

Memories From the Great War: An Analysis of Jackson Purchase Veteran's Changes in Perspective Since 1914

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Introduction: A Soldier's Story

On an autumn day in 1985, Clell Cecil Olds recounted how, more than 68 years prior, he had been drafted into the U.S. Army to fight in the First World War. When he left his home in Paris, Tennessee, he left behind his family farm, a steady job in a clay pit, and Thelma Elizabeth Wright: the woman who would become his wife when he made it home safe.¹ In that moment, his life changed forever: he was going to join the Infantry. Olds did not know yet that he would cross over to fight on the front in Europe, but he did know there was a chance he would never see home again. After boot camp and training at Camp Gordon, Olds was a private first class with the 6th Infantry Headquarters Division, serving in a pioneer platoon. Because of his prior experience with explosives from his time working in clay pits, Olds was hand-picked to use the demolitionists' tools of the trade: dynamite, Sheddite, and TNT, to aid the Allied war effort in Europe.

When it was finally time to cross over, the journey to Brest, France, from Chickamauga Park, Georgia, was a hellish, 12-day slog on the freighter USS Covington. When he returned stateside by way of Fort Oglethorpe in February 1919, both he and the world around him had changed forever. Olds was wounded in the Argonne Forest a month before Armistice Day, and gave a grisly, spine-chilling account of seeing his brothers in arms (including a good friend of his) returning from the front after a gas attack. He said the men "were vomiting and it would be just the blackest stuff you have ever looked at in your life. They were just stumbling along, a lot of them..."² But the things he recalled with the most clarity and fondness were the mundane and easily overlooked: marching orders, place names, gorgeous mountain vistas, French villages and their inhabitants, living conditions, and food. Although his experience in Europe was abruptly interrupted by a piece of German artillery shrapnel leaving a ghastly wound across his shoulder and collarbone, Clell Cecil Olds did not describe being "shell-shocked" or traumatized at all. He especially did not address the incident to the same length or level of detail as he described life at camp or trekking around the pristine mountain lakes of France's Vosges region. To me, this says that the most profound moments of his wartime experience were not just the heroic sentiments behind his service or combat traumas he faced, but rather the eye-opening experiences he had along the way.

¹ "Obituary of Clell Cecil Olds," *The Commercial Appeal*, July 25, 1992, A8.

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This project is primarily based on the oral history collections of Murray State's Pogue Special Collections Library, notably the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project's interviews, conducted in the late 1970s and 1980s, of octogenarian WWI veterans like Clell Olds. Their memories of the war and accounts of life in the Purchase Area in the early 20th century are strikingly clear and well delivered considering the interviewees' advanced age. The remarkable uniqueness of Pogue Library's WWI oral history collection served as the inspiration for this project. The collection is expansive and includes narratives from the entirety of the Jackson Purchase region between the Tennessee and Mississippi Rivers, from Paducah to western Tennessee. The interviews were conducted in veterans' homes so that they could be at their most comfortable, with some photographs, medals and other documents selected by the veterans to show their interviewers parts of their pasts firsthand. Most interviewees were students and history department faculty members, as well as some consultants from the community, like Bill Peyton, who conducted interviews of many Purchase Area African Americans for the Black Oral History Program.

In a way, the war was a coming-of-age experience for both American soldiers and the United States itself. While the war was far from easy for Olds, he looked back on the experiences he had with a relative fondness that is unexpected when using the lens researchers have come to expect of wartime histories: that of jaded combat veterans recounting the unending horrors they have seen. Clell Olds' wartime experience changed him in far more ways than one. When he came back home, his views on the war itself and the Europeans he encountered were different from when he had left. His first-hand experience allowed him to see new perspectives thousands of miles from home: perspectives that defined his memories of the "Great War." For Olds and many Lost Generation Jackson Purchase residents like him, World War I represented their first (and often only) experience with global cultures through life overseas. Through seeing both the war itself and foreign languages and cultures firsthand, Jackson Purchase veterans of WWI experienced shifts in their perspectives of the rest of the world, the war and its justification, and American society.

This project fits into a greater context of social histories that have been undertaken on the First World War, histories that have become particularly popular since the various centenaries of WWI events from 2014 to 2018. Very little English-language historiography exists that interprets American soldiers' changes in viewpoint due to their wartime experience in World War I, due in part to the "forgotten" nature of the war and the relatively short period of U.S. involvement. World War II and the Vietnam War are viewed as more significant focal points of historical scholarship regarding American soldiers' wartime experiences and their impact on those soldiers' perceptions, so this topic has gone relatively unexplored in mainstream historiography. But, the First World War includes the same topics of ethnic and racial identity, the perception of "otherness" in the enemy, whether American entry into

foreign wars is justified, and the impact of media efforts or first-hand learning on these perceptions, as the two more oft-covered wars.

What seems most significant to me, in terms of telling a social history of the war, is not necessarily applying modern views on WWI to veterans' interpretations, but rather analyzing and understanding why soldiers felt the way they did about their wartime experience. Using the work of modern historians as a guideline, I hope to allow the Purchase Area's veterans of the Great War to express their own sentiments from their time in the service. Recent historical works like Edward A. Guttierrez's *Doughboys on the Great War: How American Soldiers Viewed Their Military Experience* have used new methodologies to get as close as possible to veterans' first-person perspectives through the use of documentary evidence. Guttierrez's research highlighted service records and veteran surveys (administered as close to soldiers' return from Europe as possible) as a way to show how troops felt immediately after their service abroad was complete. Guttierrez raises the critical point in *Doughboys* that a story always changes with the telling, and that just as memories are flawed, they are also subject to reinterpretation and reframing with age.³ The Purchase Area veterans interviewed in the 1970s and '80s had decades to forget or reshape their narratives to fit cultural norms, whether intentionally or not. With that in mind, by bringing together a wide array of secondary sources covering topics from veterans' views on the war, to home front perspectives on the war's justification, to the role of ethnic immigrant and African-American soldiers, to historiographic trends in analyses of the Great War, it is possible to fill in the gaps of the primary source narratives. The primary source interviews in turn provide validity to the overarching interpretations social historians have made by fitting into the greater global and national trends established in their social histories. This interpretation of Jackson Purchase WWI veterans' experiences and perspective shifts fits into the greater national and global trend that overseas military experience, regardless of the time period, leads to shifts in veterans' perspectives on cultural and social topics.

“Over Here, Over There”: Global Perspective Shifts

When American troops crossed the Atlantic starting in 1917, they experienced a variety of new languages, culture groups, ethnicities, and nationalities that they had not encountered before. Jackson Purchase veterans in particular had not experienced foreign cultures or life abroad, as the majority were the sons of farmers or other working-class men (or worked these kinds of jobs themselves). These men had likely not spent much time outside of their own counties, let alone across the Atlantic Ocean far from their homeland. Thus, the experience of crossing over was a jarring one that would change Jackson Purchase doughboys' views of their

³ Edward A. Guttierrez, *Doughboys on the Great War: How American Soldiers Viewed Their Military Experience* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2014), 7.

allies and enemies, people of other ethnicities, the European nations that hosted them, and their own country by comparison.

A significant portion of these shifting perspectives falls into the category of confronting “otherness.” Doughboys experienced “others” when they learned to communicate with French citizens, coordinated with their British and other European allies, and worked to thwart German efforts on the front (or encountered German Prisoners of War). These encounters served not only, as one would at first believe, to fill the gaps between Americans and Europeans, or citizens and soldiers, but also to establish a sense of common belonging. President Wilson and General Pershing held firmly that the American Expeditionary Force should be kept in separate divisions from their French and British allies, as they would respond best to the American command structure (and taking orders from fellow Americans).⁴ But in spite of this initial desire of AEF commanders to preserve the independent “identity” of American soldiers through cultural segregation, troops on both sides were brought together by the common experience of fighting a dreadful war. Soldiers and civilians mingled on either side of the front through troops marching through populated areas, camping in the countryside, and occupying enemy territory. Occupied areas, the shared territories of coalition forces like training, rest, and POW camps, townships in the French countryside and bustling cities and ports like Paris, Brest, and Marseille, served as a common ground upon which citizens and soldiers of all nationalities intermingled.⁵

This mingling led to a cultural and social exchange, which tied the allies closer together and opened soldiers’ eyes to both the similarities and differences between not just their allying nations, but their German and Austro-Hungarian enemies as well. A complex relationship evolved between all of these groups, at both a national and individual level, as they were brought together under strenuous circumstances and bonded by either shared sacrifice or, after the Armistice was signed, a desire to rebuild, go back home, and move forward. Soldiers generally felt a strong cultural kinship to their allies, and in some ways an even stronger relationship emerged between AEF forces and Rhinelander Germans after the war ended, with the American zone of occupation being considered the most effective and compassionate of the four (the others being the Belgian, British, and French zones). Aid programs carried out by occupying American forces and U.S.-based charities showed stark contrasts with the more resentful French zone occupiers, and American troops reportedly showed more respect and courtesy for local villagers’ privacy and individual rights than the German Army itself had done.⁶

⁴ Michael S. Neiberg, *Fighting the Great War: A Global History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 325.

⁵ Emmanuelle Cronier and Victor Demiaux, “Encountering the Other in Wartime: The Great War as an Intercultural Moment?” *First World War Studies* 9 no. 2 (2018): 141–50.

⁶ Gutierrez, 137.

Veterans from the Jackson Purchase were no exception in terms of growing accustomed to international experiences and cultures. Though each individual differed in terms of his personal views and prejudices, each showed a remarkable degree of empathy and gained a much greater cultural understanding over the course of his wartime experience. What the region's soldiers first saw when they arrived in Europe was a grateful French civilian population that had been committed to a total war for years.⁷ The general consensus was that the French were incredibly willing to work alongside the American troops, and that the AEF's arrival was a welcome sight for the war-weary French people. For some, the best impressions the French people made were through their food culture. The French economy (as with the rest of the world involved in the Great War) was in a tumultuous state throughout the war years. Clell Olds recounted his experiences of eating eggs from French farmsteads and, in a more classically French way, buying champagne from vendors for \$2 a bottle. At the time of his interview, he speculated the same brand would have cost more than \$20 at the liquor store in Paris, Tennessee.⁸ Another veteran, Harry Hammond, was greatly impressed with French workers' and soldiers' strong affinity for coffee, recounting bonding with them while sharing the drink. Due to coffee's relative scarcity in France at the time, he remembered the French reputation for flocking to coffee wherever it could be found aboard American ships, and that where the French were concerned, he liked them a lot. He expressed a great deal of contempt for the British, however.⁹ Most importantly though, these experiences always contributed to a deeper understanding than surface-level interactions normally would have. For Olds, his wartime experience also meant learning the French language and reading American newspapers in French, or having his friend Pvt. White read them to him. Soldiers' lifelines to news from back home, especially on the supply-starved front lines, often ended up being French language sources. African-American soldiers like Andrew Carmon, of Mayfield, Kentucky, and Rev. William Davis, of Paducah, even enlisted with French divisions so that they would be allowed to fight on the front and prove themselves.¹⁰ This was the most direct form of cultural exchange between different nations' soldiers possible, as these troops interacted with Frenchmen constantly. Cultural and social exchanges took place in an osmotic fashion, whereby military experience immersed Jackson Purchase veterans in foreign cultures and allowed them to have experiences that were extraordinary. These experiences made the world seem smaller than it had been before. A mutual cultural understanding was reached between allies that allowed both to benefit from the other's presence. These experiences defied the standard of cultural

⁷ Clell Cecil Old, 11.

⁸ Clell Cecil Old, 31.

⁹ Harry Hammond, Interview by John Watson, June 21, 1983, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

¹⁰ Andrew Carmon, Interview by Bill Peyton, October 18, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

segregation set by coalition leaders. The barriers of “otherness” came to be broken down as Jackson Purchase veterans discovered that in spite of their different nationalities, at a base level everyone was the same. Carl Milam, a South Fulton resident, said it best: “We were there to help them and they would help us. That's right. Otherwise, the nicer you are, they'll soon learn. The nicer you are, the nicer they'll be to you.”¹¹

As for the French viewpoint of American soldiers, a lack of French-language sources in translation means that raw data and top-down histories are what is most plentiful, as well as American viewpoints on French perspectives. What can be said for certain is that the arrival of the American Expeditionary Force had a significant impact on the French national morale. Throughout much of 1917, French protests and calls for an end to the war grew rapidly. Though defeatist viewpoints were wholeheartedly rejected, the prospects of a white peace, or a French victory with a treaty that was more favorable to the German people than the Treaty of Versailles, were on the rise. Of French letters sent through Bordeaux postal inspection in September 1917, a lesser number than in previous months advocated peace through total victory, while letters advocating peace through compromise saw a 7% increase. This shows a degree of war weariness in the populace, which set the tone for AEF arrival on the front in October.¹² An immediate contrast was set as soon as American troops arrived on the front: they were numerous, healthy, well-fed, and had a strong morale that had not yet been dulled by years of trench fighting.

They arrived not a moment too late, as American forces were central to stopping General Ludendorff's Spring Offensive of 1918. American divisions halted the German advance in the Belleau Wood, just 35 miles from Paris, and on the Marne River, for which one U.S. regiment received the powerful nickname “The Rock of the Marne.”¹³ The impact this newfound fame had on the morale of allied citizens and soldiers, especially the French, was tremendous. As such, while AEF soldiers held the French in high regard, the feeling was mutual. Thus, it becomes easier to understand the warm welcome Jackson Purchase veterans received in France. This is also due to the strong relationship between battlefield performance and feelings of xenophobia. Soldiers and citizens alike become more likely to accept and learn about foreign cultures not just through proximity and shared battlefield trauma, but also through feelings of gratitude or indebtedness to foreign soldiers. The inverse became true of Russians in 1918, when anti-Russian xenophobia reached a peak. It was said in Paris that the Russians, who had dragged France into the war to begin with, would never be forgiven for their

¹¹ Carl Milam, Interview by Ted Belue, October 2, 1982, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

¹² Jean-Jacques Becker, *The Great War and the French People*, trans. Arnold Pomerans (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 225.

¹³ Neiberg, 328-9.

cowardice after making peace with the Central Powers to focus on the Russian Revolution.¹⁴ They had left the French high and dry, whereas the AEF had come to save the nation.

The feelings of unity and brotherhood inspired by the AEF's combat performance, through which relatively undrilled and undertrained American troops had held off Germany's last-ditch attempts to seize Paris and win the war, created a strong sense of supranational pride. Whether allied soldiers on the western front in 1918 were African, American, Asian, European, or French, they were united by their common alliance and struggle against the Central Powers. Though many of their forces were culturally and nationally segregated, the war gave all soldiers, Jackson Purchase residents included, the opportunity to live, fight, and die alongside people of dozens of different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures. Thus, their eyes were opened to myriad lifestyles, experiences, and cultures they previously may have written off as "foreign" and never seen or explored.

Perspectives on the War and its Justification

Critical to understanding the greater changes in perspective of Jackson Purchase veterans due to their wartime service is analyzing their views on the war outside of modern re-interpretations of their experience. Those most able to tell us about the real nature of their experience were the veterans themselves in accounts given as close as possible to their service. One thing is particularly shocking when working with veterans' first-person narratives: due to changes in historiographic interpretations and media portrayals, there are fewer actual parallels between American Great War veterans' experiences and the experiences of U.S. veterans of the Vietnam, Persian Gulf, and Iraq Wars than we would at first believe (at least in terms of whether veterans thought their war was worth fighting). This is for a variety of reasons. Questions of the justification of the war in which they fought are difficult to ask veterans of modern wars, with answers often being incredibly divisive and indicative of changing views on warfare, government policy, and honor. This is due in large part to shifting public sentiments on war and its justification that harken back to anti-war movements that came decades after the Great War itself (and as such were partly, but not wholly, inspired by the war). For the veterans and civilians of the Vietnam era, war evolved to take on a deeper meaning, especially when combined with the turbulent nature of the civil rights movement. War fatigue and the frivolous loss of tens of thousands of Americans in a foreign war had an intense impact on the American psyche, boosting anti-war sentiment massively.¹⁵

¹⁴ Becker, 307.

¹⁵ Howard Schuman, "Two Sources of Antiwar Sentiment in America," *American Journal of Sociology* 78, no. 3 (1972): 519, www.jstor.org/stable/2776305.

The historians and filmmakers of the late 1960s and '70s then sought retroactively to apply this theme to the American soldiers of the Great War, but this policy of "disillusionment" does not fit the mold of the AEF experience, which is too complex to be surmised in just that way. While the experience was sobering for Purchase Area and national veterans alike, the American populace did not view the war as quite so protracted, purposeless and brutal as the European/ANZAC experience was, or later American military endeavors would be. The Great War sent home soldiers who had seen the brutality of a World War firsthand, and deeply hoped there would not be another.¹⁶ What started as a journey of adventure and heroism did not just create the broken, disillusioned American veterans portrayed in Lost Generation literature, but also made better educated, wizened men who had seen the damage modern warfare was capable of.

Kentucky had quite a few dissenters to the national consensus that the war with the Central Powers was just and worthy of American involvement. For many Jackson Purchase residents, the war was a foreign conflict that did not matter nearly as much as the local economy. When President Wilson announced American entry to the Great War, it was third-page news in *The Murray Ledger* behind articles on the tobacco market.¹⁷ In fact, the early stages of the draft were poised to disrupt farm life in the Purchase so heavily that exemptions were offered to tobacco farm workers until the harvest was done.¹⁸ Kentucky legislators' initial arguments against President Wilson's establishment of the Selective Service hedged heavily on the fact that the draft was bound to affect lower-class workers and farmers disproportionately, thus harming the state economy.¹⁹ Eventually, though, even much-needed farm workers crossed over. Even Purchase Area farm boys with established careers, such as people well into their 30s like South Fulton's Carl Milam, were drafted and sent to Europe. Milam's objections to crossing over, like those of many Purchase residents, were not on moral or political grounds, like Kentuckians of Irish and German descent. Rather, his concerns were far more practical: he did not want to leave his widowed father to take care of the farm on his own. Even Milam, who had every right to object to being drafted into driving trucks for the war effort in Europe, still felt the war was worth fighting inasmuch as it was like being a good neighbor to America's allies.²⁰

¹⁶ Gutierrez, 172.

¹⁷ The Murray Ledger, "The Murray Ledger, April 12, 1917" (1917). The Murray Ledger. 483.
<https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/tml/483>

¹⁸ The Murray Ledger, "The Murray Ledger, April 25, 1918" (1918). The Murray Ledger. 536.
<https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/tml/536>

¹⁹ David J. Bettez, *Kentucky and the Great War: World War I on the Home Front*, Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2016. 86. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1f5g5vw.

²⁰ Carl Milam, 19.

For the veterans of the AEF, especially those from the Purchase region, wartime experience only solidified soldiers' sense of honor and duty to their cause. It even deepened their sense of adventure, but by the war's end even the archetypical American soldier knew his adventure was coming to a close. American forces spent only one year on the frontlines, with an average of 327 Americans dying per day. The French, over four years of fighting, lost 897 men every day along the way.²¹ Thus, AEF soldiers did not have the same chance to develop a sense of disillusionment as their European counterparts. When they first enlisted to fight or answered the draft, those Jackson Purchase veterans who did not already have an anti-war or anti-draft disposition, cited their national pride and sense of duty and honor as their reason for signing up. Of the Purchase Area veterans interviewed, the majority either enlisted or tried to enlist before being drafted, and of those who were drafted most said they were glad to have done their duty. This sense of obligation and honor was so strong that it still permeated their narratives 70 years after their original tours of duty. As the war wore on this sense of duty was not worn down among American doughboys, but rather reflected soldiers' changes in viewpoint on whether the conflict was ever an "adventure" at all. The immense gravity of warfare has a profound impact on soldiers, and most of all on those who have seen combat. The war was quite easy to justify for those political pundits, journalists, and government officials who had not fought Austrians and Germans themselves or seen their friends killed in brutal trench fighting, but the archetypical doughboy lost his taste for warfare after seeing combat firsthand. The Great War proved to a generation of veterans that war, no matter how just, should always be a last resort.²²

One of the most important things Jackson Purchase veterans learned over the course of their military experience was the true value of human life. The humanity of the average soldier was central to their military experience. Going to war was seen as a miserable and horrific job that just had to be done; but the vast majority of soldiers did not relish killing their enemy. There is a reason those who fought on the front lines came back with a much less jingoistic worldview than those who did not: combat was an utterly atrocious experience wherein death could come at any moment. Soldiers' accounts of their wartime experience feature far more tales of enemies and allies dying than they do of the soldiers and their allies killing people. Depending on a soldier's personal views and morals, killing was rationalized in a variety of ways. But only very rarely, and under dire circumstances, was it done without any feelings of guilt.²³ In this way, even in the darkest moments of a soldier's experience, their empathy still shines through. Every soldier on the front was a human being with a home, friends, and a family. The vast majority of those present realized that; if not immediately after killing or wounding their

²¹ Gutierrez, 173.

²² Gutierrez, 148.

²³ David Taylor, *Memory, Narrative and the Great War: Rifleman Patrick MacGill and the Construction of Wartime Experience* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 39.

fellow man, then perhaps weeks, months, or years after the fact when looking retrospectively. It weighed heavily on their hearts and minds, having a significant impact on the way Great War veterans viewed their wartime experiences. For many Jackson Purchase veterans who served on the front or met German people, the “dreaded Hun” was not the demon he was made out to be in Allied propaganda. They, like the average veteran of World War I, saw the humanity in the enemy they faced.

Amidst the backdrop of brutal trench warfare, ruthless propaganda, and sensationalist Jingoist media urging them to crush their enemies and save democracy, Jackson Purchase veterans described their first encounters with their German enemies in an empathetic and compassionate way. This reflects a greater complexity to the average Purchase Area veteran’s view on the war, as real human encounters with their enemy humanized the people they were supposed to detest. When Harry Hammond saw German Prisoners of War unloading bombs and ammunition from ships that would later be used to kill their countrymen he did not think of the justness or glory of the war, he thought of the cruel irony of forcing a human being to be an accomplice in the murder of their fellow countrymen.²⁴ When Clell Olds watched his fellow soldiers loot a recently-captured German prisoner of everything but his clothes, he felt sorry for him.²⁵ These men did not consider their enemy lesser or deserving of these punishments. They looked on them as honorable soldiers just like themselves, who were really no different from them. As they recalled it, the Jackson Purchase veteran’s wartime experience was not a radicalizing one, but rather served to highlight the rare shreds of humanity they saw along the way, moments of intense empathy and compassion that changed their outlook on the war.

Although the aforementioned encounters were with German POWs carrying out forced labor, there were several other instances wherein Jackson Purchase veterans came to live and work alongside Germans as part of the AEF’s occupation of the Rhineland. This, too, brought former enemies into close cooperation with one another. Jackson Purchase veterans did not harbor grudges against these Germans or express any wild, hateful, murderous sentiments; the war did not turn them into monsters. For the most part they liked the German people they encountered, and deeply appreciated their hospitality.²⁶ The general sentiment at that time, at least among the average German soldier who had served on the front, was that it was good for the war to have finally ended. American troops, though not as fatigued as their European fellows, felt much the same way. As previously mentioned, they had had their fill of war and adventure. In this way both sides’ soldiers shared a common goal: returning home to their families. Leslie White, of Paducah, described the elation shared between American soldiers and

²⁴ Harry Hammond, Interview by John Watson, June 21, 1983, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

²⁵ Clell Cecil Old, 16.

²⁶ Fritz Metzger, Interview by Mark Fuller, December 3, 1982, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

the German prisoners they guarded when the news broke that the Armistice had been signed: they shook hands with one another, paraded in the street and drank whiskey in celebration.²⁷ At that moment years of brutal wartime experience had come to an end and everyone in that courtyard, German or American, knew that nothing mattered more than making it back home; no ideology, cause, or alliance was quite so important as the soldiers' homecomings would be. The fighting was done, and their lives forever changed, but they had gained no great love for war.

Looking Homeward: American Society from a New Vantage

Their time in Europe and participation in the war effort provided Jackson Purchase doughboys with a new perspective from which to view their own society back home. On a national scale, the Great War served as a moment for every stratum of American society to play their part: from women working to maintain the home front to African-Americans and ethnic minorities striving to prove their American-ness on the frontlines. Thus, the niche each group filled and the lofty heights to which they rose to accomplish the tasks set for them defined the new place in American society they found after the war. While ethnic immigrants and African-Americans sought to fight for their civil rights and citizenship out of a sense of national pride or desire to showcase their capabilities, the average white Protestant American soldier who fought had some trouble returning to his former place in society as well. In spite of this, those who served expressed a remarkable patriotism, one that was molded, even amplified, by their wartime service. Those who had risked life and limb for their country above all looked back to their home country as the best in the world: otherwise they likely would not have served. Expressed above all was the idea that the lessons taught by World War I were lessons that they would never forget.²⁸

For many, the right to citizenship and acceptance in the United States was not one granted by birth. Close to 20 percent of the AEF were foreign-born nationals, and thousands of second-generation immigrants fought alongside naturalized American citizens; though it is uncertain to what degree, to an extent they fought alongside the men of the Jackson Purchase as well.²⁹ For these immigrants, making a home in America was a lofty goal to aspire toward, one that could be more easily earned through military service and bloodshed, if needs be. As is true of all ethnic minority immigrants, non-native doughboys could not just assimilate to American society. What is most indicative of the social and cultural change of the time is the ways in

²⁷ Leslie White, Interview by Bill Peyton, September 27, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

²⁸ Guttierrez, 153-154.

²⁹ Nancy Gentile Ford, *Americans All: Foreign-Born Soldiers in World War I* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 2011), 1.

which the Armed Forces handled the intake and accommodation of immigrant soldiers who could not speak English or had little knowledge of American society and culture. Many of these soldiers were drafted and had no other choice but to join the service. Their experiences, however, show a sensitive and empathetic arm of the military that fought to ensure none of its members were left behind socially. In making the best possible effort to help these people, especially in a time period characterized by ethnocentric nativist sentiments, the military stood in stark contrast with other groups across the nation. Through the Camp Gordon Plan, English language and literacy courses were included in the training immigrant soldiers received before being sent to Europe. Special considerations were made for Catholic and Orthodox Christian immigrant soldiers so that their religious needs could be met, and whole divisions were reorganized with ethnic immigrant populations' abilities to inter-communicate taken into consideration. It was known that putting immigrant soldiers alone in divisions alongside native-born troops might lead to nativist persecution, so companies of immigrants of the same ethnicity comprised a larger support network for non-native soldiers.³⁰ These companies, like the most decorated regiments of the Second World War, had something to prove. They sought not just to repay a debt of gratitude to the military programs that helped them become better citizens, but also to prove themselves worthy of being called "Americans."³¹ These sentiments eventually paid off for them, with the military's sensitive and compassionate policies also benefiting American society as a whole. Throughout their wartime service, native-born soldiers were instructed not to call immigrant soldiers degrading names or bully them, and most importantly because native-born soldiers saw the high morale, patriotism, and willingness to fight of their immigrant counterparts, they gained a greater understanding of what it meant to be an American.³²

The other group with the most on the line were African-American soldiers: the 370,000 black soldiers who served comprised 18.5% of AEF troops, and yet the vast majority were not allowed to fight. Of the hundreds of thousands of black soldiers in Europe, only around 30,000 fought in the two US "colored divisions".³³ By contrast, 160,000 black men were drafted and put into manual labor battalions or made stevedores; one-third of all labor troops in the military service were black, and racist policies meant that black draftees could not get the same deferments for flat-footedness or other ailments as white draftees could.³⁴ Thus, in stark contrast to the white doughboy's experience, even the ethnic minority immigrant's experience, African-American soldiers in the Great War were heavily persecuted and subjected to harsh

³⁰ Ford, 70-71.

³¹ Ford, 86.

³² Ford, 113.

³³ Arthur E. Barbeau, Florette Henri, and Bernard C. Nalty, *The Unknown Soldiers: African-American Troops in World War I* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 70.

³⁴ *Ibid*, 89.

manual labor. They who had signed on to fight for their country and prove that black Americans were just as capable in battle as their white counterparts had little to no practical way to prove this due to oppressive military policy. This is an experience that the African-American veterans of the Jackson Purchase knew incredibly well. All of the Purchase Area's African-American veterans experienced persecution over the course of their military service, and at least two of the interviewees expressed disgust at being kept from fighting for the AEF. This experience, which diverged from that of the average American doughboy, is best told by Reverend William Davis, of Paducah:

The United States didn't want [black soldiers] to fight, they wanted us to be stevedores. The French, I want to make this clear. I hope I can because we were treated wrongly. The French Army, the French commanders, and the French parliament, their self, said, 'They come over here to fight, and they're going to fight.' They didn't let us be stevedores. They signed us with the French Army. I had all French equipment. I had a French map. I didn't have a United States Map. I had a French rifle. All my equipment was French. We had to stay over there until we returned back to the United States before we can come back here. That is true, and I want everybody to know that because of that little misery that they done to us."³⁵

Davis was poorly trained, alienated from his fellow Americans, and had to stay in France longer than white troops, all because he was black. Davis also experienced a race riot at Camp Merritt, New Jersey, wherein a soldier was killed by indiscriminate fire from a National Guardsman. Davis' life and those of other African-Americans were viewed as more expendable than white doughboys. This hypocrisy was called out by fellow black veteran and Paducahan William Pryor, who recalled an ideological battle of wits between American General John Pershing and French General Ferdinand Foch: Foch said of black soldiers, "are they not men?" By attacking Pershing's policy of granting black troops less furlough than whites, Foch forced Pershing's hand and made him change the way his operation was run.³⁶ This stuck in Pryor's mind as though Foch was standing up for him personally.

It was these experiences, not those of combat on the front, that shaped the narratives of the Jackson Purchase's African-American veterans. While some were treated quite well, others were treated exceedingly poorly. And this discrimination had a long-lasting effect: as with World War II, when black soldiers saw a society wherein the Jim Crow laws and segregation

³⁵ William G. Davis, Interview by Bill Peyton, September 25, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

³⁶ William Pryor, Interview by Bill Peyton, September 27, 1979, transcript, Jackson Purchase Oral History Project, Pogue Special Collections Library, Murray, KY.

were not the norm, it gave them hope for the future. When they were received amicably by the French people and Armed Forces, it opened their eyes to a society that, while still racist, was considerably less openly oppressive and discriminatory to people of color than their own. Home, by comparison, with its lynchings, voter suppression, segregation, and intense racist vitriol, seemed much less inviting. Black soldiers who returned home to the South were in at least 10 cases lynched, sometimes still in their uniforms. Black veterans were more likely to stand up for themselves than they had been before the war. These were some of the first stirrings of change, a change in perception that would one day lead to the civil rights movement, but for the moment it caused troops who had already suffered in France to suffer even more back at home.³⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, World War I was a transformative experience for everyone involved. Jackson Purchase veterans, like all doughboys who served, were in many ways different people than they had been before they crossed over. Depending on the things they saw, soldiers from the Jackson Purchase looked at issues of race, society, politics, war, and nationality in new ways because of their international wartime experiences. They fit into a greater national trend of Americans soldiers who had experienced previously foreign ideals and concepts firsthand. JPA veterans' lives, especially those of draftees, were completely uprooted and shifted into an entirely new environment wherein they were given the unique opportunity to absorb elements of the unknown. AEF soldiers, Jackson Purchase residents included, effectively formed enclaves of American ideals and cultures everywhere they went. Through the mingling over time of American, British, Belgian, French, and German people (as well as Americans of various ethnicities and backgrounds) throughout the AEF's years of combat and occupation, these cultural enclaves absorbed new experiences and formed new perspectives. In the case of US veterans of color, this mingling was even more striking. For many black American soldiers, serving in combat roles meant direct interaction with the French language, French or Francophone African people, and French culture, on a daily basis. Jackson Purchase veterans' views of their allies, hosts, and enemies were all remarkably positive. The absolute hatred of German foes encouraged by propaganda was seldom expressed. In fact, it was markedly absent from soldiers' accounts, and instead a great deal of compassion and empathy for their fellow man was put on display.

Upon their return stateside, veterans had new stories to tell about their overseas experiences: some good, some bad, but all incredibly interesting and important to both local and national histories. The veterans' accounts themselves, even when given more than 60 years

³⁷ Barbeau, 177-178.

after the war had ended, were clear, concise, and vividly told. Stories like those showcased in this project offer an important look into veterans' experiences as they remember them, and are deeply important to the field of memory studies. These memories can engender a strong sense of connection between communities and their histories, so long as they do not go untold. Veterans' families, as well, can benefit a great deal from coming to understand their ancestors' role in local, national, and global histories. Resources like Pogue Library's oral history collection can play a critical role in not just telling histories like that of the Jackson Purchase's veterans of the Great War, but also in reconnecting that history to its community. The First World War is of particular import in this field due to its generally "forgotten" nature as one of America's least-addressed wars. If veterans' stories, and by extension the stories of the war itself, go untold, an entire thread of American history will be lost to time. Though they have since passed on, the veterans interviewed in the Jackson Purchase Oral History Project live on through the oral histories they have given. Their recorded memories preserve them, though in a limited capacity, as narrators of the Great War for future generations to study and appreciate.

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