

WORLD WAR I

A Single Day of Combat for a Marine Corps Rifle Company

Story by J. Michael Miller · Photos courtesy of the author

This is the first of a two-part article.

Although long buried in the past, the faded memory of a brief day of battle in June 1918 still resonates for Marines today. The small overgrown stand of trees and surrounding fields remain silent witnesses of those events. After 87 years, the Battle of Belleau Wood remains a central icon to the United States Marine Corps and represents the finest traditions of one of the world's elite combat forces. Few events of the "war to end all wars" are imprinted on the American public, although the average American might remember the Battle of Belleau Wood.

Most of the realities of the battle are overshadowed by myth. For example, few people understand the place of Belleau

Wood within the entire Aisne-Marne battle. Even recent histories of the battle gloss over the events on the ground. The fighting often is reduced to a series of bayonet charges across open wheat fields into relentless German machine-gun fire, followed by days of hand-to-hand fighting.

Modern-day Marines make a pilgrimage to the battlefield to gain inspiration from the ground and drink from the Bulldog Fountain in the town of Belleau. Legend states that should a Marine drink from the fountain there, he will add 20 years to his life. It matters little that the town played only a secondary role in the battle and remained behind German lines during the fight. What matters is that Marines need to feel the connection between 1918 and today.

When the myth is stripped away to look

at the reality, that connection becomes even stronger. As in most situations, the truth is more poignant than the accompanying lore. A single Marine unit, the 83d Company, 3d Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, on a single day, 6 June 1918, exemplifies this truth.

The 83d Co formed in the mud and squalor of Marine Corps Base, Quantico, Va., on 1 Aug. 1917. The original commander of the unit was Captain Albert R. Sutherland, who commanded four platoons, totaling about 250 Marines. The platoon commanders were young college graduates with little military experience, and most of the men were new recruits fresh from the recruit depots at Paris Island, S.C. [the Marine Corps corrected the spelling to Parris Island in 1919], and Mare Island, Calif.



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Imparting the ways of the Corps to the new Marines fell to the senior noncommissioned officers. Sergeant Michael T. "Mickey" Finn was typical of the "old salts" of the company. A native of Pompei Smash, Md., Finn enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1915 to escape the coal mines of his hometown. Difficulties at home caused him to buy out his enlistment, but he rejoined the Marine Corps in 1917, shortly after war was declared. Known to his commanders as an "old-time noncommissioned officer of the highest type," Finn was "loyal, efficient and hard working."

Initial training of the unit consisted of rudimentary instruction, such as platoon and company skirmish drill, as well as close-order drill. Preparations for the Western Front proved to be again basic, such as the correct method of digging trenches, building barbed-wire entanglements and marksmanship with the rifle and machine gun.

Sgt Finn recalled, "We had a lot of close order drill and hiking with heavy marching packs. Marches would usually take us above the remount station, marching in step, singing songs and digging trenches." The training "hardened" the men to Marine Corps life and eventual battle in France.



On 24 Oct. 1917, 83d Co began its journey across the Atlantic by loading aboard a train to Philadelphia where the transports awaited it. On 12 Nov., the sight of the docks at the harbor of Brest signaled that 83d Co was in the war. The excitement on landing was tempered by a driving rain, and a night march was made more interesting by unforgiving French thornbushes.

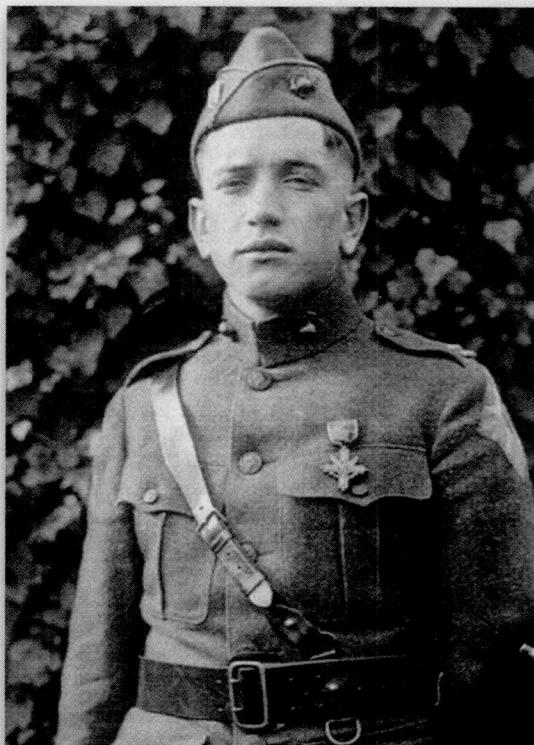
On reaching a rail station, the wet and tired Marines were loaded onto the famous 40-man boxcars with full packs, no benches and no head. After four days of hardtack and little water, the train finally halted in the area where the company was to train. A welcoming breakfast of coffee, a boiled potato and a crust of bread awaited them.

After several stints of guard and engi-

neering duty, training began with the French on 12 Jan. 1918. That winter prepared the Marines for their duty at the front. In addition, the men of 83d Co were made famous by their mascot, an anteater brought from Central America. After a period of trench duty in a quiet sector of the front, the company was pulled back in May 1918 to train for more open warfare, the final preparation for actual battle.

As the Marines trained in the French countryside, the German High Command launched a new offensive on 27 May 1918. Thirty German divisions breached the Allied front in an area held by only seven Allied divisions. The attack smashed through the line.

On 31 May 1918, 83d Co with the rest of the American 2d Division loaded aboard French camions and began a nonstop



Left: Captain Alfred H. Noble, who retired as a lieutenant general, took command of the 83d Co in France as a first lieutenant and led the company in the Battle of Belleau Wood. His oral history held at the Marine Corps University archives, Quantico, Va., is an invaluable asset for WW I researchers.

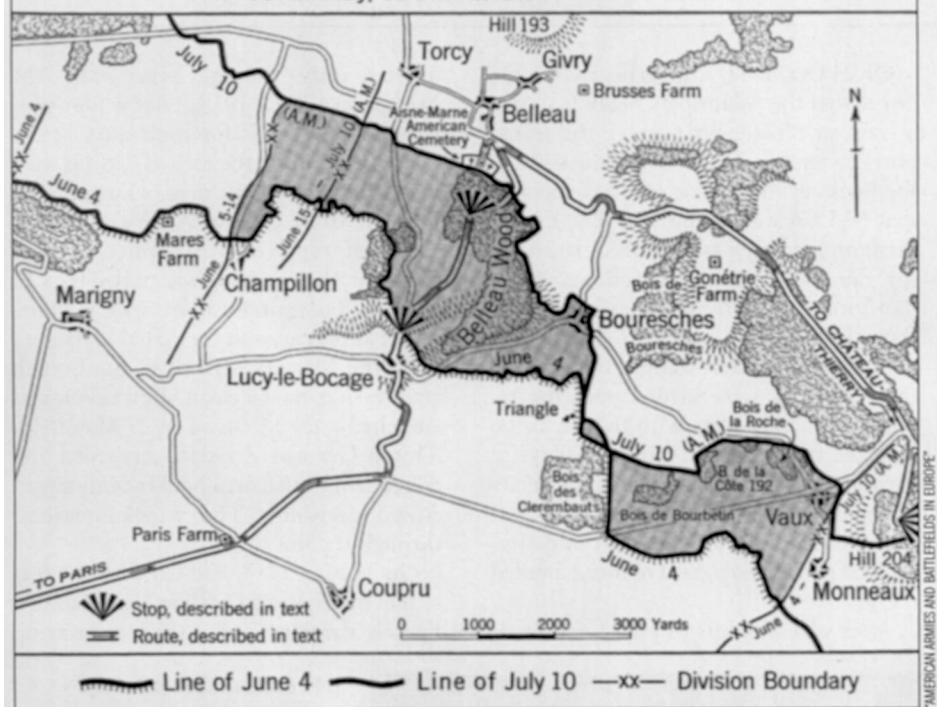


Leathernecks of the 83d Co (left) awaited an individual equipment inspection in France. They were known for their warfighting and their mascot, an anteater, held by an 83d Co Marine in the photo at right.

JIM NILO COLLECTION, MCL ARCHIVES

2d Division Operations, June 4-July 10, 1918

(7th Infantry, 3d Div. Attached June 15-23)



race to the front. Arriving in disorder on 1 June, the American units formed a line of battle behind the battered French line and began to dig in. Sgt Finn remembered the threatening sound of German artillery and the company unloading from its trucks into a farmer's field. "Just then, a shell hit in a plowed field and exploded. This was my baptism of fire," Finn said.

Several days of shelling and skirmishing followed, but the German advance halted around Belleau Wood. The French commander of that area decided to begin a series of local attacks. On 6 June, four battalions of Marines were ordered to clear Belleau Wood, seize the town of Bouresches and take the high ground beyond. The 83d Co was one of the units chosen to make the attack.

First Lieutenant Alfred H. Noble commanded 83d Co. A native of Federalsburg, Md., Noble attended St. John's College in Annapolis, Md., while it was a military school. A natural leader, Noble enlisted in the machine-gun company of the Maryland National Guard and found himself on the Mexican border once the guard was federalized. In the spring of 1917, Noble graduated and joined the Marine Corps in May. Despite having only one year in the Corps, Noble was a capable officer, notorious for his discipline. At 24 years of age, he assumed company command when

Capt Sutherland was detached to school just before the movement to Belleau Wood.

After being briefed by the battalion commander only minutes before the 5 p.m. time of attack, Noble called his executive officer and platoon leaders together. The target was Belleau Wood and then the town of Bouresches just beyond. Noble and his men would form the second line of attack, following Capt Dwight Smith's 82d Co at the proper intervals. Noble started forward with his executive officer and a runner, walking among the company, encouraging his men.

The company covered the 500 yards to the wood line with no casualties or any sign of the enemy. As the individual platoons passed into the forest, the tight organization of the company failed.

"It was impossible once one got into the woods to see for more than a few yards in any direction. Once we got into the wood ... it became a platoon leader's battle," recalled Second Lieutenant Louis F. Timmerman Jr.

Noble had trouble keeping his company together, but moved to the sound of the firing ahead. The 250 men of 83d Co tried to bolster the attack of 82d Co, but progress was slight.

As 83d Co came into line, the Germans began firing at the sound of the Marine advance, cutting down the leading files.

Noble's men could not see the machine guns in the wood.

"We went in bare-handed," Noble said, "and we got slaughtered." They could not penetrate the interlocking machine-gun fire. The Marine line of battle lacked the numbers to extend completely across the wood, so that the further the attack went into the forest, the more effective the German defenders were on the Marine line.

In the close combat in the woods, Noble tried to face his company into the heavy machine-gun fire, but command and control within the tree line proved to be almost impossible. Despite the best efforts of officers and men, 83d Co could move no deeper into the trees. The 83d Co took cover and then tried to pick off the German machine-gunner.

Private Edward J. Steinmetz soon brought down two German snipers, while Pvt Peter P. Bymers killed six German soldiers from his position, inspiring fellow Marines to continue the fight.

Gunnery Sergeant John Groff kept his platoon moving forward, despite the sight of one of his men being hit in the face by a bullet, which sliced off his chin. Groff took six of his men on a patrol into the woods and quickly ran into the main German position. He moved his Marines behind a pocket of boulders and crept behind the Germans, using rocks and underbrush as cover. Once in position, Groff ordered his men to attack. In a short, bloody struggle, five German machine guns and six prisoners were taken.

Second Lt Timmerman commanded the right rear platoon of 83d Co. Born in New York City, "Louie" Timmerman came from a wealthy family, his father being secretary of the Western Maryland Railroad. He prepared for college at Exeter Academy and entered Princeton University in 1915. When war was declared, he interrupted his studies at Princeton to join the Marine Corps on 5 July 1917. Timmerman joined 83d Co in August and was on a ship to France in October of that same year.

When he heard the sound of the heavy machine-gun fire, he led the platoon along a ravine to the right of the wood and lost contact with the rest of the company. He passed two Marine machine guns being set up in the tree line, but assumed that he was still in the rear rank of the assault, with at least his lead platoon of 83d Co ahead of him. In fact, the lone platoon was moving beyond the front of 83d Co and was passing across the front of the

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German main line of resistance. Timmerman worried he was not keeping up with his company and pressed his men forward.

"I advanced at an extremely rapid pace," he said, "even though there was thick underbrush and brambles—we just went through them."

Unknown to Timmerman, he was leading just two squads of his platoon. The other two peeled off to the left as they took fire from the German machine-gun line and attacked.

The movement through the woods was so rapid that the German outposts were overrun. "I practically stepped on two German enlisted men," Timmerman recalled. "Their position was under a piece of shrubbery or bush I walked right onto."

The first lieutenant never paused, sending the prisoners to the rear with one guard. Suddenly, his two squads burst into the open, overlooking Bouresches. The Marines had swept through the southern end of Belleau Wood and were on the east edge of the forest.

Timmerman saw the town as his target, only 400 yards away. However, he was taking casualties that further depleted what was left of his platoon. Pvt Charles Henry ran to Timmerman, shouting that a bullet had just struck him, but he had located a German machine-gun position. Timmerman sent the bloody private to the rear, formed his men into a skirmish line and charged out into the field.

The German reaction was instantaneous. Machine-gun fire erupted from the town, causing Timmerman to halt his men behind a mound of earth only 50

yards into the field. The first lieutenant realized that he and his men were alone. No other Marines were in sight, not 82d Co or any other platoons of his own unit. Before Timmerman could decide on his next course of action, Pvt Henry reappeared, shouting, "The woods were full of Germans behind us."

Although believing the private, Timmerman tried to downplay the danger, worrying that his men would lose their fighting spirit. German machine-gun and rifle fire erupted from the tree line to end the debate, and Marines began to fall to the ground. A Marine private took a bullet through the forehead and died kneeling against a dirt mound.

"A man to my immediate left was hit, groaning and dropping his head to the ground," remembered Timmerman. He knew if his Marines remained in the field any longer, they all would be casualties. The first lieutenant leapt to his feet and "shouted to the platoon to follow [him]."

Timmerman raced the 50 yards back to the tree line unscathed and found himself standing over a German machine-gun position. He immediately jumped into the ditch and "waded into the nearest ones with my very heavy boots which were steel tipped." The frightened Germans cowered under his blows, kneeling "on the ground and begging for mercy."

Pvt Ira O. Arbuckle jumped in after him, and 17 German soldiers surrendered to the Marines with their two machine guns, frightened by the sudden appearance of the Marine platoon's fixed bayonets. The Marines stripped off the German soldiers'

Marines manned a captured German machine gun after the Battle of Belleau Wood.



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2dLt "Louie" Timmerman gave the order to fire and the German advance disappeared, leaving the seven Marines masters of one small section of Belleau Wood.

equipment, and Timmerman armed himself with two German Luger pistols.

Just at that moment, GySgt Hurley appeared with three Marines from the leading platoon of 83d Co. Timmerman ordered Hurley to escort the prisoners back to the rear while he turned his men back to the original objective: the town of Bouresches.

The Marines charged back into the field to the same cover as before; the dirt mound was littered with Marine casualties. Just as before, German fire exploded from the town, and just as before, a wave of bullets came from the woods behind, this time from a small hill to the north. The fire devastated the Marine platoon, with one round tearing into Timmerman's face and knocking him to the ground. Dazed and bleeding, he saw most of his few Marines sinking to the ground, dead or wounded.

Timmerman staggered to his feet and then called his remaining men to follow him back to the safety of the tree line. He reached the woods safely and returned to the captured German position without further injury, followed by the rest of his platoon. Of the 56 men who began the assault that morning, only six were left standing.

The officers of the 83d Co realized they were fortunate to have survived the Battle of Belleau Wood. Seated, left to right, are 1stLt Noble, 1stLt David I. Garrett, who joined from the Replacement Battalion on 10 June 1918, and 2dLt Louis Timmerman.

Once the Marines reached the safety of the trees, the captured machine guns were turned to face the inevitable German counterattack. As soon as Timmerman gave the order to turn the machine guns around, he noticed a file of German soldiers moving through the trees toward the Marine position. He ordered his six men to cover and waited for the Germans to approach within 40 yards. He gave the order to fire and the German advance disappeared, leaving the seven Marines masters of one small section of Belleau Wood.

With the immediate German threat disposed of, Timmerman sent one of his men back with a message to battalion command, leaving only six Marines holding the position. The sounds of battle continued to echo through the trees, but no enemy appeared. Suddenly, small groups of Marines from 47th Co arrived in bands of two and three men. The men were separated from their company on the far side of the woods and had worked their way along the German front line until they were on the edge of the trees. More Marines joined Timmerman until he had approximately 40 men. As darkness approached, Tim-

merman felt confident he would hold his position.

As the sun set on 6 June 1918, 83d Co, specifically Timmerman's platoon, was the only unit to break through the German defenses of Belleau Wood. That distinction came with the loss of many Marines. There is still no definitive list of company casualties. Every member of the company went into battle, including the company clerks. By the end of June, it was impossible to tally accurately the number of men lost on 6 June. The best sources list 51 casualties in the assault.

The accomplishments of 83d Co were recognized and rewarded by the commanders of the 4th Marine Brigade. Lieutenants Noble and Timmerman and GySgt Groff, along with six other Marines of 83d Co, received the Army Distinguished Service Cross and Navy Cross for their action on the day of 6 June.

The 83d Co went on to fight and suffer many casualties in the following days of the Battle of Belleau Wood and serve with distinction in numerous WW I battles. After occupation duty in Germany, the company returned to Quantico. Then a captain, Noble had the solemn duty of sending the men home.

"I disbanded the company myself and gave the discharge papers to every man," Noble remembered in 1968. "I put them on the train ... and waved goodbye to all of 'em. ... There I stood, nobody but me. I remember at the time saying to myself, 'This is really a dramatic moment.' "

Author's note: The company lives on today as Co K, 3d Bn, 6th Marines and is stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C., as part of the Second Marine Division. Reconstituted in 1922, Co K served in China in 1937; Iceland in 1941; in the Pacific on Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Saipan and Tinian in WW II; the Cuban Missile Crisis; Desert Storm and in the mountains of Afghanistan.

Editor's note: Part II, in the December magazine, will describe personal impacts of the war on the leathernecks of 83d Co and their families.

J. Michael Miller is the senior archivist at the Marine Corps University's Gray Research Center in Quantico, Va. He authored a Marine Corps Heritage Foundation award-winning three-part series commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Boxer Rebellion for Leatherneck's June, July and August 2000 issues.

