

First Into Germany: Sgt. Roy Holtz – And He Did It On a Harley (38m 29s)

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1 speaker (Theo Mayer)

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Theo Mayer: Welcome to WW1 Centennial News: The Doughboy Podcast, episode number 147. The Doughboy Podcast is about what happened a hundred years ago during and after the war that changed the world. It's not only about then, it's also about now how World War I is still present in our daily lives in countless ways, but most important, the podcast is about why and how we'll never let the awareness of World War I fall back into the mists of obscurity. This week we have a very special episode for you. For the entire show we're going to tell a single story, a true story that covers new technology, the war, an amazing adventure, a lot of mistakes, an arrogant officer, a smart Sergeant, plenty of surprises and a great ending on the Doughboy Podcast. The Doughboy Podcast is brought to you by the US World War I Centennial Commission and the Doughboy Foundation who ask you to please help us build the national World War I Memorial in Washington DC with a contribution during the Armistice Veteran's Day season. We need you and your contribution to build the Memorial, which will stand in our nation's Capitol to honor and remember the people and the events of World War I for generations to come. It's easy and it's important. Just pause the show right now and open up your texting app. Then text WWI or WW one to the phone number 91999. You'll get an instant text back with a link that will allow you to donate any amount to the project. I'm Theo Mayer, the producer and host of the Doughboy Podcast and welcome to this very, very special episode. There's an iconic World War I picture. The picture shows Sergeant Roy C Holtz of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin and he's riding through a European city on a Harley Davidson. Yeah, a Harley. Also iconic and also from Wisconsin. But actually the picture and the caption aren't quite accurate. Roy was a corporal at the time. That's Belgium in the picture, not Germany, but the story's true. It's real and more amazing than the simple assumption. Our good friend, citizen historian and author Rob Laplander wrote a researched account of the story. What actually happened intended for high school students. Well, Rob has generously given us permission to read the story to you on the Doughboy Podcast and we have the whole thing for you today on the Eve of the hundred and first anniversary of the events. Here is the unabridged first into Germany, Sergeant Roy Holtz and he did it on a Harley by author Robert Laplander, part one. Yep, that's me. The war had been over for a long time when he was told his picture was in the magazine right there on page four. The picture of him on his motorcycle taken the day after the war ended riding through a town in Belgium. He readily admitted that he hadn't even realized that had been taken. After all, he'd had other things on his mind that day, like getting out of German territory and back to his unit, but first he had to go pick up the captain responsible for getting them picked up by the Germans in the first place. We'll get to that. Roy had been on occupation duty in Germany months later when his aunt sent him a newspaper with the picture in it and then his buddies tracked down the photographer in Belgium and bought a few extra prints. He long ago misplaced any prints of the photo that he had, but one of his old pals had obviously kept a copy which had found its way into the Harley Davidson Motorcycle company's magazine, The Enthusiast. Now, he was on his way to the offices of the magazine to ask about getting some extra copies, you know, for keepsakes. Now, when he got there and made his request, they didn't believe him at first. They didn't believe his picture was in their magazine. He was just another old timer who was mistaken. Then he leafed through the magazine to page four and he showed him. "See, here it is. That's me." He said, pointing the grainy picture. "That's you?" They ask incredulously. "Sure is." Somebody had scrawled across the bottom of the photo, the first yank and Harley Davidson to enter Germany 11/12/18. Wow, okay. Then they begged him for his story and bit by bit he filled them in. At the time nobody realized or cared that the date written on the photo was misleading. He'd been behind German lines on the 12th being held at the main German army headquarters in German occupied Belgium, but it wasn't until November 21st that he'd actually entered Germany proper, but that didn't really matter after all these years to the magazine people. Standing there in the office of The Enthusiast was a bonafide hero, the first American soldier to enter Germany following the armistice that ended the first world war. Former Sergeant Roy C Holtz and he done it on a Harley Davidson. Roy C Holtz was born and grew up in Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin. He was the son of German immigrant parents, Frederick and Mary Holtz. He had three sisters, Martha, Vieta and Irene and two brothers, Edward and Ezra. German was naturally spoken around the house. Therefore all the Holtz family grew up bilingual. This wasn't uncommon at the time, especially in areas with heavily dramatic populations and Wisconsin was very heavy in German heritage in those first decades of the 20th century. Outside of that, the Holtz boys grew up like any other boys at the time. Fishing, swimming in the summer, hunting, doing chores around the house and playing the new national pastime game of baseball. But on April 6, 1917 German heritage became a problem. That was the day America declared war on Germany, thus joining the first world war. Now she hadn't wanted to. In fact, President Woodrow Wilson had been elected to a second term in 1916 largely because he had kept the US out of the war in Europe that had been raging since August of 1914. It hadn't been easy though. At the beginning of 1915 the Germans announced that they considered the sea around the British Isles, a war zone, and that they'd sink any merchant vessel in that zone regardless of whether it flew the flag of a neutral country, those countries not involved in the war like the United States or not. This practice culminated in the May 7th, 1915 sinking of a British passenger liner, the RMS Lusitania, bound for England from New York. 124 Americans perished in that incident, which caused a

national uproar in the United States that president Wilson was only able to calm down by obtaining a guarantee from the German government that it would suspend the unrestricted submarine warfare. According to the new guarantee given Wilson, the German U boats would not attack ships flying the flag of neutral countries. That was part one First into Germany: SGT Roy Holtz - And he did it on a Harley by author Robert Laplander. In part two, the US goes to war and so do motorcycles. Part two is titled: It's off to war. On February 1st, 1917 Germany announced that she was reversing her decision not to attack ships flying the flags of neutral nations. She announced that she was resuming unrestricted submarine warfare and sinking whatever she felt like. The country grew concerned. America had carried on extensive amounts of trade with the French and the British selling huge amounts of war materials and food. Now with free trade threatened as the Germans attempt to starve the British out of the war by cutting off their supply lines, President Wilson decided to sever ties with the German government. On February 3rd after a German U boat sank an American grain ship, the Housatonic while bringing its load to England. And throughout February and March seven more American ships were sunk. But the final straw came when a telegram was uncovered, which had been sent by Alfred Zimmerman of the German foreign office in Berlin to the German ambassador to Mexico proposing an alliance be struck between the Mexican and the German governments against the United States. In this alliance, Germany would provide military support to Mexico who stood a chance to gain back sections of Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, which had once been part of Mexico. When this Zimmerman telegram was published in the newspaper across the country the outcry was really strong and the message to President Wilson was clear. America had had enough. So, war with Germany it would be, and quickly the nation decided that anything German was bad. Suddenly some kids stopped playing with the other kids who had German names and some families in a community were shunned if they spoke German in public. Sauerkraut became liberty cabbage and street names and even town names that had been German were changed to more American sounding names. Now, one night, the Holtz household was egged by some misguided individuals just because they were of German heritage, but they were mistaken for thinking that the Holtz boys were anything but all American boys, no matter where their ancestors had come from because all three boys signed up with the Army almost immediately after war was declared. All three boys would go to Texas for training. Roy and Ezra to the 32nd division, which was made up of boys from the national guard regiments of Wisconsin and Michigan as well as volunteers from those States. Ezra was assigned to infantry duty and Roy was assigned to the 107th field signal battalion as a dispatch rider. Now, this job involved carrying important messages and packages from unit to unit at speed across battlefields and traditionally had been done on horseback. However, by 1917 the modern era had indeed arrived and Roy found much to his delight that he would carry out his dispatch duties aboard a motorcycle. Motorcycle dispatch riders were something new to war. In August of 1914 the British army had called for motorcyclists to join the army and bring their motorcycles with them for duty, and the response had been huge. The London recruiting office alone reported that they had 2000 more volunteers show up than they had spots open. And motorcycle dispatch riders showed up for service in the Belgian, French, German, and Russian armies was similar enthusiasm. Now, motorcycles for the US Army were nothing new. Really, in 1916 the US Army had been charged with a punitive pursuit of the Mexican revolutionary general Pancho Villa across the US Mexican border after he'd raided the town of Columbus, New Mexico. The general in charge of that expedition, General John "Black Jack" Pershing in fact, knew that the relatively new technology of motorcycles could do really well in the desert conditions that they were operating in. And so he placed an order for 12 machines for his expedition from a small relatively obscure company that he favored based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. That company was called Harley Davidson. These 12 machines proved to be so dependable and tough during the punitive expeditions that after the US entered the war in Europe in April of 1917, further orders were placed with Harley Davidson and by the end of the war there were 20,000 Harleys in the Army's inventory. Over there, the Harleys were used not only for dispatch riding, but also for the performance of reconnaissance patrols ahead of advancing troops. Many machines were fitted with side cars and could carry passengers, supplies or ammunition when needed, and just as they had with the Army in the deserts of Texas and New Mexico in 1916, the nimble motorcycles would again prove themselves to be hardy and reliable machines on the battlefields of France and Belgium in 1917 and 1918. And it was on a Harley Davidson that corporal Roy C Holtz would make history. That was part two of First into Germany: SGT Roy Holtz - And he did it on a Harley by author Robert Laplander. During part three Roy Holtz learns how to ride a motorcycle and he saves his brother's life. Part three: Rolling with a red arrow. A lot of Wisconsin and Michigan men were formed into the 32nd division in August of 1917. They became known as the Red Arrow division, but we'll get to that. By February they were in France and headed for their training area at the front. Between May of 1918 and the end of the war the division would only know 10 days when it wasn't actually under enemy fire. They would capture thousands of prisoners, defeat 11 German divisions and never yield a foot of ground that they'd taken. They also earned the French nickname of les terribles, the terrible ones, for their fierceness and action. Now, it was in one of the very first battles that corporal Roy Holtz saved his brother Ezra's life. In the hours after the battle, Ezra lay in the mud of the battlefield, wounded and poisoned by mustard gas. Ezra was sure that he was going to die before any medics could find him as he didn't have enough breath to yell out to them because of the gas that he had inhaled. Then lying there, he heard the distinctive familiar putt, putt, putt, putt, putt, putt, putt of a slow moving motorcycle. Now, Ezra knew that Roy drove a motorcycle with the 107th field signal battalion and he also knew that he'd been working in the same area during the battle. Could this actually be his brother? When they were boys back in Chippewa Falls, the brothers had developed a particular sounding loud whistle. They used it to keep contact with each other out in the woods so they wouldn't get lost. Now, while Ezra didn't have enough breath to yell out loud, he did have enough breath to

whistle, which he did. Suddenly the putt, putt, putt, putt, putt of the motorcycle stopped and Ezra whistled again. Only minutes later there was Roy plotting over to him with his goggles pushed up on the furry part of his aviator cap above a dirt smeared face. Before long Ezra was in a hospital recovering from his wounds and Roy was back out on the muddy roads of France speeding across the battlefield with more important messages. After he got out of the hospital, Ezra transferred to the 107th field signal battalion as well and became one of the motorcycle mechanics. The 32nd division gained real fame during the massive Meuse–Argonne offensive. Planned by general Pershing to be the war winning blow against Germany. The Meuse–Argonne offensive would be the biggest and bloodiest battle in American history ever, even until today. The battle stretched for 14 miles from the east bank of the Muse river to the Western edge of the great Argonne forest. The final objective was cutting off the main German rail lines north of the battlefield, which supplied all the German armies in Northern France and in Belgium. All of the area was heavily fortified by the German army and it was known as the Hindenburg line. To try to smash through as quickly as possible, nine divisions of the American army went over the top on the foggy morning of September 26, 1918 following a huge artillery bombardment or barrage designed to soften up the enemy. Well, the barrage only worked some and the attacking doughboys, some 600,000 men ran into serious resistance. In the end, the battle would last a total of 47 bloody days. In fact, running right up to the last day of the war on November 11th, 1918. 27,000 American troops would lose their lives in combat. Over 1.2 million doughboys from 22 American divisions would see action in the Muse-Argonne. It was during the fighting that the 32nd division earned their nickname and distinctive unit insignia, a red arrow piercing a solid line as they were the first division to break through one of the strongest German lines on the morning of October 14th, 1918. Corporal Roy Holtz and his Harley Davidson were at the head of the attack all the way running messages at speed and performing important reconnaissance missions, sometimes alone and other times with a passenger in the sidecar. The war was winding up towards a dramatic climax as they approached the Muse river. The Muse was the last large water barrier to cross after which mostly open country led to the German border and the US Army was beginning to plan for the next move, driving the attack onto German soil. But getting across this heavily defended river was going to prove to be quite a chore. That was part three of First into Germany: SGT Roy Holtz - And he did it on a Harley by author Robert Laplander. In part four Roy gets very frustrated with an arrogant officer who doesn't know enough to listen to a veteran non-com. Something that every smart officer knows to do. And Roy reveals that he speaks great German. Part four: You've got to be kidding. Finally on the night of November 5th, 1918 Roy Holtz' unit, the 128th infantry regiment of the Red Arrow division crossed the bridge head over the Muse river. They were backing up the fifth division and they knew they were getting closer to Germany all the time. Now, there were rumors of an armistice floating around, but nobody was really sure of what was going on with that. Communications as the units rapidly chased the Germans had become confused. That was really important to know if there would be a ceasefire in order to spare lives from being lost unnecessarily. And so on the evening of November 8th Corporal Holtz was detailed with his captain to head back to headquarters and get the full picture of exactly what was going on. It was a dark night and it had been raining for several days making the roads just paths of slimy mud. Roy wasn't particularly anxious to drive out through it, but he had no choice. Orders were orders. He and his captain, a fellow only remembered as Sam, set out and almost immediately there were problems. The captain insisted on choosing the route and it soon became clear to Roy that they were headed in the wrong direction. "Captain, I know this area," Holtz shouted above the sound of their motor in the windy rain driving into them. "And it isn't the way. I think we're heading towards German lines, not away from them." "Don't you worry, son, I know what I'm doing. Drive on Corporal Holtz." Disgruntled and convinced he was right, Roy, nevertheless did as he was told. But after several more miles of sliding along the slimy mud choked roads through the rain, Holtz felt that he just had to try again. "Captain, I'm telling you, we're heading deeper into German lines. This is the wrong way, sir." "Dadgummit corporal, I told you I know what I'm talking about and this is the way. Now, you drive where you're told son." Famous last words. Eventually, even for all of the certainty after miles and miles of slipping along on terrible roads in the rain and seemingly to get nowhere, even captain Sam had to admit they were lost. Coming to a stop as they crested a hill, at the bottom they could see the light coming from a farm house. Now, that proved that they were nowhere near the front, that's for sure. Any light show near the front would instantly draw enemy fire. Carefully Roy maneuvered the Harley and it's bulky sidecar through the heavy rain down the slippery road to the bottom where Captain Sam ordered him to pull up to the farmhouse and ask for directions. Just literally seething inside, Roy shut off the motorcycle, dismounted and walked awkwardly to the door. They'd been riding for hours and he was stiff and cold and soaked to the bone. Roy pounded on the door and soon enough it flung open. Instinctively Roy stepped inside quickly out of the rain and the door slammed shut behind him. Wiping the rain from his face and adjusting to the light in the room he looked around and his heart just about jumped out of his mouth. To his shock and surprise down the center of the room ran a long wooden table and sitting all around it were a dozen or so German officers. They had stumbled upon the headquarters of the fifth Bavarian division. A really dispirited, oh, you've got to be kidding, was about all the angry corporal could get out before he was seized by a German guard and relieved of his 45 automatic pistol. Asked if he were alone, he admitted that his captain was outside waiting for him. Told to call him in, Roy later confessed that it was a fiendish delight that he did so and hollered out the open door just to crack, "Hey Sam, come in here." No sir, no captain, no military courtesy at all. So, in stomped an angry captain Sam, whose jaw dropped plum near to the floor when he saw what the situation was. They were now prisoners of war. "See what your blasted directions got us into," snapped a seething Roy. But captain Sam said nothing. Just then a door flung open from one side of the room and a German general stepped through demanding to know what was going on. Told that they had

just taken two American prisoners that had simply wandered in, the general called an orderly over and told them to go fetch the interpreter, but Roy stopped him. [foreign language 00:25:06] "It's not necessary, general sir, I speak German." The general officers were thunderstruck and even Captain Sam seemed impressed. The general smiling assumed a kindly air and steered Roy into a side room before calling the orderly to bring in some Schnapps, some fine German whiskey. Pouring out two glasses, he toasted Roy and started to interrogate him, asking questions about American troop positions and strength, supply conditions, battle plans, stuff like that. But the corporal wouldn't talk. Another glass of Schnapps and more questions, but still Roy wouldn't talk. Clearly the armistice talk was all bunk, yet another glass of schnapps and yet more questions, but Roy's lips were sealed. Finally giving up, the frustrated general led Roy back into the main room where he found captain Sam sitting very uncomfortably among the grinning German officers. The general announced that they were going to send these errand Americans on to main German headquarters near Spa, Belgium and one of the General's own officers would accompany them to see that they got where they needed to go. As the German captain who was picked to go, got ready for the rainy trip, Roy tossed it over in his mind, Spa, Belgium. If they were anything close to Spa, that meant they had gone a huge distance in totally the wrong direction. That was part four of First into Germany: SGT Roy Holtz - And he did it on a Harley by author Robert Laplander. In part five we wrap up the story, the mystery of the photo and how Roy actually was the first man into Germany and on a Harley. Part five: The actual story of the picture. Now, having gone in the wrong direction and winding up accidentally stumbling into a farmhouse that turned out to be the German headquarters of the fifth Bavarian division. Roy and his captain Sam now prisoners of war, get back to their Harley, ordered to go to the town of Spa. Roy mounts up and Captain Sam again takes his place in the sidecar, scowling at the German officers standing next to him who then mounts the rear luggage carrier above the back wheel behind Roy and off they go into the rain once again with the German officer yelling directions into Roy's ear. It wasn't too long before the German captain began to complain about the ride on the hard seat behind Roy. Every bump in the road was teeth jarring for them, but the more the German complained, the harder and faster Roy drove seeking out every bump and every pothole he could possibly find on the road. By the time they reach Spa, Belgium, the dawn of the 9th of November was lightening up the Belgian countryside and the German officer was in awful shape and the headlights on the Harley had shattered. At the German headquarters, the Americans were both interrogated this time, but neither said anything before being thrown in a jail cell together and left there. It was two days later when someone finally paid attention to them. A guard sauntered over to their cell on that famous morning, the 11th of November, and said that an armistice had finally been signed. Now, if it held at 11:00 AM the war would be over and they'd be free to go back across the line to their units without any problem. Now, sure enough, just before noon, the guard came back and threw their cell door open with a smile and announced that they were free to go. The war was indeed over. However, according to the date on the picture, the two didn't leave Spa until the next day when Roy was given back his automatic and was taken to where his Harley Davidson was being stored. It was while he was driving back through the streets of Spa to the jail to pick up his captain that a local Belgium photographer snapped the famous picture of him passing a retreating German supply column and being eyed up and down by the German soldiers. And as famous as it would eventually become, he later never even remembered the photo being taken. So, having picked up his captain once again, the two started back to their unit, which unknown to them was well over 60 miles away. Roy was pushing his motorcycle hard to get back and somewhere along the way they got off the main road and believe it or not, got lost again. Pulling up in another little Belgian town, they stopped to ask directions of the local priest. And before they knew what was happening, the whole town had turned out to greet them as the liberating heroes and the church bells were ringing joyfully. They were the first Americans that these people had ever seen. And the celebration surrounding them went on through the afternoon and well into the evening. That night the priest put them up in his house and the next day after having to practically drag themselves away from the excited town folks and with good directions this time, and the sound of bells still ringing in their ears, are two doughboys Roy and Captain Sam pulled up to the 32nd division headquarters. They just had time to report and clean up some before the division was on the move again. And Corporal Roy Holtz was once again in the advanced reconnaissance element, off and to Germany proper. On November 21st the 32nd advanced recon unit reached the town of [foreign language 00:31:15] in Luxembourg on the Saar river. The river constituted the border with Germany and it was later that day that Corporal Roy Holtz was given a mission to ride across the bridge over the Saar into [foreign language 00:31:30], Germany when Roy Holtz did indeed become the first American doughboy on German soil. Now, although several curious town folks peered through their windows at what would soon become a familiar site, American doughboys, Roy was not molested in any way. After a look around, he returned and made his report. Over the next couple of days, Corporal Holtz would ferry several officers over the border to speak with German officials in anticipation of the rest of the 32nd crossing over into Germany there to begin army of occupation duties. Corporal Holtz, fluent in German as he was helped out in translating some of these meetings. On the morning of December 1st the Red Arrow division crossed the bridge as a whole and by December 11th had moved forward to positions for occupation duty along the Rhine river at Koblenz, Germany. Here the Wisconsin and Michigan doughboys, many of whom like Roy were of German heritage, found a largely friendly population willing to work with their American cousins for the greater good. The war really was over. Epilogue. Roy Holtz was promoted to Sergeant after the war remaining with the Army of occupation through the spring and into the summer of 1919. He finally returned home to Chippewa Falls on August 9th of that year and was reunited with his family once again. All three brothers had made it through the war, though Ezra would lose a lung to the mustard gas he'd taken in. Despite that, he and Roy became electricians

together and formed the Holtz Brothers Electric Company. The company enjoyed much success over the years due to the hard work of the two combat veterans until Ezra died in 1952. Roy died later in 1964. And Edward, the only brother who didn't go overseas became the Chippewa Falls police chief and he died in 1965. Though the facts have been blurred somewhat over the years and there has been some confusion as to exactly what constituted Germany in regards to the picture. None of that takes away from Roy Holtz' wonderful and colorful adventure, and there's no dispute that Roy was the first to cross the Saar river onto German soil on November 21st. Nor have the actions of Sergeant Holtz and his ride on an iconic American motorcycle been forgotten. Even a hundred years later, for etched into the granite of Wisconsin's veterans tribute at Cadott, Wisconsin. His entry reads, Sergeant Roy C Holtz, Chippewa Falls. First US soldier on German soil after the armistice of World War I and he did it on a Harley Davidson. The end. This was a special presentation of First into Germany: SGT Roy Holtz - And he did it on a Harley by author Robert Laplander. A very special thanks to Rob for his generous sharing of the story on the Doughboy Podcast. Rob has a special relationship with the doughboys. He's the man behind the Doughboy MIA Project, which continues to seek and explore resolution on the MIAs from a century ago. He's also a wonderful author of several books, including Finding the Lost Battalion: Beyond the Rumors, Myths and Legends of America's Famous WWI Epic. We have a slew of links for you to Rob and his projects, Harley Davidson in World War I and more in the podcast notes. With that, we wrap up episode number 147 of the award winning World War I Centennial News, the Doughboy Podcast. Did you know that you can make a donation to the memorial in the name of something or someone? So, if you liked today's show and story, how about making a donation in the name of Sergeant Roy Holtz and his Harley? Just text the letters, WWI or WW One to the phone number 91999. Many thanks to Katherine Achy and Katz Laszlo both line producers for the podcast during the creation of the series. Mac Nelson and Tim Crow, our editing team. Jay Elmisho, research, and I'm Theo Mayer, your producer and host. The US World War I Centennial Commission was authorized by Congress in early 2013 to honor, commemorate and educate the nation about World War I on the occasion of the Centennial of the war. For over a half a decade, the commission commissioners, staff and our many associates and supporters have labored to inspire a national conversation and awareness about World War I. We've brought the lessons of a hundred years ago to today's educators, their classrooms, and the public. We've helped to restore World War I memorials in communities of all sizes across the country. Now as the commission's charter to honor, educate and commemorate the Centennial of World War I has been successfully accomplished, the full focus of the commission is turning to its capstone mission to build the national World War I Memorial in Washington DC. We want to thank the commission's founding sponsor, the Pritzker Military museum and library, as well as the major contribution of the Star Foundation. Thank you to our podcast sponsors, the US World War I Centennial Commission and the Doughboy Foundation. The podcast and a full transcript of the show can be found on our website at ww1cc.org/CN. You'll find World War I Centennial news, the Doughboy Podcast in all the places that you get your podcasts, including iTunes, Google Play, Tune In, iHeartRadio, Spotify, Radio On Demand, even on YouTube, asking Siri or using your smart speaker by saying, "Play WWI Centennial News Podcast." The commission's Twitter and Instagram handles are both at WW1CC and we're on Facebook at WW1 Centennial. Thank you for listening. So long.

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