
Oatmeal and Coffee

Kenneth Gearhart Baker

If anyone is interested, I was born in Rochester, Indiana, the second child of Charles and Mary Baker, August 5, 1896. My older brother, Walker Willis was born in Wolcott, Indiana on December 3, 1894, and my sister Madge at Otterbein, Indiana, 1900.

In 1901 we moved to a farm 8 miles southwest of Wolcott. Here I started to school in the fall of 1902. A small country school having three of us in the first grade. I went to this school until December, when we moved to another farm a mile and a quarter southwest of Wolcott and I was transferred to what to us was a very large school, having eight rooms in a two story building. No inside plumbing however, that was to come later when we moved to Monticello in 1912, county seat of White County, Indiana.

As fate ordained, I was born just at the right time to get into the first World War. I will never know whether I was born just at the right time to get into it, or whether it was started just at the right time to get me, but either way, we got together. Like most kids of the correct age, [I] just couldn't wait. At the beginning of the war, "Hank" and I were in school in a city some distance from our home town, and as was usual at the time, were interested in this war as a rather distant excitement. Our heroes were the fliers, so when the war came we immediately decided that we wanted to be fliers, but being very naive, thought that all we had to do was go to some recruiting station and the army would jump at the chance of getting us to fly one of their 'aeroplanes.' Well, we soon found out that it was not that simple. If we were to get to fly one of their planes we had to know somebody, say like a governor or a senator or at least a judge, to endorse us. Then, if we passed the physical and moral examinations, they might consider us. We were crestfallen and disgusted and ready to pass the army up and let them fight their war without us, when the recruiting sergeant gave us a bit of what he must have thought was sage advice. Since the flying part of the army was a branch of the Signal Corps, we should consider joining the Signal Corps, and then transferring to the flying section. We went home and talked this idea

over, and decided this might not be a bad idea, since we both had decided we did not want to be in the infantry. After mulling the idea over a while we decided to give the Signal Corps a try, so we went looking for a recruiting station for the Signal Corps. We found it in the form of a National Guard recruiting station, who assured us they could sign us in the signal battalion and that we could put in an application to transfer to the flying section after we had been in a short time. That recruiting sergeant would tell you anything just to get your name on the dotted line. We signed, and the atmosphere changed at once. Now we were in, we were told, not asked. We were told we could go home and stay there until we were called, which would be in about a month, and that we should be ready to leave on orders so we were to be ready at all times, and were not to leave on any extended trips so as not to be readily contacted.

We went home and in due time received notice to report at such and such a place at such and such a time.

Well, it was a little sooner than we had expected. But since the war was moving along maybe they had had to speed things up a bit so we decided to accommodate them, even though it had interfered with a fishing trip of a few days.

Upon arrival at the armory where we had been ordered to report, we were introduced to an old army custom, hurry up and wait, stand in line and wait. After standing around most of the day we were told we could sleep in the armory on a cot or go out to a hotel, or home, just so we were back by seven o'clock in the morning. We chose a hotel. Most of the men lived in the city so went home. Next morning we arrived on time and after waiting around for two or three more hours got on a train and started for our camp site, some 70 miles from the city. We arrived at camp in the evening, were lined up again and marched to our tents. Fortunately some one had already set them up, otherwise we would probably slept in the open that night.

After having been in camp all of half an hour we were lined up again and my name was called and I was advised that I was on guard duty. That was what you got for having a name that started with a letter at the first of the alphabet, B for instance. Later we decided the reason for this was that most sergeants had never learned their "letters" in school beyond C, so each day in making up details they always started with A and rarely got beyond C.

With 5 or 6 other would-be soldiers who knew about as much as I did about it, we were marched off to the guard tent to join other unlucky souls. At the guard tent we were lined up again and assigned the hourly shifts we would be actually walking on duty. I drew, or rather was assigned, hours 10:00 to 12:00 pm and 2:00 to 4:00 am, told to stay at the guard tent and be ready at our assigned hours. I had a bunk in the guard tent, but sleeping was impossible. I had no idea what I was in for.

Punctually at 10 minutes before 10:00 we were lined up and marched off to duty, the four in my group went to the back of the camp ground and were told we were to guard the camp at the side we were covering and were to prevent any intruders from entering or insiders from leaving. In my ignorance I asked the corporal in charge of us how we were to stop anyone who wished to come in or leave, he looked at me in a very superior manner and said, why you challenge them—you say "Stop! Who goes there? Advance and be recognized." Then, in my ignorance, I blurted out "But what if they don't stop?" That stumped the corporal, for in his book all challenged people stop. Then finding himself, since he did not want to be shown up by a common "buck" private with one day's experience, he said "you call the Corporal of the Guard." Well, that sounded OK to me. I was willing to pass the buck and responsibility on to him. But I wondered how far the ones we were trying to stop would be gone by the time the corporal got there, but decided that was his worry, not mine.

This was a sad night, walking back and forth over a given course about two hundred feet long through eight inch high grass that was wet with dew when you started and got wetter by the minute. By the end of term I was soggy wet up to my knees, and remember, was still in civilian clothes—still wearing light oxfords.

We were relieved at twelve and marched back to the guard tent to rest till 2:00 am when we were to go back for some more. I took off my shoes and socks—wrung the socks out and hung them up to dry. At two o'clock they were back and we went back to the same spot, and went through the same agony all over again. At four o'clock we were relieved again and told to stay at the guard tent until six, at which time we were dismissed and advised that we had the day off to rest.

My first day in the army was to be remembered but not looked back upon as a day to be fondly remembered.

True to their word, I was not molested all of my second day however at chow time I learned what the mess call on the bugle sounded like and was introduced to the army main stay in the food department, "slum." It is made, as far as I can remember, as follows. Take a 35 or 40 gallon GI can, fill it about $\frac{1}{3}$ full of water, preferably clean, and heat to boil. Into this put about 40 or 50 lbs of chopped up beef in chunks about bite size, to some as big as your fist, about half a bushel of potatoes, (this is the amount left over from a bushel after a KP has peeled a bushel), these are cut into bite sizes also. Then carrots and onions and any other vegetables that may be lying around. You boil this mess until a potato feels more or less soft. Then you take a large iron skillet, put in a good supply of lard, melt it and get it hot, then add a goodly supply of flour to the grease and heat over a hot fire, stirring vigorously until the flour is brown and dump into the boiling mess in this GI can. The result is a brown gooey mess that will stick to your ribs, mess plate, clothes or anything else it happens to



COMPANY A, SIGNAL CORPS, CAMP DOUGLAS, WISCONSIN;
KENNETH BAKER IS SEATED AT FAR RIGHT,
LOOKING OVER HIS SHOULDER

Courtesy of Betty Baker Rinker

touch. Particularly tight to your mess kit when you try to wash it out in the lukewarm water supplied in the GI can for that purpose after the meal. Even I could believe that the whole mess was not too sanitary.³

On the third day we were all lined up in front of our tents early in the morning, so we may be counted and answer to our names, alphabetically of course. I guess this was to see that no one had gotten disgusted and taken off the night before.

Here again my name got me in bad, starting with Ba I was first in line and sure enough, first name called for detail, rations detail. What that was I had no idea, neither did the three others, but we soon found out that we were to get in a wagon and ride over to the rations dump and draw the rations for the battalion for that day. Now the rations dump was about a mile from our camp site, on a railroad spur along which a platform had been built.

On to this platform provisions were unloaded and then divided up for the various organizations of the division. Our battalion had a small sign over the area assigned to it. When we arrived the sergeant in command of our detail reported [to] the QM sergeant⁴ in charge of

³In World War I slum also was known as slumgullion. By GI can Baker means a government-issue can; the acronym was of World War II vintage. KP is kitchen police, 'police' meaning a detail of any sort.

⁴QM is quartermaster, which refers to the corps and officers responsible for providing supplies.

the rations distribution and checked our list, pointed to the pile of groceries and said there it is, take it away, so we loaded it on our wagon, which was none too clean, and the bread was unwrapped, but never the less we piled it in the wagon and went back to the camp. Here we delivered it to the company kitchens, in quantities equal to their size.

It may be well here to tell you how our battalion was made up. There were four companies. First was the Headquarters Company. It was small consisting of about fifteen to twenty men. Next there were three service companies, Co. A, which had approximately 150 men in it, Co. B about the same number, but Co. C had about 300 men in it. I was in Headquarters Company. I presume my name had something to do with that also, starting as it did with a B.

When we got back to the company after the groceries were delivered, the sergeant called me into the headquarters tent and said, do you think you could deliver the rations, and I said I thought I could, and he said you are on permanent rations detail. I said "all by myself?" and he said no, each morning at 7:00 AM a wagon and driver will be here for you and three other men to help. You are responsible to see that the rations are delivered. That was all the instructions. There was that fatal name again, beginning with a B. How else could you explain it otherwise.

It didn't turn out to be so bad however, because being on permanent detail I was excused from all other details. I would not have to walk guard, stand reveille, take exercise in the wet cold grass in the morning, or do any of the routine training exercises. Life was sweeter.

Things went along for a week or two. The operation of rations delivery rather smoothed out, except a wrangle every day with the mess sergeants each of which seemed to think he was being short changed, which of course was not the case, at least as far as we were concerned. The mess sergeants were particularly touchy about the meat, sugar and syrup. As it was set up, A and B companies each got a quarter of beef each day and C company got two quarters. This worked out so that A and B company got a front quarter on alternate days and of course C got a front and hind quarter each day.

Each company mess sergeant was after me to get him more sugar, canned milk, cookies. There was nothing I could do about it, or at least so I thought, until we four rations flunkies began to get army wise. We soon learned that by being very helpful at the dock like helping the QM "bucks" in distributing the various groceries and unloading the refrigerator cars we could accidentally put certain things in our truck instead of where they were supposed to be. These things usually turned out to be a hind quarter of beef instead of a front, or a 50 pound bag of sugar or a gallon of syrup, a case of milk or jelly or jams.

I will have to admit that we probably favored A Company a bit with these goodies since that is where we ate, and that it also paid

back in kind every once in a while as the mess sergeant got me into the back end of the cook tent every once in a while where we enjoyed a steak or other goodies never enjoyed by the buck privates and on a par with any officer in the field. My first lesson in the army—don't be too particular and a little back scratching usually pays off.

After being in camp a week or ten days we were issued a uniform. As usual, lined up and marched over to QM tent in which the "cottons" as they were called, were piled presumably in sizes, shirts, pants, leggings, and socks and shoes. As we marched by they threw a shirt, hat, pants and leggings and socks at you; when they got down to shoes, they did give you credit for knowing what size you wore, and then gave you the next half size larger. They didn't give you any underwear. Whether they assumed you didn't wear it or that you had your own I will never know.

About half an hour after the issue was over I think one of the largest exchanges of clothing ever existed started and went on for the next twenty-four hours. Being a more or less standard size, I made out very well on the whole.

Things went on rather smoothly for a week or two when one day we got orders to strip for physical and shots. It turned out that the physical was to be given in a small farm house on the camp grounds about a mile from our tent site. Here we were all lined up in front of our tents ready to go when some bright officer discovered that the sandy rocky field between us and the farm house was also covered with sand spurs which were hell on bare feet, so we were permitted to get our shoes. After another half hour delay we got on our way to the farm house, by this time the sun was well up and hot, so 500 of us strung out over a field, naked as jay birds, headed for a small house, capable of holding no more than fifteen or twenty, with the examining crew with equipment, inside at one time. The rest stood out in the sun getting redder by the minute. This was some very poor planning by someone in charge, but this we were soon to learn was par for the course.

Upon entering the house we were given a battery of orders, such as bend over, spread your buttocks, stand straight on one leg, on the other, open your mouth, say aah, raise your arms, take a full breath, let it out, raise your right arm, wham—a needle in it, raise your left arm, another needle, scratch till it bled—a dab of vaccine, and advice not to wipe that arm. All this in a constant walk between two rows of medicos, out the front door of the house, and no orders as to whether that was all or where to go. So we stood around in the hot sun and after about two minutes one keeled over, "dead out" from strain and heat, soon another, then another, and altogether there must have been close to seventy-five or eighty on the ground. We drug them over and put them in the shade of a couple of trees in front of the house. After a while each would come to, sit up and look foolish. After a short time some officer came out and said we were to go back to

our tents. This was unusual to give a bunch of enlisted men credit for enough intelligence to find their way back home. I guess the officers felt fairly secure in turning a bunch of buck privates loose alone to find their way home a mile across a field in plain sight, and especially since they had no clothes. We were to all report back in one week to check on our vaccination; mine didn't take so I had to go through the whole business again in a week.

Life rather settled in for a time except the camp was overrun by visiting friends, relatives and girl friends. This kind of curtailed our activities as far as dressing and trips to the latrine was concerned when under normal circumstances certain clothing was considered unnecessary.

Time passed, all types of rumors were always flying around, but finally one began to emerge as a dominant theme. We were going to move about every place in the U.S. but it finally settled down to some place in the south, but to every place from Florida to California. Things were quite confused, but as time passed the weather got colder where we were, and when ice began to form on our water bucket at night we were ready to move. But no one seemed to know where.

Finally one day an order came. Pack to move, nothing but army issue was to be taken. Now over the period of time that we had been in this camp a lot of junk had accumulated in the way of sweaters, mufflers, gloves, socks etc., from doting mothers and girl friends. The pile of junk was astounding, and could no way be hid in a standard army back pack.

At last we were lined up and marched over to the train. It looked good, made up of Pullman cars which would indicate a long ride. Also there were to be only three men to a compartment, two to the lower bunk and one in the upper with the excess equipment, such as back packs, etc. Actually the two in the lower had the best, but as we got shaken into place quite comfortable. Intervals in the train were interspaced baggage cars equipped as kitchens.

After three or four days and nights of riding we finally arrived at our destination, and we were not real sure where we were then, but had deduced from the information gleaned from casual conversation with locals at the rail stations along the way that we must be some place in Texas. Why all the secrecy we didn't know, but information was scarce. At least for us.

We were shunted on to a siding at the camp, unloaded and marched to our tents. It turned out that they were an improvement over the last camp, the tents even had board floors in them and one electric light, about twenty-five watts.⁵

⁵The place was Camp MacArthur in Waco, Texas, named for General Arthur MacArthur, father of General Douglas MacArthur. When the army received congressional authority to institute a draft not long after the declaration of war, the military perforce had to arrange construction of housing for the draftees, and the arrangement was for tent camps in the South, wooden barracks in the North. Baker and friends were

When everything you own is either on your back in a pack or you are wearing it, it usually does not take long to move in. We were all settled in about forty-five minutes, with old rumors taking up just where they left off when we left the old camp.

One rumor that persisted was that we were going to be mounted. Why, no one seemed to have the slightest idea, and wondered why. Imagine riding a horse around a front line filled with trenches, and fox holes. Even the officers couldn't be that dumb—even the higher up ones. But in a couple of weeks we got horses, and a picket line and the whole mess that goes with them. It turned out, however, there were not horses for everyone, just enough for the officers to ride and the dog-robbers to take care of.⁶

Things moved along more or less smoothly for two or three weeks, then lightning struck as far as I was concerned—the sergeant came to me one morning and said “You have a horse.” And I said “Me? I can't have a horse, I am just a buck private. No buck private has a horse. Besides, I don't want a horse. I already have four mules and a wagon to take care of, and that is all I need or want.” Sarg just says, “You don't have to take care of them, you got a helper and now you got a horse whether you want one or not.” And I said “What officer owned the horse, and why can't his dog-robber take care of his horse like all the rest do?” Sarg just said it does not belong to anyone, so now it is yours. “What is the matter with it?” I asked. “Nothing as far as I know,” said Sarg, “except it needs cleaning up and a little feed. It is tied up in the stall down by the equipment shed at the end of the company street, better go down and get acquainted.”

I went down to see what had been foisted off on me and why. A buck private with a horse just couldn't be—there had to be a catch some place, and there was.

This horse turned out to be the meanest looking horse I had ever laid eyes on. I mean he had an evil eye, and when I got close to him he took a bite at me. He missed, but not far and I heard his teeth snap. This horse was no animal to get careless with. I circled around him and he took a kick at me. After carefully scrutinizing him, I decided he must have been dreadfully mistreated and was fighting back. He was always on the defensive, he had had no care and known no gentle treatment.

First he had to be cleaned up, the army would insist on that. I went back up to company headquarters and asked Sarg who was

in one of the new tent camps. The arrangement worked fairly well, save for the tent camps in border states such as Oklahoma, where the Thirty-fifth (Missouri/Kansas) Division was stationed at Camp Doniphan on the reservation of the army's artillery school at Fort Sill. Oklahoma winters were cold, and Doniphan also underwent incessant batterings from sandstorms. Lieutenant Harry S. Truman of the 129th Field Artillery Regiment, a part of the Thirty-fifth's field artillery brigade, which trained over the winter on the Sill ranges, found the tent camp almost unbearable. For Baker's first sight of a barracks camp see below, p. 39.

⁶A dog robber was an officer's attendant or personal servant.

mad at me. No one that he knows of, but I had grown up on a farm and they had thought I might know about horses. (How wrong they were).

I sat around and thought about it for a while, then went over to the kitchen and wrangled an apple away from Cookie and took it down to "Pinto." I decided to call him "Pint" [sic] for lack of anything better. He was wary of any gesture of kindness, but hunger won out and he actually took the apple from my hand, and not my hand with it. He even let me touch his nose, but little. I hung around him for a time and then fed him a bucket of oats in his manger feed box and put some hay in his manger, and brought him a bucket of water. He drank it as if he hadn't seen water for a week, so I gave him a second bucket and left him for the night.

Next morning he didn't seem quite so hostile, another apple helped. I decided it was time to try to curry him and give him a good cleaning up, however remembering my first meeting, decided not to trust too far. I tied his head solidly to the manger so he couldn't bite, second maneuvered around the stall side, reached through and got a rope tied around his front leg and jerked it out from under him and tied it up so he only had three legs to stand on. It seems as though a horse has trouble trying to kick standing on three legs, he loses his balance trying to stand on two legs and kick at the same time. He also has trouble trying to kick sideways, so if you want to get struck by a horse or kicked, you must get in front of him or in back.

After spending the larger part of two months in Texas, camp rumors began to circulate about a move overseas, also about losing our horses. It seems the generals in Washington had finally decided that horses would not be such a good idea in trench warfare even if they were indispensable during the Civil War. This was a new war with telephone communication. As I had anticipated, one day Sarge had me come into his tent to tell me that Pint would be taken away. They did, but they got a lot different horse than had been brought to me. All I could hope for was that he got a good home.

As rumors usually did, they materialized eventually, so in the first week of December we were marched over to a train again, loaded into Pullmans and headed generally in a northeasterly direction, but not a word was said as to where we were going.

After seven days on the train we were unloaded and marched to a two story barracks building heated by a big furnace in the middle of the first floor with heating pipes going to the second story. We needed that heat, it was really cold. We heard we were in Hoboken, N.J.⁷ We were around the barracks for two days and I mean around

⁷Until the construction of vast Hudson River piers in the 1920s, with sheds and railroad sidings, the port of the New York area was not Manhattan but Hoboken. Hence the motto of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF), as troops in France were known, when the time came for return to the United States after the war: "Heaven, Hell, or Hoboken."

it, we were not permitted to go outside. No one wanted to, it was just too cold.

Two days later we were loaded on to a ship—a big ship. By rumor grapevine we were on the White Star liner, *Baltic*, English. You knew it wasn't American the minute one stepped on. We were marched to our stateroom. I think they marched us there to see we did not desert when we saw our so called stateroom. This room was one floor below what appeared to be the first open deck, the room itself was six feet wide, eight feet long and about six and one half feet high. Into this space six of us with all our gear were packed. Two bunks on either side, two across the end. This gave us a dressing space in the middle two feet wide and four feet long. No toilet of course, it was one deck up and a real horror; about twenty feet square, toilets along one side and a urinal trough along the other. Half of the toilet seats were broken or missing entirely, the other toilets were plugged up and over flowing. They could only be used by standing on them, which was being done, or not used at all, just the floor. There was about an inch of water and raw sewage sloshing around on the floor. It was a horror. After being on board about three or four days an officer came around and asked how everything was, he heard, nothing happened.⁸

The night after we boarded the ship we took off and went north to what we heard was Halifax harbor. We did not disembark but were on board for a day or two while a convoy of all sizes of ships was assembled and on the second night we put off, moving slowly since no one could go faster than the slowest ship, which we learned was about 8 knots.⁹

After our first night aboard we were herded to the mess hall, a large room full of mess tables with a serving table at one end. For our first breakfast we got a bowl and a spoon; into the bowl was slapped a gob of cold oatmeal, a small amount of canned milk, two small pieces of bacon so cold it was turning white as the fat congealed, a cup of cold tea with a little bit of sugar, and a slice of bread. Nothing else. For the next 13 or 14 days exactly the same thing. Of course there was plenty of griping by the men but nothing was ever done. The other meals were just as bad; lunch would be fried potatoes, a

⁸It is surprising to read Baker's description of the *Baltic* for in May 1917 the liner had carried the AEF's commander, General John J. Pershing, and staff to England. Presumably Pershing did not see such accommodations, nor did officers of his staff. After World War I the officers who accompanied Pershing established the Baltic Society, annual sessions of which continued into the 1940s, usually with Pershing in attendance.

⁹Not long after America entered the war the British admiralty went over to convoys, abandoning all effort—save for ships capable of outsailing enemy submarines—to encourage single sailers. In the spring of 1917 losses to submarines became intolerable and something had to be done. But convoys, though almost 100 percent safe, were inefficient. As Baker related, each ship had to reduce its speed to that of the slowest vessel. Moreover it was necessary to gather ships in port, which was time-consuming. And when a convoy arrived it frequently overwhelmed the facilities of the receiving port.

piece of chicken, which was immediately dubbed sea gull, because it was argued that only a soaring bird would have as large and long a feathers as the feather holes in the bird's wing indicated. It just had to be a sea gull, and not a chicken wing, and besides there were plenty of gulls available. On an occasion or two we got fish, and it never varied while we were on board that ship, not even the cold cup of tea.¹⁰

After we had been on ship for thirteen days one of the men who had been out on deck just at dusk to get a breath of fresh air before ducking to our stinking stateroom announced that land was visible on both sides of the ship, so we decided that we must be at the narrowest point between Scotland and Ireland. He hadn't been in the room more than a minute or two until we heard a dull heavy thud. We rushed out on deck and someone said the ship just back of us had been torpedoed and that the torpedo had been meant for us being the largest ship in the convoy. All of a sudden there was much activity with small torpedo boats racing around dropping depth charges. They never got the submarine as far as I ever heard, but they were having a lot of activity for a while. Our ship put on speed and soon pulled out of sight of the damaged ship in the fast fading evening light. Next morning we were in Liverpool.

In Liverpool we heard that the torpedoed ship was named the *Tuscania*. It had stayed afloat for over two hours and most of the troops aboard had been saved because of this, and also the closeness of land. Our division had only lost 15 men.¹¹

On Liverpool docks we were loaded on trains, a sorry looking mess of soldiers. The English who saw us land must have thought what a sorry looking bunch and they expect to win the war. After a com-

¹⁰The origin of army entrees was always a source of conversation, especially aboard British ships, and half of the two million troops of the AEF sailed aboard British ships. Sergeant William S. Triplet of the Thirty-fifth Division believed the meat served aboard his ship was Australian jackrabbit. William S. Triplet, *A Youth in the Meuse-Argonne: A Memoir, 1917-1918*, ed. Robert H. Ferrell (Columbia, Mo., 2000), 33. In World War II the present editor found himself stationed for a year in Cairo where local restaurants featured chicken dinners. American troops in the city never saw chickens, but the city contained innumerable vultures.

¹¹Every soldier who crossed the Atlantic was convinced his ship or another in the convoy was in danger of being attacked by enemy submarines. If he saw wreckage from sinkings, or ordinary flotsam, he identified a periscope. In the case of the *Tuscania*, Baker was approximately correct. That transport was sunk, with loss of thirteen men. Other U.S. ships lost on the eastward trans-Atlantic run were the *Moldavia* and animal transport *Ticonderoga*, with 56 and 215 deaths respectively. On return voyages, the U.S. Navy did not escort ships heavily. Two broad lanes for convoys reached to Europe, with troopships taking a lane different from ships carrying supplies. Troops usually went direct to France, supplies to England. Each lane was two hundred miles wide and difficult for submarines to cover. Supply ships crossed far more frequently (one hundred supply ships to every troopship), and were slower and less protected. Submarine commanders concentrated on them. The Germans also believed that American troops, trained by officers with no experience on the western front, would not affect the fighting.

paratively short ride we were unloaded at Winchester and I immediately went looking for the infirmary. When I had found it a couple of doctors looked and said Ah! and loaded me in an ambulance and off I went to a hospital. There I was put to bed with a mattress on it and clean white sheets. A couple of doctors came to see me, looked at my throat, said Ah! disappeared and shortly were back with syringe needles big enough for a horse and gave me shots on both sides of my stomach and left. Next morning I had water blisters as big as my thumb all over my belly. The doctors came in, looked me over, said Ah! and left. I was warm and sleepy, so the next thing I knew it was next morning, the welts on my belly were gone and the soreness in my throat was better. The doctors came in, looked me over, said Ah! and left. There was another day which didn't make me mad; clean and warm and reasonably good food. Another 24 hours passed and when I awakened the soreness was all gone from my throat, and I felt good. The doctors came in, looked me over and said send him back to his outfit.

This was the beginning of a bad time for me because my outfit had moved on during the two days absence and I was now a casual. In the army a casual is just another way of saying you are going to get the dirty end of a lot of work details, and doubly sure if your name starts with an A, B, or C. So I say again, if you are thinking of joining the army as a buck change your name to start with an X, Y or Z. No sergeant in the army ever got beyond ABC in the alphabet, so all details are made up of bucks whose names start with A, B or C. My name started with B so I was the first to be sent right back out to the hospital, this time as a KP, kitchen police, peeling potatoes. After a week of this a promotion was forthcoming. I got promoted to dish washer. While the army was supposed not to keep a man on constant detail for over 48 hours, they forgot the regulations and kept on all the help they could get, always asking for more. I found out that if you did a reasonably good job you were kept on and on, the way to get gone was to be dumb, undependable, and lazy. But I didn't get smart fast enough.

In the evenings we sat around the kitchen table and played cards. At first not much gambling, as no one had much money. I didn't have a cent. Finally there was a pay day for everyone but me, being a casual, with no known home. The kitchen help feeling sorry for me made a pot of 7 shillings so I could join the game. This game lasted all night, and in the morning my 7 shillings had grown to over \$350 as I found out when I took it down to the base post office the next day and sent \$300 home to my father to put in the bank for me. The next night a new game started. I went to bed, there were a lot more dishes to be washed the next day.

This went on for weeks. Ever so often I went to the casual office and asked to be sent back to my company, always got the same answer from the sergeant—in a day or two. Time went on, every few days a

couple of us would walk into the city and walk around looking the town over, also Winchester Cathedral, a very noteworthy edifice said to have been built in the 1100 hundreds. I was in it a number of times and got to know one of the caretakers who liked to show us around and tell us the history, and of the repairs and changes that had been made over the years. Just at that time they were doing quite extensive repairs, shoring up the foundation. It seems according to the caretaker the original building was built on oak pilings in low marshy land, and in the last two hundred years or so the marsh had dried out so the water was now some ten or twenty feet lower. The tops of the oak pilings supporting the cathedral had dried out and rotted, letting the whole edifice sink approximately four feet. At first running abutments were built along the side to brace up the walls, but this had been deemed inadequate, so now an effort was being made to pour concrete pilings inside the church, which they were in the process of doing. Some 40 years later I visited the cathedral. It was still standing, so the latter method of shoring it up must have been successful.

My social life with the opposite sex had gone to pot, and as I had struck up a "cross the counter" acquaintance with a girl about my age who worked in a tobacco shop which her father owned, but was run by her and her mother. Her father was on duty during nights in the home guards, a sort of police organization, for the duration. All the regular police were in the army. After one consultation with mother it was agreed that I might escort the young lady home after work. We took a short walk in a park along the Itchen River which ran through town, and then cut through the cathedral grounds which were completely enclosed by a high stone wall and heavy iron gates, which were closed and locked at about 10:00 pm at night, a fact I was not aware of. We arrived at her home through some winding narrow streets, all very dark, except for some very well shaded gas street lights about every two blocks. After arriving at her home we sat around and talked about America. They seemed to have some very vague ideas concerning the U.S. Later mother served some tea and cookies, called biscuits by them, and I was off to find the camp the best I could.

I started out to retrace my way to the cathedral gates, but when I got there they were closed, locked and very dark. I decided that if the cathedral wall could be followed eventually I would come out on the other side. Unfortunately this couldn't be done, no street followed the wall, but led off in all directions it seemed to me, so I wandered around trying to go west till I hit High Street which I knew. After wandering around for some time I stopped to get my bearings if possible when a faint sound of heavy diesel engines could be heard sounding as if they were coming from above. Looking up could be seen the silhouette of a German Zeplin heading to the northwest toward the industrial heart of England. There was no interference from the English as the Zeplin was flying above the flying height of the fight-

er planes of that day. I watched for a time till it went out of sight, then resumed my hunt for High Street which was eventually found and I arrived home about 2:00 o'clock. That was the end of my social life in England.

I was getting tired of England and my job as a KP, boring tedious hard work. I kept a ceaseless bombardment on the casual office where I always got the same answer, in a day or two. One day I happened in and an officer was in the office and he asked how long I had been on special duty away from my outfit. When I told him three months, he said "What!" and turned to the sergeant and said get this man out and the next day notice came for me to report to casual headquarters. When I arrived the orders were ready for me to report to 107th Aero Squadron maintenance in Scotland. So there was quite an argument while I tried to convince the powers in the office that I did not belong to the 107th Aero Squadron but to the 107th Field Signal Battalion and that it was in France. This finally accomplished I was told to come in the next day.

I went out to the hospital and put my things together, said my goodbys, wished the poor "buck" who had been assigned my beginners job of peeling potatoes good luck, with a little good advice on how to get away unless he liked the job.

Back at the casuals headquarters next morning twelve of us who had been separated from our organizations that had moved on to France were lined up with our packs on our backs with a "90 day wonder" second lieutenant in charge.¹² He did not have to carry a pack. We started to walk, no one ever told us where we were going, how far or anything. We had been given a small package, which turned out to be a sandwich and an apple. We were also told to fill up our canteens. After much map study we finally chose a road and started walking, and kept walking all day. By 4 o'clock in the afternoon our poor lieutenant was pretty well bushed and he didn't even have a pack to carry. Finally we came to a little town in which there was a contingent of U.S. soldiers. We were turned over and the lieutenant disappeared. We twelve casuals were assigned bunks, so after we were fed we went to bed sure the next day we would move on.

Next morning we roused out early for breakfast, you guessed it, oatmeal and coffee, but it was made in a U.S. GI kitchen and hot. After breakfast, we were called out, front and center, for detail, which was regular routine with "bucks" present, and as usual if your name started with A, B or C you were called first. I was put on guard duty at a double gate which as far as I could see really closed off nothing, was used by everybody that was going that way. I was told to guard the gate, I never did find out who I was to guard it from, or what. On duty, two hours on, two hours off, twenty four hours a day.

¹²The army commissioned second lieutenants after a training course of three months.

This went on for about three weeks, when from sheer exhaustion and desperation, I went to the guard room, a sergeant and an officer who had never been there before when I had called, wanted to know how long I had been on duty, when I told him he turned to the sergeant and said "Is this true?" The sergeant didn't know how long I had been on duty but he smelled trouble for someone, he knew as well as any "buck" 48 hours was the limit without relief.

Next morning we were lined up again. I had had a full night's sleep the night before for the first time in three weeks. Most of the men who had walked down to this town with me were among this bunch.

Next morning after a breakfast of oatmeal and coffee and a slice of bacon, of all things, we were put on a train, third class of course, and were on our way to Southampton. Why any "buck" private was put on a train to go only a few miles, walking distance of a day, is more than we could figure out, we decided the army must be losing its grip or someone made a mistake. Anyhow, when we got to our destination and into a barracks building, we could not figure out why we were not immediately called out for a potato peeling detail or a dish washing stint, but after a couple of hours laying around it became apparent, we were called out and marched down to a dock, and onto a medium sized ship. Here we went down two decks, both of which were filled with horses and mules. It was easy to figure out who was to be taken care of first in case of trouble with German bombs, which the army thought was more valuable, horses and mules or "buck" privates.

We went down two decks and arrived in what appeared to be a mess hall, at least the large room was partially divided into two rooms, the one we went into had two tables in it. These were picnic type tables, substantially built, with seat boards running full length down either side. In the other half of the room were already arrived our traveling companions, who were as far as we could determine, English army Moroccan soldiers, at least they had on English army uniforms. With that each one wore a turban instead of a regulation English army hat and a sash about his waist in which he carried the most evil looking long curved knife one could imagine. They looked like someone you should be friends with, no hostilities. We started in at once to be friendly even if we could not understand a word they said.¹³

Along about four o'clock in the afternoon we were called out to eat, two decks up and a few feet from our ladder down was a kitchen, and just beyond that was apparently the mess hall, in which was a hastily put together mess facility. The mess we were served was also put together in a hurry, fried greasy potatoes, a piece of meat of some kind, we decided it was horse that had been either starved or worked to death, bread, one slice, and a cup of lukewarm tea. We were in

¹³Clearly the "Moroccans" were Indian troops.

this place for an hour or better and the Moroccans were not with us. If what they got was no better than ours, I would not like the job of serving them after seeing those knives they had.

When we finally left the mess hall we went out on deck and it was dark. As we sauntered back toward our deck ladder I noticed a tall can sitting on the deck outside of the kitchen door. It had apparently been set there to cool the contents. We filed back down our ladders and sat down around a table after taking our packs off and piling them in a corner.

We hadn't been seated very long before we heard a clanking and shuffling of feet. Apparently someone was coming down the ladders in a hurry and carrying an object of some kind. We soon found out—here came one of the “bucks” toting the cooking container that had been outside the kitchen door, and he was yelling, “Hide it quick!” We did, it went under the pile of backpacks we had just piled in the corner. We all sat down at the dining table and began to talk, the Arabs looking on. We did not have to sit long when down the ladder came what must have been the ship's chef, or at least the head cook, looking around and demanding where it was. We of course were all innocence, no one knew anything in true “buck” manner. The guy took one glance at the Moroccans, each with his hand on the handle of his long curved knife, and decided to call it a day as far as he was concerned.

After a short time, and a little reconnoitering above decks, we investigated what we had obtained in our can. It turned out to be a beef stew, still hot and good. We each filled our mess kits, over half was left, so we gave it to the Arabs and they seemed very happy with it. I wondered how they ate it without a fork or spoon, but they seemed to get along OK with three fingers, and we made friends for life.

Shortly after we had finished our dinner the ship began to move, and a bit later we went on deck and we were in the channel. Black, not a light in sight. We went down to our room and got as comfortable for the night as possible. I got a bench to sleep on, not too bad, but not to be recommended either.

Next morning we were in a harbor and docked, awakened, marched off to a camp and breakfast. You guessed it, oatmeal, almost warm, with coffee and a bit of canned milk. Back at the barracks the usual happened, detailed to the kitchen and potatoes to be peeled. Here we had only butcher knives to peel with. Peeling a potato with a butcher knife is not the easiest thing in the world, the potatoes turned out square by the time we were finished. The wonder is that the mess sergeant didn't make us peel the peelings over again.

Next day we were loaded on a train in the third class car, of course, and started off toward Paris. Some time later we arrived at the Paris terminal and ordered out, and taken to the U.S.A. office, told not to leave, but soon felt the need of a rest room. After a little inquiry we found it, but could hardly believe that men and women used the same doors to enter, contrary to American teachings. Upon

entering, we found ourselves in one large room with a T division through the center. Men right women left. Upon getting into the men's half we found the one wall was completely covered by stalls about two and a half to three feet deep, no door in front and the only fixture being a hole in the floor about five inches in diameter, that was all. Later I had an opportunity to look in the other side. The women were no better off than the men as far as accommodations. Not to be cowed by lack of modern toilets, we entered the stall as many others were doing. As might be expected, all had not hit the hole in the floor. It was a filthy place. After having been in the cubby hole about so long, there appeared at the entrance an old woman with toilet paper for sale, holding out three or four sheets of paper, obviously out of a sales catalogue, and saying one sou. She made no sale to us. Any "buck" with one weeks service had learned to carry his own paper in goodly quantities, it has many uses. It must have been pretty tough on a guy without a sou, but it was obvious how he overcame the dilemma by cleaning his finger on the stall wall, and took pride in who could make his mark the highest. We arrived at the conclusion there must be a lot of tall Frenchmen.

We all collected back at the U.S.A. canteen where you could buy American candy bars, cookies, cigarettes, etc. We got a good supply of all, pockets full, which was a wise move. We never saw a U.S.A. mess hall for two days. We sat around the U.S.A. office for a while when a sergeant took us out into the section of the terminal where you boarded the train to your destination. We were taken way back and put into a third class passenger coach, no one ever heard of a "buck" riding in any other class, and told not to leave it, the car would be picked up later. We sat around the car for a time with all types of cars coming and being picked up. At last a flat car was pushed on to the siding next to us. On this little flat car were loaded wine casks, three large ones first, then two smaller ones, then on the top a cask of about 25 gallons.

After the switch engine and brakeman had left, one of the men in the gang looked out and said, "They have delivered the wine," and got up and went over to the flat car and came back to report that the casks were full. We got a coopers pin somewhere and went back to the wine casks and soon knocked the bung loose in the little cask on top, and brought back a cup of wine, the type we call rouge, sour as vinegar, but wet. We all went over and filled our cups, and sat around drinking it. When we had finished, we decided it would be easier to bring the little cask to our car, than to keep going over to the flat car to fill our cups. With a bit of doing, we got the keg mounted in the back of our 3rd class car.

Later in the afternoon they parked a 1st class passenger car on the track next to us. Of course we looked it over and decided it was superior to ours, cushions on the seats and seat backs, also lace curtains at the windows—luxurious.

It was getting late in the afternoon so we decided since it looked as if we were going to have to spend the night in the 3rd class car we would be much better on the cushions in the first class car than on the hard benches of the 3rd class, so we pushed the first class car over on our switch and the third class over where the first class had been. Cushioned seats make much better beds than plain boards. By this time it was dark so we decided to turn in. Some time during the night we were bumped around and connected to a train and headed out, where we did not know.

Next morning, about 9 AM we were switched onto a side track, after sitting around about an hour a Frenchman came along to ask us where we were going. He could speak a little English, and when we got it through to him we were headed for Alsace, he threw up his hands and said we were almost to Brest, just the opposite direction. After a while some other Frenchmen showed up, and a great palaver took place. It was decided that we had to be sent back to Paris. An American sergeant came out to see us, asked a hundred questions and got no answers. We were at our stupid best, we knew nothing, but asked no questions. We were put on another car, not first class needless to say, and told to stay, but we pleaded we needed a rest room, so we were given permission to go to the rest room, and incidentally use the canteen to replenish our candy, cookies and cigarette supplies. Necessary since we had had nothing to eat but these for at least 24 hours.

Sometime during the night we were moved out and started, someplace we hoped in the right direction, and sometime the next morning we arrived at a small town, which we learned was in Alsace, the area we were supposed to be trying to find. And to make everything fine for me, after sitting around for some time, who should drive up but my old pal Hank Brucker, to haul us back to Division Headquarters. Not necessary for me. I knew where I was going, we soon arrived at Headquarters Battalion and I was home after 5 months of being a casual trying to get there—Army efficiency.

Going back to company Headquarters, was soon back to my own quarters. Assigned to a hay loft in a convenient barn, complete with cows, rats, chickens and cooties. My first encounter with the big lice that were everywhere, and with which I carried on a losing war for the next five months. After being around for several days, being assigned a truck to drive, all my own, everything was just right. I was bunked up in the barn hay loft with the rest of the company men. One night we kept hearing a rat or some other rodent rooting around and snuffling around. Finally Hank got tired listening to it, reached over, got one of his shoes and let fire in the general direction of the noise. The noise stopped, but the next morning, look as we might, we never did find Hank's shoe. Hank had a difficult time trying to explain to the supply sergeant why he only needed one new shoe. It seems that regulations concerning the missing of one shoe,

and issuing of one shoe had never been written. Hank had to settle for two shoes.

Things went along for two or three days, when one morning I awoke with a sore throat, and I went over to the sick bay to have it attended to. That was my mistake. The doc took one look, said "ah" and in about two minutes I found myself in an ambulance off to the hospital. The hospital was only three or four miles away, and was a church. The pews had been removed and iron beds had replaced them. It was run by the French.

Hadn't been there 5 minutes till a French doctor came in, looked at my throat, said "ah" and soon came back with a syringe big enough for a horse, and gave me a couple of shots in my belly, covered me up nicely in bed and left. In a few minutes a French nurse came in and explained how she could speak English, which was a good thing or I never would have suspected it. She also had a thermometer, a tongue depressor, a throat swab and iodine bottle. First she handed me the thermometer and as I started to put it in my mouth as I had been taught to do, the nurse grabbed it and started some wild gyrations, a chorus of voices from the G.I.s in the adjacent beds all sang out at once "stick it in your ass." I learned from that that the French have some strange ways.

The next day my throat was better and I was feeling much better, and was introduced to French cooking, that is, army style. You guessed it, oatmeal for breakfast, but with milk and sugar, warm, really not bad. For lunch we had toast and soup, very thin, with a cabbage leaf in it, for dinner we had toast, potato and some kind of meat, usually chicken or rabbit or maybe mutton.

The menu never varied. One day at lunch one of the not so sick men called out "some one is going to catch hell in the kitchen tonight, there are two cabbage leaves in my soup."

Days passed. The same routine every day, the nurse came in, took my temperature, or I did, depressed my tongue, took a swab, painted my throat with iodine, and said "positive." This went on for three weeks, then one day she came in and said the doctors have decided you are a natural carrier. I never did find out what I was a carrier of, but that made no difference, I was sent back to my outfit. When I reported in to my company, the sergeant said, "I am sorry, but we couldn't keep your place open any longer, you are transferred to Company C," and out I went. I said good-bye to Hank and out I went.

Now Company C in our battalion was trained to install telephones in the field and to maintain lines of communication on the front, and were farmed out to the infantry battalions or companies to keep the company telephone [in] communication with battalion, other companies and regimental headquarters, and on occasion with division, but not often, mostly between companies and battalion, also outposts. All this so called training was supposed to be taking place while I was in England and in French hospitals trying to get back to



ESTABLISHING TELEPHONE COMMUNICATIONS IN FRANCE

Joint War History Commissions of Michigan and Wisconsin,
The Thirty-second Division in the World War (Madison, Wisc., 1920)

my company. I missed it all, but I could hook up a phone and install a switch board, which was all any of them could do. I hadn't been at my new assignment but a day or two when the supply sergeant called me in to see what was needed to get me up to combat supply shape. After giving me a good going over he decided what was needed in my case was a tin kelly, gas mask, pliers, 45 automatic pistol, extra shells, dagger, electricians knife, first aid kit, friction tape, wire, all hooked onto my web belt around my waist, along with my mess kit, cup and canteen.¹⁴ In addition a French made field telephone, in a wooden box, wooden hinged top, and weighing about 25 lbs., carried on a strap over my shoulder. It was awkward and heavy.

For some days rumors had been flying around that we were going to go to the front, and two or three days later we were loaded into Packard three ton trucks and headed in a generally northerly direction, but none of [us knew] where we might be going.

After riding several hours, and getting very well cramped up, I was staring out the back end of the truck, and I noticed a dead

¹⁴A tin kelly was an army helmet.

American soldier laying in the shallow ditch along the road, and in a moment or two another, then another looking as if they had been dragged off the road not too long ago. I started counting, and counted 252 before we seemed to be entering a fair sized town. We still did not know where. After driving a few more blocks we crossed a stream on a pontoon bridge which appeared to be in the middle of a business district of a fair sized town. Soon after crossing the bridge we made a left hand turn on a street about a hundred feet from the river and in a few blocks were in a residential district, pulled up in front of a nice looking house. As we unloaded the sergeant in charge yelled at us to be careful of "booby traps" since there had not been time to search the houses. The house ten or twelve of us had been assigned to had been a nice home. It was equipped with good furniture, among which was a very ornate grand piano, not too big, but ornate. The "hinies" who had just left the day before had done a good hatchet job, all the pictures had been hacked, glass broken, legs chopped off tables and chairs, the only reason that the piano legs hadn't was because they were too big and hard wood, but they had tried. One of the big "boobies" with us rushed over and threw up the piano top, then just stood there and growled, he looked as if he were paralyzed. I went over to the piano and looked inside, and there on the strings lay a German "potato masher" hand grenade. I didn't have any idea whether it had been triggered or not. Usually after the trigger has been pulled you have three seconds to get rid of it, or it will get rid of you. I dropped to the floor, but nothing happened; big "booby" stood there looking at it and holding up the piano top. Finally I decided the trap had not been triggered, so I gingerly got up to take a look, and told the guy holding up the piano top not to put it down as that might trigger the hand grenade. I got up and looked the grenade over carefully and saw that it had been wired with a very fine wire to a hammer on the piano keyboard. Had someone started to play the piano and hit the right note he would have triggered the grenade, and he and the piano disappeared. After very carefully examining the trap I had the G.I. holding up the piano top brace it up with the regular top brace, and get away, and duck if I yelled duck. Very carefully I reached in with my pliers and snipped the trigger wire in two, it just fell apart and the trigger pin never moved. Very gingerly I reached in and picked up the "potato masher," carried it out the back door, across the lawn, and pulled the trigger in the prescribed manner, and tossed it into the river and ducked down on the bank. In a few moments it went off with a muffled roar and a great deal of roiling water, and only one little fish about an inch and a half came floating to the top. Fish were scarce in that particular spot in the river on that day, August 5, 1918, my birthday.¹⁵

¹⁵In the late winter and early spring of 1918 the German high command in the West, principally General Erich Ludendorff and the titular commander Field

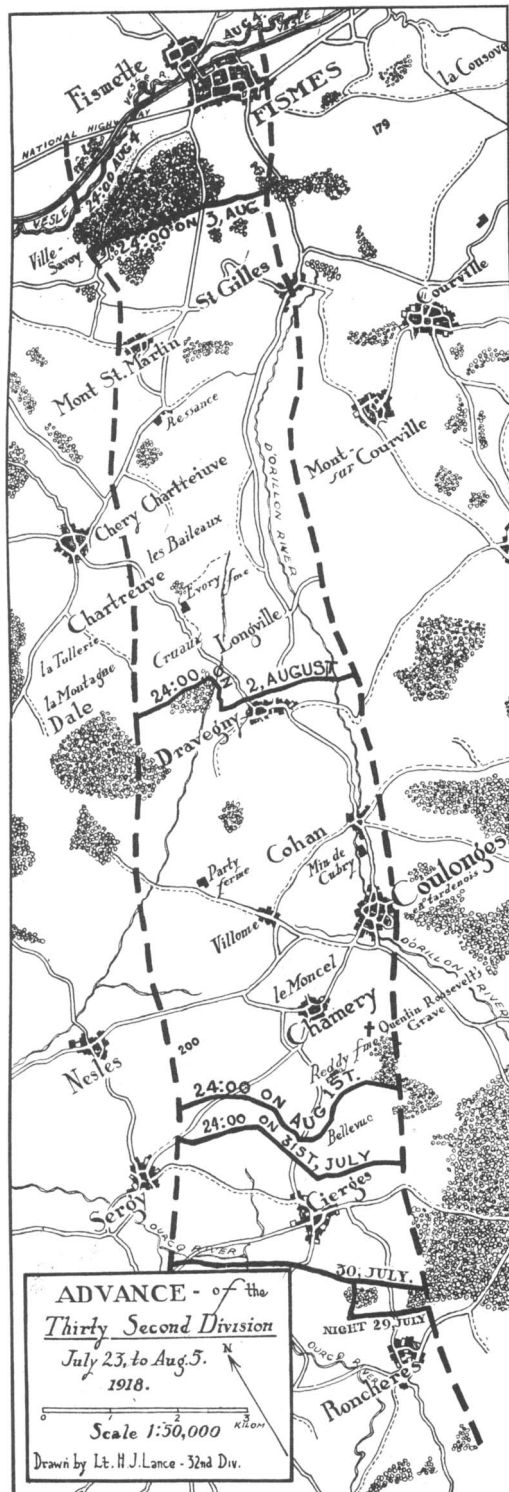
After that episode, we gave the house a very good looking over indeed, no more traps, so we went down the street for a couple of blocks to the field kitchen for some C rations, bread and a cup of coffee.¹⁶

Next morning we were routed out early and immediately after breakfast detailed to deliver a quite large reel of phone wire to a company headquarters some place up the field.

We looked that roll of wire over and decided it was too large to carry, so we started to scrounge around looking for something to carry it on. We found an old spring wagon sort of contraption with two hind wheels still intact and a pair of shafts available. We broke the rear two wheels and back axle loose from the damaged body and arranged the coil of wire on the axle, then got the shaft wired to the axle, found an old horse in a barn, hitched him to the two wheels and had a reasonable wire reel cart, and started out to find the company we were supposed to deliver the wire to. After walking and helping the poor old horse pull the reel of wire, for an interminable time, we arrived at a small town on the outskirts of which was a small orchard associated with a farm house. Inside of the fence around the orchard was a fresh grave which had rather been fixed up for an ordinary soldier, but couldn't have been more than a few days old. It had been mounded up with a low stick fence and at one end there was stuck in the ground the long end of a broken airplane propeller, onto which had been tied the shorter end to form a rude cross, and on to this cross piece there had been scratched the name Quentin Roosevelt, son of Theodore Roosevelt.

Marshal Paul von Hindenburg, fixed upon a now-or-never strategy, a series of massive offensives against the British and French forces in northern France, in hope of breaking their lines and ending the war before the AEF could affect the outcome. At that time, the late winter, the AEF had hardly been in action, only a division or two having served in the line, and then in training, taking part in no offensives or indeed action beyond two box barrages put over by their German opponents in which the Americans essentially were worsted, men killed and taken prisoner. The first of Ludendorff's offensives began on March 21 and initially was a huge success, promising to divide the British and French armies and roll the British forces up to the Channel, meanwhile taking Paris. Eventually it failed, only to be followed by four more lunges against the Allied forces. The last of the offensives began on July 15 and came to a quick end. Three days after its beginning two American divisions, the First and Second, together with a French Moroccan division, jumped off against a salient, a wedge, into Allied lines in the vicinity of Soissons. The counteroffensive, which ended on August 6, forced German withdrawal from the salient, albeit at a large cost on both sides. It was the first major American battle against German troops, and the inexperienced men of the AEF went forward in bunched formations, to be mowed down by artillery and machine guns, sometimes in windrows. After Soissons a series of attacks forced the German army back. On August 8, three days after Baker rode along the body-littered road he here describes, the British moved forward in an offensive that at first stunned the German high command. The truly large U.S. campaigns followed at St. Mihiel (September 12-16) and, by far the larger, the Meuse-Argonne (September 26-November 11).

¹⁶The C-ration was a staple of the World War II menu, and Baker who was a veteran of both wars was writing in its memory; he refers to canned stew of some sort.



Joint War History Commissions of Michigan and Wisconsin,
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Our wire was delivered, the poor old nag that had served us so well, if reluctantly, was turned loose to get along the best way he could, and we headed back toward Chateau Thierry and something to eat and a place to sleep. We had covered several miles we were “pooped” out as we were carrying our packs and all field equipment, as we did not know when we would be back, if ever, when we started out that morning.

The next morning we were routed out quite early, had breakfast, and loaded into trucks, and started to a new destination, we knew not where. We were on the trucks two or three hours, when we suddenly turned off the road and into what appeared to be a cave, but actually was a limestone quarry, old and big. It appeared to have about the whole division in it, but of course there were not that many.¹⁷ But there were a lot of men, and a large switch board with at least twelve or fifteen telephone connections. We pulled up a short way inside the entrance, close to the switch board. It was getting dark and we went out looking for a field kitchen. We could smell the coffee. We didn’t take long, and were back at our truck in a half hour or so. However in the meantime night had settled and we felt lucky thinking we would be in a good quiet place.

No luck. Hadn’t been settled down for a rest more than 15 minutes when a call came for a lineman, and out I went because a circuit was out. I traced it out of the entrance and up over the slight hill over the cave entrance and slightly downward for about half a mile to a company switch board, found a break about 100 feet from the company board, followed the wire on in to the company board and for a while everything seemed OK. The headquarters was located in a dugout built by the Germans, but really not intended for U.S.A. use.

Everything looked serene and protected from an occasional burst of machine gun bullets passing harmlessly overhead, also shells were going overhead and landing a hundred feet or so from the headquarters. It looked good to get a bit of sleep, propped up against the switch board. No luck however. In about an hour word came to me that a line was out, back to battalion headquarters just where I had come from in the cave. So getting myself together I started back to the headquarters board, but soon found that I was following a different line, that made quite a different circuit back, a practice frequently practiced when it was a heavily loaded line, and subject to being knocked out frequently. By this time it was very dark and there seemed to be quite a bit of activity, shells and machine gun fire, and progress slow, and contact with “doughboys” apparently moving toward the front, taking a lot of time, identifying and trying not to get shot by some trigger happy, nervous guy who would shoot and ask questions afterwards. I walked and crawled along for what seemed

¹⁷This must have been the cave at Tartiers.



CAVE AT TARTIERS

Joint War History Commissions of Michigan and Wisconsin,
The Thirty-second Division in the World War (Madison, Wisc., 1920)

an interminable time, laying down when star shells came over to lighten up the sky. The Germans seemed to be very interested in that particular part of the front. I don't know what was going on but I had a suspicion that a regiment or division was being moved into the line and "Fritz" was nervous. I was too. After crawling along for some time with the telephone line in my hand I came to a body, and my wire ran under it so I had to feel around it to locate my wire on the other side; then move on for a few feet and run against another, move on; star shells and the place lighted up light as day, and inevitably followed by a burst of machine gun fire and a shell or two coming over. They were all two or three feet high, they did you no harm except make you nervous and slow you way down. It was slow business. Finally I got back to the cave and had a clear board after clearing the break. I was sure glad to get back, since it was beginning to show light in the east. I had been most of the night, was dog tired and plenty dirty. The next morning after having a couple of hours rest I went out to investigate the area I had been over the night before, and counted over 200 dead on the little field I had crawled across the night before.

In front of the cave entrance a road ran. It seemed to be quite an important road from the amount of traffic it carried. In front of the

cave entrance and off to one side was dug a small trench about 18 inches wide and 15 feet long. In one end of the trench a post was set in the ground and on top of this post was mounted a German machine gun in such a way as to command the road and particularly, any airplanes that might be strafing the traffic. The Germans must have left in a hurry, because the gun, upon examination, seemed to be in operating condition, even with a belt of ammunition in it. After looking it over and pulling back the cocking lever, pointing it toward the sky, I pulled the trigger and fired three shots before I could get my finger off the trigger.

There was considerable traffic on the road and it wasn't long before a German plane came along strafing the road from about 150 feet up. Whether anyone was seriously hurt I will never know. However, I jumped down in the trench and grabbed the machine and pointed it down the road. Sure enough in a very short time another plane came along strafing. I got the machine gun pointed in his general direction and pulled the trigger and sent a good burst in his general direction. Nothing happened so I must have missed. Later on, one of the German triplane fighters made a run. I was so intent on looking at it, I forgot to shoot. Practically all the ammunition was gone anyhow. That was the only triplane I ever saw. They were so little I don't know how they managed to fly. They must not have been too successful for that is the only one I ever saw.

Out of Soissons the Germans must have made a rather determined stand for we were around there a few days. However I never got to sleep in the cave again. The next I was in the cave it was about all cleaned out, but there had been plenty of activity around where I had been, mostly further and further away from the cave.

One night two or three days later there were three of us wandering around looking for a place to spend the night, when another company lineman came along and gave us a piece of advice. He said that just ahead of us about 50 yards was a narrow gauge railroad and maybe there might be a shed or building near it. We went looking and there sure enough along a narrow gauge railroad was a rather well built log cabin type structure, and the railroad ran up to the only door. No one around, we went inside. There was no one in it and it was clean, and covering over half the floor space were boxes, about two feet square. We decided at once that it would be a wonderful place to put up for the night. There was one little draw back, when you closed the door there was no light. One of the fellows searched through his belongings and came up with a piece of candle. We lit it and set it on one of the boxes, closed the door and bedded down for the night—dry, quiet and a good sleep. Next morning awakened sometime about sunrise, lit our candle, and proceeded to get ready for the day. We were almost ready when the door flew open and a French soldier looked in, took one look, stepped back, said “oiei” and took off on a dead run down the narrow gauge track. I took one look at him and

said something tells me we better get the hell out of here. The whole French army will be on us very soon. We got out fast. Down the road about a quarter mile we found a kitchen, and had breakfast. With a little discrete questioning we learned that we had wandered over the line between the French and Americans, and the narrow gauge railroad was put there by the Germans to haul ammunition to the Big Bertha—a big cannon put in to shell Paris, and had actually sent a few shells, but they had quickly dismantled it when they began to retreat and the French and Americans had advanced too quickly. The log hut was an ammunition dump for the guns. They had moved out so fast they had not even got it all moved before they had to leave. Our bed had been powder for the Big Bertha. I am glad none of it had been spilled around on the floor of the log hut or it could have gotten quite warm. That stuff burned rapidly we found out later when we lit a stick and watched it run along the ground.¹⁸

After leaving Soissons, the war seemed to kind of speed up, never a dull moment and the lines seemed to be always out about the next morning.¹⁹ I was put on an out line and took over the line not going in any good determined direction at all. It seemed to rather be following a road, and it soon became apparent this road had artillery on it, horse drawn 75's, and that they were getting tangled up in my telephone wires in a way they shouldn't, and there was a lot of it. The horses were floundering around and falling over and getting telephone wire under their shoes and around their legs, it was no good trying to clean this mess up in the dark. About two thirty or three o'clock I gave up and sat down by a tree and fell off asleep. When I awoke it was just getting light and the horses and guns were still milling around, the guns more or less pointed in one direction which was over my head. Before long one battery after another went off just over my head. I was partially behind a tree from them, which helped some, but it knocked me out for a while. I finally got my bearings and got up to the road. Here the French were industriously cutting my telephone wires into six inch pieces trying to get it off from

¹⁸Named by the Americans for the heiress of the Krupp munitions firm, Bertha von Krupp, the rifle also was known as the Paris gun. Emplaced prior to the offensive of March 21 it fired on the capital for weeks and caused panic until Parisians recognized it was an instrument of terror, rather than a preliminary to the capture of the city, and steeled themselves to resist it. The gun caused hundreds of casualties, one of the worst occasions being when it sent a shell into a church during services.

¹⁹The Thirty-second Division had been taking part in the rolling up of the Soissons salient, which was bounded by Soissons to the west, Château-Thierry, and Reims. The southernmost boundary of the salient was at Château-Thierry on the Marne, with some German units across the river. The battle drove the Germans north to the Aisne River and alternatively was known as the Aisne-Marne offensive. The division's next action would lie to the north and west, between the branch of the Aisne known as the Oise, which ran east, and continuation of the Aisne to the northeast—the Oise-Aisne offensive hence was in this forked region, beginning August 18, ending September 6. American Battle Monuments Commission, *32nd Division Summary of Operations in the World War* (Washington, D. C., 1943), 6-32.

under the horses shoes, and around their legs and the 75's axles and other parts. It was easily apparent that that wire would not be used again as a telephone system. I went back to company headquarters and explained why the telephone was out, and apt to stay out for some time. I took another line out in a different direction.

The fighting seemed to be picking up and movement accelerated. The Allies were on the move and all in one direction, which was good. It was becoming quite evident that business at the front was picking up. Days would go by when I would not spend more than a few hours without all my switch boards in various headquarters changing location and I was busy. Would no sooner get one line in and back to headquarters, wherever that might be, when another was out, day and night. One day, or I should say, one night about two in the morning I started out with a line in my hand. We were quite close to the front, for every 5 or 10 minutes a German machine gun let loose and I ducked. It was easy to tell the difference between German guns and ours. When I say ours, I mean French. We had no American machine guns. I never saw an American machine gun on the front until the very last days. I walked a mile to see it—a Browning. The Germans guns had a heavier sound than the French "sho-sho's" we used.²⁰ Well, the wire I was following took me to a road, and turned and followed this road. Bad practice—too much traffic. In a short distance I came to an American truck stuck along side the road. Being stuck wasn't hard to get in a truck equipped with hard tires. It could be done in a puddle of mud no larger than a campaign hat.²¹ Anyway this driver must have gotten himself lost, he had no business being that close to the front with a truck. He apparently found that out, he wasn't around any more. An evil thought came over me. It was misting rain, there was a chill in the air, I was wet, and oh so tired, and the phone wire was repaired. The truck with a canvas top on it looked so dry and besides the truck bed was made of steel with steel sides. That would stop machine gun bullets at that distance if any happened to hit. So I weakened and investigated the inside of the truck. It wasn't empty. There were two men in it, one making groaning noises, the other still—too still. The one groaning

²⁰The French guns were Chauchats. When the United States entered the war the number of machine guns in U.S. Army stores was fifteen hundred, with four makes. In the production of armaments that was attempted in following months, down to the armistice in November 1918, almost all of the efforts to produce planes, tanks, artillery, mortars, and rifles failed, with the exception of the Eddystone Enfield, a poor reproduction of the inferior British Enfield, and the Browning guns, which by the end of the war numbered 29,000 rifles and 27,000 heavies. Pershing forbade their use until near the end of the war, for fear the Germans would capture and copy them. The Brownings were the guns of choice in World War II and the Korean War.

²¹Troops trained in the United States with broad-brimmed campaign hats of the War of 1898 and the Mexican border mobilization of 1916–1917. The AEF received the small soft hats known also in World War II, and for battle they wore the short British-style helmets.

asked for a drink. I gave him a long drag out of my canteen of water and sweetened vin rouge—awful stuff, but wet. He said he had been hit in the belly a couple of hours ago by a machine gun and he was cold—could I wrap his blanket about him. The other man also wanted a drink and he was also hit by a machine gun, but in the lung to the right and above his heart. He was also cold and shivering, and wanted his blanket.

It was dark inside, wet and cold outside. I lay down to get a little rest and sleep with my blanket around me, soon was gone. I must have slept for two or three hours, for when I next opened my eyes it was light but still rainy and misty. As I came to, I became aware of my surroundings. I reached out and touched the hand of the man next to me. It was cold and stiff, but he was not feeling it. I looked over at the other man, he was laying very still, not shivering any more. Dead men don't shiver.

I got out of the truck, picked up a wire at the edge of the road, bit into it, found it alive at both ends. One [i.e., headquarters] reported it was just about to move, and would be out in a few minutes, making new connections. So I followed the wire in the opposite direction and soon came to a headquarters of a company, also expecting to move within an hour. I reported the two dead men in the truck, and asked about a kitchen. It was down that way the last they knew, so off I went looking for oatmeal and coffee.

The fighting had been heavy for the last few days, and casualties heavy and replacements were coming in.²² I took a line back in the direction I had come from the day before and in about an hour or two found myself back where I had started the day before, that is, the same company only in a new headquarters closer to the front. Everything was in working order at the switch board at the moment and it was quiet for the time being. I had just settled down to get a little rest and sleep, never losing an opportunity to rest, when in came the captain with a brand new 90 day wonder of nice fresh new second lieutenant. He was all spit and polish, shined shoes, with a crease in the pants and shiny new Sam Brown belt, polished 45 automatic,

²²At this juncture the narrative turns to the Meuse-Argonne offensive, by far the largest battle during American participation in World War I. The AEF lost 26,000 men killed, the most costly battle in the nation's military history. One million men took part in the field armies, First and Second, directed by Pershing, who was army group commander. Nine divisions opened the battle in the I, V, and III corps, distributed left to right on a front extending from the Argonne Forest in the west to the Meuse River near Verdun. The Thirty-second Division at first was in reserve for V Corps, whose divisions, left to right, were the Seventy-ninth, Thirty-seventh, and Ninety-first. On September 30 the Thirty-second relieved the Thirty-seventh, and on the night of October 3-4 it relieved the Ninety-first. Fighting took place in the neighborhood of Romagne, the present-day location of a cemetery containing 14,000 graves. The division captured Romagne on October 14, was relieved October 20, and reentered the line as part of III Corps on the east bank of the Meuse, November 9. *32nd Division: Summary of Operations*, 33-68.

probably trained on how to dress a private or enlisted man down and put him in his place if he by any chance forgot to salute an officer, particularly him, and also ready to show everybody how to conduct the war and get it over with.

The captain asked me if I knew where company I was, or if I could find it, and I said I thought I could if it was still on the end of a telephone wire where it had been about an hour ago. The switch board man said he thought it was because he had talked with I only a few minutes ago. Then the captain told me to deliver Lt. So-and-So there at once. I said "Yes, Sir," it was all I could say. I went over to the switch board, asked the operator which was I Company circuit, picked up the wire and said to the Lieutenant "This way," and he said "Sir" in a way to let me know I was to say "Sir" whenever I addressed him. After having proceeded a short time a German shell came over and landed a short distance away. I heard it come and automatically made a slight duck, as you invariably did when shells came over. It landed a safe distance away and the lieutenant said "Why did you duck?" and I said "just from habit, some explode closer, and within range of their shrapnel." The lieutenant asked how I knew it was shrapnel, and I said most of the shells sent over by the Germans on this front at this time were shrapnel because it was more or less open fighting and they were interested in killing infantrymen or wounding them. He then asked how I knew it was a German 77 and shrapnel, and I said, by sound, and didn't elaborate further. I could have said you will learn fast enough, if you live long enough, but then if I had said all of that I would have had to end with a "Sir" and I had about run out of "Sirs" for this guy. We soon arrived at I Company and turned the lieutenant over to the buck private on the board who told the lieutenant that the "Cap" would probably be in in a few minutes if he made it at all. He didn't finish with a "Sir" and the lieutenant didn't say a word. He was catching on it might be better to have these fellows for friends, with so many bullets flying around.

The war carried on for a few days and once again I was on a trip to I Company only a little farther toward the front, once the front had moved a quarter of a mile or more toward Germany. The "buck" on the board asked if I knew where battalion headquarters were and I said yes. He said there was a man here the Captain wanted to go back now. He was not wounded, but had the worst case of shell shock, jitters, nerves he had seen in a long time; he sure was out of it. In a few minutes the Captain came in with the lieutenant, who was the mud-diast, most bedraggled individual I had ever seen; hollow eyed, stooped, gun gone, and shaking like a leaf in the fall breeze. It certainly was the same man I had brought in a few days before, but the strut and cockiness were all gone and when I said to him "follow me" there was no "Sir." This man had learned about war in a few short days.

It was along about this time that I saw the most gruesome sight I had ever encountered. Three of us were following a wire to the com-



BAKER'S DIVISION CAPTURED THE VILLAGE OF ROMAGNE AFTER
HEAVY FIGHTING IN OCTOBER 1918

Joint War History Commissions of Michigan and Wisconsin,
The Thirty-second Division in the World War (Madison, Wisc., 1920)

pany headquarters, the fellows with me to join the company, and me to the board. A few shells came over and we ducked down, not too close to us, we went on a short way when we saw a soldier sitting with his back to a tree, humped over with his head forward on his chest, down in his blouse. One of the fellows with me remarked that maybe the man was hurt, and went over and spoke to him. Getting no reply he nudged him with his foot, and the man's head simply fell off over to the side. He had been hit by a shell sliver that had practically decapitated him and he had been killed instantly. How he had got into that sitting position against the tree I will never know, but all his blood was down inside his blouse. He never heard the shell that got him. There was nothing we could do, so we went on to company headquarters. It struck me a bit, I must confess.

About this time it seemed to me there was a sort of lull in the fighting. I guess we were not pushing so hard, anyway, everything seemed to stand still, the kitchen where I had eaten once or twice stayed put, and I was hanging around for a day or two. The Germans ran up an observation balloon across the small valley from where we were located. Then I was sure the observer who was in it spotted the kitchen at once, and lobbed two or three shells over at us to let us know he knew we were there. The French air force sent fighter planes over one at a time to make a try at shooting the balloon down, usually

coming in high and diving down at the balloon. They did not have any success. Of course the balloon was ringed with German machine guns, and they did manage to get one of the French fighters, but they never did shoot the balloon. The Germans did eventually pull the balloon down, but they were a bit late as the ground troops eventually took the sites. Later I was at the balloon site, after it was burned, and saw the truck which was used as its ground base. The truck had a large winch filled with cable which was used to raise and lower the balloon. The truck engine was tied up so as to drive the winches.

It was at this headquarters that I got my first hit with shrapnel. About noon each day the Germans always lobbed three shells over at the kitchen. They seemed not to have the range worked out very well for they always missed by about 100 to 200 feet. The shells always lit over in a little ravine. You could depend on the Germans doing better than this. About the third day they did. A shell came over awfully close to the mark. It was so close there was not enough noise to have any time to duck, but I was trying. Just as I ducked a piece of shrapnel about the size of your hand hit me flat on the hind end. Just like being kicked by a mule with new shoes on. I was protected by my blouse, pants, a roll of telephone wire; never the less it knocked me flat on my face, and I had the sorest fanny for a week you ever saw—black and blue. It is a good thing that shrapnel did not hit edgewise or it would easily have relieved me of half my fanny. It made me more wary of shells. I ducked lower, faster and with more protection if it were available.

Time passed and in the end I got able to walk again without wincing with every step.

It must have been getting along the first of October, anyway, along about this time for some reason, the powers that were decided that we needed a rest.²³ I do not know what brought that on, it had never happened before, as far as I could remember. They must have run out of enemy. We were even loaded into trucks and hauled five or ten miles in some direction, unloaded in a small town that had civilians in it, and not badly shot up. We were advised not to light a light after dark as the Germans patrolled the area with planes at night. It would not have taken very long to find that out on our own. The little town had a road, which looked as it might be of some importance, and a small river running along side. In short time we were billeted in a barn close to the river, and were advised it would be a good time to take a bath in the river and wash our clothes, just as if this wouldn't occur to us. The army never gave a buck private the credit for having enough sense to get in out of the rain, until there was a dirty job to do. Then he was told, go do it.

²³Baker's chronology is out of order, for the division did not get relieved until October 20.



THE THIRTY-SECOND DIVISION WAS RELIEVED FOR FIVE DAYS ON
OCTOBER 20, 1918, AFTER THREE WEEKS FURIOUS FIGHTING IN
THE MUD AND RAIN

Joint War History Commissions of Michigan and Wisconsin,
The Thirty-second Division in the World War (Madison, Wisc., 1920)

The next morning I rounded up a bucket, filled it with water from the creek, and had a fire going. Shed my underwear and cooties, my socks and shirt, and had them merrily boiling away in the bucket with a small piece of soap, always available to a buck who had been around for a while. By noon the washing was done and hung out to dry. The day had warmed up to be quite pleasant and we decided it was time to go swimming and get rid of the cooties and cootie eggs that might be hiding away in the folds of our skin. We went down to the stream, which seemed to be quite low, and filled with rocks of all sizes, with a pool of water deeper than elsewhere in the rippling stream. Ideal bath tub, although a bit exposed and chilly in the breeze. I planned to make it as fast as possible, so I stripped off, laid my clothes on a rock on the shore, and proceeded to take a bath, with about fifty other bucks in the immediate vicinity. It wasn't long before I was chilly, ducked into the small pool on the down stream side of my rock and was ready to leave, when I looked up and on the bank was what must have been the entire female population of the village on the bank, located all about the rock where my towel and clothes were piled, laughing and jabbering, enjoying the best show that had been in town for their lifetime. I stood around in my pool of water shivering, getting colder by the minute, hoping they would go away,

which they showed no inclination to do. So finally the fellow next to me said, what the hell, and we stood up and headed slowly toward the bank, picking our way carefully among the rocks. The women and kids were all around my clothes, so it was necessary to literally shove them away to get to my clothes. But we finally made it and got dressed, with plenty of close observation to each detail.

By the end of our week, we had only been bombed three times and I was very well de-cootied and could sleep all night without scratching. We were herded back into the trucks and back to the line we went. Not much movement had taken place. We were about where we were when we left. The Germans must have taken advantage to get ready to pull back because in the first few days we were back we appeared to be moving again by the changes made in the various headquarters company stations and outpost positions.²⁴

As I was making a run between two switch boards one day, just after I had spliced a wire and got them to talking again, in a little ravine about half way between stations, I came across a couple of stretcher bearers with a wounded man. They were both very well pooped, but one of them, a small guy, was really bushed. He said he could go no further, and would I carry his end of the stretcher a short distance to the aid station. I agreed since the man on the stretcher didn't look as if he had too much time left. He had been struck in the shoulder by shrapnel or machine gun [fire] and had lost a lot of blood. We picked up the stretcher and started for the aid station. It was really rough going and hindered by the fact that the right arm of the man we were carrying kept falling off to one side of the stretcher, which started the bleeding again, and he did not have too much left to lose. Finally I took a piece of telephone wire and passed it around the stretcher a couple of times and bound his arm to his side. In that manner we made it to the aid station. I am sorry to say, however, that our passenger did not. I was somewhat late in getting back to the switch board, but then no one noticed, the lines were still in.

For the next few days we seemed to be making fair progress toward the German lines, but were very busy keeping the lines of telephone communication functioning.²⁵ One night I went on a call on an out line back to battalion headquarters, finally got it in around about four o'clock in the morning, all bushed, decided to get a little sleep if possible. It was a nice warm balmy night for this late in the fall, so I decided to sneak away about a hundred feet and sleep an hour or two in a little field just a short distance from the exchange. I spread my poncho in what had been an old plow furrow at the end of the

²⁴As mentioned in note 22, the Thirty-second Division did not go back into the line until November 9. By that time there had been spectacular movement on the sectors of I and V corps, where an offensive launched on November 1 led to a breakthrough. III Corps, turning into the east bank of the Meuse, proceeded much slower.

²⁵They returned to the line two days before the armistice of November 11.



KENNETH BAKER, SEATED; DON SIMMONS, STANDING

Courtesy of Betty Baker Rinker

little field, wrapped my blanket about me, my shoes for a pillow, and my helmet propped up against my head. I was soon asleep. I do not know how long I had dozed off when there was a roar and I saw all the stars of a constellation and a severe pain in my head and I was out. How long I do not know, but when the shell hit it was dark, and when I began being aware of the world around me again, it was quite light, so I must have been out for at least a couple of hours or more, and I was sick, and had a terrible headache. I lay still for a short time, collecting my thoughts, and getting them together. Finally I began to explore my head to see what damage had been done. My helmet, which had been propped over my head, had taken a beating. It had a large dent in it where a piece of shrapnel had mashed it down far enough to hit my head, and broken a hole in the helmet so that the sharp edge from the break had punctured my skin on my head and dented my skull. However there was little blood on my head, but did it hurt, and when I tried to stand up, it was almost impossible, so I just sat down and stayed there for some time. Finally feeling a bit strange, I got back to the first aid tent at battalion headquarters. They wanted to send me to a hospital, but all my contacts with a hospital had been bad, so they stuck a patch on my head, gave me some aspirin, and a pill for pain, and told me to take it easy for a day or two. That was easy to do for me. In a couple of days I was feeling quite well again, and went back to work, with a very tender head. It gave me something to think about, and more respect for German 77 shrapnel.

After a short time things more or less settled into the old routine. Just one telephone line after another out. No let up. Then one day the news arrived that I had been waiting for the last two months. I got orders to be shipped back to my old place in Headquarters Company back at division headquarters. Just like going home. I was to report back November first. They must have needed a truck driver. I couldn't get away, however, until the top sergeant of the company had his chance to get at least one more days work out of a buck private he was going to lose. He couldn't touch me for a detail so long as I was on the telephone maintenance detail, so I had to peel potatoes again. But I didn't mind, I was going home.

On November first I went back to Division Headquarters and found Company C of the Signal Corps and checked out and reported to Headquarters Company and to the top sergeant, and was immediately assigned a truck—three ton Packard. Moved in with my old buddies, and had a good night's rest, mostly out of range of cannon fire and away off from machine gun fire. Next day I was sent out in my truck on routine runs, and had a good talk with my old buddy Hank, and got a lot of pointers on what to scrounge up to make my truck (tent) habitable, good solid useful information from an expert. Within a couple of days we were on the move again, this time we were supposed to go to a little town not too far away with the name

of Dun Sur Meuse. On the way there we passed a sign on the road pointing off to our right, to Verdun. That was the place where there had been a long hard battle before the Germans had finally broken through on their push to Paris, which they had never reached, but had been stopped at Chateau Thierry where we had helped the French stop them, at our first front experience.²⁶ Upon arriving in Verdun, we could hardly believe how completely a city could be leveled by bombardment. As far as I could see there was not one single building standing, with big shell craters all over the place and trenches. In one place was the notorious trench of bayonets where, along where the trench had been, it was filled, but bayonets were protruding from the ground in an orderly row. It was said that at the end of the bayonet was a man's body, still in an upright position, still with his gun in his hand where he had died when the trench had been filled in by cannon fire, each man stood his post and died rather than retreat. They were French bayonets.

After driving around town we took off for Dun, not too far north. We soon found it. A small French village on the Meuse. The town was mostly intact since it was located in the little valley of the Meuse River. The town had been shielded from the shells because of the rather close, high rise of the valley side just back of the town. Any German shells that cleared the heights just back of the town would also clear the few houses strung along the road, but back closer to the hills, and would land on the road and in the Meuse River or the fields beyond, so the town had been spared.

We were assigned to stay in a stone barn that had lost one corner to a stray shell, because it also had a small barnyard for us to park our trucks in.

We moved in and cleared out a corner of the barn for a place to sleep and built a small fire to warm the place a bit as it was getting chilly after the sun went down. As dark approached we let the fire go down to just a mound of coals and stretched a shelter half over it so as not to be seen from above and keep the heat in. Spent a comfortable night. In a couple of days rumors began to float around the war would be over in a few days. The rumors got more persistent from day to day until a definite date was set. It came and went, but the war was still on.²⁷ Then the date was moved forward and got stronger and stronger. We had been fooled once, this time we did not

²⁶Baker is confusing the Battle of Verdun in 1916 with American defense of Château-Thierry two years later. Americans had not participated at Verdun, which was an epic struggle because of huge casualties suffered both by the German attackers and French defenders, usually estimated as half a million on each side. At Château-Thierry on the Marne, American machine gunners from the Third Division prevented a German break-through across the river.

²⁷The false armistice, a widespread but erroneous report of peace, came several days before the real one. The author again blurs chronology, for the Thirty-second Division reentered the line two days before war's end.

swallow the rumor. Then one day an order came through that all firing would stop at 11:00 o'clock. We took this with skepticism, and went on with our business, which was driving trucks here and there, moving various things and men occasionally. About 10:00 o'clock in the morning of the 11th Hank and his truck were sent on a trip down the road. Off he went out of sight, down the road. In about 15 minutes here came a truck down the road wide open, and a shell broke right on it, it appeared to us. In a couple of minutes in came Hank. The whole back end of his truck banged up with what had sure been a near miss of a German shell. Hank said that last one hit right on my tailgate, and those bums up there said the war was over. Had that shell been a couple of seconds sooner it would have hit Hank right on his truck section. It sure would have been tough to get killed within a few minutes of the end of the war.

Within a few minutes of 11 o'clock it seemed as if every outfit in the army was trying to shoot off every piece of ordinance they had. We hid under our trucks. Then at 11:00 everything was quiet, very quiet. We lay there waiting for it to start again, but it didn't, it was for real.

That night we had a real fire in the barn and slept warm. Next day was quiet. We just set around or worked on our trucks and speculated on where we would go and how soon we would start home. This went on for a day or two and the rumor started that we were going up to Germany in the Army of Occupation.²⁸ In another day this was verified by the fact that we got orders to take our trucks over to the auto dump and get new trucks. We were all elated at the idea of having nice new trucks. Too good to be true. We went over to the dump turned in our trucks and were taken over to a line of old trucks that didn't look as good as the ones we had, and told to pick ourselves out a truck. These old pieces of junk were not nearly as good as the ones we had. I got one which they bragged on a lot, which should have been a warning to me. It was a junker. I barely got it back to our parking lot. The next two days I spent trying to tune up the wreck so it would run. Finally, with a new distributor, new plugs, timing, it ran reasonably well. I also fixed the governor so it did not interfere with the speed, which was strictly against orders, but I could always say that is the way it was when I got it, just be the good old dumb buck.

The next day orders came to me to be ready to take off early since my truck was to be used for the telephone communications

²⁸For the Army of Occupation, the Third Army, General Pershing chose only divisions that had seen the most action. The men of the AEF always believed that the First Division, the first in France, saw the most action, followed by the Second. Both were regular army divisions. In fact the Thirty-second achieved the same number of battle honors as the First and one more than the Second. So proudly reported a guard officer, Captain Charles S. Coulter. Coulter, "National Guard Service in World War," *Infantry Journal*, XXX (January 1927), 97.

truck, and I was to report to a lieutenant so and so, who I did not know[,] did not belong to our battalion, but I was to report to him. The usual army clear, concise orders. If a buck was involved, we were never told anything. As it turned out I did not have to find the lieutenant. He and the sergeant found me in the morning early, asked if I were ready, I said yes "sir," and he said first we have to go get some stuff at headquarters, and we will be off. So off we went to his headquarters, the lieutenant on the seat beside me, the sergeant in the back. The only reason I got to keep my seat was because I had to drive, and I could not do so from the back.

We were off, going south along the Meuse River for a few miles. Then turning off to the left to pick up the Moselle River highway which ran in a general northeast direction. This road was crooked, and up hill and down. Not much time could be made, although it really was not a bad road. We were supposed to get out ahead of the general moving troops, most of who were marching and in horse drawn wagons, slow going. The lieutenant had a map, on which was marked our destination for each day, only about 15 miles per day, and name of small town or wide place in the road where we were to stop and make telephone connections in the local telephone switchboard to Paris, so the General in charge would talk with headquarters in Paris upon his arrival. It seems he held back and traveled with the troops so as to arrive with the kitchen. Of course he was not walking.

I soon found out that it was a good practice to make a call on my old friend the mess sergeant and scrounge food to take along in the truck, just in case. I always managed to keep a supply of bread, C rations, coffee, bacon and jam on hand, which came in handy at times, and made a big hit with the Germans in whose homes we usually stayed.

We had started out on about the third day after the armistice, and were on the road quite a number of days, going slowly for us, but plenty fast for the men who had to walk. I think we advanced roughly 15 miles a day, some days more, some less, easy for me in a truck, but for a man with a full pack, up hill and down, not so easy. I am not real clear on just what day we crossed the Rhine River, it must have been the 12th or 13th of December.²⁹ We were out in front of the troops a good way when we came to a stretch of a mile or two of straight road, quite good, so I stepped down on the old Packard truck some and made a lot of noise. Pretty soon we could see a big bridge ahead of us and also an MP out in the road frantically warning us to stop. We stopped and the MP wanted to know how we were out so far in front of the main army, and a lot of other questions. I was glad the lieutenant was there, he was in command, I didn't have to say a

²⁹It was the thirteenth.

thing. Just sit there and look as dumb as possible, and finally they decided that we could go ahead, but were not to catch up with the Germans who were a short distance ahead. We drove on to the bridge over the Rhine River, which was located north of Coblenz about 8 miles according to the map the lieutenant had. As we passed the middle of the bridge we could see the tail end of the German army in a column of four about ready to leave the bridge. We drove to within a couple of hundred feet of the hinnies, and slowed down so as not to get any closer, after clearing the bridge.

There was a road leading off to the right, so we took it, and landed in a small town on the river bank, very close to the spot the lieutenant was looking for, the telephone exchange. We pulled up and stopped. He got out and we looked around and lo and behold there was a little restaurant right beside the truck, so the sergeant and I decided it would be a good opportunity to try out German cooking, although it didn't look too prosperous. We went in and the operator and two customers, who apparently just finished a late breakfast or mid-morning snack, eyes popped out. We must have been the first American soldiers they had seen and they apparently had not expected us that day. The two customers left at once. We sat down at a table and ordered three eggs, toast and coffee. The operator looked startled, and said *kine eis, bread ersatz un nicht haba fleish*—coffee ersatz, nicht gute. I said one minute, and went out front to my hoard in the truck, and came back with a half loaf of badly mashed, white bread, also a chunk of bacon and a glass of jelly. I put them on the counter and said toast, and bacon, also three eggs, and the sergeant echoed, three eggs. We gave him our canteens of coffee and told him to make it hot. In no time we had three eggs, fried strips of bacon and white toast, and a glass of jelly, grape as I remember, a good hot breakfast. And the word must have gotten about as people began to walk past the restaurant to see the American soldiers. In about half an hour the lieutenant came back and said "I see you have already had breakfast," and we said "Yes sir." As we came out the lieutenant said we had to go to Coblenz and look up where the bridge-head command office was to be, so off to Coblenz we went and crossed back to the city which is on the west bank, on a pontoon bridge. There was also another permanent bridge here. How it happened to be spared I will never know.

We found the headquarters and after a time the lieutenant came back and said as soon as we unloaded his material, I could report back to my outfit, which was not far away in Coblenz at present. I took off and soon found them all wondering where I had been.

We were in the city only a few days till we all moved back across the river to a little town where we took up residence in a private house with a barnyard, in which we could park our trucks. This house was fairly large having four rooms in a row on the first floor and four above them. On the first floor a living room in front, then the dining

room, then the kitchen and bedroom. The household consisted of a mother and father and two teen aged daughters. There were two of us lodged in the back bedroom on the second floor. The only way we could get there was to go through the daughter's bedroom. It was quite apparent that mamma was quite apprehensive. She needn't have been because there were some very strict orders out concerning our conduct and fraternization.

The company kitchen was about a block away, and my old friend "sarge" was there. We understood from the first that we would not be located here long. During the time we spent in this house along came Christmas and would you believe it we had turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes, green peas, gravy, the whole Christmas dinner. How the army managed that will always be a mystery to me. The German family we were living with could simply not believe it. We brought in heaping mess plates of everything including big cups and canteens of real coffee which the Germans had not seen for a year or two. We divided up and you should have seen them dig into that dinner.

Within a day or two after Christmas the word began to circulate that we would be moving again and sure enough in a few days we got the word. This was not to be a long move, actually not more than ten miles further away from Coblenz, but closer to the perimeter of the occupation. Didn't mean much, we left one morning and were in and established by mid-afternoon. From my view it was a total loss, we ended up being billeted in what had been some kind of school for the feeble minded, at least that was what had been moved in. Our room was what had been a gymnasium, with twelve or fifteen of us sleeping on army cots. Quite a come down from the feather beds we had been sleeping on the last few days, and no women to make them up. There was naturally a lot of squawking. One advantage was, however, all our equipment was in the same building, with our trucks parked in the street on a slight hill, along side the building, which was to cause trouble later.

Things settled down into a routine within a week. I had a daily run with a big Fiat auto which had a body built on the back in which I hauled batteries to the various radio stations located throughout the area which our division occupied.³⁰ This took about three or four hours a day, and the rest of the time was used up by special missions, or sleeping, hauling stuff here and there, sleeping and reading. One drawback being there was always someone in the room, talking, playing cards, smoking, etc. At least not conducive to sleeping.

I got fed up with this condition before long, and began to figure out how to get a private room in a private home, and was informed that it was possible, if I could find one within a block or so, and I

³⁰It was the area in the vicinity of Dierdorf and Rengsdorf.

must be in the orderly room during the waking day when not out on duty.

I started looking, and came up with a room in a house about two blocks away and closer to the kitchen than we were now, where my old friend mess sergeant was in charge. The place I found was not a big place, but typical of the houses in the neighborhood. It was situated on a curving street, and sat directly on the street, no yard. The house had two stories in front, two rooms on the first floor and two above. On the back side of the house had been built a sort of T addition one and one half stories in height, about. In the T part on the back down stairs was a dining room, kitchen arrangement, and a stairway going up to the room above, which actually had side walls about four feet high and a gable roof. A stairway led from the kitchen-dining room below. There was no plumbing, although there was a pump in the kitchen sink.

Also attached to the kitchen was the cow barn. By opening a door to the kitchen you could get a close view of a cow facing the other way; convenient for milking. Where would you put her calf?

Also in the back and attached to the house were the chicken coops stacked on top of each other and containing about a dozen hens, also the Chick Sales and a barn or shed containing hay and feed for the cow.³¹ There was a regulation by the government that all eggs laid by the hens went to the government for use in the hospitals, and were collected each week.

Light for the house was provided by one drop from the center of each room. I got permission from the sergeant of the Headquarters Company to move out of the gymnasium and offered to put a phone in the sergeants room and headquarters room so he could get ahold of me whenever he needed me. This was the thing that did the business. Before it was all over, we had a regular telephone exchange for the favored few. It took a lot of patching up of old phones to get this system working. Finally everything got worked out. My room had a good bed, with feather comforters above and below. The only trouble being they were too short and had to be laid catty-cornered across the bed to cover me from my chin to my feet. I figured most Germans must be short or they liked to double up in bed. After my room had been fixed up to my liking, it had a comfortable warm bed, a stand along the wall on which were placed an old time bedroom pitcher and wash bowl, along with water at all times, and a mirror for shaving. Along side my bed was a small table on which the local family had placed an electric lamp, after I had run a wire from the ceiling outlet. Where that lamp came from I will never know.

³¹A Chick Sales was an outhouse. It was named after the humorist, a vaudeville figure, who was the author of a little book entitled *The Specialist* in which as an alleged carpenter he described the virtues and defects of several models.

After about two or three weeks, the high brass became concerned about how us poor privates were being housed, so the lieutenants were requested to make a visual inspection of our quarters, and report any irregularities which they came across. The chore fell to the lieutenant in charge of the Headquarters Company. Of course no buck private was told of this inspection, the object being to keep the privates as ignorant as possible about what was going on or what was about to take place.

Well, I was inspected, all out of a clear sky about eight o'clock one morning, my lieutenant burst in upon the people with whom I was living and demanded to see my room. They did not know what to do, except show him the room. He came up and caught me half dressed and shaving and it was well past 8:00 and any buck private was expected to be down to the orderly room and to have had his breakfast of oatmeal and coffee, and be ready for the days assignment. And here I was in my underwear, just shaving, and sitting on the end of the bed was the tray on which my breakfast had been served, and it was only too obvious that breakfast had consisted of two eggs, white toast, jam and coffee served in a china cup, and bacon, two big pieces. The lieutenant took one look and said "Who the Hell do you know"? Well, he knew who I knew, he also knew that I knew there would be just the routine report on my quarters, everything OK. Word came down the next day the lieutenant would like to have a telephone in his room if one could be found. One could be found. I had a better room than he did, more light and more service.

After our inspection, which by the way, was the only one I ever had in Germany, things settled down to more or less a daily routine. I made my daily routine delivering batteries and had lots of loafing on my hands, and since I had a regular delivery run and was on detail I could not theoretically be on two details at the same time, so could not draw KP or guard duty or other details that are always looking around for some poor buck to do them. So I had time to get in a little more trouble. The small courtyard at the school where the company was housed had become a repository for cars and trucks that were not running so well, or not at all. Among this assortment of immobile vehicles was a Harley Davidson motorcycle that was among the casualties. Several guys had had a turn at trying to get it to run, no success, so one day I tried my hand. First had to find out why it wouldn't run. It didn't take long to learn there was no spark getting to the spark plugs. Upon examining the distributor it was obvious the points were not opening and on further inspection the spring to the points were broken, and the points would not open, therefore no spark. After scrounging around for a short time I found a small piece of flat steel that looked as if it may have been out of an old corset or something of the kind. After considerable time and effort, bending and cutting and working on it, it would fit behind the broken copper spring in the distributor so it would open when it should and

distribute a spark to the cylinders at the right time, and to my utter astonishment, the engine ran after a fashion.

Well, there was nothing to do but to immediately test it out, no matter the chain was so loose it was practically falling off. I got the cycle on the street, the engine started and off we went. The further we went the better it ran for a mile or two, and we were out in the country in no time, on a very narrow hard top road. The farmers in Germany never miss a bet. The road was just wide enough so that by being careful a couple of vehicles could pass. The farmer had plowed and seeded the normal sides of the road right up to the hard top and the telephone poles sat back in the farmer's field about 8 or 10 feet on either side of the hard top. This area was cultivated and well fertilized with the contents of the honey wagon.

After having gone down the road a couple of miles, I slowed down and turned around and as I slowed the engine began to miss and jump. Anyway, starting back toward home base the engine ran very roughly, missing and bucking. As I gained speed I just aggravated the condition. Finally with a great jerk the drive chain jumped off the sprocket, got mixed up in the rear wheel, off the road we went headed directly toward a telephone pole, which we fortunately missed by about an inch. The cycle fell over. I dived over the handle bars, plowing a nice furrow in the soft, freshly plowed, well fertilized field with my forehead and nose, losing some skin in the process, and collecting some fresh fertilizer, especially too near the road. I lay still for a few minutes taking careful inventory of all my moveable possessions, and decided nothing was missing or broke or lost, and that everything was in working condition. I got up and shoved the motorcycle out to the road, in hopes some one I knew with a truck would come along. I was in luck. Sure enough one of my outfit stopped and asked if he could help. I said yes, help me get this thing in the truck and back home, so we loaded the cycle in the back end. The driver said "Do you look awful! Are you hurt?" and I replied that I guessed not. He climbed in the truck and I walked around to the other side and climbed in, and he said "You stink like Hell. Don't touch anything." We got back to headquarters and drove into the back end of the yard, where we unloaded the cycle and stored it, or rather leaned it against the wall. As far as I know it is still there, but I will bet no one is riding it.

I needed cleaning badly and it took the rest of the day and all of the next day to get reasonably clean and patched up where I had lost skin from my nose and forehead. I laid off motor cycles for life.

Postscript

This is the end of the narrative written by Kenneth Baker. He wrote with pencil on a yellow paper tablet while sitting in the easy chair of his Florida retirement apartment. The memoirs were started in August of 1984, 66 years after he had crawled under machine gun fire and ducked shrapnel while mending telephone wires on the battlefields of France. Kenneth Baker was then 88 years old.

He had no diary, no bundle of cherished letters kept by his family, no friends with whom he could reminisce nor questioners to quicken his memory. His only reference was his copy of *32nd Division in the World War* issued by the joint War History Commissions of Michigan and Wisconsin.

The narrative was finished. When I visited my parents in their apartment, I recall reading it to its conclusion with his description of coming home. Unfortunately I did not take the manuscript with me then, and when I did take it for typing the last pages were missing. And Kenneth Baker had grown too tired to write again.