Episode 3, 2005: WW1 Chemical War Map Baton Rouge , Louisiana

Gwen: Our final story exposes us to the horrors faced by U.S. forces in the dying days of World War I. Summer, 1917. World War I has ground on for three bloody years and witnessed the first use of terrifying new weapons, including chemical gases. British and French soldiers had been locked in a grim trench stalemate with Germany. That April, the United States entered the war, and in June, half a million American soldiers land in France. A year and a half later, the Germans surrender. A schoolteacher from Louisiana has found an artifact from World War I that could shed light on how American troops contributed to the Allies' victory, and how they faced the horrific threat of gas warfare.

Michelle Theriot: After my grandfather died, my father and I were looking through some paperwork that he had. We found a box, and I opened it up and there was a map. I didn't know exactly where it was, but I knew it was old, and I knew that my grandfather had served in the First World War. And I've had it ever since.

Gwen: I'm Gwen Wright. I've come to Baton Rouge to meet Michelle and learn more about her family's link to the First World War.

Michelle: Come on in.

Gwen: Thank you. Well, I'm very eager to see this document you told me about. This is it?

Michelle: Yes, this is it. On this side, you'll see the map of France.

Gwen: Oh, yes! And you said that there's something on the back?

Michelle: Yes, on the back you'll see descriptions of the chemical weapons shells. And there's a warning at the bottom: "Adjust your gas mask quickly -- keep it on."

Gwen: Now, where did you find this document?

Michelle: Well, this document belonged to my grandfather, Everett Daniel Theriot. And after he died, we found the map in a box, and the first thing I noticed were the chemical shells on the outside. And I thought, oh, how odd. And so I opened it and I -- and I saw the map.

Gwen: So tell me: What do you know about your grandfather's time in World War I? Do you know what corps he was in or what job he had?

Michelle: Well, I know he was in the army corps of engineers, and we do have a few photographs.

Gwen: Oh, nice.

Michelle: These are some photographs that he took of other soldiers in his unit when he was stationed in France.

Gwen: They all say "France, 1918," but they don't say where. These are fascinating. And I think these -- these little parcels they have hanging around their neck are actually parcels for their gas masks.

Michelle: Oh, really? They look sort of like lunch boxes.

Gwen: Well, tell me what exactly you would like to know about that document.

Michelle: Well, I hope to learn about a portion of my grandfather's life that I never knew about. Um, I mean, he never talked about his experiences in the First World War. Also, I would like to know about the chemical weapons chart on the back side. Um, you know, perhaps my grandfather was involved in a chemical attack.

Gwen: This document must have meant something to your grandfather if he kept it for all those years. So, thank you for the chance to do this.

Michelle: Thank you.

Gwen: My first step is to take a closer look at the document. This is in English, but there's some French writing up here at the top that says "32nd Corps d'Armée." This is clearly done to help soldiers know how to identify different kinds of chemical agents. Did Everett Theriot live through an attack of poison gas? It's a pretty awful thought. And the other side...it's not a complete map. The -- it -- it cuts off on the edges. This word here is even cut off in the middle of a letter. Yet the information that's here shows the Moselle River and marshes along one side, and I know the Moselle is in the East of France in the area that was one of the central points for the trenches of World War I. I'll need to find out exactly what went on in that area during the war. It turns out the Moselle River is near the site of a critical battle in World War I, the battle of St. Mihiel. In September, 1918, U.S. General John J. Pershing sends the First American Army into battle at St. Mihiel. It is the Americans' first operation as an independent army since joining the war in 1917. Pershing is convinced that he shouldn't follow the strategies of the British and French generals. He's worried -- for one thing -- that his troops, if they get in the trenches, will lose their morale like the other soldiers. Here is the entire front of the war, and here, it's a little loop in the walls of the trenches, a place where he can cut off the Germans. They'll be surrounded on three sides by Allied troops. The area is just west of the Moselle River that features so prominently on Everett's map. The Americans overwhelm the Germans at St. Mihiel, and the victory hands the Allies a decisive advantage on the Western Front. The Armistice is signed just two months later, ending the war a year earlier than had been expected. Everett could have been involved in this major operation that redefines World War I. I've come to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, to look up Everett's regiment's historical records. I want to see if he was at St. Mihiel during that crucial offensive in September, 1918. It seems that Everett Theriot was in the 508th Engineers Service Regiment, Company C. It was a unit of African-American troops. The U.S. army was still segregated during World War I. White soldiers like Everett often led units of African-American troops. And here it is. It turns out Everett and his men were at the battle of St. Mihiel. So it says here that Everett's unit, Company C, "was moved up to a point directly behind the line of departure to be used for repair of damage to roads and crossings as might develop under German bombardment." So Everett Theriot was right in the thick of this crucial battle. While I'm at the national archives, I want to show the map to First World War expert Mitch Vokelson. Perhaps he can tell me what engineers like Everett did in the battle of St. Mihiel. He confirms the battle was key to ending the First World War.

Mitch Vokelson: That's correct. The Germans recognized that more Americans were coming, and there was no way that their numbers could go up against the allied numbers with all these Americans coming over.

Gwen: The battle of St. Mihiel also marks the debut of commanders such as George S. Patton, whose brilliant use of tanks in 1918 -- another new weapon in this war -- anticipates his legendary role in World War I.

Mitch: This was Patton's beginning. He, after this battle, had seen the future of warfare and realized that tanks during the operation were used to support the infantry. But he realized that they were going to be their own arm and would operate independently.

Gwen: Well, Everett Theriot was an engineer. What was the role of the corps of engineers in this particular operation?

Mitch: They had a very key role. Supplies needed to get to the front, so the engineers would go forward first and either clear roads or repair the roads themselves.

Gwen: So this map could have been a critical tool for Everett to guide his unit during the St. Mihiel campaign, but Mitch isn't so sure. He tells me that a military map would normally have a key for the various markings on the map. He, too, notices that it has no borders. It may not be an operational military map at all.

Mitch: It's a portion of a much larger map that was cut up. It's basically a piece of paper that was recycled, and the more important document is on the other side. The map itself is probably not significant. It just may be a coincidence that it has the river.

Gwen: So, officially at least, the map appears to be little more than recycled or scrap paper for the chemical weapons chart. But could both sides have had personal meaning for Everett? Thank you.

Mitch: It's my pleasure to help, Gwen.

Gwen: I've come to the Army War College in Pennsylvania to meet historian
Douglas Johnson II. He confirms the document is primarily a chemical warning chart. He says it was issued by the French military to help U.S. soldiers when they first arrived in Europe.

Douglas Johnson: It's obviously written by a Frenchman. It says, "Our sense of smelling is very often taken unawares." It tells you that the French have translated this for American use, purely a French effort to help the Americans live through the front.

Gwen: Doug says that the gas chart is evidence of how unprepared U.S. soldiers were for the industrialized killing of World War I.

Doug: this is all completely foreign to us. Until this time our operations had been focused on chasing Pancho Villa in Mexico, through the Mexican desert, pistols and rifles, and that's it.

Gwen: Well, tell me something, though. Why would the Americans not have had any training in gas weapons before they came into France? We knew about the war. It had been used already.

Doug: We knew about the war but you couldn't tell it in the United States. The President had said, "we're not going to war. We're not going to send people over there," and so –

Gwen: And to be neutral, then he didn't want

Doug: --Neutral in thought as well as in deed.

Gwen: Doug explains that President Woodrow Wilson had reassured the public that America would not enter the European conflict. So when war was finally declared, American soldiers were woefully unprepared for chemical weapons. They might not see a warning chart such as this until just before battle.

Doug: They may show it to him as he's -- as he's marching up to his first position and say, hey, guys, pass -- you know, read this as you're marching along. And so one fellow reads it and passes it to the next fellow behind him, who may not be able to read, and so the buddy behind him will read it to two or three of them who can't read. This is not a particularly literate army.

Gwen: By the time they entered the war, some 16,000 British and French soldiers had already been felled by brutal gas attacks, and more than a quarter million more suffered from painful skin lesions, blindness, and heart and lung ailments. Doug explains that chemical weapons caused fewer deaths than artillery. It was the capacity to generate terror and injury that made them attractive to generals on both sides.

Doug: And from a military point of view, I want a lot of casualties, and I don't really care whether they're killed or not. I want two people to have to take you to the rear to be treated, and then I want five people to be involved in your treatment. Killing you is easy.

Gwen: The chart's descriptions of mustard gas, chlorine, and phosgene were meant to give the soldiers a sense of control over these deadly weapons, and to convince them that they had to use their gas masks.

Doug: This one goes on to say, "causes deadly suffocation by even one inhalation," though when you read the top line on this, this one says "smells very much like garlic and mustard." This is mustard gas.

Gwen: Doug makes his point by leading me through a demonstration.

Doug: Put on this mask. All right, let's set the stage. Okay, now the shells have landed near you, they just went "pop," they didn't go "bang." You have about eight to nine seconds to put this thing on, so you're going to stop breathing, right now.

Gwen: First I need to blow air out to clear the mask of any chemicals present. As soon as it comes over my face, I want to take a big gulp of air, but if I take a breath, I'd be inhaling poison gas. It's pitch-black in here. I'm starting to feel panicked. It's almost – when you breathe in, it just -- you feel like you're not getting any air. It just -- ah, get me out of this thing. That's terrible! You feel as if -- you feel so panicked inside that thing. What's awful about it actually is being inside is as terrifying as being out.

Doug: Yeah.

Gwen: All right. I feel better being back in this world, but I have a clearer sense, it's true, of the kinds of panic and the kinds of pressures that Everett Theriot may have felt. But what kind of military action did Everett's unit actually encounter? I'm heading back to the National Archives. I'm taking another look at the records of Everett's company. This is what I suspected. I've got my answer. Michelle will certainly be surprised by this. I let Michelle know about her grandfather's heroic actions at the Battle of St. Mihiel.

Michelle: I just – I didn't know, you know.

Gwen: I also explained that the chemical weapons chart may have been one of the reasons he held on to this document. The question that you asked me that still remains is whether your grandfather suffered personally from a chemical weapon.

Michelle: Yes.

Gwen: "The company was moved to avoid artillery fire and gas during the German attack on Xivray, which rendered the camp untenable." So Everett's in a company at great risk of artillery fire and chemical gas. Everett and his troops soldiered under constant threat of gas attack while they were working near the front lines. This document may have helped save his life.

Michelle: Oh, I am -- I am so proud of him.

Gwen: So Michelle, I can't say for sure that your grandfather suffered a chemical attack, but we have an historical record describing his activities with his company, speaking about the frequency of gas attacks. And he received a pension after the war, and pensions went to people who had been severely wounded or who had suffered from an attack of chemical weapons.

Michelle: I wish we could have talked about this when he was still alive.

Gwen: Mm-hmm.

Michelle: Um...but even finding out now is -- is very special to me, and it -- it helps to understand more about his character. I'm -- I'm very proud of him, very.

Gwen: Everett Theriot returned from France, glad to be alive. If he encountered any chemical attacks during the war, however, it didn't seem to affect his long-term health. He lived to the ripe old age of 96. Millions of young men, including 58,000 American troops, were not so fortunate. The soldier-poet Wilfred Owen, who died in the last month of World War I, evoked the special horrors of gas attack for this lost generation.

"Gas! Gas! Quick, boys!
An ecstasy of fumbling
Fitting the clumsy helmets
Just in time
I saw him drowning.
Guttering, choking,
Drowning."

ENDS