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Written by Tom Denker
my oldest Brother
you & Great Uncle

TOM DENKER'S WORLD WAR I REMINISCENCE

March 4, 1918, I reported at 165 Depot Brigade, San Antonio, Texas, where I was issued army clothes, had a physical examination, was vaccinated and assigned to a company for training, (there were three companies in all) of which was drawn the kitchen police. As I was near the head of the alphabet I received duties scrubbing kettles in all three.

I was bunked on the second floor on a cot in the barrack dormitory. On one of the cots next to me was a conscientious objector guarded by a sergeant. He was given water to drink, but by the third day the captain of the day said to cut off the water. This made the boy capitulate and they took him out of the room.

There were other objectors, who were less stubborn, cleaning the grounds around the barracks. They were placed in the medical corps, I believe.

After three weeks of training a bunch of Oklahomans and Texans were sent by railroad to Camp Sheridan at Montgomery, Alabama. We crossed the Mississippi River at Vicksburg. Two railcars were put on each side of the ferry when we crossed the river. (I understand there were only two bridges across the river at that time.) I thought the Mississippi River was the biggest body of water I had ever seen.

At Sheridan we lived in tents with wooden floors. The sides were three feet high with a tent pole in the middle of the tent. This was used by four men and their packs.

Here we were trained and we used the rifle range twice. We were made up to company strength from various camps throughout the United States.

About the last of June our company was entrained to Camp Merrit in New Jersey where we were outfitted for overseas. About 1:30 a.m. we were marched to the Hudson Palisades and down to a tugboat where we boarded. We stood man to man on the tugboat until we reached a wharf in Hobokan. We boarded a banana boat called the Calamasis. The next day we were ferried out into the big New York harbor where we joined eleven other ships as a convoy across the Atlantic Ocean. Our ship was manned by U.S. sailors.

Somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic, July 4 was celebrated. We were

given a menu card with all the food written out in French. I sent mine home with the name of the ship censored out but dad figured the name out.

Each ship had a number of cubby holes as lookouts had to report by tube to the crow's nest any object that was noticed. I had this sentry duty one time for two hours. It looked like a lot of men slept on the deck with their clothes on and with their pack as a pillow. We were supposed to have a place in the "hole" but it smelled bad.

It took 12 days to cross to Brest, France. As usual, the first few squads had to stay aboard the boat to help unload the boat. After a good night's sleep we unloaded the boat, rode the barge and then rode a truck to the Pantazon barracks, which was nothing more than a cow pasture. There were supposed to have been 52,000 men landed. I think we used the shallow part of the harbor.

It misted all the time we were there and we slept in our pup tents with only our raincoats under us.

After several days at Brest we left by third-class train cars to Abainville, Meuse. The car compartments we were in were meant for 10 people--5 face to face. There was only one door which opened to a running board.

We had a squad in each compartment along with food, water, and backrolls for each person. This was very uncomfortable on our two-day ride. However, stops were made along the road where the Red Cross or Salvation Army served coffee and snacks.

After arriving in the vicinity of Abainville, we were homed for a while living in our pup tents. Each man had half of the making of a tent in his backpack. The tent was about three-feet tall sloping outward in the back with the front open. One slept in these tents with most of his clothes on using his extra pair of shoes and backpack as his pillow.

I became sick and was given some O. D. pills (they were olive drab in color) and was told to rest in my tent. I fell asleep there and by the next day felt much better.

soon we began on the narrow railway construction and military drill. We were also moved into the upper story of the rock dwelling of a village as there were no country homes. All the farmers lived in the village.

Trucks were now used to transport our supplies. Most of our meals were a good tasting hash (slum gullion), bread, coffee, and a tapioca pudding. Occasionally we had a pancake meal.

The first part of the company was doing the track work the farthest from the front. The assembled track section came by barge pulled by a lonely mule. The canal came through the village and was a good place for us to bathe and swim in.

We had our clothes washed by the local women. We had to furnish the soap. They would use an open stream of water going through a large block of rock shapes using the side of the rock as a washboard and they paddled the dirt out.