

Volume IV, Chapter 1

Looking at the Meuse- Argonne

World War I through the eyes of the United States
soldier

Bill Melega



World War I shaped the world we live in, but compared to World War II, it is often overlooked in popular media. Because of this, students rarely have the opportunity to reflect on the influence of this war and its effect on the soldiers who fought it. The goal of this chapter is to provide a first-person look at World War I through the eyes of an American soldier. What would he see? How is it similar to or different from the experiences of French and German soldiers?

Through first-person footage, the videos in this chapter will transport you and your students to the Meuse-Argonne battlefield on the French-Belgian border. The U.S. soldiers fought over the same battleground in the Meuse-Argonne starting in 1917 that German and French troops had been fighting over since 1914. In addition to simulating the perspective of the average U.S. soldier, the chapter is designed to dispel assumptions and stereotypes about U.S. soldiers in World War I.

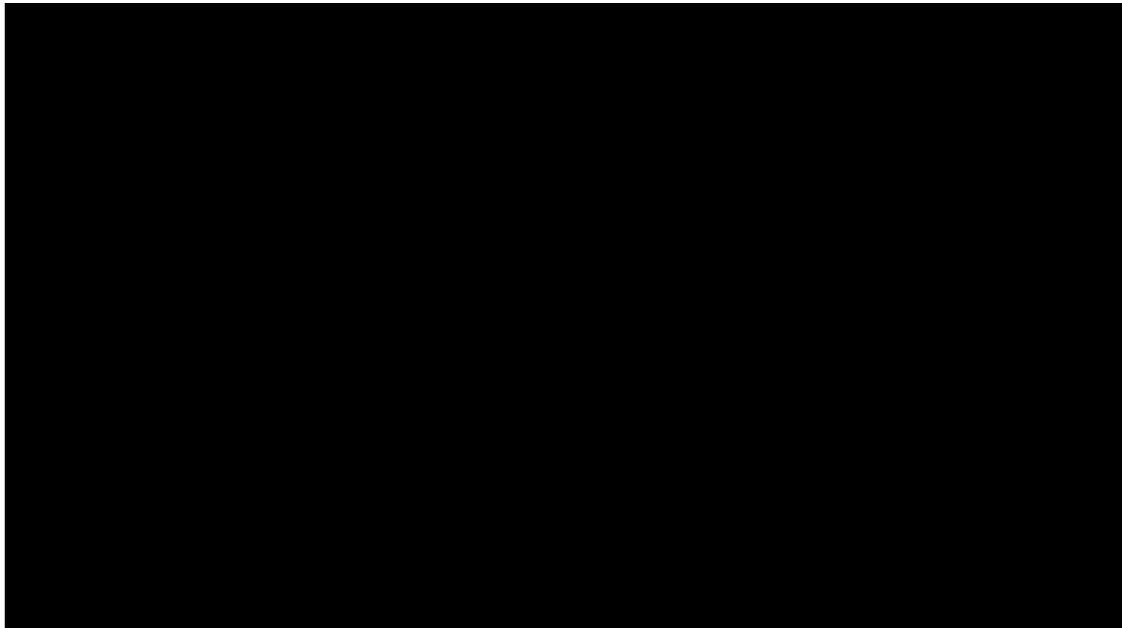
Each video in this chapter is followed by a set of discussion questions for you to use with your students.

The photographs and maps used in this chapter come from *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (ABMC 1938), also known as The Blue Book.

American Battle Monuments Commission. *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1938.

Welcome to the Meuse-Argonne

Welcome to the Meuse-Argonne

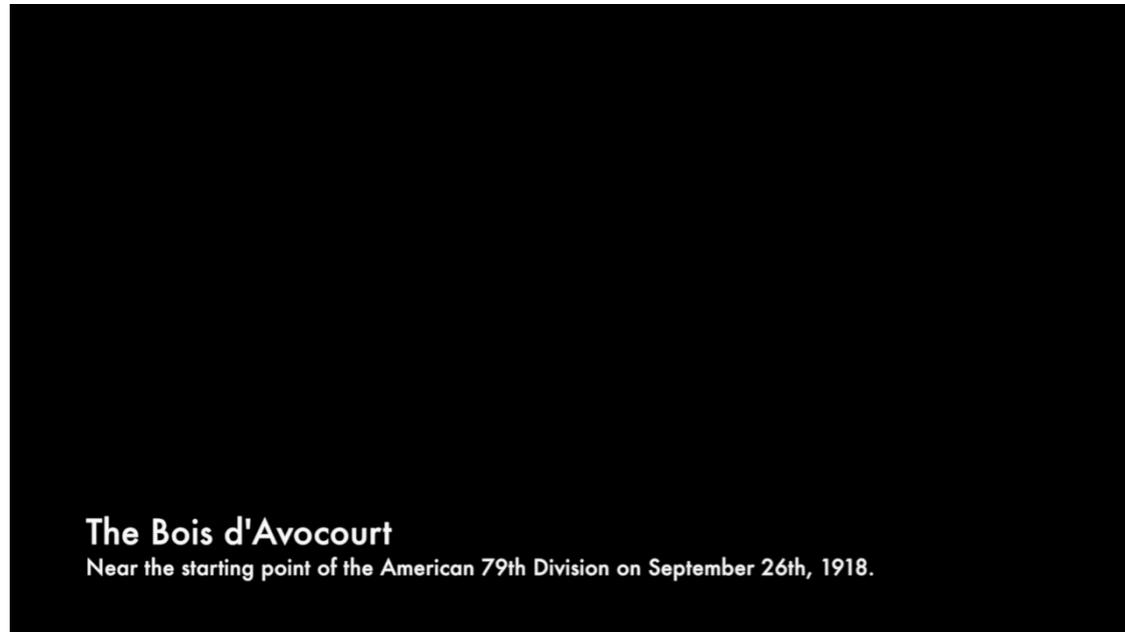


Chapter author Bill Melega introduces you to the Meuse-Argonne and shares his experiences.

1. Think about World War I. What are some stereotypes of the type of fighting that took place?
2. After thinking about stereotypes, list the common misconceptions that exist about the role of the doughboy in World War I.
3. In the end, what important changes in the world power structure came about due to the entrance of the U.S. and the Doughboys into the war?
4. Who were the doughboys? Where did they come from? What were their backgrounds?

Through a Soldier's Eyes

The Bois d'Avocourt

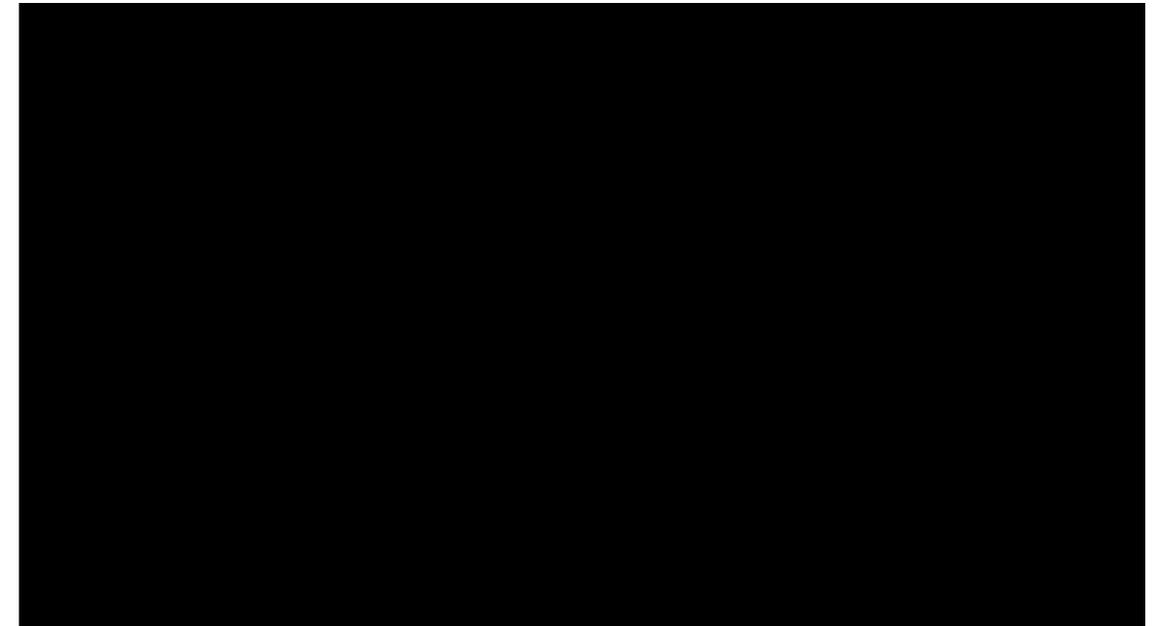


Bill Melega tours the French and German defenses and explores no man's land.

The Bois d'Avocourt

1. How were the fighting tactics used by U.S. soldiers different from those of the French and British allies?
2. Describe the crossing of no man's land.

Just North of Chambronne Creek in the Bois de Chéhémin



Bill Melega tours the American defenses.

North of Chambronne Creek

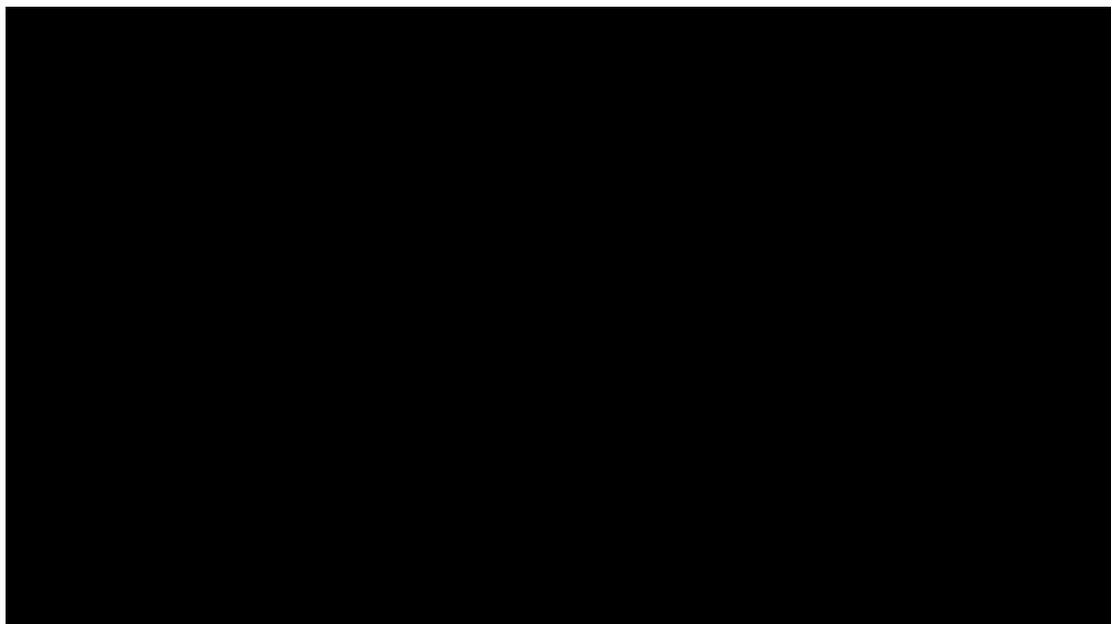
1. How was the American system of defense in the Meuse Argonne different from that of the French/German trenches?
2. How many days had gone by without the troops having time to eat a meal? Explain reasons why the doughboys were unable

to eat? No time? Logistical problems? Terrain or geography?

Other reasons

3. How many Americans died crossing No Man's Land and are at the Meuse Argonne Cemetery?
4. Explain the difference between the stereotypical No Man's Land and the U.S. soldier's No Man's Land?
5. As the doughboys walked out of the woods on Hill 250, explain/ describe what is awaiting them across the field? Why was that position important to the German Defenders?
6. According the U.S. General John Pershing, what was the only thing the U.S. soldier needed?
7. Why were the Americans headed to the woods?

The Heights of Romagne



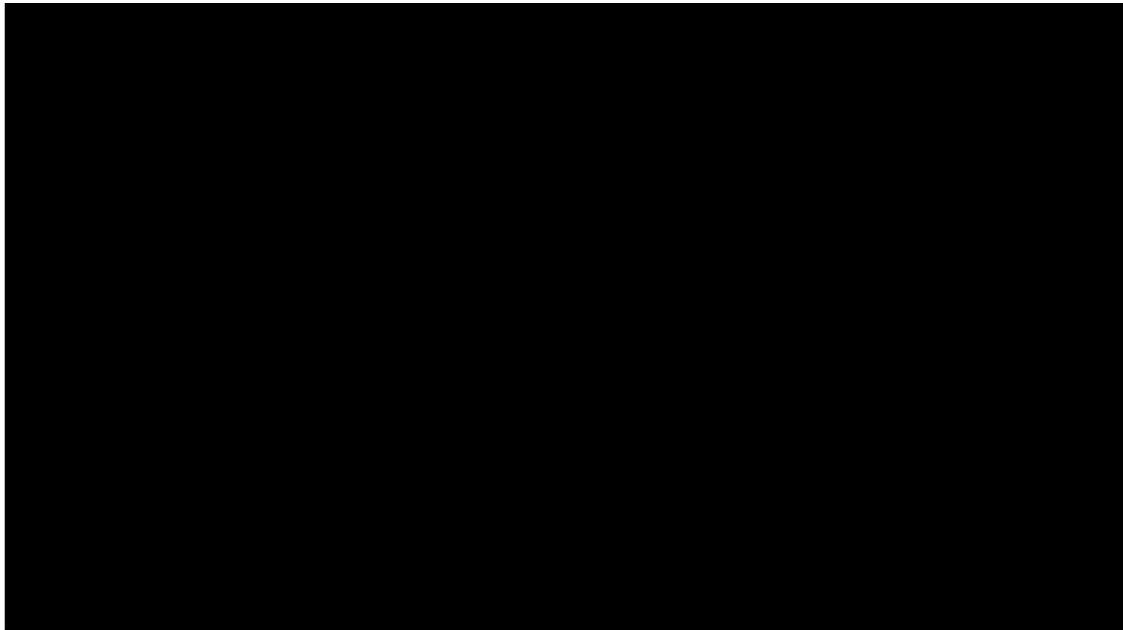
Bill Melega contrasts the American fighting tactics with the French and German fighting tactics.

The Heights of Romagne

1. What are the Heights of Romagne? Why is the Hindenburg Line considered the Heart of the Lion? Why is it important?
2. How did individual U.S. soldiers spend the night to experience some sense of safety?
3. How was the Doughboy's experience different from that the European soldiers' experience from 1914-1917?
4. Why was the crossing of the Doughboy's No Man's Land so difficult? Take into account the difference between theory and reality.
5. How many days and casualties did it take to capture the German trenches?
6. Describe the construction of the trenches. Include details about what made them different from other trenches in World War I.
7. Describe the experience of the American Doughboy in World War I.

Reflection

Reflecting at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery



Bill Melega reflects on how his knowledge and understanding of World War I has expanded on his visit to France.

Reflecting at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery

1. How have your stereotypes of World War I changed, if at all?
2. What was the purpose or goal of this chapter? How did the doughboy live day to day? How was his experience different from those of his allies and opponents?

3. How many states and territories are represented at the Meuse Argonne? What does this mean about the country at the time? Why do you think there is so little attention paid to World War I soldiers and veterans?
4. Explain how the U.S. doughboy helped to define a new era in history.
5. As the war was winding down, describe what Thomas Shinn was thinking on November 11th. Was this typical of the soldiers at the time?

Assessment Options

Write a series of diary entries from the perspective of the American Doughboy trying to capture the Hindenburg Line. Use your information from the video and use specific pieces of evidence in your entries, such as what the environment was like, what your goal was, what your orders from General Pershing were, and what you would have heard, seen, or smelled. How is your experience as an American Doughboy different from the experiences of your British and French allies?

Another possibility is to draw a sensory figure, what you think a U.S. Doughboy would have looked like. Write a description of what you think a doughboy would have experienced using his five senses. What would he see? What sounds would he hear? What are some of things he would have felt, both physical and emotional? What would he have tasted? What would he have smelled? Describe in detail. What would a doughboy have been carrying, wearing, drinking, and eating?

Video Transcriptions

Welcome to the Meuse-Argonne

Hello my name is Bill Melega. Welcome to the Meuse-Argonne battlefield of World War I. As a young boy, July 4th 1976 sitting with my grandfather, I was captivated with the idea of the American soldier landing on D-Day. I've been to Omaha beach in France many times, and the powerful essence of that place has always captivated me so I've taken several student trips there making documentaries with the Bedford Virginia D-Day memorial to show them that the power and just the presence of that place as well. A short while ago for the 100th anniversary of World War I, I was asked to be part of a World War I project. And to be able to tell a story. When I said Meuse-Argonne many of you may not have known what I was talking about. And I began to think about that, and to me World War I is what I call a door hinge of history where you close the door to the past behind you and step into a new future. And there are many misconceptions of what the doughboy of World War I went through. And I got real excited and I told everybody and anyone that I was going to work on this project. From my local congressman in his office in Washington to an adult class I teach where one of the members gave me a DVD of a diary of a man named Thomas Shin from Concord, North

Carolina where my aunt lives. And reading Thomas's diary transported me to this place. And I thought what is it that I want to do. For me, World War I was about digging trenches and static warfare and a no-man's land of 50 feet. Well I'm here to break down some of those misconceptions and assumptions to show that was not the doughboy's war. Also many people think that we are a Johnny Come Lately and we really did not do all that much. Well behind me is Montfaucon, the halfway point of the American battlefield, and this is America's no-man's land. Fields 4 or 500 yards wide or dense, thickly passed forest rifled with machine guns. And in the end, the American doughboy does play a significant role. He does not sit in trenches. His job was to constantly advance. The soldier, his rifle, his bayonet would get the job done. So you're going to follow me in the footsteps of Thomas Shinn and his doughboy brethren as we show you what the soldier really went through here in the Meuse-Argonne. So the question I'm going to ask- what was the U.S. soldier's role? What was his experience? Can you see it through his eyes? And today I wandered around, today is actually my birthday, and I got to spend some time by myself on a battlefield in the woods, and I was thinking about the American soldier. And I became very

proud of him, but at the same time I got sad. Because nobody knows who he was. Nobody knows what he did. His role is often overlooked. That is what I am about to change. And I was frustrated as well but now I've come to be determined, to tell the American soldier's story. He fought very hard, he fought very long. And in the end, he helped bring about a change in the world over structure. Old monarchies fell. The Austrian-Hapsburg, the oldest empire in Europe fell. The Ottoman empire of Asia and Europe fell. The Romanoff dynasty fell. And power shifted westward. And that was all due to the doughboy. As the soldier grew up, 77% of the soldiers in World War I were draftees. These were citizen soldiers who came and did their duty and helped that power shift to the west. And that is what we are about to show you.

The Bois d'Avocourt

As the American soldier comes into World War I, the policy is not to hide in the earth it's to constantly move forward, according to General Pershing. Advance the rifle and the bayonet in the spirit of the soldier. This is some for the first areas where our soldiers would jump off through, in a wood or a you know Bois d'Avocourt where we are. This is almost exactly what they would see. Well it is what they would see, 100 years later. And now this is different from the Boya French communications trench, is the serpentine nature of it. So once again if an explosion happened you'd get some soldiers but not all of them. This is a fixed French position, the static warfare. Again the stereotypical "All Quiet on the Western Front." As you can see I'm resting level against here. This

is front line, this is not safety, this is not sleeping, this is fighting with your rifle looking out at the Germans just about where you'd see this sunlight over there where the forest is fallen. And there's a good shot of a German defensive position right on where those stumps are. So this is ground zero World War I 1914 through 1917 until the United States soldiers will arrive here on scene. Coming out of the French side, getting close to the German zone, right in the heart of what the French would call no-man's land. It was not so much a term to be used during the war again, as is popularly thought, stereotypical as no-man's land, we're getting in here to where ground's beginning to slope away. Craters, explosions. You can still see the trench networks at what these two armies exhausted each other doing. For two to two and a half years. And so this is kind of fitting, you know, metal reinforcement with the blown-apart woods and downed trees. This kind of looks like we would have no-man's land in our minds, in our homes and classrooms. So as we've just luckily crossed the kilometer-wide no-man's land with General Bedford behind us we're about to attach the German command bunker. Machine gun, rather. And go Jack Barkley on it here. Yeah it would be machine gun, command would not be this close, yeah. So you can just see. First line you see these craters, explosions, artillery shells. No direct line. Question is do you stop? Here? Or do you press on and keep going? So here we are, across no-man's land, and we've made it.

North of Chambronne Creek

End of October. This is where the American advance would get to facing what we call the Hindenburg Line. Known as the Kriemhilde Stellung to the Germans. Remember the American philosophy is no trenches but you're constantly advancing. Guys by this time hadn't eaten in 4 to 5 days. They had little water, they were exhausted, and they were told just one more hill. Just one more objective. And so here's the American forward firing position. You saw the German and the French trenches, you know, dug deep, reinforced. This is the American soldier's defense. Exposed, just a shallow little pit that we could dig out very fast for protection, knowing the enemy is just over there across the road. You're now within not only deadly rifle range, but also artillery and mortar, getting ready for one more no-man's land. The safety of the woods are left behind, you now have to cross no-man's land into the heart of the monster to end the war. I think this more than anything will exemplify the U.S. soldier's experience. As you come out of the woods on Hill 250, sitting across this field 400 yards away through this forested wood, this hilltop, running cross the ridge line to you see the roof of the chapel to behind it, heights of Romagne, this is the interconnected high point. This is where the German's had dug in their strongest defenses, here in the Meuse-Argonne. The Hindenburg Line, created to keep us from getting to Sedan and their supply line. So as the United States soldier, not digging trenches, not digging fox holes, his task as we walk in his footsteps, what I want you to understand is to cross no-man's land, as far as you can see, following that ridge line and these

woods here, this is the American soldier's no-man's land. Much bigger than those of his British and French allies. This is what he would see, standing at exactly where he stood, looking at exactly what he saw. Just over the rise there lies the cost, nearly 15,000 U.S. soldiers.

The 80th division of the United States soldiers comes out of the wood, and they turn here to the La Madeleine Farm. Which was a former German hospital where the patients were removed, and it was lined up with machine guns. So contrary to the no-man's land that you stereotypically think about, this is the U.S. soldier's no-man's land. It's not fighting between trenches, it's being constantly on the move. Just behind the farm there is the city of, village of Cunel. Moving over that way to that ridge way the village of Romagne. And that is our attacking point driving northward. This is the heart of the Hindenburg Line. To the Germans the Kriemhilde Stellung as they are trying to fortify right behind is the great city of Sedan and their railroad and their supply network. It must be held, and therefore we have to take it. So American soldiers did not dig trenches, they were constantly on the move. General Pershing's orders, they call to the attack the soldier, his rifle, his bayonet and his spirit will win the day. Germans are in this side of the trees, Americans are on that side and so these are American no-man's lands. This is American fighting in World War I. Constant movement, open and exposed, no safety of the trenches, no time to sit and wait, a constant grind. By the time the American soldiers got here, it was over seven weeks. They were tired, they were

exhausted, some veteran, some green, but constantly on the move pushing forward. And when they got to an objective, and they thought they were done, there was always one more wood to clear. The Germans are in the woods, so in the woods we will go.

Pock marked and shot at from all over. Always moving forward. Can't help a buddy. Bandaged. Can't take a break. One hill, one objective, and then forward again. [Breathing sounds]. To the next objective.

The Heights of Romagne

The heights of Romagne. The heart of the German defensive positions. Known in the U.S. as the Hindenburg Line, to others, the Germans as the Kriemhilde Stellung, the heart of the lion, a fortress of defensive networks protecting the German supply line in the great city of Sedan just over these hills. To capture this, which had been a goal throughout years of warfare, once the supply line is broken the German army is done. So this is the U.S. doughboy's perspective. His battle was one of thick, dense forest, riddled with machine-gun nests, command bunkers and German trenches. This was his no-man's land, an ugly, nasty, bitter battle fought amongst this thick forest. It also was across 4 and 5 hundred yard fields pock-marked with shell craters. It was not the static trench warfare that you would have seen between the Germans, the British and the French from 1914- 1917. It's not trenches; it's foxholes such as this one. Whereas the doughboy, following General Perishing's' orders, does not dig trenches. He

was supposed to be constantly moving forward. Throughout much of the 47 day Meuse-Argonne campaign the doughboy kept moving. Didn't stay where he was for very long. What you can walk across in two days took the GIs, or doughboys excuse me, almost 7 weeks. So as you fight for the forest and you get told to hold your position, we didn't dig trenches. Here you have a medieval land barrier. A shallow ditch if you will. We didn't have time to dig trenches, nor did we want to. That was bad in the eyes of General Pershing. So what the American soldier would be forced to do, was to dig a shallow depression, such as this one right here. Here he would lay down for the night, or if he came across Germans such as in a defensive position right there, if you can see in front of me or across the street, he would lay down. Dig out this pit as fast as he could, putting some leaves in the bottom for some insulation and quiet cause it would be raining. It would be muddy, it would be filled with water. Anything he could do to help keep himself off the ground and dry, and yet below ground to give him protection. Doughboy did not understand the overall objective. He's got a few friends right there, and a few friends right there. The camaraderie that exists in all militaries was great. But I only knew what was right in front of me, and here it is. They were called cutlets, for the soldiers to lay down, and this is what they saw. This is what separates the American soldier from that of his British and French allies, and that of a German. The assumption is that it was all static warfare. It was not. This is what the doughboy would see, this was his protection. You're exposed, you're out in the open, you are by yourself with friends, you know, close by, but

it was not living deep in the tunnels and in the trenches that the Germans and the French and the British experienced. There was no feeling of safety. You were wet, you were cold, you were miserable. By this point, the doughboy would not have eaten in 4 to 5 days cause it was too hard to get food forward. The water they filled from rain, from puddles as it was constantly raining. So this will epitomize the doughboy's experience. Exposed, out in front, never stopping, always grinding on and on.

Here we are, in another doughboy's no-man's land. General John Pershing gives the order. We're not taking trenches, we're moving forward, we will take out the Hindenburg line and we will destroy the German supply network. The orders are given, the doughboy advances. Plans are great in theory. However one of the things not taken into account was to rain like this. I'm standing right now in what was a direct line of assault by the American doughboy here in the heights of Romagne. A town which now houses United States American cemetery. Up above is the Hindenburg line. These are German, fixed trenches. The stereotypical trench that you think of. That did exist, the doughboy, however, was not in them. There is a small foxhole right here that I can crawl into. There's another one right up here between these trees. However, our objectives were supposed to be quick. Lightning-rapid blows. But no one ever thought how is the GI, the doughboy, rather, going to get up there occupied by the Germans. As you can see, there's really no flat area. There is no shallow points. Some are steeper

than the others, but this is no-man's land for the doughboy. Not a trench, not a 50-yard wide no-man's land, but something like this.

I'm taking this line to get up this hill, but there's nobody shooting at me. Nobody's throwing hand grenades at me. I can take my time. I can catch my breath. The doughboy, he could not. An offensive, an attack all along this line, straightforward, not pausing to stop. Because if you stopped you're never going to get started again. You were also told to move forward no matter what. Your buddy gets hit, your buddy gets shot, nothing you can do for him. You can't slow down, you cannot stop, the objective must be taken. Hindenburg Line dead ahead.

This is the doughboy's no-man's land. My rifle, my bayonet, and me. [breathing sounds] you get to the top, you've made it, you haven't been killed, you're right smack-dab into German trenches. Only fitting I'm out of breath. You're looking at a north to south view. The horizon is where we started from, some six weeks ago. Fighting across forest and field, you can see out there in the distance. We're standing atop the hill where the Germans are dug in. It'll take 6 days and 6,000 casualties just to capture the spot in which I am now standing. All done by the weary, the tired, but ever-moving forward, grinding on American soldier. The doughboy of World War I.

Here we are descending into German trench. We are just at the rim of the hill that we just recently climbed. Doughboys got to come up over the hill, right there. There's a first line of defense up there, here is secondary. And Thomas Shinn, and several others, will remark at how well-made and how perfect the German trenches were as it comes to fixed defensive positions. Here we are with 100 years of erosion, and I cannot see to the top of the trench. Every now and then, there is a break. And these trenches were curved, as they are, as you can see them. So if a grenade or an artillery shell landed within them, they would only take out a section, not the whole thing. So I'm a German soldier, I'm standing, my rifle, I'm waiting for the doughboys to come up over the rise if they crest the hill. And they run right smack dab into me. So once again, what is laying in front of me that you can see, that is the doughboy's no-man's land. Not a small strip of land, but this hill, this wooded terrain, run with barbed wire strung everywhere or a wide-open flat field which we will see in a short time. This is the doughboy's experience. Once again, never stopping, never waiting, not digging trenches, capturing them, using them if you had to, but as Thomas say, the Germans, or Thomas says, the Germans were here to stay. They were not going anywhere. And so just behind them was their supply network. Everything that they needed for supply they were going to fight doubly hard, right here in the heart of the Kriemhilde Stellung, what we call the Hindenburg Line.

Now that I'm in them, you got to fight your way through them, eliminating all the Germans who know that if they leave the war they've been fighting four years for is lost. It is the doughboy's advance that makes victory, and the ending of the war, possible.

I'm resting in an American soldier's, the doughboy's, forward position. I came out here to study World War I, to redirect some of the assumptions that people have about World War I. We all think it was 'all quiet on the Western front' with static trenches and a no-man's land. But where I'm laying epitomizes the United States' doughboy. I am in the heights of Romagne, a densely-thick forest, packed with German trenches and machine gun nests and snipers. This was the heart of what they called the Hindenburg Line. Their defensive network protecting their supply is just over my shoulder. And the American doughboy was supposed to be constantly moving forward, no time to rest. So I'm in a medieval land marker. For the night the American GI would dig out the shallow depression that you can see me sitting in. Just over my shoulder, right over here are German and Austrian command bunkers and soldiers. Just a few feet away. So the American doughboy did not fight the static warfare. He was out front. He was exposed. This 47-day campaign was to have him moving constantly forward. It'll take him 7 weeks to go barely 20 miles, fighting every foot of the way. I'm out here to redirect those assumptions, to show what the doughboy's experience was like. I have a few friends to my left and to my right, but this is it. Here I am, in the thickly dense heights of Romagne in the Meuse-

Argonne, pushing forward against an enemy desperately trying to stop me. I'm open, I'm exposed, I'm not living in a trench, I don't have that safety. That is, I haven't shaved, I haven't eaten, it's been 47 days since I could change my clothes, I haven't eaten in 4 or 5 days, I've been drinking rain water. And this is what the U.S. doughboy went through. Played a significant role here in World War I, something that many people don't know, even educated people don't realize the goal and the mission, and what the American soldier went through.

Reflecting at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery

So I didn't really know what to expect, like most of you I you know thought it was static trench warfare as always portrayed, and this last week has just really opened my eyes. You know been to Normandy beach several times. By myself and with students. And over here in eastern France, I've learned a phrase that every French family lost someone in this war. From our hotel head waiter, to people that we ran into on the street, and being here at the Meuse Argonne Cemetery, I've ran into guys from Australia and New Zealand and you know a lot of French people, and its immaculately taken care of and preserved and they are here to tell the story. And that's kind of like my purpose. The American Soldier, the doughboy, did not fight in trenches. I have been fortunate enough this last week to walk many miles of this battlefield. And I saw the German trenches and I saw the French trenches, and seeing it from the doughboy is quite different, where

he was on the move, not in trenches as is portrayed and I, I believe you've got to touch it and see it and smell it, to bring history alive is kinda my, my shtick, and you know I put my hand in the earth, may sound corny to some of you, but ah (pause), it's the only way you really get to know and see what they did and, you know, what they went through. I'm not a crying guy and you can see how much this has touched me, um. (pause)

We were out washing headstones the other day, and going along I was reading each one, trying to make that personal connection, like I have with, you know, Ray and Roy Stevens, and Bedford Hobeck from D Day, and I saw that there was all 48 continental states were here and a guy from Alaska and and it hit me here, that there's no Saving Private Ryan, there's no Band of Brothers. There's no pacific to kinda popularize it and renew that interest. And like here are these guys, um that. You know I have a wife and three beautiful kids. They never got to really grow up. They never got to have a family. They never got to realize that that American dream. Many of these guys, 77% draftees. They were either first generation immigrants or or right off the boat, and (exhale) they did their job, they came, and they helped to define a new era. They closed the door to, to the past and they helped build the modern world in which we know and didn't get to enjoy any of those freedoms (pause)...

Camera man: Take a second.

Bill: Here I go again. Right behind me is Micheal Zatine along with nearly 15,000 other soliders and he was killed 10:50am on November the 11th, ten more minutes and he would have made it safely, and the diary that I read guy by the name of Thomas Shinn of Concord, North Carolina, said when he saw that he compressed himself into the earth just to make it, and he began thinking about home and and a family, so I just, here they are, here is the high cost of freedom behind me, and I urge you to come out here and see them to to remember them and my thing about history is, its not the fact and the date, it's the people, its what happened and why and there are 15,000 Americans right there that badly want you to come and get to know them.

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“Time will not dim the glory of their deeds.”

GENERAL OF THE ARMIES JOHN J. PERSHING

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