CHAPTER 11

United States Field Artillery in World War I

Janice E. McKenney

Fighting had been raging in Europe almost three years before the United States entered the First World War in April 1917. The Allies were in dire need of the fresh manpower and war materiel that America could provide, which eventually sealed the fate of Germany. The Allies did not expect artillery expertise, although by the end of the war the Americans were able to provide it. Armed and trained mostly by the French and British, the United States field artillery became a first-class fighting force. Imbued by the ideals of mobility and open warfare, the American field artillery eventually adapted to prevailing trench warfare tactics.1

Before Hostilities

When the war began in Europe, the United States had only the rudiments of modern field artillery. The Regular Army field artillery at the time consisted of six regiments, containing 36 field batteries. Each regiment was organized into two battalions of three four-gun batteries. The 1st, 3rd, and 5th Field Artillery were organized as light artillery to serve with infantry troops, the 2nd and 4th as mountain or pack artillery, and the 6th as horse artillery to serve with the cavalry. The troops were scattered among the states, the Philippines, Hawaii, and Mexico. The National Guard field artillery then consisted of three regiments, ten battalions, and 17 separate batteries.2 Favoring mobility and open warfare, the Army armed its field artillery with mostly light weapons.

Soon after the French introduced their 75mm gun in the late 19th century, the United States had begun work on a similar 3-inch (76.2mm) field gun. The effort resulted in the 1902 model, and issue began two years later. Its sights were similar to those on the French 75mm piece, which made the 1902 model the first American weapon suitable for indirect laying. It fired a 15-pound shrapnel or

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1 This chapter is based mainly on Chapter 5 of J.E. McKenney, The Organization of Field Artillery in the United States Army, 1775–2003 (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2007), which is extensively footnoted.

explosive shell to an effective range of 6,500 yards and a maximum range of 8,000 yards. Improvements were later made on the tube and breech, but subsequent models were commonly referred to as the 1902 model 3-inch gun. It was the principal field piece of the Army from 1905 to 1917. With the new gun, the Army was able in 1905 to adopt indirect fire, although the full potential of the technique was not realized until after the war with the advent of modern communications. In the meantime, the Ordnance Department was working on heavier materiel in the 3.8-, 4.7-, and 6-inch categories.3

Training was improved. The Army had established the School of Fire for Field Artillery at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, in 1911, one year after the organization of the Field Artillery Association, which published the Field Artillery Journal. Although the new journal was only semi-official, the articles were considered authoritative and reliable. As a consequence, the magazine became the ‘spokesman’ for the branch. During the war the Journal of the United States Artillery, the corresponding magazine of the Coast Artillery Corps, added anti-aircraft, heavy, and trench artillery to its coverage. In 1913, the Field Artillery Board, which had been established at Fort Riley, Kansas, to study and report on all subjects pertaining to field artillery, moved to Fort Sill.4

Disturbances along the Mexican border provided practical testing of doctrinal and organizational changes. From 1911 through 1916, Mexico held the attention of the Army. Cognizant of problems with the ad hoc maneuver division organized for the border, and of the need for creating permanent tactical divisional organizations, the Army War College undertook a study and published its results in 1912 as The Organization of the Land Forces of the United States, also known as the Stimson Plan after Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, who had been consulted. The Stimson Plan, which constituted a whole program for mobilization, along with an expanded revision prepared in 1915 entitled Statement of a Proper Military Policy for the United States, later influenced Congress in framing the National Defense Act of 1916.5

The National Defense Act of 1916, a milestone in the Army’s history, reorganized the land forces of the United States into four components: the Regular Army; the National Guard; the Organized Reserves; and the Volunteer Army.

3 J.E. McKenney, The Organization of Field Artillery, p. 99; K.F. Schreier, Jr., “The U.S. Army 3 Inch Field Gun Model 1902,” Military Collector & Historian 25 (Winter 1973), 185–92. The Germans had redesigned their 77mm gun with a spring recoil, and the 3-inch field gun was modeled after it rather than the hydropneumatic recoil system of the French “75”

4 J.E. McKenney, The Organization of Field Artillery, pp. 102–103.