



**American Legion Post 178  
Millerton NY**

**Killed in Action Tribute**



**Corporal William J. McLaughlin Jr., US Marine Corps**

**PFC John Kyle Smith, US Army**

*Post Historian Sean M. Klay*

### **Introduction**

In 2007, this Post began recognizing local fallen members of our nation's armed forces with a Killed in Action Tribute to better connect this ceremony to the meaning of Memorial Day. These are the stories of our young men and women, our sons and our daughters, who we send off to fight and win our nation's wars on distant shores.

2017 marked the centennial of the start of the United States involvement in what we know today as the First World War. It is a war that you will at best get a passing reference to in high school, and History majors in college and graduate school will probably not even encounter a single class on it. Yet it is a war, perhaps even more so than the Second World War a mere 21 years later, that defined the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

It was a war Europe stumbled into. Beginning in August of 1914, everyone said it would be over by Christmas, yet, it would continue for over four years. This war was a war of firsts. The first time a war was fought on the land, on the sea and in the air. The first use of tanks, flamethrowers, poison gas, submarines, and modern battleships in combat. By 1917, the year of America's entry, every major European power of the day was involved, and all were literally being bled dry. The better part of an entire generation of European men were dead on the battlefields of France, Italy, Austria-Hungary, Germany, Russia, modern day Turkey, Greece, the Middle East, on the Islands of the Pacific, and on every ocean. By war's end, there would be over 18 million dead, 23 million wounded, 4 empires ceased to exist, and the map of Europe and the world changed forever.

Young men and women from Millerton NY 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.**

William J. McLaughlin Jr. was born August 21, 1888 to William and Mary McLaughlin. Young William's maternal grandfather, Joseph McGhee, the progenitor of the McGhee family here in Millerton had emigrated from Scotland in the 1850's. He served with the 150<sup>th</sup> 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 other than that he was born in Jersey City NJ and had an older sister Agnus. His mother Mary died early in his life, when William was a year and a half old. The record is mostly silent until 1916 when William now age 28 decided to enlist into the United States Marine Corps, a decision that pleased his Civil War Veteran grandfather Joseph immensely. Initially assigned to the new dreadnaught battleship USS North Dakota, things rapidly changed for William and the nation on April 6<sup>th</sup>, 1917 when Congress, following the request from President Wilson on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, officially declared war on Imperial



## American Legion Post 178 Millerton NY



### Killed in Action Tribute

Germany and entered the Great War on the side on the Entante. Within a week he was reassigned to 77<sup>th</sup> Company (later C Company) of the 6<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion then being formed at Quantico VA. The 6<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion, would constitute part of the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Brigade, which when complete was attached to the US Army's newly created 2<sup>nd</sup> Division. By the end of the year, William with his brigade and the rest of 2<sup>nd</sup> Division would join the 1<sup>st</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> Divisions in France, where General John J. Pershing was organizing the American Expeditionary Force.

From the little personal correspondence, we know about, and the clues from local newspaper accounts it appears William was a prolific writer, and quickly distinguished himself as a leader able to keep a cool head under fire. From March 1918 onward, with a brief exception in August of that year for reasons unknown, William spent the war on the front lines taking part in nearly every major battle and campaign the American Expeditionary Force took part in. His service included that battle that helped define the US Marine Corps as a fighting force and shook the confidence of the Imperial German Army to it core, the Battle of Belleau Wood. By October 1918 William, now a Corporal and responsible for a Machine Gun Squad within his Company, took part in what would prove to be the last great American offensive of the war, the Meuse-Argonne.

### John K. Smith

During William's great adventures our other Millerton resident was not idle. John Kyle Smith was born to Frank and Mary Smith in Tivoli NY on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1888 and within a decade would find himself the oldest of six children. From the state and federal census records of the time we know that John went to school in Red Hook with the rest of his siblings 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 had a house on Elm Ave and a shoe store on Main Street.

This is where John was working in 1917 when the United States entered the Great War. June 5<sup>th</sup>, 1917 was a historic day, where young men from all over the United States reported to their local draft boards to register for the draft. John was one of them, and on his draft registration card we can find his uncles signature as the certifying official.

Nearly a year later John received his draft notice, and on May 25<sup>th</sup>, 1918 he reported with a number of other young men from Millerton to Millbrook NY where he officially enlisted into the U.S. Army. By June 30<sup>th</sup>, John along with fellow Millerton residents Santa Anna Finkle, William G. Simmons, and George A. Evans were on the same troop ship the S.S. Mercury, with several other Dutchess County residents, on their way France. After a few short months of training John found himself assigned in October 1918 to the 320<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment part of the 80<sup>th</sup> Division as a replacement soldier for the losses the division had already taken. On the night of October 31<sup>st</sup> and into the early morning hours of November 1<sup>st</sup> the 80<sup>th</sup> Division relieved elements of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division to take their place on the line immediately adjacent to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division and the 4<sup>th</sup> Marine Brigade.

### The Events of November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918

The morning of November 1<sup>st</sup>, 1918 found Marine Corporal William McLaughlin and Army Private John Smith within 10 miles of each other. At 0430 the American Artillery opened on the German positions just yards away. The infantry assault began at 0630 that morning. For Corporal McLaughlin this experience of "going over the top" was nothing new. For Private John Smith it was his first time. For both it would be their last.



**American Legion Post 178  
Millerton NY**



**Killed in Action Tribute**

What exactly happened to John, we may never know. The record so far has been silent with the only indication be a notation on his service record that he was killed "North of St. Juvin."

For William we have a record of the events of that morning from a letter written to Williams sister Agnus by his good friend Guy Moore who wrote her and that letter was published on March 6, 1919 in the Millerton Telegram, the local paper of the day.

Dear Mrs. Dignan,

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 77<sup>th</sup> Company.  
Mrs. Diegnan, many have paid the price but none more brave than he. He was loved by his company.

As the letter indicates, the war ended just 10 days later, on the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, of the 11<sup>th</sup> day, of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of 1918, the guns finally fell silent, 1,564 days since the war began.

**Remains Return Home**

Following the war, the families of both William and John received correspondence from the War Department regarding the permanent disposition of their loved ones remains. Both families elected to have their remains returned to the states. Corporal William J. McLaughlin Jr. lies at rest in Irondale Cemetery here in Millerton, next to his father William Sr. and just a few headstones away from his mother Mary, and her family.

John remains were returned to the U.S. in July of 1921 and were laid to rest in Red Church Cemetery in Red Hook not far from where his parents were laid to rest over 20 years later.



**American Legion Post 178  
Millerton NY**

**Killed in Action Tribute**



**After the War**

After the war these men were not forgotten. Williams sister Agnus kept his memory alive long after he had gone to his eternal rest. She was an active part of American Legion Auxiliary Unit 178 here in Millerton serving in a number of positions. In 1934, as noted in the April 19, 1934 edition of the Harlem Valley Times, presented a “beautiful gavel and bell to the unit in memory of her brother Corporal W. J. McLaughlin who made the supreme sacrifice over there in the World War.”

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.

**Thank You**

Tributes like this take a numerous amount of effort and this one was no different. I would personally like to thank the efforts of the Dutchess County Historical Society and our own local North East Historical Society who each contributed greatly in collecting the information needed to make this tribute possible. To them I owe a deep and heartfelt thanks.

*Authors Note: The above narrative was presented during the Post 2018 Memorial Day observances in Veterans Park, Millerton NY as part of the Posts annual Killed in Action Tribute.*