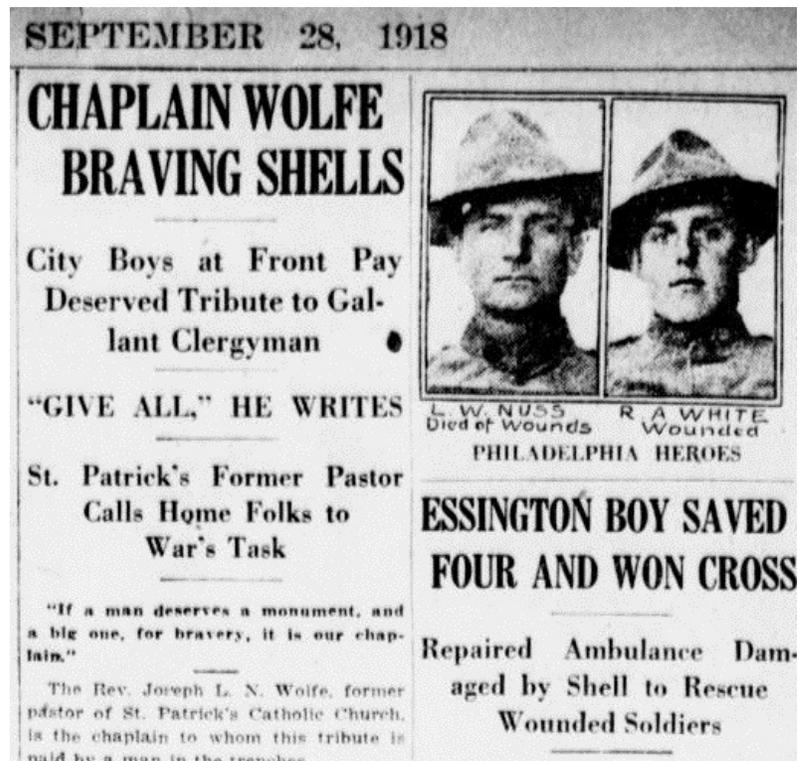


A Philadelphia Chaplain's Heroic World War 1 Acts

By Chris Gibbons Published in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* January 1, 2017



In autumn 1918, during World War I's great Meuse-Argonne offensive in France, a badly wounded young American soldier lay on his back, clutching the hand of a chaplain, Lt. Joseph Wolfe, as the priest administered last rites.

Although the battle raged around them, an eerie calm enveloped the fallen soldier as he looked up into Wolfe's eyes — knowing that they were likely the last he'd gaze into upon this Earth. The chaplain held his emotions in check, finished his prayer, and made the sign of the cross above the young soldier's body.

Wolfe's grim tasks were just beginning. Dead and wounded soldiers littered the floor of the Argonne forest. Cries for help pierced the air amid the hissing bullets, rattling machine gun fire, and exploding mortar shells. Wolfe crawled over and knelt next to another wounded American soldier, trying to help him in any way he could.

Other 28th Division soldiers, who had taken cover, were stunned by what they saw. "Calmly and without fear [Wolfe] administered to the boys who were hurt and those who were in danger," wrote fellow soldier John J. Mangan in a letter to the Philadelphia Public Ledger in November, 1918. "This is but one

instance of the work of this noble priest that the boys who were out there were able to see.” A wounded soldier told Mangan that Wolfe “spent three days on the line without a bite to eat ... out there in the thickest of the shelling, not knowing the minute when it would come his turn.”

My continuing search for the Roman Catholic High School alumni who gave their lives in World War I led me to the heroic story of Rev. Joseph L.N. Wolfe. I had come across numerous newspaper articles lauding Wolfe’s acts of bravery during the Great War and unexpectedly discovered that he graduated from the historic school in 1899.

Born in Philadelphia in 1881, and raised in the city’s old Logan Square section, Wolfe pursued theological studies at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary following Roman, and was ordained a priest in 1906. He was serving as assistant pastor at St. Patrick’s Church in Rittenhouse Square when the United States entered World War I in 1917. Wolfe enlisted at the age of 35 and was assigned as a chaplain in the 110th Infantry Regiment in the 55th Infantry Brigade of Pennsylvania’s 28th Division.

Wolfe saw some of the bloodiest fighting of the war as his division fought in nearly every major U.S. Army engagement: Champagne, Marne, Marne-Aisne, Aisne-Oise, Meuse-Argonne, and Metz. His letters home, frequently published in the Catholic Standard and Times, not only revealed the horrors of war, but also the incredible bravery of American soldiers.

“During these days of terrible fighting there were many acts of heroism performed,” Wolf wrote. “Litter bearers bravely running out on the battlefield to carry in the wounded, ambulance drivers disregarding their own safety, boldly driving their machines over roads exposed to enemy view and often under shell fire. ... Then there were the runners, often mere boys, stationed every few hundred yards to relay messages back and forth. And they ran and delivered their messages, taking amazing risks, sometimes giving up their lives in the effort.”

But it was Wolfe’s own heroic exploits that won him the admiration of the 28th Division soldiers. The Public Ledger referred to him as the “Father Duffy of the 28th” in deference to the nationally known Father Francis Duffy of New York’s famed Irish-American 69th Infantry Regiment. Soldiers returning to Philadelphia continually praised Wolfe for his courage under fire.

“That man is right up in the front lines all the time, encouraging and administering to the boys,” said Capt. James McMonigle in the Ledger. “I’ve seen him stay out for days at a time under fire, administering the rites of his Church to the boys and burying the dead. I’ve laid with him in a ditch at times for hours. If a man deserves a monument, and a big one, for bravery, it is our chaplain.” For his gallantry in battle, Wolfe was awarded the Citation Star, WWI’s equivalent to the Silver Star, by General of the Armies John J. Pershing.

Upon returning home to Philadelphia in May 1919, Wolfe consoled many grieving parents who wanted to learn of their son’s final moments. Over the years, he delivered sermons at numerous memorial services throughout the city, and remained active in veterans’ affairs. In 1926 Wolfe was selected as the national chaplain of the American Legion on the first ballot.

Wolfe also served as pastor in the West Philadelphia parishes of Saint Barbara’s and Saint Gregory’s. He died in 1949 at age 67 and is buried at Holy Cross cemetery in Yeadon.

As we approach the 100th anniversary of America's entry into World War I, Wolfe's words in 1919 during a war memorial service at St. John's Church in Manayunk still resonate today. He stated that America betrays her war dead and abandons her principles if "she harkens to the clamor of selfish men for material gain ... and fails to bring liberty and justice to all without exception, fails to insist that the rights of small nations be respected or that the principle of self-determination be applied to all."

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