



The Battle of Belleau Wood

Introduction

When the First World War began on August 1914, the United States wanted to remain neutral and maintain a national unit of a country where an inhabitant on four was a foreigner. The German provocations at the beginning of 1917 overcame the hope of restoring the peace by some negotiation.

On April 6th 1917, President Wilson, who couldn't admit that the German submarines attack the American trade ships, declared war to Germany.

On May 27th 1918, 30 German Divisions attacked and exploded the forehead of the "Chemin des Dames", digging a deep hole from the Aisne to the Marne, reaching the river between Château-Thierry and Dormans. The final objective was to reach Paris.

On May 31st, the 10th Colonial Division helped with the 3rd US Division stopped the Germans at Château-Thierry before they crossed the bridge of the Marne which was blown up by the French engineering.

The Germans were stopped and arrived at the North West of Château-Thierry where they seized the Hill 204, Vaux and then the villages of Belleau, Torcy and Bouresches, where the fights were relentless against the French. These ones tried desperately to check the enemy advance, particularly at Belleau with the 152nd Infantry and the 158th Divisions as well as other units of the 43rd and the 73rd Divisions.

Behind, the 2nd American Division of General Bundy (composed by two Battalions of the land forces (2nd and 3rd)), one Marine Battalion (4th), each counting 6 000 to 7 000 men, pursues its gathering.

It is forwarded as fast as possible to Nanteuil-le-Haudouin by train and by truck. The landing that was started on May 31st in the evening, is far to be achieved the next day. On June 2nd, the Germans seized the villages of Belleau, Torcy and Bussiares as well Château-Thierry.

On June 3rd two American Divisions (of whom the Second Infantry Division) that have just finished their instruction arrive to give help to the 158th and the 152nd Divisions. The German offensive is then broken. On the same time, aircraft recognizing notice that the enemy reserves are running out. In the evening of the June 3rd the front head is stabilized. The three French Divisions (164th, 152nd and 158th) can leave the battlefield after having lost their forces and half of their staff engaged between the May 31st and June 3rd.

BELLEAU WOOD

Belleau Wood, nearly rectangular, presented more than a thousand meters of bushy borders. The Germans had organized it with method and rapidity in a redoubtable position. It is with an aggressive state of mind that the 2nd US Division took possession of the sector of Belleau. They stood opposite of the Belleau Wood and Bouresches. For the first time since their arrival in France, the Indian Head Division is alone against the enemy in the heart of a wild battle. From June 3rd to the 5th, the Americans fit out the ground near Lucy-le-Bocage.

On June 4th, the 2nd Division must push away a violent German attack at the farm "des Mares". This is the point the closest to Paris to have been reached by the German army on May and June 1918. It will never be over passed.

On the morning of June 6th, the 2nd US Division continues two news attacks of a long series. At five o'clock, the first Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment dashes to the hill 142, a height situated on the West of Belleau Wood. It is a success! The energy of the Marines surprises the defenders (the 237th German Division).

Twelve hours later, the Marine Brigade attacks again to seize the village of Bouresches. The 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment, the 3rd and the 6th Marine Regiments must cross the South part of Belleau Wood. They must undergo very heavy losses, in particular during the crossing of a field where the Americans are exposed to the German machine gun. About twenty Americans reach Bouresches just before 10 o'clock p.m.; and arrive to chase away the enemy. They will hold the position without being provided before the next day. In spite of five new attacks, the Germans will never arrive to take back the village. However, to help the inhabitants the Americans have to cross extended areas swept by the German machine guns. The losses are terrible: the 4th Battalion regrets 1087 dead and wounded for this only day the June 6th.

On June 10th, after an artillery preparation of more than 40 000 projectiles, the Americans arrive in the wood, removing nearly 300 prisoners and a lot of machine guns.

On June 11th, the central part of the wood is taken with 400 prisoners and 37 machine guns. The fights will go to the hand-to-hand-fight.

On June 12th, the efforts of the 2nd US Division are essentially on the north of the wood. The actions are always very confused and generally led with very insufficient means. The Marines rush by waves but this way of fighting causes heavy losses.

The principal German reaction occurs on June 13th and 14th. At 2 a.m. after a violent artillery attack with help of gas new assaults are made on Bouresches. It needs all the energy of the 23rd Infantry Regiment to keep the position.

Between June 16th and 21st, the 2nd Division US is strengthened by detached units of the 3rd US Infantry Brigade which is engaged several times in the battle of the wood. The 5th and 6th Regiments (of 2nd Division) which support a fierce battle since June 3rd can now take a little rest.

On June 23rd the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment is engaged against the Germans in the north of the woods. General Bundy orders an American and French artillery attack essentially on the Northern part of the wood.

So on the 25th at 3 a.m. the German defences are crushed down during 14 hours long by a huge flood of fire and iron.

Belleau Wood is reduced to the state of jagged stumps. The ground is covered by artillery projectiles. It is only on 5 p.m. that the infantry is sent up.

On the evening and during the night the battle continues very strongly. In the north of the wood the 3rd Battalion of the 5th Marine Regiment meets several resistances nests that have escaped to the bombs.

At several places near the hunting lodge the fights are very hard. It is only on the morning of June 26th that the Americans can finally dominate the whole wood. The Germans retreat on the village of Belleau, on Torcy-en-Valois and on the Clignon.

On June 26th after beating off some early morning counterattacks, Major Maurice Shearer sends signal, "Woods belong now entirely to the US Marine Corps."

On July 5th the 2nd US Division is raised by the 26th. The Indian Head Division has splendidly filled its mission. After this battle the Germans called the 2nd Division: "Teufelhunden" – Devil Dogs – because these ones had fought with a lot of courage and spite.

In remembrance of these facts the US aircraft carrier CVL24 is named Belleau Wood in 1942. As well there have been several other US aircraft carriers that have been named "Belleau Wood".

Today there is also a Marines' military base in Afghanistan that is named "Belleau Wood".
