

## OUTSTANDING GRADUATE NON-SEMINAR PAPER AWARD

### VICTORY AT ST. MIHIEL

HELEN HUND

Few battles in military history can be judged both tactical and strategic successes. The World War I Battle of St. Mihiel is one of these. Its success can be attributed to many reasons: the excellence of the battle plan, the leadership of the generals and field commanders, the enthusiasm of the American doughboys, and the lack of German will to hold the salient. But above all, its success depended on the great cooperation within the newly-instituted American Chief-of-Staff command, and within the recently-formed Allied command, both of which allowed for the powerful massing of troops and materials needed to defeat a determined enemy fighting a total war. Cooperation produced the massive army which formed for the first time at St. Mihiel - an army "nearly four times as large as Grant's Army of the Potomac at its maximum strength, three times Napoleon's Grand Army at Leipzig, nearly twice the German army at Sedan in 1870, and much larger than either the Japanese or Russian armies at Mukden, the largest on record before 1914."<sup>1</sup>

On 24 July 1918, the commanders-in-chief of the Allied armies - General John J. Pershing, General Henri Petain, and Field Marshal Douglas Haig - met at the headquarters of Marshal Ferdinand Foch in Bombon. Marshal Foch proposed new offensives to be initiated by the Allied forces in the Great War. "The moment has come to abandon the general defensive attitude forced upon us until now by numerical inferiority and to pass to the offensive."<sup>2</sup>

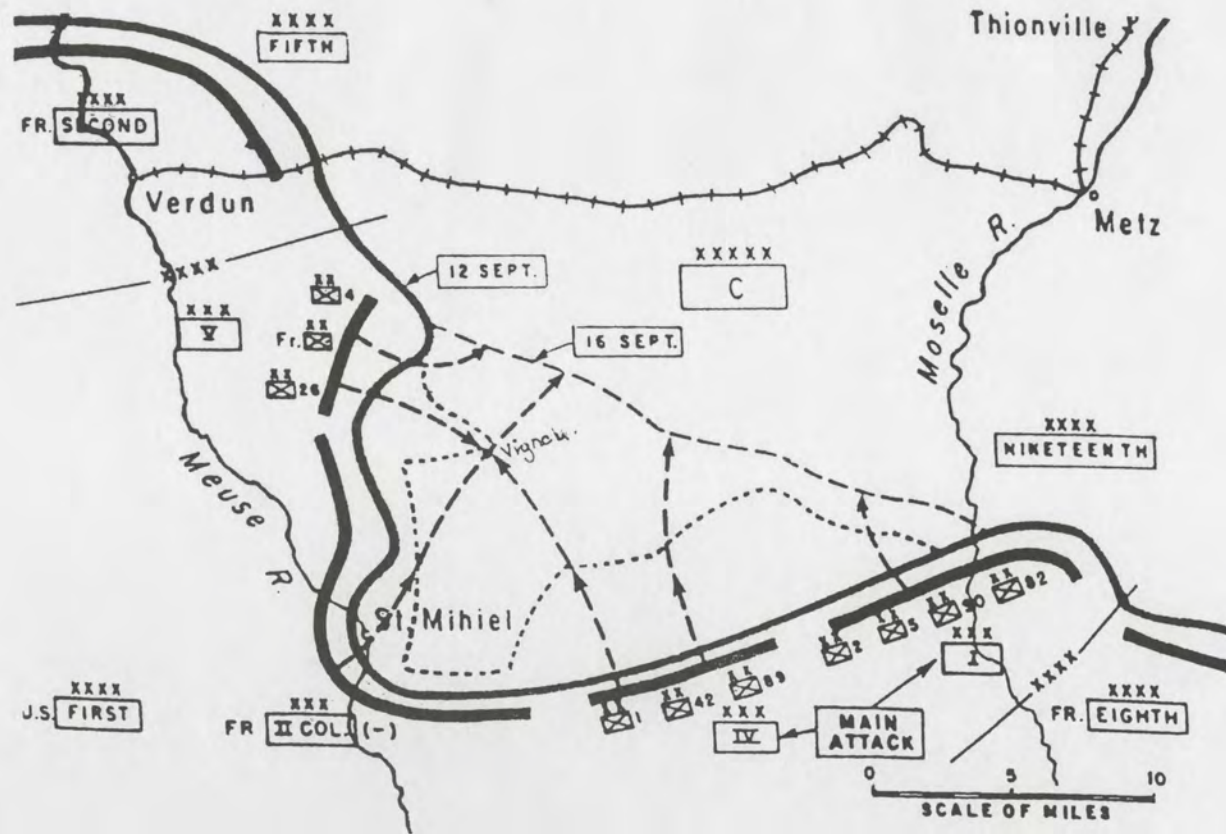
Allied morale was higher than it had been for many months. The German spring offensives had been blunted, and fresh troops continued to arrive from the U.S. The three commanders, however, had serious misgivings concerning offensive action against the German Western Front at this time because of the condition of their national armies:

Field-Marshal Haig: The British Army, entirely disorganized by the events of March and April, is still far from being reestablished.

General Petain: The French Army, after four years of war and the severest trials, is at present worn out, bled white, anemic.

<sup>1</sup> David Trask, *The AEF and Coalition Warrmaking, 1917-1918* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1993), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand Foch, *The Memoirs of Marshal Foch*, trans. Bentley Mott (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, 1931), 370.



The Battle of St. Mihiel

General Pershing: The American Army asks nothing better than to fight, but it has not yet been formed.<sup>3</sup>

General Foch assured them that the proper coordination of forces would render the objectives practical. A series of operations of limited extent could be rapidly executed along the Western Front, preventing the Germans from using their reserves to advantage and denying them time to rebuild depleted units. American troops would be responsible for carrying out the St. Mihiel offensive, which would return control of the Paris-Avrucourt railroad to the French and permit a later, larger offensive between the Meuse and Moselle.

Pershing had sought a larger offensive in the St. Mihiel area, one which would have continued westward to include the town of Metz. He was pleased nonetheless with the Allied plan. The action forced the creation of the American First Army, and therefore the return of most American divisions from the English and French armies. The already depleted French and English armies regretted the loss of American troops. Field Marshal Haig was especially disturbed by the removal of American troops and privately expressed his dismay: "What will history say regarding this action of the Americans leaving the British zone of operations when *the decisive battle* [Amiens] of the war is at its height, and the decision still in doubt!"<sup>4</sup>

Pershing had fought an often acrimonious battle in order to retain command of his own troops. He had pressed for the formation of a distinctly American army from the start, for two reasons. His official instructions from Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, required him to maintain "the forces of the United States [as] a separate and distinct component of the combined forces, the identity of which must be preserved." In addition, Pershing and his advisors considered the demoralized French and English armies to be caught in a hopelessly stalled trench war; they were not fighting to win, but fighting not to lose. Only by taking the offensive, and implementing maneuver warfare, could victory be achieved. Pershing believed in the "cult of the rifle" and open-field warfare; that is, the infantryman with his rifle and bayonet fighting *outside* the trenches.<sup>5</sup>

The American First Army, consisting of fourteen divisions, was officially formed 10 August 1918, and Pershing officially assumed command 30 August. The "battle of command" had been successfully fought, and now Pershing had to solve other grave problems: untrained troops, a troubled Service of Supply, and a serious lack of artillery, tanks, and aviation. The French provided immediate aid in all categories, but especially in equipment. Foch provided ninety-nine batteries of French 75's, fifty batteries of heavy

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 373.

<sup>4</sup> Douglas Haig, *The Private Papers of Douglas Haig: 1914-1919*, ed. Robert Blake (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1952), 323.

<sup>5</sup> John J. Pershing, *My Experiences in the World War*, vol. 1 (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1931), 38; James J. Cooke, *Pershing and his Generals: Command and Staff in the AEF* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997), 33, 13.

howitzers, and twenty-one squadrons of aircraft. He also provided two artillery staffs, because the Americans had only one. Throughout the war, Pershing would depend heavily on the Allied High Command to provide whatever he lacked, despite his insistence on the independence of the American army.<sup>6</sup>

The American First Army's objective, the St. Mihiel salient - *L'Hernie* to the French - was a triangular bulge which protruded into Allied lines twenty miles southeast of Verdun. The town of St. Mihiel was located at the apex of the triangle. Along the west were the heights of the Meuse River, and along the south ran flat, swampy land which became hilly as it approached the Moselle River. Along the base of the salient, the Germans had built the Michel Position (or *Michel Stellung*) - twenty miles of modern defensive fortifications incorporated into the rugged terrain. This was a "veritable field fortress" with "elaborate systems of trenches, barbed-wire entanglements, concrete shelters and machine-gun emplacements." These fortifications were arranged in two lines, the first better fortified, the second one, five miles back, less so.<sup>7</sup>

Both sides had considered this a quiet area along the Western Front since 1915, when the Germans had repulsed the French attempt to retrieve it. Many American soldiers began their war service here in the Toul, or "Old Home" Sector, for it was a safe area to initiate "green" troops. Although the Germans had held the salient since 1914, they were now manning it thinly, with probably no more than 23,000 troops. Two divisions had been pulled out for the spring offensive, and were not replaced. Of the remaining nine weak divisions, seven divisions each held seven and a half miles of front, with the other two divisions in reserve.

Against these weak forces, Pershing planned to send eighteen divisions, consisting of almost a half a million men, to attack the 23,000 German soldiers. The American divisions each had a rifle strength of 13,000; the 2nd, 5th, and 42nd Divisions each had five riflemen for every yard of their division's front. The American concentration of force was great. The problem Pershing now faced was how to move this concentration into place without alerting the enemy. Petain had suggested a ruse, whereby the Germans would be convinced that an attack would occur far to the southeast, at Belfort on the Moselle River. Pershing gladly adopted the plan, and sent the unsuspecting Omar Bundy with his VI Corps, along with staff officers from six other divisions, to prepare details for an attack in the Belfort area. Bundy probably realized his part in the eventual St. Mihiel battle, as he noticed tanks moving ostentatiously in his area and heard the great load of nonsensical radio messages flooding the airwaves. His liaison with headquarters, Arthur Conger, added a none-too-subtle flourish to the subterfuge: he typed out the Belfort battle plan in his hotel room, threw the carbon in the trashcan and went out for a walk. When he returned, the carbon was gone.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Trask, 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

However, the objective of surprise ultimately failed, and the enemy sent three additional divisions into the St. Mihiel area. Pershing expressed his dismay at the lack of security: "Unfortunately, both the French and the Americans have talked, and it now seems certain that the enemy is aware of the approaching attack." The best security in the world could not have concealed the massive quantities of troops and materials flooding the Allied area surrounding the salient, and the inexperience of hundreds of staff officers also aggravated the problem of security. Each staff officer, feeling that his part in the battle was momentous, disobeyed orders forbidding battlefield visitation. The roads leading to the battlefield from headquarters were congested with officers who wished to personally view the ground over which their troops were to fight. Inexperience also complicated seemingly simple orders. Officers in charge of the movement of supplies and munitions to the area were ordered to conceal these goods; inspectors would then check the location and concealment methods. One inspector required a supply officer to "conceal" his ammunition dump with paulins, even though only white paulins were available. This huge target was soon bombed by the enemy, and the American First Army lost its largest single supply of munitions.<sup>9</sup> Eddie Rickenbacker summarized the security problem:

Every taxi driver or waiter in Paris could have told one just where the Americans were concentrating... The number of guns, the number of troops and just where they were located, how many aeroplanes we had...were discussed by every man on the streets.<sup>8</sup>

The Germans had indeed noticed much movement in front of General Max von Gallwitz's army group, between St. Mihiel and the Moselle. As early as the end of August, an American offensive was expected. Although General Headquarters had reinforced the sector with three additional divisions, Quartermaster-General Erich von Ludendorff recommended the evacuation of the salient. Local commanders, however, were optimistic about their strength, and General Headquarters was reluctant to evacuate the sector because of the industrial areas lying behind it. Therefore, orders to withdraw behind the Michel Position were not given until 8 September. Only advance guards were to remain in the most forward trenches. Lieutenant General Georg Fuchs, commander of the majority of German troops in the sector, ordered the withdrawal of heavy artillery pieces and the destruction of buildings, bridges, roads and water supplies in preparation for abandoning the salient. The German army was doing precisely what Marshal Foch had earlier predicted to General Pershing: "The Germans would fall back from St. Mihiel at the first sign..." of an Allied assault.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Meirion and Susie Harries, *The Last Days of Innocence* (New York: Random House, 1997), 340.

<sup>9</sup> Pershing, *Experiences*, vol. 2, 249; George C. Marshall, *Memoirs of My Services in the World War, 1917-1918* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), 131.

<sup>8</sup> Harries, 341.

When the Americans received reports of German withdrawal, they sought to use Fuchs' situation to their advantage, but they had to act quickly. Pershing called a staff meeting on the evening of 11 September to discuss the possibility of carrying out the attack the next day. General William "Billy" Mitchell, was surprised that some of the "Old fossils" were hesitant to exploit the situation of the German army:

Our Chief Engineer recommended that we delay the attack because there had been considerable rain. This, he said, had held up our light railways used for getting up artillery ammunition. The question of adequate water for some of the troops would be difficult and a thousand and one things which could not be done were mentioned.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, First Army headquarters had been revising Pershing's original - and larger - August Plan, producing the September Plan for the attack on St. Mihiel. (See map.) General George Marshall and Colonel Walter Grant had devoted themselves exclusively to the September Plan since 30 August. Their work was constantly interrupted by field commanders seeking "minor" changes that they believed would simplify their troops' battlefield orders. Their requests seemed entirely reasonable to them, but they did not realize the complications caused by even the most minute alteration. The massive concentration of troops imposed a rigidity on all formations, that the officers were unaccustomed to from their earlier military experiences. Changes were often made, but they came from above and not from below. When Marshal Foch and General Pershing decided on a minor change of order, that "inch at the top became a mile at the bottom."<sup>11</sup>

The battle plan, suggested by Pershing and detailed by Marshall and Grant, met the objective of simplicity. A first assault would be made on the south face of the salient, and a secondary against the west face. Holding attacks and raids would also be made against the nose of the salient to hold the enemy in place, Major General Joseph Dickman's IV Corps (89th, 42nd, and 1st Divisions) was assigned the principal attack against the south face. To the right of the IV Corps, Major General Hunter Liggett's I Corps (82nd, 90th, 5th, and 2nd Divisions) would make a supporting attack. The V Corps under Major General George H. Cameron (26th, part of the 4th, and the French 15th Colonial Divisions) was assigned to strike eastward across the heights of the Meuse. Then it was to link with Dickman's troops, cutting off the defending German units. The French 11 Colonial Corps would advance northeasterly, in order to support the attack on its right and left flanks. The reserve consisted of three divisions: the 35th, 80th, and 91st Divisions. A total of 550,000

<sup>9</sup> Trask, 104; Erich von Ludendorff, *Ludendorff's Own Story, August 1914-November 1918*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1919), 361.

German sources disagree concerning who ordered the withdrawal and when. Fuchs maintains that he ordered the withdrawal without waiting for superior orders.

<sup>10</sup> Harries, 341.

<sup>11</sup> Marshall, 134.

American and 110,000 French Troops were to attack 23,000 German and Austrian troops in the salient. The Allied troops would have over 3,000 artillery weapons at their disposal - most of which were contributed by the French, and 1500 aircraft - most of which were contributed by the British and French.<sup>12</sup>

The greater part of the St. Mihiel salient was surrounded by dense entanglements of barbed wire. The staff had thought that these could be crushed by heavy tanks. However, on 28 August General Haig withdrew his promise of supplying heavy British tanks for the St. Mihiel battle. The staff now faced a serious problem. The troops attacking from the south would need fifty-five breaches in the seven-mile front - eight gaps per mile. The staff estimated that army gunners would need 1600 rounds of ammunition to make sufficient gaps in the wire which was sixty-six yards deep. It would not be possible to bring a sufficient amount of ammunition to the front in the short time remaining, and the bombardment would require eighteen hours - totally destroying any sense of surprise. Pershing's surprise attack would become a battle of attrition.

Three proposals for dealing with the wire were considered: first, to precede the infantry advance by eighteen hours of artillery fire, second, to precede the infantry advance by five hours of artillery fire, which would not destroy the wire, but would demoralize the enemy and inspire our troops, and third, to launch an infantry attack without any prior bombardment. For a time, the last proposal was the most popular with the greatest number of the staff. Grant and Marshall were horrified. The experience of recent Allied battles had demonstrated the great butcher's bill for sending troops into wire entanglements. In the end, Pershing decided on four hours of preliminary bombardment on the southern face of the salient, and seven hours on the western side.

The final drafts of the special instructions, or annexes, to the battle order for the engineer troops, supply services, signal communications, intelligence service, control of road traffic, handling of prisoners, and others, were prepared by Grant and Marshall after receiving them from the various Chiefs of Services. Hospitalization for 50,000 casualties - the standard number for an operation of this size - was prepared.

A heavy rain fell throughout the night of the eleventh. The artillery preparation began at 0100 on 12 September. The 2,971 guns of the American First Army opened in unison. "The enemy's attack struck...by surprise," stated the official German report later. Because their intelligence had predicted an offensive on the fifteenth, the American attack caught German artillery on the road, and some companies had already installed themselves behind the Michel Position. However, the remaining Germans did not immediately abandon their salient. At 0420, Fuchs informed higher command that "the evacuation would not be begun as there were no compelling reasons for such action at that time."<sup>13</sup>

The infantry on the south face advanced at 0500, behind the rolling barrage of 267 light tanks commanded by Lieutenant Colonel George C. Patton, Jr. The weather was

<sup>12</sup> Trask, 106.

<sup>13</sup> Harries, 343; Ibid.

clearing, and the heavy fog which had covered the Woivre plain was giving way to brilliant sunlight. The Southern Force - all divisions of I Corps, and the 42nd and 89th Divisions of IV Corps - pivoted on the Moselle River. These six divisions swung to the right in a twelve-mile arc toward the town of Vigneulles. The First Division of IV Corps, on the left of the other six divisions, advanced northwest to meet up with troops of V Corps while protecting the left flank of its own IV Corps. The Western Force moved at 0800, giving the Southern three hours head start. The 26th Division met up with the First Division of IV Corps. The Fourth Division, northernmost of the Western Force, remained in place. To its right was the French 15th Division, which moved to the edge of the heights of the Meuse in order to protect the left flank of the 26th. The Central Force, the French 11 Colonial Corps, followed the retreating enemy. All divisions advanced with little difficulty, supported by an aerial division of 1400 British, French and American planes under the command of Colonel William Mitchell.

General Pershing, along with Secretary of War, Newton D. Baker, watched the action from the old fort of Gironville on a height to the south. The general's plan was executed with perfection that day. By nightfall, the American divisions heading toward Vigneulles were only ten miles apart. The only difficulty had been the poor conditions of the roads, which slowed the arrival of the horse carts and the trucks bringing ammunition and rations to the front. The next few days would be spent mopping up and securing the salient.

General Pershing was relieved to see the rapid progress of the troops across the barbwire entanglements. After the battle he would learn of the methods employed by the troops in dealing with these barriers. Special pioneer detachments and engineers had been sent to accompany the first wave of troops and cut the wire with long Bangalore torpedoes and wire cutters. The troops, however, became impatient with the slow progress, and merely stepped over the wire. Some regiments even brought along their own chicken wire to lay over the barbwire, forming a "carpet" that allowed a line of troops to quickly walk over the wire. The cutting of the gaps took almost the entire day, but these gaps remained a necessity for the passage of artillery, trains and reinforcements. So amazing was the soldiers' passage that few believed it. Marshal Petain believed the story, and sent about 800 incredulous French officers and noncommissioned officers to see how the American soldiers had crossed an area previously considered impassable. When the officers saw the evidence on the ground, they believed - and commented that the American soldiers were aided by the enormous size of their feet.<sup>14</sup>

Meanwhile, General Fuchs had recognized that his forces were in danger of being cut off. At 1200, he ordered the retreat of the Mihiel Group to the Schroeter Position, but then quickly decided to send them all the way back to the Michel Position without making a stand at the Schroeter. At 0400 on 13 September, Fuchs had completed the retreat. Shortly after, the first elements of the First Division of IV Corps and the 26th Division of V Corps met at Vigneulles. Fortunately for the Germans, Pershing had given his field commanders very little decision-making power. Therefore, when the commanders could have pushed

<sup>14</sup> Marshall, 147.



ahead more quickly, they did not; and Pershing, for his part, was unable to get his orders through to the commanders when he realized an early junction could be made at Vignulles. This delay allowed thousands of Germans to escape capture.

By the afternoon of 13 September, the Americans had reached all their objectives: the First Army had seized the Paris-Avicourt railway and straightened out the enemy line. Pershing reported the capture of almost 16,000 prisoners, 443 guns, 752 machine guns, and large amounts of light material. American casualties totaled 7,000 for those first two days, but 3,000 more casualties would occur during the consolidation of the salient after 13 September. Casualties were 40,000 less than headquarters expected. All activities in the area ceased after 16 September, because the First Army had to move quickly to be in position for the Meuse-Argonne battle, which was to begin on 26 September.

Ludendorff and von Gallwitz, however, thought the Americans would continue the attack, and wished to reinforce the ranks. But when von Gallwitz asked Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg for reinforcements on 17 September, the latter angrily replied, "I am not willing to admit that one American division is worth two German. Whenever commanders and troops have been determined to hold their position and the artillery has been well organized, even weak German divisions have repulsed the mass attacks of American divisions and inflicted especially heavy casualties on the enemy."<sup>15</sup>

Some of Pershing's staff believed that the St. Mihiel offensive should have been extended to Metz, in spite of the commitment of troops to the Meuse-Argonne sector. This was also Pershing's original plan before the Allied command truncated it. George Marshall, although opposed to further attacks because of Foch's orders, nonetheless believed an assault on Metz would have been successful. "[T]here is no doubt in my mind but that we could have reached the outskirts of Metz by the afternoon of the 13th, and quite probably could have captured the city on the 14th, as the enemy was incapable of bringing up reserves in sufficient number and formation to offer an adequate resistance."<sup>16</sup>

The evening of the thirteenth, a meeting was held at headquarters to decide whether the attack should be resumed, and a move made toward Metz. Marshall and Grant issued a statement opposing the action: the assault had lost its momentum, and the enemy had been given time to regroup his scattered forces. American forces had stopped short of the Hindenburg Line, and out of range of the heavy artillery of the permanent fortifications of Metz. Twelve additional hours would be necessary to draw up plans and deliver them to the front, providing the enemy with even more time to reinforce his position. At this time, an assault on Metz would be extremely difficult and would produce heavy casualties. Furthermore, American troops would be unable to reach their assigned positions for the Meuse-Argonne offensive in time. Pershing decided to follow the original plan. Stabilization

<sup>15</sup> James H. Hallas, *Squandered Victory: The American First Army at St. Mihiel* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1995), 222.

<sup>16</sup> Marshall, 146.

of the front proceeded quickly, and the troops intended for the Meuse-Argonne were sent on their way.<sup>17</sup>

Could Metz have been assaulted successfully? Pershing and Marshall believed so; others believed not. Everyone agrees that St. Mihiel was a tactical victory, but was it a strategic loss? Could a successful Metz offensive have ended the war earlier, and could it have prevented the 120,000 Meuse-Argonne casualties? The strategic value of a successful Metz offensive rests on three subarguments: the value of the railway line behind the Meuse-Argonne front versus the value of the railway line behind Metz; the real strength of the Michel Position and Metz, and above all, the American army's ability to carry out the massive Metz operation on its own.<sup>18</sup>

The first two arguments depend on the third: the American Army's ability to successfully assault Metz, and then successfully take the Longuyon-Sedan railway line and the Briey Iron Basin - both twenty miles beyond Metz. This is not an objective the American Army could have achieved, for two reasons. First, the American Army depended heavily on both British and French materials and manpower. Would Foch, Petain and Haig have committed their supplies to the Metz offensive? No. They strongly disagreed with Pershing's inclusion of Metz in his St. Mihiel offensive. The cooperation and coordination of materials and manpower by Foch, Petain, Haig and Pershing produced the success of St. Mihiel. Second, the recently-formed American Army consisted of a great number of partially-trained, inexperienced troops. They were not ready for a major offensive against a position the enemy was determined to hold. St. Mihiel had been an excellent training ground for these troops, because the Germans had already decided to withdraw from the salient. For that reason, the battle has been referred to as "the Americans relieving the Germans."<sup>19</sup> General Hunter Liggett cites the inexperience of the troops and other reasons to support his belief that a Metz assault would not have been successful:

The possibility of taking Metz and the rest of it, had the battle been fought on the original plan, existed, in my opinion, only on the supposition that our army was a well-oiled, fully coordinated machine, which it was not as yet. If all the divisions had been battle-tempered and battle disciplined as were the First, Second and Forty-Second, which again they were not, it might have been worth while to make the attempt, despite the facts that the rainy season had begun and that an advance would bring our right under the guns of Metz, our left under the Meuse heights north of Verdun.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Hallas, 260-5. Hallas, in general, makes the three subarguments. I have added "on its own," to emphasize the fact that the AEF most certainly did need the Allied arms, staff and training to carry out this offensive.

<sup>19</sup> Willard Klunder, American Military History 525 Class Notes: April 1, 1999.

The American Army's ability to take Metz, thus depended on its ability to supply its own troops and to provide more training for its troops - and as General Liggett has also mentioned - its ability to overcome the problems of the rainy season and terrain. Could the American Army have accomplished this in such a short time without the cooperation and coordination of the Allied forces? No. The St. Mihiel offensive, in its limited but cooperative form, did most certainly offer both a military and moral strategic advantage: the German threat to the rear of the Meuse-Argonne offensive was eliminated, and more importantly, the morale of the war-weary Allies was dramatically increased. As Pershing himself maintained: "The St. Mihiel victory probably did more than any single operation of the war to encourage the tired Allies. After years of doubt and despair, of suffering and loss, it brought them assurance of the final defeat of an enemy whose armies had seemed well-nigh invincible."<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Hallas, 263.

<sup>21</sup> Pershing, vol. 2, 273.