

ARMY THRICE AS LARGE AS GRANT'S CUT ST. MIHIEL SALIENT

Continued from Page 1

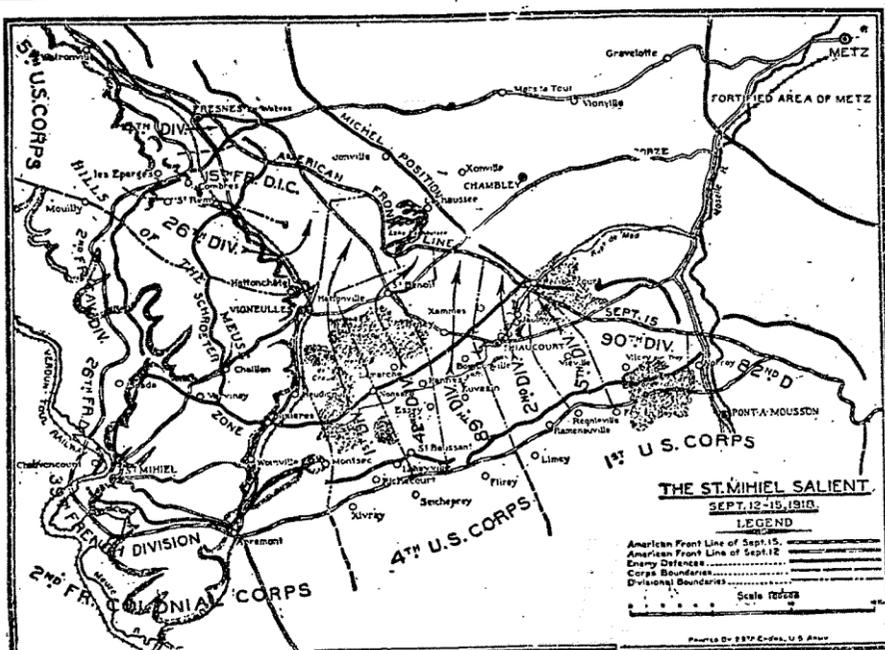
into French territory. Directly back of it and supporting it with excellent rail and road communications, was the great German fortress of Metz, hardly over 50 kilometers from St. Mihiel.

During the first year of the war the French made several powerful efforts to wipe out the St. Mihiel salient with its constant enveloping threat to Verdun. But, working under the tactical theories of trench warfare then in vogue, they met with little success so far as ground gains were concerned.

The first effort was made at Les Eparges, where, in February, 1915, they began an attack to break through down the face of the hills to the plain of the Woivre. After the attack had been sustained on into April the French were in possession of Les Eparges and believed that they had killed 30,000 Germans. But their own losses had been very heavy, the salient was not yet broken and the effort here was given over.

During the summer of 1915, they again attacked, this time along the southern face and particularly at Apremont, beneath the edge of the hills, and at the Bois la Pretre. At the latter place they tried to force their way down the deep ravines into the valley of the Moselle. For months the battle went on, literally from tree to tree, until the forest had been wiped from the face of the earth.

By this time the French had captured most of the few square kilometers of ground within the confines of a wooded hill, but at a terrible cost of life, and shortly afterward a German counter-offensive of the same nature forced them to relinquish a considerable part of the ground gained. From that time until September, 1918, the St. Mihiel salient remained among the "quiet sectors," not because the French did not desire to obliterate it but because their forces were too constantly engaged on other and more vital fronts to allow of the great concentration necessary for its reduction.



Americans on Sullent's Edges

Largely because it was a quiet sector lying in that region of eastern France which, from the first entry of the United States into the war, had been designated as the zone of operations of the future American armies, several of the American divisions first to arrive were played along different parts of the salient, particularly between Pont-a-Mousson and Apremont, as part of their training in becoming first-class fighting divisions.

This was the case with the 1st and 26th Divisions, of which at least one, the 26th, had a battle there of no insignificant proportions when one day in April a German shock regiment attacked Seicheprey, carried the village, held it for a short time and was then rejected by the New Englanders.

It was quite natural, therefore, that when the American forces in France had at last, by the latter part of August, 1918, risen to numbers sufficient to constitute an army, having at least nine divisions which had participated in the great offensive battles between the Marne and the Vesle, and corps staffs which had learned to function in command of troops in major operations, the St. Mihiel salient should have been selected as the place for the first American Army to demonstrate its power and fitness as a fighting unit.

In addition to relieving Verdun and its rail communications, the suppression of the salient would restore 150 square miles of occupied French territory, including a city which had before the war been home to 10,000 people; would reverse the threat of German attack on Verdun to a threat of Allied attack on Metz, and would furnish a last fighting force for the operations both against the Briey iron fields just north and east of Metz, which were vital to Germany's war industries, and against the double track railroad which, running up from Metz through Metz, Mosionville, Sedan and Metzerey, furnished the means of transportation by which the German divisions were rapidly shifted back and forth as needed from one end of their Western battle front to the other.

Disposition of Enemy's Forces

It was to the prevention of this result that the American battle plans were largely directed, and for its accomplishment that the Germans made some rather hesitating arrangements.

Thanks to some German official reports captured sometime after the front, it is possible to know with more accuracy and detail than usual something of the disposition and movements of the enemy's forces during the operations in the salient.

It appears that Lieut. Gen. Fuchs, commanding the detachment "C," disposed in the salient from right to left the XXXVth Austro-Hungarian Division, forming, perhaps with troops of the VIIIth Landwehr Division, to its right, the "Gombré group"; the CXXIIth Division and the Vth Landwehr Division forming the "Mihiel group"; and the Xth Division and the LXXXVIIIth Reserve Division forming the "Gorge group." The XXXIst Division was in close reserve, and the CXXIIIrd, CVIIIth and LXXXVIIIth Divisions further away, but within reach.

On the extreme right flank, lapping over the front which was actually attacked, the VIIIth Landwehr Division apparently belonged to the Vth Army, of Gen. von Francois, while on the extreme left, astride the Moselle, was the CCLVth Division, command of which, for purposes of better co-ordination, had been repeatedly requested by Fuchs, but which he did not receive until 9:45 o'clock on the morning of the attack.

Probably all of these divisions were very far below the 9,000 rifles each which the Allies regarded as the normal strength of German divisions, but it was claimed that the CXXVIIth and Xth Divisions were particularly depleted, while the LXXXVIIIth was regarded as unreliable because of the large proportion of Alsace-Lorrainers in its ranks.

First Army in the Making

The general conception of the operation having taken form, available American divisions were gradually drawn into the front and were placed in the salient, some from the training areas further back, some from the quiet sectors of the front in Alsace and the Vosges mountains, but particularly a number of divisions which had recently gone through the hard fighting in the Marne salient. In addition, a considerable number of French troops already in position were placed under American command.

The staff of the First American Army was created and Gen. John J. Pershing, Commander in Chief of the American Expeditionary Forces, himself took command of the army for his first operations as a natural preliminary to assuming command of the group of armies which were soon to be organized.

The first work, necessarily, was the constitution of the Army into a complex mechanism which had to be built and made to work properly from the front line back to the Service of Supply, which now, for the first time, were called upon to take complete care of their own Army from their own base ports to their own railheads.

After that, for the coming operation itself, maps and plans, which the Army ordered alone, including battle instructions, field orders, etc., filled a book of 56 pages, were worked out by the staff with a detailed care probably never before bestowed upon the preparation of an American Army for battle.

The exact zone of action of every organization, the objectives to be attained at certain hours and minutes all along the line, the duties to be performed by every one of the multitudinous units of the Army; infantry, field, heavy and railway artillery, engineers, tanks, pursuit, reconnaissance, observation and bombing aviation, cavalry, gas and flame troops, ammunition and supply trains, and other motor transport, Signal Corps troops, water supply, anti-aircraft defense, hospital units, troops trained for the care of prisoners, with traffic control and with liaison—all these details and many more were minutely prescribed and no contingency that could be foreseen was left unprovided for.

September 12 "D Day"

At length September 12 was definitely fixed as "D day," and "H hour" as 5 o'clock in the morning, and there began the gradual concentration of attacking troops along the front, concealed from the enemy by every possible artifice and precaution. The troops already in sector, which were, from right to left around the salient, the 82nd, 90th, 80th and 1st United States Divisions, and the 29th and 2nd Divisions of the Cavalry, French Divisions, maintained only their normal activities. New batteries of artillery coming in were not allowed to register on their targets in advance of the first aviation activity which was not increased, and the masses of arriving troops and transport marched by night and concealed themselves by day.

Nevertheless, the enemy got an inkling of what was going on, and several days before the actual attack he began preparations for evacuating the salient in case of necessity. But, judged by the standard of a German general military decision, their measures in this case seem to have been curiously nervous and hesitating.

Apparently they were somewhat awed by the magnitude of the preparations against them; at all events, they neither reinforced the salient so strongly as to guard it against any attack, nor frankly gave it up and abandoned it, though it should be noted that at this time the German mass of reserves was already pretty thoroughly involved in opposing the British and French offensives between the Somme and the Oise.

In the St. Mihiel salient they stopped some construction work which was in progress and began slowly withdrawing some heavy artillery and supplies from the front, but the orders were issued to the troops in the sector and those within close supporting distance looking to the holding of the positions with the forces on the ground.

The German defenses after the expenditure upon them of four years of labor, were naturally strong in themselves. Behind the intricate and deeply organized first line they embraced a second line called the Schroeter zone, which was virtually a smaller salient five or more kilometers inside the original one. Starting northeast of Les Eparges at one end, it ran south over the heights of the Meuse, utilizing their boldest profiles so as just to retain their eastern escarpments, then near Varvigny, swinging east to Buxieres, and then, behind the deep valley of the Rupt de Mad, running northeast by Nonsard, Lemerche, Beny and Xanxennes to Rembercourt.

Here it connected with the Mihiel position, the real withdrawal position of the salient, which was a part of that ultimate system of defense called in some places the Hindenburg line, in some the Kriemhilde Stellung, and so on, but which everywhere the Germans regarded as the line on which they should say to the Allies, "Thus far and no farther."

The Schroeter zone covered the roads leading northeast from St. Mihiel by Chailion and north from Apremont by Heudicourt, through Vigneulles and St. Benoit-en-Woivre to Gorze, behind the center of the Mihiel position. It was largely no more than a wire line, well sited, but only partly entrenched, and, though fairly strong by nature the fact remained that it was a temporary withdrawal position only; that a good 22 kilometers intervened between the St. Benoit crossroads and the main salient at either Apremont or the Chauvencourt bridgehead and that it would be necessary, in case of a strong attack, if the forces around the latter points were to escape capture, for the holding troops to keep the Schroeter zone intact until the retreating columns could clear their flanks past St. Benoit.

Objective and Exploitation

The advance of the 1st and 4th Corps were to attain certain objective lines by given times; a "1st phase" line just short of the Rupt de Mad was to be reached early on the 12th; a "1st day" line embracing Thiencourt and the crests beyond the Rupt de Mad as far as Nonsard was to be reached by evening of that day, and a "1st phase, 2nd day" line, including Vigneulles and St. Benoit, was to be reached as soon as possible on the 13th.

After this, if not already upon it, the advance was to be carried up to the "Army Objective," which would be a line of resistance straightened out in front of the enemy's Mihiel position, but at some distance from the latter, while the "1st day" line was to carry the front, and particularly the outpost zone, as far ahead of the line of resistance as it could be forced without undue effort and sacrifice.

The 2nd Colonial Corps had from right to left the 39th and 26th Infantry Divisions and the 2nd Cavalry, with no division in corps reserve. The 39th, Brig. Gen. Foster, was to follow up on its right the attack of the 1st United States Division; the 2nd Cavalry Division was to follow up on its left, across the hills of the Meuse, the attack of the 26th United States Division south of Les Eparges. The inner flanks of these divisions and the 26th Infantry Division, Brig. Gen. Helinet, around the point of the salient and east and west of St. Mihiel, were to press in only strongly enough, by means of limited frontal attacks and raids on important points, to force the Germans to engage and prevent them from retiring past the main salient, which could break across their line of retreat near Vigneulles and St. Benoit.

Though it might reasonably be expected that the fighting here would not be as heavy as on other parts of the front, the task assigned to the 2nd Colonial Corps was one calling for great tactical skill, as the pressure to be exerted would have to be carefully controlled according to circumstances if the desired results were to be achieved. The formidable Metz Sec, which lay in the sector of the 39th Infantry Division, was not to be attacked directly, but engaged, in the general advance.

On Sullent's Western Face

The 5th United States Corps had in line from right to left the 26th United States Division and the 15th Colonial Infantry (French), with the 4th United States Division in reserve. The 26th Division, Maj. Gen. Clarence E. Edwards, came into the line east of Monville on the 11th, replacing the French 2nd Cavalry under Maj. Gen. Hennocque.

The whole great maneuver was designed to be, in effect, an enveloping operation; breaking through the bases of the salient, closing to its center and pocketing its garrison. Altogether for the attack the First American Army had, as indicated above, eight divisions in line and three corps in reserve, counting the 82nd Division as reserve, while, in addition, the 35th and 81st Divisions were in Army reserve and the 80th and 83rd Divisions were available if needed.

Great Enveloping Operation

The 26th Division was to make its attack at 8 a. m., three hours after the advance should have begun on the south face of the salient, and was to drive southeast across the hills and up the creek valley of the Ruisseau du Longeau to a "1st day" line just east of the village of Dommarin.

Thence it was to swing east with its extreme right flank overrunning Hattonchateau, where it would come into contact with the left of the 1st Division, 4th Corps, advancing from the other side of the salient, and close the enemy's line of retreat from St. Mihiel to Gorze. From this line it would then swing northward down the faces of the hills to the Army Objective line fronting the Mihiel position on the plain of the Woivre.

To the left of the 26th Division, the French 15th Colonial Infantry Division, Maj. Gen. Guerin, swinging on a smaller arc of the same semicircle, was to attack in front of the enemy's strong positions on the three detached hills of Les Eparges, Combrès and Amaranthe while the 26th Division was flanking them through the creek valley, and after capturing them was to line up with the 26th Division on the Army Objective. The 4th United States Division, Maj. Gen. John L. Hines, of which, at the last moment, a part was put in line on the extreme left, was to follow up as a hinge, performing the same functions on that flank that the 82nd Division performed on the other.

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