

John J. Nagazyna Hero or Liberty Risk?

John J. Nagazyna (USMC photo)

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

Tigny, France, 1918, awarded Navy Cross for "extraordinary heroism in action"

Brooklyn Navy Yard, 1923, awarded summary court-martial and reduced to rank of private for "drunk on duty"

In the beginning, there probably was not any hint that John J. Nagazyna was destined to be an unusual and remarkable Marine.

On 29 July 1914, only weeks after an Austrian archduke and his wife were killed by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, all of Europe was on the verge of being plunged into the flaming cauldron of a war that would claim 15,000,000 lives. In New York, though, it was an ordinary day, and the Marine recruiter who signed Nagazyna into the ranks of the Marine Corps probably saw nothing but an ordinary 18-year-old. If the recruiter could have looked into the future and seen what it held in store for his new recruit, he wouldn't have believed it anyway.

That future didn't unfold right away. First, there was boot camp. For John Nagazyna, in the days before centralized recruit depots at San Diego and Parris Island, S.C., boot camp meant Marine Barracks, Naval Base, Norfolk, Va. It was there that Nagazyna was introduced to close order drill, the manual of arms and the general orders for sentries on post.

In common with a recruit of today, he was not permitted to refer to himself or even think of himself as a Marine until he had met the exacting standards of a hard-nosed, old-line drill instructor. Only then could John Nagazyna don the eagle, globe and anchor, pack his seabag and report to his first duty station, the battleship USS *Michigan* (BB-27), as a member of the ship's Marine Detachment.

Routine peacetime assignments ended

abruptly in the spring of 1917. War had been raging in Europe for almost three years, but America had steered a careful course of neutrality. That neutrality had been severely strained in 1915, when the British passenger liner *Lusitania* had been sunk by a German submarine off the coast of Ireland, with numerous American passengers among the dead. Then, early in 1917 came the discovery that Germany had been secretly encouraging Mexico to invade the United States. That did it. On 6 April 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a Declaration of War against Germany.

Nagazyna found himself on the raw new base at Quantico, Va. Once there he took his place in the ranks of the 1st Battalion, Sixth Marine Regiment, commanded by Major John Arthur Hughes, the legendary "Johnny the Hard."

Johnny the Hard was no easy man to please. Hughes wasted no time in honing the battalion into a razor-edged instrument of war. Still favoring a gimpy left leg, a souvenir of a gun battle with *insurrectos* in the Dominican Republic the previous November, Hughes drove the battalion and himself without letup. When the battalion embarked for France in late September 1917, John Nagazyna was wearing the chevrons of a sergeant.

Once in France, the 6th Marines became part of the 2d Division, United States Regular, a hybrid division, half-Marine, half-Army. As part of the 2d Div's 4th (Marine) Brigade, the 6th Marines along with the 5th Marines and the 6th Machine Gun Bn learned the ins and outs of trench warfare in relatively quiet sectors. Firmly resisting requests to feed American troops into French and British units as replacements, General John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), set about building an American Army.

The building and training came to an end in the spring of 1918 when the Germans launched their massive twin offensives designed to knock France and Britain out of the war before the weight of American numbers could tilt the balance. By mid-May the Allied front in France was reeling backward under thousands of high-explosive and gas shells and more than 250,000 German troops. Two weeks later the entire French 6th Army had collapsed. The Germans had taken nearly 30,000 prisoners and were driving hard for Paris. It was time for the 2d Div to go to war.

The 2d Div met the German attack head-on at a place called the Bois de Belleau (Belleau Wood), and John Nagazyna learned about war firsthand. He also found what may have been his natural element, for John Nagazyna was a born fighting man.

In the monthlong battle to wrest the shell-blasted woods and thickets of Belleau Wood from the Germans holding it, Nagazyna, now a gunnery sergeant, was always in the hottest part of the fight. In firefights that marked the struggle for Belleau Wood, he never failed to rise to the needs of the situation. On four separate occasions his fearless leadership in what was often hand-to-hand combat resulted in his receiving four Silver Star Citations. From the French government there was the Croix de Guerre, 1914-18, with palm and bronze star, each denoting an additional award.

Wherever or whatever the fight was, John Nagazyna could be found up front, storming a German machine-gun position with rifle and grenades, throwing back an attack or leading one. In World War I, gunnery sergeant was a fairly new rank, and Nagazyna helped create the leadership legends of the rank.

Among the Marines of the 95th Com-



COURTESY OF COL CHARLES WATERHOUSE, USMCR (RET)

"Belleau Wood," a painting by Colonel Charles Waterhouse, USMCR (Ret), depicted the close-quarters battle where Marines, like John Nagazyna, charged through the wheat fields to enter the woods under intense machine-gun fire to take on and defeat the Germans with rifle and bayonet.

pany, "Gunny" Nagazyna was the one who gave encouragement, set an example of leadership, drove home an attack or put a boot in a backside to encourage a laggard. It wasn't wise for anyone, anyone at all, to get in Gunny Nagazyna's way.

If Nagazyna found his calling as a fighting man, it was a good thing, for there was still fighting to do. After the bloodletting at Belleau Wood, there was barely enough time to fill out the depleted ranks of the Marine brigade with fresh replacements before the brigade was thrown into battle again. This time the objective was the huge bulge the German spring offensives had driven into the Allied lines to within 18 miles of Paris. The brigade's task was to smash in the south side of the German positions around Soissons and deny German access to the vital Soissons-Chateau Thierry highway.

The 5th Marines and their Army comrades of the 9th and 23d Infantry regiments started in style on 18 July 1918. Rolling forward behind a pulverizing ar-

tillery barrage, leathernecks and dough-boys caved in the German lines and sent the defenders reeling backward until the day's final objective, the town of Vierzy, had been secured. The price had been high. The job of finishing the Germans off would fall to Lieutenant Colonel Harry Lee's 6th Marines, assigned the mission of seizing the town of Tigny and sealing off the all-important highway beyond.

Promptly at 0830 on 19 July 1918, the 6th Marines launched its assault. The Germans were waiting. The lead platoons were greeted by a veritable wall of high-explosive shells and a blizzard of machine-gun fire. To Sgt Don Paradis, 80th Company, 2/6, the incoming German shellfire "was so great that it seemed like a black curtain." To Sgt William Scanlon of the 82d Co, "The machinegun fire encountered before the town of Borsches [sic] [at Belleau Wood] was bad, but the fire now is a thousand

times worse. It is like a hailstorm."

Casualties were immediate and heavy. By noon LtCol Lee had to report that his rifle companies had been reduced by 30 percent. Well-directed fire from German 77 mm and 105 mm field guns was shredding the advancing ranks. Every inch of ground was being paid for in blood. A report received from Johnny the Hard Hughes indicated that the strength of 1/6 was barely more than 100 effective men. Every officer in the 95th Co was killed or wounded. The attack was grinding to a halt.

Then John Nagazyna took over. Raising his personal war cry, something along the lines of a maniacal howl of rage mixed with the bellowing of an enraged bull moose, Nagazyna stormed into the teeth of the stuttering Maxim guns, shooting, bayoneting and bludgeoning anyone and everyone who stood in his way. Like a wild man, the enraged gunny scooped up other Marines from shell holes and battered German gun positions, slamming them into the German lines, ripping those lines open in a slashing thrust. Not until



John J. Nagazyna
May 1937


USMC

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How many men could combine courts-martial for "over indulgence in strong drink" with meritorious promotions?

No. 103456

U.S. MARINE CORPS



SERVICE-RECORD BOOK
OF

NAGAZYNA
(SURNAME)

JOHN JAMES
(CHRISTIAN NAME)

RANK

PRIVATE
SERGEANT
PLATOON SERGEANT
FIRST SERGEANT

12 MAY, 1937
(DATE OF ENLISTMENT)

PREVIOUS SERVICE (ACTIVE)

19 Years 11 Months 15 Days

DATE OF EXPIRATION OF EACH EXTENSION

N.M.C. 109-A & I
8-28-34-1531

U.S. GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE: 1934

the last German had been killed or driven from the lines before Tigny did Nagazyna stand panting and exhausted, rifle tightly clutched in his fists.

The shell that finally got him was an ironic afterthought. Maybe some unknown German gunner had one last shell to fire off. More than likely it was just sheer, blind chance. In any event, Nagazyna went down with a shell fragment in his left leg, to be carted off by an Algerian *Tirailleur* and deposited in a French hospital. Nagazyna's mother in Brooklyn, N.Y., was informed that he had been killed. Later the mistake was corrected with a telegram, leading Nagazyna to remark, "I can't figure out whether headquarters was sorry I wasn't dead or sorry they made a mistake in reporting my death."

For his actions at Tigny on 19 July 1918, Nagazyna would receive the naval service's second highest award for valor, the Navy Cross. The citation would read in part, "He set an example of personal bravery and determination as to inspire his men to success." The Army would present him the Distinguished Service Cross, while from the French there would be the *Medaille Militaire*, awarded only to generals, admirals and non-commissioned officers for exceptional acts of bravery. A gold star for his *Croix de Guerre* would follow.

Nagazyna recovered from his wound at Tigny and fought again at Blanc Mont in October, and in November he joined the march across the Rhine and into Ger-

many with the Army of Occupation. On 6 Sept. 1919, he was mustered out of the ranks of the Marine Corps.

John Nagazyna wasn't cut out to be a civilian. He tried several undertakings, but his heart wasn't in it. On 22 Aug. 1922, he reenlisted with a decided thirst and compiled a record that could be thought of as bizarre.

How many men could combine courts-martial for "over indulgence in strong drink" with meritorious promotions? How many men could collect both office hours and letters of commendation? John Nagazyna could.

His trail through the 1920s and '30s is a mystifying maze of reductions and promotions, condemnations and commendations. Where one reporting senior would "Prefer not have" Sgt Nagazyna in his command, another reporting senior would check the fitness-report block marked "Particularly desire to have."

Some proud, dedicated Marines possessed a prodigious appetite for bottled goods. John Nagazyna appears to have raised those qualities to an art form, which resulted in a General Court-Martial for drunkenness at Quantico in 1931. That could have been thought of as pure and simple bad timing. It was Prohibition, and the base was plagued by illegal alcohol from Quantico town, described by John A. Lejeune as "an unsanitary place, an abode of bootleggers and other low types."

The commanding general of the base at the time was Major General Smedley D. Butler, "Old Gimlet Eye" himself and a hard-line teetotaler. It was thought that the court-martial of a senior noncom-

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MEDALS (including good-conduct medals and bars, but excluding those awarded for qualification with infantry weapons), BADGES, AND DECORATIONS; MEDAL OR BADGE NUMBER AND DATE AWARDED

Navy Cross.	Nicaragua Expedition, 1927.
Distinguished Service Cross. 12 Jul 1918	Cuban Expedition, 1917.
Croix de Guerre Palm, Gold & Bronze Stars.	31 June, 1933, Awarded Silver Star Medal, Oak Leaf Cluster.
Purple Heart.	Medaille Militaire of France.
Victory Medal.	Awd GC Med # 9732, 6 Strips, 3 Bars. (29 June 37, 4th Bar)

LETTERS OF COMMENDATION (Pasted on back cover)

SUBJECT	DATE	BY WHOM ISSUED

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If your service record book looks like this one, you may be "old Corps." Nagazyna was considered by some to be too old for WW II, but in a November 1993 *Leatherneck* article, "Like Father, Like Son," he was quoted as saying before WW II, "I haven't missed a Marine expedition in years, and I don't want to miss the biggest of them all." (Records courtesy of Personnel Management Support Branch, Code MMSB, HQMC)

John J. Nagazyna's Awards and Decorations

- Navy Cross with gold star
- Distinguished Service Cross
- Silver Star with three gold stars
- Purple Heart with gold star
- Navy Unit Commendation
- Marine Corps Good Conduct Medal with five bronze stars
- World War I Victory Medal
- Army of Occupation of Germany Medal
- Haitian Campaign Medal
- Second Nicaragua Campaign Medal
- China Service Medal
- American Defense Service Medal
- American Theater Campaign Medal
- European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal
- Asiatic, Pacific Campaign Medal
- World War II Victory Medal
- Medaille Militaire
- Croix de Guerre, 1914-18, with palm, gold star and bronze star
- Fourragere in the colors of the Croix de Guerre, 1914-18, personal award



Marines used to speak of "seeing the elephant" to describe combat time. Nagazyna certainly saw the elephant. Based on a revised Marine Corps rank structure in December 1946, Nagazyna retired as a master sergeant.

missioned officer would deliver a stern message to the entire command. First Sergeant Nagazyna was reduced to private, only to be promoted to sergeant, then to platoon sergeant.

Bottled goods or no bottled goods, PltSgt Nagazyna left a lasting mark as a drill instructor at Parris Island in 1936 and 1937, earning high praise for producing outstanding recruit platoons. At Tientsin, China, the services of 1stSgt Nagazyna were sought after, and when the 6th Marines sailed for Iceland in early 1941, Sergeant Major Nagazyna sailed with them.

Maybe Nagazyna's misadventures with strong spirits grew out of boredom. Maybe he was marking time while he waited for the next war. If that was the case, boredom and marking time ended on Sunday, 7 Dec. 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, lighting a fire that would blaze across the Pacific for the next four years.

John Nagazyna spent the early part of those years shuffling about from unit to unit as new regiments were formed out of existing formations, before settling in as sergeant major of 3d Bn, 22d Marines and setting sail for an island called Eniwetok. It was early 1944, and Admiral Chester A. Nimitz, Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, was launching his offensive against the outer ring of Japanese-held islands in the Central Pacific.

On 22 Feb. 1944, Maj Clair W. Shisler's 3/22 was in a ferocious battle with Japanese defenders conducting a typically tenacious defense of the southern half of Eniwetok. Unknown to Maj Shisler, a misunderstanding of orders had resulted in a wide gap between the bat-

alion and the Army regiment operating on the battalion's right flank. The Japanese commander, LtCol Masahiro Hashida, threw a strong counterattack into this gap, aiming directly at the command post of 3/22, just at the time when Maj Shisler was inspecting his front-line companies.

Gathering up every clerk, cook, mechanic and field music within reach, SgtMaj Nagazyna led his hastily collected mini-unit directly into the teeth of the Japanese attack. Howling his old war cry, Nagazyna smashed into the Japanese, firing, slashing, battering his way ahead, carrying the attack forward by sheer personal force, a born warrior in his element. He didn't stop until every last Japanese attacker had been killed, and he himself was laid low with a grenade fragment in his left knee. John Nagazyna's second war was over.

On 28 June 1944, Captain J. P. Owen, commanding officer of the U.S. Naval Hospital, Mare Island, Calif., presented SgtMaj John J. Nagazyna a gold star in lieu of a second award of the Navy Cross. The words of the citation were a fitting tribute to a fighting man: "His superb courage and outstanding leadership contributed greatly to the disruption of the enemy's attack and to their eventual annihilation. His relentless fighting spirit and courageous devotion to duty, maintained in spite of great personal risk, were in keeping with the highest traditions of the naval service."

Nagazyna retired on 30 June 1947 and settled down in his home in San Diego, directly across the street from the Recruit Depot. He died on 26 May 1955 and was buried with full military honors in San Diego's Fort Rosecrans National Ceme-

tery, overlooking the blue waters of the Pacific.

So who was John Nagazyna? Was he a hero? Was he a liberty risk? Or perhaps he was both—a Marine who should be kept in a glass case carrying a sign that bears the inscription: IN CASE OF WAR, BREAK GLASS.

Nagazyna's place among the legends of the Marine Corps is secure. He was truly an unusual and remarkable Marine, a fighting man without peer and one of only two Marines to be awarded the Navy Cross in both world wars.

Author's note: In 1946 John J. Nagazyna's eldest son, John K. Nagazyna, enlisted in the Marine Corps. Upon completion of boot camp at Parris Island, a platoon mate, James R. Nilo, noticed that the Marine Corps emblems the younger Nagazyna wore were of a slightly different design from those he himself had just received. Asked about his emblems, young Nagazyna replied, "My father is a Marine. He gave them to me."

John K. Nagazyna saw combat in Korea and Vietnam and attained the rank of CWO-4, before his untimely death from cancer in 1981. Together, father and son gave the Marine Corps 67 years of loyal and dedicated service.

Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a Leatherneck contributing editor, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. Leatherneck appreciates the support of the Manpower Management Division (MMSB) in the preparation of this article.

