

## OVER THERE! A Jersey City Doughboy's Journey to France and Home

By John A. Trosky

Over the next two years America will remember those who fought and died "Over There" as we honor those who served during this centennial remembrance of US involvement in World War I. The Great War, the War To End All Wars, just the names conjure images of doughboys going over the top, Black Jack Pershing, Liberty Bonds and the untold slaughter of men by artillery barrage and machine guns amid the stalemate in the trenches on the Western Front in France. The carnage had already been going on for more than two years before the United States became a party to the conflict on April 6, 1917. With the Imperial German Navy resuming unrestricted submarine warfare and the exposing of the "Zimmerman" telegram sent by Germany seeking an alliance with Mexico to invade across the southern US border, President Woodrow Wilson asked for a declaration of war.

Because of American distaste for a standing army, it was necessary to seek volunteers and conscripts to form a National Army for the purposes of fighting in France. This army was raised largely from the core of the old US Army which was mostly used to defend borders and suppress Indian activity in the West, along with National Guard units and a large draft of able-bodied men. Eventually all land units would be called the United States Army, which leads us to the cover shown below.



*Fig. 1: This heavily damaged cover is franked with a single Scott #529 which pays the war rate of 3 cents per ounce that was effective in 1917. The cover is cancelled with a Jersey City machine cancel dated October 6, 1918.*



*Fig. 2: The reverse side of the cover featuring the “Returned USA 1/22/19” endorsement along with a Washington DC received machine cancel dated May 2, 1919.*

The cover was sent to Private Louis Marmorstein of the 79th Field Artillery Head Quarters Company of the American Expeditionary Forces most likely by his parents in Jersey City. The corner card on the cover indicates a clothing shop of the same name in the Greenville section of the city. His original draft registration is shown in an addendum at the end of this article. He was most likely rejected for service during the initial draft of 1916 as shown on his draft card of that era. However, as was the case for many previously rejected draftees, he was inducted during the second or third draft in the years 1917 or 1918. His prior reasons for being rejected may not have been sufficient during later drafts.

The 79th Field Artillery to which he was assigned was originally constituted as a cavalry unit in 1916, organized in June 1917 at Fort Riley, Kansas, and then designated as a field artillery unit in November 1917. It was later assigned to the 7th Division on December 6th, 1917 in Georgia. The entire division then set sail from Hoboken, NJ aboard the SS *Leviathan*, a former German steamship named *Vaterland* that was seized by the US government and converted into a troop ship at the very same Hoboken NJ piers which belonged to the Hamburg-Amerika Linie. Once arrived in France, the division saw limited action at full strength but elements did engage German forces on the front. The division was used on the front lines late in 1918 which has relevance to the cover above. The 7th engaged in both infantry combat, shell fire and chemical attacks near Saint Mihiel and the Moselle River valley in Lorraine. In the final 33 days of combat before the armistice on November 11th, the division sustained 1709 casualties of which 204 were killed in action and 1505 wounded; Pvt. Marmorstein may have been one of them.

Whether Pvt. Marmorstein was wounded or not is unknown. However, the cover contains a notation that he was sent for some time to Camp Hospital 31, Camp de Meucon in the Department of Morbihan in Brittany. This is different from Field Hospital 31 in Contrexeville in the Vosges Department of France. There were over 75 of these field hospitals in the rear of the front throughout France to tend to the wounded. They were created from seminaries, convents, colleges, hotels, wooden barracks and field tents. The Camp Hospital 31 served double duty as not only a hospital to treat wounded but was also the site of an old French artillery training school. This served the American Expeditionary Forces as an artillery training center as well, the hospital being only 3 km down the road. The hospital consisted of 12 stone barracks type buildings with 60 beds each along with other wood and stone smaller structures for support. It is not known how long Pvt. Marmorstein remained there. Was he sent there for training as a member of the 79th Field Artillery HQ Company or was he, in fact, wounded in the recent combat in the Vosges? The hospital saw a severe epidemic of influenza/pneumonia during the months of August, September and October of 1918. Could Pvt. Marmorstein have been a victim of the influenza outbreak of 1918? The US Army suffered modestly compared to the other belligerents in the war with 116,516 deaths and 320,000 sick and wounded out of 4,700,000 who served. However, the army lost more personnel in World War I to disease (63,114) than to combat (53,402) largely due to this epidemic.



*Fig. 3: Where the Road to the Base Hospital Began at the Front, the Aid Station. This one from the 79<sup>th</sup> Division.*

Additional notations are made and also crossed out for Saint Aignan, which is misspelled as *Aignon*. There was an Infirmary #1 located at this town which was an annex of Camp Hospital #26. Prior to the war it was operated as the Hospice De Saint Aignan by a group of nuns. This annex was needed for the Camp Hospital due to the large numbers of troops in the area. This hospital treated few wounded or gassed patients, mostly old wounds and conditions requiring re-hospitalization. Many suffering from the influenza epidemic were treated here with as many as 144 patients listed as deceased in the month of October 1918 alone from the disease.

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Another notation in pencil is Blois. This is the capital for the Loire et Cher department in which Saint Aignan resides. This was the location of Field Hospital #43 that comprised a series of seven hotels. Knowing the types of hospitals and the time of year in 1918 that Pvt. Marmorstein was a patient and the fact that he was attached to a headquarters unit with the artillery, it is highly likely that he may have been a victim of the influenza epidemic sweeping the world rather than any combat wounds.



*Fig. 4: Typical surgical ward at a forward base hospital in France. This one a Type "A" constructed unit.*

On the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, November, 1918, the guns on the western front fell silent for the first time in over four years. Pvt. Marmorstein may well have still been hospitalized. The back flap of the cover indicates that he was returned home on January 22, 1919. This cover, however, took a lot longer to get delivered to the addressee as it followed him from hospital to hospital. Notice the Washington, DC machine cancel backstamp dated May 2, 1919, a full four months after Pvt. Marmorstein returned home. The cover was redirected to the sender at 665 Ocean Avenue in Jersey City for a round trip time of seven months on its long journey to the trenches of France and back home.

During the war there was an unprecedented amount of mail being dispatched to US troops overseas. Between July 1, 1917 and June 30, 1918 over 35 million letters were sent from the home front to France and at least 15 million sent by doughboys going in the opposite direction. Initially, the State Department designated Charles Leary to run postal operations for the army in France. He took many Post Office Department employees overseas to staff these new Army Post Offices. Most of these POD employees were from the Railway Mail Service. These civilian RPO clerks and supervisors were detailed to the AEF Postal Administration the backbone of mail delivery. After April 1917 and US entry into WWI, RPO clerks were exempted from military service but many joined up anyway. The backlog of mail to and from troops due to a shortage of qualified personnel became a crisis. With the loss of many experienced postal employees to army service, it was truly a struggle to not only set up service to the troops but to also maintain it.

Two terminals were established to handle all military mail to the front, one in NYC and another in Bordeaux, France where 18 RPO train routes to the front were set up along with six closed pouch lines. The terminal in Bordeaux distributed tons of mail per month. The New York terminal was located at the Chelsea Railway Mail Service Terminal at Pier 86 at the foot of West 46<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan. Conditions for workers there were miserable at best which included wearing overcoats and gloves in freezing winter temperatures and excessive heat in summer. They dealt with mail that was poorly addressed (as, 110<sup>th</sup> Engineers, France) until the Army began to standardize addressing. Many “dollar-a-year” volunteers chose to help out the RMS clerks to get mail to the boys “over there.”

It was at this terminal in New York City that the letter to Pvt. Marmorstein was consolidated with thousands of others from across the country and placed on ships going to AEF troops in France. This same terminal received all of the mail dispatched by the Bordeaux terminal in France and distributed this mail to various RPOs and post offices in order for families to receive word from their doughboy fighting at the front. In May 1918, military personnel eventually took over all operations from the Post Office Department. This became the Military Postal Express Service, the first all military mail system in United States history. By December 1918, upwards of 131,900 sacks of mail had been dispatched from the Chelsea RMS terminal and it received 25,532 from France. At one point, the new Military Postal Express Service handled more mail than the entire French civilian postal system. Since mail service was sort of a work in progress, this may have been the reason that the letter to Private Marmorstein took the long route in finding him. Typical were comments such as those of Major Edwin C. McNeil in a letter home in 1918:

The mails don't come very regularly. It's been a week now since I've had any letters. I checked up and found I was short 13 of your letters....Lord knows where they go...No matter what they say in Congress, mail service here is very bad. My baggage from San Antonio has arrived after 2 ½ months and the box of books which I need most has still not come.



*Fig. 5: Processing mail for the troops at the front at Saint Pierre des Corps.*



Fig.6: Actual MPES postmark from late 1918 just after the Armistice was signed on November 11<sup>th</sup>.

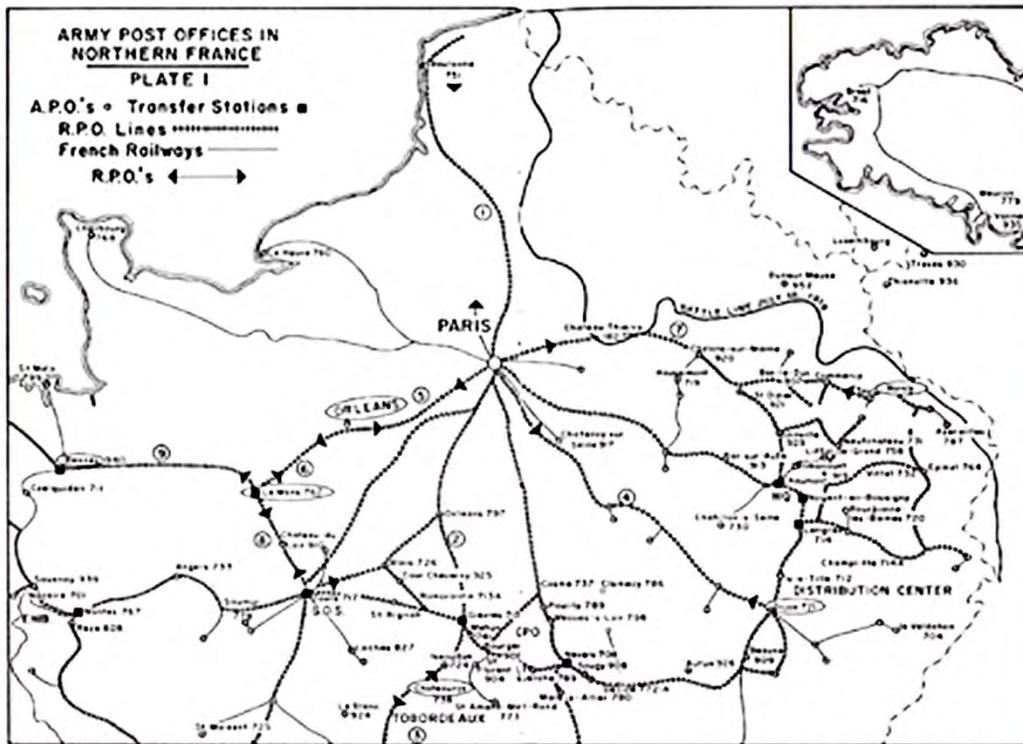


Fig.7: Map of RPO routes in Northern France for AEF mail delivery.

Records of the 1940 Census show a Louis Marmorstein living in Ward 7 of Jersey City, in the Greenville area, age 48. If this is the same person he would have been 26 in 1918 and a prime candidate for service in the United States Army. He obviously survived the war and went on to remain in Jersey City long after the war. Social Security death records indicate he died in February 1966.



Other stories and covers commemorating the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of U.S. participation in WWI are welcome. Should you have a cover or story to add over the next few years, please send it along to your editors.



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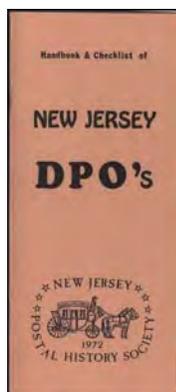
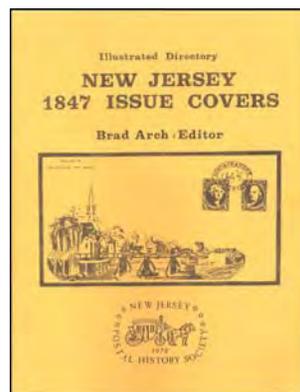
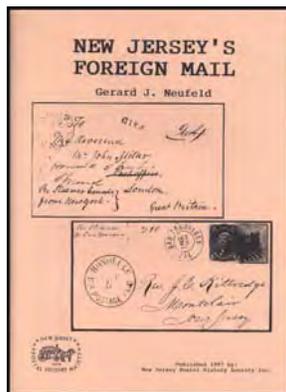
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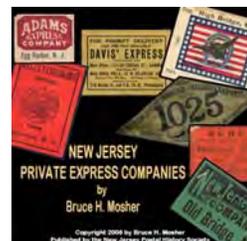


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