

Downers Grove Reporter

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"And The Star Spangled Banner Forever Shall Wave, O'er The Land of The Free and The Home of The Brave."



LETTERS FROM DOWNERS GROVE SOLDIER BOYS

JOHN KIDWELL'S IMPRESSIONS OF FRANCE

Somewhere in France, October 8, 1918.

The Downers Grove Reporter, Dear friends:

The Downers Grove Reporter is one of the things I anxiously await for and the contents of which are greedily devoured. It is one of the strong links between me and my home and you.

On one occasion, not long ago, I was especially glad to receive it. We had been expecting mail for about two weeks but on account of our frequent and seemingly incessant moving, our mail was greatly delayed. At last it came, or to be exact, very little of it came, and my share of it was the Downers Grove Reporter. Under these circumstances, I assure you, its news was very eagerly read. And when I have finished with my copy there are many others who read it, so in a way Downers Grove is becoming very well known in France.

France, itself, is rich in natural beauty. Many people are of the opinion that it greatly resembles our New England states. However, I think its hills, valleys and many small streams, look very much like central Missouri, and I have seen places here that are almost duplicated in that state. Its trees, particularly, its pines are the same, the only difference I think being in the color of the soft sandstones, they being white here, while in Missouri they seem a reddish brown.

But France is changed from its former self, there is not one corner of it that does not in some way bear the stain of war. In the sea coast town in which we landed we could read in the faces of the inhabitants, of the horrors of war. The cost was silently expressed in the black that every woman wore and most dramatically told by the many refugees who swarmed the town.

The story of the refugee is a sad one, and most of them arrive at some place of safety without one earthly belonging except what they wear and carry away. Families become separated; some of them tell harrowing tales of how some member of their family was detained by the invading Hun and how all their property was pilfered and destroyed. And now in their new location, they make their living from the American troops, who they look upon as their wealthy saviors. Many times they take advantage of us and charge exorbitant prices, on account of the universal opinion that we are actually made of money.

About six or eight weeks ago, we were moved from the English front to a portion of our own sector; and here for the first time, I saw for myself real warfare. I am seeing it now and am convinced that I have seen enough. In fact all the souvenir I want of this war, is the memory of the many things I see every day. "Sourvening" is quite an occupation and the prisoners are relieved of their belongings before they get any distance from the line.

In coming to the line, I saw the real devastated condition of France, just behind the lines. We had moved twice in one week, each time moving a little closer to the front. The third time we marched directly into the front line. The night was very dark and the road seemed very quiet, being devoid of all transport and there not being a sound anywhere to break the silence. Quite suddenly the road seemed to become a kind of a sunken highway, with camouflage built up on the banks, on either side. Quite as suddenly we came once more out upon open ground and as I heard some one say that we were in No Man's Land, I looked around and agreed that we were in some kind of land the

likes of which I had never seen before.

It seemed a place stripped of every thing except the ground and the sky. God's creation and man's work lay in ruins. A few piles of bricks and stones was all that seemed of a once peaceful village, and the trees, what was left of them, stood up like bare monuments in some cemetery. Not a leaf was left and hardly a branch, and in many cases the trunks of the trees had been blown to pieces. Long since the civilians have left this part of the country, and will not return until the war is over, and then they will begin the enormous task of rebuilding and cleaning out the country.

I have seen many things here that I shall never forget and the other night I saw something that will stay with me perhaps longer and more vividly than anything else.

I was returning from a twenty-four hour session at the front and was walking down the dark camouflage road, as quickly as possible so I might get back to my dugout, get something to eat and lay down and rest my weary bones. It was about 10 o'clock at night, and I stumbled over the irregular road which had been shelled at regular intervals for the past three weeks.

The road led up to the top of a very steep hill where it turned sharply to the right. I made the turn and then stood astounded at the spot. The hillside and valley was ablaze with lights! It looked like an enormous city, each little group of lights might be a small village, that had been there before the war. But what was it and what did it mean? I didn't know and cannot understand the reason for it. The only explanation for it was that it was new troops camped for the night there, and in ignorance of their proximity to Jerry's line and not realizing what a splendid target for either artillery or bombs their lights made.

I think this struck me so forcibly because it was reminiscent of what that roadway might have been in years gone by and it made me think of our own roads and the surrounding country with its blinking lights in the distance.

The boys over here are accomplishing great things and all of us hope that we shall soon be home to tell you ourselves of the many things happening in France.

Sincerely,

John F. Kidwell, Jr.

WARREN WELLS TELLS OF HIKE

France, Sept. 17th, 1918.

My own dear Dad:

I am hardly in a mood for writing letters but have absolutely nothing else to do for the next few hours except sit in an old orchard in the shade and pretend I am watching some horses.

Since I wrote Mother last week the weather has cleared up and we have enjoyed a week of much needed rest.

We moved back into the big dugout and stayed there till yesterday. 'Twas a regular place too, and all electric lighted. Yesterday noon six of us were told to make up our packs and report to Regimental Headquarters. Which we did and here we are. Taking care of a bunch of new horses which are soon to be divided among the different companies. Then we shall go back with ours and will probably be here for a week or ten days.

It seems as though the war is a long ways off these days and at times it really is hard to realize that we are in truth but a stone's throw from Germany.

Sunday last was a beautiful day and another fellow and I went for a hike early in the morning, right beyond the hill on which we were camp-

ed was another and much higher hill and we went up and over the hill to see what was on the other side. When we reached the top we had to keep well under cover as we were but a few kilos from the front and Jerry could have seen us plainly. It was well worth the risk though, because the view was simply wonderful. In the foreground was a beautiful valley through which a well known river wound its course and then disappeared among the distant hills. On a bare slope, which rose gradually from the opposite side, was plainly visible a vast net work of trenches much like a huge spider-web and presumably the front line. Here and there could be distinguished a small patch of green timber and away off to the left on what seemed to be the highest point of land in sight we could just make out the ruins of what had once been a beautiful castle. Now, however, the French say it is a veritable nest of Fritz machine guns. Then stretching in a complete half circle beyond the most distant ridge was a string of Fritz's observation balloons, nine in all and distinctly visible from those nearest and almost opposite us to those farthest away to the right and left. These balloons were warning enough to lay low because there are sharp eyes glued to a long range telescope in these greenish grey sausages and they can see for many miles.

Started back for camp so as not to miss dinner and on the way we simply had to stop and pick some wild blackberries. They were very plentiful thru the woods and surely did taste good. Ate our fill and then picked a cap full to eat for desert at dinner. They were dead ripe and very sweet and would fall off into our hands at the slightest touch. Only took about a half an hour for us to pick a cap full and then we beat it for camp.

Spent the entire afternoon doing bunk fatigue and after supper went down the road about three kilos to the next town to see some movies. The theatre which was an old barn fixed up for the purpose, was packed to the door and, of course, the audience was entirely composed of soldiers. The pictures were very good and a little orchestra (drum, violin and piano) furnished plenty of lively music.

I understand that we are to have a little vaudeville show here tonight too. These are what put spirit into us, I'll tell you and fill us with the determination to lick this bloody Hun. Lick him good and lick him soon and the sooner the better.

Must close now. Getting late and we have to feed and water 68 horses before mess. Hope to have some mail soon. Our last was received on Sept. 7th. Bushels of real love to you Dad, to Mother and to the girls.

As always,
Your son, Warren (Wells.)

MICHALEK CAPTURES 18 GERMANS

Somewhere in France, Sept. 17, 1918.

Dear Sister: I have received your letter and was glad to hear from you. I am well and hope you are the same. I am sorry I couldn't write to you sooner but we have been to the front and have just come back. We went over the top but I got back this time all right. I expect you heard of the great American drive, I was in it. This time I paid the Germans for what they did to me in June. I'm sure I killed four of them and shot at many others but there was so many men shooting that I couldn't tell who got them. I've captured 18 and have the picture of four which I am sending to you. I have a German watch, an Officer's belt and this fountain pen. The pen belonged to a German Officer but it is mine now.

We captured one big town and advanced a few kilometers. You should have seen the battle field, it was filled with dead Germans, equipment, big guns and everything else. I have the picture of it. The Germans had the town since 1914. You should have seen the French civilians kiss us. They were quite a few of them in the town and told us the Germans treated them like prisoners. At first they thought we were British troops.

I give my regards to all at home. Good-bye.

John S. Michalek.

WILSON DAVID WAITING TO SAIL

Brooklyn, N. Y. Nov. 1st, 1918.

Dear Mr. Staats: I am getting the Reporter regular and am surely glad to get it for it always brings good news from home but it hasn't recently on account of the flu. Well, I have something to say about the flu itself, its an awful bad habit to get.

I have now met two of our Downers Grove boys in the Navy since I have been on the Receiving ship. They are William Brady and John Kropp. I guess you know the Kropp boy that worked at the Dicke Tool Company last summer.

As I have forty-eight hours leave I guess I will spend it knocking around our little village here, but keeping as far away from the bad

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flu habit as I can. Have seen a great deal of New York now but I have still more to see. Went down to New Jersey after the munitions plant had blown up and it looked as if it had been bombarded by 16 inch shells for a week. I am going through the New York American some day when I have time and see how they run off the papers with their large press.

I am still waiting to sail. Have waited long enough now but as it is getting cold on the high seas now, I am not so anxious.

From your old devil,
Wilson B. David.

A. F. JOHNSON TAKES PISTOL INSTRUCTION

Camp Logan, Texas, October 31st, 1918.

Dear Sir: Just a few lines to let you know am getting along very nicely here. The weather is very changeable and last Sunday it was so cold we had to wear our overcoats all day and Monday it got warmer and has been all week so far. We are getting more work piled on us now since we have a new company commander and we are taking instruction in the automatic pistol. Have to take it all apart, piece by piece and put it together again. We expect to go out on the rifle range soon and see what kind of marksmen we will make. Have been watching the casualty lists in the paper each day and in the Houston Chronicle of Oct. 28th, I see Frank Gregory's name from Downers Grove in the list of wounded. Did not know whether you had heard of it before or not so I enclose the piece which I clipped out of the paper.

Get the Reporter each week and read the letters from the boys across the pond with interest. They are expecting 8000 new men in camp the 5th of next month and there may be some from Camp Grant.

Will have to close as we have to go and play for mounting of guard in a short while. Best regards.

A. F. Johnson.

PLUMB WANTS TO MEET THE KAISER

A. E. F. France, October 5th, 1918.

Dearest Mother: Just a few lines, hoping they will find you well as they leave me fine and dandy.

We have been having very disagreeable weather, raining nearly every day. It is very muddy, but you see that it doesn't stop our progress. The cooties and rats are enjoying my company more and more as the days go by. We had a little fun the other night, one of the new men came in our dugout to sleep, one of the boys had a radium watch, he held one finger over the dial making it look like

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a pair of eyes. The new guy claims there is a rat in our dugout as big as a dog.

The country is sure torn up around here. There is not a square foot of ground but what it is a shell hole. I cannot tell you where I am. Boys who are not in the immediate war zone can mention the name of towns they are in.

You have mentioned the name of a large town close to us many times in the early days of the war.

I am encouraging a heavy truck over shell torn roads and under shell fire hauling ammunition and rations. I have seen many exciting times and hard times but would sooner be with an artillery battery than to haul shells because Fritz shoots at us and we don't have a chance to shoot back, but we'll get them. I am enclosing a couple of pieces of the wings of a German airplane which was shot down a few days ago when the square head came over to see if they had done enough

damage to a first aid hospital.

The American Red Cross, Salvation Army and K. C. are the three organizations the boys look for. The Y. M. C. A. is doing good work in Paris but we are not fighting there. I was made a first class private a few weeks ago, so get more wages now.

I received a letter from a girl in Algona, Iowa, who is a nurse now. She said she was leaving Iowa for France shortly, and went on to say that she hoped to meet me in France, but I be darned if I want to meet a nurse, I'd rather meet the Kaiser. I cannot fancy that old shrapnel in my system and be singing, "I don't want to get well." Ha! Ha!

I have nothing more to say so will conclude for this time. Good-bye Mother.

Your loving son,
Fred (Plumb)
(Other soldier's letters on page 7)