



THE U.S. ARMY  
CAMPAIGNS OF WORLD WAR I



ST. MIHIEL  
12–16 SEPTEMBER 1918

THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF WORLD WAR I  
COMMEMORATIVE SERIES

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**ST. MIHIEL**  
**12–16 SEPTEMBER 1918**

*by*  
*Donald A. Carter*



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Center of Military History  
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# INTRODUCTION

A century ago, the great powers of Europe became engulfed in what was then called the Great War. It signaled a new age in armed conflict in which mass armies supported by industrial mass production brought an unprecedented level of killing power to the battlefield. By the time the United States entered the war in 1917, the combatants were waging war on a scale never before seen in history. The experience defined a generation and cast a long shadow across the twentieth century. In addition to a tremendous loss of life, the war shattered Europe, bringing revolution, the collapse of long-standing empires, and economic turmoil, as well as the birth of new nation-states and the rise of totalitarian movements.

The modern U.S. Army, capable of conducting industrialized warfare on a global scale, can trace its roots to the World War. Although the war's outbreak in August 1914 shocked most Americans, they preferred to keep the conflict at arm's length. The United States declared its neutrality and invested in coastal defenses and the Navy to guard its shores. The U.S. Army, meanwhile, remained small, with a regiment as its largest standing formation. Primarily a constabulary force, it focused on policing America's new territorial possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific as it continued to adapt to Secretary of War Elihu Root's reforms in the years following the War with Spain. It was not until June 1916 that Congress authorized an expansion of the Army, dual state-federal status for the National Guard, and the creation of a reserve officer training corps.

In early 1917, relations between the United States and Germany rapidly deteriorated. The kaiser's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare threatened American lives and commerce, and German meddling in Mexican affairs convinced most Americans that Berlin posed a danger to the nation. In April 1917, the president, out of diplomatic options, asked Congress to declare war on Germany. But the U.S. Army, numbering only 133,000 men, was far from ready. The president ordered nearly 400,000 National Guardsmen into federal service, and more than twenty-four million men eventually registered for the Selective Service, America's first

conscription since the Civil War. By the end of 1918, the Army had grown to four million men and had trained 200,000 new officers to lead them. As it expanded to address wartime needs, the Army developed a new combined-arms formation—the square division. Divisions fell under corps, and corps made up field armies. The Army also created supporting elements such as the Air Service, the Tank Corps, and the Chemical Warfare Service. The war signaled the potential of the United States as not only a global economic power, but also a military one.

In June 1917, the 1st Division deployed to France, arriving in time to parade through Paris on the Fourth of July. The first National Guard division, the 26th Division from New England, deployed in September. By war's end, the American Expeditionary Forces, as the nation's forces in Europe were called, had grown to two million soldiers and more than forty divisions. During 1918, these American “doughboys” learned to fight in battles of steadily increasing scale: Cantigny, the Marne, Aisne-Marne, St. Mihiel, and Meuse-Argonne, adding thirteen campaign streamers to the Army flag. Overall, in roughly six months of combat, the American Expeditionary Forces suffered more than 255,000 casualties, including 52,997 battle deaths (as well as more than 50,000 nonbattle deaths, most due to the influenza pandemic). The war that the United States entered to “make the world safe for democracy” ended with an armistice on 11 November 1918, followed by a controversial peace. American soldiers served in the Occupation of the Rhineland until 1923, before withdrawing from Europe altogether.

The United States will never forget the American soldiers who fought and died in the World War. America's first unknown soldier was laid to rest on 11 November 1921 in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, where soldiers still stand guard. The United States created permanent American military cemeteries in France, Belgium, and Britain to bury the fallen. To this day, memorials to their sacrifice can be found across America, and the date of the armistice has become a national holiday honoring all those who serve in defense of the nation. The last surviving U.S. Army veteran of the war died in 2011. It is to all the doughboys, those who returned and those who did not, that the U.S. Army Center of Military History dedicates these commemorative pamphlets.

JON T. HOFFMAN  
Chief Historian



# ST. MIHIEL

## 12–16 SEPTEMBER 1918

Early in the morning of 12 September 1918, nearly half a million American soldiers crouched in forward trench lines along a sixty-five-kilometer section of the Western Front, waiting for the signal to advance. The target of the American-planned and American-executed operation was a massive salient that had bedeviled the Allies since late 1914. Until this point in the World War, members of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) had not fought in a formation larger than a corps, and then only under French or British leadership. Now, as part of the newly formed American First Army under the command of General John J. Pershing, they prepared to launch an operation that was, according to one historian, “America’s first truly great modern battle.” The four-day offensive would not only serve as a baptism of fire for the First Army but also demonstrate to the Allies and the Germans alike that the Americans were capable of operating as an independent command. The action showed how far the U.S. Army had progressed in its evolution from a frontier constabulary to a modern combined arms maneuver force, and it helped set the stage for the grand Allied offensive that would seize the initiative all along the Western Front and blaze a path toward ultimate victory in the war.

### STRATEGIC SETTING

By the summer of 1918, war had raged across Western Europe for nearly four years. What had started in August 1914 with a sweeping German maneuver to envelop the French Army and take Paris turned quickly into a bloody stalemate. Troops advancing in the open proved no match for the lethality of modern military technology, forcing armies on both sides to dig in for protection and survival. An extensive series of parallel trenches soon stretched from the English Channel in the northwest to the Swiss border in the southeast, with infantry strongpoints protected by barbed wire and machine gun nests and supported by devastating artillery fire. The opposing armies hurled waves of men against these

trench lines, and the results were horrific. In 1916 alone, battles at Verdun and the Somme each resulted in nearly one million killed and wounded. Both sides applied new weapons and tactics in desperate attempts to break the deadlock, but neither proved to be a decisive solution. As a result, the fighting continued, a wasteful war of attrition with no end in sight.

Over the course of 1917, however, the war's strategic balance began to shift. The United States entered the war on 6 April, and American troops began arriving in Europe in June, but the pace of their arrival was slow, and by the end of the year the AEF had less than 250,000 men on the Western Front. In the east, the situation was even more critical for the Allies; in Russia, a revolution had overthrown Tsar Nicholas II in March, and as the months went by the Russian Army slowly disintegrated as the provisional government struggled to hold the country together. In November, another revolution installed a Bolshevik-led Communist, or Soviet, government under Vladimir I. Lenin. The new Soviet government began peace negotiations with the Central Powers, and on 3 March 1918 the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk ended Russia's participation in the war. The slow rate of the American buildup and the elimination of the Eastern Front led General Erich Ludendorff, the German Army's operational commander, to redeploy significant forces from the east in the hope of achieving victory on the Western Front before American forces arrived in numbers too great to overcome.

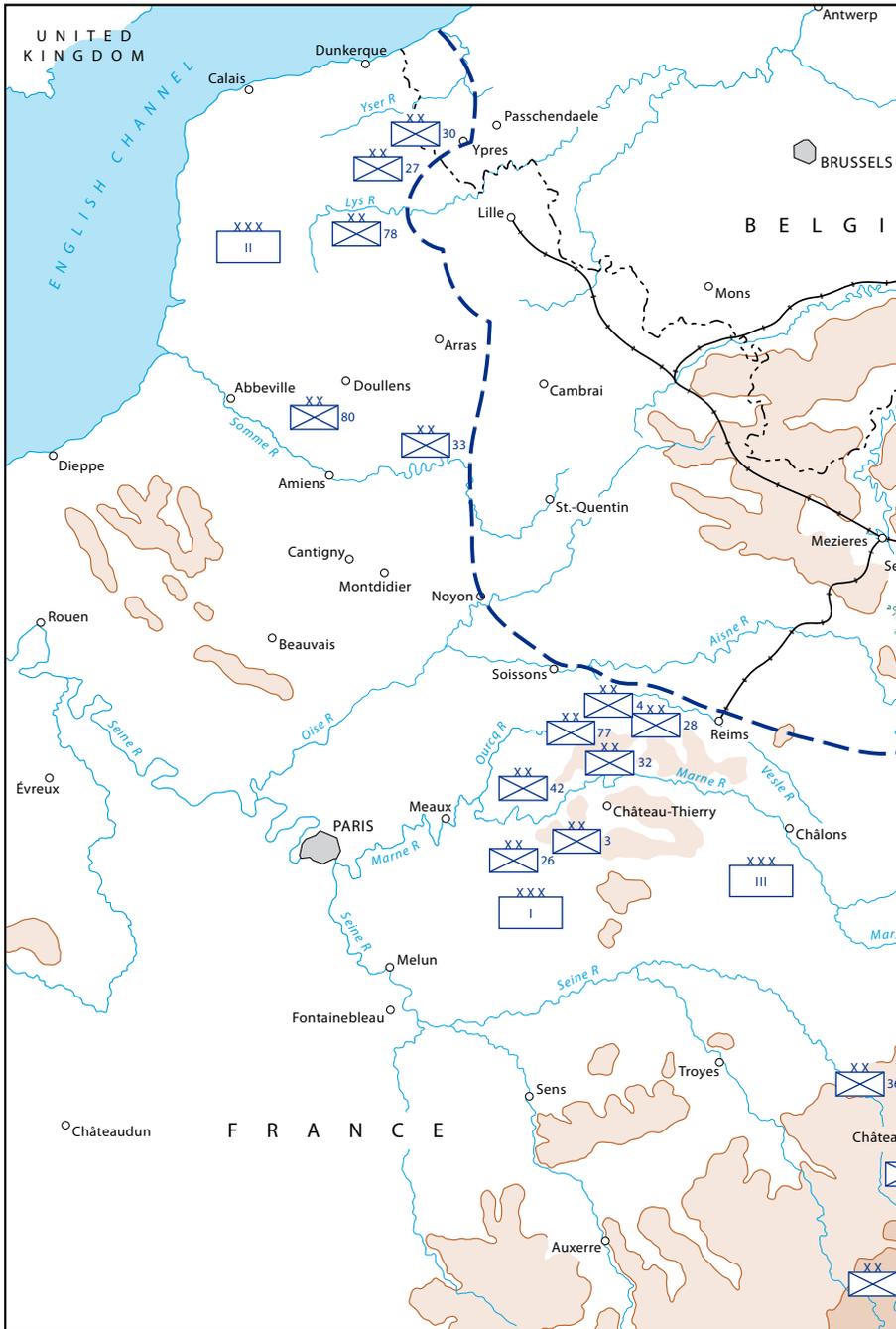
A series of German offensives, beginning with *Operation MICHAEL* on 21 March 1918, posed the greatest threat to the Allies since 1914. To improve their unity of effort in the face of the renewed German advance, the Allied commanders met on 26 March to discuss the crisis. They named General Ferdinand Foch, chief of the French General Staff, as the "generalissimo" to coordinate all Allied armies on the Western Front, albeit without direct command authority. General Pershing symbolically placed all American forces then in France at Foch's disposal. In April, large numbers of American troops began entering the lines to help stop the Germans. In May, the 1st Division captured the town of Cantigny, the first small-scale attack of the war solely planned and executed by American troops. In June, the U.S. 2d and 3d Divisions were instrumental in defending the area around the town of Château-Thierry, blocking an attack at Belleau Wood and preventing the Germans from securing a foothold south of the Marne River. The following month, the 1st and 2d Divisions spearheaded an assault at Soissons that helped reduce a massive salient in the line created by the German offensives. Despite

the Americans' vital role on the Western Front through the spring and early summer, they had yet to achieve their national objective of fighting as an independent army.

### *Creating the American First Army*

In mid-July, the bulk of American divisions was concentrated on two sectors of the line (*Map 1*). One was an active portion of the front in Champagne, near Château-Thierry. The other was a quiet sector in the Woëvre Plain area, extending from Nomeny, east of the Moselle River, to a point north of the German-occupied town of St. Mihiel. The AEF stationed its newer, not yet fully combat-ready divisions there to acclimate them to frontline conditions. The sector also provided an area where units fresh from combat could reconstitute and absorb replacements. The concentration of forces in these two regions enabled American corps headquarters, such as Maj. Gen. Hunter Liggett's I Army Corps and Maj. Gen. Robert L. Bullard's III Army Corps, to gain experience exercising tactical and administrative control over multiple divisions. Although these corps still required more training and experience in combined arms operations as well as staff planning and execution, Pershing's goal was to use the corps and their divisions as the base upon which to form an American field army.

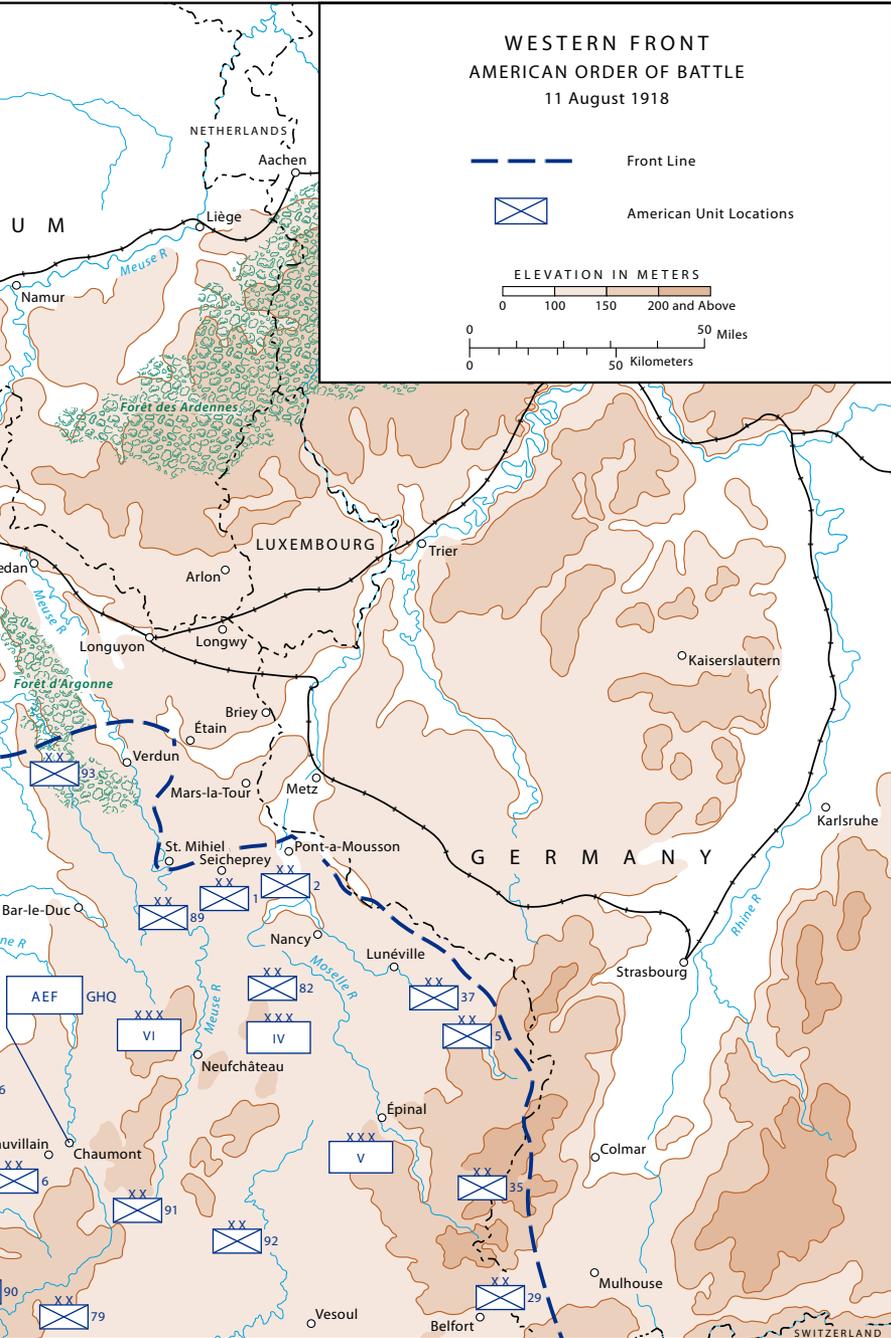
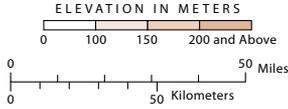
The creation of an independent American field army had been an objective for Pershing ever since he assumed command of the AEF. The basic structure had been developed as early as July 1917, and its component parts, such as the First Army Artillery and First Army Air Service, were organized during the early months of 1918. As the AEF grew, Pershing created the I Corps in late January 1918 and hoped to build a full field army by 1 June. The German spring offensives temporarily derailed these plans, but after the initial crisis passed the AEF commander once again returned to the effort. In early June 1918, Pershing and General Henri Philippe Pétain, the French Army's commander-in-chief, agreed to base an American corps near Château-Thierry, establishing it as a stepping stone toward a full army. Even General Foch, who had strenuously pushed for the amalgamation of American forces into Allied armies during March and April, admitted on 10 July: "The American army must become an accomplished fact." With the AEF strength rising to 1.2 million men in July, and with an additional 250,000 troops arriving each month, Pershing felt that the time had finally come to achieve his goal.



MAP 1

# WESTERN FRONT AMERICAN ORDER OF BATTLE 11 August 1918

- Front Line
- ☒ American Unit Locations



On 21 July, Pershing conferred with Foch and Pétain at Bombon, the site of Foch's headquarters, and proposed forming an independent American army with responsibility for part of the Allied line. Foch approved, based on the expectation that as soon as it was formed, the American First Army would relieve the French Sixth Army north of Château-Thierry. On 24 July, the AEF General Headquarters (GHQ) issued the orders that formally announced the organization of the First Army, effective on 10 August, with an order of battle that included the I and III Corps headquarters and the 3d, 4th, 26th, 28th, 32d, and 42d Divisions.

In addition to specifying an initial order of battle, the orders also assigned key personnel to the First Army staff. Pershing took on the position of commanding general while he maintained his role as AEF commander. Col. Hugh A. Drum, who had been quietly developing the plans for forming the First Army since the beginning of the month, became the chief of staff. With Pershing dividing his time between headquarters, it would fall to Drum to direct the planning and preparation for the First Army's initial major operations. Other members of the primary staff included Col. Robert McCleave as the assistant chief of the general staff for operations, or "G-3." McCleave had worked well as the assistant to Brig. Gen. Fox Conner, the GHQ operations officer. Pershing later assigned Lt. Col. Walter S. Grant to the G-3 section, and appointed Col. William L. "Billy" Mitchell as chief of the First Army's air arm, the First Army Air Service. As the staff came together, American maneuver units prepared to function as an independent national force, although they still needed heavy Allied support, particularly from French aviation, artillery, and tank units.

With the First Army becoming a reality, Pershing immediately began looking for a location for its first combat operation. The most promising was the reduction of the St. Mihiel salient in Lorraine. Fortunately, this idea aligned with Foch's plan for the Allies to maintain the initiative on the Western Front. With operations already underway to eliminate the Marne salient, on 24 July Foch announced a plan to conduct operations against several other German salients in the coming months. The goal was to straighten the front and secure vital rail lines for a general Allied offensive in 1919. When Pershing requested the mission of reducing the St. Mihiel salient, Foch readily agreed, but the generalissimo could not set a date for its start until the Allies successfully concluded the ongoing Aisne-Marne Offensive. When operations along the Vesle River stabilized on 6 August, Pershing decided to concentrate the units

that would constitute the First Army in the St. Mihiel area rather than on the Vesle, and forgo the planned relief of the French Sixth Army. Foch concurred, and directed Pershing and Pétain to develop the necessary plans to reflect the change. The two commanders agreed that three or four American divisions would remain on the Vesle, but shifted all the other combat-ready ones to form the First Army in the Woëvre Plain region in preparation for the St. Mihiel operation. The stage was now set for the Americans to take their place as an independent force on the Western Front.

### *The Salient and Its Defenses*

Reducing the St. Mihiel salient was a natural choice for employing the First Army in a dramatic and decisive action. Created during the initial German invasion of 1914, the salient had withstood multiple French efforts to regain the territory and remained an impediment to Allied operations in the sector. Pershing optimistically believed that in reducing the salient, the First Army might continue the attack northeastward toward the city of Metz. Such an advance would threaten not only the strategic Briey Iron Basin, a key to German war production, but also the lateral rail network that ran through the city and the nearby Saar coal fields. Perhaps most important, Pershing thought that a successful attack would validate the decision to create an independent American army and convince the British and French to recognize the Americans as equal partners in the war effort.

Twenty-five kilometers at its deepest, the V-shaped salient occupied roughly three hundred square kilometers, with its base running between Pont-à-Mousson along the Moselle River and the town of Haudiomont to the northwest. The village of St. Mihiel was located near its tip, astride the Meuse River. Along the western side of the salient, the wooded heights of the Meuse dominated the terrain, while lesser hills, forests, and a 380-meter camel hump elevation called Montsec highlighted the southern edge. The Woëvre Plain constituted a large portion of the remaining ground within the salient. Although the low area of the plain was a natural avenue of approach for an advancing army, the September rainy season threatened to make the terrain swampy and possibly impassable to wheeled-vehicle traffic. The Germans had the advantage of occupying the highest ground in most of the area along the salient front, on which they had constructed strong defensive positions supplemented by vast stretches of barbed wire.

The German high command recognized that the St. Mihiel salient was the most likely target of the imminent American attack. In September, the German defense consisted of eight full divisions and two separate brigades along the forward face of the salient. The force, known collectively as *Army Detachment C*, was under the command of Lt. Gen. Georg Fuchs, who had a reputation among the Allies as a clever and capable leader. The *Gorz Group*, which consisted of the *77th* and *10th Divisions* of the *I Bavarian Corps*, held the German left flank. The *Mihiel Group*, made up of the *5th Landwehr Division* and the *31st Division*, also of the *I Bavarian Corps*, held the forward tip of the salient. As the time for the offensive grew near, however, the *192d Division* began to replace the *31st Division* in the forward area. The *Combres Group*, consisting of the *35th Austro-Hungarian* and the *8th* and *13th Landwehr Divisions*, held the German right flank. Outside of Fuchs' direct tactical control, the *Metz Group*, with the *255th Division* and the *84th* and *31st Landwehr Brigades*, held positions in the area of the Moselle River to the left of the *Gorz Group*. The *Metz Group* also exercised control of the *195th Saxon* and *123d Divisions*, positioned farther to the rear in reserve.

Although the number of units looked impressive on paper, the German forces were actually understrength and war-weary. Furthermore, compared to the 28,000-man American divisions they would face, even full-strength German divisions averaged less than 15,000 troops. Ascertaining reliable figures on German forces in and around the salient proved difficult, as estimates of actual German strength ranged between 50,000 and 100,000 men. The *Landwehr* divisions, in many cases composed of older men between the ages of thirty-seven and forty-five, had been organized primarily to hold static positions, and demonstrated little initiative or aggressiveness. Fuchs considered the *10th Division*, which had been in combat during the recent Somme and Aisne offensives, as his only fully reliable formation.

The German defenses within the salient were heavy and elaborate, consisting of three zones. (See *Map 2*.) The rear position, known as the Michel Line, ran along the base of the salient and included that sector's portion of the Hindenburg Line. The forward position, called the Wilhelm Line, was an eight-kilometer-deep defensive zone running from Pont-à-Mousson in the east to the town of St. Mihiel itself, a distance of about sixty-five kilometers, then northward up the heights of the Meuse to Grimaucourt, just southeast of Verdun. The third zone, known as the Schroeter Line,



*German trenches in the Bois de Esparges (National Archives)*

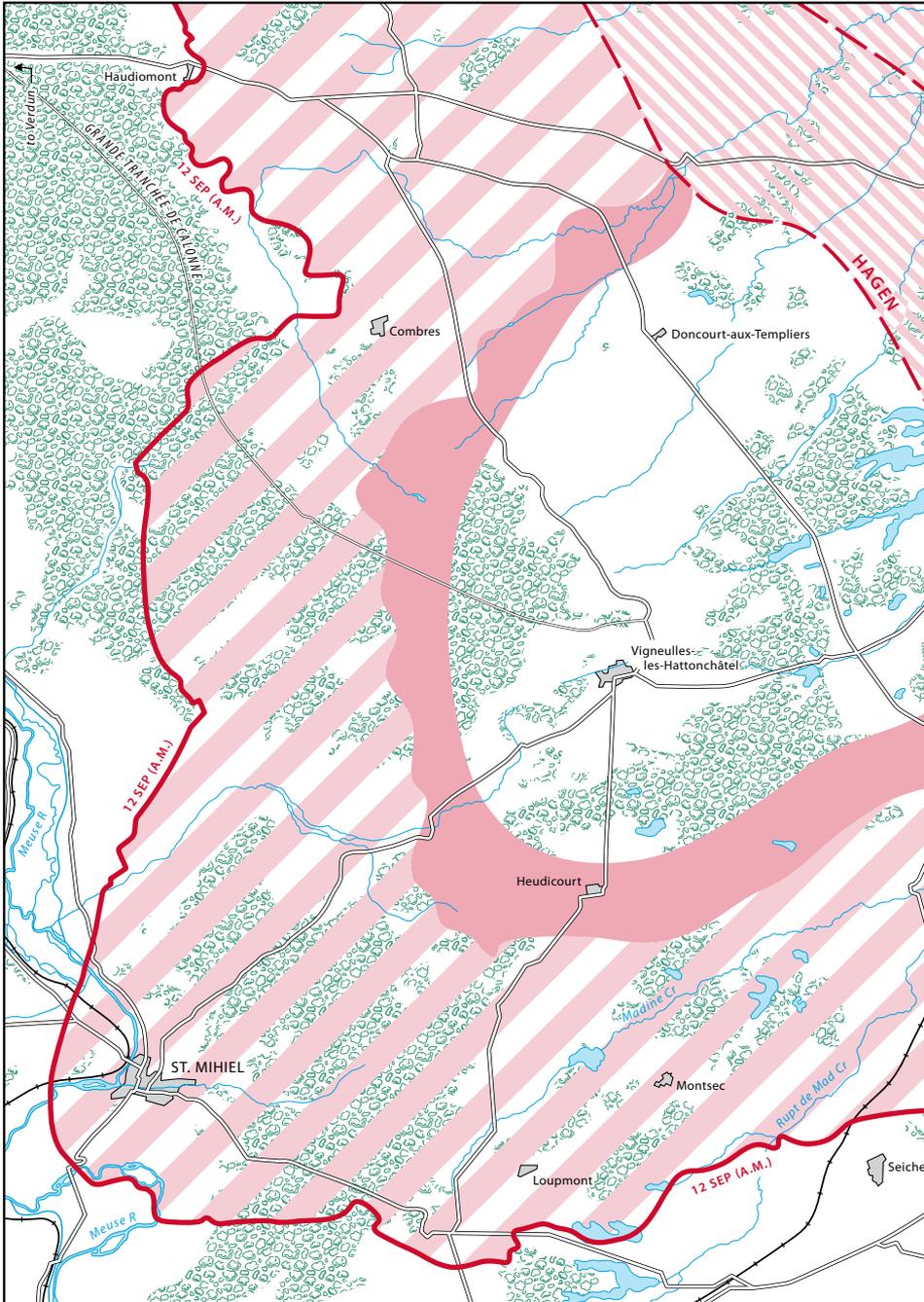
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made up the interior sector of the Wilhelm Line. Still unclear as to the size of the force being assembled against them, Fuchs announced to his forces that preparations for an attack against the salient were underway, and declared, “Composite Army C will prepare to repulse these attacks.”

Although the Germans had defended the salient against French attacks since late 1914, they had few illusions regarding the security of the position. Its wedge shape made it highly vulnerable to a pincer attack. Allied successes in the north also indicated that the static nature of positional warfare no longer defined tactical realities on the Western Front. Moreover, the Germans needed to conserve manpower in the light of their losses earlier in the year, requiring them to shorten the line wherever possible. As early as June 1918, the high command began work on a planned troop withdrawal from the salient, code-named *LOKI*. So long as the sector remained quiet, they would hold their current positions, but as soon as they detected a major Allied assault in the offing, the defenders would withdraw to the shorter, more defensible Michel position across the base of the salient to make their stand.

### *Planning the Attack*

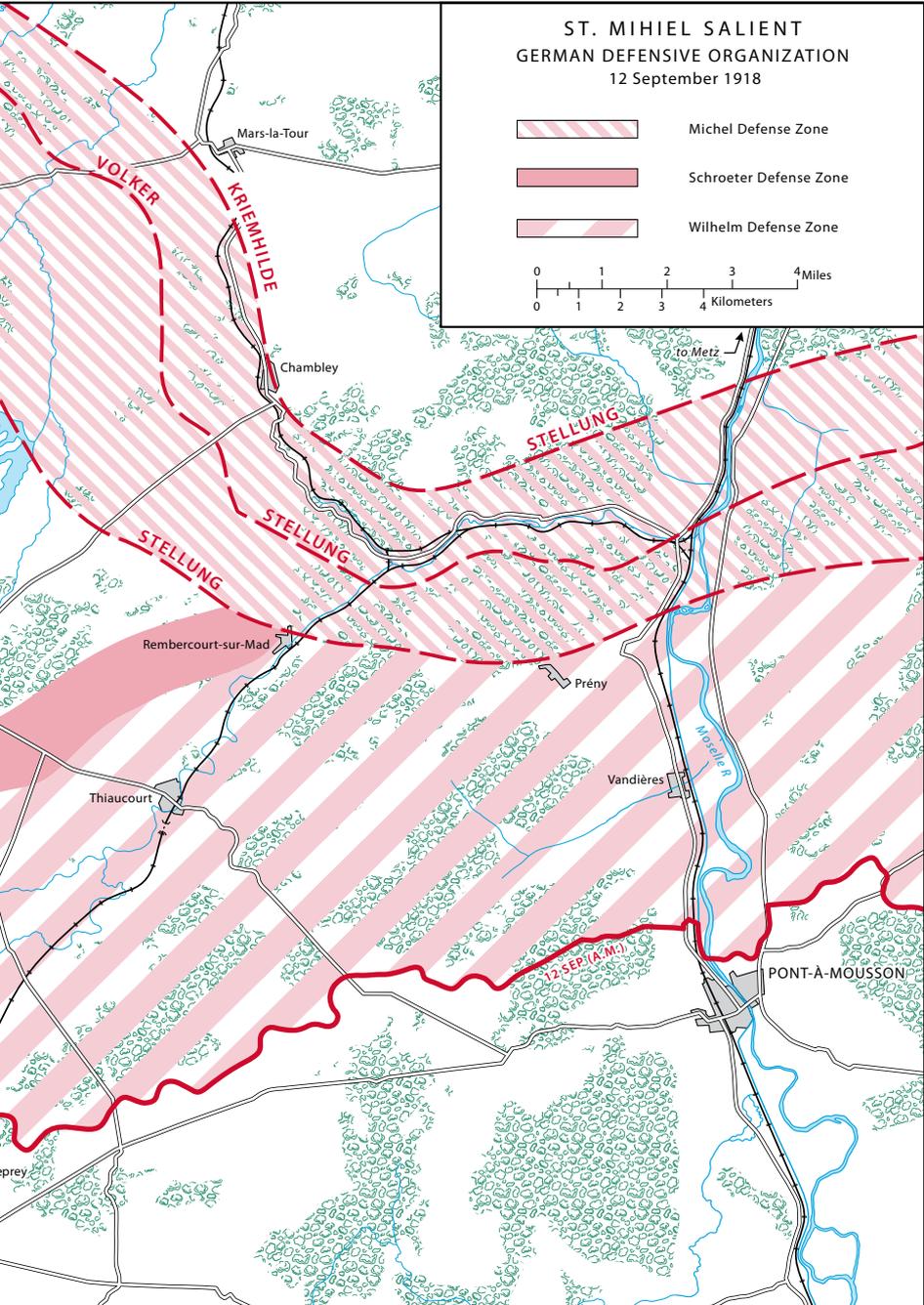
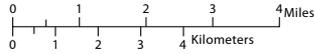
For the Americans, much of the initial responsibility for developing the plan to reduce the salient fell on Colonel Conner and



MAP 2

ST. MIHIEL SALIENT  
GERMAN DEFENSIVE ORGANIZATION  
12 September 1918

-  Michel Defense Zone
-  Schroeter Defense Zone
-  Wilhelm Defense Zone



his GHQ staff, as the First Army planning staff was just starting to assemble. One of his key subordinates was Lt. Col. George C. Marshall, who until 24 July had been the operations officer for the 1st Division. Marshall had already developed a reputation throughout the AEF as an outstanding planner; he also knew the St. Mihiel area from his early days in France, when the 1st Division had been stationed there as part of its introduction to combat. Conner and Marshall worked closely with McCleave, the First Army G-3, to develop a plan for the upcoming operation.

Throughout August, both the GHQ and First Army staffs wrestled with their complex assignment (*Map 3*). The buildup for the St. Mihiel attack involved over half a million Americans and 110,000 Frenchmen. Supporting the attack would require some 3,000 guns, 200,000 tons of supplies, and 50,000 tons of ammunition. Some of the men and equipment were already in position, but most would have to be transported into the area. The staff officers needed to prepare detailed march tables to make the best use of the available roads. While part of the staff worked on those problems, others planned the battle, figuring how many units should be employed in which sectors to attain specific objectives. At the request of the Allies, the Americans had focused on shipping infantry and machine gun battalions to Europe, leaving the First Army well short of the artillery, aircraft, and support units it would need to execute the attack. Pershing spent considerable time in negotiations with Foch, who was named Marshal of France on 6 August, to arrange French support for the attack. As the plans proceeded, the French provided transportation for almost all troop and supply movements. The French also were particularly generous with air support and placed a number of aircraft under Pershing's command for the operation. Finally, Foch agreed to provide one French corps to conduct a supporting attack.

On 30 August, Pershing and the First Army officially assumed responsibility for the St. Mihiel sector. As the staff worked at their headquarters at Ligny-en-Barrois, Foch arrived unexpectedly and threw the process into disorder by announcing a new mission for the First Army. Since their meeting at Bombon, the Allies had not only successfully concluded the Aisne-Marne Offensive, but had launched three others. One at Amiens began on 8 August, another on the Oise-Aisne front started on 18 August, and the last opened in the Ypres-Lys region the next day. All achieved marked success. With the reduction of these salients, Foch began formulating a more ambitious plan for operations on the Western Front for the



to reinforce threatened areas of the line. The Germans, he believed, could not be strong everywhere at once.

To support this new plan, Foch wanted the Americans to operate on the French right flank, driving north into the area bounded by the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest. Instead of acting under the command of the U.S. First Army, most American divisions would serve as reinforcements for the French Second and Fourth Armies. Foch's plan minimized the attack through St. Mihiel, which he now believed of limited necessity, and eliminated the drive on Metz that Pershing desired. Not surprisingly, the American commander opposed the new plan. Not only did it diminish the operation that Pershing and his staff were working feverishly to carry off, but it also threatened to break up the newly formed First Army and place American units once again under Allied control. In the long and acrimonious meeting, Foch pushed his plan while Pershing refused to abandon his goal of keeping the American army independent. Finally, the exasperated Foch demanded, "Do you wish to take part in the battle?" Pershing sternly replied, "Most assuredly, but as an American Army and in no other way."

Three days later, on 2 September, Pershing and Pétain met Foch at the latter's headquarters to seek some resolution. Foch agreed to postpone the grand offensive until 25 September if the Americans agreed to participate. Under the new plan, the First Army would take part in the attack by operating in the Meuse-Argonne region. In return, Pershing agreed to curtail the St. Mihiel Offensive, scheduled to begin the second week of September. The operation would commence on or near 10 September against the southern and western faces of the salient, with limited objectives and duration. Instead of driving on Metz, the First Army would have three or four days to advance to the Vigneulles-Thiaucourt-Regniéville line. Once achieved, Pershing would shift the First Army's primary operational area to the Meuse-Argonne sector. All available American divisions would concentrate for an attack on 20–25 September in what would become known as the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Although Foch had misgivings regarding the Americans' ability to conduct two major attacks in such a truncated timeframe, he agreed to the plan.

The scale and difficulty of the tasks to which Pershing committed the First Army is hard to overstate. This revised plan required the Americans to conduct the attack at St. Mihiel while also preparing for an even larger operation to commence in two weeks'

time. The First Army would need to move most of its forces over ninety-five kilometers north, and in order to be in position to attack at Meuse-Argonne, some of them would need to begin moving before the St. Mihiel operation was completed. As Pershing later noted in his memoirs, "We had undertaken to launch with practically the same army, within the next twenty-four days, two great attacks on battlefields sixty miles apart." Pershing's insistence on conducting the St. Mihiel operation also meant that the First Army would be limited in which forces it could use at the beginning of the Meuse-Argonne. Having committed many of the most experienced and highly trained divisions to St. Mihiel, it would take time to reassign these units to Foch's grand offensive. Consequently, the AEF would use its best units in a limited but significant operation at St. Mihiel, and employ less proven units to initiate a much larger offensive in terms of numbers committed and objectives.

After Pershing and Foch reached their agreement, the GHQ and First Army staffs set to work revising their plans and developing new timetables. Colonel Drum later noted that from this point onward the two operations "should not be looked upon as separate and distinct," but rather as "interdependent." The First Army planning staff effectively stopped working on St. Mihiel and began developing the Meuse-Argonne operation. This left Conner's GHQ G-3 staff with the job of overseeing the final preparations for the St. Mihiel attack. The new limited objectives required some changes in the direction of the assault but no major reshuffling of units. The First Army had grown considerably by the end of August, so that Pershing now had three American army corps and one French corps under his command. The offensive required two simultaneous attacks by the Americans, one against the western face of the salient and the other through the rolling farmland and pockets of woods between the Moselle River and Montsec. Between the two American attacks, a French corps would attack the tip of the salient, and exploit the success of the units on its flanks.

To better coordinate the attack with all units operating on the same schedule, the First Army planners developed a simple control measure. They designated the date on which an operation would begin as "D-day," and the time as "H-hour." The means of measuring time before and after the designated start date or hour used the minus (-) or plus (+) signs, respectively. Therefore, the day before D-day would be written as "D-1," and two hours before H-hour would be expressed as "H-2." Conversely, the day after the operation began would become "D+1," and two hours past the start time as "H+2."



*Members of 328th Machine Gun Battalion, 82d Division,  
training for the offensive (National Archives)*

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These control measures appeared for the first time in American military history on the First Army order for the St. Mihiel Offensive.

The Americans planned to attack on two converging axes that would meet to cut off the salient. The main attack would advance into the salient from the south with two American corps. The I Corps, commanded by General Liggett, would be on the easternmost corner along the southern side of the salient from Pont-à-Mousson on the east to Limey on the west. The corps' four divisions, the 82d, 90th, 5th, and 2d, arrayed respectively from right to left, or east to west, with the 78th Division in reserve. The 82d Division would hold the shoulder as the rest of the corps attacked to the northwest toward the village of Thiaucourt, and would continue on that axis to pinch off the base of the salient. The IV Army Corps, under Maj. Gen. Joseph T. Dickman, held the line from Limey west to Xivray-et-Marvoisin and would array its subordinate units, the 89th, 42d, and 1st Divisions, from east to west respectively, while keeping the 3d Division in reserve. Initially, the IV Corps would protect the left flank of the advancing I Corps, then wheel to the west to contain German forces attempting to retreat from the forward portion of the salient.

The French II Colonial Corps, composed of the French 39th and 26th Infantry Divisions and 2d Dismounted Cavalry Division (DCP), would support the principal drive from the south by holding the attention of the maximum number of enemy troops at the tip of the salient between Xivray-et-Marvoisin and Mouilly. Maj. Gen. George H. Cameron's V Army Corps would begin the attack against the salient's western face from Mouilly to Watronville with the American 26th and 4th Divisions along with the French 15th Colonial Division (DIC). In this corps' sector, the 26th Division would advance deep into enemy-held territory toward the village of Vigneulles, and then drive southeast to link up with advancing IV Corps units and trap German forces in the point of the salient. The French 15th DIC and the 8th Infantry Brigade of the U.S. 4th Division would conduct supporting attacks, while the corps held the rest of the 4th Division in reserve. Pershing retained the 35th, 80th, and 91st Divisions as the First Army's reserve (*Map 4*).

### *Coordinating the Supporting Arms*

Artillery was the most important of the supporting arms, but also one of the most time-consuming to train properly. Therefore, field artillery brigades in the AEF trained on a separate schedule, and consequently they took longer to achieve combat readiness than the infantry they supported. However, Pershing's decision to utilize his most experienced divisions at St. Mihiel meant that all but one of his frontline units would go on the attack with the support of their own artillery. Only the 90th Division would fight without its organic artillery brigade, which was still in training and would not be ready for action for several months. In its place, the 78th Division's 153d Field Artillery Brigade and 303d Ammunition Train would support the 90th Division during the operation.

As the battle plans neared completion, the duration of the preliminary artillery bombardment became an issue of concern. Pershing felt that utilizing a multiday preparatory artillery barrage—as the Allies had done in previous years—would eliminate any chance of surprise and allow the enemy to plan counterstrokes. He therefore decided to allow only enough of an artillery preparation to encourage and embolden the attacking troops while disrupting the enemy, denying the Germans time to either withdraw or commit large numbers of reserves. A shorter bombardment would be particularly important in the event of rain, where prolonged shelling would turn the wet ground into







*6th Field Artillery piece at St. Mihiel (National Archives)*

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an impassable morass. After lengthy consultations with his staff, Pershing allotted a period of no longer than four hours for the preattack artillery fires.

To be effective, the preparatory fires had to be intense. Realizing that the First Army needed additional fire support, Foch provided Pershing units from various French armies and the artillery reserve. In some cases the American divisions received double or even triple their standard allotment of artillery. To further increase the number of guns available, Pershing approved shifting the 58th Field Artillery Brigade from the 33d Division and the 76th Field Artillery from the 3d Division to support the 1st Division's attack on the center of the salient's southern edge. The concentration of firepower was the largest in American history to that point. As the First Army prepared for its advance, hundreds of artillery batteries, from the fast and mobile 75-mm. guns to massive 400-mm. railway cannon, stood ready to fire.

In addition to infantry and artillery, the Americans would also employ units from the service's newer branches on an unprecedented scale. St. Mihiel provided an introduction to combat for several elements of the AEF's fledgling Tank Corps. Brig. Gen.

Samuel D. Rockenback, commander of all AEF tank units and training centers, assigned Lt. Col. George S. Patton Jr. and the Tank Corps' 304th Brigade to the First Army for the operation. The brigade consisted of the 326th and 327th Battalions, commanded by Captains Sereno Brett and Ronulf Compton, respectively. Each battalion included seventy-seven French-built light Renault FT tanks. Rockenback also wanted to assign the Tank Corps' 301st Battalion, equipped with forty-five British-built Mark V models, but it would not complete training in England in time. To increase the number of tanks in the First Army, the French also assigned the 1st Assault Artillery Brigade to the operation. It included the 13th, 14th, and 15th Battalions equipped with 225 Renault FTs, two battalions of the 505th Mobile Artillery Regiment with twenty-four Schneider CA1 medium tanks, and one battalion of the 11th Groupment of Mobile Artillery with twelve Saint-Chamond heavy tanks.

The tanks utilized in the St. Mihiel operation varied in size and capabilities. The Renault FT had a two-man crew and was five meters in length and about two meters in height. It weighed six-and-a-half tons, could travel at a speed of eight kilometers per hour, and held either a 37-mm. Puteaux SA 18 gun or 8-mm. M1914 Hotchkiss machine gun in its cramped turret. The somewhat box-shaped Schneider CA1 had a crew of six. Weighing thirteen-and-a-half tons, it stood over two meters in height and six meters in length, and could reach a speed of almost thirteen kilometers per hour. For armament, the Schneider had a short-barreled 75-mm. blockhouse gun and two Hotchkiss machine guns. In contrast to the Renault and Schneider, the Saint-Chamond was a behemoth. Served by as many as eleven men, it measured roughly eight meters in length, stood two-and-a-half meters in height, and moved at eleven kilometers per hour. For armament, it carried four Hotchkiss machine guns and an M1897 75-mm. gun. Understandably, given its pointed bow, large size, and heavy firepower, many soldiers described the Saint-Chamond as a "land battleship."

All of the American and some of the French tank units were committed to support the IV Corps. Patton assigned Compton's 327th Tank Battalion, minus twenty-five Renaults held in brigade reserve, to support the 42d Division. To make up for the Renaults in reserve, the French augmented the battalion with six Saint-Chamond and twelve Schneider tanks. Brett's 326th Tank Battalion, meanwhile, supported the 1st Division, which was the only

American division that had worked closely with the new machines. The plan alerted infantry commanders to expect to see tanks in their sectors, but directed the infantry not to follow the tanks unless they were sure that both they and the tanks were heading in the same direction. As Patton planned it, the brigade would attack across the 1st and 42d Division fronts in three groups. The 326th, supported by the brigade reserve, would advance on the left, cross the Rupt de Mad creek, and lead the 1st Division to its objectives. The French heavy tanks would follow the infantry in the center. On the right, the 327th initially would follow the infantry, then pass through their lines and lead the 42d Division to its objectives at the villages of Essey-et-Maizerais and Pannes. As with their commitment of artillery, the Americans and the French intended to use mass to overcome the German defenders.

Finally, the First Army would receive strong support from Allied air units, with French, British, and Italian elements all participating in the operation. The First Army Air Service contributed twelve pursuit, ten observation, three day bombardment, and one night bombardment squadrons. Added to these were twelve observation, four pursuit, and two night bombardment squadrons from the French as well as three night bombardment squadrons from the Italians. The French also provided an aerial division of two brigades that contained a total of twenty-four combat (pursuit) squadrons, fifteen bombardment squadrons, and two protection (bomber escort) squadrons. Rounding out the forces were eight night bombardment squadrons from the British, who operated as an independent force but coordinated their activities with the Air Service. With a total of 1,481 aircraft, including 366 observation airplanes, 323 day bombers, 91 night bombers, and 701 pursuit aircraft, the St. Mihiel Offensive was the largest assembly of aviation assets committed to a single operation to that date. In addition, the First Army employed fifteen U.S. and six French balloon companies.

The U.S. units accounted for about 40 percent of the total, with the French providing most of the rest. American forces consisted of primarily Spad XIII pursuit aircraft; Salmson 2-A2, DeHavilland 4 (DH-4), and Breguet 14 A.2 observation planes; and Breguet 14 B.2 day bombers. Colonel Mitchell, chief of the First Army Air Service, was concerned that many of the American units had only recently been formed and lacked combat experience. To overcome these deficiencies, he tried to group together his more experienced squadrons with those new to the battlefield, or to put veteran pilots in charge of green units. Yet the lack of battle-hardened officers

and units meant that many American pilots would gain their first taste of combat operations over the skies of St. Mihiel.

Planning the air component of the St. Mihiel attack fell primarily to Mitchell and his staff. Although the head of the AEF Air Service, Maj. Gen. Mason M. Patrick, reviewed the plans and reported them to General Pershing, both senior leaders gave Mitchell and his staff broad discretion. With the support of his superiors, Mitchell developed a campaign plan to control the skies over the battlefield, spelled out in a detailed memorandum issued on 20 August. It identified the “general mission of aviation” to “absolutely prevent access to our lines by enemy reconnaissance aviation,” and to “secure complete information about hostile formation[s].” Mitchell noted in his memoirs: “Air forces are the eyes of the army, and without their accurate reports, ground forces cannot operate.” He recognized that the air above the battlefield was a new medium, offering a wide scope for action, and that controlling this medium was essential to the successful employment of combat forces on the ground.

Prior to the operation, intelligence estimates of German air forces in the sector ranged between 213 and 295 aircraft, but Mitchell believed that they could mass upward of a thousand planes in the area within three days of the start of the battle. He therefore anticipated having “a preponderance in the air for at least two days before the Germans could concentrate [their forces].” With this small window, Mitchell organized his forces to dominate the skies. Over half of his planes would attack the enemy and deny reconnaissance by shooting down observation planes flying over the lines and “busting” enemy observation balloons. Initially, Mitchell intended to rely on the French Aerial Division, which he directed to alternate striking each side of the salient with a full brigade, maintaining constant pressure on German air and ground units. If the Germans responded to these attacks in force, Mitchell would be ready. He organized most American attack elements in the First Pursuit Wing, commanded by Maj. Bert M. Atkinson. It included two pursuit groups and a day bombardment group, and would counter German efforts to control any part of the battlefield. In this manner Mitchell looked to maximize his combat power during the battle’s crucial first days.

Mitchell organized the remainder of his forces to serve as direct support for the ground units. The largest formation, the Corps Observation Wing under the command of Maj. Lewis H. Brereton, contained three American air groups and one French group,



*2d Lt. J. H. Snyder receiving an observation camera*  
(National Archives)

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each assigned to one of the four corps involved in the operation. Although Mitchell maintained overall control over these units, they took their operational directions from their respective corps headquarters. This ensured that each corps, and in practice each attacking division, had a dedicated air element providing direct support. Their principal duties were to provide observation for attacking infantry and spotting for supporting artillery, through the use of either reconnaissance aircraft or observation balloons. In addition to these units, Mitchell had at his disposal the First Army Observation Group, made up of American aircraft under the direction of First Army Headquarters; an Army Artillery Observation Group composed of mostly French units spotting for the First Army's artillery; a French Night Bombardment Group that included the Italian units; and five squadrons of pursuit aircraft organized into 1st Pursuit Group, which roamed the battlefield

protecting reconnaissance aircraft and attacking German ground forces if the opportunity presented itself.

Mitchell codified his vision of the air campaign in an annex to the First Army's Field Order No. 9, issued on 7 September, which laid out the operational plan for the St. Mihiel attack. It specified that air operations would consist of four phases. First was the early preparation phase, which lasted from the day the order was issued to the day before the attack. During this period, pursuit and bomber aircraft would carry out their normal activities so as not to alert the Germans to the impending operation, while observation squadrons gathered "all information necessary to the preparation of the attack, especially for the artillery preparation." The second phase covered the period between the beginning of the artillery preparation and the start of the infantry attack, during which Air Service bombardment and pursuit units set out to attack prearranged targets behind the lines and to clear the skies of enemy aircraft. These missions continued into the attack phase, covering Mitchell's two-day window, with the added mission of attacking enemy "troops, trains and important targets on the ground." The orders specifically called on pursuit units to "attack with bombs and machine guns, either enemy reinforcements marching to the attack, or enemy elements retreating." Once the two-day window closed, the Air Service would move into the exploitation phase, continuing the attack based on "the necessities of the moment." With the plan in place, the Air Service set about making final preparations. Mitchell would have to wait to see if his untested force could achieve his ambitious plan. Unfortunately, despite his efforts to control every aspect of the upcoming operation, Mitchell could not account for the weather, which would make its own mark on the battle.

### *Deception Plans*

As the American operational plan came together and the troops began moving, rumors of the impending attack began to spread. Even though it was impossible to hide the offensive from the Germans, the Americans went to great lengths to conceal the exact time and location of their attack. Using borrowed French radios in the area around the Belfort Gap, American operators set up a decoy communications network over which they sent thousands of coded messages for the benefit of German monitoring stations. To make the fictitious transmissions more credible, they included the assorted slang and profanity that Germans had come to associate

with American signal soldiers. German intelligence interpreted the increased message traffic and concluded that they had located the presence of a new American corps in the area.

To further deceive the Germans that the American attack would take place through the Belfort Gap, General Conner, the AEF operations officer, created an elaborate ruse. He gave Maj. Gen. Omar Bundy, commanding general of the VI Army Corps, detailed plans for a fictitious offensive leading out of Belfort in the direction of the heights to the southeast. The letter of instructions mentioned seven divisions as having been designated for the attack, and directed the general to proceed to Belfort with his staff and representatives from each of the divisions to begin planning and to conduct initial reconnaissance. One of Conner's assistants, Maj. Arthur L. Conger, checked into an expensive hotel in Belfort and "accidentally" left a piece of crumpled carbon paper identifying plans for the coming attack in the wastepaper basket. Knowing the hotel to be a virtual den of German espionage agents, Conger was pleased to find that the carbon paper disappeared shortly after he planted it. The ruse was effective, at least to a point. Although the Germans wisely considered an operation to clear the Belfort Gap a foolish idea, they could not completely discount the possibility that the Americans, whom they considered inexperienced amateurs, would try such a thing anyway. As a result, they evacuated villages in the nearby areas, reinforced defenses, and positioned additional artillery to defend the area.

## OPERATIONS

### *The Americans Attack*

The First Army Field Order No. 9 set D-day for the operation as 12 September, with H-hour at 0500. In the days leading up to the attack, French night and British day and night bombers conducted routine missions in the attack sector. Hours before the attack, Allied bomber units launched more intense raids concentrating on a more detailed list of targets. The Allied bombers under Mitchell's control hit the roads in the vicinity of the town of Vigneulles, targeting enemy transports and troops to impede German movements. To further block traffic, Allied units also bombed targets well behind the German lines, including the railroad yards and ammunition dump at Chambley-Bussières, and the road junction just to the south. Other Allied bombers struck

munitions dumps at Gondrecourt-Aix, Valleroy, and St. Jean-lès-Buzy. At the same time, British bombers struck the railroad center, supply dumps, and the airfield near Mars-la-Tour, and the railroad yards at Metz. Immediately before the attack, the bombers shifted to medium-range targets to disrupt rail traffic and track repair at the Chambley-Bussières, Dommary-Baroncourt, and Longuyon railheads; the railroad yard and ammunition dump at Dommary-Baroncourt; and the Meuse River bridges between Verdun and Sedan. Allied air units also attacked German command posts and airfields throughout the salient.

Meanwhile on the ground, in order to preserve the element of surprise, nothing moved along the American line until after dusk on 11 September. Infantry and artillery units stood in the assembly areas concealed by woods some six kilometers behind the frontline positions. Soon after dark, everything started to move. Much to the chagrin of the doughboys, it also began to rain. A long column of American-manned Renault tanks rumbled along the roads. Batteries of artillery moved from their wooded concealment toward the Rambucourt-Flirey-Limey highway. Battalions of infantry trudged through the rain toward the front.

Both the artillery and the infantry were to bypass the more recently dug and sturdy mainline trenches, and instead take up positions amid a maze of older, unoccupied, mud-choked ones farther forward. As the artillery units usually arrived first, battery commanders discovered that other than occasional sentry posts, nothing stood between them and the Germans. They sent detachments of gunners forward to establish local security with skirmish lines that could protect the batteries from enemy patrols until the infantry was in place. Some units had difficulty reaching their assault positions. The 16th Infantry of the 1st Division, for example, later reported that its lead battalion got into position later than expected “owing to engineer guides going astray,” but was ready well before the time to attack. The steady rain continued throughout the night as Signal Corps wiremen ran telephone lines from the battalion positions back to regimental command posts. With all other preparations completed, infantry assault units lay on the wet ground between the inundated old trenches and waited for H-hour.

At precisely 0100, all of the Allied guns simultaneously opened a massive volley, as some 3,000 pieces commenced firing. Doughboys recalled that the intensely black night suddenly seemed to burst into a sheet of flame. Infantrymen who had occupied the trenches

on previous occasions looked across to the German-held Montsec and wondered when the enemy guns would respond with deadly counterbattery fire. The hours seemed to drag on as the combat veterans among them who had patrolled no-man's-land pondered what real effect the artillery would have on the well-prepared enemy positions they had often observed. The green troops, whether serving in the newer divisions or as replacements in older ones, waited apprehensively in the darkness and drenching rain, imagining what the day would bring. The engineer guides then led the doughboys through the maze of protective barbed wire to the line of departure, most often marked with white linen tape, to make it easier for the infantrymen to find their jumping-off place in the predawn darkness. The artillerymen continued firing salvos aimed primarily at the enemy's artillery positions. Allied pursuit squadrons took to the sky to destroy hostile aviation and balloons throughout the zone of attack from five kilometers in front of the line of departure to as far as the line of exploitation, and on the flanks from eleven kilometers north of Pont-à-Mousson to as far as Étain to the west of Metz. With bombs and machine guns, low-flying air patrols attacked enemy reinforcements marching to counterattack as well as retreating defenders. Despite these efforts by the airmen, increasing rain and fog would severely hinder Allied air maneuvers for the first two days of the operation.

Although the Germans anticipated an attack, the opening bombardment still took them by surprise. They had begun preparations to evacuate the salient, removing some of their ammunition and supply stockpiles first and displacing artillery batteries to the rear, when it struck. General Fuchs had ordered two divisions to withdraw to a secondary line formerly occupied by artillery, but one of the commanders misinterpreted the instructions and left two-thirds of his infantry in its old positions with virtually no supporting artillery. Aerial strafing and bombing along with artillery shells created particular havoc among German units caught on the move. Teams of horses the Germans had brought in to extract the remaining forward artillery batteries were themselves unable to move. Withdrawal routes soon became blocked by craters and fallen trees, and littered with mutilated human bodies and horse carcasses. Movement ground to a halt in many places.

At 0500, the artillery changed the form of its fire. The heavy guns continued to suppress enemy batteries and machine guns, but the 75-mm. field guns of the divisional artillery began firing



*Ambulance stuck in a ditch* (National Archives)

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direct support for the infantry. Along the American line, company commanders watched as the first rounds of the protective rolling barrage hit the ground in front of them. They need not have even looked at their watches to know that H-hour had arrived. The men knew it as well, rising to their feet and shaking off the stiffness from waiting for hours in the rain on the soaked ground. As their officers signaled the advance, the doughboys crossed the line of departure at H-hour, with daylight still twenty minutes away. They moved forward under the protective curtain of fire that advanced one hundred meters toward the enemy trenches every four minutes. The attack waves moved steadily forward until they reached the first belt of enemy barbed wire. Teams of infantrymen with wire cutters and engineers with explosive Bangalore torpedoes went forward to work on the obstacles. They quickly opened lanes that allowed their comrades to continue moving ahead.

After the American barrage passed over them, German artillerymen came out of their shelters, manned their guns, and opened fire. However, having stripped the forward defensive belt of much of its artillery, the remaining batteries had too few guns to seriously impede the determined advance. Still, the attackers

encountered pockets of deadly resistance. Braving machine gun nests and rifle fire, the doughboys overran the forward enemy positions and pressed on behind the barrage to surround and capture the remaining batteries. As the Americans cleared the third line of the Wilhelm defense zone, they broke through the last strong line of resistance. The 1st Division reported that the enemy trench system was not difficult to pass, “having been greatly demolished by the rains and shell fire.” By 0900, the infantry along the southern front of the salient had advanced steadily, although they were slowed by the wet, mud-caked ground and the need to escort groups of German prisoners to the rear.

### *The IV Corps Advances*

The IV Corps, operating at the center of the salient’s southern edge, provided the primary thrust of the opening attack. It also had the farthest to go and generally made good progress despite serious opposition in the last line of trenches located in the Quart de Réserve, a small wood of about one square mile midway between Seicheprey and Nonsard. The 42d Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Charles T. Menoher, “had been given the main effort,” as the *New York Times* later reported, and attacked in the direction of the heights overlooking the Madine creek to “deliver the main blow” of the corps. Made up of National Guard units from several states and the District of Columbia, the 42d or “Rainbow” Division formed the center of the corps. At that point in the war, it was one of the more experienced First Army units. The 1st Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. Charles P. Summerall, advanced on the corps’ left flank. Composed of Regular Army units, the 1st Division—also known as the “Big Red One” for its shoulder sleeve insignia—had been the first American formation to deploy and see combat in France in 1917. Although as a unit it had more combat experience than any other division in the AEF, its ranks included many new replacements. Lastly, the 89th Division, commanded by Maj. Gen. William M. Wright, advanced on the corps’ right. A National Army division, its enlisted ranks were filled mostly by men drafted from Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska.

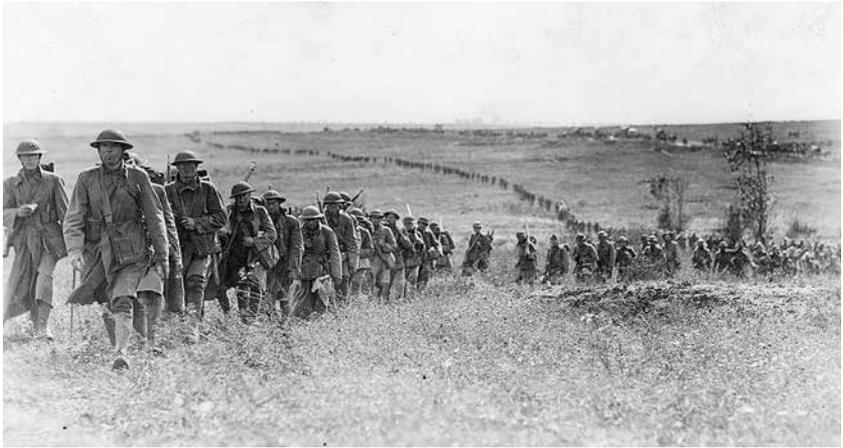
In the Rainbow Division’s zone, its 83d and 84th Infantry Brigades advanced abreast with two regiments in line. In their assault formation, each regiment had two of its three infantry battalions in the first line with their companies forming two waves about twenty meters apart. Elements of the brigade’s machine

gun battalion and attached trench mortar and 37-mm. gun units followed in support. To the rear of these followed the regiments' third infantry battalions with their attached units. The supporting battalions were ready to reinforce those to their front or mop up any resistance that remained behind once the assault waves pressed forward.

The 83d Infantry Brigade advanced with the 166th and 165th Infantry on line, and breached what reports called the enemy's "shell of defense" with "little difficulty." The 1st Battalion of the 165th Infantry—formerly known as the "Fighting 69th" Regiment of New York—moved forward on the brigade's right flank. Its commander, Lt. Col. William J. "Wild Bill" Donovan, knew that the Germans occupied good defensive positions and feared that his men would suffer frightful casualties once the enemy opened fire. He felt some relief when the German artillery did not respond with its characteristic fury. The barbed wire, which had everyone worried, also did not cause much of a problem. Although present in great abundance, much of it was old and rusty, and the breaching teams quickly opened lanes through the obstacles. Except for some pockets of resistance, the advancing waves overwhelmed the defenders. Realizing that they had caught the Germans on the point of withdrawal, Donovan urged his men forward, and they took all of the battalion's first-day objectives by 1400.

The entire 83d Brigade advanced eight kilometers and occupied the villages of Essey-et-Maizerais and Pannes against relatively light resistance. Local inhabitants were relieved to see their liberators after almost four years of German occupation. Pvt. Albert M. Ettinger of the 165th Infantry recalled that "French civilians wept joyously and offered what little provisions they had to our men." To the left of the 165th, the 166th Infantry, originally composed entirely of Ohio National Guard soldiers, also made good progress. Fighting along with elements of the 1st Division, the 166th took the town of Lahayville before reaching its first-day objective by 1630.

The going was not quite so easy for the 42d Division's 84th Infantry Brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. Douglas MacArthur. The 167th and 168th Infantry and the Tank Corps' 327th Battalion experienced "slower going" and encountered a "more vigorous resistance." The men of the 168th Infantry ran into elements of the German *10th Division* entrenched in the Bois de la Sonnard. Machine gun fire cut into the assault waves from front and flank



*Supply train and infantry* (National Archives)

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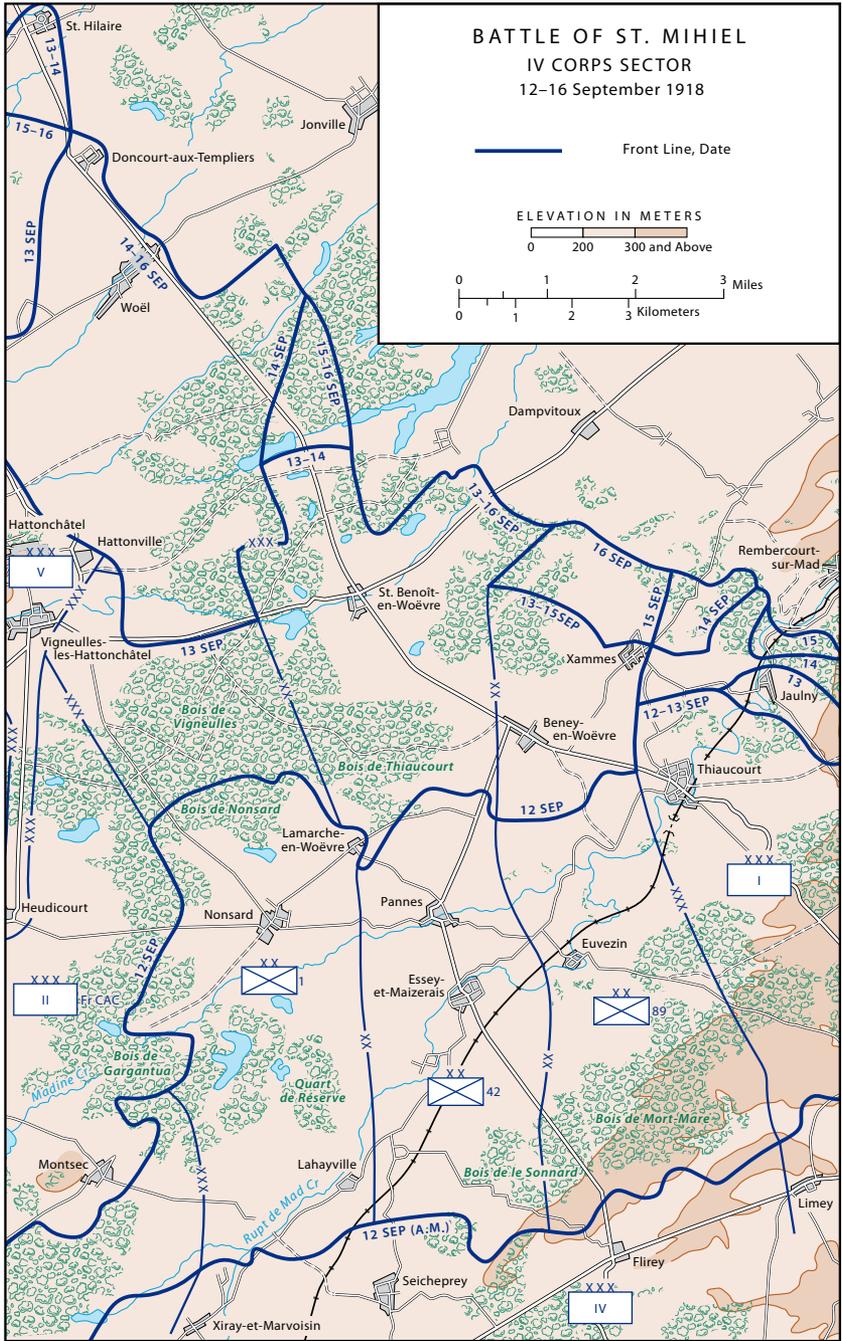
while short-range heavy mortars called *minenwerfers* (mine throwers) lobbed high-explosive projectiles that created large craters on impact and showered the advancing doughboys with deadly shell fragments. Despite the carnage, their officers urged the men forward. With the support of the attached Stokes trench mortars and 37-mm. guns, the infantrymen came on in rushes toward the first belt of barbed wire, outflanked the machine gun nests, and overcame the strongpoints. Although many of its officers fell in the advance, the regiment surged into the woods and over the German front line. By 0630, the 168th Infantry had made short work of the defenses and was advancing to what seemed to be a weaker second line. The battle for the Bois de la Sonnard cost the regiment more than 200 casualties, but the attackers captured more than 300 prisoners and another 600 surrendered to follow-on units. No one bothered to count the German dead. By 1630, all Rainbow Division units had broken through the German defenses and secured their objectives. (*See Map 5.*)

Elsewhere in the IV Corps, the 1st Division attack made rapid headway. From a tactical standpoint, the division had drawn the most difficult assignment in the corps. Not only did it have to screen its own flank against German forces holding the high ground to its left, but it also had to advance across the rain-swollen Rupt de Mad, a tributary of the Moselle River which ran northwest across the division front. The division advanced across

no-man's-land in a series of waves with the 1st Infantry Brigade on the left and 2d Infantry Brigade on the right. The supporting artillery preparation had targeted enemy machine gun positions with noticeable effect, and the infantry advanced behind a rolling barrage, reaching the German wire against light resistance. In fact, the advancing doughboys suffered more casualties from following their protective artillery screen too closely than from enemy fire. As expected, the division met serious opposition in the last trench of the Quart de Réserve. Despite the determined machine gun fire, they finally cleared the woods at the cost of 600 casualties.

Following that engagement, the 1st Division troops found the going much easier as they secured the third objective of the first phase of the operation. The corps commander ordered Summerall to resume the advance as soon as all of his units were ready. The final objective planned for the day included the towns of Lamarche and Nonsard, as well as the Bois de Gargantua. As artillery fire fell on the objective, the support battalions passed through the assault battalions to advance. They found the Madine fordable, but the high banks delayed the crossing of the tanks. Even so, the division occupied its first-day objectives in depth shortly after noon.

In general, as the tanks lumbered forward to provide support, they often had difficulty keeping pace with the advancing infantry on the broken and soggy ground. When Colonel Patton received word at 1000 that such “bad ground”—interlocking shell craters, gaping trenches, and the ever-present mud—was delaying the 327th Tank Battalion and accompanying infantry, he left his headquarters and made his way on foot to Essey-et-Maizerais. He found General MacArthur, and the two calmly stood talking about the situation as the battle raged. Meanwhile, at 1045, Air Service balloon observers reported seeing American troops “flat on their stomachs in front of the trench at Moulin under heavy machine gun fire,” with a “number of tanks behind them.” Patton got five of the Renaults moving, but all but one ran out of fuel before they reached the intermediate objective of Pannes ahead of the 42d Division. Tanks pulling sledges brought forward a supply of gasoline and topped off the vehicles so they could continue. The five tanks formed a line abreast and led the infantry advance north to Beney, which the Americans captured along with a battery of four field guns and sixteen machine guns. At other times, the Renault FTs pulled ahead of the infantry. The 326th Tank Battalion reached Xivray before elements of the 1st Division. The tanks experienced similar logistical problems to those in its sister units. The 1st



**MAP 5**

Division took Nonsard with the assistance of twenty-five tanks just before they too ran out of gas.

On the IV Corps' right, the 89th Division also had a difficult assignment. It attacked in the general direction of Dampvitoux, supporting the 42d Division on its left and assisted by the 2d Division of the I Corps on its right. The Bois de Mort-Mare extended across almost the entire divisional front with only a narrow strip of open ground to the east. German defenses included strongpoints with trenches, concrete machine gun nests, and deep dugouts. The division advanced with its 178th Infantry Brigade on the left and the 177th Infantry Brigade on the right. Both brigades suffered heavy casualties as they approached the woods, but as they came within sight of the German positions, doughboys rushed forward individually and in small groups to take on the Germans. An exploding shell knocked 2d Lt. J. Hunter Wickersham, a platoon leader in Company H, 353d Infantry, 177th Brigade, to the ground with a severe wound. With his right arm disabled, he continued to lead his platoon in the attack, firing his revolver with his left hand until he collapsed and died. He received the Medal of Honor posthumously for his bravery in action. Under such pressure, the German line cracked, and soon hundreds of enemy prisoners were streaming to the rear. By 0800, the Mort-Mare woods were in American hands and the division was advancing toward the next defensive line.

By 1230, the IV Corps reached the southern edge of the Bois de Nonsard and Bois de Thiaucourt and captured the town of Nonsard. The infantry had advanced eight kilometers through the muddy fields and paused to rest. Aside from active patrols, they temporarily halted their advance, having achieved almost all of their first-day objectives.

With the IV Corps making good progress, General Dickman requested and received permission to continue the attack toward the second day's objectives. Sensing that the German line was in complete disarray, he turned to Lt. Col. Oliver P. M. "Happy" Hazard, who commanded a provisional squadron of cavalry, to continue the advance. Hazard's men were part of the American 2d Cavalry. As in the French and British armies, the Americans consigned cavalry to limited roles on the Western Front. They generally performed security, liaison, and reconnaissance duties in previous operations, but could fight as dismounted infantry if the situation demanded. Each trooper carried a Springfield M1903 .30 caliber rifle, and the unit also had a number of the newly arrived



*An American tank in trouble (National Archives)*

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M1918 Browning Automatic Rifles (BAR), which enabled the men to deliver a disproportionate amount of firepower. Of greater importance to Dickman, however, was that the cavalymen were rested and available to make a renewed attack. Hazard's squadron initially consisted of Troops B, D, F, and H, but Troop B was performing patrol and liaison for the IV Corps' assault divisions. Because of the distinct nature of a cavalry unit's organization, Hazard's three troops would have at most 240 fighting men between them to make the assault, less than a standard infantry company. Moreover, even if the cavalry reached the railroad, they lacked demolition equipment with which to destroy the line.

Even so, with reports that the Germans were starting to break, the squadron was ordered to move forward of the 1st Division's line to reconnoiter the railroad and highway between Heudicourt and Vigneulles and block the Germans' escape. The troopers reached Nonsard by about 1600, and Hazard ordered Capt. Ernest N. Harmon of Troop F to lead the advance guard. The men rode forward nearly two kilometers before entering the woods, encountering burning huts and loose-running livestock along the way.

Once in the woods, the cavalry units became disorganized, with the advanced guard losing contact with the main body and one of the troops moving forward along an adjacent route. The advance elements soon located an enemy wagon train preparing to withdraw. As they formed from column into “line of foragers” and drew their pistols in order to advance, they received fire from advancing enemy infantry and machine guns hidden in the woods to their flank and rear. Taken by surprise, the cavalrymen retreated about 300 meters to where they could dismount under cover and form a skirmish line with their M1903 rifles in order to advance—the heavy woods being unsuitable for mounted action. They initially conducted this retirement in good order, even though they had many green horses unaccustomed to heavy fire. Under continued machine gun fire, however, some of the less-well-trained horses became skittish. The machine gunners, trained to shoot low, caused few casualties among the men, but their bullets hit some horses in the legs, while other horses panicked and became difficult to control. The troopers returned fire and killed most of the enemy machine gun crews on their flanks in their retreat. The officers reformed their units as the riders calmed their horses when they reached the wood line. Not strong enough to block the road without additional support, the cavalry withdrew behind the safety of the 1st Division.

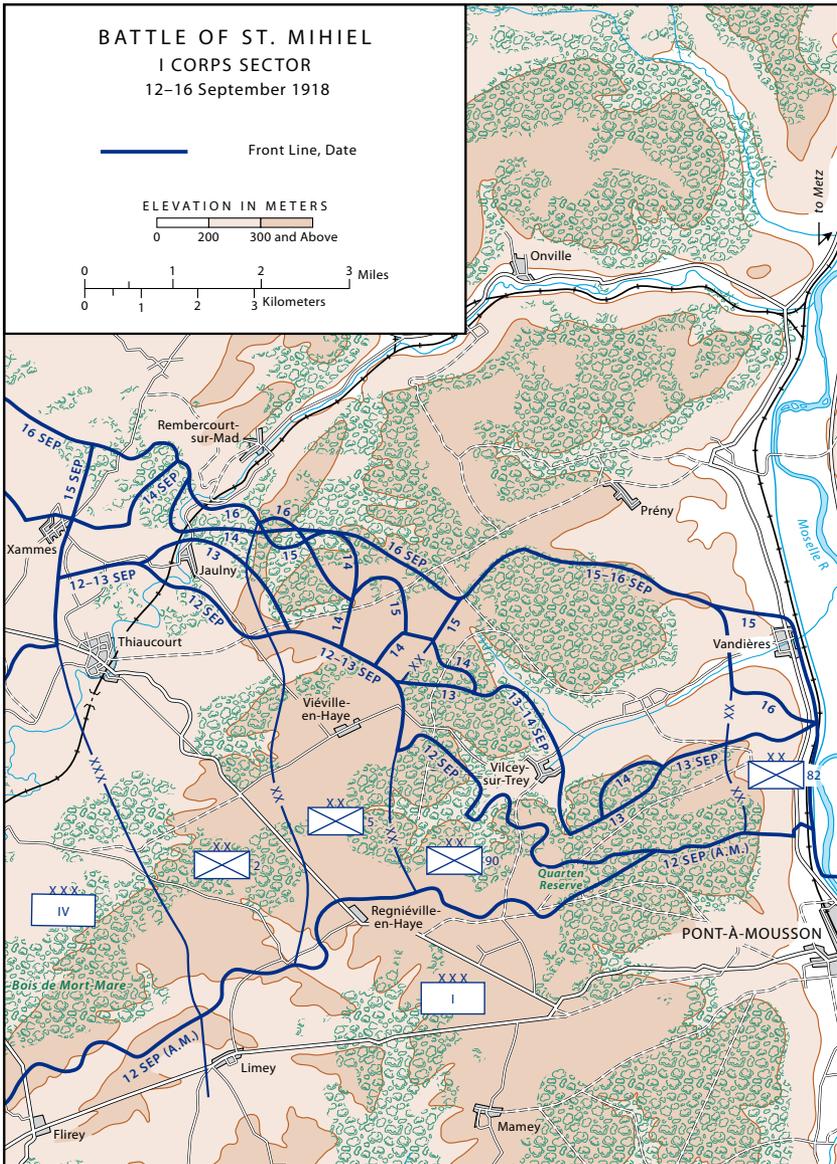
Refusing to be dissuaded by the failure of the cavalry advance, Dickman ordered the 1st Division to continue the attack that evening. The movement was slow and difficult through the darkness in the Bois de Nonsard followed by the Bois de Vigneulles, but the infantry advanced in relatively good order. By early the next morning, 13 September, elements of the 28th Infantry, 2d Infantry Brigade, began taking up positions to the east, southeast, and south of the town, including positions astride the Vigneulles–St. Benoît road. Additionally, Dickman rushed a brigade of the 3d Division from the corps reserve to guard the left flank in order to allow 1st Division to continue its push forward in the morning. By the morning all were ready for the final push into Vigneulles to meet up with the 26th Division from General Cameron’s V Corps, thus closing the gap on any German forces remaining in the apex of the salient.

### *The I Corps’ Attack*

To the right of the IV Corps, General Liggett’s I Corps conducted a supporting attack, smashing into the southeastern section of the

German line. Three of his divisions, the 2d, 5th, and 90th, began their assault at 0500 on 12 September while the 82d remained in position to anchor the right flank along the Moselle River. Liggett's primary objective was the high ground north of Thiaucourt, which, next to St. Mihiel, was the largest town in the salient. Since the town sat on a major railroad line, the Americans considered it to be one of the most important objectives of the offensive. Liggett's divisions had much the same experience as those in Dickman's IV Corps. The 2d Division, reconstituted and reinforced after the bitter fighting at Soissons, cleared a series of wood lines defended by degraded German units. Enemy morale was so low that many surrendered or fled at the first sight of the approaching assault waves. By noon, the division had taken its primary objective of Thiaucourt and by the end of the day had captured the fortified high ground to the north of the town (*Map 6*).

Elsewhere in the I Corps zone of attack, the 5th and the 90th Divisions protected the 2d Division's flank and advanced apace as German resistance crumbled. The going was relatively easy in the 5th Division's sector, but the doughboys of the 90th Division faced some of the fiercest fighting of the battle. The division's 179th Infantry Brigade attacked on the division's left, with the 357th and 358th Infantry advancing through machine gun-infested woods where the Germans had erected iron gratings between trees to channel the attackers into fire zones. On the division's right, the 180th Infantry Brigade assigned its 359th Infantry to take a well-defended piece of ground known as Quarten Reserve, which had been the scene of bitter fighting in previous years. Crawling ahead, the doughboys reached a series of German barbed-wire entanglements as machine gun bullets snapped over their heads. As a call went out for someone to bring up a pair of wire cutters, Cpl. Jesse M. Grisham climbed out of his hole and calmly walked forward. Seemingly oblivious to the battle around him, Grisham cut one path through the entanglements, and then another. He had moved on to a third location when his luck ran out and a burst of machine gun fire cut him down. For his bravery, he was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross. Despite the stiff opposition, the assault rolled on, and by the end of the day the troops of both the 5th and 90th Divisions were up against the initial defenses of the Michel Line. On the far right, the 82d Division did not advance, but sent out aggressive combat patrols and raiding parties to confuse the enemy and to hold the defenders in place and keep them from interfering with the rest of the corps' advance.

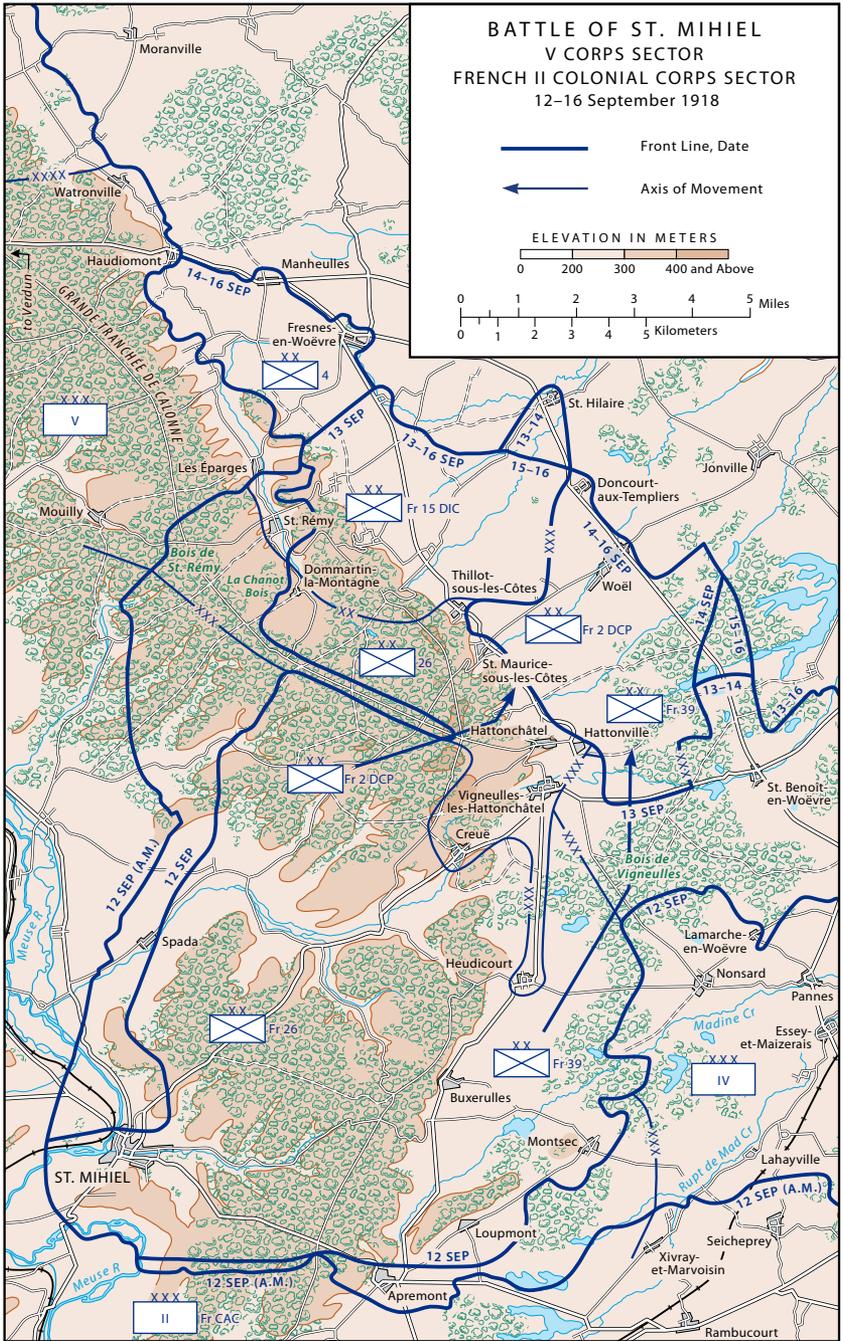


**MAP 6**

## *The V Corps' Supporting Attack*

Along the western edge of the salient, General Cameron's V Corps initiated a planned secondary attack at 0800, three hours behind the attack on the southern face. As elsewhere, the artillery preparation began firing at deep targets at 0100, and at 0500, when the main attack began, the artillery supporting the V Corps dropped to fire on enemy positions to its front. At H+3, following seven hours of artillery preparation, the infantry attack commenced. The corps' primary assault force was the 26th Division, nicknamed the "Yankee Division" because it had been organized with National Guard units from New England. Under the command of Maj. Gen. Clarence R. Edwards, the 26th Division advanced along a front of just over three kilometers, on a line stretching between Les Éparges to the north and a position in the woods southeast of the town of Mouilly. Edwards placed the 104th and 103d Infantry of the 52d Infantry Brigade on his left, with the 101st Infantry from the 51st Infantry Brigade on the right. Edwards held back the brigade's remaining regiment, the 102d Infantry, as divisional reserve. The French 15th DIC attacked on the 26th Division's left, protecting its flank. Farther to the north, the American 4th Division's 8th Infantry Brigade conducted a supporting attack while the rest of the division remained in corps reserve. The French 2d DCP of the French II Colonial Corps advanced to support the American 26th Division's right flank (*Map 7*).

Unlike the more open terrain facing troops to the south, the 26th Division moved forward into dense forests and rolling hills that extended off the Meuse River to the west. Although German resistance was sporadic, the attacking infantry encountered extensive barbed-wire obstacles and hundreds of shell holes and craters, caused by the opening bombardment, that further impeded the advance. When Pershing learned at midafternoon that the division had yet to reach its day's objective, he sent instructions urging the corps commander to push forward. Despite the difficult terrain, the doughboys moved through the thick woods of the Bois de St. Rémy and La Chanot Bois. The Germans made their principal defense with well-placed concrete machine gun nests, or pillboxes, within the woods, as well as determined machine gun fire from the small village of Dommartin-la-Montagne that stymied the attack on the division's left. Noticeably absent, however, was the enemy's artillery, having been either withdrawn or silenced by the American artillery preparation. The Yankee Division soldiers finally reached



MAP 7



*Member of the 101st Field Signal Battalion stringing telegraph wire in captured German position (National Archives)*

their assigned objectives during the afternoon and early evening of 12 September, but the work was far from complete.

On the 26th Division's flanks, the French had varying degrees of success. To the south, the French 2d DCP's advance initially made greater gains than the Americans. However, the French launched their attacks in stages, hoping to hold the German units further to the south in place while the American attacks burrowed into the salient. Once the French started to move in the early afternoon, they rapidly caught up to the Americans as the Germans were beginning to withdraw. Unfortunately, the French 15th DIC on the 26th Division's left did not enjoy similar success. Although the French were able to seize the town of St. Rémy by 1400, stiff German resistance prevented them from moving much further.

At the First Army headquarters, Pershing was concerned that the pace of the V and IV Corps' advances, although steady, would allow the Germans to withdraw their forces from the apex of the salient before the Americans could close the gap. As with Dickman's forces to the south, Pershing pressed Cameron to continue the advance. The general needed little motivation, ordering Edwards to have his 51st Brigade make a drive toward Vigneulles. Edwards complied, calling up his reserves and having the brigade reform into a column of march during the early evening. The brigade was ordered to conduct a night march along the Grande Tranchée de Calonne, a road running through a dense forest straight toward the village of Hattonchâtel to the southeast. The race was on to link up with the IV Corps before the Germans could affect their withdrawal.

Meanwhile, the 52d Brigade received orders to vigorously renew its advance, which had stalled just past La Chanot Bois. The night attack succeeded, forcing the enemy to withdraw rapidly toward St. Maurice-sous-les-Côtes, on the edge of the Woëvre Plain. As the Germans fell back, the 52d Brigade expanded its axis of advance to include the village of Thillot-sous-les-Côtes, pushing the Germans off the high ground northeast of Hattonchâtel in preparation for the 51st Brigade's final push.

### *Along the Apex*

The II French Colonial Corps held the point of the salient between the U.S. IV and V Corps, and had great success in accomplishing its mission. An hour after the main attack began, the French launched a number of limited objective attacks that kept the German defenders busily engaged on that front and prevented their withdrawal. The French 39th Division, positioned on the southern edge of the salient to the left of the American 1st Division, kept pressure on the Germans occupying the critical high ground at Montsec and Loupmont. This prevented the Germans from hitting the 1st Division's left flank in force and enabled its push to Nonsard. Units of the French 39th Division followed the left flank of the American 1st Division until it reached the Heudicourt-Vigneulles road and established a blocking position astride it. At the same time, the French 26th Division met stern resistance outside of the town of St. Mihiel, which would not fall to the attackers until the morning of 13 September. Finally, as described previously, the French 2d DCP protected the flank of the American advance along the western edge of the salient. Once the

American attack was well underway, the French corps launched a series of vigorous raids that penetrated the German front lines. As the Germans began to realize the dire nature of the situation, their resistance within the salient slowly started to disappear.

### *Closing the Gap*

The initial American attacks on 12 September accomplished their missions, pushing into the sides of the salient and punishing the German defenders. Pershing and his GHQ and First Army staffs learned that the Germans were burning the supplies they could not move and pulling back from the forward portions of the salient. Retreating soldiers, artillery, and support trains soon flooded the roads between the two American attacks. With the Germans initially holding out against the French attacks along the point of the salient, all that remained was to link the American attacks, preferably before the Germans could withdraw.

Playing on the rivalry between the Regular Army and National Guard, General Cameron goaded General Edwards to have the 26th Division “try to beat the 1st Division in the race and clean up.” Lead elements of the 102d Infantry reached the town of Hattonchâtel around 0200 on 13 September, followed by the remaining elements of the 51st Infantry Brigade and assorted divisional units. By seizing Hattonchâtel, the Americans could view the entire Woëvre Plain before them, including Vigneulles a kilometer to the south and a hundred meters below them. They immediately sent out patrols to close off the roads and to make contact with units from IV Corps. On the other side of the gap, the 1st Division began its advance toward Vigneulles and Hattonchâtel shortly after midnight, closing any roads that remained open from the west. About 0900, Brig. Gen. Frank E. Bamford, commander of the 1st Division’s 2d Infantry Brigade, received a message that scouts from the 28th Infantry had noticed activity in and around the village of Hattonville, just to the east of Hattonchâtel (*Map 8*).

From a distance, it appeared to the scouts that enemy units of various sizes were moving into the town, possibly concentrating to counterattack or make a firm resistance. The regimental commander soon requested artillery support. Not long afterward, 1st Division patrols established contact with those of the 26th Division. The Big Red One soldiers soon learned that the Yankee Division occupied both towns, and the scouts actually had witnessed groups of German prisoners being marched to holding areas in the town.





*View of Vigneulles from Hattonchâtel, with Montsec in the distance*  
(National Archives)

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At 0930, the 1st Division and IV Corps headquarters received the message, “Objective reached, held by 26th Division.” Both divisions established defenses and made contact with units of the French 39th Division advancing from the south. Looking to redeem the honor of the mounted arm, the three troops of the 2d Cavalry advanced and achieved better results, capturing an enemy battery and a number of prisoners. Mopping up continued for the rest of the day, but the First Army had closed the St. Mihiel salient.

### *The War in the Air*

As American and French forces battered the Germans on the ground, the war in the skies got off to a slow start. Despite Colonel Mitchell’s plan to use an overwhelming number of aircraft to support the ground campaign, the weather severely limited what his units could do. On 12 and 13 September, low clouds, heavy rain, and high winds made the simple act of flying extremely dangerous, let alone in combat. The American First Army Air Service could not launch the mass attacks that Mitchell desired, and had to settle for limited sorties of small groups or individual flights. Because of the low cloud ceiling, which forced pilots to fly less than 300 meters above the ground, pursuit aircraft generally abandoned trying to

take on the German fighters en masse, and instead engaged in ground strafing and targeting enemy reconnaissance planes. The cloud cover similarly restricted Allied bombers and observation aircraft to low-level flying, making them susceptible to both enemy small-arms fire and friendly artillery fire.

Making matters worse, a number of the American flyers struggled not only with the weather, but with operating their aircraft. Many of the DH-4 bombers, fitted with a new American 400-horsepower Liberty V-12 engine, had only recently arrived on the battlefield, leaving little time for pilots to become accustomed to the new planes' capabilities. Even for those pilots who understood their aircraft, nearly half of the American squadrons lacked significant combat experience. The men soon found that Mitchell's intent that pursuit units protect reconnaissance and bomber aircraft proved difficult because of the performance characteristics of the various planes. Bombers could barely match the pursuits' minimal safe speed necessary to stay aloft, and the pursuit fighters did not have the range to stay with the bombers or observation planes, which flew up to sixty kilometers beyond the front lines. Meanwhile, the reconnaissance crews encountered their own problems. The poor weather prevented photographic reconnaissance until 14 September, limiting the pilots to conducting visual observations only. Moreover, while they could report their findings to ground forces via air-to-ground radios, they could not receive messages themselves and thus had no way to verify receipt of their reports. Some pilots tried to coordinate with ground forces to relay information back behind the lines, but many of the infantrymen were ill-trained in the correct procedure for signaling aircraft and were reluctant to expose themselves to enemy fire by putting out marker panels in any case.

By 14 September, the weather began to clear and Mitchell's forces finally could take to the skies in large numbers. By this point, however, the battle had changed. With the Germans withdrawing behind the formidable defenses of the Hindenburg Line, Mitchell shifted to longer-range bombing missions and air-to-air engagements. The Germans, meanwhile, had reinforced their air units in the area. Even though they did not commit as large a force as Mitchell had anticipated, they were still able to mount a bloody defense as they covered their reforming ground units, inflicting significant losses in what would be one of the costliest months of the war for Allied air units.

Considering the disparity of air units committed to the battle by both sides, the outcome was never really in doubt. The Germans



*2d Lt. Frank Luke Jr. and his Spad XIII fighter plane*  
(National Archives)

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remained capable of attaining air superiority anywhere they chose on the Western Front, but at this point in the war the St. Mihiel salient did not warrant the resources required to defend it. This is not to say that Mitchell's forces did not do commendable work. Over four days, American aviation conducted 3,300 flights over the battle lines, totaling 4,000 hours in the air, while firing 30,000 rounds of machine gun ammunition and dropping over 1,000 individual bombs, delivering seventy-five tons of high explosives. In combination with the British and French, Mitchell's forces shot down twelve enemy balloons and over sixty planes. The Americans lost fifty-three planes and suffered ninety-five casualties, including thirty-six killed in action. Among these was 2d Lt. David E. Putnam, who at the time of his death on 12 September was the leading American ace with twelve kills. The battle also saw the beginning of 2d Lt. Frank Luke Jr.'s short but spectacular career. The 21-year-old pilot scored his first career kill on 12 September, shooting down a German balloon. Between then and his death on 29 September, he would rack up eighteen kills (fourteen of them balloons) in ten sorties over eight days of combat. Like their

counterparts on the ground, the American airmen were quickly learning the realities of combat and gaining the experience necessary to mount ever-larger campaigns.

### *Wrapping Up the Offensive*

On the German side of the line, the *Army Group C* commander, General Fuchs, considered the evolving situation. By 1100 on 12 September, he recognized that his forces faced a major offensive. Although the troops at the apex of the salient initially repelled the French assaults, the Americans had deeply penetrated the southern and western flanks. Fuchs recognized that the situation was untenable and sent orders to execute a general retreat to the Michel position at once. Buoyed by their apparent success against the French, German commanders were reluctant to depart—unaware that the attacks primarily were intended to hold them in place. In lieu of a full withdrawal, they issued orders to pull back to an intermediate position still within the salient. Fuchs quickly intervened and had them retreat before the two attacking pincers could close. He understood that a rapid withdrawal could result in heavy losses of men and materiel, but he also recognized that any delay in the withdrawal invited an even greater catastrophe for the Germans trapped in the salient.

Despite the American breakthroughs, the Germans withdrew in good order. The rapid American advances had virtually annihilated the *77th Reserve Division* and shattered elements of the *10th Division* and the *Austrian 35th Division*. Still, the *107th Division* and the *28th Reserve Division* managed to hold their positions on the Combres Heights along the western side of the salient long enough to allow most of the defenders around St. Mihiel to escape before the trap shut completely. By the evening of the 12th, the Germans were able to mount scattered local counterattacks, supported by increasing heavy artillery, indicating a stiffened enemy defense.

Despite the growing resistance, the Americans resumed the attack on the 13th, although fatigue, bad weather, soggy ground, and enemy defenses sapped much of the men's strength and slowed their momentum. The advance continued steadily through the areas that the Germans had abandoned, but slowed as the men approached the new German defenses along the Michel Line. Patrols sent to reconnoiter the new enemy positions met more determined resistance. Soldiers of the 89th Division watched in horror as interlocking machine guns and direct-fire artillery cut



*Entrance to German tunnels built in 1914, leading to the top of Montsec from the inside (National Archives)*

an advance by the adjacent 2d Division to ribbons. Elements of the 42d and 89th Divisions also tried to continue their advance, but were soon brought to a halt by heavy artillery fire. All along the American line, the doughboys dug in and prepared to hold their recently won positions.

During the limited fighting that occurred through 14 September, American units consolidated their new lines. The previous two days of fighting had brought the First Army to the Michel Line. The three American corps now held a line roughly forty-two kilometers long, extending from Vandières in the I Corps sector through Jaulny, Doncourt-aux-Templiers, and Fresnes-en-Woëvre to Haudiomont in the V Corps sector. Given his men's successes over the previous two days, General Pershing was sorely tempted to press the attack beyond the limited objectives that he and Marshal Foch had agreed to during their meeting on 2 September. If he ignored the agreement, the American First Army could push on for Metz, threatening the Briey Iron Basin and the critical railway net beyond. When he put the suggestion to his staff, however, they vigorously opposed



*Sign revised by American soldiers (National Archives)*

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continuing the attack. The First Army's best divisions were exhausted and needed relief. Moreover, many of the reserve units supporting the St. Mihiel operation were to begin moving north for the upcoming Meuse-Argonne Offensive. General Liggett, the I Corps commander, likewise expressed his doubts about pressing the attack. He believed the defenses around Metz to be far stronger than those encountered at St. Mihiel and felt that the First Army, despite its recent success, was not yet ready for such an effort. In the end, Pershing decided to honor his commitment to Foch and by 15 September began withdrawing some of his divisions and moving them north. One week later, on 22 September, the American First Army assumed control over the Meuse-Argonne sector in preparation for Marshal Foch's offensive.

#### ANALYSIS

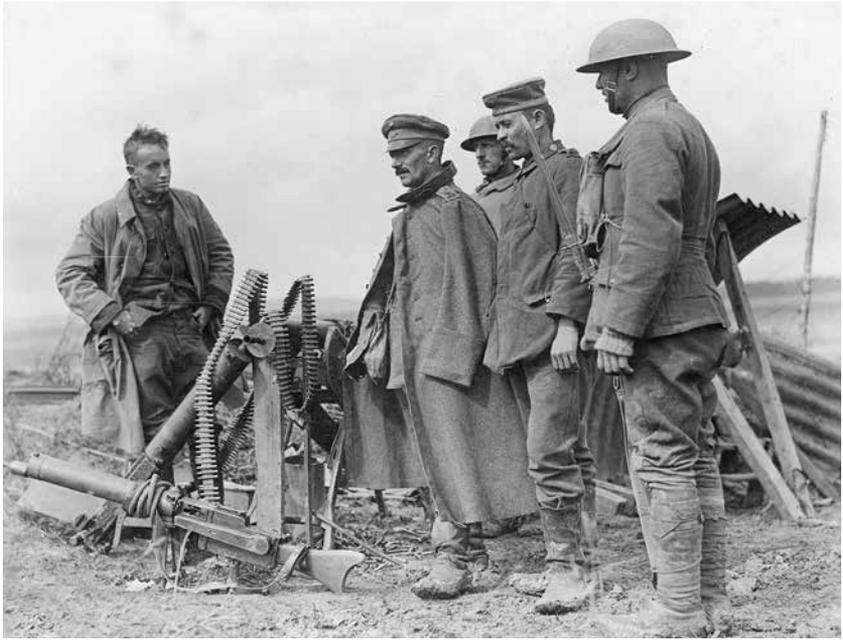
Although sporadic fighting continued until 16 September, the First Army attack closed the salient in thirty-six hours and achieved several important objectives. One of the offensive's original goals

was to open the Paris-Avrincourt rail line for Allied use. Furthermore, as Pershing included in his report, the Americans “released the inhabitants of many villages from enemy domination.” By driving the Germans out of the St. Mihiel salient, the Americans also deprived the enemy of a base from which he could harass the American rear in the upcoming Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Although unable to push their way through the Michel Line, the Americans were now in a position to threaten Metz, the Longwy-Briey industrial complex, and the crucial railroads passing through that area. More important to Pershing and his staff, however, was the proof that the Americans could successfully plan and conduct an independent operation of this magnitude, even though the 7,000 casualties that the Americans suffered reflected the operation’s limited scale in comparison to other battles of the Western Front.

Although a senior German leader characterized the battle as a “severe defeat of Composite Army C,” from the enemy’s point of view it had not been a complete catastrophe. They had lost some 2,300 men killed or wounded and another 16,000 captured, but the bulk of the defending force escaped the converging American spearheads and reestablished defensive lines along the base of the salient. Still, in making their withdrawal the Germans lost about 450 artillery pieces and a considerable amount of ammunition and supplies. After four long years of war, none of these were losses they could easily afford.

On the whole, the implications of the American victory were dire for Germany. Four years of war had significantly weakened German manpower. Advancing American soldiers at St. Mihiel noted that many of the enemy soldiers they encountered were old men or young boys. Prior to the St. Mihiel attack, many Germans had regarded the American soldiers as amateurs, a foe they could easily repulse. The Americans’ success convinced the Germans that the Americans were tough fighters that they could not dismiss so readily, especially because they knew that thousands more doughboys were arriving in France every day.

The AEF’s success at St. Mihiel had repercussions at multiple levels. As previously noted, the reduction of the salient removed the threat of German interference on the flank of the Allied offensive to the northwest. More important, considering the threat that the Americans now posed to the area surrounding Metz, the Germans would need to maintain enough reserve forces in the area to repulse any further attack. Consequently, those reserves would not be available to prevent Allied forces breaking through the German



*German prisoners and captured machine guns (National Archives)*

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defenses in the coming months. Yet Pershing's decision was not without consequences; he utilized many of his most experienced divisions at St. Mihiel, and they would be sorely missed in the opening phases of the upcoming Meuse-Argonne Offensive. In truth, when considering the level of planning that went into the operation, the units involved, and the Germans' resigned willingness to abandon the salient, the First Army's performance at St. Mihiel may have, as one historian noted, "represented the high point of the AEF." The question remained as to how well the First Army could operate on a larger scale against more determined resistance.

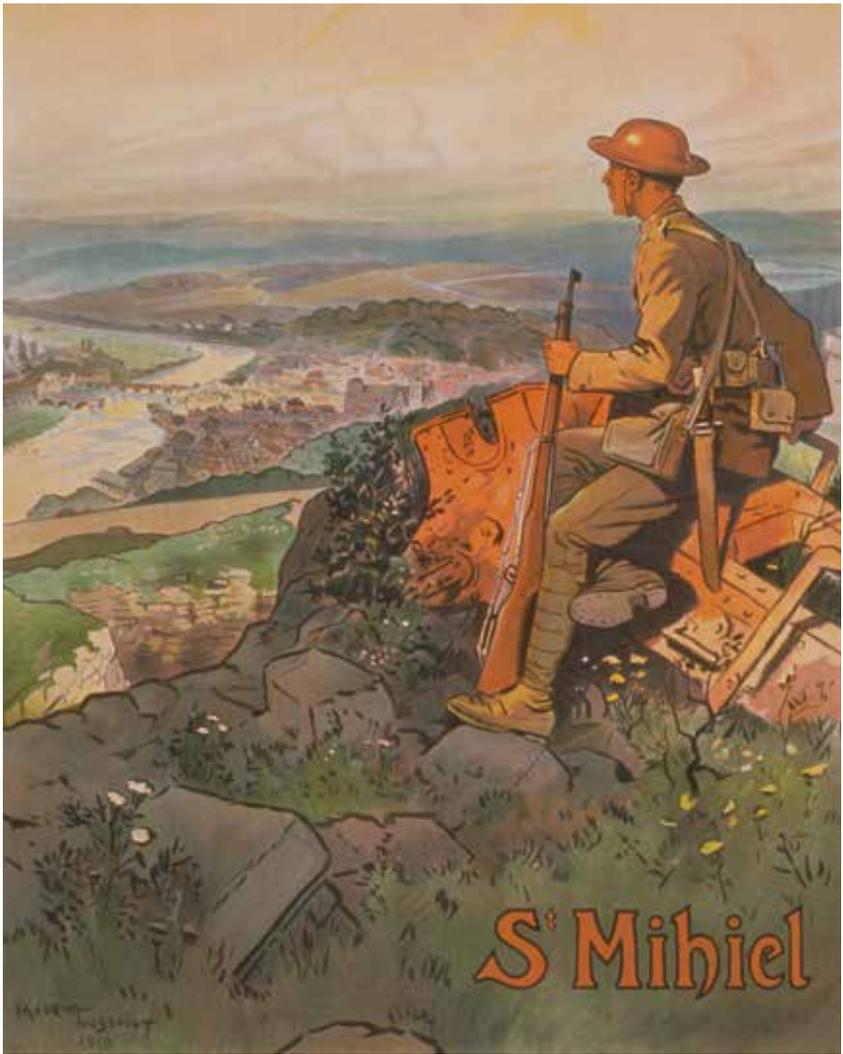
During the St. Mihiel Offensive, the U.S. Army learned a number of operational and tactical lessons that had a great impact on the service's development. For the first time since the Americans entered the trenches, they had superiority in the air. Although weather limited the impact, air support was effective and proved its utility in helping the ground forces achieve their objectives. Army officers also learned valuable lessons for using tanks. At times, tanks lagged behind the infantry, and at other times they moved

far in front of it. When out of contact, the only way the tanks and infantry could communicate with each other was by runner. When tanks found themselves fighting alone against enemy machine guns and infantry, they had to withdraw. Infantry and tank corps officers had to learn how to better cooperate. Many, but not all, of the deficiencies experienced during St. Mihiel would be corrected with the additional experience gained during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Cavalry was a different story. Although the 2d Cavalry Regiment enjoyed some success, St. Mihiel provided further proof that cavalry had become obsolete on battlefields dominated by artillery, rapid-fire weapons, and barbed wire.

The successful advance against the St. Mihiel salient bore a larger significance for the legacy of the U.S. Army. The deployment of the American First Army into battle was the single largest concentration of U.S. military power since the Civil War. It demonstrated the enormous military potential of a nation that, throughout its history, had neglected its military readiness and avoided any semblance of a large standing army. To many observers, the American success once again validated the nation's reliance on citizen soldiers in times of national crisis.

Furthermore, the ability of the American staffs to plan and coordinate operations also illustrated a growing professionalism among the American officer corps. The service's 1903 reforms under Secretary of War Elihu Root had increased training for officers and had established the School of the Line and Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, where attendees learned to communicate with a common language and grappled with issues related to the control of large units in battle. Colonel Drum, the First Army's chief of staff, and Colonel Marshall, its assistant operations officer, exemplified the value of the Leavenworth education as they planned the St. Mihiel attack and then coordinated the subsequent movement northward to participate in another offensive one week later.

Finally, the U.S. Army's success at St. Mihiel signaled some important changes for the Army's role in the rest of the war. The successful attack indicated to the British and French that the American army could operate as an independent force, that its staff could prepare and execute detailed plans in a competent manner, and that American soldiers had sufficient training to contribute significantly to the upcoming Allied grand offensive. The doughboys' success also seemed to vindicate General Pershing's insistence that the Americans must operate as an independent army. The AEF had taken an important step in achieving President Woodrow Wilson's



St. Mihiel. *Illustration by Maurice Toussant* (Library of Congress)

goal of securing a seat at the negotiating table once the Germans were finally defeated. Although criticisms continued, the AEF's ability to wage war on par with the Allies signified the arrival of the U.S. Army as an equal player on the modern battlefield, and the United States' position as a formidable actor on the world stage.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

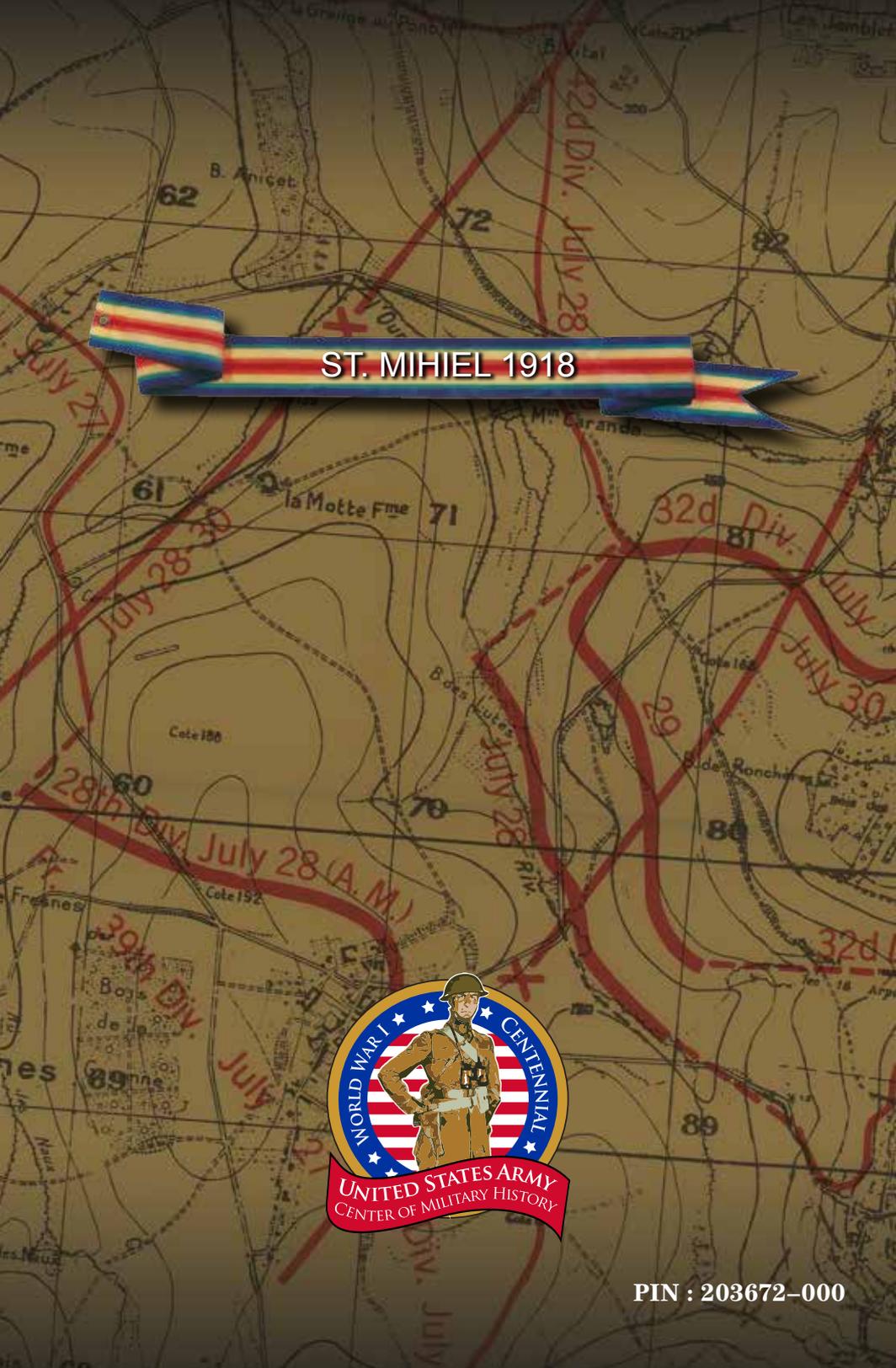
Donald A. Carter was born in Albany, New York, and grew up in Oneida, New York. He graduated from the United States Military Academy in 1977 and served as a Field Artillery Officer until 1992. During that time, he received a Ph.D. in history from Ohio State University in 1985 and served as a military instructor at West Point and at the U.S. Army Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. After leaving the Army, he joined the U.S. Army Center of Military History (CMH) as an archivist. In 1995, he left CMH to serve with the Gulf War Declassification Project and the U.S. Army Declassification Activity. He returned to CMH in 2003 as a historian. His publications include “Eisenhower Versus the Generals,” in the *Journal of Military History* (October 2007); “The U.S. Military Response to the 1960–1962 Berlin Crisis” for a National Archives pamphlet commemorating the release of Cold War records; “War Games in Europe: The U.S. Army Experiments with Atomic Doctrine,” in *Blueprints for Battle* (University Press of Kentucky, 2012); *Forging the Shield: The U.S. Army in Europe, 1951–1962* (CMH, 2015); and *The City Becomes a Symbol: The U.S. Army in the Occupation of Berlin, 1945–1949* (CMH, 2017). He is married with two children and lives in Dale City, Virginia.



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For more information on the U.S. Army in World War I, please visit the U.S. Army Center of Military History Web site ([www.history.army.mil](http://www.history.army.mil)).



ST. MIHIEL 1918



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