

STORY IS TOLD OF HEROIC DEATH OF ERNEST ECKERLEN

Shortly before Armistice day of this year, and dated November 3 at East Orange, N. J., a letter was received by Mr. and Mrs. Eugene Eckerlen of Salem giving an account of the death in battle of their son, Ernest T. Eckerlen, in France, November 3 or 6, 1918. The letter comes from J. W. Green, who was a buddy of the Salem youth, and is addressed "To the Mother of Ernest T. Eckerlen." As recorded in the letter Eckerlen's heroic spirit was manifested over a period of weeks, during which his health was exhausted, and his adventures culminated in his death while under shell fire. The letter follows:

I am at last about to perform a duty which I have already procrastinated for a long time. The contents of my letter will undoubtedly seem strange and unexpected to you, but I hope that you will fully understand the intention and feelings with which I write.

First, I beg to extend to you and yours my deepest sympathy in your bereavement of the glorious and honorable sacrifice of your son, Ernest T. Eckerlen. It is with the same affection and true friendship that made Ernest

and me buddies for over a year in France that I fulfill this obsequious duty.

Shortly after your son was killed, you probably received an official notice from Washington, D. C., stating more or less that Private Ernest T. Eckerlen was killed in action at the front in France. That mere statement of sad news is a very inadequate manner of telling a hero's mother the story of the courageous and fearless adventures of her son before his death on the battle front. I can fully imagine with what shock you received this news at that time about three years ago, and I realize how many sad hours you must have spent since then, especially in your recollections of Ernest's childhood, his youth, his budding manhood stirred at the outbreak of the war, the day he left home to volunteer his services to his country, his departure for France, his long stay away from home, and finally the fatal news of his having fallen in battle.

It is because of this, that on November 5th or 6th, 1918, when Ernest was killed, that I resolved to some day write to his mother and tell her the truth about his heroic deeds. So, Mrs. Eckerlen, I will take this opportunity to relate briefly those events in your son's military career, which will reveal the truth to you and help mitigate the grief and suffering which his loss has caused you.

I met Ernest for the first time at Chaumont, France, in that cold dreary winter of 1917. In those days friendships were easily begun, and it took but a short time for Ernest and I to become intimately acquainted. Our friendship was strengthened when on Christmas day, 1917, we went to confession.

While staying at Chaumont, we were in the company that was appointed General Pershing's honor guard. It was there doing that duty, that by his proficiency in military duty, his athletic ability and his fidelity to his comrades, that Ernest won the friendship and good will of his company mates. It was a pleasure to bunk near Ernest or to be on duty with him. He was so faithful, manly and true.

After our company (the 7th) was at Chaumont for some time, we naturally became impatient. We began to get anxious for a taste of real war, for which we all had enlisted.

We were feeling rather uncomfortable staying behind the lines and seeing our friends from other companies of the regiment that was on the front, come marching back wounded and maimed by the enemy. In time the spirit of the company was so aroused, that a few deserted and joined the units in the trenches at the risk of being imprisoned for a long time. Partly because of this our commanding officer received orders to pack up, and a few days later we were on our way to that worst of all places.

We joined the Second division in the Champagne sector at Somme Py, a part of the battlefield which was deserted by the Germans, and it was there that our real experiences were begun. They placed the C's, D's, E's and F's in the 23 company of the Sixth machine gun battalion, that put Ernest and I in the same company, and in the same platoon.

and most of the time even in the same gun crew.

To reach this sector, we hiked about 60 or 70 miles with little or nothing to eat, carrying heavy packs, rifles and machine guns (each man on the line) and through a continuous rain. You can understand how miserable we must have been with such a load to carry and wet to the skin. When we would stop for a rest, some of the fellows were so exhausted that they would fall over as soon as the command was given even though they were standing in a puddle of water. Our hardships were extraordinary on this hike, because our company commander had lost us, consequently we hiked many miles in a roundabout way.

It may seem strange, but it is a fact, that a big man has much more difficulty than a small one on a hike of this nature. A big fellow not only has a heavier load on himself to carry, but his pack as a rule is heavier than a smaller man's. When it comes to digging out of danger the larger soldier would have to, of course, dig a larger hole for himself, and in modern warfare, digging in, is about the most important operation at the front. Without a hole for a hiding place, a soldier under shell fire is absolutely out of luck.

Because of these facts when we reached Somme Py, we found that Ernest not only had trench feet (so swollen he could hardly take off his shoes) but he was feverish and so sick he could hardly talk. He was so lame, however, I believe I was the only one who noticed his real condition, because I was his bunkie. Everybody in the company would like to be Ernest's bunkie. In an outfit like ours, a man of his calibre was respected as a leader, even though he was but a private.

When the whole gun crew learned that Ernest was thus handicapped, we all conspired him, in fact, tried to compel him to go to the doctor, who would send him to a field hospital for treatment. He felt it an insult to be told this, and all we could do was admire him for sticking it out, although I kept telling him all the time that it was foolish for him not to go back for a rest, and then join us again just before "going over the top."

We were in this sector for a number of days, under shell fire most of the time. Ernest's physical condition was becoming constantly worse. On the other hand his morale was made stronger by the hardships and the constant danger.

In the lines a machine gunner was required to carry the following: His pack (weighing about 20 pounds) a pistol and ammunition (about 12 pounds), and either a tripod (40 pounds) a machine gun (50 pounds) or two boxes of machine gun ammunition (about 20 pounds apiece) thus the average weight carried by one man was about 60 or 70 pounds, besides helmet, blankets and other things. Of course we could take turns with the heavy equipment. One would carry the gun for a while, the other the ammunition or the tripod. With this weight on our shoulders we would have to sometimes hike for miles through darkness, rain, shell fire, fog, over ditches and shell holes, across ravines and rivers. When all these facts are considered one would not wonder why everyone in our company could not understand how it was humanly possible for anyone as sick and exhausted as Ernest to remain with us.

One night we stopped on the slope of a hill for a rest, while changing sectors. It was so dark in those woods we could hardly see our own hands. Ernest was still with me. As miserable as he was, he immediately started with me to dig a trench. We did not have to go very deep because the lay of the land was in our favor. Without thinking of anything to eat, we snuggled against each other in our small hole in this thick forest, and then we fell asleep.

I woke up in the middle of the night with a ring in my ear. It was the noise of the shells. There is nothing more terrifying than the whistle of a shell going through the trees. It seemed as though they were all falling in once place, in a hollow just below us. When I woke up I found myself shivering like a leaf, my knees were actually knocking each other. Then I realized that Eck was alongside, so I shook him to see if he was awake. He was as still as a rock when he said "What's the trouble?" I asked him if the shelling bothered him, and he said "No," he was too tired. That surely did encourage me. We went through a miserable night.

There were any number of exploits and narrow escapes that Eck and I went through after that. To be brief I will only say that Ernest went through it all in the same exhausted and sickly condition, but with plenty of courage and pluck.

On the morn of November 1st about 3:30 a. m. we were ordered to pack up and get ready to take our position in the front line. You see our commanders had planned to launch a big drive in the Argonne, and our company was a liaison company, that is, we were designated to hold a gap between our division and the 89th. Ernest seemed a bit refreshed, but later I found out he only acted so to conceal his feelings. We started out for the wilderness in a single file, each man carrying his own load, as much as possible (we could not carry too much ammunition, it was too badly needed) Ernest was behind me and we were last in the column. As we were hiking along through a downpour of heavy shells, the strap on my ammunition box broke. I stopped to repair it, looked around and did not see Ernest. I was alone there on that road and I admit I felt rather uneasy. The orders in the marine corps are that a marine doing duty at the front cannot help another marine in distress. It is the first-aid man's duty to take care of wounded and sick men. However, at times there are exceptions, but you see we

had just been told before starting out, that nothing should keep us behind.

It was too hot on the road so I ran to a gully for shelter. I hollered for Eck, but a human voice in that noise was like the noise of a watch ticking in a boiler factory. As I was lying in the gully for protection, I noticed a big smoke and gas and in it a human form approaching. It was unmistakably Ernest. I got out of my hole to talk to him. He certainly was exhausted. We both thought it best to get out of shell fire, so we jumped into a shell hole alongside the road. After a very short time we decided to make an attempt to find the outfit. Ernest jumped out of the shell crater, straightened his shoulders and headed for the direction of the company. A man as exhausted as he showing that much courage was enough to make any one feel like going to Berlin.

After some difficult meandering through the forest, we met a corporal who was looking for us. We reached the outfit after many narrow escapes and we took our places in the front line with the rest of them ready to go over at dawn. The hell we went through that morning until dawn was beyond description. We really were so terrified by the nerve racking noise of the bombardment, that when the zero hour approached, it was a relief to get the command to go up and over. Anything to keep a man active in danger, tends to steady his nerves. It is

the terrifying whistle of the shells and the cries of the wounded men that are more annoying than the evident danger itself.

From November 1st to November sixth we had routed the enemy fully ten miles from Grand Epre to a point near Beaumont. We captured a number of guns, a large number of prisoners and several towns and one stronghold. During that time we had little or nothing to eat, no rest except a seat in the mud hole, and the severe loss in our platoon of about 20 out of 33 men. Besides there were no signs of them being relieved. I don't know how we stood it, and it is beyond me how in God's world Ernest stuck it out. At times he would just fall over and lie on the ground till another atom of strength came to his limbs, and then he would plug along again. We tried our utmost to get him to become evacuated (sent back to a hospital) but in vain. We at least relieved him of a great deal of his load and tried to help him as much as we could.

On about November 6th, 1918, our platoon consisted of 13 men, before the attack we had 33. We were ordered to hold a machine gun position on a hill in a dense forest. We reached there after a memorable hike that none of us will ever forget. We immediately began to dig ourselves in. Ernest and I were still together. We started to dig for all we were worth. It seemed that Ernest had found new stamina. It was a clear sunny afternoon, (the

first in about two weeks. The weather was probably the chief cause for Ernest's improved physical condition. After we had dug about three feet deep we decided it would be a treat to have something hot to drink. I had found a German trench heater (a small can with solidified alcohol) and fortunately we had some raw coffee. We had everything ready and found we had no matches. Just then the German flying squadron hovered over us and we heard them send the range back to the artillery. We knew this was a sign of some heavy shell fire. There was a fellow in a hole nearby who offered Ernest a match. To reach him Ernest had to lie on his side across the parapet. As he was in this position a very heavy shell whistled so loud I knew it was going to land near. It was the first shell of a heavy bombardment which which lasted all afternoon. I felt myself covered with mud as it exploded right in our midst. I extricated myself and as I stood up I saw Ernest in pain. I immediately noticed that his right leg was severed just above the knee, and he was holding his thigh with both hands looking at the ugly wound. He said to me "Crecca, see if you can get a stretcher." Corporal Sigel and myself strapped a belt around his right thigh to prevent further loss of blood. There was only one stretcher around and Charles Davidson, who was badly wounded at the same time, was already placed in that one.

and as he was being carried through the barrage, both stretcher and bearers were hit. One of them, Joe Francots, a very intimate friend of Ernest, was killed, and the other was badly injured. I was still sitting near Ernest. He kept asking me to find out what was wrong with

his other leg, it pained him so. There was a small hole in his left knee. There was evidently no pain in the right one and it seemed as though the pain in his left leg was relieved as I straightened it, having lost his right leg.

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NOTICE

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