

FOREWORD

Nothing makes a man feel more heartsick than the awful picture of men repeating an event, which had, even the first time, such horrible results on human beings. Maybe twenty four years is a long time to some people, long enough for them to forget. But to me, the world war is not as easy as that to forget. It seems like yesterday that I experienced what I experience even to-day in dreams, men being killed in action, men wounded, suffering and crying for care when no help was possible. The five days of being lost in the famous "pocket" are too vivid in my mind to forget; five days of horror and bloodshed for what we, as soldiers in the Lost Battalion, thought was a just cause.

To-day we still think it was a just cause but it seems to me that we are slipping into a situation where another dreadful experience like mine will be necessary for the young men of to-day. If such a case happens, it seems to me that it is very important for the young men to keep in mind the picture of what happened in 1917 and especially in October 1918. I hope I can help to make them think twice by writing my experiences as they really happened. That I have tried to do in the pages that follow.

The international picture looks mighty dark to me now. It looks as if Hitler's war-making machine is on the march with nothing as yet powerful enough to stop him. Sometimes I feel so downhearted about allowing such a person gain control of most of Europe, after the efforts made for a better Europe twenty four years ago, and sometimes I feel so darned mad at the American people for the indifferent attitude they sometimes have, that I feel like getting my old musket and starting where we left off in 1918.

The very things are shaping up now in such a way as to be close to the way I felt would develop all along. If the public opinion keeps up the way it is now, any efforts made by the government to put the country on a war basis will result in a revolution. There is nothing that I would hate worse and I could almost cry thinking about it, for if such a thing happened it would look as though all the struggling, dying and suffering in the last war was done in vain. Maybe ^{if} the hardships of the last war were painted as they actually happened to a regular soldier like myself, then the picture of public opinion might change. People forget too easily, but they surely wouldn't forget if they had been through what I and a number of others have been through.

That is the reason for writing what I am writing---in the hope that besides being reading

for my friends it would be a grim reminder of past mistakes. The picture I paint in words is not second hand. It is first-hand and true. It is such a picture that I think is necessary. I have a boy old enough to fight and I am concerned over his welfare, but I also think my country and its democratic principles are worth saving. Therefore I hope my comments herein written will have some influence upon the ones who read it. In that light, I offer it to whoever can read, hoping for the best.

I WAS ONE OF THE LOST BATTALION

When I was drafted and left McIntosh, South Dakota on April 28, 1918, I had no idea of the extent of my travels before I would return home again. I did not know if I ever would again return for that matter, nor what changes would take place in the meantime. I gave all this no thought. At the time I was not married, had been used to a care-free life on the range and farm and like practically all of the others in the first company to which I was assigned, my parents were the only care I left behind. Camp Lewis in Washington was where I was sent to be sworn into the army and to receive my first training. This was very limited. We were outfitted with the full clothing and equipment of an Infantryman, and had only a little drilling during the five weeks at this camp. A bunch were shipped out every so often, to what destination we did not know. Some were left behind to help train and drill the others. I had the chance to be made a corporal but I didn't like that. It was too easy to mix them up, so the next bunch that went out, included me.

Camp Kearney, California was the next stop. Here we joined the Fourth Division. Up to the time I reached this camp, I had had only two days training with the army rifle. But I had carried a pistol or a rifle with me all the time while riding the range back in South Dakota, and I could shoot. During the first day on the rifle range, I could not hit a thing. The next day, when shooting rapid fire, I got a bull's eye every time. A lieutenant came up to me and asked what had been the matter the day before. I told him that every time I was ready to shoot the day before, some one would bang away at my side. This would cause me to flinch just that little bit to throw my sight off, but that with rapid fire, I got the range and held the sight. The officer slapped me on the back and said, "Rapid fire is what we want. You're alright." These were the only two days I had on the rifle range.

In those days, there was no delay, and it seemed to me sometimes not even enough for the best routine in rifle practice and drill. I did not have to have practice with the rifle, but drilling was something else. But off we went at the end of only two weeks for another move somewhere. When I was going to dinner on the day we were moving camp, I saw a boy whom I had known back home. His name was Harley Wilcox. We only had a minute to talk as they had us slated for a big pow wow after dinner. I looked for him later but the

cars were gone and I never run into him again until after I returned home. I would have liked to have been with him, as all this was new and strange to me, and I would have liked to have shared it with someone from the old home town. There were a large number of fellows in the outfit, but we didn't have no time for play.

During my lifetime I had not had an opportunity for much travel and had not been in but four different states. But on this trip, destination unknown then, my travel lust was being fully satisfied. Across mountains, onto the plains, into cities bulging with factories all booming with industry and the final stop at Camp Mills in New Jersey. It was all a sight for me and during the seven days on the train, we had a lot of fun. Each car was full but everybody had sufficient space. The baggage car had been turned into a kitchen with the old army range ever busy getting out the food for the whole troop train.

Here again at Camp Mills, there was no delay; a brief stop to get our ground legs again and a breathing spell, and onto a big boat for the hop across the pond. And what a pond it was, sometimes rough as some of the Rockies, and at other times as smooth as glass. We were eight days crossing. The last two days, I began to feel tough. I didn't know what was the matter. It wasn't seasickness. When we landed in England, there was quite a hike to make and I was sick as a cat with a fever and weak. We would hike fifty minutes and rest ten. By the time we reached camp, I was all in. The English acted as if they were glad to see us and followed us like kids, waving and cheering. I got by for the two days we were here, just holding my own, and then we were off for another trip. This time we were loaded on a much smaller boat and packed in like cattle late at night. By dawn the next day we had reached the shores of France at a place that I have since found out was Cherbourg, France. Over the long period since this experience, dates and places have faded considerably. Since that time, I have had so much sickness and distress, that it seems hard to remember anything. I do remember this, I was getting sicker all the time.

This time, we had a twelve mile hike to make when we debarked. We were billeted in an English camp or at least there were a lot of English soldiers around. I was so sick I didn't know how I got there but some of the buddies helped and the camp was reached at long last. As we came to the outskirts of the camp, we had orders to fall out on the side of the road, until arrangements were made for barracks inside the camp. There was

a little French kid tagging along dressed in a black slip over smock dress and with wooden shoes clanging on the hobble stone street. I gave him twenty cents and my canteen. Soon he came back to me with the canteen filled with wine. I tipped it up. It went gurgle, gurgle, gurgle until it was all gone and I sent him after another. I got half of that one down when the call came to move on. We had about two blocks to go. I didn't stop for supper or anything but unpacked my roll and went to bed. It was the next morning when I woke up but I didn't get up. When the sargent came around on inspection, he bawled me out for not shaving. So I got out my razor and hung up my mirror to take a shave. When I looked in it, I saw that my face was all broken out as thick as it could be with small red pimples which I knew immediately was the measles. Off I was rushed to what was called a hospital. It had a tile brick floor and boy, it was surely hard. I laid on it for four days and nights with only one blanket that was used for a padding. There were no shades on the windows. Our eats were fine for the measles, nothing but what we called sow-belly and gravy one meal, the next gravy, bacon and coffee, no bread nor even hard tack. But somehow I was tougher than the measles and got over it even if it did take a quart and a half of wine to make it pop out. But my outfit had gone on and I was assigned to another, which I now know was the 77th Division from New York.

With this outfit, I had two days of training with the bayonet and then off we were loaded again, this time not in comfortable cushioned cars, but in very small box cars, 7 x 20. These cars had a sign on them 40 men or 8 horses. We had 40 men in our car. The train went so slow that we could take our mess kits and by building a fire along the track, we could cook our bacon with the train always on the move. Finally we came to one small town where we were told it was our final stop. Just as the train pulled in, we saw an M.P. (Military Police) pushing one of those small mail carts loaded with all the bread they could pile on it. Boy, we were hungry and there was no stopping us from that bread. It was a free-for-all. Some got a little, others got a lot and still some got nothing but bruised and smashed fingers. But it tasted like Melba toast.

Again, as always there was no dilly dallying around. I had never seen a gas mask until the next day when we started to the front lines. We were shown how to put them on and given a long speech about how to detect gas, and what to do in case of an attack.

We drew our ammunition and each received one box of hardtack and a can of corn willy. This food was to do us for the first three days in the lines. As night came, we started for the front lines.

From the camp, we could hear the occasional bombing of the big guns of the artillery which became louder as we drew nearer. Close in behind the lines, we were hiking in a deep ditch. I don't know just what happened nor how, except that I do know the trench blew up. And such a mess! I hadn't forgotten what I had been told---to look out for yourself. When I came to my senses, I was up on the bank crouched down on my knees and with my gun down in firing position. A second instinct just seemed to tell me that we had been attacked and to protect myself. But there was no enemy in sight, nothing but blackness pierced by the screams and moans of those all but torn to pieces. We rolled a big rock off one buddy whom I thought I recognized in the darkness and I asked, "Is that you Reuben?" and he replied, "What is left of me." He was in the same squad as I. It was my last sight of him and many more were to go the same way.

It must have been around eleven thirty that night when we crawled into some big dugouts for protection and rest. It was pitch dark and we just sat around, listening to the big shells going over and talking in subdued tones. I got to talking to a buddy sitting close by me and happened to mention the name of the town Marmath, North Dakota. This fellow asked me if I knew Percy Perney and when I replied that I did, he told me he was his brother. Though we couldn't see each other, we surely had a real visit for about two hours. He was then called out and put with another company. I never saw him again in France and it was only after I returned that his brother called me into his store one day to tell me that his brother had gotten wounded on the second day of the fighting, was taken to a hospital and passed away. One by one even in this early stage of the war game, buddies and acquaintances that I would strike up with were dropping out.

The break of dawn brought plenty of activity. We started over the top. With a parting word of warning and instruction to each man by an officer standing in the trench, up and over the top we went. It was an odd feeling. It didn't seem like fear, nor even dread, but more just a feeling of wonderment at what we might see or learn

as we pushed out into no man's land. I never saw so much barbed wire in my life as there was strung around there. I could get through better than some as I wore number ten shoes with hob nails. I had been used to wearing number eight riding boots nearly all my life and it is no wonder that now my feet are flattened out and my arches broken. They serve as continual reminders of those days often making it necessary for me to get out of bed at nights and walk around for an hour or two.

Then, marching on and on, I didn't think anything of stepping over dead bodies of men with whom I had started out or wading through a pool of blood, but now something comes up in my throat. Sometimes my eyes get so full of tears I can hardly write and my thinker quits thinking, just halted on those dreadful scenes that I ran into hundreds of times each day. To think back, I can just see them drop, to look at them and hear what they said and their requests for help. But we had to go on and leave them lay for others to aid when they could work up to them. I don't know who felt the worse.

There had been a great deal of rain and the going was slow and hard over the slick mud. One day when we were advancing, I started to jump a trench. I slipped and fell on my left leg, throwing my knee out of joint. I had done this about ten years before, so it was loose enough that I could get it back in place fairly easy. The company had only gone a little ways ahead when they had orders to fall out for a brief rest and two of the boys came back and helped me up. After I got up with the main outfit, I got a stick for one crutch and used my gun for a cane. I made a go of it this way. It took lots of guts, but I didn't want to go back to the hospital for treatment of something like this and kept on the go, though slow. When I had fallen, my tail bone had struck a rock. That hurt as much as my knee or more. I could hardly sit down or lay dawn and when I'd get down, it was the devil to try to get up again. In about a week though, I was as good as ever again. I just wore it off.

This territory through which we were advancing on the Western Front had been in the German's hands for over four years and they had dug outs fixed up like homes. All of our work up to this time had been hunting these dug outs and routing them. I shall never forget on particular time. Pop Pop! Pop.' started a machine gun. All of us dropped as close to the ground as we could. There were a lot of them who didn't get close enough to

the ground. As soon as Jerry stopped shooting, we crawled around until we found the door leading to the machine gun nest. I threw a hand grenade in and just as it hit the door, it exploded. Here they came out and really acted as if they were tickled to death to get out alive. There were six of them. Three looked as if they were around seventy years of age and had great long whiskers. But the other three looked very young. When we would roust out a dug-out, the first thing we would look for on the inside was food. That showed what was on our minds even if not on our stomachs. There hardly ever was any food, but old dank black bread. Next we looked for ammunition and then souvenirs. We found plenty of these, but could not take any but the best and smallest, as we were already loaded to the limit with the things we just had to have each day.

On another instance when the sargent had told me to throw a grenade into a machine gun nest, I had rheumatism and didn't throw it far enough, or either it back-fired. It went off too quickly and the dirt and rock surely did pound us. The sargent yelled, "Good God, man, can't you throw any farther than that?" But it brought the Germans out just the same. Each day was just a repetition of the day before, hiking, crawling, searching for machine gun nests and routing them out. If it had not been for the almost amusing incidents to break the monotony, many fellows would have gone raving mad. There was a very intensive drive on, with orders to advance as rapidly as we could, clean out everything in our way, and not give any ground that we took. Across open fields, through woods and over hills we kept steadily going. When night would come, we would just dig in where we stopped as darkness hit us and hope for supplies of food and ammunition to keep up with us. Often it was several days before we had anything but the hard tack and corn willy left over, without even a fresh supply of this. Hot food or coffee was something I could remember I had had long long ago.

Once as we were advancing, we had orders to drop down so Jerry would shoot over us. There were a lot of large blackberries growing at this place where we dropped. I was hungry and getting up on my knees, I picked and ate some. Pop! Pop! Pop! went a machine gun, but he didn't get me. In a little bit, I tried it again. The sargent yelled for me to stay down. I was so hungry that I was willing to take the chance of getting

hit and crawled around to the other side of the bushes. I was sitting there eating the blackberries when the machine gun spotted me again and pop!pop!pop! it started every few minutes. One of the boys got a bullet through the leg just before the knee. The sargent told me that as I was so eager to get shot at that I could take the fellow back to the first aid station. So I put the fellow's arm around my neck and holding him around the waist, we started across a little field that had been farmed and was cleared off. I should judge it was about 20 rods across it, and how the bullets did sing as they sailed by. But neither of us got touched. He was a big load though, through the soft mud. But I got him safely back to the first aid station and then started on the return trip to the outfit. I picked berries on the way and took my time. When I got back to the place where the outfit had been, I could see nor hear nothing, and I could not tell where they had gone. I looked around and wondered what to do. Finally, fear or lonesomeness thinking of myself being out there in the middle of the woods alone and a little vague as to direction, seemed to creep over me and I started across the valley. As I got to the top of a little hill, I stopped and listened but couldn't hear a sound. The woods were so thick, it was next to impossible to see very far, but I got a glimpse at last of some men going across an open place. Without waiting to be sure that they were part of my outfit or even friendly troops, I started after them on a run. There was no grass growing under my feet until I caught up with them, and they were of my own outfit. They surely had cleaned the Germans out making this advance. I never saw anything but dead bodies scattered around. Maybe you think I wasn't glad to see the company again! The sargent asked me how I made it and I reported all OK.

One morning when we were camped in the timber about two days back from the front line on one of those very few reliefs we got, there was a hungry bunch of men lined up for chow. There were a few cans and papers thrown around. We had hiked about half a mile and just as we thought we were ready to be served, the sargent told us that the major said we had to go back and clean up all that mess before we ate. I was first in line and was among the eight men picked out to do the work. Boy! did I blow off? and started cursing. He called me by name and said that if he heard any more of it, that he'd give us all the detail of the company. Then he said that he would hold the outfit

until we got back. So we did the work, got our hash and I walked over and sat down by his side. We were as good friends as ever. A few days later he called for volunteers to go back after chuck when we were advancing again back in the lines. I jumped up and he said, "No, John, you are too near all in, but it pays to be square."

So back into the fighting we went, advancing rapidly all time, on the look-out for machine guns nest, steadily gaining day by day. The Germans had held this territory for so long they had dug-outs fixed so you couldn't see anything until they would start shotting, and by the time we ducked down, there was a lot of lead sailing around. As soon as they would cease firing, we would crawl around and throw a few grenades at the place where we thought the dug-out was and how they would come out. One day, we had fought a tough battle, and the sargent left one man to watch a wounded German as we advanced. We hadn't gone far until this fellow came running as fast as he could and all out of wind. He wouldn't say what had happened but I'd be willing to bet that Jerry turned over and grunted, and this old kid just quit the flat.

There were men falling out and new ones coming in all the time as we drove the Germans farther back. It wasn't any easy go by a long shot, and at nights the whole outfit were mving so slowly, from a distance they hardly looked as if they were moving at all. There was only one time that we retreated any. We had run into a machine gun nest just before dark, and I'll tell the world they sure made a lot of the boys drop, never to get up again. After Jerry ceased firing, we moved back a short ways and let the artillery thin them out. It was awfully dark and cloudy that night. It was dark before we dug in for the night. I was placed on guard. As I was standing close by a tree, trying to pierce the darkness and drizzling rain, I heard a bullet whine and jerked my gun up into position for firing. As I grabbed hold of the stock, I ran a sliver in my hand. And when daylight came, there was a hole through the stock of my rifle. . Our artillery kept at them hot and heavy all night, and the next day we were able to advance again with the same old speed and more safely.

Another little incident happeded while I was on guard at a later time. The night was as dark as pitch and very still. I was in a crouched position with my rifle at my side. I could hear a noise in the brush and I was trying to see what it was. Stealthily

it came nearer and nearer to me. When I thought the object was close enough, I sprang to my feet ready to fire away at the spot and umph, umph, umph, in quick succession came the grunts of a wild pig as it scooted off through the forest. You have heard the expression of people's hearts coming up into their mouths, well, I had to swallow mine several times before it would stay down. If the whole German army had stepped out in front of me, I wouldn't have been nearly so scared, because that was about what I was expecting, more or less; anything but a wild pig.

Every day and night brought something unlooked for, but not what we run into on the date of October 2nd, 1918. We had had orders to advance straight north, but on this day we run into fierce machine gun fire in thick woods. It was too thick for the artillery even to do much good, and to try to go straight through it was sure suicide, so our commander who was Major Charles W. Whittlesey, turned the outfit towards a hill on our right. We made it over the top of this little hill in nice shape and as the enemy fire had been so intense and as it was getting dark fast, we were commanded to dig in for the night, on the down grade of the slope and protected more or less here from the artillery fire of the Germans. Early the next morning some more men stumbled onto us, and we learned that the balance of the men, supporting us on the right had been cut off. Major Whittlesey sent man back to get orders and find out how the advance was to be made for the day, and they quickly returned advising they couldn't get through. We knew then that we had been entirely cut off from all support and were surrounded by the Germans. There were something over five hundred men from various companies in this lot who were cut off in what is now historically famous as "the pocket", and which men have become known as the Lost Battalion.

There were a lot of German soldiers on the hill in front of us, around which there was a road near the top. They seemed to know that we were surrounded and felt that they could handle us with machine guns and potato masher bombs. If we tried to make the open space at the bottom of the hill snipers and machine guns would have picked off every man as soon as he stepped in the clear. Our men had not come up for relief during the night and we had practically no eats at all, just a few cans of corn willy and hardtack and no water at all. There was some in the small stream at the bottom of the hill which

we could not get to at all during the day time, but which some of the fellows did succeed in reaching at night later on. They would fill up a few canteens and then beat it back into the brush, protected by a lot of men hidden behind trees at the edge of the clearing.

We soon began to search the dead men for food and ammunition. There were a lot of men lying just outside the woods in the clear space. Once I tried it out there to search for food and ammunition but the bullets were flying too thick for me. It seems they were coming from all sides. The way I went into the brush, I was sure behind myself. You may laugh at this, but if you had been there, you wouldn't have had time to laugh. The bullets were close enough to clip the leaves off the trees and low brush so that they would sting the devil out of my face. Yet none of them hit me. I wondered then, as I have done millions of times while fighting in France, how in the deuce I ever got through it all without being hit by a single bullet. It seemed almost impossible. But our food was almost entirely gone and the men had to have water. The Germans were trying every way to get at us, using potato mashers, machine guns and trench mortars in bitter attacks. But we had dug in and the Major was not going to give ground. They even tried sending messages to us asking that we surrender, and speaking commands in English to make our commanders think there were American soldiers close by, but Major Whittlesey said he'd never give in. Messages had been sent out by carrier pigeon, asking for aid and giving our location, but it seemed they must all have been killed for the second day rolled around and there was no help in sight.

There were so many dead around us, that the smell was almost unbearable. Some started digging graves for these men, and whenever they would stand up in sight, the Germans would open up on them in full blast. On the hill behind they had machine guns and plenty of them. There were twenty of us who tried our luck to get those Jerrys, so we could get rough for food but no luck. Sargent Anderson was in charge. We had just made it up the hill to the road and were lining up when the machine guns let loose and how the lead did pour in at us for just a minute. Just long enough for us to get out of sight. Those who couldn't jump, rolled or were drug off the road. I jumped and when

I hit, I hit rolling, me and the gun all through the brush. When I finally came to a stop, I was pretty well scratched up and my clothes were torn about off. Again I wasn't hit. There were only three of the twenty who escaped however. I remember that Sargent Anderson got a bullet just above both eyes. It knocked him down but it only burned the skin in a dark brown line. He surely had a close call. One of the boys had a finger shot off and some were dead. Many tried to sneak out but they would just have to come back, if they could get back. Many never did return. Whenever we saw a plane overhead, we would try to signal to it, waving white flags, but they evidently never did see us.

My buddy and I were lying in our little dug-out or fox-hole, keeping watch for the Germans coming in behind us. They were hollering as they were passing through an open space in the timber. I told him that the next time one came out, I was going to cut loose. We weren't the only ones who had the same idea. My gun barrel got so hot I couldn't touch it with my bare hands. They didn't scare us as much as they thought they would. The men were getting weaker and weaker. Our ammunition was almost gone. We had robbed the dead men of everything in the way of food, water and ammunition. The stink was almost unbearable. Many wounded men would almost rot before they died. They surely were brave though, and knowing that we didn't have food nor water to give them, they didn't ask for much and didn't complain much either for the intense pain they must have been in. At night sometimes, we would be able to bury a few of them in shallow graves or just throw dirt over them in their dug-out.

Right after noon on the third day, with no assistance in sight, and the Major refusing to give up to the many ruses used by the Germans to get him to surrender, there came one of the worst barrages I have ever seen. My buddy and I were lying in the same dug-out listening to the shells come over. We could tell about where they were going to hit. He would say, "Here is one that is coming close." And it did strike---too close for comfort. The dirt was thrown sky high and both of us were nearly buried. I only had one hand out in the open. With this one free hand, I reached my shovel and dug myself and then my buddy out. We had just got ourselves out when another shell hit close by and we were buried again. The third time was too much and we started looking for a safer place. As I was walking around, I stepped on something that wasn't too solid and

felt it roll under my feet. I looked down and there were three men lying on the ground covered up with dirt until you couldn't see them. They were still alive but stunned. I would not have known they were there if I hadn't stepped on the leg of one of them. My buddy and I layed flat on the ground to keep the flying shrapnel from the shells from hitting us. This shrapnel would make an ugly wound and was a lot worse than machine gun bullets, many of which would go right through a man and leave a clean hole. Neither my buddy or I got a scratch but there was a lot of shrapnel that came awful close, so close that we could just about feel it whiz by. But a miss is as good as a mile.

Soon we realized that it was our own artillery that was bombing us. I certainly would have hated to be a German and have to take barrages like this one very often. That artillery fire that afternoon was the worst attack of the whole siege. Major Whittlesey released the last carrier pidgeon along about the middle of the afternoon and when that pidgeon took off, it carried a prayer from every man there. It seemed the absolute last hope of any relief. Food was all gone. Some little later, the firing from the artillery stopped and we all had hope that our message had gotten through.

But our hopes were again shattered the next day when the firing started all over again. But the shells were not landing on us this time, but on the hill ahead. The shells were going over us, so our artillery must have received some kind of message and were getting better range. We had seen planes flying over, but they missed their bearing, and we could see bundles or something being tossed out. We later found that what we believed at the time was true, that these planes had been endeavoring to bail out food for us, but they were missing fire. How that did anger us, having to think of those Germans getting good food intended for us. But the major wouldn't give in.

It was dangerous for us to stick our heads up even a little during the day time. The Germans sure had sharp eyes. Once when my buddy and I were lying in a fox-hole, he put his hat on the end of his gun and raised it. Immediately the German machine guns started popping away at it. I dug three bullets out of the bank. He said, "The sons of a gun have sure got us spotted." I replied, Yes, and you had better lie still. That was even too close for me." In the day time, we could only try to lie still, no

matter what we wanted to do or how we cramped. The minute we would move around, they would pour the bullets in on us. We had to do what little stirring around that was absolutely necessary during the dark of the night, and very little of that even. At times, they would start closing in on us. Then we would spread to the top and bottom of the hill and lay or sit still until one of them moved. And then we had to get him quick before he got you.

When they stopped so we could get out a little, such a mess you never did see. Some of our men were dead, other dying and moaning for help. Some were already buried and others just in pieces. You may think it is an easy job to write about it all, but I write a while and my eyes get so filled with tears at the memory of it all that I just have to quit. Then something big comes up in my throat and chokes me. I try to lie down and rest but I can't rest nor sleep. If, after exhaustion, I do sleep it is only to live it all over again in dreams, seemingly more real than when I'm awake. Now after more than twenty years, the memory carries an indelible copy of those miserable days in the pocket, that will be never blotted by good times or other troubles I may have.

The most terrible thing of it all, it seems to me, was the fact that we could do next to nothing for the wounded. We had no first aid to take care of them. What little supplies each of us had carried, had long since been used, even shirts, socks and underwear had been torn into rags for bandages. Everybody living was like a living scare crow. It didn't seem so terrible then, as it was a sight that was before our eyes every minute of the day and to each of us it seemed so evident that it would only be a short time until we would take our place along side of them, that we became reconciled to it. But now, it seems most terrible and inhuman, I can only wonder why I never was hit by a bullet nor shrapnel or starve to death right there. I guess it was just because Jerry didn't have my number.

That night the major sent two volunteers back to see if they could get through now. In a short time one came back, and was so badly shot he just made it. The other never returned and I never learned whether he got through or was killed. The barrage kept up again all day, and the next, which was the sixth day in the pocket, Major

Whittlesey wanted some of us to try again by working our way along the road. He went along himself. What few of us who were able to navigate at all went with him, although our back-bones and our stomachs were rubbing. I was so weak I could hardly make it and the hill was pretty steep. The major passed me and said, "Come on, Jack, this may be our last battle." I looked up at him and said, "I'm a game son of a _____". When we got up to the road, we sat on the edge of the bank, scouting the woods across and above the road. I didn't know it at the time, but Major Whittlesey was sitting behind me about three feet. I saw a German running crouched over, and wheeling around with my rifle, fired at him. When I had fired the end of the barrel was very close to the major's shoulder and he almost shouted, "What the h_____ is coming off?" I just pointed to the German who was then rolling over the bank and he said, "Good work, boy." This little compliment from the major will always be remembered.

We couldn't make it through and worked our way back down into the pocket where the others were. But shortly after dark, following terrible fighting and shooting to the rear of us that didn't let up even when dark came, a bunch of our own boys broke through. They said they had as hard a battle as any they had ever been into to break through and that they could smell us a long way off. I don't think I'll ever be as glad to see anyone as I was that bunch of men. It wasn't safe yet for us to try to go back during the night, so we settled down with happy hearts and thoughts of what the next day would bring to spend the last night in that hell hole pocket.

Early next morning more men arrived and the Major was right down among his men, doing anything he could for them. Worn with fatigue and hunger, a happy bunch started the hike back to the rear for a little rest and food. It was quite a hike back to the place where we could get food, but we didn't mind it. I can well remember the first thing I had to eat was a big white onion, and boy, did I bite into it. Next I had some red molasses and bread. There were prunes, tomatoes, spuds, rice and coffee, a banquet if I ever looked at one. I would eat a few bites or rather gobble it down, then I would have to run aside and I'd vomit it all up. I'd go back and eat some more, then lose it. This was the way I tried to eat supper, with darned little staying down. That night we did have so called bedding, and boy, the nicest part of it all was to

be in out of the rain. Many a time the water would drown us out of our dug-out or fox-hole when caught in the pocket and I would try to sleep leaning against a tree. But then I'd catch myself falling over. An old building was out shelter that night and I'll bet I made forty trips to the bushes---with both ends operating.

Next morning, the sun was shining, and boy, did we feel wonderful! We tried to shave but had only cold water and with three weeks whiskers on, besides plenty of clay that had massed on our faces, You can imagine what agony we went through with trying to scrape all this off with a safety razor. Some of the yells were like the coyottes back in Dakota. We got a clean bath and clean clothes. How well I remember the first bath after my first few weeks in the line. When I removed my clothes, the ground was all white for several feet all around me from the scales coming off after getting well of the measles. Our underclothes were as stiff from dirt as if they had been starched. Most of the fellows were kept busy for some time picking the cooties off their clothes, but as I had a little envelope in my shirt pocket filled with sypazilla, I didn't have many cooties.

Now we were out of the fighting for a while, at least. We were told that we were going way back behind the lines for the long deserved rest, and that the end of the war was not very far off, that an armistice had been talked between the Germans and the Allies, so we were all in the best of spirits. We spent most of the day lying around and resting. It is wonderful how a rest feels after such a strenuous time as the last week had left us. We had no ambition to do anything else. At the time, it all seemed like another big battle that we had pulled through.

The next morning at four o'clock, we were ordered to roll our packs for what we thought was the hike back to the rest camp. We hiked four days but didn't mind, though it seemed to me we were headed in the wrong direction, yet I was always turned around while fighting, sometimes going one way and sometimes the other. The little stay-over of one day had put us in good spirits again. But we were hiked right back into the front lines again, and here we found some real fighting. An intensive drive started as we reached the lines and lasted four days. This time, it was slow going---the artillery

would blast away all during the night and with the first speck of dawn, over the top we would go to try to take the position bombarded by the shells. Instead of going miles and miles each day as before, we were just gaining ground gradually, mostly from trench to trench. Finally we reached a river which we had driven the Germans back to in a very fierce attack. That night the artillery fairly blew the Germans and the river bridge out of existence. The next morning what was left of the Germans on our side of the river were driven right into it. Those who were not shot or did not jump into the river were taken prisoner and we took a lot of them.

So here we camped, making ready to cross the river and continue the drive farther on and fell back over a small hill, which offered protection over the night. I was so dead tired and sleepy that the big shells didn't bother me that night at all until very early in the morning one woke me that had landed close by. It waked me but I dropped off to sleep again. My buddy and I were sleeping in the pup tent which we shared. Soon I felt an awful burning in my throat and chest. When I tried to open my eyes, the pain was terrible. I realized the last shell had been a mustard gas shell. Quickly I put on my gas mask as I kicked my buddy to awaken him. We walked along in the darkness, kicking others and waking them. I had gotten too much. It was damp and the gas hung close to the ground like a dense fog. I was taken back to the kitchen and given lots of hot cakes and jam, but I could eat only a few bites. I want to tell you that mustard gas is hot stuff. I stayed in the kitchen all day until about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. They wanted to hustle me off to the ambulance early that day but I felt that I'd be OK after a while and wouldn't go. Finally I had to give in. I was so badly burned I couldn't see and could hardly walk, so they lead me slowly to the ambulance. I felt as if I were on fire all inside and all outside too for that matter. In the ambulance, we rode about four hours until we reached a hospital or large first aid station. It was just a large tent. They took my clothes off and that night all the money I had went also. I was putting in most of my time fighting with the bed pan and as I couldn't open my eyes, I made good pickings. I was in this place for two days, then taken on a hospital train near Bordeaux. It was a modern American Hospital car and here we began to get some real attention. When in New York, just before sailing, I weighed 185# and the

Morning I got to the base hospital, I weighed 135#. The Germans didn't get all of me but 50# certainly went somewhere. After landing here in the base hospital, I got the flu on top of the mustard gas, possibly due to the weak condition of my lungs, and from that pneumonia developed. I never got to open my eyes until I had been there for five days and I guess I was lucky to ever open them again. Every since that time, I have been weak, and unable to go for any length of time at anything. I can only read for a few minutes at the time. They didn't weigh me any more at the hospital, but I know that I continued to lose weight. I had been there for four weeks and was seemingly getting no better. One day, when able to barely make it across the room, I reached a bottle of castor oil, and took a double dose. About eight o'clock that night, I really got sick, believe me. My fever was way over a hundred and for about an hour or two, the bed pan and I had quite a rattle. The doctor came and gave me a shot in the arm that put me out, but he never could tell just what was the matter with me. In the morning, I felt better and afterwards began to gain some. My throat was sore from the gas and from coughing and I'd spit blood most of the time, and still do every time I get a bad cold. It seems impossible to get the gas out of my bronchial tubes.

In a short time I was able to get out, but I didn't dare get out in a wind as I was so frail I thought I might be blown away. I was nothing but skin and bones, but when my appetite did come back, it was hard to tell if it was me or a hog eating. I wanted to eat everything and all the time. I surely began to put on the fat. I craved sweets of every kind. I sold my watch and got me a can of rich chocolates. I ate about half of the can right down. They tasted lots better than they did later coming back up. The last half of the box lasted me a long time. I had learned my lesson. My stomach was on the bum also which became a permanent source of trouble for me. The Armistice had been signed while I was so very sick, but being so sick, I didn't care, so there wasn't any celebration for me. I was told the town surely went wild that day and night. I can remember the noise and general good feelings around the hospital. It was just in the air.

As soon as I got able to be up and around for several hours, I wanted to go into town but couldn't get a pass. One of the orderlies had a pass and told me I could use if provided I wouldn't get too drunk. I made it OK and no one asked me for my pass. One

day the orderly and I both wanted to go to town but I didn't have a pass. When I came to the guard at the bridge, I walked up to him and began talking just as I had always done. When I started to walk on he told me not to try to drink it all in one night. And from then on, I never had a pass and wasn't ever bothered. Since the Armistice was signed everybody and everything was more lenient. Even the French people in the town were more jolly and friendly, especially to the American soldiers.

Sometimes in the evenings a few of us would take a walk out in the country, pick some grapes and lounge or roam around. We would sometimes dig some spuds and after buying a little butter, would fry the spuds. It was a feast, just as we did when we were kids. Then we'd go on to see our mademoiselle. In a field one day, I noticed a French farmer plowing with four horses hitched to a plow and all strung out one after the other, with a kid riding the lead horse. I have driven eight head of horses many times but no one ever had to ride the lead horse. They used one horse to a two wheel cart for most of their hauling instead of a wagon and team like in this country. An old mule hitched to a load of wood on one of these carts was standing in front of a store in town at one time when we were on leave and I walked over close by him and softly yelled, "Yea, la." (That is what they say to start the teams) Ha! Ha! and did I start him? The Frenchmen clopped out of the store in his wooden shoes and started the race after him. We had shinnied between the buildings to watch the race, but the Frenchman finally caught him and from way down the street we could hear him raising Old Ned in the French language. The French ways of doing things are so much different from our ways and customs.

Once when we were going down the streets of Bordeaux, we met a couple of janes. As they came past us, I bumped one of them on the elbow. They both stopped and started jabbering away at me. They were both drunk and we decided to leave them alone. But as we started away, one of them gave me a push in the chest and off the sidewalk I went, nearly landing on the seat of my pants. Further up the street, we noticed a fine looking young widow looking out a window. I went to the window and started a conversation with her and just as I looked around, I saw an M.P. (Military Police) coming so I had to beat it. I returned later is the reason I know she was a widow.

There were always a lot of things happening to take the joy out of life as well as to make things pleasant. One morning about fifteen of us were called out and lined up. We didn't know what was coming off but soon found out. They took us out with picks and shovels on the street and were told to get to work. We got our heads together and all sat down on the job. The sargent was with us. He sent the Corporal to tell the officers we had struck, as we hadn't had a pay since in August. The officers came over and they raved and raved around for a while. When they got done with their speech, our leader got up and told them we were willing to work but not without pay. So they told us to work until evening and that they would try to get our pay. But they didn't have any success and we didn't work any more. I was there in the hospital at Bordeaux until sometime in December 1918.

During December, I surely got fat, gaining back to 135#, the same as when I left Camp Mills in New York. On Christmas day I was on the boat headed back to the good old U S A. And was I sick! I surely fed the fishes. My stomach was then and still is in an awful shape. Every time the ship would ride over a big wave, it would seem there was an awful pressure on my back and then when the ship would dip down, O Boy! I expected everything to come up but the moon. But just the same, sick or not sick, injured, or no, maybe with pieces left in France, every fellow was glad to see that old Statue of Liberty. And though time had brought an end to the terrible days in the pocket, history will ever have a record of the death, suffering, gallantry and deeds of five days of living pergutory.

Ancestry.com - North Dakota Military Men, 1917-18

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Name: Ralph Edmund John

Army #: 3,140,524

Registrant: yes, Slope county

Birth Place: Kansas City, Kans.

Birth Date: 19 Jan 1890

Parent's Origin: of American parents

Occupation: farmer

Comment: inducted at McIntosh, S. Dak., on May 24, 1918; sent to Camp Lewis, Wash.; served in 41st Company, 11th Battalion, 166th Depot Brigade, to July 10, 1918; Company G, 158th Infantry, to Sept. 20, 1918; Company A, 308th Infantry, to Oct. 16, 1918; Casual (in Hospital), to Jan. 6, 1919; Company D, Convalescent Detachment, Camp Dodge, Iowa, to discharge; overseas from Aug. 9, 1918, to Dec. 30, 1918; wounded, gassed, Oct. 15, 1918. Engagements: Offensive: Meuse-Argonne. Defensive Sector: Foret-d'Argonne (Lorraine). Discharged at Camp Dodge, Iowa, on Jan. 23, 1919, as a Private