

The Distance Between Heaven and Hell

By Neal Ashmun

My grandfather, Neal Dilley was an ambulance driver during WWI in the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) at the battle of the Marne near Soissons France. On September 6, 1918, he wrote home to his parents in Logan County, Colorado from a hospital in Tour, France, “There is one strange thing to me – here in many other places in France the country is inspiring and beautiful, while in the war zone it just the opposite...in some cases there is only a few miles between the two scenes so to me and others who have seen something of both of these scenes, it is very hard to realize that two such conditions exist in the same country, in fact within only a few hours travel of each other, but after all, perhaps the actual distance between heaven and hell is not so great after all.”

The U.S. declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917. Four million officers, men and women served in the United States Army between 1917 and 1920. Neal was one of the 43,000 from Colorado.

After the U.S. declared war, Neal registered for the Draft on the 5th of June 1917. His name showed up in the *Denver Rocky Mountain News* on September 20th. His name was listed as receiving an agricultural and dependency exemption. The title of the column was “Paul Revere May Be Slacker.” Neal was helping his father and older brother James farm 160 acres just outside Merino, Colorado. He enlisted anyway on 4 March, 1918. He was 28 years of age.

The 16th Infantry Regiment



Figure 1: Neal Dilley, 1918, copy from family archives of Neal Ashmun

My grandpa would have been trained in one of thirty U.S. Army Basic Training camps established in 1917 across the country.¹

Neal found himself in the 16th Infantry, 1st Division (The Big Red One), Ambulance Company No. 2. Most likely at Ft. Sam Houston, Texas.² A Military Transport Passenger List recorded that Neal’s unit left Hoboken, New Jersey for France on April 26, 1918.

He joined Ambulance Company No. 2 which had been in France since July of 1917. All of the ambulances in the 1st Division by then were motorized except Company No. 2 and 3 which were still horse-drawn therefore could get closer to the front.³



Figure 2: Horse Drawn Ambulance in WWI, “Picture Post Cards from the Great War 1914-1918,” <https://www.worldwar1postcards.com> Used with permission of the web site owner.

1. Garamone, Jim, “World War I: Building the American Military,” 29 March 2017, U.S. Department of Defense web page, (<https://dod.defense.gov/News/Article/Article/1134509/world-war-i-building-the-american-military/>)

2. *History Of The First Division During The World War, 1919-1919*, Compiled and Published by The Society Of The First Division, (Philadelphia, PA: The John C. Winston Company, 1922), 2

3. *Ibid.*, 49,181

Private Dilley saw his first action in the Battle of Cantigny, May 28th – 31st. Cantigny was held by the Germans 71 miles north of Paris. This bulge in the Allied lines would be the site of fierce fighting and if not re-taken could be Germany’s road to capturing Paris. It was also the AEF’s chance to show it could fight. The 1st Division took the town at a cost of over 1,022 casualties.⁴ Ambulance companies like No. 2 supported this operation including furnishing litter bearers for the assaulting troops besides handling the sick and wounded in the trenches.⁵

On July 15th the 1st Division found itself in the bloody Battle of the Marne. The 16th Infantry overran German trenches and were overrun in return only days later. On July 19th Major Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. led a charge against a German machine gun position and was shot in the leg. An article in a local newspaper (most likely the *Greeley Tribune*) said that Neal’s ambulance assisted in getting Teddy Jr. off the field.⁶

The 1st Division suffered horrific losses. “In some cases, the companies were commanded by privates. Every battalion commander in the four infantry regiments was a casualty.”⁷ The ambulance companies were overwhelmed. Many ambulances were destroyed and field hospital personnel worked around the clock without sleep. There were nearly 10,000 casualties.⁸

During a German artillery barrage, Neal got hit. He was one of the lucky ones. He was evacuated to a base hospital at Tour. His letter continues, “went to a dance given by some English girls last night – now what do you think of that – a crippled man who can hardly walk going to a dance. Of course, I couldn’t dance, but I could talk and put away my share of good supper and enjoy myself generally.”⁹

Return From WWI and Muster Out: 1919

A photocopy of a U.S. Army Transport list shows Neal returning to the U.S. in December of 1918 from Brest, France on the USS *New Amsterdam*.¹⁰ He was discharged 1 February 1919 at Ft. Logan, Colorado.¹¹

Returning home, he married his second cousin, Nelly Clark on 22 June 1919.¹² Like so many young men returning from France that year, he never returned to the farm. “Heaven” was Denver where Neal jumped into the



Figure 3: Neal Dilley’s dog tags, “Q.M.C” was for the Quartermaster Corps, which included the Army Medical Services, personal archives of Neal Ashmun



Figure 4: Neal Dilley’s armband, personal archives of Neal Ashmun



Figure 5: Neal Dilley’s dead and wounded personal effects bag with bloodstains, personal archives of Neal Ashmun

4. *History Of The First Division During The World War*, 86

5. *Ibid.*, 82-93

6. Newspaper Bio, “Official from Dept. Hdqs. State Off. Bldg, Denver Colorado COMMUNIQUE,” Neal Dilley, probably the *Greeley Tribune*, 1947, family archive photocopy, Neal Ashmun, 14 June 2018

7. *History Of The First Division During The World War*, 138

8. *Ibid.*, 139

9. Letter from Neal Dilley

10. List of Military Personnel Returning To The United States, The National Archives at College Park MD, Records of the Office of the Quartermaster General, 1774-1985; Record Group Number: 92; Roll or Box Number: 223. ancestry.com, accessed by Neal Ashmun 14 June 2018,

11. Honorable Discharge from The United States Army, 1 February 1919, Copy of a photocopy of the original, 6 Oct 1948, family archive photocopy, Neal Ashmun 14 June 2018

12. *Iowa, Marriage Records, 1880-1940* (Lehi, UT, USA, Ancestry.com Operations, Inc., 2014), Ancestry.com, Iowa Department of Public Health; Des Moines, Iowa; Series Title: Iowa Marriage Records, 1880–1922; Record Type: Textual Records. Record for Nellie Edith Clark

new industry of radio.¹³

His son, Donald Dilley (my father) has a letter from the National Personnel Records Center answering his inquiry about Neal's service records.¹⁴ His records likely did not survive the National Personnel Records fire in St. Louis on 12 July 1973. Neal suffered from his wounds for many more years.¹⁵ He got a letter from a doctor in 1938 attesting to a condition as a result of his wounds in battle.¹⁶ Neal made claims for medical assistance from the VA as late as 1948.¹⁷

Public Service

By the 1940s public service became Neal's calling. In a newspaper article by the VA (probably in the *Greeley Tribune*, 30 August 1947) it stated that "Comrade Dilley has been very active in veteran's affairs for the past twenty-five years, being a member of the VFW and Legion as well as the DAV." The DAV is "Disabled American Veterans." The article said his title was "1st Junior Vice Commander of the Colorado DAV."¹⁸

In 1952, Neal ran as a Republican and was elected as Weld County State Representative to the Colorado State Legislature.¹⁹ The certificate of election states that he won the fourth highest number of votes in the entire election.²⁰

He dedicated the rest of his life to serving veterans, especially wounded veterans, and later the citizens of Weld County. My cousin, Carol Buhr, tells the story of him delivering groceries to Vets and paying for them out of his own pocket if they were having hard times.

In the 1950s I remember grandpa sitting in his favorite parlor chair in his house in Kersey. Grandma would fuss about his pipe smoking, and he'd pretend he didn't hear her. No one in the family recalls him talking about the war. Like his purple heart stored away somewhere in a box, he kept his war experiences to himself.

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13. Newspaper article, "Tens of Thousands Hear Open Air Radio Concerts On Denver Streets and Thruout Country; Receiving Set at Post Building," *Denver Post*, 1 April 1922, p. 3; "Neal Dilley, demonstrator for the Winner corporation, had charge of the reception and amplification of the music from the balcony of The Post building." *newspapers.com*, accessed by Neal Ashmun 16 Oct 2018

14. Letter from Shirley Watson, Archives Technician, National Archives and Records Administration to Donald Dilley, 4 March 2005, regarding Neal Dilley's service records, original in family archives of Neal Ashmun

15. Medical Department, U.S. Army Clinical Record Brief, Neal Dilley, 5 Jan 1919, family archive photocopy, Neal Ashmun 14 June 2018

16. Letter from O. S. Vinland, M.D., 6 Jan 1934 describing Neal Dilley's wounds from battle in WW I, family archive photocopy, Neal Ashmun 14 June 2018

17. VA Form 10-P-10, July 1948, Application for Hospital Treatment Or Domiciliary Care, Neal Dilley, Claim 544-832, family archive photocopy, Neal Ashmun 14 June 2018

18. Newspaper article, "Official Communique from Dept. Hdqs. State Off. Bldg., Denver, Colorado," probably the *Greeley Tribune* "No. 35", including in the article is a photograph of Neal, sometime in 1947, family archive photocopy, Neal Ashmun, 14 June 2018

19. Newspaper article, "Friends of Neal Dilley," probably 1952 in the *Greeley Tribune*, photocopy in family archives of Neal Ashmun, 14 June 2018

20. Office of the Secretary of State, Certificate of Election State of Colorado, Neal Dilley, State Representative County of Weld In The 39th General Assembly, 28 Nov 1952, family archive photocopy, Neal Ashmun, 14 June 2018