

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

A FEW MEN IN THE GREAT WAR: THE EXPERIENCES OF THE  
SOLDIERS OF COMPANY D (BRISTOL), 1ST CONNECTICUT  
NATIONAL GUARD REGIMENT, MARCH 1917-APRIL 1918

HISTORY 599 (THESIS)

APRIL 1990

FRANCIS M. COAN

## CHAPTER FOUR

## SEICHEPREY

On March 31 the 102nd Regiment arrived at the rear of the Toul Sector. At nightfall the regiment moved up to the front lines by platoon. Rainy weather and a German bombardment of gas and high-explosive shells made the march an unpleasant one. Worse, many units had trouble finding the positions they had been assigned to occupy. Despite the difficulties, by daybreak on April 1 the entire regiment was in position.<sup>1</sup>

The Toul Sector was a region of rolling hills interspersed with woods and ruined villages. The low ground between hills, crisscrossed by small streams, was marshy. No Man's Land--that stretch of open ground which separated the opposing armies--was a plain ranging in width from about one-third to one mile. The German lines occupied higher ground that commanded the Allied positions. Almost in the center of the German lines stood Mont Sec (Dry Mountain), an isolated, bare, steep-sided height which loomed over the surrounding terrain and provided the Germans with an exceptional observation post. Despite constant raids and artillery duels, the lines in the Toul Sector had remained stationary since 1914.<sup>2</sup>

Company D was initially positioned in and around Seicheprey, a ruined village located about one thousand yards north of the main American defenses. The Bristolites found the defensive works

in their sector weak. Only a single road and one trench connected Seicheprey to the American rear areas. A ravine approached the village from the northeast, providing cover for German patrols and raiding parties. Due to the marshy ground, the trenches were partially collapsed and filled with mud and water. A few cellars had been converted into bombproofs, but most of the dugouts were vulnerable to shellfire. On the positive side, the barbed-wire entanglements were generally in good condition, and, except for where the ravine lay, fields of fire were excellent.<sup>3</sup>

Company D performed a variety of tasks while posted at Seicheprey. Almost every night a patrol slipped into No Man's Land to gather intelligence and intercept German interlopers. Much to the chagrin of Sergeant Thompson, who hoped to "get" himself a German, the enemy was rarely encountered. On occasion the Americans approached so near the enemy lines they could hear German soldiers talking and singing. When not patrolling, the Bristolites worked to repair and improve their defensive works. Rations were cooked in the battalion kitchens at Seicheprey and delivered nightly to the troops. Rumors of German spies in American uniforms put the men on edge, although the Americans apparently never apprehended a single enemy agent. The weather remained damp and rainy, except for the odd clear day. The morale of the company was generally high. Private Elmer Linden wrote: "We're having the time of our lives living underground with the rats." Sergeant Thompson reported the soldiers were well, and "doing their bit every minute." Corporal Clifford Lawrence admitted he was homesick, but he was optimistic the Lord would protect him from harm and ensure the defeat of Germany.<sup>4</sup>

The Americans found the German artillery far more active in the Toul Sector than it had been at the Chemin des Dames. Heavy bombardments of high-explosive and gas shells struck various parts of the sector like "a volley of thunderbolts" at all hours of the day and night. The most inconspicuous targets, such as the smoke rising from a cooking fire, was immediately fired upon by the German gunners. In forward positions German machine-gun and sniper fire added to the danger. One historian noted: "The Chemin des Dames had scarcely prepared the troops for this activity." Corporal Skelsky admitted: "It sure is hell at times with the artillery banging away all day long and night the same way." The Bristol troops quickly learned to keep under cover at all times, and within a couple of weeks the men grew accustomed to the German "thunderbolt" bombardments. As always, the shelling proved more frightening than lethal, and not a single Bristolite was killed or wounded during the first half of April.<sup>5</sup>

The Germans constantly probed the defenses of the 26th Division. Small raids, each preceded by a heavy barrage, were launched in the pre-dawn hours of April 6, 7, and 8. On each occasion the Germans were repulsed with little American loss. None of the raids involved Company D. On April 10 the Germans staged their most ambitious attack to date, assaulting the American 104th Regiment around the Bois Brule (Burning Wood), located on the extreme left flank of the Toul Sector. French troops farther to the west were also attacked. The attack, shielded by an early morning mist, was spearheaded by a battalion of stormtroopers, soldiers specially trained in the new German infiltration and maneuver tactics. American artillery, machine-gun, and small arms fire took a heavy toll

of German lives and beat back the assault. On April 12 the Germans renewed their attack, engaging the 104th Regiment in a pitched battle which lasted several hours. Once again, however, the Americans were victorious. Two small German raids on April 13 were driven off rather easily. On the night of April 15/16 an American patrol entered No Man's Land north of the Bois Brule in an attempt to ascertain future German intentions. The patrol reached the German forward trenches and found them abandoned. "The enemy," wrote one war correspondent, "apparently has given up, temporarily at least, his attempt to penetrate...the American...line."<sup>6</sup>

Other intelligence, however, suggested the Germans were preparing an even larger assault than that launched against the Bois Brule. Allied observers noted the arrival of artillery and infantry reinforcements in the German rear areas. A German prisoner taken by a French patrol said that a fresh battalion of storm-troopers had been moved up to the front opposite the American lines. The Americans responded by deploying additional artillery batteries in the sector. One soldier, seeing the guns rolling towards the front, wrote: "We imagine there is going to be SOME FIREWORKS soon."<sup>7</sup>

At about 1:30 a.m. on April 20 the units of the 1st Battalion, 102nd Regiment, were repositioned. Company D, supported by machine gun detachments, occupied the Sybille trench, just northwest of Seicheprey. Company C, with machine gun support, was posted in the Remieres Wood, a short distance northeast of the village. A and B Companies were positioned further to the east, linking up with the French 167th Regiment. Major George Rau, 1st Battalion commander, was stationed in Seicheprey along with the

battalion headquarters and assorted rear echelon troops. The nearest reserves were located about one thousand yards to the rear, near the village of Beaumont. The night was unusually quiet: no American patrols ventured out, and no Germans were seen. The cold, light rain falling about midnight degenerated into a thickening fog as morning neared.<sup>8</sup>

At about 3:00 a.m. the German artillery opened a bombardment heavier than any yet experienced by the men of the 26th Division. Private Arthur Nelson, writing after the battle, noted: "The French soldiers say that it was as bad as any single [bombardment] at Verdun." Within eight minutes every telephone line connecting Seicheprey to the rear, and the Sybille trench to Seicheprey, was cut. Most of the runners dispatched to carry information to the rear were killed or wounded. Private William Bolton, sent from Company D with a message for Major Rau at Seicheprey, somehow completed his journey unscathed. For an hour the entire sector was blasted by high-explosive and doused with poison gas. Shortly after 4:00 a.m. the German gunners concentrated a gas bombardment on the 102nd Regiment positions. Just before 5:00 a.m. the American forward positions became the focus of German attention.<sup>9</sup>

The Bristolites were stunned by the weight of the German bombardment, but according to Corporal Walter Yale "everybody held their head pretty good." Yale praised the Company D officers for maintaining the morale of the men during the ordeal. Corporal Charles Blanchard concurred, writing: "Our officers were right in front of us and certainly kept us at our mettle." Soldiers sheltering in dugouts, such as Sergeant Thompson, found themselves

without light as concussions from exploding shells extinguished candles and lamps. For the men in the trenches conditions were even worse. Shells bursting ten feet away literally bowled over Corporal Clifford Parsons, who miraculously escaped serious injury. "It was worse than H--- could ever be," wrote Parsons, "not knowing what minute was going to be your last." Large sections of the Sybille trench were levelled by the bombardment. An exploding shell killed Private Timothy Driscoll and wounded Private Arthur Nelson, but left Corporal Yale, a few yards away, unharmed. Private Thomas Scott saw another shell kill Private Elmer Linden a short distance away. Some of the Bristolites displayed amazing calm while under fire. When a spent piece of shrapnel struck Corporal Blanchard in the leg, Blanchard, unharmed, coolly picked up the fragment and kept it as a souvenir. Private Ernest Firth, in an act of "gallantry and great courage," recovered two wounded comrades caught in the open during the bombardment and brought them to safety.<sup>10</sup>

At about 5:00 a.m. some thirty-two hundred German soldiers, including fifteen hundred elite stormtroopers, advanced across No Man's Land behind a rolling barrage, a curtain of shellfire moving forward at a constant speed just ahead of the attacking infantry. The Germans planned to attack the American defenses at three points. One detachment would assault the Sybille trench and drive directly into Seicheprey. A second group would seize the Remieres Wood and enter the village from the east. A third detachment would outflank and enter Seicheprey from the west.<sup>11</sup>

The Germans, benefitting from an overwhelming numerical advantage, overran the Sybille trench and destroyed Company D as a fighting unit after "one hell of a fight." Many of the Bristolites, surprised by enemy troops who appeared suddenly out of the fog, surrendered without firing a shot. Others, however, resisted furiously. Captain George Freeland, the company commander, fought until he was severely wounded and captured. Sergeant George Nelson, confronted by a large group of the enemy, fired his revolver until he was taken prisoner. Corporal James Moody and his detachment aimed their automatic rifles at the Germans "and let drive. We sure piled them up proper, believe me." Moody hit four of the enemy, and watched "them turning somersaults" until he fell with a head wound. Corporal Clifford Lawrence "accounted for [his] share" of Germans before a neck wound incapacitated him. Private Alvin Lugg, finding himself surrounded, displayed "exceptional bravery" by fighting his way free with hand grenades and the bayonet. Corporal James Bird showed "unusual heroism" in inspiring his isolated platoon to beat off German attacks for three hours. Sergeant William Thompson, despite being "scared clear through", shot three Germans before seeking the shelter of a dugout, "because where I was it would be sure death to stay." Thompson and his two comrades heard German voices approaching, and "took for granted that we had but a few minutes to live." The three men prepared "to shoot all that came in the narrow doorway", but the Germans instead set off an explosive charge which collapsed the dugout and knocked Thompson senseless. When he regained consciousness, Thompson found himself deaf, wounded in the knee and leg, and choking on his own blood.

The sergeant, using one arm which remained unburied, dug his comrades and himself out of the wreckage after nine hours of laborious work.<sup>12</sup>

After clearing the Sybille trench, and capturing much of the Remieres Wood following a bloody battle with Company C, the Germans entered Seicheprey. The attacking troops overran the American aid station, taking a number of prisoners. According to a German correspondent, the Americans in the village fought "tenaciously", and had to be driven "from houses, gardens, and cellars" with hand grenades and flamethrowers. The Germans destroyed dugouts and strongpoints, and set an ammunition dump afire. Sergeant Erving Dresser, Corporal Charles Blanchard, and several privates, all detached from Company D for kitchen duty, fired on the Germans with rifles and automatic weapons, hitting several of the enemy. German machine gun fire forced the Bristolites to seek cover in a nearby building, and an enemy flamethrower set the structure ablaze. "They had us cornered," recalled Blanchard, "and we saw at once that it was to be a fight for our lives." The Bristolites rushed out of the building with fixed bayonets and drove off the Germans. One of the soldiers, in an act witnessed by Blanchard, "ran the steel through [a] Hun's neck and finished him." Blanchard and most of the men escaped, but Dresser was shot through the leg and captured.<sup>13</sup>

At 1st Battalion headquarters, Major Rau organized a collection of orderlies, clerks, runners, and cooks into two infantry detachments and launched a counterattack to drive the Germans from Seicheprey. Rau's men, supported by elements of the 102nd

Machine Gun Battalion, moved through the village only to find the Germans in the process of retreating. Rau's detachments skirmished with the German rear-guard, but heavy machine gun and artillery fire prevented the Americans from seriously interfering with the withdrawal. The Germans fell back to the Sybille trench, taking with them their wounded, many American prisoners, and a considerable amount of captured equipment.<sup>14</sup>

As information concerning the German attack slowly reached rear area headquarters, American and French commanders mustered units for a counterattack and attempted to send reinforcements to the front. Allied artillery bombarded Seicheprey in the mistaken belief the village was still occupied by the Germans. Not until nightfall was the mistake recognized and the Sybille trench brought under fire. Continued heavy German shelling caused casualties in the Allied rear and made troop assembly and movement difficult. During the afternoon Major General Edwards and Major General Jean Passaga, French XXXII Corps commander, planned a counterstroke which would regain all of the ground lost to the Germans. At 4:00 a.m. on April 21, following a brief bombardment, four companies of the 102nd Regiment supported by French units were to advance behind a rolling barrage and drive the enemy from the Sybille trench and Remieres Wood.<sup>15</sup>

The bombardment took place as scheduled, but Major John Gallant, commander of the attacking force, cancelled the assault at the last moment. Gallant was court-martialed for his decision, although his actions seem justified by the facts. He lacked information concerning German troop dispositions; his units had never

previously operated together, and his force was marginally sufficient for the job at hand. In any event, patrols sent out before dawn discovered the Germans had abandoned the Sybille trench. Elements of the 102nd Regiment, including at least part of Company D, reoccupied the trench. Heavy German fire continued to sweep the area, causing several more casualties among the Bristolites. Private William Lagasse was killed, Corporal George Scott suffered a severe leg wound, and Private John Tobin was slightly injured. The troops found the Sybille trench and surrounding area littered with German and American dead. Sergeant Thompson discovered the body of one of his men, Private Joseph Pratt. During the morning Allied units attacked German forces in the Remieres Wood. American and French troops recaptured the wood in a bitter, close-quarter battle which lasted until noon. By nightfall the Germans were completely driven from the Allied lines.<sup>16</sup>

General Pershing called the American losses at the Battle of Seicheprey "considerable." Eighty-one Americans died, four hundred and one were wounded, and one hundred eighty-seven were captured or remained missing. Not surprisingly, Companies C and D absorbed many of the casualties. Several days after the battle the two companies combined mustered only ninety-five men, compared to about four hundred on April 20. The Bristol contingent, which numbered approximately sixty-five before the battle, lost six killed, eighteen wounded, and about twenty to twenty-five captured. Most of the survivors lost all of their spare equipment and clothing to German looters. German losses totalled at least one hundred sixty-five killed and over five hundred wounded, missing, and captured.<sup>17</sup>

Which side won the Battle of Seicheprey? Clearly the Germans were the victors, for they accomplished their goal of teaching the 26th Division "that war is not a sporting [event]." The Germans surprised the Americans, overran the American forward positions, annihilated two infantry companies, and withdrew virtually unimpeded with many prisoners. German casualties amounted to less than twenty-five percent of the attacking force, a loss rate not uncommon in First World War battles. "The individual Americans fought well," noted German Commander-in-Chief General Erich von Ludendorff, "but our success had, nevertheless, been easy." General Pershing blamed several 26th Division officers for the defeat, and considered taking disciplinary action against them. Nobody blamed the troops of Companies C and D for the setback. The Connecticut soldiers, in the words of one historian, had engaged in a "desperate resistance" against long odds.<sup>18</sup>

General Passaga awarded medals to many of the Americans who distinguished themselves at Seicheprey. Corporal James Bird and Privates William Bolton, Ernest Firth, and Alvin Lugg received the Croix de Guerre. "Yes, it's some medal," wrote Bird. "I'll tell you. Some French General pinned them on our blouse, shook hands with all the boys and wished us the best of luck." Private Bolton, in addition, won the American Distinguished Service Cross for his exploits as a runner during the battle.<sup>19</sup>

In the weeks following the Seicheprey engagement many Company D soldiers wrote home, describing the battle to friends and relatives. As might be expected, the letters convey a variety of thoughts and emotions. Several men, including Sergeant Thompson,

We're sorry, but your incoming fax may be incomplete. Please call the sender to verify your fax or to request a re-send.

Your fax may be incomplete because one or more of the following has occurred:

1. Fax transmission was interrupted.
2. "End fax" signal not received.
3. Unable to convert to desired file format.

We apologize for any inconvenience.

You will not be charged for this additional page.