

PENNSYLVANIA

A HISTORY

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LIEUTENANT WILSON BAUGHMAN GAITHER was born in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, June 8, 1892, the son of Paul H. Gaither, lawyer, and Ida (Steck) Gaither (see preceding biography).

He received his elementary training in the public schools of his native town and was graduated from the high school there in the class of 1911. He then entered Lafayette College, Easton, Pennsylvania, whence he was graduated in 1915. Upon leaving college, having selected the law as his profession, he registered as a student with the law firm of Gaither & Whitten; and at the same time entered upon a course of study of law at the University of Pittsburgh.

He early enlisted in the United States Service in the World War, and in August, 1917, was sent to the Officers' Training Camp at Fort Oglethorpe, Georgia, and later transferred to the Coast Artillery training corps at Fortress Monroe, Virginia, where in November he received a commission as first lieutenant of the Coast Artillery Corps. He was in the first squad from this training school to be sent to France. On the way, Lieutenant Gaither stopped at his home, and on December 1, 1917, appeared in court and there, in the uniform of the service, he was sworn in as a member of the Westmoreland County bar.

Before going to the front Lieutenant Gaither was commander of Battery D, 56th Coast Artillery Corps, in France, but was later transferred and made an observer in the air service. He rendered valuable service as an observer at St. Mihiel and in the Argonne. He died October 17, 1918, from wounds received in action, and the following letter to his parents from Captain Pettee, described the details of his injuries which resulted in his death:

Our headquarters was in a big chateau in the village of Montfaucon, northwest of Verdun. Montfaucon was built on the crest of a very steep and high hill which stood up out of the plain far above everything for miles. The chateau was on the extreme northern tip of the hill, facing the enemy, and was the only house in the town that could boast four walls. It was the same chateau which sheltered the German Crown Prince during the first battle of Verdun and contained a concrete tower in which was built a tremendous periscope through which that notable watched the defeat of his armies.

The enemy at this time was fighting, as he had never fought before, about three thousand yards north of Montfaucon. Attack met counter-attack many times every day. It was during that period of continual pounding that resulted in the rout of the German army.

The liaison office was on the ground floor of the chateau. It was a small room in the center of the building. Six officers, including your son and myself, lived there constantly. There was little time to sleep in those days, so that we stole what rest we could in the same place that we worked.

Montfaucon was constantly under enemy observation and artillery fire. Our chateau, however, miraculously continued to survive, although we did lose the little that remained of our roof. We felt comparatively safe, as the walls were thick and only a shell dropping at a very steep angle could possibly harm us.

That is exactly what happened. I had undressed (for the first time in two weeks) and had rolled up in my blankets on the floor. The other five officers including Lieutenant Gaither, were busy in the room. There was a crash. The room filled with smoke and I heard the others running out. I shook off the blankets and started after them, but tripped over the prone body of Lieutenant Gaither. I discovered that he had a bad cut on the side of his head which was bleeding profusely. A first-aid packet served to stop the bleeding and I carried him out. The headquarters surgeon was there a few minutes later and a suitable dressing was provided. Lieutenant Gaither soon regained consciousness. He did not know what happened at all. He complained of feeling sick, but he had but one idea. He wanted to get back to his "outfit" and "get to work." He kept saying that his outfit was short of men and that he could not be spared. That he must go back immediately. About this time we discovered that the cause of our disaster had been a gas shell—mustard gas.

So slowly does this vaporize that we had not noticed it before. Before the ambulance arrived, all six of the officers who had been in that room were blind from a rather painful swelling of the eyelids. It was then that the doctor confided in me his fear of a gas infection setting in Lieutenant Gaither's wound, which by itself he did not consider very serious. I have since learned that is what happened.

We were all taken to the field hospital that night. Lieutenant Gaither was sent out immediately, and I heard nothing more from him until I arrived here at Nantes and heard from his sister.

He died a soldier's death and in a worthy cause. You have every reason to be proud of your son and of his great sacrifice. I know that he would not have it otherwise.

The following tribute is from the set of resolutions adopted by the Westmoreland Law Association at its annual meeting January 13, 1919, in memory of Lieutenant Gaither:

Though superbly equipped to pursue the arts of civil life, Lieutenant Gaither was quick to volunteer in the service of his country. By nature he loved the paths of peace. He answered the call to arms, not to achieve military glory, but actuated only by a high sense of duty. But in the conflict he shrank from no danger.

Lieutenant Gaither was a member of the First Presbyterian Church of Greensburg. He led a clean, wholesome life, and had the highest ideals and aspirations. He was unassuming and modest to a fault and yet when aroused by the call to arms, the resolute Huguenot blood which coursed through his veins came to the surface. It was aptly said by a fellow-member of this bar—"how fitting, after all, it was that this genial smiling Huguenot gentleman should have died gloriously for France."

When the aged pass away we are consoled with the thought that their work is finished. But when, as here, a youth endowed with rare attributes of body, mind and soul, is taken at the very threshold of a career of promise we are prone to be cast down with a sense of the loss to society; and yet in offering up the Ancient Sacrifice, only the first of the flock—those without spot or blemish—were acceptable. And it may be fitting still that in laying this sacrifice upon the altar of freedom, it should be required that only America's best blood would be received.

Dr. Thomas S. March, superintendent of the Greensburg public schools, in a letter to the Greensburg "Morning Review" of November 20, 1918, among other things, said:

I had known Mr. Gaither well for many years and had followed his career with interest in school, college and university, and I was also deeply interested in his work in the army.

Wilson Gaither was a man of more than ordinary ability. When occasion required he was brilliant. His school and college records show that in subjects in which he was deeply interested, he ranked among the leaders of his class. His mind was keen and active. He was fond of meditating upon social and ethical questions, which ordinarily do not interest young men, except those of large intellectuality. When he

took up the study of the law, he did so with such intensity as to give promise of success in his chosen profession.

Below is a letter received by Mr. Gaither from members of Battery D, 56th Regiment, C. A. C.:

Dear Mr. Gaither:

The news of Lieutenant Gaither's death, contained in your telegram, came as a great shock to Battery D.

We had heard rumors at the front in France, but refused to believe that our well-loved officer had been taken from the world.

He came to us as battery commander while we were at Clermont-Ferrand, and most efficiently commanded the battery during the tedious period of intensive training in the little village of Lempdes, district of Puy-de-Dome.

Lieutenant Gaither through his cheerful disposition, good judgment, and absolute fairness in all things became instantly popular and before his transfer to the air service every man had grown to consider him as a friend. His favorite saying, which later became a watchword to the battery, was "Boys, we are going thru hell so we will go in singing, and come out with a smile." It surely was remembered by us, while we were in action. Lieutenant Gaither was efficient as an officer and preserved excellent discipline but it was his purity of character and loyalty to his duties which remained with us as our inspiration, when later we faced the enemy who robbed the world of this man—whose type forms the back bone of civilization. He encouraged his men in clean sports and led us in war songs which made our marches less tiresome. He purchased a violin and joined in our musical entertainments evenings, setting an example which was followed by the regiment.

Later we heard of his excellent work as an aerial observer attached to our Brigade. Some of us met him on the road from Epinonville to Eclisfontaine on the Argonne-Meuse Front. He was delighted to see us and mentioned having flown over our camp that morning.

It is terribly sad that he can return to the loved ones of whom he told us—only in spirit.

Battery D, 56th Regiment, C. A. C. of the American Expeditionary Forces, sends to you its most sincere condolences and sympathy. Rest assured that a loving memory of your son will always remain in the hearts of all who were privileged to know him.

Very Sincerely,

BATTERY D, 56TH REGIMENT, C. A. C.

Here follow signatures of 156 members of Battery D.

The following are extracts from letters written by men who had been under the command of Lieutenant Gaither:

I saw him again at Cheppy, a little village west of Montfaucon in the Argonne about October 10. He came up the road in an automobile with a Major, and as the road was blocked by a convoy, his car had to stop opposite the emplacements of Battery D's four guns. Some of the boys at once recognized him and they all gave him a hearty cheer and sure were glad to see him. He was surprised to see us and shook hands with us all and told us he had been flying over our heads for the last few days doing duty as an observer.

He was considered a very good Lieutenant by all. We were under his command as I remember nearly three months. During that time he was our companion as well as officer. He was our father and looked out for our comforts to the best of his ability. He would listen to the complaint of any man and try to right the wrong, if possible. He was strict in military discipline and sure did have a fine battery at drill time. At retreat we were asked to sing and had a fine time every evening. Every man liked him for this and the French people were all very much pleased too. During drill hours he was so strict that by the men he was nicknamed "Snappy" and was congratulated by the General for having a good battery at drill. Some men did not write home to their folks so letters were received by the Lieutenant asking why not. They were duly reproved for it and shamed by the whole battery as it was made public. Also, he had no use for a man to get drunk at all.

Other tributes, equally as high as those that have preceded, were given by Rev. Charles Schall, D. D., Lieutenant Gaither's pastor and during the war Captain and Chaplain of the 110th Regiment, 28th Division, and by fellow-officers.