

Seacliff resident recalls end of W.W. I -- he was there at Austrian surrender

by Mark Marinovich
County News reporter

Claude Johnson remembers United States' victory in World War I like none other. He was there.

In the comfort of his Seacliff home, Johnson lit his pipe, sunk deep into his chair, and recounted the last days of the Great War. An alert, contemplative gentleman of 84, Johnson told County News what really happened during that cold November in Europe 59 years ago.

Johnson was 25 when the army drafted him. He and his brother George "sold" their successful laundry business to "a crook who never

paid a cent." And it was off to Camp Sherman, Ohio, where temperatures were dipping as low as 18 below zero.

"We lived in tents. . . It was so cold, some of the boys started deserting. But the colonel was very kind, and relieved us of all drills."

His luck didn't last long, though. A new, tougher colonel was sent in to whip the recruits into shape. The first day, Col. William Wallace ordered rifle practice. "We lost men to frostbite," said Johnson. But the rough treatment continued. "Once he fined me a month's salary for a missing button that wasn't missing!"

Johnson, by then a sergeant, and his regiment of 3,700 were sent to

France. General "Black Jack" Pershing, French Premier Georges Clemenceau, and Italian Premier Vittorio Orlando reviewed the troops and decided the men would be the United States' best representatives in Italy, where morale was low and losses to the Austrian army high.

"We were greeted in Turen, Italy, by thousands of women who poured baskets of flowers on our heads. . . We marched through Milan and Turen through six inches of flowers. King Emanuel saw us and liked us. . . we marched all over Italy.

"Our job was to get them back into order. They were completely demoralized."

The regiment marched and marched. Soon Johnson and the men grew bored and wondered if there would be no variation in their daily routine.

"Then came the time when we were about to go to the front, where we knew there was a battle. Colonel Wallace assembled us one night and said, 'There's one thing we've sadly neglected. We've had no practice at marching at night so we've got to get busy and do it.'"

For practice, night after night the troops were marched out of Treviso, the town they were stationed in. At daylight, the men were broken up into small companies and marched back into the city by different routes.

Then the offensive took place, at the Piave River, seven miles outside of Treviso.

"The English soldiers set out a pontoon bridge across the Piave," said Johnson. "They launched artillery across the river and split the Austrian line. We (the Americans) went across the river and chased them for seven days and seven nights. They threw down their guns and even clothes so they could retreat faster."

At one point, Johnson and the men marched for 31 miles with 75 lb. packs on their backs, setting a world marching record.

(Continued on page 6.)

Johnson's regiment of 3,700 took 186,000 prisoners

(Continued from page 1)

"On the first day we shot down an aviator. . . and on him we found a copy of a report he had made. It said he had counted 10,000 soldiers entering the city of Treviso. He counted them every day."

Johnson said Colonel Wallace had employed an old Civil War tactic -- deceiving

enemy scouts by marching the same troops out of camp at night, and back into camp during daylight.

Finally, the men caught up with the retreating Austrians at the Tagliamento River, the boundary between Austria and Italy.

"I stood right there next to Colonel Wallace and saw this white flag waving on a

stick, and over came six or seven Austrian generals who begged the Colonel not to attack them. They'd thrown away all their guns. . . They said they'd sign an armistice the next day. My Colonel didn't trust them so he said, "No, you go back. We're going to attack you at five in the morning!" "

The next morning, November 4, 1917, the Austrians surrendered.

"It's a historical fact that my little regiment of 3,700 men took 186,000 Austrian prisoners."

Meanwhile, rumor reached America that the war was over. But in fact, the main principal in the war, Germany, was still very strong.

"We seized freight trains and prepared to enter Germany from the south, where there were no defenses," Johnson said.

Kaiser Wilhelm had received word that 10,000 Americans had forced Austria to surrender.

"When he heard that, he decided the gig was up. . . and surrendered. . . That was November 11, the official Armistice Day."

Johnson documented most of his experience with photographs from a Brownie camera, which he still has. He also saved newspaper clippings.

What has he learned from his experience? "War is futile. I don't understand why things aren't worked out by arbitration. . . In five minutes after we took those Austrians prisoners, we were trading cigarettes and medals."



LETTER FROM MUSSOLINI hangs in the Seacliff home of Claude Johnson. The local W.W.I veteran received the letter when he was stationed in Italy with the American forces.

— County News photo.