

Belleau Wood: The Cates Diary

June marks the 80th anniversary of Belleau Wood—a famous and brutal battle that stands as a landmark in Marine Corps history. We commemorate it by publishing a diary kept by one of its most renowned participants—1st Lt Clifton B. Cates, 96th Company, 2d Battalion, 6th Marines.

June 6 to 9

The morning of the 6th, the 96th company moved to a position in the northwest corner of the Bois des Clerembouts, near la Cense Farm, in a close support position, relieving the 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment. During the day the members of the company constructed rustic crosses and fences around the graves of the men who had made the supreme sacrifice.

The 96th company received orders about 4:30 p.m. that an attack was to begin at 5:00 p.m. on Belleau Woods and Bouresches. The 3d Battalion, 6th Regiment, was to attack on the right and the 2d Battalion was to conform to their movements. Later the above order was modified and it stated that if necessary the left companies of the 2d Battalion would be used.

The 96th Company was assigned as the left flank company of the battalion, as the leading company. The company immediately moved into position and the advance started.

Soon after the attack was begun, Capt Duncan and 1stSgt Sissler were killed and Lt Bowling was wounded; casualties among the men were very heavy. Lt Brailsford, who was on detached duty as a liaison officer with the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, was also killed soon after the attack started. 1stLt Robertson taking command continued the advance with the company toward Bouresches. The organization (3d Battalion) that was supposed to take the town failed to do so; the 96th Company

therefore attacked and captured it (caught them right at meal time). The attack was made over an open wheat field with no connections on either flank. Terrific machinegun fire from Belleau Woods and Bouresches caused the company over 50 percent casualties.

Lt Cates was knocked unconscious by a machinegun bullet hitting him on the helmet (Jack Sheridan doused him with a bottle of champagne, that he had carried for so long) but later continued on into town with a few men. Soon afterwards, contact was made with Lt

2 by the 10th German identified as one of the German's finest divisions, and it was defended by the 7th and 8th Companies, 398th German Regiment.

Many acts of heroism were recorded this day, and numerous Croix de Guerre and Distinguished Service Crosses were awarded to the men and officers of the 96th Company, for this operation. While in Bouresches, the 96th Company lost its only prisoner-of-war when an ambulance containing Private A. Cunningham became lost and drove into the enemy's lines. On June 8th replacements were sent into Bouresches to strengthen the badly depleted company. Soon after they arrived a strong enemy attack was broken up. The 96th Company was relieved the night of June 9-10 by a unit of the 3d

Battalion, 5th Regiment, and it marched to a support position in the woods south of Rue Gobert at La Mon Blanche.

June 10-13

A support position was held for two days, and then the company moved further to the rear into La Sablonniere Woods near Maison Blanc, in a reserve position. At 1:00 a.m., June 13, the company was rushed to a support position in the woods northwest of Lucy-le-Bocage, as a German prisoner had stated that the enemy was to attack at daybreak. The attack did not materialize, but the 78th and 96th companies were detailed to recapture Bouresches which had erroneously been reported captured by

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Robertson, who had entered the western part of town, and he turned the few men that he had left over to Lt Cates, who proceeded to clean out the town, while 1st Lt Robertson went to the rear to get reinforcements. After the town was completely mopped up, only 21 men remained to hold it. Luckily, no counterattack was made before reinforcements arrived. At 1:45 a.m. a few 2d Division engineers came in. One prisoner and one machinegun were captured in Bouresches. It was for the capture and holding of the town of Bouresches by the 96th Company, that the 4th Brigade was cited by the French and American in General Orders. Bouresches had been captured from the French on June

CITED IN ARMY ORDERS.

The 4th American Brigade under command of Brigadier General James G. Harbord, composed of:

The 5th Regt. of Marines under command of Colonel Wendell C. Neville;

The 6th Regt. of Marines under command of Colonel Albertus W. Catlin;

The 6th Machine Gun Battalion under command of Major Edward W. Cole;

Was thrown in full battle on a front violently attacked by the enemy. Immediately asserted itself as a unit of first order. On its very entry on the fighting line, broke down, together with the French troops, a violent attack by the enemy on an important part of the position, and began on its own account, a series of offensive operations, thanks to the brilliant courage, the vigor, spirit and tenacity of its men who overcame all hardships and losses; thanks to the activity and energy of its officers, and thanks also to the personal action of its chief, General J. Harbord, the 4th Brigade found its efforts crowned with success. In well co-ordinated action its 2 regiments and machinegun battalion realized, after 12 days of incessant fighting (from the 2d to the 13th of June 1918) on a very difficult terrain, an advance varying from 1200 to 2000 metres, on a front of 4 kilometers, capturing a large amount of material, taking more than 500 prisoners, inflicting on the enemy considerable losses, and capturing 2 objectives of first importance; the village of Bouresches and Belleau Wood.

(Order no.10805 "D")

At Great General Headquarters, October 22, 1918.

The Commanding General-in-Chief

(Signed) Petain

the enemy the previous night. After the advance had been started, the orders were revoked, and the two companies dug-in in the small woods southeast of Lucy-le-Bocage.

June 14

The company was ordered to relieve a company of the 2d Battalion of the 5th Regiment in Belleau Woods at 2:00 a.m. on the 14th. Beginning exactly at midnight of the 13-14, the enemy laid a most terrific barrage of mustard gas, high explosive, and shrapnel on the company, the bombardment lasting for 4 hours, and it suffered heavy casualties. The relief was finally completed by 6:00 a.m., and a support position was occupied. Members of the company were detailed to removed the wounded from Belleau Woods, but in a very short while, practically the entire company had to be evacuated; Lieutenants Robertson, Lockhart

and Page (U.S.A.), and 150 men were sent to the hospital suffering from mustard gas burns. Only Lt Cates and a few men remained of the 96th Company, and all were badly burned from mustard gas.

June 15-16

The remaining officer and men of the company served in the front-line in the northern edge of Belleau Woods with the 80th Company, 2d Battalion, and helped to break up a counterattack by the enemy. Relieved by the 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry, on the night of 16-17.

June 17-26

On the 17th the company occupied a reserve position in the Bois Gros Jean on the Paris Metz Highway. On the 21st Capt Wethered Woodworth, 1st Lt Robert L. Duane, and 140 men joined the company as replacements; Capt Woodworth assuming command of the

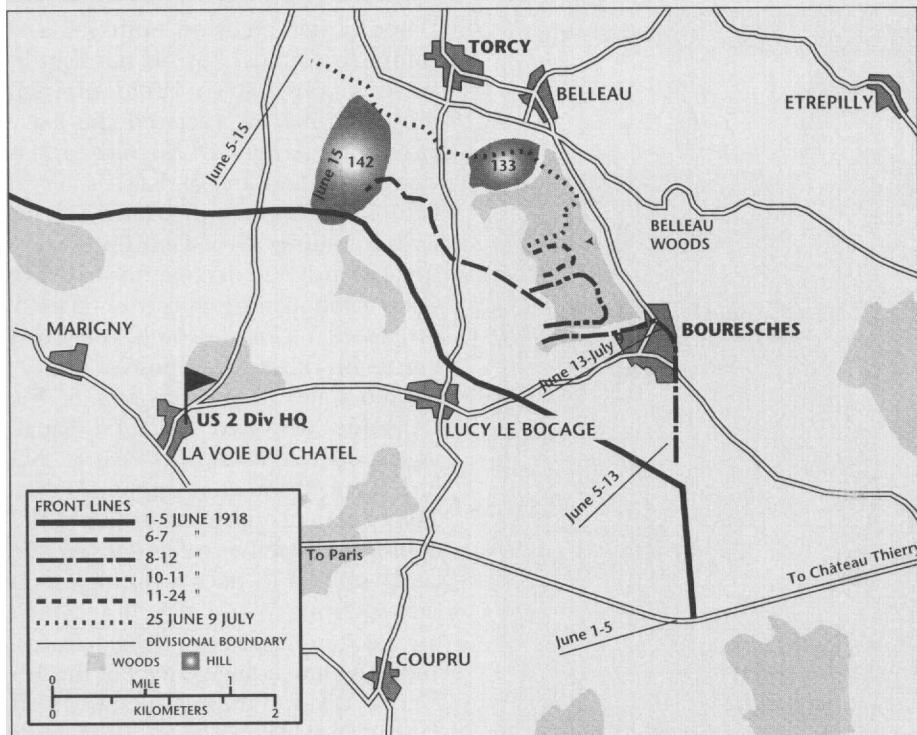
company. The night of the 23-24 the company was ordered to the woods northwest of Lucy as Brigade reserve, where it remained until the night of the 16th.

June 27 to July 9

On the night of the 26-27, the company relieved a company of the 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment, in the northern edge of Belleau Woods. Prior to the relief the enemy shelled the area near Lucy with gas, and it was necessary to wear gas masks while making the relief. During this tour in line, active patrolling was carried on, and the company constructed double apoxol barbed wire across the entire company front. The line was extended from the northern edge of Belleau Wood to the Belleau-Lucy Road. Enemy artillery and machineguns were very active. On the afternoon of July 2, Lieutenant Cates was detailed to take 80 men from the 2d Battalion and to proceed to Paris to participate in the July 4th parade; 20 men were taken from each company. The detachment returned the night of the 6-7. On the night of July 2-3 the 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment, extended its lines and relieved the 2d Battalion; the company moved to a support position northwest of Lucy, where it remained until the night of July 5-6. It was then relieved by a company of the 103rd Infantry, 26th Division, and the company moved to a reserve position in Grosjean Woods. On the night of July 6-7 the company moved to a position east of Bezu le Guery and occupied a defensive line in the second position until the night of the 9-10. On July 9, the command of the 2d Division area passed to the 26th Division, the 2d Division being held in reserve by the French, as the new enemy offensive was expected at any time.

Synopsis from June 1st to July 9th

The 2d Division was rushed into line and stopped the enemy's drive on Paris. Later it assumed the offensive and defeated some of the best German Divisions. Many prisoners, machineguns, and other equipment were captured.



Within six weeks the 96th Company had suffered terrific casualties: 2 Officers and 40 men were killed, and 5 officers and 273 men were wounded and gassed: a total of 320 casualties.

The following orders and articles of the French and German document, show the esteem they held for the troops of the United States Marines:

French Army Headquarters, dated June 30th, 1918: In view of the brilliant conduct of the 4th Brigade of the 2d Division, which in a spirited fight took Bouresches and the important point of the Bois-de-Belleau, the commanding officer of the Sixth French Army orders that henceforth the name of Bois-de-Belleau shall be "Bois de la Brigade de Marine."



General Clifton Bledsoe Cates, USMC at Belleau Wood June 1918

by GySgt Leo J. Daugherty III, USMCR

Belleau Wood was his initiation into the Corps, and the experience of war shaped his career.

Gen Clifton Bledsoe Cates, the 19th Commandant of the United States Marine Corps (1948-1951) and a highly decorated combat veteran of both World Wars I and II, commanded the 96th Company, 2d Battalion, 6th Marines during the battles for the town of Bouresches and Belleau Wood, blunting a series of determined German attacks and helping to derail the last major German offensive on the Western Front during World War I.

Gen Cates was born on 31 August 1893 in Tiptonville, TN. He attended preparatory school at the Missouri Military Academy prior to entering the University of Tennessee where he studied law and graduated with honors in 1916. While in college he lettered in both baseball and football and remained an avid sportsman his

entire life. Upon the U.S. declaration of war against Germany on 6 April 1917, Cates enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve. After he successfully completed training at Marine Barracks Port Royal, SC, and Quantico, he was commissioned a second lieutenant. Assigned as a platoon commander with the 96th Company of the 2d Battalion, 6th Marines, commanded by Maj Thomas Holcomb, 2dLt Cates embarked with the rest of the battalion for France in January 1918.

Upon entering the front-lines southeast of Verdun in March 1918, Holcomb's Marines quickly learned the



As a second lieutenant . . .