

World War I Vet Sees A Changing World

BY RAHN ADAMS

"It's a different world, in a way." In his 93 years, World War I veteran Dorman Mercer of Bolivia has been both a participant and observer in America's ongoing fight for freedom, and he has seen the changes that have come along with it.

Mercer, who was a farmer, sawmill operator and county forest ranger in Brunswick County before his retirement, enlisted in the U.S. Army in July 1917, to fight in what was then thought to be "the war to end all wars."

"I was hoping so—that it would be the last of the world wars," Mercer said, "but we've had a lot of wars since then."

The 22-year-old farmboy from Bolivia spent 18 months during and after World War I with the 117th Engineer Train in France and Germany.

How did he feel about leaving his native Brunswick County to fight overseas?

"I felt like it was the thing to do," he said. "I was serving my country, and I don't think I would have felt right to stay home at that time."

"Naturally, you'd rather be back home," he added. "It was pretty rough sometimes, but you got by all right most of the time."

His outfit was called the "Rainbow Division," he said, because it was made up of soldiers from across the United States.

"I was a wagoner, and I drove trucks and mules in wagon trains," said Mercer. "Our work was to haul ammunition to the front, and picks, shovels, and barbed wire for the engineers to use."

Stationed about 10 miles from the heavy fighting, Mercer and his fellow wagoners were called on to deliver ammunition and supplies to the front lines at all hours of the day and night, and he had several "close calls."

The roads he traveled were the most dangerous, because "that's what the Germans were shelling," he said.

Once while retreating from the front, a German shell hit the roof of a nearby house and showered Mercer with shrapnel and debris.

Less than two weeks later, he was gassed in an engagement and required medical treatment, although he said his injuries "didn't amount to much."

He said some of his experiences in the war would be better off forgotten.

"Some of the things I'd like to forget about," he said, "but you just can't forget about them."

On May 11, 1919, Mercer received his honorable discharge at Camp Lee, Va., and the next day he was aboard a Norfolk and Western train to Wilmington.

Although his family and friends were glad to see him,



STAFF PHOTO BY RAHN ADAMS

WORLD WAR I VETERAN Dorman Mercer of Bolivia looks over his U.S. Army honorary discharge notice dated May 11, 1919.

he said his return was met with little fanfare.

"We didn't have any great big celebration when I got back," he said, noting that he had remained in Germany with the army of occupation for several months after the war had officially ended.

In the years to follow, Mercer has watched war develop from the trench fighting of World War I to the technologically advanced warfare of today.

"It's not very much like World War I now," he said,



PHOTO CONTRIBUTED

DORMAN MERCER served as a wagoner for the U.S. Army in France and Germany during World War I.

comparing his mule trains to the sophisticated transport equipment used by today's Army.

Mercer said last week he doesn't get "as much of a kick" out of Veteran's Day anymore, having seen so many of them.

But he said he hoped people would turn out for

Veteran's Day observances Wednesday (Nov. 11) here and across the country "just in honor of the people who served in the wars."

"They (all veterans) served their country like everyone else," he said. "They were fighting for freedom."

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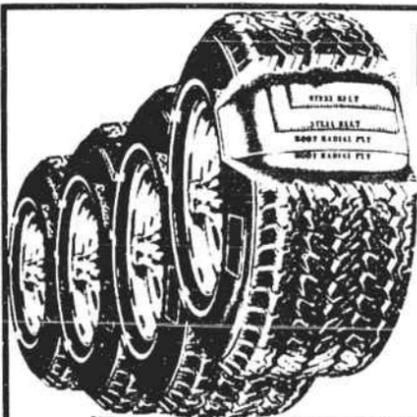
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