World War I – The Spring Offensive

**BLUF:** The Spring Offensive of World War I, also known as the Ludendorff Offensive, was the last full-forward assault by the German Army. It began on 21 March 1918 and ended in July 1918 with the German Army making the most in-depth advance either side made on the Western Front since 1914. With the offensive, the Germans believed they could push the British to the English Channel and force an armistice out of the French. The advance, however, needed to be a rapid attack before the Americans fully deployed in France. The action, however, was a pyrrhic victory for the Germans. They suffered 688,341 casualties, leaving the German Army too weak to defend their gains against the fresh American troops.

**GENERAL STORY:** The Spring Offensive was divided into four operations by the Germans. Operation Michael was the main assault designed to drive the British west toward the English Channel. Operations Georgette, Blücher–Yorck, and Gneisenau were diversionary attacks, hoping to split Allied forces. The use of the Feuerwalze or rolling barrage significantly assisted the German gains, which opened large holes in the Allied front lines.

Since the Allied front lines were mostly “outpost zones,” their losses were minimized due to the German artillery attacks. When the Germans pushed through the “outpost zones,” they were met by massive Allied resistance in the “battle zone.” Allied reinforcements made up the “rear zone,” which plugged holes and counterattacked.

For four months, the two sides slugged it out along a nearly 200-mile battlefront. On 18 July 1918, the German advance came to a halt, gaining nearly 40 miles of territory. The victory, however, depleted the German human and material resources needed to win the war. By late summer, the Allies began driving the Germans east with their final offensive.

**MARINE STORY:** The Marine Corps started landing men in France by mid-1917. The bulk of the Marines arrived in the early months of 1918. When the Spring Offensive began, elements of the 5th Marines arrived at Château-Thierry on 1 June 1918. On 3 June at Lucy-le-Bocage, the Marines beat back the German advance. This attack was as close as the Germans got to Paris. On 6 June, the Marines advanced across a waist-high wheat field toward the German machine-gun emplacements. The Marines and Germans attacked and counterattacked over the next 20 days until the Marines finally held Belleau Wood. Marines such as Private John Kelly, Gunnery Sergeant Ernest Janson, First Sergeant Dan Daly, and Marine Gunner Henry Hulbert were mentioned for their bravery and initiative. From the fight at Belleau Wood, the Marines learned that tactics had to change to avoid such high casualties in the future.

**QUESTIONS**
1. Why did the Germans initiate the Spring Offensive in 1918?
2. Why was the German success considered a pyrrhic victory?
3. What did the Marines learn from the fighting at Belleau Wood?

**SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY**