

IDEAS & ISSUES (HISTORY)

Battle of Belleau Wood

An analysis

by Sgt Nicholas Joiner

Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, *Warfighting* (Headquarters Marine Corps, Washington, DC, 1997), stresses the importance of ignoring the impulse to rationalize war and organize it functionally to predict an outcome. War is best described as “hoping to determine possibilities and probabilities of risk, disorder, friction, and chance to determine an outcome.” Since war is the creation of human will, it will always be determined by the complexities and peculiarities of human behavior. No amount of technological or scientific calculation that can be measured will guarantee victory in war. This concept proved true in 1918 when the acts of a few individuals overcame insurmountable odds to achieve victory at the Battle of Belleau Wood.

A quick summary of the challenges the Marines faced at Belleau Wood can be quickly summarized by a METT (mission, enemy, terrain and weather, troops and fire support available, time available) analysis. In early June 1918, German forces, rejuvenated with victories in Château-Thierry and Vaux as part of the spring offensive, reorganized in Belleau Wood and dug into a defensive posture in order to replenish supplies made short with their rapid rate of advancement. Along the line of advance were the cities of Amiens and Paris. The U.S. Marines' 4th Brigade, nearly all inexperienced under the charge of BG James Harbord, USA, launched an attack on the defensive position. The Germans, using concealment in the wood, entrenched in fighting positions heavy with machinegun fire facing the enemy avenue

>Sgt Joiner is an artillery electronics technician currently serving as a platoon sergeant, Communications Platoon, Headquarters Battery, 12th Marine Regiment. This article was written as an assignment while attending Sergeants Course 3-12, SNCO Academy, Okinawa, Japan.



“They’ve got us bracketed!” (Sketch by Capt John W. Thomason, Jr.)

of approach through a vast, mostly open field. Supported by two additional Reserve battalions, the Germans were able to unleash terrifyingly accurate artillery support. Although the fighting positions were mostly intended to be skirmishers' holes meant for use for a brief period of time, they still possessed the advantage of preparing the defense and using proper use of terrain. The Germans, concentrated in thick wood, were able to maximize use of offensive action by well-aimed, massive machinegun fire across a field that had to be crossed by the Marines. The Marines were very

limited with their supplies and mostly equipped with Springfield, bayonets, Chauchat automatic rifles, and Hotchkiss machineguns; they were even short on grenades.¹

On the morning of 6 June 1918, in what became the bloodiest day in Marine Corps history, Marines launched an offensive attack against a heavily fortified German position on Hill 142 across an open field to the west of Belleau Wood. Hampered by flat terrain, the Marines advanced with fixed bayonets across open wheat fields swept by German machinegun and artillery fire.

Caught in the open, retreating French soldiers advised the Marines to follow suit, where Capt Lloyd Williams was famously quoted as saying, "Retreat? Hell, we just got here!" Despite heavy losses, Hill 142 was taken following bloody hand-to-hand combat.

The following day (7 June), the Marines launched an attack to overtake Belleau Wood. Against forces with an established defensive control of the terrain, the Marines sought to gain control of German machinegun nests. By the evening, the Marines held the edge of the wood, entered the consolidation phase, and were prepared to ward off an enemy counterattack that would follow that night. The single day of fighting would cost the Marines more than 1,000 casualties. Fighting a war of attrition, the Marine offensive through Belleau Wood lasted until 26 June, during which the Marines routinely resorted to bayonets and knives. On the morning of 26 June, Marine Maj Maurice Shearer sent the signal: "Woods now entirely—U.S. Marine Corps."²

Examining the defense of the Germans in Belleau Wood in reference to the Sergeant's Course student textbook, their defense was fundamentally sound. The Germans prepared themselves by properly using the key terrain flawlessly, using the heavy concealment of the forest for observation of enemy locations and avenues of approach and maximizing use of offensive action by employing machinegun nests against a known enemy advancement across open field. Even though they expected to use the area for the reorganizational phase of their attack, the Germans had time to prepare and were able to coordinate mutual support from artillery units. The machinegun nests were positioned in the primary fighting positions concealed from enemy observation and able to coordinate organization on the ground.

An examination of the offensive of the Americans reveals that they failed to secure many tactical advantages usually associated with a successful offensive campaign. Whether a result of experience or coordination between unfamiliar countries, the offensive failed



A flare going off over the front lines. (Sketch by Capt John W. Thomason, Jr.)

to prepare for the mission. The Marines gravely failed in the mission of gaining information on the enemy. At many times in my study, I noted that the Marines failed to realize how many Germans were fighting and their positioning. They provided little security for advancing troops, relying solely on the fundamentals of fire of maneuver and maintaining momentum against an exasperated German stronghold. The fundamentals of the American offensive were flawed, and if not for the acts of valor from the individual Marines, the result of the battle, and

more importantly the war, could have been drastically different.

War has always and will always be a clash of human dimensions. War is shaped by human peculiarities which characterize human behavior, and how different groups of people react differently to situations. The attack on Hill 142 overwhelmed the retreating French soldiers with fear, but strengthened the Marines' will to thrust forward into a timeless victory that solidified our place among the elite fighting organizations of the world.

>Author's Note: My analysis of these accounts was made using the Sergeant's Course warfighting textbook and Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1, Warfighting.

Notes

1. This METT-T summary was accumulated from resources and accounts compiled on www.firstworldwar.com.

2. I made a summary of accounts by a day-to-day analysis of the Battle of Belleau Wood found on www.history.com.



Read more about Belleau Wood at www.mca-marines.org/gazette/BelleauWood.



5th Marines, Champagne, France, 4 October 1918. (Sketch by Capt John W. Thomason, Jr.)

Has wished every day for his safe return.

Has fought back the tears when times got tough.

Has counted down each second leading to this moment.




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