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A GOLD STAR PILGRIMAGE TO FLANDERS FIELDS

By J. Darren Peterson

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row.
—Lt. Col. John McCrae, M.D.

While many people, especially those educated a few decades ago, remember these lines penned by John McCrae, most residents of southeast Alabama's Wiregrass region probably do not realize that a local connection exists to the military cemetery in Belgium known as Flanders Field. The Flanders Field American Cemetery in Waregem, Belgium, was one of several cemeteries created after World War I as a final resting place for American soldiers who died in Europe during the war. The cemetery contains 368 graves, 21 of them Unknowns, and the names of 43 soldiers missing in action are inscribed on the memorial walls. Among the graves of Flanders Field is that of Private William C. Barlow of Ashford, the only Alabama native buried there.

William Cataloe Barlow was born December 27, 1888, in what was then known as the Dixons Beat in Pike County, Alabama, near Brundidge. One of three children born to Leroy H. and Russia Bryan Barlow, William was known to his family by his middle name, Cataloe. The Barlows moved south to Houston County in 1911. Leroy, Russia, and their daughter Essie moved to Dothan, while William moved to Ashford, where he took up farming like his grandfather, Anderson Barlow, had done before him. He also worked occasionally as what was then known as a substitute Rural Free Delivery (RFD) courier, or mailman.

Barlow was twenty-eight years old when the U.S. ordered the first of three mandatory draft registrations. It was held June 5, 1917, for men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-one; Barlow registered but requested a draft exemption listing "dependent parents" as the reason. Shortly thereafter, on March 24, 1918, he wed Miss Effie Palmer of Edison, Georgia. They were married less than a month when their tranquility was shattered. On April 20, fifty-two men were summoned for military duty by the Houston County draft board. Despite his exemption request, Barlow was among them.

Barlow shared only five days more with his bride. He reported to Dothan at 1:00 p.m. on April 25. Before noon the next morning, Barlow and eighteen other white draftees left Dothan by railroad headed for Columbia, South Carolina. The black draftees had departed that same morning at seven o'clock for Battle Creek, Michigan. The remaining men from the draftee group traveled over the next few days to Fort Oglethorpe, near Chattanooga, and Camp Sheridan at Montgomery.

National Guard units in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, and Tennessee were ordered to form the U.S. Army's 30th Infantry Division in July 1917. When casualties occurred and replacement soldiers were needed, though, men joined those ranks from all over the country. After training for about six weeks, Barlow was transferred into Company F, 105th Engineers Regiment, 30th Infantry Division on May 17, 1918. His overseas service began May 27 and would last only three short months.

The U.S. 27th and 30th Infantry Divisions were attached to the British 4th Army as the American II Corps.
Barlow’s time in battle was therefore spent on the Western Front where the corps occupied the Canal Sector near Ypres, Belgium, during the Ypres-Lys Offensive, close to where John McCrae was stationed when he wrote the poem “Flanders Fields.” Through that effort, American troops liberated the village of Voormezele.

Four days after the battle for Voormezele, Lt. Col. Herr issued an order calling for an attack requiring that 2,520 cylinders of mustard gas be “pushed” across the front occupied by the 30th Infantry. It was to take place during the night of August 24–25 or as soon after as weather conditions permitted. The attack was, in fact, delayed by three days. During the evening of August 27, soldiers positioned train cars of the gas, which were discharged at 2:25 a.m. the next morning. Tragically, a change in wind arose about three minutes after discharge, driving a cloud of the chemical back under the train onto the British and American troops.

The portion of the train manned by the 105th Engineers was hardest hit by the cloud. While retreating from the gas, many of the men encountered wire entanglements more than one hundred yards from the train, which slowed their escape. Although all personnel were wearing protective gear and gas masks, the gas proved too strong. The backlash being at its strongest in the area, and the wire slowing or, in one case, preventing immediate escape, three engineers were either killed outright or died soon after. Those killed were Corporal Ray Stroman of Indiana, Private Dave Lee of North Carolina, and Private William Cataloe Barlow.

Due to the state of communications at the time, Barlow was not listed on the daily War Department roster of casualties until five weeks after his death on October 2, 1918. As next of kin, Effie was notified at her Ashford address of the death of her husband and asked her preference for his burial. The body could have been returned to the States, but she chose, like nearly thirty-three thousand other families at the time, to have her husband permanently laid to rest near where he fell. Cataloe Barlow was accordingly buried in Flanders Field.

Like Barlow, many thousands of soldiers were buried overseas, and trips to Europe were beyond the means of most Americans. One notable exception was Charles Lindbergh, who flew the Spirit of St. Louis over Flanders Field on Memorial Day in 1927, only nine days after his historic trans-Atlantic flight. As part of a memorial ceremony, he dropped poppies over the cemetery and saluted the fallen.

Serious efforts began in the 1920s to lobby the government to take other Americans, mainly the mothers and widows of the fallen, to visit the soldiers’ graves. Although the first such legislation was introduced in Congress in 1919, a full ten years passed before support—

*Gold Star pilgrims arrive at Aisne-Marne. (Courtesy National Archives and Records Administration.*)*
her hometown of Edison, Georgia, where she remained unmarried through 1929—eleven years. When the government approached her offering a trip to her husband's grave, she accepted. But her marriage in January of 1930 to J. E. Kirksey, also of Edison, rendered her ineligible for the trip.

Barlow's mother, Russia, accepted the government's offer. But because of her age and physical condition, she convinced the government to allow her daughter Essie to make the trip.

Russia and Essie Barlow, the first women from Dothan to make a Gold Star Pilgrimage, left for New York City on June 20, 1931. Before leaving, Russia said she was glad to go to Europe, but that the trip would be a sad one, even after thirteen years, because of the death of her son. She declared, too, that she had no fear of seasickness. "Why, I'm young and strong and I'm not going to be sick," she said. They were assigned to Pilgrimage Party H, and were advised by the Quartermaster to wear "somewhat heavier clothing" and to pack "sufficient underwear, nightgowns, stockings, and handkerchiefs," as laundry facilities would be unavailable.

Essie and Russia traveled by train, arriving in New York on June 22. On June 25 they sailed from New York aboard the USS President Roosevelt with the rest of their group, bound for Cherbourg, France. They arrived in Europe July 2, and would stay there two weeks. Their activities (orchestrated by the U.S. Army) included a wreath-laying ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at the Arc de Triomphe, a visit to Napoleon's tomb, three days at Flanders Field, and considerable time for individual sightseeing.

Their stay in Europe would end July 16, and the Barlow women arrived back in the States July 24. While we do not have any record of Russia's experience on her trip, another Gold Star Pilgrimage mother wrote the following after returning home: "I feel that a gap has been filled, and that now that I have seen my dear son's resting place, and know that it will for ever be kept beautiful, I am more contented."

A native of Alabama's Wiregrass region, J. Darren Peterson is a software engineer with a deep interest in history.
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