

Gunner Nice of the Manasquan Hero, Possessor of Adventures with the F

By ELIAS S. LONGSTREET

THE brawny chest of that hardboiled ex-Marine William F. Nice will have to be expanded and his home at 22 Parker avenue, Manasquan, will have to be enlarged if he continues to receive decorations and citations for the part he played in the World war. There are 11 of them now and it may be that in the course of events, when Uncle Sam gets thru house cleaning, budget paring and general reconstruction the old gentleman will remember a few more instances in the career of Nice of which recognition should be taken.

As a warrant officer with the rank of Marine gunner, equivalent to the rating of second lieutenant, Nice was in charge of the first and second platoons of the 49th company, Fifth regiment, of that incomparable Second division, at first composed of seasoned Marines and service-bitten army regulars. He served over 20 months on the other side. Those were months filled with daring adventure and devastating hardships, in which the rustle of the wings of the angel of death became as commonplace to him and his mates as the chirping of sparrows.

His latest decoration of Gunner Nice, is the beautiful silver star of the Order of the Purple Heart, originated by Gen. George Washington during the American Revolution but which later was allowed to die out, recently to be revived largely thru the efforts of U. S. Sen. W. Warren Barbour of Locust Point. It was just recently bestowed upon him and now it takes its place with the Croix de Guerre and another Croix de Guerre with palms, each of which signifies a citation for exceptional gallantry.

Some of the exploits of Gunner Nice and his comrades are told in that lively war volume with the menacing title, "Fix Bayonets," written by Capt. John W. Thomason, Jr., commander of the 49th company. When a motion picture was made of the book Wallace Beery played the role of Nice. It should be the task of painstaking historians to declare which of the American divisions played the greatest part in the great war, but certainly the Second will vie for the honor. Composed of seasoned service men, the Second (the Indian Head) was hastily gathered together and sent overseas with the First. Even after the lapse of years patriotic hearts beat faster at the recollection of how the "Victory drive" of the Germans in 1918, was halted at Chateau Thierry, when the Second was bundled into camions and rushed into battle across the Paris-Metz highway. There in Belleau Woods the Fifth and Sixth Marines won undying fame when they stopped the German rush and, with their buddies, fought for 11 days against repeated attacks to drive them back. And for this exploit the Second gained newspaper acclaim as the savior

Marines chased the natives into Manzanillo and the rebels surrendered. They wanted to do all they could but had no desire to fight Uncle Sam.

Then the South Carolina set sail for home. After a short time there the lads boarded the German liner, a thoroughly disgruntled crew which believed they were being sent back to Haiphong. They were embarking upon their greatest adventure, which many never returned. They set sail for home, were almost stopped before they began. On June 10, 1918, the Japanese marines attacked the group of vessels in which Gunner Nice was included. One torpedo passed across the bow and another across the stern. Guns five, seven



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hundreds who had started. Whole platoons were shot down.
The whole Bois de Belleau was a machine gun nest. But the
Americans took it and here the Germans, who had rolled up
tired French divisions all the way from the Chemin des
Dames, were stopped good and plenty. And later in French gen-
eral orders the woods were named "Bois de la Brigade de
Marines," after us.

"Then we bumped into the Aisne-Marne offensive at
Soissons next, in Foch's drive in July 1918, when he whole west-
ern front moved. But I forgot to tell you that we paraded
in Paris on the Fourth of July after Belleau Woods and you
never saw a wilder welcome than the French gave the boys.
Well, on July 18, 1918, all the guns in the world opened up
for a five-minute barrage and we charged with the Senegalese.
And remember, we hadn't had food for two days and had
gone three nights without sleep. That's where I lost my
orderly, little Tritt. We found him dead under the branches
of a fallen tree.

"While there I was sent out on patrol one night to locate
the enemy. We found them all right and they found us. We
had 56 men. The Germans cut us off from our battalion and
there was a lively scrap in which we sustained 37 casualties. The
rest of us managed to fight our way back. We were cited in
both French and American orders for that scrap and the
day's work in general.

"I was hit in the right forearm, but it was only a flesh
wound and I stayed with the company. We had advanced over
six miles, captured over 3,000 prisoners, 11 batteries of ar-
tillery, over 100 machine guns and the like. Some of those
guns we turned on the retreating enemy.

"We were under the command of General Foch. As a
mater of fact the Second was his command of shock troops
and he sent us wherever hell was popping. That was how we
came to get a crack at the fighting in the St. Mihiel offensive
in September, 1918. There was one machine gun nest that
bothered us like the devil there and I and four men were
sent out to silence it. It was a hot crawl to get close enough
to heave hand grenades, but we did it and killed eight gun-
ners. After that we had a little relief. The Fench thought
enough of the incident to give us citations."

THEN came the Champagne offensive and its battle of Blanc
Mont, the taking of which Marshal Petain hailed as "the
greatest single achievement of the 1918 campaign—the Battle
of Liberation." The Marines were in it, you might be sure.
The old Second by now had suffered tremendous losses of the
old timers who had first composed it, but sturdy replacements
had taken their places and it was now held as the special



GUNNER NICE OF THE DEVIL-DUGS

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captain had established himself, Nice reported, "I've organized the company sector with 20 men, captain. They're all we got left—you and I make 22. Lord I'm tired, but what I can't see is why we didn't get ours too."

That was where Nice was reported killed and word to that effect was sent back to the States. But later came the correction that he was but slightly wounded. It was hell to have seen in the Blanc Mont offensive and Maj. Gen. John A. LeSueur, commanding the Marine corps, wrote to the officers and men of the Second division: "To be able to say, when this war is finished, 'I belonged to the Second division I fought with it at the battle of Blanc Mont ridge' will be the highest honor that can come to any man."

After a short time to rest and reequip, the division was ordered to join the First American army and then into the Argonne forest. It went and over the top in the great offensive of Nov. 1, the victorious Second taking its objective in one day whereas three days had been allowed. The Second had the post of honor, leading the advance. It drove thru the enemy's fortified lines to a depth of over nine kilometers, seized the heights of Bayonville and destroyed the German divisions on its front.

On Nov. 3 it hurried itself forward to Poise and captured the heights of Vaux. Those were days and nights of terrific endeavor. At night it pressed forward thru the forest of Belval by a single road and occupied the ridge near Beaumont. And all America followed the advance of its great armies with bated breath. On the night of the 4th it again attacked and advanced its lines to the Meuse. And finally, on the night of the 10th, it forced its way across the river and occupied a commanding position on the eastern bank.

That forcing of the river will ever remain an exploit of outstanding endeavor even in a war that seemed with human exploits. An order of the Second division, dated 1918, describes the historic crossing on the night before the attack became operative. It reads:

"On the night of Nov. 10 heroic deeds were done by
In the face of a heavy artillery and withering

machine gun fire, the Second engineers threw two foot bridges across the Meuse and the first and second battalions of the Fifth Marines crossed resolutely and unflinchingly to the east bank and carried out their mission.

In the last battle of the war, as in all others in which this division has participated, it enforced its will on the enemy.

Nice's platoon, the first of the 46th, was the first to cross and the nights of those who survived the plunge into the inferno for many weeks afterward were often made horrible, as half asleep, half awake, the terror of it returned. Volunteers were called for the first passage and just before dawn it was made.

"We were ordered to take the heights upon the other side," said Nice. "And we did. But our casualties were 68 percent in doing it! At that, I don't see how any of us got across. I think every man who crossed was given a citation by both the American and French armies."

On Nov. 17, 1918, the Second commenced its march to the Rhine, passing thru Belgium and Luxembourg. The German frontier was reached Nov. 26, crossed Dec. 1 and the Rhine was crossed Dec. 13. Thereafter the Leathernecks led an uneventful existence until they were ordered home, sailing March 3, 1919, and arriving in Hoboken March 11. Nice was discharged at Quantico Aug. 23, 1919. And as the brave leads who had composed the great shock division dispersed into civil life they were praised in highest terms by General Pershing in a general order. The concluding paragraph read: "Officers and soldiers of the Second division, your achievements and sacrifices have earned for you and your alien comrades the praise and gratitude of our nation."

The Marines were the only organization in the Second division to be nicknamed by the Germans, to whom the Americans came to be known as the "Devil Dogs." The Germans honored their foes with only three such nicknames. The Scots were dubbed "Ladies of Hell" and the French Alpine chasseur were known as "Blue Devils."

"You can bet your bottom dollar that we were glad to get back to 'God's country' again," said Nice. "There was only one unfortunate incident to mar the return voyage. No there was no submarine attack this time, but I lost a neat little sum of money in a poker game. There was over \$900 in the pot and

I was dealing. I dealt one card to Lieut. W. M. Gore of Oklahoma and it was the jack of hearts, just the one he needed to complete a straight diamond flush. Boy that was a sad blow. Here's the very jack I dealt him, with his name written on it. I'm keeping it as a souvenir. It hurt me as much as any of the wounds I got on the other side."

Once more a civilian after many years in the Marine corps, Nice was faced with the problem of adjusting his life to new conditions. He made his home in Atlantic City at first, coming to Manassas about 12 years ago, having married Miss Florence Sloat, daughter of David Sloat, an old railroad man of that town, Dec. 31, 1920. They have one child, William, Jr., aged 12.

"Yes, a bank job's pretty tame after years in the Marine corps," Nice admits. "But you get used to things like that, just as you get used to grubbing around in the trenches. Praise has been heaped aptly upon the old Second division but I'd like to put in a good word for one man that hasn't gotten his full share, according to my way of thinking. That's Col. Hiram I. Bears, 'Fighting Hiram' he's called. I lay the success of the Second to the training it received from him."

Special Marines Gain