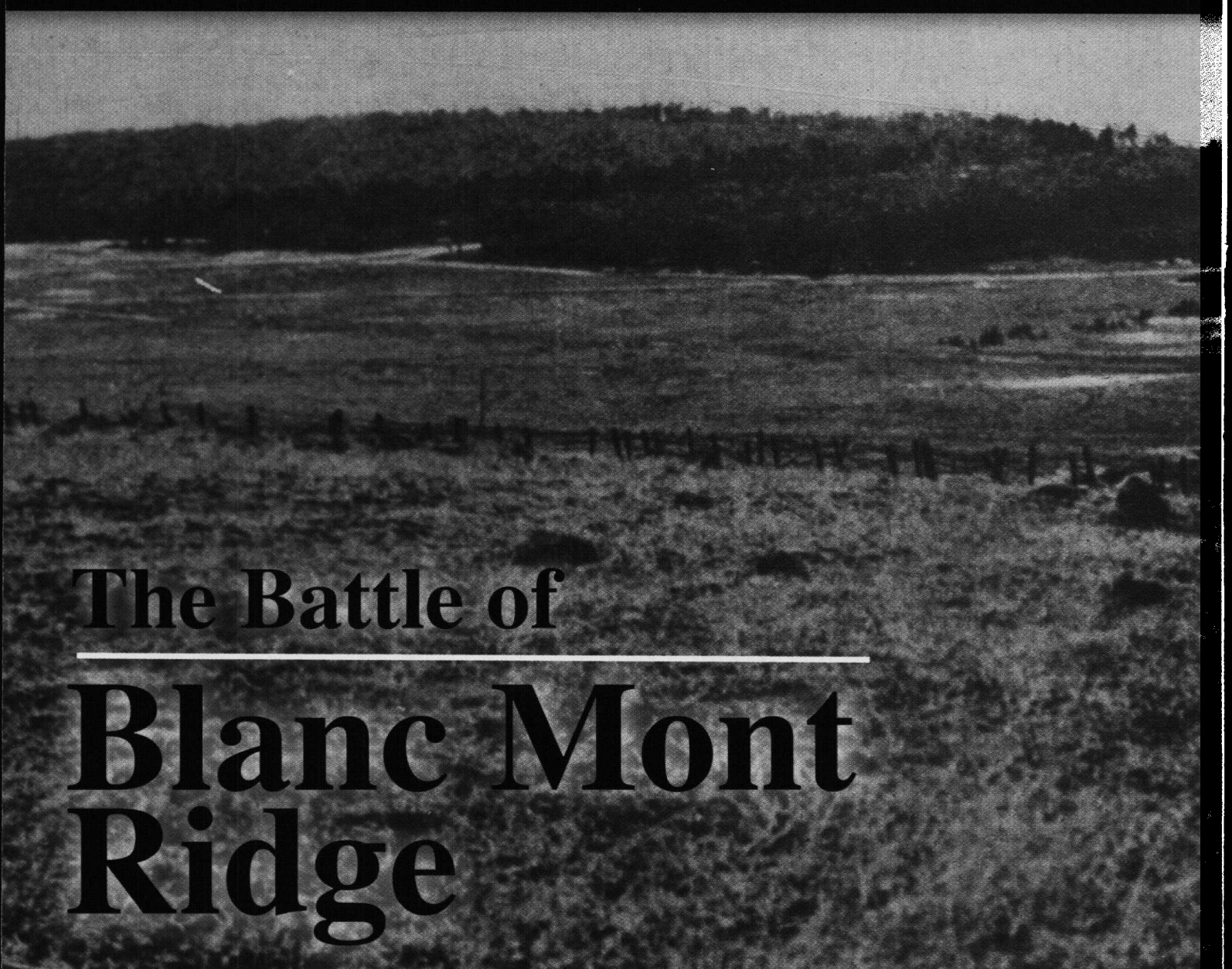


October 1918



The Battle of Blanc Mont Ridge

It happened more than 80 years ago, in the autumn of 1918. The Marines who fought there are for the most part gone from us now. The handful who remain are ancients approaching the century mark, living out their last years in a world eons removed from the world they knew, when as young men they boarded *camions* and bounced and jounced through the night into the white chalk country the French called *la Champagne*. They were rested and refreshed after a brief respite from the war in the pleasant country near Toul, and their ranks had been filled out with replacements after the August battles around Soissons and the drive to St. Mihiel.

Down in the ranks, where war always gets personal, they whiled away the boring hours as men at war do. Some dozed, as much as the rattling ride allowed, while others turned disinterested eyes to the featureless plain rolling by. Those with a concern for events of the day speculated over the latest scuttlebutt—true, as it would turn out—that they were on loan to the French Fourth Army, to fight under the orders of one-armed General Henri Gouraud. A *bon* fighter this Gouraud, so the word was, a man hated and feared by the *Boche*. Where he was, interesting things happened.

Here and there, other men tried their luck at the laws of chance. Dog-eared,

greasy cards were the counters; matchsticks were the stakes. Not one in a hundred knew they were bound for a place called Blanc Mont Ridge. Those who survived would have its name engraved upon their very souls for the rest of their days.

Blanc Mont and the long ridge that trailed away eastward from it dominated the level plateau of the Champagne, the wine country that stretched west to the ancient cathedral city of Rheims. The Germans had held the ridge since 1914, the first summer of the war. Fully aware that Blanc Mont Ridge constituted the key terrain of the entire region, they had fortified it into a stronghold that had defied every effort to pry them

“To be able to say when the war is finished, ‘I belonged to the 2d Division; I fought with it at the Battle of Blanc Mont Ridge,’ will be the highest honor that can come to any man.”

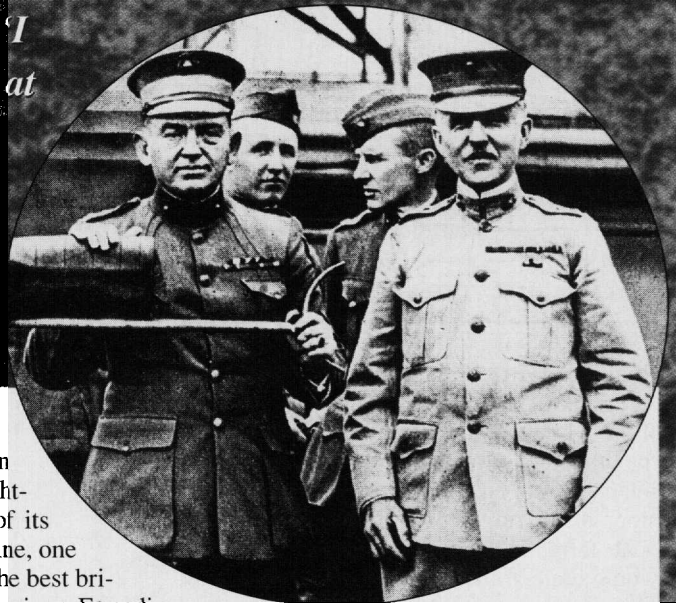
*—John A. Lejeune, Major General
USMC, Commanding
2d Division United States Regular*

loose. Yet the ridge was also a potential Achilles heel. If the ridge could be taken, the entire German group of armies in the sector would have no choice but to fall back to the line of the Aisne River, 30 kilometers to the east.

The French threw everything they had into the attempt. The Germans resisted with everything they had. Throughout the latter part of September three very good French divisions fought themselves to blood-soaked exhaustion, barely denting the maze of trenches and bunkers that glowered down from the heights. Worn out and used up, they could do no more. Now the job would fall to the Marines and soldiers of Major General John A. Lejeune's 2d

Division, the “Indian-heads.” This 2d Division was a tough, hard-fighting outfit, with each of its two brigades, one Marine, one Army, deeming itself the best brigade in the entire American Expeditionary Force.

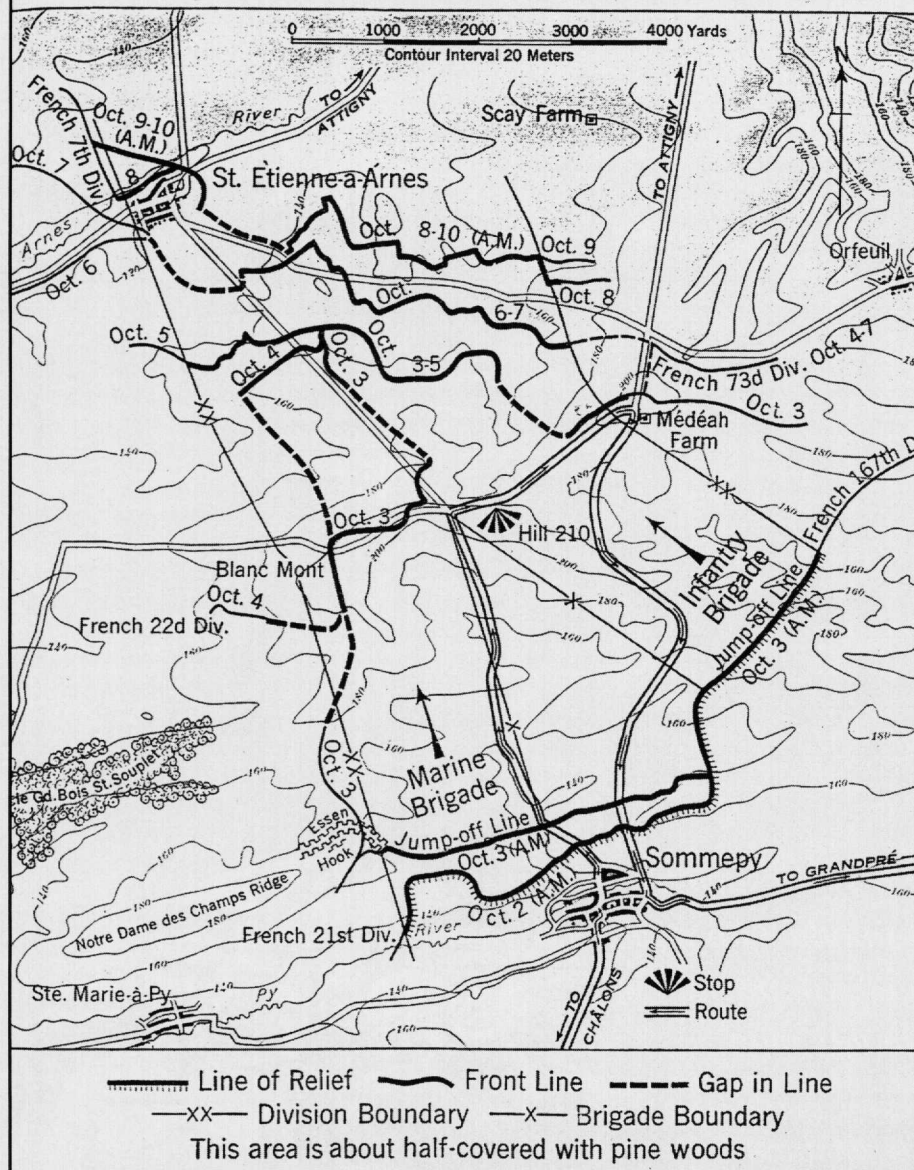
The attack, set for 3 Oct. 1918 against the east-west running key terrain of Blanc Mont Ridge, would be from the south—the Marine brigade on the division's left, the Army infantry brigade on the right. In between, there would be a gap of several hundred meters. The plan was simple enough. The division would stage a converging attack. The Marines of the Fifth and Sixth



Taking the chalky ground of Blanc Mont, known as *la Champagne*, came down to a matter of individual Marines refusing to be beaten. MajGen John A. Lejeune (above left), shown here visiting with the Corps' 12th Commandant, MajGen George Barnett (right), commanded the 2d Div at Blanc Mont, where in four days of combat, Marines suffered 2,185 casualties.

2d Division with French Fourth Army, Oct. 2-10, 1918

(71st Brigade, 36th Division, Attached October 6-9)



Regiments would seize the left flank of the ridge to their front, while the doughboys of the 9th and 23d Infantry Regiments would take the eastern slope of the ridge before Medeah farm. The two brigades would unite at the crest. Simple enough, provided the two badly battered French divisions operating on each flank could keep up.

In the sector of the Marine brigade, Colonel Harry Lee's 6th Marines led off, following a pulverizing barrage by every gun of the division's three artillery regiments. Storming up the long slope, the Marines rolled over the stunned German troops manning the first lines of enemy trenches. Suddenly, the advancing lines were lashed by heavy flanking fire coming from a strong point known as the



Pvt John J. Kelly, 78th Co, 6th Marines, won the Medal of Honor at Blanc Mont.

"Essen Hook" on the regiment's left. The French 21st Infantry Division, in whose zone the Hook lay, had been stalled in its tracks by fierce German resistance. Now, a hail of machine-gun fire was

falling on the 6th Marines, chewing up the flank companies of Major Ernest C. Williams' 2d Battalion.

The attack of the 6th Marines, faced with stiffening resistance in front and withering fire on the left, ground to a halt. The regiment now was faced with the problem of continuing the attack, but in two directions. Individual Marines rose to the challenge. Corporal John Henry Pruitt and Private John Joseph Kelly, both

members of Captain James McBrayer Sellers' 78th Company, staged separate single-handed assaults on key German strong points, blasting them into silence and herding nearly 50 defenders into captivity. For their actions each would be awarded the Medal of Honor. Tragically, Pruitt would be killed before the day was out.

Other Marines were no less valorous. As it would be in another war more than 25 years in the future, uncommon valor was a common virtue. Individually and in small groups, Marines shot and blasted their way into the teeth of the German defenses. Through it all the Germans maintained a withering fire. The ground gained was not gained without cost. Capt Wendell Westover of the 6th Machine Gun Bn saw it this way: "The section was attacking a Boche machine gun, deployed in a long, thin line. First a few men on one flank would rush forward a short distance, then, as the fire was directed at their attack, those on the other end would make a quick advance ... five men lay still on the ground ... one, two, four men dropped."

The advance had turned into a slugging match, but the Marines were slugging harder. With Marines like Lieutenants Edward Lindgren and Jacob Leinhard and Pvts Sam Glucksman, Bruce Mills, Roy Beird and Richard Jordan throwing the punches, the Germans were rocked back on their heels. More weight was added to the attack as Maj Frederick Barker's 1st Bn, 6th Marines passed through the bloodied 2d Bn and continued toward the crest.

On the right, Maj George Shuler's 3d Bn kept pace despite fierce resistance. Battered and beaten into submission by sheer individual courage and determination, the German defense began to crumble. Small pockets of resistance would continue to fester for several days, but organized units were fast disintegrating in the face of the unrelenting assault of the 6th Marines. By noon Col Lee could report that all initial objectives were in Marine hands. But there were still more Germans to be dealt with.

Sheltered in deep bunkers behind the crest of the Blanc Mont hill mass were elements of the German 200th Infantry Division, largely unscathed by the day's fighting. Dealing with these would be the job of Col Logan Feland's 5th Marines, ordered to pass through the 6th Marines and continue the attack. For a variety of reasons, the attack never got off on time. Darkness fell with the 6th

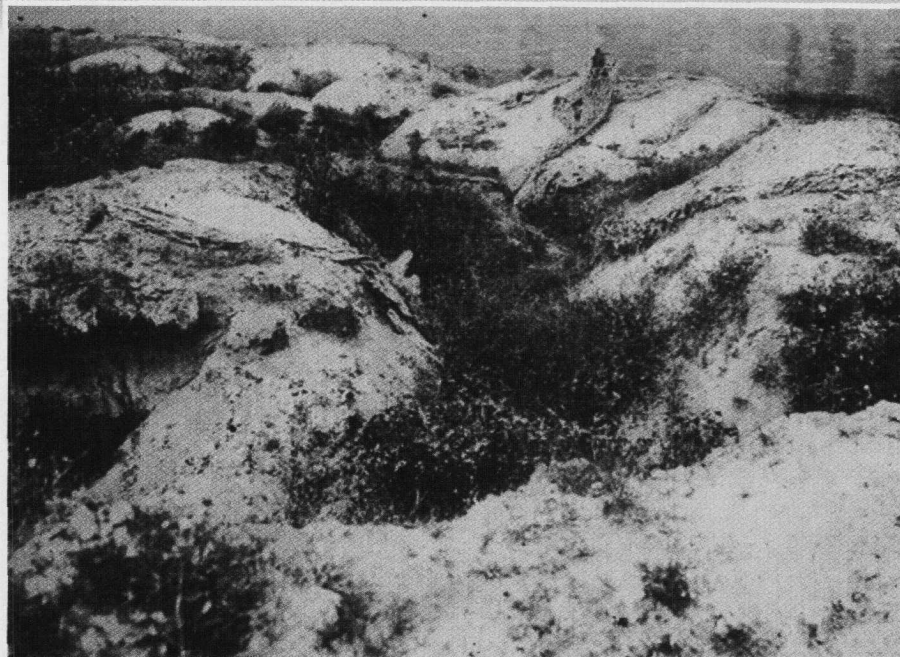
Marines clinging to the ground won during the day, while the 5th Marines closed up and prepared to jump off early on the morning of 4 Oct.

That attack was launched in a column of battalions, Maj Henry Larsen's 3d Bn leading, with Maj George Hamilton's 1st Bn in support and Maj Robert Messersmith's 2d Bn following in reserve. Before the day was over, there would be plenty of work for all three battalions.

Pushing over the crest of the ridge, Larsen's battalion was met by a hailstorm of lead and steel, most of it coming from the heights just below the small town of St. Étienne-a-Arnes. Still more machine-gun fire poured in from each flank. Casualties mounted at a frightful rate as the attack staggered to a halt, while German reinforcements flooded into a wooded area on the battalion's left. By noon the situation was approaching the critical stage, with the battalion hanging on by its fingertips while Larsen wondered how much longer his men could hold out.

As with the attacks of the 6th Marines the previous day, it came down to a matter of individual Marines refusing to be beaten. One of those was First Sergeant John McNulty of the 6th Machine Gun Bn's 77th Co, firing in support of Larsen's hard-pressed ranks. Severely wounded, the "Top" waved aside a corpsman's help and went on with the job of keeping his company's guns in action. It was a small event in a big day, but like so many small things it was the spark that inspired other men to go beyond what they thought was their limit. The battalion hung on.

Help was not long in arriving, as 1/5 and 2/5 surged forward to shore up the 3d Bn's exposed flanks. Even so, the left flank of the Marine brigade remained in the air. The French on the brigade's left had been unable to advance, and the Germans in the Essen Hook continued to pour in a murderous mortar and machine-gun fire. The entire Fifth Marine Regt was now on line with no reserves. What was going to be done would have to be done with what was on hand. The regiment shook itself and started forward, advancing into a firestorm of shells and bullets. By squads, platoons and companies they were minced. But



Fifth Marines, commanded by Col Logan Feland—shown at left with Col Harold C. Snyder, who would later command the regiment—cleared the Germans from Essen Hook (above). The regiment did its job but was finished as a fighting force.

shrapnel, gas and heavy stuff that came as drumfire, killing them." The Germans poured it in, shells of every caliber, 77s, 105s and the big 210 mm trench busters the Marines called "seabags," showering down in a constant thunderous roar.

And still the Marine ranks came doggedly on, shaking the Germans with their ferocity, determined to get in close and punish their tormentors. Get in close they did, and soon the tree-clad slopes below St. Étienne were the scene of scores of individual combats—bayonets, rifle butts, trench knives and bare fists the weapons. John W. Thomason later described how Cpl Robert Slover, who earned a Navy Cross for his day's work, spitted a towering Prussian in the throat with his bayonet, then pulled the trigger and blew the Prussian's helmet—and most of his head—into the air. In the face of men like this the Germans broke.

Payback was to be the term of another war far off, but now it was payback time, time for the fearfully depleted ranks of 1/5 to get back some of their own. As though on the rifle range back at Parris Island, S.C., or Quantico, Va., Hamilton's Marines laid into the fleeing Germans, sending one after another into that long,

they cleaned out the Essen Hook and the defenses beyond it.

Maj George Hamilton's 1st Bn in particular took it in the neck. Fire lashed the battalion from the front, both flanks and left rear. In George Hamilton, though, the Germans had a tiger by the tail. As combative a man as ever drew breath, Hamilton led his men toward the slopes before St. Étienne under a rain of high explosive and gas. Marines whose experience stretched back to Belleau Wood in June saw it as the heaviest fire they had ever endured. One of them, Pvt Elton Mackin, Hamilton's runner, recorded it this way: "The men were stunned, lashed down to earth by flailing whips of

"We were shot to pieces in the Champagne—I never enjoyed the war afterward."

*—Capt John W. Thomason
United States Marine Corps*



Blanc Mont was key to the entire region. The Germans had controlled the area for more than four years, watching from lookouts like this one atop the ridge. If the ridge could be taken, the entire German group of armies in the sector would have to fall back 30 kilometers to the Aisne River.

loose slide that changes a running man into a corpse. For good measure they lashed out as well at the gunners of a 77 mm field gun battery who thought themselves safely out of range, but who learned to their sorrow what a Marine with a rifle can do.

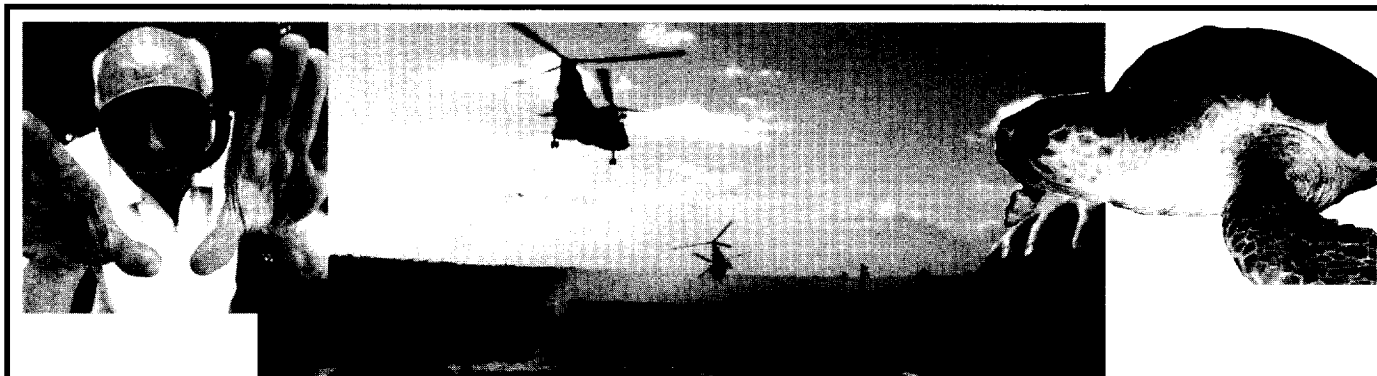
With the business of evening up the score attended to, the 1st Bn, 5th Marines sat down to lick its wounds. There were no end of wounds to lick. The battalion had all but ceased to exist. Capt Leroy P. Hunt reported that his 17th Co had an effective strength of two officers

and 35 enlisted Marines remaining out of the 250 who had started out that morning. In the 67th Co, leadership had changed hands four times in less than that many hours, with Capt Frank Whitehead, Capt Francis Kieran and First Lieutenant Felix Beauchamp going down wounded.

Besides himself and his second in command, John W. Thomason, Capt Percy Cornell could count only 22 other members of the 49th Co still on their feet. In the 66th Co even the indestructible Lt Louis Cukela, whose exploits as a sergeant had already brought him the Medal of Honor, Medaille Militaire and Croix de Guerre, was carried off wounded, one of the company's 227 casualties.

Things weren't much better in the other battalions of the 5th Marines. The regiment had done its job, but it was finished as a fighting force. There still were Germans to be pried out of their fighting positions. It was now up to the 6th Marines to put an end to it.

At 0600, Saturday, 5 Oct., the 6th Marines started doing just that. There were still Germans willing to put up a fight clinging to positions on the ridge, and



By any definition, the Marine Life here will make your vacation very memorable.



CHANCES ARE, WE'LL LEAVE YOU WITH A NEW VIEW OF MARINE LIFE—including historical coastal villages and miles of unspoiled beaches. Discover why gigantic and rare loggerhead sea turtles nest here. Why the largest U.S. Marine Expeditionary Force in the world camps here. And why pirates and patriots, for centuries, have called Onslow County home. To find out more about our abundant and diverse Marine Life call now: **1.800.932.2144**. Or email us at: octour@co.onslow.nc.us

ONLOW COUNTY
NORTH CAROLINA



For **FREE** vacation information call now: **1.800.932.2144** or email: www.onslowcountytourism.com



Young men with pets such as the dachshund from Germany and an anteater taken to France from Haiti were the same men who, in battle, without a second thought, shot or plunged a bayonet into a man.

“The taking of Blanc Mont is the single greatest achievement of the 1918 campaign—the Battle of Liberation.”

*—Henri Phillipe Petain
Marechal de France*

Ridge and St. Étienne was now in friendly hands, and the Germans were on the verge of being knocked out, but that would have to fall to someone else. The 2d Division had been fought to a frazzle. During the night of 6/7 Oct. the spanking new 36th Infantry Division, the Texas Division, relieved the weary Marines and soldiers of the 2d Division.

The 2d Division that filed wearily down from the shell-scarred slopes of Blanc Mont Ridge was a skeleton of the division that had gone into action short days before. In the Marine brigade, casualties in killed and wounded totaled 2,185, a frightening figure for only four days of combat. The Army infantry brigade suffered comparable losses, and the 2d Division would record 4 Oct. as its bloodiest single day of the entire war.

What had been gained? In the final analysis the German failure to hold Blanc Mont Ridge ended any hopes Germany still might have had of staving off defeat, salvaging a stalemate and engineering a negotiated settlement to the war. For Germany, there now could be only a hopeless fight leading to inevitable surrender. The loss of Blanc Mont Ridge had sealed Germany's doom.

Editor's note: Five future Commandants of the Marine Corps fought at Blanc Mont: John A. Lejeune, Wendell C. Neville, Thomas Holcomb, Clifton B. Cates and Lemuel C. Shepherd Jr. For those who are interested in walking the grounds of the WW I battlesites, Military Historical Tours gives a 10 percent discount to Marine Corps Association members. See their ad on page 45.

The author, 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.

Honor, Pride, Tradition



The Making of a Marine

Shot on location at Parris Island and San Diego, witness for yourself the toughest military training in the world. Marine Corps Boot Camp. Item #MOM (50 min) (2000) **NEW \$19.95**



The Evening Parade: Preserving the Tradition

The most dramatic military pageant in the world. From Marine Barracks, Washington, DC, experience the electricity of a live performance. Item #EPAR (72 min)(1996) **\$19.95**

Fierce Pride in Country and Corps

Go behind the scenes with the Marine Corps Silent Drill Platoon and Drum and Bugle Corps. See how members of these elite units are selected and how they prepare for their performances. Item #FPCC (60 min)(1997) **\$19.95**



The Sunset Parade For Those Who Gave All

From the Marine Corps War Memorial this spectacular parade is performed by the elite units from Marine Barracks, Washington, DC. In honor and memory of those Marines who have given their lives since 1775. Item #SPAR(70 min)(1997) **\$19.95**

The Crucible The New, The Proud

The toughest military training just got tougher. Witness for yourself this 54 hour trial by fire that is now the final rite of passage in becoming a Marine. Item#CRBL (55 min) (1998) **\$19.95**



A Few Good Women

Regardless of gender, becoming a Marine is tough. Learn about the history of women in the Corps and see boot camp today. Item#AFGW (50 min) (1996) **\$14.95**

Send check or money order (no cash) to:

Good-To-Go Video

P.O. Box 998, Beaufort, SC 29901

1-800-444-3348

www.goodtogo1.com

NAME _____

STREET _____

CITY, STATE, ZIP _____ ITEM NUMBERS _____

VISA MC AMEX

Card # _____

Exp. Date _____ Subtotal: _____

SC res add 5% tax: _____

S&H: **\$4.95**

Total: _____