

Matthew Rice – Company A, 165th INF Regiment – WWI

Listed in 1917 Rainbow Roster:

RICE, MATTHEW, Pvt., 242 E. 60th St., New York City

He lived just west of 2nd Avenue near the 2nd Avenue off-ramp of the 59th Street Bridge, which is now called the Ed Koch Queensboro Bridge.

Rice is listed on a large plaque in the armory that records all those in the 165th during WWI who received decorations such as the DSC, Croix de Guerre and MOH. It's noted that Rice received the Croix de Guerre twice.

In a program printed for the Annual Reunion of the Old 69th at the Waldorpf Astoria Hotel in January, 1940, where the movie "The Fighting 69th" was premiered, Matthew Rice is listed as being seated at Table #7. A photo of that event does not show the location of that table.

We have no other records of Rice in our archives, unfortunately. But he is mentioned briefly in Father Duffy's book, "Duffy's Story."

Rice was wounded during the Argonne Offensive. Here are some of the things that Fr. Duffy wrote about the battle and the 165th involvement.

"...jumped off at 8:30 in the morning" [10/14/17] at battle of Landres-et.St. Georges. (pg. 268)

"Lieutenant Colonel Donovan was assigned by Colonel Mitchell [Regimental Commander] to have general change of the situation at the front." (pg.268)

(Donovan would remain in command of the offensive even after being severely wounded on October 12th with a rifle bullet "going through the [a leg] bone and rendering him helpless," Duffy wrote on page 273. Ultimately, he did relinquish command and allowed himself to be evacuated from the battlefield when the attack ultimately became a stalemate.)

(Duffy noted that Donovan would go into battle wearing all of his "signs of rank" as opposed to what officers are supposed to do "to avoid being made a mark for sharpshooters." Donovan did it "so that none of his men could miss knowing who he was." (pg. 271))

"There is no tougher experience than that of advancing over considerable distance under fire. The trouble is that men are being shot down by an enemy they cannot see." (pg. 269)

Earlier he wrote of the bad weather conditions noting that "a large part of the time it rained steadily," which made road conditions "abominable."

“Facilities for communication with the front were poor throughout the whole action. The wire, strung along the wet ground, were all the time getting out of order; horses were few and runner had to make their way back through seas of mud.” (pg. 267)

Days after the battle became a stalemate after great sacrifice, Duffy wrote: “Nobody wants to talk very much about the recent battle. It was a nightmare that one does not care to recall. (pg. 282)

Noting some of the individual heroic actions, Duffy wrote” “The battalion runners received great praise from everybody, as they had to take untold risks in moving from place to place without shelter.” (pg. 282)

“Liaison men [runners] have to take untold risks in action of this kind. Of Major Kelly’s group in the sunken road nearly all were killed or wounded. Young Eddie Kelly (killed), Cody (killed), White (a hero in every battle), Liebowitz (wounded) and Matty Rice worked their way from Kelly to Bootz or from Kelly to Donovan.” (pg. 283)

It’s difficult to tell from Duffy’s book the exact location of Major Kelly and Bootz.

On page 273, however, he writes: “The attackers finally fell back a short distance to the deep cut in the road. Our second attempt to break through had failed. Major Kelly with Lieutenant Connelly and parts of companies A and C held this place as a vantage point to make a third attempt in the morning. Bootz was in charge on the left of the main road.”

On page 276, Duffy wrote: “Landres et St. Georges is our Fredericksburg and the Kriemhilde Stellung our Marye’s Heights.”

“...I have no doubt that our fellows could have broken through, but we have become too weak in man power to exploit an initial victory in a way that should be done to make the most of it. Three weeks in line under such conditions do not fit men for the hardships of a sustained advance.” (pgs. 291-292)

My Observations:

Major Kelly, called “Dynamite Mike,” led the 1st BN during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

Major Henry “Pappa” Bootz commanded Company C. Bootz had been cited for valor at Luneville and the Ourcq.

The map of the 42nd Division in the Battle of Landres –Et-St. Georges shows 1/165 near the forest line below Hill 263 on October 14th. (Pg. 153: “A Doughboy with the Fighting 69th” by Albert M. Ettinger and A. Churchill Ettinger. Albert served with the 69th in WWI. Churchill is his son.)

Duffy indicates that Bootz “was in charge on the left of the main road.”

Duffy's reference to the main road may be the one behind the 1/165th. That road is near where COL Mitchell had his Regimental HQ in Exermont.

The distance between the 1/165th position on October 14th and Regimental HQ at Exermont, by my measure on the attached map, is a little over 3000 meters.

The October 13, 1952 article in *The Reporter Dispatch*, which ironically was 34 years after the Argonne Offensive, indicates that Rice "crossed a level field swept by machine gun fire to deliver a message from his regimental commander and the commander of the an assault battalion and received a return message"

The article also reports Rice did a return run even though already wounded.

Since Rice's Croix de Guerre citation is the official account of his battlefield valor, it would seem that he made two trips back and forth from a position near the forest near Hill 263 back to the Regimental HQ at Exermont.

On another section of that battlefield, on October 14, 1918, BG Douglas MacArthur, who commanded the 84th Brigade during the battle and was assigned the task of taking Hill 288 near Cote de Chatillion estimated that there were "200 machine guns in the Cote de Chatillion, pinning down all four of the battalions of his brigade that he had put into the line." (pg. 46, U.S. Army Chemical Corps Historical Studies Gas Warfare in World War I, The 42nd Division Before Landres-et-St Georgers. Published by the U.S. Army Chemical Corps Historical Office, Washington D.C., March, 1960.)

If the 83rd Brigade and 165th was confronted with similar German MG defenses in its sector, even at half that number, the machine gun fire that swept the battlefield must have been horrific.

No doubt that Matthew Rice was heroic in his actions and certainly deserved the awards and citations he received.

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