

AVIATOR WILLIAM A. HOEVELER, JR., IN WWI

By Niles James Laughner



**“SWALLOW HARD,
WILLIAM A. HOEVELER,
AND PLUG ON. THE
WAR IS NOT BEING
FOUGHT FOR YOU!” –
HOEVELER WRITING
TO FAMILY WHILE
TRYING TO REASSURE
HIMSELF, 1918**



Sergeant William Hoeveler in training,
Miami, Florida, 1917.

The country was raucous with Victory Parades—a cacophony of sirens, horns, bells, cheering, screaming, tears, and John Philip Sousa’s best music blaring from the local band. All was not well, however, in the America of 1918. Victory had been achieved in Europe, and the United States military had proved itself to the world, but the silent costs of the Great War were only beginning to be tabulated. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) was not available as a diagnosis for the shocking set of symptoms displayed by so many men coming home from foreign combat, yet it was a real growing problem.

Like a latent viral infection, the disease carried by many U.S. troops did not manifest itself for months or years. Lieutenant William

Hoeveler, a Pittsburgh native and WWI pilot in the fledgling field of aviation, carried the effects of countless horrors he experienced throughout his military service for almost 20 years until they claimed him. As a pilot with the French 66th Escadrille, he was credited with shooting down at least one German plane. As a veteran seeking a new path during peacetime, he was far less successful. Hoeveler’s tale is like many others: a regular man changed by combat, the minutia of history that comes and goes like the tide, almost unnoticed—yet it rings with the humanity and value with which each soldier’s life is imbued.

William Hoeveler’s family was an American success story. When his ancestors emigrated from Europe in the early 1800s, the

rapidly industrializing United States allowed them to reach amazing heights. William Sr. owned a large moving and storage company in Pittsburgh and served on the Pittsburgh City Council before his death in 1914. The Hoeveler family lived in Oakland, at that time one of the wealthiest parts of Pittsburgh. Bill’s sister was sent to France with the YMCA under the direct supervision of Mrs. Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. His brother served as an important member of the American Protective League. All three children were well educated with writing skills beyond many of their peers.

So it is perhaps surprising that Bill’s first mention in the newspapers was a 1910 *Pittsburgh Press* police blotter entry: at age 16, he ran a horse and cart off the road while

driving a car at night, without a license, without lights, and on the wrong side of Grant Boulevard. He was arrested and the horse had to be shot by the police due to injuries. No further mention of this crime appears anywhere in the press. He may have been helped by his father's position on City Council. This irresponsibility, lack of fear, and perhaps somewhat overdeveloped sense of adventure could be disastrous at home, but it served him well during his World War I service.

William Augustus Hoeveler, Jr., and his close friend Joe Trees, Jr., enlisted together before World War I as flying sergeants in the Aviation Section, Army Signal Corps (replaced in 1918 by the U.S. Air Service, forerunner to the Air Force). Hoeveler became an airman in a truly exciting, yet terrifying time in aviation history. The airplane was a relatively new piece of equipment and there was no prior protocol for using it as a fighter or bomber in concert with a larger military strategy. While advances in technology and innovative tactics hinted at the airplane's power as a tool of war (to be

fully realized during World War II), there was much about World War I airpower that was primitive. A pilot flew without a parachute, and was issued a revolver in the event that his plane caught fire while he plummeted to his death. It was not a field for the faint of heart.

At a Florida training facility, Hoeveler and Trees lived together and flew together. In no time, the wonder of flying completely captured Bill Hoeveler. His instructor, Roger Jannus, was a highly experienced flyer, and gave Hoeveler his first real taste of open cockpit flight. Bill wrote home to his mother,

We poke into a white cloud and the cold dampness rushes by our faces and feels for all the world like a Scottish mist, but the planes are fast and we come out the other side not knowing where we are, because a cloud is just like tunnel in the air ... just the two of us, alone, out of sight of land, water, people, riding on air and looking down at clouds, their feathery tops all glistening in the bright sunlight, and clear blue vapor above us.

~ March 10, 1917

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Bill Hoeveler's flight instructor, aviation pioneer Roger Jannus, was the brother of celebrated pilot Tony Jannus. Both brothers were dead before the war's end.



One month later, America went to war. Events that began with the sinking of the *Lusitania* and ended with the Zimmerman Telegram culminated in America's declaration of war on Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. By the fall of 1917, Hoeveler and the first American troops were in Europe, only partially trained for combat. More work was accomplished in the United Kingdom and France, where combat veterans abounded as instructors. Hoeveler spent time in England before seeing battle, and wrote of the experience to his family:

Had a wonderful time in England, bought some new clothes and leggings and was treated like a prince. We being the first American aviators, we were IT ... they couldn't do enough. The Major in charge gave us a six cylinder car and a lovely girl driver, and letters to the nearest flying field to London ... there was a General of the RFC there, we palled around with the high brows, had lunch at the C.O.'s table and went on a beautiful flight in real planes, so much better than the ones I had been flying...

We went up, up to great heights far above the clouds, so that the earth was gone, and nothing but limitless miles of billowing clouds, some white, fleecy, tempting ... others black and threatening towered high above even our height. But we climbed till we had conquered all and looked down on this seething mass of all colors. The sun and the clear, clear blue were all that we had above.

~ October 30, 1917

When Bill Hoeveler reached France, he was immediately assigned to office work at the headquarters in Paris, much to his dismay. His assignment at the Aviation Section, Signal Corps Reserve was "pen pushing" as he called it, and his title included "L of C," or "Lines of Communication." In April 1918, Lieutenant Hoeveler (now 24 years old) was sent to train on French bombers at his own request. He had already completed Chasse school (training on fighter planes), but after being sidelined with his desk job, Hoeveler considered any option that would get him into combat. He was able to

Pittsburgh Society Youth Offers Army His Services as Aviator

Joseph G. Trees, Son of Oil Operator, Graduate of Wright School, Telegraphs to War Secretary—Has Own Hydroaeroplane—William Thaw May Come Back From France.

"I hereby tender you my services as an aviator equipped with my own high-powered hydro-aeroplane for either border patrol or scout work in the interior of Mexico."

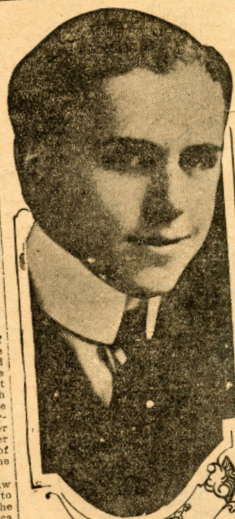
The foregoing message was sent to Secretary of War Newton D. Baker yesterday, by Joseph Graham Trees, Pittsburgh society youth, who last April was graduated from the Wright winter aviation school at Augusta, Ga., as "one of America's best qualified aviators," as his certificate reads. Trees is a son of Joseph C. Trees, oil producer and operator. The young man is now on his father's ranch at Pecos, Tex., where he went about three weeks ago.

This is the second time young Trees has offered his services to the Government. When he left the Wright school in April, he went to Hammondsport, N. Y., and purchased from the Curtiss factory there a \$7,000 hydro-aeroplane, with an air speed of 65 miles an hour and a water speed of 60 miles. He then volunteered his services as an aviator to Uncle Sam. In reply the secretary of war thanked young Trees, and told him that he might call upon him "in the event of trouble."

Trees and William A. Hoeveler, son of the late Councilman W. A. Hoeveler, were the late companions, and both had entertained from early childhood the desire to have military careers. Young Hoeveler cast aside his social pleasures in Pittsburgh several months ago and went to the French front to drive one of the American Red Cross ambulances. Shortly after that, Trees went to the Wright winter school of aviation and took up the study of aviation, with a view of enlisting in the United States aviation corps.

Many inquiries were made of the Thaw family in this city yesterday as to whether William Thaw would accept the invitation of the Aero Club of America to quit the Franco-American flying corps and return to this country for service in the event of war with Mexico. Benjamin Thaw, the boy's father, is now in New York. William Thaw is now in a French hospital recovering from wounds suffered in an aerial encounter with a German flyer several weeks ago.

Pittsburgh friends of Thaw believe he will return if his physical condition permits. It is not believed that the French government will try to detain him. In



Joseph G. Trees

fact, Alan R. Hawley, president of the Aero Club of America, an admirer of the Pittsburgh aviator, who cabled him, expects that Thaw will come back to this country as soon as possible if war with Mexico materializes.

Joe Trees, Jr., enlisted with Hoeveler and was one of his best friends. His untimely death during a training accident profoundly impacted Hoeveler and his outlook on the war.



Sergeant Hoeveler about to crank the engine, Miami, Florida, 1917.

**HOEVELER INCHED
CLOSER AND
CLOSER TO THE
TRUE NATURE OF
WAR. IN MAY 1918,
WORD BEGAN TO
CIRCULATE ABOUT
AMERICAN PILOTS
BEING LOANED TO
THE FRENCH AIR
FORCE.**



keep flying just enough to maintain his rating despite his office assignments. Bombers were something new, even to the infant aviation field, and presaged what would come to full bloom 25 years later.

The planes are more than 6 times larger than the little chassers, and very different to fly. We carry an observer who fights the enemy from the back, and drops the bombs, while we do the flying and fighting from the front. It was very strange to handle a huge thing like that up in the air. It feels like a big ocean liner, with power and speed.

Of course it is very interesting and quite scientific and the bombing itself remarkably accurate. But still, chasse has a wonderfully glorious attraction about it: however, I think I will go on and finish this branch, go over the lines in it for about six months and then go back to the chasse and finish up the damn war that way. ~ April 17, 1918

Hoeveler inched closer and closer to the true nature of war. In May 1918, word began

to circulate about American pilots being loaned to the French Air Force. In a note home, Bill Hoeveler notified his mother of his assignment to the French Air Force: the 66th Bombardment Squadron or "Escadrille." But with his moment of triumph came great personal loss. Hoeveler's friend and fellow enlistee Joe Trees had left his base in England for a routine flight and somewhere en route his life ended in mangled airplane wreckage. His death was instantaneous and left Hoeveler devastated. Undoubtedly, it changed him.

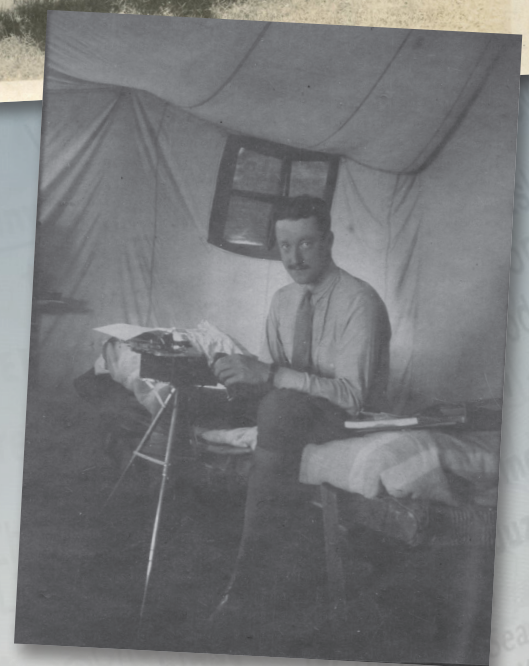
I never had anything hit me quite so hard. He was one of the best friends I had. Then to be killed while in training, that is the worst part. At the front, you are going for a cause, and if some Hun knocks you down, it is just bad luck for you, but behind the lines, and Joe being one of the best fliers I knew, it is very hard to take.... I guess this life we lead is all written out for us, and we just ride along while someone else turns the pages. ~ June 10, 1918

Bill helped handle the return of Joe Trees' possessions to his family. The excitement and perhaps naiveté of Florida was a long-gone memory.

Hoeveler soon experienced the battle himself, his dream (and his escape from office work) finally realized:

Yesterday we went way into the lines at a low altitude, and caught Hell. But, as luck would have it my observer and I brought down our first Boche. It has not been reported as official yet, and to be official must be reported by the infantry or artillery observation men.

We had a very tight time of it, as we were shelled and also were fought with by the old Squadron of von Richthofen, who by the way CAN fight.¹ Our Chef d'Escadrille was leading, I on his left and a young American by name Barber on his right. We fought with our front guns all the way to our objective, turned, bombed and started for home. Just after the turn, a shell hit poor Barber, knocked off his right wing and he went



to his death in Hunland. The von Richthofen outfit then took us on with full force, and we fought the good fight. One got on my tail and started firing, put five bullet holes in my left wing, I zoomed to the right, but when he turned towards us my observer shot him down.

When the Huns show that they appreciate your work enough to send the best fighters they have up to stop you, it shows that you are doing something very worthwhile. And when you knock one of these best men down, it is most satisfying. ~ August 12, 1918

Though he was now credited with an official aerial victory, Hoeveler's list of wounded and killed buddies continued to grow rapidly. In his letters home, Bill regaled his family with exciting stories of the "grit and coolness" of his fellow American aviators as they battled German pilots. But with the humor and the thrilling narrative was a human cost: real comrades shot down, real friends wounded and dealing with the horrors of

Top: Strangely, no uniforms were ever issued to the Florida Pilot trainees until their arrival in Texas several months later.

Middle: Left to right, Roger Jannus, "Ishe" Thurlow, Joe Trees, "Perc" Dodge, and Bill Hoeveler relaxing at the "Oasis," their rented Miami home.

Right: Bill Hoeveler typed almost all his letters, both in the American Field Service and U.S. Air Service. He is shown here at his typewriter, mounted on a tripod.

field hospitals, even if Bill did not detail those realities. Sometimes his news is delivered in a gruff manner, informing family that a friend “got his” and was killed in a crash. Perhaps the humor and the brashness helped Hoeveler to put a good face on for his loved ones, masking his actual emotional struggles.

By early autumn 1918, with the growth of the U.S. Army in France, many units and men on loan to foreign forces were called back. Hoeveler was eased into this transition by his next task, flying in support of his country while in the service of another. In mid-September 1918, the army utilized the services of many French squadrons in its first “all-American” offensive against the St. Mihiel salient. This bulge in the lines, occupied for most of the war by the Germans, was chosen as a target and was seen as achievable given the numbers of U.S. troops available. Still, the services of the French were requested, and the

66th Bombardment Escadrille flew missions in support of the attack. By this time, Bill Hoeveler was one of the few aviators still on detached service.

As the squadron’s record improved, and the competence of its officers was noticed, many of them were promoted to higher duties, moved to other units in need of improvement, or farmed out as replacements. Most of the men he served with were gone, and the ambivalence Hoeveler felt was palpable in his first letter after the St. Mihiel attack.

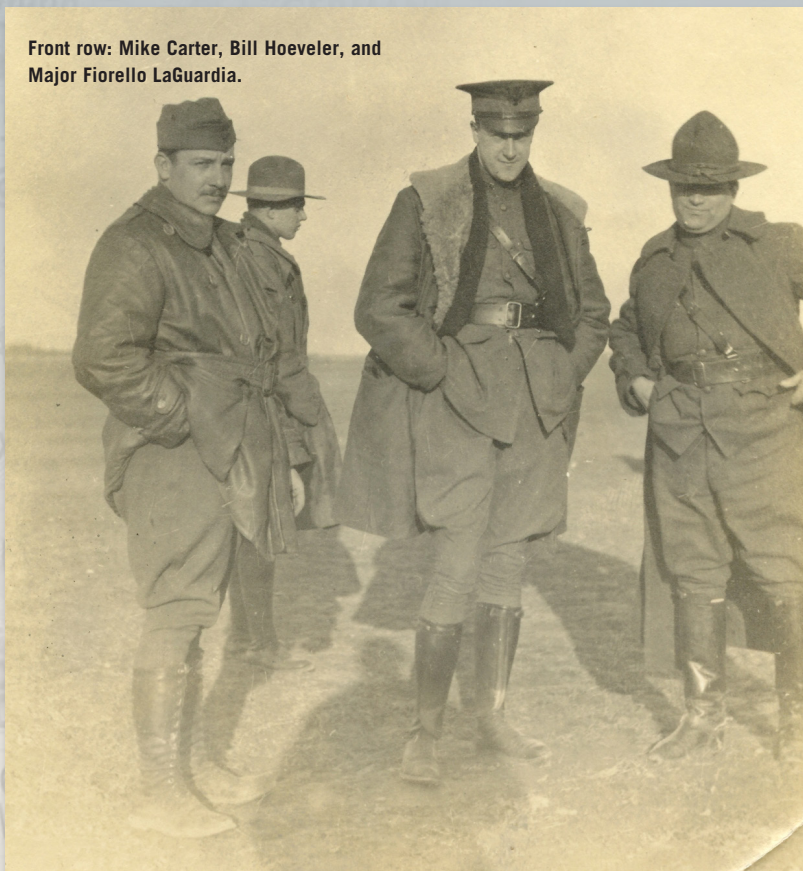
I am afraid it is all over, as I heard yesterday that the orders were in recalling me to the American Army, and I am very sad about it. But then all the good Frenchmen are going away, all my friends.... So I will go back to the Americans with the feeling it is for the best. Then there will be lots of new untried pilots there. As I told you in my last letter nearly all my friends ...

have been killed or have left the work. These are sad days, but the war is going wonderfully for us, and better days will soon come along; so I say, “swallow hard, William A. Hoeveler, and plug on. The war is not being fought for you!” ~ September 27, 1918

As Hoeveler wrote that letter, Germany was in a corner, unable to win in the face of improving British and French tactics and an unlimited supply of American servicemen. The leaders of all the armies knew it was over, and even knew exactly what time it would end. But it still had its final day, taking lives and futures with it while it could. In the face of victory, Hoeveler reflected on loss when he sat down to type out a note to his sister Genevieve. His letter holds faint traces of bitterness under the bravado.

Your most welcome letters have been coming along very regularly. Just yesterday I got one telling me all the news and

Front row: Mike Carter, Bill Hoeveler, and Major Fiorello LaGuardia.



**HE HAD SEEN THE
CONFLICT FROM
ALMOST EVERY
ANGLE—THE FIRST
WAR TO INVOLVE
MOST OF THE GLOBE,
AND THE FIRST TO BE
FOUGHT ABOVE IT IN
THE AIR.**

giving me your “Better than Bensons” views on this “after death problem,” which by the way bothers me very little. My latest ideas on the subject are “get as much in this life as you can, because now you are dealing with realities and can see where you are going.”...

The point of someday meeting all your friends after death is fine, but suppose you had a lot of friends you hurt—one or two of them you had hurt so badly that you had ruined their lives, and still you were well liked by others. It might be a bit embarrassing to have them all together! But I guess if you are making this “as you like it” Heaven, you would pass an embargo on disturbing elements, and make them orderlies to the nice well-liked saints. They could shine your halos and keep your harp well-oiled and put rubber heels on your sandals. ~ November 10, 1918

At 11:00 a.m. on November 11, 1918, the Great War for Civilization and Humanity came to a pre-arranged close. Fighting staggered on in North Russia and Siberia and a few other far-flung locations, but for almost everyone else, the war had ended:

The great show is over and I am still alive and full of health. The holiday spirit is very strong over here just now, and all the towns in France are celebrating full swing.... I went down yesterday afternoon and it was a brawl. All the refugees were marching through the streets with flags of their home towns, the wounded were having another parade ... and everyone was having a Hell of a time. I don't know what is going to be done with us all over here now, as the incentive is gone and there is nothing for we civilians to do. What do you think? Today, two poor chaps crashed and were burned to death, isn't that hard luck, to be killed the day after the war is called off? ~ November 13, 1918

Hoeveler had spent most of the previous three years away from home. He had seen the conflict from almost every angle—the first war to involve most of the globe, and the first to be fought above it in the air. What now? The end of the war was not simple and clean.

Squadron banner of the 66th Escadrille de Bombardement.



Hoeveler's comrade pilots in the 66th French Bombardment Squadron.



Lt. Hoeveler, 2nd from left, with his observer (right) just before leaving on the mission that netted his first German victory, August 1918.

Death Threat Is Charged In Hoeveler Divorce Trial



Mrs. Mary A. Hoeveler.

"I won't shoot you now I'll warn you before I do."

This was the charge of Mrs. Mary A. Hoeveler, daughter of John S. Robb, Jr., attorney, seeking a divorce from her husband, William A. Hoeveler, Jr., of the Schenley apartments.

Mrs. Hoeveler testified before Judge John A. Evans that her husband had threatened her with a revolver while intoxicated and on other occasions had menaced her.

Separated Last June.

Her husband did not contest the suit. Mrs. Hoeveler seeks a legal separation from Hoeveler, son of the late W. A. Hoeveler, former city councilman.

The couple were married June 20, 1924. They had made their home at Fifth ave. and Emerson sts., until

they separated in June, 1929. Since then Mrs. Hoeveler has been living in Washington ave., Carnegie. Her husband has been making his home with his mother at the Schenley apartments.

Mrs. Hoeveler testified her husband was intoxicated most of the time they were married.

She told of entering a darkened room in their home, and when she lighted a candle, found Hoeveler pointing a gun at her.

On other occasions, it was testified, he called her vile names.

She was driving home late at night, Mrs. Hoeveler said, when her husband grabbed the steering wheel of the machine and attempted to run it into a telegraph pole. She said she wrested the wheel from him, averting an accident.

The martial spirit that was imparted to the men and women of the war had a life of its own and did not always want to die.

That great question, "What if?" lingered with many soldiers for the rest of their lives.

Some men were delighted to be done with it but others may have felt that their greatest chance for glory was stolen from them:

The war closed up about two months too soon for William A Hoeveler as I had been made a Flight Commander (in the 497th Aero Squadron) and was training my flight to take to the front.... I could have seen about how my own ideas of training worked out. But they closed up the front and my job went out with it. C'est l'Armistice! ~ December 3, 1918

In late December, Bill's duty station was closed forever. He helped ferry the aircraft to Romorantin, having at least one near accident on the way. On a visit to Paris, to see the Peace Commission at work, he met five of his friends who had been reported dead, but had actually been prisoners of the Germans instead. Bill also picked up Joe Trees' aviation coat, which his family had given to their son's best friend as a gift, having safely stored it in Paris to await its claimant. With no more flying to be done, a heavy aviator's coat like this may have seemed useless to some, but Bill wrote to his family that he was thrilled to have it on the cold boat ride home. One can imagine Lieutenant William Hoeveler, Jr.,

on deck, sailing towards America, wearing that coat, wishing its previous owner was there instead, feeling in its heavy warmth the absence of so many who would never go home to their loved ones.

When the numbers were tallied, at least 8 million men were dead and 20 million wounded (7 million of whom came home

with permanent disabilities). Of those that returned, one historian wrote, "They put on civilian clothes again and looked to their mothers and wives very much like the young men who had gone to business in the peaceful days before August 1914. But they had not come back the same men. Something had altered in them."²


Bill Hoeveler's post-war life was like many of his generation. Growing up in the midst of a war left a large hole to fill in the participant's psyche. In a 1919 passport application, Hoeveler listed his occupation as "Oil Business," working as a representative for the Benedum-Trees Oil Company, but this career did not last. In 1924, Hoeveler met and married Mary Amelia Robb, a local socialite. Mary Robb was the daughter of Emmaline Mary (Foster) Robb and John Scott Robb, a wealthy family in Carnegie. Mary and Bill, having turned 30, were married on the veranda at his in-laws' home on Washington Avenue on June 14, 1924, with Bill's brother James as best man.³

Little information exists about the Hoevelers' life together after their wedding day other than living on Fifth Avenue in Shadyside. One known fact is that in February 1929, the Hoevelers took a 14-day cruise to exotic cities in the West Indies on the S.S. *Araguaya*.⁴ Trips to glamorous locations became popular for those wanting to escape the harsh winter weather in Pittsburgh, but for the Hoevelers, it may have been a trip taken to revive their relationship.

After five years of marriage, an announcement of the Hoevelers' divorce appeared in the *Pittsburgh Press* on November 16, 1929, citing June 1928 as the time of their separation. In the divorce announcement, Mary testified that Hoeveler was intoxicated for most of the time that they were married. The last straw for her occurred when she returned home one evening to find Hoeveler waiting for her in a darkened room with a revolver pointed at her, warning

Clipping from the *Pittsburgh Press* detailing the Hoeveler's divorce.

Perhaps for Hoeveler, his friend's death, missed opportunities during the war, the transition into civilian life, and the termination of his marriage was too much to handle. William Augustus Hoeveler, Jr., died in the early hours of June 23, 1937. Within 15 hours he was laid to rest in his family's mausoleum in Homewood Cemetery, an exclusive residence for the socially significant dead of America's most thriving industrial city. According to his

Hoeveler seems to have lived up to his ideal, expressed to his sister in the waning days of the war, to “get as much in this life as you can.” He did his best to accomplish this feat, though there is little doubt that the horror and exhilaration of combat, grief, loss, frustration, sheer boredom, and self-medication filled the remainder of his life. He was never free from the burden of his early experiences, and carried them with him to his grave. 

¹ More famously known as the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen was killed on April 21, 1918, several months before this letter was written. By August, his "outfit" *Jagdgeschwader I* (commonly known as the "Flying Circus") was commanded by Herman Goering, destined to be Hitler's deputy fuhrer and Luftwaffe chief during World War II.

³ Robb-Hoeveler wedding announcement, Items of Interest, *The Pittsburgh Gazette Times*, June 15, 1924, 15.

⁵ "Death Threat Is Charged in Hoeveler Divorce Trial"
Pittsburgh Press, November 16, 1929, 5.



Don't Forget Him!

He must have places to go and things to do. And, surely you, in the full possession of the comforts of civilization made possible by the peace he

Keep him smiling till we can get him home.
Give and give freely to the good work of these seven
organizations.

It is your one chance to repay a fraction of the debt you owe the boys who have made the world a safe place for you to live in.

[illegible]

United War Work Campaign ad, November 11, 1918.