

# Quarantine leads local military expert to story behind chaplain's WWI pandemic efforts

Bryan McKenzie

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All he wanted was a little COVID-19 distraction, but the century-old photo of a military chaplain took an Albemarle County man on a 102-year time trip to a different state during a different deadly pandemic.

The sepia-toned photo of a man in a World War I-era uniform sits in a swivel frame meant for a tabletop. His round face sports an enigmatic smile and his round-rimmed glasses peer from beneath the brim of an officer's cap topped with a U.S. Army insignia badge.

Across the mat, in expansive and fluid cursive, is the inscription "Florence, May God Bless You." It is signed "Regis Barrett, OSB, Chaplain, U.S. Army."

"I've had it for several years," said Art Beltrone, a local military historian, collector and appraiser of military artifacts. "I obtained it from a Northern Virginia collection of military collectibles and I liked it because it's a photo of a chaplain and those are difficult to find,

especially from the First World War era, because the chaplain corps was small.”

Beltrone said the photo, its dedication and signature caught his eye years ago.

“This one was signed and so it had a connection to an actual person, and that’s always a nice thing. It was in a nice, large frame with a swivel base, so it obviously meant a lot to someone,” he said. “It fascinated me.”

Beltrone is a man driven by fascination. His discovery of canvas bunks festooned with graffiti scrawled by soldiers, sailors and Marines aboard the General Nelson M. Walker, a Vietnam-era troop ship, led to the nationally known Vietnam Graffiti Project, which preserved the hopes, fears and jokes of men going to war.

In the time of COVID-19, with everyone warned to stay home as much as possible, Beltrone found himself with a lot of time and home projects on his hands. He began to see the portrait of the chaplain in a different light.

“I never really took the time to research the photograph before,” he said. “But I began to wonder who this person was and what he did in the military. I found myself wanting to know more about him. I’m really into checking into the names of people involved with artifacts and I found myself with lots of time, so ...”

Beltrone started digging into Chaplain Barrett. What he found was synchronicity with a time a century ago, when people were warned to mask up when they went out and to stay in when possible as an infectious and often fatal virus spread about the land.

“It turned out that he played into the 1918 pandemic in a big way,” Beltrone said.

Barrett, a Catholic priest of the Order of St. Benedict, was born on July 29, 1882, somewhere in Pennsylvania, according to military records sent to Beltrone by Marcia McManus, director of the U.S. Army Chaplain Corps Museum in Fort Jackson, South Carolina.

In April 1918, as German forces seized Armentieres, Mount Kemmel and heights south of Ypres, shaking the French, English and American alliance, the 35-year-old priest joined the Army’s chaplain corps.

A month later, he was assigned to chaplain training and Camp Zachary Taylor, a few miles outside of Louisville, then the nation’s largest military training camp.

According to the records, his class scores were pretty good. He received 86 of 100 on his classwork; 79 of 100 on his final examination; 158 of 200 on preaching ability; and 442 of 500 on suitability to being a chaplain.

As the German army attacked on a 70-mile front from Chateau Thierry to Rheims and the American 3rd Infantry Division successfully defended, despite severe bombardment and repeated infantry attacks, Barrett was assigned to the 159th Depot Brigade at Camp Taylor.

In September, as the Army began an offensive to push the Germans back using tanks commanded by then-Maj. George S. Patton and warplanes commanded by Brig. Gen. “Billy” Mitchell, Barrett found himself in a war zone all his own, a fight for which he would be recommended for a promotion to captain for “devotion and self-sacrifice” that were “worthy of the highest praise” and “meritorious service at the base hospital during the influenza epidemic.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 100,000 Americans died of the flu during October 1918.

At Camp Taylor, 20% of the barracks became an emergency hospital, and urgent appeals went out for additional nurses.

The camp was big. It had 1,530 buildings across 3,376 acres and housed 47,000 men. On Sept. 24, more than 100 soldiers had the flu. A day later, it was 262. By the end of the month, about 2,100 soldiers were sick.

On Sept. 27, camp leaders enacted a partial quarantine and prohibited soldiers from theaters, restaurants and other public places. Only a dozen soldiers were allowed in camp buildings at the same time.

At one point, according to Louisville historical societies, a sixth of camp personnel was hospitalized and as many as 1,500 died, their coffins taken away under cover of night to keep morale from tanking.

“He realized the desperation that was setting in at the camp with 14,000 sick patients and 800 deaths between September and November,” Beltrone said of Barrett. “They were short on doctors and nurses and it was getting desperate.”

That’s where Barrett stepped up. Kentucky nurse educators Sara Bolten and MaryAnn Thompson wrote of his efforts to recruit Catholic nuns to serve in the camp in their treatise, “They Buckled on the Armor of God: Kentucky Catholic Sister ‘Nurses’ in the 1918 Flu Pandemic.”

“Father Barrett’s unorthodox methods included breaking the lock and hinge of a convent screen door when his knock went unanswered,

demanding to know how many nurses he could take back to the camp immediately,” they wrote.

Barrett recruited nuns from around the state, including the Sisters of Loretto some 50 miles away in Nerinx, and Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, in Nazareth, about the same distance away. His efforts recruited 88 nuns, some of whom had nursing experience and others who were educators, into the camp to serve.

According to Bolten and Thompson, the women worked 12-hour shifts seven days a week. At least 22 sisters contracted the flu and many suffered long-lasting effects from the disease. One nun, Sister Mary Jean Connor of the Sisters of Loretto, died of the flu and received a military funeral at the camp.

The pandemic would fall and rise for another year. Barrett received his commission to captain in May 1919 and continued serving at the camp, transferring to the 28th Infantry Division in October 1919.

In March 1920, Barrett’s superior in his religious order asked him to resign from the military to serve the church in southwestern Colorado, where an abbey was being built and ministerial help was needed. He was honorably discharged the same month, but requested to remain as a reserve officer in the Army’s chaplain corps, which was approved in June 1920.

The story doesn’t end there, because Barrett’s service didn’t end.

He served at the Canon City, Colorado, Abbey of the Holy Cross, riding across the state from Denver and Boulder to Pueblo and Grand Junction as a circuit priest for small parishes.

Barrett befriended the McNichols family, which would become one of the most powerful families in Denver and Colorado politics. He was well respected in the state, which was still considered to be on the frontier.

According to records and personal accounts, when the country went to war again, Barrett sought to rejoin the Army as a chaplain in 1942. At 60, he was considered too old for the regular chaplain corps, but was accepted as an auxiliary chaplain and volunteered to go where needed.

He landed in Africa with the Douglas Aircraft Co. at a repair center and airbase with both military and civilian contractors. The North African campaign was wrapping up and the airbase brought military aircraft in from several theaters for repair and served as a transportation center for personnel and materiel heading to Italy, Russia and China.

It also provided a gathering place for diseases brought onto the base from across the military campaigns, including typhus, malaria, cholera and yellow fever. Base officials struggled with balancing the quarantining of new arrivals with the need to fight a war, according to first-person accounts.

Barrett fit in, serving both military members and civilians, according to first-person accounts, including celebrating a Christmas Eve field Mass attended by most of the base personnel.

Within seven months, however, Barrett would be dead.

Early reports state that he died heroically in action beside the troops, but it was actually an infection of streptococcus pneumoniae bacteria that stopped him on July 12, 1943, about two weeks short of his 61st birthday.

“The Military Ordinariate announced that the Rev. Regis Barrett, O.S.B., died in Africa of a streptococcus infection,” The Denver Catholic newspaper reported on July 29, 1943, on what was Barrett’s birthday.

The paper also carried a first-person account of Barrett’s death and funeral from William H. “Bill” McNichols Jr., who later served in the European theater, winning medals for valor, and as Denver’s mayor from 1968 to 1983.

“About one half-hour ago, I returned from the funeral of Father Regis. He died in the hospital after two weeks’ illness of bronchial trouble, later complicated by septicemia and pneumonia,” McNichols wrote. “The funeral was the largest ever held in these parts. Catholics and non-Catholics were there. Everyone that knew him loved him. His death was indeed a great blow to this base.”

Barrett, a hero of the 1918 pandemic, was buried in a temporary cemetery in Algiers. Sometime after 1948, his body was moved to plot I, row 13, grave 6 of the North Africa American Cemetery in Carthage, Tunisia. He bears no military rank and is listed only as a civilian and a chaplain.

In Colorado, the Abbey of the Holy Cross, which the monks closed in 2006, now houses a winery and vineyards. In its cemetery, a plaque honors Barrett and notes his burial in Africa. A cemetery flagpole, dedicated in 2015 to the monks and nuns and others in the cemetery who served in the military by local American Legion Post 13, bears his name.

Barrett’s story, and others like it, keeps Beltrone fascinated by military artifacts, memorabilia and the people connected to them.

“I picked it up because it was just a nice photograph of a World War I Army chaplain in a great frame,” Beltrone said. “But the man and his story make it a relevant historical artifact during this historical time we are living through, the daily events we read about and the daily pandemic reports and news coverage. History has a way of happening again and again.”

# Unknowns make Fluvanna virus outbreak a scary situation

Bryan McKenzie

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Ellen Hess has never been as scared as she was the day that COVID-19 took her breath away.

“I’ve been in a bad motorcycle accident, I’ve had three children, a major head injury, a dissected carotid artery, but I have never been as scared as that day that I could not breathe and thought for sure I was going to die,” Hess said from her bedroom in her Fluvanna County home. “I am not a dramatic person. I’m trained as a nurse. But I was scared.”

Hess, a nurse liaison with Envoy at The Village skilled nursing facility in Fork Union, was among the first staff members at the home to come down with COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.

The nursing home has seen staff and residents hit with COVID-19, accounting for the majority of cases in the county. Friday afternoon, the Thomas Jefferson Health District said the current count of confirmed cases in Fluvanna is 70, out of 212 in the district.

All staff, residents and patients at the center have been tested for the virus. Health department and company officials have declined to comment on the exact number of positive tests at the facility.

A majority of outbreaks in Virginia have been connected to nursing homes, state officials said this week, and one of the deadliest in the country has been at the Canterbury Rehabilitation & Healthcare Center in Henrico County.

Eight residents of the Thomas Jefferson Health District now have died from the virus, according to information released Friday, but officials have declined share more-specific location information, citing privacy concerns.

“I want to reassure the community that health providers are working with Envoy residents and staff,” said Mozell Booker, a Fluvanna supervisor representing the Fork Union District. “Debbie Smith, Fluvanna County emergency management coordinator, is keeping the [Board of Supervisors] informed of the progress being made. I ask that you keep positive thoughts about the health of our residents and providers.”

Hess is the wife of Fluvanna County Sheriff Eric Hess, who is now also in self-quarantine and is taking care of her as her bout with the virus enters a third week.

The sheriff has not been tested, but shows no symptoms and is continuing to work from home, keeping the office running while keeping his distance.

“I know that I do not want to go through what my wife has gone through and is still going through,” Sheriff Hess said. “I take my temperature twice a day and it’s a big relief when it reads 98 degrees and I don’t have headaches.”

For an experienced medical care professional, COVID-19’s blow has been powerful and frightening, Ellen Hess said.

“This has been scary. If you plan to have surgery, or if you are diagnosed with a disease, you can go on the internet, talk to a doctor who’s an expert and educate yourself so you know what to expect, but this has been a moving target. You wonder, what’s going to happen next?” she said. “And a lot of the time the answer is, ‘We don’t really know.’ And they don’t.”

After treatments at the University of Virginia Medical Center restored her breathing without needing a respirator, Hess returned home.

The virus, however, was not done. Her blood pressure began rising to frightening heights with excruciating headaches.

“I’m usually around 100/50 but it was reaching 226/167 and I know that’s not good,” she said. “I started getting concerned. I went into the hospital a couple of times for treatment. The doctors said there have

been some reports of high blood pressure. There's so much they don't know, yet."

Because many aspects of the virus are still unknown, much of the early advice given to Hess was based on the behavior of other, somewhat similar viruses.

Recent studies in the U.S. show that the virus is easily transmitted by infected people in close proximity, even if they are not showing symptoms.

Early research shows that people may have the virus and transmit it to others but never become ill. They show the virus may stay airborne in a room for up to three hours and can live on metal and plastic surfaces for up to three days.

The virus is known to attack the respiratory system, causing sudden onset pneumonia that can prove fatal. But doctors in New York, Detroit and Louisiana, states that have been hard hit by the virus, say they've seen indications that the virus possibly attacks the heart, liver and kidneys, as well.

Little of that was known when nursing homes and society started locking down in March as the first wave of cases hit a nursing facility in Washington state.

The Envoy at The Village in Fluvanna initiated lockdowns and cleaning regimens, following advice from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"It was tough and disorienting for our residents because we went from having 30 to 50 voluntary activities a month to having all activities and visits end in one day," Hess recalled. "We did our best as staff to

find ways to keep them engaged, but there was a lot of anxiety about things we didn't know.”

One bit of advice the CDC had put out, that face masks were not necessary if people did not exhibit symptoms of COVID-19, was changed by the organization after further studies showed the virus could be spread by close interaction.

“This means that the virus can spread between people interacting in close proximity — for example, speaking, coughing or sneezing — even if those people are not exhibiting symptoms,” the CDC said in its masking recommendation.

That recommendation was made April 3.

On April 5, Hess began running a low-grade fever.

On April 6, she was tested.

On April 7, her test results came back positive and the couple went into quarantine.

For Sheriff Hess, it's meant staying in one side of the house while his wife holes up in another to keep a safe distance.

He fixes the meals, many of which are brought to the doorstep by friends and neighbors, and follows special procedures to clean dishes and disinfect shared areas.

“I have hazardous-materials training, so I'm lucky in that I understand a lot of the procedures,” he said.

The sheriff manages his department via telecommuting, reading reports and holding meetings online. For stress relief, he works on their farm.

“The farm has been a pain sometimes, but it’s really kept me from going crazy,” he laughed. “It’s been great therapy mowing grass, and I’ve split about three years’ worth of firewood.”

The couple said support from the community has both buoyed their spirits and kindled pride in the county.

“We’ve had so much support from people praying for us and wishing us well and bringing food and helping out. It means so much,” Ellen Hess said. “The sheriff’s office chaplain came out and stood on a porch and prayed for us and the community and the county, and that meant a lot. This is a time when you cling to those things that give you light and a sense of normalcy.”

For others, the couple recommends respecting the stay-at-home orders put in place by Gov. Ralph Northam. People don’t know how seriously the virus may affect them until they’re already in the throes of an infection, they said.

“I’m a healthy person. I’m on no medications. I have no pre-existing conditions, no comorbidities, and this has hit me hard,” Hess said.

“People need to think whether they want to take this home to their mom or their family, if they want to feel this way,” she said. “Do you want to be the one to give it to a 90-year-old person who doesn’t recover? It is that serious.”

# UVa professor helps measure the universe's dark matter

Bryan McKenzie

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It may seem more Harry Potter than Star Trek, but the universe is literally full of dark energy and dark matter, and a University of Virginia professor joined colleagues across the country to measure it.

Professor Anatoly Klypin, an expert in numerical simulations and cosmology, helped to develop a mathematical formula utilizing a lot of letters and the Greek alphabet to determine that about 69% of the universe is composed of dark energy. That leaves dark matter and matter we can see combining to make up about 31%.

If being less than a third of the universe isn't harsh enough, dark matter makes up 80% of that, which means that only about 4% of the cosmos actually can be seen, at least by humans.

“Dark matter was something that was laughed at for a very long time,” Klypin said, “but as more astronomers studied the skies, and the instruments and measurements became better, it began to be taken seriously. Same for dark energy.”

“The universe is moving. It's expanding. When studying spiral galaxies, you expect their velocity to decline as they reach the edge of

the galaxy, but it was discovered that it remained constant. The only explanation was dark matter,” he said.

There is more dark matter than one might think, but there is also less visible matter than one might hope for.

“To put that amount of matter in context, if all the matter in the universe were spread out evenly across space, it would correspond to an average mass density equal to only about six hydrogen atoms per cubic meter,” said Mohamed Abdullah, one of the authors of the team’s study. Abdullah is a graduate student in the Cal-Riverside Department of Physics and Astronomy and a student and colleague of Klypin.

Being only six hydrogen atoms per cubic meter means we are tiny.

“However, since we know 80% of matter is actually dark matter, in reality, most of this matter consists not of hydrogen atoms, but rather of a type of matter that cosmologists don’t yet understand,” Abdullah said.

That means we are both teeny and tiny.

Klypin and Abdullah’s team developed GalWeight, a tool to measure a mass of galaxy clusters using the orbits of the individual galaxies. Using an existing sky survey, they created a catalog of clusters and ran with the math to determine the matter.

“A huge advantage of the GalWeight galaxy orbit technique was that we could determine a mass for each cluster individually rather than rely on more indirect, statistical methods,” Klypin said.

Just because something makes you feel small and you can't see it, doesn't mean it isn't real. Determining the existence of dark matter took much math, including a bit of middle school geometry, plus a lot of advance proofs and thinking to track down the existence of something that no one could see.

“You don't need to look at something to know that it exists,” Klypin said. “I never saw Napoleon Bonaparte, but I know that he existed by what he left behind. If you think about our own lives, you can see some things and not see others, yet you know those things are there. You can't see the wind, but you can feel it, hear it and see the effects it has on your surroundings.”

The same applies in space, he said. For that, advanced mathematics and Newton's Law become our eyes.

“Let's say there is a mass of Klingon warships in our solar system somewhere between the Earth and the sun. We can't see them because they have cloaking devices. Those ships would have an impact on the orbit of the planets around them, as well as impacts on the sun, and all of that could be determined mathematically,” he explained.

“So when we began investigating the cosmos and galaxies, we discovered something was binding the galaxies and there should be some mass between them. Sure, it could be Klingons — you never know — but it's probably not. That mass we call dark matter.”

Dark matter and dark energy are two different things. According to cosmology — a branch of astronomy concerned with background checking the origin, evolution and future of the universe — the universe is made up of matter, radiation and dark energy.

Dark energy is hypothetical. It's believed to be a force that keeps pushing the universe outward toward wherever the universe is going. It remains constant no matter how far the universe goes.

Dark matter is the mass that holds galaxies together even as dark energy pushes them down field. It is what keeps the center of a galaxy rotating at the same rate as the edge of the galaxy.

Scientists have tried to figure out what the matter is, including developing a concept of a weakly interacting massive particle, known as a WIMP. Unfortunately, the WIMP seems to have been knocked down as a possibility as it has not been recreated in particle colliders.

“This has been a truly international effort. It would have been very difficult to complete without that spirit of collaboration,” Klypin said of GalWeight. “There are a lot of people working on these questions from all around the world. There is a lot of sharing of information and research, and new developments come quickly.”

Klypin said it is possible that research eventually will reveal the nature of dark energy and the identity of dark matter.

“Maybe in 100 years we'll develop a way to see dark matter and know what it is,” he said. “I don't know what it is, but I'm pretty sure it is not Klingon.”