# A Calamity of Errors

## THE UNTOLD STORY OF THE 5TH REGIMENT AT BLANC MONT RIDGE ON 4 OCTOBER 1918

*by James P. Gregory Jr.*

**Abstract**: The Battle of Blanc Mont on 4 October 1918 had the worst single day's casualties for the Marine Corps in World War I with the 5th Regiment suffering 1,097 casualties. However, the details of the attacks by the 5th Regiment are very commonly left out or glossed over in official accounts, memoirs, and discussions after the war. Why is this important and why is an analysis of the actions on this horrific day absent from so many primary sources? The answer is multifaceted: command's failure to properly coordinate the attack, senior leaders lacking awareness due to posts of command initially remote from the front lines, overzealous Marines, a chaotic retreat, and a lack of acknowledgment of 4 October after the war. The untold story of 4 October, the good and the bad, deserves to be recognized in order to remember those Marines who gave their lives that day and to acknowledge the lessons from the failures, blunders, and defeat, as they are also a part of the larger history of actions of the Marine Corps in World War I.

**Keywords**: Battle of Blanc Mont, Blanc Mont, Meuse-Argonne, Marine Corps, 2d Division, the Box, 5th Regiment

Historian Allan R. Millett noted that 4 October 1918, during the Battle of Blanc Mont, saw "the worst single day's casualties for the Marines" in World War I.[1] Lieutenant Colonel Peter F. Owen and Lieutenant Colonel John Swift confirmed this in *A Hideous Price: The 4th Brigade at Blanc Mont, 2–10 October 1918*, stating that the 5th Regiment suffered 1,097 casualties on 4 October.[2] Neither the terrific fighting of Belleau Wood nor the slaughter in the beet fields at Soissons created such a high casualty count in a single day. However, the details of the attacks on 4 October by the 4th Brigade and its two infantry regiments, the 5th and 6th Regiments, are very commonly left out or glossed over in official accounts, memoirs, and discussions after the war. Not until recent decades, approaching the World War I centennial, have the events of that day garnered a more detailed discussion in Marine Corps histories. Why is an analysis of this horrific day absent from so many primary sources? The answer lies with the failure of command to properly coordinate and understand the attack,

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[1] Allan R. Millett, *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 314.

[2] LtCol Peter F. Owen, USMC (Ret), and LtCol John Swift, USMC (Ret), *A Hideous Price: The 4th Brigade at Blanc Mont, 2–10 October 1918* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps History Division, 2019), 54. See this work for a better understanding of the larger context of 4 October and the Battle of Blanc Mont.

overzealous Marines, a chaotic retreat, and a lack of acknowledgment of 4 October shortly after the war.

These blunders bled the American Expeditionary Forces' (AEF) 2d Infantry Division and its Marine brigade. Yet, officials have ignored the calamity of errors that befell the 4th Brigade. The Marine Corps will be perceived by those who study the details of the October 1918 battle as not acknowledging their tactical failures. The battle for Belleau Wood in June 1918 is the touchstone World War I historical focus. Marines learn of that battle from the beginnings of their commitment to the Corps, however, there is much to be learned from other major battles of the Great War, including the missteps and failures of leadership at Blanc Mont. Even the terminology used in discussing the events of 4 October show a reluctance to admit that some Marines did chaotically run toward the rear to escape what was perceived to be certain death as their command structure fell apart. It was a short moment, but oral histories and a command investigation serve to document the retreat, as detailed later. Those writers who have chronicled the events of 4 October for the Marine Corps have shied from terms like *panic* and *retreat*, characterizing the action as a "withdrawal" and describing Marines as "falling back."[3] However, participant accounts demonstrate that some Marines did panic and retreat, leading to widespread chaos.

The rigorous study of history demands we investigate failures as well as herald victories. Otherwise, credibility suffers as myth overcomes reality and leads to a stronger sense of infallibility. Admitting failures of the past—embracing them—reveals the true valor and sacrifice of the Marines and the lessons bought for a terrible price.

The Battle of Blanc Mont took place in the Champagne region of France. The chalky soil of the region made fortification easy for the Germans, who successfully turned the unimposing ridges into fortified defensive positions with extended fields of fire. Intricate trench networks spread across the region. The 2d Division, with its 3d Infantry Brigade and 4th Brigade, faced a series of German rear guard positions that had been improved in the preceding year. The division's zone of attack focused on three ridges, with the middle ridge, Blanc Mont Ridge, being the key to the German positions.[4]

The Germans had constructed redoubts and laid razor wire to channel attacking forces into designated kill zones. Nature also provided protection and assistance to the German forces. Overgrown farmlands afforded wide-open fields of fire. Newly sprouted scrub pine grew in forested pockets on Blanc Mont Ridge and other knolls around it, obscuring the ridge and its reverse slope. The Sommepy-Saint-Étienne road also aided the Germans by dividing the 2d Division's zone, making it an obvious avenue of approach for the attacking force. Thus, Blanc Mont Ridge seemed almost impregnable by the time 2d Division arrived.[5]

The German *XII Corps* defended Blanc Mont Ridge under the command of General of Cavalry Krug von Nidda. He realized that his numbers would be insufficient to hold the line. Therefore, his objective was not to repel an attack but to inflict as many casualties as possible while performing a fighting withdrawal. Even if the 2d Division captured the ridge after taking heavy casualties, it would still be a tactical victory for the Germans.[6]

Before the arrival of the 2d Division, the French 4th Army had taken the German first line of defense. This left the second main line of resistance just north of Sommepy, the third main line of resistance along Blanc Mont Ridge, and the fourth main line of resistance in the vicinity of Saint-Étienne.[7] Each line consisted of several trench lines, underground bunkers, and hardened strongpoints. The German defensive plan relied on forward outpost zones with light defenses of machine guns and forward observers concentrating fire on the attackers from fortified bunkers. These zones allowed the majority of the German infantry to

[3] For instance, Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 35, describes the action as "the units fell back." However, in Peter F. Owen, *To the Limit of Endurance: A Battalion of Marines in the Great War* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007), 174, he describes it as "the 5th Marines retreated in disorder." The Marine Corps' official publication by Owen and Swift does not use the word *retreat*.

[4] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 7.
[5] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 8–9.
[6] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 5.
[7] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 10–11.

avoid early combat. This meant that by the time the Americans would reach the main line of resistance, weakened by casualties and slowed by obstacles, the German infantry could successfully counterattack.[8]

This is the situation the 2d Division found itself up against on 1 October 1918. That night, the 2d Division's 3d and 4th Brigades relieved the French 61st Division near Sommepy. The division was ordered to attack on 2 October, but Major General John A. Lejeune, Marine commanding general of the division, did not believe that there was enough time to organize a proper reconnaissance to successfully engage the enemy nor could the 2d Field Artillery Brigade have time to occupy its firing positions before the attack. The French agreed to postpone the attack until 3 October. The Allied plan revolved on an idea of simultaneous attacks by all three divisions: the French 21st Infantry Division on the left, American 2d Division in the middle, and the French 170th Division on the right. This large push would "limit the German defenders' ability to maneuver within their elastic defensive positions and prevent them from concentrating fires and counterattacks against a single attacking division."[9]

The attack on 3 October was somewhat successful for the 2d Division. The 4th Brigade's 6th Regiment had taken part of Blanc Mont Ridge, but many fortified positions along the summit remained. Deep bunkers and a network of communication trenches were anticipated to take several more days to capture. The 6th Regiment had "destroyed at least two battalions of infantry, captured hundreds of prisoners, and seized the Blanc Mont-Medeah Farm road" but despite these victories, the Marines were still victims of direct fire from German artillery as they continued to hold the ridge.[10] The 5th Regiment had cleaned out a section of the trench network called the Essen Hook that morning and captured more than 100 prisoners. Unfortunately, this key fortified position was turned over to the French forces, who lost portions of it that afternoon.[11]

## The Attack

On the morning of 4 October 1918, the 3d and 4th Brigades prepared to attack the German positions. An agreement among the battalion commanders, delivered by runner, inexplicably designated 0600 as the time of attack on 4 October.[12] Accordingly, 5th Regiment began its push forward and was immediately subjected to the heavy German defenses. However, this was not according to the plan of 4th Brigade and divisional headquarters. The official plan of the day, spelled out in 4th Brigade *Field Order No. 19*, issued at 0200 on 4 October, were

> Our Army Corps is to continue the advance on 4 October. The 170th Division French is to take position in the left rear of the 2nd Division and follow its advance. The 3rd Brigade advances on the right of the 4th Brigade. The 22nd Division French attacks on the left of the 2nd Division.[13]

The field order states that "the hour of advance will be announced later." The 2d Field Artillery Brigade was designated to support the attack; no tanks would be provided, and aerial support would be ordered by the 2d Division.[14] Nonetheless, at 0600, the 5th Regiment began its advance.

The 5th Regiment launched its attack north, under German artillery barrage, moving through the 6th Regiment atop Blanc Mont Ridge. Using the Sommepy-Saint-Étienne road as a guide, the 5th Regiment attacked with the 3d Battalion in the lead, the 2d Battalion in support, and the 1st Battalion in reserve. To the east of the 5th Regiment, the 3d Brigade, with

[8] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 10–11.
[9] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 5.
[10] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 24.
[11] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 16–26.

[12] Account of former Capt Thomas Quigley, commanding officer, 45th Company, wounded on 4 October, 27 May 1926, provided to the author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in Record Group (RG) 117, Records of the American Battle Monuments Commission, Correspondence with Officers of the American Expeditionary Forces, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA); and Summary of Operations, 30 January 1926, provided to the author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in RG 117, NARA.
[13] *Brigade Field Order No. 19*, 0200, 4 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army War College, 1927), comp. by Capt Cylburn O. Mattfeldt.
[14] *Brigade Field Order No. 19*, 0200, 4 October 1918.

*Courtesy of Bruce Malone*

2d Division, American Expeditionary Forces, "boulder marker" in the area of the former German position known as the Ludwigs Rücken.

its 9th and 23d Infantry Regiments, spent the morning of 4 October defending the advanced position it had captured the previous day. The 23d Regiment would only pass through the 9th Regiment later in the day.[15] The 5th Regiment and 23d Regiment would both be entering an area between the reverse slope of Blanc Mont Ridge, Ludwigs Rücken, and Blodnitz Hill.[16]

The commencement of the 5th Regiment's attack caused a mass of confusion within the 4th Brigade and 2d Division headquarters, too far in the rear to understand how the attack progressed. Command attempted to grasp the situation and coordinate the advance. However, their attempts to coordinate added to the overall confusion of the battle as orders began to conflict.

*Division Field Order No. 37* from Major General Lejeune directed that "the advance will be made by the division at an hour to be communicated later, and will be pushed forward without regard to the progress of the divisions on the right and left." The 15th U.S. Field Artillery Regiment was selected to provide rolling and standing barrages for the attack and the 252d Aero Squadron, Air Service, AEF, would assist the division.[17] In direct contrast to this, at 1055 on 4

[15] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 39.

[16] This area colloquially became known as "the Box" and is described by Pvt Elton E. Mackin, a battalion runner in 67th Company (D), 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, in his semifictional memoir *Suddenly We Didn't Want to Die: Memoirs of a World War I Marine* (Novato, CA: Presidio, 1993).

[17] *Field Order No. 37*, Divisional Field Orders, 0600, 4 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army War College, 1927), comp. by Capt Cylburn O. Mattfeldt. The author believes the air squadron is a typo in the original records as the 252d did not make it overseas; instead, it should read 258th Aero Squadron, attached to the 2d Division.

October, a memorandum was sent to Army brigadier general Hanson E. Ely, commanding general, 3d Brigade, by Army colonel James C. Rhea, chief of staff, 2d Division, which stated that

> The Division will move forward today at H hour, according to the order sent you last night. H Hour has not been decided at this moment because we are waiting for the attack of the divisions on our right and left which started at 9:50 A.M. to develop. We do not want to get any further out in advance of those divisions.[18]

According to 4th Brigade and 2d Division headquarters, the 5th Regiment's attack should not have started until the afternoon. Additionally, headquarters did not know the position of the Marines on the front line. This culminated in a ridiculous and dangerous spectacle witnessed by the 67th Company, 5th Regiment, during the push forward. The company had moved more than a kilometer from its jump-off point. While halted just north of the junction of a dirt road and the Sommepy-Saint-Étienne road, the Marines witnessed a

> spectacular dash into the enemy lines by a staff car. Through mis-information the occupant of this staff car must have been under the impression that our front line was several miles ahead of its actual location. The car approached from the rear at a terrific speed and passing us proceeded down the road into the enemy territory. The car was greeted with a burst of machine gun fire and several riflemen opened up on it. The driver stopped his car, turned it, and again passed us at top speed. The driver and the occupant were unhurt by the fire, but they no doubt had been treated to the thrill of their lives.[19]

No doubt an attempt to figure out exactly what was happening at the front, the staff car made it back to the American lines for a report and possibly a change of clothes.

For the attacking Americans, the confusion at headquarters also meant that they advanced with no artillery support. The 15th Field Artillery Regiment should have provided a rolling barrage that would suppress the German defenders by blasting everything immediately in front of the infantry as they moved forward. Unfortunately, the artillery did not receive any order about the 0600 attack. Instead, the entire 5th Regiment walked straight into a German artillery barrage and a well-prepared defensive line. Marine Corps Reserve second lieutenant Sydney Thayer Jr., the platoon commander of 43d Company (F), 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, recalled in a letter to the American Battlefield Monuments Commission (ABMC) dated 1 May 1926,

> Late in the afternoon of October 4th, Lt. [Edward] Klein of the 12th or 15th U.S. Field Artillery Regiment, who was serving in the capacity of liaison officer, visited me, and when we got oriented he told me that as far as he knew, the supporting artillery had absolutely no knowledge that an attack was to be made that day, and until then he had absolutely no idea where we were. This, of course, would not make good reading from a staff point of view, but inasmuch as it is the truth, I thought I would let you have it for what it is worth.[20]

[18] Memorandum, Divisional Field Orders, 1055, 4 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 1.

[19] "The 67th Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, in the Champagne," provided to author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in RG 117, NARA.

[20] Account of Sydney Thayer, 1 May 1926, provided to author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in RG 117, NARA.

*Courtesy of Steven C. Girard*
Capt Henry L. Larsen, commanding officer, 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment.

Furthermore, while the 252d Aero Squadron was designated to receive a copy of *Division Field Order No. 37*, there is no evidence the squadron was assigned any duties prior to the still-undesignated H-hour.[21] This left the air completely in the possession of the German airplanes that constantly attacked the Marines and soldiers as they advanced forward.

In addition to the lack of divisional awareness, the French did not operate according to the American plan of action. Instead of pushing northward to connect to the 6th Regiment, the French 22d Division drifted northwesterly, leaving a gap.[22] This caused the 6th Regiment to place more support on its left flank, leaving the liaison with the 5th Regiment on its right open. The French 170th Division also failed to push forward enough to liaison with the 3d Brigade, leaving its right flank exposed. This proved to be costly, as it left both flanks of the 2d Division open, allowing the German defenders to attack on both sides of the Americans.[23] The mass confusion of those in command would quickly prove deadly to troops of the 3d and 4th Brigades.

The 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment, under the command of Captain Henry L. Larsen, led with the 47th Company and 16th Company abreast and with the 45th Company and 20th Company in support. As the companies deployed into their attack formation and moved toward the Ludwigs Rücken, German artillery and heavy German machine-gun fire from the front, left, and left rear inflicted heavy casualties.[24] A personal account made to the ABMC years after the war by a Marine veteran of the 67th Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, stated,

> The enemy held the west end of the ridge to the north, the road at the west end of the valley . . . and he had machine guns in the woods to the south-west. Into the open end of this horseshoe of fire the battalion advanced. . . . As the line advanced the intensity of the fire increased . . . the air was so filled with flying lead that the noise resembled the tune of a swarm of angry bees.[25]

Despite heavy losses, the Marines pushed hard against the German forces, who appeared to be retreating. The

[21] Author believes 252d Aero Squadron is a typo in the original records that should read 258th Aero Squadron. See footnote 17.

[22] Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 33.
[23] Telephone message from Col Hugh B. Myers to G-3, 21st French Division, Field Messages HQ 2d Division, AEF, 1500, 4 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 5 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army War College, 1927), comp. by Capt Cylburn O. Mattfeldt.
[24] Account of former Capt Augustus B. Hale, commanding officer, 77th Company (C), 6th Machine Gun Battalion, 12 April 1930, from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, in RG 117, NARA.
[25] "The 67th Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, in the Champagne."

Marines chased them down. Private Elton Mackin, 67th Company, 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, recalled that

> Men seldom run headlong during an attack. . . . Sometimes the excitement, the lust for action, gets the better of judgment and you travel too fast, overrunning objectives. This is especially true if human game breaks into view to lure you on when almost all your officers are down. . . . The fury of their rush, coupled with the sight of running quarry, led them on. The way led down a gentle open slope; the hunting was good. So they followed after. . . . Scarcely pausing, they shot the gunners down amidst their pieces and chased the survivors into the cover of the patch of wood beyond. They were in their element—the Yankee style of fighting amid the trees. . . . The line broke into scattered groups, all pressing forward. . . . While the fever of the attack lasted, discipline was forgotten in the urge to hunt and kill. . . . The wily German had drawn his troops away to either side as the hunters ran down their quarry and now Heinie had the remnant of a marine battalion bottled in a long, narrow belt of woods, with the slope and stubbled field behind them. It was a place for men to die; a spearhead of out-flung battle line thrust deeply into the German front, exposed to fire from three sides, its line of communication cut off by enfilading Maxims firing from the flanks.[26]

The overzealous Marines, hot on the tails of the German forces, had pushed into the German front, creating a pocket surrounded on three sides. They had run into a deathtrap. Almost as soon as the 5th Regiment emerged from cover over the slope from Blanc Mont and into a draw before the base of Ludwigs Rücken, the German defenders opened fire. The Marines encountered strong machine-gun fire coming from the northwestern side of Blanc Mont Ridge, as well as from their front and on each flank. Private Harvey Hurst, 43d Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, wounded at Blanc Mont, explained the predicament:

> At Blanc Mont Ridge either because the Marines went so fast, or because of misunderstanding, the French on their left and the army on the right failed to come up to their support. The French had ordered them to take a certain objective. They took it and were left in a little pocket.[27]

Captain Augustus B. Hale, commanding officer of the 77th Machine Gun Company, 6th Machine Gun Battalion, attached to the 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment, later reported to the ABMC:

> As the 47th Co. and 45th Co. (who were the leading units) advanced down the hill toward St. Etienne, the enemy could be seen in small groups coming from the trenches in front of St. Etienne and making for the bottom of the hill to our left as if they intended an attack on our left rear. At this time, we were suddenly subjected to heavy machine gun, trench mortar, one pounder and some artillery fire.[28]

The Marines' overzealous push forward left their flanks exposed. In one case, they had not properly cleared the woods from which they emerged. According to a letter sent to the ABMC by Major Littleton W. T. Waller Jr., commanding officer of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, "the infantry and machine guns

[26] Mackin, *Suddenly We Didn't Want to Die*, 187–88.

[27] "Harvey Hurst, 43d Co., 5th Regiment, USMC," *Iron County Register* (Ironton, MO), 6 March 1919.

[28] Account of former Capt Augustus B. Hale, 12 April 1930, provided to author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in RG 117, NARA.

were suddenly subjected to heavy machine gun fire from the front and flanks, apparently the woods had not been cleared out during the advance."[29] The Marine casualties quickly rose as the wounded poured into the medical dressing station "not now and then, but in a steady stream."[30]

The heavy losses forced Major Larsen, commanding officer of the 3d Battalion, 5th Regiment, to send a field message at 1300 requesting assistance in their desperate attempt to hold the position. "Cannot hold front line longer; that is, my position. . . . Have evacuated 3 company commanders and many officers—having hard time to hold men together. Am sending this request to 1st and 2nd Battalions to come up and help hold. . . . Situation is critical."[31] As the 3d Battalion attempted to survive the inundating fire and several counterattacks, the 2d Battalion, commanded by Major Robert E. Messersmith, worked to move up in support.

The Marines of 2d Battalion found themselves in an equally dire predicament as they moved up to the 3d Battalion. As stated earlier, the failure of headquarters to provide air support allowed the Germans to control the skies. German aviators flew low, using their machine guns to good effect against the Marines. They also dropped numerous hand bombs on the attacking force. This constant harassment forced the 23d Machine Gun Company, attached to the 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, to keep busy engaging the planes instead of the attackers that surrounded them.[32] As Captain DeWitt Peck, commanding officer of the 55th Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, later stated of their terrifying position, "The 43rd Co. was receiving fire from five directions . . . the North, East, West, and South, and an airplane shooting down from above."[33]

The 2d Battalion's attempt to support the 3d Battalion failed, as it too fell prey to the horrific fire. Artillery, machine guns, and planes cut down the Marines as they scattered into isolated groups and began to dig in. From the German perspective, Lieutenant Colonel Ernst Otto wrote of 4 October 1918:

> The separate and isolated groups coming in carelessly at first, were at once subjected to a withering concentrated fire of light and heavy machine guns. Everywhere good results were observed. Gaping holes were torn in the lines of riflemen, entire columns being mowed down. Much to our advantage were the light yellow-brown uniforms of the Americans, altogether impractical for this terrain. They were visible at great distances and offered excellent targets. . . . One could plainly observe that the unrest in his rank grew every minute. Lone individuals and frequently entire detachments, ran aimlessly about. . . . Already, a few began to escape up the hill; finally the hostile detachments, in wild flight, hastened up the slope. . . . Even during their flight, they were sharply pursued by our machine-gun fire.[34]

A carrier pigeon message from the German *200th Division*, who were engaging the 23d Infantry, also recorded the plight of the Marines: "Enemy advanced far in sector of right neighbor division. . . . Enemy in sector

[29] Account of Maj Littleton W. T. Waller Jr., included with the account and records of Ziba Drollinger, 23 February 1928, provided to author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in RG 117, NARA.
[30] Richard Derby, *"Wade In, Sanitary!": The Story of a Division Surgeon in France* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1919), 146.
[31] Field Message from Larsen, 1300, 4 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 5.
[32] Account of former Capt John P. McCann, 28 April 1926, provided to author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in RG 117, NARA.
[33] Account of Capt DeWitt Peck, 29 April 1926, provided to author from the personal collection of Peter F. Owen, originally found in RG 117, NARA.
[34] LtCol Ernst Otto, *The Battle at Blanc Mont (October 2 to October 10, 1918)*, trans. by Martin Lichtenburg (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1930), 79.

of right neighbor regt forced to retreat by our flanking MG fire."[35]

Confirming this story, Private John E. Ausland, 55th Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment, recounted their attempt to reach the 3d Battalion.

> We couldn't see through these trees to the right or left, except for the men nearest you, but we could see ahead. And apparently the enemy ahead could see us. . . . All Hell broke loose. "Dig in," shouted Captain Peck. As we dug, the shells from the German artillery on the ridge ahead rained on us. The machine guns on our left, possibly three hundred yards away, opened up shooting through the evergreens by calculation. . . . Lieutenant [Joseph F.] Maher was killed and Captain Peck was hit in the neck. . . . Seeing we faced annihilation Captain Peck shouted, "Fall Back." "By whose orders?" the men shouted back. "By order of Captain Peck," was the reply. And so the retirement began. As men saw a chance to make it they left. . . . But I have to give it to Captain Peck. He was wounded and was going to get out of here anyway and could have left us to our fate, or let some other officer give the orders to fall back. He had everything to lose, personally, and nothing to gain but he gave the order anyway, and the Marine Corps doesn't look lightly on falling back, no matter why.[36]

Unfortunately, this order to fall back led to the only known retreat by the Marine Corps in World War I.

*Courtesy of Steven C. Girard*
Capt DeWitt Peck, commanding officer, 55th Company, 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment.

Seeing the advance of the 2d Battalion, Major Larsen ordered the survivors of the 3d Battalion to fall back to better positions behind the 2d Battalion.[37] However, as they began to fall back, the 2d Battalion did not hold its position. Instead, members of the 2d Battalion also began to chaotically retreat "as men saw a chance to make it."[38] This collapse of both battalions led to a disorganized retreat of the Marines. Fortunately, at this critical moment the 1st Battalion arrived in support. Major George W. Hamilton, commanding officer of the 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, witnessed Major Messersmith, Captain Peck, Captain David T. Jackson (commanding officer of the 18th Company), and sev-

[35] Extract from Carrier Pigeon Message of *200th Division*, #21, "War Diary of the 51st Reserve Division from September 29 to October 5, 1918," 1530, 4 October 1918, in *Translations of War Diaries of German Units Opposed to the Second Division (Regular), 1918*, vol. 8 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army War College, 1927), trans. by Gustav J. Braun and Trevor W. Swett.
[36] John E. Ausland, "The Last Kilometer: Goodbye World," as cited in Owen and Swift, *A Hideous Price*, 35.
[37] Field Message from Adjutant 4th Brigade, headquarters, 1440, 4 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 4 (Washington, DC: U.S. Army War College, 1927).
[38] Ausland, "The Last Kilometer: Goodbye World," 35.

eral lieutenants at the forefront of this retreat. Major Messersmith explained "that he had lost all his officers" and Captain Jackson appeared hopeless. Major Hamilton and Captain James A. Nelms, commanding officer of the 8th Company (Regimental Machine Gun Company), 5th Regiment, endeavored to turn the men back but were "forced to draw their pistols" to stop the retreat. Hamilton and Nelms stopped the rout and organized the remaining men of the 3d and 2d Battalions with the 1st Battalion ordering them to dig in along the edges of the woods.[39]

With the consolidation of the 5th Regiment's battalions, the 1st Battalion now absorbed the enemy's fire, suffering as the 2d and 3d Battalions had all morning. Private Ausland recalled, "We now had no line. Just groups of men in the patches of woods, and no real connection between the groups."[40] Throughout the afternoon, isolated squads of Marines attempted to reconnect with their regiment's defensive positions. Private Hurst recalled that "all night, they were exposed to a raking machine gun fire from each of these two flanks. Seeing their plight, the Germans broke through on their rear; and thus through one whole night that outfit was 'stormed at by shot and shell' on all four sides. It was worse than Belleau Wood while it lasted."[41] Even though the 5th Regiment had been rendered combat ineffective, the Marines continued to fight until finally being relieved on 9 October.[42]

## An Investigation

After the battle for Blanc Mont Ridge ended for the 2d Division on 10 October and command of the field was transferred to the 36th Division, AEF, the full impact of the 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment's chaotic retreat became clear. On 13 October, Major Messersmith was told by letter from Colonel Logan F. Feland, commanding officer of 5th Regiment, that Major Hamilton had reported the retreat on 4 October, including Messersmith's failure of command. Feland's letter directed Messersmith to "submit to me any statement you may desire to make in regard to that part of the report referring to yourself." Major Hamilton's 4 October report became the initial complaint against Messersmith.[43] On 15 October, Colonel Feland ordered Lieutenant Colonel Julius S. Turrill, his regimental executive officer, to "conduct an investigation in order to determine and report upon the facts which may be established in regard to the conduct of Major Robert E. Messersmith, U.S. Marine Corps, during the action in which the regiment was engaged on October 4, 1918."[44]

In his 16 October written comments on the report, Major Messersmith seemed to place blame on Captain David Jackson, stating,

> Shortly after establishing my P.C. [post of command], I noticed Captain David T. Jackson in opening at top. Captain Jackson to best of my knowledge remained at top of this P.C. from this time until evening of October 6th, 1918 when we were relieved. . . . Inasmuch as "E" Company, the command of Captain Jackson was some distance removed from my P.C., it was not the proper place for him to occupy. . . . By his being away from his company the entire responsibility of the Company rested on 1st Lieutenant [John R.] Foster who ably carried out all duties.[45]

Messersmith completely ignored the retreat on 4 October by starting his report after the 1st Battalion had consolidated the battalions of the regiment.

Despite the allegations of leadership misconduct, other Marines, such as Captain James McBrayer Sellers, commanding officer of the 78th Company,

[39] Robert E. Messersmith biographical file, "Report of Major George W. Hamilton, 4 October 1918," Historical Resources Branch, Marine Corps History Division (MCHD), Quantico, VA.
[40] Ausland, "The Last Kilometer: Goodbye World," 37.
[41] "Harvey Hurst, 43d Co., 5th Regiment, USMC."
[42] BGen Edwin Howard Simmons and Col Joseph H. Alexander, *Through the Wheat: The U.S. Marines in World War I* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2008), 211.
[43] Robert E. Messersmith biographical file, Logan Feland to Robert Messersmith, 11 October 1918, MCHD.
[44] Robert E. Messersmith biographical file, Logan Feland to LtCol J. S. Turrill, 15 October 1918, MCHD.
[45] Robert E. Messersmith biographical file, report by Messersmith, 16 October 1918, MCHD.

2d Battalion, 6th Regiment, supported Messersmith. In his memoir, in reference to Messersmith's retreat, Sellers stated, "He had looked after his men, and the messages he sent back were correct, since this later advance was ridiculous. I know. I advanced there."[46] The withdrawal, called for by Captain DeWitt Peck, played a large role in what became a wholesale rout of the 1st and 2d Battalions. His order triggered the 2d Battalion to begin retreating before the 1st Battalion had finished passing through its lines. However, the failure to stop this retreat inevitably resulted in the actions against Messersmith.

In his investigation report, dated 24 October, Turrill concluded that as elements of the 3d Battalion began retiring through the 2d Battalion lines, the retrograde movement carried with it parts of the 2d Battalion: "In some cases junior officers of 2d Battalion ordered their men to retire, and in others the men apparently went of their own volition." The enemy machine gunners were about "a thousand yards from the front lines" and their heavy fire on the Marines apparently led individual men to run toward the rear.[47]

Under these conditions, Turrill concluded, "it was tactically correct to withdraw" to a better defensive position. However, the error came in permitting "the front and support lines to intermingle and retire" together, thereby causing a chaotic escape toward the rear and the beginning of a general withdrawal of the regiment. Since Major Messersmith commanded the support battalion, immediately to the rear of the assaulting battalion, "he should have held" under the intense conditions until the front line had finished withdrawing through his line. Unfortunately, there were about 250 troops of the 3d and 2d Battalions rapidly moving to the rear under heavy enemy fire in a disorganized manner that amplified the general panic. Major Hamilton and Captain Nelms managed to remedy the situation, averting "a general retreat."[48]

*Courtesy of Steven C. Girard*

LtCol Julius S. Turrill, regimental executive officer, 1st Battalion, 5th Regiment.

*Courtesy of Steven C. Girard*

Col Logan Feland, commanding officer, 5th Regiment.

[46] William Sellers, James Gregory, and Steven Girard, *C'est La Guerre: The Memoir of Capt. James McBrayer Sellers, USMC* (Oklahoma City, OK: Gray Sparrow Books, 2020), 99.

[47] Robert E. Messersmith biographical file, Results of Investigation into the Conduct of Major E. Messersmith, 24 October 1918, MCHD, 1.

[48] Results of Investigation into the Conduct of Major E. Messersmith, 1.

*Courtesy of Steven C. Girard*
Maj Robert E. Messersmith, commanding officer, 2d Battalion, 5th Regiment.

For his role, the report stated, "Major Messersmith was not awake to the true tactical situation and did not initiate any steps to avert the danger of a panic. Thereby he displayed lack of leadership." As battalion commander, he was responsible for ensuring his line held as the 3d Battalion withdrew. Instead, he retired about 200 yards, where he ran across Major Hamilton before following Nelms and Hamilton's lead to restore the combat lines. The investigation also concluded that "Major Messersmith displayed no lack of courage. The cuff of his blouse and his field glass were penetrated by bullets."[49] However, due to his inability to prevent the retreat and instead joining it, the 2d Division command, in a 28 November letter, directed 4th Brigade command to ensure Messersmith was ordered to be assigned "to some duty, outside this division, if in command of troops, or not in command of troops if within this division" rather than any disciplinary actions.[50]

This investigation confirmed that a chaotic retreat had in fact taken place on 4 October 1918. It stands as an unfortunate blemish on Messersmith's successful career, possibly becoming the reason he never received any awards after the war. The disorganized retirement, brought on by the initial overzealous attack at 0600 and lack of timely brigade and divisional leadership, created such an embarrassment to the Marine Corps' reputation that the events of that day are almost nonexistent in the official record after the war.

The official records of the 2d Division are brief regarding 4 October and the withdrawal. The 2d Division's journal entry for 4 October only states that "the 2nd Div. attempted to advance but after making a small gain were held up by artillery and machine gun fire upon their flanks. . . . The remainder of the day spent in strengthening the position held by the Division."[51] This simple statement does not seem to correlate to the next page that contains the 4 October entry of the 2d Division's war diary, which lists a total of 1,889 men killed, sick, and wounded.[52] The Field Orders for the 5th Regiment skip from 3 October to 18 October.[53] From the divisional field orders there is no mention of the attack, only plans to establish an H-hour.[54] Field messages from the 4th Brigade adju-

[49] Results of Investigation into the Conduct of Major E. Messersmith, 1.
[50] Results of Investigation into the Conduct of Major E. Messersmith, 2.
[51] "Journal of Operations, 2nd Division, October 4, 1918," in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 6 (Washington, DC: Army War College, 1927), comp. by Capt Cylburn O. Mattfeldt.
[52] Entry of 4 October 1918, "War Diary of Second Division (Regular), American Expeditionary Forces," in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 6.
[53] Field Orders 5th Marine Regiment, 3 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: Army War College, 1927), comp. by Capt Cylburn O. Mattfeldt.
[54] Divisional Field Orders, 0400, 4 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 1.

tant for the day do not mention any report of the 5th Regiment falling back but reveals, "We haven't heard anything about it here. I don't think we know much about it."[55] Even Messersmith's operations report from 11 October simply states, "Moved towards objective under heavy machine gun fire and artillery fire until 2:30 P.M., October 4th. . . . We were forced to retire but held about 4:00 P.M."[56] The 4 October action does not receive much in-depth attention in the official records of the 2d Division other than the direct messages from attacking Marines. This translates to the recollections of those in charge.

Not only do the records neglect to outline the severity of the 4 October fights, but some commanding officers incorrectly portrayed the battle. This may be due to their costly errors in coordinating the attack. For example, Brigadier General Wendel C. Neville, commanding general of the 4th Brigade, gave a lecture to the students at the Army Center of Artillery Studies on 21 April 1919. Of the attack he stated

> At 6:00 a.m., October 4th, orders were issued by the 2nd Division for a further advance, in the direction of Machault-Caurcy [*sic*] where a position of resistance was to be established and held. This attack, however, was not carried out until the next day—the French had not advanced on the left and the enemy resistance on that flank was too great to disregard. It had to be "cleaned up" to some extent before the advance could be continued. The next (or nests) causing the most damage were close up to the west of Mont Blanc. These were reconnoitered during the afternoon and evening of October 4th by the 3rd Battalion, Sixth Regiment, and an attack was made in the evening after artillery preparation. This attack was not carried to a conclusion as it developed that the position was very strong and special preparations would be required if undue loss in man power was to be avoided.[57]

He then moves on to discuss 5 October in detail. The person in charge of the brigade that suffered so severely on 4 October appears to minimize the significance of the day's events and the 5th Regiment's actions.

In 1921, the Historical Branch of the War Department's War Plans Division put together the *Blanc Mont (Meuse-Argonne-Champagne): Monograph No. 9*. It completely glosses over 4 October 1918, making it a mere footnote of the story. The only mention of the day states that the Germans clung "to the western slip of Blanc Mont, from which the 4th Brigade had to dislodge them on October 4."[58]

As perhaps the most glaring example, in 1922, Major Edwin N. McClellan began writing a series of articles for the *Marine Corps Gazette* on the history of the 4th Brigade during the war. The battles were written in short sections to be continued in consecutive magazine issues. However, once McClellan reached the Battle of Blanc Mont, the story ends on the night of 3 October. The September 1922 issue featured his last article on the battle, which concludes with the 5th Regiment moving up through the 6th Regiment. He summed it up simply: "The Fifth finally connected up with the Third Brigade on the right and with the Sixth Regiment in the rear." Since McClellan was the officer in charge of the Marine Corps' Historical Section at the time, the sudden end to the articles and exclusion of 4 October onward is a mystery that may suggest a reluctance to discuss the events of that day.[59]

Likewise, in this idea of downplaying the actions on 4 October, Major General Lejeune brushed over

[55] "Field Message, 2:40 p.m., October 4, 1918, Adjutant 4th Brigade."
[56] Robert Messersmith, Operations Report 1-8, 11 October 1918, in *Records of the Second Division (Regular)*, vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Army War College, 1927).
[57] Wendell C. Neville, "Blanc Mont: Lecture Delivered on Infantry in Recent Operations" (lecture at Army Center for Artillery Studies, Fort Sill, OK, 21 April 1919).
[58] *Blanc Mont (Meuse-Argonne-Champagne): Monograph No. 9* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1922), 4.
[59] Maj Edwin N. McClellan, "The Battle at Blanc Mont Ridge," *Marine Corps Gazette* 7, no. 1 (March 1922): 1–21; Maj Edwin N. McClellan, "The Battle at Blanc Mont Ridge," *Marine Corps Gazette* 7, no. 2 (June 1922): 206–11; and Maj Edwin N. McClellan, "The Battle at Blanc Mont Ridge," *Marine Corps Gazette* 7, no. 3 (September 1922): 287–88.

the conflict in his 1930 memoir *The Reminiscences of a Marine*. He acknowledged that the 5th Regiment made an advance through heavy machine-gun fire along its front, left flank, and left rear and that it continued until being forced to halt. He then mentions Major Hamilton's skillful command in stopping a German counterattack that afternoon.[60] Lejeune's book was for public consumption and not an official history, but the exemption of such a brutal day in Marine Corps history plays a part in not acknowledging the day's failures. The official records and the works of those in charge on 4 October downplay or exclude the bloody combat that the 5th Regiment faced. Continuing this trend, *History of Second Battalion, 5th Regiment U.S. Marines, June 1st 1917–January 1st 1919* and *Over the Top with the 18th Co., 5th Regt., U.S. Marines: A History* both briefly touch on the attack by simply recounting that they pushed forward under tremendous fire from the flanks and fell back to a better defensive position.[61]

Fortunately for historians, the firsthand accounts of those who served on the front lines, like those found in the ABMC statements used in this article, always mention that fateful day. Their horrific experiences could not be forgotten. Their accounts reveal the hell that was 4 October 1918 and illuminate a new perspective of the Marine Corps' participation in World War I.

## Conclusions

The attacks on 4 October by the 4th Brigade and its 5th and 6th Regiments have become a footnote in World War I Marine Corps history. These blunders bled the 2d Infantry Division and its Marine brigade. Inexplicable issues plagued the 5th Regiment, such as the change of H-hour to 0600, which started the 5th Regiment's attack several hours before the planned time. The failures of divisional and brigade command to fully comprehend the status of the front lines resulted in a bungled attack that lacked proper preparation. The 5th Regiment attacked without artillery or aerial cover. The overzealous Marines extended their lines into a compromised position inundated by fire on all sides. This heavy fire decimated the Marine ranks, leading to a chaotic retreat that nearly routed the entire regiment. Finally, the officers in divisional and brigade headquarters responsible for the debacle glossed over and attempted to erase the embarrassment of 4 October from the official and public records after the war. By pretending it did not happen, the Marine Corps successfully buried its biggest failure of World War I.

Despite becoming the bloodiest day of the war for the Marine Corps, the actions of 4 October are very commonly bypassed in retellings of the battle on Blanc Mont Ridge. It is not until the last few decades that the events of that day garnered a more detailed discussion in Marine Corps histories. The failure of recognition fell on a calamity of errors with the failure of command to properly coordinate the attack, overzealous Marines, a chaotic retreat led by several officers of the 5th Regiment's 2d Battalion, and a lack of acknowledgement after the war. There is much to be learned from other major battles of the Great War, including the missteps and failures of leadership at Blanc Mont. The rigorous study of history demands we investigate failures as well as herald victories. Admitting failures of the past—embracing them—reveals the true valor and sacrifice of the Marines and the lessons bought for a terrible price.

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[60] MajGen John A. Lejeune, *The Reminisces of a Marine* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 1990), 160.
[61] Nathaniel Hardin Massie, *Official History of the 2nd Battalion, 5th Regiment, U.S. Marines, June 1st 1917–January 1st 1919* (Neuwied, Germany: n.p., 1919); and Cpl H. B. Field and Sgt H. G. James, *Over the Top with the 18th Co., 5th Regt. U.S. Marines: A History* (Neuwied, Germany: Louis Heuserche Buchdruckerei, 1919), 25–26.