

Belleau Wood Pilgrimage

by Col Michael C. Howard, USMCR

The Battle of Belleau Wood and the area itself still provide a mystical attraction. This is rightfully so, particularly as the battle and battlefield itself still offer a powerfully unique opportunity for Marines and others to better understand Marine Corps heritage and 'esprit de corps.'

What makes Belleau Wood special and unique to me as a Marine? It goes well beyond lectures, books, or videos. It even goes beyond a cherished personal visit. For me, it started with an old friend.

PFC Cecil Key, Oregon's last Belleau Wood veteran, was from Forest Grove, OR. He was born on 27 May 1900 and enlisted in the Marine Corps within days of America's 1917 entry into World War I (WWI). Though underage, a tough, authoritarian father and desire to leave home, coupled with a strong patriotic sense of adventure, led him to a Marine recruiter and then to boot camp at Mare Island, CA.

Key stated that he "loved the Marine Corps from the start" and felt a special bond with those who responded to senior Marine recruiter Maj A.S. McLemore's highly successful slogan, "First to Fight." The Marine Corps was virtually overwhelmed by the positive response to McLemore's recruiting effort. Parris Island and Mare Island were deluged with recruits, and temporary training stations had to be set up in Philadelphia and Norfolk. In May 1917, 6,000 muddy acres of training areas, including a main railroad line and deepwater approaches for transports, were acquired by the Marine Corps at Quantico, VA. Cecil Key arrived there 7 July 1917 and was assigned to the new 78th Company, 2d Battalion, 6th Marines (2/6). This 250-man company was made

up half of men from Minnesota (the highly capable and respected company commander was Capt Julius Messersmith), while the other half were from Oregon and Washington state. Cecil was initially assigned as a rifleman to the 78th's 2d Platoon (1st Squad), but later in France, when his age was discovered, he was reassigned as a company runner, believed to be a safer billet. Following additional training, Cecil qualified "expert" on his 1903 Springfield. Each Marine in Cecil's company donated one dollar for a "company mascot" from Philadelphia, a bulldog named Butcher or simply "Butch," who was later killed in a German gas attack. Cecil remembered then-BGen John A.

Lejeune personally shaking the hand of each Marine in Philadelphia as they boarded the transport, the USS *Archibald Henderson*, in January 1918. Gen Lejeune looked Cecil Key in the eye as he shook his hand and said, "I hope to see you in France."

The 78th Company disembarked a few weeks later in St. Nazaire, France. Maj Thomas Holcomb commanded 2/6, that was now assigned as a part of 4th Marine Brigade, 2d Infantry Division, American Expeditionary Force (AEF). Cecil recounted the additional training they received in France, including the loss of their prized Lewis light machineguns to the fledgling aviation units being

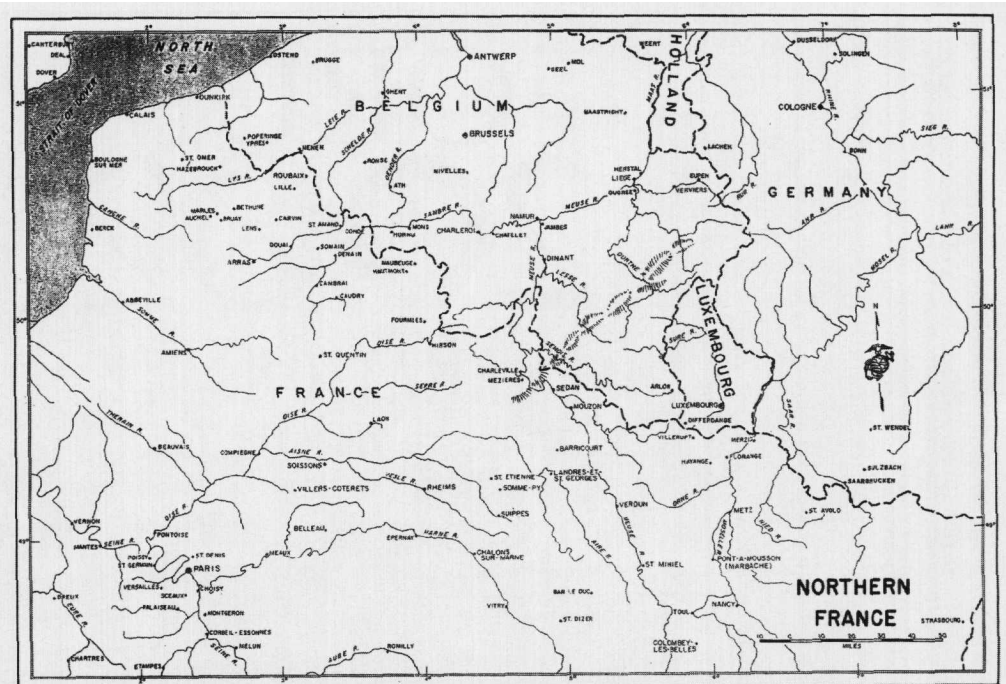


Figure 1. Original Belleau Wood strategic and tactical maps published in Col Robert Debs Heinl, Jr.'s classic, *Soldiers of the Sea*.

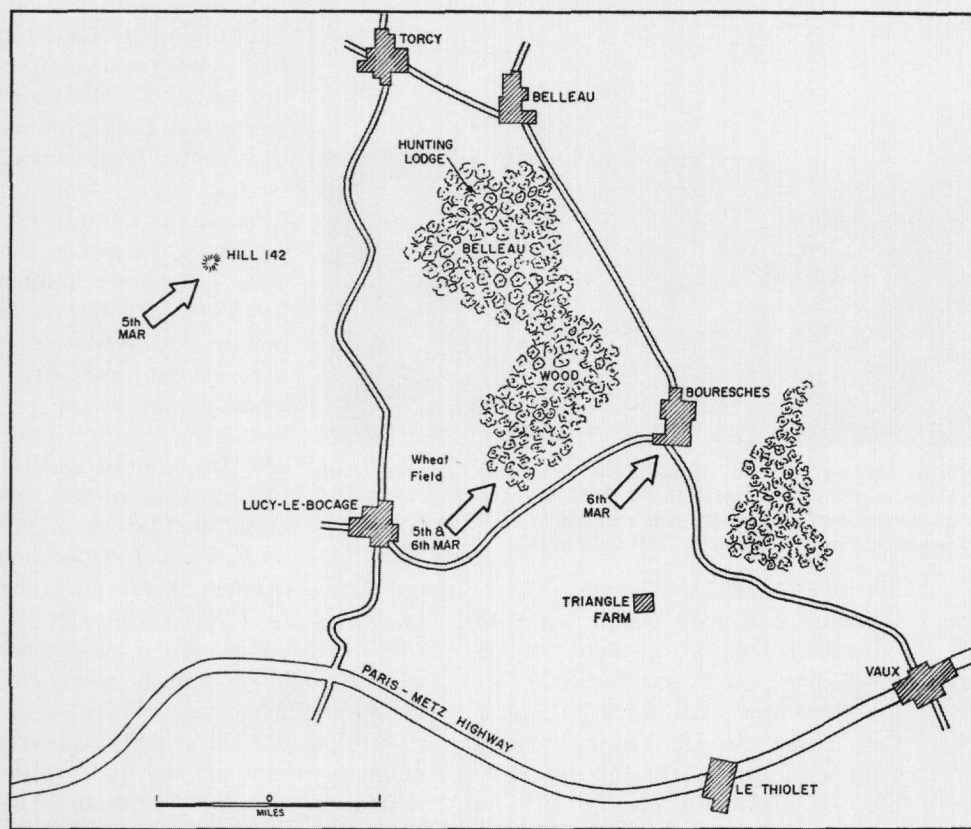


Figure 2. Battle of Belleau Wood, 6-26 June 1918.

formed. These fine weapons were replaced by both the French light 8mm Chauchat automatic rifle and the cumbersome, but reliable, Hotchkiss medium machinegun. British SBR (small box respirator) gasmasks were also issued.

On 27 May 1918, German GEN Erich F.W. Ludendorff, bolstered by the massive influx of troops from the Eastern Front where Russia had been knocked out of the war by revolution, launched a devastating offensive. Up to this point, GEN John "Black Jack" Pershing (the AEF commander) had successfully maintained the independent status of American units, rejecting the pleas of French and British officers who wanted the Americans committed piecemeal to replenish their own worn ranks. With the German offensive almost making it to Paris in 4 days, the 2d Division was among the formations rushed forward to stem the tide.

This it did at Belleau Wood where, having first stopped the German attack, the Marines launched their offensive on 6 June 1918. (See Figures 1 and 2.) More Marines were killed in action and

wounded this first day (1,087) than in all previous Marine Corps engagements combined. Not until 20 November 1943, at Tarawa, would the Marine Corps suffer such heavy casualties in a single day.

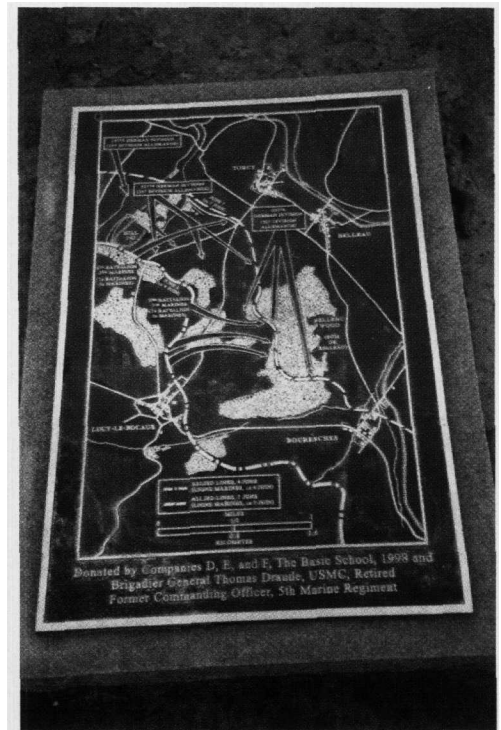
Using the highly popular, uncensored dispatches of *Chicago Tribune* reporter Floyd Gibbons, who had been seriously wounded and rumored to be near death, Pershing's staff inadvertently allowed detailed reports to be sent to a news starved America. Cecil Key was caught in a German mustard gas attack that lasted for 4 hours on 14 June 1918. He was seriously blinded. His exposed skin was chemically burned, and his uniform heavily impregnated with chemicals. Evacuated, he remained in a hospital for the next 6 months. Fortunately, he regained his sight.

Following German occupation duty, Cecil returned to the United States where he was discharged in the summer of 1919. He married, raised a family, and spent the next 50 years working for Union Pacific Railroad. He was active in the Oregon veteran community,

particularly the Marine Corps Coordinating Council (MCCC), and attended his last Marine Corps Birthday Ball in November of 1995 as the special guest of this author. Having graciously left his entire WWI uniform and photographs to the MCCC of Oregon, Cecil Key quietly passed away on 16 January 1996. He was a good friend and a devoted Marine.

Today, Belleau Wood preserves both the gallant memory and noble sacrifices of our Marines. Having known Cecil Key, listened to his tales at length, and studied what was done there, I was eager to visit this special area. Fortunately, I had this opportunity for 2 precious days of "battlefield study" in December of 2000. It is my hope that those who read this will also want to do the same and that what follows will be of assistance.

For preparatory background reading and general overview, I highly recommend the following "Belleau



Beautifully made bronze maps donated within the last few years by several Marine Basic School classes and other Marine officers. Most of these are in French and English.

Wood" sections in works by four famed Marine Corps historians: Col Robert Debs Heinl, Jr.'s classic, *"Soldiers of the Sea"* (Chapter 5, pp. 192-219); J. Robert Moskin's *"The U.S. Marine Corps Story"* (pp. 99-124); Allan R. Millett's *"Semper Fidelis"* (pp. 287-318); and BG Edwin H. Simmons' *"The United States Marines: A History,"* (pp. 95-106). For detailed study, including excellent tactical maps, there is the singularly masterful work by Robert B. Asprey, *At Belleau Wood*, (G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1965). With superb accolades from three who were there (Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., Gen Clifton B. Cates, and MGen Gerald C. Thomas), this is a must read for all Marines. And lastly, I highly recommend the enjoyable and very user-friendly *U.S. Marine Corps in World War I, 1917-1918*, by Mark R. Henry (Osprey Publishing, "Osprey Military Men-at-Arms Series #327," Oxford, Great Britain, 1999). This book contains a wealth of beautiful drawings, paintings, and photographs relating to uniforms, equipment, weapons, and tactical organizations.

Charles De Gaulle Airport, Paris is easily accessible by many reputable airlines. I had arranged for a rental car ahead of time through National/AutoEurope. (I also picked up Michelin Map #237 France: Ile-de-France, 1/200,000 at Automobile Association of America.) Belleau Wood is located roughly 40 miles east of Paris. (Take "D 212" to "N 3" to "A 4-E 50".) This is highway and expressway all the way. Head east until you get to Chateau-Thierry. (There is no lodging available in Belleau, Lucy-le-Bocage, or Bouresches nor is there a clear exit ramp off the expressway.) The town of Belleau itself has a population of a mere 150 voters. Chateau-Thierry (about 10 kilometers farther east of



The official entrance to the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery and Memorial (operated by the American Battle Monuments Commission of the U.S. Government). The latter was created in 1923 and was personally organized and overseen by GEN Pershing.

Belleau) is a nice size town with plenty of facilities (hotels, restaurants, banks, and gas stations). My first recommendation for lodging is the "Hotel Ile De France" (three star) at the top of the hill overlooking the town on the "Route de Soissons." This is where past Marine Corps Commandants, color guards, and other assorted U.S. Marines stay by choice. It is moderately priced (310 to 630 francs depending on the room) and has a fair restaurant in the hotel. The phone number is 03 23 69 10, e-mail: <hotel.ile.de.france@wanadoo.fr>. Once settled at the hotel you can easily use the country roads and head back west to Belleau following the signs.

By far the "friendliest highlight" of the trip was pulling into the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery & Memorial (the official name for the 42.5-acre Belleau Wood cemetery and visi-



View looking south toward northern end of Belleau Wood.

tor center) and meeting Mr. Phillip DeLaMater, the American superintendent for the area grounds. A U.S. Army veteran, he has been married to his French wife for some 30 years and is completely at home in this area. His phone number is +33.(0)3.23.70 and e-mail is <Aisne-Marne.Cemetery@abmc-er.org>. There is also a web site: <<http://www.abmc.gov>>. The American Battle Monuments Commission was established by law in 1923 and is an independent agency of the executive

branch of the U.S. Government. My wife and I knew we were in good hands when following an hour or two of conversation, Phillip kindly offered to give us a tour of Belleau with particular emphasis on the privately located and famed "Devil Dog" fountain. This fountain is on private land adjoining the stables of the Countess of Belleau, who still lives in a beautiful estate just north of Belleau. Legend has it that any U.S. Marine who drinks from this fountain will have an additional 20 years added to his life! What I found fascinating was Phillip relating to me the story concerning the head of the fountain—a large, bronze mastiff type dog. Evidently real dogs of this type had been in the Count of Belleau's family for many generations. Upon the German occupation of this area, the Count's dogs gave the German troops such a bad time that they called them "teufelhunde" (or devil dogs). Later,

when these same German troops encountered U.S. Marines in action, they were reminded of these dogs and thus gave Marines this same nickname! The beautiful stable area next to the fountain is the natural "gathering ground" for Marines on the annual, 6 June "Belleau Wood Day." A memorial ceremony, reenlistments, promotions, an address by the Commandant (last year Gen James L. Jones spoke to the assembled crowd in fluent French) are held in this area.

Belleau Wood itself (originally the hunting preserve for the Count of Belleau) consists of some 200 acres adjoining the cemetery to the south. If you want to actually walk the majority of the beautifully preserved battleground (easily done in half a day) in chronological order, you can drive southwest of Belleau to Lucy-le-Bocage and park near the village church. Facing north, you are now oriented on where the 4th Marine Brigade first deployed in this area and later launched its

attack. Hill 142 (original 5th Marines objective) is there 3 miles to the northwest, but difficult to find. The wheatfields are just as they were to the north (still being farmed but with a small additional road running through them into the main woods). Bouresches, the original main 6th Marines objective, lies 3 miles to the east. The imposing Belleau Wood itself, heavily wooded and at higher elevations, lies just north of this Lucy-le-Bocage to Bouresches axis. The woods are still covered with vestiges of German trench lines and shell holes. Ravines, thick brush, relics of war, and a series of professionally done historical markers (all gifts by The Basic School classes of the 1990s) adorn the high ground. This is where the famous black granite steel, life-sized statue of a U.S. Marine stands (bare-chested due to the intolerable heat wave of June 1918). The famous eight-sided Hunting Lodge lies just north of this overlooking the Memorial Cemetery and village of Belleau.

As you walk this ground, I know that my fellow Marines will get the same goosebumps I did as you realize that this is the same area where Capt Lloyd Williams (commanding 51st Company and later killed in action 12 June 1918) uttered, "Retreat, hell. We just got here." Where badly wounded war correspondent Floyd Gibbons wrote, "I am up front and entering Belleau Wood with the U.S. Marines." Where 1stSgt Dan Daly (of Peking and Haiti fame) yelled to a platoon, "Come on you sons

of bitches. Do you want to live forever?" Where SgtMaj John Quick (of Guantanamo and Samar) brought fresh ammunition in a Ford Model T to 1stLt Clifton B. Cates in Bouresches, under German fire on the exposed road from Lucy-le-

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Bocage. Where 22-year-old 1stLt Lemuel C. Shepherd, recently graduated from Virginia Military Institute, was badly wounded but refused to leave his platoon of the 55th Company, 5th Marines. Where GEN James Harbord, USA, commanding 4th Marine Brigade, signaled on 26 June 1918, "Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely." Where French GEN Degouette, commanding France's 6th Army, decreed on 30 June 1918, "Henceforth in all official papers, Belleau Wood shall bear the name, 'Bois de la Brigade de Marines,'" And, where my friend, PFC Cecil

Key of Forest Grove, OR, was badly blinded by German mustard gas serving with the 78th Company of 2/6.

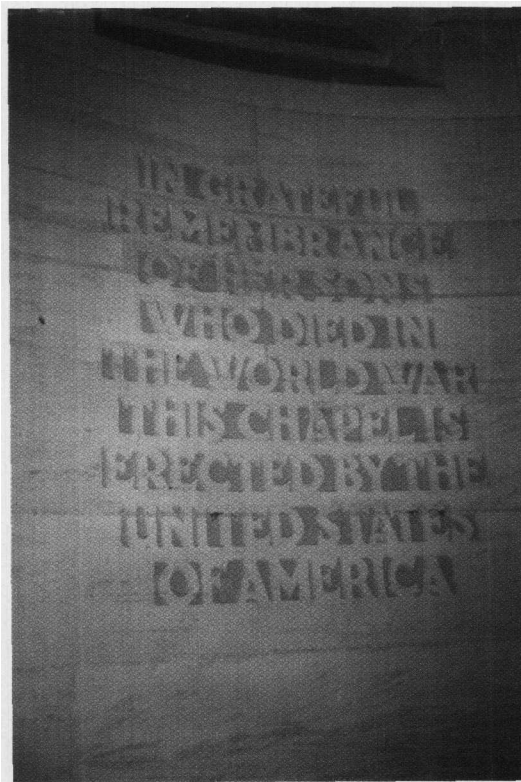
Belleau Wood represents much to the Marine Corps. It marks the transition point where the Marine Corps changed from a neocolonial, sea service detachment and occupation force to that of a truly modern fighting force. Lessons learned here would be applied toward key developments in the 1930s and during World War II. The price for this transition was

high: 126 officers and 5,057 enlisted men of 4th Marine Brigade were killed or wounded there. Today, 2,289 Americans (252 unknown) are buried there. It is well worth a visit by anyone, but to a Marine it will indeed be a pilgrimage.

Such *esprit* I have never seen! These wounded men, when they saw us in our Marine Corps uniforms, spontaneously began to sing the Marine's [sic] Hymn, as we walked through the wards, its sound grew in volume as man after man took up the refrain until it made the welkin ring. There were no signs of downheartedness among those American fighting men, for fighting men and mighty warriors they were! They were certain that the measure of the foe had been taken and that his final defeat was assured. I said a prayer of thankfulness because I was an American and a Marine, even as these men were.

—MajGen John A. Lejeune
Reminiscences of a Marine

USMC



Inscription inside the U.S. Memorial Chapel at Belleau Wood.

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>>More Belleau Wood photos are available for viewing on our web site, <<http://www.mca-marines.org/gazette/gaz.html>>. Click on "On the Net" in the left menu, then on "Historical Photos."