

1918 Sinking of the *Otranto* Leads to Purchase of The Doughboy Monument for Berrien

By Skeeter Parker

Just over a month before World War I ended on November 11, 1918 Berrien County experienced the horrors of war in a way that probably no other county in the United States has in the loss of its homefolk. Twenty-five young men from every town that was part of the county at the time – Adel, Alapaha, Cecil, Enigma, Lenox, Milltown (now Lakeland), Nashville, Ray City, and Sparks – lost their lives on October 6, 1918 when the British transport ship on which they were traveling, the *Otranto*, was struck by another British ship, the *Kashmir*, during a storm a day away from port in the Irish Sea. According to the New Georgia Encyclopedia the storm had gale-force winds and an ensuing wave struck the *Kashmir* causing it to veer hard and ram the *Otranto*.

ROLL CALL OF THE *OTRANTO* DEAD FROM BERRIEN COUNTY

Pvt. Hiram Marcus Bennett, Sparks; Pvt. Jim Melvin Boyett, Milltown; Pvt. John Guy Coppage, Cecil; Pvt. Rufus Davis, Sparks; Pvt. Mack Hilton Easters, Lenox; Pvt. George Bruce Faircloth, Milltown; Pvt. Lafayette Gaskins, Nashville; Pvt. Bennie E. Griner, Nashville; Pvt. Lester A. Hancock, Alapaha; Pvt. Robert J. Hancock, Lenox; Pvt. Arthur Harper, Enigma; Pvt. William P. Hayes, Alapaha; Pvt. Thomas H. Holland, Adel; Pvt. George H. Hutto, Adel.

Pvt. Ralph Knight, Ray City; Pvt. Benjamin F. McCranie, Adel; Pvt. James M. McMillan, Nashville; Pvt. William McMillan, Enigma; Pvt. John Franklin Moore, Adel; Pvt. Charlie S. Railey, Alapaha; Pvt. Tillman W. Robinson, Enigma; Pvt. Thomas J. Sirmons, Nashville; Pvt. Shellie Lloyd Webb, Ray City; Pvt. Joel Wheeler, Nashville; Pvt. William C. Zeigler, Sparks.

These unsuspecting young men departed from Fort Screven on September 25, 1918 headed for England for "intensive training". They were all part of the replacement draft.

Articles about the sinking appeared in *The Nashville Herald* in the years to follow, including "Thrilling Story By *Otranto* Survivor (James G. Wright)" in the January 3, 1919 edition and "The *Otranto* and Monument" written by Wyna G. Tygart in two parts in the June 25 and July 2, 1959 editions. Both of these gave splendid details about the rescue efforts which were perilous themselves. Internet searches have also revealed details about the sinking from other eye witnesses.

Fund Drive Begins

As if the flu pandemic in 1918 were not enough, the pall of death hung even heavier over Berrien County at a time when the rest of the country was celebrating the end of hostilities in WWI. However, the local citizenry was determined that the soldiers' names would never be forgotten, as it says on the Doughboy monument "LEST WE FORGET." A monument fund was announced on the front page of *The Nashville Herald* on November 29, 1918, and readers were told "Every public spirited man, woman and child in Berrien county should contribute liberally to this glorious cause."

Because most of the Nashville newspapers from the 1920s were destroyed or missing when microfilming was done, details surrounding the Doughboy statue's coming to Nashville mostly come from various internet sources. According to one of those sources the statue was ordered in the spring of 1921 and erected in the middle of Marion Avenue in late July or August 1921. Different sources also say that while the monument was installed in 1921 it remained under covers until 1923 when "payment for the sculpture and impressive base was completed."

This is borne out by a January 18, 1923 article in *The Nashville Herald* in which the writer said: "It is an everlasting shame and a matter to cause the people of these three counties to feel badly over that this handsome memorial now stands veiled, because it is not paid for." The reader should keep in mind that in October 1918 Cook and Lanier Counties had not been formed yet and were still part of Berrien.

1939 – Doughboy on the Move

As stated earlier, the statue originally stood at the intersection of Davis and Marion. Based on available pictures it would have been centered up with the front doors of the old Berrien Drug Store building which now houses the Landmark shop. When Davis Street became part of state highway 11 in 1939, the monument was deemed an impediment to the flow of traffic, so it was moved to its current location.

A crew from Clark Memorial Works in Macon began dismantling the Doughboy monument on February 28, 1939, and it took three days to complete the move and reassembly because of frequent interruptions by rain. The monument was disassembled into three pieces, and one of the workers who helped in the original installation 18 years earlier was on hand to help move it to its new home.

First of Its Kind

Designed by Ernest Moore Viquesney, the Doughboy statue in Nashville was the first of its kind, depending on which source is quoted. The statue was "shown in a national exhibition and displayed in Americus, Georgia while Viquesney worked on the one ordered for delivery to Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina." The statue for Furman was the first installed, but the one in Nashville is the "original." More than 150 copies of the statue were created for municipal memorials across the nation according to the Smithsonian Institute.

There are conflicting accounts as to the cost. The original "monument fund" articles in *The Nashville Herald* stated a cost of \$1375 for a granite monument that was fourteen feet high. There was no mention of the Doughboy statue, but that could have been added in later editions which are no longer available. A biography of Viquesney on the internet, however, says "Apparently, the Doughboy's earliest sale was the \$5,000 order for Nashville, GA, in August of 1920."

Many Have Forgotten

Alas, unlike the words engraved on the monument "LEST WE FORGET", many of us have forgotten the sacrifices made by so many of our servicemen. Few today even know of the Otranto's sinking and the loss of lives that affected our county in such a deep way. When we look at the monuments on our courthouse lawn and elsewhere, maybe we need to do more than just "see" the granite or marble before us.