

Louis Cukela - In the Right Place

BLUF: During the Battle of Soissons, 18 to 19 July 1918, Sgt. Louis Cukela's platoon encountered a German position at Le Translon Farm. Without hesitating and over the advice of his Marines, Cukela infiltrated behind the German lines. There he located a machine gun nest, silencing the gun. Cukela seized two German machine guns and four German soldiers using captured hand grenades and the captured gun.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS DISPLAYED: Justice, Judgment, **Dependability, Initiative, Decisiveness**, Tact, Integrity, **Endurance, Bearing**, Unselfishness, **Courage, Knowledge**, Loyalty, & **Enthusiasm**.

SETTING THE STAGE: Louis Cukela was born on 1 May 1888 in the Dalmatian City of Split, Croatia, part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Fearing impressment into the Austro-Hungarian Army, Cukela and his brother immigrated to America, settling in Minneapolis, Minnesota, in 1913. The remainder of his family, including his father and three sisters, remained in Europe. On 21 September 1914, Cukela enlisted into the U.S. Army. He served as an Army corporal with Company H, 13th Infantry Regiment, when discharged on 12 June 1916.

Seven months later, on 31 January 1917, with World War I in full gear in Europe and before the U.S. made its entry into the war, Cukela enlisted in the Marine Corps. He joined the 66th Company, 1st Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment at the Marine Barracks in Washington, D.C.

THE STORY: Cukela was deployed to France in 1918 and fought in all the 5th Marines' engagements. This involvement included Belleau Wood to the Meuse River Crossing in 1918. On 18 July 1918 at Soisson, he served with the 5th Marines as a gunnery sergeant. Cukela and his men were stymied by a German machine-gun position while proceeding through a wooded area known as the Forest de Retz. Despite his men's protests, Cukela crawled along the Germans' flanks to gain a blind-side advantage. He took out one position, then, using the German hand grenades, he took out the other German positions. During the process, Cukela captured four prisoners and two undamaged German machine guns.

Cukela was wounded twice; however, he never received any wound stripes because he was treated at French and British aid stations. Therefore, there are no records of his wounds from the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery Division. According to his statements, the first wound was suffered to his left leg on 16 September 1918 during the St. Mihiel engagement. Cukela was wounded for a second time, in the left arm, during the fighting in the Champagne sector. Neither wounds were severe enough to restrict him from duty.

Cukela received a field commission to the rank of second lieutenant in the Marine Reserves on 26 September 1918 and was selected for a regular commission on 31 March 1919. He was promoted to first lieutenant on 17 July 1919.

AFTERMATH: Following the war, Cukela served overseas bases in Haiti, Santo Domingo, the Philippines, and China. He also served at eight stateside stations, including Quantico, Philadelphia, Norfolk, and Mare Island. In 1919, while stationed in Haiti, Cukela was one of the U.S. military personnel questioned by a Senate committee for the atrocities committed against the Haitian people. Cukela executed a group of Haitian prisoners in the middle of a Marine Corps post. For this atrocity, he was not court-martialed but was transferred to another facility. Marine Corps Commandant General Barnett, in 1920, set up a board headed by Colonel J. H. Russell to decide which temporary wartime officers would be retired, demoted, or discharged. Educated men of good families were preferred over former enlisted men with little formal education. As a consequence of those criteria, Cukela was demoted from first lieutenant to second lieutenant.

From June 1933 to January 1934, Cukela served as a Marine company commander with the Civilian Conservation Corps. His last years in the Marine Corps were spent at Norfolk, where he served as the base quartermaster. Retired as a major on 30 June 1940, he was recalled to active duty on 30 July 1940. During World War II, Cukela served at the Marine Corps Barracks at Norfolk and Philadelphia. He returned to the inactive-retired list on 17 May 1946. He served five days short of 32 years as an active-duty soldier and Marine. On 19 March 1956, Cukela died at the U.S. Naval Hospital, Bethesda, Maryland. He was buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery.

For his actions during World War I, Cukela was awarded the Army and Navy Medals of Honor. He also received the Silver Star medal, the Médaille Militaire, the Légion d'honneur (Chevalier), the Croix de Guerre with two palms and silver star, and the Croce al Merito di Guerra.

QUESTIONS

1. What leadership traits does one believe were displayed by Cukela during the action, and why?
2. How did the actions of Louis Cukela affect his fellow Marines? The enemy? Future Marines?
3. What lessons can one take from Cukela's conduct during his career?

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