

World War I Profile: Harry Clayton Chinnis, 1888-1946

*Harry Clayton Chinnis
WWI Profile:
Winnabow, Brunswick
County
U.S. Army
Private, First Class
Served: Oct. 7, 1917 to
Aug. 9, 1919
Overseas: April 24, 1918
to Aug. 1, 1919*

By NORMA ECKARD
GUEST COLUMNIST

Harry Clayton Chinnis was born and raised in Brunswick County. A family tree is located in Family Search.

Harry had a brother who also served, Joseph Wheeler Chinnis. Joseph had enlisted in the National Guard in 1916 when he was 18 years old, then served in WWI with the 119th Infantry, 30th Old Hickory Division.

In 1922, Joseph enlisted in the U.S. Navy, serving in WWI. He retired in 1948.

Harry's WWI draft registration shows he was single, living in Winnabow and working in a sawmill in Bolivia.

Harry was married in April 1917, then ordered to report for military duty on October 3, 1917 [Source: Ancestry]. He and five other men were sent to Camp Jackson for training. Pvt Chinnis NC WWI Service Card shows he was serving with the 331st Infantry, but it appears to be a typo and should read



Shoulder-sleeve insignia

321st Infantry, 81st Wildcat Division. This assumption is based on the training camp and the assignments of the five men who were drafted with him.

The 5th Division was organized in December and Pvt. Chinnis was transferred in February 1918 to the 11th Infantry. Some information about the division and other Brunswick County men who served can be found starting with Pvt Barfie Randel Long's WWI Profile. Pvt. Chinnis left for France in April.

Chinnis did not take part in the operation detailed in Pvt. Long's profile. A new branch of service in the Army for the military police was formed in July 1918. In August, Pvt. Chinnis became a member of this new branch, assigned to III Corps, MP Company.

The U.S. Army realized an increased and focused military police force was necessary due to the volume of prisoners of war, the challenges of traffic control, and the responsibilities typical for a police force. Merely controlling traffic had become overwhelming due to the number of troops, vehicles, and horses trying to navigate the muddy conditions in France. Gridlock often forced delays in operations.

Recall from Cpl. Herbert Ward's WWI Profile the description of the first All American Offensive at St. Mihiel at the beginning of September 1918, an operation that was secret and therefore required night marches:

The weather was one continuous downpour of rain; the roads were slippery and wound over steep hills and through wet woods; as the organization approached the lines the traffic on the highways grew denser and denser

until those arteries were solid-streams of vehicles and men, with a current in each direction.

Orders were that the artillery should be in the sector and in position by September 8th; but the enormous traffic on the roads, the scarcity and wretched condition of the horses and the incessant rain made it impossible to complete the march on time. Forage was scarce, water was often unobtainable. Horses died along the road or had to be abandoned to the mercy of French peasants. The muddy ground made the entrances and exits of woods extremely difficult; sometimes as much as three hours were consumed merely in getting organizations out of the woods and on the road. The strain on men and animals was terrific. Sleep was almost unheard of.

The following continues that description. [From the same source The Official History of the Fifth Division]:

The MPs were given their first real test in handling the traffic on the roads leading to the front. They were handicapped by lack of experience in such jams. Officers and men exhausted themselves in the gigantic task of keeping the roads clear, many doing forty-eight-hour shifts without sleep.

One M. P. knew his job thoroughly. As this traffic cop was patrolling a road reserved for animal-drawn transportation, a big automobile tried to force its way through. The M. P. promptly halted the machine, with the threat, "I'll shoot if you move another inch. He probably didn't notice the four stars. The Commander-in-Chief of the A. E. F. alighted from his auto and congratulated the private with the remark, "You are the first M. P. I

have found doing his duty."

The photograph of Pvt. Chinnis can be enlarged to show many details of his uniform. On the lower half of his left sleeve, his chevron shows he has served six months overseas. His MP armband is also on his left sleeve. Overseas, the Americans adopted the British style shown here, black wool with the red MP cut in red felt. His shoulder insignia is III Corps.

In October 1918, Chinnis was promoted to Private, First Class.

Pfc. Chinnis boarded USS Minnesotan on July 23, 1919, and was honorably discharged on August 9, 1919.

The 1920 Census lists him living with his wife's family in Town Creek, working in a sawmill. He later owned and farmed his land and raised a daughter with his wife.

Tragically, Harry Clayton Chinnis committed suicide on July 7, 1946, at age 57, an apparent reaction to his failing health, according to a local newspaper article. He was laid to rest at Vines Cemetery in Winnabow. Military honors are shown.

If you would like to help honor Harry Clayton Chinnis or another Brunswick County WWI veteran, email the Friends of Fort Caswell Rifle Range at ftcaswellriflerange@gmail.com or go to caswellriflerange.com.

Special note: Read about the nurses who served at Fort Caswell during World War I at caswellriflerange.com.

Another Roll Call event is scheduled for Monday, Nov. 11, Veterans Day, at 11 a.m. beside the 1918 Fort Caswell Rifle Range Memorial in Caswell beach. A rain date is slated for Saturday, Nov. 16, at 11 a.m. beside the rifle range. The public is welcome to attend.



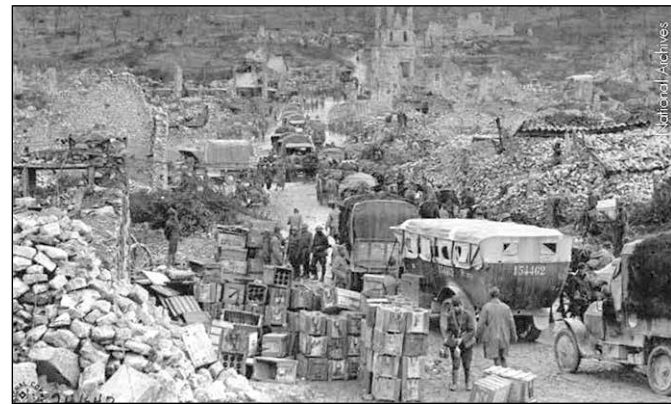
Harry Chinnis

Photo contributed by Jane B. Henry

Private Harry Chinnis (right) is Jane B. Henry's maternal grandmother's brother.



MP in France.



Photos contributed

Photos from national archives show a gridlock during World War I.



Traffic comes to a standstill.



A photo of a traffic gridlock.