THE U.S. ARMY
CAMPAIGNS OF WORLD WAR I



# INTO THE FIGHT

## APRIL–JUNE 1918

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THE U.S. ARMY CAMPAIGNS OF WORLD WAR I
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Cover: *Members of the 7th Machine Gun Battalion, 3d Division, guarding the Marne River at Château-Thierry.*
(National Archives)

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# INTO THE FIGHT
# APRIL–JUNE 1918

*by*
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Center of Military History
United States Army
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# INTRODUCTION

A century ago, the great powers of Europe became engulfed in what was then called the Great War. It signaled a new age in armed conflict in which mass armies supported by industrial mass production brought an unprecedented level of killing power to the battlefield. By the time the United States entered the war in 1917, the combatants were waging war on a scale never before seen in history. The experience defined a generation and cast a long shadow across the twentieth century. In addition to a tremendous loss of life, the war shattered Europe, bringing revolution, the collapse of long-standing empires, and economic turmoil, as well as the birth of new nation-states and the rise of totalitarian movements.

The modern U.S. Army, capable of conducting industrialized warfare on a global scale, can trace its roots to the World War. Although the war's outbreak in August 1914 shocked most Americans, they preferred to keep the conflict at arm's length. The United States declared its neutrality and invested in coastal defenses and the Navy to guard its shores. The U.S. Army, meanwhile, remained small, with a regiment as its largest standing formation. Primarily a constabulary force, it focused on policing America's new territorial possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific as it continued to adapt to Secretary of War Elihu Root's reforms in the years following the War with Spain. It was not until June 1916 that Congress authorized an expansion of the Army, dual state-federal status for the National Guard, and the creation of a reserve officer training corps.

In early 1917, relations between the United States and Germany rapidly deteriorated. The kaiser's policy of unrestricted submarine warfare threatened American lives and commerce, and German meddling in Mexican affairs convinced most Americans that Berlin posed a danger to the nation. In April 1917, the president, out of diplomatic options, asked Congress to declare war on Germany. But the U.S. Army, numbering only 133,000 men, was far from ready. The president ordered nearly 400,000 National Guardsmen into federal service, and more than twenty-four million men eventually registered for the Selective Service, America's first

conscription since the Civil War. By the end of 1918, the Army had grown to four million men and had trained 200,000 new officers to lead them. As it expanded to address wartime needs, the Army developed a new combined-arms formation—the square division. Divisions fell under corps, and corps made up field armies. The Army also created supporting elements such as the Air Service, the Tank Corps, and the Chemical Warfare Service. The war signaled the potential of the United States as not only a global economic power, but also a military one.

In June 1917, the 1st Division deployed to France, arriving in time to parade through Paris on the Fourth of July. The first National Guard division, the 26th Division from New England, deployed in September. By war's end, the American Expeditionary Forces, as the nation's forces in Europe were called, had grown to two million soldiers and more than forty divisions. During 1918, these American "doughboys" learned to fight in battles of steadily increasing scale: Cantigny, the Marne, Aisne-Marne, St. Mihiel, and Meuse-Argonne, adding thirteen campaign streamers to the Army flag. Overall, in roughly six months of combat, the American Expeditionary Forces suffered more than 255,000 casualties, including 52,997 battle deaths (as well as more than 50,000 nonbattle deaths, most due to the influenza pandemic). The war that the United States entered to "make the world safe for democracy" ended with an armistice on 11 November 1918, followed by a controversial peace. American soldiers served in the Occupation of the Rhineland until 1923, before withdrawing from Europe altogether.

The United States will never forget the American soldiers who fought and died in the World War. America's first unknown soldier was laid to rest on 11 November 1921 in the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Arlington National Cemetery, where soldiers still stand guard. The United States created permanent American military cemeteries in France, Belgium, and Britain to bury the fallen. To this day, memorials to their sacrifice can be found across America, and the date of the armistice has become a national holiday honoring all those who serve in defense of the nation. The last surviving U.S. Army veteran of the war died in 2011. It is to all the doughboys, those who returned and those who did not, that the U.S. Army Center of Military History dedicates these commemorative pamphlets.

JON T. HOFFMAN
Chief Historian

# INTO THE FIGHT APRIL–JUNE 1918

April 1918 marked the first anniversary of the United States openly aligning as an "Associated Power" with the Entente or Allied nations of France, the British Empire, Italy, and other smaller powers in their efforts to defeat the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, the Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria. Even though the United States had made extraordinary efforts to mobilize its military forces, its industry, and its entire society to join the fight, after a full year it had sent only 329,005 troops to Europe, put only one combat division into frontline trenches in a "quiet" sector, and had yet to engage in a single significant battle. But over the next few months, all that would change dramatically.

This commemorative pamphlet focuses on the activities of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in the crucial months of April, May, and June 1918. At the start of this period, the Germans hoped to use their numerical superiority on the Western Front to smash a hole through the Allied lines and force their opponents to come to terms before American forces could fully enter the war. The Germans conducted three massive offensives between April and June, but failed to achieve any strategic advantage. Although French and British veterans provided most of the resistance to these German attacks, the AEF soon would play a significant role on the Western Front by racing its fresh divisions forward, helping to stop the German advances, and finally launching attacks of its own. By the beginning of July, after brutal fighting at Cantigny, Château-Thierry, Belleau Wood, and Vaux, the bloodied American units had proved that even though they were inexperienced, they were willing to fight hard and learn fast. Those characteristics, in conjunction with the flood of American reinforcements arriving in France by the thousands each day, suggested that the tide was beginning to turn against the Central Powers. The Americans were not only in the war; they were joining the fight.

## Strategic Setting

When Germany resumed its campaign of unrestricted submarine warfare in February 1917, its leaders understood that doing so would most likely draw the United States into the war. However, the Germans believed that they could knock the British out of the war and effectively end the conflict before the Americans arrived in force, and were willing to bet everything on their ability to do so. The German U-boat campaign sank nearly six million tons of shipping that year, and led to the American declaration of war on 6 April, but the British managed to hang on. Although British tenacity was a disappointment to German leaders, the remainder of 1917 was a disaster for the Allies. In April 1917, the French Army, by far the largest Allied force on the Western Front, launched the ill-conceived Nivelle Offensive. This operation, which continued long past any realistic hope of success, resulted in wide-ranging "acts of collective indiscipline" among the French forces that at times approached the level of mutiny. General Henri Philippe Pétain, who took over command of the French Army after the failed offensive, famously visited nearly every division in his army, promising to "wait for the tanks and the Americans" before ordering any more major offensives. As the French restored order to their ranks, the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) suffered horribly in the hundred-day-long Third Battle of Ypres (better known as the Passchendaele Offensive) from July to November, losing over 300,000 men to advance the lines just eight kilometers. On the southern front, the Italians suffered a crushing defeat at Caporetto beginning in late October—more formally known as the Twelfth Battle of the Isonzo—where they were thrown back some seventy kilometers, suffering over 300,000 men killed, wounded, or captured while losing over 3,000 artillery pieces. Finally, in the east, the Bolshevik Revolution in November 1917 and the subsequent Brest-Litovsk Treaty of March 1918 led to the departure of the Russians from the war. This final calamity, the capitulation of the Eastern Front, meant that Germany could shift its forces from the east to wage an all-out campaign in the west. Observing the Allies' deteriorating position, Pétain confessed to French president Raymond Poincaré in the early spring of 1918: "There is only one remedy; rapid arrival of the Americans and [the] amalgamation" of them into the Allied armies. It was doubtful that the United States would accept this policy, but the Allies clearly were awaiting American reinforcements.

Unfortunately for the Allies, March and April 1918 only brought more troubles. During those months, they experienced the most dangerous events of the conflict since the Battle of the Marne in the summer of 1914. In a bid to win the war before American military forces could change the balance of power on the Western Front, General Erich Ludendorff, the de facto head of the German Army, initiated two enormous German offensives that drove back the Allies—especially the BEF—and greatly depleted their forces. Ludendorff launched his first spring offensive, *Operation Michael*, near St. Quentin in mid-March. It failed to end the war, but the Germans took over 3,000 square kilometers of territory, gaining in about two weeks more land than all Allied attacks on the Western Front had taken since the beginning of the war. In the process, the Allies lost another 250,000 men and more than a thousand guns. In response to the crisis, General Pétain sent out an emergency order:

> The enemy has hurled himself upon us in a supreme effort. He hopes to separate us from the English so as to open the way to Paris. Cost what it may he must be stopped. Hold your ground! Stand firm! Our (American) comrades are arriving. All together you will throw yourselves upon the invader. The battle is on. Soldiers of the Marne, of the Yser and of Verdun, I call upon you. The fate of France hangs in the balance.

The Allies eventually stopped the German attack, but at tremendous cost. (*See Map 1.*)

On 9 April, the German high command launched a second offensive: *Operation Georgette*. The attack hit the British near Ypres. Initially, it proved so successful that a shocked Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the BEF commander, issued his famous "Backs Against the Wall" order, demanding that "every position must be held to the last man; there must be no retirement." British troops rose to the occasion, and they even received support from the few American units working and training with British forces in the region. About 500 troops from the 30th Engineers (later 1st Gas Regiment), the 28th Pursuit Squadron, and the 16th Engineers participated in the defense in various ways. Their contributions were varied, and included assisting with long-range bombing and reconnaissance missions, moving essential materials, and building miles of railway. Again, the German offensive bogged down before reaching the Channel coast, but the Allies had lost another 112,000 men, as well as all of the ground they had gained during the costly



The Alert. *Sketch by Capt. Wallace Morgan*
(National Archives)

Passchendaele Offensive in the second half of 1917 and much that they had held since 1914. This was the strategic and operational environment that the AEF entered when its troops actively joined the fight in April, May, and June 1918.

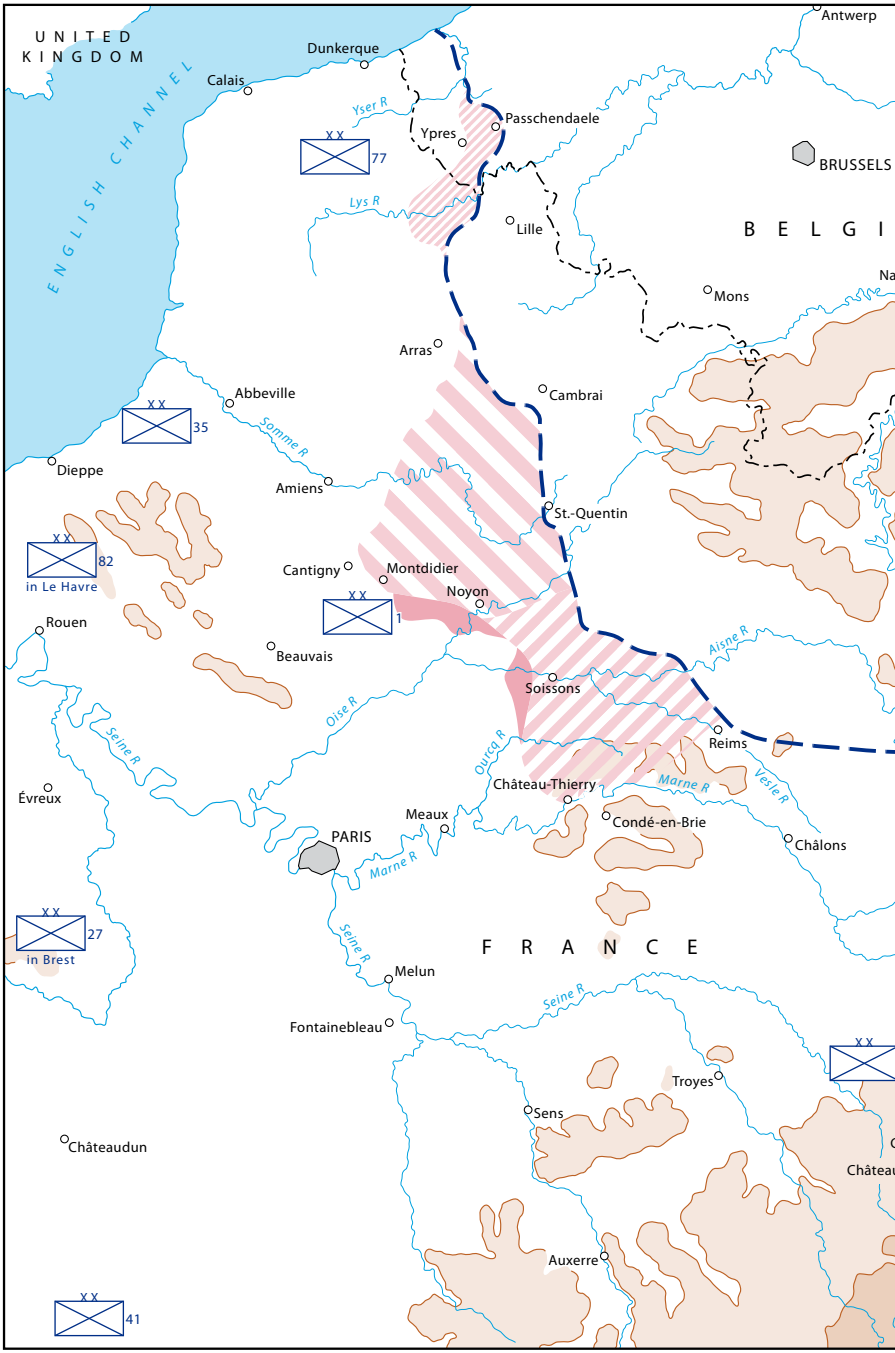
Almost the only sliver of good news for the Allies was the increasing number of fresh but totally inexperienced Americans who were arriving in Europe to fight. But even here, many Allies were disappointed with the pace of the American arrivals and the speed with which American men and units reached the Western Front. By the end of 1917—nine months after America's declaration of war—only four partially trained combat divisions, and a grand total of 183,000 American soldiers, were in Europe. These numbers grew sluggishly into the early months of 1918. In December 1917, 54,000 Americans arrived in Europe; but in January 1918 only 41,000 men reached France; and in February—the month before the first German offensive—American arrivals dropped to just 30,000 men. From the perspective of an exasperated General John J. Pershing, the commander in chief of the slowly growing AEF,

the rate of arrivals was going the wrong direction—and his Allied colleagues shared this view. On 1 April, the Germans possessed a numerical superiority of over 300,000 infantrymen on the Western Front, an advantage of roughly 26 percent over the Allied forces. Although the numbers of American arrivals would increase in March and accelerate dramatically in May and June to more than 200,000 men per month, the fact remained that in mid-April, a full year after America had entered the war, no American division had entered an active combat sector on the Western Front or demonstrated its will and ability to shoulder its part in the defeat of German forces.

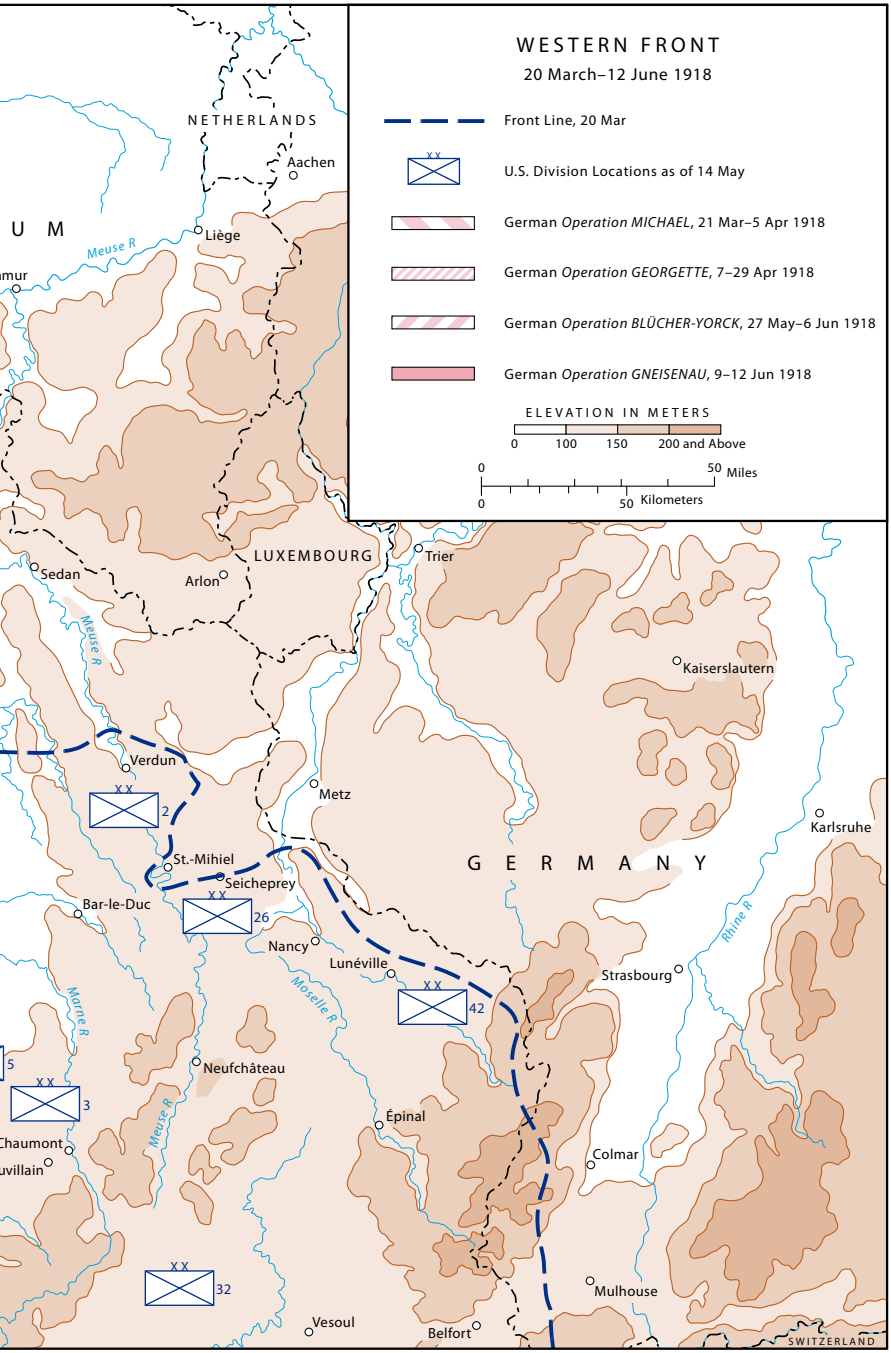
By the end of June, however, the strategic and operational situations would change dramatically. Throughout May and June 1918, multiple American divisions entered the lines, took command of their own sectors of the front, released more experienced Allied divisions to fight in active sectors, helped resist German attacks, and increasingly engaged in their own offensive operations against a much more experienced enemy force. As American soldiers entered France by the hundreds of thousands, the AEF had demonstrated that it was willing and able not only to fight, but also to defeat the German Army in intense warfare.

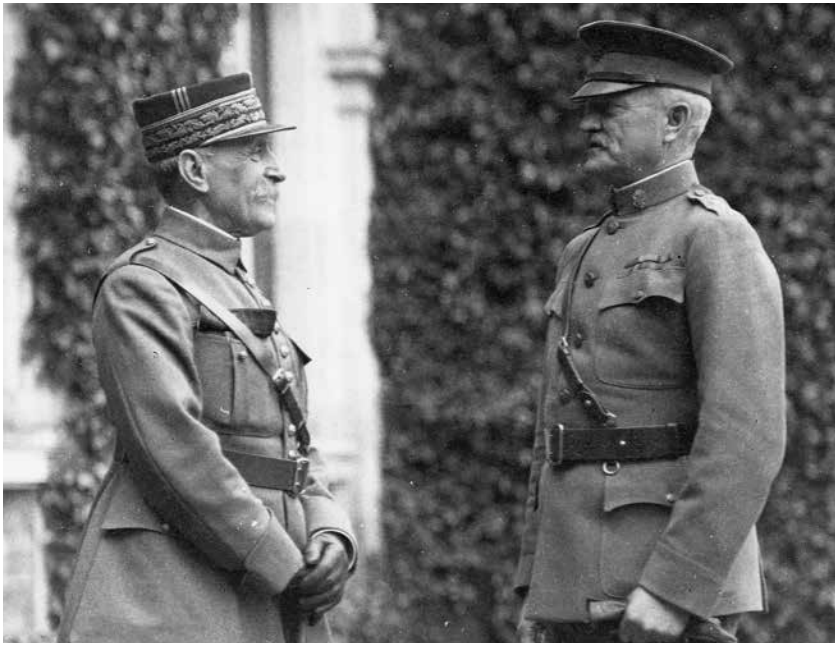
The crisis brought on by Germany's first and second offensives that spring forced many significant changes in Allied policy and AEF activity. The fear that the French and British armies might be split apart, physically and emotionally, and the need to ensure better cooperation going forward finally convinced the Allied political and military leadership to appoint General Ferdinand Foch, the current chief of the French General Staff, to serve as an Allied supreme commander. Initially, on 26 March, Allied leaders charged Foch "with the coordination of the military operations of the Allied armies on the western front." Within two weeks, he received "all powers necessary" to determine and direct "the strategic direction of military operations" throughout that critical theater.

As the French, British, and American commanders in chief, Pétain, Haig, and Pershing all retained "full control of the tactical employment of their forces" as well as "the right of appeal" to their home governments, if required. Pershing, who proudly insisted that he was an early advocate of improved unity of command, showed his full support for this change by meeting individually with Foch during the dark days of his initial appointment in late March, when the first German offensive was still raging. After securing a private audience with the new generalissimo of all


UNITED KINGDOM
ENGLISH CHANNEL
Calais
Dunkerque
Yser R
Ypres
Passchendaele
Antwerp
BRUSSELS
Lys R
Lille
B E L G I
Mons
Arras
Cambrai
Abbeville
Somme R
Dieppe
Amiens
St.-Quentin
Cantigny
Montdidier
Noyon
Rouen
Beauvais
Aisne R
Soissons
Oise R
Seine R
Reims
Ourcq R
Château-Thierry
Marne R
Vesle R
Évreux
Meaux
Condé-en-Brie
Châlons
PARIS
Marne R
F R A N C E
Melun
Seine R
Fontainebleau
Troyes
Sens
Châteaudun
Auxerre
77
35
82
in Le Havre
1
27
in Brest
41

**Мар 1**


WESTERN FRONT
20 March–12 June 1918
Front Line, 20 Mar
U.S. Division Locations as of 14 May
German Operation MICHAEL, 21 Mar–5 Apr 1918
German Operation GEORGETTE, 7–29 Apr 1918
German Operation BLÜCHER-YORCK, 27 May–6 Jun 1918
German Operation GNEISENAU, 9–12 Jun 1918
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
50 Miles
0
50 Kilometers
NETHERLANDS
Aachen
Liège
Meuse R
LUXEMBOURG
Trier
Sedan
Arlon
Meuse R
Kaiserslautern
Verdun
Metz
Karlsruhe
St.-Mihiel
Seicheprey
GERMANY
Bar-le-Duc
Nancy
Rhine R
Lunéville
Strasbourg
Marne R
Moselle R
Neufchâteau
Épinal
Meuse R
Colmar
Mulhouse
Vesoul
Belfort
SWITZERLAND



*General Foch* (left) *and General Pershing* (National Archives)

Allied armies, Pershing gave Foch the same assurance he had given to Pétain:

> At this moment there are no other questions but of fighting. Infantry, artillery, aviation, all that we have are yours; use them as you wish. More will come, in numbers equal to requirements. I have come especially to tell you that the American people will be proud to take part in the greatest battle of history.

The AEF's size, state of training, and equipment at that point in time made the offer more important in theory than in reality, at least in the short term and with respect to its effect on the first two German offensives. However, it did signal a crucial change in Pershing's initial plan to methodically build up and train a massive American force composed of its own divisions, army corps, and field armies; supported by its own logistical organization; engaged on its own broad sector of the front; and led entirely by American officers. Pershing's offer meant that some American units could be

used for combat under larger Allied field commands—a fact that showed his willingness, under at least some emergency situations, to allow for some of the amalgamation that virtually all Allied civil and military authorities had wanted since the United States joined the war.

Although the Allied political and military leadership initially celebrated Pershing's offer, within a few weeks the continued state of crisis led them to argue for even more amalgamation. Specifically, the Supreme War Council—a committee formed in the fall of 1917 to coordinate Allied military strategy—called for Pershing to deviate from his plan of bringing over entire combined arms divisions in the all-too-scarce Allied ships, and instead bring over only infantry and machine gun units in May, June, and July to replace the Allied losses suffered in the recent fighting. Sensing that this change could severely disrupt his plans of creating a large, properly balanced, independent, and all-American army, Pershing resisted these pressures at first, but soon settled on a compromise. In the Abbeville Agreement of 2 May, Pershing agreed to allow British shipping to carry over 130,000 infantrymen and machine gunners in May and 150,000 in June. He insisted, however, that any "excess" shipping capacity be used to bring the other kinds of troops required by a modern army, including artillerymen, engineers, and supply and auxiliary troops. He also refused to make any concessions at all for July. This compromise did not satisfy the Allied leaders, but it allayed some of their concerns. Unfortunately, this modified, unbalanced deployment plan would delay the development of a truly autonomous and self-sufficient AEF.

In accordance with Pershing's offer to Foch, the U.S. divisions furthest along in their training went quickly into frontline sectors. The 1st Division was the best-trained American unit and the only one to have completed the entire plan of training developed by AEF General Headquarters (GHQ). At the time of the first two Ludendorff offensives, it was holding its own sector at Seicheprey, along the St. Mihiel salient in the east. It promptly doubled the length of the frontage under its command to allow a neighboring French division to be sped toward the more active front in the Somme region. The 1st Division suffered more than 650 casualties during its two-and-a-half-month tour in that "quiet" sector before it withdrew in early April for a final field exercise in Picardy. It did not remain there long, and within two weeks the 1st Division had moved into deadly frontline positions, marked only by shell craters, foxholes, and some shallow slit trenches, immediately west

of the little French village of Cantigny. (*See Map 1.*) According to Pershing, the movement came "at General Pétain's request."

Like the 1st Division, the 2d Division was in the line along the St. Mihiel salient when the Germany spring offensives began. Unlike the 1st, however, the men of the 2d Division—which had one infantry brigade of soldiers and another of U.S. marines—were still in an intermediate phase of training, with infantry and machine gunners joining French units in the front lines and artillery batteries learning their business within French artillery regiments. French units held official command and control of the sector. But the crisis of the German attacks to the west forced the French high command to withdraw the French division training these American units and send it to the unfolding battle. On 1 April, with little warning and long before it had completed its full training program, the 2d Division took command of the sector from the French and held it until the middle of May. During its eight weeks training in and defending the frontline trenches between Verdun and St. Mihiel, the 2d Division suffered almost 900 casualties. Clearly, these "quiet" training sectors were quiet only by the relative standards of the Western Front in 1918.

The 42d Division, composed of National Guard units from so many states that it took the nickname of "Rainbow Division," was finishing a phase of trench warfare training in the front lines of the relatively quiet Vosges Front, near Lunéville, when *Operation Michael* began. It also had been under the tutelage of a French division that held command of the sector. Within two weeks of the first Ludendorff offensive, the 42d Division returned to the frontline trenches in the Vosges region, but this time it relieved the French 123d Division and assumed command of its own sector. The 42d held this sector until mid-June, suffering nearly 2,000 casualties in this four-month period.

Several other American divisions also made contributions in the late spring of 1918. The 32d Division, composed of National Guard units from Michigan and Wisconsin, had only recently arrived in France and was still conducting its initial training in a maneuver area well behind the line when the first two German offensives erupted. After an accelerated training program in April, it entered the front lines near Belfort in the Vosges region in mid-May, initially for training in trench warfare. It soon took command of a sector there and held it until mid-July, suffering 365 casualties during that period. The 3d Division, which would play a small but important role in helping to stop the third great



*Soldiers from the 369th Infantry serving with the French*
(National Archives)

German offensive in late May and early June, had some units still in the United States when the first offensive began in March and a few en route when the Germans struck along the Lys in April. By mid-May, it was working through its AEF training program in Châteauvillain, well behind the front lines, but was looking forward to its upcoming tour in another "quiet" sector of the front.

One unique American "division" in France at this time was the 93d Division, eventually composed exclusively of four segregated African American infantry regiments built from prewar National Guard units and rounded out with wartime volunteers and draftees. In fact, the 93d Division was a division only on paper. It had only four infantry regiments (the 369th, 370th, 371st, and 372d), which typically were attached to different combat divisions, but it had no organic artillery or support units. After arriving in France, the men served exclusively in labor duty well behind the lines until the Allied manpower crisis and the constant French call for American troops convinced Pershing to offer the units

to the French as combat soldiers. The French were anxious to receive them as soon as possible. The most famous of these units, the 369th Infantry (sometimes called "Harlem's Rattlers"), was training with the French VIII Corps of the French Fourth Army in the Champagne region by mid-March. By mid-April, the battalions had entered the front lines under the tutelage of the French 16th Division to complete their training with a tour in a supposedly quiet region. After just a week, the battalions took command of their own subsectors of the front, and spent the weeks until 4 July rotating in and out of the front lines, fighting off raids, taking and inflicting casualties, and winning a few Croix de Guerre along the way.

The final AEF division to make a contribution to the Allied cause during the first two Ludendorff offensives was the 26th Division. Composed of National Guard units from across New England, the "Yankee Division" had been one of the first four divisions to arrive in France in late 1917, and it was finishing a phase of training in the front lines along the Chemin des Dames under the command of a French division when *Operation Michael* broke out. In early April, it hurriedly moved to the trenches along the St. Mihiel salient to take command of its own sector of the front. After relieving the 1st Division, the infantry from the 26th Division spread out to cover a massive eighteen-kilometer frontage of muddy but established trenches east of St. Mihiel. Over the next twelve weeks, they suffered more than 2,000 casualties, many while desperately fighting off a large, intense German raid near Seicheprey.

As these movements and actions indicate, Pershing was proving as good as his word in allowing the full use of available American troops to meet any urgent operational crisis. In every instance where American units (usually incompletely trained) went into combat in April, May, and June, they did so within an Allied command, as part of Allied field armies and corps, supported by the British or French logistical system, and on frontline sectors chosen by Allied leadership.

## Operations

### *Cantigny*

When the 1st Division began marching east toward Cantigny on 17 April, in a column stretching over some thirty kilometers of road space, French planners wondered if the still-green Americans

could complete a thirty-six-kilometer movement and immediately deploy into proper combat formation to engage the Germans in battle. The day before the long hike east, General Pershing assembled the division's officers to tell them that they were "about to enter this great battle of the greatest war in history" and remind them that "in that battle" they would "represent the mightiest nation engaged":

> You have behind you your own national tradition that should make you the finest soldiers in Europe to-day. We come from a young and aggressive nation. We come from a nation that for one hundred and fifty years has stood before the world as the champion of the sacred principles of human liberty. We now return to Europe, the home of our ancestors, to help defend those same principles upon European soil. . . . Our people today are hanging upon your deeds. The future is hanging upon your action in this conflict.

He closed by stressing that he, the president, and the "people at home" believed strongly in their "success" and were confident "in your courage and in your loyalty, with a feeling of certainty in our hearts that you are going to make a record of which your country will be proud." At least one officer in the audience—the Division G–3, Lt. Col. George C. Marshall—believed that Pershing's message "made a profound impression on all those present."

Though the soldiers were anxious for battle after nearly a year of training, Pershing's personal encouragement was especially important considering the tremendous success that the Germans had been having since mid-March. As Marshall noted in his memoir,

> Few Americans will ever realize the situation of the Allies at this particular period of the war. The Fifth British Army, virtually demolished, had been replaced by French reserves and these in turn were suffering severely. . . . Those who marched to battle for the first time in the summer and fall of 1918, as did the great majority of the AEF, have never experienced the feeling of men who went forward to meet an enemy in overwhelming numbers, crushing all within his path.

By 24 April, the various elements of the division were at the front, and that night they began to relieve the Frenchmen

who had been scrapping with the Germans for control of the sector until just the day prior. On their left, to the north, was the French 45th Division, and on the right was the French 162d Division. All were now a part of the French X Corps commanded by General Charles A. Vandenberg and the French First Army led by General Marie-Eugène Debeney. Opposing them—across a sloppy, ad hoc, but very real no-man's-land—were troops of the German *Eighteenth Army* under General Oskar von Hutier, who had formed his command the previous December following his transfer from the Eastern Front.

Although the Germans and the French were both exhausted from the previous weeks of fighting, neither wanted to yield any advantage to the other. Those attitudes did not change when the Americans arrived. Though no infantry attacks occurred during the Americans' first few weeks at the front, the artillery fire was nearly continuous, often including mustard gas. The use of such persistent chemicals meant that even when artillery was not firing, the front around Cantigny remained a dangerous place. The routine effort to move food, water, ammunition, and other supplies to the front, or simply to improve a foxhole, could and often did lead to serious injury or death. More than ninety different German batteries regularly fired into the division sector, and some French officers in the area compared the standard intensity of the artillery fire there to that of the infamous Battle of Verdun. Enemy aircraft adjusted artillery fire, and occasionally bombed and strafed the American positions. During one well-placed nighttime artillery bombardment, nearly a full battalion of the 18th Infantry—some 900 men—were killed or wounded by a mix of high explosive and mustard gas shells. Early on, the division commander, Maj. Gen. Robert L. Bullard, ordered his artillery brigade commander, Brig. Gen. Charles P. Summerall, to respond in kind, and the American guns did so much firing—on average more than 10,000 rounds a day—that they wore out a 75-mm. gun each day. Even so, American casualties mounted, as did the infantrymen's frustration at the artillery's inability to suppress the German fire.

By early May, the French and American commanders were looking for a way to assume a more aggressive and offensive posture. They decided on a multidivision attack to drive the lines far enough forward to allow Allied artillery to shell the German transport hub of Montdidier, some eight kilometers southeast of Cantigny. When that plan had to be dropped because of the fear of an impending German attack elsewhere, the American and French

commanders decided to allow the 1st Division to make a short but sharp advance to seize *and hold* Cantigny. French Colonial troops had taken the village twice in the previous weeks but lost it each time to unbearable German artillery and strong counterattacks. Anxious to show that the AEF was up to the challenge of actual combat, Pershing approved Bullard's and Vandenberg's proposal for the small American-led assault.

Pershing's memoir notes three reasons for the 1st Division's attack. The first was tactical, as the existing positions allowed the Germans to hold the high ground in and around the wrecked village of Cantigny and "inflict constant losses on our troops while suffering little damage themselves." The second was moral, as the Allies' recent enormous losses in territory, equipment, and manpower had been accompanied by a corresponding loss in spirit in both the British and the French armies. Pershing believed that at that moment "the morale of the Allies required that American troops make their appearance in battle." Finally, but of particular import to the AEF commander in chief, was the possible benefit that an attack would have on the interminable argument about amalgamating American soldiers and small units (such as companies and battalions) directly into French and British divisions. Pershing hoped that a successful American attack "would demonstrate that we could best help the allies by using our troops in larger units instead of adopting their plan" of using Americans for the "building up of their forces."

The details and requirements for a plan to seize the heights of Cantigny were so different from the original corps-sized attack that the division staff had to start from scratch when developing the orders. Colonel Marshall, along with staff officers Maj. William C. Sherman and a French captain named Crochet, completed a fresh and dangerous reconnaissance in the most forward positions before drafting the infantry scheme of maneuver. They gathered intelligence on every known enemy position, strongpoint, machine gun nest, and trench mortar site. Marshall and his officers then drew up a plan in which three battalions from the 28th Infantry, commanded by Col. Hanson E. Ely, would attack and capture the village and its outlying fields, surround it with new defensive positions, and prepare to meet the expected German counterattacks. Each battalion would be reinforced with a machine gun company, Stokes mortars, and 37-mm. guns to overwhelm the defending machine gun nests and to resist enemy counterattacks with the aid of attached engineers. French

flamethrower teams would help two of the attacking American battalions to clear out enemy trenches and cellars, and the center battalion would advance with twelve French-made Renault FT tanks manned by French tankers.

Marshall then worked with Summerall to design a powerful artillery fire plan to support the assault. The plan called for a "short but very violent artillery preparation" for one hour prior to the infantry assault to neutralize the defenders while maintaining surprise. The assaulting infantrymen would be protected by a rolling barrage to and through Cantigny that eventually would halt and remain as a curtain of fire just beyond the new defensive line established to the north, east, and southeast of the village. As many as thirty aircraft and one balloon—all of French manufacture and operated by Frenchmen—would support the attack by seizing local air superiority, helping to monitor infantry progress, and assisting the artillery.

Although the participants noticed the novelty of being part of the first American attack to use airplanes, tanks, and flamethrowers, all understood that the battle's outcome most likely would hinge on the effectiveness of the artillery. Thankfully, Summerall knew what it took to provide sufficient fire support, and he secured an impressive number of guns for the attack—no doubt aided by senior commanders, both French and American, who wanted the first American-led attack of the war to be a certain success. In addition to the division's own artillery brigade (two regiments with twenty-four French 75-mm. guns each, one regiment of twenty-four 155-mm. Schneider howitzers, and twelve old trench mortars), the attack had the dedicated support of eighty-four more 75-mm. guns, twelve more 155-mm. howitzers, twenty heavy 220-mm. and 280-mm. howitzers, and twenty-eight more trench mortars ranging in size from 58-mm. to 240-mm.—all French-made and operated by French gunners. These 228 pieces would directly support the infantry advance. Summerall computed that he had one 75-mm. gun for every fifteen meters of front, and one heavy howitzer (155-mm., 220-mm., or 280-mm.) for every thirty-eight meters of front, without even taking his trench mortars into account. He knew, however, that most of the casualties in the war came from the enemy artillery that pounded the attackers as they massed in forward assault positions, worked their way across the fire-swept zone of no-man's-land, and tried to consolidate any newly taken positions. For that crucial counterbattery mission, Summerall received additional support from the longer-range French artillery



*Col. Walter S. Grant observing artillery at Cantigny*
(National Archives)

in the X Corps. Those big guns and howitzers dedicated two guns to every known enemy artillery position, hoping to neutralize them during and following the immediate period of the attack.

As countless Allied and German attacks had shown over the previous three years, however, raw numbers of tubes and weight of shell were no guarantee of success. These modern implements of war needed to be coordinated specifically for each situation to maximize their effect. Summerall's plan, therefore, described three distinct phases for the operation. The first phase involved the preparatory fire. In the final days before the attack, the long-range 220-mm. and 280-mm. artillery was to complete "the slow and methodical fire of destruction already begun on Cantigny." To prevent the Germans from suspecting that an attack was imminent, and to prevent them from ascertaining the exact target for any possible attack, the artillery brigade would minimize registration

fire and conduct similar fire missions on other distinctive targets along the front. Then, one hour before the infantry assault, all the divisional artillery would begin a violent bombardment of both the "zone of attack" as well as other positions "selected for diversions." For the final fifteen minutes of this preliminary bombardment, a number of guns were to shift from firing high explosive rounds to smoke shells in order to obscure German observation of the impending attack.

As the infantry advanced, the artillery would begin its second phase by initiating a rolling barrage to escort the soldiers across no-man's-land at the rate of 100 meters every two minutes. After a brief pause to allow the units to reorganize, the guns would resume the advance at the slower rate of 100 meters every four minutes to cover the infantry all the way through the wrecked village and to the new defensive line they were to establish. Those guns not firing the rolling barrage would specifically target other enemy positions that could fire into the zone of attack. To add to the maelstrom, three groups of machine guns were to fire a small-arms barrage into the enemy positions during the assault.

The final phase of the fire support plan would ensure support for the infantry after they seized Cantigny and as they prepared for the inevitable German counterattacks. To meet this challenge, much of the artillery that had fired the rolling barrage would shift to a "box barrage" after the assault, surrounding the infantry with a curtain of protective fire on three sides that would help break up any attempted German reprisals. Because the infantry was not scheduled to make a deep enough advance to seize or drive back the enemy field artillery, and because they were going to be holding new, undeveloped defensive positions, French corps counterbattery support had to be maintained even after the assault. In fact, the artillery plan specified that counterbattery support had to continue nonstop until "the end of the operation" and then "on the following days . . . be ready to intervene in case of violent enemy artillery reaction on the conquered position." Through this plan, Summerall arranged and coordinated a massive commitment of firepower for a relatively minor regimental-sized attack that had a goal of driving forward a maximum distance of 1,600 meters along a frontage of 2,200 meters.

As the gunners finalized their plan and amassed six days' worth of ammunition to support the attack, the 28th Infantry left its frontline positions to prepare for the assault. After being replaced by units from the 18th Infantry, the men of the 28th

Infantry moved back to a prepared training ground well behind the lines where they could rehearse the entire attack on terrain similar to that in the assault zone, complete with a mock-up of Cantigny village. For two days, the regiment and supporting personnel practiced the attack. This was the first time that most of the infantry had even seen tanks and flamethrowers, and they had to work on communicating and coordinating with the French-speaking operators of each weapon system. Senior officers, including the regimental commander Colonel Ely, critiqued the various practice sessions. On the second day of training, the entire attack contingent completed "a full dress rehearsal," and both senior observers and participants agreed that the unit was ready to make the assault on 28 May.

Unfortunately, despite the 1st Division's planning and preparation, events far from Cantigny threatened to derail key elements of the plan. On 27 May, the German *Seventh Army* initiated the third massive German offensive of the spring, *Operation Blücher-Yorck*, by attacking the French Sixth Army along the Chemin des Dames some fifty miles to the southeast. The attack hit the French between Soissons and Reims, completely rupturing the Allied lines. By the end of the day, the leading German infantry had advanced an unprecedented twenty-two kilometers—the deepest single-day advance of any attack on the Western Front. The new crisis had an immediate effect on French support for the 1st Division's attack on Cantigny, which was to kick off the next morning. To stop the new German offensive, Pétain, with Foch's concurrence, began ordering various Allied units to move into the new zone of battle. Unfortunately for the 1st Division, that included much of the French artillery that was scheduled to support its operation. Although the French high command kept the guns in place for the initial assault, they ordered the weapons and their operators to begin moving out immediately after the attack, rendering them unavailable to provide crucial protection for American gains and to resist anticipated German counterattacks.

Even as the reassignments were unfolding and the division staff began working on potential adjustments, the assault troops assembled in their jump-off positions on the day and night before the division kicked off the attack. Each infantryman had, among other gear, 220 rounds of ammunition, 2 hand grenades, 4 empty sandbags, 2 canteens of water, and emergency rations. Promptly at 0445 on 28 May, the final preparatory artillery firing began,

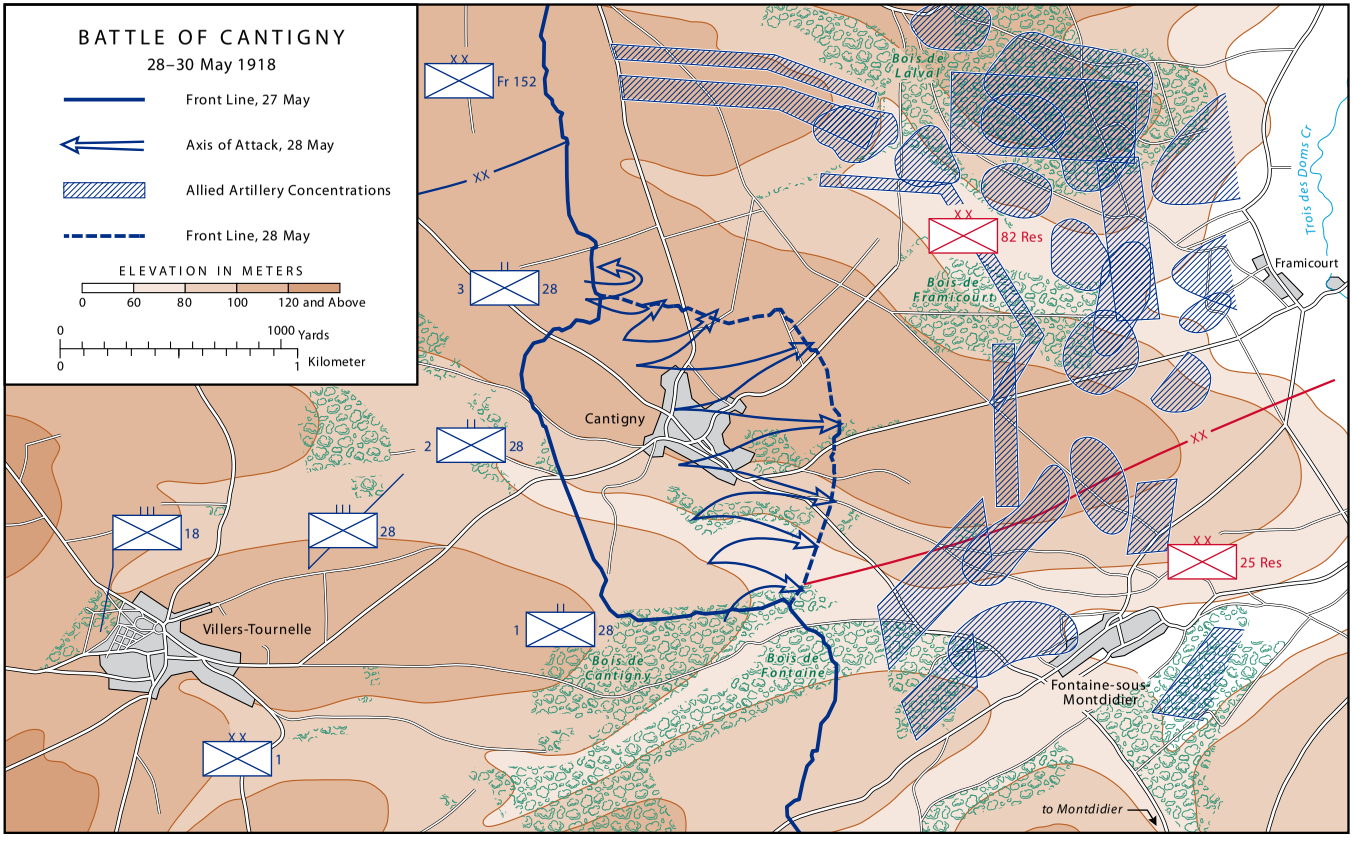


*Americans attacking at Cantigny with the support of French tanks*
(National Archives)

followed by some return fire from the German guns. About an hour later, the entire Allied artillery contingent let loose the full intensity of the prepared preliminary bombardment, smashing every enemy strongpoint, smothering known German artillery positions with a mix of high explosive and gas rounds, and practically obliterating what was left of the village of Cantigny. Infantrymen later claimed that the artillery preparation was "a sight never to be forgotten" and "very impressive." Ely reported that it was "tremendous and most effective."

Right on schedule, at 0640, the first attackers moved into no-man's-land and followed the rolling barrage toward the German positions (*Map 2*). Supported by the French tanks, the first wave of infantry reached the first German line in about ten minutes, followed by the second and third waves of attackers. The Americans caught the defending Germans by surprise and in the middle of a transfer of command from one battalion to another. Aided by the tanks, the American infantrymen successfully fought their way through the village in a little over half an hour and began to set up a new defensive line on the far side of town. The attached machine gun units selected their new firing positions, in some instances choosing spots with clearer fields of fire instead of positions less vulnerable to German artillery. Even though the tanks tore up the freshly laid telephone wires on their way back to

MAP 2


BATTLE OF CANTIGNY
28–30 May 1918
Front Line, 27 May
Axis of Attack, 28 May
Allied Artillery Concentrations
Front Line, 28 May
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
60
80
100
120 and Above
0
1000 Yards
0
1 Kilometer
XX
Fr 152
XX
3
28
2
28
18
28
1
28
XX
1
XX
82 Res
XX
25 Res
Bois de Laval
Bois de Framicourt
Framicourt
Trois des Doms Cr
Cantigny
Villers-Tournelle
Bois de Cantigny
Bois de Fontaine
Fontaine-sous-Montdidier
to Montdidier

their starting positions, the senior commanders and staffs learned via runner that the initial phase of the attack appeared to be a success. The artillery fire had killed or wounded as many as 600 defenders and dazed many of the rest. The initial assault netted 150 German prisoners. The 2d Battalion, 28th Infantry, which seized Cantigny itself, reported that it had taken its objectives and established the new defensive positions with no more than light casualties, reported to be between sixty and eighty in the battalion. Interrogations of the shaken German prisoners of war and reports from a French aviator all seemed to confirm the success.

However, word soon trickled in that the 3d Battalion, 28th Infantry, to the north of the village and the 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry, to the south had had a much tougher time in the attack and had not taken, or at least had not *held*, all of their assigned objectives. Casualties were heavier on the southern flank and the new positions seized were not nearly as strong as expected, but things were much worse north of Cantigny. There, some attacking infantry ran into such severe German machine gun fire that those not killed either retreated back to their original jump-off positions or veered off to the right, into the lanes of the 2d Battalion. To make matters worse, Ely did not know about the troublesome conditions on the two flanks until much later in the day, and therefore was unable to take corrective action.

The situation on the flanks was a concern, but the most serious problem for the 28th Infantry and its attached personnel was the premature departure of the supporting French long-range artillery. The Americans would not have the counterbattery fire they needed to prevent the German gunners from pounding them in their newly established positions. Those German guns, nearly all of which were beyond the range of Summerall's 75-mm. batteries, could blast the new American lines with impunity. Some doughboys reported that the Germans had also seized local air superiority, which enabled German aircraft to assist their artillery with fresh reconnaissance to help adjust their fire.

American casualties increased rapidly throughout the day, and included many officers—most notably Lt. Col. Robert J. Maxey, the regiment's most experienced battalion commander, who was killed by artillery fire before 0900. As the casualties mounted, soldiers began looking to their own safety. Some groups began to move out of their assigned defensive positions into less vulnerable positions to the rear, into the wrecked village, or into surrounding woods. This did not bode well for the integrity of the newly established



*Ammunition dump for used 75-mm. shell casings* (National Archives)

defensive arrangements that needed to be ready to meet the expected German counterattacks.

Thankfully, Summerall's artillerymen stayed alert and active. Even though most of their guns could not reach the enemy artillery batteries, they could target German infantry positions, including suspected assembly areas and routes of attack toward the new American positions. Summerall's gunners broke up a number of distinct but hurried counterattacks during the day by preventing the Germans from getting close to the defending infantry. In the early evening, between 1700 and 2000, the Germans attempted to launch their first major, coordinated counterattacks, supported by artillery fire. None of these attacks succeeded, but the Germans' supporting artillery barrages led to yet more American casualties. Many of the infantry companies had suffered well over 30 percent casualties before nightfall. Ely reported to his superiors that "[u]nless heavy artillery can give us support it will be necessary to withdraw for entire front line is battered to pieces with artillery."

Increasingly aware of the danger to his unit, and especially to the success of the mission, Ely sent in reinforcements and made arrangements for more to follow. He sent forward the 1st Battalion's reserve unit, Company C, to stiffen the defenses south of Cantigny and secured permission from his brigade commander, Brig. Gen. Beaumont B. Buck, to use units of the 18th Infantry if necessary. Ely soon sent Company G of the 18th Infantry to support the flagging 3d Battalion. Thinking that they were part of a critical counterattack, Company G drove forward toward the originally assigned objective. Their advance may have been aided by the continued support of the 1st Field Artillery Brigade, whose timely fire was breaking up German counterattacks on the left flank that afternoon. By nightfall, the 1st Division had shattered or beaten back counterattacks from different directions by a variety of German units. But even darkness failed to provide a respite, as German raids, probing patrols, and artillery fire kept the men awake and drained what little energy remained.

The morning of 29 May brought two more German counterattacks from the Bois de Framicourt, a quarter-mile east of the new American positions. Both failed, but Hutier ordered another counterattack against the southern edge of the new American lines for later in the afternoon. As on the previous day, Summerall's gunners broke up this attack before it reached the now worn-out American infantry, but the exhausted doughboys continued to suffer under the German artillery fire. Despite the climbing casualty figures throughout the day, Ely's superiors refused his request for his men to be relieved by the rest of the 18th Infantry, or given permission to withdraw to less vulnerable positions. The second day of battle ended without much change in the front lines of either side, but the terrain in and around Cantigny was so blasted by shellfire that it began to resemble the cratered moonscape more typically associated with the battlefields at Verdun and the Somme.

On 30 May, the third day of the battle, the fighting finally died down. With the exception of a single probe of the southern American positions, the German infantry—as worn out as the Americans were—was generally inactive throughout the day. Yet even though the Germans did not attempt more counterattacks, their artillery fire remained active, and German aircraft occasionally bombed and strafed the American positions. Beginning that night and continuing through the next, the remainder of the 18th Infantry methodically relieved the 28th Infantry. The final casualty toll for the assault and defense of Cantigny came to 38 officers and

903 men—an astoundingly high figure for a successful attack by one reinforced regiment. The German forces opposing the 1st Division suffered severely as well; the two infantry regiments of the *82d Reserve Division* lost 1,437 men, including 488 declared missing (of which 285 were prisoners of war). A third regiment, from the *25th Reserve Division*, lost an additional 324 men. In the gruesome calculus of an attritional war, the fledgling AEF had done what it needed to do. It had killed and wounded more of the enemy than it had lost.

Everyone involved acknowledged the impact of the geographically minor but bloody first American battle. Bullard claimed that Cantigny showed to friend and foe alike that "Americans will both fight and stick." Pershing promoted the precedent-setting nature of this first successful American attack, claiming that it was "a matter of pride to the whole A.E.F. that the troops of this division, in their first battle . . . displayed the fortitude and courage of veterans, held their gains, and denied to the enemy the slightest advantage." Looking for evidence to support his resistance to the Allies' continued calls for some kind of broad-based amalgamation, he also wrote that Cantigny validated his adherence to "the importance of organizing our own divisions and higher units as soon as circumstances permit." It was his "firm conviction that our troops" were "the best in Europe" and "our staffs . . . the equal of any." Even the Germans, he felt, had to acknowledge that "the moral element" of the American victory "must not be underrated." As Marshall later noted, "We held Cantigny. The Germans never afterwards reoccupied the village." This would become a theme not only of the AEF contributions in May and June 1918, but for the following months as well. The inexperienced Americans helped stop German attacks with tenacious defense; proved able to push the Germans back at various points along the line; and, with rare exceptions, held on to whatever terrain they seized.

*Château-Thierry*

For much of the Allied leadership and forces, the emergency brought on by *Operation Blücher*, the third German offensive that started on 27 May, overshadowed the 1st Division's successful attack and dogged defense at Cantigny. In the first two days of the initial assault, the Germans had driven back the French Sixth Army as much as twenty-five kilometers while attacking along a front of some seventy kilometers. The rapid German advance, the

most significant since 1914, appeared to be heading straight for Paris, roughly fifty kilometers to the west. French units retreated so quickly and in such disorder that they failed to destroy the bridges across the Aisne and Vesle rivers. The Germans captured tens of thousands of French soldiers, along with hundreds of artillery pieces, in the first few days. More than a million people left Paris, and the French government prepared to evacuate and move to Bordeaux farther west. Perhaps of even greater import, British military and political leaders discussed the possibility of having to evacuate the BEF from the continent, and began to plan for that terrible possibility. By 30 May, the Operations Section of the French high command, GQG, believed the situation to be the "gravest of the war."

Pétain himself had to consider the almost certainly catastrophic options of withdrawing completely from either northern or eastern France, and told his army-group commanders to examine the possibility of full retreat to some more defensible position in the west. He also advised the French premier, Georges Clemenceau, to move the government from Paris—but Clemenceau, based on assurances from Foch, disregarded the recommendation. Foch appears to have seen what Pétain did not—that this attack was not intended to win the war by taking Paris, but rather to convince the French to send reserves from Flanders to this new front so that the Germans could launch a massive war-winning offensive against the British. Nevertheless, this reasoning was not clear to everyone at the time, and Ludendorff had shown in his previous attacks a complete willingness to take whatever gains he could from his offensives, whatever their original objectives. This German drive had to be stopped regardless of its intended goal.

For the third time in just nine weeks, the Germans threw the Allies into a state of operational crisis management. Again, as before, the AEF's fresh but inexperienced units were an important part of the answer, and in fact the American contribution to stopping *Operation Blücher* exceeded its involvement in the first two German offensives. When the German attack broke through the French lines along the Chemin des Dames on 27 May, both the American 2d and 3d Divisions were in training areas well behind the front. The 2d Division was north of Paris, over a hundred kilometers to the west of the new offensive, while the 3d Division was over a hundred kilometers to the southeast of the attack zone. Neither unit had completed its training—the 2d was concluding an abbreviated series of field maneuvers in only a quarter of the

practice time originally scheduled in the AEF training plan, while the 3d was in the initial phase of the standard AEF overseas training program and none of its units had experience in the trenches. Nevertheless, Pershing decided that the gravity of the emergency warranted offering both divisions to the French high command. The French accepted and made plans to employ the Americans immediately, though not without an openly stated concern for their respective states of training and experience. Pétain issued explicit instructions limiting how to employ the fresh American units, especially the 3d Division, and detailing the kinds of support they would need to get the most out of them. The French also assigned ten French officers to serve as assistants to the American battalion commanders.

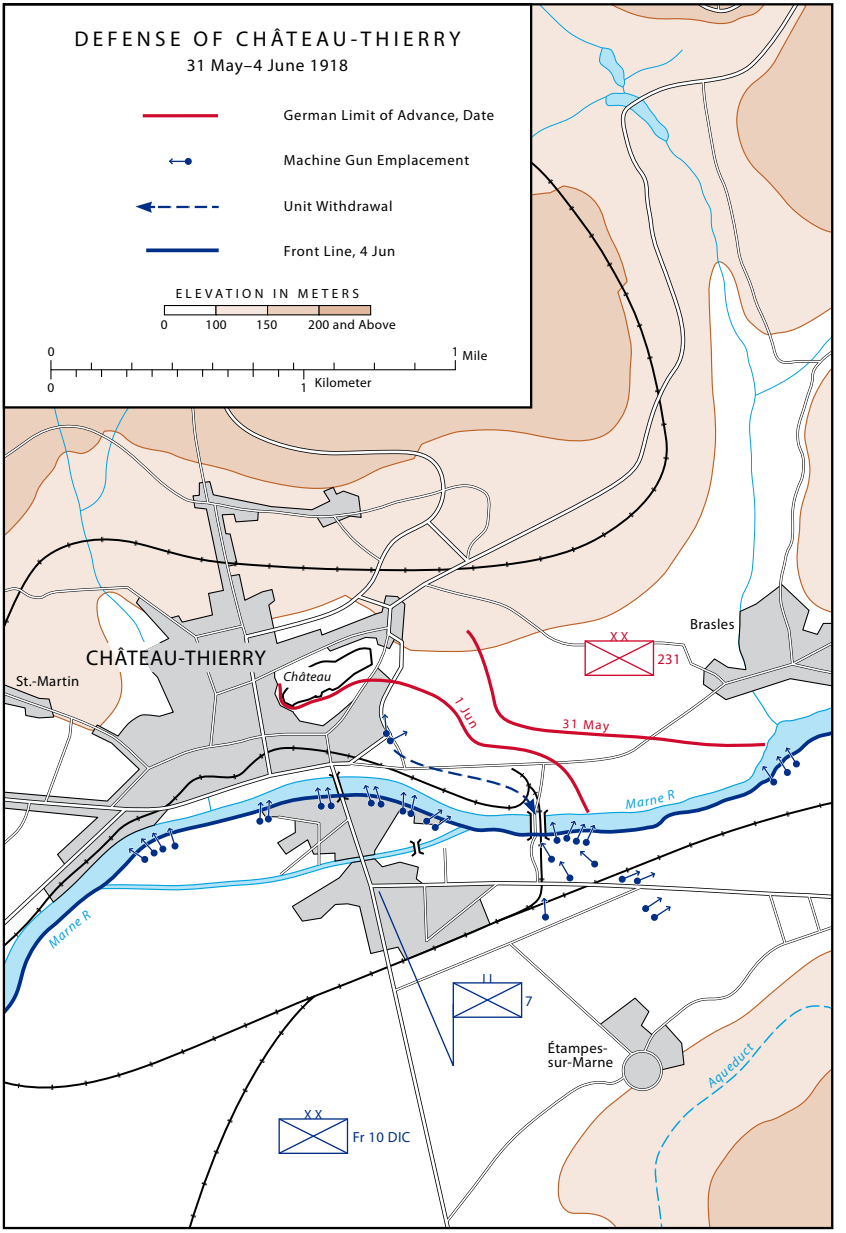
On the afternoon of 28 May, the 3d Division received its first warning order to prepare to move out for the front, to an unspecified sector. Division commander Maj. Gen. Joseph T. Dickman was away from his headquarters examining a quiet frontline sector in the St. Mihiel region in preparation for the division's expected move there as part of the next phase of training. Hurriedly recalled to the division, Dickman learned that the frontline phase of training was canceled, and that the division needed to prepare to move immediately to actively defend a still-unknown section of the front. The division's leaders may have expected to go to the Vosges region to replace a more experienced French unit that could deploy to the raging battle. This was how AEF divisions had indirectly contributed to stopping the first two German offensives. But the next day, AEF GHQ notified the 3d Division that it would support efforts to block the Germans from crossing the Marne River, and that it would join the French Group of Armies of the North, commanded by General Louis Franchet d'Espèrey. D'Espèrey soon assigned the division to the French Sixth Army, which assigned the Americans to the French XXXVIII Corps, then operating near Château-Thierry, a small city divided by the seventy-meter-wide Marne River.

The bulk of the division, especially the two infantry brigades, had to shift north by train. They began to move out on the evening of 30 May and arrived in the battle zone by 3 June. However, the 7th Machine Gun Battalion—the division's one fully motorized combat unit, composed of around 370 men, a few dozen heavy machine guns, and assorted cars, motorcycles, and trucks—was on the road in their overloaded light Ford trucks by the early afternoon of the 30th. Their orders were to reach Condé-en-Brie,

a small town about ten kilometers southeast of Château-Thierry, as soon as possible. Most of the battalion's convoy arrived at its destination midday on 31 May, having battled bad roads and traffic congestion. Gas shortages, breakdowns, and perhaps some bad driving delayed the arrival of a few vehicles. The scene at Condé-en-Brie was even more chaotic than the roads en route, and the Americans struggled to locate the appropriate French commander and ascertain what they were to do next. Eventually, the commander of the sector's French 10th Colonial Division (DIC), General Jean-Baptiste Marchand, ordered the battalion to Château-Thierry, then perceived to be the "most threatened point in the line."

After a brief reconnaissance of the area in the early evening, two companies took up defensive positions in the southern portion of Château-Thierry (*Map 3*). Two gun-crews—some fourteen men, commanded by 1st Lt. John T. B. Bissell—went across the river to join men from the 10th DIC defending the northern part of the town. They set up a firing position 300 meters northeast of the main bridge over the Marne. General Marchand ordered the American gunners to provide cover while the French withdrew, and authorized Bissell to withdraw to the south bank when necessary. The two companies positioned all other machine guns along the southern bank. Company A, with eight guns, defended the main stone bridge by taking up positions in houses along the river; Company B, with nine guns, established itself 500 meters to the east in order to cover the approaches to a railroad bridge. Its crews set up their guns in a sugar refinery and along a road following the river. The remainder of the battalion's guns took up positions stretching out to a thousand meters to the east. A French machine gun officer attached to the battalion ensured that the gun positions were secure and had clear firing angles on the bridges and their northern and eastern approaches. Both bridges had been wired for detonation in the face of the German advance, which had already reached the northern and eastern parts of the city. The first crews began firing by 1800 on 31 May. By the time all the men and guns were in position and firing, about 0400 on 1 June, most of the troops had been awake for over thirty-six hours, and the battle was only beginning.

The German artillery had been shelling the Franco-American positions throughout the night of 31 May–1 June, killing and wounding numerous soldiers. Some retreating French troops passed through these positions on 31 May and 1 June, while many


DEFENSE OF CHÂTEAU-THIERRY
31 May–4 June 1918
German Limit of Advance, Date
Machine Gun Emplacement
Unit Withdrawal
Front Line, 4 Jun
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1 Mile
0
1 Kilometer
CHÂTEAU-THIERRY
St.-Martin
Château
1 Jun
31 May
Brasles
XX
231
Marne R
Marne R
II
7
Étampes-
sur-Marne
Aqueduct
XX
Fr 10 DIC

**Map 3**

Senegalese infantry engaged in desperate house-to-house combat in the northern half of the town. The American machine gunners on both sides of the river were occasionally targets of enemy snipers, machine guns, and "severe" artillery fire throughout that first night. On 1 June, the Germans attempted to seize the entire city, and so threatened the Allied positions that the French blew up the main bridge that night around 2000, while many Allied troops—including Lieutenant Bissell and his crews—were still on the north side of the river. Bissell initially tried to swim to the south bank to inform his compatriots that he and the French needed cover in order to withdraw, but found the river impassible. Instead, Bissell and his men, some wounded and all under heavy enemy fire, had to make their way to the south bank by working across the railroad bridge. As the bridge was then under fire from both the Germans and Americans, Bissell called out and exposed himself to friendly fire to signal the gunners on the southern bank to cease fire so the withdrawing troops could cross the trestle. Although the Allies had been forced to abandon their guns, Bissell and all but one man made it safely across the river, accompanied by an indeterminate number of Senegalese soldiers. For his bravery, Bissell received the Croix de Guerre with Palm and in 1920 the Silver Star.

The situation was so confused that at least one American company commander ordered some of his men to withdraw from their positions on the south bank after receiving an erroneous report that the Germans had successfully crossed the main bridge. Once they realized the error, the men returned to cover what remained of the bridges. The Germans made one more effort to cross the Marne on 2 June, again focusing their efforts on seizing the railroad bridge before it was destroyed the night of 3–4 June. Even though they drove out all organized Allied resistance from the northern half of the town, the combined efforts of the French colonials and American machine gunners prevented the Germans from succeeding. In fact, the War Diary of the German *231st Division* explicitly credited the "heavy machine gun fire from the south bank" as the reason why it was unable to cross the main bridge when its forward patrols found it intact.

In his memoirs of the war, General Dickman provided an accurate, if American-focused, summary of the 7th Machine Gun Battalion's participation in this important firefight: "A few hundred machine gunners of the 3d Division delayed the Germans in the northern outskirts of Château-Thierry, gained time for the withdrawal of the outnumbered French troops, and prevented the



*Destroyed main bridge over the Marne River, Château-Thierry*
(National Archives)

crossing of the bridges until they could be blown up." Considering the size and scope of the battle, the American machine gunners made a small but nonetheless critical contribution to the massive French effort to stop the Germans from successfully establishing a bridgehead over the Marne. Despite the chaos of the situation, they did all that was asked of them and performed well, especially considering their incomplete level of training. Sixty-five Americans were killed or wounded in only a few days of fighting in and around Château-Thierry between 31 May and 4 June, when the battalion moved to the corps reserve.

The French were pleased with the American contribution to the Allied effort that stopped the offensive at that point of the line. General Marchand made special mention of the battalion's contributions to the corps command, and recommended that many individuals be decorated. Col. Jean de Pierrefeu, a GQG staff officer, described the importance of the timely American reinforcement around Château-Thierry by writing:

> The spectacle of this magnificent youth from across the sea, these youngsters of twenty years with smooth faces, radiating

> strength and health in their new uniforms, had an immense effect. They offered a striking contrast with our regiments in soiled uniforms, worn by the years of war, with our emaciated soldiers and their somber eyes who were nothing more than bundles of nerves held together by an heroic, sacrificial will. The general impression was that a magical transfusion of blood was taking place.

Later, Pétain honored the American machine gunners with a special citation:

> The 7th Machine Gun Battalion (American) under the command of Major [James] Taylor, barred to the enemy the passage of the MARNE. In the course of violent combat, particularly the 31st of May and the 1st of June, 1918, it disputed foot by foot with the Germans the northern outskirts of Château-Thierry, covered itself with glory, thanks to its valor and its skill, costing the enemy sanguinary losses.

During the first week of June the rest of the infantry and machine gun units from the 3d Division went into scattered positions all along the south bank of the Marne, extending from a point a few kilometers west of Château-Thierry to positions nearly twenty kilometers to the east, near Dormans. Although the Allies did not know it at the time, by early June the third great German offensive of 1918 had run out of steam along that part of the front. The 3d Division would hold its position along the Marne, keeping a watchful eye on the Germans across the river, until the final German offensive of the war erupted in the middle of July and the Second Battle of the Marne began.

*Montdidier-Noyon Defensive*

While the 3d Division was holding the line along the Marne in June, the 1st Division had to defend its gains at Cantigny during the fourth great German offensive of the year. On 9 June, the Germans launched the Montdidier-Noyon offensive known as *Operation Gneisenau*, striking immediately to the south of Cantigny. Though this offensive was not as successful as Ludendorff's first three attacks—in part because Allied intelligence sources accurately identified its location and timing in advance—it still achieved a relatively deep but narrow




*Gas alarm being sounded by an American soldier* (National Archives)

penetration nearly ten kilometers into the French lines. In fact, the neighboring French division on the right of the 1st Division was thrown back more than two kilometers on the first day, causing a serious threat to its flank. The men of the 1st Division—by this point stretched to cover approximately eight kilometers of the front—held on to all their defensive positions despite being subjected to a heavy bombardment of high explosive and gas, and numerous local infantry attacks. The 1st Division's resolute defense and timely counterattacks prevented the German offensive from getting any wider and served as a solid foundation for the French counterattacks that eventually plugged the lines. The fighting was fierce enough along the 1st Division front that it suffered more than 560 casualties in the effort to hold its lines. Although halting the offensive proved less dramatic than other engagements during those chaotic months, Marshall noted that the commander of French First Army, General Debeney, "promptly and emphatically declared that the American division was the only one carrying out [its] orders" to resist all attacks without withdrawing. By 13 June this German attack had run its course, but the 1st Division would hold its line around Cantigny until it withdrew in the middle of July.

Before the Germans struck south of Cantigny, and while the fighting was cresting and then subsiding in Château-Thierry, the third German drive continued a few kilometers to the west. The actual German goal for this phase of the attack is uncertain, but from the perspective of some members of the French high command and the French government it appeared to be heading directly toward Paris. In fact, as late as 30 May, Ludendorff reminded his army commanders that the main goal of the attack was to "threaten Paris." In the end, it was along that path, astride the road from Château-Thierry to Paris, that the U.S. 2d Division made its first contribution to Germany's eventual defeat.

On 30 May, while elements of the 3d Division were racing northwest toward Château-Thierry, the 2d Division was in a training area near Chaumont-en-Vexin, north of Paris, finalizing preparations to depart the next morning to relieve the 1st Division at Cantigny. Late that night, GHQ issued new orders for the division to move the next day by trucks to Meaux, a town about thirty kilometers east of Paris, halfway between the capital and Château-Thierry. Like the 3d Division, the 2d Division was being assigned to a French corps—the XXI Corps, commanded by General Jean-Marie Degoutte—to help stop the leading elements of the advancing German *Seventh Army*.

Despite the late change of orders, the division's infantrymen and some of its machine gun units boarded buses the next morning and headed toward the battle in a road column over twenty kilometers long. Upon arriving at Meaux on 31 May, the leading units went forward in separate columns to plug holes in the rapidly withdrawing French front lines. In doing so, they traveled along roads filled with French troops and civilians "retreating in great confusion." Some American units headed directly east toward Château-Thierry while others advanced slightly northeast along the line of the Ourcq River. The commander of the 4th Brigade (U.S. Marines), Army Brig. Gen. James G. Harbord, later described that next leg in these terms:

> Hundreds of refugees crowded the road and the adjacent fields. Every portable thing that a frightened peasantry would be likely to save from among their little treasures was to be seen along that crowded highway. . . . Meanwhile we passed many French officers and men all going from and none toward the front. Until



*French refugees fleeing the German offensive* (National Archives)

> nearly dark, when some very good-looking French cavalry came along, my small party were [*sic*] making the only movement in one direction along that congested highway. We were seeing the motley array which characterizes the rear of a routed army.

The division leadership sped ahead of the troops in its staff car, racing forward to report to General Degoutte and receive his orders. Maj. Gen. Omar Bundy, the commander, and Col. Preston W. Brown, the chief of staff, finally met Degoutte that evening and discussed the plan for the division's involvement in the westward-moving battle. Degoutte originally proposed to have the division's arriving infantry regiments counterattack the advancing Germans as soon as each new regiment reached the front. The French had been using this approach for their own reinforcing divisions throughout the current crisis, though in the words of one French officer the high casualty rates made it seem as if the arriving troops "evaporated immediately like drops of rain on white-hot iron." The Americans were aware that Degoutte's plan would lead to a series of small, unsupported attacks as each road-worn regiment arrived at the front, and that these hurried and isolated attacks,

without the support of the division's artillery and machine gun units, would be both costly and unproductive. As an alternative, the 2d Division's leadership suggested that they be allowed to form up the entire division along a new defensive line just behind the retreating French front. They explained that this approach would allow the exhausted French units to withdraw through the new American position and reorganize, and would give the Americans the time needed to rest from the forced march, prepare for battle, stop the Germans, and then counterattack in good order. Degoutte eventually accepted this recommendation, and then asked Bundy and Brown if the untested units would be able to withstand the expected German onslaught. Brown's reply has become one of the most famous statements of confidence in American arms: "General, these are American regulars. In a hundred and fifty years they have never been beaten. They will hold."

By the next day, 1 June, two American regiments—the 9th Infantry and the 6th Regiment (U.S. Marines)—were assigned to the French 164th and 43d Divisions, respectively, and had established a long but hastily organized defensive position blocking the road to Paris near the villages of Le Thiolet, Bouresches, Lucy-le-Bocage, and Champillon. Unit commanders struggled to gather solid information on the terrain and tactical situation ahead of them—the entire 6th Regiment, for instance, may have had only one good map of the new combat sector—though some reports suggested that only scattered elements of French divisions remained between their new line and the advancing Germans. The Americans met no enemy infantry on that day, but did receive hostile artillery fire.

Unfortunately, the situation to the immediate northwest of them was collapsing. That night, advancing German forces exposed a four-kilometer gap in the French line near Gandelu. Degoutte, who had no other reserves, ordered Bundy to send some of his men north immediately to plug it. Bundy quickly ordered an ad hoc combat team composed of the 23d Infantry, the 1st Battalion of the 5th Regiment (U.S. Marines), two companies of the 5th Machine Gun Battalion, and a company of the 2d Engineers to move north to help stop any possible German advance between Brumetz and the Bois de Vaurichart. These units had just arrived in the American sector and were beginning to get settled when they received orders to move. After a ten-kilometer forced march in the dead of night, they established a new defensive position by early the next day, effectively plugging the gap.

By 2 June, the rest of the 2d Division's combat units were arriving in the sector, as some French elements continued moving to the rear through the new American line. Many U.S. soldiers reported that retreating French soldiers exclaimed that the war was lost—"*le guerre est fini*"—as they trudged past, although other reports suggested that the sight of the fresh American reinforcements immediately revived the spirits of retreating French soldiers. Both reports likely have some basis in fact. At many spots in, around, and even in front of the new American positions, other French units held their ground. Stiffened by the AEF reinforcements on their flanks and rear, the French prepared to fight with greater determination on the following day.

Some American companies saw their first enemy infantry on 2 June, as the German offensive continued on a front from Vaux in the east to Gandelu to the northwest. Marines from the 6th Regiment, east of Lucy-le-Bocage on the right flank of the 4th Brigade position, joined French infantry in engaging the attacking Germans with long-range machine gun and rifle fire. The Americans experienced for the first time—but not the last—the devastation that those weapons, along with some accurate French artillery fire, could inflict on infantry that advanced in waves through open country without sufficient artillery support. One corporal noted that "at three hundred yards it was like being on the rifle range." But even a thoroughly successful defensive stand had its cost; nine marines were killed or wounded by sporadic enemy artillery fire that day. On the far right of the American line, the commander of the 9th Infantry, Col. Leroy S. Upton, reported two dozen casualties from enemy shellfire. Yet the motley collection of experienced but tired French veterans and green but determined young Americans had slowed the German advance. It was the first time the opposing German corps had been stopped since the start of the offensive on 27 May.

Early on 3 June, Degoutte ordered the French 43d Division to counterattack east in an attempt to retake a small wood known as the Bois de Belleau—in English, Belleau Wood—which French troops had evacuated the night before out of fear that they would be outflanked by the previous day's successful German advances. The counterattack failed, offering a warning of the strength with which the Germans were already holding that small, dense wood. The attack also served as a reminder that the French Army still held nearly all of the most forward positions on 3 June. By late that afternoon, the 2d Division's four infantry and marine regiments



*American field artillery receiving reports from an observation post by telephone* (National Archives)

had stretched themselves into a thin defensive position at least fifteen kilometers wide—with a few small but unsettling gaps in the line—and dispersed machine guns and artillery in firing positions to support them against the expected German onslaught.

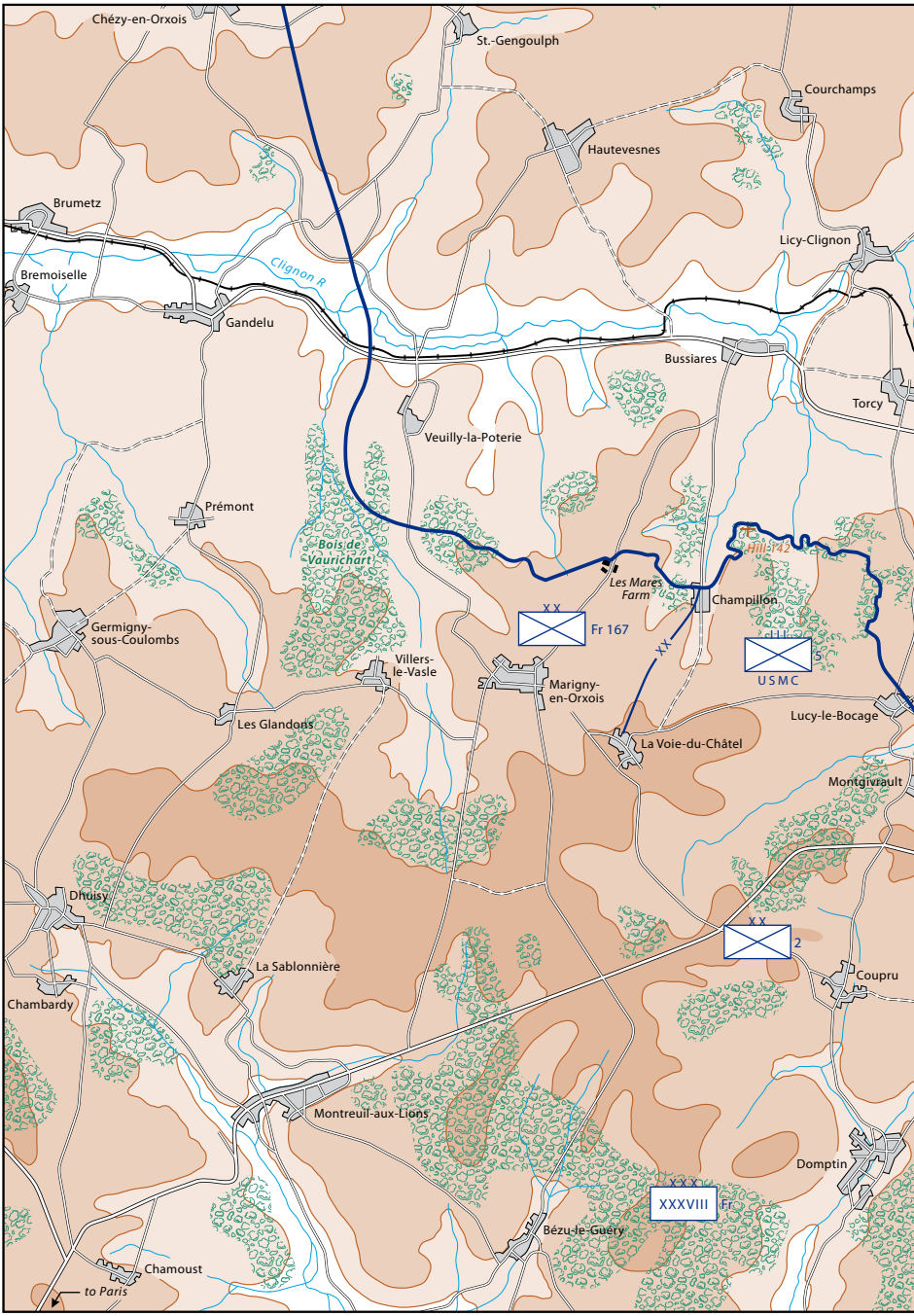
At this point, the 3d Brigade's regiments were actually holding opposite ends of the new American line, with Upton's 9th Infantry on the far right, south of Monneaux, and Col. Paul B. Malone's 23d Infantry on the far left of the line, west of Champillon. The 4th Brigade's two marine regiments held the center, with the 6th Regiment to the left of the 9th Infantry, and Col. Wendell C. Neville's 5th Regiment to the right of the 23d Infantry. This area had no trench systems, so the defensive positions aligned with the natural terrain—following little ridges and ravines, and making a maximum use of the small farms and woods in the area. The soldiers and marines dug shallow holes to provide protection from enemy fire; the new German observation balloons that went up in

this sector warned that enemy artillery fire was going to become more intense each day. Although the French logisticians arranged for the divisional artillery to travel to the front by rail, they unfortunately ordered the American rolling kitchens to travel by road, which meant that the men in the line had to go days without any warm food to strengthen their spirits. The only decent food the troops were able to enjoy had been appropriated by foraging in the nearby farms.

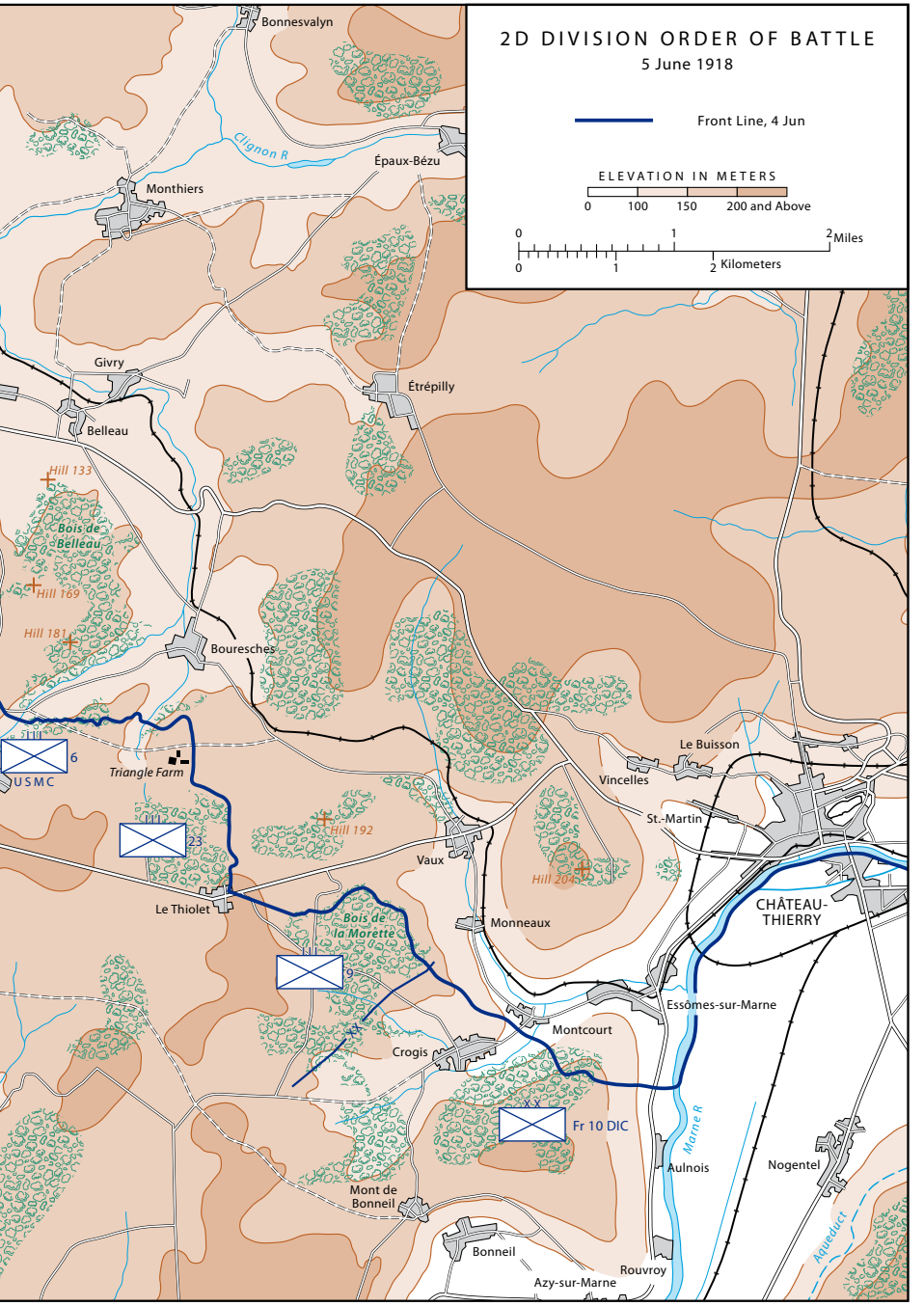
General Harbord and some other Americans reported that elements of the 4th Brigade stopped at least one serious German attack in its tracks on 2 and 3 June, inflicting heavy losses. Col. Albertus W. Catlin, commander of the 6th Regiment, described severe fighting by marines in the center of the American line, and 1st Lt. Lemuel C. Shepherd, a future Commandant of the Marine Corps serving in the 5th Regiment, was wounded in one of these firefights. The division's semiofficial history states that the situation was "critical" on 2 June and that the Germans maneuvered and made probing advances on 3 June.

Early the next day, 4 June, the 2d Division took over full command of its broad sector of the front. The last of the isolated French units in front of and beside the American frontline positions withdrew to the rear, and the 2d Division relocated a few of its units to straighten out its order of battle. The 9th Infantry retained its place on the far right of the line in the Bois de la Morette, while the 23d Infantry moved into positions from Le Thiolet to a complex known as Triangle Farm, between the 9th Infantry and the 6th Regiment. The 6th Regiment held the line from Triangle to Lucy-le-Bocage, while the 5th Regiment dug in along a semicircular line running north from Lucy and then west to Champillon, connecting the Americans with the French 167th Division on the left (*Map 4*).

On that same day, the opposing German corps commander sensed that his offensive had run out of steam in the face of increasing resistance, so he ordered his divisions to discontinue any major attacks and to temporarily shift over to the defensive. Still, on 4–5 June, some German units maneuvered, patrolled, and even made small attacks to secure better defensive terrain. For the inexperienced American defenders, these local skirmishes often felt like serious attacks. Even if the firefights posed little strategic or operational threat to the Allies at that point in the war, they were violent enough at the tactical level. In only two days, the division suffered more than 200 casualties.


Chézy-en-Orxois
St.-Gengoulph
Courchamps
Hautevesnes
Brumetz
Licy-Clignon
Bremoiselle
Clignon R.
Gandelu
Bussiares
Torcy
Veuilly-la-Poterie
Prémont
Bois de Vaurichart
Hill 242
Les Mares Farm
Champillon
XX
Fr 167
XX
III
USMC
V
Germigny-sous-Coulombs
Villers-le-Vasle
Marigny-en-Orxois
Les Glandons
Lucy-le-Bocage
La Voie-du-Châtel
Montgivrault
Dhuisy
XX
2
La Sablonnière
Coupru
Chambardy
Montreuil-aux-Lions
Domptin
XXX
XXXVIII
Fr
Bézu-le-Guéry
Chamoust
to Paris

**Map 4**


2D DIVISION ORDER OF BATTLE
5 June 1918
Front Line, 4 Jun
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1
2 Miles
0
1
2 Kilometers
Bonnesvalyn
Clignon R
Épaux-Bézu
Monthiers
Givry
Étrépilly
Belleau
Hill 133
Bois de Belleau
Hill 169
Hill 181
Bouresches
6
U S M C
Triangle Farm
23
Hill 192
Vaux
Hill 204
Le Thiolet
Bois de la Morette
Monneaux
Le Buisson
Vincelles
St.-Martin
CHÂTEAU-THIERRY
Essômes-sur-Marne
Montcourt
Crogis
XX
Fr 10 DIC
Marne R
Aulnois
Nogentel
Aqueduct
Mont de Bonneil
Bonneil
Rouvroy
Azy-sur-Marne

Thus, during the first five days of June the soldiers and marines of the 2d Division completed an exhausting, chaotic, unexpected, and last-minute movement into a French defensive sector that had been collapsing for nearly a week. The American forces established a new defensive line; shifted their units around as required to plug emerging gaps; and responded in kind to sporadic enemy fire from rifles, machine guns, and artillery. They repulsed some strong but localized German attacks, and strengthened the resolve and morale of the Frenchmen fighting around them. After the battle, Degoutte wrote a note to General Denis Duchêsne, then commander of the French Sixth Army, in which he complimented the Americans' speed and stamina at that critical spot of the front, and admitted that "their unexpected arrival and the way in which they entered the zone of fire created a decidedly favorable impression on our troops. Their bringing into action of machine guns, here and there, at long range, made it possible to inflict heavy losses on the enemy." Although the near chaos of those trying days makes it practically impossible to reconstruct with certainty the exact encounters between the Americans and the Germans, the 2d Division suffered more than 500 casualties from 2 to 5 June. In hindsight, the 2d Division's activity in its new defensive positions near Lucy-le-Bocage and along the Paris Road complimented that of the 3d Division at Château-Thierry. The French were still doing the majority of the fighting at both locations, but both of the American divisions provided critical contributions to stopping the German offensive for good in that sector.

The arrival of the fresh American divisions, each about the size of a small French corps, provided at least as much moral encouragement as combat power. Both were extraordinarily important and, at this point in the war, inextricably related. French Army morale had dropped dramatically after the tremendous defeat it had suffered during the third German offensive of late May 1918. As Degoutte's initial conversation with the 2d Division leadership illustrates, the very *presence* of the American units was vital to the Allied war effort. In the uncertain situation on 1 June, the French XXI Corps commander felt compelled to question the American divisional leadership's confidence in their men's ability to hold in the face of the expected German attacks. Yet once he had overcome his surprise at Brown's firm declaration that the Americans "will hold," Degoutte's sentiments shifted from concern to hope, and he told the Americans that he intended to counterattack the enemy as soon as the German

offensive was stopped. Colonel Pierrefeu, the prominent French staff officer who described this timely American reinforcement on a broken front as "a wonderful transfusion of blood," extended the metaphor when he asserted that "life was coming in floods to reanimate the dying body of France." The Americans' timely arrival encouraged French soldiers of all ranks by providing the numbers and morale necessary to stop the German advance and quickly shift over to the offensive. On 5 June, Degoutte ordered the Americans and the French division on their left to press forward. The French commander may have intended these short advances to be minor attacks designed to seize better defensive terrain, but they unwittingly initiated a fierce battle that became one of the most famous of the war.

*Belleau Wood*

The orders that led to the brutal nineteen-day fight for Belleau Wood, a one-kilometer by three-kilometer kidney-shaped forest, did not foreshadow the famously bloody conflict that was to follow. In accordance with Degoutte's command, Harbord directed that at 0345 on 6 June, the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, commanded by Maj. Julius S. Turrill, was to advance about a kilometer to seize and hold the northern portions of a small elevation just north of Champillon, identified as Hill 142 on the map. Reinforcing Turrill's unit were the regiment's 8th Machine Gun Company, the 23d (B) Company* from the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, and Company D of the 2d Engineers. To shore up Turrill's left flank, Harbord eventually sent in the 51st (G) Company from Lt. Col. Frederick C. Wise's 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, which was serving as the brigade's reserve. The French 167th Division on Turrill's immediate left would make the main advance, but Turrill's marines needed to advance as well to keep their front line abreast of the attacking Frenchmen. More significantly, Degoutte also directed that "as soon as possible" after this minor Franco-American attack—even as soon as that afternoon—other 2d Division units should make a similar advance to take "the Bois de Belleau and the long crest (southeast-northwest), which immediately dominates Torcy and Belleau," two small villages about two to three kilometers north of the American lines. These orders, and the way the 2d Division

* Marine Corps companies initially used numbers for unit designations. Over the course of the war, these numbers shifted to letters to align with U.S. Army standards.

carried them out, were to make 6 June one of the most famous and most bloody days of the war for the American forces.

Through their early morning attack, the marines successfully advanced the American lines as ordered, but suffered severe consequences when Harbord failed to coordinate sufficient artillery fire for the effort. After a scant five-minute preparation by a small percentage of the divisional artillery, the marines advanced without the benefits of a rolling barrage. Their infantry tactics only made matters worse. Moving forward in a linear formation of dense waves more appropriate to some bygone era of warfare, they crossed 300 meters of open wheat fields in the face of machine gun fire that rapidly thinned their ranks. Through grit, determination, and sheer impetuosity, the surviving men disregarded their losses, dispensed with the parade ground formations, and worked their way forward in small groups that ultimately killed, captured, or drove back the Germans. Reinforcements, and the slow but eventual arrival of the French on their left flank, helped them hold the new positions in the face of German counterattacks. Yet the attack had a high cost: Turrill's unit lost thirteen officers and 325 men, or about 90 percent of the officers and 50 percent of the men who made the initial advance.

At the direction of the division commander, General Bundy, Harbord followed up the morning attack at Hill 142 with orders for an afternoon advance to seize Belleau Wood at 1700. He developed a two-phase plan in which troops from four battalions would first take the southern half of the woods and then take the northern portion, while other marines advanced through the village of Bouresches immediately to its southeast and drove all the way through to the rail station north of the village. Sadly, Harbord coordinated even less artillery support for the hurried afternoon attack than he did for the early morning assault. A portion of the division artillery was to provide merely "interdiction and harassing" fire in the attack zone and to target locations where "it is possible that there are nests of machine guns." Again, he did not arrange for a rolling barrage to cover the infantry as they advanced. The order's lack of detail about the fire support for the attack suggests conspicuous ignorance about the strength of the German defenses and of the requirements for successful assaults in modern war. Harbord later explained the insufficient firepower support by claiming that the French had told him that the wood was only lightly held, and he took them at their word. As with the morning attack, the assault troops made matters worse by

using slow-moving linear wave formations. The results would be disastrous for the marines who attacked that day.

Although the Americans' approach to the battle showed their inexperience, the German defenders prepared for a tough fight. By the time of the initial American attack, nearly 1,200 men from the *237th Division*'s *461st Infantry Regiment*, supported by around 200 machine guns and a number of trench mortars, had been organized in three distinct defensive lines in the woods. These positions made maximum use of the natural terrain features, which included many rock formations with massive boulders and some ravines. The woods were dense enough to give any attacker substantial problems with forward movement, communication and liaison between small units, and general spatial awareness. In short, it was difficult attack terrain, an easy place to get lost and disoriented. The Germans augmented these natural defensive strengths by digging their own trenches and foxholes, making a maximum use of the boulders, and protecting those positions with barbed wire.

The marines began their assault promptly at 1700. The men of Maj. Benjamin S. Berry's 3d Battalion from the 5th Regiment had been holding a generally north-south line directly north of Lucy-le-Bocage, and had to move straight east across a road and through a wheat field for nearly a kilometer before they could reach the edge of the woods. Sgt. Merwin H. Silverthorn, of the 20th (K) Company, described their tactics this way:

> We started off in . . . formation . . . which consisted of four waves with first wave and all waves holding their rifles at what is call high port, not even aiming or firing or hip firing or anything like that. . . . the first wave, consisting of riflemen and hand grenadiers that were supposed to throw hand grenades to protect the riflemen; the second wave consisting of rifle grenadiers, people who had rifle grenades and riflemen; and then the third wave duplicating the first wave, and the fourth wave duplicating the second wave—with 75 meters between the first wave and the second wave—and then actually the third and fourth waves are replacements for the first and second waves [sic]. . . . We moved towards Belleau Woods, which we could see at this high point, nobody firing a shot. Bayonets fixed, moving at a low steady cadence that we had been taught to move, because theoretically a barrage is shooting in front of you and you don't want to go too fast or you'll walk into your barrage.



*Part of Belleau Wood soon after its capture* (National Archives)

Unfortunately, no rolling barrage escorted the advancing troops that day. They were walking straight into the trained fire of experienced German riflemen and machine gunners without any covering fire whatsoever, with predictably tragic results. The enemy fire mowed down Berry's men as they marched forward in waves through the green wheat. Some marines continued to walk forward until they were hit, while others dove to the ground and attempted to work their way forward in more sensible ways. Berry himself was seriously wounded, forcing Capt. Henry L. Larsen to take temporary command of the battalion. One veteran marine in the 47th (M) Company, on the far right of the attacking formation that was being blasted from the front and the front left, remembered some men "spreading out in the wheat and taking the old formations" marines "had used so many times in the cane fields of Santo Domingo," during the 1916 American invasion of the Dominican Republic. Elements of the broken formation veered away from the enemy fire—heading to the right, in this instance—and ran or crawled to the nearest cover. Remarkably, a few did make it into the far southern part of the wood, where

they met the remaining members of Maj. Berton W. Sibley's 3d Battalion of the 6th Regiment, who had survived a much shorter walk through open fields due south of the wood.

Sibley's battalion had held an east-west line directly east of Lucy-le-Bocage. Their approach toward the woods meant that most men had to drive straight north, across an open expanse of only a few hundred meters, before hitting the southern edge of the woods. But even that shorter crossing distance was enough to enable the Germans to inflict severe damage to the companies assaulting the woods. The men who eventually reached the tree line gathered themselves into combat teams to eliminate enemy strong-points and drive out the German infantry from the southwest arm of the woods. After moving forward a few hundred meters into the wood, they ran into the enemy's main line of resistance along a rocky slope, which stopped them cold. They soon reported that it would take "direct hits from heavy artillery" to overcome the enemy positions.

The two easternmost companies of Sibley's battalion advanced to the northeast down the road that ran south of the woods from Lucy-le-Bocage toward Bouresches. They found and followed a convenient ditch to the south of the road that took them as far as some wheat fields southwest of the village, where they were stopped by enemy fire. They too suffered heavy losses to machine gun fire along their route of attack.

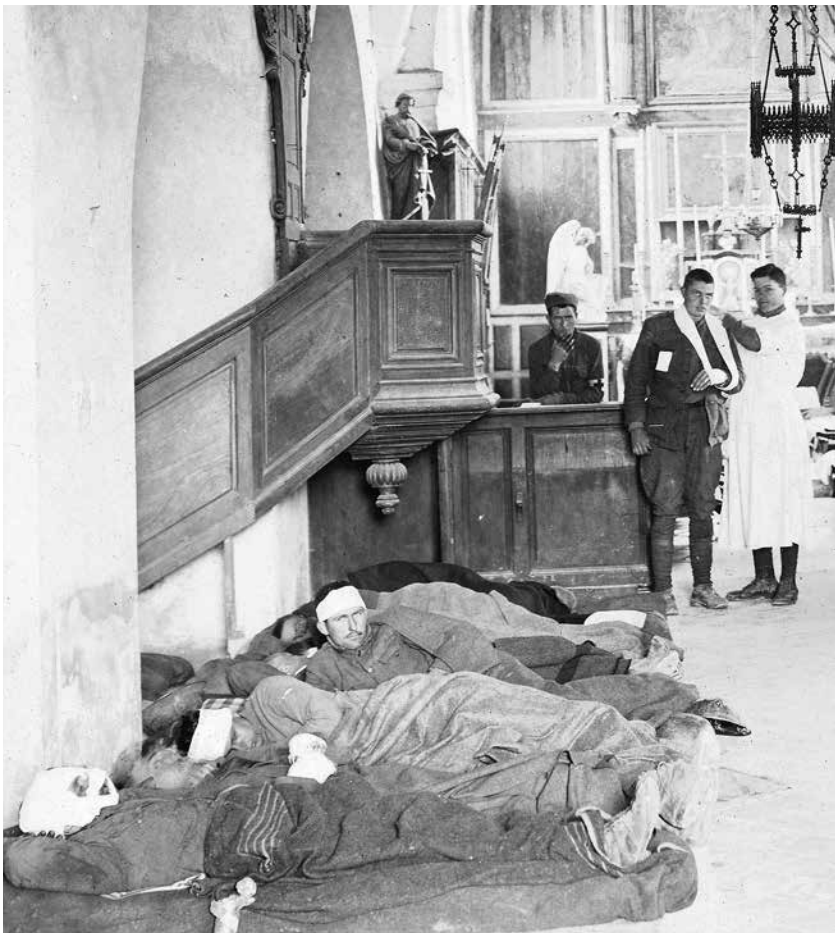
The 6th Regiment's 2d Battalion, led by Maj. Thomas W. Holcomb, was in line immediately to the east of Sibley's men, and its mission was to advance as required to stay abreast of them as they moved to attack and hold Bouresches. One of Holcomb's companies, the 96th (H), had some cover from a ravine that ran from its starting position straight toward the village, until it opened up to a wheat field south of Bouresches. After being pinned down in the wheat field for nearly an hour, 1st Lt. James F. Robertson got his men up and moving again. Although they fired as they moved and used the creek depression to its utmost, only twenty-one men were able to fight their way into the village and drive out its German defenders—who withdrew to their main line of resistance along a railroad embankment to the rear of Bouresches. Robertson then put another lieutenant in charge of preparing the village for defense against German counterattacks and ran back for reinforcements, which arrived in time to ensure that the village never again fell back into enemy hands.

As the fighting on 6 June continued, the brigade and division headquarters received a great deal of misinformation throughout

the afternoon and evening, most of it suggesting that the attack had started out well and that casualties were light. One glaringly inaccurate report claimed that the attacking marines "entered into woods to the attack . . . with absolutely no loss. . . . Things going fine." As evening fell, the truth began to emerge, and it became clear that the assault had been costly and not even close to successful. Even though the 2d Division had advanced along Hill 142, moved into the southern edge of Belleau Wood, and taken Bouresches, the marines had failed to accomplish the first phase of the plan and Harbord had to cancel the second phase entirely. The casualties for the day were horrendous—1,087 marines were killed, wounded, or captured, a figure greater than the total Marine Corps losses in all engagements from 1775 until 1918. To date, the attack on Belleau Wood remains one of the bloodiest days in U.S. Marine Corps history.

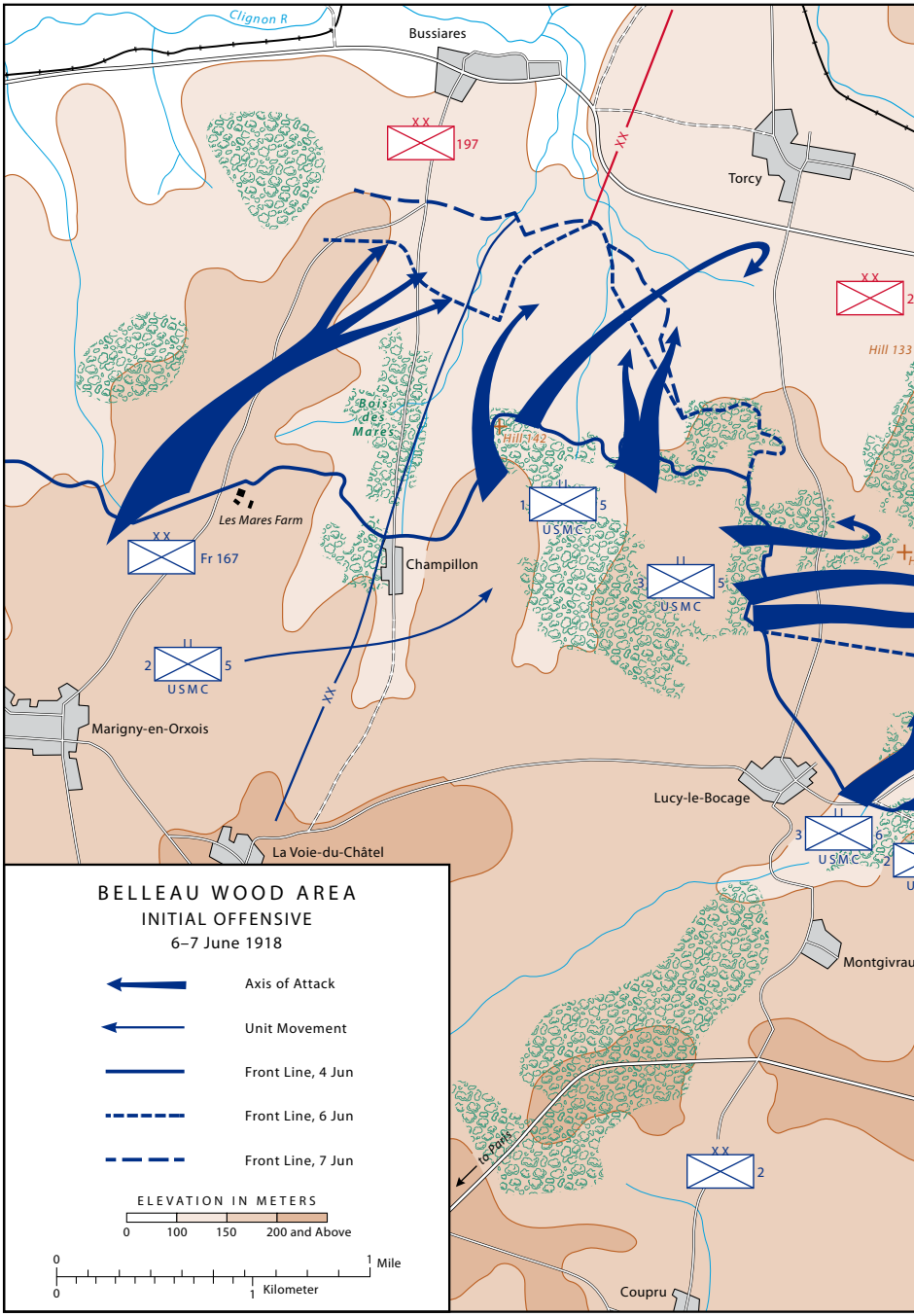
To the east of the 4th Brigade, the soldiers of the 3d Brigade also attacked on 6 June. Although that assault has been overshadowed by the marines' assault on Belleau Wood, it had an equally high cost and was even more fruitless. Two battalions from the brigade's 23d Regiment, the 1st Battalion under Maj. Edmund C. Waddill and the 3d Battalion under Maj. Charles B. Elliott, had been holding the line from Triangle Farm down toward Le Thiolet. They were ordered to advance toward the Bouresches-Vaux road "where necessary to prevent a reentrant angle in the line near Triangle Farm" as the marines advanced on their left. The orders of the regimental commander, Colonel Malone, specified that the two battalions were to advance "only slightly" to a "very limited objective" approximately a half a kilometer to the front, and only *after* the marines to their left had secured their objectives around Bouresches. (*See Map 5.*)

Even with these supposedly clear orders from the brigade and regimental commanders, the battalion commanders attacked at a time, in a manner, and to an extent not consistent with expectations. The 3d Battalion initiated its attack at 1715, before the marines to the left had advanced or even moved far enough to create the feared "reentrant angle" in the line that would require the 23d Infantry to advance. When the 1st Battalion realized that the 3d had advanced, it went forward to protect the 3d Battalion's flank. By the time the brigade commander, Brig. Gen. Edward M. Lewis, learned what was happening and ordered the advances to cease, both units were fully engaged with the enemy. In the face of severe machine gun fire that caused heavy losses to the attackers, some

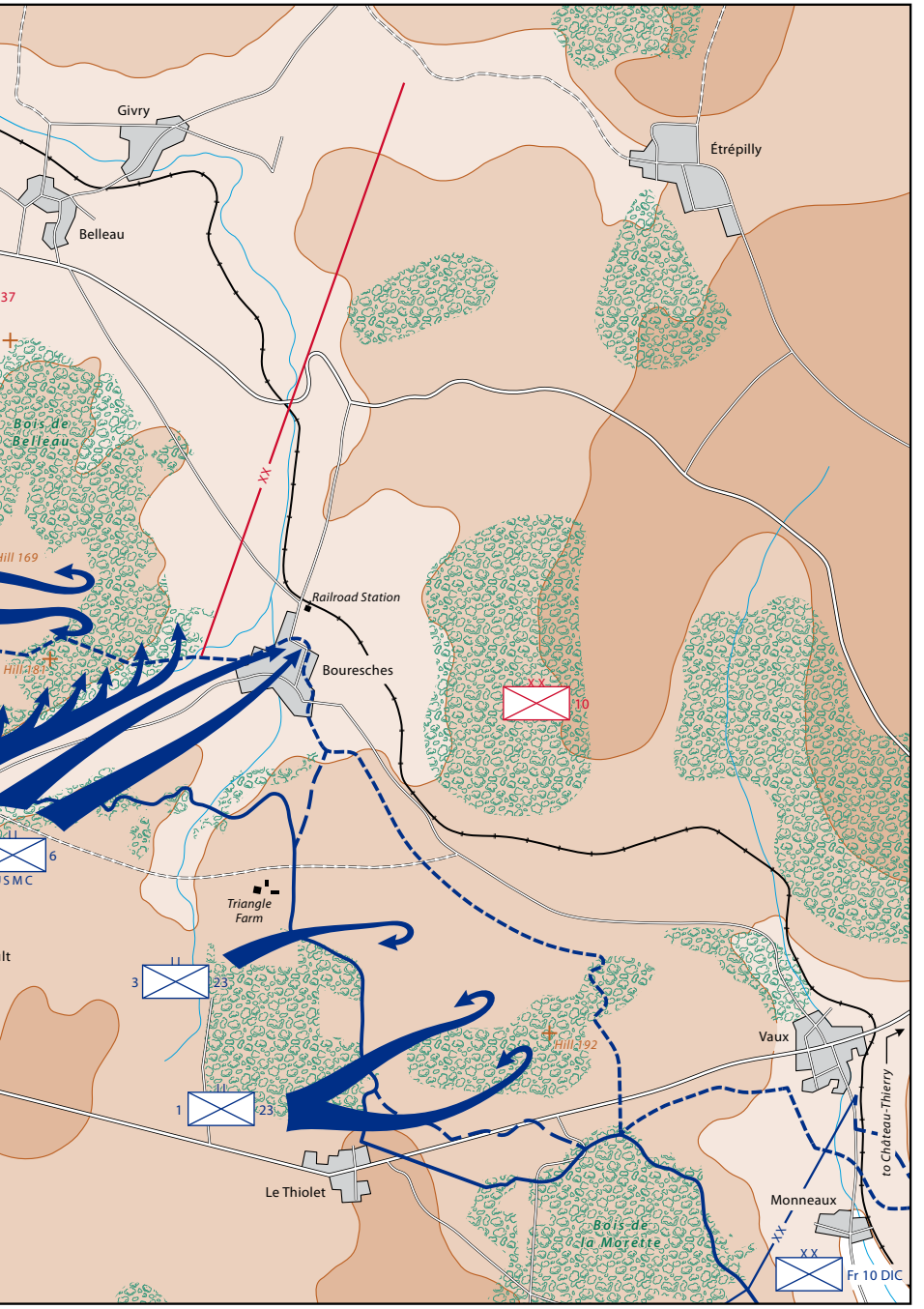


*Church used as a hospital for wounded Americans* (National Archives)

aggressive survivors ended up driving the Germans off of Hill 192, a slight elevation that was beyond the new line specified in the attack orders. That unexpected and unwanted "success," however, placed the surviving soldiers in an exposed advanced position with no support on either flank. When Malone learned of the situation, he immediately ordered the men to move back to their original lines, but their withdrawal—to the extent that they attempted one—was confused at best. In the worst of the fighting that night, the Americans were thrown back and annihilated by counterattacking


Clignon R
Bussiares
XX
197
XX
Torcy
XX
2
Hill 133
Bois des Mares
Hill 142
1
5
USMC
Les Mares Farm
XX
Fr 167
Champillon
3
5
USMC
2
5
USMC
XX
Marigny-en-Orxois
Lucy-le-Bocage
3
6
USMC
2
La Voie-du-Châtel
Montgivrau
to Paris
XX
2
Coupru
BELLEAU WOOD AREA
INITIAL OFFENSIVE
6–7 June 1918
Axis of Attack
Unit Movement
Front Line, 4 Jun
Front Line, 6 Jun
Front Line, 7 Jun
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1
Mile
0
1
Kilometer

**Map 5**


Givry
Étrépilly
Belleau
Bois de Belleau
Railroad Station
Bouresches
Triangle Farm
Vaux
Hill 192
Le Thiolet
Bois de la Morette
Monneaux
to Château-Thierry
Fr 10 DIC
XX
10
23
6
3
1

Germans. The two companies suffered more than 300 estimated casualties. Company M was destroyed, and Company K nearly so, and yet the American lines did not advance.

For their part, the Germans yielded no important ground and never had their main line of resistance in the sector breached. The two German divisions attacked by the Americans on 6 June, the *237th* and *10th Divisions*, suffered approximately 400 and 150 casualties, respectively. In the first large-scale clash between Germans and Americans in the Belleau Wood sector on 6 June, the Germans were the indisputable victors. Even though the next few weeks would see a shift in the Allies' fortunes, the following days were equally trying for the American soldiers and marines.

On 7 and 8 June, the 2d Division sent fresh units to replace the battalions shattered in the previous day's attacks. The 5th Regiment sent Wise's 2d Battalion to relieve the survivors of Berry's 3d Battalion in Belleau Wood, and the 23d Regiment moved Maj. Deshler Whiting's 2d Battalion into the line to replace Elliott's seriously weakened 3d Battalion near Le Thiolet. They beat back some local German probing attacks, consolidated their positions, and made preparations to continue the advance in the immediate future. General Degoutte, the French corps commander, wanted the Americans to resume the attack, but he also explicitly admonished the marines to take a much more thoughtful approach. He insisted that "in view of the strength of the hostile points of support" in the target area, "this advance will be conducted methodically, by means of successive minor operations, making the utmost use of artillery and reducing the employment of infantry to the minimum necessary." The French and German leadership knew all too well that hurried, haphazard infantry assaults, made without considerable artillery support and based on uncertain intelligence and sloppy reconnaissance, led to little or no advances and long casualty lists.

Meanwhile, the Germans also reorganized their positions. They brought in the *5th Guards Division* to replace the *167th Division*, which had been severely damaged by strong French attacks to the left of the marines on 7 June. They also shortened the width of the *237th Division* sector and inserted the *28th Division* to its left. Strangely, this change drew the new division boundary line in the middle of Belleau Wood. When the marines renewed their attack, they now faced the *461st Regiment* of the *237th* in the northwestern half of the wood and the *40th Fusilier Regiment* of the *28th Division* in the southern and eastern

portions. These adjustments were still underway as the battle resumed on 8 June.

That day, Sibley's 3d Battalion of the 5th Regiment attempted to drive forward after a brief mortar barrage of the German line in the southeast sector of the wood. Although the Germans suffered more than 150 casualties and lost a few machine guns, the Americans took heavier losses and did not meaningfully affect the German defensive position. After a visit from the division's artillery brigade commander, Brig. Gen. William Chamberlaine, Harbord finally decided that he needed a new approach to secure the desired results, and ordered Sibley to withdraw his men to a clearly identifiable line at the southern end of the wood so that it could be "systematically covered by artillery fire" before they launched any more attacks.

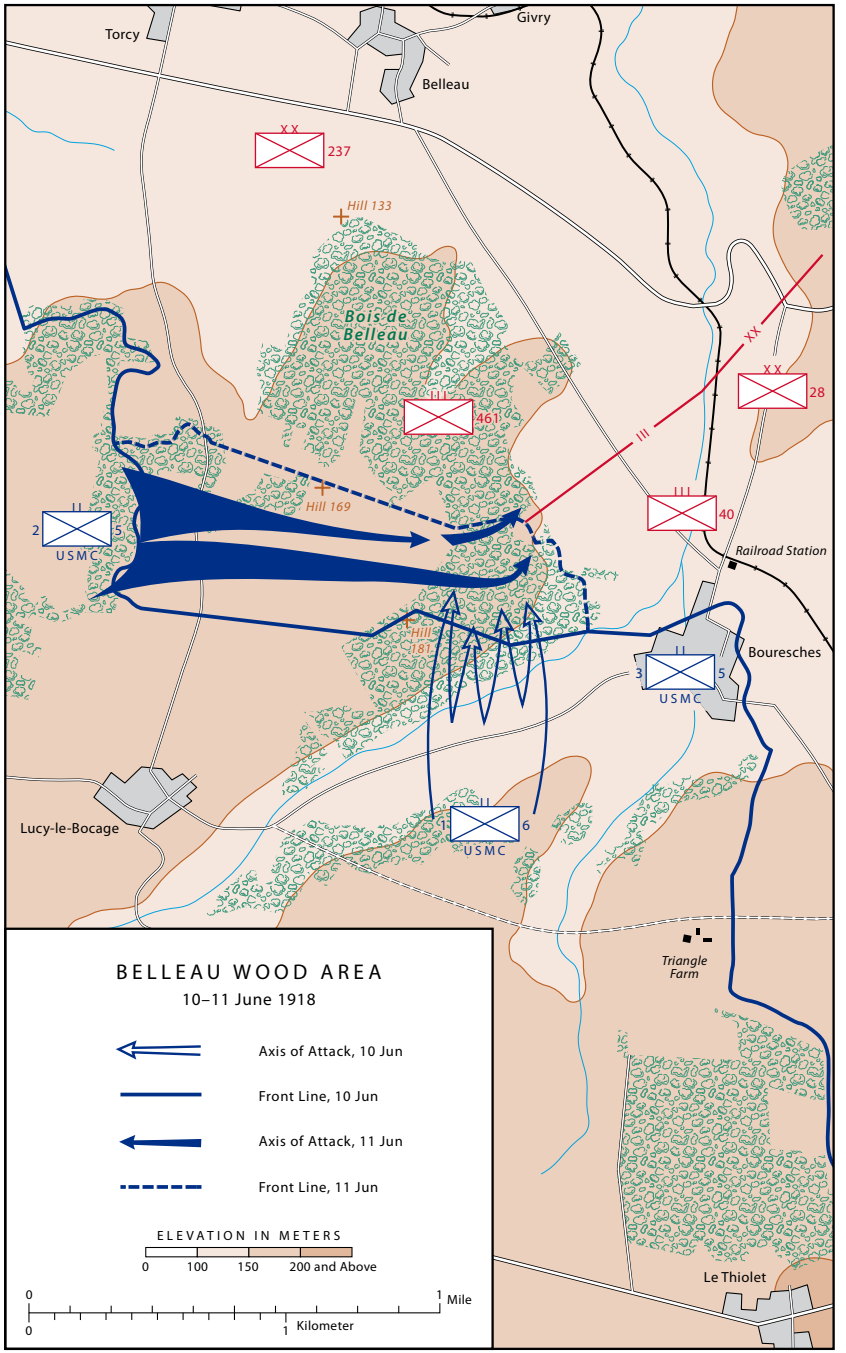
For the first time since entering the line at the beginning of June, the 2d Division was going to make a full, methodical use of its artillery in support of its infantry. Chamberlaine organized the fire of all 160 artillery pieces in the division's sector to support the advance of one battalion of marines in its effort to take the southern half of the wood. Beginning the morning of 9 June and for nearly the next twenty-four hours, all available guns were to pound the woods and the surrounding area at a rapid, sustainable rate of fire. Before the marines began their advance toward the German line, all guns would fire at their maximum rate for a full hour at suspected enemy strongpoints in and around Belleau Wood. Finally, for the first time in the battle, the 75-mm. guns would shift to a rolling barrage to escort the attackers to and through the German positions. The attack plan also directed twelve machine guns in Bouresches to fire a massed barrage along the eastern edge of the wood to isolate the German defenders from reinforcements.

At 0430 on 10 June, Maj. John H. Hughes' 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment, which had replaced Sibley's worn-out battalion, followed the rolling barrage forward in the hopes of securing the entire southern half of Belleau Wood. Hughes reported that the artillery preparation had "blown the Bois de Belleau to mince meat," and that the rolling barrage was "working beautifully." Enemy machine gun fire was generally silent, suggesting that the defenders were shaken by the new firepower-based approach. By 0510, the attacking marines reported reaching their objective—"approximately an east-west line" running "through Hill 169." Casualties were much lighter than in any of the previous attacks since 6 June, and the regimental intelligence officer reported: "Action in the

woods deemed finished." It seemed that the Americans finally had discovered a formula for success. However, unbeknownst to Hughes, his battalion had stopped nearly a kilometer short of its assigned goal. In fact, it had merely advanced to the position that Sibley's battalion had held on 8 June. Not only did the assaulting companies fail to reach their assigned objectives, as expected, but Hughes' failure to properly identify and report his new position led to additional problems for the brigade and division leadership as they attempted to manage the battle's progress (*Map 6*).

Hughes' error specifically affected Harbord's next effort to take the woods, in which Wise's 2d Battalion from the 5th Regiment would drive into the woods from the west early on 11 June. Harbord ordered Wise's marines to attack along the same route that Berry's men had covered on 6 June, but this time with much more artillery support. However, Harbord thought that Hughes' battalion was in a much more northern, and therefore closer, supporting position than it really was. Even more seriously, Chamberlaine's gunners had to limit their preparatory artillery fire to areas beyond the line where they believed Hughes' men to be.

Despite these problems, the attack of 11 June, though tougher and bloodier than it should have been, nevertheless produced significant results. A morning fog enabled Wise's men to get much farther across the bloodstained wheat field west of the wood before German machine gun fire began thinning their ranks. Even with heavy casualties, many marines successfully reached the forest edge. There, they gathered into combat teams and began working their way to the northeast, east, and southeast, hoping to link up with Hughes' men. Fortunately, a still unknown group of ingenious marines found a weakly guarded ravine running along the seam between the two German regiments holding the wood and followed it to the northeast. They eventually slammed into the left flank of the *461st Regiment* holding the northwest portion of the wood and the right flank of the *40th Regiment* holding the southeast sector. The Germans in the *40th Regiment* also had to contend with intense machine gun fire pouring into the eastern edge of the woods from Americans in Bouresches. To make matters worse for the defenders, Hughes' men were driving forward from their line in the southern section of the wood. The Germans thus were being assaulted from at least two directions and fired upon from a third. Entire German companies were surrounded and either destroyed or convinced to surrender. Some observers noted that American machine gunners were mowing down groups of


Torcy
Belleau
Givry
XX
237
Hill 133
Bois de Belleau
III
461
XX
28
III
40
Railroad Station
Hill 169
II
2
5
USMC
Hill 181
Bouresches
II
3
5
USMC
Lucy-le-Bocage
II
1
6
USMC
Triangle Farm
Le Thiolet
BELLEAU WOOD AREA
10–11 June 1918
Axis of Attack, 10 Jun
Front Line, 10 Jun
Axis of Attack, 11 Jun
Front Line, 11 Jun
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1
Mile
0
1
Kilometer

**Map 6**

Germans attempting to move in and out of the eastern edge of the wood. Beyond the numbers of killed and wounded, at least 400 Germans and 30 enemy machine guns were captured in the day's assaults. The two attacking battalions were finally able to link up, breaching the enemy's main line of resistance. The Americans suffered over 180 casualties in the effort.

Although the attack was arguably the most successful of the battle thus far, it did not achieve its stated goal, and misinformation again clouded the leadership's understanding of the situation. Wise initially reported that his men had reached the far northern edge of the wood. In reality, they had driven across the width of the wood and were holding the eastern edge. Wise compounded the error by refusing to listen to his battalion intelligence officer who attempted to set him straight. Harbord received the inaccurate information and quickly reported to Bundy that "the northern half of Bois de Belleau belongs to the 5th Marines." Bundy conveyed the thrilling news to Pershing, who issued a press release announcing the capture of the entire woods. Only later did Wise come to realize his mistake, particularly when German infantry began counterattacking into his open left flank.

To meet these attacks, Wise bent back his flank and, aided by the support of the 2d Engineers, had his marines assume a strong defensive position that enabled them to hold their new line and exact serious losses on the enemy. The new American position was not accurately identified and relayed to Harbord and Bundy until later that afternoon. As Harbord gained a better understanding of his units' true position, he also gained a deeper appreciation for the condition of his men in the wood. He reported to Bundy: "Officers and men are now at a state scarcely less than complete physical exhaustion." Staff officers at AEF GHQ began thinking through ways to find and bring in reinforcements to continue the fight.

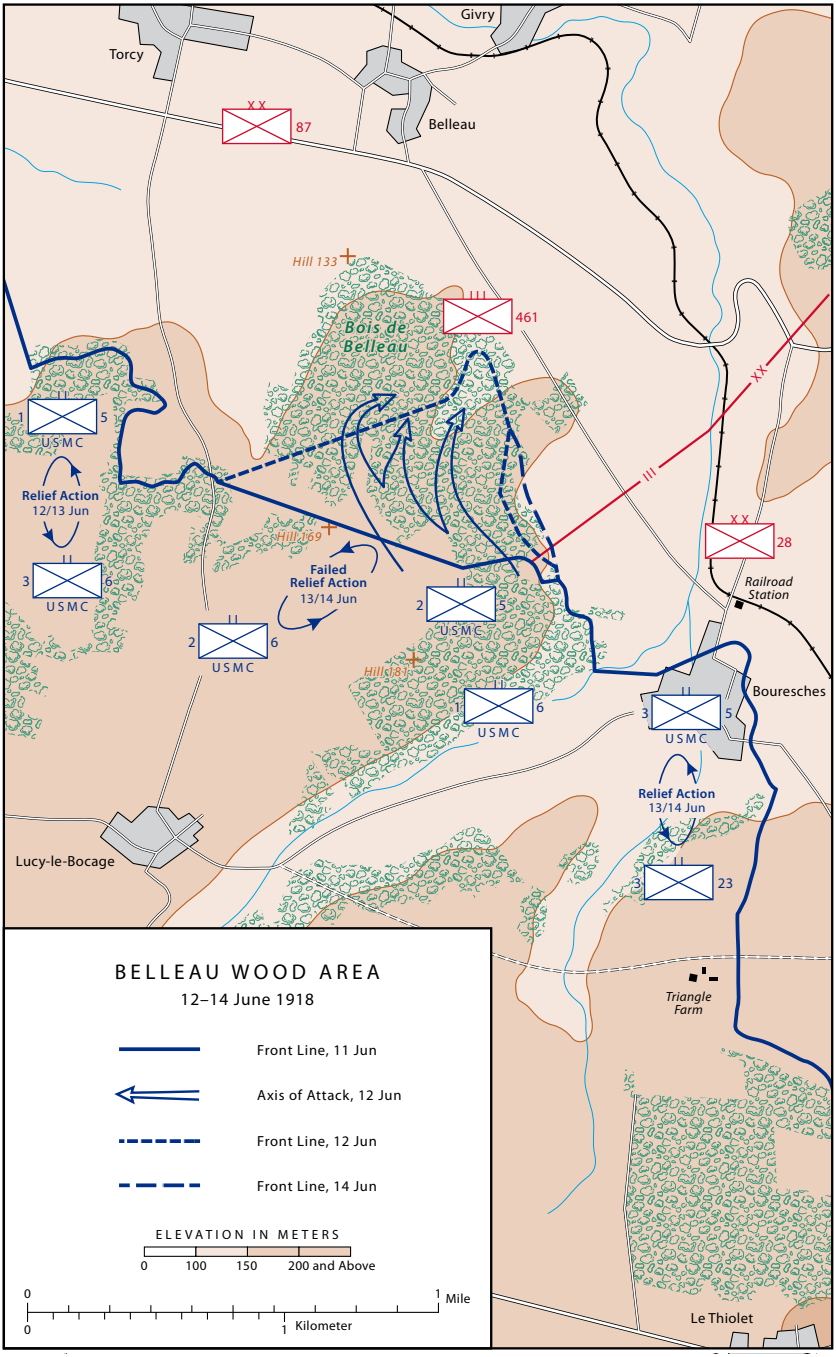
By dawn the next morning, 12 June, the battle was raging again as the Germans attempted another counterattack that the tired marines beat back. Artillery fire from both sides increased in intensity. Some troops later said it was the worst they experienced in the entire war. As the fighting settled down, Harbord held a conference with his subordinate commanders to plan his next attack for that afternoon. Wise agreed that with sufficient artillery support, his men should be able to clear out the northern half of the wood. Harbord directed an hour and a half of artillery fire from some of the 75-mm. guns in the division's 12th Field Artillery Regiment to soften the German defenses prior to an assault at



*General Harbord (right), wearing a French Adrian helmet, questions a German prisoner* (National Archives)

1700. At 1630, after the first hour of the artillery preparation, Wise reported that the light guns were not having the desired impact in the dense woods, and that the number of guns firing could not saturate the portion of the wood held by the enemy. He asked for an extra hour of fire, which Harbord granted. But this was not enough. In spite of the bombardment, the attacking marines still had to work forward with ingenious tactics and make a maximum use of their own mortars and rifle grenades to advance. Although the men fought their way forward nearly another kilometer despite heavy casualties, they remained unable to clear the northern edge and northwestern section of the wood. By now the American companies were so reduced in size that they could not adequately hold all the terrain they had taken. Although the division wrongly informed Pershing that the marines had captured the entire wood, a powerful German strongpoint still anchored one more defensive position in the northern half (*Map 7*).

Long before this point, the battle had assumed the character of a grudge match. Neither side wanted to concede failure, especially at the strategic level. When the German high command decided to resume unrestricted submarine warfare in early


Torcy
Givry
Belleau
87
Hill 133
Bois de Belleau
461
Relief Action
12/13 Jun
USMC
Hill 169
Failed
Relief Action
13/14 Jun
Hill 181
Railroad Station
28
Bouresches
Relief Action
13/14 Jun
23
Lucy-le-Bocage
Triangle Farm
Le Thiolet
BELLEAU WOOD AREA
12–14 June 1918
Front Line, 11 Jun
Axis of Attack, 12 Jun
Front Line, 12 Jun
Front Line, 14 Jun
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
Mile
Kilometer

**Map 7**

1917, the senior naval officer had promised the Kaiser that no Americans would make it safely across the Atlantic. America's prewar army was tiny and wholly unprepared for the kind of massive, industrial, expeditionary effort that would be required to engage in the fighting on the Western Front. By mid-1918, with over a million American troops in France, the naval leadership's inaccurate assertions had been replaced by assurances from German army officers that the young and inexperienced AEF was not professional or competent enough to affect the war. Yet each American success in combat, no matter how small, suggested that over time, American belligerency in general and American combat forces specifically would ensure Germany's ultimate defeat. As the commander of the *28th Division*, General Gustav Böhm, admitted during the battle:

> Should the Americans on our front gain the upper hand only temporarily, this may have the most unfavorable influence on the morale of the Entente and on the continuation of the war. In the fighting that faces us it is therefore not a matter of the possession or non-possession of a village or wood of indifferent value in itself, but the question of whether the English-American publicity will succeed in representing the American Army as one equal to the German Army or as actually superior troops.

For his part, General Bundy viewed the situation in a similar light, stating that "effects on both American and German morale and prestige . . . make imperative the occupation of the Bois de Belleau." In this charged atmosphere, tactical and operational considerations gave way to the strategic concerns of national and inter-allied morale fed by international propaganda. This line of reasoning helps to explain not only the American persistence to take the small and tactically insignificant wood at practically any cost in blood, but also the German decision to pay an even higher cost in men to retain a partial hold on that same little section of the line.

The morning of 13 June dawned with a German counterattack that hit the American lines from the eastern edge of Belleau Wood to Bouresches. The fighting was fierce but the soldiers and marines held their positions and inflicted heavy losses on the weary attackers. That night, Bundy shortened the 4th Brigade's front line and extended that of the 3d Brigade. Soldiers from Major Elliott's 3d Battalion, 23d Infantry replaced the 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment

(now under the command of Maj. Maurice E. Shearer) that had been fighting hard in Bouresches since 6 June.

Even with their shortened brigade frontage, the marines holding the line in and around Belleau Wood experienced a new level of misery early on 14 June when the Germans hit them with mustard gas. German artillery fired between 6,000 and 7,000 rounds of gas between Lucy-le-Bocage and the wood. This barrage hit many units, but had the most serious effect on Holcomb's 2d Battalion. The marines were moving forward to replace the men of Wise's 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, in the wood when a combination of high explosive and mustard gas rounds struck their position. As troops removed their masks to deal with their wounds and those of their comrades, they inhaled the gas, which seriously damaged their lungs. A regimental surgeon reported that "practically [the] entire battalion [is] physically unfit do [*sic*] to gas." The 1st Battalion, 6th Regiment, which continued to occupy the southern portion of Belleau Wood, also took heavy casualties. These included the battalion commander, Major Hughes, who had to be evacuated and temporarily relieved by Maj. Frank Garrett. All told, the division suffered approximately 800 casualties from that gas attack alone.

The persistent nature of the gas meant that unless troops in the affected areas exercised extreme care, they could be injured by the gas for many days to come. In an environment where men needed to dig holes and constantly stay in the dirt to avoid being shot or shelled, this risk of injury was a serious problem. Harbord therefore directed his men to clear out of the gas-saturated portions of the wood, and reported to Bundy that his infantry companies were horribly depleted, the remaining men were exhausted, and morale was "liable to snap" at any time. In response, Bundy visited Degoutte and asked for Col. Thomas M. Anderson Jr.'s 7th Infantry, 5th Brigade, from the 3d Division, then in corps reserve, to be assigned to the 2d Division to help hold the line in Belleau Wood. The reinforcements were desperately needed, as by 16 June the division had suffered over 4,000 casualties since the month began. If Pershing's headquarters had not been able to send it some 2,700 replacements—even ones who were not fully trained and had not yet been tested in battle—the 4th Brigade, and perhaps the entire division, would have had to withdraw from the line to rest and refit before finishing the battle.

Between 15 and 17 June, both sides relieved their thoroughly worn-out units in the northern portion of the wood. The German



*Marines of the 2d Battalion, 6th Regiment, on the move to a rest area*
(National Archives)

*87th Division* replaced the *237th Division* in line, while the *28th Division* shifted its boundary to the east, which allowed the *87th* to hold complete command and control of the German positions within the wood. By 17 June, the fresh but only partially trained and wholly inexperienced men of the 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry, led by Lt. Col. John P. Adams, relieved the exhausted marines. But even though the units changed, the nature of the battle did not, as the brutal fighting would continue for another week. The commander of the *87th Division* requested permission to withdraw completely from the woods and take up positions in the rear with better fields of fire, but the German corps commander instead demanded that the fresh troops make "assault raids" on the American positions while also continuing to pummel them with artillery fire. At this point German shelling was causing a hundred American casualties a day, irrespective of infantry patrols, raids, or attacks. Even as the American gunners sought to protect their infantry by replying in kind, the French—who controlled the ammunition supply for the 2d Field Artillery Brigade—reduced the number of shells available, believing that the Americans had fired excessive rounds of artillery

during the first two weeks of the engagement. The French also reduced the number of aircraft available for the sector, effectively yielding air superiority to the Germans for the rest of the battle. The reduced artillery and air support proved unfortunate, as the new French corps commander, General Stanislas Naulin, wanted his corps to push the Germans back all along the sector. Doing so would mean taking the rest of Belleau Wood.

In accordance with the corps orders, Harbord ordered the fresh but untried soldiers from the 7th Infantry to clear the northern tip of the wood. On both 18 and 19 June, the 1st Battalion's Companies B and C attacked the German strongpoint in the northwestern section of the wood, without any artillery support at all. The first attack failed completely and led to twenty-one casualties. The second made some initial progress, but at the cost of three times the number of men killed and wounded. On 20 June, Adams ordered a third attack by two platoons from Company D and one platoon each from Company A and Company C, again without any artillery support. It too was repulsed. That evening, Harbord, who wrongly believed that just a "little machine gun nest" was holding up an entire battalion of American soldiers, sent a stinging note to Adams, criticizing the failed efforts of his unit and challenging him to succeed in its final attempt the next morning. Adams' men were scheduled to be relieved later that same day.

In response, Adams sent Harbord two messages—one open and official, and one confidential. In the open note, Adams told Harbord that his men needed more and better weapons to complete the task: 1,000 hand grenades and 500 rifle grenades, as well as mortar and artillery support, were "absolutely necessary." In the confidential message, Adams acknowledged that "orders have been issued for an attack tomorrow morning" but "under the conditions noted I do not believe any attack without heavy artillery fire preceding can move the [machine] guns from the woods. They are emplaced and strongly held. The woods is almost a thicket and the throwing of troops into the woods is filtering away men with nothing gained" [*sic*]. He asked Harbord to consider withdrawing the two frontline infantry companies to a clear line so that "a heavy artillery fire" could safely precede the assault. He then reiterated, "I can assure you that the orders to attack will stand as given, but it cannot succeed. This is only my individual expression and has not reached the ears of anyone else . . . please consider this . . . the two Stokes [mortars] won't even worry the German Machine Guns."

Whatever Harbord thought of Adams' messages, he did not ignore them. In response, he agreed to arrange some artillery support from midnight until 0315, after which the infantry were to advance behind a rolling barrage and wipe out any Germans that were left. It is unclear how many guns Harbord dedicated to this preparation, or what their rates of fire were, but this fire support plan proved inadequate. Adams reported that the artillery fire was "light in volume and ineffective." Subsequent events confirmed his assessment. The attack began on time, but failed to achieve its goal. Not only did the infantry run into strong resistance from the German infantry, but German artillery responded to the American barrage with a much more effective counterbarrage. The soldiers of the 7th Infantry ended the attack back in their starting positions, having suffered dozens more casualties. As planned, Shearer's 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment, soon relieved them.

Despite the 7th Infantry's failed attack, Harbord sent Shearer's marines back into the woods with instructions to wipe out the remaining German positions—again without any artillery support. Although intelligence reports indicated that the Germans had placed as many as 200 men and fifteen machine guns into the wood, he told Shearer it was "not practicable to withdraw again and give further artillery preparation." He instructed Shearer to make "judicious use of sharpshooting snipers," which would allow the battalion to take the enemy positions "without much expenditure of men." He continued: "With the sniping . . . you should be endeavoring to get the machine gun nest surrounded so you can rush them when ready." Harbord wanted Shearer to clear the woods with these tactics before the end of 23 June.

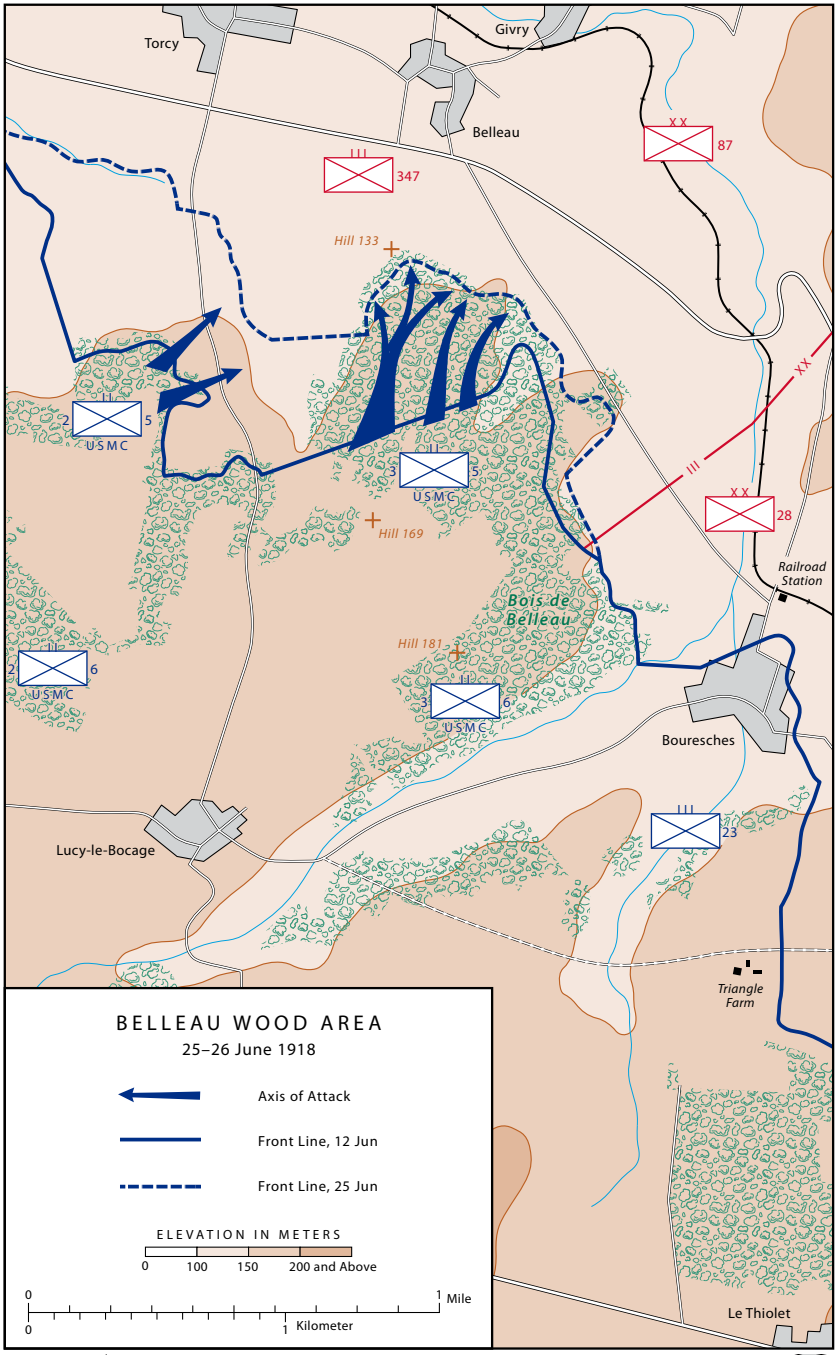
At 1900 that day, the 16th (I) and 20th (K) Companies attempted an assault on the German positions. Although they made some initial progress, overtaking the forward enemy outposts, they stalled at the main German line of resistance, which was much more strongly held than Harbord suspected. According to estimates, one portion of the German line had as many as sixteen heavy and thirty-five light machine guns. The two companies suffered nearly 130 casualties but ended up withdrawing to their starting positions to regroup. Shearer then reported: "The enemy seems to have unlimited alternate gun positions and many guns. Each gun position covered by others . . . am of the opinion that infantry alone cannot dislodge enemy [machine] guns."

Finally, on 24 June, Harbord returned to the approach that had yielded some earlier success, namely saturating the known

enemy positions with a long, heavy artillery bombardment before sending his marines forward. After a conference with all the applicable infantry and artillery commanders, Harbord agreed to withdraw Shearer's battalion to an identifiable line farther south in the wood by 0300 on 25 June and then give the artillery an effective free-fire zone in the remaining northern portion of the wood and surrounding areas until 1600 that afternoon. The rate and density of fire was to be heavy enough to prevent any enemy infantry from moving in or out of the area. From 1600 to 1700, all artillery was then to fire at its maximum rate, before shifting to a rolling barrage to escort the marines all the way to the northern edge of the wood (*Map 8*).

This combined artillery-infantry attack worked superbly. When the marines attacked at 1700 on 25 June, they reported meeting "very little machine gun fire" and successfully advanced, for the first time in the battle, to the far northern edge of the wood. It was far from a walkover, and much hard fighting ensued along the main line of resistance, but the artillery preparation had so weakened the German defenders that they could not beat back the assault of the increasingly experienced marines. Even after the advance reached the northern tip of the wood, some scattered German remnants remained in isolated pockets, but the mopping-up operations that continued into the next morning completely wiped them out. Although Shearer's unit still suffered over 120 casualties in this assault, it achieved all of its objectives, capturing over 300 Germans and nineteen heavy machine guns along the way. The attack practically destroyed an entire German battalion of the *347th Regiment*, which lost 440 men killed or captured and left only 66 to fight another day. In this great war of attrition, it was significant that the Americans had finally begun to inflict more casualties on the enemy than they were suffering themselves.

The inexperienced Americans had defeated the Germans in the brutal battle for Belleau Wood, but at an enormous cost. When the 2d Division finally left the front lines after forty days in the sector, the casualty list ran to some 8,000 names. The losses were the result of a tenacious German defense in ideal defensive terrain, and many mistakes made by various American officers. But the marines and soldiers learned and improved during the battle, and their courage and stamina remained unquestioned. Long before the end of the battle, the German corps staff produced an intelligence report complimenting the Americans' aggressiveness and stating that overall "the American 2d Division may be considered as a


Torcy
Givry
Belleau
347
87
Hill 133
2
5
USMC
3
5
USMC
Hill 169
Bois de Belleau
Railroad Station
28
Hill 181
2
6
USMC
3
6
USMC
Bouresches
Lucy-le-Bocage
23
Triangle Farm
Le Thiolet
BELLEAU WOOD AREA
25–26 June 1918
Axis of Attack
Front Line, 12 Jun
Front Line, 25 Jun
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1
Mile
0
1
Kilometer

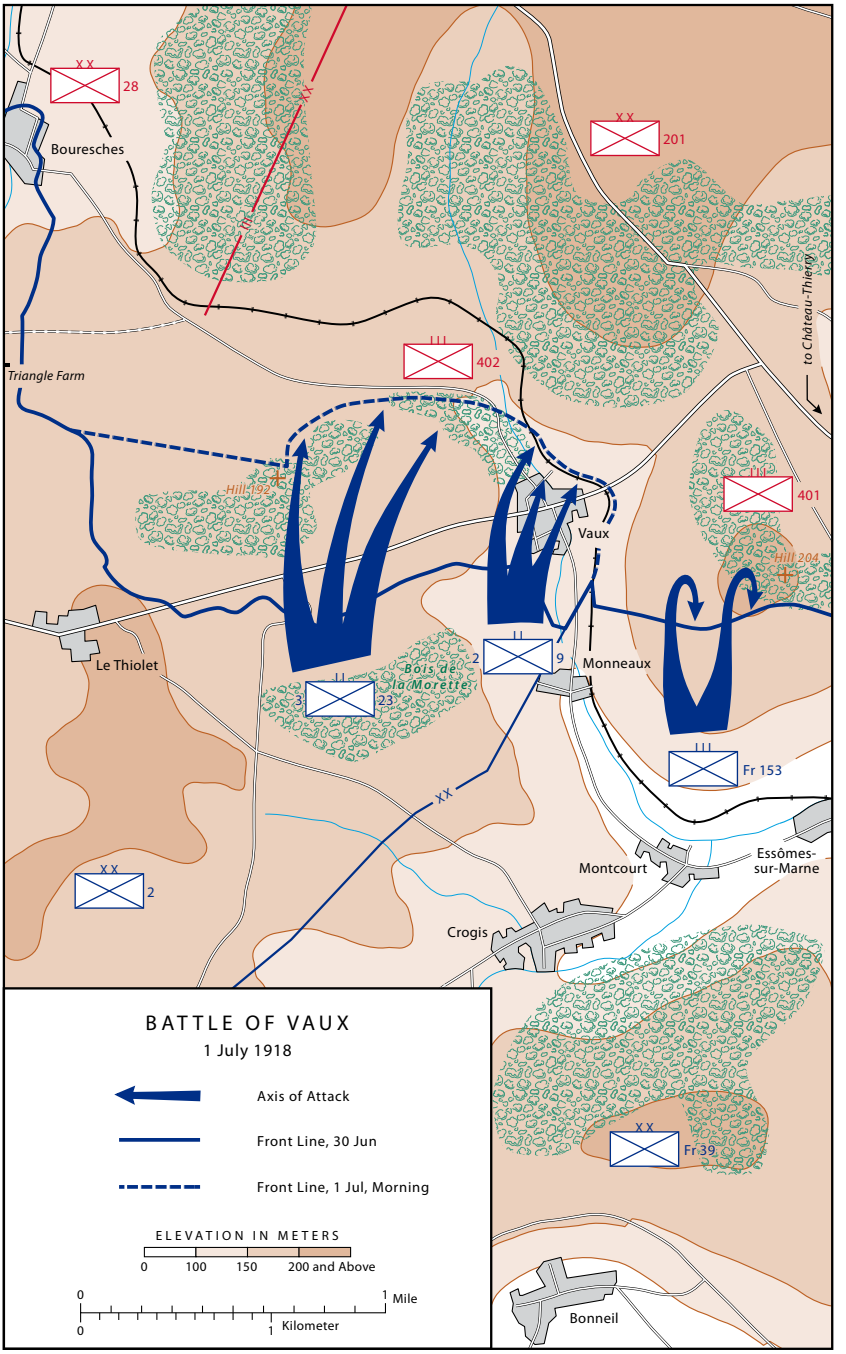
**Map 8**

very good division, if not even an attack unit"—high praise for an untested division in the middle of its first major engagement.

*Vaux*

Although the capture of Belleau Wood ended the marines' offensive activity in this sector, it was not the last significant attack by the 2d Division. Soldiers from the 23d Infantry had held Bouresches for many days, fighting off German attacks and pouring machine gun fire into the east edge of the wood, but the men of the 9th Infantry had held their sector on the far right of the division line without engaging in any major attacks. They finally got their chance in a limited but successful attack on the German-held village of Vaux, which lay in a small valley on the western side of Hill 204 along the boundary with the neighboring French 39th Division.

The genesis of the attack on Vaux came during the heart of the fight for Belleau Wood, when on 12 June the French corps commander directed the 2d Division to advance its lines in the 3d Brigade sector with a series of "minor attacks." The division leadership may have allowed Harbord to send the marines into Belleau Wood without making proper preparations, but it did not repeat this mistake for the attack on Vaux. Its staff, led by its new intelligence officer Lt. Col. Arthur L. Conger, spent many days gathering information on the village and the German defenses in it. Conger collected intelligence from infantry patrols, aircraft reconnaissance, and former village residents, enabling the 2d Division staff to develop a meticulous attack plan. The planners knew "the location, design, and strength of every building, cellar, enemy strong point, machine gun nest, trench mortar emplacement, sentry post, supply route, and billeting location." Under the leadership of the division's new artillery brigade commander, Brig. Gen. Albert J. Bowley, they then developed a fire-support plan that made a maximum use of artillery before, during, and after the infantry attack to ensure its success. Bowley choreographed the fire of sixty-six 75-mm. guns, thirty-six 155-mm. howitzers, and a number of trench mortars in a twelve-hour preliminary bombardment of the village area that was less than a couple kilometers wide and a couple kilometers deep. During the final three hours of the preparation, some dedicated guns were to fire 6,000 rounds of mustard gas north of the village to disrupt any German effort to reinforce the


28
Bouresches
201
to Château-Thierry
Triangle Farm
402
Hill 192
401
Vaux
Hill 204
Le Thiolet
Bois de la Morette
2
9
Monneaux
3
23
Fr 153
2
Montcourt
Essômes-sur-Marne
Crogis
Fr 39
Bonneil
BATTLE OF VAUX
1 July 1918
Axis of Attack
Front Line, 30 Jun
Front Line, 1 Jul, Morning
ELEVATION IN METERS
0
100
150
200 and Above
0
1
Mile
0
1
Kilometer

**Map 9**

defensive garrison and to maximize casualties among any fleeing defenders. In the last hour of the preparation, the rate of fire of all guns would increase to a maximum rate. Then three minutes prior to step off, half the light guns were to initiate a box barrage around the village, while the other half would place a standing barrage immediately in front of the American jump-off positions. At H-hour, the standing barrage would then shift to a rolling barrage to escort the infantry all the way through the village, and then halt to become a standing barrage just past the infantry's final objective. The differences between the fire-support plans for Vaux and for the initial attack at Belleau Wood could not have been more striking. (*See Map 9.*)

The division also made vastly superior arrangements for the actual infantry attack. The two battalions that were to assault the German positions in and around the village each had machine gun and engineers companies, and each infantry company had its own dedicated mission to perform in taking, clearing, and holding their objectives. As at Cantigny, the assault units were able to rehearse these specific tasks prior to the attack. Certain machine gun units that would not advance with the infantry were positioned to provide supporting fire during the assault, as were teams of 37-mm. guns and Stokes mortars. One final difference between the attack on Vaux and the battle of Belleau Wood was the level of support from the air, as the French dedicated aircraft from five flying squadrons and three observation balloons to ensure air superiority, accurate artillery fire, and real-time information on the attack's progress. It was a superb plan, and the division executed it with an impressive level of competence.

Promptly at 1800 on 1 July, companies from Major Elliott's 3d Battalion, 23d Infantry, followed the rolling barrage through the German lines west of the village, while men from Maj. Arthur E. Bouton's 2d Battalion, 9th Infantry, assaulted Vaux itself. The preliminary bombardment had shattered the German fortifications in and around the town, and the rolling barrage and French air support performed well. The men were able to take all their objectives on schedule and consolidate their new positions so securely that they had little difficulty beating back a German counterattack the next day, even though it was supported by a "drenching bombardment" with mustard gas. The casualty figures, although far from insignificant, further confirm the overwhelming nature of the victory. The Americans suffered 328 total casualties, including 47 killed, but also "a high percentage




*Graves of three American soldiers killed in the assault on Vaux*
(National Archives)

of slightly wounded," while the Germans suffered 254 killed, 162 wounded, and 510 missing, nearly all of whom were captured. The Vaux attack may have been a relatively minor affair along the Western Front in 1918, but it, like the successful assault of Cantigny, showed that even the untested American units, when augmented with French resources and given time to prepare their attacks, could successfully take and hold German positions while inflicting devastating losses along the way.

The Allied high command took great pains to recognize and laud the American contributions to halting the German advance at the Marne, defeating them to capture Belleau Wood, and ousting them from Vaux. The Allies were desperate not merely for good news, but especially for reassurances to the tired French and British forces that the Americans had entered the fight at last. For their part, the Germans could not ignore the fact that in those battles the rookie 2d Division severely damaged regiments from four experienced German divisions. The tide was turning.

## Analysis

When General Ludendorff launched *Operation Michael* in mid-March 1918, only four full American divisions were in the front lines of the Western Front, and of those four only one was completely trained and in full command of its own sector. Americans were occupying just 27 of the Western Front's roughly 750 kilometers of trenches. By the end of June, AEF divisions were occupying more than ninety-five kilometers of frontage, a clear indication of America's growing contribution to the Allied war effort. In May and June, more than 460,000 American troops arrived in France, assuring both the Allies and the Germans that the American presence would grow dramatically in the coming months. More important, in specific locations along the increasingly active Western Front in the spring of 1918—at Cantigny, Château-Thierry, Lucy-le-Bocage, Belleau Wood, and Vaux—a growing number of American units demonstrated that they were willing and able to fight with the grit and determination necessary to achieve an Allied victory.

The American divisions employed in these early operations—the 1st, 2d, and 3d—showed all the signs of inexperienced units in their first engagements. The Allies that fought with them, the Germans that fought against them, and even the American officers and men within the divisions and at AEF GHQ all were aware of this fact. Yet these three divisions, and those that came after them, were fighting in extraordinarily difficult tactical, operational, and strategic situations. All but one went into combat without having completed a full training program. At times, they arrived on a battlefield and went into action without sufficient maps or enough time to examine the terrain and establish liaison with the units alongside them. In light of these challenges, it is not surprising that these untried officers and men made mistakes and suffered

more casualties than hindsight suggests they should have. Yet for all their inexperience, they occasionally demonstrated sufficient skill to competently plan and execute attacks against a more capable and experienced foe, and showed the tenacity and courage to fight their battles through to victory even in the face of the initial problems, mistakes, and terrible losses that were almost unavoidable characteristics of any Great War battle.

The Americans displayed these strengths and weaknesses in May and June 1918, when these AEF divisions helped stop and then turn back a desperate German Army. These same divisions, as well as a number of others, would show them again in mid-July during the true turning point of the war—the Second Battle of the Marne.



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For more information on the U.S. Army in World War I, please visit the U.S. Army Center of Military History Web site (www.history.army.mil).

# LYS 1918

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