

Time was running out for the Germans. The trickle of American reinforcements had turned into a torrent. Ludendorff's four previous offensives in 1918 had cost him some 500,000 casualties; meanwhile the youth of America poured across the Atlantic, infusing hope and energy into the war-weary Allied forces. Prior to Germany's last offensive of the war in July, the German Chief of the General Staff of the Field Army, Foreign Armies, submitted the following assessment: "Considering its small experience of war and defective training the combat value of the American division can in general be described as good. In defense even the most recently arrived troops represent an opponent worthy of respect. The American soldier shows himself to be brave, strong, and skillful. Losses are not avoided. However their leadership is not yet all that good."¹

In the Marne salient, the French commander-in-chief, Henri-Philippe Pétain, had in mid-July three US divisions on the western flank of the Marne salient, two at the base and one supporting General Henri Gouraud's Fourth Army. Elsewhere unbloodied US divisions occupied quiet sectors in Alsace-Lorraine or trained with the French and British. Many more divisions apparently were on the way, for Pershing had made a commitment to the British and French in June (unrealistic as it turned out) to ship 100 divisions to France by July 1919.

Although delighted at the prospect of even more American troops America's allies continued to argue that these fresh troops could best be deployed to strengthen their depleted divisions. On June 17 Pershing had been visited by Foch and Weygand who asked him to deploy newly arrived US regiments "in the most fatigued French divisions." Foch emphasized that "the effect of young, vigorous American soldiers on the worn-out French divisions would be most advantageous; that the Americans might in the meantime learn something and that they would certainly have a very strong tendency to put the tired French divisions on their feet." Not surprisingly the Frenchman's entreaties did not impress Pershing, especially when Foch made the preposterous suggestion that

“these regiments would be needed for only a few weeks.” Pershing knew that once amalgamated he would have great difficulty retrieving these men, so he talked of uniting US soldiers “into one American fighting army.”²

Despite his recent concentration on the French front Ludendorff still believed that the shortest route to a German victory was through the British Army in Flanders. His previous attacks against the French had been designed to draw Allied reserves down from Flanders prior to delivering a decisive blow against the British. But the initial success of these diversionary offensives had encouraged him to continue them. His fifth and as it turned out final offensive was similarly designed while at the same time securing Germany’s precarious logistical situation in the Marne salient. It has been suggested that he may have momentarily convinced himself that another dramatic breakthrough on their front might force the French to seek a negotiated peace favorable to German interests.³ There is, however, no evidence that the German high command expected to capture Paris in July. The key railway center of Reims, the capture of which would go a long way toward resolving Germany’s logistical snarl in the Marne salient, remained Ludendorff’s focus.⁴

Desperation mixed with a strong dose of unreality now characterized the German high command. Many of its best trained and highly motivated troops had been used up during the four previous offensives in 1918, reducing the army to a force of tired and in many cases demoralized troops. The effect on morale of another failed offensive might be catastrophic, especially after Ludendorff chose the code name of *Friedensturm* (or “Peace Offensive”), which suggested to German soldiers that the approaching offensive would be an all or nothing effort.

In retrospect it is clear that the war was now unwinnable for Germany as the American presence rapidly grew in Europe. As grim as Germany’s prospects appeared prior to *Friedensturm*, however, no key Allied leader anticipated a German collapse in 1918. Some even expected the war to last into 1920. Although the French Army had experienced both a serious mutiny in 1917 and the Chemin des Dames disaster in May 1918, many French officers were actually more optimistic about the future than the British. As early as May 30, staff officers at GQG had begun preliminary studies for a surprise counter-thrust on the western end of the Marne salient. A proposal to launch a major attack against Soissons on July 5 by General Charles Mangin, who had assumed command of the 10th Army in mid-June, gained Pétain’s enthusiastic support. “Beyond a doubt,” he noted, “this operation presents not only the best chance of success but also the opportunity for a fruitful

exploitation; additionally, it constitutes the most effective parry to the imminent German offensive.”⁵ Foch concurred and suggested that the Sixth Army commanded by General Jean-Marie Degoutte, positioned to the right of the 10th Army, also join in the attack.

Excellent intelligence gathered from air reconnaissance and from German prisoners provided the French with an exceptional picture of German intentions to launch a new offensive in July east and west of Reims along an extended front. General Marie-Émile Fayolle, the commander of the Army Group Reserve, wrote in his diary on July 12: “The Germans are going to attack between Château-Thierry and Reims. This is more and more certain.”⁶ The French actually knew not only the day but also the precise time when German artillery preparation for an offensive was scheduled to begin: ten minutes past midnight French time on July 15.⁷

As Foch asserted his authority to shift troops to meet this German threat, the British military and political leadership reacted with growing alarm. On July 8 General Wilson warned the War Cabinet that “the Germans could now put in a bigger attack [against the British] than they did on the 21st March.” Although the British had improved their defenses he argued that they were “weaker in the respect that we [are] not in a position to give ground as was possible on that occasion.”⁸

Lloyd George and other ministers now questioned Foch’s motives, believing that his deployment of American troops was designed to force the British to deploy every available soldier on the killing fields of France. By the end of July the infantry and machine gun units of thirty US divisions would be in France, yet the BEF would apparently have only five US divisions on its front. On July 11 the War Cabinet instructed Lloyd George to remind Clemenceau that Foch was “an *Allied* and not merely a French commander-in-chief, and that he must treat the Allied interests as a whole, making his dispositions on this basis and not mainly from the point of view of French interests.”⁹ In his subsequent letter to Clemenceau (copy to Foch), Lloyd George did not mince words in his conclusion. “Should the British forces be overwhelmed by superior numbers,” he warned, the responsibility would lie with the general-in-chief’s deployment of British divisions and “would undoubtedly be fatal to the continuance” of unity of command. In sum Foch must not give the Imperial statesmen the view that “their armies have been let down by the united command.”¹⁰

Confident that the Germans were going to continue their attacks in Champagne, however, Foch continued to shift troops southward. He ordered Haig to send four divisions from British reserves south of the Somme to an area southeast of Chalons and to be prepared to dispatch

an additional four divisions. Previously Foch had shifted the last six French divisions of the Detachment de L'Armée du Nord, the French army group in Flanders, south to Beauvais, where they could reinforce either the French or British sector.

Curiously Haig seems not to have been privy to French intelligence concerning German intentions, noting in his diary: "And all this when there is nothing definite to show that the enemy means to attack in Champagne. Indeed Prince Rupprecht still retains 25 divisions in reserve on the British front."¹¹

Fearing that the BEF might be "overwhelmed," Lloyd George convened an emergency council of war and suggested that the British veto Foch's transfer of British divisions unless Haig could guarantee that the British front would not be attacked by the Germans, a commitment that no commander-in-chief could honestly give. Fortunately, Lloyd George's colleagues persuaded him to rely on Haig's judgment and Smuts was dispatched to GHQ to ascertain whether Haig "was satisfied with the evidence on which General Foch was acting."¹²

As Lloyd George panicked, the French military leadership remained generally confident. Many French officers had learned from the Chemin des Dames disaster that French soldiers, packed in the front lines, became easy targets for Bruchmüller's sophisticated artillery preparation. General Henri Gouraud, the commander of the Fourth Army on the eastern side of the Marne salient, consequently devised an elastic defense in depth. Gouraud, who had lost an arm and been wounded in both legs at Gallipoli, sought to neutralize German artillery by creating a false front, thinly manned and aptly named the "sacrificial line" by the *poilus*, many of whom faced certain death or capture if they remained in their outposts. German troops, after passing through this first line, had to advance across open fields designed as "killing zones" for French artillery before they confronted a second or intermediate line of trenches built about a mile and a half beyond the sacrificial trenches. If the Germans penetrated this second line (and they did not) they would still be confronted by a third and final line of defense.

One US division, the 42nd or Rainbow Division, commanded by Major General Charles T. Menoher with Colonel Douglas MacArthur as his Chief of Staff, formed part of the French Fourth Army's imaginative defenses east of Reims. To the west, defending the south bank of the Marne in the Château-Thierry region, were two more US divisions, the 3rd and parts of the 28th Division, whose first units had only arrived in France in mid-May. With the exception of the 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Division, which had briefly fought under difficult conditions at Belleau Wood, none of the soldiers in these two divisions had experienced hard combat.

These two American divisions were part of General Joseph Degoutte's Sixth French Army, which also included two Italian divisions and the French 125th Division. Unfortunately for the untested Americans, Degoutte did not believe in Gouraud's elastic defensive system, instead ordering the south bank of the Marne to be defended in strength, which placed the Americans within easy range of German artillery.

Flanked by the French 125th Division on its right, the 3rd Division manned outposts on the river bank. Some 350 yards behind these make-shift defenses, the division positioned itself along a railway embankment and beyond that in the hills of the Surmelin Valley. In an especially vulnerable position were four companies of the Pennsylvania National Guard (28th Division), which had been integrated with French units and placed just to the right of the 3rd Division. Each of these companies had two platoons dug in on the river bank.

The Germans chose July 15 for the launching of their offensive because the previous day was Bastille Day, a holiday celebrating French independence, with festivities throughout the country, on the assumption that many French soldiers would not be at their fighting best during the early hours of the 15th.

That Crown Prince Wilhelm's offensive would not surprise the French was demonstrated when the French artillery began interdicting and harassing fire on German infantry assembling for the attack minutes before the big German guns began their scheduled preparation for the infantry assault. German tube superiority of 2 to 1 was actually less than in previous 1918 offensives but German guns still fired an astonishing 4.5 million shells on the first day. This German cannonading knocked pictures off the walls in some Parisian districts, but much of the bombardment east of Reims was wasted on unoccupied or thinly occupied trenches in the new French system of elastic defense in depth.¹³

The most violent German artillery preparation (three hours and forty minutes) occurred along the Marne where German soldiers faced the difficult task of crossing the narrow but deep river on collapsible canvas boats (twenty men to a boat) and by erecting floating footbridges or pontoon bridges for heavier equipment. Under constant shelling and rifle and machine gun fire from the Doughboys many Germans never made it across the river but enough did to place the Americans defending the river bank in dire peril. Many had already been killed, wounded, or become shell-shocked by the German big guns. As Lieutenant Hervey Allen, 111th Infantry, 28th Division, recalls:

I was so frightened myself, I could scarcely get the men together . . . There were three or four maniacs from shell shock whom we had to overpower. We dug some of the poor devils out and started them up the hill. The faint sounds and stirrings

in the caved-in-banks were terrible. Some we could not reach in time and one of these was smothered. We had one party of wounded all together and started up the hill at once, when a big shell fell right in their midst. I saw men blown into the air. Awful confusion again . . . The state of a wounded man, wounded again, and still under fire, is beyond description.¹⁴

The four rifle companies of the 28th Division were cut off when their French allies fell back, and few Americans made it to their own lines.

The withdrawal of the French 125th Division because of the ferocity of the shell fire also imperiled the 38th Regiment, 3rd Division, commanded by Colonel Ulysses Grant McAlexander, by exposing its flank. Along with the 30th Regiment it endured the heaviest fighting and suffered the most severe casualties while generally holding its ground.

Along a fourteen-kilometer front the Germans crossed the Marne and advanced in places from five to six kilometers.¹⁵ But they succeeded only in bending rather than breaking the front, earning the 3rd Division the proud nickname of the “Rock of the Marne.” By the afternoon of the 16th Major General Joseph T. Dickman, the commander of the 3rd Division, reported: “There were no Germans in the foreground of the Third Division sector except the dead.”¹⁶ At midnight on July 17 *OHL* issued orders to begin withdrawing across the Marne.

Five battalions and the artillery of the Rainbow Division on Gouraud’s sector east of Reims also played a role in stemming the German tide. The waves of gray infantry who survived the advance beyond the sacrificial trenches through exploding artillery shells and deadly gas were repeatedly repulsed by defenders of the intermediate or secondary line of defense. “In all the war,” General Liggett later wrote, “no attack on such a scale accomplished so little.”¹⁷ Bloody hand-to-hand combat characterized some of the fighting in the American sector. Private Martin J. Hogan of Brooklyn, New York, vividly recalls the ferocious combat:

They broke furiously upon our line and the line of the Sixty-ninth became a dizzy whirl of hand-to-hand combats . . . Clubbed rifles were splintered against skulls and shoulder bone; bayonets were plunged home, withdrawn and plunged home again; automatics spit here and there in the line; grenades exploded; while a man occasionally shot his dripping bayonet from his enemies body. Our front line became a gruesome mess.¹⁸

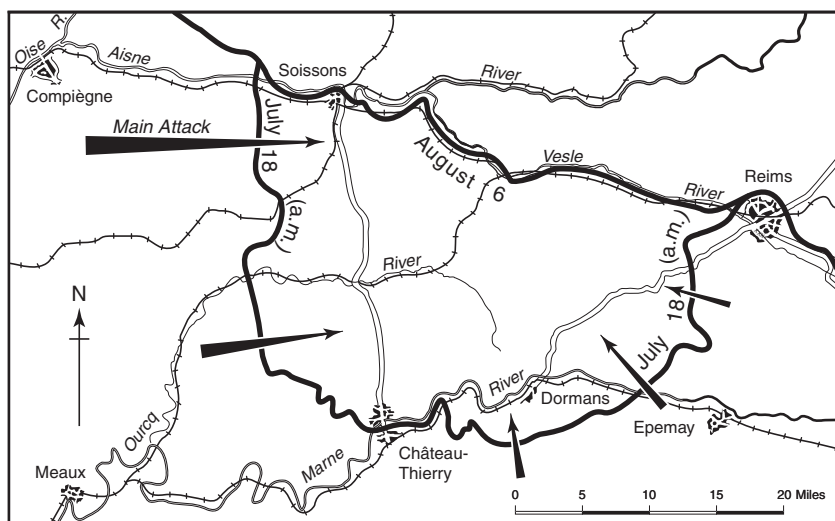
The Rainbow Division lost 450 killed and 1,300 wounded.

But the line held and by nightfall it was obvious that the German offensive had been a disaster, especially east of Reims. The only real advantage that the Germans had enjoyed throughout the day had been air superiority. Rudolf Binding, a German staff officer, summed up this fateful day for the German Army. “I have lived through the most

disheartening day of the whole war.” The French had “deliberately lured” the Germans to attack a false front. “They put up no resistance in front; they had neither infantry nor artillery in this forward battle-zone . . . Our guns bombarded empty trenches; our gas-shells gassed empty artillery positions; only in little hidden folds of the ground, sparsely distributed, lay machine gun posts, like lice in the seams and folds of a garment, to give the attacking force a warm reception.”¹⁹ On July 16 the German high command suspended operations against the French Fourth Army although intense fighting continued south of the Marne as French counterattacks drove the Germans back.

As the Germans floundered, Foch and Pétain turned their attention to the offensive. Anticipating the most recent German offensive Foch had concentrated his reserves, which now included four British and five American divisions, in Champagne. From the Argonne to Switzerland he had only a single French division behind the front to call upon if the Germans chose to attack in that area. But this gamble paid off. Pétain had thirty-eight infantry and six cavalry divisions in reserve to call upon when on July 17 he issued his final order for a powerful counteroffensive against the vulnerable German salient.²⁰

The French planned to attack with the French Fifth, Sixth, Ninth, and Tenth Armies along both the base and flanks of the German salient (Map 7). *GQG* scheduled its major attack by Charles Mangin’s Tenth Army on July



7. French-American counteroffensive, July 18, 1918

18 against the German right flank. Supported by tanks, aircraft, and massed artillery, this force, largely concealed in the thickly wooded forests of the Marne sector, included two US divisions (First and Second) which had been assigned to General Pierre E. Berdoulat's XX Corps. The Tenth Army, with its five corps and twenty-two infantry divisions and three cavalry (really mounted infantry) divisions, constituted a formidable strike force.²¹

Similar to September 1914 and in the very same locality, an overconfident German high command had created an exposed right flank on the Marne vulnerable to counterattack. The Germans simply could not believe that Foch and Pétain could assemble a force capable of launching a serious attack against their right flank, especially after the Germans launched their assaults on both sides of Reims. "Not only could he furnish a sufficient number of units for his defensive front, but he was able to place full strength divisions in readiness for his main offensive drive," incredulous German staff officers subsequently concluded.²²

Berdoulat assigned the 1st and 2nd American divisions a key objective, a drive toward Soissons to interdict vital German rail and road connections essential to the supply of German forces in the salient. Pershing had just appointed new commanders to both of these divisions, Harbord, who was on leave in Paris, and Major General Charles Pelot Summerall, who had recently replaced Bullard, the newly appointed commander of the American Third Corps. Of the two men Harbord faced the most difficult situation. The French had made arrangements for the approaching counteroffensive in great secrecy, and Harbord was surprised to learn that his 2nd Division had been attached to the XX Corps (which included the 1st Moroccan Division) in Charles Mangin's Tenth Army. Mangin, called the "butcher" by some of his men, was known for his blunt but realistic comments. As his losses had mounted during the costly fighting over Verdun in 1916, he had remarked: "Whatever you do, you lose a lot of men."²³ He was, however, no "chateau" general commanding from afar. Staying close to the action, he had twice been wounded.

Few if any American generals have been promoted to then confront a position as confused as Harbord's. His division had been placed within the French supply and transportation system and committed to an offensive at some undisclosed location. Moreover, his artillery train had been separated from his infantry. Harbord's hands were also tied because he had been placed under the tactical control of the experienced but youthful General Berdoulat.

On Tuesday evening, July 16, Harbord finally caught up with the commander of the XX Corps at his headquarters at Rétheuil. Over a hurried meal Berdoulat informed him that his division

then scattered through the Aisne Department and entirely out of my hands, would be in the attack on Thursday at daybreak . . . but I knew nothing of where they were to go, and was powerless to hurry or change conditions. A division of twenty-eight thousand men, the size of a British or French Army Corps, had been completely removed from the knowledge and control of its responsible Commander, and deflected by truck and by marching through France to a destination uncommunicated to any authority responsible for its supply, its safety or its efficiency in an attack but thirty hours away.

When a discombobulated Harbord raised questions, French officers sitting around the table shrugged their shoulders, some remarking "*c'est la guerre.*"²⁴

In his account of his meeting with Berdoulat, Harbord notes that French staff officers provided him the battle plan of the XX Corps and some maps. He also mentions that French officers offered to help him prepare his division's battle or attack order. "I declined with thanks and perhaps a little ice in my voice," he later wrote.²⁵ Later, on July 17, General Albert Daugan, the commander of the 1st Moroccan Division, provided him with battle orders written by his chief of staff. Having fought in this area, General Daugan's staff knew both the enemy and the ground over which the Americans would advance. Harbord, however, turned down this offer as well. He later argued that "to draw Battle Orders requires not only professional knowledge and tactical judgment but an estimate of the morale and efficiency of the commanders and units affected. It also involved in this case knowledge of the American temperament and character. No French officer had these special qualifications."²⁶

Harbord's parochialism perhaps worked to the detriment of the men he commanded. His "Plan of Attack," which he and his Chief of Staff Colonel Preston Brown completed at 4:30 a.m. on July 17, omitted any mention of supporting fire by machine gun barrages or the deployment of light 37-mm guns. Instead it mirrored the official AEF doctrine that emphasized self-reliant infantrymen. Each soldier received two days of rations and 220 rounds of ammunition.²⁷

Even if Harbord had been otherwise inclined, the conditions he inherited were surely partly responsible for the 2nd Division's lack of firepower. His division had literally been picked up by the French and hurled into battle, many of its soldiers arriving on the battlefield with only minutes to spare and without adequate supporting arms. Emerging from the woods and advancing across waist-high wheat fields the men of the 2nd Division were without grenades, mortars, or machine guns. Masses of French tanks supported the attack but the 2nd Division had never trained with tanks.

The usual rolling barrage also supported the infantry but extensive artillery preparation had been prohibited to ensure surprise. Fortunately, the Germans thinly held their front and fought from makeshift defenses. German artillery initially caught off balance by the surprise attack and nests of Maxim machine guns posed the greatest danger to advancing Americans. Unlike the First Moroccan's attack order, which provided for a measured advance with pauses to regroup, emphasize Johnson and Hillman, the Americans attacked "with a uniform rate of advance irrespective of terrain or enemy, and without consideration for pauses to consolidate and reorganize, much less pass fresh units through so as to maintain the momentum."²⁸

As Harbord and his Chief of Staff Brown put the finishing touches on their "Plan of Attack" in the early morning hours of July 17, US troops began arriving in the region of Rétheuil. Although they had marched throughout the night and had been given no hot food, many of these troops had another fifteen or so miles to cover before reaching their assault positions.

On the previous day Major Ray Austin, 6th Field Artillery, 1st Division, began to understand fully the magnitude of the approaching offensive. "Truck trains in endless numbers moved along every road," he wrote at the time,

batteries of light artillery, immense tractor-drawn 6, 8 and 12 inch guns, staff cars hastening in all directions, blue snake-like columns of French infantry, regiments of Senegalese troops (big negroes whose blackness makes the blackest negroes I have ever seen appear pale in comparison), brown-skinned Moroccans in olive drab uniforms similar to ours, groups of Indo-Chinese laborers, strangely camouflaged tanks, military police at all turns and cross roads directing traffic, like policemen in a big city.²⁹

The route to their assault position took Harbord's troops through the forest of Villers-Cotterêts. Twelve miles square, this former royal hunting ground was thickly forested with towering oak and beech trees in full bloom. A national road ran diagonally to Soissons but many smaller roads, with numerous intersections, crisscrossed the forest, constituting a veritable maze for the marching troops. "Occasionally," Private Fitch L. McCord, 82nd Company, 6th Marines, recalls, "a heavy gun or caisson slips into the ditch somewhere ahead, and the diversified column jams up, remaining in a solid, almost motionless pack, and amid a jamboree of sounds, squawks, horns, whistles and shouts, sways back and forth a few times and moves on."³⁰

Sleepy and exhausted men plodded along these narrow roads now deep in mud because of a violent rainstorm accompanied by thunder and lightning. When darkness came, men slipped into ditches,

sometimes breaking arms and legs. Many held hands or put a hand on the shoulder of the man in front of him to guide their way. "They had no maps, no guides," writes Harbord. "They were not told where to go, and could only follow the instinct of the American soldier and march to the sound of the cannon, seldom silent on that front."³¹

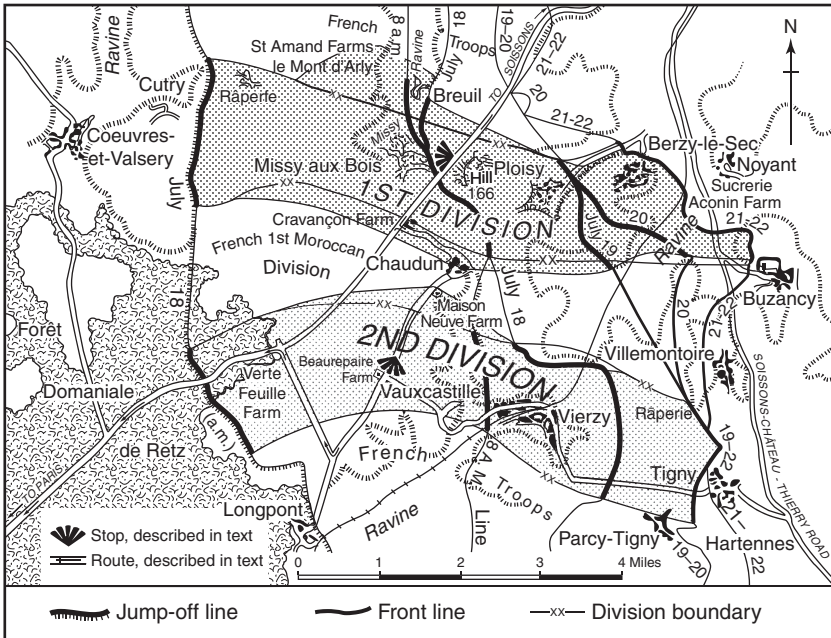
According to one Marine, "no battle tried them half as hard as the night road to Soissons."³² Some units had to double time (a lead battalion in the 2nd Division actually ran the last ten minutes) to get to their assigned assault positions in order to advance behind the rolling barrage scheduled to begin precisely at 4:35 a.m. The necessity to meet this deadline frequently meant that communication equipment and machine gun companies did not make it to the front in time.

From his vantage point with the 6th Field Artillery, 1st Division, Major Austin described the effect of the moving wall of exploding shells behind which the infantry advanced at the rate of one hundred yards every three minutes:

Our Infantry, following close at a walk, were upon the Germans almost before they had recovered from the shock of the barrage passing over them, and the smoke shells which we fired every fourth shot made a smoke screen which helped conceal our Infantry from the observation of enemy machine gunners. All watches had been synchronized, of course, and when the artillery "cut loose" it made the ground tremble and every hill and valley was just a mass of flashes in the dim light of early morning. I never realized that there was that much artillery in the world. The guns of my three American batteries (I also had three French, but saw little of them as they did only barrage works) were set almost hub to hub and there were many batteries above and below them on the same hillside. The Infantry went forward in a long line extending as far as could be seen to either side, the successive waves following each other at even intervals, and the lines which I saw were a small part of a similar line some forty kilometers long that was moving forward in the same way at the same time, supported by artillery the whole distance.³³

Further south in this lengthy wave of advancing infantry was the American 26th Division and battalions of the 4th Division, interspersed with veteran French troops from the II and VII French Army Corps. Approximately one-half of the advancing soldiers along the German right flank were American.³⁴

Berdoulat placed the 1st and 2nd US Divisions and the 1st Moroccan Division in the first line for the offensive and the two French divisions, the 58th and 59th, in the second line (Map 8). The Moroccans, sandwiched between the American 1st and 2nd Divisions, were some of the fiercest warriors in the French Army. Originally composed of French Legionnaires, this division was now largely made up of Senegalese,



8. French–American attack south of Soissons, July 18–22, 1918

Muslim blacks from West Africa, clothed in mustard-colored uniforms with helmets bearing a crescent emblem. In close combat, they preferred bayonets and broad-bladed knives over rifles. In Liggett's words, "they were more at home with sharp steel than with lead."³⁵

They seemed to have impressed almost every American soldier with whom they came in contact. "The looks on those Moroccans were enough to make the enemy drop his guns and run," remembered Private Charles M. Engel, 119th Field Artillery Regiment, 32nd Division.³⁶ Fighting alongside them at Soissons, Lieutenant John Thomason, 49th Company, 5th Marine Brigade, later wrote:

Kill, which is at best an acquired taste with the civilized races, was only too palpably their mission in life . . . Each platoon swept its front like a hunting-pack, moving swiftly and surely together . . . the hidden guns that fired on them were located with uncanny skill; they worked their automatic rifles forward on each flank until the doomed emplacement was under a scissors fire; then they took up the matter with the bayonet, and slew with lion-like leaps and lunges and a shrill barbaric yapping . . . They carried also a broad-bladed knife, razor-sharp, which disemboweled a man at a stroke.

During a lull in the fighting a Senegalese sergeant approached Thomason and offered him “a brace of human ears, nicely fresh, and strung upon a thong. ‘*Bo’jour, Américain! Voilà! Beaucoup souvenir ici bon!*’”³⁷

Thomason may have been unsettled by the Senegalese sergeant’s offer of German ears, but he and other Americans learned from the tactics of the First Moroccans who flanked German machine gun nests or took them from the rear rather than taking them head on. An officer in the 1st Division, Edward S. Johnston, later suggested that

it was by observation of the Moroccans in this action that the regiment learned the method of advance ordinarily utilized by European veterans, whereby the assault line, having lost the barrage, progressed steadily forward, individuals, under the eye of their squad leaders, moving at a run from shell-hole to shell-hole. When stopped by resistance – usually a machine gun – the squad, section, or platoon engaged it by fire from the front, while flankers immediately worked around with rifles and grenades to take it from the flank. It was a common saying in the 1st Division that the Moroccans taught them how to fight.³⁸

Initially the offensive went extremely well, with easy and rapid advances made by the infantry supported by artillery, tanks, and aircraft. The 26th Regiment, 1st Division, for example, advanced two kilometers and achieved their first objectives with little loss or resistance.³⁹ By late afternoon, however, German resistance stiffened and losses mounted. “On the first day the enemy was able to gain a great success, as figured in ground gained and men and matériel captured,” a German assessment concluded, “but did not know how to exploit it to the limit on the same day . . . his advance already began to waver on the next day and he was unable to gain the objective doubtlessly planned.” Nonetheless, this German assessment characterized July 18 as “a turning point in the history of the World War.”⁴⁰

On July 19 the butcher’s bill became even greater as higher officers lost touch and control of smaller units while the Germans fed in fresh divisions. “Communications really existed only when the commander went forward in person, and only when the troops had halted long enough for someone from the rear to find them,” suggest Johnson and Hillman.⁴¹ In their haste to get forward, American infantry courageously, although recklessly, attacked in dense and rigid formations without adequate fire support. By pushing ahead of French troops on their flanks they also exposed themselves to flanking fire. Through no fault of their own, the 6th Marines provided an especially egregious example of how not to assault German positions. Believing that the enemy was about to crack on July 19 the XX Corps ordered Harbord to interdict the

strategically important Soissons–Château-Thierry Road. Upon receiving these orders Harbord decided to commit his division's reserve, the 6th Marines. Although on the previous day two regiments had failed to achieve this objective, the 6th Marines alone attempted to overrun a position now held by fresh German troops brought up overnight.⁴²

After advancing to the jump-off line through heavy enemy shelling, the Marines began their assault around 8:30 a.m. across flat, cultivated fields with no cover and without supporting artillery fire. Ominously, the Marines had seen this before at Belleau Wood. Without supporting arms, which included Stokes mortars and French-made 37-mm guns still to the rear in their regimental train, Marine mortar teams and gunners were given rifles and employed as infantry. An opening barrage had been fired prematurely at 7:00 a.m.⁴³ Hence no supporting fire shepherded them across the open field. A few French tanks offered assistance but German artillery quickly knocked out most of them. Advancing in two waves separated by about fifty yards, Marines "were falling torn and mangled beyond description. The shells seemed to come in one solid, screaming, rushing stream," one Marine recalled. "The ground seemed alive with bursting geysers of smoke and dust."⁴⁴

As they came under fire many Marines instinctively leaned forward as if they were advancing against a strong wind. "I would see a man walking across the fields with his rifle at his hip[,] suddenly he would take another step and there wouldn't be no step there and he would go down," recalls Corporal Joseph E. Rendinell of the 6th Marines. "Some fell flat. Some grabbed at their wounds and sort of crumpled down. And some would sit down slow like they were sitting down in a chair. I don't remember ever seeing a man throw up his arms and fall back."⁴⁵

By nightfall 1,300 of the 2,450 Marines involved in the attack were dead or wounded. The Marines had advanced some two kilometers and were within rifle range of the Château-Thierry highway, but they could go no further. Although its men had been hungry and exhausted, short of vital equipment, and unfamiliar with the terrain, the 2nd Division had advanced almost eleven kilometers and fought three distinct battles, all in a little over twenty-four hours.⁴⁶ But it could do no more. Harbord sent the following message to General Berdoulat: "I desire to insist most strongly that [my division] should not be called on for further offensive effort . . . the troops in the fighting line of the division have many of them been without water or food for over twenty-four hours."⁴⁷

As Harbord's battered and exhausted division, which had suffered 4,319 casualties, was being relieved during the night by the French 58th Colonial Division, XX Corps ordered the 1st Division to take the

hilltop town of Berzy-le-Sec which overlooked the Soissons–Château-Thierry road and the Soissons–Villers-Cotterêts railway. At 5:30 a.m. on July 22 the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 28th Infantry and elements of the 18th Infantry joined the 26th Infantry, which began the attack with its 2nd and 3rd Battalions in assault waves and ended with all survivors advancing in “one thin line”;⁴⁸ they succeeded in driving the Germans out of Berzy-le-Sec.

In five days of combat German artillery and machine guns had inflicted staggering losses on the 1st Division. All of the 26th Infantry’s field officers, for example, had either been killed or wounded. On July 23, the day Haig’s 15th (Scottish) Division relieved the 1st Division, Lieutenant Shipley Thomas, the 26th Regiment’s intelligence officer, attempted to contact the division’s adjutant. Major General Summerall answered the phone and the following conversation ensued:

“Hello,” the commander of the 1st Division said, “this is General Summerall. Who is this?”

“Lieutenant Thomas, sir, 26th Infantry.”

“Well, how are things?”

“I have to report that we have broken through as far as we can. Our colonel is dead, our lieutenant colonel is dead, and all the majors are dead or wounded. And God knows how many captains and lieutenants are down. And the situation with the men is just as bad.”

“Dear God, Mr. Thomas! Who is commanding the regiment?”

“Captain Barney Legge.”

“How is he doing?”

“Fine, sir, with what he has left.”

“Well, who is his executive officer?”

“I guess I am.”⁴⁹

Shipley Thomas’s regiment had begun the offensive on July 18 with 3,100 men and 96 officers. The Germans had killed or wounded 62 officers and 1,560 enlisted men.⁵⁰ Other regiments in the division suffered even greater casualties. The 28th Infantry, for example, suffered its heaviest losses of the war at Soissons: 56 officers and 1,760 men killed or wounded. Casualties for the entire division amounted to 234 officers and 7,083 men.

Tragically, the secrecy and haste which had characterized the launching of the offensive toward Soissons had militated against providing adequate hospital facilities. One field hospital, with only 200 beds, had

to care for over 3,000 men before the 1st and 2nd Divisions were relieved. Inevitably some soldiers who would have survived died from neglect.⁵¹

It was painful for the Scottish soldiers who relieved the 1st Division to see so many dead young Americans in and around Berzy-le-Sec. According to the British historian John Terraine it reminded them of their young and eager comrades who had not survived their initial introduction to industrialized warfare at the Battle of the Somme in 1916 where they had waged war with similar enthusiasm and raw courage.⁵²

American soldiers had not been wounded or killed in vain. The Allies had at long last regained the initiative and the Germans were in full retreat from their vulnerable salient. The counteroffensive launched after the Second Battle of the Marne represented the beginning of the end for German hopes of becoming the hegemonic power on the European continent. General Liggett recounts the story of General Albert Daugan, the commander of the 1st Moroccan Division, who was observed with tears in his eyes during the Battle of Soissons. "Does not the day go well, my general?" someone asked him. "Mais oui!" he responded. "I weep for the families and sweethearts of these Americans. See how they go into battle as we did in 1914! My division, the flower of the French Army, no longer can keep up with them."⁵³ Liggett goes on to add: "Courage sometimes is the only substitute for the skill that comes of experience. It is a fearful price to pay, and we always have paid it in our wars."⁵⁴

Other American divisions also participated in the Allied counteroffensive, officially called the Aisne-Marne Counteroffensive (July 18–August 6). Foch's plan initially involved six American divisions, the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 26th, and 28th. By the time the counteroffensive officially concluded on the Vesle River on August 6 an additional three divisions, the 32nd, 42nd, and 77th, had also participated.

Although heavy fighting characterized the staged German withdrawal, sufficient Allied forces had not been available for the Allied wings advancing eastward from Soissons and westward from Reims to trap the German divisions within the salient.

The 26th ("Yankee") Division and 4th Division, fighting in the center of the salient, also participated in the July 18 counterstroke. The 4th Division, whose last elements had only disembarked a few weeks earlier, included many thinly trained recruits, some of whom had only recently learned to load and fire their rifles. According to Van Every they actually received their first rifle practice training north of Meaux within "sound of the hammering guns at the front."

Baker sought to justify the War Department's policy of sending untrained soldiers across the Atlantic with a most questionable rationale. "We have learned," he wrote Pershing in July, "that to keep men too long in training camps in this country makes them grow stale and probably does as much harm by the spirit of impatience and restlessness aroused as it does good by the longer drills. The men in our training camps are champing at the bit, and this applies not only to the officers, who naturally want their professional opportunity, but to the men as well."⁵⁵ It, of course, goes without saying that the type of training proved much more important than the length of training.

Because of its inexperience, the 4th Division when it entered the line was broken up and its battalions intermingled with French troops in the II and VII French Army Corps.⁵⁶ The more experienced 26th ("Yankee") Division, commanded by the verbose Major General Clarence R. Edwards, a West Pointer (1883) who was considered by his superiors to be something of a loose cannon, remained intact, and along with the French 167th Division constituted Liggett's First Corps which was attached to General Degoutte's Sixth Army. When Edwards visited Liggett and asked him for advice prior to his advance ordered by Degoutte, he was told "not to crowd men too much in front line to take shell fire and not to let the attack run away beyond the objective." Liggett also emphasized to Edwards that he must keep "in touch with the movement and preserve liaison."⁵⁷

On July 18 the 52nd Brigade of the 26th Division launched an early morning assault in the Belleau Wood region. Although the German front was not strongly manned the Americans faced well-placed and well-concealed machine gun nests. To his credit Edwards supported his advancing troops with heavy machine gun fire. Losses mounted as the advance continued. An officer told Pierpont Stackpole, Liggett's aide, that "confusion in the 52nd Brigade was hopeless" with "stragglers and trophy hunters all over the place." After four days of fighting and an advance of ten kilometers the 52nd Brigade showed signs of disintegration. Degoutte, however, issued new orders for "push, push, push" the next day, July 22.⁵⁸

Liggett subsequently ordered the 52nd Brigade to shift to its left and take the place of the spent French 167th Division whose ration strength was less than an American brigade. The division's 51st Brigade then occupied the place being vacated in the line. Confusion reigned, with units becoming intermingled. Meanwhile, officers had difficulty controlling their men. Advancing across a wheat field, Captain Daniel W. Strickland, 102nd Infantry, 51st Infantry Brigade, saw his men seek

cover without orders. This checked the rush of the advance and it became necessary for squad leaders to drive their men forward in some cases by force. Greenhorns in the rear tried to fire through the ranks ahead and increased the casualties. It developed that morning that the last batch of replacements sent up could not even load a rifle, much less fire it.⁵⁹

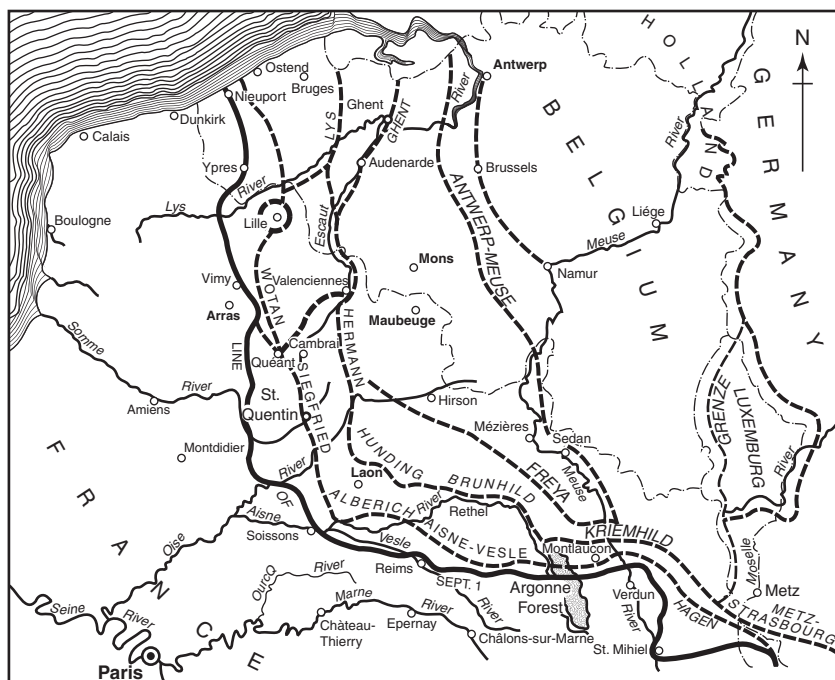
These replacements had landed in France only sixteen days earlier. Now some of them were about to be killed.

On July 23 Colonel Frank Parker, the commander of the 102nd Infantry, 51st Brigade, reported to Liggett that “the First Battalion had 175 men; Second Battalion 250, Third Battalion 500; all the rest dead.” Liggett, however, believed that “a large portion of the missing were asleep in the woods or straggling.” Stackpole described the atmosphere at Edwards’s headquarters as similar to “a morgue – everybody dead or dying or in a state of collapse of crying for relief.”⁶⁰ On the night of July 25/26 the fresh 42nd Division took over the front of the First Corps, a relief that did not go well. Units of the 101st, 102nd, 111th, and 112th Regiments had become intermingled in the advance and their removal from the line in darkness proved difficult. During the advance the 26th Division had suffered 4,857 casualties and another 1,200 men had been evacuated because of exhaustion or illness.⁶¹

The Rainbow Division found itself facing a prepared line of defense, the *Caesar Line*, one of four German withdrawal positions between the Marne and the Aisne. On July 26 the Rainbow Division assaulted the La Croix Rouge Farm whose numerous stone buildings and stone walls had been converted into a formidable machine gun nest. Alabamians of the 167th and Iowans of the 168th Regiments approached the farm through woods and then advanced in waves across a cleared field into the teeth of German artillery and machine guns (Map 9). The results were as horrific as they were predictable. In their bayonet assault Iowans and Alabamians overran the German position but lost over 1,000 men, either killed or wounded. Survivors spent a miserable night without food (the men had not been fed all day) on muddy ground in pouring rain.⁶²

The Rainbow Division next confronted a strong German defensive position just ahead on the other side of the nearby Ourcq River, really more a creek than river and only some five yards across in the American sector. The heights and deep woods on the north bank, thick with German machine guns, however, ensured that any attack would be costly. The advance across the Ourcq River by three US divisions, the 3rd, 28th, and 42nd, constituted the largest all-American offensive thus far in the war.⁶³

To the 42nd fell the greatest challenge, storming the heights on both sides of the village Sergy. For five days and nights the 42nd Division,



9. German defensive positions behind the Western Front, September 1918

supported by two battalions from the 4th Division, battled a crack German division, the 4th Guard Division. Sergy changed hands seven times during the battle with the hard-charging 42nd Division taking heavy losses as it repeatedly assaulted the slopes.

On August 1 Pétain cautioned Liggett “against too much eagerness on part of Americans and attempts to take tons of machine gun nests by direct attack.” He told Liggett and his staff that “the French had learned this lesson with cost and we must learn ours as quickly as possible.” Liggett agreed, noting that “he had been continually impressing this on the divisions, brigade and other commanders.”⁶⁴ That evening the Germans broke contact and retreated to a new defensive position along the Vesle. On August 3 the 4th Division, which entered the line for the first time as a complete division, relieved the 42nd Division, which had lost 8,000 men killed or wounded since July 14.⁶⁵

Many US divisions received their baptism in battle during the advance from the Marne to the Vesle. Losses had been heavy for these inexperienced divisions and not every American soldier displayed the heart of a

lion. "Far back of our lines and camps my provost marshal now began to gather large numbers of American soldiers that had straggled from these various divisions. The French villages were full of them," recalls General Robert Lee Bullard, who rose to General Officer Commanding (GOC) of the Second Army by the end of the war.

Relatively to the number of American soldiers that had been here, the stragglers were few, but actually their numbers were great . . . When to-day after the war, I read in their histories the bragging of some of our divisions of the fierce warrior bravery and high sense of duty of all their men, all, without any exception mentioned, I cannot help remembering the great number of their dead-beats that we herded up.⁶⁶

Although fighting continued, the Aisne-Marne Offensive officially ended on August 6 with the opposing forces facing each other across the Vesle and Aisne rivers along a generally straight line running from Soissons to Reims. Some 132,000 Doughboys had assisted the French in repulsing Ludendorff's last offensive, and 200,000 participated in the counterattacks that cleared the Marne salient.⁶⁷

Ludendorff's gamble for victory had proven to be a disaster. As he later wrote: "The attempt to make the Entente peoples ready for peace by defeating them before the arrival of the American reinforcements had failed. The impetus of the army had been insufficient to deal the enemy a decisive blow . . . I realised clearly that this made our general situation very serious."⁶⁸

Germany's military position was about to become even more precarious. On August 8 German defenders on the British front at Amiens were stunned as a heavy early morning mist began to dissipate. "The sight of a mass of 400 tanks trundling towards them was plainly too imposing a sight for numbers of German troops . . . A great many of them fled or surrendered."⁶⁹ The British Fourth Army's heavy artillery suppressed the enemy's artillery while a combined arms attack by infantry with tanks, Lewis guns, trench mortars, and rifle grenades neutralized German machine guns. The Allies now possessed a widening technological superiority over Germany. For its offensive at Amiens, the BEF had at its disposal 1,386 field guns and howitzers in addition to 684 heavy guns. British and Imperial troops also had 1,900 aircraft available along with 342 heavy tanks, 72 light Whippet tanks, and 120 supply tanks. By nightfall, with the Canadians and Australians especially distinguishing themselves, the Germans had been pushed back some eight miles on a 15,000-yard front. French divisions also participated in this offensive which rather than the Battle of Amiens should properly be called the Battle of Amiens-Montdidier. The main attack had been delivered by the

Australian and Canadian Corps but Debeney's First Army also advanced southwards beyond Montdidier.

A delighted Haig recorded in his diary: "Enemy blowing up dumps in all directions and streaming eastwards. Their transport and limbers offer splendid targets for our aeroplanes." In four days this Anglo-French offensive had overrun more enemy front than they had taken during four and a half months during the 1916 Battle of the Somme. This Allied success at Amiens-Montdidier dramatically emphasized how the face of battle had changed by the summer of 1918. As Haig wrote his wife, "Who would have believed this possible even 2 months ago?"⁷⁰

In contrast to the AEF's official doctrine which continued to associate successful operations with self-reliant infantry armed with rifles and bayonets, many Doughboy officers began adapting to the realities of the modern battlefield. This included General Edwards, who had certainly not distinguished himself during the just-concluded Aisne-Marne Offensive and had become increasingly unpopular with both Pershing and Liggett. But Edwards's official report on the 26th Division's recent operations reflected an understanding of the challenges presented by the modern battlefield and offered solutions. Edwards suggested that when possible an attack in strength should be preceded by reconnaissance squads to identify machine gun nests and to neutralize them by employing greater firepower (artillery mortars, heavy machine guns). He also said that "it goes without saying" that when possible machine gun nests should be outflanked rather than attacked head on. He also advocated greater firepower to assist advancing infantry, especially rolling barrages with a mixture of exploding shells and gas, and better communication between infantry and divisional artillery. Aware of the superior Browning automatic weapons now being produced in American factories, he asked that his division be furnished with them as soon as possible. His recent advances had not been assisted by tanks and he requested them (four for every infantry battalion), as well as air support. He made no mention of rifles and bayonets.⁷¹

Edwards's discussions of tactics would have very much displeased his commander-in-chief who at this time was busily torpedoing a War Department plan to have experienced French and British officers conduct advanced courses in the United States for higher commanders. America's allies do not make use of the rifle's "great power," he argued, and their doctrine "was based upon the cautious advance of infantry with prescribed objectives, where obstacles had been destroyed and resistance largely broken by artillery."⁷²

Although the offensive initiative on the Western Front now passed to the coalition against Germany Ludendorff refused to accept defeat. On August 14 Germany's political and military leadership assembled at the Spa Crown Council presided over by the Emperor. Germany's leaders appeared to recognize that their nation had reached its limits of endurance. Yet Ludendorff stubbornly argued that the German Army could yet paralyze the enemy's "will to fight by a strategic defensive" and "force him to accept peace."⁷³

Although Amiens and the Aisne-Marne Offensive lifted Allied spirits, no one in London, Paris, or Washington anticipated that the killing would be over in another three months. On the same day that Ludendorff talked of imposing German will on the enemy through defensive warfare, Bliss, reflecting the mood of the Allied military representatives at the SWC, dispatched a message to Baker and March at the War Department: "Everything now points to favorable conditions for launching a conclusive campaign on the Western Front next year, and if enemy's resistance is crushed on this front it will cease everywhere."⁷⁴

With Americans appearing on the battlefield in ever increasing numbers, Pershing now focused on collecting his scattered divisions and forming an independent army with its own strategical objectives, a goal which soon put him at sixes and sevens with Haig and Foch, and even more so with the British Prime Minister Lloyd George.