

At rest abroad

From magnificent cemeteries to the most spartan of isolated graves, thousands of Americans are buried on foreign soil. They deserve all honor.

STORIES AND PHOTOS BY MATT GRILLS

The Aisne-Marne American Cemetery near Belleau, France, is home to the graves of 2,289 Americans who fought in the region during the summer of 1918.

SEALED IN BLOOD

Memorial Day at Belleau Wood highlights the bonds forged on the battlefield.

As Marine Corps Commandant James Amos kneels, Belleau Wood is silent, save for scattered bird songs and the rustling of leaves overhead.

He sets a small token at the base of the Marine monument – a commemorative coin given to him from members of Task Force Belleau Wood serving in Afghanistan.

Soon, hundreds will fill the nearby cemetery for a Memorial Day ceremony. But here, now, in the heart of Belleau Wood, Amos and the Marines behind him are privately honoring those who died taking this forest in one of World War I's ugliest battles.

Lt. Gen. Hervé Charpentier, commander of the French Land Forces, joins Amos in placing a wreath and rendering a salute.

At the ceremony, the two officers talk of what the Americans did at Bois de la Brigade de Marine, or "Wood of the Marine Brigade," and what it meant.

"Their sacrifice for this morsel of French ground sealed in blood the bonds that unite our two countries," whose forces have fought side by side on battlefields since, Charpentier says.

Amos praises an alliance that "continues in the mountains and valleys of Afghanistan, and recently over the skies of Libya as French Rafales and MC Harriers flew in support of Operation Odyssey Dawn."

Though U.S. soldiers outnumber Marines buried at Aisne-Marne, the Marines have a special attachment to the cemetery and the woods beyond. This is where the modern Marine Corps was born – where on June 6, 1918, it lost more men than it had in its entire history up to that point.

On Memorial Day, they are remembered and celebrated. A bugler plays Taps. A French student reads a poem. The Marine Drum and Bugle Corps gives a rousing performance, and the Marine Corps Silent Drill Platoon wows the crowd with precision marching and rifle maneuvers.

After the ceremony, hundreds of Marines – from the 5th Regiment, the 6th Regiment, Marine Forces Europe in Stuttgart, Germany, and elsewhere – gather for a reception in the courtyard of a nearby chateau, where they take turns sipping from the famous "devil dog" fountain.

"This is my third visit, and every time I come back I get goose bumps," says Sgt. Maj. Jamie Deets of the 6th Marine Regiment. "In the United States



we're fighting to save our battlefields. Here at Belleau Wood, there's no commercialization, no buildup of housing – a fitting tribute to our Marines and soldiers who gave the ultimate measure here."

Lt. Col. Mark Sojourner, who is stationed at Stuttgart and works for AFRICOM, brought his wife, Lori, and their two daughters over on a USO tour. He calls the trip "a pilgrimage every Marine would like to make."

In Bouresches, a villager ran up to Sojourner with a bottle of wine and old photographs. "He just said 'thank you' over and over, that he loved Marines and appreciated that we're here," he says.

For Mike Miller, the Marine Corps archivist, Memorial Day capped an incredible week of exploring Belleau Wood for the first time. He spent two days walking the battlefield, sometimes crawling on his hands and knees across ravines.

"You can see fighting holes, shell holes, trenches worn down," he says. "There's an uncomfortable quiet when you're in there. This is nasty terrain."

Years ago, Miller interviewed Gene Lee, who was the battle's last surviving combat veteran when he died at 105. Surrounded by Marine memorabilia, Lee recalled the terror of charging through a wheat field swept by German machine-gun fire. Then he broke down, grieving the buddies he'd lost.

Thinking of Lee, Miller stops at the headstone of every soldier, sailor and Marine in the cemetery to pay his respects. He's touched to see that beside each U.S. flag flies a French flag, placed by local schoolchildren.

"This is something every American should see," he says. 🌿



‘THE GLORY OF THEIR DEEDS’

Isolated burials, private memorials trace American blood spilled in France.

Ray Shearer has been in France only two hours, and already he’s climbing into a church belfry in the village of Bony, trying to make out a 90-year-old inscription on a weathered bronze bell.

“In memory of Lieutenant Alan Mathews,” he reads aloud, translating the French. “Killed in action Aug. 3, 1918.”

From the top of the church, Shearer can see the white marble crosses of the Somme American Cemetery. Among them is a headstone for Mathews, a second lieutenant in the 132nd Infantry and Cornell graduate, killed by shell fire when his regiment joined the front line at Albert.

Unknown to all but a few, Bony’s church bell belongs to an aging group of private memorials, monuments and isolated burials across France that trace American blood spilled in the two world wars.

Shearer visits and photographs as many of these sites as he can squeeze into his trips for the American Overseas Memorial Day Association (AOMDA), which, with The American Legion’s support, places flags at all known graves of U.S. servicemembers in Europe.

As a trustee and secretary, Shearer attends AOMDA’s annual board meeting and Memorial Day ceremonies at many of the U.S. cemeteries in France. Years ago, he started taking a few extra days to crisscross the country, curious to learn more about the 183 remote burials that receive U.S. flags from AOMDA every spring.

“Over time, fewer people are aware of the sites,” he says. “Nobody could tell me anything about them – who they were, where they were at. So I obtained a list and started going out.”

Stanley Hill of Massachusetts survived a fractured skull when a shell exploded near his ambulance as he was evacuating wounded soldiers near Reims on July 15, 1918. He died of meningitis a month later and is buried in a French military cemetery in La Veuve.

Norman DuBois of New Jersey served as a second lieutenant with the 149th Field Artillery. He was killed in action July 15, 1918, and is buried on the north side of a church in Cuperly.

Richard Banks of New York, a second lieutenant in the U.S. Air Service, was killed in a truck accident Oct. 30, 1918. He’s buried in Cimetière du Sud in Nancy.

Shearer has been to their graves, and dozens more like them. When a U.S. flag’s out, he’ll spot the headstone right away. Other times, having incomplete or inaccurate information, he’ll ask *le maire* – the mayor – or another local for help.

Inevitably, these conversations alert him to a memorial plaque or monument the next town over. They spark friendships, too – from French citizens to U.S. veterans living there, Shearer is finding allies in his efforts to document and preserve sites honoring America’s wartime contributions in France.



For 15 years, Ray Shearer has been documenting America’s isolated burials, private memorials and monuments in France.

No Small Task. Lillian Pfluke welcomes Shearer’s work. A retired Army major who graduated in the first class of women at West Point in 1980, she spent a decade at the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) in Paris overseeing private memorials

– basically, anything that isn’t put up by the U.S. government.

ABMC keeps track of, and periodically inspects, assorted statues, plaques, fountains, windows and other markers. Some were gifts to be maintained by their recipients. Others were erected by villages, families or veterans associations. ABMC encourages sponsoring organizations and towns to take care of these, and even allows them to set up a trust fund with ABMC for that purpose. But ABMC doesn’t maintain them.

“It’s not ABMC’s mission to do that, and they don’t really have the money to do that,” Pfluke says. “I made a lot of headway for them, but I realized I was never going to solve the problem within that constraint.”



Second Lt. Norman DuBois of New Jersey served with the 149th Field Artillery, 42nd Division, during World War I. He was killed in action July 15, 1918, and buried on the north side of a church in Cuperly, in France’s Champagne-Ardenne region.

She left and started a nonprofit foundation, American War Memorials Overseas (AWMO), to “document, promote and preserve” the nation’s wartime legacy. As of March, its online database had recorded 542 private memorials at 310 sites,

Learn more about American War Memorials Overseas:

www.uswarmemorials.org

with 3,206 names and 1,105 units.

Some are especially distant, including the graves of five airmen of the U.S. Army Air Corps in Australia, two plaques in New Zealand commemorating the arrival of the 2nd Marine Division following Guadalcanal, and a monument to Task Force Smith at Osan, South Korea. The lion’s share of memorials, though, is in Europe.

“Documenting means finding them all, which is no small task,” says Pfluke, who relies on volunteers

to photograph sites, describe them, and pinpoint their locations for posting on AWMO’s website.

“You can read a book and say, ‘Oh, there’s a plaque in Bastogne,’ but you’ll look a long time for a plaque in Bastogne unless you know exactly where it is. We give GPS coordinates and a good description so people can actually find it.”

Preserving private memorials is a greater challenge. Gen. John J. Pershing said of his generation of fighting Americans, “Time will not dim the glory of their deeds.” Our memories aren’t so fortunate.

In fact, Pershing opposed anything other than official monuments because he feared they’d eventually be neglected, says Peter Herrly, Pfluke’s husband, a retired Army colonel and member of Paris Post 1.

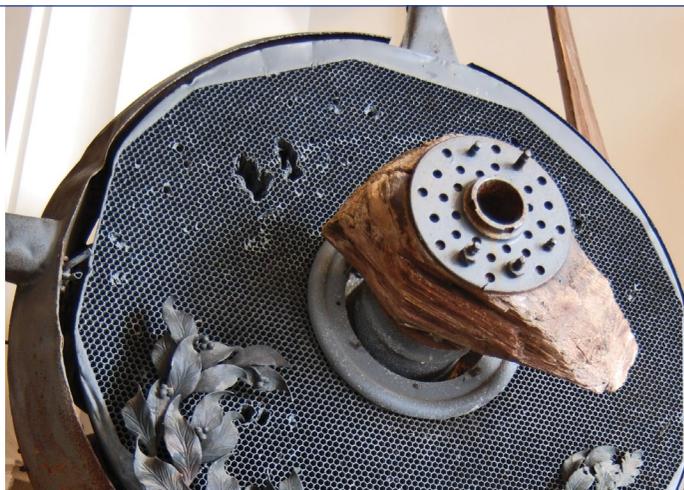
Nevertheless, there are as many as 800 private memorials in France.

“The sources for them are legion,” Herrly says.



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Quentin Roosevelt, the youngest son of Theodore Roosevelt, served as a pilot in the 95th Aero Squadron. He was shot down July 14, 1918, behind enemy lines and buried by the Germans. The wreckage of his plane is on display at Chateau Thierry's city hall. After Quentin's death, Theodore Roosevelt wrote, "We have always believed that where the tree falls, there let it lay." This sentiment influenced thousands of American families, who, when given a choice, opted to leave their sons buried where they fell or interred at one of the eight U.S. cemeteries on foreign soil.



"Maybe it's a village that saw an airplane shot down and rescued somebody. They saw the other crew die and put up a monument to them. Maybe it's an infantry unit, a stone that says, 'To the American soldiers from the state of Pennsylvania who fought and sacrificed here.' Well, it doesn't belong to the Army. Who's going to take care of it? Maybe the state of Pennsylvania will, but they have to know about it.

"Maybe it's a mother of a soldier who was killed, and she comes to France or Belgium or Luxembourg to put up a monument to her son. She convinces the village to let her place it there and then she dies. Again, who's going to take care of it?"

The French have a private association, *Souvenir Français*, to care for their war memorials. Pfluke believes a similar outfit can find long-term maintenance solutions for America's memorials.

Many sites are well cared for by the French, particularly in areas where tourism is a big part of the economy, she says. But other American memorials fall into disrepair as sponsors pass away and personal knowledge about the events disappears. In those cases, AWMO contacts the military unit or local officials to help. Depending on the situation, it might pay for materials and send in volunteers like the Girl Scouts to clean up.

"Often, if we do a renovation, it renews the town's interest in the monument and they jump in to take care of it," Pfluke says.

Sacred Ground. Shearer has a personal connection to World War I. His great-uncle was Maj. Maurice Shearer, who led the 3rd Battalion 5th Marines in the final assault to capture Belleau Wood. On June 26, 1918 – after three weeks of brutal hand-to-hand

combat with the Germans, 1,811 killed and 7,966 wounded – he sent the famous message, "Woods now U.S. Marine Corps entirely."

In 1998, Shearer traveled to France to mark the battle's 80th anniversary, and he returns every year to lay a wreath at the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery and Memorial, down the hill from the forest of the legendary *teufelshunde* – "devil dogs."

He knows the surrounding fields and villages well – Belleau, Torcy, Lucy-le-Bocage, Bouresches. This is where Capt. Lloyd Williams, when advised by a French officer to withdraw, said, "Retreat? Hell, we just got here." Where Gunnery Sgt. Dan Daly, a two-time Medal of Honor recipient before he even got to Europe, shouted, "C'mon, you sons of bitches, you want to live forever?" Where 2nd Lt. Tom Ashley charged a German machine-gun nest, fought until he was shot through both hips and the abdomen, and bled to death under a tree.

In Bouresches, Shearer stops at *Café de la Place*, a small restaurant owned by friends, Magdalena and Jean Myslinski. Inside, faded photos of crumbling buildings remind residents of how the village was nearly destroyed during the war. And on a bulletin board near the bar hangs a story about Pvt. 1st Class George Dilboy, titled "A Soldier's Tale for Those Who Come to Bouresches."

Dilboy was a Greek immigrant to America who fought at the Mexican border in 1916 and 1917. He rejoined the Army to fight in France, where he was killed when the 103rd Infantry encountered German resistance at Bouresches. After his platoon captured a railroad station, Dilboy was fired upon by a machine gunner. Standing on the track and fully exposed, he fixed his bayonet and ran forward. His right leg was nearly severed above



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the knee, and his body was riddled with bullets, but he continued to fire, killing two of the enemy and dispersing the gun crew. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Magdalena tells Shearer about a new memorial to Dilbo, in the field where he fell on the outskirts of Bouresches. On July 18, 2010 – 91 years after Dilbo’s death – villagers joined members of his family in planting an oak tree from his homeland. With Memorial Day approaching, the accompanying plaque is decorated with U.S. and French flags.

Before heading out to see it, Shearer walks through town with Magdalena, who points out walls and roofs that were never repaired after the war. Much of the rebuilding was done using the same stones, she says.

All over Bouresches, more miniature U.S. and French flags wave, including a couple from a street sign bearing the name of Lt. j.g. Weeden Osborne, a Navy dental surgeon and Medal of Honor recipient who was killed in the advance on Bouresches.

Osborne was carrying wounded Marine Capt. Donald Duncan to safety when an artillery shell exploded and killed them both instantly.

In a few days, following the Memorial Day ceremony at Aisne Marne, Café de la Place will host guests from the Marine Corps battalions that distinguished themselves at the Battle of Belleau Wood – the 2/6 out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., and the 3/5 out of Camp Pendleton, Calif. Together, they’ll toast their predecessors’ bravery and sacrifice.

“It’s an honor to have them,” Magdalena says.

Hearts and Minds. Just opposite the church in Lucy-le-Bocage is an imposing concrete boulder, about five feet across. On the top is a raised star, with a tarnished marker dated June 1, 1918. The Army’s 2nd Division placed 24 of these monuments in France, wherever it saw action.

“This is one of the few that still has a bronze plaque,” Shearer says. “We don’t know what’s happened to the others. Could be collectors over the decades. We’re trying to get them replaced.”

He was able to do something similar in Ville-Savoie, where 2nd Lt. Edward Graham of the 305th Field Artillery died Aug. 21, 1918. Four days earlier, Graham had been relieved because his eyes were inflamed from mustard gas, but he insisted on returning to duty.

Outside a cave used as a shelter by soldiers, Graham and two other men were killed by an exploding shell. For decades, a bronze plaque marked the spot, but when Shearer finally located the cave, the plaque was gone.

“You could see where it had been,” he says. “I got together with a few people I knew would support something like this, and we had a new plaque made of granite, with one of those ceramic photos people put on headstones now.”

Shearer isn’t alone in doing restoration work. Near the village of Jaulny, in northeastern France, the above-ground tomb of Capt. Oliver Cunningham has been repaired and the land around it cleared.

A Yale graduate who fought at Chateau

Thierry, Vaux and Belleau Wood, Cunningham was killed by mortar fire on his 24th birthday, Sept. 17, 1918. His comrades of the 15th Field Artillery buried him with military honors where he fell, though he was eventually reinterred at St. Mihiel American Cemetery in Thiaucourt.

When Shearer first looked for Cunningham’s tomb, he came up empty, walking within 20 yards of it and turning around when he saw high weeds and downed trees. Making the search more difficult were old instructions that located it 500 meters from the village cemetery. “That could be anywhere,” he says.

Shearer then realized that the wooded area had been a field, and tried again. He found the tomb, but it was cracked, and the marble tablets on top were in pieces. Since then, a local group – the Association Lorraine d’Histoire Militaire Contemporaine – has done a complete renovation.

“The mortar has been patched, the tablets have been replaced, and there’s a placard on the front,” he says. “It looks fabulous. It’s a perfect example



Soldiers of the 2nd Division set up 24 concrete boulders across France to mark where they fought during the first world war. Only a few have the original bronze plaques.



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On Sept. 17, 1918, Capt. Oliver Cunningham of the 15th Artillery, 2nd Division, was killed by a shell explosion near Jaulny, France. He is buried at St. Mihiel American Cemetery, but Cunningham's original tomb marks the spot where he died. His family gave three bells to the church in Thiaucourt in his memory.

of the efforts made by many people in France to maintain our memorials.”

Some are even building new ones. Jocelyne Papelard loves the United States. She came to the country on a Fulbright scholarship, married an American and became a U.S. citizen. After moving back to France, she joined AOMDA's board, and she takes local schoolchildren to place flowers on soldiers' graves at Epinal American Cemetery for Memorial Day.

Last year, Papelard invited veterans of the 3rd Infantry Division to help inaugurate a monument honoring 18 U.S. soldiers who died to liberate her village of Luxeuil les Bains in 1944. This summer, Army officials from Germany will dedicate a stele for 1st Lt. Robert Booth of the 405th Fighter Squadron, who crashed in the Vosges while trying to deliver relief supplies to the 36th Infantry Division's "Lost Battalion" on Oct. 27, 1944. Both monuments were donated by a Frenchman.

“It isn't important who organizes these ceremonies,” Papelard says. “It's that they take place. Not only do we have to keep the memory alive ourselves, we must nurture it in the hearts and minds of our young.”

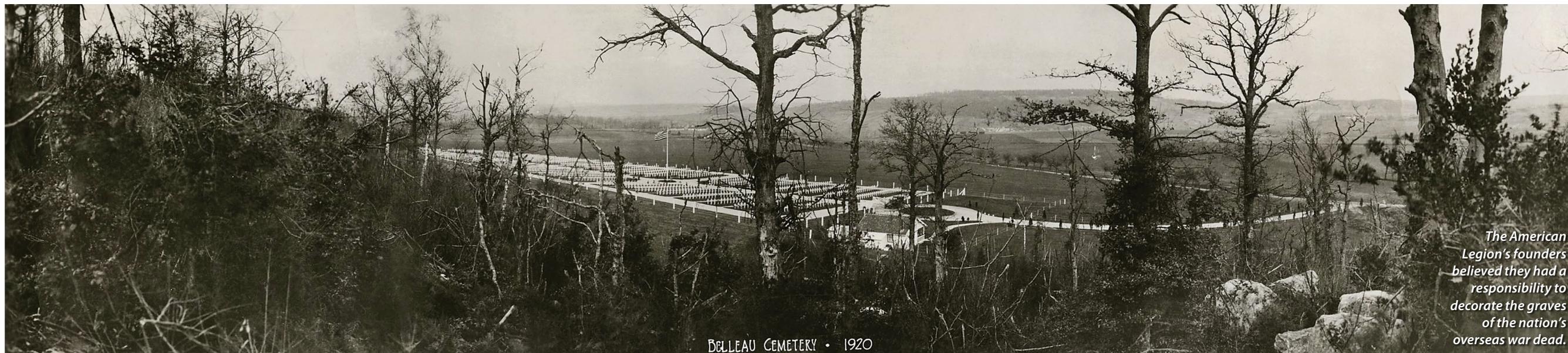
That seems to be the sentiment at Shearer's next two stops, which also are World War II sites. At Perreuil, in eastern France, he pulls over to see a memorial stone for flight officer Leroy Saunders, who died Sept. 4, 1944, when his P-47 Thunderbolt

crashed during an armed reconnaissance mission. Saunders stayed with the plane to make sure it didn't hit the village, and until his remains were moved to Epinal, the people of Perreuil guarded his grave. Today, they fly the U.S. flag over his memorial.

In Plottes, Shearer looks around for a plaque on the wall of a small house. He finds it at the town square. This is where the bodies of three crewmembers and six passengers were brought after their B-26 crashed in the woods Nov. 13, 1944. Despite fog warnings, Lt. Richard Hisey flew on toward Longvic, the new home of the 320th Bomb Group. When he descended, trying to find the Saône River, the plane flew into a hillside and burst into flames. The townspeople never forgot, and on the 60th anniversary of the crash, they welcomed relatives of the bomb crew for a memorial celebration, parade and laying of flowers.

Back on the road – somewhere in Allerey is the grave of Pvt. Paul Burton, the first American to die at the camp hospital there in 1918 – Shearer considers what to do with all the information he's collecting. He'd like to share it in some way with Americans who want to personally trace the U.S. military's legacy in Europe.

“It's safe to say that wherever you go in France, you're probably within an hour of an isolated burial or private memorial,” he says. “Take the time to visit a site.”



BELLEAU CEMETERY • 1920

The American Legion's founders believed they had a responsibility to decorate the graves of the nation's overseas war dead.

PARTNERS IN REMEMBRANCE

The Legion, American Overseas Memorial Day Association share ancestry.

The Americans who won the first world war grew up decorating the graves of Civil War dead.

Leaving Europe for home, they trusted others to do the same for their 78,000 comrades resting eternally beneath white wooden crosses blanketing the French and Belgian countryside.

"It is the first Memorial Day in the blood-ground of the old A.E.F. without the A.E.F.," wrote J.W. Rixey Smith in the May 28, 1920, *American Legion Weekly*. "The actual presence of tribute and ceremony to American dead abroad must be left to American agencies in Europe, to the Allied governments and to the folk among whom they are buried."

A Memorial Day committee led by Hugh Wallace, U.S. ambassador to France, and Lt. Col. Francis Drake, commander of the Legion's Department of France and founder of Paris Post 1, planned a grand observance across the continent. Tribute would be paid from Romagne in the Argonne, where 22,000 soldiers were buried, to Lille, where three sailors had been laid to rest.

"No American field of honor on the other side will be without its Memorial Day ceremony, no American grave without its flag and its flowers," Smith reported.

Drake and the Rev. F.W. Beekman, an Army chaplain and dean of the American Cathedral in Paris, raised funds through newspaper appeals and by asking American Legion posts in the United States, Americans living in France and soldiers along the Rhine to contribute to the proper decoration of graves. French citizens, who wanted to take part in the ceremonies, gave unsolicited donations.

Few occasions have been as poignant, or as unifying. At Thiaucourt, U.S. and French soldiers watched farmers and their families weep for the Americans who died to free their towns. On the edge of Belleau Wood, a detachment of Marines helped the people of Torcy and Belleau spread red poppies, white daisies and blue cornflowers on graves. At Romagne, the mayor and priest marched before a wreath so large it required 23 men to carry it, while schoolchildren linked every cross with a chain of daisies and sang hymns.

Within two years, the bodies of 46,284 American servicemen were returned to the United States, at their families' request. Another 30,921 from World War I will forever remain in U.S. cemeteries overseas, where the heirs to Drake's Memorial Day committee are faithful to place a flag at every one of their headstones, every May.

Shared Roots. In 1923, the Paris Memorial Day Committee voted to change its name to the American Overseas Memorial Day Association (AOMDA). Participating organizations included The American Legion, the American Graves Registration Service, the American Chamber of Commerce, American Red Cross, the American Club, the American hospital, the American University Union, Franco-American Welfare, Knights of Columbus and YMCA.

"The Legion essentially started AOMDA," says Ray Shearer, a Marine Corps veteran and Legionnaire who has served on the association's board of trustees since 2000. "The same group that formed Paris Post 1 was instrumental in establishing the association."

HOW TO JOIN AOMDA

Yearly membership dues for AOMDA are \$50 or 50 euros. Life memberships are \$500 or 500 euros. Request a membership application or download the form online.

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AOMDA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Contributions, including membership, are tax-deductible in the United States and France. Donations, grants and bequests in any amount are welcome.

Herman Harjes, an American banker who joined the Army and became Gen. John "Black Jack" Pershing's liaison to the French, served as Post 1's first commander. A.W. Kipling, an Army captain who supervised the evacuation of American wounded from the battlefield to Paris hospitals, was post adjutant. Cabot Ward, in charge of counterintelligence at St. Mihiel, was vice commander. Nelson Jay, another banker who worked for Pershing, was a founding member of the post.

All served on AOMDA's board under the leadership of Drake and Beekman, Post 1's chaplain. Acting primarily as Legionnaires, they arranged Memorial Day ceremonies, sent delegations from the post to cemeteries outside Paris and, by 1923, raised over a million francs from the Legion and the public to help cover the costs of grave decoration.

Recognizing that the income from that fund wasn't enough to meet each year's need, Drake asked The American Legion to establish a permanent endowment. A two-month campaign succeeded in raising \$161,500. Interest generated by the Overseas Grave Decoration Trust fund today purchases all U.S. flags placed at the graves of America's war dead in Europe. Since 2007 alone, the Legion has provided nearly 63,000 flags.

Even in 1940, when Americans were fleeing Paris and all the cemeteries except Suresnes were in German hands or on the battle front, the Legion and AOMDA commemorated Memorial Day by placing marble crosses and poppy wreaths – one for each site – at the altar of the American Cathedral.



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After World War II, the American Battle Monuments Committee (ABMC) added 13 cemeteries in Europe, bringing the total to 21. AOMDA coordinates grave decoration and Memorial Day ceremonies at all of them – 11 in France, three in Belgium, two in England, two in Italy, one in Luxembourg, one in Holland and one in Tunisia.

AOMDA also arranges for the decoration of individual isolated burials, supplying U.S. flags for 183 sites scattered throughout France, eight in Belgium, and numerous others in Germany, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. In anticipation of Memorial Day, volunteers gather in Paris every January to mail fresh flags to local officials, families, Legion posts, civic groups and U.S. embassies assuming responsibility for each grave.

At the cemeteries, AOMDA and ABMC staff work with neighboring towns and villages to make certain that Old Glory graces every headstone.

“It’s phenomenal,” Shearer says. “The day before the ceremony, local schoolchildren and their parents come out and place our flags at our guys’ graves. The Aisne Marne cemetery has 2,289 burials, and they’ll have all the flags placed in a couple of hours. Normandy has 9,387. The Lorraine cemetery has 10,489. The Meuse-Argonne, the biggest one in Europe and the biggest of World War I, has 14,246. Every one gets a flag placed at it.”

“Long After We’re Gone.” Like a lot of groups and associations born in the aftermath of the world wars, AOMDA is facing a steep membership decline. With fewer U.S. veterans living in France, there are fewer people and resources to support AOMDA’s mission.

James Gerard, a New York investment manager and AOMDA’s treasurer, says the association lives on “a shoestring budget of about \$20,000,” including a \$5,000 grant from The American Legion that supports Memorial Day ceremonies in Europe. That falls short of the \$25,000 – and rising – cost of Memorial Day ceremonies in France alone.

In March, AOMDA voted to create a permanent endowment to fund all Memorial Day activities at U.S. overseas cemeteries. Gerard figures that if even 3 million of the 24 million living U.S. veterans each contributed a dollar, AOMDA would be able to support Memorial Day ceremonies “long after we’re gone.”

These events are worthy of the dead they honor. In 2011, thousands congregated at American cemeteries across France to hear military bands play “La Marseillaise” and “The Star Spangled



Ray Shearer, left, and James Gerard carry on AOMDA’s mission to observe Memorial Day at U.S. cemeteries overseas.

Banner,” and U.S. and French officers reflect on their nations’ history of shared sacrifice dating to the Revolutionary War. In Belgium, four A-10 Thunderbolts out of Spangdahlem Air Base in Germany flew over a crowd gathered at the Ardennes cemetery, U.S. and Belgian troops paraded their nations’ colors at Henri-Chapelle, and a student from the Brussels American School recited John McCrae’s famous poem at Flanders Field. At Cambridge American Cemetery in England, dignitaries, military personnel and veterans laid more than 120 wreaths.

For 25 years, Gerard has presided over ceremonies at the Somme American Cemetery in Bony, France. His father – a brigadier general who served in World War II and the Korean War – did so from 1964 to 1986.

“The mayors of these towns throw open their doors on Memorial Day,” Gerard says. “They really want to show their thanks. There’s always a toast to French-American cooperation and friendship after every ceremony. It’s a very moving day. If more Americans saw it, they’d say, ‘Wow.’”

He and Shearer plan to boost AOMDA’s profile in the United States, possibly with a more interactive website that tells the stories of isolated war graves overseas. They’re also reaching out to military unit associations and veterans groups – Legionnaires, in particular, whose founders vowed that on one day each year, for all time, the graves of their comrades would be decorated and their sacrifices acknowledged.

“The people of AOMDA do this as a labor of love,” Gerard says. “It’s up to people like Ray and me to pick up the torch and carry it forward. We are the ones who are going to make sure these soldiers are remembered.” 🌿