

## **Soldier of Fortune**

**by Mark F. Bernstein**

It was many and many a year ago, in a kingdom by the sea—the sea in this case being the Raritan Canal—that a young man there lived whom you might know—or would have known had you been a sports fan a hundred years ago. His name was John Prentiss Poe, Jr., though he was “Johnny Poe” to everyone who knew him or read of his daring adventures.

Johnny Poe—who flunked out of Princeton, yet is the only member of his illustrious family to have his portrait hung in Nassau Hall. Johnny Poe—the football star, soldier of fortune, seeker of death and glory. Generations of Princetonians still hold Hobey Baker, another lonely vagabond, as their idol. But in his time, it was Johnny Poe who inspired middle-aged men to poetry.

He was a first cousin twice removed of Edgar Allan Poe, though he might better have stepped out of the pages of Kipling. One of six football-playing brothers to attend Princeton in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it was their good fortune to come along at a time when the romantic reputation of what would become the Ivy League was being forged along with its athletic reputation. Good players became celebrities, while those, like Johnny, with a hint of tragedy about them, became legends.

By the time Johnny arrived on campus in 1891, his two older brothers had already established the family name in athletics. Samuel Johnson Poe made several good runs in Princeton’s failed comeback against Yale in 1883 and was named to the first All-America lacrosse team after leading the Tigers to the national championship.

His second brother, Edgar Allan, known to friends as “Pete,” was a Phi Beta Kappa student who entered college at the age of sixteen bearing the famous name. Acknowledged as the first quarterback to bark out signals, he also donned the first facemask, a metal plate he strapped to his forehead to protect a broken nose. In all, he led the Tigers to a 32-2-1 record and a national title in his three seasons and was named to the first All-America football team. One young lady attending the Yale game is said to have asked her escort, “Is he related to the great Edgar Allan Poe?”

“He is the great Edgar Allan Poe,” the man replied.

A younger brother, Arthur, would lead the Tigers to another national championship in 1898 and a year later, in one of the most celebrated plays of the nineteenth century, broke Yale’s heart by drop-kicking a thirty-seven yard field goal with less than a minute to play.

His older brothers’ fame, no doubt, has something to do with why the freshmen elected Johnny their class president the day he arrived on campus, but there was also his own disarming modesty. “Fellows, I am proud of the honor you have bestowed upon me,” he declared. “My face can’t be ruined much, so I’ll go into all the battles with you head first.” Essentially a loner, he nevertheless won their devotion by visiting each man personally in his dorm room. In a celebrated snowball fight that winter, he led the class to victory over the sophomores in battle so bloody that the faculty outlawed all future contests.

Because there was no rule against freshman eligibility, Johnny moved straight to the football varsity in 1891 and, although he stood only five-foot-five and weighed 143 pounds, he starred at halfback tied for third on the team in touchdowns scored. But he

flunked out of school the following spring, a failure to apply himself that presaged many future disappointments. The morning he left for home, his entire class escorted him to the train station to say good-bye.

As he had promised, Johnny returned to Princeton that fall and did even better on the gridiron. “As a half-back Johnny Poe has few equals,” wrote Caspar Whitney in *Harper’s Weekly*. “It is simply astonishing, considering his size and weight, that he manages to get so much drive into his line bucking, and not a half-back playing to-day is so clever at dodging.” A perfectionist in things he cared about, he would go back to his room after practice and spend hours pitching a football into a pile of sofa pillows until he got it right. Unfortunately, such dedication to his schoolwork remained lacking and he was expelled again, this time permanently.

Adrift, Johnny tried his hand coaching football, worked for a steamboat operator, and tried selling real estate in Maryland and coal in West Virginia. But as he confessed to a friend, “This scramble for the almighty dollar does not appeal to me, as I am so utterly rotten in the scramble.”

Johnny wanted to be a soldier. For anyone. Anywhere. Surely, he said, “there must be some such man who, disgusted with the awful sameness of things, would enjoy observing how the grandest game on earth is conducted in China, Arabia, Central America, Formosa, Borneo or the Congo.”

Like many of his generation, he had been raised on romance, and in a Gilded Age filled with the “scramble for the almighty dollar,” there seemed little room for such experiences. Many thought football provided a substitute. Charles Francis Adams, a Harvard man and another scion of a famous family, argued that the game “educated boys

in those characteristics that had made the Anglo-Saxon race pre-eminent in history.” The doctrine of muscular Christianity, as it was called, resonated with students who had grown up on stories of the Civil War and sought ways to earn honors of their own. Beating Yale was a poor substitute for beating the rebels, but the college generation of the 1880s and 1890s embraced it with all the fervor their fathers had shown in marching off to battle.

Johnny’s own father, however, had not marched off to battle. Like many well-to-do men of his generation, John Prentiss Poe, Sr. ’54 had paid a substitute to go fight in his place, a derogation from the code of honor that surely must have diminished him in the eyes of his middle son. Though a famous man in his circle—attorney general of Maryland, founder of the state law school, and a longtime Democratic political leader—the relationships between famous men and their sons are often strained, and one senses that John Prentiss Poe’s was with his. “Why is it that all the children love you so much more than me?” he once asked his wife. “Will I ever understand the reason?” Preoccupied with work and politics, he had little time for his children and did not share their athletic interests. “I wish I was more of a sportsman,” he confessed, “but such pastimes are inevitably a bore to me.”

Most of the gallantry in the family came from their mother’s side, and Johnny was his mother’s son. In every family photograph he can be seen sitting at her feet or standing behind her, a hand on her shoulder. Anne Johnson Hough was the daughter of Maryland slaveholders and rabid secessionists, whose Baltimore wedding in 1864 was held under armed guard. Johnny’s cousin, Bradley Johnson, was a Confederate general. An uncle, Gresham Hough, rode with Mosby’s dashing raiders.

With that to aspire to, and perhaps his father's contrary example to expunge, Johnny joined the Maryland National Guard, hoping to escape the fate he knew awaited him at home. Three of his brothers would join their father's law firm. Pete, later elected Maryland's attorney general in his own right, hunted grouse, rode to hounds, and performed in society theatricals in his spare time. Arthur settled in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, as an executive for a breakfast cereal company, a career Johnny could only have regarded with a shudder. Military life, by contrast "though rough in spots and monotonous as a Quaker meeting for long stretches at a time," struck the young dreamer as far more appealing than "the usual round of clubs, theaters, dances, card parties, summer resorts, and all the conventional rich man does."

When Johnny's guard unit was called to active duty soon after the Spanish-American War broke out in 1898, his father lectured the family's black sheep. "I beg you to realize fully that you are now a soldier in the ranks, bound to absolute, prompt, and implicit obedience," wrote the lawyer who had never shouldered arms himself. "It is not for you to question your orders or to set yourself up against your superior officers commissioned and non-commissioned. You must do your duty whether it is pleasant or unpleasant."

Fate, however, always conspired to keep Johnny from the action he craved. His regiment made it as far as Tampa, where they waited for a transport to take them to Cuba. The Rough Riders, which were filled with ex-Ivy League athletes, were in the same position, but Theodore Roosevelt was able to find a ship for his men while Johnny's commander did not and so his unit spent the rest of the war in Huntsville, Alabama. Still, he wrote a friend, "I am having a corking fine time and don't care how long this

unpleasantness between the two countries keep up. Just think of my getting \$21.60 a month for a little bit of drilling, and the rest of the time lying under the trees reading the newspapers.”

He was still so much esteemed in the eyes of his college mates that when Woodrow Wilson was inaugurated as Princeton’s president in 1899, he asked Johnny to serve as a marshal for the installation ceremony, a remarkable honor for a man who had never even come close to graduating. Later that year, Johnny jumped at the chance to fight guerillas in the Philippines, passing up a chance at a commission had he stayed home. This time he made it to the front, but saw no action. Bored and disappointed, he was forced to ask his father to buy his way out of the army.

Returning home to Baltimore, Johnny worked as a surveyor for a few months, probably under parental supervision, before escaping to New Mexico to be a cowboy. But that did not work out, either, and he returned east again in the fall of 1903, falling back on the only thing he knew. He served as an assistant coach on Princeton’s national championship football team, giving them a motto—“If you won’t be beat, you can’t be beat”—that would be the Tigers’ rallying cry for years afterward.

Johnny might have made a good coach, but when the governor of Kentucky called out the militia in 1904 to suppress the “Black Patch War” by small tobacco farmers against the big cigarette companies, he dropped football and volunteered. When Roosevelt, now president, sent an American force to Panama a few months later, Johnny dropped Kentucky and volunteered for that, too. Mindful of his previous disappointments, he sought a guarantee of action before he enlisted. “If I were to go there, to Panama, and not see any service,” he wrote the Marine Corps commandant, “I

would feel that if I were to go to Hades for the warmth the fires would be at least banked, if not altogether extinguished, owing to furnaces being repaired.” The commandant was so taken by this letter that he gave Johnny the commission he wanted.

Superficial parallels between Johnny Poe and Teddy Roosevelt, another Eastern swell bent on glory, are obvious. But where TR always sought command, Johnny not only shunned it, but dropped it when it happened to come his way. Within weeks of landing in Panama, having pulled so many strings to get in, he asked to be reduced in rank. “Nobody expects anything of a second lieutenant,” he explained. “They do of a sergeant.” Instead, he was put in charge of the mules that pulled the unit’s heavy guns.

By the fall of 1905, he was back out in the hamlet of Goldfield, Nevada, working as a watchman in a gold mine and writing to inquire if the Imperial Japanese Army would let him join the Russo-Japanese War. He professed to be delighted with his mining salary of seven dollars a day. “I know of no other place in the world where I could make [as] much. Hurrah for Goldfield!”

Such joking was saved for his friends. To his family, he confessed that he hated mining and preferred the shorter dinner hour in camp because it left him less time in which to have to make conversation with the other men. Though his younger brother, Net, went with him to Nevada for a while, Johnny repeatedly wrote how ill suited Net was for the life and was glad to see him return home.

The Eastern press, which still remembered the family gridiron fame, eagerly reported his adventures, which Johnny happily played up in letters that often made their way into the papers. He told of organizing a prospecting expedition across Death Valley in search of an abandoned gold mine that turned out to be only three empty wooden

chests. On another trip, a fellow prospector chastised him for carrying a silver soapbox, one of the give-aways of his pampered upbringing. “The next time I go” Johnny vowed, “I shall pull two-thirds of the bristles of the toothbrush out and break the comb in half and wipe my face on the horses’ manes.”

Still, an undercurrent of melancholy ran ever deeper through his letters. “I do not suppose you know of anyone who would like to finance a trip to Northern Africa,” he wrote a friend, “and get with the French against the Tribesmen and mow them down as they come on in waves in their Mohammedan Frenzy?” Trying to scare up a regiment, he urged another classmate to join him. “I believe we could get our names in the papers, but we would have a hell of a time keeping from marrying fool heiresses.”

By early 1907, he confessed, “I am tired of mining and only hanging around here and longing for something worthwhile to happen someplace in the world. I stuck to it for two years and a half, most of the time I never looked at a paper for fear I should want to leave for some little war that had broken out.”

He could not entirely resist looking, though, and as he later told the story decided to leave Nevada on the spur of the moment when he read a headline that war had broken out between Nicaragua and Honduras. After so many disappointments, however, he had learned to be skeptical about such reports. “There is so much hot air about these Central American controversies that I hate to spend \$150 or \$200 just to run down on the strength of a rumor,” he wrote. In fact, he had spent months corresponding with the Nicaraguan government, offering to raise a regiment of similarly disaffected American fortune-seekers in the event of war.



“I have made such a botch of my life and probably will continue to do so, that I can’t see where I quit so much the looser should I die in Nicaragua,” he wrote Net before shipping off. “There is no occasion for mother to be worried. There is no fighting in Nicaragua but as soldiering is the about the one thing I still can take a little bit of interest in, I think I might as well follow it up till the interest in that dies, too.”

Johnny embarked with the intention of joining the Nicaraguan army, but when his steamer was held up in Honduras for several days, he got off and joined the Honduran army instead. “No matter where or on what side,” he once joked, “they are both usually wrong, so it doesn’t make much difference which one chooses.” “El Capitan Poey,” as his Honduran comrades called him, was at last in the thick of a fight, commanding an artillery piece at the siege of Amapolo while earning, as he proudly reported, two pesos a day—about 85 cents.

His mother once observed with exasperation that Johnny’s “only idea of life seems to be traveling around gathering experiences to narrate to Princeton audiences.” When the Nicaraguans captured him as a spy, he later told one such audience, he feared he would be stood before a firing squad and began “wondering what to say to get into the “noble-saying-before-dying” class”:

While I remembered Nathan Hale, General Wolfe and Crittenden at Santiago Cuba in ’78, none of these seemed to do justice to the occasion, and [I] fear I should have been compelled to fall back on such a trite and worn out saying as this: “Fire, you mustard colored, black and tan—and be damned to you.” I know I should have been mortified to death at having this rather bourgeois remark on my tombstone, but what could I say, with no whiskey to give me some poetic thought as “I trust you will never have to shoot a more innocent man.” Hell! Hell! Hell!

Instead, after two days of rough questioning, he was released and told he had forty-eight hours to leave the country. In one of those impossible twists of fate that seemed to follow him, he was rescued by a visiting American gunboat, the *U.S.S. Princeton*. One story that made the papers had Johnny asking the captain if he could bring along his fifty-four pieces of luggage. When the captain blanched, he pulled the “luggage” from his pocket—a deck of playing cards and an extra pair of socks.

He made it back to Princeton in time for reunions that spring, where he stayed up late under the tents on warm June evenings and awed his lawyer and broker classmates with tales of distant fields. But then there was nothing to do but return to the mines and oil wells, though the press reported rumors that he had been found dead in the mountains of Mexico.

“Lord how I hate this work,” he moaned in a letter home. Most nights he spent reading in his barracks, alone with his lonely dreams. “Very often I am here by myself,” he told Net, “but that is what I like best, as you doubtless realize.” As if to further emphasize his break with all that lay back home, he gave away his evening clothes. “How terribly deserted Goldfield and Columbia are,” he wrote his mother from Nevada, “but I shan’t miss people here.”

While digging a ditch one day, Johnny decided to contact the state’s governor, Tasker Lowndes Oddie, about joining the state police. Oddie, who also came from an old Maryland family, commissioned him as a special deputy and sent him off to infiltrate a gang of cattle rustlers and gamblers. Disguising himself as a prospector, Johnny spent weeks gaining their trust and learning their plans before personally leading the posse that swooped in to arrest them. A few years later, he happily interrupted his mining career

again for a two-year stint in the Klondike, joining a government team that surveyed the boundary with Canada.

At the age of 41, Johnny Poe was already a veteran of five wars, but the soldier of fortune was growing older. He had only recently inquired about going down to Mexico to chase Pancho Villa, but must have been crestfallen when the army informed him that he was too short for the artillery, although they invited him to join a unit holding down the fort back in Texas.

World War I gave him a last chance. Within days of the outbreak of fighting in August 1914, Johnny went to Canada and enlisted in the British army. He was on a ship bound for Europe before the end of the month, selling his cufflinks to buy some Shakespeare and the Book of Common Prayer to read on the voyage. "Certainly dry reading," he wrote his mother.

Once again, Fate tried to keep him away from the action. Finding himself stuck in the Royal Garrison Artillery, lobbing shells over a hillside, he asked to be transferred to the infantry. He joined the Black Watch, the ancient Scottish brigade. Here was what he had always been looking for: men marching into battle in kilts, their standards waving and the bagpipes playing the "Highland Laddie."

His old classmates, who still adored him and perhaps lived a bit vicariously through him, started a letter-writing campaign. More than 130 of them sent their good wishes. But as so many of his generation discovered, this was not the old type of war. Johnny Poe was killed in action on September 25, 1915 at the Battle of Loos. In the hands of the mythmakers, one account of his death said that he carried four or five men to

safety after being hit. Another said that as he started his last charge across no-man's land, he began calling out his old football signals.

The truth, though more prosaic, was no less honorable. According to the official report of the battle, Johnny was carrying a load of shells when he was shot in the stomach. "Never mind me," he told his comrades, "go ahead with the boxes." When they returned a short while later, they found him dead, and buried him near a place called Lone Tree. Scores of people have searched, but his grave has never been found.

Johnny's name was inscribed on the Black Watch roll of honor at Edinburgh Castle. Princeton named one of its athletic fields in his honor and commissioned a portrait of him in his tartan, which now gathers dust in a storage closet. The John Prentiss Poe, Jr. Football Cup, given to the university by his mother, is awarded annually to the member of the team who best exemplifies courage, modesty, perseverance, and good sportsmanship. It remains Princeton's highest football honor.

A hero becomes an empty vessel into which we pour our own longings and inadequacies. As Johnny himself would have acknowledged, his was an empty life, full of wandering, searching for glory he never found. Reading his letters from across the years, one finds not someone in love with life, but someone desperately looking for meaning and purpose in a life that had very little.

At times, it seemed to haunt him. Alone in the Nevada desert several years earlier, he mused on the path he had chosen and hearkened back to the Walter Scott novels he had read as a boy. "Though living side by side with wife deserters, crooks, a child murderer, and some of the scum of the earth," he wrote, "I think the fact of being a Princeton man was a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night in keeping me from sinking

to their level, and the knowledge that Old Mother Princeton wishes to believe of her sons as Isabella of Croix did of Quentin Durward: ‘If I hear not of you soon, and that by the trumpet of fame, I’ll conclude you dead, but not unworthy.’”

A decade before he died, Johnny addressed his classmates at their tenth reunion. He quoted from *The Lost Legion*, a favorite poem by Kipling (who lost a son in the same regiment, two days after Johnny’s death). The verse applied equally well to him:

*Our Fathers they gave us their blessing;  
They taught us, they groomed us, they crammed;  
But we’ve cut the clubs and the messes;  
For to go and find out and be damned.*

**END**