

Crowder, Dr. David L. Oral History Project

Olaf Frederiksen-Experiences of WWI

By Olaf Frederiksen

December 10, 1973

Box 1 Folder 37

Oral Interview conducted by Gary Treu

Transcribed by Kurt Hunsaker December 2004

Brigham Young University- Idaho

I'm interviewing Olaf Frederiksen, today, December 10, 1973. The general topic will be World War I.

GT: Mr. Frederiksen, when were you born?

OF: I was born on the 28th day of February, 1897.

GT: Okay. About 1914, what were you doing then?

OF: In 1914, I think, was the first year that I entered the Albion State Normal School at Albion, Idaho, to go to this Normal School to get teachers training and become a teacher.

GT: And what happened when you knew that the United States was going to go to War?

OF: Well, I had attended the school for three years previous to this, and I think during that time the World War had broke out. And I think it was some time in 1914, if I remember right, and the war was at a stage where they was drafting men, and I figured that I would be drafted before long. So I didn't go back in 1918 to continue my schooling, because I was sure that I would be drafted. So I tried to get me a job to carry me on until the time did come when they might draft me. So I got a job with the Railroad Company, the Oregon Short Line, I believe it was called then. It's a job. Wherein that we had a crew of about eight men or so, and we lived in not moving come place to do our work. And, we also had a boxcar cookhouse and often a boxcar that the cook and his wife lived in for the crew. And equipment that was necessary in repairing deep wells and repairing broken machinery or whatever the trouble was nay place on the Oregon Short Line, from Butte, Montana, to Pocat3ello, and from Idaho Falls to Yellowstone. And we were sent some place practically everyday, except when we happened to have work that come into Idaho Falls. And so I had that job for about a year when I was drafted, which was then in, let's see, when was it? In 1918, on August the 26th, and from there on I was soon sent to Camp Lewis into the Army.

GT: While you were with the Railroad, that's where, did you learn your occupation as a plumber?

OF: Yes, that's the first time I ever had anything to do with plumbing.

GT: Okay. Before you left Idaho Falls, did they give you any k8nd of send-off or any kind?

OF: Yes, we had quite a send-off. The night before we were to embark on a train to go to Camp Lewis, the friends and neighbors and people of Idaho Falls, presented us with a party and dance that lasted till about three o'clock in the morning. I was never one who would drank or did anything like that, but a lot of them there, I think, got kink of lit up before train time the next day. And we left Idaho Fall, I think, around 11 or 12 o'clock, in the day time the next day. And we went to Pocatello, and they changed trains. I guess they just took us down there to join another bigger train, which was also bringing draftees

from other parts of Idaho and maybe other states, as far as I know. It was a big, long train, and it was all filled with recruits. Then we left Pocatello kind of late in the afternoon, and we went by way of Pendleton and into Portland, Oregon, and on up into Tacoma, and then to Camp Lewis.

GT: SO Camp Lewis is in Washington?

OF: Yes, It's in Washington.

GT: Did you have any trouble on the way up there?

OF: Well, I was quite drowsy from the night's party, you know, the dancing and so forth, and I hoped that when we got on the coach that we'd be able to curl up in a seat and get some sleep, but I soon discovered that was useless because any time anybody looked like he was getting too comfortable why somebody would be up and down the aisle raising the dickens and they'd kick ya on the shins or something to wake you up, and we never did get to sleep anytime on the trip.

GT: Well, who did you meet when you stepped off the train?

OF: Well, to my great surprise and doubtness when I came down off the steps of the train I looked and who was walking guard out where we was unloading; and low and behold it was my own brother who had been drafted a year before. And he was in the Deep Hold Brigade, is what they called it at the time. They were ones who run the camp, you know, and helped do the training of recruits and helped to get them their uniforms and so forth, and all the things that they needed, equipment, gun, whatever it was, you know, that they had to have to be a soldier.

GT: Okay. Could you tell us what the camp was like?

OF: Well, the camp was one that had not been in existence very long. I think they just cleared out a campground there, it was quite gravelly soil, too, and a lot of why you would call cobbler rocks and smaller rocks. Yep, even the parade ground had all these kind of things upon it. And I think they'd gone in there with saw mills and had sawed green lumber, and it was kind of gone in there with saw mills and had sawed green lumber, and it was kind of right in the timber line, as I remember. And of course, these barracks had been built out of this rough lumber which was green lumber; and of course they were, the lumber would shrink as it dried and there would be big cracks between the batons, and also the roof was just – I don't remember what it had on top for roof – probably tar paper, or something of that type, or kind of not too expensive of roofing. As I assumed it was just a temporary set-up to train soldiers. And I think since then that probably it has been improved for a very nice camp for soldiers.

GT: During this time, did you have chance to pick what you wanted to do at that time?

OF: Well, I thought I did. They all gave us a chance to take an examination on what we thought we'd like to do. Well, I'd been working on the railroad and had learned a little bit about plumbing so I think I probably answered the questions good enough so for as what I needed to know to get by with plumbing in the army, you know, with the little bit, it probably would have to be done. But instead of doing pipe work why I inherited a detached battalion of machine gunners, and I guess I was about as near as I'd come to being a pipe carrier.

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GT: Oh, what kind of training did you receive when you were in this machine gun battalion?

OF: Well, to begin with, we learned how to do the drill, you know, squads right and left, and everyday it was that way. And it seemed like it was very nice there when we first went down in August. And that is a beautiful time of the year there in Camp Lewis. Pretty near everyday was beautiful and sun-shiny, and we enjoyed being in that camp. And I remember that they decided they wanted to clean all the cobbler rocks off the parade ground, and so they got the whole army that was there at the time to line up on both sides of the parade grounds, and they started us across there with instructions to pick up every rock and pebble that we could and carry them so that we made windmills the full length of the parade grounds with these rocks and cobbles and also they were about, oh maybe 40 feet apart. And it took us about 30 minutes to cross that field, and we had every rock in the windmill that was on the ground. Later, I think that they had work crews that gathered these rocks up. I don't know as they had machinery like we have now. It seems to me like that they were using certain type of soldiers to do this with shovels, big shovels, and they'd scoop it onto the trucks, and they used it to build roads around and through the camp and one in front of the barracks, so that they would have better roads to come in with the trucks and so forth.

GT: While you were with this machine gun thing, did they take you upon to qualify with these things?

OF: Well, we drilled and learned how to handle these machine guns and the way they were used in war in natural combat. And of course, we were trained and instructed on the experience of other soldiers that had gone before and how they used these machine guns over there in Germany. And I could probably describe this to you how it was done, if you like.

GT: Sure.

OF: Well, they, if I remember right, the p—I man in each squadron had the gun, I think that's true. It's possible that it might've been every two squads that had a gun, and they would put one that was the gunner, and he'd take his position on the Browning Machine Gun. I think that was kind of a new gun that had just come out about that time, and it was water-cooled. And then the man that had the spare parts would be back a distance, probably 25 feet or 25 yards, I don't remember. It was quite a little space between each man, you, know, and the one that had the ammunition probably he was the first one up, and then the next one was the one that had spare parts. And the rest of the crew were more like infantry men, if I remember right. And they were not all in one group. They would be scattered out so that if the shells started coming why they had to get in the prone position and get as low as they could so they would be probably be looking for the lowest ground they could, probably be in a hollow-like, as that's the way I recall it. This may not be actual facts though being this history could be found where it describes this more accurately. But that would go on everyday; and then of course, part I think. First thing in the morning would be to drill in the infantry with the rifles that we were issued. I don't remember the name of the rifle even now, but it was a Browning or a what it was, I really don't know. But we would drill with those rifles, learn how to port arms and all those things, you know, going in reverse and how to change to the right and to the left and how to halt and how to present arms and so forth, and goes through the inspections every week or so when they have inspections. I guess probably most people knows what them things are.

GT: You told me a story about when they took you out to the range with the Line Lieutenant. Would you please relate that to us?

OF: Well yes, I'd be glad to. Before this time came, I had developed mumps. I had been in what I guess they called a hospital, I guess. It was just an old wood barracks like the rest of them, but also the flu epidemic had hit the country at that time. It was at its worst about that time. And the whole camp had been quarantined to not spread this flu or to take it to any foreign country or any other place where it could spread, so they quarantined this whole Camp Lewis. And I had developed this mumps cause there were a lot of boys too in the camp that had got the mumps. And this hospital or whatever it was, was practically full of them. Probably 50 or 60 men in there with the mumps. I didn't have ht mumps on the one side of my jaw, and so they put me on K.P. And it seems that the Red Cross furnished a lot of the things that we eat in this place. Oh, we had cake and whipped cream, and we had canned peaches, home-canned fruit of all kinds and lovely things, you, know, that we don't always see in the camp. And I'd carry these things out to the soldiers that were, had the big jaws, you know, with the mumps, and I'd present it to them, and they'd try to take a bite probably and that's about as far as it would get. If you've had the mumps, you know how it would be. And so I'd just carry the trays back, and I was welcome to eat all that I wanted, and I really started putting on weight there I guess for two weeks, taking car of the mump patients and eating good. But it seems like I had also got kind of pale and wasn't used to marching so far, and we got up to the target practice place with the machine guns, why I was kind of tired. And they

had, I don't know how many machine guns, probably 50 of them, lined up certain distances apart, and they had targets on the hillside. And they had it figured out so that there was a Captain or maybe a higher officer than that, that would give the signal for all the guns to fire at once, and they were made so that you couldn't fire more than 25 shots. And of course, there would be a missing shell, and so the machine gun would stop. But I misunderstood the instruction, I was the first man on our squad to be sat on the gun. I was instructed how to do it, how to get my feet on the front legs and put weight on them to hold the machine gun from coming up while it was shooting. Then also to sit on the back leg to help hold it down solid. And if I was a good gunner, the distance the target was away,; every shell would've probably went right about in the same hole, but this ammunition, every bullet isn't perfect, you know, and shooting at a great distance, they probably, well they landed way out in a great distance. They'd form a cone that might be 25 feet wide by maybe 100 yards long. Some would fall quicker than the others and some would go sideways somewhat and some would go on a greater distance than others, depending on how much vibration the gun would make and so forth. SO we learned that this was also a means of marring down a regiment or somebody that was marching you know, and it covered a lot of men. But I got the wrong idea of when I was supposed to start shooting. Instead of watching for this top officer who was going to give the signal for all the guns to shoot at once, why I got the signal from another man that was instructing his crew, and I thought he was the one, and I thought he gave the signal. And I pulled the trigger and man, oh, man, instead of holding that gun solid, I was just firing those 25 shots all over the target up the hill. And I really got a Scotch blessing from my Sergeant, whoever it was, a Lieutenant or Sergeant, I don't recall which. But that's what happened the first round, and when I pulled the trigger, why there was three or four other that did the same thing down the line, so I guess they got eat out too. And then they finally did get it all straight and everybody in line went to shoot, and I never experienced such a thing in my life when all those guns started shooting at once. I thought I was going to deafen, cause they were so loud and not expecting to hear such an enormous amount of firing all at once. I thought I was going to deafen, cause they were so loud and not expecting to hear such an enormous amount of firing all at once, cause it really shocked me.

GT: So did this flu epidemic that you talked about, did that prevent you in any way from maybe staying out of Europe?

OF: Yes, it did. I think it held us in camp for several months. As a matter of fact, until we were discharged, because it was getting along at the time when the Armistice was signed.

GT: One other experience you talked about was you gas train. Could you relate that one to us?

OF: Yes. I kind of flubbed on that one too. I didn't pass the first test. But it was another thing that required quite a march of the company. I don't know, we marched through the timber. I couldn't barely remember the directions we were going; I never was straight on the directions at Camp Lewis anyway. It seemed like the sun came up in the north. But

anyway I was on the tail end of the companies; squads, you know, and it was over hilly country. You'd go up a hill and then down. And over another hill and around about in the timber, till we came to where they had prepared a place to take this gas test. And this marching up on the tail end on the line of the soldiers. They go kind of slow going up the hill and about half of the gang gets over the hill before the tail end gets to the top, and they're going down fast on the other side. It seemed like it kept me running up hill and down hill both. And when we got to where we would be tested, they gave us training on how to put on our mask and so forth and how to do it fast. Well, I guess I'm kind of a nervous person anyway, and I get kind of worried about something like that and be quite sure to flub on it every time instead of being gone and doing it as it was supposed to be done. But I had a new mask that had never been on anyone's face and anything new like that is generally harder to put on than something that has been used before. And so I was too slow, and I even had one side that wasn't quite in place, and so I flunked and I had to take it over again. And that kind of upset me pretty bad, and that's about all I remember about it. Then we had that same journey to walk back again.

GT: Did, what kind of gas did they use to train you with?

OF: Well, I guess it was the same as what they used all during the war. I can't remember for sure what it was called now. It wasn't the real bad one, you know, the mustard gas. That was one of them wasn't it? And what was the other one? It wasn't tear gas. It was more potent than that, I think.

GT: Did you ever get any, since your mask wasn't in place, did you ever get a goo whiff of the gas?

OF: No, it didn't seem to be. Oh, I could smell it alright, but it didn't bother me any, didn't hurt me any, but I got a lot stiffer lecture on it that made me all the more nervous.

GT: What happened when President Roosevelt died?

OF: Well, that was another kind of a hard day on the soldiers. They were firing salutes in his honor. And it seemed like they got us all on the parade ground too early for when this was to take place. Yeah, we marched around all far noon. It seemed to me like. We didn't get to go in for our mess, and I think it was afternoon before they fired the salutes, and it seemed like we were standing at attention so much as we did, and that about wore me out, so I remember that day very distinctly too. Not that I didn't think a lot of President Roosevelt, but it was just one of those things, you know, that wear you out, if you was kind of worried about something anyway.

GT: So you were there toward the Puget Sound Area and, well, how come you weren't immediately discharged after the Armistice was signed?

OF: Well, I was almost discharged. There was a fellow in my uniforms and things, or whatever my beds and stuff, and then they got word that there was an uprising of some kind in Seattle, Washington, there in the ship building business, where they were building

ships, you know, for the government. And it looked like it was going to develop into sort of a shooting affair, and so they picked some of the companies to continue to stay there at Camp Lewis, because they might need them over there to settle this trouble, whatever it was. I don't recall what it was now, but it made us stay in camp at least a month longer before we got discharged.

GT: And, do you know what the date was when you were discharged?

OF: Well, let's see, it was in February, 1919.

GT: 1919. SO what happened when you were discharged?

OF: Well, there wasn't much that happened only just to go to the office and get everything, all the details taken care of, and a ticket for going home and your pay that you received that day. And of course, when we landed in Idaho you pay that you received that day. And of course, when we landed in Idaho Falls, it was right in the middle of winter, and when we came from Camp Lewis where it was nothing but rain all winter, so it seemed awful cold when we got home, I can remember that. And after a week or so, I went to see about my job again, and I found that the railroad company had reserved my job so that I went right to work with them again. It was in the winter and also during the war, the railroads had been take over by the government, and they'd done away with a lot of the depots, especially the freight depots and they were only using the one on the railroad that was, that would need these establishments, the others they'd done away with and didn't upkeep them. And as I was in the water service why, during the absence of the use of these depots, like with the toilets, they had been used when there was no water there to flush them. And they'd busted all the bowls, and most everything had been left, not like it should've been. Then also they wanted to renovate the whole building, you know, and they had the carpenter gang. They were there, working there, getting things repaired, and also painted, and the painters were there. So we had about three different gangs working there on the same building. The painter, he'd probably be up on the scaple or on the step ladder or something painting, and somebody else would come through a door with some lumber on his back and probably tip him over, or bump his ladder enough so that he would spill paint all over. And our job, we were working on these toilets. We put in new toilets and so forth, and we were the first ones that finished up our job, and our foreman he made a special effort to talk to all the men on every crew to make sure that they didn't use these toilets because they didn't have any heat or water in there yet. And they all promised to do so. So the next morning, we would be able to leave. This was in Butte, Montana, and we were ready to pull out the next morning, and the boss decided before the train took off, to go back and see how things were. And low and behold, there the toilets had been used and everyone of them was busted again. So we had it all to do over again.

GT: Mr. Frederiksen, what company were you with while you were in the army?

OF: We were in a detached battalion, machine gun battalion, Company A-37th machine gun battalion. This was for the purpose of probably replacing the machine gunners that

were over in the war, as they were killed off, you know. I think that was the purpose for us, and I guess they were anxious that we should get over there too; but the flu epidemic kept us in Camp Lewis.

GT: Well, when you came home, how much money did the, I mean, they paid for your tickets, so how much money did they give you when you came home?

OF: Well, as I remember, I believe it was about \$35.

GT: Was that a pretty good sum of money then?

OF: Well, I guess compared to the times now it would've been equal to maybe \$100 now, maybe more.

GT: Well, where abouts did your parents come from? We'll get a little background now.

OF: They were Danish people. My mother was born in Copenhagen, and my father was in a place, I think called Urand, and he'd been serving in the army, and he met my mother in Copenhagen.

GT: And how did they come to the United States?

OF: Well, they came by ship, of course, to New York. It was on a ship called Masdan, M-A-S-D-A-N, Masdan. And I think they had some relatives in Utah, to the Mormon Church at the time, and they had a group of converts that they were bringing to America. And so my folks, when my mother and father, after they were married and the time was just about this time, so they came with the aunt of my mother. So that they'd all be together as they made the journey, and they came clear to Utah.

GT: And how did you come to Utah, your family?

OF: Well, it's like I said, with this aunt. She came to see her parents, and so I imagine that's why they came there. They never did join the Church, but while they were there they accumulated a few milk cows and chickens and stuff like that and a little furniture. And my three oldest brothers were born there. Later they also bought a little place, and my mother and the three boys they took care of that for a few years, while they were there. And my father, he was a laborer, he worked in the Nevada Mines for a while, and then finally go work as a stockman. And it seems that these stockmen moved the cattle or sheep or whatever they had clear up into Idaho, and he came up with this job. And they were out in this place they called Canvas Meadows and later called Kilgore. And that's where he saw this land, and it appealed to him because of the land was just as fluent and not a very steep slope, you know, from the mountains, clear across Lim Marsh Valley. And there were several streams come out of these mountains and across this valley, and you could put a log across the darn creek most any place and put some stakes in and throw some hay or stuff in there, and you'd have a dam that you could water 160

acres with pretty easy. And that appealed to him, and that's how they come to move to Kilgore.

GT: Were you born in Kilgore?

OF: Yes. I was born there in 1897. And as a matter of fact, I was the fourth white child born in that valley.

GT: Well, Mr. Frederiksen, before we conclude the interview, I'd like for you to spell the names for the record, so that they may be placed permanently.

OF: My name?

GT: Yes, your name.

OF: My first name is Olaf, O-L-A-F. And the last name is Frederiksen. It is not spelled like most people spell that name. It's F-R-E-D-E-R-I-K-S-E-N, Frederiksen

GT: Thank you, Mr. Frederiksen.