

AN  
AMERICAN  
SOLDIER  
IN THE  
GREAT WAR

THE WORLD WAR I DIARY  
AND LETTERS OF  
ELMER O. SMITH

Private First Class, 119th Field Artillery Regiment, 32nd Division

*Edited by*

John DellaGiustina



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*To my  
Mother Sharon, Aunt Margo, and Uncle Steve,  
children of Elmer and Marjorie Smith  
and their families*



*... It's what's left that matters.  
Photographs, letters, empty clothes,  
no, it's the stories behind them,  
those are what matter.  
Stories live forever,  
but only if you tell them ...*

From the 2012 movie *Memorial Day*



## P R E F A C E

In August 2014, the world remembered the 100th anniversary of the start of one of the most ghastly conflicts in human history—“the Great War,” “the War to End All Wars,” and commonly referred to in recent times as World War I or the First World War. In 1917, the United States joined the Allied effort to defeat Germany, culminating with victory in November 1918.

Over the past decade the last survivors who fought in this major war have passed from this earth. Now the only sources of information from this conflict are the written records. These include the numerous personal accounts, unit files, newspaper articles, journals, and books that have documented the carnage and events of that now distant past. This book centers on one soldier’s actions in that conflict and adds to the existing record of primary source material.

Elmer O. Smith was my grandfather. Enlisting in the U.S. Army in April 1917, he started a diary on New Year’s Day 1918. Throughout that pivotal year he made short entries into this diary to document his activities and thoughts. These entries captured what he faced in his unit’s training, their deployment overseas to France, battles with the German Army, his wounding, subsequent convalescence, return to the front lines and the armistice. It describes the rigorous day to day activities of a soldier training for and facing combat during World War I.

The unpublished diary’s entries are supplemented throughout the book by many of the letters he wrote to his mother, Olive Smith and sister, Zelma Smith. The diary and letters were transcribed from the existing documents and incorporated in their original form, misspellings, punctuation errors, and all. Multiple primary and secondary sources have contributed to a more complete war record of this soldier and framed his war life within its historical context. As a soldier at the bottom of his chain of command, Private Smith did not have the luxury of the wider perspective that these additional sources can now provide. Thus, this book aims to show how Private Smith was just one part of a much larger, broader effort to bring American combat power to

bear on the German Army and bring about the end of four years of devastating conflict in Europe and elsewhere.

I personally thank and acknowledge the extensive efforts over the years of my Aunt Margo to preserve the Smith family history, to include the transcribing of her father's handwritten diary and letters. As a trained historian and career U.S. Army officer, I accept responsibility for any errors or omissions contained in this book.

Tucson, Arizona

April, 2015

# CHRONOLOGY

## World War I Timeline of Elmer O. Smith

**April 6, 1917:** The United States declares war on Germany

**April 30, 1917:** Elmer O. Smith enlists in Battery B, First Michigan Field Artillery Battalion, Michigan National Guard, Lansing; Begins twice-a-week training, initially at Lansing Armory, then Camp Hoague in east Lansing

**May/June, 1917:** U.S. Draft established

**July 3, 1917:** Proclamation of President Wilson federalizes the National Guard units of Michigan, Wisconsin, and most other states

**August 3, 1917:** 32nd Division established and organized. Michigan National Guard units incorporated. Battery B becomes part of 119th Field Artillery (FA) Regiment, 57th FA Brigade, 32nd Division

**August 5, 1917:** All National Guard soldiers formally drafted into Regular Army

**August 17, 1917:** Battery B moves via train to mobilization site, Camp Grayling, Michigan

**October 1, 1917:** 119th FA Regiment moves via train to Camp MacArthur, Waco, Texas

**January 1, 1918:** Private Elmer Smith starts 1918 Diary

**January 4, 1918:** Private Smith transferred to Headquarters Company, 119th FA Regiment

**February 6, 1918:** 119th FA departs Camp MacArthur via train for New York City vicinity

**February 11, 1918:** 119th FA arrives at Camp Merritt, Tenafly, New Jersey

- February 26, 1918:** 119th FA departs New York harbor on British transport ship Olympic bound for Great Britain
- March 6, 1918:** 119th FA unloads ship in Liverpool, England
- March 10, 1918:** 119th FA crosses English Channel on ferry from Southampton, England; arrives in Havre, France the next day
- March 13, 1918:** 119th FA arrives at Camp Coetquidan, France, artillery training post, via train
- June 4, 1918:** 119th FA departs Camp Coetquidan by train for the Western Front
- June 7, 1918:** 119th FA arrives Toul, France. Moves to French village 12 miles behind front lines
- June 13, 1918:** 119th FA moves to French village six miles behind lines
- June 14, 1918:** 119th FA moves to firing positions
- June 16, 1918:** Private Elmer Smith wounded in action in enemy artillery attack on position at approximately 3:30 PM. Evacuated to front line hospital
- July 11, 1918:** Private Smith departs hospital in vicinity of Toul; travels by train to hospital at Basiolles
- July 16, 1918:** Private Smith travels to convalescent camp 3 miles from Basiolles hospital
- July 22, 1918:** Private Smith declared fit for service; leaves convalescent camp, travels to Neuf Chateau and Chaumont via train; arrives St. Aignan the next day
- July 29, 1918:** Private Smith leaves St. Aignan for replacement camp via Tours and Bordeaux; arrives at Camp Corneau near Atlantic Ocean the next day
- August 7, 1918:** Private Smith departs Le Corneau replacement camp by train; travels via La Teste, Bordeaux, Tours, Orleans, Nancy Le Sec, Chateau Thierry
- August 9, 1918:** Private Smith arrives at 32nd Division Headquarters, Mezy

- August 11, 1918:** Private Smith arrives at 119th FA Regiment rear echelon headquarters
- August 23, 1918:** 119th FA moved to the rear around Chateau Thierry toward Soissons; 32nd Division is the only American division on this front
- August 30, 1918:** 32nd Division captures Juvigny
- September 2, 1918:** 119th FA moves forward to Juvigny area to support 1st Moroccan Division
- September 4, 1918:** Private Smith receives a little mustard gas from German artillery attack
- September 5, 1918:** 119th FA firing batteries move forward
- September 6, 1918:** 119th FA moves back from front, camps at Mortamont
- September 9, 1918:** 119th FA Regiment moves to Villers Cotteret; takes train to vicinity of Danmartin, arrives the next day, hikes to Danmartin
- September 17, 1918:** 119th FA moves again to Bienville
- September 18, 1918:** 119th FA continues to move forward
- September 21, 1918:** 119th FA camps in the vicinity of Vaubecort at Dombasle
- September 24, 1918:** 119th occupies positions near the frontline
- September 26, 1918:** 119th FA moves forward to support infantry advancing across “No Man’s Land” on first day of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive
- September 27, 1918:** 119th FA continues to move forward
- September 30, 1918:** 119th FA moves toward advance position near Verdun while under fire
- October 9, 1918:** Major 32nd Division infantry brigade attack supported by artillery fire
- October 10, 1918:** 119th FA Moves to within machine-gun range of the front line

- October 21, 1918:** 119th FA moves up its Regimental command post three kilometers (km)
- October 27, 1918:** Private Elmer Smith promoted to Private First Class (PFC)
- November 1, 1918:** Massive 119th FA artillery barrage supports 15 km infantry brigade advance
- November 2, 1918:** 57th FA Brigade and subordinates including 119th FA Regiment pulled out of the line for first major rest since June 14, 1918
- November 11, 1918:** Germany agrees to armistice. The World War ends
- November 14, 1918:** 119th FA decotized/deloused at Villers sur Cousances
- November 22, 1918:** The 119th FA moves to Mussey, France
- December 21, 1918:** The 119th FA moves to Mauvages, France and is headquartered here until they depart for transport to the U.S. in April 1919
- December 28–January 10, 1918:** PFC Smith takes rest and recuperation furlough to Nice, France, including travel to and from
- February 2, 1919:** Catholic Church in Mauvages, France holds service to thank the 119th FA
- May 3, 1919:** 119th FA returns to U.S. via ship, U.S.S Frederick; shortly thereafter, travels via train from Camp Mills, Long Island, New York to Michigan
- May 13, 1919:** 119th FA participates in Victory parade in Lansing, Michigan
- May 15-16, 1919:** PFC Elmer Smith discharged from U.S. Army at Camp Custer, Michigan

# Introduction:

## Pre-War Life in Michigan

ELMER OSCAR SMITH was born on March 5, 1897, in Wheeler Township, Gratiot County, Michigan, to Wilfred F. and Olive I. Smith (Oakes). Like many American soldiers who entered the military during the war, he was raised on a farm. The Smith property was an 80 acre family-owned farm in Fairfield Township in the northwest corner of Shiawassee County. The family moved there about 1906. In 1910, a large barn was built on the property. The family received mail at Box 127 in the small, mid-Michigan farming community of Ovid, Clinton County, about three miles to the south. The small unincorporated town of Carland in Shiawassee County was also close to the farm.

Wilfred “Fred” and Olive Smith married in November 1892. Elmer was the second of five siblings—older sister Zelma (born 1893), younger brothers Clarence (1904) and Dee (1908), and younger sister Genevieve (1913). As a boy one of Elmer’s favorite activities after a large rainstorm was to visit the creek that ran through the property and search for Native American arrowheads and artifacts exposed after the water receded. He frequently found artifacts after his father would ask him to dredge the creek as well. He graduated from the eighth grade in June 1912 and as the oldest son spent subsequent years helping his family on their farm.<sup>1</sup> His grandfather, Oscar Thomas Oakes, a Civil War veteran, died in February 1916 in Michigan. In the fall of 1916, at the age of 19, Elmer left his rural life to attend formal schooling at Lansing Business University and earn a living in Michigan’s capital city of Lansing, 40 miles south.

### **The Great War**

After a Serbian nationalist assassinated Austria’s Arch Duke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on June 28, 1914, peace in Europe quickly disintegrated. In August 1914, the geopolitical web of alliances established in the decades before drove the European nations to mobilize their militaries and precipitate

the greatest conflict in human history to that point. By 1916, the World War had been raging in Europe for over two years. It had expanded elsewhere as the Central Powers of Germany, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Turk Empire partnered to fight against France, Great Britain, Russia, Serbia, Italy and numerous other Allied countries with combat spanning three continents. The rapidly advancing technology of the industrializing world was now producing the deadliest weapons ever known. The devastating firepower of these weapons of war provided such significant advantage to the defender in dug-in positions that the main Western Front battle line in France became largely static with two opposing trench lines extending from the English Channel over 500 miles to Switzerland's border. Thousands of soldiers on both sides were killed or wounded every week as the future main area of U.S. operations became mired in stalemate. Once stabilized in 1914, the front lines shifted no more than ten miles in either direction for almost three years.<sup>2</sup>

The U.S. avoided the European-centric war for over two years. But as aid shipments to Great Britain and France increased, German U-boat submarines began to actively track and attack American maritime traffic in the Atlantic Ocean. By early 1917 these torpedo attacks escalated to the point that America had little option but to actively defend itself and its political and economic interests.<sup>3</sup>

Other events also drew the U.S. closer to war. In March 1916, Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa raided U.S. territory at Columbus, New Mexico, killing eight soldiers and nine civilians. In response, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson sent the U.S. Army under Brigadier General (BG) John J. Pershing into Mexico to pursue Villa and reduce the threat along the border.<sup>4</sup> On March 1, 1917, President Wilson made public the famous Zimmermann telegram incensing Americans throughout the country. The telegram from German Foreign Secretary Alfred Zimmermann to his minister in Mexico proposed a defensive alliance with Mexico and at the war's conclusion promised to return former territory in Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, as a result of continued German provocation, President Wilson acted. On April 2, 1917, in a joint address to Congress, he declared, "We will not choose the path of submission... but... exert all... power and employ all... resources to bring the Government of the German Empire to terms and end the war... The world must be made safe for democracy." After affirmative votes in the Senate and House of Representatives, President Wilson signed the U.S. declaration of war on April 6, 1917.<sup>6</sup>

As a young man who had recently moved to a moderate size, growing American city, Elmer Smith, sought to begin his adult life. Through the following letters it is possible to understand what a future American soldier typically experienced as a civilian in the months just prior to the start of America's entrance into the war. He sent these letters and postcards to his family at the Ovid post office, Box 127. Typical of the era's low cost of living, a postcard required a one cent stamp and a letter cost two cents. In November 1917 the rate for a letter increased to three cents.

***Letter to Sister Zelma, November 8, 1916***

817 Washtenaw St.

Dear Sister:

Well how are you now days. Am feeling fine myself. Am getting along in my school work just fine. It is a little hard but will be able to master it. I like my boarding place just dandy. Have anything I want to eat. Mother said you were going to have a social Thanksgiving. I calculate to come home then I think they will let me off at the restaurant. I am going to tell them I am going to come anyway. I have two tables to take care of and they keep me bobbing every second during the eating hours. They put up the best 25 cent meal in the city. Received the Ovid paper from home today. Are they having many dances around there now. Had a letter from Frank he is coming home Thanksgiving and wanted me to come home. And he would write to A Squiers and have him get the Hall and the music and we would put on a dance.

We had a Hollownen party up here last week. I didn't have a very good time as I didn't know many.

I sent grandma Oakes and grandma Smith each a card the other day and forgot to put any stamps on them so got them back yesterday. Have you heard from Harry. Send me his address if you will. Well I guess I will have to quit and go to bed as I am tired. I get tired working at the restaurant and then walking way up here, I don't feel a heck of a lot about studying. Am supposed to be on the job at 5:30 in the morning. I work from then until nearly school time, but don't have much to do after 6.45. Spend about an hour there at noon and go to work about 5 at night and work until 7 then I eat. So you see it is

usually eight or after when I get up to my room. I am going to see if I can get a room nearer my work. Well my roommate is scribbling and probably will be half the night, but believe I will close.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

**Letter to Sister Zelma, November 21, 1916**

526 W. Allegan St.

Dear Sister:

Well how are you getting along now days, and how is everybody. I am getting along with my studies all O.K.

Just received that box of good things to eat that mother sent me. Have just returned from supper so don't feel like eating it now, but it will taste pretty good a couple of hours from now. Will be glad when I come home so I can have something besides restaurant fare to eat.

Tell Ma that I thank her many times for the lunch.

I am coming thanksgiving, job or no job. But then I guess my job is safe. I spoke to them a week or two ago and told them I was coming home Thanksgiving. and they said all right. I am not worrying about my job for their is any amount of them here. I can arrange it so I get home the night before.

Hope you have a good crowd to your social. Would like to be there to attend it. Have gave that kid any more washboard rubs.

Hope their is a dance there while I am home. I haven't been to a dance since we were up to Elsie last. Don't get much chance to go any where here for every thing costs money. I take in a movie once in a while, but not very often.

There is quite a little expense here more than I imagined. I have to spend 40 to 50 cents a week for paper for school. I bought a few things in the line of wearing apparel that I could have gotten along without but as they calculate getting started the first two months is more expensive than any other two. I am figuring on saving enough from the rest to make up for it.

Was over to Slessman's Sunday, they wondered if the folks wouldn't bring me back and then come up to their place, Albert said to tell ma

if they come, a dish of baked beans, seeing their were so high, would taste pretty good. They start their new house next month.

Tell Clarence & Dee they will have to let me come home and show them how to catch muskrats. I should say they were having pretty good luck catching skunks. Does Genevieve miss me yet I presume I will see some change in her when I come home. Tell her if she is a good girl I might bring her something. Is grandma Oakes coming out Thanksgiving would like to see her. I wrote her a card but haven't heard from her. Wrote a letter to Harry but haven't received any answer yet. Well it is getting late and I can't think of anymore to write about, and have some work to do besides so will close.

Goodbye,  
E.O.S.

P.S. Write right back and tell me the news. Am about ready to make a raid on that box.

***Letter to Mother, December 11, 1916***

526 West Allegan St.

Dear Mother and all:

Well how are all the folks now. Was suprised to hear that pa was sick a bed. Hope that he will be out again. How did he get it. It was to bad about the cow. Hope that you don't have anymore bad luck.

Have fixed with my boarding job. I have to work mornings and noons and get my supper throwed in. That makes it a lot better I think. I am getting along in my studies all right. Staying out Thanksgiving put me behind a little but I am catching up. I didn't stand as good on my report card as I would of liked to. But expect to stand better this month.

You had better talk pa off the farm as quick as you can. Because he wouldn't last long if he stayed there. If you want me to come home, write and I will come at once. We may not have any room when we get back after Christmas as the landlady says we must pay for Christmas week wether we are here or not in order to hold our room. But we told her that we wouldn't do it. I won't be home until the sat. following Christmas. Saw the mailman over here today just to speak to him. Well

there isn't much to write about so had better go to bed. I got out of bed to write this.

What's the matter Zelma she dosen't write. Write soon and let me know how pa and every thing else is. If you want me to come home don't be afraid to write and say so. Does Genevieve miss me. Well it's 10:30 and time I was to bed.

Good bye,  
E.S.

***Postcard to Mother, January 25, 1917***

526 West Allegan St.

Dear Mother:

Will scribble a few lines this morning my eyes are some better but have had to give up studying nights. If i thought I could get a job for a week or so i would quit school until my eyes are better. Don't think I will stay at the restaurant very much longer. They keep putting it on to me more and more. I feel all dragged out when I get down here in the mornings. They give only 20 minutes to eat my dinner & get to school. Will write.

Good bye,  
E.S.

***Postcard from family friend Mrs. Curtis, February 9, 1917***

Hello Elmer your Ma wanted me to let you no [know], they are all better and that your Mas [Ma's] Uncle George is dead he burnt up in his house your Ma said. Take good care of yourself Zelma is at school

Your friend,  
Mrs. Curtis

**Letter to Mother, February 11, 1917**

Lansing Mich.

Dear Mother and all:

Well how are you getting along and how soon do you expect to be out.

I have been feeling pretty good of late an am getting along fine in school. Tell Mrs. Curtis I received her card, butt had some difficulty in placing that factory. I had to rake my brains to remember in such a city. That was to bad about uncle George. Did you hear any particulars about it. When do you expect to have your sale. Let me know and I will come home that week. I presume you haven't found a house to move into yet. When does Jap take. How is Genevieve did the vaccination make her sick? My roommate has quit Havens restaurant and has went to work at another restaurant. I don't know what he wanted it quit for he only had to work 3 hours a day. To the other place he has to work five he gets 2 dollars a week extra. But he has to be on the job at 5 o clock in the morning. Don' think he will stick to it long. Because he is always grunting around because he has to work for his board. Mrs Havens was glad to get rid of him. He sort of got the big head is making a darn fool of him self. All the help at the restaurant don't like him and have lots of fun about him. He is one of these kinds of fellows that think everything ought to come his way. He is going back to Owosso when he gets through. I told him I didn't think he could get a job. But I guess he thinks somebody is going to lay off his bookkeeper and give him the job. I don't think he will last long on any job. He has about 4 more weeks here. Will be glad when he goes too. One of the waitresses told me that Mrs Havens was going to make me a present. Some time or other. I didn't know when. She said that Mrs. Havens said that her and myself were the only ones she could depend on. Well I have written about enough for this time. So will close.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

P.S. If you can find that piece in the Ford Times that you were going to send to me. Send it, I would show it to my roommate it would fit him to a T. Goodbye

***Letter to Mother, March 14, 1917***

514 West Allegan St.

Dear Mother and all:

Received your letter tonight and was glad to hear from you. How are you all? I am feeling fine. What are you going to do with your goods when you go up north. And how soon can you have McCreerys house. Have a new room, I am going to move Saturday. Have a roommate by the name of Fowler. Or will have when I move. It is the night chef's house. Think I will like it there, as they want you to be right at home and make use of the whole house. Why don't you if the roads are good come over here and out to Eaton Rapids while you haven't anything to do. I haven't been out to the Slesmans since I have been back but I think I will go over next Sunday.

Well it is nearly supper time so I will have to close. My new address will be 504 S. Sycamore St. Tell Zelma to write.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

***Postcard to Mother, April 14, 1917***

Lansing Mich.

Dear Mother and all:

How are all of you now. Haven't been feeling very well lately have had to work nearly all night at the restaurant. Frank came last fri. night and stayed until mon. noon. Am home before long. Well must close.

Good Bye,  
E.S.

***Postcard to Mother, April 20, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore

Dear Mother and all:

How are all of you since left. Arrived here safe and sound. Did you get home without anymore blow outs.

Told Mrs. Havens tonight guess I would quit and get a day job. For I am getting sick of working nights. Can't go anywhere because it is so late when I get through work. She wants me to stay next week. I know where I can get a day job and a little a week besides. Will write a letter soon.

Goodbye,

E.S.

As the letters and postcards portray above, Elmer was a bit frustrated with the dual responsibilities of attending school while working to earn a living.

With the U.S. declaration of war in April 1917, Elmer's plans and life in Lansing would soon be placed on hold and his path changed forever. As April drew to a close he made the monumental decision to enlist in the U.S. Army and serve his country in a time of war.

NOTES

1. Michigan Public Schools, Shiawassee County, *Elmer O. Smith, Eighth Grade Graduation Diploma*, June 17, 1912.
2. Byron Farwell, *Over There: The United States in the Great War, 1917-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 21-41.
3. Farwell, *Over There*, 31-32.
4. Thomas Boghardt, "Chasing Ghosts in Mexico: The Columbus Raid of 1916 and the Politicization of U.S. Intelligence during World War I," *Army History* (Fall 2013): 7-10.
5. Farwell, *Over There*, 33-34.
6. Farwell, *Over There*, 35-36

# Chapter 1

## Enlistment in Lansing, Michigan

AFTER THE U.S. DECLARATION OF WAR in early April 1917 and before a nationwide draft began in June 1917, many young American men felt a call to duty and enlisted in one of the branches of the Armed Services, either the U.S. Army, the U.S. Navy, or its naval land component the U.S. Marine Corps. Elmer O. Smith was one of these men. On Monday April 30, 1917, the 20 year old enlisted in Lansing into the state militia's field artillery unit, Battery B, First Battalion, Michigan Field Artillery. In letters home he provides rationale for joining this Army National Guard unit, explaining that he was better off enlisting than being drafted. He thought there was less likelihood of deploying to France and a shorter duration of service as a National Guard enlistee vice a Regular Army draftee.

The U.S. Congress passed the Selective Service Act or Selective Draft Act and on May 18, 1917, President Wilson signed it into law. Subsequently, during the war, there were three main draft registrations.<sup>1</sup>

- The first, on June 5, 1917, was for all men between the ages of 21 and 31.
- The second, on June 5, 1918, registered men who reached age 21 after June 5, 1917. A supplemental registration, included in this second registration, was held on August 24, 1918, for those becoming 21 years old after June 5, 1918.
- The third registration was held on September 12, 1918, for men ages 18 through 45.

In retrospect, since Elmer Smith was not yet 21 on June 5, 1917, he would not have been required to register for the draft until June of 1918 after turning 21 in March 1918. He would likely have never left the U.S. if drafted in the summer of 1918. But Elmer felt compelled to serve his country in April 1917.

This decision set him on a course to deploy to France as a U.S. Army soldier with the 119th Field Artillery Regiment, 32nd Division in early 1918.

In the first two letters below, Elmer states his reasons for enlisting vice waiting to be drafted. In the May 1st letter, he writes that by enlisting in the state National Guard he would be required to attend unit drill but otherwise be “free to do as you like in a time of peace.” Perhaps this is how the Battery B recruiters or leadership helped convince him to enlist, but this was wishful thinking. This was not “a time of peace,” as the U.S. had formally declared war three weeks earlier.

An increase in military preparedness throughout the U.S. started a year earlier. The National Guard Act of 1916 activated Battery B and most units of the Michigan National Guard following the Pancho Villa raid on Columbus, New Mexico in March, 1916. These units deployed to El Paso, Texas, starting in June 1916, and spent about six months performing training and garrison duties there before returning to Michigan.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the Michigan National Guard, headquartered in the state capital of Lansing, as well as Battery B’s leadership had recent experience in recruiting and enlisting new soldiers into their ranks. In the spring of 1917 with war formally declared, Elmer Smith was one of the unit’s first enlistees. Although never mentioned in his correspondence, Elmer was aware of the Lansing Battery’s 1916 deployment to west Texas and as a young man was likely intrigued by their mission and activities. The Batteries A and B Michigan National Guard Drill Hall was located in downtown Lansing on the 301 block of South Capitol Avenue near its intersection with Washtenaw Avenue, quite close to where Elmer worked, lived, and went to school.<sup>3</sup>

Based on Elmer Smith’s letters, postcards, and other documents this chapter provides a relatively accurate picture of how National Guard unit activation and mobilization proceeded until August 1917. Elmer seemed genuinely excited about being a part of his unit as it organized for war. The unit met several times a week at the Artillery Drill Hall downtown before moving to Camp Raymond Hoague in eastern Lansing, where initial drill, training, and equipping occurred when the unit was activated in July. Located on the Espanore farm, the camp was named for a Lansing soldier who had died during the Mexican border deployment.<sup>4</sup> A and B Batteries trained at Camp Hoague, while C Battery drilled on the grounds of the Michigan Agricultural College located a few miles further east. This school would later become Michigan State University in East Lansing.

In early July 1917, President Wilson signed an act federalizing state National Guard organizations and drafting its soldiers into the U.S. Army. Phased in over the next month, all National Guard combat units and their soldiers, henceforth, came under the formal command and control of the active Army.<sup>5</sup>

***Letter to Mother, April 24, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore St.  
Lansing Mich

Dear Mother & all:

Thought I would drop you a few lines to let you know I am all right. How are all the folks. Have you had any more tire trouble.

I told you on my card that I was going to quit at Haven's. She doesn't want me to. She told Fred that she couldn't blame me for not wanting to work these warm nights. I was getting pretty sick of this night stuff. Never had a night for myself. She wants me to stay this week yet. Fred is going to his home for a couple of days and she wants me to work in his place.

Begins to look as if I would have to go to war. I hear that they are going to start drafting them, and I probably would get caught in that. I believe I would rather enlist than to be drafted in. I guess I will have to enlist or get some new clothes my coat has worn through on the elbow and my best shoes have started to come to pieces. Received a letter from Frank he expects to get that scholarship. One of the headmen of the college took him aside one day and told him that he wouldn't be surprised that he got it. So he is pretty sure of it. If he does. He will get his tuition and all his expenses paid for another year. Well it's time I was going to work. Write soon.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

**Letter to Mother, May 1, 1917**

407 S Sycamore St.

Dear Mother and all:

How are all of you folks now days I am feeling good. Have some news for you it probably wont sound very good to any of you folks. It had to come sooner or later from the way draft system looks. I enlisted with battery B. yesterday. Took the exaimination & was sworn in last night. As for you worrying about me don't do that for I hardly think I will ever see service in France because it takes a couple of months to get the recruits in shape to send them. And besides you count on the U.S. in not sending all her men over their anyway. For they could do more by sending the Allies munitions and food. You see if I was drafted in I would have to serve 3 yrs in the regular army of continual service while in a battery you are free to do as you like in time of peace. I don't have to report only two nights a week and have the rest of the time to myself. Expect to go & drill a little tonight. But please don't worry about me.

I have a new job working in the Empress Cafe during the meal hours now. I get \$2 a week besides. I got pretty sick working nights at Haven's. Mrs Havens hated to see me go she told Fred she didn't blame me for not wanting to work nights. She told me I could come back any time I wanted to.

I scrubbed a hole in the knee of my best pants last night. It was raining and I was running so as to get home. The sidewalk was slippery and I fell down on one knee. I guess I can get Mrs Harvey to fix it. Will try and come home next sat. if they will let me go at the restaurant.

Well it is getting near five o clock and must go to work. Come when you can and write soon.

Goodbye,

E.S.

Don't worry

***Postcard to Mother, May 6, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore St.

Dear Mother and all:

Received your card today. I am feeling pretty well. Yes I went to A.A. [Ann Arbor] and had a fine time. Frank has not enlisted. Have sent quite a little of my clothes such as handkerchiefs to laundry will send the rest home. I am planning on coming home in about 3 weeks & stay until we are called out. I wonder if I could have 5 or 6 dollars will try to make it due me through. If you haven't got it now perhaps I can make get along with out it. Well it is bed time and have got to shave. Still have to get up 4:45

Goodbye,

E.S.

***Postcard to Mother, May 10, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore St

Dear Mother & all:

Have a couple of minutes so will drop a line. I am feeling good for me. Don't know yet when I will be called out. Uncle Jim sent the glasses yesterday. How is all the other folks. Well its about school time so must stop write soon.

Goodbye,

E.S.

***Postcard to Mother, May 14, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore St

Dear Mother and all:

Will drop you a line or two this morning to let you know that I am all right. Was over to Sleemans yesterday When are you coming over let me know.

Don't think I will be called out for a while yet. Expect my uniform this week. Bought me a new pair of shoes the other day had to give \$7 for them. I couldn't get anything that looked durable for less.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

***Postcard to Mother, May 15, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore St.

Dear Mother and all:

How are all of you. I have a hard cold don't know how I caught it. Let me know if you are coming over this week. If you don't come I may go to Ann Arbor. Come if you can.

You can send me the Ovid paper if you want to. I think I will take out a little life insurance in a little while. Write soon

Goodbye,  
E.S.

***Letter to Mother, May 27, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore

Dear Mother & all:

Received your letter yesterday and will try to drop you a few lines.

I am feeling pretty good now days and hope you are all well.

No I am not in that section that comes to St. Johns. I have been transferred into the Battery C. until further notice. I have to report to the armory tomorrow for battery inspection. You see this new battery has to be inspected by a U.S. inspection officer before it will be accepted. If we get the battery that will make a battalion and we will be under a Major. From the way things look now I don't think we will be sent to [Camp] Grayling. From what we have been told by our captain and the way the paper we will be sent to El Paso Texas for training about the 15th of July.

Don't know when I can get home again. Say why can't Zelma come over here and stay for awhile. Slesmans would be glad to have her

*Enlistment in Lansing, Michigan*

come and stay with them. She could bring along a couple of quart of beans to pay for her board. Tell her to think it over.

Haven't had my second exam yet won't get that until I go into training camp. Think I will pull through it all OK. I am going to send you a sort of a picture you can pin on the wall in a few days. Well I guess I have written about all I can think of for this time. Every thing is going well at school. Write soon.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

P.S. Saw H.R. Dunham a few minutes the other day. Mrs Havens has sold her feed barn.

***Postcard to Mother, May 29, 1917***

Dear Mother and all:

I am feeling fine and hope all of you are the same. Think I will go to Ann A this weekend. Did not go to school this after noon. Had to be a pallbearer to a funeral of a man who lived in Ovid a couple of yrs ago. Say have pa make me a sort of box about 30 x 20x 12 I will have to have one when I go away. Tell him to fix it so I can put a padlock on it. Think I can get a job doing clerical work & typewriting for our battery. I inquired last night and they said there was quite a demand for such people and I would stand a good chance.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

***Letter to Mother, May 29, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore

Dear Mother & all:

Received your letter tonight I am feeling fine. To bad about Zelma she wants to take care of herself and not have to stay in bed too long. I dont know what that mans name is. Sheldons were not there just a few of the mourners. There was a Geo. Smith there from Ovid. Bucks had charge of the funeral and I had to ride out in their great big Owens limesouine. It is some car believe me. Nicest car I ever rode in.

Haven't sent the picture yet will try and send it tomorrow. Don't expect a picture of anything fine or of myself it isn't.

I want a sort of chest made. something like a trunk. You know how I mean. Don't care what color it is would rather have it dark I have got to have a box of some kind to put my stuff in or it will be stole. Just a box of any kind that will stand ruff use. Would like the cover lined with tin or something so if it was out in a rain it wouldn't leak through.

About the clerical job there is nothing sure about my getting it. I am going to try to see the captain tomorrow night and see what I can do. Lieut. Spencer [First Lieutenant Earl H. Spencer, Battalion Adjutant (Personnel Officer); he was promoted to Captain on June 12, 1917] told me the other night I could get in on it he thought. They got to have them. Don't know what pay I would get. The job would mean all the while the army was in service. You see I probably would not have much guard duty to do and real fighting if any. Wont know if I get it until we go into training camp.

I am going Ann Arbor Sat morning [June 2]. When are you folks coming over. I presume Slesmans are looking for you ever Sat. How is Dee, Clarence & Genevieve. Well I must study a little and then go to bed.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

***Postcard to Mother, unknown date, on or about June 2, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore Lansing

Dear Mother and all:

Received your letter a few minutes ago. I received my washing O.K. Did not go to Ann Arbor & don't know when I will. I get 90 some cents for every drill night.

Had to come to the room this noon to change my shoes. The rubber is all coming off of one and have got to have them half soled. I went in to see how much it would be and they \$1.25. Don't know when I will be home again my job holds me down more than my other one. All that was why I didn't get to A.A. [Ann Arbor] What seems to be the trouble with Zelma. Tell Zelma I want another picture of Pete.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

***Postcard to Mother, June 12, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore

Dear Mother & all:

Will drop you a few lines this morning. Received the money all right. Wouldn't be surprised then I would be home next week. If you folks want to come over here why don't you wait and come some Fri. You see I will have to be here every Fri. night & Sun for drills. Did not get the Battery job. Well I am going to eat my breakfast. Write soon.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

***Postcards to Mother, June 20, 1917***

407 S. Sycamore St.

Dear Mother and all:

Will drop a few lines this morning to let you know I am well. Expected to be home in a day or to but they want me to stay at the restaurant until Sat. as I have drill Sun morn and Mon. night I might as well stay until Tues. A fellow can't quit at one of these d--m restaurants unless he gets fired. Why can't you folks come over Sat. then I can ship my trunk back by you. I am going to have my picture taken this morning.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

P.S. Have just had my picture taken. Will have to have some money to settle for them.

Wed. P.M.

Dear Mother & all:

Will drop you a line to let you that I may be home tomorrow night. They have a waitress coming and if she is satisfactory will be there. Will get the pictures when I come over again.

Goodbye,  
E.S.

**Postcards from friend Frank Nethaway, July 5, 1917**

Postmark July 5, 1917, 12:12PM

Greetings Bob [Elmer]:

Your last postcard at hand this afternoon. Its' rather late to postpone my trip out as I can't get away next week end before sat. night. Have written to the boys & Archie that I will be out tomorrow night. Would like to see you at Carland tomorrow night. Think it over. See if you can't be at home also on sat. & sunday. Well must hop out and mail this. Hope to see you tomorrow.

Frank

Postmark July 5, 1917, 3:00 PM

Dear Fuzzie [Elmer]

Am coming out friday night. I hope there is a dance. If there isn't, let's go cooning [raiding for] watermelons.

Yours,  
Frank

**Letter to Mother, July 9, 1917**

Mon. eve. Camp Raymond Hoague  
Lansing Mich.

Dear Mother & all:

Will drop you a few lines this evening. We aren't straightened out yet haven't done much today received my equipment but not my uniform. I presume we will begin tomorrow and it will begin to get a little stiffer each day. Say send an old blue shirt or some other dark colored shirt for this one will soon get dirty. I did not have to come out to camp last so stayed with Lamour Paraby. When you address my letter send it to Battery B First Mich. Field Art. Lansing.

Well can't think of anything more to write about so will close. Write soon.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

**Letter to Mother, July 12, 1917**

Postmark July 16, 1917

Camp Hoague

Thurs. July 12

Dear Mother and all:

Received my shirt OK but did not get any letter. I like it all right, get good grub to eat and have lots of fun. It seems more like going out on a camping party. We had drill today for the first time. It has been so wet we couldn't do anything. Set the tents up in the mud so went to bed in a pretty nasty place. We each have cots to sleep on. There is ten fellows in our tent I have been assigned as cannoneer. I don't know wether we will go to [Camp] Grayling or not. A lieutenant told us this afternoon we would go to Waco Tex.

We have our federal physical exam's tomorrow, so will know wether I stay or go. Received my uniform but not a hat or any leggins so can't wear it. Well its getting dark so will close. Are you coming over Sunday you probably saw the visiting hrs. in the State Journal. Well will close.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

**Letter to Mother, July 23, 1917**

Postmark July 24, 1917

Camp Hoague

July 23, 17

Hello everybody:

How are you all these hot days. Just received your card today. Looked for you yesterday. Glen & Ross and the girls were here yesterday. There was about two thousand here yesterday The Reo band gave a concert. Well will have to close for a little while as I have to go to do stables.

Well will finish as I didn't have to do stables because I go on Guard tonight. Passed the physical exam. All right. Had my vaccination and a shot of typhus in my arm this morning. So expect to be a little sick.

Say I wonder if you would lend me \$5 until pay day. Then take it out of what I send home I get \$5 a mo. extra as I take care of the Lieut. horse. The visiting hrs. are 2 until 8 Sundays & two hrs. at night. Well come over when you can. Don't know when we leave here.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

***Postcard to Mother, August 8, 1917***

Camp Hoague  
Aug. 8, 17

Hello everyone:

Got here all right Sun night. And haven't broke camp yet I doubt if they do this week. We had the hardest rain I have ever seen this year here yesterday. I haven't seen grandma. If I knew where she was would go & see her. I am on guard tonight and tomorrow. Well this is all for this time.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

***Postcard to Mother, Aug 10, 1917***

Camp Hoague  
Hello everybody:

Received your card. Wouldn't wonder if we moved from here in a few days our clothes & equipment arrived today. I have been feeling good. Have you had much rain out there we have had a lot here. Well will close for this time.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

***Letter to Mother, August 13, 1917***

Camp Hoague  
Aug. 13, 17

Hello everybody:

How are you all. I am feeling fine. Did you go to South Lyons. I think we will leave here sometime this week. We have received all our equipment so there is nothing holding us here. We had a large crowd here yesterday and had another review.

The Home Guards and the Industrial boys with their band & the Old soldiers also marched. There was an awful crowd. It started to rain so we got a little wet.

They have been drilling us hard and getting pretty strict. One fellow got a day of hard work for digging his ear in the ranks. Well I can't think of anything to write, a new fellow in our tent is talking like the devil, can't think of any thing. We has got another wind jammer in here and I guess they are trying to see if they can't compress enough wind to blow the tents off the stacks. Just heard we are not to go to Grayling to Texas instead I don't know wether there is anything in it or not. Well must close.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

***Letter to Mother, August 16, 1917***

Typed on The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)

Letterhead with notation:

CAMP RAYMOND HOAGUE

LANSING, MICHIGAN

Aug 16, 1917

Hello Everybody:

Received your letter yesterday was glad to hear from you. Glad you had a nice time on your trip to South Lyons. We received word tonight that we were to start loading in the morning, So we will get out of here tomorrow sometime. I don't know where we are going but probably to Grayling. The three batteries attended the funeral of the fellow that was shot at East Lansing. It made a hike for us of about seven miles so am a little tired. Well it isn't but a few minutes before retreat & am in a hurry so I can't think of much to write. I am going to take some clothes down & keep in my chest tonight that I don't want to take with me. Well must close as I must go, will write again as soon as I can.

Goodbye,  
Elmer

**Excerpt from “A Brief History of the 119th Field Artillery”**

August 17, 1917, was a memorable day. The morning was spent in breaking camp and in cleaning and repairing equipment, the afternoon in saying “good-by” and that evening, amid cheers, sobs and salutations from over 20,000 men, women and children, the Lansing batteries departed from the city at 9:05 on a special train via the Michigan Central. They arrived at Camp Grayling on the morning of August 18th.

NOTES

1. Colonel Leonard P. Ayres, *The War With Germany: A Statistical Summary* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 17-19.  
Byron Farwell, *Over There: The United States in the Great War, 1917-1918* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999), 50-51.
2. Colonel Chester B. McCormick, "A Brief History of the 119th Field Artillery," *Honor Roll and Complete War History of Ingham County in the Great World War: 1914-1918* (Lansing MI: The State Journal Company, 1920), 219-220.  
Farwell, *Over There*, 27, 38.  
Captain Bruce Jacobs, "Three Centuries of Service: The National Guard in War and Peace," *The Dedication of the National Guard Memorial* (1959), 26-29.
3. Library of Michigan, Michigan Documents, *Downtown Lansing, Michigan Plot Map* includes location and layout of the Batteries A and B, Michigan National Guard Drill Hall, circa 1915.
4. McCormick, 219.
5. Woodrow Wilson, President of the United States of America, *Call into Federal Service and Draft of the National Guard* (Washington: July 3, 1917). McCormick, 219.