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Journey of Uncertainty

Elbert Walker Shirk & the Belgian Expeditionary Force

by Steve Spiller

She was only 500 miles from the coast of France and headed home when two torpedoes launched from the U-90 tore into her port side.^[1] An hour earlier the crew of the *USS President Lincoln* had been occupied with morning chores. They now found themselves in lifeboats and rafts as they watched the 18,000 ton, former German liner disappear into the icy Atlantic. The required emergency training had paid off. Fewer than thirty of the 715 on board, including Army passengers, lost their lives that final day of May, 1918.

Troops preparing to leave the United States for France and England continued to face a journey of uncertainty. U-boats, influenza, crowded quarters, and the glow of a single cigarette could prove deadly. Convoys zig-zagged across the Atlantic in an effort to prevent the loss of more ships, equipment and personnel.

Among the thousands of men preparing to leave for Europe in June of 1918 was a small contingent of Belgian soldiers, less than 400 in number. They, unlike the freshly and hastily trained soldiers of the American Expeditionary Force, had already experienced the devastation and horror of war. The Belgian Expeditionary Force was on a journey wrought with danger, apprehension and uncertainty, and heightened by beginning in a country experiencing war, and revolution.

According to an account on a World War 1 website, the Expeditionary Force left Brest, France aboard the British ship *SS Wray Castle* on September 22, 1915.^[2] They brought with them armored cars manufactured by the Minerva Motor Company, cars which had proven effective in the siege of Antwerp.

The Belgians arrived in Archangel on October 13. They were to fight alongside the Russian troops in Galicia against the Austrians, including participating in the Brusilov offensive in the summer of 1916. As the dissatisfaction with Czar Nicolas and the leadership of the Russian Army grew, the Belgians, highly decorated by the Russians,

would remain in the country. In 1917 civil war and revolution would lead to the ratification of the Brest- Litovsk Treaty. There was little opportunity for the Belgian Expeditionary Force to leave Russia; at least not via the route they had entered the country in 1915.

In February 1918 the Belgians left Kieff for Moscow. Two months later they were in Vladivostok. There would be others forced to take this same path, including the Czech Legion and Stanford professor and Romanov historian Frank Golder. It had not been an easy journey. It was necessary to assemble adequate provisions for the expected three months prior to beginning the trip west. They even had to bring together and repair the trains they would take. Initially they traveled with passports signed by Nikolai Krylenko. Further west his authority was not recognized, including in the regions of Omsk and Harbin. On April 25 the Belgians boarded an American transport in Vladivostok destined for the United States.

Arriving in San Francisco on Sunday, May 12, 1918, the Belgian troops were far from home, yet enveloped in the admiration of an adopted nation. Hundreds of thousands were involved in an international effort to feed and house "Poor Little Belgium." "Meatless and wheatless days became common.

It was fitting that the soldiers would be guests of Stanford University where the Hoover Institution was to be established, dedicated to the study of war, revolution, and peace, and to the efforts of the mining engineer turned humanitarian and president. In the inner quad of the University on May 15 the Stanford ROTC stood guard as the Belgians entered the Memorial Church for a program held in their honor.

The troops were also welcomed to the Presidio and to Camp Fremont, attended dinners hosted by the Defenders Clubs in Oakland and San Francisco, participated in a mass led by their own chaplain, Father Lens, and sat in review of a Red Cross parade.

During the nearly week-long stay in San Francisco, the Belgians were motored around the Peninsula, sightseeing. A call had gone out requesting the temporary use of citizens' automobiles. Over 200 owners responded. It was in these vehicles that the soldiers traveled to Stanford, the automobiles adorned in the Belgian tricolor of red, yellow and black.

On May 14 they marched in a parade from the Ferry Buildings along Market, Geary and Powell Streets to San Francisco's City Hall. The San Francisco Chronicle reported:

The school children of the city had been given a half holiday. They had assembled in thousands, and they cheered and cheered and sang "Over There," and all sorts of other patriotic songs.[3]

Flowers were showered upon the men of Flanders and Wallonia. Roses, sweet peas, and rhododendrons adorned their khaki uniforms. Even the rifles they carried over their shoulders appeared to have been plucked from neighboring gardens as blossoms sprouted from the cold steel. The adulation would be repeated again and again over the next two weeks. They were at the beginning of a cross continental journey to New York City, a stark contrast to their anxiety driven passage across the desolate Siberian landscape.

The U.S Army Quartermaster Corps was ordered to provide trains and Army personnel to accompany the Belgian soldiers to the east coast, including "two of the best cooks at the Presidio."[\[4\]](#) They reached New York City around the first of June. While waiting to leave for Europe they were housed at Fort Totten. The non-stop celebration and reception continued in New York. Surges of emotion accompanied the Belgians as they marched down 5th Avenue. Shouts of "Vive la Belgique" were heard along the route.[\[5\]](#)

The members of the Expeditionary Force would soon be in France. Their fellow countrymen were being deported and placed in forced labor at the German fronts where they were exposed to Allied fire, undernourishment, a lack of clothing, and the ravages of tuberculosis. What were these men thinking as they prepared for the last leg of their journey? Would they once again be fighting the Germans and Austrians, only this time on the Western Front?

Also preparing to leave for Europe was Lt. jg Elbert Walker Shirk of the United States Navy Reserve Aviation Corps. The Lt. had left the security of the mid-west and a loving wife, and leased his manufacturing business to a cousin, allowing the Lieutenant to participate in the war effort. At age 38 he had not been required to register for draft when the United States entered the war. On May 11, 1918 he enlisted in the Navy.[\[6\]](#) His actions were not out of character for this self-assured man who excelled on the athletic field, won sailing regattas, and captained his school track team. He was also a man of the arts, at ease composing music or playing the violin. And, he was not a slacker.[\[7\]](#)

Hoosier Life

Elbert Shirk grew up in Peru, Indiana a small town north of Indianapolis along the banks of the Wabash River. He was born of privilege on November 11, 1878. His grandfather, Elbert Hamilton Shirk, was considered one of the wealthiest men in Indiana.[\[8\]](#) The grandfather had purchased depreciated Mexican War bounty land warrants when they became available to private investors. With encouragement from Shirk, farmers in Indiana traded their land to him for land in Kansas, Iowa, and Nebraska. His wealth grew. Elbert Shirk's other business interests included establishing the 1st National Bank of Peru. His oldest son Milton would become president of the bank.

On June 6, 1868 Milton Shirk married Ellen Walker, the daughter of Joseph Walker of Worcester, Massachusetts. Milton and Ellen Shirk had two sons; Elbert Walker Shirk, born in 1878 and Joseph Henry Shirk, born in 1881. Milton Shirk continued the prosperous ways of his father. When he died in May of 1903 his estate had an estimated value of \$5,000,000.[\[9\]](#)

Another wealthy Indiana family lived in Logansport, a town directly west of Peru. There, "Judge" Cheney and his wife raised three daughters and a son. Their eldest daughter, Helen, married J. Alfred Kimberly in 1865. Kimberly, a native of Troy, New York, owned a dry goods business in Neenah, Wisconsin with his childhood friend and partner Havilah Babcock. Seven years later the two joined with Frank Shattuck and Charles Benjamin Clark to start a paper company on the banks of Wisconsin's Fox River.

J. Alfred Kimberly and Helen Cheney Kimberly had seven children, two sons and five daughters. Their youngest was Mary Emma Kimberly, but to family and close friends, she was always "Bobbie" or "Bob." Mary would attend the Mary Burnham School in Northampton, Massachusetts and graduate from Smith College in 1904.

In 1894 Elbert and Joseph Shirk, and their cousin, Richard Edwards, enrolled in Worcester Academy in Massachusetts. Despite the age difference, Elbert and Joseph were in the same class. Their maternal grandfather, the Honorable Joseph Walker, was president of the small Baptist academy.

Elbert was viewed as one of the leaders on the Worcester campus. In his senior year he captained the track team, running the 300 yard and low hurdles, was president of the Athletic Association, played on the football team, and was president of the Philharmonic Society.

Elbert, Joseph and Richard Edwards continued to follow the same educational path. In the fall of 1898 the three entered Harvard University. Harvard had undergone dramatic changes during the second half of the 19th century. The industrial revolution and the presidency of Charles W. Eliot significantly impacted the direction of the college. In 1847 The Lawrence Scientific School was established, providing scientific and engineering courses of study. Elbert enrolled in Lawrence.

For the next two years the brothers were roommates in Matthews Hall, a Gothic structure resembling a "Transylvanian castle."[\[10\]](#) They were among the minority of students, about 27%, who lived in the less fashionable on-campus housing; housing adjacent to the former dump and hog slop that had become Harvard Yard. The Spartan living conditions were in stark contrast to the private dorms just off Harvard Square known as the "Gold Coast."

Elbert's Harvard career was noticeably uneventful. Dropping and adding classes, extended periods of absenteeism due to a variety of ailments and poor grades did little to

inspire the future architect. A letter written in January of 1899 to Elbert's parents from Worcester Principal Daniel W. Abercrombie, hints at challenges faced by Elbert,

You and I and other friends have never doubted the goodmetal that is in Elbert. We have only hoped that life would so discipline him as to bring things to an equilibrium for him that one part of his nature might not seriously over balance another.[\[11\]](#)

President Eliot had introduced the "elective system" permitting students to select their own classes giving them "free play to natural preferences and inborn aptitudes."[\[12\]](#) Elbert's good friend and classmate Prentice Coonley, reflected on this freedom in 1953,

The privilege of electing courses while we were at Harvard resulted, in my case, in four wholly delightful years andno preparation for earning a living.[\[13\]](#)

Another of Elbert's classmates was Joseph C. Grew, who would have a distinguished diplomatic career. His biographer, historian and professor Waldo Heinrichs wrote,

. . . young aristocrats of Harvard's Gold Coast acquired their 'gentleman "C" ' with no great effort, and some enjoyment and profit, without risking deliberate commitment to the mastery of any particular subject.[\[14\]](#)

Elbert resigned from Harvard on January 25, 1901, writing,

I respectfully submit my resignation from the Lawrence Scientific School. The increasing illness of my father makes this necessary. As the eldest son it falls upon me to be with him and as soon as I am able, assume business control of his property.[\[15\]](#)

For the next two years Elbert worked in the lumber industry in Louisiana and later returned to Peru where he was named an officer in the 1st National Bank, the bank founded by his fraternal grandfather. He also became involved in the Indiana Manufacturing Company, makers of refrigerators, wooden sewing machine parts and bicycle rims.

Elbert and Mary met at his cousin, Richard Edwards's, wedding in October 1904. The two were among several friends and family members who served as attendants at Richard's marriage to Marie Stuart, the daughter of a former Purdue University President and granddaughter of a former Indiana Supreme Court Justice. Mary and Marie Stuart had known each other for many years. The two had served as flower girls at the wedding

of Mary's oldest sister, Helen, when in 1889 Helen married William Zachary Stuart, an older cousin of Marie.

Within weeks of the wedding a romance bloomed. She was "My darling" and "My beautiful." He was her "Count." He had captured her heart. Elbert would hire a train to visit Mary in her hometown of Neenah, Wisconsin. There would be the parental cautions. Before the end of the year the couple was engaged. They even devised a secret code for use when sending telegrams. When a telegraph operator deciphered the code, they were forced to make changes. Elbert was on his way to Redlands for the couple's March 1905 wedding, when a telegram he sent was delivered to Mary in Barstow on her way to Redlands, with the actual words written below the coded message.^[16] They married on March 7, 1905 in a home on Cedar Avenue rented by her parents, J. Alfred and Helen Cheney Kimberly, with the Rev. Robert Burdette of Pasadena promising to "knit the bonds into a tie as gentle, and tender, and strong as love. . ." ^[17]

After their marriage, the couple lived in Bedford, Indiana where Elbert managed a cement manufacturing plant. They then moved to Peru where they built a Prairie style house designed by a Chicago architect. Elbert was President of the Indiana Manufacturing Company in Peru, manufacturing refrigerators under the Hoosier, Astoria and Indiana labels. In 1916 he moved his factory to Richmond, Indiana where he established the United Refrigerator Company manufacturing the Blue Star refrigerator. The factory would employ 300 when at full capacity.

Fateful Ocean Crossing

German U-boats were active in the waters of the Atlantic. Any military ship leaving Newport News or New York City was in danger of being attacked by these submerged weapons. Newspaper headlines shouted, "U. S. Ships Battling with Hun Submarines," "Transport Sunk on Voyage Home with Wounded," "Two U-Boats Sink 9 Ships off this Coast," and "German Submarines Have Sunk American Ships off New Jersey Shore." ^[18] The latter noted that the "Ports of New York City and Boston Are Closed and Careful Watch is on at all Atlantic Gateways." ^[19] This last headline appeared in the Redlands Daily Facts of June 4, 1918.

For the thousands of men and women traveling across the Atlantic, ocean travel would be a new experience. Effort and assistance came in many forms. The YMCA's National War Work Council Committee was concerned with the welfare of the troops, including literacy. The Council published a booklet as a guide to the novice travelers.^[20] Orientation included becoming familiar with a previously unknown nomenclature.

A new language of port, deck, starboard, galleys, and heads was quickly learned.

The War Work Council's publication also contained information emphasizing the need for discipline; strict and impartial discipline. Throwing any trash or refuse from a ship was prohibited, including cigarette butts. Warning signs were posted on the bulkheads declaring,

Throw nothing overboard. Floating articles reveal our course to enemy submarines.[21]

This was at a time when the "comfort" of a smoke was encouraged. Barnett's Photo Shop in Redlands sold pocket size cigarette cases designed to hold a photo of "the girl I left behind me." [22] The citizens of Redlands contributed to the Army Girls Transport Tobacco Fund, including the families of the Hicks, Sanborns and Harris's. [23] Twenty-five cents would provide enough tobacco for the "cruise." The troops were prohibited from smoking in the berthing areas and on open decks at night. It was possible for the light of a solitary cigarette in starless darkness to be visible from a half a mile.

In May 1918 a proposal was approved by the Navy and War Departments that would increase by 50% the number onboard over the total number of available berths. Shifts were instituted. "Hot racks" had become the norm. It was not until the influenza epidemic hit in force in August of 1918 that the numbers were dropped in an effort to reduce the spread of the viral infection.

The increase in the number of passengers necessitated expanding the cooking facilities, including the addition of large steam kettles. The goal was to feed as many as possible in the shortest amount of time. A lack of trained cooks resulted in training on the spot; galleys became classrooms in between meals. In the YMCA's publication, the members of the American Expeditionary Force were promised:

You will be assailed with a terrible appetite, and you will now welcome the call for breakfast. . . you'll pass long rows of large kettles, which are giving off savory odors. . . Mealtime is always a happy time aboard ship and I know that the reader will agree with me when he has settled down to a good old 'Regulation dinner.' [24]

Not everyone agreed with this glowing assessment, but grumblings were more common on the return trip to the United States than on the way to Europe.

Ships of other nations were chartered, including from Cunard and the French Compagnie Generale Transatlantique lines. The *La Lorraine*, from the Compagnie Generale, was one of one hundred and twenty-eight ships that sailed for Europe in June 1918 transporting nearly 300,000 troops. [25]

The *Lorraine* was launched in 1899 at the St. Nazaire shipyards, home to many French liners. The 11,146 ton ship required 12,000 to 15,000 kilos of coal per hour. One

hundred and ninety-five stokers worked in temperatures in excess of 120 degrees, feeding 18 boilers in order to reach a speed of 20 knots.

Prior to the United States' entry into the War, destroyers were assigned a prescribed area to protect the ships. These "zone patrols" allowed for greater speed of the ships transporting men and equipment. The concept of convoys had not been accepted by the British Admiralty, fearing the slow speeds made the ships increasingly vulnerable to the German U-boats.

The United States Naval Overseas Transportation Service (NOTS) was a strong proponent of the convoy system, despite the reduced efficiency and speeds. The speed of a convoy was dictated by the slowest ship, typically at about 8 knots. Ships were directed to implement predetermined zig-zag patterns. Many of the ships were camouflaged with colorful "Razzel Dazzle" geometric patterns inspired by Cubism. The use of smoke screens and abandoning the use of navigation lights in the dark were implemented to further confuse the enemy.

According to published accounts, the *Lorraine* left port on June 11, 1918.[26] Aboard were the members of the Belgian Expeditionary Force and Lt. Shirk. The following day five ships leaving Newport News, Virginia, spotted the wake of a German submarine. This unnerving experience occurred as they were to rendezvous with ships that had left New York City. It is highly probable that the New York contingent included the *Lorraine*.

Despite the dangers, the crossing was seemingly uneventful. The *Lorraine* anchored off the French coast at the mouth of the Gironde River, waiting to dock at one of the French ports. On June 23rd about 10 in the morning there was a cry, "man overboard." [27] One of the Belgian Expeditionary Force members now found himself in the water, a water chilled by one of the coldest winters on record. Elbert Shirk was on the promenade deck, 30 feet above the surface of the Atlantic . We can only imagine how Elbert and the others were reacting to the emergency. "Man overboard" and "abandon ship" drills were included as part of the required daily onboard training. What followed can only be described as a selfless act, an act of disregard for one's own safety for the benefit of another. Without hesitation, a man from above the water's surface dove into the Atlantic. Lt. Shirk had leaped from the approximate height required of an Olympian diving from the highest competition platform.

Apparently the Belgian soldier was stunned when he fell overboard. Elbert Shirk was confronted with a man struggling, not uncommon for someone in danger of drowning. Elbert was able to successfully "asprawl" the man across a lifesaver that had been thrown to him.[28] A swift tide carried the two a third of a mile before the *Lorraine's* No. 1 lifeboat reached them. Twice the man let loose of the lifesaver, requiring Elbert to dive after him. The second time Elbert was struck in the stomach by the soldier "resulting in

the loss of breath and pain to him." [29] He held onto the man and the life preserver for over an hour by one account until the two were rescued.

The Peru Republican of August 16, 1918 proclaimed, "Lieut. Shirk is Hailed a Hero Plunges into the Ocean and Rescues a Belgian." According to the account in the Republican,

While the vessel was standing some distance from the point of landing, . . ., one of the Belgian officers became temporarily deranged and attempted suicide by leaping overboard. . . Lieut. Shirk threw off his coat and hat and plunged in to rescue the officer. . . Lieut. Shirk was showered with praise by the people on board . . . when he was brought back and it was learned that the Belgian, too, had been saved. [30]

Elbert's actions were described by a Worcester Academy classmate as,

It was the same fine spirit of loyalty actuating him there that sent him through the line twenty years ago, the spirit of service to his fellows; an impelling force from within called into action by a human need. [31]

Had then this man purposely jumped overboard or was it an accident? His experiences on the Eastern Front and the journey across Russia and China were in dramatic contrast to the three weeks he and his comrades had just experienced during the trans-continental trip from San Francisco to New York City. The Expeditionary Force would be landing in France in a few days. More than any, the Belgian knew what to expect on the battlefield. Perhaps it was too much for this man. But he was not the only one who suffered. Elbert would continue to have ill effects from his unselfish decision of June 23rd.

The Belgians arrived in Paris on the 28th of June where once again they were welcomed as heroes. [32] It is not known if the Expeditionary Force was disbanded after their arrival in France or if they were once again called upon to fight the German-Austrian armies.

Elbert would be assigned to several Navy bases in France and Great Britain. His manufacturing knowledge and experience was important to the Navy in the assembly of airplanes.

An important harbor for the U.S. Navy was at Queenstown, Ireland. Queenstown had a significant history. And, it was the final stop for the Titanic and where many of the survivors were taken after the sinking of Cunard's celebrated ship.

The U. S. Naval Air Station in Queenstown opened in September 1918 at the south eastern side of the harbor. From there seaplanes provided convoy escorts and patrolled

for German U-boats. The Navy had also established an assembly plant at the air station. The plant was under the charge of Lt. Elbert Shirk

While stationed at Queenstown Elbert received a letter from Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels dated September 6, 1918, in which the Secretary wrote,

The Department wishes to advise you that it is recommended to the Treasury Department, that a Gold Life-Saving Medal be awarded to you for your action on this occasion.[33]

Further compromising Elbert's physical condition may have been an incident which occurred while stationed in Ireland. Apparently the seaplanes were not known for maneuverability. Several of the planes had been shot down by German aircraft. According to the Class of 1902, 25th Anniversary Report,

Shirk undertook, on his own initiative, to try . . . looped the loop in a twin Liberty seaplane with a full complement of men and equipment.[34]

Elbert successfully completed the loop, but the strain caused the plane to crash into the sea. No one was hurt and Elbert was credited with "getting the plane on its side, so that he could use the rudder and flatten out just before striking the water." [35]

The war was coming to a close. On November 11, 1918 sirens wailed, the Statue of Liberty was bathed in light, effigies of the Kaiser were everywhere, and the citizens of San Bernardino disregarded the flu quarantine in favor of an official celebratory parade at three in the morning. All but one member of Congress stood in standing ovation for President Wilson before a joint meeting of the two houses.

The words of President Wilson were for all to hear. For the Kimberly family their thoughts were more private, but no less profound. For decades J. Alfred Kimberly had kept leather bound daybooks. Typically his comments were brief. Sometimes the shutter opened a bit more into the life of one of the great entrepreneurs of the 19th century. He found space at the end of his 1918 daybook to author the following,

So goes the year 18 and we step into 1919 fearlessly = War is at end & the peace conference is on in Paris. Our army is coming home every week & will soon settle back in their old work except those we left in the fields of France. Thank God there are not many more but still there will be vacant chairs & many aching hearts on our fairland for sons & fathers who can never come back. Such is war. May there never be another. JAK[36]

Mary returned to Redlands in late November and Elbert was officially discharged on January 20 at the Naval Air Station, Bay Shore, Long Island.[\[37\]](#) Four days later Mary met him at the Victorville train station.

A photograph of Mary and Elbert, with Elbert in his Navy officer's uniform, was taken at Kimberly Crest sometime after Elbert's arrival in California. On close examination, the look in his eyes is strangely distant, the sparkle is gone. War ages men, often beyond their years.

Elbert Shirk continued to seek relief from the painful, hot and throbbing ear infection that had shadowed him since June 23rd of 1918. On August 12, 1919 he sought treatment in Chicago from a Doctor Peterson. A week later, Elbert checked into Chicago's St. Luke's hospital on South Michigan Street. The city was still reeling from the racial violence that erupted the previous month, in part a reaction to the death of a young black man.

Members of the Kimberly family came from Wisconsin to see Elbert. Mr. Kimberly visited him on August 21st. Surgery was scheduled the next day, presumably for the removal of the mastoid. This was an accepted treatment for the potentially deadly infection rather than medicating with sulfa and antibiotics, which would come later.

Patients survived inner ear infections and resulting mastoiditis without surgery. Mastoiditis grounded 94th Aero Squadron flyer Eddie Rickenbacker in July and August of 1918. Hospitalized for a brief period in a Paris hospital, Rickenbacker overcame the infection and soon returned to the air. He may have been an exception. During the flier's lifetime he would repeatedly cheat death.

Mr. Kimberly's daybooks revealed the seriousness of Elbert's illness as well as relief that Elbert survived this first operation. The elder statesman required only a few words to convey hope and, concern. On August 22nd he wrote, "Elbert's operation was a success. Very much needed."[\[38\]](#)

Melancholy crept into Mr. Kimberly's words when he wrote a few weeks later,

Thursday, September 4 - Operated on Elbert. He is a very sick man
meningitis (this would have been a second operation) Friday,
September 5 - Elbert has another operation. Last hope.[\[39\]](#)

The following day Mr. Kimberly wrote, "Elbert going No hope."[\[40\]](#) The finality of "No hope" was reinforced by Kimberly as he underlined the words signaling the inevitable. He followed the next day with, "Elbert died last eve 9:00 We go to Peru for funeral."[\[41\]](#)

Dr. Petersen listed the cause of death as septic meningitis with acute mastoiditis the contributing factor.[\[42\]](#) On November 19th Elbert would have celebrated his 40th

birthday. For those surrounding him that day, the race riots of July and August mattered little.

Approximately 50 attended Elbert's service on September 9 at the home of Joseph Shirk. Music included "Children of Liberty," a march composed by Elbert. Elbert put the poetry of William Dudley Foulke to music. The Richmond, Indiana, attorney, author, poet, newspaper owner, and advocate for women's suffrage and civil service reform had captured the feelings of many when he wrote:

Children of liberty, whereso'er you be, Forward to battle till the
world is free! Crush the proud oppressor, smite him stroke on stroke
-Free the plains of Poland - break the Servian Yoke![\[43\]](#)

Mr. Kimberly and others escorted Elbert's body to Indianapolis where his body was cremated as he requested and the ashes interred. His remains were later removed and placed in the Kimberly family mausoleum in Neenah's Oak Hill Cemetery. A small American flag was placed over the box. Nearby was an emblem displaying the Croix Civique, an award presented to Elbert from the Belgian government.

On the first page of The Peru Republican of September 12, was the following headline, "Lt. Elbert W. Shirk Answers Summons - Heroic Experience Probably Caused Death."[\[44\]](#) The Redlands Daily Facts reported Elbert Shirk's death on September 13 and reprinted his obituary from the Indiana newspaper on September 22, 1919.[\[45\]](#)

Elbert was honored by Worcester Academy and Harvard University. At Worcester they said of him,

The death of Elbert Walker Shirk removes from the ranks of the alumni of the school one of their ablest and strongest members. . . He has gone from us, as he would have wished, serving his fellow men. Those of us who knew him, loved him. We shall be influenced by his personality to the last.[\[46\]](#)

Harvard did not forget its dead. On Memorial Day 1920 General John Pershing attended a ceremony on the Harvard campus in "Honor of Harvard Men Who Have Given Their Lives for Liberty and Democracy in the War Against Germany."[\[47\]](#) On display in the Widener Library, within steps of Matthews Hall, was a display by the Harvard Memorial Society memorializing the 373 faculty and students. When the Memorial Church was completed in 1932 a permanent memorial was dedicated. Etched in stone are the names of those "who have given their lives."

Elbert was also honored by the Belgium government with the posthumous award of the country's Croix Civique.[\[48\]](#) The Civil Decoration was instituted in 1867 to provide recognition for bravery, self-sacrifice, and humanitarian actions.

Epilogue

Within a year Mary gave up their Richmond, Indiana apartment and moved to Redlands to be with her aging parents. Items familiar to her, those from her life with Elbert, were packed and sent to Kimberly Crest. Many would eventually be used in the home, while others in crates, trunks and barrels would remain virtually untouched until after her death in 1979.

There remained a strong and permanent presence of Elbert Walker Shirk at Kimberly Crest. It was not then a surprise that an unopened crate in the basement contained Elbert's Lieutenant's uniform, complete with leather leggings.

In the library one would have been immediately drawn to his portrait. Elbert is dressed in his U.S Navy Lt. jg uniform. The framed photograph occupies a place of honor at the center of the library bookcase. There were actually two portraits. A simple pin mechanism allowed the frame to spin, revealing a second photograph of Elbert in his officer's uniform.

The bookshelves contained a diverse, eclectic assortment of books, including those by graduates of Scripps College and The Factories of the Valley, an industrial history of Wisconsin's Fox River Valley. Within the pages of another book, titled the Indiana Book of Merit (1932), are chronicled the events leading to Elbert's premature death. [49] Discovered among the pages was a typed carbon copy of Elbert's obituary, stiff with age.

The library was routinely the setting for weekly bridge games. A cabinet with inlaid ivory and tortoise shell was at one end of the room. It fit somewhat awkwardly into the library, adjacent to the large westerly window. Hidden in the cabinet were score pads, pencils and several sets of playing cards. Elbert's mother, Ellen Walker Shirk, had purchased the cabinet in Granada, Spain at the turn-of-the-century. In 1935 she presented it to Mary. Inscribed on a paper tag hidden under the piece was the following "given to my daughter-in-love (law)." Within the many cabinet drawers were mementos and other treasures, including the U.S Navy's Gold Living Saving Medal and the Croix Civique. Other reminders found in the home included a packet of letters carefully tied with ribbon and a small box containing a piece of the groom's wedding cake from the couple's 1905 wedding.

From the hall sitting room on the 2nd floor Mrs. Shirk had a sweeping view of the San Bernardino Valley and San Gabriel and San Bernardino Mountains. The features appeared as natural elements of the classic Italian gardens designed by her brother-in-law, architect George Edwin Bergstrom.

Mrs. Shirk would sit at her Empire style, drop front desk in the sitting room planning menus, meeting with staff, maintaining her correspondence, and handling her business

affairs. A pencil sharpener was close at hand, screwed down to the wooden window ledge. A multi-color sun catcher, a gift from a great niece, hung in the window.

Within the desk's cubbyholes and drawers were still other reminders; a preserved wedding invitation and a letter Mrs. Shirk wrote to Elbert following his death. Perhaps she had begun similar letters or maybe this was the first time she had attempted to put her grief to paper? Grief is classless. The process, the steps are predictable. We know of the denial, the anger, the bargaining, and the inability to change life's events. Lord Nelson's mistress, Lady Emma Hamilton, wrote the following in November of 1805, just weeks after Nelson's death:

". . . Hope that I shall not long after him. . . nothing gives me a gleam of comfort that I shall soon follow."[\[50\]](#)

Mary Shirk had nearly identical thoughts when she wrote,

Dearie

I feel you near me - every where - it is such a comfort . . . I feel sure if my faith was great enough I could reach you. Some day you will reach me I am sure. May it be soon.[\[51\]](#)

In reality, it would be 60 years and almost to the day, 75 years after they met at the wedding of Richard and Marie Edwards.

Mrs. Shirk's bedroom was directly above the library. The room is deceiving in its simplicity and size and, at first, appears a paradox for an heir of a multi-national corporation. A windowed door leads to a porch above the porte cochère. This south exposure with curtains of wisteria and rose was Mrs. Shirk's "little bit of Heaven." The colors were a perfect complement to the color that dominated the room. The wallpaper, the bedspread, the clothes behind the mirrored closet door, the drapes, and even, the hand embroidered pillow presented to her on her 90th birthday, reflected her strong affection for the color blue.

Throughout the years following Elbert's death, a portrait of Elbert rested on Mrs. Shirk's bedside table. The silver frame, with a photograph identical to one found in the library, may have been a gift of the Belgian government. The Croix Civique was incorporated into the frame's design.

A newer addition to the room was an alarm panel, a modern necessity of the mid-1970s, intruding into the space that had changed little in the 60 years. Sometimes spiders mysteriously found their way into the smoke detectors and triggered the sensing mechanisms. It was difficult for anyone to discern the piercing sound of an intrusion siren from that of the fire alarm. Although this was before cities instituted mandated fees

for false alarms, one did not want the police or fire departments responding unnecessarily. In the event of an alarm at Kimberly Crest, the "central station" operator was to be called, or they called you. A code word was required, a word easily remembered. One would respond with "Elbert."

[1] Vice Admiral Albert Gleves, U.S.N. *A History of the Transport Service* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921), 112-113. Admiral Gleves indicates there were actually three torpedoes that struck the *Lincoln*, although not all struck the port side.

From Kieff to Vladivostok Armoured Cars on the Eastern Front; available from http://www.greatwardifferent.com/Great_War/Russia/Kieff_Vladivostok_01.htm.

[3] "San Francisco Thousands Cheer War Heroes in Brilliant Parade," *San Francisco Chronicle* 15 May 1918, p.1.

[4] "Belgian Soldiers Are Kept Hustling," *San Francisco Chronicle* 8 May 1918.

[5] "City Pays Honor to Belgium Veterans," *New York Times*, 5 June 1918, p.11, c.3.

[6] Elbert W. Shirk, Military Personnel Records, National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri.

[7] The term *slacker* was first applied to British males who found ways of not serving their country.

[8] *History of Miami County* (Chicago: Brant & Fuller, 1887). Available from <http://members.tripod.com/~debmurray/miami/miabioref-8.htm>.

[9] "Death of Milton Shirk: Miami County Millionaire Passes Away Saturday Evening," *The Amboy Independent* 15 May 1903.

[10] "There's no place like home," *The Harvard independent* 15 July 2001.

[11] D. W. Abercrombie. Letter to Mr. Milton Shirk dated 10 January 1899. Worcester Academy Collection. Worcester Academy, Worcester, Massachusetts.

[12] William Martin, *Harvard Yard* (New York: Warner Books, 2003), p. 373.

[13] "Fiftieth Anniversary Report of the Harvard Class of 1903," (1953): 170. Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[14] Waldo H. Heinrichs Jr. *American Ambassador: Joseph C. Grew and the Development of the United States Diplomatic Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1966), p. 6.

[15] Elbert W Shirk. Letter to unknown person, Harvard University dated 25 January 1901. Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[16] Telegrams. (January - March, 1905). Kimberly-Shirk Papers, Kimberly Crest House and Gardens, Redlands, California.

[17] Robert J. Burdette. Letter to Mrs. J. A. Kimberly, dated 21 February 1905. Kimberly-Shirk Papers, Kimberly Crest House & Gardens, Redlands, California.

[18] "U. S. Ships Battling with Hun Submarines," *The Redlands Review*, 5 June 1918, p.1; "Transport

Sunk on Voyage Home with Wounded," *New York Times*, 1 June 1918, p.1; c.1; "Two U-Boats Sink 9 Ships off this Coast;"*New York Times*, 4 June 1918, p.1; and "German Submarines Have Sunk American Ships off New Jersey Coast,"*Redlands Daily Facts*, 4 June 1918, p.1.

[19] "German Submarines Have Sunk," *Redlands Daily Facts*, 4 June 1918, p. 1.

[20] B. B. Brown, *Troopships*, (New York: National War Work Council of Young Men's Christian Associations, by Association Press, NY, 1918).

[21] Benedict Crowell, & Robert Forest Wilson *The Road to France II: The Transportation of Troops and Military Supplies 1917 – 1918* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1921), Chapter XXVIII.

[22] Advertisement, *Redlands Daily Facts*, 2 May 1918 , p. 5, c. 1.

[23] "Movement Being Pushed Here to Provide Boys with Smokes, Chews," *Redlands Review*, 3 May 1918, p.1, c. 3.and "An Army Girls Transport Tobacco Fund,"*Redlands Daily Facts* 2 May 1918, p.5, c. 2-3.

[24] B. B. Brown *Troopships*.

[25] Gleves, Appendix: Table B, pages 241 - 243.

[26] "Harvard College, Class of 1902,"*Secretary's Sixth Report* (June 1922): 413. Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts. (There is also conflicting information that the *Lorraine* left New York City of June 15).

[27] Lieutenant Commander Benjamin Briscoe, USNRF, Lieutenant C. T. Chenevert, USNRF, Lieutenant Wm. E. Hooper, USNRF. Letter to unknown person dated 20 July 1918. National Archives & Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30]"Lieut. Shirk is Hailed a Hero: Plunges into the ocean and rescues a Belgian," *The Peru Republican*, 16 August 1918, p.1.

[31] "Death of Elbert Shirk, '98',"*Worcester Academy Bulletin* (no date): 16. Collections of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

[32] *From Kieff to Vladivostok Armoured Cars on the Eastern Front*; available from http://www.greatwardifferent.com/Great_War/Russia/Kieff_Vladivostok_01.htm.

[33] Josephus Daniels. Letter to Elbert Walker Shirk dated 6 September 1918. National Archives & Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

[34] "Fiftieth Anniversary Report of the Harvard Class of 1902," (1927): 598. Cambridge, Massachusetts, The University Press, 1927. Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts

[35]Ibid.

[36]John Alfred Kimberly. Personal Day Book dated 1919. Kimberly-Shirk Papers. Kimberly Crest House & Gardens, Redlands, California.

[37] Elbert W. Shirk, Military Personnel Records, National Personnel Records Center, St. Louis, Missouri.

[38] John Alfred Kimberly. Personal Day Book dated 1919.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Ibid.

[42] J. W. Peterson, M.D. Standard Certificate of Death, Cook County, State of Illinois, Elbert W. Shirk, No. 23958, (September 6, 1919).

[43] Elbert Walker Shirk, *Children of Liberty*, original poetry by William Dudley Foulke (self-published, circa 1915-1918). Kimberly-Shirk Papers. Kimberly Crest House & Gardens, Redlands, California.

[44] "Lt. Elbert W. Shirk Answers Summons Heroic Experience Probably Cause of Death," *The Peru Republican* 12 September 1919, p.1.

[45] "Death of Lieutenant Shirk Due to Heroic Experience," *Redlands Daily Facts* 22 September 1919: p.2, c.5-6.

[46] "Death of Elbert Shirk, '98'," *Worcester Academy Bulletin*, (no date): 14. Collections of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

[47] Harvard Memorial Society. Photographs: an inventory. HUD 3567.219.2. Roll of Honor Collection, Harvard University Archives, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[48] "Names of U.S. Naval Officers Decorated by Foreign Countries – Belgium," *Croiz [sic] Civique de Premiere Classe*, Elbert Walker Shirk, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

[49] Harry A. Rider compiled by, *Indiana Book of Merit Official Individual Decorations and Commendations Awarded to Indiana Men and Women for Services in the World War* (Indianapolis Indiana: Historical Bureau Indiana Library and Historical Department, 1932), pp 666-667.

[50] Michael Ryan, "Lord Nelson Hero and . . . Cad!" *Smithsonian Magazine*, vol. 34, no. 11 (February 2004), p. 75.

[51] Mary Kimberly Shirk. Letter to Elbert W. Shirk dated circa 1921. Kimberly-Shirk Papers. Kimberly Crest House & Gardens, Redlands, California.

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