

Past in Review

Eleventh Engineers in World War I

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Members of Company D, 11th Engineers (Railway) work near the Meuse River. They were among the first Americans to fight in France during World War I (U.S. Army photo).



On April 6, 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and entered World War I. Britain and France, America's new allies, requested immediate engineering assistance in building, maintaining, and operating railroads in France. The War Department responded by quickly organizing nine new regiments of railway engineers.

Two months before the outbreak of war, the Chief of Engineers, BG William M. Black, had begun forming a reserve engineer regiment in New York City. Using the slogan, *First to France—Join the Engineers*, the First Regiment, Reserve Engineers, opened its recruiting office in early May and soon filled its ranks. To avoid confusion with the First Engineers of the regular Army, the War Department redesignated the new unit the 11th Engineers in July 1917 and made it the first of the new railway regiments. The present 11th Engineer Battalion (CBT)(HVY) traces its lineage to this unit.

The 11th Engineers (Railway) trained at Fort Totten, NY, during June and set sail for Europe on July 14. Three American engineer regiments, including the 11th, were attached to the British army in France.

On September 5, 1917, a German artillery shell wounded two soldiers of the 11th Engineers. These engineers were the first battle casualties of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France.

In mid-November, the regiment joined in the British preparations for the Cambrai offensive. Amid great secrecy, the 11th Engineers helped move and unload the primitive tanks that the British had massed for the offensive. The attack made some gains initially, but like most offensives on the Western Front, soon bogged down. The 11th Engineers supported the British advance by building and repairing rail lines.

On November 30, two and a half companies of the 11th, along with some Canadian engineers, began constructing a rail yard just behind the British front lines. Sporadic German artillery fire interrupted their work. German shelling was routine, but this fire suddenly became a barrage of gas and artillery shells.

The officers ordered a withdrawal, but the engineers were already caught up in a surprise German counter-attack. Some hid in dugouts to escape the shelling and found themselves trapped behind the German advance.

Others used their picks and shovels to fight the advancing infantry. Most of the American engineers got back to their camp where the rest of the regiment had taken up defensive positions to help the British stop the counter-attack. Six of the 11th Engineers were killed, eleven were wounded, and thirteen were taken prisoner.

GEN John J. Pershing, commander of the AEF, wrote that Cambrai deserved special attention because "it was here that American troops (11th Engineers) first participated in active fighting." Engineers of the 11th received three Distinguished Service Crosses and three British decorations. The regiment was credited with campaign participation in the Battle of Cambrai, the first campaign credit given to American units in World War I. A quarter of a million U.S. Army engineers eventually served in World War I, but the men of the 11th Engineers (Railway) were among the first American soldiers to fight in France.

Suggestions for further reading:

V.T. Boughton, *History of the Eleventh Engineers*, United States Army.
William Barclay Parsons, *The American Engineers in France*.