Review: "The Last of the Doughboys" by Richard Rubin

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In 2004, when he was 103, George Briant remembered marching near the village of Le Charmel in France. "There's action and danger," he recalled. "What's thrilling about it — you know you're going to die."

Briant's hands kept moving after he stopped talking, Richard Rubin tells us: "He was in the thrall of that thrill even yet." When Briant added that in 1918 he learned too much about war — "we were standing in an open field, and then they were sitting there waiting for us" — Rubin can't resist observing, "He really had; he really was. And they were, really."

In "The Last of the Doughboys," Rubin, a journalist, supplements interviews with several dozen World War I veterans over the age of 100 with a survey of popular songs and books from the era to re-create the ordinary and extraordinary lives of his subjects. The book does not shed new light on the origins, nature or significance of the conflict. It is, however, a charming, passionate and personal paean to people who left their homes to fight "a war to end all wars," returned to the United States only to be forgotten (and supplanted by "The Greatest Generation" of World War II soldiers), and lived to tell their tales.

Rubin's centenarians forget things. He can't be sure they would have given the same answer in 1918 they gave in 2003. They often revert to clichés. ("War is hell, it's real hell.") And sometimes Rubin's veterans clam up. Asked how soldiers in his unit died in Siberia, Warren Hileman replies, "That's zeroed out information. Well, that about covers it. That's just hittin' the high spots."

Fortunately, "The Last of the Doughboys" is awash in interesting — and poignant — stories. Traumatized by the Navy's racist treatment of his brother, George Johnson, who was 111 years old when Rubin interviewed him, refuses to acknowledge that the soldiers in his own unit were black, insists that his mother was Swedish and his father of mixed European and Mohawk ancestry, and proclaims he cannot understand why "here in America, right here, so many people ask me 'What nationality are you?'"

After losing his sergeant stripes because he wrote a letter advising a friend to stay out of the service as long as possible, Henry Gunther, Rubin learns, started volunteering for dangerous missions. Informed that the war had ended, Gunther got up to advance, disobeyed orders to go back, was shot in the left temple.
and died instantly. One minute later, the armistice took effect. Gunther got his stripes back, along with a Distinguished Service Cross.

No wonder Richard Rubin concludes that “hanging out with centenarians is, in every sense of the word, awesome.”

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