

# LAWRENCE DONALD PEARSON PRIVATE U.S. ARMY

## WORLD WAR I 1896 - 1959

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There's glory waiting on those fields, there's a name for every man  
Who wants to do his level best, just like a Yankee can.

-*Trench and Camp* magazine, 1 May 1918



Lawrence Pearson in uniform, as pictured in the regimental history of the 112th Infantry.

**Lawrence Pearson was born** on February 9, 1896, in Bedford, Pennsylvania, a small railroad town about 50 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. Two years later, his parents Walter and Henrietta welcomed Lawrence's younger sister Helen into the family. Children were outnumbered by adults in the household. They shared a home with their grandmother Sarah, to whom the house belonged, and Aunt Marion. In 1900, the home even had a boarder of unknown age, George Mansfield.

The Pearson house at 228 Thomas Street on the corner of Vondersmith Avenue was only a few minutes' walk from Bedford Public School where Lawrence came of age and earned a spot on the honor roll. Outside of school Lawrence worked as a newsboy, selling newspapers and shouting notable headlines to attract customers. His father's work as a brass finisher only earned about \$600 a year—not a substantial wage even for the time—and any additional income was probably welcome in the Pearson home. Lawrence was still employed as a newsboy at the age of 14. Bedford Township's small population of about 2,200 was deeply intertwined with the Pennsylvania Railroad Company, affectionately known as "Pennsy," and it was probably the railroad that carried Lawrence Pearson to the much larger city of Harrisburg as an adult.

It is not clear when Lawrence relocated to Harrisburg on his own, but he was certainly in that city by the time he enlisted in the Pennsylvania National Guard (PNG) in 1916. As a 20-year-old, he had probably found more lucrative work than selling newspapers, but records for Pearson between 1910 and 1916 are scant. Whether seized by wanderlust, patriotism, curiosity, financial need, or a mixture of these factors, he readily volunteered for the

National Guard five days after President Woodrow Wilson issued a call for military forces to fortify the U.S.-Mexico border.

The strange episode at the time called the "Mexican Emergency" was precipitated by American support for President Venustiano Carranza in the ongoing Mexican Revolution. Rival revolutionary leader Pancho Villa retaliated by raiding the town of Columbus, New Mexico. To protect the border and eventually lead a punitive expedition into Mexico, President Wilson sent over 100,000 American troops under the command of General John J. "Black Jack" Pershing. Newly minted Private Lawrence Pearson would be trekking south as part of the PNG's 8th Infantry Regiment, Company D, though he would have very little time to acclimate before departure.

The mobilization and deployment of so many National Guardsmen from across the country was messy and poorly coordinated. According to PNG historian Steven Schroeder, most units were sent as soon as they could be put in uniform—without any prior training whatsoever—and "many National Guard organizations, inexperienced in mass movements of supplies and personnel on short notice, and over long distances, had considerable difficulty." Fortunately, for Lawrence, the PNG led the National Guard pack when it came to organization and experience. Less fortunately, there was a lack of preparation for the operation on a national administrative scale. PNG troops were soon grumbling about delays and lack of rations induced by poor regular Army planning. ". . . It seemed that from almost the moment that they were mustered into federal service, Pennsylvania Guardsmen discovered that the Army had much less concern for their safety, welfare, and comfort than the politicians and people of the Commonwealth," opines Schroeder.

Upon arrival in Texas, most National Guard units ruefully discovered that they would not be engaged in heroic combat with Mexican guerillas. Border duty was in actuality tedious, dusty, hot, and boring. Regular Army officers were soon grappling with how to keep the less-disciplined Guardsmen occupied, and how to remedy their overall lack of military experience. The solution was six months of drills, maneuvers, exercises, and education. Most of the Guardsmen hated it, though perhaps less so in the case of the better-disciplined PNG. Despite the grumbling, the majority of men came out better soldiers for it. What's more, the training proved prescient: "Few of the Guard's officers and men knew at the time that the training that they received on the Texas border in 1916 was their initial exposure to the types of skills that they would have to master if they were to endure the hazards of combat on the western front in 1918."

U.S. forces withdrew from the border in February and March 1917 when tensions calmed. But Pearson and most Guardsmen had little time to return

home and settle into civilian life. The United States declared war on Germany on April 6, 1917, joining the conflagration that had consumed Europe for three years with little to show but a bloody stalemate.

At the very least, Private Lawrence Pearson would be entering the fight with as much know-how as any American infantryman without actual combat experience. After starting with the Mexican Emergency in Company D, between 1917-1918 he would transfer at various times to the PNG 8th Infantry Regiment's Machine Gun Company and Supply Company. By mid-1917, he had experience as an infantryman, a baker, and a wagoner. He was no longer part of the Pennsylvania National Guard, however. Like the rest of the nation's Guard units, it had been "federalized," absorbed into the U.S. Army. Lawrence Pearson, moving from baker to wagoner in the Supply Company, was now a part of the 112th Infantry Regiment, then mustering at Camp Hancock in Augusta, Georgia.

At least he wouldn't be leaving his fellow Pennsylvanians behind. The 112th was mustering in as part of the 28th Division, nicknamed the "Keystone Division" in part because its foundation was composed of units from the PNG. About 27,000 Pennsylvania men poured into Camp Hancock in September 1917, far outnumbering contingents from other states. They were slowly reorganized into new units, trained, and sent overseas. It took time to prepare millions of men, huge amounts of equipment, and the many ships it took to transport them all across the Atlantic, especially with German submarines attempting to sink them along the route.

In December 1917, Pearson was transferred out of the Supply Company into the Company E roster. Though Supply Company soldiers faced many dangers at the front and were by no means safe, regular infantry companies formed the bulk of the fighting men in a regiment. The transfer would have a profound impact on how much combat young Lawrence Pearson would see in Europe.

It was May 1918 when Pearson and the 112th shipped to Liverpool, England, aboard the RMS *Aquitania*. The nervous passage took exactly a week. Only two months later, the Keystone Division was thrown into the horrors of the Western Front at the Second Battle of the Marne, the brunt of which lasted from July 15 to 18, 1918. Lawrence's regiment had received its first taste of German artillery fire the week before, as companies were stuffed piecemeal into gaps in the French line, but much more was to come. On the night of July 14-15, Company E lost the regiment's first officer of the war, when Lieutenant William Orr from Philadelphia was cut down by shrapnel.

The 112th was held in reserve for much of 2nd Marne, enduring the pounding of German artillery. Despite several dozen casualties from artillery

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and gas, the regiment was not heavily engaged and was ordered to advance in pursuit of the Germans on July 20. They reached the Marne River the next day, marching in at night:

**Weird flares dispelled the gathering darkness now and then, great guns resounded, and shells exploded and crashed like a dozen box cars in collision as the column kept up its creeping pace through [Chateau-Thierry]. . . . Then came the cry of “ Gas!” Down the line it went like wildfire; somebody called “double time,” and doughboys, getting into the fast pace, despite the wearisome hike and heavy equipment, jerked on their gas masks and hustled up the avenue. Shrapnel burst overhead and shells were alighting near the river bank . . .**

Not all was doom and gloom in the 112th, however. Passing through another shell-shattered town, the Pennsylvania soldiers found a half-destroyed hat shop. Soon, many of the soldiers were wearing derbies, felt hats, and silk handkerchiefs. Most were probably discarded by July 25 when Company E lost another lieutenant and three more men, killed by shelling and gas as they continued to advance. Those men were just a few of the 12,000 Americans counted as casualties during 2nd Marne.

But nothing the regiment had yet experienced would compare to what was waiting ahead at Fismes, a small town on the south bank of the Vesle River. On the northern bank lay the town’s smaller companion, Fismette. Other Allied troops had already cleared Fismes, but German snipers and artillery remained in Fismette picking off Americans as the 112th marched into Fismes’ “stench of decaying flesh, of gas-infested woods and of exploding shells” on August 8, 1918. Over the next ten days, Lawrence’s regiment cleared Fismette and experienced almost nonstop shellfire. On August 11, they were hit with special fury:

**In forty-five minutes horses, men and wagons were blown to pieces. Every yard of ground seemed covered by the enemy fire. Three men were killed and more than 50 wounded . . . . One artilleryman, scrambling up a slope to escape the fire, was caught by a shell and disappeared in a mountain of dirt—blown to atoms. . . . [T]here were not enough ambulances available to carry the wounded away, and men were loaded into carts and wagons; everybody in the section volunteered as stretcher-bearers; officers’ nerves, after witnessing such a slaughter before their eyes, were badly shattered. . . . One captain of Infantry, so overcome by the sight of his own men being mowed down as he looked on helpless from a mere funkhole in the hillside, collapsed and cried like a baby, unable to control his feelings.**

The front lines stabilized temporarily in mid-August, and the 112th was on a regular rotation in and out of Fismes and Fismette. On August 27, much of the regiment was in position, with Lawrence and Company E holding the left flank of Fismes on the south bank of the Vesle. The August days were blistering hot, and millions of flies swarmed the doughboys at all times—

especially when they opened their rations to eat. But worse was to come, as “early on the morning of August 27th, hell let loose in Fismette,” according to the regimental history. “The story of Fismette is the story of a fluke. Primarily, it is the old, old story of trying to hold a bridgehead without any support to the right or left.”

The Germans launched a fierce surprise attack on Fismette, quickly cutting it off from the supporting companies across the river in Fismes. The commanding officer of the 112th, Colonel Rickards, had requested permission to withdraw those unprotected units, but had been overruled by a French general. As a result, roughly a thousand German shock troops descended on 230 Keystoners of Companies G and H. In a bitter, disastrous house-to-house fight, the Germans cleared the village with grenades and close-range shooting. Due to an artillery barrage landing between the two towns, Lawrence and Company E were unaware of their comrades’ annihilation until fewer than 30 survivors managed a desperate swim across the Vesle.

Fismette held a special place of horror in the memory of the 112th, but they faced two more months of constant marching, fighting, shelling, and gassing during the St. Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives, the latter of which would result in roughly 100,000 American casualties. All told, the 112th suffered over 2,000 casualties in the fighting from July to November 1918. Company E had two of its lieutenants killed and its captain wounded. In short, by the time Armistice Day ended the fighting on November 11, many of the faces Lawrence Pearson knew were gone.

The regiment remained in France nearly six months after the armistice, finally returning to the United States via Camp Dix, New Jersey, and demobilizing on May 6, 1919, at Camp Dix. A day later, Pearson received his honorable discharge. But he was not yet done with the Army.

Two months later, Pearson rejoined the service on July 7. He likely re-enlisted to help with the “general cleanup” of WWI, and by 1920 could be found as part of the regular garrison at Camp Meade, Maryland, where his occupation was listed as baker. Camp Meade was specifically designed as a mobilization camp, constructed in 1918 and originally intended to be only a temporary wartime facility with a capacity for 50,000 soldiers. Lawrence Pearson’s second enlistment ended on April 3, 1921, when he received an honorable discharge again, receiving credit for 270 days lost under U.S. Military Article of War 107. Where these “270 days lost”—roughly nine months—stem from is unclear, but Lawrence’s later health issues may provide clues.

After his military career ended, Lawrence returned to Bedford and worked as a baker and cook. He was married for a time in the 1920s and 1930s, but divorced by 1940, apparently without children. He began suffering from worsening emphysema and pneumonia, first developed in the muddy, infection-laden trenches of France. On July 8, 1935, Lawrence filed an application for compensation as a veteran for his wartime “bonus” pay, made possible by the World War Adjusted Compensation Act of 1924. Like many

veterans and Americans at large, his financial security was extremely tenuous due to the Great Depression of the 1930s.

The Act promised only to pay out such bonuses in 1945, however. Only three years before Pearson applied, over 40,000 veterans and their families formed a “Bonus Army,” marching on Washington, D.C., and camping in the city to protest the deferment of bonuses when their financial needs were so dire. President Herbert Hoover sent in the military to break up the camp in a violent confrontation on July 28, 1932. It is not known whether Lawrence Pearson attended the march, but he faced better odds when applying in 1935. The following year Congress overrode President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s veto to pass \$2 billion in veteran compensation.

Lawrence was hospitalized in 1940 at a Veterans Administration (VA) Hospital in Coatsville, Pennsylvania, which was intended to provide care for veterans with neuropsychiatric issues. This hospitalization may point to Lawrence suffering from what is diagnosed today as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), although it was commonly referred to as “shell shock” during the First World War. It is difficult to know for certain what Lawrence experienced, but exposure to mass death and terror for months on the Western Front certainly scarred him and many other veterans for life.

Following the death of his father Walter in 1951, Lawrence continued to suffer health issues. In 1956, he was admitted to Pennsylvania’s Butler Veterans Hospital as his emphysema and pneumonia deepened. These illnesses could have stemmed from a number of causes. There is no doubt that he was exposed to chemical gas attacks, the 1918 influenza pandemic, and untold other pathogens and infections in the lice- and fly-infested camps of the war. He stayed at the Butler facility for two years and eight months. Later research has shown that staying in hospitals for years can lead to anxiety, lack of sleep, and depression, which may have only exacerbated any neuropsychiatric issues Lawrence suffered. In 1959, Lawrence Pearson died from complications of his multiple illnesses. He was 63 years old.

While Lawrence Pearson did not have any direct connection to West Virginia, the National Cemetery in Grafton was closest to his hometown of Bedford, Pennsylvania, at the time of his death. He was interred in Grafton National Cemetery on February 4, 1959.



**SOURCES** FULL BIBLIOGRAPHY TO BE INCLUDED IN FINAL VERSION

# SOURCES

## ABOUT THE PROJECT

Full bibliographies will be included in the final draft of each biography, available later in the summer of 2024.

**The West Virginia National Cemeteries Project** is a program of the West Virginia Humanities Council, funded in part by the Veterans Legacy Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs and initiated in 2021. All biographies produced as part of this program are composed by West Virginia high school students, who conduct original research on veterans interred at the Grafton National Cemetery or the West Virginia National Cemetery, both of which are located in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia.

As home to one of the nation's first National Cemeteries—founded shortly after the Civil War—the community of Grafton has longstanding traditions of honoring America's veterans, including the longest continuously celebrated Memorial Day parade in the United States. The Grafton National Cemetery, located in the heart of the city and founded in 1867, is typically the endpoint of each year's parade. Since the Grafton National Cemetery began to run short of space during the 1960s, the West Virginia National Cemetery was dedicated in 1987, just a few miles outside of Grafton.

The West Virginia Humanities Council is proud to thank the following organizations for their participation in the West Virginia National Cemeteries Project: West Virginia Archives and History, the West Virginia University history department, Taylor County Historical and Genealogical Society, Taylor County Public Library, Grafton High School, and University High School.

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