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# The Watch on the Rhine

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## THE WATCH ON THE RHINE

THE 168th now settled down for an extended and not too strenuous period of "watchful waiting". It found itself in the heart of a country saturated in legend and tradition, with more than its share of natural beauty. The inviting roads and paths led one quickly into the Rhenish hills, forest-clad and abounding in game, with here and there an ancient manor or medieval ruin peeping from above the tree tops.

Niederbreisig is a prosperous modern town with comfortable, some even luxurious, billets. From here one gets a fine view up the river where the rocky banks come close together. In the distance mount the ruins of Burg Hammerstein, the walls of which offered a shelter to Henry IV when he was fleeing from his own son who was desirous of obtaining the paternal crown. A little below Brohl, two kilometers to the south, on a hill overgrown with bush, towers the Schloss Rheineck, the home of the former Imperial Chancellor von Bethmann-Hollweg. Across the river and to the right of Niederbreisig is the town of Hönningen, crowned by the battlemented castle Arenfels; and farther down the Rhine, opposite the station of the New York and Ohio regiments, loom the fabled Siebengebirge.

Following up the Brohltal, which takes its name from the splashing mountain stream that rises in the Eifel and tumbles down the valley into the Rhine, you come either by a smooth, hard-surfaced road that duplicates the

meanderings of the stream, past an occasional shady inn, a *Badeanstalt* (the district abounds in fine mineral springs), an ancient country house or two; or by the tiny *Brohltalbahn*, a puffing, narrow gauge affair whose four daily trains follow an equally picturesque route to Burgbrohl, the station of the Second Battalion and the Supply Company. The main industry of this village is a large tile works and pottery, conspicuously labeled at the time to indicate that it was owned by neutral Luxemburgers and not by Germans. But whatever the nationality of its owners, it possessed bathing facilities that were more than appreciated by the Americans.

Five kilometers farther up the valley lies Niederzissen, somewhat larger, brighter, and cleaner. Niederzissen lacked public baths — in fact the only tub in the place was at the convent, where officers, after proper introduction and preparation, were allowed to bathe.

Oberzissen, like Oberbreisig, had little to offer in the way of attraction. There was much mud, many children, and primitive houses. A few kilometers away the ruins of an ancient *Raubritter* castle, the Burg Olbrück, sprout from a dominating hilltop. From the rim of its tower, which with several of the rooms had been restored by the Kaiser, one gets a magnificent view off into the blue haze of the Eifel Mountains, and in the other direction the ramparts of the Rhine. The base is cluttered with piles of masonry weathered by centuries, and the top of the mountain is honeycombed with underground passages and dungeons where unfortunate victims languished "when knights were bold". There is an inn in the village of Hain, at the foot of the mountain, that offers the sight-seer a book in which to write his impressions of the visit. Lieutenant Pugsley, whose impressions of the

war-torn areas of France were still fresh, inscribed therein: "Very nice ruins, but old. For more modern ruins, see northern France and Belgium".

There was much lovely country to roam and many interesting things to see if one cared about walking. The Benedictine Abbey of Laach, situated on the banks of the famous Laacher See, a water-filled, volcanic bowl bordered by waving forest, was within easy reach. Founded in 1093 by Count Palatine Henry, it was once one of the wealthiest and most celebrated abbeys of Germany, and its church, completed in 1156, is a noble example of Romanesque art.

After about a week's stay in Oberbreisig, the Machine Gun Company moved to Rheineck on the river, occupying the village and the *schloss* above it. To reach the latter there is a steep hill to climb, but one is rewarded at the summit with a superb view of the Rhine valley. The present structure, close to the ruins of the original castle, was built in 1812, but had been sufficiently modernized to provide a comfortable billet for its American guests. Cots were set up in its many apartments, even in the ballroom, which in its time, no doubt, had reflected the gold lace and trappings of the highest nobility of the country. While all the men of the regiment did not draw steam-heated castles, they at least enjoyed the supreme comfort of a bed — the first many had slept in since leaving their homes in the United States — and they were sheltered from the elements, for it often rained or snowed; and while there was no sub-zero weather, the wind could blow with bitter sharpness off the Rhine on a cold day, just as the moon could rise with exceptional beauty from behind the hills on the right bank on a clear night. There were snug cafés where they could while

away pleasant hours in the evening over glasses of beer, Rhein wine, or the potent *schnapps*, to which vin rouge and champagne had surrendered.

The relations with the civilians from the first were friendly — there is no denying it. They seemed to anticipate the wants of the soldiers and treated them with the utmost cordiality. Although the order forbidding fraternization with the Germans was still in force, there were evasions, and as the days lengthened into weeks clandestine fraternization was inevitable, and not too-obvious infractions were winked at. The people in this section declaimed at length how happy they were to have Americans, whom they did not *really* consider their enemies, with them, instead of English or French troops — or Belgians, for there were inklings of considerable disturbance at Aix-la-Chapelle, where the Belgians had partly relieved their long pent up feelings by smashing a few windows. The Spartacist uprising, which was causing concern in other parts of the country, did not affect the occupied territory, and again the Rhinelanders were glad to have the stabilizing effect of our presence to spare them the horrors of a civil war.

Now the regiment had to reconcile itself to the irksome, colorless round of garrison duty — close order drill, guard duty, school, range practice, inspections, parades — relieved by athletics, games, and maneuvers. Drill was commenced the day after arrival, and a regular training schedule, providing for five hours' work daily, was adopted a week later; but as time went by this was moderated. Tactical problems and maneuvers carried the regiment all over the surrounding countryside in the rain and cold and snow, but the troops had been doing the real thing too long to get excited over theoretical

captures, taking imaginary strong points from an imaginary enemy. But at that, time dragged heavy on the hands and soon the old song, "I want to go home", became the chant of the army "without occupation". It was not that they didn't realize that they were living the life of Reilly, and that they had never had a more comfortable existence in the army, but the war was over and the call of home was strong.

The Y. M. C. A. established recreation rooms in each of the villages, with enlisted men in charge; and soon the K. of C. opened quarters for the benefit of all. Chaplain Robb ran the canteen in Niederbreisig and superintended the entertainment of the regiment. With the aid of a German machine and German reels he was able to put on a movie show every afternoon and evening.

After a few weeks the 168th was fortunate enough to have two women, Miss Elizabeth Potts and Miss Christine Johnston, assigned it as Y workers. Their headquarters were in Niederbreisig, where they proceeded in spite of the handicaps to transform an old bowling alley into an attractive hall with a home-like atmosphere. They set up a victrola, organized dances, and served free every day doughnuts and approximately seventy-five gallons of hot chocolate. It is needless to say that the Y was jammed most of the time. Owing to the scarcity of American women, and the prohibition against the German *mädchen*, the dances held Tuesdays and Fridays were stag affairs, but the men seemed to have a first-rate time just the same. On these occasions the two women were nearly torn limb from limb by the men fighting for a chance to dance with them. Once in a great while it was possible to get hold of ten or twelve Y workers from other towns for a regular dance. Twice a week Miss Potts and Miss

Johnston journeyed up to Burgbrohl and Niederzissen to serve chocolate, make candy, and, before they could escape, to dance with the men. Indeed these two are entitled to service stripes for dancing alone, not to mention wound stripes for being hauled about over rough floors and tramped upon by innumerable pairs of hobnails. The service they performed was invaluable, and when they came home with the regiment, having been with it all through this period, they had been adopted as full-fledged members of the 168th Infantry.

In order to further relieve the monotony of the life all manner of contests — football games, races, field meets — were encouraged, and with so much time on their hands practically every organization in the A. E. F. and the Army of Occupation organized its own show troupe. As these itinerant players went about from division to division, we had an almost continuous season of vaudeville, minstrel, and musical shows, with exclusively male casts. None furnished better entertainment than the 168th troupe, and none was more excruciatingly funny than the "awkward squad" of F Company which won fame far beyond the limits of our own Division. These performances, staged at the Y halls, were tremendously popular with the men, and there never was even standing room left when the curtain rose.

Finally leaves were actually granted. Everyone was given an opportunity to visit the leave centers in France — on the Riviera, in Savoie, and in the Pyrenees. And many found their way back for a visit in Lorraine and other places where they had made friends during halts of the regiment. Then there were additional leaves to Coblenz and Neuenahr — the latter the regional leave center. This was a popular spa, the source of the famous

Apollinaris spring, with an excellent casino, good hotels, and plenty of entertainment. The events of a field meet with the Second Canadian Division were divided between Neuenahr and Bonn, where the Canadians were stationed. Then there were boat trips up the Rhine as far as Bingen and down to Cologne, with meals and music, provided for those on good behavior. Some, however, took it upon themselves to explore further into territory out of bounds, and were set down on the evening report as A. W. O. L., an offense to be atoned for by the withdrawal of privileges, a goodly fine of marks, or perhaps a few days' incarceration in the brig.

In between times the men tramped the country, polished up on German, and learned to furnish much of their own amusement. There was much deer in the vicinity, and while it was protected by military order, numerous succulent venison steaks mysteriously found their way to the various messes. In many of the companies sergeants' messes were formed, and the non-coms of higher grade took particular pains to see that they fared well. The officers found off-time relaxation at the clubs formed in each station, where nightly meetings and entertainment were provided. But perhaps the most unique, and at the same time élite, of the organizations to which the period gave birth was the P. I. R., that secret society whose dark mysteries and occult rites were so fearful that its very name could scarcely be mentioned in the light of day.

While the rest of the regiment was enjoying a comparative rest, the work of the Supply Company went on with never a let-up, for troops still had to be fed and the animals and wagons kept in condition. The Signal Platoon of the Headquarters Company had already



connected up its system of telephones and set up the radio station in Niederbreisig, and with the other specialists of this company could now sit back and take life easy.

The Band was possibly the hardest worked unit at this time. It was called upon on every occasion to play — at formations, reveille and retreat, in concerts, and in parades and other ceremonies. Colonel Tinley called Sergeant Morgans to his quarters on the day that the latter became Band Leader and told him that he wanted him to produce the finest band in the Third Army. The results justified the opinion of the regiment that it was. At the time its personnel consisted of twenty-six members. Now additional musicians were requisitioned from the school at Gondrecourt until it was increased to fifty. Then a bugle corps of twenty-six was recruited from within the regiment, the pick of the company buglers being transferred to the Headquarters Company for this purpose, making a total of seventy-six in the band. Sergeant Bengé was sent to Paris by Colonel Tinley with enough money from the regimental fund to purchase clairons and drums for the bugle corps, so now we had both men and instruments for a first-rate organization. Before it made its first appearance, Sergeant Morgans and Sergeant Bengé worked their men night and day, driving and rehearsing them until they were ready to burst. Then one day in spick and span uniforms, in perfect alignment, with instruments shining and bugles flashing, the new Band marched down the main street of Niederbreisig, playing the stirring regimental march so splendidly that it brought every one within hearing distance to his feet with a thrill of pride. For three weeks it served as the official band at Army Headquarters in Coblenz, giving daily concerts and every other day playing on the Rhine excursion boats.

There were many changes and additions to the personnel of the regiment during this period. Many of our wounded had been returned from hospitals in France, although it was not an easy matter to get them back — much red tape had to be unwound to save them from casual organizations. Captain Christopher, upon his return, relieved Lieutenant Fraser of command of Company D, and Captain Bradley took over H Company from Lieutenant Harris. When Captain Haley and Captain Lainson came back, Captains Tucker and Bonham surrendered command of I and L Companies, the former to be attached to Regimental Headquarters, to compile, with Captain Witherell and Lieutenant Ball, the regimental history; and the latter to become Regimental Intelligence Officer.

After a year and more in Europe, none of the line companies retained their original commanders. Aside from those above mentioned, they were headed as follows: Headquarters Company, Captain Nead; Supply Company, Captain Johnson; Machine Gun Company, Captain Swift; A, Captain Wood; B, Captain Witherell; C, Captain Sefton; E, Captain Doolittle; F, Captain Thrasher; G, Captain Younkin; K, Captain Cotter; M, Captain Briggs.

On the 23rd of December a number of men who had previously been awarded the D. S. C., but who had not been formally decorated, received the medals from the hands of the Divisional Commander, a heavy rain detracting from the dignity of the ceremony. Major Casey, Captains Bunch, Haynes, and Witherell, Lieutenants Williams, Breslin, and Pruette, and Sergeant Binkley of I Company were honored at this time.

A few days later Lieutenant Bentz, who had been with

us since Rimaucourt, was ordered to rejoin his regiment in France. He had proved a valuable aid to the 168th, and as a result of his exploits above and beyond the call of duty had been recommended for a D. S. C. But like many other recommendations that had been made by the regiment, it never went through.

These fruitless efforts to gain recognition for the meritorious services of our men caused an immense amount of dissatisfaction within the organization. D. S. C.'s were being ladled out by the bushel to the Regular Army divisions, and only a few strays dribbled in to us. There is still preserved among the archives of the regiment the following endorsement on a list of recommendations for D. S. C. that had been returned disapproved by higher authority:

1st Ind.

Hq. 168th Infantry, American E. F., 26 March 1919. To C. O. Co. G. 168th Infantry.

1. Due to an unexpected shortage of bronze, copper, and pretty ribbon, caused by the exceptional demand to accommodate certain units of the American Army with decorations, the issue of medals to this organization has been reduced. In lieu of the D. S. C.'s herein recommended, the company commander is authorized to buy each of the men above mentioned a good five-cent cigar.

On Christmas Eve a party was given for the children of Niederbreisig in the town hall. The Christmas season is a time for forgetting national antipathies, and the youngsters of Niederbreisig had never borne arms against us. As at Rimaucourt a year before, there was an American tree, and dolls, toys, and candy; but somehow the fête lacked the happy spirit of the other occasion. The children were stolidly grateful, but less animated and enthusiastic than the *petits* of the Haute-Marne.

It snowed that night, and a heavy blanket covered the ground as the Band formed up before daylight to play their carols. One by one lights appeared at the windows, German and American, as the occupants gathered to listen to the strains of old familiar hymns floating out into the frosty air. There were programs of entertainment and real Christmas dinners at each of the stations of the regiment. Even without it the men would have been happy; for while the year just closing had opened in uncertainty, the new one approaching held the prospect of seeing home and family.

On the 21st of January Major Yates left the regiment to return to the States, and Major Brewer assumed command of his old organization from which he had been separated since the 12th of September. On the 7th of March the Third Battalion changed station with the First, which since our arrival in Germany had been enjoying the greater comforts and advantages of urban Niederbreisig. K Company took over the billets of A in Oberbreisig, while the other three remained in the larger town. Major Ross decided to have more room in Niederrissen, so he put only two companies in there, sending C Company to Oberzissen and D to Waldorf, a hamlet on the other side of the Bausenberg, the steep hill (in ages past an active volcano) that towers above Niederrissen on the north.

On the 9th of March an impromptu parade which aroused the excitement of the civilian population was staged in Niederbreisig. Led by the bugle corps and preceded by a large painted banner, a company of men in chance formation marched on Colonel Tinley's headquarters. The Germans thought it a Bolshevist uprising of some sort (banners meant mutiny or revolution to them) and ran along with the soldiers, fearfully yet

hopefully expecting a fracas. But the banner was most harmlessly inscribed, and the purpose of the paraders equally pacific. It proclaimed to the world at large, and to Niederbreisig in particular: "First over the top, and still going strong — Company M 168th Infantry". It was just a year since they initiated, with F Company, the first offensive of the regiment.

A week later Major Brewer was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel, Captain Haynes to Major, and Lieutenant Lucas to Captain. Sometime previous Captain Bunch, chief of the Medical Detachment, had also received his majority.

On the 16th of March, General Pershing inspected and reviewed the entire Division on a plain near the river between Kripp and Remagen. It was not a pleasant occasion, for it was a cold, sunless day, and besides the men hated ceremonies of any sort. For two solid hours the Division stood shivering in the icy wind that was blowing off the river, drawn up in mass formation awaiting the Commander-in-Chief. Following the lengthy inspection General Pershing decorated a number of men, including Colonel Brewer, and then with the decrees in the reviewing line behind him, the Division passed by in regimental columns. After a brief address the men returned to the trucks that had brought them as far as Sinzig and rode back to their stations.

To interrupt the otherwise indolent life, schools, not merely the regimental officers' and non-coms' schools, but corps and army schools were opened at Coblenz and Châtillon-sur-Seine, where unwilling students from combat divisions were instructed in things they already knew, because the higher authorities thought it good for them. Evidently the last detachment returning (in unheated box cars) from the long grind at Châtillon thought to

make up for their weeks of hard labor in one glorious celebration. It happened that their train was sidetracked for some time in the Nancy yards right next to a train load of champagne. Some adventurous volunteers decided to transfer part of the consignment (it proved to be of good vintage) to their own cars, and if there was not a general attempt to aid in juggling the heavy cases, there was whole-hearted coöperation in the consuming of the contents thereof. Not long after, an order arrived at Regimental Headquarters "for the assessment against the proper individuals, for the alleged loss of 2175 bottles of champagne". It cost the three 1st lieutenants, eleven 2nd lieutenants, and twenty non-coms of the 168th who shared in this party, sixty-five, fifty-seven, and fifteen francs each. Some of them felt that they had had their money's worth.

Early in March an officer and two non-coms from each company met at Colonel Tinley's quarters in Niederbreisig for the purpose of adopting a constitution and by-laws for the 168th Infantry Society; and a few days later, at another meeting held in Burgbrohl, the organization was perfected, with the Colonel chosen unanimously as its first President. This was followed, on the 28th of March, by the organization of the Rainbow Division Veterans at a convention in Neuenahr closely resembling, for enthusiasm and racket, an old time political convention. The old spirit that carried the Division through the war was to perpetuate it as a permanent organization. After much competition on the part of the various unit delegations, Alabama won out and Birmingham was chosen as the place for the first annual reunion. And Colonel Hough, the popular commander of the Ohio regiment, was elected to lead the association for the first year of its existence.