Belleau Wood Revisited

Here's where I set up my machine guns. As you can see, I could cover the entire road between Bussiares and Champillon Farm from here. I used the heavy wooden shutters from the farmhouse to our rear as overhead support for the earth we piled on our gun positions. I knew the Germans would be after me pretty soon and wanted to provide my men as much cover as possible. And remember, he who digs the fastest lives the longest!

The speaker is BGen Victor France Bleasdale, USMC(Ret), winner of two Navy Crosses and the Army Distinguished Service Cross. We are standing on a hill just north of Champillon Farm and he is recounting his activities of 31 May–1 June 1918. The farmhouse has not changed in 60 years. It still has shell holes through its roof. One wing is nothing more than a burned out skeleton. The cellar where the wounded were

by Col Richard H. Esau, Jr.

A visit to a historic battleground with a veteran of the action is a privilege few Marines are accorded.

sheltered still lies open to the elements. In the small part of the house left untouched by German artillery lives 65-year-old Emile Richard—the same Emile Richard, who as a 5-year-old was present when the 24-year-old Lt Bleasdale spoke with his father over half a century ago. To our right as we look towards Bouresches is Belleau Wood, which, like Champillon Farm and the intervening terrain, has not really changed in 60 years. LtCol Philip C. Mikkelson, assistant naval attache in Paris, Mr. James Neill, superintendent of the Aisne-Marne American Military Cemetery at Belleau Wood, I, and our wives are enthralled by Gen Bleasdale's word pictures. It is once again 31 May 1918 and the German Army is on its way to Paris. Only untried Americans stand in its way. The Germans have only to chew up these Americans, as they have the French, and the Marne River Valley and Paris to the southwest are theirs. World War I is just about over, and Germany is going to be victorious.

We all know they weren't victorious. We also know how great a part the 4th Marine Brigade of the Army's 2d Division played in halting the German offensive. But what is not generally known today is just how great a part these Marines played in ensuring the future of the Corps as we know it today. Gen Bleasdale's account made it all very clear.

The first Marine units into the Belleau Wood area were the machinegunners of the 15th Company, 6th Machine Gun Battalion (The Army later designated them Company A). The battalion had 48 guns, 4 companies of 12 guns each. The 15th was under the command of Capt Matthew Kingman. Gen Bleasdale believes they arrived in the early afternoon hours of 31 May 1918, rather than 1 June as reported in some histories. In any event, Capt Kingman positioned his guns along the high ground northeast of Champillon Farm anchoring his left flank on the Champillon/Bussiares road with the right flank extending toward Lucy le Bocage.

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Gen Bleasdale renews a friendship with 65-year-old Emile Richard.

Lt Bleasdale's guns held down the left flank. As his men began to dig-in, machinegun fire could be heard off the north and northeast. There were no signs of the French who were supposed to be in position just north of the Marines. As work continued on his positions and Monsieur Richard's shutters were put in place, Lt Bleasdale began to reconnoiter the local area. Soon he came upon a French sergeant machinegunner and his 20 men who were moving north toward Bussiares. They had that weariest of looks that come to soldiers who have been in the frontlines too long. Their breathing was affected by the high explosive fumes they had ingested over the preceding weeks. The effect was not unlike that caused by gas shells. As they rested beside the road, Bleasdale questioned their leader about the location of other French units using the French he had learned during his years fighting Haitian guerrillas. The sergeant knew nothing of other French units but like all good soldiers was "marching to the sound of the guns." His men had little to eat but did have some red wine. Bleasdale offered a $20 gold piece for a canteen of the wine thinking his men would enjoy a drink after their hard work.* The French sergeant refused, saying he had the wine to enjoy today but was unsure he would be around to enjoy the gold piece tomorrow. With that, he moved off up the road. Bleasdale then returned to his gun positions dismayed that the Frenchmen showed so much battle fatigue.

Once he had laid his guns, Lt Bleasdale asked Capt Kingman if he could move forward and locate the French lines. His experiences in Haiti had alerted him something was wrong. He could hear small arms fire coming closer but not one casualty had come down the Bussiares/Champillon road. Where were the French? Receiving permission, he moved overland using the tree lines and draws—terrain resembling that of his father's Wisconsin farm—to the road which runs west to east between Bussiares and Chateau Belleau. Reaching the road after traveling 2½ kilometers, he came upon the French sergeant he had met earlier. He and his men were digging-in on the southern shoulder. Again he asked where the French lines were.

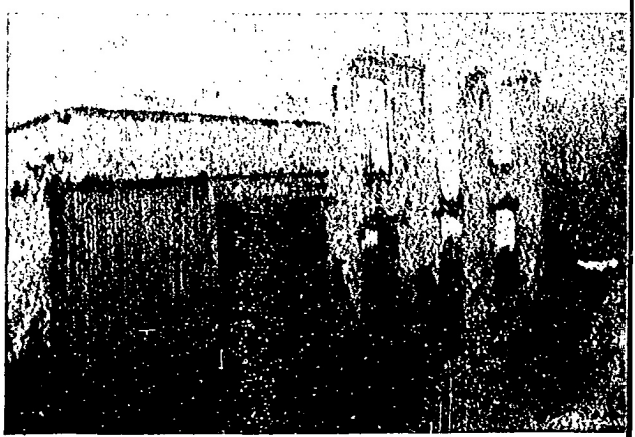
"Ici" (Here), replied the Frenchman.

"Ou est le Boche?" (Where are the Germans?), Lt Bleasdale inquired.

Without raising his voice from a low monotone, the French sergeant pointed to the north toward Courchamps and responded, "Regardez—vous le Boche" (See you the Germans).

As he looked up, Bleasdale could see German troops running toward Bussiares. The French lines in the Belleau Wood area consisted of the sergeant and his 20 men. Only they and the elements of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion stood between the Germans and the road to Paris. Bleasdale immediately set out to report what he had seen. But, as he moved to the rear, one of those "truth is stranger than fiction" occurrences took place.

Three French majors were standing in a tree line not far south of the Bussiares/Chateau Belleau road. They were dressed as if they were getting ready to go out on parade and seemed completely oblivious to the threat posed by the advancing Germans. The senior of the three was giving orders as his batman prepared lunch, table cloth, silver, et al. Lt Bleasdale's arrival didn't phase him a bit even though the Marine forest green uniform did look a bit like



Building at Champillon Farm, ravaged by artillery fire, still stands.

* The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) was paid in gold pieces in the belief the gold would help bolster the French economy and would be accepted by most French businessmen.

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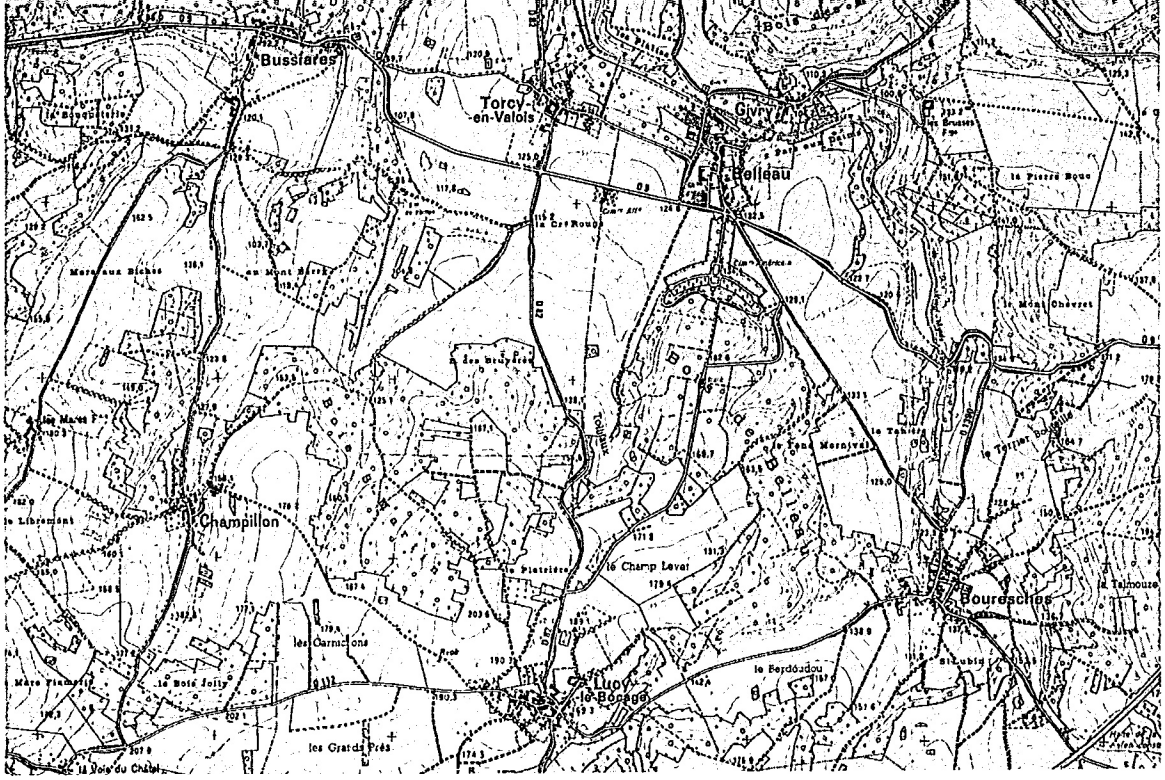

the German model. The Frenchman just kept talking and only when through with his subordinates did he condescend to talk to the American. Soon it became obvious the French major was recently arrived from Paris, was unimpressed with Americans who had yet to prove themselves in combat, and wasn't going to let the imminent arrival of the German Army ruin his lunch. As Bleasdale departed and continued to the rear, he could only wonder about things that sap a man's will to fight. He never saw the French major again but years later did meet a former French Army doctor who had been caring for the wounded in Bussiares that day. The doctor remembered seeing the young officer in the odd colored uniform talking with a French sergeant on the road to Chateau Belleau. This took place just before the doctor had been captured and required to spend the remainder of the war in a POW camp.

Hurrying back to Champillon Farm, Lt Bleasdale reported what he had seen to Capt Kingman and returned to supervise the final stages of construction on his emplacements. He was none too soon for he could see the Germans moving into position on the high ground west and just south of Bussiares. "Bleasdale's Bandits" immediately took them under fire! Thus began an action which was to last 26 days and imprint forever the name "Marine" on the consciousness of America!

Had the Germans pressed their attacks in the first days of June 1918, they might have been successful in breaking through the Marine lines. But, as the 5th and 6th Marines hurried into the lines, German chances grew slimmer and slimmer. Lt Bleasdale's machineguns kept the Germans off the road. The Germans retaliated with one massive artillery bombardment after another. They succeeded in destroying part of the Richard farmhouse and rattled the shutters and earth covering Bleasdale's guns, but they never put the unit out of action. As the Germans massed in the hopes of attacking south, GySgt Horton helped stop them by moving his guns into position to reinforce Bleasdale's unit. Unfortunately, Horton was killed by a German sniper during the action. German snipers in Gen Bleasdale's opinion were second only to Marines as marksmen. He recalled that on the same day one had put a bullet through Lt Bayne's neck as he stood on the Champillon high ground. Thankfully, it hit nothing vital, and Bayne paused only for two bandaids before going back into action.

By 5 June, the 4th Brigade had stopped the Germans cold and was planning counter moves. The Germans, for their part, wanted very much to defeat the newly arrived Americans. They felt a victory now might demoralize these green troops to a point where they would be ineffective for months to come. Accordingly, they began to reinforce their forces in the Belleau Wood area. In Gen Bleasdale's opinion the Germans failed to realize that the Marines facing them were not green troops at all. They were veterans of the Haitian Campaign and had been together for

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Not in Vain†

by John V. McNally

And when the solemn strains of the last post fade, he does not die, but lives again and ever again in the shining eyes of the youngster who hears the measured beat of martial music and watches the splendid banners borne aloft in triumph against the blue sky of another, brighter day.

† From an unpublished manuscript written by LtCol John V. McNally, USA, a paratrooper who fought in Sicily, Normandy, and Korea. McNally was an author and teacher as well as a soldier. He died in 1971. This material was sent to the GAZETTE by Maj E. W. Gleason USMC(Ret).

Courtesy of The American Battle Monuments Commission

almost four years. They knew their jobs and no one was going to make them break and run. Not only did they not break and run; on 6 June, they went on the offensive!

Mr. Neill has talked with German veterans of the battle who visit every year. They told him that the average German soldier knew he was up against new and different allied troops almost from the beginning of the Belleau Wood Campaign. Any who doubted became believers on 6 June! "Hell," one said, "they crossed open fields against massed machine-guns and still found time to drop to one knee and adjust their sights. Their rifle markmanship was uncanny. Everyone exposed was hit. They took fearsome casualties and still kept coming!" Attack they did, again and again but the German defense would not buckle. On about 8 June, Lt Bleasdale watched infantry units attack west across the road to his front in an attempt to dislodge the Germans, but again they were beaten back.

As I looked down on that unchanged scene in 1979, I thought how Marines today tend to take our communications for granted. Had the infantry company commander possessed a radio, "Bleasdale's Bandits" could have led him across the position with devastating effect. The German infantry would have been hard pressed to retain the position without extensive support.

Lt Bleasdale is not exactly sure how long he remained in position around Champillon Farm. He does know, however, that no German ever got south of his position. Some days later, after Capt Kingman was wounded and evacuated, Capt Harlan Major, the former battalion executive officer, ordered Bleasdale to move to positions north of St. Martin Wood or just west of Belleau Wood proper. His mission was to interdict that area ensuring that no German forces were allowed to flank Marines attacking Belleau Wood from the south. They didn't!

On 15 June, Bleasdale received new orders from Capt Major. This time he moved to positions on the southern edge of Belleau Wood. (At first, Gen Bleasdale was unsure of the date, but remembered he moved the day Drummer John Overland was killed. A check of the records at the cemetery office on the northern edge of Belleau Wood showed Overland had been killed on 15 June.) Seeking additional information about this displacement, Bleasdale sent the runner who had brought the order from Capt Major back to the command post. The runner's name: Drummer John Overland. As time went by and Overland didn't return, Bleasdale dispatched Pvt Wiederman to see what had happened. Wiederman returned after a while to say, "Lieutenant, they're all dead up there!" German artillery, which was almost always accurate, had killed Capt Major, Drummer Overland, and most of the command element which had taken up positions in St. Martin Wood. 1stSgt Bunkey O'Neill, who lost a leg that day but survived, said it was the most accurate artillery fire he had ever seen. Despite these developments, Bleasdale carried out Capt Major's last order and moved to Belleau Wood.

From 15 June until the final attack on 25 June, Lt Bleasdale's machinegunners were in direct support of the 5th and 6th Marines' assaults against Belleau Wood. The pressure on the Germans never relented. German regulars were forced to give up the wood tree by tree. Marines would bypass machinegun nests and go after German field guns knowing those behind them would take care of the bypassed

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Floyd Gibbons

were forced to give up the wood tree by tree. Marines would bypass machinegun nests and go after German field guns knowing those behind them would take care of the bypassed German gunners. (The knocked-out field guns are still there). The battle seesawed back and forth for days. It became a question of whether German or American resolve would break first.

From his position with the frontline Marines, Floyd Gibbons, the famous war correspondent, reported everything as it occurred. As with all great correspondents, he put his life in jeopardy again and again to ensure he got the full story. Ultimately, he was hit in the head and it was thought he'd die. Lt Bleasdale was there when Floyd Gibbons was evacuated. Gen Bleasdale recalled:

> He looked very bad. I wouldn't have given him much hope but, you know, the good Lord works in strange ways. Up until Floyd was hit, General Pershing had refused to allow any of his dispatches to be sent home. The news of Floyd's seemingly critical wound changed all that. General Pershing, overcome with emotion, ordered the Floyd Gibbons' dispatches be released as a tribute to his heroism. These dispatches hit the American press at a time when America was starved for news about "our boys over there." Soon the words "Marines," "Belleau Wood," and "performance above and beyond the call of duty" became interchangeable. The American people had taken Marines to their hearts, and we have remained there ever since. The future of the Corps as we know it today was ensured!

As it turned out, of course, Floyd Gibbons didn't die. He lost an eye and spent a great deal of time in the hospital but returned with an eye patch to enthrall audiences all over America with his tales of the 4th Brigade in the Bois de la Brigade de Marine, which became the official French name for Belleau Wood.

Lt Bleasdale, not happy with just providing support and ducking German artillery shells, made a nighttime foray into the southern part of Belleau Wood. The smell of death was everywhere. Tall trees had been cut in half and/or splintered almost beyond recognition. He reminisced:

> The silence was deafening. It cried out to me to go back, but I was drawn further and further forward. Finally, I came to the body of a German officer and from him I took a map of the area. It was the only map I ever had during the campaign. We were rushed forward so quickly they didn't have time to give us maps. Anyway, I just had the feeling they were waiting to capture me so I cut east until I hit a road and returned to my machinegun position.

On 25 June 1918, the German resolve broke. Marines, on the heels of a massive artillery bombardment of "Liberty Bond Shells" (each cost $50, the price of a Liberty Bond), assaulted Belleau Wood for the last time driving the Germans back to the north. America's first prolonged campaign of World War I was over. We were victorious. The Germans would never again threaten Paris, and their ultimate defeat was ensured.

It is difficult to put into words the feeling that overcomes a Marine when he visits the scene of one of our greatest victories—especially, when the visit is made in the company of another Marine who fought there and can make everything come to life again. The area around Belleau Wood is totally serene. The cemetery on its northern edge is beautiful and faces the German cemetery just beyond. Most of the 2,288 American men buried in the cemetery were killed in Belleau Wood. The fact that 250 are "Known but to God" illustrates the fierceness of the combat. As I walked among these graves, I felt I would never again be in better company and hoped that one day years hence a living Marine might say the same about those who fought and died in Vietnam.

Belleau Wood itself is magnificent and has barely been touched in 60 years. I wanted to be alone and moved away from our party for about a half hour. The silence was indeed deafening. It was as if those who had died in the 6-25 June 1918 campaign were still there. I'm sure they were! Later, Mr. Neill, the cemetery superintendent, was to tell me my actions and feelings were similar to those of many Marines who visit Belleau Wood. "You all go funny," he said. In retrospect, I'm sure he's right. It would be disappointing if such were not the case. I can say with certainty, however, that a visit to Belleau Wood with a veteran of the campaign is a privilege few Marines are accorded these days. For those of us who walked through time with Gen Victor Bleasdale, it was one of the more memorable experiences of our lives. USMC

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