

Travel | Past and Present

In France, Artifacts of America's Role in World War I

By RICHARD RUBIN

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A small monument near Euvezin, France, marks the spot where Maj. William J. Bland was killed in 1918. Credit Marie Liesse for The New York Times

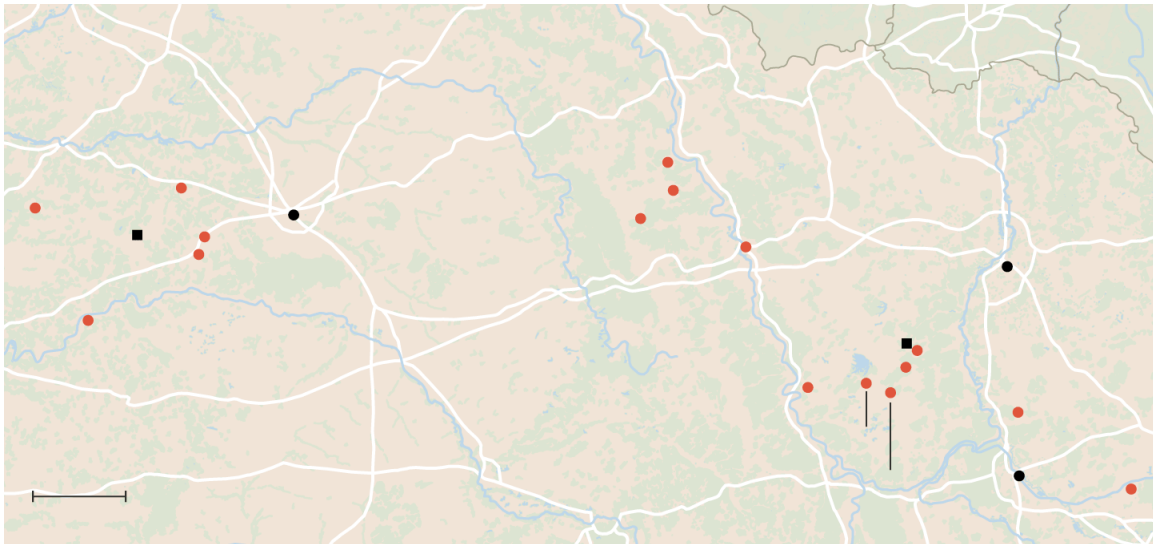
At 3 a.m. on Nov. 3, 1917, as the men of Company F, 16th Infantry Regiment, First Division were mostly sleeping in trenches and dugouts near the French village of Bathelémont, the Germans attacked with artillery and shock troops.

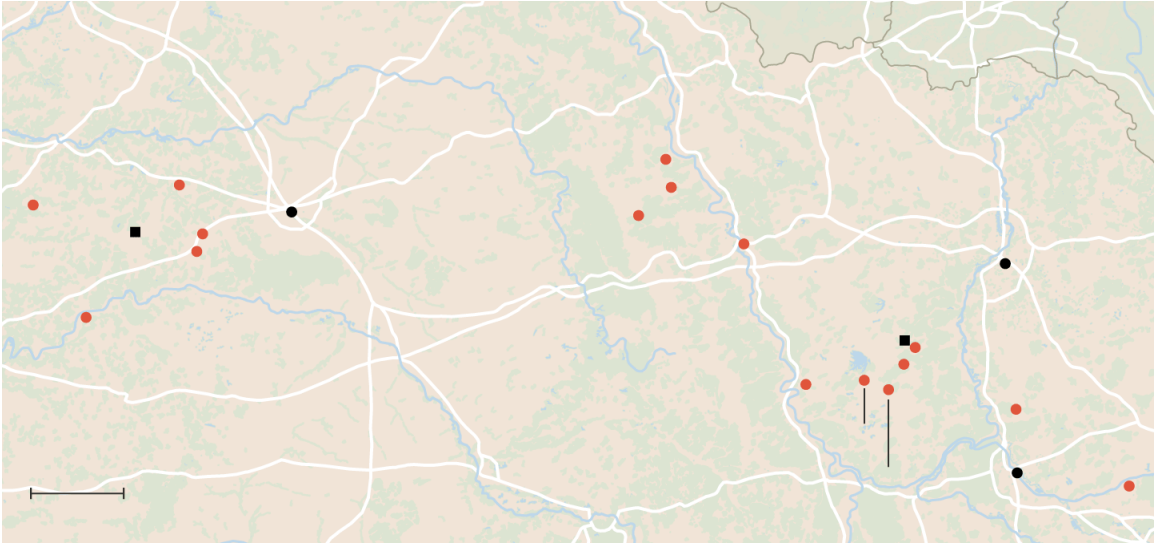
It was a lightning strike, lasting only a few minutes, but when it was over, 11 doughboys had been taken prisoner, and three — Cpl. James Gresham, Pvt. Merle Hay and Pvt. Thomas Enright — had been killed. They were the first soldiers of the American Expeditionary Forces to die in combat in the Great War.

Back in the United States, the three men's names and images were used to raise money. The French, though, had other ideas. Almost immediately, they began planning a monument in their memory, commissioning an impressive stele to be unveiled in the village center on the first anniversary of their deaths. More than 150 French towns and villages made donations to its construction. It was completed on time but could not be officially inaugurated as planned on Nov. 3, 1918; the Germans were too close.

The ceremony was held shortly after the armistice, and for more than 20 years thereafter, people made pilgrimages to the memorial. But eventually another generation of Germans got even closer, and on Oct. 6, 1940, they blew it up — not inadvertently, with a shell, but with carefully placed dynamite.

Perhaps that doesn't surprise you; but it might if you had been to [France](#) and seen just how many World War I memorials the Germans didn't destroy during four years of occupation in World War II. They are absolutely everywhere, varying in size from an index card to several acres. You don't need a trained eye to spot them — just an eager eye. Even a merely open eye will do.





After the armistice, the French government disbursed funds to every city, town, village and hamlet in France for the purpose of constructing a monument to its war dead. In the entire country, I've been told, only five settlements failed to do so, though no one I've asked there can name any of them. The village of Douaumont, which was destroyed during the war and never rebuilt, doesn't have its own monument; but it does have L'Ossuaire, a massive edifice containing a large chapel, lots of memorial nooks and corridors, a tower with observation chamber, a movie theater and a gift shop. And the bones of 130,000 unidentified men killed at Verdun in 1916.

Maybe the Nazis left that one alone because half those bones are German. Or maybe they did so because the French, during the interwar period, left so many German memorials unmolested. There are, strange as it seems, hundreds of them in France, maybe thousands, all built by the Kaiser's troops in the midst of the war to commemorate divisions, regiments, officers, actions, Kameraden gefallen.

They are ornate and maudlin and can be found in fields, and backyards, and forests, and roadside meadows, and in the many German "'14-'18" cemeteries in France, which tend to be compact and pretty, with lots of trees and lush lawns surrounded by brick walls. French World War I cemeteries, in contrast, tend to be open and plain, their concrete markers sprawling out in straight rows on sun-parched grass.

American World War I cemeteries are often even more vast than the French — Meuse-Argonne, the largest American cemetery in Europe, has more than 14,000 graves — and even more beautiful than the German. They're among the most magnificent public spaces you will ever behold; their construction was

personally supervised by the same man who personally supervised the prosecution of the war in France, Gen. John Joseph Pershing. When he was done with them, the general turned his attention to war memorials and monuments, with the intention of creating order out of burgeoning chaos.

Fortunately for posterity, he wasn't entirely successful: France is also full of American World War I monuments. Visit them and you will discover a part of the war you can't find in books or on battlefields.

In 1923, General Pershing was named chairman of the newly established American Battle Monuments Commission. In that capacity, he oversaw the design and construction of three very large American monuments in France: a massive double-colonnade on the heights above Château-Thierry; a 180-foot-tall column at Montfaucon, in the Argonne; and a circular colonnade reminiscent of the Jefferson Memorial atop Montsec, near St.-Mihiel. (The Montsec monument was, in fact, defaced during World War II — by American shells in the course of clearing the Germans off the mountain. It was restored after the war.)

They are, like his cemeteries, beautiful and impressive, but the general intended to do more in building them than commemorate three great battles. According to the future Vice President Charles G. Dawes, who drafted the legislation in question, the commission was created “to provide for a centralized supervision over all markers and memorials erected in Europe commemorating the activities of the American military forces.”

A handful of divisions, Dawes and others believed, had hogged all the glory by erecting monuments to themselves all over the place before they sailed home, using whatever slapdash materials they had on hand and presenting “historical information of doubtful accuracy.” The Fifth Division alone erected 27 monuments before it shipped out. (The saying goes that it put one up whenever its soldiers stopped to relieve themselves.) The Second Division built 23. Most divisions had none at all.

This vexed Pershing, as did the prospect of monument clutter Over There. He issued his own regulations, forbidding, for instance, the building of monuments to units smaller than a division. (He feuded bitterly with the 316th Regiment over its monument in Sivry-sur-Meuse; the 369th “Harlem Hellfighters” monument in Séchault got to stay because, ostensibly, it was put up by the French.)

He demanded that every design be approved by the commission in advance, and decreed that monuments should provide utility to the community whenever possible, which often suited divisions' veterans organizations anyway, as many of them felt a proprietary obligation toward the towns and villages they had liberated. So the 37th Division built a hospital in Montfaucon d'Argonne; the 28th Division built a bridge over the Vesle River in Fismes; and the 26th ("Yankee") Division built a church in Belleau, to replace the one they'd destroyed in the process of liberating it. (I'd wager it's the only one in France where all six New England state flags hang from the arches.)

All of them are still in use today, as are the things other divisions built elsewhere. Should you wander into a town that happens to have such a monument and reveal yourself to be an American, there's a good chance you will be directed to it forthwith, whether you ask or not. And perhaps offered some wine afterward.

Don't have too much if you intend to keep searching: Most of the monuments and memorials you will find in France are pretty small. And many of those — the most personal among them — exist today only because the general, dogged as he was, couldn't be everywhere and know everything.

People back then also had a more proprietary feeling about loss; so did communities, and even states. How else to explain something like the massive plaza (complete with classical colonnades and terraces and an eternal flame atop a pedestal) built by the state of Pennsylvania in Varennes-en-Argonne? It's beautiful and august, but it's also larger than a city block and utterly dominates the old town, which was previously best known as the place where King Louis XVI was captured while trying the escape the revolution in 1791. It's so big that you have to leave town to fit it all in one photograph.

It's also the exception. Most of the American monuments you'll find Over There are fairly modest; many were commissioned by, and for, individuals. Someone thought enough of Maj. William J. Bland, First Battalion, 356th Infantry Regiment, to leave a tablet marking the spot, near the village of Euvezin, where he was killed on Sept. 12, 1918; today it sits in the middle of a cornfield, the stalks kept at a respectful distance. (It can be accessed via a communal trail.)



A monument to Americans on Montsec, near St.-Mihiel. Credit Marie Liesse for The New York Times

In another field, beside a dirt road near the village of Cunel, you'll spot a little gray stele that was originally placed in the woods nearby:

*In This Trench
Captain
Charles Dashiell Harris
6th Engineers
United States Army
Met His Death
While Leading the Attack
That Drove the Germans
From Clairs-Chenes Woods
October 20, 1918
Aged 21 Years
He Was Awarded
The Distinguished Service Cross
[medal illustrated]
"His Initiative and Bravery
Were an Inspiration to His Men"*



A monument built by the state of Pennsylvania in Varennes-en-Argonne. Credit Marie Liesse for The New York Times

You'd have to go looking for those; but plenty of others are out there for you to just stumble upon. If you're in certain parts of the country, and if you have the time and the patience, it's worth stopping at just about any little monument you pass: It's very likely from '14-'18, and stands a good chance of being American, even if it doesn't look that way at first glance.

Along a nameless, numberless little road that runs from the small village of Lagery to the even smaller village of Aougny, there's a large old tree beside a field; if you're not driving too fast, you'll spot in its shade a cement bench. "Repose-toi. Assieds-toi," it beckons informally: Rest. Sit. In between those two chiseled invitations is the bench's raison d'être, also in French:

*To the memory
of the American Lieutenant
Carter Landram Ovington
Member of the Lafayette Flying Corps
Volunteer for French Aviation
Killed in this area on May 29, 1918
in his twenty-first year*

The mention of Ovington's youth hints at who it was who wanted you to stop and linger here awhile. Others were more direct. In a tiny park in the village of Louâtre, I spotted an oxidized copper plaque, about the size of a legal pad and fixed to a stone. Its inscription is also in French:

*In Memory of
Sergeant Dudley Gilman Tucker
American Volunteer in the 15th Spad
Escadrille, Group 13
Died gloriously in this vicinity
In combat against six enemy airplanes
July 8, 1918
He gave his life for Liberty
This tablet was placed
by his mother, who is proud of him*



St.-Mihiel American Cemetery. Credit Marie Liesse for The New York Times

Not all lives claimed by war can be found on casualty lists; but even some of them have their own monuments. After the armistice, 53-year-old Eleanor Bradley-Peters moved out of her elegant New York home and into a small

apartment near Thiaucourt, France; she never left, even after the Germans returned in 1940. When she died, the next year, she was buried in Thiaucourt's town cemetery, in a plot near the gate.

She chose it because it was the nearest one to the St.-Mihiel American Cemetery, about a mile away; among the 4,153 Americans buried there is her son, First Lt. Edward McClure Peters, of the First Division's Machine Gun Battalion. He was killed on March 3, 1918 — four months to the day after Gresham, Hay and Enright died at Bathelémont.

A proud stone eagle sits in the middle of St.-Mihiel atop a pedestal bearing the inscription: Time shall not dim the glory of their deeds. I'm sure that Lieutenant Peters's mother — who also designed her own gravestone, a white cross identical to her son's — read those words many times in the 23 years she lived nearby.

St.-Mihiel is the closest American cemetery to Bathelémont, where America's Great War, it could be said, really began. The French certainly felt that way; in 1955, a decade after the Germans were driven off for good, the town unveiled a new monument to Gresham, Hay and Enright on the same spot as the one the Germans had destroyed 15 years earlier. It was less impressive than the first, and some unspecified "controversy" led to its being moved to a different location, outside town, in 1977. But it's still standing.

Correction: October 5, 2014

An article on Sept. 21 about American World War I monuments and memorials in France misidentified the river in Fismes where the 28th Division built a bridge. It is the Vesle River, not the Marne.

Richard Rubin is the author of "The Last of the Doughboys: The Forgotten Generation and Their Forgotten World War" (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).

IF YOU GO

Where to Stay

[The Hotel du Lac de Madine](#) in Heudicourt-sous-les-Côtes is comfortable and contemporary. Rooms start at 67 euros, about \$84 at \$1.26 to the euro. The hotel has an excellent restaurant.

Where to Eat

[La Pizzeria du Lion D'Or](#) in St.-Mihiel is an appealing dinner option. Prices from 7.60 euros.

Resources

The superintendent at the [St.-Mihiel American Cemetery in Thiaucourt](#) is Mike Coonce (CoonceM@abmc.gov).

The nonprofit [American War Memorials Overseas](#) has a useful website, a valuable resource for anyone interested in American World War I monuments and memorials in France.

A version of this article appears in print on September 21, 2014, on page TR4 of the New York edition with the headline: Where Doughboys Lie. [Order Reprints](#)[Today's Paper](#)[Subscribe](#)
