



Artillery piece remains in place in June 1935, 17 years after the battle. Trees are new growth.

Belleau Wood Seventy Years Later

by Agostino von Hassell

Europe remains scarred, with monuments to the fallen of 1914-18 in every village square from Portugal through Spain, France, Belgium, and to deep in the heart of Germany. The U.S. Marine Corps still carries many of the same scars, having made the experience of World War I a living tradition, an unforgettable lesson still applied today.

Seventy years have not healed a scar that runs deep and wide through the physical and spiritual heart of Europe. From the sandy beach-es of Ostend and Zeebrugge to the serene hills on the Swiss border, Belgium, and France were marked seemingly forever with traces of what was once known as "the war to end all wars." When seen from the air that 600-mile-long fateful strip of opposing trenches and breastworks resembles a half moon, its lunar landscape of mine craters and trenches still clearly marked

in the chalky ground.

From August 1914 until November 1918, stationary warfare with a great volume of artillery fire churned the surface of this belt into a wilderness of shellholes, exposing the barren subsoil, and wrecking everything that stood above the ground. Fluctuations of the battlefield, at first narrow and violent but in the later stages of the war surging and resurging over many miles, created the "devastated zone," a stricken area varying in width from 50 miles in the Somme region to 2 or 3 miles on the Yser.

The plow of the peasant gradually reclaimed patch after patch while nature had covered the rest with a mantle of green. Yet when you travel from Flanders toward the Champagne, past the fields of battle of Ypres, Arras, Bapaume, Thiepval, Cambrai, the Chemin des Dames, the Argonne, and on to Verdun and south, you are struck by just how empty a land this is, how sparse the woods, how few the villages. Villages that thrived for centuries within sight of the next village's church tower are all but gone, names recorded on old maps. It is empty

country.

Belleau Wood

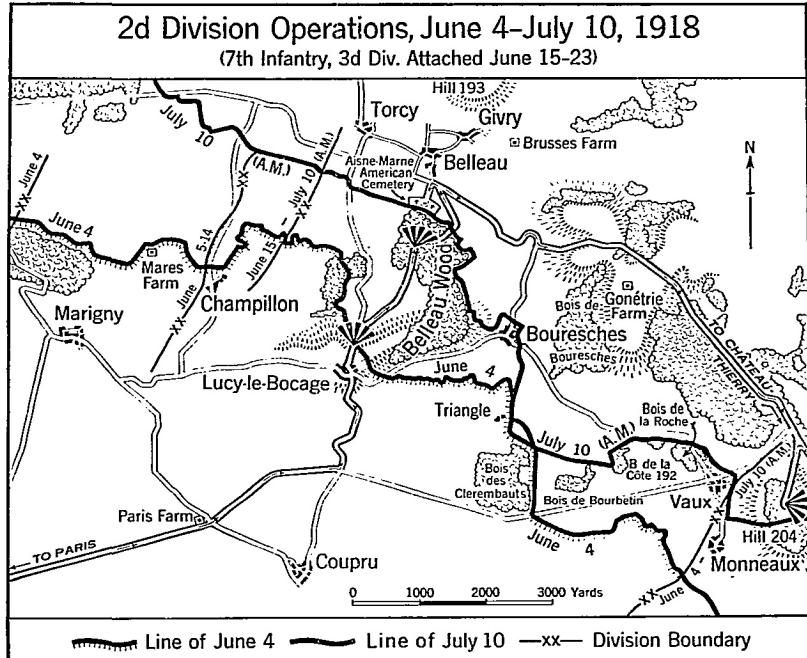
The scarred half moon's bulging belly nudges Paris. Just 56 miles separate Paris from the front. There, almost by accident when you now read the dispatches, U.S. Marines helped halt a seemingly unstoppable advance of Germany's armies gathered for a last offensive in May of 1918.

On 1 June 1918, the U.S. 2d "Indian-head" Division was hurriedly deployed to the Chateau-Thierry Road to reinforce faltering French troops. German troops had pushed beyond Chateau-Thierry and were gathering in the villages of Belleau, Torcy, Vaux, and Bouresches for a final push to Paris.

As the story has been told and retold, it was there that the Marines made a stand and, with enormous casualties, forced a retreat of the German troops.

The significance of the Battle for Belleau Wood can easily be overstated. It is likely that the war would have ended the same without it but might have taken much longer. That same week, Gen John J. Pershing, who commanded the American Expeditionary Forces, was drawing up plans for 100 American divisions to be on French soil by August 1919. For Gen Pershing at his Chaumont Headquarters, the French Marshal Foch, and others, the war was far from won.

But it was at Belleau Wood that the German offensive was stopped decisively. And more importantly, the nature of the war was changed, imper-



ceptibly at first but more visibly in later battles at Soissons, Blanc Mont, St. Mihiel, and the Argonne.

Confusion

Marines arriving at the front did not dig trenches as told by their French Allies who had been digging deep for almost five years. The U.S. 2d Division—which included the 5th Marine Regiment, the 6th Marine Regiment, and the 6th Machinegun Battalion

(formed as the 4th Brigade)—shrugged off any and all advice to dig deep, to fall back, to retreat while the Parisians were again gathering mat-tresses and precious belongings, ready to take flight as they would later in the summer of 1940. As Gen Pershing later wrote:

It must have been with a decided feeling of relief that the worn and tired French soldiers, retreating before vastly superior numbers, caught sight of the Americans arriving in trucks at Meaux and marching thence on foot, hats off, eagerly hurrying forward to battle. And the Germans, who had been filled with propaganda depreciating the American effort and the quality of our training, must have been surprised and disconcerted by meeting strong resistances by Americans,

The Marines didn't play by the rules, a defined, deadly ritual evolved over five years of war. In a war where offensive and defensive actions were played out by a precisely defined scenario, the Marines attacked without benefit of a detailed timetable, where every artillery round was scheduled by the minute for months in advance. They attacked with little concern for the choreography of death directed by several divisions' worth of staff offi-



Marines trudge past wounded and dead Germans.

Memorial Day 1988 Belleau Wood, France

Poppies, red as blood in the fresh green of the wheat around Belleau Wood, served as a sobering reminder of a battle here 70 years ago.

On 30 May 1918, forward elements of the 4th Brigade of Marines were force marched toward Belleau where Prussian troops had established formidable defensive positions, and, having routed French forces, were preparing to advance on Paris. The Marines' mission—fighting as part of the 2d "Indianhead" Division—was to stop and reverse the Prussian advance.

In the ensuing battle that started with skirmishes on 1 June and which would turn into a nightmare of close combat, confusion, and mustard gas that would last until 26 June both sides—elite units of their respective nations—had thousands of casualties.

While the battle firmly established the Marines in American minds as a superb fighting force, their performance at Belleau Wood, a battleground quickly renamed *Bois de la Brigade Marine*, earned them the lasting gratitude of the French nation and, as demonstrated again this Memorial Day, the gratitude and friendship of the

1917 *Bataille de Château-Thierry — The First American Victory*
BELLAU — Rue Principale - Principale street



people of Belleau and of the surrounding villages of Bouresches, Lucy-Le-Bocage and Torcy.

"This is a little bit of your own place," said Belleau's Mayor Claude Crapart, who flagged his modest "city hall" with Marine Corps color, Stars and Stripes, and the *Tricolore*.

But not only the villagers turned out in their Sunday best to commemorate the 2,288 Marines, Sailors, and Soldiers buried in Belleau. So did the Marine Security Guard

Detachment from the U.S. Embassy in Paris, and select platoons of French Naval Infantry and nearby regular infantry divisions.

To the mournful strains of a French Army band they paraded along the entrance way of the cemetery for ceremonies conducted with great dignity, with spit and polish, and a lump in the throat of many.

Navy Secretary William Ball III was one of several to remind the Marines, the French military, visi-

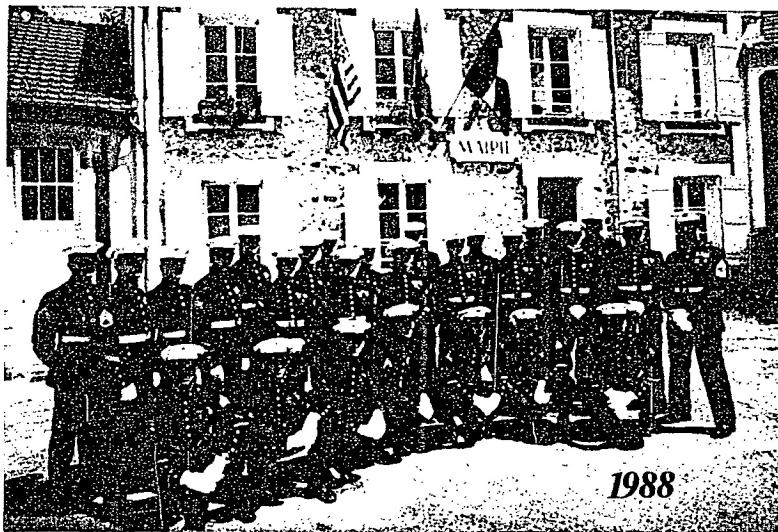
cers safely lodged far behind the front in France's many chateaus.

And advice coming from "higher headquarters" was virtually useless. Great was the confusion on the French side in those early June days as constantly changing combat orders created havoc. Staff officers of the 4th Brigade of Marines (Gen Pershing had allowed that designation to his later chagrin) had deep misgivings over the French, unable to figure out which among various editions of the same orders to follow. Reports have it that they told the brigade commander, MajGen James G. Harbord: "When it comes to the French, General Harbord, a good Marine never goes into motion until he gets the third edition."

Marines captured in the early days of the battle by Prussian troops often



Belleau's principal street shows the effect of enemy artillery.



tors from all across the United States, and the people of Belleau: "Never forget their effort."

It was actually quite beautiful: rays of a late spring sun interrupted by occasional showers, the glitter of the collar emblems of the Marines, the gleaming brass of the band, some simple prayers, a laying of wreaths, and, finally, the haunting sounds of Taps, while little French and American flags moved silently in the wind over each and every

grave.

The ceremony was followed by a small reception in the center of the woods, exactly the spot from where Maj Maurice E. Shearer, commanding officer of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines sent the famous message of 26 June 1918: BELLEAU WOODS NOW MARINE CORPS ENTIRELY.

Champagne was drunk and when glasses ran short Marines, villagers, and the visiting dignitaries from

didn't know where they were. Wrote the Prussian intelligence officer Lt von Buy in his report on the interrogations of Marines: "They were kept in complete ignorance. They cannot name the towns they have passed through."

Lt von Buy's commander, General of the Infantry von Conta wrote in his headquarters at the Chateau of Fere-en-Tardenois—a scant 18 miles from the eastern edge of Belleau Wood: "Their troops are aggressive and valiant, but solid staff work seems to be missing." Gen von Conta would have been appalled to know just how uninformed the 4th Brigade was.

"You wish more than anything else in the world to know the exact position of your troops . . . this information sometimes takes a day and night to filter in," wrote Gen Harbord.

Washington shared glasses. Toasts were made and friendships renewed. Secretary Ball presented a plaque and letter of appreciation sent by Marine Corps Commandant Gen A.M. Gray to Gaston Ducler, who for 35 years as foreman, has guarded the dead at Belleau, maintaining the cemetery in what is generally recognized as excellent condition. "He is the very best," said Arthur E. Martin, the superintendent of the Belleau Cemetery.

Later in the day the Marines, all of them, moved down to the village where the castle of Belleau once stood, destroyed in the battle. A big bronze head of a bull mastiff, spewing cold water (Belleau means "beautiful water") reminds visitors of the Hounds of Belleau who gave the Germans just as hard a time as the Marines, and, hence, the name "Devil Dogs." At "Devil Dog Fountain" each Marine took a quick drink of water, a scene "not unlike Lourdes where the faithful drink water to get healed, to get strong," said one staff sergeant, half serious, half in jest.

"This has been the best day in the Marine Corps for me," said a young corporal from the American Embassy.

Agostino von Hassell

He and many Marine officers would complain often that the confusion caused by the disorganized French probably caused many of the casualties. Gen Harbord wrote about the French:

they are the most delightful, exasperating, unreliable, trustworthy, sensitive, unsanitary, dirty, artistic, clever and stupid people that this writer has ever known. Intensely academic and theoretical yet splendidly practical at times, it will be a wonder if we do not feel as much like fighting them as we do the Germans before the war is over . . .

The Marines were fighting—to the amazement of Gen von Conta, without decent maps. "The war may be lost, the maps never be made, men die for want of the information the maps would have given," wrote Gen Harbord.

Coordination with the French, who were fighting alongside the Marines, was lousy at best. Gen Harbord went on:

You find your left flank in the air, the French on who you depended having concluded to fall back to their soup-kitchens or for some equally important reason, and failed to tell you about it. But the next day the colonel will come out and sob around over "Mes Enfants," and they will kiss each other on both cheeks, and go out and die taking the position they gave up the day before.

A War of Motion

Casualties on both sides in the Battle for Belleau were appalling, substantially higher for the Germans than for the Marines as the Germans kept throwing more and more of their best

troops against the Marines. Some 2,288 Marines, Soldiers, and Sailors are buried in the wheatfields of Belleau just 400 yards from the German cemetery, and in both places the dates and names read out a litany of suffering: June 6, June 7, June 8.

Even with high casualties, no maps, no decent communications, and no adequate artillery support, the Marines managed. Being fresh troops, their minds were still fresh and unaffected by a war that had come to a standstill. "They were the only youthful army in the field in 1918," wrote combat artist Ernest Peixotto who spent time with the Marines at Belleau.

When dawn broke on 6 June 1918 and Marines made their fateful advance across the 400 yards of wheat that separated them from the Germans and their massed machinegun positions, they had no preparatory artillery fire, no detailed plan, and no maps. They knew—and you read that in the letters and dispatches—their enemy was in the woods and their objective was to take the woods.

They employed fluid tactics, advancing and falling back, fighting for every inch, for every yard, finally overcoming the Germans where the French had failed before. Wrote Gen Pershing:

This defeat of the French furnished the second striking confirmation of the wisdom of training troops for open warfare. While the Germans had been practicing for a war of movement and concentrating their most aggressive personnel into shock troops, preparatory to the spring campaign, the training of the Allies had been still



Marines stand in the exact spot where forward elements of the 5th and 6th Marines launched their 6 June 1918 attack on Belleau Wood through the wheatfields.

limited generally to trench warfare.

A French communiqué highly complimented the Marines:

American infantry showed itself highly skilled in maneuvering. The courage of officers and men approach recklessness. The courage of the combatant troops is equaled only by the superb coolness of some of their medical corps who, in a perfect hail of bullets, gave first aid to the wounded.

A Medal of Honor was awarded to Lt(jg) Weedon E. Osborne, Dental Corps, USN, attached to the 5th Marines. He was killed 6 June. The citation reads:

in the hottest of the fighting when the Marines made their famous advance on Bouresches at the southern edge of Belleau Wood, Lt(jg) Osborne threw himself zealously into the work of rescuing the wounded. Extremely courageous in the performance of this perilous task, he was killed while carrying a wounded officer to a place of safety.

The Germans

The German troops in the Marine salient, of which Belleau and Chateau-Thierry were the two tips, were parts of the Army Group commanded by Wilhelm, Prince of Prussia and Crown Prince of Germany. Directly facing the 2d Division and the 4th Marine Brigade were elements of the 7th Army commanded by Gen Max



Lt(jg) Weedon E. Osborne.

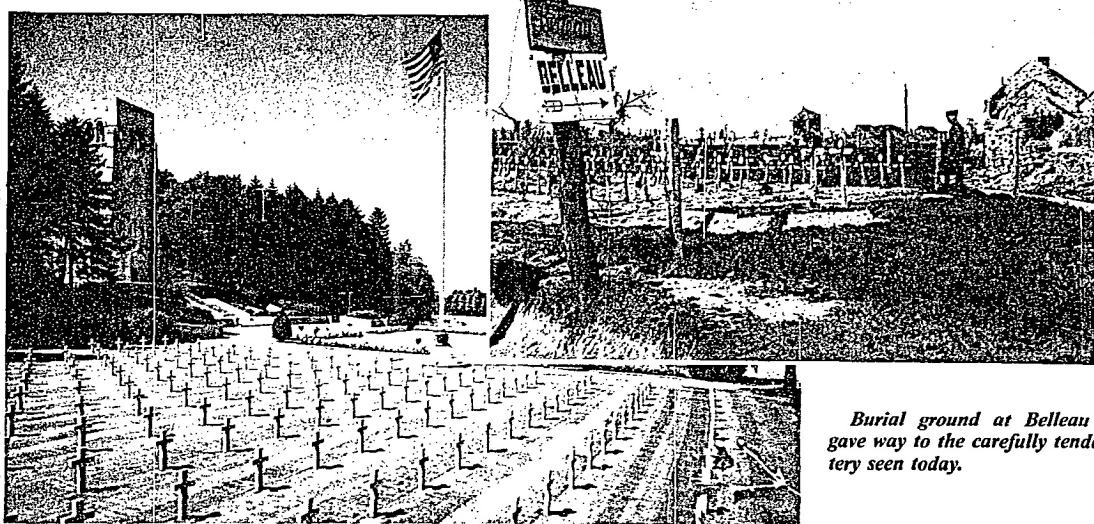
von Boehn.

These troops were among the finest Germany had to offer. For instance, in the fateful fight for Hill 142, just west of the woods, Marines of 1/5 encountered troops of the 28th Brandenburger Regiment, a Prussian unit. The fight for Hill 142 on the morning of 6 June resulted in 410 casualties for the Marines and about as many for the Prussian fusiliers.

While Prussian troops held the northern portion of the woods, the southern portion, where Marines of 3/6, 2/6, and 3/5 attacked across a wheatfield toward the woods where German troops had massed machineguns, was held by the 461st Infantry Regiment of the Prussian 237th Infantry Division. The 461st Regiment held the woods from 6 June through 15 June. This regiment "gave us the hardest fighting we had. We learned a great deal from you," wrote Maj John W. Thomason, Jr., after the war to the commander of the 2d Battalion, 461st Regiment, LtCol Hans von Hartlieb. "I write to say that we in the Marine brigade were at that time impressed by the soldierly qualities of your defense in the woods."

Col von Hartlieb wrote back:

we soon learned, however, that they who faced us were fresh (rested), valiant American troops, who were ready to do battle and who, with their never-ending aggressiveness and their dashing manner of attacking our position, in spite of great losses, early in the



Burial ground at Belleau in 1918 gave way to the carefully tended cemetery seen today.

fight aroused our full admiration.

German losses were extreme. For instance, of the 400 men of 2/461, just 60 men returned from the first 9 days of the battle.

Living Tradition

In Germany the Battle of Belleau is but forgotten with references found only with difficulty in dusty military archives. The revolution of 1918, the Third Reich, and the destruction of 1945 not only destroyed much of the physical evidence, such as papers and files, but also struck from the collective memory thoughts of a war that, in comparison, almost seemed easy. The successive upheavals of 1918 and 1945 eliminated all but the last traces of tradition in the modern German military. While French, British, and Marine regiments carry on tradition no matter how old, the German army appears to have lost any tie to its past.

Not so in the Corps where the Battle of Belleau has left traces that can be seen daily.

When German troops first came to Belleau in the summer of 1914, they encountered fierce mastiffs in the courtyard of the castle of Belleau . . . Devil Dogs . . . *Teufel Hunde*. The "Hounds of Belleau," used for hunting, had lived in the castle for centuries, having retired from their old trade as war dogs (in Julius Caesar's legions) to the more genteel life as country hunting dogs. When the Marines came in the summer of 1918, the Germans, recalling their first skirmish in Belleau, named the Marines Devil Dogs (*Teufel Hunde*).

While bulldogs and mastiffs have little in common, the one being kind

and gentle while the latter is fierce, it is the bulldog that now upholds the memory of Belleau. Just think of the Marines on liberty around the world, many wearing distinctive T-shirts imprinted with a grinning bulldog carrying a World War I helmet. Think of the ubiquitous tattoos of bulldogs. Or Chesty VIII, the somewhat unruly and, at times, bored mascot at 8th & I.

Think of the 5th and 6th Marines with their distinctive fourageres earned in France, or the teenagers invited by the Corps as "Devil Pups" to taste life as Marines. Or how the basic workings of the Marine squads and fire teams first evolved and were tested in the fields near Belleau.

A Viable Force

For the 25 years before 1918, the Corps had been finding itself serving more and more in the role of an expeditionary force, relinquishing its traditional role as guards and sharpshooters aboard ships. That latter mission had been made obsolete by technology anyway. In the many wars in Central America, China, and the Philippines, the Corps started to operate as a fully equipped land force gathering vital combat experience that was put to good use in World War I.

When the U.S. entered the Great War in May 1917, the Corps had been modernized, with its own air arm. It counted just 14,000 men and officers but would rapidly expand to reach 75,101 men and, for the first time, women, in its ranks by the end of the war. Two Marine brigades were dispatched to France. (The 5th Marine Brigade served in France mainly as military police and support units as

the overall American commander, John Pershing, refused to permit the Marines to establish a separate division.)

Gen John A. Lejeune (later to become one of the most influential Commandants) is known as the first Marine to command an Army division. He and a whole generation of influential Commandants and general officers were marked by the Belleau experience. Among those who fought at Belleau were men who became famous in World War II: Thomas A. Holcomb, Holland M. Smith, Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., and Clifton B. Cates.

The Battle for Belleau forms the bridge between the Old Corps and the Corps that followed in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. While young officers got some of their first tests under fire and would apply lessons learned in future wars, veterans of the Corps were there to help them and the younger Marines. Veterans such as Dan Daly—1st Sergeant at Belleau—who had fought The Boxers on the Tartar Wall in Peking in 1900, and SgtMaj John Quick, who earned fame on Guantanamo in 1898.

What started at Belleau and continued with the last battles of World War I established the Corps as a viable military force, fighting and winning battles on land, operating in large, brigade-sized units and not just as landing parties. Gen Pershing had questioned initially whether Marines were even capable of operating in units larger than a company, something the Battle of Belleau put to rest.

The Corps has fought more important battles, battles better known and more decisive. But Belleau was unique.

USMC