

Biography of Ralph Moan by Cameron Daly

World War I (also lasted from 1914–1918. The Franz Ferdinand, heir apparent to the throne, was assassinated by an extremist who was a member of a group. This event was the cause of the Great War can be MAIN, meaning Militarism, Nationalism. The war engulfed



known as the Great War) war began when Archduke to the Austro–Hungarian Gavrilo Princip, a Serbian of the Black Hand terrorist trigger factor, but the broad summarized with the acronym Alliances, Imperialism, the entirety of the European

continent throughout all four years, but it was not until 1917 when the United States formally entered the war. A major constituent of the 26th Division were Mainers, including one Mainer named Ralph Thomas Moan. This Mainer in particular was selected because he was one of a few if not the only Mainer in the Great War to be awarded both the French *Croix de Guerre* medal as well as the Distinguished Service Cross. From these decorations, it is apparent that he had a very significant role on the battlefield and truly deserves to be recognized in history. Therefore, this biography has been written in order to recognize the service and bravery of Ralph Moan, a Mainer who deserves more credit than he currently has.

Ralph Thomas Moan was born on July 15th, 1897 to Elbridge Moan (1866–1916) and Florence Ingalls Moan (1869–1954). Ralph was the fifth and final child in the family. He had three sisters: Etta (1886–1972), Jane (1889–1956), and Ada (1890–1955); and he had a brother, Leroy (1893–1975).¹ The family grew up in East Machias, Maine, in a lower middle class

household. Elbridge was a local barber and member of the Freemasons and Odd Fellows, and Florence was a housewife. Tragedy struck in 1916 when Elbridge suddenly passed away from unknown causes. In order to help provide for their mother, most of the kids got jobs: Etta was a seamstress, Jane was a clerk, and Ada was a teacher.² In 1916, Ralph had just graduated from

TOWN or CITY New Haven, Conn. DATE 2/28/17.
FULL NAME Ralph Thomas Moan.
POST OFFICE ADDRESS 89 Saltonstall Ave.
(Street and Number or Rural Free Delivery Number)
1. What is your present Trade, Occupation or Profession? Shipping Clerk. 11 99
2. Have you experience in any other Trade, Occupation or Profession? Valuation Inspector for State of
(State which.) Maine.
3. What is your Age? 20 yrs. Height? 5ft 11 inches. Weight? 136 lbs.
4. Are you Married? Single? or Widower? Single.
5. How many persons are dependent on you for support? My Mother.
6. Are you a citizen of the United States? yes By Birth.
7. If not a citizen of the United States have you taken out your first papers?
8. If not a citizen of the United States, what is your nationality?
9. Have you ever done any Military or Naval Service in this or any other Country? None.
Where? _____ How Long? _____ What Branch? _____ Rank? _____
10. Have you any serious physical disability? No If so, name it: _____
11. Can you do any of the following: Ride a horse? No Handle a team? No Drive an automobile? No
Ride a motorcycle? No Understand telegraphy? No Operate a wireless? No Any experience with
a steam engine? No Any experience with electrical machinery? No Handle a boat, power or sail? No
Any experience in simple coastwise navigation? No Any experience with High Speed Marine Gasoline
Engines? No Are you a good swimmer? Fairly good.

Machias Memorial High School. He was briefly employed as a civil engineer in Waterville before the United States entered the war. He did not pursue a collegiate education. Then, on April 6, 1917, Congress granted President Woodrow

Wilson's request to declare war on Germany. On April 27, Moan enlisted into the Maine National Guard, Company K, 2nd Regiment of Infantry. A very upbeat person, he entered into the service because he pursued adventure and travel. On a more solemn note, it was also very likely he entered the war to keep his mind off his father's death which was only a year before.³

After months of guard duty, Moan's unit left for Westfield, Massachusetts, where it was redesignated as the 103rd Infantry Regiment, 26th Division (the 'Yankee Division'). From there, the Yankee Division was sent briefly to New Jersey, then to Halifax, Nova Scotia, and then again to Europe. Initially, Moan was not accustomed to the ship and how it swayed back forth, especially when eating, saying how he would "grab the table to steady it," but eventually, "[he]

was enjoying [himself] heaps [of food].” On the way to Europe, Moan was disappointed in the “uneventfulness” of the voyage, noting how he only saw one U-boat while en route to Liverpool. The unit arrived in Liverpool, England, on October 9, 1917. They were then put on the London Northwestern Railway that was headed to Southampton, where they would be trained and stationed. This was the first time for many Mainers and New Englanders to travel abroad and experience the



outside world. After arriving in Southampton, Moan and his close friend Foster Tuell went to the city to learn how to spend their money in such a foreign place, as well as trying to “see what the English girls were like.” Moan and Tuell, as it turned out, did most of their activities together. Moan wrote how they would often go to the pawn shop looking for enticing deals on products, and one time Tuell was able to buy a high quality gold watch and ring. Furthermore, they would often visit the opera house together. On October 13th, Moan recalled how they saw “The Mysteries of New York,” which starred the famous American actor Douglas Fairbanks. The next day, they decided to visit the Tudor house which was once the home of the English king Henry VIII. After this, however, the Division started to make preparations to head for France aboard the “Anthrem,” a small cattle ship. According to Moan, the ship was very unstable, and he was in constant fear of the ship sinking. They arrived in Le Havre, France in the morning of October 17th, and they were the first full American division to arrive in France. They were then transported to a place near the firing line, which turned out to be Le Fol Le Grand. While there,

the soldiers did not have much money, so they were often forced to pawn their belongings (often for tobacco and chocolate, as Moan described) and even build their own barracks. In addition to that, they still had to undergo rigorous training, which usually entailed fourteen miles of walking per day. During his time at Le Fol Le Grand, he was not in his best of health, for he was hospitalized with tonsillitis for three weeks at one point. In order to make light of the war, he formed a singing quartet with Tuell, Corporal Leo Brown, and Private Royce while here. After their stay, they headed for Boise-sur-Meuse and arrived on December 15th, where they helped the 101st Engineers build an American hospital. Moan was quite pleased to learn that he would do little back-breaking work since he was put on “provo guard.” On Christmas, the quartet sang many songs in many places and had a large feast, consisting of turkey, pudding, nuts, and potatoes. That night a big party was thrown and there was much dancing. Moan was saddened to learn that the Red Cross nurses who were present were reserved for the officers, while he and the other “poor devils” had to dance with each other. On January 3rd, 1918, he was promoted to mechanic of his company due to the prior mechanic being “busted on account of drunken disorder.” One might consider this a late Christmas present. Although he received a pay raise, his job was more difficult. He now was responsible for carrying messages back and forth between units, dubbed a ‘runner.’ On January 22nd, it was announced that in two weeks, the Division would head for the trenches. Because Company K had been on detached service for the past five weeks, they were behind on their drill, so they had to drill “mighty hard” in order to prepare. On February 6th, they left Boise-sur-Meuse and marched back to Le Fol Le Grand where they boarded boxcars. The next day they arrived in Soissons. Moan and Tuell were awestruck when they saw the condition of some of the French villages and how the Germans “bombarded

practically everything to pieces.” From there they marched to Vregny, now only twelve miles behind the front line trenches. Moan was observant to the fact that the French never took



souvenirs after battle, and he wondered why.

Nevertheless, he still took souvenirs for himself, including wood and a washer from a downed German plane, and “the French revolver that killed the Boche aviator.” Moan wrote how he and his friend Tuell would watch the dogfights of Allied and German planes while in Soissons, amazed by the new technology. He liked to “stay out to see the fun.” On one instance he took special note of how the Germans outsmarted the French. On February 15th, one German plane flew up to the clouds while another attracted all

the attention. After all of the French were focused on that one fighter, “Mr. Boche” came down and bombed the French observation balloon, causing both pilots to jump and parachute to the ground. Later that day, Moan decided to relax a little bit, and he visited an old French castle. He was appalled to find that the Germans had raided the tombs of the deceased in order to steal their gold jewelry. Two days later, he and another friend were laying on a hill talking, watching a dogfight, when all of a sudden one German plane was downed only half a mile away. He and his friend ran to the plane to find two very much dead pilots who were in a “pulp, jelly form.” The two pilots were a Major and a Lieutenant who “had very important papers,” so Moan was proud of the event. Next, on February 19th, they were ordered to go to Hill #60, which was only about

nine miles from the front lines. They were stationed in a massive limestone cave which held upwards to 2000 men. However, the cave was once occupied by the Germans, so nobody could touch anything “for fear of blowing up the whole cave.” Company K was tasked with constructing communication trenches to the front line trenches, which was extremely dangerous work, according to Moan. Due to his rank, he was responsible for collecting casualties, known as a ‘litter-bearer,’ even if it meant he had to run miles at a time back and forth between the fighting and the hospitals. On February 28th, Companies K and L were digging trenches alongside each other, and the Germans were firing at the area. Intending to hit Company K, they were inaccurate and hit Company L instead, killing one Private, wounding another, and leaving a Lieutenant without a chunk of skin on his face. The next day, after beginning to feel not well (due to “the sores,”) Moan decided to head for a French hospital, so he turned around and began to run. While he was running, he heard a shell soar right past his head, landing within thirty feet of him. Moan’s diary entries would have stopped there had the shell blown up as it was supposed to. Noticing how the hospital was beginning to get bombed, he quickly came to the conclusion that he was not sick anymore, and did not need any help. However, his symptoms continued, and the Captain noticed, so he ordered Moan to be evaluated. After reaching a doctor, he learned that he had bacon poisoning. On the way back to the camp, Moan was walking with Messenger Craig and Lieutenant Newell when they heard machine gun fire in close proximity. They ran into the communication trench to learn that the fire was from an American trench firing at Germans across the way, the three being caught in crossfire. After March 6th, they went from the second line trench to the front line trench via the communication trench “Tiger.” The next morning, the trenches were hit with an artillery barrage, waking Moan early in the morning. In his diary, he

counted at least seventy shells a minute. He recalled how he and his company were attacked for two days straight with high explosive and poisonous gas shells. In order to put the experience in perspective, he said that “the man who said he was not scared is a liar.” From this point, Moan’s



carefree attitude began to vanish. During his time on the front line, Moan was exposed to an extreme amount of machine gun fire, bombs blowing up no more than thirty yards away from him, and laborious expeditions carrying wounded men many miles away to hospitals. On March 10th, they left for Hill #60 once again at 13:30 and arrived at 17:30. After assessing the Company, only one had been wounded while they had killed at least forty Germans. Two nights later, the Germans attempted to raid them. However, they were aware of their presence and managed to kill the twenty

Germans. Moan recorded the event in his diary, saying, “One man had his head blown off and it made a ghastly sight, suspended in the barbed wire.” His company was relieved of their duties the next day and fell back. Moan made one last entry on March 30th, saying he “has decided to cut this diary out right now ... from now on, all we see is HELL.” This entry indicated that his outlook on the war had changed. Earlier on, he would happily watch dogfights in the sky while talking with his friends. He did not really understand the true horror of war yet. It was not until March 6th where he was actually shown what war was like. Furthermore, Moan and his regiment relieved the 2nd Division in the Battle of Belleau Wood. He was also part of the Aisne–Marne

offensive, helping liberate the village of Torcy from German occupation. Most importantly, Moan and his division, alongside 36 other divisions, fought in the Meuse–Argonne offensive, where he was a runner. During this battle in particular, such runners were being targeted and killed in astonishing numbers. His luck unfortunately ran out, and eventually he was hit by an exploding artillery shell and was tossed twenty feet, receiving severe nerve damage. He was concussed and woke up in a hospital. Moan was then sent to Grenoble in the French Alps to recover. During this time, the Armistice would be signed, and he would not see fighting again. However, he did rejoin the regiment after he recovered. He was sent home as a corporal, and he received the French *Croix de Guerre* (awarded by General Henri Petain) and Distinguished Service Cross (awarded by General John Pershing), the latter of which being the second highest war decoration that can be awarded in the United States, second only to the Medal of Honor.⁴ The following was the citation that accompanied the award:



The President of the United States of America, authorized by Act of Congress, 9 July 1918, takes pleasure in presenting the Distinguished Service Cross to Mechanic Ralph T. Moan, United States Army, for extraordinary heroism in action while serving with Company K, 103d Infantry Regiment, 26th Division, A.E.F., near Riaville, France, 26 September 1918. Mechanic Moan, who was detailed as a runner, made several trips

carrying important messages across terrain swept by constant fire from machine-guns, snipers, trench mortars, and artillery. His disregard for personal safety and devotion to duty in the prompt delivery of messages contributed greatly to the success of the action. (War Department, General Orders No. 21, 1919)⁵

In 1919, Moan was honorably discharged from the American Expeditionary Forces. After the war, Moan pursued his passion of singing (a baritone) and often performed in vaudeville shows across the country.⁶ Initially, he returned home to his widowed mother, but in 1921, he

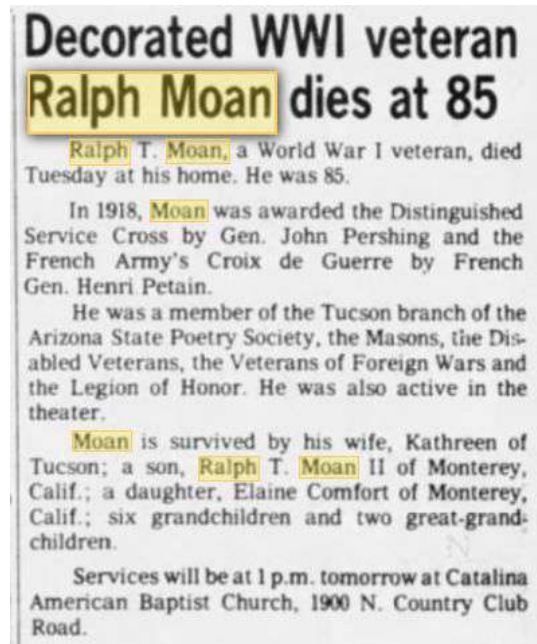


married Alice Phelan. They had a daughter, Elaine, in 1922, and then they had a son, Ralph Jr., in 1923. However, they later divorced, and Moan married Kathreen (often referred to as Kathleen) Van Brunt in the year 1929.⁷ During this time Moan worked as a shipping clerk for the Silver Manufacturing Company. After Moan married Kathleen, they moved to Manhattan where she would become an artist, and he would become an art student, but in a few years they would soon

relocate again.⁸ Their next residence was in Middletown, New Jersey, where they bought a home. They would settle down there for about 20 years before they moved to Tucson, Arizona.⁹ Van Brunt became an Army artist, and Moan became an Air Force administrator. While in Arizona, Moan entered the Armed Forces Writers' League and the Arizona State Poetry Society. He was also a member of the Freemasons, like his father. Kathreen and Ralph would remain in

Arizona until their deaths. Ralph Moan died on August 3rd, 1982 (age 85) in New Jersey. His body was buried at Evergreen Memorial Park in Tucson.¹⁰

Moan was survived by both of his children and his wife. After his death, she made Moan's WWI diary entries available to the public. His diary, entitled "My life 'over there,'" thoroughly describes his experience in the war. She would end up passing away in 1992. Elaine, his first child, would pass away in 1998. Ralph Moan Jr., his son, went on to marry Patricia Morey Hall and have five total children with her. He would pass away in 2000, leaving no more surviving immediate family of Ralph Moan.¹¹



Endnotes

1. "Ralph Thomas Moan," *Find A Grave*, May 20, 2011, accessed May 21, 2018, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/70119454/ralph-thomas-moan>.
2. "1910 United States Federal Census for Ralph T Moan," *Ancestry*, accessed May 20, 2018.
3. Jonathan Bratten, "An Unlikely War Poet: A Doughboy from Maine," *Army History*, April 28, 2017, accessed May 22, 2018, <https://armyhistory.org/an-unlikely-war-poet-a-doughboy-from-maine/>.
4. Ralph Moan, "My Life 'Over There,'" *US Army Heritage and Education Center*, accessed June 7, 2018, <http://cdm16635.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16635coll14/id/56383/rec/2>.
5. Ibid.
6. Jonathan Bratten, "An Unlikely War Poet."
7. "Ralph Thomas Moan."
8. "1930 United States Federal Census for Ralph T Moan," *Ancestry*, accessed May 20, 2018.
9. "1940 United States Federal Census for Ralph T Moan," *Ancestry*, accessed May 20, 2018.
10. Jonathan Bratten, "An Unlikely War Poet."
11. "Ralph Thomas Moan."

Bibliography

- “1910 United States Federal Census for Ralph T Moan.” *Ancestry*. Accessed May 20, 2018.
- “1930 United States Federal Census for Ralph T Moan.” *Ancestry*. Accessed May 20, 2018.
- “1940 United States Federal Census for Ralph T Moan.” *Ancestry*. Accessed May 20, 2018.
- “Arizona Daily Star.” *Newspapers*. August 5, 1982. Accessed June 11, 2018.
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/163699198/?terms=Ralph%2BMoan>.
- Bratten, Jonathan. “An Unlikely War Poet: A Doughboy from Maine.” *Army History*. April 28, 2017. Accessed May 22, 2018.
<https://armyhistory.org/an-unlikely-war-poet-a-doughboy-from-maine/>.
- “Connecticut, Military Census, 1917.” *Ancestry*. Accessed June 9, 2018.
https://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?indiv=1&dbid=2277&h=150856&tid=&pid=&usePUB=true&_phsrc=ksm47&_phstart=successSource.
- Moan, Ralph. “My Life ‘Over There.’” *US Army Heritage and Education Center*. Accessed June 7, 2018.
<http://cdm16635.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/singleitem/collection/p16635coll14/id/56383/rec/2>.
- “Ralph Thomas Moan.” *Find A Grave*. May 20, 2011. Accessed May 22, 2018.
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/70119454/ralph-thomas-moan>.