

HISTORY LESSONS
by
Barbara Buckley Ristine

"Have you an appointment, sir?" asks the middle-aged woman with an expression as severe as her short haircut. I hand her my credentials.

"Please sign the log, Dr. Peterson." The librarian's speech is precise, flawless BBC-presenter pronunciation. She directs me to a cubicle.

I have notes I've made from reading my grandfather's diary, including names of British soldiers he met during World War I. I'm hoping to fill in gaps in what I know about Grandfather by reading journals of the men he knew.

Inside the quiet research room, a white-haired man in a dark suit sits at a corner desk, his head bent over a large book. In the cubicle closest to me, a young woman, wearing jeans and a sweater, sifts through papers in a plastic tray. She reminds me of a younger version of my wife, Cathy.

When I obtained the grant to come to England for my research, Cathy said to go without her. She doesn't share my obsession with the Great War, and she knew I'd be buried in the archives all week. Besides, she needed to stay in Boston to prepare for hearings coming up in a big class-action case.

Actually, I'm relieved she didn't come, because I have another reason for being here, one I didn't share with her. This is my chance to answer questions that have nagged at me for a while, ever since I found my grandfather's diary among my father's papers. More than half of the diary's pages had been torn out.

I ask the librarian for the journal of a British officer named Fielding, one of the names I'd found in my grandfather's diary. Their connection is unclear, but my grandfather wrote an entry on October 1, 1917: *wish I hadn't told Fielding he ruined my life. It's too late to make amends.*

I'm determined to find out why Grandfather needed to make amends. Perhaps Fielding's journal can shed some light.

The librarian returns with a book, bound in worn red Moroccan leather, with the initials R.E.F. stamped in gold on the lower right corner of the cover. I feel as though I've seen it before. I run my fingers over the letters and receive a slight shock like static electricity.

On the first page, he'd written in a bold hand, *Lt. Robert E. Fielding, Artists Rifles, British Expeditionary Forces, France.*

21 May 1916

I've arrived at the front to join my regiment. The accommodations are not as dismal as I'd expected, although I'd prefer the Ritz. I've met two of the other officers, Booth and Johnson. Booth's all right for a Christ College man, took a first in Greek. Johnson's a bit of a character. They tell me the Germans have been hitting our fortifications hard.

22 May 1916

Today is my 21st birthday. Maude sent a postcard and promised to bake me a cake once she collects enough ration coupons for the sugar. The Germans must have heard about my birthday, too, because their guns have been silent all day.

We share the same birthday—funny coincidence. I read on:

Booth and I walked to the village last night to a café where the lads gather for drinks in the evening. Whilst we were celebrating my birthday, we met some ambulance drivers. One was an American from Boston, bit of a talker.

Boston, my hometown. I recall an old photo of my grandparents on their wedding day, my grandfather in his U.S. Army uniform. Grandmother volunteered for the Red Cross, and Grandfather was a gunner waiting to be shipped overseas. My grandmother's stories of their whirlwind romance are family legends.

There's a gap in the journal's dates before the next entry.

5 June 1916

Booth and I are billeted in a farmhouse that survived the shelling. We had a jolly time in the village café tonight. Met some Americans—they're a hard-drinking lot, but great fun.

I hear faint music coming from behind the wall. I turn to the college student.

"Excuse me, do you hear that?"

"Pardon?"

"The music coming from the hall outside?"

"No, afraid not."

The old gentleman glares at me and points to a sign. *No talking permitted.* I mouth "sorry" and return to my reading.

I've had a nice letter from Maude, sprayed with her perfume. When I close my eyes and breathe the scent, it's as if I'm walking with her. I missed my chance to propose when I last saw her, now it will have to wait until I have another leave.

We've been receiving dispatches from HQ all day. Something is up, but it's all hush-hush. Had a few drinks in the café with the Americans. Peterson was telling us about some nurse he met on his last leave.

Peterson? That can't be my grandfather—he didn't arrive in France until 1917.

I grew up on Grandfather's stories of the First World War—in fact that inspired me to become a historian—but even as a teen-ager, I noticed inconsistencies in the tales he told, which I'd attributed to his failing memory. His diary and the missing pages only added to the mystery for me. I'd tried unsuccessfully to research his history at the National World

War I Museum in Kansas City, so this trip to London provided the opportunity to investigate further.

I hear the music again, this time louder and more distinct: an old-fashioned concertina. I swear I smell pipe tobacco. A man's silhouette appears on the wall, wearing a round wide-brimmed soldier's helmet, and he's fixing a bayonet to the barrel of a rifle. The shadow disappears as suddenly as it appeared.

I must have dozed off for a moment. Such a vivid dream—probably from reading soldiers' diaries all morning. Maybe some coffee will help clear my head. I close the diary and return it to the librarian before heading to the cafe.

The British have improved their coffee in the years since Cathy and I visited as university students. We used to laugh at the awful taste. I wish Cathy was here now, so I could tell her about the weird dream—she'd probably laugh at my overactive imagination.

After my coffee, I visit a World War I exhibit commemorating the Battle of the Somme. Overhead speakers blare recordings of bombardments and artillery fire; flashing lights simulate blasts, adding a touch of realism. British losses were heavy in the early days of the battle, nearly a quarter-million casualties. I wonder if R. E. Fielding was in the first wave.

Back in the research room, I read the next few entries in Fielding's journal, skimming over trivial details. A chilly draft of air blows at the back of my neck, and I turn up the collar of my jacket. There must be an air duct above me. As I leaf through the pages, I notice a strong tingling in my fingers, like an electrical current.

Our brief respite has come to an end. We've been ordered to report to the front tomorrow. Something big is brewing.

I hear faint laughter, but when I look around the other two researchers are deep in their reading. The noises increase, breaking my concentration.

A burst of men's laughter mixes with the clink of glasses, and the air reeks of sweat and cigarette smoke. I am inside a dimly lit country inn with white plaster walls and dingy window curtains. Uniformed men sit at tables, laughing and drinking. The door opens and two men in medics' uniforms enter, talking loudly with American accents. One raises his hand as if to greet me. He looks familiar.

The medics speak to another man seated beside me. He's in his twenties, reddish hair, wearing a British officer's uniform.

"Didn't think we'd see you boys tonight," the taller American says. "Booth, what are you drinking?"

My companion points to a wine bottle on the table. "The house plonk. Pull up a chair and join us."

Wait—Booth, like in the diary? How can he be here with me?

I turn to ask him where I am, and the laughter grows fainter. The men fade into darkness, and I am back in the cubicle.

The young woman and the old man have not stirred from their work. The room is so quiet I can hear my own breathing.

My mind must have jumbled the exhibits downstairs with the diary entries. But everything felt so real: the smells, the sounds. You don't smell things in dreams.

I turn to the next entry, the start of the battle of the Somme.

1 July 1916

At precisely 7:30 this morning, we blew our whistles and led our men over the top. It was absolute slaughter. We've lost more men today, too many to count. The German guns haven't let up long enough to collect our dead. Johnson and I will write letters to the men's families later. How do I tell a boy's parents their son won't be coming home?

The rest of the journal's pages have been torn out, leaving only a ragged edge next to the binding. Just like Grandfather's diary. I wonder who removed them. I close the cover and return the diary to the librarian.

"Are there any other journals for Lt. Fielding?"

She consults her computer. "I don't see any others listed in the catalogue."

"Could you check again? Maybe just search under the initials R.E.F.?"

"Ah, yes, here's one: Anonymous Diary, R.E.F., recording service with Artillery on the Western Front, July 1916 - September 1916." She looks up from the computer. "Is this a relative? With the war centenary, we've had many people looking for their family records."

Relative. The hairs on the back of my neck rise as I realize why the American looked familiar. No, that's impossible—my imagination must be working overtime.

"No, I'm preparing a paper for an academic conference, I tell her before she disappears into the archives.

My pulse quickens when the librarian returns with a red leather journal, and I snatch the journal from her. She seems taken aback by my abruptness, and opens her mouth, but I am halfway across the room to my cubicle before she can speak.

When I touch the cover, I feel a prickling sensation, but it's muted, not the distinct current I'd felt earlier.

Inside the front leaf is an inscription in handwriting identical to the first journal. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* How sweet and honorable it is to die for one's country. Once again, pages have been ripped out. After turning several blank water-stained pages, I find a page I can read.

No post today. Too quiet again. I'm going mad with the waiting between barrages. We lost forty more men today. Word from up the line is to be prepared for an attack. Everyone fears the Germans will drop a gas canister on us. I've instructed my men to keep their gas masks at the ready.

A few unreadable pages where the ink has run into black blotches. Some pages are stuck together and I dare not peel them apart.

I turn a page, and experience the tingling sensation again, but it grows into a strong electric current flowing from my fingertips to my shoulders.

The feeling intensifies, accompanied by an annoying buzz, but I can't determine where the noise is coming from. The lights shut off, plunging the room into darkness.

A flickering pale light appears. The walls around me are dirt, supported by vertical wooden beams. The air smells rancid, like rotten meat. An oil lantern burns on a desk a few feet away. Two men wearing unbuttoned military tunics and khaki trousers are playing cards on a wooden crate. Cards and a pile of matches are spread on the crate.

I feel something run over my foot and I jump, upsetting the crate and spilling matches and cards onto the floorboards.

One of the men, dark-haired with a thin mustache, shouts at me. "Damnit, watch what you're doing, man. You don't need to jump every time you see a bloody rat."

The other man bends to scoop up the matches. It's Booth from my earlier dream. "Thanks, Fielding, you saved me from a trouncing. Johnson here was cheating as usual." Dazed, I stoop to help him pick up the playing cards.

Johnson taps ashes from a pipe and laughs. "Sheer luck. Good thing we only play for matches or you'd owe me your next month's pay."

I open my mouth to apologize, but the buzzing noise drowns out my words. There's a deafening explosion overhead, then darkness.

I open my eyes, and I am in the cubicle once more, my ears ringing, my hands shaking. I lean back, careful not to touch the journal at first. This is ridiculous, it's only an old book. I gingerly turn the page. I feel a slight electrical tingle, but the room doesn't vanish.

23 August 1916

Last night, a 5-9 nearly hit us. Fortunately, it didn't land in our bunker and I had time to take cover. Took some shrapnel in my arm. Johnson is dead. He was smoking his pipe and joking about skewering one of the rats for dinner. He ran out of tobacco, so he went down the communications trench to see if one of the men had a spare tin. A shell hit the trench before he could escape.

I hadn't been dreaming—I was in the trench when the shell exploded, but how?

I flip through the remaining pages, searching for an explanation of what is happening. I find another mention of Peterson in an entry dated two days after Johnson's death.

Spent last night at the dressing station, getting patched up. I'll be back to duty tomorrow.

Peterson stopped by to check on me. Tells me he's engaged. He brought his fiancée round this afternoon, Polly, a pretty nurse from Brighton. I congratulated them heartily, although his news made me miss Maude more than ever.

The buzzing sound returns, and I feel another blast of icy air. The buzzing grows louder and my vision blurs momentarily.

I'm sitting on a camp stool in a large field tent. A nurse in a long blue dress and white apron is wrapping cotton gauze around my forearm. I must be in the dressing station Fielding described.

"Hold still, lieutenant, I'm nearly done." She cuts the bandage. I pull my arm away, and I gasp from the searing pain coursing through my arm. The nurse makes a clucking sound with her tongue. "I'll fetch a sling." She strides away, her boots clicking on the wooden floor.

"Fielding! Looking for your ticket home so soon?"

I turn in the direction of the distinctive Boston accent. There's no mistaking it, he looks exactly like his photo. I don't know how it's possible but I am in France in 1916, talking to my grandfather.

"I—that is, I had—why are you here?" is all I manage to say.

"I heard you'd been hit. Matron says you'll live." He grins and taps me on my uninjured shoulder. "Hey, when's your next leave?"

My grandfather looks so young, not more than nineteen or twenty. He died when I was still in high school. Now, he's right in front of me and I can't think of a thing to say.

He says, "I've big news. Polly and I are going to Paris to get married. You're the first to know."

No, that can't be right. My grandmother's name is Mary, and she was born and raised in Boston.

"I want you to be there—I'll need a best man—and you're the nearest I've got for a friend here."

Wait, best man? I can't be best man at my grandfather's wedding to another woman.

My grandfather is waiting for a reply. I mumble an apology, and say I don't know if I'll be able to get leave. His smile fades.

The tent disappears, and I am back in the research room. This felt too real to have been a dream. Why was I pulled back to 1916, and why is my grandfather marrying an English nurse?

I check my notes. My grandfather enlisted in the 315th Infantry, United States Army, on April 23, 1917. He married my grandmother six months later at Camp Dix, right before he shipped out. So how could Fielding have known him in 1916?

I remember my grandfather's note diary entry: *wish I hadn't told Fielding he ruined my life*. How had Fielding ruined my grandfather's life?

I flip through the remaining pages of Fielding's diary but find nothing of consequence. Another dead end.

"Dr. Peterson?" the librarian whispers, and I nearly jump out of my seat. "I found a listing for another diary." She hands me another red leather-bound book, and again I experience a slight electrical shock. I can't tell from her expression whether she felt it, too, and I feel too foolish to ask. I don't want to alarm her.

This diary is more damaged than the first two. The lower right corner of the front cover's been torn away and there is a small hole through the back cover. The handwriting inside is faded, but identical to the other journals.

The first entry is dated *3 September 1916*. I don't waste time reading, and lay my hands on the open journal. An electrical charge races through my body. The room fades away, and I am in the café with my grandfather. An empty wine bottle lies on its side, and his glass is empty.

"Can't believe t'morrow I'll be a married man." His words are slurred, and his eyes are narrow slits. "So glad you're going to be best man. Couldn't do it without you."

He's going through with the wedding. If he marries Polly, what will become of me? Will I cease to exist?

I can't let him marry her.

"When's the train to Paris?" I ask.

"Can't remember exactly. It's the only train tonight." He pats at his jacket pockets, then looks at me sheepishly. "Didn't I give you the tickets?"

I pull two railway tickets from my tunic pocket, and check my pocket watch. Nine o'clock. If he doesn't make that train, there won't be one for days.

I signal the waiter for another bottle of wine.

A rooster is crowing. When I open my eyes, I'm in the café, slumped over a table. Oh, God, no, I'm still in 1916.

My head throbs and my mouth feels like it's lined with cotton balls. I lift my head and see my grandfather passed out with his head lying on the table next to a collection of empty wine bottles. I sit up and immediately regret it as the pain in my head intensifies. I check my watch. It's eight in the morning. We've missed the train.

My grandfather stirs. "What time is it?"

I tell him, and he holds his head in his hands, shaking. "God, Polly will be at the marriage registry in an hour. What'll I do? Why did you let me drink so much? I need to send a message to explain."

If this Polly accepts his apology, he could still marry her. I can't let that happen.

"You're in no shape to write her. I'll send a telegram."

He looks relieved. "Would you? Tell her I'll be on the next train. Check the schedule, will you?"

"Of course." I picture the nurse alone at the registry, waiting for my grandfather, but I have no intention of sending the telegram. I ignore a guilty twinge, and tell myself it's all right. My grandmother is the one he must marry.

My grandfather grabs my hand. "Thanks. I don't know what I'd do without you."

As he shakes my hand, I hear buzzing, and his face vanishes.

I'm back in 2017. I'm here—that means he didn't marry Polly, right? I open my wallet and check my driver's license. *Robert Peterson, 34 Greeley Street, Boston, MA*. I'm being ridiculous—this isn't some old 1980's movie where I start to fade away.

I approach the librarian. "If I give you my grandfather's name and service information, can you find his records?" She says she can check an American database.

What became of Polly? I don't know her last name or anything else to track her down. Did she ever forgive my grandfather for leaving her at the altar? I push away the thought. I know that wasn't my grandfather's destiny.

When we were first married, Cathy never tired of hearing my grandmother's stories of meeting my grandfather in a Red Cross canteen in Boston. My grandfather was smitten, and he returned daily to see her. He proposed after only one week, and he persisted until she agreed to marry him. She delighted in telling everyone how Grandfather had told her she was the only girl he'd ever loved. Cathy used to say their courtship would make a great novel. I wonder what she would make of all this.

I meant to call Cathy before she went to court today, but in all the excitement, I forgot. I try her cell phone, but it goes straight to voice mail.

"Hi, Cath, it's me. I need to talk to you. I've been seeing things I can't really explain. Call me back. I miss you."

After half an hour, the librarian locates my grandfather's records. I already knew he enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1917. But the official records show William Peterson first volunteered as an ambulance driver in the American Field Service in France from 1915-1917, before the United States entered the war, which explains how he was in France in 1916.

Maybe that's why Grandfather's war stories sometimes seemed muddled—he was remembering his days as an ambulance driver before he was a soldier. Were the missing diary pages a record of that time?

"Can you look up R.E. Fielding's records, too? I'd like to know what happened to him after the war."

"That may not be possible. Many of the British records were destroyed during the Blitz in the Second World War."

I read the third journal, the one with the hole in the back cover. I don't have to look far to find another mention of my grandfather.

4 September 1916

Woke with a wicked hangover this morning. I can't recall anything from last night, but apparently Peterson and I missed the night train to Paris. He's distraught his girl won't wait for him. I assured him that once she read my telegram, all will be forgiven.

Wait, did my grandfather send word to Polly after all?

12 September 1916

Peterson stormed into the officers' mess today, accusing me of ruining his life. Polly refuses to have anything to do with him. Peterson says he'll never forgive me.

He said I didn't send the telegram after I promised I would. I don't understand. I know I wrote the message out and gave it to the stationmaster.

An acrid metallic smell in the air, accompanied by buzzing. I anticipate being pulled back to France, but nothing happens.

26 September 1916

I haven't slept all night. Shells are raining down as I write. Our artillery is returning fire whilst we cower in the trench awaiting the signal.

I hear men shouting from far away. I turn the page and as I do, I feel the tingling again.

My entire body is jolted with electricity, as if I've touched a live wire. There's a shrill sound like a lifeguard's whistle blown in staccato bursts, and it grows louder, closer. I am in a dark field covered with barbed wire. The ground shakes and vibrates as shells explode around me. Star flares float to the ground, lighting the sky with their phosphorescence, and artillery fire pierces the air.

I fall to the ground, sinking into the clammy mud. My entire body shudders with each explosion. Men are shouting at me but I can't understand them. A mortar lands nearby, sending dirt and debris into the air, raining down on me. I raise my head to get my bearings. As I do, a bullet whizzes by, missing my left ear by inches. I burrow into the mud and cover my head with my arms. My throat burns from the rising bile. An earsplitting explosion bursts overhead. The ringing in my ears is so loud; all sound is muffled, as if I am underwater.

I crawl towards an opening in the barbed wire, and hands pull me into a trench. Booth helps me to my feet. "Fielding! What the hell were you thinking?" His face is red as he yells at me, fear in his eyes.

I look down and see I am wearing mud-splattered khaki pants and tall black boots. As I try to answer him, I hear a loud *crack*, and something smacks my face like a lead weight. The trench recedes into blackness, and I no longer hear or see Booth.

The nausea dissipates, but I am shaking. The light returns and I stare at the journal. I turn to the next page. Some more pages have been ripped out.

*30 September 1916
38th Casualty Clearing Station*

The last clear memory I have is the scream of the 5-9 shell as it dropped from the sky. I'm still quite deaf from the blast. I caught a piece of shrapnel in my jaw.

Sister says I've been here for three days. My men reported that I ran into no man's land amidst the shelling, but I've no recollection of what happened.

I thought perhaps Peterson might come see me, but apparently he's still angry. I miss my friend.

I have my blighty ticket now, awaiting transport home. I am fortunate to be done with this war. It will be good to see Maude.

The last few pages are blank, but stained a reddish color. My hand trembles as I close the cover. I return the journal to the librarian.

"I'm afraid I wasn't able to find Lt. Fielding's service records, but I did find this." She hands me a paper. It's an enlargement of a death notice from *The Telegraph*:

Died of Wounds

Second Lieutenant Robert E. Fielding was the youngest son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert D. Fielding of Wrights Lodge, Margate. He joined the Artists Rifles in July 1915. He died, October 1, 1916, of wounds received near Niems.

My chest tightens as I read the date. He died from the wounds he received the night he ran into no man's land. Fielding never returned home, never married Maude, never spoke to my grandfather again.

My grandfather's journal was written exactly one year after Fielding's death, two days after my grandparents married: *wish I hadn't told Fielding he ruined my life. It's too late to make amends.*

Fielding was indirectly responsible for my grandparents' marriage, for my existence. He never sent the telegram to Polly. Or did he?

I turn back to the entry dated September 12, 1916: *I know I wrote the message out and gave it to the stationmaster.*

A lump forms in my throat. Somehow, I prevented Fielding from sending that telegram, and I changed my grandfather's life. Did I change Fielding's destiny as well?

Then I remember the missing pages in Grandfather's diary. I'd assumed he'd torn them out, but maybe that wasn't the case. What if my father had read them and realized

that my grandfather had loved another woman before he met my grandmother? Would Dad have torn them out to protect my grandmother's memories of their romance?

I feel unmoored, as if I could slip back to 1916 if I'm not careful. I need something to anchor me in the present. I step into the hall and dial Cathy's number. She picks up on the first ring.

"What's wrong? Your message was so strange."

"I needed to hear your voice. I've missed you."

"And I miss you. I had the most bizarre dream last night—you'll probably laugh—I dreamed I was married to someone else."

I hear faint music again, this time accompanied by singing—it seems to be coming from down the hall. My pulse quickens.

Cathy's voice pulls me back. "Bob? Are you still there?"

I move towards the music, still talking to Cathy.

"When's my birthday?"

"May 22."

"What year?"

She laughs. "1966."

"What's my grandmother's name?"

"Mary. Is this a test?"

"How did my grandparents meet?" I'm holding my breath, waiting for her answer.

"Are you feeling all right?"

"Please, just tell me."

She's silent for a moment. "They met in a Red Cross canteen in Boston. Why are you asking me all this?"

The music is coming from a gallery of WWI propaganda art where a recording of "Oh, It's a Lovely War" plays from an overhead speaker. This is real, not a dream. I'm still in 2017. My heart rate slows to a normal pace.

"It's kind of a bizarre story...do you have a few minutes?"

She laughs again, and when she speaks, she sounds relieved. "You had me going there. All right, I have time to listen—tell me your story."

And I do.

End