

A SOLDIER'S MAIL

PHILOSOPHICAL CLUB OF CLEVELAND

STAN KAUFMAN 11-23-99

The last letter they were to receive for almost two months was dated June 12, 1917. It read:

Dear Folks,

We are going to move again soon. I know about when but we have been told not to write when. Now don't worry about me. We will be all right. This is not our oversea move yet. We are going somewhere by train. Even if we were to go over don't worry because there is no danger. We know where to place our trust and have faith in a safe journey. Am sorry that I cannot write a longer letter but cannot. Goodbye and God bless you. I will try to live a Christian life and continue as I have been taught. Goodbye, DeVere

Their next communication was a simple preprinted postcard with his name and outfit filled in by his own hand. The return address was Soldier's Mail – No Postage Necessary. In its entirety it read: THE SHIP ON WHICH I SAILED HAS ARRIVED SAFELY OVERSEAS. NAME: DeVere Kaufman ORGANIZATION: Hq. Co. 146th Infantry Band AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.

Thus began my fathers "Great Adventure" on the Western front during WWI.

I'll back up and explain what I'm talking about this evening. My paper is more personal than scholarly or philosophical. Early this year my mother moved to a retirement community. It fell to me to clean out her home and prepare it for sale. Most of you have "been there" I'm sure and understand what the job entails. In this case it was complicated by the fact that Kaufman's are genetically string savers. Perhaps it is not genetic as the women who marry into the family are equally afflicted. EVERYTHING is save against the day when it may be needed or become valuable. The cleanup took many months of weekends – from mid

January to sale day July 6th. I won't bore you with details except to briefly mention the attic.

It was a small attic over a three bedroom ranch. At no point was it over four feet in height, poorly lit, and stuffed with boxes, trunks, bags, bundles, and household items no longer needed or awaiting repair. Removal of this stuff took my nephew and I a bit over eight hours. Most of these things had neither been seen nor thought about since I put them into that attic thirtynine years ago! Every item had to be unpacked or unwrapped to determine its disposition. We sifted through the detritus of five generations of not just Kaufmans but also Grahams, Foxes, Eichers, Orrs, Jamisons, and more.

To get to the nut of it – it really was late in the evening when, at the bottom of a trunk I found a small shoebox. On the lid in my grandmother's 19th century cursive script: "DeVere's letters from the war" In side were neatly and chronologically ordered 74 letters written by my father starting from the day he left Wooster, Ohio on October 3, 1917 to the day he announced his return May 26th, 1919. Between these dates he left home, endured basic training, sailed to Europe, participated in three major campaigns of WWI, was there for the Armistice, recrossed the Atlantic, mustered out, and returned home. I saved these and put them on the pile to be brought to Painesville where I believe I'll save them a little longer. I doubt that these are remarkable in any specific historical sense but they offered me a unique window into the life of the teenager who, in twenty years, would become my father.

I read these letters from start to finish and then I read them again. Here was much the same kind of thing I wrote to my parents while away at college and that I read in our son's letters when they in turn left home. Lonliness, daily events, grand plans for life, resolutions later forgotten, thoughts on the future, and so on and on. There were also things I never experienced, wrote about, or read about in letters. The desolation of war, fear, loss, and grief. I read the first edition of many of the war stories that were told and retold, sometimes with apparent alteration and/or embellishment, to his sons and grandsons. Several times a reference would be made to something I needed to check out – a geographical, biographical, or historical factoid was needed to get the message after a lapse of eighty years. One thing lead to another and before long I decided to put the entire collection into context. This evening I will share with you a portion of that effort.

In addition to the letters I have read contemporary newspaper accounts of the 37th Division and particularly the 146th Infantry. These included the Wooster

Daily News, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Press, and a variety of clippings from unidentified papers. I have the October 5th, 1917 edition of the Camp Sheridan News which heralded the arrival of the 37th Division which it still referred to as the "Eighth". Published Division histories and order of battle publications were studied. *THE FIRST WORLD WAR* by John Keegan, one of the most recent books out on WWI was published in 1998. I noted in the P.D. recently that Al Gore and I finished this book about the same time. These sources were used to provide the background for this exercise in imagining my father as a young man at war.

While the '14-'18 war raged in Europe, a debate raged in America as to our proper role. There were the doctrinaire pacifists, advocates of neutrality and armed neutrality, and those who favored outright entry into war on the side of France and Great Britain.

I was always under the misperception that the U.S. was drawn into the war by the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May of 1915. It was not that and, in fact, and Wilson's campaign cry in 1916 was "He Kept Us Out Of War". What Wilson did accomplish was a negotiated return to restricted submarine warfare on the part of Germany. This meant attacks only on warships with provision for escape of crew and passengers, if any. This agreement lasted and was generally observed until the late winter of 1917 when Germany felt the need to tighten its strangle hold on Britain's war potential. Then, Germany made a rather clumsy attempt to have Mexico declare a diversionary war on the U.S. The idea was that when Germany was victorious in Europe they would assist Mexico and for her trouble Mexico would be awarded Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, and California. This infamous Zimmerman Affair, so named after the diplomat entrusted with the mission, and the return to unrestricted submarine warfare tipped an outraged U.S. into war in April 1917.

In 1917 the U.S. had the 17th largest army in the world, less than 110,000 men. We had had no experience in large scale operations since Appomattox fifty one years earlier. The National Guard was larger but spread out across 48 states and under only the most tenuous federal control. The U.S. Marine Corps was arguably our most skilled fighting force but was scattered over the globe in possessions gained or areas policed in the aftermath of the Spanish American War.

Perhaps it was this perceived weakness or disarray that prompted Admiral Capelle of the German Navy to assure the German parliament: "They will not even come because our submarines will sink them. Thus America from a military

point of view means nothing, and again nothing, and for a third time nothing.” He was speaking of the American ability to field an army in Europe and he got it quite wrong.

Ohio entered the excitement of preparation by recalling its National Guard troops that were still in the Southwest U.S. mopping up after trying to chase down Pancho Villa. It called up various units of the old “Eighth” Army, “The President’s Own” so named as many of its troops were from William McKinley’s Canton, Ohio. Under a new army reorganization plan lead by our very own Newton D. Baker, Secretary of War, Ohio’s units were to be melded with those of other states. General Leonard B. Wood appealed this decision saying that Ohio wanted to have its own Division. Baker demurred and Gov. James Cox (whom we met at the battle of Frederick a few weeks ago – Mel’s paper) went over Baker’s head to President Wilson. Permission was finally granted and Ohio troops departed for training at Camp Sheridan, Alabama united as the 37th Division. I’ll return to this concept of a “local army” again in a few moments.

Oct. 1, 1917 Dear Mother and Dad,

“After leaving Wooster we traveled in day coaches until we reached Cincinnati where we transferred to sleepers which were up to date and very comfortable. We arrived in camp this A.M. at 9:00. Marched two miles through many thousand of company streets”.

The Camp Sheridan News that day announced “The Eighth Is Here”. “Headed by band leader Billings and his famous Eighth Regimental Band the boys of Col. Weybrecht’s command marched into camp Monday morning singing and laughing in true Eighth Regiment style. The Eighth is one of Ohio’s leading military organizations. It is a well drilled organization.” Odd, I thought. Most of these boys had been in the army less than a month!

Dad wrote on Oct. 4th, “Just finished our first concert tonight. The Colonel Weybrecht congratulated us by telling us we had the best army concert band in camp. Also the best army band he had ever heard. We were all quite elated.”

Again the Camp Sheridan News: “As usual the Eighth Infantry band played a concert the first night incamp and in back of this is a little story. Col. Charles C. Weybrecht, the popular commander of this popular regiment is a little superstitious. He always had a band concert the first night in camp and this was no exception. And, as usual, The Eighth Band rendered SOME concert.”

Later Dad writes: "Walter light, C.A. Luci, Steve Polaski, George Duval and myself are in this tent" I mention names from time to time, especially if they come up again.

DeVere Kaufman enlisted on August 8, 1917 and was sworn in the same day. Even at nineteen he was an accomplished musician playing a variety of instruments. He had played in a variety of community bands and orchestras in Wayne County. He entered U.S. service as a musician 3rd Class.

Oct. 8, 1917. "We have two rehearsals daily and get up at 5:30AM to play reveille. We play at ball games in the afternoon and a concert every evening. We had church yesterday, the band playing the music. I am paid \$36 a month and will sent \$30 home. I've had luck earning spare change sewing buttons on."

Oct. 11. "Dear Mother and Father, Received your most welcome letter this evening. Receiving a letter from home is one of the greatest events in army life. The boys just go crazy at mail time." And later, "Duval sends his regards. He will never forget that supper you provided at sendoff." A bit later, "...Am glad to hear that Dad is getting along so well with the machine." My grandfather had purchased a Ford which he drove clear into the 40's. "I may send only \$25 home this month."

Oct. 28. "I don't know how much I will send home this pay day. I am a little short this time. Captain McCoy often comes to this tent. I see him quite often and we exchange news of home and look at one another's pictures. His babies are growing up." The McCoy's were friends of my grandparents. The guys Dad mention repeatedly were well known to my grandparents too. They were all Wooster men, even the company physician was a friend, he played cornet. It was much later that the army split up local units so that a community like Wooster, Ohio would not lose an entire generation as did some towns with regiments less fortunate than the 146th.

Nov. 18. "The bands now are trained to work in hospitals and do concert work in such places. Are not sent to the front at all." This, it turned out, was an error in prophecy.

Nov. 18. "George Duvall disappeared Thursday night. He cannot be found. Some of his clothes were found today in an alley in Montgomery. He was last seen on Columbus St. by some of the band boys. he did not desert as his money and

belongings are still in his trunk. I miss him a lot, he and I were together a lot. Ray Waters of our company deserted.”

The 37th Division started out with 20,000 men and lost 3000 to disease, desertion, or were simply pronounced unfit. These ranks were filled with draftees and the unit shipped out at 27,000 strong.

Vice is mentioned: “Capt. McCoy is very strict when venereal disease is found. The soldiers pay stops and he is put into the hospital until cured. I think he is right too as anybody that minds their business and behavior won’t get it. He (Capt. McCoy) will not allow gambling nor will he allow swearing or drinking.” This is wrong? In another letter he writes “...Tell Bernice that there is at least one soldier who will not smoke.” I’m not sure to whom he refers. My father smoked up to two packs a day for 70 years.

He speaks throughout his letter of rumors of no less than eleven different destinations for the unit after training. Honolulu, southwest U.S., guarding the coast of New England and then, later, California. Only one of these rumors was correct. They were going to France.

Nov. 25. “Duvall has not been found yet. Glenn Weiser and I sent to church last Sunday. Weiser and I are together quite a lot.” Later, “...I am glad that I’m in this thing since the war is necessary and has to be fought out.”

They learned early in December that their Christmas furlough was cancelled. Transportation was already a serious problem. The War Department determined that the return of so many men would literally swamp railroads. Gov. Cox said, “If the army cannot come to us, we will go to them.” He then arranged for hundreds of families to go south to visit their sons. My grandparents were among these. On Dec. 15 Dad writes, “If you can make the trip, don’t hesitate. I’ll send you money each month to help pay the trip.” This from a lad who ten days earlier had asked his parents to send him money so he could come home! I’ve mentioned his plans with money several times as this was money manager I knew. Always great plans but rarely any money and if some appeared it was promptly spent or loaned with no hope of return. Money was an issue between my parents forever. His letters echo this pattern as a teen.

Dec. 15. “I have given up the idea of a travelling profession as a musician. They are not the class of people I want to spend my life with.” And he did give it

up but not until 1933 when the Depression closed his music store in Wooster and he found that dance bands alone would not support a wife and child.

Jan. 11, 1918. “We are getting some hospital training just now. How to bandage, treatment, and caring for patients of convalescents. They are giving us lectures on wounds and diseases. This does not interfere with our musical duties however.” On the battlefields bandsmen of WWI were couriers and providers of first aid to the wounded. It was their role to get the injured off the field, usually under fire.

Ex-President Taft showed up in Camp Sheridan to boost morale. He gave a stirring speech, unusual for him, and was entertained by a massed band of 360 musicians that included my Dad.

March 8. “The artillery and rifles and machine guns, rockets, grenades, bombs, and all are used in practice. We hear the distant rumble of it all night. Fairly shakes the ground. A real battle must be awful.” Later he adds, “If this war goes on I want to go to France and see it and get into it. The longer we stay here the more I want to take a crack at one of those trenches.”

March 26. “Well the old Kaiser has commenced his Spring drive. English and French reports say that he is losing 100,000 men daily—in ten days he will lose a million—in 40 days the war will be over. We all believe that this is the beginning of the end.”

May 20. “We are going to move soon. Am not permitted to say where. I am much relieved to know the way you feel and that you are so brave about it. You must feel the same certainty and faith in a safe return as I.”

While America may have been slow in entering the war, Americans were not. Many American men had joined British or Canadian armies, the French Foreign Legion, or were serving in the French Air Force. The Lafayette Escadrille distinguished itself as one of the leading air fighting units on the Western Front.

Once war was declared the U.S. rushed to get the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to Europe to join the Allies. Indeed, that was about the only part of the army that was anywhere near prepared. It was early summer before significant contingents of troops went overseas.

The state of the war in 1918 was grim. France was having a hard time keeping an army in the field and, once there, keep it fighting. Several mutinies had occurred and Marshall Foch was extremely reluctant to press his army into the offense.

The British were somewhat better off in terms of discipline and materiel but were down to the very last of the men that could be pressed into service. The last armies that the British fielded were those rejected in all earlier conscriptions. Older, handicapped, younger, previously wounded, etc. were sent or resent to die in the in the repeated sacrifices entailed in the strategy of their General Haig. The British were also fighting on several fronts: the West, Eastern Mediterranean, and to a lesser extent in the campaign against the Hapsburgs.

Germany had not faired so well either and things had reached a new stalemate except for one thing that struck terror into the hearts of the Allies. Imperial Russia had collapsed and their army, dispirited and leaderless, floundered hopelessly. Germany was able to transfer fifty divisions of battle hardened troops from Russia to the Western Front. It seems easy to imagine this as the end of the war were it not for the arrival of the U.S. doughboys.

The brass met to discuss how American troops would reinforce the armies of France and Britain. General John J. Pershing, "Blackjack Pershing," had other ideas. "The U.S. Army is not here to replace your honored fallen. We are here to fight as a separate but allied army. Let's decide how we will work together." This was met with anger and even derision. These men had no experience in fighting. "Blackjack" was adamant. Finally and reluctantly the American Army moved into the fray as a single national unit under its own officers.

Aug. 6. "Dear Mother and Father. Forgive me if my letters seem unnatural and infrequent. The censor is quite strict and I have had some mail returned. Could ask for nothing better than we have now. I am among many of my old school chums here."

Censorship was strict indeed to the point where sometimes letters seemed banal. Every envelope had the censor's authorization for forwarding. Can you imagine every piece of mail generated by 27,000 men being censored, and this was only one Division. "Americans over the Top" lists the general rules for censorship. It's a wonder they wrote anything. He mentions farm activity in the French countryside and how it made him homesick.

Aug. 22. "I have seen some examples of German torture. Believe me, if I ever get a chance I am not going to hesitate after what I have seen. It makes a fellow want to fight. Wallace Miller is not with us anymore."

At this point the 196th infantry was in the Bourmont, the Baccarat Sector of the front in France. It was relatively quiet here though evidently not without its dangers. On December 24, 1918, the Wooster Daily News printed a long letter from Col. Frank C. Gerlach of Wooster telling the unit's early activity in the war. He's speaking now of July and early August, 1918: "It was our first experience and naturally we were on the alert for anything that might happen. Woodlands covered the greater part of the sector and being an old one and having been held for the past four years, there were many trenches as well as an endless amount of wire entanglement. There was no organized attack but occupying a sector it is necessary for front line troops to send out patrols in order to keep in contact with the enemy and capture prisoners to find out just who is on the other side and what they were doing and to learn something of their plans. The sector covered quite a considerable frontage and was loosely held. Outposts were far apart and G patrols could come in between them without much trouble and, secondly, because the troops were all new in the work caused a great deal of unnecessary alarm and frequent firing of rifles which resulted in a certain amount of recklessness which made it dangerous to be in vicinity of the front line troops. In addition to promiscuous firing there was frequent sounding of false alarms for gas which caused all the men to adjust to their gas masks only to learn that someone had started a false alarm.

Sept. 4. "In our spare time we are allowed to form classes and are given instruction in the use of all sorts of guns, grenades, and the sort. We are witnessing many things I wish I would dare tell you of. Believe me the Yanks are wading in and the Bosche have reason to believe that we can fight."

Sept. 23. "Dear Father and Mother. It has been over a week since I have been in a position enabling me to write to you. We have been hiking, camping and so forth for many days. The Captain just walked up and after talking to us around our little campfire said I should write a description of things where we are and that you should tell Mrs. McCoy Mrs. Weiser made a very shrewd guess as to our former location. You should ask her where we have been. Since we left that place it seems to me that we have toted our packs a thousand miles. At present we are in a big woods. We arrived here last night and pitched our little shelter tents in the dark. It has rained more or less all the time. Last night the rain came down in torrents. Our wood is wet and it is cold and muddy all around us. Our present

camp site is wild and the forest is very dense. Shell craters, ruined trees, in fact everything which goes in to make a place desolate and uncomfortable are here. The band has not played for many a day. Just what our work will be for the future I do not know. I do know however that it will not be musical work for a long while. I would like to tell you just where we are but of course that is impossible. You would recognize the name I'm sure."

Three days later the Battle of Argonne Forest began. This was part of the Allied Meuse-Argonne offensive. The 37th Division attacked at 5:30 AM with heavy artillery support. Through heavy rain the Division moved steadily forward capturing all objectives but one. On September 30, exhausted and disorganized, the 37th Division was commended, relieved by fresh doughboys, and sent to the rear for rest. In their first major battle the Ohio boys had lost over 3,100 of their comrades.

Again, Col. Gerlach's account of the action: "The G's have wonderful success with their machine guns and artillery. They certainly are experts. Their observation is perfect. Their airplanes guide the firing of their artillery and could locate us without any trouble. Whenever we saw a Boche plant above us we knew what was coming and in a few moments the high explosive shells would land all around us but this did not stop our advance, we kept right on. It is hard to describe the effect of this machine gun and artillery firing. We did not dare to think of sympathizing with anybody but had to keep right at our work. There was real execution all about you. You would see a personal friend reel over nearby you and others blown to pieces from high explosive shells but through it all there was no lack of taking care of the wounded. First aid was given right in the midst of all this firing. The men were carried off the fields and often times a shell would intercept the carrying away of the wounded possibly killing one of the litter bearers."

Sept. 29. "Dear Mother and Father. I suppose it would be permissible to tell you that the great drive is on and we are very much in it. We are having bad weather and wild living for along time now but are crushing the Germans everywhere. Bill Chapman, Shadwell and I are together. We are, the detachment, away from our company and will be for some time I suppose. I don't know where they are. Have not seen Cap. McCoy for a week. It hardly seems possible that one year ago today we entrained from Wooster."

Oct. 7. "It has been many days since I have been in a position where I could write to you. We have been moving here or there and the newspapers will show you what we have been doing. We have hiked for miles and miles and I guess we

will do a lot more of it before we are through. I would like to tell you what takes place between moves but am not permitted. It has sure been a most hideous nightmare or its equal made real. There are many rumors of peace and I only hope that they are true.”

Dad got the newspaper part wrong. The papers seemed to have little idea what was going on until much later. It was Oct. 21 before the Wooster Daily News reported on the offensive in the Argonne forest. Then often it was inaccurate. Most of what the Wayne County home folks knew of the war was from letters written after the Armistice (Nov. 11) or from the returning wounded.