

St. Michael Historian



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A Personal War

by Bob Zahler

One of the best resources for any historian studying a particular subject is a personal diary from an eyewitness. Unlike a newspaper account, which is typically written by someone who is not an eyewitness; or even a letter, where people may alter the account to suit the interests of the recipient; a diary is not written with the intent of anyone else ever reading it, so they tend to be very honest. As Bill Kessler prepared to be shipped out to fight in France in April 1918, he must have realized the significance of the experience on which he was embarking as he started a diary; one that was kept secret from his family until it was discovered after his death. One of his daughters typed a copy of the handwritten diary, preserving the spelling and grammar just as her father wrote it. We are incredibly thankful that the family was willing to share their father's diary with us. Despite having just a grammar school education, Bill's writing is amazingly clear and even witty at times. Because he wrote in the battlefield without much concern for punctuation, sentences tended to run from one to the next. Where quotes from the diary are used in this article, punctuation has been added for clarity. Much of the diary tells of the mundane aspects of soldier life, but there are many moments shared in his diary where it is obvious that Bill was thankful to have survived the day.

Bill Kessler served in Company F of the 327th Infantry Regiment in the 82nd Division. They left Camp Gordon, Georgia on April 17, 1918, and traveled by train through Washington, DC on their way to New York City from which they departed the U.S. on April 26. Bill wrote, "we were out of sight of land and have said goodbye to the Statue of Liberty, and at that time everybody on board seems to be in deep thoughts." During the week's voyage, Bill reported doing military drill on the deck of the ship noting that "the boat was in such motion we found it impossible to stand at attention; one hard-luck soldier has lost his hat." The ship disembarked at Liverpool, England and the men were transported by train to South Hampton on the English Channel. Bill arrived in France with his comrades on May 10. For the rest of May and the first part of June the men trained for trench warfare. It is clear that Bill was getting nervous for what lie ahead: "On June 16 we travelled through some beautiful country and as we are anxious to know where we are going; we asked every American Soldier, but none of them seem to know. June 17: we reached our destination which is Toul, France, and all we learned there is that we were near the firing line and getting closer every day."

After additional training, Bill's regiment finally saw some action. With poetic humor Bill described his first experience under enemy fire: "On July 3 we were on support in the second line of trenches, here we were not met with a warm reception by enemy artillery and the shells were breaking all around us. On the night of July 9th we took up our position in the front line trenches and the shells were playing a tune overhead..." It seems that the Germans kept up the artillery barrage for several days and that little movement of the front line took place, which was typical for most of the fighting during the war. Later Bill wrote, "did not do much scrapping here. We did a lot of patrolling every night and sleep all day; we got so well used to the enemy shells coming over, we could sleep no matter how they were coming." By the beginning of August, however, Bill revealed the tension that built over time when one had to be constantly aware of a possible attack: "We put over a

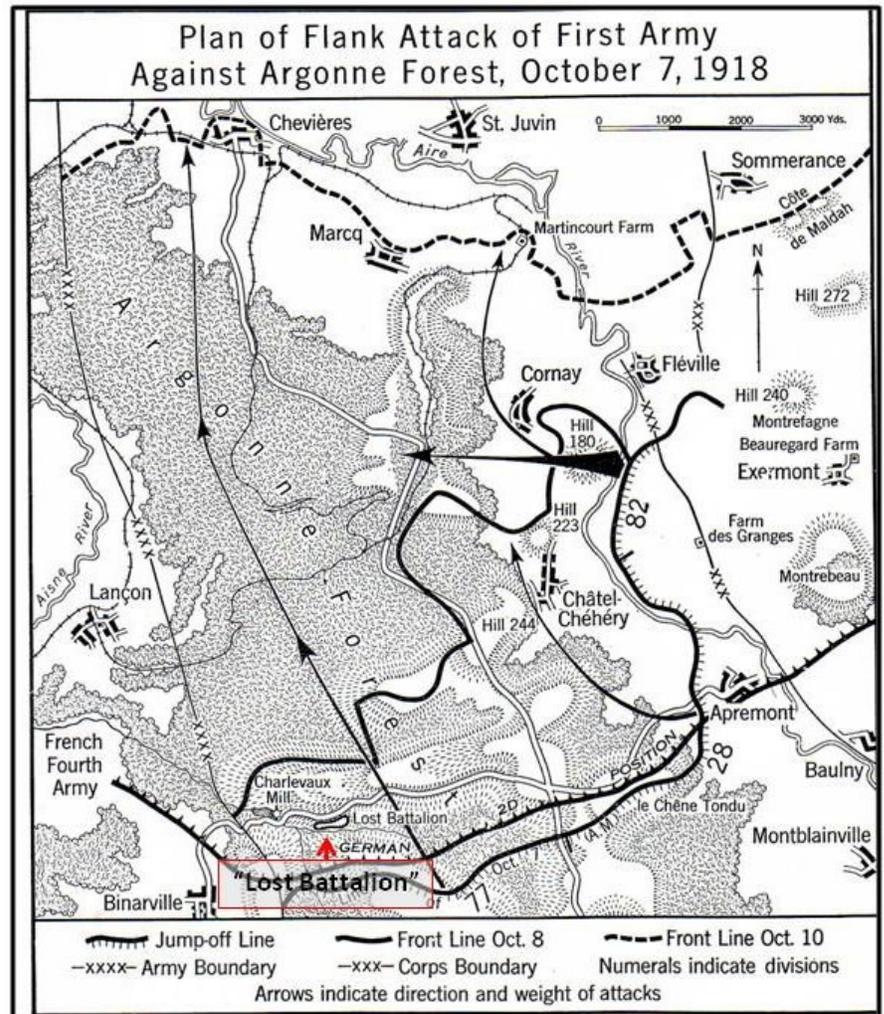


Pvt. William N. Kessler in 1917

gas barrage on the enemy at ten o'clock in the morning of the 4th, and the barrage that was sent over, whilst it was on the earth, was trembling and everyone had a creepy feeling. We also had to rush into our dugouts for we knew what was coming. At 11:30 the enemy started his music. He, too, sent some over on us, and every minute of this time I wished I had a dugout that was a hundred feet deep. At two o'clock the barrage lifted and we sneaked along through the dark to our posts as we were expecting the enemy over at any time. Oh yes, this is a great game. It makes home seem twice as far away."

By September Bill's division was relocated near the town of St. Mihiel. Here they would take part in a major engagement against the Germans that, in the end, did little to break the enemy lines. On one occasion Bill led a night-time mission through No Man's Land, the crater-pocked and barbed wire-entangled stretch of territory between the opposing trenches. The objective of the mission was to determine whether the Germans were still occupying a certain portion of the trenches. Bill's scouting party crept silently toward the enemy trench when suddenly they were discovered by the Germans. For several minutes they were pinned down by enemy fire and could not move. The Germans fired star shells, luminary flares that were so bright that according to Bill, "you could pick a thorn from your finger." Although Bill and the other members of the scouting party eventually crawled on their hands and knees back behind their own lines, they were under constant machinegun fire all the way until they reached the safety of their trench. He noted in his diary, "I never want to go through the same experience again; there is no fun in it." Unfortunately for Bill, he would have to go out on several more raiding parties.

Bill's entry for September 22nd described another evening raid that may have affected his health later in life. It was a moonlit night, which he said was not pleasant "for that kind of work." Once again they were crawling through No Man's Land toward enemy lines when they were observed in the moonlight by the Germans who then started shelling them. Since the shells were landing behind them, Bill said they moved closer to the German trenches and took cover in a shell crater; but then they were forced to put on their gas masks as they were being shelled with mustard gas. He said that as the shells landed all around "we crawled north, south, east and west not knowing where we were going." Bill and his buddies made it back to safety once the gas barrage lifted, but only after being burned by the mustard gas. While Bill's assessment was that their gas exposure was mild, their commanding officer ordered them to take off their gas-soaked clothes to diminish the exposure to themselves and others.



The base of the large, left-pointing arrow approximates the location where Bill Kessler was wounded by machine gun fire from atop Hill 180. German machine guns and artillery fired from both Hills 180 and 223 while Bill crawled his way back to Châtel-Chéhéry along the Aire River and a low-lying creek bed.

After the failure of the St. Mihiel Offensive, General Pershing moved Bill's division to Varennes on September 29 to take part in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive which would be the last military engagement in which Bill Kessler would take part. On October 6th, after a few days of being kept in the ready, Bill noted that they were ordered to make up their combat packs and turn in anything they wouldn't need. They carried 320 rounds of ammunition on a ten-mile hike to a little village called Châtel-Chéhéry. The following morning they were ordered to advance across a field covered in a low fog, which gave them cover from the enemy. But after the fog lifted at noon, they were exposed. The Germans shelled them so heavily that they were forced to remain hunkered down in shell holes the rest of the day until they could retreat in the evening darkness, leaving behind many dead and wounded. Then, on October 8th, Bill participated in the same advance that made Sgt. Alvin York a national hero (and the subject of a movie starring Gary Cooper). Just north of Châtel-Chéhéry were two hills, each protected by German machinegun nests. Bill Kessler's regiment, the 327th, was ordered to take the northern hill, noted on military maps as Hill 180; and York's regiment, the 328th, was to take the southern hill, or Hill 223. York gained fame that day by singlehandedly killing 20 Germans who were protecting Hill 223, and then



American soldiers making their way through No Man's Land to raid an enemy trench. One had to make it through barbed wire, mustard gas, artillery shells, and machine gun fire before reaching the trench.

helping capture 132 prisoners. A short distance away Bill Kessler's regiment approached their objective, Hill 180. But before they got to the base of the hill, they had to cross the Aire River. Bill wrote, "When I saw the captain jump into the damn river, chills run all over me. I followed; the water was up to my waist; the short little fellows had to swim. [On the hill] we were met with heavy resistance by the enemy. The shells were falling around us like hail, and the machine guns were clicking steadily at us, and the men were falling around us. There was three of the company [who] got killed and several wounded, of which I was one." Bill had taken a machinegun bullet to the leg. He and other walking wounded soldiers retreated from Hill 180 but continued to take fire from machine guns and artillery. Despite being seriously wounded, Bill was able to keep out of the direct line of fire by crawling along the river bank and then hobbling through a low-lying creek bed; but he noted in his diary that "the stretcher bearers could not walk in this creek for there was about two feet of water and mud. There was three men killed right there: one man

wounded on a stretcher and the two carrying it; all killed by one shell." Bill made it to the aid station in Châtel-Chéhéry where he spent the night in a bombed out building until an ambulance could take him to a field hospital. From there he was transported to what he called the "operation hospital" where he had the first of two operations on his leg. By the time he finished his convalescence in December, the war was over. He returned to his company and spent the rest of his time in Europe drilling and parading including parading for General Pershing and the Prince of Wales on February 11, 1919. His diary ended on February 12th, President's Day, which meant a day of rest: "one good thing that Lincoln did that day", referring to Lincoln being born; "hope there's some more holidays coming around." After this, Bill's movements are unknown until, according to his service record, Bill returned to the U.S. on May 18, 1919 and was discharged from the army a week later.

According to his children, Bill didn't speak much of his wartime experiences except that he never had a good word to say about General Pershing, perhaps because of Pershing's insistence of sending the men into battles that seemed futile. Periodically, for the rest of his life, Bill experienced episodes of "shell shock", or what today would be called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or PTSD. These episodes would take Bill away from his farm work for several days or weeks. When in only his early 60s Bill developed Parkinson's Disease. The doctors at the time speculated that it was triggered by his exposure to mustard gas and the PTSD. Bill Kessler died in 1962 at the age of just 66 years old. Did he know and perhaps hope, that his family would discover his diary and finally understand what sacrifices he made during the Great War? By keeping this diary, Bill Kessler helped all of us appreciate what he and his brothers in arms endured in the name of preserving democracy in Europe.

ORDINANCES
OF THE
Village of St. Michaels,
WRIGHT COUNTY, MINN.
—1890—

The Dos and Don'ts in Early St. Michael

By Bob Zahler

On February 10, 1890 the citizens of the Village of St. Michaels (yes, they used to put an “s” at the end) voted to incorporate and thus establish the first local government for the village separate from Frankfort Township. Jasper Neiss was the Recorder and the President (known later as the mayor) was John Menth. Within the next couple of months the village council approved and published the first village ordinances. It appears that many of the ordinances were borrowed from existing ordinances in other communities and they are fairly general in nature, but they definitely express the concerns and conditions of the late 19th century. Many of the “dos and don'ts” are included in long rambling paragraphs of legalese. Here are snippets of ordinances that we may find odd by today's standards: “It shall be the duty of every male person, not exempt by law, to work one day each year on the streets and alleys in the village or in lieu thereof may pay to the street commissioner the sum of one dollar and fifty cents,” also, “It shall be the duty of all persons to remove and bury, beyond the village limits, all carcasses of dead animals owned by them...” Regarding behavior they say, “Any person...shall be guilty of disorderly conduct by appearing in a public place in a state of nudity or in dress not belonging to his or her sex...or by insulting any woman by using in her presence any obscene or indecent language.” A person was also considered to be a criminal if they “shall erect any hog pen or privy nearer the front of any lot than ninety feet, or any privy nearer the line of any lot than two feet” or who “shall wander about having no visible means or business to support himself...or shall beg in public places...or tell fortunes..” Violators were to be brought before a village justice, unless it was after 9 PM. In that case the person was put in the village jail until 9 o'clock the next morning.

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We're on the Web!

See us at:

www.saintmichaelhistory.org

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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. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the St. Michael Historical Society.

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Ken Zylla Print Project Update

Artist proofs are no longer available as they have all been sold. If anyone is interested in seeing the options available for our remaining signed and numbered prints, we have samples of mattes and frame colors available for viewing at the Great River Regional Library in St. Michael. These samples are in reference to the offerings on our Order Form. The Order Form and descriptive flysheet can be picked up at the St. Michael City Hall and the Great River Regional Library. Prints can also be purchased through the “Store” tab on our website: www.saintmichaelhistory.org

Upcoming Events

March 14, Monday

Regular monthly meeting.

April 11, Monday

Annual Meeting. Election of five members to the Board of Directors for a three-year term. Election of President and Vice President for two-year terms. Vote on a change in the by-laws regarding when succession of newly elected officers and directors takes place.

May 9, Monday

Regular monthly meeting. Formal appointments of project chairpersons.