

DELPRAT KEEN
BLUE BELL
PENNSYLVANIA

August 10, 1958

Dear Friends,

This communication will undoubtedly surprise you and I address you as above because you were once our hosts.

Forty years ago – it was in late October 1918, I think – my company “A” of the 316th Engineers, 91th Division, U.S. Army was billeted in your beautiful home and grounds. We had just come out of action and were soon to go into the line again at Audenarde – where we were when the Armistice was arranged.

I am here writing you – a little late – to thank you for your hospitality and we really did appreciate it, as your home was the finest place in which we had been billeted during the whole war.

At that time, the house was pretty well shot by shell fire, the Boches had removed all useful metals such as lead plumbing pipes and had torn all the rubber cushion from the pool table.

Everything of value had been taken by them but it was still a beautiful home.

We spent most of our time in the kitchen where our officers mess cook prepared us meals on the stove which was still useable. I see in reading over my letters to my family that the big event was when I had a hot bath in your bath tub. We had to plug the drain so the water would not run out and my orderly heated water once filled the tub for me. Really, quite a big day.

During our stay with your butler returned with a note asking permission to be allowed to clean up what he could – just as tough he needed our permission – or anybody’s. He gave us permission to sleep in the library and my four lieutenants and I spread our bed rolls in that room.

In your books we found one by Robert W. Chambers – ~~war and other poems~~ – I am wrong – in which was the name of “Kathleen Wigglesworth” when he told us was your governess. He also informed us that Madame de Zutter was in Ostende, awaiting the end of the hostilities with her children, Victor age 11, Adrienne 13 and Christian 17. I sincerely hope that if Madame de Zutter is still not alive, that some of you - their children will receive this letter.

I think several of my boys are buried in the American cemetery in Waereghem. I do not have the records but I think First Lieutenant Emmett S. Carruthers and Private Purley Mc Rae are there – both killed up at Marolle where we were preparing to bridge the Scheldt. While at Waereghem, a company also bridged the Lys river at two places and did a lot of road and rail repair.

The reason for this long letter is that I have been going over some old papers and came across a postal card of “Ter Elst”, which moved me to write, just in case any of you might be interested.

It just occurs to me that I know more of you than you do of me. When I was your guest, which I find now was the few days around November 5, 1918, I was 25 years old, commanding the company. Since the war, I have stayed in

engineering and construction and the first of 1958, I retired from business. I those years, I supervised construction in Spain, Brazil and Argentina and now live in a small town outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I have two boys, 22 + 25, one an engineer and one a mathematician.

I have not been back to Belgium, but plan to do on some time, now that have plenty of leisure.

I hope I have not intruded in writing you, but it has given me great pleasure in harking back to by gone days.

Sincerely

Delprat Keen

As a note of interest, I was awarded the Belgian "Croix de guerre" at Château Lovie, near Proven on December 17, 1918.

Waregem, 1st September 1958

Dear Mr Keen,

Your good letter was indeed a surprise but also a great pleasure to me.

I am Victor De Zutter, the eldest son who was 17½ at the time you were billeted in our home in Waregem. At that time a student in Brussels. My parents, my sister Adrienne who was 13 and my brother Christian who was 11 were staying in Waregem when the fighting front advanced and reached Waregem in October 1918 and the shelling caused them to get away. They may have intended to go to Ostend but as a matter of fact got to Poperinge a small town not far from Ypres where they remained until the armistice.

When they got back they found the place had been looted by the boches and also by civilians. I myself came back then to Waregem as soon as I could, As you can well imagine I was anxious to know what had happened to my family as there was no post no telephone or anything of the sort at that time. I was very happy to find them all safe and healthy.

We were all so happy that that horrible war was over and our undesirable visitors chased out of the country. There was plenty of work to clear away the ruins and restoring our destroyed towns.

My father died in 1928 and my mother in 1937. I am living now with my wife and children, two daughters aged 17 and 16 and two boys aged 14 and 11. As a matter of fact the eldest of my boys was born on the 6th June 1944¹ the very day of the landing of the American and English troops in Normandy, who for the second time got the boches out of the country. Two occupations of 4½ years in ones lifetime is quite enough. I hope the Russians wont try to imitate them. The best thing that could happen is that they should not get on to well with the Chinese and have to remain on their guard on that side.

In the last war which started for Belgium on the 10th May 1940, I was lieutenant in the Belgian artillery. We had guns of 105mm drawn by horses. On the 28th May the French Army had retreated very far into France, the British expeditionary force had reembarked at Dunkirk and the Belgian army who was not equipped as in 1918 was completely encircled and capitulated.

We were lucky enough that the Germans did not keep us as prisoners (except the professional officers) and let us go home on 11th June 1940. Our campaign had been a very short one with very little fighting and mostly retreat. We did not get on very fast with our horses and had the roads very often jammed with other columns and with civilian refugees.

My sister Adrienne is married to a professor of the Ghent University Mr Paul van de Woestijne. They have two sons and a daughter. They live in Brussels. My younger brother Christian is also married and lives in a house he built no far from "Ter Elst". He has a daughter and a son.

My brother is my partner in our firm "Société Anonyme de Waregem" which is just on the other side of the road. We manufacture jute goods : burlap and bags. We export burlap and bags in a good many foreign countries and even some burlap in U.S.A. and Canada but competition has become very strong from India and from Pakistan.

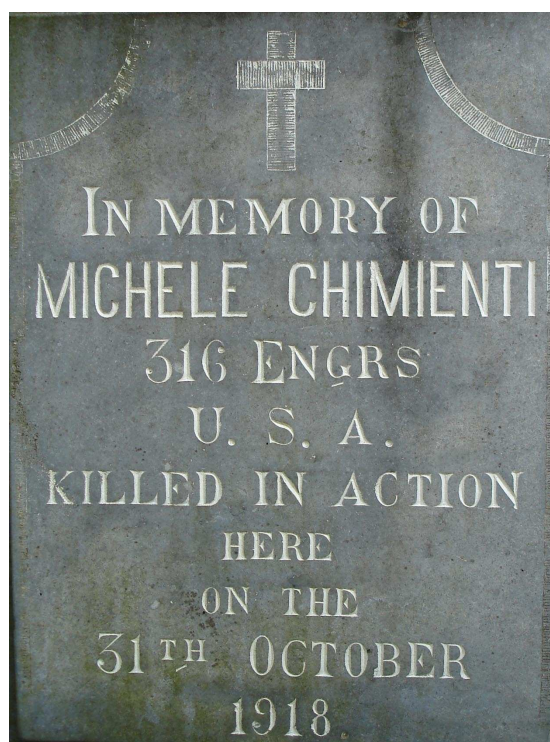
¹ Commentaire historique de Paul van de Woestijne le 6 Juin 1944 : « *On débarque sur tous les fronts* »

It will be a good pleasure to my wife and to me to see you, if you come to Belgium. Maybe you will like to see the places where you have been fighting in 1918. There was an American soldier, named Michele Chimienti, who was killed in our garden, where he was also buried. My mother had a memorial stone placed on his grave. He was later taken to the American cemetery of Waregem but the memorial stone remained. It has however disappeared during the last war. We never knew who took it away.

I hope all this will be of interest to you and in the hope of seeing you soon, I am,

Yours very truly

V. De Zutter



Note :

La disparition de la pierre tombale de Michele Chimienti est une affaire en soi. Autant que je puisse me souvenir, je n'ai comme enfant jamais vu d'inscription sur le bloc de pierre bleue. Papa confirme ici que la plaque avec les inscriptions a du disparaître pendant la guerre 40-45. Cependant l'identité du soldat américain nous était parfaitement connue, nous avons même été visiter sa tombe au cimetière américain.

En Juin 2002 la commune de Waregem organise une exposition sur la guerre 14-18 tout en se focalisant sur les ravages provoqués vers la fin d'Octobre 1918, par l'artillerie allemande, une armée en pleine déroute. Tout le centre de la localité avait été anéanti.

Quelle n'est pas ma surprise de découvrir parmi les objets exposés la plaque commémorative portant le nom de « Michele Chimienti ».

Après avoir contacté les organisateurs de l'expo, ceux-ci me révèlent que la plaque a été apportée à l'impromptu et à la veille de l'inauguration, par un habitant déclarant l'avoir découverte en démolissant chez lui une vieille cheminée : posée au sommet, elle servait à l'obturer.

Qui donc était cette personne ? En réalité son identité n'avait aucune espèce d'importance, mais bien l'emplacement de la maison qu'il venait de racheter. Une maison du voisinage, ou plutôt un voisin immédiat d'un fermier qui jadis faisait les foins chez nous. Or le mémorial était situé en plein pré. De là à penser que la pierre tombale gênait la fenaison il n'y a qu'un pas, mais tous les acteurs potentiels ne sont plus de monde, ce qui clôt l'enquête.

DELPRAT KEEN
 BLUE BELL
 PENNSYLVANIA

Sunday October 25, (1958)

Dear Mr De Zutter,

Thank you for such a wonderful reply to my letter. It was most interesting and we have read it over and discussed it many times.

You mention that your family was in Poperinge. I knew that town well, as when we moved into Belgium, we detrained at Vlamertinge and spent several days in the old British dugouts in Ypres. There was a British officers club in "Pop", as we called it, where we had the privilege of drinking some of their fine Scotch Wiskey. We had nothing like that & the British were very cordial to us.

Someday I intend to come back to Belgium and retrace our steps. All the towns are undoubtedly familiar to you – Hollebeek, Passchendaele (a horrible mass of destruction. I shall never forget Oostnieuwkerke, Roulers, Menin, Roubaix, Lille, Turcoing, den Aap(?) Courtrai, Iseghem, Oostrosebeke, Vive St Bavon, Wortegem, Marolle (where we were prepared to bridge the Scheldt but the Boche pulled out and we were ordered back), Oyghem, Denterghem, Olsene, Audenarde (where we did bridge the Scheldt right off, the main square and on November 11, a ponton bridge just out of town) where the Armistice caught us. We were in Brussels on November 22 when King Albert and Queen Elisabeth returned for the first time in four years – Quite a day ! We eventually wound up in Winnizeele from where we returned to Le Mans in France for return to the States in March of 1918.

I can well imagine your troubles with horse drawn artillery in your war. We had enough problems with horses in our time, muddy roads + heavy traffic.

We were quite touched to know that your mother had placed a memorial stone on the grave of an American soldier, killed in your garden. It was a wonderful thing to do and at this late date we thank your mother and you for the respect and honor accorded. I did not know Chimienti as he was in company E – my outfit was company A – who were billeted in your house after we were, on our way, eventually to Audenarde.

As I think I wrote you, we had planned to spend the winter in Malaga, but due to time limitations, as my older boy, Bud(?) plans to marry in early spring, we have given that trip up and hope to spend a couple of months in Mexico instead. We have now (?) there and as Mrs Keen and I speak Spanish we are looking forward to a nice time.

Should you or any of your family ever come over to the States, we would most enjoy entertaining you. We live out in the country – Blue Bell being not much more than a wide spot in the road, about 16 miles northeast of Philadelphia. Some (?) years ago, we built a small, but very modern house, all on one floor with all the modern conveniences. I think we have every electric appliance made, dish + clothes washers, dryers, etc – including an electric corn popper and a knife sharpener – to make life as easy as possible. We live a simple life with no servants but enjoy the countryside to the utmost. Mrs Keen has flowers all around, I have a vegetable garden and we

also have 1500 evergreen trees – potential Christmas trees – on part of our property.

I seem to have lapsed into a long tale again but your letter has evoked so many memories and we “old soldiers” love “to fight the war”.

Should we come to Europe, we shall try to see you and we would look forward to welcoming any of you here.

Cordially - Delprat Keen