

Over There

A Report to the Military Writers Society of America on the 100th Anniversary of the Armistice that ended World War One

By: Jack Woodville London, Director of Education

The morning of November 11, 2018, began with sunlight touching the graves, more than 14,000 of them, in the Meuse-Argonne American Military Cemetery in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, France. The cemetery, on the edge of the village, is the largest American military cemetery in France. Every hero who is buried there, and every one of the 954 men who vanished in artillery attacks and shell craters who is remembered there, gave his or her life in World War One.



There is no particular road that leads to the town or cemetery. Sedan, an hour away, is five small, curving, poorly marked two-lane roads away. Verdun, even more distant and in the opposite direction, is four. Each of them passes through towns whose names raise the spectres of battle horrors from one hundred years before: Aubreville, Varennes, Montfaucon, Dun-sur-Meuse, Sassay-sur-Meuse,

Bantheville, Mouzay, Stenay, villages that were occupied for four years by German soldiers before the American Expeditionary Force massed well over one million men to attack the Hindenburg Line and shove them back and which, afterward, were craters, rubble, and graveyards.

But, on this day, each of the towns was silent until eleven in the morning when, as eleven bells chimed, the citizens assembled in front of the square or church or war monument, placed wreaths, and saluted both French and American flags, acknowledging the solemnity and sacrifice of the war to end all wars that ended precisely one hundred years before. Speeches were read, prayers said, names called out, and the *Marseillaise* sung. Only the cemeteries and churches were open. It was a day of mourning. It was a day of celebration.

1. Background

Interest had grown in MWSA having a role in the centenary of World War One after the annual meeting in San Antonio in August, 2017. The central theme of the meeting had been to share written and personal experiences about the war to end all wars. At the conclusion of the meeting it was decided that the forthcoming anthology would consist of contributions that members had written about World War One, both before the event and concurrent with the annual meeting.

In November, 2017, the American Battle Monuments Commission posted on its various cemetery sites that the World War One cemeteries in Europe would have events in 2018 to recognize the centenary of World War One. In addition, both state and federal agencies and NGOs began to develop programs centered on World War One. The University of Texas hosted a scholarly seminar on the role of the United States in the war in which academics from across the country gave presentations on such subjects as individual battles (Belleau Woods, St. Mihiel), the state of military medicine (primitive by our standards, but improving), organization of units, and the extraction from farm, factory, home and shop of more than four million men in less than one year to be trained as soldiers in a war that was fought entirely overseas.

Having written on World War One for two publications, and having researched the battle in which one of my ancestors died within the first minutes of his first day in combat, my personal interest grew. Few occasions are as memorable as those that mark a significant anniversary of a world-changing event, such as the 50th anniversary of the D-Day landings in Normandy in 1994, the 200th anniversary of the United States in 1976, and the like. I decided that I would like to attend a memorial service in France for the centenary of World War One.

In early 2018 I asked if MWSA would send me as its representative to the memorial services to be held in France on the one hundredth anniversary of the Armistice. I had a strong wish to go and it was

understood that I would undertake the role at no cost to MWSA. Bob Doerr, Valerie Ormond, and Dwight Zimmerman worked together with me to help define the scope of the assignment and the content of the plan. At the outset we decided that we would ask the American Battle Monuments Commission for me to participate in the ceremony on behalf of MWSA and that we would honor the graves of men and women who our members asked us to locate and remember with flags and photographs.

In February, 2018, MWSA sent out in its February blast that we hoped to be represented at the November 11 memorial service and invited members to send information about anyone they knew of whose grave should be honored with a flag and remembrance. On April 16, 2018, Dwight sent a letter on behalf of MWSA to Mr. Bruce Malone, superintendent of the Meuse-Argonne American Military Cemetery, in which the organization named me as its emissary to the memorial service and asked the American Battle Monuments Commission to include MWSA in its plans.

The American Battle Monuments Commission was somewhat non-committal at the outset. Understandably, such events tend to be given to speeches by military officials and public officials who are known or, at the least, accountable. The corollary is that ABMC does not readily invite strangers to give speeches at solemn occasions for fear of not having any control over what the said stranger might do or say. Over the following months I developed a very cordial relationship with Mr. Malone and he decided that MWSA was both professional and well-regarded and that its representative, me, would have a part in the November 11 service.

The MWSA anthology, *Inspirations*, was published in August, 2018. It consists of twenty-two contributions by MWSA authors to the literature of World War One. They range from histories of the war, histories of particular battles and units, fiction, family histories, and other insights of every kind. It also reflects the diversity of the war. Not only does some of the work record that segregated troops fought with the same distinction as every other member of the AEF, including to earn the the Medal of Honor and to join the Lafayette Escadrille volunteer flying corps, but also that the doughboys, marines, and sailors came from every conceivable corner of the United States, both geographically and culturally.

Finally, as part of the mission, I proposed not only that I prepare this report to the membership of the experience but also that I try to record the experience in video and still images. It then emerged that the next MWSA annual meeting would take place in Charleston, South Carolina, and would coincide with the event in the cemetery. With advice from Val Ormond in particular, it was decided that the best way to capture the event for the conference would be to shoot video, upload it to YouTube on the spot, and send it to the conference on the morning of November 11. That decision took on a life of its own.

2. Preparation

Planning was a bit uncertain while waiting for members to provide names of men and women whose graves were to be honored. The decision was made to place American and, where appropriate for me, Texas flags on the graves, to say words of thanks, and to photograph and / or film them. Ultimately the names sent by MWSA members were only for graves in the Meuse-Argonne cemetery. If any members had requested that we honor graves at another American World War One cemetery we would have done so, but because of the remoteness of the cemeteries we almost certainly we would have gone to them before November 11.¹ In the event, members sent in some thirteen names, including to honor the missing and unknowns, and I added two whose stories compelled me. A list of the men and their graves is Appendix One at the end of this report.

I spoke by telephone several times with Mr. Malone and learned that the cemetery was under some pressure to keep the service to a tight schedule. By tradition and amity, the mayors of Romagnous-Montfaucon and other nearby villages, who have a very strong sense of friendship with the United States, send their mayors to attend the service. However, they also were to be part of their own village remembrance ceremonies so finishing the memorial service in a way that permitted them to return to their own towns was important. Mr. Malone and I ultimately agreed that I would speak briefly on the uniquely American democratic nature of the men in all the cemeteries, the rich and poor, the educated and the humble, who are buried in France. We settled on Joyce Kilmer, an American poet laureate who left his wife and five children to enlist and who wrote during the war a poem honoring the men who died in battle with him.

Most of my personal preparation consisted of two efforts.

First, I re-immersed myself in the history of the first war. I won't write that history here (or likely anywhere) but I was struck that while the saying is that "history is written by the winners", in this instance it is strongly apparent that for most of the world, the history of the war is written by the British and French winners, not the American winners. During the United States' first year in the war, few American troops engaged in any combat. Those who did go into battle did so attached to British units in Belgium and along the Somme River.

However, three uniquely American engagements should be recognized by all historians, and generally are not. The Second Division, including US marines, stopped the German spring offensive

¹ There are seven World War One cemeteries in Europe. Six are in France within a roughly rectangular area approximately 150 miles square, one in Belgium, one in England. All but one of them are in rural areas where the battles took place, and are as complicated to reach by road as the Meuse-Argonne cemetery. Each time I thought of this I reminded myself that it was a lot easier for me than it had been for the men who are in the cemeteries.

advance at Belleau Wood² at a cost of almost 10,000 killed and wounded; had it not done so, the German army almost certainly would have seized Paris and forced France to capitulate. In the next two months, the United States engaged alongside French and British forces in the Second Battle of the Marne; US casualties were similar to British casualties but US successes exceeded both British and French gains. Finally, the Meuse-Argonne offensive from late September until November 11 was the largest battle in American history. With over 1,200,000 Americans in combat in an area roughly the size of the Washington, D.C. – Annapolis – Baltimore triangle, someone in every household in the United States knew a man engaged in that battle. Different units were the first of any ally in the war to breach the Hindenburg Line and to command French units in battle. Historians other than American writers give virtually no recognition to these or any American role in the war.

The second task I undertook in preparation was to write a number of short (700 to 1200 word) local histories for several city newspapers. These were designed to tell local stories about local men in order to make the war more personal to readers. Four of these were published on November 11.³ My methodology was to search databases to find men from the town or county about which I was writing and who had died in the war. From my results I used Ancestry.com to learn more about the men individually. My goal was to learn their age, where they lived according to the 1910 census, names and ages of family members, occupation, names of friends and neighbors, date of enlistment / conscription, military unit (regiment / division, and on some occasions battalion and company), and date of death. In some cases I found US ship transport records that listed the entire military unit on board, with each man's hometown and nearest relative, which further enabled me to find men from the same town whom I had not found in the database. Finally, with the unit and date of death, I was able to reconstruct within a very few hundred yards where the man was in combat when he died. My primary source for each unit history and battle maps is <http://legacy.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/ww1/index.html>

My story arc was generally to use the first paragraph to name some of the men in 1917, tell where they went to school, worked, or who their neighbors were. Succeeding paragraphs were very brief summaries of the US entry into the war, the buildup in France, and the onset of the battles mentioned above. The follow-on paragraphs then told what happened to each man in the story: where he died, on what date, and any incidental information I might have discovered, such as one man who died within a few hundred yards of then-private Alvin York.

² Belleau Wood is now approximately 50 miles from Paris. It is revered by Marines for their sacrifice and victory. Its cemetery, the Aisne-Marne cemetery, is the one that President Trump was scheduled to attend on November 11.

³ Austin American-Statesman, Groom News, Albany News, Abilene Reporter-News

This had the unexpected consequence of not only making the war personal to the people who read the stories in their local papers, but also to make the men painfully personal to me. I found it difficult and emotional to have gotten to know more about them than almost any of their now-living relatives, only to learn how and when and where they died. For example, in one case I discovered that one of my soldiers was a 40 year old widower whose children were grown and had left home; his heirs eventually engaged in a probate dispute over how to share the servicemen's life insurance benefits from the policy he had bought a few days before he was killed in a machine gun attack. I am dismayed at how this dishonored the man who had given his life, first for them, then for us. Nevertheless, this effort educated me more about the US in the war than I would have gotten elsewhere, and put a pretty heavy cloak on my sense of reverence for these long-forgotten heroes.

3. The journey

By November my troupe had grown from one to six. My wife Alice, who has produced the video that is part of this report, had decided to go from the earliest days. We were joined by John Knox, historian of the American Flag Foundation and his wife, Cynthia. John, whose grandfather served in the 90th Division in the war, transported flags from the US to the cemetery. We also were joined by Keith Kisner and his wife, Rebecca. Keith's uncle died in aerial battle approximately twenty miles north of the cemetery. All of them brought a work ethic, reverence, and respect for what we were doing. They were invaluable to the effort.

I made the decision to travel through London, then Belgium, en route to the Meuse-Argonne cemetery. Travel to the cemetery is difficult; there are no nearby rail stations and certainly the closest airports that fly to the US are London, Brussels, and Paris. At the same time, I knew that England and Belgium had special reverence for what is there known as Remembrance Day. In London, the major streets and buildings were decorated with bunting and poppies. Belgium, the first country overrun and occupied by the German army in World War One, decorated each village war memorial. I uploaded a short test video from Belgium and sent it to Valerie and Bob at the MWSA meeting in Charleston. They had difficulty downloading it, putting a cloud over the plan to send same-day video of the ceremony directly from the cemetery on the day of the service, which was the last day of the annual meeting.



Glass poppies flowing down the front of the Imperial War Musuem, London

We chose to stay in Sedan, France and used a combination of train and rent car to get both to there and to the cemetery. I attempted to re-upload the test video from the hotel in Sedan but its signal was too weak to complete the YouTube upload.

On the morning of November 11 we drove to Romagne-sous-Montfaucon and the Meuse-Argonne Cemetery. It rained as we drove the very small local roads. We passed through Mouzon, a town used by the Army Expeditionary Force after the armistice as a gathering point to march into Germany. We next drove south to Stenay, where the 90th Division suffered terrible casualties in the last week of the war, and on to Dun-sur-Meuse, where the 5th Division fought its way across the Meuse River. The last village was Bantheville, where the 89th Division was shelled with mustard gas. As we continued on the way it was apparent that France was closed for the day. No shops were open, no cafes or restaurants, only churches, cemeteries, and town squares. We arrived at the cemetery at nine a.m.



Facing the Chapel, Meuse-Argonne Cemetery

Walking into the entrance of the cemetery is overwhelming. In November, 1918, American men were buried all over northeastern France. Moreover, the armistice called for American troops to march into Germany and occupy the Rhineland. At the same time, the Spanish flu epidemic had begun to kill

Americans at home in even greater numbers than the war had done. It would not be for two years that the army began to build proper cemeteries for its honored dead. In the interim, graves details were assembled to find and identify each place where men were buried and to identify each man who could be identified. Many of them, including my uncle, were buried in common graves where they fell, together with their brothers in arms and also with the German troops who died with them.

In 1921 the site for the cemetery in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon had been selected and dedicated. Graves details began to rebury the men. Of the twenty-seven thousand who died in the last six weeks of the war, some 13,000 were repatriated to the United States. During the next twelve years army units, architects, and volunteers worked to produce the cemetery as it exists today.

It now is a garden. On the right of the central drive there are eight sections of graves, row by row, column by column. Each section is lined by trees to give a sense of serenity and intimacy that is difficult to explain in a place where 14,600 men rest in clean, orderly graves. On the north end of the cemetery there is a visitor center. On the south end is the chapel and loggia.

Alice and my friends began to take video and photographs of the cemetery and to locate individual graves while I went to meet with Mr. Malone. It was there that I learned that it was unlikely that we would have adequate wireless internet to upload a video and also that there would not be a workspace for us to privately edit and compress video to upload.

All of us worked until 10:30, seeking each individual grave that we had been asked or chosen to honor. We took photographs, video, or both, confirmed the unit information and date of each man's death, and placed new American and, in some cases, Texas flags. We spoke or gave moments of silence to each man. Visitors began to arrive for the service. Clouds began to gather.

4. The memorial service

We gathered in the chapel at the loggia. Shortly before 11:00 a.m. the chapel began to fill with visitors who, like us, had come to pay homage to the heroes. Special guests included family members of men who are buried in the cemetery, all of whom in attendance were given seats adjacent to the podium.

At exactly eleven minutes past eleven a.m., Mr. Malone asked all to rise. An honor guard entered. The pledge of allegiance to the United States was given and then, in French, the French pledge of allegiance.

There were three speakers. Mr. Malone spoke on the history and service of the cemetery. There still are discoveries of men who can now be identified and who are reburied with their names. Within the last weeks two brothers who had been buried in separate cemeteries were reburied together in the

Meuse-Argonne Cemetery. He read a proclamation from President Trump. General Vick of US- NATO Africa Command spoke on the special friendship and relations that have existed between the United States and France for over two hundred years and especially including the special attachment that France shares with the United States from World War One. My remarks were on the democratic nature of American armies, exemplified by Joyce Kilmer, and I read a poem that he had written when an artillery attack killed fellow soldiers.⁴ The mayor of Montfaucon read proclamations from President Macron.

Wreaths were presented by the United States Veterans of Foreign Wars, by the American Legion, and by an honor guard of ROTC cadets from the Department of Defense High School in Kaiserslautern, Germany. The *Marseillaise* and the *Star Spangled Banner* were sung *a capella* by a woman with a beautiful and moving voice who, we were to learn, was Mrs. Malone. Every person in the chapel cried openly.

In one hour, the ceremony had concluded. It began to rain.

Despite the rain, we photographed the tablets that honor the men who are missing, some 954 soldiers from every state. Walking in the rain, we then returned to the graves themselves to complete the work that we had begun before the service, identifying the men, placing our own American flags, and photographing them.

By 1:30 all the visitors and dignitaries had left the cemetery. The cemetery again was silent and empty. We finished and began the return to Sedan. The rain continued as we passed back through the same towns. We stopped in Mouzon to visit the church and to find a bridge that Mr. Knox's grandfather had helped to build in 1918. By four in the afternoon we had arrived in Sedan, tired, wet, but otherwise all right.

Among us we had used seven cameras, including video cameras, as well as tripods and sound equipment (that rendered poorer quality sound than when tested). These yielded hundreds of photographs and approximately an hour of video. It was at that point, after we returned to Sedan and at approximately 8:00 a.m. EST in Charleston, that I received word from Valerie Ormond and Bob Doerr that, on the one hand, that the test video I sent from Belgium now had uploaded in the United States and, on the other hand, that very few members were still in Charleston. We all were tired from the emotional experience of the events of the day and from the hard driving in rain. Rather than try to rush edit a video that later proved to involve about 40 hours of editing and production, we concluded that we should end the day in a brasserie located across the courtyard inside the castle grounds of the Chateau Fort du Sedan.

We ended the day by giving toasts and thanks to the men with whom we had spent the day.

⁴ The text is in the second appendix to this report

5. Conclusion

We returned to London the next day. It seemed impossible that on one day we had been in the center of a quiet, peaceful, and respectful place of heroism in the French countryside, a place of great respect and sadness, and that the next day we were just six dots on the streets of a city of eight million people who were trying to get to work, to the tube, to the airport. However, it seemed even more improbable that in such a short time the events of one hundred years ago had become so remote.

Most historians agree that the poor judgement of the British and French at the peace conference set the stage for the next world war. Refusing to recognize what had happened, the same British and French had lost their grip on enormous colonial empires and would go on to become overstretched, almost bankrupt, and unable to control the world as they had done before World War One. America, ignored as a major combatant in the fighting, was universally regarded as the ally that brought peace to the battle. President Wilson's Fourteen Points were the basis for Germany agreeing to the armistice and were central to the Versailles conference. The parties adopted the main point, the creation of the League of Nations, whereupon the United States Senate voted that the United States would not be a member of the international peace keeping agency it had devised, relegating the country to twenty years as an outsider to the brewing conflict that would erupt as World War II.

Even so, the war was not yet forgotten. The Meuse-Argonne and the other American military cemeteries in France, Belgium, and England were planned and built with the most graceful and memorable cemetery architecture the world had seen. Monuments, stadiums, and war memorials were put together in American cities of every size and shape to honor the men who had gone over there. It was not until the Great Depression that the true ugliness of the war was most apparent: its destructive effect on American women, then on the soldiers themselves.

In 1930, the Army Quartermaster Corps succeeded in getting congressional approval and funding to honor the gold star mothers of the war. Between 1930 and 1932, it transported almost 8,000 women to France, and some to Belgium and England, to visit the graves of their sons and husbands who had died over there. The army invited every woman who had experienced such a death in her family and, for those who accepted, it provided everything: train tickets to New York, hotels, steamships to France (in some cases on the very ships that their sons had taken to the war in 1918), hotels in Paris, spending money. For every woman who traveled, the army escorted her and to the cemetery where her son or husband was buried. She was given freedom to stay as long as she wished to stay. Rest houses were built at the cemeteries to accommodate the old, the weak, and the emotionally exhausted. Each woman's journey

took approximately three weeks. It was a grand and gracious gesture from a grateful nation to those who gave too much.

The soldiers themselves, however, were another matter. The Depression had driven tens of thousands of them into unemployment, poverty, and homelessness. Some veterans organized a 'bonus army,' that in the summer of 1932 went by the thousands to Washington, D.C. They appeared at the capitol every day and petitioned that the bonuses that had been promised to them for service in World War One be paid now in their time of great need. President Hoover ordered General Douglas MacArthur, a veteran of the 42d Division, to clear them out. Against the advice of his aide, Ike Eisenhower, MacArthur sent tanks and machine guns against the rag-tag shanty town where the bonus marchers and their families had camped. Some were killed. George Patton, now a major, said of one of the bonus marchers 'I do not know this man. Take him away and under no circumstances permit him to return.'" The man was Joe Angelo. Angelo had been Patton's aide in the Meuse-Argonne offensive and had saved Patton's life by dragging him to safety when he was crippled by shell fire. The destitute soldiers of World War One got nothing.

These thoughts and memories are with me and I am honored to share them with you.

The video that we took has now been edited and completed and is a part of this report. The URL and upload is at

https://youtu.be/VrHjNTeb_7o

I thank the Military Writers Society of America for the opportunity to represent all of us on November 11, 2018, at the memorial service for the men and women who died in World War One and which was held at the Meuse-Argonne American Military Cemetery in Romagne-sous-Montfaucon, France on the one hundredth anniversary of the end of that war.

Jack Woodville London

November 29, 2018

Appendix One

Men and Graves Honored by MWSA on November 11, 2018

Meuse-Argonne Cemetery

Name	Unit	home state	date of death	comment
James E Van Osdol	132d MG of 36th	Oklahoma	8-Oct	Awarded French Croix de Guerre
Thomas Graves, Jr.	142d of 36th	Texas	8-Oct	Railroad clerk, died in first hour of combat
Charlie DeShazo	360th of 90th	Texas	Nov 4 war	one week before the end of the Died 6 miles from the cemetery at Sassey
John T Bussey	141st of 36th	Oklahoma	8-Oct	at St Etienne
"Unknown"				
Earle Adkins	28th regiment, 1st Division		4-Oct	vanished after German artillery attack at Ferme de Beauregard
Ben Lester	141st of 36th		8-Oct	an orphan, earned French Croix de Guerre
John Roy Fisher	325th of 82d	Texas	12-Oct	farm boy, died at St. Juvin
Simon Gonzales	360th of 90 th Texas		1-Nov	fighting for freedoms that as a Mexican American he did not have at home
Orville Knopf	26th infantry regiment, 1st division North Dakota		8-Oct	Of German heritage, died for US at L'Aire river
Sullivan Spivey	142d of 36th	Texas	8-Oct	Died first day of battle
Walter Haddock	142d of 36th	Texas	8-Oct	Died first day of battle
Clifford Dooley	142d of 36th	Texas	8-Oct	Died first day of battle
Silas Wootan	360th of 90 th Texas		4-Nov	19 year old clerk, killed one week before the end

Hugo Funke	2d engineers, 2d Division	Idaho	10-Nov	killed 24 hours before armistice
Louis Frank Psencik	360th of 90 th Texas		2-Nov	Killed by artillery fire at Sassay
William E Wells	167th of 42d Texas		21-Oct	40 year old widower, killed three miles from M-A Cemetery
Amos Childress	142nd Infantry Regiment, 36th Division Texas		9-Oct	Second day of battle at St. Etienne

Appendix Two

by Jack London

My name is Jack London. I speak on behalf of the Military Writers Society of America. The hallowed cemeteries of our World War One heroes are the most democratic of places. Here are the rich and poor, the educated and humble, the white and black and brown, and the famous and unknowns. Men from every walk of life and corner of America joined together to fight the war to end all wars and died doing so. There are many winners who earned Congressional Medals, stars, and Croix du Guerre here but vastly more whose sacrifice was just as worthy but little noted. Joyce Kilmer was an American writer, a poet, who put aside his fame and said goodbye to his wife and five children to enlist in the 42d Infantry Division. He was present when an artillery shell killed nineteen of his brothers in arms at a forest known as Rouge Bouquet. He mourned them with this poem, read by Father Francis Duffy.

In a wood they call the Rouge Bouquet

There is a new-made grave to-day,
Built by never a spade nor pick
Yet covered with earth ten metres thick.
There lie many fighting men,
Dead in their youthful prime,
Never to laugh nor love again
Nor taste the Summertime.
For Death came flying through the air
And stopped his flight at the dugout stair,
Touched his prey and left them there,
Clay to clay.

He hid their bodies stealthily

In the soil of the land they fought to free
And fled away.
Now over the grave abrupt and clear
Three volleys ring;
And perhaps their brave young spirits hear
The bugle sing:
"Go to sleep!

Go to sleep!

Slumber well where the shell screamed and fell.

Let your rifles rest on the muddy floor,
You will not need them anymore.

Danger's past;

Now at last,

Go to sleep!"

There is on earth no worthier grave

To hold the bodies of the brave

Than this place of pain and pride

Where they nobly fought and nobly died.

Farewell!

Comrades true, born anew, peace to you!

Your souls shall be where the heroes are

And your memory shine like the morning-star.

Brave and dear,

Shield us here.

Farewell!"

Father Duffy was to read the poem again, three months later when Kilmer himself was killed during the Second Battle of the Marne. His love of his brothers in arms and his words are with us today, one hundred years later. There is on earth no worthier grave to hold the bodies of the brave than this place of pain and pride.