

# Primary Source Excerpts Handout

**Robert J. Laplander, *Finding the Lost Battalion, Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America's Famous WWI Epic* (Waterford, WI: American Expeditionary Foundation, 2006) (excerpts).**

## **Private McCollum (32), p. 204**

"...We were given orders to cut a path through the underbrush...much to our surprise, we (were not) fired upon. We came to a bend in the ravine (and) could see why we had come through without being molested. In a little clearing in front of us was what remained of a large building...One of our shells had made a direct hit on the roof...Hardly had we reached this opening when we were strafed with machine gun and sniper fire. There was no place for us to go except straight up the hillside... Quickly we climbed to a ridge and safety near the crest of the hill..."

## **Private Julius Langer of Company H (44), p. 272**

"I was alone in the hole I dug. I had only a mess kit spoon and a bayonet to dig with, but it is wonderful how fast one can dig when bullets are whistling around. There was dirt flying in all directions for a few minutes and it was everybody for themselves."

## **Lt. Eager, (161, 234), p. 272**

"The lieutenant in charge of G Company...had dug him out a nice fox hole and he was sitting down there and it looked like he was safe and Lt. Harrington, who went up there with me, and I were standing there talking to him. He was sitting down in his foxhole with rock piled up in front of him, which he had dug out in digging his foxhole and it looked like good protection. While we were standing there a German grenade thrown from above the road on top of the hill...came down there and landed right on the rocks and just cut his face to pieces. Lieutenant Harrington got a slug (sic) through the shoulder out of it too (but) I did not get a scratch although I was standing just as close as any of them...I took over the company (G) from then on, being the ranking officer..."

## **Lt. Wilhelm, (20), p. 295**

"I took ten men and worked for a hundred and fifty yards to see if there was a possible chance for the company advancing between the machine gun firing from the foot of the hill and the infantry company above us.... After five of these men had been shot, I determined that this was not feasible and started back toward the remainder of the company, only to find that the Germans had swung down in between myself and the rest of the company. We were cut off...The only thing left for us was

to head straight up the hill...We had (only) advanced 5 or 6 yards (when) we found that there were Germans all around us. They were shouting to one another and evidently had some idea we were in the vicinity, so we crawled into thick underbrush and lay there all during that day.

A little path...evidently lead to a German gun position...for during the day the Germans were passing...so close we could hear what they said. After dark, we decided it would be much safer to work back in smaller groups...in the general direction of the American lines. It took us from 8.00pm to 12.00am that night to go an eighth of a mile.

Directly in front of us were three stretches of barbed wire 30 yards across, protected by machine guns...We started working through this wire, our progress being necessarily slow as every time a flare went up we would have to stand perfectly rigid until it had died out. They fired frequently with machine guns, searching the wire for any enemy that might be there...As luck would have it, we got through safely...to our own posts."

**Private John, Company A (220), p. 301**

"My buddy and I were lying in our little...foxhole, keeping watch of the Germans coming in behind us. They were hollering as they were passing through an open space in the timber. I told him that the next time one came out, I was going to cut loose. We weren't the only ones who had the same idea. My gun barrel got so hot I couldn't touch it with my bare hands. They didn't scare us as much as they thought they would..."

**Private Sydney Smith (256), p. 302**

"When I got to him, the bullet had come straight down his rifle barrel and took both the sights off and hit him right in the temple. He was still alive and every time he would breathe, a bubble of blood would raise on the side of his head. I couldn't get him up out of the mud and water; he'd have had the cloths shot off him in a little bit. I had to just let him lay there in the mud all that time...But he was still laying there alive when they came through there days later and took us out of there."

**Lt. Griffin, Co H – writing to his wife (20, 106), p. 314**

"The picture I have of you has a hole in it from a piece of shell. I have four bullet holes in my overcoat and my trousers were torn to pieces by a grenade, but I only have my knees cut besides the bullet in my shoulder. The strap to my field glasses was cut by a bullet, my gas mask was cut in half by shrapnel, and my helmet has a dent from a bullet. But they did not get me..."

**Captain Rainsford, first glimpse of ravine (103), p. 345**

"A steep and narrow ravine, its sides choked with brush and wire, the crests to the right and left

held with machine guns, rifle and hand grenades, a long distance machine gun fire sweeping down its length from the north and the first ranging shells wailing in from across the hills. Roncesvalles or Thermopylae may have looked so to their assaulting columns, grim in the sunset light; and the thought rose unbidden to the mind – what a place for men to die.”

**Private Joseph Lehmeier, (44), p. 358**

“John J. Knettel and Joseph Materna...and myself were in a dugout and a German grenade lit on Joe’s back. I grabbed it and threw it back and about 20 feet away from us, it went off. Joe got his ear cut and I got my head full of small particles from it, which made my head bleed considerably. If I had not thrown it back, the three of us would have been killed.”

**Private Minder describes action in the Ravine d’Argonne in a letter back home (37), p. 369**

“We all had to go up and help the infantry on a raiding party...(so) we went over to the left about a hundred yards...mounted our guns a little higher up on the side of the hill and were told to shoot over their heads whenever we saw a flash from the other side of the valley. That was where the Germans were and also on top of the hill. The infantry started off and in about five minutes little red flashes like fireflies could be seen all over the place. They even seemed to come from the top of the trees...(and) every time we saw a flash, we sent a few shots over in that general direction (and) were very busy changing the gun from one point to another. (But) in a half hour it was all over...”

**2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Clarence Davis, 308<sup>th</sup> (29), p. 392**

“We were subjected to terrific machine gun fire. The fire of our own artillery did not seem to damage the wire much. They could not find it among the trees. The green men fought remarkably well; you never saw such bravery. But unfortunately, their lack of knowledge of automatic rifles soon exhausted our supply of ammunition as they fired whole clips at a burst and were soon within ten feet of the German’s strongly entrenched position with our ammunition gone. We took what we could from our fallen comrades and looked in vain for supporting platoons. (But) instead of supporting platoons, Germans came around behind us as well as in front. My knowledge of the Argonne drive from here on is hearsay, for I was captured and sent to a German hospital...”

**Unnamed soldier (21), p. 395**

“Bullets flayed the soil in straight streaks, breaking the stiffened limbs of corpses, perforating and ripping up the bodies, plunging into the vacant faces, bespattering the dried out eyes. We feel the heavens burst over our heads and the earth opening under our feet. Everything is swept away by the blasts of a tornado of projectiles.”