3-14-1919

Wesley F. Diedrich First World War Correspondence #67

Wesley F. Diedrich

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Recommended Citation
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Subject Terms
William Lewis Judy. March 14, 1919. United States. Regimental histories U.S.A. 33rd Infantry Division; United States. Regimental histories U.S.A. 144th Field Artillery; Army American Expeditionary Forces; War and society -- History -- 20th century United States; American History 20th century; World war 1914 1918 United States. Navy; Regimental histories U.S.A. 124th Machine Gun Battalion; Regimental histories U.S.A. 131st Infantry; World war 1914 1918 Prisoners and prisons, German; Prisoner of war France; Great Britain Army

Keywords

Identifier
2014.160.wr_Diedrich_worldwarone_1919-03-14_065

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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 a Chipilly Ridge he laughed at the Boche snipers, made a dash at them, on his way stopped at a German dugout, rapped on the door with a few hand grenades, and single handed chased out thirty Ger-
man yelling "Kamerad," and brought them back as prisoners.
Then there is Corporal Jake Allen, 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 Hail Columbia with a shower of their
own bullets.

Now I come to the grand old man of 'em all—Colonel Joe of the
131st, 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 engi-
neers in the lead, the Prairie Division chased 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 Ameri-
cans.

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've 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
Chateau-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; they have
eaten bully-beef in Alsace-Lorraine; and now they are wintering
in Diekirch, that famous resort of the Grand Duchy of Luxem-
bourg. 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 divisional colors are yellow and black; fast colors, guar-
anteed not to run. The design is a yellow cross on a black
circular background, two inches in diameter. Yellow is an un-
usual color for a fighting crowd, but in far away places where
marked our equipment for overseas, Colonel Gardenhire had
only yellow paint, and that is why we have used yellow. Its a
good color. It is the distinguishing color of the Cavallery and,
in the Philippines, the Yellow Cross on Government property ter-
rified 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 Pétain, Field Marshal
Sir Douglas Haig and our own 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 backs." 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 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 the honor of their division, and forever more they rest on the fields where fame was won—in the shades of the forests 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.