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Military Equipment and the Erasure of Self

The collection of Staff Sergeant Walter R. Jager's personal effects in McFarlin Library contains Jager's hat, helmet, and belt accessories, as well as a German gas mask and an empty grenade shell. This sparse collection of items is a typical representation of standard-issue military equipment, mass-produced and issued to American GIs during their tours of duty overseas. Jager's military equipment, like that of every other WWI soldier, was designed for durability over personality or display. The stark practicality and impersonal craftsmanship with which this equipment was created reveals the extent to which World War I dehumanized its participants. The design of military equipment during this era forsakes the valorous ostentation of previous eras of combat, and reveals how mechanized of warfare reduces soldiers to faceless interchangeable parts, bereft of a strong individual identity, who often had more in common with their opponents than with their superiors.

The army standard equipment – hat, helmet, and belt – that Jager used during the war is almost identical to every other piece of mass-produced gear made during this time. The one distinguishing feature that all of Jager's equipment carries is the repeated legend "W.R. JAGER 94th AERO", printed in black marker on every piece of his equipment. The 94th Aero was a decorated aerial combat division during the war, scoring 70 kills throughout their 11 engagements in the Western front. Of those, 26 kills were credited to Edward V. Rickenbacker, American's most successful combat pilot and "Ace of Aces".[1] Walter Jager's own history with the unit ends up being a little less storied. According to archival material at the Pritzker Military Library, Walter R. Jager enlisted in the 94th Aero division on August 1st of 1917 at Ft. Slocum,

[1] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/94th_Aero_Squadron, accessed April 2nd

New York. He rose to the rank of Staff Sergeant, and was primarily responsible for maintaining the mechanical and provisional well-being of his division's planes. Jager participated in several battles on the Western Front, including the Meuse-Argonne Offensive and the Battle of Verdun, and was awarded the Croix de Guerre with Palm for his bravery. After being discharged from the Army in 1919, Jager returned to his family farm in Northampton, MA, where he lived until his death in 1983[2].

Almost none of this biographical data is easily discernible from Jager's standardized, generic military possessions. In fact, apart from the obsessive labeling of Jager's possessions with his name and unit, there is nothing to distinguish Jager's equipment from that of any other American GI during this time period. Of course, uniformity and standardization were by this point long-standing traditional practice within warfare, but World War I homogenized its participants to a new degree. War was no longer conducted in personal, mano-a-mano engagements between two forces, but rather through the mass killing of opposing troops via machine guns, gas attacks, and shell bombardments. The colorful uniforms and ornate weapons of past eras were forsaken during this war: functionality and durability are the primary values of World War I equipment. Bereft of any nationalistic or militaristic signs to inspire pride in the unification of a fighting force, the personal equipment of World War I only serves to erase the individuality of a soldier and reduce him to a replaceable piece of the greater war effort. The mass-produced, impersonal gear issued to every soldier was a necessary side effect of mechanized warfare: the world powers couldn't afford to expend very many resources on outfitting their ground troops, especially given the high mortality rates. The scale and scope of the war rendered personal identity insignificant: no American soldier, looking at his equipment, could have any illusions about his role as a mere cog in the great military machines of a world

[2] Based on the summary found at http://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/data/232609625, accessed March 30th

war. This constant reminder of the individual's insignificance may have helped nurture the post-war conditions of disconnectedness and resentment towards traditional authority experienced by the surviving soldiers, sentiments which are often displayed in modernist literature[3].

Because of the generic nature of Jager's possessions, one of the most interesting pieces from this collection is a German "Lederschutzmaske" M1917 gas mask.[4] The physical condition of Jager's gear does not show any significant battle damage, and given the technical nature of his position it's unlikely he spent much time on the front lines or in the trenches: however, Jager did manage to acquire this gas mask during his time overseas. It's obvious that he didn't get this piece from a standard military depot; it was likely taken from the battlefield as a "souvenir", either by Jager himself or a comrade. In any case, the gas mask confirms the reality of Jager's tour of duty, and it adds an interesting counterpoint of comparison to the collection. The piece of German equipment, incongruously present among the rest of Jager's cookie-cutter GI equipment, is remarkable more in its similarities than its differences to the standard American gear. The German gas mask bears many of the same features as its Allied counterpart; it is olive-drab and unremarkable, with cost-efficiency as its guiding design principle. The gas mask is not marked nationalistically, making it difficult to physically distinguish it from the rest of Jager's American equipment. Only the maker's inscription identifies it as a German product. Generic and mass-produced, this gas mask is almost indistinguishable from the hordes of others produced like it during this time on both sides of the conflict.

That there is functionally no difference between a German gas mask and an Allied gas mask speaks to the many similarities between German and American ground troops. The dehumanization of war affected the German troops as much as it did the Allies, and German

[3] For an example of how the loss of individuality was portrayed in modern art, see *Blast* issue 2, page 89. http://dl.lib.brown.edu/jpegs/1144600227812515.jpg

[4] http://acenturyofnovember.com/html/gallery_gasmasks.php, accessed April 2nd

grunt gear was just as standardized and unremarkable as American equipment. In a conflict so defined by nationalism, neither side made a significant attempt to distinguish their soldiers from the enemy forces: unlike in previous wars, the differences in physical appearance between a German soldier and an American soldier were comparatively minute. When confronted with the mechanized inhumanity of this conflict, it's difficult not to draw empathic parallels between the ground troops of both sides of this conflict. Since soldiers on both sides of the conflict were viewed as part of a larger war effort by their superiors, the only level on which they could retain their individuality was through relating to fellow grunts. This might help explain the impromptu truces and ceasefires between opposing sides which occasionally broke out during the early stages of the war.[5] Given the insignificant status of the soldiers to their commanders, it seems appropriate that one place these soldiers could find human empathy was from their counterparts on the other side of no man's land.

World War I changed the entire structure of conflict throughout the world. The devastating effects World War I had on its participants are well-documented, in the physical detritus of the war as well as in its literary and artistic portrayals. The design of military equipment manufactured during this time clearly demonstrates the dehumanizing aspects of this war, as well as the relative worth of the individual soldier in the overall conflict.

[5] See Vera Brittain, *Testament of Youth* p. 167, and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce for examples