

World War I Profile: John William Vereen 1896-1973

*John William Vereen
1896-1973
Brunswick County, NC
US Army, Corporal
Served: July 15, 1916 –
Nov. 10, 1919
Overseas: July 28, 1917 –
Sept. 3, 1919*

BY NORMA ECKARD

Johnnie Vereen was born and raised in Brunswick County, NC. A partial family tree is located in FamilySearch. Two brothers also served in WWI. Sgt. Pearl Vereen enlisted May 1917 and served overseas with the 17th Railway Engineers. Seaman Jack Vereen enlisted in the Navy in July 1917 and served aboard the USS Peter Struven and USS Lakeside.

"Johnnie enlisted in the US Army at Fort Slocum, NY, on July 15, 1916. On the night of July 31, the convoy of three transports, with the cruiser North Carolina and five destroyers as escort, and an oil ship carrying fuel, started on another perilous trip across the Atlantic. St. Nazaire was reached Aug. 13 without incident and all disembarked on Aug. 14.

The 6th Field Artillery, along with the 7th, were light infantry and were equipped with French 77-mm guns. The training continued for seven weeks and included road marching to condition the horses and drivers. The 6th Field Artillery was credited with firing the first American shot in WWI at 6:05 a.m. on Oct. 23, 1917.

"Experience had shown that unless a final blow could be struck the lines would stabilize and there would be another winter in the trenches during which the enemy might recover the advantage that he had lost."

The Meuse River Argonne Forest was targeted.

"Nature had contrived to include within the zone the most difficult obstacles, from a military point of view, that could be encountered. The terrain was naturally so rugged and deeply cut by ravines that it was fit only for wild vegetation. Over this surface spread the great Argonne Forest, with an undergrowth that in places resembled a tropical jungle. The Meuse River was a formidable barrier to military operations. Between the forest and the river the country was cut by deep ravines, extensive woods

and a succession of hills and ridges whose wooded crests afforded cover for machine guns to sweep their barren slopes. The Aire River flowed along the north and east of the Argonne Forest in a valley that was open throughout its length."

For the first time, the First Division was not waiting in the front line trenches. An eastward operation was planned instead. As the battle began on Sept. 26, the First Division waited. The Germans were resisting with desperate and relentless fighting and losses were mounting. All thoughts of the eastward operation were forgotten. The First Division awaited their orders to join the raging battle.

Sept. 27, the First Division began to march.

"This long night march proved to be another test of endurance and fortitude. For 12 hours the infantry plodded along the muddy and war-worn roads, the larger part of the time in a downpour of rain. The feet of many men were sore and inflamed from living in the mud and from ill-fitting shoes.

The pain that they suffered could be seen in their set faces, but only those whose condition was pitiable would succumb. It was touching to witness the devotion of these officers and men and to realize the sense of consecration that animated them. When the weary march ended, they found themselves in woods rendered boggy by old bivouacs or horse-lines and often tangled by the wire of the rear defenses.

The artillery and the trains were compelled to follow even more difficult roads than the infantry. Nothing short of the most patient and skillful handling could have preserved the strength of the horses. The strain upon these men was, if possible, more trying than that upon the infantry, for not only were they compelled to make their way on foot, but, at the end of the march, their remaining strength was required to care for the horses and keep their guns in readiness for the missions that lay before them."

The First Division relieved the 35th Division on the night of Sept. 30. The map shows the location on the left side, as the sections marked "35" changes to "1." See also the 77th Division

on the left flank, as described in the WWI Profile of Forney Mintz, resulting in the Lost Battalion.

"Wherever the eye rested, there were low crosses that marked the last resting places of the men who died for their country on either side. Many, alas, were new and crudely bore the names of American soldiers who a few days before went forward as the ranks of the First Division were now doing. Here and there were masses of swollen carcasses of horses torn beyond description by shell dumped servants whose sacrifice was little less than human and ceaselessly came the sullen roar of guns, growing ever louder and louder as the columns drew nearer the fate that awaited them."

General Pershing chose the 1st Division for the vital position, or post of honor, in most of his engagements. This, along with the long service time of the division, resulted in a large casualty count of almost 24,000: 4,964 killed in action, 17,201 wounded in action, and 1,056 missing or died of wounds. None of the men from Brunswick County became casualties.

On Aug. 1, 1919, Johnnie was promoted to corporal. He boarded USS Mobile on Aug. 24, 1919, to return to the United States. He likely marched in the parades shown in William Thompson White's WWI Profile. He was then honorably discharged on Nov. 10 and immediately re-enlisted. His re-enlistment evidently resulted in his rank reverting to private again, as the higher rank was likely only during wartime.

According to the 1920 Census, he was stationed at Camp Meade, Maryland. Now known as Fort Meade, at the time it housed the nation's tank school and experimental grounds. The census shows Pvt. Vereen was serving with the Overseas Replacement Depot, Company 49, which processed soldiers sent to Germany for occupation duty.

The Passenger List shows Pvt. Johnnie Vereen sailing USAT Antigone on Aug. 23, 1920, for Antwerp, Belgium. His name is crossed out and stamped with Did Not Sail. No explanation is found. Johnnie left the US Army on May 5, 1924 [Source: Department of Veterans Affairs Death File, Ancestry]. Around 1927, he married Lillian Hazel Gray. The 1930 Census shows he and his wife living in Waccamaw Township with their first child, little Johnnie Jr., age 19 months. Johnnie Sr. was working at a lumber mill.

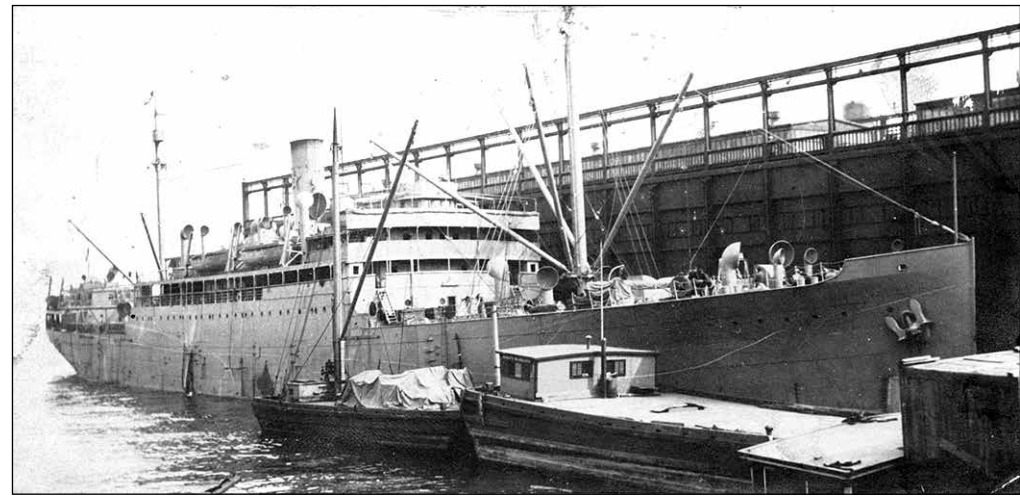
The 1940 Census shows him working as a foreman at the Reigel Paper Company. According to his family, his entire career was spent as a forester with Reigel Paper Company, planting and tending the forests around Lake Waccamaw.

Johnnie William Vereen passed away on June 11, 1973. He was laid to rest in Lake Waccamaw Hillcrest Cemetery. No military honors are shown.

In 1991, his wife, Lillian Hazel Gray, passed away. The Brunswick Beacon published this obituary on April 25, 1991, p. 6-B:

Lillian Hazel Gray Vereen

Lillian Hazel Gray Vereen, of Long Beach, died



Photos contributed

USS Henry R. Mallory.

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506	506
506	506

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April 18 in Cornelia Nixon Davis Health Care Center, Wilmington. She was 80.

The funeral was April 20 in McKenzie Mortuary Chapel, with the Rev. Frank Elliott officiating. Burial was in Lake Waccamaw Cemetery, Columbus County.

Mrs. Vereen was born in Brunswick County and was the widow of Johnny W. Vereen Sr. She was a member of Ocean View United Methodist Church, Yaupon Beach.

Survivors include a daughter, Joyce V. Formydual of Long Beach; two sons, Wayland Vereen of Yaupon Beach and Johnny W. Vereen Jr. of Long Beach; a half-brother, John B. Gray of Garner; a half-sister, Erma Holden of Supply; a stepmother, Maude Gray of Makatoka; three grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

In lieu of flowers, memorials may be made to a local rescue unit.

Johnnie Vereen Jr., his son, is living in Brunswick County today. Johnnie Vereen III served as mayor of Oak Island for four terms and passed away in 2015.

Sources:

The Society of the First Division (1922) History of the First Division During the World War, 1917-1919. Philadelphia, The John C. Winston Company.

Meuse-Argonne Map: The Society of the Fifth Division (1919) The Official History of the Fifth Division USA, During the Period of its Organization and its Operations in the European World War, 1917-1919. New York, Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Company.

Oktoberfest in Caswell Beach 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 a dance with music by The Back Porch Rockers. A Polka Dance Contest and Best Dressed Oktoberfest Outfit will be awarded.

The Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range are in need of vendors to participate in the Oktoberfest in Caswell Beach event from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 12.

Don't forget to read about the nurses that served at

Fort Caswell during WWI at caswellriflerange.com.

Another Roll Call is planned for Veterans Day, Monday, Nov. 11, at 11

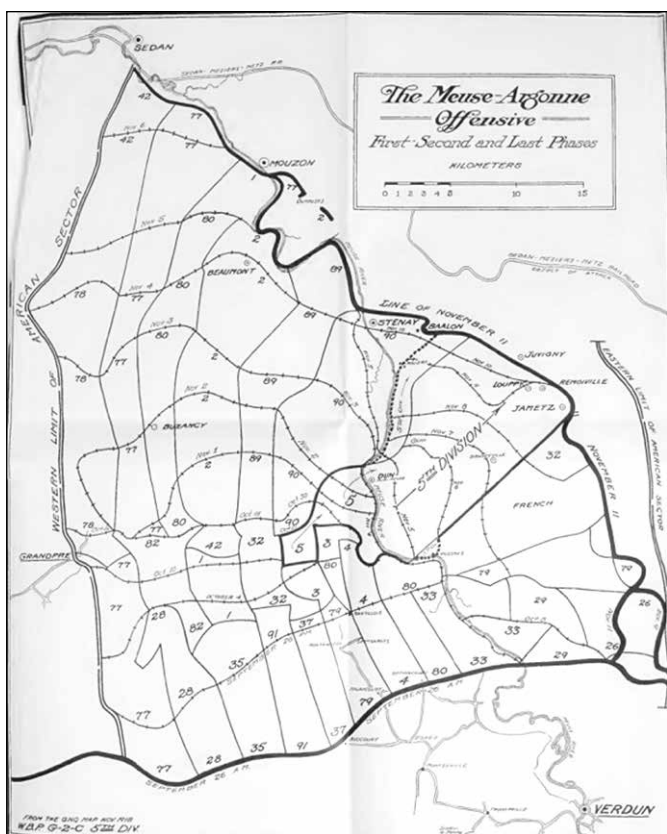
a.m. beside the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial in Caswell Beach. The public is welcome.



1st Division 6th Field Artillery Training in France.



1st Division Monument Meuse Argonne



Meuse-Argonne Offensive map.