

The World War I profile of Army veteran Mack D. Atkins

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SPECIAL TO THE BEACON

Trace historical records and you will discover many contradictions. Headstone dates do not match birth and/or date records. Census records often make one wonder: can a person truly avoid aging the 10 years between them? Yes, there are census records spaced 10 years apart that show a person with the same age.

Records handwritten through a war that occurred 100 years ago surely have many errors.

The more records found and the more detailed the records are can actually add questions, not answer them. In the case of the 119th Infantry, the source listed below has a wonderful and unusual feature: a roster that shows dates wounded and the date returned to duty. It should not have been a surprise to have some issues with the roster. These caused some missteps:

The alphabetical list is not actually alphabetical, although close, so Brunswick County names were constantly being missed. Imagine the writers alphabetizing more than 3,400 names on multiple company rosters by hand.

There are misspellings that added more complexity in a list that large.

The use of the word "sick" caused confusion. Given that some North Carolina World War I service cards showed gassing injuries and the roster showed "sick" it was left up to the researcher to make the determination. In the case of Pfc. Perry G. Carlisle, mentioned in the previous post, his service card showed no injury but the roster showed he was "sick." Newspapers did not include his name in the list of wounded, so the conclusion was made that he contracted an illness. This may be incorrect. Others appeared more straightforward. If the service card showed a gassing injury, then the "sick" of the roster must mean gas sickness. Maybe.

The usual inconsistencies with dates were present, such as dates wounded listed in the roster did not exactly match the North Carolina World War I service cards. In that case, the unit history documents help to suggest the correct date, as the unit may not have been in combat during one date presented.

Creating the World War I profiles begins with the North Carolina World War I service cards, then the World War I draft registration card. The date and place of birth do not always match. Death certificates and Findagrave listings cause more discrepancies with dates and places of birth and dates and places of death.

Another idiosyncrasy with war records is the rank. Battlefield or field promotions are commonplace. Soldiers may leave the country with one rank, then return with another much lower rank. The North Carolina World War I service cards show ranks going up and down and back up again and assignment changes between units or even divisions. Yes, some were demoted. Diaries mention soldiers demoted for drinking alcohol. But, it is assumed that the vast majority was due to new assignments or battlefield promotions that were no longer in effect after combat ended. When writing World War I profiles, the rank chosen is the highest rank the veteran had obtained as listed on the North Carolina World War I service card. This matches the military headstone applications that have been found.

The military headstone applications are submitted after death and confirmed by official War/Military Records. But even some inconsistencies are found on those. If an inconsistency is found, the World War I profile post will include a note. In some cases, the veteran continued to serve which is beyond the scope of the World War I project.

Every World War I profile on the website has had, at the very least, an inconsistency with dates. The links are typically included so the reader can investigate further. But Mack D.

NAME	NUMBER	RANK	HOME	ADDRESS
Adams, James B.	1315872	Cook	Isoline, Tenn.	
Adams, Roy	1315924	Pvt.	Andrews, N.C.	
Atkins, Mack D.	1315935	Pvt.	Makatoka, N.C.	
Agee, Byrd	1315879	Corp.	Crossville, Tenn.	
Barnes, Dewey F.	1315882	Pvt. lcl.	Grab Orchard, Tenn.	
Barnwell, George	1315883	Pvt. lcl.	Isoline, Tenn.	
Barrett, James L.	1315885	Pvt. lcl.	Farmville, N.C.	
Bail, Greg V.	2159243	Pvt.	Nevis, Miss.	
Beaty, Leslie	1315887	Pvt. lcl.	Jamesstown, Tenn.	
Bennett, Willie	1315888	Pvt. lcl.	Crossville, Tenn.	
Betts, Willis A.	1995268	Pvt.	Round City, Ill.	
Bayers, Lester W.	1315890	Mech.	Lastana, Tenn.	
Blake, Alva	2555550	Pvt.	Cedar Bluff, Miss.	

Photo contributed

119th Infantry Unit Rosters for Company E to Company G

Atkins' records had a few more than usual, which makes it difficult to state his story with confidence.

What we do know is a large portion of Mack Atkin's short life was spent in service to his country. Mack D. Atkins was born and raised in Brunswick County.

His North Carolina World War I service card is complicated and there are discrepancies between it and other sources. Using the service card and the following sources, a possible timeline can be pieced together.

Oct. 31, 1914: Mack D. Atkins enlisted in the Regular Army at Fort Caswell. He served with 19th Company, Coastal Artillery Company, Fort Caswell.

April 6, 1917: America declared war on Germany.

June 1, 1917: Pvt. Atkins was promoted to private first class.

Sept. 6, 1917: Pvt. 1st Class Atkins was promoted to sergeant.

Sept. 22, 1917: Sgt. Atkins was assigned to Quartermaster Corps at Camp Sevier, S.C.

Jan. 30, 1918: Sgt. Atkins was ranked as private. The assumption is this is due to him being reassigned.

Feb. 14, 1918: Pvt. Atkins was assigned to Company G, 119th Infantry, until discharge.

March 1, 1918: Pvt. Atkins was promoted to corporal.

At this point, Cpl. Atkins was training with the 119th Infantry, 30th "Old Hickory" Division as explained in Pvt. Luther Benton's profile.

May 11, 1918: Cpl. Atkins boarded Haverford to France.

Sept. 3 or 11, 1918: Cpl. Atkins was wounded or became ill.

The roster shows Cpl. Mack Atkins became sick Sept. 11, yet his service card shows undetermined wounds Sept. 3. Newspaper accounts at the time report that he was wounded, so an assumption is made that he was not just sick. Using information about the unit activities at the time, it is assumed that he suffered a gas injury.

Cpl. Atkins' injuries occurred during the occupation/operation as described below. His service card shows he was engaged at Ypres and the Canal sector, and the date of September 3 matches this timeframe.

The Canal sector was the general line extending from immediately southeast of Ypres, about two miles southwest to Elzenwalla, inclusive, on both sides of the Ypres-Commines Canal and the country on this immediate front was very low and wet, thus causing many hardships upon the troops occupying it. To the right of the Canal sector stood Mount Kemmel, from the top of which the Germans had a dominating view of the entire sector, thus causing camouflaged screens to be erected on all main roads leading towards the front, and making it very difficult to move about during the day. On the left of this sector was the remains of Ypres, after the great battle the British fought in July, 1916, when the Germans used gas for the first time. — Page 18, History, 119th Infantry, 60th Brigade, 30th Division, U.S.A. Operations in Belgium and France, 1917-19.

According to Col. Pratt's diary, the 105th Engineers and some infantry, possibly some from the 119th Infantry, performed a gas attack on August 28th, which resulted in many engineers and infantry being gassed. An investigation was ordered to prevent injuries in the future. This could have been the source of Cpl. Atkins' injury.

Then Col. Pratt wrote the following on Aug. 31, 1918, the 30th Division's first contact with the enemy:

The unexpected happened. The Germans are off of Mount Kemmel and the "German Eye" will no longer watch us as we work. ... The British were on top of Kemmel early this morning and moving over the slope. Our Division also advanced a short distance, capturing fifteen prisoners and one machine gun. They (the Germans) are not retiring on our front and we are meeting with considerable resistance. I received orders to assign one company of engineers to each Regiment in the line, which I did. Company F with the 120th Infantry; Company E with 119th Infantry. Our troops are attacking and we have actually come in contact with Germans in a fight.

The German retirement is very probably due to his desire to straighten his line and thus cut down the number of troops necessary to hold it. He will probably try and withdraw to the old Hindenburg line and make a stand there. He is fighting hard and giving way as slowly as possible so as to be able to withdraw all his guns and ammunition.

Col Pratt writes of many German gas shells throughout the operation. The 30th Division were then moved to the Hindenburg Line and did not participate in the Battle of the Peak of Flanders.

While evidence points to Cpl. Atkins being gassed, whatever injury/illness he suffered, his recovery took three months. By then, the war was over.

Dec. 2, 1918: Cpl. Atkins returned to service.

Dec. 16, 1918: Cpl. Atkins became a private. The assumption is his previous rank was a field promotion.

March 21, 1919: Pvt. Atkins boarded USS Huron in France to return to the US.

July 20, 1919: Pvt. Atkins was discharged. Pvt. Atkins immediately re-enlisted.

Aug. 3, 1919: Mack Atkins married Mattie Caison.

Jan. 6, 1920: The 1920 Census shows Cpl. Mack Atkins serving at Camp Jackson, S.C. This census record shows his service extended into 1920, and also confirms his rank of corporal.

Mack Atkins and his wife had two children, but Mack's life ended soon. He passed away Feb. 25, 1930, at 37. His cause of death is included in current medical research papers as having possible connections to mustard gas exposure.

Mack D. Atkins was laid to rest in Hope Mills.

His application for a military headstone does not match the above service information. It shows his rank as private, serving in the 48th Infantry, 20th Division. The 20th Division was created in October 1918, never went overseas, and was demobilized in February 1919. It could be a mistake, as mentioned earlier, or previous and later service could explain this. Anyone with information, please contact Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range and this profile will be updated.

If you would like to help us honor Atkins or another Brunswick County World War I veteran, go to caswellriflerange.com or email ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com.

A monument will be placed at the site of the rifle range in Caswell Beach Veterans' Day 2018 in honor of the men and women from Brunswick County who served their country. A book is to be published during 2019 containing all 725 names, as well as a historical overview of the 1918 World War I Rifle Range Target Pit Storage Room.

Norma Eckard of Caswell Beach is president of Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range Inc.