

“SOMEWHERE IN FRANCE...”

Glen Cove’s W.W.I Soldiers Write Home

by Daniel E Russell
City Historian
City of Glen Cove, New York

Throughout the period of the United States’ involvement in the “War to End All War”, many of the nearly 600 Glen Cove men serving with various units of the American Expeditionary Forces (as well as those who had joined other nation’s armed forces prior to U.S. intervention in the war) wrote home to tell family and friends of their experiences overseas. Almost universally, the letters were censored of any references to locations and unit designations, to prevent the enemy from acquiring important information regarding troop dispositions; the letters, instead, were simply dated “somewhere in France”.

Because of the widespread interest in “first hand” information regarding the progress of the war, the Glen Cove Echo regularly published the letters of Glen Cove servicemen. Excerpts from some of these letters are offered below:

That evening I had my first taste of gunfire. The Bosche sent quite a few shells through the woods aimlessly trying for a chance shot on a battery, and the French replied shot for shot. For the first time I heard the shells whistle and was initiated by that overwhelming sensation of being about the largest thing on the face of the globe. However, after the first few had come over, and had exploded a considerable distance away, I learned that they were not trying to get me in particular and immediately gained my composure...

You ought to have seen the ten or more men in the room clear out just now including myself, who, in the chilly morning air was comfortably rolled up in my sleeping bag and writing on my knees. Suddenly, there was a distance boom, no different from any other we incessantly hear, and immediately afterward there followed the terrifying zieu — zieu — zieu — bang of an “arrive”. In less time than it takes to tell it, everyone sort of flew down the stairs and headed towards the nearest dugout. The Bosche usually sends them over in series, frequently in threes...

— Stafford Rossiter,
September 21, 1917

In 40 degrees of sparkling frost, and icy wind cutting like sharp steel blades in the foothills, I am cuddled up in my little shack as close to a roughly

constructed fireplace as possible... Stillness rules tonight. Not a “Hun” fly, nor is there a flickering star shell in the sky. The batteries in yonder hills are at rest and I sit here in silence. Have finished reading the (Glen Cove) Echo, and it has started me thinking. I picture myself back in the grand little city. I can see the narrow and crooked Glen Street, that winds itself from the station to the corner and the flat wheel trolley (George Duryea’s Rolls Royce) pounding along. I hear Bart Dunning arguing the city’s politics and fancy myself listening to the war talk around the post office...

— F. Darius Benham,
January 16, 1918

I was sitting on my cot on the evening of February 5th, and I heard my name called. I made a wild dash out of my tent because it was the first mail I had received from home. I was disappointed because I thought it was a letter, but I was surprised to get a package. It sure was a great present. I opened it and found some good old chocolate. Well, it sure was good, because us boys never get any candy. The rest of the boys nearly killed me for the candy... If I remember, it lasted about 3 seconds, and all the boys of C Battery thank the people of Glen Cove, and so do I...

— Pvt. Reginald Green,
1918

I joined the Foreign Legion and have been sent here to learn the art of killing wholesale — Field pieces and trench mortars...Out of five hundred here I am the only American. But about every nation on the globe can boast of at least one representatives. The other evening I got three hours leave and went in the city of Carn for dinner. On the table I saw a basket of bread. I gave my order and while it was in the making grabbed two pieces and stuck them in my shirt. That's how scarce bread is in this country. I get two small pieces a day here, both together making half a loaf. For breakfast a cup of milkless and sugarless coffee; for lunch — soup and the bread; supper the same. My dish towel is my two hands and some dirt...

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I had a very pleasant surprise yesterday. We were unloading a truck load of supplies and it was about time for lunch and all hands working fast. Someone hit me on the shoulder and said "hello Blake" and when I turned around, who was there but Charles Dyer from Locust Valley. You don't know how good it makes a fellow feel to meet and old friend over here we have been living only a mile apart for nearly four months and have never seen each other before...

— Edward Blake
February 2, 1918

We have been much annoyed the last few nights by the air raids, the first one landing three in our courtyard here, into which my window faces. We, of course, all hustled into our cave, four cellars below ground, and upon returning after the first attack I found the windows in my room all smashed. Glass had blown over everything ... We found the holes the next morning to be about 12 ft deep and 15 ft across. Trees were broken and a great stone wall completely smashed... The big guns are booming again today...Things seem ominous and the atmosphere is tense. It is hard to think of anything but in terms of war and hard to think that anything else is going on in the world but war. One wonders what its all about and if life can ever go on again in the same channels. The whole fabric of civilization seems so twisted and crushed

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— Frank Johnson
April 7, 1918

In the night we generally go up on the hill near some trenches and watch the star shells and hear the guns roaring. This very minute they are pounding away like a heavy thunder storm. All night long they pound away. I'm getting used to it now Right near our camp the Lafayette Escuadrille is located. They are one daring set of fellows. I am going to take examinations for the Escuadrille next week. The Lafayette fellows have two cub bears for mascots. We have a cat named Carman and a tame jay named Jocko....

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My work of late has taken me along a busy section. Pass army after army going to and from the front. Those poor devils laden down like pack mules with their shoulders rounded from the strain seem to be doing their best despite all of it. Men's souls have to rise above the distress they have in order to survive... I am now located in a section of the country that was once a green smiling place, but is now only ruins, the valley and hills pitted with shell holes tortured levelled landscapes that present all that is said of this terrible conflict

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US Soldiers on board a troop ship headed for France during World War One. Photograph Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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[Aboard a troopship, bound for France] I flung myself on the clean, hard wood deck prepared for a really restful sleep when I discovered two of the cutest rats apparently playing tag about a foot from my head. I guess, like most people, they feel safer when soldiers are around). Well, I tried every means of persuading them to choose some other spot for their midnight frolic, but they seemed so unconcerned that I decided to return to my luxurious bunk below, only to find a bunch of fellows having even more difficulty in getting their sup-

pers to remain where they had posted them some few hours earlier...

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We have made a hike of about 60 miles in three days...When it got dark we were under artillery fire until we got into the trenches. You can bet the boys were sure excited at first. We were in the trenches for ten days and we went "over the top" to the German lines, but when we reached there the trenches were empty not a Hun in sight. So we all came back and went to sleep.

— Harry Simmons
May 12, 1918

I hope these few lines will find all the people in the new city of Glen Cove in the best of health..and hope we may all be in that dear new City eating Christmas dinner, after hitting the Kaiser good and proper, and into Berlin to raise the stars and stripes on its ramparts...Then we know that we will have an everlasting peace, and forget all about anymore wars to come for awhile but not before that is done...

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Evacuating wounded soldier by train. Photograph Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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American soldiers holding a captured German pistol, a favored war trophy. Photograph Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

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