

# *Oklahoma's "Greatest" Hero?*

## *A Review of the Military Record of Joseph Oklahombi*



*By Louis Coleman\**

For many years Joseph Oklahombi, a Choctaw Indian and native of McCurtain County, Oklahoma, has been cited in news media and other sources as the state's greatest hero of World War I. One report ranked him as "second only to Sergeant York of Tennessee as America's greatest hero" of the first world war. Another article described him as the "outstanding hero of 90,000 Oklahomans in the World War." A widely disseminated photograph of Oklahombi is labeled "Oklahoma's Greatest Hero."<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, Oklahombi has been reported as the recipient of the Medal of Honor, the Distinguished Service Cross, and the Silver Star medal, all in recognition of his exploits in France during World War I.<sup>2</sup>

A hero Oklahombi may have been, but official records do not reflect his receipt of any American awards except for the Silver Citation Star, a small emblem designed to be worn on the Victory Medal ribbon. His enlistment record shows no awards or decorations. Records in the National Archives and the Army Military History Institute show no awards other than the Silver Citation Star.<sup>3</sup>

A history of the Thirty-sixth Infantry Division in which Oklahombi served, written by an officer assigned to the same brigade as Oklahombi, makes no mention of him, his personal actions, or any awards made to him.<sup>4</sup>

Oklahombi voluntarily enlisted in the army at Idabel, Oklahoma, on May 25, 1918, and was assigned to the Thirty-sixth Division, then in training at Camp Bowie, Texas. As a member of Company D, First Battalion, 141st Regiment, Seventy-first Brigade, he participated in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive in France during the period October 6–29, 1918. He received an honorable discharge at Camp Bowie on June 19, 1919.<sup>5</sup>

Members of the Thirty-sixth Division, many of whom were from Oklahoma, received numerous awards and decorations for their World War I service. Two of those soldiers were awarded the Medal of Honor, America's highest military decoration, for their actions on October 8, 1918, in the battle around St. Etienne, France. Receiving the medals were Cpl. Harold L. Turner of Seminole and Sgt. Samuel H. Sampler from Mangum, both members of the 142d Regiment, Seventy-first Brigade.<sup>6</sup>

Soldiers who served honorably with the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) in Europe received the Victory Medal which was accompanied by a ribbon. About 6,000 men were authorized the Silver Citation Star which was awarded by Headquarters AEF, based on recommendations by lower echelons for award of the Distinguished Service Cross. When the AEF review board determined that the actions cited did not meet requirements for the Distinguished Service Cross, it awarded the Silver Citation Star. Oklahombi was authorized the Silver Citation Star for "Gallantry in action at St. Etienne, France, 8 October, 1918."<sup>7</sup> Reports that Oklahombi received the Silver Star medal may have confused this decoration with the Silver Citation Star. The Silver Star medal was not authorized until 1942 during World War II.

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Oklahombi was recommended for the Distinguished Service Cross, but only for his participation in a unit action involving twenty-three other soldiers of Company D, 141st Regiment. Records of the Thirty-sixth Division contain documents signed by Lt. Charles M. Ford of Company D detailing the actions of those twenty-four members of his company during the battle around St. Etienne, October 8–11, 1918. On the basis of the cited accomplishments, Lieutenant Ford recommended that each of the men receive the Distinguished Service Cross. Oklahombi was not singled out for his personal actions.<sup>8</sup>

Cited by Lieutenant Ford, in addition to Oklahombi, were sergeants Bud Henry, Samuel D. Denyer, Edward G. Ford, Charles H. Powell, and William E. Simpson; corporals Brosig T. Wasson, Harry H. Hale, Oscar F. Scheel, Sam E. SoRelle, Lee E. Hutchenson, and Charles F. Jennings; privates George F. Elliott, David C. McKay, Rosmond E. Lucas, William R. Hallmark, Will Dunaway, George E. Sandlin, Hugh Burgess, and Will H. Rice, and cook Arthur H. Dungan. In addition to Oklahombi, Lucas, Sandlin, Burgess, and Rice were listed as being from Oklahoma.<sup>9</sup>

Lieutenant Ford recorded that the cited soldiers had advanced to the attack in the early morning of October 8 in the face of a heavy cross-fire from twenty-five enemy machine guns. The men rushed to within a few yards of the enemy emplacements where they confronted a band of barbed wire entanglements fifteen feet in depth. They successfully cut the wire and then rushed the enemy machine-gun nests from which the devastating fire was being directed at them. They overwhelmed the Germans manning the guns and took 171 prisoners, according to Lieutenant Ford's report.<sup>10</sup>

The Company D men also seized fifty or more light and heavy machine guns and some light mortars. After taking possession of the enemy position and weapons, the soldiers prepared for an expected enemy counter-attack, using the captured weapons and ammunition.<sup>11</sup> The Company D detachment was then in an exposed position because the units to their left had been driven back by the German counter-attack and the units to their right had not attained their objectives.<sup>12</sup>

According to Lieutenant Ford, the men successfully defended the captured position for four days, despite a constant enemy barrage of high-explosive artillery and gas shells. They also made many trips into "No Man's Land" during daylight hours to gather needed intelligence concerning enemy positions and to retrieve wounded comrades.<sup>13</sup>

As previously mentioned, Headquarters AEF did not approve Lieutenant Ford's recommendation for award of the Distinguished Cross to the twenty-four soldiers. Instead, Oklahombi, and presumably the other twenty-three men, were authorized the Silver Citation Star. Oklahombi did receive the French croix de guerre with silver star and it was the citation accompanying that award that apparently led to the confusion concerning his hero status.

During the battle at St. Etienne, the Thirty-sixth Division was under operational control of the French Twenty-first Army Corps and so it was proper for the French command to recognize and honor the heroic exploits of American soldiers serving alongside its troops. Apparently officials of the Thirty-sixth Division made a recommendation to the French command that Oklahombi and his twenty-three fellow soldiers be honored for their heroism in battle. The result was that the men were awarded the croix de guerre with silver star. (Gold, silver, and bronze stars were used to differentiate between the various grades of the croix de guerre, based upon the relative significance of the actions cited.) Each of the twenty-four soldiers was listed on the same French order with a common citation.<sup>14</sup>

The content of the French citation coincides in essential points with the information submitted by Lieutenant Ford in support of

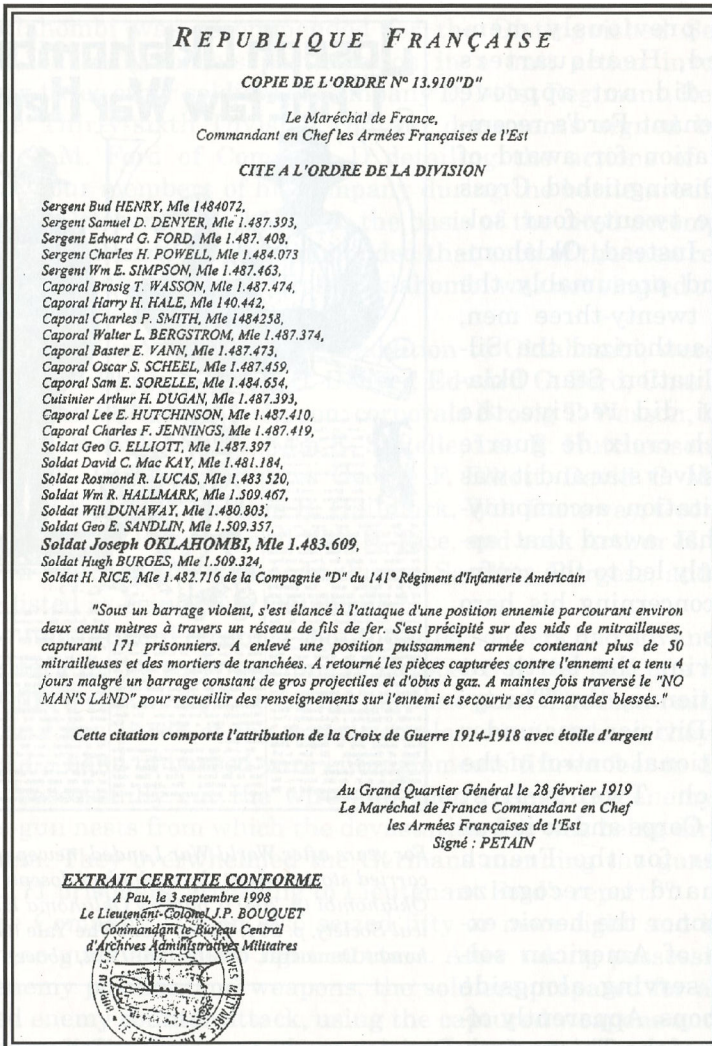
## Joseph Oklahombi: Choctaw War Hero

THE World war is the first war in the world that the setting of the sun has seen. In this war, the soldiers have seen and experienced things that have never before been seen. In the first world war, all of the soldiers were in the front line. In the second world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the third world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the fourth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the fifth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the sixth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the seventh world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the eighth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the ninth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the tenth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the eleventh world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the twelfth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the thirteenth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. 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In the ninety-eighth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the ninety-ninth world war, the soldiers were in the front line. In the one hundred world war, the soldiers were in the front line.

He married a full-blooded Choctaw girl before he enlisted in the Army. When the war broke out he left his wife and a baby girl a few months old. After he was mustered out it is reported he came to go back to the beautiful old Indian settlement where he was born to live and his wife and baby. A little while later he was told a small flock of birds which he saw were in a cypress swamp. Near the bank deep among the trees in a cypress swamp. "And now that the spirit and heart is gone," writes Charles Cooke, "it is natural that he should wander in vain through the woods to the farm, get (Oklahoma) and return with him to his home. After a time they were no more. The spirit of the war had been explained and Oklahoma was no more."

*For years after World War I ended, newspapers carried stories about the exploits of Joseph Oklahombi (p. 204) (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society, p. 204; Taken from The Yale (Oklahoma) Democrat, October 26, 1921, above).*

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*A copy of the French citation for Oklahombi and other soldiers.*

his recommendation that the same twenty-four men receive the Distinguished Service Cross. There are some minor variations in the spelling of the soldiers' names.

An extract of the French order, translated into English, was prepared for each soldier, showing only the individual as the recipient,

but using the common citation. It was this widely disseminated and quoted document bearing only Oklahombi's name that apparently led to the misconception that he alone had accomplished the cited deeds. The English version of the citation follows:

Under a violent barrage, dashed to the attack of an enemy position, covering about 200 yards thru barb wire entanglements. He rushed on Machine Gun Nests, capturing 171 prisoners. He stormed a strongly held position containing more than 50 Machine Guns, and a number of Trench Mortars. Turned the captured guns on the enemy, and held the said position for four days, in spite of a constant barrage of large projectiles and of gas shells. Crossed "No Man's Land" many times to get information concerning the enemy, and to assist his wounded comrades.<sup>15</sup>

The document containing the above citation is clearly marked as an "Extract," indicating that it was taken from a more extensive record. A reader of the citation, lacking access to the original order, might logically conclude that Oklahombi alone had accomplished the cited feats. It should be noted that the French version of the citation does not include French equivalents of the English pronouns "he" or "his." Instead, a plural French pronoun is used, which would be consistent with the citation applying to several soldiers.

The misconception of Oklahombi as Oklahoma's greatest war hero seems to have had its beginning the week after his army discharge in June, 1919, when he appeared in the offices of the *McCur-tain Gazette* newspaper at Idabel with the English version of the extract order and citation in hand. The *Gazette* ran an article in the June 25 edition, quoting the citation in full. The article also characterized Oklahombi as having "killed and captured more Germans than any other man except York, of Tennessee." An identical article appeared in the *Democrat-Record* at Idabel on June 26, 1919.<sup>16</sup>

From that beginning, the word spread, and Oklahombi came to be dubbed "Oklahoma's Greatest Hero." The late James Dyer, Jr., a fellow Choctaw who served in the Oklahoma House of Representatives from 1921 to 1925 and again from 1927 to 1931, was instrumental in drawing attention to the soldier's perceived heroic actions. Sol Joel, another Choctaw and a friend of Oklahombi, donated a copy of the citation to the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1928, along with a number of military uniform items and other equipment Oklahombi had worn or used during the war. Oklahombi had previously donated the *croix de guerre* to the society.<sup>17</sup>

As Oklahombi's perceived hero status became known and publicized in the 1920s, he became the center of attention by news media

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and veterans groups. Movie makers in California became interested and sought Oklahombi's cooperation in making pictures about the war. He adamantly refused all such offers. He reportedly told one agent that "war was not fun," and he would not be a party to making movies about such activity. He told another agent he could not participate in movie-making because he had to "stay home and catch suckers," a fish found in Horsehead Creek near his home. He also reportedly told Hollywood agents that he would go to California if they would move Horsehead Creek to Hollywood.<sup>18</sup>

Undoubtedly, Oklahombi was directly involved in the actions cited by Lieutenant Ford in his memorandum and also in the French citation. But at this late date it may be impossible to determine with certainty his specific role. He was killed in a traffic accident near his home on April 13, 1960. It is unlikely that other members of Company D are now alive since they would be near 100 years old. Oklahombi left no known writings concerning his wartime experiences, and he was reportedly reluctant to discuss the subject. There are snippets of information contained in various news reports, the credibility of which is suspect in many instances. It appears that many reports were merely repetition of prior versions of Oklahombi's exploits.<sup>19</sup>

R. G. Miller, a feature writer with the *Daily Oklahoman*, interviewed Oklahombi in 1937 and asked him, "Tell me about capturing all those Germans, how did you do it?" Oklahombi's reported response was that he had been on patrol as a scout when he saw several Germans emerge from a hole. He said he shot two of the enemy and then somehow was able to capture a machine gun the Germans had set up. He said he turned the gun on the Germans remaining in the hole and held them captive for four days until help arrived. He claimed to have been without food or water during those four days.<sup>20</sup> Miller reported Oklahombi as stating that when he finally received help 171 German soldiers and about fifty machine guns were found in the hole he had guarded.<sup>21</sup>

A long-time friend of Oklahombi recalled him telling of having held a number of German prisoners until fellow soldiers came to his aid. A similar report, which may pertain to the same incident, stated that Oklahombi had come upon a group of 250 German soldiers having lunch in a cemetery. He blocked the gate to the walled area and prevented the enemy from escaping. He was later told that 171 Germans had been taken captive in the cemetery. A variation on that story, also contained in news reports, stated that Oklahombi stumbled across a hole in which a number of German soldiers were

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hiding. He reportedly held them for three hours until help arrived to take custody of 171 prisoners and fifty machine guns.<sup>22</sup>

Still another report credited Oklahombi with capturing 171 Germans and eighty-eight machine guns. Another article recorded that he had killed dozens of Germans and captured 125 machine guns. In another instance he was credited with having used a machine gun to kill seventy-nine Germans.<sup>23</sup>

A brief history of the Thirty-sixth Division for the World War I period might serve to put the accomplishments of Oklahombi's unit into better context and perspective. The division was organized at Camp Bowie, Texas, in the summer of 1917 following entry of the United States into the war. Existing Oklahoma and Texas National Guard units were the main components of the division, augmented with draftees and recruits.<sup>24</sup>



*Visiting Joseph Oklahombi (right) at his home in May, 1921, were a man identified either as Sol Joel or John Golombie and Mrs. Czarina C. Conlan. Oklahombi wore his uniform and medal in almost every photograph made of him during the post-World War I period (Courtesy Oklahoma Historical Society, No. 4122).*

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The infantry units were formed into two brigades, the Seventy-first and the Seventy-second, each consisting of two regiments. The 141st and 142d regiments made up the Seventy-first Brigade. Oklahombi served in Company D, First Battalion, 141st Regiment.

After almost a year of training at Camp Bowie, the division was shipped to France in August, 1918. Oklahombi had enlisted and joined the division in May, 1918. The division received additional training after arriving in France and before being ordered to the front in late September.

The division was placed at the disposal of the French High Command and on October 5 the Seventy-first Brigade was assigned to operational control of the Twenty-first French Army Corps. The brigade was ordered to relieve units of the American Second Division, then in a precarious situation near the French village of St. Etienne. Opposite the brigade in the front line were three under-strength German divisions which had effectively stalled the French corps. German resistance was especially stiff in that sector of the front because its loss would jeopardize the entire Meuse-Argonne area of the German line.

The Seventy-first Brigade entered the front line on the night of October 6, relieving units of the American Second Division. The First Battalion of the brigade, which included Company D, was in the forward position. The brigade was ordered to attack the German line early in the morning of October 8.

Inadequate maps, deficient briefings, and lack of battle experience of the troops were handicaps, but the attack got under way at about 5:00 A.M. after a brief and partially misdirected artillery barrage. The path of the proposed advance was over difficult terrain through a wooded area cut by ravines and guarded by a network of enemy barbed-wire entanglements.

Members of the 141st Regiment, led by the First Battalion, went "over the top" in a cold drizzle and immediately came under heavy enemy machine-gun and rifle fire in addition to intensive artillery shelling. Despite the enemy resistance, small groups of the 141st worked their way forward and closed in on the enemy machine-gun emplacements.

Two detachments of the 141st advanced so far forward that they were in danger of being cut off from the main body of troops. One detachment remained in its advance position and held out despite threatened enemy counter-attacks, one of which they repelled with automatic rifle and machine-gun fire. The Company D group cited by Lieutenant Ford may well have been one of those units.

The battle on October 8 was a costly one for the 141st Regiment in terms of casualties. Seven officers and 187 enlisted men were killed; eighteen officers and 348 enlisted personnel were wounded. That casualty rate is indicative of the intensity of the battle.

The regiment remained in its advanced position during the night of October 8, preparing for the expected German counter-attack. They also held their ground in spite of intense enemy ground fire and air attacks through October 9 and 10. There were indications on the tenth that the Germans might be withdrawing, and that development was confirmed on the eleventh when the Seventy-second Brigade attacked through the Seventy-First and took up pursuit of the enemy.

After burying their dead, the Seventy-first Brigade joined the forward movement on October 12. The Germans fought strong rear-guard actions before making a final stand in a bend of the Aisne River about twenty-one kilometers from St. Etienne. There the two brigades of the Thirty-sixth Division made a final and very successful attack on October 27 when the Germans surrendered. The division was withdrawn from the front lines on October 29 and engaged in no further combat. The armistice ending the fighting was declared on November 11.

The Seventy-first Brigade had borne the brunt of the fighting during the division's twenty-three days of combat. Twenty-three officers and 494 enlisted men had been killed, all except 11 dying in the intense struggle around St. Etienne.<sup>25</sup>

Members of the Thirty-sixth Division received numerous awards and decorations in addition to the two Medals of Honor mentioned previously. Thirty-nine were awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, one the Distinguished Service Medal. French decorations included the Legion of Honor to five officers. Seven enlisted men received the French Medaille Militaire, the highest French decoration given to enlisted personnel.<sup>26</sup> Especially noteworthy is that 415 officers and enlisted men in the division also were awarded the French *croix de guerre*.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the numerous individual awards earned by members of the division, major commanders commended the unit in glowing terms for its performance in the twenty-three days of combat. General John Pershing, commander of the AEF, wrote that the combat record of the division was "one [of] which all ranks may well be proud." The president of France said the division had "proved the valor and the spirit of discipline of its members." The commandant of the French Twenty-first Army Corps, under which the division

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had fought, also was effusive in his commendation of the unit's performance.<sup>28</sup>

In retrospect, one wonders whether Oklahombi was aware that the citation he received from the French government did not pertain solely to him. He may never have seen the complete order which included his name along with twenty-three of his comrades-in-arms, crediting them collectively with the cited exploits. Likely, he only received the English-version "extract" of the order bearing only his name which has been widely circulated and publicized over the years.

Pertinent to the questions raised is that Oklahombi was apparently illiterate, being unable to read or write. In the interview conducted in January, 1937, R. G. Miller of the *Daily Oklahoman* asked him, "You can read and write, can't you?" Oklahoma responded, "No, no can read and write." If that is true, then perhaps it is understandable that he never protested the attention he received as the result of the English-version "extract" of the French citation.<sup>29</sup>

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> (Idabel, Oklahoma) *McCurtain Gazette*, December 14, 1932, October 2, 1935; *The* (Oklahoma City, Oklahoma) *Daily Oklahoman*, April 14, 1960; *Oklahoma City* (Oklahoma) *Times*, April 14, 1960; W. A. Carter, *McCurtain County and Southeastern Oklahoma* (Fort Worth, Texas: Tribune Publishing Company, 1923), 196; Edwin C. McReynolds, Alice Marriott, and Estelle Faulconer, *Oklahoma: The Story of Its Past and Present* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), 285; (Durant, Oklahoma) *Bishinik*, October, 1992, November, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> *McCurtain Gazette*, December 14, 1932, October 2, 1935, April 16, 1960; *Daily Oklahoman*, April 14, 1960; *Bishinik*, October 1992, November, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> U. S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, to author, August 6, 1998; Military Discharge Records, Enlistment Record, Joseph Oklahombi, County Clerk's Office, McCurtain County Courthouse, Idabel, Oklahoma.

<sup>4</sup> Ben F. Chastaine, *Story of the 36th: The Experience of the 36th Division in the World War* (Oklahoma City: Harlow Publishing Company, 1920).

<sup>5</sup> Military Discharge Records, Enlistment Record, Joseph Oklahombi, County Clerk's Office, McCurtain County Courthouse, Idabel, Oklahoma.

<sup>6</sup> Records of the U. S. Army Adjutant General's Office, 1917-1925, Record Group (RG) 407, AGO 220.523, April 12, 1919, National Archives, College Park, Maryland (hereafter cited as NA-CP); Chastaine, *Story of the 36th*, 130-132.

<sup>7</sup> Citation Orders, General Headquarters, American Expeditionary Forces, Order No. 4, France, June 3, 1919, U. S. Army Military History Institute, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

<sup>8</sup> Memorandum of Lieutenant Charles M. Ford, no date, Records of the American Expeditionary Forces, RG 120, NA-CP.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Chastaine, *Story of the 36th*, 69; Order No. 13.910 "D," French Armies of the East, February 28, 1919, Bureau of Central d'Archives Militaires, Casern Bernadotte, France.

<sup>15</sup> Extract copy of French Order No. 13.910 "D," February 28, 1919, Accession No. 3076, State Museum of History, Oklahoma Historical Society, Oklahoma City (hereafter cited as SMH OHS).

<sup>16</sup> *McCurtain Gazette*, June 25, 1919; (Idabel, Oklahoma) *Democrat-Record*, June 26, 1919.

<sup>17</sup> Accession Records, Nos. 2153–2156, 2167, 2544, SMH OHS.

<sup>18</sup> *McCurtain Gazette*, October 2, 1935; Joe Slater, interview with author, Wright City, Oklahoma, September 4, 1978; Mrs. Joseph Oklahombi, interviews with author, September 4, 1978, February 27, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> *McCurtain Gazette*, April 16, 1960; Slater interview, September 4, 1978.

<sup>20</sup> R. G. Miller, "Our No. 1 War Hero wants a Job," *Daily Oklahoman*, January 17, 1937, sec. D.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Slater interview, September 4, 1978; *McCurtain Gazette*, June 1, 1940, April 16, 1960; *Daily Oklahoman*, September 28, 1940.

<sup>23</sup> *McCurtain Gazette*, December 14, 1932, October 2, 1935; *Bishinik*, November, 1997.

<sup>24</sup> Chastaine, *Story of the 36th*. Captain Chastaine, a member of the 142d Regiment, Seventy-first Brigade, Thirty-sixth Division, presents a detailed story of the division from its inception through the training, deployment, and combat of the unit in France.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 277, 279, 287.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 265, 266, 273, 277.

<sup>29</sup> Miller, "Our No. 1 War Hero wants a Job," *Daily Oklahoman*, January 17, 1937, sec. D.