



# The ASC History Newsletter

100th Anniversary of World War I:

## Belleau Wood

This  
**MONTH** in  
military  
history ...

- 1620: Peregrine White born
- 1817: 1st Seminole War began
- 1823: Monroe Doctrine proclaimed
- 1863: Gettysburg Address
- 1864: March to the Sea began
- 1899: Battle of Tirad Pass
- 1924: USS Langley, 1st US aircraft carrier sailed
- 1941: 7 Dec. Attack on Pearl Harbor, next day President Roosevelt delivered the "date that will live in infamy" address to congress
- 1943: US attack on Makin and Tarawa
- 1945: Nuremberg Trial began
- 1950: First Marine Division near the Chosin Reservoir
- 1963: President Kennedy was assassinated
- 1969: SALT talks began
- 2004: VBIED killed over 100 Iraqi National Guard queuing outside recruiting station at FOB Headhunter, Baghdad

"Sie kämpfen wie Teufelshunde" (They fight like Devil Dogs), proclaimed a captured German soldier at the Battle for Belleau Wood. That is how a nickname begins—a nickname the Marines have carried with pride ever since. This is the story of how they earned the Devil Dogs moniker.

During the 1918 Ludendorff Spring Offensive, the French Army ordered the attached American forces to take the Bois de Belleau (Belleau Wood). The woods were about a mile in length and roughly a half mile wide. It was located about five miles northwest of Chateau Thierry on the Marne River in north-central France.

The American unit tasked with taking Belleau Wood was Major General Omar Bundy's 2nd Division. The division included the 3rd Infantry Brigade, which consisted of the 9th and 23rd Infantry Regiments and the 5th Machine Gun Battalion, and the 4th Marine Brigade, which consisted of the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion. The 2nd Division also included engineers, artillery and logistics personnel. The German 1,200-man *461st Infantry Regiment* of the *237th Division* opposed the Americans.

On May 31, 1918, the 2nd Division received orders to replace French forces at the front. On 6 June, without the benefit of recon-

naissance of the German positions, the 4th Marine Brigade received orders to occupy the woods. The Marines had incorrectly been told by the French that the woods were free of Germans.

After the 5th Marine Regiment captured Hill 142 west of the woods, the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments made frontal assaults on the south and west ends of the woods. By the end of the first day of fighting, the 6th Marine Regiment was able to take the village of Bouresches. It was during these attacks that Gunnery Sergeant Dan Daly led his men forward yelling: "Come on men, do you want to live forever?" In gaining the foothold Daly survived, but another 1,087 Marines were killed or wounded.

After four days of small raids, American forces directed heavy artillery fire on the woods starting on June 9th. The next day the Marines started what became a four-day assault, during which they were able to capture two-thirds of the wood but at heavy casualties.

On June 13, the Germans counterattacked and almost recaptured Bouresches, but their attack stalled under concentrated rifle fire. With both sides entrenched, the positions remained static until June 24th, when the Marines renewed their assault. Two days later, the Marines declared the woods secured. In the battle, US

forces sustained nearly 5,200 casualties, including about 750 killed. This figure was almost 55% of the brigade's strength. With the exception of 300 prisoners, most German defenders were killed in the 20 days of fighting.

The merits of the Marine victory at Belleau Wood have been much debated. Many French believed at the time that the Marines had halted the German drive on Paris. The Germans, however, never intended to attack Paris. As all their operational orders make clear, the purpose of the Chemin des Dames Offensive was solely a diversion to draw off the large French reserves positioned behind the British in Flanders. Some critics thus have seen the Battle of Belleau Wood as of little value and claim that much of the slaughter could have been avoided through more effective tactics. Of course, in hindsight, this same claim can be leveled against most World War I battles.

The battle, however, endeared the Marines to the American public and helped secure the future of the U.S. Marine Corps. Delighted by the U.S. performance, the French awarded the 4th Brigade the *Ordre de l'Armee* and later renamed the woods Bois de la Brigade Marine.

