

By George Harding

# The Battle of Belleau Wood 1-26 June 1918

Keystone Battle Series

Marine Corps History Division  
Marine Corps University

Going thru Gas, *France, 1918*

gmv1-9/11/15

# Lecture Outline

## I. Introduction: Why Study Belleau Wood?

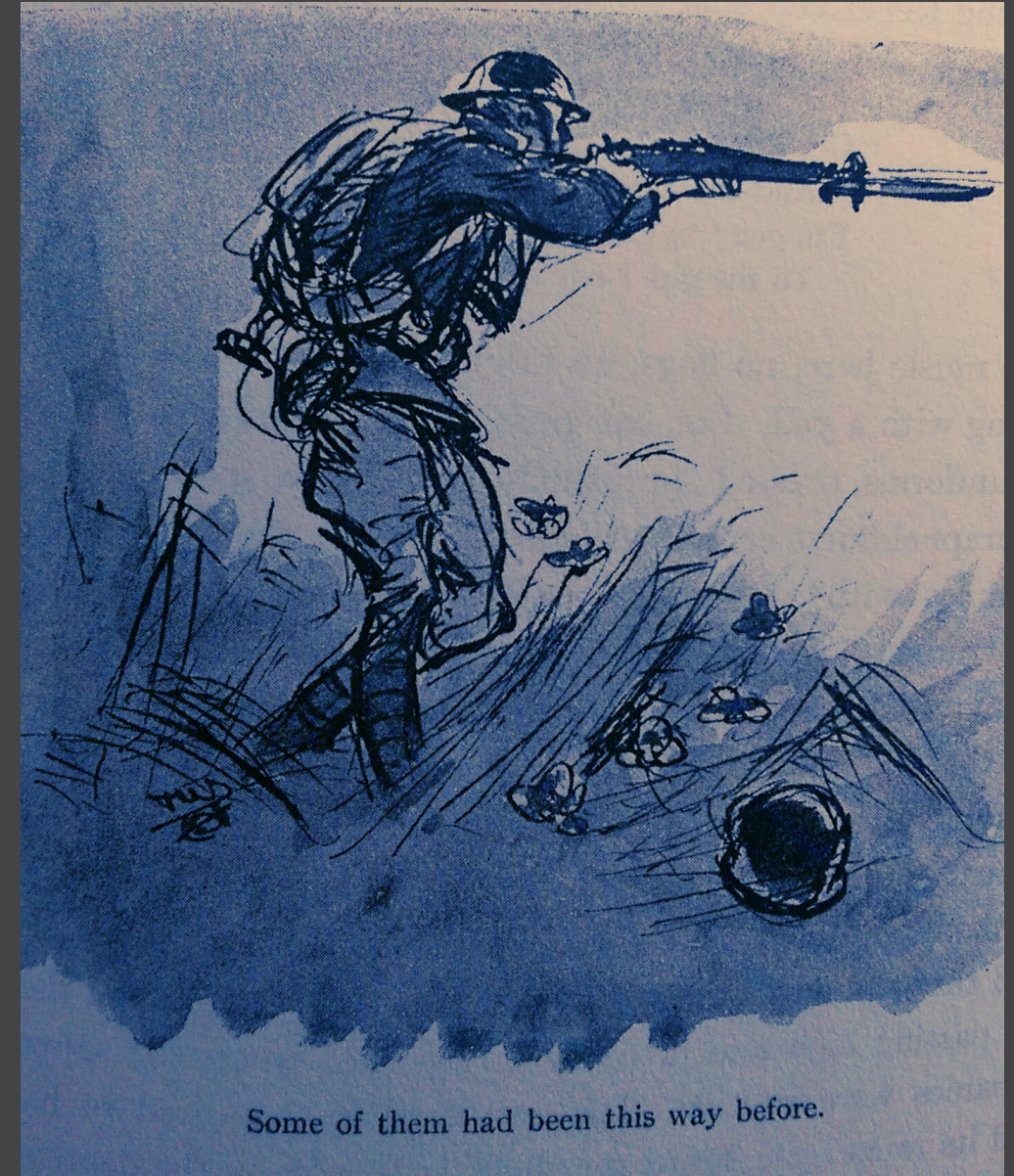
- A. Time, Place, Opposing Forces
- B. What Was at Stake

## II. Body

- A. Commanding Generals: Allied and Opposing
- B. Tables of Organization
- C. Chronology and Phases of Battle
  - a. Leading up to the Battle
  - b. Phase 1: 1-9 June
  - c. Phase 2: 10-18 June
  - d. Phase 3: 19-26 June

## III. Conclusion

- A. Killed In Action (KIA) / Wounded In Action (WIA)
  - a. Medal of Honor
  - b. Notable Participants
- B. Significance of the Battle to the War
- C. Significance of the Battle to the Marine Corps



*Fix Bayonets!* by John W. Thomason Jr.

# Introduction: Time, Places, and Opposing Forces

## Context of Grand Strategy

- ✓ War in Europe was four years old
- ✓ Allies (Great Britain, France, Italy) were in trouble
- ✓ German command launched a massive offensive in the spring of 1918 to finish off the Allies

## What was at stake?

- ✓ Germans believed they could end the war
- ✓ Initial contact between AEF and German forces; could the Americans fight?

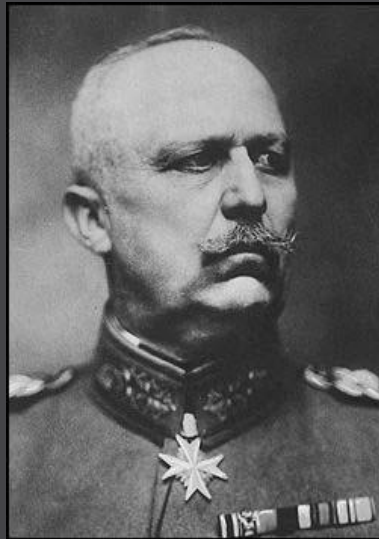


# Germany's Last Offensive: Spring 1918

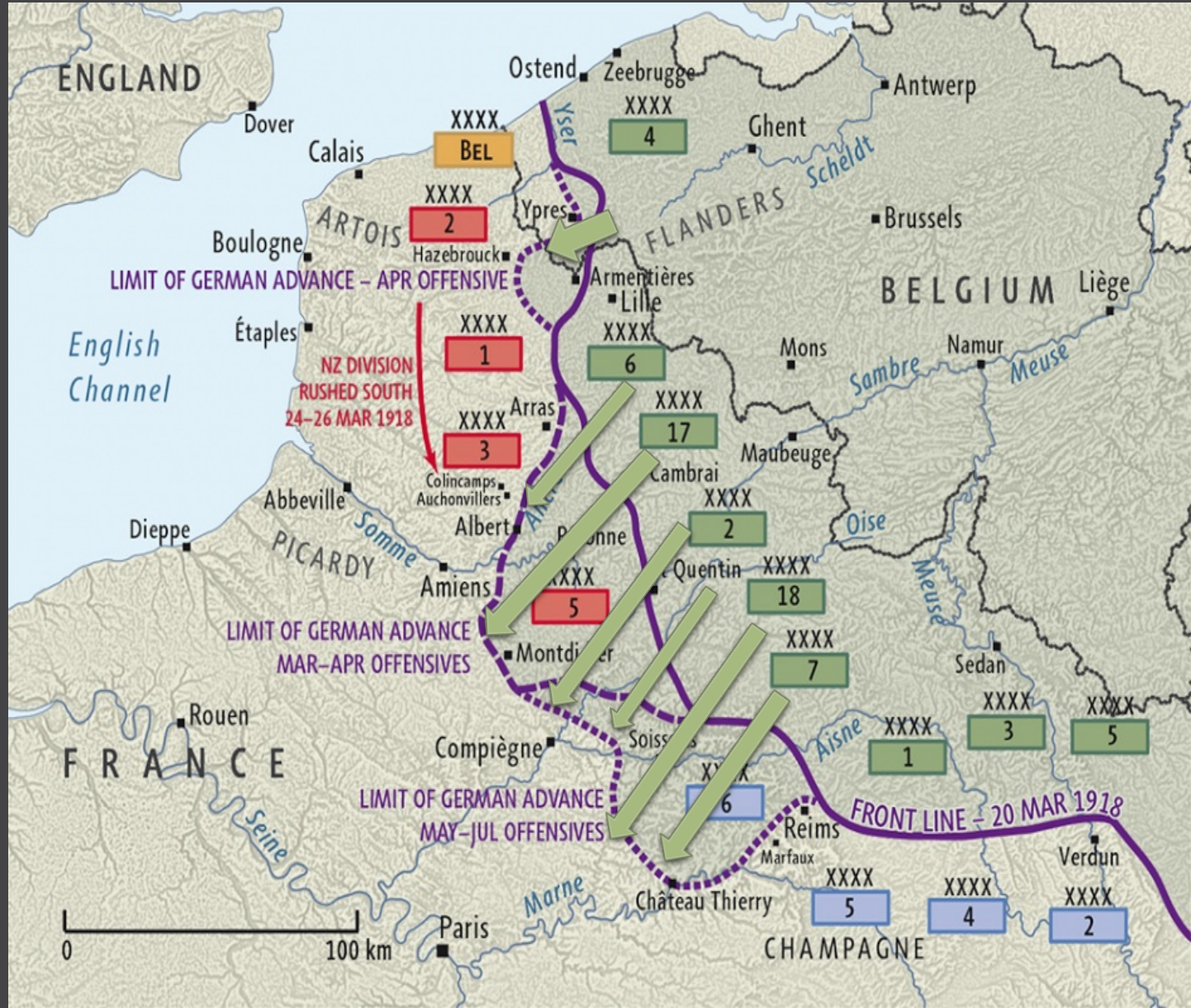
## Orchestrators of Germany's Last Offensive



Field Marshall  
Paul von Hindenburg



General Erich Ludendorff



# Commanding Generals

American



Major General Omar Bundy

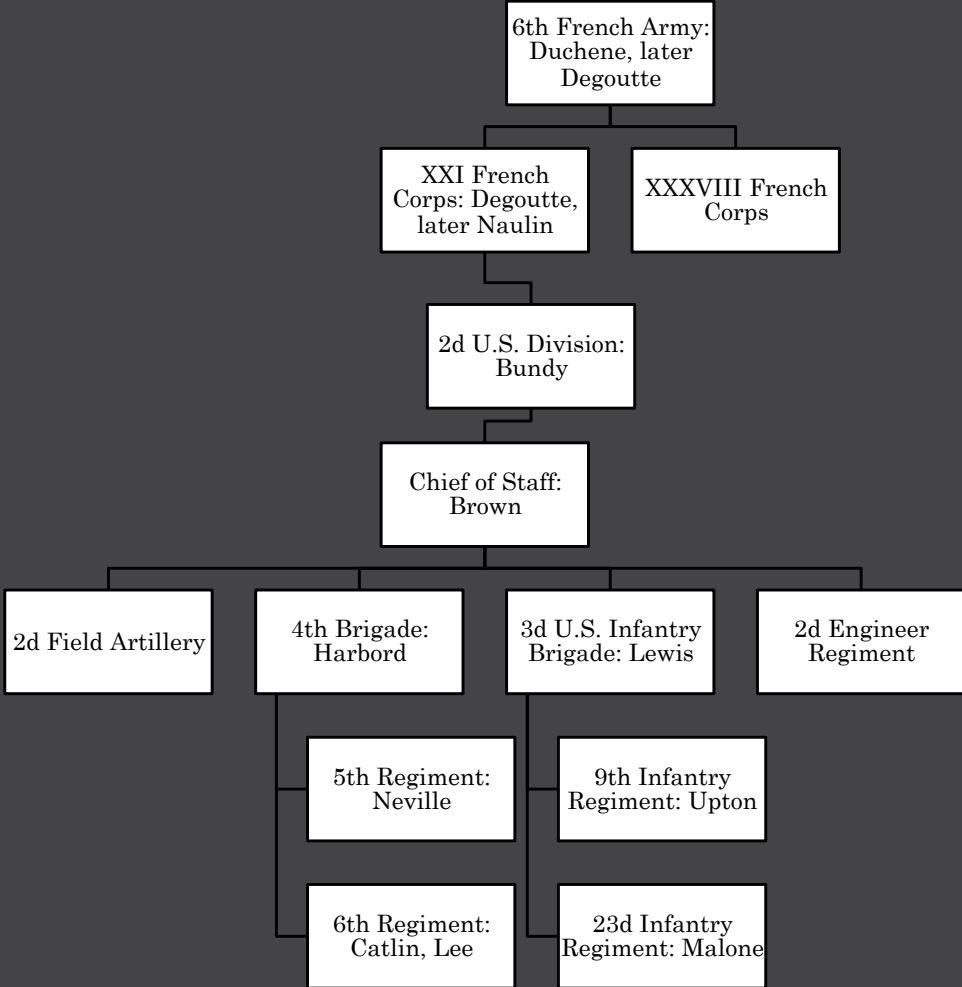
German



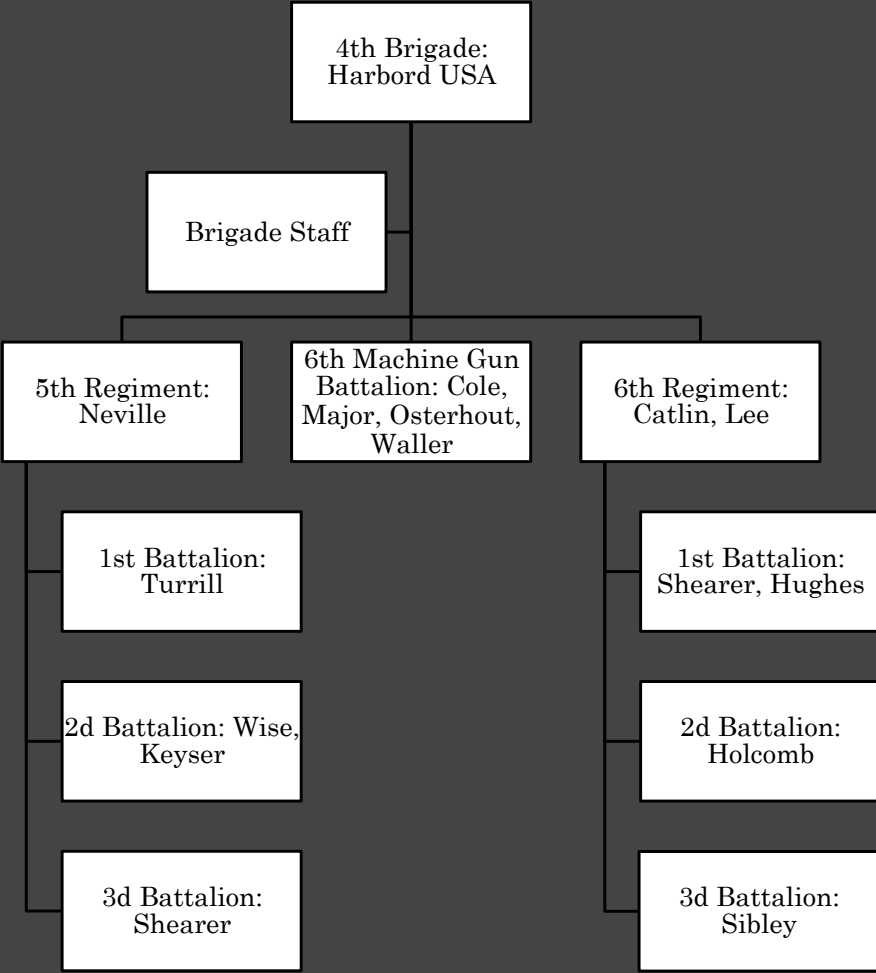
General Richard von Conta

# Simple Order of Battle and Tables of Organization (T/O)

## Army and Division T/O



## Brigade and Regiment T/O



# Chronology/Phases of the Battle

## Leading up to the battle

- ✓ 18 May 1918: 2d Division moves to positions near Paris because of German successful advances against the French and British.
- ✓ 27 May 1918: Germans launch a surprise attack at Chemin des Dames, roll back the French troops, and drive unchecked to Chateau-Thierry on the Marne River east of Paris.



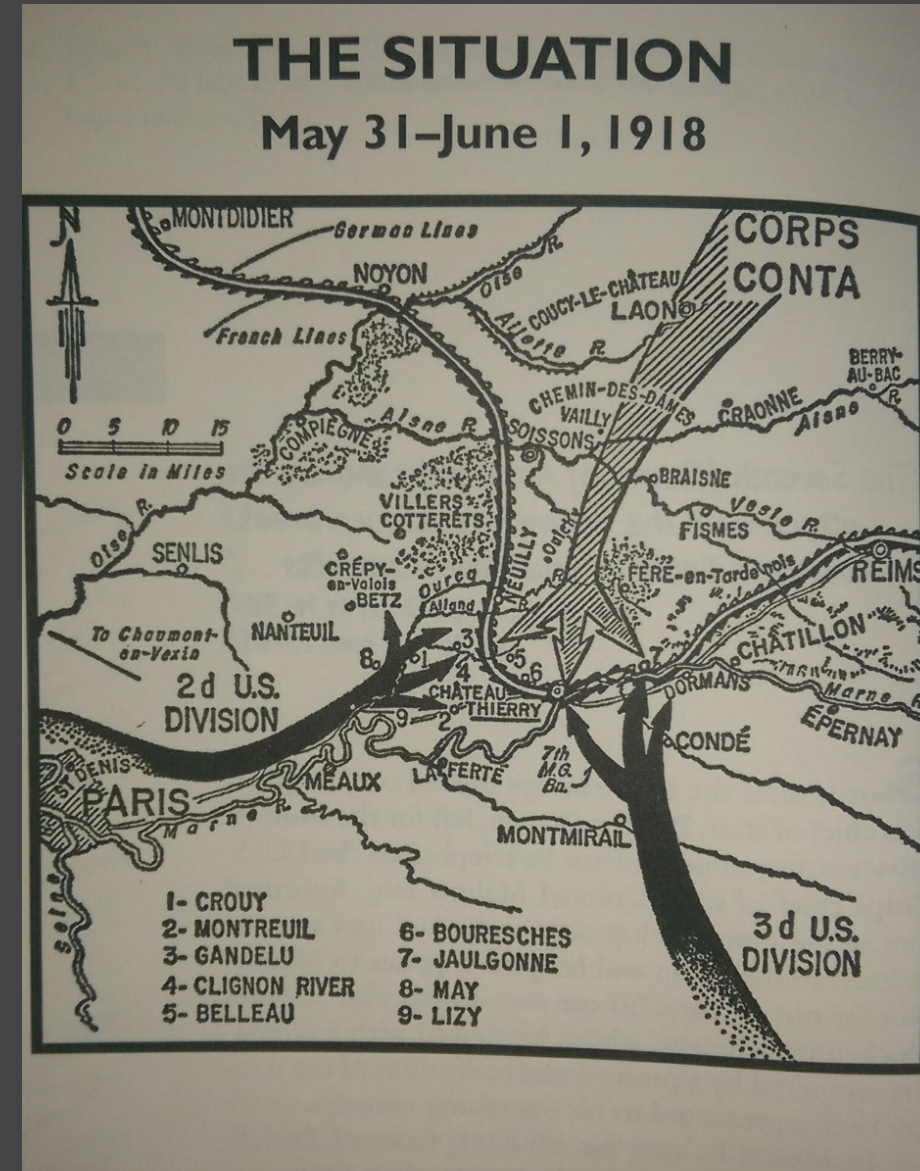
- ✓ General Phillippe Petaine calls on dozens of Allied divisions, including the U.S. 2d division, to move into the Chateau Thierry Region
- ✓ 30 May 1918: 2d Division begins moving up to check the German advance.
- ✓ Orders were that “no retirement will be thought of on any pretext whatsoever.”



Gen Petaine



Gen Pershing





# German advance halted between 1 and 5 June

- ✓ German assault divisions had lost much of their offensive punch by the time they occupied Bouresches and Belleau Wood.
- ✓ Nevertheless they attacked Marine positions on the 3rd, 4th and 5th of June.
- ✓ Marine marksmanship with the Springfield model 1903 rifle and machine guns repulsed these attacks.



Marines in defensive positions



U.S. issued Springfield model 1903

**Phase I: 1-9 June  
Through the Wheat**



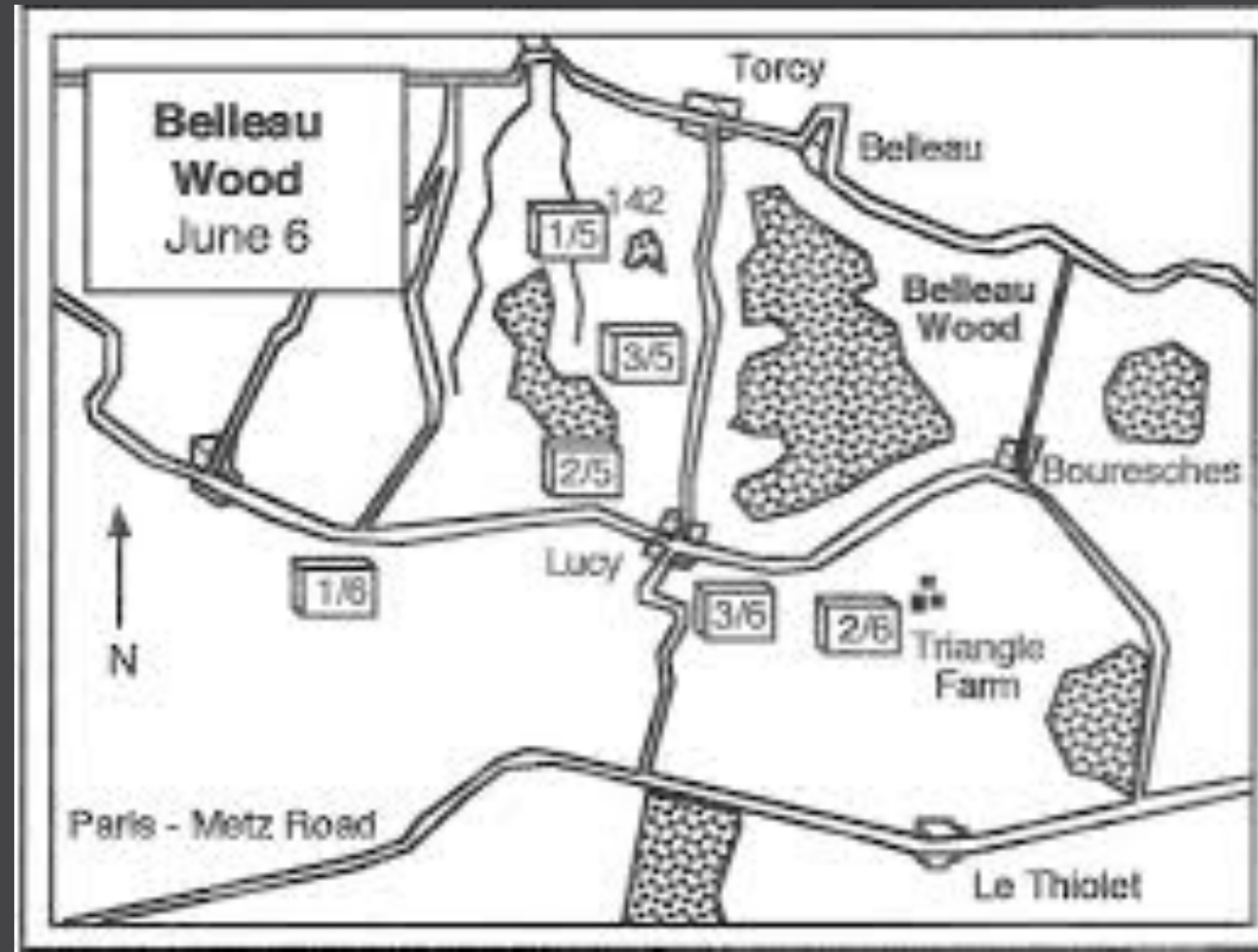
- ✓ 5 June 1918: French XXI Corps Commander, Brigadier General Jean Marie J. Degoutte, ordered the 2d Division to advance the following day to seize better defensive ground.
- ✓ 4th Brigade Commander, BGen James G. Harbord (USA), ordered 1/5 to take Hill 142, a small elevation west of Belleau Wood. The attack kicked off at 0345.



BGen Degoutte



BGen Harbord



# Gunnery Sergeant Ernest A. Janson\* and Hill 142, 6 June 1918



Despite heavy casualties, 1/5 seized the hill and defended against several counterattacks. During the fighting on Hill 142, GySgt Ernest A. Janson earned an Army Medal of Honor “for conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty” as well as the Navy Medal of Honor.



\* Served under the name Charles Hoffman

- ✓ Then Harbord ordered an attack on the afternoon of 6 June to seize Belleau Wood and the village of Bouresches, just southeast of the wood.
- ✓ The 96th Company (2/6) attacked and captured Bouresches but suffered over 50% casualties.



Assault position of 2/6 looking toward Bouresches

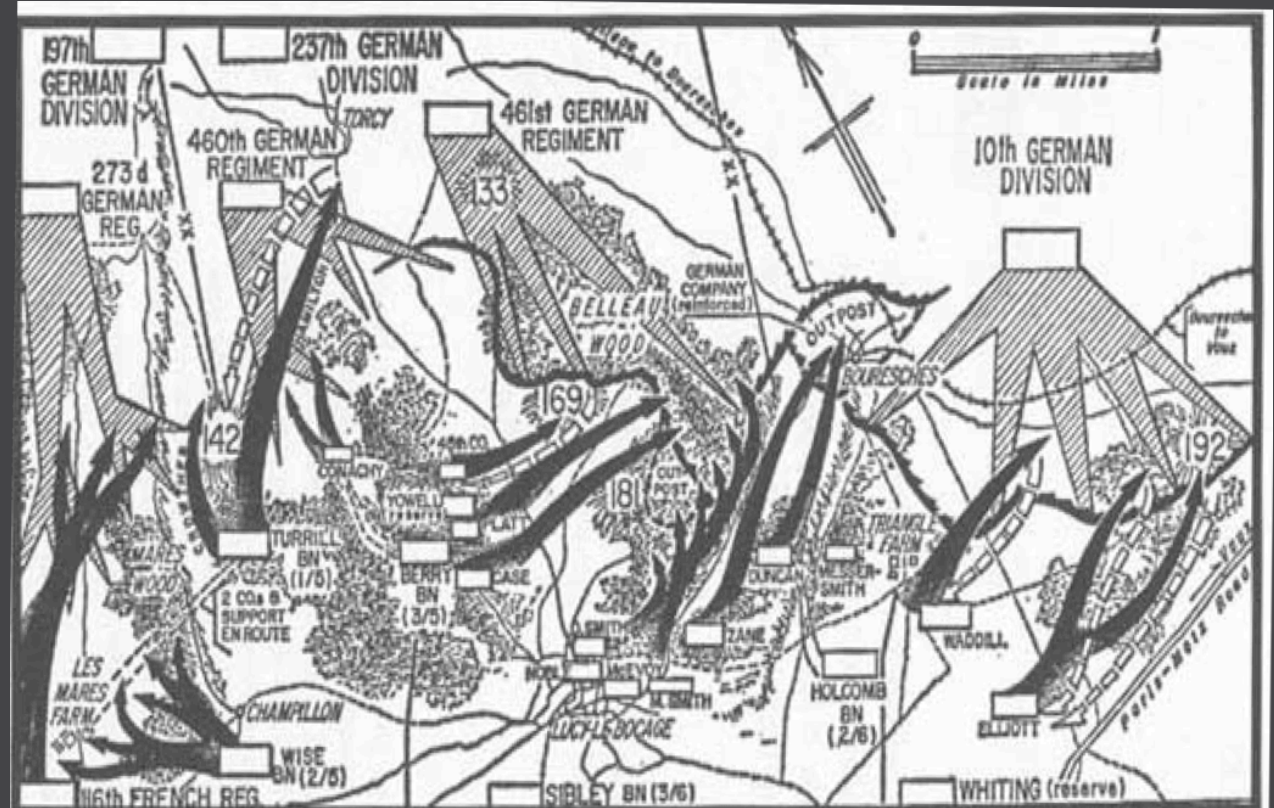


Lt Clifton B. Cates, 96th Co

- ✓ At H-hour, Marines formed up and began the assault through the wheat fields toward Belleau Wood.
- ✓ 3/5 and 3/6 suffered heavy casualties from the assault and only small elements of each made it to the woods.



MajGen Omar Bundy / Col Albertus Catlin



<p><b>Hill 142</b> 4th Marine Brig. Attack Dawn, June 6</p>	<p><b>Belleau Wood</b> Marine Attack June 6-7, 1918</p>	<p><b>Hill 192</b> 23d Infantry Attack June 6-7</p>
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- ✓ Despite successes taking Hill 142 and Bouresches on 6 June, the brave assaults into Belleau Wood faltered under withering German machine gun fire. Marines had 1,087 casualties.
- ✓ Harbord would have to alter tactics to gain a foot hold in the wood.



**Left:** Marine dead in wheat field, their objective in the background. **Right:** German machine gun position.

**Phase II: 10-18 June  
Into the Woods**





- ✓ Beginning the morning of 9 June, artillery bombarded German positions in Belleau Wood for over 24 hours with 28,000 75mm and 6,000 155mm shells expended.
- ✓ Gen Harbord also used the town of Bouresches to set up 12 machine gun positions to fire into the German's eastern flank and box them in.



U.S. 75mm guns in action. The barrage of 9-10 June marked a shift toward a much more intense and effective use of artillery by the 2d Division and 4th Brigade.

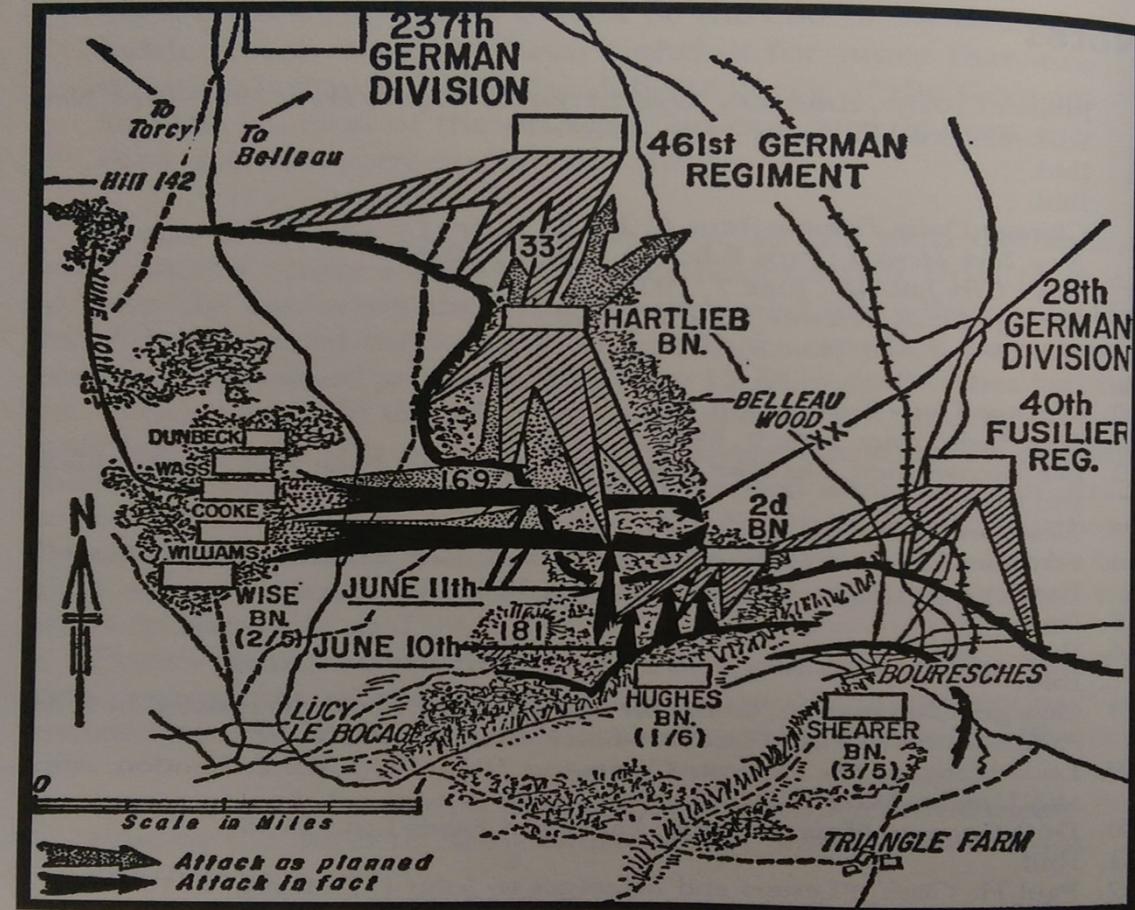
- ✓ The bombardment and subsequent rolling barrage kept the Germans' heads down and damaged their defensive positions.
- ✓ At 0430 the morning of 10 June, Marines rushed into the wood and engaged the Germans in close combat.



German soldier who died at his post. / Thomason's interpretation of Marines on the attack.

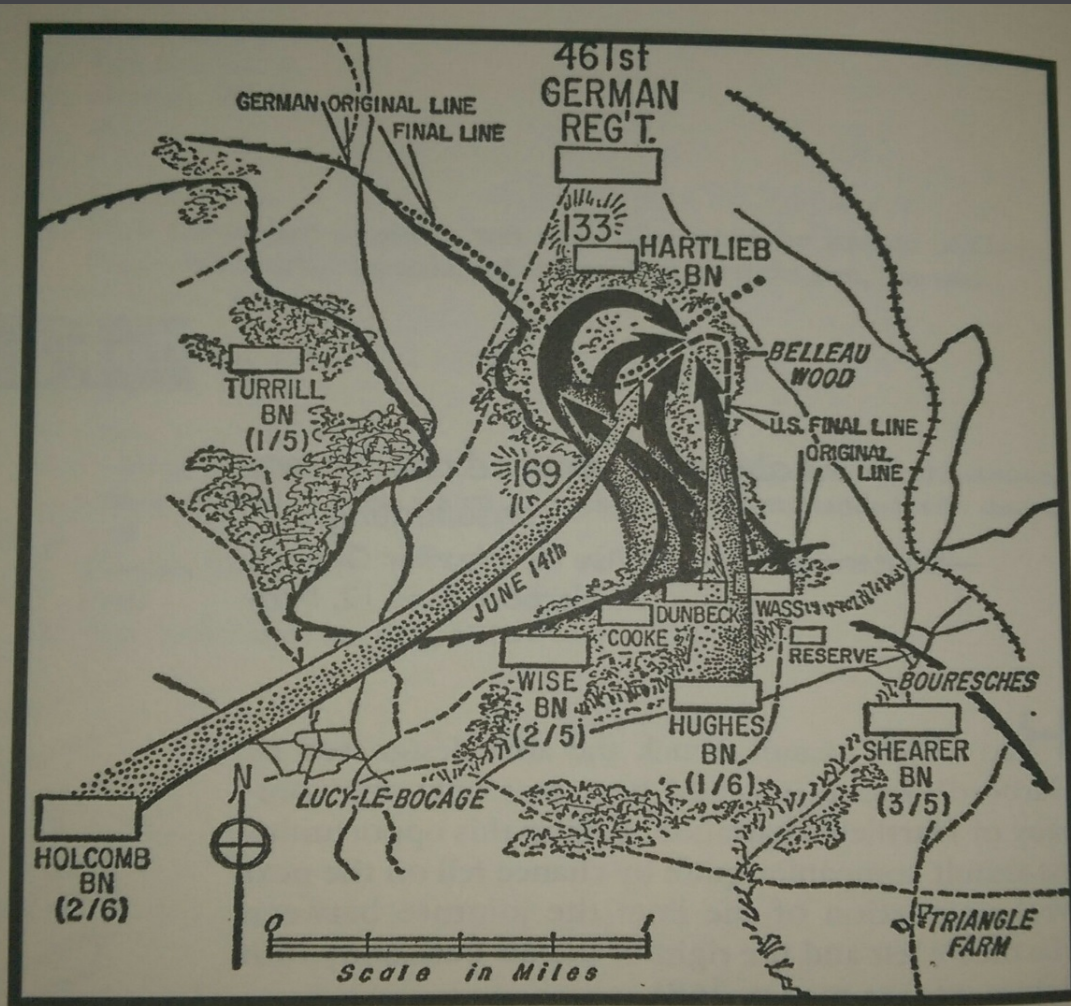
# Phase II Fighting in the Woods

- ✓ Into the woods, the advanced slowed as companies encountered German positions.
- ✓ Small unit warfare.
- ✓ Map: notice the differences between the planned attacks and actual ones.



**Belleau Wood**  
**Marine Attacks**  
**June 10-11, 1918**

# Phase II Fighting in the Woods



**Belleau Wood**  
**Marine Attacks**  
**June 12-15, 1918**

- ✓ Heavy casualties on both sides.
- ✓ Marines mistakenly reported having seized all objectives.
- ✓ This misunderstanding gave the Germans time to reinforce their positions.

- ✓ 15-18 June: Both sides consolidated positions. Germans reinforced their positions in the northwest corner of the woods.
- ✓ Heavy barrage of gas and artillery fell on Marines in the woods.



U.S. gas victims



Small unit warfare

# Medal of Honor Recipients 10-18 June



Lieutenant Orlando H. Petty USNR

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Gunnery Sergeant Fred W. Stockham

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Phase III: 19-26 June  
*Bois de la Brigade de Marine*



## Interservice Rivalry?

- ✓ 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry (Army), called in from 3d Brigade to relieve 2/6, failed to take German positions on 20-23 June.
- ✓ Harbord accused LtCol Adams (1/7 CO) and his troops of being incompetent (unfairly) and called in 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment, (Shearer CO) to finish the job.
- ✓ The Germans repulsed 3/5 as well but the Marine battalion did not receive the same controversial rebuke from Harbord as 1/7 did.



Machine gunners of the 23d Infantry  
near Chateau Thierry



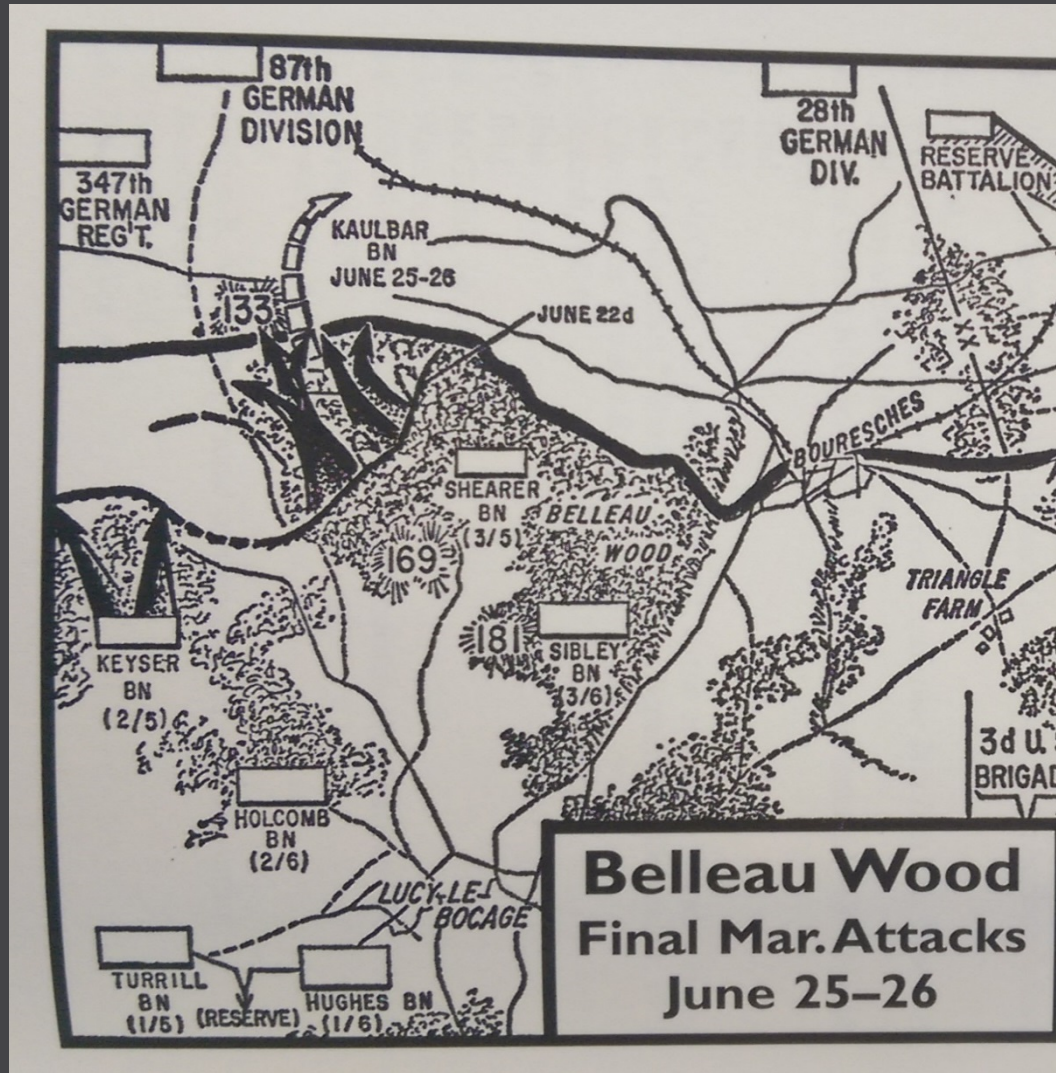
# Effects of Artillery Fire on the Wood

1/7 and 3/5's failures prompted Harbord to repeat the tactics of 9-10 June: Heavy bombardment of German positions followed by rolling barrage in support of infantry attack.



**Left:** Unexploded ordnance still being found at Belleau Wood; **Right:** Belleau Wood after the battle.

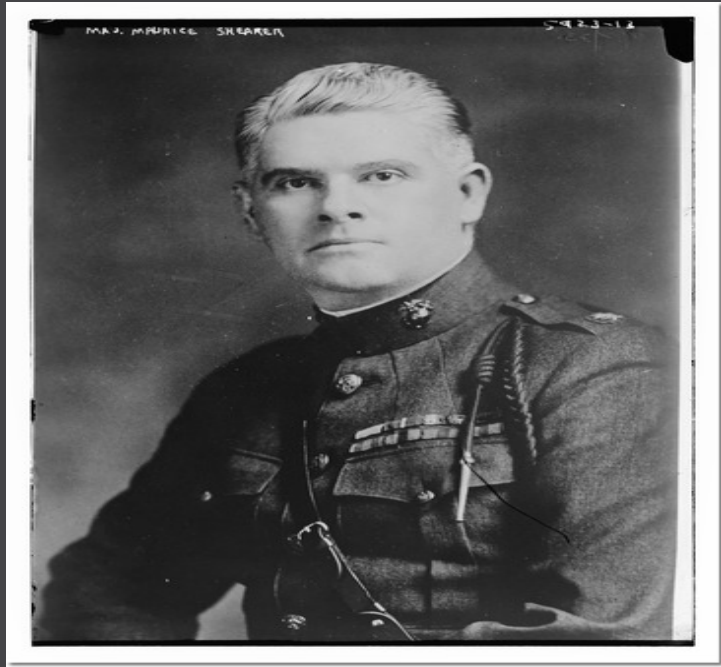
# Phase III Final Assaults



- ✓ Like the bombardments that kicked off Phase II, the 18 hour bombardment worked.
- ✓ 3/5 advanced much more efficiently.
- ✓ German troops of the 374th Regiment evacuated the wood.



The morning of 26 June, 3/5's Battalion Commander, Major Maurice Shearer, sent a message to General Harbord: "Belleau Woods now U.S. Marine Corps' entirely."



**Left:** Maj Shearer, 3/5's CO; **Right:** Hunting lodge in northern section of the wood that changed hands between Germans and Marines numerous times.

# Conclusion



Survivors of 2/6 at rest after the battle

- ✓ Casualties
- ✓ Medals of Honor
- ✓ Strategic Significance
- ✓ Significance to the Marine Corps
- ✓ Famous Participants

# Casualties: 4th Brigade

Unit	KIA	WIA	Gassed	Died of Wounds	Total
5th Regiment	404	1410	225	198	2237
6th Regiment	186	940	650	122	1898
6th Machine Gun Battalion	26	101	27	12	166
Misc	5	17	2	2	26
<b>Totals</b>	<b>621</b>	<b>2468</b>	<b>904</b>	<b>334</b>	<b>4327</b>

- ✓ Marine casualties from all other U.S. conflicts leading up to WWI: KIA 325, WIA 481, **Total 806**.
- ✓ Marines would eventually have 2,461 KIA and 9,520 WIA out of a total of 350,000 U.S. casualties in WWI.
- ✓ A perspective about Allied WWI casualties: France, 6.1 mil; United Kingdom, 3.1 mil; Italy, 2.1 mil; Russia 9.15 mil.



# German Casualties

Unit	KIA	WIA	Total	Period
237th Div	322	1145	1467	6-16 June
10th Div	39	181	220	6-10 June
28th Div	410	1245	1655	10-13 June
87th Div	110	66	176	16-25 June
Totals	881	2,637	3518	6-25 June



Total German Casualties WWI: 7.1 Million, 65% of men mobilized.

# Medals of Honor

GySgt Ernest A. Janson

GySgt Fred W. Stockman,  
Posthumous

Lt Orlando H. Petty, Medical  
Corps, USNR

Lt (jg) Weeden Osborn USN,  
Posthumous

143 Navy Crosses

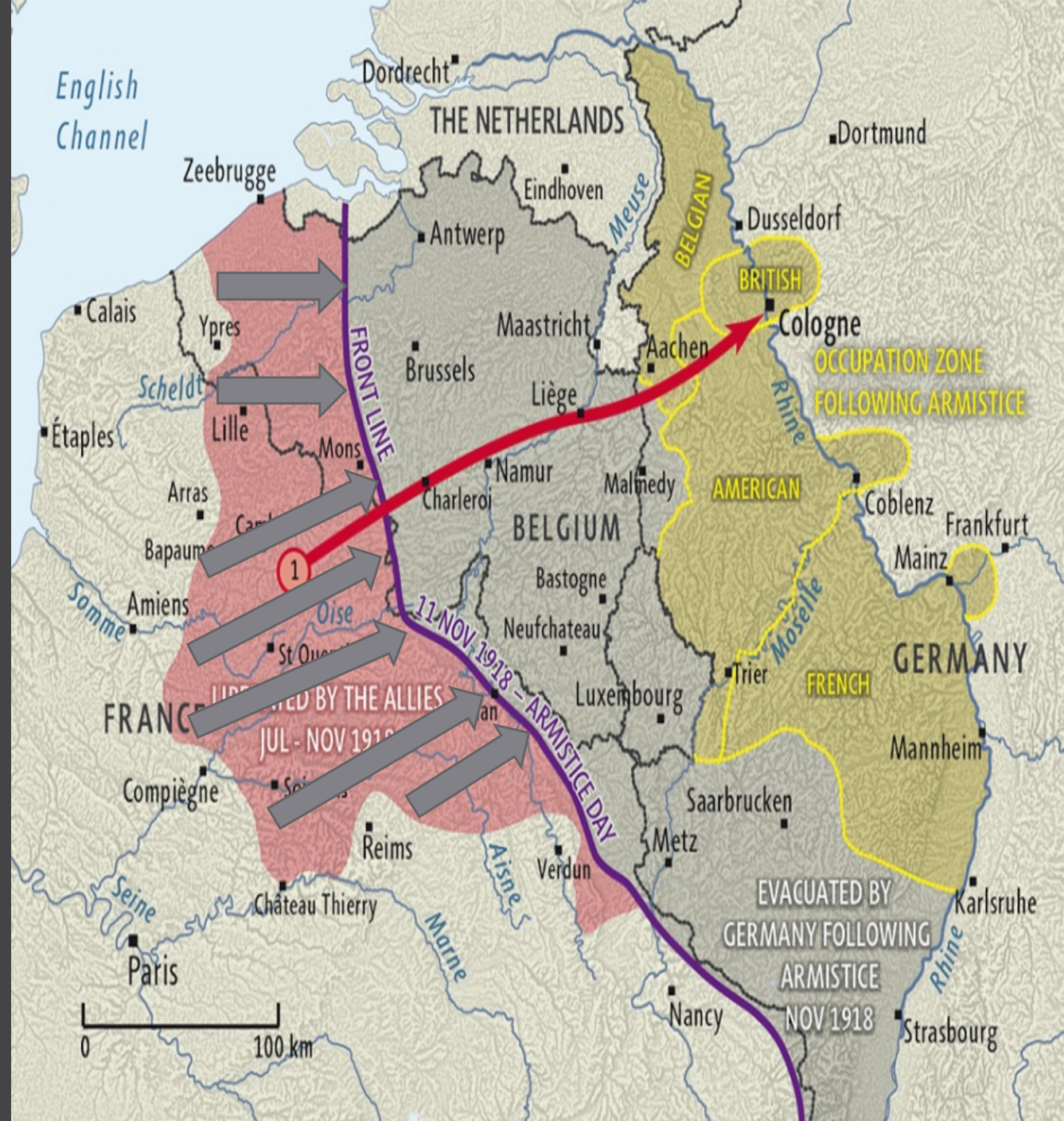


# Strategic Significance

- ✓ German army remained on the defensive until the armistice.
- ✓ Allied armies began rolling back German gains.
- ✓ AEF played an important role in this process during the Summer and Fall of 1918.



“The tremendous superabundance of pent-up, untapped nervous energy which America’s troops brought into the fray more than balanced the weakness of their allies, who were utterly exhausted.”  
Gen Erich Ludendorff, 18 July 1918.





# Significance of the battle for the Marine Corps



Marines with captured German mortar

Belleau Wood was a turning point for the USMC for several reasons.

Tactically: Gave a core cadre of officers and enlisted men experience in large scale combat operations and modern war (by WWI standards).

- Heavy artillery barrages coordinated with infantry assault
- Employment of machine guns in defense and offense
- Field fortifications
- Chemical warfare
- Navy corpsman gained vast medical experience

# Significance for the Marine Corps . . .

- ✓ Soon after Belleau Wood, Gen Pershing appointed MajGen John A. Lejeune as the commander of the U.S. 2d Infantry Division.
- ✓ Lejeune was the first Marine to command a U.S. army division in war.
- ✓ Despite working together successfully, soldiers, Gen Pershing included, resented the fact that Marines received so much public adoration after the war.



Left: MajGen Lejeune; Right: Gen Pershing

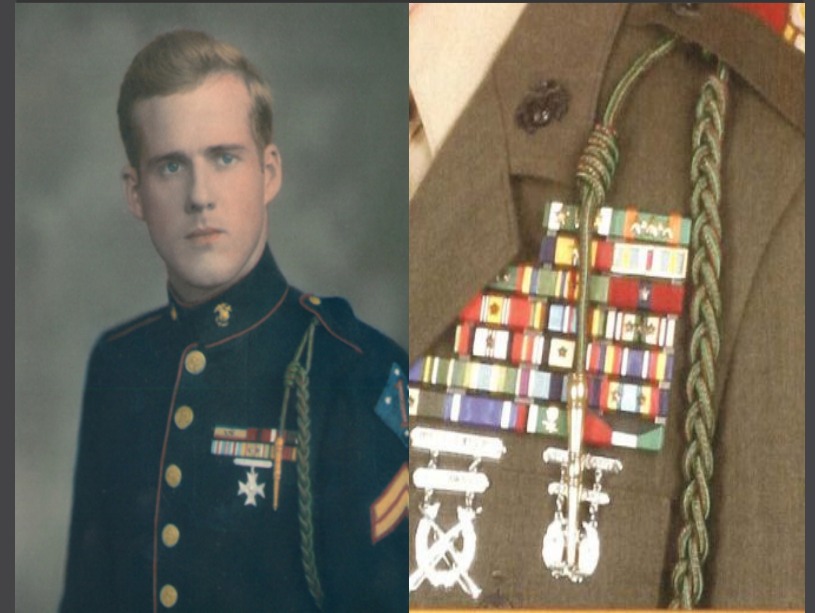
# Significance for the Marine Corps . . .

French Government renamed the wood to *Bois de la Brigade de Marine*.

5th and 6th Regiments awarded the French Fourragère.



Left: Belleau Wood Plaque



Right: French Fourragère in WWII era and present

# Future leaders of the Marine Corps



June 1918: Graves Erskine (third from left);  
Thomas Holcomb (fifth from right); Clifton  
Cates (fourth from right)



Erskine and Cates decades later.

# Future Commandants who fought at Belleau Wood



General Wendell C. Neville  
14th CMC 1929-1930  
Belleau Wood: Colonel, CO  
5th Regiment



General Thomas Holcomb  
17th CMC 1936-1943  
Belleau Wood: Major, CO 2/6



General Clifton B. Cates  
19th CMC 1948-1951  
Belleau Wood: Lt, 96th Co.  
2/6



General Lemuel C.  
Shepherd, Jr.  
20th CMC 1952-1955  
Belleau Wood: Lt, 55th Co,  
2/5

# Division Commanders at Iwo Jima who fought at Belleau Wood



Iwo Jima:  
MajGen Graves B.  
Erskine, CG 3d  
MarDiv

Belleau Wood:  
Lt, 79th Co. 2/6



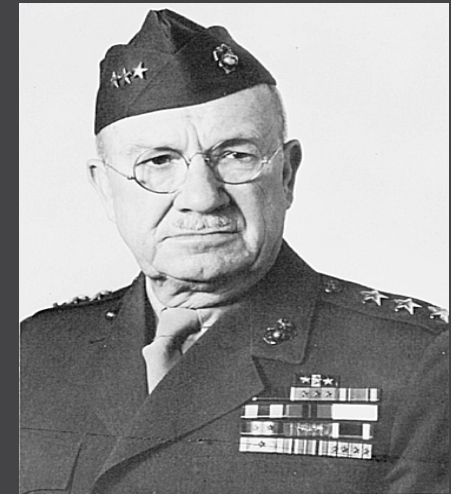
Iwo Jima:  
MajGen Clifton B.  
Cates, CG 4th  
MarDiv

Belleau Wood:  
Lt, 96th Co. 2/6



Iwo Jima:  
MajGen Keller E.  
Rockey, CG 5th  
MarDiv

Belleau Wood:  
Captain, 1/5 (XO)



Iwo Jima:  
LtGen Holland M.  
Smith, Commander  
ATF

Belleau Wood:  
Major, 4th Brigade  
Adjutant

## Other Notable Participants



GySgt Dan Daly



Lt. John Thomason Jr.



SgtMaj John Quick



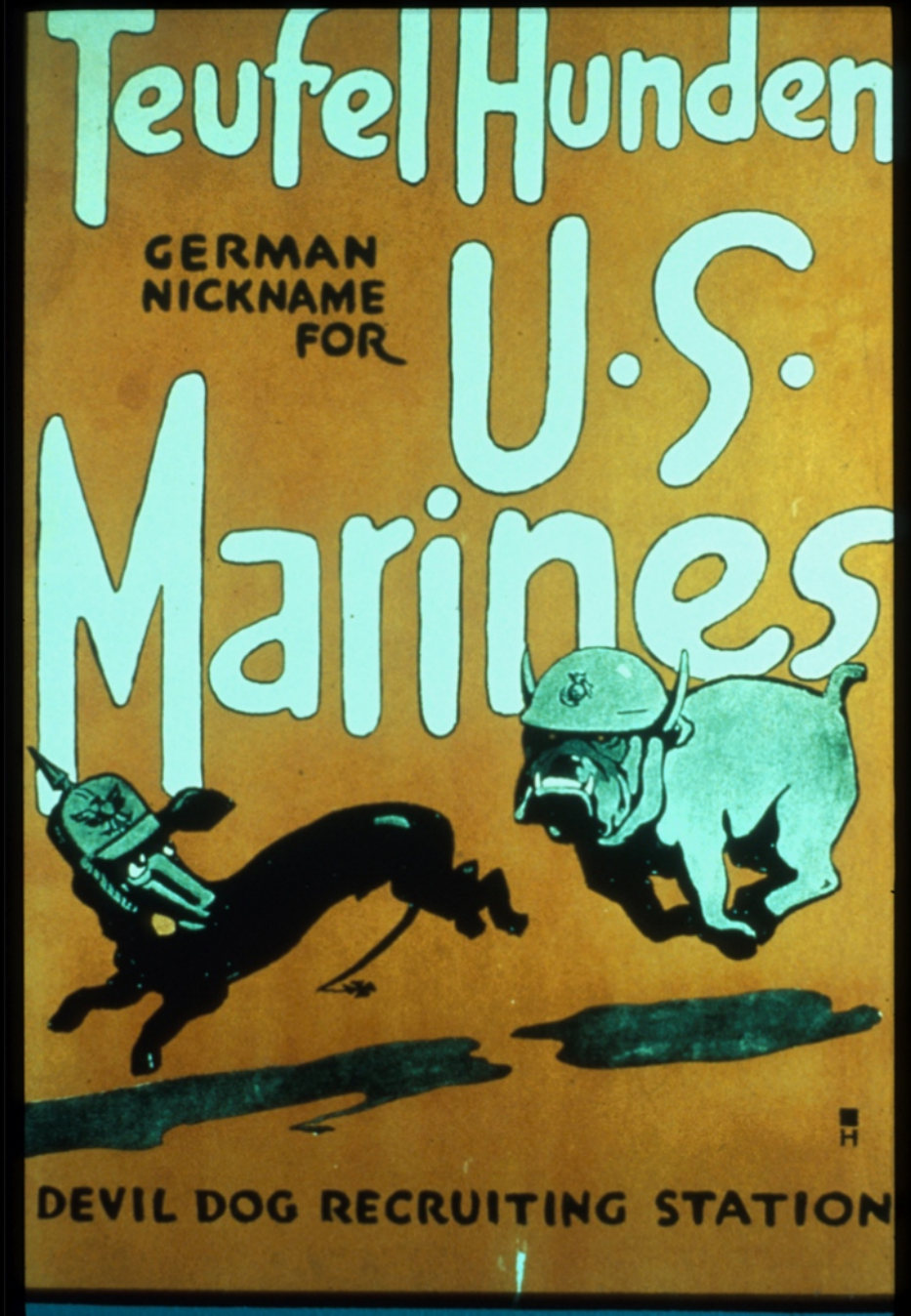
Capt Lloyd Williams

# Marine Image and Public Relations

*Teufel Hunden*: Devil Dogs

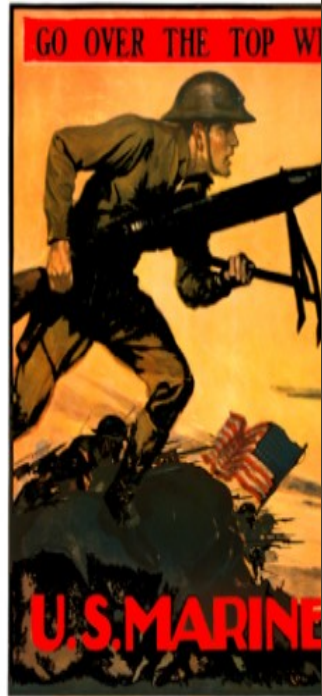


Devil Dog Fountain at Belleau Wood





# Marine Image and Public Relations



# UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS



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As part of his internship with, and under the direction of the History Division