

# **THE GREATEST TREASURE HUNT IN HISTORY**

**The Story of the Monuments Men**

by

**ROBERT M. EDSSEL**

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NEW YORK

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## CHAPTER 1

# LETTERS HOME

**Palestrina, Italy: June 1944**

The army jeep crept along the hillside road leading to Palestrina, a small Italian town about twenty miles east of Rome. Captain Deane Keller—artist, professor, husband, father, and newly assigned Monuments Man for U.S. Fifth Army—knew the path from his student days, when his painting and drawing talents had earned him the opportunity to study at the American Academy in Rome. No one was shooting at him then, but that was eighteen years ago. Recent reports detailing how German troops were using elevation and blind turns as part of their ambush-and-retreat tactics caused great concern. Determined to serve his country and return home to his wife, Kathy, and their three-year-old son, Dino, Keller and Giuseppe de Gregorio, an officer of the Carabinieri and also his driver, continued advancing up the hill, cautiously.

After rounding a bend in the road, Keller grabbed Giuseppe's arm and told him to stop. He was out of the jeep before it came to a halt. About one hundred feet ahead, lying facedown in the road, was the body of an American soldier. As Keller approached, he thought of a phrase he had once heard used to describe a corpse: "sweetish smell." There was nothing sweet in the air on this hot



Deane Keller and his son, Dino.

June day. Despite the overpowering and nauseating stench, he continued walking.

Those one hundred feet felt like a mile. With each step Keller thought about “the boys,” as he referred to them in his letters to Kathy. They had been fighting their way up the Italian peninsula since landing at Salerno in September 1943, taking one hill after another. Some were the age of his art students at Yale University. He wasn’t sure why he felt such paternal feelings of pride for them. Maybe it was a consequence of being forty-two years old. Maybe it was being five thousand miles away from his own son, unable to be the father that he had envisioned. Seeing the young men in uniform—“the boys” driving the tanks, the infantry soldiers crouching behind them, and this brave warrior lying in the road—reminded him of Dino.

As he knelt beside the young man’s body, Keller noticed something in the overturned helmet. Wedged inside the helmet liner was an airmail envelope addressed to the soldier’s mother. Keller wiggled the envelope out of the webbing. As best he could tell, the letter had been hurriedly written, perhaps before or even during battle. All he could do at this point was make sure it was posted.

Keller, like all the soldiers he’d met, relished receiving mail from home. Letters were the sole connective tissue—a lifeline of hope—for soldiers separated by time and distance from family and close friends. Even those containing the most dreaded news were preferred to the heartache and gnawing pain of no news at all.

Keller recalled a letter he’d received from his mother before beginning his assignment as a Monuments Man that filled him with pride and emboldened him for the difficult days he knew were ahead. Standing next to the body of this American soldier,



caressing a letter to a mother that contained the last earthly thoughts of her son, was just such a day.

Military service “is a big sacrifice for you,” he remembered his mother writing, “but I am thankful you can see beyond that to realize the great need for good men to help. I believe you will never regret it for your own sake and the sake of Dino. He says proudly now—‘My Daddy’s a sojer.’ I don’t know who told him that—but I suppose he saw you in that first uniform.”

On the long dust-filled drive back to headquarters, with the dead soldier’s letter inside his shirt pocket pressed against his chest, Keller closed his eyes for what seemed like just a few minutes, lost in thought about all that had happened since leaving his teaching position at Yale to get into the fight.

### **New Haven, Connecticut: May 1943**

In May 1943, as the end of the semester approached, Keller finally received a reply from the Marine Corps. “Rejected: poor eyesight,” or so they said. Admittedly, at 5 feet 7 and 170 pounds, with a grayish tint to his hair and the stereotypical wire-rimmed glasses of a professor, he was hardly the strapping figure of youth that so frequently passed through the recruiting office. Then a well-timed letter from a colleague, Tubby Sizer, the former director of the Yale University Art Gallery, mentioned a newly created art protection unit that would comprise soldiers charged with saving rather than destroying. In Keller’s mind, that sounded just right. At the end of his letter, Tubby tried to preempt Keller’s natural tendency. “Don’t be so damned MODEST,” he wrote. “Put it on thick.” Keller did, and it worked.

By the time Keller reported to Fort Myer, Virginia, for active duty in late September 1943, circumstances in Italy had changed dramatically. Operation Husky, the successful invasion of Sicily by U.S., British, and Canadian forces that began on July 10, resulted in the removal from office of Benito Mussolini, known as “Il Duce,” the leader of Fascist Italy and Adolf Hitler’s most important ally.

The battlefield then shifted to the Italian mainland, and within days, Italy signed an armistice agreement with the Allies. Hitler was enraged that his former ally had surrendered. He immediately transferred one million German soldiers to Italy to build a series of defensive lines that stretched across the Italian peninsula between Rome and Naples, intended to slow the Allied advance and make it as costly and bloody as possible. The war was now going to be fought in a country that contained millions of works of art, monuments, and churches, placing some of the greatest masterpieces of Western civilization at risk of being destroyed. It was a recipe for disaster.

Following a month of orientation and training at Fort Myer, Captain Deane Keller boarded a Liberty ship bound for North Africa. Like his 550 shipmates, including many young soldiers headed into combat, he felt proud, excited, and scared. On December 2, 1943, after more than three weeks at sea, he reached his temporary home, an army Civil Affairs training school in the remote hillside town of Tizi Ouzou, Algeria.

The kaleidoscope of fall color of the Virginia countryside was just a memory now. Standing in this desolate Algerian town, all Keller could see were colorless clusters of half-finished buildings and an abundance of braying donkeys and bleating goats. The sound of a familiar voice over his shoulder caught him by surprise.

He turned around, shaking his head in disbelief, and smiled: Standing before him was Major Tubby Sizer, the man who had encouraged him to join the new art protection unit and become a Monuments Man.

Sizer had been among the first selected to serve as a Monuments Man. The army had created the Civil Affairs school, where Keller now found himself, to educate American and British officers about military government and how to run a town once combat troops moved on. With their training now complete, Sizer, fellow American Captain Norman Newton, and British Monuments Man Captain Teddy Croft-Murray were on their way to Naples, Italy.

Despite the obvious good intentions of leaders in Washington and the Monuments Men at Tizi Ouzou, everyone questioned whether the mission could succeed. Would Allied commanders listen to the recommendations of middle-aged art history professors or architects to direct artillery fire *away from* a church or monument when being fired upon? Would Allied troops respect signs the Monuments Men posted making churches and historical buildings off-limits, even if it meant sleeping outside in the rain? And how could just eight Monuments Men, in an army of more than two hundred thousand soldiers, protect even a portion of the works of art and monuments in culturally rich Italy? After eight weeks of training, Keller was on his way to Naples to find out.

Keller's initial duties involved inspections of nearby towns and villages. These experiences left him feeling sad, not because of the extent of destruction, but out of sympathy for what the Italian people had endured. As an artist, he had always admired the country's beauty and boundless creative achievements, but it was the



Italian people who had won his heart so many years earlier. “*Buona gente, buonissima gente, ma bisogna saperla prendere.*’ Good people, very good people,” he always told his students and the soldiers he met, “but you have to know how to take them.”

During one inspection, Keller visited a hospital where he saw a man without a nose. In its place were two holes. Before the war, had he seen someone in such sad condition, he would have looked away. But sights such as this were all too common during war. Now, each wounded child, destroyed home, and damaged town made him realize how sheltered and privileged his life had been.

The severity of fighting at the town of Cassino, about seventy miles northwest of their headquarters in Naples, had Allied forces pinned down and the Monuments Men waiting until the battle was over. The only practical route into central Italy, and the big prize, Rome, required passage through the Liri Valley. That meant contending with an impregnable mountain bastion overlooking the entire valley, the Abbey of Monte Cassino—and the Germans knew it.

Every effort had been made to avoid damage to the abbey, but General Dwight D. Eisenhower’s December 29, 1943, order concerning the protection of cultural treasures made it clear: “If we have to choose between destroying a famous building and sacrificing our own men, then our men’s lives count infinitely more and the buildings must go.” On the morning of February 15, waves of Allied bombers severely damaged the abbey, but the fighting continued for three more bloody months.

Norman Newton was the first Monuments Man to reach the heavily mined and booby-trapped abbey, still under fire from enemy mortars, just hours after the remaining Germans had been

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ALLIED FORCE HEADQUARTERS

Office of The Commander-in-Chief

AG 000.4-1

29 December 1943

SUBJECT: Historical Monuments

TO : All Commanders

Today we are fighting in a country which has contributed a great deal to our cultural inheritance, a country rich in monuments which by their creation helped and now in their old age illustrate the growth of the civilization which is ours. We are bound to respect those monuments so far as war allows.

If we have to choose between destroying a famous building and sacrificing our own men, then our men's lives count infinitely more and the buildings must go. But the choice is not always so clear-cut as that. In many cases the monuments can be spared without any detriment to operational needs. Nothing can stand against the argument of military necessity. That is an accepted principle. But the phrase "military necessity" is sometimes used where it would be more truthful to speak of military convenience or even of personal convenience. I do not want it to cloak slackness or indifference.

It is a responsibility of higher commanders to determine through A.M.G. Officers the locations of historical monuments whether they be immediately ahead of our front lines or in areas occupied by us. This information passed to lower echelons through normal channels places the responsibility on all Commanders of complying with the spirit of this letter.

/s/ Dwight D. Eisenhower

DWIGHT D. EISENHOWER,  
 General, U. S. Army,  
 Commander-in-Chief.

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