Muscular Christian, military hero John Williams Overton in the Great War

Karl Miran

Abstract: John Williams Overton, one of 8.5 million World War I dead, was widely seen as a hero when killed at the Second Battle of the Marne. Seizing the opportunities available to him in the military (as he had earlier done at his boarding school and university), his talent and engaging spirit allowed him to stand out among his peers. He benefitted greatly from American boarding schools’ adoption of athletics as a tool to develop leaders through the virtues of “Muscular Christianity”. A late-blooming athlete, he nonetheless came to prominence at The Hill School and at Yale, exhibiting characteristics of the modern superstar (think: Joe Namath “guaranteeing” victory in Super Bowl III, LeBron James tossing up chalk before a game). When his athletic celebrity allowed him a fast track to an officer’s position in the Marines he modeled the lessons of his coaches, and the image of his boyhood hero Stonewall Jackson to earn his men’s loyalty. Leading his men across no-man’s land he was struck by a piece of shrapnel and died. The value of re-telling Overton’s story is the light it sheds on our society’s notion of heroes and the ethos that supports sport as a character-building educational enterprise.

Subjects: Military History; Sports Psychology; Sports History; Sports Coaching; Secondary Physical Education; Track and Field Athletics; History of Education; Theory of Education

Keywords: Overton; muscular Christianity; boarding school; Yale; World War I; USMC; track & field

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karl Miran has spent his career as a coach and athletic director, at both colleges and independent schools, including 12 years at a boarding school. An American History major in college, he has read widely in the history of sport. Miran was Athletic Director at The Hill School in 2005 when he first heard of John Williams Overton’s story, and was inspired by a scrapbook from Overton’s boarding school years, a gift from the family. Diving into that, and the wealth of primary sources present at both Yale and around Nashville, Tennessee inspired him to use the research and analytical tools learned decades ago as a college student in the service of issues that confront his profession today: what is the value of school sports? Does building a better athlete create a better person? Are the myths surrounding sport true, or just “useful fiction”?

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Do sports build character and teach life lessons? Such notions support the wide-spread participation in school sports. Thus, when I encountered the life story of an early athletic hero, it forced me to re-examine the myths surrounding sport. When the core of the John Williams Overton story was passed to me by Dave Johnson (director of the Penn Relays) it resembled an old-school inspirational tale. “The first well-known celebrity to die in World War I”, an under-achieving youth; he became a champion, a leader, and a hero, dying tragically.

More significantly, Overton ran and fought during the formative era of American sport, so his exploits and those of men like him were used to create the “Muscular Christianity” myths that supported the spread of school sports. Thus, the myth itself and the role of heroes in supporting societies’ myths are the final takeaways from this life story.
The life and death of John Williams Overton is of interest to anyone who participates in the ongoing debate concerning the educational value of sport. Since the foundation of school sports in the mid-18th century, schools have promoted the educational benefits of athletic participation, often summarized as "sports build character." Today, organizations ranging from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and the Positive Coaching Alliance to the National Federation of High Schools continue to claim that sports help the athlete grow up more employable and more moral. Opposing those claims are legions of social scientists, who cite studies showing no empirical proof of such benefits. Depending on one’s viewpoint, Overton’s story can be read two ways: as a validation of the educational value of sports or as an illustration of the larger forces that shape an individual’s character and success in life.

Before John Overton died as a Marine lieutenant at the Second Battle of the Marne, leading his men across no-man’s land, he was a star athlete (Hill School ’13, Yale ’17). In those early years of American sport schools openly linked the value of their track, baseball, and football programs to the development of “Muscular Christianity”. That philosophy has been secularized and adapted to different social mores over the years, but many of its tenets are still espoused by the sports-build-character defenders. As a movement, Muscular Christianity benefited from having heroes, particularly men like Overton. An attractive, winning athlete, he was portrayed as exemplifying the virtues of “moral and physical strength” (NY Times, 20 April 1922). A look at Overton’s development into an athletic hero, and his transformation into a military hero, does not prove or disprove the value of school sports. The story can, however, help the reader to understand the Muscular Christianity movement, and to better understand the ideas (such as our notions of competition, sportsmanship, and the role of athletics in a complete education) that evolved from it. In this story, Overton appears as a young man seeking the success and status that most young men crave. His accomplishments, as a runner and as a Marine lieutenant not only granted him that status but also cast him temporarily as a hero, whose life was to be an example for others.

1. Winning their loyalty
May 1918, Gondrecourt, France: A special event made an “off-day” meaningful for several battalions of the U.S. Marine 6th Regiment. Instead of a day of training, they were competing against American and French army soldiers in a track meet, a typical addition to American Expeditionary Force training. These Marines had yet to see combat, although they had endured 9–10 months of training. Boredom, drudgery, fear, and homesickness were certainly present at that point as their introduction to combat neared. (Most members of the 6th Regiment would be introduced to combat in June, at Belleau Wood.) To make matters worse, their morale had suffered weeks earlier, when they challenged an Army team to a baseball game, losing the game and all the money that they had wagered against their Army colleagues.

In retrospect, the energy of those American “Doughboys” would be seen as an indispensable factor in the eventual Allied victory on the Western Front but on that day in May, those troops were still unproven. For one 2nd lieutenant named John Williams Overton the “field day” was an opportunity to build the loyalty and respect of his men, to create the bonds that would enable commanders like him to channel that raw, almost reckless, energy into a disciplined fighting force.

Before enlisting, Overton had won national collegiate championships in track and cross-country and held several world records. He organized the meet, and also coached the Marines’ team. He worked tirelessly to train the Marines in the weeks leading up to the race and also used his knowledge of the sport to administer a first-class event. His approach to building his trainees’ confidence, physical prowess, and teamwork relied on the lessons he had absorbed in his youth at boarding school: sport done properly builds men, muscular Christian men qualified to lead Western society. Doing sport the right way entailed harnessing the athlete’s emotional reservoir, “firing him up”, but also celebrating and sharing the joy of competition and victory. He modeled his work on the coaches who had molded him at The Hill School and at Yale. To borrow from the apocryphal
quote, attributed to the Duke of Wellington, he was using the athletic perspective he learned on “the playing fields of The Hill School” to help win World War I.

Drawing on the methods of his first track coach, Michael Sweeney, Johnny taught his troops not only the techniques, but also the emotional approach needed for success in competition. His coaching had a positive impact on the Leathernecks, who won the meet.

His most dramatic contribution to his troops, however, came as a surprise. During the meet a rumor spread that the French Ministry of War had decided on a to-be-defined special event (with a thousand-franc prize) to conclude the day’s competition. General Alexander, the Depot Division Commander, decreed that Overton would run a mile versus a 3-man relay team composed of the Army men who placed highest in the mile run earlier in the day, triggering many side-bets between Army and Marine soldiers (encouraged by Overton). Although his eventual victory was a great boost to his men’s spirit, the manner in which Overton won the race only enhanced their delight, even if it created a moment of dramatic stress for the Marines who had put their money on him. Demonstrating his familiar graceful stride, he managed to maintain the pace of the first two Army runners, each of whom ran a quarter-mile. At the half-mile mark (as the last Army man was beginning his leg) Overton confounded the Marines by kneeling and calmly re-lacing his running shoes. Already well behind when he arose, he gradually closed the gap, dramatically passing his opponent on the final straightaway. As in his civilian days, he gestured to the crowd (a large number of Frenchmen, in addition to military personnel, lined the track); if he could enhance the crowd’s reaction, so much the better. In the celebration, Overton donated his thousand francs to be divided among the battalion. (Evans, 1920)

Overton had proven himself a hero to his soldiers, as their post-mortem tributes made clear. When he was killed two months later by a piece of shrapnel which struck him while he was leading his men across a field at the Second Battle of the Marne newspapers across the U.S. mourned his death. He was the first American celebrity to die in the conflict, so his death made real for many Americans the sacrifice that would be required in America’s first European war of the 20th Century.

Overton fits many of the accepted literary and sociological descriptions of a hero. Joseph Campbell explains that heroes of different cultures are spring from the same psychic human need, and thus possess similar characteristics. Among the most basic similarities, “Popular tales represent the heroic action as physical, the heroic action to be moral” (Campbell, 2014, p.2). In systematizing Campbell’s ideas, Christopher Vogler writes, “A hero is someone who is willing to sacrifice his own needs on behalf of others.” (Vogler, 2014, p. 29). He lists five characteristics of heroes:

Growth/Action/Sacrifice/Dealing with death/Character flaws

Vogler asserts that many heroes demonstrate one or two of the above characteristics, but Overton’s story demonstrates all five (Vogler, 2014, pp. 31–32).

Overton’s life was shaped by two well-documented social forces in American life: the adoption by independent schools of athletics as a means of inculcating values and leadership and the tremendous enthusiasm with which students at the elite colleges and universities enlisted in the military when the United States entered World War I. Had he been born earlier, his athletic talents would likely not have been developed at school, nor would they have won him a high social standing among his peers. But, by the time Overton entered The Hill School, prep schools had
within the previous generation built fields, tracks, and gymnasiums, hired trained coaches, and
developed organizations to provide and regulate competitions. Just as importantly, they had
developed an ideology about the value of sport that supported the goals of a liberal arts education.
This ideology, originally promoted as “Muscular Christianity”, sought to develop effective leaders
who would ensure the growth and international superiority of Anglo-American civilization. Selling
the ideals of Muscular Christianity required heroes, a role that Overton assumed in school, and in
the military. Like other heroes in early 20th-Century America, he served as a model “for the way
people should be and act”, in the words of Sociologist Orrin Klapp. (Klapp, 1954, p.7) Klapp
described five categories of hero; Overton would likely fit with Babe Ruth, Jim Thorpe, and other
athletic “splendid performers”. In fact, Klapp notes that the growing importance of athletes as role
models was a feature of the Twentieth Century (Klapp, 1954, pp. ix-xii).

His transition from athletic celebrity to respected lieutenant was made easier because the
leaders of the American military in World War I had adopted a training philosophy very similar
to the Muscular Christian ethos that guided boarding school athletics. By winning with style and
a smile, he made himself a very attractive character that his peers were happy to look up to. The
Marines included pictures showing Overton’s good looks in their publications as they sought to
strengthen their image in the mind of the public. Image 1 The Hill, Yale, and the Marine Corps all
associated a wide range of desired moral virtues to the heroes they used to promote Muscular
Christianity. Overton did not and could not live up to all of those virtues but it was enough that he
provided a winning image that personified and justified the vision of those institutions.

Some insight into the ethos of sport can be obtained from the contrast between the myth of the
Muscular Christian hero and the desires that drove the real man. Overton as a young man was
motivated to achieve success and status in the world in which he found himself. Athletics provided him an avenue to success, so he grabbed that opportunity.

2. His roots: growing up an Overton in Nashville

Overton's early years provide few indications of his eventual hero narrative, but his membership in a prominent family and his desire to become a star athlete were likely important to his story. John Williams Overton was born October 10, 1894 into a family that had been leaders in Nashville and Memphis since Tennessee’s days as a territory. The Overtons made their mark in industry, agriculture, law, government, and real estate. Today, one can find Overton High School, Overton Park, and Overton County in various parts of the state. More than wealth, what set the family apart was their record, in every generation, of genuine accomplishment and meaningful public service.

John Williams Overton’s lineage in Tennessee stretched back to his great-grandfather, Judge Overton, a lawyer and land speculator, who codified much of Tennessee’s law prior to statehood, helped develop Memphis, and served as the leading adviser to Andrew Jackson in his campaign for the Presidency. His grandfather, John Jr., built the famed Maxwell House hotel in downtown Nashville (noted for its coffee) and served as a director of the Tennessee-Alabama Railroad. His father built profitable mining and manufacturing companies, while also succeeding as a livestock breeder. He served on numerous civic boards.

From their business success, the Overtons left their mark on the landscape outside Nashville. The Judge developed the 2300-acre Travelers Rest plantation, which served as a favored destination for prominent men traveling west during the early years of the 19th Century. With the portion of that land that passed to him via inheritance, John Williams’ Overton’s father Jesse built a working livestock farm and estate named Overton Hall, the site of his childhood. As in the Judge’s day, many of the era’s leading men came to call; while growing up, John was exposed to guests including John Jacob Astor, Cornelius Vanderbilt, Charles W. Eliot, George W. Goethals, Joseph Warner, and other prominent national and local figures. (Overton, Jesse Maxwell Papers)

The historical record of Overton’s childhood in this environment gives some indication as to his later development, but no guarantee that he would become a world-class athlete. He grew up with two sisters (Elizabeth, one year older; and Harriet, three years younger). Both would later marry Yale men, an indication of intersection of education and family among American elites in the early Twentieth Century. Until 1909 he attended a small, private day school near Nashville. The family spent part of every summer in the mountains at Bon-Air, Tennessee, near the site of the coal company’s mines. His father would later give credit to those mountains for building Johnny’s endurance. (Overton, Jesse Maxwell Papers) His energy and spirit (often noted by his contemporaries) are evident in the picture below, fresh from a dip in the lake at Bon-Air, in the company of Lucia Burch, an early romantic interest. Image 2

As a youth, Overton greatly desired athletic success but was frustrated by his slowness and lack of skill relative to his contemporaries. Although he tried football, baseball, and other sports, he was never seen as one of the better players. The young John Overton came home in tears one day, upset that his team had lost a relay race at school, and that his classmates had blamed him, calling him clumsy. His father was unable to offer comfort, except to tell him that none of the Overtons or Maxwells had displayed athletic talent or speed. According to Jesse, the only physical genetic inheritance that the Overtons shared was big feet—not a trait that would contribute to speed. (Overton, Jesse Maxwell Papers)

3. Finding his niche at the hill school

Overton’s four years at boarding school is where his image as a hero began to form. After a few years as an unremarkable student, known more for his spiritedness than for his academic or athletic accomplishments, Overton matured, under the guidance of a respected mentor, into one of the more respected boys in his class, largely due to his late-developing athletic stardom.
In the fifty years before Overton arrived at boarding school, The Hill and the other elite boarding schools had developed the role of athletics. Schools had two reasons for embracing sports: adding physical rigor to the students’ day (thereby minimizing the risk of the boys’ misbehavior) and finding another way to teach the lessons of morality and civic virtues that the schools had always sought to imbue (Bundgaard, 2005, pp 7–9). It was a particularly fortuitous coincidence for John Williams Overton, as sports gave him an arena in which he earned prominence, first among his boarding school mates, later among the American public.

Like the other top-rank American boarding schools, The Hill’s mission had evolved from that of the schools established by New England Puritans in colonial days. As one historian has noted, “New England Puritans pioneered in the field of education as a means of shaping the individual to a psychological acquiescence in the norms of the community, to educating him ... for citizenship” (Ziff, 1973, pp. 50, 68). Of course, the academies also existed to teach the skills and perspectives needed to succeed in international trade. At one time there were 6000 (mostly small) private academies in the U.S. The number of private academies had shrunk significantly by the start of the Civil War, partially because of the spread of public education. Nonetheless, the most prestigious and successful schools grew and thrived, partially because of their alumni’s success at top-ranked universities. Although their Puritan world view originally discouraged most forms of play, the schools that survived into the mid-19th Century “also developed and refined the theory and practice of athletics as a character-building educational enterprise in this country” by adopting “the Renaissance traditions of the English courtly gentleman and the British public schools.” (Bundgaard, 2005, p. 5)

American boarding schools borrowed and adapted the practices of Rugby, Eton, and Harrow, because they held similar fears as did the British concerning the capability of men to provide...
leadership in the new world emerging in the 19th Century. Muscular Christianity, as promoted in England by Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley, was a philosophy dedicated to providing vibrant, masculine leadership for both the Anglican Church and the British Empire’s civil service, as the British upper class worried that the generation coming of age was too soft, and lacking in masculinity, to properly adopt those roles. As those concerns crossed the Atlantic, they mingled with other worries of the white American upper classes, involving race and gender. Some saw a diminution of avenues for masculine passion endangering “race suicide”, as though the white race (defined as Anglo-Saxon) would fall behind the growing number of Irish, Slavic and Mediterranean immigrants. Others saw a danger of male influence fading, as society became more feminized. In Henry James’ *The Bostonians* (1886), Basil Random worries, “The masculine tone is passing out of the world. It’s a feminine, a nervous, hysterical, cackling, carking age” (Crain, 2002). Due to industrialization and social change, the new roles available to men in the workplace and in the family were perceived as possessing less power, independence, influence, and authority than those held by their fathers or grandfathers.

By the turn of the century, American boarding schools and colleges faced increasing pressure to defend their traditional mission of developing “the compleat man” (Sweeney M, Bronze Plaque) as many Americans fretted about the perceived feminization of society. William Few, the first President of Duke University writing in the *Sewanee Review* in 1904, promoted the role of Athletics in countering “the softer and effeminate ideals of life...and in promoting those qualities —masculine, elemental, savage if you will, that belong to uncivilized men, but that should not be entirely lost in the most advanced state of civilization.” (Few, 1904)

Fostering masculinity was a more difficult task in the late Nineteenth Century partially because the concept of manhood was evolving. Anthony Rotundo describes the evolution of the American notion of “the good man”. For example, the original Puritan ideal of “communal manhood” had changed after the Revolution, incorporating more emphasis on individual success due to the institution of republican government and a market economy. During the Gilded Age, as the economy increasingly rewarded “competitiveness, aggressiveness, and even sexual desire during the Gilded Age” those traits were legitimized (Rotundo, 1993, pp. 2–3, 6). Among the societal trends related to this definition of masculinity were the “strenuous life”, which gave rise to “manly sport, ... the conservation movement, aggressive (often imperialistic) foreign policy, the sudden popularity of western fiction, a body-building craze, and the emergence of the tycoon as a cultural hero” (Oriard, 1993, pp 190–191).

Many American headmasters in the Nineteenth Century sought to incorporate the features of the classic English “Public Schools”, such as Eton, Harrow, Rugby, or Charterhouse, and they often traveled across the pond to observe the British schools, where interscholastic cricket and football matches had grown into a regular part of school life since the end of the Eighteenth Century (Bundgaard, 2005, p. 19). An important impetus to the adoption of sport was the publication in 1857 of *Tom Brown’s School Days*, in which Rugby School alum Thomas Hughes glorified the role of football in his education, and acknowledged Headmaster Thomas Arnold’s acceptance of strenuous sport and competition. Further support for the notion of “Muscular Christianity” and the role of Athletics came from the publication one year later of “Saints and their Bodies” in *The Atlantic* magazine. Axel Bundgaard notes that 1859 can be seen as a watershed year in which American headmasters everywhere saw the wisdom of granting their approval to the wealth of student-run athletic associations. (Bundgaard, 2005, p. 39) To ensure that athletics served their purposes, they also changed the nature of sports, elevating the role of the adult coach, formalizing the rules, and promoting the development of “scientific” tactics. It would take another generation or more for schools to put athletics under adult control (for example, The Hill hired its first Athletic Director and full-time coach, Michael Sweeney, in 1896) but the role of sport in school life would steadily increase from that point onward.

American boarding schools’ combined vigorous athletics, moral education, and repression as a strategy to develop the morality and vitality of their students, in a way that would later be
adopted by the U.S. military in training its troops for the First World War. All the sports that boarding schools instituted, from violent, disciplined, team-oriented sports like football, to sports such as track and field (highlighting individual effort and skill) were able to exemplify various aspects of the evolving American concept of masculinity.

By 1909, when Overton entered The Hill as a freshman, it had achieved a reputation for academic excellence and had grown to more than two hundred students in the half-century since its founding in 1851. It also retained the emphasis on moral virtue and civic responsibility that the founder intended when he chose “The Family Boarding School” as the original name for the school. Presbyterian minister Matthew Meigs designed an institution that would develop its students’ character as much as their intellect, combining academic instruction and religious worship with corporal punishment, where necessary. (Chancellor, 1976) While the application of discipline may have mellowed by 1909, the emphasis remained, as the school was still owned by the Meigs family, administered by the devout “Professor” John Meigs, son of the founder. Students participated in a rigorous, highly structured routine, including afternoon athletics. The school’s athletic program, under the direction of a dynamic Irish immigrant named Michael Sweeney, was one of its strengths. (Chancellor, 1976)

John Williams Overton’s high school scrapbook illustrates his wide-ranging interests and his development during adolescence. A mediocre student who participated in debate, drew cartoons for the yearbook, and enjoyed a full dance card at his prom, he was also a fun-loving, energetic youth whose spirit was noted by his contemporaries. Sports are prominently featured in the scrapbook, with many mementos of athletic events. From 1909–11 these are primarily from games that Overton attended as a spectator, but later years also include some evidence of his participation.

One surviving report card, from Overton’s Fourth Form (sophomore) winter term, shows all C’s and B’s. His disciplinary record follows the pattern of a student who follows the rules just enough to stay out of serious trouble: very few demerits incurred in the early weeks of the term, allowing him a more relaxed attitude (16 demerits incurred) in the final week, presumably without triggering any suspension or other penalty (Overton, J.W. Scrapbook).

When his classmates held their “Sixth Form Elections” (now called “superlatives” in most contemporary high school yearbooks) they named Overton “Most Original”, “Most Happy-go-Lucky” (tied for 1st place) and 2nd “Worst Roughhouser”. (The Dial, 1913) His zest for life is visible in the picture below, in which he hangs from the girder of a railroad bridge, an estimated 15–20 feet above the river. Image 3

The prominence given to sports photos in the scrapbook demonstrates that Overton remained as interested in athletics as he had been as a youth. Team portraits of several intramural teams (baseball and football) on which he played (in his freshman and sophomore years, when he could not make any varsity or JV teams) are included, alongside a 1911 picture of The Hill’s track holders. Image 4 He also displayed a school newspaper article listing all the school track records as of spring 1912 (Overton, J.W. Scrapbook). Perhaps he was hoping to put his own name on that list of records, but it certainly appears to have been important to him.

Overton’s eventual participation in track (he joined the team in his junior year, earning no letter that season, but developed into a mainstay and school record-holder in his senior year) owes much to the keen eye of Michael Sweeney, Athletic Director and Head Track Coach. Chester Willets ‘12 recounted standing next to Sweeney one day in the spring of 1912:

How well I remember one day he and I were standing by the jumping pit watching some of the boys on the track. Suddenly he said, “Look at that boy. Do you see that reflex?” That boy proved to be Johnny Overton, racket in hand, on his way to the tennis court. (Sweeney & Wheeler (ed.), 1942)
Thus, with Sweeney’s observation of Overton’s “reflex” (a physical trait that had not, until that point, brought him any particular success in tennis, baseball, or any of the other games he attempted) Johnny was encouraged to go out for track. Although he needed to develop his
endurance, he found some success that spring (although he fell at the start of his first interscholastic race, he recovered, caught the leaders, and won), as he settled into the middle-distance races where he would make a name for himself. He did not receive either a major or minor “H” (comparable to a varsity or JV letter at other schools) for that Fifth Form season (The Dial, 1912).

Overton and all Hill track athletes had the advantage of outstanding coaching from Sweeney and Henry Colbath (who specialized in coaching the distance events). Knowledgeable and dedicated coaches, they produced five Olympians and many college track athletes. (Sweeney & Wheeler, 1942)

As he began his Sixth Form (senior) year, Overton began to emerge as one of the track team’s better performers. For example, the Hill News during the winter of 1912–13 recounted the details of the intramural winter track meet, held on the school’s covered board track. In “the best race of the afternoon” Overton battled but was passed by Whittemore in the last lap of the mile run. As he continued to train under Sweeney and Colbath, he developed his speed and endurance, and became nearly unbeatable in the spring of 1913, described in all accounts as the “mainstay” of The Hill’s track team (The Hill News, 1913), whose first-place finish at the Middle States Interscholastic Track Meet (Mercersburg was 2nd, George School 3rd, and West Philadelphia HS 4th) allowed it to claim championship status. (Sweeney & Wheeler, 1942)

Not only did Overton compile a great many wins for the team, setting a school record in the mile, but his best times put him into elite company as a runner. His 2:01.2 in the 880 was the fastest run by any high school track athlete in the country that year, while his school-record mile time of 4:34 (the fastest among Pennsylvania high schoolers that year) was the 5th fastest among high-school runners nationwide. Image 5 By running 2:44 in the 1000 yards indoors (at the Barnard Games in New York, 1 March 1913) Johnny logged the fastest time for any Pennsylvanian that year, and established the state record for the event. He was named an All-American by the AAU in the 880. (Johnson, 1913)

Like other boarding schools, The Hill School conveyed a clear set of expectations to its students about leadership, tradition and moral virtue. Among such messages was the commencement address given to Overton’s class in 1913, delivered by former President Theodore Roosevelt, on “Training in Good Citizenship”. (Overton, J.W. Scrapbook) Another example occurred on the occasion of the most momentous event during Johnny’s time at the Hill, the death of “the Professor”, Headmaster John Meigs, in November 1911. Athletic Director Mike Sweeney gave an inspiring
speech to Overton’s class (the Fifth Form) shortly after the Professor’s death, exhorting them to show leadership in the crisis by taking responsibility for the well-being of the younger students.

A great many boys think that Hill spirit is composed of a noble effort to defend our school in football, baseball, in track, or in supporting the different organizations, but here is a direct challenge to your spirit that is worthy of all your other efforts combined; a challenge to hold together under the most trying conditions, your school, with its finest traditions … (Sweeney & Wheeler, 1942)

As Overton left college six years later, volunteering as a Marine lieutenant, he continued to follow that vision of duty and responsibility, in the larger crisis faced by the Western world at that moment.

Like all Seniors at The Hill, Johnny made a “Sixth Form Oration” a brief speech designed to educate his schoolmates on a topic of his own choosing. The topic of that speech, General Stonewall Jackson, is not surprising, as Jackson was a hero to many Southerners. Since no record of that speech exists, it would be fascinating, but speculative, to draw conclusions about the impact of Jackson’s military leadership style on Overton’s. (The Dial (Hill School Yearbook), 1913) Was Overton inspired to put himself in harm’s way, in front of his men in battle, as Jackson was renowned to have done?

4. Overton at Yale
In New Haven, Overton’s image as a hero grew and enabled his transition to military leadership. As a freshman at Yale in the fall of 1913, Overton entered another school where his athletic talent and outgoing personality contributed to his success. Developing and enhancing, on a larger stage, the skills that brought him fame at The Hill, he built a strong reputation among his Yale classmates. As newspapers across the country reported on national championships he won and the records he set, he earned a national reputation as a great runner. His athletic reputation also led to his commission (along with other Yale team captains) in the U.S. Marines.

5. Athletic success on a larger stage
As several historians of the school have noted, sports and socializing were both central to the Yale experience in that era. The class of 1917, notes Yale archivist and historian Brooks Mather Kelley, was “more interested in their games, newspapers, sports, and societies than...the curriculum.” Their yearbook listed “Not Winning a ‘Y’” as one of the “Biggest Regrets of College” for many, and also cited “To Have Made Friends” as the “Most Valuable Thing Obtained from College”. As Stuart Symington Jr. (son of the Senator from Missouri) and himself a member of the Yale class of 1950 said about his father’s world,

There was a sort of mystique in the old days of people who were good in sports...In that era, excellence in sports was highly prized. You’d see banner headlines in The New York Times that Yale beat Harvard or Princeton. It mattered greatly then. In that country-club world—small, social, and cohesive—a sport played well was a gauge of competence, a badge of manhood. (Kelley, 2004, p.7)

It appears that, for some, the 19th Century boarding school ethos of Muscular Christianity had begun to become secularized, with a wider range of imputed virtues. Nonetheless, the role of sport as a character-builder was strongly held in American universities during the pre-war years.

During Overton’s time, Yale was one of the pre-eminent colleges in American sport, because of both the quality of Eli teams and its role as a historical pioneer. Two men, one real and one fictional, exemplified Yale’s influence in American sport in the early 20th Century. Walter Camp helped shape the American vision of sport through his contributions to the evolving rules of football, developing the notion of “scientific tactics” and a chain of command similar to the industrial organization of his clock factory (Lewis, 1970, pp. 224, 227–229; Oriard, pp. 36–37, 118–119; Welch & Camp, 1899, pp. 453, 456; Corwin). At the same time, the heroic exploits of
the fictitious Yale student-athlete Frank Merriwell were told in dime novels, comic books, film, and radio. Merriwell was depicted as a clean-living star athlete who demonstrated Muscular Christian virtues, while winning games and coincidentally solving crimes (Boyle, 1962).

His prep experience had prepared Overton well for Yale, and it provided him with a social network in New Haven, as a large proportion of The Hill’s graduating class matriculated at Yale. Indeed, the number of Hill men in New Haven grew during Overton’s era. In 1913 the Hill Club at Yale listed 91 members, but by 1915 and 1916 it had grown to 130. Moreover, as the Dial (Hill’s Yearbook) noted annually, Hill alums were prominent in positions of leadership: the Yale News, the Dramatic Club, the Record, many athletic teams, fraternities, and societies were filled and led by former Hill students (The Dial (Hill School Yearbook), 1913).

Overton eventually contributed to the Hill presence in New Haven, publishing in three different campus publications, and being voted captain of both cross-country and track. His prominence in those programs contributed to his being tapped (in May 1916) for membership in Skull and Bones, the most coveted of Yale’s secret societies. Over the years, its distinguished list of members has led to the assumption that it serves as a powerful stepping stone and support for their business and political careers, as members follow their pledge to assist their fellow Bonesmen. (Kelley, 2004, pp. 8–9)

Unable to compete in varsity track and cross-country meets during his freshman year (Yale policy called for separate freshman squads) Overton nonetheless showed himself to be one of the university’s up-and-coming stars when he earned the most points of any competitor at the Yale–Harvard Freshman track meet. His performance against collegiate and national competition showed a consistent progression during his sophomore, junior and senior years:

1. 4th place Intercollegiate Cross Country Championship 1914
2. 2nd place Intercollegiate Games 2-mile (Franklin Field) 1915
3. 1st place Intercollegiate Cross Country Championship 1915 and 1916
4. 1st place (set new indoor record: 2:15 2/5) 1000 yards 1915
5. 1st place (set indoor record) 1 mile 1916
6. 1st place (lowered record to 2:14) 1000 yards AAU games, New York 1916

(Overton, J.W. Folder, Yale)

Entering the spring season in 1916, the Hartford Courant summarized his career to date, emphasizing that Overton had “already won a clean title in the claim of leading track athlete in any American university during the school year 1915–16 ... no college runner, or professional, for that matter, has won as many victories of quality since the school year opened last fall...” (Unknown, Overton Out for New Mile Record, 22 May 1916).

Many references to Overton in the media support the notion that he was perceived as a hero. Newspapers (up and down the East Coast) described his special talents in ways that match the characteristics of a hero according to Campbell, Vogler, and Klapp. In victory and defeat, it was Overton’s style that made him a favorite. His graceful running mechanics were noted:

the grace and ease of the Yale flier...Overton keeps apparently pretty much on the flat of his feet for the first half of his distance race, suddenly speeding up, rising to his toes while increasing his pace, and uncorking a sprint to the tape which is difficult to withstand. There is no wasted energy in his expenditure of effort, no high rise of his knees in front, nor any
high lift of his feet in the rear of his stride. (Unknown, Overton Out for New Mile Record, May 22, 1916)

Other elements of his personality drew attention and praise as well. After one notable loss to Joie Ray from the Illinois AC during Johnny’s junior year at Yale, George Underwood wrote in the New York Sun of Overton’s refusal to yield when behind in a race, “He of the lion’s breed goes down fighting to the last. Of such a type is John Overton of Yale.” (Russell, 1997)

Not only Overton’s competitiveness but also his flamboyance drew admirers. When a teammate described him as a “blithe spirit”, he may have been referring to Johnny’s habit of noting the location of a group of pretty girls in the crowd before a race. Then, while trailing the leaders, he would give a dashing wave to the young lovelies as he initiated his kick, perhaps making it appear that their beauty inspired him to victory. (Clark, 1981) One particularly dramatic piece of showmanship was planned for the intercollegiate cross-country championship his senior year, held at New Haven on November 25th, 1916. He arranged for a girlfriend to ride in a plane piloted by another friend in order to encourage him. The plane planned to fly alongside the runners at one point where they traversed a high ridge (allowing the plane to get closer than normal), at which point the girlfriend, holding a Yale flag, would lean out of the plane, calling, “Run, Johnny, for Yale and for me.” Interestingly, this plan was detailed in the Boston Globe prior to the race, along with the writer’s speculation that the race directors might ban the stunt, and no record exists stating that his two friends actually pulled it off (Unknown, 1916).

In the winter of 1916–17, Overton’s reputation was enhanced by a rivalry with Joie Ray, a runner from Chicago. Ray challenged Overton’s status as reigning champion of the Wanamaker 1.5 mile (at the Millrose Games in New York) winning the event in 6:45. In the next premier meet (the Madison Square Garden Games on March 7th) both Overton and Ray won their respective events, but they did not face each other. On March 10th at the Meadowbrook Games in Philadelphia, Overton shattered the world record in the indoor mile with a 4:16 clocking. In response, Ray deliberately chose a shorter distance race at the AAU Indoor Nationals, in order to go head-to-head with Overton in the 1000-yard race. That competition sparked Overton to a 2:14 time that broke his own world record for the distance. After the race, Johnny sent a telegram to his father, Jesse: Image 6

The high visibility of the rivalry prompted promoters to feature a special mile race at the March 21st John Wanamaker Commercial Institute Games, billing it as “THE GREATEST MILE RACE EVER RUN INDOORS”. Drawing a crowd of over 5000 spectators to Madison Square Garden, the race did much to promote the sport, and both Overton (in defeat) and Ray enhanced their reputations. (Tennessee Sports Hall of Fame inscription)
6. Yale and America prepare for war

During his years at Yale, while the nation debated the virtues of isolation and intervention in the war in Europe, the students watched with increasing interest. Overton may have been influenced to support U.S. entry into the war by his father's involvement in the Preparedness movement back in Nashville (Overton, J.M. Papers) and by his classmates, who, like their peers at other selective colleges, were largely in favor of U.S. participation long before Woodrow Wilson asked Congress to declare war in 1917. Student support for American intervention was supported by dispatches from the Americans who had volunteered to help the British and French (fighting for the French Foreign Legion, flying in the Lafayette Escadrille, and driving ambulances for the American Field Service). Yale students in particular were challenged to join the fight in a New Haven speech by former President and Harvard alum Teddy Roosevelt. (Mead, 2002, pp. 46-53) Because of student interest in the war, the University erected large maps (to show the progress of the various armies) in the library and “urged its men to train for military service in the patriotic spirit of Nathan Hale (Yale 1773)” (Kelley, 2004, p. 9).

Behind the scenes, Yale’s President Hadley worked incessantly: he wanted to safeguard the University’s interests, and to try to preserve the lives of as many Yale students as possible. Very conscious of the wholesale slaughter that had decimated the British and French infantry, Hadley wanted the Yale graduates who went to war to serve in positions of leadership, where they might stand a better chance of survival. To those ends he sought to enhance the attractiveness of ROTC, encouraging underclassmen to remain in school until graduation. He counseled undergrads that they would ultimately make a bigger contribution if they could serve as officers. He urged the services to employ the Yale students who had received summer training at the Tobyhanna batteries in the field artillery division, thinking that field artillery soldiers stood a better chance of survival. (Overton and more than 400 other Yale students had trained at the Yale Batteries at Tobyhanna, Pennsylvania, in the summer of 1916.) (Murray, 1919)

Hadley’s letters to the Army brass fell on deaf ears; the ultimate response was the creation of a single space at West Point, to be awarded to the winner of a competition among applicants from several elite colleges. In contrast, the Marines allowed Yale and other schools to each designate 10 of their students to be commissioned as 2nd Lieutenants on an accelerated basis. Overton was awarded one of the 10 highly sought-after slots, along with the captains of the swim and baseball captains and other prominent athletes from the Eli hockey and football teams (Russell, 1997; Hadley). By allocating these Marine lieutenant positions primarily to athletic captains the idea that sport developed “Muscular Christians” intertwined itself with the war effort, (Unknown Author, 1917) in ways that not only fostered Overton’s role as a hero, but led to his battlefield death, and the public mourning that surrounded it.

When war was declared by President Wilson on 2 April 1917, the students at Yale (like many of their colleagues nationwide) responded almost immediately. The Daily Student was full of articles about opportunities for ROTC training for undergraduates and ads for military uniforms (recruits supplied much of their own gear in WWI). (Yale Daily Student, 1917) Seniors could consider more immediate action; many were eager to enlist. The enlistment of captains from the major sports (including Overton) was noted in the Times on May 8. (Legore Joins the Marines; Overton, Ferguson, York and Hutchinson of Yale also Enlist, 8 May 1917) Since so many other Elis followed them as enlisted men, the University eventually decided to suspend its spring teams, as “not a single veteran of the baseball, rowing, or track teams remained in college.” (Yale Sports Wait for Army Orders, 1917) As The Hill’s Dial noted, discussing their alums at Yale, “by June (1917) hardly a Hill man was left in the University” (The Dial, 1917).

7. Serving his country in the Marines

During his brief military service, John Williams Overton’s hero narrative evolved, leading to the national mourning that marked his death on the battlefield. Although some of the public grief sprang from the public’s previous perception of him as an athletic hero, there are also many credible reports that he proved himself an outstanding soldier and officer, validating President Hadley’s push
to have the Marines commission him. Judging from the accounts of men who served under him, he was an inspiring leader because of the same flamboyance and optimistic personality that made him popular at school Overton exemplified the energy and sense of purpose that the new American troops brought to the conflict, leading his men successfully in two battles (Belleau Wood and the 2nd Marne) which ended the German threat to Paris and initiated the German retreat that would continue until the Armistice. Although Overton fell, his unit advanced and secured its objectives.

8. Training

John Williams Overton’s athletic background prepared him well for military leadership, largely because the American military designed its training according to many of the same principles used by boarding schools in designing their athletic programs. When the U.S. Army went into Mexico to look for Pancho Villa in 1916, Secretary of War Newton Baker had been disturbed by the prevalence of alcohol abuse, prostitution, and venereal disease at the army’s training camp and, with the assistance of urban reformer Harry K. Fosdick, had reformed the training environment, combining sports and other “healthy” recreational opportunities with repressive measures against prostitution and alcohol use. (Bristow, 1996, pp. 5–6). Supported by General John Pershing, this training strategy represented a change in emphasis and consistency from previous wars. In the Civil War, for example, sports had appeared in Army training camps on occasion as commanders scheduled vigorous sports (running, leaping, wrestling) as a way to both keep their young troops out of trouble and to “transform civilians into soldiers”. (Thrasher, 2015, p. 50). During training for World War I, Pershing, Baker and Fosdick greatly enlarged the use of sports, assigning an athletic director to every army and navy training camp, using equipment donated by the New York Athletic Club and the Knights of Columbus. (Thrasher, 2015, pp. 50, 67, 141) Overton encountered this training philosophy both stateside (at the Marine Officers’ School in Quantico, Virginia) and overseas (the Marine Training Area in Chatillon-sur-Cher, France and at the 1st Army Corps School in Gondrecourt, France, where Marine units were integrated with Army units in the American Expeditionary Force leading to the aforementioned Army vs. Marine baseball game and track meet.)

Nancy Bristow sees Baker’s and Fosdick’s vision for training soldiers (including their use of athletics) as an outgrowth of the Progressive movement’s desire to “reform and perfect American life”. Although the Progressive camp was divided about the value of American entry into the war, the training program’s goal of inculcating middle-class values in soldiers from diverse backgrounds was popular with all Progressives. As evidence of the importance placed on military training, she cites the records of the Commission on Training Camp Activities, headed by Fosdick, which President Wilson created two weeks after declaring war. The training program was promoted as uniting a nation that had seemed increasingly diverse and divided since the advent of industrialization and immigration. The CTCA boasted, “Never before in the history of this country have so large a number of men engaged in athletics,” and Fosdick noted that, “Educational and recreational athletics seemed vital in the development of the whole man” (Bristow, 1996, p. 21). The term “the whole man” is reminiscent of the term “compleat man” attributed to Overton’s prep school track coach, justifying the educational value of sport. The CTCA combined several strains of the Progressive ethic in a pamphlet “Keeping Fit to Fight”, which stressed to soldiers that their duty to remain pure from sexual temptation was not only a moral imperative, but a matter of efficiency, critical to the fighting power of the U.S. military (Wakefield, 1998, p. 1712–1713).

Because he had played the role of a leader and a hero as a runner at Yale and The Hill, Overton had a clear vision of how he would lead his platoon. In a letter to his sister Harriet, written during his training in France, Overton showed his full commitment to being an effective lieutenant. After bragging briefly about earning the highest rank among the Marine officers training at the 1st Army Corps School, he focused on his relationship with the men serving under him: “I have a good platoon, and am trying to prove to my men that I know how to lead them. The Marines are too smart to let anyone pull the wool over their eyes and if they think you don’t know your job they lose confidence in you.” (Overton, J.W. Letters) In treating his charges with respect (similar to the way an athletic team leader would promote and encourage his teammates), he chose a different
path than many other officers in the AEF, who were renowned for their harshness and pettiness. As one example out of many, a soldier from Nebraska, Arthur Yensen described officers as “a pack of imps eternally giving me hell” (Mead, 2002, p. 149). Thus, Baker’s and Fosdick’s goal of increasing physical and mental toughness, minimizing sick days, and reducing misdemeanor offenses would be most effective if enforced by junior officers who could make vigorous athletic training and the repression of vice somehow attractive to their men. Overton, who seemed cognizant of the emotional needs of 19-year-old soldiers. carried out his role in this training by modeling the attitudes and posture he had seen demonstrated by his college and prep school coaches, using esprit d’corps and the thrill of victory to bond the men to each other whenever possible. The useful knowledge Overton had gained through athletic competition represents what Vogler calls an “elixir”, in explaining the common attributes of mythical heroes (Vogler, 2014, p. 215).

Another piece of his hero narrative is found in the tale of Overton’s departure for France, demonstrating both the sort of “character flaw” (one of Vogler’s five characteristics of a hero) and the sort of “physical heroic action” emphasized by Campbell.

In a style reminiscent of his come-from-behind race tactics, Overton made a last-minute dash for the troop ship that was set to carry him and his outfit to France in February 1918, almost missing the ship’s departure from the embarkation point on the Virginia coast. On the night before they departed, he had arranged a final rendezvous with a woman from Washington (noted as his “fiancée” in one article) at a town 25 miles from the port. There was a train, departing just after midnight, that would allow Overton to reach his ship before its 5 AM departure. As he and his female guest extended their farewells, he missed the train. After arriving at the train station, and realizing the train had departed, he decided to run the 25 miles in his street clothes. The other members of his unit, on board the ship, were anxious when they discovered his absence. After delaying the departure by 90 min due to a low tide, the captain decided to shove off at 6:30 AM. Just as final preparations for departure were being made, Johnny appeared running down the dirt road in his bare feet, waving his arms furiously. His bleeding feet recovered on the voyage to France (Boyd, 1923).

9. Combat
The Allies’ troops (Britain and France, primarily) had been bogged down for years in costly trench warfare when the American Expeditionary Force entered the conflict in late spring 1918. The German Spring Offensive (initiated in order to gain an advantage before the American troops could join the Allies on the battlefield) had pushed the front further west, and closer to Paris during the last months of Overton’s training. In their short, but intense combat history, the AEF not only reversed the German advance but contributed mightily to the Allied counter-attack that led to German retreat and eventual surrender. The American Expeditionary Force (AEF) ultimately took part in 13 battles between May–November 1918 (Mead, 2002, pp. 175–176), of which Overton fought in two. Viewing him as a war hero requires seeing his contribution qualitatively as well as quantitatively, not as a single soldier, but as a leader who nurtured the same fighting characteristics in many of his men. If Overton’s energy, physicality, and courage were indicative of the positive change the AEF infantry brought to the front, and if that change was crucial in overcoming the stalemate that the exhausted British and French infantry had fallen into, his brief combat service can be added to his hero narrative.

Overton first saw combat at Belleau-Wood. On completing his training, he requested a transfer to Chateau-Thierry, where the Marines were being put into active combat. His assignment to the 80th Company, 6th Regiment, 4th Brigade, 2nd Regular U.S. Division would lead him into action at both Belleau Wood and the Second Battle of the Marne (near Soissons and east of Vierzy) (Murray, 1919, p. 37).

The battle of Belleau Wood, the first large-scale deployment of AEF forces, was a counter-attack to the Germans’ Aisne offensive, beginning 6 June 2018 and lasting three weeks. The 2nd Division (which included Overton’s 6th Marine Regiment along with other Marine and Army regiments) was
the primary American contributor. In a costly battle, using all the killing devices from gas to bombs to bayonets, the Allies removed the specter of the occupation of Paris.

Leadership of a platoon originally commanded by Captain Coffenburg was transferred to Overton, after Coffenburg was wounded in battle and evacuated (Russell, 1997). A written record of this platoon's actions exists thanks to a soldier named Cari Brannen, whose memories of the battle highlighted Overton's competency as a leader and the respect with which his men regarded him. “Johnny was a he-man through and through.” Given the danger of going to and from the front lines, “it did my heart good to follow Overton.” (Brannen, 1996, p. 88) On July 1st, the Marine Corps upgraded Overton's rank to 1st Lieutenant, but it is unlikely that he was notified of the promotion before his death (Brannen, 1996, p. 22–26, 90, 97).

After the battle, Pershing summed up the mental and emotional strengths of the Allied force thus:

Both the French and British people are extremely tired of the war and their troops are reflecting this attitude in their frequent inability to meet successfully the German attacks. It is the American soldiers now in France upon whom they rely. It is the moral as well as the material aid given by the American soldier that is making the continuation of the war possible. (Mead, 2002, pp. 227-251)

German Quartermaster Ludendorff later agreed with Pershing, “The tremendous superabundance of pent-up, untapped nervous energy which America's troops brought into the fray more than balanced the weakness of their allies, who were utterly exhausted” (Joffre, Ludendorff, Foch, Wilhelm, 1927, pp 218–229).

On July 16, Johnny was able to write to his sister that “I have just come out of the front lines without having lost any arms or legs and feel pretty good considering some of the things I have seen recently. This war is no joke, but there are lots of thrills.” Still, as he was staying in a house with a French family he was able to temporarily pursue romantic diversions before duty called again. “There are two very pretty young girls in the house who live here so it isn't half bad after all. If I could only stay here a few days—but we have just gotten orders to leave again in a few days” (Overton, J.W. Letters).

Relieved from Belleau Wood on July 5, the 6th Regiment was sent hurriedly to join the French 10th Army on July 16, the same day Overton wrote the letter quoted above. His unit was returned to the front as part of the Allied response to the German advance that initiated the Second Battle of the Marne. On July 15th, Ludendorff's troops had begun a major attack, designed to capture Reims. The Americans’ reward for their success at Cantigny and Belleau Wood was to be included in the shock troops at the front of the Allied defense and counter-attack. The American 1st and 2nd Divisions (which included the 6th Marine Regiment) were sent to bolster the exhausted French 10th Army in a counter-attack which began on July 18th. From the town of Vierzy, their objective was to cross farm fields to reach the Chateau-Thierry/Soissons highway (Strott, 1947, pp. 61, 63–64). The American troops had barely unloaded from their truck transports when the Allied advance began. Brannen described the 48-hour journey as full of the lesser indignities of war: a seven-mile march after an uncomfortable truck ride, sleeplessness, lack of food, detours, muddy roads, and minimal information about their objective. “We reached the front exhausted but, without slowing up, immediately went into battle at daybreak. We reached the line just in time to go over the top at the zero hour.”

In light of Johnny’s Sixth Form Oration at The Hill School, Brannen's summary of the Allied tactics contains an eerie coincidence:

Our troops were playing the role of Stonewall Jackson’s men (foot cavalry) in the Civil War. After forced marching and riding, a sudden, unexpected attack was being made.... We must have gained seven or eight miles that day, driving on Reims on the left flank of the Marne salient. That night we stood by our guns to hold our gains, but we were tired and hungry. The morning of July 19, the second day of the battle and the third day without food, we formed...
our lines in a road through a cut of ravine and came out for a charge across a sugar beet field. The tanks were leading, with our lines right behind them. In trying to stop the charge, the Germans turned loose everything they had. It seemed to rain shells. One hit between me and the man on my left, Ray Williams...The last glance I had of Lieutenant Overton, he was walking backward and trying to shout something back to us. He carried his cane in the left hand, and a .45 pistol in the right. The din and roar was so terrific that I didn't have any idea what he was saying, but interpreted it from his expression to be some words of encouragement. He was soon down, killed. (Brannen, 1996, pp. 30-31)

Another Marine marveled at Overton’s leadership under fire, “He always kept up a running fire of chatter to keep us up in spirit and he was talking when he was hit. Then it was all over” (Boyd, 1923).

Shrapnel from an airborne explosive struck Overton near the heart. All accounts are that his death was instantaneous. Although the advance continued, with eventual relief by the end of the day, very few of Overton’s platoon survived. Over two thousand men died in the area where Overton fell (thus the nickname “The Bloody Red Triangle”). Brannen believes he “was the only survivor of Overton’s platoon of about fifty men. There were eight able to walk away from the front, out of 212 on the company roster” (Brannen, 1996, p. 34).

Another young Marine, Lloyd Singleton (sent home with decorations for his battle wounds), told similar stories (although his count of the casualties differed slightly from Brannen’s) to his hometown newspaper about the fierce machine-gun and artillery fire the Marines faced in their advance near Soissons: “They sent us in without any artillery preparation.... It was like walking into a hailstorm of machine-gun bullets. We couldn’t see an enemy, and all day long I didn’t fire a shot. It was just a matter of keeping on walking into the face of that murderous fire.” He notes that, between 10:30 AM and 1 PM, all three lieutenants (Overton, Schneider, and Roy) and 165 of the original 250 men in the company were lost. He noted that Overton “had been ordered to stay behind, but he refused” (Marines Joked Through Their Big Engagements, n.d.). Another of his men describes Overton's battlefield leadership thus, “When Johnny went west that morning at Soissons he was a wonderful sight! Johnny never went along with the skirmish line like most of the officers, but had to be out in front, directing the platoon” (Boyd, 1923).

Costly though it was, the Second Division’s counter-attack had reached the highway and forced a general withdrawal from the German troops in the Marne salient. Three thousand prisoners, and 66 field guns were among the trophies won from the enemy. (Strott, 1947, pp. 61, 63–64) American General Pershing later concluded that due to “the magnificent dash and power” of the American forces, fighting with an offensive posture for the first time in the Second Battle of the Marne “the tide of war was definitely turned in favour of the Allies” (Horne, 1923).

10. Creating memorials to the fallen
The public post-war mourning, commemoration, and eventual forgetting of Overton’s story support Orrin Klapp’s assertion that heroes exist to serve social norms. A corollary of Klapp’s idea is that when a man’s legacy no longer serves those norms, it will be forgotten.

For several years after the war memorials to the war dead were created across America, in cities and small towns and on campuses. For example, there are a set of magnificent ivory walls at Yale and a large bronze plaque at Vanderbilt, engraved with the names of the fallen. John Williams Overton was remembered not only by inclusion on those statues and plaques but also by having events and prizes named after him. Stories that added to his heroic status were told in various publications. In all the above, his legend was employed to support the aims of the war, his schools, and the virtues of Muscular Christianity. However, as happens naturally with most individuals designated for heroism, the explicit memory of his legend faded from the public sphere in a few years. If one is looking for a continuing legacy of Overton’s life, it may be found in contemporary efforts to promote athletics as a character-building exercise.
Overton’s legend was maintained and enhanced after his death by several stories. The stories may be true, but their legitimacy is impossible to prove. Overton was reputed to have told Yale classmate Lt. Samuel Meek, shortly prior to his final battle, “Sam, if I am knocked off, get my pin and send it to mother.” While Marine publications identified that pin as Overton’s sharp-shooter’s medal, (Unknown Author, 1919) more reliable accounts indicate he was referring to his Skull and Bones pin. (As managing editor of the Yale News, Meek was a fellow Bonesman, 1 of the 10 designated by President Hadley for Marine commissions.) Also, the Overton family’s minister, Reverend Alexander, asserted that Overton had had a conversion experience: “He wrote me, as his pastor, from the camp this noble message: ‘I have fully decided to give Jesus Christ the right of way in my life’” (Overton, J.W. Folder, Yale). While such an epiphany is possible for one who, during his senior year at Yale had disavowed any church membership, it is also possible that, after experiencing the savagery of battle at Belleau Wood, he was expressing a fatalistic attitude about his chance of survival, just as when he reminded Meek to send his Bones pin to his mother.

Among the more public honors, France honored Overton’s memory with the Croix de Guerre, rarely given to a non-Frenchman, while Robert Ripley dramatized Overton’s heroism in a cartoon image 7. Grantland Rice wrote “A Marine Comes Home”, commemorating the return of Overton’s body to Nashville.

Perhaps the most ambitious attempt to memorialize Overton’s story as an icon for Muscular Christianity was the creation of a commencement award, the Overton Prize, at The Hill School. The sponsor, Martin Cromwell, from the 1915 Yale cross-country team, described its purpose:

It is given to place before Hill students an ideal—an example of manliness to be followed religiously. A perfect specimen of physical and mental manhood, Overton adding to his athletic laurels with every succeeding year, crowned the glory with his life—that America might press on, free and triumphant to greater success and usefulness. ... And in the name of this athlete I bid
every one of you at The Hill, of whatever class and age you may be to go out for athletics and try for the Overton prize—not for the prize itself, but for the moral and physical strength which clean athletics personifies and imparts. (Overton Prize Awarded, The Hill News, April 20, 1922)

The tributes from Ripley, Rice, and Cromwell echo one of the Joseph Campbell’s defining characteristics of the hero:

“The hero has died as a modern man, but as an eternal man—perfected, unspecific, universal man—he has been reborn. His second solemn task therefore (as Toynbee declares, and as all the various mythologies of man indicate) is to return then to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed.” (Campbell, 2014, p. 15)

The initiation of the award was deemed worthy of mention by the New York Times. School records show that it was awarded in its first year, 1921, to Ralph Hills (The Hill School Bulletin, 1921). A most worthy recipient, Hills was a football player and a multi-talented weight man who set the interscholastic 16 lb. shot put record in with a heave of 46' 1 1/2", and later won bronze at the Paris Olympics of 1924 with a 48' toss, while a student-athlete at Princeton. Without an explanation, the prize was not awarded after that first year. One possible explanation for the termination of the prize after 1921 is the common school practice of requiring a substantial monetary contribution to cover the costs of the prize, plus additional money to support the school’s endowment. Under this supposition, perhaps Cromwell and other donors had pledged a significant donation in 1921, leading the school to initiate the award, only to have the donors renege on their pledges after the initial year. The Overton Prize was revived in 2008, by the author of this article, who was The Hill’s Athletic Director at that time.

Other attempts to honor Overton’s sacrifice never materialized, even though they earned enough support to be mentioned in the New York Times. Among these were a plan to build a war memorial at Yale specifically for Overton and two other former athletic captains killed in the war (Yale to Honor Athletes; Will Establish Memorials to Overton, Wilson, and Sturtevant, New York Times, March 16, 1919) and a plan to name the IC4A Cross Country Championship the John W. Overton Perpetual Cup Race (Unknown Author, 1918).

Very few of the athletic heroes and war heroes from Overton’s generation saw their fame last into the 1920s, with Princeton’s Hobey Baker a significant exception to that trend (History of the Hobey Baker Award). In one respect, Overton and his contemporaries were pushed out of the public’s attention by the new sports heroes of the Twenties: Babe Ruth, Red Grange, Bill Dempsey, and Bill Tilden as prime examples. These new stars saw their fame grow for several reasons:

(1) The growth of the modern sports media (in print, on the radio, and even in newsreels) created more exploits to be promoted, often in hyperbolic language.

(2) The advent of shrewd public relations men and promoters (C.C. Pyle, Tex Rickard, and “Doc” Kearsn among them) bolstered the legends of the 1920s athletes.

(3) The public’s need for new athletic and cinematic heroes to specifically compensate for the loss of Victorian values and other changes to society that negated the “traditional dream of success” in a sense of “individual powerlessness” (Rader, 1983).

To the extent that a legacy remains for Overton and other early 20th-Century athletes, it is in the continuing efforts to use sport for educational purposes. Although the names of Overton and his contemporaries are rarely invoked, their collective past is viewed as a “Golden Age” when sports was done “the right way.” After the Great War, boarding schools and athletic coaches continued to stress the character-building benefits of sport, but the Muscular Christian ideal was secularized and made more relevant to the needs of 20th-Century American society (Crain, 2002, p. 41). For example, the 19th-Century concern with the perceived over-feminization of society became less prominent, to the extent that the character-building advantages of sport were promoted as being equally advantageous for male and female youth athletes, after Title IX (1970s) sought to level the gender balance on the athletic field.
Thus, the promoters of sports as a character-builder have adapted to the spirit of their time, continuing to use contemporary star athletes as their heroes.

Modern promoters of the educational value of sport also acknowledge that competition does not automatically, in and of itself, nurture the desired values; coaches desiring to build character must bring out the inherent lessons that sport can teach. One apt example comes from the Positive Coaching Alliance, whose website proclaims, “Better Athletes, Better People: that’s what youth and high school sports can and should produce” (PCA Website). The Alliance provides a multitude of books and workshops aimed at training youth and high school coaches.

Other organizations have retained other elements of the Muscular Christian ideology. The Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA), for example, is one of the groups maintaining an explicit link between sports and Christianity, as was done in the 19th-Century. It encourages young athletes to “Unite your two passions, faith and athletics, to impact the world for Jesus Christ” (FCA Website).

Overton himself would have been reluctant to make his type of heroism a model for all; he recognized the uniqueness of his own personality. Writing from the front to his brother-in-law (Harriet Overton’s husband Lucius Robertson) who had been very disappointed when the military ruled him unfit for service due to allergies or asthma (Conversation with Ruth Warner, 2006) “for goodness sakes stay out of this war and keep things working at home. There are Millions whose duty it is to go before your turn comes” (Overton, J.W. Letters).

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