

Life of a Soldier Narrative

Will McGuirt was an ordinary man who had an extraordinary experience as an American soldier in World War I. He was born on September 18, 1894 in rural North Carolina. McGuirt went to church every Sunday with his family, worked on their farm, and went to the local one-room school until the fifth grade, the highest grade the school offered. It is likely that he would have lived a lifetime within a fifty-mile radius of his hometown, but McGuirt's life changed forever when the United States declared war on Germany in April 1917 and joined the Allies: Britain, France, Italy, and Russia. McGuirt was called to serve in the U.S. Army and was soon on a ship to France with many other young men from his community, off to see places and things that he had never known existed.

McGuirt was a member of the 81st Division, 161st Infantry Brigade, 322nd Infantry Regiment, Company J. Known as the "Wildcat" Division, it was mostly comprised of individuals from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Florida. The men adopted a wildcat silhouette as a shoulder patch, one of the first shoulder insignia worn by troops in the American Expeditionary Forces.

The division began the twelve-day trip from New York to England on July 30, 1918. For McGuirt and the other local boys, this was their first time on a boat and, when the troops landed in England, it was the first time they had been to another country. From England they proceeded to France, where most American troops would serve. They received several weeks of training before the division began to move to the vicinity of Bruyeres in the Vosges region of France.

On September 19 the 81st Division was sent to the St. Dié sector of the Vosges Mountain region. There, as part of the French Seventh Army, the division held what was considered a quiet front, although it fought off German trench raids and endured artillery bombardments. This area was important to the Germans because it protected the strategic iron ore centers of Metz and Briey. While serving in the St. Dié sector, the division suffered 116 casualties. The battle was the first large Allied offensive of the year against a carefully prepared German trench system. The clean cut victory of the Americans at St. Mihiel was a turning point in the war. On October 31, the 81st Division moved to the vicinity of Verdun for the purpose of participating in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive of the American First Army.

The 81st Division's infantry regiments attacked German lines on the morning of November 9. From the outset, the division encountered heavy machine gun and artillery fire; heavy fog and smoke hindered visibility. When, on the night of November 10, "Wildcat" Division commanders received no official confirmation of rumors that an armistice might be signed the next day, they planned a dawn attack on the main German trench line. The division attacked enemy trench positions north of Bois de Manheulles, slowly advancing through heavy fog and shell and machine gun fire. At 10:30 a.m., they began to fight their way through the barbed wire entanglements along the German main trench line where some Americans entered German trenches and many were either killed or pinned

down under enemy fire. At 11:00 a.m., the firing abruptly stopped when the Armistice of November 11, 1918 ended hostilities. During the short time the 81st Division was in combat, 248 soldiers were killed and 856 wounded.

Following the armistice, the 81st Division marched 175 kilometers to a rest area. It took a great effort to get all of the American troops back to the United States and after the war, McGuirt's division remained in France for more than five months. The soldiers grew accustomed to life with the French villagers. The Allied Expeditionary Forces set up schools for soldiers to attend and the YMCA helped establish different forms of entertainment including sports teams, a theatre group, and even a "Wildcat" newspaper.

When McGuirt and his unit were finally given orders to leave, many were saddened as they left the new friends they had made in France. They were not only leaving behind the local people they had come to know, but they were also leaving behind many fellow soldiers that had not survived the war.

McGuirt returned home to North Carolina after being released from the Army on June 25, 1919. He married Ona Mae Griffin, a young woman from his community. He and his brothers played music, mostly country music and hymns, on Saturday nights at a country store. People would gather, visit, and share news.

Some of the young men who had fought in the war realized there might be new opportunities in addition to life on the family farm. Cotton mills were springing up in North Carolina and in nearby Fort Mill, South Carolina. Employment at the mill included a house and was a good job for men like McGuirt who had mechanical aptitude and could learn to fix looms and other equipment in the mill. Ona later said that she cried the night before they left their country town, where she and Will grew up and where everyone they knew also lived. But Will had ambition after he returned from the war. He knew there were other opportunities for him besides farming.

Will McGuirt died on January 23, 1983. There are only three things listed on his gravestone: his name, the years of his life, and that he was a soldier in World War I.