



Alan D. Gaff. *Blood in the Argonne: The "Lost Battalion" of World War I.* Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005. xvi + 368 pp. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8061-3696-7.

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The "Lost Battalion:" Narrative without Context

The biggest campaign of World War I for the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) was the Meuse-Argonne in 1918, and the biggest story to come out of the campaign was that of the "Lost Battalion." As Alan D. Gaff makes clear, this term was an inaccurate title coined by newspaper men during the action, as the 77th Division soldiers involved were neither lost, nor from one battalion. Rather, they were seven rifle companies, two battalion headquarters, and two machine gun sections, all greatly under-strength from casualties earlier in the campaign. Jumping off on October 2 into the dense, jungle-like woods and steep terrain of the Argonne Forest, this force reached its objective the same day and dug in. The next day, the Americans found that German troops had encircled their position because units on either American flank had not kept pace. The exact number of soldiers in the pocket is unknown, with estimates varying between five hundred and somewhat less than seven hundred, but from October 3 to 7, these soldiers held their position against shelling, infantry assaults, and flamethrower attacks. Food and medical supplies were quickly used up, and water could be obtained from a brook only at the risk of being shot by the enemy. Several attacks by the 77th Division failed to break through, and on October 4, for reasons still unclear, American artillery fired a heavy barrage on the Lost Battalion. In the end, advances by other American divisions finally forced the Germans to withdraw from the area and allowed the 77th Division to reach the pocket.

Gaff's intent is "to correct past mistakes, present an

accurate account of the Lost Battalion story, including previous and subsequent material to provide context, and give readers an undistorted description of the American military experience in World War I, often in the words of those who lived through these events" (p. xii). Gaff, an independent researcher and author of several books on the American Civil War and a study of Anthony Wayne's Legion in the Old Northwest, is partially successful in meeting the objectives he sets for this book.

What Gaff succeeds at doing is to present a doughboy-level description of the American military experience in World War I, and in particular that of doughboys in rifle companies. He has done prodigious research in a wide array of sources to recover information about individual soldiers: their lives before the war, their wartime experiences, and their lives after the war. The events of October 2-7 take up 112 pages of the text; the other 184 pages bring these men to the pocket and then follow their lives afterwards. These latter pages illustrate well the many differences between American society of the Great War and today's America; moreover, in this area, Gaff is well served by focusing on the 77th Division. This division was activated with draftees and junior officers from New York City, then brought to full strength before deploying with draftees from upstate New York and New England. After its first combat operations, the 77th was refreshed with soldiers stripped from a division raised in the western United States.

The author is unabashedly a champion of the enlisted

man and the junior officers. The main body of the book features frequent inserts quoting doughboy songs and other material to show that these men were “exhausted, dirty, often ill-trained troops who preferred bawdy lyrics that would make their mothers blush with shame,” and not the saintly heroes of wartime and postwar patriotic legends (p. xii). There are numerous photographs of individual soldiers from the Lost Battalion in the text. Moreover, a gallery at the end of the text comprises photographs of many of the men killed during the war. Gaff rarely has anything positive to say about commanders and staffs above the battalion level; he very much is a member of the “Lions Led by Donkeys” school. The chapters on the battle in the pocket are a gripping battle narrative, with an emphasis on the courage displayed and the hardships suffered. While Gaff rightly singles out the senior battalion commander, Major Charles W. Whittlesey, for his exemplary leadership, he makes it clear that Whittlesey had the assistance of several other very good leaders in holding the Lost Battalion together. The author’s tone is set in this passage describing the situation on October 4: “No matter what their background or the convoluted manner in which individuals entered the army and found their way to the Charlevaux Valley, they were all soldiers now, and damned good ones. Cut off from the American army and trapped in the most hellish place imaginable, discipline remained rock solid and every man did the duty required of him, from Major Whittlesey down to the lowliest replacement” (pp.186-187). Although he later notes examples where some men did not do their duty, Gaff overall remains a champion of the doughboys.

What Gaff does not succeed in doing is placing the Lost Battalion in the context of the U.S. Army’s effort

to master large-scale combined arms operations during World War I, and thus he does not provide an “undistorted description of the American military experience in World War I.” There is a brief description of small unit infantry tactics, but there is no thorough discussion of the key issues involved in the AEF’s attempts to reach the level of British, French, and German proficiency in modern combat operations. Instead, there is a backhanded slap at the “Donkeys” for issuing new tactical doctrine just before the Meuse-Argonne battle began, doctrine which, the author asserts, proved to be “virtually useless” in the Argonne Forest (p. 124). This lack of context is not a surprise as the bibliography does not list the works of James J. Cooke, Douglas V. Johnson II, Allan R. Millett, Timothy K. Nenninger, or James W. Rainey. Readers seeking such context should consult the 2003 doctoral dissertation by Mark E. Grotelueschen (at Texas A&M University), “The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in the First World War.” Grotelueschen uses the 77th Division as one of four case studies and provides an analysis that successfully places the Lost Battalion’s story within the proper context. He also does a better job than Gaff in discussing the performance of the 77th Division’s commander, Major General Robert Alexander, and of the division’s field artillery brigade during the battle.

Blood in the Argonne is recommended for those who are looking for a detailed narrative of the Lost Battalion written from the perspective of the doughboys who were trapped in the pocket. Readers who want to place the Lost Battalion within the context of the American military experience in World War should consult works by the historians mentioned above.

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