

Information Warfare at the Battle of Belleau Wood

Mastering the information environment

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The Marine Corps' introduction of the new Deputy Commandant for Information (DCI) has signaled to the force that future battles must be contested not only physically but in all three dimensions—the physical, informational, and cognitive. This overt organizational shift does not aim to introduce a new strategy for the Service but rather to embrace and formalize an established tradition of the Marine Corps' mastery of the information environment. This tradition far pre-dates our doctrinal

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concept of information operations (IO) and, in many respects, has its genesis at the watershed battle of Belleau Wood. Without the benefit of our modern IO doctrine, the Marines at Belleau Wood nevertheless intuitively demonstrated mastery in all three dimensions. This informational advantage not only car-

ried the day in June 1918 but has resonated deeply for the past century.

Before discussing the 4th Marine Brigade's actions in the information environment at Belleau Wood, it is important to provide some narrative context. To be sure, Marine Corps lore was well established prior to 1918: Presley O'Bannon's march, the Battle of Chapultepec, the Spanish-American War, and other expeditionary actions were the principal fibers that constituted the tapestry of Marine Corps history. Prior to World War I, however, the Marines largely conducted small-scale operations and certainly had never fought a pitched battle against a major European adversary. The attitude of U.S. Army leadership at the time reflected the prevailing U.S. reticence to trust Marines with such conventional operations; the Service fabricated a number of barriers, culminating in the Secretary of War regretting that "it will be utterly impossible for the war Department to furnish transportation for a Marine Regiment."¹ Thus, the 4th Marine Brigade, at the time the largest Marine formation in history, faced both American skepticism at home and dire circumstances abroad as the German spring offensive barreled down on Paris. This confluence of events set the conditions for a defining moment for the Marines. They were more than up to the task.

It was not long after the Marines arrived on the front line near Lucyle-Bocage on 2 June that they had an



Marines and French soldiers honor those who died at Belleau Wood. (Official Marine Corps photo, 1998.)

opportunity to assert themselves. Leveraging one of their key strengths, they repulsed a German open-field attack with devastatingly accurate rifle fire from a distance. The Germans, unaccustomed to such accurate rifle fire, fell back, never to resume their offensive. This episode represents an action in the physical dimension of the information environment; these are intuitive and easy to conceive of for a military mind and thus do not merit extensive litigation in this article. It is, however, worth mentioning several noteworthy actions in the physical dimension to both recognize their individual merit and connect them to the informational and cognitive dimensions so as to demonstrate the interconnectedness of actions in the information environment. Aside from the aforementioned accurate rifle fire, other familiar physical attributes of the Marines at Belleau Wood include aggressive bayonet tactics and modified bounding techniques when crossing open terrain.

The informational dimension is “created by the interaction of the physical and cognitive dimensions; exists where information is collected, processed and disseminated; [and includes] information content and flow.”² While the term “informational dimension” was surely not uttered by anyone on the field of battle in June 1918, the Marines at Belleau Wood nonetheless conducted extraordinarily effective messaging. These messages resonate today. Most famously, Capt Lloyd Williams of 2d Battalion, 5th Marines, replied to a French officer’s instruction to withdraw with, “Retreat, hell. We just got here.”³ GySgt Dan Daly provided a similarly legendary utterance when he inspired his Marines with, “Come on, you ... Do you want to live forever?”⁴ While the initial target audience of these messages may have been Marines, their impact was arguably greater on the secondary and unintended audiences—German opponents, U.S. Army skeptics, and 21st century readers.

Also assisting the Marines in controlling the narrative was *Chicago Tribune* correspondent Floyd Gibbons. Perhaps recognizing the importance of effective messaging, the 5th Marines Com-

mander, Col Wendell Neville, permitted Gibbons to accompany the Marines into battle. When his reports hit the press back home, they bolstered the Marines’ reputation, amplified battlefield successes, and elicited a familiar Army reaction; MG Robert L. Bullard lamented,

The press reports of the 2nd Division’s fight shouted, ‘Marines, Marines, Marines’ until the word resounded over the whole earth and made the inhabitants thereof, except for a few Americans in the Army in France, believe there was nothing in the 2nd Division and, indeed, nothing in front of the Germans, but Marines.⁵

The cognitive dimension “exists in the minds of human beings” and includes “values, beliefs, perceptions, awareness, and decisionmaking.”⁶ Here, the interconnectedness of the three dimensions becomes abundantly clear. No matter the pace of technological advancement, the only way to infiltrate the cognitive dimension is through observable actions in the physical dimension and effective messaging in the informational dimension. The Marines at Belleau Wood overwhelmingly succeeded in securing a psychological advantage in the cognitive dimension over their opponents. Not only did they succeed in seizing a piece of physical terrain, which had been done before and would be done again, but they deliberately broke the will of their opponents. The Marines executed new and aggressive tactics through accurate rifle fire, bayonets, and bounding and amplified this advantage through effective messaging both on the battlefield and in the press. The resultant cognitive effect was manifest in the defeated Germans’ response to the battle, which yielded the now-famous moniker “Teufelhunden,” or “Devil Dogs.”

The Marine Corps today is a revered warfighting institution. Liberated from its pre-World War I stigmas, the Corps is a powerful equal to the other Services. Now, its influence is at an all-time high, with a Marine as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and former Marines in key administration roles. This power admittedly does not stem entirely from the legacy of Belleau Wood, for subsequent generations of

Marines have contributed astonishing actions to the Service’s lore. Belleau Wood was, however, the original test owing in equal parts to the extraordinary circumstances of the time and the even more extraordinary efforts of the Marines. Never content to wage war in typical fashion, the Marines excelled in all three dimensions of the information environment. The physical, informational, and cognitive effects delivered a critical victory on the field of battle in 1918 but more strikingly continue to have impact a century later. Signs of effective maneuver in the information environment can be seen everywhere in the Corps today. The symbolism of a dashing Marine in dress blues sends a message to a potential recruit. A MEU’s show of force deters hostile actors on a far-off shore. A more contemporary quote by former CG, 1st MarDiv, James N. Mattis, bolsters Marine morale and erodes the will of potential adversaries: “No greater friend, no worse enemy.”

Thus, the establishment of the post of DCI is not the beginning of Marine Corps action in the information environment. For generations, Marines have been masters of information. Although they may not have known it as such, the Corps’ first real information warriors were the Devil Dogs at Belleau Wood.

Notes

1. Richard D. Camp, *The Devil Dogs at Belleau Wood: U.S. Marines in World War I*, (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2008).
2. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 3-40.4, Marine Air-Ground Task Force Information Operations*, (Washington, DC: June 2013).
3. 1stLt B.B. McBreen, *2nd Battalion, 5th Marines at Belleau Wood: A Pocket History*, (Project Leatherneck, 6 June 1994).
4. *The Devil Dogs at Belleau Wood*.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *MCWP 3-40.4*.

