

Cottonbalers in the Wood:

The Forgotten Role of the 7th Infantry Regiment at Belleau Wood

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From 16-24 June 1918, the Soldiers of the 7th Infantry Regiment, 5th Brigade, 3rd Division, bravely fought during the Battle of Belleau Wood in relief of the 5th Regiment of Marines, 4th Brigade (Marine), 2nd Division.¹ Although they suffered heavy losses, 7th Infantry units did not receive recognition for their role in the battle at the time. Reports of their actions faded away as stories of Marines filled newspapers across the country. After the war, the 7th Infantry did not find representation in some histories of the battle. So, how did the unit lose this part of its legacy? This article will examine the 7th Infantry Regiment's contributions to the battle and reasons why their actions may have been overlooked, which include a failure of leadership, a censor mistake from General Headquarters of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), and the actions of an overzealous press.

The bulk of the Battle of Belleau Wood occurred during the month of June 1918 about five miles west of the town of Château-Thierry, France. Despite being a small part of the Allied campaign in the area to stop the German spring offensive, it became one of the most significant battles for the AEF. The faltering German offensive was finally halted by the Americans around Château-Thierry. The 2nd Division held the woods and towns west of the city while the 3rd Division held the city and banks of the Marne River. Marines only made up a quarter of the 2nd Division, yet they received the lion's share of the glory for the fighting in the region. The French government renamed Belleau Wood to Bois de la Brigade de Marine (Wood of the Marine Brigade). Suffering almost 1,000 killed in action and around 3,000 wounded or gassed, the Marine Corps certainly deserve the credit they have received.² However, the 7th Infantry's actions also merit recognition.

After almost 10 days of constant, heavy fighting in the wood, the Marine battalions, reduced in numbers by the severe fighting and thoroughly exhausted, needed relief in order to rest and receive replacements.³ On 15 June, COL Thomas M. Anderson, commander of the 7th Infantry Regiment, received an order from BG Omar Bundy,



Soldiers from the 7th Infantry rest on a roadside, 21 May 1918. (Signal Corps photograph)

commanding general of the 2nd Division, stating that the 7th Infantry had been placed at the disposal of his division by French General Denis Auguste Duchène, commanding general of the Sixth French Army. That night, the 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry relieved the 2nd Battalion, 5th Regiment and 2nd Battalion, 6th Regiment in the northernmost point of Belleau Wood. The following night, the 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry relieved the Marines holding the sector between 1st Battalion's position and the town of Bouresches. On the night of 17 June, the 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry set up on the left of the 1st Battalion. This put all three battalions of the 7th Infantry on the frontline within Belleau Wood. Since they were loaned to the 2nd Division, they fell under the command of Marine Col Wendell C. Neville, commander of the 5th Regiment.

The Bois de Belleau was a mighty thick woods and it had been subjected to bombardment by the Germans and Allied forces as well. Trees twelve to fifteen inches in diameter were cut down like saplings and they made an almost impassable barrier where they had fallen. I never saw such shell work; a saw could not have done better work. When our bunch went over the top there were only tiny lanes between where these trees lay, through which our men could advance. The Germans had been there first, and they took advantage of the fact. They had machinegun nests trained down these lanes, and it was a darn tough job.⁴

The ground is exceedingly rough, ravine, covered with dense underbrush and all trails and paths in the direction of this stronghold seem to be covered by machinegun fire and in one or two cases by 37mm.⁵

Map 1 — 1st Battalion's Positions within Belleau Wood (National Archives)

On the following morning, CPT Paul Cartter of Company C led an attack of about 60 volunteers from Companies A, B, and C, to dislodge the Germans. In their first attempt, they were inundated by “machine gun, rifle, and hand grenade fire which increased as they crawled towards the enemy.” This push stalled and the men fell back. Undaunted, CPT Cartter took men from Company D and tried once more, but the Germans held their fortified position.⁷ The casualties from this attack numbered 11 killed, 45 wounded, and 7 missing.⁸

One example of the sacrifice and strength of 7th Infantry Soldiers can be seen in the actions of one of those missing, PVT Ernest A. Rouch from Company A, 7th Infantry. During the raid, he “was struck by machine gun bullets at three places. One bullet cut a groove in his head, another passed through his shoulder and the third went through his right ankle.” He attempted to find his way back to the American lines, but in a dazed state he walked into the German lines and was taken prisoner. He later claimed that a German officer offered him a chance to return to his lines if he would “promise never to fight against the Germans again.” To this, Rouch reportedly replied “that the Germans could send him back to his comrades, but he was an American soldier and would fight to the end.”⁹

After this second failed push, the 1st Battalion needed only to hold on until the night of 21 June when they would be relieved. However, BG Harbord sent an informal note to LTC Frank A. Adams, commander of 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry, advising him that they had “but one more opportunity to take the machine gun position and redeem themselves for the failure of the previous night.”¹⁰ Therefore, the 1st Battalion would make a final attempt to take the German position on the night of 20 June. Adams requested a heavy artillery concentration on the German positions, which was granted. In order to prepare for this bombardment, the battalion was ordered to withdraw one kilometer to avoid the danger of any short rounds.¹¹

By 2200, the company commanders had withdrawn their companies and awaited the artillery barrage; however, the promised bombardment never came. Without any artillery support, the attack began at 0315. Company A led the attack followed by Company C, while Company D remained in reserve. Unfortunately, Company B drifted too far to the left and failed to reach the objective in the dark. Companies A and C advanced up the hill but were forced back by heavy German resistance.¹²

In some parts of the woods, the Germans allowed the units to push deep into their lines before opening fire. 1LT Carl C. Helm of Company A, 7th Infantry, recalled that they had advanced to the top of the rise without a single shot being fired. He “thought the Germans had retired;” however, this thought quickly faded as “we were fired upon from all sides and from trees. Machine guns on our both flanks and in our rear opened on us.”¹³ This confusion and carnage forced the men to retreat out of the ambush.

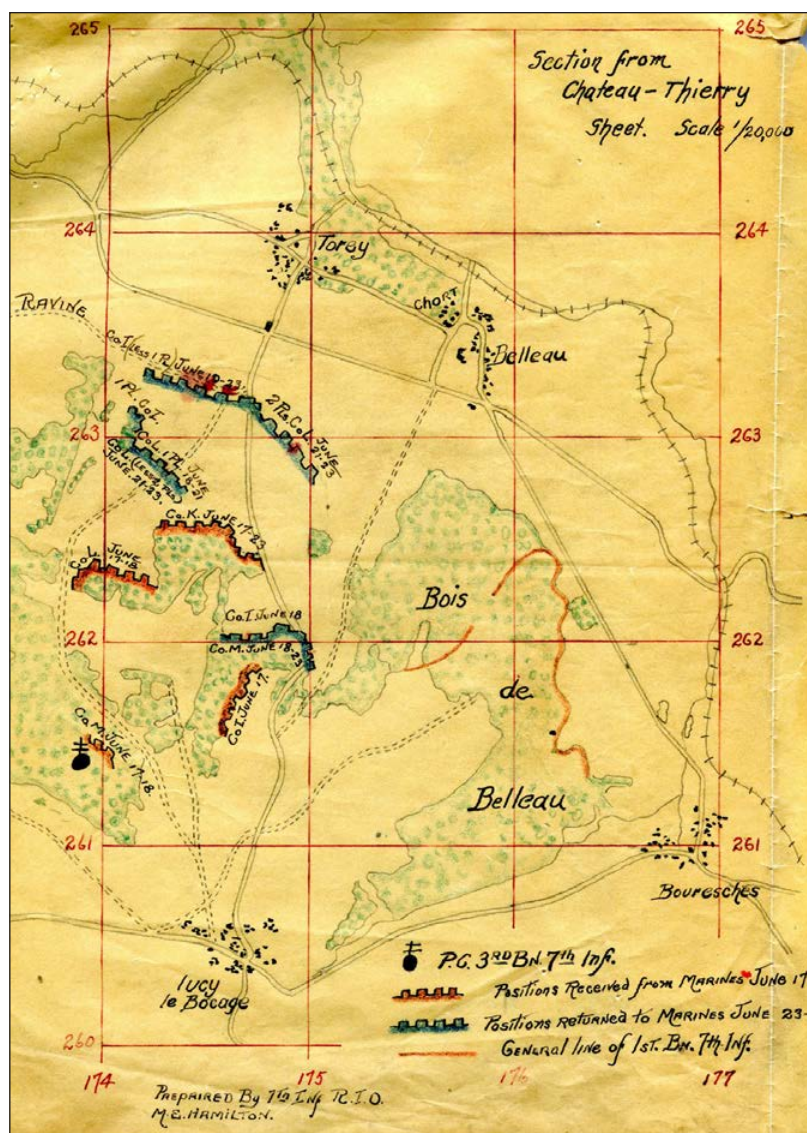
While pushing the attack, the Germans attempted to deceive the U.S. Soldiers by dressing in American uniforms and speaking in English. CPT Flannery recalled:

*There were any number of boches dressed in American army uniforms, and I remember distinctly one of them jumping up on a rock and shouting in perfect English “Cease firing; you are killing your own men.” There was some temporary confusion and in the pause they got busy with hand grenades. Those birds paid for that trick, you bet your life.*¹⁴

BG Harbord also recorded:

*The officers and several enlisted men questioned by me all said that the enemy they actually saw were... dressed in American uniforms; that certain of them mixed with our troops and attempted to interfere with the plan of attack, saying that the line should not advance as our own people were up there and we should not kill our own people. At one point in the attack when the line had engaged the enemy, a German in American uniform approached Lieut. Paysley of Company A saying to him: “My God, you are not going to fire on your own men out there in front, are you? You are not going to kill your own men.” It being so apparent to Lt. Paysley that this officer was an enemy in our own uniform, that he immediately shot and killed him, in the excitement of the moment not obtaining insignia or identification from the body.*¹⁵

This treachery, paired with the heavy resistance, forced the Americans to fall back to their original lines. Here, they waited until the Marines returned to relieve them. During their eight days in Belleau Wood, the 1st Battalion, 7th Infantry suffered 337 casualties (8 officers and 229 enlisted men, of which two officers and 34 enlisted were killed), which was 25 percent of its strength.¹⁶



Map 2 — 3rd Battalion's Positions (National Archives)

During 1st Battalion's attack in the wood, 3rd Battalion executed an advance toward Torcy through the open fields outside of the woods. Taking almost no losses, this 1-kilometer push captured the crossroads south of the town. This would be the only forward progress made by 7th Infantry units during their time in Belleau Wood.

After eight days of constant bombardment and heavy combat, the 7th Infantry still held their original lines. Despite not loosening the Germans' grip on the wood, these American Soldiers fought valiantly, and it cost the Germans dearly. After being wounded and returning to the United States, PVT Frank Dallas of Company L, 7th Infantry, stated in an interview that in the Battle of Belleau Wood, "the United States Soldiers fought at night and there was not a night that some were not killed or wounded. However, for every ten Americans killed the Germans gave up thirty dead. The carnage was great."¹⁷

Beginning the night of 21 June, the Marines began to replace the 7th Infantry's battalions throughout Belleau Wood. As the Marines returned, they found a ragged group of men who had held onto this piece of woods despite a fierce German resistance and complete lack of support from the 4th Brigade leadership. PVT Claude Romine, 82nd Company, 6th Regiment, later reported: "We went back to Belleau Wood and found the Seventh Infantry almost wiped out. They had no horses, no artillery, they didn't know where to go nor what to do, but they were still fighting the best they could."¹⁸

The Marines, rested, fed, and bolstered by new replacements, continued their attack into the northern section of the wood after relieving the 7th Infantry. As BG Bundy remarked after the war about the Marines: "This time

they were favored with a terrific artillery preparation that searched with heavy shells every part of the wood still remaining in the enemy's hands, as well as the approaches from the north."¹⁹ Perhaps the woods could have been taken if the 7th Infantry troops had been properly assisted by artillery and adequately supplied. This led to a great amount of animosity during and after their tour in Belleau Wood.

In his "Report of Action of First Battalion, 7th U.S. Infantry," LTC Adams revealed his frustrations with the 4th Brigade leadership stating:

The troops under my command were green men... They were under a terrific artillery fire, harassed by aeroplanes, and in direct observation. It was difficult to procure food and water, and the general conditions were such as to make the most experienced troops nervous.

*Our line was thinly held — our supports were nil, and our ability to hold our line, should it be attacked in force, doubtful. Laboring under these handicaps, the attack was made, as ordered, and was a failure. Two days later another attack was ordered, with the promise of heavy artillery preparation. The battalion made the attempt, but the absolute lack of the promised artillery preparation made the attempt abortive and caused heavy casualties without any military result.*²⁰

Without any supplies being transported to 7th Infantry Soldiers, they could not maintain an efficient state of combat readiness. Likewise, without any artillery support, their attacks were doomed to fail.

To the men of the 7th Infantry, this became a point of extreme contention. CPT P.J. Hurley, commanding officer of 2nd Battalion, 7th Infantry, wrote in his "Report on Occupation of Sector in Bois de Belleau" that the logistics between the 5th Regiment and 7th Infantry were nonexistent during their time in Belleau Wood. When he sent men to secure food for his battalion, CPT George K. Schuler, regimental adjutant for the 5th Regiment, directed them to kitchens about "500 yards west of the 4th Brigade HQ." The next night, his men were sent "some four kilometers from our P.C." but wandered in the dark for several hours "without being able to locate anyone in authority." Eventually, they were told that the supplies had been sent back to Lucy le Bocage several hours before. Even after finally finding the kitchens, they were only able to secure "some canned beef and forty loaves of bread." On top of the lack of food, no supply or ammunition dumps had been set up for the 7th Infantry.²¹ These conditions continued through their entire time in Belleau Wood. Fortunately, "frequent showers aided matters as the men would catch rain in their shelter halves for drinking. This condition of affairs caused the condition of the men to become weak."²²

The Army and Marine Corps leadership of the 4th Brigade failed to provide adequate support to 7th Infantry Soldiers during their entire time on the frontlines. This included a lack of coordination with the 2nd Field Artillery



Belleau Woods, looking toward Belleau Torcy Hill 193 and the German lines, 1919.
(Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division)

Brigade. Instead, they were continuously ordered to attack heavily fortified positions without the protection or assistance of artillery, leading to many casualties. CPT I.R. Williams of Company C, 7th Infantry, reported his concerns and feelings about the 7th Infantry leaving Belleau Woods:

*To me who lost 24 out of the 47 men I took in that place, it is a sore point. We failed to take the hill, but we did not lose any ground. With a proper artillery preparation and a carefully planned attack, instead of an attack planned and executed in the darkness, the 250 casualties of the 1st Bn., 7th Infantry would not have been in vain.*²³

The lack of adequate leadership cost the 7th Infantry dearly. However, they suffered another insult to their service as American newspapers began to publish articles about Belleau Wood describing how the Marines had captured not only Belleau Wood but also the city of Château-Thierry on their own.

During the war, press correspondents could not identify any unit by name nor strength of numbers. They could not announce how many or which divisions were fighting in a particular sector or even say whether the Americans functioned as a separate division or if brigaded with the French. The only identifier they could publish was "American troops." They could, however, mention specifics to units such as "artillery, the medical corps, the engineers, or any other branch of the service." So, the correspondents, eager to give their stories some character, asked General Headquarters AEF: "Why not regard the Marines as a branch of the service and let us mention them in a general way?" Someone in charge of censorship at Chaumont, home of AEF General Headquarters, gave the go ahead. This censor's hasty decision resulted in the creation of the Marine Corps as the greatest fighting force within the AEF, at least to those reading the newspapers.²⁴

The correspondents, eager to supply the latest stories from the front to the insatiable public in the states, quickly published articles about the Marines and their exploits in the Château-Thierry sector. This decision angered GEN John J. Pershing, commander of AEF, so much that he "immediately and personally relieved the officer responsible." Unfortunately, it was too late. "The damage had been done. The reputation had been made. The ball had started to roll. It never stopped. It never will." The Marine Corps filled all newspapers "just as a spoonful of ink will color a glass of water."²⁵ Their reputation had been made. They now received single credit for the capture of Belleau Wood and Château-Thierry, thus both the 3rd Division and the 3rd Brigade, 2nd Division were not acknowledged for their roles.

The first stories of the fight around Belleau Wood poured through the wires from France and were filled with the enthusiasm and pride as American troops pushed back the German army. The Marine Corps became a household name throughout the United States. Everyone read stories of the Marines and their valiant struggle against the



German machine gunners retreat from Belleau Woods, June 1918.
(Joel T. Boone Papers, Library of Congress)

German forces in the dark woods while the Army sat by and watched. Newspapers around the country ran articles with headlines such as “Marines Crush Prussian Line” and “Marines Use Up Three German Divisions in Week and Still Looking for More to Conquer.”²⁶ Fortunately, despite newspaper headlines to the contrary, it was easy to correct the misinformation that the Marines captured Château-Thierry since the 3rd Division was the only American unit to fight in the city proper. Though, it would provide a source of annoyance for 3rd Division veterans until after the war. As SGT Alexander H. Woollcott, one of the creators and editors for the *Stars and Stripes*, remarked, “though the Marines did do the biggest job done in that area at that time, there were others. But you wouldn’t have guessed it from the papers.”²⁷ Dislodging the Marines’ complete hold over Belleau Wood would prove much more difficult because they not only had the news coverage, but they had a correspondent hero to champion their story.

War correspondent Floyd Phillips Gibbons of the *Chicago Tribune* wanted to cover the American push at Belleau Wood. War correspondents on the frontlines needed to be escorted by an officer. On 6 June, Gibbons was with two Marine Corps officers — 1Lt Arthur Edmund Hartzell and Maj Benjamin Berry, commander of 3rd Battalion, 5th Regiment — as the Marines advanced on the first day of their push into Belleau Wood. While watching the drive, the Germans turned their machine guns on the detachment of men, wounding Gibbons in the process.²⁸ Though injured in the arm and losing his left eye, Gibbons survived the ordeal and quickly sent dispatches back to the states. Newspapers around the country ran articles about this brave correspondent that endured the vicious fighting for his story. He became the topic of many articles such as “Floyd P. Gibbons Injured at Front by Foe Bullets.”²⁹ An article titled “Plucky Floyd Gibbons Forgets His Wounds to Praise Marines,” praised Gibbons and his enthusiasm for the Marines, stating, “those Marines are wonderful. Nothing could stop them.”³⁰ His own article claimed that “in this fighting and struggle of the last three days, much credit redounds to the United States Marines who have been steadily in the first line.”³¹ While already prolific, the Marines now had a famous face to promote their feats.

Understandably, the misunderstanding in the press did not sit well with the veterans of the 7th Infantry who sacrificed so much in Belleau Wood. They attempted to straighten the record through official reports, letters, and news articles, but the legends persisted.

MAJ Paul C. Paschal, regimental staff officer for the 30th Infantry, 3rd Division, wrote home that “it was the 3d Division that stopped the German drive at Château-Thierry and not the Marines as some papers said. The Marines did the fighting in the Belleau Wood, but we sent the 7th Infantry up to help them.”³²

The Watch on the Rhine, a paper published by and for the Soldiers of the 3rd Division while on occupation duty in Andernach, Germany, contained a poignant statement as to the intentions of these veterans who spoke up about the truth:

*The purpose of exposing the falsity of these stories that have recurred so frequently in the magazines and newspapers is certainly not to discredit the work of the Marines, for we know that they fought well. But it is important that this entanglement be straightened out before historians gather up these untrue, exaggerated, and often ludicrous records, and use them as a basis for a history of the part America played in the great war.*³³

Unfortunately, this is exactly what happened.

Today, Belleau Wood stands as a visible example of America’s, in particular the Marine Corps’, sacrifice in World War I. The battle could not have been won without the joint effort of the Army, Marine Corps, and Navy.

Notes

¹ During World War I, the 5th and 6th Regiments of Marines served in the 4th Brigade (Marine) in the Army’s 2nd Division.

² Marine Corps History Division, “The Battle of Belleau Wood, 1-26 June 1918,” accessed from <https://www.usmcu.edu/Portals/218/HD/Brief%20Histories/Belleau%20Wood.pdf?ver=2019-05-23-083625-560#:~:text=%E2%9C%93%20Despite%20successes%20taking%20Hill,Marines%20had%201%2C087%20casualties>.

³ BG Omar Bundy, “Gen. Bundy’s Own Story of the Battle That Turned the Tide for the Allies,” *Wisconsin State Journal* (22 February 1919): 4; “2d Division Took Belleau Woods,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, (21 February 1919), 9.

⁴ T. Edward Murtaugh, “Tub Flannery Tells of Hun Treachery and U.S. Valor of the Marne,” *Salt Lake Tribune* (27 October 1918): 25.

⁵ BG James G. Harbord, "Supplementary to Report of 1 p.m. Today," 21 June 1918, 2, provided to the author from the personal collection of Steven C. Girard, originally found in National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 120.9.3, Record of Combat Divisions, 2nd Division Files, Boxes 1-90, Record Group 120 Records of the AEF.

⁶ Frederic Vinton Hemenway, *History of the Third Division United States Army in the World War for the Period December 1, 1917 To January 1, 1919*. (Andernach-on-the-Rhine, Cologne: M. Dumont Schauberg, 1919), 89.

⁷ CPT I.R. Williams, "Report on Operations of 1st Platoon, Co. C, 7th Infantry in Belleau Woods, June 15-21, 1918," provided to the author from the personal collection of Steven C. Girard, originally found in RG 120, NARA.

⁸ Hemenway, *History of the Third Division United States Army*, 89.

⁹ "Dazed by his Wounds Walked into Hun Line," *The York Dispatch* (York, PA, 20 March 1919): 8.

¹⁰ LTC Frank H. Adams, "Report of Operations at Bois de Belleau," 23 June 1918, 2, provided to the author from the personal collection of Steven C. Girard, originally found in RG 120, NARA.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hemenway, *History of the Third Division United States Army*, 90.

¹³ 1LT Carl C. Helm, "Report of Operations," 24 June 1918, 2, provided to the author from the personal collection of Steven C. Girard, originally found in RG 120, NARA.

¹⁴ "Tub Flannery Tells of Hun Treachery and U.S. Valor of the Marne," *Salt Lake Tribune* (27 October 1918): 25.

¹⁵ Harbord, "Supplementary to Report of 1 p.m. Today," 91.

¹⁶ Hemenway, *History of the Third Division United States Army*, 91.

¹⁷ "Frank Dallas, Wounded at Belleau Wood Fight, First to Return Home," *The Daily New Era* (Lancaster, PA, 24 September 1918): 12.

¹⁸ "Graphic Story Told by Leflore County Hero," *The Daily Commonwealth* (Greenwood, MS, 9 April 1919): 5.

¹⁹ Omar Bundy, "Gen. Bundy's Own Story of the Battle That Turned the Tide for the Allies," *Wisconsin State Journal* (22 February 1919): 4.

²⁰ LTC Frank H. Adams, "Report of Action of First Battalion, 7th U.S. Infantry in Belleau Woods," 21 June 1919, 1, provided to the author from the personal collection of Steven C. Girard, originally found in RG 120, NARA.

²¹ P.J. Hurley, "Report on Occupation of Sector in Bois de Belleau," 24 June 1918, 1, provided to the author from the personal collection of Steven C. Girard, originally found in RG 120, NARA.

²² I.R. William, "Report on Operations of 1st Platoon, Co. 'C,' 7th Infantry in Belleau Woods, June 15-21, 1918," 1, provided to the author from the personal collection of Steven C. Girard, originally found in RG 120, NARA.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Alexander Woollcott, "The Legend of the Marines: How Two Regiments of Fighting Men Walked Away with the Lion's Share of A.E.F. Glory," *The Charlotte News* (29 October 1919), 9-10.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "Marines Use Up Three German Divisions in Week and Still Looking for More to Conquer," *Los Angeles Times* (8 June 1918): 2; "Marines Crush the Prussian Line," *The Boston Globe* (8 June 1918): 2.

²⁷ Woollcott, "The Legend of the Marines," 9-10.

²⁸ Kevin C. Seldon, *Among the Ranks of the Carrion Men, Volume II: The Epic Story of the Thirty-Six-Day Fight in and Around Belleau Wood*, (Self-published, 2019), 230-232.

²⁹ "Floyd P. Gibbons Injured at Front by Foe Bullets," *San Francisco Chronicle* (8 June 1918): 3.

³⁰ "Plucky Floyd Gibbons Forgets His Wounds to Praise Marines," *Pittsburgh Daily Post* (10 June 1918): 2.

³¹ Floyd P. Gibbons, "American Troops on the Marne," *Pittsburgh Daily Post* (8 June 1918): 4.

³² "Says Third Division Halted Germans at Chateau Thierry," *Evening Star* (Washington, D.C., 2 February 1919): 11.

³³ "Doughboys, Not Marines Stopped Huns at Thierry," *Honolulu Advertiser* (26 May 1919): 2.

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