Robert Lincoln O’Connell

A Connecticut Doughboy’s View of World War I

By William John Shepherd

Among the more than 300 archival holdings documenting America’s Catholic heritage, the Archives of The Catholic University of America include a small but unique collection of papers, mainly correspondence, written by a young Catholic, Robert Lincoln O’Connell, relating his experiences and observations as a soldier during the First World War. Specifically, O’Connell’s papers describe his service as a combat engineer, or sapper, in the First Infantry Division of the American Expeditionary Force (A.E.F.).

The heart and soul of this unique gathering of materials is his letters to his mother and sisters, Ellen and Sarah, back in their hometown of Southington, Connecticut. “Rob,” as he was known to his family, described for them his initial training in and around Washington, D.C., in 1917; his service on the front lines of war-devastated France in 1917-1918; occupation duties in the strangely idyllic Rhinelan of defeated Germany in 1919; and the final victory parades in both New York City and the Capital immediately prior to his demobilization, also in 1919. What follows focuses on those letters written from Washington during his months of training in 1917, and, the last, on his final days as a soldier awaiting the grand victory parade down Pennsylvania Avenue.

A SOLDIER’S LIFE

Robert O’Connell was born on August 24, 1888, in Wareham, Massachusetts, the eldest son of immigrants Daniel and Mary O’Connell. Daniel was born in 1855 in Nova Scotia to Irish parents and, after living in Wales for many years, immigrated to America in 1881. His wife Mary was born in 1856 in Wales to an Irish father and Welsh mother and had immigrated to America in 1879. The couple was married around 1887. In addition to Robert, they had four other children, all born in Wareham. By 1900, the O’Connell family had moved to the town of Southington, Connecticut, located about 20 miles from Hartford and less than 100 miles from New York City. Resting in a valley, the town was originally a small farming community, but by the turn of the 20th century had developed as a manufacturing center, though it had only a few thousand inhabitants. The O’Connell family attended St. Thomas Church, which was Southington’s only Catholic Church at that time, one still attended by family members. The 1910 federal census listed father Daniel as a “laborer” in an “iron mill” and son Robert as “laborer” in a “hardware shop.”

According to his 1919 discharge papers, O’Connell enlisted in the U.S. Army at Fort Slocum, New York, on April 14, 1917, and was shortly thereafter transferred to Washington Barracks in the nation’s capital where he spent the next three months training as a machinist in Company C, First Battalion of the First Engineers. His unit also spent time along the Potomac River on the grounds of the Belvoir Estate which had served since 1912 as a rifle range and summer camp for the training of Army engineers.
As part of the First Infantry Division, the vanguard of the developing A.E.F., O'Connell’s unit, the First Engineers, embarked from Hoboken, New Jersey, on August 7, 1917, arriving at St. Nazaire, France, on August 20, but not before surviving a German U-boat attack that same day which was repulsed by the U.S. Navy’s destroyer escorts. After a brief respite, the First Engineers was stationed at Gondrecourt, where its men were trained by the French in the construction of trenches, dugouts, command posts, sites for heavy weapons, observation posts, wire entanglements, and other obstacles. They also learned how to destroy the enemy’s fences by cutting the wire or using explosives. In addition, they were drilled as regular infantry in the use of rifles, hand grenades, and gas masks.

The final phase of training for the First Infantry Division was also a baptism of fire, since the Division’s posting to the Sommervillier Sector on the Lorraine Front resulted in the unit’s first combat deaths. O’Connell served near Lunesville from December 1917 to January 1918 and near Toul, in the Ansauville Sector, from January to April, where the First Engineers quarried rock, repaired roads, and built dugouts, command posts, and wire entanglements. The soldiers were often shelled and gassed as they worked. American efforts to better organize and strengthen the positions in the Cantigny area of the Montdidier-Noyon Sector, where the First Engineers served from April to July, helped the French thwart a German offensive. To contain yet another German offensive, the First Infantry Division shifted to the Aisne-Marne sector, with the First Engineers deployed to the Compiegne Forest where O’Connell was wounded on July 18 during the first day of the Allied counterattack at Soissons. The First Engineers had not only helped overcome natural obstacles, but its men fought in the front line when necessary. They thus suffered a high rate of casualties, almost as high as some of the infantry companies, with O’Connell among them. During his rest and recuperation following Soissons, he missed serving with his unit fighting in the St. Mihiel Salient, but after recovering he returned to service in the Meuse-Argonne campaign in October and was serving there when the war ended on November 11, 1918.

O’Connell served in the Army of Occupation in postwar Germany, with the First Infantry Division crossing the Moselle River into Germany on December 1 and arriving at Coblenz, along the Rhine River, on December 12. During the occupation, which lasted until August 1919, the First Engineers constructed shelters, built pontoon bridges, and repaired roads. There was also time for sports and recreation with O’Connell engaging in hiking and going on sightseeing tours where he collected many colorful postcards. On August 18 O’Connell embarked with the main elements of the First Infantry Division at Brest and arrived at Camp Mills, New York, on August 30. He took part in the victory parades in New York and Washington before being discharged as a Private First Class at Camp Devens, Massachusetts. His decorations and awards as listed in his service record included the Victory Medal with Defensive Sector Battle Clasp, Montdidier-Noyon Battle Clasp, Aisne-Marne Battle Clasp, and Meuse-
Argonne Battle Clasp; the Victory Button (Silver); and the Purple Heart.

After the war, O'Connell briefly returned to Southington and employment as a machinist in a bottling mill before eventually settling in New York City where he worked as a laborer in an auto garage. His wife, Susan, who worked as a chambermaid in a hotel, was a New Jersey native born to Dutch immigrant parents. O'Connell's draft registration card stated that he was 5 feet 7 inches tall and weighed 120 pounds. Robert and Susan had no children. She predeceased him, dying in 1953. O'Connell died on February 17, 1972, in New York City's Metropolitan Hospital and was buried in St. Thomas Cemetery.

LETTERS HOME

The seven letters that Robert O'Connell wrote in Washington D.C. from April to August 1917 are all addressed as being written from Washington Barracks. Unfortunately, Rob had the bad habit of not dating his stateside letters, though he almost always dated his overseas letters. Rob's temporary home in the spring and summer of 1917, Washington Barracks (now Fort McNair), was established as a U.S. Army post in 1791, third only to West Point and Carlisle Barracks in length of service. Located where the Potomac and Anacostia rivers join in southwest Washington, Washington Arsenal, as it was then called, served as the site of the first federal penitentiary and of a hospital that treated Civil War wounded. Most famously, the arsenal was where several of the Lincoln conspirators, including Mary Surratt, were executed. In 1901 the base, renamed Washington Barracks, became the home of the new Army War College. This last institution, for the education and training of officers, eventually become the National Defense University in 1976. Washington Barracks was renamed in 1948 to honor General Lesley McNair, who was killed in Normandy in World War II.

The O'Connell Family, Robert surrounded by his sisters.

In Rob's first, undated, letter home, he told his mother, Mary, details of his settling in after his recent enlistment. He was mostly concerned with clothing:

*I received the package today and am wondering how you thought of so many things... I had to throw away the hat and underclothes because I simply couldn't handle them. There was no paper or cord to wrap them up, so I had to use the suspenders for a few days until I managed to find a few bits of string and some wrapping paper. All clothes had to be sent to the disinfecting plant to prevent spreading disease among so many men.... Gen. Joffre and his party visited the post yesterday. I seem to be hungry all the time, in spite of three sq. meals. Will write more later.*

We know this letter was written on April 28, 1917, because of the reference to the visit by Marshal Joseph Joffre, the famous hero of the Battle of the Marne, who spoke at the Army War
College, adjacent to Washington Barracks, on April 27.

In another letter to his mother, written about the middle of May, Rob explained why he believed it was better for him to be in the Army at that time:

I wish you would take things easy. There is not much chance of our going away to fight and if I was home, I would soon be called to work in some munitions factory, which I couldn’t refuse because I think this country will have to work hard before the war is over and I might as well be able to say I spent my time in the army as in explaining why I didn’t do something.

He also complained about the Washington newspapers, presumably the Washington Post and Washington Star, although he appeared somewhat impressed by the sites and scenes of the nation’s capitol:

I wish you would send me a Hartford Times once in a while. There is nothing else I want. It has been a very busy and very long month since I enlisted. The Washington papers are dull and uninteresting and never have any news from up there.... This city has trees along the main streets. I never saw a place like it. I have not seen Mr. Lud, the President, yet. But I have seen the principle buildings and the Wash. Monument, which you can’t help seeing, it is so tall. Don’t forget the papers.

Apparently, ‘Mr. Lud’ was a nickname for President Woodrow Wilson, perhaps an obscure reference to the legendary British king and founder of London, though it is not clear from this letter if it was meant in either a positive or a negative light, and it may simply reflect a family in-joke.

In a third letter home to his mother on May 31, Rob explained at some length the training of the engineers on the grounds of Washington Barracks. This training was highlighted by competitions among the various companies in which Robert’s company did not do well:

They had racing and other sports between the companies. C company was either last or about the middle in everything. We lost the tent-pitching by a few points.... The final score was 40 to 38. We had the 38. I was in that and surprised myself, because I was never in a field meet and thought I might get smacked up. The sergeant was sore at losing and yelled at us as we marched off the field.

In an ironic twist, given Robert’s previous comments about local newspapers, the Washington Post reported on the events in its May 31 edition, proclaiming “Co. E of Army Engineers, Winner In Field Events at the Barracks.”

Robert also mentioned a play that he would be attending at the Washington Monument:

Some of the ‘400’ are putting on an amateur play, in the open, at the Wash. Monument, tonight. I think

Washington Barracks and its wartime tent city. (Courtesy U.S. Army)
Training Exercises at Washington Barracks, 1917. (Courtesy U.S. Army)

I will wander over and see what Washington's society looks like.

We can only hope that he enjoyed the play and his glimpse of "Washington's society."

In another letter home sometime in June, he told his mother about troubling incidents, the first being a dressing down he received, presumably from his commanding officer, when he asked for leave:

I went to ask for a few days off and he began asking me about the bother I have in talking and finally said that while I might get along well enough in peace times, it would be risky to take me on active service and that unless I showed a big improvement in a month, they would have to give me a discharge.

The second event, his account of a bitter bar fight, that turned into a minor race riot, is more disturbing:

There was a black and white scrap up the street, last night. It seems that a nigger [sic] lady and a soldier had an argument and she hit him with a beer bottle. Then other coons and a couple of soldiers pitched in and the soldiers started for home right away. There they got more nerve and help and went back to clear the street. I don't know how they finished but I saw one of them this morning, with his left eye bandaged. He was telling about it and feeling of his side very carefully.

Unfortunately, this was probably not an isolated incident, as the Washington Post reported on August 10 that:

Three barrooms closed by police... result of the order of the Secretary of War directing that no saloons shall be maintained within one-half mile of a military camp... a number of saloons in Four-and-a-half street southwest may be closed because of their proximity to the Washington barracks.

This also presaged the reprehensible four-day race riot of July 19-22, 1919, involving many off-duty soldiers, which swept through the nation's capital and resulted in 6 people killed and 150 injured. The casual bigotry displayed in Rob's letter reflects an all-too-common racial attitude of that era. There are some other occasions in his letters where he used racial epithets in common usage among white people. While not acceptable by current standards, they must be understood in the context of the times when most Americans were provincial in their outlook. One also gets the sense that while Rob used some of these terms, his racial views were probably more restrained than those of many of his contemporaries.

Another June letter, this one to his sister Ellen, described Rob's field training experience down the Potomac River on the grounds of the future Fort Belvoir:

I have just put in the hardest two weeks of my life, I guess, down at the rifle range. It is about
twenty miles below Washington, on the Potomac, at a spot where the bank is almost straight up and down, about as high as a tree. It looks very pretty from the river, the tents in even rows and all the bushes and high weeds and the lower branches on the trees being cut away. The trees run out to the bank and the tents are pitched among them and passengers on the passing steamers probably wish they were camping out there. But when we (A, B and C companies) got there two weeks ago last Monday, there were no tents and lots of brush and weeds and hard work. The brush and lots of the trees disappeared, by hand, but the hard work stayed. For two days we worked around camp and lugged and tugged and sweated and wondered why we had ever wanted to leave our happy home at the Barracks.

When the United States entered the war in April 1917, it soon realized that a large cantonment was needed to train thousands of engineers for the A.E.F. Attention quickly focused on the Belvoir estate where soldiers from the engineer school at Washington Barracks had already been training in marksmanship and tactics during the summer months. Shortly after Rob was there, upgrading of the site, later renamed Fort Belvoir, began. From Rob's detailed account, we can see that his training was fairly standard, with a concentration on target shooting:

Half the company shot in the forenoon while the other half worked in the pits, pushing the targets up into view and pointing out each hit with a long stick. The hits are like this [here follows a small sketch] The targets are in pairs, on a frame work and balance each other so that when one target is hit, it is pulled down and the other rises above the parapet. The bullet hole in the lower target is pasted over and, after the next shot, it is pushed up and the hit pointed out. Then the hole in the other target is pasted over and so on, until the firing is over. I fired in the morning and managed to get in with the higher ones on the score. Working the targets is not hard but hot and tiresome.

Combat engineers could be, and often were, called upon to fight as regular infantry when the need arose, hence the training in the use of firearms. They also learned how to construct field works and to transport and erect pontoon bridges. In addition, there were some more unconventional activities, which were rather typical of young men being reckless, if not stupid, as Rob related to his sister:

Some of the fellows built barbed wire entanglements in front of the trenches and others blew up stumps or rocks for practice. One charge they set off made things seem like a young battle for a few moments. They laid a railroad rail on the place, Lord knows why, and put an extra heavy charge in, which was covered with dirt and stones. We were busy digging when there was a loud bang and the air, away overhead, whistled and whined for a few seconds and a loud droning sound began and died away. Then we heard a crash, quite away down the road and a yell. The rail had passed over us and taken a branch off a tree near a road building party.

Fortunately, no one was injured in this sorry spectacle, and Rob soon returned to the relative safety and cleanliness of Washington Barracks, a bit older and perhaps wiser in the tools and tactics of his trade.

In a July 3 letter to his mother, Rob revealed the effect of his intense training, both in the development of self confidence, as well as contempt for those who had not met the standard:

I haven’t had a chance to find out what they intend doing but I know I am making a pretty good record in the company. The captain told us last week that eight or ten men would be left behind because they were too stupid or weren’t considered fit to go with the regiment to France. I won’t be in that bunch if I can help it, as there is some honor in going over but only a disgrace in being a castoff. When the news first got out a
month ago, that we were going to France, some of the fire-eaters were delighted, until the officers explained what they would have to do. Then they weren't so anxious and kept pretty still for a few days. It was no news to me and if I go, I will do the best I can. This life is a wonderful bracer and I am glad I joined.

This confidence was on display again later in the same letter, though there was also sadness in that he would not be home for the Fourth of July. He also talked about movie night at the post, which also included some unwelcome guests:

I am getting pretty well hardened now and can easily do work that would have played me out when I enlisted. Tomorrow is the Fourth. I should like to be home for the day but that is out of the question but I shall try to get home next week if they are going to take me. We will have to drill tomorrow morning but will have the afternoon off till five o'clock, when we have to assemble. In the evening there will be a band concert and moving pictures on the parade ground. They have pictures every week, generally two short ones and a five reel feature. They are always good. The kids and their mothers from outside the Post took to coming and last Sunday night there were so many that they had to be kept back to leave room for the men and the officers' families.

Although a relatively new medium, movies were already an important part of the national entertainment scene. Rob did not mention any titles in this letter, but elsewhere he went into more detail, describing one movie as instructional while the others were of the more general entertainment variety, including one featuring legendary silent screen star Charlie Chaplin:

Last night we had movies in the gymnasium. One was taken here and showed the men building a pontoon-bridge. We all liked that. The next was "The Third Regiment," which I didn't care for and the last was the "Chaplin Revue for 1916." It is the funniest I have seen in a long time and kept the crowd going. The show was free for the men and the operator was a recruit.

One hopes Rob and the other men made the most of their entertainment options for preparations were well underway for them to make the perilous crossing through the U-boat-infested Atlantic Ocean.

The seventh letter home, a one-page fragment, addressed to his mother probably in early August, was the last we have written from Washington Barracks, a few days before his unit departed for France:

We are all packed and waiting to start. We were supposed to start last Saturday, but it was put off till Monday, so I sent a dispatch Friday night. Did you get it? The way things look now we may be here for a few days more. Would you care to make the trip down and risk finding us gone? If you do, get the first train as we may be here till Wednesday or later. Tell Anna May I will write as soon as I can find time. If you come, get the 7th St. Wharves car, which will pass the barracks.

There is no record to say if his family made the trip to see him, but one hopes they did, as it would have been a morale boost. On the other hand, one does not sense any panic in Rob's letter, just hope for a last visit before he set off to do the job he trained for. It is a matter of record that the First Engineers left Washington on August 6 and embarked for France from Hoboken, New Jersey, the following day. We also know, from one of the more pithy postcards he sent, his first correspondence from France, dated August 21, that it was a two-week trip across the Atlantic and was not without its risks:

Wearing heavy uniforms now. Weather much cooler, clear. Glad to be on shore. No sailor’s life for me. Many of the men went to town this afternoon. No match for French wine. French cigarettes make enemies at once. Feeling fine. Cold gone. Miss the newspapers. Write but don’t expect me to write much. Censor is nuisance.

Rob and his fellow engineers were now at war. It would be a 24-month sojourn that would take him across war-torn France and into postwar occupation duties in the Rhineland of Germany before he finally returned home to the United States.

Before examining O’Connell’s final letter from Washington, written just before his demobilization in September 1919, a brief overview of the fourteen letters written from France and the eight letters from Germany is not out of order. These letters are often amusing, especially Rob’s October 6, 1917, letter from France to his sister Sarah when he observes there is little sickness in camp:

We are a long way behind the lines with a party of French engineers who are teaching us about trenches and mines.... Yesterday was stormy and towards night it began to blow hard. About eight o’clock, the rain had softened the ground and the steady yanking had loosened the tent pegs and soon we could hear yells in the darkness where a tent had gone down. Then our tent sagged at one corner. It was fixed up and we went to bed and again it loosened. By that time, half the camp must have been down, so we dressed even to overcoats and helmets and waited for the tent to come down on us, after which we intended to stay under it till morning. But it stayed up, somehow, and the eight of us went to sleep, more or less dressed. There is no sickness whatever in camp, except the ordinary aches and pains and the French wine and chocolate accounts for most of those. There are only half a dozen girls in the village and three of them are waitresses in a wineshop. I don’t remember the other three. Some of the boys must have expected to begin killing Germans the week after they enlisted and are disgusted with the Army.

Another light moment was recorded in his March 18, 1918 missive to his mother when he noted that:

I am writing each week now because I have my own paper, in case I haven’t a chance to reach a Y.M.C.A. tent or an S.A. but there are few places that those people haven’t opened buildings. In this village, the two huts face each other, across the street, but the Y.M. draws the crowd and the money because they have a better equipped place. A real band has been around town for the last week and the way they grind out ragtime is a treat...this would be a lonesome business, if it wasn’t for the Y, and they have huts everywhere. I know of one on a lonesome road in a woods where a lot of guns are located. If that place isn’t wrecked this summer, it will be a wonder because the Germans are always hunting for our guns and accidents will happen.... Yesterday was Patrick’s day but only one man had any green and that was a scrap of weed in his buttonhole, that he had brought back from the trenches. He seemed to be the only good Irisher in sight.

In the same letter he made an interesting statement about his enlistment and service, as well as mentioning his former abode, Washington Barracks:
This letter will probably reach you about the end of my first year in the Army. If you remember, it was Apr. 10, when I went up to Hartford to see if they would pass me. It has been a short but lively year and I hope I get home before another passes but I'm glad I got in early because the drafted crowd certainly didn't have places like Washington Barracks to train in or warm weather, either, but they will have the laugh on us when they get over here and find things cleaned up.

Rob was wounded in action on July 18, 1918, during the Battle of Soissons, and though it appears he was not seriously hurt, it was enough to get him some rest time, as he explained in his July 24 letter to his mother:

There was a little round hole in my leggin, at the sore spot, so I took my rifle and started back for the dressing station, about half a mile away. It was just an emergency station, though, and they told us to keep going, to a larger place in a big cave. There was five in the party, by now, either limping or nursing a bad arm and that cave was almost two miles farther along. I'd have walked twenty, I think, to get some relief from those shells....When you get this, I'll be back with the company again, but I'll have had this rest, anyway, just for a little hole less than half an inch deep.

He must have downplayed his injury for his mother's sake because in fact he did not return to active duty until October, which was demonstrated in several later letters and postcards home, such as a card to his mother on September 27:

Ought to be back with the boys in a week or so, leaving the barracks at this place. A few of the boys are here after the St. Michael drive. No mail since early in July. Guess never will get it all. Have had a fine rest. Seems as if all the original company had been resting. Wish this darned war was over. I want to see what is going on at home.

And, finally, his postcard of October 15 announcing his return to his unit, plus some brief commentary on some other matters:

Got back to the company about a week ago. Received four letters, one from you, and from Mame and Helen. Better than money. Paid last in June. Did you receive the $70 from the YMCA and the piece of German airplane cover? I don't need any money. I can send it, instead. Hope all are well. Good news in the papers, lately.

The war ended on November 11, and the First Engineers arrived in Germany's Rhineland shortly thereafter as part of the army of occupation. While there, the First Engineers performed many of the same tasks they had done in France, building bridges and repairing roads as well as measures to improve sanitation. There was also much free time, with outings for sporting events:

It took about an hour to reach the river near Coblenz, although the hikieup on Dec. 13 took from seven till nearly three in the afternoon. When we reached the grounds the place was crowded with 2nd Division men, mostly Marines, it seemed, and one of them threw a snowball into our truck. As we were jammed in and had no top, that ball couldn't miss and we could only yell back, which started a barrage of snowballs. They rained in for a few moments and then we were out of range, with no one hurt,
although I got one on the ear and we all had snow down our necks. I didn’t care much for the game because the mud made the ball slippery — and the 1st Division team needed a lot of practice. The score was 6 to 0 in favor of the second team.

Company C remained in the Rhineland until August 15, 1919, when it departed for France to take ship for home. The soldiers returned to Camp Mills, Long Island, New York, on August 30.

O’Connell’s final letter written from Washington came two years after the others, with both the war in France and occupation in Germany coming in between, and with a return to his former regrettable habit of not writing a date. However, this one was almost certainly written a few days after the victory parade in New York City on September 10 and shortly before the final victory parade in Washington. The venue was no longer Washington Barracks, but Camp Leach, which was part of the campus of American University. It was apparently in no condition to receive them, though the local Knights of Columbus were helpful:

We are having things pretty easy here now that we are settled. The first couple of days were rough, first especially as almost nothing was ready for us. This is a camp of eight-man tents on frames and they had been dumped on the floor. The weeds were breast high, there was no water, no rations got in until five that evening. We got there at 10:30 and never was there such a disgusted bunch. About four o’clock some ice cream was brought around and the cook managed to get supper at 8:15. There is a Seminary across the road and we filled our canteens at the pipes on the lawn.... Now we are getting plenty of good eats and passes into town 7¢ carfare and the K of Cs especially are doing all they can, lots of cigarettes, matches, handkerchiefs, sightseeing trips around the city in busses and free beds. The papers and the posters rave about the famous or glorious First Division and the recruiting officers are making the most of it.

The campus of American University was also the base of the Army’s Chemical Warfare Unit, which had a sub-unit at The Catholic University of America. These facilities were used to develop and test deadly chemical munitions, especially the newly invented Lewisite Gas. This weapon of mass destruction was named for the army officer in charge of development, but actually invented by a former Catholic University student-priest, Julius Nieuwland. The gas did not, however, go into production in time for use in World War I, though it was later employed by the Japanese in the 1930s and Saddam Hussein in the 1980s.

Robert O’Connell’s last visit to Washington had nothing to do with poison gas, but rather with his final march with the First Engineers as part of the First Infantry Division (later immortalized in the Second World War as “The Big Red One”). The troops paraded from the Capitol along Pennsylvania Avenue and past the White House where they were reviewed by the Vice President.
and members of the Cabinet, representing President Woodrow Wilson, who was canvassing the country on a doomed mission to sell ratification of the Versailles Peace Treaty, which included provisions for a League of Nations. The ovations the soldiers received made this event equal to that in New York the week before though the weary men of the division were probably glad when it was all over. From Washington they were shipped to Camp Meade, Maryland, where many were demobilized. Robert himself was mustered out on September 27 at Camp Devens.

The First World War is largely a forgotten episode in American history. It has been overshadowed by the Civil War, which inflicted divisive wounds still on the mend, and by later conflicts such as the epochal Second World War and the tragically misguided Vietnam War, a conflict which still enthralled the collective American imagination. As important as these other conflicts are, it is unfortunate that America’s decisive participation in the Great War is so little remembered, especially since there are many stories, like that of Robert O’Connell, that are quintessentially American in the general sense, yet represent a slice of Catholic Americana in their depictions of the struggles and coping of soldiers and their families in war-time, as well.

In comparing O’Connell’s letters with those of soldiers from other wars, certain universal themes emerge, such as longing for family and home and excitement with new places and things. There are also some things very specific to a place and time, like references to music and movies and opinions on race and gender. War is essentially a young man’s game, but O’Connell, who turned thirty while serving in France, was a relatively old soldier whose account showed a certain level of maturity that was often absent in the letters written by much younger soldiers. It is unfortunate that we do not have any surviving letters O’Connell wrote to males in his family. One wonders how their tone and content would differ. He might have been more graphic in describing combat, more honest in reporting his wounding, and more gauche in discussing encounters with the opposite sex. It is also disappointing that we do not have any surviving letters received by O’Connell from family and friends. These might give us a much fuller story and an interesting window on the home-front. We might also have gained a better sense of the religious beliefs Rob and his family shared. He doesn’t say much about such matters in the letters, but perhaps his family did in theirs, and he elected not to respond. It is somewhat puzzling that letters home from a Catholic witness to the horrors of trench warfare with its attending mass destruction never reflect on the spiritual aspect of the carnage. There is a popular saying that there are no atheists in a foxhole, but perhaps there can be a spiritual indifference in soldiers like O’Connell who are confident that they will be coming home.

One also wonders how any of the letters Rob O’Connell received might have been censored and what information from home the military authorities deemed undesirable for troops in training stateside or in service overseas. Whatever questions exist, the Robert Lincoln O’Connell collection is a treasure trove now widely accessible, both online and in the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives of The Catholic University. Its materials are both a resource for an important period of American Catholic social and military history generally and as a window on the Washington area during wartime.

Note: For general information on O’Connell’s unit, see for example, Society of the First Division’s History of the First Division During the World War, 1917-1919 and Edward M. Coffman’s The War to End All Wars: The American Military Experience in World War I. William John Shepherd has been an archivist for twenty years at The Catholic University of America.