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M I L I T A R Y H I S T O R Y

OPERATIONS OF COMPANY M 26th INFANTRY (1st DIVISION)
IN THE ST. MIHIEL OFFENSIVE,
SEPTEMBER 12 - SEPTEMBER 16, 1918.

(Personal experience of a Company Commander)

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~~Salient de St. Mihiel~~

Monograph by Capt. Stuart B. Casswell

angle of about 40 degrees, making it about 40 kilometers across the base and 24 kilometers deep. The perimeter, which followed the general line, Les-Eparges-St. Mihiel-Seicheprey-Pont a Mousson was about 40 miles. This salient covered Metz, probably the best fortified city in the world and the Briey iron basin, the largest and richest source of iron ore that the German forces had access to and which they used extensively in the manufacture of projectiles. It also protected their four-track railroad system that paralleled the entire front from Metz to Lille.

One naturally wonders why this uneven teat was allowed to stick out from the battle lines from 1914 until 1918 without amputation. The reasons were many and plentiful. Germany desired that the lines remain at least that far from Metz and the Briey iron mines. They were making the defense of Verdun and Nancy as awkward as they could for the French. Only one wagon road and no standard gauge railroad could be used by the French in supplying the Verdun forces until improvised ones could be constructed. The main railroad from Paris to Nancy could be put under shell fire for 10 kilometers in the vicinity of Commercy, so a detour of about 150 kilometers was necessary. The normal German garrison for this salient was from 12 to 16 divisions.

Not known

The French recognized the value of the salient to Germany and the awkwardness that the salient caused them and as late as April 1915, they hoped and tried to reduce the salient by nibbling at the Les-Eparges corner and at Pont-a-Mousson. In their biggest attack on April 9, 1915, their casualties amounted to

INTRODUCTION

Shortly after the arrival of our troops in France, Lorraine was selected as the training field and play ground of our future operations. All of our earlier divisions received their trench warfare training in this area. Railway systems were laid and maintained with the idea of giving us a direct line to our bases and had the big German drives of 1918 not taken place, it is reasonable to believe that our divisions would probably never have strayed far from this area. Plans were early thought of for the reduction of the St. Mihiel salient, but the detailed plans and permission for the attack were not given until August 9, 1918.

HISTORY OF THE SALIENT

The formation and history of the St. Mihiel salient dates from late September, 1914 when troops from the Metz garrison, seeking to straighten their lines, made a converging attack on Verdun. Had these two attacks proved as successful as the Germans had hoped, Verdun would have been cut off, but unfortunately, from their point of view, only one of their attacks could be called successful. The troops attacking up the Rupt de Mad had such an easy time of it that they were not stopped until after they had crossed the Meuse River at St. Mihiel, when fire from the forts of Toul and Verdun caused them to halt. As the attack to the north and west of Verdun was a failure from the German standpoint, Verdun was not surrounded and the success of the French in the First Battle of the Marne caused the German attacks to die a natural death in Lorraine. The St. Mihiel salient formed in September, 1914, had legs about 24 to 30 kilometers long and an included

Le Salient de
St. Mihiel,
Michelin,
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about 40,000 men without any appreciable gains. In this attack their plans were very similar to the one the American forces later adopted.

The collapse of Russia gave the German forces a preponderance of man power on the Western front and from March, 1918 until July 20, 1918, the main thought of the allies was to protect their armies, hope that they could avert a breakthrough and await troops from America, who alone could restore the numerical superiority of the allies. After July 18, 1918 the Germans were unable to make any large attacks and Marshal Foch was able to keep the initiative in battle.

ORGANIZATION OF THE FIRST AMERICAN ARMY

~~General Pershing had always insisted for an~~

American army that could operate as such and was continually harping on this subject to the French authorities. On August 9, 1918, Marshal Foch gave General Pershing authority to form the American First Army and its primary mission was to reduce the St. Mihiel salient. By September 1, the First American Army was formed and the corps organizations were in operation. The I, III and IV Corps were to operate around the salient. The I and IV were to attack in a northerly direction and the III in a southeasterly direction.

Summary of
Operations,
First Army

F.O. #8,
First Army

DIFFICULTIES TO BE ENCOUNTERED

Now that we have assigned this task to the green American army, no unit above a division having had battle experience, let us see what makes the task so difficult. First, the western side of the salient is on the ^{NAUTS} Cotes de Meuse, a very high rugged wooded plateau, often rising 300 meters above the surrounding

Personal
Knowledge

country, deeply ravined and with the German forces holding the most desirable positions. Along the southern face of the triangle, Mont Sec, an isolated mountain between the ^{HAULTS} Cotes de Meuse and the Mad River, gave observation over the entire salient and had bomb-proof shelters, capable of handling a division. The Woevre plain was lower in elevation than the Meuse River, swampy and marshy, filled with many lakes and ponds and generally drained by the Rupt de Mad, a stream running generally northeast to the Moselle River, from 3 to 6 feet deep and from 20 to 50 feet wide. The plain of the Woevre was heavily wooded in places. The Germans had improved the natural obstacles by continually laying belts of wire until from our front line positions in March, 1918, the wire gave the appearance of being several hundred meters wide. Rumor even had it that electricity was or could be used to discourage marauders.

We are now ready to see what we had to offer to the God of War at this place. General Pershing had 16 American divisions that he could use, nine of which had had battle experience in the Aisne-Marne attack, four had occupied trenches in quiet sectors and three had just arrived in France. As the French realized that this attack must be "Fool-Proof," it would not do for the American forces to make serious mistakes or for the attack to bog down for any reason. The German commanders would play up our failures and increase the morale of their own troops, which had slipped since our July attacks. Therefore, the French loaned

General Pershing four French divisions to be known as the II Colonial Corps. (French) 500 light field

pieces, 793 heavy guns, 182 trench mortars, 273 tanks and 250 airplanes. General Pershing assigned the divisions to the corps commanders where their ability and experience would do him the most good, realizing that his attack here must be limited and not interfere with his next attack, which was scheduled on another front for September 25.

PLAN OF THE FIRST ARMY

Not shown

The plan of the First Army was to have the I Corps drive north to the exploitation line from positions extending from the Moselle River, westward to Limey. The IV Corps from Limey to Richecourt was to drive north, maintaining contact with the II Corps (French) on its left, protect the flank of the I Corps and with its left division (1st) capture Vigneulles and patrol to the exploitation line which was generally known as the Hindenburg Line. The II Corps, (French), was to follow up the attack of the American corps by raids and local attacks as withdrawal was noticed. The V Corps occupying a front from Montgiremont to Bois St. Remy was to drive in a southeasterly direction to Hattonchattel, keeping contact with the II Corps, (French), on its right.

The sector of the 1st Division, (left division in the IV Corps), was from Seicheprey, west to near Mont Sec, about 3 kilometers. Its mission was to drive generally north to Vigneulles and protect both flanks. Its formation from left to right was the 18th Infantry, 16th Infantry, 28th Infantry, 26th Infantry. The 42d Division was on the right. Exterior 3d line battalions were designated as division reserve and interior 3d line battalions were brigade reserve.

HISTORY AND TRAINING OF COMPANY M 26th INFANTRY

Company M 26th Infantry had started out as a regular army company, but casualties had caused it to be filled up with National Guard from North Dakota. We had been relieved from the Soissons attack with a strength of one officer and 30 men but by August 20 had received 5 lieutenants and enough slightly wounded and draftees from Ohio to bring our strength to 260 men. We were relieved from the Bois Le Pretre position and taken back to the Vaucouleurs area when^{ye} all battalions were given a week of intensive training in attack formations, fighting in woods, night marching, compass work and wire cutting. The morale of the company was high but I believe every old timer who had ~~been in the trenches at the foot of Mont Sec in~~ February and March, had a wholesome respect for the ~~wire that they could remember~~ and the fact that observers on Mont Sec could tell what we had had for breakfast. There was never a better example of the enemy being able to look down your throat. However, we knew that extensive plans for the attack had been made and that good infantry can take any ground if properly led. We were glad we were to be an assault company of the assault battalion of our regiment.

By September 8, we had proceeded by marching to a wooded area in rear of Beaumont, just south of our jump-off line to form an added protection to the installation of our own and borrowed artillery. Each officer was given two maps to acquaint himself with the terrain and to enable him to study the German ~~position. Absolute secrecy and cover at all times was~~ demanded. For miles the woods were full of ammunition

dumps and prepared gun positions, some of this work had been going on for months supposedly without the knowledge of the enemy.

INTO THE LINE AGAIN

Went + fell

On the night of September 11, we led our companies to the jump-off line. The movement started about 9:00 PM and all units of the divisions were to be in position by 2:00 AM, September 12. The night of September 11 to 12 was the darkest night I ever encountered and the most miserable one I ever suffered. Fortunately, my battalion had its right resting on the ruins of Seichorey and having the left assault company of the assault battalion, I was not troubled any in making my dispositions according to orders. The company of the 39th Division which had been holding the first line for two months, was relieved and we were on our own. As soon as I was satisfied with the location of each of my platoons, I began looking around for my neighbors. We had heard the 42d Division getting into position and I had marched past Company K 26th Infantry, which was right assault company of the battalion, but as the captain of Company K was of a nervous temperament I thought it was well to drop by and chin him. As soon as I was sure that Company K and the 42d Division were in position, my runners and I tried to find Battalion Headquarters. We finally located the adjutant and reported being in position and found that the battalion commander was over-stimulated and couldn't be bothered with talking to anyone. I reported that my liaison patrols had been unable to locate the 26th Infantry on my left but was not

particularly worried about it at that time. About 10:00 PM a cloudburst seemed to strike us but after hours of steady downpour we knew that it wasn't a cloudburst as it was lasting too long. To further irritate us the German artillery gave us about an hour of shelling but due to soaked condition of the ground and good luck we did not suffer any casualties. About 11:00 PM one of my platoon commanders reported to me that the Germans had captured his entire platoon during the raid. I thought this must be an error as I had never heard of 60 Americans being captured noiselessly. However, it was necessary to verify all units again. After locating the platoon for the lieutenant and explaining the advantages of being able to use a compass for night work, I again tried to locate the 28th Infantry and hunted without success until 2:00 AM. I later got the battalion commander of the 28th Infantry to admit that he did not know where he spent the night of September 11, that they had no guiding landmark as a town or crossroads to guide on and that they had waded through a lot of trenches and gone until they were tired and stopped, knowing that they could adjust themselves after daylight and that they did not wish to further lose themselves.

OUR BARRAGE STARTS

At 2:00 AM, September 12, the most beautiful artillery preparation of the war was turned loose by our 3000 guns. This artillery fire certainly cheered one infantry captain, as I did not see how even a mouse could live in the areas affected by this fire. The wire was certain to be cut. Our main fear of the difficulty in crossing the wire was changed to fear

that there would not be ammunition enough to furnish us with a rolling barrage. ~~as~~ the artillery fire slowed up perceptibly and it was later told us that the army commander was assured that the Germans were withdrawing and that the ammunition was being wasted.

THE JUMP-OFF

It was still dark at 5:00 AM when we crossed the jump-off line behind our barrage but as we did not expect any enemy for another 1/2 kilometer we were mainly interested in keeping our formation and getting sight of the 28th Infantry and keeping 50 meters from our barrage.

Our formation was with the assault platoons as skirmishers with five pace interval and the support platoons in squad columns, with a fifth line of automatic rifle under an officer. I later found that one of my best automatic riflemen 'Bear Ghost,' a Sioux Indian, had decided he wanted to be with his platoon and rejoined them in the darkness without my knowing it.

WE CROSS THE ENEMY WIRE

By the time we reached the first enemy wire, we could see the 28th Infantry on our left and by throwing in a support platoon on my left, we were able to mop up all trenches without missing anyone.

Each assault platoon had two Bangalore Torpoedoes and two attached engineers to assist in cutting the wire. None of this added assistance was needed or used. The leading elements followed gaps in the wire if present, but generally walked over the top of the wire. Fortunately, the artillery had cut some strands and loosened the posts, which were often not very good anyway. The wire was often slack and rusty

and by the time three men had crossed a belt of wire at the same place, a distinct trail was found for succeeding columns.

Our rate of march was to be 100 meters in four minutes and as there isn't much that a company commander can do after he is committed to action, except check his map, direction, units, neighbors and proximity of barrage, I was suddenly surprised to find that I was running into my assault platoons, who seemed stopped for no apparent reason, where a stop was not called for. I ran ahead to see what was the trouble and found they had reached the Rupt de Mad, that my left platoon was crossing at a bridge the Germans had built, one man at a time and that the other platoon was standing on the near bank watching them. By this time our barrage seemed to be about 150 meters away. It didn't take very long for me to start those not yet across the stream, to wading. By holding their rifle and belt over their heads, they were enabled to cross without injuring their weapons. The chill disappeared by the time they had double timed up to the barrage.

We were now near our second objective, had crossed our two most serious obstacles and gotten very little resistance and few prisoners. Those we did get, told us we would get "Hell" a little later. Machine gun nests, auto-tank guns and mortars were often deserted or surrendered without firing a shot. We crossed the 2d objective almost without incident at 7:40 AM, a few machine guns fired but were quickly silenced and the string of prisoners sent to the rear was getting bigger and bigger and as a rule seemed glad to be captured. At any rate, they were not the mean

Germans we were accustomed to in the Soissons offensive. We continued to have deep belts of wire but the spirit and energy of the troops carried them over, under and through the wire at a speed that surprised the enemy and themselves. Our troops were enjoying themselves. If this was a big league attack, M Company could stand one every day before breakfast. We halted our allotted 20 minutes on the 2d objective to thoroughly "mop up" on any stray enemy who might be hiding in the dugouts and later feel obstreperous. By this time most of the recruits had salvaged a Luger pistol and field glasses and were apt to gang around a prisoner in hope of getting an Iron Cross. A few caustic words to the N.C.O's was all that was necessary to remind them that there was still a war and that the day's work wasn't over yet. ~~The weather had cleared up by now and we~~ could see Mont Sec in the distance on our left and a rising slope to our front with a heavy green forest on our left front. The smoke screen placed on Mont Sec was dissipated and if the enemy was still using his observation posts there, we could expect trouble if we were to get any.

WE GET STIFF RESISTANCE

We had hardly made a respectable start for our third objective, when our battalion and what I could see of the 28th Infantry, were pinned to the ground by very competent machine gun fire and rifle fire from the woods and slope to our front and left front. This resistance came from what was known as the Quarte de ~~Reserve and was the most severe that the 1st Division~~ was to encounter. Knowing that our barrage was getting away from us and that we would have enormous casualties before our barrage could reach the enemy positions,

it was up to the leaders to function. I decided that our only chance of outflanking the enemy position was for us to work some troops into the woods on the left front and I started crawling to my left support platoon to order them to try and work forward on the left in a slight ravine. I was agreeably surprised to find that my left assault platoon commander had anticipated my order and was already working his units forward in a trench that ran to the Quarte de Reserve. This trench started in our zone and crossed over into the zone of the 28th Infantry. Waiting was not pleasant under these circumstances but I decided not to call for artillery fire until I saw the outcome of the flanking expedition. I suddenly saw my big Indian 'Bear Ghost' walking along the parados of the enemy position playing a most wonderful tune, closely followed by about thirty of the flanking party, ^{with his dula Rife} Individual Germans began climbing out of their trenches and coming in our direction with their hands reaching for heaven. Across the entire battalion front the small arms fire of the enemy ceased and we started forward to meet the prisoners and try to reach the barrage. The remainder of my flanking group was clearing up the resistance in front of the 28th Infantry until I sent for them. A platoon runner escorted four officers to me, one a major, had a beautiful pair of boots that I was very envious of, but they were too small. This group was sent to Battalion Headquarters minus their field glasses and Iron Crosses. One hundred and sixty-four (164) prisoners were captured by Company M at this place. One of the prisoners requested permission to

speak to me and in confidence told me that he was a French spy and that it was imperative that he be taken to a French officer at once. I had him taken to Regimental Headquarters to see our liaison officer, where his statements were verified.

WE ARE LEAP-FROGGED BY 2d BATTALION

The division attack order, specified that assault battalions were to be leap-frogged by support battalions on the third objective, about 1 kilometer further to our front. The only incidents occurring in our further rapid advance to the third objective, was a German field piece, either a 77 or 105, opened direct fire on us from near Nonsard. One of the guns firing our barrage fire began to drop shorts in our lines. Both of these guns had a tendency to discourage ~~good infantry, but there was nothing we could do about~~ them except try to outguess them and take our casualties as incidental.

We were glad to hug the ground as the 2d Battalion passed through us. We were no longer bothered by either of the guns causing our casualties.

In our tour as left assault company, we had had 7 men killed and 20 wounded. The German field piece ceased fire very soon after the 2d Battalion had gained 800 meters at which distance we followed in small columns until the day's objective was reached near Nonsard.

THE NIGHT OF SEPTEMBER 12-13

Our troops were distributed with the idea of defense, should counterattack come, but little ~~digging was done as everyone was sure that the enemy~~ was licked and only interested in getting back to his

next defensive position. At 5:30 PM, assault battalions were ordered forward a varying distance. The 2d Battalion, 26th Infantry, was ordered forward to a position in the Bois de Vigneulles and to send one company forward to the St. Benoit-Vigneulles road to cut the main highway and the standard gauge railroad at that place. At 6:00 PM, the 2d Battalion entered the very dense, Bois de la Marche in line of skirmishers. The night was very dark, the troops were tired and very shortly officers began losing men during each halt, they would fall asleep and not be awakened. Many of the remainder would get lost and after several hours of wandering around, the battalion commander found that his battalion consisted of one machine gun company and remnants of three others. The company that was to reach the railroad was delayed but is given credit for cutting the road about 5:00 AM. They had captured 250 prisoners in the woods.

WE REACH THE ARMY OBJECTIVE

At 3:15 AM the 3d Battalion was given orders to leap-frog the 2d Battalion. As telephonic communications with the 2d Battalion was out, the regimental commander of the 26th Infantry accompanied us. He was being roasted because trains and wagon transportation could be heard all night long and he did not know whether the 2d Battalion was lost or had accomplished their mission. We started our march through the woods, following trails if available, a GO ca. railroad and any paths that would carry us in a northerly direction. We finally reached the standard gauge railroad and found the battalion commander of the 2d Battalion and a few of his men, but he did not know much about the

situation. We turned left and followed the railroad to an unimproved road that led us to the St. Benoit-Vigneulles road. This night march was not without incident for Company M. Artillery fire fell along the railroad, whose I don't know, a few scattered German guns would fire from the forests. These guns were not all cleaned up for several days. The men were tired and sleepy and at one of our halts, Pvt. Johnson fell asleep and rolled on a hand grenade that he was carrying in his shirt. The pin must have broken or worked out as the grenade exploded, killing Johnson and giving the rest of us a scare. A detachment of my company, while mopping up a captured field hospital secured full canteens of very excellent Cognac without the officers knowing of it until later. We struck the Vigneulles road about daylight and with Company M as advance guard, we proceeded by route march through Vigneulles to Hattonville, where we were ordered to take up a defensive position near the cemetery. We reached there at 9:30 AM, September 13.

It is very possible that the Vigneulles-St. Benoit wagon road was first cut by the 3d Battalion; at any rate, it was definitely cut by us at about 6:30 AM and we did not see any other troops around. Traffic could be heard as late as 5:00 AM, but whether the Germans had completed their evacuation or the road had been cut at some other place I do not know. The 3d Battalion had not physically cut the railroad. They could have scuppered a train with machine gun fire and rifle fire but the rails had been removed.

Considerable discussion between all units involved, as to who first reached Vigneulles and should

be given credit for closing the salient, will always be heard. Most of the discussion seems to center about the Scout Platoon of the 28th Infantry and the patrol of the 102d Infantry. It is my belief that the 28th entered Vigneulles first and that the 102d entered Hattonchattel first as contact was made there at 7:15 AM. The 28th Infantry claims to have had a position in command of all roads leading from Vigneulles at 10:00 PM, September 12, but I do not see how traffic could have been heard all night long, had this been true. In my opinion most of the assault units were lost and did not know just where they were.

A provisional squadron of the 2d Cavalry had passed through our lines near Nonsard and tried to progress along the Nonsard-Vigneulles road but encountered heavy resistance in the woods. They overtook a field train in column but received sufficient machine gun fire to stop them and not being able to maneuver in the dense woods at night, they awaited daylight and later passed through Hattonville and took over patrolling to the line of exploitation.

French refugees were very glad to see us and gave the information that the Germans had started their withdrawal September 11 to an excellent position near Chambley.

As all army objectives assigned to units of the First Army had been taken, preparations were immediately made to withdraw divisions needed for the Meuse-Argonne; the new lines were taken over by troops of the French army and as a training field for recent arrivals in the American forces.

The 1st Division moved back into army reserve in the woods north of Mont Sec. There, quarters had been used by reserve German divisions, formerly holding the salient. They were completely equipped for comfort.

The reduction of the St. Mihiel salient reclaimed over 155 square miles of French territory, captured large stores of material, 16,000 prisoners, 443 guns of all sizes and at a cost of 7000 casualties.

Our Air Service maintained absolute control of the air during this attack. Tanks were assigned to the 1st Division but used only in front of the 1st Brigade; the Rupt de Mad was considered too much of an obstacle for them.

In spite of all precautions taken to maintain secrecy the Germans knew that we were going to make an attack on the salient during September, but believed that it would be made about the 16th. They had actually started moving their heavy artillery on September 9 and much of the light artillery was being moved back on September 11.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. Wire need no longer be feared as an obstacle, especially if old.
2. Assault units cannot expect bridges over streams they must cross. Those that are left may be dangerous. Engineers cannot build them fast enough for any but reserve units.
3. In marches into dense woods the interval between columns must be as little as possible. If tactical situation permits, one column is better than several.

Ludendorff's
Own Story

4. A surprise flanking fire of infantry weapons will cause a lowering of morale to any enemy.

5. Cavalry is of no use in dense woods against automatic weapons.

6. A limited objective should not be necessary or planned. A gigantic break through was possible as late as September 29. Ludendorff says that after September 23, he had ceased to worry about that possibility as he had had time to move several divisions to protect this front. Had advantage been taken of this weakened condition of the German troops and lines, it is very possible that the Meuse-Argonne might not have been as costly or tiresome.

7. A successful attack without heavy losses is the best training that green troops can have. Every man in the 1st Division felt that he was a hardened veteran and that he belonged to an outfit that was at the height of battle efficiency.