

Soissons, France ★

1918

Story by Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua, USMC (Ret)

Photos courtesy of James R. Nilo

"Boche machineguns, range choked in the mass of wire and fallen trees, fought desperately to stem the tide, then fell silent after being rushed by steely men who took no prisoners."

—Pvt Elton Mackin, USMC
Distinguished Service Cross
Navy Cross, two Silver Star Citations
Battalion Runner, 1st Bn, 5th Marines

It was said that the Old Marine Corps died at Belleau Wood. That may have been an overstatement, but not by much. The Marine Brigade that marched away from the ravaged, blasted forest on 10 July 1918, after more than a month of continuous fighting, had seen its ranks reduced by more than 4,000 men, half of its original strength. Enough Marines had fallen to move Major Frederic "Fritz" Wise, commanding officer of 2d Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, to respond to his wife's inquiry into the welfare of his Marines with, "There aren't any more Marines."

Fortunately, despite Maj Wise's gloomy assessment, there were still a handful of old-time hard cases left to set the example for the young replacements who were arriving to fill out the badly depleted ranks of the Brigade. Maj John Arthur Hughes, the redoubtable "Johnny the Hard," a winner of the Medal of Honor at Vera Cruz in 1914, still led the 1st Bn, 6th Marines in spite of the lingering effects of a serious wound suffered in Santo Domingo in 1916. Continuing at the head of his platoon in the 66th Company, 1/5 was another wearer of the Medal of Honor, Marine Gunner Henry Lewis Hulbert, sporting a Distinguished Service Cross as well and soon to be commissioned a second lieutenant.

The ferocious Captain George Hamilton, who had personally dispatched four Germans at Belleau Wood, remained in command of 1/5's 49th Co. In Capt Charlie Dunbeck's 43d Co, 2/5, Gunnery Sergeant Mike Wodarczyk could be counted upon to continue demonstrating why his Marines called him "The Polish Warhorse." In the ranks of the 6th Marines' 73d Machine Gun Co there was a smallish gunnery sergeant, Daniel Joseph Daly, who twice earned a Medal of Honor. His battle cry: "Come on, you sons of bitches. Do you want to live forever?" is wo-

ven into the lore of the Marine Corps.

It was a good thing men like these were on hand because the Germans weren't quite finished with their last all-out attempt to salvage victory from a worsening situation. In spite of its setback at Belleau Wood, the German Army still held on to a huge bulge it had driven into the Allied lines during its massive spring offensive. Stretching from Noyon on the banks of the River Oise in the west and running south to Château-Thierry, then northeastward to the menacing height of Blanc Mont that overlooked Rheims, the salient reached to within 18 miles of Paris. One more good push might finish it off was the thinking in the German high command.

One man who was thinking of doing some pushing of his own was *Marechal de France* Ferdinand Foch, supreme commander of all Allied forces on the Western Front. The Germans could attack and be damned. Foch was going to launch his own attack, hitting the German salient with a one-two punch on each of its flanks, driving into it and eliminating it and all the Germans in it. That added up to not much rest for the weary Marines and doughboys of the two brigades that made up the 2d Division United States Regular.

Like all American divisions of that war, the 2d Division was big. At full strength it fielded more than 28,000 men in its two brigades of infantry, the Marine Brigade of the 5th and 6th Marines and the Sixth Machine Gun Bn and the Third Infantry Brigade with the Army's 9th and 23d Infantry Regiments and Fifth Machine Gun Bn. Backing up the division's ground elements were three regiments of field artillery and a full regiment of combat engineers. The division would be a potent addition to General Charles "The Butcher" Mangin's French Tenth Army, assigned the main attack against the key German stronghold of Soissons. How vital was Soissons? If it fell, the entire German position in the salient was hopeless. That is about as vital as vital gets.

Entirely ignorant of all this were the overwhelming majority of Marines in the ranks of the Marine Brigade. With day after day after day of combat in the shell-shattered depths of Belleau Wood



In the morning mist on 18 July 1918, the 2d Division broke through the woods to be confronted with the open wheat fields in front of its next objective, the town of Vauxcastille.

behind them, the veterans of that blood-soaked affair were taking their ease around the small town of Crouette-sur-Marne. Nestled on the north bank of the Marne River, Crouette was miles from the area they were planned to attack, a place to return to some semblance of humanity after weeks of life at the animal level.

Men who had not had their clothes off their backs in more than a month reveled in swimming and bathing in the river, ridding themselves of the dirt and stench of battle and the small, gray creatures that infested their clothing. It was a chance to eat real, honest-to-goodness hot meals and sample the offerings of the local *estaminets* and *patisseries*, to taste the *vin blanc* and *vin rouge* of the Haute-Marne. There were as well certain numbers of comely French girls to be admired, but only from a distance, a distance maintained by ever-watchful eld-



ers. The French were friendly, but not that friendly.

For some fortunate Marines, there was a trip to Paris. One composite company from each regiment was chosen to march in the Bastille Day parade in the French capital on 14 July. Liberty call went shortly thereafter.

What Marine fresh from combat could resist the appeal of liberty in *la Ville Lumiere*, the City of Light? Private Henry Lenert couldn't. Decorated with the Croix de Guerre and awarded a Silver Star Citation for bravery in action after single-handedly bringing in 73 German prisoners at Belleau Wood, Lenert overtrained on adult beverages and ended up being in an unauthorized absence status, a liberty risk long before the term became common Marine Corps usage. The Marine Corps being ever practical, Lenert's office hours weren't held until after war's end on 11 Nov. There was no sense in wasting a good combat Marine.

The vacation from war ended abruptly on the afternoon of 16 July, when company by company the Marine Brigade fell into ranks, and a long, green column be-

gan flowing along the roadway that lined the Marne. Even with replacements the companies were understrength, but they moved with the easy stride of veterans, competent and sure of themselves. It was with the cynical gaze of veterans that they greeted the long convoy of *camions*, the bone-rattling French military trucks that awaited them beyond Meaux. They must be wanted somewhere in a hurry was the universal thought as they clambered aboard what they knew from experience to be one of the most miserably uncomfortable forms of transportation ever devised.

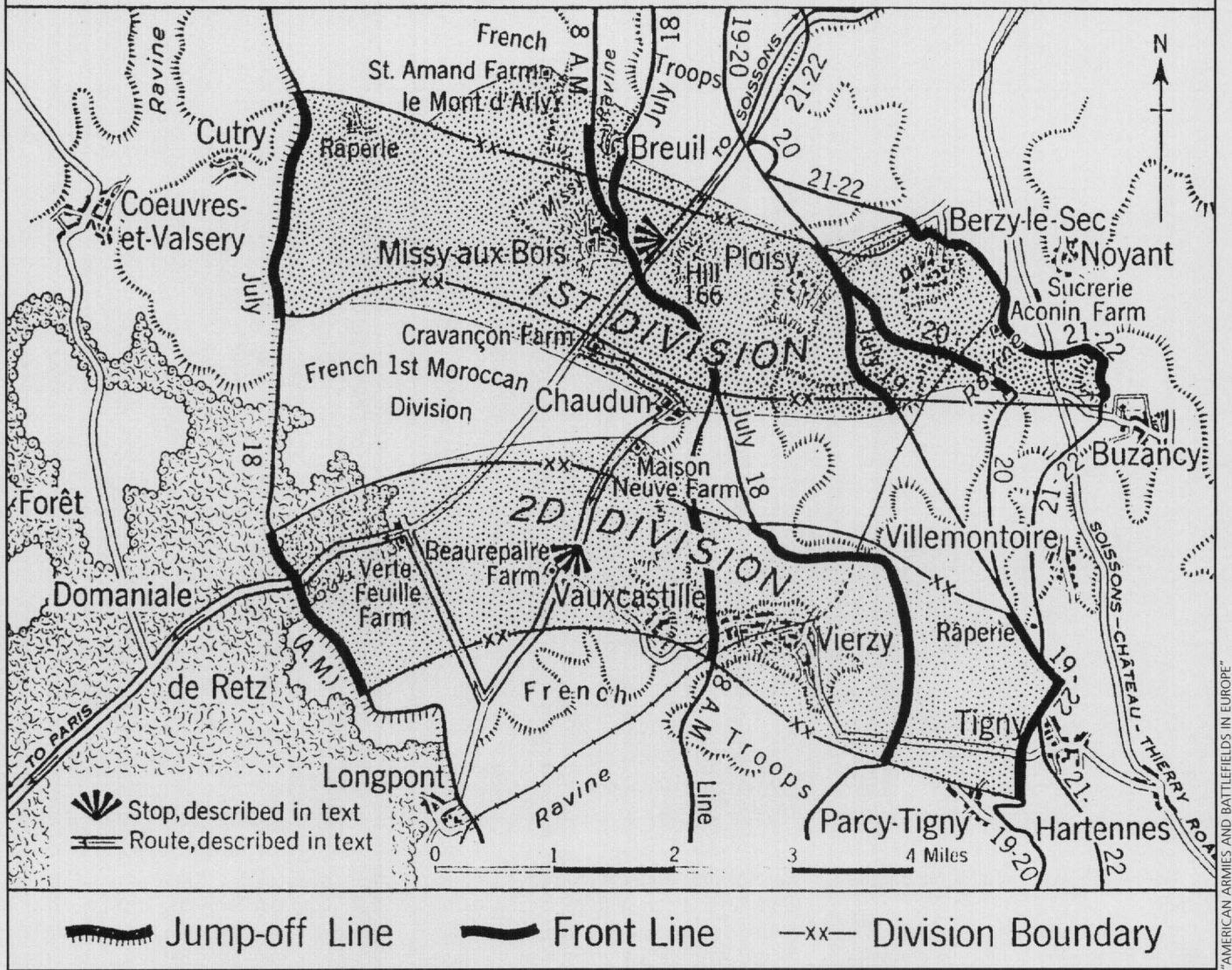
Throughout the moonlit night the convoy lurched and bounced and jolted its way north, chauffeured by slight, wiry men from France's colonies in Indochina, seemingly intent upon making sure that no Marine so much as dozed along the way. One of the drivers was an interesting young man who went by the Donald Duck-sounding alias of Nguyen Ai Quoc. The grandsons of his passengers would know him better by his true name, Ho Chi Minh.

After a sleepless night there was no

halt for breakfast. There was no breakfast, period. After piling stiff-legged and rump-sprung from their tortuous conveyances, men ate what was left of their reserve rations or they ate nothing at all as they were fallen into ranks and hurried off. The canteens, filled at Crouette, were empty now, and thirst added its insistent voice to hunger as they marched off sweat blackened and dust covered through the blazing summer heat. The war was closer now. They could hear it grumbling and rumbling just over the horizon like the distant thunder that precedes a summer storm.

Someone with a talent for such things might have described the long, rippling column as resembling a sinuous green serpent undulating across the landscape, highlights of sun reflecting from its shiny scales. The colorful description would have been lost on the Marines who made up the serpent. They weren't undulating. They were slogging almost mechanically after a night of no sleep and two days of practically nothing to eat. Sweat cut little runnels in their dust-caked faces, and when they spoke at all, it was usual-

French - American Attack South of Soissons July 18-22, 1918



ly to mutter curses through lips cracked by thirst. The sun that beat down relentlessly wasn't reflecting from scales; it was bouncing back off weapons, helmets and equipment that were growing heavier by the mile.

It was with a heart-quickenng feeling of relief that as the evening shadows lengthened, the marching ranks entered the inviting shade of the *Forêt de Retz*. Sometimes called the Villers-Cotterets woods, for the small town in the midst of them, the miles and miles of great old trees offered a welcome respite from the torrid heat of the day. If there were nothing to eat or drink, at least it would be cooler in there among the trees.

The sense of relief vanished as the rain began. Accompanied by great, rolling drumbeats of thunder and sheets of lightning, a torrent of rain quickly turned the roadway underfoot into ankle-deep mud. Darkness fell with a suddenness that

could almost be felt, leaving men to grope their way along in total blackness, blundering into one another and the horses and equipment of French units that were also floundering their way forward along the same road. Here and there a sudden cry of dismay, followed by a crumpled, sodden thud, told of a Marine who had strayed too close to the edge of the road and stumbled into the 8-foot-deep ditch that bordered it.

They were groggy with fatigue, slipping and staggering along like blind men in the pitch blackness, finding their way only by feeling for the back of the man ahead. At one point the entire column came to a complete halt when a Marine stumbled into the horse of a French cavalryman. There he stayed, sound asleep on his feet, his head pressed against the horse's flank, everyone behind him stopped because he was. It took a while to get that sorted out and start things

moving again. And the rain poured relentlessly down. From the old-timers who had seen the Tartar Wall at Peking and the jungles of Haiti to the newest recruit fresh from Parris Island, no one who made the night march to Soissons ever forgot it.

The rain ceased just before dawn, but that was about the only respite. They would be going directly into the attack, the 5th Marines on the division's left flank, the 9th and 23d Infantry Regiments on their right, with the 6th Marines held in reserve. Before that attack could take place the leading regiments first had to reach their assigned attack positions. The command was, "Double Time!"

Going into their third day without anything resembling an actual meal, punch-drunk with the fatigue born of two nights without sleep, the Marines of Lieutenant Colonel Logan Feland's Fifth Regiment somehow found it in themselves to surge

forward like sprinters. Lost somewhere back behind them in the jumble of men and equipment that clogged the roadway were the machine guns.

The Marines would be going into the attack with only their organic rifles and "sho-shos." (The French made the 8 mm *Fusil Mitrailleur Modele 1915* automatic rifle, commonly called the "Chauchat" by the French, and Marine-ized to sho-sho. It has been accurately described as "one of the crudest, most unreliable and cheaply made" infantry weapons ever fielded by any army in the world. In short, a piece of junk.)

Panting and gasping for breath, they arrived at their jump-off points only minutes before the scheduled supporting fires of the artillery opened up with one stupendous roar that shook the ground beneath their feet. Anyone with an interest in such details might have noted that it was 0435 on the morning of Thursday, 18 July.

The surprise that Marshal Foch had desired was complete. The Germans were stunned by the rain of shells that fell from every available French and American gun of Gen Mangin's Tenth Army. The Marine ranks swarmed forward, bulldozing over the first line of German defenders. Some fled, some fell, while others raised their hands in surrender.

Here and there pockets of Germans tried to stand and fight. They were no match for the Marines coming at them. Deprive a Marine of food and sleep for days and nights on end, drive him relentlessly through blistering heat and torrential rain, and you get a very irritable man. You get a man like Sergeant Louis Cukela, the Serbian-born, ethnic Croatian company gunnery sergeant of the 66th Co, 1/5, famed throughout the American Expeditionary Force for his less-than-perfect English in berating a careless subordinate: "Next time I send damn fool, I go myself."

Confronted by a German strong point that was holding up his company's advance, Cukela went himself. Circling around to get behind the German machine-gunners, he attacked wildly with his bayonet, shocking the Germans by his seemingly maniacal disregard for his own personal safety. After killing everyone within reach, Cukela used a convenient supply of German hand grenades to blast another strong point into silence, then turned one of the machine guns on its former owners. For his actions Cukela would be awarded the Medal of Honor, the *Medaille Militaire* and the *Croix de Guerre* and be commissioned a second

The Fourth [Marine] Brigade in France

Brigade Headquarters

5th Marines	6th Marines
Headquarters Co	Headquarters Co
8th Machine Gun Co	73d Machine Gun Co
Supply Co	Supply Co
1st Battalion	1st Battalion
Headquarters Co	Headquarters Co
17th Co	74th Co
49th Co	75th Co
66th Co	76th Co
67th Co	95th Co
2d Battalion	2d Battalion
Headquarters Co	Headquarters Co
18th Co	78th Co
43d Co	79th Co
51st Co	80th Co
55th Co	96th Co
3d Battalion	3d Battalion
Headquarters Co	Headquarters Co
16th Co	82d Co
20th Co	83d Co
45th Co	84th Co
47th Co	97th Co
6th Machine Gun Battalion	
Headquarters Co	
	15th Co
	23d Co
	77th Co
	81st Co

lieutenant. It was only the start of the career of a Marine for whom the word "colorful" might have been invented.

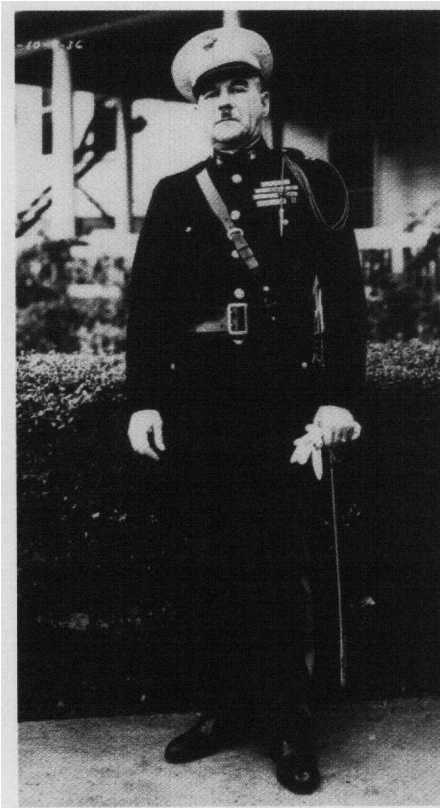
With acts such as Cukela's duplicated a score of times, the assault companies of the 5th Marines swarmed through the woods, pounding into submission the German machine-gunners who tried to stop them. One particularly troublesome hornet's nest of machine guns was, in the words of John W. Thomason, "stamped flat" by Capt LeRoy P. Hunt's 17th Co, 1/5. Later, during World War II, Hunt would lead Marines in the Pacific as a general officer.

The battle was becoming a rout. By early morning the 2d Division had cleared the woods and was driving the Germans through the gently rolling, wheat-covered fields to the east. Despite German efforts to stem the tide, all initial objectives had been seized before the sun was fully overhead. The final intermediate objective, the commanding hill of Vauxcastille, was taken in a rush by Maj Julius S. Turrill's 1/5. But there were beginning to be problems.

In executing a wide envelopment against its first objectives, the French 1st Moroccan Division, a division made up of troops from France's African colonies and the famed Foreign Legion, had fallen behind the American advance. In addition to the Germans in front of them, the 5th Marines now had to contend with withering machine-gun fire from their left. LtCol Feland had no choice but to extend his own line in that direction until half of the 5th Marines was operating in the zone of the Moroccan division. It was all being done at an increasing cost in casualties.

Not all of the casualties were caused by German shells and bullets. More than a few Marines were collapsing from sheer exhaustion. By late afternoon they also were scattered all over the landscape, units all mixed together with Marines responding to the orders of whatever officer, sergeant or corporal happened to be on the scene. It was a matter of small groups of Marines with rifles—the grenades were used up and the damnable sho-shos were suffering their usual problems of jamming and misfires—battling their way forward in short rushes against the ever-present machine guns.

When the German defenders were cleaned out of the day's final objective, the town of Vierzy, by the 5th Marines and the 23d Infantry, the 2d Division was literally out on its feet. Dusk was beginning to fall, and utterly exhausted



Capt Louis Cukela, Medal of Honor winner as a sergeant near Villers-Cotterets on 18 July 1918, posed for a photograph at Hampton Roads, Va., on 9 Oct. 1936.

COURTESY OF MAJ ALLAN C. BEVILACQUA, USMC (RET)



Marines and soldiers were only too glad to see it. With nothing to eat for three days, sleepless for two nights, constantly on their feet for two days, one of which they spent locked in combat, the 5th Marines and their Army comrades of the 9th and 23d Infantry Regiments were completely used up. There would be more fighting tomorrow, but someone else would have to do it.

That someone else would be LtCol Harry Lee's 6th Marines. The challenge was that the 6th Marines would have to cover an entire division front all by

themselves, a big order for a single regiment. Maj "Johnny the Hard" Hughes with his 1st Bn would be on the left, with 2/6 under LtCol Thomas Holcomb, a future Commandant of the Marine Corps, on the right, and Maj Berton Sibley's 3/6 in support. Promptly at 0830 on Friday, 19 July, the ranks stepped out, supported by a battalion of French light tanks. This time the Germans were waiting.

Well-directed German artillery fire began falling on the long lines of Marines advancing through the wheat fields almost immediately, deadly blossoms of

red and black amid the waving yellow wheat. Casualties weren't long in following. Among the first to fall was John W. "Johnny" Overton, the one-time Yale track star who had wasted no time in establishing a reputation for fearlessness. Struck squarely in the chest by a large shell fragment, Overton, who had led his platoon into Belleau Wood with a blazing pistol in each hand, died instantly. Overton's death was just the start of the carnage the 6th Marines were marching into.

Maj Robert L. Denig, the executive of-



Leathernecks of the 5th Marines stood shoulder to shoulder in this August 1919 photo, just as they had in France. Then-2dLt Louis Cukela, with his famous mustache, is in the front row.

ficer of 2/6, quickly figured out the German fire plan: "A man near me was cut in two. ... I yelled to Wilmer [Maj Pere Wilmer] that each gun in the barrage worked from right to left ... told Wilmer that I had a hundred dollars and be sure to get it when I was hit. ... You think of all kinds of things." Denig would not be hit. He would receive instead the Navy

Cross for his inspirational leadership.

Over in the 75th Co, 1/6, Pvt Martin Gulberg saw it differently. By Gulberg's reckoning it was all the fault of those French tanks. "These tanks were a great help to the infantry in cleaning out machine-gun nests, but I would rather take my chances without them rather than follow them, because they draw artillery fire." Billowing red and black fireballs marked the exploding fuel of shell-struck tanks, sending the cloying stench of burning human flesh, something that once experienced is never to be forgotten, wafting over the battlefield.

Through it all the German machine guns, well sited to provide interlocking bands of fire, unleashed a scything hail of lead on the advancing ranks of the 6th Marines. The Marines were in close, rooting out the defenders, one pocket of resistance at a time. Progress was being made, but at a terrible price, with Marines falling in windrows. Pharmacist's Mate First Class John M. Balch, USN would be awarded the Medal of Honor for his work in treating the wounded amid murderous enemy fire in complete disregard of the danger to himself.

As it had been the day before, the fighting came down to small bands of Marines working their way ahead to blast and bayonet one German position after another into silence. As leaders went down, other Marines rose to take their places. With all the officers of 1/6's 75th Co killed or wounded, Sgt Gerald C. Thomas, another Marine who would one day wear a general's stars, took command and led the company forward into the teeth of the German defenses. Sgt Oliver Farrant, rising to take the reins of leadership from his fallen platoon leader, carried his men forward by the sheer power of his personal example despite wounds that would eventually claim his life three days later.

The advance slugged its way against some of the fiercest resistance the war produced. In the 96th Co, 2/6, every officer went down wounded, only one among them, First Lieutenant Clifton B. Cates, able to continue. Cates took command and pressed onward at the head of the company, sending back to battalion headquarters a message that has become a part of Marine Corps legend:

"I have only two men out of my company and 20 out of some other company. We need support, but it is almost suicide to try to get it here as we are swept by machinegun fire and a constant barrage is upon us. I have no one on my left and only a few on my right. I will hold."

Cates must have presented an odd sight. With both legs running blood from

U.S. MARINES



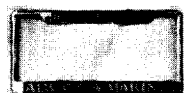
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\$15.00 + shipping. Sold in pairs.

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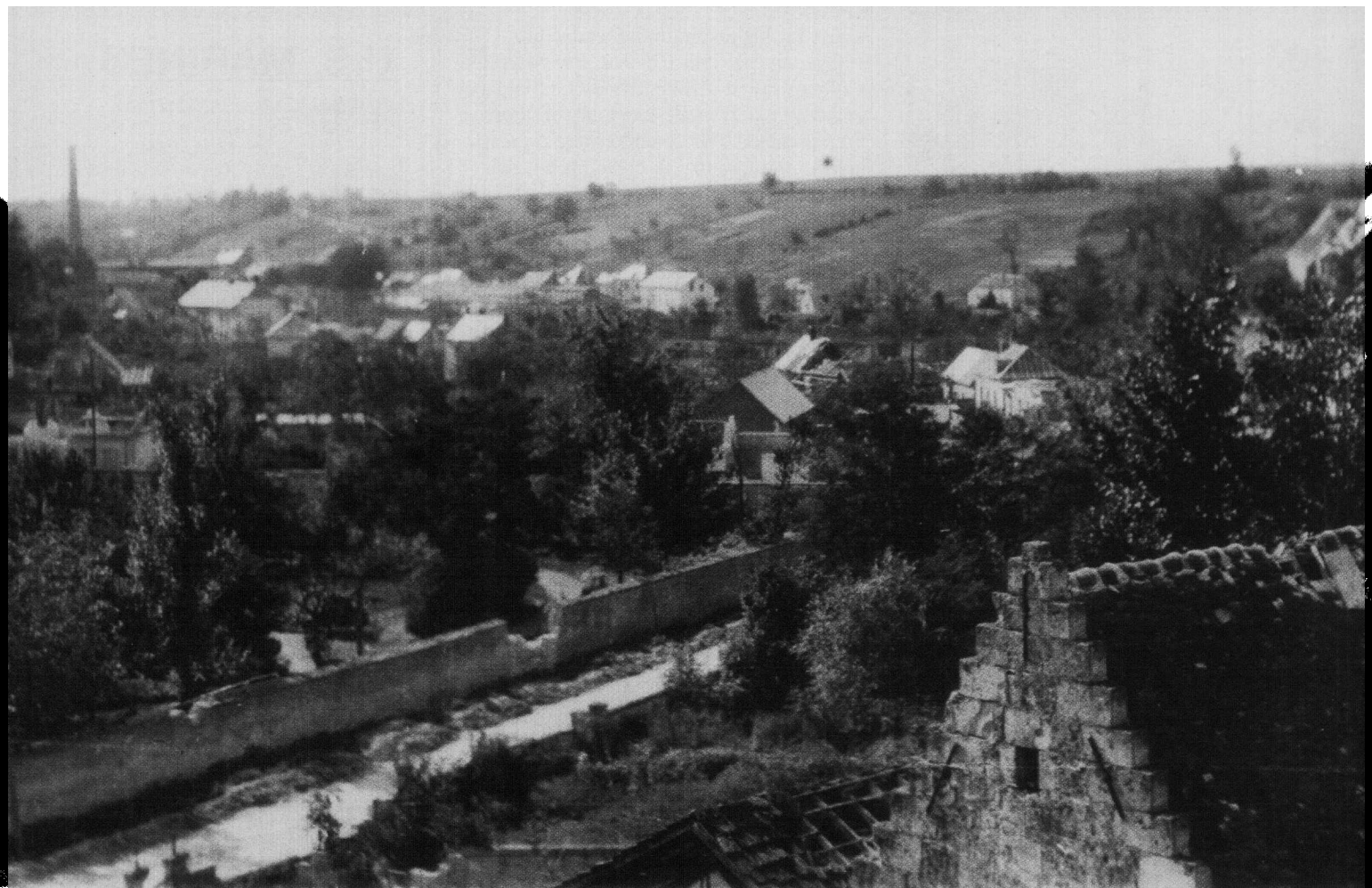
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The town of Vierzy was a critical objective in the attacks on the first day of the battle, and the ravages of war were evident at the end of the day.

multiple lacerations inflicted by the same bursting shell that had torn his trousers from him, the Tennessee-born future Commandant of the Marine Corps had wrapped himself kilt-like in a blanket. It is nowhere recorded that anyone laughed.

A less heroic message than the one sent back by Clifton Cates was that of six brief words dispatched by the 6th Marines' gas officer, 2dLt Daniel Bender. Sent forward to check for signs of German use of gas, Bender was nicked by machine-gun fire in a delicate portion of his anatomy. His account could serve as a model of reporting brevity: "No gas. Shot in the ass. Bender."

If there was any more humor than that for the 6th Marines on 19 July it was hard to find. A furious German defense born of desperation was turning the scorching hot day into an inferno of high-explosive shells and machine-gun fire. Casualties in all three battalions were appalling. Every yard of ground gained was paid for in blood. To Sgt Don Paradis of 2/6's 80th Co, the German shellfire "was so great that it seemed like a black curtain."

Sgt William Scanlon of the 82d Co underscored Paradis' words: "The ma-

chine-gun fire encountered before the town of Bouresches [at Belleau Wood] was bad but the fire now is a thousand times worse. It is like a hailstorm." By noon LtCol Lee had to report to division that casualties in his rifle companies were running in excess of 30 percent.

Shortly afterward, the order came from division headquarters: Dig in and hold the ground that had been gained. The 2d Division was to be relieved by a fresh division from corps reserve. At a frightful cost the 6th Marines had done its job. It had opened the door to the vital Soissons-Château-Thierry road. Elements of 3/6 had advanced to within 500 yards of the highway that was so necessary to the Germans, close enough to deny them the use of it. Wresting the roadway from the enemy would now be the task of fresh troops. There weren't enough of the 6th Marines left to finish off the job.

How bad had it been? The figures tell the story. The 6th Marines had gone into the attack that morning with a strength of 2,450. When the regiment was relieved by elements of the French 58th Infantry Division only 1,150 Marines remained on their feet. Very few of them bothered to look back as they marched

away westward to a well-deserved rest.

In recognition of the actions of the Marine Brigade at Soissons, the battle color of the brigade was decorated with the Croix de Guerre, 1914-18, by the French government. The brigade was the only unit of the AEF so distinguished by the French during WW I. The honor entitled every member of the brigade to wear the coveted green and red fourragere of the Croix de Guerre from his left shoulder. To this day Marines who serve in the 5th and 6th Marine Regiments continue to proudly wear the mark of distinction bestowed upon those who went before them.

Editor's note: During WW I, a Marine who was cited in official orders for an act of bravery was entitled to wear a miniature silver star on the suspension ribbon of his campaign medal. This was the forerunner of today's Silver Star.

Maj Bevilacqua, a frequent contributor to Leatherneck, 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.

