



Why write about the Battle of Belleau Wood?

Most Americans have never heard of this battle. It is not included in school history curriculums. It is little more than a footnote in TV documentaries about the Great War. Part of my mission is to bring the battle to life on the page—to breathe life into the memory of those who fought this desperate battle upon which so much depended and so much changed. I was particularly attracted to the medical side of the story since I am a physician. Some of the unsung heroes in this story didn't carry rifles—they carried musette bags stuffed with medical supplies. And thus was born the idea of writing *Our Desperate Hour*.

The Battle of Belleau Wood is well known to American World War I historians. The battle lives on in US Marine Corps lore and in the names of US Navy ships and streets on Marine Corps bases. Some historians have downplayed the importance of the battle. They pointed out that the German forces involved had over-extended their supply lines, and that the troops involved were exhausted and state that the threat to Paris was exaggerated; that the Germans would never have made it there. The perception at the time was that if the American Second and Third Divisions didn't hold, Paris would be lost and the Kaiser would win. This was the source of the desperation that drove commanders to take risks and make decisions that are hard to understand today.

Why was the battle critical from a European perspective? America was untested. In the spring of 1917, the American military was rated nineteenth in the world, behind Portugal. The only large-scale war she had been involved in since her birth was the Civil War. The French and British were not confident that American forces could stand against Germans. They were convinced that the American leadership was not up to the chore, and demanded that American troops be led by experienced French and British commanders. German commanders doubted American mettle.

American forces had not fought in any major battles until the American First Division went on the offensive in a limited engagement in Cantigny in late May of 1918. A dramatic German breakthrough along the Aisne-Marne region and suddenly threatened Paris overshadowed that small victory. It was well known that the exhausted French would sue for peace if Paris was attacked. Could American forces prevail in a large-scale battle?

Belleau Wood answered that question with a *yes* that resonated throughout Europe.

The closest the Germans got to Paris in 1918 was the vicinity of Belleau Wood. After the battle, Germany moved in only one direction—backward. The psychological effect that the Battle of Belleau Wood and the larger Aisne-Marne Offensive was huge. Exhausted Brits and forlorn Frenchmen found new energy as the Americans gained momentum. While the AEF Second and Third Divisions didn't win the war, they prevented defeat and rallied the Allies. And, it could be argued, that was the fulcrum upon which the war in 1918 turned.

Why was the battle critical from an American perspective? It proved that American forces could fight nose-to-nose with some of the best Germany could muster, and win. It put the American Expeditionary Forces in a spotlight they never relinquished until the end of the war.

And the Marine perspective? It was the first time the US Marine Corps fielded a force larger than a regiment. In fact, aside from the Marine role in the 1914 Battle of Vera Cruz, previous Marine actions rarely involved more than one or two companies. It showcased Marine courage and capability on the world stage. Germany rated the Marines 'first rate shock troops' in the aftermath of the battle. Legend holds that some Germans called the Marines *Teufel Hunden*—Devil Dogs. Whether true or not, that legendary name carries on today. It could be argued that this was the battle that transformed the Marine Corps into the force that won on Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, and so many other fights. Other Marine legends were born. Captain Lloyd Williams's retort to a retreat order became a rallying cry: *Retreat? Hell, we just got here.* Two-time Medal of Honor recipient Dan Daly's battle shout: *Come on you sons of bitches, do you want to live forever?* still reverberates in the hearts of Marines.

So, why write a novel about the Battle of Belleau Wood? Because it mattered. Because the grand and great-grandchildren of those who cheered the victory know so little about it. And to remember the sacrifice, the courage, the desperation, and the heroism of so many. I want to entertain, but I also want Americans to learn, and never forget.