

WORLD WAR I POWS FROM WINCHESTER

By Ellen Knight¹

It was during World War I, that young men of Winchester were first held as POWs of a foreign power. They survived, despite deadly experiences.

The first reported POW “of Winchester,” George R. Dahlquist, was actually inducted in New York City but gave his sister’s address on Dunster Lane as his permanent address (and lived there for nearly a decade after the war).

After arriving in France in April of 1918, Pvt. Dahlquist was assigned to the 307th Infantry in the Baccarat sector (south of Strasburg). On July 21, he was part of Captain Blanton Barrett’s patrol ordered to make a daylight raid into No Man’s Land for the purpose of taking prisoners. It was expected to take the Germans by surprise, but the Germans were waiting. Only 21 of the 54 men in the patrol returned.

“Capt. Barrett was killed by his side. Private Dahlquist was hit seven times in different parts of the body and was just going over the last wire on the American side when a shot struck his knee. He was hanging over the wire helpless when the Germans picked him up, endeavored to get from him information regarding the American position but failed. He was sent to Hanover for one night and thence to Strasburg to be operated on, and was there until the Armistice was signed,” the Winchester War Records Committee reported.²

Six days after Dahlquist, Clarence E. Perkins was taken a prisoner. After leaving his father’s dairy farm on Cross Street to go off to war in November 1917, Perkins was assigned to Co. D, 307th Infantry and brigaded with the British. Taken prisoner in July, he was held at Camp Rastatt, Germany. Little was known until Dec. 20, when the local paper announced that he had been freed and “had returned to France well and happy.”

GEORGE BRYANT WOODS

By far, the POW whom Winchester knew the best was George Bryant Woods. His father, George Adams Woods, was well known around town as a businessman, public official, and club man. While his son was at war, he joined the Winchester Machine Gun Company, part of the State Guard.

George B. Woods, born in Winchester in 1896, left his studies at Harvard to enter the service on May 30, 1917, and joined a new branch, the Aviation Section. Woods trained at the MIT Ground School of Aeronautics and went overseas that August. He continued training at the 8th Aviation Instruction Center in Foggia, Italy (where the photos below were taken).



“The Italians have surpassed all expectations and are treating us wonderfully,” he wrote to his father in September.³ Their train had an aeroplane escort, and the town band was on hand to welcome them. He wrote that they would remain there “until completely qualified to carry on night bombing raids by compass.”



Flying was, he declared, “one of the most wonderful experiences I have ever had.” During one test flight in October, they descended, “coming down almost the whole way in ‘tight spirals’ with one wing almost straight towards the ground. At 6,000 feet it is like another world and the mountains and sea in the distance were beautiful in the early morning light.”



At the end of October, he wrote, “It is hard to realize here we are at war because we get practically no news from the outside world.” That changed after January when he was

commissioned a First Lieutenant and was one of thirty men sent that March to France on order of Gen. Pershing. He was assigned to the 28th Aero Squadron, Third Pursuit Group, First Army. He flew a single-control scouting machine—until he crashed.

On May 12, 1918, through a mechanical defect, his plane fell in a tail spin from a height of 400 feet. He wrote home that it was a miracle he got out alive. The plane was completely demolished. Woods suffered a broken ankle, broken jaw, bruises about the face and head, and the loss of four teeth.

CAPTURED

On Aug. 30, having recovered, Woods was sent to the Front on the Toul sector. On Sept. 6, he wrote a letter home describing his first patrol over enemy country in command of his flight. Six days later, he was shot down.

On the first day of the St.-Mihiel offensive, Sept. 12, Woods was leading a flight on a mission to strafe the enemy. His plane was hit by machine-gun fire about ten kilometers inside the German line. The Germans continued riddling the plane with rifle and machine-gun bullets even after Woods had abandoned it. While making his way to cover on foot, he was captured by German infantrymen. A week later, German flyers dropped a note over the aerodrome stating that he had been killed.

His father received two messages almost simultaneously, one from his commanding officer that he was killed or MIA and a cable from the International Red Cross that he was a prisoner, “well, unwounded.” Confined in six successive German prison camps where he reportedly suffered hard treatment, Woods ended up at an officers’ prison in Villingen where he remained until after the Armistice was declared.

Then he was able to write home. “It has all come so suddenly and is so complete that we can scarcely yet appreciate what it means.”

The prisoners were not immediately released, not until the Rhine towns were occupied. “The whole camp, meanwhile, is all stirred up and at a high tension.... I am crazy to get back [home] yet the opportunity to see devastated France, the different fronts, and the occupied territory is something that ought not to be missed.... The completeness of the victory has lessened the disappointment of not having played a greater part.”

On Nov. 23, liberated to roam at large in the city of Villingen, Woods saw welcome signs for the troops over the gates and flags everywhere. The former prisoners left Villingen on Nov. 26. After a couple stops, on Nov. 29, Woods traversed Switzerland on a train with 250 Americans and 400 French and English officers.

It was “the most wonderful day I have ever spent!... Everywhere the Swiss knew that we were coming – even in the smallest villages there were cheering crowds.” At Bern and Zurich they were

given food and presents. "Our complete happiness with such a reception lifted us surely to the Seventh Heaven."

At 1 a.m. they arrived in France and climbed into an American Red Cross train. On Dec. 12, he wrote, "I am back in Paris again having a most wonderful time. Last night we danced." The celebrating continued. He met up with some old Harvard friends who were shocked see him, having heard that he had been shot while trying to escape.

Woods was in Paris to see President Wilson's reception. "It was a general holiday all over the city; tremendous crowds in wonderful spirits and gay Paree outdid herself." He was back in Winchester at the beginning of February, planning to return to Harvard and pick up where he had left off when he went to war.

¹ This article © 2019 is a revision of an earlier article by the author, Ellen Knight, published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on Sept. 18, 2018. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *Winchester's War Records*, 1925.

³ Bryant quotations and photographs from Italy are taken from letters written on various dates and published in *The Winchester Star* on Nov. 23, 1917 and Jan. 17, 1919.