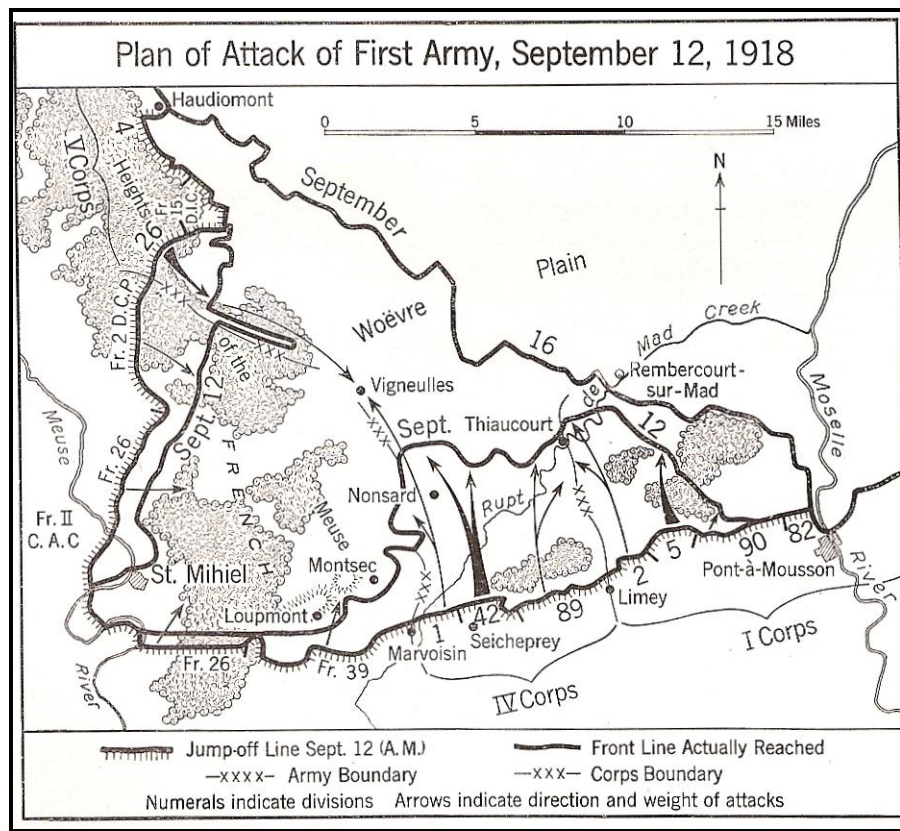


St. Mihiel Offensive: An Overview

Threatening the eastern flank of Verdun, the St. Mihiel salient existed since Germany occupied the territory in late 1914. The French tried to eliminate the salient in 1915, and the Germans used it in their assault on Verdun in 1916. Thereafter, it was generally used as a rest and training area on both sides.

This salient can best be described as a right triangle, with the north-south side running seventeen miles from Haudiomont in the north to St. Mihiel in the south, and the east-west side running twenty-six miles from St. Mihiel in the west to Pont-à-Mousson in the east: Mousson being the French name; Moselle being the German name of the river that formed the Eastern boundary. The terrain was generally low, rolling terrain with some marsh in the middle of the salient.

This salient was selected for the initial operations of the First American Army for several reasons: First, it appeared to be a relatively easy objective, and that would bolster American and Allied morale while providing the First Army with some badly-needed combat experience. Second, it was close to the American supply and communication lines that existed from the Ports in the south and southwest. Third, it would take pressure off of Verdun. Fourth, it could lead to the disruption of the Metz-Lille railroad, making it more difficult for the Germans to shift resources. Fifth, it could threaten the Brie iron ore region.



(ABMC, p. 109)

Order of Battle—American First Army, Sept. 12, 1918

On South Flank (L to R)

IV Corps

1st Division

42nd Division

89th Division

3rd Division in reserve

I Corps

2nd Division

5th Division

90th Division

82nd Division

78th Division in reserve

At the Base of the Triangle

French II Colonial Army Corps

Consisting of 3 Divisions

On West Flank

V Corps

26th Division

French 15th Division

4th Division

Army Reserve Divisions

35th Division

91st Division

The jump-off date was selected for 12 September, 1918. An artillery barrage, consisting of almost 3,000 guns, would begin at 1:00am. The seven American divisions participating in the initial assault would jump off at 5:00am. The French II Colonial Army Corps would keep the Germans occupied at the base of the triangle, and the two American and one French division in V Corps would advance 3 hours later, at 8:00am. The attacking strength, considering only the nine assaulting American and one French division (excluding the French II Colonial Army Corps and the reserve divisions) would amount to between 200,000 and 250,000 men, using the 25,500 approximate average actual strength of an American combat division on the Western Front in 1918. (ABMC, p. 501) It would be considerably higher, if all the support troops, reserve units, and other French units were included.

This large attacking force was opposite a German force that, beginning on 11 September, was in the process of a strategic withdrawal from the salient.

Author Paul Braim classifies the “German forces in the area were largely “trench” troops, those too old or infirm for offensive combat.” (Braim, p. 62) Operationally, they were composed of Composite Army C, under the command of General Fuchs, and the German Nineteenth Army, under the command of General Bothmer. Regarding German troop strength, Braim suggests that the only place where the line was strongly-manned was around Les Eparges, where one division held 2.5 miles of territory. He suggests there were six other German divisions in the line, each holding about three miles of territory. “Total enemy defensive strength in the St. Mihiel Salient and in local reserves was estimated at twenty-three thousand.” (Braim, p. 62) This would translate into an average of only about 3,500 men per each of the seven German divisions—a number that seems exceedingly small. (The discrepancy could be explained as easily as remembering that the Germans had already begun a general withdrawal.)

American Armies and Battlefields in Europe suggests that Army Detachment C, “was composed of 8 divisions and 2 brigades in line and 5 divisions which were held in the rear areas in reserves. (ABMC, p. 110) Again, using an average German divisional strength of 12,300, would suggest somewhere above 100,000 German units in the line, excluding reserves—before considering the withdrawal in progress.

When all of the American and French troops and the German withdrawal are considered, it appears that the American First Army outnumbered the German defenders by a huge margin on 12 September; thus contributing to the offensive quickly achieving its objectives.

The success of the offensive is well known. It included capturing more than 15,000 prisoners, about 450 cannons, and the elimination of the salient.

Because the focus of the tour is on the Meuse-Argonne salient, only a few areas of special interest will be discussed in detail below; including a look at casualties and pieces of the Yankee Division controversy.

Casualties

Reported Casualties during the Offensive						
<u>Div.</u>	<u>Beg.</u>	<u>End</u>	<u>Service</u>	<u>Army</u>	<u>Corps</u>	<u>Casualties</u>
2	12-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	I	1,477
5	12-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	I	1,449
78	16-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	I	58
82	12-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	I	816
90	12-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	I	1,972
1	12-Sep	14-Sep	Battle	First	IV	467
42	12-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	IV	901
89	12-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	IV	833
4	12-Sep	15-Sep	Battle	First	V	60
26	12-Sep	16-Sep	Battle	First	V/French	479
						8,512
Reported Casualties in Combat after the Offensive Ended						
<u>Div.</u>	<u>Beg.</u>	<u>End</u>	<u>Service</u>	<u>Army</u>	<u>Corps</u>	<u>Casualties</u>
26	17-Sep	8-Oct	Sector--post	First	French	738
33	26-Oct	11-Nov	Sector--post	Second	French	825
35	15-Oct	7-Nov	Sector--post	First	French	422
79	8-Oct	20-Oct	Sector--post	First/Second	French	369
81	7-Nov	11-Nov	Sector--post	First	French	974
5	17-Sep	17-Sep	Sector--post	First	I	86
78	17-Sep	4-Oct	Sector--post	First	I/IV	1,848
82	17-Sep	20-Sep	Sector--post	First	I/IV	146
90	17-Sep	10-Oct	Sector--post	First	I/IV	1,830
7	10-Oct	11-Nov	Sector--post	First/Second	IV	1,676
28	16-Oct	11-Nov	Sector--post	Second	IV	1,059
37	7-Oct	16-Oct	Sector--post	First/Second	IV	269
42	17-Sep	4-Oct	Sector--post	First	IV	1,848
89	17-Sep	7-Oct	Sector--post	First	IV	1,351
92	9-Oct	11-Nov	Sector--post	First/Second	IV/VI	959
						14,400

(ABMC, p. 165-166)

The tables above show a couple of interesting points. First, during the offensive, it was the I Corps divisions which suffered the heaviest casualties. Generally, these areas do not get as much coverage, with the exception of the 2nd Division around Thiaucourt. (This author is also guilty of this.)

Second, casualties in the St. Mihiel region, as classified by the ABMC, were higher overall in the post-offensive period. Of course, part of this can be explained by the longer passage of time. However, it

also shows that, after the German withdrawal, the Germans fought desperately to keep the ground they held.

Third, the 26th Division has the distinction of the highest casualty rate suffered by any American division in the St. Mihiel salient—2,194 casualties—but this occurred from 3 April to 28 June (or about 12 weeks), when the division was in the line with the French around Seicheprey. 634 of the casualties occurred in one deadly German assault, designed to teach the doughboys a lesson.

“26 Div came into the line here on 28 March 1918, and was hit at Apremont. The Germans hit again, at this village, at 3 05am 20 April. 1 Bn of 102d Inf were in the line, Co C in Remieres wood, D in the village, and A & B in rear in support. The tremendous barrage came in and blanketed the village and all communications to the rear, cutting off the 102d. At 5 am looming out of the fog some 2000 stormtroops attacked some 350 Americans in the outpost lines in front of the village, who were largely destroyed. OC Bn was Major Rau who formed a detail out of the cooks, bottle washers and those awaiting sentence for normal military crimes and led a spirited counterattack, northwards up the main street, which they cleared by 6am. The main attack had been against the main defense positions to the NE of the village and most of the defenders were killed. Slowly, news got back to HQ in Beaumont and a counterattack was organized. But Major Rau gradually got his men organized and drove the Germans out of their gains so successfully that the attackers withdrew. For management reasons the counterattack failed to materialize. The American losses were 634 casualties with 80 dead, and the events showed that the Americans had a lot to learn about management in the field.” (Noyes)

One more note to the story: According to Stallings, “The French Corps Commander, Major General Passaga, arrived at Brigade and took charge, reducing the West Point Brigadier (General), Peter Traub, to a mere implement of his will; for the French regiment on the right had been attacked, losing four machine-gun posts and a number of prisoners.” (Doughboy, p.53) Traub would go on to lead the 35th Division in the Meuse-Argonne.

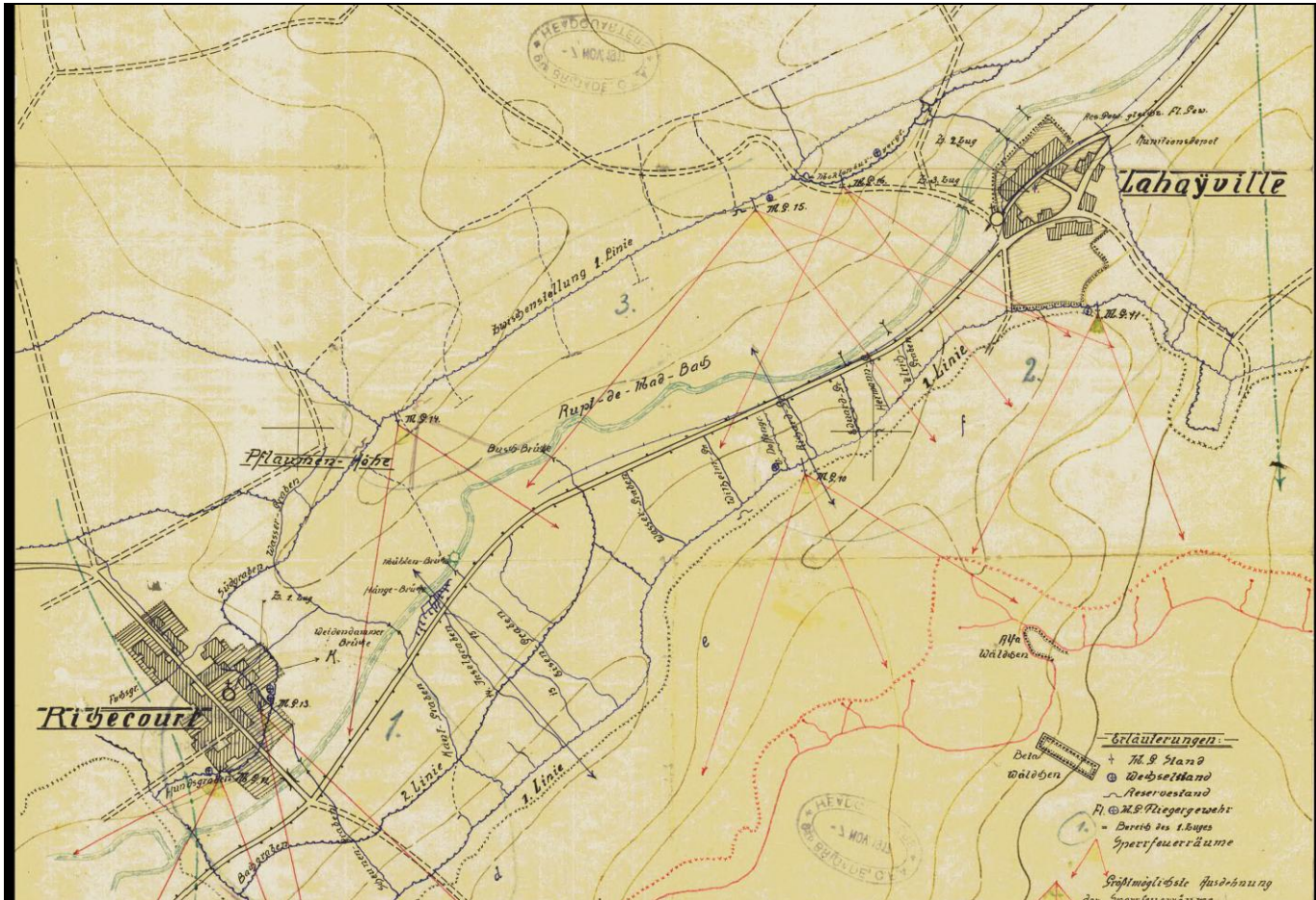
The Yankee Division and its Role in the St. Mihiel Offensive

With the April 20 events at Seicheprey as a back-drop, it is interesting to note that the Yankee Division was not put in place near Seicheprey and, perhaps, given a chance to make up for the earlier raid. In fact, the 1st and 42nd Divisions were in the line outside the village. Additionally, the 26th Division was placed in V Corps on the western side of the triangle, which did not jump off until 8:00am—three hours after the divisions on the salient’s southern side.

Initially, the V Corps did not advance as quickly as the other two corps. Resistance was light, but the Yankee Division was held up because the French division on their left flank was not advancing as quickly over the rough ground. During the evening of 12 September, orders came to the Yankee Division’s headquarters to drive as hard as they could to close the salient with the 1st Division. That honor went to the 102nd Infantry Regiment (perhaps because of Seicheprey) under the command of marine “Hiking Hiram” Bearss. Edwards promised that the troops would close the gap by 4:00am on 13 September, and they entered Hattonchâtel at 3:15. Within four hours, a scout platoon from the 28th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, entered Vigneulles and closed the salient. Of course, the slow initial advance of the Yankee Division helped to paint a darker picture of the division’s role in the war.

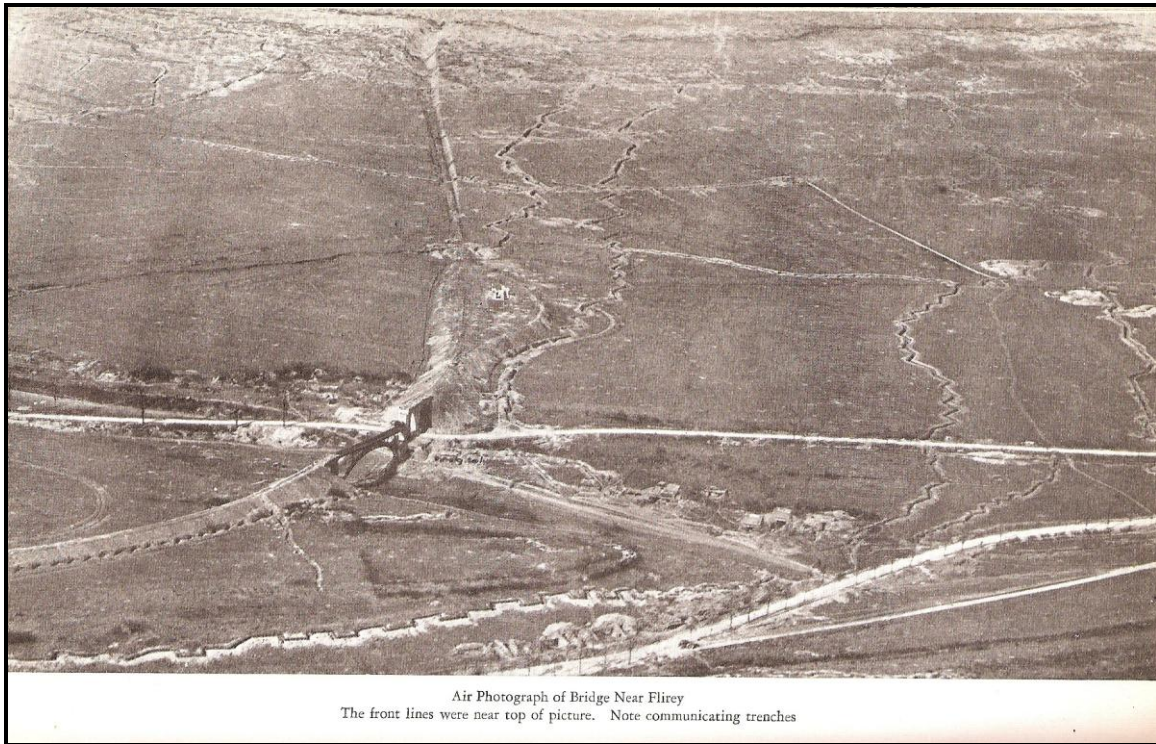
St. Mihiel Offensive: Battlefield Sites

Richecourt and Lahayville, German Trench Map from 12 Nov. 1917

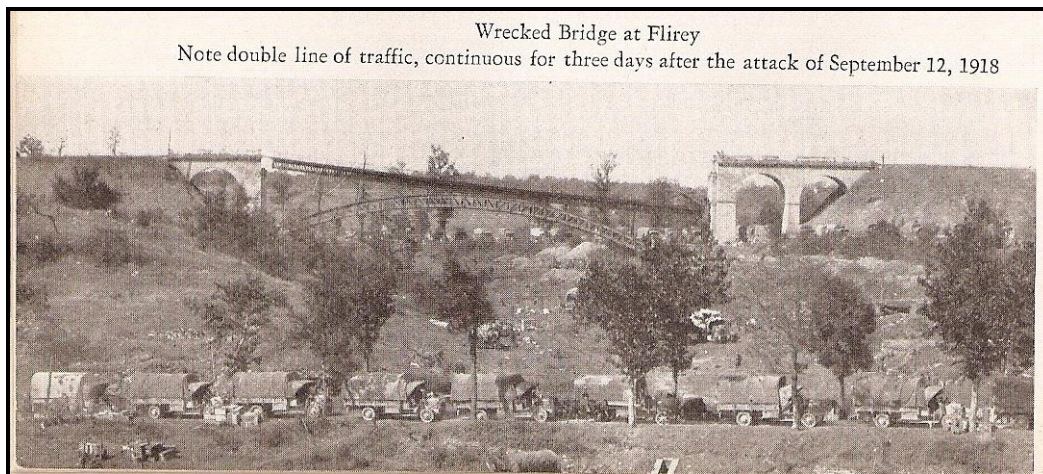


(Captured German Trench and Operations Maps from the National Archives, Naval & Military Press)

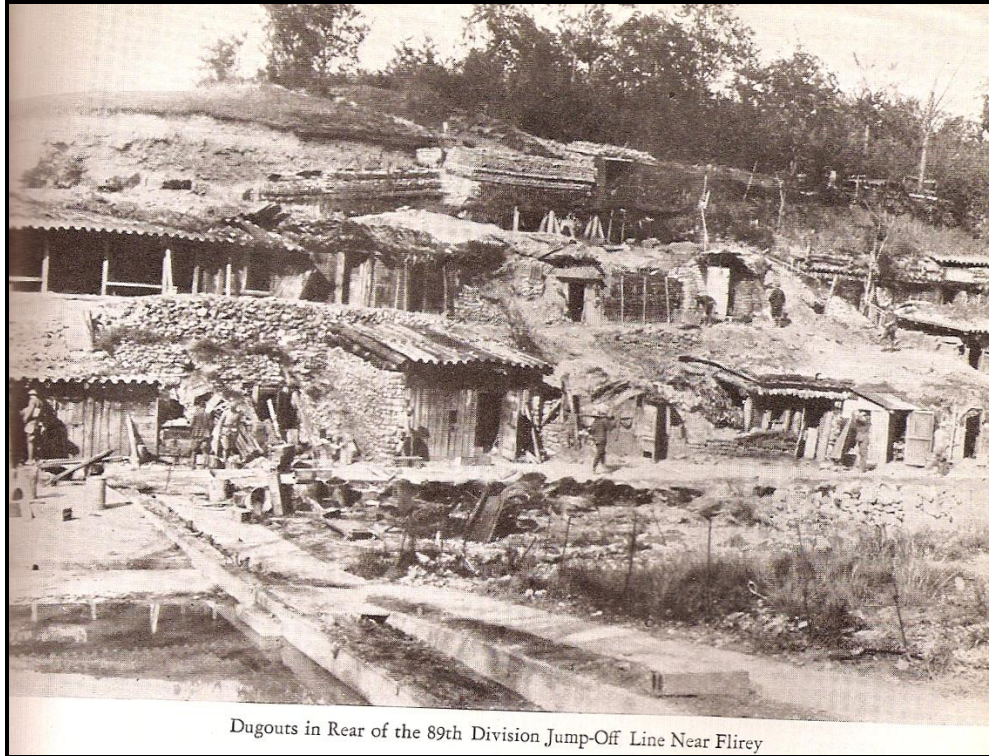
Flirey, Then and Now



(ABMC, p. 132)



(ABMC, p. 110)



Dugouts in Rear of the 89th Division Jump-Off Line Near Flirey

(ABMC, p. 133)



View of Flirey on September 13, 1918

(ABMC, p. 133)

Thiaucourt



Thiaucourt Being Shelled by the Germans After
Its Capture by the 2d Division

(ABMC, p. 144)



Street in Thiaucourt After the German Bombardment

(ABMC, p. 145)