

A Founding Reservist

Marine Gunner Charles “Elmer” E. Clark, USMCR

By GySgt Brian Knowles, USMCR

Editor’s note: The following article received an honorable mention in the 2020 Leatherneck Writing Contest. Major Richard A. “Rick” Stewart, USMC (Ret) sponsored the contest, which is open to enlisted Marines, through the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. The 2021 contest is open until March 31.

In January of 1917, the United States was not officially involved in World War I although hostilities had been raging in Europe since August of 1914. Since then, war had spread throughout the globe. Combat was sharp and quick in many remote battles and campaigns.

The main slugfest between the Central Powers and the Allies had resulted in the deaths of millions of soldiers in Europe. The U.S. Marine Corps had been watchful of the fighting and was aware they were not prepared to join the fight. With only about 14,000 Marines on its rolls in 1916, they could not engage on the grand scale of the Western Front if the U.S. became involved.

Limited funding, training and personnel available slowed preparations for war. The Naval Act of 1916 made significant changes to the role Marines would play if the U.S. joined the war. A clause within the act authorized the creation of a Marine Corps Reserve, which was established on Aug. 29, 1916. The Reserve was meant to quickly expand the numbers of Marines capable of fighting in Europe. Trench warfare dominated the Western Front, and naval campaigns ranged across the seas. Millions of American soldiers, Sailors and Marines were needed. The U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (USMCR), a cadre of trained, seasoned and professional Marines, would enable the Marine Corps to expand into a force able to join the fight.

Charles Clark personified a veteran Marine who could continue his service and share his knowledge through service in the Marine Corps Reserve. Clark’s combined service spanned nearly 18 years. He was described by his commanding officers as steady, vigilant, and showing “a



**Marine Gunner Charles “Elmer” Clark
USMCR**

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marked aptitude for the service.” Between August 1916 and the declaration of war by the U.S. in April of 1917, only 35 Marines were assigned to the USMCR. Clark was one of these first Reserve Marines, joining on Jan. 15, 1917. His military experience and training placed him at the right time with the right knowledge. His aptitude for instruction and training of thousands of Marines validated the Marine Corps Reserve’s purpose.

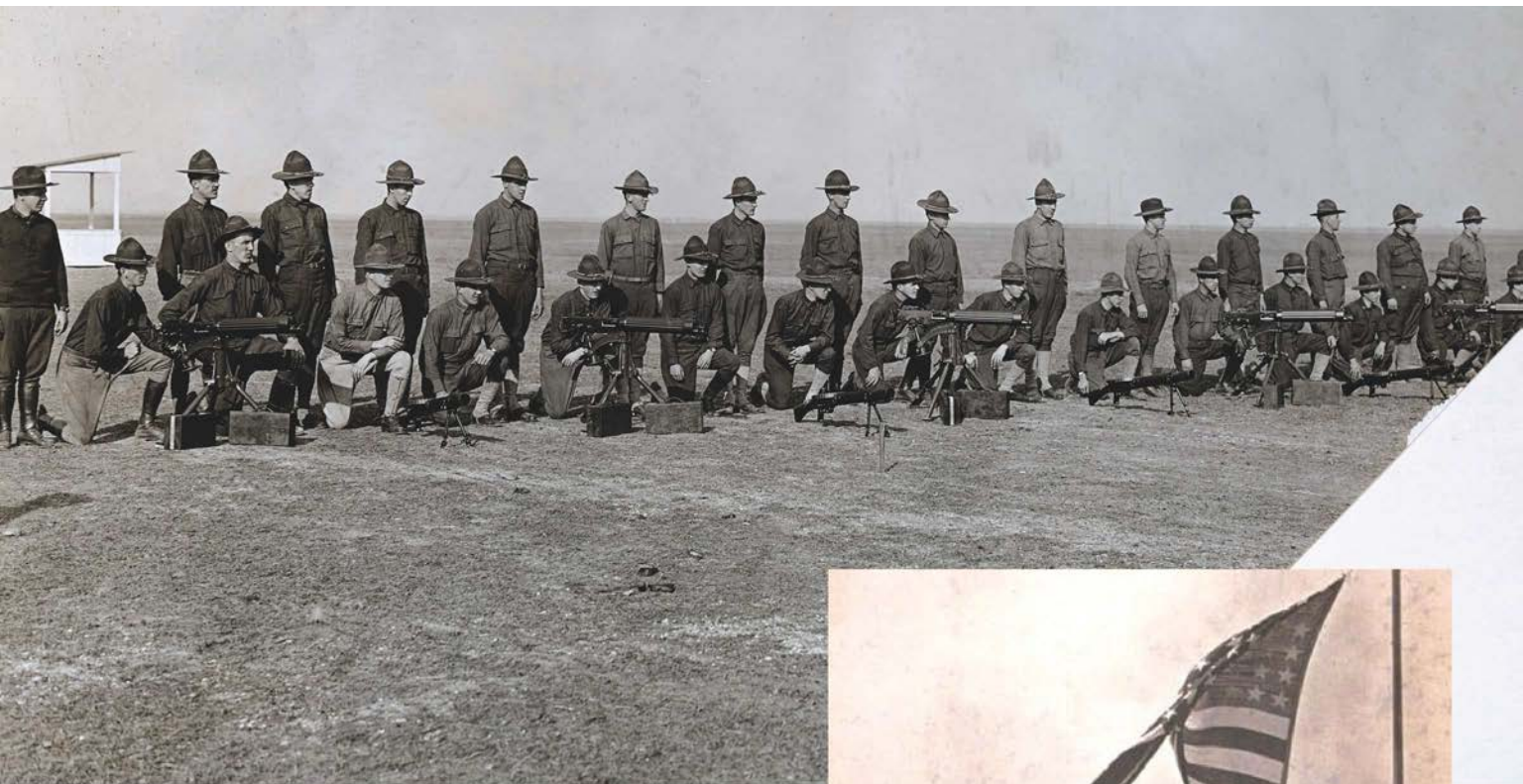
Charles Ellsworth Clark, known as Elmer, was born Nov. 2, 1867, in Dayton, Ohio, where he grew up with his father, John M. Clark, and his brother, William R. Clark. Before he began his military career, Elmer had established his professional career in Dayton as an electrician. He married later in life and didn’t have children.

The Spanish-American War began on April 21, 1898, when Elmer was 31 years of age. He enlisted May 4, 1898, with Company F, 1st Ohio Volunteer Cavalry Regiment with the National Guard and was appointed a corporal. His unit traveled to Florida by July to ship out; however, the war was progressing well for the U.S., and limited shipping made supply difficult. An armistice stopped the fighting on Aug. 13, 1898, and a treaty ended the war in December.

Clark and his unit spent August and September in Alabama awaiting orders. The regiment was finally returned to Ohio, given a 30-day furlough, and disbanded soon after. He was mustered out on Oct. 23, 1898, and returned to his civilian career as an electrician.

Something about military life must have sparked Clark’s motivation for service. Fourteen months after discharge from the Ohio Cavalry, he joined the U.S. Marine Corps. He enlisted on Jan. 15, 1900, and served until Jan. 15, 1917. He began his reserve enlistment the same day, placing him as “inactive” in the Fleet Marine Corps Reserve (FMCR).

The chronology of Clark’s active service is incomplete, but sections of his career are seen in correspondence saved



within his service record. Details of all his postings and assignments were either not retained, lost or went unrecorded. William Clark, Elmer's brother, explained that "Elmer was always a very good rifle-marksman." Records show that for several years, Elmer was a member and later a coach for the Marine Corps Rifle Team. He was stationed at Camp Perry, Ohio, and then at Sea Girt, N.J., to train with the team.

William Clark also wrote that Elmer spent a few years with the Marines in China, probably between 1909 and 1912. A highly sought-after posting, China Marines lived comfortably due to cheap labor and plentiful goods and services. Elmer likely jumped at the opportunity to serve in the Asian country.

William Clark explained more details about his brother's service. "In March 1913, he [Gunnery Sergeant Clark at the time] was stationed at Washington, D.C. (Marine Barracks, Washington Navy Yard) after having served in China for a year or two." In March of 1913, William described a flood in Dayton, Ohio. "He [Gunny Clark] received permission to go to Dayton as his immediate relatives lived there. For several weeks he served under Major Rhodes and Captain Harrison Hall in flood relief and sanitary work at Dayton, Ohio, from March to April 1913." Gunny Clark was certainly concerned about the welfare of his hometown and his family.

A year later, GySgt Clark was among the Marines of the U.S. Atlantic Fleet, landing at Vera Cruz, Mexico, in April of

Above: Gunner Clark was one of the primary machine-gun instructors for Marines heading to Europe during World War I. (Photo courtesy of National Archives)

Right: Formal raising of first U.S. flag in Veracruz, Mexico, on April 27, 1914, by Sailors and Marines of USS *Utah* and USS *Florida*. Then-GySgt Clark and his fellow leathernecks were withdrawn from Mexico later that year.



1914. He sent his family a postcard from Mexico dated May 16, 1914. The urban warfare that occurred after landing was new to the Marines and required some adjustment. Marines and Sailors garrisoned the port until relieved by U.S. soldiers. The Marine expedition and all other U.S. forces that landed in Mexico were withdrawn by November 1914. Clark returned to Washington for the next two years.

The founding of the Marine Corps Reserve on Aug. 29, 1916 created a career opportunity for Gunny Clark. At 49 years

old, with 17 years of service, he was a highly seasoned Marine. The expansion of the Corps resulted in a critical need for Marines with his expertise. No explanation is given about why he departed active service, other than his service contract was to expire.

The average lifespan of a man in 1916 was just 50 years, which suggests Clark, an "old man" compared to his men, must have been thinking about his remaining years. Transitioning to the Reserve was an honorable means to continue serving while restarting his civilian life. He likely

met Cydney E. Dymock, the woman he would marry, after returning from China, and sought to begin a civilian life with her.

Clark began his Reserve service on Jan. 15, 1917, as he transferred to the FMCR. Residing in Philadelphia, in an inactive status, he would be aware of the war news from Europe, the U-boat attacks in the Atlantic, and the possibility of the U.S. entering the war. Only 77 days into his service, he was mobilized on April 2, 1917, on the same day President Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war against Germany. The declaration of war was formalized on April 6, 1917.

GySgt Clark was quickly placed on detached duty from the Marine Barracks in Philadelphia to the Marine Corps School of Instruction, Savage Arms Corporation of Utica, N.Y. Clark married Cydney in June of 1917, and she probably accompanied him to the new posting. His age and Reserve status aside, the need to train thousands of Marines in weapons

employment is likely why Clark was not sent to Europe.

Gunny Clark's technical knowledge and field experience allowed him to supervise field training and instruct weapons usage at the school. His expertise in machine guns was also utilized in training aircrew and pilots. The use of machine guns in Marine Corps aviation greatly expanded throughout the war.

As an instructor in Utica, Clark was appointed a "Marine gunner," an infantry weapons officer, the modern-day equivalent of chief warrant officer-2, in the FMCR on June 5, 1918. Gunners were the first warrant officers for the Marine Corps, with the rank being used as of March 24, 1917. Rigorous qualifications made selection to "Marine gunner" a high honor.

He accepted the promotion to Marine gunner and executed his oath of office on June 12, 1918. He remained at the School of Instruction in Utica, N.Y., as an instructor and his performance reviews

list him as "excellent" throughout his tenure at the school.

When the U.S. entered the "Great War" in April of 1917, the Aviation Section of the U.S. Army, which was assigned within the Army Signal Corps, contained only 227 airplanes and five balloons. These were mainly training types. The U.S. Navy and Marine Corps counted even fewer aircraft. U.S. military aviation was woefully unprepared for war.

The Allies also requested tens of thousands of American-made aircraft. Industry did not have the ability to fill the orders. Manufacturing aircraft was just one issue. Having trained crews and pilots were other major problems. Although not trained to fly, with his expert knowledge of weapons, along with coaching and instructor experience, Clark was an exceptional instructor for aerial weapons training.

The success of American aviation was in the Liberty engine and training of pilots and crew. High morale, determination and fortitude of Americans helped to achieve air superiority over battlefields. Gunner Clark's greatest accomplishment was in training infantry and aviators to operate weapons on the ground and in the air.

The armistice halted fighting on Nov. 11, 1918. Although the fighting had ended, instruction continued at the school. On Jan. 16, 1919, Gunner Clark underwent a physical examination by the school's medical staff and, "no physical defects or ailments were found." However, the next day, he was admitted to the local hospital. Doctors initially thought it was malaria or influenza, possibly contracted from the steady flow of students he encountered.

Standard treatments for these illnesses failed to remedy his sickness. Further examinations at another hospital in Utica showed he had contracted "bacilli tuberculosis," impacting his immune system, which would slowly destroy his lungs. An influenza pandemic had swept the globe throughout 1918, but medical science was just beginning to explore microbiology and virology. There was no cure for tuberculosis (TB), meaning it would eventually kill him; a cure would not be discovered until 1949.

Gunner Clark was placed on a 30-day sick leave and sent to Saranac Lake, a hospital in Utica, N.Y., for observation. This hospital also confirmed the TB. After recovering from a high temperature and breathing difficulty, he was returned to duty on March 5, 1919. Sadly, he would never fully recover, and his illness would continue to afflict him.

On March 13, 1919, Gunner Clark was ordered to Mare Island, Calif., as a machine-gun instructor. It was thought that the warmer climate would help his breath-

ACCEPTANCE

Utica, N.Y.,
June 12, 1918.

SIR: I hereby accept the appointment as a ~~Secretary~~ ^{Marine Gunner} in the United States ~~Marine Corps~~ ^{Fleet Reserve} dated June 5, 1918; with rank from June 5, 1918, transmitted by letter of the Major General Commandant dated June 10, 1918.

Very respectfully,
Charles E. Clark
~~SECRETARY~~ U. S. Marine Corps.
Marine Gunner,

TO THE SECRETARY OF THE NAVY.

OATH OF OFFICE Officers' records

Having been appointed a ~~Secretary~~ ^{Marine Gunner} in the United States ~~Marine Corps~~ ^{Fleet Reserve}, I, *Charles Edward Clark*, do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic; that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the same; that I take this obligation freely, without any mental reservation or purpose of evasion; and that I will well and faithfully discharge the duties of the office on which I am about to enter: So help me God.

Charles E. Clark

Subscribed and sworn to before me this twelfth day of June, 1918.

John J. Dooley
Major, M.C.R.

THE ANNEXED BLANKS ARE TO BE FILLED BY ALL OFFICERS SUBSCRIBING TO THE ABOVE OATH.

PLACE OF BIRTH.		State or Territory of which a Citizen.	Date of Birth.
City, Parish, or County.	State		
Dayton,	Ohio	Ohio	November 2, 1867.

COURTESY OF NATIONAL MILITARY RECORDS CENTER

Clark's acceptance letter and oath of office to the grade of Marine Gunner. He executed the oath on June 12, 1918.

ing. He was detached from the school in Utica on March 24, 1919, to Marine Barracks, Mare Island Navy Yard, Calif. He and Cydney reported to his new post on March 31, 1919. Even suffering from TB, his performance reviews were rated "excellent." In all categories, he received the highest marks of 4.0 out of a possible 4.0. He was described as "calculated, even tempered, forceful, active, cautious, and fair talking." His proficiency rating indicated that he "has initiative, is intelligent, has excellent judgment, and is terrific in his performance of duty."

Despite his outstanding performance as a Marine and instructor, Gunner Clark's deteriorating health brought an end to his active service. There was also a post-war initiative to release reservists to inactive status. On Aug. 20, 1919, Clark was re-assigned to inactive duty and he and his wife returned to Philadelphia. He served his reserve requirements through recruiting duty.

Just beginning to reestablish his civilian life, Gunner Clark was admitted to a local hospital on Nov. 24, 1919, with pulmonary tuberculosis. Since he was a veteran, he was transferred to League Island Naval Hospital. On Nov. 28, 1919, the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery authorized Clark to select any naval hospital for his hospice care. Cydney cared for him throughout his treatment. His final request was to be placed on active status while receiving treatment. It was not approved.

Clark remained in the League Island

Naval Hospital as his condition deteriorated. He was unable to eat and suffered severely from deteriorated breathing. A medical report stated, "Patient in semi stupor throughout day." On Dec. 30, 1919, 52-year-old Marine Gunner Charles "Elmer" Ellsworth Clark died at 3:35 p.m. He passed due to "effects of tuberculosis, which he has contracted while on active duty." His remains were interred a few

An influenza pandemic had swept the globe throughout 1918, but medical science was just beginning to explore microbiology and virology. There was no cure for tuberculosis (TB), meaning it would eventually kill [Clark].

days later, Jan. 2, 1920, in the Northwood Cemetery in Philadelphia.

Upon Clark's death, Cydney was eligible for a widow's pension. Additionally, a \$100 check was sent by the Marine Corps Veterans' Family Assistance Fund. Her pension was \$25 a month, but Cydney refused to accept assistance from the government. In March of 1920, she wrote to thank the Marine Corps and stated that her "brother was well-employed and would accept her as a dependent." She also stated that she had contracted tuberculosis from

caring for her husband and expected to pass shortly.

As one of the first Marines to join the Reserve before the war, Gunner Clark should be remembered as a founding reservist of the Marine Corps Reserve. Although not sent to Europe, Gunner Clark contributed to victory through his ability to instruct Marines in the employment and maintenance of weaponry, notably machine guns. Aviators and infantrymen alike benefited from his instruction. By retaining Gunner Clark, the Marine Corps Reserve fulfilled its mandate of preparation and readiness of Marines for wartime support of the active component, augmenting and reinforcing active forces for employment across the spectrum of crisis and global engagement.

Gunner Clark was a great instructor and an outstanding Marine. Thousands, perhaps tens of thousands of Marines, would join the fight in France with his instruction to help win victory and honor for the Corps. He helped bring an end to one of the bloodiest wars in human history. The Marine Corps Reserve can be proud of Gunner Clark as one of its founding members.

Author's bio: GySgt Brian Knowles served with Communications Platoon, Hqtrs Co, 3rd Bn, 24th Marines from 2001-2010. He then became the field historian for Marine Corps History Division's Field Historian Branch. He is currently serving as a historian for public affairs, U.S. Africa Command. 🇺🇸



One of Gunner Clark's last assignments in 1919 was at the Marine Barracks at Mare Island, Calif., above, where he once again served as a machine-gun instructor.