

# The Last Ones to Fire:

## The 11th Field Artillery in World War I

By Kevin Hymel,  
Army Historical Foundation Research Associate



The doughboys of Battery E, 11th Field Artillery carefully loaded the 95-pound shell into *Calamity Jane*, the name of their favorite 155mm artillery piece. With the round in place, the men locked it into the breech and prepared to pull the lanyard. An officer, looking at his watch, stepped forward. Raising his hand, he kept his eye on his watch, waiting for the second hand to reach twelve. When it did he dropped his hand. A soldier yanked the lanyard. *Calamity Jane* fired. It was 1100 hrs, 11 November 1918. World War I was over.

The 11th Field Artillery may have been just another artillery regiment among the vast numbers of American troops and weapons that comprised the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), but the unit distinguished itself by being given the honor of firing the closing shot on 11 November 1918, effectively ending the First World War.

When the 11th Field Artillery was constituted as a regular unit into the United States Army on paper 3 June 1916, the struggle in Europe had been going on for almost two years. The United States, while still neutral, was facing its own problems in Mexico. When General John J. Pershing led his small army into Mexico to find and capture the bandit Pancho Villa, tensions soared between the two countries, making war seem inevitable. On 6 May 1916, the War Department dispatched the National Guard of Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico to the border, while Congress passed the National Defense Act of 1916. While the new law focused on federalizing the National Guard, creating Reserve Officer Training Corps at universities and granting the federal government emergency powers, it also laid the foundation for a five-year Regular Army expansion. Included in this expansion was the creation of 21 field artillery regiments.

Overseas events accelerated the expansion. The American public was still enraged by Germany's sinking of the British liner *Lusitania*, which killed 128 Americans. It was Germany's campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare, along with Germany's proposal to Mexico that she join a war against the U.S., that brought the nation to declare war on 6 April 1917.

Two months later, 10 officers and 200 enlisted men were transferred from the 6th Field Artillery to actually create the new 11th Field Artillery at Camp Harry Jones near Douglas, Arizona. Additional Regular Army soldiers and draftees from New York, Ohio, Missouri and California brought the unit to full wartime strength. The regiment consisted of 63 officers and 1,496 enlisted men working 24 guns. The regiment, commanded by a colonel, contained three battalions, each commanded by a major. Each battalion had two batteries, commanded by captains, and each battery contained four guns, each pair commanded by lieutenants. The regiment's first mission was to put out a forest fire in the Chiracahira Mountains, north of Douglas, in late June 1917.

On 2 September 1917, Colonel Harry G. Bishop assumed command of the 11th, and led the unit through drill, range firing, classes, and guard duty. The unit paraded for Liberty Bond drives and conducted fifteen-mile hikes to improve esprit de corps and reveal weaknesses in the artillery equipment. By the end of the year, after much shaking down, the regiment was changed from a horse-drawn unit, equipped with 4.7-inch howitzers, to a motorized unit equipped with 155mm howitzers. Unfortunately, there were no motor vehicles to replace the departing horses, and the 11th became "foot" artillery until the unit arrived in France.

In April 1918, the 11th was ordered to Fort Sill, Oklahoma where it became part of the 6th Field Artillery Brigade, 6th Infantry Division. Housed at Camp Doniphan, which adjoined the fort, the 11th began intensive artillery and combat training in preparation for overseas assignment. The battlefields of Europe were proving to be a true artilleryman's war. Improvements in technology enabled artillery to fire and hit objects well beyond visual range. Breech loading guns permitted rapid firing. As a result, the casualties of the war had been staggering. The Battle of Verdun alone claimed 300,000 casualties on both sides, mainly from artillery. Despite their lack of experience, the training of U.S. troops was dominated by American instructors, not the Allied instructors who had come to the U.S. to help the American Army. General Pershing, having seen the bloody and futile trench warfare of the Allies, wanted open warfare practiced with large unit assaults, with principal emphasis on rifle fire and artillery support. This would be the kind of training to which the 11th Field Artillery was subjected.

Before the 11th completed its training, Colonel Bishop was replaced by LTC William F. Sharp, who would bring the unit to France. Two months later the regiment packed up and left for Camp Mills on Long Island, New York. On 14 July, 1918, it sailed for England on board the Royal

Mail Steamer *Carolina*.

The regiment arrived in Liverpool, England, on 26 July. Two weeks later the 11th marched into Southampton and crossed the English Channel aboard the *S.S. Londonderry* to Cherbourg. Instead of going into battle, the 11th was transported by train diagonally across France for training at Camp du Valdahon, along the Swiss border near the town of Besancon.

While another artillery regiment completed its training, the 11th itself occupied the towns of Etalans, Fallerans and Valdahon. Within a few days the regiment began drilling on 155mm Schneider howitzers, practicing night firing as well as conducting transportation and gas drills. During this training, COL Willis G. Peace, the officer who would eventually lead the regiment into combat, took command of the 11th on 13 August. It was also during this training that the 1918 influenza epidemic hit the unit, killing more men than would be lost in combat. The epidemic eventually claimed 57,000 soldiers of the AEF. It was not until 22 October that the 11th left Camp du Valdahon and arrived in the Argonne Forest, west of Verdun.

American doughboys had already proven themselves at Cantigny, where the 1st Infantry Division launched the first American attack of the war; at the Meuse River, where two divisions blunted Germany's last offensive; and at St. Mihiel, where American and French forces pinched off a German salient. The German army seemed spent and Allied leaders believed the war could be won with one more offensive.

On September 26, three U.S. corps, comprising nine divisions and supported by the French, launched a three-pronged attack on the Germans between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest. The initial assault went poorly. The Germans were well entrenched and soon reinforced the area with six additional divisions. Pershing halted the assault to reorganize his troops. This respite gave his supporting artillery regiments an opportunity to advance to the new front along rain-soaked muddy roads. The assault resumed on 4 October with better results.

The 11th received orders to leave the 6th Division and report to Avocourt, fifteen miles from their debarkation point. The regiment marched to its new assignment where it was attached to the 58th Field Artillery Brigade, 33rd Infantry Division, giving support to the 89th Division. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive was already a month old when the unit joined the fight and set up positions southwest of Romagne, France, only two miles from the front line, the regiment looked forward to taking part in the battle.

On the night of 26 October, 1918, the howitzers of the 11th Field Artillery fired their first shots at the town of BoClair. For the next few days, enemy planes and artillery hit the unit but caused no serious injuries. On 1 November, the 11th participated in the largest artillery barrage of the war to that date. For four and a half hours the unit rained shells on the enemy line, preparing the battlefield for the infantry to go over the top. As the attack succeeded, the 11th advanced its guns to the south of Remonville, firing close range at the Germans all day before moving to the town of Barricourt. The static war that dominated the fighting on the Western Front had finally come to an end. The entire American First Army was on the offensive and would remain that way until the end of the war.

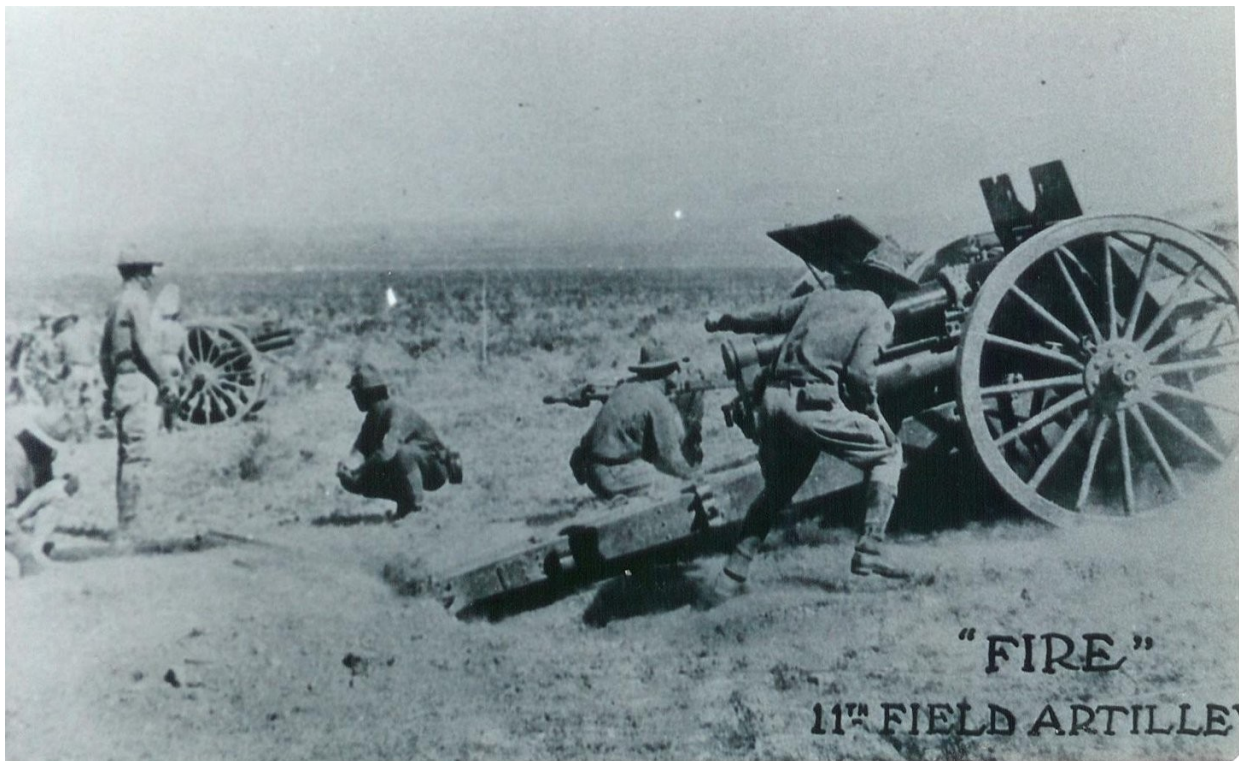
As the American attack surged forward, the regiment moved north again on 4 November, for Maucourt Farm, but the crush of men and supplies along the roads was so dense that the unit became fragmented and spread out along the road. Separated from the rest of the unit, Battery E ended up east of the town of Beafort, in front of Allied infantry lines and under heavy artillery fire. On 6 November, the battery's guns were the first Allied guns to open up against the important German railway hub at Metz-Sedan, effectively silencing a German battery 3,000 yards away. One American general commented that he had never seen heavy artillery so far forward. The battery remained in that position until the end of the war, exchanging salvos with German artillery. The German defenses had cracked. The American army had ruptured the entire German position between Sedan and Metz.

The other batteries of the 11th made it to the Maucourt Farm and remained there until called into action to support the 89th Division's crossing of the Meuse River. The regiment, save for Battery E, made its way to Foret de Jaulnay. Wearing gas masks for half the journey they harassed the Germans on the other side of the river while the Division prepared to cross. Finally, on 10 November, engineers brought up pontoons and constructed two foot bridges, allowing the division to advance while the guns of the 11th opened with direct fire on the German positions along the river. The doughboys did not realize it, but the Germans were on the verge of collapse. While the German lines along the Western Front were breaking, Germany's allies, Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Turks, were retreating in Italy, the Balkans, and Palestine. Faced with revolution at home and defection of its allies, Germany sought an armistice.

Meuse-Argonne proved to be the bloodiest battle for the Americans in World War I. The forty-seven day battle involved 1.2 million American soldiers. Artillery units fired more rounds than

the entire Union Army during the American Civil War. About half the total AEF casualties occurred in the Meuse-Argonne. The aggressiveness and skill of the 11th Field Artillery helped make American victory possible. The unit suffered 12 killed and 45 men wounded during the battle of Meuse-Argonne.

On 11 November, 1918, with the 89th Division across the river, the 11th Regimental Headquarters received orders that the war would end that day at 11:00 A.M. The men were too exhausted to cheer, but they were relieved that they had survived some of the toughest fighting ever seen in American military history. Earlier, Battery, E, still in Beaufort, was awarded the honor of firing the closing shot of the war. There is no explanation why the 11th was chosen, but it is possible some enterprising officer in the American high command noticed the succession of elevens in the cease-fire order and picked the 11th to play along with the consistency. And so it was at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day, of the eleventh month of 1918 that *Calamity Jane*, of Battery E, 11th Field Artillery, which had fired the first shots of the 6 November attack, also fired the last U.S. artillery round of the war.



With the war over, the 11th Field Artillery moved across the Meuse River to the town of Cervisy, and the regiment's priority switched from killing Germans to keeping warm. On 9 December, the unit began an eight-day march to rejoin the 6th Division near Dijon, where it

remained for five months before reporting to Brest to begin the journey home. The men's feelings of depression and homesickness were changed to pride on 10 April, 1919, when General Pershing personally decorated the 11th's colors and pinned Distinguished Service Crosses on several men of the regiment. On 3 June, the 11th sailed for the United States on board the *S.S. Mount Vernon* and arrived in New York on 10 June, 1919. It then proceeded to Camp Mills where some of its soldiers were discharged. On 19 June, 1919, the 11th reached its final destination at Camp Grant near Rockford, Illinois, where it remained until 1921 when it was assigned to the Hawaiian Division on 1 March 1921. The 11th Field Artillery later fought with distinction in the Pacific Theater of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam, and elements remain on active duty to this day.

*For More Information:*

Dickieson, Raymond D. *From Horses to Missiles, The Story of the 11th Field Artillery 1916 - 1959*. 11th Field Artillery Veterans Assoc, 1960.

Duff, James L. *The Eleventh Field Artillery*. Dijon, France, 1919.

McKinney, J.E. *Field Artillery: Regular Army and Army Reserve*. U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1992.