
VOICES OF THE PAST

DONALD KYLER'S MEMOIR

WAR/ERA

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 opinion on the Chauchat and Browning guns)- Soon we were introduced to several kinds of weapons that were new to us: machine rifles, hand grenades, rifle grenades, and mortars. We were issued one French Chauchat machine rifle to each squad. By machine rifle, I mean those weapons which shoot continuously as long as the trigger is pulled or the ammunition supply lasts. The term, automatic rifle, means those weapons which when fired, automatically load another cartridge into the chamber ready to be fired again when the trigger is pulled.

The Chauchat rifle weighed over twenty pounds and was recoil operated. Ammunition was supplied to it in spring loaded magazines. The magazine could be quickly attached to the gun by spring latches, and held twenty rounds of French rifle cartridges. One gun could shoot more shots than all the rest of the squad combined for short periods. So it added a lot to our fire power. But it was not accurate at over a few yards, was too heavy, too clumsy to aim, and in general not effective except against very close concentrated targets. About a year later those rifles were replaced by American made Browning machine rifles, which were an improvement.

The Browning weapon was lighter than the Chauchat, with an adjustable rate of fire, could be shot singly or in short bursts, and used our own rifle cartridges. The regular magazine held twenty rounds, but magazines were available that held forty rounds. It was a good weapon, but with the same limitations as the Chauchat, and had a few faults of its own. One was that it fired too fast on automatic, resulting in the loss of very effective aim. Another was that of frequent jams in the mechanism, and the loss of its use until the jam could be corrected. A little sand or mud getting into the chamber or magazine could cause a malfunction. Also, the gas port sometimes became clogged, causing failure of the extraction and ejection mechanism, which was gas operated. However, in spite of their faults, those weapons were very effective at close range concentrated targets.

But in retrospect of experience in war and in training for a few years thereafter, I was not in favor of having machine rifles in infantry platoons. Self loading rifles yes, but machine rifles, no. I believe that controlled and aimed shooting is more effective than trying to spray the landscape with shots, most of which have no effect whatever, except to deplete the ammunition supply. An infantry platoon by its nature and purpose is supposed to be mobile; almost instantly able to change direction or pace. And anything that slows them down is a hindrance. Those heavy machine rifles were such a hindrance.

Although it was able to shoot as fast as a machine gun for short bursts, a machine rifle could not, and should not have been expected to take the role of a machine gun. The machine rifleman was limited to those rare opportune instances when the full effectiveness of his weapon

could be used- on close range concentrated targets. He was limited by the ammunition supply, and even if that that were not true, because of overheating; the weapon would fail after a few hundred rounds of continuous fire.

A machine gun, in contrast, was usually set up to stay in one place for a while, and had ammunition hauled or carried to it in quantity. It could and sometimes did, fire thousands of rounds continuously, as in overhead barrage fire. It could be pre aimed, and was adapted to long range harassing fire. Unfortunately, when we were first armed with machine rifles, and for some time thereafter, over-enthusiasm was felt for them because of their high rate of fire. A high rate of fire is desirable- sometimes. But effective fire is something else. I can not speak for other units, or for those under different conditions, but so far as my company, battalion, and regiment were concerned in 1917-1918, it would have been better if we had not been issued machine rifles.

(Kyler's explanation of the rank of mechanic)- On Christmas day we were back in Demange Aux Eaux and had the day free of drill or other duty. We were served an unusually good meal because of the holiday. About that time, one of our mechanics, Joseph Bloechel, asked to be transferred out of combat troop duty. He had deserted the Austrian Army in 1910, gone to the United States, and enlisted in our army. Since Austrian troops were at the front nearby, he feared that if captured by them he would be dealt with as a deserter, which he was. He was given a transfer out of our regiment, thereby leaving a vacancy in the grade of mechanic in our company.

I was surprised when informed by Sergeant Thompson that I had been promoted to fill the vacancy. I protested to him and said that I was not qualified for it, and did not want it either. He said that I was the best qualified man available, and furthermore, in the army one does not do what one wants to do, but does what he is told to do. So I found myself one of several company mechanics and a member of Headquarters Platoon. A mechanics rank was just below that of corporal.

It was with reluctance that I left the First Squad and Platoon. Several men accused me of courting favor with Sergeant Thompson in order to leave them. Perhaps they were only jesting, but nevertheless it rankled. Later I learned that Sergeant Thompson had personal motives in arranging for my promotion. He had plans for me to become his assistant when he became supply sergeant. He had been promoted to first sergeant against his will: he was somewhat too old for so demanding a job, and he knew it. He wanted, and expected to get the job of supply sergeant, then occupied by Sergeant Brozosky. It would be a step down for him, but that is what he wanted. In the mean time I was under the supervision of Sergeant Brozosky, who in turn was under the supervision of Sergeant Thompson and under the command of a lieutenant who was second in command of the company, and platoon commander of Headquarters Platoon.

The duties of a mechanic in an infantry company varied. In general, we were charged with the repair and maintenance of all arms and equipment and to assist the supply sergeant in the transportation and distribution of all supplies other than foodstuffs or kitchen equipment. We were also available for other duties in relation to Headquarters Platoon. At every move we had to load and unload the escort wagon to free it for other use. The combat wagon was kept loaded at all times. We had to dispense gun oil, wiping rags, dubbin, foot powder, and some items of clothing to members of the company whenever the opportunity came. At every new location of more than one day there was always some minor carpentry to be done: signs to be put up,

billboards to be repaired or made, latrine covers to be made, and things like that. We had a set of metal stencils with which we could put lettering on things. A can of paint came with a tool kit.

Sergeant Brozosky assigned the job of making identification tags for the men needing them, to me. We called them dog tags. A set of metal stamps with letters and numbers was used for that purpose. Each soldier was supposed to have three aluminum tags with his name and serial number stamped on them. They were to be on a cord around his neck under his clothing. They were to be worn at all times except when his clothing was put in the delousing machine. Every time we got a new man he usually needed tags. Every time tags were lost new ones had to be made. So I had a lot of stamping to do. The reason for three identification tags was that in case the soldier was killed, one tag was to be left on the body, one tag was to be left on the temporary grave, and one tag sent to higher headquarters.

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