

THE DAY BY DAY DIARY OF A MACHINE GUNNER, 1917

This document is a typescript of a daily diary kept by an American soldier during WWI. To date, we have not been able to establish the identity of this soldier, however, the box in which it was received was originally sent to Gayle Evans, 55301 Winged Foot, La Quinta, CA 92253. We are speculating that she may be related to the soldier in question, possibly a grand-daughter.

The writer of the diary was born on August 27, 1898 in Wisconsin. On April 28, 1917, he enlisted at the local armory and was sworn in to the Wisconsin National Guards Company, Wisconsin Infantry where he took his initial training. On August 6, 1917, he was sent to Camp Douglas, Wisconsin for further training. On August 16, 1917, he was assigned to the 42 Division (Rainbow Division), machine gun company, Company B and discharged from the Wisconsin National Guard. On September 3, 1917 his company travelled by train to Camp Mills in Long Island.

On October 18, 1917, his company boarded USS Dovington on their way to France, landing at St. Nazaire, Bay of Biscay on November 2, 1917. On November 6, 1917, they boarded a train and on November 9 arrived at Brousse-en-Bois in the province of Haute-Marne, NE France where they were billeted until the beginning of December. On December 9 his company is on the move, hiking almost daily in the area of the Vosges Mountains to toughen them up. They do get a turkey dinner on Christmas Day to the delight of all. Further hiking sees them ending up on the Langres Plateau on December 30 where they are billeted in a "haunted" chateau at the top of a steep hill. The company has hiked about 140 kilometers in 4 days. The writer's heels are infected and he gets a couple weeks rest to recuperate until January 15. The company begins to work hard getting to know their machine guns and participate in drills at the bottom of the hill. On January 20 they move to Flagey, three miles away. As they have no mules they have to haul the gun and ammunition carts by hand. They begin regular machine gun drills and he is appointed loader of the gun. They also participate in numerous other drills learning to use grenades and gas masks.

On February 27, 1918, the writer is assigned to the Signal Corps with several other soldiers and begins to learn how to use the semaphore, wig-wag signaling, the wireless, T.P.S., projectors, buzzerphones and heliography. They are told they will need to memorize complete messages word for word because no orders will be written at the front in case they are taken prisoner.

On March 11, the company moves to Camp de New York, a camouflaged camp in the woods which is part of secondary defenses. He expects to move up to the front lines at any time. On March 13, the company relieves the soldiers in the trenches in the Lorraine Front taking over their pistols and ammunition. The writer describes a place where all the soldiers were buried in a dugout, killing most. There are a few still alive that are being fed through a pipe. There is no chance of rescuing them as the Germans kill anyone trying to come to their rescue. There are 12 men in his dugout. They have a small stove and a table with a short bench on each side of it. On March 21, there is a serious mustard gas attack. Most of those wearing the French gas masks perish as the masks disintegrate fairly quickly. The writer describes how he and his fellow soldiers wear their British masks for 16 hours and play cards to ensure they do not fall asleep. They are pulled back from the front as 2/3 of the outfit has been gassed

and are in hospital seriously wounded and many have died. He suffers blindness and loss of speech for 5 days but slowly recovers. He describes how liquid mustard gas if it comes in contact with flesh will eat away one's flesh and can cause serious damage or death. They learn that they were subjected to a stronger mixture of mustard gas than was previously used and that ways of treating sufferers has had to be severely altered and it explains why the French gas masks were disintegrating.

By April 15, most have recovered from the gas attack and the unit moves closer to the Front. There they meet up with a U.S. Cavalry outfit that has not yet seen action and they have great fun seeing how clueless these new recruits are. On May 6, his unit is moved to the Front where they meet little resistance. It rains every day and the dugout is extremely wet and uncomfortable. On May 11, he describes how his unit shoots down a German observer plane. The Captain sends out men to bury the pilot and the observer but not before breaking off half of the German identification for each of them. He instructs them to place the propeller blades upright at the head of the grave. He complains about a serious lack of sleep as they are short of a full complement and are lucky to get 2 hours of sleep per day. The counter-attack they are expecting does not happen and after a week they are relieved.

The outfit that replaces them has no experience and are smoking cigarettes as they march in. The Germans, realizing that new untried troops were coming in, begin the expected counter-attack. The new troops flee and the seasoned soldiers return to the front to push the Germans back and stay with the new crew until they understand their instructions.

Away from the front line, our soldier describes getting advanced messaging training, and practicing memorizing messages and delivering them to various officers. He is now part of a Shock Division and will be pitted against the Prussian Guards, Hessians and Bavarian Guards. He participates in an extensive training manoeuvre where his messaging training is tested. On Jun 18, they move out hiking for several days until they arrive at a railroad centre where they take a train to Togny, arriving on June 25. On June 27, our soldier describes how he sneaks away at night to get a plane ride even though it is against orders. On Jun 28, he is assigned a bicycle with which to carry messages. They are soon on the move again hiking 30 miles at night arriving at Camp Trombeau-des-Sarrazins on June 30, 1918. By July 5. his outfit is in the Champagne-Marne Front. The entire ground is chalk, and the dugouts are 75 feet deep and very extensive. He describes the trials and tribulations of carrying messages at night, going through an extensive maze of barbed wire. In one escapade, he is being harassed by a sniper, but makes it through.

On July 14, Bastille Day, a German patrol is captured and after questioning reveal that the Germans are planning to attack as they believe the French will all be drunk. They are unaware of the American troops in the area. The attack begins at 11:15 pm, and waves of German soldiers fifteen to eighteen deep move forward and are mowed down by Allied troops. A captain describes German soldiers piled sky high. The Germans are forced to retreat. The Allies have taken many casualties. Sporadic fighting and shelling continues, but by July 17, the Germans stop the raids and hand to hand fighting though the shelling and bombing of the rear areas doubles. Our soldier describes how he has not slept nor eaten for nearly sixty hours and is finally able to lie down and get some rest. On July 18, he resumes carrying messages and describes a number of narrow escapes. On July 18, the troops are

replaced and move back from the front and hike 20 kilometers to pup tents in a wooded area. On July 21, he and his comrades are loaded into train cars but before they can leave, they are bombed and all are thrown to the ground. Our soldier is hit, but it is just a flesh wound and he helps to get the wounded to an ambulance. The soldiers get back on the train and are able to move out arriving at a Paris suburb where they are cheered by the French who are celebrating this first big victory.

On July 26, our soldier and his Brigade head back to the Front where they engage in fierce fighting with the Germans at Meury Farm, Sergy and Hill 220. He continues the dangerous work of carrying messages. He describes finding German gunners chained to their machine guns so they cannot escape. On July 31, he is wounded by a bomb and taken to the Evacuation Hospital at Coulomiers suffering from shell shock. Eventually, he is put on a Hospital Train and brought to Paris. He writes about hearing shells from Big Bertha whine over the Hospital and land in Paris. On August 6, he reflects that it was one year ago that he left home for Camp Douglas, and what a year it has been.

On August 14, he and his comrades go by train to Base Hospital #117 in Prez-la-Fauch, a lovely rural area. He begins to receive electrical treatments and a chiropractor works on his back. Shaking uncontrollably and unable to write, the nurses in the hospital help him with his diary. As he gets better, he begins to make lighters in the shop provided for the patients and sells them to make some money. He discovers that the hospital is close to Allianville where they were posted last winter. As he improves, he is classified C2 which means he will be on permanent light duty for the duration of the war. As he is still not well, he prefers to stay in France and not be sent home until he is well again. On September 4, he is moved to a convalescent camp. After a few days, he and others are moved by train and on September 13 arrive in Blois where there is a permanent French army camp. He describes how they are put through the delousing station. Their clothes are cooked in live steam for 10 minutes to kill any vermin and they are rubbed in kerosene and corn starch before bathing. After processing, they are given a new set of clothes. He writes that he is entitled to another service stripe and now he has two service stripes and three wound stripes which attract a lot of attention and means he and others like him are served first at meals, and get front row seats at any entertainment that is provided. He describes going on a sight-seeing tour of Blois where they visit the cathedral and an enormous castle built by King Charles IV.

On September 22, he leaves Blois by train and arrives at Bourges-Cher the next day, where there is an old French Artillery Camp turned over to the U.S. Army. There he is assigned to Company C, United States Military Express Service, where he re-addresses and forwards mail. In the card file, he finds that someone with a name identical to his has been designated "Killed in Action". This explains why he has not received any mail from home and after the mistake is corrected receives a stack of 115 letters and cards. A proper notice is sent to his family.

A tour of Bourges-Cher reveals that there is large munitions plant here, so the town is packed with 'swell-looking girls' who are 'yellow from their head to their feet' due to the powder in the munitions plant which turns the skin yellow. There is also a contingent of WAACs stationed here so there is a lot of socializing between the soldiers and the WAACs.

Our soldier receives a one-week pass and he and a friend take a trip to Nice, Monte-Carlo and Marseille where they are well received and entertained by the French people. They have a grand time staying in good hotels and enjoying the food and drink. Back at the base, he talks about how some of the soldiers have got into trouble with the WAACs and there are a number of weddings as a result. He is once again sorting and re-addressing mail in a smoke-filled room which is very detrimental to his health, so he is reassigned to guard the mail as there have been a lot of robberies of registered mail. He is once again armed.

On November 3, he meets a French girl from Paris named Jeanne Gossard who treats him to a wonderful meal in a good restaurant. They continue dating, and he meets the Aunt that she is staying with. He describes her as a 'swell girl', but is tied up at home with another dear girl, so passes on the chance of marrying her.

On November 11, the war is over and a great celebration takes place. Wine and champagne flow like water and the celebration continues into November 12. He develops a bad cold and the sore on his leg is infected. He is taken to the hospital on November 16 where an operation removes a piece of shin bone that is causing problems. On November 20, the Camp is in quarantine because of a scarlet fever scare which turns out to be false. Panic causes people to try to leave the camp but they are prevented from doing so by guards. The quarantine is lifted on November 29.

He continues guarding the mail and catches a robber and wounds him. The next night, three of his henchmen follow him while he is on guard duty, and he has them arrested and taken to the French police. They are all part of a gang that has been stealing mail at the various railroad stations. On December 20, the four men are placed on trial, and our soldier is called in to give evidence. They are all found guilty and sent to Devil's Island to serve their 10-15 year sentences.

He spends Christmas and New Years at the camp. On January 9, 1919, he and his friend Greg get passes to go to Paris where he stays in Jeanne's house with her father. He describes the many sights of Paris as well as the many parties they attend. They return to camp on January 17 and on January 20 learns that he will soon go home. He leaves Bourges on January 24, 1919 after having a 'very sad parting' with Jeanne. He arrives in St. Aignan to a camp that is cold and muddy and where the food is really bad. Jeanne comes to see him on February 4 and tries to convince him to marry her and stay in France. He resists. On February 12, he finally leaves the camp and arrives at Brest on Feb. 15. It isn't until March 3 that he finally boards the USS Mount Vernon and they leave for home on March 4. They land in New York on March 11 and take a train to Camp Merritt, New Jersey. On March 17, he is finally on train home where they are greeted by crowds at every station. He arrives at Camp Grant on March 19 and works at preparing discharge papers. On March 27, 1919, he finally gets his discharge papers and is finally on his way home where his entire family is there to meet him.