

The War Department Regrets . . .

by VICTOR BOESEN



TO THE WAR and Navy Departments, few urgencies among human considerations of the times are more important than the certain, speedy and proper delivery to relatives of messages pertaining to loved ones in the armed forces. At the nation's entry into war, Western Union became the quasi-official notification agency for distributing the word which, to the family of the man involved, is of far more immediate interest than the rise and fall of nations.

Certain procedures were agreed upon under which delivery of each casualty telegram would be treated as a message to Garcia, and the shock of its receipt made as gentle as possible. To these original rules more are being added from the lessons of experience. It was soon learned, for example, that delivery late at night kept people awake in a sorrow that could just as well be spared them until morning. The military departments therefore ordered that no deliveries be made between the hours of ten at night and seven in the morning.

The uppermost concern always is

War Department Regrets . . .

to be kind, and the essence of this compassion is expressed in the company's instructions to its messengers: "Your contribution in lessening the sorrow can be exemplified by the care and consideration accorded these messages. Give each casualty message the same painstaking handling you would want it to have if it were addressed to you."

Delivery must be in written form, and never by mail or telephone save in exceptional circumstances. If the addressee lives in the country, or any other place not regularly served by telegraph, a special messenger, such as a rural mail carrier off duty, is carefully selected for the task; and any extra charges for this service must never be collected from the recipient but are made good by fixed arrangement with the Washington senders.

A variant of this procedure for handling remote deliveries is to telephone the message to someone in the neighborhood of the addressee: the postmaster, garage man, storekeeper, druggist; and he, in turn, is instructed to take the message down on paper before delivering it, telling the recipient that the original will follow by mail.

If the first messenger reports the person not at the address given, Washington is checked to see if there has been an error in transmission. Then a second or even a third messenger is sent out, on the theory that resourcefulness differs among individuals. All these failing, the message progresses through the look-up clerk at the branch office handling the wire, the main office look-up clerk, who has numerous directories at his disposal; the manager of the delivery depart-

War Department Regrets . . .

ment, and finally it goes to the city superintendent, who is a sort of Scotland Yard man taking over an assignment after provincial detectives have failed.

A message came into a Los Angeles branch one day directed to the mother of a paratrooper killed in Italy. The mother had moved from the address given, and all efforts to find her came to nothing. When the search had graduated to the downtown office, the superintendent consulted the city directory. This gave the address in hand but added the clue that the dead man had been a "messenger." Perhaps a messenger for Western Union? He had indeed, some 15 years before, and from the record of his employment a lead was found which led to his mother.

In the course of the progression from branch office to main office, draft and rationing boards serving the neighborhood of the address are called upon. Inquiries are made at the local school, the fire and police stations, stores, the post office, any other source which might have knowledge of the person's whereabouts. Sometimes an entire block is canvassed house to house.

In seeking the help of other agencies, the company has cautioned that the nature of the message is not to be disclosed except as this may stimulate better cooperation, and then only with the understanding that the information is confidential and not to be discussed lest it reach its destination ahead of the official notice.

If all measures fail at the moment, there is still hope from the advertising which thorough inquiry gives to a quest. Often this is re-

War Department Regrets . . .

warded by voluntary clues from persons who hear of the search afterward. In Los Angeles, following a hunt in which every doorbell for a block in all directions from the address listed had been rung, someone phoned in the information wanted. People who ordinarily are slow to bestir themselves usually are anxious to help when the message has to do with a war casualty.

THE SAME emphasis given to finding a person is placed upon the manner in which the telegram is delivered into his hands. Before setting out with a casualty telegram, the regular messenger is told that it pertains to someone in the military service overseas so that, though remaining outwardly impersonal and hinting nothing of the wire's contents before it is opened, he will be alert to any reaction in which he may be helpful. But he is cautioned not to intrude himself and to withdraw at once if he senses that he is not wanted. Most people resent the presence of strangers at these times, which is why no arrangement has been made with such groups as the Red Cross, the American Legion or the clergy to accompany messengers on these deliveries.

Every casualty message is stamped with two red stars in front of the address, which means that the messenger must obtain a signature for its receipt. Thus, he is forbidden to place it under the door or in the mail chute if no one answers the door. He will leave a notice telling of the wire and return it to the office.

Such notices are usually responded to by telephone, and the caller

War Department Regrets . . .

invariably asks that it be read to him. To do so is forbidden, unless circumstances indicate this to be a wiser course than making the caller wait until physical delivery can be made. Usually such exceptions are allowed only in the case of men.

One day a woman called the Hollywood branch in response to a notice left on her door. She identified herself as the grandmother of a boy in the service from that household who previously had been reported missing. She sensed that this second telegram would confirm their worst fears, and insisted that it be read to her over the phone, "before my daughter comes home. I can take it, she can't," she said. Her voice was firm. "Is he dead?"

The woman at Western Union who had taken the call hesitated. She had known the shock of personal tragedy in her own life. "Are you alone?" she inquired.

"Yes, but it's all right."

The grandmother was then told as gently as possible, "You won't have to worry about him any longer."

Similarly there are times when the rule against late night delivery may be broken. Not all telegrams relating to war casualties bring bad news. A message arrived at the Hollywood office after the delivery deadline one night, but it told a mother that her son was a prisoner of Germany. The staff correctly deduced that a "missing" notice had previously gone to the mother and that therefore this news would be a relief.

It was 11 o'clock by the time a messenger got out to the house. The mother, an aircraft worker, was asleep but she was tearfully

War Department Regrets . . .

happy to be aroused for the news that her son was alive. For five weeks she had known only that he was missing.

Much of how a casualty message is put into the next of kin's hands necessarily rests with the messenger, who is expected to use his good sense when the situation, as often happens, is outside those anticipated by prepared rules. People seldom react alike to the impact of grief. Their responses run the whole gamut of emotions. A Hollywood mother, receiving the news that her son was dead, crushed the paper in her hand and looking beyond the messenger, said, "If it hadn't been my son, it would have been some other mother's."

Family members who take the news easiest, some messengers have concluded, are the war brides. Perhaps this is because there isn't time for the relationship to ripen before the young husbands go off to war. Often, no doubt, theirs is the grief too deep for tears. One young wife, having read the fatal telegram, stood bewildered a few moments, then quietly asked the messenger to accompany her to her mother's house next door.

Hardest hit on the whole, despite the company's deference to women, are the men. Typical was the reaction of a casualty's brother, who turned pale and began to shake violently as he took the wire at the door. The messenger asked him to look after his mother, who was coming forward from a rear room, but in the end it was the mother who took care of the brother.

When a man receives bad news, according to the observations of one messenger, he turns to a woman

War Department Regrets . . .

for support. The moment a father sees the two red stars through the window of the envelope, he cries out for mother, even though the woman is his wife. "When a man's in trouble," says this observer, "his wife is his mother."

The work calls for ready resourcefulness in the messenger, and for this reason the older men who stepped into the breach throughout Western Union's system after the youngsters disappeared into uniform or factory, have worked out advantageously for this grim task.

Called "couriers" and wearing no uniforms, these men are up to 70 years old. They emerged from pensioned retirement, or are taking time out from business or profession for a few hours each day in order to have a part in the common struggle. Most have sons or grandsons in the service.

These men may not get around so fast, but the company values their mature experience as something quite as important as speed in the handling of casualty messages. Unlike youngsters, they have experienced the meaning of grief and are as touched by the pain of it in others as if it were their own. In one courier's words—"When people read these things, there's a look comes into their eyes that haunts me even after I'm back at the office."

It is something of this same feeling in the military departments and Western Union which has moved them to make it as easy as possible for those learning that they have paid war's greatest cost.

Coronet
September, 1944

p. 3

OldMagazineArticles.com