A Battle for Paris:
The Battle of Belleau Wood

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"If General Pershing's 2nd Division did not arrive in Belleau Wood, The German forces would have driven through the war wearied and demoralized French troops all the way to Paris, and possibly taking France completely out of the war." The Battle of Belleau Wood was the first major engagement after the U.S. joined World War I. This significant event was written about by the *New York Times* who lauded the soldier's achievements in heroic fashion, while the *London Times* hardly mentioned the events at Belleau Wood, aside from the occasional obligatory 'pat on the back' for siding with the Allies during the war. This paper will explore how the *New York Times* and the British Newspaper, *London Times*, reported strikingly different views of one of America's most famous battles in the First World War.

The American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) were poorly trained and ill-equipped soldiers consisting of civilians who had the same naïve and disillusioned view of war that Europeans had at the start of World War I. The newly created AEF, formed by General John Pershing, did not fully mobilize for war until the summer of 1918. With merely 220,000 National Guardsmen, the American military was hardly seen as

a force to be feared.[1] To illustrate the dire circumstances surrounding a potential invasion of Paris, historian Francis Halsey held the viewpoint that "Paris, now [in 1918], as in 1914, was again the ultimate object of German armies."[2] Essentially, the British and French forces needed new soldiers, primarily because Germany was pushing towards Paris again, which would have knocked France out of the war. Within a few months, two million Americans were conscripted to fight in Europe. The German army was becoming more desperate as conditions on the home front, as well as on the battlefield, began to deteriorate as the quick victory that German military leaders expected never materialized. French and British soldiers were tired and disheartened from the rigors of living in a state of constant warfare. The arrival of fresh, willing, and excited American troops to a small wooded area, forty-five miles northwest of Paris, significantly helped turn the tide for the allies in World War I. The resulting battle was named for its picturesque location, becoming known as the Battle of Belleau Wood.

The AEF's first major engagement became a pivotal turning point in the war. Belleau Wood was a, "pretty little wooded area some five miles Northwest of Chateau-Thierry," and was so densely packed

[1] Robert H. Zieger, *America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.), 86.
[2] Francis Halsey, *The Literary Digest: History of the World War*. (New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls Co., 1920), 122.

with wilderness, "that one could scarcely see twenty feet ahead."[3] It was within these trees that General Pershing assembled a mixed force army of 26,665 Marines into the 2nd Division in order to take the wood.[4] Jean de Pierre Feu, a French soldier, recalled that there was a, "striking… [difference in] appearance between the Americans and the French regiments, whose men, in torn uniforms, hungry and hollowed-eyed, were scarcely able to hold themselves erect."[5] The French tentatively held the line of Chemin-des Dames with 80,000 to 90,000 men spread across the thirty mile front, creating fear among the Allies as rumors circulated of that they would be greeted by nearly half a million strong German soldiers.[6] The Allies' fears proved well founded, as German forces set their gaze upon the capture of Paris. The Battle of Belleau Wood began the evening of June 1, 1918 when German forces pierced through the French lines around the area of Chateau-Thierry and Belleau Wood.

Floyd Gibbons of the *Chicago Tribune* and Lieutenant Oscar Hartzell traveled from Paris to observe the first major engagement of the AEF firsthand. Colonel Wendell Neville allowed Gibbons and Hartzell

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[3] John Toland, *No Man's Land: 1918, the Last Year of the Great War*. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1980), 277.
[4] Joseph E. Persico, *Eleventh Month, Eleventh Day, Eleventh Hour: Armistice Day, 1918, WWI and its Violent Climax.* (New York, NY: Random House, 2004), 247.
[5] Toland, 298.
[6] Halsey, 123.

free reign to "go where [they] liked."[7] Gibbons proceeded to the front lines and arrived just in time to bare witness to Major Berry's 3rd Battalion charging toward Belleau Woods. "The advancing line wavered until someone shouted 'Come on, you sons of bitches! Do you want to live forever?'"[8] According to Gibbons, the next thing he knew he looked up to see Major John Berry, now missing his left hand as a result of an injury sustained during battle, calling, shouting for his men to retreat. In an attempt to save the major, Gibbons crawled into no-man's land, and was shot through his left bicep and left shoulder then felt his face go cold as he was shot in the face. In a gruesome manner, a bullet struck him in the eye and became lodged in his forehead, but he remarkably lived to tell his tale, and wore a patch from that day forward.

Meanwhile, Sergeant Merwin Silverthorn and Lieutenant Harry Coppinger, "set off in approved trench warfare formation, holding rifles at high part and moving at a slow steady cadence."[9] As Lieutenant Coppinger ducked machine gun fire and sought a moment's shelter behind a woodpile, he had the grim realization that he had started the push with fifty-two men and now just 6 men survived.[10] Nearly a mile from the annihilation Sergeant Silverthorn's men were facing, another

[7] Halsey, 280.
[8] Ibid, 280.
[9] Ibid, 280.
[10] Ibid, 282.

soldier led his men to the front, Major Sibley's battalion, "march[ed] across the field in slow cadence under terrific fire," just before they too plunged into the woods. [11] Several miles west of the hell that Major Sibley's men were facing, Major Frederic Wise's battalion was stationed waiting in reserve. Major Sibley immediately gave orders to seek cover on both sides of the road while Major Wise inadvertently led his battalion into an open field heavily fortified by Germans. Despite the chaos that these brave soldiers faced and imminent destruction that seemed to be closing in on them, the American troops were finally able to take Belleau Wood. The American troops countered multiple attacks, gas shelling, night raids, and heavily artillery bombardment, turning the once beautiful wooded area, into a badland of splintered trees and after the smoke had cleared from the month long battle, 1,811 marines had been killed and another 7,966 wounded.[12] A few days after the first shots were fired at Belleau Wood, American newspapers circulated headlines that heralded the attack as the most important battle of the war.

News of the battle was slow to surface as the *New York Times* journalists were filled with uncertainty about what exactly had happened in the battle, so they were left only to publish a few detailed accounts

[11] Ibid, 283.
[12] Richard W. Stewart, ed. (2005). "The United State Army in a Global Era, 1917–2003." *American Military History. Volume Two. Washington, D.C.*: Center of Military History, United States Army.

about the setting of the battlefield.[13] On June 9, the *New York Times* special correspondent Edwin James commented that, "when the enemy came over the slaughter was terrific. The Germans who got past the embankment were all killed or captured."[14] In nearly every newspaper article throughout the battle seemed to portray American soldiers as far superior counterparts to the German soldiers. Americans have taken, "scores of them," reported the *New York Times*, "and are now imbued with the idea that one American can lick any German sent against him."[15] Later in the same article, the author states, "He [The American soldier] believes he is as better fighting man than the German soldier. And he is."[16]

The popular and well circulated newspaper also seemed to exaggerate claims about these skirmishes in their headlines. In a June 12th article, the *New York Times* published an article with the headline, "Stray among foes, kill 3 and escape: Two American Engineers perform daring exploit and gain valuable information," and goes on to claim that "this is one of the most daring war exploits of which I have heard on the

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[13] "The War Situation," *New York Times,* June 6, 1918.
[14] Edwin L. James, "Navy Fighting Yesterday: Americans Defeat German Efforts to Retake ..." *New York Times*,
June 9, 1918.
[15] Edwin L James, "Marines Drive Germans Back; Foe Sends Up Crack Divisions." *New York Times*, June 11, 1918.
[16] Ibid.

part of the solder of any army."[17] This account was arguably an exaggeration of two men who accidentally became lost between the two lines and happened to find German fortifications in their attempt to find their way back to their troops. With great patriotic zeal, the *New York Times* lauded the accomplishments of individuals that may or may not have been entirely and unconditionally authentic. For instance, they reported about a private named Frank P. Lenert, who became surrounded by 85 German soldiers and "Showed great interest in knowing how many were in the attacking party."[18] Lenert lied and told the German soldiers that "Eight regiments had attacked and many more were coming after them."[19] The German soldiers told Lenert that "Since so many Americans were coming it was useless for them to fight longer, and the craved the honor of surrendering to Lenert."[20] The account ends with private Lenert bringing back 85 Soldiers as prisoners, and once again demonstrating the *New York Times* belief that that American war effort was indispensable to the Allies cause.

The *London Times* describes the same occurrence somewhat differently. They reported that an American soldier named "Lennart"

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[17] Edwin L James, "Stray Among Foes, Kill 3 And Escape." *New York Times*, June 12, 1918.
[18] Edwin L James "Our Men Hold Village." *New York Times*, June 14, 1918.
[19] Edwin L James, "Many Heroic Deeds Done By Our Men in the Fight North Of Belleau Wood." *New York Times*, June 28, 1918.
[20] James, "Many Heroic Deeds" *New York Times*, June 28, 1918.

(sic), of Chicago, brought back 85 Germans soldiers. Lennart had been said to have lost his way during an attack on a German position and quickly surrendered to the Germans. The German captain beckoned him to come over and was very cordial with him, even showing generosity by giving him cigarettes. The captain then explained his position that he and his men were willing to surrender to the Americans. Lennart protested that he was lost and had no idea where he was. The captain replied "I will help you find the way."[21] The *London Times* was far less interested in the Battle of Belleau Wood than the *New York Times* and commented on it in an almost depreciating manner. For the first week of the battle, the *London Times* commented that even though, "there was rather more activity on several parts of the front . . . the fighting was not on a very important scale."[22] This account is arguably in opposition with the reports made by the *New York Times* and the imbedded reporter of the *Chicago Tribune* who was present at the battle.

Even though much of the information provided by the *London Times* is in conflict with the information the American people were getting from the *New York Times*, the London paper pays the American troops respect by writing: "All these operations maybe small and of little

[21] "Tension on the Front." *London Times*, June 28, 1918.
[22] "After The Enemy Onrush." *London Times,* June 8, 1918.

importance when compared with the recent German drives, but they serve to show what American troops can achieve and how much they promise to accomplish in the future."[23] Although they paid occasional compliments to the AEF, the *London Times* frequently undermined some of the AEF's accomplishments. For example, a British newspaper commended the American troops for capturing Belleau Wood, as well as 300 German soldiers, the *London Times* then commented in the next paragraph, "the number of prisoners captured by the Army Group of the German Crown Prince since May 27 to about 75,000."[24] Often, the *London Times* remarked that there was nothing to report, or pared down their commentary of the battle with subtle yet condescending remarks that worked to undermine the AEF.

After looking further into the divergent journalistic accounts of the AEF's impact at the Battle of Belleau Wood, it becomes evident that the American newspaper the *New York Times* and the British, *London Times* perceived (and reported about) the battle in very different ways. Historians are faced with the question as to whether the AEF"s successful maneuvers against the German forces proved decisive for victory. Historian Adam Hochschild argues that after the Germans,

[23] "American Hold on Belleau Wood." *London Times*, June 18, 1918.
[24] "Enemy Thrown Back by the French." *London Times*, June 12, 1918.

"encountered fierce resistance from newly arrived American troops…the balance of forces on the Western Front was now changed for good."[25] In Paris, after the battle had ended celebrated with a parade, the French reinforced the appreciative sentiment when the crowd roared: "Vive les Marines!" Later they even renamed the Battle of Belleau Wood: "Bois de la Brigade de Marine (Wood of the Marine Brigade)."[26] Major Marc de Larréguy de Civreux pointedly remarked that the AEF were fighting in "A battle for Paris."[27] Major de Civreux may not have been too far off with his reflection, as this battle became the catalyst of the resurgence of the Allied forces against the German, and validates the American interpretation of the events at Belleau Wood.

The American newspaper, the *New York Times,* praised the heroics of AEF soldiers, printed the overly patriotic belief that the American soldiers were by-and-large the quintessential soldiers in Europe, and lauded the Battle of Belleau Wood as one of the most important in the war. This account was corroborated by the imbedded reporter of the *Chicago Tribune*. The British Newspaper, the *London Times*, complimented the American troops in an obligatorily fashion. The

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[25] Adam, Hochschild. *To End All Wars: A Story of Loyalty and Rebellion, 1914-1918.* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, May 2011.), 330.
[26] McBreen, 1st Lt B.B., "2nd Battalion 5th Marines at Belleau Wood," *2d Battalion, 5th Marines*, (June 6, 1994): 4.
[27] "Paris Sees Signs of Counterblow," *New York Times*, June 14, 1918.

London Times believed that the actions of the American participants were small and inconsequential in the grand scheme of the battle for Europe. The aloofness of the AEF's contributions may stem from the fact that British Expeditionary Forces were also in the war and experienced far more tragedies than the American troops had time to experience themselves, but this does not disprove or underscore the French and American perceptions that Belleau Wood was, in fact, a substantial turning point of the First World War.

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