

So the Ann and the Mayor asked me to speak for 5 or 10 minutes. After doing my research on Elkhart in WW1, I could easily speak for 45 minutes. This small town did a lot in WW1.

In the short time I have, I have to do three things:

1. Give you all a short WW1 history lesson,
2. Set the stage for what our boys faced in the trenches, and
3. Tell you about some Elkhart vets and a WW1 hero from Elkhart.

It is a shame. Nobody knows much about World War One. WW 1 remains the world's most horrific war. Yet very few people in this country know about WW1. There is not even a WW1 memorial in Washington DC! The only war without a memorial in Washington DC! Elkhart is unique. You are one of the rare communities across the nation which actually have a WW1 memorial.

## **WWI HISTORY**

The war started on June 28, 1914 when the Austrian empire declared war on Serbia. In 1914, nearly all of these countries were monarchies...ruled by a king or queen and many of them were related. They all started declaring war on each other. By August, 30 countries had declared war on each other.

Worldwide, 67 million men put on uniforms to fight in WWI. Appallingly, one in every 6 of these men was killed (11 million). Of the remainder, approximately half were wounded. Nearly all of them suffered some sort of mental impacts. Very few soldiers in the front lines came through the war unscathed.

Through the entire war, armies used civil war tactics, but the industrial revolution weapons had evolved. Tanks, airplanes, gas, machine guns, and artillery are basically the same weapons we use today. The losses were horrific.

By 1915, trenches ran 500 miles from the North Sea down to the Swiss border. To put that into perspective, that's from Chicago to Memphis on I-55. The trenches barely moved in 4 subsequent years of vicious fighting. By 1918, the French and the British were worried about losing the war.

By 1918, over 9 million men had been killed. 90% casualty rates in many regiments. Horrific battles of 1916 and 1917 had ruined the armies: Ypres, Verdun, Somme, Chamin de Dames. Each battle costing 1 million men for absolutely no gain. In the Somme alone, the British had 60,000 casualties in ONE

morning! French soldiers marching to the front were bleating like sheep going to the slaughter.

The French and the British were desperate for men and material. They were begging the US to join the war. The US declared war on German in the summer of 1917.

The German knew they had to win the war before the US arrived to help. In early 1918, the Germans made their last big push to end the war before the US got there in force. The British and French lines crumbled. The Germans gained almost 30 miles pushing the British almost back to the North Sea and the French right to the outskirts of Paris. Replacement troops were being rushed to the front by Paris taxis.

It was into the mess when the US stepped in. The battle of Belau Woods occurred in June. The costliest day in Marine Corps history with 10,000 casualties. The US started pushing the Germans back away from Paris. The US continued to push the Germans north in one horrific battle after another.

Our first KIA from this area was, a soldier named Abraham Bock who died pushing the Germans back from Paris in August. He was hit by shell fire while crossing a river. The Bocks still farm on Bock Road right on the county line between here and Williamsville.

### **WHAT WE FACED IN THE TRENCHES**

So now I want to stop and paint you a picture. I want all of you put on your imagination hats!

Remember trenches ran 500 miles. That's about the same distance from Chicago to Memphis. So let's picture I-55.

We are assigned to replace a beaten down French regiment. Our sector runs five miles between Elkhart and Williamsville.

During the night, we quietly move into in the ditch on the Elkhart side as the French move out. The Germans are in the ditch on the west side of the highway. We can even hear them speaking.

The 200 yards between us is no man's land. Rows and rows of sharp barb wire fill no man's land. Everything around us is a moonscape of shell hole, thick with mud, rats, and rotting bodies. Remember for 4 years, we couldn't bury the dead. They are simply left to rot. The smell is strong of rotting flesh, gunpowder, and poisonous gas make is hard to breathe.

A couple miles behind us is our artillery. The average on the western front is one gun every 52 feet. For those of you good at math, that almost 400 guns between here and Williamsville. Firing constantly. The bad news is that the Germans have the same number of guns behind their lines firing at us. 800 artillery pieces firing in just our little sector between here and Williamsville. There is not an inch of ground untouched by shellfire. The noise is not individual BOOMS but rather a constant ROAR. The guns are firing both high explosive shells and gas. Screams of the wounded can be heard of both sides of the highway. The wounded can't be moved to a hospital. The dead can't be buried.

If you stick your head up above the ditch. There is a very good probability of you getting hit with this (shrapnel) or this (balls). You are wearing a gas mask most of the time. Phosgene gas caused your lungs to fill and you drown or mustard which burns your skin and your lungs. You can't breathe. Even worse, you can't see for more than a few feet in front of you.

German machine guns (they had 3x as many as us) are constantly buzzing over your head. The Germans shoot low. Knee high. They know if you fall or if anyone bends to help you...there will be a kill shot.

You are ordered to cross the highway, walk thru the thick mud and rotting bodies, try to get thru the wire, while shrapnel and machine gun fire fill the air. You know that only 10% of you will make it. Welcome to the western front. This is hell. The most horrific warfare in history.

## **ELKHART IN WWI**

On September 26, the largest battle in US history happened. Exactly 100 years ago. To this day, more men and equipment than any battle in US history. Artillery pieces fired 4.5 million shells (more than the entire Civil War). The Meuse Argonne remain the US' most costly battle in terms of dollars and men. 26, 277 killed. 95,785 wounded. More than D-Day, Pearl Harbor, and Gettysburg combined. The equivalent of D-Day every 4 days for 6 weeks. Yet, our largest battle remains unknown.

The Germans had defended this area for 4 years with trenches and wire, interlacing pillboxes, every inch registered with artillery. It was there Alamo. The French had lost nearly a million men trying to take this area. They considered it impregnable.

Our boys from Illinois played a major part in this battle. Twice we were ordered to cross rivers and attack a mile uphill across open fields to take well emplaced Germans. The effort rivals anything you would see at D-Day beaches. A superhuman effort. The Illinois Division (the 33<sup>rd</sup>) was in continuous fire day and night for over a month. To this day, the 33<sup>rd</sup> Division remains the most gassed unit in history. Boys Elkhart and Logan County were in the thick of it.

By November, the German were pushing for an end to the war. An armistice was agreed upon for the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, of the 11<sup>th</sup> day, of the 11<sup>th</sup> month. The war would end on November 11 at 11:00. By this time, US commanders were pretty angry at the Germans. We were pushing them back every day. US commanders did not just sit and wait for the war to end. They wanted to attack.

On the morning of November 11, just hours before the war was to end, the Illinois Division was ordered to go over the top and take a small village named Butongville. A town smaller than Elkhart with no strategic importance. The attack would go across perfectly flat open ground. Germans would simply mow Americans down with interlacing machine gun fire. That's exactly what happened.

Like a lot of our local soldiers, a boy from Elkhart named Hillary Davis was in Company C of the 124 MGB of the 33<sup>rd</sup>. He was officially a bugler, but during battle, bugler often served as stretcher bearers. When his friends were mowed down, Private Davis left the safety of the trenches several times and ran into no mans land under heavy shelling, gas, and machine gun fire to carry wounded soldiers back into the American trenches. He was recommended for the Congressional Medal of Honor. But he was awarded the DSC. A hero from Elkhart.

In all, I counted 70 residents of Elkhart who served in WW1. Five died:

Charles Cullom (flu)

Joseph "Emmett" Fitzgerald (KIA Meuse Argonne)

John Laffey (KIA Meuse Argonne)

Walter Powell (Flu Meuse Argonne)

Roy Rogers (flu)

Three of our Elkhart boys are buried in the Meuse Argonne cemetery. The largest US overseas cemetery. Also the least visited US cemetery.

There were 4 sets of brothers from Elkhart in WW1. One of these brothers, Joseph "Emmett" Fitzgerald served with the First Division and he was our first KIA. On Thursday, I was at the First Division museum in Wheaton and they have a large red poppy with Joseph's name on it. One of 6,000 from the First Division. Emmett worked as a clerk in a store right across the street from us. He was a popular boy in Elkhart. Just a few days prior to being killed, he wrote a letter to his parents (read letter).

The Svenson family sent two boys and a daughter. The Tobins sent 3 boys. The youngest John was rejected 2x before he finally joined the 143<sup>rd</sup> Inf. There were three Elkhart women who served in France as nurses.

On the home front, Elkhart gave as well. The village women knitted thousands of sweaters, glove, socks and caps for the boys. There was a food conservation committee. Encouraging gardening and canning. A scrap committee collecting iron, walnut, cloth, and wax. There was even a Home Defense Corps. In June 1918, early on Friday morning, the Home Defense Corps was activated. Someone noticed a large airship approaching Elkhart from the west. The siren was sounded and the Home Defense Corps came out...I picture a bunch of elderly Civil War vets and farmers armed with buckets, shotguns, pitch forks. They thought it was a German Zeppelin attacking Elkhart. It turned out to be an experimental air ship flying from STL to Rantoul. As you would expect from Elkhart residents, the crew was served breakfast, the airship was repaired, and they flew on to Rantoul. The famous WW1 battle of Elkhart.

World War One was a pivotal moment in American history. It helped cast America's leadership roll in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Suddenly, the US was a global power. The men who fought in World War One returned home as hero's but were soon forgotten as the great depression and World War Two became priorities. Elkhart is one of the few villages with a fine WW1 memorial and German Krups gun at the library. For a small village, Elkhart gave a lot to the war effort. You should be very proud of Elkhart's role in WW1.

Tomorrow at 11:00 churches around the nation will ring bells at 11:00 to honor the end of WW1. Three bells will be ringing in Williamsville.