



The 4th Marine Brigade at Belleau Wood and Soissons: History and Battlefield Guide by J. Michael Miller.

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A detailed study of the 4th Marine Brigade's crucial days of combat on June 1-6 and July 18-19, 1918, reveals much about the American forces' contribution on the western front. Ironically, although the 2nd Division's battle at Soissons was arguably the Marines' most decisive strategic contribution to the war, it remains obscure.... At Belleau Wood, the Marines did not stop the German offensive by themselves.... But [they] demonstrated to the world the American willingness to fight, to take serious casualties, and still remain combat effective. (363)

As all members of the Corps past and present know, Belleau Wood was the battle where Marines earned the nickname *Teufelhunden*—"Devil Dogs"—a sobriquet of pride to this day.¹ Along with Iwo Jima and the Chosin Reservoir, it is a "touchstone" battle of the Marine Corps as a fighting organization.²

What makes J. Michael Miller's latest book unique is its analysis of the effect of the battles of Belleau Wood and Soissons not only on the Corps, but on the events of the Great War. What strikes one in reading his account of the 4th Brigade's assault "through the wheat" (6 June 1918) is just how unimaginative it was. The Marines attacked with bayonets fixed and rifles carried at high port in well covered and aligned formations through a thousand meters of open ground against well dug-in veteran German infantry supported by machine-guns. One defender characterized their advance as "sportsman like, as if participating at a track meet, they came on the run" (105). The results were unsurprising: the 5th and 6th Regiments sustained over a thousand casualties, making it one of the bloodiest battles in history of the Corps.

Miller begins with the opening days of the battle, starting on 31 May and ending with the 6 June attack. The battle continued until 26 June, when the wood was declared fully secured and in the hands of the 4th Brigade.

Why is the pyrrhic victory of Belleau Wood held in such esteem? "Belleau Wood was of little strategic value and limited tactical worth to both sides. The real victory at Belleau Wood was one of morale, which in June 1918 meant more than almost any battlefield victory" (362). Miller details how Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels and Commandant of the Marine Corps George Barnett fought with the War Department and Gen. John J. Pershing to form the Marine Brigade and deploy it to France. He also recounts how the "last dispatch" of *Chicago Tribune* reporter Floyd Gibbons regarding the Marines' attack on Belleau Wood had an effect disproportionate to its ac-

1. Unless uttered by a Senior Staff Non-commissioned Officer toward junior Marines in the conduct of their duties, when the effect is derogatory. See Staff Report, "'Shipmate' and 'Devil Dog': Patronizing or terms of endearment?" *Navy Times* (8 Oct. 2016). Available online.

2. See, further, Joseph Alexander and Edwin Simmons, *Through the Wheat: The U.S. Marines in World War I* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2008).

tual significance. “Deserved or undeserved, the Marines took the stage at a critical moment in history, as both Allies and enemies questioned whether the Americans could turn the war in their favor.... The word ‘Marine’ meant victory to the Allied cause” (362). Pershing and the Army were understandably rankled by the attention paid to a single Marine brigade then in France. The seeds of later inter-service bickering in the Pacific in 1941–45 were being planted.

At first, one wonders why Miller included Soissons in his monograph. After all, a detailed description of Belleau Wood and an accompanying battlefield guide were quite enough to sell the title. But I came to see that he has done a great service by capturing, in similar detail, the events and significance of the later battle.

The July 18–19 attacks by the American 1st and 2nd Divisions at Soissons were of vital strategic value in shifting the advantage to the Allies.... The assault undertaken by the French XX Corps, led by the penetration of the 2nd Division, forced the Germans to withdraw from the entire Marne salient.... From that moment ... the Allies retained the initiative on the western front, ending in German defeat on November 11, 1918. (363)

Once again, Miller covers the events and actions of 18–19 July in detail. Naturally, we encounter some of the greats of Marine Corps history, like future Commandants Maj. Thomas Holcomb and 1st Lt. Clifton B. Cates in the attack at Soissons; men like 2nd Lt. Lemuel C. Shepherd and (then) 1st Sgt. Daniel J. Daly feature in his account of the attack on Belleau Wood. But it is Miller’s attention to other, lesser known personalities that makes his book enjoyable to read. His diligent research beyond the battlefield introduces us to many Marines in that era, from privates to senior officers. The same is true of the German officers the Marines faced in battle.

Areas for improvement in the book include the choice and layout of maps and the connection of the battle narrative to the battlefield guide. Miller provides a narrative of the action first and then turns to various stops indicated in the battlefield guide. These were often hard to locate since they are embedded within the text. One wishes for a revised edition in which associated maps would be grouped at the end of each chapter or all together at the end of the book. Color maps would make it easier to differentiate between roads, streams, or even the green lines for Allied actions vs. red for the Germans.

J. Michael Miller has written a superb new account of two battles with great significance to both the history of the Marine Corps and the events of World War I. His book’s nearly step-by-step guide to locations of interest will be a boon to all its readers and especially to anyone (like myself) interested in actually “walking the dirt.”