

Crucible of the Modern Marine Corps

reviewed by Agostino von Hassell

Yes, there are many relatively new books on the market that discuss the last year of World War I (WWI) and often the specific role of the U.S. Marine Corps in this concluding chapter of the epic battles. Yet few books are as notable as this new work by BGen Edwin H. Simmons, USMC(Ret)—one of the premier historians of the Corps in our time—and the noted historian, Col Joseph H. Alexander, USMC(Ret). *Through the Wheat* should end up on the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program list and be mandatory literature for all ranks.

Through the Wheat takes the reader on a masterful and exciting journey of how this Corps of Marines evolved from the eve of the U.S. entry into WWI all the way to its aftermath. WWI did in many ways create today's Marine Corps. Marines moved away from their old role as naval detachments with occasional duties as landing forces into a major military force that carved out its role among the Armed Services of the United States.

For the modern Corps, this war was very much the foundation. A host of senior leaders who would command Marines as flag officers and commanders (notable here are Gens John A. Lejeune, Clifton B. Cates, Lemuel C. Shepherd, Thomas Holcomb, future LtGen Mervin H. Silverthorne, and Gen Smedley D. Butler) in WWII and beyond saw their baptism of fire on the battlefields of France. Historic engagements, discussed in spending and comprehensive details in this book, such as

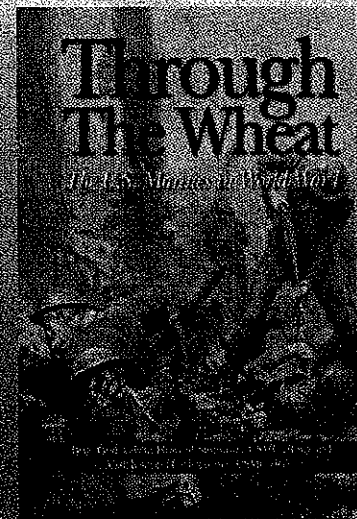
>Mr. Von Hassell is a writer who has published extensively on the U.S. Marines and now runs a national security consulting firm in New York City.

Belleau Wood, Soissons, Marbache, St. Mihiel, Blanc Mont and that inferno of the Meuse-Argonne, would mark generations of Marines. Unlike other books about the Marines in this “war to end all wars,” this is much more than just war history.

The evolution of the Corps is painted against the complex background of Washington politics, the rapidly emerging rivalry with the U.S. Army, and the now all-too-common fight over scarce budget dollars. The book charts the rapid evolution of the Corps that would take it from an initial

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strength of about 14,000 officers and men to more than 75,000 Marines—a fivefold increase in less than 16 months. It introduces the reader to how the famed Marine Recruit Depot on Parris Island (spelled “Paris” in those days) and other key bases, such



THROUGH THE WHEAT: The U.S. Marines in World War I. By BGen Edwin H. Simmons, USMC(Ret) and Col Joseph H. Alexander, USMC(Ret). Naval Institute Press, Annapolis, MD, 2008
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as Quantico, were formed and established to assure a future for the Corps.

Most critical—and that is with hindsight—was the masterly political campaign that would allow Marines for the first time (overcoming rather strenuous U.S. Army opposition) to operate as a large integrated combat force. The U.S. Army forces in France, led by GEN John J. “Blackjack” Pershing, could not conceive of the idea that an integrated and separate Marine field force could operate on its own. And certainly the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) high command could not conceive of such a force being under the command of a Marine. Yet the famous 4th Marine Brigade, which was a component of the 2d “Indianhead” Division (Army) and consisting of the 5th and 6th Regiments of Marines (both new units then) as well as the now defunct 6th Machine Gun Battalion, was allowed to operate as a unified force.

Distrust of the Army ran deep. Initially an Army brigadier, James G. Har-

bord, was the commander of the Marine Brigade—sort of “adult” supervision for the Marines. The Marines, however, acquitted themselves well in the major engagement at Belleau Wood and gained substantial publicity back in the United States. Thus Harbord’s successors in this command were then-MajGen John A. Lejeune and Maj Wendell C. Neville. Even more so and later in the last year of the war, Gen Lejeune would become the first and only Marine to command a U.S. Army division in combat. He took command of the 2d “Indianhead” Division that also incorporated the 4th Marine Brigade. This was a major accomplishment for the still-fledgling Marine Corps and would not be repeated until late last century when senior Marine generals would command joint commands consisting of all four Services. Still, the words of U.S. military historian S.L.A. Marshall remain truly fit-

ting when he described the Marines as a “little raft of sea soldiers in an ocean of Army.”

Much happened in the 24 months the book details. U.S. Marines would land in St. Thomas, acquired from Denmark during the war and now part of the U.S. Virgin Islands. Aviation would start and form the base of future Marine air with 1stLt Alfred A. Cunningham as the first Marine aviator ever. The 1st Marine Aviation Force operated in combat as the first organized Marine Corps aviation unit ever—a prelude to the devastating combined arms team of future wars. Basic recruit training was established on that swampy island off the coast of South Carolina. Early Marine recruits built the causeway that connects the recruit depot to the mainland in their “spare” time. And with this, as told in solid detail, the key elements of Marine recruit training—more or less un-

changed in its fundamentals to this day—evolved.

A singular challenge for any military writer is to make the descriptions of battles compelling and understandable. All too often the “fog of war” descends upon such writing. Not here. The authors hold the interest of the reader and clearly explain how battles evolved and what they meant on a tactical as well as strategic basis. In addition, the two authors explain quite well just how the impact of these engagements would shape the overall war.

For today’s readers the scope of the battles on the Western Front remains almost incomprehensible. That one division—as was the case with the 2d Division—was assigned a sector just 6 miles wide is something long past. Modern divisions cover much more terrain, and clearly defined forward edges of the battle area are a thing of the past. Yet the writers make it easy for today’s readers to understand and visualize these battles just 90 years in the past.

The only note of criticism here is that this book, like most books on the AEF in France, fails to mine the rich German military archives, which provide insights on how the enemy viewed, in this case, the Marines. Such classics as the work by Robert B. Asprey, *At Belleau Wood* (University of North Texas Press, 1996) rely almost exclusively on U.S. and British source material.

This book goes well beyond the service of Marines with the AEF. You will find descriptions of Marines serving in Siberia during the Russian revolution, details about the first women Marines, and the extensive “small wars”—the foundation for the famous *Small Wars Manual* in the Caribbean and in Central America. This book is a must-read.



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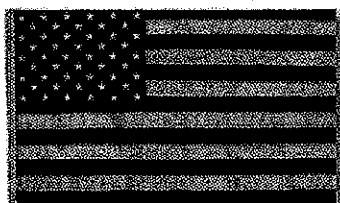


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