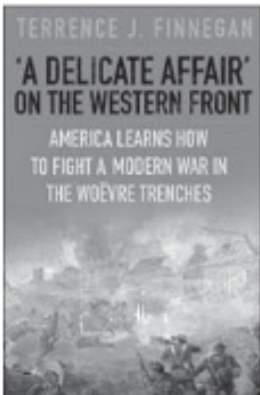


THE US ARMY WAR COLLEGE QUARTERLY PARAMETERS

Contemporary Strategy & Landpower



Gloucestershire, UK: The
History Press, 2015
432 pages
\$35.00

“A Delicate Affair” on the Western Front: America Learns How to Fight a Modern War in the Woëvre Trenches By Terrence J. Finnegan

Reviewed by Greg Pickell, LTC, US Army (Ret.)

A great deal has been written about the entry of the United States into the latter stages of the First World War. All too often, this coverage takes the form of high-level histories or narrative descriptions of well-known actions like Belleau Wood or Meuse-Argonne. These books are sometimes described as coffee table decorations. *“A Delicate Affair”* is not one of those books. This meticulously researched history of one of the very first US combat actions on the Western Front succeeds in getting below the over-done high-level narrative and “into the trenches.” Author Terrence Finnegan helps readers understand the nightmarish complexity and daunting challenges involved in trench warfare in a way seldom matched in other works on the subject. Hauntingly, his detailed assessment also looks in great detail at the German approach to the action. In doing so, he provides discerning readers much of the conceptual blueprint for the German blitzkrieg seen 22 years later.

A Delicate Affair chronicles the experiences of the US 26th “Yankee” Division as it entered the trenches near the destroyed village of Seicheprey in mid-April 1918. The event was significant. Although other American units entered the trenches before them, the 26th Division was to encounter the first planned German attack specifically focused on testing the mettle of the newly arrived American troops.

Not surprisingly, subsequent events were not kind to the 26th, which was soundly beaten during the course of the engagement. Employing the fruits of years of experience and refined tactics, the assaulting German force succeeded in breaking through the lines on a relatively wide front while taking almost 200 prisoners. Indeed, what the Americans later thought was their success in halting the drive and forcing the Germans back was really little more than a planned German withdrawal following a successful large-scale raid.

The narrative of the 26th aside, *A Delicate Affair* is a significant addition to the body of knowledge on World War I for several reasons. First, the book succeeds in conveying the incredible complexity involved in the movement and activity of any large body of troops. Finnegan then multiplies this challenge by discussing in detail the activities of the 26th before and during the battle. In the end, it becomes clear the myriad of

actions required to employ the men of the 26th effectively was beyond the capability of the inexperienced leadership at the time—and perhaps beyond the means of any army faced with the challenges that confronted the newly arriving Americans.

A second important point made by the author lies in the effective working relationship enjoyed by the Americans and their French counterparts. While the French may not have learned the lessons of trench warfare as comprehensively as their German foes, they had in fact made significant strides, and these lessons were passed on to members of the 26th Division. Cooperation between US and French leaders was similarly close, and stands in significant contrast to the experiences of other American formations as well as the senior US leadership. The close working relationship enjoyed by the soldiers and leaders of the Yankee Division and their French hosts likely prevented the Americans' baptism of fire from being even more painful.

Perhaps the most interesting part of *A Delicate Affair* lies in its presentation of the planning and execution of the attack from the German perspective. Of all the major combatants in the First World War, the German army proved to be the most adaptable, and their attack at Seicheprey employed four years of hard-earned experience. Their tactical use of artillery and mortars in synchronization with assaulting infantry provides a model that remains valid even today. More important was the Germans' use of infiltration tactics. This technique, in which attacking units flowed around and past centers of resistance to achieve dislocation of the defense, can be directly linked to the blitzkrieg tactics used by the German Wehrmacht in the opening stages of the Second World War more than two decades later. This approach, often overlooked by historians due to the differences in speed and scale involved in infantry versus mechanized movements, was completely missed by the French during this period.

A Delicate Affair is what a serious history should be—detailed, comprehensive, and capable of providing answers to root-cause questions that rarely see the light of day. The story of the 26th and the aftermath of the battle may not be the most inspirational ever written, but that is not the point. War is truly hell, and this book is ironically and appropriately less than delicate in making that point. Exhaustively documented with an extensive array of maps, tactical diagrams, and technical data, *A Delicate Affair* is essential reading for leaders seeking a real understanding of World War I in the trenches and the US entry into that fateful conflict.