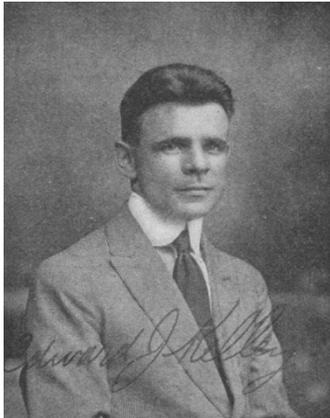


# Philadelphian Gave His Life as Nation Found It's Soul

By Chris Gibbons

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Edward J. Kelley



It is Sept. 26, 1916. Six French soldiers, three on each side, carry the plain pine coffin from the little Catholic church in the French town of Rampont. It is unusually warm for late September, and the familiar booming sounds of the German and French artillery can be heard in the distance as the mourners slowly file out of the church.

The coffin holds the body of a young Philadelphian, Edward J. Kelley, and following behind the French soldiers are more than 35 solemn Americans dressed in the simple khaki uniforms of Kelley's unit, the all-volunteer American Ambulance Corps. During the funeral Mass, the best singers among the French soldiers had given a moving rendition of "La Mort d'Homme," and their beautiful voices seemed to magically drift within the warm air and stay with the congregation as they slowly walk toward the graveyard some 300 yards away.

English poet John Masefield called these brave American volunteers "the very pick and flower of American youth." The military escort at Kelley's funeral was a sign of how highly regarded they were by the French army. A large French flag was draped over his coffin, and a folded U.S. flag rested on a pillow carried by one of Kelley's fellow Americans. Pinned to the U.S. flag was the prestigious French Croix de Guerre (Cross of War) medal with a gold star, the next to highest honor for service to France.

At the gravesite, the French division commander read the citation for bravery, and then gave a speech honoring Kelley and the other American volunteers. "It was a speech that one could never forget," W. Yorke Stevenson wrote for the Philadelphia Public Ledger. "I wish I had it word for word." It was so moving that many in attendance fought back tears. Some openly wept.

I learned of the amazing story of Edward J. Kelley during my search for the alumni of Roman Catholic High School who gave their lives in World War I. Kelley, Class of 1908, was one of the first names discovered, but Roman's records, as well as the initial newspaper reports of his death, mistakenly spelled his name "Kelly," which hampered my search for information surrounding his death.

But the primary reason that Kelley's story had eluded me was the date of his death: Sept. 23, 1916 — nearly seven months before the United States entered the war. But then I read a passage in the book, *Philadelphia in the World War: 1914-1919*, by the Philadelphia War History Committee (1922). I learned that while the United States officially remained neutral in the early years of World War I, there was a small group of young men in the American Field Service who volunteered to help the French fight Germany. These Americans "offered their services to France for the transportation of wounded at the fighting front... This little group of American volunteers at no time amounted to more than 2,000 men, but, at the time of France's greatest need, they were a tangible expression of American sympathy."

The book listed Kelley as one of the first of these volunteers to lose his life. A more thorough investigation of Roman's student records, as well as a search of the archives of the Philadelphia Public Ledger, not only confirmed that he was the same alum, but also revealed the sad details of his death.

Kelley had been in his sector for only a few days during Verdun, the longest battle of the First World War. He was helping transport wounded French soldiers from the front when a shell exploded in front of the ambulance in which he was a passenger. Shell fragments killed Kelley instantly, and severely wounded the driver, another young American volunteer.

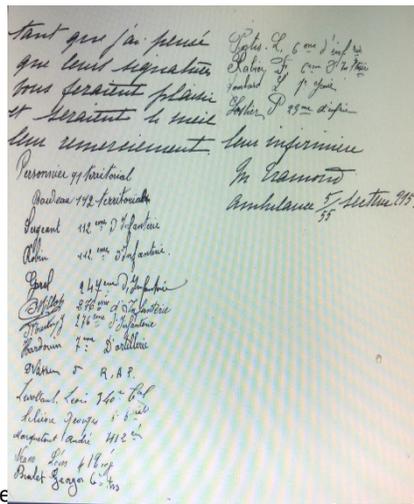
Kelley's funeral three days later touched the hearts of all who attended. In a letter to the Kelley family, the head of the Ambulance Corps, A. Piatt Andrew, wrote: "The scene was one which no one there could ever forget; they could only wish that you and those who were closest to Edward Kelley might have been there and might have felt the beauty and the sincerity of the tribute being paid to him." Before his coffin was lowered into the ground, Kelley's comrades from the Ambulance Corps placed a gold cross upon his chest and, into his breast pocket, a photograph of a young Philadelphia woman they had found among his letters from home. It was a photo of Kelley's girlfriend. Despite repeated inquiries, she remained anonymous. The reporter for the Public ledger wrote, "Somewhere in Philadelphia a young woman is grieving for the hero, but his sister refused to reveal her name."

As I've done for the past two years, I reported on the results of my search for the Roman alumni who gave their lives in the First World War to my alma mater's A.P. history students, two of whom have been assisting in this effort. Thus far, we have named seven alums, out of what we initially thought was a group of 14, based on an old yearbook passage. But newspaper articles indicate that the number is at least 32, and possibly more, who died in the war that began 100 years ago. There is still more work to do. But what we already have learned about the valor of these young men from Roman captivated the school's current students, and they applauded at the end of the presentation.

In the early years of the 20th century, a relatively young and tentative United States was still unsure of its place in a world then engulfed in conflict. But before we could find our place, the country needed to save something, something we were in danger of losing as a result of our isolationist, almost selfish tendencies. I reminded the boys at Roman to take pride in their historic school, for a young man who once attended class in the same rooms where they now sit was among a small group of American volunteers who helped the United States save this most crucial attribute, which would be desperately needed in the chaotic decades that followed. Former President Theodore Roosevelt revealed what that attribute was when he praised the likes of Edward J. Kelley and his comrades in the American Field Service: "The most important thing that a nation can possibly save is its soul, and these young men have been helping this nation to save its soul."



French soldier at Kelley's funeral



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Kelley's great-nephew at his gravesite