

# 'The old war still continues'

## *Roe Howard's Letters from France, 1917-1918*

by Nathan R. Mannheimer

**I**n August 1917, Chester Roe Howard left Mount Vernon, Iowa, to join the vanguard of American soldiers entering the First World War.

Though he wrote weekly letters home, Howard received no mail from friends or family until January 6, 1918. This five-month gap in communication, which seems incredible in our world of e-mail and instant messaging, was equally incredible to Howard, who watched the men of his unit eagerly open letters and packages during mail call. "Have you all deserted me?" he lamented in a late November letter. "I never was so out of touch with everyone in my life." Then he repeated, for the seventh time, his address. Finally, a torrent of misdirected mail reached him in January, eliciting his understatement that "the mail service over here is far from being all it ought to be."

We do not have the letters that Howard did eventually receive while in France, but the family preserved 42 letters that he had sent home, excerpts of which appear here (with the original spelling and punctuation).

Howard, who went by "Roe," grew up in a middle-class family of five. His father, Christopher Howard, owned a lumber mill in the Mount Vernon area. However, his death in 1916 left Roe, at age 21, as the man in the Howard family. Roe's younger sister, Ruth, was preparing to attend college in New York. His older sister, Lois, was already married to Clifford Johnston.

Widowhood did not render his mother, Alice, destitute. Yet she looked to her children for future social support, and Roe showed every prospect of being a dependable provider. According to her grandchildren, Alice Howard was a woman slow to offer praise, and it was well known that she strongly disapproved of her son's decision to volunteer for the war.

When Roe Howard stood up as the first military volunteer from Cornell College, he was a starring mem-



ber of the senior class. A model liberal arts student, with all-state honors as a guard on the Cornell football team, he also played French horn in the college orchestra and belonged to the Amphictyon literary society. He was a tennis and basketball player and a founder of the Beta Omicron fraternity, later known as the Owls.

He left all of that, and his family, just months short of graduation in order to start his training at Fort Snelling in Minnesota. After earning a commission as a lieutenant, Howard departed for France, eventually serving in the 104th Regiment of the 26th Infantry Division.

Roe's letters, which begin on the next page, tell the story of an observant and intelligent soldier on the Western Front. While they display his growing cynicism about war, they also demonstrate a personal commitment to "do his bit" for the Allied cause and a deep pride for the men under his command.

Dear Mother: France, Wednesday, Sept. 26, 1917.

Rumors fly thick and fast so I knew you would be glad to get a line from me. I hope you received my cable O.K. . . .

Here in France we see very few high buildings and so the towns are scattered over a lot of ground with curious streets and old, old buildings. American towns outgrow the old parts of their towns but here they hang on to them and use them so you can imagine what it is like. . . . Shipping is very much congested in all coast towns and you see many, many ships of many types and of many countries. We have also seen all types of air machines from monoplanes to dirigibles.

. . . We will jump around quite a bit in the near future so it may be hard for me to hear from you but I'll drop a line occasionally but it's hard to get a letter thru. So don't worry for everything's fine with us and its some experience. . . .

There's lots of news I'd like to know but you know how good it will seem when I do hear it.

Remember me to all, so goodbye, Lots of love to you all.

Roe,

1st Lt. C.R. Howard

Inf. U.S.A.

Dear Mother: Sunday, Oct. 14, 1917

Well, I have had no mail yet and it has been a rather long time. I know I have written few letters but I have written you three times since I left the U.S. and I hope you received them all. . . .

I'm sorry we can't tell you of our work. You know it's interesting. We are no busier than we were at the Fort. That would be impossible as to what is ahead of us we know absolutely nothing ourselves.

A representative of the Y.M.C.A. dropped in the other day and was very gladly received. He brot a football, a baseball, candies, this paper, etc. He intended to get things organized directly and then maybe we'll have some place to go. . . .

Both in England and here bicycles are very, very common. So many of the men have rented them and are off to various towns and places of interest today. . . .

Must close before I tell too much. Officers censor their own mail and that of their men when assigned to their regiments so I must not overstep my bounds.

With lots of love, Roe.

Dear Mother: Oct. 17, 1917

Just because I feel as though I'd like some mail I'll try writing for that seems to bring you a little closer. No mail at all yet. Maybe I'm looking for it too soon but I know you can't write too frequently or too lengthily. Short letters are forbidden in fact. All the fellows are talking of

packages of real eats and candy and all kinds of articles coming from the States and it sounds real interesting. . . .

Today was market day and the market place was crowded. You see, the people from the country had brot in their products. They eat lots of rabbits here so there were many crates of rabbits, lot of sheep, and all kinds of fruit. The grapes are larger than those plums in our yard at Mt. V. and wonderfully good. . . .

We handed in our pay vouchers today for Sept. pay and now we're eagerly waiting for our checks. You see, we have had no pay since we left the U.S. so we need it mighty bad. I have at the present writing just one franc (20 cents) left in my pocket. Tomorrow morning I'll buy a big bowl of chocolate for 75 centimes or 15 cents and have a nickel left. That's getting pretty low when you're as far from home as I am. . . .

. . . The French make almost a ceremony of their meals. They take so long. Everything is in courses. . . .

One of our chief amusements is planning wonderful dinners in American restaurants. Let's hope they come true some day. . . .

We see lots of American flags over here. But they are so funny. If they have red and white stripes and a patch of stars in the corner, it is an American flag. I have seen flags with only 9 stripes and any no. of stars from 13-48. . . .

I'll tell you all about this life when I see you and I'd like to think it would be next Fall.

I haven't much more to say. For fear you have lost or forgotten my address, I'll repeat it. American Infantry Officers' School A.E.F., France. Now be sure and get it right when you write me if you want me to hear from you.

Lots of love, Roe.

Dear Mother: . . . Oct. 21, 1917, 8:30 P.M.

. . . They are making a call for the U.S. men in France to buy Liberty Loan Bonds so today I signed up for \$150.00. They will take \$15.00 a month out of my salary to pay for it and so its saving money and a good invesment. . . .

. . . There is a new moon now, the first I have seen in France. It was moonlight when we came in last night from the field. We have some wonderful sunsets here and at night the skies are wonderfully clear. . . .

We are already looking forward to Thanksgiving and Christmas and even Halowe'en, planning some kind of celebration. We always like to plan, you know. There's no harm in that.

. . . We are all looking forward to the time when we come home. It is hard now for us all but I know you're glad I did the way I did and I know I am. And we'll always be so much happier for it. And we'll have a mighty happy time when we four get together again, for you mean home to me. . . .

It seems to me I've had some funny experiences in

my life. I'll always be sorry I couldn't be at Cornell for commencement and yet I had graduation exercises of my own. . . .

Goodnight, Lots of love, Roe.

Dear Mother: Oct. 24, 1917

. . . All over the country there are stone walls instead of fences, so every house has its gate and some of them are fine indeed, or must have been at one time. With a fertile imagination you can connect all sorts of pictures and stories with this country.

I know you would like to see our orderlies. They take care of our quarters and make themselves generally useful. Of course they are soldiers and are in uniforms. They are French so we learn something whenever we try to talk to them. I saw one fellow [who] must have been from the colonies. He was dressed like a Turk with a red turban, big baggy trousers and a long beard. . . .

Goodnight and lots of love, Roe.

Dear Mother: Sunday, Oct. 28, 1917.

. . . I had a rather queer experience last night. It was raining hard when I came home from dinner and I didn't want to stay at the barracks so I took one of the orderlies and went to the "cinema" or "movies." I was the only American there. All the rest were French. So I could kind of imagine what those Chinese students must have felt like at Cornell. It's mighty little French I can talk but I get around all right. . . .

Rumor flies thick around here as to our future, so we don't know what to bank on. Two new instructors arrived here today and now we're going to use the bayonet a little. There's no rest for the wicked, all right, but let's hope that means the "Boche" this time. The French word for German is Allemande, but the terms "Boche" and "Fritz" are more common with all the allies.

I have often wondered if you receive all my letters. You know occasionally a ship is sunk and . . . the mail goes down with it. . . .

I am anxiously awaiting my first mail. This A.M. a letter came for Lt. C.R. Howard. . . . I opened it and it was for some one in the engineer's department; of course I was disappointed. So there is another Lt. C.R. Howard. You must be careful with my address or my mail will go wrong. . . .

The bells in the church this morning started ringing about 5:30 am and from then on they keep it up. This town is about 95% Catholic so they have services all the time.

The French were very happy the past week to receive news of a French victory. They are more impulsive than Americans and they were so happy they made us feel the same way.

I believe the soldiers have quit looking for the end of

the war. They now just take things as they come. Sometime I want to send home a copy of the newspapers we get. They are always optimistic like the papers are at home and I imagine the German papers are the same. It's a great game, trying to convince the people. . . .

I bought a good knife the other day as I thot it might be useful in the trenches. It has a big blade, a little blade, a can opener, a cork screw, an awl, and a screw driver, so you see it is nearly a tool chest in itself. . . .

. . . We arrived at a French port in the night. I came up on deck early, just as it was getting light and silhouetted against the skyline I could see a sentinel pacing back and forth with his bayonet fixed, and their bayonet is much longer than ours. It typified a country at war and the fighting goes on but from now on it will come closer home to you all, and the U.S. will be different. I have even heard rumors that Broadway was to be darkened at night to prevent air raids. If you have to go around pitch black streets at night you will know what it is like over here.

I send lots of love to you, mother on your birthday and hope it is a happy one, and I'll be with you on your next one "apres le guerre." . . .

Roe.

Dear Mother: France, Nov. 9, 1917

We're moving today. We leave at 4:30 this afternoon so now we're just busy getting ready. We each chose between the National Guard and the Regulars. I chose the National Guard so I am going to join the 26th Division so send my mail in care of the 26th Division. . . . It's kind of hard to see all these other men get mail every day and never get any myself. There are nearly fifty officers in this barracks and all but three have had mail. And now I'm moving and that'll mix it up again, also I may as well give up hope for a long while. You can send anything over. The men get newspapers, letters, and all kinds of packages right along.

. . . It is certainly true that you soon learn to really hate the "Boche" and all I want now is to get my chance at them. But I do hate to think of all the "slackers" in the U.S. The country is full of them. Wait till they've had war a while like France has. Then they'll realize a little more what it means. No matter what the cost is to myself, I'll never be sorry I went into it. I'm more anxious now than ever. But I'm nearly as mad at American slackers as I am at the "Boche." The worst of it is that the "slackers" continue to stand in good esteem. The people ought to let them feel their disgust. . . .

It will be a pleasure to get with troops and hear the good American language spoken. It is a strain to listen to broken English and try to understand it, and also to always hear the French language when you only understand it a little, and we have had to pay such close

attention to lectures to understand. . . .

I saw the funeral of a French General the other day. They had a long procession and it was very picturesque, little choir boys, priests in full regalia, and many officers and troops.

November second is French memorial day and so we marched to the cemetery in the procession. We gathered in a square by the city hall and it was a fine sight, many French soldiers, officers, French, English, Scotch, and American. Flags and flowers everywhere. . . . Every grave had ten or twenty bunches of flowers. . . .

Hope you are all fine and happy. You don't know how I'd appreciate a good American house and a real American dinner.

Heaps of love, Roe.

Dear Folks:

Nov. 25, 1917.

. . . Did you ever hear of a goose girl to tend the geese of a village? It's a reality. Also a man will go along the village street in the morning and blow his horn and the pigs will come running out of every doorway. He takes them out for the day and brings them back at night and they all run back into their own doorway. It is comical indeed to watch them.

Also the town crier. In our town it happens to be a girl and a pretty good looking girl at that. She goes along the street and beats a big drum. The natives all come to their doors and then she reads the latest proclamation. . . .

. . . According to schedule yesterday ought to have been "Homecoming" at Cornell and they ought to have played Grinnell. I think many, many times of you all every day and how things are coming in the States. You are much better informed of the War also than we are. Only we get the personal touches and you don't. It is kind of thrilling you know to have airplanes flying over your heads while you are at drill and you wonder whether they are enemy or friendly planes.

Tuesday is mother's birthday and I send you lots of love and hope it is very happy for you. Save your celebrations of all sorts till I get home for I'll be just as ready for them as you will. So goodnight all, and heaps of love. . . .

Dear Folks: France, Tuesday, Evening, Dec. 11, 1917

. . . The other day I was the most homesick I have yet been. And the reason for it was the previous night I had a dream about being back at school and we were getting up a party to go down to the river. It sure was hard to wake up and find myself over here. . . .

I think I told you I was eating up at the Y.M. now. We heard the whirr of a motor this noon and someone stepped to the door and there was a big French plane sailing around above us. We see groups of them nearly ev-

ery day. I was down at the officers' club at a neighboring town recently and saw some fragments of the I 49, the German zeppelin recently brought down in France.

. . . We hear great stories about your sugar rations, railroad tieups and all. Will be glad to get back to the States and give Pres. Wilson my personal aid.

Goodnight all, With love, Roe.

Dear Folks:

France, Jan. 1, 1918

At last I got some mail my first since I left the States. It was a bunch of newspapers Ruth sent me from New York. The latest one was November 8. There were two "Hawkeyes," one "Record," and two Cornellians and they had a lot of news for me. Those papers cheered me up a lot. In one of the Cornellians it gave a list of the fellows from school who are at Camp Dodge. . . . When you get a little news you want so much more. . . .

[Christmas] was a pretty lonesome day for me as I am over here with absolute strangers and at that time hadn't heard a word. Before I got up, however, my orderly came over and brought me a little package from my commanding officer. It had cigars, gum, and some real American chocolates in it and was tied up with a pretty ribbon and was very much appreciated.

The various companies had programs at the Y.M.C.A. and they were very good. We had a fine tree and lots of decorations and I forgot all about the war and just enjoyed myself. We had all the French children in town up there and gave them all presents and they were a tickled lot. I've made friends with the most of them and they don't let me forget it. . . . Christmas night it was softly snowing with those great big flakes and the place was wonderfully beautiful. We have about a foot of snow now and its quite cold so its pretty hard drilling but it's all in the war game. . . .

This morning while coming along the street I saw a wagon with a wolf on it. It had just been shot and the man had it propped up so that it looked alive. They have foxes and wild boars around here also. We are in a mountainous region with high hills all around us. And we get plenty of exercise climbing them. . . .

With lots of love, Roe.

Dear Mother:

France, Jan. 6, 1918

Today has been my happiest day since that week at home with you all, for I received my first letter from you. I surely had to wait a long while but it was all the more welcome when it came. This noon while eating dinner the sergeant major brot me in a letter you wrote about Nov. 30. . . . And you said you had sent a sweater and scarf three weeks before that you had knit yourself, and I started worrying right away because it hadn't showed up

and I wanted it so much, cause it means so much to me for you made it and must have thot of me constantly but I have it on now. Tonight the sergeant major brot me in six more letters and when I got home here was the box with the sweater in it, and it is fine. I thank you very very much for it and from now on, I wear it every day. . . .

I took them out to the madam and showed them to her, and she said I had a "bonne mere." She said you thot more of me than I did of you, and I told her "No, No." Then she said I was a "Bon fils," good son. . . .

Mother, you said you were proud of your three children. I am glad it is three, and not two. It used to be the girls you were proud of, so I must be coming up quite a bit if you now claim me with them. I sure am glad I got to come over here so early. I envy the boys back in the States but this is my place now and the quicker they all get over here the better. I hate war more every day, but I want my chance at the Huns more every day also. And no matter how long it takes or what it costs me personally I hope the war does not end until the final and full hoped for result is achieved. The Germans have a big bill to settle and are far from being ready to do it yet. So we have a mighty big job already ahead and we're ready and anxious to do it, so just depend on us, and please don't worry for you'd rather have me here than anywhere else and I'd rather be here. . . .

. . . Tonight there was a little concert at the Y.M. . . . [One man] was a Roumanian. He speaks nine languages but not American, think of it. And he was really wonderful on the violin. Even critical Mt. Vernon would praise him highly. . . .

. . . With lots of love. Roe.

Dear Folks: France, Jan. 20, 1918

. . . We have been up to the practice trenches about eight miles from here twice this week. . . . Last Tuesday, it was raining something fierce and the roads were covered with ice.

The other day a flying machine high above us was cutting capers when they had engine trouble and had to come down. They landed on a hill near us. It contained a French sergeant as pilot and an American officer. Just to prove how small this world is, the other was a man I had met before, he came over on the same boat with me. . . .

A funny little thing happened over here recently. An American company had about a thirty kilometre march to make. The company had marched a long ways when they came to a town and the captain gave "Squads left"—"Company—Halt." They had visions of a nice rest. They had stopped just in front of an old church. The captain went up and looked at it. "This church is five hundred years old. Squads right, March." And their rest was gone. Join the army and see the world is an old story now.

Hope to hear from you this week and hope next week to write good news. I'd like to see the Hun's on the run

or a real peace movement. Anything rather than this restlessness.

Lots of love, Roe.

Dear Folks:

January 27, 1918.

There's one job that we officers have that I don't care for in the least, and that is censoring the men's letters. I hate to do it for it is very tiresome and I know they don't like to have it done, and their letters on the whole are very good and there is very little to cut out. I censored an awful bunch of them today and believe me, after you get thru with that job, you don't feel like writing letters, but I've got to write a few tonight.

Well, one mailman was good to me this week. I got about twenty four letters and three or four packages. . . . I also got that fine box of candy from Ruth with the eight boxes in it, and many a man over here thanks all who were responsible for it. . . . Keep candy on the way all the while, not home made candy for that won't keep, but good American chocolates. . . .

We are very busy now and if I never hiked any before, or if I ever lay abed before, I'm making up for it all now and some Hun's going to pay for it, cause it's getting rather personal. Your letters are all wonderful and you've no idea how much they're appreciated, only I'd like to have twenty five every day. . . .

Goodby for now. Lots of love. Roe

P.S. This regiment has a new colonel and yesterday we had a regimental review. I had the 1st platoon of A Co. so we were at the head, the first to pass him. The boys were proud of the honor and I was proud of them. I've got over fifty of the best fighters you ever saw and take it from me we're going to keep at the head of the procession. My only regret is that you can't see them. If I come back with them, it'll be worth your while to come half way cross the continent to see them, and they'll all be glad to see you. Roe.

Dear Folks:

January 29, 1918

Again today the mailman was good to me and brot me about twenty-two letters last night so I am catching up. They date way back last October and it is funny to read now your wishes for a happy Thanksgiving and that the White Sox won the World's championship as we knew that months ago. . . .

. . . It will be almost three months before you get weather like we're having now. We sit with no fire, with windows open, listening to the birds sing. That's sounding a whole lot better than it really is. You'd nearly imagine we were really living over here. We're not, we exist. That's all.

I was shooting my pistol this AM. My captain ranks

among the first shots of the U.S. and all the other officers have qualified as expert riflemen or sharp shooters so I am going up against real competition when I shoot with them. Just so I hit my target when the times comes I'll be satisfied. . . .

Must close for tonight. Lots of love, Roe.

Dear Folks: France, Feb. 3, 1918

Mail is much better now, almost up to date. . . . So I ought to be cheered up. Listen, never write blue letters. You must make them happy. I'll make mine happy and you all make yours happy. . . .

I don't believe I've told you about my new orderly. He's a jewel. He stays here in the room with me but never forgets his place. He's twenty four years old, and an electrician by trade and a might smart fellow. I like him as a personal friend so I've attached him to me, so he's with me day and night. I use him as my runner, and we shoot together, so he can shoot well enuf to protect us both and believe me, he'll do it.

My outfit combines all ages from eighteen to forty. One of my best sergeants is only nineteen while one of my worst "rum hounds" is my oldest man. I've got some slackers who cause trouble but it's a pretty good outfit and they all like me. . . .

Goodby, Lots of love, Roe.

Dear Mother: France, Feb. 14, 1918

Here's my valentine to you and it brings a whole lot of love. . . . We got up about four this A.M. and took a hike of about five kilometres to build some barbed wire entanglements. Our company built about 1200 metres which is a good morning's work, especially when you have to scout all over the country for everything. . . .

With best love, Roe.

Dear Folks: France, Mar. 8, 1918

It's been quite a while since I wrote, I know, but I couldn't help it. We've been busy. But it's interesting and we'll all have some stories to tell when we get back. You ought to see the big cave we're all living in. You could fly over this place and not see a thing but it's a regular city. These hills are made of soft chalk and they are all full of caves, and the walls are all carved up, that's what the soldiers do in their leisure time. . . .

I've got a French soldier making me a vase out of a France "75" shell (3 inch). It's hammered brass and if I can get it to you all right, I'm sure you'll like it. Its ultimate destination is that perfect home of Lois'.

. . . Do you know I haven't seen a woman, child or any civilian for a month. Just soldiers,—figure it out. . . .

It's good to be remembered clear over here, and fruit cake, chocolates, and American tobacco don't go amiss in this place that someone termed, "the place that God forgot." And really that isn't far wrong when you look around you. Not a house standing, trees cut down or girdled, and men sleeping in any place so long as it's under the ground. But I'd better be careful what I say. In the queerest places I run across officers that I met either on the boat coming over or at school on this side. And now they're scattered from Italy to the British front, in artillery, aviation, cavalry, and infantry, line of communications, newspaper work, and military police. . . . But the best of all would be to meet somebody from Iowa cause that's home, you know.

As soon as I can get a copy of the "Stars and Stripes" the official American force newspaper, I'll send you one, and you read it clear thru, cause it gives the real dope. . . .  
. . . Roe.

France, April 9, 1918

. . . I came thru a town "still standing" almost within rifle shot and in easy view of the Boche lines and there was a Salvation Army Canteen with two young American girls, and a phonograph playing American tunes. That is really much too close to the line for women but all of the civilian population has not moved out of these towns. Any house inhabitable still has occupants. Old folks and little children, and they won't be driven away. They have their school and church services and the little children go to school carrying their gas masks. Can you imagine such a war.

My captain is now acting major . . . and I have charge of the company and if I never worried before I'm making up for it now, for it's a ticklish time for us all. . . .

. . . Spent Easter Sunday riding in trucks and saw the birthplace of France's famous heroine (the one with the war like nature). . . .

Lots of love, Roe.

Dear Folks: France, April 14, 1918.

The old war still continues and there's nothing slow about the action now. They're busy making history every day. Right now this old house is shaking with the boom of cannons. It may mean another barrage raid, or simply artillery action. I know this is none too healthy a spot. I'll be glad to get home and know that I can wake up O.K. in the morning. The U.S. seems like a dream to me, and I can't realize what it really is. . . .

I have been at the front over two months. You know what that means. There are some Boche prisoners in town yesterday and they ranged from 18 to 41. The 18 year old was crying hard. He should worry. He's safe enough now. . . .

I'm nearly due a service stripe. A little gold chevron on the left cuff. That'll be nice but it isn't much good to you.

In a certain sector the other morning the Boche came over on the Americans. Were the Americans scared? They were not. They were singing all the time as a matter of fact. They were singing "Hail! Hail! The gang's all here!" And take it from me the "gang" is all the service that counts. And I'm proud to be with such wonderful soldiers for the world never saw their better.

Much love, Roe.

Dear Folks:

April 22, 1918

... The past week has been full of varied experiences. I've sat in the kitchen watching American women make pies and doughnuts and you know I feel right at home. I've been in an officers' club, played billiards, smoked American cigars, read the latest magazines, played the Victrolas, and had negroes to wait on me.

On the other hand I've got my men ready to go into immediate hand to hand fight with the Boche, and waited on the road from nine at night till four the next morning, waiting for the word while the ambulances rolled past, full of, yes, full of Americans, dead and dying. Shell wounds, gas, everything and we wanted to go worse than ever yet the word never came. They didn't need us. Johnny Hun had had enuf. For every American casualty the Boche had thirteen.

Well, I'm proud to say our regiment is getting a wonderful reputation. It has been mentioned in orders by the French, praised by our own army corps commander and next month we are to have the "Croix de Guerre" [French medal for heroism] pinned on the regimental colors. ...

With love, Roe.

Dear Mother:

May 11, 1918. France.

Do you remember Mother's day in the States when we used to all wear a white flower? They have the same idea over here, an additional birthday "to add to her joys, and not to her years." So, Mother, here's a letter just to let you know that all of our home loving tendencies have not been forgotten. ... Do you remember the old saying, "You never miss the water till the well run's dry"? That's the way it is with me now. But we don't forget and always when I think of home, it's you I'm thinking of. In all this world, mother, you're always first in my thoughts.

I've seen you a thousand times since that morning I told you goodbye at Cedar Rapids, and I've pictured you everyday where ever you've been and I know just what you're doing and what you look like, and I know just how you'll look when I come home and how happy we'll all be.

Mother, it was just a year ago tonight you walked down to Billingsley's corner with me and then I left for

camp and year ago tomorrow night I held up my right hand and said I'd be a good soldier while Uncle Sam needed me, and things have come a lot faster since then than I ever thot they could.

... On my birthday I started the company back up to the line and we just got out this morning about one A.M. and that was the first time I have had my pants and sox off in ten days. It was the worst place we have struck yet. But we're still among the living and opposite us they carried in their casualties so once again they fared worse than we did. ...

I had a mighty good patrol out in No Man's Land the other night. How it will seem to come home and walk around without a gun, carry all the lights you want, roll into a real bed and have real eats!

Well, mother, this whole letter is a love letter just to you. I never can do enuf to repay you for all you have done for me. Just don't worry. There's really no cause for it and soon we'll all be together again.

Goodbye and heaps of love, Roe. ...

Dear "Crimp" [brother-in-law]: France, May 19, 1918

Last night's mail brot me about seven letters and one of them was one of those rare epistles from you and Lois, and you stated I hadn't told you enuf about warfare. Perhaps our company has a horseshoe but so far we have not had a single casualty, excepting sickness of course. But we have come close enuf several times. One time the entire company came thru a gas attack (mustard gas, at that) and no one is the worse for it. ...

At one place we were in an advanced position in the ruins of an old town. The trenches were full of water and mud coming in places way above your knees. There were no dugouts and we had all night "stand to" from darkness till dawn. It is one of the worst sectors along the front. The night we were to be relieved we had to turn the boots over to the relieving company so I held my men in town till dark and then took them out over the top, telling them to lie down and hug the parapet. ... The Boche had a sniper working with a machine gun. [My men] took to the trenches and stood in mud and water waiting, waiting for our relief and then it didn't come till 2:30 A.M. After that the boys had an eight kilometre hike before turning in and you can imagine how it left their feet. ...

We had patrols out every night. The lines were over a thousand yards apart and it was marshy in between but we made it "Our Land" instead of "No Man's Land." Our colonel likes to call it "Yankee Land" and it is. Opposite us John Boche is as worried as can be and keeps the night brilliant with his star shells.

One night just about midnight I was getting my patrol ready. The men were having hot coffee before they started. Shots were heard off to our right and a runner came down

to the company P.C. (Post Command) saying a Boche patrol had opened up on an American party. I was instructed to take my patrol up and investigate. . . . We started up the road and about one hundred yards from our right post I found an American corporal, dead—shot thru the back. I sent him in. The war is different now. It wasn't a fair fight. It was the way a sneak would do, crawl up and shoot a man in the back. I could hardly hold my men back, for the Americans are the best fighters you ever saw. . . .

I patrolled all around the spot and on out thru the barbed wire. . . . Then suddenly I heard them. They weren't over twenty feet away and were beating it back toward Berlin. One of our machine guns had a beautiful field of fire and could wipe them out if they could see them so what I wanted to do was make the target visible. I had a "Very light" pistol and three flares. I snapped the trigger twice on all three flares and not a one worked. That's defective ammunition for you. . . .

Just after we were relieved that sniper got five or six men of the company that relieved me. We had an artillery officer with us, so the night the sniper opened upon us, it was reported to him and he got the artillery to open up on the sniper. They sent over about eight shells and after that not a "peep" out of Mr Hun. The next morning they were observed carrying in a man either dead or wounded so our fire had some effect. . . .

We have exciting spy hunts here. This sector is infested with them. We'll all be detectives before the war is over. . . .

One of my friends took out a patrol of 30 men two weeks ago. They were out forty-eight hours and all showed up excepting the Lieut., one sergeant, and a private. They never showed up. They encountered a Boche patrol on the way in and the Lieut. stayed back to see all his men got in. Of such stuff are your heroes made.

Goodbye till next time. Roe.

Dear Folks: May 20, 1918

. . . The Boche sent over gas last night and the regiment on our left had quite a few casualties. If I ever get mine I want to get it in hand to hand fight and not by gas or big shells. But the individual don't count for much in this war and individual desires don't play much part.

Heaps of love—Roe.

Dear Folks: Sunday, June 23, 1918

. . . We are ten or twelve kilometers behind the lines, as I told you in my last letter, yet on Sunday they shelled us. They shelled these towns that haven't been shelled for ten months and it was like rain from a blue sky. We suffered rather heavily, the chaplain of our regiment being among the killed. And I heard him preach just the Sun-

day before. . . . Many of the civilians packed up and left and you could see a regular procession up the road of hay racks, baby carriages and people on foot. But some of them still remain. And it only makes me glad that the war is not in our country.

We expect to move very soon. They say that every move in the army is a move for the worse. But we manage to keep optimistic. Of course no one loves the front but we have to go back and new pastures mean new interests; so I'm glad it's a new place. I know nearly this entire divisional front and it will be hard to find a worse place. But here it was that the 104th made its reputation, and believe me, the boche know this division by now. . . .

With all my love, Roe.

Dear Folks: July 14, 1918.

Last night and today will always stand out in my memory as "one fine time." The mess sergeant of the company and myself came here to buy supplies, green stuff to change our menu a bit, and we've had the best time we've had in France. This is a fine old French town, just as beautiful as it can be, and we are enjoying it, for tonight we go back to the woods where our men are sleeping in holes, in the open, under their shelter tents or most anyplace. . . .

We passed through the suburbs of Paris on the last day of June and I was out on a flat car perched on a ration cart so I wouldn't miss any of the sights. We saw the Eiffel tower, and some wonderful houses and gardens and many very pretty mademoiselles. Everyone cheered and waved their hands and when the Stars & Stripes appeared from a big old chateau window the men went wild. But they hurried us through, and after a few days in rest it was up again to the frontest of the front lines in the very sector where the Marines won their fame last month. We relieved the Marines, in fact. You never saw such a battle scarred area. Many, many bodies are still unburied and the smell is frightful, but it is impossible to get to them. Shell holes of all sizes and equipment of every sort both American and French, and German. I have a fine Boche helmet, soft cap, and bayonet I will try to send home.

I know that sector very well for I patrolled it more than any other officer, and out there in No Man's Land at night as we crept quietly along we passed bodies. . . . This war has brought out some cruel, cruel things. . . .

I have been on so many patrols and yet here I am hale and hearty. When it comes, it comes in a hurry, but we all have to take our chances and I'm sure we'll make them pay the price.

We have lost quite heavily recently. When we came out of last time my orderly got hit in the neck with a shell fragment but I think he'll pull through all right, but I'm might lonesome without him.



My battalion had the honor of representing the division in a review before General Pershing July 12th, and I had the honor to march the company past as the captain could not attend. He complimented the parade very highly and we were all very proud of the honor and very glad to see him. There were six Generals in the reviewing stand, and of course, many pictures were taken and many reporters present. Many Distinguished Service Medals were given. . . .

Now I have something I wish to tell you that I would not ordinarily write, but I may never be able to tell you, as one can not tell what may happen in this war, so do not take this as an idle boast.

My captain said about three or four days ago that he was very highly pleased with my work. The battalion adjutant mentioned me as one of four officers of whom the battalion was proud, and I also received a good word from regimental headquarters. So, Mother, whether I return or not, you'll understand I was not a complete failure in the biggest and hardest test ever given to men as men at all times and under the hardest of conditions. And I want you also to know that we are not proud of what we have accomplished for ourselves, for it is all for you back home, and for your good opinion. Whatever I do, it is always for you and always, no matter where I am, I picture how things are back home. . . .

Now I am fully covered with \$10,000 insurance. . . . Don't forget that in case you have to collect it. Just write to the War Risk Insurance Section at Washington and everything ought to be lovely, but I hope you never collect it. . . .

Roe.

P.S. . . . I want to hear about Clark Bowen. I have heard the faintest of rumors that he is dead. But I can't believe it. There are too many rumors around. It can't be. Roe.

Dear Folks: July 24 [?], 1918

. . . We went over the top about 3:20 in the afternoon and before I had gotten forty yards in No Man's Land I was hit. It was a piece of shell, about an inch long and half an inch wide. I have the piece now. I carried it around in my right thigh for two days before I got back here to this base hospital where they cut it out. And now I'm getting along fine. I do not suffer at all, only I am restless from continually lying in bed.

I am flat on my back now while writing so I hope you will duly appreciate this little note. I'll be walking in three weeks easily. It missed all the vital parts and at the xray the doctor said it was a very lucky wound.

. . . With love, Roe.

Dear Folks: July 23 [?], 1918

It is twenty minutes to eight in the morning and I

guess every one else in this room is asleep. There are five of us in here,—one major, he has ten wounds, a shell exploded right in front of him and killed a man not a foot from him; one captain, who has shell shock; a first lieutenant of the medical corps who has shell shock; a second lieutenant whose ankles went bad on him; and myself. . . .

. . . Our battalion commander was shot thru the stomach but would not leave. He gave orders from the stretcher. Finally after the battalion had reached its objective, he permitted them to carry him back, but he died before he reached the dressing station. There were quite a few dead lying in the field, one young fellow lay there dead with the pictures of his mother and sweetheart in his hand. What a place for those pictures! What an awful contrast between back home and that battlefield. . . .

Some German Red Cross women were captured and they were put to work dressing the wounds of our men. The German prisoners were made to carry our wounded back. German girls were captured who were operating machine guns. . . .

The boche sniped at the stretcher carriers and wounded. . . . Later I was dressing a man and a bullet went right thru my hair and wounded him again. Close escape, well, I guess. Now this is poor stuff to be writing home. Once is enough to fight this war and I don't want to fight it out in every letter I write home. . . .

Goodbye for now, heaps of love, Roe.

Dear Folks:

August 14, 1918

Today would have been father's birthday. . . . It is only ten o'clock in the morning so you see I am an early bird. I went down to the dressing room and got my wound dressed early, then I dressed and came out here in the park to write letters. My leg is coming along fine. I have been out for about four or five days. I can almost walk without a limp but I go quite slowly. . . . I'm feeling fine, never was healthier in my life. And I'm might thankful, too, for if ever a man had a narrow escape, I did.

Did I tell you how I was dressing one man's wounds there on the field and a machine gun bullet went right thru my hair and hit him again. He died later. A fraction of an inch difference with that bullet and you would have been collecting my insurance.

. . . The day before we went over, our regimental adjutant told me I was next in line for captaincy. I don't know how this trip back here will fix things but within a couple of months I ought to have my two bars.

This hospital is a famous watering resort. The Red Cross has taken over all the hotels and baths and it makes an ideal hospital. . . .

Monday night I had a date with one of the nurses, Tuesday night, the movies, Wednesday night (tonight) we have a little vaudeville show, and tomorrow night a band

concert. Doesn't that sound like hard war? Sunday I was over to a nearby town to a ball game. . . . I don't suppose any one but the Americans understood the game. There were Americans, British, French, Turks, Africans, Afghans, Singalese, Italian, and I don't know how many other nationalities there. A big Italian bombing plane flew over town low the other day and caused a good bit of excitement. . . .

Must close now. Love to all. Roe.

Dear Folks: August 30, 1918  
. . . [Today] we were on an American train with an American crew and an American engine, and we saw many Americans along the route. This country is full of them now, so different to what it was last Fall when I arrived.

My leg is coming along fine. They never sewed the wound up but waited for it to close itself and it is very small now and doesn't bother me much. I have played tennis for the past week, and danced several times, so you know I'm not very sick. . . .

The Americans are certainly doing wonderful work now, aren't they? And this past month has been a wonderful month for the Allies. let the good work go on and I'll venture Wilhelm's sleep will soon be a bit troublous.

Why did you never tell me about Clark Bowen? I must close now, with love, Roe.

Dear Folks: October 7, 1918  
Am back with Co. A. This is my third day. Things are going quite well. I'm sorry I missed so much mail while I was gone, but it may catch up to me later. . . .

I have been informed through several sources that you have published certain of my letters in the paper. Please don't. They are entirely too familiar for the world at large. Then also if I know that my letters are liable to be read by others, it will make a great difference in what I say. So no more newspaper circulation.

The papers continue to be full of good news. We are liable to be overly optimistic, which is a bad fault. Big things move slowly and the tide is now distinctly in our favor. The men have wonderful morale and are proud of their regiment and division.

. . . With lots of love, Roe.

Dear Folks: October 14, 1918.  
We're constantly creeping closer. We're under shell fire now. But under all these disadvantages I'm going to write just to send this Christmas coupon. Be sure and use it to the best advantage.

. . . Am feeling fine, but we're living in the open in the mud in the worst sort of weather.

Was delighted to get mother's picture day before yesterday and it's going over the top with me.  
Heaps of love, Roe.

**T**wo days later, Roe Howard was killed in action. He was leading an assault in the Haumont Woods outside the town of Flabas, near Verdun, as part of the Meuse-Argonne Operation. With the 104th Regiment temporarily under the command of the 18th French Division, Roe was tasked with leading the men of his company on a brief "mopping-up job." However, the French light tanks that were supposed to support the infantry advance were knocked out early in the attack. This left the infantry exposed to heavy fire on three sides and outnumbered by German forces as much as ten to one. He continued to lead his men to their objective, but without support they were unable to resist the overwhelming fire directed against them. According to a newspaper report, Roe had said earlier that he "expected a massacre, and so it proved to be." The bodies of Roe and 17 of his men were not recovered until three weeks later, on November 7, lying close to their assigned goal, still facing the enemy.

An officer who served with Roe Howard remarked that the army lost in him "a man possessing all the necessary qualifications of youth, ability, and courage which combined to make one of the finest officers in the service." As Roe himself wrote in May 1918 about another officer's bravery: "Of such stuff are your heroes made." ❖

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#### NOTE ON SOURCES

Essential sources include these newspaper articles: "Lieutenant Howard Wounded in Chateau Theirry [sic] Fight," *Mount Vernon Record*, 8-28-1918, p. 1; "Death of Roe Howard Casts Gloom Over Cornell," *The Cornellian*, 12-17-1918, pp. 1, 3; "Mount Vernon," *Marion Weekly Sentinel*, 12-17-1918, p. 8; and "Completes His Service," *Mount Vernon Hawkeye*, 12-19-1918, p. 1. Lt. Edwin L. Glasier gave a detailed report of Howard's death in "Tells Death of Mt. Vernon Officer," *Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette*, 3-17-1919, p. 1. Howard was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross but he declined the citation because he had been confused with a different soldier in the 104th Regiment; they suffered wounds two days apart near Belleau Woods. Additional information includes Chester Roe Howard, round-robin letter to Beta Omicron, 8-21-1917, Roe Howard File, Cole Library, Cornell College Archives, Mount Vernon, Iowa; Louise Johnston Cairns, phone conversation with author, 6-27-2011; and the 1916 and 1917 Cornell College yearbooks, titled *The Royal Purple*.

For a broad overview of Howard's regiment, see: James H. Fifield, *The Regiment: A History of the 104th U.S. Infantry, A.E.F. 1917-1919* (Springfield, Mass.: The 104th Infantry Regiment, 1931), 286-96, 343, 351; and Center of Military History, *United States Army, Order of Battle of the United States Land Forces in the World War, Vol. I* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1931), 113-29.

Howard's 42 transcribed letters are in *Iowa Heritage Illustrated* production files, State Historical Society of Iowa (Iowa City) and at Cornell College.