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World War I

Leo McCusker War Diary

The diary of Leo McCusker is small and unassuming, yet contains an extraordinary account of an American soldier's experience abroad during The Great War in the year 1918. This light brown cloth diary with marbled inside covers, measuring 13.7 x 8.7 x 1.5 cm, seems perfectly suited to be a travel diary. It contains an elastic closure to keep it together despite use, which is evident from its frayed edges, and contains a hidden pocket in the back cover where one could place small souvenirs or tokens. Inside the covers of this document lies an account of McCusker's travels from New York to France that date from May 6, 1918 – September 26, 1918. The combination of blue and black ink, pencil, and the notable corrections, overwriting, and sometimes-hurried handwriting are physical evidence of the raw and dynamic nature of such a personal document, leading one to imagine the types of heterogeneous conditions that might have lead to the particular writing of each entry.

The entries themselves document the activities of soldierly life, describe first-hand some of the major battles in which McCusker was involved, and reveal McCusker's more personal attitudes, judgments, struggles, pleasures, and attempts to maintain connections to home. Leo McCusker was a member of the 4th Infantry Division, and, as his first entry indicates, he set sail aboard the *Aquitania* from Camp Mills in New York, making his journey through Newcastle, Dover, and Calais before arriving at the war front in France. Though he and his division were frequently moved, both geographically and organizationally, McCusker's diary offers an

informative account of the duties and occupations involved in his tenure during the war. One of the repeated activities in which he partook, especially towards the beginning of his time in France, was military training. These included “target practice” (May 11), a “gas test” (May 19), “range school” (July 1), and “grenade work” (July 6, July 16). Though the training schools and drills seemed to be numerous, evidently McCusker did not think very much of them and repeatedly commented on their uselessness, stating that the drills were “very easy and not doing the men much good” (July 1), and that “the men [were] not being benefitted by the school” (July 8). Perhaps the training was actually inefficient, or perhaps these sentiments are driven by a more compelling anxiety to “get up and get at ‘em” (July 15), and take a more active military role in the war.

McCusker’s complaints about inefficiency and the way troops were run are further articulated throughout his diary. In one entry (dated May 25-June 27), he speaks about a Major whom he says “is a fine man and a good K.O. but he gets too excited at times to suit my system. He promised to send me to M.G. school but instead sent me to H-J- as sub-commandant.” While, looking back at the war, it does not seem uncommon to modern readers that military leaders would change their plans, here we see the consequences of such inconsistencies played out in the responses of those individuals who are affected by them. Later, on September 18, McCusker complains that “the French town mayor doesn’t know his neck from his elbow. I felt like knocking his nut off today.” This is an emotional response of frustration, but as someone whose job lies in administration and making sure that the details of daily living run smoothly, it is understandable that he would be upset when someone is not able to satisfactorily perform their job. He even criticizes the “Bosch” (Germans) for their inefficiency when they “wast[e] quite a good deal of ammunition” (July 15) by bombing Meaux, a site that, McCusker says, serves no

apparent military strategy for the Germans. Evidently, McCusker's attention to efficiency paid off as he was at one point complimented by General Cameron himself for "the way [he was] running the troop" (August 11).

McCusker worked in the headquarters (HQ) troop (which he took command of on July 27) and this perhaps provides a reason for the care with which his personal (as well as military) accounts focus on some of the day-to-day concerns of the soldiers, and the efficiency of operations. McCusker was put in charge of some of the equipment and supplies (including food), and his entries often concern his own accommodation, meals, and the times that he had to travel to retrieve something that the troop or division needed. In particular, one practical aspect of his life that he is careful to document are the billets (i.e. housing) that he and his fellow soldiers occupied. For McCusker, these billets comprised personal homes, a "milk house," (August 10) and even "a fine old chateau . . . at one time occupied by [Napoleon] and Josephine" (August 14). He keeps track of the names of the families he stays with, citing his positive experiences amongst these hospitable people, and in one case went back to visit them. For McCusker, there is a great care in the details of daily life, not only in his concern with the way military life functioned, but also the personal experiences and relationships that evidently became meaningful to him while he was abroad.

While McCusker found meaning and beauty in his time overseas, he also spends numerous entries thinking about home. Sometimes these reflections are prompted by conversations with his fellow officers and sometimes they are responses to receiving letters from his wife. Although McCusker first mentions receiving a letter from his wife, Chub, in his entry for July 10, McCusker does not write much more about her until later in his diary. On August 7, he reflects, "I hope she is happy," and references trouble Chub has been having with someone

named Rachael. Later, on August 22, he seems to have received confirmation of his wife's happy state when he receives a picture from her. On September 16, he marks his wedding anniversary: "Married nine years today. I'd like to give Chub one real good hug today," and later, he writes about how his wife will be delighted at his promotion to captain (September 20). He also sends his wife souvenirs from France. While some of the souvenirs he sends home may have been more typical, one souvenir actually came from "a piece of the wing of the Hun plane" shot down by "an American Aviator" (September 17). The way that he seeks to share his experiences with his loved ones, not just through letters or sending more typical souvenirs from abroad as a sightseer would, but through sending actual physical evidence of the war, is highly intriguing and perhaps brings a unique sense of reality of the war to the home front. While McCusker will never be able to fully share his experiences with his loved ones at home, he does attempt to maintain a connection between the war front and home life.

Amidst entries on daily life and letters from home, McCusker's diary also importantly accounts for two major offensive moves of the Allies, including the Aisne-Marne counterattack on July 18, and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive on September 26 (his last entry). According to a history of the 4th division by Christian Hall and Henry Hall, the Aisne-Marne attack had been carefully planned for weeks before it took place (68). Even though soldiers may not have been briefed on all of the details beforehand, McCusker's order to "return to the 12th" division on July 16th was enough of an indication to him that "something was up." July 18 was the "big day," according to his entry of the same date. McCusker writes that "At 5 a.m. the attack started and things ran our way. The Bosch retired and the French and out boys gave them no rest" (July 18). McCusker received a minor injury in his left foot during the advance, but went straight back to work as soon as he could, despite having permission to stay at the base to recover. By July 21, he

states that “everybody is worn out and I’m feeling rotten” (July 21). Even though the offensive was a success, and resulted in the capture of many German soldiers, it understandably took a physical and emotional toll on the soldiers involved, even one as dedicated and perseverant as McCusker.

The final entry in the diary, dated September 26, excitedly recounts McCusker’s involvement in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. Bach and Hall write, “It was known that the Meuse-Argonne area would be more solidly held and more desperately defended than any other part of the front for if it were broken through, the retreat of the German armies to the Rhine would be cut off and they would be forced to surrender” (154). On September 25, McCusker excitedly observes that “the Bosch suspects nothing” and that “the sky lit up” when the artillery of the Allies opened their fire. On the following day, he accounts “This a.m. at 6:15...our men...went over the top with a yell. The greatest battle of the world’s history –so Gen’l Hines called it...It certainly is an excitable day.” Getting a chance to see combat action, McCusker seems excited to serve his soldierly role in these battles, even sacrificing needed rest and recovery to stay involved. These two offensive maneuvers, occurring at the end of the war, mark successful military strategies, which could explain McCusker’s excited, hopeful, and proud attitude in being a part of them.

While we know the basic events of the war on a macro scale, looking at the experience of the individual soldier, like that of McCusker in his 1918 diary, can be incredibly useful to further our understanding of World War I. This particular diary notes a range of events, attitudes, and experiences, ranging from the personal, the frustrating, the touristy delights of France, and the excitement to see military action and go “over the top.” While we know that the experience of many soldiers resulted in disillusionment, alienation, and psychological torments, not every

soldier's experience was exactly the same. McCusker had his moments of frustration and exhaustion, yet his pursuit of efficiency, his connections to home, and his involvement in successful military campaigns may have helped to keep his spirits up and his mind stable. By looking at this intimate account of five months spent in France during the war, and the particular moments that have been so carefully preserved, we are able to see the war from a unique perspective, an important one that contributes to an invaluable understanding of the war and the particular men who fought in it.

Works Cited

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