

Overseas War Memorials: 'Beacon for the Future'

The non-profit organization American War Memorials Overseas—founded by Army veteran Lil Pfluke—works to document, promote and preserve private war memorials on foreign soil.

BY KELLY LANIGAN



2nd Inf. Div. soldiers created 23 markers such as this one in Thiolet, France, near the end of WWI.



Army Sgt. James Mestrovitch served with C Co., 111th Inf. Regt., 28th Inf. Div., during World War I. He earned the Medal of Honor for his heroism at Fismette, France, on Aug. 10, 1918.

“Seeing his company commander lying wounded 30 yards in front of the line after his company had withdrawn to a sheltered position,” his citation reads, “Mestrovitch voluntarily left cover and crawled through heavy machine-gun and shell fire to where the officer lay. He took the officer upon his back and crawled to a place of safety, where he administered first-aid treatment.”

However, after surviving many combat actions, Mestrovitch died in November of that year in the flu pandemic. Upon his death, his body was repatriated to his native Montenegro. He is buried in Sveti Jovan Church Cemetery, more than 5,000 miles from the country for which he served.

“There are thousands of Americans who are buried overseas outside of military cemeteries,” said Lil Pfluke, founder of American War Memorials Overseas (AWMO), a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. “But who knows about them?”

'They're Not Maintained By Anyone'

Pfluke, a retired U.S. Army major, spent her career as a mechanical engineer in the U.S. Army Ordnance Corps. She first moved to France in 1995 to work for the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) (see the August 2008 issue of *VFW*), for which she worked for 10 years.

“While I was there I discovered that there are all of these other monu-



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Above: A monument at Mopertingen, Belgium, honors the 1st Army, 19th Army Corps, 2nd Armored Division and Army Air Forces. The Sherman tank helped liberate the town.

Left: Pvt. Frank Schlaich of the 77th Division was buried in a temporary American plot in a St. Aignan, France, communal cemetery in 1918. His family chose to leave him there after the war.



The Daughters of the American Revolution erected this fountain and town water supply in Tilloly, France in 1921.

ments and all of these other burials that are not maintained by the federal government,” Pfluke said. “They’re not maintained by anyone.”

She found that countries other than the United States maintain their private war memorials with private foundations. Non-profit organizations document and maintain these tributes.

So she decided to do the same for the U.S., founding AWMO. She has visited memorials in France, Belgium, Holland, Luxembourg, the United Kingdom, Germany and Austria, and she knows of memorials in 17 additional countries.

“War memorials are a very personal and a very local phenomenon,” she said. “There are thousands of memorials but nobody knows about them. There are all these interesting memorials telling many fascinating stories. What I want to do is document them and create a database online with all of the memorials in it so people can browse.”

More than 1,000 memorials are ready to be entered into the database. Pfluke eventually wants to promote local war memorials overseas by putting out brochures and other information, and encouraging maintenance and preserva-

tion. While some monuments are well maintained, some are crumbling and forgotten. Pfluke hopes to care for them all.

“Monuments tell the story of what we did overseas during the war,” she said. “Every memorial signifies what those conflicts have accomplished, the liberties that we enjoy, the sacrifices and struggles endured to obtain that freedom.”

‘A Way of Keeping Memories Alive’

Four individuals run the group, while a network of volunteers work at different sites.

The U.S. government, via the ABMC, maintains 24 overseas cemeteries and 25 memorials. AWMO attempts to care for the thousands of private sites honoring Americans.

The organization will work with sponsors to donate American flags to be flown over U.S. commemorative sites that are not supported by the respective foreign governments. Some towns are unable to

French Volunteers Honor American War Dead

After WWII, some 15,000 American troops who were killed in the war remained on French soil in the Normandy and Brittany cemeteries, where their families seldom, if ever, have had an opportunity to visit their graves.

Enter *Les Fleurs de la Memoire*—"The Flowers of Memory." Each volunteer in this French organization is assigned the grave of an American to decorate at every opportunity, especially on our Memorial Day. Some volunteers adopt more than one grave and also attempt to locate family members of the deceased.

Jack Authelet, a town historian in Foxborough, Mass., became aware of *Les Fleurs de la Memoire* back in 2007. Vincent Robillard, a French volunteer assigned to the grave of airman Clinton Davison, contacted Davison's brother, 93-year-old Lewis Davison of Walpole, Mass., also a WWII veteran. Authelet handled the correspondence for Lewis, who has seen some comfort in knowing that many people appreciate his family's loss.

"We as a nation have honored the pledge that we would never forget their sacrifice, in part, by properly maintaining the military cemeteries there and around the world," Authelet said.

"There are some very appreciative and dedicated French citizens who have also made a solemn vow that these brave Americans would never be forgotten. Because they know that every day they live in freedom, they become even more indebted to those who lie buried in the countries they came to liberate."



Colleville sur Mer, Normandy Cemetery, Sept. 28, 2008. French citizens honor American war dead.



4th Infantry Division Memorial in Manheulles, France.

How Do Other Countries Manage Memorials?

In the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth War Graves Commission manages only the overseas military cemeteries for the British Commonwealth countries. The War Memorials Trust, a charity organization, provides expertise and grants to people and organizations maintaining British war memorials worldwide. The U.K. National Inventory of War Memorials maintains a database of more than 56,000 British war memorials.

In France, the Souvenir Francais, a volunteer organization, has cared for French war memorials around the world since 1887. It maintains monuments and gravesites, and educates the public on the history of memorials.

The German War Graves Commission cares for gravesites for German war dead in more than 100 countries.

At many major battle sites, a local organization manages memorials. For example, the Center of Research and Information on the Battle of the Ardennes, a Belgian non-profit group, documents, promotes and maintains hundreds of Battle of the Bulge war memorials.

obtain flags, and even if they can, often are not aware of the proper procedures for flying one. AWMO will include local-language instructions on how to properly fly the U.S. flag. The group's long-term goal is to have U.S. flags flying over commemorative sites around the world. For now, it is concentrating on WWI and WWII battlefields in Europe.

An "American war memorial overseas," according to the group, is any permanent object put in place on foreign soil to remember Americans involved in or affected by a conflict or war in that area.

AWMO documents and promotes various commemorative sites—museums, battlefields, bridges, fountains, buildings, benches, stained-glass windows, church bells, churches, community centers—and works with local organizations to preserve them. The volunteers also seek to locate, document and preserve burial sites such as Mestrovitch's.

Also, AWMO is working to create the only complete listing of overseas combat vehicles and aircraft in the world. Old tanks, airplanes, half-tracks and trucks in past battle areas serve as visible reminders of the conflicts.

Pfluke hopes that someday AWMO will be a large enough organization with regional chapters to take on maintenance of memorial sites.

"Certainly, a war monument is a remembrance of the past, but it is also a beacon for the future," Pfluke said. "It is a reminder for all of us to constantly nourish our ties to other countries and other peoples. It is a way of keeping memories alive, not to dwell on sadness and death, but to think about heroism and sacrifice and freedom." ✪

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Editor's Note: If you know of any obscure memorials, please let us know.

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