

# WWI Profile: George Finnis Willetts 1894-1956



Camp Jackson, 1918.



Pvt. George Finnis Willetts (photo supplied by the niece of Mary Willetts Earp).

By NORMA ECKARD

Winnabow, Brunswick County, NC  
U.S. Army, Private  
Served: April 25, 1918 – June 21, 1919  
Overseas: Aug. 8, 1918 – June 9, 1919

George Finnis Willetts was born and raised in Winnabow, Brunswick County, N.C. Two of his brothers also served, William Edgar Willetts and Fredrick Arnold Willetts.

His Draft Registration shows he was single, living in Winnabow, and farming. He stated he was supporting his father, mother, and three children. His physical description was tall, medium weight, with brown eyes and dark hair.

George was the first Willetts brother ordered to report for duty. He reported on April 25, 1918, and was sent to Camp Jackson, S.C. He was eventually assigned to Company E, 306th Ammunition Train, 81st "Wildcat" Division.

The 81st Division included 3,150 soldiers in the trains. There were engineer trains, supply trains, sanitary trains (ambulances), and ammunition trains. Previous profiled soldiers from Brunswick County included those in the Engineer Train. The Ammunition Train was similar; the soldiers transported artillery and infantry ammunition from the refilling point to the engagement zones.

Corporal John Burt Exum served with Pvt. Willetts in the 306th Ammunition Train. His letters to his mother are located online in the NC Archives and provide a wonderful view into the experience shared by Pvt. Willetts.

Some of Cpl. Exum's letters and excerpts have been included below to add personal experiences to the events of the 306th Ammunition Train, from their arrival at Camp Jackson, to their return home. Pvt. Willetts likely had similar experiences and thoughts.

John Exum held the ranks of Private, Corporal and Wagoner as needed. His letters reflect his changing rank.

The Brunswick County soldiers who served with Pvt. Willetts are listed below:

**81st Division, 306th Ammunition Train**  
Sgt. Horace C. Garrason, Ordnance Company  
Cpl. Rothschild Holden, G. Company

PFC Matthew Owens, D. Company  
Pvt. George Finnis Willetts, E. Company

This list and other rosters can be found on the World War I Army/Marine Rosters on the webpage.

Pvt. Exum arrived in Camp Jackson on May 28, 1918, a month later than Pvt. Willetts. He wrote:

*17th Co., 156 Depot Br. Camp Jackson, Columbia, S.C. May 28, 1918  
Dear Mother;  
We had dinner yesterday at Wilmington, supper at Columbia and breakfast at Camp Jackson. We drilled until four o'clock this A.M. and got here at twelve. I thought we would never get through with the exams and find our lodging place. We were up at six thirty this morning and have been on some kind of duty all day. It was answering roll call and*

*drilling. Went on a hike this evening. I am getting along all right and don't need anything but sleep.*

*I will write more when I have time. I think that will be tomorrow evening if I am not detailed for guard duty. Tell everybody I am all right so far.  
Your Son,  
John*

June 11, 1918:  
*17th Co., 156 Depot Br. Camp Jackson, Columbia, S.C.*

*Dear Mother;  
I am getting along fine. Am near lots of good fellows that I know and can see them and be with them any time except when I am on duty.*

*I sleep in a tent on a one-man cot with good springs and a straw mattress. A good cotton comfort on that a two yarn blankets to cover with if I should need them.*

*I have no use for the blanket I brought from home. It is just in my way so I think I will ship it back as room is an object here.*

*Russell Peacock and Turl Flowers are in the tent with me. One on one side and the other on the other. Several Goldsboro boys that I know are in the next tent to us.*

*I was shot with typhoid anti-toxin and also vaccinated for smallpox day before yesterday. The anti-toxin most killed me all day yesterday but is much better today so now my vaccination is taking. The boys say it is taking fine but I say it is taking hard.*

*I am just across the street from one of the Y.M.C.A. It furnishes rest rooms, ice water, literature and stationery for anybody and every-body. It is very convenient for me to be so near.*

*Your loving son,  
John*

His letter of June 14 includes the following:

*We are being issued our uniforms today. Turl and I have had one for a week but we had to buy it. We got tired of looking like a "rookie." That is a soldier with civilian clothes on.*

A later letter written in June shares the news of his assignment.

*Co. D., 306 Am. Tr., Camp Jackson, S.C., Saturday evening*

*Dear Mother:  
I have been transferred to another part of the camp. I am now with a bunch of old boys that have seen much hard service and are almost ready to go over. I have taken ten thousand dollars of insurance for your benefit. My army service number or army serial number is 1,891,436.*

*I am in the motor truck division of the ammunition train. Company D, to which I belong, will have about thirty-three trucks. They will weigh about nine thousand pounds empty. They are two-ton capacity with four-wheel drive.*

*I have to work much harder now than when I was in the Depot Br. We drill all the morning and part of the evening. The balance of the evening is spent in hearing the officers lecture on our duties the rest of our time here and what we will have to do in France. We also have practice in truck driving and signaling back from one truck to another*

*when the trucks are in line of train.*

*I was transferred over here Tuesday morning. I stood my physical examination for our sea duty Thursday evening and passed. From what I can find out this company expects to sail for France about July 15th.*

*I certainly was glad to see the folks from home that came to see me and especially May. She said she was going to see you when she got back and tell you how I was getting along and how I looked in a uniform. She has sent me two boxes since I have been down here. I only saw her once down here and that was Monday night. They took me over to town. I was transferred the next morning and transferred into a quarantined company. I can't go anywhere now nor do anything but work. Yesterday we had to work harder than usual for special inspection this morning. I started at 5-45 A.M. and stopped at 9-45 P.M.*

*We are having a half-holiday this evening. The only time we get out of a week. I have to write some more and do some washing so good bye.*

*Your son,  
John*

Note: John Exum's mother was a widow. John married a woman named May a few months after being discharged.

John traveled to New Jersey to attend the Ordnance Motor Instruction School. After returning, his letter in July described preparations to leave for France.

*Co. D. 306 Amm. Tr., Camp Jackson, S.C., July 15, 1918.*

*Dear Mother:  
I was sorry you and May could not come up to N.J. to see me. I know you would have enjoyed the trip. As it is I guess I can't come home and you had better not come down for we are now being issued the over sea stuff that we didn't have. We are packing up part of our stuff and don't expect to unpack it any more until we get over. Of course we don't know the exact time that we are to go.*

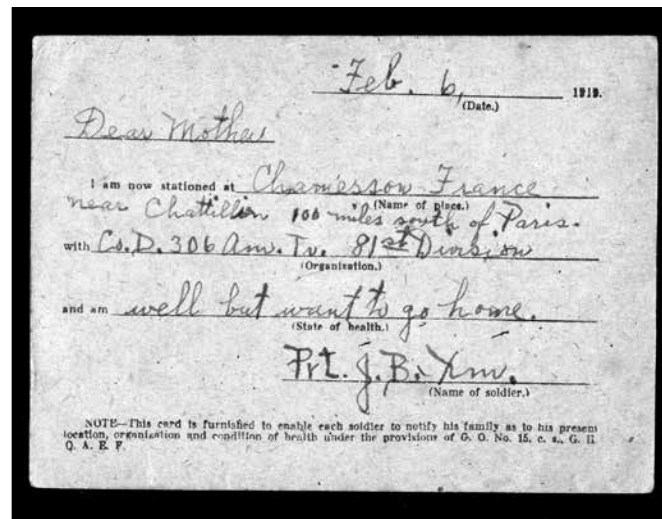
*Write to me here and if I am gone I guess it will be forwarded to me.*

*Write me if Sarah is married. I heard she was. How is Sister and the kids? Bye-bye for this time. Hurriedly,  
Cpl. J.B. Exum*

Cpl. Exum and Pvt. Willetts traveled to NY to embark for France. While in NY, they had an opportunity for sightseeing. They left the country on Aug. 8, 1918 on SS Cretic.

To read about the experiences of the 81st Division in France, begin with the WWI Profile of William Ralph Smith and read through Craven Ledrew Sellers. All of these can be found on the Published WWI Profiles webpage.

The 81st Infantry had just arrived in Verdun, when Wagoner John Exum wrote this letter. They would soon learn it was time to go over the top. Some companies of the 306th Ammunition Train served as reinforcements. It is not known if Pvt. Willetts' company was one of those. Read the WWI Profile post of Willie Hasper Hewett for details of the offensive operation.



Cpl. Exum's letter home.

Wagoner Exum's letter from November:

*From Wag. John B. Exum Co. F. 306 Am. Tr. Nov. 7, 1918*

*Dear Mother:  
I am still keeping fairly well. I had a sore throat and was pretty hoarse last week but am better now. I had a slight case of Influenza or French La grippe in September when I was near Paris but it only lasted about five days.*

*I am now living in a small dugout back of the front. I can hear the big guns all night and at intervals the sky is lit up so you can see how to walk around without stumbling over rocks.*

*The weather here is rather damp. It rains every day and every night. At other times we have mist, dew, frost and fogs.*

*I saw Larry Hooks one day this week. I certainly was glad to see him but he is looking pretty bad.*

*Nedham Barnes has been living in my dugout with me but had to leave today.*

*Write me real often. I don't have time and conveniences to write in transit but will write every time I am stationed.*

*Your loving son  
John*

As described in Craven Ledrew Sellers' WWI Profile, the 81st Division then hiked a brutal 175 km. Wagoner John Exum wrote about it in his letter home.

*Dec. 12, 1918*

*Dear Mother:  
I will explain why I have not written in some time. We have a fifteen days hike. After that was over I was sick for a week. I had a deep cold, a chill, two days fever some aches and came near having the grip. I am well again now and am very glad.*

*I have received your letter telling about the celebrations. It certainly seemed good. I later received a letter of the 3rd written more than a week before.*

*The hike was pretty hard. Most of it was through the rain and mud. We lost about fifty men out of one hundred fifty on the trip. The way we came it must have been about one hundred fifty miles.*

*I don't know when we will start for home but I hope it will be pretty soon. I have a sufficiency of "Rainy France" and this mud.*

*Your devoted Son  
Pvt. John B. Exum  
Co. D. 306 Am. Tr.  
U.S.A. P.O. 791 France*

Another letter in December describes his responsibilities, which may match what Pvt. Willetts was doing at this time.

*I get up now about five thirty; get breakfast at six,*

*report at the place the trucks are parked at six thirty. See that the trucks are filled with gas, oil and water. Then I am off for a while in the middle of the day. For the evening I receive them when they come in. I have to park them, drain the radiators and gas and oil them again.*

A later letter described Christmas in France.

*Chammeson, France  
Dec. 26-18*

*Dear Mother:  
I received the first Fremont Messenger on the 23rd. On the same date I received the Thanksgiving letter you wrote from La Grange and the one you wrote from Fremont after you returned. I certainly enjoyed them. I read every ad in the Messenger.*

*I will write now about our Army Christmas. After breakfast we were issued a bar of chocolate candy, a package of gum, a package of cigarettes, a cigar, a can of Prince Albert and some stationery.*

*Then we had company formation and marched over to the next town and saw a foot ball game between our battalion and the horse battalion. It was a pretty good game. The score was nothing to nothing.*

*We then came back and had a big Christmas dinner. We had turkey, fruit salad, cake and apple pie. I enjoyed it very much. We didn't have anything to do in the evening.*

*This morning the ground was covered with snow and the scenery was beautiful.*

*Bye-bye for this time.  
Your devoted Son,  
Pvt. John Exum  
Co. D. 307 Am. Tr.  
A.P.P. 791 A.E.F. France*

In January, Pvt. Exum wrote of being homesick. He did not yet know he would remain in France until June. He closed with this:

*I have to put on rubber boots that come up to my waist and wade out in the Seine and wash trucks.*

His homesickness was surely shared by his fellow soldiers, including Pvt. Willetts. Notice the sad last sentence before his signature.

More information about the 306th Ammunition Train was shared among increasingly homesick comments in his letters:

*My company was engaged in a convoy. We left here Sunday morning of last week and returned Thursday night. We took forty automobiles and trucks from one part of France to another. It looks like now that the 306 Am. Tr. will have a lot of this kind of work to do. On the trip I drove a big Riker truck made by the Locomo-*



Cpl. John Burt Exum served with Pvt. Willetts in the 306th Ammunition Train.

*bile Co. I carried the gas and cylinder oil for the trip. We started with five hundred gallons of gas and a fifty gallons steel drum of cylinder oil. We didn't have an accident of any consequence on the whole trip.*

He also wrote that they haul anything that needs moved from one place to another: wood, clothing, food, etc. He was informed that the 81st Division would probably remain in France for six more months.

In March the 306th Ammunition Train acted as Guard of Honor during a visit by the King and Queen of Belgium and General Pershing. Their duty was crowd control. Pvt. Exum enjoyed the experience.

On May 27, 1919, Pvt. Willetts boarded USS Missouri for Camp Stuart. Pvt. Willetts was honorably discharged on June 21, 1919. A few years later he married and began raising a family in Brunswick County, continuing to farm throughout his life.

George Finnis Willetts passed away on Feb. 17, 1956. He was laid to rest in Sharon United Methodist Church Cemetery in Holden Beach. A military headstone was ordered but is not shown. No explanation is available.

Read more about the Willetts brothers on the website: Willetts brothers honored with a family donation.

## Source

81st Division Summary of Operations in the World War, US Govt., 1944.

If you would like to help us honor George Finnis Willetts or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range at [ftcaswellriferange@gmail.com](mailto:ftcaswellriferange@gmail.com) or go to [caswellriferange.com](http://caswellriferange.com).

A future fundraiser, Oktoberfest, is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 12, at the Caswell Beach town public service facility building (fire station) to raise funds for publishing the book of Brunswick County men and women that served in WWI; to continue historic preservation of the rifle range memorial; and to honor Brunswick County WWI veterans. There will be authentic German food and dance with music by The Back Porch Rockers. A Polka Dance contest and Best Dressed Oktoberfest Outfit will be awarded. More information will follow soon.

Another Roll Call is planned for Veterans Day, Monday, Nov. 11, at 11 a.m. beside the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial in Caswell Beach.