

Army Generals, Expert Riflemen, Rogue Reporters, and Devil Dogs

How a far-off battle charted the course of the modern Marine Corps
by Col Maria McMillen

“Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely,” the dispatch of 26 June 1918 read.¹ The woods were eventually christened the *Bois de la Brigade de Marine*, or the Marine Woods, but they are more commonly known to all who have worn the eagle, globe, and anchor as Belleau Wood. After twenty days of tenacious fighting, the Marines had emerged with an uncompromising victory. The victory was the result of discipline, determination, and sacrifice: the hallmarks of the Marine Corps, before and since. The battle has cemented itself as a defining moment for the Corps for reasons both historical and legendary.

Much of how the Marine Corps operates today can be traced to the Battle of Belleau Wood, particularly with regard to the pride in belonging, passion for marksmanship training, and public relations, more commonly referred to today as strategic communications. The reality is that the battle has taken on mythical proportions. Yet the battle itself remains the centerpiece. The Marines who fought this specific engagement largely remain anonymous. Although remarkable Marines fought side by side, legends such as Sgt John

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Quick, Sgt Dan Daly, and future Commandants, Generals Clifton B. Cates, Thomas Holcomb, Wendell Neville, and Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., gained

their iconic status before (for Quick and Daly) or after (for Cates, Neville, and Shepherd) the battle. At this hallowed ground, the battle itself and the fighting spirit of “The Marines” reigned supreme, vice that of a specific Marine or specific action. At Belleau Wood, there was no Marine or moment; there was no John Basilone at Guadalcanal or Flag Raising at Iwo Jima. Because of the anonymity of the Marines on the



Lejeune and staff members. (File photo.)

battlefield, the battle lives on, etching in every Marine a sense of camaraderie with those valiant Marines, those nameless Marines, who fought.

Today, the Marines no longer have in their ranks a living survivor of the battle; the ground has been trod by but a few. Yet the battle looms large in the hearts of our country's Marines, imprinting the ethos of determination against all odds and "every Marine a rifleman" into the young recruit at Parris Island, the rugged colonel facing retirement, and the spry veteran at the local American Legion. That battle is the Battle of Belleau Wood. The fighting spirit of the Marines who fought the battle remains, just as their names are lost to time. The lasting imperatives of the battle that are mirrored in today's Corps are eloquent in their simplicity: be proud of your title, be brilliant in the basics, accomplish the mission, and get the story out; and remember, sometimes the Marines' biggest ally might not be wearing Marine Corps green.

We Are Marines

During the battle, the Marine 4th Brigade was referred to as "the Marines." Not knowing their unit or specialization didn't seem to bother the Marines of the 4th Brigade, or any others for that matter; they were just pleased to be mentioned. Then as well as today, the pride of belonging to the Corps and being a Marine supplants any subcategorization. Other Services focus on the distinction of their differences, while the Marine Corps emphasizes its

sameness. This pride in earning the title "Marine" is forged into all those who walk the parade decks of Parris Island, San Diego, and Quantico. Because it is earned, the title Marine is held in high regard by both those who earn the title and those who fight against them. This pride in belonging has carried over from the woods of France to the jungles of Vietnam, and, more recently, to the poppy fields of Afghanistan.

Every Marine A Rifleman

Upon encountering the Germans, the Marines relied on the habits they had formed in their training and in the jungles during the Banana Wars. Rather than go for a complex coordinated attack, they deployed along a low ridge and opened fire—slow, well-aimed, deliberate fire. Although the system of

"Every Marine is, first and foremost, a rifleman. All other conditions are secondary."
—Gen Alfred M. Gray

fire typically used during that time produced effective fire up to 200 yards, the Marines were inflicting casualties on the Germans at a range of approximately 800 yards. So accurate was the fire that the Germans believed they were being fired upon with machine guns.² The time spent on the rifle range and the obsessive preoccupation with marksmanship training was seeing results on a battlefield that had seen little progress in the four years prior. Today, Marines remain fanatical in their training. Ever-increasing proficiency in the rifle and more complex weapons systems are the driving forces behind Marine Corps training. This training is the bedrock that ensures the Marines will always be prepared, whenever and wherever they are called. This focus on the basics creates a foundation that puts well-trained Marines on the battlefield, ready to rush to the sound of gunfire and employ the solid tactics that training instills. Al-

though the battleground has changed, focusing on the basics rather than on the exquisite or unique has delivered victories in battles as diverse as Iwo Jima, Pusan, Khe Sanh, and Fallujah.

Accomplish the Mission

The Marines on 6 June 1918 were told by the French Corps Commander via their Brigade Commander, BG James Harbord, USA, to "rectify the line and secure stronger ground."³ It took almost three weeks, but the Marines accomplished the mission. The ground covered was a mere 2,250 meters at its greatest distance, and in some places, the distance covered was less than 1,000 meters,⁴ but that ground was hard won and involved "some of the most desperate fighting ever performed by troops."⁵ This victory against a determined enemy was even greater than the ground covered from 1914 to spring 1918. The Germans had rarely been pushed back by the allies, so 2,250 meters was significant. Something as simple as accomplishing the mission and finishing what you set out to do has been a hallmark of the Marine Corps. If you want something done right, give it to the Marines. Even under daunting odds, the Marines find a way to "get the job done." This ability is a testament to a Marine's belief in himself and his belief in the Marines on his right and left. Prior to receiving the mission, the

"Being ready is not what matters. What matters is winning after you get there."
—LtGen Victor H. "Brute" Krulak

French were retreating from the ground the Marines would occupy. This tasking of improbable missions was not unique to World War I: the 1st Marine Brigade in Korea, once again under command of an Army Corps Commander, was given an almost identical mission in the Pusan perimeter—ultimately pushing back the

"I love the Corps for those intangible possessions that cannot be issued: pride, honor, integrity, and being able to carry on the traditions for generations of warriors past."
—Cpl Jeff Sornig

North Korean unit 26 miles over four days.⁶ Accomplishing the mission sets the Marine Corps apart. Since Belleau Wood, the Marine Corps has been the reliable entity to get the job done, no matter how difficult.

Tell It to the Press

Strategic communications was born on the wheat field! The ability to get the story of the Marines from the battlefield, runway, tent, field, and office has served the Marine Corps well. The Marines capitalized on self-promotion and the love affair the Nation had with her Marines; to tell their story, the Marines didn't have to wait for the selfie, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat to spread the word. They let the embedded journalists do it for them. Much of the legend that was born on Belleau Wood was brought to the news-hungry American public because of wartime restrictions, not in spite of them.

"The Marine Corps has just been called by the New York Times, 'The elite of this country.' I think it is the elite of the world."

—ADM William Halsey, U.S. Navy

In an effort to keep the specific units unknown to the enemy, the chief censor of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) inadvertently made a slip in the instructions relative to mentioning specific troops.⁷ Gen John J. Pershing, USA, censored journalists from writing specific units in their dispatches. The journalist assigned to the Marines, Floyd Gibbons, was a writer with a colorful style. During the World War, to save time and get the "exclusive," journalists would pre-write articles and wait until after the fighting concluded to fill in the blanks. Injured but not treated at the "dressing station," Floyd Gibbons was assumed dead. As a last favor to the "dead" Gibbons, the censor pub-

lished his pre-written dispatch in all of its sensational glory. The account of the Marine Brigade at Belleau Wood parlayed the exploits and heroic accounts of the Marines. Since no other units had been mentioned in articles, there was considerable glory in the headlines and jealousy by non-Marine units in the retelling.⁸

Floyd Gibbons is also most likely the one who conceived the term *Teufelhunden*, or Devil Dogs. As the phrase was written by him at a time, the term didn't literally exist in German, as it was technically misspelled and tensed incorrectly. Nonetheless, it has gained legendary status, and the correct spelling and factual origin are of little consequence when the lore prevails.⁹ Still today, the Marine Corps' strategic communications, or propaganda, as some call it, is deliberately fostered by a trained team of public affairs specialists, but often the most sensational and lasting headlines are not generated from within the Corps but by those reporting through pictures and words on the Marine Corps Story. Who can forget Operation IRAQI FREEDOM's post-Fallujah photo of the Marlboro Marine or Tom Ricks' book *Making the Corps*? These are but a few memorable examples, however; the Marine Corps is consistently reported on favorably by journalists, authors, and photographers. Often, the Marine Corps will use the pictures and quotes in their own recruitment or motivation products. No Service uses strategic communications to a greater advantage than the United States Marine Corps, a lesson lastingly learned in the woods and wheat fields of France.

The Ally in Another Service

4th Marines initially had a Marine commander. However, in May 1918, Marine BGen Charles Doyen was found physically unfit during a required physical exam; the periodic exams were an element of AEF policy that general officers were required to perform. GEN Harbord, GEN Pershing's Chief of Staff, was chosen to take command, as Pershing told him he could give him no better command in France than that of the Marine Brigade.¹⁰ He was ex-



LTG James G. Harbord. (Photo from Library of Congress, No. 32263.)

cited to command Marines but wasn't sure the feeling was mutual. It was. GEN Harbord led the Marines during one of the most memorable battles of the Corps, and the Marines looked upon him favorably as demonstrated by their affectionate display when he was promoted to major general on 30 June 1918¹¹ as well as when the Marines commissioned a portrait of GEN Harbord to hang in the Washington, DC, Army-Navy Club. Many Marines contributed to the portrait, to include the then-Commandant, MajGen John A. Lejeune.¹² In 1923, GEN Harbord was made an honorary Marine at the dedication of Belleau Wood as an American Battle Monument. The words he spoke that day, some five years after the battle, ring true today, almost 100 years later:

Now and then, a veteran, for the brief span that we still survive, will come here to live again the brave days of that distant June. Here will be raised the altars of patriotism; here will be renewed the vows of sacrifice and consecration to country. Hither will come our countrymen in hours of depression, and even of failure, and take new courage from this shrine of great deeds.¹³

His designation as an honorary Marine speaks to the positive impact he had on the Marine Corps and its legacy.

"I can't say enough about the two Marine divisions. If I use words like 'brilliant,' it would be an underdescription of the absolutely superb job they did."

—GEN H. Norman Schwarzkopf, USA

There are many instances in battle when members of another Service have been the staunchest advocates for the Marines, usually commending their fighting spirit and tenacity in battle. Men such as MG Frank E. Lowe, USA, who stated in 1952 during Korea that "the safest place in Korea was right behind a platoon of Marines. Lord, how they could fight,"¹⁴ and GEN Wesley Clark,

combat force that proved most effective in stopping the German advance. The incredible, almost implausible, victory came at a huge cost. During the battle, 4th Brigade, a unit of some 9,000 Marines, the largest tactical unit of Marines ever assembled, suffered extensive casualties, with more than 4,000 killed or wounded.¹⁶ On 6 June, the Marine Corps' "longest day," Marines suffered more than 1,000 killed in action, more than the Marine Corps had sustained in its 143-year existence.

Belleau Wood was *the* defining point, when the United States Marine Corps transformed from a very competent fighting unit usually fighting in far-off, little known places to the modern Marine Corps machine fighting the Nation's and the world's battles alongside the Army on the world stage. It transformed the Corps from a niche naval and small wars force to the fighting organization that is seen as the first effort to put against world conflicts today. The Corps is still a supremely

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USA, during the Gulf War, who stated, "The more Marines I have around me, the better I like it."¹⁵ Clearly, the Marines are held in high regard by other Services. That was true at Belleau Wood, and it is true today.

Belleau Wood: The Defining Moment

At Belleau Wood, the Marines met a well-postured German force that mustered all its strength in the spring of 1918 for an all-out effort to break through the stalemate that had defined trench warfare for the previous four years. The Germans reached Belleau Wood because they had achieved a breakthrough, and they were ready to capitalize on the momentum gained against the French. They didn't count on meeting the United States Marines, a

competent force, a reflection of those Marines who fought the enemy in the wheat and the woods of France, a force consisting of individuals who are proud to own the title Marine, a force that epitomizes every Marine a rifleman and is good, really good, at the basics, a force that gets the job done and knows how to let the American public know they did it, through embedded reporters and other service members. The Battle of Belleau Wood looms large, greater than the greats who fought it; 100 years later, it still captivates and encapsulates the Marines of today and continues to define the modern Marine Corps fighting spirit.

Notes

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