



# The ASC History Newsletter

100th Anniversary of World War I:

## AEF Training



“The most important question that confronted us in the preparation of our forces of citizen soldiery for efficient service was training.”

—John J. Pershing

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

1675: King Philip's War began

1775: Battle of Breed's Hill

1778: French declared war on England

1863: Vicksburg surrendered

1863: Gettysburg

1876: Battle of Little Big Horn

1898: Marines landed at Guantanamo Bay

1917: American Expeditionary Force arrived in France

1918: Belleau Woods

1934: Night of the Long Knives

1941: Operation Barbarossa

1943: Operation Husky

1944: “The Great Marianas Turkey Shoot”

1950: Korean War began

1952: Airstrike against Yalu River hydroelectric plants

1966: Hanoi bombed for the first time

1976: First women enrolled at West Point

2006: The Second Battle of Ramadi

The American declaration of war in 1917 found a peaceful people improvising a mechanical war. A small frontier police force of only 150,000, leisurely trained Regular Army Soldiers supported by 70,000 National Guards needed to fight a modern war of gas and machine gun, trench and barbed wire. President Woodrow Wilson, having failed in his promise to keep the nation out of war, succeeded in keeping it unprepared. Making the world safe for democracy required the conscription and training of men on a massive scale.

In all, the Army drafted some three million men. The nation decided to use the existing volunteer force as a skeleton and parcel out the new inductees among them. After spending time in stateside army camps, these conscripts sailed for France. As demands for manpower grew, stateside training schedules were curtailed and soldiers were shipped to France with many never having fired a rifle.

American units arriving in France had received limited, basic instruction but knew nothing of the rigors of modern war. Unskilled in the arts of attacking fortified positions, of defense-in-depth, of convoys, or of modern logistics, the average private couldn't even throw a grenade.

The majority of officers and NCOs had everything to learn. At least, they did not have

any bad habits to unlearn. A certain number had served in three-month training school camps in the states and a few had even gone to school in France. But aside from self-respect and a belief that they belonged to “the greatest nations of the world,” most leaders knew nothing of war. Personal temperament dominated over professional military training. The aggressive and the domineering mixed among the timid and the listless.

To fix these deficiencies required the creation of a training program on a massive scale. The goal: to integrate all the units of a division into a cohesive team. The French set aside an area south of Commercy and Nancy for the training of American units with designated training camps at Gondrecourt, Neufchateau, Saffaix, and Mirecourt. The Third Bureau [G-3] planned to billet French and American divisions, minus artillery, in the same locality and to send units into the line serving side-by-side, until all units had seen short service in the trenches. Artillery was to be sent to school at Valdahon, and then sent into the trenches for hardening. After each branch received its training, each division was to spend time at Neufchateau for divisional training. The French expected the training to last for ten weeks.

These plans on paper quickly disintegrated when put

into practice. At first French and British trainers monopolized teaching in the schools but soon Americans predominated. Moreover, doctrinal differences compounded cultural differences: the Americans preferred a doctrine of open warfare, the British taught aggressive trench-fighting with bayonet and grenade, and the French lectured on artillery and machine gun tactics.

Still, despite significant difficulties, American forces in France received just enough training so that as a final phase they could usually conduct a raid on an enemy trench. Although far from perfect, such raids allowed for crucial experiences under fire, for further coordination of artillery and infantry, and in the practical breaching of defensive positions. But, on the whole, the AEF in France remained enthusiastic, improvised, and ill-trained. It would have to learn its lessons under fire. Only America's short participation, and the rapidity of German surrender kept casualty numbers from climbing higher than 320,000 dead and wounded. Neither skill, nor daring, nor genius, but mere time and chance kept the United States experiencing the mass casualties of the Somme and Verdun. In an old world mentality, where sacrifice on the battlefield bought crucial chits at the negotiating table, America's small sacrifices would play out disastrously at Versailles.