

Religion, Sportsmanship, and Comradeship in World War 1

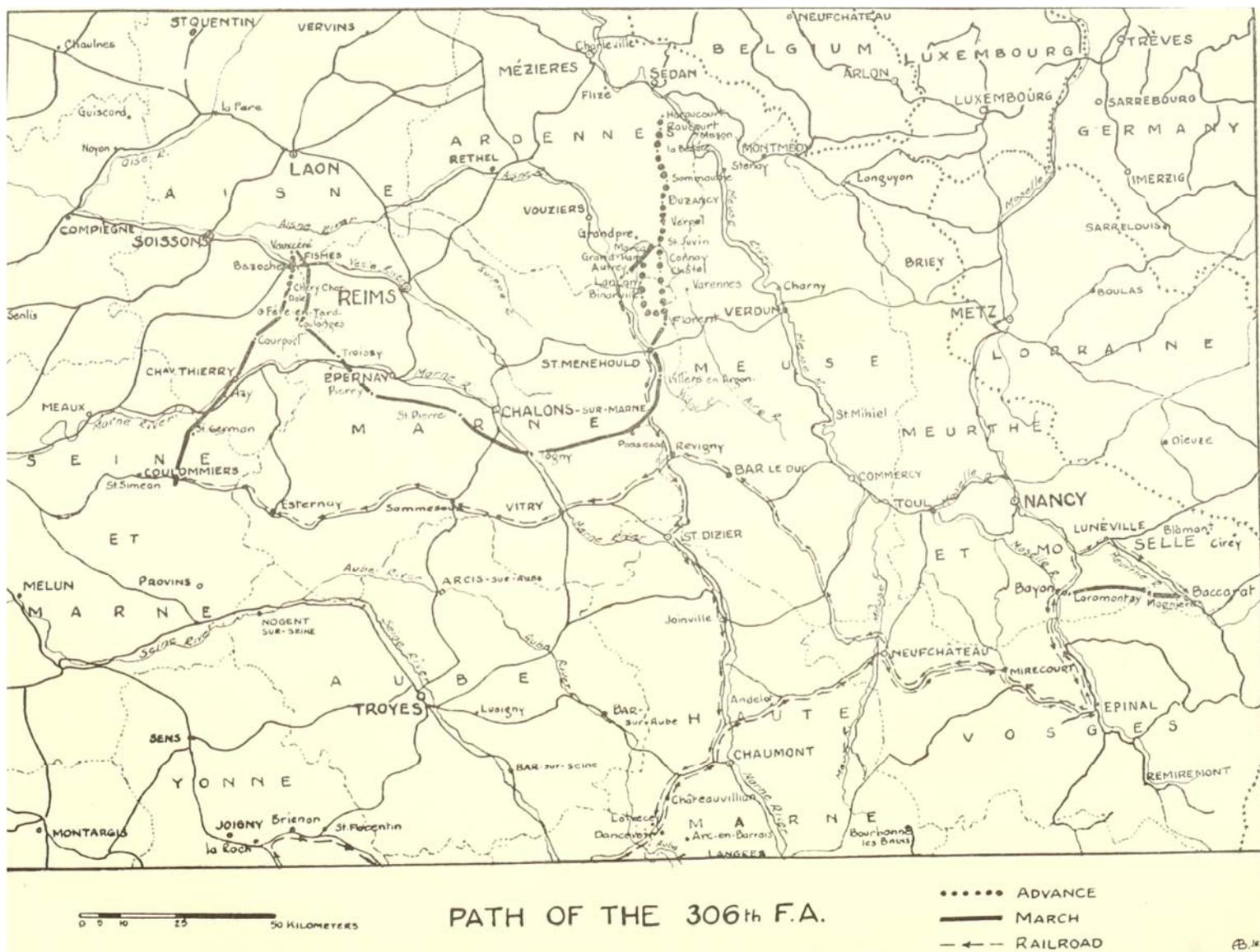
The Case of Walter M. Silkworth

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History 102

Fig 1: The path of the 306th Field Artillery, following their sixty-hour long train ride from Camp De Souge¹



¹ Duell, Holland S., et al. *The History of the 306th Field Artillery* New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920. Web. pg. 23

On September 16th, 1918, in a small French village, American servicemen Walter Silkworth and Bill Wittman walked over to the Cherry Chateau and bought crackers, chewing gum, cigarettes and matches to share amongst their friends and fellow soldiers. The rest of the day was a blur as they spent most of it cowering under any cover that they could find in the hopes of protecting themselves from the incoming shrapnel. After the shrapnel and shellfire ceased Walter and Bill composed themselves and began working on building themselves a new bunk. These two soldiers, who had not known of each other before the war, faced these hardships every day. Together they survived the grueling and nightmarish war while forging close friendships with each other that made it easier to cope with the daily demands imposed on them. The friendship between Walter Silkworth and Bill Wittman is reminiscent of countless other wartime friendships. Our culture seems to be fascinated by these types of stories as they are present in countless novels, movies, and TV shows. Such an emphasis is placed on the relationship between male friendship and warfare that these two themes seem inseparable from one another. However frightening and violent war may be, these friendships are often seen as the one positive by-product that war may cause.

The First World War, in particular, represents a culminating point in the history of male friendships as millions of men, in the US and in Europe, went to fight in a war that caused more death and suffering than any other previous conflict. Millions of American soldiers were conscripted and made to fight in grueling conditions where they had to face an increasingly sophisticated form of combat involving gas attacks and trench warfare.² As Barbara Caine writes, “more so in the trenches than in earlier forms of war-making,

² Cole, Sarah *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Web. pp. 138 – 139

soldiering was literally as well as figuratively a place in which male bonds could keep you alive”³ Friendship certainly had its place in this modern, industrial war more than ever before as these large conscripted armies allowed for much social mixing as men from diverse backgrounds, who would otherwise had never met, formed bonds that survived the war itself. It is clearly evident from the many diaries, letters, and memoirs of men involved in the Great War that they formed close and loving friendships with men of similar rank and location.⁴

Walter Silkworth was one of these soldiers. He was enlisted as a bugler and assigned to battery E of the 307th Field Artillery on July 1st, 1918. Throughout his tour, he chronicled his military service onboard an ocean liner named the S.S. Leviathan, at Camp Pontanezen and at Camp De Souge in a diary that he had wished be delivered to his fiancée should he not return. His first diary entry was written on April 22nd 1918, on the first day aboard the S.S. Leviathan and ends abruptly on the 17th of September. Each day he wrote about the events that had occurred and the detail that he provided allows for a glimpse into the lives of these servicemen. The purpose of this paper is to use Silkworth’s diary and various other secondary sources in order to identify and understand how male bonds were formed during World War 1. Specifically, this paper will focus on how hardships, a common struggle, regimented entertainment and the study of religion, fostered close relationships between Silkworth and his fellow soldiers.

Silkworth’s involvement in World War 1 began in Camp Upton, a military training camp located in Yaphank, Suffolk County, Long Island. It is hard to know where Silkworth’s relationship with Bill Wittman originated but seeing as they came from

³ Caine, Barbara *Friendship: A History* New York: Routledge, 2009. Print.
pg 306

⁴ *Ibid*, 307

different neighborhoods, Wittman having been born in the Brooklyn and Silkworth in Jamaica, Queens, they probably met during their training at Camp Upton. Yaphank, at the time, was a tiny village, isolated and surrounded by woods. The government purchased land in this area, the cost of which apparently amounted to only one dollar. Kenneth O'Brien, a first Lieutenant of the 306th Field Artillery, would later remark bitterly that "Six months later, some thirty thousand men pulling stumps on every acre of that bleak terrain, agreed that the Government had been cheated, and that the man who had sold the land should be arrested as a profiteer"⁵ Needless to say, the area around Yaphank was dull and uninviting.

In Camp Upton, the 306th Field Artillery would form and settle down in 16th street where it would take around six weeks for the batteries to organize, learn close-order drills and read the Army regulations. In addition to their regular duties, soldiers were responsible for turning the place into a respectable army installation. This involved the arduous task of pulling tree stumps, a task that was considered so difficult that it made other jobs seem easy by comparison. Kenneth O'Brien writes, "The art of stump-pulling was so highly developed that hauling guns out of the mud at the front came to be as easy as doing physical drill in the rear rank"⁶ Camp Upton was seen as the proving ground for all the soldiers, a place that would allow them to become accustomed to the uncomfortable and regimented way of life. After numerous setbacks and delays, and after seven long months at the camp, the soldiers were finally given the orders to move on April 21st and 22nd.⁷

⁵ Ibid, 7

⁶ Ibid, 7

⁷ Ibid, 11

On the 22nd of April 1918, Silkworth boarded a ship, originally an ocean-liner named the “Vaterland”, which had been repurposed and renamed the “S.S. Leviathan” in order to help transport American soldiers to the war front. They arrived nearly 2 weeks later at Brest, France on the 2nd of May, 1918. Upon arriving in France, Silkworth describes the sights as “very strange and somewhat comical ... and yet some were pitiful”.⁸ He notes the children running along the streets, following them and asking for cigarettes and he remarks on the fact that most of them were wearing wooden shoes.⁹ When they landed they had to hike three miles up hill before arriving at Camp Pontanezen, a famous military training camp where Napoleon and his men had trained. After only 5 days at the barracks they boarded a train named “Hommes 40-Cheveux 8” which took them to Camp De-Souge via Nantes and La Rochelle. They trained at Camp De-Souge for nearly 2 months, enjoying the surrounding cities and towns during the weekend. They then boarded a train at Bonneau station, which took them nearer to the war front. It was a sixty-hour long train ride that travelled across the entire country leaving them at the northeast corner of France in Bacarrat, a town near the German border.¹⁰ Afterwards they marched to Bayon where they boarded another train that took them westward via Neufchateau and Vitry le-Francois. They detrained at St. Simeon and began marching towards the war front. Silkworth’s diary ends abruptly during this march northward on the 17th of August, one day before the first war related death occurred. They would later engage the Germans in the Oisne-Aisne offensive. After marching further westward their campaign would culminate in one of the most deadly and daring

⁸ Silkworth, Walter M. “Walter M. Silkworth Papers”. Apr 22 1918 – Aug 17 1918. MS. Hofstra., Hempstead, NY. *Hofstra Special Collections*. Print.

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ See Fig. 1

offensives in modern history, an offensive that completely demoralized the Germans and brought them to the negotiating table.

Called the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, it involved sending twenty-two U.S. and six French divisions, totaling up to more than a million soldiers, into the line between the Meuse River and the Argonne Forest.¹¹ Americans sustained such high casualties that American military historian, Edward Lengel, has referred to it as the bloodiest battle in American history.¹² The purpose of the assault was to attack the Germans located at the east end of France near the village of Saint-Étienne A-Arnes in an area known as the Hindenburg Line. They wanted to push the Germans back towards the Aisne river in order to capture the railroad hub at Sedan, without this railroad the Germans would not be able to supply their troops in France with food and weapons. In the battle's first day, the American and French soldiers made a lot of progress but as they ran into German reinforcements they began to suffer heavy casualties. These heavy casualties continued until November 1 when they broke through the Hindenburg line, they managed to advance all the way back to the Aisne river, something that neither France or Britain had been able to accomplish in the previous four years¹³. The offensive did not end until the Armistice on November 11, and by that date 26,000 Americans had been killed and another 100,000 had been wounded.¹⁴ The advancement involved miserable trench warfare as the French and Americans tried to push back the Germans. George E. Dyke, a captain of the 307th field artillery describes the miserable and terrifying conditions:

¹¹ London, Jack W. "Into the Hornet's Nest: in the opening days of the 1918 Meuse-Argonne Offensive a brigade of raw recruits braved a gantlet of German machine guns at Saint-Etienne, France" *Military History* 32.5 (2007): pg. 60. Print.

¹² Edward G., Lengel "One Man's Ambush" *Military History* 24.9 (2007): pg 52. Web

¹³ London, Jack W. "Into the Hornet's Nest: in the opening days of the 1918 Meuse-Argonne Offensive a brigade of raw recruits braved a gantlet of German machine guns at Saint-Etienne, France" *Military History* 32.5 (2007): pg. 60. Print, 63

¹⁴ Edward G., Lengel "One Man's Ambush" *Military History* 24.9 (2007): pg 53. Web.

“There were nights of cold and drenching rain; when men were so weary that they slept on their horses and the horses stumbled and staggered under their loads...Suddenly a ruddy flash and then another lit the heavens, bringing the trees and battered buildings into sharp relief against a lurid field. The heavens were filled with never-ceasing lightning that sent ugly screaming things on their way to destroy, while the air beat on our ears and the very earth rocked with the thunder of it.”¹⁵

One of the most memorable moments of the Meuse-Argonne offensive was the story of the lost battalion. It was a collection of nine companies, part of the 77th division that had managed to lose contact with the other companies and found themselves surrounded by German forces. As they were pinned down and attacked on all sides, they sustained heavy casualties. Without access to their supply lines, they also began to run out of food and water. They were rescued on October 8th as allied reinforcements managed to put enough pressure on the German forces which forced them to retreat.¹⁶ When news of this success reached the 306th Field Artillery it greatly increased the company’s morale. As Captain Dyke writes, “Everyone had a new eagerness to get on. Here was the first real feeling of victory that carried us on to the end.”¹⁷

Life as a soldier in the 307th field artillery was rarely this dramatic however. In fact, Silkworth’s diary encapsulates the dull, boring, and predictable daily routines that soldiers had to endure. This was especially present during the weeks on-board the S.S. Leviathan as the majority of his diary takes place outside the context of combat and the diary ends just before the Argonne offensive. Therefore Silkworth’s diary does not focus

¹⁵ Duell, Holland S., et al *The History of the 306th Field Artillery* New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920. Web. pg. 35 - 36

¹⁶ London, Jack W. “Into the Hornet’s Nest: in the opening days of the 1918 Meuse-Argonne Offensive a brigade of raw recruits braved a gantlet of German machine guns at Saint-Etienne, France” *Military History* 32.5 (2007): pg. 63. Print.

¹⁷ Duell, Holland S., et al *The History of the 306th Field Artillery* New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920. Web. pg. 37

on death and destruction but on the daily annoyances related to a soldier's way of life. When crammed into a train leaving Brest, Silkworth writes, "We did not ride first class but much worse. Rode in freight cars whose capacity was eight call for 40 men. So we were put forty in a car. It was very uncomfortable."¹⁸ In another anecdote, Silkworth writes that he had to carry something that weighed one hundred pounds up a hill to the caisson. He even sarcastically remarked "some job". These hardships were experienced by all soldiers and through these struggles they were able to bond.

The campaign of the 307th Field Artillery was often punctuated with periods of violence, even before their major offensive at Argonne. This contributed to a sense of dread that Silkworth's diary does not adequately capture. The numerous and incessant gas alarms were a reflection of this fear. The men were often so wound up that the slightest disturbance could turn into a false alarm. The "Gassing" of Battery A is one such incident. It occurred at night time in Nesle Wood, when a Gas guard, who had been pacing up and down, rang the gas alarm. Soldiers, suddenly awake, hastily put on their gas masks and then, annoyed at the obvious fake alarm, removed them five minutes later. The gas guard had apparently lost his nerves when he had walked over a dead cat. There had not even been an explosion.¹⁹ In his diary, Silkworth documents the various gas attacks and his annoyance at the fake alarms that disturb his sleep. Silkworth also writes about the various times when they were under fire including a moment when "the shrapnel and shells were flying and bursting all around".²⁰ Silkworth and his fellow soldiers were certainly exposed to the horrors of war before the Argonne offensive. On

¹⁸ Silkworth, Walter M. "Walter M. Silkworth Papers". Apr 22 1918 – Aug 17 1918. MS. Hofstra., Hempstead, NY. *Hofstra Special Collections*. Print.

¹⁹ Duell, Holland S., et al *The History of the 306th Field Artillery* New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920. Web. pg. 106

²⁰ Silkworth, Walter M. "Walter M. Silkworth Papers". Apr 22 1918 – Aug 17 1918. MS. Hofstra., Hempstead, NY. *Hofstra Special Collections*. Print.

September 2nd, he wrote, “Rode all night, passing thru many small towns, most of which were in ruins some houses only one wall standing.”²¹ Interestingly, although he feels free to criticize the more boring and laborious parts of the war, he never writes about his emotional reaction towards any of these, more horrific, events.

The campaign was not all doom and gloom, however as the soldier’s way of life afforded them a lot of downtime, especially on the weekends, and this downtime was often punctuated by relaxation and social activities. Silkworth and his friends went on a variety of different excursions during their two-month stint at Camp De-Souge. While training, soldiers were allowed to request leave on the weekends and they often visited the nearby city of Bourdeaux. On one Saturday, instead of travelling towards Boardeaux, Silkworth and his friends decided to visit the nearby town of St. Midard, he writes,

“Fred, Ed, and Myself put in for a pass for St Midard, a nearby town...we stopped for dinner at a very pleasant, and clean ??? house by the road. These houses are inspected by the military police and authorized by the government for the soldiers...We met fellow soldiers from our battery, Sgt. Finch, Walter Cabale, Bill Horner. We all went together, our eats were 3 fried eggs and a piece of ham, each a glass of milk with a pitcher full before us a large bowl of strawberries and ?, enough for the six of us to have three...Of course we could get plenty of wine or beer to drink and the soldiers are allowed light wine or beer in authorized places”²²

There were also more formal types of entertainment, created by the army command, in order to boost soldier morale. This played a significant role in providing the

²¹ Ibid

²² Silkworth, Walter M. “Walter M. Silkworth Papers”. Apr 22 1918 – Aug 17 1918. MS. Hofstra., Hempstead, NY. *Hofstra Special Collections*. Print.

soldiers with group activities. In order to escape their regimented lifestyle, soldiers participated in organized entertainment and sporting events to blow off steam, increase morale, and bond with their fellow servicemen. This had begun during their training at Camp Upton where they attended talent shows. A committee in charge of recreational activity was formed in October, 1917. The committee was divided by battery and each battery was under the responsibility of various commanding officers. Battery E, Silkworth's battery, was led by Sergeant Sheridan, Sergeant Le Voy, and Sergeant Hewitt. Sergeant Le Voy was killed in action on the 18th of August, 1918.²³

Baseball was one of the activities which played a heavy role in fostering sportsmanship and comradery amongst soldiers. The baseball season began at Camp Upton but was delayed due to numerous reasons including: a severe winter, a late spring, and numerous "false starts" which delayed the departure for France. In the opening game, the headquarters company beat the supply company 27 to 8 but a championship was never decided. Battery C, apparently, had a team of "above average quality" players who won many informal games. Playing baseball was not always possible or easy, and at times the soldiers had to improvise. When stationed in Souge, France, there was only one ball ground, which had to be shared by around ten thousand men forcing the soldiers to only play regimented games. In another anecdote, while waiting for long delayed transport at Noyen, France, many inter battery games were played. During this interval, it was headquarters company and Battery F which made the best showing.²⁴ Silkworth, himself, describes various ball games in his diary entries. It seems that many of the games, in which he participated, were informal judging by the inconsistent naming of

²³Duell, Holland S., et al *The History of the 306th Field Artillery* New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1920. Web. pg 103

²⁴ Ibid, 103

their teams. For example, on the 10th of May he participated in a game which involved “privates against non Coms” and on the 22nd of May there was a separate game involving “Buglers against Band”.²⁵

Friendships amongst soldiers were further solidified through their shared faith in God. The Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) played an important role in providing the soldiers with a community that fostered the forming of spiritual bonds. It promoted the ideal of fostering an ideal Christian community through shared spiritual, intellectual, and social pursuits. The YMCA insisted upon spreading the word of Jesus Christ through “personal evangelism” and “expert friendship”. The idea was to befriend those who had a close relationship with god in order to band together and “win the untransformed”.²⁶ The ultimate goal was to convert fellow soldiers into “true believers”. There was a tacit belief, however, that this conversion should occur organically through the formation of relationships and bonds with Christian role models. This was termed the “influence theory” and proposed that “one’s presence and service without the direct approach will do more than anything else to induce men to become consistent believers.”²⁷ To help foster Christian friendship the YMCA often insisted on the creation of bible study groups whose ultimate objective was to “form a nucleus, which, . . . shall preserve without necessity of superimposed leadership the best traditions of the company, and shall be a living witness to the attractiveness and wholesomeness of genuine Christian living”²⁸ With regards to these clubs, the YMCA also cautioned against “going

²⁵ Silkworth, Walter M. “Walter M. Silkworth Papers”. Apr 22 1918 – Aug 17 1918. MS. Hofstra., Hempstead, NY. *Hofstra Special Collections*. Print.

²⁶ Stewart, George and Wright, Henry *The Practice of Friendship: Studies in Personal Evangelism with Men of the United States Army and Navy in American Training Camps* New York: Association Press, 1918. Web.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 79

²⁸ *Ibid*, 72

through the motions” and avoiding Bible classes “devoid of the warmth, vigor, and beneficent influences of the Christian religion”²⁹

Silkworth was, himself, very religious. This is demonstrated by the fact that every Sunday, he would choose to avoid ‘fun’ activities and read his testament, talk to his chaplain, or attend a bible study class. On one Sunday, in particular, he was coaxed into pitching on Sunday, something he finds disagreeable, he writes, “So I asked Chaplain Thomas of it, if he considered it wrong to play. He said he had not considered it so, under the abnormal conditions that the boys should have some time to enlighten their minds from the daily grind.”³⁰ This quote is also another example of the laconic and euphemistic phrasing employed throughout the diary. Rather than refer to the ‘horrors of war’ Silkworth (or the Chaplain?) instead uses the blunt and sterilized phrase *daily grind* to describe his predicament. In another example, he questioned whether he would be forgiven for failing to attend church on the last Sunday aboard the U.S.S as he had several jobs to take care of. Not only did he take part in religious activities but he also tended to write letters, sending his hopes and prayers to those back home. On April 18th, 1918, a Sunday, he writes, “I am going to write a letter or so, one to mother and sister, and another to the dearest girl that I leave behind. Guess she is in church, today and hope she is praying for me.”³¹

Religion also had an enormous impact on Silkworth’s friendships as most of the guys he hung out with shared similar religious convictions. This allowed them to attend church events together and religious clubs. Church events often included communion, which was something that Silkworth made a priority of attending. One religious club,

²⁹ Ibid, 59

³⁰ Silkworth, Walter M. “Walter M. Silkworth Papers”. Apr 22 1918 – Aug 17 1918. MS. Hofstra., Hempstead, NY. *Hofstra Special Collections*. Print.

³¹ Ibid

referred to often in Silkworth's diary, was known as the "Triangle Club". It was a bible discussion club, organized by the YMCA, which often met on Wednesdays and Sundays. It was composed of Silkworth and many of his friends including Bill Whitman, Edward Payne referred to as Ed, and a Private by the name of Fred Logan. Here they typically discussed biblical passages but often brought up more pressing issues. For example, on the 4th of June, 1918, the group addressed the topic "what of the girl I leave behind". Silkworth thought that it was a very fruitful discussion and everyone concluded that soldiers should always do their duties as faithful citizens of their country despite the pain of leaving loved ones back home.³²

On the topic of male friendship, D.H. Lawrence wrote, "But my idea is...every man should have a mate – like most of us had in the war."³³ The ideal of comradeship did not end after the Great War. This war forever transformed the social and political landscape of American life as men returned home and assimilated back into the society in which they left. These men had been forever transformed by the horrors of war and now had to cope with returning to civilian life. Walter Silkworth returned to marry his girlfriend, Marion Ryon, and they had two children.³⁴ It is safe to say that he never forgot the bonds that he forged throughout his campaign. Their common struggle, the activities that they enjoyed together, and their common religious bonds all contributed to the formation of friendships that made the war easier to survive, both physically and psychologically.

³² Silkworth, Walter M. "Walter M. Silkworth Papers". Apr 22 1918 – Aug 17 1918. MS. Hofstra., Hempstead, NY. *Hofstra Special Collections*. Print.

³³ Cole, Sarah *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Web. pg 185

³⁴ "Walter Milton Silkworth" *Ancestry.com* http://www.ancestry.com/genealogy/records/walter-milton-silkworth_136374564

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