

TIMELESS LETTERS FROM A WAR LONG AGO - One pilot's story speaks to the heroism and heartbreak of battle

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The letter begins like millions of others written by soldiers in the middle of a war, and far from home.

Dear Mother,

Sunday evening, almost quarter after eight, and I am alone in a tent, sitting on my cot . .

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This 55th, and last, letter home was not unlike the others my great-uncle, Lt. Alan **Nutt** , wrote to his parents and siblings after he left Cliffside Park in the summer of 1917 for the Great War. One of nine children, the 22-year-old Penn State student joined an older brother Henry, my grandfather, as a cadet in the U.S. Army Air Service, which later would become the Air Force.

On this Memorial Day, in the 90th year since my great-uncle's death, it is striking how his letters home transcend all wars. Eager for combat, but fearful, he speaks across the years.

Dear Pop,

When I read of your painting the back porch, weeding the garden and doing other odd jobs about the place, it sort of makes me homesick - I would like to be there so much to help you. And I suppose you and the boys would like to be here in my shoes.

For those who must watch from afar, wars are difficult to understand. News reports give glimpses of the tedium and the horror, but only through the letters of soldiers does the full scope of the experience come into view. And whether written from France in 1918 or Iraq in 2008, the letters share similar views.

Alan's are filled with the minutiae of camp life, but also with the youthful reflections of a novice unsure of his ability. More than anything, though, they are replete with unexpected memories, and a longing for the ordinary.

Last evening we had a little thunder and lightning and also a shower of hail. From a little pond nearby I could hear the noise of a good many frogs and I thought of home . . . What have you planted in the garden near the side porch? Did the severe winter injure

the hedge at all? Does it look like any lilac blossoms this year?

Often, Alan's letters speak of the frustrations of waiting to get into the "game." Five months after arriving in France, he finally had his first flight lesson.

The United States played catch-up in the air throughout World War I. When America entered the fray in April 1917, there were 56 trained military pilots in this country and fewer than 250 planes - all of them obsolete. By war's end, some 20,000 American officers had served in the U.S. Air Service, more than 700 of them from New Jersey.

It was an exhilarating, but dangerous time for the world's first fighter pilots. Only 15 years removed from the Wright brothers' first flight, the biplanes of World War I were fragile machines made primarily of wood and canvas. And flying them in combat was a primitive affair.

Before fighter planes had machine guns, pilots carried pistols and rifles. Some creative fliers threw steel darts at the fabric wings of German planes, and a few Germans attempted to ensnare allied aircraft with grappling hooks suspended on cables.

A month before his first combat mission, Alan had barely 70 hours of flying time, and one near-death experience. While practicing figure eights his plane went into a tailspin, nearly throwing him from the open cockpit. Plummeting toward the Earth he finally pulled the craft level, just above the treetops. A few days later he wrote to Henry, not his mother.

The queer part about it all, I didn't have time to be scared and I came down laughing, to think I had scared the others . . . I guess I must live to be an old man.

Despite the mortal dangers, there is a youthful naiveté, to Alan's writings. When he left Penn State, where he was an agriculture student, he had no girlfriend, and while overseas his "vices" extended to pipe smoking and an occasional game of cribbage. Even his first taste of beer left him nonplused, confessing to his mother: "I did not like it exceptionally well."

On Sept. 16th, Alan was finally assigned to the famed 94th aero squadron of the First Pursuit Group, which included America's No. 1 ace, Eddie Rickenbacker. It was a momentous day for Alan, but his letter home included a hint of superstition.

Saturday I received my orders to go to the 1st Pursuit Group. My orders were dated Friday the 13th. I reported to Ground School on a 13, exactly 13 months before. I sailed on a 13, and began my preliminary flying on the "Ides" of March, which we are told to beware of. My advanced training started on a 13. I have been pretty successful so far, so I guess I shall continue to be.

Ten days later, the American Expeditionary Forces launched the largest, and last, major battle of World War I. More than a million U.S. infantry and 600 U.S. planes participated

in the six-week-long engagement.

The group of planes from the 94th that Alan took off with that cold dark morning was later credited with bringing down two balloons.

At 5:30 that afternoon, he flew his second mission of the day, a four-plane group led by veteran pilot Alden Sherry. They were to link up in the air with four more planes, but they never showed. Then two of the pilots in the original group turned back with engine trouble, leaving just Alan and Sherry.

Shortly after the two crossed into enemy territory, they were attacked by eight German planes. Sherry dashed for the American line with five of the Germans shooting at him. He crash-landed but survived.

Now alone, and facing his first combat of the war, Alan took on the three remaining enemy planes. A soldier on the ground watched the aerial fight, and Sherry later wrote home to Alan's parents, giving an account of what happened.

The infantryman told me he put up a magnificent fight with the three planes attacking him. He sent one down in flames and pulled up to get the second one, when the third pilot shot him in the chest and head, undoubtedly killing him instantly.

A month later, Alan was posthumously awarded the Army Distinguished Service Cross. Seven native New Jersey fliers received the medal in World War I, two of them, including Alan, died in battle.

Seven days after his brother's death, Henry wrote what was surely the most difficult letter of his life. He would survive the war and marry within a year. Ninety years later, he, too, is just a ghost, and yet the grief and pride in his letter seem ever fresh.

Dearest Mother

Alan, beloved and loving son and brother, with the odds greatly against him, died fighting for his mother, for democracy, freedom, justice and truth, and no other death could make us nearly so proud of him . . . As his dear Mother, you knew him to be a true and devoted son, very upright and honest, all one could desire in a son. I who know boys in general better than you, know him to have been one man in a thousand, and more. So honest and sincere . . . and everyone loved him . . . All this does not seem right, and yet we can bear it, for "God's Will Be Done," and this will I pray over your dear son's, our dear brother's grave, as your prayer, just as soon as I find it.

Ever your loving son,

Henry

