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100 Years Ago: The Death of Quentin Roosevelt

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Now all roads lead to France and heavy is the tread
Of the living; but the dead returning lightly dance.

Edward Thomas, Roads
Flying airplanes during the Great War was dangerous business and life expectancy could be short. The omnipresent danger was illustrated on July 6, 1918 when John Purroy Mitchel was killed during a training exercise in Louisiana. The nation mourned for the former mayor of New York City and such figures as Theodore Roosevelt paid their respects at the funeral in Saint Patrick's Cathedral on July 11. Later that week the rest of the world was paying attention to the assassination of the deposed Czar Nicholas II and his family when a stringer for the Associated Press named Phil Thompson noted an enigmatic telegram coming off the wires: “Watch Sagamore Hill for——.” The message ended at that because the censors had blocked out the rest.

Thompson showed Roosevelt the telegram at Sagamore Hill and the Colonel immediately started doing the awful arithmetic; he figured something had happened to one of his four boys, all in uniform, and began tallying their whereabouts to see who was most likely to have come into harm’s way. He ruled out oldest son Theodore (Ted) and Archie, who were both already recovering from injuries incurred on the battlefield; then he thought of Kermit and remembered that he had not yet joined his American unit (Kermit Roosevelt had previously been fighting with the British in Mesopotamia,) because he had gotten malaria. That left his youngest: Quentin.

Quentin Roosevelt was born in November 1897 just before his father’s service in Cuba and meteoric rise to the New York governor’s mansion, the vice-presidency, and finally the White House. Quentin Roosevelt was familiar to most Americans, who had seen him grow up in the Executive Mansion during his father’s 7 1/2 years in Washington. When the war broke out five years after his father’s presidency, Quentin and the rest of the family followed the conflict with great interest. Still, life had its joys and pleasures. In his teens he began dating and was soon engaged to Flora Payne Whitney, a granddaughter of Cornelius Vanderbilt. The war continued and eventually, like his brothers, Quentin Roosevelt joined the Allied cause. Flora wanted to go to France and be near her fiancé but the War Department would not allow it, citing various restrictions. Lieutenant Roosevelt was in the 95th Aero Squadron and was known for his kindly nature, mechanical aptitude, and tendency to take risks in the air. He had already had a number of close calls when on July 14—Bastille Day—he and his cohorts took to the air. Accounts vary as to how he got separated, but when he did he proved an easy mark for the German gunners. His plane was shot down the young pilot, all of twenty, was killed.
Both here in the United States and in France, the extended Roosevelt family tried to learn the details as best they could. The press searched for news as well. Quentin Roosevelt's death was confirmed with certainty on 20 July 20. General Pershing and others sent their thoughts and prayers to the family. When the Germans realized who the American casualty was, they buried him in a dignified, well-marked grave. The Allies overran this sector in August to again secure the region, and Quentin's grave quickly became a well-visited shrine. There was talk about sending Quentin's remains back to the United States, but the family did not want that. Theodore Roosevelt wrote to General Peyton C. March in October expressing the parents' wish that Quentin remain in France. "Where the tree falls, There let it be," Roosevelt wrote, quoting the Book of Genesis. March wrote back saying that he understood and would respect the wishes of the Roosevelts and any family who wished their son to remain where he had fallen.
The Roosevelts intended to visit France after the war and place a stone marker at Quentin's grave. Colonel Roosevelt never had that opportunity. Already suffering a number of ailments, his son's death increased his anguish and contributed to his death on 6 January 1919. One month later, his widow sailed for France and visited their son's grave. Theodore (Ted) Roosevelt, Jr., returned from France in early March 1919. He and his wife had their fourth child, a son, in November. They christened the boy Quentin Roosevelt II. His godmother was Flora Payne Whitney.

On 6 June 1944 Ted, back in uniform and now a general, and his son Quentin Roosevelt II, a captain in the Army, both landed on the beaches of Normandy during the D-Day invasion. One month later, General Roosevelt died of natural causes and was buried in the Normandy American Cemetery. In 1955 Quentin was reinterred but, per his parents' wishes, remained in France. He was laid to rest next to his brother in the Normandy Cemetery. Flora went on with life, married several times, had numerous children, and was active in philanthropy and the art world. Her family founded the Whitney Museum of Art in the early 1930s, and she ran the museum for decades. For the rest of her long, full life Flora remained publicly silent about her first love. She lived in Old Westbury, Long Island, not far from Oyster Bay, and died in July 1986.

Professor Keith Muchowski is writing a book about Theodore Roosevelt, Sr., and Civil
War Era New York City. He volunteers with the National Park Service at General Grant National Memorial (Grant's Tomb) in New York City: thestrawfoot.com

2 comments:

Unknown  July 14, 2018 at 4:15 AM
Excellent tribute. Thank you Keith.
Reply

Bonesetter70  July 16, 2018 at 2:31 PM
Wonderful remembrance. I took a picture of General Roosevelt's grave at Colleville-sur-Mer, but I don't think that I was aware of Quentin's grave next to his. Roosevelt's going ashore with his troops on D Day is well documented.
Bob Schrock
Reply

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