

Battle of Belleau Wood

“Retreat, Hell! We just got here.”

by LtCol Michael “Kiwi” Kelly, USMC(Ret)

For any attempt to learn, the lesson needs to be placed in its true context to make the learning experience of value. The following is offered as a primer to help put Belleau Wood in its proper context. To better understand the battle, we need to understand the following:

1. The Battle.
2. The Wood.
3. The Allies.
4. The Joint Environment.
5. The Enemy.
6. Ourselves.

The Battle

Strategic level. The year was 1918. The Germans sought a decision on the Western Front before the weight of the U.S. forces, the AEF (American Expeditionary Forces), would have an impact. They transferred approximately a half million troops from the Eastern (Russian) Front over the winter of 1917–1918 with the objective of forcing the British to withdraw from the continent. They sought to achieve this through a series of offensives that would draw the French strategic reserves to protect Paris. An exhausted France, abandoned by its British ally, was expected to seek a negotiated settlement.

Operational level. The 1918 German campaign plan consisted of five offenses, Operation BLUCHER, the Aisne-Marne offensive, being the third. The German advance toward Château-



Gen Clifton B. Cates, Commandant 1948–51.
(Official Marine Corps photo.)

Thierry brought the Germans closer to Paris than they had been since the opening campaign of the war in 1914. The French requested, and received, the 2nd and 3rd U.S. Infantry Divisions to help stem the German tide in the Aisne-Marne region, in the vicinity of Château-Thierry.

The 3rd Infantry Division blocked the German advance in the vicinity of Château-Thierry. The 2nd Infantry Di-

vision was positioned to the west with the Marine Brigade assigned the sector around Belleau Wood and the 3rd Infantry Brigade centered on Vaux. There was no deliberate decision to assign the woods to the Marines; units were initially placed as they arrived. The Paris-Metz highway was designated a unit boundary, with units later consolidated and repositioned.

The Wood

Belleau Wood is little more than three kilometers in length, only one kilometer at its widest point. At the start of the battle, the woods were full and lush; three weeks later, they resembled a plantation of toothpicks. While the trees could absorb blast and shrapnel, a direct hit by artillery transformed them into thousands of deadly wooden fléchettes. While the surrounding farmers' fields are gently rolling pastures, much of the wood's interior is compartmentalized terrain, often resembling a mini-Bridgeport. Even with today's technology, C2 (command and control) of anything larger than a platoon would prove challenging. The wood was neither tactically nor strategically significant in itself; it was the battle of opposing wills for psychological dominance that underscored its importance.

Your Allies

On 3 June, by Les Mares farm, four kilometers west of Belleau Wood, Capt Lloyd Williams, 51st Company Commander, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, uttered the now-famous refrain, “Retreat, Hell! We just got here!” to a retreating French officer. As Marines, the concept of retreat is foreign, but putting

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Then-MajGen Thomas Holcomb, Commandant 1936–43. (Official Marine Corps photo.)

this French retreat into context is important to both the battle itself and our interaction with allies today. The Allies had endured four years of high-intensity combat, sustaining casualties barely fathomable today. The British attack along the Somme on 1 July 1916, partially designed to relieve the pressure on the French in the vicinity of Verdun, suffered approximately 80,000 casualties; of those, 19,600 were killed in action. Had the British continued at this rate for another two and a half days, they would have equaled the total U.S. killed in a decade in Vietnam (approximately 58,000). During these 1918 offenses, the French Army had witnessed the German Army take in a matter of days what had taken them months and huge casualties to capture in the previous two years. In Operation BLUCHER, the German 6th Army (seventeen-plus divisions) had achieved complete surprise and shattered the French 7th Army (ten divisions), which had foolishly massed its forces in the forward trenches. Once penetrated, the demoralized French fell back toward Château-Thierry.

The fact that the French had held the shoulders of the salient at Reims and the vicinity of Soissons created a favorable condition for the Allied counterattack in July that began the front-wide retrograde of German forces on the Western Front.

LtCol Logan Feland, Executive Officer, 5th Marines, noted that some Marines were hanging out at the regimental command post longer than required, delaying their return to their units engaged in the wood, this after only a few days of intense fighting; compare four days to the four years the French had endured. At this stage of the war, the British were suffering 70,000 casualties per month; the French, 112,000.

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We can question why the French pushed the attack on Belleau Wood, severely limiting the Marines' preparations; in many cases, battalions were conducting assaults with almost no warning or preparation. The answer is threefold. First, there was the pre-war French doctrine that emphasized the offensive, or *élan*. Second, the French were desperate to reclaim French territory, and with fresh American forces, they had the assets to press the occupying Germans. Third, the French knew

from costly experience that the longer they delayed the attack, the more time the Germans had to strengthen their defenses, making future assaults all the more costly.

In an era of increasing coalition warfare, it is essential that we understand the culture, experiences, and doctrine of our partners as well as the enemy.

The Joint Environment

The 4th (Marine) Brigade, commanded by an Army brigadier at Belleau Wood, fought the entire war as part of the U.S. Army's 2nd Infantry Division, which was later commanded, from August until the armistice in November 1918, by Marine Gen John A. Lejeune. The Marine Brigade included the Army's 2nd Engineer Battalion, which fought alongside Marines through to the last night of the war, building pontoon bridges to support the 5th Marines' crossing of the Meuse. Marine air did not fly in support of the Brigade, serving in the Azores and Belgium. Fires were provided by a combination of the French Air Force, U.S. Army, and French Army artillery units.

The 2nd Infantry Division was rated as one of the top three U.S. Army divisions in WWI, along with the 1st and 26th Divisions. The 2nd Infantry Division suffered the most casualties, saw the third most days in combat, and captured the highest toll of enemy prisoners. The official heraldry of the 2nd Infantry Division is the "Indian Head," which has been incorporated into several 5th and 6th Marines' unit logos.

Your Enemy

The German Army in 1918 was an exhausted but still-determined adversary. It was well led and could draw upon four years of experience. By 1918, the strength of a German division was less than half a U.S. division. A Marine battalion could put more Marines into the fight than a German regiment, but what the Germans lacked in manpower, they made up for in firepower, possessing a higher percentage of machine guns per unit. The Marines would face elements of five German divisions at Belleau Wood. The units the Marines engaged in the woods were, for the most

part, commanded by Maj Josef Bischoff, recipient of the Iron Cross 1st Class in 1915 and awarded the Germans' highest medal, the Pour Le Mérite, for his leadership at Belleau Wood. Maj Bischoff was ideally suited to lead the Germans here, having experienced jungle warfare in German East Africa (today's Tanzania), perfect preparation for the close-quarter fighting in the woods.

Many of our doctrinal concepts in *MCDP 1, Warfighting* (Washington, DC: HQMC, 1997), can be directly traced back to the tactical innovations of the German Army between 1916 and 1918 (enemy focus, surface and gaps, mission tactics).

Yourselves

In 1917, the Corps totaled 17,400 Marines. By the end of the war, we were 79,500; of those, 32,000 served in France, along with 330 Navy personnel. Gen Smedley Butler led a second brigade of Marines during the occupation of Germany after the armistice. Other Marines continued to serve around the globe. Initially, the Marines utilized the "triangle" formation of three platoons, three companies, but in compliance with the U.S. Army, they adopted the British "box" formation with four platoons and four companies per battalion. Companies were numbered, not alphabetized. As an example, 2d Bn, 6th Marine's four rifle companies



MajGen Wendell C. Neville, Commandant 1929–1930. (DOD photo (USMC) 302062.)



Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., Commandant 1952–55. (DOD photo (USMC) A402516.)

were numbered 78th, 79th, 80th, and the 96th, the 96th being added when the Marines transitioned to the box, or four-company battalion. Familiar names such as Parris Island and Quantico became Marine installations during the war.

At Belleau Wood, four future Commandants (1stLt Clifton B. Cates, 1stLt Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., Maj Thomas Holcomb, Col Wendell C. Neville) would see action, as would many of the regimental and divisional commanders who would lead us across the Pacific. Four Medals of Honor would be awarded, two to Marine Gunnery Sergeants, two to U.S. Navy officers, one a dentist serving on the front lines. On the opening day of the battle of Belleau Wood, 6 June, the Marines would suffer 1,087 casualties, more than had been lost in the 143 years since our founding on 10 November 1775, and such a bloody day would not be suffered again until the assault on Tarawa—20 November 1943. During the 22 days of Belleau Wood, Marines would suffer 1,062 killed in action, with a total casualty count of 9,036, more than the initial number of Marines in the Brigade on 6 June.

importance of the battle for Belleau Wood is questionable. What would have happened had the 2nd and 3rd Infantry Divisions not blocked the German advance crossing the Marne is open for debate. The origin of the term "Devil Dogs" is debatable; no matter, we are not about to change that. What is not questionable is the psychological importance of this fight; it buoyed our exhausted Allies and extinguished any hope of the Germans that the American Expeditionary Force could not fight. Surviving German records attest to the bravery, marksmanship, and even recklessness of the individual Marine; there is no debate there. Our initial tactics, C2, and decisions may have been questionable, but the Marines learned and adapted. For the Corps, Belleau Wood and subsequent battles shaped the next generation of senior leadership that would take us across the island-hopping Pacific campaign of World War II. Without the lessons of World War I, we would not have been prepared for World War II; they did not forget. Nor can we. *Semper Fidelis.*



Conclusion

In the overall course of the war, the

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