

Love and Loss on Home Front

By Chris Gibbons '79 Published in the Philadelphia Inquirer May 9, 2016

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TO A MARTYR'S MOTHER
The following letter from a marine overseas to the mother of another marine, killed in action,—a Philadelphia—was sent by the mother to Representative J. Hampton Moore to “demonstrate the spirit of the boys in the distant zone represent.” The mother asked that Representative Moore call the attention of his colleagues in Congress to it. It is here reproduced in full because of its unusual appeal. The mother is Mrs. C. M. Spearing, of 1532 North Fifty-fourth street. The son, Walter Joseph Spearing, was a member of the Fifth Regiment, U. S. Marine Corps.

At the Front, June 26, 1918.

Dear Mrs. Spearing:
There is grief in my heart and in the hearts of all my comrades for the great sorrow that this war has brought to you and to us. We all unite to express our heartfelt sympathy and condolence to the Mother and family of one who has fallen in a cause as imperishable as will be the names of those who have fallen to defend it. Should there be anything my comrades and I can do to mitigate your grief and to allay your sorrow—some little keepsake of Walt as a marine, perhaps; but name it, dear lady, and it shall traverse the ocean to you.

Because you do not know me, please do not think it presumptuous for me to write. You are Walter's Mother—I was his inseparable friend and comrade; that makes us two kindred souls in common grief for our nearest and dearest. Then too, this letter fulfills a duty that I am bound by oath and will to perform. Many months ago, Walt and I promised each other, that should the “God of Battles” call to one, the other would console the sorrowing Mother. Now Walt has gone West to Home and to you forever, but his figure, his voice, his wonderful

MEXICO ALTERS OIL TAX; AVERTS CRISIS WITH U. S.
Carranza Modifies Decree Imposing Excessive Levy on American-Owned Properties
By the Associated Press
Washington, Aug. 17.
The threatened crisis in the relations of Mexico with the Entente Allies and the United States apparently has been averted by a modification of the new Mexican oil tax decree by President Carranza.

FOE'S OUTER DEFENSES AT ROYE TAKEN
French Plunge to Gates of City in New Advance
DRIVE ENEMY BACK OF ROAD TO LASSIGNY
Germans Prepare to Evacuate Salient and Construct New Hindenburg Line
HAIG GAINS IN FLANDERS
British Troops Press Further Eastward in Somme Battle

LOSSES OF 110TH PROBABLY HEAVY, MARCH ASSERTS



“It is an image that has haunted me all my life,” Patch said some 90 years later, “seared into my mind”. Patch was haunted, in particular, by (a) dreadfully wounded soldier who had begged to be finished off. The young man had cried out “Mother!” as he died.” (From Peter Parker’s “The Last Veteran”)

On June 26, 1918, shortly after World War I’s Battle of Belleau Wood, Private Sol Segal of the 5th Marine Regiment gathered his thoughts as he sat beneath the swaying pine trees of Belleau, France and next to the grave of Roman Catholic High School alum, Walter J. Spearing. Many months before, Segal and Spearing had promised each other that if one of them fell in battle, the survivor would “console the sorrowing Mother.” On captured German paper, Segal then began to write the letter (excerpt below) that, in his words, “fulfill a duty that I am bound by oath and will to perform.”

“Dear Mrs. Spearing:

There is grief in my heart and in the hearts of all of my comrades for the great sorrow that this war has brought to you and to us. We all unite to express our heartfelt sympathy and condolences to the mother and family of one who has fallen in a cause as imperishable as will be the names of those who gave fallen to defend it...You are Walter’s Mother – I was his inseparable friend and comrade: that makes us two kindred souls in common grief for our nearest and dearest...Beneath the green in Belleau Woods, forever connected with the “Honor of the Marines”, lies Walt with two comrades, dead on the “Field of Honor”. Above their graves the stately pines sway in their grandeur, an imperishable monument...Dear lady, the very thought of you in grief tears my heart...in the name of the Twenty-third Company, in the name of the Marines, I salute you and all my comrades salute you.”

The pledge between Segal and Spearing, as well as the letter sent to Spearing’s mother, Ellen, are certainly not unique in the long, tragic annals of warfare. However, they do serve as touching reminders of the loving bond that exists between a mother and her son, and the anguish that mothers have always endured in times of war. But it was during World War I, as well as in the years that followed, that American mothers organized for the first time in a large scale, coordinated effort.

In September of 1917, nearly 6 months after the United States entered World War I, the American War Mothers organization first formed in Indiana, and quickly spread across the country. These mothers, who had children then serving in the military, displayed a flag in their home windows with a blue star denoting the service of a child. If a son was killed in action, a gold star was sewn over the blue. These women became known as the “Gold Star Mothers”, a phrase coined by President Woodrow Wilson. The American War Mothers was also very active in helping men and women in military service, as well as promoting government calls for food conservation at home. Many of these women also helped the war effort by joining the labor force and working in factories due to the shortage of men.

Following the war, the American War Mothers organization had grown to 23,000 members and assisted families who wished to have their son’s bodies brought back for burial in the U.S. Also, in the early 1930’s, the organization assisted the U.S. government with the “Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages”, in which the government paid the travel expenses of mothers and widows who wished to visit the European grave sites of their sons and husbands who had died during the Great War.

Shortly after receiving the letter from Sol Segal in the summer of 1918, Ellen Spearing sent a copy to J. Hampton Moore, a Pennsylvania Republican then serving in the U.S. House of Representatives, and who eventually became the mayor of Philadelphia. She sent it to Moore “to demonstrate the spirit of the boys in the district you represent”, and wanted him to share it with his colleagues in Congress. The letter was then published on the front page of the August 17, 1918 Philadelphia Evening Public Ledger.

In 1921, Ellen and Cornelius Spearing had the body of their son exhumed from the Belleau Wood battlefield grave, shipped to the U.S., and reburied in St. Denis cemetery in Havertown. My ongoing search for the Roman Catholic High School alumni who died in World War I led me to St. Denis. Like Sol Segal had done nearly 100 years ago, I sat next to the grave of Walter Spearing and gathered my thoughts. However, there were no “stately pines sway(ing) in their grandeur” above his grave at St. Denis - just a simple grass field neatly lined with rows of tombstones and bounded by a chain-link fence. As I placed Roman Catholic High School and American flags next to Spearing’s gravestone, I was surprised to see that his mother’s name was not chiseled into the granite. I reconfirmed with St. Denis that Ellen is, in fact, buried there. Perhaps when she died in Philadelphia in 1943, her family did not have enough money to engrave the headstone, or Ellen may have specifically requested that her name not be added before she passed. I cannot say. But I do know that her name’s absence is symbolic of the often forgotten, selfless devotion of war-mothers, not only those in World War I, but in all the wars. I could only shake my head in frustration as I stared at the gravestone. It’s almost as if Ellen Spearing, the mother who ensured that her son’s sacrifice would not be forgotten, had never existed.

The search for Roman’s “lost boys” of World War I continues, but it has now taken on a new meaning for me. It will carry on, and many more stories are likely to emerge from it, however, my admiration and motivation will no longer be limited to the soldiers. I’m confident that we will eventually find all of their names, and we’ll do it not only for them, but for their families as well – especially their mothers. And on this Mother’s Day, let’s not only remember Ellen Spearing, but all of the devoted, selfless, and forgotten mothers of war.

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UPDATE – After reading the article, Father Kevin Gallagher, pastor of St. Denis parish, informed me that the parish has decided to add Ellen’s name to the gravestone.