

## This Day in History... July 15, 1918

# The Second Battle of the Marne

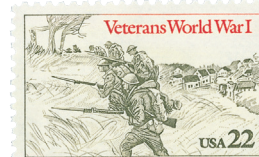
On July 15, 1918, the Germans launched the Second Battle of the Marne.

The First Battle of the Marne took place nearly four years earlier. German forces secured a string of victories in the first weeks of World War I. By autumn of 1914, most of the Allied forces on the Western Front had retreated back to a region near Paris. As they did, five German armies continued through Belgium on their way to France.

The first battle began on September 6, 1914, with 150,000 French soldiers in the 6th Army attacking the German 1st Army's right flank. The 1st German Army had turned to meet the attack, leaving a 30-mile gap between them and the 2nd Army. The combined French and British assault filled the gap and attacked the German 2nd Army. On September 7, a corps of 6,000 more French soldiers were rushed from Paris by taxicab to relieve the exhausted army. This was immediately followed by a surprise attack on the German 2nd Army by the French 5th, and led to the Germans' retreat that same day.



*Stamp issued to mark the 100th anniversary of US involvement in WWI.*



*This stamp image was based on a sketch by Captain Harvey Dunn of US troops at the Second Battle of the Marne.*

The Allies pushed the German forces back over the next few days before setting up entrenchments near the Aisne River, which would remain well into 1918. The battle ended on September 13, with German General Helmuth von Moltke telling the Kaiser, "Your Majesty, we have lost the war." The First Battle of the Marne is remembered for being one of the most decisive battles in history. It marked the beginning of the end of Germany's two-front war strategy.

German General Erich Ludendorff planned the Second Battle of the Marne in the wake of the failed Spring Offensive. The Spring Offensive, also known as Kaiserschlacht (Kaiser's Battle), was aimed at gaining as much allied ground as possible before US troops could arrive at the front. The attack began on the first day of Spring 1918, and saw quick German success. British and French troops had prepared and dug-in at some of the more strategic locations. Others were less defended – and this was where the Germans attacked. Within three days they'd opened a 50-mile-wide gap on the front, the greatest advance for either side in four years.

However, German Sturmtruppen (Stormtroopers) were leading the attacks. These elite soldiers carried few supplies so they could move quicker than regular infantry. But they ran out of ammo and food quickly, eventually resorting to looting or even killing their horses for meat, slowing their advance dramatically.

Despite the successful start, the German advance all but stalled. By the end of March, American troops began pouring into the front. The Germans launched five additional offensives in the coming months, including the Second Battle of the Marne. Ludendorff hoped that an attack through Flanders could defeat the British Expeditionary Force, and that a diversionary attack along the Marne would aid this victory.

On July 15, 1918, the Germans launched their attack, hoping to split the French and American troops. The Allied defenders east of Reims quickly halted the attacks. However, the fighting west of Reims dragged on much longer. The Allies stationed on the south bank of the Marne were under fire for three hours as Germans built makeshift bridges to cross the river. By that evening, the Germans secured a bridgehead nine miles wide by four miles deep.

During the July 15 fighting, two companies in the 28th Division of the Pennsylvania National Guard were surrounded when their neighboring French units fell back as German troops crossed the Marne River. They managed to hold their position and inflict heavy casualties, eventually fighting their way back to the front line. Another part of the 28th Division, the 109th Infantry, held their ground for three days under German attacks through ravines, woods, and trenches. The Germans later called this fighting "the most severe defeat of the war." The 109th became known as the "Men of Iron" and the 28th the "Iron Division."

The Allies launched a counteroffensive on July 18 and attacked the recently formed bulge in the German line. Two days later the Germans began to retreat. The Allies launched a fresh attack on August 1, and by the battle's end they had shortened the front by 28 miles and taken nearly 30,000 prisoners. It was a major morale booster for the Allies following the recent string of German victories.

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