

ANSAUVILLE

a failure
in training
CAPTAIN RICHARD VARELA



When the United States entered World War I in early 1917, it was a classic example of a country going to war from a standing start. The entire operation of mustering, training, transporting, and supplying the forces sent to Europe had to be thrown together in a short time. This massive undertaking was further complicated by the very nature of the weapons that were being used in Europe and by the fact that the United States had neglected to keep pace in its military technology and tactics with those weapons. This deficiency would be particularly felt in the weapons and techniques of chemical warfare, and in the training given to the soldiers.

Several years before, the Germans had demonstrated that a deadly poison gas could be mass-produced, and at Ypres on 22 April 1915 they had proved that the gas could be delivered on target. Something else had also been proved in that battle — that soldiers who were not adequately trained to face a chemical attack tended to panic and run. Unfortunately, in the two years following that battle the U.S. had done nothing to prepare its troops for the day when they, too, might face chemical weapons. That day came early in 1918.

The first American unit to experience a full-scale gas attack as an independent command was the 1st Division. This unit was made up of the 16th, 18th, 26th, and 28th Infantry Regiments, under the command of General Robert Lee Bullard. The division had been chosen by General John J. Pershing to be the first to occupy an independent front-line sector. It was assigned the Ansauville sector, 25 miles northwest of the city of Toul.

General Bullard had put his units through a vigorous training program, including the most thorough gas training of any division in Europe. But even though these soldiers had become adept at the concepts of trench warfare, gas continued to baffle them. To make matters worse, when they finally went into the front lines each of the soldiers carried either a British or a French gas mask, or one of each.

The plan was for the Ansauville sector to be occupied by rotating battalions of each Infantry regiment and by rotating batteries of the 5th, 6th, and 7th Field Artillery Regiments. The division conducted a relief in place of the 1st Moroccan Division, using elements of the 16th and 18th Infantry Regiments, during a rainy night in January 1918.

Just before the relief operation, the Moroccans had conducted a raid on the German lines and had inflicted considerable losses upon their opponents. The Germans had retaliated with a mustard gas attack that had produced about 200 casualties. In fact, elements of the 1st Division had passed these casualties while they were moving forward.

Although the American soldiers were moving into an obviously contaminated area, and despite the fact that they had been briefed about the situation, they showed no signs of being prepared for gas warfare. The conditions on the line, for example, produced a few casualties almost immediately when some soldiers set up in a con-

taminated gun position and when another washed his hands in a shell hole filled with mustard-contaminated water.

The first order of business for the Americans was to reconstruct the front-line trenches. Many of the positions were in low ground in a marshy area, and the troops soon found themselves knee deep in mud. They reorganized the entire sector in depth, established trenches and strongpoints, and laid new communication lines behind the front lines.

ACTIVE FRONT

The quiet stalemate was soon disrupted by General Bullard's orders not to wait for the Germans to fire first. He sent up word for the soldiers to "be active all over no-man's land." He said, "Do not leave its control to the enemy." He encouraged ambushes and raids, for he wanted the 1st Division to be aggressive and to harass the Germans constantly. The French were only too glad to help by allocating to the U.S. artillery batteries the better part of 100 gas shells a day. And the men of the untried American division were only too willing to use those shells.

What developed next was an escalating artillery duel across no-man's land. The U.S. artillery units immediately began firing French No. 4 gas shells (cyanogen chloride) and No. 5 shells (phosgene). The Germans responded in kind and increased the number of shells they fired from 100 to 800 daily. In spite of the heavier rates of firing, the 1st Division suffered relatively few casualties during January and early February, because most of the German shells missed the U.S. positions by a comfortable margin. But things changed in the early hours of 26 February when the Germans delivered a sudden and heavy gas attack on the 18th Infantry.

The attack apparently brought great confusion, with shells bursting throughout the sector. On the American side, panic seized some of the men of the 3rd Battalion, 18th Infantry. The first salvo of gas shells struck so suddenly that many of the men inhaled the gas before they could adjust their masks. One man stampeded and knocked down two others who were adjusting their masks. Another threw himself in the bottom of the trench, screaming and pulling the masks off two soldiers who were trying to help him. Still other soldiers found their French masks inoperable, perhaps because they had become wet, and were gassed while switching to their British masks. An officer was gassed while shouting at some soldiers who had removed their masks too early.

The casualty count mounted throughout the day. The following is General Bullard's explanation to his corps commander:

It appears that certain noncommissioned officers permitted men under their command to remove their masks within a half hour after the last gas shells fell. It also appears that after daylight some men were permitted to



work in the vicinity of the shelled area without wearing gas masks, and men who had inhaled small quantities of gas were not required to rest quietly. These failures to carry out existing orders on the subject have resulted in increasing the casualties of this gas attack about 50%.

This breakdown in gas discipline was also noted by the battalion commander, who said that "rice for breakfast that morning was allowed to stand exposed for several hours in the trench before being eaten" and that this produced "a large number of gas cases that developed some time after the attack."

According to some reports, the attack was to have been followed by a German raid on the sector, but the raid was called off when half the Germans' shells landed in their own trenches, forcing their soldiers to withdraw for two days. The Americans also withdrew from their trenches after the attack, leaving only small groups to observe and to reoccupy the front lines at daylight each day.

RAID

The artillery duel resumed and continued throughout February producing casualties on both sides. Then on 1 March, the 18th Infantry received another barrage followed by a raid. The raid demolished trenches,

parapets, shelters, and emplacements. One platoon that had just returned to its front-line position was caught by a German box-barrage. The G3 casualty report showed 24 killed, 30 wounded, and 2 gassed.

The Americans decided that a retaliatory raid was in order and planned one for 4 March. The supporting artillery batteries fired between 5,000 and 6,000 shells in preparation for the raid. About half of these shells were No. 4 and No. 5 gas shells. Two raiding parties were ready, one from the 18th Infantry and the other from the 16th. But the raid was called off by the infantry when they found that the sections of bangalore torpedoes scheduled to be used by the engineers were too long to pass through the turns in the trenches. This meant that they could not be placed in position for the raid.

But the Americans were not about to give up on their revenge raid entirely. On 9 March the regiments turned over, with the 26th Infantry replacing the 16th and the 28th replacing the 18th. But the original raiding parties stayed on, and finally on 11 March, after an artillery preparation, the division mounted two raids, one in the early morning and the other in the evening. Both raids, unfortunately, had the same results: They went as far as the third defensive trench line without encountering any German troops. Warned by the preparation fires, those troops had been withdrawn.

The artillery duels continued to increase in both tempo and quantity, and the batteries suffered heavy casualties. Their gas discipline was not any better than that of the infantry. For example, medical aid men sometimes made gassed men walk from the aid posts to the ambulances, thus creating more serious casualties. One battery suffered 21 "eye cases" when the men, in the absence of their officers, removed their masks.

Finally, when the dreaded German offensive began on 21 March, General Pershing offered French Marshal Henri Philippe Petain "all the American forces for such dispositions as were deemed most advantageous to the cause." As a result, the 1st Division was relieved by the 26th Division and moved to Picardy, where another battle was raging. The relief was complete by 4 April 1918.

CASUALTIES

It is impossible to tell exactly how many gas casualties there were in the Ansauville battle because of wide discrepancies in the figures from the various sources. For example, the division's gas organization records showed 127 officers and men gassed, while the Division Surgeon's records showed 523. In any case, General Bullard seems to have come under considerable criticism for his gas casualties. He noted in a memorandum to his field commanders that "American losses are from two to four times as great as those of the French." He also said, "There is but one conclusion; it is that our men, either from ignorance or carelessness, are not taking cover." He went on to say that "Knowledge and real efficient training came only after hard experience and after the hysteria of gas officers had ceased."

Several other facts concerning gas casualties were brought out in a report sent to the Chief Surgeon of the American Expeditionary Forces from the Medical Gas Warfare Board (A.E.F.). A field hospital commander noticed that out of 261 cases admitted for gas poison after a particular incident, only 90 had any symptoms. The remainder were returned to duty. A number of similar incidents were reported, leading to certain conclusions: Some of those listed as gas casualties apparently only thought they had been gassed and were actually suffering from something that could be called gas mania. Others, smelling the explosions of ordinary shells, became panic-stricken in the belief that they were being gassed. Perhaps as few as one-third of the cases reported as gas casualties actually were.

It is quite possible that the 1st Division at Ansauville had some of these same problems. It is certain that it continued to have gas discipline problems. As late as June the division's gas officer stated that "in the satchel of salvaged masks are found everything from clothing to wrist watches."

In spite of these problems, the 1st Division was deployed to the Cantigny campaign, in which they distinguished themselves in the offensive use of gas and

proved General Pershing's tactics of open warfare. It was a psychological turning point in the acceptance of the Americans as part of the military effort.

These soldiers had entered the war in a state of total unpreparedness, especially in their ability to conduct chemical warfare. They had had to conduct their last-minute training on the battlefield, the worst possible place to conduct it.

CHANGING TIMES

Although the times have changed in terms of technological preparedness, our approach to training today is still much the same. The program of six hours to two days that was judged adequate before the men of the 1st Division marched off to a contaminated area has been lengthened, of course. But the nature of the threat has also changed. The method of delivering the chemicals is no longer a less-than-accurate projector, but an entire array of accurate weapon systems. The chemicals themselves have changed, too. They are no longer the primitive chlorine and mustard gasses; they are the invisible nerve gasses and perhaps other more deadly chemicals whose existence is so far only rumored.

Considering this increase in the threat, then, it is questionable whether we have done enough to increase the quality and quantity of our training. In terms of discipline, instead of the clothing and watches encountered in the mask satchels at Ansauville, today we would probably find comic books, soda cans, and candy bars.

It may be only human nature to panic upon suddenly encountering the unknown, but that is the purpose of training — to drill enough confidence into a soldier to carry him through those moments until he is rational again.

At Ansauville, it was the failures in training and discipline that gave the enemy the advantage. Given the nature of the chemical threat that we are facing, we must, at the very least, deny an enemy that advantage by constantly drilling and testing our soldiers and by insisting on the strictest NBC discipline in all their training.

We must never again enter a war from a standing start as if we were coming from another century, especially in terms of chemical warfare. Whatever sector we find ourselves occupying in the future, it may not be anything like Ansauville. But we can be certain that there will not be time for us to conduct our last-minute training on the battlefield.

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