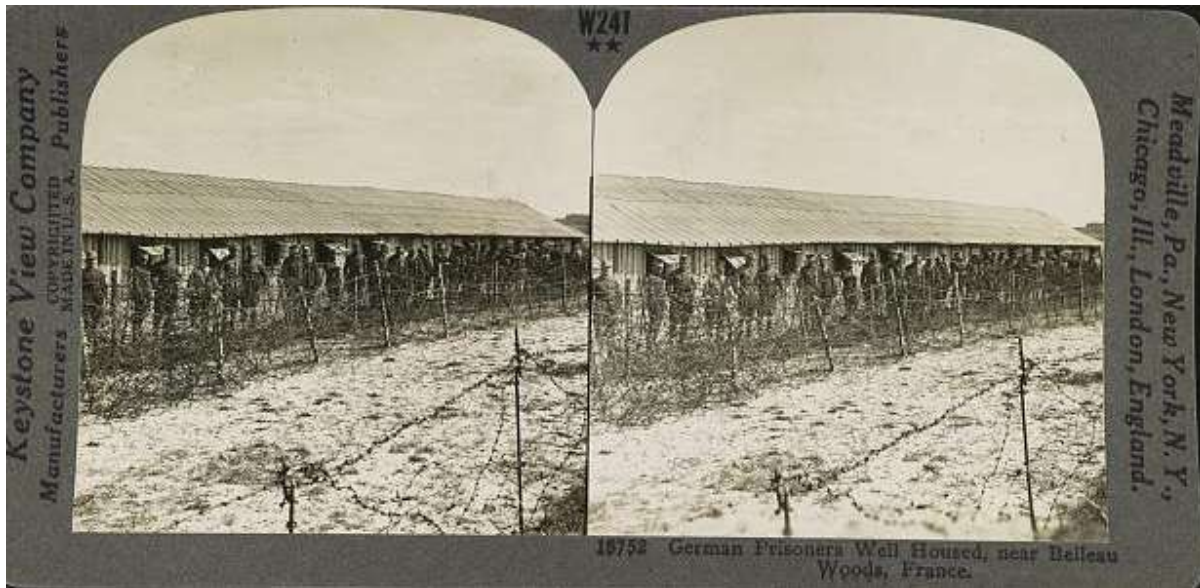


IOWA HISTORY



Courtesy: Library of Congress
German prisoners held at Vaux, France, 1918

The Deadliest Weapon in the World

On the lawn of a “beautiful old chateau” on the banks of the Marne River in France in July 1918 during the Great War (World War I) a commanding general of the American Expeditionary Forces pinned Distinguished Service Crosses to the chests of 37 marines for their “extraordinary heroism.” One of them was an Iowan, John J. Ingalls of Maquoketa. (Some sources indicate Ingalls’ address was Olin when he joined the marines, others Maquoketa.)

The general recounted the “glorious deeds” enacted by Ingalls’ Company G, 6th Regiment of the US Marine Corps on the battlefield in June when the men had “stood like a stone wall against enemy advance on Paris.” They had frequently marched throughout the night with little food or water.

He went on to say the marines had defeated “with great loss” three German divisions in the Battle of Belleau Wood at Vaux and at Chateau-Thierry. At Vaux they had taken 1,400 German prisoners. It was through the coordinated efforts of the artillery, engineers and signal troops aided by the “diligent and watchful eyes” of the medical and supply corps that they had functioned “as a well-trained machine.”

The general added, “Amid the dangers and trials of battle every officer and every man has done well his part.”

Corporal Ingalls was one of the marines who “rendered invaluable assistance” on the battlefield. On June 6 he had shown “exceptional bravery” when he was wounded at Bois de Belleau. Despite his injuries, Ingalls had refused to be evacuated but stayed to assist in the evacuation of other wounded marines. His “self-sacrifice” and “devotion to duty” helped save the lives of many other men.

Newspapers reported that the American forces had made the “shell-shattered woods” an “inferno” for the German armies. Fighting, sometimes in hand-to-hand combat with knives and bayonets, the Americans made their way through the “closely packed trees” of Belleau Woods. It was an “extremely difficult” advance. But in the end the Americans “completely cleared” the woods as they “slaughtered” the enemy in “great numbers.” Along with the German prisoners, the Americans had taken valuable weapons, including mine throwers and machine guns.

In July, as the general spoke to the men at the awarding of the Distinguished Service Crosses, he told the Marines, “Let the stirring deeds, hardships, and sacrifices of the past month remain forever a bright spot in our history.”

The marines at the Battle of Belleau Woods *did* make a name for themselves, and they cemented their place in history by their heroic actions during the month-long struggle. It was there they earned the nickname “Devil Dogs.” And after the battle the legendary commander of the American Expeditionary Force, General John J. Pershing, praised the marines with his memorable words, “The deadliest weapon in the world is a United States Marine and his rifle.”
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Sources

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