

Forbes Rickard Jr.--a Tale of Gallant Courage

By: Nick DaRosa

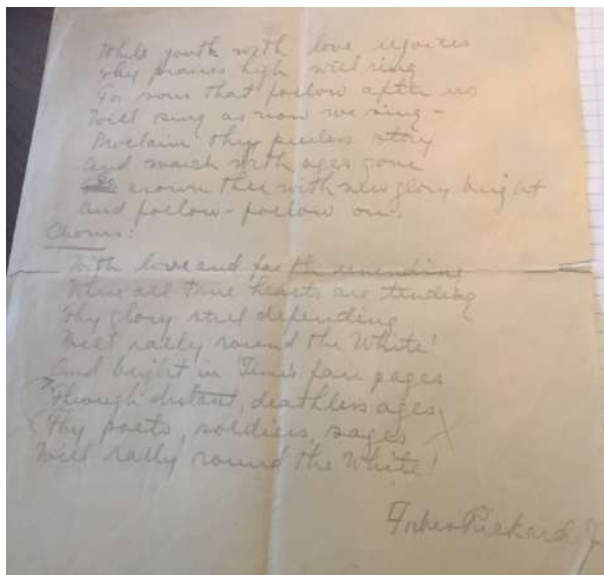


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Graduating valedictorian of the class of 1917 at Bowdoin College and serving as a second lieutenant, Forbes Rickard Jr. appeared to be a very distinguished person who I could choose to research; however, I chose this veteran in particular for a number of reasons. First, he went to Bowdoin College, so I immediately had a connection, having lived in Brunswick my entire life. His circumstances were also quite interesting to me--he was first in his class and had a full scholarship to pursue English literature at Harvard University, one of the most prestigious schools in the world, but turned it down to enter the war. Despite his unique situation, he seemed to have next to no information on him. After digging through archives to find a book dedicated to him, contacting the Pejepscot Historical Society and the Bowdoin Library, I was able to uncover

Forbes Rickard Jr.'s story so that his miraculous tale would be rightfully appreciated, and so that his significant contributions would not go unnoticed.

Forbes Rickard Jr. was born on February 13, 1896, making him 21 years old when he enlisted in the war.² He was born in Denver, Colorado to a mining engineer named Forbes Rickard and his wife, Annie Mechling, who unfortunately died when Forbes Rickard Jr. was only two years old.³ He also had a younger brother named Barclay who was born on June 3, 1897. He also ended up enlisting in the war, but did not serve alongside Forbes Rickard Jr. and survived, living well beyond World War I.⁴ After their mother's death, their father remarried a woman from Bangor, Maine named Helen Woodhull Hazlett.⁴ Rickard Jr. was a clever boy. His family described him as "showing... great promise" and noted that "his mind was however always mature beyond his years." His biggest passions were books, nature, "real" people (as he used to say), and was a prolific poet. He went to public high school in Denver until 1911, but

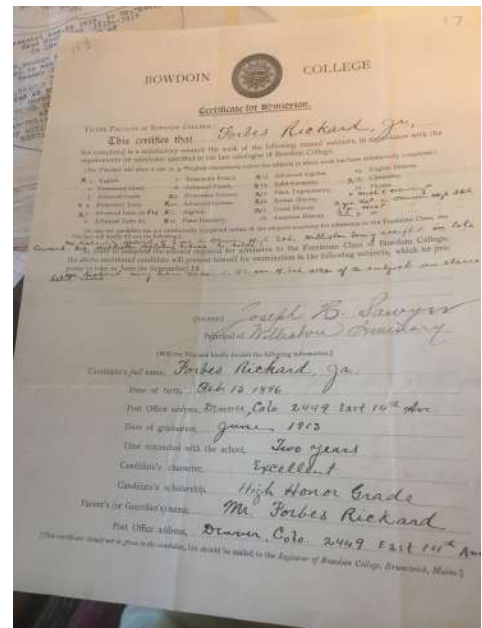


One of his many original handwritten poems⁵

was sent to Williston Seminary, a preparatory school in Easthampton, Massachusetts, graduating in 1913. Rickard Jr. was then accepted to Bowdoin College where he graduated first in his class. He was quite involved in the Bowdoin community. He was a high jumper on the class and varsity track team for several years; a member of Alpha Delta Phi, Phi Beta Kappa, the Ibis—a club that came into

fruition because of news that John London was

going to give a talk at Bowdoin—and the Masque and Gown; Art editor of Bowdoin’s yearbook, *The Bugle*; editor of the *Quill*--Bowdoin’s literary monthly journal--and was the class poet his senior year. He received a number of awards including the Achorn Prize and the Goodwin Prize, and on top of that, he received the Richard Woodhull Scholarship for four years the Longfellow scholarship to pursue English literature after graduation.⁶ Furthermore, Bowdoin College has an award in his honor--the Forbes Rickard Poetry Prize--which is given out each year by the English Department.⁷ Rickard Jr. had a full scholarship to Harvard University where he would continue to pursue literature; however, he never made it due to his entry into World War I.⁸ His family recalls that Forbes’ time at Bowdoin was the best time of his life, and he was fortunate enough to graduate as valedictorian in 1917 just a few weeks before being sent off for war.

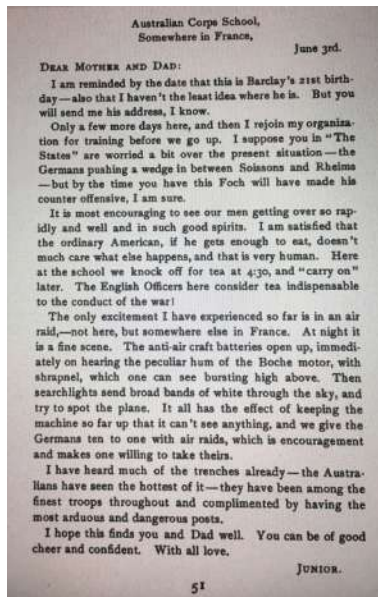


During his senior year at Bowdoin, he joined the reserve officers’ training school; however, he was not recommended to go to continue training at Plattsburgh, New York. This was particularly disappointing for someone who was eager to be on the forefront “not from curiosity, but with the feeling that it is an opportunity to fight and suffer for good such as comes seldom to ordinary lives.” In July of 1917, he decided to take an examination for commission and luckily passed and was allowed to go to Plattsburgh. After becoming a second lieutenant for Company B of the 59th Infantry in November of 1917, he was sent to Camp

Certificate of Admission in Bowdoin College⁹

Greene in Charlotte, North Carolina. It was here where he met one of his soon to be closest friends during the war--1st Lieutenant Lewis B. Ridley. Once his training there was complete in April of 1918, a month before he set sail for France, he moved yet again to the Officers' Training School at Fort Sill in Oklahoma.¹⁰ On April 29, 1918, he and the remainder of the 59th Infantry set sail to France, arriving in Calais on May 12, 1918.¹¹ In one of his many letters to his parents during his time at war, he details his life at the first location he and his men were billeted. He notes that he is living in "a beautiful quaint old town...This district is perfectly beautiful--rich green hills, with brooks and valleys--red-tiled roofs looking so cozy and safe--of course, no part of France is absolutely safe now." He claims that he thrives off of an extremely busy schedule where he wakes up "at 5:30 a.m. every day and get through Company duties in time for supper with the evening for lectures by the Major and censoring mail." He also writes about his determination to improve his French and of his experience when he was at the Australian Corps School studying the Lewis Gun. Additionally, he observes the fact that life seems so tranquil where he is, but he realizes by the sound of gunshots that chaos is deathly close and inevitable. He states, "Here is all peace and sunshine on green valley except for the distant guns. It won't be long, of course, before I am in the line with the rest of my regiment..." The 59th Infantry was involved in the Aisne-Marne campaign, the Battle of St. Mihiel, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, and were involved in Lorraine and Champagne; however, it is unknown as to which of these Forbes Rickard Jr. actually fought in. In addition to being involved with the Australian war effort, Rickard Jr. was surrounded by many British fighters, and was perplexed by their tradition of pausing the war effort for tea. He notes, "Here at the school we knock off for tea at 4:30, and 'carry on' later. The English Officers here consider tea indispensable to the conduct of the

war!”¹² In that same later, he describes the enemy air raid that he experienced at night. He



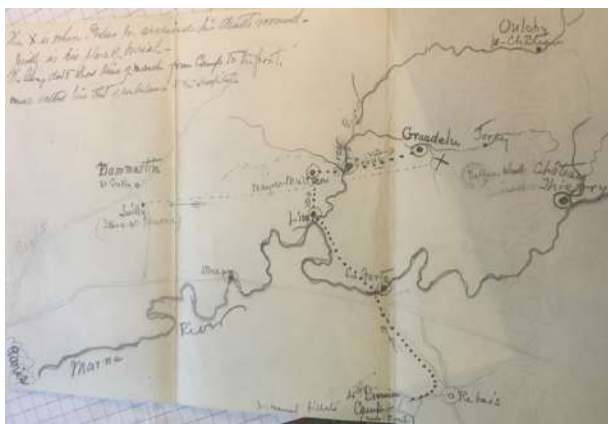
One of his letters he wrote to his parents detailing the air raid¹

describes, “The anti-aircraft batteries open up, immediately on hearing the peculiar hum of the Boche motor, with shrapnel, which one can see bursting high above. Then searchlights send broad bands of white throughout the sky, and try to spot the plane.” During Rickard Jr.’s time at war, he became Billeting Officer for the Battalion, which consisted of going ahead and finding billets for all 1000 men in the battalion. He also had the honor of being a Battalion Intelligence Officer, which consisted

of him having thirty men and training them to be scouts, observers, and snipers. Unfortunately, he was let go from his position as Battalion Intelligence Officer because a

French officer became available to do so, but Rickard Jr. wasn’t too sad about it, claiming that he was “glad to get back to the Company with work that I know about and like. I was more or less up in the air trying to train snipers and scouts.” On July second, 1918, Rickard Jr. wrote a letter to his parents, and it is a clear demonstration of the sacrifices that soldiers make when they enlist in the war effort. He states, “We had wild strawberries at our Officers’ Mess yesterday and they were fine--also lettuce and fresh cheese. All these little things are luxuries now, for the old standbys such as pie, cake, and ice cream are unknown.”¹⁴ This shows how soldiers did not have many of the luxuries civilians take for granted during World War I, and that even foods as mundane as lettuce and certain fruits were considered luxuries.

Unfortunately, Forbes Rickard Jr. did not make it through the entirety of the war, dying due to a shrapnel wound in the Second Battle of the Marne.¹⁵ Thanks to letters that detail the incident of Rickard Jr. dying from fellow soldiers who fought alongside him paint quite a clear image of this unfortunate death. The Second Battle of Marne served as a turning point in the war. Although the Germans' initial offensive hurt the Allied troops, the Allied eventually earned a decisive victory.¹⁶ Lieutenant Fred G. Coffield thoroughly describes the events leading up to



Original handwritten map of his regiment's movements leading up to his death (the X)¹⁷

Rickard Jr.'s death, stating how on the morning of July 18, they were moving between French towns such as Lizy and Jagneu, but upon reaching a hill, German balloons spotted them and their artillery opened fire on them. This caused Rickard Jr. and his men to dig individual holes for protection, which they would end up doing each of the many times they would advance.

By night, the forces were nearing the peak of the hill, but their artillery hadn't arrived yet. At the same time, they were already suffering casualties from poisonous gas from explosives. Upon reaching the top of the hill, German artillery put over a powerful barrage on the Allies, which marked the beginning of the end for Forbes Rickard Jr.¹⁸ Private Clarence B. Stevens wrote a heartfelt letter to Rickard Jr.'s parents after his death, and comprehensively described the sense of their son's death. He states, "I was standing almost directly in front of him when a shell exploded. I heard the shrapnel whiz past my ear: I looked around to see Captain Nicholson fall...then I saw Lt. Rickard grab his stomach and fall to his

knees. He rose again and came a few feet to where the sergeant was. He said, ‘Sergeant, take charge of the platoon’; that was all--he fell; he was in great pain. A few moments later, he was taken to the evacuation hospital--I heard that he had died there.”²⁰ Unfortunately, Forbes Rickard Jr. had no children nor a wife, so he does not have any descendants. His brother Barclay kept the family name alive, living up to 1976.²¹ Despite this, Forbes Rickard Jr.’s death was one that most certainly did not go unnoticed. He had a quite lengthy obituary that noted many of his impressive achievements in his short but very impactful life. Now, he is buried at the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery and Memorial in Belleau, France.²²



*Forbes Rickard Jr. 's Obituary*¹⁹

Notes

- ¹ "Bowdoin Library." *Bowdoin Library*. Accessed June 11, 2018 <https://library.bowdoin.edu/>.
- ² "1900 Maine census." Ancestry. Accessed June 7, 2018. <https://www.ancestry.com/>.
- ³ Rickard, F. (1919). *Songs with Tears*. Portland, Me.: Mosher Press.
- ⁴ "Thomas Barclay Rickard" Ancestry. Accessed June 7, 2018. <https://www.ancestry.com/>.
- ⁵ "Bowdoin Library." Bowdoin Library.
- ⁶ Rickard, F. *Songs with Tears*.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ "Bowdoin Library." Bowdoin Library.
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ "Bowdoin Library." Bowdoin Library.
- ¹² Rickard, F. *Songs with Tears*.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Boyd, Laura. "The Aisne-Marne Campaign," The National Museum of the United States Army | Army Art Collection. Accessed June 11, 2018. <http://thenmusa.org/nmusa-blog.php?d=7>.
- ¹⁷ "Bowdoin Library." Bowdoin Library.
- ¹⁸ Rickard, F. *Songs with Tears*.
- ¹⁹ "Bowdoin Library." Bowdoin Library.
- ²⁰ Rickard, F. *Songs with Tears*.
- ²¹ "Thomas Barclay Rickard" Ancestry.com
- ²² "Forbes Rickard (1896-1918) - Find A Grave." Findagrave. Accessed June 11, 2018. <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/55948239>.

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