Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents, with a discussion by Matthew Davenport about his book, *First Over There: the Attack on Cantigny, America's First Battle of World War I*. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago, and it's sponsored by the United States World War I Centennial Commission. This program and more than 400 others covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org.

The battle of Cantigny was the United States' first military engagement in WWI. Cantigny, a small farming village, marked the western-most position held by the German army in France. This key strategic point was only seventy-five miles from Paris and sat on a hill that overlooked Allied lines. Securing Cantigny offered an opportunity for the newly arrived and yet untested American troops to prove themselves as a unified force to the French army commanders. On May 28, 1918, 3500 soldiers from the US Army 1st Division came out of their trenches, crossed no-man's land, and drove the Germans out of the city, securing the Allied position and securing the first American victory of the Great War. Yet as Davenport details in his gripping account of the 1st Division's triumph, those inexperienced Americans that charged into Cantigny were forced to quickly adapt to a new kind of warfare. The battle marked the United States' first technologically modern military engagement, combining ground troops with support from tanks, airplanes, and modern artillery. This drove commanders to engage a total-war strategy where any and all war fighting means, including actions that caused civilian casualties, were on the table. Most importantly it served as the nation's first steps out onto the world stage in what would come to be called the American Century. Drawing on letters, diaries, and reports from the men themselves including General John "Black Jack" Pershing, then Colonel George C. Marshall, and Medal of Honor recipient Theodore Roosevelt Jr., *First Over There: The Attack on Cantigny, America's First Battle of World War I* recounts the inspiring story of these soldiers and their baptism by fire on the western front.

Davenport is a criminal defense attorney in Greenville, North Carolina and a former prosecutor and veteran of the US Army Reserve. A member of the Western Front Association, the American Legion, and the Military Writers Society of America, *First Over There* is his first book. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Matthew Davenport.

Davenport: Thank you very much. Thank you very much Ken. I'd like to start by thanking Pritzker Military Museum and Library for all they do to preserve and promote military history as well as the World War I Centennial Commission not just for sponsoring this but for all they have done and will be doing in the next couple of years as we approach the centenary of America's part in the World War, which is often--I don't want to use the word forgotten, but neglected. I think forgotten war is a term I usually hear from authors talking about whatever war their book's about. I'm not gonna use the word forgotten war. It's not, but it has been neglected. And Cantigny--the American pronunciation, and since I'm American I'll use that--I will start by telling you a little about it and then I'm gonna have to get you there with the whole big picture. The French pronounced it Can-Tin-Yee. The American troops when they arrived called it Can-Teen-Nee. It was and it remains a small farming village in Northern France. In March, mid-March to late-March of 1918, it
sat about forty miles from the front lines. It was still a farming village. And then came the first week of April and the big German spring offensive. And the Germans pushed at that point forty miles west, and the western front came to Cantigny. The Germans thrust through the village, and they encountered a French Moroccan division that just happened to be there in a counter engagement. And the Germans were stopped, and they dug in, and the inhabitants of Cantigny had to evacuate leaving food on tables, letters half unwritten. And the Germans took over the village just as they had done all along the length of the western front. And this place they took over the cellars and the basements, the gardens and the orchards and the hedgerows, made them into machine gun posts. They fenced the west wing of it with trenches and barbed wire. And because this was the western-most point the Americans, who at that time only had five divisions in France, were asked to send a division there to hold the line. General Pershing sent the 1st Division there not just to hold the line but to retake the village. And in two and a half days of fighting in late May they retook the village. I’ll go ahead and tell you now, spoiler alert, they won. They took the village, and it ended up becoming America’s first victory of the world war. The next day, as technology then allowed cables across the Atlantic, and newspapers coast to coast in the United States and even through Europe, this was front-page news. This was big news that the sons and the fathers and the brothers that had just volunteered and been sent over there in this new, for all intents and purposes, brand new army and expeditionary force, had found a way to defeat the Germans in battle. It was the biggest news until the armistice. Cantigny became a household name. In 1918, in the years following the war, in the hometowns of many of the veterans of the battle, they commemorated Cantigny Day, which often coincided with Memorial Day. And then came twenty-two one years later, the German invasion of Poland. And then came pearl harbor and Iwo Jima and D-Day and the Bulge and VE-Day and VJ-Day and a larger war pushed Cantigny and many other of the names like Soissons and Belleau Wood and Saint-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne out of the popular lexicon. The generation that knew them as household names passed on, and they became footnotes. Cantigny became one of the footnotes. So this book is my effort to revive it out of the ashes of history. I learned early on in the research for this that you cannot understand how the Americans succeeded in what was a small battle but was a total victory. You cannot understand how they succeeded without understanding how they got there. Because their experience in enlisting and shipping over there to France and training under the French and British and their experience in two previous sectors, it informed their decision making when it came time to execute the battle plan on May 28th and 29th and 30th. So the book is sixteen chapters; I don't even get to the battle until chapter eight. So I’m gonna tell a lot about the battle tonight, but I have to get you there first. So I want to give you a bit of the big picture. We’re not gonna get into the European war that led up to this. But WWI I think, as most of you know, combat actually occurred between the first week of August 1914 and the Armistice, November 11, 1918. Four years and three months. The United States did not enter until over two and a half years into that. From the time the United States entered the war, April 6, 1917, up until the Armistice over those nineteen months United States was a belligerent and lost 116,516 men killed in action. Now most of them were as a result of accident, disease, or sickness, mostly the Spanish influenza, which tore through many of the training camps here stateside. Many of them didn’t even make it over there. But over that time the actual combat deaths were over 54,000. But to say that the United States lost 54,000 in combat over nineteen months does not tell the story. I was curious when I started to research this battle, not just how many casualties occurred in this battle, but when did American casualties occur? Because that really tells you how involved America was and when. There was no book. There’s no published source out there that will tell you the
American casualties, combat deaths, day by day. But there are war department records at the National Archives. And if you look at them you can go day by day of reported casualties, and they're surprisingly accurate. And if you follow those you'll see some pretty surprising numbers. US declares war April 6, 1917. By the end of that year, by December 31, 1917, the US had only--and I don't use the word "only" callously, I use it relatively. The US had only lost thirty-three men in combat. Thirty-three combat deaths in the first eight and a half months. By the time of this battle, by the time this battle is launched, H-hour at dawn May 28, 1918, the US had lost fewer than 600 men in combat. So what does that tell you? Over the next five and a half months the US lost over 53,000 men in combat. The last full month of the war, October 1918, when the United States finally had a full presence on the front commensurate with President Wilson and General Pershing's vision, a full presence, a full American army--actually by the Armistice it was two American armies of multiple corps, multiple divisions each--with a whole section of the western front--by October, in October of 1918 with that full presence it was the deadliest single month in American military history for combat deaths. 27,000 men were killed in combat in one month. That is deadlier than our deadliest month in WWII, December '44. What does that tell us? It tells you that man-for-man and yard-for-yard combat on the western front was the deadliest American troops have ever experienced before or since. Now imagine if the Armistice didn't happen on November 11 and November carried the same casualties, and then December carried the same casualties. America has never experienced the kind of lost, but France and England didn't have to imagine it. They had been experiencing this at that point for three and a half years. So when the United States enters the war the first that happens, the French and the British both send delegations to President Wilson, and they say, "We are in desperate straits, and we understand your vision." Wilson's vision was--this is gonna take a while, and we're gonna have an independent American army under the American flag, no other, but this is going to take a while to build an army. The plan at the time was a year, eighteen months, probably. And the French and British both said to the president, "We cannot wait that long. We need whatever you have now. We need American troops in uniform now. Morale is breaking." Some of the French regiments at that time were near mutiny. The losses--the British were stretched thin, and morale was at its lowest ebb. So President Wilson orders his newly appointed commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, General John J. Pershing, to send what he can immediately, and that ends up being his hand-picked regiments that he forms into what's called an expeditionary division. General Pershing hand picks four regular army regiments--the 16th, 18th, 26th, and 28th--beefs the up with brand new volunteers. This, keep in mind, this is before the draft was even passed. This is May and June of 1917. And sends them by train to Hoboken, New Jersey. And in mid-June, they all ship on twelve transports across the Atlantic. The--they are designated the 1st Expeditionary Division. And when they land in France, June 28th, at the end of June they are re-designated the US 1st Division. Later of course in WWII it would be the 1st Infantry Division. It would be known as the Big Red One, the Fighting 1st. From that day, the end of June 1917 to today, the 1st Division has been on continuous active duty without interruption. It is our longest standing division. Now General Pershing had a vision for his American divisions. Divisions were going to be large, about 27-28,000 men each, and they were going to each go through three phases of training before they would be put on the front lines. And then as divisions were shipped over and equipped and trained and went through these phases they would be plugged into a corps and then multiple corps would then form an army, and finally the United States would have an American army on the front to take over part of the front--not to serve with any French or British units. You all know that history. That was a big debate at the time. He was not gonna cobble together units or pull them apart by
regiment or battalion. These were gonna be American divisions. The three phases of training were gonna start with training under the French. Really for the AEF it was gonna be training under the French or the British, and most of them practically ended up training under the French. So the 1st Division is sent immediately--now I do not speak French, and there's a lot of pronunciations I have found for this town. And I'm just gonna tell you they went there.

(Laughter)

Davenport: I'm not going to butcher it. That was the French training ground. And they had mock trenches and barbed wire, and a mock no-man's land, and this is where the American troops went and learned how to use, at that time, modern weapons. The Americans came with Springfield 30 Rifles and Colt 45s. That was it. Good, very, very good, infantry weapons, but for the purposes of trench warfare they needed more. And the French provided them with the Hotchkiss machine gun. You will see on the bottom left--that is actually during the summer, during the training, a doughboy learning to use the Hotchkiss. They were given British gas masks, the SBR, and they were given the French Chauchat automatic rifle, which jammed a lot. It was 8mm automatic rifle. This is where they learned to use those weapons. This is where they learned about holding a line. This is where they learned about patrolling in no-man's land and trench raids. And working with artillery in combined arms units--that the artillery and the infantry would work together to hold lines and to launch enemy trench raids or assaults on enemy trenches. This was all training. So they do this all summer. This was the first phase. Now keep in mind while this summer's going on and they're doing this there's no other American divisions in France. The--back over in the United States they're still debating the draft bill, it gets passed, and the draft gets implemented, 1st Division's already completing its training, and they enter their second phase of training. This is Sommerville. They enter in October the second phase of training, and that is to enter a front line sector under Allied command. Alright, so either under French or British command. In this case it was under French Corps command. They entered the Sommerville sector, which was a very quiet sector. It had not moved since October of 1914. Both sides were satisfied with letting the other side be, which was part of the problem along much of the western front for static warfare. But the Americans enter under French command and learn about how to hold the front lines. They learn how to avoid sniper fire. They learn how to relieve each other up on the front lines guard duty. They learn how to work with their artillery. This was the biggest deal. The artillery had shipped over separately. This was the first time they worked together. And the artillery had 75s and 155s. Three and five inch guns that they--these were French guns. The American artillery--three field artillery regiments, and this was where the infantry learned how to send up flares, how to send back signals for artillery barrages out in no-man's land. This is also where the Germans learned the Americans were in the front lines, and for propaganda they really, really wanted to capture and kill some Americans. And on the evening of November second, November third, the Germans send a 300-men strong raiding party across no-man's land and they attack a small platoon size section of the trench, and they really didn't have a chance. They capture eleven or twelve Americans, and they kill three. And they are the first three Americans killed in combat in a world war. This is actually a photograph of their funeral that the French corps commander came and gave a very stirring eulogy. His eulogy was so thoughtful and eloquent that they put it on the stone that is there to this day. It was rebuilt after WWII. The three soldiers of the 26th Infantry who were killed actually were all shipped home and reburied in their hometowns at their family request. But this is where America suffers its first front line combat deaths and casualties. At the end of November, early December 1917 the division pulls out of Sommerville and pulls back to a training sector, and it's preparing to
go into its third phase. The third phase is to enter and take over a front line sector, not under Allied direction but under Allied command. So they would actually take over a whole part of the front line. But before they did that General Pershing had already sent over three more divisions: the 26th-the Yankee Division, the 42nd-the Rainbow Division, the 2nd Division, which included two regiments of Marines--made famous in Belleau Wood. But they were all just starting their training under the French on the countryside. The 1st Division had already been in the front line sector and finished its second phase. General Pershing was not satisfied with the 1st Division commander, General Sibert, and he replaced him. At the top, and the man on horseback and the man whose portrait is at the top there is a man named Robert Lee Bullard. If WWI generals were covered in the press the way WWII generals were I think Bullard's name would be as famous as Bradley or Patton. He was a soldier's general. He was a fighting general. He was West Point one year ahead of General Pershing. He decided immediately that he wanted his own artillery commander, and the biggest decision he made was his first decision, and it was to appoint the man whose portrait you see under him, Charles Pelot Summerall. Charles Summerall was also a West Pointer. He was an artilleryman, had constantly been on the cutting edge of artillery, had travelled to Europe and studied the modern artillery of the French and British and what the Germans were using. Had studied this notion of combined arms, infantry, and artillery. This was anathema at the time to infantry officers. Artillery and infantry were typically clashed, and this notion of combined arms was something that general Bullard embraces. A lot of heavy firepower and big guns in the front lines. And so he appoints General Summerall to be his first field artillery brigade commander of the 1st division. The first thing he requests after this is to be moved into an active sector for the third phase. He said, "I don't want a quiet sector. I want to go into an active sector." Some of the word comes back from the general headquarters. "Well, we need to wait until the freeze is over." The northern--Northern France at the time was under a deep freeze, and General Bullard said, "It will toughen the men. I want to do it now." So in early January they traveled through what was not--could not be any better described than a frozen tundra of France--to Seicheprey. Now Seicheprey was a very active sector down on the southern end of the western front near Tulle. Seicheprey, the fighting was going on actively there every day. And as soon as they moved in of course the Germans knew it was Americans that moved into the line across from them, and this is where the Americans got their first real taste of daily and hourly artillery bombardments. This was where they first got a real taste of mustard gas attacks. Constant. This is where they understood there was never rest in the front lines, that the Germans would send raids across almost nightly. And this is where the Americans learned how to launch patrols out in no mans' land for intelligence. This is where the Americans learned how to launch enemy trench raids in conjunction with the artillery. General Summerall put liaisons from his artillery up with each platoon of infantry up on the front lines, and they had communication with his guns in the rear, and as soon as a flare went up, the guns--the shells would fall. They were integrated fully. And this is where they learned under heavy fire how to hold a front line sector and how to fight on the western front. This is it: Seicheprey. After two months there the casualties were very heavy. And the first day of spring comes and brings with it the German Spring Offensive. Kaiserschlacht, if you don't know, was multiple phases of multiple offensives by the German army. It was an attempt to knock the Allies out before the Americans could arrive in force. The eastern front had been keeping many, many German--dozens of German division occupied for the previous three and a half years. Russia effectively withdrew in November of 1917 even though the Separate Peace wasn't signed until the spring. That freed up over fifty German divisions to head west. So you have a western front that's been mostly counter balanced for three and a half years, and the Germans
are throwing fifty divisions in an offensive. And on a front where victory had been claimed by the gain of just two and three hundred yards, the Germans pushed the line forty miles. I can't exaggerate, I can't overstate, how close the Allies came to breaking here--how close they came to defeat. And in that desperate moment General Pershing, who at that time only had five divisions in France and only one was fully trained--the 1st Division, because it had spent the last two months in the third phase at Seicheprey. The other ones were still entering their second phase or still entering their first. So General Pershing goes to General Foch, the supreme Allied commander, French general, and he says, "I will temporarily dispense with my plans of an all-American part of the front. And all I have is yours." Those are his exact words. "All that I have is yours." And General Foch, who was, quote, "very much touched", in general Pershing's view, accepted and asked for one division to be sent to the furthest west point, which happened to be Cantigny. So General Pershing of course chooses the 1st Division, and he sends them to Cantigny. Before he does he pulls them out of Seicheprey back for two weeks of training. They don't yet know why they're being pulled out for two weeks of training. Rumors are swirling through the air that they might get sent to the front. General Bullard knows they are. General--I want you to see that hard dashed line there is the western front the way it looked--468 miles from the North Sea down to Switzerland. That's the way it looked most of the first three and a half years of the war, pushed backwards or forwards here and there. You see those bulges there, and in the middle, that bulge that goes all the way out to the left there straight north of Paris, that is the first phase of the spring offensive in March. And that's how far they push there. That's forty miles, and you'll see that dot on the far left that's labeled Cantigny; that's the village. That's how far west they pushed. They came fairly close within striking distance of Amiens, and they came almost even with Paris. So General Pershing pulls the 1st Division out to send them up there, pulls them back for a couple weeks of training, and on April 16th if you read the book you know I actually start with this speech. This is a really important moment. It's a historic moment. General Pershing goes and asks General Bullard to assemble all of the division's officers. He says, "I don't want any Allied officers there," meaning no French officers. No French troops. Only Americans, only 1st Division officers. I want them there in the courtyard of your headquarters. And he goes to address them and tells them that they are gonna be--they're gonna be leading the first Americans on a world stage in a world war. It's a historic moment because of some of the men who were standing there. Behind him in the fur coat standing--you'll see General Pershing there standing on the right picture. That's actually the speech. There were 900 or so--just over 900 officers of the 1st division. They're all assembled around him in a circle. Standing behind him there in the fur coat is General Bullard. General Bullard suffered from neuritis, and cold weather really got to him, so his men bought him a fur coat in Christmas, and it was a gift from his men. Of course general Pershing being much for uniformity absolutely despised it and hated it, but General Bullard wore it anyway. Standing behind General Bullard to the far left you'll see a guy named Duncan, General Duncan. He ended up being the commander of the 82nd, famous for Sergeant York. To his right, partially obscured, you'll see a slightly taller officer. That is the division operations officer, and it is George C. Marshall. Now of course, I don't have to say any more than that. General--I still call him general. At this time he was a lieutenant colonel. He was thirty-seven years old. He was the G-3 for the division. He was their operations officer. And he of course goes on to lead the army as army chief of staff in WWII and then secretary of state and defense and author of the Marshall Plan, but here he is standing as General Pershing sends him and the rest of the 1st Division off into their first battle. I think the moment is so historic because here he is sending the future of the army's leadership off into really two world wars. Among those assembled I also want to
show on the far left there that's Theodore Roosevelt Jr. He was a major, he was a battalion commander in the 1st division, and he would fight in Cantigny. To his right in the largest picture, that's a guy named John Church. He was a lieutenant, a platoon leader at Cantigny in the 1st Division at the time. He would go on as a major general in Korea to command the 24th Infantry Division. And on the right both of those are the same man. The one with the pistol is a picture taken the month of the speech, in April 1918, and the one on the far right is a picture from WWII. That's Clarence Huebner. If you don't know Clarence Huebner was a captain in the 1st Division. He was a company commander, and he would go on to fight at Cantigny. But on the far right there that's him when he commanded the 1st Infantry at Omaha Beach. So they all had a lot of future ahead of them. All in that courtyard. When they reached Cantigny, that picture on the right is the only known picture of the village as it looked before the Americans took it. You'll see--you can barely see in that photograph, but there are still buildings up on the hill, and most of the crops between that and the village are untouched. This is not like the Dante's Inferno vision you have of the western front because this is fresh farmland. They'd just arrived there. They'd only been there two weeks when the Americans arrived. So on he left you'll see they're digging. And if you look in the division records, that's all they did the first month. Infantry, engineers, artillery—they dug, they dug, they dug. Because they have to build a sector. They basically inhabited a series of shell hole-I mean, they inherited a series of shell craters from the French. There was no sector. So they had to build dugouts, trenches—And eventually the lines took shape. You'll see on the far left, that's the way the trenches looked after they dug them. Now I took—I wanted to put this picture up here. This was taken two summers ago, and that's the way—that's the view of the American lines from Cantigny, and you get a starker, more clear view because the contours of the land have not changed. That's in between the buildings up in the village. You see how dominating the position was that the Germans held. Down in that low ground out in that countryside on the forward facing fields that's where the Americans had to dig in their trenches. So they were dominated by Germans who had a very dominating observation point. So immediately Colonel Marshall—you'll see, there he is—he sets—he is ordered by General Bullard to come up with a plan to retake the village. So General Marshall sends his—puts his staff to work. That’s a photograph of his staff working on the maps at division headquarters down in mid-May. And in the middle there and on the right you’ll see his hand annotations. He actually is very much the architect of this. He hand wrote much of this, and when I say they cut and pasted, they did. The old typewriters, they would type up the plan, and every night as more intelligence would come in from patrols they would add and subtract things from the operations plan. Every night he would send out orders to front line commanders—"Tell your platoon leaders to send out patrols every night." And every night they would all take off their gear. They were—at that time they were like special ops. These were guys that volunteered to go in dozen-men raiding parties, patrol parties, across no mans' land under cover of darkness, they take off all their identity disks and all their gear, anything that would make noise, and they'd carry bowl-cutters and pistols and trench knives and a compass. And they'd go across quietly and not make a peep, and some of them would find gaps in the German trenches, cross the German lines, and go all the way into the village. And they ended up--each patrol would come back with really valuable intelligence. Machine gun nest here. Artillery dumped there, ammo dumped here. And the map was constructed by Marshall and his staff from that. So Marshall working with Summerall starts the plan with artillery and says, "The first plan is we're going to use the French. We're going to ask the French corps artilleries to support us." and the French come in with over 300 guns, and they support them with guns from size 210, 240, up to 280s. Big guns, along with all the division artilleries of 75s and 155s. And they're gonna
spend an hour pummeling the village. This one square mile, they're going to hit it for an hour with the goal of killing or rendering incapable of defense the entire German garrison. Leveling the whole village. And after that hour then the artillery is going to lift, and they're gonna start what's called a protective barrage out in no-man's land, and the infantry is going to cross behind it. Classic trench warfare assault. This--these are the maps that Marshall and his staff drew up as the plan. On the left you'll see, that's the artillery barrage map. Now all those lines, the left side there, those rectangles, those are all US Platoons. Okay, each platoon--I'm sorry, those are companies. And each company of about 250 men--this was one regiment of three battalion. Three-battalion front, each going forward. Each battalion three company front going forward with the company in reserve, and they would sweep through. And on the right you see, that is the objective, that line to the right, to the east, of the village. They would--you see the existing lines there on the left that bulge. They would start there, and the artillery map, that line that first line in front of them is actually where the protective barrage, the 75s, would fire out in no-man's land--this wall of smoke and fire. And every two minutes it would creep forward a hundred meters, and the infantry would follow. And it would creep forward another hundred meters; the infantry would follow. And the infantry. Was to go forward in three waves, and to take the village they were going to be supported just by artillery in the front, but they would be supported by French flamethrower crews that would follow them and mop up village ruins and French tanks, Schneiders, that would go through and disable all the strong points and machine gun nests. So knowing that the troops had never worked with tanks or flamethrowers or airplanes or anything else, they--General Bullard ordered them into battle rehearsal, and they were all taken out of the front lines and spent three days about twelve miles behind the front lines on a mockup of the village in a field, and they practiced going forward in three waves and mopping up the village ruins and coordinating with each other on their flanks. And they rehearsed the battle until, one of them said, "it became muscle memory". And May 28th, the morning of May 28th, was designated as J-Day. They didn't use the term D-day yet. In the first hour--these are photographs taken by the French pilot, the French observer aircraft, Spot 42--you'll see the damage done to the village. This is actually taken during the first hour during the bombardment. You'll see the smoke rising. The one in the bottom right, you'll see the way the village looked as the troops went through it. One American soldier said, "Not a single wall was left standing. It was matchsticks and rubble." at 6:45, the troops went over the top in three waves. These are photographs, some of the only known photographs of them going forward. There were actually war correspondents embedded with the third wave, so they took a lot of these photographs. And you'll see them on the top right moving forward with tanks. In different parts of the sector it was different types of crops. Some of it was knee to waist-deep wheat, in other parts it was just clods of dirt and old beet plants. And they moved across into the village. Now the experience of the troops at different parts is important. Rick Atkinson, the WWII historian, said a great line, that "topography is fate". And in this battle that could not be more true. This photograph on the right is the way the land looks today. That is actually on the north side of the village. If you look up at the map on the left see—you'll see those top lines. Each one of those little rectangles, those red rectangles on the left, those are Platoons. You'll see the first wave and the second wave, and you'll see C3, C2, C1. That's the companies. That's the way they were designated. That was Battalion C, 3rd Battalion. This is a picture taken from where the German lines were looking back toward the American lines. That was very flat. It was a slight uphill for the Americans. It was very flat, very open. And the artillery focused on the village. It didn't do one thing to these lines. So all of the Germans occupying the trenches on the north side, that north line that goes up above the village, they were mostly untouched. So when zero hour came and the creeping barrage came
across, they were ready. So this battalion on the north end was walking into a buzz saw, and they didn’t know it. The battalion—the most telling thing is the difference in casualties in crossing no-man’s land. This northern battalion that crossed this land here where the Germans had not been touched by artillery—crossing no-man’s land in ten minutes they suffered thirty-one killed in action and a hundred and eighty wounded. That’s in ten minutes. Thirty-one killed in action, hundred and eighty wounded. The middle battalion that goes into the village with the tanks and the flamethrowers where the village has been destroyed, zero killed crossing no-man’s land. Zero. That’s B Battalion in the middle there. B3, 2, and 1 there. Zero killed, and eight to ten wounded, and that’s it. Compare those. You can see the benefits of the artillery destroying the village and the garrison in the village and leaving the north untouched, what happened to that battalion. On the south the story was the same. The contours of the land are very different. This was a ravine. That road, that paved road—it’s paved now. It was a dirt road then—and that was where the German lines were. And the Germans looked down into that ravine, and that was where the Americans were walking across. They were walking straight down through that ravine up toward the German lines. And down there just like in the north side they were mostly untouched by artillery during that hour-long bombardment. And that battalion, which is designated A down at the bottom, they suffered twenty-one killed in action, a hundred and ten wounded crossing no-man’s land. I mean, compare twenty-one killed for them, thirty-one killed for the northern battalion, and in the middle zero, because the artillery had prepared that village. After they got into the village—this is an aerial view of the village actually during the battle—you’ll see the big square above the village there. It goes to the right. That is an orchard. It’s fenced in by hedgerows, and they were all German machine guns. And when 2nd battalion went across no man’s land they thought, "This is easy. No one’s shooting at us. There’s—all the Germans in the village are dead." And then they got into the orchard, and they opened up on them. And that’s where 2nd battalion faced most of its casualties. 2nd battalion in the orchard ends up having a dozen killed and ninety wounded. They are led from the front by their commander. At the top left, that is Lieutenant Colonel Robert Maxey. Maxey was also a West Pointer, a fascinating guy. He’s standing—he's leading from the front with a pistol in one hand and a map in the other, and everyone described him basically to make him sound like Chuck Norris. Maxey is leading the battalion from the front and suffers one of the first deaths by German shell. The German artillery had been mostly kept under counter battery fire during the initial assault, but as the French guns had to pull out to support an offensive down south or defend an alliance down south the German artillery started to open up, and one of the first killed was Robert Maxey. He gets sliced through his neck by a German shell, but—the wound is mortal, but he’s not killed immediately. And he’s—he orders the medics to take him on the stretcher to the company commander down on the bottom left, and that's Clarence Huebner. And Captain Huebner, he gives—Colonel Maxey gives Huebner his map, and he tells him what he wants him to do and tells him where to set up the command post, and Captain Huebner takes command of the battalion. That night Maxey dies at the field hospital, and Captain Huebner keeps and leads command f the battalion through the battle and through the rest of the war. He ends the war as a lieutenant colonel. Of course as I said he commands the 1st infantry in WWII. Following the infantry through the village, the flamethrower crews, which were French groups of two men each. One had a bag of grenades, and the other one had a flamethrower. And they'd go up, and any hole or staircase that went down into rubble that looked like it could be concealing, hiding, Germans, they would yell in, they'd throw a grenade in, and when it would go off then they would flame. And many Germans were killed this way, and most were captured. They captured over 250 Germans from the village ruins. You’ll see pictures there at the top of one coming out of a hole they’ve just
lit up. At the bottom right if you look carefully you'll see two German bodies in the rubble, which is a grim testament to the effects of the bombardment. After they passed through the village their final stage was consolidation of the line. And they were supposed to then walk into these--out the far side of the village, okay, the east side of the village into an open field, stop, drop their gear, and dig a trench. That was their job. And this is where they suffer most of their casualties, because they are out in the open. And when I say topography is fate, if you look you will see--this picture was taken two summers ago. This is the way it looks now, and the land has not changed. This was a view from the German reserve positions. All the Germans that were capable of firing and any kind of defense were in reserve, and they were ready to counter attack. Well, they were in positions with that view right there. And up on the top of that hill, you'll see those trees on the left. The village is just on the other side of those trees. The Americans came down over the crest of that hill down into that forward-facing field facing the Germans, stopped, and started to dig trenches. And look at what an easy target they made.

In consolidation of the lines, the ones who had to dig in there across that field, Company D, Company B, down in 1st battalion. Company D and digging its line just for that hour suffered fifteen killed and a hundred and twenty wounded. Company B, eleven killed, over a hundred wounded. They were just sitting targets, because the American artillery now left by the French artillery--French artillery had to leave to defend the lines against a renewed spring, German offensive down south--so the Americans are left only with their own guns and a few French supporting guns that are smaller, 75s and 155s. They lack the reach to get to the German artillery and these German positions, and the Germans just have their way with them. So for two and a half days the Americans day and night, without relief, have to dig and hold lines under constant fire. The Germans launch a counter attack in the afternoon, a counter attack that night, a counter attack the next morning, the next day, the next night. They launch seven counter attacks, each one supported by artillery, and every time they're beaten back. And on the third morning the Germans finally give up. The Americans don't know it. Americans are still expecting another counter attack, but the German records reflect that they gave up their quest for the village on the morning of the 30th. So two and a half days of fighting, the same men in the lines the whole time, and they were at their wits end. They were at the end of their tether. As most of them described it, they said, "Well, we probably could not have defended against another offensive--counter attack." this is on the top right, to build on what I was just saying, that's a view of some of the men just after they were relieved from the front lines. They're relieved on the 30th and then the night of May 31st from the front lines, and they go back to a town about eight miles behind the front lines. And that's them collapsed on the ground. I thought it was a good photograph showing them relieved. Down in the bottom center that is a photograph of some of the 255 Germans who were captured in the battle. Those are actually--that's a photograph taken the first day. And on the top left you'll see that's General Pershing with General Bullard standing on the far left behind him with his gas mask over his shoulder. That's General Pershing awarding the first Distinguished Service Crosses from the battle. That is the view the way the village looks today. This photograph was actually taken in the nineteen--late 1920s after it was rebuilt. It was taken by a veteran of the battle who went back and wanted to see the village again, and it doesn't look any different today. That is actually--I put that picture in there because it's a good view to show you, that's about the view from the American lines looking up at the village. They had about 600 yards, 700 yards to go. Some of them went as far as a mile, so that's the scale. At the bottom right that is the doughboy of Cantigny. Its sister statue--they're twin statues--sits at Cantigny Park over in Wheaton. If you don't get--if you've never gotten a chance to go to the 1st Division Museum, I encourage you to go. That was commissioned there, and they placed one in
the village of Cantigny. That's the one that is actually in the village of Cantigny, France. It was placed there on May 28, 2008, the ninetieth anniversary of the battle. And on the left I--in going through the national archives photographs, I found a lot of fascinating pictures. When I came across this one it was simply labeled, "General Pershing and staff officer". And I knew, well, that's George Marshall. And how incredible that in one photograph they have the leaders of the army through both World wars, which was really the story of this. Cantigny was--and I say this in the look--it was a very small battle along the length of the western front. Strategically it meant little to nothing. It removed a salient. But its causative ripples were big. They were far reaching because it said Americans could fight, and it was a big statement especially against all the German propaganda from the last year that had been bent on proving the opposite. So that is the story of Cantigny and the 1st Division. Thank you.

(Applause)

1: Having been in a five year--myself having been on like a five-year First World War reading jag. Why is there so little written on the American Expeditionary Force in the First World War? There’s a plethora of stuff written about the Second World War, and, you know, stacks of British books a mile high, but it's really hard to find much to read about the First World War. Why is that?

Davenport: It's the forgotten war. I always am tempted to say that. You are absolutely right. And in my studies on the First World War, I was--I studied a lot on the British and the French, the Belgians. I was fascinated by the first three years of that war. The Americans’ part does not get much print. And when I tried to get this published, it--you know, First World War? That's anathema to publishers. They don't like it. And so I mean, we were fortunate that St. Martin's Press went forward with publishing it. But they don’t like it. WWII and the civil war are two chapters of American military history. That’s it. That’s what we're told. And so I think a lot of the big reason is you have a larger war that happened twenty years after, and Hollywood and historians, rightly, have spent a lot of time focusing on the Second World War. And when their spotlight's on that big event, WWI's in the shadows on the other side. WWI's are most recent war with no surviving veterans. It has been for the last five years. There's no one to tell their story anymore. And really for the last fifteen, twenty years it's been that way. And because, you know, because of that I wanted to do my small part to tell that story. I think there's a lot of other ones out there that are doing it, but unfortunately it doesn’t sell. It just--it's not a very attractive story to many people. And I think if they would study and research and just open their minds to see this was a big deal. This was our first time on a world stage. The Americans had never done this before. We had an army that was the size of Romania's at the start of the world war, and by the armistice we have two million men on the western front. That’s amazing. It was only outdone by our expansion after George Marshall takes army chief of staff and then in 1941-43, what our army did, you know, when it expanded again. So the First World War is the first time that's happened, and because of the Second World War it sits in the shadows. So I think--I hope in the next two years everyone here, try to do your part. Tell people, and get the word out that this is interesting history, and it doesn’t need to be forgotten. Thank you.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Matthew Davenport for sharing his work and to the United States Word War I Centennial Commission for sponsoring this program. The book is First Over There: the Attack on Cantigny, America's First Battle of World War I, published by Thomas Dunne books. To learn more about the World War I Centennial Commission visit WorldWar1Centennial.org. To learn more about the book, the author, or the Museum and Library, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on Pritzker Military Presents.
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(Theme music)
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(Theme music)
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