

---

---

# 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 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 talks about shell fragments and shrapnel)-** Wounds caused by shell fragments were the most numerous and the most serious of any suffered by my company in that war. Shell fragments varied in size from small ones no larger than peas to slabs the size of a man's hand. That was because of the difference in the caliber and type of shell, its manufacture, and the temper of the metal it was made of. Some shells burst in many small pieces. Others burst in a few large pieces. Their force, or velocity, varied greatly. Usually they penetrated the body and remained in it, often with a tumbling or twisting movement as they went. Sometimes they went on through.

For many years it has been the popular term, in and out of the army, to call those fragments 'shrapnel'. But that is not the right or true term for them. A shrapnel shell is a thin walled shell, filled with metal balls and an explosive charge, intending to burst in the air when nearing the target. The bursting charge scattered the balls which depended on their initial velocity for effectiveness. The shell was exploded by a time fuse which was ignited when fired from the gun. In certain conditions they were very effective. But in conditions then existing, when artillery was fired mostly by indirect laying, they were not effective. The term 'shrapnel' came from its inventor, an officer in the British Army, who died in 1842. It was extensively used in the wars of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but was less effective in trench warfare and mostly unused after 1915, except for special occasions. Shrapnel is now obsolete, but the term survives, though inaccurate.

Pg. 82-83

**(Kyler's experience during the St. Mihiel Offensive)-** At 1:00 am, the preparatory bombardment began. The earth trembled as hundreds of guns fired into the enemy lines ahead. What had been darkness was then lit up from horizon to horizon, so that one could see to read a map without a flashlight. The bombardment continued for four hours, though less intensely than the first salvos had been. At 5:00 am the fire pattern shifted. The heavy guns continued to fire on enemy gun positions and communication lines. The light guns and all mortars began laying a rolling barrage in front of our infantry. By that time a gaseous haze permeated the atmosphere like a fog. It irritated our eyes, noses, and throats, and was the result of so much explosive material being expended.

We surged forward and followed the barrage as closely as we dared. It was much better to follow the barrage closely and perhaps suffer a few casualties from it than lag behind and lose

the benefit of its fire. Many men would argue that point; but I know. All along the enemies' line we could see signal rockets going up, evidently calling for artillery support which their guns could not give. Every one of their known gun positions was being deluged by gas and high explosive shells by at least a battery of our own guns. The feeble efforts of their artillery to reply was spotted by our observation planes and promptly suppressed by our own fire.

The enemies' first and second lines were crossed with little resistance encountered. The barrage had done its work well. But after crossing the trench system, lines of scattered wire, shell holes, the mud and water of the Rupt de Mad, we ran into resistance in the woods beyond. There the enemy had taken a stand. And the barrage was not as effective in dense woods. It merely shattered the trees into a maze of splinters and snags which were as hard to get through as were wire entanglements. The enemy had snipers and machine guns all through those woods. We by-passed some of the thicker patches, to be left and cleaned out later.

Gradually, the barrage ceased as it reached the guns' maximum range. The gun crews then had the job of moving through the same mess that we had passed through. We had penetrated the enemies' trench system and prepared lines, and then had the natural features, favorable to the enemy, to overcome. There was a small stream to ford, and several small lakes to go around. Constant pressure was kept on the enemy. It became a game of hide and seek. Wherever machine gun nests or mortars were found, they were engaged and overcome either by our own fire or were surrounded and taken from their rear.

The assistance given the infantry by the tanks in that phase of the operation was great. However, some of the enemy machine guns could not be approached by tanks, because of marshy ground or impenetrable places due to tree snags and fallen timbers. Some tanks were immobilized by being bogged down. A few were put out of action by the direct fire of concealed guns.

After the marshy ground was left behind, a halt was ordered. We dug holes for cover. It was then evening and we had outrun our artillery support. There had been some intermingling of units. The men were tired and hungry, having been in constant action since the previous day.

Pg. 101-102