

Floyd Gibbons' Legacy to the Marines ©2006

By Dick Culver

While the Marines had been among the first to arrive in France after our declaration of against the Kaiser, they had initially been utilized guard and garrison troops. General Pershing, while impressed with the smartness of the Marines and ability to perform even the most menial tasks with complaint, he was not convinced that a bunch of Soldiers could or would function well when integrated into a modern land Army. The Commandant was not amused and used every trick could muster to get the Marines into a separate unit would function under their own officers and NCOs. Grudgingly they were slowly put into the lines to accustom them to the peculiarities of trench warfare and were finally brigaded with the U.S. Army's 3rd Brigade consisting of the 9th and 23rd Infantry Regiments and the 5th Machine Gun Battalion. The Marine Units were the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments and the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, collectively known as the 4th Marine Brigade.



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Constant training and tours in the trenches had hardened the 2nd Army Division which now was the parent unit of both the Army's 3rd Brigade and the 4th Marine Brigade commanded by Army Major General Harbord. While both the 3rd and 4th Brigades had been combat seasoned, neither had ever participated in a major action. This was soon to change.

The Battle for Belleau Wood was fierce and often very personal. Marine affinity for the bayonet terrified the German Infantry.

The French notified General Pershing that Paris was in danger of being overrun, and the German 5th Guards Division had advanced within 50 miles of the City of Light. The 2nd Division was tapped to stop the German threat to Paris and to the honor of the French citizenry. Since this is primarily a story of Marines, I will stick primarily to the Marines' action, but can't leave out an organization that the Marines thought of as their own – the Army's 2nd Engineers (a part of the 2nd Division, along with the 3rd [Army] Brigade).

The first couple of days resulted in further German advances being repulsed by extremely accurate Marine rifle fire and counter-attacks. The battle began to grow and reach crescendo proportions from the 1st of June though the 6th. The 5th Regiment had advanced on hill 142 the morning of June 6th to be followed by the 6th Regiment on the evening of June 6th to make a push for the wood proper.

Floyd Gibbons had become perhaps as famous as (but a bit more flamboyant than) Ernie Pyle in WWII, and was noted for his friendship and admiration for the U.S. Marines. On the evening of 6 June 1918, Gibbons attached himself to 3/6 under the command of Benjamin S. Berry. Major Berry advised Gibbons to go back as it was "hotter than hell in there"... Major Berry advanced and was almost immediately wounded. Gibbons hit the deck and was soon

wounded in both the left arm and shoulder. A final bullet ricocheted off a rock and took out his left eye exiting through the right side of his helmet... Gibbons remained conscious throughout the entire ordeal until he could be finally evacuated and removed via ambulance to a field hospital. Prior to jumping off into the Wood, Gibbons had handed his earlier dispatches to a friend prior to entering Belleau Wood, asking him to file his notes for him if he did not survive the ordeal, and thereby hangs the tale.

General Pershing had an “ironclad” rule against identifying individual units in contact with the enemy, and until this time no specific unit had been identified in action. The American Public was literally slobbering for news of their units overcoming the Huns. Things were about to change!

Floyd Gibbons was a popular and well known individual greatly admired by his contemporaries. The news of his grievous wounds spread rapidly to the rear and it was feared that Floyd had written his last story. The censors got together and decided to publish Floyd’s last dispatches without censoring them as a tribute to the famed reporter. The Army censors also being great fans of Gibbons, agreed and Floyd’s last dispatches were published lauding the glorious exploits of the Marines in Belleau Wood. This was done without the knowledge or permission of General Pershing! The Marines being unaware of the content of Gibbons’ dispatches and up to their ears in Germans, simply continued to attack.

The dispatches concerning the battle of Belleau Wood continued to roll in uncensored for three more days and the Marines soaked up the lion’s share of the publicity. Finally the censorship was reapplied in spades and unit identification was again stopped by the Army censors. ...But it was too late. The American Public, hungry for news of “their boys” in the trenches, took the Marines to heart and rightly or wrongly, the Corp’s reputation was made.

Floyd survived his terrible wounds and was eventually awarded the Croix de Guerre with palm while being escorted by his beloved Marines as an honor guard.

The indiscretion(s) resulting from publishing Floyd’s unaltered dispatches, forever changed the American Public’s perception of the United States Marines. Now these elite troops were the most important ground troops suppressing the Hun and winning the war against the Kaiser. The Marines of course, had no idea of what was happening. Conversely, General Pershing DID have an idea and was busily gnashing his teeth.

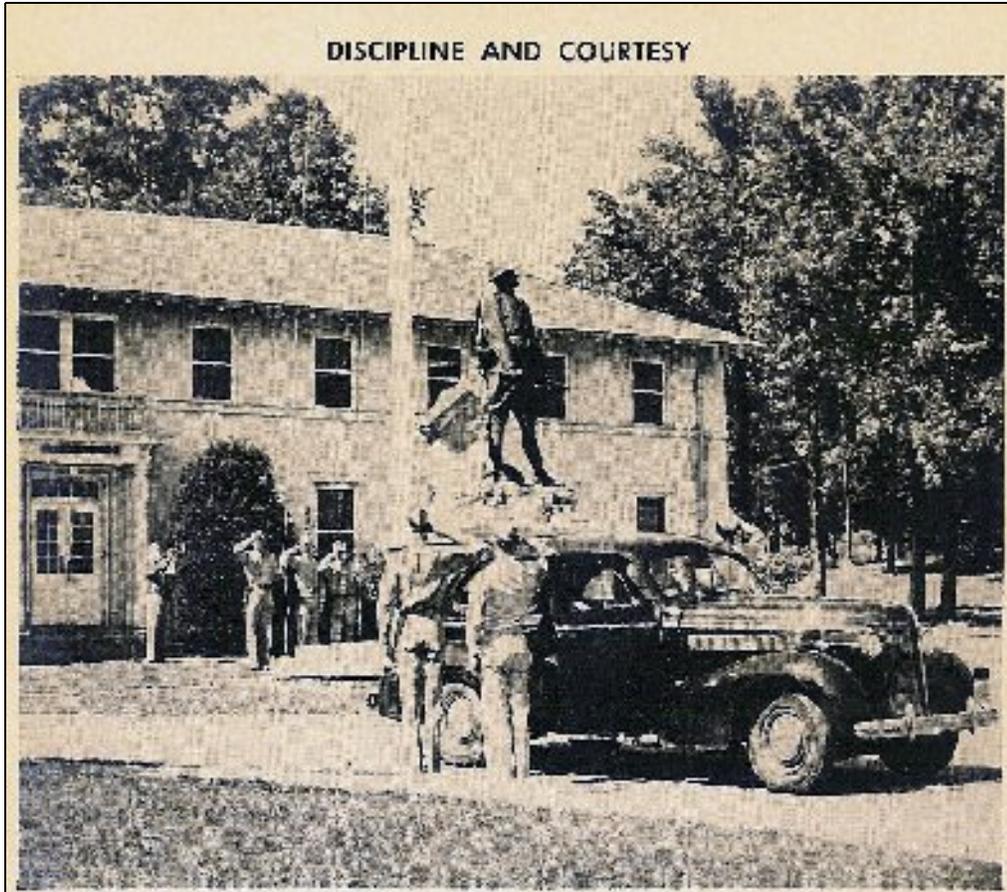
The Marines continued to shed glory on themselves throughout the end of the war and came away with an unblemished reputation. The Marines had become (rightly or wrongly) the darlings of the American Public.



Floyd Gibbons with Marine escort going to receive his Croix de Guerre

Floyd became instantly identified with his Marines and for many years thereafter went into places of eminent danger with “his” Marines, usually wearing the Marine Forrest Green Uniform. In 1941, Floyd Gibbons was posthumously made an official U.S. Marine by the Marine Corps League.

Once the war was over, General Pershing commissioned a French sculptor to create a bronze statue to commemorate the U.S. Army Doughboy’s service in WWI. General Pershing told his staff to furnish a model to pose for the French sculptor for his commemorative statue. Apparently not too much guidance was given, and the individual assigned to pose for the statue was a Marine Private. The Frenchman, having no intramural rivalries in *his* psyche, modeled the Marine Private in his entirety – complete with the Marine Corps Emblem on his helmet!



2.4 Passengers of private vehicles dismount to honor Colors or National Anthem.

Photograph of Iron Mike Standing Guard over the old Headquarters Building in Quantico. Picture taken from my *Guide Book for Marines* dated 1951, illustrating the proper rendering of honors to the colors when passing in an automobile during Colors or playing of the National Anthem!

When General Pershing saw the finished statue, he refused to accept the Frenchman’s work of art, since it had a USMC emblem on the helmet! Pershing was, in a word, outraged (and still extremely upset about the breach of censorship which he saw as an unfair overshadowing of the United States Army’s exploits in the Great War)! General Douglas MacArthur was also outraged and continued to hold a grudge even after he fled Corregidor in the early days of WWII. When safely ensconced in Australia, “Dugout Doug” immediately wrote each (Army) unit left on the Rock up for a Presidential Unit

Citation – all except one, the 4th Regiment of Marines. When his oversight was pointed out to him, he ground his teeth and made a statement to the effect that the Marines had garnered unfair publicity in WWI and he was not going to add to their fame and glory in “*THIS*” war! It wasn’t until the Inchon Landing in Korea that he finally forgave the Marines their earlier

indiscretions when they pulled the Army's chestnuts out of the fire. From that time on, they became "his" Marines and apparently all was forgiven, some 32-years after the fact.

Help was in the wings concerning the now orphaned statue, with the lonely Marine Corps Emblem however, as General Smedley Butler (holder of two Medals of Honor) saw the statue and fell in love. He took up a collection from all the Marines in the AEF and bought the statue from the Frenchman. They shipped the artwork back to the United States and placed it in front of the old Headquarters Building of the Marine Corps Base at Quantico.

¹The statue stands there today as a reminder to the Corps of its heritage and remains on guard over the old Headquarters Building of long ago. I often have stood in front of it and harked back to an earlier time. Although uncovered, I have given a slow and meaningful mental salute to those fine Marines who fought and often gave their lives so that later generations would enjoy freedom. My generation (living in the shadow of theirs) would be inspired by the glory and sacrifices of those gallant "Soldiers of the Sea" who went before. When I was a youngster in the Corps, we still had Marines on active duty who had fought at Belleau Wood, and were combat veterans of "The Great War." Two of my first three Commandants (General Cates and General Shepherd) had fought at Belleau Wood and received the Navy Cross for their actions (General Shepherd and General Cates. A third, General Pate, was also a veteran of WWI (albeit an *Army* veteran of the Great War). One of my mentors of the time was a Marine Warrant Officer who had participated in WWI and been assigned as a part of the famous railroad "Mail Guard" in the 1920s... General Cates, then serving as a Captain, had been my Dad's OIC of the Spokane, Washington Recruiting Station in 1925. I once stood in awe while they talked while stopped on the steps to "*Little Hall*" (the old PX) in Quantico. Cates was the Commanding General of Quantico at the time, having stepped down from the office of Commandant after a four year tour – General Cates simply wasn't ready to retire! My point is simply that I felt much closer to the veterans of the *Great War* than those who now serve. My Dad had joined the Corps in 1918 (a bit underage), and much later had a contemporary with him during WWII who had sailed around the World as a member of the Marine Detachment on a Cruiser with Roosevelt's Great White Fleet in 1905... It is now a different century of course, and perhaps a bit more difficult to personally identify with those who made history before us, but not so very long ago, such was not the case with the veterans of Belleau Wood!



ROC

Personal Commentary on Iron Mike and the Statue (also so-named) at Parris Island:

The statue in the story is often called "*Iron Mike*" although another statue of a WWI Marine with a machine gun over his shoulder also stands at Parris Island and was called "Iron Mike" when I was stationed there... I was aware of both, since I had grown up around Quantico, and when I went to Parris Island, I was told that the statue on "the Island" was also known as

Iron Mike! In my youth, I simply assumed that every Marine Corps post must have a WWI statue called “*Iron Mike*”! Which came first? I don’t have a clue, but my Dad, a Marine in 1918 told me that the statue in Quantico had been there as long as he could remember (which was actually shortly following WWI). Since my Dad went to boot camp at Parris Island in 1918 I would surmise that the Parris Island version came along somewhat later?

A Continuation of the Discussion of the 4th Marine Brigade and the Second Army Division:

The 4th Brigade of Marines were closely tied to the 2nd Army Division (Commanded by General John A. Lejeune, following [Army] General Harbord’s reassignment to the AEF Staff) – General Lejeune thus became the first Marine Corps General to ever command an Army Division). The 4th Marine Brigade held a great respect for the Army infantry contingent of the 2nd Division and especially the 2nd Engineers. Following the war, the Marines changed the name of their (*personal*) magazine, originally called “*The Marines Magazine*” (a sort of predecessor of the “*Leatherneck*” magazine), to the “*Marines Magazine and Indian*” in honor of their brothers in arms (the patch of the 2nd Division depicted a colorful Indian Head as their logo). I once donated a number of copies of “*The Marines Magazine*” (including the *last* issue so named) and the *first* issue of “*The Marines Magazine and Indian*” along with many other copies of both “*The Marines Magazine*” and “*The Marines Magazine and Indian*” to the Marine Corps Museum. These had been in my Dad’s trunk, along with many copies on either side of the name change. I checked a couple of years later only to find that the magazines My Dad and I had donated had somehow disappeared (...into someone else’s collection?). Egad! I have never donated anything else for the enlightenment of our modern day Marines – If they weren’t going on display, I would rather have had them myself! A *hard* lesson learned the *hard* way I suppose!

John W. Thomason makes frequent mention in his book, “*Fix Bayonets*” of the Marines’ affection for the 2nd Engineers. The tone of the articles in the magazine conveys great camaraderie between the Marines of the 4th Brigade and their comrades in the 2nd Division. Apparently it was a great “love-love” relationship.

End notes:

¹¹ The picture of the “stand-alone statue” of “Iron Mike” is courtesy of Colonel Walt Ford of Leatherneck Magazine. Colonel Ford is a fine gentleman who is always of great help in both illustrations, and background information usually of great interest to the readers! He has always been of great assistance, and only occasionally raps my knuckles with the legendary ruler said to have been used by the Sisters conducting the instructional packets administered by the Catholic Schools, heh, heh, heh... (usually *needed* I might add, and always done with great grace and aplomb).