

In the summer of 1917, from her apartment window on Kennedy Street, a little girl named Virginia Loveland watched the local Pennsylvania National Guard soldiers practice drills on the street below. She noticed that one young man, tall and lean, always seemed to have hair falling in his eyes. In a flash, she grabbed a comb from her mother's dressing table, dashed outside and ran up to the soldier, shyly handing him the comb.

The soldier, Nate Nesselson, was touched by her gesture, and months later, from Camp Hancock, Georgia, shortly before shipping out to France, wrote to her parents and was granted permission to write to little Virginia. Calling himself "her soldier boy" his letters ask about Santa Claus and urging her to be a good girl. They are sweet, age appropriate letters to a young girl.

Nathan T. Nesselson was born in Bradford in 1893, the son of Max and Ida Nesselson, of 72 Kennedy Street. He joined the Pennsylvania National Guard, Company C, on June 14, 1914, and saw action on the Mexican border and later, in France.

He also wrote to her parents, William and Madeline Loveland, and these letters are very different, describing training for the trenches, gas masks, and hand grenades. He wrote about the long hours of drilling. "We are drilling 8 hours daily during the hours of 7:45AM to 11:45AM and from 1 PM to 5PM. At 5:30PM we fall in for retreat which is a ceremony whereby every soldier salutes the colors and national anthem. It is for the purposes of reminding us that we are in the Army and of the Army's necessities and its aims.

He wrote of gas masks: "One must get his mask on in 6 seconds or perhaps lose his life. There are many different kinds of gases. Some blind one, another gas has a paralyzing effect on the parts affected by it; one kills with only one inhale and there are still others which cripple one in some way or other."

Nesselson also wrote of hand grenades: "The one most commonly used is called the Mills bomb which weighs about 22 ounces, the coat of which is made of cast iron. It is a true time bomb and is thrown at the count of three. The arms are extended their full length with the right arm drawn back as far as possible and the left arm and hand on line with the target. The bomb is thrown as one would put the shot over the shoulder."

And an icon of World War I warfare, the trenches. "A trench is not a big long ditch as some people imagine. It is dug to various depths and varies in width according to the nature of the ground and the exigencies of the occasion. There are many different kinds of trenches such as communicating, approach, dummy, and others. They are always dug in zigzag fashion, depending on the nature of the terrain. The idea is that if a squad in each short trench should be shelled and their position obliterated, then the squad in the next trench would know nothing of it and keep up their morale."

And finally, his view of Army life: "The whole system of Army discipline is to make a man feel as though he doesn't care which way the wind blows. It either makes or breaks a man but in my own case, I can safely say I will be okay after this affair blows over. This sort of life develops a man physically, but I cannot speak so well of his spiritual outlook. One cannot help but become more serious minded here. I would be safe in saying that nearly every fellow has changed here."

Nesselson trained at Camp Hancock for seven months, and left for overseas duty on April 25, 1918 on board the Aquitania out of New York harbor. By mid-June, the regiment was in France.

On August 3rd, the battle of Fismes and Fismette began. The Velse River flows between these small French village, connected by a bridge and the fighting was so fierce and extreme that 90% of Fismes was destroyed. The bridge became little more than rubble. During the first two days of battle, marked by street fighting, storm troopers, and flame throwers, 2,000 men of the American division were lost. It was the last major German offensive during World War I.

And it was here, on August 11th, 1918, that Nate Nesselson was killed.

His parents received word in September that he was missing in action. By October, they knew the truth.

His captain, Roy R. Kreichbaum, wrote of his heroism: On the 11th of August, this company with two other companies of the regiment, crossed the Vesle River from Fismes, and captured the town of Fismette. Nate was with me as a runner, and his work that day was of the highest order. Private Nesselson repeatedly exposed himself to heavy enemy fire in order to deliver messages from his company to the battalion commander. In performance of this mission, it was necessary for him to cross the Vesle River which was constantly swept by enemy machine gun fire. He volunteered to carry messages after others had been killed in the attempt and continued to perform this perilous duty until he was mortally wounded.”

It would be three more years before his body was brought back to Bradford. The return of those killed in battle overseas was disorganized and slow. Nesselson’s body finally arrived in Bradford in June, 1921. The funeral took place with full military honors with members of Lieut. John C, Roche Post and Post 108 American Legion attending in uniform and escorting the casket to the Beth Israel Jewish Cemetery.

He was posthumously awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for extraordinary heroism.

Nate Nesselson was one of forty four Bradford men that died in World War I.

By Sally Ryan Costik, Curator of the Bradford Landmark Society, Bradford, Pa.