



A Moment In Time

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I drove five hours from Mainz, Germany, in my 1957 Opel. It was ten years old but solid and good on gas. I got it for a song from a soldier rotating back to the States. Mainz was my permanent duty station courtesy of the United States Army. I was on a five-day leave. I left Mainz at 0400 hours, headed for the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery at Belleau Wood en route to Paris to see if the City of Lights lived up to its reputation.

As a history buff, I was interested in what occurred during World War One. An Army lifer at the NCO club was the first to tell me about the fierce battle at Belleau Wood. I knew it happened in June 1918 because of a high school history class. It's unlikely the NCO had read any official reports of the battle. And since casual talk after a few beers becomes more fiction than fact, his was oral history passed down through the ranks.

I arrived at the memorial cemetery at 0900 hours. I picked up a free map of the grounds, featuring information

and walking trails through the Belleau forest. The morning sky had a soft, pastel hue with fading hues of pink and lavender. It created a dreamlike canvas as clouds passed slowly overhead. A distant haze surrounded the dense woodland, giving the landscape depth and contrast. At the entrance, a bronze sculpture of a Marine named Iron Mike greeted visitors. I felt odd. I came from Germany—*Allemagne* in French—home of the *Boche* war machine that Allied Forces fought from trenches in France and Flanders in northern Europe.

When I viewed the wheat field at area five, I saw red poppies interspersed among the wheat. Its stalks and poppies fluttered in the summer breeze. It looked so serene. I stood ramrod still and absorbed the tranquility and silence. They gave me goosebumps.

Suddenly, a voice surprised me. “Hello, soldier!” I turned and saw a stranger with an eyepatch on his left eye standing near me. Either he crept like a house cat, or I had been so deep in my thoughts I failed to hear him approach. He was dressed casually. His cream-colored shirt had a broad collar. He had rolled its long sleeves up to his elbows. His wide tie had a brown filigree design that contrasted nicely with his shirt.

His high-waisted, forest-green khaki trousers were held up with matching suspenders. He looked thirtysomething. He stood 5’11, with neatly-combed black hair and hazel eyes. He was lean like a marathon runner. He had a gaunt face but appeared friendly. Yet, his clothing style looked out of date.

“Sorry,” he said, “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Oh, no problem,” I said. “How’d you know I was a soldier?”

“Your sidewalls, buzz-cut hairdo, are a dead giveaway, and only a soldier stands like that.”

I laughed.

“Is this your first time here?”

“Yes.”

“How about you?”

“Oh, no. I’m a fixture at Belleau.”

“Do you know the story of what happened here?”

“I do. You might say I wrote it.”

“Huh? Would you tell it to me if it’s no bother?”

“You’re looking at the open wheat field where the first assault of the Battle of Belleau Wood began on June 6, 1918, in the afternoon. Untested Marines not older than boys in their late teens had been ordered to take Hill 142 from battled-hardened German soldiers—*Boche*. It’s that hill over there. As you can see, its jagged terrain holds a dense forest of trees, thickets, and undergrowth. Its gullies and narrow streams are hidden from view. Belleau Wood—Belleau, meaning lovely water—is an oxymoron; nothing was beautiful about that mishmash during the next twenty days of relentless fighting.

“Even though it’s matured, the landscape looks as it did then. The Marines had to cross that 400 yards of waist-high wheat field to reach the forest where over 1,200 Germans were well hidden. They had 200 to 250 machine guns in bunkers and pits, infantry armed with rifles, and heavy mortars. Behind them, the enemy had their reserves ready to support soldiers on the defensive line.

“The Germans had spent three days creating an almost impenetrable fortress in the natural features on that hill with interlocking machine-gun fire. They sat quietly. They waited in coarse gray uniforms like hungry wolves about to kill their prey. They wanted the Americans to assault them from that open field because the Germans had an unobstructed view. The Marines would be exposed, unprotected, and vulnerable every step of the way.

“No one word can fully describe the unmerciful killing that happened. Those German machine guns fired 600 rounds per minute up to 4,500 yards. That rate of fire could be sustained for hours as long as the weapon functioned and it had ammo. The Marine assault was ill-fated before the one-minute, get-ready alert, and the shrill of officers’ whistles sounded at 1700 hours, sending two Marine battalions across that field.

“With the sun at their backs, they moved forward as the French had taught them. Their lines were dressed so that each platoon moved in four separately spaced waves, with Marines staggering themselves eight to ten paces apart. They walked with their bodies slanted forward as if they faced a heavy headwind. They held their rifles high, bayonets fixed. When they were within 100 yards of the forest, the Germans opened fire. Its intensity sliced off the tops of the wheat. It looked like a scythe had made a gigantic pass across the field. Marines lay injured or dead. Men had been hit multiple times. Cries for help went unanswered.”

I was beside myself, hearing him describe the scene. “How could that happen?” I asked.

“Military plans on paper go up in smoke during the chaos on the battlefield. A brigadier general blamed the high

casualties on the inexperience of the Marines. On June 5, a Marine intelligence officer and two scouts reconnoitered an area in the woods. The officer reported the Germans had machine guns in the forest, but his report never cited how many because how could he have thoroughly reconned 600 acres of woods? It's unlikely he had terrain or topography maps because they were in short supply and about worthless if they existed. A French spotter plane had flown over the area. Its pilot reported the section as calm. A Marine officer questioned the sanity of crossing the open wheat field because his men would be sitting ducks. Another officer doubted the attack would succeed.

“The dead lay where they had fallen. There was no time to recover them. Dismembered bodies stunk and rotted in the summer sun. Flies swarmed on them. Marines who hadn't been cut to pieces lay face down in the dirt until nightfall when the darkness afforded them cover, and they could withdraw to their lines. Plenty of attacks and counterattacks from the Germans occurred. The Marines and soldiers made six successive assaults over the next twenty days. And then, on July 26, it ended when the 5th Marines made the final attack, and the Germans withdrew from Belleau Wood. Marine casualties here and in nearby villages came to 6,534, exceeding the number of Marines who died in battle in the Corps since it began in 1775.

“Beating the Germans checked an offensive advance here and kept the *Boche* from reaching the city of Paris, only 50 miles away. World War One eventually ended on November 11 after the successful offensive the Allies launched in the months that followed.

“The Marines played a significant role in the Battle of Belleau Wood. They had lost the most men. *Bois de Belleau* would be renamed *Bois de la Brigade des Marines*—Woods of the Marine Brigade.”

“I never learned that in my high school history classes,” I said.

“I suppose not,” he said.

“I didn’t even get your name, Mr....”

“It’s Floyd Gibbons. Please, no, mister.”

“And yours?”

“Reece Adler”

“Nice meeting you. I’ve never met anyone as genuinely interested in knowing what happened here as you. But the day’s a-wasting; I’m sure you want to finish the tour and leave for Paris in daylight.”

So I thanked him. Walking to the next area, I noticed I had dropped my trail guide behind me. So I retraced my steps until I found it. I looked up and expected to see Floyd again, but he was gone.

After four days in the City of Lights, I eventually returned to my outfit in Mainz. It sure lived up to its reputation. On my first weekend back, I went to the base library. I wanted to find any information about Floyd Gibbons. I figured he must be on the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery staff.

As I flipped through the card catalog, his name appeared not where I expected, but as the war correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune* and as a book author. I read documents about him. He had a remarkable and impressive life. He began his career in 1907 as a reporter at the *Minneapolis Daily News*. To report on the Belleau Wood battle, Floyd

Gibbons went with the Marines during that first assault. When he tried to help a wounded officer, bullets hit Gibbons in his left arm and shoulder. Another ricocheted and tore through his left eye and exited out his forehead. Initially, he was assumed dead, but somehow, he survived.

When he returned home from the war, his hometown, Minneapolis, welcomed him on October 5, 1918. The archives I saw also had photos of him. It was Floyd. He died at 52 of a heart attack on September 24, 1939.

The goosebumps I had felt at Belleau Wood were nothing compared to those I felt now. Holy Toledo! Mum's the word. If I said anything about meeting him on my cemetery tour, I'd be a prime candidate for a Section 8 discharge from the Army.