

The "Bloody Angle" of the A. E. F.

It Was at Les Mares Farm, the point nearest Paris Reached by the Germans in 1918, That Marine rifles stopped the Field-Gray Tide

By William E. Moore

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Left—Lieut.-Col. Frederick M. Wise, commanding 2nd Battalion, 5th Marines. Right—Capt. Blanchfield (deceased) who commanded the Marine company holding Les Mares Farm. Below—Lieut. Shepherd, another hero of the fighting at the farm



JUST within the stone wall marking the "Bloody Angle," atop Cemetery Ridge on the field of Gettysburg, there is a granite block marking the "high tide of the Confederacy." A few of Pickett's 5,000 brave Confederates fought their desperate pathway to that point in the famous charge against Hancock's men in the late afternoon of July 3, 1863. The retreat of the Confederate Army, which began there, did not cease until Lee surrendered to Grant at Appomattox.

Some day there doubtless will be a marker erected in France to bear eternal witness to the "high tide" of the German advance against Paris in 1918. When that time comes the stone will be placed at Les Mares Farm nine miles north and west from Château - Thierry. There a battalion of United States Marines stopped

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the oncoming Germans at the point closest to Paris reached by any

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enemy soldiers in the last grand offensive before the Kaiser's legions turned tail and started for the Rhine.



In the rush of momentous events that crowded each other between that day in early June of 1918 when the American Second Division struck and hurled back the advancing Germans on the Paris-Metz road, the significance of what took place at Les Mares Farm from June 2-6, has been lost sight of. But when the real history of the final campaign of the World War comes to be written, when events are sifted and weighed against each other in the scholar's essay to evaluate their relative importance, what happened in and around Les Mares Farm will stand out as one of the chief points of interest in the American effort.

There also is a minor historic feature that marks the vicinage of Les Mares Farm as dear to Americans. It was there that some officer of the Second Battalion, Fifth Regiment of Marines, was attributed with uttering his famous: "Retreat? Hell! I just got here."

The writer is no army M. P. to adjudicate disputes between Marines so the settlement of that contention shall be left to the leathernecks themselves. In an address at the Marine Barracks, Washington, D. C., on June 30, 1921, Brig. Gen. Logan Feland, U.S.M.C., who as a colonel commanded the Fifth Marines, speaking of the historic refusal to retreat by an American officer, said:

"So many coy and modest denials of this language have been made that there is some confusion as to who did say it. I hold in my hand and will read to you a message written on the field which will throw light on the subject. This is the original message:

June 3, 1918, 3:10 P. M.

To: Battalion Commander,
Second Battalion:

The French Major gave Captain Corbin written orders to fall back. I have countermanded the order. Kindly see that French do not shorten their artillery range. 82d and 84th Com-

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panies are on their way to fill gap on right of this company.

Lloyd W. Williams,
Capt. U. S. M.C.



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“Captain Williams was the gallant commander of the 51st Company, Second Battalion, Fifth Regiment, who lost his life in action ten days later. Lieut.-Col. Frederick M. Wise, commanding the Second Battalion, received the message and confirmed it, using the emphatic language generally quoted. I have no doubt that Captain Corbin and Captain Williams used somewhat the same language. Colonel Wise had been in

the Marine Corps twenty years longer and naturally knew more about cussing than Captain Williams.

“It is quite clear that it was Captain Williams who first refused to withdraw, and by asking that the artillery range be not shortened he gave the best proof he intended to stay. Captain Williams reported his action for confirmation to Colonel Wise who emphatically, if profanely, did confirm him. It may not have been right for either of them to give this reply, but it was an indication that they were conscious of the task given the Marine Brigade by Providence. That mission was to make plain to the world that America had entered the fight, that Americans would and could stand, that Americans could and would attack.”

And that's that.

While on a visit to the headquarters of the Second Division at Montreuil-aux-Lions, after the fighting was over, General Pershing exclaimed:

“The Gettysburg of the war has been fought!”

A few details of the situation on June 1st are necessary to make clear the

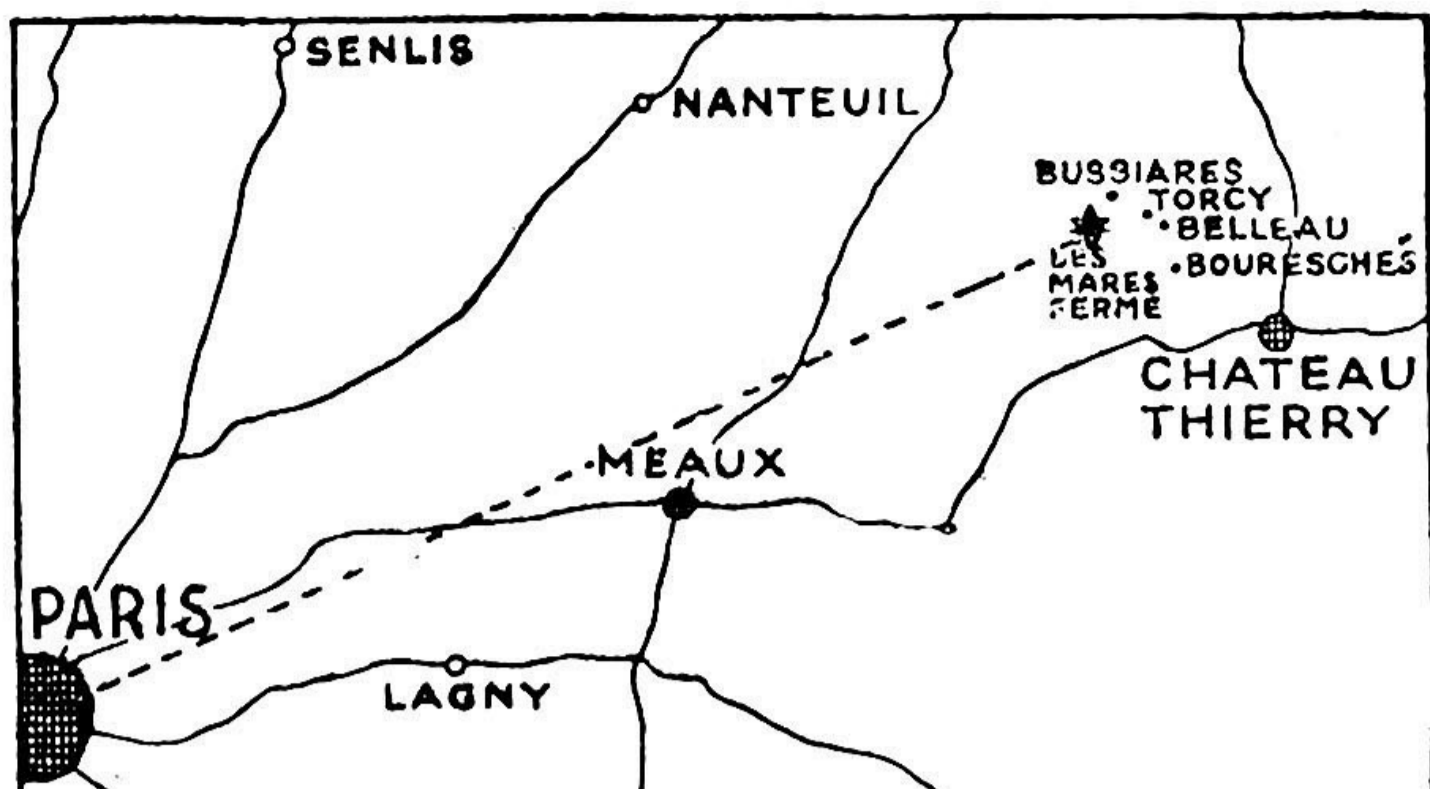
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situation confronting the Allies and the Americans when the Marines made their stand at Les Mares Farm. The Germans jumped off from Chemin-des-Dames on their last big thrust on May 27th. In four days they had traveled 35 miles towards Paris. Their line was 22 miles long between Rheims and Soissons and, writes Maj. Edwin L. McClellan, Chief of the Historical Section, U.S.M.C., "A dagger-like salient was directed at the heart of Paris with the point resting at Les Mares Farm." The assaulting forces comprised the Seventh and First German Armies under the generalship of von Boehm and von Buelow.

In order that no charge of American exuberance of statement may be laid, let us point out what importance hung upon American victory by quoting the words of two distinguished French officers. Lieutenant Colonel the Count de Chambrun, grand-nephew of LaFayette, and Captain de Marenches have written a book about the American Army in France entitled "L'Armée Americaine dans le Conflit Européen." In it they say: "Upon a line 40 kilometers long, from the environs of Fontenoy-sur-Aisne to those of Château-Thierry, the moving German front menaced Paris. The Xth French Army, facing the north part of the line, and the VIth Army facing the south part, opposed the march of the invader towards the region of Paris, which the long distance guns already were reaching and which the aviators bombed in the course of their night raids. Such are the circumstances under which the American Second Division was called to the honor (the word is written by our Allies in their operations reports) to deploy to the north of the Marne astride the national road from Paris to bar the way which led to the capital."

The Second Division was in the Chaumont-en-Vexin rest area north of Paris when summoned on Memorial Day to this post of honor. It rushed by trucks, driven by Annamites, through clouds of white lime dust, through panic-stricken Meaux, through La Ferte-sous-Jouarre with its crowds of fleeing refugees and straggling French soldiers, across the long bridge and onward over the white roadway to Montreuil-aux-Lions where the division debussed for action.

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Map showing Les Mares Farm in its relation to Paris, the Germans' goal

The French line opposing the Germans was so thin it had to give way. It was retreating, but the retirement was slow. It was under orders. It was not disorderly as has so often been pictured. When, for example, the First Battalion of Chasseurs passed through our lines only two officers and thirty-four men remained of the 600 who had entered the fight.

General Degoutte, the French corps commander, expressed his gratitude to General Bundy, commanding the Second Division, and after inquiring as to the condition of the men declared he would not send them into line until the next day if it could be avoided. It could not be avoided, however, for reports continued to arrive that the French were everywhere being driven back. The division advanced at once without waiting even for a hot meal.

On the 2nd of June the 55th Com-

pany, with the rest of the Second Battalion, Lieut. Col. Frederick M. Wise commanding, received orders to proceed through Marigny, north of the Paris-Metz road, about one and a half kilometers and take up position. These orders stated that the French at that point were being slowly driven to the rear, and pointed out that the line of resistance to be taken up must be held to the last—which is military direction to die at your post if you cannot hold it. A line was established from Hill 142

to the northeast corner of the Bois de Veully. The 55th Company was in the center, with the 51st on the right

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and the 43rd on the left. These companies were commanded, respectively, by Capt. John Blanchfield, Lloyd W. Williams and Charles Dunbeck. The other officers of the 55th Company were First Lieut. Lemuel C. Shepherd (now captain and aide to Major General Lejeune) second in command; First Lieutenant Tillman, U. S. Army; First Lieutenant Linehan, U. S. Army; Second Lieut. Hascall F. Waterhouse and Second Lieut. Le Mar Lyle.

While the 55th Company halted in a wood just above the town of Champillon the officers went forward to reconnoiter the ground. It was then 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Occasional shells had dropped about the advancing troops but now, as the officers left the shelter of the woods they had in view the full tide of war flowing towards them. Groups of haggard French soldiers, sweating in their heavy uniforms, and covered with grime, were falling back from cover to cover. Each group would fire a few rounds from a prone position, then make for another cover farther back, crouching or crawling and trailing their bayonet-tipped rifles.

Behind the farthest squads of retreating Frenchmen a wideflung billow of dust and smoke was rolling onward towards the American officers. This cloud was punctured at close intervals by bursts of flame that gave way momentarily to blacker puffs of smoke. Each explosion was accompanied by the loud roar of bursting shell. It was the German barrage. It crept up the Bussiaries roadway and over the wheatfields, driving in the last thin line of French between Paris and the German invaders.

Captain Blanchfield and his officers watched the drama of war unfold before them for a few moments. They questioned some of the French soldiers and learned there were no others behind them to stem the tide. Then the Americans turned and walked back to their command, and gave the orders to advance. They understood fully that they were leading practically untried soldiers against the best shock troops Germany had, the élite that had been chosen to batter their way into Paris.

It is typical of those leathernecks that the way they chose to advance towards their enemy was on the run.

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Under the harassing conditions that faced them Captain Blanchfield took his men forward at the double and formed a line with its left resting on Les Mares Farm. Here they dug in.

All that night and the next morning the enemy shelled the 55th Company's position heavily. The men crouched in their hastily-dug shelter holes with only their rifles to oppose to cannon. A hundred yards in advance of the company's line was a small knoll that offered an excellent field of fire. About 5 o'clock on the afternoon of the next day, June 3d, Lieutenant Shepherd was ordered there with a patrol of ten men to hold it until the fire became too hot, when he was to fall back. Having stationed his patrol and reconnoitered the ground Lieutenant Shepherd, leaving a sergeant in charge, returned to report to Captain Blanchfield. While the two were talking in the trench they noticed that the German artillery fire had increased and that a rolling barrage was advancing towards the outpost.

"Don't you think I'd better go back and look after that outpost?" Lieutenant Shepherd asked.

Blanchfield, occupied with seeing that his company was sheltered as much as possible from the advancing barrage, jerked a glance over his shoulder, scarcely looking at the waiting lieutenant.

"Yes," he snapped out.

Perhaps he had not noted that the barrage already had reached the outpost and now was rolling over the wheat-field between the outpost and trench. But Shepherd had seen what was happening and he realized that to reach his men he would have to walk through the curtain of exploding steel. He nodded to his orderly standing beside him.

"Let's go," he said casually and the two started out. Neither ever knew how he got through but they both somehow escaped death in the inferno and reached the little outpost unscathed. The two men, a bit shaken no doubt by their close-up view of death, dropped into fox holes alongside the others. But they were not to be given any time to consider their late experience.

"There come the Boches," sang out the sergeant and looking out from their holes the group could see the first of the German assault waves advancing.

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A few scouts were in the fore, then the first line in very open formation. The Marines had been taught to shoot and now their long training at the butts showed results. Firing from a rest, each man choosing his target and shooting with perfect steadiness and coolness, they picked off the advanced scouts and began dropping Germans in the first assault wave. This was a new kind of rifle fire on the Western Front and the Germans recognized it by halting their advance.

The pause was not for long, however. Within a few moments after the enemy line halted, the rattle of machine guns was heard from the neighboring Bois des Mares and a hail of bullets fell upon the outpost position. The men burrowed into their shallow holes but could not entirely shelter themselves. Cries of pain gave notice that some of the bullets were finding their marks. Several men were wounded. The German machine gun fire was so intense that it was impossible to reply. Under these conditions Lieutenant Shepherd gave the order to fall back as soon as darkness made withdrawal possible. That night the little patrol crept back to the first line trench, carrying their wounded with them.

Meanwhile the question of rations was beginning to trouble the entire battalion. The Marines had gone into battle so hurriedly that their kitchens had been left behind and they now had only their emergency rations. Even these had begun to run out and the men were thrown upon their own resources. A lone calf had been left behind when the occupants of Les Mares Farm had joined the flood of refugees that choked all the roads leading south and west ahead of the moving German front. This calf fell before a Marine bullet the first night, and the men of the 55th Company dined on veal steak. The farm was stocked with rabbits and in the intervals between killing Germans the Marines took to killing rabbits. With these, and the fowls and eggs they found about the farm, the vegetables from the garden and the wine from the farmhouse "cave" they kept themselves well fed throughout the four days of fighting. They foraged as well as they fought. But the foraging and cooking was done, not in the intervals of fighting, but simultaneously, for when the German infantry was not attacking

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their artillery was pounding the Marines' position.

After the repulse of the German attack by Lieutenant Shepherd's outpost the enemy organized a heavier assault upon Les Mares Farm itself. There was a gap of some 500 yards between the left of the 55th Company at the farm and the right of the 43rd Company in Veully Wood, with a wheatfield intervening. To fill that gap and prevent the Germans from infiltrating, part of a platoon was brought up from the right and thrown in. When the more formidable German assault started the Marines were still without machine guns. As the gray waves approached the Marines took positions in windows and doorways of the farm buildings and at breaches made by shells in the wall that surrounded the farm. From these positions they aimed and fired as coolly as if at practice, and so accurately that not a single German got within 100 yards of the buildings.

It was like the old Indian fighting of frontier days, when little groups in besieged log forts withstood outnumbering forces of attackers with the deadly aim of their rifles. During this attack Gunnery Sgt. Herman (Babe) Tharau, who later was killed in the Marbache sector, displayed his own bravery and greatly encouraged his men by coolly walking about where bullets flew thickest giving the range as the advancing enemy lines drew closer. The first two German waves made repeated efforts to rush the buildings, but each time when they came within range of the Marine rifles the number of men dropping dead or wounded in their ranks forced them to turn back and re-form outside the field of fire. The third line of the enemy, evidently discouraged by the losses among their comrades, withdrew without attempting to make the assault. Machine gun fire, however, was kept up until dark.

During the night a detachment of Headquarters Company came up with several machine guns, which added greatly to the strength of the Marines' position. With these the Germans were beaten off completely, withdrawing their own machine guns from range. Their artillery, however, laid a heavy fire on the farm all the night of the 3d, causing some casualties and setting one building on fire. The enemy artillery finally was silenced, when our own artillery arrived

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in position and opened a lively fire on all the German positions. The American artillery fire continued all of the following day, June 4th, thus giving the hard-pressed Marines of the Second Battalion a little rest from the continuous fighting they had been engaged in for 36 hours.

But even then the rest was not for long. The afternoon of the 4th a number of Germans managed to creep back through the standing wheat and were heard digging in the field. It was impossible to estimate their strength on account of the concealing wheat and it became necessary for someone to go out and investigate. Cpl. Francis J. Dockx volunteered. He won a D.S.C. and gave up his life on the brave adventure. He took three men with him. After crawling about 50 yards through the waving wheat they ran into a German patrol of 30 men and two machine guns. With no other thought than to attack, in spite of the odds against them, the Yankees opened up with their automatics and advanced upon the group that outnumbered them practically eight to one.

Fearing from the intensity of the fire that his comrades might have gotten into a hot hole Gunnery Sgt. David L. Buford (later killed at Belleau Wood), took two other men and went out to render what assistance he could. He found Dockx and his three companions engaged in a desperate encounter. The Germans were firing with machine guns and rifles, and flinging hand grenades. The four Americans were replying with their automatics and had already dropped several of the enemy when Buford came up. When the American fire was reinforced by the arrival of the Buford party the Germans began to give way. The attackers could see them running back, singly and in groups, across a cleared patch in the field. Buford was an "old timer" and a wonderful shot. Planting himself with his automatic where he had a clear view of the open space he waited for the retiring Germans to make their breaks for safety. Each time he fired a German fell. He killed seven single-handed in that engagement.

Only the machine gun crews now remained to be dealt with, so the little group of seven Americans closed in on them and after a cautious approach

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Les Mares Farm and the wheatfields of the fighting—drawn from a photograph

rushed the guns. In the final rush Corporal Dockx and one other man were killed, but the guns were taken and along with them the only members of the gun crews who were still alive. All the prisoners were wounded and of the original German squad of 30 men only five reached their lines in safety.

That was the last effort the Germans made to force their way towards Paris at Les Mares Farm. It was the "sharp point of the dagger" spoken of by Major McClellan and it had failed to penetrate the defense of the 55th Company, Second Battalion, Fifth Regiment of Marines. There was no fighting at the farm on June 5th and early in the morning of June 6th the Second Battalion was relieved by a French force. Later that day Captain Blanchfield, who had so gallantly commanded the 55th Company throughout the fight, was killed by a stray shell while walking along the roadway. He received, posthumously, the D.S.C. and the Navy Cross.

Lieutenant Shepherd, who was wounded in the neck on June 3d, but had refused to go to the rear, received the D.S.C., Navy Cross and Croix de Guerre.

Gunnery Sergeant Buford was awarded the D.S.C., Navy Cross and Croix de Guerre; Gunnery Sergeant Tharau received the Croix de Guerre.

Les Mares Farm is easy to find on any of the old army maps, or the cartes Tarides we used for road maps. If you still have one spread it upon the table. North of the roadway that runs direct from Paris to Château-Thierry lay off an obtuse triangle with the apex at Champillon, the base line running from Marigny to Bussiares. A perpendicular line dropped from Champillon to the base will end at Les Mares Farm.

This historic spot where the Marines turned the point of the German dagger is only a short distance west of Belleau Wood, Bouresches and Torcy where the Marines won their greatest fame. It is truly at Les Mares Farm that the

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“Bloody Angle”. of the Gettysburg of the A. E. F. lies, and there some day a monument should rise to inform the world what deeds were done upon that field.



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