

The Great Killer

When Edgar Hartman came down with the mumps, it laid him up for a month. That may seem unlikely. Mumps? Hartman was a 26-year-old soldier who'd just completed basic training and was actually aboard the ship and awaiting departure when he got hit with what most of us think of a simple childhood disease.

But for a month, my great uncle Edgar lay in an army hospital, flat on his back, fighting a monster. "I was a sick boy last week," he told his sister in a letter, among the last he would ever write and she would ever read, "but I'm feeling a little better now but am very weak guess you can see that on my writing."

Chances are, he wasn't alone in that army hospital. While others may well have suffered from the mumps, in all likelihood, the infirmary was swamped with sick doughboys, victims of what no one understood right then to be the pandemic it became, a virus often referred to as Spanish flu, an illness that had little to do with Spain and killed millions.

One hundred years ago, the United States of America lost thousands on European battlefields when we entered "the Great War" to help Allied powers defeat the Kaiser's entrenched hosts. It's probably fair to say that the U.S. came to Flanders Field with a strain of naivete that other countries shared, glorious undying patriotism, banners unfurled, war as manly duty.

All of that quickly changed. The war killed 116 thousand young Americans, but it sickened many thousand more, emotionally and spiritually--and physically.

As unlikely as this may sound, ten thousand more doughboys succumbed to illness than died in combat. Amazing. My uncle died on on the Vesle River, in what his obituary calls "the great drive." He took shrapnel in the side, one of this country's 53,000 combat deaths--63 thousand died from disease. You heard that right.

War preparation was a recipe for disaster. Training camps like his, Camp Greene, Charlotte, N.C., brought together boys from rural Wisconsin and far away South Carolina, from the plains of western Iowa to the boroughs of New York, each guy potentially carrying hybrid viruses and varied immunities that training camps thus blessed into breeding grounds for new and robust germ enemies.

Troop ships were hot houses of disease. Lock up a thousand boys on a cruise to Europe, and you can expect strains of influenza to move into and through all those bodies, forming its own horrifying wave. Measles and mumps prospered among young

men weakened by flu. Just as training camps had, troop ships mixed up men from all over the states, each carrying varying flu strains. Fighting disease was even more difficult in close, wet quarters.

Writing in the *Atlantic* in 1918, Henry A. May described a troop ship's atmospheric recipe for disaster: "The absolute lassitude of those becoming ill caused them to lie in their bunks without complaint until their infection had become profound and pneumonia had begun." Nosebleeds were wholesale.

The severe epistaxis which ushered in the disease in a very large proportion of cases caused a lowering of resisting powers which was added to by fright, by the confined space, and the motion of the ship. When pneumonia set in, not one man was in condition to make a fight for life.

Still today throughout Siouland, old cemeteries include whole flights of stone markers over graves of men and women and children--especially children--who died in 1918 and 1919 from successive waves of influenza that took down and laid up one quarter of the entire American population while dropping our national life expectancy by a dozen years, killing 675 thousand. Worldwide, Spanish flu killed 50 million people.

My great uncle Edgar missed his company's departure for Europe, and instead spent an additional month fighting a cruel bout with the mumps. He got to France a month before being killed in a gully on an open field in France.

Odd as it may seem, the real killer, the mass murderer of the era wasn't "the Great War," "the war to end all wars."

It was a bug, a virus. The flu was a far more ruthless killer.