RENAX CALVIN BUCHANAN

1883 – 1954, WORLD WAR I

U.S. MARINE CORPS, PRIVATE

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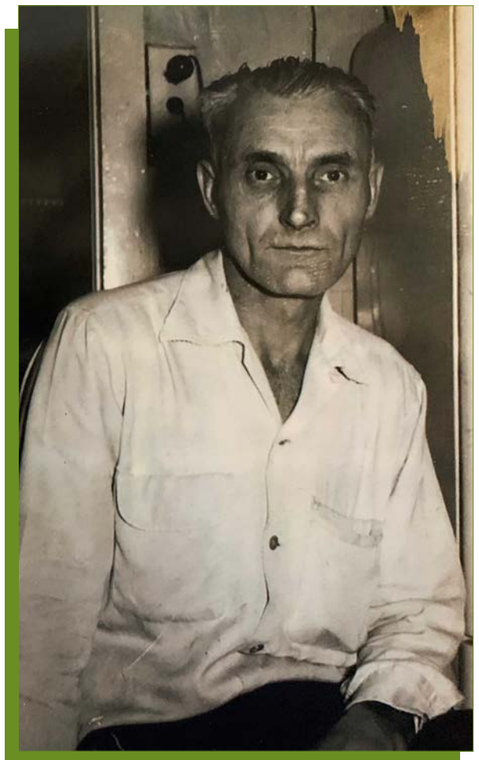
The intriguing life of Renax C. Buchanan began on June 25th, 1883, in the Appalachian foothills of western Maryland's Garrett County. His parents, Malissa and Hanson Buchanan, resided in the coal mining and railroad town of Bloomington when Renax was born, the eldest of nine eventual children.

Garrett County was formed in the 1850s and named after John Work Garrett, then president of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O). The B&O cut westward through the Allegheny Mountains and, along with the National Road, brought a steady stream of immigrant laborers into the highlands of western Maryland to work and settle. The Buchanans resided in a small but thriving Swedish-Italian neighborhood, populated by working-class families. The area was rich in natural resources, and the constant sound of trains hauling the region's coal, timber, and processed grains would have been familiar to Renax and his siblings as they grew up. Malissa herself was a Garrett County native, raised in a farming family from Oakland.

Malissa managed the home while Hanson worked as a coal miner in Bloomington. By 1900, coal had overtaken timber as the town's largest commodity. The G.C. Pattison Company operated a mine about a mile west of Bloomington, employing about 40 men, four of whom were members of the Buchanan family. At age 16, Renax worked in the mines alongside his father and younger brothers, Porter and Alonzo, who were 15 and 13, respectively. Renax propbably stopped attending school following the fourth grade—the size of the Buchanan family would have required the labor of all the oldest children for support. Renax continued working in the mines far into his 20s.



Renax Buchanan later in life. *Ancestry.com*

Hardships struck the family during Renax's youth. His brother Porter had legal troubles as a young man and frequently found himself under arrest. Alonzo was killed in a hunting accident, while a sister, Daisy, died of epilepsy when she was just 19 years old. Renax himself was not immune to misfortune. In March 1911, while working near the Potomac River in the Davis Coal & Coke Company's Buxton Mine, Renax injured his hand unloading a coal car. The injury was not life-threatening, but inhibited his ability to work.

On December 31, 1911, Renax decided to leave the coal mines and volunteer for the U.S. Army. He mustered into Company L, 5th U.S. Infantry in Albany, New York. The 27-year-old joined an army with only 84,006 active duty personnel, since the United States was not at war. In fact, the Army's strength had shrunk by 59 percent from its most recent peak strength of 209,714 during the Spanish-American War nine years prior.

The former coal miner from Maryland signed a three-year contract which began easily enough. According to newspaper articles, the unit remained in and around New York participating in parades and training exercises. In one such drill, Renax's unit engaged in a mock defense of New York City alongside National Guard units, organized as the "Blue Division," and maneuvered around Albany against the "Red Division," comprised of New England units from New Haven, Connecticut. Army life in New York probably seemed like a walk in the park compared to the coal mines of western Maryland.

At some point during his enlistment, the Army transferred Renax to San Francisco, California, but rotated him to Fort Liscum, Alaska, in late 1912 and early 1913. It was lonely frontier garrison duty, but Renax may have at least benefited from a batch of player pianos delivered to Liscum around that time. On December 30, 1914, the Army transported Private Buchanan back to the recruiting station in Cumberland, Maryland, and honorably discharged him.

The same year Renax left the Army, World War I broke out across Europe. Millions of young men from dozens of nations large and small mobilized and marched off to fight. Millions fell in the trenches to new weapons of war like machine guns, heavy artillery, airplanes, and gas. Renax, like most Americans, learned of the war from afar as the United States remained neutral.

The 32-year-old ex-soldier remained a civilian for only eight months. On August 27, 1915, Renax returned to the recruiting station in Cumberland, Maryland, and volunteered for the U.S. Marine Corps. He transferred to New York City for training, where he received high marks in firearms. He then transferred to the Marine Barracks Naval Magazine in Hingham, Massachusetts, where the Corps made him a telephone operator.

Eearly in his Marine Corps service, however, Renax's fortunes took a turn for the worse. On November 15, 1915, he was charged with being Absent/Away Without Leave (AWOL). The Marine Corps found him two days later in a jail cell in nearby Hull, Massachusetts, where he was being held by civilian authorities on a charge of intoxication. He was granted probation, but was tried twice by military courts and threatened with a Bad Conduct Discharge (BCD). The case was settled for a $12 fine.

He received two more demerits for insubordination the following year. In January 1916, he returned drunk from liberty, and two months later his superiors reprimanded him for being insolent to a noncommissioned officer. The Marines assigned him extra patrol duty on base and enacted a one-week restriction on furloughs following the second incident.

Renax's disciplinary problems did not stop the Marine Corps from deploying him overseas. The day after his case in Hingham, Renax joined the 42nd Company and embarked for faraway Guam in the central Pacific. Private Buchanan would visit Guam—part of the Mariana Islands which the United States had seized from Spain less than two

Three regiments of U.S. Marines in camp at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in 1911. The Guantanamo Marine garrison was generally not this large during Renax Buchanan's tenure in the Corps. *Library of Congress*

decades before—more than once in his career, but never for long. Instead, most of Renax's overseas time was spent around other former Spanish possessions—in the Caribbean.

Indeed, it was to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, that Renax was transferred next. The United States had not claimed Cuba as a territory following the Spanish-American War. Instead, the U.S. retained a navy base at Guantanamo Bay (which remains operational to this day) as part of a larger strategy to project military and political power into the Caribbean and deter what it saw as European interference in the region. Marines served, then and now, as the base's garrison.

However, 1916 was a year of near-constant movement for the Maryland Marine, though it is unclear whether this was related to his disciplinary issues. Whatever the cause, he returned to both Guam and Massachusetts that year. In the latter location, Renax ran afoul of authority once more, when he was charged with going AWOL for ten hours during guard duty in Hingham. A fine of $13 and ten days of extra duty were his sentence. Preferring to be somewhere else entirely, the day after the charge Renax submitted a request to "see active service" in the Caribbean again.

If Renax's request was granted, odds were high that he would be sent to Haiti, where the Marine Corps was maintaining a strong garrison. In fact, American Marines occupied the entire island nation—formerly a colony of France—and had done so since shortly after its president was assassinated in 1915. Various American presidents, time after time, resisted domestic pressure to annex Haiti, but now President Woodrow Wilson's installation of U.S. military forces was seen as a deterrent to the return of European influence so close to American shores. The small, collapsing republic was heavily indebted to several European nations and the U.S. government feared Haiti's creditors, not least among them Germany, would send troops to collect. After the 1915 arrival of U.S. Marines, a treaty signed virtually at gunpoint gave the United States military control of Haiti and oversight of its political system.

The Haitian occupation was simply one component of American gunboat diplomacy in the Caribbean. Since its victory in the Spanish-American War, the United States had taken Puerto Rico as a territory, installed Marines in the Dominican Republic's capital of Santo Domingo, and forced the independent nation of Cuba to allow American military intervention any time the United States wished.

This was the Caribbean into which Renax was sent when the Marines granted his request for transfer. He arrived in Haiti's capital of Port-Au-Prince on November 26, 1916, aboard the battleship USS *Vermont* (BB-20). He joined the 51st Company, Marine Expeditionary Forces, and assumed his former position of telephone orderly, connecting calls and facilitating communications between ship and shore. But crises soon called the *Vermont* and the Marine detachments of several navy ships to Cuba, where a rebellion was in progress against the U.S.-backed conservative government.

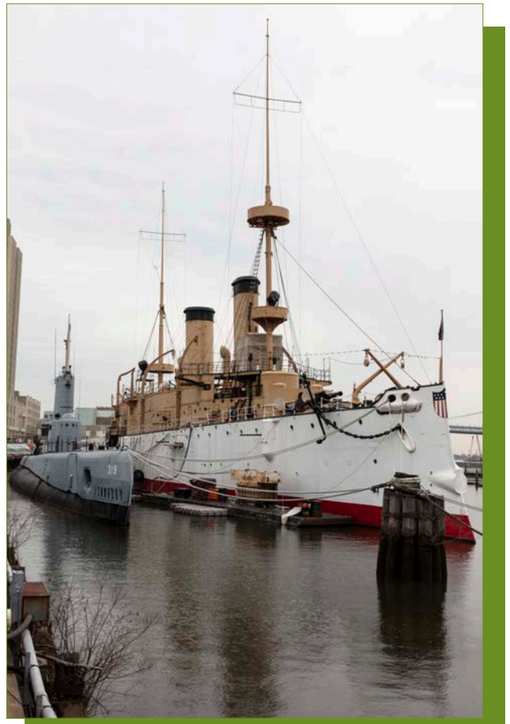
Arriving at the beginning of March 1917, Renax was among the first Marines on the scene in Cuba. The leathernecks' mission was to ensure the steady flow of Cuban sugar to the United States and Allied powers fighting against Germany. Many of the Cuban Republic's large sugar plantations were owned by Americans, who demanded that their property be protected from insurgents. This move to Cuba may have effected Renax's transfer to the 24th Marine Company, which was then the garrison of the American naval base in Guantanamo. Only a month later, the United States joined the Allies and declared war against Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Though Renax Buchanan was not among the soon-to-be-famous U.S. Marines fighting in Europe, the First World War still formed a huge part of his Caribbean service. This was the first conflict to employ submarines on a strategic scale. Although German U-boats never operated as far south as the Caribbean, U.S. Navy patrol squadrons protecting the Panama Canal were beset by rumors of hidden U-boat bases and deadly "wolfpacks" (the squadrons in which German submarines operated).

After departing Guantanamo, Renax served on a number of the obsolete vessels in the Caribbean fleet, among them the *Jupiter* (AC-3), *Olympia* (C-6), and *Ontario* (AT-13) during patrols between various ports. At the end of his travels, he boarded the USS *St. Louis* (C-20), on which he traveled back to the United States—most likely at the end of May 1917, after about six months in southern waters.

Stateside, Renax was soon in trouble again. On November 2, 1917, he was arrested for drunkenness while serving as a sentinel at the Marine Barracks in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania—where a major navy yard was located at the time. He had been discovered by the Officer of the Day, two hours late for duty, intoxicated, and missing his military-issue revolver. Renax was charged with "Drunkenness on Duty," court-martialed, and found guilty on November 26. The military court sentenced him to five years imprisonment, followed by a dishonorable discharge. Renax appealed the decision the following week and got the term reduced to 18 months. While the punishment might seem harsh in a peacetime military, Renax's offense was committed in time of war, when fear of enemy saboteurs was rampant and penalties for such negligence were increased.

The Marine Corps transferred Renax to the Naval Prison on Parris Island (spelled "Paris" until 1919), South Carolina, where he began his sentence in December 1917. Naval authorities managed Parris Island, and often prioritized rehabilitation over punishment. Prisoners were allowed to wear their regular service uniforms and participated in military activities such as drilling. These prisoners had usually been court-martialed for nonviolent



One of Buchanan's ships, the USS *Olympia* (C-6), is the oldest steel vessel afloat.
Library of Congress

crimes, and those who behaved well could be offered reenlistment upon release. Shortly after his arrival, the court again decided to shorten Renax's 18-month sentence, and to remove the dishonorable discharge penalty.

In August 1918, after only eight months of confinement, Renax was quietly released back to active duty with the Corps on a one-year probation. Following his reinstatement, he transferred to the Marine Corps Barracks in Quantico, Virginia, and prepared for overseas service.

Quantico was only a year old, constructed as a training site specifically for troops bound for the brutal realities of war on Europe's Western Front. Between its opening and the end of war in November 1918, 30,000 Marines trained in trench warfare at Quantico. At the end of that year, as troops began reurning from Europe, the Marines assigned Private Buchanan to the 180th Company, 15th Marine Regiment, and sent him back to the Caribbean.

Renax arrived once more at Guantanamo Bay. He remained in the garrison without incident until July 1919, when he boarded the USS *Lake Bridge* bound for Norfolk, Virginia. On August 26, Renax completed his service and the Marine Corps formally discharged him. His superior officer listed his character as "good," and the Marines issued him an honorable discharge.

Now 35 years old after roughly seven years of military service, Renax Calvin Buchanan returned home to civilian life for good. He had spent much of his enlistment hounded by drinking and disciplinary problems, bounced from base to base—and ship to ship—up and down the Atlantic seaboard, across the Caribbean, and across the Pacific Ocean and back. The Allegheny Mountains may have felt quaint by comparison.

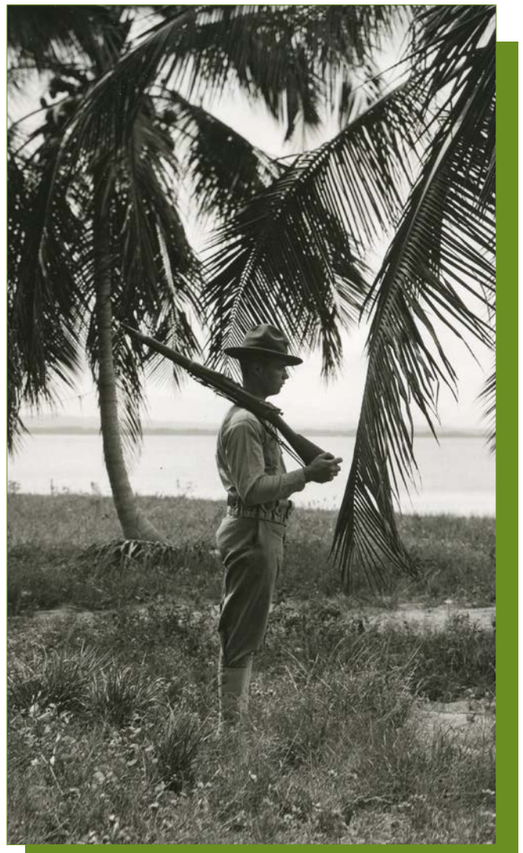
His old life as a coal miner proved to be the key to finding work. Between August 1919 and January 1920, he found his way to Piedmont, West Virginia, a small town in Mineral County located less than three miles from his family's home in Bloomington, Maryland. But Renax did not come alone. Sometime between his discharge and the move to West Virginia, Renax married Martha Ellen Wilt from Allegany County, Maryland. She went by "Ella" and may have encountered Renax during his early travels around western Maryland working the mines.

Ella had three children from a previous marriage—Opal, John, and Frank Parker—whose ages ranged from seven to 12 when she and Renax enjoined their lives. Shortly after settling in Piedmont, Ella and Renax had their first child together, Eva, in 1921, and three years later, the couple welcomed Edward. Another son arrived in 1927, but the baby succumbed to acute bronchitis.
The Buchanan family, now seven strong, did not remain in Piedmont. By 1927, the family relocated about 50 miles south to Coketon, in West Virginia's more mountainous Tucker County. It is possible their move was necessitated by hardship: later in life, Renax submitted a request for replacement discharge papers, claiming the originals had been destroyed when his house burned down in 1924.

Renax still listed himself as a coal miner, but work was difficult to find for many Americans by 1930. The Great Depression hit West Virginia particularly hard, with some counties experiencing up to 80 percent unemployment. President Roosevelt's incoming administration kicked off large-scale infrastructure projects to provide jobs. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was one new agency fighting unemployment by offering temporary jobs to some 8.5 million Americans. Renax took a WPA road construction job making $380 a year in Monongalia County.

By 1942, he was no longer employed with the WPA. The family remained in Monongalia County throughout the 1940s and 1950s, however. Renax likely drew a veteran's pension, which helped Ella maintain the household.

In June 1954, Renax checked himself into the Louis A. Johnson Veterans Hospital in Clarksburg, West Virginia (then a very new facility) suffering from abdominal pain. Renax remained in the hospital for 58 days as his condition deteriorated. On August 9, 1954, at the age of 71, Renax Calvin Buchanan passed away from intestinal complications. He had lived a hard life, but a full one. Ella lived another ten years. She is interred alongside him in Grafton National Cemetery.



Cropped image of a Marine sentry on duty among the palm trees in Guantanamo Bay in 1919. Buchanan shared the same post until July that same year, shortly before his discharge.

National Archives

PLACE OF INTERMENT:
Grafton National Cemetery
SECTION B
SITE 1627

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. Biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students and West Virginia University graduate students and PhD candidates, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first national cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School, among many others.

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Washington D.C.

SOURCES AND COPYRIGHT

For readability, bibliographies have been omitted from this publication. Student research for these biographies relies heavily on primary sources—census records, city directories, draft cards, muster rolls, and more—made available digitally through Ancestry and Fold3. Yearbook repositories and the digitized collections of many universities and archives have been invaluable resources. Most newspaper research was conducted digitally via Newspapers.com, NewspaperArchives, and the Library of Congress's *Chronicling America* database.

Servicemembers' Official Military Personnel Files (OMPFs) and Individual Deceased Personnel Files (IDPFs) are another essential part of project research, provided free of charge in most cases by the National Archives through standard records requests.

As the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project has grown and matured, the team has found that new sources sometimes surface for veterans researched in prior project years. To better maintain a "living bibliography" of all its veterans, a single master document is kept up on the project's webpage under the "Programs" tab at **www.wvhumanities.org**.

Views and opinions expressed herein do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, National Archives of the United States, or any other federal agency. For more information about the Veterans Legacy Memorial and the Veterans Legacy Grant Program, visit **www.vlm.cem.va.gov**.

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