When the Americans Turned the Tide

The Germans were pushing toward Paris in 1918 when untested American troops helped stop them at the Marne River in a pivotal World War I battle.

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By JIM YARDLEY JUNE 26, 2014

CHÂTEAU-THIERRY, France — Fifty miles to Paris. That was all that separated a hardened German Army from, perhaps, the end of the Great War. By early 1918, the Germans were rolling through northern France, and French commanders feared they were planning a decisive attack against the capital. First, though, they had to cross a ribbon of green water known as the Marne. And traverse a small forest known as Belleau Wood.

The Marne River in Château-Thierry, where French, British and American forces held back German troops in 1918 and launched a decisive counteroffensive, part of the Second Battle of the Marne.

In their way were divisions of exhausted but experienced French and British troops, along with their new, largely untested allies from the United States. Months earlier, a war-weary Paris had welcomed the arriving American soldiers with parades and ecstatic relief, believing the Yanks would swing the war for the Allies. But French commanders were uncertain how these raw soldiers, many arriving without weapons, would fare against a German Army that had fought in bloody trenches for four years.

It was the first time an American army had fought in a European war, and they were being delivered to the doorstep of a slaughterhouse. Their orders at the Marne were straightforward: Hold the line. Stop them.

They did. Today, a century later, the Second Battle of the Marne is considered the pivotal battle of World War I, as Allied troops blunted the German advance and started the counteroffensive that would ultimately win the war. It also became the battle that helped shape the legend and character of the modern American military, especially the Marines, and signaled the arrival of the United States as a modern military power.

“It is the turning point of the First World War,” said Michael S. Neiberg, a professor at the United States Army War College in Carlisle, Pa., and an authority on World War I.

It marked the start of an era in which the United States would become the guarantor of security in Western Europe and eventually the world’s lone superpower. It is a role that from its earliest stages prompted intense divisions at home and abroad and these days resonates from the sectarian conflicts of the Middle East to the Ukraine-Russia border to the disputed waters off China’s coast.

A century after a series of interlocking alliances plunged Europe into a war that drew in the United States, NATO continues to navigate between its commitment to mutual security and the risks of taking too hard a line against an increasingly assertive Russia over places like Crimea and Donetsk, Ukraine. With the American public exhausted by 13 years of war, President Obama is seeking to define a less interventionist foreign policy, but often finds, as President Woodrow Wilson did 100 years ago, that no one else is willing to step up when global stability is at risk.

The battlefield on which the American Century arguably began is bucolic today. The Marne River flows placidly westward until it joins the Seine en route to Paris. The killing fields of World War I are now pastoral and immaculate, rolling green and yellow quilts of wheat and canola, or hillsides covered with the neatly manicured rows of vineyards in the Champagne region. To stand on a hilltop is to see a horizon stretching for miles, clouds throwing shadows on the pastures or sunlight breaking through in yellow shafts, the archetype of the idyllic French countryside.

It is hard to imagine that nearly 300,000 men died or were wounded here almost a century ago.

"With time, people forget," said Didier Blanchard, who owns a restaurant filled with World War I paraphernalia in the small village of Mancy. "We no longer have a World War I soldier who is alive."

Yet there are reminders of the carnage. People occasionally find shards of shrapnel in the trunks of felled trees. Farmers often must call in a munitions squad to remove undetonated explosives from their fields. Overlooking Château- Thierry is the monument commemorating the Americans who fought at the Marne. Outside the city are two American military cemeteries — the Aisne- Marne and the Oise-Aisne, both maintained by the United States government — which together have rows of white tombstones for more than 9,000 men and women who were sent off to a distant war and never came back.

The United States entered World War I in 1917 with an untested force whose leader, General John J. Pershing, nicknamed "Black Jack," was opposed to fighting under a French command. He relented when the Germans began major offensives in the spring of 1918 to try to win the war before the Allies could gather strength from the arriving American forces. They retook an important ridge position at the Chemin des Dames, and then blitzed another 40 or 50 miles to the banks of the Marne.

Four years earlier, with the Germans sweeping toward the capital, the French stopped them in the First Battle of the Marne as taxi drivers from Paris ferried reinforcements to the front. That victory led to four years of bloody stalemate in the trenches, but in 1918 the Germans were again on the banks of the river. Historians now doubt that the Germans intended to make an immediate frontal blitz on Paris, but a German victory at the Marne could have been devastating for the Allies.

Under French command, the Americans were thrust into combat: the United States Army's Third Infantry Division fought so ferociously that it earned the enduring nickname "Rock of the Marne." National Guardsmen from across the United States fought together in the 42nd Infantry Division and are memorialized in the French wheat fields with a statue of a soldier carrying a dead comrade. And in a segregated American military, black troops defied the racial stereotyping of the era and fought with bravery and distinction.

Yet the battle would most define the United States Marines. At the forest known as Belleau Wood, with Germans positioned in shallow trenches or firing from inside a stone hunting lodge, the Marines kept assaulting until the battle was finally won. When a French officer at one point called for a retreat, a young Marine supposedly stood up and shouted: "Retreat? Hell, we just got here."

Historians say that story may be apocryphal, but a defining ethos was born, burnished by glowing reports in The Chicago Tribune by Floyd Gibbons, a reporter who lost an eye at Belleau Wood and depicted the battle as a heroic victory by the Marines. In truth, Army soldiers also fought in the forest, but historians say Army censors prohibited their role from being publicized.

The Americans proved their mettle at the Second Battle of the Marne, and Pershing got his wish to lead an independent American fighting force for the remainder of the war. The battle also helped shape some of the defining American figures of the coming century: George C. Marshall and George Patton, the great generals of World War II, served on Pershing's staff in Paris; Douglas MacArthur led troops at the Marne and was promoted to brigadier general; William J. Donovan, the "Wild Bill" Donovan who later founded the Office of Strategic Services, the forerunner of the Central Intelligence Agency, fought at the Marne; and one of Donovan's aides, a famous poet of the era, Joyce Kilmer, was killed when the two men went on a patrol.

Perhaps the most famous American casualty fell from the sky. Quentin Roosevelt, a son of former President Theodore Roosevelt, was shot down in his biplane. Today, a battered engine purported to be from the biplane is displayed at the entrance of the city hall in Château-Thierry. In 2011, the city staged cultural events to celebrate Quentin Roosevelt's legacy, and this year local high school students are building replicas of his biplane to honor the anniversary of World War I.

The Americans entered the war reluctantly and, once it was over, largely retreated into their own problems

for the next two decades, until the outbreak of World War II. But that initial American intervention created a connection here, one that still lingers despite all of the complicated history since. Tony Legendre, a retired English teacher here who has spent years researching the American role at the Marne, recalls visiting the United States for a month during the 1960s. When he brought back a Sears catalog, Mr. Legendre said people in Château- Thierry were amazed. “Many people, I think, still dream a little of the States,” he said.

At his restaurant in Mancy, Mr. Blanchard has filled glass cases with World War I uniforms, rifles, front pages of newspapers and other memorabilia. Surrounded by the past, he is worried about the present, with extremist politics bubbling up in France and Russia menacing Ukraine. The United States may no longer be the young, brash power coming to save the day, he suggested, but in many European eyes it remains what Madeleine K. Albright, the former secretary of state, once called “the indispensable nation.”

“If the United States is less powerful, " he said, “extremism could become stronger here.”