

**FRANCE**  
**ST. MIHIEL MEDAL 1918**

The commemorative medal for the Battle of St Mihiel was instituted by the St Mihiel town council on the 15<sup>th</sup> February to honour the American and French combatants who participated in the attack on the German held St Mihiel Salient in September 1918.

The bronze medal, 36mm in diameter has on the obverse a standing female crowned figure pointing with her left arm towards the salient and the Germans. She is clothed in a long flowing dress and wearing a crown, symbolising the figure of Liberty. In her right hand she is holding a staff with the banner of the 'Stars and Stripes'. In the background is a hand-to-hand battle scene depicting American troops in action against the Germans. Inscribed around the top right-hand side of the medal is the legend 'ST MIHIEL 1918'. Lower down on the same side is the underlined name of designer of the medal 'F. Fraisse'. Impressed on the rim is the Paris Mint cornucopia hallmark and the word 'Bronze'.



St Mihiel Medal 1918 ~ Obverse

The reverse has an image of a helmet, shield and map labelled 'St Mihiel' surrounded by a wreath. Below are the dates of the Battle of St Mihiel '12 & 13 Sept 1918' with and a seven-line inscription in English:

'The American Troops operating victoriously in the St Mihiel sectors broke the resistance of the enemy and captured 13·300 prisoners' and in French: 'Les Troupes Americaines operant victorieusement dans le Setor de St Mihiel ont brise la resistance ennemie etfait 13·300 prisonniers'.

The medal has a laterally pierced ball and ring for ribbon suspension and the 38mm wide ribbon is deep yellow with a 13mm central red stripe.

A second version of the medal was produced by the Paris firm of Delonde. The obverse has the figure of La République wearing armour with her left hand resting on a shield and another figure of a warrior holding a rifle. In the background is the sun rising over the battlefield. Below is the date '1918'. The reverse has the coat of arms of the Ville de St Mihiel. Above is a crown and below are two flaming torches partially wreathed and a palm frond. The words 'VILLE DE

SAINT MIHIEL' is inscribed around the top edge. The medal usually has a clasp 'St Mihiel' attached to the ribbon.

### Battle of St Mihiel

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1914 the Germans attacked Verdun on both sides of River Meuse. Hauts de Meuse, on the right bank was captured and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> Fort du Camp des Romains to the south of St Mihiel was deluged with artillery fire. The garrison surrendered to the Germans who acknowledged that the French troops had bravely and honourably defended the fort. Fort de Troyon was mercilessly bombarded by the Germans who were determined to reduce the fort to rubble.

However, the garrison held out and denied the enemy of its possession. French troops stemmed attacks but were unable to prevent the enemy taking possession of Chauvencourt on the west bank of the Meuse. Seventy-five per cent of the city of Verdun was held by the Germans. They also occupied the heights above the right bank of the Meuse down to St Mihiel, which is in the Meuse department in north-eastern France. The triangular shaped wedge of territory formed a salient which penetrated 25-kilometres into the French flanks. It remained in the enemy's possession until the autumn of 1918. A section of the line stretched across the Meuse and the salient straddled the Paris to Nancy and the Verdun to Nancy railway lines. The only road available to maintain troops and supplies into Verdun was via the La Voie Sacrée.

At the end of August 1918 General John J. Pershing (1860-1948) assumed command of the American 1<sup>st</sup> Army. He planned to attack the St Mihiel salient and break through the German line and advance onwards to capture the fortified city of Metz. Pershing's 1<sup>st</sup> Army was composed of I Corps – the 82<sup>nd</sup>, 90<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions – commanded by Major-General H. Liggett, (1857-1935) who were deployed from Clémery, east of the Moselle to Limey; IV Corps – 89<sup>th</sup>, 42<sup>nd</sup> & 1<sup>st</sup> Divisions – commanded by Major-General J.T. Dickman, (1857-1927) deployed from Limey to Xivray. These two Corps was tasked to carryout the main attack, their objective being the Vigneulles-St Benoit-Xammes line, which was to be achieved in three successive forward movements.

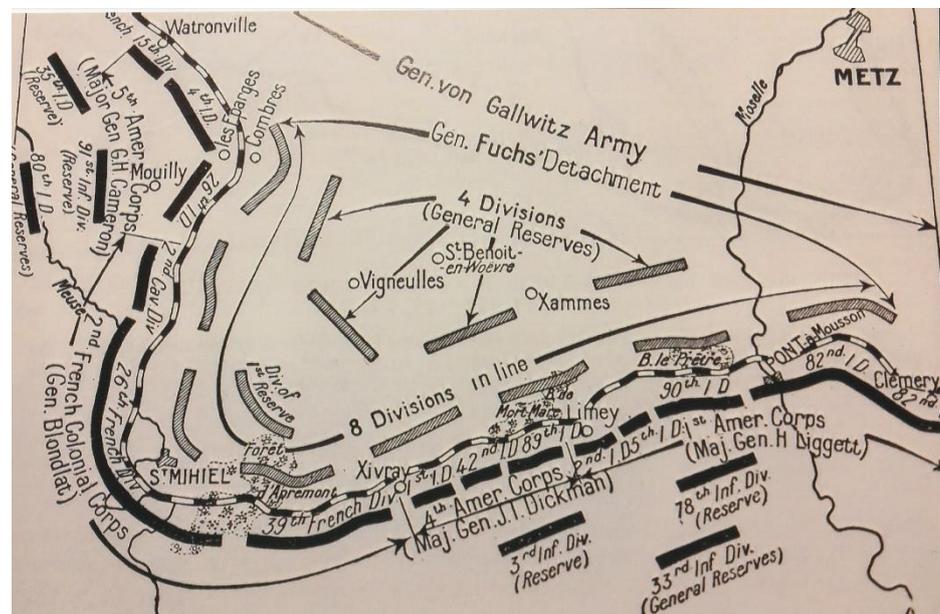


St Mihiel Medal 1918 ~ Reverse

V Corps – 26<sup>th</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions – commanded by Major-General G.H. Cameron (1861-1944) and supported by the French 15<sup>th</sup> Division, were to launch a secondary attack from Mouilly to Watronville, their objectives being the capture of the crests of Eparges and Combres and then the Combres-Vigneulles line. They were to rendezvous in Vigneulles with troops of the main attack. The French 2<sup>nd</sup> Colonial Corps under the command of General Ernest Blondlat (1862-1938) and later General Henri Claudel, (1871-1956) were deployed in the centre of the salient from Xivray to Mouilly in order to protect the flanks of the two American attacks.

In June 1917 General Pershing had issued orders for the creation of a tank force to support the infantry. By the autumn of 1918, two tank battalions, the 344<sup>th</sup> and 345<sup>th</sup> with 144 French Renault FT Light Tanks had completed their training in readiness for the St Mihiel offensive.

They were supported by 275 French Tanks – 216 Renault FT Light Tanks and 59 Schneider CA1 and Saint Chamond Tanks – of the French 1<sup>st</sup> Assault Artillery Brigade. A total of 419 tanks. Over 1400 Allied aircraft which included the newly established French Air Division (Division Aérienne) participated in the offensive. General Pershing had command over 200,000 troops in addition to 190,000 American troops in reserve.



Disposition Of Opposing Forces At The Beginning Of The Offensive

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The Germans had fortified their position with deep trenches, wire entanglements and machine-gun posts. They had incorporated into their defensive network the villages of Vigneulles, Thiaccourt and Hannonville-sous-les-Cotes. The length of the salient front was approximately 65-kilometres and its width along the German lines was 39-kilometres and penetrating the French line to depth of 22-kilometres. Beyond the first line of the German trenches was a second line known as the Schroeter Zone, which formed a second salient approximately 5-kilometres within the first. The line began north-east of Eparges then went southwards across the Meuse Heights descending eastwards behind a deep valley towards Xammes and then north-easterly where it joined the Michel Line. The latter forming part of the defensive system of the Hindenburg Line.

Lieutenant-General George Fuchs (1856-1939) commanded the German forces in the salient and had eight divisions in the line and five in reserve, the whole being a part of the General von Gallwitz (1852-1937) Army Group. The Germans had become aware of the impending offensive by General Pershing. With insufficient manpower to launch a major counterattack they began in early September to withdraw their heavy guns and prepared for a withdrawal from the Salient.

General Pershing had completed his detailed planning and before the Germans completed their total evacuation, he launched his offensive on the 12<sup>th</sup> September at 0500 hours for I and IV Corps, and 0800 hours for V Corps. The weather conditions were not favourable for the attack due to wind and heavy rainfall which made the ground difficult to traverse for both troops and tanks. Following a four-hour bombardment by 3,000 guns on the German positions the Americans advanced supported by tanks. As the American troops moved forward some were specifically tasked to cut through the barbed wire whilst others carried 'bangalore torpedoes.' On reaching the enemy trenches they fought and overcame demoralised enemy troops.

I Corps captured Thiacourt and IV Corps advanced beyond Montsec. At the apex of the Salient the 2<sup>nd</sup> French Colonial Corps on the left, gained their objective. The 2<sup>nd</sup> Cavalry Division captured over two-and-a-half thousand enemy troops with relatively light casualties. V Corps overran the crests of Eparges and Combres, repulsing a counterattack and joined up with IV Corps at Vigneulles. On the 13<sup>th</sup> September, Generals Pershing and Petain (1856-1951) entered St Mihiel claiming victory and the eradication of the Salient. The Allies had captured 16,000 prisoners, 443 guns, stores, and equipment. The Allies sustained 7,000 casualties, the Germans 7,500. Further advances were halted by General Pershing in order that the American troops could be withdrawn for the forthcoming Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

A German report on the attack on St Mihiel recorded: 'The artillery preparation which preceded the attack, was well carried out. The objectives were efficiently bombarded. The American gunners were able to change their targets in the minimum of time and with great accuracy. The liaison between the infantry and the artillery was faultless. Whenever the infantry was stopped by a nest of machine-guns, they immediately fell back, and their artillery promptly shelled the nest of machines-guns. Numerous tanks were ready, but only a few actually used; the masses of infantry alone ensured the victory'.

Roger Coleman

## Sources

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