



**Robert H. Ferrell.** *America's Deadliest Battle: Meuse-Argonne, 1918.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007. xii + 195 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7006-1499-8.



**Reviewed by** Mark Grotelueschen (Department of History, U.S. Air Force Academy)

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## Blundering to Victory

In the past decade or so the distinguished American historian Robert H. Ferrell has turned his attention to World War I, writing at least three monographs on the U.S. war effort and editing at least that many volumes of recently discovered soldiers' memoirs. *America's Deadliest Battle* is the latest product of this prolificacy, and this volume may be the capstone to this impressive contribution to the scholarly investigation of one of America's less studied wars. As Ferrell points out, although the Meuse-Argonne was the scene of one of the longest (47 days) and bloodiest (26, 277 killed) of all American battles, few scholars have taken the time to research and tell the story of this enormous, horrific, and ultimately victorious campaign. Beyond Frederick Palmer's early but substantial *Our Greatest Battle* (1919), we have thus far only had Paul Braim's thin *The Test of Battle: The American Expeditionary Forces in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign* (1987), which was a less detailed examination of the campaign than the title suggested. All this goes to show that if there is something to be gained from thorough histories of campaigns and battles (and I suspect most readers of H-War agree that there is), the Meuse-Argonne was long overdue for a good scholarly examination.

Ferrell attempts to accomplish two important tasks in this work. First, well aware of the apparent lack of interest in and knowledge of this tremendous battle, Ferrell has organized and written this book in a way that seems geared toward the general reader rather than the World War I scholar. In less than 160 pages, Ferrell tells the story of this massive campaign. He includes two brief introductory chapters—one on the inefficient U.S. mobilization effort and another on American Expeditionary Forces' (AEF) operations prior to the Meuse-Argonne—but carefully connects those discussions to the great battle that helped end the war. The remaining seven chapters move through the battle more or less chronologically and geographically, and are filled with personal sketches of important people and vignettes of individual soldiers and units, some of which will be familiar to many (the Lost Battalion, Alvin York) while others will be almost certainly new to all. He touches on the logistical effort, medical operations, air support, unit training, communications capabilities, weapons usage, command styles, controversies between commanders, and the common soldier's experience. Whether or not they agree that the five-day ordeal of the 35th Division at the start of the

offensive warrants an entire chapter, most readers unfamiliar with the battle and the AEF will find the story interesting and well told.

The second task Ferrell sets out to accomplish is to explain why the battle was so deadly for the AEF. His conclusions are generally reasonable and well supported, although perhaps not as thorough or comprehensive as more informed readers would like. Ferrell concludes that among the factors external to the AEF, Woodrow Wilson's poor management of the mobilization effort (especially the ship-building campaign) and the War Department's poor management of the unit mobilization and training effort led to numerous problems in the battle. Within the AEF, Ferrell notes that numerous soldiers suffered due to poor leadership at various levels (from young inexperienced officers, to poor division commanders such as the 79th's Joseph Kuhn and the 35th's Peter Traub, right on up to AEF Commander-in-Chief General John Pershing). Others were the victims of poor tactics, especially regarding artillery employment and the failure to use gas. The battle also turned into a bloodbath at times due to inadequate attention to logistical, transportation, and communication requirements. Although most readers will be convinced that Ferrell's conclusions are correct, those more familiar with the AEF may also suspect there is more to the story.

In his haste to keep the story moving briskly, Ferrell rarely dwells on issues that seem to warrant further discussion. One such issue is the nature and extent of the training soldiers and units received in the United States and in Europe. Ferrell discusses the inadequate training of a few units and the scandalous lack of training given to some individual replacements, but he does not discuss the general War Department or AEF training programs sufficiently. The general failures of these programs, both in the quantity and the quality of the training given to practically every AEF unit and soldier, warrant more thorough discussion in any explanation of the troubles experienced in the battle. Similarly, although Ferrell begins to explain the impact of Pershing's fateful agreement with Allied generalissimo Ferdinand Foch in early September to initiate both the St. Mihiel battle on 12 September and the Meuse-Argonne offensive less than two weeks later,

much more could be said about this. Pershing's willingness to attempt to fight two enormous battles in two different sectors of the line with the same field army, all within a two-week period, and with only a few weeks to accomplish all the planning, organizing, and preparing necessary to make the latter attack come off at all, much less succeed, had a tremendous impact on the battle.

World War I scholars may also be disappointed with Ferrell's neglect of some other factors that certainly influenced the battle, and especially the numbers of American casualties, such as the incredibly aggressive nature of the initial attack plan and the extent of the German resistance. Nowhere does Ferrell mention that the plan for the initial assault of September 26 demanded that the attacking units break through the German lines faster, and carry their attacks further, than any Allied units had proven able to do thus far in the war. Pershing and his staff demanded this, despite the requirement to push the attack through terrain much more difficult than anything the AEF had yet seen, terrain that the Germans had spent years turning into a veritable fortress and were determined to defend. This latter point—the German defense—is a second subject Ferrell leaves out of his story. With the exception of a good discussion of the German artillery that pounded American soldiers from the heights of the Meuse and the Argonne, this account rarely examines the German half of the battle.

Despite these criticisms, Robert Ferrell's book has much to recommend it. It is an interesting, informative, and briskly written story that should appeal to anyone interested in military history who wants to know more about this neglected but important battle. It will also be of great use to World War I scholars. Ferrell has mined an impressive array of archival records and personal papers, and provided readers with the best-researched account of the battle yet written. If scholars come away wishing the book was twice as long and contained more detailed analysis of some key issues (as I did), then they can thank Ferrell for beginning a scholarly historiography of an important event that is long overdue, and take his apparent omissions as a charge to continue down the path he has finally, at long last, laid down as the challenge for other scholars to follow.

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