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1919-03-14, Wesley to Family

Wesley F. Diedrich

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THE PRAIRIE DIVISION

By William Lewis Judy.

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The Thirty-third Division has a nick-name, a distinguishing insignia, and a rattling reputation.

In the States they called us the "Prairie Division". Over here we are the "Yellow Cross Division". When we shall shake hands again with the Goddess of Liberty and smell again that familiar smell of the Chicago Stock Yards, we shall once more be the "Prairie Division".

Now, who are we, anyhow? Well, we fought with the bloomin' British on the plains of Picardy in Northern France in July and August, 1918, and when the decorations were handed out on that bright summer's day on the green behind the old chateau at Molliens-au-Bois, King George himself was there to pin the medals on the breasts of the Illinois boys.

We fought side by side with the Tommies, - good pals they were, - and with the Americans of the British Empire - those fighters after our own hearts - the Aussies - I mean the Australians, the daredevils of a rough and ready Empire. They it was who paid us the biggest compliment ever given a Yank crowd over here. The whole world now knows the famous phrase and I'll tell you how it came about. The Aussies celebrated the Fourth of July with us at Hamel when we went over the top together up near Albert and after it was all over, they took us by the hand and said: "You'll do us, digger, but you fellows are damned rough". Here, too, took place an event that shall be forever glorious in the annals of England and America, - here for the first time in History the soldiers of the two mighty nations fought side by side in a common cause, and this event shall grow more glorious and more sacred in years to come when these two mighty nations look back to it as the first symbol of the new and greater union between them.

We fought with the French and now we are to get fifty Croix de Guerre. The King of Belgium heard about us and is sending us eight of his medals. The Congress of the United States gave us seven Medals of Honor. They have given forty-eight to the whole A.E.F. and the Prairie Division is wearing one-seventh of the total. Pretty good, eh? The big safe at Division Headquarters is now too small for it is crammed with D.S.C.'s., from our own G.H.Q. - one hundred and ten to date, to be exact - and more of them on their way.

We have a lot of doughboys like Corporal Paul Hobschied of the 131st Infantry. He's wearing a D.S.C. because up at Chipilly Ridge he laughed at the Boche Snipers, made a dash at them, on his way stopped at a German dug-out, rapped on the door with a fist hand grenades, and single handed chased out thirty Germans yelling "Kamerad", and brought them back as prisoners.

Then there is Corporal Jake Allex, another of Joe Sanborn's boys, Jake and his squad charged a machine gun nest and himself stuck the bayonet into five Germans. The fifth Boche was tough, and the corporal's bayonet broke off inside of him. But Jake gave him the butt of the rifle, sent one more German to Kingdom Come, and captured the remainder of the crew. In the Prairie Division, we don't look down on Corporals since these things happened.

We've a buck private in the 124th Machine Gun Battalion, Clayton Slack - Slack by name but not by nature. He's going to get a Belgium Medal, a Croix de Guerre, a Medal of Honor, and maybe a lot of others, because all alone he rushed a machine gun nest, tagged ten Germans as prisoners, grabbed two loaded machine guns which were killing our men, turned 'em around and gave the Germans hell Columbia with a shower of their own bullets.

Now I come to the grand old man of 'em all - Colonel Joe of the 131, of the Dandy First of the Old Illinois National Guard. He's sixty-three, but likes a fighting spree. Out in the front he went at Gressaire Wood, and led his men over the top, across No Man's Land, and on the run, took a hill that the Germans said they'd hold forever. They're still there holding the hill, but hiding under the ground and some wooden crosses. Well, the Colonel had his steel hat knocked off by the burst of a shell, but say - have you seen him on dress parade? There's a Distinguished Service Order which the King of England gave him and I think he's the only American officer wearing one of 'em. There's our own D.S.C. - he's got that, of course, And there's a Belgium medal too that is his pride.

Ask a Boche where he had the hottest time of his life and he'll tell you at Consenvoye Bridge, when, Colonel Allen's engineers in the lead, the Prairie Division chase him out of the Bois de Forges, held by the enemy for four years with the boast of the Boche that it could never be captured - especially by Americans.

We have fought everywhere in the A.E.F. We have been with the British, with the French, with the French Colonials, and with our own troops. There are three American Armies - First, Second and Third - and we've been in all of 'em. There are nine American Corps, and we have been in all of them except the First and Eighth. We've got the record in this regard.

Our troops have camped along the North sea, on the Somme, on the Meuse, and on the Moselle. They have passed through Chareau-Thierry; they have bivouaced in Germany; they have rested in the shadow of the Amiens Cathedral; they have marched through the shell torn streets of Verdun; and now they are wintering in Diekirch, that famous resort of the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg. From Texas to Deutschland we have traveled and now we know it's true when they say - "Join the Army and see the World".

What Division captured more prisoners and more guns, and advanced more kilometers than any other Division except three or four? The Prairie Division.

What Division captured 1436 prisoners in one day? The Prairie Division.

What Division has a General wearing a wound chevron? The Prairie Division.

What Division was one of the five American Divisions rated by the German High Command as first-class? The Prairie Division.

What Division Commander was praised by G.H.Q. because the horses of his Division and the care of them "stood as a perfect model of the standards that ought to exist in these matters throughout the Army?" The Prairie Division.

Our Division colors are yellow and black; fast colors, guaranteed not to run. The design is a yellow cross on a black circular background two inches in diameter. Yellow is an unusual color for a fighting crowd, but in far-away Texas, when we marked our equipment for over-seas, Colonel Gardenshire had only yellow paint, and that is why we have used yellow. It's a good color. It is distinguishing color of the cavalry and, in the Phillipines, the Yellow Cross on Government property terrified the superstitious natives and kept them from stealing it. Over here it had the same effect on the Boche.

We are proud of the Yellow Cross and proud of the fighter who has been our leader from the day the Division was organized Major General George Bell, Jr., known by all the rank and file of the Regulars as "Do it Now" Bell.

When the French officially took possession of the city of Metz, the Capital of Lorraine, on the 8th of October, 1918, bringing to pass their dream of half a century, the troops selected from the entire A.E.F. to represent the United States in the grand parade before the President of the French Republic, before Premier Clemenceau, Marshal Foch, Marshal Petain, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and our own ~~XXXXXXXXXX~~ General Pershing, were none other than a bunch of Chicago Lads, the battle scarred doughboys of the 131st Infantry, who had carried the Yellow Cross to Victory every time they "hopped the bags". They led the procession at Metz and the Governor General of Lorraine said that their appearance and conduct merited the highest praise.

The boast of the Thirty-third is that it never lost a fight, that it never received an order in battle which it did not carry out, and that an objective was never given to it that it did not take from the enemy on scheduled time. It is more than a boast - it is cold truth recorded in the books of the German armies as well as in the records of our own G.H.Q.

We came to France with a great reputation to uphold and high standards to maintain, for we are the Prairie Division; we hail from the fields of Illinois, out where the prairies begin their stretch, out where the East joins the West, and the best of the two is kept. Behind us are the traditions and glories of a great State, a State which in that other great war - the greatest war until its time - gave to the nation its great leader in the White House - Abraham Lincoln, and its great leader on the field of battle - Ulysses S. Grant.

We have fought as worthy sons of worthy sires. We shall return from our long journey strong men and noble, victors and proud, because in the hottest of the battle, in the front ranks of the bravest, we fought as only Americans can fight. We shall march down Michigan Boulevard, victors and glad, yet with a bit of shadow in our faces, for we are not forgetful of our brave comrades who went away with us and with us did not return, because on the sacred soil of France they fell fighting bravely for their flag and honor of their Division, and forever more they rest on the field where their fame was won - in the shades of the forrests of the Argonne and by the banks of the Somme.

They did not die in vain, neither have we fought in vain who fought by their side as they fell. They who in later years shall wear the Yellow Cross in token that they fought with the Prairie Division, shall wear a badge of high honor, and a fitting distinction for the brave men and fearless fighters they showed themselves to be.

Written at Diekirch, Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, Europe.
Fourteenth day of March, Nineteen nineteen.