

ROCK SOLID

How The Battle of Meuse-Argonne Transformed the Alliance of America and France

Rock formation, or petrogenesis, is an incredibly slow process. Over millions of years, layers of ancient shells and marine skeletons compress into limestone, a rock that's solid but still easy to break. Limestone can transform into stronger, more durable marble, but that takes even more time, heat, and pressure. For 250 years, the alliance between the United States and France has gone through a similar transformation. Our countries' friendship was fragile at first, but under tremendous pressure it strengthened into something built to last.

The alliance between France and America began in the late 1700s during the American Revolution, when France gave America the money, ships, and soldiers it needed to win, and America gave France a chance to beat its biggest rival, Britain. Those were the limestone layers of our alliance. Later, it came close to shattering during the Quasi-War and XYZ Affair, but we didn't fully break apart and over time our relationship grew stronger again with the Louisiana Purchase and the Statue of Liberty. Then, in the first half of the 1900s, the U.S. and France worked together to withstand the weight of two world wars. That's when our alliance really began to morph into marble.

Limestone only turns into marble in the dark, when it's forced underground and exposed to the harshest conditions on Earth. The Meuse-Argonne offensive forced the alliance, along with 1.2 million American soldiers and over 100,000 French soldiers, into those same kinds of brutal conditions. Under Generals John J. Pershing and Ferdinand Foch, the doughboys and poilus had to break through the German defenses of the Hindenburg Line. In addition to artillery, aerial bombing, mustard gas, and miles of barbed wire, French and American soldiers also fought

through forests, fog, and the Flu during the 47-day campaign. But the challenges were not just on the battlefield. Pershing and Foch disagreed on strategy and how American troops should be used, and even with the help of the Hello Girls, miscommunications happened a lot. Those struggles are like veins in marble. They're scars that remind us of the setbacks the Allies endured while holding the alliance together.

The Lost Battalion is one example of the crushing pressures that U.S. and French forces endured during the Meuse-Argonne offensive. For five days, 554 men of the U.S. 77th Division were trapped in the Charlevaux Ravine, completely surrounded by German forces. They withstood relentless enemy fire, noise, cold, and rain. They had no food or medical supplies, and all but one of their attempts at communication failed. The Lost Battalion even got hit by friendly fire, and eventually, their only hope for survival was a carrier pigeon named Cher Ami, who nearly died delivering Major Charles Whittlesey's plea, "Our artillery is dropping a barrage directly on us. For heaven's sake stop it." ¹

While the Lost Battalion was under siege in the ravine, American and French soldiers were fighting together on Blanc Mont, a limestone ridge that the Germans had held since 1914. Allied troops had to move uphill across open ground, totally exposed to heavy machine gun fire. But the pressure didn't just come from the enemy. The Americans were fighting under French command and communication lines were cut almost immediately by shells. Units lost track of each other, others veered off course or too far ahead, and some soldiers didn't even know where their own line ended. It was chaos. As Marine officer John W. Thomason wrote, the battlefield became "naked, leprous chalk... a wilderness of craters... wherein no yard of earth lay

¹ Jessie Kratz, "The Lost Battalion of World War I," *Pieces of History* blog, National Archives, July 21, 2017, <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2017/07/21/the-lost-battalion-of-world-war-i/>.

untouched.”² But just as the Lost Battalion’s survival depended on the larger Allied effort all around them, the capture of Blanc Mont depended on the Allied forces pushing uphill together on the ridge. For 47 days, everyone involved in Meuse-Argonne was pushed to their limits. People aren’t the same after experiencing that kind of pressure, and the U.S.-French alliance wasn’t, either.

It’s impossible to compare anything in my life to what the Allied forces endured at Meuse-Argonne. I’m 11, and not counting the VelociCoaster at Universal Studios, the most intense situations I’ve ever experienced have been Crisis Committees at Model UN. Those are just simulations, but still, the point is to build alliances quickly and work with other countries to solve problems under pressure. I used to think I’d win Best Delegate by making a strong plan and getting others to go along with it, but Meuse-Argonne showed me that knowing when and how to change my plans is just as important. When Pershing’s original plan didn’t work, he adapted by reorganizing the AEF and giving General Hunter Liggett control of the First Army. Liggett modified the Meuse-Argonne attack strategy and got the different units to work together more effectively. This turned things around and ultimately made the operation a success. Since I’ve learned about Meuse-Argonne, I’ve become more willing to adjust my plans and strategy. I’m also getting better at trusting other delegates in Model UN to lead our alliance to success. Meuse-Argonne taught me that whether it’s a middle school Model UN team or real-life geopolitics, a strong alliance knows how to adapt.

A strong alliance also isn’t built in a day. At the Sommepy American Monument, the monument overlooks the trenches and battlefield and it’s built from the same limestone where

² John W. Thomason Jr., *Fix Bayonets!* p. 134 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/75092>.

70,000 American soldiers joined forces with the French. A few miles away at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, 14,246 white marble headstones and 954 names on the Tablets of the Missing honor those who endured the battle's pressures and gave their lives in the fight.³ One lesson from Meuse-Argonne that's especially useful for a 21st-century America that's used to immediate results is that enduring alliances don't happen instantly. They take hundreds of years and millions of people. They also require tremendous effort under intense pressure. We see this pressure and sacrifice at the Meuse-Argonne memorials. We can also see that more than a century after Armistice, the alliance of France and America remains as solid as a rock.

³ "About Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery - American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC)." 2025. American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC). March 18, 2025. <https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/about-meuse-argonne-american-cemetery/>.

Works Cited

- American Battle Monuments Commission. “Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery.” American Battle Monuments Commission, October 7, 2020.
<https://www.abmc.gov/cemeteries-memorials/about-meuse-argonne-american-cemetery/>.
- Kratz, Jessie. “The Lost Battalion of World War I.” *Pieces of History* blog, National Archives, July 21, 2017. <https://prologue.blogs.archives.gov/2017/07/21/the-lost-battalion-of-world-war-i/>
- Thomason, John W. Jr. *Fix Bayonets!* 134. New York? Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1919.
<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/75092>.