

Over There

Celebrating the One Hundredth Anniversary of First Army

“First in Deed”

11th Month, 11th Day, 11th Hour

On the morning of 11 November 1918, Private Henry Gunther likely woke up having heard rumors from the previous day that an Armistice, ending the war, was to be signed soon. As he awoke he could still hear the sounds of artillery fire surrounding his unit, the 313th Infantry Regiment. For now his war would continue. Despite the rumors, the 313th was preparing for an assault of the German lines to begin around 9:30 am. The rumors that Gunther likely heard had been spreading like wild fire through the Allied Armies that an armistice was imminent, possibly started after a strange incident on 7 November 1918. Startled by something that sounded similar to a bugle call, Soldiers of the 171st Régiment d'Infanterie cautiously advanced when out of the fog three automobiles emerged gilded with the imperial German eagle. The astonished Frenchmen encountered an armistice delegation headed by German politician and peace advocate Matthias Erzberger. They escorted the delegation to the Compigne Forest near Paris where, in a railroad dining car converted into a conference room, they met with Marshal Foch who, reportedly, “fixed them with a withering gaze.” Foch opened the proceeding with a question that left the Germans agape. “Ask these Gentlemen what they want,” he said to his interpreter. Erzberger answered that they understood they had been sent to discuss armistice terms. Foch stunned them by stating “Tell these gentlemen that I have no proposals to make.”¹

Foch, resolute in the Allied response, stated that they would not make proposals. Instead, the Allies would have conditions that the Germans would have to meet. Foch's interpreter read aloud the Allied conditions, which struck the Germans like hammer blows. The concessions included: the evacuation of all occupied lands in Belgium, Luxembourg,

and France—plus Alsace-Lorraine (held since 1870 by Germany) within fourteen days; the Allies were to occupy Germany west of the Rhine and bridgeheads on the river's east bank thirty kilometers deep; withdrawal of German forces from Austria-Hungary, Romania, and Turkey; the surrender of a portion of Germany's naval forces to a neutral or Allied ports to include: 10 battleships, 6 battle cruisers, 8 cruisers, and 160 submarines. Germany would also be stripped of heavy armaments, including 5,000 artillery pieces, 30,000 machine guns, 3,000 trench mortars and 2,000 airplanes. Additionally, they would surrender the German colony of East Africa and return property of Belgian, Russian and Rumanian banks to their owners. The next demand, however, threw the German delegates into despair. Though the German people already faced starvation, the Allies intended to paralyze their transportation systems by continuing its naval blockade and confiscating 5,000 locomotives, 150,000 railway cars, and 5,000 trucks. The translator continued on through thirty-four additional demands, the last of which blamed Germany for the war and demanded reparations for all damage caused. Finally, the terms would become effective six hours after signing.² Foch then informed Erzberger that he had seventy-two hours to obtain the consent of his government to the Allies' demands, or the war would go on.

RUSH--SECRET.

AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCES
OFFICE OF THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF

November 8, 1918.

*Recd -
14 hrs -
Nov. 8/18
H.A.D.*

The Commanding General,
First American Army,
F r a n c e .

My dear General:

The following message has just been received from Marshal Foch and the directions contained therein will be carried out:

- "1. Hostilities will cease along the whole front beginning at date and hour not yet determined, Paris time.
- "2. The Allied troops will not pass the line reached by that hour on that date until they get further orders. Report carefully what this line is.
- "3. All communication is forbidden up to the time of receipt of instructions, which will be sent to the Commanders-in-Chief of Armies.
"FOCH."

In compliance with above instructions, the necessary orders will be given by Army Commanders, who will report by telegraph to G. H. Q., Chaumont, the exact line occupied at the time of receipt of orders referred to. These orders are to be sent direct from Allied Commander-in-Chief to American Army Commanders according to my request in order to avoid any delay.

Very sincerely,

John J. Pershing

The above source document, dated 8 November 1918, was sent directly from GEN Pershing to First Army and LTG Hunter Liggett clarifying the rumors of an armistice and what to do when it is signed. (Accessed from the National Archives)

Erzberger responded with a plea of his own. "For God's sake, Monsieur le Marechal, do not wait for those seventy-two hours. Stop the hostilities this very day." His plea fell on deaf ears. Foch, before the meeting, had described to his staff his intention "to pursue the Feldgrauen (German soldiers) with a sword at their backs" to the last minute until an armistice went into effect.³ The overall Allied high command felt that if they slowed their offensives the Germans would use the time to their advantage to reorganize and regroup if the armistice negotiations fell through. So, fighting would continue through the negotiations until the armistice officially took effect, six hours after signing.

The Germans signed the armistice at 5:10 am on November 11th, backed up officially to 5 am to take effect within Foch's deadline: the eleventh month, eleventh day, eleventh hour of 1918. General Pershing received news of the signing and published an order informing his subordinate commanders of such. It said nothing about what they should do until 11:00, when the cease-fire would take effect. His order left commanders within the AEF in a strange decisional no man's land as to whether to keep fighting, as it stated, or to spare their men in the intervening hours by ignoring the orders. Pershing's decision to continue fighting centered on his belief that the Germans must suffer defeat at a military level to effectively "teach them a lesson." Pershing saw the terms of the Armistice as being soft on the Germans and that even the signing of the armistice could potentially be a temporary delaying action. "Germany's desire is only to regain time to restore order among her forces, but she must be given no opportunity to recuperate and we must strike harder than ever" he said.⁴

Meanwhile, Private Gunther prepared himself for the renewed offensive that included his 313th Infantry Regiment, as a part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) attack to put pressure on the German Army. (The attack was designed to make the German's feel the full weight of the Allies to bring the war to an end on their terms.) It is not clear if Gunther or the 313th knew or suspected that the armistice had been signed; no official word had reached them. It was not until several hours later at 10:30 am that they received official notification that the war would end at 11 am and that no further fighting would take place. They received word near a village called Ville-devant-Chaumont, north of Verdun, pinned down by German machine gun fire. As 11 am approached, Gunther suddenly rose up against the orders of his close friend and now sergeant, Ernest Powell, and charged the machine gun with his bayonet. The German soldiers, already aware that the Armistice would be taking effect any minute, tried to wave Gunther off. He kept going and fired "a shot or two," according to James M. Cain, a reporter for the Baltimore Sun newspaper. Cain interviewed Gunther's comrades afterward writing that "Gunther brooded a great deal over his recent reduction in rank, and became obsessed with a determination to make good before his officers and fellow soldiers."⁵ As Gunter continued his charge the German machine gun position fired in self-defense and shot a short burst of automatic fire. Gunther was killed instantly. His time of death was officially recorded as 10:59 am, making him the last Soldier officially killed in action during the war. The Army posthumously restored his rank of sergeant and awarded him a Divisional Citation for Gallantry in Action and the Distinguished Service Cross.⁶

The Allies wishing to ensure the most favorable position possible, should fighting resume, determined to maintain pressure in the Germans until the last minute. They were equally set on strictly adhering to the terms of the Armistice. Accordingly, the 4th Battery of the US Navy's long-range 14-inch railway guns timed its last shot, recorded at 10:57:30 am. From Verdun, to land behind the German lines just prior to 11:00 am. Such determination, however, came at a cost. Fighting on the last day of the Great War resulted in 10,944 total casualties, 2,738 of them killed in action. The controversy concerning their decision to press the assault continues to this day.



Soldiers of the 322d Infantry on November 11, 1918. They have just received news that the armistice has been signed and have stopped their advance against the Germans and are preparing dinner.



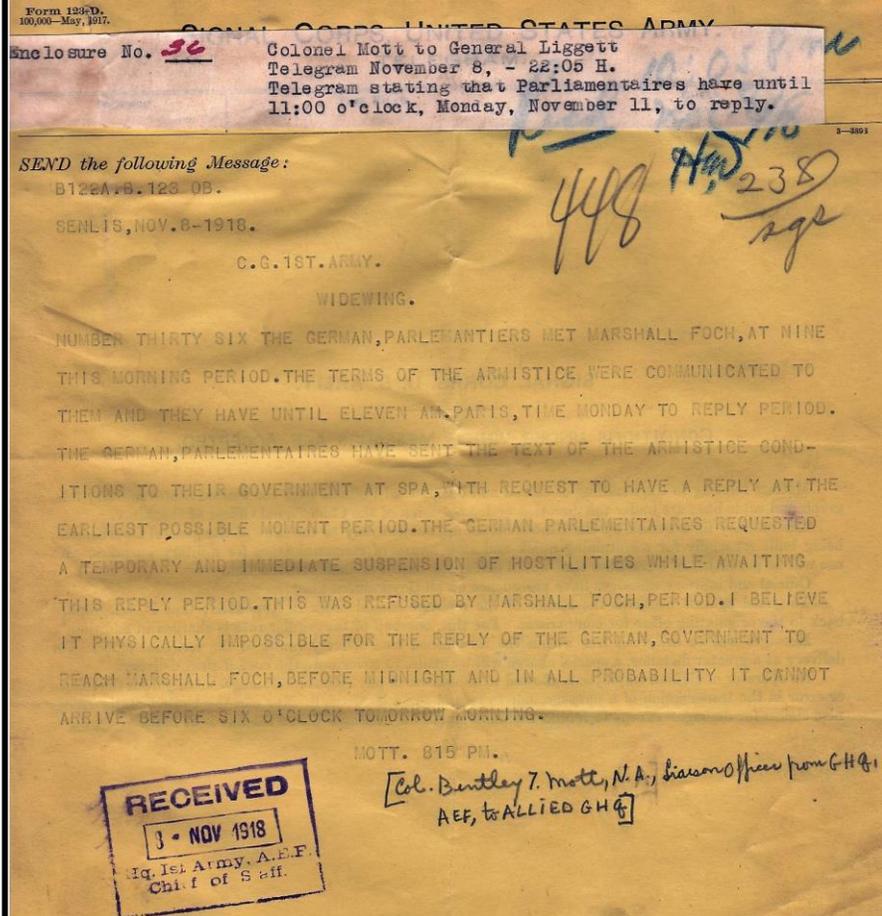
American Soldiers celebrating after the Armistice was announced, November 11, 1918.

1. Persico, J. E. (2006, December 6). World War I: Wasted Lives on Armistice Day. Retrieved November 5, 2017, from <http://www.historynet.com/world-war-i-wasted-lives-on-armistice-day.htm>
2. Official release by the German Government, published in the Kreuz-Zeitung, November 11, 1918. Accessed through: https://wwi.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Conditions_of_an_Armistice_with_Germany
3. Ibid Persico
4. Ibid Persico
5. Rodricks, Dan (November 11, 2008). "The sad, senseless end of Henry Gunther". Baltimore Sun. Retrieved November 4, 2017.
6. Ibid Rodricks

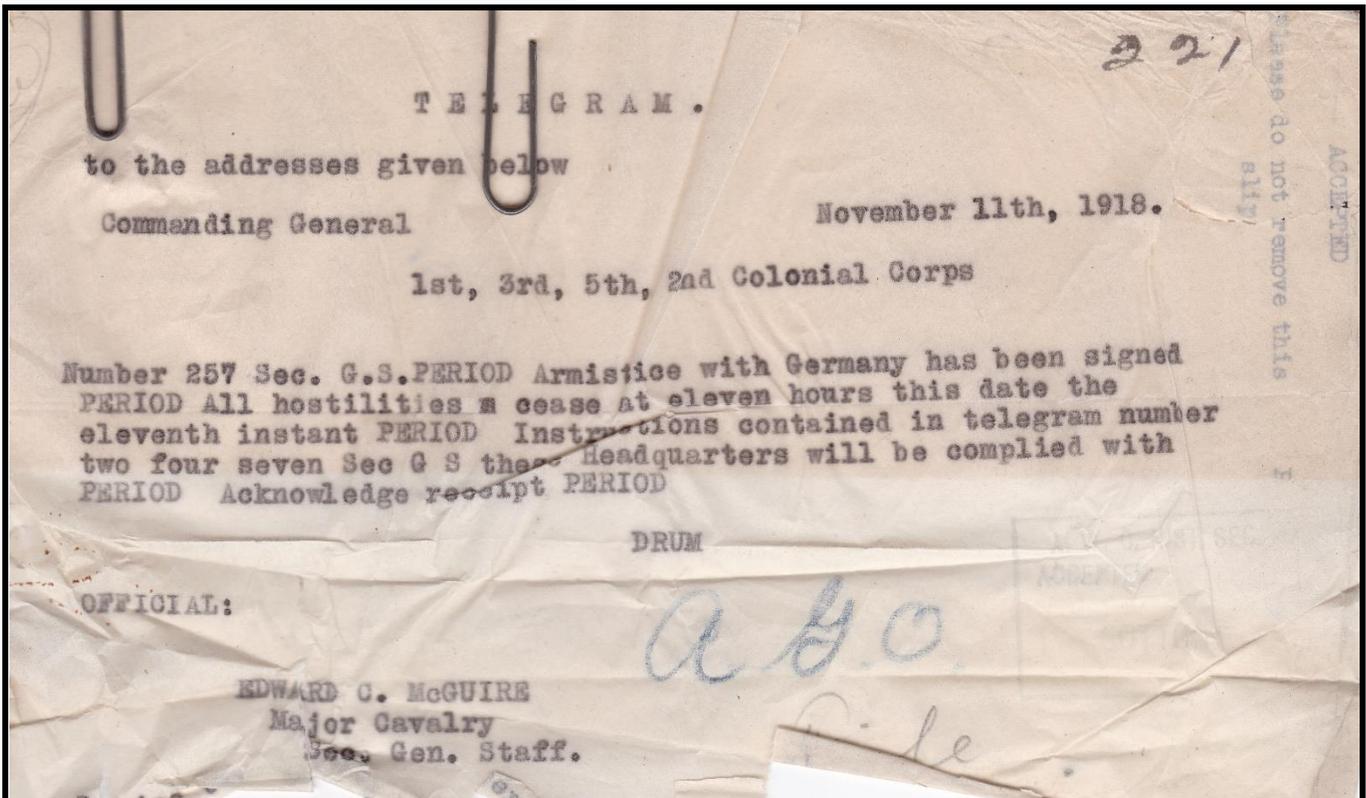
Military Humor



Cartoon published in late 1918



As noted above this is an internal First Army telegram which states that the Armistice negotiations are ongoing with a reply from the Germans by November, 11th at 11 am.



Above is an example of the type of notification that was sent out the morning of November 11th to all units in the AEF.