The Commandant's Perspective

Through the Wheat to the Beaches Beyond

The Lasting Impact of the Battle for Belleau Wood

by Gen Charles C. Krulak

"It was a hell of a mess . . . "

–Gen Gerald C. Thomas, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, reflecting on his experience as a sergeant during the fight for Belleau Wood, June 6 to 26, 1918.

On the 31st of May 1998, I delivered the Memorial Day address at the American Cemetery at Belleau Wood, France. It has become a tradition for the Commandant to visit this historic battlefield on Memorial Day to join with Marines from all over Europe, veterans groups, and the French people to pay tribute to the Marines who sacrificed their lives in the epic battle that raged for over 20 days in June of 1918. Of all the traditions associated with the Commandancy, this is one of my favorites. It certainly causes me to think deeply about the legacy of the Corps and, equally important, our preparations for the future.

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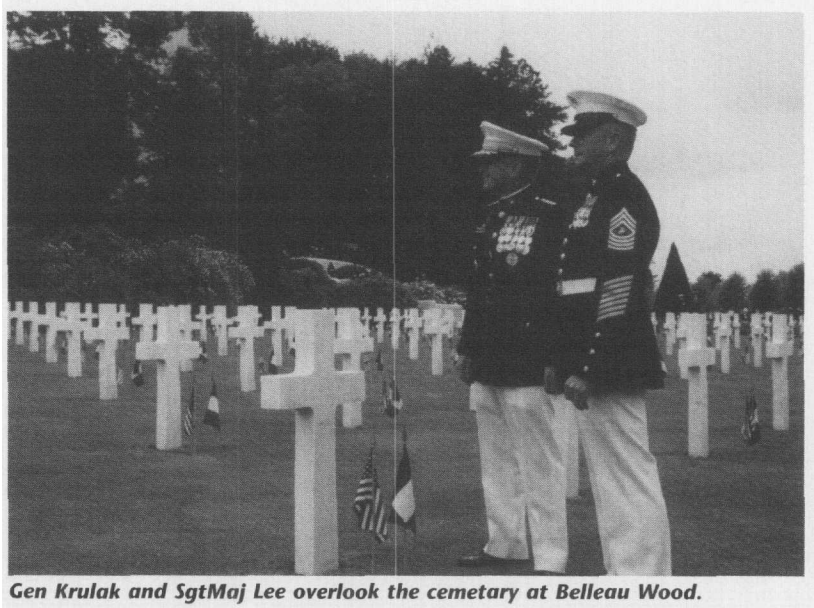
The battle for Belleau Wood, and the exploits of the 4th Marine Brigade during the First World War, have fascinated me since I was a child. In my formative years I met, and was influenced by Marines such as Clifton Cates, Lem Shepherd, Gerry Thomas, and my godfather H. M. ("Howling Mad") Smith. Their reputation as leaders, innovators, and tacticians is legendary. In the 1920s and 1930s they played a pivotal role in transforming the Corps from what it had become during the First World War—a second land army—into the world's finest amphibious power projection force. In the 1940s and 1950s these men planned and led amphibious assaults on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Guam, Iwo Jima, Okinawa, Inchon, and many others. Over the course of their careers, they tenaciously strove to ensure that the Corps would be the Nation's force in readiness—the air-ground striking force that was most ready when the Nation was least ready. All of them had one thing in common. They all participated in the battle for Belleau Wood. Throughout their careers, in every decision they made, their experience in the assault and conquest of Belleau Wood factored very heavily. In fact, I believe

that the fight for Belleau Wood was the birthplace of the modern day Marine Corps. Let me explain why.

The First World War had been raging for 4 years by the time the Marines got into the fight. The face of warfare had changed dramatically over those years. In weaponry alone, the rate of technological advance was staggering. Innovations such as large caliber, high-velocity artillery, machineguns, poison gas, and aircraft had exponentially increased the tempo and lethality of the battlefield. Even though the Corps began to prepare in earnest for combat in Europe in 1917, we were too late—we had not kept up with the technological and tactical advances unfolding in the World War. As a result, in June of 1918, the Corps found itself on a futuristic battlefield it had not prepared for, one that it did not anticipate, and the Marines who fought there paid the price in blood. Those who survived never forgot, and to a man they vowed never again—never again.



Gen Krulak and SgtMaj Lee overlook the cemetary at Belleau Wood.

The story of the battle for Belleau Wood is well known to all Marines. But to prepare for my Memorial Day speech I researched the oral histories of the Marines who fought there who eventually went on to become the future leaders of the Corps. I read the after-action reports of the division, and the regimental and battalion commanders. Then I reread three books, Thomason's *Fix Bayonets*, Mackin's *Suddenly We Didn't Want to Die*, and, Asprey's *At Belleau Wood*. In the process, I gained a new appreciation of the importance of this battle in the transformation of the Corps in the 1920s and 1930s. I gained additional perspective on why the veterans of this battle fought so tenaciously for organic air and artillery for the Corps. It also became very clear to me why they could see the incredible potential in amphibious assault when all the self-proclaimed "experts" considered it futile in light of the 1915 debacle at Gallipoli.

This year, after the Memorial Day speech, the Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps and I walked the battlefield and retraced the battle as fought by the 4th Marine Brigade. Today, the battlefield looks much as it did on the 6th of June 1918– the day the Marines initiated

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their attack. It was easy to see how the Germans were so successful in turning Belleau Wood into a natural fortress. The forest is surrounded on all sides by wide open, and relatively flat, wheat fields. The foliage in the forest is incredibly thick, making it difficult to see more than 50 meters in any direction. Glaciers deposited huge slabs of rock in such a way that they form superb natural pillboxes. The remains of the old trenches and fighting positions give credence to the veterans' accounts of how the Germans took full advantage of what mother nature had given them. The after-action reports describe how the Germans had positioned observation balloons on the ridge to the north of the town of Belleau, registered their artillery on the approaches to the forest, and emplaced machinegun and trench mortar positions so that every square inch of the wheatfields and the forest was covered by murderous interlocking fires.

SgtMaj Lee and I started off in the wheatfields where the 4th Brigade began its main assault on the woods. It was in these wheatfields that the 4th Brigade would lose over 1,000 men on the first day of the attack. In fact, more Marines were lost on the 6th of June in 1918 than in the previous 142 years of Marine Corps history. The senior commanders wanted to achieve an element of surprise in the attack so they only gave the forest a short preliminary artillery barrage, followed by a rolling barrage to support the attack. Neither proved adequate. After the initial barrage, the Germans quickly remanned their machinegun positions

and waited for the Marines. As soon as the assault began, it became readily apparent that some of the units had not made it to their assigned positions in time for the attack. Those that did immediately came under a withering barrage of artillery, mortar, and machinegun fire. Huge gaps opened up in the attack formations as the German gunners mowed the Marines down. One veteran described it, "as if a huge scythe had been swept across the field at boot-top height." The attack faltered, and many Marines went to ground seeking cover. Luckily, combat veterans from the Corps' numerous small wars, such as GySgt Dan Daly, stood tall and rallied the young Marines to rise up and press on with the attack. Throughout their 800-yard assault the Marines were raked by machinegun fire and high explosive artillery. The wheatfield still bears witness to the carnage that raged there 80 years ago. As SgtMaj Lee and I walked that field, I found a freshly plowed sector. I picked up a handful of soil and found several pieces of shrapnel. I picked up another handful and found even more. After all those years, long after the flesh and blood disappeared, the soil tells the story of the price the 4th Brigade paid crossing that now-hallowed ground.

Once they got into the forest, the Marines' problems intensified. The foliage was so thick that units became disoriented. Some of the officers' land navigation skills broke down and entire units collided. Units started to report that they had reached objectives that, in fact, they were nowhere close to. Artillery strikes were called in on the wrong coordinates. To top

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it off, the Marines had to rely on runners to pass the word because the communication wires were continually broken by enemy artillery. It was a command and control nightmare. As a result, the fighting degraded to small unit actions. But, it was in these small unit actions that the 4th Brigade distinguished itself. In fact, the Marines' initiative, tenacity, and endurance surprised the German defenders. Those three factors proved critical in the 4th Brigade's ultimate victory.

The high intensity and duration of the combat taxed the logistics system beyond its abilities to cope. Compounding the problem was the German local air superiority. To sustain the Marines in Belleau Wood, the resupply effort had to cross exposed wheat fields. Every time the Marines attempted to move supplies across those fields, they came under observation of the German balloons to the north of Belleau. Shortly thereafter, they would be engaged by intense artillery and machinegun fire. The Marine commanders asked the French for air support to shoot down the balloons, but the French couldn't spare enough sorties to get the job done. As one commander reported, "A number of German planes over this morning, and they have been busy all day. It is almost impossible to make a move in this area without coming under the eye of a balloon observer. Our aviation is either passive or non-existent." Throughout the battle, the balloons continued to wreak havoc on the 4th Brigade. The Marines in the forest were reduced to scavenging food, water, weapons, and ammunition off dead Germans and fellow Marines to continue the fight. Wounded Marines had little hope of evacuation. In fact many of the Marines who died in Belleau Wood fought until they succumbed from their second or third wound.

Co B, 1st Bn, 6th Mar in Bad Hönningen, Germany, 1919. Gerald Thomas, now a first lieutenant, is fifth from right in the first row.

Sgt Gerald Thomas was right—the fight for Belleau Wood *was* a mess. Yet the Marines carried the day. The cost was staggering. Of the 8,000 Marines who participated in the battle, over 4,700 were casualties; 1,035 were killed. Unfortunately, many who survived the fight for Belleau Wood would lose their lives in the following 4 months of combat.

When the 4th Marine Brigade returned home after the war, the Nation demobilized, and, as is our Nation's tradition, we shifted money and resources away from the military. While the money may have been in short supply, ideas certainly were not. In many ways the 1920s and 1930s were some of the most productive years for innovative military thought in American history. The Marine Corps led the way.

In the 1920s, Army and Navy planners looked to the Pacific and saw a growing threat from Japan. In response, they developed a plan by which the United States would fight its way across the Pacific to defeat the air, land, and sea forces of the Empire of Japan. The plan hinged on access to key islands for refueling, resupply, and air and sea control of sea lanes. Most of the planners believed that Japan would attempt to deny us access to these islands by invading them and then turning them into defensive fortresses. War Plan Orange encouraged visionaries such as Lejeune and Ellis, both veterans of land combat in France, to foresee a new mission for the Marine Corps—amphibious assault. They knew that if war came in the Pacific, the Marine Corps would be called upon to take those islands from the Japanese defenders. They also realized how difficult it would be to create a Marine Corps capable of doing it. To attack a fortified island in the Pacific, one surrounded by coral reefs, posed seemingly insurmountable problems. But, the Corps' young officers, many of whom were veterans of the battle for Belleau Wood, believed it could be done. After all, to them Belleau Wood was much like an island surrounded by wheat instead of water. They felt that if they could rectify the problems associated with the attack on that forest, they could build the amphibious force Gen Lejeune envisioned.

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Transforming the Corps—Amphibious Assault

They started at Newport and Quantico—the school houses. In 1920, Maj H. M. Smith, who many consider the father of amphibious warfare in the Corps, was sent to the Naval War College, where he challenged the status quo, relentlessly advocating the employment of Marines in an amphibious strike role. At Quantico, the Corps began to restructure the Field Officers Course to stress amphibious warfare. In 1924, the curriculum featured only 2 hours of classes on amphibious operations. By 1927, that time had grown to 100 hours, and by the end of 1939, over 455 hours. Students such as Smith, Cates, Shepherd, Thomas, Erskine, Rockey, and Geiger studied amphibious operations ranging from Alexander at Tyre to Hamilton at Gallipoli. They wargamed the amphibious assaults they believed necessary for War Plan Orange to succeed. These wargames were used to model the fleet landing exercises that experimented with new amphibious assault doctrine, tactics, and equipment. Over the course of 20 years, they not only discovered where the problem areas were and what to do about them, but also uncovered new opportunities resident in projecting Marine combat power from the sea.

The students looked at the amphibious assault force's exposed transit from ship-to-shore as they did the wheatfields surrounding Belleau Wood. They knew that they had to make the transit as quickly as possible, transported in landing craft that offered protection from enemy fires. Additionally, they needed a landing craft that would not get hung up on the coral reefs associated with the Pacific islands, especially Guam, which was a critical objective in War Plan Orange. These requirements, and 20 years of experimentation and study, led to the development and procurement of the Higgins boat and the amphibious tractor, two innovations that proved critical to victory during the Second World War.

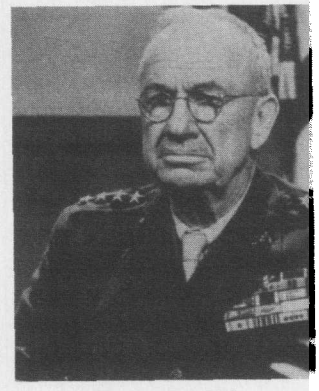
The veterans of the fight for Belleau Wood all remembered the poor state of logistics resupply during the battle. German air and artillery made it almost impossible to resupply the Marines inside the forest. If the enemy had the opportunity to destroy the logistics resupply during an amphibious operations ship-to-shore phase—the Marines could be thrown back into the sea. They knew that they needed to build up combat power ashore as quickly as possible. Through wargaming and experimentation they discovered that they had to load the ships in such as way that they could be unloaded quickly and, more importantly, in the sequence needed by the landing force. They drafted requirements for ships that

Four veterans of Belleau Wood who shaped the future Corps . . .

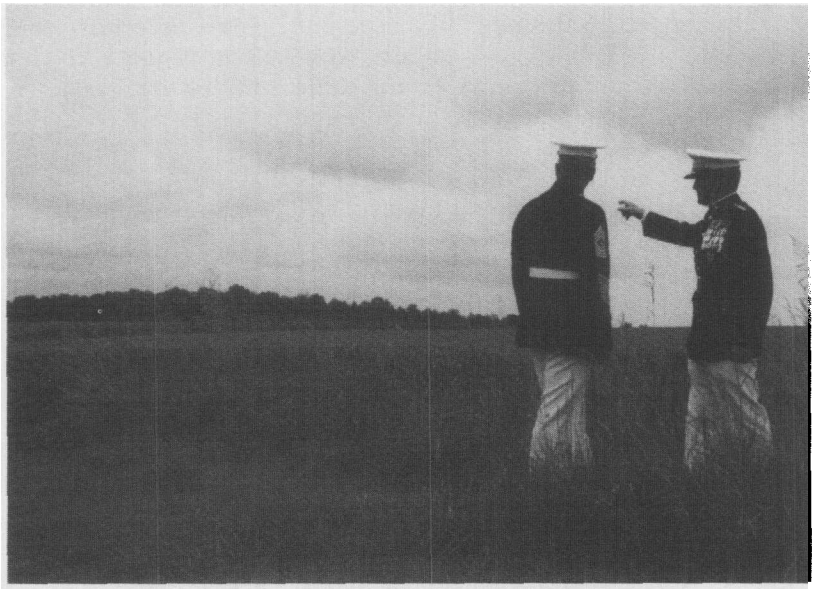
Gen Clifton B. Cates

Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr.

Gen Gerald C. Thomas



Gen Holland M. Smith



A view looking over the wheatfields toward the forest at Belleau.

could proceed directly to the beachhead and then unload heavy vehicles and supplies. They experimented with several types of landing craft to transport materials ashore. They looked at tracked armored vehicles that could take the materials in the heat of battle directly from the ships to objectives well inland. They believed that an opposed amphibious assault on a Pacific island would consume supplies at a very high rate, and they were correct. Luckily they developed a robust sea-based logistics system tailor-made to support amphibious operations. In so doing they revolutionized the art of war.

The Marines knew that they would need massive preinvasion fire support from the Navy. They knew what is was like to storm a well-defended fortress without it. As such, they strove to convince the Navy to rethink how they would use naval gunfire to support an amphibious assault. They brought Navy officers such as Lt Walter Ansel onto their team to help. In the course of their experimentation and wargaming, they discovered that naval gunfire could not address all of their fire support needs. Thus, the Marines looked to organic aviation to provide the overhead observation, fire support, and protection they needed during the preparation and amphibious assault phases. Once phased ashore they thought they could use a combination of air, naval gunfire, and organic artillery to provide the firepower superiority they needed to consolidate the objective.

Reading the oral histories of the veterans of the battle, I found each of them talked about the effect the German observation balloons had on the fight. To a man they were furious that they remained in place, unmolested by allied air. This is why these infantry officers proved to be such vocal and passionate supporters of Marine aviation in the interwar years. If the Corps had its own aircraft as part of its amphibious force, Marines would never again be put in that position. They believed the Marine commander on the scene should be able to establish the priorities for air support, not some detached headquarters. Amphibious landings and the subsequent dynamic land campaigns that followed, did not lend themselves to preplanned and scripted air support plans. The most critical phase of the landing operation was the initial assault and breakout from the beachhead. With no artillery ashore, the Marines needed their aircraft to provide highly responsive fire support. This requirement led to the development of the Marine air-ground, combined-arms philosophy.

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From the First World War on, the Marine Corps would fight as an integrated air-ground team. Throughout the interwar years they experimented with Marine aviation in support of expeditionary operations. Wherever the grunts went, the air went too. When the team was assembled to create the *Tentative Manual for Landing Operations*, the "bible" of amphibious assault doctrine, the room was filled with ground and air Marines. They developed it as a team—a combined-arms team.

On 19 February 1945, V Corps, a Marine amphibious assault force three divisions strong, landed on the black sand of the Japanese island fortress known as Iwo Jima. The landing and the 36-day battle that followed, proved to be one of the most significant feats in the annals of military history. It was the epitome of amphibious excellence. Fittingly, V Corps was commanded by a Marine who probably did more than anyone else to create the Corps' amphibious assault capability, LtGen H. M. Smith. His three divisions were commanded by Clifton Cates, Graves Erskine, and Keller Rockey, all of whom fought as junior officers in the battle for Belleau Wood.

The Legacy of Belleau Wood

Perhaps the most enduring impact that flowed from the battle for Belleau Wood was an attitudinal one—our institutional commitment to change. Belleau Wood, in many ways, constituted a strategic inflection point for the Marine Corps. In the business world, a strategic inflection point occurs when your competition develops a new product or your market changes so that what you produced in the past is no longer desired. At Belleau Wood, the Marine Corps discovered that warfare had changed, and we had failed to adapt to those changes. The 4th Brigade paid the price in blood. Those who survived never forgot that lesson, and they vowed that the Corps would never again be caught unprepared. They became the innovators, risk takers, and visionaries who championed amphibious assault in the 1920s, close air support in the 1930s, and vertical envelopment in the 1950s. They were the architects that built the force-in-readiness that we are the proud stewards of today.

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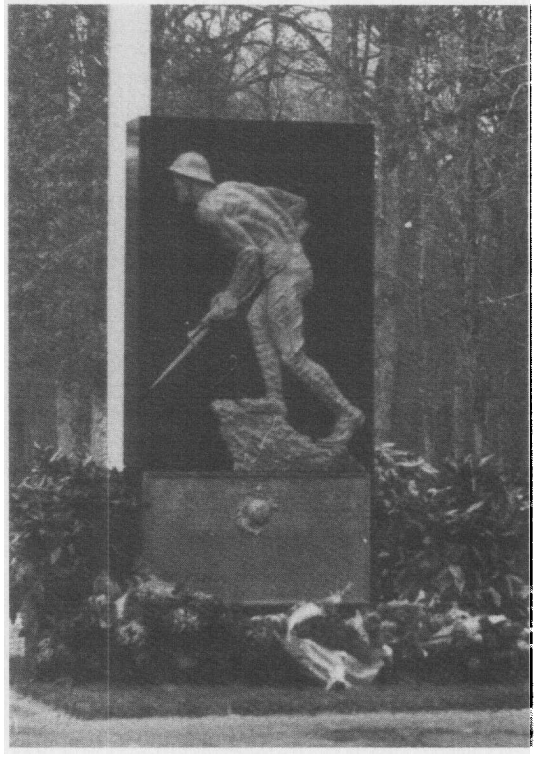
As I walked through Belleau Wood and the wheatfields that surround it, I tried to distill what lessons the current generation of Marines could glean from the veterans of Belleau Wood. In my mind the most important one is that we can never rest upon our laurels. Yes, we are the world's finest naval air-ground, combined-arms fighting force. Without doubt, the Marine Corps performed brilliantly in DESERT STORM. In many ways we are still basking in the warm glow of that victory, much like the Marine veterans of the First World War were tempted to do in the 1920s. But, those veterans knew they must change. They knew that they needed to accept the risks associated with developing new concepts for the ever-changing battlefield. They weathered the failures and the setbacks. They sparred with the naysayers. But, they never rested upon their laurels. As a result, instead of being the victim of a strategic inflection point as they were at Belleau Wood, they caused one in the Second World War.

That is exactly what today's Corps must do. That is exactly why we are pushing ahead, breaking new ground, developing our new warfighting concept, *Operational Maneuver From the Sea (OMFTS)*, a concept tailor-made for the 21st century battlefield. OMFTS promises to once again revolutionize the art of war. Like amphibious assault, it was developed based upon the future battlefield. Like amphibious assault, it will require large scale experimentation and innovation. Like amphibious assault, it will require an institutional commitment to change. Like amphibious assault, it will require the efforts of each and every Marine to discover and maximize the opportunities resident within this new concept, while sealing any exploitable seams. It's up to us, the current generation of Marines, to make OMFTS a reality.



Among the fog shrouded trees at Belleau Wood stands a sentinel—a monolith—a statue designed and erected by the Marines of the 4th Brigade. It features a Marine rifleman, the shirt ripped from his back, rifle in hand, advancing, his face pointing toward the tree line that was the 4th Brigade's objective. You can't see his face—why? Because he is not looking back towards the past—his face is pointing away—towards the future. That face and that simple statue contains a message for all of us—and for all those who will follow us. That Marine shows us the penalty that he and 4,700 of his fellow Marines paid because the Corps failed to recognize and adapt to change. That Marine knows the only way to avoid that fate is to advance towards the future—to steal a march on change—to be the cause of strategic inflection points, not the other way around. That Marine is showing the rest of us our course for the future.

USMC