

# World War I Profile: John Daniel Eriksen 1888-1961

*John Daniel Eriksen 1888-1961  
Southport, Brunswick County, NC  
U.S. Army, Wagoner  
Served: Sept. 18, 1917 – March 27, 1919  
Overseas: March 4, 1918 – March 11, 1919*

BY NORMA ECKARD

John (Johan) Daniel Eriksen was born in Norway and immigrated to America in 1906, according to his Naturalization Declaration of Intention on June 30, 1916, found in Ancestry. There is a family tree in FamilySearch.

The 1891 Norway Census record for Arendal, Norway, shows his parents were Lars Eriksen (b.1851) and Thalette Bergitte Thorgrimsen Eriksen (b.1862), married July 20, 1886. Besides Johan Daniel (b.Feb.1889), there was Einar Johan (b.1887) – should be Einar Andreas. Eventually, there were 11 children, according to Trudy Young, John's great niece who still lives in Southport.

**Trudy shared the following:**

"John was one of 11 children and left home at 14 to be a cabin boy on a ship. His parents told him 2 years, and he had to come back to go to engineering school. He went back 30 years later to visit his mother."

John signed his Declaration of Intention in 1916 as mentioned above. He was living in Southport at that time. He then married Esther Doshier on Dec. 2, 1916, in Southport (John stated on the marriage certificate that his father was dead and mother was living).

He registered for the WWI Draft as required on



John Eriksen served as mayor of Southport from 1935 to 1949. He is shown in his sea going clothes.

June 5, 1917. He stated he was employed as an engineer in Southport for C.E. Gause, Esther's brother-in-law, Charles Eyden Gause. He also stated he was a citizen of Norway but had declared his intention for citizenship.

On Sept. 18, 1917, he was ordered to report for duty. Like many of the Brunswick County draftees, he was sent to Camp Jackson and trained with the 81st "Wildcat" Division. He was assigned to the Headquarters Company of the 322nd Infantry.

In January 1918, he was transferred out of the 81st Division and within a month, became a member of the 56th Engineers (Searchlight), where he remained throughout the war.

Previous to the Great War, searchlights had been developed in the United States Army for coast defense and for battle illumination. Their principal use had been fixed installations in harbor defense, although experiments had been made in the development of mobile units for battlefield illumination.

After experimentation on the French and British fronts followed by investigation work in Washington Barracks, D.C., it was apparent that personnel must be assembled and trained for searchlight service.

The 56th Engineers (Searchlight) was authorized in January 1918. Personnel were formed with transfers from other units, such as Pvt. Eriksen, drafts, and voluntary enlistment.

The 56th Engineers had diverse duties from experimental work and development of their own equipment to front line service with the British, French, and American armies in anti-aircraft defense against the night bomber.

Because each platoon was developed as an operating unit by itself, the unit was often isolated and many never saw their other comrades.

Trudy Young provided not only the photos of John Eriksen, but letters written to his wife Esther during the war. In his letters, he often mentions that Esther should not worry because he was not serving in the trenches.

Of special interest to the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range are his experiences at the rifle range during his training at Washington Barracks. These trips were not pleasant for him. On one trip, his pants and raincoat were stolen and he was required to pay \$3.57 to replace them, although it seems he believed that insurance would reimburse his money. In another letter, he mentions he will be

leaving for the rifle range again tomorrow, Tuesday, Feb. 5, 1918. He expected to remain there until Saturday, Feb. 16.

**He shared this about his stay:**

"The mud here is something terrible. It is from 6 to 10 inches deep and just as soft as jelly. My feet been wet since I been here. I change socks twice a day but they stay cold. I am so dirty I feel right bad. I haven't had a good face wash since I been here. We can't get enough water."

After returning from the 11 days on the range, he writes, "It was just plain H-L down on the range. We even had to work at night. I made Marksman down there and I guess I would have made more if I hadn't had a toothache...and had it bad while I was shooting. I never had my shirt or pants off while I was down at the range and believe me, I took a bath last night even though it was cold."

Pvt. Eriksen served in Company A, organized March 2, 1918, and traveled to Hoboken, NJ, on March 3 with 153 men and 2 officers. They left for France on March 6 on Tenadores, arriving in Bordeaux on March 21.

Pvt. Eriksen was promoted to Private First Class in August and transferred to Company E, which is the roster that includes his name in the unit history, seen at right. From his letters, he appears to have stayed at Champigny during the months at war. As his letters could not include information about his activities, we look to the unit history, which states, "The action on enemy planes was most successful, as no enemy planes succeeded in penetrating the area covered by the lights."

Pfc. Eriksen mentions "Willis" in his letters home, which could be Pfc. Willis from the roster shown. Other men are mentioned in his letters. At least one, Early Howell, appears in another roster in the unit history. His letters also mention his mother and siblings.

In November, three platoons, including his, were transferred to Company G. From his letters, he was not pleased at the transfer because his previous Company E returned home soon after. But the Searchlights again justified their presence as several bombing raids occurred and caused no damage because the planes were forced to fly higher altitudes to avoid the searchlights.

In December, Pfc. Eriksen became a Wagoner and waited to return home. His letters mention tending the horses and no mention of

travel or hauling equipment. Read Jackson Berry Potter's WWI Profile for more information about the responsibilities of Wagoners.

On Feb. 26, 1919, he embarked at St. Nazaire on the USS Nansemond, arriving at Newport News on March 11, 1919. His letters mention that because of a gale, the trip took longer than expected so supplies were low. They were only allowed two meals each day, so he was always hungry.

Upon arrival, the engineers were demobilized at Camp Morrison, Va.

After the war, John captained menhaden boats for the Brunswick Navigation Company. He signed a Petition of Naturalization on May 11, 1920, to become a citizen, as he had completed more than the five years of residency required. A certificate appears to have been issued to him that day.

On Nov. 20, 1920, his brother Hakon Eriksen passed away in Southport. He was laid to rest in Old Smithville Cemetery (note that the year of death is incorrect and does not match his death certificate). Hakon's death certificate indicates he had lived in Southport since June of that year.

John Eriksen served as mayor of Southport from 1935 to 1949.

**Article from Southport newspaper:**

*Southport's sea-going mayor extends welcome to visitors*

Mayor John Eriksen typifies the hospitality of Southport citizens when he extends a hearty welcome to sportsmen of this state to visit here during the next few weeks and enjoy hunting and fishing that is unequalled in North Carolina.

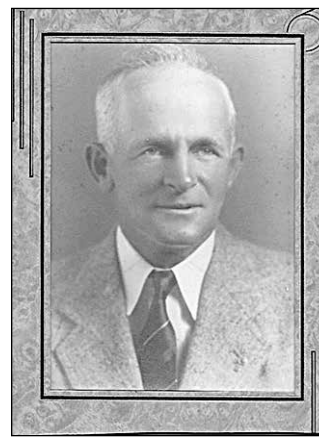
Southport's mayor is captain of the menhaden fish boat Anderson. He is recognized as one of the best fisherman on the coast and is one of the most popular men in Southport.

Captain John didn't think much of having his picture taken for the paper, but he agreed to stand still long enough for one shot to be made. He is shown in a photo in his sea going clothes.

He was born in Norway, but came to the United States before the World War. He married a Southport girl and made his home here.

Last year he was elected mayor of Southport and he has filled that office with marked efficiency. He is also senior warden of the St. Phillips Episcopal Church.

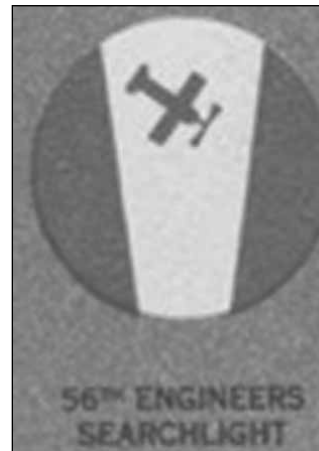
John Daniel Eriksen passed away on Jan. 17,



1950 portrait of John Eriksen. Photos contributed



John Daniel Eriksen. Photo contributed by Trudy Young, Eriksen's great niece



An actual hand-sewn 56th Engineer Searchlight insignia on a uniform, authorized in January 1918.

1961, at the Veterans Administration Hospital in Fayetteville. He was laid to rest in Old Smithville Cemetery in Southport. A military flat marker is displayed.

John and Esther had no children. He was Trudy Young's great-uncle, and was like another father to her. She remains in the house in Southport where he lived most of his life.

Sources: Trudy Young shared letters her great uncle wrote during the war, which can be found on the website.

Macomber and Brunet (1920) The 56th Engineers in the World War. Albany, The Brandon Printing Co. [Includes Rosters]

If you would like to help us honor John Daniel Eriksen or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range at [ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com](mailto:ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com) or go to [caswellriflerange.com](http://caswellriflerange.com).

Oktoberfest in Caswell Beach is scheduled for Saturday, Oct. 12, at the Caswell Beach town public service facility building (fire station) from noon until 7 p.m. 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 drink by Turtle Island



John Eriksen and his wife, Esther Doshier. They were married Dec. 2, 1916, in Southport. Photo contributed by Trudy Young, Eriksen's great niece

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5TH PLATOON, CO. E		1st Lieut. J. W. Clark, Commanding	
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McNair, Irvin	64888	Clay, Thayer D.	62294
Sergeants First Class			
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56th Engineer Company E, 8th Platoon roster.

Caterers, as well as a dance with music by The Back Porch Rockers. A Polka Dance Contest and Best Dressed Oktoberfest Outfit will be awarded.

The Friends of Ft. Caswell Rifle Range are in need of vendors to participate in the Oktoberfest event from noon to 3 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 12. Caswell Beach Commissioner Dan O'Neal will grill sausages and provide chips and drinks for \$3. Proceeds will go to the Friends of Ft. Caswell.

Don't forget to read about the nurses that served at Fort Caswell during WWI at [caswellriflerange.com](http://caswellriflerange.com)

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. Rain date is Saturday, Nov. 16, at 11 a.m. beside the rifle range. The public is welcome.