



# The ASC History Newsletter

This  
**MONTH** in  
military  
history ...

1539: Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto landed at Tampa Bay

78: Battle of Crooked Billet

1780: Battle of Waxhaws

1804: Lewis and Clark Expedition began

1813: Americans captured Fort George, Canada

1830: U.S. President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act

1863: Battle of Chancellorsville

1898: U.S. Navy destroys the Spanish Pacific fleet in Manila Bay

1918: Third German offensive on Western Front

1942: Battle of Midway

1944: USS England sank a record six Japanese submarines in 13 days

1944: D-Day on the beaches of Normandy

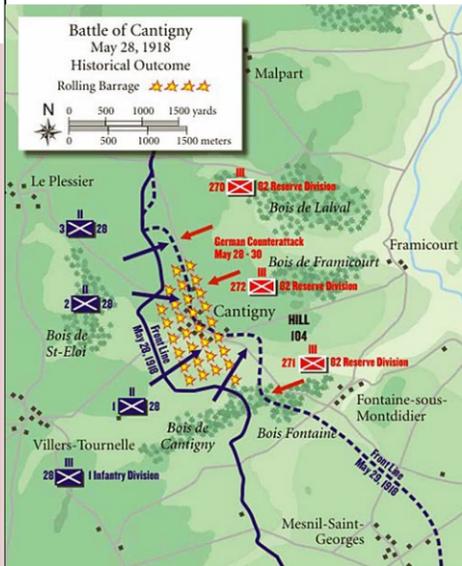
1951: Operation Piledriver

1969: Battle of Hamburger Hill

1995: NATO warplanes struck Bosnian Serb headquarters

## 100th Anniversary of World War I:

### Cantigny



The First Infantry Division in World War One earned its name by being the first division formed for WWI and the first division to ship to Europe. In May 1918 it would be the first American division in WWI combat. In May 1918, the village of Cantigny marked the westernmost point of recent German attacks. Trained in small unit tactics, taught to think in terms of squads, and able to coordinate use of artillery, armor, and airpower, this spring the Germans represented a new way of war. Could an American Army fresh from tracking Pancho Villa in Mexico and its ranks swollen with draftees, prove itself adapted to an industrialized battlefield? Three crucial days—beginning on 28 May—would provide the test in the first American offensive operations in a truly modern war.

Situated directly below Mount Didier, Cantigny controlled the approaches to Rheims and Amiens. For the rest of the Allied Powers, the engagement represented a minor action in a four year war. But for the Americans, the battle of Cantigny witnessed the birth of combined arms and the death of the horse-drawn romanticism of the nineteenth century. Hence, war would be gas-fed, mechanical, and very deadly.

On 24 April 1918 Soldiers of the First Infantry Division relieved the Forty Fifth French Algerian Division. Fighting between the French and the Germans in the area continued right up moment of relief. Pock marked with shell holes and littered with corpses, the sector lacked the dug in fortifications of more established regions. A low ridge crossed the battlefield

some 300 meters ahead of the division outposts. On the other side a low rise, Hill 104, centered the German position, while the monastery of the Bois De Fontaine protected the south. Altogether, the salient spanned a distance one kilometer long and a kilometer and a half deep.

At sunrise on May 28, almost four hundred mortars and field guns broke the silence of the morning. The few remaining windows throughout the sector shook as if from an earthquake. One hour later, at 0645, infantry and armor advanced under the cover of smoke and a rolling artillery barrage. The smells of trampled clover mingled with the odors of stale gas and acrid smoke, as men marched forward amid German machine guns “buzzing like bumblebees.” The first wave bounded ahead some seventy five yards and established automatic rifle pits to lay down suppressive fire. By 0730, the men of the second wave had advanced along a two-kilometer arc, dug in, and set wire emplacements to a depth of three feet. In the town itself, squads of infantry went house-to-house with flamethrowers and rifle grenades, squeezing Germans out of basements, shell holes, and the remains of houses. In the words of Lt. Col. Clarence Huebner, the whole affair resembled extracting “rabbits in Kansas from out of burning straw sacks.” By 0922, the soldiers of the First Infantry Division had captured or killed all the Germans in the town, and three platoons of infantry had established strong points in the eastern woods, at the cemetery, and at Cantigny’s northeastern exit.

Slowly, the German commanders organized their resistance and determined to re-take the town. At noon soldiers of the American 28th Infantry Regiment, saw the first airplanes. By 1415, German artillery zeroed in on the defender’s forward positions, and by late afternoon casualties rose to one third of the front-line troops. Yet, the Germans failed to take advantage of American inexperience. The first

counterattack, planned for 1845, failed because the 271st and 272nd Regiments of the German Reserve arrived twenty minutes late. Throughout the evening of May 28th, the battle steadily devolved into a contest between opposing artillery. The next day, American defenders of the 28th Infantry would fight off four more counterattacks. Through the proper use of artillery and the pluck of men like Corporal Lewis Paski—who captured a German machine gun, broke up an enemy counter-attack, and took nine prisoners—the Americans held their position. That evening Col. Hanson H. Ealy, commander of the 28th Infantry, reported his “front line pounded to hell and gone.” As night fell each side faced the other across a welter of shell holes and concertina wire. The early morning hours brought one more German attack at 0345, quickly repulsed. Though aircraft still flew and artillery still fired, the fighting of opposing infantry ceased on the morning of 30 May 1918. After sunset, the men of the 16th Infantry relieved the men on the line.

When the fighting stopped, the men of the First Infantry Division could be proud of their accomplishments. They took and held Cantigny at a cost of 1067 casualties (killed, missing and wounded), captured 225 prisoners, and killed or wounded 1400 of the enemy. For three days, these men illustrated that the Americans had learned the lessons of modern war. In the process, they destroyed the combat effectiveness of two German infantry regiments. Further, these Americans showed the strength of combined arms at war. In the words of Lt. George E. Butler of Indiana, “it was the finest example of teamwork I ever saw.”



1st Division Soldiers advance at Cantigny 28 May, 1918