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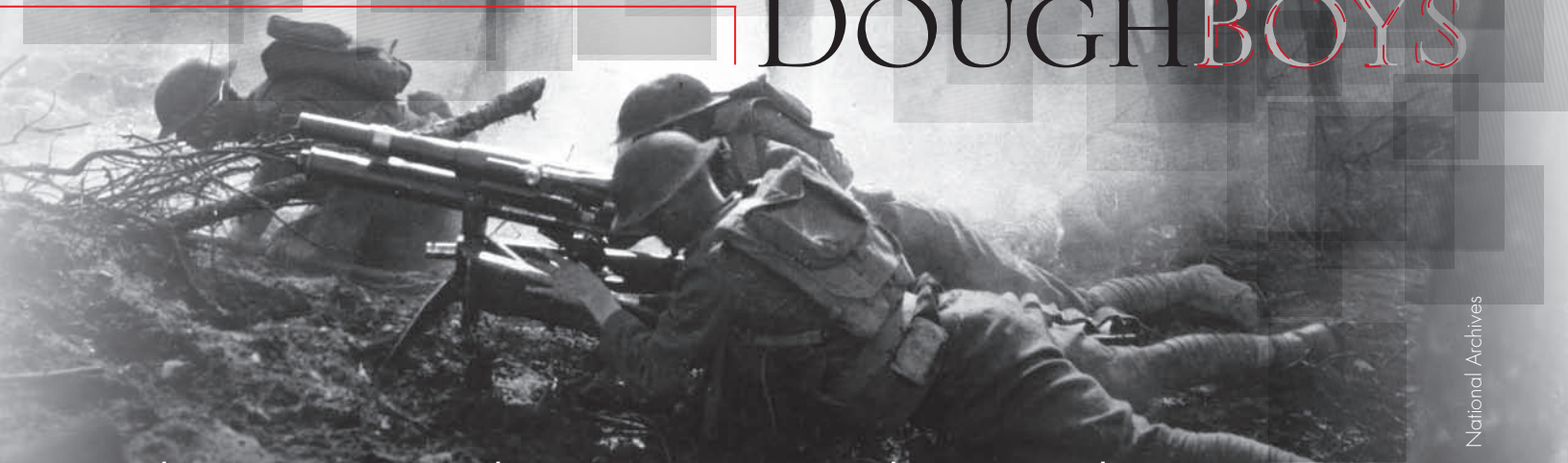
Soldiers being disciplined on the Meuse-Argonne front

Disappearing Doughboys



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The American Expeditionary Forces' Straggler Crisis in the Meuse-Argonne

By Richard S. Faulkner

On 1 November 1918, the American Meuse-Argonne Offensive was in its thirty-seventh day of grinding attritional fighting. With no true hope of dramatic breakthroughs to be exploited by swift maneuvers of cavalry, the First Army had tasked the majority of its cavalrymen with the more pressing mission of patrolling the rear area to round up the host of American soldiers straggling from the front lines. While occupying one of the webs of posts that dotted the area behind the front intended to pick up these troops, the soldiers of Troop H, 2d Cavalry, captured Pvt. Raymond Wellman of the 103d Infantry, 26th Division. The troop commander characterized Wellman as a "professional straggler" who had been caught on at least two other occasions. Having been apprehended a third time, Wellman made it clear to his captors that "he didn't want to go back to his outfit or any outfit."[1] What is missing from the Wellman narrative is an explanation of what drove him and thousands of other American soldiers to abandon their units and what effect their absence had on the American Expeditionary Forces' (AEF's) operations.

The AEF's problems with straggling were evident from the earliest battles. Maj. Gen. Robert Bullard recalled that during the AEF's summer battles between the Marne and Aisne Rivers,

> far back behind our lines and camps my provost marshal now began to gather large numbers of American soldiers from . . . various divisions. The French villages were full of them. Relative to the number of American soldiers that had been here, the stragglers were few, but actually their numbers were great. Popular public perceptions to the contrary notwithstanding, we had in our army dead-beats and deserters, evaders of battles and danger.[2]

However, it was not until the Meuse-Argonne Offensive that this problem reached crisis proportions and weakened the effectiveness of the AEF's units by draining combat manpower. After the war, Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett estimated that one hundred thousand soldiers had left their units in the first month of the Argonne drive.[3] Between 900,000 and 1.2 million American soldiers participated in the campaign. If Liggett's estimate is correct, then Private Wellman was one of the roughly 10 percent of the army's soldiers who simply stopped fighting and headed toward the rear.

Although historians of the AEF often comment on the Army's difficulties with straggling, none have tried to untangle the true extent of the problem, its effect on U.S. operations, or the factors that encouraged the American soldiers to flee the battlefield. This article addresses some of these issues or at least opens the topic to further debate and examination. The conclusions, especially those related to the motivations for soldiers to straggle, are of necessity, tentative. The stragglers themselves seldom admitted to their captors the exact reasons they left the fighting. There is, however, enough evidence to identify some of the factors that encouraged this behavior.

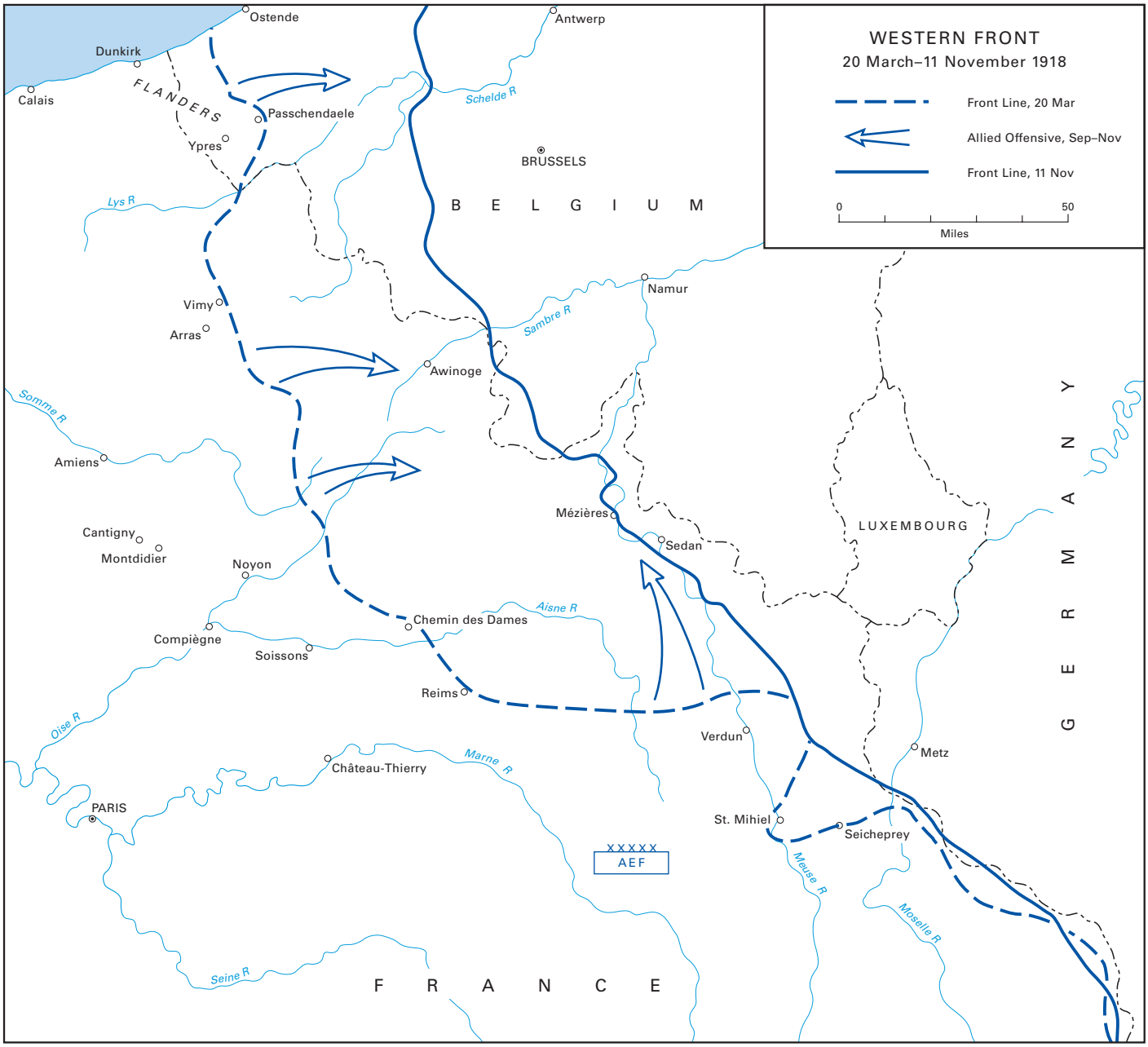
The actual extent of straggling during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive must be examined. It is difficult to substantiate the accuracy of Liggett's claim that the AEF had at least one hundred thousand soldiers absent from the lines during the offensive. However, there is enough evidence to give at least some indication of the scope of the problem. For example, during the Argonne fighting, the AEF inspector general stated that

A gun crew from the 23d Infantry firing a 37-mm. gun during an advance against German entrenched positions

> One division reported that it had only 1600 men in the front line including an engineer battalion that had been sent forward. . . . This division was taken out of the line and upon arriving in its rest area it was found that the infantry regiments alone had in them 8418 men not counting the Engineer battalion.[4]

The inspector general concluded that the 6,000 soldiers who appeared in the rest area were stragglers from the division's frontline units. When the 91st Division was pulled out of the Meuse-Argonne fighting on 4 October 1918, a V Corps inspector reported that in its ten days of combat, the unit had lost 148 officers and 3,197 men killed or wounded. More alarmingly, the officer noted that 7 officers and 2,206 soldiers were missing but added hopefully, "it is expected that this item will be reduced."[5] In Raucourt, the lieutenant in charge of the town rounded up "between 600 and 700" stragglers from the 1st Division on 8 October 1918.[6] Four days later, the 36th Division's military policemen (MP) claimed to have rounded up "500 men of the division classed as stragglers."[7] The same month the military police units of the Second Army arrested 439 men for being absent without leave (AWOL) and another 370 men for the same offense in November.[8] Although it is impossible to accurately establish the number of men absent from the AEF's combat units, the figure was clearly substantial.

What was equally clear was that the AEF's senior leaders were cognizant of the dangers that these soldiers presented to U.S. operations. The inspector attached to the 37th Division reported



In a short amount of time the Hobo Barrage arrested 719 SOLDIERS

that on 2 October 1918 he had found so many stragglers in the unit's rear area that he estimated "that combat troops only had 80% in strength."[9] The division's four infantry regiments and its 134th and 135th Machine Gun Battalions had suffered 3,010 casualties from 26 to 30 September.[10] When this number is combined with the loss of men absent from the front lines, the decrease in divisional combat power was marked.

The extent and influence of straggling on the AEF's combat power were also reflected in the actions that AEF's senior officers took to rein in these disappearing doughboys. Lt. Col. Troup Miller, a I Corps staff officer, stated that

> it was found necessary in addition to the line of straggler posts formed by the Division to establish a line in rear of each Brigade in order to reduce to a minimum any attempt at straggling. Troops of this purpose were taken from the reserve.[11]

He noted that the first time men were caught, they were simply returned to their units; the second time, they were turned over to the MPs for trial and put to "the most disagreeable work that could be found." The I Corps also tried to shame the soldiers back into line by making the reprobates wear "a large white placard . . . upon which was printed in conspicuous black letters 'straggler from the front line.'"[12]

The V Corps G–1, Col. A. W. Foreman, stated that by 18 October 1918 the number of stragglers had grown "to such an alarming proportion" in the First Army that the V Corps formed a 4,500-man "Hobo Barrage" to "systematically mop up and thoroughly search all dugouts, houses, hospitals, railheads, Y.M.C.A.'s, etc in the area assigned to them."[13] Additionally, V Corps established three tribunals under the direction of an officer at Recicourt, Avocourt, and Montfaucon to interrogate all stragglers brought in to determine if the soldiers caught were truly deserters or had been unjustly arrested. In a short amount of time the Hobo Barrage arrested 719 soldiers and returned over 150 "unauthorized stragglers" to their units.

Author's Collection

Tasked with maintaining order, directing traffic, and handling German prisoners, military policemen were often too few in number, forcing commanders to rely on cavalry troops or other soldiers to man straggler posts.

The commander of the 82d Division, Maj. Gen. George Duncan, noted that after a spike in the number of stragglers from his unit, he was forced to order his subordinates to "post file closers behind each platoon, in addition to the usual straggler's posts" and to direct his MPs continually to search likely hiding or congregation points in the unit's rear. He also required platoon leaders to carry a list of their unit's members that they constantly checked at halts or lulls in the battle to keep an accurate tally of their losses and quickly identify men who disappeared from the lines. By these methods, the division's strength rose by over five hundred "fighting effectives" between 25 and 29 October, not including replacements.[14] In a similar move, on 30 October 1918, the commander of the 89th Division ordered his MPs to move their straggler line "forward to a point three hundred meters in the rear of the front line" and to move forward "in very close contact with the advancing infantry."[15]

Unfortunately, these steps were not enough to stem the tide of desertions. In a 21 October 1918 report to the AEF chief of staff, the AEF inspector general, Maj. Gen. A. W. Brewster, observed that despite efforts to halt straggling with patrols and stationary posts, "any quick witted straggler can get through these lines, especially at night."[16] Even when senior officers attempted to rally the troops and send them back to the lines, they met with little success. Capt. Thomas H. Barber noted that one angry brigadier tried to halt the steady parade of "skulkers" going to the rear and even drove some back by threatening to shoot them himself. Barber recalled that "it struck

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A III Corps MP directs traffic at a control point in Esnes, 30 September 1918. Most stragglers easily avoided these fixed posts.

me as a very remarkable performance, as the skulkers merely went around and back another route; but at least it seemed to afford the old gentleman considerable satisfaction."[17]

Contrary to the statements of senior AEF leaders, the U.S. Army was never able to resolve this problem. As late as 9 November 1918, the Second Army provost marshal warned his subordinates that "straggling has been allowed to become a menace to the success of operations" and ordered them to "take such definite, immediate, and aggressive steps as will insure without question the immediate apprehension and return of these men to their proper places in [the] line."[18] Between 28 October and 1 November 1918, the MP companies operating straggler posts in the First Army sector rounded up 613 AWOL soldiers. On 30 October alone the MPs apprehended 193 stragglers. Those arrested came from twenty-two different AEF divisions, and most were combat soldiers from infantry regiments or machine gun battalions.[19] These apprehensions were likely only a small fraction of the stragglers roaming the AEF's rear area. If General Brewster was correct, and a "quick witted straggler" was able to avoid arrest, the number of absent soldiers probably continued to number in the thousands.

The greatest difficulty the AEF's senior leadership faced in halting this problem was simply a shortage of resources. As the number of American stragglers continued to grow at an alarming rate in the second week of the Argonne drive, the 33d Division inspector reported to the AEF inspector general, General Brewster, that "there is but one [MP] company of three officers and one-hundred and forty-four men, covering an area difficult to access in many cases of practically sixteen square miles," which limited the ability of the MPs to apprehend stragglers and also accomplish their other missions.[20] During the Argonne drive at least two division commanders requested troops of cavalry from their corps commanders to drive these men out of woods and other sanctuaries in the rear.[21]

Author Wendell Westover claimed that much of the problem with straggling and malingering stemmed from the impossibility of having any effective punishment for the reprobates. Even when commanders were successful in bringing charges,

> the Court-Martial was so frequently overruled by soft, slab-sided desk hounds . . . that discipline was hard to enforce anyhow. What did they know about the added danger to an outfit going in, incomplete because some quitter had dropped out with ammunition? What did they know of the instant effect on morale by desertion of just one man at a critical time, to say nothing of the added losses if such spirit was allowed to extend, or the operation was hindered by lack of men?[22]

Senior commanders had limited the ability of their junior officers to punish wayward soldiers in any meaningful manner. Stragglers therefore faced few repercussions; in most cases they were merely returned to their units without further action.

While often depriving junior leaders of much of their coercive power, senior officers were quick to blame these officers and noncommissioned officers (NCO) for failing to maintain discipline within their units. An inspector general investigation of the crisis in the First Army stated the causes for the problem were a "lack of discipline among both the officers and soldiers," a "lack of personnel and supervision of the men by the battalion and company commanders," and a "lack of leadership by platoon leaders and sergeants."[23] The report maintained that one of the primary reasons for the epidemic was that "platoon leaders do not know where their men are" and made little effort to track them down. Given the problems the U.S. Army faced in raising and training its wartime cadre of junior combat leaders, the inspector general's accusations were justified. However, it was unfair to make junior leaders the scapegoats for the issue. Although leadership did play a major role in creating an environment that allowed straggling to flourish, it was only one of a number of interrelated factors that produced the crisis. Other factors, such as the systemic problems the Army faced in mobilizing a mass army, the shortcuts it took in training and deploying its units, and the battlefield realities the Americans encountered on the Western Front in 1918, also contributed to the problem.

The key question that must be resolved is why did these soldiers

as the ad hoc unit came under heavy German fire, soldiers began to MELT AWAY

straggle from the front lines? Unfortunately, few gave any reason for their absence other than they were lost and became separated from their units. For many soldiers this was an honest and accurate confession. Tactical command and control during World War I was notoriously tricky for those on the offensive. The difficult terrain of the Argonne region, morning fog, and battlefield smoke resulted in a number of doughboys becoming detached from their commands. On 10 October 1918, the 82d Division's inspector general reported that "an unestimated number of men, reported to be considerable, have returned to their regiments during the past twenty-four hours stating that they had become separated and temporarily lost in the woods or during darkness." The inspector remarked that "their present attitudes and desire to fight indicates the truth of most of these statements."[24] Pvt. Ray Johnson, a machine gunner in the 37th Division, noted that during the Argonne drive some men, "being separated from their outfits by chance shellfire or orders to spread out, wandered helplessly about or attached themselves to other advancing units."[25] One such refugee, Pvt. Vernon Nichols of the 91st Division, spent three days wandering leaderless after he and two other soldiers lost contact with their company on the first day that their unit was committed to the Argonne battle.[26] Nichols and his comrades spent their time fighting with whatever American units they encountered and would then leave the unit to find food or attach themselves to another group as the spirit moved them.

In traversing the jumbled terrain of the Meuse-Argonne, the problems with the AEF's junior leaders' ability to command and control their enormous companies and platoons became apparent. The experiences of Capt. Clarence Minick illustrate the problems that commanders faced in maintaining control of their units. On 29 September 1918, his company was part of the attack by the 91st Division to seize the high ground to the northwest of Montfaucon. After fighting through most of the morning, Minick's battalion halted while the brigade commander attempted to sort out some of the confusion and mix-up of units that had occurred earlier in the day. At 1430, Minick's battalion was ordered forward to seize Gesnes. Shortly after leading his unit forward, Minick discovered that he was missing most of his company. The only elements under his control were one and a half platoons.[27]

Minick later discovered that prior to the jump-off of the attack, a runner from battalion headquarters had given a message to one of his missing platoon leaders that ordered the company to attack immediately. The runner also assured the platoon leader that Minick had been informed of the change in orders. Unfortunately, the order did not reach Minick for some time, and the platoon leader, who was out of direct contact and sight of the rest of the company, moved forward as directed. Minick confessed that due to this confusion, his company "was pretty badly disorganized." Despite these mix-ups, the captain still managed to take Gesnes but suffered heavy losses in the process. After consolidating his hold on the town, Minick had to give up his hard-won gains after the unit on his flanks pulled back and left his position untenable. Minick was not able to find his wayward platoon and squads until 0700 on 30 September.

Captain Minick's battalion was ordered to attack again on 30 September 1918. The events of this day were as confused and tragic as the day before. The American lines were in such a state of disorder that Minick's battalion and company were filled with soldiers from various units of the 91st, 37th, and 35th Divisions. Officers simply corralled all the soldiers they came across and pushed them forward in the attack. The cohesion of this

A machine gun platoon advances through a densely wooded area. Terrain like this was typical of the Meuse-Argonne region.

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U.S. soldiers passing through Montfaucon

pickup team was sparse, and as the ad hoc unit came under heavy German fire, soldiers began to melt away. By 1300 the attack had ground to a halt, and the American troops returned to their jump-off line.[28]

In trying to retain control of their units and direct them toward accomplishing the unit's missions, junior officers were often hobbled by their lack of trained and experienced noncommissioned officers. Given the size of the AEF's infantry companies (261 men) and platoons (59 men) and the lack of effective tactical communications, junior officers were dependent upon their NCOs to aid them in leading the extended or scattered ranks. The inability of some noncommissioned officers to step in to their leadership roles led to dire consequences. An infantry battalion commander remembered that after his companies were shelled, the unit lost all order and cohesion. He wrote,

> Over the suddenly disorganized mass the mere handful of officers, without the slightest voluntary aid from the noncommissioned officers, are able to exercise but little control. The battalion is hopelessly scattered in the woods for the time being. All semblance of organization has vanished.[29]

A senior 82d Division officer complained on 7 October 1918 that far too many of the unit's squad leaders had failed to "exercise aggressive control" following the loss of their officers.[30]

In April 1919, General John J. Pershing convened a board of officers to study the AEF's overall lessons learned from the war. This so-called Lewis Board, named after its chairman Maj. Gen. Edward M. Lewis, concluded that combat losses among infantry noncommissioned officers led to a drastic reduction in the quality and reliability of small-unit leaders in the last months of the war. The board maintained that "nearly every survivor who belonged to a rifle company, and who was not a complete mental failure, of necessity had to become a non commissioned officer in order to rebuild a cadre that could absorb the replacements." This fact, it maintained, led to the AEF having to rely on a group of "poorly trained and rather dull non commissioned officers."[31] Under such circumstances, it was no wonder that American NCOs were often unable or unwilling to exercise the direct leadership required to maintain adequate control of their soldiers.

Officers often compounded their problems with command and control, and further undermined the ability of their noncommissioned officers to operate on their own, by failing to brief their soldiers on the details and intent of their unit's missions. Pvt. John Nell, an infantryman in the 77th Division, remembered of his time in the Argonne region that

> we enlisted men never knew much about our movements, only what we were told and what we could see and hear. The woods were so thick; our vision was only in and around where we were standing or walking. We did not know what day of the week or day of the month it was the entire time.[32]

Pvt. Milton B. Sweningsen stated that when it came time for his unit's attacks in the Meuse-Argonne, "I guess the officers knew [the plan], but privates were given no such information."[33] Sweningsen noted the isolation and fear that he felt after being separated from his unit without adequate knowledge of what he was supposed to do. He remembered thinking,

> What to do? It did not make sense to me to start attacking alone. This was not a one-man war. I knew that there were no soldiers anywhere I could see, so I guess I started for the rear. Somewhere that morning there had been a rumor that we were

All semblance of organization has VANISHED

> about to be relieved; that may have influenced me to head back.[34]

Without any clear conception of the details of their missions, and cut off from the orders of their officers, soldiers such as Private Sweningsen abandoned their posts simply because they had no clue of what else to do.

The available evidence suggests that the largest number of cases of men straggling from the line was directly related to the failure of junior leaders and their superiors to live up to their end of the social contract. Masses of men simply left the lines because their officers had failed to provide the soldiers' basic needs of food and water. Combat logistics, the forward push of rations, ammunition, and supplies and the rearward movement of casualties, had long been a sore spot in the AEF and the cause of much straggling.[35] For example, during the Aisne-Marne operation, the 2d Division's MPs reported that

> the difficulty of getting the food to the troops soon resulted in looting for the men were searching the whole country for deserted chickens, rabbits and scant food supplies left by the villagers. Looting and straggling went hand in hand for it was noticed that in nearly all cases where arrests were made the looter was found also to be absent without leave from his organization.[36]

During the St. Mihiel Offensive the IV Corps inspector general, Col. Edward Carpenter, also noted the difficulty that the units had in getting rations to the frontline troops and that "reserve rations were repeatedly eaten without the orders of the organization's commander and at other than proper time."[37] The problem with getting rations and supplies to the front lines became even worse when the AEF moved into the Meuse-Argonne region. The region had a very limited road network, and four years of fighting and shelling had left large swaths nearly untrafficable for the army's supply wagons and trucks.[38]

Within days of the start of the offensive, soldiers were already complaining about their lack of rations. Officers in the 313th Infantry, 79th Division, noted that during their attack to take Montfaucon during the opening days of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive "it had been nearly impossible to get rations and the food carried in the packs had been consumed . . . and together with the lack of food and rest, the troops were in a pretty exhausted state." Ultimately, the soldiers of the regiment went nearly four days without any food except for their reserve rations.[39]

General Pershing inspecting U.S. troops

Between 12 and 14 October 1918, the mess sergeant for Company H, 126th Infantry, was unable to bring rations up to the line. The units made due by having returning stretcher bearers bring hard bread and cans of corned beef. On 15 October the only supplies brought forward were hard bread and bandoleers of ammunition. When the company commander sent back rations-carrying parties on 16 October, the men were "too tired, wary, and weak to

Traffic jams compounded the AEF's logistical problems.


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Poor road conditions continually hampered logistical efforts.

carry the marmite cans of hot food thru the back area brush and shell holes." As a result, the only ration the company again received was hard bread.[40] An artilleryman, L. V. Jacks, recalled that despite the best efforts of his unit's cooks during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, the lack of food meant that they "tightened their belts, for downright starvation seemed imminent."[41] If things were bad for artillery units behind the lines, it was even worse for the infantrymen battling forward.

On 9 October 1918, the inspector general for the 82d Division reported that over one hundred soldiers from the 78th Division had straggled into his unit's rear area between the night of 8 October and the morning of 9 October. He declared that "all of these men asked for food, stating that none of them had anything to eat since the night of October 7th," and "some men stated that they had had nothing to eat for a longer period than two days." All admitted that "no permission had been given to leave their camp," but their officers had made no effort to account for their men, nor given them any indication when food would arrive. He also noted that "the personal appearance of these men indicated a general disorganized condition, as evidenced by torn and shabby clothing, unbuttoned blouses and overcoats, failure to shave for several days."[42]

Private Baker admitted that he "went on an exploring trip" from the front line during the Meuse-Argonne fighting but stated that "the pangs of hunger were largely responsible for this." In his defense, after stealing a large can of corned beef from the field kitchen of another division he returned to the front to share his loot with his comrades.[43] A soldier in the 82d Division recalled that his unit was so short of food on 11 October 1918 that he was forced to rifle through the pack of a dead German to get the man's black bread. After two more days without food, he straggled from the lines to find some rations.[44] Sometimes even officers were complicit in this form of straggling. Captain Barber's company grew so short of food during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive that he selected four men that he "judged good thieves" and sent them to the rear to beg, borrow, or steal whatever rations they could find. Finally, the captain himself left the front with eight men to forage the rear area for food.[45]

Field kitchens located in the rear of the firing lines attracted hungry soldiers like moths to a flame. The problem became so acute that one officer eventually placed a guard on his mess line and kitchen to keep thieves "from sneaking in."[46] The staff of the V Corps noted, "It was found that permitting the Y.M.C.A. and other canteens to approach too close to the front lines induced straggling. Many men who did not intend to become stragglers slipped away to get a cup of hot chocolate or some cigarettes and were picked up as stragglers."[47] In some cases the satiated soldiers returned to the front following their repast. One infantryman in the 91st Division apprehended at a kitchen, told his captor that "all of our officers is gone an' we more or less

Field kitchens were often raided by hungry stragglers.


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shift for ourselves." He stated that he had come back for "some coffee an' a night's sleep" and then planned to return to the fight in whatever place he saw fit. The incredulous officer mused,

> They had discovered an excellent arrangement whereby they might commute to the front with their bellies filled with hot coffee. Presently they would be starting for the Front again to take up their jobs where they had left them last night. M.P.s over at Very were beginning to round them up. But they required no persuasion. It was one thing to fight a war on a piecework basis and quite another to quit a job and leave one's friends holding the sack.[48]

The YMCA serves hot chocolate to American soldiers.

The last line explains much of why these "situational" stragglers continued to fight despite the failure of their leaders to uphold their end of the social contract. However, the desire to not "leave one's friends holding the sack" could only sustain cohesion for so long, especially when the list of "one's friends" continued getting shorter.

Shortages of food worsened other problems that wore away the soldiers' health, stamina, and morale. On 19 October 1918, the First Army's inspector general reported that the 91st Division was in dire straits and needed at least seven days' rest to rebuild its strength. The division surgeon informed the inspector that after nineteen days of fighting and marching "none of the men were fit for duty owing to dysentery, fatigue and stomach trouble." He also noted that "the 2309 replacements recently received are all contacts with influenza, 40% now being sick with that disease." Furthermore, the inspector discovered that there were a "considerable" number of stragglers from the unit and 955 men were still reported as missing. The commanders of two of the division's infantry regiments concurred with the inspector's grim assessments. The commander of the 361st Infantry stated that "the fighting ability of the men he had left was not over 20% of what it was on Sept. 26," while the commander of the 362d Infantry "believed he did not have a single man who is an effective in the proper sense of the word."[49]

A Red Cross canteen near Senoncourt, 4 October 1918

There were measures that junior leaders could have taken to lessen some of the physical discomforts endured by their soldiers. The veteran French infantryman-novelist Henri Barbusse observed in combat, "damp rusts men as it does rifles; more slowly, but deeper."[50] In this environment it was incumbent on junior leaders to see that their men were at least well clothed and equipped to deal with their exposure to the elements. A 32d Division infantryman reported that by 19 October 1918 the lack of basic necessities in his unit was causing great hardship. The soldier was still wearing summer weight underclothes, was suffering from dysentery, and recalled that the "lack of food caused me to be very weak."[51] Another doughboy in the 82d Division remembered that when the officers failed to supervise and discipline their soldiers, the men

> threw away their raincoats and overcoats when they went over the top, so that later they had nothing at all to protect them from the cold and the wet. They went for days and days, sleeping in shell holes filled with ice-water, living on nothing but bully beef and water.[52]

This failure of officers and NCOs to maintain even this level of discipline meant that the health and combat efficiency of the units quickly degraded. During the month of October, the 82d Division's medical staff reported an average of seven hundred soldiers per day in the hospitals suffering from influenza, diarrhea, and exhaustion.[53] Oliver Q. Melton, commander of Company K, 325th Infantry, reported that between 16 and 30 October "everyone was sick and weak, many of the men were on the verge of a nervous breakdown."[54] Although some of these problems were due to the inherent nature of combat, the failure of leaders to be more proactive in ensuring the comfort of their men certainly contributed to the predicament.

The 82d Division was not the only combat unit suffering from the combined effects of high casualties, battlefield exhaustion, and shortages of supplies in the Argonne region. Inspector general reports from other divisions revealed the same poor physical conditions and morale. The lack of strong junior leadership to provide for soldiers' basic needs, build unit cohesion, and reinforce soldiers' morale had striking consequences. After only a week of the offensive, the First Army inspector general reported a disturbing conversation with the 3d Division G–1:

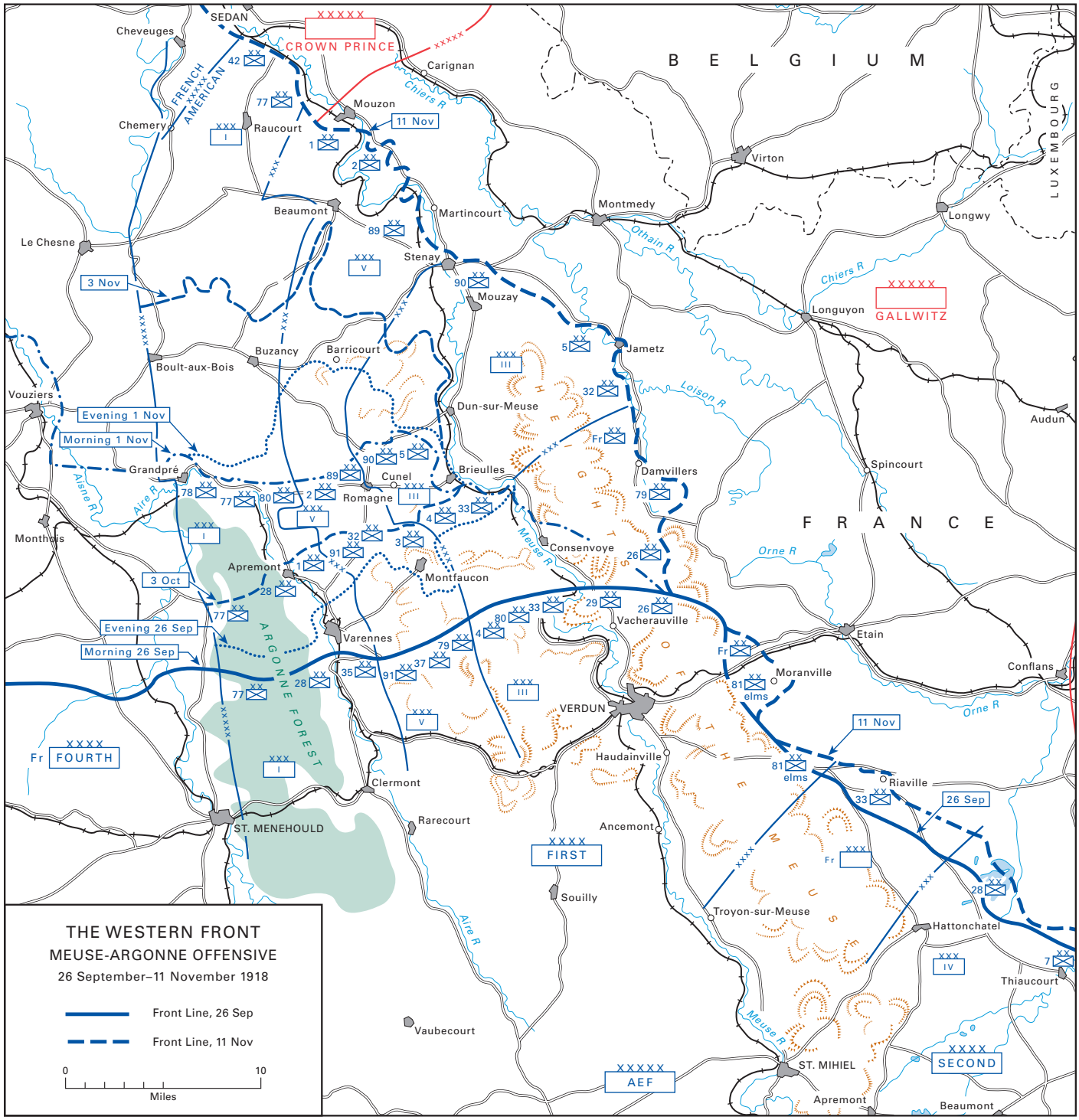
> Colonel Stone . . . stated that the 3rd Division relieved the 79th [the] day before yesterday. He says that the 79th Division was the most demoralized outfit that he had ever seen; that the men had thrown away a great deal of their equipment and that the 3rd Division has equipped a complete Machine Gun Company with the machine guns thrown away by the 79th; that the men are dejected and demoralized and apparently not the subject of any discipline. From his talk with different men of the 79th he was convinced that they were utterly unfit for any further operations.[55]

The situation only worsened as the campaign dragged onward. After his unit lost over nine thousand men in two weeks, the 1st Division's inspector general reported on 16 October that "the morale of the unit is not nearly as high as it formerly was. This is shown by the general demeanor of the men and the lack of snap and spirit which formerly prevailed in this unit."[56] After a series of costly attacks, the 3d Division inspector general reported on 15 October that "although I am inexperienced in judging men under battle conditions, I wish to state that those officers and men whom I saw of the 38th Infantry appeared to me, to use a slang term, 'all in.'" [57] The day after this report was made, the MPs rounded up over five hundred stragglers from the division loitering in the rear. Weeks of frontal attacks, combined with the leaders' inability to care for their soldiers, had brought the AEF to exhaustion and the brink of dissolution.

Ironically, although poor oversight by junior combat leaders certainly encouraged straggling, the loss of these key individuals, often poorly trained, added to the problem and resulted in a relative decline of know-how in small units. As military sociologist Darryl Henderson noted, the small unit officers and NCOs played the vital role of setting and maintaining the behavioral norms of their units and served as the intermediaries between the higher headquarters and the individual soldiers. When these leaders were lost, cohesion and effectiveness declined.[58]

The leadership of the AEF's small units was constantly being rebuilt due to casualties or the loss of leaders to AEF schools or other requirements. Lt. Joseph Lawrence recalled that, of the eleven officers assigned with him to the 29th Division after graduating from the AEF candidates' school in September 1918, seven eventually made it into the fighting in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Of these seven, three were killed in action and two more were wounded and evacuated. Only Lawrence and one other officer survived the battle without a scratch.[59] Lt. Henry Thorn, of the 313th Infantry, 79th Division, reported that his regiment's four-day attack to seize Montfaucon had cost forty-five officers; twelve of whom were killed in action. To make matters worse, as soon as the regiment came out of the line, orders came down to send one officer per company to the II Corps schools. Their positions were filled by a replacement captain and fifteen replacement lieutenants.[60]

The AEF's junior officers came and went in infantry companies with a bewildering rapidity. Company A, 1st Battalion, 308th Infantry, had seven different company commanders from July to November 1918. During the same period, Company B had five commanders, Company C had six, and Company D had four. The battalion's turnover of lieutenants was just as great. Twenty-one officers passed through the ranks of Company C in those same four months.[61] The experience of the 308th Infantry was far from uncommon. In the 107th Infantry, 27th Division, each of the unit's line companies had, on average, over sixteen captains and lieutenants assigned to



them during the course of the war. The regiment's Company A suffered the most changes in its officers, with twenty-five cycling through during the war.[62] Interestingly enough, the AEF General Headquarters had some inkling of the negative effect of these changes. In August 1918, an AEF staff officer observed that frequent changes in battalion and company commanders in the 27th Division had undermined "discipline and efficiency" within the division's units.[63] Unfortunately, this complaint went unanswered.

The negative effect of this revolving door of leaders was the breakdown of the vital face-to-face relationships between the leaders and the men and degraded the morale and cohesion within the AEF's infantry companies. As his unit entered the Meuse-Argonne region, Pvt. John Barkley noted that "officers were like passing shadows with us now. It hardly paid to try to get acquainted with them" for they generally and quickly became

casualties.[64] The casualties that his unit soon suffered in the Argonne later led him to note, "the regiment was in bad shape. We'd been cut to pieces a dozen times, and the remains reorganized so often that nobody knew what he belonged to."[65] Following ten days of bloodletting in the Argonne, a soldier from the 312th Infantry, 78th Division, observed,

> The previous days of fighting had depleted the numbers until there were left not more than an average of sixty men in each rifle company. No battalion could boast of more than five line officers, while the lack of non-commissioned officers was a serious handicap. A thorough reorganization was necessary, a division of rifle companies into two platoons in place of the customary four and a redistribution of officers to provide at least one to each company—fortunate indeed [was] the company commander who could boast a subaltern to assist him. Hasty appointments of acting non-commissioned officers to lead the subordinate elements followed as a matter of course. *No longer did the officer have an intimate personal knowledge of the individuals under his supervision.*" [emphasis added][66]

A number of soldiers echoed these sentiments. For example, Private Sweningsen, an infantryman in the 35th Division, reported that this unit was so wracked by the loss and replacement of leaders that "I hardly knew the officers of my own company."[67]

These losses had an immediate and negative effect on a unit's performance and cohesion. Pvt. Charles Flacker, an infantryman in the 112th Infantry, 28th Division, recalled that his company suffered so many casualties among its leaders that low-ranking men had to fill the positions. He remarked that it was "every man for himself" in the company.[68] After the near disintegration of the 35th Division in the opening days of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, Col. Robert McCormick noted that "casualties among the officers were undoubtedly responsible for a great deal of the disorganization" and that "most of the straggling and confusion was caused by men getting lost and not having leaders, and not from any deliberate design to go to the rear in order to avoid further fighting."[69]

The high casualty rates and subsequent turnover of officers and men resulted in a lack of discipline and accountability.

During the 5th Division's time in the Argonne, the division inspector reported that due to heavy losses "in some organizations the officers had been on duty for a very short time, and did not know the men, nor did the men know the officers. Apparently a great many men did not know their officers by sight." This presented insurmountable obstacles to the division's cohesion and contributed to its lackluster combat performance. The officer remarked that when the 11th Infantry was sent forward to relieve another unit in the line, "it was shelled by the enemy, and the men scattered." He went on to report that "a great many stragglers resulted from this . . . and the other regiments also lost a large number of stragglers by the confusion caused by the relief."[70]

While some troops went AWOL from the lines due to being lost, hungry, sick, or leaderless, others left the lines in a calculated effort to avoid combat. Private Baker, a soldier who admitted to frequently leaving the lines, drew a sharp distinction between his actions and those of the soldiers that he found lurking in abandoned German barracks behind the lines. To Baker, these men "were stragglers pure and simple, willfully playing out of battle, or in stronger terms deserters," while he was simply out of the lines for a break and always intended to return.[71] Capt. John Stringfellow, an infantry officer in the 80th Division, called these deliberate stragglers "shell-holers"; men "who in an advance got into shell holes and then liked it so well that they stayed there while their comrades advanced unsupported by them."[72]

The AEF provost marshal also differentiated between common stragglers and "battle stragglers." A straggler was "a soldier absent from his unit without permission or who cannot produce satisfactory evidence that he is on duty," while "battle stragglers" were "N.C.O.'s or men who straggle from the immediate fighting line, or from their units, when these units are moving up to the immediate fighting line."[73] Battle straggling carried the connotation of deliberateness.

The densely wooded Meuse-Argonne region was populated with shelters, dugouts, and barracks that had been constructed by the French and Germans over the previous four years of the war. The natural and man-made features provided a ready

sanctuary for any soldier seeking to escape combat. While troops straggling in the immediate rear of the front lines could offer the excuse that they were lost from their units, men hiding out in shelters and woods far behind the lines could offer no such explanation. Their straggling, more accurately described as desertion, was a premeditated attempt to dodge fighting.

It is impossible to determine how many of these men left the front to avoid combat. However, there is some evidence to show that the numbers were relatively large. The 82d Division's inspector general reported on 12 October that while most of the unit's stragglers were simply lost, "a small minority, difficult to estimate, were undoubtedly, endeavoring to evade their duty and were collected from dugouts in Chatel Chehery and elsewhere."[74] There may have been more cases of combat avoidance than the inspector admitted. On 20 October the division still could not account for 1,019 men and the adjoining 78th Division reported that the woods in its area were "full of stragglers" from the 82d Division.[75]

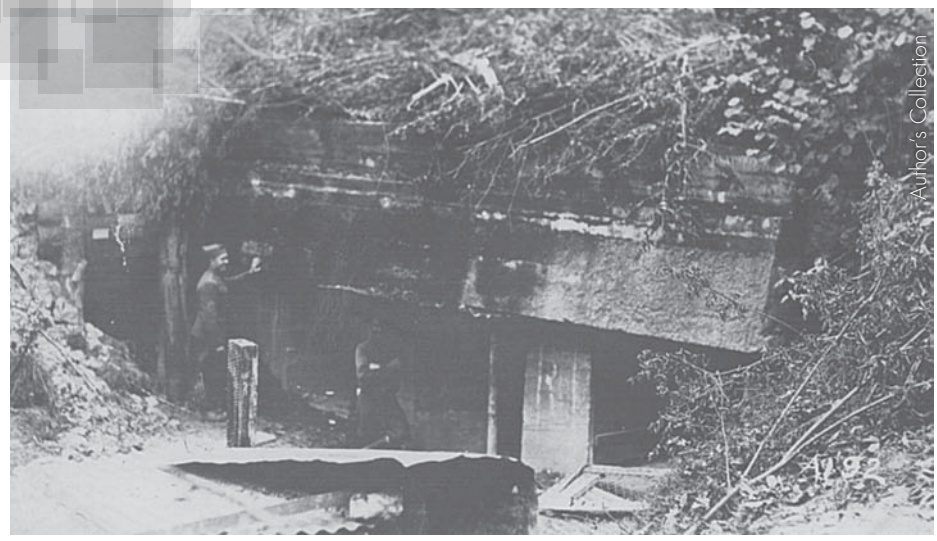
The 82d was not alone in this problem. In late October Maj. Gen. William Wright wrote that while moving through the rear area he "found a number of stragglers from the Eighty-ninth, Forty-second, and Second divisions. They were out in the woods and making themselves comfortable in the Boche dugouts and apparently with the intention of staying there."[76] On one occasion in early October 1918, a detail of MPs from the 32d Division searching for stragglers in abandoned shelters found ninety men hiding in one large dugout.[77] These reports indicate that a number of men were seeking to dodge combat and were doing so with relative ease.

Abandoned German bunkers and machine gun posts provided excellent hiding places for straggling soldiers.

Another indication of the depth of the problem of combat avoidance was the number of men apprehended multiple times for this offense. On 14 October 1918, MPs from the 32d Division complained that they had apprehended a number of stragglers from the 5th Division and returned them to their units, only to find the same men shortly after again hiding out around Montfaucon.[78] These incidents tend to support the point that the AEF had men who were so averse to fighting that they risked capture multiple times and that the fear of punishment in these men was rather small. In addition, despite repeated infractions, their small-unit leaders were unable or unwilling to do much about it.

The acting first sergeant for Company K, 142d Infantry, Archibald Hart, recalled finding a number of stragglers hiding in a German bunker while searching for water for his company. Hart noted that the stragglers had picked a spot near a supply route where they could steal food by night and then "return to their comfortable quarters near the water supply and, undisturbed, catch up on their sleep during the day." The sergeant opted not to report the men for several reasons. First of all, he believed that such

German shelters like this one in Bois de Montfaucon could accommodate a large number of men.



Supply trucks stuck in the mud were easy targets for thieving stragglers.

activities were an officer's purview, and he did not think his new commander would make an effort to follow up on the matter because the soldiers were not from his company. Also, he concluded philosophically, "a cozy hideout, well to the rear and out of harm's way, was a proper place for a skulker," for "he definitely would be a liability in the front line, and his Company would function better if he kept himself out of the way."[79] It is hard to argue with Hart's logic, but if his laissez-faire attitude to straggling was indicative of the opinions of other AEF junior leaders then their inactivity undoubtedly encouraged straggling.

Unlike those soldiers who left the lines because they were lost or hungry, discovering why "battle stragglers" sought to avoid combat is more difficult. Because few admitted their motives, any discussion in this area must be based on the observations of third parties or speculation. Some of the reasons certainly went back to issues with leadership in the AEF's small combat units. For example, Captain Barber attributed much of the straggling to poor leadership and to men becoming "fed up" with the uncertainties and pettiness of everyday military life.[80] In some cases, the junior leaders set such a bad example for their soldiers by their own misconduct that the men were naturally bound to follow. Pvt. Ernesto Bisogno stated that at Chatel Chehery "some officers ran like sheep" and abrogated their responsibilities by trying to save their own skins.[81] A 28th Division private recalled that soon after his four-man patrol moved forward to scout the German lines on 1 October, "our sergeant deserted us," leaving three privates alone and leaderless in no-man's-land.[82] Lieutenant Lawrence, an infantry officer in the 29th Division, reported that his company's first sergeant deserted the unit in the middle of the Argonne fight, taking with him "several other men of the company." He also noted the poor example set by a company commander nicknamed "Dugout Pete," which reflected his refusal to leave the safety of his bunker during his unit's attacks.[83]

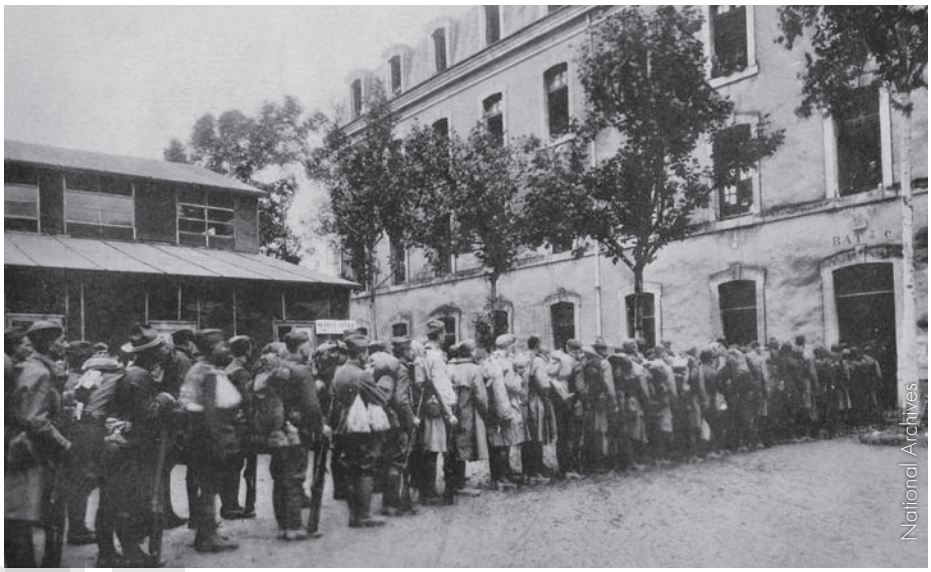
After observing the 5th Division, Col. J. A. Bauer informed his superior that "the officers with the troops of this division appear 'jumpy'" and suggested that this fact explained many of the unit's 2,500 stragglers.[84] Bauer's assessment of the 5th Division was close to the mark. During the 3d Battalion, 61st Infantry's attack on the Bois des Rappes on 15 October 1918, the unit's adjutant broke down after witnessing the death of the battalion commander and two company commanders. When the adjutant "became panicky and departed precipitately to the rear. The few men in his immediate vicinity naturally followed." The terror-stricken officer soon reported to the regimental commander that the unit "was all cut to pieces and what was left of it was retreating." This bogus report led to the entire regiment being pulled back from the line, only to suffer heavy casualties over the next two days trying to recover the terrain it had previously taken.[85]

Some of the battle stragglers were simply men who had stayed at the front until they had reached their physical and psychological breaking point. One officer later wrote that after grueling weeks at the front under constant fire, men tried to slip to the rear for "a few minutes of relief from the hell on the line." He recalled that "this kept up all night, making it necessary for me to patrol the line. . . . I would drive one man back to his position and another would try to slip by."[86] One infantryman blamed this type of straggling on the fact that commanders "had forgotten that there is a limit to human endurance."[87]

Other battle stragglers were perhaps motivated to avoid combat long before this "limit to human endurance" was reached due to fear and to the realization that neither their own training nor that of their leaders had prepared them for battle. The AEF's soldiers were "thinking bayonets" who were cognizant of these shortcomings. The fact that the AEF had large numbers of men actively seeking to avoid combat indicates that there were major problems with cohesiveness within the army's small units. In many of the AEF's small units, it was simply the case of the unwilling being led by the unready into the unknown. As soldiers weighed their chances of survival in combat and opted to "vote with their feet," the quality of their leaders was undoubtedly one of the factors that influenced their decision.

Even some of the more reliable soldiers opted to moderate their aggressiveness based on the odds of survival. When Private Baker and his unit were ordered back to the front at 0830 on 11 November 1918, the soldier did not want to risk his life for nothing and decided to hide out for a few hours to see what happened. After a bit of

it was simply the case of the unwilling being led by the unready into the UNKNOWN



Newly arriving soldiers report to the replacement center in Le Mans on 6 October 1918 for processing and unit assignment. Some officers and noncommissioned officers claimed that untrained replacements lacked basic combat skills and discipline and accounted for most of their units' stragglers.

moral calculus, Baker decided that if fighting continued after the armistice time of 1100, he would dutifully return to the fight; if the fighting ceased, he figured that no harm was done by his straggling and that he had been right in not tempting fate in the closing hours of the war.[88] Similarly, Pvt. George Dongarra admitted that when his truck broke down on 9 November 1918, rumors of a possible armistice led him and his fellow driver "to linger on the troubled motor" for two days until the fighting stopped.[89]

It is interesting to note that many officers and NCOs blamed the straggler problem on replacements. The AEF inspector general noted that when the replacements consisted of "men who do not know the rudiments of soldiering [they] soon become either 'cannon fodder' or skulkers." A soldier in the 42d Division corroborated this observation by noting that most stragglers from his unit "had been replacements newly arrived."[90] Nine years after the armistice, war correspondent Thomas Johnson wrote in his aptly titled *Without Censor* that the war was hardest on those men, usually replacements, who had been shunted off to the front with very little training under their belts. He noted,

> We could always recognize them on the roads of the battle area. They were paler, slighter, than the men who had had their proper hardening and had not just come from crowded transports, and they looked about nervously. Who could blame them?[91]

Johnson recalled that "some of the youngest ones, scared boys, drifted to Y.M.C.A. hotels where they were fed and warmed and often got their nerve and went back to the front."[92]

If replacements did make up the majority of battle stragglers (and this point is far from certain), they had good reason to flee from battle. An infantry first sergeant in the 32d Division mourned the fact that "replacements get the end of dirty things in the Army. They are shoved from pillar to post and back again. . . . They acquire buddies one day to have them leave the next day. . . . Their A[rmy] P[ost] O[ffice] number is changed before they receive mail from the folks at home."[93] If these indignities were not enough, in an Army not known for the quality and quantity of its training, replacements were often the worst trained of the lot.

The stories that some replacements had to be told how to load their rifles just before H-hour are far from apocryphal. Once the 83d Division was transformed into the 2d Depot Division, its intelligence officer began to track the level of training of the replacements that arrived in France in the summer and fall of 1918. These reports provide sad evidence of the breakdown of the stateside training of replacements in the last four months of the war. On 12 August 1918, one of the officer's agents reported that the 2,500 men who just arrived at the division from Camps Gordon and Hancock had "been in the service only a few weeks." A month later, another agent reported that the 597 draftees that had just arrived from Camps Pike, MacArthur, and Gordon "had all been in the army less than a month and have had little or no training." The men who reported on 29 October from Camp Pike had only spent one day on the rifle range and had no gas training before being shipped overseas. The men who arrived on the same day from Camp MacArthur were little better off. They had spent one or two days on the range and had been given six hours of gas training just before leaving for France.[94]

One 35th Division replacement had no real training in the thirty-five days

Rifle practice at Camp Gordon, Georgia

between the time he was inducted to the point at which he sailed for France and did not even receive his first uniform until he reached the embarkation point at Camp Mills, New York. He recalled,

> After we reached France, we were brigaded with English troops and given some training, using our own officers in close order drill. I was on the firing range once. No information or training was given about extended lines or attack tactics. Now here I was, at the bottom of a hill, in a pit of fog and on the attack. [original emphasis]

He remembered hearing such commands as "deploy as skirmishers" and "advance in squad column" without understanding what they meant.[95] To survive in combat, he simply tried to follow the directions of his squad leader and mimic his actions. Lt. Hugh Thompson found that twelve of the replacements assigned to his company just before the St. Mihiel Offensive had never fired their rifles before, and others "were not very sure of their rifles." Their only training before going into combat was "each man was allowed to fire a clip (five rounds) into the soggy ground at his feet."[96]

The commander of the 307th Infantry, 77th Division, Lt. Col. Eugene Houghton, argued that the cohesion and morale of his unit suffered from the influx of new recruits. Of the 850 to 900 men he received just before going into the Argonne battle, "90% of them had never fired a rifle, nor thrown a grenade, nor had they the ordinary close order drill." He went on to note,

> Since the action started it has been frequently reported to me by company and battalion commanders that it was practically impossible to handle these men over the present terrain. They had no idea what it meant to extend [formations] and would have to be led around from place to place. They were continually getting lost and straggling, and their officers and N. C. O.'s were practically strangers to them, it made them very difficult to handle them.[97]

Substandard training often meant soldiers had to practice with their equipment whenever possible.

A French officer instructing American troops in the use of gas masks near Menancourt

The 329th Infantry undergoing bayonet training near Le Mans during its first week in France

Sadly, there was little that a company's officers and NCOs could do to address the problems caused by this massive influx of ill-trained men. When his company received thirty exceptionally green replacements, 1st Sgt. Harold C. Woehl was moved to exclaim, "preparing such untrained men for battle was a nerve-wracking job."[98] Although it is unclear whether poorly trained replacements were a major source of stragglers, one could hardly blame these green troops if they realized how unready they were for combat and opted to leave the lines to improve their chances of survival.

Ultimately, we will never know the exact number of American soldiers who abandoned the lines during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, nor will we be able to determine exactly why large numbers of soldiers deliberately separated themselves from their units in an effort to avoid combat. What we can deduce, however, is that the number of "disappearing doughboys" was a grave concern to the AEF's senior staffs and commanders throughout the operation.

Snarls such as this prevented the forward movement of critical supplies and provided the perfect conditions for stragglers to fade into the lumbering crowd.

This concern certainly led the AEF to divert a number of resources to stem the tide. These resources, such as MPs and cavalrymen, could have perhaps been better employed in tasks such as untangling the massive traffic jams behind the lines that hindered the army's critical logistical functions. On 18 October 1918, General John Du Cane of the British Military Mission to the Allied Armies reported that the disjointed and ill-lead U.S. attacks in the Argonne did nothing but "suffer wastage out of all proportion to the results achieved."[99] Even Brig. Gen. Harold Fiske, General Pershing's chief of training, had to admit that in the final analysis

> it must be remembered that to the end most of our divisions were lacking in skill. Given plenty of time for preparation, they were capable of powerful blows; but their blows were delivered with an awkwardness and lack of resource that made them unduly costly and rendered it impracticable to reap the full fruits of victory.[100]

The lost, hungry, or deliberately malingering soldiers that crowded the roads, mobile kitchens, and dugouts in the rear areas certainly contributed to the conditions that Generals Du Cane and Fiske described.

AH

Notes

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15. Bandholtz, *History of Provost Marshal*, p. 8.

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44. Cpl Fred Takes, 325th Inf, 82d Div, USAMHI WWI Veterans' Survey.

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with disintery and dyreahea and we evacuated a number of men for this reason. They were to weak to perform their tasks."

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