

Sheri ANDERSON on Albert Clostermann

Albert Clostermann had this portrait made, circa 1916, at Multnomah Studio in the Dekum Building, which still stands at Third Avenue and Washington Street in downtown Portland.

*In Flanders fields, the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly,
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie in Flanders fields.
Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw*

*The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep,
though poppies grow
in Flanders fields.*

Canadian Lt. Col. John McCrae, after the Battle of Ypres, Belgium, 1915

I recited that poem about the World War I dead at an assembly in 1971, when I was a senior at Grant High School. Got through it word for word, too. Hardly anyone would have noticed a mistake, though; few were listening, including me. Old wars were, well, old wars.

Perhaps I would have been more aware if I had known a relative of mine lay under those poppies. Turns out my great-uncle Albert Clostermann, my grandfather's brother, is in Flanders fields, along with 367 other soldiers who died nearby, in the war that was supposed to end them all.

I first "found" Albert in 2003 in a packet of letters inside a desk in my parents' garage. My father had died, my mother was moving, and lots of stuff had to go, including the desk that had belonged to my grandfather.

The letters were from Albert, sent during his days serving with the Oregon National Guard in Mexico, France and Belgium. I had heard about my grandfather's brother who died in a war, but I knew little about him.

Dated July 16, 1916, to Oct. 23, 1918, the letters were partly in German, probably because Albert's parents were German immigrants. The family had come to the United States from Munich in the late 1890s, settling first in Denver, then Portland.

Albert and his brother Robert, my grandfather, graduated from Washington High School, Albert in 1904. He worked at a bank in Portland, then joined the Oregon Guard.

"Somewhere on the Mexican Border," as his early letters were marked, he served with the Third Oregon Infantry machine gun company. Fully intending to return home, he regularly sent money to my grandfather to pay for moorage of his boat, docked below the west approach to the Madison Bridge, today's Hawthorne Bridge.

From the border, however, Albert went into officers' training at the Presidio in San Francisco. He emerged a second lieutenant and joined soldiers from throughout the western United States to form the Army's 91st Infantry Division, which came to be known as the Wild West Division.

He was assigned to Company E of the division's 362nd Infantry. They mobilized at Camp (now Fort) Lewis, Wash., then traveled to New York and sailed for France on June 28, 1918.

What he did not know, or could not reveal, was that Company E was to join the French army in Belgium to support the Group of Armies of Flanders under the command of Albert I, King of Belgium.

Albert began his European correspondence on July 29, 1918.

Dear Parents,

I had a very pleasant and happy trip across the ocean and landed safely in England. From England we went to France ...

We are in a small country village several hundred years old. The roads are fine, being shaded on each side by rows of large trees. The main road running through the village was built by Napoleon. ...

The people here are very kind and do everything they can to help us. I am learning to speak a little French ...

Aug. 14, 1918:

We march all over our part of the country when we drill and see many of the villages but when you have seen one of these little towns you have seen them all ...

Newspapers are very rare and I wish you would please send me the Sunday Oregonian once in a while or any other magazine. ...

I will never leave the United States if I ever get back. The United States is so far ahead of the rest of the world that these European countries will never catch up with her. These people here live in the same house with the hogs, cows and chickens and they work day and night ...

On some Sundays our band comes around and plays a few tunes. All the townspeople gather around from far and near to hear the concert. ...

Sept. 1, 1918:

We have no effective lights, no matter of sewage systems, not streetcars or any kind of amusement, excepting what our government has brought over here. ... I have met several of the 3d Oregon boys over here with whom I was down on the border. They were all feeling fine and I sure was glad to see them. ...

Sept. 20, 1918:

We are camped at present in some French forest. ...

I haven't been able to speak as much French as I would like to. Still I can order a meal with wine so I know enough to get along. I would sure like to have you enjoy a glass of champagne with me. ...

I am sending \$5.00 to the place where I keep my boat. ...

Could Robert please go down and see whether everything is OK. ...

There isn't much you can send me excepting The Oregonian as Uncle Sam supplies almost everything we need. ...

Oct. 23, 1918:

In what would be his last letter home, Albert wrote in German. We're now in Belgium in a place where the Germans were just a few days ago. I'm sleeping in houses where I can. I've been able to keep warm ...

We can receive a package for Christmas, but we need to send a letter to our families telling what we want. I would like some candy ...

Feb. 4, 1924:

The last document in the packet was an engraved card to Albert's parents from the American Red Cross expressing sympathy for their loss. It was dated six years after his death and included a photo of Albert's grave at the new Flanders Field American Cemetery and Memorial in Waregem, Belgium.

I found Albert again last September, after my aunt -- my father's sister and Albert's niece -- died. Among her papers was an article from the Dec. 5, 1918, Oregon Journal: "Lieut. Clostermann of Portland Killed in Battle in France."

I also found another letter. This one, dated March 15, 2005, had been sent to my aunt from a Patrick Lernout in Waregem. A volunteer at the cemetery, Lernout said he was working on a book about the soldiers buried there.

If my aunt was a relative of Albert Clostermann, could she provide some information?

Since I planned to spend Christmas in Europe with my son, who was studying in London, I sent a reply to the e-mail address Lernout had included. A reply came within hours. "This is fantastic!!!" it began.

On Dec. 22, 2008, Lernout and Christopher Sims, an associate at the cemetery, took us to Flanders Field.

Lernout, a human resources professional, spends his nonworking hours delving into the past. Sims' job is to honor the past while preserving it for the future. Together they are compiling the book about the soldiers at Flanders Field. They are driven, they say, by a mix of gratitude, curiosity and compassion for the forgotten boys.

En route to the cemetery, they told us more about Albert. The 91st Division took part in three major battles. The final one, the Ypres-Lys Offensive, named for nearby towns, began at the end of October 1918.

On Nov. 3, 1918, eight days before the end of the war, a battle was anticipated in the nearby area of Knok. At 0500 hours, while mustering his men, 2nd Lt. Albert Clostermann was hit by an artillery shell. He died within minutes.

As we walked into the cemetery, my son and I noticed that a grave off in the distance was decorated with flags.

Lernout and Sims led us to it. "Albert Clostermann" was engraved on the stone cross. Propped against the cross was a photo. The flags, U.S. and Belgian, signified the country he had grown to love and the one he had fought to save.

The decorations were for us. Albert's family had come to visit.

-- Sheri Anderson