

# UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS *HISTORICAL COMPANY*

## “Devil Dogs”

### The 4th Marine Brigade at Belleau Wood, France, June 1918

In 1917 the United States would finally become embroiled in what had become the first truly global war, today known as World War I. Although the war in Europe had been raging since 1914 the U.S. did not officially become involved until April 1917. But in those final years of this ‘Great War’ the Marines were destined to do the hardest fighting in their history up to that time. The fourth Marine Brigade (composed of the newly formed 5th and 6th Regiments and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion) would eventually be assigned and serve as one of the infantry brigades of the American Army’s Second Division, American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). They would participate with distinction in many of the most important battles of the last year of the war.

When the AEF first arrived in France General Pershing, overall commander of the U.S. forces, was committed to maintaining the organizational integrity of his forces and reinforcing the traditional American emphasis on offensive open maneuver. Unfortunately, by 1917, both the French and British had largely adopted a defensive tactical doctrine. Pershing initially resisted the offer of British and French assistance in training the American forces. However, the sheer scale of preparing the rapidly growing AEF for combat would necessitate the need for French and British trainers after all, but as feared, they focused their training on a continuation of static trench warfare. During these months of training the French were usually amazed at the Marine emphasis and proficiency in marksmanship, but scoffed at the skill considering it to be superfluous in modern war. The 4th Marine Brigade would rapidly dispel this view during the initial actions at Belleau Wood when they laid down devastating rifle fire against the enemy at 800 yards, more than three times the accepted combat range. This highly effective marksmanship would be one of the principle factors in breaking the German assault.

During the American counter assaults on German positions in Belleau Wood the Marines quickly improvised and adapted the training they had received from their allies, integrating the best elements of what they had learned, and evolved their own offensive tactics to meet the realities of the battlefield. The Marines of the 4th Brigade fought with such ferocity that captured Germans referred to them as "*teufel-hunden*" or "*hounds from hell*" after a wild and savage mountain beast of Bavarian folklore. The American press would translate this to "*devil-dogs*," a nickname that is still embraced by Marines to this day.



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## Setting the Stage: *The Actions of 6 June*

By 27 May 1918, Still determined to force the war to a triumphant conclusion, and fearing that the influx of American troops would tip the balance of power to the Allies, the Germans, commanded by General Erich Ludendorff, launch a major offensive threatening Paris. The 2nd (AEF) Division is ordered forward to assist in establishing a new defensive line. By 1 June the U.S. 2nd Division had taken position near the village of Chateau Thierry, just forty miles northeast of Paris. The 4th Marine Brigade formed the left sector of the Division's line along the Paris-Metz highway, just south of a small forest called 'Bois de Belleau' (Belleau Wood). As the Marines proceeded toward their positions at the front, retreating French troops streamed past them on the way to the rear. As a French officer passed Marine Capt. Lloyd Williams, he tried to persuade the Marines to join the retreat. Williams, answering for every Marine, tersely replied "Retreat? Hell! We just got here."

The orders to the Marines and other AEF forces as they moved into position, reflecting the seriousness of the situation, was to dig in and hold at all costs: "*No retirement will be thought of on any pretext whatsoever.*" However, in the rush to counter the German offensive, no one had thought to issue the Americans entrenching tools. The Leathernecks and Doughboys were left to use their mess kits and bayonets to dig their positions, scraping out shallow fighting holes, they nicknamed "foxholes," for cover.

Within a day after the Marines had taken position, the Germans launched their first assault with rank upon rank of *feldgrau* infantry advancing on the American lines. Although the Marines did not have adequate heavy machine-gun support they unrelentingly cut down the Germans with well aimed fire from their M1903 Service Rifles. For the next two days General Ludendorff's troops would attempt to break the American line, but to no avail. By 5 June the German offensive had stalled, leaving them with heavy losses.

After their initial assaults on the American lines the Germans had learned that they were facing U.S. Regulars. Although the German high command did not consider Belleau Wood to have much strategic importance, they determined that, for both morale and propaganda reasons, they



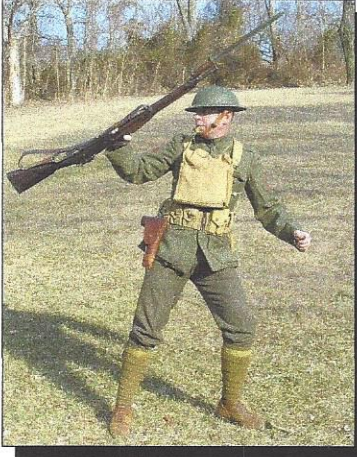
needed to assert superiority over this new (and what they considered green) enemy by repulsing any assaults made by the Americans. This was summed up by the German General commanding the 28th Division facing the Marines, when he announced "*We are not fighting for ground-for this ridge or hill. It will be decided here whether or not the American Army will be equal to our own troops.*" This would set the stage for the fiercest battle the Marine Corps had ever fought.

The following day, on 6 June, the Marines received orders to advance on the German positions in Belleau Wood, drive them out, and establish new positions there. Their primary objective stood on a fold of rocky ground in the mist of rolling farm country, roughly peanut shaped, extending approximately one and a half mile diagonally across their front and a half mile deep. Having been maintained as a hunting preserve, it was described as 'a typical piece of well kept French woodland.' The woods were filled with underbrush and tumbled boulders. The trees were tall but averaged only about five or six inches in diameter, and grew so close together that in some places visibility was limited to as little as twenty feet. Inside, the woods bristled with hastily but well placed German machine-gun nests. To get there the Marines would have to cross several hundred yards of open wheat fields, under the interlocking fire of these guns.

A short but savage artillery barrage preceded the main American attack. At 1700 (5 p.m.) waves of Marines left their works and, with bayonets fixed, began the long march across the wheat. They started the advance in well dressed lines, applying the outdated tactics taught to them by their French and British instructors. Maxim machine-guns manned by competent veteran German gunners quickly started laying down withering fire

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tearing through the Marine ranks. The American advance wavered, but raw courage and discipline carried the attack forward. Many Marines hit the deck, taking advantage of the dubious shelter of the wheat, but continued to advance on their hands and knees. The assault became fragmented and confused, with neither side being able to determine for certain the status of the battle as irregular pockets of Marines and Germans fought to the death throughout the fields and wood.

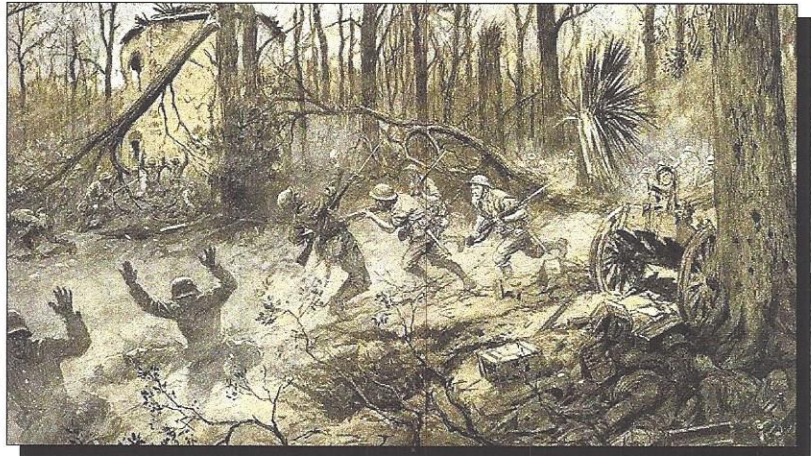


Junking their French training, with typical cynical adaptability, The Marines instinctively reverted to their own tactics and reformed into small combat groups. Applying improvised assault tactics- one small group popping up to blaze away with rifle fire while another rushed forward- the Marines Corps renowned NCO and officer leadership would prove its worth. This was exemplified by an account of war correspondent Floyd Gibbons. Surrounded by the dead and dying, Gibbons lay pinned down in the wheat, terrified. The veteran German machine-gunners had the range, and interlocking Maxim machine-gun fire relentlessly scythed down wheat and Marines alike. The final fifty yards to the woods seemed impassable. At this point Gibbons stared up in awe as Gunnery Sergeant Dan Daily swept by. *"The sergeant,"* Gibbons would report in his dispatch, *"swung his bayoneted rifle over his head with a forward sweep, yelling at his men 'Come on, you sons-of-bitches! Do you want to live forever?'"*

With a shout, the surviving Marines in the wheat surged forward and overran the first line of German machine-gun nests in the woods.

By night fall the Marines had gained a toehold in the tree line. The Fourth Marine Brigade had suffered over 50 percent casualties, with many Companies reporting the loss of all officers. Marine NCOs filled in the gaps and had their men dig in to repel German night counterattacks.

June 6, 1918 had become the bloodiest single day in the Corps' history. The Marine Brigade had suffered 1,087 killed and wounded, losing more men in that single day than in all of the preceding 143 years combined. But the fight for Belleau wood was not over.



During that night and into June 7, the Marines inside Belleau Wood repeatedly challenged the German defenders in close-in hand to hand combat. The Leathernecks proved extraordinarily adept at bayonet fighting. The German infantry, once vaunted as the premier close combat fighters of the world, had grown to dependent on their machine-guns. Once the Marines could get close enough to charge the German machine-gun nests, the fight was usually over.

The battle for Belleau Wood would drag on for another week, with the Marines slowly gaining ground and methodically attacking German positions. On 13 June they would repulse a major German counter attack, but at a further terrible cost in lives, including hundreds of casualties from poison gas. Late on 15 June the depleted Marine Brigade moved to the rear for a well deserved rest and refit, being replaced by the U.S. 7th Infantry Regiment and French forces to mop up the remaining Germans. On the 23rd the freshly replenished Marines would return to Belleau Woods to finish the job.

