Lost to the War Then Lost to Time

Almost a year passed before she heard anything at all from her brother. Not that she didn't try. She did, hard and often, writing letters that would return stamped, "Addressee Transferred" or "Return to Writer." One has a note penciled-in: "wounded 8/7/18. We have no further record of this man," then a date "4-2-19," six months after the First World War ended.

She must have been worried sick. The war, people claimed joyfully, was over. But what did she know of her brother? Nothing. A profound, inconsolable emptiness must have left her sleepless in a nightmare.

Then, on August 23, 1919, my grandmother received official notice from the War Department's Adjutant General: "It is with profound regret. . ." More than a year after his death, finally she knew her brother would not return.

Long before, she must have heard an anti-war ditty that sold nearly 700 thousand records:

I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier,
I brought him up to be my pride and joy.
Who dares to place a musket on his shoulder,
To shoot some other mother's darling boy?
Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,
It's time to lay the sword and gun away.
There'd be no war today,
If mothers all would say,
"I didn't raise my boy to be a soldier."

But Edgar, her only sibling, had enlisted in November, 1917, and gone to Europe because, well, because he thought it was the right thing to do. The
Adjutant General's letter must have offered her some relief; not knowing occupies its own level of hell.

All of that was exactly 100 years ago now, and no one knows exactly how Edgar died, even though thousands of others were killed in that action, in France, somewhere around the Vesle River. By August of 1918, the war left those hellish trenches behind when the German army began a slow but deadly retreat.

Imagine your own home town without a single soul in it, wrecked after a great storm, and partly burned, with all the evidences of the familiar activities of everyday life about, but that life and movement cut off suddenly, turned off like a light, and you will have a little idea of Fismis.

So writes Hervey Allen, in *Toward the Flame*, a memoir published just eight years after the war, a memoir recounting the travail of the Doughboys, who, like my great-uncle, fought the Bosch from the Marne to the Vesle River. Is what Allen remembers, what Edgar saw before he was killed, a ghost village beaten, starved, and deserted? And if he did, did he, like Hervey Allen, think of home?

Maybe my great uncle Edgar is actually in the action Allen remembers. He could be.

It was our intention to take up a position along the river, using the railway embankment as a trench to resist the enemy should they attempt to cross the stream. *I instructed the first sergeant, who had about half the men, to move over* into the factory on the left as we advanced. After taking a few seconds to get the automatic rifle teams and the skirmish line properly disposed, we started forward on the double. The sergeant led his men off to the left, while we made straight for the river, a stretch of about two hundred yards. About halfway the enemy turned his
machine guns on us. The air suddenly seemed to be alive with a swarm of vicious wasps, and I saw the dust cup up all about our feet. . . .About fifty yards back where three or four quiet bundles that had been men a few seconds before. I watched them from time to time, but there was no more movement.

One of those "quiet bundles" could have been my great uncle--or yours. Maybe he was one of the boys caught in a storm of bullets, a hero who laid there in breathless silence. Who knows, really? Soon, the war would be over. Who will ever know just how he died?

Maybe these lines from a poem written just then belonged to his sister back home:

. . .Though kind Time may many joys renew,
There is one greatest joy I shall not know
Again, because my heart for loss of You
Was broken, long ago.*

Today, one hundred years later, on his stone in the family plot, my Uncle Edgar's name is barely visible.