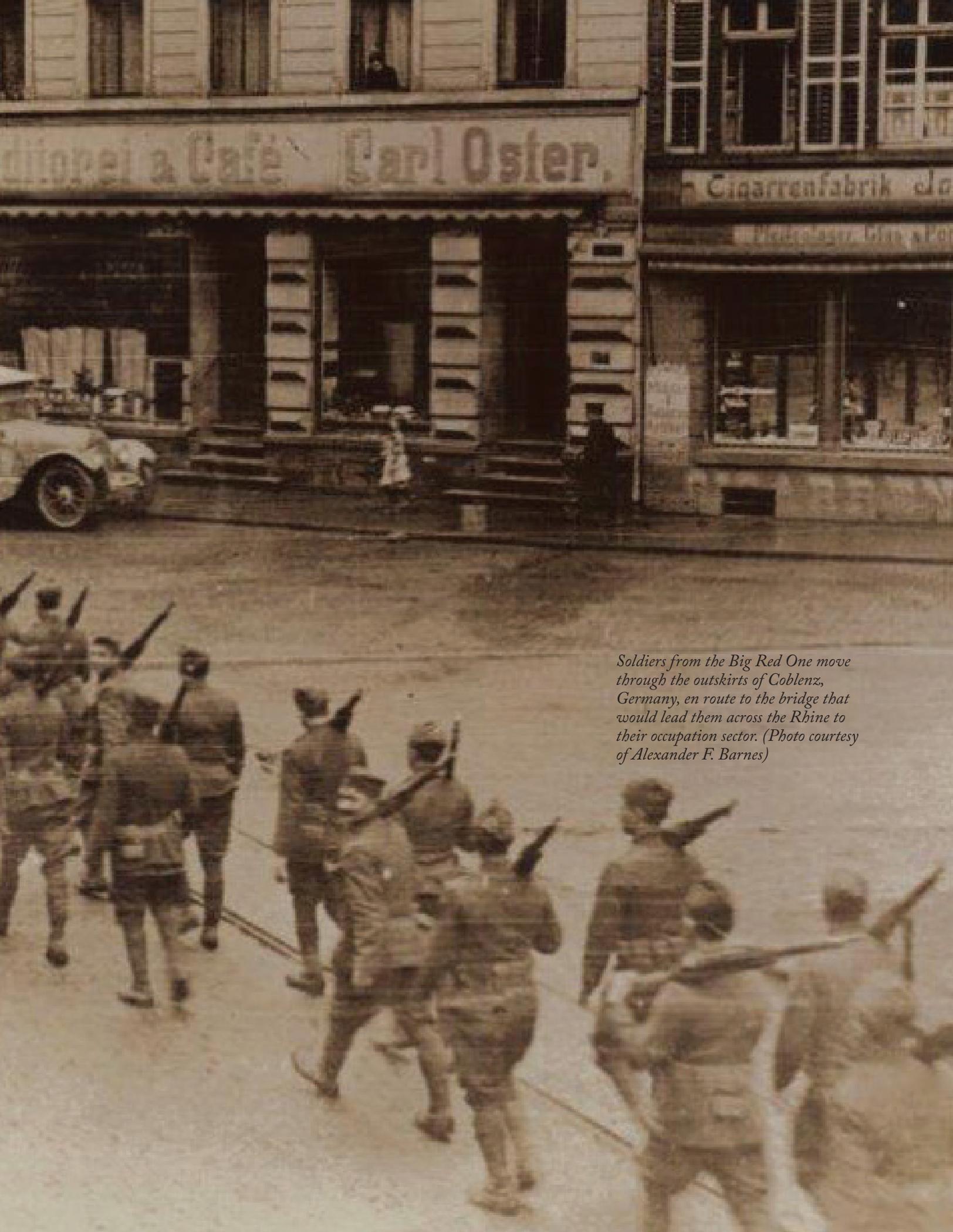


# Logistics in Motion:

Supporting the March to the Rhine

■ By Alexander F. Barnes and Sara E. Cothren



*Soldiers from the Big Red One move through the outskirts of Coblenz, Germany, en route to the bridge that would lead them across the Rhine to their occupation sector. (Photo courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes)*

## HISTORY

U.S. Army logisticians fed, clothed, and supported a quarter of a million combat-weary Soldiers as they marched to the Rhine River after World War I.

*It was cold. That was nothing new, the corporal thought. It had been cold since late September, so this miserable weather was really just a continuation. What added to the young Soldier's discomfort was the rain that was turning to sleet and the roads that were becoming more slippery the farther the convoy went.*

*It didn't help that the trucks and tractors from the Big Red One had torn up the roads while dragging their division artillery on this same route.*

*The corporal slipped the glove off his right hand and, leaning forward, tapped the gas gauge on the dashboard with his finger. No motion; either it was as frozen as his feet were or he really was almost out of gas.*

*He looked to his right at the bundled figure of his sergeant, wrapped in a heavy overcoat and a wool blanket. The sergeant's eyes were the only thing that betrayed the fact that he was still awake and watching. The corporal pointed to the gauge and the sergeant nodded but said nothing.*

*"Just great," the corporal thought. "If we don't get some gas soon, we're going to be walking the last 45 miles to the Rhine River." As the truck skidded slightly in reaction to a bend in the road, the corporal turned again to his sergeant and said, "If this is what it feels like to win a war, I'd sure hate to be on the losing side."*

With the signing of the armistice on Nov. 11, 1918, the guns fell silent on the western front for the first time in almost five years. For the victorious Allies, however, the mission was not complete. Their soldiers would occupy the German Rhineland.

Under the terms of the armistice, an area of over 2,500 square miles of western Germany with a million inhabitants was assigned to the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Another 10,000 square miles would be occupied by the Belgian, British, and French armies.

The U.S. Third Army was to set up positions in an area that stretched from the Luxembourg border east-

ward to the Rhine and in a half circle on the east side of the river. This entire part of Germany would soon become known as the "Coblenz Bridgehead."

Understanding that the armistice was really only a ceasefire until peace talks could be concluded, the soldiers had valid fears that the war might start again. As soon as the Allied armies had taken up their positions in the occupation zones, they were to prepare immediately for "aggressive, offensive action."

The march to the occupation zones on the Rhine began on Nov. 17, 1918, at 5 a.m., just six days after the signing of the armistice. The Allied forces, stretching from the North Sea to the Swiss border, moved simultaneously in the wake of the defeated and withdrawing German armies.

It would be hard to imagine a more difficult or complex operation than that of moving the Third Army to the Rhine. As an organization, the Third Army was still less than two weeks old when it received the mission to become the "Army of Occupation." Of the divisions now assigned to the Third Army, most had either been in combat right up to the signing of the armistice or had just been relieved from the trenches and were behind the lines attempting to refurbish and reorganize for further combat.

Add to the mix the uncertainty of whether or not the Germans might resume combat operations at some point during the move and then stir in a large dose of European winter weather, and you have the recipe for an operational nightmare. On a positive note, the initial part of the march would be through "friendly" France and the soon-to-be liberated Grand Duchy of Luxembourg.

### Marching Through Luxembourg

As the Third Army crossed into Luxembourg, AEF headquarters announced a policy of noninterference in the affairs of the grand duchy. For the United States, maintaining independence of command in the duchy was extremely important because not

only would the Third Army's route of march and logistics support pipeline run through Luxembourg, some U.S. forces were to remain within its borders to protect that pipeline.

Gen. John J. Pershing, the AEF commander, made it clear that the Americans would not support any of the factions currently struggling for control of Luxembourg.

When Luxembourg officials requested that Pershing have Soldiers ready in case there were riots or disturbances among the local populace, Pershing replied that it would not be necessary as there would be no riots or revolts.

He was right. The long lines of U.S. infantrymen moving through Luxembourg en route to Germany encouraged the troublemakers to stay home and gave credence to Pershing's statement.

Among the very first Third Army doughboys to cross into Luxembourg were the telephone linemen of the 322nd Field Signal Battalion. Not exactly sure how they would be treat-

ed by the locals, the Soldiers were pleasantly surprised by warm greetings and happily reported back to their unit that the local inhabitants considered Americans to be the liberators of Luxembourg.

By Nov. 26, 1918, most of the Third Army had reached the German border and stopped; it had been previously agreed that all Allied forces would simultaneously cross the German border on Dec. 1. The remnants of the German army were still slowly clearing out of what was soon to be the U.S. sector.

With five days to wait before they could cross the German border, most units used the pause in the movement to replenish their supplies, make what repairs they could to their uniforms and equipment, and rest their animals. It was needed.

Yet, in spite of the weather and road conditions, morale among the Soldiers remained high as they enjoyed their role as the liberators of German-occupied France and Luxembourg. That was about to change.

## Marching Through Germany

Once the troops crossed into Germany, all bets were off. It was expected that the German population would be unreceptive at best and hostile at worst. The hilly terrain in the Mosel River valley also worked against the doughboys.

Following Pershing's instructions, during the advance to the Rhine, the Soldiers were billeted in any house, barn, or shelter available. The movement of the Third Army was concentrated along the few roads running from west to east. With only small villages and farms clustered along these roads, it was impossible to provide clean and dry quarters for all of the troops. Therefore, on some nights, the marching doughboys had to eat, rest, and sleep alongside the road wherever they had stopped.

These hardships were accepted as a matter of course by the Soldiers; most of them had recently come from sleeping in open trenches under enemy gunfire and gas attacks. In comparison, the barns, haylofts, and



*A supply wagon moves near the small German town of Kaiseresch in December 1918. Each U.S. Army division of the period had between 8 and 10 thousand draft animals. (Photo courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes)*

porches of peasant cabins seemed like luxurious accommodations. Regardless, the march proved challenging for the Americans in many ways.

For logistics units, it was a particularly difficult operation. The organic supply, maintenance, and transportation units of each division were as worn out as the infantry and field artillery regiments. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive had been grueling, and many of the thousands of horses and mules in each division were as sick or as tired as the Soldiers.

Col. George C. Marshall, on behalf of Gen. Pershing, issued orders that AEF divisions not making the march were to hand over their best draft animals to those going to Germany and accept their worn-out animals in return. Similarly, they were to exchange motor vehicles, when possible, to ensure the Third Army had the best

available equipment.

The U.S. headquarters sent the Third Army the directive that the “First and Second Armies will also assist you in all matters of supply until such time as you are able to dispense with such assistance.” Unfortunately, many of the divisions in the First and Second Armies were as worn down as the divisions they were supposed to assist. So, the sanctioned swapping had little effect on improving the Third Army.

A requirement of the armistice made it necessary to keep a 10- to 25-kilometer separation zone between advancing Allied forces and the retreating German army. This proved to be difficult because the weather restricted the Americans’ aerial observation and denied visibility of where in front of them the German army actually was. With

road conditions deteriorating quickly because of the weather and heavy traffic, meeting the published march schedules was problematic for both sides.

During the march of the Allied armies into Germany, railroad traffic was suspended in the area between the hostile armies. This restriction was not a problem for the Third Army. The Americans had not even planned to use this mode of transportation because of the geographical constraints of their route through the Mosel Valley. The other Allied armies had a rail component to their movement, but for the Americans, the trip was on foot, on hoof, or by truck all the way to the Rhine.

### Increasing Difficulties

As the march continued, the daily reports from the Third Army back



*The difficulties facing the Soldiers during the march to the Rhine are readily apparent in this photograph of infantrymen from the 1st Division. Moving eastward through the Mosel Valley in cold, wet weather proved to be a challenge for even the most physically fit Soldiers. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center)*

to AEF headquarters in Chaumont highlighted the problems that the advancing forces were facing. The inability to accurately gauge the location of the German forces and the confusion caused by the revolution that was sweeping throughout Germany made it difficult to provide a clear picture of the movement.

The Nov. 18, 1918, AEF report said, "The march of the Third Army to the Rhine has been resumed one day in advance of the prearranged schedule owing to the lack of established authority in the region being evacuated by the enemy. The latter is having difficulty in complying with the terms of the armistice because of the limited number of roads available for his withdrawal across the MOSELLE and SURE Rivers."

In addition to the Germans having problems moving their own units out of the occupation zones, some Germans also went out of their way to make it more difficult for the advancing Americans by cutting telegraph lines and shooting bullets through water storage tanks.

In other cases, the doughboys themselves added to the confusion. One participant of the march later recorded that a few doughboys in the 1st Division swapped some of their rations to a retreating German army unit for a motorized artillery tractor.

The doughboys used the tractor as transportation for part of the march until one of their officers caught on and made them abandon it for fear of being mistaken for a German unit. The industrious Soldiers continued the rest of the march on foot using what many would refer to later as the "Hobnail Express."

## Crossing Into Germany

On Dec. 1, 1918, after the short period of rest and refurbishment, all of the Allied armies crossed into Germany for the first time. With both Americans and Germans appearing to be on their best behavior, the march continued on a wide front through the Mosel Valley west

of the Rhine.

The signal units moving in front of the Third Army found it extremely difficult to maintain communications between the moving units and their commanders because of the massive scale of the movement and the three-division-wide front. Adding to their troubles, much of the phone network they had expected to find in place had been either deliberately or accidentally damaged by the retreating Germans and, therefore, required repair or maintenance.

Motorized units also ran into problems as gasoline was in short supply. Tanker trucks in the divisional supply trains were kept busy bringing gas to keep the Third Army moving.

Still, the march continued with staggered stops and starts but was always pushing eastward with the 1st, 2nd, and 32nd Divisions leading the way. These three divisions, under the control of III Corps, were the lead elements because they had the farthest distance to travel. Ultimately, their march would lead them over the river to sectors on the far side of the Rhine.

Also moving in front of Third Army units were the advance party teams responsible for securing the billets, campsites, and stables for the troops and their horses. The advance parties and officers detailed to act as "town majors" usually preceded the main bodies of troops by 24 hours.

Upon arrival in the towns, they quickly located and developed lists of available accommodations. These billets were then assigned to units and individuals based on size and accessibility. The town majors were directed to keep accurate records of the billets and other accommodations in order to secure payment for the local property owners from the U.S. Army quartermasters at a later date.

Medical personnel making the hike became concerned as the march progressed because so many of the troops were dropping out from diseases such as mumps, flu, and pneumonia. One division had more than

2,000 Soldiers evacuated to the field hospitals during the march. The medics worried that some Soldiers would be left behind and forgotten by the advancing division. This led them to perform a nightly search along the route to ensure no Soldiers were lost.

Although the move into Germany was peaceful for the most part, there were some incidents of Germans throwing rocks at U.S. troops in the town of Kell, 12 miles southeast of Trier. It could be said that the acceptance of U.S. troops in Germany was relative to the conditions existing in each town and village they entered.

In the smaller towns and villages, there had been some stirrings of pride as the well-organized units of the retreating German army had marched through. However, as disorganized outfits with stragglers, deserters, and revolutionaries passed through, citizens had a great deal of concern and fear.

The citizens were frightened by stories filtering out of the areas east of the Rhine River, where armed revolutionaries and labor organizers were battling the police and right-wing militia groups for control of the streets. The German version of revolution and anarchy seemed to be waiting just around the corner.

Therefore, many local inhabitants welcomed the Americans for the peace and stability they would bring. Under these conditions, it is easy to see why the appearance of the uniformly healthy and comparatively well-fed U.S. doughboys, hiking through the towns behind their regimental bands to the beat of "Swanee River" and "Dixie," created a positive impression on the Germans.

And for the doughboys? Even with their flags flying and their bands playing, it was still a hard march. In the 4th Division, the movement to take up occupation duty was no small event; its march was the longest distance covered by any U.S. unit. The 330 kilometers from the Argonne Forest was a struggle.

A sergeant of the 39th Infantry



*This photograph, taken at 6:30 a.m., shows the fatigue on the faces of these 32nd Division National Guard engineers preparing to move out after having slept beside the road overnight. (Photo courtesy of Alexander F. Barnes)*

Regiment wrote to his father, "I will not mention the fourteen days hike from the Argonne woods to Coblenz, making anywhere from twenty to fifty four kilometers a day with full field equipment. I couldn't begin to express my feelings."

### **Arrival at the Rhine**

And yet they made it. By Dec. 11, 1918, all four of the Allied armies reached the Rhine. The three armies (French, U.S., and British) that had occupation sectors on the east bank crossed the river in large numbers on Dec. 13, after another short pause for reorganization.

The U.S. Army's 1st, 2nd, and 32nd Divisions were on the east bank. In their wake, they left the 89th and 90th Divisions near Trier, while the 3rd, 4th, and 42nd Divisions moved into occupation sectors on the west side of the Rhine. With the arrival of the main U.S. force, the headquarters for the Third Army was established in Coblenz, using the large German government building complex on

the west bank of the Rhine. By late December, all of the U.S. units had reached their occupation sectors and begun to settle.

Among the immediate concerns for the Third Army's logisticians, in addition to providing billets and food for the force, was the problem of replacing the Soldiers' worn out uniforms and shoes. During the march to the Rhine, the focus had been on feeding the troops and animals and repairing broken motor vehicles to keep the long march rolling. Now the attention turned to the Soldiers and their equipment.

The Army Medical Department determined that approximately 90 percent of the Third Army doughboys had some degree of lice infestation. Now that the troops were in their assigned sectors, the medics started a massive campaign to delouse the troops.

Only one truck-mounted steam sterilizer machine was available, so the division medics worked with the mechanics and built several steam-

powered disinfecting machines. When some standard steam disinfectors and portable shower baths arrived in the zone, the lice menace was rapidly reduced. By May 31, 1919, it was down to less than 1 percent.

Of equal importance was providing winter clothing and boots for all of the Soldiers. Fortunately, a complete shoe and uniform manufacturing plant was found in Lützel, a town near Coblenz. Owned by the German government and previously a major supplier of uniforms and shoes for the German army, the plant was well laid out and complete with electrical-powered machines.

The Third Army quartermasters took over operation of the facility and repaired 13,348 pairs of shoes in January and February 1919. Uniforms were also repaired, cleaned, and reissued to the troops.

When the spring of 1919 finally arrived, the Third Army logisticians had completed their work and the doughboys were as well-dressed and well-fed as they had ever been. It was

truly an amazing accomplishment, considering the difficulties they had faced.

With the Treaty of Versailles signed in June 1919, it was now time to re-deploy the Third Army back to the United States and let a new occupation force, known as the American Forces in Germany, take over the job. The retrograde of eight divisions and the redistribution of their equipment, animals, and vehicles would prove to be a major challenge for the Army logisticians, but that is a story for another day.

## Lessons Learned

So what lessons learned can we take away from this operation? There are a few.

**Quartermasters are important.** Central European winters can be extremely harsh. Any Army that is not prepared for them can quickly become disorganized and ineffective. The importance of good rations and reliable winter clothing cannot be overstated.

The AEF and the Third Army had a surprisingly low rate of trench foot and frostbite. This was mainly because of the emphasis that senior leaders put on ensuring the troops were supplied with footwear that would protect them from the problems associated with the continuously cold and wet conditions in the trenches and on the march. As a result, the doughboys suffered a lower percentage of debilitating foot injuries than U.S. Soldiers did under very similar conditions in the same part of Europe just thirty years later, during World War II.

**Common sense is a force multiplier.** Faced with thousands of sick horses and mules, the Third Army gathered as many Soldiers as they could find with ranch, farm, or veterinary experience. Adding those Soldiers to staffs of the remount squadrons, the Americans nursed back to health many of the sick animals.

Now faced with a surplus of healthy animals, mainly because the field artillery regiments were re-equipped with trucks as prime movers and oth-

er units had redeployed to the United States, the Third Army conducted a series of auctions. Selling the now healthy draft animals to a German population desperately in need of horses for farming proved to be a lucrative business and eventually turned a profit for the U.S. Army.

**Necessity is the mother of invention.** The Third Army's logisticians struggled to provide their Soldiers with meals while on the march. Arriving at their occupation sectors just before Christmas was a challenge for the division quartermasters. Germany had been under a blockade for several years, which caused a significant food shortage there and in the war-ravaged sections of Belgium and France. As a result, the issue of rations was quite uneven for a while.

It was noted that while the 42nd Division received a nice Christmas dinner with all the trimmings, some nearby 4th Division units received none. So, some of the 4th Division officers got creative, pooled their funds, and bought for their men what was available from the local vendors: doughnuts and beer.

**Salvage is a good thing.** The AEF did a good job of recovering salvageable materiel. It was reported in 1919 that 91 percent of all the materiel turned in was repaired and put back into service. For recovered shoes, the rate was almost 100 percent.

Even more impressive was the salvage companies' ability to repurpose materials. The troops used recovered kitchen grease to waterproof Soldiers' boots, and stale bread was ground up and reused as flour.

Almost every doughboy arrived in France wearing the famed "Montana Peak" campaign hat. While these hats were perfect for the Mexican Expedition against Pancho Villa, they were completely impractical for the trenches. Therefore, the hats were collected at central locations and the pressed rabbit fur from which they were made was converted into slippers for the wounded and sick Soldiers in the hospitals.

Replacing those hats were the new-

ly created "overseas hats." The wool to create some of the hats had been repurposed. Early versions of the heavyweight woolen overcoats issued to the doughboys proved to be too long to wear in the muddy trenches of Europe, so the length of the coats were shortened to the knee and the recovered material was used to make the overseas hats.

The story of the U.S. Army's occupation of the German Rhineland from December 1918 to February 1923 is not well-known, yet it represents one of the Army's shining successes in the 20th century. Perhaps forgotten because it took place between the two World Wars, it represents one of the best examples of nation building and stabilization in U.S. military history.

Logisticians' part in the march to the Rhine and their ability to feed, clothe, and support a quarter of a million combat-weary doughboys on the move in the dead of winter was truly a noteworthy accomplishment.

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