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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 experience during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive)-** As the company advanced across the more or less open ground, the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon, on the right, came abreast of the head of the gully. I was told later that the concealed enemy remained quiet until the platoon's right was opposite the first enemy machine gun. Then they opened fire on the platoon. The platoon promptly took what cover was available and directed their attention from their front to their right flank. I was with the captain in rear of the company's center. A runner from the 4<sup>th</sup> Platoon came hurrying with an urgent request for assistance and orders. The captain immediately sent me to the platoon with orders for it to move to the left and bypass the gully. It would be taken later from both sides. He also asked me to look over the situation and report back to him.

I went by a circuitous route so as not to run into that line of fire. After delivering the message to the lieutenant in command, I saw that the platoon was pinned down by the sweep of two machine guns. A mortar was also dropping shells regularly. The platoon was in a precarious position: it was hazardous to move and hazardous to remain and unable to deliver effective fire on the points of danger. Sergeant Rampsch was urgently trying to pull back and turn the right flank so as to bring automatic rifle fire on the enemy. He was shouting commands at various individuals. He shouted to me and a recent replacement man to circle and come up on the other side of the gully, which was supposed to be in the 18<sup>th</sup> Infantry's zone of action.

I would not have had to obey, because I was the captain's runner, and not a part of the sergeant's platoon. In his excitement he probably did not realize that I was not a member of his platoon. And perhaps I should not have obeyed, because my duty was to go back to the captain with information. But having been trained over and over for just that sort of situation, and inclined toward obedience also, I acted accordingly. I quickly attached my bayonet, put two grenades in my pockets and ran to the rear. The other man followed. We circled around into trees and brush and cautiously began advancing on the gully from the southeast. As we got closer, we could hear the chatter of two machine guns and the firing of a mortar. They were firing on the platoon's position.

Alone now, I crawled slowly from brush to brush and to within easy grenade throwing range, took the grenades from my pockets, pulled the pins and threw them in rapid succession into the gully where the enemy were. (By that time in the war we had been furnished with American type grenades). When the second grenade left my hand, I grabbed my rifle and rushed forward to the edge of the gully. The grenades exploded just before I got there. One German turned toward me and I shot him without raising my rifle to my shoulder. Two more were at the first machine gun, one perhaps wounded by a grenade. I jumped from the edge of gully on the nearest German and thrust my bayonet deep into the other one. I could feel bones give way

under my feet and I knew that those three were finished. Another one ran and escaped down the gully, but left a trail of blood, probably from a grenade wound. By that time my back-up man came up. I told him to go back to the platoon by the same way we had come, and have them stop firing. Their bullets were hitting the bank and chipping bark off of the trees overhead. I started to reconnoiter the gully farther down, but realizing the foolishness of that, I stopped. In the gully, I was safe from rifle fire of the platoon, but at any moment they might use rifle grenades; or they might get assistance from the mortar section. Up until then, they did not know what had occurred where I was. After a short wait, they ceased firing and it was safe for me to join them. They took over the job of reconnoitering the gully and reported that the other Germans had fled, abandoning their equipment.

Pg. 108-109

**(Kyler's thoughts about a German attack during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive)-** Early in the morning, our scouts observed enemy troops in and around Fleville and beyond getting ready for what looked like a frontal attack on our position. They probably intended to overrun us and advance down the river valley and attack the troops then making a river crossing. Their intent was tactically sound. They were desperately trying to delay or halt our offensive by whatever means. Hence, their decision to make a frontal attack without artillery support. But their execution of it was at fault in several respects.

They would have been a perfect target for our artillery. But our artillery was busy elsewhere, and were helping the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division make their attack across the river, and our other regiments in their effort to take the difficult ground on our right. Realizing that our group could not deliver effective fire from the sheltered position just above the ravine, Captain Wildish decided to man the rifle pits to the front, but abandon the ravine and put the rest of the men echeloned along both flanks rearward. In that way, in case the enemy made a frontal attack, our men would be less bunched up and would be able to deliver enfilading fire on them as they advanced.

Corporal Sanders was told to pick the best marksmen and post them in the rifle pits up the bank. He proceeded to do so and included me in the group. I do not know exactly what the captain told him, but in general we were to hold off the enemy as long as possible.

We expected a mortar and machine gun barrage, but it did not occur. Instead, they began advancing straight toward us from their positions around Fleville. Perhaps they had no mortars or machine guns available, or perhaps they thought us so weak that resistance would be minimal. They soon found out differently, however. We had a perfect field of fire, with good dug in positions in our individual rifle pits. We had narrow slots cut in the bank from which to fire. We had no rifle grenades, but did have hundreds of rounds of rifle cartridges at each pit. The enemy left their shelters in small groups and advanced on a broad front, from beyond Fleville almost to the high ground to our right front. We did not fire until they were at about 400 yards range. Then we began firing with carefully aimed deliberate shots. At that range, most of us were able to hit a man with every shot. The first volley threw the enemy into confusion. They deployed, hit the ground, and began an ineffective fire in our direction. They kept advancing by crawling a short way and then firing again.

I was approximately in the center of our line. I could see enemy soldiers, who by their actions evidently were leaders, and I directed my fire on them when they were opposite my place in line. We fired steadily, but not hastily. The enemy kept coming, several hundred of them at least. As they got closer I directed my fire on those who had worked their way nearest to us. We

did not want them to get within grenade throwing range. Also, we thought that they might charge us.

I do not understand why they did not. That would have been their best way of taking our position. If they had done so, we could not have fired fast enough to hold them.

They had no mortar or artillery support. Among them, they did have several of their light machine guns, which I would class as about half way between an automatic rifle and a machine gun. Their fire was not accurate. Their bullets kept hitting the bank in front of us and many going overhead. We presented only a few square inches of exposure. By contrast, our fire was deadly. We were able to drop them almost as fast as they moved forward. As they got closer, we increased our rate of fire. My rifle got so hot that I could barely hold it. As the range lessened, we did not need to take so careful aim, and we pumped bullets as fast as we could. And then their line stopped. The survivors fell back. Some carried or dragged wounded with them. Others just fled. We continued firing.

Pg. 113-114

**(Kyler's thoughts on occupying Germany)-** On December 1<sup>st</sup>, a small ceremony was held and the head of our column crossed the bridge over the Moselle River and entered German soil. The first town that we passed through was Trier. The people were mostly sullen and resentful. Understandably they might be, because we were the enemy and now were marching in to occupy a part of their country. Since it was not known how the people might react to our presence, an order was issued that no soldier was to be without a firearm with him at any time. That included soldiers who might be in the mess line, going to the latrine, or anywhere else he might be. It was a nuisance for the men to have a rifle slung on their shoulders all the time. Those who had pistols did not have to carry rifles. My revolver was useful in that case. The order was rescinded after we had been in Germany a while.

Pg. 128