Over There

Boston College men remember the Great War

by Ben Birnbaum
‘I was glad the Marines got me. I figured they were the best trained soldiers we had. I thought, “I don’t want to get bumped off because the guy next to me doesn’t know his business.”’

Thomas Lyons ‘16

Seventy years ago this summer, on July 29, 1914, Austria-Hungary, in a bid to acquire Serbia, opened artillery fire on Belgrade, the Serbian capital. Within days, Russia had mobilized to aid Serbia, Germany declared war on Russia and invaded Belgium, France leapt to Belgium’s defense, Turkey threw in with Germany, and England with France, bringing in, as well, the nations of the British Empire.

By the end of August, approximately 17 million men were under arms in Europe, and the New York Times editorial page noted sanctimoniously, “The European nations have reverted to the condition of savage tribes roaming the forests and falling upon each other in a fury of blood and carnage to achieve the ambitious designs of chieftains clad in skin and drunk on mead.”

That was the mood of America as the war began, but it didn’t last. The German slaughter of Belgian civilians, the sinking of the Cunard liner Lusitania, the revelation of ham-handed German attempts to get Mexico to invade Texas, unrestricted submarine warfare by Germany—all conspired to bring America into its first war in Europe. Woodrow Wilson, re-elected in 1916 under the slogan “He kept us out of war,” and who had strenuously maintained that American efforts at peacemaking could bring the conflict to an end, asked Congress for a war declaration on April 2, 1917. “The world must be made safe for democracy,” he said.

And so two years and 11 months after the first shells fell on Belgrade, on June 28, 1917, 14,000 American infantrymen and Marines landed at St. Nazare, France, the first of an American Expeditionary Force (AEF) that would number 2,000,000. The Americans were greeted by the Allies with joy. Since September 1914, the war’s protagonists had been locked in combat along a trench-pocked, 300-mile front that stretched from the Channel to the Swiss border—“a gangrenous wound across French and Belgian territory,” said historian Barbara Tuchman. The British had lost their regular army in Flanders in 1914, and a civilian army on the Somme in 1916. More than a million French soldiers had died—half of them in the five-month battle of Verdun alone—and 100,000 French soldiers had mutinied only two months before the Americans arrived.

In his memoirs, AEF Chief of Staff General John Pershing recalled that the column of American soldiers “looked like a flower garden,” as it marched through Paris on July 4, so many were the bouquets offered by the French. “Nous voila, Lafayette,” said an American officer in the ceremonies that day at Lafayette’s tomb—“Lafayette, we are here.”

If any broad inference about the sentiments of Boston College students during the period of American neutrality can be drawn from the Stylus—BC’s undergraduate literary and news magazine—it is that BC men preserved their neutrality better than well.

An unsigned editorial, “The Year 1914,” in the January 1915 edition praised the valor of all sides, saying of the French, “May this return to at least one quality of the former France, arouse a longing for the vigorous morals and manhood of a former Catholic France.” Regarding the Germans, the writer noted, “(They are) fighting the fight that is waged only for love!”

The editorial concluded, “History should take cognizance of the intense chivalry, the new virility, that this war summoned from dormancy...And in ‘God’s good time’ may the Right be victorious in this war that has already made 1914 an historical year.”
Curiously, despite the much-trumpeted stories of German atrocities in Catholic Belgium, including the murder of priests and nuns, the Stylus of the pre-involvement period featured several literary pieces that were sympathetic to the German cause and none that took up for the Allies.

One essay, purporting to be a description of a meeting between the author and a very friendly Kaiser, has the German leader take time out from planning war strategy to say, "America is a wonderful country." An April 1915 poem by Warren Cleary '16, who later served with distinction as an infantry captain, is entitled "Von Hindenburg," after the German general, and begins, "How like a rock he stands amid the snows, immovable. The Slavic hordes assail him."

Once America became a combatant, however, campus sentiment, at least as reflected in the Stylus, changed. Noted the April 1917 edition, "It has sent a thrill through the breast of each of us...(that) B.C. men have rushed to the colors without the hesitation of an instant."

"We joined because we felt it was the thing to do," said James O'Brien '16, in a recent interview. Said Thomas Lyons '16, who enlisted in the Marines, "Everybody was going. I had two brothers, and one enlisted the day war was declared. I just felt it was my duty." Martin Connors '20, talked of the "stigma" of being drafted. "You know they said it was the war to end wars. Well, I went for it, hook, line and sinker."

The Stylus soon began a section called "Communications" which reprinted letters home from alumni who were in France, and a "Somewhere Bureau" which listed the assignments of men in the service. There were campus lectures on such subjects as "Prussian Militarism." The Science Club sponsored an address on "Nitrogen in Peace and War." When Stephen E. Fitzgerald '16, an Army lieutenant, was killed in action in May 1918 at Cantigny, France—the first graduate to die in action—the magazine devoted a special issue to reprints of Fitzgerald's letters to his family.

An editorial in the February 1918 issue noted, "Many of those who sat side by side with us through the years have gone. In vain we search the halls for some of the old faces. Another vacant seat stares at us, and still another...." Yet, campus life went on. A football victory over Holy Cross in November 1918 was said by the Stylus to have been "celebrated in fitting style in the Army camp in France," and caused one soldier to write home: "(T)hose who say that B.C. had a good football team because her men are not enlisting, are, to use an expression understood both in and out of the army,—d---d liars. There must be at least 100 B.C. men in the division I am in alone."

In September 1918, Boston College dropped its regular curriculum to enroll 750 men in the military and scientific course of the Student Army Training Corps. Approximately 1,500 men applied for admission. At least one SATC candidate, Daniel J. McSweeney, a freshman, was subsequently dismissed for enrolling "without the consent of his father," according to copies of Army records.

In the end, 548 BC men served during the war—329 in the Army, 192 in the Navy and Marines, and 19 as civilians engaged in war work. Five were killed in action, nine died of disease, one by accident, and 17 were wounded. Eleven were awarded American citations and decorations, and 12 received citations and decorations from foreign governments.

Of those BC men who served overseas in the Great War, seven are alive today. The stories of five are presented on the following pages.

Photos by Lee Pellegrini
'The Germans shelled Paris every 15 minutes. At one minute to 12 you'd say an Act of Contrition. Then you knew you'd be OK for another 15 minutes.'

James O'Brien '16

Private Thomas A. Lyons
96th Company, US Marines

Thomas A. Lyons '16, enlisted in the Marines in May 1918 at 21 years of age. After training in the US and France, he was assigned to the 96th Co., 6th Regiment, Marines. He was discharged in June 1919. Ninety years of age, he lives with Mary, his wife of 63 years, in Weymouth, where he was interviewed. They are parents to two, grandparents to 26 and great-grandparents to 14. Lyons had a 42-year career at Weymouth High School where he was a teacher of mathematics and assistant principal.

'I tried to enlist as soon as the war broke out, but they were drafting everybody they wanted and I was told to wait. Finally, the Marines decided to try me out even though I was a couple of pounds underweight and an inch too short.

'Everybody was going. I had two brothers, and one enlisted the day war was declared. I just felt it was my duty. I was glad the Marines got me because I figured they were the best trained soldiers the US had. I often thought, 'I don't want to get bumped off because the guy next to me doesn't know his business.'"

Lyons sailed for France in August 1918 and saw action on the front in the Champagne sector and in the Argonne Forest, for four years a German bastion and supply route to the front.

'The way we went through Argonne, our artillery was throwing shells over our heads and the Germans were throwing shells at us. So we'd wait for a shell to burst in front of us and make a dash for the hole. Then the German shells would land behind us. As long as you stayed between our shells and the German shells, you were all right. We always had a hole to run into or we wouldn't run, and you made sure it was a fresh hole so you knew no one would be in it when you got there. Most of the men we lost, it was by their own fault. They kept their heads up too long. We could hear the bullets singing over our heads or popping if they were closer. If you had to stop for any reason, you'd dig a hole about a foot square and three feet deep and get into it. That way the only danger was a direct hit, and there was nothing to worry about if you took a direct hit because there'd be nothing left of you. Of course, all the holes filled up with water and you'd get up in the morning and the first thing you'd do is help the fellow next to you wring out his greatcoat. Then he'd help you with yours.'

On Nov. 6, Lyons took sick with gastroenteritis caused by drinking water that was polluted with gas. He was unable to keep food or drink down and was removed from the line.

'If you had to be evacuated they would put a tag on you so people behind the line knew you had a right to be coming out. They tagged me and took me to a field hospital and then put me on a train to a base hospital. On Nov. 11, we suddenly heard bells ringing, horns blowing. We knew something big had happened. At the next station they were shouting at us, 'Finie la guerre! Finie la guerre!'

'I came back in January. They put me at Pelham Bay Hospital in New York. It was a rehabilitation hospital where they knew what to do with people like me. I weighed 95 pounds when I got into the hospital and 143 when I got out in June. It's the most I ever weighed in my life.

'I don't think the experience of the war changed me at all. I never thought about it much afterwards. I came back and picked up the pieces where I left off. I never belonged to any veteran's organization. I kept my uniform for a while but then the moths got to it and I had to throw it away. Serving was just something I figured I ought to do. (But) we didn't believe any of that Woodrow Wilson stuff about it being the war to end wars. We said there'd always be wars because there'd always be fools.'
Corporal James L. O'Brien
Ordnance Corps, US Army

James L. O'Brien '16, enlisted in December 1917 with classmate Pat Donovan (see following story), who later became his brother-in-law, and served in Washington, DC, and in Paris. He was discharged in July 1919. O'Brien taught and was a guidance counselor at Dorchester High School from 1941 until his retirement in 1965. He received a master's degree from Boston Teachers College in 1929. Eighty-nine years of age, he was interviewed at his home in Jamaica Plain where he lives with his wife of 43 years, Katherine. They have four children and 22 grandchildren.

"I joined the service in Washington. I had been a substitute teacher in Boston and I and Pat (Donovan) took a government exam and became clerks in Washington. We joined because we felt it was the thing to do. Quite a few of our friends had been drafted.

"I was assigned to recruiting duty. Washington was full of soldiers then. Our friends would come down to enlist and stay with us. At one point, we had 28 men living in our room. We used to call it 'The Irish Embassy.' The pay of a soldier was $1 a day. Then they made you pay $6.50 a month for insurance and made you send $15 a month home. So you didn't have much for yourself. After five months, they decided to send me to Florida. I asked to go overseas rather than have that happen.

"I was sent to Camp Merritt, New Jersey. The place was full of men from all over the states. One morning they put us aboard a train and drew the shades. They didn't want anyone to know about troop movements. The train took us to Hoboken. They marched us right across the town to the wharf! So much for secrecy.

"In March 1918, we crossed on an old Italian freighter—15 days down in the hold. The bunks were triple deckers and there were no showers. There was a great big tub of water, and after you ate you'd swish your plate through the water to clean it. I don't know why everyone didn't get dysentery. Every morning at four we had a submarine watch. My assignment was to stand alongside a life raft. The raft was thrown over, all the men got into it, I made sure they were all there and then I got into it. As we neared Brest (France) we collided with a German submarine. There was mass confusion and terror. I slept right through it.

"Brest was the mudhole of France. We slept on raised platforms in what had once been Napoleon's barracks. The farmers came with their wagons for the products of our outhouses. The German prisoners used to load the stuff into their wagons."

O'Brien was sent to Paris and assigned to convoy work.

"We lived in an art gallery. To protect us from the flu, the woman who owned the place would pass in a cup of rum each night. The Germans had the big guns then—Big Bertha. They shelled Paris every 15 minutes. At one minute to 12 you'd say an Act of Contrition. Then you knew you'd be OK for another 15 minutes. Once, the Germans came
within 12 miles of Paris. The whole sky was illuminated from the artillery fire. They began to bring the soldiers in from the battle. My job was to pick the soldiers up at the railroad station, load them into the ambulance and unload them at the hospital. There was no light in the street. There were no lights in the houses. The ambulance couldn’t use lights. You’d wonder how the drivers were able to do it.

"There was this woman who ran a fancy store on the Champs. She took a shine to me and Pat. She used to invite us to her house for a meal every Sunday night. The Sunday night meal was always lousy in the Army. After dinner, the whole family would escort us to the subway station.

"Those (women in Paris) were nice to me. I should have written to them after the war, but I didn’t. At that age, you don’t care. You’re not grateful to people. Youth is so self-centered. You take it all for granted. I didn’t think of the enemy as the enemy at all. That was part because I was American. The French saw their land destroyed. I went up to see Rheims. We faked some passes to get up. There wasn’t a pane of glass in the whole town. We saw two people there. Then you think of all the damage done by that bomb they threw every 15 minutes."

In the summer of 1918, O’Brien was transferred to the Chief Purchasing Office, Ordnance Department, in Paris, where he remained for 10 months. "We were buying things all over Europe and my job was to record the contracts. Each contract had to be recorded under five cross-references. After the war ended we had to cancel all those contracts. That was my job. I know I was lucky. That just happened to be the life I had as a soldier.

"The day the armistice was signed, they say about seven million people came to Paris. An American could have anything they wanted. A friend of mine picked up one of the Parisian girls. Her mother had a restaurant and she invited us to supper there. Afterwards they invited us to their box at the Paris Opera. A French soldier sang the Marseillaise. You can imagine the feeling. Every day for four days they had dancing in the street."

You heard all kinds of wild rumors. Some Canadian soldiers told me the Germans had crucified prisoners. That sounded reasonable to me at the time."

Patrick Donovan ’16

Private, First Class, Patrick J. Donovan Ordnance Corps, US Army

Patrick J. Donovan ’16, enlisted in December 1917 at Washington, DC, as a private. He was attached to the Recruiting Service in Washington and served with the Ordnance Corps in France for 13 months. He taught commercial subjects at Dorchester High School from 1924 to 1955. Eighty-nine years of age, he is a widower, father of three, grandfather of 13 and great-grandfather of one. He was interviewed at his residence in Hingham.

"I signed up for the Officer Training Camp in Plattsburgh right after war was declared but I wasn’t called up until after I’d already enlisted. I had taken a job in Washington. I got itchy and I signed up. What reason does a fellow that age have? Everybody was stirred up at that time—especially in Washington."

Donovan was in recruiting work and then sent to France in May 1918 where he was stationed in Paris. "I moved around on assignments—guard duty, clerical work. In July, the Germans were close by and the German Big Bertha would be going all the time—I think it was every 12 minutes. Night after night the air raids would come. You got used to it. You’d look on (the shelling) like it was a lightning storm.

"You heard all kinds of wild rumors about what German soldiers had done. I was thrown in with some Canadian soldiers who said the Germans had crucified prisoners. That sounded reasonable to me at the time. I don’t think that at that age you think much about what you’re doing. We thought the war was a fine cause, and I think the same way now.

"I was in Paris the day the armistice was signed and you couldn’t get across the Champs Elysees. There were people standing shoulder to shoulder. Half the Army must have been AWOL that day. Joe McOwen (’16) came in. Jack
Atkinson ('16) was there and Jim Linehan ('16), and we celebrated, mixing with the crowd. You couldn't imagine what it was like. We wound up at Maxim's. You've heard of Maxim's? I don't remember what we ate. We didn't have much to eat, I'll tell you."

Donovan remained in France until the spring of 1919. He worked on road repair and storing war materials. "The only thing I brought back from the war was two German bayonets. They were great for digging dandelions. I don't have them anymore. After we came back, things just seemed to roll along as before."

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**Lieutenant Frederick J. Gillis**

**26th Infantry Division, US Army**

Frederick J. Gillis '16, was 22 when he attended the Army's Plattsburgh Training Camp in the summer of 1917. Commissioned a second lieutenant, he served with the Army's 26th ("Yankee") Division on the front at Chemin-des-Dames, Toul, Xivry-Marvoisin, Aisne-Marne, Champagne and in defensive sectors. Twice wounded, he was awarded the Purple Heart with Palm and the American Victory medal with six stars. The French awarded him the Verdun and Chateau-Thierry medals. Speaking at a testimonial dinner for Gillis in 1919, his former commanding officer, Major General Clarence Edwards, called him "the gamest and pluckiest soldier I ever saw."

Following a brief career in the Foreign Service, Gillis became an educator and was Boston assistant superintendent and superintendent of schools from 1934 until retirement in 1973. He also taught and was an administrator at BC, Boston University, Regis College and Boston Teachers College, among other places. Married since 1922, he and his wife Ellen (Russell) are parents of six, grandparents to 30 and great-grandparents to nine. Gillis is author of numerous articles on school administration and, most recently, of *Moonbeams for Ellen*, a collection of letters to a granddaughter. Ninety years of age, he was interviewed at his home in West Roxbury.

"When we entered the war, I was studying at Catholic University. I asked the professors to give me my exams early and I went over to Fort Myers to enlist. They had a magnificent calvary display every second week. I thought that would be terrific. But it was too hot down there. I got them to send me to the Plattsburgh Training Camp. I became one of the 90-day-wonders, a second lieutenant. It was easy for me to get into Plattsburgh because I had attended the summer camp in 1916, but it was hard work for most people. There were 3,600 men who attended and only 1,800 commissions. So if they found any excuse to get rid of you, they used it. I was sent to Fort Devens two weeks after I received my commission. The conditions were terrible. The barracks were just being built. The first night I was there, they called for volunteers for immediate service in France. I put my name in just to get out of Fort Devens."

Gillis was assigned to the 26th Division, 103rd Regiment, Company B, composed of volunteers from New England. "Our patriotism was high," said Gillis. "We took serving in the war as something you should do. The University of
‘I have often thought about the war and I find I cannot imagine leading an attack against machine guns. But while the war was going on, we felt it was a job to be done by our generation.’

Frederick Gillis ’16

Maine band volunteered in a body, so we had good music. Of course when they sobered up the next morning, they thought differently about it.’

In October 1917, Gillis began training at Aldershot in Great Britain and then in France. The 26th was soon stationed at Chemin-des-Dames and moved in April 1918 to the trenches at Toul, near the eastern edge of the battlefront. The French—who the 26th relieved—had been fighting the Germans to a standoff at Toul for nearly four years. It was considered a quiet sector, but that changed with the arrival of the Americans.

‘Toul was worse than horrible. The trenches were three-feet deep. You broke your back stooping down. We tried to make them deeper and dug into bodies of buried French soldiers. So we stopped digging. It was 40 yards to a stream, and that’s where the Germans were. We ate one meal a day at midnight, because that was the only time they could bring the supplies up through the trenches. The dangerous times were dawn and dusk. Everyone was on duty then. A lieutenant was on duty 24 hours a day.

‘I’ve never been able to figure how we could stand it. In retrospect, (trench warfare) was absolutely stupid. It holds the line but it doesn’t get you any place. But at the time I didn’t see it. It was the only kind of war I knew.’

The Germans began to test the American troops.

‘There’d be an attack and then a counterattack. At Apremont, we were called to counterattack. We took our original line back, but the dugouts were full of (phosgene) gas. In restoring order and straightening out the line, I was gassed. I remember being carried in a stretcher through the communication trenches. But the trenches were so narrow, they had to hoist the stretcher up above ground. Every time a shell came by, they dropped me. At the first-aid station there was a doctor taking care of 100 or so gassed soldiers. His name was Herbert Johnson and he later became a well-known doctor in West Roxbury. He had you lie down with your legs raised up against a wall or tree. ‘No matter what,’ he said, ‘don’t stand up.’ I saw some soldier stand up to urinate and drop dead. So I didn’t move. Eventually, they put me in an ambulance. There was an officer in the upper bunk. Along the way he vomited and it came down on my face. The last thing I remember is the ambulance went into a shellhole. Two days later, I woke up in a field hospital surrounded by sheets hanging from the ceiling. Outside, they were talking about me. The nurses were saying I wouldn’t make it. ‘It won’t be long now,’ they said. That’s what saved me. Until that moment I was pretty lethargic. But I got so damn mad. A few days later, General Edwards came to visit. ‘How are you, Gillis?’ he said. ‘I’m fine,’ I told him, because I knew the nurses said I was going to die.’

Gillis was sent to a hospital in Toul. ‘Every day at noon a doctor came and took my blood pressure and said, ‘That’s good, that’s good. Don’t smoke.’ That was our care for gas—take your blood pressure and tell you not to smoke. Of course, those who had made it as far as the hospital lived.’

Gillis was discharged from the hospital on June 14 to rejoin his company which was now posted at the Marne River sector. On June 16, he participated in a battle at Xivray-Marvoisin. ‘A strange thing happened there. The Germans made an attack and in the course of the battle a squad of my platoon disappeared in the woods. We were going to rescue them when a voice called, ‘Lieutenant, don’t shoot!’ The squad had been captured by some Germans who had agreed to let them go if we let the German soldiers return to their lines. That’s what we did. It turned out the Germans were Bavarian Catholics. They were wearing religious medals around their necks and my soldiers were Catholics as well. That’s the one time I saw the influence of religion in the war.’
On July 6, Gillis' regiment relieved infantry and Marines of the 2nd Division in Belleau Wood which had been taken in a month of heavy fighting. "We marched in at midnight. There was a ravine in the middle of the woods. We were told to lie down in it. In the morning I discovered two soldiers sleeping under me. There was another on top of me. But the worst thing about Belleau was the cone shrapnel. It would burst about 18 feet in the air. We had two men to a slit trench and it was a moral obligation to stay in your own trench. A soldier named O'Callahan—his picture hangs in the Cambridge Elks Lodge—found someone else in his place and said, 'That's all right' and went to find another place. Some cone shrapnel put a piece of metal in his back. It looked like part of an old saw. The sergeant and I wired our hands to a stretcher to carry him to a field hospital. He died two days later. The reason you wired your hands to the stretcher was that the field hospital was usually some distance away. Your hands would become numb from the weight and you'd drop the stretcher.'"

The Second Battle of the Marne began July 18, 1918. It forced a major German withdrawal and would mark the turning point of the war. "On July 20 we got orders to be at headquarters at three in the afternoon. We knew that meant an assault. We asked for artillery barrage and were told it wasn't necessary—that we would meet with no opposition. We had D Company on our left and C Company on our right. What I didn't know was that the officer commanding D Company was killed on his way back to his troops. They never got the order to advance. We went over and it was hell. The German machine guns enfiladed us from the left flank. I lost one sergeant five feet from the front line, right on the (barbed) wire. I'll never forget the look on his face. It was like he was saying, 'You didn't tell me it was going to be like this.' We went ahead until we came to a railroad embankment. The whole battalion stopped. I sent a runner to C Company. He came back and said, 'All the officers are killed.' Then he got a bullet through the shoulders, threw his hands up very dramatically and toppled down the embankment.

"Later that day, I was raising my hand to direct chauchoi (a French automatic weapon) fire and that's when I got two bullets through my left arm just below the elbow. They passed through me and also hit my orderly in the belly. By that time most of my platoon was killed or wounded. By the end of the day, of the 70 in my platoon, three would be left unhurt. I began to make a tourniquet with my rosary beads above my elbow. There was a soldier on my right, Bert Baker, a lad from Vermont. He came over to help me get the tourniquet on. He tied the first knot and a sniper got him through the chest. I held him in my arms. He asked for water. I raised my canteen and the sniper got the canteen. Bert passed out and then came to. 'Bert,' I said, 'I think we ought to say a prayer.' 'OK,' he said. I started remembering back to BC and a class I had with Charles Lane, SJ. Fr. Lane said there was a baptism of water, desire and blood. I thought, 'Here's the place for a baptism of desire.' So I said, 'I desire to die in the true faith founded by Jesus Christ,' and (Bert) said it after me.

"On the way back, I was ablood from head to foot, but I could walk. I came on a wounded corporal. He was the lightweight champion of our regiment. He'd been bayonetted and his guts were hanging out. I tied my shirt around him and took him in with me. We got to a first-aid station at Boursesches. It was the cellar of a railway station. There were Germans there, too. I had to go further back because my wound wasn't critical. I came to a church. I hadn't eaten for a while. Someone gave me a cigar which I chewed. That afternoon was the only time I saw calvary ac-
When the war ended, everything was wide open for three days. There was no morality, nothing. If you were weak, you were gone. Fortunately, I had the Jesuit training, so I came out OK.”

Martin Connors ’20

1919 and completed his degree at Boston College. He was a teacher and administrator in the Lowell public schools from 1920 until his retirement in 1966. Eighty-eight years of age, he lives with Ruth, his wife of 62 years, in Lowell where he was interviewed. They are parents of two and grandparents to five.

“The last half of the 1917 term at Holy Cross was troublesome. You’d go into class and someone would be missing. He was drafted or enlisted. That gave me the idea to enlist. I didn’t want to be drafted. I felt that was a stigma if they had to come after you. I guess you could say I had a patriotic feeling. You know they said it was the war to end wars. Well, I went for it, hook, line and sinker.

“I wanted to get into the OTC (Officer Training Camp) at Plattsburgh, but you needed three references to get in. I gave them three names, but apparently I didn’t have the right names, so I enlisted in the regular army. You had to sign on for the duration of the war—five years, 10 years, it didn’t matter. The government had a beautiful set-up.”

Connors trained at bases in New York and New Jersey. “One night, an officer came in and told us we were going overseas. Cold turkey—just like that. Well, I was the bravest guy in the world walking in my uniform on Merrimack Street in Lowell, but there it began to get scary. I had a friend from Lowell, a lawyer. One night he wakes me up and takes me to the latrine to talk to me. He tells me about this fellow who could fix things up so I wouldn’t have to go overseas. I went to see the man who was going to fix things. He was sitting in a chair with his feet up on a desk. I listened to what he had to say and I told him ‘no.’ He said to me as I was leaving, ‘You’ll get your arse shot off over there.’ I told him, ‘You’ll never get your arse shot off over here, you damn coward.’

“My first billet in France was in Brest in Napoleon’s old barracks. They had us in that dump for 10 days. Then I was sent to Tours, which was the big depot where all the troops came in. One day I got called. I was being assigned to general headquarters in London. The major says, ‘I see you went to Holy Cross. Can you type and take shorthand?’ ‘Yes, sir,’ I said. I had never sat in front of a
typewriter and I couldn’t take shorthand, but it was a good assignment.

“It turned out they didn’t have much for me to do in London. Then they sent me to Liverpool. I felt I was nearing the time when someone was going to ask me to take some shorthand. ‘Are they going to shoot me?’ I thought. I was assigned to this Major Simon Rooney. He had a nephew at Georgetown and we clicked. God was with me. I stayed in Liverpool the rest of my time.

‘First, I was a buffer for the major. I’d decide who to send in to see him. There’s a funny story connected with that. One day an American woman came in. She wanted to find out how she could get back to the States. I asked her where she was from. ‘Lowell, Mass.,’ she said. She gave me an address, 33 Bridge Street. Now, my father was a police lieutenant in Lowell, so I knew that was a whorehouse. I said, ‘Who do you know in Lowell?’ She gave me the names of a couple of men. I knew them. They were police sergeants.

‘Eventually, I got bored with being the buffer, so I learned code. They’d send over in a coded message the number of ships that were coming over and the troops that were on them and so on. You broke that code and sent the information in another code to London. They kept you locked in one room until the job was done. Sometimes it would take four, five days and you’d have to stay because they didn’t want the information getting out.’

In the fall of 1918, an influenza epidemic was killing 11,000 American soldiers each week. Liverpool was a major port for disembarking soldiers. “They took the soldiers off the boats, sick and dead, in their thousands. They piled the corpses in warehouses like lumber. It was a horrible sight. I would sit in the middle of the warehouse and they would bring the effects and dog-tags and so on from each one and I’d put them in an envelope and put the name on it. We had a doctor working with us. He’d insist you wash your mouth with Scotch whiskey each morning. We also had some bottles down there in the warehouse. That was his remedy. It must have worked. I never came down with as much as a cold.”

On leave, Connors and a fellow soldier visited the Isle of Man, which had been made a prison for civilian prisoners of war. “We were put up in a hotel. One day I heard some piano music from a room and I looked in and there was a girl playing classical music and a man and a woman listening to her. It was the German ambassador to the US and his wife and daughter. I could play a little music then, so I sat down and played a while. We had a lovely time for two weeks. We were the only Americans on the island. They wouldn’t let us spend a dime. Somebody even picked up the hotel bill for us. The last night we had dinner at the commandant’s house. Prisoners were waiters, black coats and all. This German prisoner was talking to me. It turned out he was a waiter at the Parker House before the war.

“When the war ended, everything was wide open for three days. I mean there was no morality, nothing. If you were weak, you were gone. Fortunately, I had the Jesuit training, so I came out OK.

“The war changed my life completely. I had plans to be a doctor. When I came back I was 23, and that was that.”

Ben Birnbaum is editor of BCM. His grandfather served in the Great War in the 77th Infantry Division, US Army.