ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. George C. Herring Jr. is alumni professor of history emeritus at the University of Kentucky. After service in the U.S. Navy, he earned a Ph.D. in history at the University of Virginia. He is the author of *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1900–1950* (New York, 1979), now in its fifth edition, and *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York, 2008). He was a visiting professor at the U.S. Military Academy in 1993–1994 and has served on the Army Historical Advisory Committee.

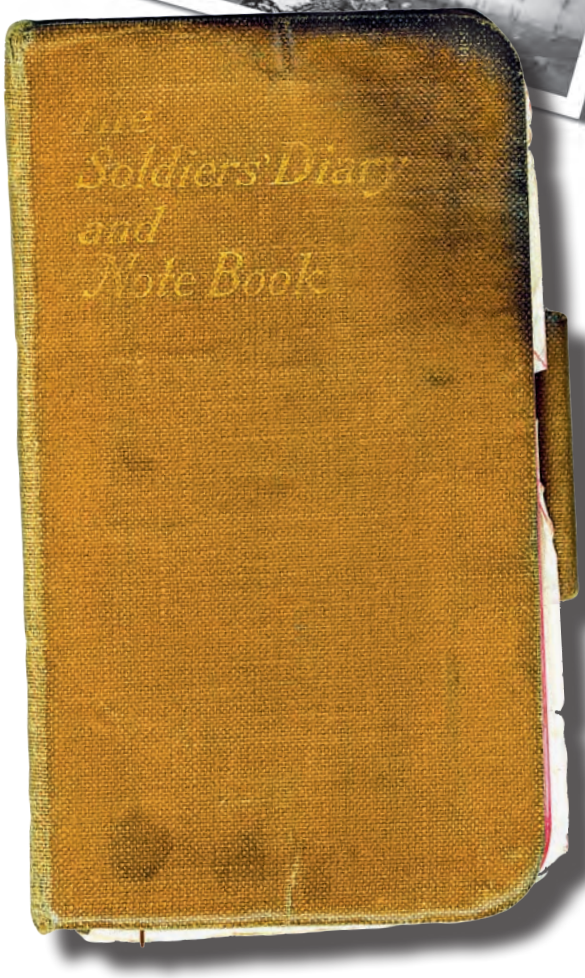
Courtesy of the Author

George C. Herring

"Glad I Was in It"

An Iowa Doughboy in the Great War, 1918–1919

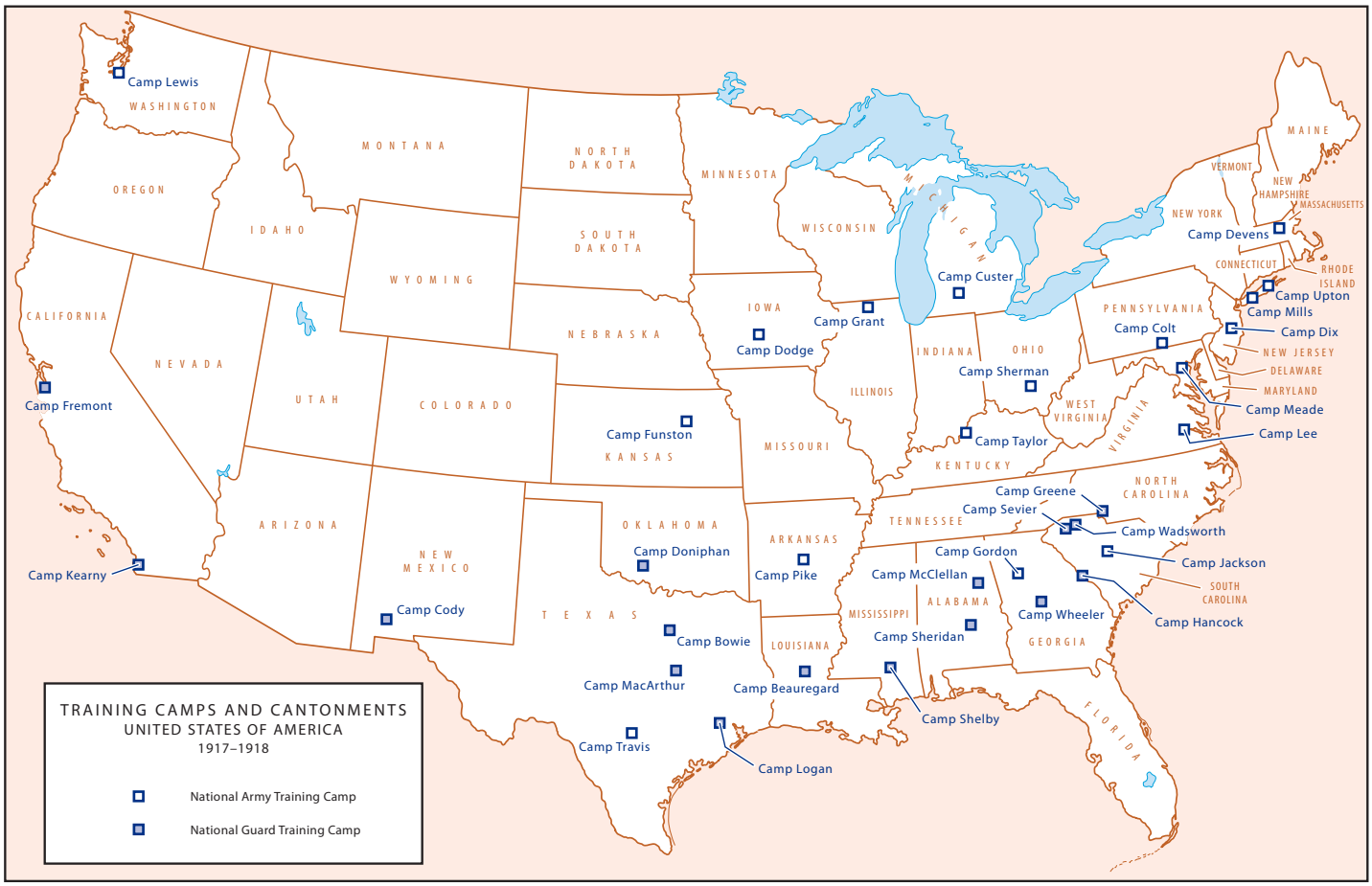
By George C. Herring Jr.



The letter dated 8 April 1918 did not begin with the word "Greetings" and it was not signed by Uncle Sam. It started, rather, "Dear Sir," and came from the Union County, Iowa, draft board, and informed 24-year-old George Herring, a native of Creston, Iowa, and student at Iowa State College, that he had been selected for induction into the U.S. Army.[1] For Herring, this letter marked the beginning of a fourteen-month odyssey filled with excitement, enormous danger, and occasional boredom. In addition, there was the thrill of seeing new places in the United States and Europe, accompanied by an unrelenting longing for home and family. Herring's time in the Great War was in many ways unexceptional. But he survived the costly and climactic battles at St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne and got through six difficult months in the occupation army in Germany. His experiences, as related in his letters to his parents, siblings, and in a pocket diary, tell us much about the life of an ordinary doughboy in an extraordinary war.

It is impossible to know the young Iowan's state of mind upon receiving his draft notice. His wartime letters suggest that he had been conflicted about how to deal with the options posed for young men by American entry into the war.[2] The 1917 draft law provided no exemption for college students. Although he qualified, Herring appears not to have sought the exemption for farm workers. He may have contemplated enlisting to fulfill his patriotic duty, but he also undoubtedly wanted to finish college. Perhaps because of his age he escaped the initial 1917 draft calls. But Germany's defeat of Russia in late 1917 and the frighteningly early success of its end-the-war offensive on the Western Front in March 1918 created huge Allied

Composite Image: The cover of George Herring's diary and composite view of photos from the St. Mihiel front, 1918 /Courtesy of the author



manpower needs and brought stepped up U.S. draft calls. Herring might have been relieved that Uncle Sam had made the difficult choice for him. As a thoroughly Americanized German-American, he expressed no qualms about fighting against the homeland of his ancestors. Like any young man going off to fight, he likely felt great excitement—and anxiety—about what war might bring.

Whatever the forebodings, his 52-mile train trip from Creston to Camp Dodge northwest of Des Moines provided, in his words, "a lot of amusement." Two prospective doughboys made music with violin and guitar. "Some of the Union and Adair County fellows were stewed [drunk] to the gills," he told his parents, "and those that weren't sick were pretty happy." At a stop in Osceola, a woman preacher came aboard and "tried to convert the boys." She took their cigarettes and ripped them to shreds and warned the young men "where they were going" if they did not mend their ways.[3]

Army life began on arrival at Camp Dodge about 2100 on 27 April. The camp had once been a small National Guard installation, but in April 1917 it was hastily converted into one of sixteen regional centers for the preparation of a force destined to fight in Europe. The doughboys were provided temporary quarters, given physical examinations, and assigned to companies. The draftees were part of the 163d Depot Brigade, whose purpose was to receive and organize the new soldiers, issue them uniforms and equipment, and provide the first rudimentary instruction in such things as marching, small arms, and gas warfare before they were sent to new locations for more rigorous training and permanent assignment. Herring knew none of the men in his company. Most, he said, were Swedes from Minnesota cities. "I rather enjoy the life already," he told his parents in a letter written shortly after his arrival, "even tho' I didn't get much feed or sleep to start me last night."[4]

The new recruit stayed at Camp Dodge less than a month. In late May, Herring was one of about 5,000 draftees sent by train from Iowa to Camp Travis, a sprawling encampment of more than 18,000 acres near San Antonio, Texas, also built in 1917 and named for William Travis, a hero of the Battle of the Alamo. The camp was the training base of the 90th Division of the newly formed National Army made up entirely of draftees. The division was composed mainly of men from Texas and Oklahoma and called the "Alamo Division" or the "Texas-Oklahoma Division." Its doughboys styled themselves the "Tough 'Ombres." It was chronically understrength because men were drawn away to fill other units en route to or already in France, hence the large infusion of Midwesterners from Camp Dodge in May 1918.[5]

An equally short stay at Camp Travis brought the young Iowan more in touch with the harsh realities of soldiering. He was assigned to


National Archives

Drafted men reporting for service at Camp Travis, Texas, c. 1917

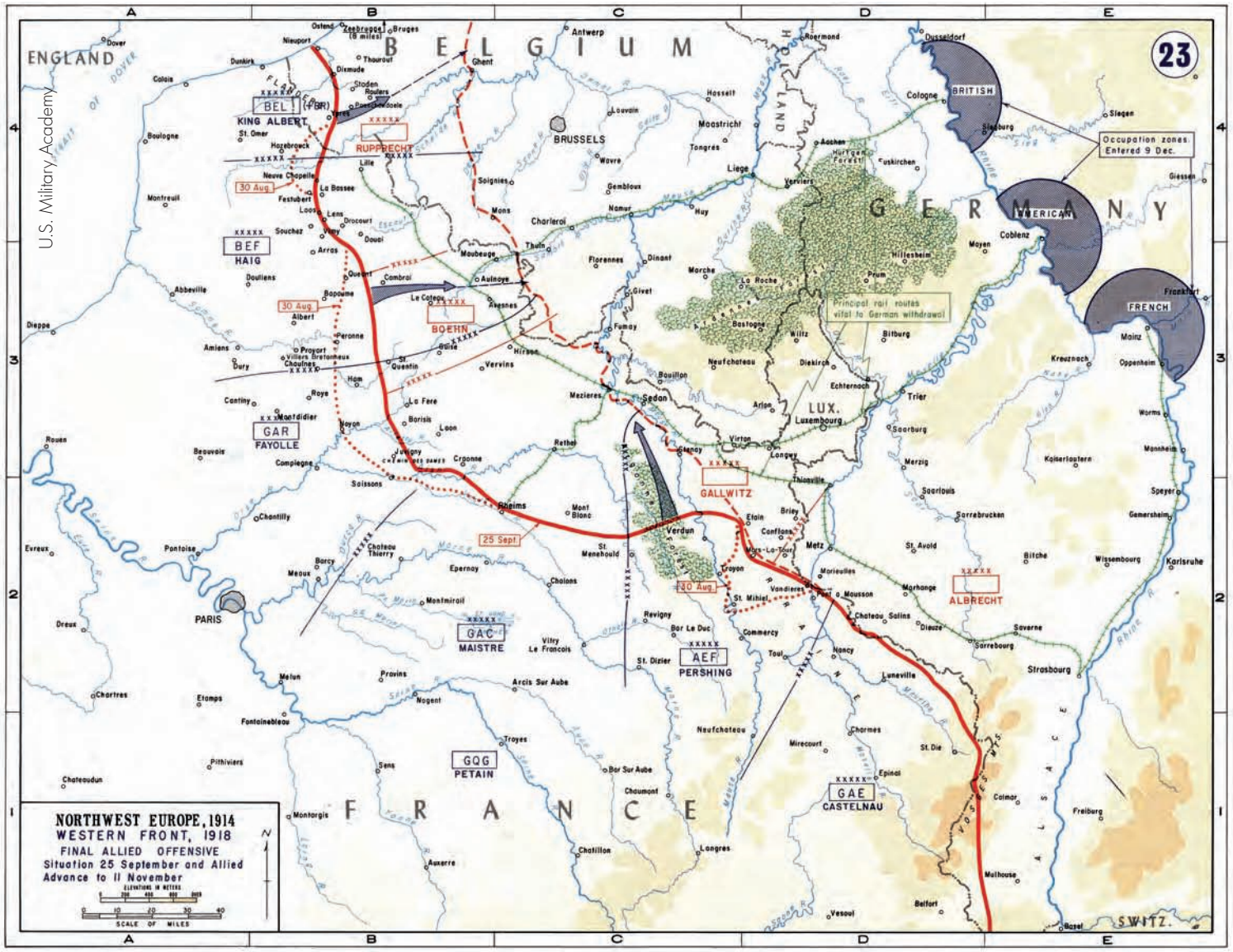
Company I of the 358th Infantry. "Everyone in my company is cussing their hard luck that they got in the infantry," he wrote his parents. The training was intensive and not in ideal conditions. "They drill about 7 or 8 hours a day with guns and pack and under these southern skies that means something," Herring noted. "I thought I sweat in the hay mow last summer but was on K.P. [kitchen patrol] today working in the kitchen and it is worse." He found the "eats" distasteful. "They have turned us all into vegetarians," he complained. "Roasting ears, squash, beans, etc. for dinner all grown around here. If we stay down here long I will look, feel, and talk like a Mexican." There was lots of work and little time off with drills even on Sunday. "Get drill, physical exercises, rifle exercises, 8 hours per day," the young soldier wrote. "They keep us doing something during all the hours we are off, it seems." As a taste of things to come, they were issued winter clothing at the beginning of the Texas summer in addition to standard military equipment. "Tomorrow we go to the rifle range for a week or 10 days," he wrote on 28 May 1918. Kelly Field air base was nearby. It "looks a little more serious out here," Herring commented, with "aeroplanes and war balloons in sight at all times."[6]

After less than four weeks in Texas, he was in New York awaiting embarkation to Europe. His letters to his parents make clear his excitement at his first trip into the eastern part of the country. At various stops along the way, crowds came out to greet the doughboys and give them coffee, cookies, cigarettes, reading material, and "enough girls' addresses to keep a fellow writing day and night." In other places, he added, "they acted like they were afraid of soldiers so waved from a distance." In a small town in Missouri, 500 soldiers swam in a "dirty little lake." This farm boy pronounced the crops in Oklahoma and Kansas "fine." Because New York state was so mountainous, he questioned how anyone could make a living there, but he also called it "the most beautiful country I ever saw." On the Journey to the embarkation point at Camp Mills on Long Island, "we could plainly [see] all the skyscrapers, the Statue of Liberty, and all the other sights connected with New York Harbor which of course was all new to me."[7]

The "Atlantic ferry," as it was called, was something soldiers had to endure as the 90th Division sailed in a convoy of ten transports that met up with Royal Navy destroyer

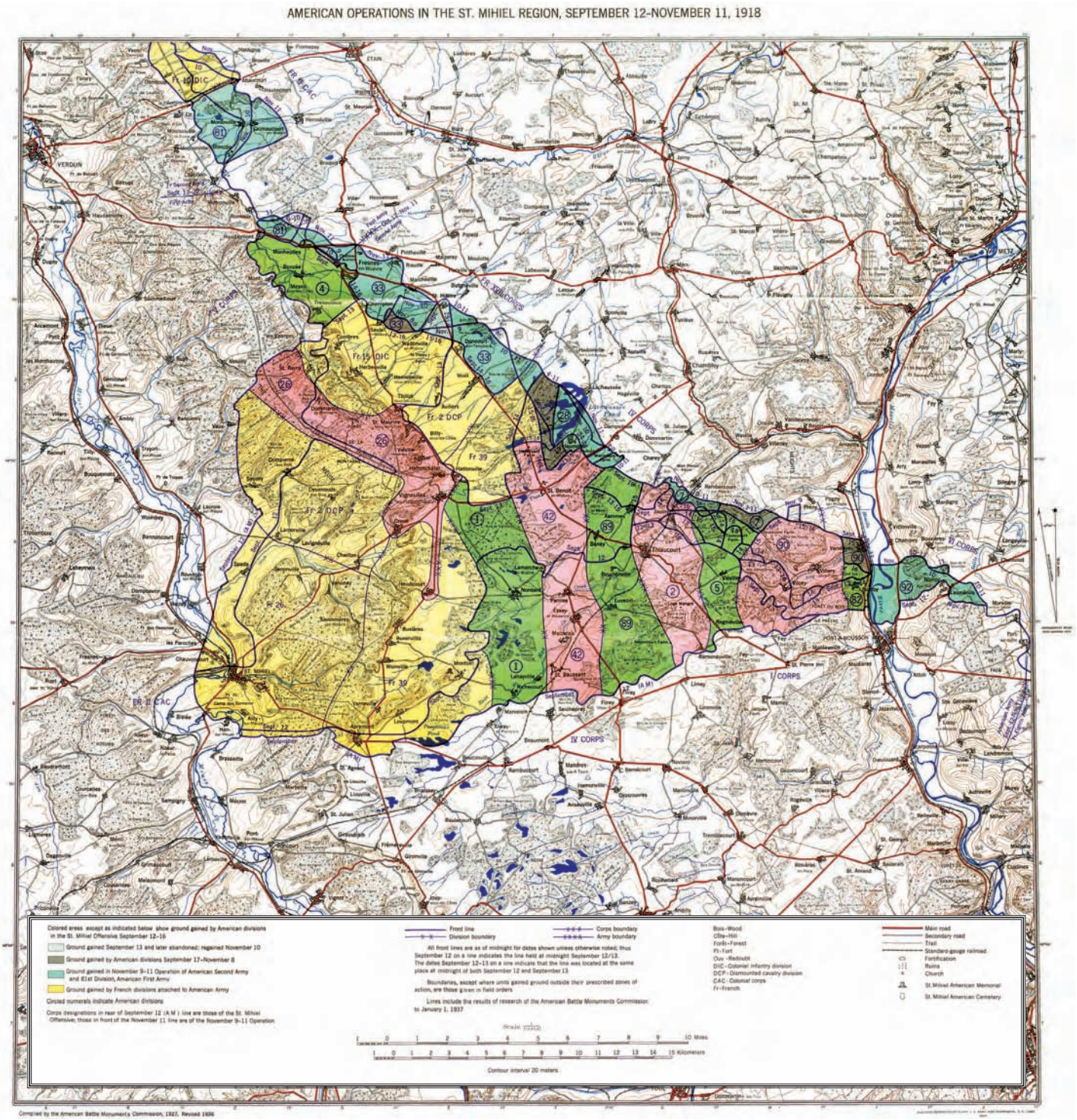

Library of Congress

Camp Travis, Texas, in 1917



escorts in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Because of the urgent demands for manpower at this desperate time in the war, each ship carried as many troops as could be squeezed aboard and in June 1918 alone, 278,664 men crossed the Atlantic. The soldiers even did shifts sleeping in the bunks and hammocks.[8] The holds were foul smelling from sweat and vomit. Herring spent most of the time sleeping on deck. "A fellow can sleep 25 hours a day," he told his family. A storm midpassage brought seasickness to many of the travelers, Herring included. "The boat rocked endways, sideways and a few other ways," he reported, "in addition to the vibrations of the engines and the wheel house overhead." He remained on deck for three days with nothing to eat, drink, or smoke. "Land looks good to me," he admitted after arrival. "I don't care to cross the sea more than once more but would like to do it going the other way."[9] The 90th Division docked at Liverpool in early July. Herring's regiment paraded before the lord mayor and enthusiastic British crowds on the Fourth of July and was treated to a banquet that evening.[10]

After a short rest period in Liverpool, the men boarded British "toy trains" for the port of Southampton. There they were "packed like sardines" into sometimes shabby channel boats and sailed to Le Havre, France. The 358th Infantry was then crammed into boxcars and transported to its training area near the Burgundy town of Minot in northeastern France, a rolling plateau between the Seine and Saone Rivers, a location rich in history going back to Julius Caesar. They were billeted in the local villages, often in barns. There for about a month, with full equipment they underwent intensive, desperately needed training with eight hours a day devoted to such exercises as target and bayonet practice, entrenchment construction, small-unit tactics, drill, and more drill. Short of officers, the 90th Division was assisted by French officers who also served as liaisons with the locals. The men quickly tired of the routine, and the air was filled with rumors of moving to the front. Originally



scheduled to undergo three more months of training, on 18 August the 90th Division received orders to replace the 1st Division in the front lines.[11] Three days earlier, Herring told his family that "it is so quiet here you would scarcely know there is a war going on" and wondered when he would go into action. He wistfully begged for good news about happenings at home and "about all the good things you have to eat."[12]

Within a month after having arrived in France, the 90th Division joined the fighting on the Western Front. "Have moved quite a distance since my last letter," Herring wrote his parents on 2 September from "somewhere in France." They traveled by "trucks, side-door Pullman [soldiers' slang for boxcars], and hiking, mostly the latter. We were on the go every day for a week and it seems we moved all over France to get a short distance." They traveled mostly at night "so we lost considerable sleep." Between 19 and 24 August, they relieved the 1st Division in trenches extending from Remenauville to the Moselle River. "Have gotten slightly acquainted with rats, 'cooties' [lice], and Fritz [Germans]. None of these have caused any casualties in the company only a little annoyance." They slept in dugouts, in the open, and sometimes in "dog tents." They experienced the

The 90th Division headquarters on the St. Mihiel front

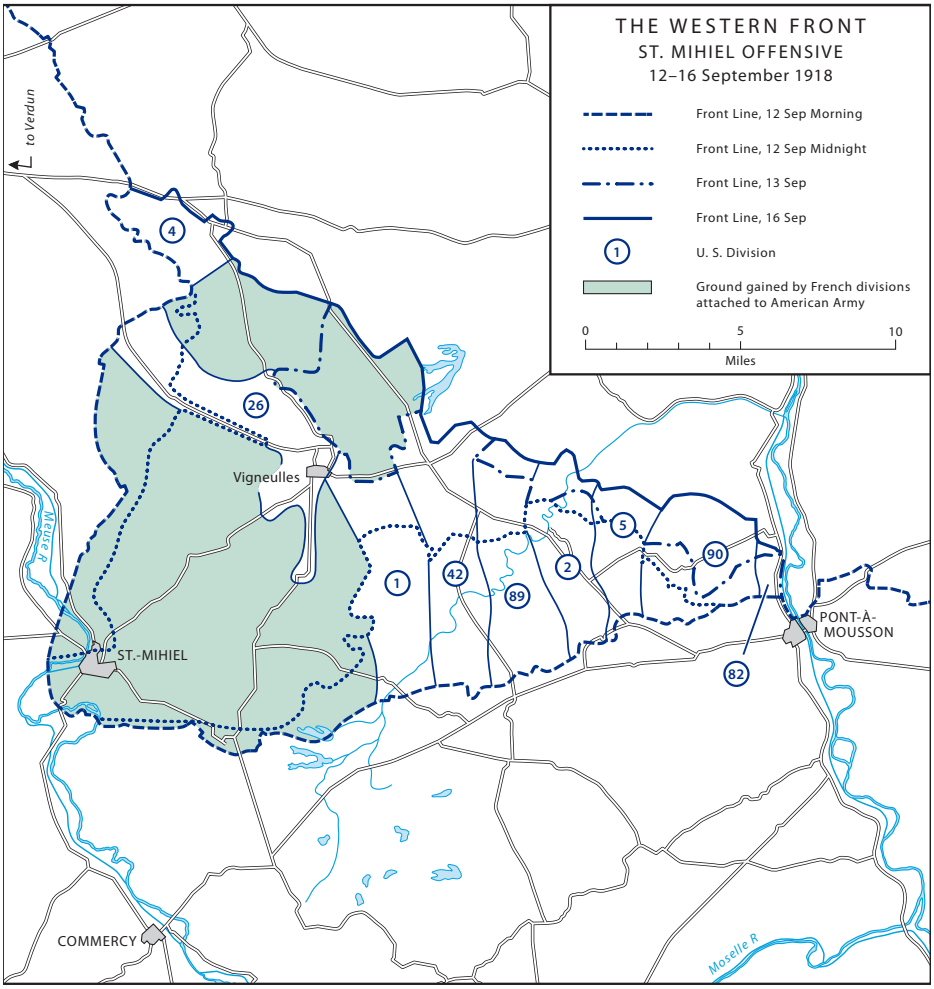
unrelenting, mind-numbing, and at times terrifying sound of artillery, as well as mud, grime, and poison gas. During this time, Herring served with his company's headquarters, carrying messages between various units.[13]

From 10 to 17 September, the division played an important role in what historian John Keegan has called the "first all-American offensive of the war," an assault against heavily fortified German positions in the St. Mihiel salient that bulged into French territory near the Moselle River.[14] For three years, this German stronghold had been an embarrassment to the French as well as a grave strategic threat. It also denied the French the use of a vital railroad line. During the years of occupation, the Germans had built deep dugouts and thick concrete bunkers, some equipped with electricity, and placed "broad belts" of heavy barbed wire in no-man's-land. The Allied plan called for 400,000 American and 48,000 French troops to attack the estimated 75,000 Germans positioned in the St. Mihiel salient. Once the Germans had been pushed out, U.S. troops, within a mere two weeks, would mount follow-up attacks against enemy lines between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest.[15]

Through good luck and exquisite timing, the St. Mihiel Offensive proved easier than expected. Unknown to the Allies, on 10 September the Germans had decided to abandon the salient. The withdrawal actually began two days later on the morning of the Allied attacks. After marching in heavy rains for four nights to avoid German detection, the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) troops moved into position for attack. At 0500 on 12 September, after four hours of bombardment of German positions, the troops went over the top. They managed the barbed wire with enormous two-handed wire cutters and rolls of chicken wire used almost like planks to walk across. They encountered only token opposition from the retreating enemy. The battle was all but won on the second day, although the Germans mounted several counterattacks and continued to harass the advancing doughboys with artillery, gas, and machine gun and sniper fire. The Americans suffered 7,000 casualties, not high by World War I standards. The victory provided a huge boost to Allied, especially French, morale. U.S. commanders exulted at their relatively easy success. St. Mihiel made clear to the German high command the decisive edge given the enemy by this infusion of hundreds of thousands of fresh American soldiers.[16]

The 358th attacked in the center, met "murderous fire," and suffered high

Rows of barbed wire on the St. Mihiel front



casualties while achieving its objectives. Over the next three weeks, the 90th Division remained engaged while seeking to stabilize the lines established by the offensive. On 25 September it participated in a demonstration offensive as a preliminary to the coming Meuse-Argonne Campaign. The aim was to deceive the Germans as to the timing and location of the major U.S. thrust. The doughboys endured massive artillery bombardment, attacked well-defended German positions, and even engaged in hand-to-hand combat. They suffered heavy losses while making minimal gains in an engagement of negligible strategic value. The fighting continued for almost two weeks with raids on both sides, localized actions, and artillery and gas. The 358th suffered the most casualties of those U.S. regiments in action.[17]

During St. Mihiel and other offensives, Pvt. George Herring was a runner, responsible for carrying messages from one sector to another, perhaps the most dangerous job in the Army because it required leaving the relative safety of the trenches or dugouts and being exposed to enemy artillery, machine guns, and even strafing from aircraft. As he reported to his family, "We advanced several miles took a village went beyond and held our position. Our company took a large number of German prisoners and material. . . . There are any number of interesting, exciting, and pitiful incidents connected with an advance which would probably be disconnected by the time they were censored. About the only thing one knows will get by is that a fellow is well and that is what is the best news, I suppose."[18] His terse but telling diary entries for these weeks of intensive combat make quite clear the constant danger, occasional peril, sheer exhaustion, and pain of losing comrades at arms that marked the first experience in combat for many of the doughboys.

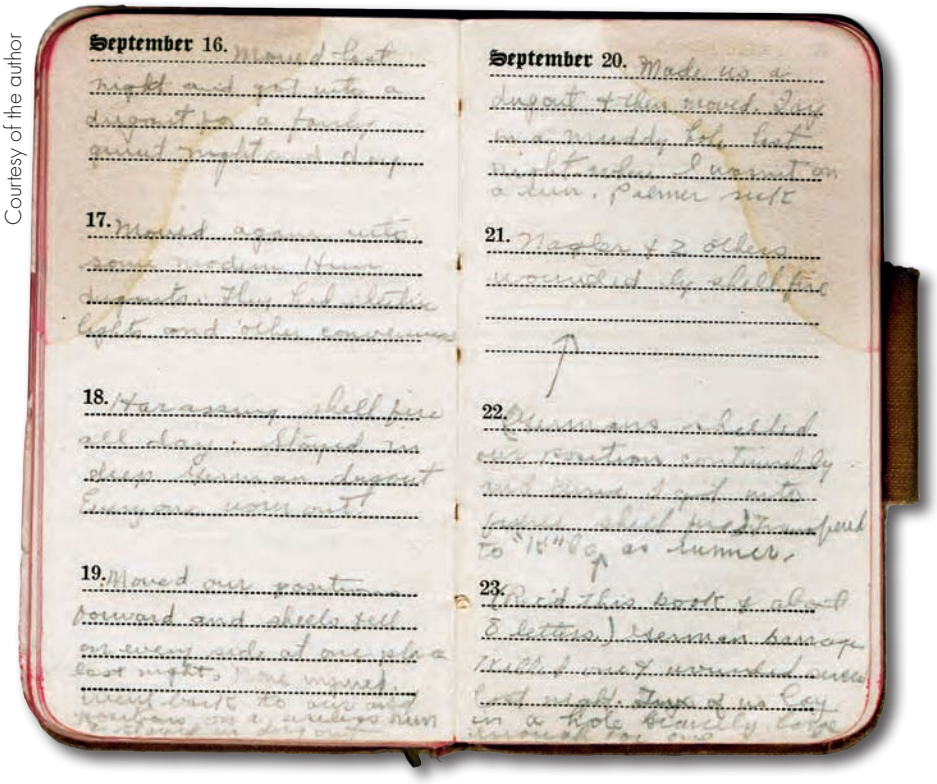
September 12: Drive in St. Mihiel sector began at 5 a.m. after a 4 hr. bombardment. We arrived in trenches just in time to go over the top after walking through the mud all night.

September 13: Spent last night in a deep German dugout after getting lost from my Co. Spent the day in trenches.

September 14: Spent last night in a shell hole digging in most of the time. Was in a dugout for 2 hrs. which was hit by a shell after we left today.

September 15: Moved our positions last night. Was in the open until artillery fire drove us into the trenches. Gas attack.

A dugout belonging to Major Woods of the 315th Engineers



Courtesy of the author


Courtesy of the author

A German dugout near Pont-à-Mousson on the St. Mihiel front in 1918

September 16: Moved last night and got into a dugout for a fairly quiet night and day.
September 17: Moved again into some modern Hun dugouts. They had electric lights and other conveniences.
September 18: Harassing shell fire all day. Stayed in deep German dugout. Everyone worn out.
September 19: Moved our positions forward and shells fell on every side at one place last night. None injured. Went back to our positions on a useless run and stayed in a dugout.
September 20: Made us a dugout and then moved. Lay in a muddy hole last night when I wasn't on the run. Palmer sick.
September 21: Nagler and 2 others wounded by shell fire. Germans shelled our positions continually... I got into fierce shell fire.
September 22: Transferred to "K" Co. runner. Rec'[eive]d this book [diary] and about 8 letters.
September 23: German barrage killed 4 wounded several last night. Two of us lay in a hole barely large enough for one.
September 24: Americans put on a barrage and raided Hun lines. Hun returned shrapnel and gas. Everyone hoping for relief.
September 25: Moved with "K" company to front lines. "I" Company being relieved. Got 3 men wounded. Going out. 60 men left.
September 26: Shelled several times during the night. K Co. moved forward supporting 1st Batt. 5 men killed and the remainder of us gassed with arsenic. We retired to our old position.
September 27: Made 2 runs to "I" Co. . . . last night thru a dark tangled wood and plenty shrapnel falling.
September 28: "K" Co. paid in front lines today. Everyone is sick or worn out. Not having [it] very hard myself.
September 29: Have had less shelling last few days. Bellgrado killed by our machine guns. Humphrey wounded.
September 30: Moved out last night with little shelling but in a downpour of rain and knee deep mud. Hike to Griscourt arriving at 5:30 a.m. Worn out, wet, and hungry. Took a bath and got clean clothes the first for 6 wks.[19]

The last day of September, Herring's unit left the front for less than a week's respite. They were billeted in Griscourt in old French buildings, some of which had fireplaces to cut the early fall chill. They continued to drill but also had time to relax, catch up on sleep, and play sports. They enjoyed concerts each night. "We have straw ticks and plenty of blankets so are well provided for now," Herring wrote his parents. "Have satisfied my appetite for sweets for the first time in quite a while and my pockets bulge with cigarettes." Most important, they got stacks of mail from home to elevate their spirits, and rumors of peace began to circulate through the ranks.[20]

Such rumors turned out to be cruelly ironic—and quite premature. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive of

George Herring (left) and his friends Pvts. Zehren (middle) and Palmer (right)

A concrete machine gun bunker between two houses in Pont-à-Mousson

October–November 1918 was one of the largest and costliest battles in U.S. military history. The engagement pitted an estimated 1.2 million U.S. troops against approximately 500,000 Germans across a 24-mile front. The Allied command sought to drive the enemy from its heavily fortified defenses between the Argonne Forest and Meuse River, built up over the years of the German occupation of parts of northern France. Combined with British and French offensives in other areas, the Allies aimed to keep maximum pressure on Germany along the entire Western Front to end the war before the onset of winter. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive lasted virtually until the armistice. In contrast to St. Mihiel, it came at a heavy cost and starkly exposed the weaknesses of the still raw American forces. The doughboys went up against Germans holding the high ground with strongly defended positions. The attack came so soon after the St. Mihiel Offensive that there was little time to prepare, and the proximity of the two battlefields contributed to nightmarish logistical problems. The waterlogged roads were pockmarked with shell holes, and with huge numbers of troops and vehicles crammed into small spaces, supply lines quickly clogged. Trucks stuck in traffic jams could not get food and water to the troops, and field hospitals could not keep up with the heavy casualties. The attacks took place at night in terrain strewn with barbed wire and other debris. Some parts of the area resembled a moonscape, the effect of intense artillery bombardment from previous engagements. Other sections were heavily forested or had deep ravines. The Germans fought fiercely. Once the attacks got under way, the Americans' inadequate training, sometimes poor leadership, and lack of discipline were on full display. Officers lost control of their men, and straggling became a major problem. In some places, the Americans moved only yards at a time. After a breakthrough on 14 October, the advance again slowed. The commanding officers kept pouring men into what one doughboy called a "living death," and the AEF incurred horrendous losses. The Meuse-Argonne Campaign became the deadliest battle ever fought by U.S. forces in a foreign war, losing more than 26,000 killed and nearly 100,000 wounded. The doughboys courageously endured and adapted and won the battle, helping to speed the end of the war, but their victory came at excessive cost. It was achieved, historian David Kennedy writes, by sheer numbers, and "smothering the enemy with flesh."[21]

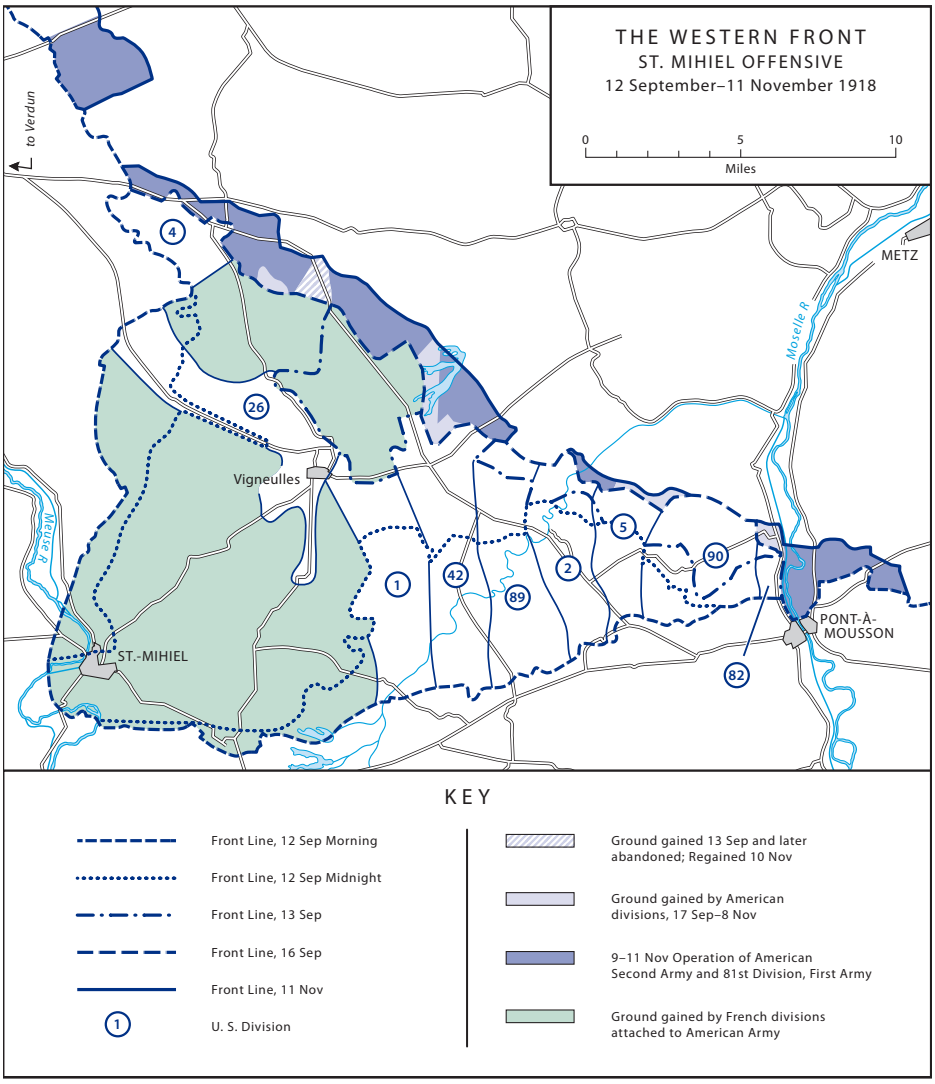
A bridge built by the 315th Engineers near Sassey-sur-Meuse

The 90th Division entered the battle on 21 October in its third and final phase. For the next three weeks, it

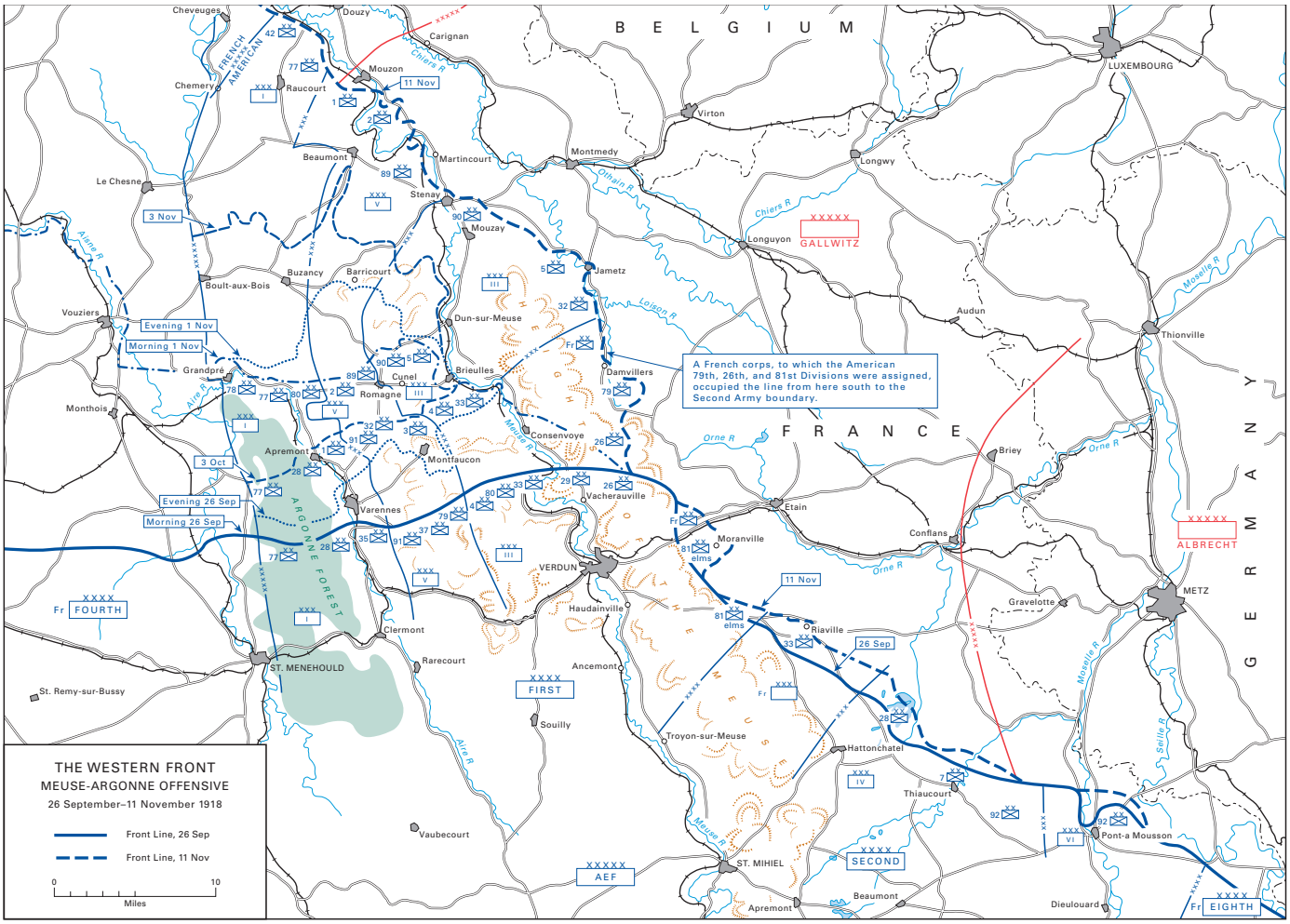
engaged in heavy fighting against German troops making what many must have recognized was a last stand. Even the supporting U.S. units endured massive enemy artillery bombardment. Lacking crucial artillery support, the Americans advanced beyond the relative security of the trenches, staying alive in shallow foxholes when they were not moving. The troops became badly disorganized at points. Gradually, they drove the Germans into retreat. The 358th was among the first units to cross the Meuse River and occupied the important French town of Stenay shortly after the armistice was declared.[22]

As with St. Mihiel, Herring's diary entries for the Meuse-Argonne reveal something of the doughboys' experience for this last engagement of the Great War.

October 18: Got up at 4 a.m. Moved out at 8:30. Hiked with little rest until 5 p.m. Slept in a dugout.
October 19: Moved most of the day. Stealing our rations as we went. Acted as a supporting division.
October 20: Company extends 2 km with 4th platoon on the furthest end. Slept in a German dugout.
October 21: Preparing to go to front again. Moved out about 9 p.m. Was a little sick today.
October 22: Hiked all night last night and arrived on front at 8 a.m. Were shelled. Rolinski and Hill killed. Hillerand, Gillrause injured.
October 23: Got lost hunting 4th platoon last night for a couple of hours. Shelling is continuous on this front but little on front line.
October 24: Got up at 12 a.m. and going all night…. I and K went over the top. Shelling was continuous. 1 K[illed] and 8 inj. In B. Co. while going to find Maj. [Terry] Allen [the fearless, flamboyant Allen would command the 1st Infantry Division in World War II]. A sniper kept us in a hole 2 hrs. Power K[illed].
October 25: Dug in on the banks of the Meuse after advancing 11 km. Snipers busy on hill. 357 and 358 contained 4 + killed. 5 captured yesterday in drive by I & K.



A typical traffic jam on the Meuse-Argonne front, c. November 1918



October 26: Two bombardments of our position today. 1 shell caved in my dugout another hit the opposite bank injuring Rosen and Pearson another hit our chow.
October 27: More quiet today. Only light shelling. 5 Div. takes [?]. 4 then retreats out of it. 100 killed in retreat.
October 28: Our relief failed to arrive. Planes drop leaflets wanting to know why we are fighting.
October 29: Weather has been clear but we almost freeze at night in our holes on the banks of the Meuse.
October 30: Another fairly quiet day but cold on the creek. Relieved in evening and went back
October 31: Spent the [?] building a tent. Moved out in evening and our boys set artillery all night. Runners returned at night fall.


U.S. Army

Troops from Company D, 358th Infantry, carry food toward the front lines during the Meuse-Argonne Campaign, 25 October 1918.

November 1: Barrage for another drive started at 1:30. 359 and 360 went over the top. We moved out at 3 p.m. and got in holes along the road.
November 2: Moved out at 8 p.m. to some recently captured billets and spent the night in comfort until 3 a.m. when we started to move.
November 3: Moved at 6 a.m. going over the top in reserve. Moved all day without sight of a German except the dead ones of the preceding days.
November 4: Spent night in the open and today living on a few reserve rations as our kitchens could not keep up with us. Had 2 meals in 3 days.
November 5: Moved further up last night and dug in. Moved 2 k. forward at 8 a.m. 358 moved about 8 km forward without resistance.
November 6: Dug in and spent a fairly quiet day without shelling.
November 7: Hoping for divisional relief as we have only about 60

men in the platoons. [Allied high commander, French marshal Ferdinand] Foch, meets German officers in France.

November 8: Digging in again today. There is more shelling activity in this sector as our artillery is just establishing.

November 9: Moved up again about 2 km at 8 p.m. and moved into holes left by 142 B[attalion].

November 10: Moved to Villers Francois (Meuse) and took billets. Artillery fire light. Germany given until 11 a.m. tomorrow to accept terms of armistice.

November 11: German guns and artillery cease fire at 11 a.m. for the first time in over 4 years. First time we were free from the roar of cannon in 3 mo.

November 12: Everyone happy. Fixed up our billet and fixed us a home. Made supper from German food, turnips, spuds, kraut, bread.[23]

The day of the armistice was a high point in Herring's time in France. It "was a great hour for us over here," he told his parents. "We have been under shell fire or near it for almost three months. It certainly is great to have things quiet again." Upon hearing reports that the war had been won "we about tore the billet down. We are all glad it is over as the prospects of laying in holes this winter were not very encouraging."[24]

Although he could not have realized it at the time, Herring's tour of duty in Europe was less than half completed at the signing of the armistice. Fearing instability or even revolution in Germany, and a possible breakdown of the peace talks, the victorious Allies provided in the armistice that their own armies would occupy the Rhineland region of western Germany to the left bank of the Rhine and the major cities of Coblenz, Mainz, and Cologne. Such a move would help ensure order, give them leverage in the peace talks, and, should war resume, offer a strategic edge. To the disgruntlement of U.S. military leaders, the Allies assigned the Americans only the northern part of the Coblenz bridgehead to occupy. The 90th Division was made part of a new Third Army of the U.S. Army of Occupation (AO) in Germany.[25]

Occupation duty was just as challenging, in its own way, as the war. The main enemies were boredom and thoughts of home. The officers sought various methods to keep the troops in line and maintain morale. The soldiers found their own ways to cope. Herring's diary entries and letters written after the armistice are far more numerous and candid than those written in wartime. His writings make clear the unique problems encountered by the AO troops in postwar Germany and how they dealt with them.


U.S. Army

Men of the 2d Battalion, 358th Infantry, passing through Vilcey-sur-Trey, 15 September 1918

The long trek through northeastern France, Belgium, and Luxembourg to the occupation zone in Germany—called "the march" without any hint of affection—began for the 90th Division on 24 November, ended on 21 December, and by Herring's estimate covered some 300 kilometers.[26] The troops were on the road for twenty-nine days, with occasional days off for rest, and averaged between ten and thirty kilometers per day. Already beaten down from weeks in combat, they often marched in foul weather. "Hiked two hours in rain and snow with wet feet and a bad disposition," Herring reported on 18 December.[27] They had limited rations and billeted in barns, schools, houses, kitchens, or whatever was available. Evenings were often spent preparing for inspections. "The boys are crabby and anxious to go home," Herring confided to his diary on 26 November. Thursday, 28 November, was a "dreary Thanksgiving." The doughboys "feasted" on corned beef, beans, and hardtack. A highly anticipated football game was canceled because of bad weather.[28] The only cheering note of the march was the warm greetings received from French, Belgian, and, perhaps surprisingly, German villagers as the Americans passed along the route. "Hospitality of the Germans is remarkable everywhere we go," Herring wrote on 12 December.[29] One of the biggest challenges of the march was getting across the rugged Eifel range between the Rhine and Moselle Rivers, "the worst hills or mountains we have found in Europe," according to the Iowan.[30] Two days after their arrival in Gerolstein, a railroad town in southwestern Germany, and two days before Christmas, virtually all of Herring's company was put on arrest, confined to quarters, and given a week of extra hikes for stealing reserve rations of salmon and hardtack.

Christmas in Gerolstein was a bittersweet affair. It was dark by 1600 "and the rain came in drifts," Herring wrote to his younger sister,

A postcard of Gerolstein, Germany, that belonged to George Herring

Bernice. "The billets are chilly, we had little smokin' or anything to read. I think most of us were thinking of a better land and the folks at home and considering our own gloomy prospects."[31]

Yet even far from home, the troops found some solace in the holiday. They were comfortably housed in a local hotel with bunks and electric lights, although, according to Herring, they were not warm enough. The town itself was in a summer resort area in a beautiful region of mountains and rivers famous for its wines, with miniature trains winding about the hills, and castles dating to the thirteenth century, a "fairyland," he called it. The people were parochial and predominantly Roman Catholic. Herring attended Christmas mass in the local church, which was "crowded to the vestibule," and had beautiful music from the pipe organ and choir. There was a Tannenbaum ceremony and candy and cigarettes were distributed. When the men returned to their quarters they got Christmas boxes and accumulated mail. "We were like kids again," Herring told Bernice. "We ate and smoked until we had our fill. Twas not the candy or gum that pleased me most, it was the good old home-made fruitcake." None of this could of course compensate for being away from home on the most festive of holidays. "There is not the same bright cheery feeling among a strange people in a strange land and it has been hard to realize it was Christmas."[32]

During the first months of the occupation, the weather remained cold, wet, and bleak, the mood sullen, and billet talk centered on going home. "A fellow here becomes a perpetual crab and there is plenty to crab about . . . a few good square meals might change one or the sight of the Statue of Liberty." "We hear almost daily that we are going home in the near future and just as often that we will spend most of the winter here," he penned on another occasion. "Every man in the Division is more than anxious to go back. Everyone appreciates more than ever what it means to live in a good country." "Topic of conversation discussed everywhere is 'going home,'" Herring noted in his diary on 13 January. On 4 February, he reported rumors "thick and fast about our leaving here for Russia [where the United States had also sent 7,000 troops as part of an Allied intervention], Coblenz or our embarkation point." He would believe the latter, he added, only "when the boat enters New York harbor." Even as he was writing, a fellow soldier came in with the "good" news that the 90th would be one of ten divisions to remain in Germany. "If I find it is true I think I will jump off a cliff," Herring wrote his parents. Finally, on 22 February, came the news the doughboys were waiting to hear: "Announced we are to sail in June. 4 months. Whew!" The date may have been later than hoped, but at least there was a date. From this point, Herring seemed to settle into his routine.[33]

To maintain morale and discipline under difficult conditions and to keep the troops ready in case the peace broke down, General John J. Pershing, the AEF commander, ordered a full regimen of military activities regardless of the weather: close order drill, parades, inspections, and ceremonies. Herring's infantry unit did guard duty by walking the post eight hours out of every forty-eight. They drilled five hours a day. "[To] say the least, we are tired of it," he complained. They participated in military ceremonies, on one occasion marching twelve kilometers each way and standing in freezing rain to see two senior officers decorated. They even conducted military exercises with live ammunition, "sham battles," Herring called them, "like we are preparing for another war. I am anxious to get home before the next one starts," he added. They also constructed new buildings for their own uses, improved existing buildings, repaired roads, and guarded railroads and bridges "so the Dutchmen [Germans] can't blow them up which is very unlikely if they had a choice," Herring commented sarcastically. During time off, they slept, wrote letters, and walked the streets of Gerolstein. "Gets pretty tiresome, the same thing every day."[34]

With the Paris peace talks lagging, the combatants still technically at war, and morale among the doughboys sagging, AEF leaders instituted major changes. Drill and military exercises continued but were conducted less often and less rigorously. Schools were established with classes in such subjects as auto repair, welding, electronics, and agricultural sciences, to keep the soldiers occupied and help


U.S. Army

Troops from the 315th Engineers, the 357th Infantry, and the 358th Infantry help build a road near Fey-en-Haye, c. September 1918.

them readjust to civilian life. Leave policies for local travel, and even for travel in France, were liberalized, some of the officers going as far away as the Riviera. Vaudeville-like shows took place almost every night, some of them produced by the soldiers themselves. General Pershing also ordered the establishment of a broad range of athletic programs to keep the soldiers fit and boost morale. Using money and equipment provided by the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), and other groups, the various companies and regiments competed in football, soccer, basketball, baseball, boxing, and wrestling. The troops themselves laid out fields for football and baseball and converted historic castles, aircraft hangars, and even hotel rooms into indoor arenas. Many teams included college athletes; the competition was often quite intense.[35]

A wrestler at Iowa State College, Herring took full advantage of these programs. In early February, he traveled to the nearby town of Daun for wrestling matches, losing one of them to a soldier he called a "professional." Although only 5 foot 4 inches tall, he also played basketball—sometimes outdoors—and recorded one day practicing "in the snow with bare hands." When spring arrived, of course, it was baseball. Participation in athletics broke up a generally dull routine by allowing travel to other towns in the U.S. occupation zone and the sharing of interesting experiences. The food was often better elsewhere. One night he slept in a jail—because no other space was available—a great conversation piece. Travel also enabled him to avoid onerous military duties. "I have done so little drilling I have been nicknamed 'gold-bricker' [a slang word coined during World War I to designate a slacker]," he told his sister, "but it takes a good soldier to miss formations and get away with it." "I have put in about three days in three months of drilling. I have more different ways of getting out of it than anyone in the A.E.F. If drilling did much good I wouldn't mind it. But we expect to be out of it before long so might as well take it easy."[36]

Herring also availed himself of the opportunity for leave by visiting Aix-les-Bains, a posh resort in the French Alps frequented by European royalty and the very wealthy. The long and "tiresome" trip required a train ride back to France, then across the battlefields where he had fought, and through areas where his unit had trained. The trip was well worth the time. "All kinds of things to eat, fine beds to sleep in, no reveille, mess kits, or taps. Free entertainment shows, vaudeville and movies, plenty to smoke and drink," he exclaimed on arrival. "Just to lie in bed, yes a real bed of the American type and to get up when one pleases and get your meals almost when you please are luxuries compared to army life," he told his sister. He described the hotel built for European tourists as "far better than Des Moines has to offer . . . with billiard rooms, dance hall, bar, hot and cold radiators, and everything. We had pretty Frog [French] girls for K.P.s, I mean waitresses, and real French cooking." He took a side trip to the mile-high Mont Revard, from which he could view Mont Blanc and

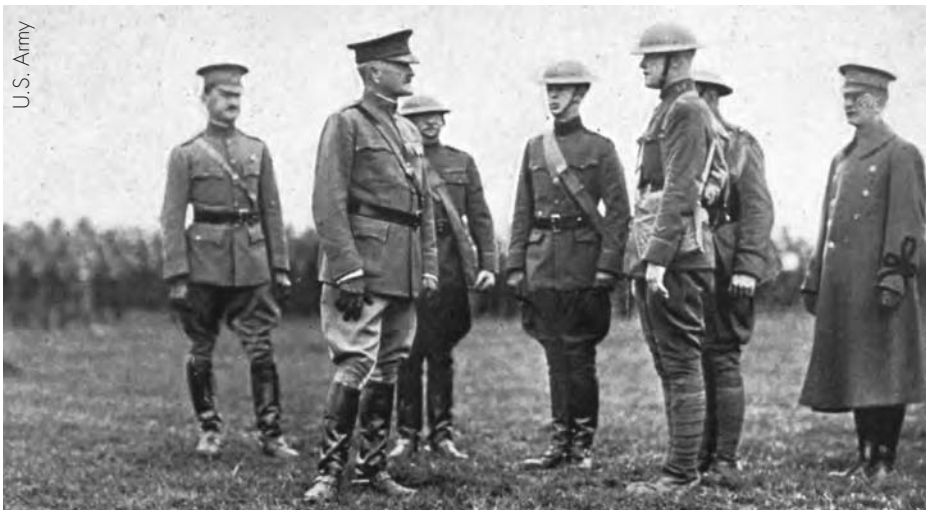
Courtesy of the author

A postcard showing two of the luxurious hotels, the Splendid and the Excelsior, in Aix-les-Bains, France

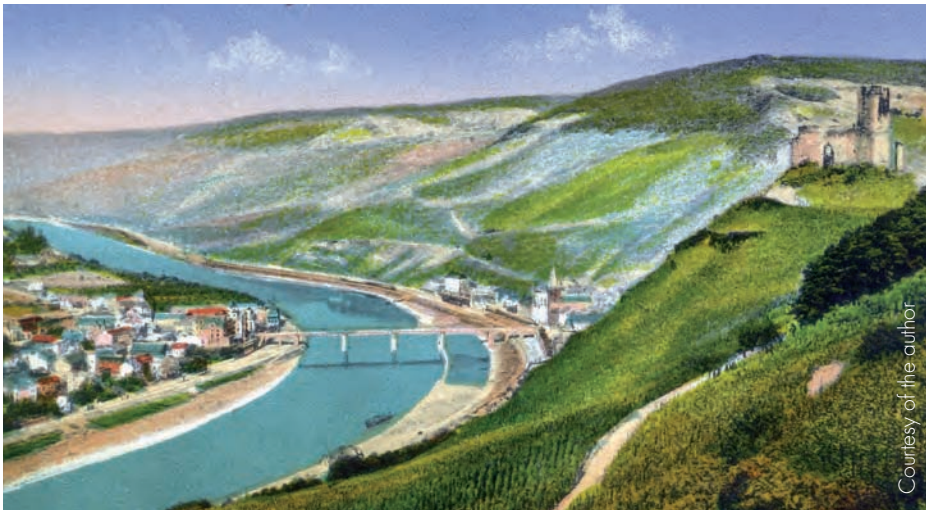
the Great St. Bernard Pass. He spent another afternoon crossing Lake Bourget and visiting Hautecombe Abbey, which was founded by St. Bernard and famous for its statuary and the tombs of saints and Italian rulers. Across the lake, he told his sister, was the pass through which Hannibal crossed from Spain into Italy in 218 BC. "I might have been more interested in school when I studied the Punic Wars in Latin," he added, "if I had known I would see the place where Hannibal and I had such a hard time getting the elephants across." Herring and his companions returned to base "poorer but wiser men" and just in time to take up pick and shovel on a road repair detail in a nearby town. "I feel better and a little more contented after having gotten away awhile," he told his parents. "I have never been very blue or homesick but more disappointed at the orders that come out. Of course we all think of the U.S. long and often and it is the land of our dreams."[37]

Much of the time following Herring's return from leave in early March was spent marking time. Signs of spring lifted spirts among the occupation troops. "I almost enjoy life," Herring admitted later in the month. He continued to thrive on what he called "Dutydodging," mostly through athletics, and a distinctive short-timer's attitude crept into his writing. He contrived to avoid General Pershing's inspection of the 90th Division through a five-day trip to play baseball in Bernkastel, which he called "the most beautiful town I have seen in Germany." "I wouldn't mind seeing him [Pershing] but the accompanying bother is what I don't like."[38]

As the date of departure neared, discipline broke down. "Our captain is a hard-boiled one and is trying to make soldiers out of us but no one is interested in such stuff now," he told his parents. The military had tried to limit drunkenness by restricting the times beer and wine could be purchased, but Herring's diary contains several references to drunken binges, one of which ended in what he called a "glass barrage."



General Pershing reviewing the 90th Division at Wengerohr, Germany, 24 April 1919



A postcard belonging to George Herring showing Bernkastel, Germany

Bernkastel, Germany, where the 90th Division had its headquarters

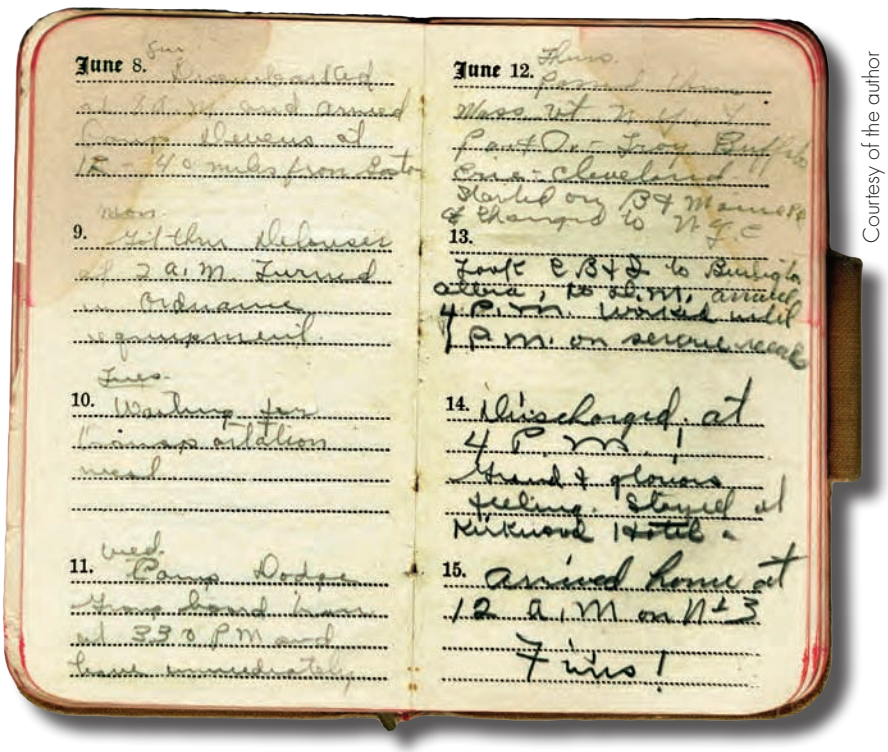
The USS *Edgar F. Luckenbach*, its decks crowded with troops, returning to the United States from Europe in 1919

More ominous was apparently what would now be called a "fragging" incident in which grenades were thrown at an officer and shots fired. All of the troops at Gerolstein were punished for the actions of a few by an eighteen-kilometer hike with packs.[39]

Perhaps mercifully, the 90th Division's departure from Europe came ahead of schedule. The men loaded onto trains on 18 May, pulled out early the next morning, retraced by rail "the march" of December 1918 and its French battlefields, and arrived at the coastal city of St. Nazaire on the evening of 21 May. They remained in the port city for seven days, where, Herring observed, "All we do is play ball and go to shows and sleep." The next day he was put on K.P. duty where 10,000 meals were served, but he did manage to get "my best feed in A.E.F."[40] Herring's regiment boarded the troopship USS *Edgar F. Luckenbach* at 1100 on 28 May and set sail four hours later. There was the usual seasickness, but as the ship approached Boston the excitement mounted. "Voyage is calm," Herring reported. "Everyone is happy." The ship arrived in port at 1800 on 7 June to a celebratory welcome.[41] On 9 June, after delousing and turning in equipment, Herring boarded a train for Camp Dodge where the adventure had all begun. He was discharged at 1600 on 14 June, a "Grand and glorious feeling," and arrived in Creston at midnight on 15 June. The last entry in his diary read simply: "Finis!"[42]

Herring's letters offer only hints at his feeling about his time in combat. He once spoke of the "pitiful" things he had seen on the field of battle. Several times he candidly acknowledged the dangers he faced. He advised his younger brother, Tim, that if he wanted to join the Army "take my advice and join the Salvation Army. The other kind is too dangerous. It isn't hard to count the men who were with the company every day thru it all." Of the tall tales he would tell upon his return—the war stories—he quickly added that "it would be hard to exaggerate the war we have been thru." "Sometimes I can almost see my serial number on the shells," he told his mother shortly before his return home. As he passed the old battlefields en route to Aix-les-Bains in March 1919 he expressed gratitude that he was "still able to navigate" and his good fortune that "it is over instead of bearing a wooden cross on some bleak hillside or lying in muddy trenches with shells beating a tattoo on the earth." Looking forward to celebrating the Fourth of July at home, he admitted that the sound of firecrackers might unsettle him. "If I hear them you can't get me out of the cellar all day." Yet on several occasions he also admitted that, despite the hardships, he was "glad I was in it." He noted that he felt this way only after the war was over. "I would never have been satisfied," he wrote, had he not participated.[43]

The wartime experiences of George Herring are not exceptional in any way. He went in the Army as a private



Courtesy of the author

The last pages from George Herring's diary

and came out a private first class. He won no medals or decorations. Yet like hundreds of thousands of other young American men, he did his duty and was honorably discharged. In combat, he performed a difficult, important, and highly dangerous assignment. He experienced the terror of being lost in no-man's-land while battle raged around him. He endured hardships that most cannot begin to imagine and witnessed unspeakable horrors with courage and stoicism. Much like Pvt. Charles Post of Spanish-American War fame, who quipped, "I . . . survived," so too had George Herring. He had fought in the "War to End All Wars" and had survived.[44]

Author's Note

George C. Herring Sr., the subject of this article, earned a bachelor's degree in agriculture at Iowa State College after the war. He joined the faculty at what was then Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), where, for a time, he also coached wrestling. He retired in 1963 as associate director of the Virginia Agricultural Extension Service.

Additionally, the author would like to thank his former colleague and good friend, Dr. John M. Carland, for his encouragement with this article and for his close, critical, and most helpful review of the manuscript.

Notes

1. Ltr, Union County Draft Board to George C. Herring, 8 Apr 1918, George C. Herring Papers (GCHP), University of Kentucky Library.

2. Ltr, George C. Herring to Folks, 15 Oct 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

3. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 28 Apr 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

4. Ibid.

5. For the formation of the 90th Division and Camp Travis, see Lonnie J. White, *The 90th Division in World War I* (Manhattan, Kans.: Sunflower University Press, 1996), pp. 1–73, and George Wythe, *A History of the 90th Division* (reprint: Lavergne, Tenn.: Kessinger Publishing, 2010), pp. 1–10.

6. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 24 May 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

7. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 14 Jun 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

8. Gary Mead, *The Doughboys: America and the First World War* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 143–46.

9. Ltr, Herring to Mother, July 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

10. White, *90th Division*, p. 76; Wythe, *History*, p. 13.

11. Wythe, *History*, pp. 13–17.

12. Ltr, Herring to Mother, 15 Aug 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

13. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 2 Sep 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

14. John Keegan, *The First World War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 2000), p. 411.

15. For an incisive account of the St. Mihiel Offensive, see David M. Kennedy, *Over Here: The First World War and American Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 192–94; for the doughboy experience, see Mead, *Doughboys*, pp. 292–306.

16. Keegan, *First World War*, pp. 411–12.

17. White, *90th Division*, pp. 96–115; Wythe, *History*, pp. 38–76; Edward G. Lengel, *To Conquer Hell: The Meuse-Argonne, 1918* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2008), pp. 369–70.

18. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 1 Oct 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

19. Herring Diary, 12–30 Sep 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

20. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 1 Oct 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

21. Kennedy, *Over Here*, p. 204. The Meuse-Argonne Offensive is analyzed in Kennedy, *Over Here*, pp. 195–205, Mead, *Doughboys*, pp. 299–330, and Lengel, *To Conquer Hell*, especially pp. 150, 412–20.

22. White, *90th Division*, pp. 116–56; Wythe, *History*, pp. 77–131.

23. Herring Diary, 18 Oct–12 Nov 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

24. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 13 Nov 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

25. Alexander F. Barnes, "'Representatives of a Victorious People:' The Doughboy Watch on the Rhine," *Army History* (Fall 2010) p. 7. The standard account is Keith L. Nelson, *Victors Divided: America and the Allies in Germany* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).

26. Wythe, *History*, pp. 182–84; White, *90th Division*, pp. 169–73.

27. Herring Diary, 18 Dec 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

28. Herring Diary, 26 Nov 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

29. Herring Diary, 12 Dec 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

30. Herring Diary, 11 Dec 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

31. Ltr, Herring to Bernice Herring, 25 Dec 1918, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

32. Ibid.

33. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 1 Jan 1919; Herring Diary, 13 Jan 1919; Ltr, Herring to Folks, 4 Feb 1919; Herring Diary, 23 Feb 1919, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

34. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 26 Jan 1919; Herring Diary, 6 Jan 1919, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

35. These programs are covered in White, *90th Division*, pp. 178–79; Wythe, *History*, pp. 192–95; and Barnes, "Representatives," p. 15.

36. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 4 Feb 1919; Ltr, Herring to Gertrude Herring, 9 Feb 1919; Herring Diary, 3, 8, 10, 21 Feb 1919, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

37. Herring Diary, 28 Feb, 1-9 Mar 1919; Ltr, Herring to Gertrude, 9 Mar 1919, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

38. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 23 Mar 1919, 20 Apr 1919, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

39. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 28 Mar 1919; Herring Diary, 16 Mar 1919, 3 May 1919, 4 May 1919, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

40. Herring Diary, 24–25 May 1919, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

41. Herring Diary, 6 Jun 1919; 7–15 Jun 1919.

42. Ltr, Herring to Gertrude, 9 Mar 1919; Ltr, Herring to Tim Herring, 12 Feb 1919; Ltr, Herring to Mother, 11 May 1919; Ltr, Herring to Tim, undated, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

43. Ltr, Herring to Folks, 1 Oct 1918; Ltr, Herring to Tim, undated; Ltr, Herring to Gertrude, 9 Feb 1919; Ltr, Herring to Mother, 11 May 1919; Ltr, Herring to Gertrude, 9 Mar 1919; Ltr, Herring to Mother, 11 May 1919; Ltr, Herring to Gertrude, 26 Apr 1919; Ltr, Herring to Tim, undated, GCHP, University of Kentucky Library.

44. Charles Johnson Post, *The Little War of Private Post* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1960), p. 340.