

PMM BLOG ARCHIVE

March 19, 2020

Walk through France with PFC Robert E. Hoeflich

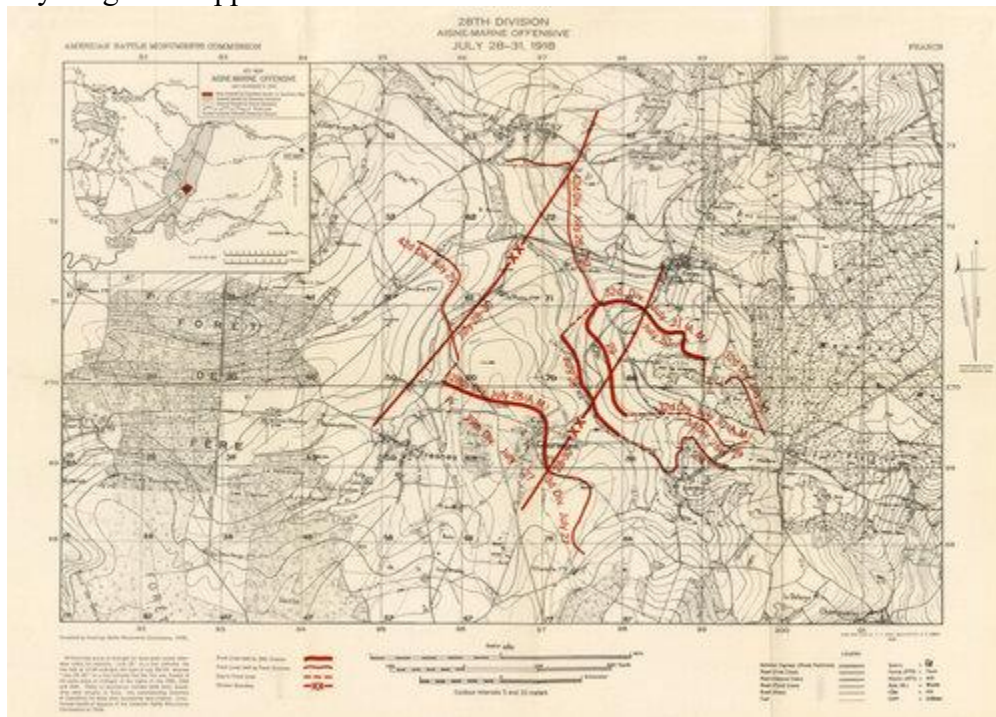


Photo, Museum Collection - MM2018.31. Hoeflich, Robert E.

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)

Robert E. Hoeflich was born in Camden, New Jersey and enlisted in the National Guard at the age of 25 on July 13, 1917 at Philadelphia. He was assigned to Company B, 103rd Engineers, 28th Division PA National Guard.

As his unit prepared to depart for France in May 1918, Hoeflich began to keep a journal in which he recorded his daily experiences, including their ship's harrowing journey through the Irish Sea before docking in Liverpool, England: "About 2 P.M. there was a terrible report and shock. I was below deck, and upon reaching deck found that they had shot at something that resembled a submarine. Our ship fired two shots and from the way they shook the boat when I was below, I thought something had hit the stern. About 35 or 40 submarine chasers, destroyers & mine sweepers & these big dirigible balloons are guarding us through the danger zone, so I don't think anything will happen to us."

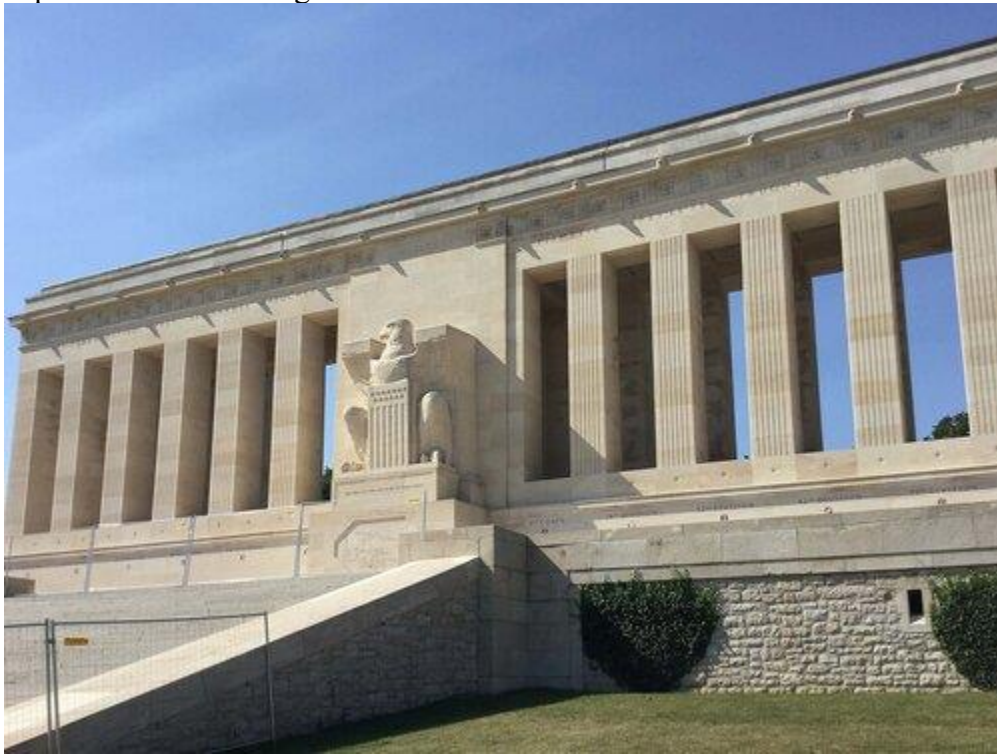


28th DIV, *Aisne-Marne Offensive / Chateau-Thierry, Battle Map, 18 JUL - 31 JUL.*

As part of an engineer battalion, Hoeflich dug trenches, build roads and bridges, and constructed defensive positions. His unit was not regularly on the "front lines", but he was not spared the horrors of trench warfare. During the Chateau-Thierry Campaign (July 1918), Hoeflich's company was called to occupy the frontline trenches. On July 18, 1918 he writes: "We were constantly being shelled by German artillery & had to keep pretty close to the bottom of our hole for protection. Things quieted down in the afternoon & they started to bring in the wounded & dead. I never saw such terrible sights in all my life. I saw one Frenchman with his head completely blown off. Four of our boys were killed, 21 wounded & 20 shell shocked. It started to rain mid-afternoon & continued until late at night. We could do nothing but lay there in thick yellow clay soaked to the skin & listen to the shells bursting about us." On July 26, Hoeflich notes that he was finally able to remove his clothes for the first time in a month.

Not all Hoeflich's entries are so grim. While in France, he discovered the joys of French-fried potatoes and is careful to note each time he eats them, even learning to make them himself. In September 1918, he takes a turn cooking for his unit and notes that while it is difficult to cook for 100 men, that "boys all getting good eats and are well pleased". That same month, he saw his first "moving picture" since he'd left America.

Robert Hoeflich's journal offers modern-day readers important insight into a soldier's daily life on the battlefields of France during World War I. We accompany him through the mundane chores associated with keeping camp clean, to the harrowing experience of shells bursting over a mud-filled trench, and the joy of a night's relaxation at the movies. At the Pennsylvania Military Museum, diaries like Private Hoeflich's help us to bring the past to life and personalize the experience of war using a soldier's own words.



*Chateau-Thierry Monument, France. 28th DIV featured, second from eagle's left.*