



South Dakota State Archives

World War I Diary - Leo Alvin Ihli

On the 17th of April 1917, Leo Ihli of Fielder, South Dakota enlisted into the U.S. Army and was assigned to Battalion C, 147th Field Artillery of the 32nd Army Division. During the next 18 months of active service in France, Leo saw action in the Toul and Alsace Sectors, in the Aisne-Marne engagements, and elsewhere. He was discharged from the service in May 1919. Although he was only 18 when he enlisted, Ihli's diary of his World War I experience is detailed and provides a series of lucid illustrations of artillery action in the war. After reading the diary, why do you think World War I gained the designation as "the war to end all wars"?

Note: Some content in this excerpt may not be appropriate for younger students.

Excerpt from Leo Alvin Ihli's Diary

Thursday, July 25, 1918 -- Slept under the guns on a flat-car. Went through some more important cities, among them Montereaux, Melun, and Corbeil-Essone. Saw some wonderful scenery. Came into Paris in the fore part of the afternoon. Could not see as much of the city as we would liked to have seen. Passed through city of Creil. Much damage done in this place by bombs. Unloaded at little village of St. Marie, near Creil. Hard tack and black coffee for supper. Left the station at dark. Hiked until past midnight then pitched out tent in the woods.

Saturday, July 27, 1918 -- First Call. Did not intend to get up right away but the Captain pulled our wet tent down upon us and as it was still raining we had to get up. Moved out at 10:00 a.m. Hiked nearly all day with nothing to eat but wet hard tack. Getting real wet. Camped in a woods at midnight. Mike and I slept out in the open.

Sunday, July 28, 1918 -- Up at 5:00 a.m. Harnessed and saddled. Broke camp right after breakfast. Hiked until about sundown. Camped in village destroyed by shellfire. One of the fellows fell in creek with my horse "Cognac," getting all of my belongings wet. Lost some of my pictures. Saw some dead Germans. Most of them turning black for we have had a little hot weather lately. Some of the fellows tried to feed one of the dead Fritzies some Yankee hardtack but he did not seem to comply. Instead he lost his head, or his head come off his body. Chaplain Squires made some of the boys bury the dead German that lost his head. Buried in wheat field nearby.

Monday, July 29, 1918 -- Broke camp after breakfast. Hiked all day as usual. The whole country shows the effect of heavy shelling. Went through the Belleau Woods and the remains of the village of Vaux. Hardly a building standing in the village. Found a German officer's headquarters. Must not have had time to eat his dinner because the table was covered with eatables. They looked pretty good but I did not like the smell. Camped about a half mile from Chateau Thierry. Went into town after had supper. There was a YMCA in one of the buildings, not damaged much by shellfire, but there was such a crowd there that we could not get in. Came home and rolled in.

Wednesday, July 31, 1918 -- Not very much to eat for breakfast. Left camp before daybreak. Walked as usual. Saw many American, French and German graves. Made camp in woods at noon. Many dead men and horses in the woods. Found a wounded German half-starved. He seemed really angry. Saw German Caisson with horses and men blown up and left just as they died. Rotten odor in the air. Took a nap in the afternoon...

Friday, August 2, 1918 -- Up at 4:00 a.m. Our guns fired about 100 rounds a piece. Guns moved up again to new positions. The positions are within a few hundred yards of Reddy's Farm, where the Germans and Americans had a real hand to hand scrap. Germans forced back six kilometers today. Many dead Germans and Americans along the road. One dead German headfirst in the mud. He was in an inverted V position with his head in the mud, slumped against backslope of bank, with his butt the highest part of his body. Some of the infantrymen walking along the road used their rifle butts as paddles as they walked by. His head went a little deeper in the mud when they hit him. Had to ride back after the ration wagon to show it the way to the new positions. Shunk was driver on ration wagon. Came back at about midnight. Crawled under canvas over harness and went to sleep.

Saturday, August 3, 1918 -- Raining again as usual. Everything wet. Started for positions again. Saw a ration wagon and horses blown up by German shell. Many wounded coming in. One slice of bread and corned beef for dinner. Had some fun shooting at German airplanes. It wasn't so much fun when they started firing back. American infantry advancing too fast for the artillery. German artillery real active. Guns went into new positions in the open in order to support the doughboys who were forced to retire a little. Watched them run the Germans back over the hills with artillery support. Our guns receiving heavy fire from German batteries on account of open position. Hardwick, Smithy, and Lt. Kennedy wounded. Also some horses. Many men returning in bad condition; some shot up and others gassed. Started to move again. Raining. Saw hundreds of dead Germans in a small woods. Picked up a few more souvenirs. Could not get very far on account of shelling. Also wounded men tramping by in the mud doing a little groaning and some cussing. I was forced to turn back. Camped in a little valley, afterwards called "Death Valley." Rolled in under canvas over harness. Ground real soggy and I have only one blanket it is wet.

Sunday, August 4, 1918 -- Up at daylight. Don't know where rest of outfit is. Real hungry; haven't had a warm meal for several days, and only one meal yesterday. Shells coming in thick and fast. Some fellows in the same valley killed and others wounded. Horses also wounded. Found some of our outfit. Found kitchen too and had a little to eat. Many more dead, wounded, and gassed in this valley. Over 160 head of horses killed in this valley, besides the men. It is a good reason for naming the place "Death Valley." Rotten odor in the air; from gas and also the dead men and horses. German sniper hidden in woods near here shot an American Lieutenant. Our pieces in the open again, and firing. They are not firing on Fismes and German positions on the Vesle River.

Saturday, August 10, 1918 -- Took care of some of the horses. Watched many German prisoners go by. Two Americans in charge of a whole column of prisoners. The Americans made German officers carry their packs. Another French balloon brought down nearby by German plane. Much artillery and aerial activity. Shells coming in too close for comfort.

Questions

List the different dangers Leo was subject to during the war.

What is Leo's typical diet? How would you describe his eating conditions?

What was the condition of the towns of Creil and Vaux?

How did "Death Valley" get its name? Give at least two specific examples.

What role does death and the dead play in Leo's story?