

Louis Cukela

Born

May 1, 1888, Split, Croatia/Serbia

Entered Service

1914 U.S. Army

1917 U.S. Marine Corps 5th Marines, 66th Company

World War I and World War II

Died

March 15, 1956



Early Years:

Louis Cukela was born in Spalato, Croatia, May 1, 1888, the son of George and Johanna (Bubrich) Cukela. He attended grade schools in Spalato, and then attended the Merchant Academy for two years and the Royal Gymnasium for two years. In 1890 his mother passed away. In 1913, Louis and his brother immigrated to the United States and settled in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His father and three sisters remained in Serbia.

On September 21, 1914, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. He was serving as a Corporal in Company H, 12th Infantry when he was honorably discharge on June 12, 1916.

World War I Years

With war raging in Europe, based on a spark touched off in Cukela's native Serbia, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps. Following the United States' entry into the conflict, he went to France and took part in the engagements of the 5th Marine Division.

Major Cukela is a double recipient of the Medal of Honor, one by the Army and one by the Navy, for the same action in World War I. The event occurred near Villers-Cotterest, France on the morning of July 18, 1918, during the Soissons engagement. The 66th Company, 5th Marines, in which Major Cukela was a gunnery sergeant, was moving through Forest de Retz when it was help up by an enemy strong point. Despite warnings of his men, Cukela crawled out from the flank and advanced alone towards the German lines. Getting beyond the strong point despite heavy fire, "Gunny" Cukela captured one gun by bayoneting its' crew. Picking up their hand grenades, he then demolished the remaining portion of the strong point from the shelter of a nearby gun pit. Cukela took four prisoners and captured two undamaged machine guns.

The famous Marine was wounded in action twice, but there is no record in the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, so he was never awarded the Purple Heart. The first wound was on September 16, 1918 at Jaulny, France during the Mihiel engagement. He was wounded again during the fighting in the Champagne sector. Neither wound was serious.

Major Cukela received a field appointment to the rank of second lieutenant in the Marine Corps Reserve on September 26, 1918, and was selected for a commission in the regular Marine Corps on March 31, 1919. He was promoted to first lieutenant on July 17, 1919, and the rank of captain on September 15, 1921.

Louis was married to Minnie Myrtle Strayer of Mifflintown, PA, at Washington, DC, on December 22, 1923. They had no children.

After the war, Major Cukela served at bases in Haiti, Santo Domingo, the Philippines, and China, also at domestic posts at Quantico, Virginia; Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Norfolk and Hampton Roads, Virginia; Mare Island, California, Washington, DC; Nashville, Indiana; and Fort Knox, Kentucky.

From June, 1933 to January, 1934, the major served as a company commander with the Civilian Conservation Corps. He was the post quartermaster at Norfolk from 1934 to 1940.

Cukela was retired as a major on June 30, 1940, but was recalled to active duty on July 30th of the same year.

World War II Years

During World War II, Cukela served at Norfolk and Philadelphia.

He returned to the inactive retired list on May 17, 1946. He served a few days less than 32 years of active duty in the Army and Marines.

Post War Years

Major Cukela died at the U.S. Naval Hospital, Bethesda, Maryland, on March 15, 1956. He was the last surviving double recipient of the Medal of Honor. After services at St. June Frances de Chantel Church, Bethesda, he was buried with full military honors in Arlington National Cemetery, March 22, 1956. Mrs. Minnie Cukela died five months later and is buried at his side.

At the time of his death, Major Cukela was survived by a sister, Mrs. Zorka Cukela Dvoracek of Sibenik, Croatia.

In addition to the two Medals of Honor, Major Cukela was awarded the *Silver Star* by the Army, the *Medaille Militaire* (he was the first Marine officer ever to receive this award), the *Legion d'Honneur in the rank of Chevalier*, the *Croix de Guerre with two palms*, another *Croix de Guerre with silver star*, all by France; the *Croce al Merito di Guerra* by Italy, and the *Commander's Cross of the Royal Order of the Crown* by Yugoslavia. He also received three Second Division citations.



2nd Lt. Cukela receiving Medal of Honor from Gen. John Pershing, ca. 1918-19

[Image courtesy of <http://www.croatia.org>]

His citation reads:

“When his company, advancing through a wood, met with strong resistance from an enemy strong point, Sgt. Cukela crawled out from the flank and made his way toward the German lines in the face of heavy fire, disregarding the warnings of his comrades. He succeeded in getting behind the enemy position and rushed a machinegun emplacement, killing or driving off the crew with his bayonet. With German hand grenades he then bombed out the remaining portion of the strong point, capturing 4 men and 2 damaged machineguns.”

Major Cukela also had the following decorations; *Victory Medal with Aisne, Aisne-Marne, St. Mihiel, Meuse-Argonne, Defense Sector clasps* and three silver stars, *Haitian Campaign Medal, Expeditionary Medal with one star, Yangtze Service Medal, American Defense Service Medal, American Area Campaign Medal, World War II Victory Medal, and the French Fourragere.*



Photo by Raymond L. Collins

SOURCES

Arlington National Cemetery:

<http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/louis-cuk.htm> read: <http://www.eserbia.org/people/military/123-louis-cukela>

Find a Grave: <http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&GRid=5814417>

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Home of Heroes: http://www.homeofheroes.com/moh/citations_1918_wwi/cukela_louis.html

Serbia America website: <http://www.eserbia.org/people/military/123-louis-cukela>

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