

Fort Stevens Review

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Winter 2019

Three Issues: Winter, Spring, Summer

“The World Must Be Made Safe For Democracy”

Story by D. Lindstrom

The Winter and Spring newsletters for 2018 carried parts one and two of a three-part story outlining the experiences of John Ferguson and the 65th Artillery, Coast Artillery Corps during World War I. The series was interrupted by an article outlining the US Army's Spruce Division which appeared in the Summer 2018 newsletter. (The afore mentioned newsletters are available on the FOOFs web site.). This story is part three and the conclusion of the series.

John was a member of 11th Company, Coast Artillery, Oregon National Guard from Coos Bay, Oregon. Once war was declared on Germany, and the formation of the 65th Coast Artillery began, John and others traveled to Fort Stevens, Harbor Defenses of the Columbia, to prepare for being shipped out to France.

The 65th was made up of men from Washington, Oregon, and California. Those from Oregon and Washington converged on the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia and soon traveled by train to San Francisco where they joined the California troops. From there, they sailed through the Panama Canal, up the East Coast and on to France.

Men of the 65th CAC were grouped in three battalions. Batteries A and B made up the 1st Battalion. The regulars were from San Diego and the rest from the California National Guard. Battery C of the 2nd Battalion was manned by Oregon National Guardsmen and Battery D consisted of regular Coast Artillerymen from the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia. The 3rd Battalion was largely made up of men from Oregon who formed up Battery E, and Washingtonians largely made up Battery F. In total, the Harbor Defenses of the Columbia contributed 31 officers and 820 troops to the 65th Coast Artillery Corps regiment. Once in France, essential officers and a few others were assigned to the 65th, but for the most part the troops were all from the Pacific Coast.

As rumors of an armistice grew rampant, John's heavy artillery training program fell into disarray. On or about November 12, 1918 he boarded a train for St. Dizier and the nearby Doulevant le Chateau, located in northeast France, just south of the front lines. Once on the train, the troops were uncertain if the armistice had been signed and if the war was over, or if they were headed to the war zone. As the train poked along, pulling off on sidings for passing trains, John and his companions watched for any news of the rumored armistice. They soon finished the coffee and sandwiches furnished by the Red Cross and hunger set in. At one stop John and others set off down the road in search of something to eat. Stopping at one farmhouse they asked for food, having none, they walked on in search of another one. As they continued along, they met a very excited, elderly lady shouting that the war was over! (The Armistice was signed on November 11, and their encounter with the elderly lady was on the 13th). Soon after, John and his companions found a café filled with excited French soldiers and luckily something to eat! In reality, John was disappointed that he didn't see action and wasn't able to put his training to good use.

The train arrived in St. Dizier that evening. A huge meal was provided and American and French soldiers paraded with flags. John wrote, *“the townspeople were howling and whooping with pure joy. The public square was decked out*

in flags and all the lights were blazing for the first time in four years.” After a night’s sleep, John and others headed for the nearby Doulevant Chateau.

Once John became a 2nd Lieutenant and completed most of his heavy artillery training, he was assigned to the 54th Artillery CAC made up of the National Guard from the State of Main. However, he was straining to rejoin the 65th which was returning from the front lines. They were slowly arriving, by truck train, at nearby Donjeux for billeting.

While performing his duties at the Doulevant Chateau, orders came down for the First Army to wear a black “A” on the left arm near the shoulder with red and blue stripes between the legs of the “A”. So, he sought out a small French seamstress shop to work on his uniforms. Later, John ruefully wrote, *“We will all be decorated up by the time we get home even if we never got into line or did anything to win the war.”*

After a few more days passed, the 65th CAC was all settled at nearby Donjeux. John, keeping track of their progress, took some time off, went up to visit Batteries C and D, and spent the night with Lieutenant Clippert (see part two) who by now was the transportation officer for the 2nd Battalion. While there he was asked if he wanted to return to the 65th, and John gave out an enthusiastic YES! In a few days he headed to Rouvray, a small village near where the 65th was billeting, and rejoined the service command. John was delighted with his billet as he slept in a *“great big French bed!”*

As it was, the armistice abruptly ended a war that many Americans were eager to continue, including elements of the 65th. However, men were now waiting around for the powers that be to figure out how to get some two million Americans back to the USA from France. As the First Army did not want idle hands, the commander of the regiment Colonel Kerfoot, issued a “schedule of instruction.” The orders included courtesy and saluting practice, artillery instruction, marching, and packing...for the trip home... Drivers were to receive instruction in the care of their vehicles, and battalion surgeons were to practice litter drill, carrying the wounded, and other professional duties. No doubt the fly on the wall heard many interesting comments about this development.

During this sojourn, John had plenty of work to do. Inventory of all “public property” had to be taken and recorded, and lists of men to be shipped back home were to be drawn up. Then there was the regiment’s payroll. John was driven in a White observation car to Souilly, General Pershing’s headquarters, which was located near the northern border. He was always impressed with rides in this type of vehicle. Anyway, he returned with \$50,000.00 cash.

Another issue was “vermin infestation” among the men and the need to delouse everyone’s clothing and blankets. It seems that World War I caused an obsession with bugs, especially lice. They were like a plague in the trenches and everywhere else. For the men, it meant taking their uniforms and blankets to large steam vats on wheels. This was not a perfect solution as the wool uniforms were now shrunk and within hours the lice reappeared.

Time was becoming of the essence as the 65th received orders they were to leave on December 20, for Brest, the embarkation site for the trip home. However, the delousing would not be finished by then. Consequently, the move to Brest was delayed until the 26th; then word arrived on December 22nd, that the delousing was finished.

John was happy about the delay, because he received some disturbing news about the billeting at Camp Pontanezen, Brest. Here they would wait for their ship to take them home. It had been raining for days and days and it was cold. The German prisoners were occupying the best accommodations, leaving tents on rain soaked ground for the American troops. Furthermore, John learned that boots were needed as mud was everywhere; the tents were on top of it, and the walkways were rivers of mud. How did such a situation develop? The best explanation is that all the planning and thought centered around getting the Americans “over there” with little thought on how to bring them home. Why Brest? Brest was the only deep water port on the west coast where ocean liners could anchor and sail directly to the United States. For the 65th CAC, getting there required a train ride across France.

On December 24, the 65th Artillery CAC boarded American boxcars while officers and staff were divided between three coaches, John among them. American boxcars? Somewhere along the line a few cramped and disliked French boxcars were replaced by new ones build to American specifications. They were still cold and hard riding, but the troops could stretch out on the straw covered floors...much preferred! The men even thought of them as “Pullmans”! They traveled over Christmas while it showed and had canned salmon, beans, and corned beef for dinner. Arriving on the 27th, the troops hiked the four miles from the rail head to Camp Pontanezen.

John wrote on the 28th that he was, *“In Brest, sitting in an old squad tent in Camp Pontanezen, mud was ankle deep and in some places worse...streets are rivers of mud.”* The information he received earlier was no exaggeration. When the men arrived, they were in good physical condition, but conditions at the camp began to take their toll. Sick calls rose from 12 to over 300 a day. For one thing, the available water for washing was run off from surrounding fields. Men filled the water wagons and from them the troops filled their canteens. The 65th CAC headquarters were affected too, and at times John found himself shouldering more responsibility than normal. Fortunately, the camp had a decent hospital, but at least four men, possibly more, died of disease before the regiment could leave for home.

Many officers were in a panic and afraid of losing control of the situation. Consequently, some were over bearing and threatening. In more than one instance entire regiments were ordered off their ship for home due so some infraction and marched back to camp for another month. In one of these cases, the quarter master complained that only a certain piece of paper work had not been done. John wrote, *"We are not allowed to criticize the powers that be on pain of having to stay longer."* John, ordinarily an easy going guy, expressed himself in the strongest of terms as to what he would do in just 24 hours if he had three or four stars. Later he wrote, *"The mud is beyond description absolutely and the camp as a whole is an absolute and utter crime. But why fret?"* Word did get back to Washington, and General Pershing made an effort to inspect the situation, but little was gained. In fact, Pershing said there never was a problem and blamed a disgruntled, court marshaled Major of spreading false rumors. He knew better.

A point that needs emphasizing is that the off quoted 65th CAC casualty list of "only" three killed and ninety nine wounded in combat does not include those who died of disease and other causes. John's diary notes that two died and another source indicates that four died of disease. Then, an article appearing in the Portland *Oregonian*, dated February 16, 1919 quoted a member of the 65th as saying that a "number of men" died of disease and other causes.

Conditions spurred John, and others, to insure that all of the paper work and records were ready in time for the 65TH CAC's departure. On December 28, 1918 John wrote, *"Just a year ago tonight, I worked till the small wee hours of the night pounding out SO #1 of the Coast Defense of the Columbia which transferred 787 men to the 65th. Tonight we are here in Brest working to bring the 65th back to the U.S."* (John's numbers are about one hundred less than what Marshal Hanft quoted in his book.)

On January 2, 1919 John dejectedly wrote, *"Still sitting here in the mud and don't know when we will leave."* The 65th had to wait another twelve days for orders to sail home. On Monday, January 13, they arrived and set the sailing time for the next day. This brought about fifteen hours of feverish work to get all the final paper work done. By 4:00 AM Tuesday morning, trucks arrived to pick up headquarters personnel, supplies, and records. Then the trucks headed for the docks. The troops, having "tramped" six miles in mud during a misty rain, arrived at the docks around 9:30 AM. Everyone was "herded" into a warehouse for inspection. Suddenly, things became touch-and-go. An unnamed general threatened to send the whole regiment back because some men had their overcoats unbuttoned and collars turned up; never mind that they had just marched in the rain with 90 pound packs. Then a Colonel, no doubt Colonel Kerfoot, took his turn. He was angry that some men didn't have an extra pair of shoes in their packs...Certificates stating that the quarter master refused to issue them made no difference. Thankfully, everyone calmed down and the men were allowed to board the lighters which took them out to the waiting ship, the HMS Haverford.

While the meals were "wonderful," John wrote that the Colonel was still *"Having a dozen fits a day."* He stormed around policing the ship, while threatening to relieve every battery commander and to get dishonorable discharges for the rest of the officers. It must have been too much; fatigue maybe? Hard to say. Suddenly he disappeared for a long while and was found to be heavily drinking.

Meanwhile, the troops were enjoying the smooth seas and plenty of entertainment. An orchestra and band were formed, a quartet emerged, and a female impersonator rocked the boat. The shows were in the dining room and frequent boxing matches took place on the deck. The only hiccup was the report of a floating mine, causing the ship to change course while a life preserver alert was issued.

As the ship took a southerly route past the Azores, the crossing took longer than usual. Finally, on the evening of January 29, 1919, after some sixteen days at sea, the Cape May light house was spotted on the New Jersey shore. The Haverford dropped anchor. The next day the ship sailed up the Delaware River and landed at Philadelphia. Thousands of people lined the streets as the troops marched to the train taking them to Fort Dix, New Jersey. Once again, the Red Cross saved the day by providing every seat on the train with a newspaper, lunch, and lots of cigarettes and tobacco.

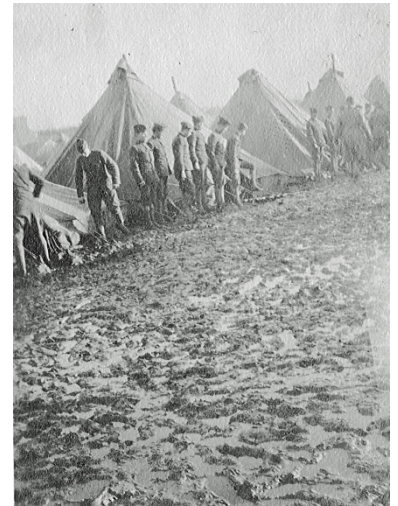
At Fort Dix, John was again immersed in paper work where five hundred men were transferred elsewhere. The *"rest (were) scheduled to travel to the Pacific Coast as a unit"* with the train divided between the three battalions. The train left Fort Dix on February 11, and made an overnight stop in Kansas City, Colonel Kerfoot's home town. Here the townspeople were treated to a grand parade and the troops were feted in grand style at the city's best hotel. The train arrived in Portland, Oregon on February 15, to another great reception. Perhaps it was in Portland where the rail cars carrying the California battalion were switched off and taken to San Diego. From Portland the train traveled to Seattle for more celebrations and parades, including Everett. The train finally arrived at Camp Lewis, now known as JBLM, on February 19. John was discharged on the February 20, 1919.

Regarding sources for this issue's article: Many thanks to the Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan who facilitated study of the Clippert Family Papers 1863-1962. The John Ferguson diary and the accompanying photos, unless noted, are located in the Fort Stevens State Park Archives, Oregon Parks and Recreation Department. The iconic Hanft book, [Fort Stevens](#), was most useful. Various web sites were also visited. The author takes full responsibility for any errors and omissions.

A Two Page Insert Follows With Photos Of The Trip Home. The Last Page Is Expanded For The Online Edition.



Above: Brest, France

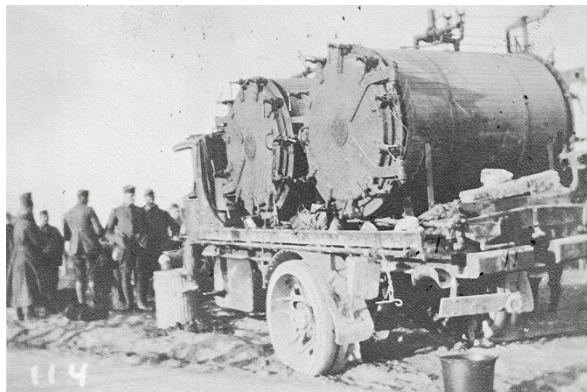


Left: American sized box cars taking troops to Camp Pontanezen, Brest France.

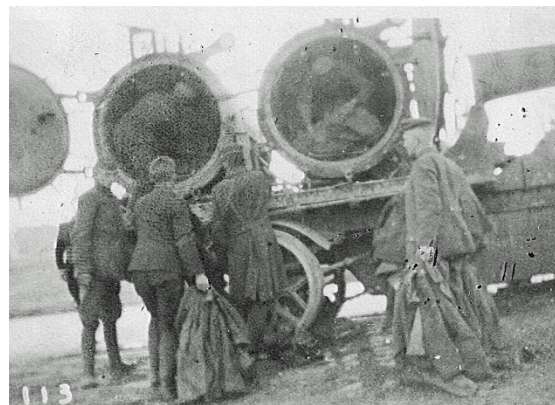


Above: The 65th CAC stands for inspection at Camp Pontanezen, in the mud.

Left: Troops line up for mess, In the mud.

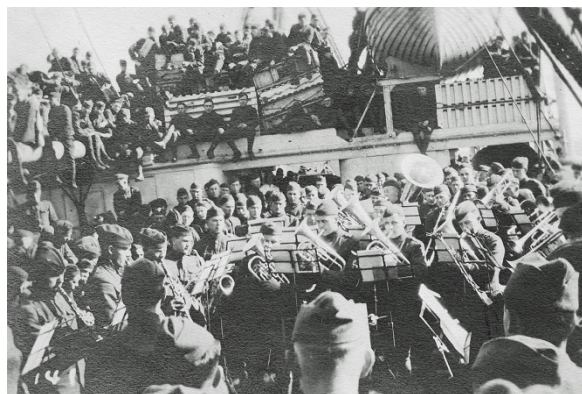


Below: Finally, the 65th boarded their "safe haven", the HMS Haverford, for home!



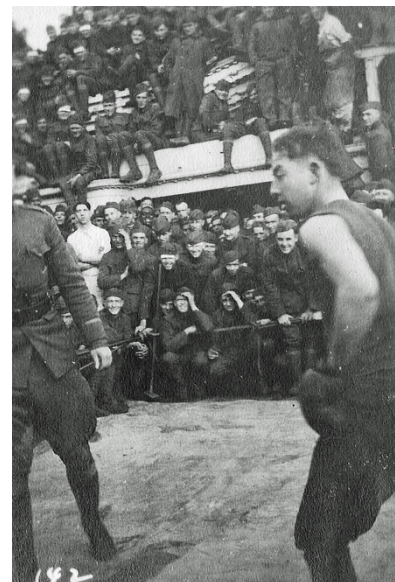
Left: The steam vats arrive to delouse the troops' bedding and uniforms.

Left: 65th CAC troops bring their personal effects to the vats for delousing. It is said the steam shrunk the uniforms and failed to kill the lice.



Left: The troops enjoy a concert on the HMS Haverford's deck.

Right: Boxing matches were organized aboard ship for the winner's purse and gambler's gain. Everyone had fun.





Left: Troops at Camp Dix, New Jersey, prepare to board the train for the Pacific Coast.



Right: The train arrives at The Dalles, Oregon



Great photo of the Red Cross on duty as the train arrives at Hood River, Oregon. Note the apples!

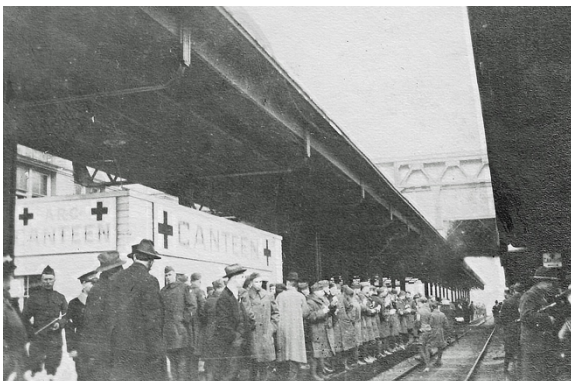


Once the train arrived at Union Station, Portland, Oregon it is assumed that here the cars for the First Battalion were switched for a train taking those from California to San Diego.



Above: After Portland, the train rolled into Seattle for yet another parade!

Below: Tacoma was the final welcoming stop. Afterwards, the train ride ended at Camp Lewis (JBLM).



From Union Station, the troops marched through Portland's downtown district to a wild and excited reception!



This Photo reveals the interior of the old earthworks as it appeared in 1917-18. In view is Battery Freeman which had two 6-inch guns and one 3-inch gun. It was built inside the parapets of the earthworks, not an uncommon thing to do. The tents in the background are behind the 3-inch gun. The space was used as a cantonment for the 65th CAC while waiting to be shipped out to France.



Corporal John Ferguson, the main character in this series, is seen sitting at his field desk in one of Battery Freeman's rooms. The battery was situated inside the old Fort Stevens earthworks. This photo was taken sometime between late 1917 and early 1918 while elements of the 65th CAC, of which John was a part, prepared at Fort Stevens to ship out for France. John felt disappointment at not getting to the front lines before the armistice was signed with Germany on November 11, 1918.

Upon arrival in Philadelphia from Brest, France on January 30, 1919, almost three months after the Armistice was signed, the *New York Times* published an article honoring the 65th Regiment, Coast Artillery. The regiment was credited with being the only "*organization of American troops to fire the British 9.2-inch howitzer in action.*" The regiment "*fired 15,000 tons of steel and explosives at five different points in the German line of defenses, all within a period of seventy days and nights.*" While the press admired the regiment's minimal losses of three dead and 99 wounded, there is evidence that some of the 65th also died of disease. Those exact numbers are unknown.

After the war, John returned to Coos Bay, opened an accounting firm, and married Gladys. They had three children. Later, he served on the board of directors for several large Oregon power companies. He died in 1960. One of sons, John, transcribed his father's diary.

Below is a sampling of Oregon's Secretary of State Office's compilation of statistics for **all** Oregonians who served in World War I.

Total in service: 44,166	Wounded: 1,100
Overseas service: 15,605	Killed in action: 367
Served in battle: 1,768	Died of other causes: 663