



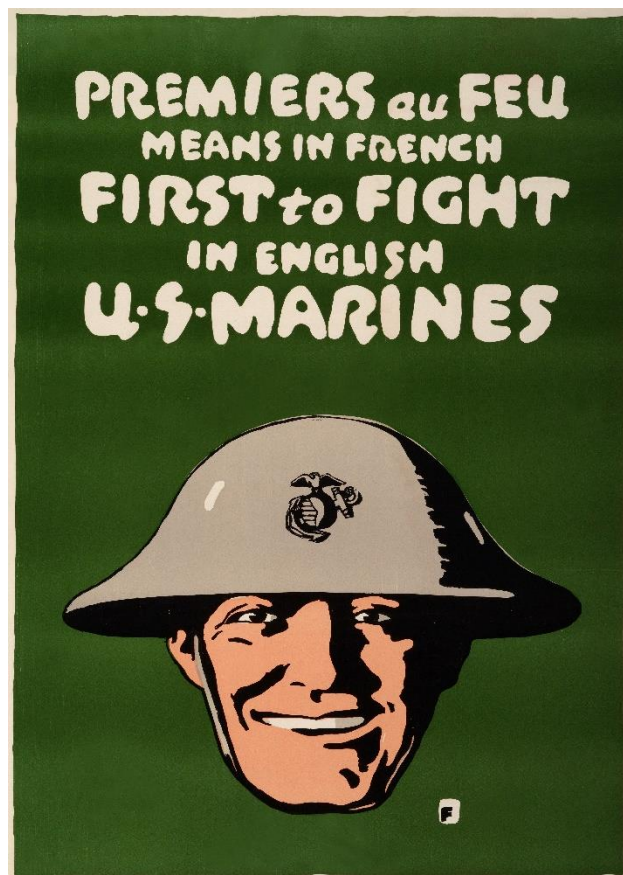
MARINE CORPS HISTORY DIVISION

World War I, 1917–1918

Starting as a regional conflict in July 1914, World War I expanded into a continental conflagration that pitted the Triple Entente powers of the United Kingdom, France, and Russia against the Central Powers of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. Although officially proclaiming neutrality, the Wilson administration sympathized with the Triple Entente. U.S. relations with the Central Powers were increasingly strained but broke in 1917 after Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare led to the sinking of American ships and it was revealed that Germany had encouraged Mexico to go to war with the United States.

By the time the United States declared war on Germany on 6 April 1917, the Marine Corps' strength was less than 14,000 active-duty Marines. Roughly one-half were serving at 25 posts and stations in the United States.

Additionally, there were nearly 5,000 Marines on duty beyond the continental United States, while about 2,200 were serving aboard Navy vessels. To recruit volunteers, the Marine Corps stressed patriotism in its recruitment posters before launching a campaign that employed a line from the "Marines' Hymn": "first to fight." The slogan proved popular, as it appealed to those who wanted to be in the vanguard of Americans deploying to France. Despite the pressure to recruit many more Marines in the rapid buildup, the Corps prided itself on maintaining its high standards as an elite institution. As thousands of young men rushed to volunteer and the draft gathered more steam, the labor potential of women became important. When wartime demands



*Premiers au Feu . . . by Charles Buckles Falls.
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necessitated more Marines for deployment to France, Major General Commandant George Barnett requested authority on 2 August 1918 to enroll women in the Marine Corps Reserve for clerical duty to replace men who were qualified for service overseas. Secretary of the Navy



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Josephus Daniels approved the request. Within days, Opha May Johnson enlisted and became the first woman Marine on 13 August. By the end of the war, 305 women Marines had answered the call to “free a man to fight” and performed services that supported the war effort.

While the Marine Corps engineered its largest mobilization to date, the Service sought opportunities for Marines to make an impact. In June 1917, while still determining the precise role U.S. forces would play in the war, President Woodrow Wilson sent the 1st Expeditionary Division (later redesignated the 1st Division) to France to boost Allied morale and show the American flag. Sensing the need to justify recent increases to the Marine Corps, Commandant Barnett convinced the War Department to accept the 5th Regiment for service with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF). Additionally, Barnett reached an agreement with Secretary of War Newton D. Baker to provide an additional regiment that would combine with the 5th Regiment to form a brigade within the U.S. Army’s 2d Division. On 14 June 1917, the 5th Regiment, composed of about 70 officers and nearly 2,700 enlisted, left Philadelphia for France on USS *Henderson* (AP 1), *De Kalb* (ID 3010), and *Hancock* (AP 3).

The 6th Regiment and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion organized at Quantico

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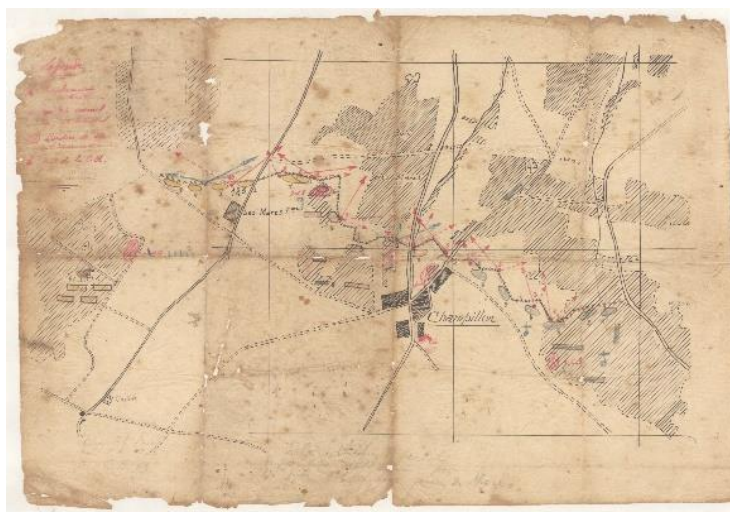
in August and sailed for France in late September. The 4th Brigade (U.S. Marines) formed from elements of the 5th and 6th Regiments on 23 October and was placed under the command of Brigadier General Charles A. Doyen as part of the Army's 2d Division. Notably, Doyen became the first Marine to command a Regular Army division, serving as the initial commander until the arrival of Army Major General Omar Bundy on 8 November.

- For more information, see:
 - [*The United States Marine Corps in the World War*](#)
 - [*United States Marine Corps in the First World War: Anthology, Selected Bibliography, and Annotated Order of Battle*](#)
 - [*Semper Fidelis: 250 Years of U.S. Marine Corps Honor, Courage, and Commitment*](#)
 - [*Women Marines in World War I*](#)
 - [*An Annotated Bibliography of the United States Marine Corps in the First World War*](#)

Belleau Wood and Soissons

In March 1918, the Germans launched the first of a series of offensives along the Western Front. The 2d Division was en route to the front by the end of May 1918 to help block the enemy advance. As they approached the lines, the Marines encountered French civilians and soldiers moving to the rear. In response to a French officer's advice to withdraw as well, Captain Lloyd Williams reportedly replied, "Retreat, hell! We just got here." This famous phrase captures the spirit of the Marines who would finally get a chance to test their mettle in battle. The Marines went into the line and blocked the last German attacks.

The men of the 4th Brigade then prepared to make their own assault. Facing them was a small wood known as the *Bois de Belleau* or Belleau Wood, in which the Germans had established a strong defensive position. On 6 June, the Marines attacked. Legend has it that



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two-time Medal of Honor recipient Gunnery Sergeant Daniel J. Daly shouted to his men as they stepped off, “Come on, you sons-of-bitches! Do you want to live forever?” Whether Daly uttered those words is uncertain, but the attack across the open wheat field that was swept with enemy machine gun and artillery fire would be remembered as the costliest in the history of the Marine Corps to that date, with 1,087 Marines killed, wounded, or missing by day’s end. When the Americans reached the woods, they became engaged in savage close combat and had to use their bayonets and fists. The brutality continued for another three weeks, with the Marines advancing with support from soldiers of the 3d Brigade and the 2d Field Artillery Brigade. After the



Belleau Wood, WWI by Sgt Tom Lovell.
National Museum of the Marine Corps Art Collection

Americans wrested control of Belleau Wood from the Germans on 26 June, Major Maurice E. Shearer, commander of the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, reported back to headquarters, “Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely.” In the process, the division suffered more than 9,777 casualties, 1,811 of them killed.

Although the initial attack showed the 4th Brigade’s inexperience, it captured the public’s imagination. News reports, especially those of war correspondent Floyd Gibbons, who was gravely wounded on 6 June, enthralled American readers. The Marines benefitted from Army censorship regulations, which forbade reporters from identifying specific units but not the Service. As there was only

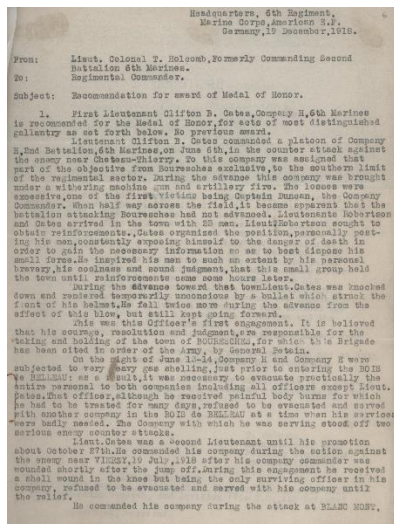
one brigade of Marines serving in France, reporters spotlighted the brigade’s grit, determination, and courage. The legend of the “Marine” Brigade was born. The French honored their achievement by changing the name of the forest to *Bois de la Brigade de Marine* (Marine Brigade Woods) and awarded the *Croix de Guerre* to this hard-fighting American unit.

Battle of Soissons

Although battered, the Marines received little respite. The German offensives had created a large bulge, or salient, along the Western Front. Anticipating further attacks, the French were



preparing a grand counterattack, with the Americans as the spearhead. The Allies blunted the last German offensive, which began on 15 July along the Marne River. The American 2d Division,



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along with the 1st Division and a French colonial division, launched a major counterattack on 18 July south of the French city of Soissons. During two days of fighting, the 2d Division sustained 4,135 casualties, including more than 700 dead, with the 6th Regiment incurring the most casualties of any unit in the division. One of the junior officers whose unit suffered considerable casualties was First Lieutenant Clifton B. Cates, future 19th Commandant of the Marine Corps. “I have only two out of my company and 20 out of some other company,” he reported. “We need support, but it is almost suicide to try to get it here as we are swept by machine gun fire and a constant barrage is on us. I have no one on my left and only a few on my right. I will hold.”

Despite the losses during the offensive, the Marines and soldiers advanced eight kilometers, cutting a vital German supply line and undermining the enemy position in the salient. The initial Allied defensive, which the Americans called the Champagne-Marne, and the counterattack, labeled the Aisne-Marne, have collectively been known as the Second Battle of the Marne. It represented the turning point of the war on the Western Front, as the German Army never again mounted a large-scale offensive.

- For more information, see:
 - [*The Bravest Deeds of Men: A Field Guide for the Battle of Belleau Wood*](#)
 - [*The United States Marine Corps in the World War*](#)
 - [*United States Marine Corps in the First World War: Anthology, Selected Bibliography, and Annotated Order of Battle*](#)

Battles of Saint-Mihiel and Blanc Mont

After receiving much-needed rest and vital replacements, the Marines and 2d Division were once again called to action, this time as part of the first American offensive of the war. For the operation, which aimed to reduce a salient around the town of Saint-Mihiel, southeast of



Verdun, General John J. Pershing led the newly formed American First Army. The attack began on 12 September and included more than 200,000 Americans divided into three corps. The Marines and 2d Division served in the I Army Corps under Major General Hunter Liggett. The division performed well, advancing more than six kilometers the first day and seizing the village of Thiaucourt. The Americans had little time to celebrate, as plans were already underway for a much larger assault 50 kilometers to the west.

- For more information, see:
 - [*A Hideous Price: The 4th Brigade at Blanc Mont, 2-10 October 1918*](#)
 - [*Reducing the Saint-Mihiel Salient, September 1918*](#)
 - [*The United States Marine Corps in the World War*](#)

Having participated in the initial attack at Saint-Mihiel, the 2d Division did not take part in the first attack of the Meuse-Argonne offensive, which began on 26 September. Held in reserve while the lead divisions battered themselves against stiff German defenses, the Marines and soldiers of the 2d Division waited for their moment to go back into the lines. It finally came in early October. As the American First Army was fighting between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest, the French Fourth Army was attacking to the west. Its advance had stalled in front of German positions along



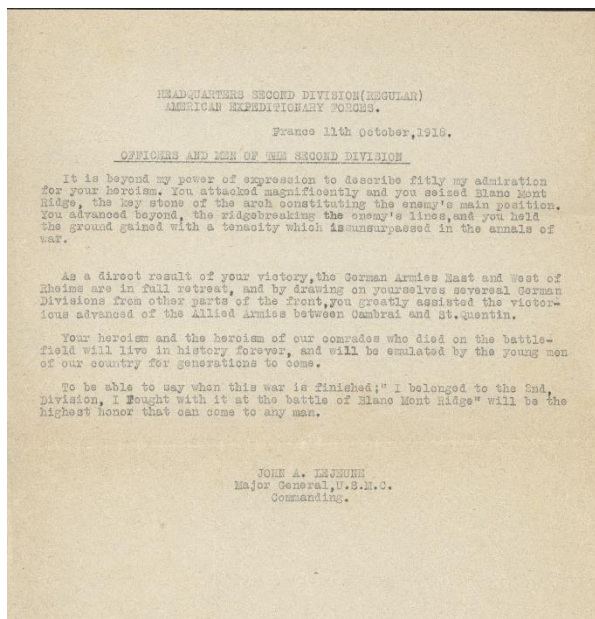
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Blanc Mont Ridge, four kilometers north of the town of Sommepey. In late September, Pershing agreed to send two divisions to assist the French and break the enemy strongpoint. The 2d Division began its move westward on 28 September and eventually took over a three-kilometer



section of the line by 1 October. The Battle of Blanc Mont began on 3 October. After three weeks of fighting, which required considerable coordination between artillery and infantry, the veteran soldiers and Marines seized their objectives at the cost of roughly 4,800 casualties.

Fighting to the End



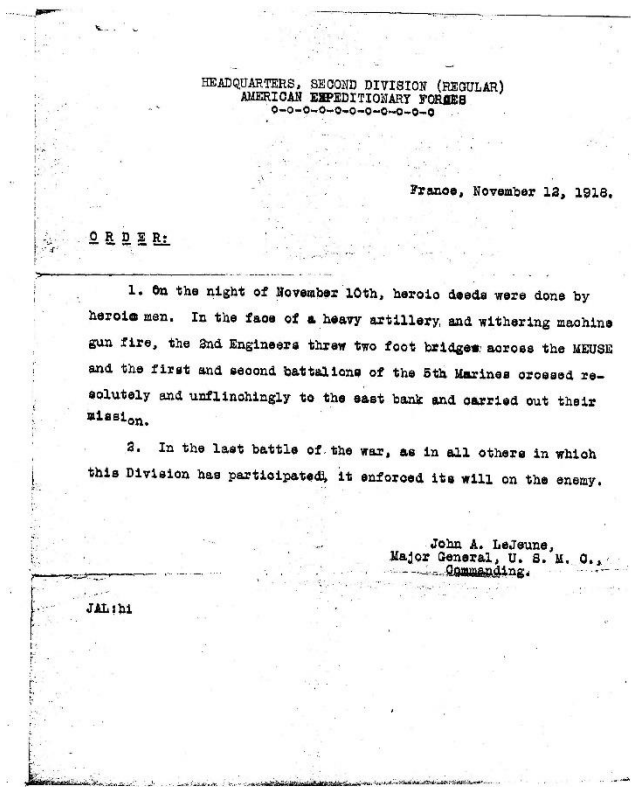
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As the 2d Division recuperated throughout October, the American First Army continued the Meuse-Argonne offensive, which had begun on 26 September with an attack by nine divisions across a 30-kilometer front. The battle went poorly for the new, untried American divisions leading the assault against formidable German defenses. After reorganizing in mid-October, the Americans finally cleaved a hole into the vaunted Hindenburg Line, the German defensive barrier along the Western Front, by month's end. The breakthrough set the stage for a final push to the Meuse River.

Taking position in the middle of the American line as part of the V Army Corps, the 2d Division led the assault on 1 November. The division drove forward roughly 10 kilometers, nearly outpacing the divisions attacking on its flanks. During the next 10 days, the entire First Army advanced while the Germans withdrew to the Meuse. By this point, the German Army was collapsing, and the two sides agreed to an armistice beginning 11 November.



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Occupation

With the Armistice declared, the Marines remained in the 2d Division when it became part of the American occupation forces. They moved to Coblenz, Germany, by 11 December and took up positions along the Rhine River. The Marines continued in their occupation duties for another seven months before sailing back to the United States in August 1919. With its veterans returning home, the Marine Corps joined the other Services in a rapid demobilization. After reaching a wartime peak of more than 75,000, the Marine Corps was reduced to less than 17,000 officers and enlisted on active duty by 30 June 1920.

As a result of the Marines' performance in World War I, the French recognized their outstanding service. The 5th and 6th Regiments were cited three times in French Army orders for their courageous accomplishments in the Château-Thierry sector, the Aisne-Marne (Soissons) offensive, and the Meuse-Argonne campaign. The 6th Machine Gun Battalion was cited for its performance in the Château-Thierry sector and Aisne-Marne (Soissons) offensive, and the 4th Brigade received a similar citation for its achievements in the Château-Thierry sector. In January 1920, the War Department accepted the award of the French *fourragère* in the colors of the ribbon of the *Croix de Guerre* for several Army organizations and three units



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of the 4th Brigade. In addition to these awards for service above and beyond the call of duty, eight Marines were awarded the Medal of Honor.

- For more information, see:
 - *Heroic Deeds, Heroic Men: The U.S. Marine Corps and the Final Phase of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, 1-11 November 1918*
 - *The United States Marine Corps in the World War*
 - *United States Marine Corps in the First World War: Anthology, Selected Bibliography, and Annotated Order of Battle*

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