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Paul F. Braim. *The Test of Battle: The American Expeditionary Forces in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign*. Shippensburg, Penn.: White Mane Publishing, 1998. xix + 247 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57249-085-7.

Reviewed by Robert B. Bruce (Kansas State University)
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The battle of the Meuse-Argonne remains one of the largest and bloodiest campaigns in the history of the United States Army. Over 1,200,000 American soldiers took part in the battle, which began on 26 September 1918 and lasted until the armistice on 11 November 1918, making it the largest engagement in American history at that time (p. 151). The Meuse-Argonne was the most significant, and the bloodiest, of all the campaigns waged by the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in World War I and marked the emergence of the AEF as a major factor on the Western Front. Given the importance of the conflict in American military history and the part it played in generating controversy over the importance of the American contribution to Allied victory in the Great War, it is somewhat surprising that in the eighty years since the battle, only two books have been written on the struggle.

The first book on the Meuse-Argonne campaign was Frederick Palmer's *Our Greatest Battle* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1919). Palmer's book, long out of print, was a journalistic account of the battle filled with vignettes about the "Lost Battalion," the exploits of Alvin York, and other lesser known, but still colorful, stories about the AEF and its "greatest battle." While a wonderfully entertaining read, although perhaps a bit sensationalistic and overly dramatic for the modern scholar, Palmer's book lacked scholarly objectivity and, more importantly, also lacked scholarly analysis of the fighting and the importance of it in the final struggle on the Western Front in 1918.

Thus, when the first edition of Paul Braim's book *The Test of Battle: The American Expeditionary Forces in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign* appeared in 1987, it promised to fill a desperately large gap in our understanding of the largest and, arguably, the most important battle of the

AEF. This book received mixed reviews but, since it was the only work to attempt to provide a serious and scholarly analysis of the battle, it has been an oft-cited work in other writings on the AEF in the Great War. Braim's work has now appeared in a second revised edition that he describes as "a more sympathetic assessment of the decisions of leaders at all levels in the Meuse-Argonne Campaign, and a less condemnatory analysis of the performance of the American Expeditionary Forces."

Braim's *The Test of Battle* provides a good narrative and, at times, insightful discussion of the problems faced by the United States Army in recruiting, training, equipping and fielding the largest force in American history to that point. Braim also provides a solid blow-by-blow account of the major engagements of the AEF in the Meuse-Argonne campaign. Braim's work is thoroughly annotated, and his bibliography reveals a careful study of the relevant literature on military operations on the Western Front during 1917-1918. He also consulted archival material at the U.S. National Archives, the Library of Congress, and the U.S. Military History Institute. The book is illustrated mainly with photographs of the terrain of the battlefield and maps taken from the various works of the American Battle Monuments Commission. The work also includes an excellent collection of graphs concerning the combat performance of the various U.S. Army divisions in the First World War as an appendix.

The major problem with Braim's book is that it attempts to cover too much and thus ends up covering not nearly enough. In a book that is supposed to cover the AEF campaign in the Meuse-Argonne, fully 41 percent of the text is spent discussing other matters, some of which relate to the Meuse-Argonne, and some of which are

merely general background. Braim opens with a thumbnail sketch of the course of the First World War during the period of American neutrality from 1914-1917. Here one must question the wisdom of attempting to “skim” through such momentous events and campaigns and the need to do so in a book that is purportedly focused on the American effort in a single campaign in 1918. Such skimming sometimes results in a rather strange description of events. For example, Braim’s discussion of the year 1915 mentions British operations in the Dardanelles and Africa, but fails to mention the French offensives in Champagne. These attacks cost France over 1 million casualties and were by far the largest and most important campaigns waged on the Western Front, which is the focus of Braim’s overall narrative, in 1915. In fairness, Braim does provide a solid analysis of the state of military thought and technology by 1917 which does have an impact on the AEF’s campaign, and so this section of the work could have been made infinitely stronger by focusing on these developments. Unfortunately too much time is spent on other matters.

One must also question Braim’s sources in these opening chapters, such as his use of a block quote from Robert Leckie’s *The Wars of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) as evidence of the attitude of the American people toward the Allied cause during the period of American neutrality (p. 14). Surely better sources than a popular general history covering American armed conflict from the seventeenth-century colonial wars to Desert Storm could have been utilized here. To name but a few, one must consider Ernest May’s *The World War and American Isolation, 1914-1917* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), Patrick Devlin’s *Too Proud to Fight: Woodrow Wilson’s Neutrality* (London: Oxford University Press, 1974) and John Milton Cooper, Jr.’s *The Vanity of Power: American Isolationism in the First World War, 1914-1917* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1969). In general, this point can be used to illustrate the greatest failing of Braim in that for all his background discussion, he fails to address the essential question which any historical work should ask—why should we care about this particular campaign? Braim fails to place the AEF and the Meuse-Argonne campaign in the broader context of the entrance of the United States onto the world stage, its participation as part of a multi-national military coalition, or any other political considerations for that matter. Thus the campaign occurs essentially in a vacuum, and one is left to ponder its true significance.

Braim’s writing style is stilted, inappropriately infor-

mal at times, and suffers from an overuse of exclamation points. For example, in his discussion of the leadership qualities of the AEF officer corps, Braim writes, “This author could think of perhaps sixty individual exceptions to the group ratings just made, and perhaps there were thousands. If fired upon on this matter, this author will retreat!” (p. 170). Braim repeatedly uses the phrase “this author” throughout the book, when such a clarification is unnecessary.

Braim provides a discussion of the historical debate over the importance of the Meuse-Argonne to winning the Great War, but again he is too brief and his sources are incomplete and questionable. While assessing America’s contribution to the Allied victory in 1918, he again falls back on using general works of military history such as T. Harry Williams *The History of American Wars*, (New York: Knopf, 1981) and Maurice Matloff (ed.) *American Military History* (Washington: GPO, 1973) and even a letter to the editor of the London Daily Telegraph by a British veteran of the two world wars. Meanwhile Braim ignores such vital works on the final year of the Great War as Hubert Essame *The Battle for Europe: 1918* (New York: Charles Scribner’s, 1972), Barrie Pitt *1918: The Last Act* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962) and John Terraine *To Win A War: 1918, the Year of Victory* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1978). All of these works provide valuable discussion of the importance, or lack thereof, of the American contribution to the Allied effort, yet Braim fails to address any of the issues they raise.

In conclusion, *The Test of Battle* provides the only book length treatment available on the Meuse-Argonne campaign of World War I, but its many failings prevent it from becoming the definitive work on the campaign, or even an adequate work on the subject. I would recommend that the scholar or general reader in search of information on the Meuse-Argonne campaign consult the aforementioned books covering the 1918 campaign, as well as the appropriate sections of John J. Pershing *My Experiences in the First World War* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995; reprint of 1931 ed.), Edward Coffman’s *The War to End All Wars: The American Expeditionary Forces in World War I* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1986) and Laurence Stallings *The Doughboys* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).

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