

Earl U.B. Richards: A Buxton Veteran

1898-1974



Figure 1. Earl U.B. Richards in his youth.

By Eliza Rudalevige

Over 32,000 Mainers served in the United States military during World War I. More than 1000 of these brave men never returned home.¹ Earl U.B. Richards was one of the lucky ones who survived and returned to Maine to continue the life that was interrupted by the war. I chose Earl U.B. Richards because he enlisted young, survived a gas attack, and went home to live his life in full despite the handicap of a lung injury. For him, serving in the war was not his whole life, but rather a small part of it, albeit a small part that had lasting effects. He was also part of an engineering corps that served with the Yankee Division, which shows how important technology is in the scheme of war. Richards proves that it was possible to lead a full life after serving in the military, but that it is irreparably altered for those that experience combat.

Early Life

Born in Buxton, Maine in 1898 to Melvin and Rose Richards, Earl U.B. Richards lived in a crowded-- and most likely very noisy-- home on River Road. He was the eldest of five children all within a six year age range and the household also included a nurse, Georgianna Bean, until all of the children reached adolescence. Listed youngest to oldest, Earl's siblings were as follows: Burleigh, Thynes, Agnes, and Thora.² All five attended public school and were able to read and write, although Earl only completed through the eighth grade.³ They most likely attended the Shadigee School that stood on the corner of River Road and Back Nippen and attended church at the Tory Hill Meeting House.⁴ After leaving school, Richards worked on a farm.⁵ Both his mother and father were born in Maine and Earl himself never strayed far from

home; in fact, he inhabited the same forty square miles his entire life, excluding his service overseas.



Figure 2. The Tory Hill Meeting House

Enlistment and Military Service

Richards enlisted at the Hollis Center at the age of 19 on July 21st, 1917 and reported for service only four days later. He became a private first class on August 20th.⁶ He trained at Camp Devens in Massachusetts and then was assigned to the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery Division.

When the Maine artillery corps companies were federalized and redistributed, he was transferred to the 101st Engineers and assigned to the 26th Division-- the famous "Yankee Division."⁷ The Yankee Division was a New England infantry division of National Guard troops that was part of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF) and the first full division to arrive in France.⁸

Richards' experience with farm work helped him carry out military duties such as handling the

horses and mules used to haul large guns. Earl Richards' youngest son, Alan, recalls that his father told him that he shared water with the mules when supply was short.⁹



Figure 3. Members of the Yankee Division

As part of the 101st Engineers, 26th Division-- nicknamed the "E" Company-- Earl U.B. Richards sailed aboard the Andania to England and then across the channel to France aboard La Marguerite. The E Company stayed one night at a camp at Le Havre overlooking the mouth of the Seine River and neighboring barracks for German prisoners. They then travelled to the town of Rolampot, where they were housed in the homes, barns, and sheds of French villagers and affectionately known as "genies." At Rolampot, the E Company worked to clear the debris and rubbish as well as rebuild the roads of the town, which had been lacking its menfolk since the beginning of the war. After this work was completed, the company began to do infantry drills

and engineering work. The first engineering project completed of a large size was the building of barracks in Le Havre and the construction of a drainage system that diverted a nearby stream.¹⁰

Soon after the completion of the barracks, detachments of Company E soldiers began to be dispatched to different locations. It is unclear which one of these detachments Earl U.B. Richards was a part of, but he did serve in the Champagne Marne defensive sector after the Champagne Marne Defensive operation that had occurred in June and July.¹¹ He was also present at the Battle of Saint-Mihiel in the September of 1918 and his division acted as part of the Meuse Argonne Offensive later the same month, which was a major part of the final Allied offensive of World War I and also the second deadliest battle in American history, following only the Battle of Normandy.¹² As son Alan Richards says, “They marched across France.” It was at one of these battles that Richards most likely suffered a gas attack, leaving him with permanent lung damage. Alan Richards also recalls a story his father told him about another brush with death; a shell landed feet from Earl, but did not explode.¹³

Because of his infirmity, Earl U.B. Richards was declared no longer fit to serve and was honorably discharged on April 24th, 1919.¹⁴



Figure 4. United States troops at the Meuse-Argonne Offensive.

Life After the War

After his time in the war came to a close, Richards returned to Buxton to live with his family, who had by then moved to Salmon Falls Road. The family had completely rearranged itself in his absence. His sister Thora had married and was now Thora Coombs, while every single one of his siblings had become teenagers, even the youngest, Burleigh. By 1920, Richards procured a job as a motor truck driver, his first employment since military service.¹⁵ The same year, at age 22, he married Ada A. Grant, who soon gave birth to their first daughter, Helen.¹⁶ Helen was followed by Gertrude, Melvin, and finally, Alan. When the need for labor at the newly built West Buxton Dam began to grow, Earl Richards acquired a job as a hydroelectric operator that allowed him to better support his family.¹⁷ Although he struggled with permanent lung damage and was under the care of a doctor for the rest of his life, Richards worked full-time and refused to accept a military pension.¹⁸ Ada, his wife, passed away in 1953 at the age of 53.



Figure 5. The West Buxton Dam.

Earl U.B. Richards died on February 12th, 1974 in the same town in which he was born, almost exactly fifty-six years after he first went into battle.¹⁹ His cause of death was old age and lung infirmity. His last living child, Alan Richards of Gorham, visits his grave regularly. The younger Richards says that his father was a stoic man who very rarely mentioned his time at war and focused on supporting his family.²⁰ Earl U.B. Richards' name is also inscribed on the Buxton/Hollis Memorial Bridge as an homage to his brave service.²¹



Figure 6. Alan Richards visits his father's grave.



Figure 7. The Buxton-Hollis Memorial Bridge.

Endnotes

1. Maine Military Records, 1910-1920. "Earl U. Richards."
2. 1910 U.S. Census
3. Maine Military Records, 1910-1920. "Earl U. Richards."
4. Ibid.
5. Robert Lowell, "Memorial Day: Remembering a Buxton 'Yank'."
6. Maine Military Records, 1910-1920. "Earl U. Richards."
7. Adjutant General Military Records, 1631-1976, "Men Transferred From 1st Maine Heavy Field Artillery to 101st Engineers and Assigned to the 26th Division"
8. Ibid.
9. Lowell, "Memorial Day."
10. United States Army, "History of the 101st United States engineers : American expeditionary forces, 1917-1918-1919," 20-49.
11. Maine Military Records, 1910-1920. "Earl U. Richards."
12. Ibid.
13. Lowell, "Memorial Day."
14. Maine Military Records, 1910-1920. "Earl U. Richards."
15. 1920 U.S. Census
16. 1930 U.S. Census
17. Maine Military Records, 1910-1920. "Earl U. Richards."
18. Lowell, "Memorial Day."
19. Maine Death Index, "Earl U. Richards."

20. Lowell, "Memorial Day."

21. USM Digital Commons, "Buxton, Maine: Buxton/Hollis Memorial

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