

OVER THE TOP



VOL. 12, NUMBER 4

APRIL 2018

Raid!

Seicheprey, April 1918

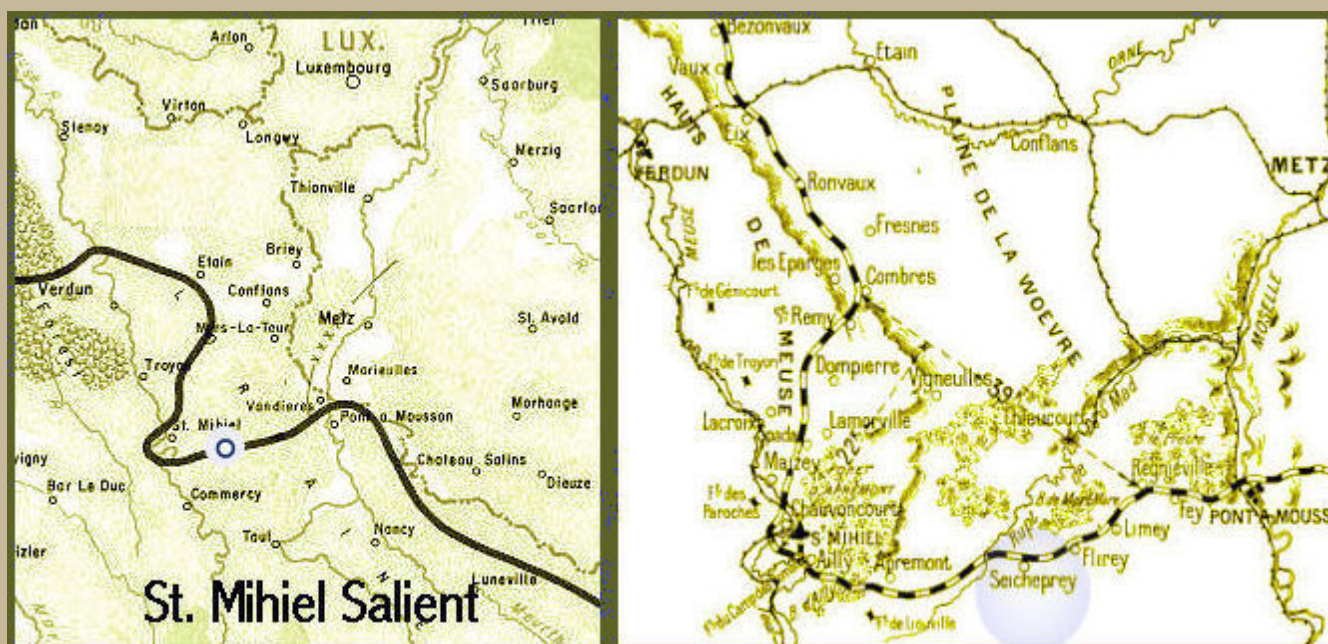
MAGAZINE OF THE WORLD WAR I CENTENNIAL

The German Raid on Seicheprey

Vol. 12, Number 4, April 2018

Organized primarily from National Guard troops from the six New England states, the 26th Division of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was aptly nicknamed the “Yankee Division.” The division was formed on 13 August 1917 and trained at installations throughout New England. It became the first non-regular army division to deploy to France when it landed at St. Nazaire, on 21 September 1917. The Yankee Division would successfully play critical roles in the three largest operations of General Pershing's forces: the Second Battle of the Marne, the St. Mihiel Offensive, and the Meuse-Argonne. Before they fought those battles, however, the Yankee Division was “schooled” by a special detachment of enemy forces that had superior intelligence and communications systems and vastly more experience in the intensive mode of warfare characteristic of the Western Front.

On 20 April 1918, the 26th “Yankee” Division fought a short but intense engagement with German forces at the village of Seicheprey in the Woëvre Plain of the Lorraine region of France. Positioned 12 miles east of St. Mihiel, Seicheprey was in a quiet sector of the front in early 1918, and the Yankee Division had recently arrived in the area. The brunt of the attack fell on the division's 102nd Infantry Regiment, composed mainly of men from Connecticut. In this issue of *Over the Top* a past contributor, Terrence Finnegan, returns to us to tell the story of the action at Seicheprey that day. He describes how the German Army conceived and prepared for the battle and— in parallel—presents us with a deeply researched account of how the men of the 102nd Infantry responded to an intense attack by more experienced and better-trained soldiers. MH



Location of the Seicheprey Raid

The German Raid on Seicheprey

By Terrence J. Finnegan



The Fight at Seicheprey by John Whiting

(Courtesy West Haven, CT, Veteran's Museum/Jos. Brunjes)

1. THE PLAN

A quiet sector seemed the likely place on the Western Front for the newly arriving American forces to become acquainted with the reality of modern warfare. The Woëvre region south of Verdun [identified as the St. Mihiel Salient in many sources] proved ideal for Americans to learn from the French what was necessary. (Map pg. 2) The Americans entering the line at the Woëvre in early 1918 would have the responsibility of defending French ground—ground that was clearly marked by three years of struggle—ground that witnessed all facets of positional war's vicissitudes. Initially, the 1st (Fighting First) Division was assigned with responsibility to independently own the battleground around the village of Seicheprey on the southern edge of the St. Mihiel Salient.

The German commander at the Woëvre, *General der Artillerie* Max von Gallwitz, tasked the subordinate commands to test the mettle of these newly arriving Americans with a well-planned *Erstürmung* (translated as “taking by assault”) trench raid. The assault, code-named *Kirschblüte* (“Cherry Blossom”—implying the fragrance of spring), was also intended to hold in place

as many Allied units that might be considered for reinforcing the north and possibly prompt the Allies to reinforce the southern Woëvre front area as well as consume as much ammunition as possible.

Germany launched its spring campaign farther north with Operation MICHAEL in the Somme sector in March and Operation GEORGETTE in Flanders in early April. The 1st Division—being the most experienced U.S. formation—was transferred to the Somme, near the village of Cantigny. In the first week of April 1918, the 26th “Yankee” Division, a National Guard division with roots back to colonial days, moved to the Woëvre. They not only occupied the five miles of front lines previously covered by the 1st Division, but also assumed responsibility for seven additional miles of front extending west to Apremont.

German planning now focused on the 26th Division for *Kirschblüte*. Seicheprey village was to be occupied and held until the Allies launched a counterattack. The German 78 Reserve Division was tasked to plan and execute the attack. *Generalmajor* Paulus von Stolz-

mann, division commander, supported by his artillery commander, *Generalleutnant* Wilhelm Hoffmann, possessed the extensive experience to orchestrate the operation. The honor for final planning and execution for *Kirschblüte* was given to Major Friedrich Bruns, commander of *Reserve Infanterie* Regiment 259. Bruns had personally fought in most of the arduous Verdun sector battles over the years. Prior to assuming command of *Reserve Infanterie* Regiment 259, he played a key role in the significant counterattack at Cambrai against British tanks. German planning thoroughly addressed combined arms roles and missions involving a regimental force augmented by assault experts and neighboring artillery. The assault was to be executed by 100 elite *Sturmtruppen* (specially selected forces, trained especially in infiltration tactics) from *Sturmbattalion* 14, *Stosstruppen* (specially trained “shock” or assault troops) from *Reserve Infanterie* Regiment 259, and up to three companies from *Reserve Infanterie* Regiment 258.



***Stosstruppen* of R.I.R. 258**

The Germans' primary adversary would be the 102nd Infantry of the 26th Division, comprised of the Connecticut National Guard and led by a well-known and respected visionary of the combat arms of the U.S. Army, Colonel John Henry “Machine Gun” Parker. Colonel Parker as a junior officer had led U.S. Army employment of Gatling guns at San Juan Hill during the Spanish-American War.

2. CONTROLLING THE COMMUNICATION

The Germans had had four years to determine the location of almost every command post, machine gun nest, and artillery battery in the sector. Twenty-four-hour surveillance was attained through the combination of all intelligence sources. The raid at the Woëvre would clearly demonstrate the German advantage of holding the high ground at Montsec, a 120-meter butte six miles west of Seicheprey. In addition to four years of constant observation from the Montsec high ground, the Germans conducted regular aerial photographic reconnaissance by experienced aviators and maintained surveillance and battlefield control with an extensive array of captive balloons. Communication intercepts were accomplished by wiretapping phone lines in the enemy trenches and beyond. Close-in communications were monitored through wireless intercepts.

The Germans also had established an elaborate spy network with Germans dressed in American uniforms that penetrated throughout the sector. Attention to detail provided 78 Reserve Division and adjacent divisions with the location of almost every *poste de commandant* (PC), machine gun, artillery piece, and the stronghold supporting each position. They knew more about the weak and unprotected spots of the battleground than the newly arrived American defenders. It helped them shape the information warfare battleground. They were fully aware of the 26th Division's frontline deployment of three full infantry regiments, with the 104th to the west around Apremont and Bois Brulé, the 102nd at Seicheprey, and the 101st in between.

The Yankee Division during this period was fully supported by the French intelligence service, which also had four years experience in the sector, although without the advantages of a superb observation post like Montsec. Nevertheless, their support helped the 104th Infantry defeat multiple-stand-scale trench raids at Bois Brulé and Apremont. Something much larger and more sophisticated was planned to hit the 102nd Infantry at Seicheprey.

102nd Inf. Chain of Command

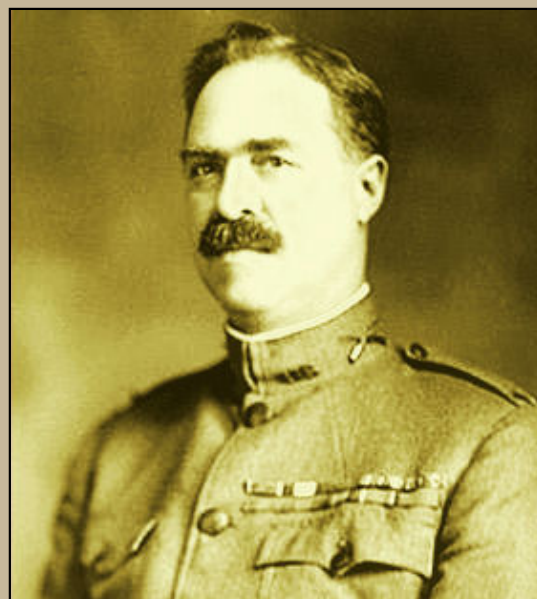
26th Division Commander
MG Clarence Edwards
51st Brigade Commander
BG Peter Traub
102nd Infantry Commander
Col. John Henry Parker

Indeed, ominous information was being picked up by French observers. French 2^e Bureau reported on 8 April that *Sturm*battalion 14 had de-trained at Vigneulles, 13 kilometers behind the line, and the troops had proceeded to Houdicourt to conduct training for a powerful raid. Rear area sightings of more trains arriving suggested logistical supplies for a sustained operation were being delivered to the sector. For several days an “alert” was maintained by the 26th Division, but morning followed morning without any confrontation. Men grew more anxious, experiencing the suspense and exhaustion that came with constant readiness. Something was up—an attack was undoubtedly impending—but neither the French nor Americans on the ground fully anticipated the where, when, and scope of *Kirschblüte* until it hit.

Throughout 19 April the Germans employed harassing fire searching every *boyau* (communication trench) in the 26th Division sector. It was during this time without a doubt they were registering their guns for the extraordinary barrage which was unchained on the southern Woëvre front the next morning.

3. AN ARTILLERY BOMBARDMENT LIKE NO OTHER

On the early morning of 20 April 1918, at precisely 0400 hours (German war time, 0300 hours Allied time), *Generalleutnant* Hoffmann's artillery commenced a major artillery bombardment to herald the opening of the operation. Everyone was jolted by the sound of artillery projectiles screaming through the air. German infantry trying to catch a few minutes of sleep were suddenly wide awake. German howitzers were the first heard, sounding like a deep bass drum. Looking to the north, they saw bombardment fires from Maizerais, Baussant, Euvezin, and Essey. The “symphony” now included light field guns—firing high-angle projectiles which sounded like an express train on smooth rails. Annihilating artillery fire now covered the entire American sector up to the rear echelon. The intensity of the German bombardment was so great that windows rattled in Metz, Trier, Mainz, and Koblenz. “All hell was let loose!” was one American's recollection. An artillery officer stationed beyond the Beaumont ridge called it a murderous barrage. A third recalled, “The Boche batteries now began to sweep the rear areas as well as the front line positions, with a deadly fire. Only a moment after signal rockets had sent out their warning, our batteries opened up and the Battle of Seicheprey was on in full blast. Thousands of gas shells were falling all around the place and the air was poisoned from the deadly odor.” French veterans called this “Little Verdun” for what the 102nd experienced.

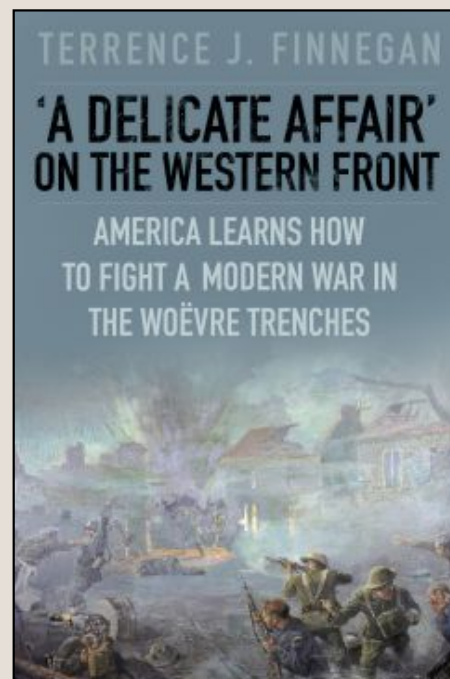


Colonel John Parker

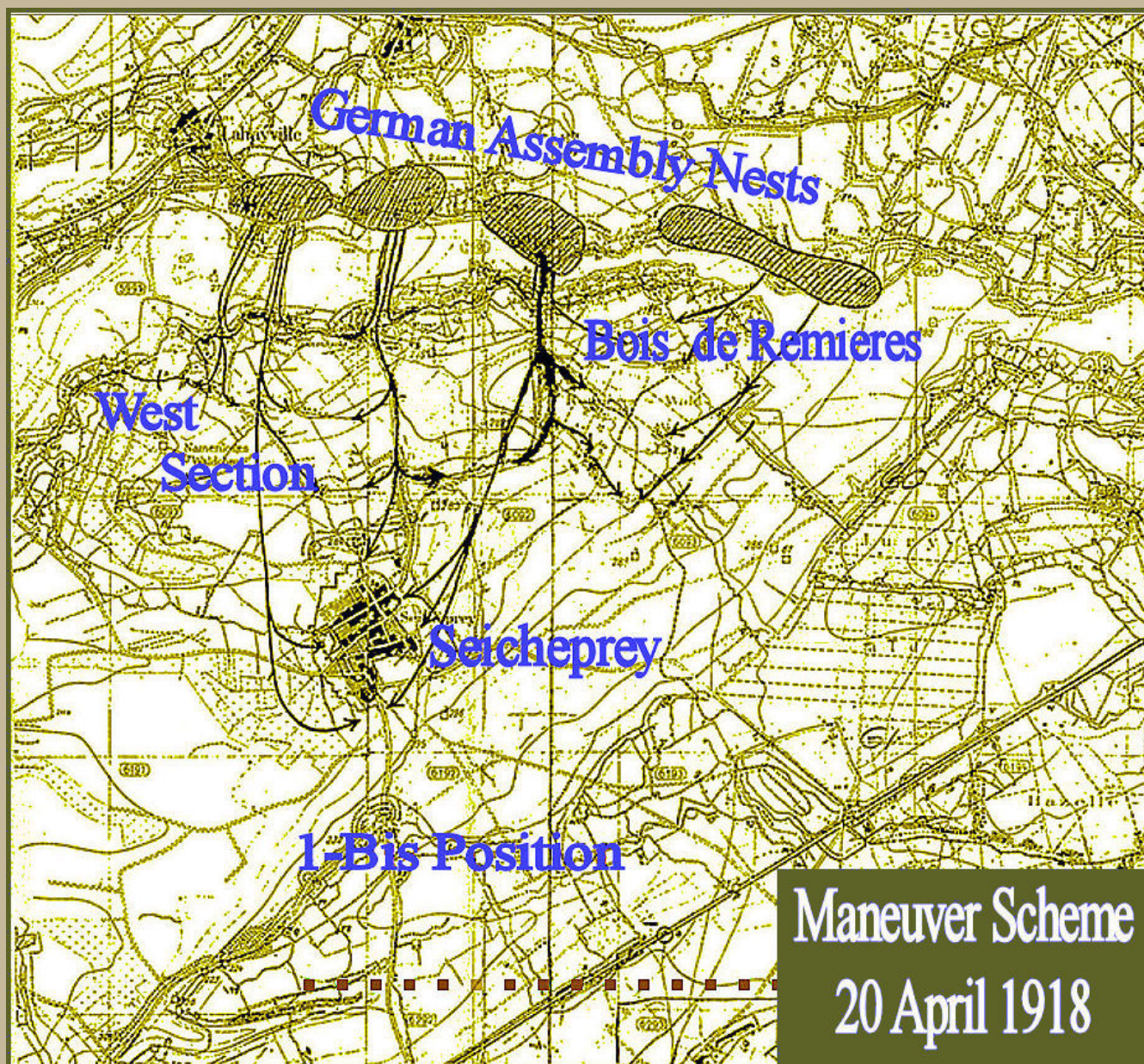
Hoffmann's close-range artillery conducted the initial bombardment and switched to a rolling bombardment ahead of the infantry advance. The long-range artillery group kept reinforcements to support the Americans at the front at bay. As destructive fire shaped the battle, *Sturmtruppen* and *Stosstruppen* moved into their jump-off positions. (Map pg. 6) Commencing at 0430, specially detailed batteries began firing and continued until the beginning of the infantry attack.

This article is based on material presented in the author's '*A Delicate Affair*' on the Western Front. To order the full work, visit

<https://www.terrencefinnegan.com/books>



The price for an inscribed copy is \$20.00 dollars plus postage. Kindle edition also available.



4. A SPRINT TO THE OBJECTIVES

Conditions were perfect for an assault. The night frost had hardened No-Man's-Land and the attack route around Seicheprey. A dense fog developed toward daybreak and spread over the Allied sector, paralyzing all observation capability for the Americans on the front line, particularly the outposts. The Germans reported that it was impossible to see 100 paces from the village—effectively screening the attack as well as obscuring vital American liaison via rocket signals. *Kirschblüte's* assault commenced at 0430 with a simultaneous *Minenwerfer* (trench mortar) and artillery bombardment combined, deluging the American front lines. *Minenwerfer* fired into the center of Seicheprey for 40 straight minutes. Under this cover, the raiding party rushed forward in well-practiced formations. *Pioniere* (engineers) blew gaps in the American wire using *Ladungen* (elongated charges) filled with explosives. After passing the Americans'

wire, the offensive assault proceeded in small detachments to the portions of the enemy's trenches where it was expected that prisoners, machine guns, or information could be captured. The first-wave strike force comprised handpicked grenadiers accompanied by experienced ammunition carriers with *Handgranaten* (grenades), wire cutters, flares and signal equipment. The second wave was 30 meters behind the first wave. Machine guns were placed between the two waves.

Facing what—in later wars—would be described as a "blitzkrieg-like" strike were Connecticut National Guard soldiers with barely two months of combat experience, recently gained in the trenches at Chemin-des-Dames. Colonel Parker later recalled that his troops were deployed in compliance with French orders to establish "Centers of Resistance" and to "FIGHT TO THE DEATH IN PLACE." The most stirring description was "sacrifice positions."

For Parker at his PC on the Beaumont Ridge overlooking Seicheprey from the south, the orders were black and white—simply stated: “Send no reinforcements forward without permission. Fight it out on your main line of resistance, the 1-Bis [second line of defense a quarter mile north of Beaumont] position. (Map pg. 6) These orders came from the French Corps Commander under whom General Edwards was serving, and they were sound orders.” Parker concluded that “one thing Americans never understood about the French was the manner in which they issued a complicated battle order insisting that a certain position must be held “to the last man”. . . and then made provision in orders for a retirement to a second line of defense!”

Major George Rau commanded the 102nd Infantry's first battalion defending both Seicheprey and *Bois de Remieres* to the east. (Map pg. 6) *Kirschblüte* decapitated Rau's command of forces in the village and neighboring forest. Seicheprey's telephone lines were destroyed with the first blast of shells. Eight minutes after the bombardment commenced, wire communications from the 102nd Infantry headquarters at Beaumont were cut. Colonel Parker recorded, “Notes made at the time indicate the extraordinary accuracy [with] which the Germans cut all our telephone wires.” In many places in the sector, wires were being destroyed as fast as telephone men could repair them.

As the bombardment unfolded, Colonel Parker noted, “The artillery wire was the only one working.” American artillery fired back, but the targeting lacked direction. The attacking soldiers crossed without any fire to slow down the strike. The Seicheprey roads from the northeast and northwest were soon filled with German troops, culminating in the first strike converging at the Seicheprey church.

Kirschblüte's first and second waves advanced upon the American dugout north of the Sibille Trench that connected the Seicheprey section with *Bois de Remieres*, but bypassed it, leaving the third wave to contend with any resistance. Each unit had their own mission and the independence to execute any plan to overcome the Americans. For the next one-and-a-half hours the Germans and Americans engaged in a desperate struggle among the village ruins. As envisioned by Major Bruns, Major Rau's forces were to be fixed in place, surrounded by *Sturmtruppen* and *Stosstruppen* methodically annihilating any opposition as they proceeded from dugout to dugout. Bruns's assault force also served as a lethal block for any Americans attempting to flee out of Seicheprey toward Beaumont as well as a deterrent against any Allied counterattack. German troops demonstrated the ability to think independently in a fast battle maneuver. After the first wave breached the initial defenses, the entire fight at Seicheprey became hand to hand.



A Desolated Seicheprey After the Raid

5. A SOLDIER'S BATTLE IN SEICHEPREY VILLAGE

The fighting ability of the individual soldiers determined what followed at Seicheprey on 20 April 1918. It was a soldier's battle. Liaison was all shot to pieces, so it was simply a matter of every man for himself. The men seized their weapons and fought hand to hand. Isolated machine gun crews were completely surrounded, receiving fire from all quarters. Major Bruns assigned Battalion Grumbrecht the honor of directly assaulting Seicheprey, without stopping, and taking possession of the village. It helped accelerate the operation. His combined *Sturm*battalion and *Stosstruppen* force was to avoid the outlying trenches and annihilate the resistance from within.



American Machine Gun Position

At 0500, ten minutes after commencing the attack, *Leutnant* von Ponickau's engineer squad made it to the north side of Seicheprey. As they proceeded directly south toward Seicheprey the Germans ran into fierce resistance at the village's northern cemetery. Major Rau had set up a Chauchat automatic rifle that fired on the advancing soldiers. *Stosstruppen*—thinking the Americans now occupied a position in rear of a broken-down wall of the church—started to shoot at it with a machine gun. *Sturmtruppen* and *Stosstruppen* then rushed both sides of the church and took out the Chauchat. Other companies continued south toward their rendezvous point just east of the village. At the southern end of the encirclement of Seicheprey, *Leutnant* Thomas's engineers crept up and encircled an

American machine gun nest and destroyed it with *Handgranaten*. Soon the air resounded with the Germans shouting “Hurrah!” Their maneuver resulted in capturing five wounded Americans as well as the machine gun. Their next move was to turn north from this high-water mark of the advance and annihilate any resistance left in Seicheprey.

In a letter home that was published after the war, Major Rau recalled what went through his mind as *Stosstruppen* and *Sturmtruppen* advanced. “I had only two companies on the line, attacked by Prussian stormtroops and two battalions of reserve infantry. Every man stuck to his post. Our mission was to hold the ground...We held. They came clear through the town, blew up my first aid station, burned all my kitchen. They captured my doctor and sanitary men the first thing.” Lieutenant Burke, medical officer, and all but one of the enlisted personnel in the station were captured. They were busy inside the building tending to casualties when the *Stosstruppen* entered. The Americans figured that the Germans mistook the aid station as Rau's battalion command post. The two were the largest remaining structures in the village and were within close proximity on the same street.

The elite *Sturmtruppen* element reinforced the primary *Stosstruppen* advance in the center thrust on the village and the sweep of the forest. Both were intended to capture Americans fleeing out of Seicheprey toward the Beaumont Ridge where Colonel Parker's PC operated. As Major Bruns had foreseen, Major Rau's American forces were to become fixed in place, surrounded by German soldiers methodically annihilating any opposition as they proceeded from dugout to dugout.

Leutnant von Ponickau's engineers proceeded to attack the dugouts in the village. Americans in one dugout offered stubborn resistance and refused to come out. *Handgranaten* were thrown, followed by a German engineer shouting to the Americans to surrender. They refused and in the process wounded the engineer with gunfire and hand grenades. *Leutnant* von Ponickau responded by ordering the American dugouts be destroyed using two charges of 30 pounds each. That proved deadly for the dugout was blown apart. An American ammunition dump was discovered containing hand grenades and rifle cartridges. The German engineers set off charges that caused a massive blast followed by cartridges, trench mortar shells, rockets, and other combustibles exploding in every direction.



Sibille Trench, Key Link Between the Village and Bois de Remieres

Leutnant von Ponickau's engineers then proceeded to their final objective—attacking Major Rau's PC. A Company D junior officer, Lieutenant Daniel Strickland, remembered the screams and screeches that made the blood run cold coming from the throats of “half drunken Germans as they hurled their *Handgranaten* at every American that appeared.” The fighting was incredibly fierce, surprising the battle veteran *Stosstruppen* —rifles used as clubs, pickaxes, trench tools, knives; everything came into play. One kitchen was afire where the *Stosstruppen* had shot *Flammenwerfer* streams of liquid fire. The *Stosstruppen* and engineers on the east side of the village entered the building containing Company D's kitchen. Carl Jacobs, Company D's mess sergeant, and his kitchen police fought off *Flammenwerfer* operators with cleavers and butcher knives. Despite being surrounded and called to surrender, Company D's kitchen force fought until all members were killed or wounded. One German was split through the head to the shoulders by a cleaver blow—testifying to the intensity of the struggle.

When the 1st Division left Seicheprey three weeks prior, disciplinary prisoners from the 18th Infantry were left in Seicheprey for the newly arrived 102nd Infantry to control. The 20 prisoners spent the time doing manual labor around the village. When the battle broke, the prisoners, still clad in blue utility overalls worn by U.S. Army prisoners, were released from the makeshift prison. For the next hour, most fought hand to hand against the invading *Stosstruppen* within the broken houses and against the crumbled stone walls.

Some quickly surrendered to the Germans. The prisoners hurled chunks of stone and mortar as well as swinging picks and shovels as lethal weapons.

One of Major Rau's junior officers, Lieutenant Ingersoll, went outside the PC and saw soldiers coming from all points within the village that were able to escape the *Stosstruppen* attack. Now Major Rau had a contingent of cooks, signal men, runners, and others to set up his defensive perimeter. Sergeant Major Church, Major Rau's senior enlisted soldier at the PC, quickly set up a line of defense behind sandbags around the entrance and within the primary *boyau* that led toward to the 102nd bunker on the Beaumont ridge. Sergeant Major Church organized stragglers rushing in and armed them with available ammunition and grenades from the ammunition dump. The Americans heard more shooting and saw a soldier running hard from the village center shouting out that the Boche were near. Major Rau and his collective force saw more Americans running toward them followed by about 20 *Stosstruppen* in hasty pursuit. Rau shouted to the men to jump into the trench running along the Seicheprey *boyau* while the men behind the sandbag pile fired away at the enemy. The *Stosstruppen* shot back. For an hour and a half both sides exchanged fire. Major Rau determined it was time to fight within the village and proceeded to conduct his own personal reconnaissance with a handful of soldiers and advanced back into the Seicheprey ruins. Everyone kept up as heavy rifle fire as possible and *Stosstruppen* withdrew toward

6. A SOLDIER'S BATTLE IN BOIS DE REMIERES



Major George Rau

Sacrifice positions were also manned in *Bois de Remieres* and the adjoining Sibille Trench. "Our orders were 'no retreat' and we were determined to stay until the last man had been annihilated." The initial shock of the assault and the resultant destruction created an impossible combat environment for maintaining unit integrity. Captain George Freeland, Major Rau's Company D commander, was in the primary dugout in Sibille Trench. The battle in Sibille Trench witnessed an entire squad of Americans under the command of Captain Freeland fighting until every man was killed, wounded, or overpowered. Freeland was wounded by a *Handgranaten* blast but fought until he was overwhelmed and captured. Private Alvin Lugg—surrounded yet undaunted—broke through the *Stosstruppen* using hand grenades and his bayonet. Sergeant George Nelson fired away with his revolver at a large group of *Stosstruppen* rushing him and was overwhelmed. Corporal James Moody and his Chau-chat team shot many Germans as they came forward. "We sure piled them up proper, believe me."

Perhaps the most telling moment in *Bois de Remieres* that day was the heroic effort of Captain Arthur Locke. Locke's Company M had just departed for Ansauville earlier that night, but he remained in *Bois de Remieres* to orient Captain Alfred Griswold's Company C to the strongpoints maintained within the forest. When the bombardment commenced, Locke took cover with Company C in a dugout on the eastern end of Sibille

Trench, which bordered on *Bois de Remieres*. As the *Stosstruppen* advanced toward Locke's position, Captain Locke grabbed a Springfield rifle and proceeded to fire clip after clip into their ranks. The *Stosstruppen* shouted out to Locke to surrender. He refused and continued to fire. As Locke was reloading the fourth clip into the rifle, the *Stosstruppen* rushed in and riddled him with machine gun bullets.

Sturmtruppen and *Stosstruppen* then advanced on the PC serving Captain Griswold's Company C in the southern *Bois de Remieres*. The destruction of American strongpoints meant survivors who escaped maneuvered on their own to other areas and kept up the fight. It was a traumatic moment with visibility still poor due to fog and smoke. The Germans threw *Handgranaten* at every step, as machine guns from both sides were roaring. Americans gauged the volume of fire by the way the twigs were snapping off right and left. At Captain Griswold's PC, several attacks were fought off with the soldiers that assembled. As the Germans attacked, Griswold fired away, dropping two Germans. He killed three more with a Mills hand grenade. Captain Griswold was subsequently captured and led by two guards through the forest toward No-Man's-Land. While en route, one of the guards fell into a shell hole. Griswold quickly body blocked the other and scrambled south—managing to make it through two bombardments but suffering a wound from a splinter to his shoulder. A critical example of the ongoing chaos among the Americans due to German decapitation of effective communications ensued. Major Rau was first learning that his Company C was in the fight of their life in *Bois de Remieres* when a shell-shocked Captain Griswold entered his PC.

As it was, the close combat between the two enemies in the *Bois de Remieres* was almost totally hand to hand. Two Company C men demonstrated the courage of the moment in the forest. Corporal James Thorley was wounded early on in the battle but continued fighting while urging his men to defend their positions. When the Germans attacked—with fog so thick to the ground that the defending Americans couldn't see where the threat lay—Thornley climbed to a lookout post on a high tree behind the PC. He was able to see *Sturmtruppen* advancing. The wounded Thornley then commenced directing his troops to fire on the enemy positions. Another hero, Private Edward Dion, was completely surrounded by *Stosstruppen* but fought them off with grenades and rifle fire. At a critical moment, Dion carried a wounded comrade through the bombardment to a first aid station. He returned immediately to his post and continued the fight.

7. THE WESTERN PENETRATION

Seicheprey's initial battleground of 1914 was to the west of the primary *Kirschblüte* assault. These trench works were almost totally dilapidated by 1918, but Americans held the position here as best they could. (See map pg. 6) Major Bruns envisioned a third thrust in this area under the command of *Hauptmann* Tolle from the 258 *Reserve Infanterie* regiment. The Germans advanced south through two small wooded areas and crossed into American lines behind *Minenwerfer* bombs impacting just 50 meters ahead of their advance. *Stosstruppen* enveloped an American stronghold at this point of the attack and managed to capture six men. *Vizefeldwebel* (Sergeant 1st Class) Paul Ettighoffer recounted the battle, describing Americans wearing flat steel helmets on their angular beardless faces. He was struck by the quality of the uniforms the Americans were wearing—to include “beautiful long rubber waders,” a luxury not seen in trenches before. It was the best apparel for the mud and sludge of Seicheprey.

As the Germans advanced farther south through knee-deep mud, they discovered a large bounty of booty—cans of food, blankets, and other accessories. Suddenly Ettighoffer and his fellow *Stosstruppen* heard two machine guns firing. The squad leader, *Offizierstellvertreter* (warrant officer) Kientz, leaped into the closest nest shouting, “Hands up, you bloody fools!” Kientz managed to grab the officer in charge,

Lieutenant Robert McDowell, 102nd Machine Gun Battalion, and simultaneously put his *Doch* (bayonet) to McDowell's throat.

The remaining Americans in the nest hesitated and started to raise their hands in surrender. When another machine gun started to fire in the Germans' direction, Kientz immediately responded by throwing a *Handgranaten* that killed the crew. Then the air became a bombardment of American grenades and German *Handgranaten* exploding around the combatants, creating geysers of mud and sludge and making both enemies unrecognizable. A few *Stosstruppen* took charge of Lieutenant McDowell and his remaining men and proceeded back to the German lines. The rest moved on until they came to another large shelter. A *Stosstruppen* rushed the shelter and shoved two *Handgranaten* into the riser, creating a muffled explosion. *Offizierstellvertreter* Kientz went toward the dugout entrance and ordered the Americans to come out. They responded with pistol shots. Kientz's men proceeded to throw *Handgranaten* into the dugout. One American near the top of the stairs caught the *Handgranaten* and threw them back. A *Stosstruppen* shot back and killed him. The rest of the dugout surrendered and came out. Ettighoffer noticed that some of the Americans wore pistols loosely on their belts like cowboys. Others came out with their hands in their pockets—giving Ettighoffer the impression of small schoolboys about ready to be punished.



***Stosstruppen* of R.I.R. 259 After the Raid**
Note Soldier on Right Wearing a Doughboy's Helmet with Captured Klaxon



Americans Captured in the Raid Assembled for a Propaganda Photograph

Offizierstellvertreter Kientz then shouted at the assembled prisoners to put their hands up high. The Yanks responded hesitatingly. Suddenly an American burst out of the shelter and ran south to the nearest American line. The startled Germans raised their weapons to fire. The remaining captive Americans started angrily shouting at the Germans—then became exuberant, cheering on their counterpart in the run of his life. “Run, Bill!” Bill made it to the next trench and dove in. The Americans erupted into applause —“Hurrah for Bill!” *Offizierstellvertreter* Kientz's *Stosstruppen* witnessed what they thought was the Americans' take on this horrific experience—war is a sport. The battle-hardened Germans, on the other hand, saw themselves as aging soldiers long spent with war and time at the front. The newly arriving Americans expressed youthful vigour, wanting to continue on in this “game.” With their advance completed, Kientz's squad now prepared for defense against a possible counterattack.

8. BUGLE CALL

Suddenly, at 0620 hours, an hour and twenty minutes after the assault commenced, a bugle call filled the air, signaling to the *Sturmtruppen*, *Stosstruppen*, and *Pioniere* to commence the withdrawal within 20 minutes. After the bugle call, *Kirschblüte* kept up the artillery bombardment keeping American and French reinforcements at bay. As the bugle notes of “retire” rang through the area, the Americans could see their enemy withdrawing along with American prisoners carrying wounded. The struggle at Seicheprey lasted only 40 minutes more with the German soldiers withdrawing according to plan.

The bugle call was a welcome respite for many of the German veterans fighting in Seicheprey that morning. Many were somewhat shocked at the tenacity of the enemy they were experiencing in this fight. Every dugout appeared to be a last stand. It seemed like every American refused to come out of their dugouts and fiercely defended their entrance. Throughout the battle in Seicheprey, it was individual combat—man against man. The experience that morning planted an important seed in the thinking of all Germans—desperate resistance of the Americans was due to the fact that they have been told that the Germans kill prisoners. The message that resonated in Berlin was American combat groups, although badly hit by artillery fire, fought until overcome. For the remainder of the day, the Americans were checked in place. Only when nightfall came did the Americans get a clear idea of what had transpired in all sectors.

9. PREPARING FOR A COUNTERATTACK

When the Germans returned to the safety of their own lines after executing *Kirschblüte*, *Minenwerfer* and machine guns were assigned to positions to produce a protective bombardment to ward off whatever American counterattack was generated. None was to follow, though. Thanks to the successful decapitation of American communication networks throughout *Kirschblüte*, knowledge of German location and intentions was at an absolute minimum.

Brigadier General Peter Traub, 51st Brigade Commander, clearly was exasperated about the lack of clear information about the location of the enemy:

"The latest I had was that our troops were holding Seicheprey and fighting there behind stone walls and ruined buildings."



**Memorial Fountain at Seicheprey
Contributed by State of Connecticut
Sole Reminder of the Big Raid**

As evening approached, 51st Brigade contacted the 102nd Infantry's PC with, "Observer at Beaumont has just reported that a number of Germans are in the open east of Richecourt."

Fifteen minutes later, 51st Brigade passed on to Major General Edwards's PC at Boucq an update from 102nd Infantry. "Parker just reports a large concentration of Boches along the Richecourt–Lahayville–St. Baussant and Bois de la Sonnard. Reports the situation is serious because the 1-Bis line position is so thinly held. Systematically shelling 1-Bis position. About a Regiment."

While this was going on, the report added "a Boche observation plane giving lots of trouble." Aviation was key at this time, and the Americans did not have an advantage due to the weather and the Germans' Montsec observation post. A lasting memory for the 102nd's Lieutenant Dan Strickland was looking up at daybreak and seeing the first rays of light from a dissipating fog with a black *Artillerie-Flieger* (an artillery observation aircraft) overhead almost touching the Seicheprey housetops, signaling to German artillery the location of each little group of American defenders left in Seicheprey. A Company C man fighting in *Bois de Remieres* recalled, "It seemed that we were not getting any support from our artillery whatever and no Allied plane to give battle to the Hun plane, which kept signaling our whereabouts."

American aviation was called on throughout the day to provide American commanders with an understanding of where the Germans were. First Lieutenant Walter "Barney" Barneby, 1st Aero Squadron, and the newly arrived Marine aviator Lieutenant Kenneth Culbert, flew their only sortie that day over German first and second lines at 1800 feet. The weather was miserable—poor visibility combined with a hailstorm battered their SPAD XI. Lieutenant Barneby and Lieutenant Culbert flew three times over the area but did not confirm any concentration or movement of troops. The forty-minute mission took them directly to Richecourt where they turned east toward Flirey and entered the airspace over the battlefield. Barneby and Culbert proceeded to give the Germans a dose of their own medicine firing approximately 100 rounds into the 78 Reserve Division first and second line trenches. The division mentioned Barneby's and Culbert's sortie in its official report on the battle, mentioning the enemy aviators flying over the trenches at a low altitude firing machine guns. This "proved very annoying." Both aviators were awarded the *Croix de guerre* for operating under heavy fire and adverse weather conditions. Lieutenant Culbert became the first decorated U.S. Marine aviator in the history of the Corps.

Casualties at Seicheprey

On 21 April, 78. R. D. forwarded a casualty report to higher headquarters. The summary covered all German combatants: 82 men were killed and missing. 263 were wounded. 16 men suffered other injuries. Their casualty total came to 361. On the American side, an accounting of losses listed 58 killed, 145 wounded, and 231 missing, for a total of 434 U.S. casualties.

The 26th Division commander, Major General Edwards, and Brigadier General Traub directly suffered some of the most effective enemy control of information at a vital moment. The highest compliment to the Germans' accomplished planning came from Colonel Parker's postwar assessment. "During the progress of the fight a German actually called General Traub, the Brigade Commander, on his own phone, taunted him, told him things that convinced Traub it really was a German and one of the enemy speaking to him...So, also, did they penetrate into all the secrets of the 26th Division. It was excellent work." Ironically, the Germans defeated their perfect intelligence against the 26th Division when the operators took the occasion to harass the general officers with comments on "learning the game" by brazenly announcing their identity to the astonished generals and offered some

.13. facetious comment!



Stained Glass Window Commemorating the Raid, Hamden, CT, Memorial Town Hall

10. ETERNAL SYMBOLISM OF THE RAID

The American correspondent Heywood Broun of the *New York Tribune* in his postwar recollection provided a succinct summary of the affair. "Seicheprey, the first big American battle, had every element of the World War in little [miniature]. Before the loss of the village . . . the troops defending it had fought from ambush and in the open, had fought with gas and liquid fire, with grenades, rifles, and machine guns. In the inferno the new troops were giving proof of valor that was to come out later and be scattered broadcast, as a measure of what America would bring. In and out of the streets of Seicheprey, in its little public square, from the yards of its houses, hundreds of American soldiers were fighting for their lives. France lay behind them, trusting to be saved."

A tribute by German combatants to their enemy at Seicheprey came from members of the elite *Sturm-battalion 14 Grenadier*. Ratey informed his superiors, "On the defensive, the American is an opponent who must in no way be underestimated. He does not defend himself in trenches, but in groups and individu-

ally in machine gun nests, in nests of riflemen and in dugouts. In dugouts he defends himself to the last moment. For instance, into a small dugout two *Handgranaten* were thrown, machine guns and rifles were fired into it, and still the men did not come out. They surrendered only after the dugout was fired. In spite of the violent artillery fire, a man with a machine gun remained in his nest in a tree. He did not surrender, but had to be shot down. Prisoners had to be handled with great caution. It happened repeatedly that they escaped in an unguarded moment, or that they tried to free themselves by force. During one such escape attempt a German officer was shot down by an American. Another American, completely surrounded, still tried to defend himself. He had to be knocked down. The American makes frequent use of his trench knife."

Unteroffizier Hummel, Grenadier Karasiewicz, and Grenadier Baier collectively assessed, "American resistance in front of the main line of resistance, in the main line of resistance and in the supporting positions in front of the village of Seicheprey, was stubborn. Every man had to be overpowered individually. The

light machine guns of the Americans fired up to the last moment. Since the troops occupying the village did not want to come out of their dugouts but defended the entrances, individual combats, man against man, took place.” *Oberst Freiherr von Ledebur*, chief of staff to *Generalleutnant Fuchs's Armeeabteilung C*, generated the final report for *General der Artillerie von Gallwitz* and senior commands. He consolidated the reports and made it clear that what *Kirschblüte* demonstrated was future battles with Americans were not to be taken lightly. His final words served as an admonition for future conflict. It was indicative of the report that it was concluded in all capital letters: NOT ONE AMERICAN SURRENDERED WITHOUT A FIGHT.

What Seicheprey taught the U.S. Army was that the total modern combat environment put everyone within range at serious risk. All combatants came to terms with the incessant destruction provided by never ending artillery, machine guns, and the relentless sniper. The appalling volume of shellfire at the front defined kinetic kill at its worse. What made the Seicheprey affair sobering was that the French practice of sacrifice positions—a procedure imposed on American military thinking by the French tactical command—was adhered to within the Woëvre. What worked was the demonstrated tenacity of the individual American showing incredible courage and in many cases fighting to the death. This was what resonated with the German commanders. They now faced a fresh enemy with purpose.

What problems the Americans experienced did not include the quality of their individual soldiers. It was liaison. Controlling the battle became the lesson that the Americans struggled with for their entire time on the Western Front, culminating in the final major offensive of Meuse-Argonne. Liaison proved the hardest objective for Americans to successfully master—affecting decision-making based on an accurate and definitive knowledge of where your men were and what they were doing.

Seicheprey remains an unknown event for most present-day World War I students. Ironically, it became well known throughout the American Expeditionary Force that fought the war. Up until the St. Mihiel offensive in September, Seicheprey continued to be an American battleground. For the Germans, *Kirschblüte* generated hope that they could fight the newly arriving Americans and defeat them with sound tactics and strategy. In the context of war's evolution in the 20th century, examining the Seicheprey Raid in detail has unearthed two important military advances that

were clearly witnessed in the village and adjoining forest. The German adversary—armed with four years of battle-hardened experience—executed a modern-day engagement of tremendous significance. The extremely well-planned combined arms operation with fast-moving infantry, massive firepower of *Minenwerfer* and artillery, complemented by aviation, which provided decisive targeting on enemy positions as well as extensive harassment of the enemy from above, gave purpose to modern tactics of 20th-century warfare. These tactics would culminate on the battlefields of Poland, Belgium, and France with the fast battle operations of *BLITZKRIEG*.

Equally significant was the Germans' attention to detail in neutralizing and decapitating their enemy's ability to plan and execute an operation. Employed were all avenues of modern-day intelligence, including aerial reconnaissance, wiretapping, espionage, and infiltration as well as the annihilation of critical communication lines by decisive artillery strikes and sabotage. Seicheprey was more than a raid across No-Man's-Land. It was a definitive example of an INFORMATION WAR that governs the way nations struggle in a 21st-century battlefield environment.

Remembering a Veteran of Seicheprey



PFC Cyril Finnegan

The author's grandfather, PFC Cyril Finnegan, served in the battle at Seicheprey. He was a medic assigned to the field hospital of 102nd Infantry on 20 April 1918. This issue of ***Over the Top*** is dedicated to his memory.