tools to achieve an unclear objective. No one stays lost forever, though.

Slowly, the Americans begin to learn to hide and wait for the Germans, essentially adopting their tactic. (Lengel 133) They also figure out that perhaps one or two quiet, sneaky guys with some guts in the dark might be more effective at taking out “dug-in” German positions than a line of guys charging up a hill or across a field. (Lengel 152, 215 & 351) Undertrained at actual combat and tactics, they do begin to exploit one of those most valued of American traits, individual know how. From Col. Wise's “squirrel squads” quietly rooting out snipers and bayoneting Germans pretending to be dead or wounded (Lengel 162) to Tennessee's own Alvin York (Lengel 280-282) and Lt. Sam Woodfill out of Alaska (Lengel 324-325), men who put their hunting skills and practice with guns to work on the battlefield, in York's case taking 132

captives, and in Woodfill's sharpshooting the near impossible shot and taking out German nests of machine guns.

In a more general way, the men “harden up.” Some of them go from boys to men, while some just become steel in the face of misery, relentlessly doing the hard job, or in the case of Pvt. Kyler, the dirty jobs. (Lengel 293). There are multiple instances in the book of men simply murdering German captives, killing much more frequently and with less cause than they would have before – not trigger-happy per se, just so keyed up and disconnected from “normal” life that what they do becomes the most rational response. There is Barkley (he of the dramatic tank seizure (Lengel 261-263)), and his buddies, Mike and Floyd (Lengel 250) of Lost Battalion, who wade through blood and kill in trenches like something out of a movie – and I guess that is where those sorts of movies come from. Their exploits are emblematic of men so near the breaking point that they have stepped beyond it rather than break, sometimes operating without any real command. Even then, Barkley eventually succumbs to exhaustion when he sits down one day and simply cannot get back up.

In the case of some, they come to rely on each other when they realize that they cannot rely on command, like in Pvt. Rizzi's “sharing” story (Lengel 140), or they simply break ranks and disobey the orders when the orders are no good, like when then-Captain Harry S Truman does it in the face of communication shortcomings and destroys a German artillery battery. (Lengel 138)

Even the arrival of the “Big Red One” (Lengel 218) serves to make a point about the deficits of these first wave troops – when they arrive and are confronted by the bedraggled and shell-shocked men who have been at the lines for months, they are filled with confidence born of

the training they have been given, something that the men they are relieving picked up on the fly on the front lines of combat.

Finally, and this is more of a groundless observation than anything, but it seems as though sometimes, the best way to conquer ruthless German efficiency was to throw a pack of American chaos at it. More than once, Lengel gives us a story of a German line that panics and runs, or breaks up and falls back because a group of enraged AEF soldiers have had enough, snapped, and come running straight at them with havoc in their eyes. Not that this would routinely work, but as a “hole card” sort of tactic, it seems to have some merit.

These are all things that the men did out of necessity, after they were used as cannon fodder by command and essentially blamed for their own deaths – 'you wouldn't be dead if you'd had more spirit.' Lengel goes out of his way to say that while Pershing and his officers bear the bulk of the responsibility for the senseless and non-productive loss of life at the Meuse-Argonne, that there were other factors. While this is most certainly true, and that nothing happens in a vacuum, Pershing himself was fond of relieving his officers of command when objectives were not reached, this indicating that any widespread military failures are the fault and responsibility, ultimately, of those in command. He himself tacitly acknowledged this when he stepped aside for Gen. Hunter Liggett after being diplomatically attacked on all sides. (Lengel 313) That means he is chiefly to blame for this human disaster.

Pershing's ego is a character in the book. You can see it on many pages taking control of the situation and throwing its weight around. Even Lengel acknowledges it, on page 313. It seems as though the story about Pershing's family from the beginning of the narrative, coupled with his brilliant administrative history are there to lead the reader to the conclusion that maybe,

just maybe, 120,000 men died because Pershing was a grieving widower, unfit for command. His ego needs a win, and he needs to be right about how to get one, and it has to be gotten in the old school way, perhaps to justify that methodology.

It is very difficult, even for a student trying to be open-minded, to walk away from this narrative with any other conclusion about Pershing's behavior. Gen. Pershing begins the process but stubbornly arguing against the AEF being put under anyone else's command, which feels like a show of strength or a glory-grab and denies the new guys an opportunity to be directed by veterans of the conflict in which they are about to find themselves. Early on, his whole plan seems to be based on the exertion of American will against a target and expecting it to move (Lengel 61). Initially, this could be seen as faithful, hopeful, or optimistic, but there comes a point at which this is delusional. He becomes angry and resentful when anyone even dares question his mandate (Lengel 197) and cannot “conceive of German defensive systems built around machine guns” (Lengel 144) even when that's what exists all over the Meuse-Argonne. Instead, he continuously pushes his 'willpower mandate' and blames his officer corps when they cannot produce. *“I am counting on the splendid spirit, dash and courage of our Army to overcome all opposition.”* Apparently, he was counting on that spirit, dash and courage to such a great degree that he ran through a lot of guys in a very short time waiting for spirit and dash to make them invulnerable to being pushed at machine guns. Because of this, a vast influx of American soldiers, initially meant to turn the tide against a German army depleted by four years of fighting suffered many of the same manpower and staffing issues as did the Germans after only four and half months. (Lengel 312)

Pershing's influence has a trickle-down effect, too – from Kuhn and Bullard pushing their

men into ever-increasing fire to Summerall's disgusting use of euphemism to cover anything that didn't fit the idea (Lengel 354), many of these men conformed to the standard as offered.

Typically, it took a non-officer leader to break the mold, and there are many, many, instances of that in the book.

In the end, when Pershing steps aside and Hunter Liggett's slow and deliberate plan (Lengel 354) breaks the line on November 1st during armistice talks, it is done with supplying the men in mind, with minimizing casualties in mind, with an endgame other than 'plug their guns with your corpses.' Confidence and morale are treated like important quantities again, and even one last ego move by Pershing – the re-taking of Sedan (Lengel 398) – is headed off before it can become an embarrassment. Adaptability, not intractability, and the lack of ego seem to carry the day.

Lengel makes a strong argument that no American, from Pershing to York, knew what to expect from the Meuse-Argonne, but that there might have been people who could have helped to enlighten them if their advice and command had been welcomed. It also seems that while the grunts on the ground adapted out of need that in the absence of need, no changes were made to the strategy in the rear because ego was in the way. Sending 120,000 men to die against an enemy who saw them coming from across the Atlantic before they even got up this morning was a tactical nightmare and possibly an avoidable circumstance. One should not send last war's army to fight the current war. The consequences are disastrous.

Work Cited

Lengel, Edward G. *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918 – The Epic Battle That Ended The First World War*. Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2008. Print.