



# An American on the Western Front

Patrick Gregory on the writing of this book with Elizabeth Nurser, about Arthur Kimber's experiences as a US serviceman in World War I (book cover left)

Half smiling, half self-conscious, proud in his new flying officer's uniform, a 21-year old stared out at me. His level gaze cut through the century which separated us.

Arthur Clifford Kimber was a young American, a student at Stanford University who served his country in the First World War and was killed in action a few weeks before its end. That much I knew. That and the fact that he had carried his country's first official government flag to the Western Front when his country joined the war in 1917.

A partial account of the young man's mission, a slim volume called *The First Flag*, had appeared back in 1920. It and a large and untouched cache of his letters and photographs formed part of my wife's family history, a legacy and a subject which would pop up from time to time. But little more than that. The young servicemen's remaining possessions had been reduced over the years to a few boxes, ones which had been moved from pillar to post, stored in basements, attics and garages in America and Britain: diligently kept but largely overlooked.

Yet as the centennial of America's war loomed the keeper of those boxes, my American mother-in-law Elizabeth Nurser and I decided that

the time had come to bring them out. Elizabeth has lived in Britain for more than 60 years, arriving in Cambridge back in the 1950s as a Fulbright scholar: a native of California and the niece of the young serviceman in question. For her it was unfinished business.

We both knew that what Kimber had left behind was valuable from an historical point of view: valuable because the letters and photographs formed such a complete archive, and noteworthy given their historical context.

But when we began to go through the letters, transferring them into an editable format and proofing them, what surprised us was the clarity of the voice coming through and how engaging the letters were. Here was a young man in the round, someone with whom we could connect. His writing gave us a window through which we might look at his time: to follow his story but also see the wider picture, to live through moments in history big and small.

The letters were written at a rate of two or three per week every week over an 18-month period - a period which almost exactly mirrored that of America's participation in the war - and Kimber had asked that each

letter he posted back to his home in California be typed up by his mother and two brothers. He was conscious of wanting to capture his time in France as a complete memoir, one he hoped to be able to reflect on himself in later years. It was an ambition he was never able to realize of course, his life cut short as it was; which was where we came in all these years later.

His letters begin in the spring-time sunshine of California, April 1917, and end in the rain of north-eastern France in the autumn of 1918. They chart Kimber's progress from when he boards the first of his many trains carrying his precious cargo of the flag to the front, days after a large and impressive leave-taking ceremony in San Francisco. We go with him to New York and a parade down the packed streets of Fifth Avenue. We follow him by armed steamship across the Atlantic and travel with him through England and France, his first impressions of war-time London and Paris, onwards to the flag's presentation on the front south of Verdun.

With these ceremonies out of the way, we get down to the business of the war itself and it is here that we really get to know Kimber. He serves first as an *ambulancier* - an Ameri-

**Top right: Official presentation of the American flag to the French troops - June 1917**

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**Middle right: Clifford at Cazaux gunnery school, March 1918**

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**Bottom right: Leave-taking ceremony, San Francisco Civic Auditorium, 24 April 1917**  
(THE FIRST FLAG, © KIMBER LITERARY ESTATE)

can ambulance driver seconded to French military forces – and then as an early recruit to the US Air Service, training and flying as a fighter pilot with both American and the French Air Services. Yet in order to allow the modern reader an opportunity to follow his story properly, we felt it necessary to build a narrative shell around his letters, a narrative which would put him in his proper historical context. We needed to combine his personal story with the bigger picture: the wider panorama of America's war.

It involved two years of writing and research, of proofing and editing, of picture research and indexing, libraries and online archives constantly accessed, otherwise mundane details double-checked. Chapters went back and forth between son-in-law and mother-in-law. What I wrote, Elizabeth edited and fired back, with the keen attention to detail born of 50 years in publishing.

And honestly? Yes, on occasion there was haggling fit to test the most robust of writing partnerships, let alone an in-law one. But tellers of old music-hall jokes might just be disappointed: we emerged intact and happier with a century-year old story finally told.

I only hope the young man who still stares out at me from 1917 thinks we've done him justice. ★

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