

Excerpts from *The Best World War I Story I Know, On the Point in the Argonne, 26 September - 16 October 1918*, by Nimrod T. Frazer; MBA Harvard University; recipient of the Silver Star for Gallantry in Action in the Korean War; recipient of the French Légion d'honneur; Alabama Humanities Foundation Fellow, 2018. His father, William J. Frazer, fought in World War I in the battle of Croix Rouge Farm, among other engagements.

"...the Meuse-Argonne offensive, commenced on 26 September 1918.

The campaign was a huge affair - much bigger than previous American Western Front battles.

Hill 260, or the Cote de Chatillon, stood on the highest ground and controlled lines of fire all around, making it a key stronghold on the Meuse-Argonne front that the Germans intended to hold at all costs.

The Cote de Chatillon was also significant because it stood as a strongpoint along the Kriemhilde Stellung, a linchpin of the German Hindenburg Line.

Commander-in-chief of the allied armies, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, had originally planned for the Meuse-Argonne battle to be fought in 1919, but the timing was changed to fall 1918 after the French and British victories during the 2nd battle of the Marne and Amiens.

It would become the American's largest and most complex operation in the war, over an area about eighteen miles east-west.

More American troops - 1.2 million - were required in that single operation than at any point in American history before or since.

The nine American divisions lined up on 26 September 1918 - the Meuse Argonne sector's natural defenses of narrow valleys and succession of hills for placing machine guns made it ideal for defensive positions that were deadly to attackers.

The Meuse-Argonne's first phase and the 35th Division's failure.

Their Division, a National Guard unit from Missouri and Kansas, had not yet faced hard soldiering, and its best preparation for real fighting had been limited patrolling against Germans in a quiet sector of Lorraine.

In addition to leadership issues, the Americans faced challenges of strength.

Their local attacks met limited success as the Germans always counterattacked.

On the fourth day of attack, Major-General John J. Pershing called a halt, and for the first time in the war, American divisions were forced to retreat.

The 35th was replaced by the 1st Division; most of the original 1st Division soldiers were well trained, with service on the Mexican Border in 1916-1917.

Furthermore, it was the most combat-experienced American division in France.

Both Allies and Germans respected the 1st Division for taking Cantigny, 28 MAY 1918, and holding it against two counterattacks; the first successful US operation and therefore the first to demonstrate that Americans could actually defeat Germans.

The 1st Division was under French command when Soissons was retaken from the Germans, 18 - 22 July 1918, in which there were 90,000 combatants killed in action, and another 185,000 Allied plus Central Powers casualties.

The 1st Brigade of the 1st Division attacked on the first day of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, 04 October 1918.

Heavy infantry fighting started when 1st Brigade troops came out of the ravine between Exermont and Gesnes, and hand-to-hand combat spread down the line.

Private Donald Kyler of the 16th Infantry Regiment described: 'I crawled slowly from brush to brush to within easy grenade throwing range, took the grenades from my pockets, pulled the pins and threw them in rapid succession into the gully where the enemy were. When the second grenade left my hand, I grabbed my rifle and rushed towards the edge. The grenades exploded just before I got there. One German turned toward me and I shot him without raising my rifle to my shoulder. Two more were at the machine gun, one perhaps wounded by a grenade. I jumped from the edge of the gully on the nearest German and thrust my bayonet deep into the other one. I could feel bones give way under my feet and I knew those three were finished. The other Germans fled and abandoned their equipment.'

The 1st Brigade had succeeded in driving a wedge into the German position, but success came at a great price.

The two battalions counted 2 officers and 240 men remaining of the 20 officers and 800 men who had joined the assault that morning.

Despite the 1st Division's advances, it had not captured its primary objective, the Cote de Chatillon.

The 42nd Rainbow Division's relief of the 1st Division began that night, 11 October 1918.

Of all the sectors on the Western Front, this was the most important to the Germans.

The 42nd four infantry regiments - the 165th (New York), the 166th (Ohio), the 167th (Alabama), and the 168th (Iowa) - would each take part in the coming attack.

[Those four units, plus other subordinate units such as the 151st Machine Gun Battalion, comprised the 84th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brigadier-General Douglas MacArthur].

The Germans occupied good defensive positions protected by twenty-foot-wide belts of new barbed wire, three rows of elaborate trenches, and dozens of machine gun positions.

Behind those barriers stood two more defensive lines with low wire and shallow trenches.

By the end of 15 October, the 165th Infantry had made two unsuccessful assaults on the Cote de Chatillon, and the 166th Infantry tried without success to attack in the direction of Landres-et-Saint-Georges.

Major Lloyd D. Ross, commanding the 168th, told the officers of the 1st Battalion, Companies F and H, that the Cote was to be taken that day [16 October].

...the two companies lined up left to right on 16 October, then advanced toward the hedge at 0830.

The point of the battalion came out from the cover of the woods and started up the meadow in open ranks.

The Germans waited until the men came to the swale's ridge before cutting loose with machine guns, direct fire 88s, and rifles.

The Iowa skirmish lines continued with bayonets fixed.

Companies C and B broke into a run toward the hedge.

After about twenty shots the German riflemen ran for the woods.

The Iowans in the hedge on the left exchanged rifle and machine gun fire with the Germans in the woods to the north.

The 168th's entire 1st Battalion was on the front.

About that time the 167th advanced and reached the crest of the Cote de Chatillon.

The last element of the lowans reached the crest at about 1640, joining the Alabama troops as they reached the summit.

The regiments would share equal honors for capturing that vital position.

The 168th's 1st Battalion suffered 440 casualties, 70 dead, in five attacks over three days.

Still, with the 167th, the 1st Battalion, 168th Infantry Regiment had succeeded in achieving what other regiments across several divisions had not been able to accomplish, and the attack was considered the most scientifically fought and most skillfully directed of all the regiment's actions."

