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**THE WORLD WAR I DIARY OF WILLIAM S. LESLIE,
PVT. 169TH AERO SQUADRON,
AMERICAN EXPEDITIONARY FORCE**

by Jane Leslie Newberry

The majority of the young men who served in the American Expeditionary Forces during World War I had been protected by a way of life which was to exist no more following that conflict. These young men came from areas where they had been born, raised, and schooled in agricultural communities and knew little of the rest of the world, even little of the remainder of the United States. It was from such an area that a young man, listed as 19.7 years of age on his service record, finally managed to join the United States Army after fattening himself with a steady diet of bananas. William Shelton Leslie was the son of an itinerate Baptist minister, Charles Edward Leslie, and his first wife, Lugumia Elephare Cross. The Leslie family had emigrated to Texas in the 1880s from Virginia and settled near Hermleigh. Leslie's youth had centered around the difficult life as the son of a poorly paid, circuit-riding minister.

Leslie enlisted at Dallas, Texas, on December 4, 1917. His service record indicated that his occupation was a student, that he had blue eyes, brown hair, fair complexion, and was 5 feet 11 1/2 inches tall. Leslie was assigned to the 169th Aero Squadron of the United States Expeditionary Forces and was the youngest member of the squadron of 160 men.

The 169th Aero Squadron was organized at Love Field, Dallas, Texas, in December 1917. Love Field was described at that time as a cotton field and mud puddle. The 169th was originally an all Texas outfit, but received replacements in combat from all states of the Union, Canada, and Mexico. Just before the Squadron of 160 men was scheduled to leave for Europe, one man came down with the measles, resulting in the quarantine of the entire group. The troop ship that the group should have taken was sunk by a submarine and 100 men were lost. In January 1918, the Squadron finally left Love Field and arrived at Liverpool, England, on March 4, 1918, less than twelve weeks after it was organized. The Squadron arrived in England before the American First Army was organized, and was attached to the British Royal Air Force where it served for eight months training pilots and ferrying planes across the British Channel to France.¹

Crossing over to France in August 1918, the 169th served with the French Aviation Militaire for two months. General John J. Pershing's First Army had been organized by this time and the squadron became a part of the aviation section of The First Army, receiving citations for meritorious service during the

Jane Leslie Newberry, daughter of William S. Leslie, lives in Shreveport, Louisiana.

battles of the Meuse River, the Saint Mihiel, the Argonne Forest, and the Defensive Sector. The squadron later served for a short time with the Canadian Flying Corps in Canada, and at various air fields in New York and Texas.²

But what was the reaction of this young man to a world beyond his scope of imagination? Although it was against regulations, he kept a small diary. The small green diary, titled, **THE SOLDIERS OWN DIARY**, has on the inside: "Pvt. Wm. S. Leslie, home address, Hermleigh, Scurry Ct. Texas; Signal Corp, Aero Squadron 169, Platoon 1," and is dated February 1, 1918. The book was published in England, and has numerous definitions and hints for soldiers. There are many addresses, mostly of girls, and several references to money loaned and sometimes paid back.

The diary is scanty, but tells the story of some of Leslie's experiences. These experiences vary from fear of the unknown; from being in a foreign country and his reaction to the English people and the miserable weather conditions both in England and France; those of a normal 19-year-old and his girl friends; a bout with the mumps; several encounters with non-coms; and even running over someone with a car. There are many days with no entries. When the squadron reached the battle zones in France, which included Meuse River, Saint Mihiel, the Argonne Forest, and the Defensive area, no entries exist at all; Leslie does not share the horrors of warfare. Although it is not mentioned in the diary, Leslie served as an observer in the fragile wood-framed planes. Thus, the diary paints a picture of the life of a private in the American Expeditionary Force, a far cry from the famous journals of the well-known officers. Some of the entries are difficult to read and have been transcribed as closely as possible. The diary begins Saturday, January 26, 1918 as the 169th Aero Squadron leaves Love Field.

January 26, 1918 – Left Love Field at 9:30 - didn't get to say goodbye to anyone.

February 17, 1918 – Left Hazelhurst at 3:30 - embarked on ferry at Hoboken on ship at 10:30 - sailed away at 4:20 - quartered in hold of ship. Very much so.

February 18, 1918 – Arrived at Bedford Bay, Halifax at 12:00 am. Wait for convoy - on guard - nurses and officers promenade deck.

February 19, 1918 – Still on guard - would talk to nurse, but she didn't want me to get shot for violating G.O. #7 - discouraged and quit. Dixie would not have acted so cruelly.

February 20, 1918 – Daily routine - still in bay.

February 21, 1918 – Left Bedford Bay 3:00 pm. Accompanied by 3

transports, 3 freighters, also U.S. Cruiser, "San Diego." "Old Glory" sure looks good.

February 22, 1918 – Washington's birthday - went on guard at 4:00 pm but I cannot carry a "Life Destroyer."

February 23, 1918 – On guard. Our string band played and "Diane" and I danced. Had an immensely good time considering.

February 24, 1918 – Sea very rough - awfully sick.

February 25, 1918 – Sea little smoother. Ate dinner. Stayed on deck quite awhile.

February 26, 1918 – Nothing unusual on deck all day. Joined by a tramp cruiser. Heard a lecture on Verdun, 18:30.

February 27, 1918 – Day dawns clear and beautiful and warm. On deck. We are now in home of submarines. On guard first shift 8:00 o'clock.

February 28, 1918 – On guard til 4:00 o'clock - signed payroll and stood muster. -----

March 1, 1918 – Nothing new. Very strict on account of submarine menace. A lecture on Japan and poems by Capt. somebody.

March 2, 1918 – Joined by eight sub chasers. They sure look good. Hope we will be "there" soon. Some fellows are scared so badly they stay up all night.

March 3, 1918 – Nothing unusual.

March 4, 1918 – Disembarked at Liverpool 10:30. Entrained arrived Romsey 8:00. In camp 9:00. Merry England Camp Watley.

March 5, 1918 – Nothing particular. Weather very wet and drizzling rain - getting acquainted.

March 6, 1918 – To hospital in AM - hike in afternoon.

March 7, 1918 – Hike in AM to Romley. Saw a church built in 1347.

March 8, 1918 – Hike in AM beyond Romley - drill in afternoon. Spent my last shilling.

March 9, 1918 – Left Camp Watley 2:00 - arrived Amesbury in same eve. Hikes to Salisbury Plains - almost dead.

March 10, 1918 – Getting acquainted.

March 11, 1918 – Drilling some - my feet ache awfully. Are fairly settled.

March 12, 1918 – D.P. Dining room police. Had quite a walk with G in evening. Missed supper.

March 13, 1918 – Drilling and formal retreat. Severely disappointed. Will probably meet tomorrow.

March 14, 1918 – Met her but for a while. She is such a dear good lady.

March 15, 1918 – Nothing new except can't leave camp except with NCO. Went to concert last night.

March 16, 1918 – Review and inspection by Capt. McLeroy. A walk with G. A promise broken by Flo. I don't know why.

March 17, 1918 – To Stonehenge in eve.

March 18, 1918 – Detail. From 8:00 to 5:00 with G. Attended concert by _____.

March 19, 1918 – Left Lark Hill 12:30 pm - arrived 3:52 at Andover Junction. Quartered in tents. Very damp. Told Flo goodbye.

March 20, 1918 – Getting acquainted with camp. Fired machine gun 10 rounds.

March 21, 1918 – Put up new tents and moved into them. Went to town.

March 22, 1918 – Put up tents all day. Extremely fatigued. Went to town to movies. _____ of a time.

March 24, 1918 – K. P. OT found a home [horse?]

March 25, 1918 – Dug ditches. Put up tents. A walk. (Met L.B., also Jersey.) [crossed out and added to the next day].

March 26, 1918 – Carried wood and loitered. Met L.B., also Jersey.

March 27, 1918 – Did nothing in particular. Some nasty English weather.

March 28, 1918 – Very cold and raining. Cleared up slightly in evening. Met Lillian.

March, 29, 1918 – Worked on hanger - nothing new.

March 30, 1918 – Went to work supposedly. Am in transportation department. Unassigned. I am learning to distrust everybody.

March 31, 1918 – On duty

April 1, 1918 – Have mumps. In isolation hospital. Not sick yet.

April 2, 1918 – Weather bad. In all day.

April 3, 1918 – Still in A. H. Sister visited today. Talked to NZ and Pioneers. Passed cake. Never even spoke to Yank.

April 4, 1918 – Same thing. Sold my cane also had _____. I've _____.

April 5, 1918 – Rather freakish today. Letter from L.

April 6, 1918 – Pd L4,19S,7D. Also letter from Josephine.

April 7, 1918 – Carried on

April 8, 1918 – Carried on. Nine letters from USA.

April 10, 1918 – in

April 11, 1918 – My birthday. 20 years old. The nurses were real sweet.

April 12, 1918 – Still in

April 13, 1918 – Removed to convalescent camp. No good.

April 14, 1918 – Dreary

April 15, 1918 – Still in. Snowed.

April 17, 1918 – ? with bloody English. Think I'll smack 'em in the nose.

April 18, 1918 – Bread and jam. Very exciting indeed. Soon, oh, so soon!

April 20, 1918 – Tiff and Leg.

April 21, 1918 – Leave tomorrow. rah.rah.

April 22, 1918 – Done gone. Left hospital in afternoon.

April 23, 1918 – Loitered all day. Saw Robbie

April 24, 1918 – Work in AM

April 26, 1918 – Saw Lillian 10 minutes in PM.

April 27, 1918 – Loitered in AM. To Bascomb Downs in PM.

April 29, 1918 – In London on pass at Union Jack.

April 30, 1918 – Westminster Abbey and House of Parliament to _____. Talked to sure 'nough American girl. Back at 11:30.

IN MAY OF 1918, THE FIRST AMERICAN-BUILT WAR PLANE REACHED FRANCE. POWERED BY THE 400 HP LIBERTY ENGINE, THE D. H. 4 CLIMBED 4000' IN FOUR MINUTES SIX SECONDS AND DID 126 MPH.

May 1, 1918 – Saw Bobbie in eve. A light dawn.

May 2, 1918 – Rain, very wet

May 3, 1918 – Working in GRS

May 4, 1918 – Saw Rusbee[?] a walk some[same] time. Lillian in Dilente[?]

May 5, 1918 – Rainy. Work. To church.

May 6, 1918 – Sgt's Mess

May 7, 1918 – Sgt's Mess

May 8, 1918 – Slight disturbance. Disagreed with cpl. and got — -ride in plane - fine.

May 9, 1918 – Indefinite O.B. and K.P. Off duty report every 30 minutes to S. M.

May 10, 1918 – Still on and in

May 11, 1918 – Still on and in

May 12, 1918 – and yet

May 13, 1918 – so

May 14, 1918 – Yet

May 18, 1918 – off KP and CB

May 19, 1918 – Met Nellie

May 20, 1918 – Half holiday in eve with Nellie. A sure 'nough girl

May 21, 1918 – Nise [sic]

May 22, 1918 – Met Nell. Same as ever. Rather tame.

[MAY 22, 23, 24, 225 SEEM TO BE WRITTEN IN DIFFERENT HANDWRITING, BUT STILL SEEM TO BE HIS COMMENTS]

May 23, 1918 – Met Flora [crossed out] Nell Awfully sweet in bottle green

May 24, 1918 – Met Margaret [crossed out] Nell Pictures

May 25, 1918 – Met Nell. Disappointed. Seeing her no more.

May 27, 1918 – Met Daisy. Awfully nice.

May 28, 1918 – Holiday - failed to get a pass

May 30, 1918 – Decoration day in Winchester Cathedral, castle and museum

May 31, 1918 – Disgusted. No more English girls

June 1, 1918 – Must go back to get a Yankee girl. Awful fall on cycle

June 2, 1918 – Met Nell

June 3, 1918 – Nothing on consequence

June 4, 1918 – Holiday. Failed to get pass. Went to Brim[?]. B in eve. Lovely time. Nell in eve.

June 9, 1918 – Met Nell

June 16, 1918 – to Larkhill

June 29, 1918 – On ambulance until 2 A. M. Played tennis with Mrs. Wright. Kathleen

June 30, 1918 – Up in H. P. first wreck

July 1, 1918 – On ambulance in morning. Nell in evening

July 3, 1918 – To London in evening. Great crowds of U.S. troops. Many U.S. flags flying

July 4, 1918 – Temple and Justice in A. M. Ballgame in eve. Saw their majesties

July 7, 1918 – To Stonehenge and Brimstone Bottom

July 8, 1918 – Rain

July 9, 1918 – BB Rained some awful. Wet as a hen. Went berry picking

July 10-12, 1918 – RAIN

July 13, 1918 – Had a bread and cheese tea at Appleshead - Rain

July 14-19, 1918 – RAIN

July 20, 1918 – Left Andore at 5:03 for London. Far trip up Thames. Sunday in London at 6:36 oc Rain

July 21, 1918 – Thames - A love day Rain

July 22, 1918 – Back from London. CB again. Oh my. Rain

July 23-24, 1918 – Rain

July 25, 1918 – Released from confinement. rain

July 26, 1918 – Whew! A great big box of candy from Sis and Auntie. Gee, it is lovely. Rain

July 27, 1918 – Ran over a man with ford. Don't know how seriously injured.

July 28, 1918 – To Tideworth [?]

July 30, 1918 – Court of Inquiry. To Tideworth and Conholt Park

July 31, 1918 - August 3, 1918 – Rain

August 15, 1918 – Told JR goodbye

August 16, 1918 – Preparing to go to the front

August 17, 1918 – on truck detail in morning - left at 2 o'clock arrived 5:40 - Flowerdown [?]

August 26, 1918 – arrived St. Mexiant - Napoleon's conclaux barracks [?]

August 27, 1918 – fatigue - Beaucoup

August 30, 1918 – Order to pack up and leave. Bags all hauled down - on guard.

August 31, 1918 – All a workout - Barrack bags returned to barrack. Still eating slum. No pass yet

September 1, 1918 – KP

September 2, 1918 – Left St. Maxient at 3p

September 3, 1918 – still on train

September 5, 1918 – arrived Vinets

September 6, 1918 – digging trenches

September 7, 1918 – more trenches

September 8, 1918 – more construction

September 9, 1918 – KP

September 10-20, 1918 – [one word on each day] All this time I was still doing it as usual

September 21, 1918 – Bunk fatigue today – strange to say the top failed to find work for me today. He sure loves me!

September 22, 1918 – Rain and __ __

September 30, 1918 – KP

October 4, 1918 – Printing ensignias on A.P.

October 13, 1918 – Rumors of peace

October 14, 1918 – Hurrah! Fritz says Koward. Be home someday

November 11, 1918 – Armistice signed. Great celebration in France

November 14, 1918 – Hear we are to leave “toot sweet”

November 16, 1918 – Still waiting return voyage

November 18, 1918 – Guess won't go too soon

November 19, 1918 – Gee! This mud is awful - It rains always - Tout le temp

December 2, 1918 – Hope vanishes - still rain

December 3, 1918 – To console myself I will go to Martha tonite

December 5, 1918 – This is final - nothing to do but keep from freezing

December 6, 1918 – Since Armistice in OM as

December 15, 1918 – unable to read

December 16, 1918 – _____, exec. permission a la Mademoiselle Martha Ruby

December 24, 1918 – With Martha at night to Catholic Communion, USO

December 25, 1918 – Left M. at 2 am, Reverie at 4:30 - dinner with her - Par Content

December 26, 1918 – Rain, Mud, Snow, Cold, N' everything

December 27, 1918 – I called on MR this evening

December 28, 1918 – Rain all day - muddier n' anything

December 29, 1918 – Thinking of Odene [Adene?]

December 31, 1918 – To MR at 7 P.M.

January 1, 1919 – In at 2 am - all dressed up and _____ to go.

January 2, 1918 – Home

At the end of the war, the 169th Aero Squadron returned to America on the U.S.S. Mallory.

William Shelton Leslie returned to the United States, attended The University of Texas, and was graduated from Baylor University. He received his LLB in 1925 from Baylor Law School. He practiced Law until retirement in 1971. In 1927, he married Emily Jane Allen and had one daughter, Emily Jane Leslie. He began his practice in Bay City, Texas, where he served as county attorney. Later he moved to San Angelo, Texas, and began a partnership with E.E. Murphy. After the death of his first wife in 1945, Leslie married Stella Cobb in 1947. Leslie was active in the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Texas Defense Guard during World War II. He also served as county attorney and city judge in San Angelo. He was active in the

reunions of the 169th Aero Squadron. For many years, Leslie corresponded with his friend, Nell, whom he had met in England.

Leslie died on November 20, 1972, in Brady, Texas, and is buried in Fairmount Cemetery in San Angelo, Texas.

In an article in the *San Angelo Standard-Times*, October 22, 1964, Leslie reminisced about the “baling wire days” of World War I flying. “Understand,” said Leslie, “when we got there the art of aerial fighting was still very crude. We had just gotten out of the rock throwing stage and shooting at the enemy with a pistol or rifle. While we were there they began mounting machine guns in the rear cockpit and later perfected one to fire from the front cockpit through the propellor blades. The methods of warfare were rapidly changing.” He continued by saying that on the day before the armistice was signed, the airfield of the 169th came under attack, but no one was injured.³

NOTES

¹Kendal, T.J., unpublished notes.

²Kendal, T.J., unpublished notes.

³*San Angelo Standard Times*, Oct. 22, 1964, Section B, page 1.