

WWI Memoires



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WWI Memoires

by Clinton Rogers Dissmore



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Drafted!

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How well I remember the years 1917, 1918 and 1919. I was just a Wisconsin farm boy of 21 back on September 21, 1917 that got caught in the draft to increase Uncle Sam's Army and Navy during World War I.



Sept. 22, 1917
Clinton leaves for Camp Grant

After passing the physical exam, we made up 63 of the draftees that boarded the Pullman train at Whitehall and were on our way to Camp Grant Rockford, Illinois, September 22, 1917.

Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois

Boot Camp

We arrived toward evening and were met by several other boys from Trempealeau County who had gone to Camp Grant about two weeks earlier. They taught us how to make up our beds on the army cots in the 250 man barracks that had been built on the rich corn ground on fairly level ground during the summer, with heat



Outline	View Timeline
Drafted	
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piped through 4 inch cast iron soil pipe held in the air by poles.

We were made a part of Company B, 341st Infantry, 86th Division, known as the Black Hawk Division. Some of these boys were neighbors, high school graduates, and buddies like myself, and came from various occupations. When we were called out for morning exercises we all discovered muscles that we did not know we possessed. Reveille was usually sounded some time before sunrise.

Government Issue

In time we were issued our blankets, poncho, half of a pup tent, trench shovel, cotton underwear, cotton khaki uniform, leggings, tan dress shoes, cotton khaki shirt, black tie, campaign hat with blue cord with gold tassel, Gillette razor, mess kit, and a condiment can containing hard tack, salt and sugar. Later we were issued a Craig 30-06 rifle and bayonet (which we carried loaded when on guard duty about camp). There was also a belt with pockets for extra ammunition to which a scabbard was attached to sheath the bayonet and attach the canteen for water and your drinking cup which fitted over the bottom of the canteen.

Life in Camp

As time went on we learned to drill, stand at attention every time an officer showed up at the barracks or you met one out in the camp or on the street, to salute the uniform whatever the rank of the officer, and to salute the U.S. flag if you passed by it or under it.

You took your turn at guarding the camp two hours on, four off regardless of the kind of weather. It was very trying at times during bitter below zero weather, a hard rain or snowstorm. Usually while on guard duty you would be challenged by your Corporal of the Guard or the officer in charge. You had permission to shoot any one you suspicioned of sabotage, etc. One guard shot a man that was climbing the water tower to empty a gallon of strychnine into it. I was told he was hit three times before he hit the ground.



Nov. 1917 Soldiers performing exercises at Camp Grant in Rockford, Illinois

After reveille was sounded, you bounded out of bed and hurried to dress in ten minutes or less and line up in a double row to answer roll call when your name was called. We lined up according to our height in our particular platoon which was made up of six squads of eight men each, an officer, and at least one sergeant. The Corporal of each squad held the left hand front rank of each squad. We stood at attention while the flag was raised on the flagpole and toward evening when the bugle sounded retreat and the flag was lowered.

We all got a turn at helping in the kitchen to peel about two barrels of potatoes; also to mop the dining room floor and wipe the tabletops, which was no small task. Sometimes kitchen police duty was given as a punishment for the breaking of a rule. Sick call was also given every day.

Rest and Relaxation

Timeline

- 1917 Sept. 21
- 1917 Sept. 22 - Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois
Company B, 341st Infantry, 86th Division, known as the Black Hawk Division
- 1917 Christmas - Only furlough to go home to Whitehall
- 1918 Jan. - Back to Camp Grant - Measles and 7-Day Pass
- 1918 Mar. - Camp Logan, Houston, Texas
Company C, 132nd Infantry, 33 Illinois Division, National Guard.
- 1918 May 10 - Travel to Hoboken, New Jersey and Camp Mills, New York
- 1918 May 5 - Boarded the Mount Vernon for France (trip took 8 days)
- 1918 May 24 - Disembarked in Brest, France and assigned to Napoleon Barracks - Sent immediately to the Somme Front, patrol between Albert and Amiens
- 1918 July 25 - buddy Ferdinand was wounded
- 1918 Aug. 2 - went over the top for first time without a gun
- 1918 abt. Sept. 1 - After the Somme, with the French around St. Mihiel and the Argonne - never had clothes off for 45 days
- 1918 Oct. - they took St. Maurice and Consenvoye
- 1918 Nov. 11 - Armistice at St. Maurice
- 1918 Nov 30-Dec 7 - Hiked 200 miles to Saarbours, Germany
- 1918-1919 winter - Army of occupation in Luxembourg
- 1919 mid-April - started to move toward Brest, France
- 1919 Apr-May - back to New York
- 1919 May 27 - paraded in
- 1919 June? - Back to Dissmore Coulee

Thanksgiving 1917

Thanksgiving day 1917 was a memorable occasion with turkey and all the trimmings. Our cooks could prepare very tasty meals even bread pudding of leftovers.

Christmas 1917

The only time I ever got a furlough to go home was Christmas 1917. Our Army pay for a private was \$30.00 a month; a private first class \$33.00 a Corporal \$36.00. Out of these salaries they were buying Liberty Bonds and were paying a premium on a \$10,000 insurance policy. As a P.F.C., I would receive \$21.00 a month after the deductions. I don't recall what the train fare was to Whitehall one-way but I had in the neighborhood of \$8.00 when I got back to Camp Grant.



Passes to Rockford

While I was at Camp Grant, I got passes to go into Rockford on a Saturday afternoon or a Sunday to attend church usually with my Whitehall friend Earl Gage. Almost always we were invited by some family to have dinner with them and fellowship with them and enjoyed the fellowship and every meal.

Cousins in Chicago



Occasionally I got a two day pass to go to Chicago by train to the Union Depot; and then I would get a ticket on the elevated train to Wisconsin Avenue, Oak Park, Illinois, where my dad had cousins: Mabel Rogers, Mrs. Lutrelle Sr. And daughter Lutrelle Wilson and an Aunt Sarah (Rogers) Conway, who was a sister of my grandmother Mary (Elizabeth Rogers Dissmore).

Sarah (Rogers) Conway was married to Edwin Stapeton Conway who became the president of the Kimball piano company of Chicago and got to be a millionaire. I had the privilege of visiting the eleven-story factory where the pianos were manufactured.

The Conways had two servants who I got to know real well. The cook was Charlotte (I don't remember her unmarried last name) and the chauffeur was Hedley Biddick. Hedley Biddick served in Company G, 129th Infantry, 33rd Division, Illinois National Guard, in France. I first met him at Camp Logan, Houston, Texas, where I transferred from Camp Grant after I signed up for overseas duty. After Hedley returned from WWI, he married Charlotte and they lived on the Conway estate where I visited them in 1919. On July 4, 1918 Hedley participated in the battle of Belleau Wood, which was not far from Chateau Thierry on the Marne. After my transfer to camp Logan, Houston, Texas, I was placed in Company C, 132nd Infantry, 33 Illinois Division, National Guard. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

Measles and a 7-Day Pass

When I returned from my Christmas furlough home, it was my turn to get on a garbage detail to pick up the garbage about Camp Grant with a high wheel wagon drawn by two mules. Late that afternoon, I became sick with the three day measles and went to the base hospital near Rockford and was put on a liquid diet for a few days until I recovered but was not discharged for two weeks and then on a very snowy day in January 1918 at noon. Along with five others, we were given passes of seven days to each of us to go wherever we wished.

We returned to the barracks of our companies by mule ambulance. My company was quarantined and confined to quarters; to enter the barracks would be to lose the benefit of my furlough so the six of us decided to start walking to Rockford. My first thought was to go home but as I had just returned after the Christmas furlough I decided because of low funds to go to Chicago where I knew I would be welcomed by the Wilsons. I had the \$8.00 left of my pay.

We started to walk to Rockford through the nearly knee deep snow and the snow getting deeper by the minute. We made slow progress toward Rockford six miles away, so when we had walked four miles and were getting tired, we met a man dressed in a fur coat driving a team on a bob sled. We inquired what he would charge each of us to turn the bob sled around and give us a ride into Rockford. He said \$6.00. We got in the sleigh and covered up with the horse blanket, only too glad to get the ride assuming that our tiredness was due partially from lack of strenuous exercise while in the base hospital.

We got there before dark. We learned that the trains were not running before Monday and that meant a stay of two nights in Rockford. To while away the time we took in a movie and looked up a hotel where we got board and a bed for \$1.00 a night.

On Sunday I got cheap meals at a Chinese restaurant. My funds were getting pretty low. However, the steam locomotives had snowploughs on the front and were running by Monday. My fare to Chicago would cost me \$2.55 and the "L" train to Wisconsin Avenue, Oak Park, Illinois, would be at least 10 cents, so I found myself in the windy city of Chicago with 5 cents in my pocket and five days left of my pass.

I went to the Wilsons, and they made me go to bed so that they could wash all my clothes I wore while on that garbage detail and iron them. Then these dear cousins took me over to my Great Aunt Sarah Conway's and she gave me \$5.00 to spend while I enjoyed my stay in the city and had a good time. I immediately salted it away in my billfold for return train fare to get back to Rockford and Camp Grant. I had no need of the money while in Chicago as the Wilsons handed me streetcar fare and transfer tickets, which made it appear that I was purchasing the tickets.



[Click to hear song "Over There"](#)

The daughter and I had a hilarious time singing and playing around the piano, as she was a good pianist. We also played pool on the pool table in Great Aunt Sarah's basement. One day we were going into the basement we accidentally dislodged a large brass bowl that was propped against the side of the stairway which went clang clanging down the stairs while Auntie was taking her afternoon nap. She was not awakened by the noise, for which we were very thankful.

During my stay in Chicago I visited many places of interest usually accompanied by both Lutrelles.

I made it back to camp okay and spent some time with the company while they were still in quarantine. Every one got a large dose of castor oil.

Camp Logan, Houston, Texas

About the middle of March 1918, many of my buddies were being transferred to units going overseas; so when I was asked what I wanted to do (I was a Corporal by this time and acting Sergeant), I was offered a choice of getting officers training and staying in the states or being transferred to an outfit soon to go overseas. I chose to go overseas. The number in our company was getting thin by this time.



I got transferred to the 33rd Division, National Guard outfit from Illinois, which was stationed at Camp Logan, Houston, Texas. It took us several days to get there as we went through the several states of Kansas, Oklahoma, and into Texas and saw large wheat farms and oil wells along the tracks and country we passed through.

We lived in large tents to begin with and I was assigned to Company C, 132nd Infantry. Our Colonel was Davis, a hard spoken man that rode around on a beautiful white horse and had us stand at attention in the hot sun until some men fainted, and he would bellow "Take 'em out to the woods and shoot them."

By this time we had been issued our wool underwear and olive drab wool uniforms and steel helmets and a Springfield rifle in preparation for our departure for overseas duty. I heard remarks about the accident he would have when he got "Over There." I will say this for his favor, that after he heard a few shells and bullets sing past him he could not do enough for us boys.



We received intensive training in target practice on the target range, which was six miles distance from the camp. I made a score of 8 bulls eyes at rapid fire on an 8 inch bulls eye at three hundred yards and only shot eight times but was supposed to shoot ten times and that included loading the rifle with a clip of five cartridges in one minute's time.

Headed Overseas

Traveling to New York

The 33rd division pulled out of Camp Logan about May 10, 1918 and we rode trains through Mississippi, Louisiana, Kentucky, Tennessee, Ohio, and on to Hoboken, New Jersey and Camp Mills, New York.

We arrived a few days before boarding a transport steam ship that was captured in Boston harbor when the United States declared war on Germany. There were three large steamships captured: the Father Land ["Vaterland", renamed "Leviathan"], the Crown Prince ["Kronprinz Wilhelm", renamed "Von Steuben"] and the Crown Princess Cecelia ["Kronprinzessin Cecilie" renamed "Mount Vernon"], the one that I went to France on, which was over 800 feet long and had 38,000 horsepower. It carried 7000 soldiers besides a crew of 1500.

We went onboard ship May 15, 1918. When we passed out of Hoboken harbor we caught sight of the Statue Of Liberty given to the United States by France. We wondered if we would ever see the old girl again holding high the torch of liberty. We did see it again a year to the day; that is, some of us, but others that left on the same ship were sleeping beneath the sod in France.

Onboard the Mount Vernon



I went over on the Mount Vernon and came back on it. I was on the galley detail carrying the food up the long flight of steps to the first deck where the food was served. When the bow of the ship dipped the kettles would be light in our hands, but when it came up they were so heavy we could hardly hold on to them.

But going to France, we were free to walk around on deck. There were three decks of them, or if you felt nauseated or sea sick, you laid in your bunk. There were a couple of days that I thought I might feed the fish, as they must have figured at least some would, as they gave us corn beef slimy soup.

Two five-inch cannon were mounted to swivel, one on each end, and a constant alert was maintained for the sight of a periscope or U-boat. We were drilled with life preservers to abandon ship if the occasion came or there was fire.

We reached France in eight days and were in a convoy of about eight ships including destroyers. At one time they thought a periscope was sighted and the gun crew manned the cannon but it proved a false alarm. We sighted several large whales near the ship both going and also dolphins which followed the ship to pick up any garbage thrown overboard which was not allowed as it would give away our position.



On the Western Front in France

When we got to Brest, France the ship was anchored some distance from the shore and we disembarked into boats to go ashore where we were assigned to what was known as Napoleon Barracks for the night of May 24th, 1918. Later on one of our moves we slept at Verdun. Now as we got nearer the front battle line we could hear the boom of cannon and shells exploding.

The Somme Front



We were sent immediately to the Somme Front where we received training in digging trenches and other experiences as we joined them in holding the trenches as reserves doing patrol between Albert and Amiens where we saw many gruesome sights including skulls and skeletons, broken equipment and the like, at Dead Mans Hill.

We were issued the Enfield rifle the same as the English Tommies used and the Lewis automatic rifle and I was assigned to the automatic rifle squad. As I sat on the firing step of my trench I noticed movement in the loose dirt and after that I had body lice as long as I was in France. We had a name for them, "Cooties."

We were under the severest shelling we experienced while on the Somme Front especially at Nine Elms Trench, where it was concentrated on us for two hours with out let up and several were killed or wounded including one of my comrades, Ferdinand Estenson. My Corporal Severson was shell shocked and I got a

Corporal by the name of Ott. One man put his finger in front of the barrel of his rifle and shot off a finger just to get a "blighty" as the English called a wound that got them off the front. We were on the Somme Front until about September first.

"Over the Top" for the First Time

On August 2nd, I went "over the top" for the first time and crawled through shell holes and Canadian thistles being shot at by a German in a foxhole with a machine gun. I didn't have a rifle or pistol as there was a shortage and the Lieutenant had my .45 pistol. I was carrying two hand grenades and a pouch of several pans of ammunition for the Lewis automatic rifle and a bayonet in its scabbard that I borrowed from another rifleman.



It ended up with us losing one man from a hand grenade and me firing the Lewis gun until it jammed on the 2nd pan after firing three shots. There was a light rain falling all the while but I took the gun apart and put it together several times as we could not have any light showing. It took me the most of the next morning to get the mud jammed in the gun out before it would work when I shot in the air to test it.

Casualties of War

The day Ferdinand was wounded in the side and ankle, I saw him carried from the trench July 25th, 1918. The English made a daylight raid that day and lost seventy men; many of them never got beyond the trench, and others were killed in the shellfire.

I and a Garret Decker carried a stretcher out in "no mans land" and picked up a young Tommy with a large piece of shell in the back of his waistline that paralyzed him from the waist down. He wanted us to hold his hand and rest every so often, which we did although we did not know how soon the firing would be resumed. The Jerries were out there also and picking up their dead and wounded at the same time but did not fire at us. These boys we picked up were from the Tenth London Regiment.

St. Mihiel and the Argonne



After the Somme we went to be with French and would relieve each other around St. Mihiel and the Argonne, where I never had all of my clothes off for a period of forty-five days except part of my under shirt when I would pick off the cooties and eggs. We were soaked to the skin and dried out again with the clothes on our back time and time again.

In the Argonne we came up on many dead bodies rotting out in the open of both horses and men also had keen competition with rats that would try to get our food even though we hung it under a tent roof.



Armistice

November 11, 1918

Finally after taking the towns of St. Maurice and Consenvoye in October, and many prisoners and German machine guns, and on the 26th of September, forged wood and prisoners, the armistice took effect November 11, 1918, as Jerry was ready to give up the fight.

I was staying at St. Maurice, France, but on the eleventh of November the whole company was called to replace the 131st Infantry Company at the front who had had considerable losses. As we came near, we saw dead Americans everywhere, and bodies leaning against trees, and bodies lying here and there among the trees, and were struck with fear. A young man from the cook's detail was with me as we dug a foxhole among

the jack pines. He didn't have a gas mask or helmet and was so scared that he was useless when twigs would fall from the pine to the ground when hit by German rifle fire.

It was very foggy that morning of the eleventh so that visibility was only about one hundred feet, and the Germans were not much further than that from us. Then all began to get quiet. The rifle firing ceased and, gradually, the boom of cannon. Two sergeants from my company that spoke German went to meet German soldiers that came to meet them. The sergeants told me to let them have it if they showed any shenanigans, which they didn't, and there was a great shout among the entire front, and the Germans shot fireworks that could be seen for miles. We, the Americans, could hardly believe the war was over.

That afternoon it snowed about two inches and the weather was mild. I remember helping to carry a copper wash boiler of black tea and going back to St. Maurice to my cabin lighted by carbide and heated by charcoal and enjoyed a box spring mattress, which we had captured from German officers.

The Winter of 1918-1919

They Said We'd Be Home by Christmas

When we were told that we would be home by Christmas we did not mind when they told us to drill on the natural parade ground at St. Maurice on top of a hill. It was for toughening us to make a 200-mile hike with extra ammunition and equipment that weighed nearly 100 pounds.

We walked the distance in seven days sleeping on the cold ground or in some shed maybe filled with dry leaves and snuggled together like pigs for warmth. We arrived at Saarbouurg, Germany Dec. 7, 1918, and slept in a high school for a week.

In the Army of Occupation in Luxembourg

Then we became a part of the army of occupation in Luxembourg, where I spent the winter and was trained for General Bell's Honor Guard and was called upon to parade at special occasions of the 33rd Division. While at Junglinster, Luxembourg, I was also selected to go to a bombing school near the Swiss border and saw the castle at Viandon. Here we threw dummy grenades for about a week.

Going Home

The middle of April 1919, we started to move toward Brest, France, by trucks called lorries and by train. I passed through Paris and viewed the Eiffel tower and the Arc de Triomphe. When we got to Brest, we boarded the Mount Vernon and were on our way back to the States.



When I got back to New York I received 3 one day passes from my Captain to go up the Hudson River shore by train to Camillus, New York, a small town near Syracuse, to visit some second and third cousins: Sybil (Conway) Munro, Fred Munro, and daughter Genevieve. Gen wrote me while in the Army and for time after I got home. Sybil was Uncle Edwin and Aunt Sarah Conway's daughter. Gen was quite a horsewoman. She married but don't remember the name for sure.

They showed me a good time and paid my way putting me on a Pullman sleeper to return to New York where I found the Company about ready to leave for Chicago, where we paraded the 27th of May 1919. Our Pullman car was pushed onto a side track where some porters went through it, cleaning not only the car but got away with some of my choice trophies received off German prisoners and some new underwear and an iron cross.

After the parade, the train left for Flint, Michigan, where we got a feed at the Rio truck plant and Lansing, Michigan. After arriving at Camp Grant, Illinois, we were offered a chance to re enlist, which very few did.

I was discharged on a Saturday* and on Sunday we started for different points along the way. I say we because we got to Bluff Siding and East Winona with no trains on Sunday and got on a hand car driven by a gas engine which took us to Independence and there we hired Reuben Lyngdahl Model T Livery to take Peter B. Moe and I home to the town of Pigeon where dad's farm, Dissmore Homestead was located in Dissmore Coulee.

My oldest brother, who had served in the Navy at Paimboeuf, France with dirigible balloons, Elbert, was home and had a girlfriend. It sure was nice to be home where there was no fear of being shot at or being gassed, especially the mustard variety. I wore the gas mask many times, and because they were only good for so many hours, I was on my second gas mask, which I was permitted to take home with me. It was borrowed by the Fred and John Jacobsons at Coral City when they fumigated their flour mill.



Thinking Back

To my knowledge I never killed any Germans, but very possible as I shot in their direction many times, especially at night when on twelve patrols out in "no man's land." After the war many of the men would experience hair-raising nightmares when they would cry out in their sleep "GET EM! GET EM!"

In conclusion surely God was merciful to me a sinner now saved by grace. The Germans had a large brass buckle on the front of their shiny black wide belt with "Gott Mit Uns." I hope He was. The cause they were fighting for was wrong.

I stated in one of my letters to the Wilsons while still on the Somme Front and viewing the terrain pocked with shell holes and all dug up exposing the skeletons of buried men and equipment who had fought at Dead Mans Hill, I called it a God forsaken place, and they wrote back telling me that God had not forsaken any of his creation but called it good. I'm sorry that at that time I did not know Christ as my personal Savior and could not tell any of my comrades how to be saved: that Christ had died and shed his blood at Calvary so that through grace and faith in him our sins can be forgiven and we will receive eternal life. If we believe.

Our chaplain was Catholic and would seek out the Catholic members of the squad I was in to give them absolution as we approached the front. I was looking to works to save me, the way I see it now. However, God was merciful to me and spared my life while others were shot down on either side of me or were wounded. Surely He caused His guarding angels to encamp around me and protect me, so that I didn't get so much as a scratch or have a cold while over there.

I did get scratched while picking black berries out in the woods when I picked a gallon of the berries to supplement our rations when it was difficult for the detail to bring them to us. Then most of the time it was butterless bread cut into thick slices to last us all day if the rats didn't get it first. We never starved and God always provided and we got lots of sugar.

With water it was different. Much of the water near the front was poisoned and one day I carried eight canteens slung over my shoulder to go back two miles to fill them with water on a bright sunny day. Most of the canteens were U.S., but I had three French make and they were shiny. I was shot at from a distance, which whizzed over my head. I got back okay as I walked a narrow gage railroad track I saw lizards. The bread was exposed to rain as they pushed along the track but it had a crust that looked like sawdust that shed water very well.

One time when picking berries, a dogfight was taking place above me and anti aircraft shells bursting flack landed near. I picked it up -- it was HOT.

*Clinton was discharged from service Saturday, May 31, 1919, and returned home on Sunday, June 1, 1919.



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December 10, 1976
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