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# VOICES OF THE PAST

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DONALD KYLER'S MEMOIR

WORLD WAR I

1917-1919

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*The following excerpts are from the memoir of Sergeant Donald Kyler, a Soldier who served with the 1<sup>st</sup> 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 accident with an orange)-** Some time later, after we had moved to Fort Bliss, I was peeling an orange one evening and threw the peelings between ours and the next tent. Just then Corporal Baughn, whom I respected and admired, happened to see me. He told me to pick up the peelings and bring them along. We went to the supply tent where we checked out a pick and shovel. I carried the peelings and the pick and shovel and we went near the incinerator. He told me to dig a hole and keep digging until he told me to stop. He went away and I started to dig. I kept on digging and had visitors. Soldiers came by laughing and joking about me digging for buried treasure or something. When it was about time for (tattoo) to sound, and after I had dug for several hours, Corporal Baughn came back. We buried the orange peelings. We then went back to our tents and later became very good friends. That incident made a lasting impression on me. I learned obedience, not only about the things that I thought were important, but also about the things that the army thought were important.

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**(Kyler's experience with guard duty at Fort Bliss)-** I had one period of guard duty while at Fort Bliss, during which an episode took place that I was ashamed of. In my platoon there was a soldier who had helped and advised me in a number of ways. His name was Hendrix Graves. He was an excellent soldier except when drunk. Although he had been a noncommissioned officer a number of times, he was then a private and under sentence in the lockup at the time I was on guard. I was assigned several prisoners, including Private Graves, to do some clean up work in rear of the camp incinerator. The prisoners were all serving short sentences, and I didn't think they would give any trouble. I became negligent in my duty and allowed the prisoners to get to close to me. Suddenly, Graves grabbed my rifle, twisted it out of my grasp, tripped me and had me down where he could have clubbed me to death. Instead, he stepped back, and when I had gotten up he handed the rifle back to me. He said; "I did that to teach you a lesson. Never trust a prisoner in any circumstance- not even me. I might be drunk the next time."

I was surprised and ashamed that I had let it happen. No other work detail had seen us. I asked the other prisoners not to mention it to anyone and said that I would not. Had I reported it to the sergeant of the guard, Graves would have had additional punishment added to that he was already serving. And I would have been penalized for not reporting it, had it become known.

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**(Kyler's experience during the voyage to France)-** The train took us through Texas and Oklahoma. We passed through Saint Louis, Missouri and eastward across Illinois into Indiana, and within a few miles of where I was born. We went through Fort Wayne, Indiana and eastward to Tonawanda, New York, where we were switched to a seldom used side track in a grove of trees. There we waited more than twenty four hours. Guards were posted roundabout to prevent anyone from even stepping off the site. Secrecy was desired. Then, during the night, the train took us to Hoboken, New Jersey, where after unloading; we were marched through back streets to the piers. There we began to board several steamships, and were aboard by morning.

About two thousands of the men of my regiment were loaded on the steamship Saratoga. She was a freighter, formerly in the Central and South American trade business and had been hastily converted to a troop transport. Two decks below the weather deck were used for sleeping quarters and the deck below was used for storing supplies. Our sleeping bunks were simply woven wire stretched over horizontal rails supported by wooden posts wedged between decks. Our bunks were four tiers high, with narrow aisles between every other row. I was put in the forward part of the ship, in the first deck below the weather deck. The only way out of there was up a narrow hatchway which had to be used by hundreds of men. If the ship had started to sink, there would have been a terrific stampede there.

In stormy weather waves sometimes came over the forward part of the weather deck. It was hazardous to be there then. Ventilation for the decks below was provided by wind catchers which funneled air to them.

Four guns had been mounted on the weather deck; two forward and two aft. Wooden shell storage boxes were bolted to the deck in rear of each gun. Navy gun crews were provided to man the guns. The ship's crew, including the captain, was the regular crew members temporarily taken into federal service. The ship had toilet facilities for the crew and cabin passengers only. On one side of the ship, about half way back, wooden platforms had been built out over the water from the weather deck. The platforms were screened on the outside with canvas, and there all our toilet acts had to be performed. There were spigots from which cold sea water could be got for washing, but drinking water had to be gotten elsewhere. There was constant foot traffic to and from those platforms. About a thousand men had to use each one. Farther amid-ship there were several faucets where drinking water was available, but each one had a guard posted by it to see that no one filled a canteen or otherwise took water from it other than for drinking.

During the first few days out from port the weather was good and we tried to stay on the weather deck as much as possible. But there was not room on deck for all of us at once, so we had to alternate. Each morning we were taken on deck in units and given calisthenics and foot drills. The ship rolled and pitched so much that little of that could be done. Sometimes it was difficult to stand up. While some units were on deck exercising, others were below being given instructions. In the afternoons we were free, except those men assigned for some duty. Some were assigned as guards, others as coal passers to help fire the ship's boilers. The ship was short of crew members, and furthermore some of the coal was stored in part of the ship's hold remote from the boilers. Some men were assigned to the ship's galley where food was prepared. I was detailed as a shell passer, to carry shells from the ship's hold to the shell boxes on deck. The only time I had to do any of that was when the gunners were having target practice.

I was interested in the ship's guns. Each time the gunners took the canvas covers off of the guns I tried to be close by to observe. Each gun was aimed by two men, one on one side and one on the other. Each man sat on a seat attached to the gun mount and had optical sights to look

through. One man was responsible for the elevation of the gun and one for the traverse. Control was by hand wheels through reduction gears. With the constant movement of the ship, that required concentration. A third man loaded the gun, closed the breech and fired it. I was one of the men who were supposed to hand him a new shell and take care of the empty casing after it was ejected.

We were in a convoy of twelve ships, several destroyers, and a cruiser. About every day the cruiser would tow a target astern and the guns of the various ships in the convoy would take turns in firing at it. Once at night, an enemy submarine was suspected. All the ships in the convoy speeded up and steered a zigzag course, while the destroyers dropped depth charges in the suspected area. Thus, my first experience in the war was a naval one.

During the voyage we were fed twice daily. The food consisted of one item plus bread and coffee per meal. Beans or vegetables or meat stew was the usual fare. We called the meat stew, slum. When properly made it is delicious. I am still fond of it. But it was not properly made on that voyage. It was carried to us in large buckets and ladled out to us in our mess cans. Considering the difficulty of feeding so many men in so small a space, and with limited equipment, we fared well in those circumstances. There was always some spilling. After every meal there was always a mop up chore to do.

The convoy sailed northward in a great arc toward Europe. The weather grew cold and the sea rough as we neared where the Gulf Stream and the Artic Current came together. We had summer uniforms on and no overcoats, so there was no loafing on deck. One had to exercise strenuously to keep warm when there.

Because there were so many men below deck, the air scoops had to be kept in use constantly. For several days it was cold damp air. There was no comfort for anyone. The sea became so rough that feeding had to be suspended for a time. It was hazardous to go on the foredeck, as waves sometimes swept over it. Many of the men were seasick, even some of the ship's crew. But as we approached Europe the weather became pleasant and the sea calm. It was a relief for all of us.

About that time the convoy was joined by six British destroyers to help prevent submarine attacks. Soon land was sighted and some of the ships, including the *Saratoga*, entered the harbor at Saint Nazaire, France. We docked and prepared to go ashore. The 28<sup>th</sup> Infantry, from another ship beat us ashore, though.

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