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ST. MIHIEL: THE BIRTH OF AN AMERICAN ARMY

by

DONALD SMYTHE

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The year 1918 was in its final months. The United States had been at war for a year and a half, but until now efforts by the American Expeditionary Forces had been of limited significance on the western front. Not until October 1917 had its troops gone on line, and then only at the battalion level, in a quiet sector, as part of a French division. Not until January 1918 had one of its own divisions taken over a section of the front, again in a quiet sector. And not until May 1918 had it engaged in an offensive operation, and then on a limited scale—some 4000 men, a reinforced regiment, at Cantigny.

During the summer of 1918, American contributions to the Allied effort increased. The 2d and 3d Divisions helped block the German advance at Belleau Wood and Château-Thierry in June. The 3d Division earned the sobriquet "The Rock of the Marne" for its heroic stand at that river in July. The 1st and 2d Divisions helped spearhead the Allied counteroffensive in July against the Marne salient near Soissons, while other US divisions subsequently helped collapse the salient completely in July and August. But almost without exception, these divisions operated as part of Allied corps. No US army yet existed.

All that changed on 10 August when the American First Army, under the command of

General John J. Pershing, became operational. Its first assignment was to reduce the St. Mihiel salient, a huge triangle jutting into Allied lines on the southern part of the front. The salient cut the Paris-Nancy railway and served as a possible jump-off point for a German flanking attack against Verdun to the west or Nancy to the east. It also served as an effective German bulwark against any Allied advance toward Metz or the vital Briey iron mines.

Reducing the salient had long been an American dream. Pershing had spoken of it to General Henri Philippe Pétain, head of the French Army, on first meeting him in June 1917. And then, in the fall of that year, a strategic study by GHQ staff officers recommended that it be the first US operation. Colonel Fox Conner, AEF Chief of Operations, confirmed this view in February 1918. Finally, on 24 June 1918, when General Ferdinand Foch, Allied generalissimo, met Pershing, Pétain, and Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander, to plan future offensives, Foch assigned reduction of the salient to the Americans.¹

At the end of August, however, just two weeks before the St. Mihiel attack was to take place, Foch suddenly proposed that the main American effort be directed not east against the salient, but north in the direction of Mezieres and Sedan, in an attack that

eventually would become known as the Meuse-Argonne Operation.²

A reluctant Pershing agreed to this proposal and thus committed himself to what was really too large an undertaking. An untested, and in many ways untrained, American Army was to engage in a great battle (St. Mihiel), disengage itself, and move 60 miles to another great battle (Meuse-Argonne)—all within the space of about two weeks, under a First Army staff that Pershing admitted was not perfect and, as of 2 September, had no inkling that the Meuse-Argonne Operation was even being contemplated. Army staffs normally required two to three months to produce a fully articulated battle plan with all its technical annexes. This staff—and again it must be emphasized that the staff was new, inexperienced, and untested—would have about three weeks. It was a formidable commitment, if not an impossible one, and it is not clear that Pershing should have undertaken it. Two of his four army corps had just been organized, while the army staff had no experience yet working as a team.

The alternative, however, was to leave the St. Mihiel salient bulging in the Allied lines, menacing the flank and rear of any army operating west of the Meuse River. Its reduction would eliminate the last German salient on the western front. Besides—and perhaps this was the major consideration—the Americans were all set to go.³

The St. Mihiel salient was approximately 25 miles across and 16 miles deep, with its apex at St. Mihiel and its base anchored at Haudiomont and Pont-à-Mousson. It had been a quiet zone for most of four years. The Germans had settled down, planted vegetable gardens, and fathered children by local women.

They had also had time to construct some formidable defensive works: four or five zones with elaborately constructed trenches, shelters, barbed-wire entanglements, machine-gun nests, and artillery emplacements. The barbed wire seemed endless; in one place it ran 13 rows, some as deep as a room. A measure of the salient's strength,

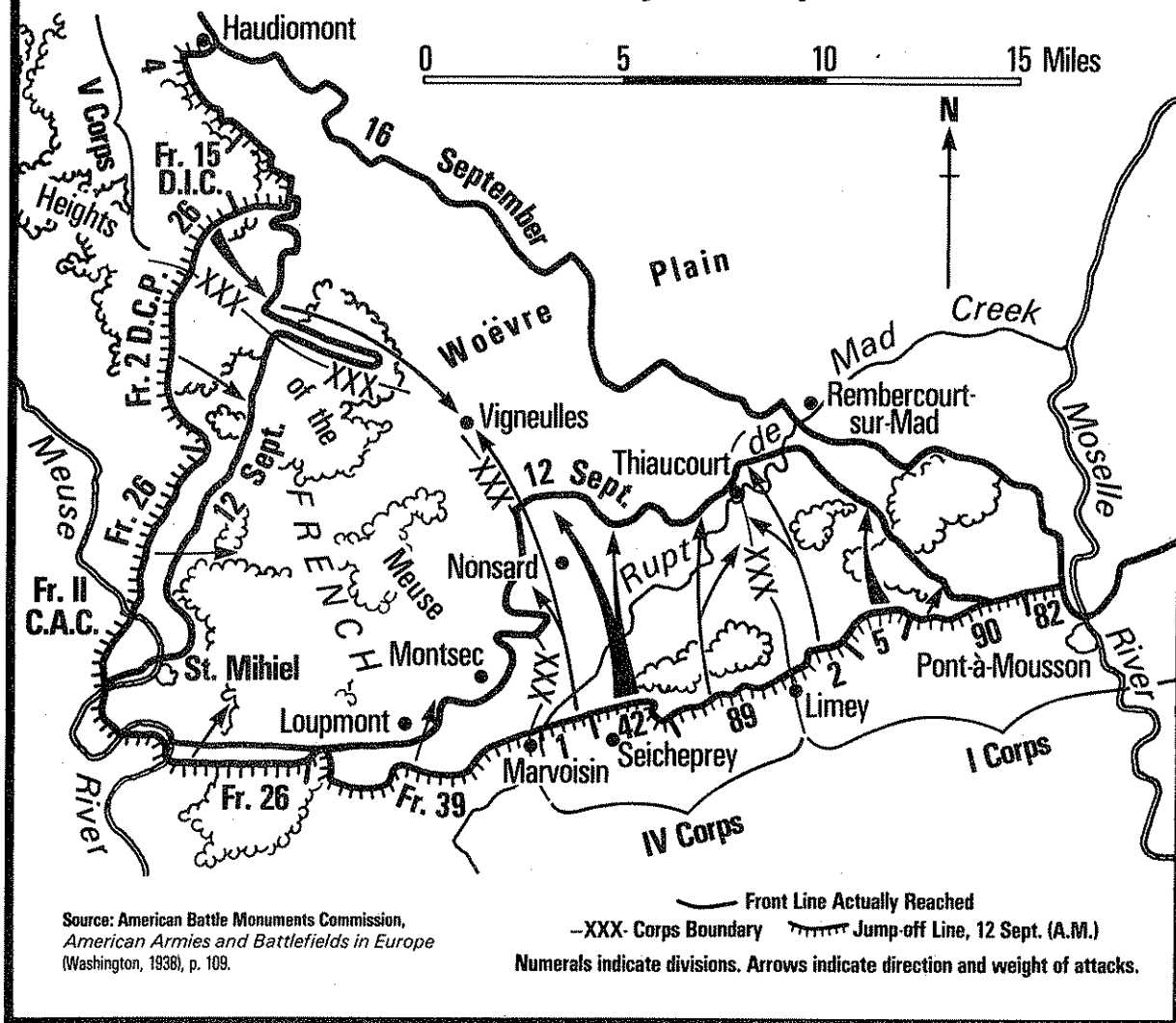
perhaps, was that after two strong but futile attacks in 1915 the French had been content to then leave it alone. Pershing called it "a great field fortress."⁴

To be sure, it had some weaknesses. Like all salients, it was vulnerable to converging attacks from the sides. Perhaps because the salient had been quiet for so long, the Germans manned it with second- or third-class troops. Of the eight and one-half divisions assigned to its defense, one had recently arrived from Russia and was, by the Germans' own admission, "not reliable." Another was "completely worn out." A German noncom wrote home, "The men are so embittered that they have no interest in anything and they only want the war to end, no matter how."⁵

Despite these German shortcomings, considerable pessimism existed in the Allied high command concerning the coming US attack. Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, told Lloyd Griscom, Pershing's liaison officer with the British, that he viewed the "premature" formation of the American Army with "great concern." Although the doughboys themselves were brave, American staff officers suffered from "incapacity and inexperience." One of two things would surely happen: the Americans would encounter heavy resistance and be stopped with "cruel losses," as the French had been; or, encountering light resistance, they would pursue and fall into a trap. Since the Americans were sure to make a mess of it, jeopardizing the cause, Wilson sent a special messenger to Foch to persuade him to cancel the operation. Foch refused to, although he did admit that the American Army was "inexperienced and immature."⁶

Planning for the St. Mihiel operation, which was scheduled for 12 September 1918, went forward, both at First Army headquarters and at AEF GHQ. Because Pershing was busy as commander of both headquarters, he delegated considerable responsibility to the First Army Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Hugh Drum, a brilliant 38-year-old officer of wide staff experience who had been on Pershing's staff at Fort Sam Houston before the war. Fox

Plan of Attack of First Army, 12 September 1918



Conner, AEF Operations Chief, loaned the First Army Lieutenant Colonel George C. Marshall, Jr., who had a reputation for working hard, being on top of things, and doing well whatever he was assigned to do. Marshall, then 37 years old, was a graduate of the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, as were Conner and Drum. They understood the same language and worked well together.⁷

The materiel buildup for the St. Mihiel operation had begun in August and was formidable: 3010 guns; 40,000 tons of ammunition; 65 evacuation trains; 21,000 beds

for the sick and wounded; 15 miles of reconstructed roads using 100,000 tons of crushed stone; 45 miles of standard-gauge and 250 miles of light railway; 19 railhead depots for distributing food, clothing, and equipment; 120 water points that furnished 1,200,000 gallons a day; and a 38-circuit central switchboard with separate nets for command, supply, artillery, air service, utilities, and other functional areas. Maps alone for the operation weighed 15 tons.⁸

Much of what was furnished had to be borrowed from the French and British, since priority shipments of infantry and machine

gunners during the spring and summer from the United States had thrown the American Army thoroughly out of balance in matters of artillery, transportation, and needed services. Not one of the 3010 guns was of American manufacture, nor were any of the 267 tanks. The French provided virtually all the transportation and nearly half the artillerymen, tank crews, and airplanes. The air force, under Colonel Billy Mitchell, had 1400 planes—the largest air armada ever assembled to that time—but not one was American-built.⁹

To use this mass of materiel, some two thirds of a million men—550,000 Americans and 110,000 Frenchmen—moved into position around the salient. The Americans gathered from all parts of the front: from the British Expeditionary Force, from the Château-Thierry area, from the Vosges—all joining Americans who had been stationed near the salient. Finally, 18 months after the nation had declared war, and more than a year after beginning its training and service with various other Allied units, the American Army was coming into being as a living, working organism.¹⁰

Massing the subordinate elements of this new army for battle was difficult, for movement had to take place secretly and at night. In the dark, the roads swarmed with men, animals, trucks, guns, caissons, tanks, and every kind of impedimenta. During the day, the men hid in woods or billets and tried to catch what sleep they could. At night, they were on the road again, without lights, struggling forward in the direction of the salient. The American Army was moving up.

Or, rather, slogging up. The mud was incredible, and the continuing rain kept making more of it. Elmer Sherwood, a 42d (Rainbow) Division veteran, speculated that the only vehicles making their usual speed were the airplanes. Another soldier suggested that the American high command ought to substitute “submarines for tanks, ducks for carrier-pigeons, and alligators for soldiers.” Grimy, slimy, wet, and cold, the troops cursed the mud; it got into clothes, hair,

food, drink, and equipment. It was one of the agonies long remembered—sunny France!¹¹

The Order of Battle, from right to left, was as follows: the US I Corps (Hunter Liggett) with the 82d, 90th, 5th, and 2d Divisions. Then came the US IV Corps (Joseph T. Dickman) with the 89th, 42d, and 1st Divisions. The two corps lined up on the south face of the salient.

At the apex was the French II Colonial Corps with three French divisions (39th, 26th, and 2d Dismounted Cavalry).

On the west face of the salient was the US V Corps (George H. Cameron) with the 26th Division, part of the 4th, and the French 15th Colonial.

Against the German salient, then, Pershing was sending four corps, composed of four French and eight and one-half US divisions.¹²

Strategically, the most important corps were those of Dickman and Cameron. Entrusted with the veteran 1st and 42d Divisions, Dickman was to hit from the south face and drive hard for Vigneulles, where he was to be met by Cameron driving in with the veteran 26th Division from the west face. The juncture of the two US forces would close the salient and bag the Germans inside it.

The attack on the south face by the IV Corps (Dickman) was designated as the primary attack, and that on the west face by the V Corps (Cameron) three hours later was to be the secondary attack. Supporting attacks would be delivered on the right shoulder by the I Corps (Liggett) and at the apex by the French corps.

Pershing was gambling not only on the new and untried First Army staff, but on two new corps commanders and four untested divisions. The new corps commanders were Dickman and Cameron, both promoted from divisional command after the Aisne-Marne campaign in July; they had been given less than a month to organize their headquarters and prepare for battle.

The four new divisions were the 5th, 82d, 89th, and 90th. Two of them, the 5th and 89th, were commanded by West Point classmates of Pershing, John E. McMahon and William M. Wright, while the 90th was

headed by Henry T. Allen, who had been with Pershing in the Punitive Expedition in Mexico in 1916. These three divisions had received front-line training, either in the Vosges or near the salient. William P. Burnham's 82d, however, which had trained in the rear with the British, had no front-line experience. And none of the four, of course, had seen active combat operations yet.

The other five divisions were workhorses that Pershing knew he could depend upon. The 1st and 2d had spearheaded the Soissons counteroffensive on 18 July, as mentioned, and were ranked "excellent" with regard to training, equipment, and morale. The 4th, 26th, and 42d had seen hard fighting in the drive from Château-Thierry to the Vesle River. They too ranked high.

The 1st Division was under the capable Charles P. Summerall, a commander without peer; the 2d was under John A. Lejeune, former commander of its Marine Brigade; the 4th was under John L. Hines, Pershing's adjutant during the Punitive Expedition, who had come with him to Europe on the *Baltic*; the 42d was under Charles T. Menoher, another of Pershing's West Point classmates, and the 26th was under Clarence R. Edwards. Although Edwards was beloved by his men, many officers on Pershing's staff had serious doubts about his competence. Lejeune and Hines were new commanders, replacing James G. Harbord, who had gone to head the Services of Supply, and Cameron, who had moved up to command the V Corps.¹³

In using the 1st, 2d, 4th, 26th, and 42d Divisions, Pershing was calling upon the best he had. Hoping to ensure the success of the St. Mihiel operation, he was leaving the cupboard quite bare of experienced front-line troops for the Meuse-Argonne operation, scheduled for two weeks later. He knew the risk, but there was little he could do about it. The decision to employ these experienced divisions had been made before Foch had suddenly sprung the Meuse-Argonne operation on him on 30 August. By that time all five divisions were so thoroughly committed to St. Mihiel that they could not be withdrawn from the operation.¹⁴

In planning the attack, the First Army had counted on borrowing 300 heavy tanks from the British and 500 light tanks from the French, but when the time came the British could not spare the "heavies" and the French could furnish only 267 "lights," about which they were pessimistic. The muddy terrain, they said, would probably bog down the machines, which were none too reliable, and the deepest German trenches were eight feet across, a distance two feet wider than the tanks were able to span.

Brigadier General Samuel D. Rockenbach, AEF Chief of Tank Corps, and Lieutenant Colonel George S. Patton, Jr., a tank brigade commander, were nevertheless convinced that the tanks could advance, provided that the mud didn't get worse. Even though the small Renaults could not cross the deepest German trenches, they could effect initial surprise, crush the wire, and lead the infantry up to the first line of trenches. Then, if the trenches were too wide, the tanks could cross with the aid of pioneers. "You are going to have a walkover," Rockenbach assured Pershing.¹⁵

On 10 September, two days before the attack, Pershing held a conference with his corps commanders and key members of their staffs concerning the preliminary artillery bombardment. Liggett and Dickman, hopeful of achieving tactical surprise, wanted no artillery preparation, unless continued rain inhibited the use of tanks.

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Cameron wanted a four-hour barrage. Major General Edward F. McGlachlin, Jr., First Army Chief of Artillery, was undecided, but inclined toward a 22-hour barrage. Lieutenant Colonels George C. Marshall, Jr., and Walter S. Grant, both on loan to First Army from AEF GHQ, urged an 18-hour preparation.¹⁶

Pershing postponed a decision. It had been raining off and on all day, sometimes quite hard. That night he decided on no artillery preparation, then reversed himself the next morning, 11 September, and ordered a four-hour preparation on the southern face and a seven-hour bombardment on the western. The preparation fire would disconcert the enemy, give a psychological boost to the attackers, and insure that the wire was damaged if the tanks weren't able to get to it.

It kept raining on 11 September. Pershing wrote in his diary, "Luck seems to be against us." He worked at his headquarters all day, waiting for the attack; all his corps commanders said they were ready and confident of success.¹⁷

The night of 11 September was jet black with steady rain. The artillery was in position, in some cases almost hub to hub, ominously silent. The troops were moved into the front lines at the last possible minute to achieve surprise. Sergeant William L. Langer, carrying ammunition in the trenches, found them practically empty at 2000 hours, but a short time later they were crowded with infantrymen, waiting apprehensively for the dawn.

Precisely at 0100 hours on 12 September, thousands of cannon fired simultaneously. Light belched from their muzzles, flaming out so frequently up and down the line that one soldier read the *Stars and Stripes* newspaper by the glare. Sergeant Langer compared the noise "to what one hears beneath a wooden bridge when a heavy vehicle passes overhead."¹⁸

Watching the preliminary bombardment, Pershing found the scene both "picturesque and terrible." He exulted that now, at last, after 18 months of effort, an American army was a living reality, "fighting

under its own flag." Yet how many men would die on that day—American, French, German.¹⁹

In the trenches, cold, wet, and miserable men huddled over their rifles, shocked by the thunder of cannon, gazing with frightened fascination at the weirdly illuminated landscape, lit up as they had never seen it before. "Will I still be alive a few hours from now?" each must have wondered.

The artillery fire was directed at German command posts, rail lines and junctions, trenches, and wire. It was not terribly effective, but it did, as Pershing had hoped, give a psychological boost to the waiting infantrymen, especially those who had not heard so much artillery before.

At 0500 hours the whistles blew. All along the front, men took a tight grip on their rifles, clambered up the wood ladders out of the trenches, and went "over the top."

Watching from a commanding height at old Fort Gironville, Pershing could not see clearly because of the drizzling rain and mist, but he followed the advance by watching the explosions of the rolling barrage. He hoped that the infantry was right behind.²⁰

The first thing they encountered was the barbed wire. The artillery had taken out some of it, but not much, because of the shortness of the preliminary bombardment. But trained teams of pioneers and engineers were in the lead, armed with axes, wire cutters, and bangalore torpedoes (long tin or sheet-iron tubes containing TNT). Fortunately, German counterbarrage fire was weak, giving them time to cut holes in the wire.

The infantry rushed through the gaps or, where there were none, used American ingenuity to pass. Leading platoons carried chickenwire, which, thrown across the top of the German wire, formed a bridge. Where chickenwire was lacking and the German wire was thick and low, the doughboys simply vaulted up on top of it and ran across, somewhat like a kid crossing a stream by jumping from rock to rock.²¹

The advance went well, especially on the south face, paced by the veteran 1st, 2d, and 42d Divisions, to which Pershing had assigned the open terrain so they could flank

the wooded areas, which had been assigned to the four new divisions.

"Get forward, there," Wild Bill Donovan yelled to his Rainbow Division men; "what the hell do you think this is, a wake?"²²

It was almost exactly that for Terry de la Mesa Allen of the 90th Division. Shot in the mouth, teeth missing, blood running down his face, he helped wipe out a machine-gun nest before loss of blood sent him to a first-aid station. In World War II Allen would command the 1st Division in North Africa and Sicily.

Some incidents were bizarre. Sergeant Harry J. Adams of the 89th Division saw a German run into a dugout at Bouillonville. The American had only two shots left in his pistol, so he fired them both through the door and called for the man to surrender. The door opened, and the German came out, followed by another, and another, and another, and another, and another—some 300 in all! Amazed, Adams marched the whole contingent back toward the rear, covering them with his empty pistol. Americans who saw them coming thought at first it was a German counterattack.

Other incidents seemed equally unbelievable. The 2d Division captured prisoners from 57 different German units—an impossible melange. It was found that they were from all over the western front, sent to Thiaucourt to attend a machine-gun school there.²³

Much of the ease with which the Americans advanced was due to an earlier German decision to evacuate the salient, orders having been given to that effect on 10 September. Some materiel had already been withdrawn, and more was in the process of moving when the Americans struck.

The attack thus caught the Germans embarrassingly *in via*. There were units that had practically no artillery in position, and those that did were almost out of ammunition. The German defenders were certainly not of a diehard type, as Sergeant Adams discovered when he marched in his

300 prisoners with an empty pistol. Thus it was Pershing's luck to attack a salient that the Germans were just about to hand over to him anyway, capturing without heavy losses positions which if stoutly defended would have heaped up American corpses. A wag described St. Mihiel as the battle "where the Americans relieved the Germans."²⁴

By the afternoon, troops on the southern face of the salient had reached their objectives; by evening, they were one day ahead of schedule. On the west face, progress was slower, the 26th Division being delayed by the failure of the French 15th Colonial to keep up on its left. Some of its own units on the right of the line, however, had projected a long finger into the German lines pointing toward Vigneulles; through that town ran the main road of escape out of the salient. Pershing picked up the phone and ordered Cameron and Dickman to move toward Vigneulles "with all possible speed."

Pushing hard under "Hiking Hiram" Bearss, a regiment of the 26th Division reached Vigneulles at 0215 hours; some four hours later a regiment of the 1st Division closed from the east. The main road out of the salient was now cut; the mouth of the bag was squeezed shut.

On 13 September the advance continued from the south and west, wiping out the salient and stopping at the line agreed upon by Pershing at his 2 September conference with Foch. Local operations continued until the 16th, consolidating positions for defense, while the First Army prepared to pull out and head for the Meuse-Argonne operation. It had captured 450 guns and 16,000 prisoners, at a cost of only 7000 casualties.

The operation reduced the salient, restored 200 square miles of French territory, freed the Paris-Nancy railroad, opened water transportation on the Meuse, and secured the right flank of the First Army for its coming operation in the Meuse-Argonne. It also paved the way for a possible future attack against Metz, the Briey-Longwy industrial complex, and a crucial railroad supplying the Germans to the northwest.²⁵

Finally, and perhaps most important, it demonstrated that the American Army was

able to successfully handle an operation of some magnitude. As the British *Manchester Guardian* put it:

It is as swift and neat an operation as any in the war, and perhaps the most heartening of all its features is the proof it gives that the precision, skill, and imagination of American leadership is not inferior to the spirit of the troops.²⁶

Actually, American success came a bit too easily at St. Mihiel, engendering perhaps an unwarranted optimism and confidence similar to that which afflicted the South after the first Battle of Bull Run. Knowing that the salient was to be evacuated anyway, German soldiers abandoned their positions more readily than they might otherwise have done. Even as it was, they delayed the First Army long enough to allow most of the defenders to escape before the jaws of the pincers closed.²⁷

On the afternoon of 13 September, Pétain came to Pershing's headquarters and together they visited the town of St. Mihiel. Ecstatic at their deliverance after four years of German occupation, the people—mostly women, children, and old men—crowded around them waving little French flags. Graciously, Pétain explained to the people that although the French had taken the city, they served as part of the American First Army, whose soldiers had made victory possible by their attacks on the shoulders of the salient.

Tremendously elated by the victory, Pershing felt that it vindicated his insistence on building a separate American army. "We gave 'em a damn good licking, didn't we?" he remarked. On the evening of 13 September, when receiving the congratulations of Dennis Nolan, AEF Chief of Intelligence, Pershing rose from his desk and, pacing the floor, gave the most eloquent tribute to the American soldier that Nolan had ever heard. Going back into history, Pershing remarked

how wave after wave of Europeans, dissatisfied with conditions in Europe, came to [America] to seek liberty; how . . . those who came had the willpower and the spirit to

seek opportunity in a new world rather than put up with unbearable conditions in the old; that those who came for that reason were superior in initiative to those, their relatives, who had remained and submitted to the conditions; that in addition to this initial superiority in initiative they had developed, and their children had developed, under a form of government and in a land of great opportunity where individual initiative was protected and rewarded

As a consequence,

we had developed a type of manhood superior in initiative to that existing abroad, which given approximately equal training and discipline, developed a superior soldier to that existing abroad.²⁸

Flushed with success, with an American army in being and growing daily more important, Pershing faced the future not only with confidence but with higher aspirations. With American soldiers flooding into France, the day would not be far off when the American Army would be larger than either the French or the British. "And when that time comes," he told George Van Horn Moseley, AEF Supply Chief, "an American should command the Allied Army."²⁹

The St. Mihiel victory left Pershing in a jaunty mood. When the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George, telegraphed his congratulations from a sickbed, saying that the news was better than any physic, Pershing answered: "It shall be the endeavor of the American Army to supply you with occasional doses of the same sort of medicine as needed."³⁰

The witty Harbord, who had once commanded the 2d Division, pointed out in his congratulatory message that nearly 300 years before on the same date, 13 September, Oliver Cromwell had led his Ironsides into battle quoting Psalm 68. It seemed remarkably apropos to Pershing's recent success: "Let God arise and let His enemies be scattered; let them also that hate Him. Like as the smoke vanishes so shalt thou drive them away." Pershing answered: "Your old

division might well be termed The Ironsides, though I doubt whether they went to battle quoting Psalm 68."³¹

Public German reaction to the American victory was of the sour-grapes variety. Newspapers and the official German communique pointed out that Germany had planned to evacuate the salient anyway, and that the troops had retired in good order to previously prepared positions.³² Privately, however, the German High Command was considerably upset. Though intending to evacuate, they had not wished to do so until absolutely necessary. And although most of the defenders had gotten out, considerable stores had been either captured or destroyed in place to preclude seizure. General Max von Gallwitz, the Army Group Commander, had warned Lieutenant General Fuchs, commanding Army Detachment C opposite Pershing, "not to concede an easy success, particularly since we are dealing with Americans." Despite that warning, in 48 hours the Americans had wiped out a four-year salient twice unsuccessfully attacked by the French.³³

Eric von Ludendorff, who functioned as the supreme German commander, was terribly disturbed. A German officer who visited him the night of 12 September found him "so overcome by the events of the day as to be unable to carry on a clear and comprehensive discussion." Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, the titular German Commander in Chief, called 12 September a "severe defeat," which rendered Gallwitz's situation "critical."³⁴

In later years a number of people believed that the Americans might have achieved an even greater victory had the First Army been allowed to keep moving east. Douglas MacArthur was among them. On the night of 13-14 September, MacArthur, a brigade commander in the 42d Division, stole through the enemy lines in the direction of Mars-la-Tour and, ten miles to the east, studied the key German fortress at Metz through binoculars. From this reconnaissance and from interrogation of

prisoners, he concluded that Metz was "practically defenseless," its garrison having been temporarily withdrawn to fight on other fronts. MacArthur immediately requested that he be permitted to attack Metz with his brigade, promising to be in the city hall "by nightfall."³⁵

The request was denied. The St. Mihiel offensive was a limited operation and had already achieved its objective. Further advance ran the risk of overinvolving the American Army, already committed to a new and even greater operation on a different front some two weeks hence.

MacArthur believed that this failure to push on toward Metz was "one of the great mistakes of the war." Although at the time Pershing believed that he had no choice other than to keep St. Mihiel a limited operation in order to be on schedule for the Meuse-Argonne attack, he would come to share MacArthur's view.³⁶

Hunter Liggett, however, put the matter in a different light. Liggett claimed that taking Metz was possible "only on the supposition that our army was a well-oiled, fully coordinated machine, which it was not as yet." Even doing its damndest, the First Army "had an excellent chance of spending the greater part of the winter mired in the mud of the Woëvre, flanked both to the east and the west."³⁷

Liggett, the I Corps commander in this operation, and later First Army commander, knew what he was talking about when he said that the Army was not well oiled and coordinated. American infantry fired at their own planes. Further, when encountering machine-gun nests, many seemed to have no sense of how to take cover. Instead of hugging the ground and crawling forward, they charged recklessly across open spaces or fell back walking bolt upright.

Artillery fire was delayed and slow to adjust during the rolling barrages, holding up the infantry, and then the artillery was slow in displacing cannon forward, so that the infantry outstripped it during the advance. Despite the fact that the terrain furnished excellent observation posts, the artillery fired

by map rather than by direct observation, using ammunition extravagantly and inefficiently.

Discipline was lax. When halted, men tended to get out of ranks and disperse, becoming stragglers. Pilfering of prisoners was almost universal. Animals were misused, abused, or not used at all. During traffic jams, instead of dismounting and resting both horses and men, the riders slouched in their saddles for hours. Animal-drawn ambulances, vitally needed at the front for transportation over muddy roads that were impassable for motor transport, were used in one division for evacuating field hospitals in the rear. And when telephone lines went dead, instead of using a horse relay system that would have provided quick, practical service over roads impassable to vehicles, commanders simply remained out of touch.

Command headquarters were too far to the rear and inadequately marked. One staff officer carrying an important message wandered for hours before he could find either one of a division's two brigade headquarters, although he was not far from either.

Divisions issued wordy orders, full of contingent clauses and appendices, repeating information available in standard manuals and prescribing detailed formations, even down to battalion level. Most subordinate commanders and their staffs probably never even read them.³⁸

The traffic jams were monumental. Patton's gas trucks took 32 hours to cover nine miles on 13 September. Two days later Georges Clemenceau, the French Premier, was caught in a jam so huge that it confirmed all his fears about US incapacity to handle large forces. "I had warned them beforehand," he wrote in his memoirs.

They wanted an American Army. They had it. Any one who saw, as I saw, the hopeless congestion at Thiaucourt will bear witness that they may congratulate themselves on not having had it sooner.³⁹

Indeed, the very day MacArthur recommended a further advance, his

division's Chief of Staff was complaining that because of logistical problems the men were not being adequately fed and clothed.⁴⁰

Far from being impressed by the American effort, many felt that it revealed serious deficiencies that boded ill for the future. "The Americans have not yet had sufficient experience," said a German intelligence report, "and are accordingly not to be feared in a great offensive. Up to this time our men have had too high an opinion of the Americans."⁴¹

The decision to terminate the St. Mihiel offensive as planned was undoubtedly sound. Apart from the fact that striking out toward Metz might have enmeshed the First Army in a fight from which it could not readily disentangle itself in time to meet its Meuse-Argonne commitment, and apart from the fact that Pershing had already, with Pétain's permission, pushed beyond Foch's original boundaries for a "limited offensive," the American Army was as yet new and largely untested. It was better to take one sure step with success than to attempt to run before one was ready, and stumble.

NOTES

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