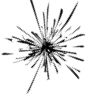


1 The First to Fight



WHEN CONGRESS DECLARED WAR on Germany in April 1917, the Marine Corps was better prepared to fight than the rest of the country, but nonetheless was not ready to take the field immediately. With a strength of 17,400, the commandant, Maj. Gen. George Barnett, could boast a nucleus of disciplined fighting men already in uniform.¹ Crisp, efficient, and experienced in small wars throughout Latin America, the marines had little doubt their fighting ability would soon be tested in the world war.

Yet experience gained in sea duty, expeditionary service, and occasional combat in Latin America and Asia against poorly organized, trained, and armed irregulars would offer limited benefit to marines thrust into the cauldron of the Western Front. Of course, a number of qualities honed in expeditionary duty would prove indispensable: individual and small-unit discipline, rifle marksmanship, a corps of professional noncommissioned officers, and most of all, an esprit de corps. But the officers' woeful, albeit understandable, ignorance of progressive innovations in warfare and of tactics above the company level would carry a bloody price.

In a pattern that has been often repeated since, a quickening tempo of worldwide expeditions had frustrated the efforts of the Marine Corps to transform itself. In the thirty-six months prior to the American declaration of war, the sea-going companies and garrisons of the corps had been committed to expeditionary forays. Marines had landed in Vera Cruz, Haiti, and Santo Domingo. They had maintained a perpetual commitment to legation guards in Peking and Nicaragua. Finally, they had performed traditional service in marine barracks and aboard U.S. Navy vessels. All of these tasks had further fragmented General Barnett's unrealized vision of a 5,000-man expeditionary Advance Base Force. The Advance Base Force would have fielded a brigade of infantry, artillery, and support troops perpetually ready to sail with the fleet. Yet due to its worldwide commitments, the Corps entered the First World War with no such force; in fact,

it possessed only a few scattered companies available for immediate service.²

Adamant that the Marine Corps would not sit on the sideline for the duration of the war, Barnett petitioned Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels for a meeting with Secretary of War Newton D. Baker. The general offered Baker a regiment of marines for service with the AEF immediately and promised a second regiment to follow soon after. Accepting Baker's precondition to conform to army standards of equipage, uniform, drill, and tactical doctrine, Daniels and Barnett left Baker's office with the promise that the first regiment, the 5th Marines, would accompany the 1st Infantry Division to France. Barnett built the 5th Marines using almost all of his immediately available prewar regulars, scraping together companies from ships and stations along the East Coast and the Caribbean and flushing out their rosters with the few hundred marines then in recruit training. Before the 5th Marines had sailed for France, recruiting began to build a second regiment out of whole cloth: the 6th Marines.³

The Recruits

Because the 5th Marines had snatched up most of the marines available, the Corps amassed the majority of the 6th Marine Regiment with men who had enlisted after the declaration of war. As it turned out, this was no handicap. In the spring of 1917, recruiting sergeants found that they could pick and choose from a number of qualified candidates, rejecting all but the most fit. Oddly, in a nation where only one out of thirty men aged eighteen to twenty-four years old were enrolled in college, the Marine Corps found itself deluged with fit, educated collegians.⁴

Recruiters capitalized on exuberant public support following the declaration of war. When the University of Minnesota held a euphoric patriotic rally, 2nd Lt. Carleton S. Wallace, the former captain of its track team, swaggered among the exultant students in his dress blue uniform. Upward of five hundred undergraduates enlisted en masse, with the blessing and applause of the university faculty.⁵

It is safe to say that many of these educated recruits could have obtained commissions in the army or the National Guard. Had these men entered the army, few would have wound up in the infantry. Over the protests of commanders overseas, the army's classification system directed all but unskilled laborers into specialist fields.⁶ Because marine volunteers were beyond the reach of the army's person-

nel bureaucracy, and because specialists comprised a relatively tiny minority in the Corps, marine infantrymen tended to have a great deal more education and vocational training than their army counterparts.

A quick look at a few of these men is instructive of the caliber of marine recruits. One obvious officer candidate, Cadet Carl Andrew Brannen, resigned from Texas A&M University when war came and joined what he described as the “mass exodus” to enlist. At eighteen, Brannen felt that his age designated him as “the most appropriate one” to represent his family in uniform. Discarding a temptation to join the air corps, the young man chose the marines because he liked the recruiting posters.⁷

In another case, Levi Hemrick had dreamt of visiting France all his life. Intelligent, conscientious, and at times philosophical, Hemrick enjoyed a draft exemption as the principal of a three-teacher school in Dekalb County, Georgia. Although he held few illusions about life as a marine, he felt the tug of duty and reasoned a trip to France at least offered a potential chance to see Paris. Hemrick found a milk truck headed to Atlanta and hopped aboard to seek the recruiting office.⁸

Melvin L. Krulewitch had earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1916 from Columbia University. The twenty-one-year-old had wrestled, rowed competitively, and thrown the shot put in college. The cousin of a naval captain, Krulewitch pictured marines as gallant “khaki-clad figures springing from the bow of a motor sailor, leaping on the beautiful, silvery sand, with the palm trees growing around there in Central America.” Reality hit him abruptly. His fellow recruits left him aghast. “Many of them needed a bath,” he later recalled, surmising, “The Marine Corps Recruiting Station on East 23rd Street was used for gathering up, shall we say, the leavings of the Bowery and all kinds of people of that sort.” Krulewitch’s fellow recruits notwithstanding, the recruiters generally selected only literate, healthy, and physically fit young men, self-starters who responded to the Marine Corps’s “First to Fight” call.⁹

Born on Chicago’s South Side, John Joseph Kelly had grown up quick-fisted. The fourth son of Irish immigrants, Kelly made up for his five-foot-five, 112-pound build with irrepressible humor and never-say-die toughness. Somewhat of a romantic, he had run off with a traveling circus at sixteen. He returned home two years later to discover that his eldest brother was a captain in the National Guard, another was flying in the Air Corps, and the third was in army in-

telligence. Kelly felt obligated to do one better and sought out the marines.

Don Paradis was working his way up the ladder at the Detroit City Gas Company. The company had given him a new Model T Ford, which he used to make his rounds investigating customer billing complaints. Paradis was a big man, and at twenty-one years of age, he had common sense to match his size. Management appreciated the way the young man kept their customers happy, and his future with the gas company looked bright. But Paradis took the developing U-boat menace personally and began making the rounds of the recruiting offices. He found the army recruiting office filthy, smoky, and crowded with drunks. The navy office was worse. Dejected, he headed home only to happen upon some marine recruiters who had pitched a tent in Grand Circus Park. They promised him that he would be in France in four to six months. "That promise, and those clean, snappy uniforms did the trick."¹⁰

Throughout the spring and summer of 1917, many thousands more found their way to recruiting stations in the big cities. As this vast, untapped sea of men came rushing to arms, the Marine Corps had little difficulty finding adequate recruits. The "First to Fight" poster campaign became one of the most successful recruiting drives in history. By war's end the Marine Corps would have rejected three applicants for every man enlisted.¹¹ Those accepted were typically fit and eager, the cream of the first crop of volunteers. Trains whisked those enlisting east of the Mississippi to Port Royal, South Carolina. A quick barge ride across the sound deposited them on a humid, flea-bitten sand spit of misery: Parris Island.

Parris Island

The primary mission of the Marine Corps recruit depots has never been to teach combat skills. At Parris Island (and in 1917 at Mare Island on San Francisco Bay) the Marine Corps transformed civilians into marines and boys into men. The job has been not so much to instruct techniques as to instill discipline. Drill instructors have used nearly unvarying methods over the years, most of them unpleasant, to foster an immediate, instinctive obedience to orders.

Training at Parris Island in the summer of 1917 was often harsh because it was so primitive rather than through any brutal design. Most recruits slept under canvas. Those who had bedding found it infested with vermin. A metal pail served as each man's laundry. Drill sergeants inspected each recruit's freshly cleaned clothing daily

(often tossing wet uniforms into the company street for real or imagined dirt). The depot had not yet built a proper chow hall, and Don Paradis recalled sitting on the ground while sand dusted his food as he ate. Levi Hemrick loathed breakfast: “foul-smelling eggs, spuds boiled in their jackets, fried fat-back, and black coffee.” Recruits debated whether the Marine Corps served such ghastly food deliberately, as part of the general toughening process, or because of wartime shortages. But they unanimously agreed that it tasted awful.¹²

Lacking facilities to house the influx of recruits, the Corps used labor parties to build new buildings on the island, physically toughening the privates of 1917 as they constructed barracks in which most would never sleep. Hoisting I-beams in thirty-man teams built strength and teamwork. Private Krulewitch remembered unloading so many bricks that the rough edges sandpapered the skin off his hands. Companies marched from their bivouacs to the beach to fill pails with oyster shells, then staggered back in agony one mile to the company street. The crushed shells were dumped in the street to cover the soft sand.

Recruits who had grown up in the squalor of America’s slums and dirt-poor farms were occasionally ambivalent to the physical labor, harsh quarters, and unsavory rations. Nonetheless, the harsh regimen of drill and physical training profoundly impressed every recruit. In 1917 the Marine Corps divided a recruit’s ten-week stay at Parris Island into roughly equal amounts of drill, rifle marksmanship, and working parties.¹³ This regimen greatly surpassed what most First World War armies devoted to recruit training in both time and intensity.

Drill enjoyed primacy in Parris Island’s curriculum, and with good reason. Popularly known as “torture under arms,” rifle drill instilled unwavering discipline and an unequivocal understanding that the Marine Corps tolerated nothing short of swift, precise, and complete obedience to commands. Brannen, a former Texas A&M cadet, observed, “My drill master was satisfied with nothing short of perfection.”¹⁴

Drill served more than just instilling discipline. In 1917 “close order” and “open order” drill served as rudimentary tactical doctrines. In a manner that would not have looked out of place in the Civil War, the Marine Corps expected its battalions to fight as precision units, marching in the same formations and to the same commands on the battlefield as on the drill field. If the Corps could be condemned for clinging to outdated tactics, it must be remembered that the Euro-

pean armies of 1914 had abandoned such methods only after suffering through months of colossal casualties.

Marines learned bayonet fighting through the most painful drill of all. Pvt. Melvin Krulewitch called it torture, “because you had to squat down in a peculiar position and hold that nine-pound rifle out and take the most fantastic positions from which you couldn’t move. It would be a crippling position. And then the crazy things they taught you: parry, bayonet thrust, parry saber thrust, parry cavalry attack.”¹⁵ He was right. There would not be many opportunities in France to parry cavalry sabers. Some of these drills were crazy things to teach men headed to the Western Front, but every exercise painfully performed with precision welded the recruit’s bond of discipline more tightly.

If drill was the catechism of the Marine Corps, then rifle qualification was a sacrament. In a war where many army replacements would arrive at the front without having fired a weapon, marine marksmanship would astound both allies and adversaries. More than any other attribute, rifle marksmanship set the U.S. Marine apart from other fighting men. Superbly accurate and firing a powerful .30-caliber round, the 1903 Springfield was a rifleman’s rifle. The Corps knew how to teach men to shoot and refused to cut corners. After three weeks of tedious instruction and practice, recruits found themselves scoring hits from the thousand-yard line.¹⁶

Throughout the days of hard labor, drill, and rifle practice, the recruits exercised at every opportunity. Paradis remembered six o’clock reveille was rudely followed by a twenty-minute jog about the parade deck. He found the frequent conditioning hikes even tougher. The heavy field pack carried in those days hung from two thin web shoulder straps that cut into a man’s shoulders. On the hottest days some recruits finished only by “sheer grit and determination.”¹⁷

Most painful of all, rifle calisthenics, or “butts and muzzles,” forced recruits through unnatural contortions with their nine-pound rifles. Krulewitch could still chant the drill decades later: “Front and center, up on shoulders, low swing, muzzle forward, lunges, right lunges, left lunges.” Another marine lamented his experience in a letter home. “Designed to make either a MAN or a lunatic out of you. I have heard big men sobbing and crying through gritted teeth. I have done it myself.”¹⁸

Despite their moans and lamentations, nearly all marines recognized, even boasted, of the transformation their drill sergeant had wrought. Levi Hemrick claimed that he “took on from fifteen to

twenty-five pounds, most of it going into broadening of the shoulders, hardening of arm and leg muscles.” The former schoolmaster felt justifiably proud of his appearance: “The sun’s heat and the outdoor exercise added a healthy rugged tone to our facial complexion and strengthened the lines that led to the mouth and chin. Both the head and body posture went through a change that indicated development of physical power, firmness, determination and boldness; a fighting man’s image.” Marine recruit training in the Great War was effective, albeit anachronistic. The Corps consistently developed all of its recruits to its rigid standards. Since the army struggled with expansion, poor personnel management, equipment shortfalls, epidemics, weather, disorganization, and an absence of definitive guidance, “Training of the U.S. Army . . . was shallow, inappropriate, and spotty.” In contrast, marines left Parris Island physically and mentally tough and harshly disciplined. They could shoot well. They marched magnificently. If they were unready for the Western Front, they were bright, eager, and superbly prepared to learn.¹⁹

Unbeknown to the new marines, their leaders were far less prepared to train them.

The New Lieutenants

The recruits shipped to Parris and Mare Islands would fill the platoons of the 6th Marines. Finding lieutenants to lead these platoons presented a more troubling dilemma. The Marine Corps had no officer candidate school in 1917 and no recruiting organization to find and screen potential officers. Marine officers had been commissioned for a number of years from the Naval Academy or from the enlisted ranks, but neither of these traditional sources could meet the demands of the expanding Corps. The navy, suffering growing pains of its own, had invested too much engineering and seamanship training on its midshipmen to squander them on the marines. The Corps itself was swearing in many top NCOs as lieutenants.²⁰ However, should the commandant commission too many of his sergeants, the relative quality of both his officer and NCO ranks would inevitably suffer.

General Barnett took a bold step. Writing personally to the deans of the country’s top universities and military schools, he offered to commission around ten seniors from each on the dean’s recommendation alone. Caught in a manpower crisis, he gambled that a reputation of good character would compensate for a lack of military screening and indoctrination. By October 1917 Barnett had commis-

sioned 506 lieutenants directly from civilian life.²¹ To his credit, many of these men proved themselves as some of the top platoon leaders in Marine Corps history.

One of the best of these was a football player and Phi Beta Kappa student in his senior year at the University of Chicago, James McBrayer Sellers. Sellers had graduated from Wentworth Military Academy in Lexington, Missouri. Attending Wentworth was a Sellers family tradition—he had been born on campus during his father’s tour as superintendent, and his brother served on the staff. When Wentworth received the commandant’s letter, his brother advised him to pounce on the opportunity. “I did not know what the outfit was,” Sellers later confessed. “I thought it was something like the Coast Guard or the Merchant Marine.” The young man walked down to the recruiting station in Chicago and liked what he heard. His classmate and football captain, Red Jackson, was game too. The Corps wanted them to depart immediately, but a month of classes and final examinations were all that stood between them and their diplomas. Well, they reasoned, there was a war on after all. The two pleaded their case to the dean, who acquiesced, swept up in the patriotism of the moment. “You go on in, and I will get you your diploma,” he assured them. The classes and exams were dispensed with, and within days, Sellers was riding eastward with his degree and a commission as a second lieutenant.²²

The Marine Corps shortly assembled 345 shiny new lieutenants like Sellers at a rifle range in Winthrop, Maryland. The new officers congregated here for instruction and, hopefully, qualification with the Springfield rifle. Sellers qualified on both the army and navy rifle courses, though he found the navy course much tougher; it included firing from the standing position at the five-hundred-yard line. Fulfilling the commandant’s promise to adopt army regulations did not translate into suspending the Corps’s high standards of marksmanship. Having won shooting trophies at Wentworth Military Academy, Sellers was one of only two candidates who fired expert on the navy course.²³

While at Winthrop, Sellers first met many of the future lieutenants with whom he would serve in France. Twenty-three-year-old Clifton B. Cates had earned his Bachelor of Law from the University of Tennessee in 1916. A baseball and football player, Cates would earn a remarkable reputation in combat and emerge as one of the standout marine officers of the war. Carl Brannen would remember him as “the most optimistic person I ever saw.”²⁴

Another Tennessee man, twenty-two-year-old Johnny Overton, the Yale track captain and a Skull and Bones member, had set records in middle- and long-distance running his senior year. Born in Nashville, the son of the president of Alabama Fuel and Iron Company, Johnny had intended to follow his father in coal mining or iron manufacturing.²⁵

One twenty-year-old lieutenant was not at all happy with his decision to join the Marine Corps. Graves B. Erskine had served along the Mexican border with the Louisiana National Guard and felt that entitled him to have an opinion on how the Corps ought to be run. So far, this outfit was moving far too slowly to suit him. Erskine had left Louisiana State University to fight, not to sit around Winthrop, Maryland. "I'm going to Canada to join the Black Watch," he declared to those in earshot and submitted his resignation. Lt. Col. Paul Rixey summoned the impertinent upstart, patiently lectured him on how things worked in *this* Marine Corps, and tore up the resignation letter.

Erskine soon made friends with Lt. William Arthur Worton. Unlike most of the Winthrop bunch, Worton had received his commission through a peculiar footnote to Marine Corps history, the 1st Marine Company of the Massachusetts Naval Militia. Enjoying a similar status to members of the National Guard, the sixty-five Massachusetts Marines drilled aboard the battleship USS *Kearsarge* each weekend and put to sea for two weeks each summer. Quite the blue-blooded company, it was supervised by an inspector-instructor from the regular Marine Corps named Capt. Frederick H. Delano, a relative of the Roosevelt family. At sixteen Worton had enlisted as a private. By the time he entered Boston Latin School at age nineteen, the young man held a commission from the governor of Massachusetts as a marine officer. After America declared war, the Department of the Navy federalized the 1st Marine Company and distributed its marines throughout the Corps.²⁶

After three weeks of rifle marksmanship at Winthrop, the fresh lieutenants reported to the new Officer Training School at Quantico, Virginia. Along with similar courses held at Marine Barracks Washington, D.C., and Parris Island, the Officer Training School fell far short of expectations. Instead of preparing to command rifle platoons, the disgusted young officers piddled away their days learning semaphore and drilling. The Marine Corps made some effort to train them for combat, though, the students throwing dummy grenades and learning a little extended-order drill. But most officers com-

pleted the course knowing little more of tactics than their greenest private. In Cates's estimation, "Half of it wasn't worth a hoorah."²⁷

The Corps pulled virtually all of the platoon commanders destined for the 6th Marines out of Cates's Officer Training School class two months before graduation in order for them to command the marines expected imminently from Parris Island. According to James Sellers, the staff at the school selected the best officers in the class for service with the 6th Marines.²⁸ If true, the regiment would have culled no more than 135 out of the class of 345—roughly the top 40 percent. Once again the Marine Corps's inability to provide training and experience mandated reliance on a qualitative measure of innate ability. These lieutenants would have to master their duties while on the job. Untrained and unfamiliar with the ways of the Corps, the eager new officers were ripe for molding in the hands of their new battalion commander.

The Commander

Maj. Thomas Holcomb's seventeen years ashore and afloat spanned an era in which an officer's actions in a few moments under fire could spawn a legendary reputation. Renowned officers such as Johnnie "The Hard" Hughes, "Hiking Hiram" Bearss, and Smedley "Old Gimlet Eye" Butler enjoyed a modest celebrity status in the Corps. Perhaps it says as much about Holcomb as it does about his contemporaries that he had won no nickname. A native of New Castle, Delaware, Holcomb spent much of his early career quietly guarding naval installations in the Philippine Islands against a possible reemergence of Emilio Aguinaldo's insurrection. He later served a number of years in Peking, deterring any Boxer-like uprising that might once again imperil the Legation Quarter. Neither emergency came to pass, and Holcomb's name stayed out of the headlines.

In 1910 Holcomb extended his tour in Peking to study Chinese full time. This extension in such a coveted assignment reveals that he had already been identified as an officer of exceptional potential. Although having earned only a high school degree, Holcomb valued education far more keenly than did the majority of his contemporaries. The Marine Corps kept him at his studies for four years, recognizing his intellect and the importance China might play in the near future.

Not merely an academic, Holcomb demanded the same high standards of discipline and toughness as any marine officer. During his time in Asia, he had earned a minor reputation as a competitive

shooter, firing on the Marine Corps Rifle Team on six occasions before 1912. Holcomb had little use for a marine who could not shoot. One of his platoon commanders stated years later that the major accepted only experts and sharpshooters into his battalion; mere marksmen were not allowed.²⁹

In 1914 the commandant brought Holcomb to Washington as his inspector of target practice. This was Holcomb's first stateside shore duty in twelve years. A politically astute officer, he served for a period as General Barnett's aide, taking pains to ensure the Marine Corps stayed in good graces with patrons such as Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt. In 1917 Holcomb was a newly married major looking forward to the birth of his first child. On August 14 he took command of the 2nd Battalion of Col. Albertus Catlin's 6th Marine Regiment.³⁰

Holcomb's officers remember him as a strict yet compassionate leader, a "deep, deep thinker" who held strong views on the role of an officer. Arthur Worton recalled that the major lectured him one time on the magnitude of his duties as an instructor: Holcomb viewed an officer as a teacher, his men as students. "For the few minutes that you're in battle, that's nothing; you're always a school teacher in the Marine Corps. If you're not a good one, then you're not a good marine." Lieutenant Cates was unimpressed with Holcomb—at first: "When we first joined the battalion we didn't think too much of him. We thought he was a little too uppity. We soon changed our opinion. After Soissons, he was tops with everyone."³¹

Holcomb whisked his officers off to training schools whenever possible, even taking commanders from their platoons at the front. Lieutenants could expect frequent, personal instruction from their battalion commander on proper conduct. Graves Erskine thought he would show off as a busy beaver one morning at Quantico by shoveling snow. Decidedly unimpressed, Holcomb brought him up short: "Let me tell you something, young man. You are a commissioned officer. You get paid to use your brain and not your hands. Now put that shovel away and get an orderly to do it."³²

The major had old corps ideas about discipline as well and how enlisted marines should behave. But a good marine could expect a fair shake and a second chance, when warranted. Two privates with otherwise spotless records came before the major one day on charges. The camp guard had caught them devouring ice cream they had lifted from a Quantico druggist. The two sheepish men reported to Holcomb, fearing a court-martial or worse. He gave them holy

hell, despite their platoon commander's attestation to their previous good service and a plea for clemency, and sent the two off to the brig to sweat it out overnight. When they reappeared before him in the morning, Holcomb let them off with a stern warning, provided that they reimburse the druggist. He took care to attribute his leniency to their platoon commander's favorable remarks, then dismissed them. In doing so Holcomb had not only preserved the clean records of two promising marines but also had shrewdly reinforced the lieutenant's stature and authority within the platoon.³³

Such a bond between officers and men is crucial to combat effectiveness. Building his battalion from the ground up, Holcomb had to quickly assemble a collection of raw recruits, green lieutenants, and a sprinkling of old Corps regulars. There would be time for tactics later. Before the scholar-commander could open school, he had to first build a thousand individual marines into a spirited team.

The Battalion

The new base at Quantico did not impress marines reporting aboard in the summer of 1917. Unpaved streets of mud and the scent of fresh-cut lumber betrayed the last-minute efforts of the Corps to construct a base for expeditionary troops. The clatter of construction and the pounding of hammers never ceased. As trains dumped off recruits at the railhead, senior NCOs formed them into rifle companies and marched them to wooden barracks smelling of green pine. Marines bound for France drew forest green winter uniforms for the first time, underlining the hasty, urgent assemblage of wartime units: new green uniforms, freshly cut lumber, and raw, untrained manpower.

Having just landed after a short boat ride from the Winthrop rifle range, James Sellers jotted down his first impression of the emerging camp:

The place here looks just like pictures of mining towns I have seen. There is one small street which constitutes the original town. This street leads right up from the pier. There are rows and rows of unpainted wooden shacks, sprung up almost literally overnight. The small streets between are all cut up with rainwash, and we stumble over what is left of a former small forest, roots and stumps, and sewer excavations. South of the town is another city of tents from which come the sound of bugles, roll calls and the barking of dogs. And there is a dance hall where they charge 20c for a dance with one of the painted

ladies brought to town for the purpose. Between nearly every two tents, there are dummies for bayonet practice, and at all hours of the day enlisted men can be seen slaughtering these dummy Germans.³⁴

As fast as the carpenters built new barracks, they filled with new marines. The small battalion headquarters included a commander, executive officer, adjutant, quartermaster, and sergeant major. In France most battalion commanders would scrounge up an additional lieutenant and assign him the duties of intelligence or scout officer. According to army tables of organization, the battalion would need more than thirty officers and one thousand men to fill its authorized ranks.

A captain commanded each of the four companies, with a first sergeant assigned as his senior NCO. The army's system of letter-named companies imposed later in France would be universally ignored in the Marine Corps. Each marine company retained its unique numerical designation. In 2/6 the companies numbered 78th, 79th, 80th, and 96th. Most companies received five lieutenants, an executive officer and four platoon commanders. Each platoon rated a gunnery sergeant as platoon sergeant and six sergeants to lead each of the eight-man squads.

Holcomb and his few regulars found themselves engulfed by wartime volunteers. Ninety-three percent of the regiment's men had seen less than twelve months' service.³⁵ As trainloads of raw manpower disgorged from the railhead, the handful of old salts hastily organized and equipped the four rifle companies.

Capt. Robert E. Messersmith, supposedly a "tough hombre," commanded the 78th Company. Messersmith had served as a Coast Guard cadet in 1909 before his commissioning. He had fought in skirmishes in Nicaragua, including the capture of rebel forts at Coyotepe and Barranca in October 1912.³⁶

Messersmith posted 2nd Lt. Amos Shinkle as his company executive officer over 1st Lt. Julius C. Coggsell. A squeaky-voiced lieutenant from Charleston, South Carolina, Coggsell did not make much of an impression at first. Sellers described him in a letter as "well meaning but very kiddish and irresponsible, and more or less of a joke in the company." Shinkle, however, impressed Messersmith as a self-reliant man who had overcome humble origins through bull-headed determination. One of the few prior NCOs among the lieutenants, Shinkle had never finished grammar school and had worked

as a common laborer and carpenter from the age of thirteen to support his family. He had enlisted in 1913 and had served as an enlisted marine assigned to the presidential yacht. Shinkle had passed the officer's examination in 1917, which included algebra, geometry, and plane trigonometry, through determined self-study.³⁷

Lt. James Sellers, the Wentworth Military Academy graduate who had distinguished himself on the rifle range at Winthrop, commanded one of Messersmith's platoons. Lt. James Pickens Adams, who had played football for Clemson, led another platoon and helped Sellers coach the company football team. Sellers noticed that Adams had a tendency to lower his head and drive through obstacles rather than expending precious brainpower figuring out an easier way.³⁸

Nearly two-thirds of Messersmith's men had enlisted in the mass exodus from the University of Minnesota. They had ridden to Mare Island together, endured boot camp together, and crossed the country together.³⁹ The old regulars and remaining wartime volunteers like Johnnie Kelly, the pint-sized Chicagoan, found themselves surrounded by collegiate men-turned-marines.

In order to present a uniform appearance on parade, Messersmith organized his four platoons by height. A diminutive gunnery sergeant named Charles Lyman seemed small in front of the tall marines of Sellers's 1st Platoon. The lieutenant thought that "any one of them could physically have broken [Lyman] in two," but nobody doubted who ran the platoon. Lyman had left Philadelphia years earlier and had become accustomed to a certain way of soldiering that no world war was going to upset. He napped in the platoon office after lunch each day, and God help the private who disturbed him. Far from resenting the inexperience of the raw lieutenant, Lyman took a fatherly interest in his eager platoon commander. Sellers in turn quickly learned to trust his gunnery sergeant's words of advice.⁴⁰

Capt. Randolph T. Zane reported from the marine barracks at Pearl Harbor and took command of the 79th Company. Zane was married to the daughter of the governor of California. Although Holcomb may have appreciated Zane's political connection, he learned to prize the captain's leadership far more. Lieutenants Worton and Erskine, the well-mannered Bostonian and the Louisiana upstart, reported to Zane. "Calm as a cucumber," recalled Erskine. But "if you didn't come from the Naval Academy you didn't stand very high with him." "An extremely capable student of war," thought Worton. "A wonderful captain for a young officer to serve under." Zane "looked after his

company after we got to France, and was *respected* by the men of his command,” recalled an NCO in Erskine’s platoon.⁴¹

Second Lt. John A. West, a husky All-American fullback from the University of Michigan, joined the 79th Company as a platoon commander, as did a hell-raising young graduate of Indiana’s Culver Military Academy, Charles I. Murray. Track star Carl Wallace, whose mere presence had stampeded students from the University of Minnesota, also commanded a 79th Company platoon.⁴²

Zane had the extreme good fortune to have 1st Sgt. Bernard L. Fritz assigned to his company. One of the most remarkable NCOs to ever serve in the Marine Corps, Fritz had studied at the university in Heidelberg, Germany, before returning to the United States to become a Jesuit priest. Following a different call, he gave up his vestments and enlisted as a marine private. By the time he joined the 79th Company, Fritz had nearly twenty years of service. He had fought at Veracruz along the way and had refused a commission despite his obvious qualification. “I’m a first sergeant, and I enjoy being a first sergeant,” he explained to Worton. Originally from Casker, Minnesota, Fritz had a reputation as a tough disciplinarian. He recited regulations as he had learned to quote scripture. Towering over the company, the sergeant enjoyed the immediate, unanimous respect of every marine.⁴³

In sharp contrast to Fritz, Sgt. Richard Mazereeuw stood out from his peers for sheer vulgarity. Tall, thin, and irrepressibly Irish, Mazereeuw had a filthy, unmistakable mouth, which made him a minor celebrity within the 79th Company. He smoked a long-stem pipe incessantly yet could set a superb example of military correctness when the mood struck him.⁴⁴

The 79th Company’s privates included Oscar Rankin, a “pious peaceful man” and a former minister. He would often lead prayer meetings in the company mess tent. Rankin partnered up with Pvt. Thomas Gragard. Two brothers who had enlisted together, Sidney and Glenn Hill, also wound up in the 79th Company.⁴⁵

Capt. Franklin B. Garrett sought to build his 80th Company into a handpicked force. He sorted through the trainloads of new marines, weeding out men he determined to be unfit for expeditionary service. Grover O’Kelley, “a fine, Christian man, from Birmingham, Alabama,” and his boot-camp buddy Don Paradis easily met Garrett’s standards. The company commander promoted the pair to corporal in September and to sergeant a month later. Lieutenants in the 80th

Company included Thomas S. Whiting, a Virginia Military Institute graduate, and two graduates of Culver Military Academy, Cecil B. Raleigh and Charles H. Ulmer. A bright young Georgetown lawyer named Lucien H. Vandoren would join them before embarkation, and a third Culver graduate, John G. Schneider of St. Joseph, Missouri, would report in France.⁴⁶

Capt. Donald F. Duncan commanded the 96th Company. He also hailed from St. Joseph and had graduated from Culver; his family knew that of young Lieutenant Schneider. A bachelor, Duncan had served in the Canal Zone in Panama and guarded naval prisons in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and Puget Sound, Washington. He had spent two uneventful years on Guam just prior to joining the 6th Marines. Duncan was beloved by his marines, in whom he encouraged a rough-and-tumble spirit. First Lt. James F. Robertson, an émigré from South Africa, was the 96th Company's executive officer. "A big, rough and ready man. . . . [A] fine marine, but the men hated his guts. He was a hard boiled rascal," remembered Cates.⁴⁷

Duncan gave Lieutenant Cates command of the 96th Company's 4th Platoon. To Cates's delight, he found himself teamed with charismatic Gy. Sgt. (Gunnery Sergeant) Fred Stockham. As the platoon sergeant, Stockham quickly won his lieutenant's admiration as well as the respect of his marines. "When the going was hard, and your tail was dragging, it was Sergeant Stockham who was there with a word of encouragement or a pat on the back that pulled you through," recalled one marine. When mail call disappointed a young marine, the gunny would reassure him with his upbeat sayings, "'No news is good news,' or, 'That letter can arrive tomorrow.'"⁴⁸ Orphaned as a young boy, Stockham had enlisted in 1903. After serving with Holcomb in the Legation Guard in Peking, Stockham left the Corps in 1907 to join the Newark (New Jersey) Fire Department. Returning to the ranks in 1912, he fought at Leon, Nicaragua. When the United States entered the Great War, Stockham was a recruiting sergeant in St. Louis, Missouri.

Captain Duncan's hometown friend, Sgt. Aloysius Sheridan, was likewise assigned to the 96th Company. Duncan no doubt exerted some influence to get his friend into his command, but if there was any jealousy over Sheridan's relationship with his captain, there is no record of it.⁴⁹

In late summer a middle-aged lieutenant by the name of Evans Spalding reported to the 96th Company. Spalding came from money and had traveled the world a bit. His father ran the Boston and Maine

Railroad, providing the son with the finances to dabble about looking for adventure. He had served in a volunteer ambulance unit in France and made sure his new comrades knew all about it. Spalding had “*savoir faire*,” according to Worton, and evidently did not take all of this Marine Corps discipline too seriously. Holcomb hated him.⁵⁰

Holcomb knew his battalion would soon depart for France. The 5th Marines had sailed while many of his men were just arriving at Parris Island. Johnnie-the-Hard Hughes’s 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, only days older than Holcomb’s battalion, followed in mid-September.⁵¹ But Holcomb could count himself lucky to have a core of old-school regulars leading his companies. His lieutenants appeared fit, spirited, and eager to learn. Likewise he could hardly have asked for a more disciplined, high-spirited bunch of privates. The battalion commander needed only a modern tactical doctrine and the time to train his marines to execute it. Tragically, he would have neither.

“Machine Like Musketry”: Training at Quantico, August 1917–January 1918

The failure of the Marine Corps to provide a coherent tactical doctrine would undermine Holcomb’s efforts to train 2/6. In 1917 rifle marksmanship dominated American tactical thought, and Lt. Col. Harry Lee was the rifle’s first prophet. The executive officer of the 6th Marines, Lee had written an article in the fledgling *Marine Corps Gazette* that espoused the tactical doctrine of the Corps. Based on the U.S. Army’s *Field Service Regulations of 1914* and *Infantry Drill Regulations of 1911*, Lee’s article reveals at a glance the outdated tactical thought that misguided marine instruction in 1917.⁵²

Lee’s “Musketry Training” envisioned the company attack as an exercise in precision drill, emphasizing absolute, centralized control. He flatly stated his object that “the action may be machine like.” Small-unit leaders did not learn principles to apply to dissimilar situations; they learned a complicated drill by rote and functioned within it automatically.

In Lee’s ideal infantry attack, the company deployed on line from a rendezvous point. Company commanders designated sectors of fire, rates of fire, range estimation, and other fire commands to the lieutenants, who in turn relayed the commands to squad leaders, who relayed them to the riflemen. During the conduct of fire, the captain would issue commands to send forward replacements or ammunition and to change the method of fire. Once “fire superiority” was achieved, he would commence rushes.⁵³

Anticipating that battlefield noise would drown out shouted commands, Lee wrote out a complicated system of whistle and hand-and-arm signals. For example, for the signal "What range are you using?" he instructed: "Extend the arm toward the person addressed, one hand open, palm to the front, resting on the other hand, fist closed." Other signals directed the riflemen to rush by company, by section, by squad, and by individual. Signals from battalion commanders and higher were to be relayed by semaphore (hence the classes Cates had attended in Officer Training School). An attack consummated when the marines charged the enemy position, during which phase Lee admonished all to "look to their target, in order that, on arrival at the position, their bayonets may pierce that at which they have been firing during the advance."⁵⁴

The entire system of centralized command and control hoped to overcome the fog of war by creating an orderly linear battlefield. Marching and shooting as a well-drilled team, a disciplined force of well-trained riflemen would rush and blast their way through a similarly arrayed but poorly disciplined force of inferior marksmen. Predicated on the principle of fire superiority, this doctrine demanded that the attacking force neutralize the defender with accurate, sustained rifle fire. Lee's instructions were doomed to fail when applied by unsupported infantry attacking concrete-reinforced machine gun positions. The inflexible tactics would leave bewildered small-unit leaders unprepared to capitalize on fleeting opportunities. Unable to achieve fire superiority, devastated by the defensive fire of water-cooled machine guns, and deaf and blind to commands from surviving leaders, marines would be forced to improvise in a Marine Corps that had excoriated individual initiative for the sake of discipline.

Lee's article lagged behind army doctrine in published regulations. The *Infantry Drill Regulations* emphasized individual initiative over rigid formations. Soldiers were expected to rush from covered position to covered position, not dash madly and erect. Small-unit leaders especially were told: "It is impossible to establish fixed forms or to give general instructions that will cover all cases. Officers and noncommissioned officers must be so trained that they can apply suitable means and methods to each case as it arises." Despite these progressive concepts, the *Infantry Drill Regulations* "remained comfortably American in its emphasis on initiative, but it ignored the drastic changes in technology," according to one recent historian. Notwithstanding Lee's article, marine officers were expected to be

proficient in the *Infantry Drill Regulations*, and their tactical views generally mirrored those of the mainstream Regular Army. Professional soldiers of the prewar army prided themselves on their marksmanship as much as any marine.⁵⁵

European officers of 1914 would have felt comfortable teaching Lee's method of musketry. But during three years of war, European armies had adapted to the realities of modern warfare. Reinforced machine gun positions, sited to cut down attackers with interlocking fields of fire, dominated the No Man's Land between enemy lines. It took artillery, not mere riflemen, to achieve fire superiority over such positions. To conserve manpower, the Germans had pulled many defensive positions back to the reverse slope, hidden from artillery forward observers. By 1917 German development of storm-troop infiltration techniques neared full implementation.⁵⁶

The Marine Corps had not lived these three years with its head in the sand. Commandant Barnett had shipped officers to the Western Front as observers. These observers, and army officers on similar missions, brought back the techniques of trench warfare. Yet they did not revolutionize tactical doctrine. Consumed by expeditionary duty and focused on developing the Advance Base Force, the Corps had little inclination and fewer resources to revamp infantry regulations. Furthermore, both army and marine officers believed that a decision on the Western Front could only be achieved by an end to the trench-warfare stalemate and a return to an ill-defined concept of "open warfare." It was in this vaguely understood arena, out of the trenches, in which Americans vowed their peerless riflemen would realize victory.⁵⁷

Holcomb pressed his battalion through what training he could. The men formed for physical training each morning at precisely 7:00 A.M. New marines sadly found that they had not left butts and muzzles behind at the recruit depot. They bayoneted straw dummies, threw dummy grenades, and drilled hour after hour. Accustomed to perfection, the old regulars honed the battalion to parade-like sharpness. "Precision was the password," remembered Lieutenant Erskine.⁵⁸ But the companies allocated most of their dwindling number of training days to polishing an implausible doctrine.

If the marines' precision marching lacked relevance to the Western Front, it nonetheless made for a grand parade. On September 5, 1917, the 6th Marines boarded trains at Quantico Station early in the dawn. The regiment marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in a "Preparedness Parade" led by President Wilson and returned late in

the evening, dehydrated and sore from a long day of waiting and marching. Still clad in summer khakis, Corporal Paradis thought he looked less than warlike: “We were a skinny, undressed outfit in that parade.”⁵⁹

The men in the ranks had begun to suspect that preparedness for parades did not amount to being ready to fight. Years later, after surviving five major offensives, Paradis would note with hindsight that they should have learned how to dig foxholes. It is one thing to dig a hole in the ground but another to dig fast, narrow, and deep while under fire. Lieutenant Sellers agreed: “Practically all we did was drill and dig trenches. We did not have any real combat training, map reading, or other important requirements for survival in the field.” Arthur Worton also thought the lieutenants ought to have devoted some time to map reading and the use of terrain.⁶⁰

Holcomb too sensed the battalion had much to learn. Toward the end of September, he began to put companies through mock trench fighting.⁶¹ Absent formal guidance and experienced instructors, these exercises provided little practical benefit. They did demonstrate the battalion commander’s justifiable concern for his unit’s unprepared state and the willingness of his men to apply themselves to what opportunities arose.

The major began quizzing his officers on French and British field manuals. He took the information in these guides seriously and expected his officers to follow suit—as young Lieutenant Cates discovered one day. Cates had not done the reading on field engineering prior to officers school.

Holcomb: “How many entrances should a dugout have?”

Cates: “Well, at least one.”

Holcomb was not amused. “That’s a hell of a bright answer!” he barked.⁶²

The two officers were sizing each other up, and thus far neither was decidedly impressed with the other.

Over the winter, veteran officers from Canada came to Quantico to lend a hand. These men had survived horrific combat at places such as Vimy Ridge. “My eyes have been opened up a great deal,” Lieutenant Sellers wrote home. Although after an inspection Holcomb received a commendatory letter, complimenting him on the battalion’s superb discipline, appearance, and spirit, the Marine Corps could not provide the field training the companies needed, including cooperation with artillery, penetrations and envelopments, gas warfare, and

a hundred other life-or-death tasks the marines would perform the following summer.⁶³

The Lewis Gun Experiment

Maj. Edward B. Cole commanded the 1st Machine Gun Battalion.⁶⁴ His gunners fired the excellent Lewis machine gun, one of the best modern weapons available. The Marine Corps had purchased the weapons after its observers had seen the American-designed Lewis prove itself in battle with the British Expeditionary Force. Light enough for one man to carry, the Lewis could be taken forward alongside advancing riflemen. The accurate and dependable weapon promised to deliver a heavy punch during the critical assault phase.

Initially the Marine Corps issued the machine guns exclusively to Cole's command. But in order to place firepower in the infantry battalion's hip pocket, each battalion formed a machine-gun platoon. Major Cole's machine gunners, many of whom had attended a school at the Lewis gun factory in Utica, New York, instructed 2/6's gunners. A prehistoric lieutenant named Thomas J. Curtis, with twenty years' enlisted time and a "fondness for using big words wrongly," ran the classes. Sellers heard him remonstrate his students, "Name those parts proper and chronological, and don't be ambiguous."⁶⁵

After a week of such instruction, the Marine Corps pronounced that each company would have its own eight-gun platoon. The erstwhile students now became the duty experts and instructed the battalion's four new machine-gun platoons. But before the incorporation of Lewis guns got far along, a critical shortage of the weapons in the Air Corps forced the marines to relinquish all their guns. The machine gunners of 2/6 reverted to riflemen. A critical augmentation to the battalion's firepower had been lost. It would not be made good.⁶⁶

Humor Is Out of Place

Quantico turned cold by the end of September, but not all of the marines had been issued forest green wool uniforms. Holcomb was not about to have his men fall out wearing two different-color uniforms, no matter how deeply the cold bit through their thin summer khakis. The battalion formed for physical training each frosty morning, shivering together, privates and majors alike.

This astounded the aristocratic Lieutenant Spalding. He was a grown man, not a twenty-year-old cub. He had been to France—why he was practically a veteran—and was not about to freeze when he

had a perfectly fitted regulation set of forest greens to keep him warm. One especially bitter morning, Spalding donned his winter service trousers and prescribed field shirt before marching down the company street with the 96th Company.

As Holcomb sat astride his horse, scrutinizing the ranks, he espied the solitary green figure in a mass of khaki. The major exploded. "Mr. Spalding!" he yelled, spurring over to the 96th Company. "Mr. Spalding! Where did you get those breeches?" The nonplused lieutenant turned, saluted, and replied, "Brooks Brothers, Major, Brooks Brothers." Holcomb barely managed to keep his cool. "I'll give you five minutes to get out of them and get back here."

"He has no sense of humor, no sense of humor," Spalding wailed as he dashed off.⁶⁷

To young Lieutenant Worton fell a task for which the Massachusetts Naval Militia had never prepared him. Quantico had become a boomtown, with a rough frontier look and temptations to match. Following the thousands of marines and construction workers came ladies who knew how to part a man from his pay. The women set up shop at the Potomac Inn and in a few small houses, and the men and the money soon followed.

The marine base encircled Quantico town, pinning it against the Potomac River. The base commander felt that it was more or less a Marine Corps town. He summoned Worton, whose lot had come up as the officer of the day, and instructed the young lieutenant to march into town with the military police and run the women out.

Worton's great prostitute round up started at ten in the morning on a Tuesday, when few customers would be around. Presenting a no-nonsense appearance in his pressed khakis with sword, Worton dutifully marched his guard into Quantico. It was a small town, and in no time the MPs had one hundred ladies lined up on the platform. Worton purchased one-way tickets to Washington with Corps funds. He noted approvingly that his marines were polite and deferential and that they maintained a professional bearing in their interaction with the working girls. A few of the older NCOs did seem a bit familiar to some of the ladies, and one sergeant in particular whispered at length to one of his charges, but the authority of the officer of the day seemed intact.

The train soon arrived, and Lieutenant Worton began to breathe more easily. He began to congratulate himself for escaping embarrassment during this potentially undignified task. Then, alarmingly, six of the women left the line and strode directly toward him. Wor-

ton froze. Filled with dread, the young gentleman stood flat-footed as the ladies surrounded him. Each one then planted a warm, full kiss on the flabbergasted officer before stepping aboard the train. To the delight of the NCOs, they called out loudly to Worton, "Goodbye, sweetheart!"⁶⁸

Final Days

Worton and 2/6 would depart from the same platform soon. The 1st Battalion had sailed in September. When the regimental headquarters company and the 73rd Machine Gun Company left on October 16, speculation of an imminent departure gripped the men. Only Holcomb's 2/6 and Berton Sibley's 3/6 remained at Quantico. Pre-embarkation inspections and final gear issue seemed to confirm what everyone suspected: 2/6 would leave next, and soon. Holcomb's companies were up to strength. His men had drawn their combat issue. He had completed about all the training Quantico offered. The major had one last matter to attend to before he would be ready.

Mrs. Holcomb had not yet given birth. Major Holcomb knew what awaited him and his men on the Western Front, and he could estimate the odds against his safe return as well as the next man. Presumably he felt that if he ever was going to lay eyes on his child, he had better do so before going off to war. As a recent aide to the commandant, Holcomb undoubtedly still held some influence at Marine Corps headquarters. One can only conjecture who whispered what to whom, but without a doubt the order of embarkation was reversed. Sibley's 3/6 sailed for France first, on October 24. As the train carrying Sibley's marines pulled away from Quantico, Holcomb's battalion snapped to present arms while a band played "The Star Spangled Banner."

The image of Holcomb's battalion seeing off Sibley's reveals a forgotten, human side of the old Marine Corps. Amid all the complexity and confusion involved in transporting a brigade of marines to France, despite all the heady urgency of wartime, the Corps interchanged the departures of two battalions so one major could see his child born. In Europe a war of attrition was being fought, and there the human element was being supplanted by statistics. The contribution of the puny U.S. Marine Corps could be eaten up in a few days' "wastage" on the Western Front. Perhaps after a few bloodbaths had decimated the battalion several times over, the faces of the men would lose significance and become numbers in a ledger. But in October 1917 the Corps had not shaken off the closely knit bonds of

the prewar years, and its officers still considered themselves part of an exclusive fraternity, even an extended family.

Whether or not Holcomb urged his superiors to switch the orders, or merely kept silent, the decision uncomfortably smacks of cronyism. No doubt there were men in both battalions who had good reasons to wait on the next ship, just as there were other men in both battalions eager to get the great move started. Still, on the balance one battalion was pretty much the same as the next. In the calculus of 1917, enabling one father to see his firstborn child was still as strong a reason as any to shuffle troop movements.

A few weeks after 3/6 sailed, Bea Holcomb gave birth to a healthy boy.⁶⁹ The major's men took advantage of the reprieve. Many enjoyed furloughs over Thanksgiving and Christmas. As they filtered back to Quantico, the winter grew miserably wet and severe. If anything, training accelerated. The Canadian officers and a few Scots supervised construction of an authentic trench line, and the companies became reasonably adept at trench warfare. As the new year arrived, daily rumors tortured the anxious leathernecks.

In mid-January 1918 the word came. The night before embarkation, Lt. Charles Murray decided it was an occasion for a lot of drinking. Cates, Erskine, West, and the bachelor company commanders, Duncan and Messersmith, were up for a hell raising, and the drinking commenced. Somewhere along the way they discovered that if one tossed a .45-caliber pistol round into the stove, it exploded. Inevitably that struck all hands as just the thing to do the night before sailing off to war, and more rounds were scrounged up.

Once again Arthur Worton had the duty, and he found himself trying to maintain his dignity as he trotted through the snow to the officers quarters, sword banging against his thigh. "Gentleman!" he declared as he entered, "This must stop!"

It stopped only long enough for the four lieutenants to overpower Worton, lash him to the bulkhead, and nail his shoes to the floor. The lieutenants poured liquor down his throat as the two captains beamed with pride. But before they could force much booze into Worton, the sergeant of the guard showed up looking for his duty officer. This took the wind out of everybody's sails. The four officers could truss up old Worton, but nobody messed with the sergeant of the guard. The party subsided, Worton recovered, and he took his revenge a few hours later when he roused four tender-headed lieutenants for a five o'clock reveille.⁷⁰

On January 19 the marines of 2/6 at long last heaved full packs onto their shoulders, crunched through a newly fallen snow, and boarded the train. Huddled in their forest greens and overcoats, the men endured a cold ride north to Philadelphia, where they filed aboard the troopship USS *Henderson* one thousand strong. After a short stop in New York to join a convoy, the battalion was underway for France, the war, and the American Expeditionary Forces.