

90 Years Later

Belleau Wood revisited
by Agostino von Hassell

It's about the size of Central Park in New York City or maybe one-third of the Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island. When seen from the air, the battleground of Belleau Wood today looks impossibly small and, more importantly, almost exactly as it looked on 6 June 1918 when this critical engagement started what would last through 26 June.

Much has happened with the U.S. Marines since that famous battle. Those 20 days of intense tree-to-tree, trench-to-trench fighting would transform the Corps into what it would become in World War II (WWII) and beyond. The battleground itself also changed. It changed back to what it always had been—a small hunting preserve surrounded by wide-open wheat fields. But there is one important difference.

The bodies of over 1,000 Marines and over 2,000 Germans remain unrecovered inside the woods and the nearby fields, including the infamous Hill 142. The soil is still full of unexploded ammunition. Over 80 tons of shells rained down on each square mile of grounds. The land restored itself over the years; trees grew back where the battle had left nothing but stubble. The only clearly visible scar in the ground is the large cemetery that embraces the northern end of the woods with 2,289 crosses and stars of David—almost startling in the brightness of their white marble.

Hindsight now shows that while for the Germans (see article on p. ...) the engagement at Belleau Wood was not a major event, it was the core of what would be the future Marine Corps. With this one fight the U.S. Marines established themselves as a substantial and well-formed fighting force. It was the first time that Marines operated in

units larger than a company. Based on that record, the modern Marine Corps evolved and would become the formidable force that would prove itself first in the additional battles of the WWI, such as Blanc Mont and St. Mihiel, and later in WWII, Korea, Vietnam, and Iraq.

The Impact of the Battle

“Nothing except a battle lost can be half so melancholy as a battle won,” wrote Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington, in a dispatch from the field of Waterloo in June 1815. Since time

>For bio see p.

immemorial a core problem for both political and military leaders has been how to gain benefit from the massive losses in life and limbs of a battle won. Just what comes next? What was and is the benefit of a battle won?

6 June 2008 was the 90th anniversary of the pivotal battle of Belleau Wood in France. The United States Marines had finally conquered the



Marines marching through Belleau Wood enroute to memorial service. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

woods and, in the words of French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, “saved Paris.” That day—6 June 1918—would bring the single highest casualties in Marine Corps history until the 1943 battle of Tarawa. Marines would suffer 1,087 casualties that day. Overall casualties in this grim 20-day battle would be 9,777 killed and wounded. Well over 8,000 Germans lost their lives.

Young modern-day Marines do grow misty-eyed when they glance across the open wheat field where Marines from the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments advanced over open ground against massed machinegun, mortar, and artillery fire from the well-dug-in German forces. 6 June was a day that would create Marine Corps legends—just like Normandy 26 years later would result in heroism that still makes people wonder what kind of country can produce such men.

On 1 June 1918 the Marines were getting into position but were urged by the retreating French to follow. Retorted, so the legend goes, Capt Lloyd W. Williams of Berryville, VA, “Retreat, hell! We just got here.” He would fall on 12 June 1918 during the battle for Belleau Wood, while serving with the 2d Battalion, 5th Marines. He too

had shipped out from Quantico.

Capt Williams was tended to on the battlefield by Navy (Medical Corps) LT Orlando Henderson Petty who would carry Capt Williams off the field of battle. His Medal of Honor citation for actions that day states:

Having been knocked to the ground by an exploding gas shell which tore his mask, Lt. Petty discarded the mask and courageously continued his work.

A grateful France re-named the woods “Bois de la Brigade de Marine.”

His dressing station being hit and demolished, he personally helped carry Capt. Williams, wounded, through the shellfire to a place of safety.

Equally famous is GySgt Dan Daly (by then already decorated with two Medals of Honor earned in Beijing during the Boxer Rebellion and in Vera Cruz, Mexico) who swung his heavy Springfield ‘03 rifle over his head during the famous initial assault on the

woods. He urged on his Marines yelling, “Come on, you sons of bitches, do you want to live forever?”

The battle for Belleau Wood started in the dawn hours of a hot June day and would not conclude until 26 June after the Marines had seized all of the dense woods. It was savage. Six times the Marines would get into the woods only to be repulsed in heavy hand-to-hand fighting. “This battle saved Paris,” exclaimed French Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, because it prevented the Germans from entering Paris just 60 miles to the west. A grateful France renamed the woods “Bois de la Brigade de Marine.”

Today the Anise-Marne Cemetery at Belleau Wood contains 2,289 graves. Each was decorated this past Memorial Day with one small French flag and one small U.S. flag. Some 1,060 Marines and others remain missing, buried by intense artillery in the blood-soaked grounds of Belleau Wood.

That battle is enshrined in Marine Corps history as one of the major acts of valor, as would be Guadalcanal, Tarawa, Iwo Jima, Hue City, and the two battles of Fallujah. But what came next? During the immediate fog of war it is hard to tell just what comes next.

What is the benefit of the “butcher’s bill”? All too often there is no tangible benefit. The battle gets recorded, burials are made, medals awarded, and the world moves on. The challenge of exploiting a battle won is enormous and can only come when there is a plan in place on how to move on after the engagements. Such plans have to be political as well as military, and the actions of the Marines now in Iraq appear to show that this lesson has been learned and is being applied.

This 90-year-old lesson from the battlefields of France is helpful now more than ever. The immediate result was obvious. The final major German offensive was stopped, and in 4 hard months of fighting the groundwork was laid for what would lead to the 11 November 1918 armistice. It is clear now, and was clear during the July-November 1918 time, that lessons learned



An aerial view village of Belleau Wood. (Photo courtesy of the author.)



The battlefield today. Unexploded ordnance can still be found in the fields, woods, and the village. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

at Belleau Wood had been applied and did indeed help with the final outcome. U.S. battle tactics in WWI were changed and adjusted, and the war was brought to a relatively rapid conclusion. But right after the decisive battle of Belleau Wood, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, GEN John J. “Blackjack” Pershing, did not yet see this. He wrote back to Washington that the war would last well into 1919, and over 100 U.S. divisions would be needed in France.

In hindsight it is clear that the valor displayed by Marines in France in 1918 helped bring WWI to a rapid conclusion. Emerging hindsight shows that the value and heavy loss of life in Fallujah and other Iraqi battlefields has allowed that troubled nation to earn a front page headline recently on the cover of the *Economist*: “Iraq fixes itself.”

This past Memorial Day the Commandant of the Marine Corps, Gen James T. Conway, attended commemo-

orations in Belleau Wood, a tiny village of about 135 people. Yes, there were many speeches, but among the lessons learned that do cast the actions in Iraq and Afghanistan into a very sharp light were two aspects of the ceremony. The villagers of Belleau Wood and the surrounding villages turned out in their Sunday best and did not pass up a single Marine, a single American, without walking up and saying thank you. And this is for a battle 90 years in the past. One can only hope that 90 years hence (or sooner) Iraqis and Afghanis will thank America in the same way.

In front of “Devil Dog” Fountain—a massive bronze bullmastiff in the courtyard of the old castle of Belleau—stood the Commandant of Marines. Behind him was the water from that fountain. Belleau means beautiful water, and for many Marines this is a place to reflect on the past of their Corps and drink that life-giving water. There was not a dry eye when this Commandant faced Marines who had

traveled there from Washington, based in Europe and North America, and awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal to Marine LCpl John L. Cook III of Hopatcong, NJ. This simple act at this historic place showed how lessons learned by the Marines continue well into the present. That Al Anbar Province, Iraq is—in the somewhat bizarre military language of today—“restive” is an accomplishment of the Marines. There, and after two bloody battles, they applied lessons learned in past wars and turned the situation around. Today Al Anbar is held up by many as an example of how to bring the simmering civil war in Iraq under control. That province now shows signs of economic revival, and the U.S. Army is trying with growing success to apply the same methods to a still troubled Baghdad. Is there a lesson learned here from Belleau Wood and all of the other battles in America’s past? Yes. The key is to study history.

