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A Visit with the Lost Battalion

By James Legg

Regular readers may recall that in 2009 I was fortunate to work with the Sergeant York Project in the Argonne Forest in northern France (see *Legacy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, March 2010, pages 18-22). Last fall, I returned to the Argonne to work for several days on another project related to the American Meuse-Argonne Offensive of 1918.

After the successful completion of the Sergeant York field work in 2009, one of the principals in that project, my old friend Brad Posey, proposed a new research effort. His "Lost Battalion Project" would examine the site of the other great legend of Americans in the Meuse-Argonne, the epic stand of a portion of the 77th Division after it was cut off and surrounded deep behind German lines (see page 15). The Lost Battalion siege position, or "pocket," had never received archaeological attention of any sort, but its location was well known, and it had been worked over by illegal relic hunters for decades. Posey's original plan was to document the physical features remaining on the site (fighting positions, shell holes, etc.), and to salvage whatever remnant remained of the artifacts with a systematic, piece-plotted metal detecting survey. His research proposal to the French archaeological authorities was accepted, but permission from the private

owner of the site was denied. However, the owners and managers of all of the various properties in a huge tract of the Argonne Forest to the south of the Lost Battalion position soon granted access. This area included everything from the southern edge of the Lost Battalion position, about 1,800 meters south to the vicinity of the 77th Division front on October 1st 1918. The new research design for the project necessarily excluded the Lost Battalion site proper, but was otherwise far more ambitious. The project has been underway for more than three years, with Brad Posey and assorted volunteers travelling from Germany to work over holidays and long weekends; volunteers have also come from Great Britain and the U.S. Permitting, oversight, and support have been provided by Yves Desfossés, the regional archaeologist for the Champagne-Marne. Yves has received Posey's draft reports and collections from the first two years of work. Recently he provided high-resolution LIDAR mapping of the area that reveals every shell hole, entrenchment, and bunker.

The project area was the scene of perhaps a dozen small-unit actions immediately proceeding, and during, the Lost Battalion siege and relief. Posey's new plan was to define and document these various engagements with metal

initially skeptical that any sort of coherent picture would emerge, and predicted a generalized, essentially anonymous scatter of battle artifacts throughout the project area. The results to date have proven me entirely wrong.

Several factors have contributed to the clarity of the results to. First, like the Sergeant York site, the Lost Battalion project area is somewhat removed from the static Western Front, and there was no fighting there before or after the events of October 1st to 7th, 1918. Second, the firefights were relatively small and discrete, and they were scattered over a large area—there is no general clutter of artifacts. Third, while the Lost Battalion position itself has been heavily collected, the project area to the south appeared to be nearly undisturbed when work began in 2009. Finally, the American and German historical sources for the Lost Battalion affair are unusually rich. These include not only official records, such as reports, messages, and trench maps, but also a large body of participant testimony. One of the most useful sources has been the records and grave maps documenting the removal of temporary burials from the battlefield in the several years after 1918—most of the dead were identified, and most were buried at or near where they fell (their empty grave features are still visible). This allows the correlation of certain events known to have caused particular casualties with modern locations. Artifacts marked with individual or unit identifications have also offered significant clues—these have included American collar insignia, marked canteens and mess kits, and a German ID tag.

I was finally able to make an appearance in October 2012, when I joined Brad Posey for a round of fieldwork. In spite of regular rain, we managed to accomplish some coverage in an area where part of an American company was pinned down about 20 meters in front of a German trench, near the western edge



Fig. 1: Brad Posey with a German M1917 rifle grenade. (Photo by James Legg)

detector survey, with the goal of finally figuring out who did what and where, during this remarkably confused interval. To suggest that the Americans and Germans were victims of the "fog of war" is an understatement, given that the maneuvering and fighting took place in a dense forest, often at night, and involved units that were typically lost and out of communication. I was



Fig. 2: The complete collection from an individual American rifleman's firing position. These .30'06 rifle cartridges and stripper clips were recovered from an area about a meter in diameter. The very limited dispersion suggests that the rifle was fired from a prone position, not surprising under the circumstances. (Photo by James Legg)

of the Argonne Forest. Earlier, Posey had found evidence for several American casualties in this location, each marked by a grouping of uniform and equipment artifacts. When I visited, the goal was to

finish defining the American position. We found discrete clusters of fired American cartridge cases in a rough line paralleling the trench, each cluster representing the firing position of an individual rifleman

or light machine gunner (riflemen were represented by U.S. .30'06 cases, machine gunners by French 8mm cases). Also along this line were fragments from several German hand grenades. Beyond the left (west) flank of the American line, we found a German firing position, including numerous fired and unfired 7.92mm cartridges and the cap from a German stick grenade. This suggested an effort by the Germans to turn the American flank. Elsewhere, I detected a nearly complete bandolier of 55 (of 60) U.S. .30'06 cartridges.

The Lost Battalion fieldwork continues this spring, and at this stage, is perhaps half finished. There is still some hope that the siege "pocket" site itself might be accessed and documented, but there is still plenty of ground to cover in the existing project area. In any case, the project is already an outstanding contribution to battlefield archaeology. The clarity of the data is remarkable, and I have no doubt that Brad Posey will be able to demonstrate for the first time who did what and where, in that part of the Argonne Forest in early October 1918.



Fig. 3: Documentation photos of live ammunition, including a bandolier-load of U.S. .30'06 rifle cartridges, and unfired French M1916 VB rifle grenades (as used by the American Expeditionary Force) from the location of an American casualty. Unfired small arms ammunition and live ordnance cannot be retained, much less taken back across the German border for lab work, so these materials are documented on site. (Photo by James Legg)