

The U.S. Enters The Great War

For a nation of its size and importance, the U.S. had one of the smallest standing armies in the world. Normally less than 200,000 troops, the U.S. government had to focus on increasing the size of its army. After a small number of volunteers enlisted in the army the Selective Service Act was passed by Congress (1917) to meet the Allies' needs. This law required men between the ages of 21 to 30 to register for the draft (the range would be expanded to men between 18 to 45 by the end of the war). By 1918 about 2.8 million doughboys (as U.S. soldiers were called in the war) made up the U.S. Army. Not only did this bring enormous problems in supplying the U.S. troops, but also in preparing these civilians to fight a highly trained and experienced German army.

The Americans had many things to do before they could help the Allies. Camps were hastily constructed and training moved swiftly as farmers, factory workers, and shopkeepers learned to march, obey orders, fire weapons, and use gas masks. In some camps they were woefully short on weapons and supplies, so soldiers were forced to drill with broomsticks rather than rifles, and barrels hung between poles were used to imitate horseback riding for cavalry recruits. Although the army had many obstacles to overcome, General John J. Pershing was a stickler for military precision and wanted his men to look like a professional army when they arrived in France. To the Allied Powers this could not come quick enough.

The Allied Powers began to experience difficulties as the war continued into 1917. Czar Nicholas II was overthrown in Russia, and after a brief try at democracy, the Bolsheviks (Russian Communists) rose to power. Led by Vladimir Lenin, the Bolsheviks signed a peace treaty with Germany and dropped out of the war to focus on the internal struggles within Russia. The Germans could now throw the entire weight of their army against the British and the French on the western front; whose morale had become so low that when Allied generals ordered their troops "over the top" (to leave the trench and advance on the enemy), the soldiers had begun to refuse. The sooner the American troops arrived, the better the chances that the Allies would survive the conflict.

In the meantime, the United States had to figure out a way to break the German submarine menace that was destroying transport ships faster than they could be replaced. Admiral William Sims decided to use a convoy system (a group of vehicles traveling together) to get the ships through. Each group of transport ships would be protected by destroyer escorts all the way across the Atlantic Ocean. This new plan made it difficult for the German submarines to do much damage before they were tracked down by the destroyers and.....destroyed.

At last, the doughboys arrived. They were clean, singing, and confident; they looked strange to the grimy English and French soldiers, but the Allies celebrated their arrival as the doughboys marched through the streets and sang "Over There," and "It's a Long Way to Tipperary." After training in trench warfare and perfecting gas mask drills, General Pershing sent his soldiers to the front.

The three most important battles in which Americans participated were at Chateau Thierry, Belleau Wood, and (by far the largest) the Meuse-Argonne Counteroffensive Campaign. The Americans struggled at first against the battle hardened Germans, but eventually their numbers and fresh spirit helped turn the tide of the war in favor of the Allied Powers.

During the Meuse-Argonne Campaign the French, British, and American forces were used to deliver a series of rapid blows against the enemy along a line from Verdun to the North Sea. Unfortunately for the Allies the Argonne forest's geography made it an easy place to defend, but difficult to capture. The forest



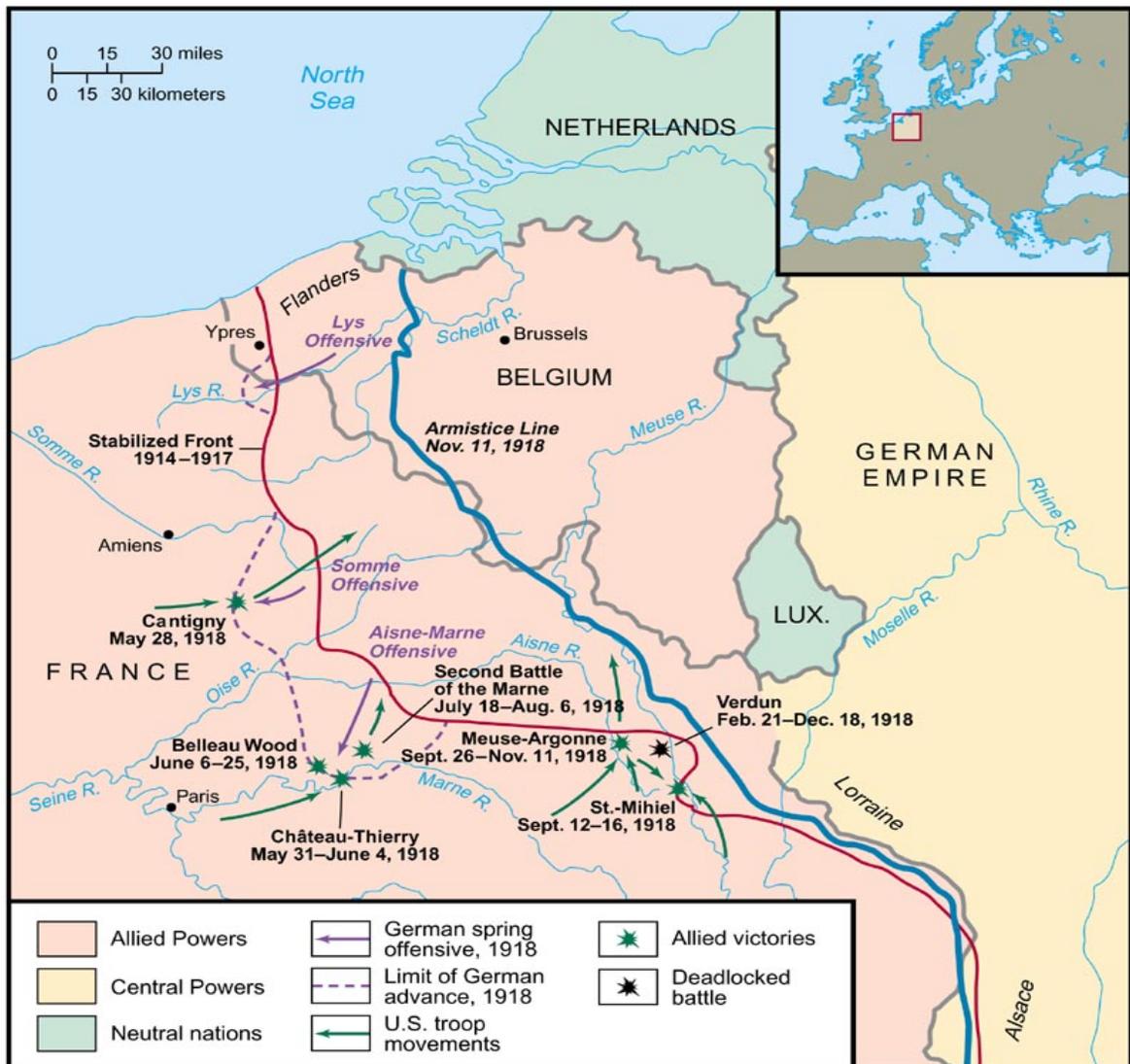
John J. Pershing



Alvin York

was a boulder-strewn wilderness of giant trees and thick underbrush. Every trail and ridge hid an enemy sharpshooter or cannon, as the Allied soldiers pushed into the forest. Many Americans distinguished themselves in combat, but no soldier garnered more popularity or fame than Alvin York. The third of eleven children raised in a two room cabin in Tennessee, York was a pacifist, who initially applied for conscientious objector (opposition to fighting based on freedom of thought) status. After speaking in length with his commanding officers (both devout Christians), they convinced York that God wanted him to fight and would protect him. Later, while out on patrol, York took charge of his platoon (after suffering heavy casualties) and killed at least 15 Germans, and captured 132 enemy prisoners. His actions silenced 35 German machine guns and earned him a promotion to Sergeant; along with the Congressional Medal of Honor.

As German morale began to weaken, their army began to retreat all along the lines. The German generals began negotiations for a cease-fire, and two days after Kaiser Wilhelm II left Germany, an armistice was signed at 11 o'clock on November 11, 1918.



THE WESTERN FRONT: U.S. PARTICIPATION, 1918