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Reminiscences of Sgt. Robert J. Flint: “One Doughboy’s Experience in the World War of 1917-1918”

Creator: Robert J. Flint
Dates: 1940
Quantity: 1 folder
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Biographical Note

Robert Flint was born in 1898 near St. Louis, Missouri, living his early life in Webster Groves, Missouri. He arrived in Chicago with his friend Fred “Stebbie” Stebbins in April 1917 and enlisted in the First Illinois National Guard. He was eventually assigned to Company M after the First Illinois was federalized as the 131st Infantry, 33rd Division.

After training and miscellaneous security details in the Chicago area, Rockford, Illinois, and Houston, Texas, Flint was promoted first to Colonel then to Sergeant. He and his unit landed in Brest, France in late May, 1918. After a short period of training, Flint was assigned to observe a Canadian machine gun battery, and was slightly wounded by a German mustard gas attack on July 4, 1918. After a short recuperation at LeTreport, Flint returned to the front alongside the Australians near Albert, France.

In August 1918, Flint led a small party on a covert raid of a German machine gun nest. As he charged the position, his leg was fractured in several places by machine gun fire. The Americans managed to clear the Germans, with Flint killing the machine gunner at close range with his revolver. Flint hid throughout the remaining battle of the

next day, alongside the body of the dead German, before eventually being discovered and rescued by fellow members of the 131st Infantry.

He spent over one year in hospitals throughout Europe and the United States, confined to a wheelchair for several months. While hospitalized in France, arrangements were made for his transfer to Rouen, where his sister Hazel “Bing” Flint was stationed as a nurse. Flint returned to the United States soon after the Armistice, where he stayed in hospitals in New York City, Des Moines and St. Louis. He was discharged from the Army on August 29, 1919 and returned to Webster Groves. He married Viola, one of his most dedicated well-wishers from his convalescence, and saw the birth of Alice in 1915, for whom he wrote the reminiscence at Christmas, 1940.

Scope and Content of the Collection

According to its inscription, the manuscript was presented to Flint’s daughter, Alice (b. 1925), at Christmas 1940. The memoir, entitled “One Doughboy’s Experience in the World War of 1917-1918,” is a chronological, autobiographical narrative recounting Flint’s Army service from enlistment and training to combat, injury, recuperation, and discharge. It covers the years 1917 through 1920.

Flint provides detailed stories from his training in Rockford, Illinois and Houston, Texas, telling of the relatively innocent bonhomie and mischief-making of camp life. Of particular and graver interest is his retelling of the Houston Race Riot, which occurred in August 1917 after several hundred African American soldiers from the 24th US Infantry mutinied and marched on the city of Houston. Members of the Illinois National Guard were mobilized to quell the violence, an action described by Flint as the “Battle of the Graveyard”. Flint also describes the execution of two of the mutineers later that year.

The narrative continues with Flint’s experiences in Europe. He provides rich detail on the civilian population of war-weary France, in particular the people of Brest and LeTreport. The combat operation in which he was severely injured is described in vivid terms, climaxing with Flint’s account of a raid on a German machine-gun nest where he was shot in the leg several times before shooting and killing the German machine gunner, then finally rescued several hours later. These actions were alongside the Australian force during the Battle for Le Hamel, August 1918, during the Second Somme counter offensive.

Flint’s reminiscence provides unique detail about hospital life during the First World War, as he experienced stints in hospitals at LeTreport (twice), Rouens, and Tottenham, England, as well as three Army hospitals in the US. He was eventually discharged in 1920.

The reminiscence is accompanied by a transcription of a short article about the reunion of Flint and his sister in a Rouen, France hospital and an untitled poem by Omer Reynolds.

Arrangement

The collection is one item, a 65-page typewritten manuscript. Numbered chapters were included in the original manuscript, but PMML staff created the subjects under the chapter headings used in this description.

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Related Material

This reminiscence was originally housed within the Lt. Lawrence Westerman Collection, but separated due to its unknown provenance and depth of discrete information.

Collections

Robert T. Herz Collection
Lt. Felix R. Zaugg Collection
Marshall E. Keister Collection
John N. Schufreider Collection
Lt. Lawrence Westerman Collection
Samuel Caplan Collection
Journal of Pfc. Roy H. Wilson, 1918-1919

Key Subjects

Several people are prominently mentioned in the reminiscence. These names include:

Breakey, Sgt. ?
Flint, Hazel "Bing"
Fairman, Mike
Hane, Chippie
Lorenze, John
Masseiowsky, Bill

Stebbins, Fred “Stebbie”
Vanyac, ?
Wiesnkewski, ?
Young, John

This collection is also indexed under the following headings in the Library’s online catalog. Researchers interested in materials about related topics, persons, or places should search the catalog using these subject headings.

Subjects

Illinois National Guard—Regiment, 1st
Riots—Texas—Houston
United States—Army—Infantry Regiment, 131st
World War, 1914-1918—Campaigns—France—Somme
World War, 1914-1918—Medical and sanitary affairs
World War, 1914-1918—Personal narratives, United States

Detailed Description of the Collection

Chapter One, April 1917-September 1917

Enlistment
Chicago Training, 16th and Michigan Armory
Michigan Central Bridge detail, Hammond, Indiana
Training at Camp Grant, Rockford, Illinois

Chapter Two, August 1917-April 1918

Transportation to Camp Logan, Houston, Texas
Houston Race Riot, August 23, 1917
Promotions to Corporal and Sergeant
Witness to executions

Chapter Three, May 1918

Transportation to Hoboken
Departure to Europe on *Leviathan* May 1918
U Boat raid near France, May 30
Landing in Brest
Pontanezen Barracks

Chapter Four, July 1918-October 1918

Battle of Le Hamel alongside Canadians, July 4, 1918
Mustard gas injury
Observations on General Hospital #16 and wartime LeTreport, France

Severe injury during Second Battle of Albert, August 1918
Treatment at LeTreport hospital
Reunion with sister

Chapter Five, November 1918-September 1919

Surgeries and treatment at General Hospital #21, Rouen, France

Relocation to Tottenham, England hospital

Arrival and stay at Greenhut Debarkation Hospital, New York City, December
1918

Relocation to Camp Dodge Hospital, Des Moines, Iowa for further surgery

Relocation to General Hospital #29, St. Louis, Missouri

Discharge from Army, August 29, 1919

Appendix

“Sister Finds Brother Wounded in France”

“What is this Slimey dismal O’le...”