

Battle of Belleau Wood

Past to present

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



Belleau Wood. (Painting by Frank Earle Schoonover.)

While the nature of warfare remains unchanged, the character of warfare continuously evolves, yet many of the lessons from our experience at Belleau Wood remain relevant today. Setting aside momentarily the emotional connection to Belleau Wood, the two key lessons identified, and more importantly learned, from Belleau Wood were: the ramifications of industrial-level warfare that the Corps’ leadership took forward with them into World War II and the von Clausewitz concept of the human factor in war, “With uncertainty in one

scale, courage and self-confidence must be thrown into the other to correct the balance.” While the fight in and around Belleau Wood certainly did not decide the outcome of World War I, it played a vital role in boosting the morale of our exhausted Allies, extinguished the hope of the Germans that the U.S. forces could not fight, and internally

reinforced the *esprit de corps* and self-confidence that saw the 4th Marine Brigade prevail despite the odds.

Utilizing the six battlefield functions should assist in categorizing those lessons learned at Belleau Wood that still resonate within the present-day Marine Corps.

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Command and Control (C2)

1. Fight smart. Understand the enemy and the fight.
2. Mission orders; orders process.

The Marine Brigade was blessed with leadership from the regimental to platoon level that had combat experience: both regimental commanders were recipients of the Medal of Honor. Between 1900–1917, when the United States entered World War I, Marines had seen action in over nine countries, from China to the Caribbean, but that experience was nothing like what awaited them in France. At Belleau Wood, the Marine Brigade was actually commanded by BG James Harbord, U.S. Army, GEN John Pershing's Chief of Staff, who had limited combat experience. Harbord's surviving "field orders" were largely coordination instructions and lacked both mission and intent: vital ingredients in uncertain and chaotic circumstances when higher headquarters exerted limited control over the units. Harbord routinely circumvented the chain of command, issuing orders directly to battalion commanders—only adding to the inherent friction of combat.

Orders process: On the opening day of the battle, 6 June, the "1/3-2/3" rule for allowing subordinate units time to prepare was not practiced. All four of the attacking battalions were afforded minimal time for the orders process, let alone brief backs, rehearsals, etc. Maj Julius Turrill had minutes to prepare the 1/5 Mar attack on Hill 142; similarly, Maj Ben Berry, 3/5 Mar, had fifteen minutes to prepare the assault across the open wheat fields. 6th Mar fared little better with Col Albertus Catlin receiving the brigade order at 1545 to coordinate three battalions, one of which was a 5th Mar battalion, with a line-of-departure time of 1700.

Intelligence

1. Develop the intelligence picture.
2. Adaptation; learning environment.

Despite the Corps' experience of patrolling and small unit action prior to World War I, limited attempts to develop the intelligence picture were undertaken prior to the battle, with Lt

William Eddy's (the 6th Marines' S-2) small patrol into Bussiaries on the eve of battle being one of the few positive exceptions. For much of the battle, the leadership was fighting blind. Limited French aerial reconnaissance proved to be of little value. Positive reports from battalion commanders to regimental and brigade level were readily accepted at face value and passed onto higher headquarters, such as LtCol Frederick "Fritz" Wise's, CO, 2/5 Mar, premature announcement on 11 June that he had taken the wood and Maj Johnny "the Hard" Hughes', CO, 1/6 Mar, assertion he had secured the southern half of the wood on 10 June despite a hard fought advance of only a few hundred meters into the southern defense belts. Negative reporting—such as Lt William Matthew's accurate assessment of 2/5 Mar position in the waist of the woods and German disposition to the units north, and Maj Maurice Shearer's, CO, 3/5 Mar, report of resilient German defenses in the northern wood—were dismissed out of hand. All intelligence assessments are just that, assessments; leadership must utilize experience to assimilate information, both good and bad, and render the best decision possible.

Small things matter. 5th Marines' XO, LtCol Logan Feland, frustrated with a decreasing situational awareness because of unintelligible reports that required runners as the primary means of communications, who were also vulnerable to getting killed, delayed, or providing reports out of sequence, introduced the simple practice of having a date and time on each report; this led to a better understanding of the actual, rather than imagined, fight. LtCol Feland also routinely stationed himself forward, alongside the companies engaged in fighting, providing the required leadership and enhanced situational awareness.

Maneuver

3. Unity of effort.
4. Isolate the objective.

At the highest level, GEN Pershing, the Commander of the American Expeditionary Force, wished to establish a return to open battle—largely ignoring the four years' experience of the Allies

and realities of the Western Front. This resulted in a series of disconnects between the training and implementation. The American Expeditionary Force employed Allies to help train U.S. forces; this training emphasized set piece battle with "artillery conquering, infantry occupying" as typified by the stalemate of the trenches. Unfortunately for the Marines, and the attached U.S. Army 2nd Engineer Battalion, Belleau Wood was somewhat of a hybrid battle, neither truly positional trench warfare nor an open battle of maneuver. When the battalions advanced—in a coordinated, supporting manner in the view of the brigade headquarters but in reality a series of separate assaults—each battalion stepped off in parade ground precision formation, presenting wonderful target arrays as evidenced by both Marine and German memoirs. The Marines quickly abandoned these tactics in the close confines of the woods, but mental rigidity by higher headquarters witnessed a return to such tactics in the opening phases of follow-on battles at Soissons, St. Mihiel, and Mont Blanc.

The successful seizure of Bouresches by Maj Thomas Holcomb, CO 2/6 Mar, on the opening day of the battle was never exploited to isolate the wood. Until the final day of the battle on 26 June, the Germans were able to reinforce, resupply, and rotate forces in the woods from the north and west. Had the brigade attempted to either physically isolate the wood or at minimum interdict German access by fires, it would have improved the fight for the battalions in the woods.

Fires

5. Fire enables maneuver.
6. Send a shell rather than a body in most circumstances.

Personal courage and individual skill are no match for high-volume machine gun fire and accurate artillery as employed by the Germans in 1918, yet that was the initial mindset of the senior leadership at Belleau Wood. Routine artillery preparation fires were suspended in an effort to achieve surprise and because of a lack of knowledge about the enemy situation. As the fight progressed, the Marines began to understand the



Lejeune and staff members. (File photo.)

value of fires in support of maneuver; the final assault by 3/5 Mar, on 25 June, after a costly and repulsed assault on 23 June, was preceded by a 14-hour barrage—enabling the final assault to secure the wood.

Some historians question the necessity of actual seizing the woods, rather than shell and gas the wood to make it uninhabitable to either side. While this decision was not the Marines to make, the point is moot; however, the lesson remains: Do we need to send the Marine in harm's way or is there another option?

Logistics

7. Amateurs talk tactics; professionals talk logistics.

As the Marines approached Les Mares farm at the western point of what would become the Marines' sector, they arrived with only emergency rations and what they carried on their backs. The field trains, transiting a limited road network clogged with fleeing French civilians and disorganized units in retreat, took several days to catch up with the Brigade. Fortunately, the Marines were able to supplement their meager rations with liberated wine from nearby cellars and the occasional lost cow. The limited planning timelines did not account for ammunition resupply nor evacuation of the wounded. Maj Turrill's, CO 1/5 Mar, understrength, pre-dawn assault on Hill 142 that opened the battle was immediately followed by requests for

stretchers and ammunition resupply upon consolidating their objective as no allowances had been made prior to the attack. This reinforces the fact that, despite prior combat experience, the Marines were not prepared for the unfolding battle they had just entered. The battalion lost 333 Marines during a two-company assault on Hill 142. As the battle progressed, Marines entered the fight with ambulances pre-staged at regimental aid stations while enemy prisoners and band members equipped with stretchers prepared to assist in casualty evacuation.

Force Protection

8. Hit what you aim at.
9. If you can see him, he can see you.
10. Dirt is our friend, so is "Doc."

From the initial engagement by Lt Lemuel Shepard's outpost north of Les Mares Farm, the Marines marksmanship abilities proved vital and routinely noted in German reports. While no match for similarly accurate machine gun fire, the individual Marine's combat skills, *esprit de corps*, and even recklessness routinely carried the day in countless, unknown skirmishes throughout the wood. The Marines quickly understood if you could see a German observation balloon, he could see you and accurate artillery fire would soon follow; thus, night movement, terrain masking, and infiltration by small unit became the norm as Marines adjusted their tactics, techniques, and procedures. Digging

in meant increased chance of survival; again, Marines quickly adapted—although we never equaled the German ability to develop hasty trench systems from individual fighting positions. Future Assistant Marine Commandant's, then-Sgt Merwin H. Silverthorn, great granddaughter recounted a story as we stood at the edge of the 3/5 Mar, "wheat field" of how Sgt Silverthorn unbuckled his web gear to get closer to mother earth as German fire swept the wheat field. Concealment does not equal cover. Marines began the habit of driving rifles into the deck to help locate wounded Marines as the wheat concealed the location of the wounded. As always, our Navy brothers were at our side, attending our wounded on the field and performing surgery in road culverts within a "click" of the fight.

Summary

Instruction at Parris Island and Quantico stating the Marines won World War I at Belleau Wood is to give scope to the facts to say the least. That victory though was vital for the psychological edge we achieved for ourselves, our Allies, and significantly over the Germans. The hard-won lessons were carried through by those who had fought here and would later lead the Corps across the island-hopping campaign in the Pacific. The aforementioned lessons that resonate still are but a token. At the Marine Brigade's next battle near Soissons in July, some of the same flawed tactical formations were initially employed; lessons are often identified but learning can take time. We did follow our Allies' procedure of withholding approximately ten percent of key leaders from initial assaults because of the high casualties that could be expected. On the opening day at Belleau Wood, 6 June 1918, we lost more Marines on that single day than we had lost in the 143 years since 10 November 1775. The lesson is "learn."

