

## Brigadier General John Henry “Machine Gun” Parker

Brigadier General [rank awarded upon final retirement] John Henry “Machine Gun” Parker, was born on a farm near Tipton, Missouri and graduated as the 3498 cadet from West Point, class of 1892. His initial notoriety during the Spanish-American War earned him the tag, “Gatling Gun Parker.”<sup>1</sup> In the advance on Santiago Parker proposed to take one of the two Gatling guns which the Americans had with them and fire over the heads of the front line to check and advance from the Spanish reserves. It was an amazingly innovative application of an evolving weapon system. Parker’s idea was executed—a stream of bullets went over the heads and far beyond the advancing American line and successfully kept back the enemy from reinforcing their front line.<sup>2</sup> Years later, Lieutenant General Bullard reflected on Parker’s accomplishment with, “In the Spanish-American War at the battle of Santiago, Parker demonstrated to the military world, for the first time, the value of the machine gun which, although existent long before that war, had never been understood or demonstrated as a valuable weapon. You know how the World War proved it. Parker’s mind and conception had run far ahead of the advanced military minds of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

In 1903 Captain John H. Parker was assigned to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and organized a “model of unit of machine guns,” the precursor of the machine gun company—further demonstrating what machine guns could do. Parker authored several books that caught the public’s attention on this and other military subjects that reflected a broad and deep intellectual capacity. His first book, *The Gatlings at Santiago*, put Parker into the limelight both within the US Army and the public at large. His follow on work, *Tactical Organization and Uses of Machine Guns in the Field*, and *Citizen Soldiers* both addressed significant applications of modern weapons as well as innovative roles for the evolving modern U.S. Army. Parker reflected later in life that his *Tactical Organization and Uses of Machine Guns*, met the test of time at Château-Thierry. “Never in all the history of the military art has any text been so perfectly vindicated as that little book, though it was 20 years before its vindication came.”<sup>4</sup> Parker’s intellect proved a challenge for he knew he had a good idea and kept badgering seniors and superiors, including President Theodore Roosevelt, with recommendations to create a machine-gun corps with himself as a brigadier general at its head. His manner and self-promotion infuriated Major General J. Franklin Bell. “He’s a pestiferous, immodest ass,” Bell wrote to the assistant secretary of war, “but has much ability notwithstanding and his disagreeable qualities must simply be tolerated for the sake of his usefulness.” Bell did allow Parker to continue work—this time with Company A, 20<sup>th</sup> Infantry, to experiment further the role of machine guns in war. Parker’s work continued to be valued, but his recommendations for a separate branch beyond infantry and cavalry was dismissed.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gatling Gun evolved into Machine Gun. Parker Obituary, New York Times, 1942

<sup>2</sup> Walter Barlow Stevens, *Centennial history of Missouri: (the center state) one hundred years in the Union, Volume 2* (St. Louis, Chicago: S.J. Clarke Pub. Co., 1921), 892.

<sup>3</sup> Bullard letter cited in draft “Action Front! A Saga of the Service,” Parker files, USMA.

<sup>4</sup> Colonel “Gatling Gun” Parker, *Memories of the Service*, Draft, 10 May 1937. 211. West Point Archives.

<sup>5</sup> Major General J. Franklin Bell quoted in Edward M. Coffman, *The Regulars, The American Army 1898-1941* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 2004), 161-162.

Pershing knew Parker. Parker served Pershing during the Mexican expedition against Pancho Villa. The two were talking one evening in January 1917 when Parker predicted Pershing was to become either chief of staff or commander of an expedition to France. Pershing was taken aback as if he didn't see that happening. Four months later, Pershing commenced organizing his command and soldiers to proceed to France.<sup>6</sup> Parker became part of the initial crew of experts that arrived in France with Pershing providing guidance and direction on how machine guns were to be employed by follow-on U.S. Army forces through the automatic weapons schools that he stood up and ran the Automatic Weapons School at Gondrecourt and Langres.<sup>7</sup> As the director, Lieutenant Colonel Parker that summer conducted a tour of a French training center for automatic weapons. In his report Parker announced, "We are both convinced...the day of the rifleman is done. He was a good horse while he lasted, but his day is over...The rifleman is passing out and the bayonet is fast becoming obsolete as the crossbow." The report was not well received at Chaumont. Lieutenant Colonel Paul B. Malone, heading GHQ AEF's training section, scribbled on his copy of Parker's note, "speak for yourself, John."<sup>8</sup> Parker mused, "Personally, I prefer the use of machine guns which gives then a chance to come out alive to the one that practically insures the death of more then fifty percent and loss of one-half the guns. I believe in first line machine gun work when it is necessary, and use it when it is necessary. It was necessary at Seicheprey. It was used at Seicheprey. It was necessary at *Bois de Remieres*, and was used at *Bois de Remieres*."<sup>9</sup>

Parker knew almost all of the Chaumont staff. Once Captain George Patton drove him north to observe British operations. When they were returning from the visit, Patton accidentally drove into a railroad gate and received a serious gash to the head. Parker bandaged Patton and took him to a nearby hospital. Later that month the two linked up again when Patton was visiting Parker's machine gun school. Patton recalled Parker "insisted on calling me major."<sup>10</sup>

Colonel Parker had a remarkable family. His wife served with him in the Philippines and was instrumental in establishing schools for the natives in areas that were considered hostile. His son, Captain Henry Burr Parker, a non-graduating member of West Point, class of 1914, was in theater at the same time but assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery.<sup>11</sup> The two managed to link up when Parker ran the Automatic Weapons School. Henry Burr Parker also served as an aerial observer while assigned as an artillery man flying with four different *escadrilles* and two Aero Squadrons. On two occasions he was shot down and survived.<sup>12</sup>

On 13 January 1918 Parker, received a phone call directing him to report to General Harbord, Chief of Staff. Parker was teaching the "Suicide Club," members learning to become machine gun operators. He opined that the school was the best system of training machine gun operators in the world and it made a success of American Arms possible. On that day Parker became an

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<sup>6</sup> Coffman, *The War to End All Wars*, 204.

<sup>7</sup> Parker Obituary, NY Times, 1942.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Rainey, "Ambivalent Warfare," 38, 45, note 21 in Grotelueschen, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Colonel John H. Parker, "Raid April 20-21st on Beaumont Zone," 25 April 1918, Box 44, 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, RG 120, NARA.

<sup>10</sup> Blumenson, 460.

<sup>11</sup> Walter Barlow Stevens, Centennial history of Missouri: (the center state, 1921, Volume 2. 892.

<sup>12</sup> Draft "Action Front! A Saga of the Service," Parker files, USMA, 15.

adopted son of the “Old Nutmeg State.”<sup>13</sup> Harbord told Parker that the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry was in bad shape. The 26<sup>th</sup> Division was going in the front line and something had to be done quickly. All the 102<sup>nd</sup> field officers had been relieved and sent to other duties. “Someone must put a soul into that outfit, and General Pershing has personally selected you as the man he believes best fitted to do it.”<sup>14</sup> Parker replied, “Say to General Pershing that no officer trained as I have could possibly refuse such an assignment. I will do my best to make good on the new job.” Harbord concluded the discussion with, “That is exactly what General Pershing expected you to say. Now I shall try to repeat his exact words....Tell Colonel Parker there will be a pair of stars hung up on the Chemin des Dames for him. Tell him to go and get them!”<sup>15</sup>

Two weeks after Parker talked with Harbord, he met General Edwards. It suggested an air of paranoia. Edwards was reserved. “I understand you are sent by General Pershing?” “Yes, General, I was so informed.” “Great friend of yours?” “I have served on his staff twice, General; but do not claim to be at all intimate with him. On the contrary, our relations have usually been strictly formal and official. Of course I admire him greatly.” “Know Chaumont pretty well, I suppose?” “No General; never was stationed there.” “But you know all that group at Chaumont, of course. Did you hear any comment about me there, any indication that I might be relieved of command of the 26<sup>th</sup> Division?” “My assignment is to take command of a regiment in your Division, General. I have heard no gossip, and would not listen to it if I did. I expect to give you all the loyalty due to my Division Commander, just as I was loyal to Pershing while I served on his staff, and to do the very best I can for the regiment.” The exchange assuaged Edwards’ fears, responding with, “I know you John Henry, and am glad to have you in my command. I shall remember what you have said. Can you, in addition to your other duties, help train the machine guns of the Division?”<sup>16</sup>

Colonel Parker loved to banter with *commandant* du Boisrouvray, who later described the man as “unusually tall, shoulders too wide for his size with a small round head—a head with a short nose and a round chin. He looked like a gigantic Buffalo Bill. He claimed to speak fluent French, Spanish and English—a fact that was somewhat true because he would consistently mix the three languages into one sentence.”<sup>17</sup> One evening at Chemin des Dames Colonel Parker called du Boisrouvray to his headquarters and proceeded to say in a loud voice, “Boar-Rouvray, my friend, I found a way to end the war.” Du Boisrouvray was puzzled. “Yes,” Parker continued, “simply change the spirit, take the offensive spirit of the Crusades...the spirit of Joan of Arc!” In a quiet voice he stated, “Do you know Mademoiselle St. Paul?” Du Boisrouvray replied “I answered that I had heard about her. Parker trumpeted, “Well, here is the new Joan of Arc! It is mademoiselle St. Paul!” Parker met her at Soissons wearing a nurse’s uniform that prominently displayed a red cross! Du Boisrouvray said John Henry Parker always saw big!<sup>18</sup>

Parker commanded the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, the regiment he fondly called his “Nutmegs.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Colonel “Gatling Gun” Parker, Memories of the Service, Draft, 10 May 1937. 2. West Point Archives.

<sup>14</sup> Colonel “Gatling Gun” Parker, Memories of the Service, Draft, 10 May 1937. 216. West Point Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Draft “Action Front! A Saga of the Service,” Parker files, USMA.

<sup>16</sup> Colonel “Gatling Gun” Parker, Memories of the Service, Draft, 10 May 1937. 221-222. West Point Archives.

<sup>17</sup> du Boisrouvray, 349.

<sup>18</sup> du Boisrouvray, 350-351.

<sup>19</sup> Note: Another source shows Parker was born in California, Missouri. Joe Kolinsky, “The Grand Old Man of the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry, General John Henry Parker,” *Yankee Doings*, March 1943, 11.

Parker was in his element when the 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry assumed command at Beaumont at the southern Woëvre front. He was very energetic. In every phone call he received, he proudly answered “Headquarters Division.” Parker was quick to explain the array of machine gun deployments on the map. “Machine guns everywhere! More Germans nowhere!”<sup>20</sup>

It was testament to the moment that Parker’s regimental commander counterparts serving in the 1<sup>st</sup> Division for the most part achieved what Major General Harbord predicted. Colonel John Hines was promoted to Major General and served as 4<sup>th</sup> Division commander that August—eventually commanding III Corps at the time of the armistice. Colonel Frank Parker, 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry, also was promoted to Major General and became the 1<sup>st</sup> Division commander that led the division’s final move towards Sedan the last days of the war. Colonel Hanson Ely, 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry, later commanded 5<sup>th</sup> Division at Meuse-Argonne. Colonel Hamilton Smith from the 26<sup>th</sup> Infantry led his troops in battle at Soissons that summer and was killed by machine gun fire. Parker’s potential to achieve further command was not hampered by lack of courage. General Edwards cited Parker twelve times in division orders for distinguished contact in battle.<sup>21</sup> John Henry Parker was also a recipient of four Distinguished Service Crosses while serving as 102<sup>nd</sup> Infantry commander in battle—an incredible legacy and statement of the man.

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<sup>20</sup> du Boisrouvray, 352.

<sup>21</sup> Draft “Action Front! A Saga of the Service,” Parker files, USMA.

**This article is excerpted from Terry Finnegan's history: *A Delicate Affair on the Western Front: America Learns How to Fight a Modern War in the Woëvre Trenches*. For other articles and material on World War I, Air Intelligence and Reconnaissance, and Military Aviation, visit the author's website:**

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