



BELLEAU WOOD: 6 DAYS IN JUNE

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Photos courtesy of the Marine Corps History Division Archives

"This bitter struggle for a bit of ground smaller than Central Park marked the turning point of this whole war."

—Col Albertus W. Catlin

Commanding Officer, 6th Marines

WIA June 6, 1918

Moving Up, May 31, 1918

It had been a long, dusty, miserable ride for the 4th Marine Brigade of the 2d Division United States Regular (today's 2d Infantry Division). From an assembly area near Meaux, France, the 5th and 6th Regiments of Marines and their fellows of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion had bounced and rattled along indifferently maintained French country roads for three spine-jolting days in springless *camions*. Their drivers, rather small men from France's colonies in Tonkin and Annam in Indochina, had piloted their transportation as though they were in a hurry to keep their dates with eternity.

Where in the hell were they going? No one seemed to know. What little word coming down from above told only of a massive

German offensive that was pushing the French and British up ahead relentlessly back, threatening to drive a wedge into the Allied line and open the road to Paris.

Where in the hell were the field kitchens, and when was there going to be some chow? No one seemed to know the answer to either of those questions. The few who still had something in their packs used a bayonet or a trench knife to pry open a can of the detested Argentine beef that Marines had long since tagged with the lasting name of "monkey meat" and chewed grimly. Few, if any, cast covetous glances their way; monkey meat was that bad.

June 2, 1918, The Paris-Metz Road, 30 Miles From Paris

They were butt sprung, dog tired and wolf hungry, and everyone else seemed to be going the other way, French civilians and disorganized batches of French soldiers, now and again casting apprehensive looks over their shoulders. "*Beaucoup Boches la*," some soldiers attempted to communicate what was coming hard on their heels. Others, men completely out on their feet, simply mumbled, "*La guerre est fini*."

The situation was at best confused. No one knew exactly what was up ahead, and with but a bare handful of maps available,



Left: They were victorious over the Germans, and here the members of the 5th Marines present arms while in formation in France, 1919.



Capt Berton W. Sibley



Three Marine riflemen rest amid the vegetation of Belleau Wood, France.

no one had much of an understanding of the layout of the terrain beyond what could be seen. Incoming reports of large numbers of Germans somewhere out in front continued to arrive in abundance. In point of fact, there were elements of five German divisions up there. Despite furious resistance by the exhausted and outnumbered French, they had occupied the towns of Lucy-le-Bocage and Bouresches and were using a wooded area shown on the few available French maps as *Bois de Belleau*.

In better days, the *Bois de Belleau* (Wood of Good Water or Belleau Wood) had been the private hunting preserve of a well-to-do French family. In addition to a spring of clear cold water in front of Belleau Wood that gave the woods their name, there was a handsome chateau from which the occupants had long since departed for healthier climes. From the spotty accounts coming in, the Germans were putting the woods to good use as a concealed assembly area from which to reorganize and continue the thrust at Paris.

June 3-4, 1918, Les Mares Farm, 2 Miles From Lucy-le-Bocage

As fast as they arrived, the Marines of Captain Lloyd Williams' 51st Company, 2d Bn, 5th Marines were fed into the line in expectation of just such a German attack. Less than an hour after arriving, Capt Williams received a message from the commander of the French XXI Corps in overall command of that sector, directing all French and American forces to fall back.

Williams, reporting the order to Lieutenant Colonel Frederic



“Fritz” Wise, commanding 2/5, messaged that he had countermanded the order, adding: “Retreat, hell! We just got here!” Lloyd Williams was killed in action less than a week later, but his words have lived as a battle cry. Odd how just a few words can make a man a legend.

All along the line, Marines were scratching out individual positions, positions that would be called foxholes. It was fortunate that they dug in. At daylight, German artillery began pounding the Marine line in preparation for an attack by German infantry that had known nothing but success.

When the barrage lifted, *solid feldgrau* ranks emerged from the woods out in front and began moving forward. They were wary and alert, but they were experienced and confident. For weeks they had driven before them every enemy they had faced.

They were confronted head-on by something that shocked them: aimed, accurate and deadly rifle fire that could kill a man at 500 yards. The Marines along the firing line opposite the German advance were superbly trained in one respect, a skill that has been a Marine Corps trademark over the decades—rifle marksmanship. Long hours on rifle ranges back in America had made them a formidable foe for which the German ranks were totally unprepared.

As more and more among those oncoming ranks fell, the attackers staggered, stumbled and then fell back to regroup and try again. The result was the same deadly rifle fire that sent ever greater numbers of Germans sprawled in the dirt. Masters of

their craft, the Marines employed the Springfield Model 1903 rifle murderously. Sustained, deadly rifle fire that killed men in windrows shook and rattled the confidence of the advancing ranks. Each German attempt to move forward was beaten back. The march on Paris was faltering in a blizzard of well-aimed, concentrated rifle fire.

For two days the Germans threw themselves at that line. Each time, they were shattered by well-aimed rifle fire thrown at them by what a captured German report later would describe as “remarkable marksmen.” Exhausted, the Germans withdrew into the woods to reorganize.

The German thrust at Paris had been stopped in its tracks, but only for the moment. If they were not interfered with, the Germans would use Belleau Wood as a rallying point to reorganize, refit, absorb replacements and reinforcements, then come on again. To permit that would be to disregard one of war’s basic rules: Never allow a beaten enemy to recover. If the success of the past two days was to have any permanent meaning, Belleau Wood would have to be cleared.

June 6, 1918, Hill 142 in Front of Belleau Wood

Hill 142 was not a towering Mount Everest, soaring into the clouds. On the handful of French maps that were available, the hill’s elevation showed as 142 meters (465 feet). While that was the hill’s elevation above sea level, in relation to the surrounding



Above: The open wheat field presents a serene view in marked contrast to the devastation that was to come after the 5th Marines attacked the German lines on June 6, 1918.

Left: Maj F.D. Garrett and other officers of the 5th Marines at the head of the convoy en route to the rest camp after the Battle of Belleau Wood.

north-south. The attack would first have to move down the north slope of Hill 176, cross a wide swale covered with waist-high wheat, then assault Hill 142 with the 49th Co advancing along the east side of the hill, while the 67th attacked in a like manner along the west slope. Daylight came early in those latitudes, and dawn was already beginning to lighten the eastern horizon as the Marines of 1/5 made their final preparations. They would be ready to go at H-hour, 3:45 a.m. All too many of them would not see the sun set on that incredibly confused, scorching hot day.

3:45 a.m., June 6, 1918, Hill 142

In the ranks of the 67th Co, First Sergeant Daniel A. "Pop" Hunter checked the alignment of the company waiting in open order in four ranks, looked at his watch and gave the order to move out. Advancing at a walk, the 67th Co rolled down the north slope of Hill 176 and into the wheat field. Once there the Marine ranks were met by a barrage of machine-gun fire that swept across the forest green lines like wind-driven hail.

Casualties were immediate. Among the first was Pop Hunter. Hard hit, the old veteran of 30 years of service went down, struggled to his feet and started forward once more, only to be hit and knocked down a second time. He fought to his feet again, was hit a third time, fell and lay still.

Pop Hunter was but one among many as the whiplash streams of machine-gun fire flayed the green ranks. Their attack formation, four widely spaced waves, was precisely what they had been taught, and they executed it perfectly. It also was the worst possible way to go up against a dug-in enemy armed with abundant automatic weapons.

Even before reaching the objective of Hill 142, one-third of the 67th Co was down. Half of the company's officers and non-commissioned officers were wounded or dead. The wheat field that had been so serene and peaceful the day before was liberally sprinkled with the still figures of Marines who had answered their last morning roll call.

Marines are quick to adapt, though. After the first vicious raking, those still on their feet quickly went flat on the ground below the hemstitching lines of fire that continued to rip above them, neatly trimming the tops of the almost-ripe wheat. The Marines of the 67th Co hit the deck, but they didn't simply lie there motionless. They were in a foul humor and of a mind to take it out on their tormentors.

Put a Marine through three days of a rump-battering ride in

terrain, the hill rose little more than 60 feet above the wheat fields in front and the woods behind.

That was enough to make Hill 142 a formidable obstacle to any attack into the woods themselves. Attacks into the woods from either side of Hill 142 could be cut to pieces by flanking fire from the hill's eastern and western slopes. Knowing that the Germans had fortified the hill accordingly, meticulously planned interlocking fields of machine-gun fire made venturing out into the open in front of or to either side of Hill 142 a perilous undertaking. Perilous or not, the German defenses on Hill 142 had to be overcome before any attack into Belleau Wood could go forward.

3:15 a.m., June 6, 1918, Hill 176

The mission of eliminating the German defenses on Hill 142 fell to Major Julius Turrill's 1/5. Initially, Maj Turrill would have only two of his companies, Capt George W. Hamilton's 49th and First Lieutenant Orlando C. Crowther's 67th, available. The battalion's other two companies, 17th and 66th, would not arrive until that afternoon. Even though the rifle companies of the Great War were 250-strong, Maj Turrill's diminished battalion would be going up against more than twice its number of veteran German infantry from the 460th Infantry Regiment.

From their position on Hill 176, the Marines of 1/5 could clearly see their objective. Hill 142, slightly lower and directly to the front, was elongated, longer than it was wide, its long axis oriented

a rattletrap truck with a lead-footed driver. Deprive him of practically anything to eat and no more water than the steadily depleting drops in his canteen. Cook him beneath a scorching hot sun each and every day until his tongue feels like a block of wood. Make him measure his sleep in minutes, not hours. What you arrive at is a very unpleasant man, a man it isn't smart to antagonize. You have a man who has had all he intends to put up with, a man looking for someone to take it all out on. If you are that someone, you would be better off locked in a closet with a Rottweiler.

Without any actual order to do so, the Marines of the 67th Co—those who were left—began moving forward. In ones and twos, in the remnants of squads, crawling flat out in order to stay beneath the streams of machine-gun fire only inches above them, they kept moving doggedly forward. Fear, as it sometimes does, had given way to a murderous rage and a single-minded resolve to even the score. A later generation would call this payback.

It was nothing they had learned in training; they had never been trained to fight in such a fashion, but combat has a way of teaching in a hurry. Keep low, hug the ground, work your way forward, close in on each enemy position, then use hand grenades, rifle butts and bayonets to blast, slash and batter, treat the machine-gunners mercilessly.

Slowly at first, then increasingly faster as they became more proficient in the technique, the thinned ranks of the 67th Co began their own thinning of the gray-clad *sturmtuppen* who had been having things their own way. One of those *sturmtuppen*, Gefreiter (Private First Class) Gunther Hebel, 460th Infantry Regiment, would later write his parents that "My company has been reduced from 120 to only 30 men." Gunther Hebel and his comrades who weren't killed were relentlessly rooted out and driven back.

The attack of the 67th Co was gaining momentum, but there still was a price to be paid. By mid-morning every company officer had been killed or wounded. The 67th Co was led by a handful of corporals and sergeants, along with ordinary privates who rose to the occasion. It's always that way with Marines, isn't it?

On the east slope of Hill 142, things were going much the same way for Capt Hamilton's 49th Co. Tall, broad-shouldered, rugged George Hamilton was fast gaining a reputation as one of the bravest of the brave, a leader who led from in front. It was from the front that he led now, armed with a rifle and bayonet. Before the day was over, George Hamilton would employ that rifle and bayonet fatally four times and collect a Navy Cross for his courageous leadership.

As with the 67th Co, working its way along the west slope, the advance of the 49th Co came with a price tag. Even before reaching Hill 142, all of Capt Hamilton's platoon leaders except 1stLt John W. Thomason, who one day would be heralded as "The Kipling of the Marine Corps," were casualties. A prolific writer in the years after the war, on that scalding June day, Thomason would prove a redoubtable fighter in evicting the Germans from that piece of critical real estate.

Capt Hamilton also benefitted from the presence of Gunnery Sergeant Charles F. Hoffman (an assumed name used by Ernest A. Janson). Spotting a light machine-gun squad working up a shallow ravine to a point where the 49th Co could be taken under flanking fire, Hoffman (Janson), despite being painfully wounded himself, killed two of the squad and sent the remainder running. For his actions, he received the Army Medal of Honor, the first awarded to a member of the American Expeditionary Forces.

By late morning, Hill 142 had been neutralized, but the 49th and 67th companies had been decimated, cut down to less than 50 percent effective. Only two officers, Capt Hamilton and 1stLt



One of the many casualties from Belleau Wood is assisted by his fellow leathernecks. More than 1,000 Marines were killed or wounded on June 6, 1918.

Marines gather around a German trench mortar captured by 2d Bn, 5th Marines during the Battle of Belleau Wood.

Thomason, were still on their feet. Hamilton reorganized the remnants of both units into a single provisional company and set up a hasty defense on the north slope of Hill 142. Throughout the afternoon three German counterattacks were driven off. Hill 142, the obstacle to any attack into Belleau Wood, had been eliminated.

5 p.m., June 6, 1918. In Front of Belleau Wood

With twilight not coming on until 8:30 p.m., it was thought that there would be ample daylight for the seizure of the day's next objectives, Belleau Wood itself and the town of Bouresches on the woods' southeast corner. Events would prove this to be a greatly optimistic assessment. No one knew, but all hands soon would find out, that Belleau Wood was not the neatly tended French wood lot they had seen so many of before. Years of wartime neglect had reverted the woods to a near jungle state, filled with second-growth trees and choked with underbrush that held more than 1,200 veteran troops of Major Gerhard Bischoff's 461st Infantry Regiment who intended to stay there.

Promptly at 5 p.m., the waiting lines of Marines moved out in the attack. The leading assault elements, Maj Benjamin S. Berry's 3/5 and Maj Berton W. Sibley's 3/6, under Col Albertus W. Catlin, commanding 6th Marines, were raked by machine-gun fire that caused one Marine to remember that "the air seemed full of red hot nails." One of the first of many casualties was Col Catlin, struck in the chest by one of those red hot nails that "felt like I had been struck by a sledgehammer." Colonel Catlin survived, but for him, the war was over.

Soon enough, something that had been absent during the morning attack, German mortars and artillery, joined in, splattering the Marine ranks with the cracking explosions of 77 mm "whiz-bangs" and the distinctive "plop" of gas shells. From that point anything that could go wrong did go wrong; the neatly spaced attacking ranks shredded and minced, with units increasingly intermingled, all tangled into a mob, but a mob that was pressing forward. If the morning attack had been confused, the afternoon action became chaotic, and the fight for Belleau Wood devolved into a bare-knuckle brawl, one that even today is all but impossible to untangle.

Only flashing images of that fight come through. There is a quick flash of Marines almost instinctively lunging ahead in squad rushes to deal with the machine-gunners, all but suffocating in gas masks on yet another blistering day. In one of those actions, 6th Marines' Private Martin "Gus" Gulberg never forgot the manner in which "machine-guns were everywhere. ... We had to rush each gun crew in turn. ... It was a furious dash from one to another."

Out of the fog and jumble of that day, there is the brief, clear image of a smallish gunnery sergeant. Daniel Joseph "Dan" Daly was already a two-time recipient of the Medal of Honor. Now he urged the 73d Machine Gun Co, 6th Marines forward with a challenge that has lasted through the ages: "Come on, you sons-of-bitches! Do you want to live forever?"

In the 5th Marines, English-born Marine Gunner Henry Lewis Hulbert, the first Marine to hold that grade, stabbed, shot and blasted his way into the ranks of Gerhard Bischoff's machine-



gunners. He was 51 years old, yet his stamina and endurance were the envy of men young enough to be his sons. He led them now in a rampage that machine-guns, high explosives and gas couldn't stop. For his actions, he received the Distinguished Service Cross.

Georgia-born 1stLt Laurence Stallings, a 3/5 platoon leader, hadn't advanced more than 20 yards when a shell fragment ripped open his right leg. Seconds later a hand grenade detonation tore away the knee cap on that same leg. Crawling onward, he used a pistol and grenades to kill every member of a machine-gun crew. Laurence Stallings would lose his leg. He would become a critically acclaimed Broadway playwright and Hollywood scriptwriter whose play and subsequent motion picture "What Price Glory?" are still Marine Corps classics.

In the thickest part of the savage struggle there was a civilian. That was war correspondent Floyd Gibbons of the *Chicago Tribune* who went forward with 3/5. As were fully half of the battalion, Floyd Gibbons was wounded, losing his left eye. His feature article that proclaimed "MARINES TAKE BELLEAU WOOD" was more than a bit premature, but it sent thousands of young men to Marine Corps recruiting stations.

Belleau Wood had not been taken. It had been reached, but it would require nearly the entire month of June to roust the Germans from their defenses in that tangle of trees and undergrowth. On that one day, June 6, 1918, however, more Marines were killed and wounded than in the combined total of all the combat engagements in Marine Corps history to that date.

The 6th of June 1918 marked the beginning of the Marine Corps transformation from a semicolonial constabulary to a vital element of America's armed services, one that can strike anywhere at any time. Can it be said that the Marine Corps of today was born amid "red hot nails," exploding mortar and artillery shells and clouds of poison gas on a June day almost 100 years ago? Yes, it can and it was.

Author's bio: Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars as well as on an exchange tour with the French Foreign Legion. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.

