



THE WAY THE GERMANS DID IT AT CHATEAU-THIERRY

the recent war approximately 1000 men from North Carolina were killed in ba



THE WAY NORTH CAROLINIANS DO IT AT HOME

epidemic last fall and winter 13,644 North Carolinians laid down their lives to a "spit-borne" disease—infl

Photos contributed

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WWI Profile: Sgt. Robert Guy Farmer 1886-1918

By NORMA ECKARD

Robert Farmer's U.S. Army Record of Enlistment shows he enlisted on Aug. 7, 1907. He reported that he was nearly 22 years old. He served in the Coastal Artillery Corps (CAC) at Fort Perry, N.Y., for three years. He was honorably discharged as a private on Aug. 11, 1910, at Fort Perry, N.Y. The 1910 Census also shows that he was a private in the U.S. Army at Fort Perry, N.Y.

At age 24, he re-enlisted on Oct. 18, 1910, at Fort Slocum, N.Y. He served in the CAC at Fort Caswell for three years. On Oct. 18, 1913, Pvt. Farmer was honorably discharged at Fort Caswell.

On June 28, 1914, Archduke Ferdinand was assassinated. Susie Carson, daughter of Brunswick County WWI veteran Craven Ledrew Sellers, wrote that those living in Southport felt that the U.S. would be drawn into the conflict. Could this have affected Robert Farmer's decision to re-enlist yet again? On July 13, 1914, Robert Farmer re-enlisted at Fort Caswell. His residence is listed as Southport, N.C.

On Aug. 2, 1914, Germany declared war on Russia. Susie Carson: "A few days later, Southport's fear reached fever pitch when a German ship loaded with coffee came into the Southport harbor to avoid capture at sea. Another German ship was already anchored in the harbor, as were two British ships awaiting orders. All remained quiet on the Southport waterfront and all four ships departed without incident."

On Aug. 23, 1914, Robert Farmer married Katie Piver in the house at 717 N. 5th St. in Wilmington. That house no longer exists, but was replaced in 1920. Three soldiers from Fort Caswell served as witnesses. When the U.S. entered WWI in April 1917, Robert and Katie Farmer were the parents of three children.

Susie Carson: "Happenings at Caswell were of keen interest to Southport citizens, especially when the big guns were to be fired. Notices of the firings were always given and when they came the townspeople removed pictures and mirrors from their walls and dishes from shelves because when the guns went off the houses shook violently and mirrors, dishes, and pictures crashed to the floor. The noise from the guns was deafening."

On Oct. 18, 1917, Robert Farmer was promoted to Sergeant. He served with the 1st Company, CAC Cape Fear throughout the war, remaining at Fort Caswell. It seems highly likely that he spent some of his time training soldiers at the Fort Caswell Rifle Range.

"Until World War I, coast artillery meant seacoast artillery; the World War brought additional functions, especially anti-aircraft artillery."

Seacoast artillery was used in defense of the coastline. If a war resulted in no threat to the coast, seacoast artillery would be unused and seacoast artillery forces would be anxious to join in land combat. This issue presented some difficulty throughout the history of coastal defense.

As technology improved, Coastal Artillery Companies, which were assigned to forts, split artillery into heavy and light. Coast Artillery Corps were created and were separate from field artillery. Coastal responsibilities included planting submarine mines.

Reorganization and renumbering of the CAC units made the historical tracking of assignments confusing. The build-up for World War I added more confusion when reading historical records for soldiers in CAC units. The unit number could mean before the renumbering took place or after.

When entering World War I, land combat units did not have heavy artillery or training. The CAC was tapped to provide both the heavy artillery and men trained to use it. While the heavy coastal artillery didn't arrive in France in time for use in the war, the men were quickly trained in heavy land artillery and techniques and served in France.

As airplanes became more advanced and crucial to the war, the U.S. Army turned once more to the men of the CAC for Anti-aircraft forces, due to their unique training firing at moving targets.

"At the end of WWI, the CAC, with an enlisted strength of 147,000, was much more varied than it had been two years before, with

heavy artillery batteries, regiments, and brigades with or destined for the field armies; and anti-aircraft and trench mortar units for specialized roles. In the U.S. and its possessions, gun, mortar, mine, and searchlight companies remained organized into coast defenses, for harbor defense." [Source: Smith, Bolling W. & William C. Gaines, American Seacoast Defenses: A Reference Guide Compendium: Coastal Artillery Organization, A Brief Overview].

It's clear that the CAC played a major role in providing the country with defensive capabilities in WWI. But the rapid advances in technology and new roles by the CAC, as well as reorganization and renumbering, makes it difficult to follow the soldier's NC WWI Service Card information. It seems the best way to determine what role the veteran had is by checking for overseas service. For example, Sgt Farmer served from at least 1914 until his death at Fort Caswell, which implies a seacoast defensive role, or perhaps training men in heavy artillery before they were sent to France.

Brunswick County provided many men for the CAC. The information from their NC WWI Service Cards is listed on the Brunswick County Army/Marines WWI Veterans webpage, but it must be left up to others to determine their specific roles in the war.

Susie Carson: "An epidemic of Spanish Influenza hit the lower Cape Fear in the early fall of 1918, claiming many lives in Southport and Brunswick County as well as at the Fort. The schools and theatre were closed and all public gatherings were cancelled."

From Oct. 1, 1918, until Oct. 9, 1918, Sgt. Farmer was attended at the hospital at Fort Caswell for pneumonia from influenza. It appears that a Captain A.L. Peters, MD, attended him and signed his death certificate. Sgt. Robert Guy Farmer passed away Oct. 9 and was laid to rest in Old Smithville Cemetery in Southport, N.C.

On March 31, 1919, the Farmers' youngest son, Robert Guy Farmer Jr., one year of age, also passed away from bronchi pneumonia while battling influenza. He was also laid to rest in Old Smithville Cemetery in Southport.

Note: 624 North Carolinians were killed in battle; 204 died of wounds; 1,542 died of disease while serving; for a total of 2,370 NC military deaths; 13,644 North Carolinians (non-military) died of influenza.

Robert Farmer's eldest and remaining son, Arthur Latney Farmer (Navy), was awarded a Silver Star many years later for his service in WWII when 14 enemy planes attacked his ship as he manned the machine gun. His story follows as a tribute to his father:

Arthur Farmer receives Silver Star for bravery

Southport boy was member of Navy gun crew that distinguished itself in fighting off enemy action at sea.

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity as he stood by his gun, fighting off persistent attacks by 14 enemy planes on his merchant ship, Coxswain Arthur L. Farmer was awarded the Silver Star, while an officer and a gunner were presented citations in an impressive decoration ceremony last Friday afternoon on the Naval Station parade ground at New Orleans.

Arthur L. Farmer, now Boatswain's Mate Second Class, was a long way from his home at Southport, and very tired, for the crew aboard his ship had been at battle stations since the previous morning, with time out only for hurried trips to the galley. At the moment every man of the Armed Guard unit was tense, alert, because word had been flashed that a flight of 40 German torpedo planes was winging to the attack.

Farmer, weary but unafraid (it wasn't later that his knees "knocked together") was manning a machine gun located after when the first wave of low-flying Heinkel 177's swept over the ship. The battle was joined, guns flashing amidst the roar and clatter.

Two of the Nazi planes launched the torpedoes at Farmer's ship, then swerved to the rear. The "tin fish" missed, but the Coxswain didn't. He and other gunners poured a steady stream of lead into the two Keinkels and both burst into flames and crashed into the sea about 500 yards beyond the ship.

It was estimated that, in all, 14 German planes took part in the attack surging around Farmer's ship for about 15 minutes, but the withering hail of fire from the vessel beat off

the Heinkels, and the freighter continued on her course - victorious.

The gunners were on constant alert throughout that night and the following day. But the next afternoon two torpedoes which were fired by a U-boat between the freighter and the blinding sun, smashed into the ship, but she maintained full speed ahead. Then, 10 minutes later, a third torpedo crashed into the engine room, and the ship broke in half.

Farmer jumped into the sea and was picked up by a lifeboat which became the three-day haven of 21 men. All of the crew except one merchant seaman were rescued. On the third day the survivors were picked up by another Russia-bound vessel.

By that time, nervous reaction had set in and Farmer had a full-sized case of "jitters." He had hopes that his troubles were over.

But those hopes were short-lived. The next midnight, German planes found the rescue ship, and Heinkel 88s began a dive-bombing attack which continued with only sporadic abatement for seven long hours. For the second time, Farmer was compelled to go over the side with his companions. He was picked up immediately by a British vessel and taken to a Russian port, where he remained for seven weeks.

Farmer saw partial vengeance during the second action when a Russian submarine slammed two torpedoes into a powerful Nazi battleship, forcing it to retire. On his return voyage, Farmer also shared in a detached sort of way, in an engagement, which cost the Axis a surface raider and 60 prisoners of war.

This, in brief, is the story of Arthur Latney Farmer, whose courage was recognized by President Roosevelt, in a citation awarded through Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox, beginning with the words: "For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity."

If you would like to help us honor Robert Guy Farmer or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft Caswell Rifle Range at ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com or go to www.caswellriflerange.com.

Another Roll Calling event will be Saturday, April 6, at the rifle range in Caswell Beach starting at 11 a.m. A future fundraiser is scheduled for Saturday, May 4, at the Caswell Beach Town Public Service Facility building to raise funds to publish the book of Brunswick County men and women that served in WWI and also to continue restoration on the rifle range memorial. It will be a dinner, derby and dance with music by Trilogy. Call 278-7584 for information.