



100th Anniversary of World War I:

Battle of St. Mihiel

12 September 1918—15 September 1918

This MONTH in military history

- 1675 King Philip’s War begins
- 1863 Vicksburg surrendered
- 1863 Battle of Gettysburg
- 1876 Battle of Little Big Horn
- 1898 Marines land at Guantanamo Bay
- 1917 AEF arrives in France
- 1918 Battle of Belleau Wood
- 1941 Operation Barbarossa
- 1950 Korean War begins
- 1966 Hanoi bombed for the first time
- 1976 First women enroll at West Point

As A Matter of Fact

Rock Island Arsenal kept former Italian POW’s during World War II. When Italy surrendered to the allies, the Italian soldiers were released, but with Germany continuing to occupy Italy, the soldiers were employed with non-critical jobs in constructions and grounds-keeping on Rock Island.

June Trivia!

- 1. What was the largest seaborne invasion in history?
- 2. What was the name of the military analyst who gave the Pentagon Papers to the New York Times?
- 3. In what year was the second peacetime draft instituted in the United States?

For answers, go to the announcement section on the ASC History SharePoint site .



The battles of World War I changed how war was recognized to modern soldiers. Cantigny established the strength of combined arms on the modern battlefield and Belleau Wood turned Marines into Devil Dogs. Yet, the American Army for all of its dash and derring-do, still lacked a simplified process of command and control. The Battle of St. Mihiel witnessed the birth of the modern operations order that allowed for independent initiative from front line commanders.

For four days in mid-September 1918, eleven Allied and thirteen German divisions faced each other across a wedge some two hundred miles in area. Bounded by Pont-à-Mousson to the south, St. Mihiel to the west, and Verdun to the north, these rolling hills and heights along the river Meuse dominated the plain. Since 1914 the Germans had occupied the region, erecting a fortress of steel, concrete, barbed-wire, and machine gun nests threatening the whole region between Verdun and Nance and interrupting rail traffic between Berlin and Paris.

If the Americans could take the two massive German rail centers at Sedan, they might win a victory and possibly the war. Thus, the American Army shifted west from St. Mihiel. The success of this operation was dependent on the soldier’s ability to follow General Pershing’s orders. A model of clarity, illustrating that brevity is also the soul of war, Pershing’s eight page order shamed the French whose 150 page proposal defied comprehension. Understanding that ownership and initiative represent the essence of small-unit leadership, Pershing divided the sector into parts

and left responsibility for teaching those parts to individual unit commanders.

These two Army Corps were to deliver the principal attack, the line pivoting on the center division of the First Corps. The First Division on the left of the Fourth Corps was charged with the double mission of covering its own flank while advancing some twenty kilometers due north toward the heart of the salient, where it was to make contact with the troops of the Fifth Corps. On the western face of the salient lay Major General George H. Cameron’s Fifth Corps with the Twenty-sixth Division, Fifteenth French Colonial Division, and the Fourth Division in line, from Mouilly west to Les Éparges and north to Watronville. Of these three divisions, the Twenty-sixth alone was to make a deep advance directed southeast toward Vigneulles. The French Division was to make a short progression to the edge of the heights in order to cover the left of the Twenty-sixth. The Fourth Division was not to advance. In the center, between the Fourth and Fifth Army Corps, was the, Major General E. J. Blondlat’s Second French Colonial Corps covering a front of forty kilometers with three small French divisions. These troops were to follow up the retirement of the enemy from the tip of the salient.

At dawn on September 12, after four hours of violent artillery fire, and accompanied by small tanks, the Infantry of the First and Fourth Corps advanced. The infantry of the Fifth Corps commenced its advance at 8 a. m. The operation was carried out with entire precision. Just after daylight on September 13, elements of the First and Twenty-sixth Divisions made a junction near Hattonchatel and Vigneulles, 18

kilometers northeast of St. Mihiel. The rapidity with which the Allied divisions advanced overwhelmed the enemy, and all objectives were reached by the afternoon of September 13. The enemy had apparently started to withdraw some of his troops from the tip of the salient on the eve of the attack, but had been unable to carry it through. Altogether the allies captured nearly 16,000 prisoners, 443 guns, and large stores of material and supplies and suffered less than 7,000 casualties during the actual period of the advance.

During the next two days the right of the American line west of the Moselle River was advanced beyond the objectives laid down in the original orders. This completed the operation for the time being and the line was stabilized to be held by the smallest practicable force.

None of the propaganda generated by the enemy could overcome the effect of the morale on their own troops. The Americans were able to organize a large force and successfully charge through German defenses. It gave American troops implicit confidence in their superiority and raised their morale to the highest it had been. These divisions concluded the attack with small losses and high spirits. Many were available almost immediately for deployment in new theaters of combat. The strength of the American forces numbered around 500,000, while France supplied around 100,000.

When the fighting was over St. Mihiel proved the worth of the American way of war and the modern operations order. In numbers alone more Americans had participated than in any previous engagement up to that time. The area taken represented the largest uninterrupted advance ever gained during four years of war on the Western Front. Finally, more prisoners of war were taken than in any twenty four hour period of the war and more French territory liberated than during any period since the lines stabilized in 1914.