

Belleau Wood

The unknown German perspective

by Alexander Merrow, Capt Gregory Starace, & Agostino von Hassell



A stereoscopic photo showing a burial ground for Americans who lost their lives in the battle. (Archival photo provided by the author.)

Belleau Wood conjures up memorable phrases for those who have studied the battle. “Retreat, hell! We just got here.” “These are American regulars . . . They will hold.” “Come on, you sons-o’-bitches! Do you want to live forever?” “Teufelhunden.”

Belleau Wood has become part of the lore of the modern U.S. Marine Corps. The battle is thought to have stopped the German armies’ final roll toward Paris and perhaps even to have turned the tide of the “Great War.” Those involved in the ferocious fighting from 6 to 26 June 1918—whether they captured the wood or died in the wheat fields outside of the wood—became heroes.

The historical literature on Belleau Wood could fill several shelves of a library. Classic accounts, such as Robert B. Asprey’s *At Belleau Wood* (Putnam, 1965), and recent works, such as Alan

>Dr. Merrow earned his doctorate in modern European history at Georgetown University. He has taught history at the University of Tennessee and Franklin & Marshall College. He currently lives in Hamburg, Germany.

>>Capt Starace is currently assigned to Marine Cryptologic Support Battalion. He is a part-time master’s student in strategic intelligence at the National Defense Intelligence College. He received his bachelor’s degree in history from The George Washington University.

>>>Mr. Von Hassell has written widely about the U.S. Marine Corps and other subjects and runs a national consulting firm in New York City.

Axelrod’s *Miracle at Belleau Wood* (The Lyons Press, 2007), provide detailed accounts of the experience of the U.S. Marines during the battle. Memoirs from individual Marines complement standard accounts and show the valor, fear, and sacrifice that enabled Maj Maurice Shearer to declare on 26 June 1918 that the woods were entirely under the Marines’ control.

Yet, the existing works reveal little of how the German forces opposed to the U.S. Marines experienced the battle. What were their orders and objectives? How did they respond as the battle unfolded? What were their troop strengths? How did they assess their American adversaries? A complete picture of Belleau Wood depends on the answers to these questions. Without

them our understanding of Belleau Wood is a little like one-hand clapping.

From the German perspective, the battle was neither famous nor infamous. There are no German books on the “Wald von Belleau.” The battle had none of the positive valences that can be read into American accounts. German historians do not attribute significant importance to the defeat in the greater context of the Western Front in the spring of 1918. The German soldiers who died during the battle were indistinguishable from the massive losses that the German Imperial Armies suffered in the final year of the war.

Fortunately, the records of the German divisions that took part in this offensive still exist. MAJ Bertram Cadwalader, USA, of the Army War College transcribed the original documents in 1927. Allied bombing in 1945 destroyed the original files housed in Potsdam, but Cadwalader’s transcriptions, located in the military records of the German Federal Archive in Freiburg, can still be examined.

What do these sources reveal? Detailed orders show daily—and sometimes hourly—objectives and tactics: troop movements, artillery missions, and machinegun positions; situation reports describe the results of German attacks and American counterattacks; and daily casualty reports document the massive losses the Marines inflicted. Officers’ reports also contain assessments of their American adversaries—and how these changed over the course of the battle. The sources reveal that while they were not impressed with the tactics and decisions of American commanders, they still feared the Americans’ vigor and determination.

The detailed division orders show a decentralized order style akin to what was later refined by the Wehrmacht between World War I and World War II. This order style also resembles the maneuver warfare used by the 2d Marine Division in the 1980–83 time period when the division was commanded by the Corps’ future 29th Commandant, Alfred M. Gray.

Above all, however, these sources reveal that the German forces were exhausted, strained, and in desperate need of relief. The success of the Germans during the Aisne-Marne offensive (27 May to 6 June) had come at a cost. They were ill-equipped to successfully transition to the defense and solidify their gains. In the final analysis, this suggests that the outcome at Belleau Wood had more to do with German weaknesses than American strengths.

Four German infantry divisions were arrayed against the Marine Brigade. This, however, is highly misleading in today’s terms because each division probably numbered less than 1,500 men. For example, the Royal Prussian 237th Infantry Division commanded by LTG Albano von Jacobi—who had earned the prestigious *Pour le Merite* on 12 April 1914—was comprised of the

478 enlisted personnel). The other divisions arrayed against the Marines—the 10th, the 28th, and the 197th—showed comparable numbers. In addition to these infantry divisions, there were also elements of 5th Prussian Guards Division, the 87th Division, and various air squadrons.

The context of Belleau Wood fits into the general history of the Great War, which hinged on the failure of the Schlieffen Plan during the opening move of the war in 1914. The German failure to knock out France before focusing on Russia had dire consequences. German military leaders found themselves in the position they feared most—a two-front war. When victory finally came in the east, General Quartermaster Erich Ludendorff was optimistic that Germany would win the war against the Western Allies as well. The 1917 Treaty of Brest-



German Cemetery: 4,365 Graves 600 Yards from the U.S. Cemetery. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

244th Infantry Brigade, 83d Field Artillery Regiment, and a Detachment of the 23d Field Artillery. The 244th Infantry Brigade consisted of the 460th Regiment (21 officers and 575 enlisted personnel), the 461th Regiment (12 officers and 429 enlisted personnel), and the 462d Regiment (14 officers and

Litovsk provided Germany with a strategic opportunity. Able to focus exclusively on the Western Front, the Germans redeployed 33 divisions—more than 500,000 soldiers—from the east to the Western Front. They poured all of their men and resources into one final great offensive, the Ludendorff of-

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A view of Belleau after the battle. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

fensive, to strike a decisive blow against the allies.

Despite the arrival of the troops from the east, German forces were still weaker than those of the Allies. The German armies in the west had a strength representing just 80 percent of that of the Allies. Moreover, the German armies suffered disadvantages in the number of machineguns per infantry division (324 to 1,084), artillery (c. 14,000 to c. 18,500), airplanes (c. 3,670 to c. 4,500), and trucks (23,000 to c. 100,000).¹ These disadvantages, from the German perspective, could lead historians to the conclusion that the outcomes of battles during 1918 were determined more by material disadvantage than by the actions of men in the field.

A pattern emerged during the spring offensive of 1918. German commanders used local superiority and proven “infiltration” tactics to achieve significant initial gains. However, inadequate supplies

prevented further attack while exhaustion and Allied reserves made transitioning to the defense difficult. Regardless, the German armies had managed to advance within 50 miles of Paris. Observers on both sides of the conflict estimated the distance to be a 3-day march. And the German armies were winning the battles against the equally exhausted French and British troops. German military leaders had little reason to believe the swathe of forest north of Château-Thierry would significantly alter the outcome of the offensive.

In the theater in which the Marines found themselves at the beginning of June 1918, the German objective was to protect the left flank of the Seventh Army, centered in Soissons. The town of Château-Thierry was crucial to this effort. Belleau Wood, in turn, was key terrain within this context. First, the former hunting preserve was a natural defensive position, one that would integrate well into the overall German defense. Be-

cause they had experienced difficulty maintaining their gains, they needed to accept whatever advantages the natural landscape provided. Second, German commanders acknowledged that conceding Belleau Wood to the Allies would make holding Château-Thierry much more difficult.² Moreover, they wanted to gain ground in order to improve their defensive situation. It was an attempt to strongpoint the line while maintaining an “offensive spirit.” Clearly, Belleau Wood had significant value to them.

The German 237th Infantry Division entered Belleau Wood on 2 June and secured it by the end of the next day.³ The division was ordered to continue the attack and take Lucy-le-Bocage, but increased resistance led them to call off the attack scheduled for 4 June.⁴ The increased resistance surprised the Germans. They had beaten the French back consistently over the previous weeks and had no explanation for increased difficulty. Their

intelligence did, in fact, report the arrival of reinforcements, but it did not report the presence of Americans. In fact, situation reports make no mention of Americans in the immediate area until the note of an American corpse that was hauled in after the fighting on 4 June.⁵ The poor intelligence was typical and may have been a factor throughout the battle. While some divisions were able to point to troop movements as evidence of an imminent attack, others complained about their failure to get balloons or airplanes for aerial reconnaissance in order to gather valuable information regarding the composition and disposition of the Allies.

The intensity of the two American attacks on 6 June surprised the Germans, though both assaults were deflected. German troops and commanders alike viewed the U.S. Marines with ambivalence. On the one hand they were unimpressed with American tactics and assumed they had not been properly trained. “The tactics and training of the Americans in the open field is of a very low level.”⁶ Moreover, the Germans marveled that American officers could be so naïve as to send the troops across the wheat fields bunched together, one behind the other, making them easy targets for their machineguns.⁷ “The American method of attack during the last days,” recorded an officer with the 237th Infantry Division, “is on the level of massed infantry [‘Stosstaktik’] in uncleared terrain and at night. They had success only through encirclement.”⁸

Inferior American fighting ability was the assessment the German military wanted to portray to the German public. One military press release described the American “baptism by fire” as a “bloodbath.”⁹ It suggested the newly arrived Americans were “Sport-soldaten,” who now realized that war was not a game. The military hoped to limit the damage that American involvement did to the morale of the German homefront.

However, other assessments of the Americans confirmed the Germans’ fear that the mere arrival of fresh forces

might be enough to stop the Ludendorff offensive. “Their physical condition is very good,” wrote a major from the 461st Infantry Brigade, 237th Infantry Division.¹⁰ Another German officer reported the Americans were young and powerful, well-equipped, and made a powerful impression.¹¹ This impression must be put into context; the Germans were used to fighting a physically and mentally war-weary France and Britain. To confront physically strong Americans who were eager to prove themselves in battle was certainly a departure from German experiences with the French and British troops who, after 4 years of fighting were nearly starved, broken, and war weary. They were now facing physically and mentally fresh American forces, and as the battle continued, German officers came to see the strengths of the American fighting capability. Especially common were references to the

Marines’ outstanding marksmanship and a natural affinity to fighting in the “bush” or in forested lands.

Despite the mixed assessment of the Americans, they could not deny that the Marines brought more of a fight than they had anticipated. Over the course of the 3-week battle, the fighting in Belleau Wood was fraught with dozens of attacks, gains measured in fighting holes, and tenacious close quarters combat. As the days passed, the Germans found themselves losing ground.

One of the difficulties of portraying the German perspective of Belleau Wood is that the battle was not that significant for their war effort in 1918. The difficulties experienced by the German divisions at Belleau Wood betray problems that were systemic throughout the German offensives of 1918. Time and again German divisions advanced, reached their culmi-

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nating point, stalled, and then could not effectively transition to the defense. The battle of Belleau Wood was indistinguishable in this regard.

At the time, however, German commanders knew what was at stake in this first fight against the Americans. MG Max von Boehn, commander of the 28th Infantry Division, wrote on 8 June that the Allied press would amplify American success at Belleau Wood, suggesting that a single American division was sufficient to stop the German advance. This, Boehn argued, would rally the Allies and would be “most unfavorable” for the “morale of the Central Powers for the remainder of the war.”¹²

The German perspective of Belleau Wood, however, is significant for the American understanding of the battle. The German sources enable us to draw several conclusions. First, the outcome of the battle had more to do with German weaknesses than with American strengths. By 1918 the German armies’ combat power and will to fight was significantly degraded. Of course, German successes in the weeks prior to the arrival of the Americans suggested that the French and the British were equally—if not more—degraded than the Germans. The German sources confirm that the infusion of fresh American troops was a decisive factor in the outcome of the war, as historians have correctly acknowledged.

The difficulties the German armies faced in 1918 should not be underestimated. On 12 June an officer of the 398th Regiment, 10th Infantry Division reported up the chain of command that:

. . . the regiment is not ready to fight in the action on the main front. It is not ready to fight on even a quiet front. It needs four weeks for training—away from enemy fire.

The regiment has lost 50% of its fighting strength through death, wounds, or sickness. Of the optimal strength of 850 men for the infantry battalion about 300 men are needed.¹³

The situation was similar in the

10th Infantry Division, where they experienced a significant loss of “older, combat-experienced officers,” which led to a “noticeable increase in uncertainty among the troops.”¹⁴ The same battlefield report implored that:

. . . after 13 days of uninterrupted action of the infantry on the front lines and 19 days for the field artillery, the troops are in dire need of relief, despite the best offensive moods and raised spirits.

A second conclusion to be drawn from the German sources is that the Germans were not impressed with American tactics. The inexperience of the Marines contributed to their questionable approach of the wood on 6 June. This undoubtedly contributed to the 1,087 who died and were wounded on that grim day, the highest number of single-day casualties in Marine Corps history to that date. Subsequent reports of poor American tactics suggest that the Marines did not learn their lesson soon enough.

Finally, the German perspective of the battle also suggests that German commanders had a bigger picture in view than Belleau Wood and Château-Thierry. They were concerned about the entire Seventh Army, and even about the entire Western Front. The High Command was even able to praise their troops after the Marines captured Belleau Wood entirely on 26 June. The German Crown Prince himself congratulated LTG Albano von Jacobi, commander of the 237th Infantry Division, for the performance of his troops.¹⁵ Perhaps this was intended as a morale boost. It is worth noting that the war did not end in June 1918 but continued for another 4 months.

A final comment can be drawn from looking at the German sources on Belleau Wood. Many are skeptical that the moniker *Teufelhunden*—Devil Dogs—was in fact bestowed on the Marines by a German soldier. The inaccurate German (the correct German would be *Teufelshunde*) suggests the name was fabricated. The German sources shed no light on the veracity of the claim. However, absence of evidence does not

mean evidence of absence. The term, if it were proffered, would likely have been bestowed orally to a Marine whose German allowed only an incorrect recording of the term. It is highly unlikely that evidence of this iconic term would have been recorded in the German war diaries.

Notes

1. Klein, Fritz, et al., *Deutschland im Ersten Weltkrieg*, 3 vols., WHO PUBLISHED THIS?, Berlin, 1968–69, vol. III, pp. 230–31, 314.
2. Anlagen zum Kriegstagebuch der 10. Infanterie-Division 4, Bundesarchiv-Militärabteilung, WHO PUBLISHED OR OFFICIAL RECORD – TRANSLATION? (hereafter BAMA) PH 8 I/134, p. 15.
3. Kriegstagebuch der 237. Infanterie-Division, TRANSLATION?, BAMA PH 8 I/357, p. 5.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 6.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
6. Anlagen zum Kriegstagebuch der 237. Infanterie-Division 2, TRANSLATION? WHERE PUBLISHED?, BAMA PH 8 I/359, p. 37.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 32–33.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 37.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 59–60.
12. Anlagen zum Kriegstagebuch der 28. Infanterie-Division, BAMA PH 8 I/192, p. 44–45.
13. Anlagen zum Kriegstagebuch der 10. Infanterie-Division 2, BAMA PH 8 I/132, p. 2.
14. Anlagen zum Kriegstagebuch der 10. Infanterie-Division 4, BAMA PH 8 I/134, p. 1.
15. Anlagen zum Kriegstagebuch der 237. Infanterie-Division 3, BAMA PH 8 I/360, p. 21.



Read more about the Battle of Belleau Wood at www.mca-marines.org/gazette/_____.