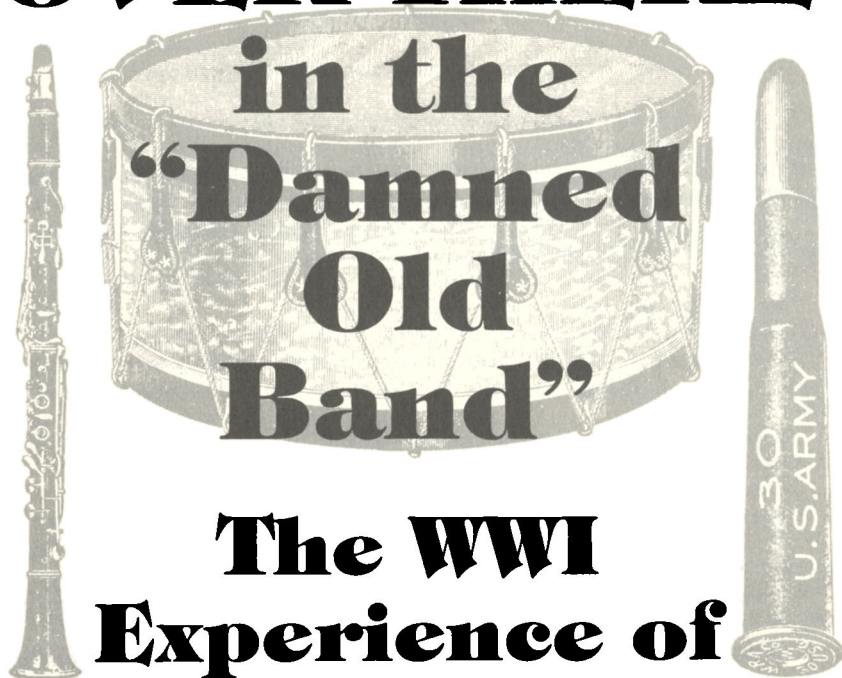


# OVER THERE



## The WWI Experience of OSCAR NOBLE

*By Brad Agnew\**

Oklahoma marked its tenth year as a state on November 16, 1917, but Oscar Noble and many of his fellow Sooners at Camp Travis, Texas, were too busy with drill and training to celebrate the anniversary. They were among 28,000 men from Oklahoma, Texas, and several other states who were being molded into the 90th Infantry Division, one of forty-three that would be sent overseas to assist the Allies in pushing the Germans out of France and crushing the Central Powers. The division's insignia bore the inscription "T-O" for Texas-Oklahoma, but the men insisted that the letters stood for "Tough 'Ombres."

Noble, whose name was one of the first drawn in the national selective service lottery, had volunteered rather than waiting to be drafted. Leaving his job as a rural letter carrier in Sallisaw, Oklahoma, he caught the train for Camp Travis, located near San Antonio, Texas, where he was sworn into the army on September 6, 1917. During the in-processing a questionnaire given to the new recruits asked if they played musical instruments. Noble wrote "clarinet" followed by a question mark. The next day he was issued a clarinet and assigned to the band at Headquarters Company of the division's 358th Infantry Regiment. In addition to rehearsals, the band also was trained in first aid and drilled as stretcher bearers, but they escaped the more rigorous training the rest of the division endured. Noble and his fellow musicians were called "the damned old band" by the less fortunate recruits.

A month after he reported to Camp Travis, Noble was joined by his wife, Bertha. The couple, who had been married three years, rented a small place in San Antonio where she remained until the 90th Division shipped out for France. Not long before the unit left Camp Travis, an epidemic of measles swept the camp, resulting in the quarantining of all army personnel. Noble went to his company commander to seek permission to visit his wife. The captain told him that he could not authorize him to leave camp, but if his wife were in San Antonio, he knew what he would do. For the first, but not the last, time, Noble went absent without leave.

On June 9, 1918, Noble and his unit left San Antonio by train bound for port in New York. The same day, the 27-year-old private started a diary he would maintain for the next seven months. Mrs. Noble left Texas on a train just ahead of her husband's. They met briefly in Waco and then continued their separate journeys. Early the next morning Noble's train stopped in Muskogee, Oklahoma, where the soldiers were greeted warmly and given sandwiches and coffee. An hour later, as his train passed through Wagoner, Oklahoma, Noble saw his wife again, "Looking rather lonesome." It would be more than a year before the couple would be reunited.

As the train wended its way toward New York, occasional stops broke the monotony of the journey. In Sedalia, Missouri, the band played while the troops were treated to ice cream cones; Noble had four. In Indiana the train paused along the Wabash River long enough to allow the men to take a dip, which Noble said was "very much needed and greatly appreciated." Factories along the route acknowledged the passage of the troop train by blowing their whis-

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tles. In the evening of June 13, after five days of continuous travel, the men reached Camp Mills on Long Island, where they would await a ship to carry them to France.

When the promise of a pass to visit New York City was not fulfilled, Noble and many of the men from his unit slipped out of camp to see the sights "just as well as if we had fifty passes." For missing roll call at retreat Noble was assigned fatigue duty all morning on June 17. He noted in his diary that he had "plenty help." The next day the unit drew so much overseas equipment that the men grumbled that they were "going to be used as pack mules from here out."

On June 19, part of the 90th Division boarded an English liner, the *SS Canada*, and early the next morning passed "the woman with a lamp in her hand." By the end of the second day on board Noble concluded that sleeping accommodations were "bum" and that the food "would kill a dog." That was the good part of the voyage. The third day out the *Canada* encountered heavy weather. Almost no one reported for meals to ship's mess, which the troops had christened "Jimmy's slum" in honor of the chief cook. Noble made frequent trips to the rail because he "felt like the fishes were getting hungry." Although the weather eventually improved, the food did not. On June 28, he recorded in his diary, "we had rotten fish for breakfast and dinner and Australian Jack rabbit for supper."

Clear weather also increased the chance of German U-Boat attack as the convoy approached the danger zone. At mid-Atlantic the U.S. Navy escort turned back and British destroyers assumed responsibil-






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*Before his induction into the Army as a private (right), Oscar Noble briefly taught school at Maple School near Sallisaw (facing page seated in center) (Courtesy Oscar Noble).*

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ity for bringing the American troops safely to Europe. Reports of U-Boat activity prompted naval officials to alter plans to sail directly to Le Havre, France. Instead, the convoy was re-routed far to the north where the boys from Oklahoma and Texas found it difficult to adjust to sleeping when “it hardly gets real dark the whole night.”

From the ship Noble wrote his wife, Bertha, “I certainly have enjoyed my voyage over very much.” There was no mention of bad food, difficulty sleeping, or U-Boat danger, all of which were discussed in his diary. Perhaps his lack of candor in the letter was to shield his wife from the reality of military life in wartime. Or it may have been that Noble was emphasizing the positive to avoid the displeasure of his company’s officers, who censored all mail. In subsequent letters Noble told his wife that he was not free to tell her much of what he was doing or even where he was, although he did suggest that she refer to the newspapers on specific dates to see what the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) and he were doing. Actually Noble’s first letter after leaving the United States bore the mark of the censor. In a postscript telling his wife, “I will be somewhere [erasure],” the location was so thoroughly erased that a hole was almost worn through the paper.

On July 1, the *Canada* entered the channel between Scotland and Ireland, “a very beautiful sight indeed” to men who had not seen land



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*This portion of a 358th Infantry group photograph was taken at Camp Travis, December 27, 1917. Noble is standing third from the right above (Courtesy Oscar Noble).*

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for twelve days. The next day the Americans disembarked at Liverpool to the strains of "Over There." On the Fourth of July, men from the 90th Division paraded through the streets of Liverpool, and the Lord Mayor of the city gave the troops a "big feast for supper." Noble did not realize there was that much food in all of England; and after the unpalatable rations of the voyage, good food was particularly welcome. He might have eaten even more had he realized how meager and irregular his meals would be for the next few weeks.

The division boarded trains for the trip across England to Southampton on July 5, and after sunset the following day, the Americans crossed the channel and landed at Le Havre, France. Loaded in cattle cars, the men travelled east three days to their training area. Noble noted that he spent his fourth wedding anniversary on the train eating "corn willy," the doughboys' name for canned corned beef. The unit arrived at Recey-sur-Ource, a small city some thirty miles from Chaumont where General John J. Pershing had established the headquarters of the American Expeditionary Force. Noble's regiment marched nine miles into the country, where they bivouacked near the village of Minot. The band cleaned out a barn which would be called home for the next five weeks.



Logistical support did not move as rapidly as the troops did; for several days after their arrival in the Minot area the doughboys slept without blankets and had to make do with the few personal items they had carried with them. By July 12, however, Private Noble recorded that barracks bags had arrived and he had finally been able to take a bath, although he grumbled that he was still eating "corn willy." Within several more days the first mail from the states reached the men and the division's mess facilities were in place. Noble noted in his diary, "July 16th—Same old thing only we are getting plenty to eat."

Letters written at the same time are more upbeat. Noble described the beauty of the countryside, the industry of the farmers, and the bounty of the land. He wrote, "I am really enjoying myself," although he wished his wife could be with him but under different circumstances. "I sure do like the French people," Noble wrote. "They are doing all they possibly can do to make us feel like we are at home while with them. They certainly are very hospitable. I sure do wish I could speak French." There is a note of homesickness in one of the letters, in which Noble mentioned that it had been almost six weeks since he had heard from his wife. Three more weeks would pass before the Oklahoma private received mail from home. The first letter from his wife, dated June 17, took almost two months to reach him.

The men were informed that they would remain in the Minot area

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ARMY AND NAVY  
YOUNG MEN'S CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION  
"WITH THE COLORS"



Somewhere on Atlantic  
Hq. Co. 358, U.S. Inf  
Amer. Exp. Forces

My Dear Bertha;

I am still traveling  
but my journey will end  
soon. I certainly have  
enjoyed my voyage very  
much, except for a day or  
two when I was sick.

.....

a long letter and tell you  
several little things.

With much love  
Oscar.

Note my new address:

O. C. Nobli

Musician Hq. Co.

358 Regt. U.S. Inf

Amer. Exp. Forces

P.S. I will be somewhere

To the Writer: Save by Writing on Both Sides of ans

To the Folks at Home: Save Food, Buy Liberty Bonds and War Savings Stamps.



for "a few weeks." Life for the band settled into a routine of rehearsals, performances, military drill, and fatigue duty. Actually, camp life far from the front was not particularly taxing. Private Noble's diary indicates that drill and road marches continued despite rainy weather. His entry for July 27 suggests that the band did not throw itself wholeheartedly into the training. "Took a hike (?) That is we went out behind a hedge fence almost half a mile from our barn and took a nap." Another entry noted that the men "just lounged around and had a good time, if such a thing is possible in France."

After settling in at Minot, Noble frequently mentioned the abundance of milk, butter, and eggs, and the productivity of the French farmers. In one letter he told his wife, "Uncle Sam sure does feed his boys. We don't know what meatless, wheatless, and sweetless days are in the army."

During the division's training, General Pershing visited the unit. While inspecting the band, he suggested that the men would be using "different instruments" soon. By early August, divisional maneuvers under live artillery and mortar barrages, fired by the French, marked the culmination of the unit's training. The men returned to their barracks, received an intensive course in defense against gas attack, and were alerted to stand by for movement to the front. In preparation for combat, members of the band turned in all of their clothing




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*After leaving his wife Bertha (right), Noble wrote letters describing some of his experiences (facing page). Notice the censor's erasure marks on the last line (Courtesy Oscar Noble).*

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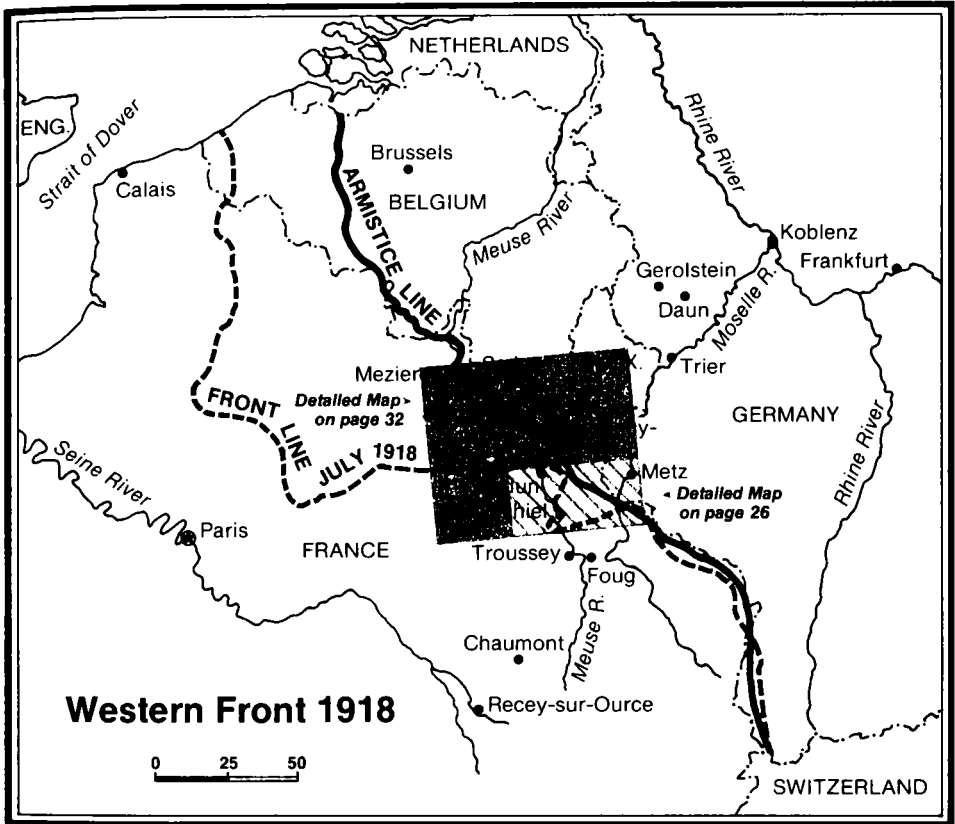
except the uniforms they were wearing and a change of socks and underwear and a coat. As the division awaited the order to move up, Noble learned that he had been promoted to corporal with an increase in monthly pay from \$21 to \$33.

In letters home, Noble expressed his eagerness to get into the action. He wrote, "Since we have gone to the trouble of coming over here I certainly hope we get our share of the excitement." Alluding to Allied successes all along the front, Noble joked, "From the way things look now it would be some task to even get a chance to face one of the unhumanly creatures [the Germans] for they seem to have their backs turned most of the time." He even suggested that his wife ask his mother to "save a big turkey for me for I might come home Christmas." While Noble's optimism about a quick end to the war was not unfounded, his letters show little understanding of the nature of trench warfare or of the ordeal that lay before him and the AEF in the final phase of the war.

Noble and most of the division's personnel were unaware of the mission that had been assigned to the AEF by the Allied high command. After three months of bitter offensive warfare the German advance had been halted by mid-July, 1918. The exhausted Germans were forced onto the defensive as massive infusions of American manpower tipped the balance of power against them. The first priority of Allied commanders was to eliminate the bulges, or salients, along the front. These German positions hindered communications and transportation and endangered the flanks of British, French, and American units. The AEF was assigned the task of reducing the salient south of Verdun which had threatened that vital French fortress since the first year of the war. The Germans defending the Saint Mihiel salient had repelled several French offensives, but by August of 1918, their defenses in that sector had been weakened to provide manpower for offensive operations in other areas during the spring and early summer. The 90th Division was assigned a section on the southern flank of the Saint Mihiel salient.

On August 17 Corporal Noble and his fellow band members, weighed down by full field packs, left Minot by "hobnail express." By the end of the first day the doughboys had covered over twenty miles, and Noble had blisters the size of "2 or 3 dollars." Despite his aching feet, he proclaimed that he was "still in the game" and kept up as his unit continued the march. On the evening of the second day the band was loaded on a troop train which would take it close to the front. Noble later confided to his wife that marching long distances with a





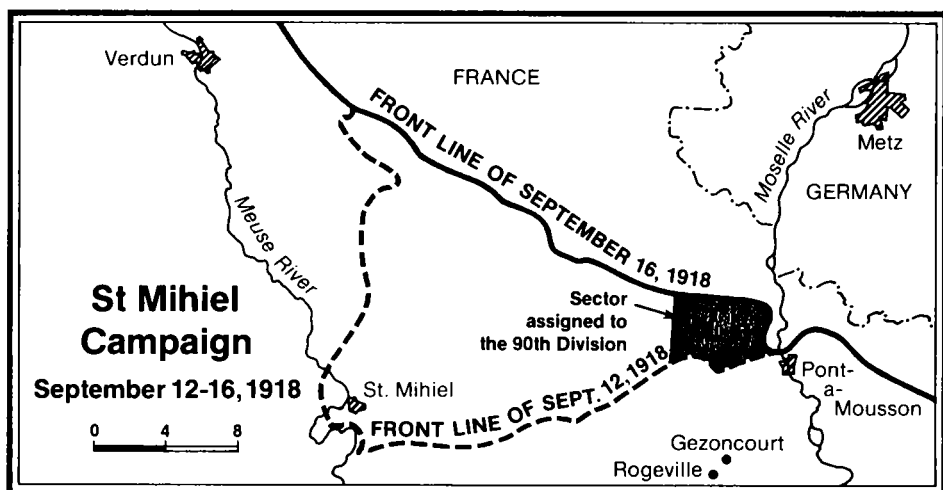
seventy-five or hundred pound pack “takes a man with grit and determination to do it. Not bragging but I make it as well as the best one in our outfit.”

The twelve-hour train trip cramped into a “crackerbox” with twenty-four men provided only temporary rest for the blistered feet of the bandsmen, for after leaving the train at Foug they marched through the rest of the night before reaching the village of Troussey on the Meuse River. The German line was still more than ten miles to the north, but Noble got his first view of the enemy when a “Boche” plane flew over. After dark the next day, trucks picked up the band and carried it northeast for five hours to Rogeville. They remained there through the day and then under cover of darkness marched two kilometers to Gezoncourt. Both Rogeville and Gezoncourt had been badly damaged by artillery barrages.

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Only six kilometers from the front, Gezoncourt afforded the Americans an excellent view of the nightly fireworks to the north. Nearby, anti-aircraft batteries also performed for the new arrivals in an effort to keep German aircraft at a respectful distance. Allied gunners were not always successful, for Noble got his first glimpse of aerial combat when a German plane "slipped over and burned" an observation balloon.

The unit settled in to await the start of the American offensive, and Noble observed his twenty-eighth birthday on a rainy Monday, August 26. Initially, the Oklahoma corporal had trouble sleeping because of the nightly artillery exchanges. Shortly after his arrival at



Gezoncourt he grumbled, "Was up all night. Our big guns were sending Fritz some peace talk every few minutes." Later he complained, "Fritz was very rude last night. . . . He awoke us this morning at 12:30 and would not let us sleep any more until 3:00 o'clock." Despite the proximity of the enemy Thursday afternoon, August 29, the band played a concert.

The first of September the band was ordered to move three kilometers closer to the front where they set up housekeeping in the woods with "big guns belching all around." For the first time Noble recorded that German artillery and gunfire had inflicted casualties on the men of the 90th Division. He mentioned that two men in the 358th Infantry Regiment were wounded by shrapnel and a member of the band was grazed by machine gun fire. Most of the shells passed Noble's position above treetop level and burst "a few hundred yards

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back of me but they sound like they are only about ten feet over my head. They sure do whistle as they pass thro [sic] the air." Noble collected a piece of shrapnel as a souvenir of his baptism of fire.

Noble's letters home with return addresses, "Somewhere in France," were not particularly informative at this period. Although he hinted at conditions, military censorship in the 90th Division seems to have been strictly enforced. Noble told his wife that he should be able to tell her where he was because other divisions were allowing their boys to divulge their locations. It was not until the armistice, however, that his letters included a location.

Noble was able to tell his wife he was "going to the dogs fast for I drank a cup of beer just before dinner." Noble claimed that he had refrained from earlier opportunities to try the wine and beer which were commonplace in Europe but illegal in dry Oklahoma. He added, "We can get all the wine and beer we want over here. Some of the boys want a plenty too."

Despite the nearness of the Germans, Noble and his fellow soldiers spent some of their time picking blackberries and making jam. As chief cook for the undertaking, he not only stole sugar from the company mess but also used his helmet as a pot. He still remembers that the "helmet jam" was as good as homemade.

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*These men of the 358th Infantry passed through Vilcey on September 15, 1918, after action on the front (from A History of the 90th Division).*



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After three weeks near the front the bandsmen had become acclimated to the nocturnal sounds of trench warfare. Noble commented, "Fritz sent over a few more shell[s] last night but I was so sleepy that I couldn't be bothered." Shells were not the only thing falling from the skies to complicate life in the trenches. The fall rains had begun, turning the roads and earthworks into a sea of mud. Noble mentioned walking "a quarter of a mile thro [sic] mud up to my shoe tops" for chow.

Neither the German shelling nor the rain slowed the buildup of troops, artillery, and supplies around the salient. Noble decided the offensive was imminent on September 10 when the men were told that they could write no more letters until further notice. The next day Noble saw "beaucoup tanks" rumbling north, and that evening the band was ordered forward to serve as stretcher-bearers and medics.

Travelling in the dark, the men slogged through roads turned to quagmires by recent rains. Progress was further slowed by heavy military traffic moving north. To make matters even worse, the band got lost. Noble wrote, "after wading aound in the mud for three or four hours, we found our place of abode for the night."

German artillery wounded several Americans in the regiment, but at 1:00 A.M., September 12, 3,400 Allied guns "turned loose all at once," giving Noble the impression that "the whole earth rocked."

The first wave of infantry went over the top at 5:00 A.M. Noble and his fellow musicians accompanied the second wave to bring back the wounded. The bandsmen carried full loads both ways—toting ammunition to the attacking infantry and returning with litters of the wounded. Moving in either direction they were subjected to enemy sniper fire. Noble and the other litter-bearers worked through the day until midnight without a break, even for a meal.

Early the next day Corporal Noble entered the first French village he had helped liberate from German control. The civilians of Vilcey hugged the doughboys and were preparing to feed their hungry liberators when German artillery zeroed in on the village and forced the Americans to abandon it. One boy was killed by a shell that landed a few feet away from Noble. Forgetting their hunger, the American soldiers "put a great deal of distance" between themselves and the village. Finally, on September 14, Noble and his comrades got their first meal in three days. Although German gunners lobbed a shell so close that it sent dirt and gravel flying into Noble's "syrup," he wrote, "I couldn't be bothered. *I was that hungry.*" Although a nearby soldier

soldier was killed by the explosion of a gas shell and a friend from home was wounded, Noble finished his dinner without injury.

For a few days the battle on the ground and in the air continued furiously. On September 15, Noble noted "Business still rushing." But by then the battle was virtually over. The Germans, who had been preparing to evacuate the Saint Mihiel salient, fought stubbornly as they withdrew to new defensive positions along the Hindenburg Line. Many American commanders, including Brigadier General Douglas MacArthur, believed that the American advance should have been exploited by a direct assault on Metz, a major German communication and supply center. General Pershing, however, had already committed the American army to offensive operations north of Verdun in the Meuse River-Argonne Forest sector.

Corporal Noble's diary reflects the close of major offensive operations in the Saint Mihiel campaign. From September 15 to 24, the band and other troops were employed in burying the dead. On the 25th the unit pulled back several kilometers from the front to play for battalions being withdrawn from the lines for seven days of rest. Noble reported, "We are still under shell fire, but it is quite a relief to be back even this far" from the front. During this period Noble was playing a selection of Southern melodies while Company I was marching back to the front. As the band played "Just Before the Battle Mother," Carney Welch, a friend from Sallisaw, passed Noble and told him, "that's a hell of a tune to be playing and me going up to the front." Within hours Welch was carried back and died not long afterwards. Noble still remembers the episode as if it happened yesterday. And a few residents of Sallisaw still remember why their American Legion post bears the name "Carney Welch."

Despite continuing censorship of the mail, Noble's first letter after he went "over the top" made it clear where he had been. He told his wife that he had been on the move constantly since September 12. "You can judge for yourself where I am. I am sure you read the paper the 12th inst. I wish you would keep the papers dating from the 12th to about the 20th inst. I would like to see them for various reasons." To make his recent actions even clearer, Noble told his wife, "I am writing on captured paper."

In a letter written after the armistice Noble provided more details about the combat on the Saint Mihiel front. Despite harassing German artillery fire, burial details, including Corporal Noble's, continued their grim task. Noble wrote, "But Fritz was determined to disturb us if he possibly could so directly they sent over four Bosche



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*Noble's unit occasionally travelled by truck, but more often it moved by "hobnail express" (from A History of the 90th Division).*

[sic] planes. They came over dropping eggs (bombs) and emptying their machine guns at us. . . . That particular time there was nothing else to do, so I just crawled under a blade of grass until the storm passed over. Some of his bullets hit within a very few feet of me but his eggs hit several yards away."

Eventually, Allied aircraft forced the Germans to discontinue their attack. Noble did not see the combat in the sky, but he heard that one of the German planes had been brought down. Concerning another air battle he had observed, Noble told his wife it "certainly is a thrilling sight." Watching planes go down in flames and pilots leaping from their burning aircraft "wasn't like seeing a picture. It was the real thing—not the reel thing."

For several weeks the band settled into a routine of daily concerts, fatigue duties, and adjustment to life just behind the lines. Noble's company commander, Ernest B. Houser, like many of the foot soldiers of the regiment, had been critical of the "damned old band" because they rehearsed when the other men were engaged in more vigorous training. After the action at the Saint Mihiel salient, however, Houser changed his opinion. Referring to the work of the litter-bearers, he told his company, "I'll take my hat off to the band." After the war, just before the men were mustered out, Houser took the entire forty-member band out to dinner.

In his last night on the Saint Mihiel front Noble single-handedly conducted a raid on the unit kitchen, where he liberated the in-

gredients for pancakes that he and his buddies prepared in their "stalls" the next morning. The last days of Indian summer passed, and heavy frost greeted the troops on the morning of October 4. Several days later Noble recorded, "Took a bath in the Creek. Almost froze."

The band left Gezoncourt and marched south away from the front. Rumor suggested that the division was being pulled out of the line for a rest, but in this case the rumor was wrong. The American army had already launched an offensive to breach the formidable German defenses in the Meuse-Argonne area guarding the important railheads at Mezieres and Sedan. The attack in the new American campaign had begun on September 26, the day before the band had been pulled back from the front lines on the Saint Mihiel sector. The band and the rest of the 90th Division were now marching not to a rest area but to relieve American troops already engaged in the bloody struggle in the Meuse-Argonne front.

Noble and the band marched for three days before they were loaded onto trucks driven by Japanese who knew only one English word, "cigarette." Travelling north, the division finally reached Blercourt, about a dozen miles west of Verdun. The men "waded [in] mud about knee deep for almost a mile" before stopping for the night about 11:00 P.M., October 13, near an old French barracks. Finally given permission to bed down for the night, Noble wrote, "I didn't hunt very long. I soon found the muddiest spot around and 'flopped.'"

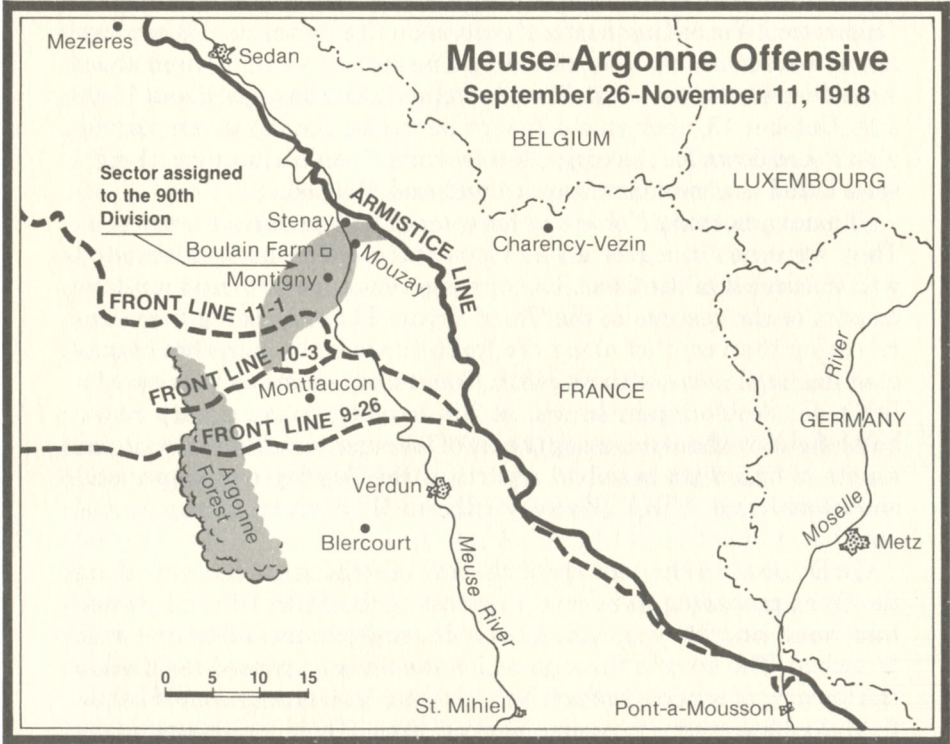
The next morning Noble and his companions oriented themselves. They were not in a rest area but on the old Verdun battleground within earshot of the front. The division remained in place four days as part of the reserve of the Third Army. The only thing more unrelenting than conflict along the front line was the rain that blanketed the battle zone without letup. Censorship seems to have eased a little, for Noble again hinted at his location "near a very noted battlefield" without arousing the ire of his superiors. He also sounded a note of optimism based on reports in the Sunday newspaper and speculated that "'Bill' [Kaiser Wilhelm II] is about to say 'uncle' now."

On October 18 the unit spent the day marching toward and along the front preparing to relieve elements of the Fifth Division which had been on the line since the Meuse-Argonne offensive was launched. The terrain through which the division passed testified to the ferocity of earlier conflict. Noble wrote, "Am now on an old battle field. And believe me it is some 'shot up' place. There isn't a whole tree

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to be seen nowhere where there was once a thick heavy forest.” The next day the division passed Montfaucon, the village from which German Crown Prince Wilhelm had observed the battle for Verdun in 1916. The only thing that remained of the town were a few stone walls.

On the night of October 21, the 90th Division moved into the front line again. The relief was completed by about 4:00 A.M. the next morning, and the Germans welcomed the division back with “a rather heavy dose of gas.” Noble and his “pal” dug a foxhole and lined it with empty beer kegs. German artillery continued to make life miserable for the Americans. It became particularly intense at mealtime and punctuated the night to keep the doughboys from sleeping. Noble commented, “Fritz dropped them all around us last night but he didn’t seem to have our number.” A week later Noble encountered a friend from home. They chatted briefly and had just parted when a German shell exploded where they had been standing a few seconds earlier. Noble confided to his diary, “We would both [have] been



'bumped' off if we had been women for we would have still been talking."

The jocular tone of Noble's comments on German shell fire concealed the horror of the soldier's existence on the Meuse-Argonne front. After the war Noble asserted, "In my opinion Hell would be a place of pleasure compared with the Argonne front."

Initially, the 90th Division held its position and probed the German line. Noble was assigned to improve his unit's defenses and bury the dead. One of the dugouts that Noble helped build was the command



*Noble's diary and letters indicate that "chow" was a major preoccupation in the life of a doughboy. Here, under German fire on October 25, 1918, men of the 358th carry hot meals to soldiers on the front (from A History of the 90th Division).*

post for his colonel. He observed, "threw so much dirt on it that we almost caved it in on him. I think he should have a D.S.C. [Distinguished Service Cross] for that."

On November 1, following an early morning artillery preparation, Noble's regiment advanced five kilometers. That night he "slept in the . . . mud with only one blanket." The Germans had withdrawn, but their artillery still made daylight movement dangerous. Therefore, after consolidating its gains Noble's unit continued the advance during the night of November 3.

Actually, advance does not precisely describe the command's maneuver. Noble wrote, "rather we milled around. Our Capt. was lost. When day light came this morning we found our course and started in that direction." Unfortunately, Noble's commanding officer was not



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*Soldiers of Noble's unit provided food to French citizens of Mouzay after liberation during the closing days of the war (from A History of the 90th Division).*

the only one to find the way; the Germans determined the range of the Americans. As the unit was passing through Montigny, a shell hit Noble's platoon and killed one man and wounded two others. Noble sprained both ankles and had to use a cane to walk. Nonetheless he remained "in the game."

Although the pain from his black and swollen ankles gave him "fits" and kept him awake at night, Noble managed to hobble a kilometer and a half on November 6 as his unit advanced to a new position at Boulain Farm. The Germans welcomed the Americans with more artillery and the rain resumed. The battlefield was awash in mud. In describing it to his wife, Noble wrote, "it was real mud too. We have no mud over there [in the USA] compared with what we have over here." He added that the only reason the mud frozen to their boots did not freeze their feet was that "Fritz kept things hot with 'G.I.' cans (large shells)."

The Americans were also "warming the feet" of the enemy with their own artillery. Noble estimated, "We send 10, 20, and sometimes a hundred [shells] to his one. That's one thing that got his number." But from the vantage point of his foxhole Noble observed, "Things are looking rather gloomy." He told his wife, "I have already gone



through with some things within the last month that I never thought I would be able to do and still live." Combat on the Saint Mihiel front "was a tame affair to what I have seen since." For the first time since he reached France an element of doubt is reflected in Noble's correspondence. His plans for after the war are now based on a condition—"when I am home again. If I am so fortunate." Another reason for Noble's gloom was that he had not received a letter from home for some time. In admonishing his wife to "be sure to write every few minutes," Noble claimed "I would go thro [sic] a German barrage for a letter from you anytime."

On November 8 a rumor that the Germans were preparing to sign an armistice reached the front lines. This was not the first time reports of an end to the fighting had moved along the grapevine, and Noble was skeptical. The next night the 90th Division advanced about seventeen kilometers through rain, mud, and heavy shell fire and caught the Germans by surprise near Mouzay and advanced to Stenay on the Meuse River.

By this time news of the impending armistice had been confirmed through official channels, but Noble remained dubious. His diary for November 11 contains an entry—"A.M." followed by a large question mark, but the entry following "P.M." reads "Must be true for the music has ceased." Although Noble's diary contains no further reference to the armistice, he recalled that the Germans shelled the American positions right up until 11:00 A.M. on November 11, and remembers the comment of a soldier wounded in the last hours of the war—"This is hell to get killed the last day." The next day Noble wrote his wife. "You can not begin to realize what a relief it is since the shell[s] have stopped going and coming. I am sure they have quit for good too."

Reflecting over the past two months, Noble concluded, "Our division has made a record that is a credit to the U.S.A." His observation was corroborated by the enemy. A German colonel serving as chief of staff in the army group opposing the Allies on the southern portion of the western front mentioned the 90th Division as one of those "particularly feared by the German General Staff."

Noble also acknowledged the impact of "this murderous war" on himself. "I am thankful that I have made it through safe and sound, physically, and hope a better man morally—I believe I am any way. I have been under shell fire for the past eighty days with the exception of five days when we were changing fronts."

After two months under constant artillery fire, the quiet was dis-

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turbing. The men had trouble sleeping and suggested assigning a man to stay up all night to "throw hand grenades on the house ever few minutes so that we can sleep. It doesn't seem right to not have a shell come over every little bit."

For the next two weeks the division remained near the position it held when the fighting ended. The men moved out of their foxholes into more suitable accommodations. The band took up residence in the barracks of a prison near Stenay, the last city liberated by the men of Noble's regiment. Noble passed the time by writing letters and picking "cooties . . . until I got too sleepy to see one." Food was plentiful though monotonous. The army seems to have been well supplied with potatoes and Noble commented on "Having sauerkraut and turnips three times a day. It is all on the Bosche [sic] too." He added, "The 'Square heads' must have been in somewhat of a hurry when they left this place for they left 'oodles' of sauer-kraut in our possession. It is good stuff too. And turnips till the world looks level."

Perhaps the most welcome benefit of the end of fighting was that for the first time since he entered the line Noble got "a good warm bath." He wrote his wife, "You may read in the papers where we get a bath about twice a week and also get a change of clothes that often, but it is a lie. It is almost two months since I had a bath . . . and I have had one change of clothes in the mean time."

Post-armistice life was not totally spent in the pursuit of leisure. Although the men could not fathom the reason, they were required to drill, an assignment which put "everybody out of humor." Spirits were temporarily buoyed, however, by rumors that they would be home by Christmas. Then came news that the 90th Division would serve as part of the Army of Occupation; Noble wrote his wife, "you need not look for me home by Xmas but possibly soon after."

On November 24, the band marched east about twenty-three kilometers toward Germany, arriving at Charency-Vezin, where they remained for three days to keep from overrunning the withdrawing German army. The advance was resumed on November 30. Travelling through Luxembourg, the band crossed the German border at 10:35 in the morning of December 7, playing "America First." That evening the doughboys were billeted in German homes. The next day the Americans turned northward, passing through Trier on the Moselle River. Averaging about twenty kilometers a day, the band continued its march in the rugged, forested country east of the Moselle Valley until December 22.

## OVER THERE

Although the mail was still being censored, Noble was much more candid in his description of conditions. "Since it [the fighting] has ceased we have been dealt misery as well. As I see it the exposure and hardships we have gone thro [sic] since the Armistice was signed was all uncalled for. We have hiked 200 miles at times in rain, mud, and snow. Many times our feet were so sore that it seemed almost impossible to go on, but some one said we must. So we kept on walking. Carrying our 'mules' load."

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*During the occupation of Germany, Noble's band played for ceremonial occasions as well as for American troops and German citizens (Courtesy Oscar Noble).*

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Noble spent Christmas at Daun, "a beautiful little town with beautiful pine forests all around it." Blanketed under five inches of snow, the town looked like a scene on a Christmas card, but away from his home at Christmas, Noble recorded, "Not much doing here believe me."

Drilling and playing concerts were the band's principal occupation. The day after Christmas Noble grumbled, "Drilled in snow. My ears got frost bitten." In early January the band hiked over to regimental headquarters to play for a review at which the unit's colonel was to receive a decoration. Noble confided to his diary it was an award "for finding the deepest dugout on the front."

In a particularly bitter letter home Noble railed about drilling in the snow and the rain which he considered to be the "biggest piece of

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foolishness, hard heartedness, or something I ever saw." He suggested that the treatment of the men was not only cruel but also fatal for some. "In fact, they are dying every day now. We have played five funerals in the last week already. . . . We won the right to be treated like humans instead of cattle, while we were in the trenches. . . . All this foolishness tends to embitter the life of the otherwise good natured person. . . . It certainly does try a man to the uttermost, however."

The dreary, overcast weather of western Germany continued to be reflected in Noble's correspondence. Several weeks later he sent his wife a clipping from the *New York Herald* of a speech by a congressman from Massachusetts criticizing Pershing and the American High Command. Noble wrote, "believe me Bertha he speaks the sentiments of thousands and thousands of us doughboys over here in this blamed place. We have good and just reasons for our criticism of them. We (the National Army and the National Guards) have had anything but a square deal. The people will know the whole truth when we get back. As the Congressman says, Pershing has been partial towards the Regular Army all the way through." Reacting against rumors that the selective service law would be extended to hold the occupation forces in Europe indefinitely, Noble asked his wife to petition his local draft board to authorize his discharge. "I say let Black Jack Pershing keep his Old Regulars over here if he thinks so much of them."

A letter dated February 3, 1919, from Noble to his wife provides additional indication of the Oklahoman's growing frustration. The doughboy who felt he was going to the dogs for drinking a cup of beer during the war suggested that he had considerably more than a single cup of "good grape wine." Although he claimed that "You couldn't say I was polluted," he warned his wife not to tell his mother for fear that she would disown him. Later he admitted, "Had 'Beaucoup' wine, Champagne, and schnops."

Since the end of the war Noble's primary concern was to get home as soon as possible. The uncertainty concerning the length of the division's occupation duty was a major source of his frustration since the armistice. In early March a new international crisis threatened to delay the division's departure. He wrote, "Things are looking very gloomy again, however. If Russia declares war on Germany, which seems very probable just now, we are apt to be kept over here indefinitely. If it has to be done we can go over and give Russia a little spanking now. Someone will have to protect Germany for we won't allow them to raise an army just now."



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*Corporal Oscar Noble, as he appeared while serving with the Army of Occupation in Germany, January 25, 1919 (Courtesy of Oscar Noble).*

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Despite the grumbling of the men, occupation duty was not arduous. Noble was eventually quartered in the home of Ernst Wand, the superintendent of schools in Gerolstein. He found that the German people bore little animosity for the Americans. Wand told Noble that "people like you and me didn't start the war." Although the Wand family's provisions were meager, they invited their American lodgers to eat with them. When Noble saw that they hardly had enough for themselves and that their "coffee" was brewed from barley, he "procured" coffee, bacon, and other supplies for his hosts.

The Allied blockade of Germany had made many consumer goods scarce or impossible to obtain for the average German. Describing the plight of the local population Noble wrote, "You can get most anything they have for a small piece of chocolate or a piece of soap. Soap certainly is a scarce article with them. . . . For a half a bar of soap you can get a bed and—everything that goes with it." In the next paragraph Noble hastened to reassure his wife that although many of the European women were attractive, "I wouldn't give one girl hailing from the most backwoods spot in Arkansas, for a whole barn full of



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those over here. I have no love, or anything else for them. ha! ha!"

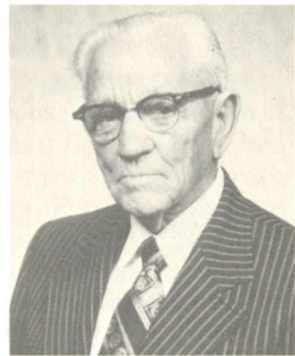
A few days after Christmas the men of the 358th Infantry who attended the nightly YMCA show were entertained by a "real 'United States' girl there that sang for us—the first one I have seen or even heard since we left the states last June."

Noble had been out of the trenches for over six weeks, but he still carried the memories of combat not only in his mind but on his body. It was worst in formation when he was at attention and not allowed to move. Invariably his personal cooties would "start out on a patrol." "Yes," Noble admitted to his wife, "I actually have cooties and if you ever hear anyone else who was on the front very long say he never did have any cooties on him you can put him down as a liar." The cooties were another reason the doughboys wanted to leave France. They had been promised delousing before boarding ships for America.

While he was stationed in Germany, Noble received a forty-eight-hour pass to go to Paris. Once in the French capital, the Oklahoma soldier decided he could not possibly see all the sights in the city in the time allotted and stayed a week without authorization. Noble's superiors seemed unconcerned about his breach of discipline and took no action against him. When he returned, he learned that the band had been sent to Koblenz, where they were to play on board an excursion boat taking American servicemen on tours of the Rhine Valley.

Neither leave in Paris nor excursions on the historic Rhine lessened Noble's desire to go home and resume his life as a civilian. The 90th Division received orders to sail for America in May. The band left Germany on May 20 and sailed from Saint Nazaire, France, on June 1. En route Noble was again promoted, this time to sergeant. The company commander explained that his new stripe was not for his musical ability, but because of his performance under combat. The return trip was more pleasant than the voyage over; the food was better and Noble was not seasick. He arrived in Boston, Massachusetts, on June 7, 1919, almost a year after he had sailed to France with the American Expeditionary Force.

After parading through downtown Boston the troops boarded trains for Camp Pike, near Little Rock, Arkansas. It required a week



*Oscar Noble, 68 years after returning from the "Great War."*

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to process the paperwork necessary to return the men to civilian life. Noble finally was reunited with his wife, Bertha, in Sallisaw on June 23, 1919. Two weeks later he returned to work delivering mail to farm families in eastern Oklahoma. The fields of Saint Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne were a world away, but they would remain vivid in his memory for the rest of his life.

Noble's letters from the front not only described the horrors of trench warfare, but they also were filled with his plans for the future. Most of Noble's aspirations were fulfilled after the war. He and Bertha had two children, he earned a comfortable living even through the Great Depression as a postal employee and became a pillar in his church and community. Bertha died in 1974, but Noble, ninety-six in 1987, is still vigorous, alert, and proud of his role in the Allied victory in the Great War.

## NOTES ON SOURCES

\* Dr. Brad Agnew is a Professor of History at Northeastern Oklahoma State University, Tahlequah. He is the author of many books and articles dealing with the West and Oklahoma.

The information for this article came primarily from three sources: Oscar Noble's hand-written, eighty-seven-page diary covering the period from June 9, 1918, to January 7, 1919; fifty letters from Noble to his wife and other relatives from late June 1918 to May 27, 1919 (the first letter is undated but was written on the voyage to Europe from June 20 to July 2, 1918); and three interviews conducted with Noble on November 2, 1983, April 31, 1984, and April 18, 1986. All three interviews were recorded on audio tape. The tapes and photocopies of the letters and diary are available to researchers in the archives of the John Vaughan Library, Northeastern State University, in Tahlequah, Oklahoma.

Also useful in placing Noble's personal account into perspective and following his movements through France and Germany were George Wythe, *A History of the 90th Division* (n.p.: The 90th Division Association, 1920); American Battle Monuments Commission, *90th Division: Summary of Operations in the World War* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1944); and American Battle Monuments Commission, *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938). Maps in the publications of the American Battle Monuments Commission were particularly helpful in locating the places described by Noble in his letters and diary and corroborating the accuracy of his descriptions of the action. Kenny A. Franks, *Citizen Soldiers: Oklahoma's National Guard* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), contains a chapter that provides a brief overview of the 90th Division in World War I. The maps accompanying the articles were modified versions of ones appearing in Hilde Heun Kagan, ed., *The American Heritage Pictorial Atlas of United States History* (New York: American Heritage Publishing Company, Inc., 1966).