

WORLD WAR I

# "Johnny the Hard" Settles for Nothing Less Than the Best

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

*"Major Hughes was my ideal. He was everything I wanted to be."*

—1stLt (later BGen) Robert Latané Montague  
Navy Cross  
France, 1918

The officer of Marines who wears the ribbon of the Good Conduct Medal attesting to his prior service as an enlisted Marine is no oddity. Of all the U.S. Armed Forces, the Marine Corps always has offered the greatest number of paths from the enlisted to the commissioned ranks. One of the most unusual of these Marines came around a little more than 100 years ago.

In the early 1900s, the Marine Corps inaugurated a program that would allow young men with a high-school diploma to enlist for a period of one year, after which those who were evaluated as having the proper potential would be commissioned as regular officers. In today's Marine Corps, a high-school diploma is the norm, not the exception. That wasn't the case a century ago when few Marines,

many of whom were foreign born, could boast of having completed 12 years of schooling. A high-school diploma, it was felt, was indicative of a better than average education, the mark of a young man who had applied himself, a young man with possibilities.

That was the theory. Unfortunately, the experiment produced spotty results in practice and was discontinued after only a few years. Every now and again, however, the program uncovered a real gem. It did just that in November 1900, when it came up with a 20-year-old New Yorker named John Arthur Hughes. No one knew it at the time, but the new recruit was destined to be a Marine Corps legend, known by the nickname "Johnny the Hard." The name always was spoken with a mixture of awe, admiration and exasperation.

In the beginning, though, there was merely a nice young man who, it was noticed, held himself to a rigid standard of conduct, applied himself totally to each and every task he was assigned and had short shrift for anyone who didn't do the same. During his period of initial instruction at Marine Barracks, Boston Navy



John Arthur Hughes

Yard, those with sharp eyes for such things were quick to take note of his ramrod-straight posture, booming voice and ice-blue eyes that could cut through steel. He was a young man with possibilities, one who wasted no time in making his mark as a man who could be depended upon. He would do to make a Marine officer.

On 17 Dec. 1901, John Arthur Hughes was appointed a Marine second lieutenant and reported to the School of Application in Philadelphia, the forerunner of today's The Basic School at Quantico, Va. The School of Application of 1901 was nothing like The Basic School of today. It was little more than a fast-paced familiarization of those qualities expected of a Marine officer. Young Hughes wasted no time in becoming known as a "quick study," fast to pick up and retain instruction, far above average. He was a hard charger long before the phrase became popular.



In this photograph, published 16 May 1914, Marines stand in loose formation near the Hotel Terminal after going ashore at Vera Cruz to protect American interests during the bloody Mexican Revolution, which erupted when Venustiano Carranza led forces against Gen Victoriano Huerta's government. (Library of Congress photo)

Soon enough, he found himself at his first duty station, the Philippines, where the Philippine Insurrection was wearing itself out in a flurry of minor skirmishes and bushwhackings. Under the leadership and guidance of such noted Marines as Littleton W. T. Waller Jr. and the redoubtable Hiram I. "Hiking Hiram" Bearss, he learned the practical aspects of leading men and hearing shots fired in anger. By some means or other, exactly how is uncertain, he came to be widely known as Johnny the Hard.

Hard he was—a demanding taskmaster who settled for nothing less than the best. This attribute can lead some men to become martinets, lording it over the men they command, earning their loathing in the process. But it's hard to loathe the leader who holds himself to the same standards to which he holds you, who does everything he asks you to do and does it better. Johnny the Hard—hard but fair—soon won the respect and, yes, the admiration and affection of his Marines. He may have been a hard nose, but he was a hard nose who led from the front by example.

Those early years of Johnny the Hard were a miniature of the Marine Corps of the era, a fair example of the Corps' activities: semi-colonial actions in the Philippines, Cuba and Panama interspersed with duties as old as the Marine Corps itself at Mare Island, Calif.; Philadelphia; and Portsmouth, N.H. Along the way, Hughes was promoted to first lieutenant in 1903 and to captain in 1908, with the legend of Johnny the Hard always growing, repeated wherever Marines who had served with him gathered.

In 1914, the Marine Corps began to emerge from being a small expeditionary force to the engine of war it became on the battlefields of France, an evolution that led to the Marine Corps of today. Trouble was brewing in Mexico in 1914. Three years earlier, in 1911, Porfirio Diaz, the strongman who had held sway over Mexico for three decades, surprisingly had been ousted from office by a lightly regarded opponent, Francisco I. Madero, and forced into exile in France.

Then, in 1913, Madero himself was assassinated by supporters of General Victoriano Huerta, who seized power, but not without strong opposition from constitutionalist Venustiano Carranza. Mexico exploded in gunfire.

So what? Mexico always had revolutions. What did it matter to the United States? But the latest set-to in Mexico was different. Germany, which had interests of its own to pursue, had stepped into the picture, openly supporting the Huerta regime and pledging to support it with arms



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LtCol Hiram I. Bearss



LtCol Wendell C. Neville

**Above: While attempting to clear Vera Cruz, Marines and sailors took a great deal of Mexican sniper fire. Snipers from this tower in Vera Cruz drew immediate naval gunfire response from USS Chester (CL-1), a light cruiser.**

and munitions. Germany's actions matched its words.

In April 1914, the German freighter *Ypiranga* was already en route to the port city of Vera Cruz, loaded with weapons for the Huerta forces. (Three years later with the discovery of the infamous Zimmermann Telegram, it was learned that Germany was urging Mexico to invade the American Southwest. That led to Congress declaring war against Germany.)

Mexican revolutions were Mexican affairs. On the other hand, when a European

power attempted to exploit one of those revolutions to its advantage, the U.S. President could not, would not, stand around and watch. For nearly 100 years, the Monroe Doctrine had put Europe on notice that the Western Hemisphere was off-limits to European adventurers and colonizers. Rear Admiral Frank F. Fletcher's squadron, with the Marines of Lieutenant Colonel Wendell C. "Buck" Neville's 2d Regiment of the 1st Advanced Base Brigade embarked, was already on station in the Gulf of Mexico.

Early on the morning of 21 April, acting on the orders of President Woodrow Wilson, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels ordered RADM Fletcher to seize the port of Vera Cruz. Before noon Buck Neville

On 11 May 1914, President Woodrow Wilson attended a National Memorial Service at the Brooklyn Navy Yard honoring the Marines and sailors killed in Vera Cruz, Mexico, during the Mexican Revolution.



**Right: A U.S. Navy brigade operated on the left of the Marines at Vera Cruz. In this photograph, a sailor searches a Vera Cruz citizen for weapons.**

had his men ashore; their objective was to secure the port facilities, including the cable station, nearby electric power plant and customshouse.

At the head of 15th Company, Johnny the Hard was one of the first ashore. Mexican soldiers, local militiamen and convicts released from the city jail contested the advance, laying down a nasty fire on the Marines. In the thick of the fighting, leading from the front, Johnny the Hard moved the company forward from house to house and along rooftops, eliminating pockets of resistance as they were encountered.

Oblivious to enemy fire, untouched by it, Captain Hughes was everywhere at once, directing the fight like a conductor directing a symphony orchestra and, in the process, being largely instrumental in the securing of all objectives before nightfall.

Johnny the Hard wasn't quite through. The following day, 22 April, the fighting



continued, and casualties among the Navy element of the landing force soared when a column of bluejackets was ambushed and cut off. The situation could have been worse but for the timely arrival of 15th Co with Johnny the Hard at its head, blazing away with his Colt Model 1911 .45-caliber

service pistol.

For his actions at Vera Cruz on 21-22 April 1914, John Arthur Hughes was awarded the Medal of Honor. The citation would record that "Captain Hughes was in both days' fighting at the head of his company, and was eminent and conspic-



Below: Quantico was just being established as a Marine training center when “Johnny the Hard” Hughes arrived for pre-WWI training in 1917. (MCA Archives photo)



was and couldn't have cared less. The trouble was the island of Hispaniola that the Dominican Republic shared with Haiti, a problem all of its own, sat squarely astride the eastern approaches to the Panama Canal, absolutely vital to America's interests. After two years of failed diplomatic efforts to reconcile the bewildering number of feuding factions, President Wilson ordered the Marines ashore in May 1916, beginning an occupation that would last until 1924.

By and large, the occupation worked out well. Over time, order was restored throughout the country, the national debt was slashed dramatically, economic growth burgeoned, and, for the first time in the country's history, a viable road network linked the republic's various regions.

A functioning government and a national army were taking shape.

Only in the eastern regions of El Seibo and San Pedro de Macoris was there intense resistance to the occupying forces. Ironically, it was in the relatively peaceful north, near the city of San Francisco de Macoris, on 21 Nov. that Johnny the Hard went down with a gunshot wound to his left leg that would plague him for the rest of his life. The wound never healed properly. It dribbled blood and pus every so often, and from time to time bits and pieces of bone would work their way out. He was never entirely without pain in that leg, and while he gritted his teeth and plugged ahead (Johnny the Hard didn't know how to do anything else), the pain was always there.

The pain was there when Johnny the Hard, then a major, arrived at the new base the Marine Corps was carving out of the Virginia woods at Quantico in July

1917. He arrived to take command of the 1st Battalion, 6th Marines that was just then forming from scratch. There was a lot of work to be done. Everything had to be put together from nothing, and Johnny the Hard wasted no time getting it underway.

In only three short months, America would declare war against Germany, and the battalion would be up to its neck in that war before long. Young men straight from the farm and the corner drugstore would have to fight that war. As only he could, Johnny the Hard impressed on his officers and noncommissioned officers that readying those young men was going to be their job if it took all day, every day. It just about did.

Working from “can't see” to “can't see,” from well before dawn to well after dark, the battalion worked its way into shape, with the battalion commander in the thick of it, favoring his gimpy left leg, but not giving it any slack. When Johnny the Hard conducted battalion drill, his booming voice could be heard all over Quantico. It could be heard when he had to drive home a point as well. Somehow or other the job got done. On 23 Sept. 1917, 1st Bn, the first element of 6th Marines, sailed for France.

In France, more training was interspersed with stretches on the line in quiet sectors, just to get the feel of things. All that came to an abrupt end in the spring of 1918. German Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, ably abetted by his brilliant staff officers Erich Ludendorff and Max Hoffmann, had thrown a massive offensive against the British and French forces holding the left of the line on the Western Front. Designed to force Britain and France into a negotiated peace before American manpower and industrial might could

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uous in his conduct, leading his men with skill and courage.” That certainly was right. Johnny the Hard didn't scare worth a damn. In later years, there would be a number of voices raised in skepticism—some of it justified—at the large number of Medals of Honor passed out for the intervention at Vera Cruz. No one ever said that Johnny the Hard didn't earn his fair and square.

Latin America was a pesky region in those teenage years of the 20th century. No sooner was the Vera Cruz problem solved than events in the Dominican Republic got out of hand. The pot began to simmer before all American forces had been withdrawn from Mexico, and by 1916, it all boiled over. Where Mexico had been pretty much split between the backers of Huerta and Carranza, the Dominican Republic seemed to have almost as many factions as it had people, a countrywide free-for-all, everybody against everybody else.

Most Americans couldn't have said exactly where the Dominican Republic

Before June 1918, Lucy le Bocage, with Belleau Wood just to its front, was a quaint French village. Constant artillery barrages and continuing battles in the area destroyed Lucy.



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make themselves felt, the offensive was succeeding all too well.

By May, French commander in chief Gen Henri Petain was asking GEN John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), to help stem the tide. "We'll give you everything we have," was GEN Pershing's reply.

The Marines of Johnny the Hard's 1st Bn, 6th Marines, a part of the famed Marine Brigade of the 2d Division, United States Regular, soon found themselves in a first-class fight with the cream of the German Army in a forest known as the Bois de Belleau (Belleau Wood). It was a vicious affair on a scale far larger than anything in which Marines ever had been involved. For a solid month, Marines and Prussian Guards battled each other, no holds barred, fighting with rifles and machine guns, mortars and grenades, while the artillery of both sides poured in a deluge of high-explosive and gas shells.

Johnny the Hard lasted only eight days in the cauldron of Belleau Wood before going down with wounds that would put him in a hospital for a month. Those eight days were fast and furious days with Hughes sending 1st Bn, 6th Marines into a knock-down, drag-out brawl with Germans attempting to hold the sector of woods about the critical village of Lucy le Bocage. As usual, Johnny the Hard ranged the battle line, driving, driving—always driving. The leathernecks of 1st Bn, 6th Marines were falling fast, but they

were taking droves of Germans with them, getting in close, slashing with bayonets and clubbing with rifle butts.

Johnny the Hard's Marines must have taken on something of the temperament of their battalion commander. One German officer wrote that the attack of 1st Bn, 6th Marines had been "the worst day of my life. God has mercifully preserved me. They fight like devils." For his bravery and leadership at Belleau Wood, Johnny the Hard was awarded the Navy Cross. From the French government there was the Croix de Guerre, 1914-18, with two palms.

With his wounds from Belleau Wood barely healed and with his gimped leg still tormenting him, Johnny the Hard nevertheless rejoined his battalion in time to take part in the attack at Soissons the following month. If Belleau Wood had been a bloodbath for 6th Marines, Soissons was a torrent of blood. Going into the attack on 19 July, the regiment was met by a German artillery barrage one Marine described as "a black curtain." Maxim machine-gunners laid down a fire that another Marine could remember only as being "a thousand times worse [than at Belleau Wood]."

Soon enough, Hughes was forced to report to regimental headquarters that 1st Bn, 6th Marines had been shot down to barely more than 100 effectives. Shortly afterward, he went down with a double lung full of gas. That was the end of the war for Johnny the Hard. He would be

promoted to lieutenant colonel and remain on active duty, but his torn leg and blistered lungs were beginning to be entirely too much. John Arthur Hughes was transferred to the Retired List in 1920. Upon retirement, he was advanced to the rank of colonel.

After leaving the Marine Corps, he joined his father in business for a number of years. He settled in Cleveland in the early 1930s, where he served as director of the Ohio Repeal Council, managing that state's campaign to ratify the 21st Amendment rescinding Prohibition. Following ratification, he became director of the Ohio Liquor Control Board. In 1936, he was appointed safety director of the Great Lakes Exposition held in Cleveland in 1936 and 1937.

Colonel John Arthur Hughes, Johnny the Hard, died on 25 May 1942 and was interred with full military honors in Virginia's Arlington National Cemetery.

Wouldn't he have been something else with whom to serve? Now, that would have been an experience.

Semper Fidelis, Johnny!

*Editor's note: Maj Allan 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.*

