

WORLD WAR I

A Single Day of Combat for a Marine Corps Rifle Company

The Memory

By J. Michael Miller

This is the final part of a two-part article.

The echoes of 6 June continued to haunt the 83d Company in 1918. The memories of that day initially came to the fore dealing with company casualties. Each Marine lost on 6 June caused a ripple across the Atlantic to each and every family. With the severe losses of the company, battalion and brigade and the lengthy period of action, casualty reporting was very rudimentary. Company clerks became casualties themselves, and incomplete lists of the killed and wounded were sent back to Headquarters Marine Corps.

The new Marines at the Casualty Branch of Headquarters, assigned to notify the families of Marine casualties, were overwhelmed by the unexpected number of men lost in combat. By the end of September 1918, more than 4,000 Marines were casualties, and each case required three or four letters to parents and relatives. Despite the overwhelming task, the Commandant, Major General George Barnett, signed at least one personal letter to each family.

A case in point was that of Private Arthur N. Fauble. Enlisting in the Marine Corps on 30 May 1917, at age 25, Fauble left his trade as a stonemason in Akron, Ohio. He learned the trade of a Marine at what is today Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, S.C., and then was assigned to the 83d Co at Quantico, Va. Five months after his enlistment, he was in France with his company.

Fauble's luck was not good in France. He had the mumps for almost the entire month of March 1918. After he recovered in April, Fauble became one of the first casualties of 6th Marines when he was overcome by the explosion of gas shells during the brigade's introduction to trench warfare, but returned to the company at the end of the month.

Pvt Fauble was killed during the 6 June

stating, "I gave my son for his country, and I think I should at least have the body. I can bury it in the same cemetery with his brothers and where I expect to be buried. ... Please send the body of my son to me."

In 1922, work began to remove Fauble from a temporary grave in the Belleau Wood Cemetery, but the graves registration party found the body of another Marine within the grave. In 1926, the Quartermaster General speculated that Fauble still rested in the original burial area, but his body never was found.

Another of the men killed in the assault was Pvt Carl Williams, entering his sixth month as a Marine. When war was declared, Williams was a farmer and also worked in his father's cannery in Waynesville, N.C., a small town nestled in the mountains. One of eight children, he was fiercely patriotic and determined to fight for his country. He left home to join the Corps in December 1917 and never returned to his valley in the Smoky Mountains. He was killed, with his body so obliterated that only his identification discs could be found.

In 1921, the Quartermaster General determined that Williams might be among the unknown, isolated Marine bodies discovered after the battle and placed in the Aisne-Marne Cemetery. This news was of little comfort to the family. Their loss was so crushing that the family spoke little of Williams after his death; the mention of his name was too painful. They erected a large headstone in Green Hill



MSgt PHIL MEHRINGER

On 30 June 1918, after the Battle of Belleau Wood, General Jean Degoutte, commanding the French Sixth Army, declared, "Henceforth in all official papers, Belleau Wood shall bear the name, 'Bois de la Brigade de Marine.'" The name, which translates to "Wood of the Marine Brigade," is on the brick wall at the entrance to the wood.

assault on Belleau Wood, but his body was not found until 1 July. His family learned of his death that summer, and family grieving began. Although divorced, his mother and father both wished for his remains to be returned to Ohio. The tragedy deepened when his father passed away in 1919 before his son's body could be returned home.

In 1921 Mrs. Seeley (Fauble's mother) sent a forlorn letter to the Marine Corps,



The Germans had prepared deep defensive trench lines inside Belleau Wood. The Marines dug a line of shallow pits, which they called "foxholes," when they consolidated their positions inside the wood. (Photo courtesy of J. Michael Miller)

Cemetery in Waynesville to mark his loss. As a means of some closure, Ruth Maney Williams visited the Aisne-Marne Cemetery in 1931 in the company of other Gold Star mothers.

Corporal Marion Maxey Collier, a native of Fort Worth, Texas, lost his life during the attack on 6 June. Both of Collier's parents passed away when he was a young child, so his uncle, a graduate of the Naval Academy in 1884, raised him. Collier was just short of his 23rd birthday when he enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1917. The young Texan left his work as a civil engineer to become a Marine private. He was quick to learn military life and was appointed corporal only four months after his enlistment. Tattoos on both his arms no doubt added to his prowess in the 83d Co ranks.

On 25 June 1918, Boyd T. Collier, a brother of Marion, received the fateful telegram stating that he had been killed in battle. MajGen Barnett offered the family members "my heartfelt sympathy in your great loss. Your brother nobly gave his life in service of his country." Collier's two brothers and two sisters wrote back to the Commandant, asking for "our dear boy's belongings," and saying, "This poor fellow's death is an awful blow to us. While we are proud to be able to give this noble brother in the service of our wonderful country, it is a sad, sad day for us."

The lack of information about their brother particularly upset Collier's family. They tried to learn the details of his death and where he was buried but to no avail. The exact date of his death proved elusive, simply listed as between 6 and 8

June. On 2 Sept. 1918, a one-paragraph letter revealed the date as 6 June and that his remains were buried in the ravine where he fell, near Belleau Wood. No word ever was received from France. A death certificate dated 31 May 1919 noted that Collier was killed by multiple gunshot wounds and temporarily buried on 9 June 1918.

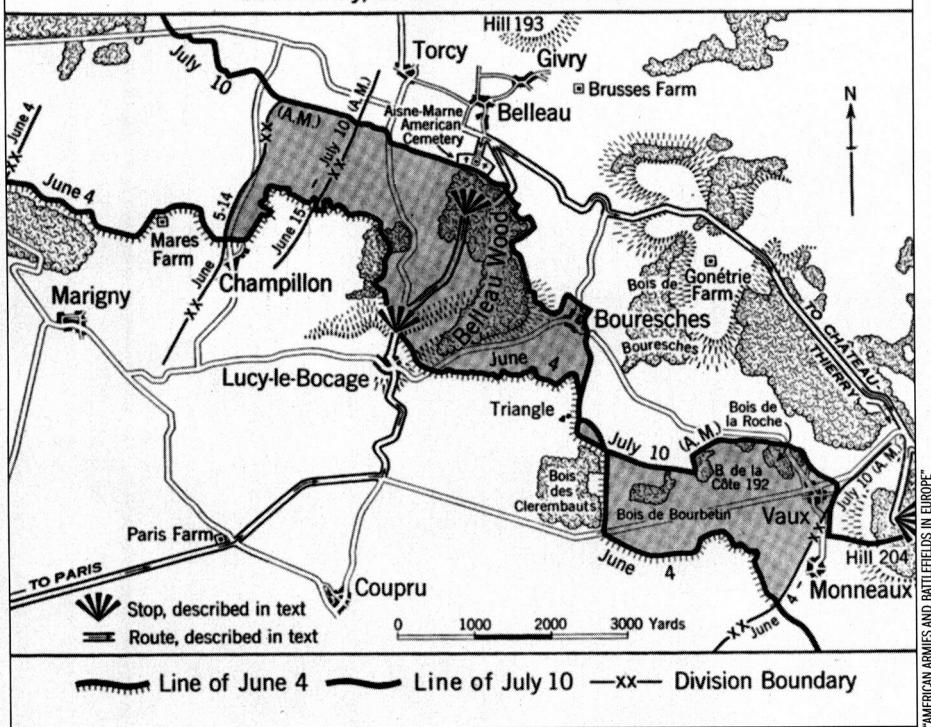
Just as poignant was the fate of Second Lieutenant Richard W. Murphy from Greensboro, Ala. "Murphy was a great, powerfully built man of about 6 feet 2 inches," remembered a fellow lieutenant. "An extremely rugged frame ... of complete steel muscle." Murphy entered Virginia Military Institute in 1911, but was dismissed for deserting two days before Christmas 1912. He graduated from Marion Military Institute and was reinstated

"This poor fellow's death is an awful blow to us. While we are proud to be able to give this noble brother in the service of our wonderful country, it is a sad, sad day for us."

—*Siblings of Cpl Marion Maxey Collier to Commandant, MajGen George Barnett*

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

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



to VMI in 1913. Murphy achieved the rank of first sergeant of his cadet company, but the following year he was dismissed again for striking an instructor and "gross excess demerits."

Murphy studied at Alabama Polytechnic Institute, now Auburn University, but left after only three terms. Still seeking his place in life, he began work in the steel mills of Alabama, which led him to Youngstown, Ohio, where he worked for the Republic Iron and Steel Company.

When war was declared, Murphy traveled to New York to take the examination to be a Marine officer. He was accepted by the Marine Corps, becoming a second lieutenant in August 1917. The rough fields of Quantico proved to Murphy that he had found his true calling in life. In the first days of occupying the front lines, Murphy lived up to the nickname given him by the 83d Company, "Roaring Richard."

In the trees and boulders of Belleau Wood, Murphy led his men forward. "He was always hankering for a fight," a fellow lieutenant remembered. Another friend wrote, "When the orders to advance came, he would not turn back, and the only thing that would stop him would be a bullet." Lt "Dick" Murphy led his platoon directly into the German machine-gun position. There the fight raged with great

fury, each man able to look his enemy full in the eye as he fired his weapon.

Murphy took position to the front of his men. Charging farther into the woods, he took a full burst of German machine-gun bullets in his stomach. The impact knocked the Marine lieutenant to the ground, where he lay bloody but still conscious. Murphy was pulled to the rear by his men and sent to the aid station.

He never saw his company again. The young man died from massive wounds the following day in the hospital. His death was not reported to the company, who listed him as missing in action. On 14 June a telegram notified his family that he was severely wounded, but no other details of his condition were known. Friends and family received no word of his fate until 17 June, when his grave was located near the field hospital.

A telegram from MajGen Barnett advised the family of their loss and ended by stating, "Your son nobly gave his life in the defense of his country." The family immediately attempted to bring their loved one home. Today he rests in the shaded family plot in the town cemetery of Greensboro.

The survivors of that day in Belleau also were haunted by their long memories. Gunnery Sergeant John Groff was

typical of the senior enlisted Marines of the 83d Co in 1918. Groff enlisted in the Marine Corps in 1912 after completing two years of high school in Syracuse, N.Y. He learned his trade at Vera Cruz, Santo Domingo, and Haiti before leaving the Marine Corps in 1916.

When the war began, Groff returned to the Corps and helped in forming the company at Quantico in 1917. After a distinguished career in the Marine Corps that spanned both World Wars, Groff lived to be more than 100 years old and retired as a brigadier general in 1946. The bloody images of dying Marines in Belleau Wood would haunt this great Marine forever.

While 6 June was not Groff's first day of combat, the effects of that day were apparent in an oral history interview almost 70 years later. Despite his experience, Groff was surprised by the ferocity of the German defense. "Before we knew it, we had lost half our men," Groff recalled. "Men were bleeding to death and begging that something be done for them, and we couldn't do it. We had to go forward, or we would have been wounded. Men were dying; you couldn't do nothing. ... All we had was the Springfield rifle."

Groff was impressed by the courage of the young lieutenants of the company. "They didn't know much about the Corps; all they did was lead; lead, that was all." Watching the Marines of his company go down under the machine-gun fire proved the hardest part of the fight for Groff. Even after almost seven decades, the memories caused tears to flow down the face of the general.

The experience of combat in France had a profound effect on First Lieutenant Davis A. Holladay, becoming a cornerstone of his life. He forever was proud of his Marine Corps experience. He was severely wounded at Belleau Wood and later at Soissons and was eventually medically retired from the Marine Corps in 1919. With the advent of World War II, Holladay again entered the Marine Corps and remained on duty as an administrative officer until retiring as a major in 1946.

On 6 June, Pvt Bernard "Steve" Schwedke was wounded severely during the attack on Belleau Wood. He could recall in an interview in 1979 the details of the attack, although not the exact date. "We were entering the Bois de Belleau," he remembered. "The Germans cut down about half of us, and I was shot in the leg

Lt Richard W. Murphy took position to the front of his men. Charging farther into the woods, he took a full burst of German machine-gun bullets in his stomach.

and head. I found out later that a Gold Star had been hung in Grand Rapids, Wisconsin, and memorial services held. I'm glad I didn't deserve that."

As the years passed by, perspective on the war changed. Sergeant Michael T. "Mickey" Finn, one of the original members of the company, remained in the Marine Corps after WW I and became the first master gunnery sergeant in Marine Corps history. Among his 12 campaigns were three tours in Nicaragua, with the award of the Silver Star and Nicaragua Medal of Merit. Finn also was renowned as a marksman with the pistol and rifle, representing the Marine Corps in numerous competitions. He retired in 1948, and became a local legend, living just outside



COURTESY OF J. MICHAEL MILLER

Second Lt Richard W. Murphy, known for leading from the front and continually pressing forward, was one among many who did not survive the charge into Belleau Wood.

the Marine base at Quantico until passing away in 1983, just short of his 90th birthday.

In the years just before his death, memories of 1918 still remained with Finn. His last wish was to meet some of the German soldiers he fought against in France. "I'd like to sit down and drink a bottle of beer with them," he allowed. "I'd enjoy talking with them."

Asked in 1981 how he would like to be remembered, Finn simply stated, "A Marine. Yes, sir, ... that's what I want to be remembered as."

Today, Marine Corps League Detachment 333 bears the name Mickey T. Finn, and every day Marines read his name as they drive past the league building just outside the main gate of Marine Corps Base, Quantico.

Perhaps the Marine with the most perspective on 6 June 1918 was the company commander, Alfred Noble. He served in

the Marine Corps until 1956, when he retired as a lieutenant general. LtGen Noble served in both staff and line positions in places like Haiti and Cuba after WW I and then with the 3dMarDiv in WW II. Despite all the service he had seen, LtGen Noble could recall many years later the memory of his days at Belleau Wood with great clarity. In his oral history interview in 1973, the horror of that day was crystal clear. "We'd have gone into anything; we just didn't care how much it was," the general recalled. "[We] never stopped at all until we were just decimated, and we couldn't go any further."

The 83d Co is now "Kilo" Co, 3d Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment. Captain Christopher P. O'Connor commanded the company in combat in Afghanistan and recognized the tradition of arms that he has inherited. "I believe it has helped to give this company a little more identity," Capt O'Connor stated as he reviewed the record of his company in WW I. He continued, "Having a connection with our forebrothers-in-arms and the accomplishments and sacrifices that they have made is always a welcome reminder of our duties and responsibilities."

Capt O'Connor drilled the target dead center with his comments. "Having a connection" with Marines who have gone before is the underpinning of the Corps. That connection has been aptly described as "the Spirit of Semper Fidelis" by author and restauranteur Maj Richard T. "Rick" Spooner, USMC (Ret).

In his short essay "Leathernecks," Colonel John W. Thomason Jr., a decorated hero of WW I and famed author and illustrator, noted that the WW I Marines consisted of a "number of diverse people who ran curiously to type, with drilled shoulders and a bone-deep sunburn, and a tolerant scorn of nearly everything on earth. Their speech was flavored with Navy words, and words culled from all the folk who live on the seas and the ports where our warships go.

"They were the old breed of American regular, regarding the service at home and war as an occupation; and they transmitted their temper and character and view-point to the high-hearted volunteer mass which filled the ranks of the Marine Brigade."

Editor's note: 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 magazines.

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