KARL GEORG (GEORGE) CAMPLAIR

RESEARCHED BY: Jennifer Camplair

DATE OF BIRTH
April 18, 1885

DATE OF DEATH
1966

HOMETOWN
Angerburg, Prussia

ENTERED THE MILITARY
1903

BRANCH OF SERVICE
Imperial German

UNIT
1st Company, 3rd Pioneer Division
BEFORE THE WAR

Karl Georg Camplair was born on April 18, 1885, in what was Angerberg, East Prussia to Martin Camplair and Charlotte Zabjitski. He had one brother, Max, but little is known from his childhood. Prussia had recently come under the control of Germany, and Camplair was conscripted into the Imperial German Army. His training and first service took place from 1903 to 1905.

German policy dictated that young German men were universally conscripted into the military. Therefore they were trained by the military and would be called up at any time to serve during a war. Camplair was instructed as a “Pionier” or combat engineer. His responsibilities included building and repairing structures such as railroads, bridges, and other fortifications. Camplair kept a detailed notebook filled with pictures and drawings related to this training and his regiment.

A TALENTED ARTIST

After his training was completed, he moved to Berlin in 1906 and worked as an architect. His drawings of houses, front doors, and interiors were intricately detailed and made with ink on paper. He also created many sketches of animals, tables, and a selection of original fonts. He was a gifted young artist, but his dreams were interrupted in 1914 when World War I was declared.
MILITARY EXPERIENCE

Camplair was called back into military service in Schöneberg soon after war was declared in June. The detailed war diary he kept, filled with photographs, showed that his unit served in the cities and canals of northern France including Cambrai, Saint-Quentin, Lille, Bapaume, Péronne, and Canal de la Deûle.

His diary included scenes of his life in France during the early war: canal construction, riding on trains with his fellow soldiers, eating and drinking French cuisine, and celebrating Christmas 1914.

Later in the new year, when he reached Bapaume, France, Camplair’s unit came across the first of many towns that had been destroyed. He included many photographs that showed more of the destruction of railroads, bridges, and churches and fewer pictures of lightheartedness.
Camplair’s unit traveled across Europe. He was sent first to northeastern Europe near what is now Latvia and Russia, and then he went south to Serbia, Macedonia, and Bulgaria. The pictures from this time period are almost exclusively of engineering projects that show the construction of bridges and work on the rail lines.

**VETERAN EXPERIENCE**

During the war, Camplair was given opportunities to visit his future wife in Berlin, Charlotte Müller, whom he married in 1918. After the war, Camplair returned to his wife. Their first son, Hans Georg, was born in 1919 and the next year, another son, Peter, was born. With two young children to support, Camplair was unable to return to his architecture work and the mounting pressure to support his family, combined with the struggling German economy, pushed him to look outside his country for a better life. Through a contact at the German embassy in the United States, Camplair was able to secure passage for himself and family to immigrate through Ellis Island.
ARRIVING IN A NEW COUNTRY

Camplair left Bremen, Germany, on December 29, 1924 and arrived in New York in January 1925 on the passenger ship S.S. President Roosevelt. He made his way to Maryland and worked as a sharecropper until he had saved $100 so that he could buy his own land in Cabin John, Maryland. Charlotte brought their two young sons to America on the S.S. George Washington in 1925 and they constructed a new life from the ground up. The new land provided rock to be quarried to build a house, fertile soil for crops, and room for the animals they raised for a source of food.

There was a growing anti-German sentiment in the United States during and after the war and many German Americans chose to Americanize their names. The S.S. President Roosevelt manifest lists Camplair’s name as George Camplair, which suggests that he may have decided to change his first name. His son Hans also began to use the name George Hans Camplair, Jr. Many of his neighbors were veterans of World War I and had fought on the American side.

During World War II, as a naturalized citizen, Camplair completed a draft card to serve the United States. He was never called into service, although both of his sons joined the military. Camplair continued to work as a farmer and carpenter to provide a good life for his family.

COMMEMORATION

Camplair’s commemoration is not based on medals or outward achievements. His experience during the war no doubt shaped the man he became as a husband, father and immigrant. He gave up everything to move to America and build a foundation for his family that would propel them forward in future generations.

Camplair died in 1966, eight years after his wife, Charlotte. His lifelong dedication to his family enabled his oldest son to graduate high school and join the U.S. Army as a cartographer and later work for the U.S. government overseas and in Virginia. His younger son, Peter, also served the United States through military service. His characteristics of a tenacious work ethic and determination have been passed on to his family, who carry on his legacy.
PROFILE: KARL GEORG (GEORGE) CAMPLAIR

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Camplair Family Photographs. 1902-1930. Courtesy of Nancy Phelps.

World War II Draft Cards (Fourth Registration) for the State of Maryland; Records of the Selective Service System, 1926-1975; Record Group 147, Series M1939; National Archives and Records Administration - St. Louis.