

DALTON RANLET

PVT 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers

1900-1917



This is the story of the 11<sup>th</sup> US Engineers (Railway), which was the first unit to fight in World War I, and of my uncle Dalton Ranlet, who died at the very beginning of the war. It is also the story of how my family and friends searched for his records. This search ultimately led to a combined effort by American Army engineer alumni and the French town of Gouzeaucourt to create a memorial to the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers were recruited from the greater New York City area as the railway experts who could repair the railroads bombed by the Germans. The regiment was activated in early May 1917. With enthusiasm for the war running high, it was easy to select only the best qualified volunteers. After initial training at Fort Totten, New York, in July of 1917 nine US Army engineer regiments joined four infantry divisions in the vanguard of American forces headed for Europe. As the first Americans to arrive in the United Kingdom the engineers received an excited welcome, including a visit from the King and Queen. While in the United Kingdom, there was additional training (especially including gas warfare) on the way to France. By late August the soldiers were in France in support of the British forces.

The British war machine required constant resupply, and those supplies moved only by rail. Difficulties in maintaining their railroads led the British to place a high priority on railroad units in their request for American assistance. Soon the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers found themselves busy constructing and repairing railroads and establishing new railheads. Sometimes they worked the railheads to unload those gigantic new contraptions known as tanks.

Working so close to the front placed the engineers within range of German artillery. On 5 September 1917 the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers suffered the first American combat casualties of the war when two of its soldiers were wounded by artillery.

By mid-November the excitement intensified as the British pushed more supplies forward in support of their planned offensive at Cambrai. They believed that with the element of surprise and the assistance of large numbers of tanks they could achieve a major breakthrough in the vicinity of Cambrai. To avoid detection the engineers worked at night and disguised their efforts as dawn approached. The efforts

paid off and on 20 November the British broke through German lines causing widespread celebration among the allies. After the first day, the attack slowed and by 28 November British forces began to dig in and consolidate their gains for a later attack.

The Germans, however, had different plans. They recognized the British were vulnerable to a surprise counter-attack, which began on 30 November. Caught by the unexpected ferocity of the German artillery and infantry the British fought valiantly, but unsuccessfully. By 3 December the lines returned to their previous shape, with few exceptions. The British evacuated the remainder of their gains on 7 December 1917.

For the American engineers, 30 November began routinely. Three companies went to work improving the railroad connections near the town of Gouzeaucourt. Orders for the day were to leave their rifles in camp, because the Germans were believed to be in retreat. Then at 0730 intense artillery began to hit the town, followed by German infantry attacks. The Americans at first took shelter from the artillery and then attempted to retreat as best they could, but without their weapons. Some escaped by speaking German to fool the enemy. Others fought with picks and shovels against rifles and bayonets. Still others picked up the rifles of dead British soldiers and joined their comrades in an improvised defense. At the headquarters, the regimental commander used the remaining soldiers to dig trenches in preparation for further German advances. By late evening most of the regiment found their way back to camp. The next morning's roll call revealed that thirteen soldiers were wounded and seventeen others were missing. The close of the war showed that of those missing soldiers eleven were captured, four were confirmed dead, and two were missing but presumed dead.

Their bravery received attention from the highest levels. As the first American unit to fight in this war the determined stand signaled to both friends and foes that the United States would be a formidable force once the mobilization and deployment was completed. No less than Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, the British Commander in Chief, wrote to General Pershing: "I desire to express to you my thanks and that of the British forces engaged for the prompt and valuable assistance rendered, . . . we all appreciate the prompt and soldierly readiness to assist in what for a time was a difficult situation,"

My uncle Private Dalton Ranlet was one of those missing in action, but later confirmed dead. At 17 years old he lied about his age to leave his job as crew chief in the subway construction and enlist. At Gouzeaucourt, he was taking shelter from the artillery when the private next to him advised to stay in place, but Dalton made a dash for American lines. Apparently, the artillery killed him shortly afterwards. When he did not rejoin the others after the fighting, the family still hoped that he might be a prisoner of war. He was not found after the post war prisoner exchange, so he was listed as missing in action. As late as 1926, Colonel Barclay Parsons was trying to locate all his men and Dalton Ranlet was not to be found. Dalton's father and his girlfriend, Marie also inquired, writing letters to the government and to the Army to no avail. Dalton was presumed dead but listed as missing.

In 1955, during the excavation of the basement of a house across from the railway station in Gouzeaucourt, two bodies were found. They were sent to the British graves registration in Arras. One body had distinctively American boots that carried the mark of the St. Louis depot. That body went to the American mortuary in Landstuhl, Germany. Testing revealed that it was Dalton Ranlet, identified through his dental work, the only one of the six killed in Gouzeaucourt who had perfect teeth. The Army decided not to notify his family since it had been so long. Had the Army looked in the phone book, my grandfather had moved about 6 blocks from his former address and would have been easily found.

Dalton was buried in the Somme American Cemetery for WW I veterans, which followed the wishes of my grandfather, on a card signed in 1922.

My family kept his name and spirit alive all those years. My mother and his sister, Eleanor Ranlet Molyneux, who was born after his death, grew up knowing about Dalton's part in the war. In 2007, I was working on family genealogy and found my uncle, Dalton Ranlet, in the American Battle Monument Commission's website, with two different listings. Dalton Ranlet was on the wall of the missing, in the chapel of the Somme American Cemetery with a rosette listing him as the only person who had ever been found and identified. He was also buried there.

In 2012, my friend Leo Hirrel and I visited the cemetery and Dalton's grave. The superintendent of the cemetery was interested in the story but had nothing to add to it. How was Dalton discovered? Why didn't the Army let the family know? What were the circumstances of his death? Fortunately, Leo's background as a historian helped us to pursue this case.

We started at the National Archives in Washington, DC to look for any information we could find. We did find a letter, written by a major that authorized the burial in Bony, France at the Somme American Cemetery. We could not locate any other correspondence that went with it. Our attempts to contact the Army in Ft. Knox led to a referral to the Personnel Records Center in St. Louis. They had a burial file that closed out in 1936 with no information on the recovery of his remains. We had the notion that an Individual Deceased Personnel File (IDPF) would have the information we sought, but we could not connect with any file. Later Leo had a chance contact with another historian who was researching war dead from WW II. That historian had a photocopy of the log of the Landstuhl mortuary, which gave us a file number for Dalton's IDPF. With that information I finally located all the U.S. Army documents relating to my uncle. We now had the whole story, his travels and identification, his autopsy, his burial in Bony and a letter from the First Sergeant of his unit recounting the details of his death.

In the meantime, I was also trying to see what information might be available in France. In researching the Battle of Cambrai, I contacted Phillippe Gorczynski, a French historian with a museum and a great interest in the Battle of Cambrai. He brought into the discussion his friends and fellow historians, Lucien de Fawe and Jean-Luc Gibot. They knew Gouzeaucourt and were very well versed in the Battle of Cambrai. Like many French citizens in this area, they were very appreciative of the American efforts in World War I and eager to help me.

On our next trip to Europe, we decided to meet these gentlemen and thank them for their input. On our first day we drove directly from the Brussels airport to Cambrai. We thought we would have lunch and a short visit. The French had something different in mind. We received a tour of Gouzeaucourt and the many battlefields. We toured the site of the encampment of the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers and the railroad station. We drove out to the Cemetery and saw Dalton's grave. At 4 in the afternoon, there was a ceremony with the Acting Mayor, the Veterans' Committee and the local historian. Pictures were taken and it was covered by the newspaper *La Voix du Nord*. We adjourned to the City Hall where we had champagne with the Acting Mayor and all the dignitaries that were in attendance. The following morning, we tagged along on a tour of the Museum with a load of British citizens. It had a tank that Phillippe had located and dug up and two Pierce-Arrow trucks that were in use in Gouzeaucourt in 1917, possibly carrying Dalton to his work. I told Dalton's story, as it knew it then, to the Brits and it was well received.

In our conversations, the citizens of Gouzeaucourt told us that they would like to see a memorial to the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers in recognition of the regiment's role as the first American unit to fight in World War I; but they did not know how to get the money. We knew that there must be an organization in the United States willing to sponsor the project, so upon our return Leo located the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineer Battalion Association with the assistance of the US Army Engineer School. They willingly began a fundraising campaign and worked with Lucien and Jean-Luc to design and construct the memorial. The project required about two years of careful attention to details; but everything was ready for the dedication on 23 September 2017, about 100 years after the battle.

The big day was an unforgettable display of Franco-American friendship. It began with a reception in the city hall, where the mayor presented me with a medal for my efforts in this memorial. We joined the parade to the monument site, with the U.S. flag in the front. When you see the U.S. flag honored like this in a foreign nation, at their own initiative, it's a moving experience. The dedication ceremony included speeches, followed by the American and French anthems. I was asked to unveil the memorial and to lay one of the three wreaths. Later we went to another reception which honored the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers with pictures of them working and relaxing 100 years before. The day ended with a fabulous multi-course dinner and fireworks.



If you are ever in the vicinity of Cambrai, take the road to Gouzeaucourt and along that road you will find the memorial to the 11<sup>th</sup> Engineers (Railway), the first Americans to fight in World War I. It is a tribute to the American Army, and to the citizens of both nations who made the memorial possible.

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