

Rededication of the Kilmer Display
Joyce Kilmer Service Area
New Jersey Turnpike
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“My shoulder ache beneath my pack.”

That’s the opening line of Joyce Kilmer’s poem *Prayer Of A Soldier In France*, which was inspired by suffering endured by him and his fellow soldiers of the Old 69th Regiment as they struggled against a severe French winter while marching toward the front during what he labeled “a terrible hike” that left “bloody tracks in the white roadway.” One officer, he recorded, said the long march “made Napoleon’s retreat from Moscow look like a Fifth Avenue parade.”

Kilmer also recorded that one medical officer compared the harsh conditions to those suffered by Washington’s soldiers at Valley Forge.

That opening line is a far cry from that which opens his most famous poem: *Trees*.

“I think I shall never see
A poem lovely as a tree.”

Both written about nature: One its beauty; one its brutality.

Trees, published in 1913, was penned by the young man you see in the upper left of the panel about him. The photograph shows Kilmer exuding self-confidence and a calm demeanor.

Prayer of a Soldier...written in 1918 by the same self-confident man with the calm demeanor, is also shown as soldier, wearing an action-rumpled uniform that displays his sergeant’s rank and the characteristic steel helmet of the era.

The transition from private citizen, and noted poet to soldier and patriot is exceptional, and one you should take the time know more about than we can describe here today.

It’s a fascinating, moving and uniquely American story. And one remembered and admired to this day.

When America entered the Great War on April 6, 1917, Joyce Kilmer wanted to join the famous Fighting Sixty-Ninth not because of its Civil War fame, but because the unit's Mexican Border Campaign duty of 1916-17, as he wrote, "showed it to be the best trained and equipped fighting unit that America possessed."

Initially, Kilmer had joined the 7th Regiment, but made it known that his ambition was to be in the 69th.

Learning of this, Father Francis Patrick Duffy, the 69th's chaplain since 1914, met with Kilmer and wrote that the poet saw "what he considers a plain duty, and he is going ahead to perform it, calm and clear eyed and without the slightest regard to what the consequences may be."

Father Duffy went on to write in his 1919 book *Father Duffy's Story* that:

"I shall be glad to have him with us personally for the pleasure of his companionship and also for the sake of the regiment to have a poet and historian who will confer upon us the gift of immortality."

Kilmer was liked and respected by all in the Regiment.

Colonel William "Wild Bill" Donovan took a particular liking to the poet/soldier, because Kilmer was bright, dedicated, fearless and level-headed even under the worst of circumstances.

Joyce Kilmer could have been a commissioned officer and was offered the opportunity to train to become one many times. He refused, because he feared he'd be transferred to a different unit if he did so.

The Regiment went into the trenches for the first time in March, 1918 and immediately suffered its first losses, as explained on the tableau displayed here entitled "The 69th Regiment."

Twenty soldiers were killed when a headquarters dugout caved in as a result of enemy mortar fire. The incident was immortalized in Kilmer's poem *Rouge Bouquet*, which is also part of the display.

Portions of that poem, a moving requiem to those killed at Rouge Bouquet are read to this day at wakes of those who served in the 69th and at Regimental memorial services.

In a later battle, at the Ourcq River, on July 30, 1918, Sergeant Kilmer joined then Major Donovan on a battlefield intelligence gathering mission. At one point, Donovan went ahead while Kilmer stayed behind to record essential details on enemy emplacements.

When Donovan returned to where he last saw Kilmer, the poet/patriot had been killed by a sniper.

The entire Regiment was saddened by the loss. Here's how Albert Ettinger, a fellow soldier, put it in his remembrances. "He was such a gentleman and true patriot. He didn't have to go to war. He had a family. He was a scholar, a student, a writer: he had a brilliant career ahead of him: he was a kind and loving man in every respect."

As Father Duffy predicted, Joyce Kilmer, by his selfless service and sacrifice, did "confer the gift of immortality" upon the 69th Regiment.

To the members of the Kilmer family with us today, please know that the 69th Regiment holds his memory dear, and each Unit member is fully aware of his dedication and valor.

I'll close with the words Father Duffy wrote as a memorial to all who served in the 69th in World War I and to conclude his book.

"...in our generation, when the call came, we accepted the flag of our fathers; we have added to it new glory and renown – and we pass it on."

Joyce Kilmer did indeed add new glory to the flag of our fathers. And his legacy continues to be passed on to the new generation serving today in the Regiment he so loved.

Thank you.

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