



# Year of the Veteran

1917-1919

## One community's sacrifice in the Great War

by Sean Klay

*Editor's note: This is part of a year-long series of articles by town, village and city historians about the World War 1 era as Dutchess County recognizes "The Year of the Veteran" with the Dutchess County Historical Society. If you have information relating to the time around WWI in Dutchess County, call (845) 471-1630 or visit [dchsny.org](http://dchsny.org).*

2017 marked the centennial of the start of the United States' involvement in what we know today as the First World War. Young men and women from Millerton had a part to play in this global drama unfolding an ocean and a world away. Into this inferno stepped two men from Millerton: a U.S. Marine, William J. McLaughlin Jr. and a US Army soldier, John Kyle Smith.

William J. McLaughlin Jr. was born Aug. 21, 1888 to William and Mary McLaughlin. Young William's maternal grandfather, Joseph McGhee, progenitor of the McGhee family in Millerton, had emigrated from Scotland in the 1850s. He served with the 150th NYV Infantry Regiment, taking part in some of the fiercest battles of the war, including Gettysburg, Chattanooga, Look-out Mountain, Atlanta and Sherman's March to the Sea.

Little is known about William Jr.'s early years. He was born in Jersey City, N.J., and had an older sister Agnus. His mother Mary died when William was 1 1/2 years old. The record is silent until 1916 when William, at age 28, enlisted into the Marine Corps and was initially assigned to the USS North Dakota. Things changed for William and the nation on April 6, 1917 when Congress declared war on Imperial Germany. Within a week he was reassigned to 77th Company of the 6th Machine Gun Battalion, then being formed at Quantico VA. The 6th Machine Gun Battalion would constitute part of the 4th Marine Brigade, attached to the US Army's 2nd Division. By the end of the year, William with his brigade and the rest of 2nd Division would join Gen. John J. Pershing and the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) in France.

From March 1918 onward, William spent the war on the front lines taking part in every major battle and campaign the AEF participated in. By October 1918 William, now a corporal and responsible for a machine gun squad, took part in what would prove to be the last great American offensive of the war, the Meuse-Argonne.

John Kyle Smith was born to Frank and Mary Smith in Tivoli on Dec. 3, 1888, and was the oldest of six children. From the state and federal census records we know that John went to school in Red Hook, following which he worked to support his family. Sometime between 1910 and 1915 John moved to Millerton to live with his Uncle Fredrick Smith, who owned a shoe store on Main Street.

This is where John was working in 1917 when the United States entered the Great War. On June 5, 1917, John, along with young men from all over the United States, reported to their local draft boards to register. On John's draft registration card, it's his uncle's signature as the certifying official.

A year later, John received his draft notice. On May 25, 1918, he reported with other young men to Millbrook, where he enlisted into the U.S. Army. By June 30 John, along with Millerton residents Santa Anna Finkle, William G. Simmons and George A. Evans, were on the troop ship S.S. Mercury with other Dutchess County residents going to France. After three months of training, John found himself assigned in October 1918 to the 320th Infantry Regiment, part of the 80th Division, as a replacement soldier. On the night of Oct. 31, the 80th Division relieved elements of the 82nd Division to take their place on the line immediately adjacent to the 2nd Division and the 4th Marine Brigade.

The morning of Nov. 1, 1918 found Corp. McLaughlin and Pvt. Smith within 10 miles of each other. At 0430 (4:30 a.m.), American artillery opened on the German positions. At 6:30 a.m., the infantry assault began. For Corp. McLaughlin this experience of "going over the top" was nothing new. For Pvt. John Smith it was his first time. For both it would be their last.

What exactly happened to John, we may never know. The only indication is a notation on his service record that he was killed "North of St. Juvin."

For William we have an account from a letter written to his sister Agnus by Guy Moore and was published on March 6, 1919 in the Millerton Telegram:

*Dear Mrs. Diegman,  
Am writing you as a friend of your brother. We promised to write for each other. He was killed Nov. 1, at 6:30 a.m. just as he went over the top, on the Meuse and Argonne front. He had just fired a machine gun barrage for the infantry to advance and then we started forward. He was leading us through a storm of German shells when he was hit. I was only 30 feet behind him and when I got to him it was all over.*

*So thank God he didn't suffer and was not mangled like so many.*

*He had charge of my squad since the St. Mihiel drive. After all he went through it seems hard to think that there were but 10 days more, and this his fate.*

*I have a remembrance which he got in Chateau Thierry and will mail it to you. He carried it till he went into the last drive, and gave it to a teamster to keep for him but I have it now.*

*His friend,  
Guy E. Moore  
77 Co., 6 Mach. Gun Batt.  
U.S. Marine Corps*

*P.S. Please accept deepest regards from 77th Company. Mrs. Diegman, many have paid the price but none more brave than he. He was loved by his company.*

Following the war, the families of both William and John received correspondence from the War Department regarding the disposition of their loved ones' remains. Corp. William J. McLaughlin Jr. lies at rest in Irondale Cemetery in Millerton.

John's remains were returned to the United States in July 1921. Where he was finally laid to rest in Red Hook is now a mystery.



The gavel and meeting bell of Legion Auxiliary Unit 178 of Millerton were presented by Agnus Diegman in memory of her brother William McLaughlin in 1934. Corp. McLaughlin was killed in action Nov. 1, 1918, on the Meuse-Argonne front. *Photo courtesy of Sean Klay*

After the war these men were not forgotten. William's sister Agnus kept his memory alive as a part of American Legion Auxiliary Unit 178 in Millerton. In 1934, as noted in the April 19, 1934 edition of the Harlem Valley Times, she presented a "beautiful gavel and bell to the unit in memory of her brother Corporal W. J. McLaughlin."

The World War veterans of Tivoli and Red Hook would not let the memory of their native son pass away, naming their new Legion Post in his honor.

Sean Klay is a 15-year member of the American Legion and has been the Historian of American Legion Post 178 since 2007. He is a graduate of Westfield State University with a B.A. in History.



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