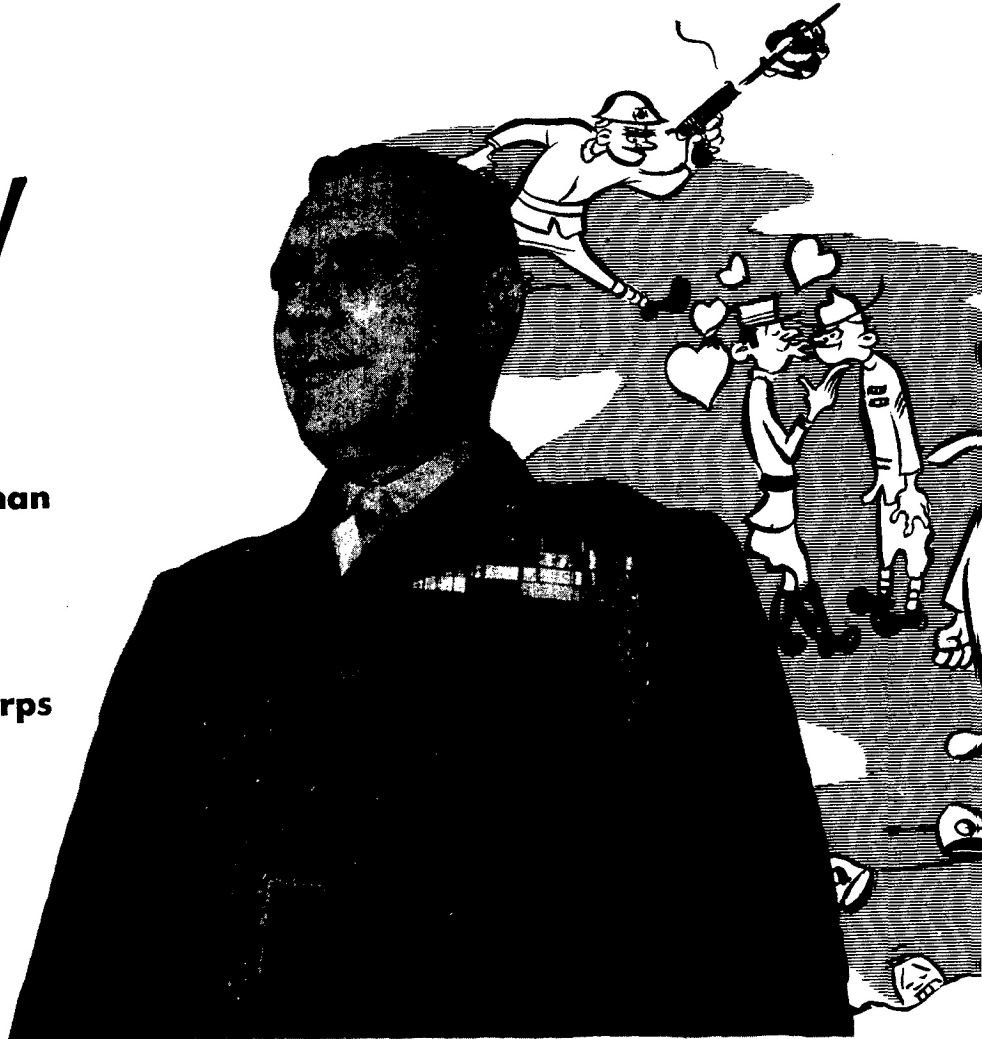


by Sgt. Lindley S. Allen and  
Corp. Paul Hicks

Leatherneck Staff Writers

# Old Nagy

**This iron-fisted old man  
of war has seen a lot in  
his years with the Corps**



**Master Sergeant John J. Nagazyna**

**H**E sat with a bottle of beer in his hand, his game leg propped up on a chair, looking out at the San Diego Marine Base across the highway from his window. Suddenly he caught the eye of a young Marine within the compound, and the bottle was raised in a brief, informal salute. For a moment Master Sergeant John Nagazyna USMC, retired, seemed to be back in uniform, a part of the organization to which he had given more than a quarter century of his life. Then the moment was gone, and the old man remained with his memories, his game leg, and his bottle of beer.

The youngster on the base never knew that he had been greeted by one of the most colorful, decorated, and respected noncoms ever to serve in the Marine Corps, a World War I hero, a soldier through many Marine campaigns between wars, an inspiring leader in combat, and a peerless "Top" sergeant and sergeant major — John Nagazyna, good Marine.

"Old Nagy" as younger men sometimes called him, when he was not around, enlisted in 1914, and served for a time aboard the old coal-burning

USS *Michigan*. When America entered War I he was transferred to the Sixth Regiment, and went with them to Soissons. During one of the early advances of that famed offensive all of the officers of his company were either killed or wounded. The Germans poured a heavy crossfire into the embattled Marines. It was one of those crucial moments in combat, when someone must take the initiative or everyone is lost.

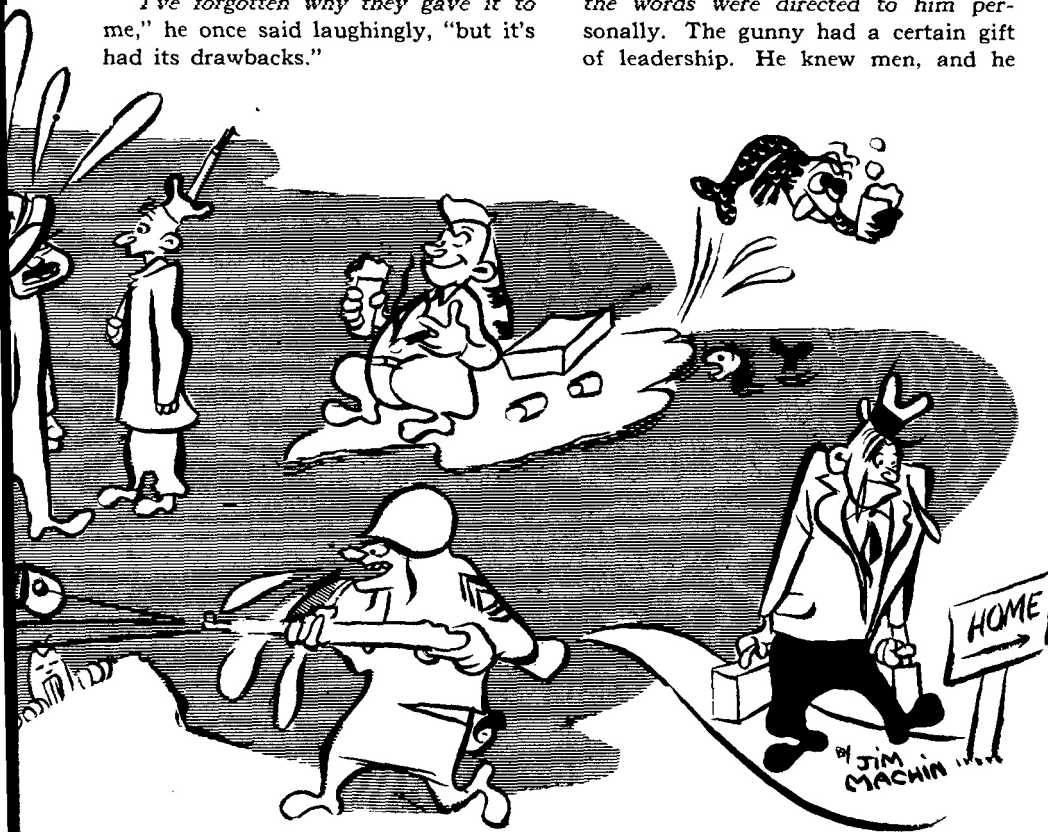
Nagazyna bellowed like a bull. He pulled men out of the trenches and shell holes and reformed the company into a fighting organization. Moving up and down the line he encouraged the men to another charge. Impelled by his driving force the company rallied and secured its objective. He was awarded the Navy Cross, the citation signed by Josephus H. Daniels, the famed World War I Secretary of the Navy.

Later, when the company was being relieved from Soissons, a stray shell landed near Nagazyna. During the resulting confusion the gunny, severely wounded, was left behind. He lay in a shell hole for many hours until a big Algerian trooper found him and took him to a nearby field hospital. In the meantime his mother in Brooklyn received word from Headquarters that he had been killed. Sometime later a letter arrived from the supposedly dead Marine. Completely puzzled Mrs. Nagazyna sent an inquiry to Headquarters and received an apology which admitted that a mistake had been made in the reporting of her son's death. This letter is one of the gunny's most cherished possessions.

"From its wording," he says, "I can't figure out whether Headquarters was sorry I wasn't dead, or sorry they made a mistake in reporting my death."

The *Medaille Militaire*, France's highest military decoration, is another of Sgt. Nagazyna's prized possessions. It is awarded only to enlisted men, and officers of the field marshal rank, for exceptional bravery in action. According to tradition he is entitled to an annual tobacco allowance of 200 francs, and the privilege of billing the President of France in the event of sudden illness.

"I've forgotten why they gave it to me," he once said laughingly, "but it's had its drawbacks."



One night after the war he was standing a sergeant of the guard watch on the main gate of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. A French admiral passing by saw the medaille on his blouse and was inspired to embrace the Marine, kissing him on both cheeks, in the customary French manner. Nagy was flabbergasted, but the raucous laughter of other Marines who had witnessed the kissing echoed long and loud.

The gunny put in several years as a DI at Parris Island following World War I. Legend has it that he was the toughest member of that leather lunged brethren who officiate at the birth of Marines. The stories that have circulated about Nagazyna on that remote island, would fill volumes. Discarding legend for factual accounts, it is safe to say that the platoons turned out by Gunny Nagazyna were among the best in the Corps.

When he returned to the line he carried his disciplinary traits with him. Throughout his years of soldiering be-

tween wars he maintained a rigid code of life for himself, and for the men under his authority. A company might be in the field, but he felt they were still Marines and saw to it that they acted accordingly. Nothing escaped his searching eyes, and to pass an inspection his company had to be perfect. If it wasn't he delivered an address to the troops that no one forgot. When he read off a company every man felt that the words were directed to him personally. The gunny had a certain gift of leadership. He knew men, and he

handled them with skill and force. And he got results. Nagy knew the Marine Corps manual like a back country preacher knows his Bible. A country preacher lives by his Bible; Nagy lived by his manual.

He demanded perfection of his men, and he gave it to them in return. He knew his job and he did it as well as he expected the men under him to do theirs. When his battalion was setting up defensive positions on Wallis Island, early in World War II, he was always leaving his office on "in person" inspection jaunts. If foxholes hadn't been dug he would check with the squad leader on proposed locations, and if satisfied would "suggest" that everything be squared away before his next visit.

One of Nagy's outstanding traits was an iron insistence on capable NCOs. He demanded respect for the officers and NCOs of his outfit, but saw to it that his noncoms well deserved that respect. A man had to act as a noncom

should, or he would soon find himself back in the lower paygrades. One of his men, while still a PFC, had been acting squad leader for some time. When Nagy finally presented the man with his corporal's warrant, he warned him:

"You've done a good job as acting corporal. Now that you've made corporal I want to see you act like a sergeant. If you don't you'll damn soon be acting PFC!"

Nagazyna enjoyed relaxation. His capacity for brew was prodigious, and, stuck on some tiny Pacific island, he often found the supply inadequate. Then he would make the rounds of the outfit's younger lieutenants, deliver a sparkling snow job, and walk away with some extra beer. Even on the most remote Pacific sand spits the gunny was seldom thirsty.

Perhaps it is Mars, the God of War himself, who controls the destinies of men like Nagazyna. It was a rare occurrence for a battalion sergeant major to engage the enemy in close quarter hand-to-hand fighting. There probably were no more than a dozen who ever did, but one of them was Gunny Nagazyna.

He was sergeant major of the 3rd Battalion, Twenty-second Marines on one of the small islands of the Eniwetok Atoll. Early one morning the CP was caught off balance when a platoon of Nips infiltrated and launched a surprise attack. The battalion commanding officer was at the front, checking his companies, and the burden of organizing a counter attack fell on the burly shoulders of Gunny Nagazyna.

While the Japs poured a blistering fire into the headquarters men, Nagy let out one of his famous bellows and practically duplicated the feat which had won him his first Navy Cross. He alerted the Marines in their foxholes, and when they recovered from the first shock of the attack, led them in the annihilation of the enemy. He worked a BAR, and personally accounted for a pile of inert Nips until a .30 caliber bullet tore through his left knee. He was awarded a gold star for his Purple Heart, and a gold star for his Navy Cross, but he knew he was through. The wound forever limited him to the mildest duty.

Some months later he was retired with full honors at the San Diego Marine Base. After the ceremony he limped across the highway to the home he had shared for many years with his wife.

It is not difficult to imagine the thoughts which pass through his mind as he sits there by the window today, beer in hand, looking back into the Marine Corps that was his life. . . **END**