

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

World War I Veteran Project

World War I Experience

O. H. 256

CHARLES G. WORMER

Interviewed

by

Jim Duffy

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: CHARLES G. WORMER  
INTERVIEWER: Jim Duffy  
SUBJECT: World War I experience, Life as a veteran  
DATE: May 15, 1975

D: This is an interview with Mr. Charles Wormer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on World War I veterans. It is May 15, 1975, and approximately 8:00 p.m. Jim Duffy, the interviewer will be talking to Mr. Wormer about his experiences in World War I, in 1818 and 1910.

W: I was called into the service in May, 1918, and I left the States on July 21, 1918. On August 3, 1918, I landed in Liverpool, England, and we traveled up to Southampton. We camped up there near Southampton. A few days after that we crossed the Channel and went into Cherbourg, France. From there on we just went from one camp to another until about the first part of October.

I was transferred to a clerk school on account of having this trouble with my back. I couldn't go into active service. I spent two weeks in this clerk school, then I was promoted to an instructor in this school, in Army paperwork. I stayed in that clerk school until sometime in December, after the armistice was signed. We still kept the school going after the armistice. It was a school that taught the Army paperwork. They needed a lot of help in the offices with the Army paperwork.

In the meantime, before I went to this clerk school, I went to a camp that was a replacement camp, and we trained soldiers that came over from the States. We trained them to go up to the front. In fact, there were a lot of them, hundreds of them, that never fired a gun and they were sending them up to the front before they had ever fired a shot. We trained them in that

kind of work for a while, and as they needed them up front, well, we'd send them. From then on, I went to the clerk school. I stayed in that clerk school until sometime in December, then we just put time in until January, when we were shipped home.

D: How did you come to join the service in 1918?

W: I was drafted.

D: You were drafted?

W: Yes.

D: At the time that you joined the service, what was your thinking about World War I? Were you in favor of the United States going into the war or did you have no thoughts about it or what?

W: Well, I was in favor of it, yes. In fact, I was on the draft list and my name didn't come up, but I volunteered to go. There were fifty men from Girard that were going and I wanted to go with them, so I volunteered to go.

D: Where did you go upon induction? Where did you go for your training?

W: Camp Gordon, Georgia.

D: How long were you there?

W: Six weeks.

D: What kind of training process did they have in those days? How were you trained?

W: Well, they had bayonet training and rifle range and all that, but I wasn't in on that. I went into a band down there. They organized a band and I went into it for about four or five weeks, then they decided to do away with the band and they sent me back to the company. In two weeks I was on my way over to Europe, and I hadn't been out to the drill field or fired a gun or tried in any kind of training.

D: Did you find this to be the case with many people?

W: There were many men that came over there that never had any training.

D: To the best of your knowledge, do you feel that the trained men that did go over there had adequate training for what action they saw?

W: No, I don't think they did. The ones that came over after I was there, I don't think had much delay. They were shipped over there pretty fast.

D: Do you think that the lack of training had anything to do with the number of people who were killed or injured?

W: Oh, I don't think so, no. When they'd come over there, we'd get them and train them for a few weeks, and that's about all they needed. You know, the American youth picks things up pretty quickly. You know, they picked things up pretty fast. It didn't take long to train them in that sort of thing. A lot of men came over there that had never even fired a rifle. They were sent up to the front, but they knew how to take care of themselves.

D: They learned pretty quickly?

W: Yes.

D: What outfit were you in when you originally went in? Do you recall?

W: Camp Gordon was a replacement camp for the casuals. We didn't have a company. You were just replacements for troops that they needed over on the other side.

D: You had no number or designation?

W: No, no designation. Just "camp casuals" is what they called us. You didn't belong to any particular outfit until you got over there. Then they would transfer you to another company, to some division over there.

D: When you were shipped over, did you have any idea at all where you were going? Did they inform you at all?

W: No. I didn't know anything about where I was going.

D: You said you went from the United States to Liverpool. Where did you disembark from the United States?

W: Camp Merritt.

D: Where's that?

W: New York.

D: Did you go through the St. Lawrence Seaway?

W: No, we went up the Hudson River and got on a boat. Camp Merritt is up the Hudson River from New York.

D: I see. What kind of things did the men do on the boat en route?

W: Well, we had a pretty calm trip going over there. It took twelve days, which was a pretty long trip on account of the submarines zigzagging back and forth all the way over. We had good weather all the time. We had a couple of torpedo scares and we fired on a few of them, but we didn't have any trouble because we had a lot of good escorts taking us over. We had a convoy around us all the way over, taking care of us.

D: Do you know how many men were on the ship with you?

W: Oh gosh, I wouldn't know.

D: Was it a regular military vessel?

W: No, it was an English cattle boat. It didn't even have bunks. You had to sleep in hammocks. You didn't even have bunks to sleep in.

D: Did you have any duties while you were on the ship going over?

W: No, we had nothing to do.

D: Did the men find anything to do on the way over?

W: Oh, we played cards. You couldn't do anything else but play cards and put in the time.

D: What did the men talk about on the way over? Did you have any anticipation about what you might see when you got there?

W: No, no, we didn't. At that age, we weren't thinking about war much or about what was over there.

D: Nobody expressed any anticipation at all?

W: No.

D: Okay. When you got to Liverpool, what did they do with you? Were you trained anymore or did you just wait there?

W: No. We got off the boat at Liverpool and we got on

trains and went way up England to this camp near Southampton. I think we spent about a half a day on the trains going up there. We were up there at that camp for about a week. The camp was outside of Southampton. Then we went down to Southampton, got on boats and went across the English Channel. We landed at Cherbourg, France. That was really a rough voyage across the English Channel. That was worse than the trip across the ocean or coming back.

D: Was the weather bad at that time?

W: Oh, it was bad. That English Channel is a pretty rough place.

D: Was England used for anything except just getting you there and getting you ready to go to France?

W: No, we did nothing.

D: You did nothing but just travel?

W: Yes, we just traveled around there and waited to get over to France.

D: Approximately how much time elapsed between the time you came to Liverpool and when you left for France?

W: I'd say about a week.

D: When you eventually got to France, when you landed, was it just a normal type of landing or were you going into a battle operation?

W: No, the battle was way back in the lines. We landed down in the South of France.

D: Were the conditions in France different than you had anticipated going over there? Did you expect anything of France when you got there that might have differed from what you saw?

W: Well, I didn't know what to expect, but I found that they were fifty years behind the times. They weren't up-to-date at all, nothing like our country was.

D: What do you mean?

W: Well, in other words, the farmers used oxen to plow their fields. We didn't see much of the cities because we were always camped outside of a town or city somewhere.

- D: Did you get much time to wander around while you were there?
- W: Yes, quite a bit. Yes, we really did. We would be training in the daytime and then in the evening we would go into some little town.
- D: What were the French people like? Did they receive the Americans pretty well?
- W: Yes. Well, I wouldn't say they were very friendly.
- D: Why not?
- W: Well, we didn't see much of them because we didn't get into town where they were; we were always out in the country somewhere.
- D: I've heard stories of how they put the Americans up in their barns and then tried to charge the government for damages that the soldiers did to them.
- W: Well, I know we slept in the hayloft of a barn for a couple of nights when we first got over there, but that was just for a couple of nights until they moved us somewhere else.
- D: How about your supplies over there? Did you eat well? Did you have adequate supplies?
- W: We ate very well, yes. I'd say we ate well.
- D: Of course, you weren't in battle field conditions, but as far as the other men were concerned, did all of their equipment seem to be there when they needed it? Did they ever have any difficulty in getting the things that they needed?
- W: No. They had plenty of supplies there.
- D: Mr. Wormer, what was your job like once you got to France? What was your purpose and where were you assigned?
- W: Well, I wasn't assigned to any particular place until I was assigned to this replacement division. I think it was the seventy-sixth, I'm not sure. It was the division that would get these men as they would come over and give them some training before they sent them up. They had what they called a replacement camp. In other words, they had a big, central record office at Tours where they had a record of every man that was in the service.

- D: Tours, France?
- W: For awhile, yes, until I went to this clerk's school. See, I was listed as an office clerk, so they sent me to this clerk school.
- D: In the clerk school, what specific kind of training did you get?
- W: I got training on all the paperwork that they had in the Army. "Army paperwork" they called it.
- D: Did you keep any kind of records?
- W: We learned how to keep records of all the men that were in there and what they were doing.
- D: How did they keep track of all of these people, with so many people just sort of let loose on a continent? How did they manage to keep those records?
- W: In Tours, they had a big, central records office and they had hundreds of men working in there on these. They had your complete record of what you were doing in civilian life. It was really efficient.
- D: How soon did the records department find out about the men who were lost or killed in action? How soon did it take the records department to get their records finalized and to take care of things?
- W: I couldn't tell you that. I don't know how they did it.
- D: You don't suspect it would be a very long time, do you?
- W: I couldn't tell you. Evidently, it would be reported by the company commanders.
- D: And just work back?
- W: And work back some way.
- D: During your stay in France, working in the capacity that you've mentioned, what was a typical day like, right on the job? Did you have any free time?
- W: Oh yes, we, at this clerk school, had three men that were instructors. We would do training in the morning and then we would have this school in the afternoon and instruct these new men on how to handle this paperwork. We would have the evenings off and, of course, Saturdays off. We did quite a bit of drilling to keep in shape. After the armistice, there wasn't too much to do. Then on about the first of December,



we didn't do much but drill to keep in shape. We had football games and basketball games and any kind of training to keep us in shape. That's all we did.

D: You said before that you didn't get much opportunity to get around to the countryside and sort of sightsee.

W: No. No, you couldn't get away. You had to be around your camp. You couldn't get out and you had to get a pass to get into town or anyplace that you wanted to go.

D: So you really didn't have that much freedom then to get around?

W: No.

D: Okay. Did you get into any areas at all where you were actually out in the field?

W: No.

D: You were strictly in office work. Okay. You had mentioned to me, in a previous conversation, that you had come in contact with some German prisoners. Would you describe what happened there and how you happened to come in contact with them?

W: Well, I brought a group of them back with me when we went out with these men at one time. Then they had a German prison camp and I used to go over there and stand around and listen to what they were talking about. See, I could understand a little of it. They seemed to be happy and enjoying it because they were getting good food, and they seemed to be well pleased to be out of the war, to tell you the truth.

D: Did you have any occasion to talk to any of our men that had been to the front and had fought up there?

W: No, not too much. No, when they went up there, after the armistice was signed, they stayed and kept on going into Germany, you know, in the Army occupation. They didn't come back to us at all.

D: When you went into the service, did you go with the idea that you were going to be in the fighting forces?

W: Yes. Sure.

D: Were you disappointed that you ended up in the clerk's end of it?

W: No, I wasn't too much. I was satisfied where I was

at. Not that I was afraid of it, but it was just the way things worked out. That's the way it had to be. You didn't have anything to say about where you were going or what you were doing.

D: Did your clerical branch have any contacts with the French Army?

W: No.

D: Nothing whatsoever? Okay. Mr. Wormer, what rank were you when you were in the service?

W: Corporal.

D: You reached corporal?

W: Yes.

D: Who was your commanding officer at the time that you were in France?

W: Captain Eckert.

D: You don't happen to remember his first name, do you?

W: No, I don't.

D: What was Captain Eckert like? Was he a good man to work with?

W: Very fine. He was a very fine man, yes he was.

D: Was he a West Point officer?

W: I couldn't tell you that. No, I think he was formerly a National Guardsman.

D: How would you describe your relationship with him?

W: It was very good. Very good.

D: Was there a military relationship between the men who worked in your office and the officers, or was it a boss-employee type of relationship?

W: Well, it was a friendly relationship. The captain was very friendly with us and the fact that he gave me the chance to come home with him made me feel that he was pretty good to me that way.

- D: What do you mean he gave you the chance to come home with him? Would you explain that?
- W: Well, the Army of occupation was going into Germany and ordinarily, men would be transferred to some company that would go up there. He was going back to his original outfit, which was the Forty-first Division. He told me then, "If you want to go home, I think I can take you home with me. I can have you transferred to my division and take you home with me," which he did.
- D: Did you have any contact with him or anybody else after the war was over?
- W: No, I didn't. He lived in Montana. The forty-first was a western division.
- D: Oh, he was from the Forty-first Division?
- W: Yes. That was North and South Dakota and mountain Montana. It was a western outfit.
- D: I see. You were over there at the time that the armistice was signed, correct?
- W: Right. Yes.
- D: What kind of things were going on at the time that the armistice was signed? Was there a big celebration?
- W: Well, yes, there was. We were situated outside of this little town, and after the armistice was signed and we knew it was signed, why, of course, we all went into town and everybody was in there celebrating.
- D: How did most of the men feel? Were they anxious then to get home?
- W: Yes, they were anxious to get home after that.
- D: Did any of the men that you were with eventually go with the Army of occupation?
- W: Oh, I couldn't tell you that. I think some of them did, yes.
- D: Did you know how they felt about that? Were they curious to get up to Germany?
- W: No. No. Of course, if I had to do it over again, I would have gone into Germany because I had relatives who lived pretty close to the border of Germany and France, and I would have liked to have visited them.

But you know, I was anxious to get home and I didn't want to put anymore time in over there than I had to. It would have been a chance for me to get into Germany at that time.

D: Mr. Wormer, after the armistice was signed and the war was over, what happened to you then? Where did you go?

W: Well, I stayed at this clerk school until about the middle of December. I don't know why they kept it going that long, probably because there was a lot of work to be done in the offices. Then all we did was put the time in until we were ready to come home. We would go out and drill and take hikes and play football and basketball, anything to keep in shape.

D: Where did you leave France from?

W: Breste.

D: Breste. Then did you come directly to the United States or did you stop in England again?

W: No, we came directly across to Hoboken, New Jersey.

D: Was your trip back any different from your trip going over?

W: Oh, it was a rough trip, very rough. In fact, there were days when we couldn't even keep dishes on the table to eat, it was so rough.

D: Were you up on deck much during the voyage home?

W: Well, the first two weeks were really bad. The first week was bad and then it calmed down and we could sit up on the deck in the sunshine and it was fine.

D: I asked you before about the trip going over and if there was anything that you noticed about the men, if they anticipated anything or if they seemed to be worried about what was going to happen to them. You didn't seem to feel that there was anything you could say.

W: No. Everybody seemed to be taking things as they came. That's all you could do.

D: Did you notice any change in the men's attitude on the way home from the attitude on the way over? Were they pretty much the same?

- W: Well, of course, it was a different outfit coming home than went over. When I was going over I was mostly with the men from around my part of the country. Coming home I was with the western division. Those western fellows didn't think there was anyplace like the west. They thought there was no place like the west.
- D: Did many of the men who came over from France to the United States with you after the war was over serve at the front or were they mostly men from your area?
- W: They were mostly from our area. The Forty-first Division wasn't a combat division, it was a training division.
- D: Okay. Thank you ~~very~~ much, and if at some time in the future you would think of anything else that you would want to add, why, please contact me.
- W: Well, as I told you, I don't have too much to add to it because I didn't have too much experience over there.
- D: Well, what you've given me is really fine. It will add quite a bit.
- W: Well, I hope it helped some anyway.
- D: Okay. Thanks a lot.

END OF INTERVIEW