

Submission to Wellesley Townsman by Joshua Dorin – September 14, 2015
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Forgotten Wellesley Citizens: Capt. Jack Early



Caption: Jack Early (1896 – 1921)

Photo credit: *Rainbow Memories* (via archive.org)

It's really difficult to describe the life of Jack Early in a way that doesn't make him seem like this mythical uber-citizen of Wellesley who was alive one day and gone the next.

Within a period of only four years -- from 1917 until his untimely death in 1921 at the age of 25 -- Early served his country in the battlefields and trenches of the Champagne region of France, returned home to establish the Wellesley Post of the American Legion, and was elected the Town's youngest-ever Selectman.

His résumé is intimidating to even the best of us.

This is especially true regarding his military service. Jack Early was, to put it simply, a true leader. A full year prior to the United States declaring war on the German Empire during World War I, he voluntarily left his job at a Boston banking firm -- only two years removed from his graduation from Wellesley High School -- to attend an officer training camp in Plattsburgh, New York. By the time the U.S. entered the war, Early was the youngest commissioned second lieutenant in the Army.

He arrived in Europe in the fall of 1917 with the Third Battalion of the 42nd (Rainbow) Division. Assigned to Company L, Early shared the command of 247 soldiers with six other officers. While the first half of his tour was dominated by routine patrols, by mid-summer of 1918 his unit was thrust into the middle of the trench warfare in northeast France. Facing heavy bombardment at the foremost part of the front against the Germans, Lieut. Early was able to keep his men safe and hold his part of the line of resistance. Then, as the opposing infantry attacked, he led a counterattack in the face of machine gun and rifle fire, flanking the enemy and breaking up their line.

For these actions, Early was awarded the Distinguished Service Cross, the second highest military honor given to a member of the U.S. Army.

When he returned home to Wellesley in May 1919, Early – having been promoted to Captain -- didn't stop working to provide safety and support for his fellow soldiers. Joining a national movement to establish a unified veterans organization throughout America, Early was instrumental in organizing the Wellesley Post of the American Legion. It therefore came as no surprise to anyone that he was elected its first Commander.

The Legion's mission was simple: to promote, as described by Early, "the crystallization and preservation of 100% red-blooded Americanism." By supporting the former servicemen and working to consecrate the memories of the recent war, the Legion could elevate the ideals upon which America was founded and protect the nation from anarchy and nihilism.

Early's tenure as Commander of the Wellesley Post was, however, brief. In early 1920, he was thrust onto the grand stage when he was unexpectedly elected to fill a vacancy on the Board of Selectmen. Although forced to resign from his Post command -- as the American Legion prohibited its commanders from holding public office -- Early rightfully believed that his election to the board was an acknowledgement by the citizenry that the hundreds of new veterans in Wellesley were a vital component of the town and that he shouldn't waste this opportunity to represent them within municipal government.

In most instances, a 23-year-old on the Board of Selectmen may seem a bit out of place. But in this case, not at all. Jack Early possessed all the right traits: respectful, reliable, passionate, and judicious.

Although he only served on the board for 18 months, there were plenty of opportunities for Selectman Early to show off these skills. Wellesley was already on its way to becoming a modern suburb, and the resultant population boom gave the board much work -- everything from accepting new streets to granting permits for gasoline filling stations to considering improvements to school facilities.

No one would have been surprised if Jack Early had served as Wellesley Selectman for the next half century. But alas, he was taken away from the town too soon. In

September 1921, while attending a reunion of the Rainbow Division in Ohio, Early collapsed on the side of the road as the driver of his car was changing a flat tire. The cause of death was heart failure, thought to be a side effect of the war.

Ten days later, a funeral was held at St. John's Church in Lower Falls. It very well may have been the most widely observed funeral in Wellesley's history. Every business in town was closed for its duration. Each flag in Wellesley was put at half-staff. Teachers stopped classes so that students could attend memorial exercises. At the North School (at the current site of Warren Elementary School), the pupils lined Washington Street as Capt. Early's casket was carried from his family's home at 93 Washington Street to a horse-drawn caisson and brought down the hill to the church.

Following the service, a large procession escorted his remains four miles to the family lot at the Calvary Cemetery in Waltham where he received a burial with full military honors.

Why life can be so unfair that it robs the world of so many with so much unfulfilled potential is a question no one can answer. There have been few people in our town's history who have shown as much promise as Jack Early. In his brief life, he was a hero, a leader, and a role model to all. Great things were certainly still to come.

Yet his life can inspire us -- even nearly a century later -- to put aside our own interests and work selflessly for the greater good of the town we call home.

To read more about Wellesley history, visit Joshua Dorin's blog at <http://wellesleyhistory.wordpress.com>