

The Crucible of Leadership

The Battle of Belleau Wood

by Capt Roderick J. Singleton, Jr.

The root word of leadership is lead. Lead is defined by Merriman-Webster as “to direct operations, activity or performance of; to have charge of; to suggest to.”¹ Among the storied history of leadership in the Marine Corps is the Battle of Belleau Wood, which took place from 1-26 June 1918. The Battle of Belleau Wood forever enshrined the Marine Corps’ tenacity and fighting spirit. This legacy was created in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds against a superior fighting force. There were many factors that were not in the favor of the Marines and allied forces; however, despite the formidable odds against them, the leadership demonstrated during the Battle of Belleau Wood is what ultimately lead to victory and turned the tide in World War I.

The Battle of Belleau Wood took place during the German Spring Offensives. On 3 March 1918, the Germans were freed from fighting on two fronts with the signing of the Treaty

>Capt Singleton wrote this article as part of the 2018 H&S Bn Belleau Wood Writing Contest.

of Brest-Litovsk. With the war on the Eastern Front over, the Germans focused their efforts on breaking the British and French armies on the Western Front. A swift and victorious offensive on the Western Front could defeat the British and French before the American military could arrive. The German forces were rapidly gaining ground and seemingly unstoppable in their offensive across France, until they were stopped by U.S. Army forces at Chateau-Thierry on 2 June. The 2nd Division took up positions to the south of Belleau Wood near Lucy-le-Bocage on 1 June. During this time, the intelligence was almost non-existent, and the Marines were not equipped with proper maps and supplies. The regimental commander of 9th infantry, COL Upton, reportedly

“had a map, taken arbitrarily from an unsuspecting French officer who passed by.”² This established the tone for the leadership of the American forces, characterized by the creative ways in the manner they had gathered information and lead their men. Even the transports responsible for moving units from debarkation points to their assembly areas were unreliable. The communications were terrible at the higher commands where there were instances of units that were not accounted for in the planning or tasking. For instance, “The 2nd Division had been ordered to the 6th Army, but Colonel Brown found the headquarters of the 6th in a state of complete confusion. They knew nothing of the Americans, and they had no definite plan for their employment.”³ Confusion and a lack of information were common themes throughout the initial employment of the Marine units.

Through their resilient and determined leadership, Marine units continued to strive despite the adversity and



Col Wendell G. Neville. (File photo.)



MajGen Thomas Holcomb. (File photo.)



Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr. (File photo.)

uncertainty that surrounded them. As quoted in *FMFM 1-0*,

They fight for one another. Any man in combat who lacks comrades who will die for him, or for whom he is willing to die, is not a man at all. He is truly d—d.⁴

The issues previously encountered were only the administrative and logistical burdens that they had to overcome in order to get their bayonet tips pointed in the right direction. On 5 June, the French XXI Corps commander ordered the 2nd Division to recapture Belleau Wood. Upon arriving to the battlefield on 6 June, the Marines were about to be engaged in one of the deadliest battles in the history of the United States Marine Corps: “The Marine Brigade suffered the worst single day’s casualties in USMC history with 1087 men killed or wounded.”⁵ These men fought with the tenacity and ferocity only gained from the knowledge that the Marine’s to their left and right were willing to lay down their lives for each other. During



Clifton B. Cates, Commandant 1948-51. (File photo.)

higher headquarters. Though they received poor intelligence regarding the Germans in Belleau Wood, they were prepared to fight and subsequently

the war effort. The Marine Corps was able to capture the public’s attention by having their stories told in the media while “those of the Army units were ignored.”⁷ The achievements of the 2nd Division in this uncertain environment was an impressive feat especially against a well prepared enemy, but that does not dilute the achievements of the United States Army units who fought and died alongside their Marine Corps brethren.

Leadership in Belleau Wood was successful because of the small unit leaders on the ground who stuck to the basics, despite the absence of clear direction from higher headquarters. In addition to the basics, they had seasoned leaders who truly cared for the men under their charge and went out of their way to ensure they were taken care of. This commitment is what bound those warriors together then and continues to bond Marines together today in combat. The crucible of combat forms a connection that only those who have experienced it can truly understand. Finally, those experiences give young leaders a solid foundation to utilize throughout their careers to be successful in any endeavors they choose.

These men fought with the tenacity and ferocity only gained from the knowledge that the Marines to their left and right were willing to lay down their lives for them.

this intense period of fighting, the acts of valor performed by the Marines and Sailors earned them accolades and saved countless lives as they continued to press the German forces. In one instance, when several Marines were caught in an open air artillery barrage with gas,

Gunnery Sgt F. Stockham [was] nominated for the Medal of Honor for putting his gas mask on a wounded Marine while continuing to assist others. Stockham died a few days later from the effects of the gas.⁶

This crucible of combat minted leaders both young and old. They were constantly tested as they led and fought valiantly despite not always receiving the best information and guidance from

earned the name *Teufel Hunden* from the German soldiers for their fighting spirit and tenacity.

The leaders who were forged in this battle became commandants and division commanders who lead the Marines Corps in the future: LtGen John A Lejeune, 13th Commandant of the Marine Corps; MajGen Wendell C. Neville, 14th Commandant of the Marine Corps; Gen Thomas Holcomb, 17th Commandant of the Marine Corps; Gen Clifton B. Cates, 19th Commandant of the Marine Corps; Gen Lemuel C. Shepherd, Jr., 20th Commandant of the Marine Corps. Belleau Wood was a proving ground for many Marines and it solidified to the allies that the United States was fully committed to

Notes

1. Staff, “Lead,” *Merriam-Webster*, (Online), available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com>.
2. John W. Thomason, *The United States Army Second Division Northwest of Chateau Thierry in World War I*, edited by George B. Clark, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2006).
3. Ibid.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *FMFM 1-0, Leading Marines*, (Washington, DC: January 1995).
5. Staff, “Chateau-Thierry The Battle For Belleau Wood,” *Worldwar1.com*, (Online), available at <http://www.worldwar1.com>.
6. Ibid.
7. Kennedy Hickman, “World War I: Battle of Belleau Wood,” *ThoughtCo*, (Online: February 2019), available at <https://www.thoughtco.com>.

