



Artillery Scout: The Story of a Forward Observer with the U.S. Field Artillery in World War I by James G. Bilder.

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In this slim book, author James Bilder writes about his grandfather Len Fairfield's time as an artillery scout in the 124th Field Artillery Regiment (FAR) of the Thirty-Third Infantry Division. Artillery Scouts (later called Forward Observers) worked on the front lines, among the infantry, to spot targets and control the artillery fire directed at them. Unfortunately, as Bilder admits, his grandfather neither kept a diary nor wrote detailed letters home during the war. Consequently, the author has relied on family memories, but he cross-checks them where possible against the division's records and the diaries of other officers. The lack of a bibliography, notes, and index will force subsequent historians to duplicate the author's research to follow up on any particular incident.

As a retired forward observer, I was disappointed that Bilder frequently gets artillery terminology, techniques, and details wrong, despite consulting with members of the Illinois National Guard's Second Battalion of the 122nd FAR, my old unit. While I did not expect much on the wartime evolution of artillery doctrine and procedures, I would like to have learned more here about how Fairfield's job differed from my own seventy years later. It seems that, aside from technological advances (from horses and field telephones to Hummers and radios), not much has changed.

Proceeding chronologically, Bilder opens with an introductory chapter on his family history, including the "meet cute" story of his grandparents encountering via a wrong number. He also sketches the political situation in America and abroad as the war began. Amusingly, a few of the problems that bedeviled Fairfield's training in the United States were much like those I experienced decades later. I am grateful, however, that I never had to train using "pretend" equipment or worry about having enough coal to heat my tent in a brutal winter.

I was intrigued to read that the veteran instructors at the prewar French artillery school where Fairfield's unit spent a month or so took a much more relaxed—and effective—approach to teaching than did the American trainers it had endured earlier. Bilder's grandfather contracted the flu during the 1918 Spanish influenza pandemic, and the author gives some statistics about its effects on units of the 124th during their time at the school. Bilder closes the book with a short epilogue on the postwar lives of Fairfield and his ten children.

Having read World War I memoirs by American, German, and British infantrymen, I was familiar with the mundane details of military life—for example, the awful food and the poor conditions in the troopships en route to Europe. But I learned here that the 124th FAR, with its short-range "French 75" cannon, was usually stationed a mile or so behind the frontlines, far back enough to make its members experience very different from the infantrymen's. And, too, the 124th was only in combat for the last two months of the war, during Allied offensive operations, when getting resupplied with food and ammunition while moving guns forward during the autumn rains posed bigger problems than German artillery.

I was surprised to learn just how ineffective gas warfare was. Apart from the time the 124th advanced past dead German troops caught off guard by American gas shells, Fairfield rarely saw gas vic-

tims. The frequent German gas attacks he mentions caused few if any casualties in his unit. Nor did they kill many of the unit's horses and mules, which were often fitted with "feedbag" gas masks, which I had previously thought were almost useless. Fairfield's own horse, "Annabel," survived several attacks without harm. Though Fairfield gives graphic accounts of many men of the 124th being killed by artillery fire in the last month of the war, Bilder's research shows that the whole regiment sustained only thirty-nine fatalities during the war.

The author's vivid prose style makes it seem almost as if his grandfather is telling the story himself. But parts of the framing narrative are marred by colloquialisms and lack of relevance to the overall narrative. For example, he writes that "In the first-half of the 20th Century, 'Doughboy' was a term to Americans that came to signify *one tough hombre*" (71; my emphasis). Like many recent popular histories, *Artillery Scout* is not well copyedited.¹ But the publisher is to be commended for including two maps showing the 124th's movements during the battles of Saint-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne. (Sadly, the latter misplaces some towns and omits altogether other repeatedly mentioned sites, making it hard to track the regiment during the battle.)

The lack of scholarly apparatus and documentary sources in *Artillery Scout* will frustrate professional historians. But the book is suitable for general readers and undergraduates interested in the personal experience of an artilleryman (as opposed to an infantryman) during the First World War and, besides military matters, in the details of working-class lives of the time.

1. E.g., read "medieval" for "mid-evil" on p. 46.