Into the American Century:

How the First Infantry Division Broke International Barriers During The First World War

Ethan Sahin

Senior Division

Historical Paper

Paper Length: 2,499 words
“The Armistice stopped the First Division once; the singing of Peace stopped it a second time; German soldiers never stopped it.” This quote, from a *New York Times* war correspondent during the First World War, perfectly describes the efficiency and performance of one of the greatest military units ever created, being the first American division to fight in France in 1917. It was the men of the First Infantry Division, including Sgt. Frank Burczyk, who proved America was capable of breaking barriers and would lay the foundations of which America would later be recognized as a superpower after the Second World War by demonstrating extreme courage and combat effectiveness, despite the initial disadvantages and doubt that was held against them in the First World War.²

The First World War started because of alliances. Because of fear for Austro-Hungarian imperialism across Europe, Serbia refused to be absorbed into the empire. A Serbian nationalist assassinated an Austro-Hungarian diplomat, Franz Ferdinand, igniting the empire into war. Due to alliances that had been previously made, France, Britain, and Russia faced off with the central powers, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire.³ The United States (U.S) joined the war in 1917, as it was fed up with Germany destroying U.S. merchant/passenger ships, and the Zimmerman telegram, sent from Germany to Mexico to convince the Mexicans to declare war on America.⁴

America was unprepared for war, as most Americans did not see the point of maintaining a large military presence. They felt the U.S. was impenetrable from European attack. This

---

2 See Appendix A
4 Knispel, Sandra. "Why Did America Enter World War I? Because Germany Embarked on a Deadly Gamble." University of Rochester.
resulted in the military being poorly equipped with outdated technology\(^5\). Despite this, thousands of Americans fought for the hope of an ever-lasting peace. But there was one unit that proved itself to be one of the greatest fighting forces ever used during conflict. This division was the first in France, the first in the trenches, and the first to hold defense and counter-attack operations. It was the first to have soldiers die for America and the first across the Rhine. But it was also the last to leave Europe, almost a year after the war ended. This was the First Infantry Division.\(^6\) Composed of some of the best infantry regiments of the time, when the 1st Division was in combat it was a nearly unstoppable force.\(^7\)

This paper will follow one local soldier of the 1st Division through the course of the war. Frank Burczyk was born on December 8, 1894, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. His parents, John and Katarina Burczyk were both immigrants of what was then West Prussia (modern-day Poland).\(^8\) When he was 21 years old, he decided to join the military on March 11, 1915\(^9\). By this time, the war in Europe was already in full swing, but America had remained neutral. When Frank joined the Army, he was placed into Company L of the 28th Infantry Regiment, which was stationed on the Mexican border, defending it from Pancho Villa and his raiders. Frank participated in the Mexican Punitive Expedition later from 1916-1917, defending Texas from attack.\(^10\) Records suggest that during this time, Frank was promoted from private to corporal.\(^11\) But on April 6, 1917, the U.S. declared war on Germany and the Central Powers. The Army, in desperate need

\(^5\) National Park Service. "Preparing for War." National Park Service. ; See Appendix G  
\(^7\) See Appendix B  
\(^8\) See Appendix C  
\(^9\) War Mothers of America Frank Burczyk. 1919.  
\(^11\) "Company L, 28th Infantry Regiment, 1912-1935 Pub. Date."
of a more organized force, created the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) to send to France. All Army units at the time were organized into divisions. The 28th Infantry Regiment was organized into the 2nd Brigade, 1st Infantry Division. This division had been made up of hand-picked veteran units and was the star of the commander of the AEF, General John J. Pershing. This division was expected to be the best of the AEF and was sent overseas immediately. The division was organized at Fort Jay on Governors Island in New York, then sent to France, under French command.12

The months from October to March would be mostly divisional training. From October 15, 1917, to November 15, 1917, the division toured in trenches in the quiet Somervillers sector, in Northeast France, with occasional raids. From then until January of 1918, the division was drilled incessantly. “They were trained in French tactics and British bayonet exercise, retrained in the same methods adapted to the American system, and then had to do it all over again on the strictly American plan.”13 On January 15, 1918, the division occupied the Ansauvillers sector. 15 days later, on January 30, 1918, the sector passed under American command, becoming the first American-controlled sector. “It was a quiet sector in which warfare consisted chiefly in lying cold and utterly miserable in water-filled trenches and gun pits, with only an occasional night raid or patrol or enemy gas bombardment to vary the monotony.”14

This was life for Frank and the 28th Infantry for months, but soon enough they would be called on for their first battle. Starting on March 21, rumors spread that a long-advertized German offensive broke loose. It was not until March 31 that the First Division was given orders

---

to prepare to move. By the night of April 3, the relief of the sector had been completed. Two
weeks later, the division was on its way to Montdidier, a German-occupied area.

“There was one hike no one who took part in it can ever forget. From late morning to late
afternoon they marched, twenty-five kilometers, halted for supper, were assigned billets.
And then, just as everyone was turning in for a good night’s sleep, First Call blew, and a
few minutes later Fall in. From midnight - a night so black you literally could not see the
man before you - until four in the afternoon - forty kilometers more. There can be nothing
more delightful than a leisurely walking tour through Picardy in springtime. But
sixty-five kilometers without sleep - under full field equipment - seventy-five pounds of
it - fifty minutes’ hike, ten minutes rest, and that ten sometimes reduced to three - it can
be torture. But it can be done.”

The Division now faced its first battle, one that turned heads of every major participant of
the war. They reached the French town of Cantigny on May 25, 1918. On the night of May 27,
the 28th Infantry Regiment moved into the trenches opposite the town in preparation for the first
American offensive of the war. From 3:00 am to 5:00 am, the First Field Artillery Brigade
battered the Germans, starting as “a slow fire of destruction” and ending as “an ear-splitting,
earth-shaking inferno.” At 5:30, as the artillery formed a rolling barrage, the first soldiers of the
28th Infantry Regiment, including Corporal Frank Burczyk, leaped from the trenches. Then, the
first wave of the 28th Infantry, including Company L, reached the German lines, wiping them
out with rifle fire and bayonets. The Americans continued to chase the Germans back up into the
forest surrounding Cantigny, taking the town. The Germans made attempts to counter-attack,
but all of them were struck down quickly by the men of the 28th Infantry; all six counter-attacks.
The Battle of Cantigny was won thanks to the soldiers of the 28th. This would set shockwaves
throughout Europe, as America was not expected to perform so efficiently in their first battle. It

17 See Appendix D
sent the message that Americans could fight and that they were fully capable of holding their own in the war.\(^{19}\)

In early July, the division was taken by truck to the Marne; America was preparing another attack. The First Division moved towards Soissons at this time and reached it near its Southwest edge. That night, a storm battered the area. Despite this, the 1st Division reached their position on the slope of the plateau at 4:55 am. At the same time, German artillery began raining down on the soldiers who had no idea two Frenchmen had defected and warned the Germans about the attack. At 5:00, the artillery began a rolling barrage. The 1st Division went over the top of their trenches, and through the mist and out of the valley, right into German machine guns. And at 2:00 pm, after a small break, they resumed the attack, stopping once more at nightfall, having taken a total of 7 kilometers. Even though so far the attack had been a success, many were killed or wounded. In the morning, the Allies started to attack once again but faced more opposition than the previous day. U.S. lines thinned but continued forward.

After the second night, the severely crippled 1st Division was reinforced with replacements, as the next day was the most brutal of the battle. In the morning, the First Division fought five German divisions. A German counterattack was met on the left, and the 2nd Brigade took the brunt of its force (the 26th and 28th Infantry Regiments). The 28th Regiment fought hand to hand with the Germans, using anything they could. It was later said of the event that it was a “hand-to-hand struggle without equal in the history of American arms... They fought with bayonets, with grenades, with clubbed rifles, with knives. Men fell like dead leaves before the autumn gale. Officers went down in alarming numbers. One battalion commander of the

\(^{19}\) THE FIRST DIVISION. (1918, Oct 26). *New York Times (1857-1922)*
Twenty-Eighth reported that all of his officers were down.\textsuperscript{20} Despite this brutal setback, by nightfall, the remains of the 1st Division laid across the Paris highway.

Just as the division thought they would be relieved, they were given their toughest attack yet. That night, the Germans were reinforced with another Prussian Guard Division, which was put into place specifically to target the 2nd Brigade, which faced the Germans with the hardest attacks. The next day, when the 2nd Brigade continued the attack, it looked as if they were going to be halted by the Prussians. But the Brigade commander reformed his lines and personally charged in the first wave of an attack, steamrolling the Germans. The ruins of Berzy-Le-Sec belonged to the Division. On the fifth night of the attack, the First Division was relieved by the 15th Scottish Division. That night, they celebrated in the village of Pontarme. But few could enjoy it. Just over 10,000 soldiers walked into the battle, but only around 2,000 walked out; they had lost 8,000 men.\textsuperscript{21} During Soissons, Frank Burczyk’s Sergeant was most likely killed, leaving him to take the spot his comrade once held, promoting him to Sergeant. Frank was also awarded a silver star for his actions, given for the following reason: “With utter disregard of danger led his men in the attack, setting a splendid example to his men by his coolness.”\textsuperscript{22}

After Soissons, the next objective of the American Army was the St. Mihiel Salient, which would be the first battle for many other U.S. Divisions, and its outcome would greatly increase morale throughout the AEF. On September 12, 1918, the First Division moved into the trenches. Early the next morning, an intense artillery barrage began. When dawn broke, so did the attack. Expecting German artillery, the troops were surprised when only a few scarred shells were sent towards them. Because the Americans were advancing at such a rapid pace, German

\textsuperscript{22} "World War Records First Division A.E.F. Regular Citations First Division Volume XXIII."
soldiers surrendered in large numbers, overwhelmed by the 1st Division. That night, the battle was over the Americans. There were only 700 casualties from the whole division, which was monumentally less than expected. It gave a huge boost of needed morale for the soldiers of the 1st. It was reported that at some point in September 1918, Frank was sick, likely from pneumonia or similar illness. But he must have made a quick recovery or he ignored his illness, as he participated in another attack not long after.

Two weeks later, the 1st Division faced the Meuse-Argonne front, which consisted of terrible rain, hills, narrow defiles, and forests, which had been heavily fortified by the Germans who had laid there for many years. When the First Division arrived at the front, they were instructed to take over the sector (Exermont) of a division that was starting to fail and was finished on October 1.

The Division went over the top on October 4, not expecting the fierce opposition that would shock the division back to the harsh reality following St.Mihiel. Frank Burczyk was in the initial wave of troops where opposition was extremely fierce, and it was one of the hardest attacks the 1st Division would ever have to lead. The Germans, knowing that if they lost here they would be defeated, threw everything they had at them. Despite this, most of Exermont had been taken by nightfall. The 1st attacked again November 1 and would trample all opposition in its way, until the last day of the war. The First rushed across two divisional sectors, literally sprinting in some situations, 60 kilometers in two days while carrying enough provisions to front a major offensive to try and defeat the Germans at Sedan, but was relieved by French troops.

24 “Company L, 28th Infantry Regiment, 1912-1935 Pub. Date.”
25 War Mothers of America Frank Burczyk. 1919.
On November 11, the war ended. Most of the troops of the 1st Division, including Frank Burczyk, returned to America in September of 1919. In July of 1919, Frank was recognized for extreme bravery and courage under fire during the Meuse-Argonne offensive and was given another silver star. After the war, Frank was transferred out of the 1st Division, and placed into an unknown reserve unit on March 10th, 1920. It is likely he stayed there for quite some time before returning to normal civilian life.

Because the First Division proved that the United States was not to be thought of lightly by demonstrating superior military power, America from then on was more seriously considered as a vital ally to have. And movements back at home propelled by the war, such as women’s and African-American rights would produce a country that had the societal and political power to greatly sway the path of the 20th century. This would also become known as the “American Century”, in which America was the main military, economic, and cultural superpower after World War Two, where America gained even more international credit for such events as D-day, and the invention of the atom bomb. One great example of America's power is the Cold War, in which the U.S. used its power to rally its allies against communism, creating an environment where America had more power than its European counterparts.

It was the men of the First Infantry Division, including Sgt. Frank Burczyk, who proved America was capable of breaking barriers and would lay the foundations of which America

---

26 Miller, Henry Russel. *The First Division*. N.p.: Crescent Press, 1920. ; See Appendix F
28 "Company L, 28th Infantry Regiment, 1912-1935 Pub. Date."
29 Hindley, Meredith. "World War I Changed America and Transformed Its Role in International Relations." National Endowment for the Humanities.
would later be recognized as a superpower after the Second World War by demonstrating extreme courage and combat effectiveness, despite the initial disadvantages and doubt that was held against them in the First World War. Their legacy is one that is seldom remembered though, as America has largely forgotten what it sacrificed during the First World War, even though the brave soldiers of such units as the First Division would assist in propeling America into the world we live in today.
Appendix A
Appendix A (cont.)

This helmet is a standard-issue M1917 steel helmet used during the war by Sgt. Frank Burczyk. I found it at a flea market covered in gold paint. Knowing that sometimes soldiers would paint over their unit insignias when they joined the American legion where they painted their helmets gold, I removed the paint. Underneath were two insignias of the First Division, one on the front and one on the back. There were also two different layers of paint, one light green on the beneath a darker olive drab on top. As I did my research, the reason for this became apparent. The insignia on the front, painted right on top of the first coat, was the first one he painted, likely in France sometime in 1919. After Frank was put into the reserve army, they likely made him paint over his old insignia with newer paint, which is the darker color. After he got out of the reserve, he probably put the 1st Division insignia on the back for parades, before painting it over again with gold.

This is one of the reasons that this helmet is 100% his, but there are a few others. For one, he carved his last name into the underside of the brim, likely with a bayonet. But what is curious is that this name doesn't exactly match the name on most of his records, “Burczyk”. This is explained by looking at records of his family; because his parents had just migrated from West Prussia, they decided to change their last name “Burtschik” into something else. It seems different members of the family took different variations of the name at different times, almost always based around “Burzyk”. For example, some other variations include “Benozyk”, “Burezyk”, “Barczyk”, “Benszyk”, and “Burrzzek”. Despite this, by the mid-1940s, the whole family seemed to standardize to “Burczyk”. So it is very likely the variation Frank chose to write in his helmet was “Burzyk”, but he changed it as his family did. And to top that off, looking at the roster of the entire 1st Division during the war, there was only one other person with the same/similar last name (“Burczyk”). He was a tank crewman who was killed in action. Helmets used by dead soldiers were rarely returned to families and were usually either left behind or reissued to a different soldier, so the chance of it being his is almost zero, and there would have been no reason for anyone to paint over the helmet in the first place if it wasn’t Frank’s.

It is the paint that really confirms that it is Frank’s, as his service records in the reserve army fully explain it. The helmet also has a large dent on the front right side, likely from debris such as a piece of wood and not from a bullet as there is no distinctive smaller divet within the dent that comes with a gunshot. The brim is also dented in the same place, meaning it was probably a long object flying at high speeds, characteristic of debris such as wood or rock blown in the air by shell-fire. Probably would have caused a severe headache and bruising, but nothing life-threatening.

Sahin, Ethan P. “Frank Burczyk’s Helmet.”
Appendix B

1st Division

- Headquarters, 1st Division
- 1st Infantry Brigade
  - 16th Infantry Regiment
  - 18th Infantry Regiment
  - 2nd Machine Gun Battalion
- 2nd Infantry Brigade
  - 26th Infantry Regiment
  - 28th Infantry Regiment
  - 3rd Machine Gun Battalion
- 1st Field Artillery Brigade
  - 5th Field Artillery Regiment
  - 6th Field Artillery Regiment
  - 7th Field Artillery Regiment
  - 1st Trench Mortar Battery
- 1st Machine Gun Battalion
- 1st Engineer Regiment
- 2nd Field Signal Battalion
- Headquarters Troop, 1st Division
- 1st Train Headquarters and Military Police
  - 1st Ammunition Train
  - 1st Supply Train
  - 1st Engineer Train
  - 1st Sanitary Train
  - 2nd Ambulance Company and Field Hospital
  - 3rd Ambulance Company and Field Hospital
  - 12th Ambulance Company and Field Hospital
  - 13th Ambulance Company and Field Hospital

Organization of the 1st Division

This photo, from the Milwaukee Public Library’s Soldier Portrait collection, shows Sgt. Frank Burczyk, likely in France, in 1919. On his chest, there is a Mexican Border Service ribbon bar and a Marksmanship Medal. On his shoulder is the Croix de Guerre Fourragere, an award that the French gave to the 28th Infantry Regiment for their bravery in Cantigny. On his sleeve is his Overseas Service Chevrons. Each chevron represents 6 months overseas, and veteran soldiers of the 1st Division were among the only combat troops that could have reached 4 chevrons (2 years).

This photo shows troops of the 28th Infantry Regiment moving into Cantigny with French Schneider CA1 tanks supporting them, May 28, 1918. This photo was most likely taken while the troops were making their way to the jumping-off point, not yet in combat.

Appendix E

This photo shows the officers of the 3rd Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment, sometime in 1919. All but a couple of the officers are replacements, as most of the original officers were killed during Soissons.

Appendix F

This is a map of the First Division's movements in the Meuse-Argonne. It shows a day-by-day progression of the frontline's location (up to Oct. 10). After this, the army wasn't entirely sure where the exact location of the 1st Division was, as that is when the division was scrambled across two sectors to try and get to Sedan before the French.

The Meuse-Argonne Offensive." Map. 1918.
Appendix G

This image shows some of the standard equipment that a soldier of the 1st Division would have used. The insignia of the 1st Division, a red “1” on a green shield can be seen both on the shoulder of the standard wool uniform and the M1917 helmet (the helmet belonging to Frank Burczyk). The uniform, although not belonging to him, belonged to another 1st Division soldier who also had four Overseas Service Chevrons (partially hidden) and a Mexican Border Service Ribbon Bar (very stained, on the left breast of the uniform). It also has a Discharge Chevron (visible), and two Wound Chevrons, meaning he was wounded in action twice (not visible). The rest of the equipment (although likely not 1st Division, but examples of equipment that they would have used) includes a gas mask holder, canteen, bacon tin, mess kit, overseas cap, haversack, and cartridge belt. Compared to German and British equipment, the A.E.F.’s equipment was outdated, with too small of a canteen, uncomfortable and poorly-made uniforms, and an unnecessarily complicated haversack. All of these pieces are from my personal collection.

Sahin, Ethan P. "Equipment of the First Infantry Division in WWI.”
Primary Sources

Used for intro quote. Book printed in occupied Germany in 1919 for troops of the First Division on Occupation duty for them to read.

"Company L, 28th Infantry Regiment, 1912-1935 Pub. Date."
https://firstdivisionmuseum.nmtvault.com/jsp/viewer.jsp?doc_id=iwfd0000%2F20170720%2F00000090&query1=&recoffset=0&collection_filter=All&collection_name=56386d36-a49e-4b1d-b93d-2b6019867d4d&sort_col=relevance&cnt=2&CurSearchNum=1&recOffset=0.
Muster Rolls for the 28th Infantry Division. Was used for the dates and information that it gives about Frank's service.

Used to show the American public's opinion on the war, and how important Cantigny was to them.

Used for several images of the 1st Division during WWI.

This source is an image of Frank Burczyk. Shows what medals he earned.

Used as a visual to help show the timeline of the First Division in the Meuse-Argonne.

Miller, Arthur Harrison. *Official Souvenir Program of the Victory Parades: 1st Division, U.S.A.*
Used for images of the First Division during the 1st World War.

Original print written by a 1st Division veteran. Explains the 1st Division's role in each major battle they participated
Original document from the War Mothers of America filled out by Frank Burczyk that gives some general information about him and his service.

https://firstdivisionmuseum.nmtvault.com/jspviewer.jsp?doc_id=iwfd0000%2F20181018%2F000000005&query1=&recoffset=0&collection_filter=All&collection_name=cdf20c52-01e6-47b0-ba0b-6574c9e5437f&sort_col=relevance&cnt=4&CurSearchNum=1&recOffset=0.
Records of citations (silver stars) given out to 1st Division soldiers, including Frank Burczyk.

"World War Records First Division A.E.F. Regular Citations First Division Volume XXIII."
https://firstdivisionmuseum.nmtvault.com/jspviewer.jsp?doc_id=iwfd0000%2F20180924%2F00000012&query1=&recoffset=0&collection_filter=All&collection_name=cdf20c52-01e6-47b0-ba0b-6574c9e5437f&sort_col=relevance&cnt=3&CurSearchNum=1&recOffset=0.
Records of citations (silver stars) given out to 1st Division soldiers, including Frank Burczyk.

"World War Records First Division A.E.F. Regular Index to Citations Volume XXII."
https://firstdivisionmuseum.nmtvault.com/jspviewer.jsp?doc_id=iwfd0000%2F20180924%2F00000011&query1=&recoffset=0&collection_filter=All&collection_name=cdf20c52-01e6-47b0-ba0b-6574c9e5437f&sort_col=relevance&cnt=0&CurSearchNum=1&recOffset=0.
Records of citations (silver stars) given out to 1st Division soldiers, including Frank Burczyk.
Secondary Sources


Sahin, Ethan P. "Equipment of the First Infantry Division in WWI." Last modified February 9, 2020. JPEG. Used to show equipment used by the First Division, and Frank Burczyk's helmet.

Sahin, Ethan P. “Frank Burczyk’s Helmet.” Last modified April 1, 2020. JPEGs. Shows Frank Burczyk’s helmet, the inspiration for the project.