

THE WAR TO END ALL WARS DIDN'T, BUT ITS HEROES LIVE ON
By Marie Coady

On most days, no matter fair or foul weather, the Arlington Road side of Horn Pond is full of walkers and joggers who revel in the beauty and serenity the pond offers. People from all over the area come to enjoy one of the few spots left in our overdeveloped world that allows them to experience the wonders of nature. And if Mother Nature cooperates this Memorial Day weekend, Horn Pond promises to draw thousands to its shores.

So, if you happen to be among the numbers who amble or race along Arlington Road, take a moment to stop along the way to pay tribute to three of Woburn's young men whose lives, so full of promise, were cut down in one of America's bloodiest wars, the "war to end all wars", World War I.

If you start at the Hudson Street end, the first memorial you'll come to is Lynch Park located at the entrance to Hudson's Grove. It is named in honor of Pvt. Charles H. Lynch, otherwise known as "the kid", cut down by a German sniper's bullet on May 27, 1918.

The news of Charles Lynch's death arrived at his home at 24 Stoddard Street some 10 days after a German sniper's bullet caught him just behind his ear on a road in Flirey, France killing him instantly. As Corporal William Carroll, a fellow Woburnite serving in the same regiment, described the incident in a letter to his sister, "He was out on patrol when the Germans started an attack, and as far as I could learn he was making for a dugout. If (he) were just a minute earlier the poor kid would still be with us."

But 18 year-old Charles H. Lynch, nicknamed "the kid" by his regiment, and another Woburn boy, C. Wendall Rupp, didn't make it. And when Carroll tried to retrieve Lynch's body, the Germans opened fire. In his letter Carroll agonized at having to leave "the kid's" body out on the road until dark. He referred to the Germans as "dirty skunks" for making him seek cover while his friend lay out in the open.

Charles H. Lynch enlisted in the service of the United States on June 27, 1917 and began active duty a month later. By November of that same year Lynch wrote home to Alderman John Doherty, who had been his boss at the American Hide & Leather Company in Woburn.

"Every once in a while," Lynch wrote, "when we are sitting around our billet stoves here someone will say, 'Well, I wish I was lugging frames for Jack Doherty this winter', but they all figure on going back."

The following January of 1918, Lynch's letter to his "fairy godmother", a Miss Mahoney who had sent him a box of goodies, described "some pretty stiff drilling". His thank you letter was gracious, but he also told of getting seasick for two days on his trip across the Atlantic and of the "great raining spells which make thick mud which hangs to your boots and makes it very disagreeable."

But his last letter, the one he never lived to mail, is his most poignant. It was a letter to his mother and he left it in the care of the regiment's chaplain, Rev. Osias Boucher, who forwarded it to his mother along with a personal note. The letter was dated May 27, 1918, the very day of Lynch's death, and Rev. Boucher took pains to explain the circumstances surrounding his last few hours.

"Dear Mrs. Lynch," Rev. Boucher wrote, ". . . he was well prepared, for before going to the firing line he went to confession and communion." and as a member of the choir, had spent the last few hours in the Reverend's room "singing like a bird" along with a few other companions.

It was also Rev. Boucher who greeted Charles Lynch's body and led the funeral cortege to Calvary Cemetery where Lynch was interred on August 5, 1921. For the three intervening years Lynch's body lay in a crude grave in Flirey, France near where he fell. Today an imposing memorial built and maintained by the people of France commemorates the spot where Lynch was killed.

But Lynch was remembered by more than hometown friends and family. He so impressed John S. Sumner, a writer from New York and Secretary of the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice, he was inspired to pay tribute to him in a national publication entitled *America*. In it Sumner described his first brief meeting with Lynch on the Toul front in Vertuzey, France on May 14, 1918.

"For only nine days I knew him, but I knew him intimately . . . I came in contact with thousands of men of the 101st, 102nd and 104th infantry, but none so impressed me for manliness, soldierly deportment and Christian character as little Charlie Lynch, who at the age of eighteen gave his life for his friends and his country."

Just across the street from Lynch Park on a triangular shaped island at the bottom of Hudson Street, is a memorial to another World War I soldier, Pvt. Patrick E. Degan. Little is known of Degan other than the fact he was killed in action at the Battle of the Argonne Forest, also known as the Battle of the Meuse-Argonne, on October 6, 1918; and that his mother, Mrs. James Degan of Richardson Street in Woburn, received a telegram on Friday evening, November 1, 1918, at her South End home informing her of her son's death.

Patrick Degnan was born and raised in Woburn and attended Woburn Public Schools, but was drafted into the army from Gloucester after having moved there with the promise of a better paying job. He, along with his two brothers all served with the United States Army in France. But it was Patrick who found himself a player in the historic Battle of the Argonne, the largest World War I operation that involved American troops exclusively. It was also a battle that lasted 6 weeks, took 27,277 American lives, and wounded 95,786.

The Argonne is a region of France in the upper most northwest corner near the border of Belgium and Luxembourg with the Aisne River to the west. Its hilly terrain, rising 1,150 feet, is landscaped with rock and dense forests. It has been the site of many battles beginning in 1792 and continuing through World War II. But on September 26, 1918, it became a scene of desperate fighting as American troops launched their first real offensive of the war.

Under the leadership of General John J. Pershing the US 1st Army began their attack. By October 4, 1918, the 1st Army began a series of attacks all resulting in heavy casualties and little gain. The objective was to drive the Germans out of an area they'd held since the beginning of the war. By October 7, 1918, the 1st Army was reinforced by the 82nd division and the tide began to turn, but it was too late for Private Patrick Degnan. He had been mortally wounded and died the day before reinforcements arrived, on October 6, 1918. He was 29 years of age.

By November 11, 1918, American troops had driven the Germans back and turned the tide of the war. Also the famous Sergeant York had made a place for himself in history by wiping out a nest of 35 machine guns and capturing 132 Germans. That was also when the survivors of the "Lost Battalion" walked out of the Argonne after enduring 100 hours without food, while under constant attack by the enemy.

But it wasn't until July of 1921 that Patrick Degnan came home to his final resting place at Calvary Cemetery while the soldier's last reveille, *Taps*, played over his grave and that of his friend, Arthur Monan of Woburn, who was killed with him in the Argonne.

As you continue down Arlington Road, just as you come to the corner of Lake Avenue, you'll come to the memorial of Pvt. Edward C. Foley whose family lived nearby. In fact the news of his death was delivered to his aunt, Mrs. Francis J. Kenney of Lake Avenue.

Foley and Charlie Lynch served in the same unit and were "good buddies". But unlike Lynch, Foley was an orphan and along with his four brothers lived and was nurtured by his aunt who lived just up the street from where his memorial stands today. And it was to that aunt that he addressed his letters

“My Dear Aunt”, he began his letter of May 15, 1918, “Gee! It certainly feels good to get behind the lines away from the constant rumbling of the artillery guns, the hot, stuffy dugouts, the rain and the ankle-deep mud, and last but not least the strenuous task of trench digging and barb-wiring out in 'No-Man's land'.”

Those letters to his aunt painted a vivid picture of the battle conditions he and his companions experienced on the front lines. He describes his brief respite as being an opportunity to be refitted with “new clothing and equipment” before returning to the front where, “We have been under heavy strain for the last four months. Gassed, raided, bombarded, shelled, and in short, we've got ours, but the Boche will get it back a hundred fold.”

Foley describes his fellow soldiers as “not the same happy-go-lucks” they were upon enlistment state side. He describes them as a changed lot who scurry to confession and communion as battlefield conversions. His biggest concern amidst all the danger was that his aunt be provided the allotment money due her. He is concerned because many of his companions had complained that their parents had not as yet received theirs, and he writes, “I hope you get mine all right, because if anyone needs the money it's you.”

As a member of a bombing squad, Foley describes it as the “Suicide Club” and is reminded daily that he may never make it back home. But his letters are rich with descriptions of life in the trenches. He describes a Mills bomb, the forerunner of the hand grenade, “as big as a goose egg. All we have to do is wait until we see a bunch of Huns out looking around the barbed wire. There is a little spring on the bomb which we bang on our helmets and five seconds later after the bomb leaves our hand and the smoke clears away there are no Huns left to go back to the Kaiser.”

Foley's second letter home, dated May 25, 1918, didn't arrive in Woburn until July 5, 1918 a mere 13 days before his death. That last letter described receiving two packages from home one in which he found a cake he shared with his mates. He also commented on the enlistment of his younger brother Victor. “Victor will have donned his khaki and passed into the ranks. I guess by the time he is all trained and ready to come over here it will be “All Over” for when the Americans get going good and strong it won't take long.”

But it was too long for Edward C. Foley. He along with his friend John T. Flaherty, were killed at Chateau Thierry between July 18th and July 23rd. That was when three American divisions were selected to break the most sensitive part of the German line. At 4:35 a.m. on July 18th, American infantry double-timed into line and drove the Germans back. In the action that ensued the infantry suffered 4, 000 casualties and among them was Private Edward C. Foley.

As Foley prophetically wrote in one of his letters, “In this game if a fellow has luck with him, he will come out of everything all right, but should one come over with his name on it, he is done.” And so it was Eddie Foley's time, and he was done.

So take a moment this Memorial Day weekend and stop to pay tribute to Pvt. Charles H. Lynch, Pvt. Patrick E. Degnan and Pvt. Edward C. Foley, three young men who died before their time in the “war to end all wars”.

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