Who Was Simon Jacobson?

By Colonel John M. Riley

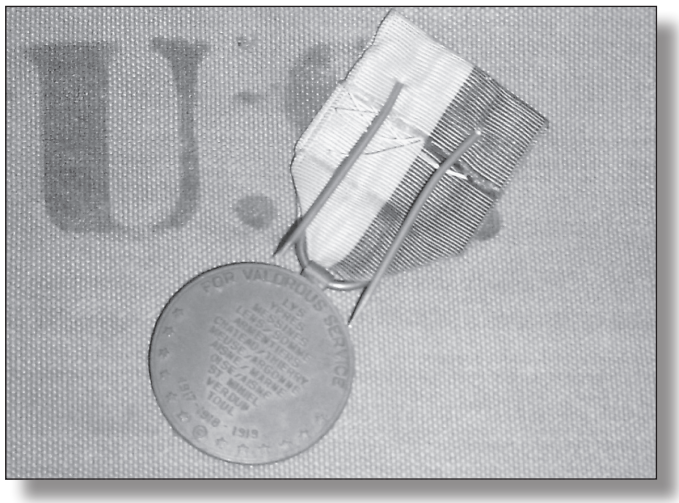
Simon Jacobson just happened to be one of the first. He was not the first to answer the call to arms at the outset of World War I; but as fate would have it, he was one of the first U.S. Army Soldiers to wear the crossed retorts—the branch insignia of the Chemical Corps. Jacobson was an Army engineer who proudly served in the unit that eventually became the 1st Gas Regiment. In the context of the Army profession, Sergeant First Class Jacobson is a stellar example of what it means to serve our Nation. As a young, educated, professional engineer involved in a technical line of work, he twice volunteered to serve his country while America was engaging in hostilities with belligerent aggressors.

Simon Jacobson was born in South Carolina in 1888. He received a degree in chemistry from the College of Charleston in 1910 and then continued his education at Columbia University in New York and, later, at The School of Industrial Arts in New Jersey (now Mercer County Community College), completing his formal education in 1914. While studying professional engineering during a time when tensions with Mexico were at their height, Jacobson felt compelled to enlist in the New York National Guard. Although he did not serve on active duty along the border, he completed 2 years of National Guard service (1912–1914) and attained the rank of corporal.

In 1914, as a civilian, Jacobson moved to Utah, where he worked as a research chemist at the International Smelting Company in Tooele. The International Smelting Company annually processed thousands of tons of copper and lead ore that had been mined from the rugged hills of the western United States. The metals were needed to fill the demand for refined materials and to fuel industrial growth in America. Ironically, just a few years later, the same company provided much of its material in support of the U.S. war effort against the Central Powers in Europe.

With war raging in France (along with the U.S. declaration of war against Germany just a few months earlier), Jacobson once again enlisted in the Army in September 1917—this time as an infantryman in the 362d Infantry Regiment, which was part of the 91st "Pine Tree" Division that was forming in the western United States. Probably due to his background and education as a professional engineer, Private Jacobson was transferred to the 30th Engineer Regiment in December 1917 following an Army-wide call for volunteers from within the ranks who possessed certain specialized skills. After the Germans had "violated all the laws of war and humanity with their introduction of searing flames and poisonous gases into the trenches of the Allies,"[1] General John J. Pershing directed the 30th Engineers to form a new unit to "beat the Hun at his own

The front of the 1st Gas Regiment commemorative medal bears the shield and the numeral 1 worn by many of the Soldiers of the regiment. A scarce memento of the Army's earliest chemical unit, members of the regiment apparently had them minted in France at the end of the conflict.



The reverse of the commemorative medal contains a list of the 12 engagements in which elements of the regiment took action. Providing fire with heavy mortars and projectiles, the Hell Fire Boys supported operations in nearly every sector where members of the American Expeditionary Forces were engaged.

The World War I chevrons worn by Simon Jacobson identified him as a sergeant first class of engineers. While the 30th Engineer Regiment became the 1st Gas Regiment, many of the Soldiers retained the insignia of the Corps of Engineers throughout their service during World War I.

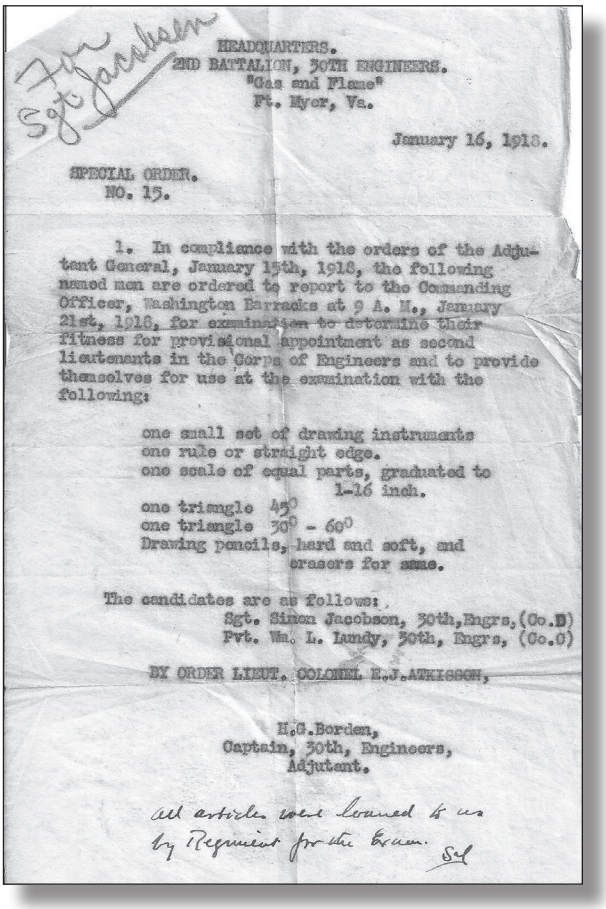
game." Consequently, since October 1917, Major E.J. Atkisson had been working on forming a "gas and flame" battalion of "Hell Fire Boys."

As the regiment began to take shape and the 2d Battalion was activated in December 1917, Private Jacobson joined D Company. A month later, as the battalion trained for its new mission at Fort Meyer, Virginia, Jacobson was promoted to sergeant. On 31 January 1918, the regimental commander selected Sergeant Jacobson and another experienced engineer to take an academic evaluation for possible promotion to engineer officer. The results of Sergeant Jacobson's examination may never be known, but he was never commissioned. Instead, he was promoted to sergeant first class of engineers just before sailing for France in February 1918—a promotion that placed him in charge of a mortar section.

Not long after their arrival in France, Sergeant First Class Jacobson and the rest of the Hell Fire Boys became heavily engaged in their mission of delivering gas and high-explosive shells to enemy trenches. According to his personal and archival records, Jacobson saw action at Fère-en-Tardenois along the Marne line, at Vesle River (a tributary of the Aisne), at the Second Battle of the Marne, at St. Mihiel, and during the Meuse-Argonne Offensive—where both sides used gas in an attempt to dislodge the other from their trenches and break the stalemate in one last push to end the war. Although Sergeant First Class Jacobson became the victim of a gas attack in October 1918, he counted himself as one of the lucky ones. While many others suffered debilitating injuries or death as a result of gas exposure, Jacobson remarked that he "remained in the field hospital but 2 days for treatment [and] returned to [the] outfit to complete [the] drive!"[2] He went on to fight in his final engagement of the war at the brutal Battle of Verdun.

Sergeant First Class Jacobson returned from France with the 2d Battalion, 1st Gas Regiment, in February 1919. He was promoted a final time to master engineer, senior grade, before being mustered out of service at Camp Kendrick, Lakehurst, New Jersey, by the end of February.

As Americans put the war behind them, Mr. Jacobson returned to Utah and resumed his work at the International Smelting Company, eventually attaining the position of smelting supervisor. He remained active in local veterans' organizations throughout his life. He also kept with him a small collection of war mementos including his noncommissioned officer stripes, his 1st Gas Regiment commemorative medal, and a piece of shrapnel from the gas round that landed near his position and injured him in 1918. In 1933, in recognition of his wounds from the gas attack, Jacobson received the Purple Heart award from the War Department. Simon Jacobson passed away in 1949, but he will forever be part of the history and legacy of the Dragon Soldiers who serve in our Army.



For Sgt Jacobson

HEADQUARTERS.
2ND BATTALION, 30TH ENGINEERS.
"Gas and Flame"
Ft. Myer, Va.

January 16, 1918.

SPECIAL ORDER.
NO. 15.

1. In compliance with the orders of the Adjutant General, January 15th, 1918, the following named men are ordered to report to the Commanding Officer, Washington Barracks at 9 A. M., January 21st, 1918, for examination to determine their fitness for provisional appointment as second lieutenants in the Corps of Engineers and to provide themselves for use at the examination with the following:

one small set of drawing instruments
one rule or straight edge.
one scale of equal parts, graduated to 1-16 inch.
one triangle 45°
one triangle 30° - 60°
Drawing pencils, hard and soft, and erasers for same.

The candidates are as follows:
Sgt. Simon Jacobson, 30th, Engrs, (Co.D)
Pvt. Wm. L. Lundy, 30th, Engrs, (Co.O)

BY ORDER LIEUT. COLONEL E.J.ATKISSON,

H.C.Borden,
Captain, 30th, Engineers,
Adjutant.

all articles were loaned to us by Regiment for the Exam. Sgt

Paper ordering Sergeant First Class Jacobson and another Soldier to take an examination to demonstrate their skills in general engineering with the potential to be appointed as lieutenants. Shortly after the exam, the regiment sailed for France and Simon Jacobson served out the war as a noncommissioned officer.

While he continued to wear the stripes of an engineer sergeant, Sergeant First Class Jacobson adopted the collar disk of the Chemical Warfare Service (the precursor to the Chemical Corp) and the common cobalt blue and golden yellow shoulder insignia worn by early Dragon Soldiers.

Today's Dragon Soldiers should take the time to reach back into the past and learn about the stories of the Hell Fire Boys who started it all. As members of the chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) profession, we must remember that it is our responsibility to uphold the reputation and honor the sacrifices of those trendsetters from long ago. As we begin yet another period of dramatic transition, Soldiers like Simon Jacobson can serve as great examples of flexibility, professionalism, and selfless service.

Endnotes:

[1]James Thayer Addison, *The Story of the First Gas Regiment*, The Riverside Press, Boston and New York, 1919.

[2]State Historical Society World War I Service Questionnaires, Division of Archives & Records Service, State of Utah, 1914–1918, *<http://archives.utah.gov/research/inventories/85298.html>*, accessed on 22 March 2012.

References:

Don Strack (compiler), "International Smelter at Tooele," 27 May 2011, *<http://utahrails.net/mining/smelters-tooele.php>*, accessed on 22 March 2012.

"Utah, Military Records, 1861–1970," ancestry.com, *<http://search.ancestry.com/search/db.aspx?dbid=2228>*, accessed on 22 March 2012.

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