GOING AND COMING AS A DOUGHBOY

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Going and coming as a doughboy by Elmer H. Curtiss

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as a
Doughboy

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

By ELMER H. CURTISS
Formerly of Company K, 161st Infantry, Sunset Division
and
Company H, 102nd Infantry, Yankee Division

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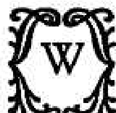

WITH a suitcase well packed with things I expected to need on the journey I left San Francisco for Kaiser Bill's dugout November 3, 1917. I stepped off the train at Camp Lewis exactly three days later. We spent that day answering to roll call, getting a physical examination, assignment to quarters, listening to instructions on army life, standing in line to get our equipment, and sending our civilian clothes home.

We were called out at 5:45 the next morning for our first reveille, and lined up for exercise at 5:30. The morning was bitter cold. After breakfast we drilled for four hours. We hiked three miles after dinner to get a thorough physical examination and our first typhoid innoculation. My arm was very sore, and two men fainted near me. Out of 40,000 men in the camp 700 of us were picked to start to Camp Mills the next afteroon.

As our sixteen-car train passed through Seattle we shook hands with hundreds of pretty girls who swarmed along the sides of the train. We took a run in Spokane the next morning. At Troy, Montana, the people turned out with fruit and candy. Minot, North Dakota, met us at 11 o'clock at night with hot coffee and a regular banquet, anything almost that we wanted. We paraded in Minneapolis for the exercise. This stunt was repeated at St. Thomas, Ontario, and at Niagara Falls, where we crossed over to the American side.

At Camp Mills I was assigned to Co. K, 161 Infantry, made up mostly of the Washington National Guard. My first task was carrying wood for the kitchen. This work was interrupted frequently by drill calls, various shots in the arm, or some kind of an inspection. Our quarters were squad tents. The assignments of ten men to a tent made moving around difficult.

In the morning we were given only five minutes to dress in the bitter cold. We were immediately given some vigorous exercise which would warm us a little. We then went to the mess kitchen, drew our rations and ate them out in the open in front of our tents. We were taught not to throw anything away, and encouraged to obey this rule by the guard posted over the garbage can.

An officer told us all about the advantages of War Risk Insurance and I took the limit, $10,000, which cost me $6.70 a month. I received my second shot in the arm immediately after signing for my insurance.

We received rifles and ten rounds of ammunition November 22. That day I walked three miles to a hotel and got a bath. There was no charge for soldiers who furnished their own soap

and towel. I washed out a pair of sox and hung them under my bed to dry. They were frozen the next morning. After that I got up every morning at 2:30 and started a fire to keep from freezing.

I spent Thanksgiving in New York. My ticket cost me $1.20. That left me 30c for candy. The next day we hiked 15 miles, carrying our rifles. It was chow time when we got back and we lost no time scampering to the mess hall. The next day we practised squad and platoon drill in our company street. A large blister on my left heel kept me wide awake all the time.

At night we usually chipped in and bought a pie or two and sat around swapping yarns. One night a sailor who had just returned on a ship which had carried officers to England spent the night in our tent.

My squad was on fatigue in December. We did all kinds of work around camp, including K. P. The marking of our clothing at this time led us to believe we would be leaving shortly. We worked for several days on a large ditch to carry off storm water.

When the wood supply in our tent was exhausted we organized a foraging party and came back loaded in no time. Then we made a fire that would have warmed up the Devil himself.

I received my 4th shot in the arm early in December. The Q.M. was busy boxing all supplies and material on hand. I began breaking in my trench shoes, and my sox, which were about a quarter of an inch thick, never kept my feet warm.

One of the boys in my tent was sick, and we were out under quarantine. The doctor never even came to see the fellow to see what was the matter. That night I washed a suit of underwear and dried it in front of the stove. We sat around the next day raising Cain, picking dust out of the air, and waiting for Sawbones to inspect us.

I had an awful appetite the next day. I made seconds on the stew, hot prunes, and coffee, and put away 7 slices of bread. Snow the next day was followed by rain and a young cyclone which kept all hands holding the tent down. There was a bread shortage the next day, and we bought a 15 cent loaf for the bunch.

December 11th we packed everything in our barracks bags and shipped them ahead. We emptied the straw out of our ticks, turned in our cots, and had nothing to sleep on for two nights. We stood in line four hours on the dock in Hoboken before we were checked off and allowed to board the "President Lincoln," which was a former Boche freighter taken over by the government and converted into a transport.

After we had found our bunks on the third deck I managed to get a few lines started to the home folks by way of the tug which drew up alongside after we left the harbor. After lying at

anchor for two days we started across via the long southern route in order to avoid submarines and icebergs. I was glad to get my feet on solid ground again after eighteen days at sea and two more at anchor outside of Brest.

We were taken off in lighters and marched immediately to the train. Here we had our first glimpse of German prisoners of war loading coal under guard. At first glance the French freight cars seemed about the size of a match box and capable of holding about a dozen men, but by the time they called our car loaded there were forty-two of us packed into the car like sardines.

It was the last day of the old year. We feasted on corned Willy and trench pastry, called hard tack in the history books. Sleep was out of the question. We swapped yarns instead of throwing confetti and blowing horns as we stood there in the swaying car, so close that when one man moved the whole crowd moved.

Our first stop was for two days. We were lucky enough to get a little straw on which to spread our blankets out under the stars. Then we were shipped on to Mehon where we unloaded our packs. My squad was detailed to handle the supplies. We were glad, for it saved us a long hike and we were very tired. As we rode along that five miles of ice-covered road I thought the truck would skid off the road every minute.

The coffee served to us by the French was stronger than Atlas with no sugar nor milk.

January 12th it rained all night, melting the snow, and the next morning we started building railroads. The hardest part of this work was lifting the steel rails and ties soaked in water.

I received my first pay January 25th, amounting to 264 francs. I started 200 francs for home in the first mail. The Y. M. C. A. had just completed a splendid building containing a stage, pool tables, reading and writing tables, best of all a canteen where we could buy a number of articles.

January 29th I received a package from home containing some oil of wintergreen which helped a cold I had been unable to break up. We had to get up at 5:45 and be out at 6 for fifteen minutes exercise. By this time we had finished our mess hall and no longer had to eat out in the open where we were always cold.

February 6th a man was discovered in my company who had been sent over by mistake. It seems that he had a wife and one child dependent upon him for support.

We had a hard time getting used to French time. 1 p.m. with them is 13 o'clock, 2 p. m. 14 o'clock, etc.

February 9th I received a box containing fruit cake, peanut candy, nigger toes, and a pair of gloves from my father. I managed to get a pass to town Sunday. Joan of Arc lived there

at Mehon for some time, part of the time in a large tower 200 feet high. We paid the woman at the entrance 15 sous and were permitted to climb to the top of the tower from which we could see the level country stretching away for miles on every side. We could see one of the numerous French freight canals running through the village.

We visited the dungeon where political prisoners were kept, and then went over to a very beautiful church. We could not see much of the church, as services were being held just then, so we left in a few minutes and went to a French cafe, where we ordered eggs, potatoes, bread, butter, and wine.

Our next stop was at a photograph shop, where we went through the agony of posing for a picture. The price was 8 francs for a dozen to be finished within a week.

After the railroad was completed we built three warehouses for storing ammunition, 1000 feet long and 100 feet wide. My company unloaded a string of forty cars in one night. Each car contained an average of 140 boxes of French 75 shells, six to a box. These were used principally in shooting at aeroplanes or for barrages in small attacks. We had to work fast to keep warm.

February 21st I was paid 64 francs, and I sent some more money home. I was doing guard duty at the warehouses, four hours on and eight off. We had to walk two miles to get to our posts. It took me fifteen minutes to make the rounds. When relieved we spent our time sleeping or talking. There were five of us together, so we did not get lonesome.

One day I was put on what we called the "Cossack Post." We had a tent full of dynamite and blasting powder for the engineers. It was placed out in a large open field. We had to walk around and around this tent all night, with fixed bayonets. I solved the problem by getting a box on which I could sit down when I got tired. I placed it where I could spot any one immediately who tried to sneak up on me.

I received my photos February 28th. Gas masks had just been issued to us, and we certainly looked like monkeys. I thought for a while that the weight of my steel derby would dislocate my neck.

When orders came for us to move we packed up our belongings and boarded a train of third class coaches, eight men to a compartment. The train stopped at the first village, where I gave a Frenchman ten francs to get us some nuts. He came back with about a bushel, which soon disappeared.

After a long ride we were unloaded and drilled a while in a large field. Few of us had any idea what was coming, as the officers would not tell us anything. Two days travel landed us at Men La Tour, the supply base for the Toul front, about eight miles back of the lines.