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Kelly of the Foreign Legion: Letters of Légionnaire Russell A. Kelly
by Michael Kennerly, General Books, 1917

Jon Porter

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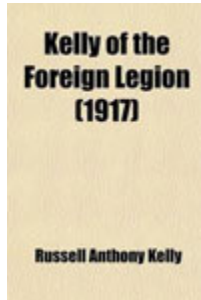
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Kelly of the Foreign Legion: Letters of Légionnaire Russell Kelly

by Michael Kennerly

Reviewed by Jon Porter

On November 3, 1914, Russell Kelly and his friend Lawrence Scanlan sailed from New York to Bordeaux aboard a Canadian tramp steamer laden with 650 horses destined for the French army. Kelly and Scanlan were destined for the French Foreign Legion and this is a collection of Kelly's letters home to his family, many of which were published in a New York newspaper. He began his military training in November 1914 at the Dépôt de Lyon, a hastily converted school house, and left for the front in February, assigned to a newly formed régiment de Marche made up of idealistic foreign volunteers, including four other Americans. Soon he was in the trenches under heavy German artillery bombardment in the 2nd Battle of Artois. By mid-May, the casualties were so severe that his company of 250 legionnaires was reduced to 55 with all of the company's officers killed or wounded. In his last letter home, Kelly notes that he and his fellow soldiers "are unanimous in wishing the war to end soon," and for Kelly, it did. He was declared missing after the assault on Hill 119 on June 16-17, 1915. His friend Scanlan, after lying wounded for fifty-six hours on the battlefield, was rescued by a stretcher-bearer, sent to an American military hospital in Paris, and awarded the Croix de Guerre in the summer of 1916 for his bravery in battle. Between May 9th and June 16th, 700 officers were killed and 1,500 wounded, in addition to the 16,000 soldiers killed, 63,500 wounded and 20,500 missing (which, as in Kelly's case, usually meant killed) in this battle. Kelly was officially declared killed in action by the French on January 16th, 1917.

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