

WORLD WAR I

A Marine Called Charley

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret) · Photos courtesy of Susan Strange



Capt Charley Dunbeck

"I'm going across that river. I expect you to come with me."

—Capt Charley Dunbeck, USMC
CO, 2d Bn, 5th Marines, night of 10 Nov. 1918

It was cold that night, cold and raw and wet, a thoroughly ugly night. It had been cold and raw and wet and thoroughly ugly for a week. For the Marines of the 2d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, more than a few of them alternately freezing from the cold and burning with fever from influenza, it also had been a hungry time, the advance outpacing the field kitchens.

Now the blackness of the Meuse River confronted them. They shortly would have to cross that river on rickety footbridges, little more than wooden planks laid on makeshift pontoons, taking them to where German machine-gunners waited on the opposite bank. Helluva way to spend the Marine Corps Birthday.

There was going to be an armistice the next day; that was the scuttlebutt. If the Germans had heard, they didn't appear to be impressed by it. All day long they had treated the waiting Marines to a downpour

of incoming artillery fire. The deafening explosions of 77s, 88s, 155s and the big 250 mm Minenwerfer projectiles that the Marines called "Moaning Minnies" rained down in a drumbeat of shock and concussion fit to pound a man's brain to pudding. It could kill a man too.

Some Marines who had crouched in shallow holes already had died. So had Army engineers of the 2d Division's 2d Engineer Regiment, as they emplaced the footbridges the battalion would cross. Farther downstream to the north near the town of Mouzon, where the 6th Marines were to cross, everything had come to a halt. Accurate German artillery had turned the entire supply of bridging materials into kindling.

The job of getting across the Meuse River would fall to 5th Marines with 2d Bn in the lead. The battalion would have the fortune to be led by a commander who had earned the respect and admiration of the Marines he commanded, a leader who never said, "Go on," but always said, "Come on." His name was "Charley" Dunbeck, and his story began back in June not

Below: In late 1918, MajGen John A. Lejeune, the commanding general of 2d Division, AEF, center, facing left, along with other officers, observes a 2d Bn, 5th Marines post-war training exercise at Segendorf, Germany. The exercise was led by Capt Charley Dunbeck.



far from another river, the Marne.

His service records list him as Charles E. Dunbeck, but he preferred Charley. Like more than a few Marine officers, he began as an enlisted Marine. Commissioned on the eve of America's entry into World War I, he was a captain commanding 43d Company in Lieutenant Colonel Frederic M. "Fritz" Wise's 2d Bn, 5th Marines when the Marine Brigade moved to halt the third in a series of German spring offensives that had been rolling up the Allied lines since March.

The first week of June, Marines and Germans were facing off to see which side would own woodland astride the road to Paris only 63 kilometers away. The German high command had committed elements of five divisions to take the wood that was the former hunting preserve of a well-to-do French family.

The owners called the woodlot the *Bois de Belleau* (Wood of Good Water or Belleau Wood) for its natural spring of cold, clear water. It stood as a necessary objective in the German drive to force France and Britain into a negotiated peace before American manpower and industrial might could tilt the table irreversibly against Germany. However, the German high command failed to recognize the obstinacy of Marines with rifles.

It was Marines with rifles, men described in an official German report as "remarkably accurate marksmen," who brought the all-out German offensive to a halt, forcing the *feldgrau* ranks to take up defensive positions in the wood. On 6 June, LtCol Julius S. Turrill's 1st Bn, 5th Marines had wrested the critical terrain feature of Hill 142 from the well-dug-in defenders. That was the opening round in a knockdown, drag-out brawl that would last the entire month. It was almost Charley Dunbeck's last fight.

In the mist-shrouded early light of 11 June, 2d Bn, 5th Marines jumped off in the attack at what was thought to be the exposed flank of the German unit defending the wood, with Dunbeck's 43d Co on the battalion left. The Marines actually were advancing directly into the prepared positions of two German regiments.

Machine guns cut the Marines to ribbons. In short order Dunbeck's company suffered more than 50 percent losses. Somehow, those who were left got in close enough to use bayonets, rifle butts, bare fists and entrenching tools. The Germans of the 40th Fusilier regiment didn't give up easily. If the Marines wanted the line, they would have to take it.

The fight turned into a battle royal, both sides determined to claim ownership of that ripple in the ground. Dunbeck eventually could send a runner back to report

A leader who never said, "Go on," but always said, "Come on." His name was "Charley" Dunbeck.



This 4 Nov. 1918 aerial reconnaissance photo of the southwest Villedomont area, the Meuse River and the surrounding terrain was taken by the U.S. Army's 24th Squadron in advance of the planned river crossing. (National Archives photo)

they had reached the first objective, but losses were heavy. Shortly thereafter, while in a hand-to-hand battle with two machine-gunners, Dunbeck shot one with his service pistol, and the other was a victim of his trench knife. Dunbeck went down, shot through both legs, with a bayonet slash in the shoulder and a whiff of mustard gas for good measure.

His Belleau Wood wounds kept Dunbeck out of the Marine Brigade's next big fight at Soissons in July. With his wounds still not completely healed, the irrepressible Dunbeck was back with the 43d Co by September when 2d Div went to the Champagne Region on loan to General Henri Gouraud's IV French Army. It was time to oust the Germans from the commanding heights of Blanc Mont Ridge, and wounds or no wounds, Dunbeck intended to have a hand in it.

Blanc Mont Ridge was the dominant terrain feature of the region, controlling everything about the old cathedral city of Rheims. The Germans had held the ridge since the opening days of the war four years earlier.

Fully aware that ownership of the ridge meant ownership of the Champagne, the German command had put those years to good use. Trench lines were connected to scores of reinforced concrete bunkers, each one sheltering two or more machine-gun teams, the whole providing carefully plotted interlocking fires that left scarcely

an inch of dead space. Every foot of ground in front had been surveyed and registered for protective artillery fires. While not occupying fighting positions, the defenders of the ridge rested in deep underground concrete shelters offering electric lighting, running water and ventilation. Underground galleys provided three hot meals daily.

All things considered, the ridge was a pretty good place to take a stand, and it was a tough nut to crack.

Dunbeck was whacked again.

Going to the aid of a wounded

Marine lying in the open, he was shot in the forehead and sent sprawling.

That cracking began at 0440 on 3 Oct., and it was rough sledding from the start. Before 6th Marines and the doughboys of the 9th Infantry could jump off, they had to oust uncooperative Germans from their start line. On the left, *poilus* of the French 21st Div were slaughtered by murderous machine-gun, mortar and artillery concentrations. Small progress was made, but it was not a good day.

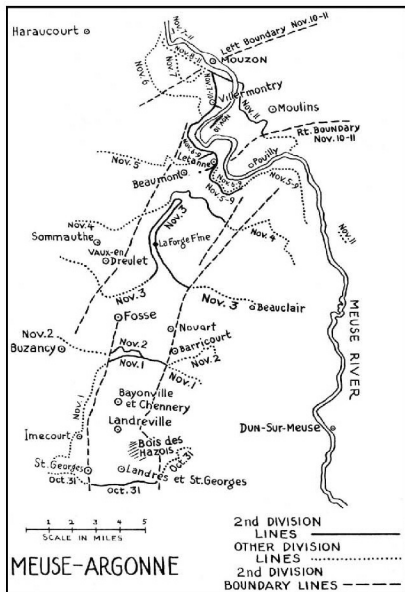
When 5th Marines took over the attack at first light on 4 Oct., they saw a

landscape out of a charnel house. All about them, piled in ragged, blood-soaked heaps, German, French and American corpses lay, torn and shredded. Friday, 4 Oct. 1918, is the single-most costly day in the history of 5th Marines.

The attack by 5th Marines began as planned with the regiment in the standard formation of a column of battalions, battalions on line, 3d Bn in the lead, followed by 1st Bn in support, with 2d Bn in reserve. The plan went out the window in minutes, as the Germans weighed in with a torrent of high-explosive and gas shells accompanied by the vicious fires of dozens of machine guns. Barely beyond the start line, all three battalions were soon on line with fire coming in from the right front, direct front, left front, left flank and left rear. At the most exposed position, the extreme left of the attack, Dunbeck's 43d Co was catching it in the neck.

Somehow progress was being made, but it was progress purchased at a frightful cost. Fully half of the company was killed or wounded. Marines who had fought at Belleau Wood and Soissons reckoned the German artillery fire at Blanc Mont dwarfed anything they ever had encountered. Marine veteran Elton Mackin described it: "The men were stunned; lashed down to earth by flailing whips of shrapnel, gas and heavy stuff that came as drumfire, killing them."

Dunbeck, coughing from the effects of



This hand-drawn Meuse-Argonne map, left, reflects the 2d Division's advance during the last days of WW I, and the caption on the photo above is "Where Marines crossed the Meuse River, France, 1918."



This Army Signal Corps photo is captioned, "Marines at finish of Meuse-Argonne area, France, World War I."

another encounter with mustard gas, continued to lead the way, poking and probing for chinks in the German defenses, getting small assault teams in among the machine-guns and rooting them out.

As daylight began to fade into twilight, Marines held half of the hill while the Germans clung defiantly to the other half as the battle continued to roar with no lessening in intensity. Then, Dunbeck was whacked again. Going to the aid of a wounded Marine lying in the open, he was shot in the forehead and sent sprawling by one of the machine-gun rounds lacing the air. Miraculously, he wasn't killed, but he was knocked half 'goofy and blinded by his own blood.

Constantly wiping blood from his eyes in order to see, the skipper of 43d Co briefed his executive officer, Capt Nathaniel H. Massie. Only then would Dunbeck allow his wound to be treated and take his place among the 1,600 members of 5th Marines who were killed or wounded that expensive day. Costly, yes, but it was Americans, not Germans, who held Blanc Mont at the end.

Dunbeck wasn't cut out for hospitals or aid stations. Within days he was back with

the battalion as the commanding officer. It was unusual, most unusual, for a captain to be commanding a battalion while there were senior officers available, but Major General John A. Lejeune, USMC, the division commander, had made it plain that Dunbeck was the one man he wished to see in command of the 2d Bn, 5th Marines.

MajGen Lejeune's desire reflected the sentiments of the Marines of the battalion. For them, Dunbeck had proven himself to be a standup guy, a man they would follow anywhere. Follow him, yes, but don't get too close to him was the wisdom of the Marines in the ranks; the man drew fire as horse droppings draw big green flies.

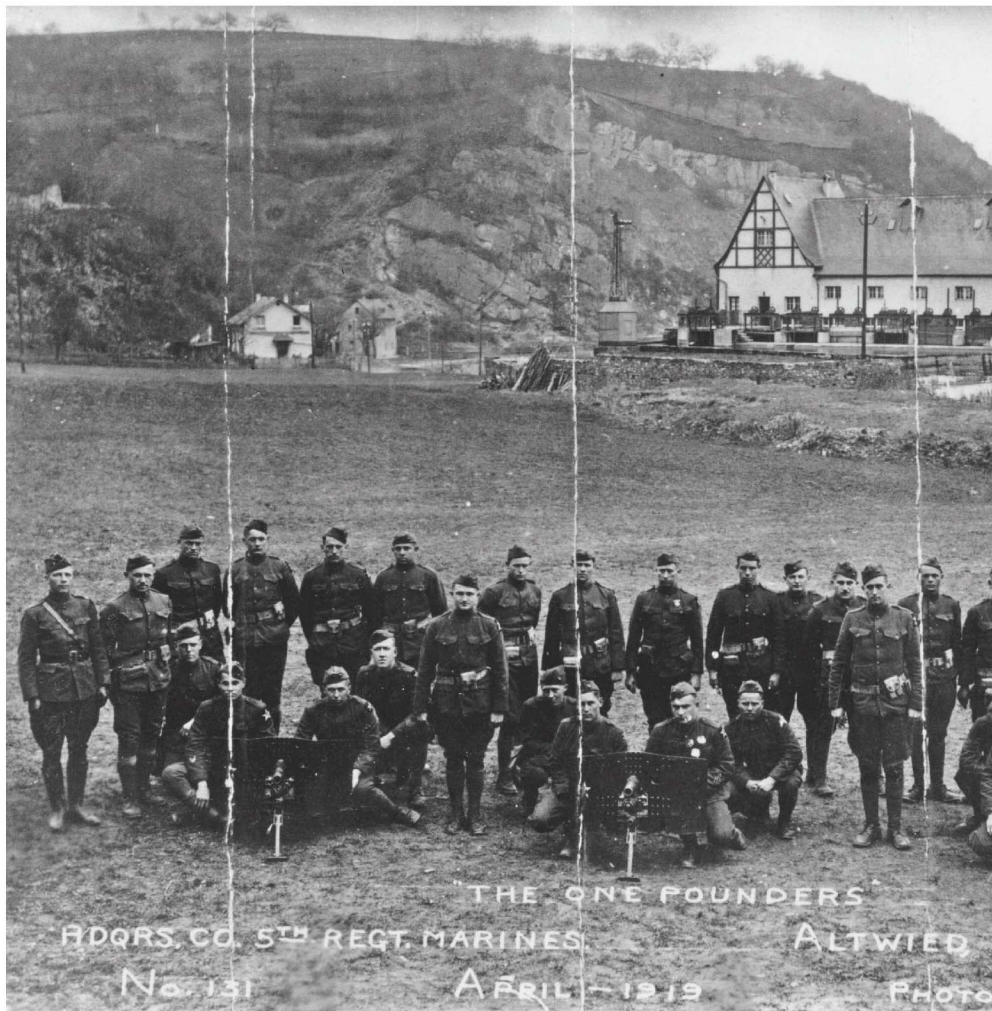
The loss of Blanc Mont tore a huge hole in the defenses the German command called the Hindenburg Line. Built using Russian prisoners during the winter of 1916-17, it was a seemingly impregnable system of bunkers, underground troop shelters, barbed-wire belts and hundreds of machine-gun positions, supported by ranked mortar and artillery batteries. It stretched from the British sector near Lens to the Franco-American front.

With his key position breached, the

commander of the German V Army, Gen Georg von der Marwitz, had to order a general retreat to better defensive positions along the Meuse River. Beyond lay the vital Metz-Sedan-Mezieres Railroad, the necessary supply line for all German forces in France. If the railroad were lost, the position of the entire German army would be hopeless.

In four years of war, Germany had lost an entire generation of her finest young men. Despite the staggering cost, Germans still were willing to stand and fight in that autumn of 1918. They fell back grudgingly, clinging to every bit of ground until they were pried from it, fighting desperately to buy time for their engineers to construct a new defense line on the east bank of the Meuse. Pounding them around the clock, GEN John J. Pershing sent a half-million men of the American Expeditionary Forces into the great Meuse-Argonne offensive with the goal of landing a knock-out blow that would end the war once and for all.

For Dunbeck and his battalion, the reality of the Meuse-Argonne was one long firefight in constant contact with a tenacious enemy. Throughout the month of



October, there was scarcely a day when the Marines of 2/5 weren't trading shots with truculent Germans who didn't yield a foot of ground until they were ordered or forced to fall back. The battalion would advance more than 50 kilometers during those days, always face to face with a stubbornly resisting foe.

From October into November the weather deteriorated to conditions that would have made simple misery almost desirable by contrast. Leaden skies leaked an around-the-clock drenching rainfall that failed to reach the freezing mark by only a few

degrees of temperature. Mud-caked Marines, shaking with the ravages of influenza, went into the attack through a curtain of ice-cold rain and clinging mud and muck that required all of a man's strength just to put one foot in front of the other.

While the bone-chilling rain continued to fall, the road network disintegrated, and the supply system staggered, lurched and stumbled. By a superhuman effort, ammunition was somehow brought forward. Rations were something else. Food was in abundance, but very little of it reached the line. Most of the food was

stuck in the mud somewhere back in the rear.

Glum Marines, worn down near to the point of exhaustion, burning with fever, crouching in muddy holes half full of water, fantasized about something, anything, to eat. Even a tin can of the despised Argentine beef Marines called "monkey meat" would have been greeted as a bonanza. There was no monkey meat. There was nothing.

As cold, wet and muddied as his Marines, Dunbeck, like those Marines, was going on nerve and willpower. Two en-



Officers and men of Hq Co, 5th Marines pose for a unit photograph with their 37 mm infantry support cannon at Altwied, Germany, in April 1919 during the occupation of Germany.

to show themselves. Someone might have asked, "Why in the hell are we doing this?" "Because Charley asked us to," would have been the answer. At 2130 on the night of 10 Nov. 1918, as a freezing rain continued to fall, the order came down: Go!

The attack was met by a curtain of steel. Incoming artillery, already a constant roaring, rose to an avalanche of sound as hundreds of red flashes tore apart the blackness of the night. The German machine guns, silent until now, sent deadly whiplashes among the Marines who went into the storm hunched forward like men braving wind-driven sleet. Casualties were immediate; their numbers were frightening.

The Marines of 2d Bn, 5th Marines went into it. Men who knew that the war might end tomorrow, who knew that what they were doing could well extinguish their chances of seeing that tomorrow, went into it. Knowing that each step might be their last, that their lives might bleed out there

with the end of the war in sight, they went into it. Charley Dunbeck went with them.

Perhaps by sheer willpower, some of them, nowhere near all, got across, got in among the machine-gunners and spared none of them. There was no formation to it, no following a plan of attack, just hard-eyed old men of 18, 19 and 20, working their way from strongpoint to strongpoint in small groups, leaving no living man in their wake.

They had endured the cold, the rain, the hunger, the aches and fevers of the great influenza pandemic, the days upon days of unending close combat. Finally, they were getting some of their own back. Their great-grandsons would have a word for it: payback.

After it was all over, after the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, 1100 on 11 Nov. 1918, when it all ended, MajGen John A. Lejeune visited some of the wounded in a field hospital. He wanted to thank them for everything they had done. To go into the attack, risking death with the end of the war almost in sight, was to MajGen Lejeune a special form of courage.

A bandaged sergeant put it all in perspective. "Captain Dunbeck told us he was going across and expected us to

come with him. When he put it that way, what man with any shred of self-respect couldn't go?"

The effects of gas on his lungs and heart put Dunbeck on the Temporary Disability Retired List in 1920. That didn't mean that the Marine Corps had no further need for Charley Dunbeck.

In 1942 there was another war, and he was recalled to active duty and advanced to the rank of colonel. One of his first duties was at the funeral of John A. Lejeune, whose dying wish was that Charley Dunbeck be among his pallbearers.

Col Charley Dunbeck, USMC (Ret) died in 1977 at 92 years of age. At his death he was the oldest and one of the most highly decorated Marine Corps officers on the Retired List, with the Navy Cross (two awards), Distinguished Service Cross (two awards), Silver Star (four awards), Purple Heart (two awards) and the Croix de Guerre 1914-18 with two Palms and one Gold Star.

German machine-gunners waited for them to show themselves. Someone might have asked, "Why in the hell are we doing this?" "Because Charley asked us to."

Author's note: The 2d Division United States Regular (today's 2d Infantry Division) was a hybrid organization, half Army, half Marine Corps, the only one of its kind in GEN John J. Pershing's American Expeditionary Forces. Like all American divisions of the Great War, it was a large formation, twice as big as a British, French or German division. Mustering 28,000 men, the foundation of the division's combat power was its two infantry brigades, each containing two entire regiments, a machine-gun battalion and a heavy mortar company.

The ground gaining elements of the division were supported by an artillery brigade of five regiments, an engineer regiment and divisional combat-service and combat-service-support units. Today the 2d Infantry Division, the "Indian Head Division," still counts the 5th and 6th Marines as honorary members.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Later in his career, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.



counters with mustard gas had left him with a chronic wracking cough that the cold and wet did nothing to alleviate. No less than the front-line Marine, the battalion commander was bone weary and wolf hungry. Dunbeck, a man who lived by a strict personal code, was not a man to eat while the Marines to whom he gave orders went without.

Crouched on the west bank of the Meuse River, waiting for the order that would send them across, they were pounded relentlessly by German artillery, and German machine-gunners waited for them