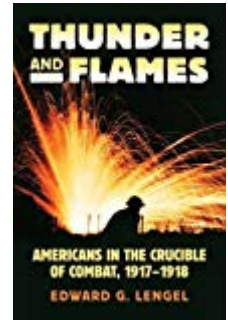**Edward G. Lengel.** *Thunder and Flames: Americans in the Crucible of Combat, 1917-1918.* Modern War Series. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015. xii + 457 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-2084-5.

Reviewed by Mark Folse

Edward G. Lengel's *Thunder and Flames* traces the combat development of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) from November 1917 to August 1918. This book converses mainly with Mark Grotelueschen's *The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I* (2006) and Richard Faulkner's *The School of Hard Knocks: Combat Leadership in the American Expeditionary Forces* (2012). All three illuminate the AEF's deficiencies while at the same time acknowledging its strengths through detailed analysis of separate units and campaigns. Utilizing French, German, and American sources, Lengel attempts to apply a unified narrative to the AEF's history, which he claims is lacking in Grotelueschen's and Faulkner's works. He argues that the AEF's experience is largely resistant to generalizations but some salient characteristics exist. American officers and troops suffered from poor training which cost lives. Franco-American relations were acrimonious for the most part. Additionally, Lengel argues that the French fought better than Americans admitted during the war.

Lengel contends that American training did not fully prepare the AEF to fight in France. Untested American troops performed poorly in their first encounter with the enemy in November 1917 when Germans killed three, wounded five, and captured dozens of American soldiers during a night raid. Division and brigade commanders, unfamiliar with the lethality of German machine gunners and artillery, sent thousands of Americans to their deaths in reckless attacks without adequate artillery support. The US 2nd Division, for example, "was so badly handled in Belleau Wood that it never fully recovered," Lengel claims (p. 205). Unwilling to learn from their French allies, AEF commanders continued to send waves of brave but reckless attacks against seasoned German troops throughout the summer of 1918 with horrendous results.

Disagreements over tactics attenuated Franco-American relations. By late 1917, the French utilized heavy preparatory barrages and methodical advances in order to avoid unnecessary casualties. The American officer corps accused the

French of being too slow and too cautious, however. At Soissons in July 1918, American aggressiveness led to troops wandering clumsily into their allies' attack lanes, causing confusion. Additionally, the AEF's assault tactics cost more lives and created salients in the line that left them vulnerable to counterattacks.

Americans blamed the French for many of their woes and wanted to end the amalgamation of AEF units with the French army. Lengel argues that at Soissons, the American 1st and 2nd Divisions "found it more convenient to simply charge ahead at their own pace and blame the French for falling behind" (p. 300). At Fismette in August 1918, the Germans overwhelmed elements of the US 28th Division. The AEF blamed the incident on the French, who allegedly abandoned their positions prior to the battle. According to Lengel, the tragedy at Fismette "would encapsulate everything that was wrong with the amalgamation idea and reinforce the necessity of uniting the AEF under a single American Command" (p. 340).

Lengel discredits American claims that they saved the French from defeat and nowhere is this more apparent than his account of the 2nd Division's fight at Belleau Wood. Division lore posits that they stopped the German drive on Paris and turned the tide of the war while the French retreated. In reality, Eric von Ludendorff designed the German assault near Chateau Thierry to pull French divisions from the British lines further north so he could knock the British Expeditionary Force out of the war. Unbeknownst to the Americans, therefore, the German drive toward Paris was a feint. "Paris was not the objective of the offensive," Lengel claims (p. 203). Also, he argues persuasively that the French, not the AEF, stopped the German advance by taking the brunt of their assault. What Americans saw as a French route was actually a deliberate phased withdrawal.

The French fought more effectively than Americans claimed and their successes often aided AEF efforts against the Germans. "In broad out-

lines," Lengel contends, "this book suggests that French forces fighting alongside Americans performed much more effectively than they have been given credit for" (p. 9). While Brigadier General James Harbord's 4th Brigade struggled fighting at Belleau Wood, "the Germans received a first-class mauling at the hands of the French," to the west, which reduced pressure on marines and soldiers engaged with Richard von Conta's troops (p. 125).

Meticulously researched and well written, Lengel's *Thunder and Flames* succeeds in clarifying how the AEF performed while under French command. One criticism deserves mention, however. He explains what Americans did wrong and what they could have done better at Belleau Wood, Soissons, the Marne, and Fismette. Lengel contends that "untested formations ... would employ exactly the same clumsy and bloody tactics ... despite the passage of time and opportunities to transmit these lessons across the AEF" (p. 371). He does not explain fully *why* they chose to repeat those tactics over and over again, however. Despite this issue, Lengel's work here is valuable and highly commendable. Students and scholars of World War I should read this book and see for themselves.

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Citation: Mark Folse. Review of Lengel, Edward G. *Thunder and Flames: Americans in the Crucible of Combat, 1917-1918.* H-War, H-Net Reviews. October, 2016.

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