

## Soissons, 1918. (Doughboys in battle)

Soissons, 1918 by Douglas V. Johnson II and Rolfe E. Hillman, Jr. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999. 213 pp.

Until recently most accounts of World War I fell into a rather predictable mold. The focus was on the high command or the individual soldier in the trench with little consideration of events in between. European scholarship, particularly in Britain, was dominated by bitter disagreement over leadership, casualties, and the horror of combat. Critics assailed brass hats for their stupidity, callousness, and chateau generalship. Efforts to describe battles and campaigns often degenerated into descriptions of rats, mustard gas, and futile charges against machine gun nests. For the most part, Americans have escaped this historical debate, in part because there was little challenge to the interpretation of events reported by General John Pershing and his supporters immediately after the war. This version held that despite resistance from the Allies and the War Department, Pershing shaped the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) into an effective, aggressive organization that carried the offensive in the final months of 1918. Heroic doughboys such as Sergeant Alvin York reinvigorated the Allies and decisively snatched victory from the Germans. Perhaps because it was such a satisfying myth--proving both military prowess and intellectual and moral superiority over Europe--this uncritical emphasis on Pershing and AEF exceptionalism continued for decades. Douglas Johnson, a research professor in the Strategic Studies Institute at the U.S. Army War College, and the late Rolfe Hillman, an accomplished writer and military authority, break from this uncritical mold in *Soissons, 1918*.

In recent years, scholars have returned to documents on the war and reexamined command, tactics, operational efficiency, combined arms doctrine, and myriad other topics. Indeed, virtually no area of World War I scholarship has been left unchallenged. The result is a greater appreciation of the immense problems of fighting on the Western Front, the importance of coalition warfare, and the scope and range of Allied tactical and doctrinal innovation. Indeed, most recent evaluations of the operational ability of the British and Commonwealth forces in the latter half of the war are quite favorable. Not surprisingly, the new scholarship has contributed to a reappraisal of American contributions and raised some troubling questions about Pershing and dysfunctional AEF tactics and overall battlefield performance.

*Soissons, 1918* is a significant reassessment of the American effort on the Western Front. Written by two soldier-scholars, it examines the first major AEF offensive operation. Anticipating a renewed enemy offensive on the Aisne-Marne salient, General Ferdinand Foch ordered a spoiling counterattack on a vulnerable German flank. He selected Tenth Army

, commanded by General Charles Mangin, which included 1st and 2nd Divisions, to attack toward Soissons. In the battle of July 18-22, the Americans broke through the German lines but could not sustain the attack. By the time the divisions were pulled out of the line they had lost 13,000 dead. Although they did not take Soissons, Johnson and

Hillman argue that the offensive unhinged the enemy attack and disrupted German long-term strategy.

This book can be appreciated as a precise day-by-day narrative of the five days of combat. Chronologically organized chapters follow regiments, brigades, and divisions. Extensive quotes from participants provide insights into the hardships and confusion. The authors are particularly effective in reconciling conflicting accounts and reconstructing events. They also provide an astute and detailed analysis of AEF command from the corps to regimental level. Although the Allies had developed a complicated and centralized system of command and control, inexperienced American troops lacked the training and willingness to implement it. Pershing claimed that AEF command would be decentralized but in practice insisted on centralized direction. The result was that AEF command in fact had the inflexibility of the Allies but little of their efficiency. Pershing added to the problem by insisting that his commanders both demonstrate drive and get results regardless of the tactical situation. That led to a command climate permeated by fear in which officers often became victims of the uncertainties and ambitions of their superiors. One vignette is the sad tale of the relief of Colonel Conrad S. Babcock of the 28th Infantry, whose reputation was damaged by his division commander's ruthlessness, animosity, and ignorance.

The authors argue that Soissons was "a confused mess ... a complete mix-up of men and organizations" but also a key transition for the American Expeditionary Force. The battle revealed not only a lack of American preparedness, but how rapidly AEF units adjusted. Like an increasing number of American historians, the authors recognize the skill and ability of the Allies. They give full credit to the French command, particularly to Foch's ability to see the German vulnerability on the Soissons flank and Mangin's ruthless drive. They discuss the usually overlooked but crucial role of tanks and detail the intricacies of coordinating World War I battles. They criticize Pershing on several counts but are sympathetic to the great burdens he shouldered. Ultimately, the doughboys and leathernecks paid a high price for their victory, partly because of inexperience and lack of training. They attacked in tight formations, did not use support weapons, and also failed to coordinate infantry and artillery. Americans at Soissons were a force in transition, the victims of rapid expansion, untested commanders, inadequate training, and dysfunctional doctrine. That they fared as well as they did may be the most telling argument in favor of Pershing's methods.

Soissons, 1918, while advancing our knowledge of the American effort in World War I, raises questions on the ability of militaries to learn from mistakes in time to avoid repeating them. Moreover, it addresses the issue of putting driving leaders in charge of untrained and inexperienced troops. Placing soldiers in harm's way without adequate preparations always leads to disasters. This book deserves a careful reading.