
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 on a combat train)- On July 11th Sergeant Thompson approached me in a kind and conciliatory manner. He informed me that I had been selected to accompany our regiment's "Combat Train" on a journey. There would be one man from each company so detailed. I was to report to 1st Lieutenant Baker, who was in command of the combat train. Lieutenant Baker was formerly a Company G officer, and a good one. I knew him well. Sergeant Thompson said that he thought we would be going into battle soon, but he didn't know when or where.

I said goodbye to him and several friends and hunted the combat train. It was parked in a woodland several kilometers away. I found Sergeant Greer, the wagon master of the train. He told me to go to the kitchen, get some chow, (a common name for food) and bed down for the night.

The next morning Sergeant Greer assembled the train personnel and the escort men, such as myself. Lieutenant Baker addressed us and told us what we were to do. The train would move mostly at night. We would stay hidden during daylight hours as much as possible, to avoid being seen by hostile observation airplanes. There would be one meal served every morning when we camped for the day. We would be crossing the rear of a retreating French Army, and might have to change our plans and direction suddenly. The escort men were not to ride, but would walk distributed among the vehicles. We would carry our rifles and cartridge belts. Our other equipment would be on our company's wagon. Our job was to give security to the train, either from enemy forces, such as motorcycle troops, (who were reported to have slipped through the French defenses) or from looters of any kind. The escort men were to keep their rifles loaded and with them at all times. The wagon drivers and their helpers were also armed with rifles, which were kept in scabbards on the vehicles. However, their primary responsibility was to drive and manage the mules and wagons.

When camped, one sentry would be posted to watch the parked vehicles, and one to watch the picket line, where the mules were tied. They would be relieved from time to time, but the watch would be kept until it was time for everyone to stir at dusk. The men would bed down as near to the vehicles and mules as was practical. The sentry was to chase away any passers-by who might disturb them. We would be going through a populated country, but it was in confusion and turmoil. The Lieutenant did not know exactly where we were going, but said that we would receive orders from time to time. Other wagon trains of our division, including the artillery brigade, would be traveling by night in the same direction. Every effort would be made to try to keep them from using the same roads at the same time. Lastly, Lieutenant Baker placed

a sergeant in command of the escort men. He was subordinate to the wagon master. We were ready to get going.

We had fifteen combat wagons, one forage and ration wagon, one rolling kitchen, and one water cart. Lieutenant Baker rode a horse. Sergeant Greer and his assistant rode mules. We started that afternoon, traveled the rest of the day and all night. When dawn approached it was time to find a stopping place. Lieutenant Baker did not ask. He just had us pull into a little woodland and take it over. We were too tired to care where we were, but we had been going west, which was not toward the fighting. It was as though we were retreating with the French forces then trying to stop the German advance.

It must be remembered that it was a time of confusion for the high command, as it was for us. History has revealed that fact. History also reveals that our 2nd Division had moved north while we were fighting near Cantigny, and had planned to relieve us after that offensive. Instead, they had been hastily recalled, and had back-tracked and were then helping hold the line east of Paris. It is thought that they played a major role in stopping the German advance.

During the second night of our travel, we turned south and dawn found us somewhere north of Paris. During the third night we crossed the Oise River. No suitable camping place could be found, so the vehicles were pulled to the side of the road and left there for the day. Some men bedded down under the vehicles to take advantage of the shade, but were greatly bothered by traffic on the road, military and otherwise. Refugees were traveling from the east where the fighting was taking place. From there we made another night move.

Our division's foot troops had been taken by hundreds of French military trucks, from the vicinity of Beauvais to the vicinity of Dammartin en Goele. We were supposed to join them there. But on the night of July 15-16, they were again taken by trucks to the vicinity of Pierrefonds. Therefore, we had more moving to catch up with them.

It was necessary to make contact with them before they went into battle, because not only did we have the regiment's reserve ammunition, but we also all grenades, and the important signal rockets and flares. The grenades were too heavy and too dangerous to be carried very long by troops on the march. The signal rockets and flares were too fragile. Therefore, it had been decided not to issue them until just before the attack.

Although those of us who accompanied the animal drawn trains had to endure much fatigue and some hardships, in some ways it was better than what the men who rode the trucks had to endure. They were packed into those trucks very closely. There was no comfort: no place to sit or lie down except on one's comrades. The trucks had canvas covers over wooden bows over the load space. When in motion, the train traveled at a slow uniform rate. There was no stopping except because of road jams. Rough places in the road had to be gone over without slowing down. That went on for hours. Even when the train stopped because of a traffic jam, the men could not unload to relieve themselves. It was strictly against orders. The train would not wait for anyone. The jostling, the heat, the stench of closely packed bodies, of urine and feces: those were some of the things that they had to endure when riding those truck trains.

When riding on the railroad between fronts, the conditions were better. There was less crowding, and we could relieve ourselves over the side of a moving train. The people of the various war zones had grown used to seeing that sort of thing and they thought little of it. In their characteristic French way they would shrug and utter the familiar phrase, "It is the war."

Although on that move, I did not ride on the truck train, I experienced the same conditions, before and afterwards. On the morning of July 17th, we got to where the companies had camped after the last truck ride. But they were gone by marching toward the then supposed

front line about ten kilometers away. As the attack was scheduled for before dawn on the morning of July 18th, the necessity of haste was apparent.

By then, all the thoughts of secrecy had been abandoned, not only by our train but by all wheeled transportation also. Other trains, artillery, French and American tanks, and other various vehicles were trying to use the same roads at the same time. That caused great congestion.

We had a meal and camped there in a woods for a few hours. It was the last rest we would have for some time. Although German long range guns were dropping shells on the road periodically, they didn't bother us. Both men and mules had reached the state of fatigue that noise did not disturb their rest. But there was not enough of it. Later in the day, the sergeants kicked us out of our sleep. It was time to get rolling. Lieutenant Baker had sent scouts ahead to reconnoiter, but I don't know what their report was.

We pulled out and moved forward little by little the rest of the day. At night it became worse. All persons were tired and tempers flared. A major of artillery ordered our train to pull over and let his battalion pass. Lieutenant Baker did. But up ahead some ambulances refused to do so. The major surrounded them with men and threatened to upset them into the ditch. They pulled to one side. The artillery got around them and so did we. Their drivers should have known that artillery and ammunition trains had the right of way.

All transportation traveled without lights, although the night was cloudy and dark. In those conditions, accidents were inevitable. Congestion became so bad that Lieutenant Baker decided to take to the fields in an effort to get forward. We did so, but it was such hard going that in places we had to halt and put the teams from half the train in double hitches on the other half of the train in order to move at all. One place was especially bad. The wagons slid down a bank with the brakes set hard, and then mired in the mud below. Sergeant Greer had all the escort men and all the wagon helpers in there to help each wagon get through the mire. Some mules fell in the water and had to be helped up. All of us became covered with mud, some even in the hair of their heads.

At another place, several wagons slid down a bank, had to be unloaded, righted, and loaded again. Those were the reasons why it took us so long to travel the few kilometers to where the carrying parties were to take the extra ammunition and grenades, etc., to their various companies. We were scarcely more than seventy kilometers from where we had started near Beauvais, but had traveled much more than that in a circuitous route to get there.

We finally met men from our regiment, Sergeant Thompson was among them. He said that as soon as the train parked he would bring some G Company men to our wagon to get ammunition. I began preparing to issue as the train parked. Soon, Sergeant Thompson and I were handing out bandoleer after bandoleer of rifle cartridges. We also issued ammunition for the French automatic machine rifles, with which we were still equipped. A rifleman ordinarily carried a hundred rounds of rifle cartridges: an automatic rifleman and his helper much more. What we were issuing was extra ammunition for the impending attack. But when we looked for the signal cartridges, they could not be found.

It suddenly came to my mind that the wooden box they were packed in must have been overlooked when we had to reload some wagons back along the way. It was then only a few hours until the attack would begin. For our company's leaders to have to go into action without signal rockets was awful. I felt very badly about it. I told Sergeant Thompson I thought I knew where they might be, and that I would fetch them as soon as I could.

There was a storm approaching. I was tired, wet, covered in mud, and in no condition for the task that was ahead. Nevertheless, I left all my equipment at the combat wagon and started back. If the enemy had sent over gas shells I could have gotten a gas mask from somewhere along the road. The road was more congested than it had been before. Artillery of various calibers were trying desperately to get into position for the initial bombardment. Walking on the road was impossible. I had to go along- side of it. Even then, there was danger of being run over by ammunition trucks. After a few kilometers of that, I came to where the wagons had to be reloaded. The signal cartridge box was there in the mud. Carrying that box back to our wagon was the most exhausting thing I ever did. I had to stop to rest several times. With almost my last strength I delivered the box to Sergeant Thompson. He told me to stay with the wagons. They were waiting in place to follow up after the attack. It was raining, accompanied by lightning. It was soon to be time for the bombardment to begin. But I did not hear it.
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(Kyler's battle while with the combat train)- Our combat train tried to follow our regiment's units as closely as possible. The decisions that Lieutenant Baker had to make were not easy. He wanted to have the wagons available to keep the companies supplied with ammunition, but did not want to get into a trap and lose the whole train. In general, he tried to keep the train at least two kilometers in rear of any fighting. Although he always had scouts ahead, sometimes we had to back-track. On one such occasion we were trying to make contact with a carrying party from one of our battalions when the scouts were fired on by a German machine gun. Lieutenant Baker came galloping back from the leading wagon; shouting to get those wagons turned around in a hurry. He directed some of the escort men, including myself, to rush forward and engage the machine gun until the wagons could get away. We did. The escort sergeant directed our fire so that it covered the machine gun nest from several directions. When the machine gun fired in our direction we took cover. The others fired on him. In that way we diverted his fire away from the road where the wagons, except the leading one, were getting away.

I was in favor of outflanking the machine gun and destroying it. But the sergeant motioned us back when the wagons had escaped. Three of the leading wagon's mules were down in pools of blood. The driver turned the unwounded one loose and killed the wounded ones. He then assisted his helper, who was wounded, to the rear where the rest of the train had gone.
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(Kyler's experience when the combat train gets attacked by airplanes)- Our train did not move far at any one time, but moved frequently. One of the reasons was to prevent becoming targets for enemy artillery. Hostile observation planes frequently came over, although allied planes tried to keep them drives off. German attack planes also sometimes made bombing and machine gun runs on suitable targets.

About the third day a part of our train was traveling on an open and level space when three German fighter planes suddenly dived out of the sky. They made machine gun runs on us and some artillery units nearby. All of the escort men and most of the wagoners fired on them with our rifles. The planes rushed overhead, banked, returned several times. I used the cartridges in my belt and got more from a wagon. My rifle barrel got very hot.

It was difficult to bring down an airplane with rifle fire, but one of them was hit, did not pull out of a dive, crashed and burned. The pilot died in the wreckage and flames. The other planes left.

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