Following Russia’s capitulation after the internal turmoil caused by the Bolshevik Revolution, German Maj. Gen. Erich Ludendorff re-allocated his forces from the eastern to the western front and mounted a massive attack whose objective was to capture Paris, believing that it would force the Allies to surrender. Ignoring the intelligence gathered from a couple of German prisoners that “an important German offensive was in course of preparation between the Oise and the Reims,” the French and British were caught completely unprepared for the violence that the Germans unleashed upon them on May 27.

As the Germans advanced very rapidly under a well-coordinated combination of infantry, armor, artillery and poison gas, the shocked British and French commanders could only watch in horror as their lines disintegrated. The Germans moved over 12 miles that day and any French reinforcements sent in to counterattack “evaporated immediately like drops of rain on a white-hot iron.” By June 3 the French were in full retreat from the Germans.

The American Expeditionary Force (AEF), comprised of both U.S. Army Soldiers and Marines, took up various defensive positions directly in front of the German advance. Passing through the Marine’s lines, a retreating French major suggested to them that they too follow suit. Upon learning of the major’s suggestion, Marine Capt. Lloyd Williams loudly replied, “Retreat, hell! We just got here!” For the next two days the Germans relentlessly attacked the Marines’ defenses and each time were thrown back. The German commanders were forced to have their units dig in and prepare defensive positions. Going on the offensive, the Allies ordered the AEF to attack near Bois de Belleau or Belleau Wood.

Led by Marine Brig. Gen. James Harbord, the task to attack Belleau Wood fell upon the 4th Brigade of the 2nd U.S. Division. The battle plan consisted of a two-phase operation kicking off on the afternoon of June 6. The first phase given to the Marines took up various defensive positions directly in front of the German advance. Passing through the Marine’s lines, a retreating French major suggested to them that they too follow suit. Upon learning of the major’s suggestion, Marine Capt. Lloyd Williams loudly replied, “Retreat, hell! We just got here!” For the next two days the Germans relentlessly attacked the Marines’ defenses and each time were thrown back. The German commanders were forced to have their units dig in and prepare defensive positions. Going on the offensive, the Allies ordered the AEF to attack near Bois de Belleau or Belleau Wood.

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ever, contradictory reports made by various observers suggested that the woods were heavily defended. One French pilot flying over the woods noted that, “Fire is heavy enough southeast of the Bois de Belleau...I am under the impression that they are occupied by the Boche.” Planned as a surprise attack, the AEF would make a bloody mistake: There would be no substantial use of artillery fire before the advance.

When the light artillery barrage completed, the Marines emerged from their positions and marched across open ground towards the woods. It turned out that the “unoccupied” woods actually consisted of numerous, interlocking German machine gun positions. Making their presence known, the Germans swept their machine guns back and forth mercilessly, tearing into the Marines and pinning them down in the open. “Come on, you sons of bitches! Do you want to live forever!” shouted Marine Gunnery Sgt. Dan Daly as he attempted to motivate his platoon forward. Many of the Marines did not make it to the woods and many who were wounded were killed trying to seek cover. Marine Lt. Graves B. Erskine related that, “We jumped off after about 10 minutes of very light artillery concentration in and around the area of Bourresches and were met with murderous fire, mainly automatic weapons, some artillery and some mortar. My platoon consisted of 58 men in addition to myself when we jumped off. About 40 minutes later, five of us were left.”

Because so few Marines had lived to even make it to the woods, they were unable to hold their positions against a German counterattack that night. In the middle of the night the Marines fell back to the original positions they had assumed only 12 hours before and were instructed to make no other attacks until further ordered.

Seemingly unfazed by the underlying cause for the high casualties that they had sustained, another attack, also characterized by a low level of artillery support, was ordered on the woods. AEF mortar fire proved to be ineffective on the German positions and as soon as the Marines broke cover on the morning of June 8, the German machine guns mowed them down. Marine Maj. Berton Sibley reported back to Harbord that, “They are too strong for us. Soon as we take one machine gun, another opens...All of the officers of the 82nd Company wounded or missing and it is necessary to reform before we can advance.” Harbord ordered his officers to, “Get cover for your men in the ravine at the south end of woods. Let your men rest. I will have artillery play on the wood” with a massive bombardment set to begin on the morning of June 10.

At 3:30 a.m. that morning the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade unleashed hell. For the next hour they fired approximately 28,000 shells from their 75 mm guns and approximately 12,000 rounds from their 155 mm howitzers into Belleau Wood. The Marines once again stepped off and followed the rolling artillery barrage close enough for it to provide cover. This artillery-centered method, scoffed at by subscribers to the infantry-centered concept, appeared to have worked. Reports from the battle came back to Harbord stating that, “Artillery barrage working beautifully,” “Action in woods deemed finished,” “The line advanced obtaining objective without opposition” and “Everything going nicely. No losses coming across...there is practically no firing. Artillery has blown the Bois de Belleau to mincemeat.”

Harbord reported back to his division headquarters that the objective had been reached shortly after 5 a.m. with eight men killed and 24 wounded. Over the next two days the Marines continued to fight in the woods making reasonable progress. Although their casualties were higher during those two days than on June 10, the distinction between the two tactics was glaringly apparent. As Marine Gen. James Lejeune noted, “Strikingly obvious is the great need for artillery in the attack, when one contrasts the little progress made without it and the advances of the last two days.” Unfortunately for his men, Harbord apparently did not let these hard-learned lessons over the past several days sink in well enough.

On the night of June 17, Harbord ordered the 7th Infantry Regiment of the Army’s 3rd Infantry Division to relieve his battle-weary Marines. Instructed to clear out the remaining Germans from Belleau Wood, the Soldiers fell far short of their goal. Twice they assaulted the German positions without any significant pre-planned artillery support and each instance ended in a predictable outcome. Harbord felt that these failures were due “from the inefficiency of the officers of the 7th Infantry” and ordered his Marines back in to finish the job. The burden to complete this task fell upon Marine Maj. Maurice Shearer.

Harbord informed Shearer that “it is not practicable to withdraw again and give further artillery preparation.” Amazingly, Harbord added, “It is believed that by the judicious use of sharpshooting snipers you can reduce the German positions without much expenditure of men.” Shearer was given until 10 p.m. on June 23 to finish the job. The attack kicked off promptly at 7 p.m. that day and once again the results were foreseeable.

By 8 p.m. Shearer reported that his progress was slow but the Marines were stopped cold shorty thereafter. In less than three hours, they had sustained over 130 casualties and were pinned down by German machine guns in several places. The wounded bled to death in the woods as nobody could reach them without themselves also becoming a casualty. By 11 p.m. Shearer informed Harbord that the attack was going to be stopped for the night and would continue in the morning. Marine Capt. Robert Yowell reiterated what his superiors should
have learned: “I know of no other way of attacking these positions with chance of success than one attempted and am of opinion that infantry alone cannot dislodge enemy guns.”

Finally on June 24 Brig. Gen. W. Chamberlaine, commander of the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade, developed a rather elaborate artillery plan to assist the Marines. During the early morning hours of June 25 the combined French and AEF artillery fired a massive barrage which lasted well into the afternoon. Army Capt. George Wahl, a commander whose battery was involved in this barrage, recalled that, “the artillery was given full permission to play on the evacuated part of the woods to its heart’s content. It did. During the early afternoon every gun that could shoot was turned on the place. By dusk it was practically kindling.” Precisely at 4 p.m. the barrage increased in intensity and rolled back so that Shearer’s Marines could follow closely behind. Shortly before 6 p.m. Shearer reported that he had sustained many casualties but more importantly, the German machine guns which had caused murderous casualties in the past were practically silenced. With their defenses crumbling under this attack, the German commander, Capt. Alexander Von Kaulbars, ordered his units to retreat from the woods that evening. Reaching their objective in the northern part of the woods, the Marines had not been with awe the deadly accuracy and devastation that their artillery had caused. At 7 a.m. that morning Shearer proudly sent Harbord a message proclaiming that, “Belleau Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely.”

Scott Cortese resides in Harrison Township, Mich., and retired at the rank of 1st Sgt. from the Michigan Army National Guard in 2015 after 23 years of service. His MOS was 13F and he served with the active duty army, the Army Reserve and the Army National Guard. He is also a veteran of Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom. Finally, Cortese earned a Bachelor’s in history from Wayne State University in Detroit.

Resources
Wahl, Capt. George D. “Battery “B” of the Twelfth Field Artillery During the Late War,” The Field Artillery Journal Volume XIV, Number 2 (1924): 131-143. This article provided a first-person account of a battery commander during the battle of Belleau Woods.
Asprey, Robert B. At Belleau Wood. New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1965. This book provided an excellent secondary source which told the story behind the battle with a combination of historical information and first-person accounts.
Grotelueschen, Mark E. Doctrine under Trial: American Artillery Employment in World War I. London: Greenwood Press, 2001. This book dealt primarily with the tactics that the AEF had employed during the war and also the training that the AEF artillery had received.