

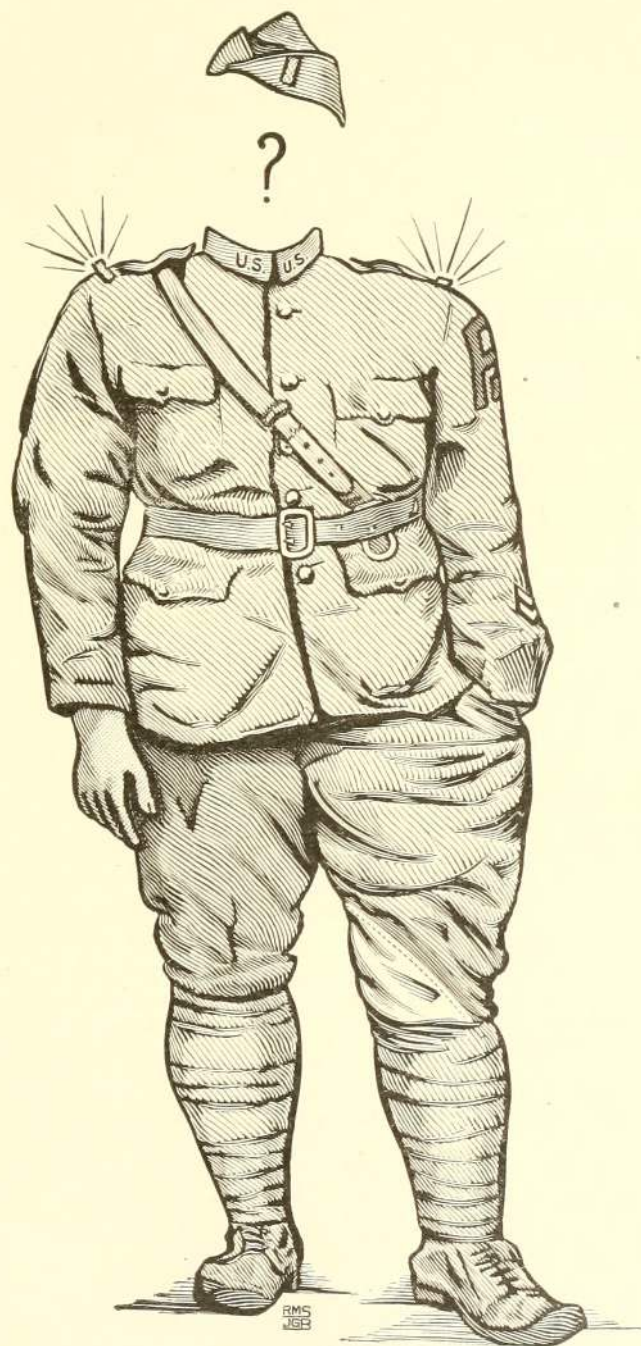
EARL DURBIN WILKINSON

PRIVATE FIRST CLASS
U.S. ARMY

WORLD WAR I
1887 - 1960

WRITTEN BY LOGAN DEEL
UNIVERSITY HIGH SCHOOL
INSTRUCTED BY MEGHAN DUNN

DRAFT THIS IS A WORK-IN-PROGRESS
FOR TEMPORARY DISPLAY ONLY



A mystifying illustration from the war diary of Company C, 23rd Engineers. Placed at the end of the book, perhaps it signified the sense of confusion some soldiers felt upon returning home after the war. *Library of Congress*

Earl Durbin Wilkinson was born in Grafton, Taylor County, West Virginia, on April 2, 1887. His parents were Olive Thompson and Ashby “A. J.” Wilkinson. He had two sisters, Carrie and Geneva Wilkinson. Grafton, the county seat of Taylor County, was a thriving railroad town around the turn of the century, almost doubling in population from 3,159 in 1890 to 5,650 in 1900. This occurred despite the Panic of 1893, a four-year period of economic depression that shuttered thousands of businesses and skyrocketed unemployment rates.

In 1900, the Wilkinson family owned their home and employed a live-in housekeeper, suggesting that they weathered that financial crisis. As Earl grew up in the 1890s, he attended Grafton Grade School where his father was an assistant principal. When Earl entered his teenage years, his father took work as a traveling salesman—possibly selling insurance, since he is listed a decade later as the “state agent” for American Bank Insurance Company.

By 1910, 23-year-old Earl was employed as a freight clerk for the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad (B&O), Grafton’s largest employer and a major economic concern in north-central West Virginia. West Virginia towns along the main lines, such as Clarksburg, Grafton, and Wheeling, had a large numbers of residents employed by the transportation behemoth. As Grafton was the primary B&O hub, clerking there would have been busy and complex. Earl managed inventory, tracked shipments, and maintained records of incoming and outgoing freight.

It is possible that growing up in Grafton led Earl Wilkinson to a lifelong fascination with trains. By the time he filled out his draft card in 1917, at the age of 30, he was living at 405 12th Avenue in Seattle, Washington, working as a brakeman for the Seattle Electric Railway. This municipal transportation conglomerate, which ran extensive trolley services throughout Seattle, had won a 40-year city franchise in 1900—effectively monopolizing all mass transit in the area. Unfortunately, by the mid-1910s it was no longer the ideal time to be working for Seattle Electric. According to one historian, “By 1918 the transportation situation in Seattle had become quite intolerable. Service was hardly better than it had been in 1899 when Stone and Webster began taking over the independent lines—service was erratic, cars were ill maintained and often dilapidated, and roadbed maintenance on many lines had been neglected to the point where it was literally unsafe to run cars over them.” As the train crewman responsible for maintaining and operating the brakes on his trolley, these conditions might have led to harrowing experiences for Earl on crowded Seattle streets.

Whether Earl volunteered or was drafted after the United States joined World War I is unclear. At age 30, he was at the upper limit of the initial draft range

of 18-30 years of age (expanded to 45 in 1918), but his unattached status—no wife, no children—might have rendered him more susceptible to selection by the local draft board. Earl’s draft card was completed and signed on June 5, 1917, the same day that all unregistered men were required to submit their information or face a year in jail.

His induction into the Army and assignment to the 7th Engineer Truck Company, 23rd Engineer Regiment, must have come quickly. Earl would be on a ship headed for France by March 1918, only nine months after signing his draft form. Before then, however, he would have trained at Camp George Meade in Maryland. Constructed specifically for training soldiers during World War I, about 400,000 soldiers passed through the enormous facility over the course of the war. It was located 18 miles from Baltimore, making it possible to move large numbers of men and equipment by rail and ship. At least four engineer regiments (including the 23rd) and seven engineer battalions trained there, though they formed only a fraction of the troop traffic funneling through Meade’s 2,000 buildings.

The 23rd was formed on August 15, 1917, and began shipping overseas in November. Earl would thus be joining a unit with several months’ experience in Europe when he crossed the Atlantic a few months later. Engineers were some of the earliest-deployed and valuable units on the Western Front with so many roads, railroads, bridges, docks, wharves, and buildings smashed by years of war. Even before units of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) were ready to fight in Europe, the engineer units were being called upon to build. Earl Wilkinson was probably assigned to the truck company because of his technical experience with trains, and because the work was likely to be less strenuous for the older recruit.

Training at Camp Meade evidently left time for love, because Earl married Florence Hamilton in Baltimore on February 10, 1918. Their acquaintance, if not their courtship, probably went back much further, since the Hamilton family was also from Grafton. Since the two were the same age and lived in close proximity during their youth, it seems likely. It is also possible that they intentionally chose to be married before Earl shipped overseas.

Earl departed with the 23rd Engineer Regiment aboard the USS *George Washington* (a former German ocean liner that was seized and refitted for military transport) on March 30, 1918. It sailed from Hoboken, New Jersey, likely bound for Brest, France. A naval logbook recorded some of the features of the *George Washington*, noting that the ship had telephones, pianos, Victrolas, and a bulletin board with current newspaper updates. The 23rd was lucky to leave Camp Meade prior to the outbreak of the global influenza pandemic, which resulted in a complete quarantine of the camp.

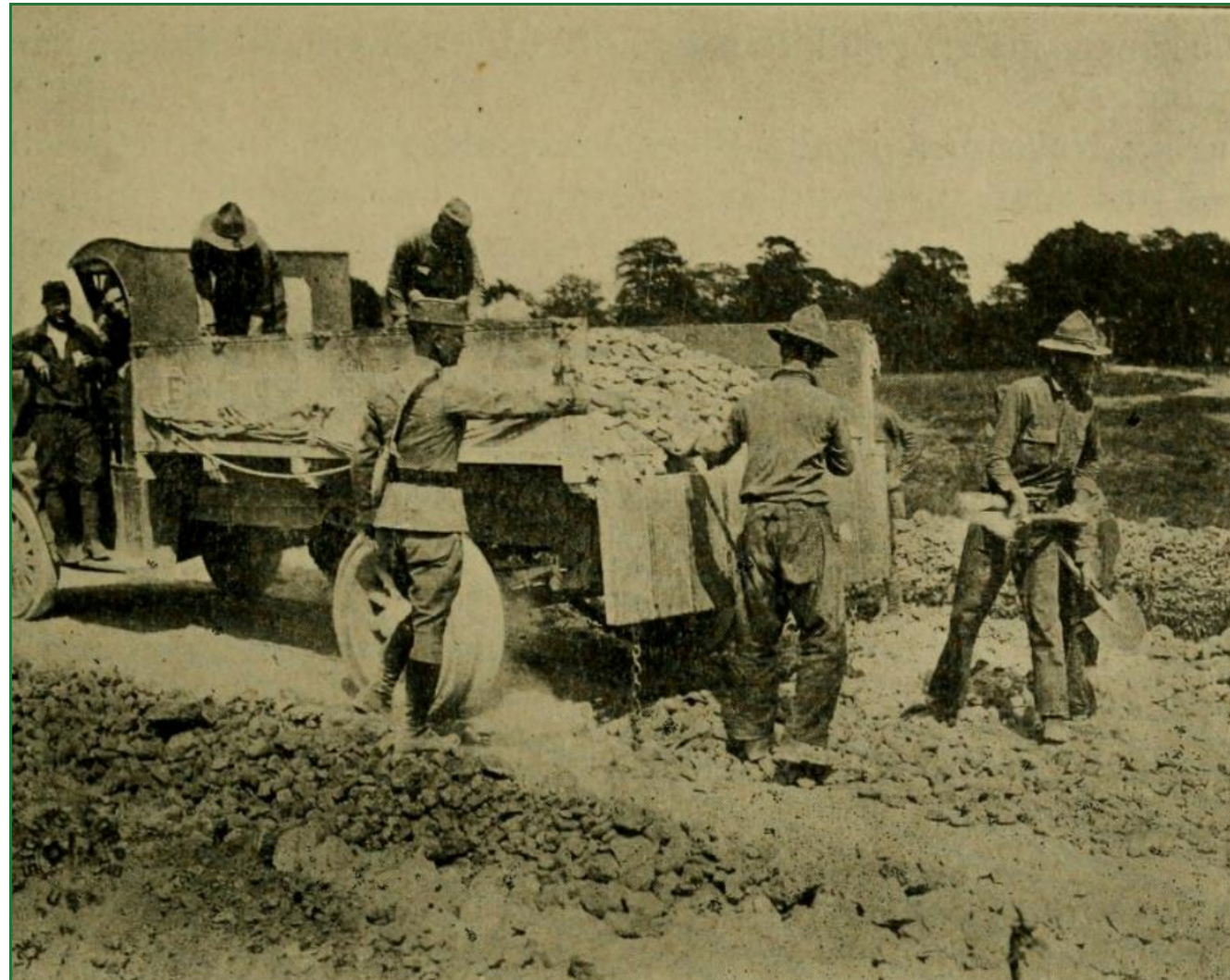
EARL DURBIN WILKINSON

The 23rd Engineers sailed for the Western Front with an unusual composition. Whereas most American engineer units aimed for a nominal strength of 1,660 men, the 23rd had nearly 4,000. Ten truck companies supported them with 310 trucks, plus five wagon companies with 305 wagons. They specialized in the construction of one thing, and one thing only—roads—and they were the only designated regiment with such a specialty, further supplemented by six independent battalions. While at least 25,000 engineers would contribute to road construction in the AEF, it was the 23rd that earned the moniker “The Road Builders of the American Expeditionary Forces.” Rebuilding and maintaining roads destroyed by shellfire or worn out from heavy traffic was one of the AEF’s most essential tasks. War had decimated European agriculture, which meant that roads were essential for keeping American troops supplied with food brought in by ship—to say nothing of other essential war materiel such as weapons, equipment, and ammunition.

Upon arrival, the 23rd Engineers boarded French troop trains bound for St. Nazaire some 150 miles away. Once there, the regiment’s companies were apportioned out to three different military sectors to begin their work. Some companies transferred to the vicinity of Toul where they worked to support the French advance, others went to Bordeaux to help construct port facilities, and the final contingent went to the town of Nevers to help construct roads, airfields, and light railways.

By May 1918, much of the 23rd Engineers had transferred to Toul, in the Lorraine region. The unit came under attack from enemy bomber aircraft, artillery, and gas shells as they worked to repair roadways and ferry supplies from the railroad depot to the 26th Infantry Division operational area. To reduce the chance of attack, much of the road repair work to fix the damage caused during the previous day was done at night or in the early morning. The regiment’s truck companies played a particularly vital role, driving trucks of various types, such as the Mack dump truck, to pour gravel or dirt to fill in shell holes along the roadways. These vehicles drew enemy fire, and the work could be dangerous as artillery and aerial bombs frequently targeted logistical routes behind the front lines.

Much of the 23rd then relocated Breuvannes, Haute-Marne, to repair roads in rear training areas worn out by the constant arrival of new troops. Much of the unit stayed throughout the summer of 1918. The new duty station agreed with the men who enjoyed life away from the front line. While they still worked, they no longer endured enemy attacks and were able to fraternize with the locals. Some members from Company B even staged a play called “Lost in the Trenches.” Following their stay, the 23rd Engineers moved on to various spots along the Western Front, supporting American forces in their campaign throughout the late summer and fall around St. Mihiel, which the AEF—with the support of French forces—retook from the Germans by mid-September 1918.



The 23rd Engineers performing road work, ensuring supplies en route to the front moved quickly and easily. *Library of Congress*

scars of war. Eventually they relocated to Le Mans, France, just southwest of Paris, to begin returning home. From the port city of Brest they embarked for Boston, Massachusetts, in May 1919. At Camp Devens, the 23rd Engineers were discharged from the Army—man by man. Earl’s turn came on July 19, 1919.

The returning soldier rejoined his wife Florence in Grafton. The Wilkinsons, together for the first time since their Baltimore wedding, lived with Florence’s parents at 148 East Bluemont Street, where they would reside for the rest of their lives. Earl went back to work repairing railcars for the B&O Railroad. The couple enjoyed making the short journey to Fairmont for concerts, and in 1922 Florence took a job teaching music at the Fairmont Normal School.

The hardy old engineer dealt with multiple illnesses in the final decade of his life. On June 5, 1960—43 years to the day that he signed his World War I draft papers in Seattle—

Earl Durbin Wilkinson died at the Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center in Clarksburg. Though the Wilkinson house was a mere stone’s throw away from Grafton’s Bluemont Cemetery, Earl’s family elected to inter him in Grafton National Cemetery, near many of his World War I comrades. Florence passed away 18 years later and is buried alongside him, his “war bride” to the last.

The 23rd Engineers played a vital role in maintaining roads for important battles, including working on the Meuse-Argonne front, a region that would be part of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive. More than one million American soldiers participated in this last major Allied offensive of the war, lasting from September 26 through November 11, 1918. The AEF’s goal was to break through the layered defense built by German troops over four years of occupying the region between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest.

In addition to road work, the 23rd placed searchlights along the road in the Meuse-Argonne region to protect against nighttime air attacks. Support from the 23rd helped the AEF to move forward and keep pressure on demoralized German units, as support for the Kaiser’s war waned in Berlin and elsewhere. The bloody Meuse-Argonne, which claimed 26,000 American lives and wounded more than 90,000 troops, ultimately pushed the war to its conclusion.

Following the armistice on November 11, the 23rd Engineers continued to be essential. Many engineer units were retained for months after the German surrender to continue rebuilding French railroads and roads and repair the



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.

Please refer comments or questions to the West Virginia Humanities Council
1310 Kanawha Blvd E, Charleston, WV 25301
wvhuman@wvhumanities.org
www.wvhumanities.org
304.346.8500



Veterans Legacy Grant Program
Department of Veterans Affairs
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