



*Thunder and Flames: Americans in the Crucible of Combat, 1917–18* by  
Edward G. Lengel.

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The First World War is the most significant “forgotten” conflict in American military history. Though it marked the United States’ emergence as a significant power on the international stage, relatively few books by American authors have been devoted to it; in his introduction, military historian Edward Lengel<sup>1</sup> (Univ. of Virginia) summarizes the existing meager half dozen or so significant book-length battle histories (excluding unit histories). Several important battles lack histories entirely. Indeed, one of the author’s goals in *Thunder and Flames* is to lend a sense of “narrative cohesion” to the events of the First World War, to take both “academic and general readers a step or two closer to understanding both the nature and scale of American military participation in World War I. The tale is compelling, but it will take many more storytellers—and dedicated researchers—before it can be told with the accuracy and thoroughness it deserves” (ix).

Lengel joins results of research in official and archival sources with “a variety of firsthand accounts” (viii) in a sound, fascinating account of American operations in France. He captures the reader’s attention in the opening paragraphs of his introduction with two rapid-fire stories of doughboys in combat in summer 1918. Lt. Hervey Allen’s perilous crossing of the Vesle River and Lt. Frank Whelton’s bloody hours manning a machine gun post in the ruins of Fismette make for the sort of gripping drama typically found only in fictional accounts.

*Thunder and Flames* contains sixteen chapters. The first sketches the US army’s deficiencies in structure, tactics, training, staff work, and other core competences in 1917. Lengel assigns the blame for such lack of readiness to the (ir)responsible military officials, overlooking bad policy decisions of the President Woodrow Wilson administration. The program of reforms begun by Sen. (and former Secretary of War) Elihu Root to create an effective military force and, especially, a functioning general staff met resistance in the Wilson administration. In fact, in 1914, Wilson even threatened to fire Army general staff officers who were conducting theoretical studies of the war breaking out in Europe. He eventually relented, but adamantly opposed the serious preparations that many others (correctly) believed were needed.

Chapter 2 covers the stalemate on the Western Front after the Allied offensives of 1917 wound down and before the great German offensives opened in spring 1918. This period saw the first front-line deployment of American doughboys and their first encounters with German forces. Following enemy raids meant to “bloody the Americans, take as many prisoners as possible, wreck installations ..., and withdraw as quickly as possible,” observers reported on “the bravery of the doughboys and the cluelessness of their commanders” (39, 43).

Chapters 3–5 concern operations in May–June 1918 by the Twenty-Eighth Infantry Regiment of the First Division at Cantigny and the Third Division at Château-Thierry, as well as the Second Division’s

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1. His previous work includes *General George Washington: A Military Life* (NY: Random House, 2005) and *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918: The Epic Battle That Ended the First World War* (NY: Henry Holt, 2008).

entry into the lines. Cantigny, marking the Americans' transition to the offensive, was touted as proof of the doughboys' mettle and a harbinger of greater things to come. Though generally accurate, the assessment obscured persistent serious shortcomings.

Lengel punctures the myth of the doughboys marching into Château-Thierry through crowds of exhausted and defeated French soldiers to break the back of the German advance on Paris. He demonstrates that the French, though giving ground, were still fighting well. For several days afterward, US troops took positions to the south of the town, while French Senegalese troops continued to fight Germans house-to-house. Assertions that the victories at Cantigny and Château-Thierry boosted Americans' morale were based on massaged after-action reports that originally made no such claims for their decisive impact in battle. Men performing their missions in creditable fashion were lionized in later retellings, as American contributions were blown out of all proportion to reality.

Chapters 6–12 treat the US Second Division's actions during the Battle of Belleau Wood from 6 June to 2 July 1918. Lengel here quotes an old saw of British military history—the apocryphal exchange between Gen. Carl A.M. Hoffmann and Q. Gen. Erich Ludendorff regarding the British Expeditionary Force. Ludendorff: “The English soldiers fight like lions.” Hoffmann: “True, but don't we know that they are lions led by donkeys.” In Lengel's words, at Belleau Wood,

the Americans won and the Germans lost. In the process of achieving this victory, however, [generals Jean-Marie] Degoutte, [Omar] Bundy, and [James G.] Harbord failed a splendid group of marines and soldiers. If Degoutte had eased the Americans into battle, and if Bundy and Harbord had demonstrated patience, planned carefully, and exercised control—for haste was never a necessity—the 2d Division would have captured Belleau Wood, gained vital experience, and avoided the horrendous casualties and exhaustion. (206)

Chapters 13–16 track operations by the Third Division, later joined by the Twenty-Eighth, beginning in mid-July on the Marne. The First and Second Divisions attacked south of Soissons and the reduction of the Marne salient was complete by the first week of August. The final chapter, “Tragedy at Fismette: Travails of the 28th Division, August 1918,” paves the road to Saint-Mihiel, but does not recount in detail the war's final weeks.

In this valuable addition to First World War history, the author identifies but does not fill several gaps in the literature. One desideratum might be a fair comparison of the preparedness of American forces in 1917 and British in 1914. Instead, the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) is contrasted with nearby veteran French units; indeed, Lengel writes that his book “can rightly be considered a study of AEF operations under French command” (9). Thus, unfortunately, US units seconded to the British, particularly the Twenty-Seventh and Thirtieth Divisions during summer 1918, are not discussed. Nor are British impressions of the AEF units that helped break the Hindenburg Line during the Second Battle of the Somme (21 August–2 September 1918), though Lengel may be reserving these subjects for a later work.

It is often asserted that the AEF and its leaders could have performed better in the last months of the war by heeding more closely the costly lessons learned earlier by their Allies. But those lessons had not yet been certified by the victory still some months distant when the AEF came into the battle line. American leaders knew in 1917 and early 1918 only that the Allies were locked either in a stalemate, sustaining massive casualties, mutinies, and revolutions, or in the throes of an inescapable defensive crisis. No sane commander would have blindly followed the lead of men who had produced such a situation.

*Thunder and Flames* is enriched by many good maps of the engagements discussed; better yet, a “Note on Maps” provides a link to the University of Alabama's online collection of the American Battle

Monuments Commission's superb, detailed battlefield maps. I would add that Google Street View allows the reader to stand, for example, on the very *pont de Fismette* (or its successor) that Lieutenant Allen feared to cross on a long-ago August day.

One hopes many more storytellers and dedicated researchers will add to the insights Edward Lengel presents in his latest book on the epochal struggle that so profoundly shaped the course of the century that followed it.