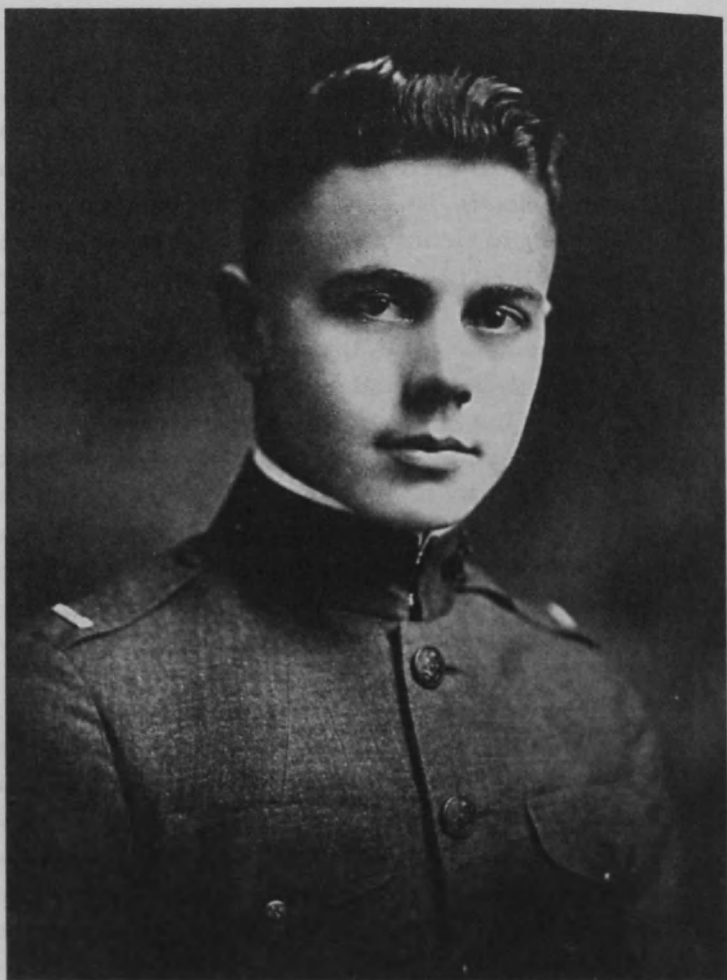


“Up in the Argonne”:
The Tragedy of Lieutenant Justus Owens
and the 82nd Division in the First World War

BY RICHARD S. FAULKNER

 ON October 10, 1918, as the 82nd Division's 3rd Battalion, 326th Infantry Regiment began its attack to capture the small Argonne Forest town of Pylone, France, the doughboys of Company L came under heavy and accurate machine gun fire from German positions overlooking the Decauville railroad. The company deployed to silence the machine gun, but the steep and rutted terrain of the Argonne quickly channeled and fragmented the American advance into a series of disorganized, uncoordinated and huddled rushes. The enemy fire began to take a heavy toll among the confused and bunched American ranks. First Lieutenant Justus Erwin Owens rallied his soldiers and was leading the platoon to destroy the German gun. As they scrambled up the slope, twelve Company L soldiers fell before the machine gun's concentrated fire. Twenty feet from the German position the young lieutenant also fell, shot by a German sniper concealed in the fork of a tree directly over the machine gun. Shooting the lieutenant proved equally fatal to the sniper. The German's fire had disclosed his position to First Sergeant John M. Peurifoy, whose fire knocked the sniper from his high perch to the forest floor be-

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Lieutenant Justus Erwin Owens of Franklin County, Georgia, was twenty-four years old when he posed for this photograph soon after he joined the 82nd Division at Camp Gordon in May 1917. Photograph from *Justus Owens Scrapbook* in Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Georgia Libraries.

whether the president of the United States should be limited to one six-year term.⁴ Owens also served as the junior class vice president and was elected the Class of 1915's permanent president

⁴Miriam G. Parr, comp., *University of Georgia Demosthenian Literary Society Minutes, 1913-1924* (Athens, Ga., 1954), 44, 55, 65. Owens supported the government maintaining a merchant marine and successfully debated for limiting the American president to one six-year term.



Soldiers from Owens' company wait in line for chow while training at Camp Gordon in Chamblee, Georgia, in the fall of 1917. Nearly a year later, some of these doughboys would fight and die with Justus Owens in the Argonne Forest. *Photograph from Owens Scrapbook.*

of the service and the fundamentals of patrolling and other infantry tactics. With the knowledge gained from the OTCs, the new officers were expected to train the draftees of the National Army divisions. Unfortunately, the quality and quantity of the OTC training did not adequately prepare Owens and his peers to accomplish this mission. After the war, Army Chief of Staff Peyton March admitted that a lack of competent instructors, rifle ranges and time prevented proper instruction for both officers and enlisted men. March noted that officers received only thirty-six hours of marksmanship training, an amount that the army had considered the bare minimum for a prewar regular army recruit.⁷ As the newly commissioned officers left the OTCs to join their

⁷U.S. War Department, *War Department Annual Report for Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1919*, Vol. 1, Part 1 (Washington, D.C., 1920), 313-14. The army's basic training system was still in its infancy in the first seventeen years of the century. Regular army recruits received only basic School of the Soldier and marksmanship training at recruit depots. The soldier's training would be completed with further instruction and "on the job" experience with his regiment.

When Owens reported to Camp Gordon in late August 1917, the 82nd Division was still a skeletal organization consisting mainly of a division headquarters and cadre detachments for the remaining divisional units. The War Department intended to man the division from draftees drawn from Alabama, Georgia and Tennessee. The southerners filled Camp Gordon through September and early October and began systematic training for the division's deployment to France. Though draftees, the 82nd's enlisted men seemed to possess the same degree of enthusiasm for the American war effort and their new military roles as their officers. This is surprising given the early anti-intervention and anti-conscription sentiment of many southerners prior to April 1917.¹²

With the division approaching full strength, the War Department reversed itself and ordered most of the soldiers attached to the 82nd transferred to the 30th, 31st and 81st divisions. That decision left the 82nd with a cadre of only 783 men to rebuild the division's organization.¹³ More importantly, six weeks of cohesion building and training had gone to waste. In late October and November, the division was brought back up to strength with draftees from New England and the mid-Atlantic states. One officer commented that the new organization consisted of "boys from the North officered by boys from the South."¹⁴ The new levy contained a large percentage of recent immigrants unable to speak or read English. This hindered training and forced the division commander to establish English language schools to give the soldiers

¹²In 1914-1917 the South still contained many Populists who believed that northeastern businessmen were engineering the United States' entry into the war to protect investments and make more war profits. Southerners opposed conscription for a host of reasons. Many feared the arming and training of African Americans. National Guard officers believed that the draft would weaken the Guards' standing and funding. Others held that the draft was inconsistent with American democratic principles. Most southerners dropped their objections to both the American involvement and conscription following Wilson's declaration of war. See David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York, 1980), 18, 95-96; and John W. Chambers II, *To Raise an Army: The Draft Comes to Modern America* (New York, 1987), 107-108, 114.

¹³G. Edward Buxton, ed., *Official History of the 82nd Division American Expeditionary Force* (Indianapolis, 1919), 1-2; and U.S. Department of War, *Order of Battle of the United States Land Forces in the World War: American Expeditionary Forces* (Washington, D.C., 1931), 349.

¹⁴Holden, *War Memories* 24. Holden was a second lieutenant in the 328th Infantry. This mix of southerners and northerners seems to have worked rather well. None of the soldier narratives betray any hint of sectional stress in the ranks or between the officers and enlisted men beyond a few good natured jokes.

officers fresh from the OTC frequently received instruction on a subject during the day only to turn around and give the same class to their sergeants that night.²⁰ A handful of French and British instructors assisted in the training, but limited numbers and language barriers hindered their effectiveness.²¹ The 82nd was also hobbled by a shortage of weapons and equipment. In its early days the division's soldiers trained with wooden rifles. American production quickly rectified the lack of small arms, but shortages of machine guns, mortars and other specialty weapons continued to plague the division. The division chief of staff, Colonel G. Edward Buxton, remembered:

The training of specialists in the United States was necessarily of a theoretical character. The Divisional Automatic Rifle School possessed about a dozen Chauchat rifles; the regiments had none. Colt machine guns were issued to machine gun companies, although this weapon was never to be used in battle. The Stokes Mortar platoons never saw a 3-inch Stokes Mortar while in the United States, and the 37-mm. gun platoons possessed collectively one of these weapons during the last two or three weeks of their stay at Camp Gordon. A limited number of offensive and defensive hand grenades were obtained and thrown by selected officers and non-commissioned officers at the Division Grenade School. The men of one regiment witnessed a demonstration where four rifle grenades were fired.²²

Even the weather seemed to conspire against the beleaguered division. The harsh winter of 1918 brought large amounts of snow to Atlanta and limited much of the training to indoor activities for days at a time. This disruption of training came at a critical time; the 82nd had almost reached full strength again and was fast approaching its movement to France. When Owens departed for France in April 1918, his soldiers were almost totally deficient in the knowledge and skills necessary to operate all but the most basic weapons in the Allied inventory. Some even questioned the doughboys' basic knowledge of rifle marksmanship. The 82nd's famous Tennessee backwoodsman Alvin York noted that during

²⁰Sirmon, *That's War*, 21.

²¹*Ibid.*

²²Buxton, *Official History*, 4.

fruit salad, pineapples with mayonnaise and a lemon pie. He won the approval of Aline's father and stayed so late that he missed his train to Atlanta and just avoided being absent without leave. Whether Aline and Justus were a case of love at first sight or a war-time romance carried forward by the press of the times, the couple was married on January 19, 1918.²⁵ Three months later Owens was on a ship bound for Europe.

The 326th Infantry left the disembarkation center at Camp Upton, New York for Liverpool, England on April 25, 1918. After a week-long stay in England, the division crossed the English Channel to Le Havre and began its final training before entering the front-lines. Following AEF commander John J. Pershing's guidance, the 82nd was to spend at least one month undergoing "realistic" training with the British, then receive "hands on" experience occupying trenches and conducting raids on a quiet sector of the French front. From May 15 through June 14, the 82nd trained with the British 66th Division in Picardy.²⁶ Unfortunately, the Americans' instruction was far from realistic. The British collected all the 82nd Division's American weapons and reissued British small arms, automatic rifles and machine guns. While this move eased supply problems, instructing the doughboys on marksmanship and maintenance of weapons that they would never use in combat was a waste of valuable training time.²⁷ The Americans complained that the British instruction was too basic for the men of the 82nd and that it differed little from the routine of Camp Gordon. Owens' brigade commander became so frustrated with the Allies' training methods that he removed the British instructors from his unit's target practice.²⁸ The 82nd's "realistic" training with the British consisted mainly of bayonet fighting, ceremonies, close order drill, marksmanship, physical training and the English methods of trench warfare and the attack. Pershing wanted the AEF's training to de-emphasize the use of trenches and concentrate on offensive maneuver tactics. While

²⁵Article from *Lavonia Standard Gage*, October 22, 1918; and Owens to Barnes, "Monday Night."

²⁶War Department, *Order of Battle*, 349-51.

²⁷Buxton, *Official History*, 11-12. Another reason for the rearming of the Americans was the British desire to retain the 82nd Division for operations on the British sector of the front.

²⁸Sirmon, *That's War*, 96-98 and 101.

Although the Lagny and Lecuy sectors were considered quiet, the 82nd Division still lost 44 men killed in action and another 327 wounded. In one incident alone 17 soldiers were killed and 15 wounded when two German shells slammed into an incompetently overcrowded section of trench.³³ Gas casualties accounted for many of the division's wounded, for a number of the doughboys lacked proper gas warfare training and confidence in their gas masks.³⁴ On paper, a month's training with the British and 58 days of front-line service with the French certified the 82nd Division as trained and ready for combat. In reality, the division's senior commanders had little experience in planning operations, coordinating mass tactical movements and resupplying the division under combat conditions. Equally important, the 82nd's junior officers and enlisted men left the Allies without a clear understanding of the dynamics and deadliness of the modern battlefield.

As the 82nd completed its final preparation and training, Owens took time to reflect on his situation. While separation from his wife and the realization of war's true nature perhaps dulled his initial enthusiasm, he remained committed to the army and did not regret his decision to join or his service in France. In a letter to his brother William on August 2, 1918, he noted with a little envy that a mutual friend had returned to the United States to serve as an instructor, but he still avidly encouraged his brother to enter the service. Justus expressed the hope that his brother could get to France before the war ended and noted "I know of no reason you shouldn't have a commission and I say 'so get it!'"³⁵ Owens seems to have believed that it was his duty to serve in France and in a practice as old as soldiering itself, he disparaged those men who remained in the rear. In September he wrote his sister Mattie: "So Hugh fights the war out at Camp Lee? Pretty soft I call it. In some ways he's lucky—I guess; but I can't believe I'd be satisfied to

³³Buxton, *Official History*, 15-16.

³⁴This was a major problem throughout the AEF. While the other belligerents began to view gas weapons as a nuisance and a means of harassment, chemical attacks remained deadly and effective against the Americans. Doughboys in the 82nd never seemed to learn from the mistakes of others and suffered large casualties from gas throughout the Meuse-Argonne offensive. Sirmon, *That's War*, 206-207 and 258.

³⁵Owens to "Bubber," August 2, 1918, Owens Scrapbook.

around in the rain and slush and mire of no-mans land for several hours—and were still out there when our artillery opened its barrage. . . . It was real fun to stand out there—altho' we were soaking wet and half freezing—and listen to the "music." . . . In addition to what we could see of our own guns, we could see the flashes of Jerry's guns as he—very weakly—tried to counter barrage. Of course, lots of his shells were going over us too. But, in spite of the fact that we had neither dug-outs or trenches, we didn't feel the slightest unease, but we knew they were headed for somebody further to the rear than ourselves—and as long as that was the case, we didn't much care where they went—so long as they didn't land in our kitchen. . . . We finally located our woods at about 2:15 A.M. It was still so dark we could hardly see anything, so I placed my men in one corner of the woods and told them we'd hold tight till it got lighter. . . . As soon as it got light enough for us to get thru' the mire we found there, the rest of us scoured the patch of woods from edge to edge and corner to corner. The only Bosch we found were "good" ones. They were buried in 1916. We were rather surprised—and, I must say, disappointed—not to find any live Germans over there. We'd walked around so long and were so wet and cold that we were in such a humor that no Bosch would have fared well in our hands.³⁸

Wet and tired, the platoon spent the rest of the day in the woods eating hardtack and "bully beef," watching American aircraft attacking enemy positions and observing the intermittent German and Allied artillery duels. While Owens' company and battalion commanders commended his work, he noted, "our stint seemed easy enough to us" and admitted "the truth is anybody could have done it."³⁹

During the St. Mihiel operation, Owens experienced the impact of the "fog of war," that nebulous element that sows confusion, uncertainty and chance into every military operation. The lieutenant's floundering in no-mans land reflects a lack of training and a large degree of both good and bad luck. His confident and bellicose statements aside, given the physical state of his soldiers and his own confusion, Owens was fortunate to find the woods unoccupied by the Germans. Other members of his division were not so lucky. When the 82nd pulled out of the St. Mihiel

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*

AEF's doughboys had never fired their rifles in training.⁴² Pershing wanted to use firepower and maneuver to defeat the Germans but hedged his bets by refusing to downsize his massive and unwieldy "square" divisions. With over 28,000 men, the "square" division was about the size of a British or French corps and, in theory, could absorb a large number of casualties. Although Pershing planned the Meuse-Argonne as a show of American tactical finesse, poor training, difficult terrain and the lack of a developed war fighting doctrine turned the campaign into a series of half-coordinated frontal assaults that smothered the German defenders under the weight of American bodies.

For the first week of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the 82nd Division remained out of the lines as part of the First Army's reserves. On October 3 the division moved to Varennes-en-Argonne and made its last minute preparations before entering the battle. While parts of the division occupied the front-lines on October 6, Owens' brigade remained behind as the First Corps reserve. From October 7 to 8, the division's 164th Infantry Brigade attacked the northeast corner of the Argonne Forest and temporarily captured the town of Corney. During the 164th Brigade's fighting, Corporal Alvin York gained notoriety and a Medal of Honor for killing 15 and capturing 132 Germans.⁴³ On the night of October 8, after marching through a driving rainstorm and the traffic and mud clogged roads of the American rear area, Owens' regiment finally entered the fight after relieving troops from the 28th Division at Montblainville. The day before, Owens wrote what proved to be his last letter to Aline. In the letter he unburdened his thoughts but still tried to reassure his wife and, perhaps himself, before going into action. He wrote:

I'm not going to attempt to answer all the cheering and loved filled letters I've received from you during the past few days. We've had a rather strenuous little hike today and I'm going to bed soon. We are still in reserve but we moved up a few miles nearer the front this A.M. We don't know when—if ever—we will be used in this push . . . but it doesn't seem probable that it will continue much longer with-

⁴²Coffman, *The War to End All Wars*, 66.

⁴³War Department, *Order of Battle*, 353-55; Buxton, *Official History*, 31-41 and 46-64; and American Battle Monuments Commission, *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (Washington, D.C., 1938), 229-30.

me (if such a thing is allowed to others) to whom he longs to return and for whom he can feel that he is fighting. My sole thought and desire now is for the war to be finished so I can come back to you. That is why we are all so anxious "to get into it." We feel that the addition of our little effort will have its part to play towards bringing the Kaiser to his knees. I have often told you that I felt no "misgivings" about what may happen to me as a result of my getting into some real action. Something has always seemed to tell me that I'd come back all right. That faith is just as strong as ever.⁴⁴

In the letter, Owens sounded confident but tired and a little anxious. In fact, the young officer was more weary than he let on. The entire week before his regiment entered the lines, Owens had been confined to a cot with a case of the grippe. He disobeyed the regimental surgeon's orders by accompanying his unit to the front.⁴⁵ Owens was not alone in his discomfort. Poor weather, a lack of rest, shortages of clothing and short rations plagued the health of the division. One doughboy remembered: "They threw away their raincoats and overcoats when they went over the top, so that later they had nothing at all to protect them from the cold and the wet. They went for days and days, sleeping in fox-holes filled with ice-water, living on nothing but bully beef and water."⁴⁶ In the opening phase of the Meuse-Argonne battle, the 82nd's medical staff reported a constant population of around 700 soldiers hospitalized for diarrhea, colds and exhaustion.⁴⁷

Even for fully trained troops the Argonne Forest would have presented a formidable obstacle. The forest measured 72 by 15 heavily wooded kilometers interspersed with steep hills and deep ravines. To this naturally defensible terrain, the Germans added a series of well-sited and fortified entrenchments. After viewing some of the captured works Owens noted: "He [the Germans] left a number of elegantly furnished dugouts here in the woods. Quite a number of them are wired for electric lights; others are

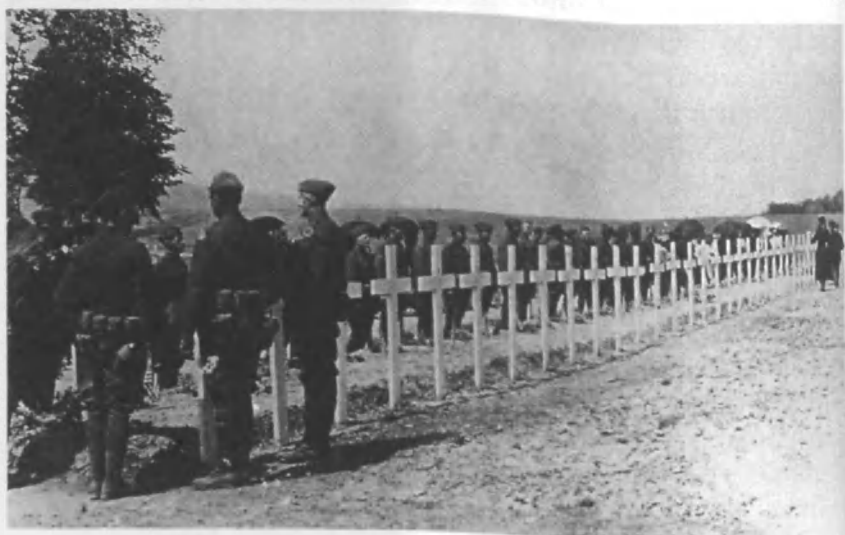
⁴⁴"Last Letter from Lieut. J. Erwin Owens," *Lavonia Times and Gage*, no date. The original letter was from Owens to "My Dearest Little Wife," October 7, 1918, Owens Scrapbook.

⁴⁵Howell, "Justus Erwin Owens," 246-47.

⁴⁶*The Service Record: Atlanta's Military Weekly*, June 5, 1919, 57.

⁴⁷War Department, *Annual Report for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1919*, Vol. 1, Part 3, Continued (Washington, D.C., 1920), 3374-76. High levels of sickness and fatigue among American troops in the Argonne are also noted in Sirmon, *That's War*, 258; and Holden, *War Memories*, 151 and 167.

The photograph below depicts the dedication of the American military cemetery where Justus Owens and 14,200 other Americans killed during the Meuse-Argonne offensive are buried. The cemetery, at Romagne, France, remains by far the largest American burial site from both World Wars in Europe. The YMCA helped soothe grieving families by sending them photographs of loved ones' graves, such as that at right sent to Justus Owens' family in Georgia. *Both photographs from the Owens Scrapbook.*





In November 1918, students from Marietta High School, where Justus Owens taught science from 1915 to 1917, commemorated his death with a special assembly, culminating with the presentation of his photograph for display in the school's auditorium. *Photograph from the Owens Scrapbook.*

old lieutenant near the spot where he fell.⁵² After the Armistice, Owens' body was reinterred at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery at Romagne. At the request of his family, the body was returned to the United States and buried in Canon, Georgia on September 13, 1921. Justus Owens had finally come home.

⁵²Howell to "Mrs. Barnes" (Mattie Barnes), December 15, 1918.