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# VOICES OF THE PAST

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THE DIARY OF PAUL H. TOTTEN

WORLD WAR I

1918-1919

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*The following excerpts are from the diary of Paul H. Totten, 339<sup>th</sup> Infantry, and cover the period from November 7, 1918 to June 10, 1919. A typescript copy of the diary can be found in the World War I Veteran Survey Collection at the US Army Heritage and Education Center in Carlisle, PA. The excerpts are presented here unedited and contain words and phrases that were in common use among Soldiers at the time of the World War I. The transcriptions below are taken from the copy in the USAHEC collection, and are presented unedited and as unchanged as possible.*

## **Thursday, November 7, 1918**

On guard until 6:00 AM. Physical inspection in PM. Spent the evening at the Y. Music and dancing to the harmony of the accordion and violin. Kind of took my mind away from the snow.

## **Friday, November 8, 1918**

On K.P. all day. Not as punishment but just taking our turn. Scalded my good right hand with hot tea at supper time. Reported to infirmary for treatment. More good news today concerning German officers leaving Russia. Might be significant, but we are still praying. My hand commencing to puff and smart.

## **Saturday, November 9, 1918**

On sick call in the morning. Put on light duty. Some stolen goods confiscated by some of our F. Co. boys. Sure tasted good. Forbidden fruit always tastes better you know!

## **Thursday, November 14, 1918**

Floating leisurely down stream with time on our hands. One of the Bolo<sup>1</sup> prisoners gave me a hand made wooden comb. It was crude but a good souvenir, which I still have today.

## **Friday, November 15, 1918**

On this trip down stream our barge collided with a sand bar and Hell was popping. We were eating breakfast one minute and the next minute we were all piled up in a corner, tables, utensils, coffee, food, et all. I skidded over the table and wound up with the rest of the boys in one human lump, plastered with oatmeal and whatever else we had been gnawing on. My burned hand survived the bump but we all had, more or less, black and blue spots, sore muscles and bloody noses. T was quite a flight. Arrived at Archangel at 5:00 PM and back to Smolney barracks again. Had my hand dressed again. Visited Ted and Dwight at machine gun quarters. NEI.

## **Saturday, November 16, 1918**

Mail from home. Another day of doing nothing for a change. Saw red Fisher, an old associate at Camp Custer, now with M Co. Always got a big kick out of Red. He makes us feel better.

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<sup>1</sup> Bolshevik

**Saturday, November 23, 1918**

Series of short naps between naps was the order of the day.

**Sunday, November 24, 1918**

Attended Sunday services in our barracks this morning. Moved to old G Co. barracks in afternoon. For why, I can't imagine, not so homey here. With Ted and Dwight in the evening.

**Monday, November 25, 1918**

Forty degrees below zero this morning. That's reasonable chilly. Hand dressed again. Looks much better. The Doc says it hasn't ought to be long now.

**Tuesday, November 26, 1918**

Slept nearly all morning. Physical inspection in PM. Another evening at machine gun barracks. NEI.

**Wednesday, November 27, 1918**

My bandage removed this morning. Skin looks pretty thin. I had quite a scorch.

**Thursday, November 28, 1918**

"THANKSGIVING DAY." Instead of roast Turkey and dressing, we had chewing tobacco issued. Same old Limey menu, no smacking of lips noticed.

**Monday, December 16, 1918**

Physical exams in the morning. Must have passed because I was back in the old warehouse guard again at 2:00 PM. This time on Post No. 7 with a detachment of White Russians. These were the ones that were anti-Bolshevik. We had a lot of fun trying to understand each other, but there were a nice bunch and there was no boat rocking. Have often wondered how they adapted when Russia went Red.

**Tuesday, December 17, 1918**

Relieved at 2:00 PM. (These guard stints were for a twenty-four hour period. Two hours on post and four hours rest for the entire twenty-four hours). Received letters from home. Spent early evening with Ted and Dwight.

**Friday, December 20, 1918**

Bunk fatigue nearly all morning. On the old familiar wharf guard, Post No. 1 again with the white Russian guards. Got to where we could understand their signals when they wanted a cigarette. Wish all the Russians were like these boys.

**Saturday, December 21, 1918**

Relieved at 2:00 PM by British forces (King's Liverpools). Washed pack. Had beans, toast and pancakes with Ted and Dwight. Wrote to Walt Ford.

**Saturday, December 28, 1918**

Chased prisoners all morning, then on guard at machine gun Post. No. 4. Reports of strong Bolshevik force at Yemski. Don't know about the significance.

**Monday, December 30, 1918**

Back in the never ending cadence again. Scooted out on guard once more. Back with the white Russians again. Our conversation technique is slightly improving but we still have to pretty much rely on the old Jewish method of hand contortions yet.

**Tuesday, December 31, 1918**

Relieved at 2:00 PM. Vermeulen and I go to Archangel. Took a Russian Sauna bath in one of their huge bath houses. Lots of steam and lots of sweat. These public bath houses were immense structures and portioned off in suites. The one we were in consisted of a carpeted dressing room, with large mirrors and other furnishings. Another room with ordinary tubs and the Sauna room. This room was approximately 12 x 15 feet and could be completely filled with water to a depth of at least two feet. At the end of this room there was a tall structure made of stone with two openings and several steps to the top. Water from the pool could be thrown in the bottom opening on a terrifically hot plate or flame of some sort and the steam would emerge from the top aperture. The further up you went the hotter it got, to a point which only an expert could endure. After the application of steam we could submerge to the pool and splash around like kids in a creek. While doing all this we could look out the windows at the white snow and way below zero temperatures. A situation of one extreme after another. Took an unusually fast gait over the three miles back to Smolney, well bundled up and wearing our face masks. Along way from the "Sunny South". Entering the New Year spic and span.

**Wednesday, January 1, 1919**

At ease all forenoon. Celebrated the new year by going on duty at Post No. 4 with machine gun outfit. Chased prisoners most of afternoon, then shouldered the rifle.

**Thursday, January 2, 1919**

Relieved by British forces (The "Bloody" Royal Scots) at 2:00 PM. More mail from home. Letter from Dooley. Must be something in the wind. Everybody blue and discouraged. Emergency guard posted.

**Friday, January 3, 1919**

House cleaning day at the barracks. Looks better but lacks that shine a good housekeeper strives for. My turn for guard duty. On River view post. Lonesome but pretty.

**Saturday, January 4, 1919**

Relieved by the Limey detachment. Hower, Vermeulen and I go to Archangel in late afternoon. At Y refreshments and moving pictures.

**Sunday, January 5, 1919**

Vermeulen and I go to Archangel. Attended services at Subornia Cathedral. The Russian religion is Greek Orthodox. The congregation all stand while bearded Priests attired in gorgeous robes perform the ritual. They then retire and a new group appears. Don't know whether it is a new

service or a continuance, but the people constantly arrive and leave also. Of course, the service was not understandable, but it appeared devout and meaningful. Conditions changed with the event of the Bolshevik take over, soon after we had left Russia. At that period religion was prohibited and the churches evolved into museums. We returned early and, lest I forget, I was elected to be once again on E Warehouse guard. Again with the white Russians.

### **Tuesday, January 14, 1919**

Warmer and snowing. A few tonsorial jobs this morning. Hower, Vermeulen and I go to Archangel in late afternoon. Went to the Y and had refreshments. Nice music but no Waltzes. Today is the Russian New Year. No signs of celebration.

### **Wednesday, January 15, 1919**

A little more barbering this morning. Articles of war read to us by Capt. Ramsey (our skipper) about as interesting as a dreamless sleep, but we were very, very attentive. News concerning an assembly at Murmansk. Don't know what it's all about, Murmansk is our only winter port of entry to this northern icehouse, so we fretted some. On kitchen guard at 2:00 PM. This is an enviable post as our hands had access to fragments of forbidden fruit. Something like a doggie bag.

### **Saturday, January 18, 1919**

Off again at the customary 2:00 PM. Cut all the officers hair and some of the unfortunate infantry men. I was the only tonsorialist in our group and was kept fairly busy. Also had inspection by Col. Stewart. Everything must have been OK. Went to the Y with Dwight in the evening. Say the movie "A Romany Lass," was good.

### **Sunday, January 19, 1919**

Slept nearly all morning. Back at it again on Post No. 5, just an old shed that the Devil wouldn't have wanted. This was the 4th relief mentioned on the 13th. NEI.

### **Monday, January 20, 1919**

Off at 2:00. Sheared a few more locks. Vermeulen, Hower and I go to Archangel on pass. These trips to Archangel were all on pass. The Brass was exceptionally generous. Praise be! At the big Y where the French put on their entertainment. There was a small detachment of French soldiers operating in the city. Their program was good but couldn't make out the words. Hoofed it back to Smolney and our hard bunks.

### **Tuesday, January 21, 1919**

Just a few more golden? tresses to clip this morning. Back at it on the old familiar stroke of 2:00 PM on E warehouse guard with Jess Hower. Still way below zero. This particular warehouse was made with logs with sort of a shallow tunnel underneath. on a wistful impulse Hower wormed his way beneath and with effort inserted his poniard shaped bayonet between two of the logs. After a few exhausting twists we were rewarded with a small, reluctant stream of "SUGAR" -- of all things! So, we filled our mess kits and used our secret hoard where it tasted the sweetest. Luck on a contraband stunt like that was really awesome. An aggravating tooth was bothersome for a spell. Couldn't have been the sugar -- or could it?

**Tuesday, January 18, 1919**

Between 50 and 60 degrees below zero reported this morning. Couldn't endure more than a few minutes outside. The sensation of exposure to weather in this temperature is really an experience. The minute you step out in it you feel it grab you all over. Just like a frigid shawl, under pressure being suddenly applied to a warm body. Can't take it only for a short spell. But the Rusksies can't take it either so there's no, "charging of the light brigade," on either side. Wrote a few letters and called it square for the day.

**Thursday, April 3, 1919**

At the river crossing all morning. Relieved at noon. Hower came over and we went foraging. Found a potato pit and walked off with a bushell or two. Rummaging through the deserted church. Lots of beautiful things that were left when the populace evacuated. Have often wondered what ever became of them. Picked up a few trinkets which I still have. On road guard for two hours, then under the blankets.

**Monday, April 7, 1919**

Started our own, "that one more day". Mail arrived, bringing me sorrowful news of my sister Ruth's death due to the relentless epidemic of influenza. I received this notice by way of our home town newspaper -- The Exponent. Am expecting Dad's letter soon. Another disrupting event we had to undergo today was our shot for Cholera. Experienced a terrible back fire. Miserable sick afterward. Had previously been slated for patrol duty but due to the humane action of Lt. Sheridan I was excused. My most heartbreaking day.

**Tuesd, April 22, 1919**

The ice on the rive had been reported as five feet thick. I was difficult to imagine but watching it break up this morning and remembering those many days of 40, 50, and 60 below zero, we were pretty well convinced. This clearing process was a spectacular sight -- almost awesome. Monstrous chunks of ice would pile up, stop and then go tumblins on again for another sequence. Two days and the river was free.

**Wednesday, April 23, 1919**

Busy today building block houses and hoping that we would be up and away before they would be out to use. Somehow or other a ball game was organized between the 1st and 4th platoons. Our platoon won 6-5. It was nice to watch even though there were no home runs.

**Wednesday, May 7, 1919**

Left Chemova at 3:00 AM for Chedrova. Arrived after an exhausting march, with few rests at 11:00 AM. On this trip I realized I had slept some on the march. I learned later that this phenomena, while nor a frequent occurance, did occur at times. But it happened to me -- so help me. It was a baffling experience and one that is difficult to believe. Billeted in a Russian home. Rumors of leaving for the front again. Dammit! We are all exhausted and touchy.

**Sunday, May 11, 1919**

Worked all day gouging our trenches. Helped string barb wire at night. We're trying to stop the bad boys or at least give them a hard time. Hope they get cold feet and stay put. We're exhausted and the old sleeping place looks pretty good.

**Monday, May 12, 1919**

When do we rest? Another day of toil on fortification. Slated again for guard duty but another squad took over. One of our patrols discovers, and reports the enemies position. Uncomfortable cold wind.

**Tuesday, May 13, 1919**

Up again long before the cock crows. Another day on the trenches. Nothing else of importance excepting some aching arms.

**Wednesday, May 14, 1919**

Another day of grind on the trenches. Started on Block houses. They are made from logs that we cut. A little snow today, enough to cover the ground. Seems odd for the month of May, but we're far enough North to expect many differences. The only bright thing is that the snow is white instead of black. Northern Lights put on a show for us tonight.

**Friday, May 23, 1919**

Helped all day on our dug out. Bolos shelling Malla Bresnik, or what's left of it. More rumors of relief. Fortifications nearing completion. NEI.

**Saturday, May 24, 1919**

Activity for today as listed below:

work, work, work, dig, dig, dig. More work and more digging today -- That's all!

**Sunday, May 25, 1919**

Worked on dug out in the morning. That blue clay getting tougher ever day, or night, as the case may be. As a memento of this project, I made a couple of marbles from this Russian clay, which I still have. It makes me laugh now, but does bring back memories of perspiration and painful muscles. A few shells over hear from the Bolo artillery. Evidently trying to discover our Canadian artillery position. A few hours rest in the afternoon. Put on guard relief but wasn't called upon to serve.

**Saturday, May 31, 1919**

Relieved from guard duty early. Slept and loitered away most of the day. On fatigue at 8:00 PM. Shells from Bolo artillery landing pretty close. Enough to make us scoot to our hard earned dug out. No real damage, just left a few small craters. Also did a little barbering today. Picked up a few rubles. Price of a hair trim, three rubles. We dealt with Russian money which was of Czarist issue. The three rubles were worth slightly more than twenty-five cents on our money. So, that made a little more spending money for the poor, down trodden barber. Daylight for twenty-four hours now. The sun rises from out of the South-east and progresses into an immense oval orbit, terminating in the North-west. On clear evenings something happens to color the skit with every color and shape imaginable. It's by far the best show put on here.

**Saturday, June 7, 1919**

Up with the birds this morning. Cruising down stream all day. River banks heavily wooded and silent. Beautiful yellow flowers of some variety, with some red one peeking through along edge of the river. Nature seems to take good care of these desolate, and uninhabited regions with a peaceful hand. It certainly was a masterpiece of landscaping and very pleasant on the eyes. Sighted Archangel about 5:00 PM and landed a few hours later. Left Archangel at 8:00 PM for Economie barracks which is our shipping port. Retired to nice clean quarters in pleasant surroundings.

**Sunday, June 8, 1919**

Rushing around hither and tither trying to get things to mesh for our departure. Everybody busy but don't seem to know exactly just what to do. Seemed strange not to have any authoritative, "Do this and do that", orders issued. All of us seem to be cheerful and cooperative is in high gear. Milled around in early evening generally looking things over. Gazed a while at the big ocean at our front door hoping to be floating around on it soon. That's the temperament we found ourselves in today. So be it!

**Monday, June 9, 1919**

Still busy cleaning up. Gradually straitening things out. Inspections galore prior to our flying the kite. Saw Ted and Dwight Smith, also Jess Hower and Henry Vermeulen. They are evidently slated for the passage also. So nice to have contacted them. Today about the same as yesterday.

**Tuesday, June 10, 1919**

Impatiently hurrying with preparations for departure. Our transport ship (The British Menoninee) steamed into position today. It looked battle worn. It was an old unpolished one stacker, but we're all willing to ride it out. Today we were de-loused and issued some more equipment. Strict garrison duty enforced, of all things. At ease all afternoon. F Co. (ours) plays baseball with H Co., 10-3 in favor of F Co. Kind of gave us a feeling of superiority. The weather is almost scalding, made more so with out heavy O.D. Uniforms. Went to our Y in the evening. Heard Tom Watt on "Skylines" and watching movies. Then to roost. Mosquitos really organized tonight. These Russian mosquitos (probably Bolshevik also) were small, compared to our familiar species. But what they lacked in size they made up in workmanship. They could surely drill and sap. We used to cover our heads with our heavy blankets when we slept in an effort to avoid their stings. But when we fell asleep the blanket would drop and they would go "over the top", with unsheathed bayonets. On awakening our faces would feel like we had a mud pack on.