

SEARCHING FOR JOHN DEWITT

*How 80 Forgotten Letters from the Trenches of WWI
Revealed Timeless Lessons of Honor and Courage*

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Searching for
**JOHN
DEWITT**

*How 80 Forgotten Letters from the
Trenches of WWI Revealed Timeless
Lessons of Honor and Courage*



JOHN CHASE, MD

To John Ryder DeWitt

*To members of the military,
the quiet patriots who do their jobs without
chest pounding or self-congratulation*

*And to former military, the modest heroes
who came home and moved on
with little fanfare*

*I hope this book will encourage families
to ask their veteran relatives about their
military service and not have to learn about
it by reading long-lost letters 100 years later.*





GERMANY

John DeWitt's movements in France
November 1917 to November 1918



ITALY

Adriatic Sea

PROLOGUE

AN UNEXPECTED CALL from my sister Abby more than a century after Billy Schupp died unnerved me at first. She had found a cache of letters written by our grandfather, John DeWitt, that had sat for years in shoeboxes in our uncle's garage, unread.

Those letters would send me on a journey I had not packed for nor planned to make.

Neatly written by our grandfather, the letters were unfailingly cheerful and reassuring. They would open for me a chapter of John DeWitt's life I knew nothing about.

My unassuming grandfather, it seemed, was a war hero.

His letters home left much unsaid about what he was going through. The fact that he packed them away when he returned home and never spoke of his experiences was perhaps his most profound statement of all.

I resolved to find out what he had gone through and why he had kept quiet about it.

I was not prepared for what I would discover.

My first clue came from a story about two trench runners from Iowa, both serving with the 168th Infantry in France.

BILLY SCHUPP, a young runner with the American Expeditionary Force from Iowa, died in western France in July 1918. What remained of his body after the fragments of

a German shell ripped through him as he sprinted near the front lines was thrown violently upward in an explosion of mud and chaos.

Two hundred yards behind him, Al Boysen, his good friend and fellow Iowan, watched helplessly.

Billy Schupp's violent demise was not an isolated event. He was one of 125,000 Allied soldiers killed or wounded that month during the Battle of the Soissonais and the Ourcq.

The German army was on the move in what would be a last desperate offensive to regain its supply routes in western France. For two hellish weeks, Allied Forces would throw all they had at the attacking Germans. As their comrades waited with bayonets fixed, anticipating a German assault, young men like Billy Schupp and Al Boysen had another crucial job to do, deliver messages that would prevent the American lines from being overrun.

Boysen and Schupp were vital cogs in the effort to stop the Germans. They were also expendable.

Schupp and Boysen, good friends from Council Bluffs, were members of the 168th Regiment, part of the famed Rainbow Division that had arrived in France six months earlier. Rainbow Division volunteers included the poet Joyce Kilmer and future World War II spymaster William "Wild Bill" O'Donovan. The Rainbow Division's chief of staff was an ambitious young officer on the rise by the name of Douglas McArthur.

Schupp and Boysen were trench runners, members of an elite group whose mortality more often than not was counted in days. They had been chosen by unit commanders who recognized their athleticism and quick minds, assets in perhaps the most thankless job on the Western Front. Schupp and Boysen were among tens of thousands of young American

men, some barely old enough to shave, who had volunteered to fight the Germans thousands of miles from their homes in New York and Nebraska and Ohio and Arkansas, every one of the forty-eight states, Arizona having joined the Union only six years before, when Schupp and Boysen were adolescents.

Schupp and Boysen knew their life expectancies were tenuous at best. They understood their deaths would not be a matter of bad luck but the expected outcome of soldiers delivering messages through the muck and mazes of deeply dug trenches and the open spaces between the lines—a maelstrom of falling shells, thick crossfire, and anxious and accurate German snipers.

Billy Schupp's brutal death was not an anomaly. It was a daily and predictable ending for trench runners.

Schupp and Boysen began their training at Camp Dodge, just outside Des Moines. They were among 115,000 Iowans to enlist after President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war on Germany on April 9, 1917.

They continued their training at Camp Mills, on Long Island, a raucous and hastily expanding training ground of some 40,000 men on their way to war in France. Just ten miles outside New York City, Camp Mills was larger than either Council Bluffs or Des Moines. Earlier that year, New York City had seen angry rioters take to the streets to protest rising costs of food prompted by the war they were about to enter.

That was not their concern.

On rare occasions when they were not training, Schupp and Boysen went to the movies, and marched in a parade as visiting Iowa Governor William Harding watched from the reviewing stand. They played basketball, went to church on Sunday. They visited Coney Island, whose rides included a

three-story carousel called the El Dorado and rode its famed Ocean Roller Coaster. They walked the beach at Rockaway. They lapped up the city crowds and excitement and adoration.

These were all pleasant diversions, amusing interludes before the storm.

Mostly, though, they trained. They were headed to France to fight.

Schupp and Boysen boarded the S.S. *President Grant* along with the rest of the 168th, some 10,000 men, and headed to Europe. The *Grant's* captain and officers were no doubt wary of lethal German submarines. It was after all, a German submarine attack on the *Lusitania* off Kinsale, Ireland, that had eventually brought America into the war.

The soldiers packed aboard the *Grant* had other things on their minds. They were about to do their part in what they considered a noble cause.

By December 1917, the lives of Schupp and Boysen and the other men of the 168th Regiment had changed dramatically. All the training and drills and exertions they had invested in had not properly prepared them for what awaited. No training could possibly recreate the sordidness and desperation of life in the trenches or the daily bombardments and death.

War on the Western Front, enemies within shouting distance, was barely controlled chaos, an imprecise and ineffective attempt of at least the appearance of order and strategy when all around was bedlam.

At its very center, the most essential of all elements, was the ability to communicate to other Allies along the front about where one was and what one was planning to do.

With imperfect technology and the constant destruction of fragile radio and rudimentary telephone lines,

communication between trapped command posts, where coordination was critical to moving forward, depended on the legs of runners like Schupp and Boysen.

I would learn much later, they would depend on my grandfather's legs too.

By July, the once-raw recruits were physically fit, hardened emotionally, and certainly fatalistic. By then they had seen death up close. By then their minds were able to quickly process where they were and how to get anywhere else in a landscape that changed constantly. Knowing the lay of the land was not simply an admirable talent for runners, it was a matter of life and death. Map reading, speed, and precision were essential skills for a trench runner.

So was courage.

By July they had grown used to the drill. They knew at some point they would be chosen from the pool of company runners to deliver a message in what became a macabre lottery. It was the luck of the draw. They did not mind. That was what they had agreed to do, and they would do it. Everyone in the pool of runners understood the odds and played the game.

In July, as the battle raged around them, Schupp and Boysen's number came up. It was their turn and they walked quickly to the company command post, a weakly un-descriptive term for what was nothing more than a dark dugout trench. Wearing the red arm band that announced their specialty, a mark of honor that also served as a perfect target for snipers, Schupp and Boysen stood in front of the company commander and performed a ritual they had done many times before.

He needed a message delivered to battalion headquarters dug into the open field ahead of them, a once pastoral landscape of gentle hills and groves of trees.

Their commander handed them a message on paper, which they memorized. Paper and the message it contained could easily be pulled from the pocket of a dead runner by the Germans.

Once both men read the message, they returned the piece of paper to the commander. Then they recited it aloud. The Germans could not pirate a message from a dead man.

Schupp left first. Boysen followed 200 yards behind, German artillery pounding the area.

Boysen watched as his good friend was hit, Schupp's body tossed in the air by the explosion. Remnants of the exploding shell that killed Schupp struck Boysen's legs, nearly bringing him down.

He had no doubt Schupp was dead.

Bleeding and ashen, he continued to the command post and delivered the message.

Then he turned to head back to his friend.

Two others in the command post grabbed his shoulders and pulled him back.

"Where are you going?" they asked.

"Where am I going?" Boysen replied, anguished.

"I'm going back to get my buddy."

Then he fainted.

JOHN DEWITT served with Billy Schupp and Al Boysen. All three were from Council Bluffs. He had trained with them at Camp Dodge and Camp Mills. He wore the red arm band, made his own frantic runs and delivered the same crucial messages and took part in the same daily lottery.

His letters home, found in a box more than a century later, made little mention of such things.

I resolved to learn why.

ONE

I DON'T REMEMBER asking the question.

When my grandfather's answer came forty years later, long after he died, I was shaken.

It began with a call from my sister Abby in May 2020.

She had been helping our eighty-year-old Uncle Jack move from his large house in Oklahoma City to an assisted living near her home in Lincoln, Nebraska. Rifling through his cluttered garage she had found several shoeboxes containing some old letters.

"What are these Jack?"

"Oh, just some old letters my Dad wrote to his parents in Council Bluffs when he was in World War I."

Jack had retired after a long career with the FBI. His father's war exploits apparently had not interested him, and no doubt, his father had rarely spoken of them.

Abby was intrigued.

They seemed to be much more than "some old letters."

She began skimming and two things jumped out immediately. After years sitting unprotected in shoeboxes in Jack's Oklahoma City garage, they were remarkably well preserved. Even though all were posted hurriedly from the summer of 1917 to the fall of 1918 as our grandfather John DeWitt made his way through training camps in Iowa and New York to Europe, they were written with beautiful, flawless penmanship.

“What did he do in the war, Jack?”

“Oh, he was a runner in the trenches,” Jack said, adding nothing more.

After moving Jack to his new and more manageable apartment, she brought the letters back to her home in Lincoln and called me about her find.

I was intrigued by the discovery but not overly excited. The country was reeling from Covid and I was not enthusiastic about getting on an airplane. Old letters from our grandfather seemed interesting, but not enough to drop everything.

I made a trip to read them in August, traveling to Lincoln after I had made to trip to see my ailing father in Arkansas.

Abby and I sorted the letters, close to eighty, and put them in chronological order. As we sat at her dining room table, Abby told me she had learned our grandfather had won a Purple heart, had run the trenches, and had been gassed and hospitalized.

I perked up a bit.

Grampa, as we called him, had never mentioned this. Still, I was not overwhelmed with curiosity. It seemed an interesting part of family lore, but nothing more.

I read through the letters quickly that afternoon. All were upbeat, optimistic, and seemed to me nothing more than an interesting part of my grandfather’s life I had never heard about, a bit of family history tucked away for years in shoeboxes.

My perspective would change dramatically.

A few hours later, the quiet and unassuming John Ryder DeWitt, who had died years before, would answer the question I don’t recall asking.

I was floored.

Abby and I began opening other boxes from Jack DeWitt's old house. In one marked "FBI files" I found a typewritten note my grandfather had, in 1972, dictated to his secretary in the one-man law office he ran in Griswold, Iowa, for years after he returned from France. The note was written to me and Jack DeWitt.

As I read the note, I saw my bow-tied grandfather sitting behind his wide oak desk. I could almost smell the comforting aroma of his cigars forty years later.

I sat upright, suddenly awake.

John DeWitt would die a year later from colon cancer. Did he know that he was sick? Was that what prompted him to finally open up about his war experiences?

October 17, 1972

To: Jack DeWitt, John Chase and any other interested persons

You have asked me about my war experiences.

I told you I was a Battalion runner, but I don't think it meant a great deal to you.

I recalled that there was an article in the Stars and Stripes about runners.

The other day Joel Boone brought in a book containing articles of the Stars and Stripes.

I looked and found the above account.

Al Boysen and Billy Schupp were members of my own Company L.

They were company runners.

I was located at battalion headquarters.

Each company had two runners there.

It was after the above-described battle that I was recommended for a DFC (but it should have been DSC-Distinguished Service Cross)

I was given a Division citation rather than the DSC.

I thought you would be interested in reading same.

“Holy crap,” I said to Abby.

I was jarred and suddenly awake, startled, wondering who Billy Schupp and Al Boysen were.

With the note was a yellowing and fragile newspaper clipping from *The Star and Stripes* that recounted Billy Schupp’s death in France, dated Friday, August 9, 1918, with the headline:

**SPEEDY RUNNERS NORTH OF
OURCQ RACE WITH DEATH**

*Wearers of the Red Brassard Carry Tiding of Battle
as Hun Goes Back*

*Men Cross Fire-Swept Areas With Messages That
Mean Defeat or Victory for Comrades*

*They were young and slim and could run like the wind.
They were together on the greatest day and hour of their
lives. It came on the historic fortnight of July 1918, for
their regimens was one that waited with fixed bayonets
when the mighty German offensive broke like the surf
against the expectant Allied line and did not sit down till
the Marne and the Ourcq lay behind them.*

It was apparent John DeWitt had had a radically different life in the army than the one he recounted so cheerfully in his letters to his mother.

Until that day in Lincoln, I had never seen my grandfather's note. I had not seen or read the article. I don't recall any curiosity on my part about his time in Europe in 1917 and 1918, and I can't remember asking about it.

My grandfather was correct about my lack of interest in 1972. I was eighteen years old when he dictated the note, a self-absorbed Iowa high school senior with other things on my mind—graduation, the football season I was in the middle of, what lay ahead for college.

His experiences in World War I would not have meant that much to me then. I doubt I would have done anything to learn more.

Reading the note in 2020, I felt he was reaching out to me from the grave!

The note and the *Stars and Stripes* article were the beginning pieces of a puzzle I'd try to assemble over the next few years.

I wanted to learn as much as I could about what exactly John DeWitt had gone through and why he had closed the door on his experiences when he returned to Iowa.

Growing up, he was simply Grampa, a man I'd watch football with when we visited his home in Griswold. Our conversations, as many conversations between a boy and his soft-spoken grandfather, were always pleasant but superficial.

Reading the note and the article in 2020 chilled me and sparked my curiosity.

I reread *The Stars and Stripes* article, and something else caught my attention.

Go to anyone who any day or week of the battle where it was hottest and ask who were its heroes. He will want to name all the men who put their shoulders to its

tremendous burden, from ammunitions drivers, plowing stubbornly on through maddening miles of mud, knowing and asking no sleep for many days and nights, to the battalion commanders, who could not and would not remember what the books said about their place being behind the line. But if he must single out one group for tribute, the chances are he will reluctantly pass the others by and say: "The Runners."

What had John DeWitt done during the war, and why had he never talked about it?

I wanted to know more.

I thought back to the pleasant but distant man I had known and visited over the years from our home in Ida Grove, two hours north of Griswold, on holidays. I remembered his big belly and cigars and voracious appetite.

I thought of the times he'd take my father to play golf at the Atlantic Country Club and how we'd get to swim in the club pool while they were on the course. I remembered him taking me to his law office and walking up the long flight of stairs, exercise, he said, that would keep him healthy.

I remember trying to sleep through his raucous snoring in the bedroom next to his and Grandma's. Grandma snored too, but could not hold a candle to his racket, which seemed to rattle the windows.

We'd watch football together but said little.

Sitting in Lincoln, I reread the letters, all written to his mother, and noticed some clues to the young John DeWitt.

He was only weeks away from his twenty-first birthday when he began writing home, not much older than I was in 1972. His letters were much the same, pleasant, for the most part upbeat and optimistic, unfailingly cheerful.

I'd see he was a devout Catholic, often mentioning Mass and Confession. He was caring, unfailingly sending money from his slim paycheck home.

I would learn later he was making \$30 a month for his efforts, the equivalent of about \$550 today for putting his life on the line.

“Did you get the order for \$10? I will try to make it \$15 next pay day.”

I would notice he was hungry for news from home, his normal easy-going banter would grow more irritable when he failed to get a prompt reply. I'd see also he was eager for packages of cookies and doughnuts and clothing.

I'd see his kindness and empathy. He once wrote home suggesting a spinster neighbor, Miss Sprague, “adopt,” a fellow soldier Harry O'Connor who seemed to have no family and thus no packages.

He was modest to a fault, only briefly mentioned being chosen as a runner—a rigorous and challenging review process I would learn later—and never revealing he had the most dangerous job in the Army.

He was capable of complaining, I'd learn.

Our tents are cold and it is windy and dusty so excuse the dirt. This really is the dirtiest camp that ever was. You can't keep clean and I take a shower every day and the water would be warm alongside of ice water and the wind is chilly too.

Before the cigars I remember clearly, there were cigarettes, once writing home delightedly about a gift of a “a carton of Camels.”

He was proud that he enlisted, and proud of his lack of fear. My reading that afternoon was superficial. I wanted to know more.

There was much left unsaid in those letters.

In the middle of a war where his life was on the line, where his friends died with predictable violence every day, he wrote to his parents that all was well.

What was really going on?

I needed time with the letters, to study them, to research what was happening at the time he wrote them.

It took another two years to get them in front of me at home in Florida after other family members had shared them.

Once I did, my search for John DeWitt became focused. By the summer of 2022, I began in earnest, searching to learn as much as I could about a part of history that had long faded, of young American men who sacrificed everything.

John DeWitt had been a part of it, yet he was silent about it.

Now he was speaking directly to me.

I would learn during my later search to read between the lines of John DeWitt's letters.

I would discover what he went through, and why he could not explain Hell to his devoutly Catholic parents, or to anyone else when he returned to Iowa after the war — perhaps even to himself.

Certainly, it was not something he could explain to his grandson.

I resolved to learn as much as I could about John DeWitt and his comrades, what they fought for, and what they had gone through.