

WWI took its share of local boys

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

Sunday, August 04, 2002

World War I, which started in 1914, shaped the 20th century and influenced people's lives around the world.

A whole generation of young men was taken from home and thrust into the international conflict with scant preparation.

During the early months of 1917, Vacaville, like the rest of the country, was trying to prepare for the possible entry of the United States into the war.

By April, young men were voluntarily enlisting in the Army and Navy. Recruiters became a common sight in town.

On April 13, 1917, the Vacaville Reporter wrote: "Recruiting Officers For Navy Here. ... Vacaville was visited Friday and Saturday by an automobile recruiting party from the U.S.S. Huntington, now lying at Mare Island Navy yard. ... considerable interest was manifested by the young men of the town. The two naval men are making a trip through the northern part of the state in an effort to obtain recruits for the ship, which is short of a full crew."

Only a few weeks later, on May 7, German submarines torpedoed and sank the British ocean liner Lusitania, drowning 1,198 people, including 128 U.S. citizens. A wave of indignation swept thorough the country.

Edwin Uhl remembered this time, when he was barely 21 years old.

"I was shocked, of course, when the Lusitania was sunk by the German submarines in May of 1917. That's when President Woodrow Wilson declared war against Germany, and I was a student at the University of California. I remember reading in the front of my fraternity about the headlines and news. ... I was hoping to remain at the university, but could see that I would be in the draft. All these things were being discussed by us in the fraternity."

Conscription quickly became law. June 5 was designated as the day in Vacaville to register all men between the ages of 21 to 31. The Vacaville Reporter ran a list of the questions asked and explained what to do in case of sickness or other reasons for being absent.

Emotions ran high. On June 1, Judge Henry Gesford, chairman of the Napa Council of Defense, published a letter in the Vacaville Reporter, titled "Lukewarm Citizen Called 'Slacker.'" In it, he reminded readers to support the war effort, admonishing that "A citizen who is lukewarm, careless, negligent or neutral is classed as a slacker - a hateful name to be called to an American in this crisis ..."

On that Tuesday, 344 registered, with 150 classified as citizens and 194 as aliens. Of the citizens, 73 were exempt due to having dependents or for health reasons. Seventy-seven were willing to serve, young Ed Uhl among them.

His name appeared on the long list published on July 13, under the registration number 2963.

The second draft quota of about 125 men departed in late September, Uhl among them. The Vacaville Reporter described the farewell the young men received:

"Amid the waving of the flags, the strains of martial music and the fond goodbyes of relatives and friends, about 125 young men ... departed from Fairfield at 11 o'clock Wednesday morning, and entered upon the greatest adventure of their lives. All tried to face the ordeal of parting bravely, but many eyes, especially of those who were to be left behind, forced a smile through a mist of tears."

The young soldiers and nearly 5,000 spectators assembled in front of the Solano County courthouse. At the conclusion of all the speeches, the young men marched off to the Fairfield-Suisun depot, accompanied by the school children "each carrying a flag, which they waved at appropriate times with patriotic fervor."

There they boarded the train, already filled with recruits from Alameda, which would carry them to the training camp at Lake Washington.

Uhl recalls that "[I] went into an officers' training camp to try and get a commission as officer of the U.S. Army. I entered this camp ... and spent about four-months-plus (doing) the hardest work I ever did in my life."

Walter Woods, another young recruit, wrote a letter to a friend, which was published by the Vacaville Reporter on July 20, giving a vivid description of the living conditions and training the men received.

"Each man has a mess kit, which includes a knife, fork, spoon, cup and plate with a top, which makes another plate, and it fits on the handle of the first plate, so they are both together. When not in use, you fold them up and put your knife, fork and spoon inside. Your cup fits on the bottom of a canteen, so when you are carrying them they

are not in the way.

“We have three blankets, a cot, a poncho and half of a shelter tent. The shelter tent we use as a sheet when in camp and a blanket-roll when on march. Our poncho we use as a bedspread and a rain coat when it is raining, or a sleeping bag when marching. ... You see, we use all our things for more than one purpose, so we won’t have to carry so many different things. You know, everything we have we have to carry when moving or marching, and the combined weight is about 50 pounds, not including our side arms.”

Their days were long and arduous.

“We have to get up at 5:30 and be at drill at 5:45 until 6:30. Then off until 7 a.m. Then of to mess and off again until 8:45. Drill every 45 minutes out of the hour until dinner at 12. Then on again from 1 until 4:30 p.m. The last hour is put in the lake swimming and the water sure is fine after the day’s work. At 5 p.m. we line up for mess and then off until 6, and then we go again for half an hour until 8:45.”

It was an adjustment to suddenly have to be responsible for all the gear. Walter Woods continued:

“I have gotten to be some wash maid. We have to be clean, and I have only one B.V.D. shirt, so when Saturday inspection comes I take it off and wash it, and let it dry over night. Last Friday night it rained, so I didn’t have a shirt and told the captain if the sun didn’t shine, my laundry didn’t work. He didn’t like it much and asked me if I couldn’t get a better laundry but I don’t think I could.

“I have to sew the buttons on my clothes, darn my own socks and patch my overalls, so most of the time I am busy, but when I am not I sure think of home; but I am glad I am here.”

Camp life and the prospect of going overseas to the battlefields posed a big challenge to these young men, coming from small communities. Walter Woods hinted at his feelings in the final paragraph of his letter:

“Some of the boys are getting very homesick, but I guess they will get over it, as they can stay home all their lives.”

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