

St. Michael Historian

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St. Michael's World War I Heroes

by Bob Zahler

The role that St. Michael men played in the First World War was typical of that of other communities across the U.S.. Many men answered their country's call to serve, but of the 39 men from St. Michael and surrounding Frankfort Township who either enlisted or were drafted, only about half went to France. Of those men, again like those from the rest of the country, most saw combat in only the last five months of the war; but that involvement was crucial to winning the war for the Allies.

World War I, or the Great War as it was once commonly known, was sparked by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria in June 1914. Austria-Hungary and its ally Germany used the assassination as a pretext to begin a war for territory that would eventually draw-in all the major nations of Europe due to a complex system of alliances.

While fighting took place along several fronts between the "Allies" of France, Great Britain, Russia, and Italy; against the "Central Powers" of Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire; the centuries-long grudge match between Germany and France quickly focused the fighting along a line stretching from the English Channel near Nieuwpoort, Belgium in the north to the Swiss border in the south. This

line was the Western Front of the war, with the wide Eastern Front situated mostly in Russia. Industrialization had advanced weapon capabilities such that the traditional style of warfare, whereby the opposing armies met on an open battlefield, had now become unrealistic. The combatants dug into the earth and created opposing trenches where men slept, fought and died. By the end of the war, both sides had dug over 12,000 miles of trenches. The inability of either side to make significant gains in territory created a virtual stalemate that even at the time seemed entirely futile. Before the United States became fully involved in the war, there were over eight million casualties (dead or wounded) in the Western Front alone.

From the start of actual fighting in September of 1914 through the spring of 1917, the United States tried desperately to remain neutral; but unrestricted torpedo attacks by German submarines against both combatant and neutral ships, including the sinking of the British ocean liner *Lusitania* with 128 Americans on board, turned American public opinion against Germany. A very reluctant President Wilson finally asked for a declaration of war against Germany in April 1917. At that point the United States army was very small, only about 200,000 men with 80,000 of those serving in National Guard units. The Selective Service Act of May 1917 sought to quickly increase our military capabilities, but our lack of preparedness meant that assembling an army ready for battle and transporting them to France would take time. Additionally, General Pershing, who was put in charge of the American Expeditionary Forces, or AEF, refused to put men into battle until they were sufficiently trained for trench warfare. While the first American troops arrived in France in June 1917, by December there were still only 183,000 men and Pershing would only allow them to be used in specific tactical situations, much to the chagrin of the French and British Generals who were eager to get the Ameri-



Three men from St. Michael serving in France have a chance meeting before going into combat: Phil Steffens, Clem Vetsch & Bill Robeck

cans involved. Improved shipping arrangements increased the American presence to 900,000 by June 1918 with 10,000 more arriving every day.

It seems that most of St. Michael's men were not inducted into the army until 1918. Information on these men was found in the Military Service Record completed by each veteran after the war and which are now viewable at the Minnesota History Center; however, the records for some veterans could not be located. The following combat veterans have researchable Service Records: Clem Vetsch, Bill Kessler (Sr.), Bill Robeck, Phillip Steffens (Sr.), and William Gutzwiller. The following were known to have been deployed to France, but little or no information was readily available: Andrew and Arnold Neiss, John and Math Otten, Frank and Andrew Sieg, Hubert Georges, Joe Hagemeyer, Nick Schumacher, Walter Eull, Rudolph Senart, Frank Eicher, Fritz Holzmann, John Heuring, and George Englert. When asked on the Military Service Record to note the battles in which they participated, each soldier used the common names of offensives (operations/attacks); however, most of the American engagements were in the same general area in the Lorraine region along the southeastern sector of the Allied trenches. All of the St. Michael combat veterans who had Service Records reported being a part of the Argonne-Meuse Offensive, and some mention the Second Battle of the Somme, both engagements stretched throughout the last two or three months of the war until the Armistice on November 11, 1918. Additionally,



FIG. 34.

Men from St. Michael saw the most action in the area on the map just south and west of the word "LORRRAINE" on the map, near the Argonne Forest.

going on at a particular time, any soldier who stuck his head out of the trench or who was sent on a patrol into "No Man's Land" (the territory between the opposing trenches) was at risk of being hit by enemy snipers.

Clem Vetsch was wounded in the Verdun Sector in the Argonne Forest region early after seeing his first action in July 1918. This was before the main Meuse-Argonne Offensive began, but perhaps it was from a sniper. His wound was apparently not critical as he participated in other battles in that region until the end of the war. Interestingly, Clem's military position was only about 150 miles from Niederlauterbach, France, the birthplace of his grandfather, Jacob Vetsch. Bill Kessler was also in the Argonne region where he participated in battles near Toul and St. Mihiel. He reported being wounded in the leg by a machine gun bullet on "Hill 182" on October 8, 1918 (this was also the same day that WWI hero Alvin York single-

handedly killed 15 Germans and captured an additional 132). Bill Kessler did history a great service by keeping a personal diary during his time in France. He recorded the mundane along with the exciting moments of his experience. Excerpts of his diary will be included in a future edition of this publication.

Bill Robeck participated in the battles of the Somme, Argonne-Meuse, "and others" according to his Service Record. Bill was never wounded, but his service must have been exemplary as he was promoted to corporal shortly after the Armistice in November 1918. Phil Steffens didn't see action until August 1918 where he participated in the Battle of the Somme near Albert, Belgium, after which he fought in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in September and then in a battle



near St. Mihiel where he was wounded in the hand and leg on November 10, one day before the Armistice was signed. Phil received a citation for "gallantry in action" by Maj. General George Bell and came home without his left hand. William Gutzwiller arrived in France in late September 1918 just in time to see some action. He reported being involved in a battle on October 15 at Thiaucourt, which is near St. Mihiel. Brothers Arnold and Andrew Neiss also served in France. Arnold was in the 312th Mortar Battery and Andrew served in the 309th Infantry Regiment, both of which participated in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive late in the war. Arnold came home, but Andrew died on April 10, 1919 near Dijon, France. According to his nephew Jim O'Donnell, Andrew was tossing hardtack to famished French civilians from out of the window of a moving train when his head struck a post. After initial burial in France, he was reinterred in Arlington National Cemetery.

With political and economic collapse at home and the prospect of facing increasing numbers of fresh American troops, Germany surrendered at 11:00 AM on November 11, 1918. The St. Michael men who survived the fighting in France, along with those who served in the US or other locations (Andrew Schumm served in Cuba with the Marines) came home to St. Michael between January and July of 1919.

Bill Kessler was wounded in the Battle of the Argonne Forest

World War I continued on back side

Milestone Reached for 'New' St. Michael Cemetery on *Find A Grave* Website! By Stephen S Barthel

Crystal Sayen and I visited both the old and new Saint Michael cemeteries on November 11, 2011, photographing the visible grave markers, row-by-row. Since that time, I have meticulously searched various websites to find the birth (including maiden names) and middle names of the deceased buried in these cemeteries. I added the information to the *Find A Grave* website (see findagrave.com). Other people also have been adding names and grave marker photos before and after we got involved, so upgrading their grave information with maiden names, etc., needed to be done for all 843 interred in the new cemetery. Adding maiden or birth names makes it easier to find people, using searching under birth or married surnames.

As of October 22, 2015 the work for *Find A Grave* on the entire Saint Michael Cemetery (New) has been caught up, although it will be a long time before this work is ever completed. *Find A Grave* provides links (see sample photo) to the photographs of the grave markers. You can visit the grave markers for the new cemetery and partially completed old cemetery by directly accessing the following URLs (web addresses):

Saint Michael Cemetery (New):
<http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gsr&GScid=2365039>

Saint Michael Cemetery (Old):
<http://findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gsr&GScid=83457>

As a bit of trivia, the first person interred in the new St. Michael Cemetery was Peter Paul Huss, according to a notation by Father Geisenkoetter in the parish register. He was interred in 1951.

Grave Search Results
Records 161 to 200 (of 843 total matches)

Name	All Names	Cemetery
Daleiden, William		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. 1897 d. 1957		Saint Michael Wright County Minnesota, USA
Dawson, Dorothy Leona Ann Mueller		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. Apr. 10, 1916 d. Sep. 24, 1998		Saint Michael Wright County Minnesota, USA
Dawson, Edmund John		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. Sep. 1, 1915 d. Feb. 16, 1990		Saint Michael Wright County Minnesota, USA
Dehmer, Ambrose John		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. Nov. 25, 1901 d. Apr. 4, 1991		Saint Michael Wright County Minnesota, USA
Dehmer, Benedict Pius "Ben"		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. 1904 d. 1989		Saint Michael Wright County Minnesota, USA
Dehmer, Catherine Anne		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. Jul. 5, 2000 d. Jul. 5, 2000		Saint Michael Wright County Minnesota, USA
Dehmer, Chad Donald		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. Jun. 25, 1972 d. May 20, 2010		Saint Michael Wright County Minnesota, USA
Dehmer, Corinne Agnes DeMars		Saint Michael Cemetery (New)
b. Apr. 20, 1928 d. Dec. 14, 2014		Saint Michael

World War I continued

As in other wars, those who saw combat didn't talk much about it when they came home. Few would understand or could possibly comprehend what they encountered. According to Roger Robeck, son of Bill Robeck, his dad said that he hated the rats more than the Germans. The living conditions in the trenches were horrible: lice, rats, wet boots from standing in

water in the trenches, and the persistent fear that one might die from either a German sniper, exploding shells, or from the Spanish Flu pandemic. The flu hit the trenches especially hard because of the close living conditions and the fact that this particular strain struck young adults harder than the old or the very young. In Europe in the fall of 1918 there were more casualties from the flu than from bullets. Of those stationed in the U.S., St. Michael soldiers Arthur Dick and Frank Niessen both died at their military camps of complications from the flu. Robert Zahler contracted the flu at Camp Grant in Illinois, but managed to pull through after a long convalescence.

St. Michael did its share in the Great War. Whether serving in the trenches in France or simply answering the call to duty and serving where their country directed them, the men from St. Michael served honorably, and many served with distinction under the most horrible conditions imaginable. Those who saw combat returned with both physical and emotional scars, but few would let others know what they had to endure to be heroes to the country they protected.

St. Michael**Historical Society****11800 Town Center Drive****St. Michael, MN 55376***Phone: 763-416-7967**We're on the Web!**See us at:****www.saintmichaelhistory.org***Like us on ***Facebook!***

Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the St. Michael Historical Society.

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Publisher: Bob Zahler

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Ken Zylla Print Project Update

To date we have sold seventy prints, of which sixty-three have been framed and seven prints were ordered and sold unframed. These have all been processed and delivered. We now have only four Artist Proofs remaining out of fifty that were signed by Ken and numbered. Limited Edition Prints numbering up to five hundred and signed by Ken Zylla are still in good supply.

Once again, our tenth anniversary print by Ken Zylla, nationally acclaimed artist, entitled "St. Michael USA" is still available for purchase. The print depicts a Central Avenue street scene between Main and First St. SE in St. Michael from the year 1960. Order forms and description flyers are available at the Great River Regional Library in St. Michael or at the City Hall front desk during business hours. Prints may also be purchased through our online store at: www.saintmichaelhistory.org

There you will find color samples of frames available to purchase through us or if you prefer call Sheldon at 763-497-4205 to view available frame settings. Just a reminder, these prints will make GREAT CHRISTMAS GIFTS for all ages.

Upcoming Events

December 14, Monday

No meeting

January 11, Monday, 7 PM

Rescheduled presentation of history of Dehmer's Meats by Joe Dehmer. Monthly meeting to follow.

February 8, Monday, 7 PM

Monthly meeting followed by a "show and tell" by curator Bob Zahler of some of the unusual items in our collection.