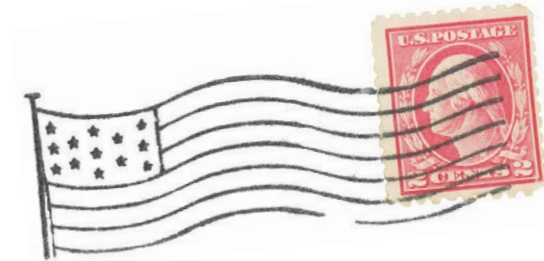


**CALL OF DUTY**

Norman Lake was prepared to serve, but the war cast a shadow over his future with Helen Gladys Keller.



# “OUR EFFORTS WILL NOT BE IN VAIN”



A century ago, as the nation found itself drawn into World War I, a Penn State student and his girlfriend in Peckville, Pa., sent hundreds of handwritten letters to each other. The girlfriend became his wife, and she kept those letters. Now their son has donated the collection to Penn State. They tell a story of a different time—and of the college as it transformed into a military camp during the war.

BY VICKI GLEBOCKI '93, '02 MFA LIB

## “HONESTLY, WAR DOES SEEM INEVITABLE.”

Norman Lake sat in his room at the ATΩ House at Penn State, writing to a girl back home. It was March 28, 1917. The “war situation ... is the common topic of the day now,” Lake penned to Helen Gladys Keller, an elementary schoolteacher, in his careful, curving script. They’d been corresponding on and off for several months, though Lake had recently started signing his letters to her “with love.”

The frosh had a lot going on. He’d turned 24 years old two weeks before and was just over a month into his second semester in engineering, balancing the workload with first-aid and wound-care classes that were now required on campus. He’d just been released from 11 days of quarantine in the frat house after a brother contracted scarlet fever. Now, he was desperate to get home to Peckville, Pa., near Scranton, for Easter break so he could call on “the one girl” there. Still, the war in Europe and whether the United States should get involved was, he wrote, “all the State College people talk about these days.”

Lake ’22 Eng already had a plan: Should the country declare war, he’d register in the Scranton Engineering Corps, hoping to be deployed with friends from home. He wasn’t the only student ready to serve. In February, news reached campus that President Woodrow Wilson had severed diplomatic ties with Germany after the country threatened to attack American ships. In turn, writes **Michael Bezilla ’75 MA, ’78 PhD Lib** in *Penn State: An Illustrated History*, 2,300 undergraduates—just 300 shy of the entire student body at the time—sent the same telegram to the Commander in Chief: “[W]e tender our services in whatever capacity they can be used, for preserving the national rights of a country against aggression.” The college itself officially pledged its support to the war effort as well: The Trustees announced that all campus buildings and athletic fields would be turned over to the War Department to use for military training.

Then, it happened. On April 6, the United States declared war against Germany to, as President Wilson proclaimed, “vindicate the principles of peace and justice in



**OBJECT OF AFFECTION**  
Keller taught at West Chester Normal School, where the yearbook called her “earnest and faithful in all that she does.”

the light of the world.” Instantly, the Penn State campus changed. “Students Adopt Military Measures,” read the *Collegian’s* headline on April 18, the first wartime issue published by the then-weekly newspaper. “Penn State has enlisted in the cause of national preparedness. With the entrance of the United States into the great world conflict the college authorities have definitely taken steps to provide the students of Penn State with the training which shall enable them to do their share in meeting the military and industrial needs that confront the country during the present crisis.”

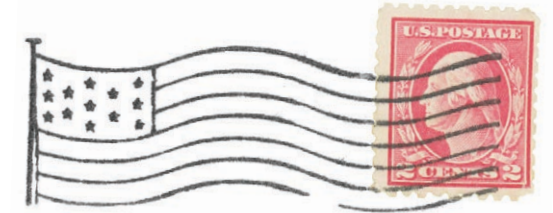
A week after the war began, the college created a special class for upperclassmen who were interested in joining the military’s officer reserves corps. They’d meet three nights a week to learn military science and tactics, topography, military law, infantry drill, and small arms firing. While there was confusion over how exactly the war would affect students, there seemed to be no confusion about duty: 500 students showed up for the first meeting.

As an underclassman, Lake began doing regular training on campus, marching every Monday in regimented

drills. He’d been excused from drills the previous fall because of football practice. “Now I prefer drilling as it may prove essential later,” he wrote to Helen, though bemoaning the fact that, soon, he’d have to purchase an expensive military uniform. Military training had always been part of Penn State’s land-grant mission, and that training would prove valuable, giving students an advantage over enlistees from other schools. Even so, the training became much more intense and urgent, including classes for coeds in nursing, the wireless, and canning.

By early May, more than 300 men had already enlisted and more than 300 agriculture students had left to work on farms in Pennsylvania, many acting as official government reps to ensure that enough corn and wheat was being planted since, as the popular war slogan exclaimed, “Food Will Win the War!” “By next week,” Lake wrote to Helen, “I am inclined to believe there will be nearly half the college leaving.”

“Everybody OUT!” commanded the *Collegian* on May 9, calling students to the front campus outside of Old Main for a patriotic rally. “The band will be out, and the meeting will assume the proportions of a patriotic demonstration never before witnessed at Penn State.” President Edwin Erle Sparks addressed the crowd, reporting about a meeting he’d attended in Washington, D.C., with 187 other college and university presidents where they’d agreed that students should be discouraged from regis-



tering for service until after they graduated. However, on May 18, as the first U.S. troops were on their way to France, the government passed the Selective Service Act. On June 5, the first day of the draft, all male students ages 21 to 31 joined 9.5 million others nationwide and, as the *Collegian* reported, got “their names enrolled as eligibles for the first section of Uncle Sam’s big army.”

**BACK HOME IN PECKVILLE** for the summer, Lake waited. With the first 14,000 American troops arriving in France at the end of June, he expected to be called by the Scranton draft board at any time. Meanwhile, he worked at a local mill and, of course, spent every free minute with Helen—hiking to pick blackberries, hitching a ride with friends to see movies in Scranton, and “calling around” at her home every Tuesday evening.

He returned to Penn State in September surprised to find that enrollment had dropped by only 300 students from the previous fall. But the loss felt larger. “Athletic teams are shot to pieces,” reported the *Collegian*, “the upper classes are greatly reduced in number, [student] government has been disorganized, and there is an air of don’t-know-how-things-will-go all around.”

Along with most men on campus, Lake drilled every day, opting for the daily 4:30 to 5:20 p.m. stint offered by the newly formed Reserve Officers’ Training Corps. The War Department sent retired Major James Baylies

## THE LOVE LETTERS

**Norman Lake ’20 Eng** died in Lancaster County, Pa., in 1989 at the ripe old age of 96, 11 years after his “Dear Helen” passed away. While his sister-in-law was cleaning out his home, she found a grocery bag packed with handwritten, yellowed letters—hundreds of them. She gave the bag to Norman’s son, **Daniel Lake ’54 Eng**, who promptly stuck them in a closet and left them there ... for 12 years. Then, one random day, he decided to read a few. “I thought to myself, ‘This is a love story! We need to preserve this,’” says Lake, who

is now 86 and lives outside Lancaster. He donated them to Penn State.

Norman, who worked as a land surveyor for most of his career, loved “State,” as he fondly referred to his alma mater in that bag full of letters. And he passed that love down to his family: 14 members of the Lake family went to Penn State, including Dan and his brother **Bob ’51 Eng**.

Even so, Dan had to read the letters to find out that his father played football for Penn State during his freshman year. “I learned so many things about my dad



from reading them,” Dan says. He now knows how his parents courted back and forth, in letters, for almost six years. “They never talked about any of that,” he says. Until now, Norman and Helen’s family didn’t know the couple had a private expression they wrote to each other as they planned their future life together during those uncertain times: “Wait and hope.” —VG



to Penn State to be commandant of all new military programs. Students didn't hesitate to, as the *Collegian* described it, "do their part in the great war against Germany for the cause of humanity." They planted war gardens and sold Liberty Bonds to friends and family. Many voluntarily signed up for newly created classes in mathematics, hygiene, accounting, inventory, and transportation. Signal Corps instruction—radio, telegraph, and telephone—required a rigorous schedule: military courses from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., including an hour of drills and a four-hour block for academics. Profs worked double overtime to teach the new classes on top of their regular ones.

There was one class students seemed to avoid: German language. Enrollment was down more than 35 percent. "Though this is a rather large change ... the students have been level-headed, and have not tried to defeat Germany by taking other languages," quipped the *Collegian*. Except they had. Not only was there an increase in students studying French, but the newspaper would eventually publish weekly instructions on the basics: "Not knowing how soon we will be called for service 'over there,' where a knowledge of the French Language is one of the most valuable assets, it behooves every Penn State student to closely study these simple lessons."

#### STUDENT SOLDIERS

Male students were required to join the Student Army Training Corps; they rose in the morning to a bugle call and heard "Taps" at 11 p.m. Daily drills included bayonet practice, shown here on Holmes Field (now the HUB lawn). McAllister Hall is in the background.

Other schools, though, struggled with growing anti-German sentiment. Some institutions cut the language from the curriculum entirely, removed German books from the library, even publicly questioned the patriotism of professors who'd gone to German universities. Penn State students were less extreme—their biggest act of resistance was renaming sauerkraut "liberty cabbage."

In her letters to Lake early that fall, Helen worried constantly about his status. "No," he responded on Sept. 19, "I did not hear from the Board as yet and hope I don't either." Yet, as they both knew it would, word finally came. On Oct. 14, Lake sent a postcard from Camp Meade, Md., where he'd been stationed with 40,000 troops: "Arrived here last night.... I rather believe I'll like it too. Most of the fellows in our barracks are from around home." Upon arrival, he was given a straw-tick mattress, three heavy blankets, two pans, one set of silverware, and a drinking



cup. "To get our eats," he described, "we fall in line ... to have the pans covered with—oh I don't know what to call it, but nevertheless it does taste good especially after one of our 16 mile hikes."

Lake was assigned to the Company A 311th Machine Gun Battalion, 79th Division, which was known around camp as the "Suicide Club," because "the most feared weapon" had killed the largest number of men in modern warfare. His lieutenant considered the title an honor. "I can't see it that way, tho," he confided to Helen. After completing rounds of inoculations, Lake was selected to

learn topographic map drawing, and his days fell into the strict military schedule that so many Penn Staters were experiencing at different camps: bugle call at 5:25 a.m., ranks at 5:45, mess at 6, battalion drill at 7 followed by physical exercise, first-aid work, bayonet practice, hikes, map sketching in the field, mess again at 6 p.m., studying, and lights out at 9:45. "We all realize that our efforts will not be in vain," he wrote to Helen, who sent him fudge, cakes, pies, even a sweater she'd knitted. He begged her to write more often, even every day, if she could.

With news of American casualties being reported late that fall and troops leaving Camp Meade more frequently, Lake seemed to be coming to terms with the seriousness of his situation. He predicted that, after April 1918, his own battalion "will see the Huns." In an uncharacteristically vulnerable letter on Jan. 21, Lake wrote, "As time progresses, I long for those letters from you as they seem to inspire and make me want for all the good things in life. After I wonder if my destiny will be determined by this war over on the other side and deprive me of the many things which were likely to come into my life, or better yet into our lives." He asked her to, please, send a photo of herself—"that little one that I used to look at so much. Remember the one?"

Lake's lieutenant recommended him for Officer's Training School, and the coursework—and competition for the few officer commissions available—gave him a welcome distraction. But, by the end of March, his battalion ap-

peared to be gearing up for deployment, sloshing "in the trenches" dug in the camp that were filled with water and muck, which they learned to drain and reinforce. ("It was rather hard work.") They began practicing in earnest at the firing range, shooting actual machine guns, which he'd never done before. ("I suppose it is quite thrilling.") When he wasn't chosen to become an officer, he immediately applied for the next Officer's School starting in May. ("I should not give it up.")

"It won't be long now until we sail for France," he wrote Helen on June 10. "And the sooner we go over the bet-

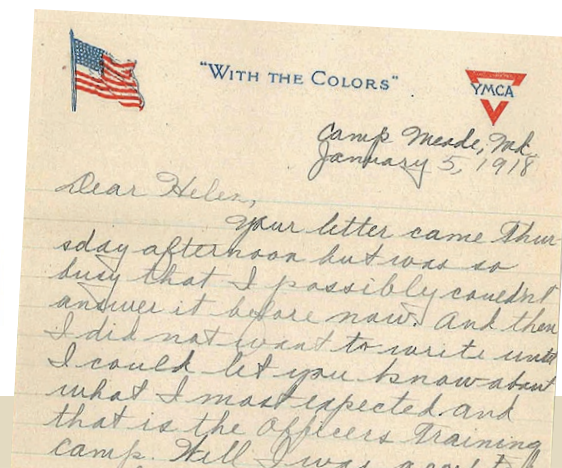
ter it will suit me for I am certainly sick of this place." He was correct. On July 4, 1918, nine months after arriving at basic training, Corporal Norman Lake began the journey to France.

## "IT WON'T BE LONG NOW UNTIL WE SAIL FOR FRANCE."

On July 18, Helen received a pre-printed telegram with a return address that read, simply, "Soldier's Mail": "THE SHIP ON WHICH I SAILED HAS ARRIVED SAFELY OVERSEAS."

**BY THE TIME FALL SEMESTER** got underway, Penn State was functioning as more of a military base than a college. Nearly 1,500 enlisted men were stationed there for technical and vocational training. Many lived in Old Main and were fed in a special mess built behind McAllister Hall. Others were housed in barracks built on Old Beaver Field or in frat houses that had been transformed into barracks. The typical signs of the start of a new year, like freshman dinks, were nowhere to be found. All intercollegiate athletics were cancelled.

Now that the draft age had been lowered to 18, all male students were required to join the Student Army Training Corps, established that September on every college and university campus by order of the War Department. Run jointly by the military and the college, the SATC was a regular corps of the U.S. Army, so the government paid for their 15 hours of military training each week, their college fees, and \$30 a month in military pay. The goal was to give students enough training in nine months to be able to deploy them.





**ALL IN**

By 1918, nearly 1,500 enlisted men were stationed at Penn State for training, and the college built barracks to house them.

On Oct. 1, promptly at noon, more than 1,600 students gathered in front of Old Main to be inducted into the SATC. The flag was raised. Participants sang the national anthem. Then, each raised his right hand and took the oath of allegiance. These students were now officially privates on active duty. As a result, the authority of Major Baylies now exceeded that of President Sparks.

From then on, all students wore military khakis. At 7 a.m., a bugle call woke the campus. Students marched to and from classes and meals. Inspections took place on Saturday mornings. Drills were held daily. Students practiced throwing grenades, using bayonets, constructing trenches. Courses in history, economics, and political science were tweaked to help the war effort. Everyone, now, took French. Curfew was at 8:30 p.m. and finally, at 11 p.m., “Taps.”

As the students adjusted to their strict new routines, 25-year-old sophomore Corporal Lake found himself “somewhere in the Western Front in France.” His unit had been sent immediately to the front. His battalion was bombarded in September by heavy artillery in an attack that lasted for six hours. “We lived through that,” he wrote to “Dear Helen” on Oct. 17, when he finally got his hands on a small piece of paper. That battle launched the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, a mission intended to cut off the entire German 2nd army positioned in the Argonne

Forest and along the Meuse river. In the end, the Allies captured more than 23,000 German prisoners. “Every few hours a bunch of Boche [a derogatory term for the Germans] prisoners could be seen being marched ... some being badly torn up,” Lake described, as his unit, relieved by another division, retreated to a small village where they awaited orders.

This experience “driving back the Huns” had a profound effect on Lake. “If I were back in the states now I should ask you to do one of the biggest things that ever entered my life,” he wrote to Helen. “But, as you understand, the big pond separates us at present, so all I am doing is waiting patiently for the day of peace to come.”

But new orders came instead. Lake’s battalion carried guns and ammunitions on a march back to the trenches, through rain and mud up to the top of their boots. They slept in shelled-out German buildings, sopping wet and freezing, marching again at daylight. Near the German front line, they crouched in a dugout and hid in ruined buildings as German shells whizzed overhead all night long. On the morning of Nov. 11, their captain summoned the troops to his shack: “Well boys,” he announced, as Lake recounted, “the Armistice has been signed. At eleven o’clock today the Boche is to cease firing and if he does, we shall also cease firing. Wherever you are at that time, dig in, but no shaking hands with the Boche will

take place.” Lake thought the captain’s words were “far-fetched”—until 11 o’clock came, and “all was quiet.”

**AS ABRUPTLY AS THE START** of the war changed Penn State, the end of it didn’t exactly return the campus to the way it was before. In fact, only 12 days after the Armistice was signed, the main engineering building caught fire. Near the corner of College Avenue and Allen Street, it was the architectural heart of campus, massive with domed turrets and an arched stone entrance. Four fire departments tried and failed to put out the blaze. Some felt that Penn State would never be the same after the war. The loss of the engineering building seemed to make that assessment very real.

The military activities, though, stopped immediately. By Jan. 1, all men in SATC were honorably discharged or transferred. Major Baylies returned to retirement. The barracks were torn down. Compulsory chapel was reinstated every Tuesday, Thursday, and Sunday. As the *Collegian* reported, “College Assumes Normal Aspect.”

President Sparks began fielding letters from Penn Staters abroad, asking what would happen when they returned. To one, Sparks typed: “Each man will be given a schedule beginning as nearly as possible where he left off his college work. There will naturally be much irregularity but we hope to get all students regular again.”

Sparks himself, though, was suffering. With the life of the college totally disrupted for years, he had taken on extremely long hours and new, unfamiliar tasks. The extra pressure the SATC placed on the college and the destruction of the engineering building were more than he could bear. “Dr. Sparks suffered a complete mental and nervous breakdown,” reported the *Collegian* in 1919. He planned to take a leave after commencement, when he conferred degrees on six members of the senior class who’d given their lives to their country. Sparks never returned to his post as president: He resigned in 1920 and became a lecturer in history.



On Memorial Day 1919, students gathered on the Old Main terrace for a commemoration service, honoring the nearly 2,200 Penn Staters who’d served and the 74 students and alumni who’d fallen in the war. “The College is proud of her sons and rejoices in the honor they have brought to themselves and their Alma Mater in the great service they have rendered mankind,” wrote H. Walton Mitchell, Class of 1890, in the foreword to *Penn State in the World War*, published by the Alumni Association in 1921. “They went forth gladly to the performance of duty, and we have welcomed them home with the fullest of assurance that the duty was well done.”



**EVER AFTER**

Helen and Norman wed in 1924 and were married for 54 years, until her death in 1978.

Two days later, on May 28, 1919, Norman Lake finally returned to American soil. He’d spent the six months since the war’s end bouncing around encampments in France, desperate to get back home to Helen. In fact, he didn’t even want to return to Penn State, because he had three years left of school and that was, he wrote to Helen, “a terrible long time

to wait for something I want to do very soon—provided the other is satisfied. Do you get my meaning?”

Finally, on Saturday, June 8, 1919, Norman and Helen reunited. It would be five years before they’d get married at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Peckville, with Helen wearing a gown of blue radium silk and carrying a bouquet of white and sunburst roses. Until then, Lake worked hard to finish his degree as fast as he could.

“One thing I am glad of is the fact that I am very ambitious this year; I suppose it’s because of my appreciating the fact of not being in the army anymore,” Lake wrote from the ATΩ House on Sept. 28, 1919. “Whenever I get a lazy feeling why I just look back to those days in the army and then suddenly become very ambitious, so I have concluded that the army has done me good.”

*Vicki Glembocki, former associate editor of The Penn Stater, is an award-winning magazine writer and columnist, and a contributing editor at Reader’s Digest. She lives outside of Atlanta.*