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**In June 1918, the world watched a new
Marine Brigade meet its test of combat**

d Belleau Wood

IT WAS THE LATE AFTERNOON OF the 6th day of June, 1918. In Paris, a censor was methodically deleting the names of organizations and places from a press dispatch delivered somewhat earlier by a courier. Its author was the censor's friend, the famed Floyd Gibbons, representing the *Chicago Tribune* and its associated papers. The phone rang and a voice reported that the great Gibbons was dead—lying in a grain field near the northwest edge of Belleau Wood. The shocked and saddened censor picked up the dispatch and released, exactly as it was written, the story of the attack on Belleau Wood. The news was out to an electrified world. The 4th Marine Brigade was in action! As it actually happened, Gibbons had arrived at 5th Marines' headquarters on the afternoon of the 6th of June and shortly thereafter sent his driver to the Press Bureau in Paris with a dispatch based on the anticipated outcome of the yet unlaunched afternoon attack which had the primary objective of seizing Belleau Wood and the railroad station of Bouches. It was the purported intention of the reporter to fill in certain details of the story after the battle. But while accompanying the attacking 3d Bn, 5th Marines, he was struck in the head and left in the grain field, presumably dead. Hence the rumor of his death and the subsequent breach of censorship regulations.

The 4th Mar Brig was a war baby, conceived in the turbulent spring of 1917, following the declaration of war on Germany by the United States.

The savage and remorseless war on the Western Front had settled down to a bruising stalemate, and on the Eastern Front, Czarist Russia tottered on the brink of destruction.

The Allies were slowly bleeding white on the blood-drenched battlefields, and on the seas the lurking U-boats took their evermounting toll of men and materiel. Gloom and despair stalked across the unhappy land of France.

The ominous situation called for action and America answered the call. In order to bolster the sagging morale of the Allies, President Wilson almost immediately announced that an Army division and a regiment of Marines would be sent to France as the forerunner of the American Expeditionary Force.

The Marine Corps was faced with the instant problem of forming a regiment since all except a few of the organized companies of Marines were serving in the Caribbean area. The immediate plan was to create the 5th Marine Regiment by returning troops from the West Indies and using them as the core around which to build the war strength companies. The 1st Battalion was formed at Quantico, and the 2d and 3d at the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Sufficient officers were available to assign an experienced captain and lieutenant to each company. The remaining lieutenants were inexperienced having been commissioned from college. In the main, the noncommissioned officers were seasoned men. The privates were largely inexperienced, 2,600 having been transferred from Parris Island to fill the ranks.

On 14 June 1917 the 5th Marines sailed for France with Col Charles A. Doyen in command. LtCol Logan Feland, the second in command, had preceded the regiment to France with General Pershing and

his staff. The battalions were commanded by Majors Turrill, Wise and Westcott. Soon afterwards a replacement battalion of 1,100 officers and men, commanded by LtCol Hiram I. Bearss, followed the 5th Marines overseas and joined them to bring the regiment up to full war-time strength.

Upon its arrival in France, the 5th Marines were promptly attached to the 1st Div, American Expeditionary Force. The 1st Div, already at its war-time strength of 4 infantry regiments, began to dissipate the strength of the Marines by assigning them to various guard details in France. One company was sent to Southampton, England, a port for handling American troops enroute to France.

Fearing that the 5th Marines would be relegated to rear echelon duty, and spurred on by the eagerness of the Marines themselves, the Secretary of the Navy prevailed upon the President to approve a brigade of Marines, rather than a regiment as previously planned. Orders were at once given to organize the 6th Marine Regiment and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion. On 17 August 1917 the task was begun. Thus the immortal 4th Mar Brig was born.

The 6th Marines and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion were assembled at Quantico. Colonel Albertus W. Catlin commanded the 6th Marines and LtCol Harry Lee was second in command. Battalion commanders were Majors Holcomb, Sibley and Hughes. Major Edward B. Cole, later to give his life at Belleau Wood, commanded the 6th Machine Gun Battalion. Experienced non-commissioned officers were detailed to each battalion to provide the complements of sergeants, gunnery sergeants, 1st sergeants, quartermas-

By Capt R. L. Johnson



ter sergeants and sergeants major. The privates were drawn from every available source on the East Coast and from Mare Island on the West. It is interesting to note that 60 per cent of the personnel in the regiment were college men. While the 6th Marines lacked the initial experience of the 5th Marines, Gen Lejeune, in his autobiography, *Reminiscences of a Marine*, reported that the regiment soon found itself, and to the unprejudiced eye there was no difference between these two magnificent regiments in the stress of battle.

The 6th Marines were transported to France piecemeal, the 1st Bn arriving on 15 October 1917, the 3d Bn on 12 November and the 2d Bn on 5 February 1918. Upon its arrival, the 6th Marines went into training with the newly formed 2d Div, the 4th Mar Brig being one of the 2 infantry brigades in that division.

Brigadier General Doyen, recently promoted from colonel, was placed in command of the brigade. Colonel W. C. Neville was thereupon transferred from Peking, China, to command the 5th Marines. Finally after many months of delay, the Brigade, consisting of 280 officers and 9,164 enlisted men, was ready for the test of combat.

In the middle of March 1918 the Brigade, as a part of the 2d Div then assigned to the X Corps of the Second French Army, began its first tour of combat duty in a quiet defensive sector southeast of Verdun. It was initially planned to give each

of the battalions, in turn, about 10 days' experience in the lines and then rotate them to the rear. But on March 21 the Germans launched a fierce drive towards Amiens and the impetus of the attack threatened to drive a wedge between the French and English forces. In desperation, the French withdrew a division from the X Corps and one from the Corps on the left of the 2d Div to stop the drive. It was the old story that the Marines have learned so well. Rotation was to the front. Initiations in war are seldom subtle.

During the week 9 May through the 16th, the French relieved the 2d Div. The Germans, having almost cut the Allies in two south of Amiens, began attacking the British on the Lys and Marshal Foch was forced to order a number of French divisions which were being held in reserve to support the British. The 2d Div was ordered into a reserve position to protect Paris.

Meanwhile, BrigGen Doyen, along with a number of Army officers, was found physically unfit for active service by a Medical Board and was returned to the United States. Brigadier General J. G. Harbord, a National Army officer was placed in command of the 4th Mar Brig.

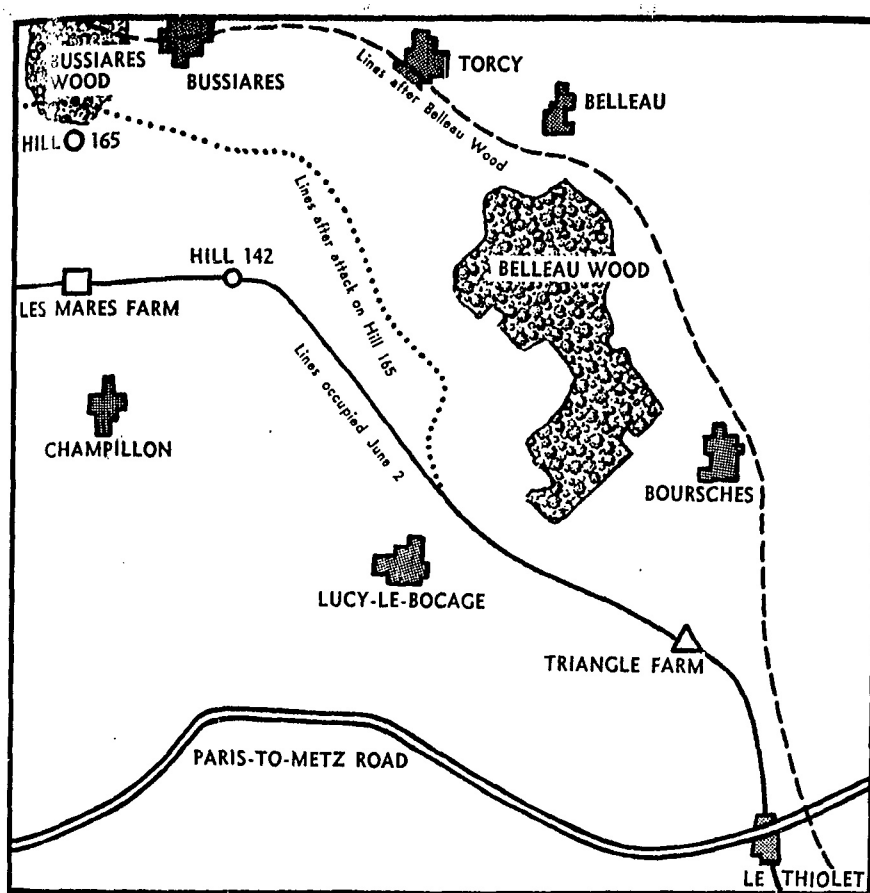
Suddenly on 27 May, the Germans launched a massive offensive on the Chemin des Dames. The weakened and depleted French and British divisions which were defending this heretofore quiet sector were rolled up like a rug and the enemy smashed on to the Marne at Chateau-Thierry. French reinforcements were unable to contain the attack. Panic and despair swept over Paris as the German war machine ground on.

On 30 May, the 2d Div was committed and ordered to proceed to Meaux on the Paris-to-Metz Road and to establish a defensive line behind the retreating French army about midway between Chateau-Thierry and Paris. The roads were so congested with fleeing refugees and soldiers that it was necessary to detruck and march to the positions which the 2d Div intended to defend.

As shown by the accompanying sketch, the Brigade occupied a line extending from Le Thiolet on the Paris-to-Metz Road northwestward through Triangle Farm, skirting the southern tip of Belleau Wood to Hill 142, and thence westward to Les Mares Farm. Two battalions of the 5th Marines and one battalion of the 6th were held in reserve. The 6th Machine Gun Bn occupied positions in the line. The Marines immediately prepared shallow positions and waited for the attack.

Throughout the 2d day of June





the remnants of a broken and demoralized French army filtered through the Brigade's lines to the rear. It was clearly evident that the German attempt on their positions would not be long in coming. At about 5 o'clock in the afternoon the attack began, hitting the 2d Bn, 5th Marines.

The Germans, flushed with victory and favored by the momentum of their attack, came down from the north and northeast, driving the French before them. They came in two columns, like automata, their helmets glittering in the afternoon sun. Suddenly the Marines opened fire with terrible effectiveness on their advancing lines. Withering rifle fire, well aimed and deliberate, slashed the attackers to pieces. Three times the Germans tried to crack through the Brigade, and each time they were thrown back with staggering losses. The German drive on Paris died in the wheatfields that afternoon.

In the succeeding days both sides were punished by increasingly heavy artillery fire, the Germans scoring with particular effectiveness from the vicinity of Hill 165 in the zone of

the French 167th Inf Div which was on the Brigade's immediate left. In order to secure stronger ground and to put the German guns out of action, the French corps commander ordered an attack on the morning of 6 June. The mission of the French 167th Inf Div was to seize the hills to their front which dominated the Clignon River from the south. The 1st Bn, 5th Marines, commanded by Maj Julius S. Turrill, and supported by the 5th Regiment Machine Gun Co (8th) and the 23d Machine Gun Co of the 6th Machine Gun Bn, was to support the French division by seizing the remaining high ground of Hill 142. The 3d Bn, 5th Marines, then commanded by Maj B. S. Berry, was to advance on the right of the 1st Bn, keeping his left flank in contact with them. The attack was launched at 4 o'clock that morning. The 1st Bn, attacking on a front of approximately 800 yards, advanced about 1,000 yards to the north. Neither the French on their left nor the 3d Bn on their right were able to keep up with the 1st Bn. The attack, which struck between two German divisions, took them by such complete surprise that they were

compelled to shift their reserves to halt the advance of the Marines. The attack cost the 5th Marines about 400 men killed and wounded. Twenty prisoners were taken.

And now Belleau Wood. As a wood goes, it was not a large one; the long axis, which ran roughly north and south, was scarcely over a mile long and it was only slightly over a half a mile wide at its broadest point. About half way up its long axis it narrowed to a decided neck. It was typical of those maintained by the efficient French Forestry Department. The trees were not large, averaging about 6 inches in diameter, but they grew tall, straight and dense. Except for the fringes of the wood, it was comparatively clear of underbrush. The earth was thickly strewn with huge boulders and the southern end was cut by a deep ravine.

The dent hammered in the German lines by the 1st Bn, 5th, left the enemy holding a pronounced salient at Lucy-le Bocage and at noon on 6 June, BrigGen Harbord ordered the immediate capture of Belleau Wood to straighten the lines. The general plan was to have the 3d Bn, 5th Marines attack from the positions it was then holding almost due east across the short axis of the wood and seize all but its southern edge. Simultaneously, the 3d Bn, 6th Marines, commanded by Maj B. W. Sibley, was to attack to the north and eastward and seize the southern portion of the woods and the town of Boursches. The 1st Bn, 5th Marines, on the left of the Brigade front and the 2d Bn, 6th Marines, on the right, were ordered to advance their flanks to conform to the movements of the attacking battalions. At the conclusion of the attack, the Brigade expected to occupy a line skirting the northeast edge of Belleau Wood and the town of Boursches.

The attack, supported by comparatively ineffective artillery fire, was launched at 5 o'clock in the afternoon; three and a half hours remained before darkness. The 3d Bn, 5th Marines, attacking eastward across a wheatfield approximately 400 yards in width, was subjected to murderous machine gun fire but the battalion drove on without faltering. So severe were the losses, however, that the few determined men

who managed to reach the western edge of the woods were withdrawn under the cover of darkness. Maj Berry, himself, was seriously wounded, suffering a shattered arm which later cost him his hand.

Meanwhile, the 3d Bn, 6th Marines, managed to move from its positions across about 200 yards of open ground and seize the southern edge of the woods. The 3d Bn attacked in 4 successive skirmish lines, the men placed about 5 yards apart, and the waves 15 to 20 yards behind each other. One by one they crossed the open ground and entered the fastness of the forest.

The original plan was that a company from the 3d Bn, 6th, was to capture Bouresches, but a company from Maj Holcomb's battalion, through a misunderstanding, reached the heavily defended town first. In the vicious battle which ensued, the company, with its commander dead and only 20 effectives remaining, drove an estimated 300 to 400 Germans from the stoutly defended town and held it against all efforts to expel them with artillery fire, high explosive and gas.

The late afternoon attack cost the Marines heavily. It left 31 officers and 1,056 men killed, wounded or missing—more casualties than the Corps had suffered in all its previous history. Among the casualties was Col Catlin who was shot through the lungs while standing on a parapet directing the attack of his battalions. Upon his evacuation from the front, he was succeeded by LtCol Harry Lee.

On 7 June, the Marines prepared to resume the attack. During the night of the 7th and early morning of the 8th, the 2d Div artillery shelled the woods and at 0400 the 3d Bn, 6th, again attacked in an effort to drive to the north through the machine gun infested forest. Failing to advance, the battalion withdrew to a ravine south of Belleau Wood to permit the artillery to shell the German positions.

In the early morning of 9 June, preceded by a heavy artillery bombardment, the 1st Bn, 6th, launched an attack on the southern portion of the woods. The battalion, supported for the first time by an adequate artillery preparation, made encouraging progress and the battalion commander optimistically reported



that he had reached his objective, the narrow neck of the woods. Actually, as events were later to prove, he had only reached the line that Maj Sibley had reached on the opening day of the attack.

The next attack by the Marines was made in the early morning hours of 11 June. Preceded by a light artillery preparation (as a result of the erroneous impression of the progress made on the 9th) the 2d Bn, 5th, commanded by Maj Wise, launched a determined attack to complete the capture of the woods. The battalion advanced to the north, its left guiding on a road which ran just west of Belleau Wood. It was anticipated that the battalion would join the 1st Bn, 6th, at the narrow neck of the woods. Unfortunately, the 2d Bn was not aware that the 1st Bn, 6th, had not reached the neck of the woods as they had been reported on the 9th. In an effort to establish contact with the 1st Bn, the 2d Bn, 5th, moved steadily to the right as it advanced until finally its left flank had moved over to where its right boundary was intended to be. At last contact was made and the battalions drove on to the narrow neck before being stopped by heavy losses. The following morning the Germans counterattacked in a vain but determined effort to retake the southern half of the woods.

At 1700 on 12 June, the 2d Bn, 5th, reinforced by 2 companies of engineers and 150 replacements, resumed the attack. Again the artillery preparation was inadequate, but the 2d Bn drove on with indomitable courage, fighting their way forward independently or in small groups

and finally broke through the Germans' main line of resistance. At 2040 they reached the northern edge of the woods and stopped to reorganize. Only the boulder-strewn northern corner of the woods was left in the hands of the enemy, defended by what remained of the German 461st Inf Regt. During the day a number of prisoners were taken, among them a wounded officer who reported that the Germans intended to counterattack early the next morning to regain the woods.

On 13 June the expected German counterattack materialized. Preceded by a massive artillery bombardment, the German infantry attacked the entire eastern edge of the wood and the town of Bouresches. The counterattack, despite its fury, failed, and for the remainder of the day the Marines were subjected to artillery harassment, both high explosive and mustard gas. During the day over 450 gas casualties were suffered by the 1st Bn, 6th.

For the next 2 days the Germans continued to launch determined attacks against the eastern edge of the wood and to reinforce the corner of the wood which they still held. The enemy, however, was too badly mauled to repeat a counterattack on the scale of the one launched on 13 June and the Marines, though tired and depleted, held.

During the period, 15 June to 22 June, the 7th Infantry of the American 3d Div, which was in army reserve, relieved the weary 4th Brig. The brigade sector remained under the control of Col W. C. Neville throughout the period, however. Meanwhile the enemy, too, was busy licking his wounds and replacing

the remnants of the shattered German regiments with the 87th Inf Regt.

The brief respite from the lines gave the brigade an opportunity to bury its dead and reorganize, partially refilling its dwindling ranks with 2,800 replacements.

On the night of 21-22 June, the 3d Bn, 5th, re-entered the lines and took over the center battalion area in the Belleau Wood. The next night, 3d Bn, 6th, took over the right battalion area and on the succeeding night, the 2d Bn, 5th, took over the front lines on the left of the sector.

Once again plans were made to drive the Germans from the remainder of the woods, and once again the attack was launched without an adequate artillery preparation. Preceded by ineffective fire from trench mortars and rifle grenades, and employing the spectacular tactics used by the 2d Bn, 5th, on 12 June, the 3d Bn, 5th, jumped off at 1900 on 23 June. But the Germans, determined to hold, had arranged their machine gun positions to be mutually supporting and as their positions were overrun, the crews usually managed to escape with a part of the guns' mechanism. Immediately another gun would take the position under fire and mow down its captors. Bayonets were not enough. The attack stopped and for the time being, the Germans held.

On 25 June at 1700, after division artillery bombarded the German positions for 14 straight hours, the 3d Bn, 5th, attacked behind a rolling barrage and by 2130 they had secured the wood, only a few stubborn positions remaining on its extreme perimeter. They fell the next morning and Belleau Wood became a matter of history.

On the night of 4 July 1918 the 52d Army Brig relieved the 4th Mar Brig and, along with the remainder of the 2d Div it was placed in corps reserve. The succeeding months once again saw the Marines distinguish themselves in the great offensive which brought the war to its successful conclusion.

Perhaps no action in World War I so clearly exemplified the spirit of the Marine. Except for army artillery support and the brief period during which army troops occupied

the lines, Belleau Wood was a Marine show from start to finish. Fighting for the first time as Americans led by Americans, the Marines stopped the flow of the German army and in the savage weeks that followed they drove them from their forest citadel. With grenades, bayonets and rifles, they took on the best the Crown Prince could offer and beat them. They restored dignity to that forgotten weapon, the rifle. And when the battle was done, the Germans no longer scoffed at the ability of the American fighting man. The enemy paid the Marines their highest tribute—their battle reports called them the shock troops of America. The Marines asked no quarter and gave none—from tree to tree, boulder to boulder, gun to gun, they fought, impelled only by their magnificent courage and their indomitable spirit. When their leaders fell, they fought on alone, driven by that imponderable something called "esprit de corps."

During this momentous battle,

the 4th Mar Brig suffered nearly 5,000 casualties and inflicted over 3,000 on the German front line troops. The 4th Brig had written its history in German blood—and its own.

On 30 June 1918, in honor of the great battle which had been won, the following order was published by a grateful France:

With Army Staff

6930/2

*Army HQ, June 30th, 1918
Order*

In view of the brilliant conduct of the 4th Brigade of the 2nd US Division, which in a spirited fight took Bouresches and the important strong point of Belleau Wood, stubbornly defended by a large enemy force, the General commanding the Sixth Army orders that henceforth, in all official papers, the Bois de Belleau shall be named "Bois de la Brigade de Marine."

*Division General Degoutte
Commanding Sixth Army*

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