



## The 355<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Nebraska) Regiment in the World War

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Full Citation: Homer L Kyle, "The 355<sup>th</sup> Infantry (Nebraska) Regiment in the World War," *Nebraska History* 20 (1939): 292-297

Article Summary: Kyle served in the Nebraska Regiment in 1918. He describes the organization of the 89<sup>th</sup> Division, its training, and its experiences in Europe.

### Cataloging Information:

Names: John Paston

Place Names: Camp Funston, Kansas; Camp Mills, New York

Keywords: (band) contests, St. Mihiel drive, Meuse-Argonne offensive, Army of Occupation

## The 355th Infantry (Nebraska) Regiment in the World War

HOMER L. KYLE, Lincoln

An infantry regiment, as organized in 1917, consisted of twelve line or combat companies and three special-duty companies. The line companies were designated by letters—A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H; I, K, L and M. The special-duty companies were the Machine Gun Company, the Supply Company and Headquarters Company. Each company was commanded by a captain. Companies A, B, C and D constituted the First Battalion; E, F, and H, the Second Battalion; and I, K, and L and M, the Third Battalion. The three special-duty companies composed the Headquarters Battalion. Each line battalion was commanded by a major and the Headquarters Battalion by the Lieutenant Colonel of the regiment. The regiment was commanded by a colonel. Each company, when at full war strength, averaged about 250 men, and a regiment about 4,000 men.

The 89th Division was an organization of drafted men which trained at Camp Funston, near Fort Riley, Kansas. It was organized under the provisions of the draft law of 1917, and its men were drawn from the states of Kansas, Missouri, Colorado, Nebraska, South Dakota, Arizona and New Mexico. The division contained two brigades of infantry—the 177th and 178th. The 177th brigade consisted of the 353d and 354th regiments, and the 178th brigade included the 355th and 356th regiments. The men coming from Nebraska were chiefly assigned to the 355th regiment, and it thus became known as the "Nebraska" regiment.

It will be noted that twice 89, the number of the division, is 178, the number of the highest brigade; and twice 178 is 356, the number of the highest regiment. Thus the number of the regiment indicated that brigade and division to which it belonged.

The first contingent of drafted men (five per cent) reported at Camp Funston, Kansas, on September 5, 1917. They found the camp a wilderness of half-constructed barracks, piles of lumber, dust and confusion. The barracks were without heat or light, and often without windows, and the water supply was very uncertain. Fall rains soon changed the streets into rivers of mud.

The first contingent was given two weeks of intensive drill in rudimentary military tactics in order to fit the men to act as non-commissioned officers when later contingents should arrive.

On September 19th the second contingent (forty per cent) arrived at Camp Funston and were assigned to the skeleton units already organized. The 355th regiment was at that time commanded by Col. William G.

Sills with Lieut. Col. James D. Taylor second in command. Most of the junior commissioned officers of the regiment were from Colorado. It was deemed bad for discipline to have officers and enlisted men from the same state.

With the arrival of the second contingent, the work of creating an efficient fighting organization began. The professional military men in command were frankly dubious at first as to the character and quality of the drafted men. They expected the conscripts to be a surly, dull-witted lot, hard to teach and chafing under discipline. But sooner or later, they all acknowledged that they had misjudged their men.

Conditions at Camp Funston were certainly not calculated to raise the morale of the young conscripts. Not only were they suddenly torn from their home surroundings, many of them for the first time in their lives, but they were subjected to a strange and rigorous discipline, and even the common comforts of life were largely absent. The barracks were crowded and unheated, the food was poorly prepared and monotonous, the bedding and clothing were insufficient for comfort. The simplest, most personal acts of the soldier's life, and the most intimate details of his personal hygiene, were subject to the continual inspection of his superior officers. His hours of rising and retiring, the clothes he wore and the manner in which he wore them, his behavior in the presence of an officer, the shine on his shoes, his bathing and shaving habits, the physical condition of his eyes, ears, nose and throat, tongue, teeth, lips and palate, of his feet and hands—indeed, of every organ of his body, was the subject of constant supervision and regulation. He was vaccinated, he was inoculated, he was given injections, he was swabbed with iodine inside and out; and, to cap it all, he was forced to bathe at least once each day in the icy waters of the shower baths, except on those not infrequent occasions when the water system was out of order and there was no water available for any purpose whatsoever. Long before he reached the battle line, the conscript had learned the truth of General Sherman's famous aphorism defining war.

Soon after a wave of disease broke over the camp. First it was epidemics of colds, measles and mumps. Then in November came the dread spinal meningitis. Companies and regiments were quarantined for weeks at a time, and the men, when not actually drilling, were confined to their dreary and over-crowded barracks. In the spring of 1918, the first cases of flu appeared, but fortunately the division went overseas before the flu reached epidemic proportions.

To relieve the monotony of camp life, a series of contests between the regimental bands of the division was arranged for the winter months, and the *Denver Post* offered a \$500 loving cup for the winning band. The 355th Infantry band won the cup. It was rated as one of the finest bands in the U. S. Army. In the spring of 1918 it toured Nebraska. A

curious fact is that its leader, Sergeant John Paston, was not an American citizen but a subject of Austria, although for years he had been in the U. S. Army. When the United States declared war against Austria he hastily naturalized, and remained with the 355th Infantry throughout the war. He is still in the army and is now stationed at Hawaii.

The third contingent of drafted men (forty per cent) were added during the first week of October, 1917, and the final contingent arrived in April, 1918, while the division was preparing to leave for France.

The regiment left Camp Funston on May 21, 1918. It was a typical Kansas spring day, windy and thick with dust. Everyone was glad to leave Camp Funston and its climate behind. The regiment arrived at Camp Mills, Long Island, on May 24th and 25th, after a really enjoyable trip through pleasant countrysides and cheering towns and cities. At Camp Mills Major-General Leonard Wood was relieved of his command of the division and Brigadier-General Frank L. Winn took command.

The regiment spent ten days at Camp Mills, during which time passes were freely granted to New York City, and thousands of boys from the middle west got their first glimpse of the "Great White Way." I should add that New York treated us fine.

On June 3, 1918, the regiment embarked at Hoboken on the White Star Liners *Baltic* and *Adriatic* which had been converted into troop transports. After an interesting but uneventful voyage of thirteen days which carried them far north towards the Arctic Circle, the Americans arrived at Liverpool on the afternoon of June 15th. The next morning they disembarked, marched directly to a railway station where they received a real Royal Welcome in the form of an engraved letter from King George V, then entrained in a funny little passenger train, each coach divided into small compartments, and chugged off for the south of England amid wildly cheering crowds of Britishers, mostly women. The train reached Romsey, near Southampton, that same evening, and we unloaded and marched a mile or so to Camp Woodley. Romsey is not many miles from the scene of the battle of Hastings in 1066, where William the Conqueror with his Norman hosts overwhelmed the Saxons under King Harold.

The regiment spent a week at Camp Woodley and on Sunday, June 24th, it marched to Southampton and embarked on a small transport which carried it to Le Havre, France, after a most miserable night voyage across the English Channel.

A day was spent at a so-called "rest camp" on the bluffs above the harbor at Le Havre, then, on the afternoon of June 25th, we boarded a train of the celebrated "40-and-8" boxcars. According to the legend they bore, their capacity was "*40 hommes et 8 chevaux.*" Accommodations were the same for both kinds of passengers. On the last previous trip they had obviously carried *chevaux*. We travelled all night and all the next day, and the following night arrived at the town of Liffol-le-Grande, perhaps fifty miles or so from the city of Toul. At 4:30 o'clock next

morning we were aroused and, strengthened with a cup of black coffee all around, marched seven miles to the town of Grande where we were billeted on the inhabitants. Here we trained intensively for about a month and then, on August 3rd, we were hauled by truck through Toul to the small town of Trondes about eight miles from the front. Here we billeted for two days.

On August 5th the regiment marched from Trondes to take up its position at the front, relieving the 327th Infantry regiment of the 82d Division. We took over the towns of Ansauville, Hammonville, Mandres and Beaumont. They were all badly shot to pieces and practically all of their inhabitants had long since left.

Our front lines were about a mile and a half from the German lines, and the village of Seicheprey lay between in No-Man's-Land. It had long been the custom of both sides to send out nightly raiding parties to this town to try to pick up a few prisoners. We were told by members of the 82d Division that when they had relieved the 26th Division some weeks before, the Germans had painted a huge sign on one of their observation balloons: "Goodbye, 26th. Welcome, 82d!"

The German welcome to us was warmer but not so pleasant. For six hours, from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. on the night of August 7th and 8th, they subjected our green troops to one of the heaviest gas bombardments of the war. As a result 57 officers and men of the regiment were killed and 273 were wounded, many of whom later died in hospitals. It was a severe and costly initiation, but even German gas was not as hard on morale as Kansas dust.

After this gas bombardment, no operation of importance was carried out on either side for several weeks, although the town of Beaumont was treated to a heavy shelling early one morning. It became apparent, however, that a large-scale operation by the Americans was in preparation. We could only guess at this. To find out what was really going on we had to depend on the newspapers from Paris just like the rest of the world.

On the night of September 11th the regiment marched a few miles to the right and took up new positions at Flirey, where the monument to the American soldiers now stands — I hope. At 1 a.m. on the morning of September 12th a terrific bombardment of the German positions began, and at 5 a.m. ("zero hour") the outfit went over the top amid a hail of machine-gun bullets from the enemy.

The 89th Division was supported by two veteran divisions, the 42d or Rainbow Division on its left and the 2d Division, with its brigade of Marines — the only U. S. Marines in France — on its right. Although this was the first offensive for the 89th, it had no difficulty in keeping abreast of its two veteran neighbors and reaching its objectives on schedule — and even ahead of schedule. This engagement was known as the St. Mihiel drive. The 355th Infantry captured the towns of Euvezin, Boullion-

ville, Beney and Xammes, and took a large number of prisoners and several hundred cannon and machine-guns. Imagine our chagrin a few days later to find that members of the Rainbow Division had painted gorgeous "rainbows" on practically all of the cannon we had captured! "It pays to advertise."

The St. Mihiel drive cost the regiment 65 officers and men killed and 245 wounded.

Following this battle the regiment held the newly established front, with its headquarters in the town of Beney, until October 8th, when it was relieved by units of the 37th Division and was moved by trucks, driven by Chinese from French Indo-China, to the town of Recicourt near Verdun. From Recicourt, on October 12th, the regiment moved up through territory made famous by the furious German assault on Verdun in 1916, to relieve units of the 32d Division. The first stop was Epionville near Montfaucon, where the Crown Prince maintained his headquarters during the drive on Verdun.

Shortly after relieving the 32d Division our regiment was ordered to clear the Bois de Bantheville, or Bantheville Woods, of German machine gunners. This proved to be the bitterest engagement of the entire war for the 355th. The losses of the 2d battalion were especially heavy. But one German prisoner was taken, due to treachery on the part of certain of their machine gunners who pretended to surrender and then opened fire. The woods were successfully cleared.

On November 1 began the final drive of the war for the regiment. It was the last phase of the great Meuse-Argonne offensive. The regiment was held in reserve until the 3d, when it went into action and continued its drive until the very minute of the Armistice. During this last drive it captured the towns of Barricourt, Taily, Beauclair, Beaufort, Laneuville, Luzy and Cesse. On the evening of November 10th it effected a crossing of the Meuse River under heavy enemy fire—a very difficult operation—and was entering the important city of Stenay when the Armistice went into effect.

The losses of the regiment during the Meuse-Argonne drive were 6 officers and 112 enlisted men killed in action, 23 officers and 493 enlisted men wounded, and 1 officer and 16 enlisted men missing. The total losses of the regiment during the war were 52 officers and 1,416 enlisted men killed, wounded or missing. Of these, 8 officers and 248 enlisted men were killed, 43 officers and 1,149 enlisted men were wounded, and 1 officer and 19 enlisted men were missing. This does not include officers or men who died of disease, of whom there were a few.

I have been informed by members of our regimental band that the first burials of American soldiers in what is now the American cemetery at Romagne were made by members of the 355th Infantry band. Burial of the dead was one of the duties assigned to the band. When they went into battle their band instruments were left behind.

Following the Armistice, the 89th Division was selected as one of the six crack divisions of the A. E. F. to form a part of the Army of Occupation in Germany. The other five divisions were the 1st (known as Pershing's Pets), the 2d, the 32d, the 42d (Rainbow), and the 90th. The 355th Infantry marched into Germany at Echternach on the Luxembourg border on December 6, 1918. Regimental headquarters were established at Saarburg on the Saar River near the ancient and historical city of Trier. There we remained until the division was sent home the following May.

During the early spring of 1919 each division in the A. E. F. organized a football team, and a series of games was arranged to determine the championship. The 89th Division team won the championship of the Army of Occupation after a close win over the 90th Division, then went on to defeat the highly touted St. Nazaire team, composed largely of stars from Yale and Harvard, and then the 36th Division team to win the championship of the A. E. F. Members of our regiment were on the winning squad. Needless to say that the financial condition of the members of the 89th Division was vastly improved by these victories.

The regiment left Germany on May 9, 1919, and embarked at Brest, France, on May 15th, on the U. S. S. *Leviathan* (then the largest ship afloat), arriving at New York on May 22d. On May 30th it arrived at Omaha and paraded through the streets, and later in the day reached Lincoln and paraded from the railway station to the capitol grounds, where it consumed vast quantities of cake and fried chicken. It then proceeded to Camp Funston, where the men were mustered out on June 2d and 3d.

The 355th Infantry Association was organized in Saarburg, Germany. Each year a convention and reunion is held in some city in Nebraska on the Sunday and Monday nearest September 12th, the anniversary of the St. Mihiel drive. Each year several hundred veterans come together from all parts of the United States to relive for a few hours those hectic days of 1918.