

# WWI Profile: Dorman Lowell Mercer 1894-1996

By NORMA ECKARD

*Dorman Lowell Mercer  
Bolivia, Brunswick County,  
NC*

*National Guard, Wagoner  
Served: July 24, 1917 –  
May 12, 1919*

*Overseas: Oct. 18, 1917 –  
April 24, 1919*

*Wounded: July 27, 1918  
Gassing*

Note: Dorman Mercer was the first Brunswick County WWI Profile published in the blog. Because the profiles following his became more detailed, his profile has been rewritten. Read the previous post about him at caswellriflerange.com.

Dorman Lowell Mercer was born in Brunswick County, NC. His brother, Edward Mercer, also served in WWI.

In June 1917, Dorman registered for the WWI Draft as required. His registration shows he was single, living in Bolivia, and farming.

A month later, Dorman enlisted in the NC National Guard. In October he became a wagoner. He left for France with most of the 42nd Division in October 1917.

"I was a wagoner, and I drove trucks and mules in wagon trains. Our work was to haul ammunition to the front, and picks, shovels, and barbed wire for the engineers to use." Dorman Mercer [Source: The Brunswick Beacon].

The previous post described the formation and training of the 42nd Rainbow Division, along with the months in France up to March 21, 1918, when the German offensive was unleashed.

The Rainbow Division remained in the Baccarat Sector for nearly three months, until the end of June. The Champagne-Marne Defensive and Aisne-Marne Offensive immediately followed.

The following was used to determine where and when Wagoner Mercer was injured:

July 14th was the start of the Champagne-Marne Defensive. On July 25, the 42nd Division prepared for the Aisne-Marne Offensive. According to his NC WWI Service Card, he was wounded on July 27.

"Once while retreating from the front, a German shell hit the roof of a nearby house and showered Mercer with shrapnel and debris. Less than two weeks later, he was gassed in an engagement and required medical treatment, although he said his injuries didn't amount to much." [Source: The Brunswick Beacon]

From this description, it seems his first brush with injury was in the Champagne-Marne Defensive, while his official gassing injury was during the Aisne-Marne Offensive.

The map segment shows Paris on the left. The Allied Champagne-Marne Defensive is marked. Following that, the 42nd Division moved to Chateau-Thierry [sha-toh-tee-uh-ree], west at the top of the salient, to push the enemy to the north during the Aisne-Marne [ayn-mahrn] Offensive. At the far right is the St. Mihiel [san-mee-yel] salient, the site of the first all-American operation, which the 42nd joins later among a total of 14 American divisions.

The Champagne-Marne Defensive, referred to as "the last and greatest trench battle," was planned by the Germans for July 14, French Independence Day. According to a captured enemy soldier, it was the hope of the Germans to face only drunk and surprised French soldiers with what was to become their last offensive move against the Allies. This information gave the Allies the chance to prepare.

The French filled the first line of their trenches with decoys, sacrifice troops, to keep the enemy fooled and delay their advance.

The second line was occupied by infantry from the American 42nd. Beside them, the 117th engineers were serving as infantry. Behind that line were the animals and transportation,

artillery, and "great heaps of ammunition."

At five minutes past midnight on July 14, on a front of 42 miles, the German barrage began, four continuous hours.

Excerpts below are taken from "The Story of the Rainbow Division," source listed below.

There was death and destruction in the very air; it seemed to be reaching out with hungry, clutching hands, sweeping victims in; the sky swished and swirled like a hurricane, bringing a rain that burst with a red crash when it landed, and the clean night breeze became a deadly draft of poisonous gas.

For years to come Americans who lived under it will shake their heads and fail for words when you talk of the first part of that night in the Champagne.

At four in the morning, the German infantry began the assault, not knowing that the French were prepared for them.

[The Germans] found nobody to fight; nothing but mines that roared up beneath their feet, and thick gas clouds and shells tearing great holes in their ranks. And in little torn forests of wire the men of the French sacrifice companies now came out of their holes like small swarms of angry bees and stung them with bursts of machine-gun fire.

The Allied artillery began to fire.

Direct hits from high explosive shells began piling into the German attackers. But still they kept on, thousands more climbing over heaps of bodies to fill the gaps. And finally, by sheer disregard of losses, they came to the intermediate line, the Allies' first real line of defense.

Then and there the Battle of the Champagne became a rough-and-tumble fight with bare knives, fists, teeth and rifle-butts.

Machine-guns were spraying the Germans, hand-grenades bursting in groups of them, rifles were spitting at them from the parapets, but still they came on.

The 167th Infantry of the 42nd Division went in by platoons, winding through the trenches, crawling over heaps of dead French, Americans and Germans, and labyrinths of tangled wire, into the melee. Of the first platoon, none ever came back.

Thus they were still fighting while the sun rose high and the air grew warm and the day advanced, and the first shock of the last German offensive had fallen on men who would not yield an inch.

By noon they had gained a foothold seven times in the 165th Infantry, 42nd Division trenches and seven times had been hurled out. That evening at six o'clock they tried it again and were beaten off.

All night bombs and shells fell on the fighting lines and rear areas; steady showers of them on hospitals, towns and roads. There was no rest from them, especially the bombs. By day, the sky was literally dark with German aeroplanes. Every French plane had been chased away.

The German aviators would hover above trenches like hawks circling to pounce on chickens, then swooping low, cut loose with machine guns and showers of steel darts upon the heads of the infantry. Carrying parties with ammunition had to dodge these planes as they would swarms of bees.

Stretcher-bearers carrying wounded men through trenches and along roads were shot down by low-flying aviators.

At six o'clock on the morning of July 16, the Germans attacked again and were again thrown off.

On the night of July 16, the Germans gave up hope, and the hand-to-hand fighting ceased. The Allied line in the Champagne, though it had bent in and out during the two days' battle, was reestablished with not a foot of ground lost; the German offensive had crumpled in the early hours of the first day. The decisive battle of the war had been won.

Now the Hun became spiteful. Raging in defeat he shelled the rear areas as far back as Chalons, and sprinkled the earth with bombs from the sky.

Back there, where the ammunition and supplies had come from and where the wounded had been carried, the scene was indescribable.

Dead horses lay everywhere, simply spattered about the landscape. The big American hospital at Bussyle-Chateau had been wrecked by bombs, several wards full of wounded soldiers destroyed and the men killed.

Roads were obliterated for miles. Blight seemed to have descended on trees and vegetation, everywhere within a radius of 20 miles the earth was torn and tortured, but the line had held. The bodies of Americans of the Rainbow had barred the road to Chalons; and some were in huddled, shapeless heaps in the trenches and some were wiping off their bayonets and crying.

They said the Rainbow Division had put a new spirit into France; that before the battle their mere presence had been a tonic, and that their resistance during the battle was like a promise of new life. And he announced for the first time the successful launching of an allied offensive between Soissons and Chateau-Thierry.

Officers who had not slept for days, covered with the dirt and blood of the trenches, shouted with joy. Camps of men just out of the jaws of death rang with laughter and song. The tide of war had turned. The French celebrated their 14th of July on July 19, and champagne ran like water.

Wagoner Mercer's official wound (gassing) was yet to come, recorded as July 27.

The Allies were ready to take an offensive position and this began with the Aisne-Marne Offensive on July 25th, mere days from the beating above. There was no rest for the 42nd Division. They boarded the trains that would take them there.

The long trains that carried the Rainbow rolled through [suburb of Paris] there between July 21 and 24. It was a beautiful day, warm and mellow, and wherever they could find holds for hands and feet, the men clung to open flatcars, taking the air. Bridges across the railroad yards were crowded with Parisians, mostly women and girls. For nearly four years they had had no chance to celebrate a victory, but now they had one, and here, within sound of their voices, were the Americans who had stopped the Germans in the Champagne.

They cheered wildly and threw kisses and flowers at the men in olive drab. The men cheered back; their spirits had returned, they had seen the worst of war; there was nothing they could not tackle now. It was good to

be alive on this warm July morning with Paris cheering you as a conquering hero. This was the "sort of stuff you read about."

It was thus the Rainbow Division went toward the Aisne-Marne Offensive for what was to be the bloodiest battle of the outfit's history. For at this stage of the war it was "Push while the pushing is good," and no division of soldiers with such reputations as the Rainbow for steadfastness and valor could be permitted to rest while there were such possibilities of getting the enemy on the run, not even when that division had been in actual combat without rest since midwinter.

The 3rd Division had just completed blocking the Germans at the Marne, as detailed in James Isaac Jenrette's WWI post. The 42nd Division was now joining them in the area of Chateau-Thierry for the first Allied offensive.

The Aisne-Marne Offensive included the capture of La Croix Rouge Farm: a clearing surrounded by forests on four sides with a road running diagonally SE to NW. The road and woods were lined with German machine gun nests. The 42nd Division relieved the 26th Division. The artillery of the 26th Division stayed in position to assist.

Much has been written about the La Croix Rouge Farm battle, which is too long to recount here. (One source: <http://croixrouge-farm.org/history-battle/>)

The 42nd began the attack on the morning of July 26. Six days and nights of constant fighting of the hardest kind ended on August 1st when the Germans stole silently away at night.

(Source: Official History of the 42nd Rainbow Division)

The Rainbow had outwitted, outgamed and outfought the best soldiers in the German army. They were now in full retreat. The weather was hot, and the country full of ruined villages, dead, unburied bodies... and thousands of dead horses.

The men were dirty; baths were next to impossible. But instead of being withdrawn from the salient, which seemed on the verge of becoming a pesthole, the Rainbow Division infantry was held in reserve for nearly a week. Sickness broke out. There were gaps in the ranks of the Rainbow now... big gaps.

On Aug. 17, the division was loaded into cars marked "Hommes 40, Chevaux 8," and rolled off to the Bourmont area. It was booked for a period of "intensive training."

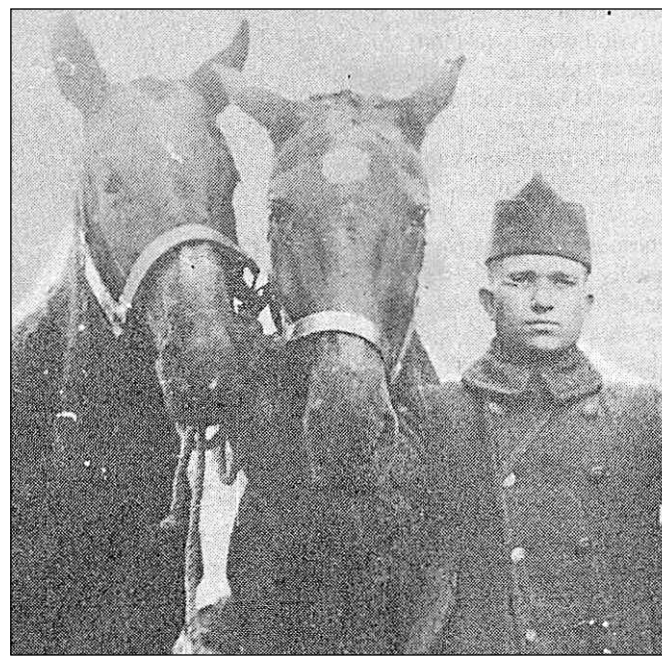
At that point, many replacements for the infantry arrived. The division had over 5,500 casualties just in the Aisne-Marne Offensive alone.

For the first time, the Division was being resupplied and rested.

Five replacements were from Brunswick County and only recently inducted into the Army. Two would be wounded in the coming weeks.

Fortunately, as stated in his interview, Wagoner Mercer's wounds were slight and he returned to duty.

After the Armistice, Wagoner Mercer served in the Army of Occupation, then returned with his unit in April 1919. He rejoined his family in Bolivia, married Annie Mae McKeithan in



Photos contributed

Wagoner Dorman Lowell Mercer (Source: Photo reprinted with permission by The Brunswick Beacon Brunswick County News, Nov. 15, 1917).



U. S. Official Photo  
150th F. A. Rainbow division marching through Chateau-Thierry to the front. July, 1918

Rainbow Division marching to Chateau-Thierry in July 1918.

1925, and raised a family. He was a farmer, sawmill operator, and county forest ranger before his retirement.

Dorman Lowell Mercer was laid to rest on Dec. 6, 1996, at Forest Lawn Cemetery in Bolivia, beside his wife. He was 102. No military honors are shown.

Sources:  
Reilly, Henry J. (1936). Americans All, The Rainbow at War: Official History of the 42nd Rainbow Division in the World War. Columbus, OH: Heer.

Sherwood, Elmer W. (1929). Diary of a Rainbow Veteran. Terre Haute, IN: Moore-Langen.

Thompkins, Raymond S. (1919). The Story of the Rainbow Division. NY: Boni & Liveright.

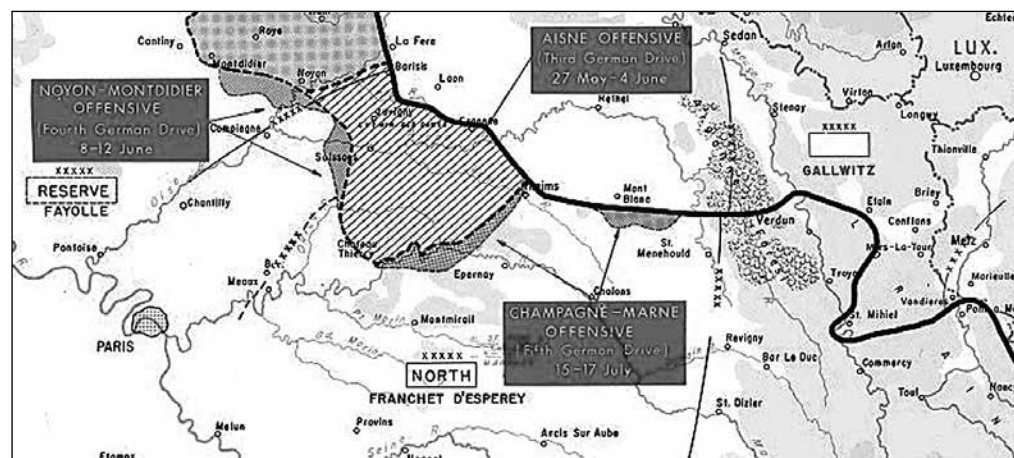
World War I American Battle Monuments Commission (1944). 42nd Division Summary of Operations in the World War. Washington DC: GPO.

If you would like to help

us honor Wagoner Dorman Lowell Mercer or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range at [fcaswellriflerange@gmail.com](mailto:fcaswellriflerange@gmail.com) or go to [caswellriflerange.com](http://caswellriflerange.com).

A future fundraiser, Oktoberfest, is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 12, at the Caswell Beach town public service facility building (fire station) to raise funds for publishing the book of Brunswick County men and women that served in WWI; to continue historic preservation of the rifle range memorial; and to honor Brunswick County WWI veterans. There will be authentic German food and drink as well as dancing with music by The Back Porch Rockers. A Polka Dance Contest and Best Dressed Oktoberfest Outfit will be awarded. More information will follow soon.

Also, another Roll Call is planned for Veterans Day, Monday, Nov. 11, at 11 a.m. beside the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial in Caswell Beach. The public is welcome.



Western Front map, 1918.