

War Resonates Anew on Hallowed French Ground

By STEVEN ERLANGER

CHÂTEAU-THIERRY, France — The remains of some of the last American doughboys of World War I to be identified were found just a few years ago, buried in a vegetable garden in this little town, wine bottles clasped in their crossed arms. They had died of their wounds in a field hospital set up in an adjoining farmhouse.

Because dog tags rusted so quickly, soldiers created their own unofficial method for future identification: They wrote a note identifying the dead, with the date and manner of death, and two comrades of higher rank signed it as witnesses. They then stuck the note in an empty bottle, corked it and buried it in the arms of the corpse, said David Atkinson, superintendent of the sweeping **Aisne-Marne American Cemetery**, at the foot of the hill where the Battle of Belleau Wood was fought, a site sacred to the Marine Corps.

More than 116,500 American troops died in World War I in less than six months, slaughtered in a war that was supposed to end all wars. In this region of France — today a lush, rainy carpet of fields and hills — roughly 300,000 troops were killed or wounded on all sides in the summer of 1918, 70,000 of them American. They were vital to the successful effort to block the Germans from advancing on Paris, about 60 miles away and accessible now by a suburban train.

The battle here is considered to have been crucial, ending a string of German successes and thwarting Germany's push to achieve victory before the American Army arrived in full strength.



The New York Times
Thousands of American war dead are buried in France.

The immaculate American cemetery at Belleau and another one nearby, known as the **Oise-Aisne American Cemetery** and laid out like an open-air cathedral, together contain more than 8,000 American graves. The headstones of white Italian marble are set in ranks, like a parade formation of the dead.

Many of the names — like Mike Zlotcha, a private from Michigan who died on Sept. 23, 1918, or Cataldo Carletta, a private from Pennsylvania who died on July 16, 1918 — are European in origin. At least 18 percent of the American soldiers who fought in World War I were not born in the United States, Mr. Atkinson said; many were immigrants from Europe who returned here to fight and die.

All the dead will be mourned on Friday, a date observed throughout Europe to mark the anniversary of the armistice that began at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918.

Though 11/11/11 is not its centennial, there is still an unusual resonance.

President Nicolas Sarkozy of France will devote much of his day to commemorations honoring Georges Clemenceau, France's wartime leader, and Charles

Péguy, the beloved poet who died near here in the first Battle of the Marne. "Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics," Péguy once wrote.

Mr. Sarkozy will also go on Friday to nearby Meaux to inaugurate **Le Musée de la Grande Guerre (the Museum of the Great War)**, a 75,000-square-foot oblong building devoted to historical artifacts of the war, near an American memorial erected in 1932.

Nearly all the artifacts were amassed by Jean-Pierre Verney, 66, the grandson of a German woman. Inspired by the tales of veterans, he became fascinated by the war and began buying items at flea markets and auction houses. He became obsessed with collecting, selling "my wife's furniture and jewels" to do it, Mr. Verney said.

In the 1970s, he said, "people weren't interested, and the state was cautious." He proposed displaying his collection at various museums and got no response. But in 2004, at a war commemoration, he met the mayor of Meaux, Jean-François Copé, who now runs Mr. Sarkozy's governing party.

A foreign museum had offered Mr. Verney two million euros (\$2.7 million at current exchange rates) for his collection, but he wanted to keep it in France. Mr. Copé arranged to buy it for 600,000 euros (\$823,000) with the promise of the museum.

Only about 5 percent of Mr. Verney's 50,000 pieces will be displayed: uniforms from more than 30 nations, guns, canteens, call-up notices, weapons, ammunition, grenades, gas masks and protective suits, prostheses, patriotic knickknacks, art made by bored soldiers out of shells and ammunition. There is a **Browning FN Model 1910 pistol**, the same type (and a sales catalog for the gun, which cost 42 francs) that Gavrilo Princip used to assassinate Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and his wife in Sarajevo in 1914, the spark that touched off the war. And, courtesy of the French state, the artifacts include a 1917 Renault tank, a truck that housed carrier pigeons, and two warplanes, the fragile **Blériot XI** and a **Spad XIII biplane**.

There is a re-creation of a French trench and a German one, with a no man's land in between, and there are films to provide historical context for the years between 1870 and the end of the war.

The museum, with workers racing to finish in time for Mr. Sarkozy and the public, cost 28 million euros (\$38 million), divided between state and regional authorities. Some three million euros (\$4 million) came from corporate contributors, including Disneyland Paris, 10 miles away, with which the museum expects to form a tourism partnership.

The organizers expect up to 100,000 visitors a year; the memorial at Verdun gets about 200,000 a year. Interest remains high; Michelin is publishing two World War I battlefield guides on Friday, for this area and for Verdun.

On Saturday, in nearby Fère-en-Tardenois, another memorial will be dedicated in the region: a bronze statue on a plinth in honor of the soldiers of the United States 42d Infantry (Rainbow) Division who died in the **Battle of Croix Rouge Farm** in July 1918. Sculptured by a British artist, James Butler, the statue depicts an

American soldier carrying a dead comrade. The memorial is the gift of an Alabaman in the name of his father, Sgt. William Johnson Frazer, who was wounded in the battle, which involved a bayonet charge by the 167th (Alabama) Infantry Regiment.

As for Mr. Verney, what interests him is the human story of the war, especially now that the last serving soldier is thought to have died. So he was stung the other day when a well-known French historian of World War I, Annette Becker, dismissed him as "a handyman who has amassed bric-a-brac, with no historical legitimacy." Mr. Verney called the remark "despicable" and said: "I am not a collector. I'm a farmer; I made a furrow and I drew it myself, with difficulty." Now, with the museum a reality, Mr. Verney said, "I'm going to leave the trenches and reflect, and rest a little."



Corentin Fohlen for The New York Times
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The names of missing American soldiers are engraved on chapel walls at the Aisne-Marne American Cemetery in Belleau.

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