**The Battle of Cantigny, 1918**

On May 28, 1918, the second day of the great German offensive, [known as the “Spring Offensive”], the 28th Infantry Regiment (some 4,000 troops) under Major-General Robert Bullard of the US First Division attacked a strongly fortified German-held French village called Cantigny some 75 miles north of Paris, under the command of German Army General von Hutier, and marked an important change in the history of the American army. A small battle by World War I standards, the Battle of Cantigny was America’s first significant battle, and first offensive, of World War I.

While the Americans were intent on demonstrating the First Division’s prowess as a combat unit, the French were intent on learning whether they could trust this relatively raw formation of foreigners. So important was this first American commitment to the battle at hand that U.S. General Pershing himself came to address the division’s 900 officers on April 16: “…you will represent the mightiest nation engaged,” he told them. “Our future part in this conflict depends on your action.”

The purpose of the attack was to secure Cantigny and the central portion of the Cantigny plateau, which was an advantageous position that yielded excellent observation. The assault was planned to seize the plateau with the French providing both air cover in addition to 368 heavy guns and trench mortars, plus flamethrower teams. The advancing American infantry were preceded into the village by twelve French tanks following a two-hour advance artillery barrage. The attack would depend on surprise and weight of artillery. Timed to occur near daybreak, the intense preparatory artillery fire would precede the French tanks which would led the assaulting American infantry across no man’s land.

The attack on the morning of 28 May proceeded much as planned. At 5:45 AM, as an early morning haze wafted over the battlefield, the preparation artillery struck throughout the attack area. Just before 6:45 AM, the French tanks moved slowly forward from their positions in the Valle de Coullemelle to cross the American trenches at pre-selected traverses. French aircraft swarmed ahead. The 75-mm gun barrage shifted onto the line of departure and blasted there for three minutes, and then the “Doughboys” of the 28th Infantry Regiment grunted up from their trenches, hefting their extra ammunition, grenades, rations, flares, shovels and assorted kit, and formed into squad lines, bayonets fixed, to follow the rolling barrage. Much to everyone’s surprise and relief, they met spotty resistance. The tanks could not enter Cantigny itself through the rubble but quickly eliminated several German machinegun positions west and north of the village. With a few tanks stalled or stuck in shell holes, all battalions reported to have reached the objective line by 7:20 AM.

With the attack apparently successful, US troops consolidated their hold and prepared for the coming German counter attacks. German artillery fire against the new American positions became intense by noon. In the face of seven German counter-attacks, the 28th Infantry Doughboys fought back with withering American rifle, machinegun and artillery fire and eventually wore down the German offensive, but not without inflicting a rising number of American casualties. Reserves were committed to bolster the line. By May 30, the new American position was sufficiently secured and the 16th Infantry Regiment relieved the 28th. The fight had caused the First Division 1,067 casualties – killed, wounded, missing and gassed and 100 German soldiers captured as prisoners.

Cantigny made a profound statement to Germans and Allies alike. It bolstered Allied morale to hear of American troops in the line, on the offensive and succeeding. It underscored U.S. Gen. Pershing’s persistent argument that American troops were more valuable in large formations of their own than as embedded reinforcements for the Allies. Most important, it began a narrative of American success powerfully amplified by the heroic stands of the 2d and 3d Divisions along the Marne just days later. Clearly, Americans could fight, and there were now nearly a million of them in France.

**Source: Firstdivisionmuseum.org and Firstworldwar.com (modified and combined articles)**

**The Battle of Belleau Wood, 1918**

The battle fought in Belleau Wood ([June 1918](http://www.historylearningsite.co.uk/timeline_of_world_war_one.htm)) was the first real taste of battle for the US Marines in World War One with General Pershing calling Belleau Wood the most important battle fought by US forces since the US Civil War. The Battle of Belleau Wood followed the Battle of Cantigny in what was a response to the German Spring Offensive in 1918.

During the Spring Offensive, the Germans had come dangerously close to breaking the Allied lines protecting Amiens and Paris. German Gen. Ludendorff’s force was strengthened by a huge influx of experienced German soldiers to the Western Front who previously had fought against Russia. The German push, ironically, was so successful that those at the front – Stormtroopers who had done so much damage to the Allied front line – could not be supplied and their advance slowed to a halt short of Amiens. Along the line of advance, however, the Germans had constructed heavily defended positions that while in place threatened cities such as the major rail hub at Amiens and Paris itself. One such place was Belleau Wood.

The task of clearing Belleau Wood was given to the 2nd and 3rd Divisions of the US Army. Half of the 2nd Division was made up of units of the US Marines.

To get to the woods, the Marines had to cross wheat fields and meadows. The Germans had placed their machine guns in a way that they could continuously sweep these fields with accurate and high intensity fire. The Marines had to launch six attacks on German positions in Belleau Wood that were for the most part difficult to identify in an initial attack because they were so well positioned. The wood itself was also made up of closely packed trees that made any advance difficult in the extreme.

Caught in the open fields or in the densely packed wood, French officers advised the Marines to turn back. This they refused to do. US Marine Captain Lloyd Williams said in response to this, “Retreat? Hell, we just got here.”

US Marine casualties were the highest in the Corp’s history up to that date. However, once units got into the woods, the trees that hindered a swift advance also became a source of protection. Marine snipers could pick-off German machine gun posts with some ease. Once a machine gun fired, it gave away the position of the machine gun team. General Pershing was to state that “the deadliest weapon in the world is a Marine and his rifle.” Even a post-battle German report stated that the Marines marksmanship was “remarkable”.

By June 26th, the Marines confirmed that they had taken the entire woods. To clear the woods in their entirety, the Marines had frequently resorted to hand-to-hand fighting with bayonets and knives. Such was the ferocity of this that the Germans gave the Marines the nickname “Teufel Hunden”, which roughly translates as “Devil Dogs”.

The success of the US Marines in clearing such a strategically important place came at a cost. Out of the 9,777 US casualties, 1,811 were fatalities. No one is quite sure about German casualties because the end of the battle at Belleau Wood corresponded with a general German withdrawal along the whole front. Over 1,600 German prisoners were taken, so it is assumed that German casualties were high.

The psychological damage the defeat had on the German military cannot be overlooked. The Germans were in a very well defended stronghold with a sweep of fire that was to prove deadly. Few in the German military hierarchy would have expected the woods to fall so quickly. Not only was the defeat of the Germans at Belleau Wood a major blow to the Germans, it also proved to be a huge morale booster to the Allied forces that were still suffering from the onslaught that was the German Spring Offensive. After the battle, the French renamed Belleau Wood “Bois de la Brigade de Marine” – Wood of the Marine Brigade and the 4th Brigade was awarded the Croix de Guerre by the French in recognition of their achievement.

**Source: Historylearningsite.co.uk**

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| **Second Battle of the Marne, 1918**   |  | | --- | | The Second Battle of the Marne marked the turning of the tide in World War I. It began with the last German offensive of the conflict and was quickly followed by the first allied offensive victory of 1918. The American Expeditionary Force with over 250,000 men fighting under overall French command played key roles both in the initial defense and the later advances. | | In late May, the German high command had ordered a major offensive from the Chemin des Dames northeast of Paris towards the River Marne threatening both Paris and the Paris - Verdun rail link. The 2nd and 3rd divisions of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) helped defend along the Marne on either side of the river town of Chateau Thierry. In July, when it became clear that the Germans would renew their assault in the area, a decision was made to absorb the assault, let the enemy tire themselves, and then counterattack soon afterwards.  There were two distinct parts to the Second Battle of the Marne. |   **Phase I: The 5th Ludendorff Offensive, July 15-17, 1918**   |  | | --- | | At midnight, July 14/15 the last German push of the Great War started. As predicted, it was a German drive to get across the Marne just east of Chateau-Thierry commanded by General Ludendorff. From Chateau-Thierry, the 3rd American Division were strategically located, where they'd been ever since their machine gunners had come charging up the riverbank six weeks before. Then came another French outfit and next the 28th American Division. The 38th American Division was in line just west of where the Surmelin River flows north into the Marne. The Surmelin runs northwest and down either side of its gentle valley there ran two good roads which went south onto the main Paris highway. This was to be the main German supply route, the route by which guns were to move south and help exploit a possible breakthrough in the Allied line.  **Phase II: The Aisne-Marne Counter Offensive, July 18 - August 17 1918**  In the first days of July, 1918, it became apparent that the Germans would be unable to launch more than one other great attack, and towards the 10th of the month it was believed certain that if the enemy attacked the blow would fall in Champagne. Thanks to the arrival of American troops, the Allied reserves were now sufficiently numerous to justify a counterattack, and if, as every High Command was confident, the Champagne front could hold with the troops already allotted to it, the Allied Command retained complete freedom in the selection of the front upon which the counterattack should fall. The selection by the Germans of Champagne and the eastern face of the Marne salient, as the fronts on which they were to make their last effort was fortunate for the Allies; for this decision of the enemy allowed an Allied counterattack which, while affording immediate relief to the enemy's thrust, would also obtain other advantages for the Allied cause.  The approach of the German lines along the Marne toward Paris had caused apprehension throughout France; it was essential that the threat on Paris be relieved at the earliest possible moment. Aside from reasons of morale, purely material reasons also demanded the reduction of the Marne salient as the first task of the Allies when the offensive should pass to their hands. Paris contained a multitude of essential war industries, and so long as the Germans maintained their lines these industries were seriously hampered by the constant long range bombardments and air raids. The great east and west railroad through Chateau-Thierry must also be regained by the Allies as a first necessity in the troop movements required in any general offensive.  Notwithstanding it's losses of 7,000 casualties, the 1st American Division, by constant attacks throughout four days and nights, had broken through the entrenchment's in the German defensive line, had captured 68 field guns and quantities of other material, in addition to 3,500 German prisoners taken from the seven separate German divisions launching the offensive. Never again could friend or enemy question the fighting qualities of the American soldier!  But while the work of the 1st and 2nd American Divisions attracted most attention because of the special importance of their attack, they were not the only American divisions to participate in the July 18th offensive. The 26th American Division was just northwest of Chateau-Thierry and together with the 167th French Division formed the 1st American Corps, which was the first American corps to exercise tactical command. This corps acted as a pivot in the beginning and later had to advance under peculiarly difficult conditions. Notwithstanding the difficult nature of it's task, and the fact that it lost 5,300 officers and soldiers, on July 25-26 the 26th American Division was relieved by the 42nd Division, which, after having taken some part in the successful resistance to the German attack of July 15th in Champagne, had been brought round to the Chateau-Thierry region.  As has been mentioned, the 42nd Division relieved the 26th on July 25th. On the next day the 42nd Division attacked, and by the 28th it had crossed the Ourcq and taken Sergy. Here the enemy offered desperate resistance, launching counterattack after counterattack, the village of Sergy changing hands four times. But the 42nd definitely occupied Sergy on the morning of July 29th and continued to press forward until August 2nd when the enemy withdrew. Afterwards U.S. General Robert Bullard commented: " I have rarely, if ever, seen troops under more trying conditions... they were on the spot and they stayed there..."  The results of the Aisne-Marne operation were far out of proportion to its size...the initiative [on the Western Front] had passed to Allied hands, where it would remain, and Ludendorff would be compelled to postpone indefinitely his cherished Flanders offensive. With German morale sagging, it was clear that Ludendorff's hope of crushing the Allies before the United States could put a large force in the field would not be realized.  **Source: worldwar1.com (modified)** | |  |  |  | | --- | |  | |  |      |  | | --- | |  | |  | |  |  |  | | --- | |  |  |  | | --- | |  | |  | |

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