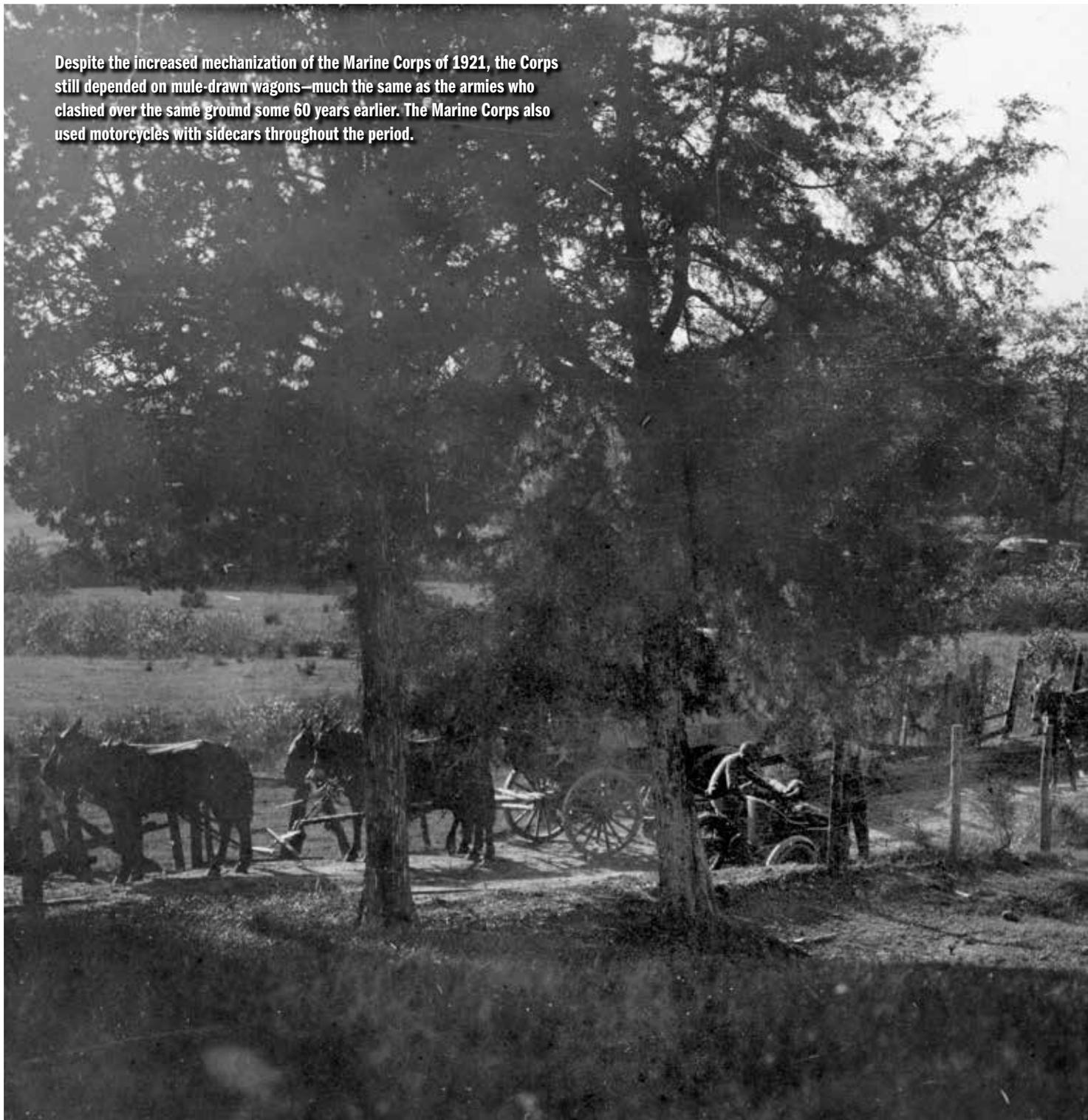


Despite the increased mechanization of the Marine Corps of 1921, the Corps still depended on mule-drawn wagons—much the same as the armies who clashed over the same ground some 60 years earlier. The Marine Corps also used motorcycles with sidecars throughout the period.



## Marines at the Battle of the Wilderness

By Kenneth L. Smith-Christmas

**T**he Marine Corps' East Coast Expeditionary Force marched out of Quantico, Va., in September 1921, and headed for the Civil War battlefields to the southwest of Fredericksburg, Va., where they reenacted the 1864 Battle of

the Wilderness in early October. It was to be the first of four Civil War reenactments staged by the Marine brigade in the years from 1921 through 1924. [See the April 2014 *Leatherneck* for the 1922 reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg.]

The primary reason for the reenactment was to provide training for the brigade

of Marines in the East Coast Expeditionary Force, then consisting of Fifth Marine Regiment (infantry), 10th Marines (artillery) and battalions of attached engineers, signalers and medical corps, as well as detachments of aviation and chemical units. The legendary Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler, commanding what



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was then known as the Marine Barracks Quantico, envisioned Civil War reenactments as a means not only to provide a proving ground for innovations in the Corps, but as a way to increase publicity for a Marine Corps which was suffering from the effects of the draw-down that followed World War I.



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Visiting dignitaries were a critical part of the Marine Corps' Civil War reenactments of the early 1920s. If the VIPs were impressed with what they observed, they could provide the support desperately needed by the Corps in the post-World War I period.

### Fact or Fiction? The Mystery of Smedley Butler And "Stonewall" Jackson's Arm

During the 1921 Wilderness battle reenactment, legend has it that Brigadier General Smedley D. Butler questioned whether Confederate Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's amputated left arm actually was buried under a granite marker in the family cemetery at the Ellwood plantation house located on the Wilderness battlefield in Virginia. The arm had been retrieved from the field hospital where LTG Jackson was treated after being mortally wounded during the 1863 Battle of Chancellorsville, and it was then buried by one of his staff. LTG Jackson later died in an outbuilding on a plantation south of Fredericksburg.

According to a story told in the late 1930s by a member of the family then living at Ellwood, BGen Butler had disputed the claim with a local resident and said that he would have a squad of Marines dig up the arm to prove his point. The story goes that when the squad of Marines dug up the site, they indeed found the remains of a shattered left arm in a wooden box. Chagrined, BGen Butler had it reburied in "a metal box."

The event is celebrated on a nearby Virginia historical roadside marker, and it has been recounted in many histories, both of the Civil War and the Marine Corps. After the U.S. National Park Service acquired Ellwood in the late 1970s, the Park Service decided to protect the site and planned to build a concrete cap over it.

In order to justify the project, the Park Service employed an archaeological team to ensure that



COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

This bronze plate marker was placed by Marines in 1921 at the burial site of Stonewall Jackson's arm.

Hot chow was provided to Marines and dignitaries in the field by mobile kitchens.



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Accordingly, BGen Butler invited President Warren G. Harding, who reviewed the troops on 2 Oct., as well as a number of other dignitaries, to witness the event. They watched Marines with Civil War-era blanket rolls over their shoulders maneuver across the fields in formations reminiscent of battles in the mid-19th century.

The Marines wore their field hats,

sometimes creased for the event in the earlier style—not the familiar “Montana Peak” that was adopted in 1912, and tried to convey the feeling of the original battle. Separate demonstrations of modern equipment and vehicles took place apart from the reenactment, and it was deemed by all to have been a great success.

*Author’s bio: Ken Smith-Christmas served on the staff of the Marine Corps Museum for nearly 30 years and was the senior curator on the exhibits design-planning team for the National Museum of the Marine Corps. In 2010, he retired from the Project Office of the National Museum of the U.S. Army, where he had been the director of Exhibits and Collections.*



the arm was still there. The archaeologists found no evidence that the ground around the monument ever had been disturbed, and although they did not employ deep-ground-searching techniques to find the “metal box,” they concluded that the story was a fable. The Park Service echoed these findings in 2010, claiming in an interview and a press release that “the arm was never dug up. It certainly was not reburied in the box near the marker, there’s no question about that.” The press release goes on to say that “very likely, the story did not happen.”

Curiously, there is a photograph of a brass marker plate on exhibit at Ellwood. The original plate was removed from the 1903 granite marker after the Park Service acquired the property, and the cast brass plate was placed in storage for safekeeping. The plate is of high quality, and its placement on the monument shows that someone went to considerable effort and expense to produce it and affix it to the monument. As the Park Service noted in its 2010 press release on the subject,

no pre-1940 documentation has been found to support the story—no newspaper or magazine articles, no memoirs, no official reports and no letters.

It does, however, raise the question: Why then was this plate enshrined on the marker? If BGen Butler had painted himself into a corner by voicing his skepticism, and if the only way to exonerate himself was to desecrate a grave, would he not have simply and reverently acknowledged his mistake by having a marker made in “tribute to the memory of Stonewall Jackson,” after having been proven wrong and left it at that?

BGen Butler, understandably, did not include the story in Lowell Thomas’ biography of him—“Old Gimlet Eye.” The Marine Corps certainly was not going to bring up the subject and further embarrass the general. Some brash acts are best forgotten until time makes them into a good story.

—Kenneth L. Smith-Christmas