

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
OTTO S. RYSTAD
Infantryman, Army, World War I.

1995

OH
1172

OH
1172

Rystad, Otto S., (1893-1997). Oral History Interview, 1995.

Master Copy: 1 videorecording (ca. 52 min.); ½ inch, color.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 52 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 52 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcript: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Abstract:

Otto S. Rystad, a Barnes Township, Iowa native, discusses his service in L Company, 3rd Battalion, 316th Infantry Regiment during World War I. Rystad reflects on friction in German American communities caused by the declaration of war, popular support of war bonds, and the en mass draft registration on June 5, 1917. Drafted into the Army, he talks about riding a train to training, four weeks of basic training at Camp Gordon (Georgia), and the hurried transition from farmer to soldier. Rystad details getting a pass to see a ballgame with his cousin the night he received his orders to go overseas. He discusses sleeping on the deck of the ship during the trip from New York to France and passing through a rough storm. He recalls his first impressions of France, boarding a troop train, seeing the destruction in Verdun, and marching in pitch darkness. He mentions the food they had on the march, the anxiousness of the soldiers who hadn't been in combat, and surviving a nearby bomb explosion while crossing a bridge. Rystad touches on relieving the Twenty Ninth Division, being stationed in a two-man foxhole where he could see Germans every day, and finding a dead soldier "sitting" up against a tree. He describes the combat conditions, difficulties with food supply, enjoying donuts from the Salvation Army, and catching rain water in his helmet to drink. Rystad details being positioned in front of some big guns on the day of the Armistice, combat continuing until the last minute, and the eerie silence afterwards. He addresses the uniform and shoes he was issued and singing all the time. He discusses his homecoming: Decoration Day celebrations in Philadelphia, traveling home, and the reception from his family and church.

Biographical Sketch:

Rystad (1893-1997) served in the Army from July of 1918 to June of 1919. He passed away March 12, 1997 in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Portrait of Otto S. Rystad:**Service Details:**

Born November 9, 1893. Enl. July 24, 1918. Pvt Hdq. Co. 316th Inf. 79th Div. Trained at Camp Gordon until August 27. Sailed from Hoboken August 30 on U. S. S. Plattsburg; landed Brest September 12. To St. Georges September 19 to October 2; to aviation camp near Verdun sector until October 27; joined 79th Div. and went to Meuse sector of Verdun front; October 29 in offensive at Verdun, there until November 11; held line until December 27; to Heippes December 27; to Orquavaux by march, arrived April 2, remained there until May 2; to Clisson; to St. Nazaire. Sailed May 16 on U. S. S. Texan; landed Philadelphia May 29. To Camp Dix; to Camp Dodge, IA. Mustered out June 10, 1919.

Interviewed by Cynthe Silverman, 1995
Transcribed by Patrick Gould, August 2011
Abstract written by Susan Krueger, 2011

Interview Transcript:

Cynthe: Hello. My name is Cynthe Silverman. I am an English teacher at Florence [Wisconsin] High School. I am here this afternoon because of two reasons. One of the reasons is that in my English class, year after year, I teach "All Quiet on the Western Front." Basically, ancient history for me and I know very definitely, this is ancient history for my students. It is another world, another time, another place. And sometimes it's hard to put that book into human terms, real people. One of the teachers, one of my best friends I work with is Mr. Dennis Rystad. And we've talked many times about how to make books more real for kids. Make the experience more human, more touching. And, we've talked about "All Quiet on the Western Front" and over lunch one day Mr. Rystad said, "Cynthe, you know my Dad served in that war." I am one of those people who get really excited. Couldn't wait to do something with this survivor, a veteran of World War I and it wasn't enough to have him all for myself. I chose and am delighted to share Mr. Otto Rystad with you. He is sitting here on my right. Mr. Otto Rystad is a veteran of World War I. You are ninety six years old, correct?

Otto: Ninety five.

Cynthe: Ninety five going on ninety six. This afternoon, what I am hoping to do is ask a few questions and take this gentleman back seventy, seventy five years ago to a time when he was a young man serving Uncle Sam, serving his country in a foreign land of, went to France to serve and did in fact serve in World War I. And I thank you for being so generous with yourself in joining me here today. One of the first things I want to know is how old were you? And were you drafted or did you enlist?

Otto: I was drafted

Cynthe: They had a draft. And what year was that?

Otto: 1917.

Cynthe: So, 1917 and this is the tail end of World War I or we didn't know it at the time, but the war was dragging on--

Otto: The beginning of the war, the war was declared April 6, 1917. And then the draft was passed the seventeenth of May. And then the fifth of June we had to register. There was ten million men then in that age, draft age, that registered that day. Then later, they came with that Liberty Fund, you know, war bonds.

Cynthe: War bonds.

- Otto: All that came sort of bunched up. Of course the declaration of war was against Germany so there got to be a little bit of friction at home there too because there were a lot of Germans there.
- Cynthe: In your hometown, you were in Minnesota at that time?
- Otto: I was in Iowa.
- Cynthe: You were in Iowa then. And there were Germans, people of German extraction living--
- Otto: Oh yes, there's a lot of Germans in the Middle West.
- Cynthe: Did that create a lot of friction at home?
- Otto: It created some, not too much, but it was. We had, what you call, pro Germans, you know. And some of it took it quite hard so there had to be a little friction. And then the bond issue came, and that went over good. That, it went, really went; it had an overrun on that so that went fine.
- Cynthe: So, Americans were willing to spend money to support the war effort?
- Otto: Yeah. They collected more than they asked for. And then, of course, the draft came and some of the boys got called. Then I got a little friction of why does my boy have to go and somebody else's stays home?
- Cynthe: That hasn't changed for any of the wars, has it? We're hearing from Dan Quayle [former Vice President] and things like that. So it hasn't changed.
- Otto: So, it wasn't too bad. Beginning of the war was declared April sixth and the draft registration came the fifth of June. A lot of them enlisted between that time; they didn't wait for the draft. There was a lot of boys enlisted. That way, they had sort of a choice what department they wanted to go in.
- Cynthe: When you got to boot camp, how long were you in training and what sort of training did they give you?
- Otto: Well, we got numbers. We were registered. My number was, I got in the four million, I think. So, that was down quite a ways. I was on the farm, so I stayed on the farm that year. I didn't have to go in 1917. And I stayed part of 1918. I stayed home so that I could put in the crops. And, July twenty fifth, then I was drafted. Then I was called. There was five hundred of us that were called from that one county. And the neighboring county had five hundred drafted. So it was the big draft. So, we had to meet in Storm Lake, Iowa [that] was the county seat for us. So, they had a special train waiting for us that carried a thousand men. Otherwise, it would have

taken them a little at a time, you know. But, this was a real big draft. And that train, left Storm Lake about nine o'clock, we got on the road. And in the evening we go into Freeport, Illinois. There we had a lunch. And from Freeport we went down to the next stop, was down in Alabama--[it was] dark. And then we stopped at Birmingham, Alabama, and they were down there with [indecipherable] and one thing or another. Then from there we went right to the camp, Camp Gordon was the name of the camp we went to, Camp Gordon, Georgia.

Cynthe: Georgia, okay.

Otto: And, the train went right to the Camp. That is right outside, what do you call that town? Atlanta. Then of course, we really got busy. We got off of the train. Everybody hollering, new to us, coming from the farms [laughs]. So, first thing was the physical. We had to go through that first. Then the next was to get our uniforms. And they were thrown at us, you know, like playing baseball. Got that, then it was to get to the billets and get our cots. They were numbered. Everything was numbered. Then we had to change. Take off our civilian clothes and put on our khaki uniforms. They were summer weight. Then we went down to eat. First thing we got salami, fried potatoes, and a piece of bread. And, after that we were to report back to the bunk and wait for orders. But, there wasn't too much that happened after that. We went out and sat in the shade. It was awful hot there in the middle of the day. And they just listened to lectures. Listened to orders, what we would have to go through; different things. And then, back to the billets and then had, we called it supper, you know, evening meal. Awhile later we had to line up. And that got to be kind of a mix up. So, we lined up and the officer told us to stand at attention, look straight ahead. Some of them took it so serious [laughs], two of them fell on their face. They were not used to that concentration.

Cynthe: Farm boys couldn't handle that [laughs]. How much time in total were you at the camp before you were sent overseas?

Otto: We only had four weeks. They really tried to prepare us for overseas right away.

Cynthe: That didn't give you much time to change from a farm boy to a soldier.

Otto: No, it was so different. The farm, they didn't have a job where they had to concentrate much. So it was really tough. They were really disappointed. They wanted the farm boys to take the heat, which they did. They took the heat quite well. But all those orders and that, it worked quite hard on them. But gradually, they were really training us for overseas. They started off training us how to make a pack and roll our packs and one thing and

another. Then we got triple vaccinations and then finally, we got into our woolen uniforms.

Cynthe: Getting you ready for the cooler weather in France.

Otto: Yah, and then Saturday, before we left, my cousin was more aggressive than I was, he got a pass to go to the ballgame in Atlanta. And he wanted me along, so he took me to the office there and I got a pass. They were willing to have us go. We went to the ballgame. We sat there awhile and we didn't care about the ballgame, so we went down to the guards down there if we could get out and go up town, so they did. They checked us. We had to be dressed just so, you know. We went up town and loafed around.

Cynthe: Is this one last fling before shipping out?

Otto: Yah, so, but we loafed around until about 10:00 o'clock. We went in and had the meal. We got a different diet there for a change. We got back to the billets about 12:00 o'clock. And there the orders lay on the bunk. Be ready, I think about 9:00 o'clock next morning, be ready to move. And, so--

Cynthe: I am assuming they shipped you over on a big ship. Is that how they got you over there?

Otto: Oh yah.

Cynthe: Did you go directly to France or to England first when you landed?

Otto: Well, we had our orders for [indecipherable] the next morning, we were lined up and we got on the train. And, I don't know just how to put this, but anyway, we were headed, anyway we got on the train and got as far as Raleigh. Now I don't remember Raleigh, is it North Carolina or South Carolina? It's the capital of one of those states. I think it was South Carolina.

Cynthe: Well, I was thinking North Carolina, so between us, we got it. [laughs]

Otto: Anyway, we got off there and marched up to the capitol to get exercise and then marched back and had a little lunch there. Then on the train, we got up through New Jersey and went up to Camp Merritt, New York. [actually in New Jersey] There we got off and had to march to--no, we didn't have top march there. We got off and had a meal there; a meal of cooked rice with a lot of sugar in it and a [indecipherable] of some kind. And a piece of bread and some coffee and that was it.

Cynthe: That's it?

Otto: Yah, and the next morning we had the same thing, hot rice and a lot of sugar, and water and coffee, and we had to march down to the pier and we got on those, ferry boats, I guess you call them. That they have on the Hudson all the time. We got on one of those and the rain was pouring down; had to march through the rain to get down to the Hudson River. Then we went down the Hudson River to Hoboken. But it cleared before we got down to Hoboken so the sun was shining. There we were served lunch, ice cream and cake and lemonade I think.

Cynthe: They gave you guys an awful lot of sugar, gosh.

Otto: The boat, Plattsburg, it's an old boat, was waiting for us. So we got on the boat and that salt smell in there just about got you. But, you soon got used to it. Salt smell is strong. But then, we, I was one of the last ones on the boat, so a few of us boys, we didn't get a bunk. We had to sleep on deck, which was the best thing that ever happened to me. We were out in the air, fresh air. And the ones down below, the air conditioning on the boat wasn't very good. A lot of them got sick. It was quite a mess down there. Then, we slept on the floor underneath the hammocks that the sailors set. And that evening, just about dusk, we started out. We went by the Statue of Liberty and we got out in the water. It wasn't a big boat. It was about, we had about three thousand men, I think, on there, or something like that.

Cynthe: What did you think when you passed by the Statue of Liberty?

Otto: [Laughs] I don't know what we thought. Things were going fast. We were really moving fast at that time. Oh we had thoughts, no question about it. Then we got off in the real Atlantic. They said we headed south. We were told we went almost down to Cuba, then we got in the Gulf Stream and that was warm. We were hot weather we got into. But it was nice, and how they moved along. They were actually trying to fool the enemy you know? They didn't, they took different routes just to keep them--

Cynthe: Make it difficult for the Germans to track you and try to sink you.

Otto: It took us two weeks to go across. And we run into an awful storm. That really was a tough one. Those waves, we couldn't walk. We had to crawl on our hands and knees, and even the sailors couldn't hardly walk on the decks there. I was lucky there. I slept out in the open air. But the one's down below, they really got sick.

Cynthe: Oh God, I can imagine.

- Otto: They were in really back shape. That storm lasted about three days. We couldn't get any food. The kitchens couldn't do anything. And finally, they came around with some fruit, oranges and different things. And that's all we got there for a couple of days. That lasted about two or three days. Then it quieted down and we had quite true. We had seven in our convoy. And we couldn't see any of the other boats during that storm, only one showed up once in awhile. So it was pretty rough. They really got sea sick. Then we got going and we landed in Brest, France. We couldn't get to the pier, so we had to go over the side of the boat and jump into a, what did they call them--those smaller boats?
- Cynthe: Landing boats or launched ones? Okay.
- Otto: And we landed in, I should know that town.
- Cynthe: Did they ship you right out to the trenches?
- Otto: We landed at, I should remember that. Brest, I thought Brest.
- Cynthe: Yeah.
- Otto: We got off the boat and we went down by Napoleon Barracks to which [indecipherable]. And pup tents. Camped three days and then we got squad tents. Stayed in there and then we got on the train. And we went way down to Saint-Georges; down in a beautiful country; beautiful, you know, grapes, you know. For what they used for wine, you know.
- Cynthe: It was wine country?
- Otto: It was really beautiful. It's arranged; it's nice country. We stayed there two weeks. Done a little drilling and got organized. And, then we stayed there almost two weeks. Then we had to move; got orders to move. We walked awhile up to a railroad. And we had to sit and wait for that railroad to come for quite awhile. Then we got on, we were lucky, we got on an American built railroad. The cars were bigger. Then, of course, we knew where we were going. They finally came and we got on, standing room. I sat in the door myself [laughs]. But they said stand in there. That was quite a deal, rode all night and part of next day. We got into--, Hell, we got into Verdun, sure, railroad station. And that was still bombing. Uptown Verdun, there was nobody there. That was all bombed out.
- Cynthe: Buildings were destroyed?
- Otto: Verdun, that was a big fort, you read about that. Yeah, but an officer came down there and ordered us out, soon as you could. We got out. We got our packs and jumped off and had to go through a barbed wire fence and up a

ways. And two of those cars we came on, were bombed when we were gone. We walked out a ways. Well, we walked out quite a ways 'til we went to a military, an aviation camp, they called it. And we stayed there for little over a week. And, during that time, they were of course, preparing us for duty. We could hear the bombing there.

Cynthe: Could you see anything?

Otto: Yeah, in the night, when it was quiet. We could hear them. Then we had orders to move. So we marched down to a town, we called, Les Walferon [??], were we were supposed to meet the Seventy Ninth Division. And, we did, they were already there. The Third Battalion of the Seventy Ninth Division was already there. And, they thought they were going to have a rest. And they were quite disappointed. So, we joined the Division there. I got in 3rd Battalion, and 316th Infantry, and L Company. There was five hundred of us who joined the Seventy Ninth Division there. They'd been in hard battle in Montfaucon if you had read history. So they were pretty well tired too. And they lost a lot of men. Well, we got lined up that evening. We had, I think we had a meal before we went. We marched, hard top, so the marching wasn't too bad. A couple of things happened. They seen us coming, I guess. But it was in the dark. We marched in the pitch dark too on the way to Verdun. Some got off into the military camp right outside of Verdun, but my outfit went right in through the gates of Verdun. And we marched up to the center of the city. It was all bombed out. No people there and we had to go down two flights of stairs underneath in the lower, it was damp down there. Even the water was dripping a little. There was bunks there. And we had to stay there that night. Next morning, we got out. That was Sunday. And, we could walk around. We had a little time off. We walked around Verdun for awhile. We couldn't go too far. And they fed us there and then, in the evening, we had to get organized again. And, we were down on our bunks. They told us to be ready to go at anytime. So we went down and rested for awhile. They called us up and we were lined up and then they told us to go back down again. Barely got down there, sat a little while, and they called us up again. And, then we got lined up. Of course, they were bombing the railway station where the supplies were coming in. Sending the bombing down there, but uptown there was no bombing. Then we got on the march. And that was a real march. We had to go through those trenches, you know, where they'd been fighting for three years and truck were trying to get through there, in the dark. From dark, we couldn't smoke. We couldn't show any light of any kind. Trucks went without lights. It was a tough march. We couldn't, they wanted to get us across into a group of trees. Well, we started to rest for awhile, before daylight. But, they couldn't do it. I got out of wind. I just hadn't had a rest, I'm dead too, but there was a few that could make it. They were old timers, I guess. So, we didn't get in by daylight, but we got into that group of trees. And the cross they were

leading there they were still bombing. But they didn't bother us where we were staying. We got a rest there then. And there I got restive because I hadn't been to the front before. I walked around and all of us to a man, they were reading their bibles, and their prayer books. They were real, that was a real sober bunch. You might imagine. I went back to my own pack and I got my testament out. And, we let's see now, we stayed there. Yeah, we got a meal that night. We didn't stay that second night. We got a meal, bacon, mostly bacon and bread. And we got our canteen filled with water. Then we got some bacon and bread, hard, what do you call that?

Cynthe: Hardtack?

Otto: Hardtack bread, to take along in our mess kits. Then, we lined up. We were close. We could hear the bombing, you know. We were close. Yeah, then we marched up, we marched down to a bridge; a big long walk bridge. Platoon bridge. And we walked across; we barely walked across when two big bombs came. You could hear them coming. You could see the light it was getting dark and they lit right close to where I was. And one of them was so close it threw dirt on us, you know. They were the kind of bomb that exploded when they hit the ground. If anybody got hurt, I don't know. Right around me, nobody got hurt. So, the officer told us to lie down, not to stay together. But you know how that is? When you are afraid, when you are scared, you want company. So that didn't work out too well. But, then, we got going again, but they started, those shrapnel bombs. They exploded in the air throwing shrapnel all over. One hit me in the back. It was in the fall so we had our overcoats on and it lost its power, so it didn't hurt.

Cynthe: You were lucky.

Otto: If it had hit me in the face, you know, it could have done some damage. But it lost its power. But they were bad. Then we had to flop down in the ditch there and wait awhile. Then we met the Twenty Ninth Division. We had to relieve them. And, we got to going again and they came and met us and took us **[End Tape1, Side A]** to our different locations. I got an outpost where I could see the Germans every day. There were holes that were dug out, so they weren't big. It was just room for two men. And there were several of them. I was right in front of a railroad track that had been bombed and that was [indecipherable]. In front of my dugout, if you call it that, was a man sitting, leaning against a tree with a rifle on his shoulder. He sat there. I couldn't figure out why it was wrong. And the next day he sat there. We didn't dare to get out to see what was going on since they kept on bombing all the time. Finally, it got a little quiet, so I walked up and I went over to him, he was dead. I could see where he'd been hurt anyplace. But I suppose he was shell shocked. So I, after that, things got a little heavier, the bombing and staffing, machine guns, and all kinds of

things got going. Airplanes from above were dropping bombs. For three, four days there, it really was tough.

Cynthe: Otto, can I stop you there? The airplanes, were they open airplanes? How did they drop their bombs?

Otto: Yep, they were open airplanes.

Cynthe: Someone just leaned out and--

Otto: Yeah, two in each. One was dropping bombs and the other one was driving the plane still. They flew right over. Some of them got shot down too, you know. Yeah, they were tough. It was everything. And machine guns were the worst for us. You stuck your head up, boy, you know, you were a target if you stuck your head up. Well, I had that station for a few days and the second day I was there they called me out to kill [??] what we called a GI can full of cooked rice. [indecipherable]. Two of us, carried it; a handle on each side of the can, and a corporal with a gun to guard us. We barely got started and they seen us. And then the bullets were flying all over. So we never got to deliver it. So, the corporal, he'd been there before, so he said, "get down." We was right close to a shell hole. Get down, so we all flopped down in that shell hole and some others flopped right on top of me. But the hole next to us, they got hit, one got hit in the mouth. His teeth was coming out. The other one got hit through his throat, so they had to take them back. So, it really was tough there for awhile. So, there went our food. We went three days there without any food at all. They couldn't, the cooks [indecipherable] See, they burnt wood. And they seen the smoke. Now, of course they have gas, you know, so they've overcome that, but those days they were wood burners. And that got shot up and after that there was no cooked meals. They finally flew over with a net on their airplane where they'd drop tin cans, food in tin cans. They'd drop that down on the ground, if you were able to get there. I finally got up there and all that was left there was tomato sauce [laughs]. And, I never liked tomatoes.

Cynthe: I've heard [laughs].

Otto: My day, and I busted it open and boy did it really, it really tasted good. When you're hungry, everything tastes good [laughs]. So, I, that's the only food I had for a few days. [indecipherable due to bad tape recording]. There was no way to get it up there. It couldn't get there. Finally, the Salvation Army, they really were good. One day a fellow came with a burlap bag, full of, they weren't doughnuts. I think they call them "fry cakes," don't they? They have a different mixture than a doughnut. They aren't so rich. But they are dipped in grease, you know. They were made the same way as a doughnut, in that respect. [indecipherable] Boy I really

got after that [laughs]. That really helped. But, the water was the big problem. You can get along without food, but you can't get along without water very often. So, we'd done various things. I took my helmet. It rained quite a bit when we were up there. And, I took my helmet and laid it on the ledge there and caught some rain water in my helmet. So, I got a little that way. Some took their mess kits out when it rained. There was water underground, but that was soaked with mustard, gas, you know. You couldn't touch that water on the ground. We managed to get by. Now, what's next?

Cynthe: How long were you actually in France?

Otto: How long?

Cynthe: You arrived, in the fall--

Otto: Yeah, I didn't tell--I'll go back. We joined the Division the twenty fourth of October [1918]. We marched into Verdun. We stayed there that day. That evening we marched up to where I told you, that clump of trees. And then the twenty sixth, we took our lines at the front. The twenty sixth of October. So, we were up there about fifteen days and fifteen nights altogether on the front lines. No relief, and I, my orders were to, I could hear the Germans. I could hear them talk down there. My orders were, if they were advancing, I supposed to report back. So, I was right on the line you might say. Sometimes a bullet, a bomb from our own artillery would land. But that didn't happen very often. I was right on the real front line all the time I was there. Then finally, they went over the top. They went right by us. We had orders to lay low and not to do any shooting or anything. And they went by us and I guess they chased them back because after that, it got more quiet where I was. Then we marched up to a different place. The day of the Armistice [November 11, 1918], we laid right in front of the big guns. And they kept shooting to the very last. And we had rumors all the time that there was going to be a stop, but it never happened and we didn't believe it this time either. But old history [??] you know, the eleventh month, the eleventh day, the eleventh hour, the eleventh minute, it is going to stop. And it did. That is the funniest feeling I've ever had, I guess. It stopped, almost on that minute. And everything got almost just like a haunted house. It got so still after all that noise. It really was a funny feeling. So, we had to stay on the line. You know, you couldn't trust the Germans, I suppose because of what had happened before maybe. So, we stayed there for awhile. Then we finally, couple of days we moved down to a little town, Damvillers. That's a small town. The Germans called it Blue Cross. Its part of a field hospital, barracks. They were in good shape. They hadn't bombed them yet. The town, Damvillers, was bombed.

- Cynthe: Otto, one of the most difficult things for my students to deal with when they read the book, "All Quiet on the Western Front" is the idea that all of these young German soldiers in the book were ruined, absolutely ruined and destroyed by the war. Did the American soldiers, did you feel that your life was over, that you were damaged and destroyed by your experience in the war?
- Otto: No. You mean the after effects?
- Cynthe: The after effects, yeah. Picking up the pieces, pulling your life together.
- Otto: No, well of course, when I was there we didn't get much time for brooding. But, no I really didn't. I don't know just what to say on that. But, we were trained. I didn't get much training you know. I had four weeks of training.
- Cynthe: Yeah, that's not much. That's not much training at all.
- Otto: No. It takes three years to make a good soldier [laughs] and we had four weeks. [indecipherable] training us to go across. Of course, those four weeks we had at Camp Gordon, Georgia, we were kept quite busy. We had good barracks and all that, good food.
- Cynthe: So it was a good thing you didn't have too much time to think and brood.
- Otto: No. And they were great when we went out to the drill grounds. We were always singing. We done a lot of singing you know. They wanted you to sing, and they tried to keep you jolly you know. I don't know, it was an awful change for me coming from the farm, but most of the boys took it in good stride.
- Cynthe: Good.
- Otto: Like, preparing in like shoes. We were issued two pair of shoes. They measured my foot. I'll bring that in. I really got a good fit. They were heavy. They were real--
- Cynthe: Sturdy?
- Otto: Yeah, sturdy, what they call "clod hoppers," you know. But, the soles were real thick, but the tops were kind of heavy leather, but they were soft. They weren't hard to break into at all. And they gave you two pair. And you had to keep them greased all of the time. That you did, but I was lucky there. I had a good fit and I didn't have any foot trouble. And believe me I hung onto that second pair; all through the service. They were both the same size. But a lot of people had a lot of foot trouble. I just brought that

in. That was done in camp. Gordonville. Of course, we had some long hikes. We had one day in Camp Gordon where they had the whole camp out. That was sort of an inspection day. There was a lot of officers there on horseback and one thing or another. It was kind of interesting, a band out there. They checked you and all. They checked your uniform and one thing or another. We spent a full day there. That was on the parade ground.

Cynthe: Otto, one thing I want to know. You were in more like a two man hole. Where you ever in the big intricate trenches they had? Where they were layer upon layer, or were you in more of a little dug out?

Otto: In camp you mean?

Cynthe: No, when you were in France?

Otto: Oh, in France.

Cynthe: Did you spend much time in the big trenches?

Otto: Well, when we were in Brest, we marched out to the old Napoleon [??] Barracks and we camped there. You know, it takes two to make a pup tent. I carried half of one and the other guy carried the other half. And we used that to cover our pack when we hiked. So, it took two men to set up a pup tent. So we slept in pup tents for two or three days and then we moved to squad tents. Then we had cots. So, we were there for two or three days. And some of the boys got sick there. And then of course, you got orders to move and then we got on the railroad. There we got on an American built railroad. The United States built railroads over there. And they were better. They were bigger cars, wide tracked. So I was kind of lucky on that. That took us down to St. George.

Cynthe: Otto, could I get to the thing about, you were there through January (1919) to keep the peace. The armistice was in November and you guys stayed till January to make sure everything was alright. What was it like coming back to America? Where did you arrive when you came back? Where did you arrive and what was it like?

Otto: We arrived in, we were on the freighter, we didn't have a real passenger boat. We arrived on Decoration Day in Philadelphia. We came up the St. Lawrence River. Well, yeah, they were celebrating. So we got a pretty good welcome. The boats were all blowing their, whatever you call it. And sort of gave us a welcome. It felt good.

Cynthe: I bet.

- Otto: So we got off and Red Cross was down there and served us ice cream and different things. We were free then for awhile. Then, we got on a train again and went down to Camp Dix and there we separated. See, I was from Iowa. About five runners [??] of us were from Iowa. But Camp Dix was in New Jersey. And I was there and my Seventy Ninth Division was in Camp Mead. And I think that's in Maryland. I'm pretty sure it's either in Maryland or Philadelphia. I think it's in Maryland. So, they were close to home, but we got on a good train which we had sleepers; took us two days to get back to Des Moines, Iowa. That's where we were discharged.
- Cynthe: Did they have a big party for you guys when you got home?
- Otto: No, the Middle West isn't like the east. Oh, the east had lot's more. They were emotional there. When we left, when we went down on the train from Camp Gordon there was crowds at every station; train loads and not in the Middle West. They were cool that way. They weren't that way at all. But of course, we, oh we were welcomed, but they kept us busy. We got in the barracks and they got busy right away to discharge us. So, we weren't in camp very long there. No, then we got detached in order to get down, back to our county seat where we came from. And, I was the only one who got off the train there in Storm Lake, Iowa. That was the county seat; nobody there. The roads were all broken up and there wasn't any cars in those days. They couldn't get to Storm Lake to meet me, so I had to stay overnight in Storm Lake. And, I didn't even call up home. But they knew we were coming, so I got on a train to a little town called Rembrandt.
- Cynthe: Rembrandt.
- Otto: Iowa. And there they met me. They gave me the welcome there. Then I went to, my brothers had stores there. So, I went to the store. My other brother on the farm came and picked me up, horse and buggy. He bought a car for me when I was gone. But, that's the first car we had in the family. There wasn't too many cars in those days. I went home and all was quiet. No excitement. We did have several, yeah, afterwards you know. Not that day. Not that particular time. Oh yeah, the church put on big sort of a shindig for us, banquet, and everything.
- Cynthe: You deserved it. You worked hard.
- Otto: Yeah, we did. It was rough. You know, there's one thing if I may say so, that I'm still puzzled on. How little food and water you can get along without and you don't seem to notice it. I felt alright. The water did bother me. I was thirsty. The food didn't bother me. For three days I went without food, but it didn't seem to bother me much. And it didn't seem to

weaken me. And, how you hold up in a condition like that, something there, some higher being that is taken care of you.

Cynthe: Amazing, you could do it.

Otto: Somebody was taking care of us.

Cynthe: Good, I'm glad.

Otto: Well, very little food was up there in the front lines for fifteen days and fifteen nights. I don't understand how, it rained, and we stuck in the mud, part of the time. If we got a little nap, we just laid down where it was brown. And it rained quiet a few times there. How, you go through all of that? I don't understand.

Cynthe: But you had to and you did it.

Otto: We had to do it, yeah. And the excitement kept you going of course. There was always excitement there.

Cynthe: The adrenaline.

Otto: Yeah. It kept you on the alert all of the time. But, there's people that went through a lot more than I did. The [indcipherable] unit that we joined, they captured Montfaucon. They really went through something. And the Montfaucon was in the Argonne too. See, I didn't tell you that.

Cynthe: Otto, yeah, we're just about ready to stop. Ahh, those of you who see this later on, maybe I will be lucky again and talk about some other experiences. I just want you to remember, you've got living history all around you. You've got dads and uncles who were in Vietnam, grandfathers in Korea--World War II. Don't let these special people go. Don't lose these stories because it's real. It's your family. It's your history. Take the time to talk to people who have been there, who know the story. Get it in the history book if you don't have it. Talk to these real people. And thank you Otto. I loved it today. Thank you.

[End of Interview]