



Photos contributed

Camp Sevier, S.C., 1918 — 30th Division, 120th Infantry, Brunswick County, N.C.

## The World War I story of Pvt. 1st Class Erastus I. Nelson

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SPECIAL TO THE BEACON

Erastus Iredell Nelson was born and raised in Brunswick County. A partial family tree is in Family Search. The 1910 Census and his World War I Draft Registration shows he was working on his father's farm.

On Sept. 19, 1917, Nelson was ordered to report for duty (Source: ancestry.com). The 120th Infantry was formed with the 119th Infantry, as part of the 30th "Old Hickory" Division. The roster contains quite a few Brunswick County men. All of the rosters can be found on the World War I Army/Marine Division Rosters on the website.

Killed in action were Nelson, a private first class, Aug. 22, 1918 and Pvt. Harry L. Piggett, Sept. 29, 1918; Pvt. Edward A. Mills was severely wounded Sept. 1, 1918; Pvt. William C. Hewett died of wounds Oct. 25, 1918; Pvt. Claudie H. McCall died of disease April 13, 1919; Pvt. Hanson H. Leonard was wounded Sept. 19, 1918; Pvt. Jesse J. Leonard was wounded, Oct. 9, 1918; Pvt. 1st Class Kinnie Benton Wagoner George M. Milliken, Pvt. Andrew J. Robbins, Pvt. Bryan Stanley and Pvt. Martin R. Willis came home without serious injuries.

The 120th Infantry trained at Camp Sevier, S.C., along with the other units of the 30th Division. They soon began training with French and British instructors covering the use of bayonets, bombs, scouting, trench-warfare and open-warfare. The middle of December 1917 brought an unusually frigid winter that interfered with training and caused hardships, but the men were able to resume training in January.

The trip to New York City to prepare for embarkation began in May 1918. All men had an opportunity to visit the city, which was a great experience for "most of the men" (no further explanation was given).

Transport from Boston to London was provided by an Australian transport service. The food, therefore, was Australian and not appreciated by the men. The boats were crowded but the weather was good and all submarine attacks were unsuccessful.

The trip to France was completed on June 5, 1918, when all men were given a copy of an autographed letter from His Majesty George V.

At first, the men were anxious to join the battle. For a long time, the constant query was, "When do we go south?" But in course of time, it was changed to "We don't want to go south." At Calais, the distant thunder of guns could be heard, and the nightly air raids with the accompaniment of bombs, taking their nightly toll of women and children, gave the first touch of war, and opened the eyes of many to the kind of enemy they were to fight.

They were the first troops to enter Belgium. It was July 4 and the village had Belgium and French flags flying from the houses in honor of the American holiday.

In early August, the men were thrilled to have an inspection by King George. It was over in a few minutes but enjoyed by all.

Training was finished and the Division prepared to relieve British troops at the Canal Sector at Ypres. The entire sector is a ghastly monument to the tenacity and courage of the British soldiers. For four long years, they held it against bitter attacks by a determined enemy; today it is consecrated ground made sacred by the bodies of hundreds of thousands of Britain's finest sons and the few Americans who lie "where poppies bloom."

On the night of Aug. 17, the 120th and 119th Infantry relieved the British troops. At this time, Pvt. Luther Benton of the 119th Infantry was wounded.

The ground was very low, easily flooded, and the water so near the surface that each shell hole became a little pool. All of the high ground — Observatory Ridge, Passchendaele Ridge and the famous Mont Kimmel — was held by the enemy. These points of observation enabled the enemy to detect any movement within the sector, and, as a result, daylight movement was of necessity reduced to a minimum, for even small parties would provoke instant and heavy shelling. The salient was so deep and so narrow it was subjected to shellfire from front, flanks and rear. Oftentimes the men in the forward systems believed that they were being shelled by their own artillery when, in fact, the shells were from enemy guns on our right and rear. It was during these operations Aug. 22, 1918, that Erastus Nelson was killed in action.

Between July 4 and Sept. 5, 1918, the following 120th Infantry casualties were reported: 34 killed in action, 216 wounded and

a prisoner of war.

The following is a copy of a letter from Lt. Gross (George) McClelland, chaplain, 120th infantry, 30th Division, American Expeditionary forces, to Mr. and Mrs. John C. Nelson, R.F.D. 1, Leland, notifying them of the death of their son, Erastus Nelson:

"Your son met death instantly yesterday afternoon by a direct hit. He was in the line of his duty and died like a man. I wish, as the officiating chaplain at his burial, to command you to the great Comforter of hearts in this, your dark but proud hour. We buried your son this morning at Nine Elms Cemetery with due military honors. A number of the boys from our regiment were present at the service. I should like to get a line from you at any time. Meantime, assuring you of my personal sympathy, and with every high personal regard."

A friend of Erastus Nelson received a letter from him, which was written Aug. 17: "There are so many laws concerning what a soldier can and cannot write that I hardly know what a fellow is allowed to say and get his letter past the censor. Anyway I am well and getting plenty to eat, although it is far from being your table. We are not working so hard now. This much talked about 'Sunny France' is not what I expected to find. Its lots colder here than at home, and is at least 100 years behind the good old U.S.A. in every respect. The more I see of it the more I appreciate America. I am having quite a lot of fun with my French. By using my hands, I can generally make myself understood. I think I am going to be able to speak French soon. I find more trouble trying to count the money than anything else. We are billeted in a French village, but am not allowed to give the name. At present, I am sleeping in a barn, which is not so bad so long as we are under a roof. If at any time you do not hear from me for quite a while do not worry for if anything happens you will be notified at once."

His remains were returned to the United States in 1921 (source: ancestry.com) and laid to rest in Nelson Cemetery in Leland.

Erastus Nelson was the first killed from Brunswick County. There would be four more. Information regarding the 120th Infantry was gathered from Official History of the 120th Infantry 3rd North Carolina 30th Division from Aug. 5, 1917, to April 17, 1919.

His brother, Walter, was a wagoner with the



The gravestone of Pvt. First Class Erastus I. Nelson, son of J.G. and Harriet S. Nelson born Oct. 8, 1893, killed in action Aug. 22, 1918, while serving as an infantryman with American Expeditionary Forces in Belgium

117th Engineer Train, 42nd Rainbow Division. The 117th Engineer Train was created entirely with North Carolina men. Walter Nelson served with Wagoner Dorman Mercer and quite a few other Brunswick County men. This is confirmed by his N.C. World War I service card and his Army Transport Passenger lists for both outgoing and incoming, as well as the roster for the 42nd Division. Yet, his application for military headstone and his military flat marker show "155 Depot Brigade." The Depot Brigades were to receive, train, equip, and forward replacements (both officers and enlisted men) to replacement divisions of the corps. Walter Nelson had enlisted in the N.C. National Guard in July 1917, was a member of the 117th Engineer Train in October 1917 when he was transported to France, and remained in the 117th Engineer Train through April 1919 when he returned to the United States.

With all of this evidence from multiple records and the published roster, the assumption is his military flat marker is incorrect.

If you would like to help us honor Erastus Nelson or another Brunswick County World War I veteran, go to [caswellriflerange.com](http://caswellriflerange.com) or email [ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com](mailto:ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com).

A monument will be placed at the site of the rifle range in Caswell Beach Veterans' Day 2018 in honor of the men and women from Brunswick County who served their country. A book is to be published during 2019 containing all 725 names, as well as a historical overview of the 1918 World War I Rifle Range Target Pit and Storage Room.

*Norma Eckard of Caswell Beach is president of Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range Inc.*