

The third in a series of essays featured in conjunction with Greenwich Faces the Great War

# Col. J. Alden Twachtman: Artist as Soldier

By Karin J. Crooks, Volunteer Researcher

In spring 1914, the future shone for John Alden Twachtman (1882–1974), eldest child of American Impressionist and nucleus of the Cos Cob art colony, John Henry Twachtman (1853–1902). Wealthy patrons nationwide increasingly commissioned architectural murals from this Yale School of Fine Arts graduate who had studied architecture at L’Ecole des Beaux-Arts. Returning to Greenwich in 1911 to build a small home for his family atop his mother’s Round Hill Road property, Alden co-founded the Greenwich Society of Artists in 1912, the Greenwich Riding Association in 1913 and the Greenwich Bird Protective Society in 1914.

Alden’s mother Martha was traveling in France just before the Great War was ignited on June 28. Shock from Germany’s invasion of Belgium and horror from its army’s treatment of Belgian and French civilians and destruction of their cultural treasures immediately arose amongst the Greenwich artists who had lived and studied there over the past decades, including the Twachtman family. By October 1914, the War’s shadow loomed, as Alden’s wife Louise wrote in her diary, “We are going to have a baby in March! ... And Eric [their eldest] is strong and very happy. There is only the horror of the War hovering over us...”

In February 1916, risking his regular income stream, Alden enlisted as a private in the Connecticut National Guard, Battery F, 10th Military Field Artillery, a unit composed of mainly Greenwich men. This was not his first military experience. Like many Yale students stirred by the Spanish-American War, Alden served with the C.N.G. from 1898 to 1900. Even earlier, growing up in Cincinnati, Ohio, until age seven, Alden was exposed to tales of the Civil War. Alden’s immigrant grandfather,



*Twachtman in 1913, wearing riding clothes (photograph from private collection) and in 1919 wearing army uniform.*

Christian Twachtman, trained in the German military, served in a local militia during the Civil War defending the German sector from the Confederate troops on Cincinnati’s doorstep. Christian had raised his family along Washington Park, where city troops drilled and German emigrants strongly supported the Union cause. Ironically, in 1917, Alden would be fighting against his father’s own German kinfolk.

In preparation for a Mexican war, Battery F was called into service in June 1916, and Alden was appointed a second lieutenant, commencing his rapid rise in the officer ranks. After training in Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, he was made captain of Batteries E and F before embarking for El Paso, Texas. Popular and resourceful, Alden would draw on his architectural skills to train his men



*(Above) The Twachtman home on Round Hill Road, circa 1970, courtesy of James B. Baker. (Right) Louise Twachtman (wearing Twachtman’s tag) on house steps with her two sons, 1918. From the collection of Arthur P. Twachtman, Historical Society Archives.*





Logo of Yankee Division and 103rd Field Artillery Regiment in which Twachtman served.

in superior artillery speed and accuracy, on his expert horsemanship to manage the transportation of artillery and on his rich cultural background to keep the men entertained in down times.

Soon after returning from Mexico, Alden's batteries were drafted into service for the Great War, and in August 1917, absorbed into the 103rd Field Artillery regiment (the only "heavy artillery" unit) of the new 26th ("Yankee") Division of the American Expeditionary Forces, composed entirely of National Guard units from New England. After further training in 155 mm howitzers at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Alden was promoted to the rank of major as commanding officer, third battalion, September 1917, before embarking for Coëtquidan, France. There the 103rd F.A. trained with French troops, and he wrote to his mother Martha, "I cannot tell you how strange it feels to be over here in your France near places we have been in, to be an army officer this time with 500 men under me and artillery of immense strength... It is my right and duty as an American... to be in this fight, the greatest crusade this mind could imagine..." With like spirit, Louise had bid farewell to

**Go—and my heart goes with you**

**To fight on the fields of France**

**It's the only way I can enter the fray**

**You shall carry my will as your lance.**

**Go—and I shall not falter**

**When you join in the grim advance**

**And God give me grit to do my bit**

**At home—while my heart's  
in France.**

*Poem by Louise Twachtman for Alden, October 15, 1917 entry from the diary of Louise Twachtman, collection of Eric and Sally Twachtman.*

him on October 8: "...we saw them off from the Boxford station — Alden stood on the platform of the rear car. He looked superb — Pride dried the tears in my heart before they reached my eyes." She would wear his dog tags from captain rank around her neck on a satin ribbon until he returned.

As the 103rd F.A. slogged through engagements in the tiny sector of the Western Front where the A.E.F. fought from February to November 11, 1918, Alden rose to full colonel and earned a division citation of gallantry for his courage during the Chateau-Thierry drive as well as the Army's Distinguished Service Medal for his "courage, marked ability and leadership qualities... [rendering] maximum support to the infantry to which he was attached, thereby contributing in a large measure to their successes" in the Aisne-Marne, St.-Mihiel and Meuse-Argonne offensives. In April 1919, Col. Twachtman returned to Greenwich, his family and his profession as architect and artist.

Sketch by Col. J. Alden Twachtman, entitled "Lest We Forget," printed in Life Magazine, 1922.



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*A longer version of this essay will be available on line at [www.greenwichhistory.org](http://www.greenwichhistory.org).*