

Letters from a DeKalb Kaiser in the Great War

By EvaAnne D. Johnson

November 11 marked the 100th anniversary of the end of World War One. Over 1,000 men from DeKalb County served in the war. Glenn Kaiser was one of them. He had been born in DeKalb in 1893. When he was drafted in September 1917, he was 24 years old and was a tinner in his father's tin shop in DeKalb. During the war, he frequently sent letters to his mother, Jennie Kaiser, in DeKalb. These surviving letters show a unique perspective of life on the front 100 years ago.

In September 1917, Glenn was called to Camp Grant in Rockford for induction into the Army. Other DeKalb boys were sent south to Texas shortly after arriving, but Glenn was ordered to stay back for a few more weeks. In December, he was sent to Camp MacArthur near Waco, Texas. He joined the Headquarters Company of the 127th Infantry of the 32nd "Red Arrow" Division, which primarily had men from Wisconsin. Glenn did a lot of "hiking" (i.e. marching) and thought Waco was a "fine city." [letter from 22 Dec 1917]

Glenn spent several weeks at Camp MacArthur, until January 1918 when his regiment was ordered to Camp Merritt in New Jersey in preparation for shipping off to France. In February, Glenn and his regiment boarded the *USS George Washington* and sailed for France a few days later. They arrived in Brest, France on March 4. Glenn's first letter from France was optimistic:

Dear Mother, We got here all O.K. We got on the ship the 16th of Feb., still on it. We all like it and know I will get along fine. [...] This war will soon be over and I will be back this year. I hope this will find you all well. I am feeling

fine. I will
write often
and hope you
will. [...] Love
you and all.
Your son Glen.
[letter from 6
March 1918]

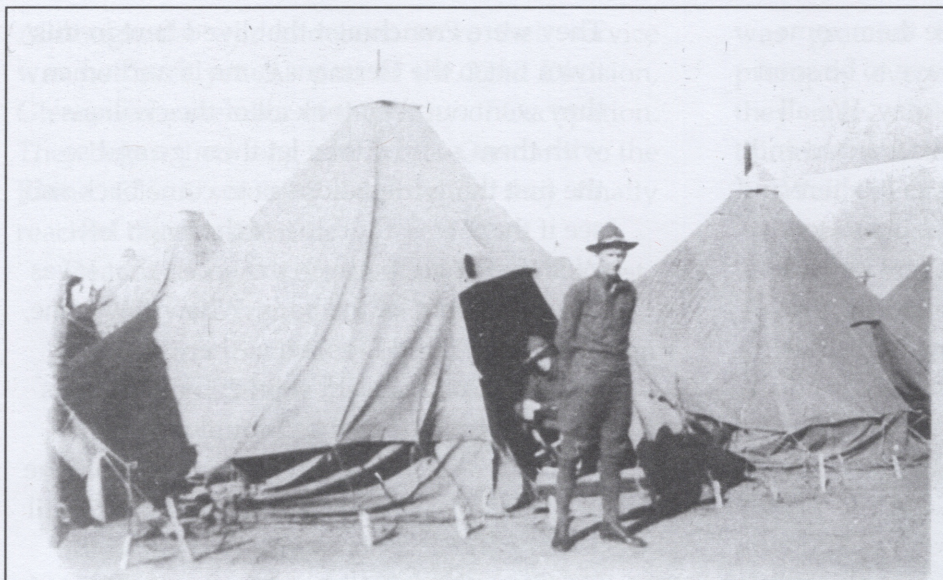


Glenn Kaiser, c. 1917

Glenn's unit trained and worked in the area until May 1918, when they moved to the front lines in Haute Alsace, which was part of Germany at that time. They were the first U.S. troops to set foot on German soil. Glenn was able to write a few letters to his mother during that time, but was not able to tell her much about the war. Many of his letters described the weather and the daily life of civilians around him. He wrote:

I am feeling fine and having a good time. We have been up here at the front for some time. I know you would like to know where I am but we can not say. [...] I can't tell you anything about the war now but when I get back I can talk for a month and then have something to say. [...] They say this war will be over the fourth of July. Well if it is, it will be a joke on me. It looks like about five years to me. I hope that I am not right. They are putting up hay here now. They cut it by hand and have cows for horses and then they milk the cows the same as we do in the states. The women do our laundry for about one tenth as they would there. Eggs are five Franks, which is \$1. [letter from 29 June 1918]

In late July Glenn's division pulled out of Alsace



Glenn sits at the entrance of his tent, while an unidentified friend stands in front of him, taken about 1917-1918.

and moved to participate in the Aisne-Marne campaign. On July 30, 1918, his regiment experienced their first major battle in the woods near Bois des Grimpettes. During August and the first weeks of September, Glenn participated in the remaining battles of the Aisne-Marne campaign and the Oise-Aisne campaign. The 32nd Division suffered heavy losses during the campaigns. Glenn was not able to write any letters during the heavy fighting, but was able to write a few letters to his mother after they moved back from the front. After seeing the realities of war, Glenn was glad that he wasn't at the front with his close friends from DeKalb, and had some advice for his younger brother Floyd:

Dear Mother, As I am back from the front lines I will let you know that I am feeling fine and hope that you are the same. [...] Well I am glad that Harry Aument is in the Navy and tell Floyd if he has to go, join the Navy because there is no hiking and he always has a bed to sleep in and they sure do eat. I was on the boat for 21 days and we had some eats. And as for getting up to the front to fight, there is all kinds of things they can

do back of the lines and as far as a man getting killed, he will die when his time comes and not before. There is no one who knows as well as I do so tell him for me to join the Navy if it is the last thing he does. [...] The Germans will not fight. They are all down and out so you can see it will not last long. [letter from 12 Sept 1918]

As I am where I can sit down and write, I sure will do so at least two or three times a week. [...] Mother I want you to send me the DeKalb paper.

I know that they are coming over all the time and if they are sent from the paper office I will get them all right. [...] I have been near the DeKalb boys but have not met any of them. Say mother I am glad that I am not with them. Not that I do not like them but the front is no place to be with friends. If I had it to do over I would do it the same. [...] From your son, Glen M. Kaiser. [letter from 14 Sept 1918]

In late September, Glenn and the 32nd Division joined the Meuse-Argonne campaign. They again encountered intense fighting. The cold and rainy weather, difficult terrain, and constant enemy fire likely made those weeks extremely unbearable for the soldiers. Glenn may have been gassed during this campaign and was deeply affected by the experience. By late October, the 32nd Division was relieved by other troops, and they were allowed a few days' rest away from the front. Glenn was reassigned from Private to Cook during this time.

Well I have seen a lot of the boys from Illinois, Elgin, Genoa but the DeKalb boys keep

out of my way but I hope I see them some-day before this ends. It will have to be soon because this is the last light of day. We all would like to see it end, but we want to end it right. [...] We are all willing to die here and know that we are dying for the ones we love. [...] We will all live through it and be back in the good old summer time or sooner. You know we go farther away from home but when the Germans see the Amex come walking into Germany, they will say that they could not house them dam Amex and then we will come back through Germany. Some of the boys say now that we take a good look at France for this will be the last look. So that is what keeps the boys going. [...] The first Segt. thought it was *[indecipherable]* from Pvt. to Cook so that will help some and this will be all for this time. Cook Glen Kaiser. [letter from 28 Oct 1918]

Glenn's regiment saw battle during the last few days of the war. He realized that the war was likely over when the shooting stopped. It was quite a relief for the weary soldiers. Glenn wrote a very long letter on November 12 to his mother, and was finally able to talk about the war:

Dear Mother, As there has not been any big iron shot over at us for two days I have begun to think that the war that I have prayed to end is here. And I sure am glad of it, if anyone this side of New York is. But it has been more than we thought it has been because we all look back at the good ole USA and said there is but one way to get there and that is to let Germany know how we could fight, and we did. The Germans have a belt and on that belt it says God is with us, but we are all with him, so we know he sure is and has been right with all of our boys. We are now on the Front and have been there for a long time. Last night was the first time I had seen a civilian in one month and a half.

They were Frenchmen that lived here in this town when the Germans came in and when they went out they took all of the civilians with them so now they let them go and so the first thing they did was to come back and see if there was anything of the town left. Well there was, because the house that I was sleeping in one of the beds. When they came, I was in bed and I looked at them and they looked at me and said something but it was alright with me because I could not understand them. Well we are going to see that the Germans get out of France and stay out until we let them come back if they are all right. This Division will be home as soon as any of them. We are about the best Div. Here the old 32 Div. has done more fighting then any of them and we were the first Div. on German land. Also in the first and last big drive. I have not left the company, not over one day at a time so I have been in this from the start to the end and still here and glad of it and not sorry that I came over here. [...] Well Ma the first night that there was no more shooting, no airplanes came over there was not a thing to think of, not a thing to do but sleep and I sure was good and slept. I had been up for about three nights. [...] We could tell that the Germans were getting poor every time we went against them. Sometimes we went up against good fighters but at the end it was kids from 18 to 16 and you could not help but to feel sorry for them but when they shot some of them big houses over, you could kill them without thinking a thing of it. More than once they made me think of home and made me wonder if I'd get there if they kept on shooting, but let us hope that it is all over for years to come. I know it will not be with the Kaiser. He has left Germany but someone will get him before long. [letter from 12 Nov 1918]

Although the war had been won, their service was not over yet. As part of the 32nd Division, Glenn was a member of the Army of Occupation. They began their long march into Germany to the Rhine. Glenn wrote a letter when they finally reached their destination:

Dear Mother, We are here in Germany at last. [...] We were from the 17th Nov. to Dec. 11 getting here. Say it is a long ways to march on

foot, but we all got here and we cooked always two meals a day and sometimes three and there sure are some hills here. It was uphill and no down to it. We came up through Luxemburg and along one side of Belgium from there into Germany. We stopped at the Rhine Dec 11 and on Dec 13 we came 20 miles in Germany from the Rhine so that is where we are now. Colbenz is the

nearest big city that is about 18 miles back of here. We are sleeping inside now so it is not so bad. Some of the people are fine and some of them are like the old Kaiser himself but they will like the Amex in two or three years when they can see through this thing. There was one town we were in that 300 German soldiers went out and 25 came back so their mothers can't help but think of that. [letter from 17 Dec 1918]

Glenn sent several more letters during the next few months. He eventually grew weary of Germany, and was eager to get home. Very few letters from home were coming through, but he

was grateful to get the DeKalb newspaper promptly every week. When he got word that they may start going home soon, he started thinking of all the good food that he missed:

Well all I can say is get ready for me because I can sure eat and I don't want any beef or tomatoes and to hell with the beans. I can do without milk and sugar but for the love of mike get some good coffee. I have had pork

two times in one year but I have had deer more than two times. [letter from 31 Jan 1919]



Glenn with some of his fellow comrades, taken in Alsace, France. He sent it to his mother with a letter on June 29, 1918. Glenn is in the back row, third from the left. The other men are unidentified.

Glenn's division finally got the orders to return home in April 1919, and they started their journey homeward. There are no surviving letters from his trip home, but he must have been overjoyed to return to DeKalb and see his family again. Glenn was

honorably discharged from the Army on May 18, 1919, at Camp Grant. He returned to work at his father's tinning shop, and continued the business after his father passed away. Glenn passed away February 27, 1948, and is buried at Fairview Cemetery in DeKalb.

All excerpts were taken from letters written by Glenn M. Kaiser to his family in DeKalb, IL from 1917-1919. The letter collection and photos are privately owned by the Drake family of Genoa, IL. To read all the surviving letters from Glenn to his family, visit <https://thefamilylibrarian.wordpress.com/projects/letters-from-the-great-war/>. To read more about the 32nd "Red Arrow" Division and their role in WWI, visit <http://www.32nd-division.org/history/ww1/32-ww1.html>. 