Patton's First Tank Attack

*This article is adapted from a paper presented by Kevin Hymel,
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**American Tanks at Seicheprey
By Harvey Dunne**

On the afternoon of September 12, 1918, in the midst of a bloody battle between the American Expeditionary Force and the German Army, two American Army officers, a 32 year-old lieutenant colonel and a 38 year-old brigadier general, greeted each other on a small exposed hill. On either side of them, infantry and tanks maneuvered forward to the French town of Essey, a quarter-mile to the north. Small-arms fire and an occasional artillery burst kept the air alive and dangerous.

The lieutenant colonel sported a Colt .45 pistol with an ivory grip and his engraved initials. A pipe was clenched in his teeth. The brigadier wore a barracks cap and a muffler his mother

knitted for him. As they spoke to each other, a German artillery barrage opened up and began marching toward their position. Infantrymen scattered and dove for cover, but the two officers remained standing, cooly talking with each other.

The lieutenant colonel, George S. Patton, had been in the army for nine years, and the brigadier general, Douglas MacArthur, for 15, but the two West Pointers had never met. Their careers had taken them in different directions until this day during the First World War. Both officers became famous for their bravery and daring in the Second World War, yet both set the precedent for courage under fire

in the First. That Patton and MacArthur did remain standing while an artillery barrage passed over is historically accepted, but what they said to each other as the shells began to drop remains a point of controversy.

The battle in which Patton and MacArthur were to meet was the first the American Army fought as a separate army, in its own sector and guided by its own generals. Despite attempts by the British and French to integrate American troops into their own decimated ranks, the American First Army was organized on June 24, 1918. It formed up west of the St. Mihiel salient, a bulge in the Allied lines 25 miles wide and and 15 miles deep, which the Germans had occupied for four years. The first test of the American Army was to eliminate the bulge in the line.

On September 12, beginning at 0100 hours, Allied guns unleashed a five-hour artillery barrage across the salient. Immediately following the bombardment, the Doughboys of the 42nd, supported by Patton's 327th Tank Battalion, started toward their objectives.


Lt. Col. George S. Patton

The tank advance was the first tank attack in American history, and it was being led personally by the man destined to be acknowledged U.S. Army master of armor warfare. In this very first attack George Patton demonstrated the very characteristics he would brought to his Second World War masterpieces, the breakout from Normandy and the relief of the Bulge.

Both Patton and MacArthur personally moved forward to maintain control of their units on the battlefield. By 0630, MacArthur was in the Sonnard Woods, 800 yards into enemy territory, where he was pushing forward elements of the 84th Brigade. At about that same time, Patton was advancing his command post to the town of Seicheprey (#1, Map on pg. 29), about 300 yards southwest of MacArthur's position. With reports coming in that some of his tanks were bogging down on the battlefield, Patton began heading northwest to assess the situation. His reaction to being shelled along the way was: "I admit that I wanted to duck and probably did at first but soon saw the futility of dodging fate."

As Patton headed northwest to the town of Essey (#2), MacArthur was making his way north through the Sonnard Woods to the same place. Halfway between the woods and the town, near a farmhouse, Patton spotted MacArthur on a small hill and walked over to him. It was then that the barrage started toward their position, and it was there that they stood, while everyone else ran for cover.

As the American attack advanced, the Germans began to retreat from Essey (#2). It is not clear from either personal account if Patton and MacArthur walked toward the town together or moved separately as they passed dead Germans, horses, smashed artillery pieces and other debris of war. When Patton neared the town, he encountered five tanks reluctant to advance for fear of shelling. Infuriated, he led the tanks into town on foot. Once there, the tankers stopped

Patton Attack Route Sept. 12-13, 1918
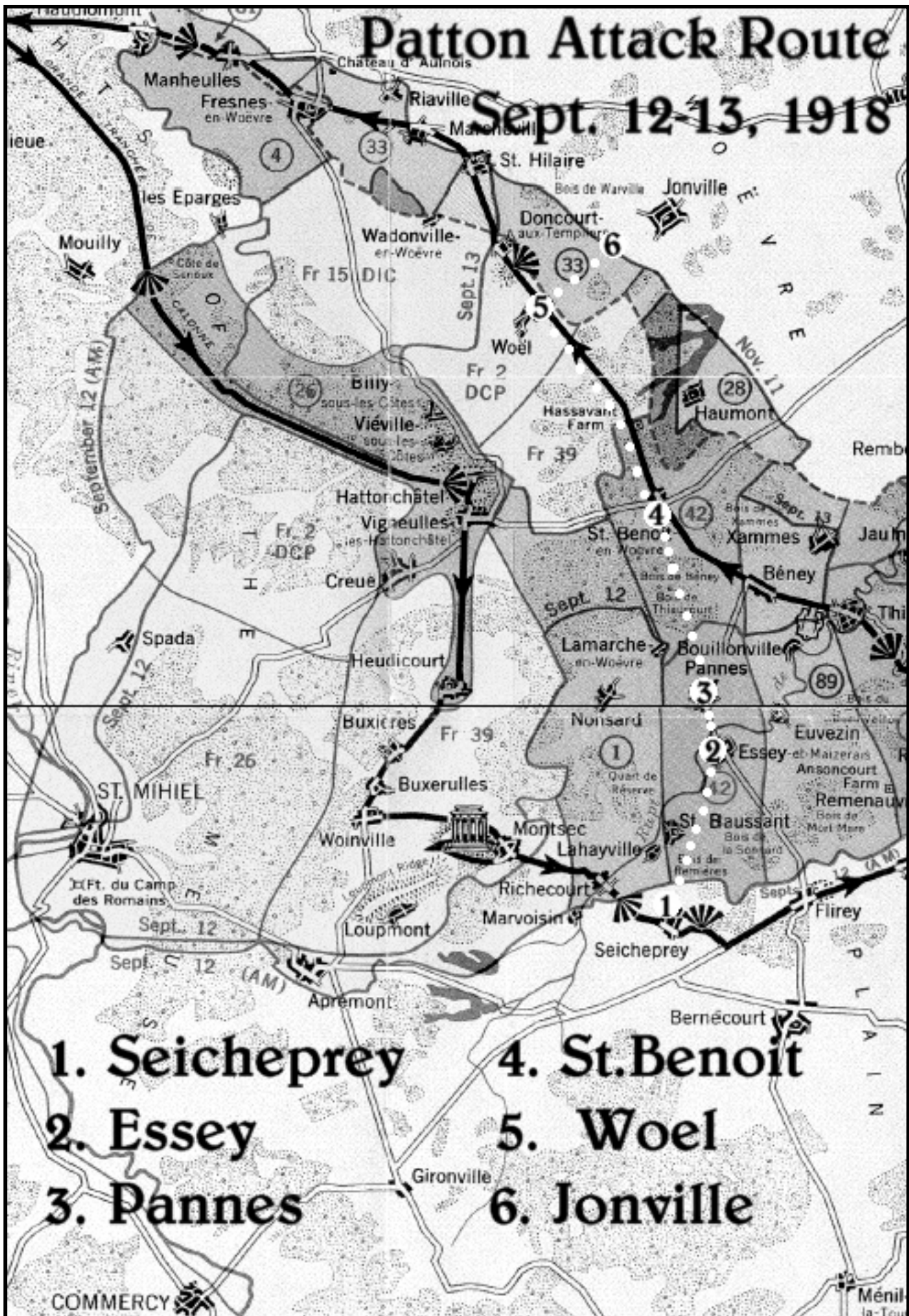
1. Seicheprey 4. St.Benoit
2. Essey 5. Woel
3. Pannes 6. Jonville

again, refusing to cross the only bridge in town in pursuit of the fleeing Germans, fearful that the bridge was mined. Patton walked across the bridge, proving its safety. Once across, he noticed that there were explosives under the bridge, but the wires had been cut.

Assembling for Action

After recrossing the bridge, Patton returned to the town center just in time to see a group of German soldiers emerge fromf a dugout and surrender to MacArthur. MacArthur did not mention this incident in his memoirs but instead reflected on the signs of a panicky German retreat: the musical instruments of a regimental band laid out; a battery of guns left behind still stood their station; and, in a nearby barn, a horse waited in full saddle for a German officer.

On the Advance

[Ed. Addition: Mr. Hymel focused more on the Patton/MacArthur interaction in his original article and did not cover the later stages of Patton's attack. This paragraph is compiled from other sources.] Patton continued attacking the next day and a half. At St. Benoit (#4) an impatient Patton refused to await supporting units. Instead, he sent a patrol of three tanks and five dismounted soldiers toward the town of Woel (#5) to keep contact with the enemy, later reinforced this advance group and ultimately charged cavalry-style with his whole force pushing German forces six miles farther, towards Jonville (#6). Patton's fighting, two- day advance covered 12 miles, a remarkable achievement given the rolling terrain, the mechanical unreliability of his tanks and the inexperience of his troops. But, after all, it was Patton in command.

Patton and the Renault FT-17 Tank