

MARINES AT GETTYSBURG

BY: GySgt THOMAS WILLIAMS

Every American is familiar with the iconic battle fought in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, during the American Civil War. Some are even aware that two Marine officers and the “Presidents Own” Marine Band accompanied President Abraham Lincoln to Gettysburg in November 1863 to dedicate the National Cemetery there. However, few people are aware of the long-term relationship the Marine Corps has had with the historic site. Although Marines did not participate in the 1863 battle, 59 years later they would re-create many of its epic engagements. In 1922 Col. Smedley Butler would march the garrison of Marines from Marine Corps Base Quantico, Virginia to the hallowed fields of Gettysburg. Conducted as a training exercise, but more importantly to raise public opinion and awareness, the Marines would travel to the National Battlefield and reenact many aspects of the original battle. Ultimately over 100,000 spectators would come to witness this monumental event, including the President of the United States.

The summer of 1922 was a busy one for the Marines at Quantico. The Marine Corps East Coast Expeditionary Force was preparing for their annual maneuvers. Aware of the favorable publicity generated by the 1921 maneuvers conducted on the Wilderness battlefield, Brigadier General Smedley Butler was determined that the 1922 Gettysburg outing would exceed all expectations. With politicians in Washington again looking to eliminate the Marine Corps, President Warren Harding was persuaded to attend, guaranteeing national press attention.

The 5th and 6th Marines left Quantico for Washington, DC by barge on the morning of June 19, 1922. The 10th Marines, accompanied by tanks and motor transport units traveled overland to join the infantry at a tent camp erected on Haines Point and named Camp Lejeune. That evening the Marines passed in review for the President, marking the first time since the Civil War that troops had paraded on the grounds of the White House.

The combined force advanced toward Gettysburg in easy stages, stopping for successive nights in Bethesda, Gaithersburg, Ridgeville, Frederick, and Thurmont. The veteran 5th and 6th Marines, covered with dust from their march from Thurmont, arrived on the Gettysburg field midday on June 26. The infantry was preceded by the elements of the Motor Transport Corps, the Signal Corps, a Naval Medical Detachment, and the Military Police. They advanced to their camp south-southwest of town, between Confederate Ave. and Emmitsburg Pike [Road], suitably named Camp Harding.

Unfortunately, the 26th was marred by a tragic event that cast a pall over the entire exercise. While maneuvering over the Marine camp in the company of three other aircraft, the plane of Captain George Hamilton suddenly nosed over, slipped into a tail spin and crashed on the farm of William Johns, near Steinwehr Avenue. Captain Hamilton was killed on impact while his mechanic, Gunnery Sergeant George Martin died



on the way to the hospital. Captain Hamilton was a well-liked and courageous officer, especially known for his heroism in France during World War One, receiving many medals and honors, chief among them being the Distinguished Service Cross. He saw service at Belleau Wood, Soisson, St. Mihiel, Champagne, and the Meuse-Argonne, where he commanded two battalions of the 5th Marines.

While only 5,500 Marines made the march from Quantico, they were packing or carrying sufficient equipment and supplies to equip a 20,000-man division. Skeletonized companies of 88 men were carrying all the ammunition, range finders and technical gear required for a 140-man company. Each company was carrying the 20,000 rounds of small arms ammunition necessary for the multiple exercises planned for the Marines 10-day stay in Gettysburg. For the first time a small, two-wheeled cart was used, allowing two men to move the packs and gear of their entire squad.

The next four days were busy ones. The aviation section established a flying base, the planes being carefully examined by their mechanics; everyone determined that the crash of June 26th would not be repeated. The Air Wing was planning a night “bombing” attack on their own airfield near the camp, dropping flares rather than bombs. The defense was to be provided by four, blank-firing 3-inch anti-aircraft guns assisted by three sound gathering and ranging devices and a battery of searchlights. These

sound gathering and ranging devices, developed during the First World War, enabled their operators to determine the position and altitude of the approaching aircraft by their engine noises. This information would then be telephoned to the anti-aircraft guns located adjacent to the airfield.

The infantry and artillery conducted maneuvers; the troops toured the battlefield by truck each with a battlefield guide and all hands turned-to for the rehearsal of Pickett’s Charge. On the evening of the 26th the Quantico Post Band arrived from Richmond, Virginia, where they were detailed to provide music for the Confederate Veterans Reunion. The Quantico Band combined with the other three bands (presumably the bands of the 5th, 6th and 10th Marines) to give evening concerts. A recreation tent was established a short distance from the Virginia State monument for these concerts as well as an evening moving picture show. The public was invited to attend both activities free of charge.

The Marines began their actual maneuvers on June 28th. One battalion each from the 5th and 6th Marines participated in what was termed a “fence problem” in the vicinity of the High Water Mark. The problem consisted of one battalion entrenched in the defense, while the other was detailed to assault the position and take it in approved Marine Corps fashion. Umpires were appointed to monitor and critique the exercise, commenting on the methods and shortcomings of the attack, also in approved Marine Corps fashion.



President Harding and his entourage, including Major-General John Lejeune and General of the Armies John Pershing, arrived on July 1st 1922, watching the first “reenactment” of Pickett’s famous charge. Marching shoulder to shoulder, the 5th and 6th Marines marched across the mile of open ground between their camp and Cemetery Ridge. The 10th Marine’s guns, acting as both union and Confederate batteries, fired salvos across the field, creating huge clouds of smoke that shrouded the advancing infantry. Civil War veterans, among the more than 100,000 spectators watching the event, applauded the accuracy of the spectacle. Sunday, July 2nd was a day of rest for the Marines. The charge was again reenacted on July 3rd.

The grand charges over the Gettysburg Battlefield concluded on July 4th, 1922, when the Marines attacked across over the same ground, this time using all the current weapons at their disposal—tanks, aircraft, and machine guns—to demonstrate how the modern (1922) Marine Corps would assault General Meade’s position. This assault was preceded by a blank-fire artillery barrage by the 10th Marines, this time firing from a position 2,000 yards behind Seminary Ridge. This day’s events drew a crowd exceeding 125,000, including various foreign military observers, notably Major-General Haraguchi of the Imperial Japanese Army. As an added attraction, planes from the air wing shot down a condemned, hydrogen-filled observation balloon.



The Marines were more than ready to break camp on July 6th, the previous day’s rain having turned their camp into a sea of mud. They retraced their route to Washington, DC, again passing in review for the President and finally returned to Quantico. The 1922 summer maneuvers proved to be a notable success, providing both officers and men with realistic training in the lean, post-war years. Captain John Craige, aide to the Commandant, commented on the considerable benefits, both training and public relations that were gained from the exercise:

“In the field of attracting the favorable notice of the Nation to the activities of the Marine Corps, equal success was achieved. Several thousand columns of newspaper clippings have been received at Headquarters, cut from the papers of cities all over the country, from Maine to California, and articles in magazines are still making their appearance, dealing with the march and the exercises at Gettysburg. On the day following the President’s visit to Camp Harding at Gettysburg, newspapers all over the country carried front-page stories on the demonstration in his honor and, thereafter, illustrated pages, rotogravure sections, illustrated magazines and the like were filled with pictures of the doings of Marines, while moving pictures of the exercises appeared on the program of every one of the great weekly moving-picture concerns.” ■

IMAGE CREDITS: Harris & Ewing, photographer. *Marines during reenactment of Pickett’s Charge at the battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.* Pennsylvania United States Gettysburg, 1922. [July] Photograph. www.loc.gov.