

WWI Chicago Based Army Infantry Company L Seeks Descendants

by: Ron Miller

The Men of L were members of Company L of the Chicago based Illinois National Guard's Second Infantry Unit who were mobilized and Federalized in 1917. Company L was augmented by draftees who were primarily from Chicago and the Midwest. Company L was in the 33rd Division "The Prairie Division" which was one of the American Expeditionary Forces (A.E.F.) led by General John 'Black Jack' Pershing.

Infantry soldiers are 'foot soldiers' who march and fight primarily with rifles and bayonets. Company L was a unit in the 3rd Battalion of the 132nd Infantry Regiment of the 33rd Division, The Men of L fought on the Western Front participating in many of the famous battles including the Meuse Argonne and Somme operations.



33rd Division Patch

Following the European wars of the 1870's countries wanted to be prepared for future war. They knew they needed the support of other countries to win. European countries formed alliances, both public and secret, to go to war if their ally was attacked. In 1914 the assassination of a minor Serbian official gave Austria-Hungary the excuse for declaring war on Serbia. Because of 'entangled alliances' all the nations in Europe were obligated to go to war. For more details on the causes of WWI see: www.bbc.com/news/magazine-26048324. While the United States was neutral, it provided supplies primarily to the Allied Powers. Germany retaliated by sinking shipping that killed many US citizens which ultimately caused the US to declare war on Germany in April 1917. For more details see: <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/wwi>. The German Kaiser wanted to capture Paris and end the war in about 42 days. They attacked in August 1914 through neutral Belgium and were stopped in France on what was called 'The Western Front', which eventually consisted of extensive trench fortifications. The initial 14,000 American Expeditionary Forces (A.E.F) arrived in summer 1917. By May 1918 a million U.S. soldiers arrived, with 500,000 serving on the Western Front. American battle tactics were successful and the war ended November 11, 1918. For more details: <https://www.loc.gov/collections/stars-and-stripes/articles-and-essays/a-world-at-war/american-expeditionary-forces/>.

The Major Allied Powers

Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Romania, Japan, and the United States

The Central Powers

Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey)

Modern Warfare

Machine guns, tanks, airplanes, radio communications, chemical weapons

Casualties

All military: Killed 9 million+, Wounded 21 million+
 All civilians: Killed and Wounded 10 million
 United States Military: 4,700,000 served
 116,516 Americans killed, 375,000 Casualties

Combat operations of the 132nd Infantry were along the Western Front which was located about 70 miles north of Paris and extending about 135 miles east. Company L participated in many battles including operations at Albert, Mort Homme, Forges, Bois de Fays, Bois de Foret, Consenvoye, and Dannevoix. Battle details, below, attest to the sacrifices the Men of L made towards making WWI, 'The War To End All Wars'. Sources: Various operations reports, WWI histories, books and articles listed on the Company-L.com website: <https://company-l.com/books/>

On the nights of October 6th and 7th, 1918, the 3rd battalion, which included Company L, was attached to the U.S. 4th Division and took part in the attack on Bois De Fays. The battalion took a position in the shape of a horse shoe, with the enemy on both flanks in Bois de Maulamont. The 3rd battalion was exposed to intense artillery and machine gun fire and gas. The battalion continued its forward movement, and on the night of October 10 it advanced through Bois de Malamont and renewed the attack on October 11, reaching the Bois de Foret which was their final objective. The advancing lines were subject to artillery fire and gas causing the unit to suffered many casualties. Hand-to-hand fighting occurred frequently and machine gun nests were numerous and strongly placed. Every foot of the advance was contested. The fighting was so fierce that the troops could not be provided with proper rations. Company L had every officer killed or wounded; it was commanded by the Company First Sergeant until the objective had been reached. Battalion casualties were 38 killed, 315 wounded and gassed. During this battle the battalion captured 400 Germans.



Sergeant Wesley Foster

Photo: Collection of Ed Hudson, used with permission

Sergeant Wesley Foster was killed in action by an artillery shell on October 11th, 1918, during the battle of Bois De Fays. He was assigned to Company L in April 1918. Wesley was 'Regular Army' and had served in the Panama Canal Zone, the Caribbean, the Philippines, and China. Edward Hudson is Wesley's grand uncle who has written a book, "The Wanderer: The Story of Sgt. Wesley Foster".

<https://www.edwardhudson.com/>

After the battle of Bois de Fays the 3rd battalion took positions on the Meuse in the front of Donnevaux holding the line until October 21st. On October 24th they were ordered to the Troyon Sector about 30 miles southwest of Metz where they stayed until the armistice was signed. Patrols penetrated the towns of St. Hilaire, Bois de Warrville, Bois L'Epinens and the southern edges of Buttenville where they encountered contact with the enemy nightly. At 0545 on November 11th, 1918, Company L attacked the enemy in Buttneville and drove them to the north edge of town. Later, they received word of the armistice which was signed at the 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month. During this last day of the war Company L suffered 1 killed and 6 wounded.

The 'War to end all wars' was over. The regiment was then tasked with caring for released German POW's. They stayed in the Troyon Sector of France until December 7th when they marched to Saarburg, Germany, arriving December 15th. They left December 17th for Luxembourg, arriving on the 20th, where they stayed until May 1919 when they departed for their eventual return home to Chicago.



Company L

Photo: Collection of Ron Miller, used with permission

Private First-Class Harry Shankman, second row, third from left. Drafted, he was in the fourth platoon, Company L. Harry was a motorcycle courier while Company L was in Luxembourg. He was gassed during combat operations and died, age 55, from its effects. Harry Shankman is Ron Miller's grandfather.



Harry Shankman

Photo: Collection of Ron Miller, used with permission

In early May, after being "decoated" and issued new uniforms, the Men of L returned to America, sailing from Brest, France on the same ship, the Mount Vernon, that brought them to France almost a year earlier. The ship manifest listed Company L embarked with 3 officers and 207 soldiers.

The Mount Vernon arrived in New York Harbor on May 17, 1919. At Staten Island the ship was met by the Illinois Governor and the famous 33rd Division, the "Prairie Division", was welcomed home. The troops disembarked at Hoboken and went to Camp Mills, Long Island. From there they entrained

for the return to Illinois. The request for one giant parade in Chicago by the entire Division was rejected by the War Department. Instead, the Division demobilized in June 1919 with a parade down Chicago's State Street for each of 3 increments of troops on May 27th, 1919.

The Company L doughboys got off the train and marched to Grant Park for a reception and visiting with their relatives. At 11 a.m. the parade began. The troops wore their service uniforms and trench helmets marked with the 33rd insignia (the yellow cross) and carried rifles, bayonets and light packs. After the parade there were banquets held at "Loop" hotels. Then the men proceeded to Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois for their honorable discharges.

Survivors of Company L formed a veterans' society in January 1918, when the regiment was in Gonderange, Luxembourg. It was believed to be the first association formed after the war ended. Sources: Corporal Reuter's personal journal entry and newspaper article, publisher unknown, undated, probably 1929.

In Chicago, the Men of L organized as a non-profit fraternal corporation on May 7, 1929. The Men of L hosted picnics, dinners, and organizational meetings. Meetings continued for 45 years, until 1974, when the organization ceased operation due to loss (death) of members. Over four hundred soldiers have been identified as having served with Company L.



Corporal Lee Reuter

Photo: Collection of Barbara Metzger, used with permission.

Corporal Lee Reuter was the Company L clerk for most of the war, and also served with the second platoon. He was a member of Company L when it was the Second Infantry Unit, Illinois National Guard when he was mobilized for WWI. Lee was a founding member of the post-war Men of L organization, serving until his death in 1972. The shadow box display includes his dog tags and medals.

A hundred years after WWI, Navy Commander Ronald Miller (Retired), creator of the Company-L.com website and grandson of Private First Class Harry Shankman, in conjunction with Edward Hudson great uncle of Sergeant Wesley Foster, and Barbara Metzger daughter of Corporal Lee William Reuter, have combined forces and have dedicated themselves to honoring the Men of L and their sacrifices. The three met when the website Ron created honoring the service of his grandfather was discovered by Barbara (2011), and Ed (2015). Over the intervening years the idea for honoring all the Men of L, telling their story, and finding their descendants became their

mission. The website has a database listing all known soldiers associated with Company L. Our goal is finding their descendants. Several have already discovered our website and some have donated copies of their ancestor's memorabilia and photos. Men of L organized again as an Illinois non-profit January 2019.

Photo: Collection of Barbara Metzger, used with permission.

Corporals Louie Kovitz (left) and Lee Reuter (seated), France 1918. Both look war-weary. Note the combat chevron on their left sleeves and the wound chevron on Corporal Reuter's right sleeve.



On the website's searchable database are compiled information pertinent to each soldier. Documents include the Army Transport List Manifests for the voyage to and from France. These often-contained enlisted soldier service numbers which was a new concept for administering the large number of soldiers. The manifests also listed next of kin information including addresses. Army Morning Reports and Muster Reports contained information relating to individual soldier's status and assignments. Copies of all these documents were obtained from the National Archives (NARA) and are available on <https://company-l.com/> website. Additionally, the wartime daily life of Company L soldiers are becoming available from their personal journals which their descendants are sharing with the Men of L. Some memorable extracts from Corporal Lee Reuter's journal:

– I was afraid a siege of the Flu had hit the outfit for the boys were all getting sick and had the symptoms.

– Before the march ended I was all in. I felt rather horrible. My shoes were worn out and I felt every stone in the road. My feet were awfully sore and I truly did not expect to make it to wherever we were going.

- *Here we were again billeted in a barn. . . . Lots of straw. . . . Not a particular good sleep . . . 3 in a bed.*
- *The hill tops in Germany were snow covered. Louie and I hiked around the town then over the river and thru Wies and Nennig. Some of the people smiled and spoke. Others made faces and we could feel the hate. The little ones were equally divided, some walked up to us. Others spit at us. One group shook their fists at one of our planes and were wishing him to fall and break his neck.*
- *We were billeted in a foul smelling house high up on the hill across from an old prison built in 1021 AD.*
- *Our moving was due to unsanitary billets. We were now all in houses. I was placed with 6 in a small, unclean room, which had stove, table and chairs.*
- *I wished I could rid myself of cooties for it was most unpleasant to have them always crawling on you. Especially crawling and biting when you cannot get at them because of so many persons around. But it was a part of life so — Turned in tired and hoped not to move in the morning.*

The Men of L are dedicated to the memory and sacrifices of Company L soldiers. Our goal is publicizing the website for finding descendants of the Men of L so they may know their battle history and stories of their ancestor's sacrifices. We hope members of the Chicago Genealogy Society will find ancestors who served with the Men of L. Additionally, the website is designed to educate the public on WWI and how it impacted those who served defending our great Nation.



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