

### THE WAR'S GRIM TOLL

During World War I, 36 men from Carroll County died, eight during the Meuse-Argonne offensive. Of those, two were with the 79<sup>th</sup> Division—Private John Carroll Yingling, who died on the first day of the offensive, and PFC Verl Eugene Cluts Snider, who died on September 29, shortly after the capture of Montfaucon.

Six died in action, six of wounds sustained in action, two killed themselves, one drowned, and one died of spinal meningitis. Nineteen died of what is listed as pneumonia. No doubt this pneumonia was a secondary result of the flu. Burt Asper, a doctor from Springfield Hospital, vanished at sea with the USS *Cyclops*.

American combat deaths were 53,402. Death by disease was over 63,000, and most of those by flu. The flu killed over 675,000 Americans—civilians and soldiers—and probably over 50 million people around the world. During October 1918, it killed 60 to 90 a day at Camp Meade, including: Clarence Yingling, October 2; Arthur Frock, October 6; Henry Hill, October 7; Irvin Myers, October 9, and Ellis Harrison, October 12.

Some made it to France only to fall to the flu: Raymond Hesson (October 6); Loy Meyers (January 6, 1919); and Nevel Wheeler (March 21). Others died in various U.S. camps. William Hively died at sea on October 5.



Westminster native Ephraim Tracey died on October 6, 1918, of pneumonia while in training at Camp Humphreys, Virginia. (HSCC Collection.)

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# Carroll History Journal

The Historical Society of Carroll County, Maryland, Inc.

## HELL IN ALL CAPITALS: ROBERT SCHNITZER, CARROLL COUNTY, AND THE MOUNT OF THE FALCON

By JACK WHITE

**Editor's Note:** *The Times*, the predecessor of today's *Carroll County Times*, ran a regular feature during World War I when the paper was published weekly. Usually appearing on page 3, the column, "With Our Boys 'Over There'" showcased soldiers' letters from the front sent to parents and loved ones. Often wrenching and brutally honest, these missives from "France" or "Somewhere in France" gave readers eyewitness accounts of life in the trenches and the horrors of going "over the top" and contribute a vital narrative to county history.

He's an unknown soldier now. Long dead. Long forgotten. They're all dead now. The Doughboys who fought for America in World War I.

But once in 1918, when he was 31, Robert Schnitzer of Westminster was alive in a way few of us are ever alive. Or want to be. He lay face down in France, surrounded by dead, wounded, and dying men, while a whirlwind of steel tore up the earth around him. Men screamed for help. But he could not help them. No one could help them. He could not help himself.

The assassination of an Austrian Grand Duke in Sarajevo in 1914 triggered the war that would lead Schnitzer to France. After the assassination, the Russians, French, and British quickly lined up against Germany, Austria-Hungary, and eventually Turkey in a war that started quickly, but seemed as if it would never end. By the time America came in on the 6th of April in 1917, several million soldiers and civilians were already dead. In 1916 alone, in ten months at Verdun, 140,000 Germans and 162,000 French died. That same year in July, during the Battle of the Somme, the British suffered 400,000 casualties in four and a half months. Nearly 20,000 died in the first day's fighting.

## With Our Boys "Over There"

Interesting Letters from Home Boys in the Service of Their Country

We will endeavor to publish in this column each week letters from boys over seas. Times readers are requested to furnish us with letters received from friends or relatives for publication.

After Germany's brutal initial push through Belgium and down into France in August 1914 failed to take Paris and bring a quick end to the war, the fighting settled into a stalemate fought from a line of trenches. That line ultimately extended some 500 miles from the North Sea down through Belgium and France, all the way south to Switzerland, severing a swath of conquered France from the rest of the country.



British Howitzer during World War I. (Flickr's The Commons, Public Domain.)

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It was a new kind of war, the first fought from trenches. The first where U-boats destroyed ships. The first with telephones. The first where troops fought with machine guns, tanks, airplanes, poison gas, and even flamethrowers. But also with carrier pigeons, mules, and horses. Eight million horses died.

But mostly, it was fought with precision long-range artillery. The combatants hurled several hundred million shells at each other, shells that would obliterate villages, strip forests bare, bury men beneath piles of earth, tear soldiers to pieces, and on occasion vaporize a man into a fine red mist. Others died without visible wounds from the mere pressure of a nearby blast.

As a prelude to any advance, the attackers typically deluged the enemy with artillery. For one week before the Battle of the Somme, the British fired over a million and a half shells at the Germans.

Robert Schnitzer was born in Philadelphia in 1886. His father, Jacob Schnitzer, was a German, who'd shipped out of Hamburg for the United States in 1881 and married Leah Barnes, an American, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Robert was their only son.

Schnitzer's parents divorced, and he grew up with his mother in Gettysburg in the home of an aunt and uncle. Eventually he moved with his mother to Carroll County, and in 1911, he opened the R & L 5 & 10 store on the corner of East Main Street and Longwell Avenue in Westminster. Soon after, he



"Class of Army Officers practicing the 'Short Point Stab', American Army Camp, U.S.A." Detail, stereograph, Keystone View Company. (HSCC Collection.)

married one of his cashiers. When that marriage failed, he married again, this time to Bessie Murdoch of Hagerstown. He married her in New York City, and brought her back home to live on Liberty Street in Westminster with his mother.

The wedding took place on February 22, 1918. Two months later, he was drafted. He liquidated his stock, closed up his business, and moved to Camp Meade, where he received some hurried and ineffective training. He shipped out to France on July 8,

crammed on the USS *Leviathan* with over 10,000 other young Americans for a week-long voyage through treacherous waters patrolled by German U-boats. He landed on July 15, and moved into the frontline trenches near Avocourt on September 13. Two weeks later, not five months from selling candy, toys, novelties, hats, and glassware in Westminster, he climbed over the top into

Form 1 REGISTRATION CARD 1917B	
1 Name (last, first, middle initial)	Robert William Schnitzer 30
2 Home address	Westminster Carroll Co Md.
3 Date of birth	June 24 1886
4 Are you (1) a natural born citizen, (2) a naturalized citizen, (3) an alien, (4) or have you declared your intention (specify which)?	Natural Born
5 Where were you born?	Philadelphia Pa.
6 If not a citizen, of what country are you a citizen or subject?	Am S
7 What is your present trade, occupation, or profession?	Merchant
8 If you are employed?	Working for self Carroll Co
9 If you are a father, mother, wife, child under 12, or a sister or brother under 12, specify dependent on you list support (specify which)?	Widow Mother & Wife
10 Married or single (which)?	Married (specify which)? Caucasian
11 What military service have you had? Rank	None
12 Do you claim exemption from draft (specify grounds)?	
I affirm that I have verified above answers and that they are true.	
[Signature]	

19-3-8 A 926	
REGISTRAR'S REPORT	
1 Tall, medium, or short (specify which)?	Tall Slender, medium, or stout (which)? Slender
2 Color of eyes? Color of hair? Color of skin?	Brown Brown Dark
3 Has person last seen by hand, foot, or bark eyes, nose, mouth, or discolored (specify)?	None
I certify that my answers are true, that the person registered has read his own answers, that I have witnessed his signature, and that all of his answers of which I have knowledge are true, except as follows:	
[Signature: Harry C. Sullivan]	
Resident of	H-Pa
City or County	Carroll
State	Maryland

Draft registration card for Robert Schnitzer. (National Archives.)

*more kiss those motherly lips. If the worst happens to me: take the news courageously, be brave as I am going to try and be, and rest assured I am going into it cheerfully and resigned to whatever my fate may be... Hoping for the best and trusting I will see you all on earth, or that we will meet in Heaven, I am your most affectionate and loving son,*

*Farewell, PVT. Francis X. Elder*  
(*The Times*, November 29, 1918)

By the time the letter appeared, Elder was already dead. He had died fighting on October 11.

After those five days of furious combat, the 79<sup>th</sup> was sent to the rear.

Schnitzer wrote:

*Now I stay at supply company and see that our outfit of eighty-five men get all that is coming to them. Sort of supply officer for the whole force. Their grub is cooked here and then hauled up to the lines. Don't know how long this will last, but it is a cinch and am six miles away from the big shells anyway.*  
(*The Times*, November 22, 1918)



American Cemetery of Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, 1918. (Creative Commons license, Public Domain.)

The 79<sup>th</sup> would return to battle on October 27 and fight all the way to November 11, when at 11 a.m. the armistice took effect, the guns went suddenly silent, and for the first time in four years it was safe to stand upright on the battlefields of France. The last American soldier to die was Henry Gunther of Baltimore of the 313<sup>th</sup> Infantry.

The 79<sup>th</sup> did not fight the next day. They walked the fields of past battles instead, finding, identifying, and burying the dead. They would stay in France until May 1919. Robert Schnitzer would spend most of that time in the hospital with double-pneumonia, both lungs infested with virulent bacteria, no doubt caused by the devastating and rapidly mutating Spanish flu that ravaged the world in 1918 and made a final stand in early 1919.

Finally, he shipped home. He arrived in Hoboken, New Jersey, on May 5. He briefly visited Westminster sporting a new mustache, then returned to the hospital at Camp Meade, where he stayed until May 27. (*Gettysburg Times*, May 7, 1919)

After the war, General Bullard lived the life of a hero. He appeared in uniform, covered in medals, in a Lucky Strike cigarette ad. The ad said, "An army man must keep fit – reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet." He died in 1947 and is buried at West Point.

Private Schnitzer was honorably discharged on June 24, 1919. By 1920, he was operating a new 5 & 10 in Baltimore. He eventually moved to Hagerstown, where by 1930 he made his living as a traveling shoe salesman.

In 1936 he entered the United States Veterans Hospital in Washington D.C. He had cancer. They operated. They treated him with radium. He died in the hospital on the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup>. He was 50. (*Gettysburg Times*, July 2, 1936)

He's buried, with the mother he never abandoned, at Evergreen Cemetery in Gettysburg. It's in this cemetery on November 19, 1863, that Abraham Lincoln delivered his famous address. Schnitzer's stone is small and flat against the grass that edges up against it. It includes no biblical verses, no epitaph, and no indication of his military service. Just two dates and a name facing up into the sky.

ROBERT W. SCHNITZER

But it cost the 79<sup>th</sup> another 2,000 casualties. Many other Americans all down the line of advance also died as the German artillery retained its accuracy hours longer than anticipated.

The 313<sup>th</sup> battled through relentless machine gun fire. They fought through artillery, gas, flames, and barbed wire. Snipers put bullets through their helmets and their hearts. The weather was foul. They were often soaked. They didn't sleep. They got no food or water. They had no air cover, no artillery support, and no experience. They charged headlong at machine gun nests. Most of their officers were dead. They were abandoned by their fellow Americans. They took heavy casualties. They took Montfaucon.

They did it shortly before noon of the second day. There wasn't much there, a town mostly ruined, piles of dead Germans, dead horses, a destroyed church, burial grounds ripped up by artillery that emptied graves and tossed dead Germans into the rubble and wreckage of cratered streets.

The 313<sup>th</sup>'s commander, Colonel Claude Sweezey, a man of few words with a pronounced stutter, attached a message to pigeon number 47 and sent it into the sky. Flying through intense artillery, its left wing torn and bleeding from shrapnel, the pigeon arrived at divisional headquarters an hour and 43 minutes later with the message.

“Montfaucon captured 11:45.”

So they took the town. And then fought on. Three more desperate days, almost without rest.

Schnitzer wrote:

*I cannot describe each day's fighting because all are alike. Hell in big capitals. I don't know*

*when we make another advance but hope we get a rest soon.*  
(*The Times*, November 22, 1918)

News returned slowly to the home front. Four days after the war ended, on November 15, 1918, the *Times* wrote: “Reports have been circulated to the effect that a large section of the 313<sup>th</sup> has been wiped out...”

And it had. But the Carroll County boys were lucky. Nearly 400 participated in the Meuse-Argonne offensive. Of those, about 170 served with the 79<sup>th</sup> Division, and approximately 110 of those with the 313<sup>th</sup> Infantry. Some were gassed. Many were badly wounded, like Nathan Hobbs of Sykesville, whose legs were so riddled with shrapnel they told him he would never walk again. (He did.)

They suffered terribly, but mostly they survived.

Men from Carroll County served as soldiers, sailors, marines, and pilots. Several women served as nurses. Mostly their letters were short on detail. They could not reveal their locations beyond “somewhere in France.” Before the fighting, the letters were lighthearted, mostly filled with mundane details, and usually intended to set to rest the fears of distant mothers.

Others were more earnest, like this one.

*Dearest Mama,*

*As I am about to enter the big fight for Democracy, it is my desire now...to pencil you a few lines briefly, and bid you, papa, and all a sincere farewell, and may Our Dear and most Precious God always protect you in this life, and knowing this, I will die cheerfully for a good cause if it be his holy will, otherwise it will be the happiest moment of my life when I can once*



“Montfaucon, Showing German Observatories & Fortifications Captured By The American Forces, Sept. 17, 1918.” From *The History of the Seventy-Ninth Division, A.E.F.* (Library of Congress.)

combat. Shortly afterward, he wrote a vivid 12-page letter to Bessie.

*Here are a few cold facts. Our entire outfit has lost 50 percent officers, including five majors out of six, and thirty-five percent men in five days fighting. My comrades and best friends were knocked off and killed on all sides of me, some only one step from me. To hear them crying, praying, see them dying and have to pass on and let them to their fate, take an iron nerve and heart. Mine has been wrung out of me time and time again.*  
(*The Times*, November 22, 1918)

He wrote of shooting a young German.

*I shot him as he passed. The bullet went in his left side and out on his right...He was so young and fair that my heart ached and I felt guilty of murder, but the next day when a piece of German shrapnel hit my metal helmet and made a dent in it the size of an egg, I lost then and there all the pity I had for the fellow.*

And he wrote of the time when he “sweated blood” and lost all hope of seeing his loved ones again. They were advancing when a German plane began circling them, and conveyed their location to German artillery.

*They laid down a barrage on us that no one in God's world could escape. Shrapnel rained down and exploded like rain and hail all around and over us. We all threw ourselves on the ground and while we were helpless like that, that plane came back again and down to about 400 yards above us and then the devil opened up on us with a machine gun and dropped gas shells. It was awful. Arms, legs, mutilated bodies everywhere, and every second I thought my turn would be next. I gave up all hope and made my piece to God with a prayer. My nerves gave way and I shook like a leaf for hours after. I laid there on that field all night.*

Norman Mitten, another Westminster soldier in Schnitzer's unit wrote,

*I was wounded Friday night. All our officers were wounded, except one Lieutenant. We went over no man's land while shells were bursting all around us and I was laying in a shell hole shooting Germans when a shrapnel shell burst right over my head, and only two pieces hit me. One piece went through my heel, and the other tore my haversack off my back, and tore my overcoat all to pieces and never hurt me. If I*

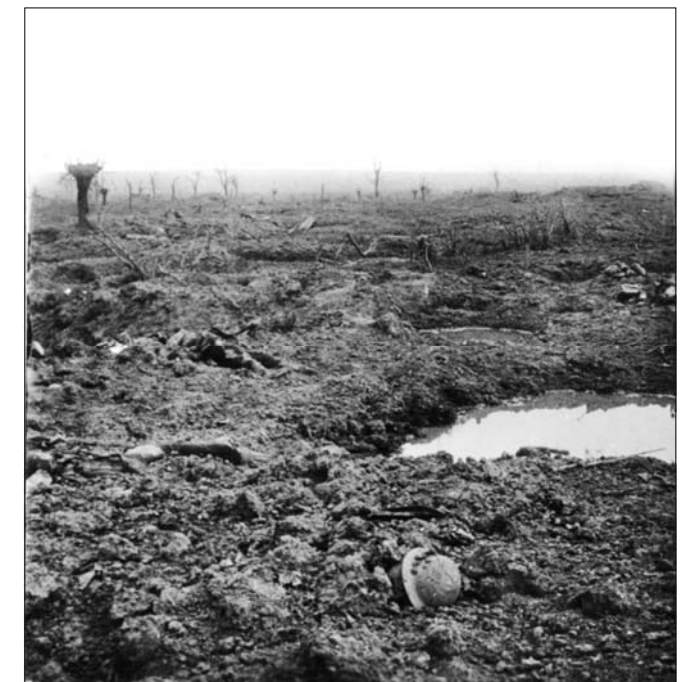
*wouldn't have had my overall bundled up in my pack it would have torn my back all to pieces.*  
(*The Times*, November 8, 1918)

This was September 1918, from the 26<sup>th</sup> through the 30<sup>th</sup>, as the U.S. launched the Meuse-Argonne offensive, the bloodiest battle in U.S. history. It would last 47 days, cost 26,277 American lives, and leave another 95,786 wounded, a rate of 2,600 American casualties a day. Over half the Americans killed in the war died during this offensive.

The attack followed a night-long artillery barrage on German forces. And then, at 5:30 a.m., with his helmet, his gas mask, grenades, and rifle, Schnitzer charged through the muddy shell holes, barbed wire, bones, broken guns, half-buried corpses and the huge rats that fed on them in the wasteland between the trenches. They called it “no man's land.”

Schnitzer and Mitten were with the 313<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion of the 79<sup>th</sup> Division of the United States First Army. The division was freshly created for the war and included mostly draftees from Maryland and Pennsylvania. There were so many Baltimore boys in the 313<sup>th</sup> they referred to it as “Baltimore's Own.” But there were also plenty from Carroll County.

Of the nearly 28,000 in the division, well over half had been drafted that May. In an article published in



“No Man's Land near Lens, France.” Detail, stereograph, Keystone View Company. (HSCC Collection.)



Map showing the battle lines and identifiers for the American divisions involved in the Meuse-Argonne offensive. (Wikimedia Commons, Public Domain.)

the spring 2017 issue of *Military Quarterly* called “Mystery at Montfaucon,” William Walker wrote, “Some of the recruits had never fired a bullet before landing in France. Once they arrived, the men in the division completed less than half the allotted three months of combat training before they boarded trains for battle. They had never seen a front-line trench,



“Our Boys in France Learning to Correctly Use Gas Masks.” Detail, stereograph, Keystone View Company. (HSCC Collection.)

much less experienced the brutal combat of the world’s first industrialized war.”

And yet, General John Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces, assigned them the most critical and difficult operation of the entire endeavor. On September 26, he expected them to take the Butte of Montfaucon (Mount of the Falcon). The Germans called it “Little Gibraltar.” The French called it impregnable. It rose in the distance 300 feet into the sky.

Inside the town of Montfaucon, at its high point, in the ruins of a house, the Germans had mounted a large telescopic periscope with a perfect view of the surrounding area. With it they could target their artillery with deadly accuracy. The 79<sup>th</sup>’s job was to charge the hill and take the town. Walker wrote, “Little Gibraltar was guarded by numerous trenches and concrete bunkers...and hundreds of machine-gun nests.” And according to Thomas Johnson, an American war correspondent who witnessed it, “Storming the Mount of the Falcon was like storming some medieval citadel. Its crest towered above the Americans in the gathering dark, spitting fire. Before them yawned a moat-like valley protecting its foot. They must cross the valley first, then climb the slope, and all under heavy machine-gun fire through the shelling.”

The 313<sup>th</sup> were in the lead. The initial attack took place through smoke and early morning fog.

Schnitzer wrote:

*Our first half-mile was easy as everything was blown to pieces and all we had to watch was to keep from falling in the shell holes. Then all of a sudden the Germans lit up their front with rockets that looked like Christmas trees all lit up. I never saw such a display of firearms and everything was light as day. But we were protected because our big guns had just laid down a curtain of smoke which kept just ahead of us and so the Germans could not locate us for machine gun fire, but they kept popping away and finally the “rat-a-tat-tat” of incessant machine gun fire*



“French Soldiers Resting in the Trenches.” Detail, stereograph, Keystone View Company. (HSCC Collection.)

*was in a big one with Major Pepper. Bullets screamed, hummed, and whistled over our heads all the time... We kept advancing in rushes and finally had taken good cover again in shell holes.*

*This time you could hear the bullets striking in the ground all around you. Major Pepper had just handed me a cigarette when a sniper caught him right in the head. He never said a word, just sat like he was dazed until he fell over...*

*The ranks thinned out, but kept going forward. It was awful, but it had to be done. Finally we routed them and they fell back to their stronghold almost two miles away. From this town, the Crown Prince of Germany watched the Battle of Verdun; and the French have tried to capture this town four different times without success and with heavy losses. We took it in two days’ fighting.*

*(The Times, November 22, 1918)*

*made us take cover in shell holes. I was with the Second Battalion Headquarters and right with Major Pepper all the time.*

*When things cleared away a little we were harassed by snipers in trees...I was ordered to advance and try to silence some of the fire... Three of us were shooting into one tree and down came a sniper. He had tree bark wrapped all around his body, arms and legs, and twigs stuck in his hat. I jumped in a trench...I soon came upon the body of a German lying dead across his machine gun and then saw several more who were killed by shell fire... Well this woods opened out on cleared fields for about a mile stretch. It was right at the beginning of this clear space that the real fighting started.*

*(The Times, November 22, 1918)*

The clear space was known as the Golfe de Malancourt. It was a trap. Walker wrote, “Time after time, the men of the 313<sup>th</sup> Regiment attacked across the open gulf; those who weren’t shot immediately were immolated by burning oil [from German flamethrowers] spewing 25 yards from the German lines. ‘The slaughter,’ as Colonel Frank Barber later put it, ‘was indescribable.’”

Schnitzer wrote:

*All of a sudden machine guns opened up on us right and left, in front and behind and all we could do was drop flat on the ground and trust to God. Some were lucky and got in shell holes. I*

But Pershing expected it in one. Which raises the question, why had he given these untried troops such a crucial task?

He hadn’t exactly. On the day of the attack, situated to the right of the 79<sup>th</sup> was General Robert Lee Bullard’s experienced 4<sup>th</sup> Division. The battle orders clearly stipulated that Bullard’s role was to fight through the lightly guarded sector in front of him and then turn and envelop Montfaucon from the flank. The 79<sup>th</sup> would keep the Germans busy until Bullard’s men destroyed them. But Bullard misinterpreted the orders.

He did this intentionally.

George Cameron was commander of V Corps. The 79<sup>th</sup> were his men. Bullard was commander of III Corps. The 4<sup>th</sup> were his men. According to Walker in his “Mystery at Montfaucon,” Bullard considered Cameron a rival and despised him. He said, “I’m not going to help George Cameron win any battle laurels.”

So instead of assisting the 79<sup>th</sup> and the men of “Baltimore’s Own” pinned down and dying on their left, Bullard’s forces dashed to glory through lightly defended territory, covering more ground on that first day than any unit in the advance. It looked great as a pin on a map back at headquarters.