

A Veterans Day Tribute

France, 1918

The Big War

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

"A stream of Maxim bullets churned up and down the river searching. They rapped from time to time across the planks, sounding like a sudden roll of muffled drums. You felt their jarring shake all up your limbs and fought against the cramp of belly muscles knotted with fear. You watched men die ahead of you."

—Pvt Elton E. Mackin

Navy Cross, Distinguished Service Cross

Two Silver Star Citations

Battalion Runner, 1st Bn, 5th Marines

"The Big War." For the men who fought it, that was what it would always be: The Big War, capitalized. Other wars might, and indeed would, come and go, but for the Marines who served in France, the war that was the defining experience of their lives would always be The Big War.

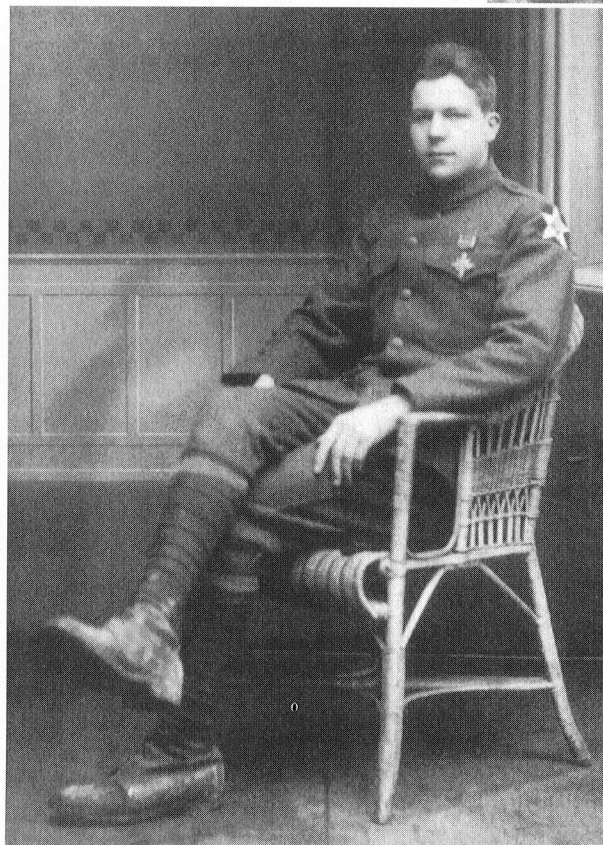
As October 1918 gave way to November, it also had become a nasty war. The weather, cool but pleasant enough a few weeks earlier, had turned markedly colder. That in itself wasn't bad, but it seemed to be constantly raining as well. Cold and rain combined in an assault on body and spirit that never went away, soaking men to the skin, chilling them to the bone and sending their outlook on life and the war into the regions below zero.

Marines being Marines never descended into self-pity or wallowed in the gloom of "poor little me." While they might be in a collectively sour mood, there was nothing downhearted about them. They took up the challenge of the weather and threw it back in Mother Nature's face. Somewhere in the ranks a vocalist would raise a chorus of a Marine version of the old drinking song "How Dry I Am": "How wet I am. How cold I am. Nobodeee seems to give a damn." That done, they hunched up their shoulders and settled down to tough it out.

Even the newest among them, and there were many of these, took on the temperament of the veterans, the old men of 18, 19 and 20. They were the experienced nucleus of fighting men who formed the bedrock of the Marine Bri-

gade of the 2d Division United States Regular. There were few of these old salts, though. Many of the high-spirited volunteers and old Corps regulars who had gone ashore at Brest in the summer of 1917 had been left behind at places like Belleau Wood, Soissons and Blanc Mont.

Some of the wounded from earlier battles were trickling back. Captain Frank Whitehead, popular and respected among the Marines he led, still a bit tender around the edges from wounds taken at Blanc Mont in October, passed Private Elton E. Mackin lounging in a shell crater that served as a command post of sorts for Major George W. Hamilton's 1st Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment. Waving off Mackin's crisp salute, Whitehead, a former enlisted Marine himself, grasped Mackin warmly by the hand. "How in hell are you, Slim? Haven't they killed



COURTESY OF THE GENERAL ALFRED M. GRAY MARINE CORPS RESEARCH CENTER, ARCHIVES BRANCH

Above: Marines stood on the sole remaining footbridge across the Meuse River. The footbridge was used by leathernecks of 1st and 2d Bns, 5th Marines on the last night of the war. (James R. Nilo collection)

Left: Pvt Elton E. Mackin posed in 1919 wearing his Distinguished Service Cross.



you yet?" Whitehead laughed. Old hands like Whitehead and Mackin and new recruits fresh from the latest replacement draft all waited for their next assignment.

That assignment would be the great Meuse-Argonne offensive of General John J. Pershing's American Expeditionary Force (AEF), an all-American army of more than a half million men. Everything that had gone before was a preliminary. This was the main bout. This was the knockout punch that would take Germany out of the war. For the Marines and soldiers of the 2d Division, that would mean taking the lead in the attack against the German V Corps, forcing it out of its fortifications in the Hindenburg Line, Germany's last line of defense, and driving ahead to cross the Meuse River.

No one thought it would be easy. Germany might be on her last legs, but Germans still were prepared to fight, brave and determined men who stood by their duty even when that duty seemed hopeless. The old *Boche* still had men like

"The second man ahead met the bullets as he stepped across a length of raft, sank to his knees, twisting, and slid face first into the river, vanishing quietly. He left an empty place against the fog."

—Pvt Elton E. Mackin

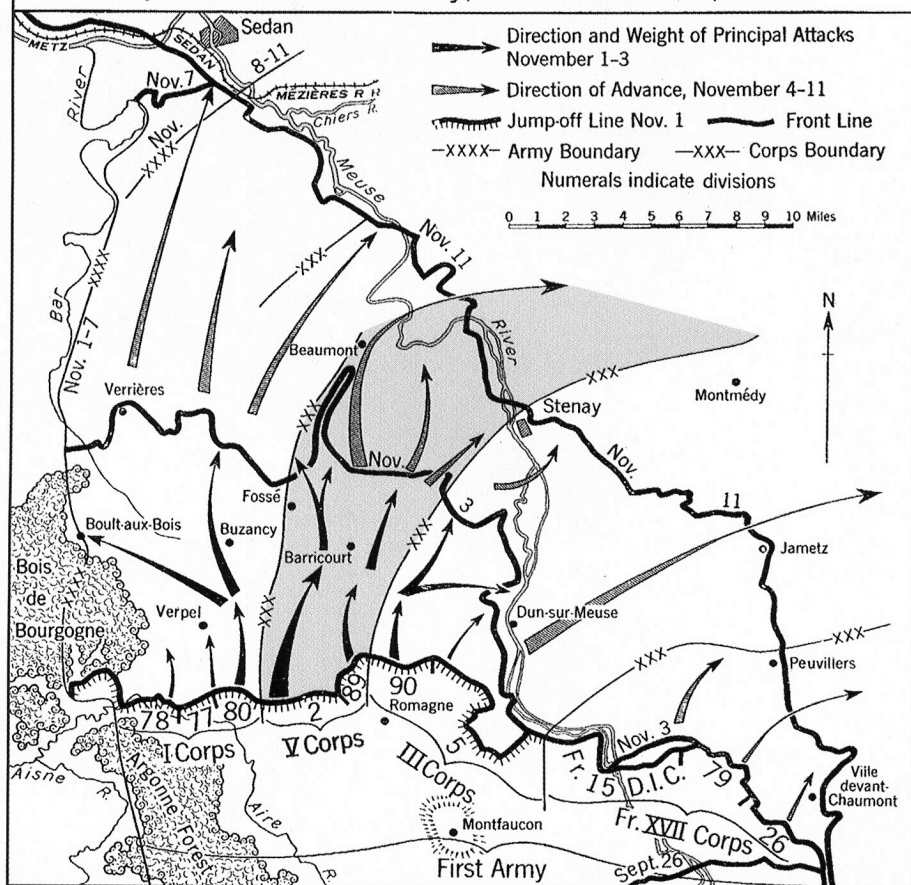
that, men willing to stand and do battle. (*Boche*, a French word that has no exact translation, was vehemently uncomplimentary in its meaning. As applied by Marines to their German enemies, though, it was an almost affectionate term for a brave and respected adversary.)

The Marines met them on Friday, 1 Nov., moving out from their assault positions near the town of Buzancy at 0530 after two hours of preparatory fires by every gun of the three artillery regiments that constituted the 2d Div's artillery brigade. The Germans replied in kind,

and there were immediate casualties in the attacking companies, notably in the 6th Marines, which lost nearly 100 killed. Among the first to fall was the commanding officer of the 76th Company, 1/6, Capt Macon C. Overton, a man idolized by the Marines he led.

Was it the sight of his beloved commander falling that prompted Pvt David T. Depue to react like a "berserker" out of Norse legend? Who knew? No matter why, Depue picked up an automatic rifle and charged headlong into the German machine-gun fire, blazing away from the

Operations of First Army, November 1-11, 1918



AMERICAN ARMIES AND BATTLEFIELDS IN EUROPE

hip as he ran. Hit twice and with his ammunition gone, Depue fell upon his antagonists, using his weapon like a club, flailing murderously about him. He was found mortally wounded, surrounded by the bodies of dead Germans.

The Germans fought stubbornly and fought well, but the Marine attack was making headway on schedule. The American artillery was particularly effective, pounding the German fortifications relentlessly. Following close behind the barrage, the Marines pressed on toward their initial objective, rooting out stubborn pockets of resistance.

More than a few of the Marines "trudging" forward were doing so despite racking coughs and burning fevers. They were casualties of the great influenza pandemic that was sweeping the world and eventually would kill more than 20 million people worldwide before running its course. Despite suffering debilities that were putting civilians in hospital beds, they went on. It was raining, and it was cold, but they slogged on through the mud, red-rimmed eyes searching for pockets of resistance as the shells plowed up the ground before them. Their supply lines had collapsed under the twin burdens of weather and disintegrating roads, and many of them had been without food for two days. Still they went on.

The Germans, despite being forced in-

exorably backward, battled them every step of the way. Amid a rain of German shells and a hail of machine-gun bullets, the Marines routed the defenders from their prepared positions, with men like Second Lieutenant Wilbur Summerlin, Capt Robert M. Montague, First Lieutenant Leo Hermle and Sergeant Fred Marlowe leading the way.

With rifles, automatic rifles, grenades and flame throwers, the men of the 5th and 6th Marines shot, blasted and burned their way forward. The twin towns of Landres and St. Georges, reduced to rubble, were taken in stride, and soon Maj Hamilton's 1/5 could report taking a battery of German 77 mm guns, those guns that were so vital to the *Boche*.

A like feat was performed by Gunnery Sergeant Arthur High of the 77th Machine Gun Co. Leading a party of 12 men forward in an infantry role, High took his small group, circling behind a German artillery battery that was preparing to withdraw, and captured the entire unit before the Germans quite knew what had happened. Perhaps not wanting to be outdone, 1stLt Neil Dougherty of 83d Co, 3/6 led his platoon in a slashing raid that netted an additional 10 of the high-velocity 77 mm "whiz-bangs" and 42 prisoners.

It was the same story all along the line. GEN Pershing's Meuse-Argonne Of-

fensive was grinding forward like a bulldozer, plowing under everything in its path. Through it all, the cold miserable rain pelted down on Americans and Germans alike. Misery is an equal opportunity employer.

It went on that way through the first week of November, bone-weary, half-frozen, mud-caked companies shifting back for a day or two in the comparative comfort of reserve, while other equally bone-weary, half-frozen, mud-caked companies took their place at the head of the advance. There could be no stopping. An enemy back on his heels has to be kept that way. There can be no opportunity for him to catch his breath, dig in and make a stand. One great obstacle, the Meuse River, still lay ahead.

A river is a military obstacle, a natural feature where a smaller force can successfully halt a larger force, and as the first week of November drew to a close, the larger force wasn't that much larger at all. Despite the ground gained, despite the guns and prisoners taken, the Marine Brigade had paid a price in casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Harry Lee's 6th Marines, normally more than 3,000 strong, had lost more than 1,000 men in a week of fighting. In Colonel Logan Feland's 5th Marines the casualty figures weren't much better. Many of these had fallen before German fire. Many more had succumbed to the twin ravages of dysentery and flu. "Men very weak," noted LtCol Julius S. Turrill, the 5th Marines executive officer, in a message to regimental headquarters.

Losses, sickness and sheer weariness there might be, but ahead lay the river, and on the high ground on the other side of the river the Germans were waiting. They were exhausted, their ranks were painfully thinned, and they were short of everything except courage, machine guns and artillery. Despite their losses, the Germans still had plenty of firepower and the will to use it. They were determined men fighting with their backs to the wall, and crossing the river to pry them loose from their grip on the east bank would take some doing.

Before anyone could cross the river to fight Germans, someone was going to have to provide a means of getting across. That would be the job of the 2d Div's ever-reliable 2d Engineer Regiment. Soldiers equally at home with a rifle in their hands as with a pick or shovel, the 2d Engineers had proven themselves on a score of occasions, fighting beside their Marine comrades in arms, earning the leathernecks' everlasting admiration. Still, the engineers were going to have their work cut out for them putting footbridges



JAMES R. NILO COLLECTION

Col Logan Feland (lighting cigarette) had commanded 5th Marines at Blanc Mont, where horrific losses were endured. He sent the combat-worn unit across the Meuse on the night of 10 Nov. 1918.

“We had advantages: leaders we had followed many times before and fog that blanketed our movements and stifled our noise. The old *Boche* didn’t know we were there. He didn’t even send out patrols to see. He was content to see what his guns had done, were doing, so splendidly.”

—Pvt Elton E. Mackin

across the Meuse in the face of stiff German resistance.

Throughout the late afternoon of 10 Nov., the Marine Corps Birthday, the engineers of 1LT James V. Slade, USA, completely in the open and whipped by vicious German fire, labored desperately to put floating footbridges across the Meuse at two points. The bridges were built parallel to the west bank, then the upstream ends were cast loose to be carried over to the far shore by the river’s current. It was a technique as old as floating bridges themselves, a technique that would have been recognized by the engineers of Caesar’s legions. Engineers died doing it, as the Germans fought back with everything they had.

At the town of Mouzon, the crossing point for the 6th Marines, the German resistance was so furious that no headway could be made. Even after dark descended, German fire blasted pontoons and bridge sections into kindling as fast

as they were put in the water. The 6th Marines’ attack was called off.

Getting across the Meuse, if it could be done at all, now would fall to Col Feland’s 5th Marines. With Capt Leroy P. Hunt temporarily in command, 1/5 would cross near the town of Letanne, while 2/5 under Capt Charley Dunbeck, the battalion’s senior surviving officer after the carnage at Blanc Mont in October, would go over slightly downstream. In overall command would be Maj George W. Hamilton, normally 1/5’s commanding officer and a man generally conceded to be the best combat commander in the Marine Brigade.

The assault waves moved out in pitch-blackness and freezing rain at 2130 following a one-hour artillery barrage, the most pronounced effect of which was to stir the Germans to a thunderous response. High-explosive and gas shells rained down on the advancing Marines in a torrent. Casualties littered the ground

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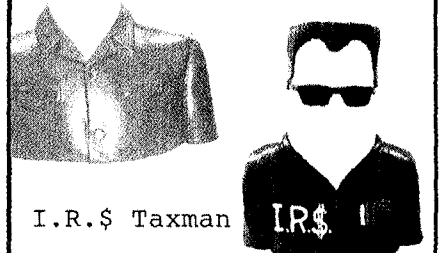


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"The Boche, by this time [at Blanc Mont], had come to depend largely on machine guns for defense. ..."
 Extracted from "Final Report of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion"
 by Maj Littleton W. T. Waller Jr. (*Leatherneck* file illustration)

long before the riverbank was reached. More Marines died there at the riverbank, their still forms sprawled amid those of the engineers who had fallen earlier. The far bank blazed with machine-gun fire as Marines sprinted onto the swaying footboards. Men stumbled, spun and staggered in midstride as bullets found them, then fell into the black water. Others took their places. "Come on, Marines! Come on! This way!" they shouted. Perhaps they were inspired by the words of Capt Dunbeck, a former gunnery sergeant and Marine Gunner, who said: "I am going across that river. I expect you to go with me."

Somehow they gained the far bank—those of them who were left. Capt Hunt's 1/5 could muster scarcely more than 100 effectives. What was left of the battalion assembled into what wasn't even a company. There they found themselves under an even more punishing fire from Germans on the high ground above them. As brutal as that fire was, it couldn't stop them.

Among the handful on the east bank were Marines such as GySgt Sam Clarkston, Corporal Bill Ferguson, Pvt Hans Naegle and Cpl Guy Heryford, fighting men who refused to accept defeat. Flayed by constant shellfire but with determination and blood in their eyes, they set about systematically levering the Germans from their prepared positions, one by one blasting the stuttering machine-gun bunkers into smoking silence and blood-soaked corpses. Pharmacists Mate 2d Class Ray Messinelli would earn the Distinguished Service Cross there, tending wounded Marines in complete disregard for the danger to himself.

As the clock approached midnight, Charley Dunbeck had 2/5 across the river despite fierce German resistance. The battalion was in somewhat better shape than Hunt's 1/5, with slightly more than 200 Marines present and able to fight. Among them were more than just "a few good men." Cpl Walter Hiller and

Pvt John Haney would charge fearlessly into the German machine guns to silence them with grenades, bullets and bayonets. Pvt Wilbert Sinclair and Sgt Tony Kane each knocked out a pair of machine guns single-handedly.

Together, the thinned ranks of 1/5 and 2/5 shoved the Germans back through the rain and the fog and the darkness, making the machine-gun crews pay for their stubbornness. There was no real formation to it, only small groups of Marines unhesitatingly following officers and sergeants and corporals they trusted, killing everyone who got in their way. The Germans were baffled.

As night gave way to a leaden dawn on 11 Nov., the initial objectives had been secured. Then the word came down from Division Headquarters: Hold in place. Short hours later, at 1100 on 11 Nov. 1918, the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, the guns fell silent all

"We were going over. The Germans held the far bank, as all well knew. Some of us remembered night attacks in other places."

—Pvt Elton E. Mackin

along the line that stretched from the English Channel to the Swiss frontier. The Big War was over.

For the Marines who fought it, The Big War would never be completely over. It would remain a part of them for the remainder of their lives, and they would forever be proud of their part in it, proud of what they had done. Long after it was all over, they would stand tall with the knowledge that their division, the 2d Di-

vision, half-Marine and half-Army, had gained more ground, taken more prisoners, captured more equipment and suffered more casualties than any other division in France.

Yet, strangely, they would be unaware of their most lasting accomplishment, for it was the Marines who fought in France who planted the seed of today's Marine Corps. Everything that came afterward—Guadalcanal and Tarawa, Iwo Jima and Okinawa, Korea, Vietnam, Kuwait, Afghanistan and Iraq—all had their beginnings long ago in France. The Marine Corps today is what they were then.

Author's note: In World War I a Marine who was cited in official orders for an act of bravery was entitled to wear a small silver star in the suspension ribbon of his campaign medal. This was the predecessor of today's Silver Star Medal.

The quotes by Elton Mackin were excerpted from his memoir, "Suddenly We Didn't Want To Die." As a battalion runner, the most dangerous job a Marine could have, Mackin fought from Belleau Wood to war's end. Anyone looking for insight into the life of a front-line Marine in The Big War will find nothing better than Mackin's vivid account, which is available in MCA bookstores.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars, was a major contributor to Leatherneck's recently completed Korean War commemorative series.

