

Slaughter on an Industrial Scale

After the opening months of WWI, literally millions of soldiers were mowed down for no real purpose as foot-soldiers were easily repulsed and ground was not gained.



Cannon fodder: Exhausted infantrymen of the Royal Warwickshire Regiment rest after attacking the German line at the Somme during July 1914. The regiment was in the thick of the fighting for most of the five-month battle.

British infantry charged forward, hoping the thousands of shells exploding on the enemy would allow them to reach the German lines without great casualties. Much to their dismay, German artillery and machine guns opened up and shredded the assaulting troops. The British answered with more troops and then more and more. By the end of the day, the British had suffered 58,000 casualties, more than 19,000 of them killed. It was the worst single-day loss in the history of the British Army. The Germans suffered nearly 12,000 killed or wounded. The Battle of the Somme had only just begun.

British and French troops continued to strike at the Germans, day after day, week after week. Advances were measured in yards, not miles. As part of the British Expeditionary Force, Australian troops got into action on July 19 and suffered 5,500 casualties, taking the 5th Australian Division out of the battle for the next three months. During the same time, a brigade of South Africans and Rhodesians were fighting in another sector on the front and lost 2,500 men. The British were using up the “bloody colonials” at an astounding rate.

The blood bath continued until well into November, when inclement weather caused General Douglas Haig to call a halt to the British offensive. Along a 16-mile front, the combined British and French armies had pushed the Germans back six miles at the deepest point but only three or four miles at most points and hardly at all at either end of the line. This took nearly five months and cost the British 420,000 casualties, the French 200,000, and the Germans 500,000. A German officer and veteran of the battle,

by Roger D. McGrath

World War I was a blood bath of such mind-boggling proportions that in hindsight it seems the nations of Europe had simply gone mad. Germany lost two million men, France 1.4 million, Britain and her colonies 1.1 million, Russia 2.2 million, Austria-Hungary 1.5 million, and Italy 600,000. American troops didn't join in combat on the Western Front until the last six months of the war yet we lost 117,000 men — and we were considered the fortunate one of the war. To put those numbers in perspective by adjusting for our much greater population today, that would be like losing 370,000 men in a half year. As a percentage of their populations, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand took tremendous hits. With a population of seven million, Canada lost 65,000 men. Australia, with only five million people, lost 62,000. New Zealand had a mere 1.1 million inhabitants yet lost 18,000.

The carnage on the battlefields of WWI is largely explained by the various armies

employing tactics of earlier conflicts against the latest weapons of a new century, particularly highly advanced artillery pieces and machine guns. Although charging across open ground against the enemy now became suicidal, commanders stubbornly refused to abandon the tactic. Instead, they simply sent greater numbers of men in the next wave. It's unfathomable today, especially to Americans, that a commander would watch the decimation of one of his regiments and respond by sending another and, then, another into the same withering fire. I can't help but think that some of this had to do with the hierarchical class structure in Europe: hoi polloi were expendable. A look at the battles of the Somme and Verdun is revealing.

Beginning on July 1, 1916, and not ending until November 18, 1916, the Battle of the Somme was fought along the river of the same name in northern France. The battlefield became one big abattoir, the likes of which the world had never seen. The fighting began with a massive British artillery barrage early on the morning of July 1 against German positions.

Friedrich Steinbrecher, wrote, “Somme. The whole history of the world cannot contain a more ghastly word.”

For fear of demoralizing the public, casualty figures were not reported to the home front in Britain. Members of Parliament knew of the enormity of the losses, though. Prime Minister Lloyd George privately complained about Haig’s overall strategy and his battlefield tactics. Correspondence between the two was not friendly. Haig thought George had no business interfering in military matters and that he, Haig, should have sole authority over battlefield operations. George thought Haig “perfectly insolent.”

As wounded men returned to Britain and death notices arrived at British homes, the general public began to grasp the magnitude of the casualties. The government feared that enlistments and morale would decline. By 1917, there were many indications that the nation had grown war weary. The British government had London newspapers print the following:

WHAT CAN I DO?

How the Civilian May Help in the Crisis.

Be cheerful.

Write encouragingly to friends at the front.

Don’t repeat foolish gossip.

Don’t listen to idle rumors.

Don’t think you know better than Haig.

Since Britain was losing tens of thousands of men a month, recruitment became a priority. Until the summer of 1914, minimum height requirement for enlistment was 5’3” and the age range 18-35. When war erupted in August and young men rallied to the cause, the Army increased the minimum required height to 5’6”, thinking that it could be more selective than usual. However, casualties mounted quickly and in October the height requirement was lowered to 5’4”, and to 5’3” in November.

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Time tested or worn out? At the Battle of the Somme, General Douglas Haig commanded the British forces. His antiquated tactics cost the British 420,000 casualties, earning him the sobriquet “Butcher of the Somme.”

By June 1915, the upper limit of the age range had been raised to 45 and the minimum height requirement lowered to 5’2”. Standards for vision and hearing, and for dental health, were also lowered. During the first year of the war about a third of those trying to enlist were rejected. By 1917, almost all were accepted.

Britain also formed what were called the “Bantam Battalions” for men 5’-5’2”, although a few under 5’ were accepted. Most of the latter were 17- and 18-year-olds who were expected to grow an inch or two. The Bantams were created at the insistence of MP Alfred Bigland, representing Cheshire in the northwest of England. Tradition has it that a group of miners went to a recruiting station in Birkenhead to enlist. When one of them was rejected because he was below minimum height, he exploded in rage and attacked the soldiers there. It took six men to subdue him.

Bigland heard about the incident and

thought there should be a place for such tough little guys, especially miners who were accustomed to hard physical labor. He asked the War Office for permission to form special units of short men, and by November 1914, the recruiting station in Birkenhead was enlisting Bantams. Within weeks they were organized as the 1st and 2nd Birkenhead Battalions of Cheshire, later becoming the 15th and 16th Battalions, Cheshire Regiment. Eventually, there were 29 Bantam battalions serving in three divisions. They suffered severe casualties in the battles of the Somme and Arras, and after the December 1917 Battle of Cambrai, having taken so many casualties, essentially ceased to exist.

While the British and the French were fighting the Germans at the Somme, the French were fighting the Germans at Verdun. The battle began in February 1916 and dragged on until the middle of December 1916, making it the longest battle of WWI. During the first several months of the fighting, the Germans captured Fort Douaumont and Fort Vaux, and by late June were on the verge of taking Verdun. Although appearing on the verge of collapse, the French army rallied and stopped the German advance. Fighting dragged on through the summer and into

the fall with neither side gaining ground. Then, in October, the French retook Fort Douaumont, and in November Fort Vaux. By the middle of December, the French had taken back most of the territory the Germans had captured. The 11-month-long battle left 156,000 French soldiers dead and another 300,000 wounded. The Germans lost 143,000 dead and 290,000 wounded. Nearly 900,000 casualties, and the two sides were back where they started in February.

The carnage was indescribable. "Humanity ... must be mad to do what it is doing," wrote a young French lieutenant in his diary at Verdun in May 1916. "What scenes of horror and carnage! Hell cannot be so terrible." Older, battle-hardened senior officers said similar things. "My heart leapt as I saw our youths of twenty going into the furnace of Verdun," wrote General Henri Petain. "But ... when they returned ... their expressions ... seemed frozen by a vision of terror; their gait ... betrayed a total dejection; they sagged beneath the weight of horrifying memories." The Germans shared the horror. "I've already seen a lot," wrote a lieutenant to his parents, "but I've never known the war to take on such an indescribably horrifying aspect."

The daily slaughter and the stalemated

nature of the battle at Verdun affected morale but so, too, did the weather. A Catholic chaplain in a Bavarian regiment said he could chart the mood of the troops by the weather. Day upon day of dark, overcast skies and rain not only left the ground a sea of mud but dramatically lowered morale. Similar observations were made across the lines. "As for the shelling, we're used to it," said a French soldier, "but our worst enemy is the bad weather, the raging rain." Men were soaked to the bone. When the clouds broke in May, a soldier exclaimed, "Sun has killed our gloom."

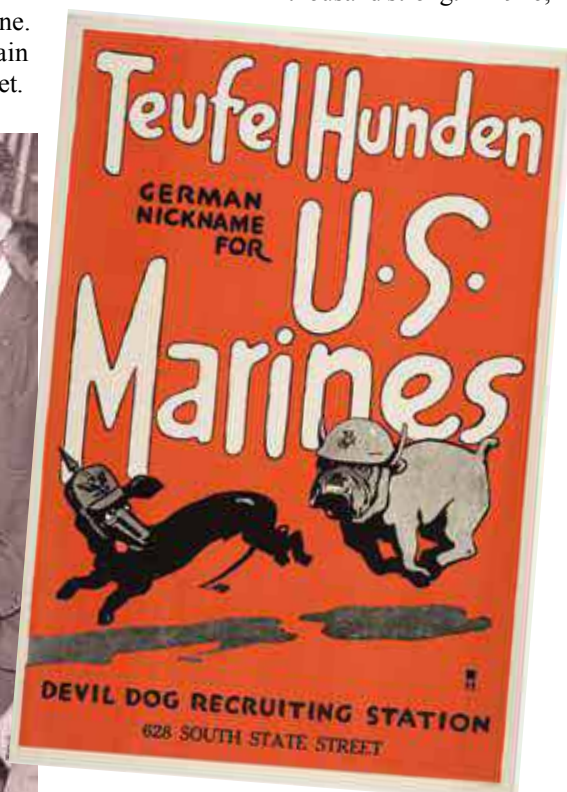
Food was another important morale factor. "The efforts of the Army in the field," wrote German general Erich Ludendorff, "depend to a high degree on their rations. That, next to leave, has the most decisive effect on the morale of the troops." The French had known this since the time of Napoleon, who famously said, "An army marches on its stomach." Not surprisingly, it was the French troops who complained most regularly about both the quality and quantity of their food. "We're shamefully fed," wrote one soldier. Most also complained they didn't get enough wine. German troops tended to complain only about the monotony of their diet.

The American entry into the stalemated blood bath that was the war on the Western Front tipped the balance almost immediately in favor of Britain and France. When the British and French troops looked at the arriving Americans, they couldn't believe how tall, robust, and enthusiastic they seemed. The American troops were even singing. Moreover, American commanders were not interested in spending four years in trenches with nothing to show for it other than hundreds of thousands of dead soldiers. They wanted to get it over, over there. This meant rapid troop movements and maneuver. No one was better at that than the U.S. Marine Corps, but the Corps would now have to operate on a scale many times greater than it ever had before.

Until WWI, the Marines were used principally as landing parties to secure a harbor or protect an American consulate, or as special operations and counter insurgency forces. The Marines were swift and deadly, but large-scale operations were not their forte. When the war erupted in Europe, the Marine Corps was only a few thousand strong. In 1916,



Preparing for war: During May 1917, Congress passed the Selective Service Act, requiring all men 21-30 years old to register for military conscription. These New York City men are signing on June 5, the first day of registration.



Tough terriers: Tradition says that during the Belleau Wood fighting the Germans began calling the Marines *Teufel Hunden*. Ever since, Marines have embraced the Devil Dog nickname.

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Congress authorized an increase to 15,000, and in March 1917, President Woodrow Wilson used his emergency powers to push the number to 18,000. Congress then authorized a final increase in May 1917 to 31,000. This would mean the Corps could not only supply enough Marines for the Navy in the war but also enough Marines for two regiments of infantry to serve with the American Expeditionary Force (AEF).

First, though, a grand recruiting campaign was necessary to inspire fighting-age men to join the Corps. The Marines' typical appeal to the martial spirit of American males was effective, and thousands were soon swearing oaths at recruiting stations. “The officers, from captain up, and fifty or so of the non-commissioned officers were old-time Marines,” said Colonel Albertus Catlin, commanding officer of the 6th Marine Regiment, “but the junior officers and all of the privates were new men....

Sixty percent of the entire regiment ... were college men. Two-thirds of one entire company came straight from the University of Minnesota. Of our young lieutenants a large number were college athletes.” Unlike today, young Marine officers came in good numbers from the Ivy League, including such schools as Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.

By mid-March 1918, the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments reached the front in France as part of the 2nd Division of the AEF. They had been moved up just in time for the German offensive. By early June the Marines, already the veterans of several skirmishes and battles, were approaching Belleau Wood. Leading his troops in retreat, a French major came upon a company of Marines, commanded by Captain Lloyd Williams. The major ordered Williams to join the retreat. Williams exploded, “Retreat, hell. We just got here.”

The Marines quickly dug shallow

fighting positions and readied themselves for the oncoming Germans. “We watched them come on,” said Lieutenant Lemuel Shepherd, a recent graduate of Virginia Military Institute. “A thousand yards, seven hundred, five hundred. I held our fire. Our sights were set for three hundred.” A Marine machine gunner estimated that 500 Germans were approaching his position. “We waited until they got close, oh, very close. In fact, we let them think they were going to have a leadpipe cinch. Oh, it was too easy; just like a bunch of cattle coming to slaughter. I always thought it was rather a fearful thing to take a human life, but I felt a savage thrill of joy and I could hardly wait for the Germans to get close enough. And they came arrogant, confident in their power, to within 300 yards.”

Deadly accurate Marine rifle and machine gun fire stopped the German advance. “You couldn't begrudge a tribute to their pluck,” said a Marine. “It was too much for any men. They burrowed in or broke to the cover of the woods.”

The Germans remained fully entrenched in the woods and supported by artillery, mortars, and machine guns. It was now the Marines' job to dislodge them and that meant crossing hundreds of yards of open wheat fields exposed to German fire. The Marines launched their assault with an artillery barrage. With the shells whistling overhead, riflemen came on the run. Soon their blood was mixing with the blood-red poppies of the wheat fields. Marines were dropping everywhere, either knocked down by German machine-gun bullets or seeking some cover by hugging the ground.

Just when it appeared that withering German fire had stopped the assault, First Sergeant Dan Daly, a 20-year veteran who already had been awarded the Medal of Honor twice, rose from the ground and, waving his .45 overhead, yelled, “Come on, you sons of bitches. Do you want to live forever!”

Seeing the legendary Marine charging forward inspired others to do the same. By twos and threes, and then by dozens they rose to their feet and followed. Miraculously, Daly reached the woods and single-handedly destroyed three machine gun nests, while other survivors of the charge took out more. The Marines were



Primary “horsepower” of WWI: French reinforcements water their horses on the way to Verdun. Horses and mules were used everywhere on the Western Front. Some eight million of them died.

in woods but the carnage behind them in the wheat fields was horrific. Some 1,100 Marines had been killed or wounded, including 31 officers. It was the most losses in a single day at that time in Marine Corps history and would remain so until Tarawa in November 1943.

As usual, Navy Corpsmen showed nothing but disregard for their own lives while treating fallen Marines. Pharmacist Mate 2nd Class Frank Welte raced through a hail of machine gun bullets to reach a group of wounded Marines some 130 yards short of the woods. Braving more German fire, he dressed the wounds of one Marine after another. He was tending to a fifth Marine when shrapnel from an artillery shell struck him in the back and in the foot. In great pain, he finished dressing the Marine's wounds and was filling out a diagnosis tag when a machine gun bullet hit him in the head. Somehow, he managed to give his book of diagnosis tags to the wounded Marine, telling him to "turn them over to the chief" when the Marine arrived at the battalion aid station. With that Welte toppled over and died. He was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross.

Once in the woods, the Marines faced a new kind of horror. The combat was at close quarters, often with grenades, pistols, bayonets, and knives. Ground fog occasionally reduced visibility to near zero. Land navigation with crude maps and compass, even on clear days, was half guesswork. Captain George Hamilton, who had been a star athlete in college, led his company of Marines, at least those who had survived the crossings of two wheat fields, on the run well into the woods. He was about a half mile beyond his objective and had outdistanced all but a handful of his own Marines when he realized his mistake. Retreating was no easy proposition. "I crawled back through a drainage ditch filled with cold water and shiny reeds," said Hamilton. "Machine gun bullets were just grazing my back and our own artillery was dropping close."

Once back to his objective for the day, Hamilton set about reorganizing his company. He learned he had lost all five of his lieutenants and several of his sergeants. One platoon would have to be led by a corporal. Although German artillery shells were falling from the sky, Hamilton ran from position to position until he had formed his men into a defensive line.



American blood: The Battle of Belleau Wood was the Marine Corps' finest moment in WWI. In three weeks of bloody fighting, the Marines swept the Germans from the forest and demonstrated they could fight at brigade strength.

And none too soon. Having moved stealthily through thick undergrowth, a squad of Germans began hurling grenades into the Marines. Hamilton himself was struck, not by shrapnel but by fragments of rock that a grenade had hit.

At the same time, Hamilton's gunnery sergeant, Charles Hoffman, spied a dozen Germans creeping through heavy brush on the Marines' flank. The 40-year-old Hoffman, a career Marine, charged into the brush and bayoneted two of the Germans before other Marines joined him and killed the remaining enemy. The Germans had been carrying five light machine guns that, if put into action on the Marines' flank, would have decimated what was left of Hamilton's company.

And so it went yard by yard, casualty after casualty, day after day through Belleau Wood. Wounded were evacuated but not necessarily quickly. The dead remained where they were, some not buried for days. The stench was god-awful. Searching for wounded comrades, a squad of Marines came upon a macabre scene. A German officer was "seated comfortably with his knees crossed. Before him was spread a little field table on which was cake, jam, cookies and a fine array of food. A knife and fork was in either hand. Beside the officer was seated a large, bulky sergeant who had been knitting socks. The darning needles were still

between his fingers. Both their heads had been blown off by a large shell."

While the Marines were fighting their way through the woods, they scored a publicity coup. Army General John J. Pershing, commander of the AEF, had his press section rigorously enforce a policy of censoring anything that identified units, even whether they were artillery or infantry or cavalry. There could be no mention of individual troops and their home states. Frustrated in their efforts to write interesting copy, reporters complained bitterly to their newspapers back home.

Then they got a break. Beginning on June 6, they were allowed to identify Marine units as Marines. Pershing and his press section clearly did not anticipate the consequences of the policy change — and the timing for the Corps could not have been more propitious. Suddenly, stories on the Marines in Belleau Wood poured into newspapers in the United States and headlines blared, "MARINES SMASH HUNS GAIN GLORY"; "MARINES IN GREAT CHARGE OVERTHROW CRACK FOE"; "MARINES WIN HOT BATTLE"; "OUR MARINES ATTACK"; "MARINES SINK WEDGE IN ENEMY FRONT." Underneath the headlines ran colorful stories of the Marines, naming individuals such as Dan Daly. The public could talk of nothing but the Marines.

It wasn't until June 26 that Major Mau-



Versed in war: Although he could have sat out the war, famed American poet Joyce Kilmer enlisted in New York's "Fighting 69th" regiment. On the front, he continually volunteered for the most dangerous missions.

rice Shearer, an Indiana boy and veteran of the Spanish-American War, declared, "Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely." By then U.S. forces, which included Army elements, had suffered almost 10,000 casualties. Of those more than 1,800 were deaths. There are no good figures for German casualties, although they were thought to be in the thousands. A nearby cemetery holds the graves of more than 8,000 German soldiers, but how many of those came from engagements other than Belleau Wood is unknown.

In honor of the Marines, the French renamed the woods *Bois de la Brigade de Marine* and awarded the Marine brigade the Croix de Guerre. General Pershing declared "the Battle of Belleau Wood was for the U.S. the biggest battle since Appomattox and the most considerable engagement American troops had ever had with a foreign enemy." Pershing also exclaimed, and he was no particular friend of the Corps, "The deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle." The Ger-

mans agreed. An after-action report described the Marines as "vigorous, self-confident, and remarkable marksmen." And legend has it that in the fighting in the woods the German troops began calling the Marines *teufel hunden*. Devil dogs or not, the Marines now had an international reputation.

With the Americans in the war, and winning victories like that of the Marines at Belleau Wood, the stalemate was broken. On July 15, the Germans launched a final, desperate offensive, which became the Second Battle of the Marne. German General Walther Reinhardt said, "We well-nigh reached the objectives prescribed for our shock divisions for July 15th and 16th ... with the exception of the one division on our right wing. This encountered American units." The fierce resistance of the Americans stopped the German advance and on July 18 the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the AEF, the 1st French Colonial, and the Gordon Highlanders launched a counterattack. It

succeeded brilliantly. German Chancellor Georg Von Hertling wrote, "On the 18th even the most optimistic among us knew that all was lost. The history of the world was played out in three days."

Spearheading the counterattack was the 69th Infantry Regiment, the famed "Fighting 69th" of New York, although it was formally the 165th Regiment when it became part of the AEF. Among those in the unit was Sergeant Joyce Kilmer, one of America's most prominent and prolific poets and essayists in civilian life. Although he was 30 years old and had a wife and five children when America entered the war in April 1917, he immediately enlisted. He quickly rose through the ranks to sergeant and was offered a commission but when told that he'd have to transfer to another regiment he declined. On the front he continually volunteered for the most dangerous missions. "He was worshipped by the men about him," said a fellow soldier. "I have heard them speak with awe of his coolness and his nerve in scouting patrols in no man's land."

On July 30, 1918, Major William "Wild Bill" Donovan, the CO of the regiment's 1st Battalion, had Kilmer lead a scouting party to locate German machine gun nests. Typically, Kilmer ventured beyond the rest. When the others finally caught sight of him again, he appeared to be peering over a low rise. Their calls to him went unanswered. They raced to his side and found him dead. "A bullet had pierced his brain," said the regimental chaplain, Father Francis Patrick Duffy. "His body was carried in and buried by the side of Ames. God rest his dear and gallant soul." Kilmer was posthumously awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French.

During the two weeks of furious fighting that began on July 15, more than half of the soldiers of the regiment were killed or wounded. Donovan's 1st Battalion was especially hard hit. Donovan himself was wounded, and all but one of his officers were killed. It was reminiscent of the Fighting 69th in the battles of the Civil War. Donovan was decorated with the Distinguished Service Cross and promoted to lieutenant colonel. For his heroism later during fighting in October, he was decorated with the Medal of Honor and promoted to colonel.

For the next two months, the Allies pounded the German lines everywhere, and on September 26 the Americans launched the Meuse-Argonne offensive. The drive involved 1.2 million American troops and another hundred thousand Frenchmen. Bloody fighting occurred daily but the AEF advanced rapidly, and by the middle of October had broken through the Hindenburg Line, a series of German defensive strong points. By early November, German resistance was crumbling everywhere, and at home the government was collapsing. The offensive had achieved its objectives, but at an enormous cost. The AEF lost 26,000 killed and 96,000 wounded. The Germans had an equal number of casualties, but also had 26,000 of their soldiers taken prisoner. They could do nothing now but surrender. At the 11th hour on the 11th day of the 11th month, the Germans signed the Armistice in a dining car on a railroad siding in the Compiègne forest. Four years of the most ghastly slaughter the world had ever known was over. ■