
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 lice and rats in the trenches)- Soon after having left Gondrecourt, and after having been in billets previously occupied by other troops, we became infested with body lice. We called them cooties. They were very difficult to get rid of, and even if we had done so, it would not have been for long. The whole front, in places where soldiers had been, was loused up, as we said.

Between various fronts during the next year we were sometimes taken to delousing stations, where all our clothes and bedding were wrapped in bundles and put in a retort, where steam under pressure was used to kill the lice and their eggs. While our clothes were being processed we bathed, usually in the open air and completely nude. We used a strong soapy solution to remove lice and their eggs from our bodies. It did not always work, and then anyway as I said, we would soon be loused up again. One man in a company can soon infest the rest of the company. So we gradually got used to being lousy. We never did get rid of them until after the end of hostilities, and then only after repeated attempts, the fumigation of our billets, and so on.

We found the trenches and dug outs in the Sommerviller Sector also infested with rats. They went into no man's land and probably into the enemies' trenches also. We eliminated some of them, and made more progress in that respect than with the cooties or bed bugs. The latter, although in all the sleeping places in the dug outs, did not seem to follow us from place to place as did the cooties.

(Kyler's experience before a big attack)- It was evident that we were getting ready for a big attack. Of course the high command did not confide in us. But there was the evidence: the stockpiling of ammunition, the artillery reinforcements, and the matter of the 28th Infantry going off somewhere rehearsing. Toward the last of May all the 37 millimeter guns, mortars, and heavy machine guns of the division were moved to the rear of the right center section of the line then held by the 18th Infantry. Then during the next two nights the 28th Infantry relieved the 18th Infantry who retired, except for their heavy weapons and machine guns.

During the relief the Germans sensed that something unusual was going on. They launched a heavy bombardment of the entire front, followed by a box barrage around a section of the front held by the 26th Infantry and mixed units of the 18th and 28th Infantry regiments. A strong raiding party followed, but were thrown back with many losses. The heavy shelling caused many casualties among our troops, part of whom were not under cover at the time. My own company lost several men killed and some wounded, although we had the advantage of being in such cover as hastily dug holes could provide and were in a support position.

Bugler Jacobs had his forehead and eyes torn off by a large shell fragment. He ran in circles and had to be caught, restrained, and tied to a stretcher. He lived. Another man, (name forgotten) just fell over dead without a sound. A shell fragment had penetrated his back and came out of his chest.

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(Kyler's experience on a listening post)- The second night we were there, Private Pinaire and myself were given an assignment to man a listening post in front of our left platoon. We had to crawl out of our front line trench, through a gap in our wire, and to a shallow and camouflaged shelter, which was our post. We were not to fire on enemy patrols except to prevent our capture but were to observe and listen to all enemy activity. In case an enemy raiding party approached, we were to note it's size if possible, and crawl back to our own line with the information. As it was not feasible to make regular relief's on that post we were to stay out there from soon after dark until almost dawn.

That was a cold and miserable assignment. We could converse only in whispers and could not move around much to keep warm. Also, we always missed the regular feeding time, which while in the trenches, was once every night. Our corporal saved our portions, which we ate after we returned to our trench before dawn. The food and coffee were cold by that time.

We were on that post five nights, and had heard and reported numerous enemy activities. There were other listening posts to the right and left and they also had heard enemy patrols. There was a small gully which lay diagonally across no man's land. It seemed that the enemy frequently used it as partial protection for patrols entering or emerging from their lines.

The sergeant in charge of the trench behind us sometimes crawled out to our post to see how we were doing. On the third night a French officer came out and questioned us. He did not crawl, but walked. At first we thought that it was all right, since we were more or less under French command. But then he said, "Wot would you do in case of fug?" That made Pinaire suspicious. He was of French descent and knew the language fairly well. After the officer had left he crawled back to the trench and reported to the sergeant that the officer's accent didn't sound right to him. The sergeant reported it to the officer in charge of the company's forward defenses, who in turn reported to the French commanding officer. An investigation was made, and the same officer who had questioned us, and his orderly, were caught questioning other Americans. They were German spies. Their hands were tied and they were taken away. We heard that the French executed them the next day. Pg. 60