

Over There

Celebrating the One Hundredth Anniversary of First Army

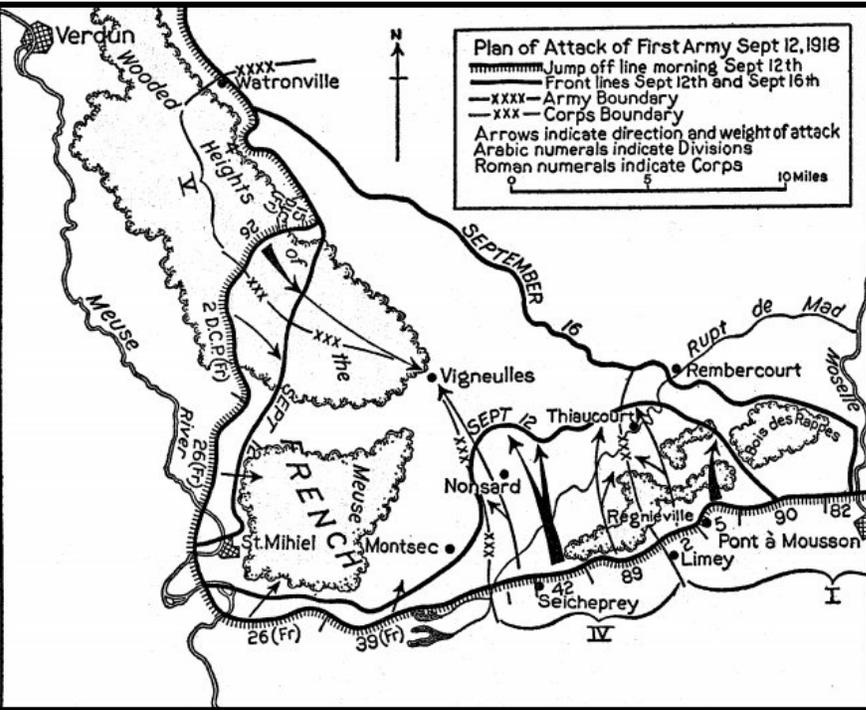
“First in Deed”

“First Army’s First D-Day”

Ninety-nine years ago this week, the St. Mihiel Offensive (12 to 16 September 1918) would establish the unproven U.S. Army in the eyes of the French, British and opposing German forces. The offensive proved to be the first of its kind in many ways for the American Expeditionary Forces and would portend how the war would be fought. This would be the first and only major offensive that the American Expeditionary Forces independently led as an organized force separate from their Allies. It would be the first offensive that the first organized field army in United States history (First Army) would lead. The attack would be the first time, at this point, that more than half a million American Soldiers were engaged in a single attack, occurring along a 30-mile-wide German position that jutted 15 miles into Allied lines. The attack would also mark the single largest use of airplanes in history with 1,500 Allied planes involved in various capacities during the attack. Finally, this attack would become the first officially designated D-Day in United States Army history.¹ D-day was set for 12 September 1918 and was announced by Field Order Number 9, First Army, American Expeditionary Forces, dated September 7, 1918: ‘The First Army will attack at H hour on D-Day with the object of forcing the evacuation of the St. Mihiel Salient.’ The start of the St. Mihiel offensive would be a record-setting day for the Americans on a salient that had formed in 1914 and remained unbroken, even after repeated attacks by the French Army.

General John Pershing, the senior American Commander and First Army’s Commander was junior in status to his British and French counter parts, at this point in the war, and he had to obtain French Field Marshal Foch's permission to take over an entire section of the St. Mihiel sector. The request was accomodated by leaving three American divisions on the Vesle front under French command during the offensive.² Pershing promised Foch that, in addition to other concessions, if First Army carried out the St. Mihiel attack on its own it would be ready to disengage, move and re-engage with a much greater American attack in the Meuse-Argonne sector in approximately two weeks. This was a lofty promise but one that was successfully carried out with only minor delays.

Senior officers expected high casualties. Colonel George Marshall, one of the planners of the St. Mihiel Offensive, wrote in his account of the battle: “About fifty thousand (50,000) casualties was the percentage normally to be expected and hospitalization was prepared accordingly. Nevertheless, if we suffered that many casualties during the brief period involved, the American people, not



First Army Soldiers marching into the St. Mihiel salient on the morning of September 12, 1918.



"Fresnes-en-Woevre, in the St. Mihiel sector where terrific fighting took place." Schutz Group Photographers, 1918.

accustomed, as were our Allies, to such huge payments in human life, would have seized upon the criticism of any Allied official as a basis for condemning our own Commander in Chief."

Marshall suggested to General Pershing that they precede their attack with an 18-hour artillery bombardment aimed at the Germans' barbed wire defenses. Although long bombardments sometimes lasting days were the norm in World War One, Pershing decided to limit the bombardment in this instance to just four hours to retain the element of surprise. The attack began at 5 a.m. on the morning of September 12. Tactically, the terrain became the biggest threat to the attacking American forces. After five days of rain, prior to the attack, the ground became almost impassible to both the tanks and infantry. The weather section of I Corps operation order stated: "Visibility: Heavy driving wind and rain during parts of day and night. Roads: Very muddy."

The many in-depth series of trenches, wire obstacles, and machine-gun nests that the Germans installed to augment their defensive positions would prove to be another obstacle for First Army. The Renaults designed to cross six-foot trenches in

dry weather, were being forced by their crews to negotiate line after line of trenches that were eight feet deep and ten to fourteen feet wide in horrible mud.³ The French considered the enemy's barbed wire defenses impassable until engineers, artillery, and tanks could remove them, but impatient American troops simply found ways to walk over the barbed wire. Eight hundred astonished French officers visited the American positions two days after the battle to see for themselves how First Army negotiated the obstacles. "A French officer in this party told me afterwards that the evidence on the ground convinced him that our infantry had walked over the wire, but he thought perhaps they were assisted in this remarkable performance by the size of their feet," Marshall recounted.⁴

By the evening of September 12, most American troops attacking the salient's southern boundary were a day ahead of their scheduled objective. "The German resistance on this part of the front was disorganized by the rapidity of our advance and was soon overcome," Pershing wrote.⁵ By 6 a.m. on September 13, the Americans had entered Vigneulles from both the southern and western directions. "The salient was closed and our troops were masters of the field," Pershing declared in his account of that moment.⁶ By the evening of the September 13 First Army reached its final objective of the offensive, completely erasing the bulge of German-held territory that had existed for four years. The following day the German forces mounted several counterattacks; all were repulsed. As one observer, Sgt. Edwin Gerth, of the 51st Field Artillery noted "A Great Day for the Americans! Our infantry is still pushing 'em back. Many prisoners are going by. We were at guns all morning, but had to stay in camp all afternoon. We are out of range and await orders to move up. Steady stream of men and material going up constantly. Two of our boys sneaked off and went up to the old Hun trenches and brought back lots of Hun souvenirs-razors, glasses, pictures, equipment, etc."⁷

"The St. Mihiel Salient, that needle point on the Western Front for four long years, had been nipped off," wrote American Captain Barnwell Rhett Legge in a 1919 account. "The First Army, but recently come into being, gave to the world tangible evidence of America's power."⁸ The battle of St. Mihiel also serves as a teaching tool to modern tactical commanders regarding the necessity to issue clear and concise orders that allow small unit leaders the freedom to carry out their commander's intent during the battle or (mission command).

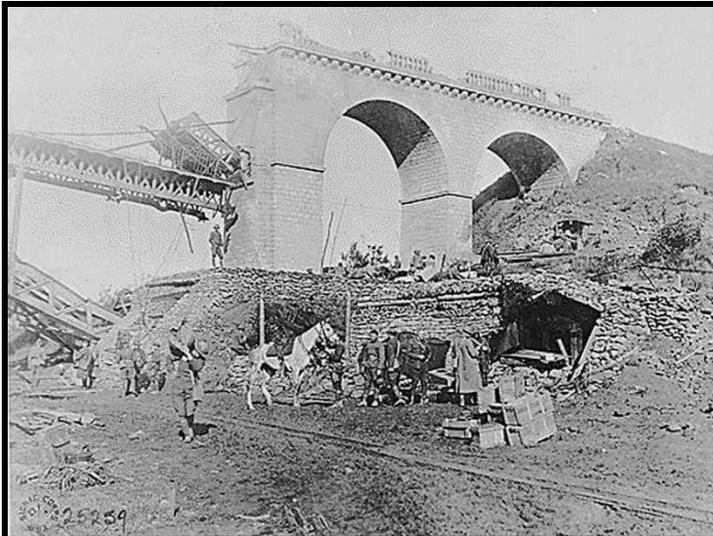


German prisoners that were captured on the first day of the St. Mihiel offensive.

As an example, the combat commanders participating in the operation, namely Colonel George S. Patton Jr. and his subordinate officers, believed that by rapidly adapting to a situation their personal leadership could influence events on the battlefield. The audacity of the small unit leaders proved that officers who commanded their soldiers from the front, like Patton and his subordinates, would ease the chaos of the battle.

Through September 16 First Army consolidated and mounted local operations around the new lines to secure their grip on the newly conquered territory. They would then initiate a handover to the French and conduct a follow on movement to the Ardennes sector. Overall, as a relatively limited offensive, the St. Mihiel operation proved a huge success for the Americans and First Army. During combat operations First Army inflicted German casualties of approximately 2,000 killed in action, 5,500 wounded in action took 15,000 prisoners and captured 450 pieces of artillery and countless machineguns. This cost included approximately 7,000 casualties for an attack that was expected to cost First Army over 50,000 Soldiers. "On my visit to several corps and division headquarters the following day, I found all jubilant over the victory and overflowing with incidents of the fighting, reciting many feats of heroism among the troops," Pershing wrote.⁹

1. Hanlon, Michael. "St. Mihiel Offensive". <http://www.worldwar1.com/dbc/stmihiel.htm>
2. Giese, Joseph, Captain. "Battle Analysis of St. Mihiel." Center for Military History. 2004
3. Ibid Giese.
4. Adwar, Corey. "America Fought Its First D-Day 96 Years Ago Today, And It Was A Huge Success." Business Insider 12 SEP 2014. <http://www.businessinsider.com/battle-of-st-mihiel-was-americas-first-d-day-2014-9>
5. Ibid Hanlon
6. Ibid Adwar
7. Ibid Hanlon
8. Ibid Hanlon
9. Ibid Giese



Headquarters of the American 89th Division next to a destroyed bridge at the Battle of St. Mihiel.



An American tank, assigned to First Army, advancing ahead of a trench in the Battle of St. Mihiel.

First Army Distinctive Unit Insignia

The basic design was suggested by the authorized shoulder sleeve insignia of the First Army. The interlaced fleur-de-lis represent wartime service in France and alludes to the initial organization of the Headquarters Company as the Headquarters Troop, First Army at La Ferte-sous-Jouarre, France 10 August 1918. The three stars at the top of the letter "A" are for Lorraine 1918, St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne campaigns in which the First Army participated in World War I. The five stars on the center cross bar are for the Normandy, Northern France, Rhineland, Ardennes-Alsace and Central Europe campaigns in which the First Army participated in World War II, the red arrowhead referring to the assault landing on the Normandy beaches. The motto "First In Deed" is based on the numerical designation, purpose and achievements of the First United States Army.

