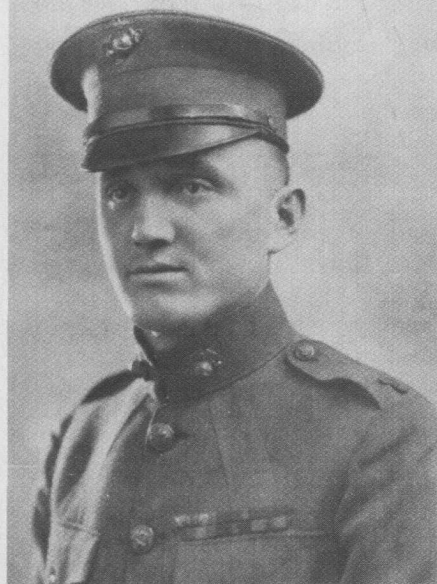


# The POLISH WARHORSE



Marine Gunner Michael Wodarczyk, known to his Marines as "The Polish Warhorse," was "everything a Marine should be."

By Maj Allan C. Bevilacqua,  
USMC (Ret) • USMC photos

**T**he gunny was in a tight spot. For that matter, the entire 2d Battalion, 5th Marines was in a tight spot. The out-of-date, inaccurate French maps the battalion had been issued—one to a company—called the place the *Bois de Belleau*, and on Monday, 10 June 1918, it seemed that every tree sheltered a German. Every man jack of them was blazing away enthusiastically, laying down enough fire to quell a revolution. Much of it was directed at Captain Charlie Dunbeck's 43d Company, where the gunny led the 4th Platoon. Even worse, to the gunny's way of seeing it, a large body of gray infantry was moving into a position on the company's left flank. Enfilade fire from there could shred the entire 43d Co, thereby stopping the battalion dead in its tracks.

The gunny wasn't one to waste time dithering about things. In 1915, while stationed at the Navy's Craney Island Ammunition Depot in Norfolk, Va., he had not hesitated to dash into a high-explosive storage bunker to remove burning refuse that could have set off a devastat-

20

## Michael Wodarczyk

ing explosion but for his action.

The gunny was a man of action, and he took action then. Without waiting for orders he gathered up the handful of men nearest him and led them in a looping movement to the left, angling for the rear of the rocky outcropping where the enemy machine-gunners were beginning to adjust their sights. Intent on the Marines

advancing across their front, the Germans were completely unprepared for the band of howling wild men who burst out of the woods in their rear. Surprise, total and violent surprise, can unnerve the best of men. These Germans were no different. They dropped their weapons and raised their hands in surrender.

The 43d Co's executive officer, First

**“Hard as nails,  
but absolutely  
fair.”**

Lieutenant Herb Bluhm, saw it this way: “This enemy position was on our flank, and only for the good work of GySgt Wodarczyk the company would have been caught in an enfilading fire and the loss would have been very large. GySgt Wodarczyk took a few men and advanced on this enemy position and without the loss of a man, captured the entire



After winning combat honors as a gunnery sergeant in WW I, Wodarczyk became a student naval aviator with VO-1M in San Diego in November 1922.

enemy position, which consisted of about fifty men well armed with rifles and machineguns.”

Freed from the pressure on the left, the attack of the 2d Bn, 5th Marines rolled forward, methodically chewing up the German 40th Infantry Regiment, while the gunny and his small band herded their bag of prisoners to the rear. For the gunny it was all in a day’s work. The French government saw it otherwise. In due course the gunny would receive both the Croix de Guerre Order of the Army and the Medaille Militaire, one of France’s most prestigious combat awards, bestowed only upon generals in command of armies, admirals in command of fleets and noncommissioned officers for acts of extraordinary heroism.

His service record listed his name as Michael Wodarczyk. From the time he entered the Marine Corps at the age of 22 in 1912, it had been simply “Mike.” The Marines of the 4th Plt, with that inherent talent Marines have for hanging nicknames on their leaders, had taken to calling him—always among themselves, of course—something else, something that would stick with him for years into the future. They called him “The Polish Warhorse.” It always was said with affection and not a little bit of awe for a man who seemed indestructible.

The Germans put that theory to the test at Blanc Mont Ridge in October. They sent the man known as The Polish Warhorse kicking with wounds that would land him in a hospital for months and eventually put him out of the Marine Corps with a disability discharge. The

Germans and the Marine Corps both failed to consider the determination Mike Wodarczyk could take to any obstacle in his path. With a single-minded purposefulness he set about working himself into condition to meet the physical standards for reenlistment. It took him 18 months, but on 18 Nov. 1920, Mike Wodarczyk went back to the Marine Corps he loved. In August of the following year he would be discharged once again, this time to accept appointment as a Marine Gunner.

Many Marines would justifiably regard donning the bursting bomb rank insignia of a Marine Gunner as the crowning achievement of a career. A skilled mechanic and maintenance officer by then, serving with the First Air Squadron in Santo Domingo, the Polish-born Wodarczyk was far from ready to sit back, put up his feet and admire his handiwork, however. He had one more thing in mind. The year was 1922, and 32-year-old Mike Wodarczyk wanted to be a naval aviator.

That was something that would take a bit of doing. Shrunken to a shadow of its wartime strength, the Marine Corps, like all services, was faced with a legal limit on the number of commissioned officers as a percentage of its total strength. As a simple matter of numbers, there was no room for Mike Wodarczyk among the ranks of Marine fliers.

That did not necessarily mean the door was firmly closed and locked. In the decades of the 1920s and 1930s there were farsighted men in the American naval establishment. Looking ahead, they saw the inevitability of war in the

Pacific between America and an increasingly imperialistic Japan. When that war came, carrier-based aircraft would play a major role, and the Navy and Marine Corps would need every qualified aviator they could muster.

Out of this foresight was born the odd category of student naval aviator. For men so designated there would be no formal flight training, no Pensacola, Fla. They would learn their trade through on-the-job training, not counted against the number of aviators allowed the Navy and Marine Corps. So it was that in November 1922, Gunner Wodarczyk was "detailed to duty involving flying as a Student Naval Aviator" by Major Edwin H. Brainard, commanding officer of Marine Observation Squadron 1 (VO-1M). He flew his first solo flight on 8 Feb. 1923, and by July 1926 he had logged more than 620 hours behind the controls and was one of the squadron's most skilled and experienced pilots. An examining board found him "an exceptionally qualified aviation WO"; a "competent and well-trained pilot, who performs any and all missions that the NAs in this organization are called upon to carry out." No matter that, he still was not authorized to wear the gold wings of a naval aviator.

Whether or not Marine Gunner Wodarczyk, with more than 600 hours at the controls, was really an aviator was something for Marine Corps officialdom to puzzle out. However, events don't always wait upon officialdom. As often as not, events take off on their own. In mid-July 1927, events in Nicaragua took off running.

Nicaragua had been a jittery place for some months, the scene of a makeshift cease-fire between the government forces of President Adolfo Diaz and the rebel *insurrectos* led by Augusto Sandino and bankrolled by the USSR through the Communist International, the Comintern. Neither side trusted the other, and caught squarely in the middle were the Marines of Brigadier General Logan Feland's Second Marine Brigade, supposedly keeping the peace, but in actuality keeping their fingers crossed. They could have spared themselves the trouble.

At 0115 on 16 July 1927, a force of more than 500 *insurrectos* launched an all-out surprise night assault on the 38 Marines and 49 guardsmen of the Guardia Nacional de Nicaragua who garrisoned the village of Ocotal deep in the jungle-covered interior. Barely beating off the initial attack, the Marines and guardsmen stood their ground, repelling successive efforts to overrun them that lasted throughout the remainder of the night and into the morning hours. Even so, the outlook was not promising. The nearest possible relief force was at Managua, more than 125 miles away. It could take a ground column two weeks to cover that distance, through nearly trackless jungle and over rugged mountains. The small force at Ocotal did not have the stocks of food and ammunition necessary to last that long.



In July 1927, Gunner Wodarczyk, flying with VO-7M in Nicaragua, bombed and strafed *insurrectos* in the first Marine air-ground combined actions.

That was the situation that greeted the

routine daily reconnaissance patrol of two DeHavilland DH-4B biplanes from Maj Ross Rowell's VO-7M, flying out of Managua. Flying the lead plane was Lt Hayne D. Boyden. On his wing was Marine Gunner Wodarczyk, the aviator who wasn't really an aviator.

Failing to notice the warning panels set out by the ground troops, Boyden set his plane down on the town's sketchy airstrip in an attempt to determine the nature of the situation. He barely got out with his hide, bullets pinging through the DeHavilland's wings and fuselage as he horsed the ship back into the air. Wodarczyk, in the meantime, was making pass after pass at the encircling *insur-*

**"He displayed great heroism in the face of intense hostile fire and repeatedly made brilliant attacks that dealt the enemy crippling blows."**

rectos, spraying them with machine-gun fire. Aware now of the gravity and urgency of the situation on the ground, Boyden made straight for Managua to give the alarm. The Polish Warhorse hung around, continuing his strafing runs until his ammunition was exhausted. Then he, too, set a course for Managua to rearm, refuel and join every available aircraft that Ross Rowell was leading back to Ocotal.

It took the squadron two hours, dodging torrential thunderstorms along the way, to reach the besieged ground force. Once over the target area Rowell's airmen began immediate bombing and strafing runs, utilizing the dive-bombing techniques that had been Rowell's idea several months earlier. Rowell described it this way:

"I led off the attack and dived out of column from 1,500 feet and pulled out at 600. Later we ended up by diving in from 1,000 and pulling out at 300. Since the enemy had not been subjected to any form of bombing attack they had no fear of us. They exposed themselves in such a manner that we were able to inflict damage which was out of proportion to what they would have suffered had they taken cover."

One after another the Marine fliers bored in, firing their machine guns on the way down, releasing their bombs just above the trees, the rear gunners giving the *insurrectos* a farewell hosing down as they climbed out. After several doses of this, *insurrectos* began fleeing the area. They were given no respite by Rowell, Wodarczyk and the others, who continued to hammer the fleeing revolutionaries until all ordnance was expended. The fight at Ocotal rightfully deserves to be called the first Marine air-ground combined action, and it broke the back of the attackers. As the ground commander reported: "The air attack was the deciding factor in our favor, for almost immediately the enemy fire slackened and the enemy began to withdraw in disarray."

For his part in the action The Polish Warhorse would receive a commendation from Nicaraguan President Diaz. A recommendation for the Distinguished Flying Cross would read in part: "He displayed great heroism in the face of intense hostile fire and repeatedly made brilliant attacks that dealt the enemy crippling blows. He contributed materially to the victory which resulted in the complete rout of the enemy and saved the garrison from great loss of life and almost certain destruction." His name was among those cited as "worthy of emulation" in Brigade Order Number 27 of 1 Aug. 1927. And officialdom caught

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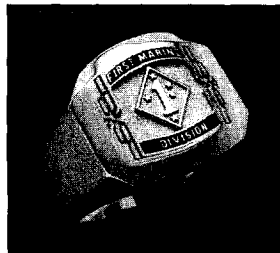
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up with events. On 29 Oct. 1927, Marine Gunner Wodarczyk was appointed a naval aviator. Shortly thereafter he was advanced to the rank of Chief Marine Gunner.

In the months that followed the fight at Ocotal, The Polish Warhorse spent considerable time in the air as Nicaragua descended into a constant running gunfight. Each day brought ambushes, pursuits, bushwhackings, raids and counterraid. What kind of flying conditions did he encounter? Speaking before the students and staff of Quantico, Va.'s Marine Corps Schools in 1928, Maj Edwin H. Brainard described things this way:

"The mountains rise to an elevation of 6,000 or 7,000 feet. The trade winds blow almost continually, making the air over the mountains very rough, and during the rainy season—which lasts from about the first of May to the first of December—severe thunderstorms are very common, and rain and clouds over the mountains are prevalent, thus making flying conditions exceedingly bad."

In short, Nicaragua was a dicey place for a pilot in an open cockpit, fabric-covered biplane, a place where the elements and the terrain were almost as dangerous as the enemy. Yet, somehow none of this seemed to daunt The Polish Warhorse. More and more it became apparent that the gunnery sergeant of Belleau Wood had a special touch with an airplane, a touch that increasingly made him the squadron troubleshooter, the man who could get through when nobody else could.

On 28 Feb. 1928, Mike Wodarczyk got through near the remote hamlet of Pijanal, about 35 miles north of Ocotal, by then a major base. A band of *insurrectos* had gone to ground near the village after an unsuccessful attack on a Marine pack train. Among the *insurrectos* was Augusto Sandino's chief lieutenant, Luis Espinosa. Ramming home his attack through a furious barrage of ground fire that shot away part of his vertical stabilizer, The Polish Warhorse placed his bombs squarely on top of the *insurrectos*. A field report from the Marine ground commander later would advise 5th Marines regimental headquarters at Matagalpa: "Luis Espinosa, colonel, spy and foraging *jefe* under Sandino was carried to the home of Paula Blandon, his mother, Tuesday, February 28, 1928, following the aerial bombard-



"Hard as nails," The Polish Warhorse participated in 25 successful air-ground engagements, winning the Distinguished Flying Cross.

## The Polish Warhorse is among the select few Marines who have been decorated for heroism in both ground and air combat.

ment and machine-gunning during which Espinosa was wounded. Espinosa died same date and was buried in cemetery at Los Chilaros."

Short weeks later, on 19 March 1928, The Polish Warhorse was in action again. Leading a flight of Vought O2U-1 Corsairs, Wodarczyk encountered a force of some 150 *insurrectos* near the village of Murra. The *insurrectos* were well-concealed in terrain that made attack difficult, and they were inclined to fight. A fight was what they got.

In three separate attacks, each attack met by fierce resistance from the ground, Wodarczyk led his flight in treetop-level bombing and strafing runs. Each time the flight had exhausted its supply of bombs and machine-gun ammunition it would return to Ocotal to replenish and top off fuel tanks. Then Wodarczyk would lead the Corsairs back to Murra. He would have his men in the

air for seven hours, see his observer shot and his own parachute pack riddled with bullets, his plane pocked with bullet holes from nose to tail. Only nightfall ended his relentless onslaught, lending credence to the squadron saying that if you flew with The Polish Warhorse you could count on a busy day.

In his official report of the action at Murra, Ross Rowell would write: "The gallantry, courage, skill and leadership demonstrated by this warrant officer were of the most distinguished character. This WO has distinguished himself in action on many occasions. He leads the list of pilots in this squadron with a record of 25 successful engagements to his credit. This is the fourth time he has been recommended on account of gallantry in action during the past twelve months. The qualities displayed by him merit great consideration."

The Major General Commandant, John A. Lejeune, apparently thought the same way. On 18 June 1928, Chief Marine Gunner

Michael Wodarczyk was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross "for extraordinary achievement in aerial flight and in recognition of his initiative, skill and courage." In time there would be an award of the Nicaraguan Cross of Valor as well. Taken together with his decorations from Belleau Wood they would place The Polish Warhorse among the select few Marines who have been decorated for heroism in both ground and air combat.

What manner of Marine was he, this man they called The Polish Warhorse? "Hard as nails!" replied one who knew him, quickly adding, "But absolutely fair, right down the line all the way. You got what you rated from him. If you got reamed, you deserved it. If you got praised, you earned it." Retired Maj Gordon Matthew remembered the squadron officer who so impressed then-Private Matthew more than 60 years earlier: "Gunner Wodarczyk was my ideal. He was everything I wanted to be, everything a Marine should be."

*Editor's note: Maj Bevilacqua, a frequent contributor to Leatherneck, is a former enlisted Marine who served in the Korean and Vietnam wars. As an officer, he was an instructor at Amphibious Warfare School and Command and Staff College, Quantico, Va.*

