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Madison County's Doughboys The Enemies: Germany and La Grippa

By
Jacquelyn Procter Reeves

In the previous issue of the Review Ms. Reeves oriented readers on the beginning of the Great War in 1914 and followed Madison County conscripts to their training base at Camp Mills, New Jersey where the 4th Alabama Infantry Regiment was reflagged as the 167th Alabama Infantry Regiment and joined the formation of the Rainbow Division. The Editor

Part II

On May 7, 1915, the luxury ocean liner, *Lusitania*, was fired upon by a German submarine while sailing near the coast of Ireland. Eighteen minutes after a torpedo ripped through the side, the *Lusitania* sank. Of the 1,119 people who died from the total 1,924 passengers, 128 were Americans. Among those who died were Alfred Vanderbilt and playwright Carol Frohman. While America had no intention of getting involved in a European war, Americans were outraged. In April, 1917, the United States finally issued a declaration of war against Germany. Few were surprised.

On Tuesday, August 7, 1917, recruits began to file in to the auditorium of the Madison County Courthouse, the grand jury room, and the circuit clerk's office. Dr. T. E. Dryer, along with six other local doctors, were tasked with examining 820 local men to determine their eligibility to serve in the U.S. Army.⁸⁴ The average exam, even though it was described as "rigid," took only four minutes, perhaps due to the large number of recruits. On Tuesday,

⁸⁴ Huntsville Mercury, Tuesday, August 7, 1917, "Examination for new Army Brings About 30% Rejection on Physical Defects," p. 1.

273 men were summoned, an additional 273 were summoned for Wednesday, and the final 274 were expected on Thursday. Because it was expected that about 30% of the recruits would be rejected for physical reasons, and more would be excused for exemptions, there was a possibility that more men would be called in for service to meet the local quota.

With great pride, the newspaper article stated, “to the credit of Madison County boys, every man answered as his name was called.”⁸⁵

A few days later, the newspaper reported that a total of 297 men failed the initial exam due to physical disabilities. Of the 523 that passed, it was expected that as many as three-fourths would claim exemption based on dependents.⁸⁶ Still, of that number that was rejected, as many as 90% of them could be called to fight in spite of their disabilities. Perhaps it wasn’t all bad news. The headline that day screamed “U.S. Army’s Full 300,000 Strength Secured.”

The pride of Madison County, Edward Chambers Betts, was sworn in as a captain at Ft. Oglethorpe, Georgia, where he was in training. He was described as the “handsome young son of Judge and Mrs. Tancred C. Betts.”⁸⁷

While U. S. soldiers were gearing up to fight in Europe, the death toll in Europe continued to rise. Casualties were reported among students at German universities: of the 643 students from Heidelberg University, 250 had been killed. Of the 5,255 students called from Munich University, 10% were casualties, and of the 3,700 called from Leipzig University, 664 had been killed. It was estimated that of the 42,000 students from German universities, 6,000 had already been killed, and yet the end of the war was nowhere in sight.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Huntsville Mercury, Friday, August 10, 1917, “Madison County Exemption Board Begins Monday Passing on Affidavits,” p. 1.

⁸⁷ Ibid, “Hon. Ed C. Betts Sworn in as Captain in New National Army.”

⁸⁸ Huntsville Mercury, Sunday, August 12, 1917, “6,000 University Students Killed During the War,” p. 11.

As American men were called up for training, it was important for all Americans to make sure there were no distractions or unnecessary temptations. President Wilson ordered that no alcohol could be sold within a half mile of military camps.⁸⁹

For the civilians of occupied France, the war continued to be especially brutal. They learned to adapt either by working with the German soldiers or quietly and carefully working against them. Private Ralph M. Brown, whose diary was recently discovered in an antique shop in Oklahoma by retired Brigadier General Edward Wheeler, wrote on April 9, 1918 that about two dozen German Stormtroopers had been captured and surrounded by French soldiers. The French wanted to kill them on the spot, but were stopped by an officer. "The French can hardly be blamed," Brown wrote. "The Boche have ravaged France, destroyed its economy, looted every building and wine cellar and violated its women. A hundred years from now the French will still hate the Germans for what they have done to this country."⁹⁰

Captured French soldiers were forced to undergo special "training" designed to teach them the proper Prussian way to greet superior officers in the German Army.⁹¹ Considered to be disrespectful, the French were to spend two hours at a stretch passing a stuffed German officer's uniform, salute properly, and greet it with "Bon jour monsieur l'officier." Their attitude was reinforced with the help of a sentinel who stood by with a fixed bayonet.

⁸⁹ Huntsville Mercury, Monday, August 13, 1917, "Saloons Ordered to Stop Selling Liquor," p. 1.

⁹⁰ Wheeler, BG Edward, USA (RET), "A Doughboy's Diary," Officer Review, The Military Order of the World Wars," December 2015, Volume 55, Number 5, p. 4. U.S. Army Private Ralph M. Brown was from Washington, D.C, and he was assigned to the 4th French Army to drive an ambulance. His diary covered February 9 through November 11, 1918.

⁹¹ Huntsville Mercury, Monday, August 13, 1917, "Frenchmen Taught How to Greet Superior Officers" by Associated Press, p. 6.

By mid-August, 1917, American troops were beginning to arrive in Europe. King George, Premier Lloyd George, and other high officials from France and Belgium observed as American troops paraded through London for an official review.⁹²

The Entente Alliance hoped that the arrival of Americans would hasten the end of war. But one of the most dreaded consequences of this war was neither bullet nor bayonet. It was poisonous gas. The long-term effects were still unknown, but what was known was pure hell for the victims.

The first use of gas in warfare (in this case, tear gas) can be traced back to the French in August, 1914.⁹³ Germans began to use gas on a large scale, first a chemical that caused violent sneezing, then tear gas delivered in howitzer shells. Shells were first fired against the Russians on the Eastern Front, but because of the extreme cold air, the liquid gas did not vaporize, rendering it useless.

They were not deterred.

In April, 1915, poisonous chlorine gas was released along the Ypres Salient.⁹⁴ Within seconds of inhaling it, the victim's respiratory organs were instantly burned and the men began to cough and choke. Few recovered, and of those who died, they were assured long and painful suffering.

The British planned retaliation and in September, 1915, along the British front line near Loos, chlorine gas from 400 emplacements was released. Unfortunately, the wind was not cooperative, and a shift brought all of that back into the trenches of the British. Back to the drawing board.

Soon, a more deadly gas was developed and the delivery was even more sophisticated. The effects of the new phosgene gas didn't manifest until as much as 48 hours after it was inhaled, causing the soldiers to inhale more of it, and the consequences were more ghastly. The gas was loaded into artillery shells, which

⁹² Huntsville Mercury, Tuesday, August 14, 1917, p. 1.

⁹³ Firstworldwar.com a multimedia history of world war one, firstworldwar.com/weaponry/gas.htm

⁹⁴ Ibid

meant they could be sent farther into enemy lines and the destination was more precisely controlled.⁹⁵

Mustard gas was introduced by the Germans and the effects were horrendous. Large blisters formed internally and externally within hours. Even though gas masks were distributed and continually evolved to improve their efficiency, the poison remained treacherous within the soil for weeks after it was released.⁹⁶

Locally, the newspaper printed mostly positive reports of the war. They ranged from short snippets regarding the defeat of German troops and the strength of the French and American troops.

Men from the First Alabama Infantry, the Second Alabama Infantry, officers of the old Fourth Alabama Infantry and First Alabama Cavalry and 167th Infantry were gathering items in preparation to become the newest members of the “Rainbow Division.” Those men left behind, who had not yet received their orders to leave, sent them off with cheers and good wishes. After a stop in Mineola, Long Island, they would begin their voyage to France.⁹⁷

as “Tommies” and American soldiers were sometimes referred to as “Sammies,” short for “Uncle Sam’s boys.” Today, we are more familiar with the term “Doughboys.” While several explanations for this term have been offered, no one really seems to know where and why the name originated.

⁹⁵ Ibid

⁹⁶ Ibid

⁹⁷ Huntsville Daily Times, Sunday, August 20, 1917, “Mighty Cheers Greets Soldiers,” p. 1.

The official, and formal, send-off was scheduled in Huntsville for Saturday, September 1, 1917, complete with a speech from the governor. “There will be music and marching, speeches and specialities,” the newspaper reported.⁹⁸

It was important, for the morale of America’s fighting men, that as many as possible plan to attend the festivities and watch the parade. All who owned cars were encouraged to assemble at 9:30 a.m. on Meridianville Pike, north of Walker Street and drive in the parade.⁹⁹

On the national front, President Woodrow Wilson addressed the “New Army” with a powerful message. He prayed for God to keep and guide the soldiers. He reminded the soldiers that their every action would be watched with “deep solicitude by the whole country” as well as the entire world because they represented hope and a chance for freedom from tyranny. President Wilson asked them to conduct themselves with “a standard so high that living up to it will add a new laurel to the crown of America.”¹⁰⁰

While hot air balloons were used with somewhat moderate success in the Civil War, airships began to appear in the sky. The German company that made most of them was Zeppelin, and even though other companies soon began to construct airships, they were all known as Zeppelins. They were used to drop bombs, and to a lesser extent, they were useful for surveillance.

In early October, 1917, a German Zeppelin was shot down by the French, and crash landed near an American camp. After an air raid over England, the Zeppelin’s pilot had lost his way. The darkened skies were overcast and those on board assumed they were flying over Holland. The Germans were quickly arrested and taken as prisoners.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, August 29, 1917, “Great Send Off Will be Given Our Army Boys,” p. 1.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, September 5, 1917 “Eyes of World on New Army Says President,” p. 1.

¹⁰¹ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, October 24, 1917, “Great Zeppelin Fell Near Camp of the Sammies,” p. 1.

Newspapers reported increasing numbers of “aeroplane” raids, especially by Germany. On October 1, a raid over London was made by more than 20 airplanes “of the Gotha type.”¹⁰² Not only were bombs dropped, shrapnel from high angle guns rained upon the city and caused considerable damage. A week later, German planes made another air raid over London. In the meantime, 300 more recruits were called in to report for physicals in Madison.

Secretary of War Newton Baker stated that he wanted enough men ready to fight to make a substantial showing against the enemy. By October, his goal had been met. By November 5, the Red Cross was already tending to wounded American soldiers in France.¹⁰³

Sadly, as expected, the first casualties were announced as well. One man from Alabama was wounded and another Alabamian was captured. The newspaper did not reveal where this battle took place, only that they were cut off from reinforcements and could not retreat to safety.¹⁰⁴

In the meantime, another article described an unusual event that took place in Huntsville on Sunday, November 3, 1917. Sixteen Buicks, eighty Oaklands, and twenty-one Dodge automobiles were driven through Huntsville. They were driven from factories in Michigan en route to dealers in Atlanta and South Georgia. “The head mechanic in charge stated that very little machine or tire trouble had been encountered, the extent of the trouble so far having been a few punctures.” In addition, more than fifty carloads of tourists were headed south and got caught up in the same caravan. The newspaper reported traffic congestion at the Tennessee River ferry, which was overcome with the back-up of vehicles that needed to cross. Some cars returned to Huntsville and

¹⁰² Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, October 3, 1917, “Germany's Air Frightfulness at Flood Tide,” p. 4.

¹⁰³ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, November 7, 1917, “First Mention of Wounded Soldiers in France,” p. 1.

¹⁰⁴ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, November 7, 1917, “Germany's First Victims Among Americans in Front Trenches” p. 1.

some remained in New Hope “and were entertained by the people of that thriving town.”¹⁰⁵

Even though we were far from the battlefields of Europe, there was constant worry of attacks by dissidents. In Bridgeport, a man was picked up for being a slacker. After some questioning, Joe Parks, who said he was a Russian Jew, was suspected by being a German spy. In his pockets were a number of railroad switch keys. At the time this was reported, authorities were waiting for someone who could be brought in to communicate with him.¹⁰⁶

By January, 1918, the people of Europe had suffered through three and a half years of war. While peace talks were going on, no one could find a middle ground on which to come to an agreement. Russia announced that 3,000,000 more men would be sent to fight.¹⁰⁷ In the meantime, world-wide shortages of goods affected everyone.

A letter sent to the W.L. Halsey Grocery Company in Huntsville, signed by the Food Administrator for Alabama, ordered that sugar would be sold only in two or five pound bags and no one could buy more than one sack of flour at a time. Mr. R. M. Hobble stated that flour would be sold in 24 pound bags or 48 pound bags only.¹⁰⁸

In mid-January, a critical shortage of coal was exacerbated by a historic snow storm. Due to the “fuel famine,” a five-day shutdown of all manufacturing companies in states east of the Mississippi River was to begin Friday, January 18, 1918. The shutdown included munitions factories.¹⁰⁹

An interesting story reported that emergency food rations were given to each soldier to sustain them for several days, in the event

¹⁰⁵ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, November 21, “Sunday Proved to be Tourist Day in City,” p. 1.

¹⁰⁶ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, January 2, 1918, “Alleged Slacker May be a Spy,” p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ Huntsville Daily Times, Thursday, January 3, 1918, p. 1.

¹⁰⁸ Huntsville Daily Times, Friday, January 4, 1918, “Food Administration Limits Purchase Sugar and Flour on Huntsville Market,” p. 1.

¹⁰⁹ Huntsville Daily Times, Thursday, January 17, 1918, “Complete Shutdown for Five Days Beginning Friday,” p. 1.

they could not get to regular food while in the midst of battle. Americans were given three different kinds of parched maize plus three pieces of chocolate. The story said that American Indians could live for days on this diet while “hunting on the war path.” French, Belgian, and Teutonic soldiers carried compressed meat; Russians carried compressed teas, and “Oriental forces” carried corn pressed rice and macaroni. North British soldiers carried oat bread and Swiss soldiers carried white chocolate. Still others ate smoked dried pears and drank coffee made from compressed figs.¹¹⁰

The newspaper reported the good with the bad. Millionaire John D. Rockefeller donated \$500,000 to America’s war effort.¹¹¹ In the meantime, the number of Army deserters was beginning to multiply. Charles B. Brown, an Army deserter, was captured in Huntsville by Patrolman Hardin.¹¹² The January 16 issue of the *Huntsville Daily Times* published the names of 26 Madison County deserters. Subsequent issues of the paper listed others so that the police and the public would be aware.¹¹³

It was at about this time that newspaper articles began to report widespread illnesses in various camps.¹¹⁴ The number of deaths reported to be caused by pneumonia increased weekly. Officials were sent to various camps to investigate conditions where the death rate was higher than average. While the reports did not indicate any reason for alarm, we now know that information about the seriousness of these illnesses was censored to keep up morale of soldiers and civilians alike. It is believed that the Spanish flu pandemic, which killed three to five percent of the world’s population, began in January, 1918. This was especially critical at

¹¹⁰Huntsville Daily Times, Friday, January 11, 1918, “Many Articles Used in Emergency Rations for Fighting Men,” p. 1.

¹¹¹ Huntsville Daily Times, Monday, January 7, 1918, p. 1.

¹¹² Huntsville Daily Times, Tuesday, January 8, 1918, p. 1.

¹¹³ Huntsville Daily Times, Wednesday, January 16, 1918, “26 Alleged Deserters from Madison County,” p. 1.

¹¹⁴ Huntsville Daily Times, Wednesday, January 30, 1918, “More Sick at Army Camps,” p. 1.

this time because while flu outbreaks traditionally kill the most vulnerable (very young, old and weak), this virus produced a strong overreaction of the victim's immune system, or an auto-immune situation that was most apparent in those who were young and healthy to begin with. In extreme cases, one could have a cough and be dead four hours later.

On March 6, 1918, an article appeared in the paper announcing that W. L. Dodd, a bacteriologist, on the staff of *The Delineator*, a women's monthly magazine, was going to make "an exhaustive analysis of the local milk and water supplies in connection with the health inventory now being put on with the assistance of Health Officer Dr. Carl A. Grote."¹¹⁵ Dodd was one of many representatives traveling throughout the country to conduct studies based on hygiene and preventative medicine. There was no mention that it could be connected to the large number of deaths due to sickness worldwide. On the same page, the death of Mrs. O. Patton was announced. The prominent Huntsville woman died from pneumonia.

Conservation was encouraged on every front. Americans were encouraged to use less gasoline; women and girls were asked to wear fewer white kid gloves and dye last year's straw hat to make it look new.¹¹⁶ Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania residents were angry that the usual five-inch hot cakes had been reduced to two and a half inches to conserve wheat, but the price had not been lowered accordingly.¹¹⁷ Paper hangers, in the meantime, were asked to refrain from using wheat flour paste to hang wall paper.¹¹⁸ Bread was of utmost importance to the soldiers overseas and Americans were strongly encouraged to show their patriotism by lowering their consumption of wheat as much as possible.

¹¹⁵ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, March 6, 1918, "Bacteriologist for Delineator," p. 1.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, "Dress Conservation Tough on the Girls," p. 4.

¹¹⁷ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, March 27, 1918, "Cake Eaters are Very Indignant," p. 4.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, "No More Flour-Paste," p. 4.

On May 8, 1918, news of the death of James B. Manning, a 19-year-old Huntsville Marine was reported. He had been in France only six months with the 6th Regiment before his death on April 27. His father, William B. Manning, said that he had another son fighting in the war as well. In an interview, Mr. Manning said that his son James was well known among his friends in the Green Grove neighborhood.¹¹⁹

The reality of war had come to Madison County.

Next Issue Part III

About the Author; Jacquelyn Procter Reeves has written 12 books on local history and true crime. She has been editor of the Huntsville-Madison County Review, Valley Leaves, and associate editor of Old Tennessee Valley Magazine. Jacque is past-president of the Huntsville Madison County Historical Society, Maple Hill Cemetery Stroll, and has been a contributing writer to many other publications. Jacque is founder of Avalon Tours and co-founder of Huntsville Ghost Walk and Mischief and Mayhem Tours. She served as curator of the historic Donnell House in Athens for 11 years.

¹¹⁹ Huntsville Weekly Democrat, Wednesday, May 8, 1918, "Jas. B. Manning Dies in France," p. 1.