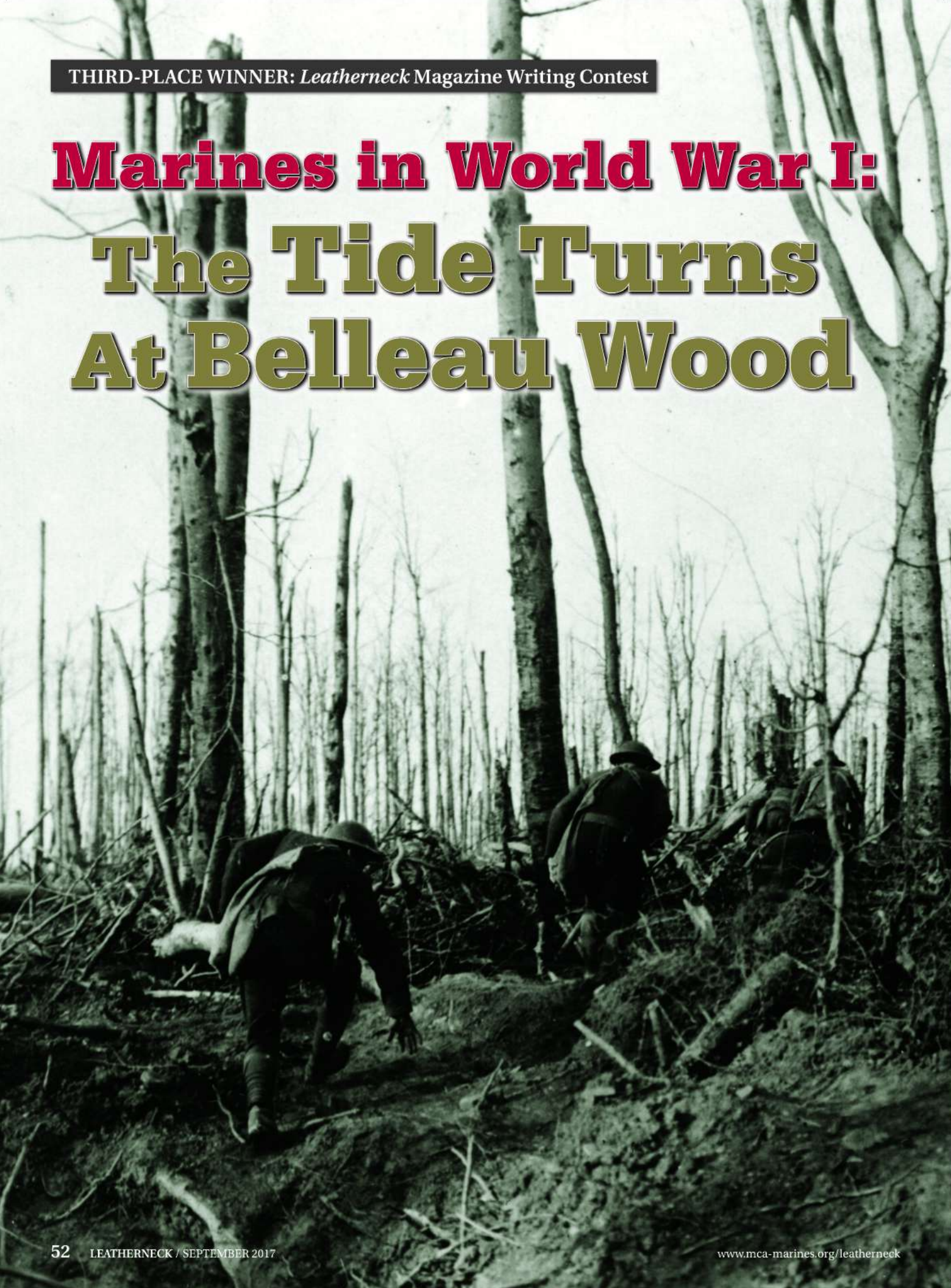



THIRD-PLACE WINNER: *Leatherneck* Magazine Writing Contest

Marines in World War I: The Tide Turns At Belleau Wood





By SSgt Linda A. Scott, USMC

Editor's note: The following article is the third-place winner of the Leatherneck Writing Contest. Maj Richard A. "Rick" Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. Upcoming issues of Leatherneck will feature other submissions.

Nearly four years after the outbreak of World War I, the United States took part in its first major battle of the war. It was a ferocious battle that cemented the reputation of the U.S. Marines as an unrelenting and unwavering fighting force. Approximately 50 miles north of Paris, the Fourth and Fifth Marine Divisions fought the Battle of Belleau Wood.

WW I was separated into two sides: the Central Powers and the Allied Powers. Initially, the Central Powers only consisted of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Subsequently, the Central Powers were joined by the Ottoman Empire and Bulgaria. The major hitters in the Central Powers were located between Russia to the east and France to the west.

The Allies initially only consisted of France and Russia—both of which had similar territorial aspirations regarding the land that separated them. It was not until the Germans invaded Belgium that Great Britain agreed to side with France to fight the Central Powers. The U.S. attempted to remain neutral during the onset of the war, but eventually joined the Allies when war was declared on Germany. The U.S. was not a member of the Allies during the war, but instead considered itself an Associated Power. Initially, Belgium also attempted to remain neutral, but was drawn in when it was invaded and occupied by Germany.

Disputes between Austria-Hungary and Serbia acted as the ignition source of a large powder keg. Germany had an interest in annexing parts of Russia, and France wanted to annex territories to its east. The Russians began mobilization efforts as a security measure due to mounting issues between Serbia and the Central Powers. Seeing this great mobilization as a threat to the Central Powers, Germany vowed to help its ally, Austria-Hungary, and began to mobilize for war. Russia promised it had no intent of going to war, but that it was simply preparing for the increasing conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia.

The mobilization of both Russia and Germany led the German government to inform Russia that they were in a state of

war. Upon declaration of war on Russia by Germany, France declared war on Germany in order to support its ally. Germany found itself fighting on both the Eastern and Western Fronts. To put a quick end to the dispute with France on their Western Front, Germany attempted to move through Belgium to create a shortcut to Paris. The invasion of Belgium led Great Britain to also declare war against the Germans. Several smaller states followed suit and declared war on Germany and Austria-Hungary in support of Allied efforts.

Upon America's entry into the war, President Woodrow Wilson was cautious. Though he believed WW I was the result of actions by both Central and Allied Powers, he sided with the Allies and made attempts to aid them economically. He had no interest in changing the German regime. Wilson felt that Germany's current Reich would be the most influential and had no intention excluding the Reich during post-war negotiations, politically or economically.

As the war progressed, the Germans managed to break through Allied lines and move into France. A Russian surrender on the Eastern Front led to an increase of German soldiers taking offensive positions. The soldiers who had fought in Russia were now in a position to use their experience on the Western Front. Once the U.S. joined the war, the Central Powers knew they needed to advance before the U.S. was able to fully deploy their troops to Europe. The German Army reached the Marne River at Château-Thierry, roughly 60 miles north of Paris. When Château-Thierry fell, the Germans continued their advance to France's capital and moved into Belleau Wood, a 200-acre forest where the German troops met the U.S. Army's 2d Division, which had Marines under its command.

Prior to the official start of the battle, the Germans were able to break through the French lines near the location of the Marines. To fill the hole created by the German advance, the Marines conducted a forced march throughout the night, which put them in a position to help establish a 12-mile line of defense north of the highway that led to Paris.

Moving through the shattered woods, Marines kept low as remaining German gunners looked for targets.

COURTESY OF MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

The U.S. had two options at this point in the war. As they were not yet fully deployed, the U.S. forces were not at their full strength or potential. The Germans had overcome fighting on two fronts and still were advancing. The Allied line could either dig in or make aggressive offensive movements to push Germany back.

The American troops were under the command of Army General John Pershing, whose vast military experience was gained in a variety of different situations and environments. GEN Pershing had learned the importance of knowing one's enemy, which later came in handy during his assignment as the commander of the American Expeditionary Force.

French and British numbers had been heavily depleted and they requested American troop reinforcements to strengthen their thin lines. GEN Pershing refused to allow his men to fill the empty spaces among the Allies' lines. He believed the full force of the U.S. troops needed to be present and established before spreading them all over the battlefields. He did allow British generals to command some groups of U.S. military and allowed all-black units to be integrated into the British and French ranks. He believed the training of the U.S. troops was vastly different than that of the Allies, and therefore the effectiveness of U.S. forces would be depleted through full integration. GEN Pershing also believed that a unified front of American troops would be intimidating to the German soldiers and would weaken enemy morale. During his initial command and establishment of the American Expeditionary Force, Pershing was able to increase the initial count of 130,000 American troops into a well-trained force of more than 2 million fighting men.

The decision was made for the U.S. troops to take an offensive position and move into Belleau Wood to clear it of Germans and push back opposition forces. On the first day of fighting, Marines had to cross a wheat field to move positions. During this time, GEN Pershing realized he had underestimated the effectiveness of the machine gun, as constant fire from the German machine-gun nests created treacherous conditions for the Allies. The nests were so well-positioned that intersecting fields of fire made the movement of American troops exceptionally difficult and dangerous. Eliminating the nests was a large hurdle

for the Americans to overcome. More than 1,000 Marines lost their lives on the first day, representing the largest number of Marine casualties until that point in their history.

During this initial push into Belleau Wood by the Marines on June 6, 1918, the open fields and superior positions of the Germans led the French commanders



Capt Lloyd Williams commanded 51st Co, 2d Bn, 5th Marine Regiment at Belleau Wood. He famously declared, "Retreat, hell! We just got here!" Wounded on June 11, 1918, his first thoughts were of his Marines as he said, "Don't bother with me. Take care of my good men." He died later that day.

to advise the Marines to turn back. The Marines proved unwavering in their dedication to duty and refused to retreat. Marine Captain Lloyd Williams' response to the suggestion of retreat later became one of the Corps' most famous quotes: "Retreat, hell! We just got here!"

The U.S. Secretary of the Navy de-

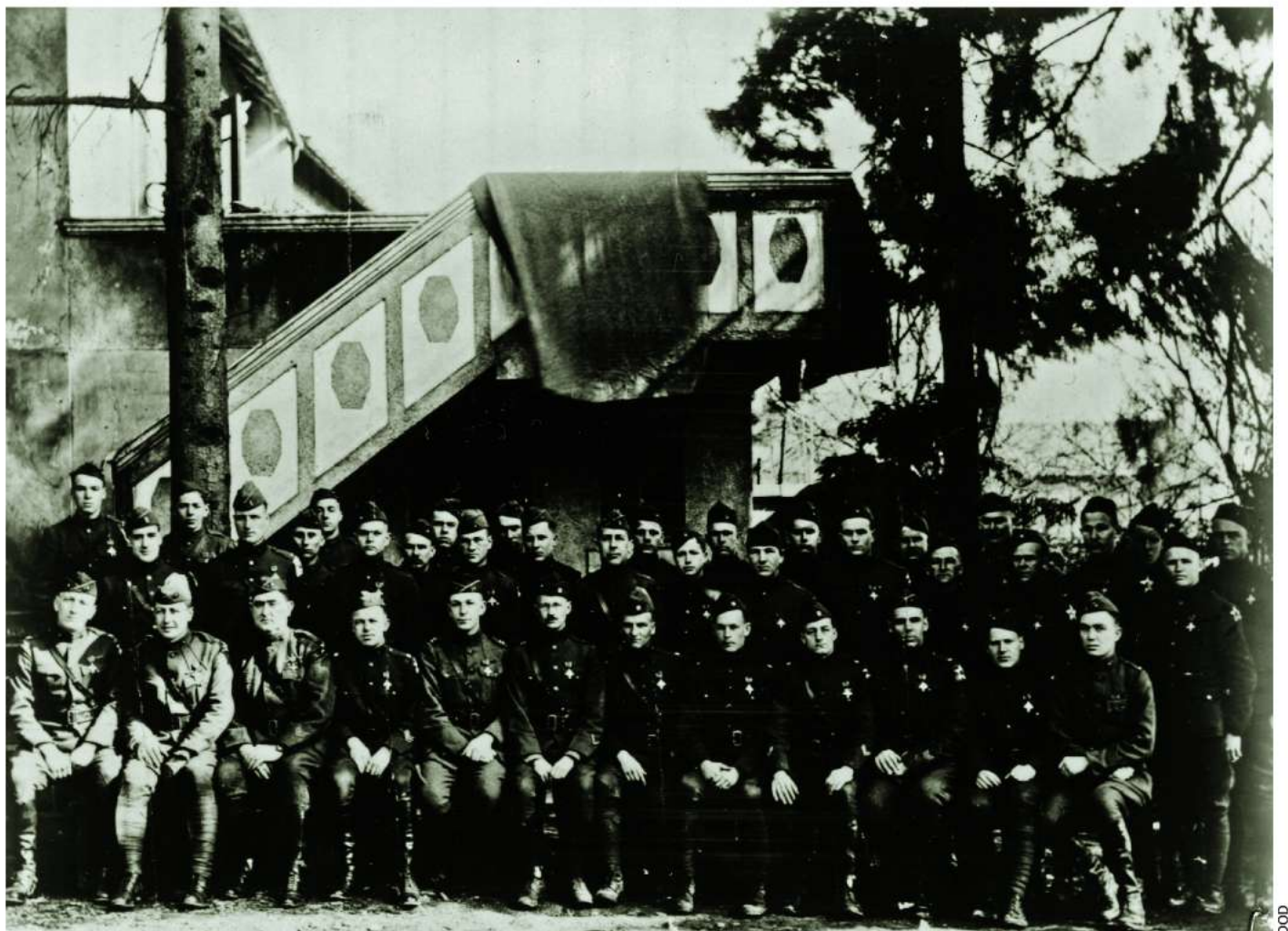
scribed the actions of the Marines as they moved across the open fields prior to entering the woods as proceeding "strictly according to American methods." The Marines pushed through in waves, beginning with a rush, then a halt, then another rush. As they pushed forward, stepping over the bodies of their fallen comrades, they remained relentless and determined to complete the mission. As companies of 250 men fell to 60 or less, sergeants took command and remained steadfastly dedicated to duty.

Eventually, the Marines were able to push past the fields and into the forest. The groupings of trees that had previously made passage through the fields difficult now proved to be an asset. Using the trees for cover and concealment, the Marines continued to advance with a reduced risk of machine-gun fire. The German commander was determined not to let the Americans take back the forest and called forces from the rear to reinforce their decreasing numbers. The Marines repelled the counterattacks and maintained overall control of their positions.

Another great success of the Battle of Belleau Wood was executed through the demonstration of superior Marine marksmanship. Upon entry into the woods, Marine snipers used the trees to maintain concealment. German machine-gun fire gave away their positions, allowing Marine snipers to identify and pick off some gunners. Over the next three weeks, the Marines continued to fight their way through the forest, reinforced by French and American Army artillery.

As the Marines advanced, they engaged in hand-to-hand combat with German machine gunners. Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels described the Marines as almost savage in their efforts to defeat the Germans, explaining that, "United States Marines, bare-chested, shouting their battle cry of 'E-e-e-e-y-a-a-h-h-h yip!' charged straight into the murderous fire from those guns, and won!" Although many charged, often only one would make it to the intended target. Often, with only his bayonet as a weapon, the Marine would either kill or capture the German behind the gun.

The fighting continued for several weeks. The Marines found themselves with dwindling supplies and men. They often fought for days with no sleep, food or water. Commanders watched their men



The officers and men of the 5th Marines fought gallantly at the battle of Belleau Wood

collapse from exhaustion and listened to their wounded call for water that was not there. Marines slept in the shallow holes that had been created by enemy artillery. Commanders and Marines witnessed comrades torn to pieces by machine-gun fire, yet continued to push forward. Wounded men continued to fight until their last breath.

Exhausted, when others would have ceded, the Marines persevered through more attacks by the Germans in attempts to retake the forest. Although tired, hungry and thirsty, the Marines continued to hold. Commanders wrote back to the rear that their men were wearied and received instructions to continue to hold the line. One such message read: "Losses heavy. Difficult to get runners through. Some have never returned. Morale excellent, but troops about all in. Men exhausted."

Even with such limitations, the response was always the same: the line must be held. The Marines continued to push. Little by little, their line advanced. On June 24, the Marines initiated their final push. Beginning with bombardment by French and American artillery, the Marines cleared the last of the Germans out

of Belleau Wood. To do this, they once again faced sweeping machine-gun fire, necessitating more hand-to-hand combat and use of bayonets. It is said that the Marines relied on their iron will and sheer nerve for the duration of their time in the forest. On June 26, Major Maurice Shearer was finally able to send the signal: "Woods now entirely—U.S. Marine Corps."

Less than six months after the taking of Belleau Wood, World War I ended with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles. The efforts of the Marines, with the assistance of Allied artillery, had broken the German line, stopping their advance. Reports stated that the Marines had saved France from German invasion and occupation.

A firsthand description of the battle by Colonel Frederick A. Wise ends with an emotional testament to the end state of the Marines. "At the battle's end ... I lined the men up and looked them over. It was enough to break your heart. I had left Courcelles May 31st with 965 and 26 officers—the best battalion I ever saw anywhere. I had taken them, raw recruits for the most. 10 months I had trained them. I had seen them grow into Marines. Now, before me stood 350 men

and six officers. 615 men and 19 officers were gone."

The Germans were so impressed by the relentless fighting of the Marines during the Battle of Belleau Wood that they nicknamed them "Teufelshunde." Loosely translated to "devil dog," the nickname is still used today although there is ongoing debate regarding the actual term used by the Germans, with some suggesting that another more commonly used term, "Höllenhunde," was used to describe the Marines as "hell hounds." Regardless of the origin, the devil dogs who fought at Belleau Wood so impressed GEN Pershing that he said, "The deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle."

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