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Elmer McKee: A Window into the Past

Abstract

Elmer McKee was a Gettysburg College graduate, decorated World War II soldier, successful in his career, and a humble family man. This paper examines his correspondence with his then girlfriend "Diz," from February 25, 1945 to April 5, 1945, it is in this time that he is awarded the Bronze Star Medal. This work attempts to piece together his experiences overseas and how he coped with the experience at such a young age, examining as well what image he wanted to project outwards to his friends and family.

Keywords

Elmer McKee, World War II, soldier, Bronze Star Medal, Letters

Disciplines

History | United States History

Comments

Written for History 300: Historical Methods.

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Elmer McKee:

A Window into the Past

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Dr. Michael Birkner

History 300: Historical Methods

March 2, 2020

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

War is a powerful force. It shapes landscapes, governments, generations, and individuals. One of the most notable of such conflicts is the Second World War. Elmer Slaybaugh McKee was one specific individual whose life was transformed and whose plans were put on hold by this momentous event. This paper follows McKee's journey from February 25, 1945 to April 5, 1945, using 11 consecutive letters. These epistles were written by McKee to his girlfriend at the time, Elizabeth Richards, whom he would later marry after the war.¹ In his letters, McKee addresses her by her nicknames, "Diz," and occasionally "Ug." This selection of letters includes four V-mail cards, one being an exceptionally-well drawn Easter card, and seven full-length compositions, two of which are unfortunately incomplete. These correspondences provide a window into the past and reveal what life was like during such a tumultuous time in history. Over the course of these correspondences, the exact location of McKee is rarely revealed, though it is clear that this period of time pays witness to him moving from France to Germany, pursuing the Nazi retreat. What is even more remarkable is his first-hand accounts of the heroic acts that would later earn him the Award of the Bronze Star Medal² and the Award of the First Oak Leaf Cluster to the Bronze Medal.³

In order to understand who Elmer S. McKee would become, it is necessary to understand his roots. From an early age, McKee showed great initiative in his work, graduating early with his high school's February class instead of in June.⁴ When McKee arrived at Gettysburg College in the Fall of 1940, he quickly emerged as a natural leader. Within his first month at the school,

¹ Elmer McKee, interviewed by Jessica Hanson, October 29, 2002, transcript, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA, <https://gettysburg.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16274coll2/id/2878>.

² Award of the Bronze Star Medal, May 3, 1945, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee '44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

³ Award of the First Oak Leaf Cluster to the Bronze Star Medal, June 14, 1945, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee '44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

⁴ Elmer McKee, 5.

he was elected as “temporary freshman class chairman,”⁵ and later as freshman class president in December of that year.⁶ These leadership skills would later shine through in the army as well, where he was an officer, ranked Lieutenant, at the time of the selected letters. Additionally, he would be promoted to Captain.⁷ These leadership skills would also serve him well when he was unexpectedly thrust into the role of company commander a mere month after being shipped overseas.⁸ Though he did not feel at all prepared or qualified for the task, he was able to rise to the occasion.⁹ He portrayed this experience in his letter dated February 25, 1945, when he wrote, “Another interesting incident occurred when I was company commander,” and goes on to disclose a mostly peaceful, yet tense, interaction between his platoon and platoon sergeant and a company of German soldiers.¹⁰ In the letter he does not reveal the stress involved with this supervisory role, something he later emphasizes in his interview with Gettysburg College student Jessica Hanson in 2002. While McKee was a humble man, this choice to conceal his stress may have been made in order to impress his beloved Diz, or to save her from any worry.

⁵ “McKee Will Serve As Frosh Chairman,” *Gettysburgian*, September 19, 1940, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GTy%2F1940%2F09%2F19&id=Ar00406&sk=DD4F0380&viewMode=image>.

⁶ “Frosh Select Class Heads,” *Gettysburgian*, December 5, 1940, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GTy%2F1940%2F12%2F05&id=Ar00109&sk=60568B7B&viewMode=image>; In many of the *Gettysburgian* articles about McKee’s Student Senate involvement, he is listed as Elmer W. McKee, which appears to be a recurring typo as there was only one Elmer McKee in the 1940 freshman class, and it was Elmer S. McKee; *Spectrum*, 1941.

⁷ “Elmer Slaybaugh McKee: 1921- 2017,” obituary for Elmer McKee, *The Patriot News*, March 24, 2017, <https://obits.pennlive.com/obituaries/pennlive/obituary.aspx?n=elmer-slaybaugh-mckee&pid=184679913&fhid=28175>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 25, 1945, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA; In this interaction, McKee’s platoon sergeant and men were travelling down a road to join another unit. On their journey, they happened upon some soldiers, who they thought were just from another allied company, until they started speaking in German. The sergeant followed the technique used by McKee in the machine gun nest incident, and told the Germans to surrender, using his limited German vocabulary, as they were surrounded. The Germans demanded to see their commanding officer, which was McKee, so the sergeant promised to go get him and quickly fled with the platoon.

In addition to being a natural leader, McKee was also an extraordinary student. While pursuing a degree in chemistry, his name was regularly on the Scholastic Honor List at Gettysburg¹¹ and was awarded the Baum Mathematical Prize.¹² Nonetheless, like many young people, he spent quite a bit of time questioning what his future would hold. This doubt was enhanced by the war putting his plans on hold, which he explained in one letter to Diz, saying, “Don’t know what I’ll study if I go back to school - probably the same thing I was. Don’t even know if I’ll go back - things are so mixed up now.”¹³ What is interesting about this particular exchange is that, without realizing it at the time, McKee had already received a Gettysburg College diploma. While he was in officer training, he had picked up a few classes at Virginia Poly Tech. Much to his surprise, those classes had accrued enough credits for him to graduate from Gettysburg. He discovered this months later when, “my parents wrote me and said you had graduated from Gettysburg... they attended the service while I didn’t even know I had graduated.”¹⁴ While overseas, McKee was also inducted into the Iota Chapter of the Phi Beta Kappa national honorary scholastic fraternity, selected for his “scholarship, character, love of

¹¹ “Scholastic Honors List,” *Gettysburgian*, October 2, 1941, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1941%2F10%2F02&id=Ar00203&sk=AEB1F0EC&viewMode=image>; “Scholastic Honors List,” *Gettysburgian*, February 27, 1941 <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1941%2F02%2F27&id=Ar00204&sk=48846A99&viewMode=image>; “Scholastic Honor List,” *Gettysburgian*, October 1, 1942, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1942%2F10%2F01&id=Ar00301&sk=83E3EE2A&viewMode=image>; “Scholastic Honor List,” *Gettysburgian*, February 26, 1942, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1942%2F02%2F26&id=Ar00304&sk=22C67C44&viewMode=image>.

¹² “Honor, Prize Awards Made At Graduation: Thornburg Wins Title As Valedictorian Of ‘42 Class,” *Gettysburgian*, October 1, 1942, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1942%2F10%2F01&id=Ar00401&sk=6E4396EE&viewMode=image>.

¹³ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 24, 1945, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

¹⁴ Elmer McKee, 11.

learning, and in further consideration of promise of achievement.”¹⁵ When he learned of this, he wrote to Diz, “Say, what’s this Phi Beta Kappa stuff. I thought they only gave that to guys that are bright” with his playful humbleness always managing to shine through.¹⁶ It is truly remarkable that McKee was able to leave such an impression on the Gettysburg College faculty that they granted him awards while he was an entire ocean away. This affinity for learning and intense intelligence not only contributed to his success later in life, when he would continue his education at Johns Hopkins and the Harvard Business School, but also to his success in the military, where he rapidly emerged as a person who was able to think on his feet.¹⁷

Another integral aspect of McKee’s identity and college experience was his membership in the Xi chapter of Phi Gamma Delta, which he rushed in the spring semester of his freshman year with 11 other young men, one of which was Raymond S. Musselman.¹⁸ It is evident through McKee’s letters that among his “Phi Gam” brothers, he was particularly close with Raymond “Moose” Musselman. The two young men were both members of ROTC while in college, were called to active duty at the same time, and completed basic training together.¹⁹ Later, while being interviewed by Hanson, McKee specified that he frequently wrote Musselman while they were overseas.²⁰ As McKee quickly learned, “It’s just luck really that nothing

¹⁵ “Faculty Chooses Honor Students,” *Gettysburgian*, March 22, 1945, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1945%2F03%2F22&id=Ar00405&sk=6DD39D80&viewMode=image>.

¹⁶ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, April 4, 1945, MS- 237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

¹⁷ March 24, 2017, obituary for Elmer McKee, “Elmer Slaybaugh McKee: 1921 - 2017.”

¹⁸ “Greeks Plan To Induct 113 As Members: Co-ed Groups Will Initiate Five Upperclassman, 29 Freshman,” *Gettysburgian*, March 13, 1941, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1941%2F03%2F13&id=Ar00104&sk=0007D496&viewMode=image>.

¹⁹ “Former Cadets Hold War-Planned Reunion,” *Gettysburgian*, November 14, 1946, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Gettysburg/SharedView.Article.aspx?href=GT%2F1946%2F11%2F14&id=Ar00302&sk=24A6802F&viewMode=image>.

²⁰ Elmer McKee, 9-10.

happened to me.”²¹ Unfortunately Musselman did not have that same luck and was killed in action. The selected letters present a depressing, yet full circle narrative regarding Musselman. In the first letter, February 25, 1945, McKee remarks, “Also heard from Mrs. Musselman. She didn’t know exactly where Ray is.”²² While a happy ending is hoped for, this mystery is resolved in the second to last letter in the selection when he writes, “mother said that Ray Musselman was killed in action.”²³ While he does spend this first, short paragraph of the letter reminiscing about the good times he had with Musselman and commenting on how surreal this news is, he quickly rebounds to his usual commentary detailing recent events, and as usual expressing how terribly he missed Diz. This progression shows how hardened to reality a soldier is forced to become. You are exposed to such unimaginable horrors that intense mental compartmentalization is required to maintain a certain level of sanity and to carry out orders. In the following letter, dated just one day later, April 5, 1945, he notes that he wrote to Mrs. Musselman, Ray’s mother in an attempt to console her.²⁴ This small act of compassion is indicative of his thoughtful, caring, and loyal nature.

In comparison with the previous letter, on the fourth of April, he seems to exude a certain amount of bitterness, once saying, “this damned war,” when reflecting on how many of his friends’ lives the fighting has taken.²⁵ This last letter reveals that he has learned that two more fraternity brothers were killed, Will Bill and Charlie.²⁶ Despite the fact that war, to a certain

²¹ Elmer McKee, 22.

²² Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 25, 1945.

²³ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, April 4, 1945.

²⁴ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, April 5, 1945, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ After examining the yearbooks, it is unclear which William and Charles in Phi Gamma Beta McKee is referring to, though he clearly refers to them as fraternity brothers when he notes, “It’s pretty hard to believe that guys like he [Musselman], Will Bill, and Charlie [name illegible] have been killed in this damned war. They’re so alive in my memories of school and the fraternity that it doesn’t seem possible,” Ibid.

extent, can normalize and desensitize someone to death, the loss of a friend will always take a toll. To have lost three friends at the same time is unimaginable. His struggle to come to terms with this grief comes through in the distracted nature of this last letter. Despite the fact that just one day before he wrote to Diz, relaying news of Musselman's death, in this letter he yet again presents the news as new information.²⁷ He also appears to be frustrated with the noise and crowdedness of his location and gets caught up in reminiscing about the past, seemingly more than usual. It can be surmised that the speed and nature of events has reached such a threshold that it is hard even for him to process, made more difficult by the lack of peaceful alone time. Nonetheless, just like his previous letter, his capacity for compartmentalization is impressive, attempting to change the tone of the letter by promising to bestow upon Diz his bridge playing expertise and commenting on the food.²⁸

Throughout the letters, McKee provides Diz with some details of what his duties entailed. At the most basic level, McKee was a member of the 254th Infantry Regiment in the 63rd Division and served in both France and Germany.²⁹ After his training, McKee was shipped from New York to France, arriving on December 2, 1944.³⁰ Therefore, at the time of the first letter in this selection, McKee had been fighting in Europe for approximately three months. Throughout the first three letters, it can be inferred that McKee was still in France. In his letter dated February 25, he tells Diz that he is staying in "a room in a kinda beat up French house on the edge of town"³¹ and that he had just "had about my fourth shower today since being in France,"³²

²⁷ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, April 5, 1945.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ March 24, 2017, obituary for Elmer McKee, "Elmer Slaybaugh McKee: 1921 - 2017."

³⁰ Elmer McKee, 15.

³¹ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 25, 1945.

³² Ibid.

a statement which does an excellent job of breaking down his nonchalant facade that often masks the harsh realities he is living. McKee often did this by brushing them off as simply being a part of his new normal, such as one comment, stating, “10 o’clock and all is quiet - except for an occasional machine gun which nobody pays attention to anymore.”³³ After this letter, though, McKee does not specify his location again for the following three letters, although he does allude to some degree of location movement by occasionally indicating a change in where they are camped out, such as, “Am living in a cellar again - nice thick walls.”³⁴ On the fourth correspondence, however, he dates the letter “14 March, Germany.”³⁵ While his exact whereabouts are never revealed through the letters, he does remain in Germany for the rest of this time period. Approximately two weeks later he indicated that he was then “well into Germany.”³⁶ McKee’s approximate path can be mapped using the documentation of his heroic actions, which earned him two distinguished awards. The first, of these awards, Award of the Bronze Star Medal, was awarded for his “achievement in action on 20 February 1945, in the vicinity of Aeursmacher, Germany,” a region on the northernmost part of the French-German border.³⁷ McKee was also later awarded the Award of the First Oak Leaf Cluster to the Bronze Star Medal “for heroic achievement from 18 March 1945 to 21 March 1945 in the vicinity of Ensheim, Germany,” which is approximately 70 miles from Aeursmacher.³⁸

³³ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 10, 1945, V-mail, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

³⁴ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 28, 1945, V-mail, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

³⁵ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 14, 1945, V-mail, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

³⁶ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 26, 1945, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

³⁷ Award of the Bronze Star Medal, May 3, 1945.

³⁸ Award of the First Oak Leaf Cluster to the Bronze Star Medal, June 14, 1945.

The Award of the Bronze Star Medal was bestowed upon McKee for approaching a German machine gun nest and persuading them to surrender, which ultimately resulted in killing two German soldiers and capturing six. I was able to find three different accounts of this event: his letter to Diz on February 25, 1945, the restricted army documentation specifying that McKee would be a recipient of this award, and his explanation of the event in his interview with Hanson. All three versions of the story align, differing solely in details. The most in depth account was the letter to Diz, as it was still fresh in his memory, written just five days after the event took place. In each version of the story, the overwhelming theme is McKee's remarkable instinct to selflessly lead, as well as the great extent to which his success was dependent on sheer luck. Upon being informed of the machine gun nest by another unit, McKee unflinchingly decided to take the offensive and crawl, with his section sergeant, extremely close to the nest. Once again, McKee's character shines through in his writing. Though it appears that he is proud of what he did, he refuses to gloat, and instead jokingly attributes this bold decision, which could either be classified as brave or reckless, to still being "intoxicated from my trip to Paris."³⁹ When the sergeant pointed out that the Germans were only about 25 yards from McKee, he yet again courageously acted on instinct and told their aggressors that they were surrounded.⁴⁰ The Germans did not immediately believe McKee's bluff and remained in place. However, out of another instance of pure luck, "there came almost 6 more GI's up the hill from the other side of the Germans."⁴¹ With this extra support, McKee was able to persuade all of the Germans but two to surrender. Using his advantageous position, he and his sergeant had a clear shot of the two

³⁹ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 25, 1945.

⁴⁰ In this exchange, McKee yelled over to the Germans in German. While at Gettysburg College, McKee took three years of German, which would have been very useful for intelligence at this time; transcript; Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

remaining soldiers. Despite the fact he appears to be proud of his accomplishment, the way his story finishes, “Both Germans were finally eliminated,” drips with disgust towards this brutal and inhumane nature of killing and war.⁴²

The second award McKee received, the Award of the First Oak Leaf Cluster of the Bronze Star Medal was given for his action at the Siegfried Line. Unlike his full account of the German machine gun nest incident, McKee’s only mention of the Siegfried Line was that “The diversion for the past few days has been some distance behind the front lines after a rather tough fight in cracking the Siegfried Line.”⁴³ Always humble, McKee elected to use this letter to instead tell Diz of the “glorious spring weather”⁴⁴ and to talk about a show he had recently seen. This may have been in an attempt to avoid reliving what had been a difficult and testing fight, or perhaps because he did not view this account as a worthwhile use of letter writing resources. Regardless, it should be explained that the Siegfried Line, or “The Westwall,” was a system of German defense, used for regrouping forces. It was made up of machine-gun posts, barricades, bunkers, and concrete, pyramid-shaped fortifications called “dragon’s teeth.”⁴⁵ The Siegfried line was thoroughly defended and well equipped, and passing it was no small feat. As evidenced by his Award of the First Oak Leaf Cluster of the Bronze Star Medal, McKee fought valiantly and was integral to the effort. However, if I had read his letters alone, I would never have known anything beyond the fact that he was present for the fight.

⁴² Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 25, 1945.

⁴³ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 24, 1945.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Tony Ly Tissier, “The Division Moves into the Line,” in *Patton’s Pawns: The 94th US Infantry Division at the Siegfried Line* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2007), 6-7, https://gettysburg.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/permalink/01GETTYSBURG_INST/rol5uk/alma991004496096405231.

As has already been previously alluded, McKee was a man who wore many hats while in the Army. He was first and foremost a Lieutenant, and served for a short term as company commander. Included in his V-mail from March 10, 1945, he told Diz that he had been transferred to being an officer on his current staff, but that he was not happy with the change.⁴⁶ In a later letter he reiterated his disdain for the position and expressed his desire to return to D company, though he did add that he was getting more accustomed to the post.⁴⁷ Beyond these short comments, his precise duties were not explained. What was clear, though, was that he made an effort to stay connected with his men, once mentioning that he took a night watch shift even though his officer status made him exempt brushing off his kindness by saying, “it doesn’t do any harm and the men appreciate it.”⁴⁸ It should also be noted that part of his job was censoring mail. Although he never spoke about this duty in this selection of letters, his signature is included in the circle designated “Censor’s Stamp,” in each of the four V-mails he sent Diz.⁴⁹ It can be assumed that the partial vagueness of his letters, particularly in regards to his location, can be attributed to him being a censor. This post meant that he would have been fluent in the rules for what could and could not be included in the letters back home and would not have been prone to take unwarranted risks.

Lastly, it would not be just to discuss Lieutenant Elmer McKee without devoting a section to his love for Diz. It is quite evident that their relationship was a turbulent one: both had strong personalities and they were at different stages in their lives, looking for different levels of

⁴⁶ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 10, 1945.

⁴⁷ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 24, 1945.

⁴⁸ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 28, 1945.

⁴⁹ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, February 28, 1945; Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 10, 1945; Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 14, 1945, Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, April 1, 1945, V-mail, MS-237: Captain Elmer S. McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

commitment.⁵⁰ Throughout the period of time I have focused on, however, there was no serious conflict or arguments; aside from McKee attempting to get a rise out of Diz by insulting her dog, Buffy.⁵¹ While they might not have had any serious conflict during this time, it is also clear that he was fighting an uphill battle in an attempt to fully win her over. He was not easily discouraged, though, as his love for her was so great. When people are exposed to such horrors and intense levels of stress as those that come with being a war-time soldier, having something or someone back home for you to fight for, that will be waiting for you when you get back is integral for your motivation and mental sanity. Without a doubt, Diz was that someone for Elmer. Not a single letter passed without him expressing his love for her, relaying the fond memories that keep him going, his plans for dates when he returned, or even a heart breaking comment such as, “I do love you. I know, you’ll never admit that, but anyway I do,” in an attempt to guilt trip her into reciprocating his intense feelings.⁵² Fortunately, Elmer did get his happy ending, and married his beloved Diz after the war.⁵³

An experience as brutal and intense as war can never fully be understood by an outside observer. It is undoubtable that Elmer McKee was an extraordinary, intelligent, and kindhearted person. His great capacity for leadership and affinity for learning was evident from his college years, and is owed partial credit for his success in climbing the ranks. However, the rest of that puzzle is completed purely by luck. Through McKee’s account of Musselman’s death in

⁵⁰ Elmer McKee, 7.

⁵¹ Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, March 27, 1945, MS-237: Captain Elmer McKee ‘44 Papers, Special Collections, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA.

⁵² Elmer S. McKee to Elizabeth Richards, April 5, 1945; As previously mentioned, Elmer and Diz were at very different stages in their lives. Elmer had long ago decided that Diz was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with, while she was just looking for a good time and was still looking to date around. As a result, McKee placed extra emphasis on how deeply he loves her in each and every one of his letters, though his tone and intensity often imply that he was constantly looking for affirmation that she felt the same; Elmer McKee, 6, 15.

⁵³ Elmer McKee, 24.

particular, this truth is brought into focus. McKee's letters also demonstrate the surreal duality of his life: valiantly fighting for his country and graduating from college at the same time, an almost comical juxtaposition. Friend, lover, hero, and scholar; Elmer S. McKee was a remarkable human being whose life and letters provide a window into an extraordinary time.

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Sunday Feb 25, 45 [added in pen "45"]

My darling,

Conditions aren't so hot for writing a letter but I've been thinking about you so much that I'll make an attempt. Hope you can read this. I'm writing in my platoon CP with my plat sgt., driver and aid man. We have a room in a kinda beat up French house on the edge of town. Furniture - 2 stoves, a sink (no running water), a cabinet for dishes, 4 chairs, and some mattresses we picked up. Am writing this by candlelight on a book balanced on my knee.

Well, dear, things are quiet again - have been for a day or so, but I suppose they'll start popping again one of these days. The men are dug in in foxholes out in the field but they have them filled [wrote filed] up with mattresses, straw and overhead cover, so it isn't too bad. I was sleeping in the field with them till the night before last, when I moved back here with C co. Spent two miserable nights and there in the rain and muck but the last few days have been just like spring. Had a pretty bad cold and could hardly talk for a while [wrote, "awhile"], but I'm getting over it gradually. Outside of that I'm still as healthy or healthier than ever.

You're always asking me to tell you what I'm doing so I'll relate a little incident that occurred the other day. B Co and my machine gun platoon moved up on a hill to set up a [most likely "defensive," obscured by hole punch] position. We were relieving another unit, and upon arriving at our destination we were informed by elements of this other unit that there were some Germans dug in with a machine gun nest more than 100 yards from our position. They pointed out the approximate location. Well, it's damn silly digging in when you know there are some Kraut that close with a MG so something had to be done about it. Don't know what got into me - probably I was still intoxicated from my trip to Paris (now, I didn't do much drinking. Only an

occasional glass of wine) - but anyway I asked my one section sergeant if he'd like to go with me to see if we could get the Germans nest. He's a helluva nice kid and gladly consented. They had their position just over a very small rise of ground so that by crawling we could get very close and still not come under their fire. So that's what we did - crawled. We squirmed over the ground like a couple of worms and after going about 40 yds, the sgt. yelled, "Hey, lieutenant! There's two Kraut about 25 yds to your left front." I couldn't see them at first, but rising up a little I saw two helmets shining in the sun. Well, I didn't know what the hell to do. I know these were more of them and all we had were our carbines - no grenades; so [word obscured by hole punch] German I said, "Come here, you're surrounded." It didn't do much good. We lay there for a few exciting seconds - which seemed terribly long - trying to figure out what to do, when, thank god, there came almost 6 more GI's up the hill from the other side of the Germans. They had an automatic rifle. We yelled and told them about the Germans. They opened up with the auto-rifle and soon the Germans climbed out of their holes with their hands in the air. The other two still refused to give up. The other soldiers opened up with all their weapons from the one side and while the Germans were busy watching them, the sergeant and I could take our time and get a good shot. Both Germans were finally eliminated.

Another interesting incident occurred when I was company commander. We were moving out in an attack. I called the first platoon sgt (my platoon) in and told him what was going on and showed him on a map the road he was to take in order to join the unit that he was supposed to support. He took off with the platoon and after going down this road about 500 yds he ran into some soldiers. He thought they belonged to one of the companies so he asked one man, "What company is this." The reply was "Was?" In German that means "What." The sergeant

immediately recognized the man as a German soldier and saw that lots of others were digging in all around. Sgt Jerry speaks a little German so he told the men he was surrounded and asked the Germans to give up. The German asked to see an officer, however there was none present; so Sgt Jerry said "Wait, I'll get you one." He then slowly walked back, had the platoon turn around and follow him back to where I was. Nobody was hurt and that's the last we saw of those Germans.

Gee, Diz, I sure enjoyed your wonderful 5 page [annotated, "Feb 4"] letter today. That poem or song (I don't hear the latest hits anymore) "An hour never passes" is all reet. Yep, hon, I think of you too - in my leisure time, always; when things are kinda rough and get rougher and rougher, when I have a tough job, I keep goin' because I know you'd want me to. When things are the hardest they seemed much simpler when I think of you and feel that I'm doing it for you - as that someday i'll be able to come home and hold you in my arms and we can have so much fun together - just like we used to do. It's funny the things a guy thinks about over here. For instance just now - for some unknown reason - I started thinking of going on the roller-coaster at Hershey with you. Going around a sharp bent and feeling you so close, stealing a kiss going down one of those big dips - what a simple thing to think about - I mean a roller-coaster - but you're there and that's what counts.

Just took time out for my evening snack. Now 8:30. Had a K ration and a cup of hot coffee. Been getting plenty to eat lately. We had chicken for supper - steak the other night ["other night," obscured by hole punch]. It's not like you get at home but a guy can't kick about that.

Appreciate that little cartoon about the guy playing bridge. We played a few rubbers the other day. Sure I'll teach you to play poker. Guess I can win as fast as you can lose. Uh oh - shouldn't have said that I guess.

Saw Bruce the other day. The first time all we could do was exchange greetings and slip each other that Fiji grip, but I looked him up the next day. Funny how I found him. I saw a couple guys from his company so I asked them if they knew where Lt. Raffensperger was. They gave me some directions which weren't too clear and I took off. I found a house which I thought should be the right one according to the directions but when I asked what company was there they said A Co. Bruce is in D. I was about to leave when all at once I heard a piano and a loud tenor issue forth from the window, I couldn't mistake that voice. We had a bull session for about 15 minutes. It was hardly long enough to learn much news.

Received a letter from Bill Hartman and he's over here someplace now. Don't know where. His letter was addressed from Ft. Meade. Also heard from Mrs. Musselman. She didn't know exactly where Ray is.

Here's the kind of humor we get:

Life is sweet - but oh, how bitter

To love a girl and then not gitter.

Sitting in my GI bed

My GI hat upon my head,

My GI pants, my GI shoes

Everything free, nothing to lose,

GI razor, GI comb

GI wish that I were home.

Hey, we would have a helluva time deciding on a pet, wouldn't we? I guess we'd at least both want a dog, but I'll be damned if I could stand one of those ugly spaniels [wrote, "spanials"] - or whatever Buffy is. You better keep her hidden when I get back there, in case I should happen to forget and bring my pistol ["my pistol," obscured by Hole punch] along or something. Why, hell, Buffy is only a good sized mouse. Ching on the other hand is pretty, friendly and big enough to take care of himself - only neglected. - I can imagine the answer I'll get from this little paragraph.

Well, Ug, it's gettin' plenty late. Must get my beauty sleep. Oh, had about my fourth shower today since being in France - or was it the 5th? Anyway it's gettin' to be a damned rare occurrence. You can do wonders though with a good helmet. Also got some clean clothes. The pants are about 4 inches too long but when they're tucked in combat shoes, they look pretty good.

Just a minute - more trouble. My platoon's spread all over hell and I'm havin' troubles getting them fed. Gotta talk to C Co's mess sergeant and get things straightened out.

Ok, back again. Oh, I was gonna quit. Here goes again - a telephone call... Only some medrial captain calling asking whether I had any excess German pistols I'd like to trade for a quart of whiskey. Such is war.

Well, hon, as I said several paragraphs ago - I must end. I love you very much and wish terribly that I could see you and talk to you. I promise I'll be careful and that I'll be dropping

around 1813 Regina St one of these days to pick up a pretty girl with light brown hair and green eyes. Until then take care of yourself and be good.

Love,

Elmer.