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# 2d Battalion, 5th Marines at BELLEAU WOOD

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6 June 1918

A Pocket History



During World War I, Marines were armed with the U.S. Magazine Rifle, M-1903 Springfield. The field uniform was the service uniform with wrap-around leggings. A gas mask was carried on the chest.

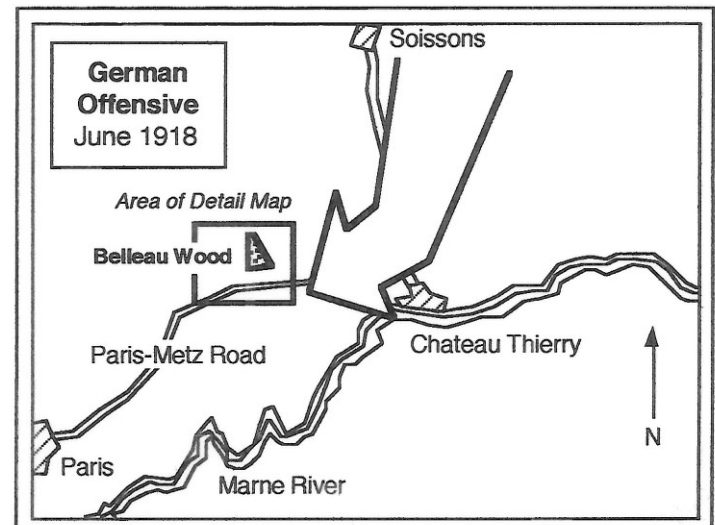
## World War I, France.

Immediately after the United States entered World War I, the 5th Marines sailed for France. On 14 June 1917, the 1st, 2d, and 3d Battalions, 5th Marines boarded the *USS Hancock*, *Henderson*, and *DeKalb*, and twelve days later debarked at Saint Nazaire, France. Each battalion had 1100 Marines in four rifle companies. The Commanding Officer of 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was LtCol Frederic M. Wise.

After nine months of training, the Regiment marched to the front lines on 17 March 1918.

## Belleau Wood

On June 1, 1918, a major German offensive overwhelmed Soissons and moved south to the Marne River. Stopped at Chateau Thierry, the enemy turned and attacked west toward Paris. One of the leading assault regiments, the **461st Imperial German Infantry**, occupied Belleau Wood.



Belleau Wood was only 65 kilometers from Paris. Measuring approximately 1000 by 2000 meters, it was a nearly impenetrable forest of dense underbrush, trees, and boulders. Its ravines and caves were ideal for hiding machine-gun nests and infantry strongpoints.

Responding to the German attack, the 5th Marines marched northeast along the Paris-Metz road. At Lucy, the 5th and 6th Marines moved north off the Paris-Metz road and took up positions facing the German onslaught. A watching U.S. Army officer commented: "They looked fine... tall... healthy and fit - they looked hard and competent."

### Germans Halted

In the afternoon of **June 3d**, the Germans attacked west out of Belleau Wood and straight into 2/5. Extended waves of enemy infantry, with bayonets fixed, advanced across the open fields. From hastily-dug fighting holes, the well-trained Marine marksmen opened fire with deadly accuracy. The battalion mowed down the attackers, and the assault fell back. Accurate fire at more than 400 meters was a new experience for the Germans. This assault was the last forward action of the German offensive.

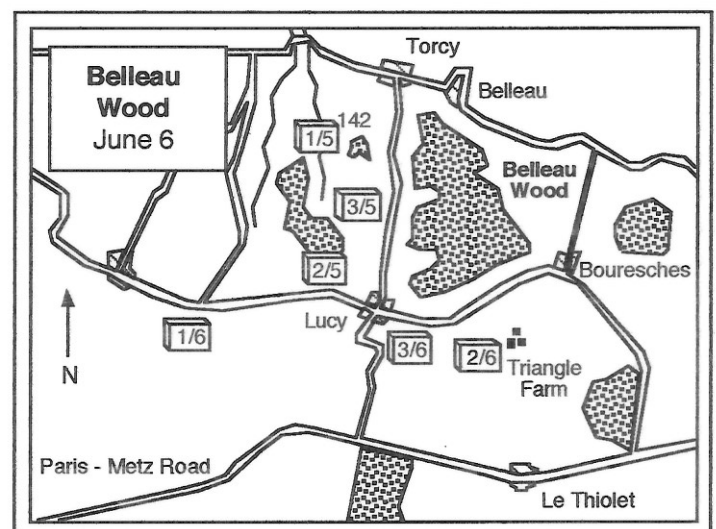
That night, exhausted French units withdrew through 2/5's position. A French Major ordered **Capt Lloyd Williams**, a 2/5 company commander, to withdraw. Williams responded, "**Retreat, hell. We just got here.**" For the next two days, the Marines watched the woods to their front. The Germans dug in from Torcy to Hill 142, Belleau Wood to Triangle Farm, and Le Thiolet to Chateau Thierry. Inside Belleau Wood, the Germans prepared strong defensive positions with interlocking fields of machine gun fire supported by mortars and artillery.

On **June 6**, the 5th and 6th Marines assaulted Belleau Wood. 1/5 was positioned west of Hill 142 with 3/5 on their right. 3/6 held Lucy with 2/6, at Triangle Farm, on their right. 2/5 was in reserve in the woods

northwest of Lucy, and 1/6 was in corps reserve.

At 0345, 1/5 attacked and took Hill 142. By 0700, they had dug in and prepared for a counterattack. In this initial sharp fight, 1/5 lost 9 officers and 325 Marines. One company of 2/5 moved to the summit to reinforce 1/5's weakened flank.

At 1700, after a short artillery prep, 3/5 and 3/6 assaulted Belleau Wood from the west. Moving through a green, waist-high wheat field, the leading companies were ripped apart by German Maxim machine-guns. Both battalions rushed the woods and



initiated a deadly close-quarters battle. After these units had gained an initial foothold in the south, 2d Battalion, 5th Marines moved forward and into Belleau Wood.

South of the wood, 2/6 assaulted and took the well-defended town of Bouresches.

Shelling and firing continued all day on the 7th. After midnight, an enemy counter-attack in the wood was stopped cold.

Before dawn on the 8th, a renewed attack by 3/6 was stopped cold by heavy losses of 400 Marines. 2/5 was ordered to move behind the Torcy - Lucy road to allow Belleau Wood to be shelled.

On **June 9**, an enormous U.S. artillery concentration decimated Belleau Wood, creating a wasteland of dead-fall, broken tree

stumps, and upturned earth. In response, the Germans shelled Lucy and Bouresches, and reorganized their defenses.

At 0430 on **June 10**, 1/6 attacked, but was immediately stopped by intense resistance. The next day, **June 11**, an under-strength and tired 2/5, having already suffered 25% casualties, attacked the middle of Belleau Wood from the west. This aggressive attack turned the tide. A 0330 artillery preparation was followed by a 0430 assault. 2/5 moved through the wheat fields camouflaged by a morning mist. Heavy enemy machine gun fire again killed many, including **Captain Lloyd Williams**. As the battalion fought into the woods, the fighting broke down into intense, close-range combat. Here, the Marines showed their advantage in weapons skills, small-unit leadership, and morale. In a vicious fight, 2/5 captured thirty enemy machine guns and almost 400 German prisoners at a cost of 50% casualties. This was the most prisoners taken by any American unit up to that point in the War.

The battalion fought completely through the woods and came out on the far southeast side. The regiment, however, believed that 2/5 held the **north** end of the wood, a costly error. Although the German's southern line was destroyed, the enemy had reinforced the north end of the wood.

On **June 12**, after a three-hour preparatory artillery barrage, 2/5 resumed the attack. 1/6 supported the attack from the south. The battalion found that most of the artillery had landed 1000 meters too far. 2/5 again engaged in brutal rifle and bayonet fighting in close quarters. Rocky ravines hid the machine-gun nests of the German defenders. **Pvt Aloysius Leitner** was mortally wounded after helping capture six Germans and their machine-gun position. He was awarded the Navy Cross posthumously. The two battalions in the woods, continuously bombarded with enemy artillery, steadily pushed the Germans north and east.

At 0300 on **June 13**, the Germans struck back at Bouresches. 3/5, who had relieved 2/6, repulsed the attack. 3/5's CO sent a message, "Have not given up one inch of ground..."

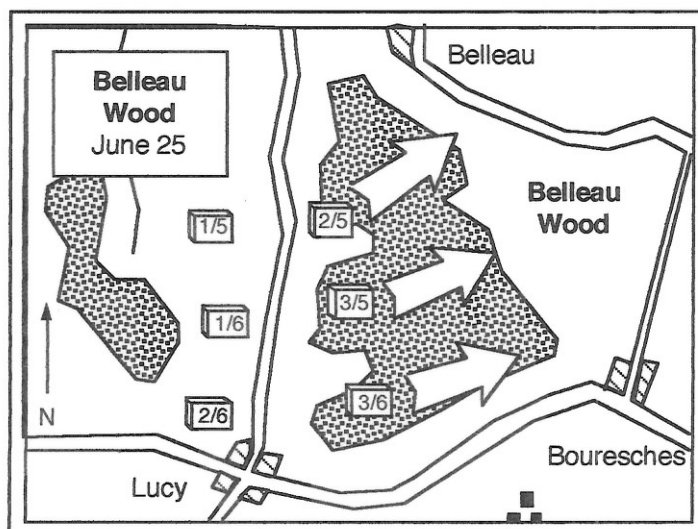
2/5, still inside Belleau Wood, was shelled by artillery. LtCol Wise reported, "**terrific barrage from [CP] forward... Losses... heavy... Morale excellent...**"

1/5 moved into the west side of the wood and found it full of Germans who had infiltrated behind the attacking Marines. 2/6 was gassed before being able to reinforce.

On **June 15**, the west side was finally cleared after nine days of continuous fighting. The bearded and exhausted Marines were relieved by the 7th Infantry Regiment, United States Army. One week later, on **June 23**, after the 7th Infantry had failed to clear the wood, the Marines were ordered to go back in and finish the job.

On **June 25**, after an all-day artillery barrage, a determined and grim 2/5 again advanced into Belleau Wood. The battalion was now led by LtCol Ralph S. Keyser. 2/5 attacked on the left, 3/5 in the center and 3/6 on the right. Against this relentless assault, the Germans fell back and began to pull out to the north.

The assaulting Marines reached the northern edge of the woods on the following day. A report was sent out, "**Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely.**"



## Aftermath

The victory at Belleau Wood had saved Paris and the French were delirious with joy. The French parliament declared July 4th a national holiday to honor Americans in France. In a parade in Paris, the Marine Corps flag was hailed with enormous cheers of **"Vive les Marines!"** The French government renamed Belleau Wood, **"Bois de la Brigade de Marine"**, and decorated both the 5th and 6th Regiments with the Croix de Guerre.

During the Belleau Wood fighting, **2d Battalion, 5th Marines** lost 19 officers and 615 Marines. Secretary of the Navy Franklin Delano Roosevelt, inspecting the 5th Marines after the battle, decreed that enlisted Marines would from now on wear the eagle, globe and anchor on their uniform collar.

The Germans, too, were impressed with the Marines. An official German report described the Marines as **"vigorous, self-confident, and remarkable marksmen..."** Captured prisoners and German letters described the Marines as *Teufelhunde*, or **Devil Dogs**. Belleau Wood demonstrated that the Marine Corps could fight against a

well-trained and equipped European army and prevail.

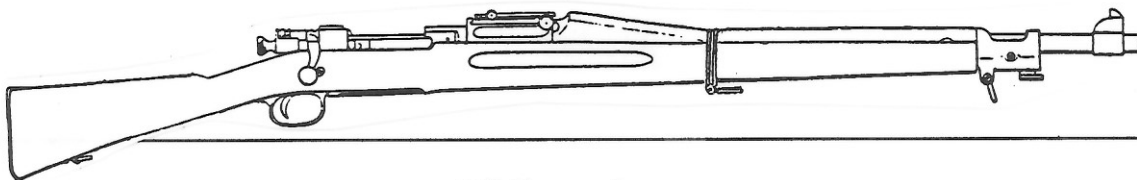
General Pershing, Commander of all U.S. troops in Europe said, "The Battle of Belleau Wood was for the U.S. the biggest battle since Appomattox and the most considerable engagement American troops had ever had with a foreign enemy."



This monograph was prepared for the 76th anniversary of 2/5's participation in the Battle of Belleau Wood, June 6, 1994.

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