

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY

A FEW MEN IN THE GREAT WAR: THE EXPERIENCES OF THE  
SOLDIERS OF COMPANY D (BRISTOL), 1ST CONNECTICUT  
NATIONAL GUARD REGIMENT, MARCH 1917-APRIL 1918

HISTORY 599 (THESIS)

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referred to their first face-to-face confrontation with the enemy as "an experience that they would never forget." Many of the troops expressed relief--and sometimes amazement--that they emerged from the ordeal alive. Corporal Charles Blanchard wrote: "I came out without a scratch, although the chances seemed mighty slim at several stages of the game." Sergeant Thompson was thankful to be "alive [as] that is worth more than anything else to me." Thompson concluded: "I am glad I was so lucky." Corporal Clifford Parsons wrote: "I can't seem to realize that I came out of it as well as I did." Parsons began to believe: "If your number doesn't come [up], you [are] safe and if it does you'll get [hit] no matter where you are." Several soldiers credited their religious faith for protecting them from death or capture. Private Thomas Scott observed: "There was a bunch of us that went to confession the morning of the 19th and I know that is all that saved us." Corporal Walter Yale guessed "it was only God's will" that he remained unharmed. Private Arthur Nelson, probably reflecting the beliefs of many of his comrades, trusted "in the Lord for I sure owe Him many thanks."<sup>20</sup>

Most of the men expressed sadness, depression, or homesickness in their letters. Sergeant George Ryan confessed he was "tired of military life" and "sick of looking at soldiers." Sergeant Roy Edman wrote: "I wish the war would end. I have been near dead once, and once is enough." Sergeant Thompson, referring to Company D, admitted: "We are a pretty sad bunch of fellows." In a letter written to his brother, who may have been considering enlisting, Thompson said: "You don't want to be over here....After you see what it is you would not relish it." At least a few of the troops believed

they stood little chance of surviving the remainder of the war. Corporal John Skelsky observed: "A man goes with each shell." Private Alvin Lugg, in a letter to a friend, concluded: "Perhaps I may return although the chances seem small." Some soldiers, however, retained their enthusiasm for military service. Corporal Blanchard, in a postscript to one of his letters, asked a friend to tell Bristol Police Chief Ernest Belden that fighting in France "is much more exciting than cornering auto thieves." Corporal Clifford Lawrence, although homesick, was "anxious to clean up the cause of democracy before" returning. Corporal James Bird insisted the men of Company D "still have the same old spirit....[The Germans] may have gotten a few of us but they'll never break our morale or spirit."<sup>21</sup>

Many of the troops were satisfied the Germans had paid heavily in lives for their success at Seicheprey. Corporal Yale wrote: "We gave the Dutchmen some good receipts." Private Scott speculated: "I guess they thought they had struck Hell alright." Private Nelson believed the battle taught the Germans "what the Americans were made of." Other Bristolites, angered by the loss of friends in combat, sought revenge against the enemy. Private Lugg stated bluntly: "The best German living is a dead one." Corporal Parsons called the enemy "devils", and "hoped to bag more in the next fight." Sergeant Edman wrote: "Someone is to pay for [the American losses at Seicheprey], and dearly too." Corporal Bird promised Company D was "going to give the Boche h--- before it's over." A large number of soldiers expressed pride in the initial battlefield performance of Company D. Sergeant Edman, in a letter to a

friend, wrote: "When you read the news about what the Americans did April 20, you will know what regiment it was, the smiling 102nd!" Edman observed: "D. Company is keeping its old record and making it better every chance it gets." Corporal Blanchard noted: "Old (D) Company holds the distinction of bearing the brunt of the attack." Private Lugg stated: "We've been in the fight"; and, somewhat naively: "We're all veterans in Co. D. now." Captain Frank Merrill, former Company D commander, thought the unit "showed the stuff that (Tin Soldiers) are made of." Veteran French soldiers, much to the satisfaction of the Bristolites, praised the performance of the American troops at Seicheprey. The most realistic appraisal of the combat efficiency of Company D came from Corporal Skelsky. Skelsky was understandably proud of the courage displayed by the Bristol troops in their maiden battle. The corporal noted, however, that the soldiers still had "a lot to learn" about combat because they were "new at the game." Skelsky realized the Bristolites would have many opportunities to improve their battlefield skills as the war continued.<sup>22</sup>

## NOTES

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