
NORTHWESTERN PENNSYLVANIA IN WORLD WAR I: The 112th Infantry Regiment

By Brian Kridler

The first World War turned the globe and, in particular, Europe upside down. Its costs in terms of lives lost and dollars spent are still incalculable. The human casualties suffered by the main combatants - Germany, France, Russia, Great Britain and Austria - were so extensive as to be measurable only in terms of an entire generation. The wholesale slaughter that was so typical of the Western Front and other theaters from 1914 to 1917 is still unimaginable to those of us who did not witness the carnage.

The cause of the overwhelming losses was a three-year stalemate that sapped the strength of the nations involved. However, the deadlock ended in 1918. Germany was able to return offensive mobility to the Western Front, and the introduction of a new significant allied power - the United States - as an active belligerent threatened to upset the terrible balance that had existed for the past three years. Germany's commanders, aware of America's potential impact, launched several offensives with which they hoped to push the British into the sea, isolate the weakened French, and sweep into Paris before the U.S. troops arrived¹ General Erich Friedrich Wilhelm Ludendorff and the rest of the German command were optimistic that their armies might accomplish the heretofore im-

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possible task. Russia had thrown in the towel with the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, thus allowing for a shifting of troops to the Western theater. This gave Germany its first manpower advantage since the opening days of the war. In addition, tactics which had proven very effective in the East were being readied for the fronts in France and Belgium. The Germans were involved in a race against time, however. The initial Yankee divisions, green but each 28,000 men strong and full of the youthful optimism which had long vanished from the European armies, were beginning to land and continue their training in France. A decisive German victory was crucial before the weight of the Americans could affect the balance.

It is the purpose of this article to examine the history of one unit of the growing American juggernaut - the 112th Pennsylvania National Guard Infantry Regiment. By looking specifically at this group's organization, training, and battles one can find a representative example of what the war was like for many young Americans sent to France in 1918. The examination of this regiment's actions and engagements also provide insight into the type of war fought by the American units and their role in the eventual Allied victory. Finally, this article will evaluate the 112th Regiment's performance, and in light of its history, draw conclusions concerning the entire American military effort in 1918.

ORGANIZATION AND TRAINING

The 112th resulted from the merging of two pre-war National Guard regiments in accord with General Orders No. 22, dated October 11, 1917.² As part of an overall plan for Army reorganization, the 16th PA and 8th PA were combined. The 16th was headquartered in Oil City and drew companies from surrounding Northwestern Pennsylvania communities. The 8th, on the other hand, hailed from the Harrisburg area.³ This consolidation occurred in light of the expected magnitude of the American build-up, and to provide for the large-sized U.S. divisions numbering 28,000 men each, double the strength of healthy European counterparts.⁴ Each division was to include four infantry regiments of 3,750 men each. Rifle Companies, which had previously consisted of 150 men, were increased to 250 troops per unit.⁵

The 112th and three other regiments - the 109th, 110th, and 111th - encompassed the 28th Infantry Division. The 28th, or "Keystone," Division was initially made up of National Guard units from the state of Pennsylvania. As it experienced losses, individual replacements or "casuals" from all across the Union were filtered into its ranks ultimately diluting its "all Pennsylvania" status.⁶ In terms of casualties the division had the most of any National Guard group, and was preceded by only three other Regular Army divisions: the Second, First, and Third.⁷ By the end of the war the 28th Division experienced over 16,000 casualties, including more than 2,500 dead.⁸

In the autumn of 1917 the "Keystone" regiments were being readied for training. Due to pre-war enlistment rates and recent service along the Mexican border, the 28th was the first new division to have more than the required number of men per company after being called into federal service on August 5, 1917.⁹ The regiments of the division began to arrive in Augusta, Georgia for basic training on August 20, 1917 and continued to do so until mid-September.¹⁰ Plans called for them to drill and train at nearby Camp Hancock. The Army, however, was being fairly generous in its assessment of the "camp" which "was barely half-finished, with incomplete buildings, dismal excuses for roads, and poor or even nonexistent drill grounds, obstacle courses, and rifle ranges."¹¹ Such was the material unpreparedness of the United States for war. Enlisted soldiers were first required to become construction workers and build the camps at which they would be trained. The necessary tasks included the clearing of trees and brush, erecting of tents and platforms, and the eventual installing of electricity by the end of September.¹²

Once the camps were ready, training was to be in accord with the new organizational plan of the overall commander of the Army, General John J. "Blackjack" Pershing. His changes provided for the large divisions, each designed to withstand heavy losses and "absorb punishment." This, he hoped, would enable them to overcome the defensive trench systems by sheer weight of numbers and training in offensive tactics. Secondly, Pershing planned to exploit the unique "American independent character" by fostering individual initiative and innovation in his men. Finally, the Yankee forces would consist

predominantly of trained riflemen. With concentrated and superior accuracy, the general believed that his troops could bypass German machine-gun emplacements.¹³ With "standards of discipline and turnout . . . as strict as those of the British Brigade of Guards," Pershing and his staff set about training an Army.¹⁴

The 112th went through two training programs at Camp Hancock. The first lasted 16 weeks and ended in January 1918. The second commenced immediately after, and continued until spring when the troops were eventually shipped out.¹⁵ The basic training experience could be summed up as a cross between the rigors of Valley Forge and the pleasures of a grand social event. Certain periods of hard work and training brought the young men into close contact with weapons and equipment when they could be supplied - another reflection of the nation's unreadiness. One source provided a list of some of the events on a typical weekly schedule: "trench digging, long hikes and marches . . . close order drill, bayonet combat, bomb throwing, target practice and other . . . work, varied by parades and reviews."¹⁶ The trainees also attended regular evening classes in technical subjects as well as "patriotism and civics."¹⁷ The troops came under the tutelage of American and Allied instructors. For instance, they studied rifle and bomb techniques with the French, boxing from a Canadian, and bayonet use under a British-trained American.¹⁸

By Georgia standards, the winter of 1917-1918 was unusually difficult. Adequate winter clothing and blankets were in short supply for the abnormally cold weather. Another authority James A. Murrin mentioned, "heavy snows, ice and bitter cold"¹⁹ In addition the tent platforms lacked fuel for their heaters. Finally and to make matters even worse, an outbreak of the measles erupted amidst the January cold. Thirty cases were reported on January 14, and the 112th was duly quarantined. Within eight days, 150 men were hospitalized and over 900 in isolation. Efforts to control the spread were apparently successful, and the quarantine was lifted by the end of the month to everyone's satisfaction.²⁰

Quite possibly the most unpopular feature of the isolation was its infringement upon the social aspects of camp life. All was not always "work" at Hancock. Frequent mention was

made of trips to Augusta, a day off to attend the Ringling Brothers' Circus, gatherings at the camp Y.M.C.A., and weekend athletic competitions. Murrin presented one unintentionally comic episode for the modern reader. As part of a public exhibition, the 112th, while enthusiastically being cheered on by thousands of Augustans, savagely attacked row upon row of dummies with its bayonets. This may be well and good, but can anyone, with their present view of the military, imagine what followed: a Y.M.C.A. "singing festival" led by a minister and attended by both citizens and soldiers?²¹ Paris Island this was not!

In February the Army began to grant furloughs to five percent of the men from a given unit at a time. These continued during the next two months and were enthusiastically received by the 112th. When they were suddenly and ominously halted in April, time had become short. Murrin remarked that, "a blind man could have read the writing on the walls."²² In the eyes of the eager young men, it was about time! One of the last experiences of the 112th in Augusta before shipping out was an opportunity to march with veterans of the Confederate Army in a joint Confederate Memorial/Liberty Loan Day celebration. The Bloody Shirt was never less evident than on April 6, 1918 when Pennsylvania troops marched to the Southern rebel yell.²³

OVER THERE

On April 30 the men of the 112th finally departed Camp Hancock and Georgia. Over the next four days all units were entrained for New York City, each passing through cheering Pennsylvania home crowds in Philadelphia. By May 3 the entire regiment had arrived in the city and prepared to depart aboard the British passenger liner *Aquitania*. This vessel was the sister-ship of the sunken *Lusitania*, and was capable of carrying up to 6,000 troops across the Atlantic.²⁴

In Europe the allies were desperate for the presence of American soldiers, especially in light of Germany's recent manpower advantage and their devastating spring offensives. The U.S. and British governments made arrangements for the rapid shipping of American infantry aboard English vessels. Very often departing without full equipment and always lack-

ing artillery, the Americans began to cross the Atlantic in a steady stream of first 120,000 and then 250,000 men each month. This placed a great burden upon the British citizenry who went without badly needed supplies and food during the long summer so that all shipping efforts could be devoted to the transport of troops.²⁵

The *Aquitania*, accompanied by several other troop ships, crossed under the watchful eyes of an escorting fleet of destroyers. Murrin, one of the only sources to deal in detail with the regiment before it arrived in France, remarked that, "The trip could not have been improved upon. Weather was splendid on all but one or two days, and as to submarines, not a one was encountered."²⁶ He, of course, as a cub correspondent was able to mess with the officers in the stately dining rooms of the craft, and also to enjoy their entertainment. For "amusement," the enlisted men were provided with speeches by their officers who harped upon the "sacred privilege" that was theirs in this great undertaking.²⁷

Mornings were spent on the deck of the ship where the men passed time watching their escorts, engaging in friendly boxing matches, or writing letters home.²⁸ Lifeboat and fire drills were common daily practice. At night the young troops were berthed in the hold of the craft, and in crowded conditions that necessitated "quite a contortion to get to bed without disturbing any of the other soldiers." To add to the discomfort, the air was so stuffy and "warm that a healthy soldier [needed] no blankets."²⁹

The *Aquitania* was carefully escorted through the mined Irish Sea, and finally arrived at its berth in Liverpool, England on May 14. No time was wasted as the troops were almost immediately entrained and headed across the countryside for Dover. A short stop in Rugby provided for "warm tea from the English Red Cross." The men of the 112th arrived in Dover, were boarded on the British craft *Onward* and on May 16 were steaming across the channel for Calais, France. Murrin mused, "A month later we would have given most anything to glimpse either Folkestone or Dover again."³⁰ By May 18, 1918 the entire unit was in France.

In Calais, the regiment spent a night in "Rest Camp No. 6." Because they were to be trained with the British forces,

they traded in their American made Springfield for English Enfield rifles. In addition, the doughboys received gas masks, and then were ordered to dispense with personal items of comfort that would not be needed at the front. It had been decided that due to the desperate situation of the British in Flanders following the opening 1918 German offensives in that region, the 28th and other divisions would train in their rear as a show of support. On May 19 the division was moved by rail and foot to their camps in the villages of the Pas-de-Calais.³¹ The schedule called for six hours of drill a day, most evenings being spent listening to the regimental band from Oil City or amidst the village shops where a meal of fresh dairy products could be had.³²

The training with the British had lasted for only a few weeks when it was decided that the 28th and other divisions would be moved into positions behind the French sector north of Paris. During March and April, the German offensives in Flanders had succeeded in pushing formidable salients into the British lines there. In late May a third attack was launched southeast of the British sector along the French lines in the Chemin des Dames. The attack was meant only as a diversion to draw Allied forces from Flanders so that a final blow could be delivered against the British troops there. Initial successes, however, prompted General Ludendorf to attempt an exploitation of the new salient. His hope was that a decisive victory could be achieved with a breakthrough and drive into Paris. The attempt was nearly successful, but the German armies were eventually halted along the Marne River in large part due to the timely intervention of two American Regular Army divisions near Chateau Thierry. Preparing for further offensives, Ludendorf's operational security deteriorated and Allied intelligence was able to correctly discern where they would fall, unlike before. It was in preparation for the fourth German surge of 1918 that the 112th and the rest of the division were moved south from the British sector into training behind the apex of the Marne salient at Chateau Thierry. The fourth attack - the Matz Offensive - fell on June 9-10 before the Americans were in place, but after initial limited German gains the lines once again stabilized along the river.³³

Early German successes in 1918 were attributed to the

implementation of new tactics combined with temporary manpower advantages gained by shifting troops from the pacified Eastern Front. These are worth discussing, because it would be an eventual Allied superiority in numbers combined with these adopted German tactics that insured victory in November. In particular, the Americans would make use of them in the Meuse-Argonne offensive of September-October.

First and foremost, Germany worked very hard to achieve the element of surprise. Great attention was given to maintaining the secrecy of infantry and artillery build-ups by taking advantage of night movements and forest cover. Overwhelming numbers of short and long-range guns were moved into camouflaged positions. Because of the German development of new mathematical techniques, registration fire for artillery was no longer a necessity.³⁴ Thus, a rolling barrage could now immediately precede small groups of highly trained infantry, or storm troops.³⁵ These lightly burdened and highly mobile young men were taught to "cross the trench lines, by-pass centres of hard resistance and machine-gun nests and if possible break through to attack the enemy artillery."³⁶ The masses of heavier infantry following in their wake did the necessary mopping up. These three things secrecy, massive artillery bombardments using new mathematical techniques, and trained shock troops using infiltration tactics - opened up the Western Front in 1918. These same methods would, to a certain extent, be copied by Allied forces in the Autumn offensives.

It was, perhaps, Ludendorff's great failing that he did not stick to his initial strategy of limited, diversionary advances in the south in favor of one more massive strike in the north. By attempting to make too much of the Marne advance, he eventually over-extended his supply lines, widened his front, and wasted his reserves while the American Army continued to grow and train.³⁷

Ready to depart the British sector, the 112th once again traded rifles for their original Springfields, and began preparations to move south towards Chateau Thierry on June 9. After a strenuous day's march the regiment found themselves encamped on the historic battlefield of Agincourt, where the French mud, unlike at Passchaendale in 1917, had once favored another English army in 1415.³⁸ By June 12, all 112th

units were entrained for Paris, the outskirts of which they passed while en route to Varis. The ensuing week witnessed seemingly countless changes of location. However, by the end of the month, the men were in reserve positions in and around Bussieres, south of the lines at Chateau Thierry.³⁹

As the 112th came into areas that were within range of the German artillery, every effort was made to conceal their positions from enemy air reconnaissance. The "War Diaries" recorded that: "Every care has been taken to conceal tents from the enemy planes, and wagons are being camouflaged with tree branches."⁴⁰ Secret orders arrived on June 29, and they detailed plans to have, from each company of the 112th, one officer and three non-coms temporarily assigned to the 2nd American Division at the front. This was representative of the American Army's training doctrine during World War One, which called for the gradual placement of troops, as they became ready, into the front lines. The 112th had already been through the initial stages of its preparation: drilling behind Allied sectors with a gradual movement toward the front until within areas experiencing shelling. The next stages introduced small units to a gradual baptism under fire. Ultimately, platoons and companies were sent into the forward lines for action in limited engagements - defensive and offensive - and the gradual gaining of experience.⁴¹

The sources indicate that the men were eager for some sort of action against real Germans. The endless marching, counter-marching, and drilling of May and June had begun to have its effects on morale. Proctor mentioned periods of "grumbling and fault-finding among the men, who couldn't understand why they still saw nothing of the war at first hand."⁴² In their naivete they felt that they were ready for whatever the enemy could throw at them. However, first contact with real combat often came in the form of incoming shelling and gas attacks at the hands of an unseen enemy that couldn't be fought. Proctor noted that the young soldiers, when under artillery fire, "became convinced that the Germans knew they [the 112th] were on the way to the front and were deliberately trying to prevent them, through sheer fear of their well-known prowess."⁴³ This overwhelming self-confidence seems to have been typical of the American doughboy.

What must have been a particularly frustrating episode began during the early morning hours of July 4. The regiment was awake and on the march by 3 a.m. in response to a perceived German threat. They were at once ordered forward to the works in the vicinity of La Chapelle, a march of 9-10 miles. By 7:30 A.M., all troops were in their positions. They waited until 1 P.M. when the regiment was withdrawn a distance of approximately two miles to cover in the Grand Forest. They remained under the tree cover until after dark when, finally, they were counter-marched back to their original positions near Bussieres! During the entire episode, not a single shot was fired.⁴⁴

Regardless of these apparently fruitless maneuvers, training continued with the gradual placement of small groups into the line for battle experience. On July 6, orders were received to send two platoons from the 112th into the French line for a one week assignment. After the first week they were to be replaced by two similar units. On July 8, two entire companies were ordered to another front, also under French control.⁴⁵

According to the July 6 orders, the 112th was represented by platoons from Company G of Erie, and Company I from Warren. These soldiers were placed into the lines at Hill 204 near Chateau Thierry. While in their positions, they came under attack on two consecutive days. The latter assault succeeded in establishing a German machine gun position on the flank of the men from "G," forcing them to withdraw and give ground. Both platoons returned to the regiment on July 13 after suffering light casualties.⁴⁶

In accordance with the July 8 orders, Companies H and M, drawn from Ridgway and Grove City respectively, were attached to the 156th French Infantry and sent to the front.⁴⁷ These assignments were by nature problematic owing to poor communications and a short supply of interpreters. In his book *The Battle for Europe 1918*, H. Essame recounted an incident that occurred when two 28th Division companies drawn from regiments other than the 112th were sent to the front with similar orders. Amidst a German advance, the two Pennsylvania companies were not notified of a general French withdrawal along the line. Holding on to their positions, they were then forced to combat the enemy on both flanks. The Ameri-

cans were left to fight their own way back to the relative safety of the French lines, with some groups taking up to 36 hours to do so and most being decimated in the process.⁴⁸

ADVANCE TO THE VESLE RIVER

On July 14 the regiment's involvement as a fighting unit began to pick up momentum. Bastille Day opened with a terrific German bombardment that heralded the beginning of the fifth and final German offensive, which was followed immediately by the Second Battle of the Marne. The latter effectively pinched out the Marne salient, and ended any real German hopes of victory. The shelling on the 14th was so intense that "The earth rocked, [and] the little building in which our headquarters was located shook as if it were in a death convulsion"⁴⁹ During the ensuing hours of terror, the 112th suffered its greatest casualties south of the river. In the first and second battalions alone, gas and explosives accounted for 89 losses, including 13 deaths.⁵⁰

The artillery exchanges of World War One were evidence of its destructive power. Nothing was more feared or hated by either alliance's infantry. Worst of all was "its random, murderous power, above all their defenselessness against it."⁵¹ An examination of one month's casualty returns shows that the 112th's greatest losses were suffered at the hands of the enemy's big guns with their output of gas and shell. During the month of August, 154 casualties were attributed to gas attacks, 75 to shrapnel, and 85 to shell fire compared with 15 to rifle fire, 22 to machine guns, and 6 to grenades.⁵²

During the next few days of the German advance, the regiment took up positions in the second defensive line. Sister units of the "Keystone" Division participated in front line actions and were in part responsible for the stubborn defense of the Marne crossings that turned the tide of the offensive and sent the German Army reeling.⁵³ The apex of the enemy advance came to within three miles of the 112th's line, but on July 18 the momentum had shifted and Germany's retreat from the Marne began.⁵⁴

During this ill-fated German offensive, considerable American and French Colonial forces had been accumulating near Soissons, which was located near the western shoulder of the

German salient. The Allied counter-offensive, also beginning on the 18th, revealed the perilous position of Ludendorf's armies. If the Allies were able to punch through their overly-extended lines, the Germans would be facing a largely American body under French command in their rear.⁵⁵

Unfortunately, even though the force at Soissons pushed the German lines back, they never broke through, and the enemy was able to conduct a well-ordered and successful retreat to the Vesle River, all the while pressed from the South by the 28th and their neighboring units. It was a hard-fought struggle, however. Allied attempts to force withdrawal met fierce artillery and airplane attacks.⁵⁶ In addition, they were hampered by strong centers of rear-guard resistance ensconced in medieval farms and shell-torn villages. Allied infantry (the 112th included) ducked incoming explosives and gas, and they struggled with persistent snipers, machine-gun emplacements, and small ambush parties. The roads that the Germans left them to travel upon were carefully blocked or mined whenever possible. Allied and German dead were everywhere, creating an unbearable stench, and the hamlets and villages were laid to ruins, steam-rolled over by the retreating juggernaut. In many cases, Allied infantry had to slow their efforts even further in order that their own artillery support wouldn't be left too far behind.⁵⁷

The 112th crossed the Marne and moved under incoming fire through the village of Chateau Thierry. By July 24, most of the unit had advanced ten miles to the northeast without real or sustained contact with anything but the output of Germany's guns. However, the Second Battalion, which included Companies G, F, E, and H, saw action while temporarily attached to the 26th American Division. Under the command of Erieite Captain Lucius M. Phelps, the Pennsylvania doughboys became involved in the battle for Red Cross Farm. Farms offered strong centers of resistance because of their medieval fort-like architecture, which consisted of "centuries old buildings, built of stone with exceptionally thick walls, offering ideal protection for machine-guns, snipers, and one-pounders."⁵⁸

The units of the Second Battalion were assigned the task of taking a nearby hill being held by German machine-gunners

who had driven off similar assaults during the previous day. Without anything even resembling a preparatory artillery barrage, Companies G and F surged up the rise relatively unopposed. Luckily, the Germans had abandoned the position and retreated north since the last American assault.⁵⁹ The battalion faced only token resistance, and having easily attained its objective, the companies continued to advance for five kilometers until becoming apparently too close for German comfort. The enemy opened with a heavy artillery barrage that pinned them down and forced the battalion to dig in, halting the forward progress. On July 25 they were released from duty and returned to the 112th at Bois de Trugny. Shortly after, the entire regiment was relieved by units of the 42nd "Rainbow" Division and given three days of rest in and around the positions they occupied.⁶⁰

From the 25th until August 6, little contact was made with the enemy, who had successfully retreated to positions on either side of the Vesle River, over twenty miles to the northeast of the original lines along the Marne. Concerned about how this inactivity would affect his troops' morale and readiness, commanding officer Colonel George C. Rickards admonished the men to stay sharp by "giving close attention to...duties, hygiene, sanitation, military courtesies, soldierly decorum and bearing" ⁶¹ This was not a reflection of a unit that was overwhelmed with combat operations. Essentially, the events of the past couple of weeks had amounted to little more than "hard hiking, contact with the enemy having not yet been obtained." ⁶²

They soon had their fill of combat, however. On August 6 the three battalions of the 112th were moved into Allied front line positions along the Vesle. The Second Battalion, again under the command of Captain Phelps, was placed into positions in the village of Fismes. The entire area had become known among the Americans as "Death Valley" for the incessant shelling and strong German resistance all along the river. Snipers and machine-gun units plagued the doughboys from both sides of the water, especially from opposite Fismes in the smaller community of Fismette. Street-by-street sweeps eventually cleared the Germans from the former, but fire continued to be directed from the latter. As a result, a crossing and

assault were planned for the evening of August 7 in order to silence the guns in Fismette.⁶³

Three attempts at gaining a foothold north of the Vesle ensued. The first, at 7 P.M., was preceded by a fifteen minute barrage. Initial success was gained by small Second Battalion units that were able to ford the river, but due to insecure flanks a withdrawal was ordered. Later, after an hour of allied shelling to soften the German resistance, Captain Phelps led a second assault on the village at 4 A.M. of the following morning. Squads of soldiers crossed the river on the only existing foot-bridge while others swam or waded the barbed wire laden waters. Lieutenant Shearer of Harrisburg led a squad from Erie's Company G across the Vesle in waters reaching up to the necks of the men. Their objective was a strong German position in a medieval tannery. Advancing under small arms and machine-gun fire, the men were able to work their way toward the building. With excellent marksmanship and well-placed grenades, Shearer's doughboys eliminated the enemy presence. Unfortunately, a German counter-attack again forced an American withdrawal across the river.⁶⁴

After these two attempts, the 112th was not to be denied. At 11 A.M. Companies F, H, and G, advancing all along their front, were able to secure a bridgehead across the Vesle. The doughboys pushed the Germans back and began to dig in amidst the shell-torn village. The abandoned buildings offered the necessary cover, and the regiment threw back enemy counterattacks until they were relieved by the 111th Infantry during the early morning hours of August 10.⁶⁵ Unit exchanges typically took place under cover of darkness to hide the temporary disorganization from the eyes of the enemies who might exploit such a weakness. Once a new unit was in place, its commanding officer then assumed control and responsibility for all standing orders at the local headquarters.⁶⁶

From August 14 to 17, the 112th enjoyed the relative quiet of three days of relief in the rear. Nearly 100 replacements or "casuals" were received and inserted to bolster existing ranks. By the 19th, units of the regiment's First Battalion were again ordered to occupy positions in the lines at Fismes, with one company from Corry holding works in Fismette. The "War Diaries" make note of the fact that the Germans contin-

ued to "occupy and operate machine gun nests in FISMETTE after dark, deserting nests before daylight," and that the roads into Fismes were under heavy artillery fire.⁶⁷ On the 20th, in an effort to consolidate the American positions in Fismette, the western edge of the village was occupied and fortified. The Third Battalion relieved the First on the 22nd, and it was at this time that an additional company of troops was placed north of the Vesle. Trench work continued for the next four days, and little artillery activity was reported.⁶⁸

Both the local German and American commands had taken note of the relatively weak Yankee positions in Fismette. Colonel Rickards, Commander of the 112th, had for several days been requesting an offensive crossing by the 77th Division to his left and the 110th Infantry to his right. None were made. For his part, Rickards sought permission to pull back his exposed troops to the southern shore on August 26, but was told only that Divisional HQ was seeing what could be done.⁶⁹ The Germans, at the same time, were planning to throw the Americans back across the river. One thousand picked storm troops were being secretly placed into the lines opposite Fismette, and their intelligence was pointing to the likelihood of an American battalion exchange taking place during the night of the 26th.⁷⁰ The Second did relieve the Third, and Companies G and H moved into Fismette - G on the left and H on the right. At 4:10 A.M., a German strike commenced as enemy artillery opened fire upon the small hamlet. After fifteen minutes the shelling was rolled forward across the river and set down upon Fismes, effectively cutting communications between the American troops on opposite sides of the river. During the ensuing firestorm, Captain Phelps was severely wounded in his Fismes HQ, and the troops there were ordered to prepare to repulse an assault upon their positions. Streets were barricaded and river crossings covered by mortars and one-pounders.⁷¹ All the while, the companies south of the river - E and F - were ignorant of what was happening to their comrades in Fismette.

After the artillery bombardment, an initial pre-dawn enemy frontal assault upon the Second Battalion lines in Fismette was repulsed. More German artillery preparation soon followed. Then, under cover of fog and dust, enemy units were successful in flanking both sides of the American line. Pouring

into the village with a 5:1 manpower advantage, the storm troopers proceeded to surround one group of men after another, killing or capturing them in the process. For an hour or more, hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets, grenades, and liquid fire took place. The bridge escape route was effectively cut off when a German machine-gun team was able to set up a position covering the expanse.⁷² Some men were able to escape by swimming the Vesle or via a wooden dam that still stood at one point along the river. The fighting was so heavy that another Erieite, Lieutenant Edward Schmelzer, who was in command of G, reported, "You couldn't go into the street without being fired at," and that, "every squad was fighting its [own] battle."⁷³ By mid-morning it was over. More than 85 percent of the Americans were out of action with between 60 and 70 men killed and 138 taken captive, 50 of whom were wounded. These numbers were out of a total of 230 men and 6 officers in Fismette on the morning of August 27.⁷⁴ The large numbers of Americans imprisoned by the Germans, including company commanding officers Lieutenants Schmelzer and Fredenburg, were held at P.O.W. camps in Rasstatt and Vilingen until their release on November 28. Schmelzer later recalled that conditions were difficult and "had it not been for the Red Cross they would have starved to death"⁷⁵ Whatever remained of Companies G and H was consolidated until replacements could refill the ranks.⁷⁶

THE ARGONNE FOREST

Initial thoughts of attempting to retake Fismette were soon abandoned as the 28th and other American divisions prepared for a move eastward. Pershing had finally been able to gain a sector in which the new army could act independently, out from under foreign command. A unified American front and an important contribution to any Allied victory was needed to increase the bargaining strength of President Wilson and his "14 Points."

Accordingly, Pershing was given a stretch of the eastern sector of the Western Front where the Germans had long held a salient around the fortress of St. Mihiel. Initial American plans were to pinch out this thorn in the French side, and then continue to push toward the vital German rail junction at Metz.

However, British Field Marshall Haig and Allied Commander-in-Chief Ferdinand Foch successfully argued to shift Pershing's offensive to the west. The commanders decided that after the Yankees eliminated the salient they would be sent into the area between the Meuse River in the east and the Argonne Forest in the west. This was done in an effort to coordinate the American drive with a British effort in Flanders. The 28th was assigned the task of penetrating the heretofore thought impregnable Argonne along the Aire River.⁷⁷

The 112th was on the move towards its assigned positions during the first weeks of September. At one point the men of one battalion marched a distance of 74 kilometers in four nights' time, hiding under forest cover by day.⁷⁸ As such, the regiment's movements were part of an impressive logistical operation under the untried American command. For the most part successful, the General Staff of the young army was able to secretly maneuver over half a million men and 4,000 guns into the Meuse-Argonne front for the jumping-off date of September 26.⁷⁹

For the first time, the units of the 28th Division would be taking part in a grand head-on offensive. The area known as the Argonne Forest had within it defensive works "as elaborate and ingenious as any on the Western Front, roughly 12 miles deep, bristling with barbed wire, mutually supporting concrete strong points and machine-gun nests in great depth."⁸⁰ All three of the battalions went into the line on September 26. To their right were the men of the 30th Division and to the left the 77th.⁸¹ They advanced steadily during the opening two days of the offensive, and headed toward La Chene Tonde, which was 5 miles from their starting positions. There was virtually no artillery opposition and casualties were light.⁸² The field itself provided the most difficult obstacles. Proctor wrote that it "was so gutted with shell craters as to make the going almost like mountain climbing." He further remarked that "it was utterly impossible for all the men to make their way in between."⁸³

Upon its arrival at La Chene Tonde, the regiment began to encounter stronger German resistance. It took the regiment four days to bypass the strong positions along the ridge there. Germans and Americans struggled to overcome one another on

the war-torn field. Frontal assaults became costly as each set of belligerents had a defensive advantage over the other. Superior numbers of American riflemen could easily defend against the German infantry, but in turn could not bypass the ensconced machine-guns of the enemy defenses. Finally, abandoning costly frontal assaults, the 112th turned to infiltration tactics that were ultimately successful. The Army "War Diaries" describe German emplacements and snipers that were "proving bothersome, but being routed . . . successfully by small parties of infantrymen and bombers."⁸⁴ It was slow going as units crept forward while their fellows to the rear directed withering rifle fire upon strong points. The forward group then laid covering fire in return so that the men behind them might creep ahead. It was in this way that the regiment eventually carried the ridge by going "up hill, steadily gaining, until on the evening of the fourth day . . . the 112th lay down and slept on the crest of the ridge in token of their victory."⁸⁵

Following shortly upon their successes at La Chene Tondu, the three battalions continued to advance several kilometers to the village of Chatel Chehery. Along the way they were attacked by a German force at Apremont. Since the 112th was preparing to go on the offensive, they had large numbers of troops with which to defend themselves, and the German soldiers were consequently "mowed down in rows" as they advanced.⁸⁶

Once the 112th reached Chatel Chehery, the fighting centered around Hills 244 and 223. One source recorded that the heights were so steep as to necessitate climbing on "hands and knees."⁸⁷ On October 7 the doughboys set their teeth and took the position on Hill 244 during their first attempt. They continued their momentum and pushed the defending Germans up and over the next rise - Hill 223.⁸⁸ One member of Company I, Sergeant Ralph Summerton of Warren, earned the Distinguished Service Cross for his efforts. The fighting of the past few days had resulted in heavy Company I casualties. Learning that his unit was without officers to lead the morning's assault, Summerton refused to be hospitalized for influenza and minor wounds. He went on to lead his men up to the top of Hill 244 where he was put out of the fight with a more serious rifle wound.⁸⁹

The efforts of the 112th in and around Chatel Chehery aided in relieving pressure to their left that was being placed upon part of the 77th Division, lost and surrounded in the heavy forest. The work done on Hills 244 and 223, combined with the efforts of the 55th Brigade and 82nd Division, forced the Germans to back off long enough for the trapped men to fight their way to safety.⁹⁰

On October 9 the "Keystone" Division was relieved in its sector by the 82nd American Division. In nearly two weeks of continuous offensive combat the 112th and its sister units succeeded in pushing the German lines back ten kilometers, displaying what the First Army Corps commander called "first-class fighting ability."⁹¹ Casualties were terrible. The regiment had gone into the Argonne with 77 officers and nearly 3,000 men fit for duty. When it emerged, the unit could list only 10 officers and just over 500 troops as capable of front line service.⁹²

Immediately following its relief, the entire division was transferred east to The St. Mihiel area near the town of Thiaucourt. If the war had continued, a third American offensive was planned towards Pershing's original objective of Metz. It was in preparation for just this contingency that the 112th was placed into the lines again. Their immediate mission, however, was to "patrol and carry out reconnaissance on a large scale."⁹³ In search of prisoners, raids into the thinly held German lines were common practice during the closing days of the war. For instance, on October 22, units of the regiment brought back 27 prisoners.⁹⁴ As time passed, the feeling that the war was about to end prevailed and "a spirit of elation was abroad."⁹⁵

Following the armistice of November 11, the 28th did not become part of the army of occupation, and attempted to make the most of the idle months that followed. Some of the more fortunate men of the group were able to attend schools in England and France. The 112th's band was particularly active in inter-Army competitions, and eventually won a trip to Monte Carlo for itself.⁹⁶

IN RETROSPECT

How then can the experiences of the 112th be summed up? The past months had seen lengthy stretches of training,

marching, and waiting interspersed with periods of combat. However, in retrospect, the time spent in France could be best divided into four nearly distinct periods: training behind the British and French lines, the Second Battle of the Marne and its aftermath along the Vesle, the Argonne offensive, and the anti-climactic conclusion in the Thiaucourt sector.

The initial phases of the training were fairly typical of what most American Divisions went through as they were carefully prepared for action along the front. It is my guess that most of the young doughboys were chaffing at the bit, much like the men of the 112th Infantry. Frustration was evident amidst the day-in and day-out training. It continued under the incessant rain of the unseen enemy's artillery during July and August.

When contact began during the advance toward the Vesle, it was in a very limited fashion. Germany fought a brilliant rear-guard action that kept their pursuers at arm's length and forced them to fight for each piece of lightly but well-defended ground. During this period, only certain units of the regiment came into direct contact with German foot soldiers. Most, again, were obliged to suffer the infantryman's nightmare - heavy artillery bombardment. Hunkered down in their muddy trenches, they must have thirsted for action they could at least have some control over. The time spent in the lines at Fismes and Fismette gave them a taste of the heat of battle, but these hard-fought engagements were on a small scale. The 112th did not experience the combat more typical of the large World War One battles until the Argonne offensive.

The 112th fought well in the Argonne, as did the 28th Division, and they certainly fought often. They were withdrawn, partially as a result their extensive losses. Like other American units, the 112th and the 28th engaged in costly tactics which accounted for the high casualty rates. The Yankee units had such large numbers that they presented artillery and machine-guns with remarkable targets: tightly grouped waves of men advancing along a broad front. When units of the regiment employed infiltration tactics similar to those of the German storm troops, they met with success, such as during the initial taking of Fismette and at La Chene Tondu. The unofficial sources would have you believe that the 28th fought hard-

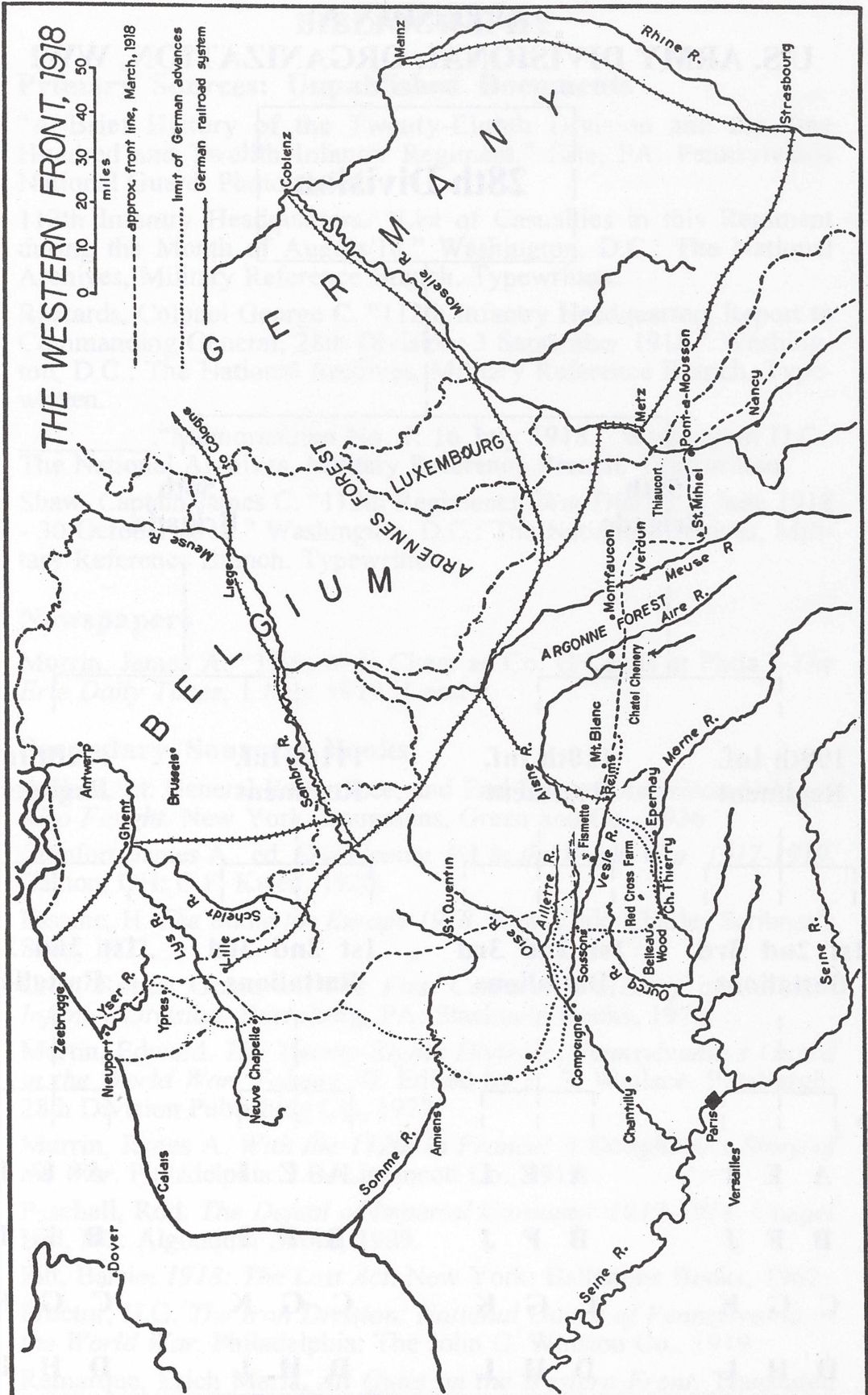
est against the most stubbornly held German positions in the Argonne. The military records are no help in the matter, and it is certain that the authors of the various accounts were writing with a high degree of emotional attachment to the unit. To be sure, the terrain of the Argonne Forest made for some of the offensive's most arduous combat.

Finally the fourth "period" was spent in the Thiaucourt sector. This was a relatively quiet area where they performed their assigned tasks well and without real incident.

Concerning the entire American Expeditionary Force, Paschall had this to say: "There was no question that the individual American soldier fought and fought well." Unfortunately, they suffered what he argued were unnecessarily heavy casualties. He stated that "The American assault was little more than a human wave into the face of German machine guns, weapons the Americans treated with contempt" The Europeans had learned their lessons after employing such tactics. The Americans didn't seem to acquire any of this wisdom from their experienced allies. Perhaps something in the Yankee character reinforced the belief that they were different because they were Americans. Just because the young men of France and Great Britain couldn't win using these frontal tactics didn't mean that the young of America couldn't! However, "Losses or not, the Americans kept coming on."⁹⁷ When the Army had reorganized back in 1917, it had done so with the intention of creating divisions capable of sustaining large numbers of casualties. Murrin thought his unit was part of an "invincible steamroller."⁹⁸ In reality, they were green troops fighting against and amongst seasoned veterans. Had the German Army been at its peak strength, it is unlikely that the Americans would have been so immediately successful. Remarque, in his classic novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*, said it best:

For one hungry, wretched German soldier come five of the enemy, fresh and fit. For one German army loaf there are fifty tins of canned beef over there. We are not beaten, for as soldiers we are better and more experienced; we are simply crushed and driven back by overwhelming superior forces.⁹⁹

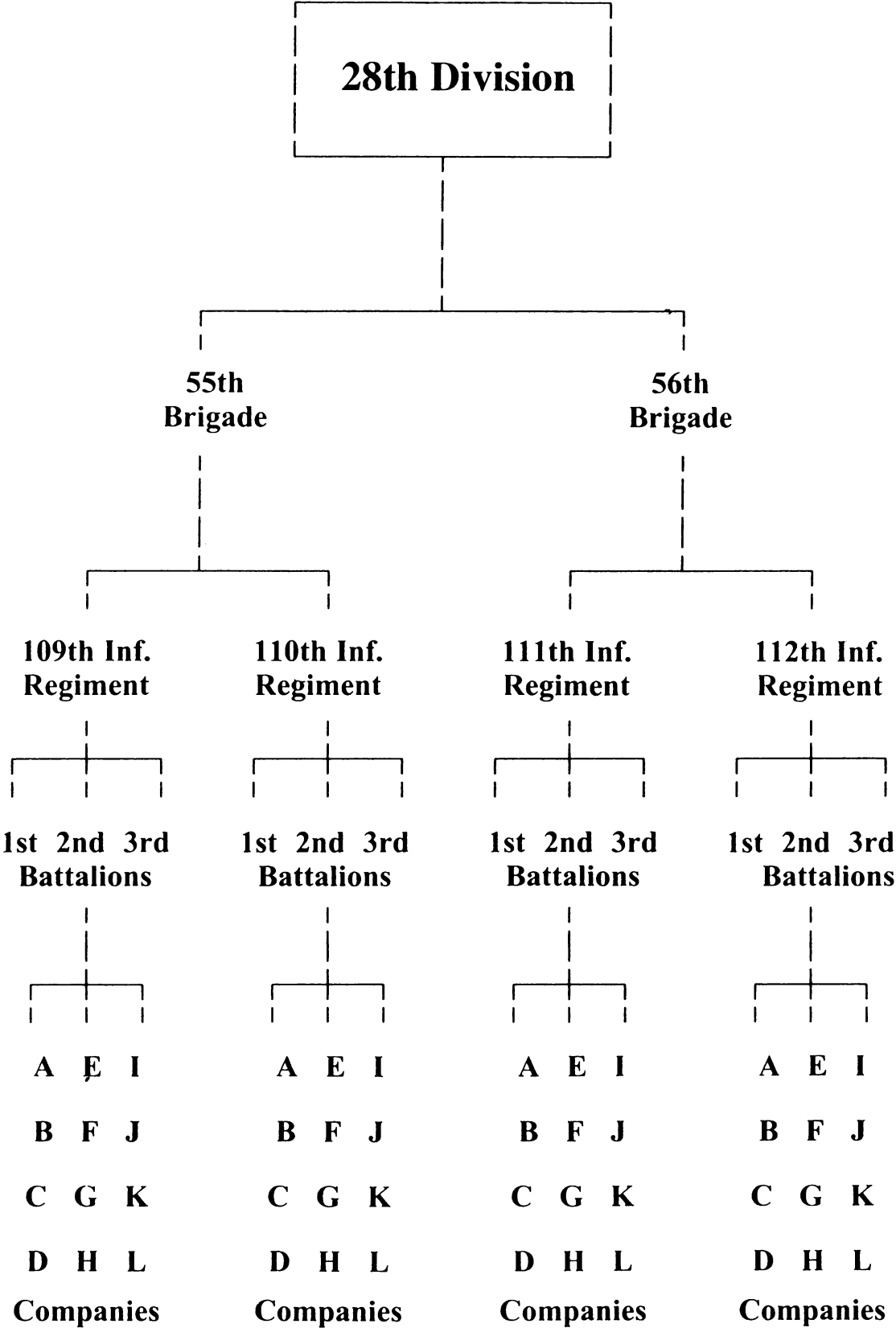
Essentially, it was the “fresh and vigorous driving power”¹⁰⁰ embodied in the young American troops combined with irresistible numbers and an eagerness to fight that enabled the Allies to defeat a disillusioned German army. The American Army came in and got the job done they set out to do. The same holds true of the 112th in its individual experiences. They met with some degree of success in all of their efforts, and at all times displayed a tremendous spirit and enthusiasm for the job at hand “over there” - something of which their contemporaries back home in Pennsylvania and succeeding generations can be immensely proud.



THE WESTERN FRONT: JULY 1918

After James L. Stokesbury, *A Short History of World War I*
 (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1981), 258.

APPENDIX A:
U.S. ARMY DIVISIONAL ORGANIZATION, WWI



Further subdivision into Platoons and Squads

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3. H. G. Proctor, *The Iron Division: National Guard of Pennsylvania in the World War* (Philadelphia: The John Winston Co., 1919), 20.
4. See Appendix A for Division Organizational Chart.
5. Robert Grant Crist, ed., *The First Century: A History of the 28th Infantry Division* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1979), 114.
6. Proctor, 108.
7. James A. Murrin, *With the 112th in France: A Doughboy's Story of the War* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1919), 310.
8. Ibid., 310.
9. Ibid., 3.
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11. Crist, 114.
12. Murrin, 13-14.
13. Rod Paschall, *The Defeat of Imperial Germany: 1917-1918* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1989), 168.
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15. Crist, 116.
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18. Murrin, 24.
19. Ibid., 31.
20. Ibid., 35.
21. Ibid., 18-23, 35.
22. Ibid., 39.
23. Ibid., 46-47.
24. Ibid., 51-53.
25. Barrie Pitt, *1918: The Last Act* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1962), 159.
26. Murrin, 60.
27. Ibid., 75.
28. Crist, 117.
29. Murrin, 65, 70.
30. Ibid., 78-82.
31. Martin, 80-81.

32. Murrin, 84.

33. Essame, 44-71.

34. Prior to 1918, artillery units had to sight their guns by firing upon an enemy until reconnaissance indicated that they were on target. As such, keeping a forthcoming offensive a secret was an impossibility so long as guns had to be "registered" before the actual bombardment began.

35. Ibid., 67.

36. Pitt, 61.

37. Essame, 55, 63.

38. At Passchaendale, thousands of young Brits met their ends while struggling to attack German positions over a field turned quagmire.

39. Captain James C. Shaw, "112th Regimental War Diaries: 9 June 1918 - 30 October 1918," (Washington, D.C.: The National Archives, Military Reference Branch, Typewritten), June 10-29.

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96. Ibid., 154.
97. Paschall, 192.
98. Murrin, *A Doughboy's Story*, viii.
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100. Bullard, vii.