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Who has tolerated and helped me for fifty nine wonderful years.
Introduction

The chronicle that follows focuses on the dramatic wartime experiences of the 4th Marine Brigade, part of the U.S. Army Second Division regulars that served with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in World War I. It seeks to deepen and broaden our understanding of how American Marines (possibly as many as 30,000 overall) confronted the rigors of soldiering and the lethal dangers of the battlefield in what many have called the Great War.

The Second Division, especially in World War I, was known as the “Race-Horse Division” because its highly competitive brigades relentlessly tried to outrace each other to be the first to reach each battle front. Some months after the end of the war, a German artillery officer named Colonel Rudolf von Xylander told an interviewer that “we were always much pleased to learn that the French divisions in front of us were being taken out and replaced by Americans, because then we could turn over and get a little sleep. But if we learned the Second Division was coming after us, the one composed of Marines and infantry, we had to reinforce our line, increase our battery fire and generally sit up and take notice.” He added that American officers and troops were neither as experienced nor as well trained as the French—they “were very brave, but they would rush about sometimes like crazy people and get all mixed up.” But he added, “This was not true of the Second Division . . . ah! they never stopped; they had plenty of steam.” When he had been in command of the German guns at Blanc Mont and “the Second came along and pushed [us] off . . . Ach, Gott, there were so many of them; they were hard to kill, and the more you
shot them down the more of them there were. I don’t think they stayed
dead.”

Regarding their own nickname, the Devil Dogs (Teufelhünden), the 4th
Brigade can thank the German troops they fought at Belleau Wood. Suppos-
edly, that nickname derived from a combination of the Marines’ fierceness
in combat and a water spout located at the farm in the village of Belleau.
The spout, still there, is in the shape of a Devil, mouth wide open, emitting
a constant flow of water. The Marines themselves learned of their moniker
from several German prisoners and from captured German soldiers’ letters
home. In one letter a German corporal wrote: “The Americans are savages.
They kill everything that moves.” The Marines might well have expressed
the same sentiments about many of the Germans they fought.

The story that follows is presented mostly through the words of individ-
ual Marines, incorporating material extracted from memoirs, letters, and
diaries, even a few type-written or handwritten pages, most of which have
not been seen since the war ended. Their tale also draws upon newspaper
accounts from that time, as well as upon accounts from some World War I
veterans who waited decades before opening up with memories that were
inevitably a mix of personal fact and fiction. There are even a few that were
published, though not many, and those, except for one, were in rather lim-
ited editions.

Included are all sorts of stories: What it was like to travel to “Paris Island”
as it was then known. What happened upon arrival and after. How officers
were “captured,” and why them and not others. So-called advanced training
at Quantico, the long oceanic voyage to France, and what happened when
they first got there. And the grueling demands of combat. Not all was excit-
ing; some experiences were so boring that some Marines fervently wished
for an enemy to fight, no matter the risks, at least until he got his belly full
of that. Many others, however, wished for a “blighty”—a wound that would
give the soldier a few days or weeks cared for by beautiful nurses and with
great food in a nice, clean hospital somewhere far from the terrors and ugli-
ness of the front.

The major problem for anyone researching this subject is, not surpris-
ingly, the relatively small number of Marines who recorded their personal
experiences during the war rather than the many more who wrote after the
fact and deliberately or unconsciously utilized what others (including histo-
rians) told them about their war. Sadly, a number of the more “legitimate”
writers were either wounded or killed early on and found themselves out
of the war or life itself. A fine example was a first lieutenant, later captain,
James McBrayer Sellers, who wrote wonderfully well but was out of most
of the action at Belleau Wood until coming back for Blanc Mont and the Meuse-Argonne.

But before the Marines found themselves in French trenches, they found themselves not exactly uppermost in the minds of the nation’s war planners. As a matter of fact, the U.S. Army initially saw neither reason nor need to include the Marines in the continental fighting. But a very persistent and persuasive Major General George Barnett, commandant of the Marine Corps, managed to convince Secretary of War Newton D. Baker that the then modest U.S. Army needed manpower that the Corps could immediately provide. Baker opened the door but left the Marine units officially under the U.S. Army’s direction.

The Marines originally selected for combat duty were the 5th Marine Regiment and its replacements. Meanwhile, Barnett on his own initiative began assembling the 6th Marine Regiment, plus a machine-gun (MG) battalion, the 1st, later changed to the 6th, which followed the 5th Marines already in France. Together these regiments formed what would be called the 4th Marine Infantry Brigade. Barnett then immediately began building another brigade, the 5th, to create a Marine division. Thereupon, General John J. Pershing, commanding officer of the American Expeditionary Force said, NO! NO MORE MARINES!, almost in those exact terms. Consequently, when the 5th Brigade of many thousands of Marines (more than 10,000) went to France they were shunted aside and were not utilized at the front, even though American men were dying in the Argonne forests and replacements were drastically required.

When the U.S. Army leadership was preparing to enter the war, they had formed a board of selected officers that became known as the “Baker Board” after Colonel Chauncey B. Baker, of the Quartermaster Corps. Based on observations of the war in Europe, the board decided it wise to develop divisions that were larger in size than the ones used by European armies. Their rationale: In light of the war’s heavy casualties, a larger division could stand its ground for a longer period. The building block for such divisions would be the company, which would include:

4 platoons of 50 men each, 200 total
Company headquarters, 31
combat train group, 5
field train group, 3
officers, 6
1st Sergeant, 1
casualty margin, 10
The board recommended four companies for each battalion, totaling 1,024 officers and men, and with a three-battalion regiment of 3,072 officers and men. Each regiment would have a machine-gun company of 172 men, each with 12 guns, plus four spares. A brigade, composed of two infantry regiments, would have a machine-gun battalion with three companies comparable to the company in the infantry regiment. The total strength of a division would be 25,484 officers and men with 16,546 in the two infantry brigades of four regiments, rather than the old style of three regiments. The ancillary units—artillery, engineers, trains, and so on—of the Second Division would have direct contact with the Marine brigade only occasionally.

The Marine Corps had to conform to that formation, rather than its initial one of four companies, three infantry plus a machine-gun company, but, as always, they quickly adapted. They had to do that, for example, when the army insisted that the Marines could not have a separate supply service in France and, instead, would have to rely on the army’s service, even encompassing Marine clothing needs, which resulted in the odd sight of many Marines wearing U.S. Army uniforms. Marines, however, found a way to retain their Globe-Eagle-Anchor emblem, helping them preserve a sense of their distinctive service identity.

The U.S. Army massed an amazing 2 million men in France from June 1917 to the end of the occupation of Germany in June 1919. Of that total, some accounts state as many as 30,000 Marines were sent over, in two brigades and as replacements, not a significant number by comparison. However, 10,000 of that group made a major impression on the French, civilians and military, who credited those Marines with saving Paris in June 1918.

Perhaps the German armies might have been so tired out by the end of May 1918 that the thought of trying to march on Paris might have limited appeal, even though the city was lightly defended by a small number of American units, including the valiant soldiers of the Second Division. The French themselves were also exhausted and would seem to have been prime candidates for surrender. The British had many problems and seem poised to pull back across the English Channel after being badly beaten in early 1918. Whatever the reality, most historians agree that, if Paris had fallen, France would have surrendered, leaving the AEF, minus its allies and with a diminishing logistical base, in a highly precarious and likely unwinnable situation.

But because the German drive of May–June 1918 was stopped near Château-Thierry by the Second Division, there would be no French surrender at the fall of Paris. Meanwhile, the American army continued to flood reinforcements into France, and though not as well trained as they could have
been, they were able to stop the exhausted Germans from regaining the initiative. And the 4th Marine Brigade was definitely part of that effort.

Our story, however, must begin at Paris Island (later spelled “Parris”). The Marines began using Paris Island, South Carolina, as a training site for incoming personnel on 1 November 1915. Over many years it had been utilized for various functions, including as a disciplinary barracks for the entire U.S. naval service. On 6 April 1917, the day Congress declared war against Imperial Germany, there were 835 men in training to be Marines. At the height of Marine recruitment, that total rose to 13,286 men in training at one time, which ultimately reduced to 4,104 on the day the Armistice was declared. In addition to Paris Island, there was one other regular recruit training facility—on Mare Island, California—and two temporary training facilities located in Philadelphia and Norfolk, which were utilized at the beginning of the war.

The course of instruction (“boot camp”) lasted eight weeks, of which the first three were devoted to instruction in close-order drill, swimming, bayonet fighting, personal combat, and physical exercise. The next two were devoted to extended order and interior guard duty. The final three weeks were spent on the rifle range. There were also schools for noncommissioned officers, clerical personnel, radio operators, field music (buglers), and of course, cooks and bakers.

Subsequently, the Marines were transferred to an advanced training facility at Quantico, Virginia, which had been created in April 1917 and was established a month later. It was designed primarily as the training grounds for newly minted officers who would be commanding company-sized and smaller units of what would become the 6th Marine Regiment. Its inauguration occurred on 14 May 1917, when four officers and ninety-one enlisted Marines plus two Navy corpsmen arrived under the command of Major Chandler Campbell.

The first Marines to ship out for France were assembled as three separate battalions in May and June 1917, drawn from earlier recruits who had already served in Haiti and Santo Domingo. The First Battalion, 5th Regiment was created in four companies under the command of Major Julius S. Turrill, at Quantico, the last week in May 1917. Three of those companies were developed from battleships’ guards. One more, a machine-gun company, arrived from Pensacola, Florida. The 2nd Battalion was developed in Philadelphia by Major Frederick M. Wise on 1 June 1917. Three of the companies had recently arrived from service in the islands, and the fourth was also a machine-gun company. The final battalion, the 3rd Battalion, was also created in May 1917 from recently arrived companies that had been serving
in the islands; Major Charles T. Westcott was its first commanding officer. All three of the 5th Regiment’s battalions were in place in France by late June 1917, their arrivals roughly coincident with that of the U.S. Army’s First Division (the famed Big Red One).

It should be noted that the arrival of the Marines was definitely not greeted with “huzzahs!” and open arms by General John Pershing, leader of the American Expeditionary Force. Pershing was anything but an advocate for their participation in the war. But because they were there, and he had orders to utilize them, he initially tasked them with noncombat duty unloading ships and providing security for various AEF encampments. So while the First Division trained for fighting the enemy, the 5th Marines were stuck with menial labor and guard duty. That remained the situation until Major General Commandant Barnett sent another regiment (the 6th) and a machine-gun battalion of Marines to France. (In sequence they were: 1/6 in September 1917; 3/6 in late October 1917; Sixth MG battalion in late December 1917; and 2/6 in January 1918.) Badly in need of more troops, Pershing immediately combined this Marine brigade with a pair of regular U.S. Army regiments, the 9th Infantry and 23rd Infantry, to form the new Second Division, now composed of the 3rd Brigade of Infantry and the 4th Brigade of Marines. Eventually acknowledged by nearly everyone, except Pershing and his staff, as the finest division in France, the Second Division advanced more miles and captured more territory than any other, captured more prisoners and guns, and had more casualties.

Once formed, the Second Division was sent to the front to learn lessons from the French in how to fight a war from trenches, as it had been fought for nearly four years. In a so-called quiet sector not far from the city of Verdun, the men of the 4th Marines and 3rd Infantry spent two months enduring training provided by the French, but they were disappointed with the quality of instruction and felt that the main lesson to emerge was how easily one could be killed.

In mid-May the division was relieved from duty and shipped westward and just north of Paris, where they soon arrived. The unit’s few days there were spent in repairing themselves, their equipment, clothing, and so forth, just before they were due to leave for Cantigny, where they would relieve the exhausted First Division regulars. That was not to happen, however, because the Germans had launched another major assault upon the French lines in the Chemin-des-Dames and were rapidly heading toward Paris. Marshals Philippe Pétain and Ferdinand Foch, the two leading French officers, begged Pershing for any American forces that could respond. Pershing complied by sending the Second Division, at that moment the AEF’s best available troops.
On the morning of 31 May 1918 the Second Division began its ride to meet the foe. They journeyed to battle in camions, very uncomfortable French trucks that were largely driven by natives of the area known as French Indo-China. On 1 June the division began arriving at an area just a few miles west of Château-Thierry. There they were directed to take up positions, the 4th Marine Brigade north and the 3rd Infantry Brigade south. As luck would have it, the north was where most of the fighting would take place, around and in a forest the French called Bois de Belleau (Belleau Wood). Consequently, the Marines emerged from the heavy fighting there as true combat heroes, while the U.S. Army infantry held their southern line until the end of the month, when they were to take the village of Vaux lying before them. They did, and a fine job it was. But the world heard of Bois de Belleau, not Vaux.

The 1st battalion of the 5th Regiment launched an attack early on 6 June, followed late in the day when 3/5 and 3/6 attacked Belleau Wood. While this later attack against the wood was on, 2/6 attacked the town of Bouresches. This latter success was purchased with casualties in most of two companies, only twenty men overall surviving the ordeal. All four battalions were shattered, especially the 3/5. The 1/6 launched an attack on 10 June and the 2/5 another on 11 June. The latter unit took most of Belleau Wood in a few days while suffering enormous casualties. In the aftermath of the fighting, the soldiers' living conditions were terrible. Food was always rare, and sometimes days went by between meals. The men survived on what they could take out of dead German or French packs, or what they managed to scrounge from their comrades, especially the replacements who were being fed into the lines every day.

During the month of June the Marines were on line for sixteen days without relief, an unusual circumstance. Even the French, always desperate for manpower, never allowed their troops to go more than a week at most without some relief. When the Marines were finally relieved for a few days it was by an ill-trained U.S. Army regiment, which then proceeded to lose some ground the Marines had taken.

Within a week the Marines came back in the form of a rebuilt 3/5, which was given the unenviable task of taking all of Belleau Wood. Finally, on 26 June, Major Maurice Shearer, the 3/5’s commanding officer, sent a message to his superiors emphatically claiming: “BELLEAU WOODS NOW U.S. MARINE CORPS ENTIRELY.” There was a bit of cleanup work, but essentially this battle was finally over. As a partial reward for their efforts, a number of the Marines were allowed to march in a Fourth of July parade in Paris, and the balance were sent south to the Marne River to, after so many
days fighting, clean themselves and their clothing. The very happy French leadership renamed these woods the *Bois de la Brigade de la Marine.*

At this point, Marshal Foch decided to break the German line just about 50 miles north of Château-Thierry, near the ancient city of Soissons, utilizing the now experienced American First and Second Divisions. Meanwhile many replacements for the casualties suffered by the 4th Brigade were welcomed and absorbed by the Marines.

A horrible trip to the new site on camions exhausted the Americans of the Second Division, and without any rest the 5th Regiment, along with the men of 9th and 23rd Infantry of the 3rd Brigade, launched the first attack on 18 July 1918. They gained a large amount of terrain but at the end of the day were tuckered out and greatly reduced in personnel. On 19 July it was the 6th Regiment’s turn, and they advanced alone against terrible German artillery and machine-gun fire. A handful of Marines managed to survive this onslaught, but many died. It was badly planned and effectively wiped out the 6th Regiment for the time being. Later, a new contingent of replacements brought the 6th almost back to its original strength.

The Second Division spent more than a month recuperating in a sector known as Marbache and it environs, a relatively quiet sector of the war. It was during this period that the 4th Brigade began to overhaul its command leadership. The numerous U.S. Army junior officers, those that survived the beating of the previous two campaigns at Belleau and Soissons, were beginning to be transferred out. The Marine brigade was desperate for junior officers. It had a host of senior noncoms, who had been promoted from within the ranks, but few lieutenants to lead platoons. The army had a surplus and had provided the 4th Brigade with a large number of them (more than sixty, in fact) to lead platoons in the period between March and July 1918. In fact, a few would remain throughout the entire war. Perhaps what one officer later wrote about his experiences will represent what the interaction was like for both groups (Marine Corps and U.S. Army officers in the 4th Brigade) and his attitude toward being transferred out of the Fourth Brigade.

**Captain George V. Gordon wrote:**

Our parting with the Marines was not an easy one for we had many friends among them, and acquaintanceships formed under conditions that we lived are lasting.

The Marines were the only American troops that I had served with in France, and as we had been through battles that history will record as being of great importance in their bearing on the entire war. I naturally was proud of my service with them and felt a regret having to leave.
I also was inoculated with the Marine spirit, in fact, after my constant association with them, felt more like a Marine than an Army man.\textsuperscript{1}

Gordon’s comments suggest that when “Army men” and Marines served together that experience tended to minimize antagonisms between the services. Such combinations in the 3rd Brigade worked well and no doubt played a beneficial role in the battlefield successes experienced by the 3rd Brigade, which fought alongside the 4th Brigade in France.

From their location in the Marbache sector, the Second Division marched southward from mid-August until 11 September to a location in which General Pershing wanted to prove his U.S. First Army’s mettle: at the St.-Mihiel salient. It was here that he had decided he would lead an American army and eliminate a salient the Germans had held since the beginning of the war.

On the morning of 12 September the U.S. First Army, including a substantial number of French divisions, advanced and quickly overran the retreating Germans. In a few days the salient was wiped out, the Marines and army infantry preserving their reputation as first-class fighting men.

Next came what many veterans of the division consider their worst encounter of the war, perhaps including Belleau Wood: the Battle for Blanc Mont. Pershing was asked by Foch and Pétain to provide the French with three American divisions to assist our ally in taking an entrenched position the Germans had held since the beginning of the war. It was on a height overlooking the French city of Rheims, just west of the Argonne forest, which the American armies were about to attack. In response to the request, Pershing tabbed the Second Division and a relatively untrained Thirty-sixth National Guard (NG) Division, which had just arrived in France.

The Second Division arrived at its appointed location on 1 October, but because the units were still in disarray the beginning attack was postponed until 3 October. On that day both brigades advanced. The 6th Regiment advanced up the incline first, followed by the 5th Regiment. By midday the Marines were sitting on the top of the Blanc Mont Massiff. The 6th and 5th had fought their way upward against Germans to their front and to their left flank. The French on their left had not kept up; in fact they hardly advanced at all, nor would they for several days to come. Consequently, the 4th Marine Brigade was basically surrounded by Germans for several days.

The following day, 4 October, the 5th Regiment advanced alone. They were caught in front, on the left flank, and in the rear by artillery and machine-gun fire. Later its members called it “The Box.” By midafternoon on 4 October, they were slaughtered. The 5th Regiment was finished and, for the balance of that battle, merely took up reserve positions. The 6th Regiment
was entirely alone until the newcomers of the 36th National Guard Division showed up and tried their best, fighting hard but with limited skills. Finally, by 10 October the Thirty-sixth NG was ordained to relieve the battered Second Division, and the latter fell back and regrouped. The former went on to accomplish the original plan of driving the Germans entirely off that ridge and backward to the Aisne River.

For some reason, in his final report on the actions of the AEF during the war, Pershing completely “forgot” about Blanc Mont. I’m not sure that the U.S. Army has ever acknowledged that sorely fought battle by the always trustworthy Second Division and the Thirty-sixth Division. That was the first and last fight of the Thirty-sixth NG, but the Second, with numerous replacements, was moved rapidly eastward to take part in the Meuse-Argonne campaign. The AEF had been badly handled by the Germans at the Argonne Forest during their earlier assaults, and Pershing was desperately in need of divisions with fighting skills to keep up the AEF’s responsibilities during this major offensive by the Allies.

The Second Division, after some brief repairs in mid- to late October, made their way to their assigned portion of the line. It happened to be in the middle of the line, and beginning on 1 November they did their duty (the Marines leading for a few days and the infantry taking over for the following days). The advance was continuous, with the Germans gallantly fighting as they retreated. By 9 November, the 4th Brigade was within walking distance of the Meuse River, and there they rested. On the night of 10 November the 6th Regiment had orders to move north to the village of Mouzon, and after the 2nd Engineers had created several bridges they and 3/5 were to cross over and take territory on the eastern bank. The two battalions of the Fifth Regiment, 1/5 and 2/5, were that night to cross over on bridges to be established farther south.

The officer commanding the 6th Regiment refused to cross bridges constantly destroyed by the German artillery and instead marched his men south. The leader of the crossing farther south took his men across the river, 1/5 first, and they were butchered. The few that made it remained on the eastern bank, then 2/5 made their attempt, which was almost as badly handled as 1/5. The few remaining Marines held their ground, for whatever value that had, and at 1100 on the morning of 11 November the Armistice went into effect.

By war’s end the 4th Marine Brigade had suffered a severe casualty rate of 150 percent. Those who survived marched into western German territory to occupy areas until the peace treaty was eventually signed. Following the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the Second Division was sent home,
arriving in early August 1919. After parades, the 4th Brigade was returned to the Marine Corps and on 13 August was disbanded and the veterans sent home.

Those men of the AEF who survived the war, or at least the great majority of them, never forgot their combat experiences in France. Those former soldiers and Marines went through hell, and most of those who survived wanted nothing more to do with the wars and troubles of Europe. Unfortunately, their political leadership, most not having participated in any wars, thought differently. As we know, twenty-plus years later the world went to war once again. The resolution of 1918, which was thrown away by European leaders, was repeated in a most horrible fashion for all concerned. The words of the 4th Brigade Marines provide a powerful reminder of the costs of ignoring the lessons of each war, one that should not be forgotten.

Although most of the selected entries reliably reflect each soldier’s actual experiences, some quite obviously seem to parrot material the individuals had read about “their” experiences, perhaps the result of having been wounded and out of action for part of or even the duration of the war. Such temporary or permanent casualties, at least the ones whose letters home are available, offered incomplete or inaccurate accounts of their unit’s actions. They were often overmodest and vague about how they became casualties or how seriously they were hurt, partly in keeping with the legendary Spartan-like stoicism of the Corps and its Marines. That badge was often burnished in journalistic accounts in ways hardly appreciated by U.S. Army regulars, many of whom thought Marine derring-do was vastly overrated and self-aggrandizing. Here and there, commentary and notes are supplied in order to clarify the identity of individuals and the circumstances and actions they describe. Because the Marines’ seven engagements were spread over as many locations and a period of nine months, the maps have been collected in one section for referral.
This map represents the Second Division zones of occupation while in France, except for a few locations where the division was in training or in rest billets.

The asterisks indicate a general location where the division fought each of its five major battles in France. They are the Aisne-Marne Defensive (Belleau Wood); the Aisne-Marne Offensive (Soissons); St. Mihiel; Blanc Mont; and the Meuse Argonne. The dates are approximate periods in which the division was engaged in battle.

The large, bold line indicates the approximate location of the German and the Allied forces at the beginning of June, 1918.

LOCATION OF 2D DIVISION'S BATTLES IN FRANCE
NORTHWEST OF CHATEAU-TIERRY (Beauieu Wood)
1 June to 5 July 1918

ADVANCE OF 2D DIVISION AT SOISSONS
18 and 19 July 1918