

S1080 SHAFER, WALTER, WORLD WAR I DIARY, 1918-1919
1 FOLDER

PROVENANCE

Natalie Drew donated the diary on March 22, 2012.

SCOPE AND CONTENT

Walter Shafer of Ferguson, Missouri, served in Company H, 138th Infantry Regiment, 35th Infantry Division, in World War I. Shafer's diary details his war experience from the time when the 35th Division left for France until it returned to the United States once the War ended. The diary covers the dates May 2, 1918 through May 13, 1919. Shafer notes at the end of his diary that he wrote entries when he could and not always at the time when events occurred. "No matter how others look at this diary," he wanted them to remember that "it was not written in a comfortable living room and with all the bright side of life surrounding me at the time."

The United States was ill-prepared to fight a modern war when it declared war on Germany and its allies on April 6, 1917. The U.S. Army barely exceeded 100,000 men while the field armies of the European combatants (Germany, Austria, and their allies against Britain, France, Russia, Italy, and others) numbered in the millions. Following the declaration of war, United States spent a year recruiting, equipping, and training a force of sufficient size to aid the Allies in their desperate struggle. Initially, the nation relied on volunteers (an established American method for raising war armies) but the manpower needs of the Western Front forced the United States to adopt conscription.

The U.S. Army did maintain a single fully equipped infantry division when it entered the war. In the year between the declaration of war and the 35th Division's departure for France in early May 1918, the War Department labored to create, train, and equip units fit to fight in France. As with many of the units in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF), the core of the 35th came from existing National Guard units, in this case organizations from the Kansas and Missouri National Guards. Thousands of volunteer and drafted men provided the manpower to fill up the understrength existing Guard units and newly created organizations of the 35th. Walter Shafer was one of those men.

Shafer's diary begins with a May 2, 1918 entry, which records the Division's arrival in New York City to board transport ships for the journey to France and the war front. The majority of entries are mundane and brief. It is clear that Shafer rarely missed a meal for the daily entries invariably list what he ate for breakfast, lunch, and supper. The diary's value is the insight it provides on largely mundane day-to-day soldier's life, even in war. Most the time, much of what Shafer and his comrades did was tedious, boring, and sometimes, seemingly pointless.

The 35th Division landed in France May 20, 1918 and worked its way slowly toward the front lines. (Shafer's May 26 entry notes that it marked "fourteen months of service for most of us.") His unit entered rear area trenches on June 21, and encountered enemy shelling and rifle fire. On July 6, Shafer was lightly wounded by a shell fragment. The only substantive combat that he and his comrades faced was during the Meuse-Argonne campaign, from September 26 through September 30th. Thereafter it served as relief troops for the French Army in a quieter area and left the combat zone for good on November 6, 1918. Three days later the war ended.

Shafer and his comrades spent nearly six more months in France before returning (as a civilian) to Union Station in St. Louis on May 13, 1919. In the time between the end of the war and the return to the United States, Shafer's division followed a routine of daily drills, and, according to one sour entry, helping "to keep this God-forsaken country clean." Apparently Shafer's regiment, among others, was kept busy clearing up war rubble and garbage. A battle front becomes a messy place. The troops were kept busy in drill and "police duty" (Army talk for cleaning up) while the War Department arranged their shipment back to the United States.

FOLDER LIST

1. Diary, 1918-1919