Miscommunication, WWI-Style

In the Spring issue, an article on the McClelland family’s troubles in 1899 illustrated how delays in communication could lead to heart-wrenching misunderstandings. History Center school programs volunteer docent Walter Patton, Jr., has a stack of papers from 1918 that likewise show the pain caused by errors in communication, especially when it takes weeks to correct them.

Walter’s uncle Bill—William Patton—was fighting with 5th Machine Gun Battalion, Second Army Division, in France during World War I. A telegram from December 20, 1918, said William had been severely wounded in action on November 7. On Christmas Eve, a second telegram reported that William had died November 9 from the wounds. A small news story then reported the information:

William Patton, postmaster at Venetia, Washington County, has received information that his son, Private William Patton ... died in a hospital in France from wounds November 9.

Was it shock or disbelief—or both—that the family felt a month later (January 25) when they got word that William was alive and well. The good news came in a letter that William had written on December 29, his birthday, stating he was stationed along the Rhine River. His brother Walter wrote back the next day, recounting, “We had all mourned you dead” and noting that even William’s high school had planned a memorial service “but now you will spoil it on your part.”

It took two more months for an official telegram to announce the error. A letter from the War Department the same day further explained that it was Private William R. Patten who had died, and that William Richardson Patton was present for duty.

Bill survived the war just fine and returned home to become a coal miner, as did most of his family’s men. The Pattons now count four generations in the region’s coal and steel industries.
The telegram announcing the bad, but incorrect, news about William. Even the typist of this note had to correct the spelling of the Patton name.

The corrected news.

William Patton, postmaster at Venetia, Washington county, has receive information that his son, Private William Patton of Company B, Fifth Machine Gun Battalion, Second Army Division, died in a hospital in France from wounds November 9. William Patton took part in several big battles and his death was the result of wounds suffered in action on November 7. He enlisted in July, 1917, and went overseas last December. He was a nephew of Robert Patton of Pittsburgh, city detectives.