



# **A Soldier in World War I: The Diary of Elmer W. Sherwood**

*Elmer W. Sherwood, Robert H. Ferrell*

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In April 1917 a sophomore from Indiana University, inspired by the stories of his grandfather's service in the Union army during the Civil War, left school and enlisted with a National Guard unit in Indianapolis that became the 150th Field Artillery Regiment. Before long the young man, Elmer W. Sherwood, found himself in the thick of fighting in France, as his artillery regiment served in combat with the 42nd (Rainbow) Division, including the horrendous Meuse-Argonne offensive that claimed 26,000 American lives.

Sherwood, who described himself as the Rainbow Hoosier, kept a diary of his time overseas, including his experiences in the army of occupation following the war's end. Published by the Indiana Historical Society Press and edited by Robert H. Ferrell, Indiana University distinguished professor of history emeritus, *A Soldier in World War I: The Diary of Elmer W. Sherwood*, captures the words of the Hoosier soldier as he wrote them on the front lines. Corporal Sherwood tells of the hard existence of life in the trenches, including the endless mud that sometimes trapped unwary soldiers for hours at a time and the wretched food he had to eat for nourishment. The book also includes a shipboard diary Sherwood sent home from France shortly after his arrival, which appeared in his hometown newspaper, and his tale of his unauthorized trip to Paris at the war's end prompted by a challenge from a pretty female Red Cross canteen worker.

Gen. Charles P. Summerall, who helped to organize the artillery brigade Sherwood served in, said that the Indiana veteran in his diary "recorded simply and vividly his experiences and impressions through the days of campaigns and battles." What comes through in the pages of Sherwood's writings, Summerall continued, is his sense of humor mixed with the tragedy of life and death on the battlefield. "Even the faithful horses and the almost human guns," the general noted, "receive their full share of credit and affection."

As editor Ferrell points out in his preface to the book, there exists today in Indiana only a handful of surviving veterans of World War I from the millions who marched away to help keep the world safe for democracy. Soon, these too, will be gone, and one of the ways their memory can be preserved is through the writings of men such as Sherwood, who retired to Florida and died in 1979.

ROBERT H. FERRELL is a historian of American foreign policy and American history. He began teaching at Indiana University in 1953. He has written extensively on U.S. presidents, especially Harry S. Truman. Ferrell's books include *Dear Bess: The Letters of Harry to Bess Truman* (1983); *Woodrow Wilson and World War I* (1985); *Ill-Advised: Presidential Health and Public Trust* (1992); *Choosing Truman: The Democratic Convention of 1944* (1994); *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (1994); *The Strange Deaths of President Harding* (1996); *The Presidency of Calvin Coolidge* (1998); and *Truman and Pendergast* (1999).

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