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ENGL 3733: World War I

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4 April 2013

The Edwin Conroy WWI Correspondence
Letters Home and the Struggle to Stay Positive

Soldiers in World War I saw, heard, and did some incredibly gruesome and terrible things. Those on the Western Front during the First World War experienced the unimaginable, forced to spend weeks in trenches, where it rained for days on end, with hundreds of other soldiers. In the Ben Byrnes collection of the Edwin Conroy WWI Correspondence, we see the letters of Private Edwin Conroy. Conroy was a member of the American Expeditionary Force, sent to France during the last months of the war. In this collection are a number of letters written to his mother (as well as a few other family members) from the front. The letters date from January 1918 until December 1918. In them, we are able to see a soldier in the trenches trying to remain positive as he writes home to his mother. It becomes painfully clear just how difficult it was to remain positive the more time he spent in combat. By reading these letters, we are given an example of a soldier greatly affected by his time in the war.

Edwin Conroy was an American soldier from New York City, and was sent to France with the American Expeditionary Force in the summer of 1918. Like many soldiers, he appears to have been excited for a chance to fight for his country. In the letters he wrote home to his mother, he expresses some of that excitement. Before he was actually sent to the trenches, his

attitude was quite positive. The first month and a half of his service in France seem to be a positive experience, and he writes home with an optimistic tone. On July 1st 1918 he writes, “I know where I am but not where I’m going... Don’t worry tho, my dearest Mother, just think of me taking a slight pleasure trip and coming back soon.” This sort of attitude was likely common among those young soldiers who had never experienced war or actual fighting. Many of them likely believed, as Conroy did, that they were going to war for a noble cause, and that they would fight and then return home to their families soon. In another letter, written on the 20th of July Conroy states that he is “feeling fine and everything looks bright.” This is in sharp contrast to much of the literature, war poems, and descriptions that we mostly see when looking at things from World War I. He continues on and says, “To see our boys over here is a treat. All healthy and in the best of spirits, eager to get a chance to go in and win. The quicker we win the sooner home so naturally there is a great incentive to win.”

The letters written up to this point have contained many comments such as those, expressing a feeling of optimism about the war and also about returning home soon. At times he even mentioned that he expected to be home within a couple of months. It isn’t until around the seventh letter included in the collection, dated August 21st 1918, that Conroy begins to express doubts and fears. He mentions that receiving letters from home is “just like a beam of sunshine all the way from the States to a country full of clouds of war.” At this point he seems to be conflicted about the war and his part in it. He is still holding on to that optimism, writing that “today is a beautiful day, sun shining bright and it seems hardly possible that I am in the war.” In the same letter, however, he mentions that he has now seen combat in the trenches, which gave him “a little sinking feeling.” In most of the letters he had written previously, he had told his mother not to worry. He does so in this letter as well, but instead of telling her not to worry

because things are looking bright, or because they are all doing well, he says, “don’t worry as our lives are in God’s hands.” Although he repeatedly assures his mother that “things are going our way” and still expresses some hope in being able to return soon, it seems less sincere in these letters than it did in the beginning. His writing begins to contain a hint of fear, and he no longer seems to be so assured in his own safety and ability to survive the war.

He does try to maintain his positive attitude, at least to reassure his mother. He begins to write with humor, more so than he did in the early letters, possibly as a way of dealing with the horrors that he was witnessing. He explains that the Germans fly over often, “but the French anti-aircraft guns scare them off. It is pretty to see the white shells break in a clear blue sky, but I guess the Boche flyer does not think so.” He also says that he might have to work as a mail carrier when he returns to America, because he’ll miss carrying the “mascot” called a gas mask. All of these comments and many more fill the letters from the end of August through September. He still seems to be able to maintain a somewhat positive outlook, although instances of fear and uncertainty begin to become a little more common.

Around mid-September, much of the humor disappears from letters altogether. He writes of their march back to the front in the dark and pouring rain, where he struggled to see and follow the man directly in front of him. He describes that they “sleep in dugouts that hold hundreds of men” and constantly hear explosions and guns. On October 10th he writes a letter that contains very little optimism. He opens by writing, “some place to write a letter in a shell hole.” He has spent several weeks in the trenches this time, and says “it is certainly desolate here. Only stumps of trees and ground all holes.” He also says, “Talk about thunderstorms, nights here have them all beat. The roar of guns and flashes from the cannons make one continuous storm.” It is obvious throughout this letter that the conditions have worsened and that Conroy is

struggling. It has been raining for days, they never get any sleep because of the roar of canons, and they live in holes in the ground made of mud. "I hope peace comes soon," he writes, "so that I can get back in God's country again." What he first described to his mother as a "pleasure trip" has become a place of nightmares.

This was the final letter Conroy wrote from the trenches. In a letter marked October 23rd, he explains that he "was gassed laying a shell hole" and is sent to a hospital. Another soldier was with him, who had "had his arm shot away" and so Conroy was helping him to put on his gas mask when the gas hit them. The battle was fought on Columbus Day, and Conroy writes that he will never forget that day as long as he lives. He says, "we went over the top at 7 a.m. and hell just broke loose. It seemed nobody could live thru the rain of shells, machine gun bullets and etc. but we did and gained out objective." This was the only time Conroy had ever expressed to his mother in the letters that he had had a genuine fear about being able to survive.

Private Conroy spent the rest of the war in the hospital recovering. He learned of the end of the war from his hospital bed. After the end of the war he is able to explain much of what he was not allowed to before, and the letter from December 1st filled in many of the gaps that were created by the censors that read and reviewed all outgoing letters. He explains that he went to an intelligence school while in France, and was given a position in an intelligence unit "whose duty it was to crawl over at night and get information and capture a prisoner, otherwise spy work." It is obvious that he would have experienced and seen many things that were frightening, and the loss of optimism in his letters is more than understandable. He explains that one of the letters he had sent home had been written while sitting in a shell hole on the battlefield of Verdun, next to the body of a dead German soldier. "Dead men have lost all their terrors," he writes, "and a strange feeling a man ever had from seeing them. 'Tis a strange world." He did not mention this

to his mother before, but now that the war is over the need to hide such details is no longer necessary. With the end of the war, Conroy writes with a renewed optimism at being able to return home and a gratefulness at having survived. He has lost something though, in the few months he spent on the front. His humor and positivity disappeared in the later months, being replaced by a sort of fear and depression that he seems to have tried very hard to keep from his mother. "If the soldiers had their way there would be no war." He then writes that no one can understand what the soldiers went through. The war that he had previously been so excited to fight in had lost its glory. He had begun to doubt that he would ever make it home, and he lost more than can be expressed.

He says it is impossible to believe everything he has been through, and that he wouldn't "do it again for a million dollars."

These letters present us with an incredible story of an American soldier's experience in the war, as well as an example of how the war affected those who fought in it. Edwin Conroy survived and was much better off than many other soldiers who fought in the war, but it becomes painfully obvious by reading through each letter in the collection that he suffered and became more and more disheartened the longer he spent overseas and in the trenches. Although he tries to remain positive in all of his letters, it is clear that this just is not possible by the end of the war. Conroy's is just one of thousands of stories of the men who fought in World War I, but these letters provide an interesting insight into how the war affected the soldiers.