

Jessie Lincoln likewise never returned to Mount Pleasant and died in 1948.<sup>45</sup> The children of Jessie Lincoln Beckwith grew up in Chicago, Washington, D. C., and Manchester, Vt., having no connections with Mount Pleasant until 1965. In that year, her son, Robert Todd Lincoln Beckwith, visited Iowa Wesleyan College at the June Commencement to receive an honorary LL.D. degree.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>45</sup>McMurtry, *op. cit.*, 11.

<sup>46</sup>Haselmayer, *op. cit.*, 56.

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## AN IOWA DOUGHBOY'S VIEW OF WORLD WAR I

By **Joseph H. Peiffer**  
Edited by **Virgil J. Vogel**  
Chicago City College

The year 1968 marks the 50th anniversary of the participation of American soldiers in large scale campaigns of the first World War, since only token contingents arrived in France during the first year of the war. This event has attracted nothing like the attention which was devoted, a short while ago, to the centennial of the Civil War. We need not here seek the reasons for this phenomenon, but we can note the hard fact that the ranks of those two millions who crossed the sea "to repay the debt of Lafayette" are rapidly thinning. Most of them will undoubtedly carry with them, beyond all recall, priceless recollections of the events of 1918 which could illuminate for future generations what it was like to be a participant in the first large-scale modern war, in which technology played an important role, and which has left deep marks on the shape of today's world.

The books which describe the political, diplomatic, and military maneuvers of that war fill many shelves, and others continue to appear. What most of them lack, however, is a

picture of what the war looked like to a "buck" private in the trenches. Only the first hand impressions of the war as recorded by plain doughboys can convey any meaningful understanding of the horror and tragedy, the heroism and also the stupidity which the war brought forth.

Such a view of the war is presented here. It is in the form of a letter written after the war, from Bordeaux, France, on March 20, 1919, by Private Joseph H. Peiffer, to his first cousin and close friend, Michael E. Vogel (my late father), and his wife, Veda, my surviving mother, who then lived on a farm near Harper, in Keokuk County, Iowa. They had requested him to put down on paper his account of the war, a task he performed with notable skill and clarity. His letter was published in the *Sigourney Review* of May 7, 1919, and the *Keota Eagle*, of May 8, 1919.

The location of the original letter, if it survives, cannot now be determined. The newspaper clippings of the letter, not identified or dated,<sup>1</sup> were preserved by my mother in an album. I was born three days after Mr. Peiffer entered the army, and grew up when the memory of the war was still fresh. Many times as a boy I read those now yellowed and crumbling clippings and I believe that it is time to preserve from eternal loss the story that they tell. Modern methods of photoduplication have produced partly illegible results, due to their age and the dark blotches caused by the underlying adhesive. A few lines of the nearly complete copy, from the *Keota Eagle*, had been damaged beyond repair. Fortunately, Mr. Peiffer is still living, and I sent him a typed copy of the letter as pieced together from these clippings. He had preserved a copy of the letter, from which he supplied the missing lines and checked my copy for accuracy. Mr. Peiffer also answered in writing many questions put to him about his background and about the contents of the letter, which proved helpful in preparing this introduction and the footnotes.

<sup>1</sup>For positive identification of the sources of the clippings, and the dates of their publication, I am grateful to Mr. Dan J. Adams of the *Sigourney Review* and Mr. Roger A. Richardson, publisher of the *Keota Eagle*.

The experiences he recites were shared by many thousands of men, but relatively few were induced to commit their memoirs to writing. Mr. Peiffer's letter is a vivid and detailed account of his personal observations and experiences in the American Expeditionary Forces over a period of 13 months, of which about 11 months were spent overseas. (He remained in service ten more weeks, after the letter was written). The letter is written in clear repositorial style and, with the exception of a few colloquialisms and minor structural errors which would concern only a pedant, there is little to indicate that the author had only the elementary education which was customary for farm youths in the last decade of the 19th century and the first decade of the 20th. Except for one instance involving French orthography, the editors appear to have left the original version undisturbed. Likewise, we have made no changes except those which, for reasons of clarity, are placed in brackets.

Of the larger issues of the war he does not treat, but of the day-to-day trials and sufferings of a soldier in France he provides the vivid account of a discerning observer and participant. Though he describes bloody campaigns, he modestly omits mention of any spectacular personal role in these events, and it was only through interrogation that I obtained the information, supported by a document signed by his commanding officer, that he was awarded the wound chevron for injuries inflicted by shrapnel and mustard gas in the Meuse-Argonne operations on Oct. 27, 1918.

Joseph H. Peiffer was born on a farm near Keota, in Keokuk County, Iowa, on June 14, 1887, being one of a family of five sons and seven daughters of Joseph Peiffer, Sr., and Theresa Lutz. Both parents were American born and of German descent. Like my father, to whom the letter was addressed, he was educated in the Sts. Peter and Paul parochial school in Clear Creek township. He farmed in Keokuk County from 1910 to 1925, except for the time he was in service. (Joseph H. Peiffer is pictured at the right; the photograph was taken in 1937. He was the policeman at Jesup.)



According to his information,<sup>2</sup> he was inducted into the army on February 22, 1918, and was eventually assigned to Co. G, 325th infantry, 82d division. After brief periods in three widely separated training camps, he was shipped to England in late April, 1918. Following a short stay in England, his unit was sent to France, where they served under the English at the extreme northwest end of the front, near the Somme River. Soon thereafter they were shifted to the more violent sectors on the southeastern front where the French had long been embattled. In this region Pvt. Peiffer was wounded, only two weeks before the war's end. After the armistice on November 11, he remained in France nearly seven more months for "police duty." It was during this period that he wrote his account of the war, at Bordeaux. While there, he was given three weeks leave, during which time he visited the shrine at Lourdes, and travelled in Spain. He finally returned home on June 4, 1919, ten days prior to his 32d

<sup>2</sup>Pvt. Joseph H. Peiffer's service record is given in Earl William Wells, *Honor Rolls: Keokuk County, Iowa, 1917-1918* (Iowa City: Athens Print Shop, 1920), p. 115. It agrees with the information supplied by Mr. Peiffer except that the date of his induction is shown as one day later, Feb. 23. I am grateful to Mrs. Wayne L. Zehr, librarian of the Wilson Memorial Library, of Keota, for sending me a transcript from this book.

birthday.

After he quit farming in the mid-20s, he married Florence Brown of Jesup, Iowa, and the couple became the parents of two sons and three daughters. Mr. Peiffer was for several years a special deputy sheriff and police officer in Jesup, but the family moved to California about the time that World War II began in Europe. There he worked in the Belair shipyards at South San Francisco and in the Mare Island Navy Yard at Vallejo. He and his wife now live in "retirement" at Chehalis, Wash. Though he is past his 80th birthday, he reports that "I feel quite well and walk several miles a day, and have a little job at city hall a few hours a day."

#### Text of the Letter

Bordeaux, France, Mar. 20, 1919

Mr. and Mrs. Mike Vogel, Harper, Iowa.

Dear Cousins, Mike and Veda:

Just received your letter and am always glad to hear from you.

Time certainly does fly. It will be a year next Sunday that I received orders to leave Camp Dodge<sup>3</sup> for Camp Gordon.<sup>4</sup> We were at the latter place about two weeks when our division (82d) was ordered to Camp Upton, N.Y., where we were just a week when we were called at 2:30 one morning and ordered to roll packs. We took the train for New York (City). When we reached there we got off and marched direct(ly) to the boat. We steamed out of the harbor about 9 A.M. I watched the Statue of Liberty as we sailed out of sight and wondered if and when I would ever see it again.

<sup>3</sup>Near Des Moines, Iowa.

<sup>4</sup>Near Atlanta, Ga.

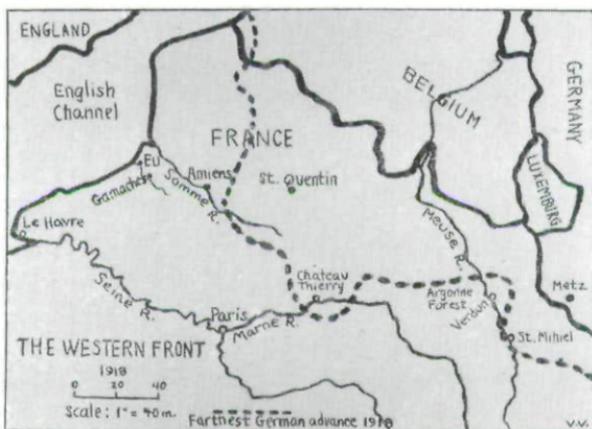
We were on an old English freight boat and it took eleven days to make the trip. On the third night, while I was on guard, I started feeding the fish. There were no lights and no one was allowed to smoke on deck. Guards were ordered to arrest anyone caught smoking. The officer of the day came along and flashed a light on me and asked me my general orders, but I was too sick to even answer him. The 8th day we were attacked by submarines but they did not appear above the water. There certainly was some excitement for awhile and we were all grabbing for our life preservers and making a rush for the decks. There were five depth bombs dropped and they gave such a shock it almost felt like the boat was crushed. We took a round about way in order to keep out of the danger zone. I certainly felt relieved when we sighted land again. It was about 4 A.M. when one of the boys who slept next to me and who was on guard that night came down and told me to get up and that we had reached land, but it proved to be only Scotland that we were passing. Later in the day we passed Ireland and got to Liverpool, England, at 7 that evening. Next morning we landed and boarded the train for Winchester. Here we got cleaned up and on May 11th we went to London for a parade. We received a royal reception as the train pulled into Waterloo Station in London. We were met by many thousands of people. Then we paraded through the heart of the city and from there to Buckingham palace. We marched at attention all the time. I suppose you know what that means. Not even allowed to say hello! — or to smile at those pretty little English girls. About all you could hear them say was "Smile, Sammie, smile." I presume they meant "the worst is yet to come," and it did.

At 1 P.M. we had lunch and refreshments and had the afternoon free. We went around in the city to see the sights and were invited to their homes. We had a nice time that day. We went back to Winchester that evening and the next day went to South Hampton (Southampton) and from there loaded on the boat and crossed the English channel and

landed at Le Harve<sup>5</sup> (Le Havre), France.

There we were issued our gas masks and helmets. We turned in our rifles and got English rifles; also turned in our baggage. We left everything except what we could carry on our backs. Our packs weighed 70 pounds and rifles 11 pounds. Just imagine carrying that for fourteen hours without a thing to eat. We hiked 25 miles many a day with this outfit on our backs.

After a few days at Le Harve we went to Eu.<sup>6</sup> We stayed there about a week and put in some hard drilling. We went bathing in the channel every day. We were then under the English and got English rations. It was simply fierce. They starved us so that we got so weak we couldn't drill. I never saw anything like it before in all my life and never want to again. They had to put guards all around the kitchen with rifles and fixed bayonets. Oh! it is awful to go hungry. I never saw any bread while there and very little hard tack. If you never saw English hard tack you



*courtesy of Virgil J. Vogel*

**Map of Western Front**

<sup>5</sup>The *Sigourney Review* version consistently carries this Anglicized phonetic rendering of the spelling of the French seaport city's name, while the *Keota Eagle* has the correct French spelling.

<sup>6</sup>Eu (ø), an old Roman town boasting a 12th Century Gothic church. It is situated on the Bresle River two miles from its mouth, 64 miles NNE of Rouen. Its estates were once owned by King Louis Philippe. Present population ca. 7,000.

cannot imagine how hard they really are. They have no taste and the longer you soak them the tougher they get.

We left one morning for a hike with full packs and hiked all day until 2:30 next morning without a bite to eat. But many of the boys didn't get there. They were strung all along the road exhausted. I was too tired to put up our tent so laid down on the ground for a nap. At 3:30 I woke up and there was some excitement. There was an air raid on. The Germans paid us their first visit. The French women and children were all up and running around the village like wild. Next day we made another hike to Gamaches<sup>7</sup> and staid there two weeks. I never saw anyone as happy as those villagers were to see us come. Women and children came running to meet us, as we marched through towns and villages. Many were leaving their homes in that sector. They took all they could haul on their two wheeled wagons. It was sad to see them. Many did not leave after we came. They said they felt safe while we were there. They were surprised when we told them how many Yanks there were in France. We were the first U.S. troops in that sector.<sup>8</sup> The women brought us wine and cider as we rested along the roads. It did us more good than English hard tack.

The Germans made some awful air raids every night. Believe me, those bombs did rock the earth when they landed. This was near Amiens to the left of St. Quentine (St. Quentin). After about three weeks with the English we were ordered to turn in our rifles again and were issued our own and hiked back to Eu, took the train for Paris and from there to the Toul sector with the French. Went into trenches on June 25th. Some time we had, couldn't talk nor understand French, but were put right in the trenches with them. All the pass words were French and were changed every

<sup>7</sup>Gamaches (not Gamatches) is a Norman town about eight miles SE of Eu. Latest population figure: 3,194.

<sup>8</sup>By May, 1918, a half-million American men were in France, but the figure eventually rose to 2,084,000. Of these, 1,390,000 saw active combat service, mostly in the south and southeast sections of the front defended by the French.

day. Some were hard to remember, you were simply out of luck if you forgot the pass word.

The French halted us and we halted them. One couldn't go very far in a trench at night without being halted. I heard a German band play the second night I was on outpost and could hear them talking. They seemed to be having a gay old time, I suppose they were used to trench life after four years of it and didn't worry about what might happen. But I wasn't quite so happy, as it was all new to me.

The French had Morroccoans (Moroccans) on this front. They all carried a knife about eighteen inches long in their belts. They were good fighters. They went over the top with this knife between their teeth. They thought more of the knives than their rifles as weapons. Just imagine those black fellows at night with their eyes and white teeth shining. No wonder the Germans would run. After about two weeks the French left us and from then on the Metz front was held by the Yanks. Our first real battle was the St. Mihiel drive. Perhaps you read all about it. That was some barrage the Yanks put over. The heavy artillery stood hub to hub. It was about 2:30 A.M. when the signal was given and passed down the line with pistols. In ten seconds all guns and artillery started to roar. It was fierce, the sky was lit up like day and the earth trembled, even in a deep dugout it would knock out a candle.

After the St. Mihiel drive we were ordered to Verdun. Were seven days getting there, a distance of little over 100 miles, camped there 3 days and got rested up. Then started for the Argonne forest and that is where I saw some terrible sights. The French say it was the worst battle of the whole war. It was the Hindenberg line which von Hindenberg (said could never be taken, but it took the Yanks to show him that he was all wrong. It is a very rough country and the line was on top of a very high ridge and the dugouts were back of the hills and timber. The Argonne forest is heavy timber, mostly oak. After we captured this forest there was nothing left of these trees but splinters for a half-mile on each side of the line with the

exception of a few trunks which were still standing.)<sup>9</sup>

It would be worth the trip over here simply to see the old Hindenberg line. You would wonder how troops could ever advance through a place like that was. The Germans surely had some comfortable dugouts. I was in several that were about 80 feet deep. They had rooms and swell parlors, as good as you see in the best American homes. They also had women staying there. I saw a lot of women's clothing that was left there and also a good many other things, which is evidence that they had to get out in a hurry.

The French fought on this front for four years and never gained a foot and lost nearly a million men. No wonder the Germans began to think it could never be taken. We captured many horses, cattle, donkeys, mules, wagons, rolling kitchens, artillery, and guns of all kinds, even railroad trains.

We slept on the ground with dead bodies all around us but were used to it and did not think much about it at the time. The Priest with the 325th reg. certainly was a brave man. At Chateau Thierry he read mass in a church of which there wasn't a thing left but the walls and an altar inside and was under shell fire at the time. After the service he got busy burying dead soldiers. There were over 50 bodies near the church. He got help and got them all buried that day. Many of the bodies lay a week or two or even longer. I saw one dead body who had a letter in his hand from his mother. One boy lay on his back with his arms straight up from his body. I could hardly bend them. I noticed he had something clutched in one hand so I pried it open. It was a girl's picture and on the back was written, "your sweet heart." Some had rosaries in their hands. Some looked like they were only sleeping, even after they lay on the field for a week, others had turned black and looked awful. Some had their arms or legs blown off, and others were literally torn to pieces.

<sup>9</sup>The bracketed portion of the foregoing passage was missing from the clipping due to tearing and crumbling. The missing words were supplied by Mr. Peiffer, from his copy.

But what makes a fellow's blood run cold is when you hear a dying soldier call for his father, mother, or sweetheart. I often noticed when I was in great danger that was all whom I could think of. There is so much truth in the song "Just Before the Battle, Mother."

The Germans were evidently getting tired of the war. They surrendered by whole companies and came over with their hands high above their heads. Some were mere boys of 16 years, others were men of 55. Prisoners captured in the morning had to help carry wounded off the battle field for that day, unless they were gassed or wounded, when they got the same care our boys did, only our boys were first. They all seemed happy and threw away their helmets saying "The war is over for us."

What caused considerable excitement was when about 25 hostile airplanes came over and our machines went to meet them. All the machine guns for a mile around opened fire. Also the French seventy-fives and sometimes the heavy artillery opened a barrage. All at the same time. It almost made a fellow go wild. Still one would have to laugh to see the boys run for a dugout, if any, or fall in the mud.

Whenever a shell came our way, and we thought it would drop near us, down flat on the ground we would go. In that way the shrapnel is not so apt to hit you. It rains every day after August and the mud is fierce, so you can imagine how we looked after dropping in the mud and water. Nov. 11th is one day I will never forget. We were going back out of the Argonne forest on Nov. 9th, we hiked back of the lines about 50 miles and on Nov. 11th, got to a burg about the size of Washington, Ia.,<sup>10</sup> and it was all lit up. This was the first light I had seen in six months except candle light in dugouts. I was pretty tired but soon forgot about that. It seemed like a different world, foud (four?) bands were playing, the people were simply wild. The Madamoiselles kissed the yanks and ran through the streets singing and yelling. The old folks were as bad as the young.

<sup>10</sup>County seat of Washington County; population at that time about 4,000.

The French and American soldiers, women and children ran through the streets arm in arm. At that time I was sure I would be home by Christmas, but have had many disappointments since. I do however expect to be home by June 1st.

We paraded for President Wilson and Gen. Pershing on Xmas day, and on Feb. 4th we paraded again for "Black Jack" Pershing. We were on a large field, there were 25,000 soldiers, so you can imagine how large the field was.

Gen. Pershing passed every man. We were lined up in company front. He spoke to many of the boys asking them what battles they were in.

He started at noon and it took until dark to review the whole division. Well, I suppose there will be more box car riding, you will note my address is a seaport, but I do not expect to get away from here until June. I remain your cousin,

Joe Peiffer

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## OF MAPS and AMERICA ON WHEELS

By Lida L. Greene  
Librarian of Iowa State Historical Library

Two maps lay on the desk within a few inches of each other. One, the 1968 Iowa Highway map, sprawled open to show the site of Salem in Henry County, and the other, thin, black, hard-bound, and 116 years old, had been printed to guide the argonauts of the 19th Century to their golden treasure in the Far West. "At least," I reminded myself as I watched our visitors leave, "whatever the perils of modern travel, we did not have to warn the young McHenrys about a Skunk River crossing labeled Dangerous quicksand. Beware when stream is in flood!"

The Robert McHenrys live in Maryland just outside the national capitol. Bob is a college professor and knows a great deal about Stalinism and the Cultural Revolution in

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