

In the Trenches: Andrew Carroll WWI - Letters October 14, 1918

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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

A letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

October 14, 1918

Dear Pop & Mom,

Now that I have the paper and a little time I am going to make use of it. I am now in “Blighty” (England). I am stationed at the 1st Southern General Hospital, Edgbaston, Birmingham, England. I have been here 6 days. I expect to be here about another week or so then I expect a short leave, and back to my Company again, or rather what is left of it. I was only slightly gassed but I got enough to last me and to satisfy me for some time. There are quite a few of us staying nights at private familys. (sic) As soon as the patients are able to be up and around they send them to convalescent camps & out to “billets” with private familys (sic), they do that to make room for those coming in all the time. The place I am staying at is nice big home where a Lawyer lives, and they are very nice people too. We are all dressed in Blue uniforms (light Blue) with a white shirt and a flaring Red tie, which shows you are a patient in the Hospital.

We get a pass downtown every afternoon. We take the double decked tramcars which is free, Birmingham is quite a large city, and a very nice city too, it is about 1 million population. We get good feed here at the hospital, Breakfast at 7 PM Dinner at 12 - Tea at 4 o'clock & Supper at 7. Downtown are some...(this section of letter is missing)...4 o'clock you will find them pretty well crowded, as it is tea time.

They, the nurses here, as well as the people treat the Americans fine. We are about the 1st ones to come to this particular hospital.

Speaking of this gas I got, I did not get such a big dose of it but what I got was enough for me. There are some of the patients here that have got it bad, bad burns all over their bodies, face and neck, Eyes all swollen up, inflamed and very sore plenty in the lungs & throat & Stomach which causes all kinds of pain and agony, coughing & choking. Oh, I tell you that gas poisoning is the worst thing that anyone could get, it is terrible, Mustard, Phosgeme, Lachrmatore, lethal are some of the gases they throw at us. This so called Mustard gas burns one terrible causes great pain, altho it is not mustard, it is called that because it burns so. This gas is the most infernal kind of warfare ever thot (sic) of.

(end of excerpt)

Questions for further research and discussion:

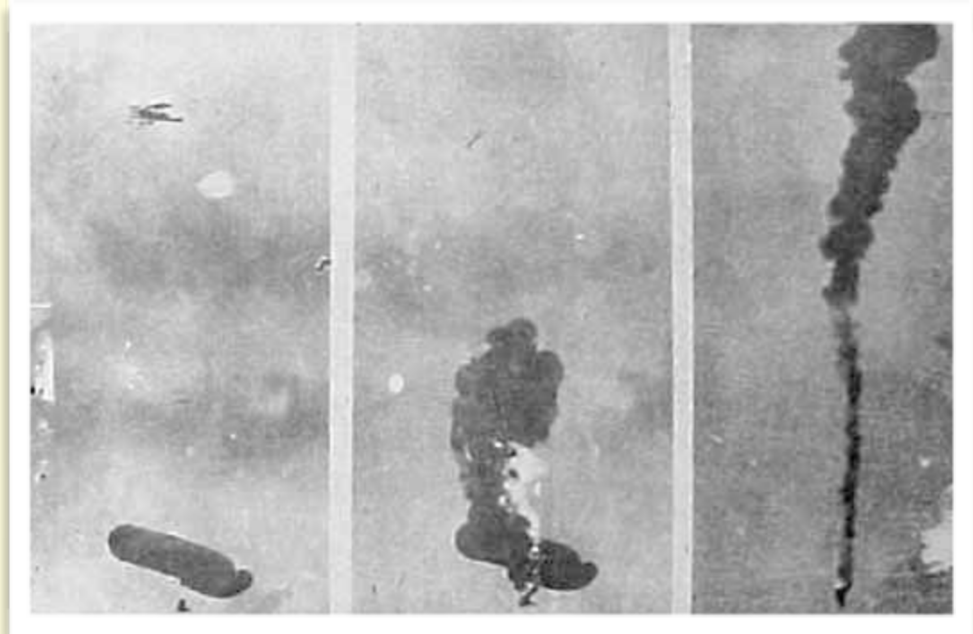
- Describe the effects that Mustard Gas has on its victims.
- Describe Andrew's life while at the hospital.
- Why did some soldiers stay with the family instead of being hospitalized?

Second excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

Never will I forget that day of the attack Sunday Sept 29th 5:50 in the morning, cold and very misty.

We started from the woods where we had been camping for a couple of days, which was about 6 miles behind the lines and behind a hill where we could not be seen by “Jerry’s” observation balloons. We were ordered to separate (sic) in squads so as not to be bunched up. We were told to try and get a little rest as we did not know when we would move into the lines. Rest! Where could we get it? All we had with us was our slicker (Raincoat) Toilet articles and our “iron rations”. The night was very cold indeed and the world “Rest” was a very large world, more easily said than done. Nevertheless we would all letdown, huddled close together with our slicker half under us and half over us. We would lay there awhile until we were about numb then we would get up awhile and run around, there were no rest for us that night. That was Friday night Sept 27th. Sometime during the night we were called together again with orders that we had to move up into the lines. We were all in good spirits, tho tired. Each Platoon (which is 4 squads) going by ourselves thru the darkness, and I tell you it was dark too. I forgot to mention that coming down the road just before dark there was a German steel helmet laying beside the road and a sign on it which read: “Mine - Do Not Touch”, it was one of those deadly traps that the Germans set all over when they evacuate a place. If anyone was to pick that helmet up or kick it they would go to Kingdom Come and back again. It is dangerous to touch or move a dead German anymore, they mine their own dead and anyone that moved one that is mined they would go “West” “aflyin” - It would be “napoo” for them. “Finis”.

(end of this excerpt)



World War 1 German Observation Balloon, bombed and engulfed in flames. This image is in the public domain where the copyright term is the author's life plus 70 years or less.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- **Who is Andrew referring to when he says “Jerry’s”?**
- **What are some of the difficulties and problems that Andrew faced during the evening of September 29th?**

Third excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...Now back to my story again. Our platoon started forward with our gun and ammunition wagons trailing behind and we had to practically feel our way along. The big guns were booming all around us as we moved forward and their flashes would light up the surroundings just like lightning does. We had to walk in a column of twos, as there were ammunition carts drawn by 4 & 8 horses going and coming with shells for the guns and they were flying along too, up thru the din and the roar, we moved until we were right back of our lines. Some one hollered “Gas”! And we sure did get our gas masks on in a hurry as they were shelling the cross-roads directly with gas-shells mingled with High Explosives. We moved up further and got out of where the gas was and then took off our masks. We were then within 4 or 500 yds from the support lines. Machine gun bullets were zipping around us and we hastily got our machine guns and boxes of ammunition and hurried into the trenches and sent the mules & carts back. We had to get off that road quickly as they sell & cover with machine gun bullets all road directly back of the lines at various intervals all night long in order to catch “ration” parties & ammunition Parties & reinforcements that come up under cover of darkness, and when you get on those roads you have to step lively because they do “get you”. We notice that by 4 or 5 dead horses & 3 or 4 dead men laying stretched out on the road — it was a terribly gruesome sight, but we soon get used to those sights...

(end of this excerpt)



British Vickers machine gun crew during the Battle of Menin Road Ridge, World War 1 (Ypres Salient, West Flanders, Belgium), September 21, 1917. This work was created by the United Kingdom Government and is in the public domain.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- Tell how Andrew describes walking on the roads behind the lines.
- How would you feel if you had to walk with Andrew on this road?

Fourth excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...It was early morning when we got into the trenches. Our infantry had just got in ahead of us, they were scattered along through the trenches each with his rifle in his hand and bayonet fixed. And how good they all looked to all Americans, as this was to be an American attack on this particular front, as daylight came we were pretty well situated then and mind you, all this time there were plenty of Big & little shells, (mostly Big) flying all around but every one was calm as could be. I forgot to mention that this attack was to “come off” Sunday morning and there was a 48 hour Barrage thrower over on the German lines which was the Hindenburg line, so you can imagine what it was like. It was the biggest and longest Barrage ever sent over for 48 hrs the heaviest bombardment ever attempted, it was simply terrific.

That Saturday morning, Sept 28th — after we had got into the lines, there was one of those big 9 point 2's dropped right on top of our trench. Killed two outright and wounded 12, one was shell shocked, it made an awful mess and the lucky part of it was our squad was sitting in about the same location. I had just got them out of there to go up to another place. In about 1 hours time, after about a dozen big shells dropped on top of us there were about 30 or 40 casualties killed and wounded. Gee, but it was hard, but thru it all everyone kept perfectly calm. Our platoon was with the 3rd Battalion of our regiment, which consisted of Cos. I-K-L-&M. One young lad whom I had been talking to only a few minutes before was laying there in a heap of thrown-up dirt with his face & skull all crushed in. Terrible! But all those sights you had to keep firm and I might say hard hearted, because it wasn't our plan to give way to those sights...

(end of this excerpt)



Questions for further research and discussion:

- What does “Barrage” mean?
- From his letter, how does Andrew describe the barrage?

Painting of Battle of the Hindenburg Line by William Longstaff, c. 1918-1919. This image is in the public domain in the United States because it was published before January 1, 1923.

Fifth excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...After we got settled in the trenches and used to the shells we tried to find a comfortable spot in the mud to get some sleep & rest, but no sleep. All day long we had to content ourselves by smoking & talking of other things than “Jerry’s” shells. One spot in the trenches were two German machine guns, loaded and ready to fire, and beside those guns, lay about 6 dead “Jerry’s”. As you know the Germans had occupied those trenches a couple days before and they were chased back by our 106th Inf. There were German rifles, Bayonets, hand-grenades, equipment, and any amount of ammunition laying around everywhere. Down in the dug-outs were German clothes & equipment threw all around, left there in their haste to get away from the American rush of a couple days before.

Night time came at last, we sent out a detail to bring in rations but they came back empty handed as they could not get thru with the rations.

This was Saturday night Sept 28th and we had no sleep since Thursday night and all we had to eat that day (Saturday) was two pieces of Hard-tack & some of the inevitable “Bully Beef” “Old Corn Bill,” so we were destined to make the best of it. We went down into the deep dug-outs and let Jerry pound away all the wanted to, as we had to get some sleep, if we could as we were badly in need of it. Every once in awhile we were wakened by the Sentry Shouting: Gas! and we would have to scramble to get our gas masks on. The gas would get down into the dug-outs, as you know it hangs close to the earth unless a wind is blowing. We would not get much but enough to make our eyes run and to sneeze & coughs. Nevertheless we tried to sleep as we had a big job to do the next day.

(end of this excerpt)

Questions for further research and discussion:

- **What were some of the foods Andrew had to eat the evening of September 28th?**
- **Why couldn’t Andrew fall asleep?**
- **How do you think he felt?**
- **How do you think his family felt after reading this section of his letter?**



Photograph of a trench in the Hindenburg Line near Havrincourt, captured by the 42nd Division September 1918. Photographer not identified. This image is in the public domain in the United States because the copyright has expired because it's first publication occurred prior to January 1, 1923.

Sixth excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...About 2 o'clock our Lieut. Awakened the Sgts & Corporals to tell us and show us the plan of attack. We were given our instruction so that we thoroughly understood them and about 4 o'clock we awakened the rest of the lads to get everything ready, such as examine the Machine-guns & oil the, & examine the ammunition etc. everything had to be just so. At 5 o'clock we came out of the dug-outs and got into position. The morning was dark, cold & very misty and everything seemed rather quite. Looking back we could see some great iron monsters creeping up & over trenches over barb-wire and all. Nothing stops them. They were the big Tanks coming up into position. The exhaust of their heavy motors could be plainly heard. As it began to get lighter we could see a great many light-artillery guns back of us, 18 pounders, 5 & 6 in guns, Trench-mortars etc.

At 5:27 there seemed to be deathly silence all around, then all of a sudden, The storm broke loose. It seems as if the very heavens broke loose from their fastenings, back of us I could see nothing but flashes & the din & roar was terrific. Hundreds of Guns, big and small were turned loose...

(end of this excerpt)



An early model British Mark I “male” tank, named C-15, near Thiepval, September 25 1916. The tank is probably in reserve for the Battle of Thiepval Ridge which began on September 26, 1916. The tank is fitted with a wire “grenade shield” and steering tail, both features discarded in the next models. Photographer: Ernest Brooks (1878-1957), September 25, 1916. This photo is from the collections of the Imperial War Museum and created by the United Kingdom Government, public domain.

Questions for further research and discussion:

Seventh excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom



Image: *A Man in a Trench* - April 1917, two miles from the Hindenburg Line; study of a soldier in full battle-kit. He leans against the side of a trench; his rifle stands between his legs and he holds the muzzle loosely in his hands. Artist: William Orpen (1878-1931); April 1, 1917. This image is in the public domain because it was created by a member of the forces during they active service duties are covered by Crown Copyright provisions.

...Then thru the roar could be heard our machine gun battalions also throwing a Heavy machine Gun Barrage along with the artillery. There were hundreds of machine guns all along the line throwing thousands of bullets over our heads and at the Germans. The attack was on a hundred mile front so you could imagine how gigantic it all was. The Bombardment was the biggest ever attempted, how any living being could exist under it was a mystery. A few of the lads started to get nervous and excited but all it needed was a little encouragement and they were all right, altho we had been in the lines before this was practically the first of its kind that we had to go thru, but we all stuck to our post, every man, not one flinched his duty. Mind you this was not a one-sided affair. We were getting all of “Jerry’s” “issue” over on us as well, and it kept us busy “duckin” and that is one of the most natural things a man will do, is to “duck”. We will suddenly hear a terrible screeching and down will go the heads, then an awful roar, and dirt, shrapnel and everything flying all around you, then someone will say: that was a close one, but he missed us by a mile. The bombardment was on...

(end of this excerpt)

Questions for further research and discussion:

- **How does Andrew describe the action of the men during the bombardment?**
- **What was the response of the soldiers to “Jerry’s issue”?**

Eighth excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...At 5:50 (which was zero hour) we heard whistles thru the din, the Infantry was up and “over the top” and were going forward, they were to move 100 yds in three minutes so you can imagine how slow you have to go to cover 100 yards in 3 minutes, Try it. At the end of 3 minutes the Barrage lifted and they moved on and so until the objective was reached. Suddenly the 2nd wave was “over” and we with them with our machine guns, our duty was to support the advance and to “mop up” & wipe out machine gun nests. By the time the 2nd wave had started the German machine guns and artillery were open and we were advancing thru a wall of flame machine gun bullets & shells, they were bursting over us and all around us. Bullets were flying thick and fast. It was fierce & terrible but all of us kept moving. (I forgot to mention that when the “first wave” went over there were 55 big tanks went on ahead of them.) Our job was to get those machine-guns out because they were causing us losses. But we could not see them because they were hidden in the heavy & dense smoke. Our artillery had thrown over a heavy smoke barrage as well, so as to cover our advance, but it was so dense we could not see where we were going and the heavy shells and machine gun bullets were cutting us to pieces. Part of our advance was halted and we intrenched ourselves and then the battle was on...

(end of this excerpt)

Questions for further research and discussion:

- What does “over the top” mean in this context?
- What was Andrew and his Company’s job during the battle?



Image: A raiding party of the 10th Battalion, Cameronians (Scottish Rifles) waiting in nap for the signal to go. John Warwick Brooke, the official photographer, followed them in the sap, into which a shell fell short, killing seven men. Near Arras, March 24, 1917. Part of Ministry of Information First World War Official Collection. This image is in the public domain because it was created by the United Kingdom Government and was taken prior to June 1, 1957.

Ninth excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...The Germans had massed large bodies of troops along that section and were putting up a stiff resistance as far as possible but we were taking prisoners by the wholesale. We were south of Cabrai on the Gouy-Le Catalet Sector you have, most likely, been reading all about that fight. But we got there. I read later, we were right in the Hindenburg line with its tunnels & deep dug-outs, but they got them out. If they wouldn't come out fast enough we would drop or throw a few hand grenades and they would come out like bees with their hands over their heads, hollering , Kamerad-Kamerad. They would be sent back at once. Sometimes some would put up a little resistance but there would be just a squeak and : "Napoo" - Finis, and out would come a long Bayonet out of their carcas covered with gore. They do not play with them for long because they have learned to their sorrow that it doesn't pay. Every time you move towards a prisoner, up goes his hands right away. It is funny and a good majority will start "shelling" out their souvenirs, such as watches, money and even their buttons off their coats. That is the fist thing some of the Allied troops do is to give them a good "friskin". If you get a German Piston you can sell it easily for 50 to 100 francs. It takes 5 francs & about 60 centimes to make a dollar of our money so you can see how much you can get...

(end of this excerpt)



Questions for further research and discussion:

- **Locate the Hindenburg Line on a map. Who did they fight and capture there?**
- **Why were captured German soldiers so willing to give up their possession? Why did the American soldiers want them?**

Image: Australian soldiers searching German prisoners of war for "souvenirs" following their capture during fighting around an outpost of the Hindenburg Line near Hargicourt in France. October, 1918. The image is available from the Collection Database of the Australian War Memorial and is in the public domain because it was first published outside the US, first published before March 1, 1989 without copyright notice or before 1964 without copyright renewal, it was in the public domain in its home country (Australia).

Tenth excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...In this attack we understood beforehand that we would meet with strong resistance because (as you have read) the Germans were there thick around the Hindenburg Line. Sunday afternoon (the day of the attack after we had intrenched in) our squad, along with about 10 or 15 Australians, went “over the top” to raid the German machine gun nests and the Australian Commander got us ready and then said Already, come on “Yanks”, over and at em, and over we went a flying and just as we did those “Jerry” machine guns opened up on us and we got an awful fusilade (sic) of bullets, then the big shells began flying. All of a sudden I heard an awful roar and I felt myself going thru the air and I landed head foremost down in a big shell hole that was 10 or 12 ft deep. I played there about 5 minutes and I didn’t know what happened. At last I realized what had happened. I tried to get up and I found I was nearly covered with mud & dirt. I waited there a minute or two and I found that the shells were all around me and I said to myself: Better to get “knocked off” by marching gun fire than Shells, so I made ready and then started and Say: talk about run, a deer or rabbit or anything “wasn’t in it” with me. I was making a mince in nothing flat. Some going, eh? The machine gun bullets were all around me but on I sailed. I saw another shell-hole about 25 yds ahead of me and I thot if I could make that I would be “all set”: and when I was within about 5 feet from it I made one glorious high dive and right into that shell hole. There were 3 Australians and one American in there. We started to dig in again as we intended to stay there to wipe those machine guns out. (Later we did). We heaved all kinds of grenades at them then we rushed them with bayonet, Pistol & Bombs. Later, as I was busy with Jerry I got a little gas and did not mind it altho my eyes nose & mouth were burning and when I landed in that shell hole I got a little and then going back where our lads were and all out of breath I run right into more gas and I was breathing so hard I got a lot of it down in my throat and lungs. Later I was sent back as I could hardly see or breathe and I was sick...

(end of this excerpt)



Questions for further research and discussion:

- What other country was fighting with the Americans against the Germans?
- What happened to Andrew during this Battle?
- What do you think his family was feeling as they read this part of the letter?

Image: Photograph of Australian soldiers in a dugout on Hill 60. From an album of photographs by Frank Hurley taken in France and Palestine, 1917-1918. From the State Library of New South Wales. The image is of Australian origin and is now in the public domain because its term of copyright has expired.

Eleventh excerpt from letter dated October 14, 1918 from Andrew to Pop & Mom

...Well, I landed into a 1st aid station some time during that night. Sick, chilled thru soaked thru (as it was raining) hungry and exhausted, I was given a bowl of hot boullion (sic) and I never had anything that tasted so good as that did, and I downed it like a savage. After hanging around all night waiting for an ambulance I landed into another place about 5 miles back, was stripped of all my clothes & equipment, put into pajamas, given more hot drinks, placed on board a hospital train that was there then went on an 18 hour journey and talk about sleep, I thot I would never wake up. This was Monday Sept 30 and the last sleep I had before was Thursday and what little eat & drink I had was on Friday night before. Now you can see how I felt. There was quite a crowd that went on that hospital train, in fact they were coming in fast. We were sent to the Base Hospital, stayed there a week then we were sent here to England and here I am getting on fine and feeling good.

When we started out on the attack that Sunday morning our Lieut. was ahead of us, and he got 8 machine-gun bullets thru the head. It sent his steel helmet flying thru the air. One of our Sgts was wounded and I being Senior Corporal had to take his Place. I heard later that Lieut. Jack Welch of Niagara Falls was Killed. A big shell landed down on top of him & 3 or 4 others and killed them. I am not positive that it is so, I got it from a lad that was near them. He was well liked by everybody. The lads under him all thot the world of him.

I had the paper that told all about the attack of ours but it has disappeared somewhere.

The American Red-Cross has found out that we are here and they have brought over some things for us, such as magazines, cigarettes, etc. The American Care Committee from the American Consulate at Birmingham was up and we filled out some slips so that we can draw a little money while we are here.

I suppose everyone has been reading all the news of the war & Peace Terms?

Well goodbye all
will try and write soon
love to all
Andrew



Image: Injured Canadian officer being loaded onto troop train; from bound selection of Canadian Government's official photographic series from WW1; c. 1914-1920. This Canadian image is in the public domain in Canada and United States because it was published before January 1, 1923.

Questions for further research and discussion:

- How was Andrew feeling when he got to the First Aid Station?
- What happened to him before he got there?
- Why were the American Red Cross and The American Care Committee important to the soldiers? Do these organizations exist in the same capacity today?