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On the Eve of His Last Flight

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On the Eve of His Last Flight

[From the Harvard Bulletin]

ON May 16 the Bulletin printed extracts from a letter written by Lieutenant Kenneth P. Culbert, '17, on March 22 to Professor C. T. Copeland. In the Bulletin of May 30, his death on May 22, by the fall of an aeroplane at the French front, was recorded. On that very day the letter to Professor Copeland, from which the following passages are taken, was postmarked in France. At Culbert's death, so soon after that of Major Lufbery, whose funeral is described below, he was decorated with the Croix de Guerre, with palm, "for excellent, faithful and courageous work in numerous former flights." He was a second lieutenant in the Sixth U. S. Marines, attached to the first Aero Squadron of the French Army. The following letter appears to have been written on the very night before the young aviator's death.

May 21, 1918.

At Night.

When last I wrote you the moon was almost translucent in a cold, clear sky; tonight it seems tinged with the blood of men and mellowed with the endless succession of years. Apple-blossoms are on the trees, the air is soft and soothing, and below in the valley at our feet the Meuse is running quietly along; which means that winter has slipped by, and summer has come. Again I wish you could be here—not to be in the midst of an air-raid tonight—but to enjoy the beauty of this spot.

Like a Hunting Lodge in the Maine Woods

Were it not for the faint rumbling of cannons in the distance you would imagine that ours was a hunting lodge in the Maine woods. For our huts are lost in a tiny batch of fir trees on the upper slope of a hill; below is the river, and across the valley a typical tiny French village.

It's hard to reconcile such peaceful rural scenes with war—somehow cows browsing by the side of a stream, the fragrance of apple-blossoms in the air, and the clear notes of church-bells are in no way connected with the general notion of war. Yet one has but to tramp over the hill and see the tiny black crosses on the planes (which denote Hun bullet holes, or shrapnel from "Archies"); or amble along the country road and watch French and American troops resting from their turn in the trenches; or cut across the field to the hospital to realize that war has left its marks here as in all places.

This old war is the most gigantic business proposition that ever came along. And obviously the more efficiently it's run the less human sorrow will come from it; and greatly fewer will be the broken hearts. Coördination and coöperation—complete and to the fullest extent sincere and persistent—are what we need. Until we get that France will continue to see her towns crumpled to stark walls, men of the Allies will die in agony—and the Hun will ring his damned "Austerglochen" in token of supposed victories. The Hun may have made some strategical and tactical gains, but he's never won a victory, for victories don't come until hearts and wills are broken and the last drop of blood has been drained. That he has never accomplished in any way. The French, soldier and peasant alike, are undaunted. The British are hurling the Huns back and dying in their tracks like the men they are—and thank God we've come at last, with all the ardor of youth and faith in the right of our cause, to put our links into the chain that must never be broken. . . .

The "Harvard Club of O——"

You've probably heard that Dug Campbell has gotten two Boches already. From every indication he's going to be one of the best men we'll ever have in that end of flying—just as he was one of the most genuine men who ever went through Cambridge. Harvard has its "sons" all over France—indeed six of us (officers in my squadron) have started a Harvard Club of O——. You can imagine how greatly the village is honored when you consider that it has just about thirty closely packed stone shacks, and two rather common cafés—where you can buy very good champagne, and very poor beer.

Perhaps you know some of the men. First and foremost is Steve Noyes—he's an old-timer and a prince of a chap) who is a pilot; a youngster named Hughes, of '18, another comparatively old-timer named Hopkins, and Jocelyn of '16, and myself. Billy Emerson, '16, was the sixth—but I regret to tell you that last taps were sounded for him last week. We do not know whether the "antis" got him, or whether it was a Boche plane. He went out on a réglage and was shot down in our lines. He was an honor to Harvard, a gentleman and a soldier—the first of our little club to gain the one glorious epitaph.

How They Buried Major Lufbery

Perhaps you'd like to hear of Major Lufbery's funeral—you doubtless know that he was shot down, and fell from his burning plane into a courtyard. He had done a great deal in uniting the French and Americans—he was the greatest of our airmen and seventh on the list of French aces—he had all the qualities of a soldier, audacity, utter fearlessness, persistency and tremendous skill—in every way, sir, he was a valuable man.

As we marched to his interment the sun was just sinking behind the mountain that rises so abruptly in front of T—; the sky was a faultless blue, and the air was heavy with the scent of the blossoms on the trees in the surrounding fields. An American and French general led the procession, following close on to a band which played the funeral march and "Nearer My God to Thee" in so beautiful a way that I for one could hardly keep my eyes dry. Then followed the officers of his squadron and of my own—and after us an assorted group of Frenchmen famous in the stories of this war, American officers of high rank and two American companies of infantry, separated by a French one.

How slowly we seemed to march as we went to his grave, passing before crowds of American nurses in their clean white uniforms, and a throng of patients and French civilians! He was given a full military burial; with the salutes of the firing squad, and the two repetitions of taps, one answering the other from the west. General E—— made a brief address, one of the finest talks I have ever heard any man give—while throughout all the ceremony French and American planes circled the field. In all my life I have never heard taps blown so beautifully as on that afternoon—even some of the officers joined the women there in quietly dabbing at their eyes with white handkerchiefs. France and United States had truly assembled to pay a last tribute to one of their soldiers. My only prayer is that somehow through some means I can do as much as he for my country before I too wander west—if in that direction I am to travel.

"Useful" and "Interesting" but Never

a Word of "Danger"

As for myself, sir—I left the French front about six weeks ago and joined the First Aero—going with it to the so-called American front. Our sector is comparatively quiet, and life goes on as of usual. My squadron is an observation one—we

direct our artillery fire (and I'm glad to tell you that our artillery has knocked the stuffings out of several Boche batteries); we work with the infantry, and photograph the enemy positions. It's useful work and quite interesting. Every man in the outfit is praying that the morrow will bring orders sending us up to the Somme for work in the new offensive which the Huns will doubtless begin in short order.