

The "Devil Dog" Legend

BLUF: During the fighting at Belleau Wood in 1918, the Germans received a thorough indoctrination of the United States Marine Corps' tenacious fighting ability. Fighting through impenetrable woods and capturing terrain that supposedly could not be taken, the men of the Marine Brigade struck terror in German hearts. The persistent attacks delivered with unbelievable courage had the Germans referring to Marines as the "Teufelhunden," meaning "fierce fighting dogs of legendary origin" or as popularly translated, "Devil Dogs," or so the legend goes.

SETTING THE STAGE: The Battle of Belleau Wood was fought from 1 June to 26 June 1918. Overall, the woods were attacked by the Marines six times before they could successfully expel the Germans. They fought off parts of five German divisions, often reduced to using only their bayonets or fists in hand-to-hand combat. On 26 June, the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines, under the command of Major Maurice E. Shearer, supported by two companies of the 4th Machine Gun Battalion and the 15th Company of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, attacked Belleau Wood, which finally cleared that forest of Germans. On that day, Major Shearer submitted a report merely stating, "*Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely.*", ending one of the bloodiest and most ferocious battles U.S. forces would fight in the war.

THE STORY: German soldiers facing American Marines at Belleau Wood during World War I noticed their aggressive fighting spirit in battle. According to Marine Corps legend, the Germans referred to the Marines as "teufelhunden" or "devil dogs." The Marine nickname of "devil dogs" later appeared on a recruiting poster shortly after the battle. It gained popularity through the decades following World War I, becoming a linchpin for 20th century Marine Corps ethos.

However, there is no proof that it came from German troops as a reference to the Marines. The first red flag to be raised is using the words "Teufel Hunden" as two words in the posters of the period. Proper grammatical German would use the word "Teufelshunde" with a connecting "s." Whoever created the posters could have made fair use of German spell-check. The *Boston Globe* ran a story about the nickname on 14 April 1918, six weeks before the fight at Belleau Wood. Other newspapers used the story throughout April and May of that year.

Though the reality of the story is questionable, it made for a compelling recruiting drive slogan. The Marine Corps used the concept repeatedly for decades after World War I. American author H.L. Mencken reminded readers in "The American Language" in 1919 that "*The Germans, during the war, had no opprobrious nicknames for their foes ... Teufelshunde (devil-dogs), for the American Marines, was invented by an American correspondent; the Germans never used it.*" Nevertheless, the nickname still exists because it is too captivating to resist.

QUESTIONS

1. Why are legends like the "Devil Dog" tale so crucial to the Marine Corps' ethos?
2. What elements of the story lend credibility to the legend?
3. What elements detract from the authenticity of the story?

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