

# The Great War

## Men of Richmond Answer the Call to Serve

by Joy Lewis

On April 6, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson and the Congress of the United States declared war on Germany. Over the course of the next eighteen months more than four and a half million American servicemen and women were involved in the conflict that raged on the battlefields of Europe. Over one hundred thousand died and more than double that number were wounded.

In the first two months of the war two hundred twenty-seven men living in Richmond, between the ages of eighteen and forty-five, registered for the draft. Of those, twenty-six entered the Armed Forces, either through enlistment or having been drafted. Two lost their lives in battle and another earned the Distinguished Service Cross and the French Croix de Guerre: Albert Belcher, Murray Savage, and George Bartlett, respectively.

Albert Belcher was born in Canadice in the spring of 1897, the son of George Belcher and Minnie Rankin. As a young man twenty years old he was employed in Richmond as a farm hand. Bert enlisted in the Marines in early June of 1917 and was sent to France the following February. This (excerpted) letter to his siblings is dated March 17, 1918.

“Dear Bro. and sis – Well I arrived in France all O.K. and had a very interesting trip on the way over. The weather was nice and warm but the sea was rough all the way. I almost fell out of my bunk a couple of times but did not get seasick to amount to anything. Then after we landed we had the pleasure of a couple days ride in cattle cars. It sure was some ride and we had a good opportunity to observe the country and it is a very interesting place at that. The people all live in little hamlets (villages) and work the land around the outside. The houses are all made of stone and cement and have red tile roofs and they make a very pretty sight nestled as they are in a little valley (never on a hill). The French people are very nice and treat us fine. They seem to be a very peaceful home-loving people and it makes my heart sad to think their fair land is torn by war caused by a greedy people without a just cause whatever...

“The boys over here are just splendid and I am glad I am here. It is my place and I am willing to do my little bit then when the war is over I am coming back and live [with you]. Well dear Brother and Sister...give my love to all and here is a kiss for each one of you all the way from France... Your wandering Brother, Bert”

Three months later Bert’s obituary appeared in a local newspaper: “Word confirming the death of Bert Belcher, who fought with the marines in the battle of Chateau-Thierry, has been received by his parents...Private Belcher was killed in action on June 5<sup>th</sup> and...last Monday was the War Department informed from France that he had been killed.”

Murray Savage, son of Richmond farmer John Savage and Eliza Murray, was a few days short of being twenty-seven when he was killed in action at the Argonne Forest in France October 8, 1918. In 1988 Edmund Nighan Jr. of Honeoye wrote a lengthy article detailing the heroics of Murray's outfit – Company G, 328<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 82<sup>nd</sup> Division – “the unit made well known due to the exploits of Medal of Honor recipient, Sgt. Alvin C. York.” Mr. Nighan wrote

On Oct. 8, 1919, the 82<sup>nd</sup> Division was in the thirteenth day of an offensive in the Meuse Argonne, along with the 77<sup>th</sup> Division which was on their left. Facing the American lines were some 400,000 Germans in a vast defense of hundreds of machine gun positions, supported by great numbers of artillery and tanks. Co. G of the 328<sup>th</sup> was one of those chosen to go over the top at 6:00 a.m....At jump-off, Co. G was to advance across open ground to Hill 223, then towards the Decauville railroad...

One of the platoons of Co. G was commanded by Sgt. Bernard Early and was composed of 19 men: Sgt. Early and three squads of six men each. At jump-off, Corp. Alvin York's squad was on the left flank, Corp. William Cutting's squad took the center and on the right flank was Corp. Murray Savage's squad.

The Company Commander ordered Early's platoon to slip down the hill around the left flank of the main enemy position and to attempt to knock out as many machine guns as possible. Aided by a low-lying mist, Early, York, Cutting and Savage and the remaining thirteen privates slipped down the hill, through some woods and underbrush, along an unoccupied trench and finally into deep woods behind the enemy gun positions. Realizing they had become lost and were few in number, Early ordered them to circle back toward the American lines...

Corp. Savage's squad had discovered something interesting [a group of] about thirty German soldiers 'just sitting around a campfire gabbing.' Their ranks (one was a Major) indicated that Savage had stumbled on the Battalion Headquarters which controlled the machine gun positions. Sgt. Early hid his men in the brush and told Corp. York to keep his men hidden in case of trouble. Then, on command of Sgt. Early, all opened fire. In the first volley [more than a dozen German soldiers were killed]. The survivors fell to their knees crying '*Kamerad*' as a sign of surrender.

Keeping York's squad hidden, Early entered the clearing with Savage, Cutting and their squads. They disarmed the Germans and, the next minute, they knew they had made a mistake. A command in German rang down the hill. The prisoners fell flat on their stomachs and machine gun fire from no more than 30 yards away raked back and forth across the Americans, followed by grenades. Corp. Murray Savage was killed by a grenade.

According to a letter written by Sgt. Ed. J. Kingston to Murray's family, "Murray was buried the following day in a little trench cemetery in a town called Chatel Chehery." In the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, Murray's final resting place is in Plot F, Row 38, Grave 29. His family was given a stone marker commemorating his death, which they placed in Lakeview Cemetery. His obituary noted that Murray "was a general favorite and his home coming was looked forward to with pleasure by his friends, but his soul goes marching on... [He] was a dutiful, loving son and brother and a devoted friend." In 1923 the Bloomfield-Savage American Legion Post #970 in East Bloomfield was inaugurated, named in honor of Cpl. Savage.

George Bartlett was the son of Edward and Minnie Bartlett. He was born in Rochester on February 17, 1899 and orphaned at an early age. His paternal aunt and uncle, Elizabeth and John Potter, lived in Honeoye and they took the eleven-year-old boy into their home to raise. George, at age eighteen, entered the army, and was soon promoted to corporal. An undated newspaper clipping in the files of the Historian's Office gives a few details of George's heroism, while serving at Soissons, France in the summer of 1918: "A runner, he carried important attack orders to the front line."

Just before the close of the war, in November 1918, George was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, presented by General John J. Pershing himself. The citation accompanying his medal reads "...for extraordinary heroism in action while serving with Company I, 26th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division, A. E. F. [American Expeditionary Forces], near Soissons, France, 19 July 1918. Acting in the capacity of battalion runner, Private Bartlett volunteered and carried an important attack order from his regiment headquarters to the front line battalion through terrific artillery bombardment. He was twice knocked down while in the performance of this mission, but successfully delivered his message on time. Although in a dazed condition upon reaching the forward lines, he again volunteered to carry a message across an area swept by enemy machine-gun fire."

The Distinguished Service Cross is America's second-highest medal for military valor, awarded to those who have performed acts of heroism involving contact with the enemy. For his courageous actions, George also received the Croix de Guerre, France's highest military award. Both these medals are on display at the Honeoye-Richmond Historical Society Museum in the back room of the Richmond Town Hall.

Also available for review at the museum are the names of the twenty-six Richmond men who served in the military during World War I, with details of their family, background, and service during the war: Benton Abbey, Carlton Ashley, Fayette Bacon, Glenn Barnard, George Bartlett, Clarence Becker, Albert Belcher, Willard Boughton, George Colmyre, Charles Cratsley, Narsas DeKranian, Roy Dillingham, Raymond C. Francis, Frank Logan, John Meehan, William Morrow, Frank Rouse, Murray Savage, Harold Short, Frederick Stacey, Walter Sweeney, James Taylor, Arthur Treble, Clarence Watkins, Murray W. Watkins, and Edwin Wood.

There are thirty-seven other veterans of the Great War whose final resting place is a Richmond cemetery. These names may be found on the memorial on the grounds of the Town Hall.