
VOICES OF THE PAST

DONALD KYLER'S MEMOIR

WORLD WAR I

1917-1919

The following excerpts are from the memoir of Sergeant Donald Kyler, a Soldier who served with the 1st Infantry Division in World War I. Kyler's type written memoirs are included with his other papers in the World War I survey collection at the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center at Carlisle Barracks, Carlisle, PA.

The transcriptions below are taken from the copies in the USAHEC collection, and are presented unedited and as unchanged as possible. As with all transcripts there is the possibility of error.

(Kyler's experience with the food party)- Soon after our company went into position there I got a new assignment. I was told to go forward and familiarize myself with the location of all the platoons and how best to get to them. What I found I didn't like. The communication trenches were muddy and had water in them in places. Boards had been put down in the worst places. They were slippery and not easy to walk on. Where there was water one either had to wade through it or take a chance and go over the top to get around it. The latter course was risky because of sniper or machine gun fire.

When I got back to the village, what I was to do was revealed to me. And I didn't like that either. Because of the difficulty of carrying food and supplies from our position to the line platoons, it had been decided that the usual procedure would not be done there. It was felt that carrying parties from the platoons, necessarily rotating because of other duties, would have more difficulties than a semi-permanent party would have. Also there were some rubber boots available, but not enough for more than a few men. Two men from each platoon was sent for. They assembled in the village and I was put in command of the group. Our instructions were that until further notice we would be the carrying party for all the forward platoons.

Those men, I knew, were the most undesirable ones in their respective platoons. They were considered unreliable for one reason or another. Some were inept. Some were just ornery. All were older than I was. For those reasons it was with apprehension that I took command of the group.

The first thing to do was to find places for them to bed down in. I wanted them to be as close together as practical, so that I could call them out easier. In finding shelter among the ruins of wrecked buildings it was wise to beware of walls that might fall, especially as the place was likely to be shelled. By partial excavation and improvisation we finally got located in a group in what were more like burrows than anything else. In my own shelter I had to bend low to enter.

It was in the evening. I had been continuously on the go since the previous day: and with darkness came another night of duty. None of us had eaten since the previous day. Our job was to carry food, water, ammunition, supplies and mail from the village forward through the communication trenches to the four platoon command posts. We were not responsible for distribution from there on. We were to collect the empty food containers from the previous night's feeding and return them to the village. We were to be called on to carry or assist any movable wounded back to the first aid station, and carry corpses and their equipment to the village.

Another carrying party, mostly from our Headquarters Platoon, had been given the responsibility of meeting the cart in the rear. They met at various times and places at night and relayed the food and supplies to our position in the village. They did not have to worry about snipers or of slipping off of planks into mud holes. But they did have farther to go and were exposed to much more shell fire. I did not envy them.

The mess sergeant, back at the kitchen location, each day got a report of how many men were present in each platoon. He had the food portioned to each platoon and tagged each container or bag as to which platoon it should go. It was to go to that platoon and no other. That night my group had no more than gotten the first batch of food to carry forward than I had a command problem. Several men wanted to open cans and start eating at once. I stopped them and called the group together. Then I spoke to them somewhat as follows.

“Some of you seem to have a wrong idea as to what you can get by with. I want to make it emphatic that we all have responsibilities. It is my responsibility to see that you carry out yours. Our responsibility is to get that food forward to where it belongs- all of it!! You are hungry. I am hungry. We all are. Our food is in the cans marked Headquarters Platoon. It is being left here with the supply sergeant. We will eat after we have returned from taking this stuff forward, and not before! I warn you that I will not tolerate any of you taking any of that food, and I will not hesitate to use extreme measures to protect it.

We will go forward through the communication trenches and sometimes in the open in single file. We will halt sometimes to rest. Do not dally behind or stop at any of the platoons when we get there. We are going as a group and we will return in a group. Are there any questions? All right, then, let’s go.”

There was some grumbling, but no more than I expected. That didn’t worry me. But the silent ones did. There were two Yaqui Indians who rarely spoke to anyone except to themselves, and in their own language. They seemed to have a limited use of English, but I suspected that they understood a lot more than they pretended to. One of them was to later save our group from almost certain disaster. I soon learned to respect and trust them.

Some of those men had been badly treated in their squads and platoons. I think that it was mostly because of a lack of understanding by their leaders. One can not motivate all men the same way. I found that by being generous with compliments when deserved, and spare with reprimands though deserved, that better results would be obtained. A light reprimand with an air of holding back more that might be added may be more effective than a harangue would be.

I led the group slowly forward through the first communication trench. We wore rubber boots and had gas masks along, but no other equipment except a loaded pistol that I carried. When we came to a watery place I could hear men slipping around on the planks. One man fell into a deep hole and got water in his boots. Beyond that point we halted to rest a bit and let the man drain the water from his boots. Then we continued on and finally delivered all the food cans and bags to their proper places.

We had started out loaded to capacity. I decided that in the future we would make more trips and would not try to travel those trenches with such heavy loads. After returning to the village we were given our portions of food and drink. It had been about thirty hours since we had eaten. Then we were to try to get some rest during the remainder of the night and the coming day. Ensuing darkness would mean another night of work.

That went on for a few nights without incidents for us, except the usual harassment of shell fire. Then it turned cold. That night when it came to the watery place in the trench it had ice too thick to wade through but not thick enough to walk on. I chopped some of it out of our

way but decided that was too slow. If we were to get our job done we would have to go over the top and bypass the low places. We climbed out of the trench and I led them in an arc around the low ground. We came to a band of wire entanglements. I thought we were on the right side of it and that if we angled across an open space we would come to the rear of one of the platoons we were to serve. But I was wrong. I felt a hand on my arm. It was one of the Indians. He had dropped his load and had caught up with me. He pointed in the direction in which we were going and whispered one word: "Boches." That was the word the French used, meaning Germans. I signaled for the men to reverse direction. We got back to the wire and took cover in weeds and brush. After a breathing spell I told him to lead us out of there, and he did.

After we got back to the village to pick up our second load I told the men how badly I felt about the bad error I had made. I also praised the man and reported to Sergeant Thompson what had happened. We all felt very grateful to him for what he had done. And I will never forget that by my error, we would have been killed or captured.

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