

Chapter 9 Additional Material

Challenges of the Mexican Punitive Expedition

The following excerpts from an article in *The Military Engineer* recounts some of the challenges during the Mexican Punitive Expedition in 1916. The author, Colonel Henry A. Finch, looked back nearly four decades. He demonstrated how effective engineers needed to know when to break with accepted wisdom in order to adapt to the real-world environment.

By way of context, tensions along the American border with Mexico had been growing in 1915. Then in March of that next year, Mexican revolutionary Francisco “Pancho” Villa and his followers attacked the town of Columbus and the U.S. Army’s Camp Furlong in New Mexico.

They inflicted casualties among American civilians and soldiers alike. Later that month, some 10,000 American Soldiers entered Mexico to chase down and capture Villa. The cold weather and rough terrain made logistics and mobility difficult for the American units. Only the Engineers could help alleviate these problems. Colonel Finch picks up the story based on his memories:

I concentrate here on the outstanding lesson learned by the military engineers from that great experience: The compulsion laid on members of that group to be willing ... to forget “what the book says,” and, on occasion, even to act in direct opposition to the dictates laid down in the manuals. The principal responsibility of the engineers with the Expedition centered around keeping truck traffic moving on the single road, the line of communication with our home base at Columbus, New Mexico. In the beginning the existing road was of packed earth and it wandered over hill and dale in the semi-desert country. Quite adequate for the light Mexico wagons that had been

using it for decades, it quickly went to pieces under pounding given it by our army trucks. . . The befuddled truck train leader had to choose between as many as a dozen routes, all rutted and loaded with dust.

The first chief engineer of the expedition, an able leader, believed in following the book. . . The ruts were filled by hand and by road scrapers, and the ruts were crowned in strictly conventional fashion. The theory was that the expected rains would pack the [dust] – and so they would have done – but they never came.

Finch next explains how problem was solved by field expediency, or more popularly known as a Soldier's solution:

There happened to be an answer, which was discovered toward the last by some unsung genius unhampered by reverence for the textbooks. This was to reverse the blade of the scraper, thus removing the [dust] to the should of the road instead of mounding it in the center. This improved traction by exposing the hard material on the lower levels.¹

Finch concluded that “Service in Mexico was good experience for the test to come” in the First World War.

Major General George W. Goethals and American Logistical Problems in the First World War

To help remedy the supply problems, Secretary of War Newton Baker appointed Major General George W. Goethals as Chief of the Division of Purchase, Storage, and Traffic in the U.S. Army. Goethals brought decades of experience managing complex projects like the excavation of the Panama Canal to his new post. After the French failed to construct a canal across Central America to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans in late 1800s, Americans took over this herculean project in 1904. However, the first American chief engineers were civilians who cracked under the strain of work and political pressure.

Slow progress was made until March 1907, when President Theodore Roosevelt turned to Corps of Engineers. He declared, “I’m going to give it to the Army and to someone who can’t quit.” The president found the right man for the job—Lieutenant Colonel George W. Goethals. He worked tirelessly to end corruption and find solutions to severe environmental problems. He directed construction of the fifty-one-mile-long Panama Canal until it was opened in 1914, ahead of schedule and under budget.



George W. Goethals wearing the two stars of a major general during the First World War.

Credit: U.S. Army Photograph

After he was promoted to major general during the First World War, Goethals tried to streamline the American logistics system. But, he faced resistance from bureau chiefs in the Quartermaster Corps, Ordnance Department, and others who saw his attempt to centralize control of Army logistics as undermining their own power. Other problems occurred in Europe when General Pershing moved Major General John G.

Harbord from commanding an infantry division to become the commander of the AEF's Service of Supply. Harbord gave Pershing effective control of the logistical system in theater and blocked Goethals' attempts to extend his reach from the War Department to the AEF.

In an administrative sense, Goethals succeeded in laying the foundation for an efficient logistical system on the home front; yet he never could solve one of the basic problems of getting enough transportation vehicles, whether motorized or horse-drawn, to the front lines. Part of this deficiency was because American industry needed time to retool before it could supply millions of Americans in uniform: Had the First World War run into 1919, Goethals' efforts would have borne fruit in terms of a logistical system with production capabilities to meet the massive demand of overseas operations

Short Bibliography

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Origins of the U.S. Army Chemical Corps

The U.S. Army Chemical Corps of the twenty-first century traces its origin to the Corps of Engineers during the First World War. This conflict saw nearly four years of trench warfare with horrific casualties. None of the European armies could break through the enemy trench systems. This resulted in stalemate and attrition. In desperation, they used poisonous chlorine, chloropicrin, phosgene, and mustard gases in artillery to kill or incapacitate enemy soldiers. They then hoped their own soldiers could successfully assault and capture the enemy trenches.

Although sometimes effective, these chemical weapons lacked the precision in targeting and delivery to be decisive in battles, let alone the First World War as a whole. When the United States entered the conflict and fought in battles, American soldiers began to experience the deadly effects of poisonous gas. This drove the senior American commander, General John J. Pershing, to create a Gas Service Section to increase the American offensive and defensive capabilities with these chemical weapons. He looked to the Corps of Engineers and redesignated the 30th Engineer Regiment (Gas and Flame) as the 1st Gas Regiment in July 1918. A month earlier, the U.S. War Department created the Chemical Warfare Service. Pershing's decision made sense because engineers possessed technical training and scientific backgrounds necessary for chemical warfare. Elements of the 1st Gas Regiment saw action in the Battle of Saint-Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne Campaign. Although limited in use, those American units did fire shells filled with poisonous gas at the German positions.

Source: Al Mauroni, "The U.S. Army Chemical Corps: Past, Present, and Future," <https://armyhistory.org/the-u-s-army-chemical-corps-past-present-and-future/> (accessed 18 June 2016).

The "Lost Battalion" in the Argonne Forest

Many American units performed well despite horrific conditions of the First World War. Among the most noteworthy was the "Lost Battalion" that saw action during the AEF's Meuse-Argonne Offensive in the fall of 1918. This unit was not a battalion proper but instead several companies in the U.S. 77th Division totaling 554 American officers and men under command of Major Charles White Whittlesey. The 77th, nicknamed the "Metropolitan Division" or the

“Statue of Liberty” Division, drew most of its 28,000 soldiers from New York City’s Lower East side. They spoke more than 40 different dialects or languages.

On October 2, 1918, Major Whittlesey and his men took part in a rapid advance into the Argonne Forest that outdistanced friendly units on their flanks. German forces easily surrounded these troops in a ravine, isolating them from resupply and reinforcement for six days. The beleaguered Americans dug into defensive positions. They desperately fought off numerous enemy attacks despite running low on food and ammunition. The Americans could only replenish their water by crawling to a nearby stream in the face of enemy gunfire. The Americans suffered from artillery barrages, ground assaults, sniper fire, and even a flame thrower attack. Communication with other American units was only possible by using carrier pigeons. Despite his seemingly untenable situation, however Major Whittlesey held his position and ignored German requests to surrender.

The Americans lost 360 men killed, wounded, missing, or captured before being relieved on October 8. That the “Lost Battalion” could mount this defense, costly though it was, represented a real accomplishment for the Americans. It proved their mettle in combat. Nevertheless, that the communications breakdown placed these doughboys in such a predicament raised serious doubts about American command and control. For his intrepid leadership and courage under fire, Major Whittlesey received the Medal of Honor, as did four fellow officers, one sergeant, and one private. Twenty-eight other American soldiers also received the Distinguished Service Cross, the second-highest award for valor in combat.

Short Bibliography

Gaff, Alan. *Blood in the Argonne: The “Lost Battalion” of World War I*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2005.

¹ Henry A. Finch, “Reminiscences of an Old ‘Engine,’” *The Military Engineer* 48 (March-April 1956): 123.