

In the Trenches: Andrew Carroll WWI - Letter October 17, 1818

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Andrew Daniel Carroll - Letters Home During World War I

The following excerpts of Andrew Carroll's letters home capture life on the front as well as home during World War I. From the letters and photographs, you will learn about the life of an Oswego County man and his experience during World War I.

Andrew Daniel Carroll was born on May 11, 1890 to James and Margaret Carroll who had seven other sons and two daughters. The family lived at 168 West 2nd Street in Fulton and were devout Irish-Catholics who were members of the Church of the Immaculate Conception in Fulton, NY and later the Holy Family Catholic Church.

Andrew enlisted in World War I on July 23, 1917 when he was 27 years old. He was first placed with the 74th Regiment from Buffalo and three months later was transferred to the 108th Machine Gun Company Infantry. At the outbreak of the war, Andrew's mother said that she would unfurl an American flag at the family's home to reach son who entered the service. Three flags hung outside the Carroll home for the duration of the war. One was for Andrew who was the first in the family to enlist and the others were for his brothers, Edward and Maurice. Andrew fought in several major battles in Europe during the war and was discharged on March 31, 1919.

What makes Andrew an "uncommon common man" is the fact that while he was stationed in Europe he wrote many wonderfully detailed letters to his family in Fulton, NY. These descriptive and moving letters have been wisely preserved by his family. These letters describe one man's experiences on the French war front in World War I. One major battle that Andrew took part in was the Battle of the Hindenburg Line in September of 1918.

Andrew Carroll died from a heart attack on January 18, 1939 at age 48.

Note: This information is based on the work by Judith Wellman for the Oswego County Historical Society.

In the Trenches: Andrew Carroll WWI

First excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

Thursday Oct 17, 18.
1st Southern General Hospital
Edgbaston, England

Dear Mother,

I mailed you a long letter yesterday and I hope it reaches you O.K. I thot (sic) while I had a good opportunity I would give you some o fat names and places that our company has been in since leaving Newport News, Va: We left Newport News at noon May 19, 1918 on the Ship: "Kursk". We were 14 days at Sea and had 15 big ships in our convoy all loaded with troops and it certainly was a grand sight. We arrived in the harbor of Brest, France at noon May 24th. About 3 days out we were met by a big flotilla of Destroyers and was escorted in. We sighted a "Sub" once on our journey but had no trouble with it.

After landing at Brest we went into Camp just outside the city for 3 days then we boarded trains, (that is box cars) on which were marked on each one 40 Hommes-8 Cheveaux which means 40 men or 8 horses. On board these odd little cars we got and the train started on. We were 3 days and 3 nights on this train and we landed at Noyelles near the mouth of the Somme River. From there we "hiked" about 7 miles and went into camp for the night. All along the "hike" we could see big flashes and hear big dull booms and we could see the search lights searching thru the sky, later we found out the "Huns" were having an air-raid on the city of "Abbyville". In fact, they did nearly every night. The next day we land at "Rue" we stayed there in "billets" for a day then we went onward to a little village called "St. Firmin." We went into billets there and stayed there about 3 weeks. It was there that some of the Sgts and Cpl's. Were sent to machine-gun school at Le Champueuf. We were there about 3 weeks..."

(end of this excerpt)



War Drawings by Muirhead Bone - the Great Crater, Athies, 1918. This image was created and released by the Imperial War Museum on the IWM Non Commercial License and is in the public domain because the original is an artistic work which was created prior to 1968.

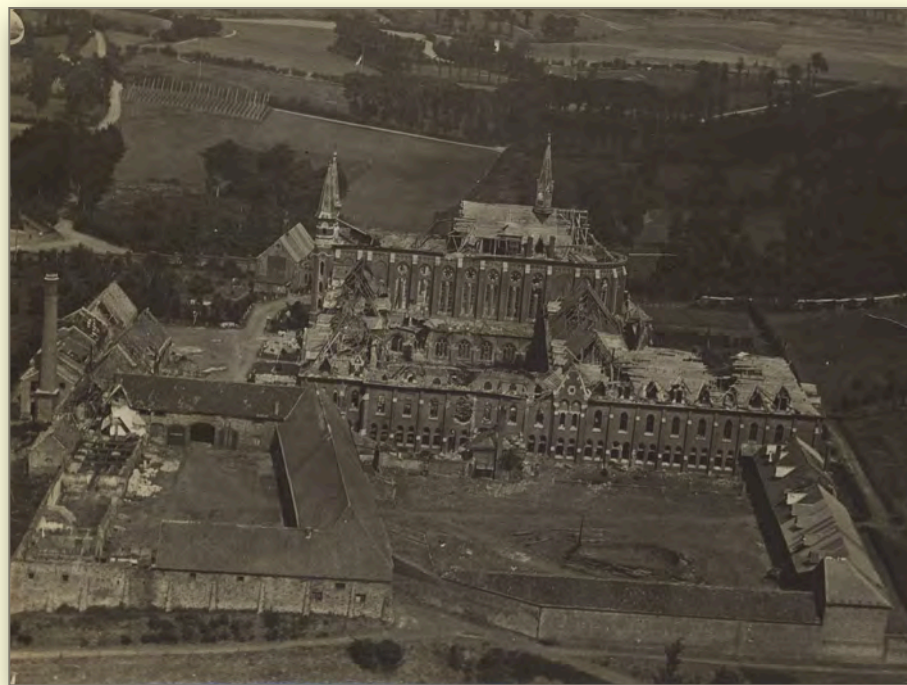
Questions for further research and discussion:

- How did the soldiers travel from one city to another?
- How did Andrew describe the air-raid on Abbyville?
- Where was Andrew stationed in the United States before leaving for Europe?

Second excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...Our company moved across the Somme River right at the mouth. We went thru St. Vallery's, thru Le-Crotoy, thru Noyelles to another little village named: Esterbeouf. We were at machine-gun training & target practice there. After about 3 weeks there we moved to "Abbyville". Boarded another line of box cars and we rode two days and a night during which we passed thru Bologne & Calais. That was July 4. We could see, in those cities the French, British and American flags out everywhere. At noon of July 4 we landed at a little town named Blendicques. We hiked about 6 or 8 miles with our heavy packs and it was hot too. We went into camp in a big woods for the night, the next afternoon about 5 o'clock we started again and after hiking thru the night for about 7 or 8 miles we went to camp at "Zermezele". It was at Noyelles, Abbyville & Blendicques that we first saw what damage the aerial bombs did to this town. The next day we started on again and this time it was about 10 miles. We passed thru Cassel & Steenvorde and when we went thru Steenvorde we had to walk in a column of squads about 50 yds apart as the "Huns" were shelling that town nearly every day, the town was empty of people and it was an awful sight too, buildings, churches etc. all battered down. We went on thru, later passed thru the Belgian Frontier and landed at "Abeeel" which was also partially destroyed. There we made our homes under some big "Hangaars". From there we could see "Mt Rouge" and Mont-De-Cats. On this same Mont-De-Cats (pronounced Mont-De-Kaa) was a big monastery of the Trappist Monks. It was 2 1/2 miles from where we camped. It was badly destroyed by Shell-fire. There is a history connected with that place. Prince Max of Hesse was mortally wounded there in 1915 and the Trappist Monks took him in and later he died there the Kaiser wanted them to turn over the body and they would not until the Huns got out of Belgium. The Kaiser tried to invoke the aid of Pope but no use. The French Troops buried his body in secret and the Huns were so angry because they could not get the body they afterwards destroyed the Monastery. It is completely in ruins. The building was built in the 13th century...

(end of this excerpt)



Monts de Cats, Trappist Monastery, 6 miles northeast of Hazebrouck, shelled My-June 1918. This image is a photograph from an album of World War One-related photographs in the William Okell Holden Dodds fonds. Brigadier General Dodds joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force in 1914 and was commanding officer of the 5th Canadian Division Artillery and served in France from 1917-1918. This image is in the public domain.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- What was Andrew doing while staying at Esterbeouf?
- What was the condition of some of the towns that Andrew passed through? (Such as Cassel and Steenvorde)
- Briefly describe what happened to Prince Max of Hesse at Mont-De-Cats.

Third excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...Nearly every night “Jerry” used to “Strafe” the road along where we were camped. It was to hinder the traffic on that road as it was a main road on that front. We were watching the shells one night about 6 o’clock when all of a sudden a high velocity shell struck in a little pond about 25 yds away from us, it threw mud & water all over. If it struck 5 ft either way it would have been Good-bye with us, you should have seen us fly, but luckily no more came our way. At night time we are not allowed to have lights burning long because there are always German planes over head. Nearly every night you can hear over head a: mmm - m-m-m-bzz-bzz-bzz.- a droning sound; then someone will shout: lights out - “Jerry up” and immediately out goes every light. Then you can see the big search lights any where up to a dozen searching the skies for “Jerry”. (a plane shows very white in the glare of the searchlights). Then you can see and hear the anti-aircraft guns blazing away at them. It is a pretty sight to see a plane come down in flames. In the day time when a German plane comes very close, the aircraft guns, machine guns & rifles are turned on him and it is certainly great fun watching it. Those shells look pretty, bursting all around him, hundreds of shells sometimes.

We “get” a great many more planes than they do of ours. It is amusing and a wonderful sight to see 4 or 5 of our planes flying over “Jerry’s” lines. When “Jerry” gets too close with his shells our men Dive right straight down and then circle away around them and there will be “Jerry’s” shells bursting a great many feet over their heads and they just play with “Jerry” like that for a long time. There will be hundreds of big black spots up in the sky where the shells are bursting. It is a wonderful sight to see...

(end of this excerpt)



Captured German plane, 1919, E. McConnell photographer; Library of Congress. The image is in the public domain in the United States because it was published before January 1, 1923.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- Why was it important to keep the lights out at night?
- Look up the word “Strafe” and explain what the Germans were doing.
- How does Andrew describe a German plane being destroyed and what does he think of the sight?

Fourth excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...We were at that Camp for about 2 weeks and we packed up and started again. We took a 26 mile hike that day and I, as well as the rest of the company was never so dead tired and “all in” as we were that day, it was hot and the roads were those big cobble stone roads and it was simply awful. We passed thru Steenvorde, Cassel, St. Eloy, Wemairs-Cappel, and about 10 o’clock that night we landed in a little town called: Neurlet. We put up in barns where there were plenty of Straw and we just about got to sleep when 2 or 3 German Planes dropped about 5 or 6 Great big Bombs and two of them landed on each side of the street on top of houses and it smashed everything to pieces all around, and it happened that part of our 106 Machine Gun Btn were billeted there. It killed 2 and badly wounded 22 others. I’ll never forget that night, every time one of those bombs dropped the concussion was terrific. The next day we started on our journey. We crossed over about 2 miles of swampy land, some places which was from 3 to 5 feet deep. We walked on a narrow foot bridge the Engineers had built and it was a Sight to see that long line of men crossing that swamp, it was an immense big swamp, it covered a large area. That was part of the Flanders you read of. We got out of that swamp and stopped near a big woods had dinner and an hours rest and then started on...

(end of this excerpt)



On the road to Cassel, artist - Ernest Blaikley (1885-1965), March 13, 1916. This image was created and released by the Imperial War Museum on the IWM non Commercial License and is in the public domain because it is an artistic work other than a photograph or engraving which was created prior to 1968.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- What had Andrew gone through that made him feel “all in”?
- In your opinion, how did Andrew feel while he was staying in the barn in the village of Neurlet?
- Describe his journey after leaving Neurlet.

Fifth excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...We passed thru St-Omer which was quite a large city, and it was pretty well knocked to pieces by bombs. I saw more big beautiful churches in France and Belgium that were destroyed. It is a crime. Also beautiful buildings of ancient architecture, old buildings, all destroyed beyond repair. We passed thru St-Omer which was a very pretty French city and then went thru St-Martin and landed at "Etrehem" and went in to Camp in "Billets". The hike that day was about 8 miles. The next day and a couple days after there were 42 cases of influenza broke out in our Company and I just barely missed it by a margin. The water in France is very bad all over and every bit that is used has to be filtered and chlorinated. We stayed in Etrehem about a week after having some machine gun practice, from there we paced up and were on the go again. We went to Luderzeele-Le-Crois then to Ouderzeele and went in to Camp. A hike that took two days as we were going slow. We were at Ouderzeele about a week and we re'd orders to move again and we hiked back up to the Hangaars where we were before. We were up there a few days and we were ordered up into the lines. We were sent up to the East Popperinge line on the Ypres Front. We went up on a narrow gauge railway, and was up there 7 days. It was a reserve line and near the trenches where we were there were 2 or 3 houses that was Partly destroyed by Shell-fire (as they were shelling all around us every day) we occupied this house. We used to go out without being seen by Jerry and dig potatoes onions etc and along with our rations that was sent up to us every day, we had a great old time. Alto (sic) there many times we got our "wind-up" by Jerry's shells bursting all around us. One morning while we were there a German Plane came sweeping over our heads and he was only a little ways up and going right straight back to our rear. He was one those daring ones trying to take photographs. Immediately anti-air-craft guns opened up then machine-guns & rifles and you should have seen us shower bullets at that fellow.

He got by us but all along the line they were giving it to him and finally they got him. He was hit about a dozen times, the wings of his machine was like sieve, his engine was full of holes, but that was not good, until you hit his petrol tank and then - "napoo" - Finish, and down comes "Mr Jerry" from the sky. The machine usually goes up in flames and "Jerry" is no more - such is the horrors of war...

(end of this excerpt)

Questions for further research and discussion:

- How does Andrew feel when he sees cities being destroyed?
- What are some health problems that the men suffered from while in France?
- What food was Andrew gathering at night?
- What happened when they spotted the German photographer's plane?

Sixth excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...After 7 days we went back to our billets stayed there one day then moved up to the front lines in front of Kemmel hill at Dickesbusch on the Ypres front. We were up there about a week, you were speaking of reading about that Frank Owen that was wounded I was within a foot and a half of him when he got it, the bullet passed thru one of our Sergt's hand and hit this Owen, and if he did not stop it as he did I would have been the next one. Those two were the only casualties that we had altho the other companies had quite a few. That Ypres front is a terrible front to be on, in fact any where there in Flanders. You could not dig the trenches deep because they would fill up with water. When it rains there you sink knee deep in mud. There are no dug-outs there. The ground is so low up there, that is the reason. Any one that has been on the Ypres front is considered a Veteran. It is (as I have heard many times) an awful Hell-hole. You had to keep your head down there all the time, or the snipers would make short work of you. Our American troops kept them busy all the time. They would go out over on raiding parties after snipers etc, and it was almost death to do it. We were with the Scotch troops there, and they are certainly wonderful fighters, they fear no German and they keep the Germans busy all the time, and they take very few prisoners...

(end of this excerpt)



War Damage on the Western Front in 1918, The ruins of Walker Farm, near Dickebusch, November 21, 1918. Collection of the Imperial War Museum, the photograph was taken by American military personnel in their official duties and is public domain as it is a work of a US military or Department of Defense employee, taken or made as part of the person's official duties.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- Why did Andrew say that the Ypres Front was a terrible place to be?
- What do the American and Scotch troops do that makes Andrew think they are so brave?

Seventh excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...One morning just at daybreak a German Plane flew just over our heads and he was shooting down into our trenches. He would circle all around and shoot again. He was shooting tracer bullets so he could see where his shots were going. A tracer bullet is a phosphorous covered bullet they are used for night firing to enable you to follow their course to see where you are shooting.

As I was saying, this plane was shooting down at our trenches and just as he flew over us we stood as rigid as could be because by moving he could see up Plain. He must have seen us, or at least thot (sic) he did, because he let a few shots fly at us, and one dropped about 7 or 8 inches from my head and when I heard it my shoes came way up into my neck. Talk about feeling funny, I did that time, all of us did, because we expected that he would surely open up on us again, but he didn't. Another time, there were quite a few shrapnel shells bursting around us, and I heard a loud: *bzzzz-zzz* then a heavy "Thunk" and a big piece of shell went into the bank, about 2 ft from my head. Those are the "babies" that makes you wish you were some where, other than where you are. One morning they were shelling us heavy, we were in those little concrete pill-boxes and every time one would strike near us, the concussion was so great we got out of there. The concussion of those big shells are simply awful...

(end of this excerpt)



American soldiers in trenches, France, 1918, Library of Congress; this image is in the public domain in the United States because it was published before January 1, 1923.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- Why did the Germans use tracer bullets?
- How did Andrew feel as he is being shot at by the Germans?

Eighth excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...After 7 days we cleared out of there and went back to our billets, and the very next day the Germans evacuated Kemmel Hill, and that day you should have seen the troops moving up, big Trucks, Troops, supplies, Guns and everything moving forward, all day long the roads were packed, about a week later we moved again, one to Wormhout, camped there for the night, then went to Watow and stopped at Popperinghe. That was a very beautiful city but badly destroyed by shell-fire, from there we went to Winnerzeele to Int-Rozendaal - thru Molenwaal, Bandegen, Harinche, Rousebrugge, Bergues, Bourbourg. We passed by a great many Belgian Camps and you should have seen them line up and look us over, they wear little caps like ours. We boarded the train, we rode all that day. Passed down thru Calais & Boulougne. We landed at Mondicourt about 2:30 in the morning then started on thru the gloom. The little towns we passed were: Nalloy & Orrville, we landed at Amplier at daybreak and went into billets. We were at Amplier about 3 weeks. It was a nice little French village that nestled down in a valley, on each side were high hills which were very pretty. While we were there the whole division went out on a "hike" our day for maneuvers. We went thru a form of an attack.

A few days after that the whole division was on the move. We went to Doullens. We boarded a train for Lincourt which, by the way, was part of the territory that the Germans held a couple weeks before. We passed thru the City of Amiens on our way. Amiens is the 2nd largest city in France. It is a beautiful city too, and we could see buildings with shell holes in them as we passed. Amiens was right in the line of attack a few weeks ago. We landed at Lincourt in the early morning and marched about 5 kilometers which is about 3 miles. We went into camp in a woods right where the Germans were before they were chased out. We were then right on the old battlefield. All around us was captured guns of all kinds & equipment. It was a very interesting sight to wander all over where a fierce battle was held and where hasty retreat was made. The next day a few of us went to Peronne which was about 4 miles away and that place was a sight. It was in total ruins, German signs were all over...

(end of this excerpt)



Military operations, convoys and marches: American soldiers arrive in the French village of St. Marie. Weary from the long hike, they have chosen places in the shade to wait for the next command to push on. National Archives, c. 1917-18.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- Who held the cities of Amiens and Lincourt before Andrew arrived?
- At this point, who do you think was winning the war?

Ninth excerpt of a letter dated October 17, 1918 from Andrew to his mother.

...A couple of days after we landed we moved up into the line to the “big stunt” I wrote about and from there on you know. This, so far, is a part of my doings in France & Belgium. I could write forever and then ever tell you all.

I hope you have received some of my letters by this time because I have been very anxious to know if you have rec'd any because I wrote a good many letters & cards. For a while it was very hard to write we did not hardly have the chance. I had an old battle map that I wanted to send you but I lost it, sorry to say. I wrote to Edward & Maurice but I haven't heard from either one of them as yet. These battles over here are simply terrific now, from what they used to be. They are giving the Germans no rest at all. They are rushing him night and day without a stop. There is no stop whatever all along the whole line it is the same. The battle is on as it never was before. You have heard of those German bayonets that had a saw edge on one side? We found some of those things and they certainly are an ugly looking weapon. They also use explosive bullets as well. One young lad here in the hospital was hit by one, it struck the bone of his arm exploded and left a terrible hole in it. He has been in the hospital for 7 months now.

I have about exhausted my vocabulary now, so I will have to think about closing up. When anyone writes send the mail same as usual until I notify you to the contrary. The other night I was invited out to tea and I had a very nice time, I like it fine over here. The English people treat the Americans very nice. Well goodbye all I will try and write again soon.

Love to All
Andrew

P.S. Before we went into the lines that day I went to confession & communion in the Field there was a big crowd went that morning. It was a great sight to see too.

(end of this excerpt)

Questions for further research and discussion:

- According to the second paragraph, whose side do you think had the stronger forces?
- What was Andrew's life like while he was recovering in the English hospital? How does it compare to being in battle?