April of this year (1992) marked the 75th anniversary of America’s entry into World War I. November marks the anniversary of the death of Iowa’s first World War I casualty.

To a majority of Iowans, the name Merle Hay is associated with a road and mall in Des Moines. The significance of Merle Hay, the man, is what few Iowans know.

In April 1917, the small town of Glidden began its work to aid the war effort. The Glidden Graphic said on April 12, 1917: “Up to the present time, to the best of our knowledge, no young man from Glidden has enlisted. Every town and community will be expected to furnish its share of young men for Army and Navy service.”

Merle D. Hay, a 20 year old farm mechanic, quit his job to enlist in the Army on May 4, 1917. The May 10 Glidden Graphic described this scene: “Tears mingled with cheers as Glidden’s contingent left to make their sacrifice for their country.”

Hay was sent to Fort Bliss, Texas, and assigned to Company F, 16th Infantry. He then traveled to the East Coast and embarked by ship for France. The troops arrived in France on June 27 and trained alongside French veterans.

The following are excerpts from a letter he wrote Sept. 24, 1917:

How are you at home? I am well and doing fine here. I got the picture of Basil (his brother) and think it is very good, but I would like to be there wearing clothes like them. We sure do get tired of wearing the same old thing every day. But then we will not have to do it all our lives. Someday we can do as we please, you can bet. I made what is called an allotment of $15 a month for six months and it is to be sent to you and you can do with it whatever you please. I will quit for now and write again soon, so goodbye.

From your loving son, Merle Hay.

On Nov. 1, the company arrived by truck closer to the front, and for Merle Hay, closer to immortality. The next day they traveled to the front line trenches and at 10 p.m. took up positions 500 yards from the German lines. Company F, along with the rest of the battalion, settled in for what they presumed would be an uneventful night.

At about 3 a.m. the Germans opened an artillery barrage. The men scrambled for cover. The shelling concentrated on the area behind the Americans’ position, cutting them off from reinforcements. At this point 240 German infantry men made their assault. The Americans were caught by surprise as they emerged from wood and earth shelters to engage the enemy in hand to hand combat amid darkness and confusion. After 15 minutes, the Germans withdrew, and help arrived for the beleaguered Americans. Seven Americans were wounded, 11 captured, and three killed.

The three dead were Corporal James Gresham, Private Thomas Enright and
Private Merle Hay. Hay died from a bullet wound to the head. Merle Hay was the first of Iowa’s sons to die in combat in World War I.

The three were buried together in Bathelemont, France, the next morning. A marker was placed near their graves on which was inscribed, “Here lie the first soldiers of the Great Republic of the United States, who died on the soil of France for justice.”