

Volume II, Chapter 4

A Living Memorial

The Role and Power of the Meuse-Argonne
American Cemetery in Honoring Sacrifice and
Service

Colin Baker and Lynn Rainville



The American Cemetery at the Meuse-Argonne

In this chapter, Colin Baker explores the role of chaplains in the burial of fallen soldiers and the symbolism and significance of grave sites. Lynn Rainville then reflects on how those left behind responded to the burial of their loved ones overseas.

Relevant links:

[ABMC website FAQs, including a section on ABMC history and burial policies](#)

[General overview of ABMC and its cemeteries](#)

[Recent ABMC news article on the founding of ABMC and establishment of overseas cemeteries](#)

The Founding of a Living Memorial

While it may seem an oxymoron, Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery is a living memorial to over 14,246 service men and women who gave their lives during World War I.



This Day in History, September 26, 1918: The Meuse-Argonne Campaign Begins

It is living in a figurative sense, via the regular maintenance of its striking white marble gravestones, and in a literal sense, via the elaborately planned botanical landscape. There are numerous ways to catalog the dead who sacrificed their lives in The Great War: between eight and ten million military dead with over 7 million more from the surrounding civilian populace. Within this mortality count, approximately 116,500 were Americans; the Graves Registration Service calculated 80,178 deaths or missing in action. Among the American dead, about 46% died in or directly



Multiple corpses go unburied during fierce fighting in France, 1915. A photograph titled "Casualties after a charge." Source: [Girdwood Collection, British Library](#).

from battles while the remainder lost their lives to disease, accidents, and training incidents.

Caring for the Dead During the War

In order to understand the patterning of World War I gravestones in France, we have to begin with a short study of how fallen soldiers are cared for during battles and while the war itself still rages. The men and women who died during combat posed an ethical dilemma for their surviving comrades: how to safely and properly care for their corporeal remains while fighting for one's life?

There are countless examples of soldiers risking, and in some cases losing, their lives to pull a comrade's already dead body back to the relative safety of a trench or defensive position. Even if a soldier died after being evacuated a field hospital, his colleagues must still decide how to dispose of the body in a manner safe for both the living and the dead.

During World War I, temporary burial sites were created that ranged from hastily dug, individual burials to mass graves. Various military units were responsible for managing these temporary resting places, including sanitary squads and the Pioneer Infantry. Military chaplains played an important role in presiding over the funerals for the individuals buried in these impermanent graves

Burying the Dead: Saluting the Work of American Chaplains at the Meuse-Argonne

As long as armies have existed, chaplains have provided for soldiers' spiritual needs, aided the wounded, improved morale and buried the dead in improvised cemeteries. Chaplains have served in the U.S. army since the Revolutionary War. Thrust into the first global industrial war, their role in World War I shifted as rapidly as the U.S. army itself was forced to, when faced with the chaos of trench warfare.

During the war, chaplains often found themselves under fire or dealing with casualties far behind the front lines. This was due to the nature of an "industrial" war, in particular the range and effectiveness of modern Artillery. Twenty-three U.S. army chaplains died during World War I. Several are buried at the Meuse-Argonne cemetery. Many demonstrated tremendous bravery under fire administering last rites to fallen soldiers, oblivious to the fire around them, or dashing out into the open to rescue the wounded without regard for their own lives. At the Meuse-Argonne, the Reverend Ben Lacy, Jr. called in artillery fire to stop a German attack and earned the nickname "The Fighting

Chaplain." This section examines the frontline experiences of several of these courageous men.

The most famous of these during World War I was undoubtedly the Catholic priest Father Francis P Duffy. Attached to the 165th New York regiment of the 42nd "Rainbow" division Father Duffy was instrumental in preparing his unit for battle.

Colonel Frank R. McCoy wrote about Duffy that "although the Chaplain is that par excellence and beloved of the men, he is one of the most interesting men to me...very learned. And he has helped me to nick into my new regiment most thoroughly" (Harris 2006, 203).

Duffy was often in the front line during engagements. Corporal Bill Gordon wrote to his father "I suppose you have heard of our chaplain, Rev Father Duffy. Well, he today is our father. If we are in trouble, we look for him...When we are going into battle he will come around to everybody and tell them to say a little prayer and God will take care of us, and when the battle is over he is at the



Father Francis P. Duffy

first aid waiting to say a good word to the wounded” (Ibid, 353). Bronx native Private Tim Nolan noted that “Whenever things were the hottest there was Father Duffy, crawling around from shell hole to shell hole, telling us it was not as bad as it seemed, to stick it out a little longer” (Ibid, 353).

The mass casualties of trench warfare often dictated that chaplains had to bury the dead immediately in the vicinity of the front line, occasionally even under fire. Private Nolan added that he saw Duffy “burying our dead right out in the open with Jerry (the Germans) looking down at him from machine gun nests a couple of hundred yards away. He was digging away with a pick by himself, just as cool as though planting potatoes in his backyard. How he got away with it, God knows” (Ibid, page 353).

Father Duffy survived the war, returned to the U.S. where his service in World War I was memorialized after his death in 1932 by a statue erected for him in Times Square, New York, in 1937 and a 1940 movie about his regiment, *The Fighting 69th*.

Amongst the many duties of World War I chaplains was assisting with burying the dead in temporary graves.

At the Meuse-Argonne, Episcopalian Reverend Hal Kearns took charge of one burial detail, writing that “Our men were falling in such numbers that it was no longer possible to send those who had made the great sacrifice back to burial grounds in the rear; they must be buried on the battlefield” (Lengel 2009, 102).

The Reverend Kearns further observed,

*“Bodies were borne on stretchers and accumulated in convenient, easily designated spots where burial grounds were created, each burial ground being carefully marked on field maps so it could be located later. ..Where possible, religious services were held at such internment but often we worked under such heavy shell fire that there was opportunity to utter only a word of prayer as we lowered the bodies into their temporary resting places.”*⁶ (Ibid, page 103)

From the military standpoint, identification and burial were matters of both accounting and morale. Nothing was more depressing to the front line soldier than to see unburied dead around them.

For civilians there was a new human need that diverged from the earlier practice of mass anonymous burials for lower ranks. Because mass “death at a distance” was so traumatic, the public demanded “rights” to recover and identify the body. Families required an individual body or grave as a focus of their grief.



Statue of Father Duffy in a section of New York's Times Square now called Duffy Square

Burial detail, often performed by specialized units, notably African American in the U.S. Army, was among the most unpleasant and unpopular tasks of the war. Burial groups were supplied with rubber gloves, shovels, stakes to mark the location of graves, canvas and ropes to tie up remains amongst other tools and materials. Men remarked that it was “the most dreadful experience



Chaplain Duffy officiating at the grave of Quintin Roosevelt, son of President Theodore Roosevelt, Aug 9th, 1918 . It is significant to note that President Roosevelt believed war dead should be buried near where they had fallen. Source: U. S. Official Pictures of the World War.

I've ever had." The chaplain assigned to this detail described the post-traumatic effects of such work as causing a trying "of the nerves...and a curious kind of irritability that was quite infectious" (Hodgkinson 1997).

After the war ended the first burial task was to consolidate thousands of isolated graves, next to combine small cemeteries into larger ones, and finally to locate and identify the large numbers of the missing at the Meuse-Argonne. Only after this, in the 1920s, did the re-interment into large permanent cemeteries

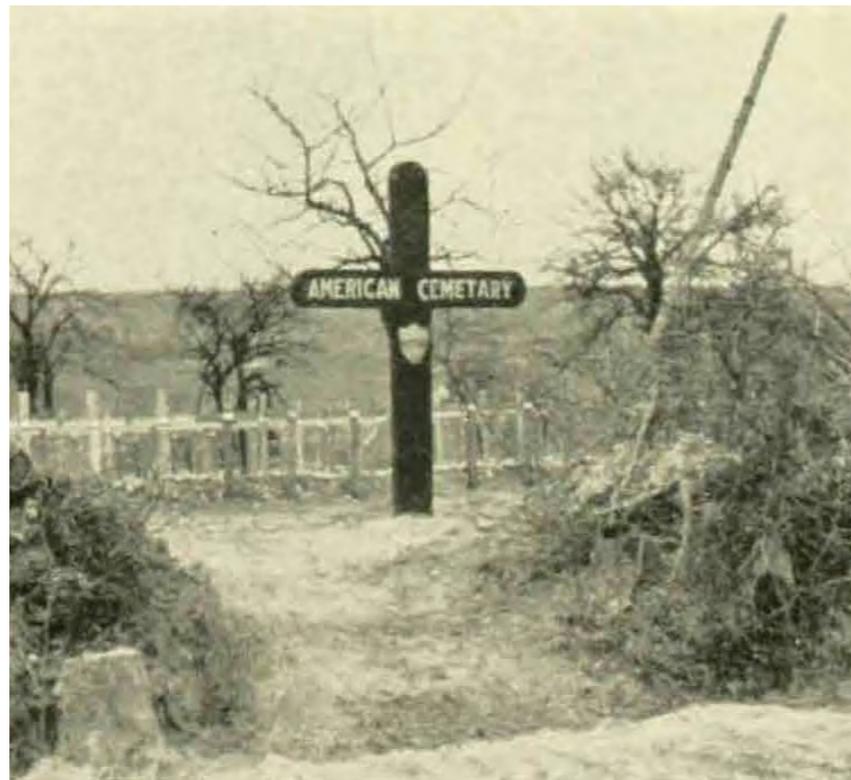
such as Meuse-Argonne take place. By that time the immediacy of burial requirements had taken a back seat to questions of the design and purpose of the cemetery.

Until then, temporary cemeteries abounded at the Meuse-Argonne. Father Duffy conducted many burial services at these cemeteries. Colonel McCoy noticed that during one burial, French villagers had erected a simple fence and planted a hedge with flowers and vines. Duffy collected children from the local village and they decorated each temporary cross with flowers praising the



A temporary battlefield cemetery at Tronsol farm for men of the U.S. 1st division, Oct 1918 (near Gesnes – see later chapter on weapons with a section on a pistol duel and the "battle for Mayache ravine" for an account of events in this exact spot). Source: National World War One Museum, Kansas City.

villagers for their “tribute to our dead which warms our hearts to the people of France.” He then sent letters to the mothers of the regimental soldiers just buried saying to each “It was a source of great satisfaction and gratitude to us to find that the graves we have had to leave behind in our movements have been carefully tended by French soldiers and civilians. Day after day women and children from the villages have spent the twilight hours with soldiers trimming the grassy edges and cultivating flowers until our little cemeteries are more blooming and beautiful than most one finds at home...Our Colonel wishes me to express this information to you with renewed expression of the sympathy which he and all of us feel for you in the sacrifice you have called upon to bear in the cause of our country” (Harris 2006, 204).



Temporary cemetery typical of the type found at the Meuse-Argonne before re-internment. Source: American Armies and Battlefields in Europe, p. 317.

The strain of being under fire, aiding the wounded, and conducting burials for men they often knew well was immense for chaplains. Father James Hanley was wounded by a bullet returning from no-man's land while trying to rescue a wounded soldier. The tourniquet he administered on his own leg saved his life in the short term but, together with being gassed, ultimately contributed to his death from pneumonia in 1920. Reverend John B DeValles served for 18 months with the 26th Division before being found unconscious from the effects of mustard gas at the Meuse-Argonne. He returned to the U.S. in 1919 but spent the remaining months of his life in and out of hospitals until his death in 1920.

Chaplain Reverend Ben Lacy survived the war while serving with the 30th Division and became famous in his native North Carolina for an incident at the Meuse-Argonne where he called in artillery fire to break up a German attack. He went on to become a pastor in Atlanta and moderator of the Presbyterian church of the United States after the war.

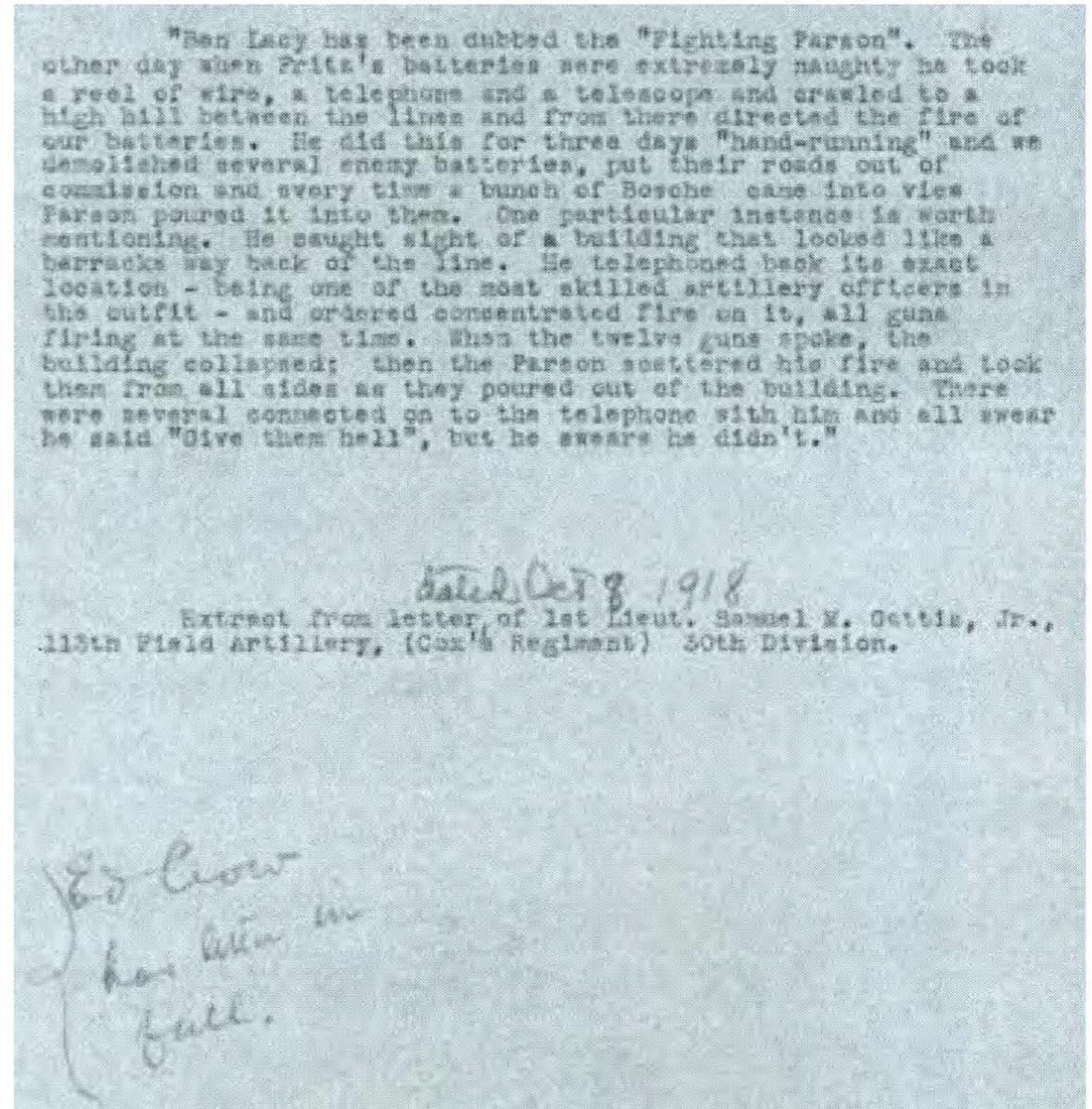
Lacy's own diary reveals the true toll of the Meuse-Argonne in the last few pages where he recounts his time after the Armistice attending the sick and dying. On February 17, 1919, he “went to funeral of some of my men, then visited hospital. Bodies brought to gate of ambulances. One put on caission. Band, chaplain, caission, Guard of honor, French and American, pall bearers, Music to grave. All at salute and present arms while body is being

covered and conveyed. Short service, 3 volleys taps. Big flag at half mast."

Finally, the February 21 entry simply reads, "Some very sick men still in hospital. Am doing little else now except visit sick and bury dead."



Artillery spotter directing fire at the Meuse-Argonne – in the manner of Ben Lacy Source: National World War One museum, Kansas City

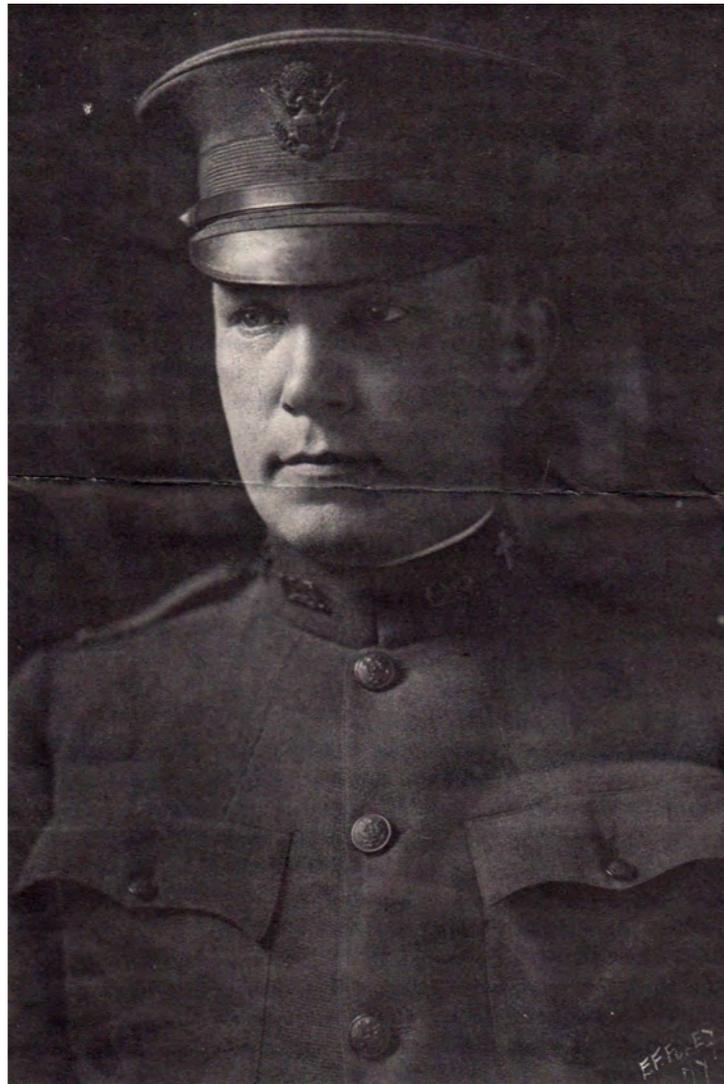


Letter written by Lieutenant Gattis at the time describing incident and Ben Lacy's bravery. National World War One museum, Kansas City.

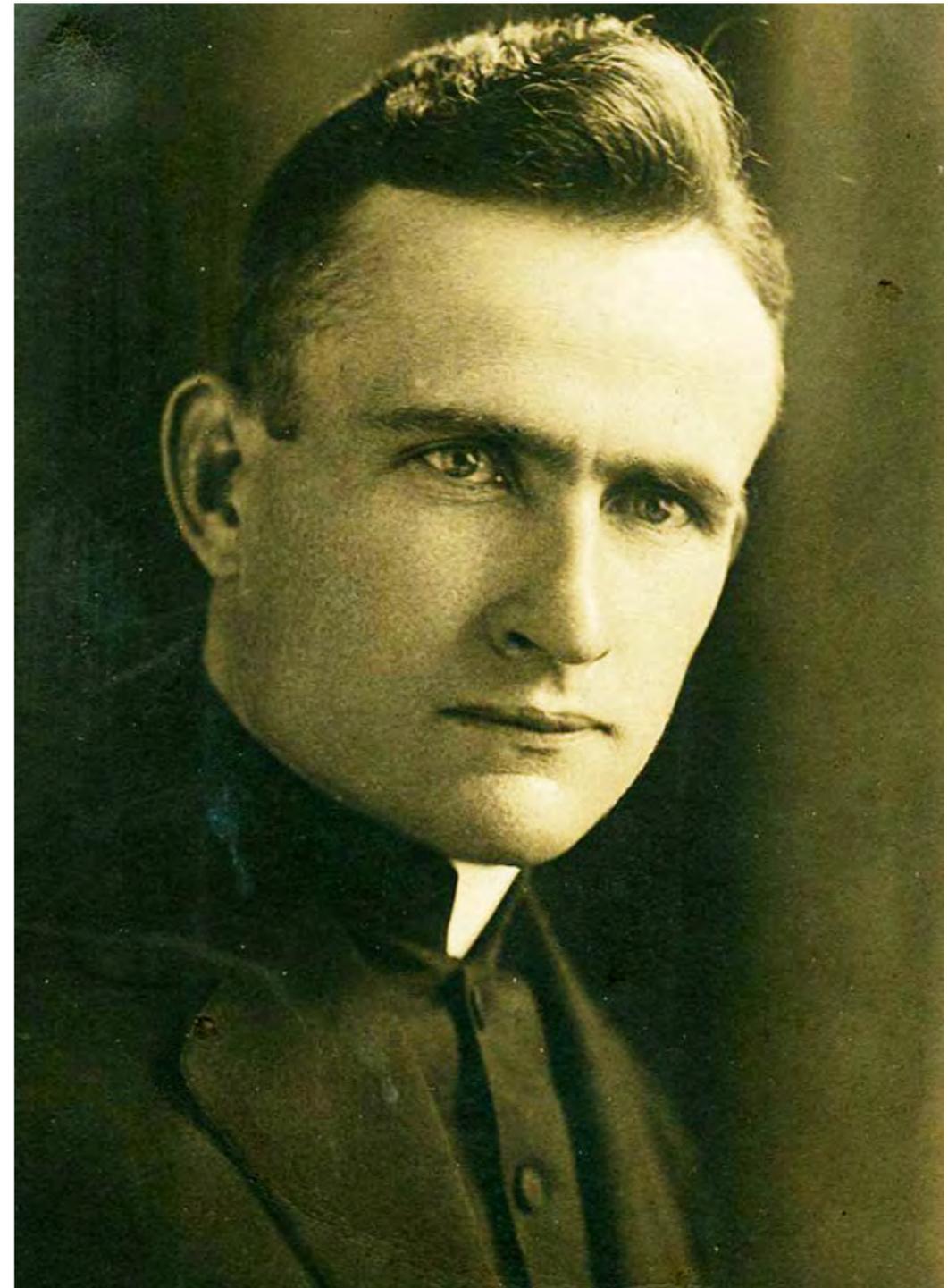
For a rare video interview recollection of an actual World War I chaplain's experiences, see [this video](#) at the Internet

One of the four chaplains buried at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery is Coleman E O'Flaherty. His life and service in World War I exemplify the dedication of U.S. army chaplains.

Born in 1878 in Connemara, County Galway, Ireland, the eldest of eight children, O'Flaherty expressed an interest in the priesthood. His schooling was financed by the American Roman Catholic church on the condition that he eventually emigrate to the United States to study as a priest. Arriving at Ellis Island in 1898 on the White Star liner Cymric, he attended Catholic Seminary in New York before being ordained as a priest in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in 1901 at the age of 23.



1st Lieutenant Colman O'Flaherty. Private collection, Coleman O'Flaherty, Australia.



Father Colman E O'Flaherty in an undated archive photo. Source: Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls.



Coincidentally, the Cymric was sunk in 1916, a year later than and in the same location as the Lusitania, by a German U-boat. This Sandusky, Ohio newspaper addresses the sinking of the Cymric and its implications for U.S.-German relations.

Father O’Flaherty worked for 17 years in various pastorates in sparsely populated South Dakota, helping establish at least two schools. His friend the Reverend B. Weber described him as “zealous, energetic, fearless.” At age 39, he volunteered as a chaplain and attended Chaplaincy school in Oklahoma before being posted to France as a 1st Lieutenant in the 28th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division. Reverend Weber says that upon leaving,

O’Flaherty shook his hand and with great emotion said, “I don’t think we will meet here again”.

Father O’Flaherty was cited for distinguished conduct during an action of the 1st Division south of Soissons, France in July 1918. Major H.L. Loughry reported that “he displayed bravery under fire and with utter disregard for personal danger aided the wounded, buried the dead and assisted front-line troops in every possible way during action.”

Lieutenant Birmingham of his regiment added, “he was always up in front where the fighting was going on. As soon as he would see a man fall he would go to him and administer to his needs.”

Near Verdun at the Meuse-Argonne in October 1918, he was aiding men wounded from shellfire when he himself was hit by a shell and died. He was initially buried in the temporary cemetery of field hospital number 12 before being re-interred at the Meuse-Argonne cemetery where his grave is today.

Awarded the Distinguished Service Cross for this final service, his citation reads “Chaplain O’Flaherty displayed conspicuous gallantry in administering to the wounded under terrific fire, exposing himself at all times to reach their sides, and give them aid. In the performance of this heroic work, he was killed.”

While researching at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, I recorded a brief tribute to him and all the U.S. army chaplains of World War I at his gravesite.

A Tribute to Father O'Flaherty



However, his close friend Lieutenant Birmingham does him, and fellow chaplains, better justice with this closing tribute:

“He was to all of us a great and dear friend, never for a moment losing his genial smile, even when things were going very hard with us. Officers and the men in the ranks loved him because of his unselfish interest in our material and spiritual welfare. We always looked upon him as a person far above us, he was so brave and so good to everyone, always accompanying us “over the top” to take care of our wounded and cheering us on. Be you Catholic or not did not make any difference to him. He knew us as his Boys and he was known to us as our Chaplain.”

UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CHAPLAINS *in the* WORLD WAR



O'Flaherty, Rev. Colman (Sioux Falls)
Commissioned April 4, 1918. Father O'Flaherty served in the A.E.F. with the 28th Infantry and was the first Catholic Chaplain to be killed in the war. He was killed at Very, France, October 17, 1918. He and a corporal had been in a shell hole throughout the day. He heard some wounded men calling for assistance. He left the shell hole and was squarely struck in the chest by a German A.S. shell. Death was instantaneous and the Chaplain was buried where he had so gallantly fallen. All of the morning of his death, Father O'Flaherty had been helping bury the dead and succor the wounded, under heavy shell fire. The men of his regiment said that he had gone over the top in every fight from Soissons until the day he was killed.

ORDINARIATE
ARMY AND NAVY CHAPLAINS
NEW YORK CITY

Coleman O'Flaherty's obituary.

National World War One museum, Kansas City



Historical controversy: Details on the exact date of Colman's death vary.

Activity: Chaplains

After having read the chaplains section in the ebook, research more about one of the following chaplains:

- Father Duffy
- Ben Lacy
- Colman O'Flaherty
- Any other World War I chaplain

In addition to general searches, [the ABMC database site](#) can be used to find some starting information on soldiers (including chaplains) buried at overseas sites from World War I.

Students should use the World War I filter on the left and then can search by last name to find a known casualty, or can look down the list of ranks to find a chaplain listed among the 712 pages of World War I casualties.

Once located, by clicking on the last name more information will appear to aid further searching online. Unit histories are often available online and are an excellent place in to look for the context of where the individual was serving at various points in World War I. State libraries are also an excellent source – locate the Military Dead archive or database. For example, in Virginia, the [Virginia Military Dead Database](#) is a great place to locate veterans from your county who died in World War I. Many of these are buried at the Meuse-Argonne. You can then search the ABMC database for more information.

For example, details below from Colman O'Flaherty on the ABMC database helped me to locate records about him from South Dakota, and then to locate living relatives in Ireland and Australia. We were able to exchange new information on Colman - allowing for a fuller picture of him for his family today as well as for us in this ebook.

Did you know?

Colman O'Flaherty was in many ways representative of the U.S. army at the Meuse-Argonne.

1. Born in Ireland, he was an immigrant. Nancy Gentile Ford in *Americans All! Foreign-Born Soldiers in World War I* states that “during the First World War, the U.S. government drafted into military service nearly a half million immigrants of forty-six different nationalities, creating an army with over 18 percent of its soldiers born in foreign countries.” Including soldiers with immigrant parents, the percentage jumps to 30%.
2. He was killed by shellfire. This was the leading cause of death of U.S. troops, with estimates ranging between 60% and 80% of all U.S. deaths caused by shelling.
3. His death had a world-wide impact. His nephew reports that “In August 1918 he wrote to his mother in Galway, Ireland and advised her that he hoped to visit her for Christmas 1918. The family lore is that this news brought great joy to his parents who had not seen him since he left Ireland in 1898, and they immediately set about painting their home and preparing for his visit. Unfortunately, Fr Colman E O'Flaherty never did make that trip.” This was a world-wide war where an Irishman, born under the British Empire, fought for the United States in France, where he was killed by a German shell and his death was mourned in South Dakota and Ireland and whose relatives today commemorate him from the United States, Ireland and Australia. The Meuse-Argonne was in many ways America's opening act on the world stage.

And yet, in one way he was not representative of the U.S. army at the Meuse-Argonne

1. He volunteered at 39, and died at age 42. Most U.S. soldiers who served in this battle were in their twenties. Because of this most relatives who visit the cemetery or commemorate U.S. soldiers who served at the Meuse-Argonne are several generations removed – usually grandchildren or grand-nephews/nieces. However occasionally sons or daughters, or in the case of Colman O'Flaherty, a nephew, survive to commemorate their relative. This makes the 100 years since the war started not as distant as it seems.

Colman E. O'Flaherty, Chaplain, U.S. Army

28th Infantry Regiment, 1st Division

Entered the Service From: South Dakota

Date of Death: October 01, 1918

Wars or Conflicts: World War I

Buried: Plot B Row 35 Grave 8

Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery

Romagne, France

Awards: Distinguished Service Cross

For your chosen chaplain, answer the following questions:

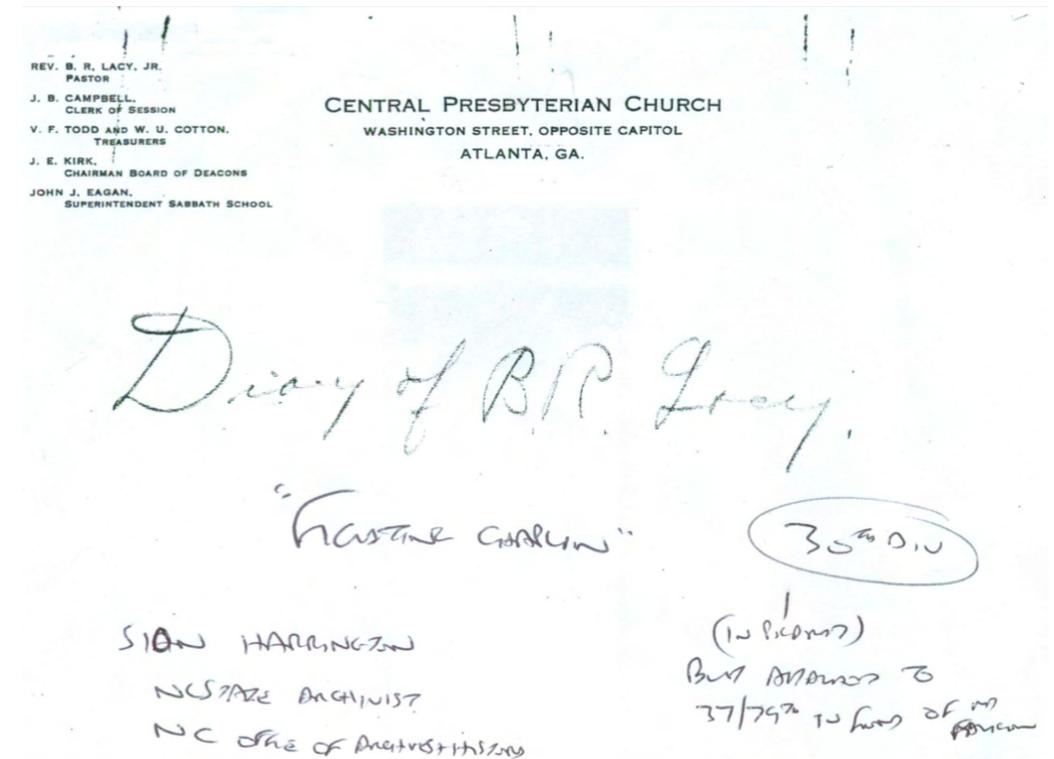
1. List the three most important roles they play in their unit.
2. Pick the role that is of most interest to you. Put yourself into the shoes of your chaplain and write a 2-3 sentence diary entry describing yourself in that role during your time in the trenches at the Meuse-Argonne. Make sure to describe the sights, sounds and smells of the scene so that your relatives back home can understand a little of your life as a chaplain in the front line.
3. Do U.S. military chaplains today perform roles similar to those 100 years ago? Locate a current/recent U.S. military

chaplain. Contact your state's local national guard unit if unsure where to begin.

Either:

- a. Write a fictional short newspaper article as might appear in the local paper, giving a brief overview of your military chaplain (2-3 paragraphs)
- b. Do an actual interview with the real chaplain, noting down your questions and their specific answers. Perhaps this could even turn into a real newspaper article you submit to your local or school newspaper.

The Diary of Ben Lacy



Tap or click to view the document.

Additional assignments based on Ben Lacy diary:

- A. Daily life in the trenches - describe Lacy's experiences with sleeping, eating, mud, etc...
- B. Shellfire – describe what you learn of its effects – outgoing as well as incoming.
- C. On the attack – describe what an ordinary soldier sees and hears.
- D. Terrain – how does this affect the battle/life in trenches?
- E. Style of writing – describe Lacy's emotions, comments on his men, descriptions of the dead.
- F. Follow his movements September 11 to October 13 – plot them on the terrain map. See chapter of the geography of the battle for linked photos and videos of battlefield at Esnes, Montfaucon and Gesnes.

Post-War Burial of the Dead at the Meuse Argonne Cemetery

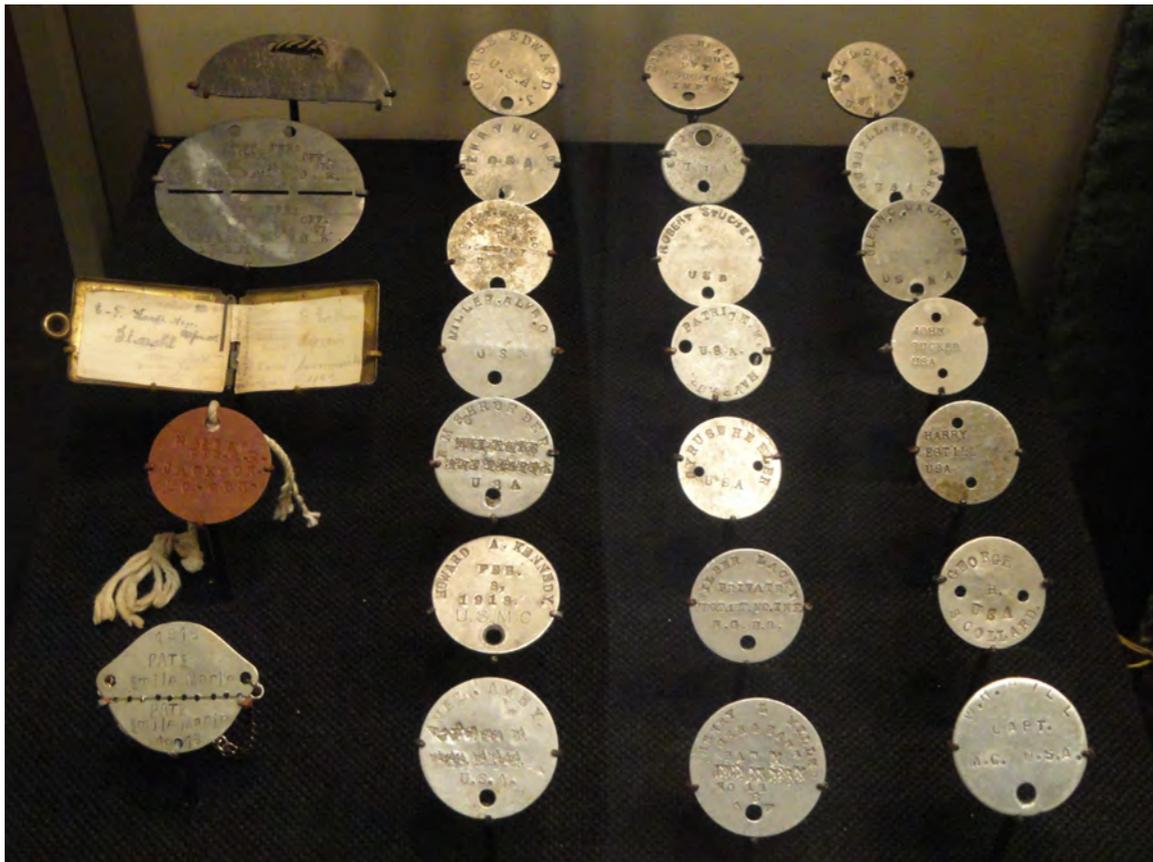
Ultimately, the Meuse-Argonne Offensive would help bring the war to an end. However, although the armistice occurred on November 11, 1918, men continued to die of war-related injuries, accidents, and diseases in the months that followed.

After the war ended, the Americans and their allies had to decide how and where to bury their dead. Mass graves had been commonly used in past conflicts, such as the 6,000 British soldier deaths from cholera during the Crimean War. One could argue that the American ethic of individualism influenced the decision to bury each soldier under a named headstone whenever possible. Moreover, the American ethos of democracy led to the historically unusual circumstances of egalitarian cemetery plots where majors were buried alongside privates. In Europe, America negotiated the long-term lease of hundreds of acres of land in order to bury their dead in "American cemeteries." After World War I, the Americans laid out eight cemeteries along the former "Western Front." In this chapter we focus on one such cemetery: the Meuse Argonne American Cemetery located at Romagne-sous-Montfaucon in the Meuse, along the Western Front.

The Founding of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC)

While the biology of human decay necessitated immediate burial of some sort, the long-term formal plans for the cemeteries that would become the final resting places of American soldiers took almost a decade. During the war, on August 7, 1917, the American Graves Registration Service (GRS) was created. Their task was made somewhat easier by earlier regulation, passed on July 6, 1916, that assigned each soldier two circular tags, one to remain with the body and the other to file as part of the burial record.

Originally, the American World War I dead were buried in over 2,300 cemeteries scattered throughout Europe. This included at least 70,000 burials of which 15,000 were in isolated graves (Budreau 2010, 22). Adding to the logistical challenge, in 1918 Secretary of War Newton D. Baker promised the nation that the dead would be returned home for burial. In the end, this promise cost the government over 30 million dollars as bodies were repatriated between 1919 and 1922 (Budreau 2010, 21). And this



World War I dogtags

figure does not include the cost, per the family's wishes, of burying tens of thousands of other soldiers in cemeteries abroad.

The American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC) was founded by Congress in 1923 and President Harding appointed a seven-member committee to honor the American armed forces through monuments and memorials abroad. General John J. Pershing was appointed as chair of this organization and served as its head until his death in 1948.

In the decades following World War I, a total of eight cemeteries were designed by the ABMC. In order to serve the needs of the

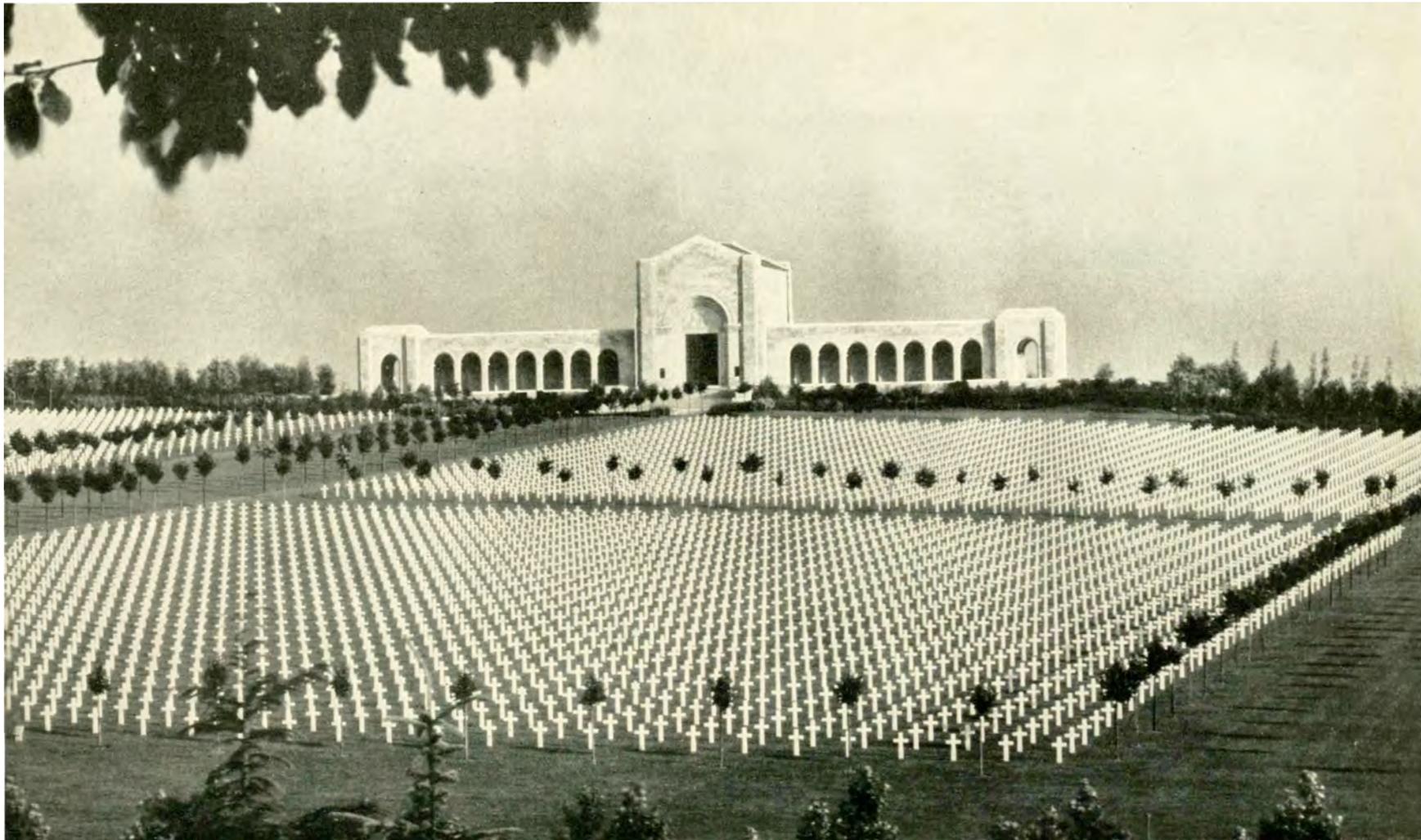
mourners and adequately remember the fallen men and women, each cemetery included a chapel, ornamental landscaping, a battlefield map, and some form of a memorial statue. Burials were marked by white marble gravestones, while the names of the missing and presumed dead were inscribed on the walls of the chapels.

The Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery did not formally unveil its newly landscaped site and almost 15,000 gravestones until 1937.

In the preceding decades, the ABMC had hired some of the leading architects and designers of their day to craft a chapel, a grand entrance gate, a symmetrical series of plots, and a beautiful yard, filled with graves.



General Pershing, appointed the chair of the American Battlefields Monuments Commission. Source: ABMC Blue Book, p. 15.



A historic photograph of the Meuse Argonne American Cemetery soon after its founding.

Designing ABMC sites

In contrast to the U.S., most of the Allied Forces decided not to repatriate their dead; instead, burying them in battlefield cemeteries, usually segregated by nationality. While the U.S. gave next-of-kin the option to bring their child or spouse's body home, they hoped to make the foreign cemeteries attractive enough that Americans would pick the less expensive option to bury their dead abroad. The chair of the Commission of Fine Arts (C.F.A.), Charles

Moore, was the catalyst behind the designs of the American cemeteries in Europe. In designing these sites he was clearly influenced by Arlington National Cemetery, just outside of Washington DC, and suggested that erecting uniform white, marble stones situated within "gentle wooded slopes" would produce "the desired effect of a vast army in its last resting place" (Moore 1917, 494). The democratic nature of these identical gravestones emphasized the egalitarian ideal of American society while the symmetrical blocks and paths within Moore's planned landscape suggested a predictable and thereby soothing route through the

graveyard. Moreover, the orderly rows of headstones at the Meuse Argonne cemetery created a park-like atmosphere that dovetailed with the emergence of "Memorial Parks," replacing the more visceral term "graveyard," back in the United States. Image: To the dismay of the domestic lobby representing Vermont stone carvers, the ABMC decided to purchase Italian marble from Carrara because of its reputation for producing high quality raw material.



The uniformity of white marble gravestones in many of the historic sections of Arlington National Cemetery outside of Washington DC. Photographer: Lynn Rainville.

Over the course of the 1920s, the ABMC altered the focus of the commemorative mission from describing the activities of the American forces in Europe, primarily through battle maps, to a more nationalistic focus on large monuments "to perpetuate the deeds of its sons... and help to preserve the glorious record of America's achievement in the



Rows of graves at the Meuse Argonne American Cemetery. Photographer: Colin Baker.

World War" (ABMC Annual Report 1914, 4). This grandiose goal required skilled craftsmen; in 1925, the commission decided to hire the well-known French architect Paul Cret, who had emigrated to America in 1903. A second famous architect, John Russell Pope, designed the nearby monument at Montfaucon. Cret employed his Beaux-Arts method to design neo-classical buildings and sculpture. This style would have been very familiar to its post-World War I American audience, as many of Washington DC's museums and federal buildings adhere to this style.



Photograph of Paul P. Cret around 1910 from the University of Pennsylvania's Archives.

One of the most symbolically important elements of the cemetery is the chapel, where mourners and visitors could pray and reflect. At the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, Louis Ayres, of the prestigious NYC firm York & Sawyer, designed a Romanesque styled chapel which he argued would be "sympathetic to most people's idea of a chapel" and, presumably, especially so to

a French audience (York & Sawyer 1926). The resulting building incorporated buttresses, capitals, and carved moldings that caricature participants in the war.



Many of the architects who worked abroad to design American memorials and cemeteries were French-trained and several worked to design buildings and landscapes in large U.S. cities such as Washington DC Here is an example of one of Paul Cret's Art Deco designs, for the Marriner S. Eccles Federal Reserve Board Building (completed in 1937). Source: Federal Reserve.



Montfaucon Memorial designed by the architect John Russell Pope. Sources: Library of Congress, American Armies and Battlefields in Europe.

Activity: Cemetery Design

Ideally, students will visit a local cemetery before working on this activity. A nearby cemetery from any era will encourage students to think about the layout, design, and organization of burial plots. If there are veteran graves from any war, that would be ideal.



*The Chapel at the Meuse Argonne Cemetery.
Photographer: Lynn Rainville.*



A close-up of the top of a war-inspired column at the Chapel. Photographer: Lynn Rainville.

Instructions for students:

Imagine you are General Pershing, American Expeditionary Force commander in 1918 and the first head of the American Battle Memorial Commission in the 1920s. You have been tasked by the U.S. Congress to create an American Military cemetery in Europe to include all the U.S. war dead of World War I. You should submit an initial design concept to Congress along the following lines:

1. A map of where the cemetery is to be located, bearing in mind where the majority of U.S. deaths occurred during World War I.
2. A general sketch of the overall cemetery layout, noting special features such as:

- Cemetery boundary: what would you use to enclose it? walls, hedges, trees, fences etc.
- Roads/paths within the cemetery to enable visitors easy access
- Grave section layout: would you organize the stones by surname, state, unit, date of death, other?
- Location/brief exterior design of any house of worship
- Location/brief exterior design of any other buildings that you think would be necessary for mourners and visitors
- Landscaping: what would you plant or build as decoration? trees, flowers, fountains etc...

Important Links:

[Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery](#)

[Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#) (for examples of cemeteries built by the Allied Forces)

[Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge](#) (German War Graves Commission)

The Dedication of the American Cemeteries in Europe

The American cemeteries in Europe were formally dedicated in 1937, on the twentieth anniversary of America's entry into the war. Oddly enough, the chapels were dedicated on Memorial Day while the monuments, such as the Montfaucon column, were formally opened in August. At the Montfaucon dedication, both General Pershing and Marshal Petain gave speeches and President Roosevelt added some comments via radio (Grossman 1984).

Gravestone Designs

The American Cemetery at the Meuse contains row after row of perfectly aligned marble headstones. They are deceptively simple in design, a three-dimensional cross with no additional motif except the inscription itself. But a lot of thought and planning went into this solemn symbol. Back home, in America, gravestones for military veterans are usually curved marble markers with crosses or stars of David inscribed within a small circle at the center.

In contrast, the ABMC cemeteries contain markers that are carved into the shape of either a cross or a Star of David. These strikingly white stones were carved with what had become the standard military inscription since the Civil War: the name of the deceased, his rank, his birth and death date, if known, his military unit, and any commendations such as a medal of honor. The end result is a sea of white stones within an ornamental landscape of trees, bushes, and an ornamental pond.



*A typical veteran's gravestone in the United States.
Photographer: Lynn Rainville.*



An example of a cross and star of David in an ABMC cemetery abroad. Photographer: Lynn Rainville.

Non-American Gravestone Designs

On the American stones there is no space for a personalized epitaph. In contrast, the Commonwealth Graves Commission allowed surviving kin to select a short biographical inscription. In other words, the American stones create an egalitarian ethos where the stones of generals resemble those of foot soldiers. These white stones also create a welcoming sea of brightly colored memorials.

In sharp contrast, the German cemeteries often contain dark-metal markers, or sometimes painted wooden ones, that lie under pine trees and are surrounded by unmaintained forests, creating a foreboding atmosphere. Of course, this impression is subjective. One could turn this around and say that the American model is not



The cemetery landscape at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery. Photographer: Colin Baker.

sufficiently somber whereas the German style creates a sense of mourning and bereavement.

And then there are the British cemeteries, which resemble gardens. To the untrained eye, it almost appears as if the gravestones were inserted into flower beds, not the other way around. The British tradition of gardening, especially raising flowers such as roses, goes



A marble stone at the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery. Photographer: Colin Baker



A German World War I Cemetery. Photographer: Lynn Rainville

back centuries in the literary and literal world of Britain. British soldiers brought books of poetry and literature with them into the field during World War I that assumed a level of botanical literacy that not all nationalities shared. For example, one British battalion entertained themselves by hosting a gardening competition to see which company could create the most symbolically meaningful

plot. This nationally recognized interest in gardenings led one person to observe that the British fighting forces were “gardeners camouflaged as soldiers” (Fussell 1975).

These three short examples demonstrate that while death is universal, the symbols used to commemorate and remember the dead vary with cultural beliefs and traditions. Another universal human reaction to death is the process of mourning. After World War I, a group of mothers joined together to ensure that their children’s sacrifice was appropriately commemorated.

Activity: Gravestone Design

The form and symbolism of gravestones illustrates the emotions, beliefs, and ideas of the individuals who selected the marker.



A flower-bed at a British Cemetery in Belgium. Photographer: Lynn Rainville.

In the pictures below, find the symbol indicated and think about what it meant to the survivors and why they selected it for the gravestone of their loved one. Tap or click each picture for the answer, or scroll to the end of this section for all of the answers.

In the second half of this lesson, design a gravestone for a family member. First, pick the shape of the marker.

Next, select a symbol that illustrates your feelings for them, your grief over losing them, or their personality. You can download a list of options from the [Association of Gravestone Studies \(PDF\)](#). Create two stones, one for a family member who did not serve in the military, and one for a veteran. If you don't have any close relatives who served, imagine an ancestor who fought in World War I.

Make sure to note underneath what the shape and design signify and why you chose them.





Examples of options for grave marker shapes

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Answers

- The cross is a common Christian motif symbolizing the location where Jesus Christ was crucified and indicating the nature of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).
- An upright torch often symbolizes the eternal flame. When it is turned upside down it symbolizes death.
- This motif illustrates the deceased meeting their maker.
- The laurel wreath was given to victors in the original Olympic games (first held in ancient Greece). In a mortuary context it symbolizes victory over death.

Remembering the Dead: The Role of Gold Star Mothers Pilgrimages to the Meuse-Argonne

In her book, *Bodies of War: World War I and the Politics of Commemoration in America 1919-1933*, author Lisa Budreau notes that, in the new era of mass industrial war:

Public support is crucial to a successful national war, as victory depends less on professional armies than on the extent to which an integrated social unit composed of democratic committees can sustain a collective will. As the nation began its military mobilization during the early months of 1917, many women were quick to voice their support for the war and to suggest ways that it's lost servicemen might be remembered. Their authority was instinctively based on their traditional status as mourner, nurturer, and sacrificial mother – an active role they had

assumed immediately after the Civil War.
(Budreau 2010, 87)

Shortly after World War I, therefore, grieving mothers began to organize into Gold Star Mothers groups in order to provide support for mothers who had lost sons or daughters in the war. The name came from the custom of families of servicemen hanging a banner called a Service Flag in the



A service flag with one gold star and two blue stars.

window of their homes. The Service Flag had a star for each family member in the United States Armed Forces. Living servicemen were represented by a blue star, and those who had lost their lives were represented by a gold star.

When the U.S. entered the war, one of the promises made by the government was the return of the bodies of dead soldiers. Matters were complicated, however, by the politics of varying U.S. groups and Allied nations, primarily concerning whether to repatriate the

dead to individual family graves, or rebury the dead in large national cemeteries near where they had fallen. Moreover, the Meuse-Argonne battlefield saw such prolonged heavy fighting that bodies of the dead buried could be lost if temporarily marked, or not recovered at all because of subsequent fighting and shelling.



Meuse-Argonne grave of John W Melton.
Photographer: Colin Baker.

Eventually, the ABMC was established and mothers and other relatives in the U.S. were given the choice to return the bodies of their sons or have them re-interred in the nearest large U.S. cemetery in Europe. After a prolonged political struggle, the mothers and wives of those buried overseas were given permission to undertake a pilgrimage, at U.S. government expense, to the gravesite of their sons and husbands.



U.S. Government official pilgrimage invitation. National World War One museum, Kansas City.

Oct. 13, Sun. Half sick. Got mail off. Services in mud and mist ^{Serv}
at "A" "E" "C" eschellon. Used caisson for pulpit at "C" All attended.
German dugout and houses luxurious. Capt. Fletcher with whom I stay ¹⁵
has private dugout with steps from his bed room. Stoves galore. They
had electric lights and water works everywhere. Chicken yards, swings,
besides all things for fighting. Names of boys of "E" killed Oct. 3, 1918

Robert L. Alston,
John W. Melton,
Robey E. Cambell
Geo. G. Barnes.

Diary entry from Ben Lacy recording the death of John W. Melton. Diary entries from Ben Lacy, Central Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, held at North Carolina State Archives.

Of the more than 11,000 women deemed eligible by the U.S. Government for the Gold Star Pilgrimage, just over half accepted the government's offer. Between 1930 and 1933, they visited their family members' graves in Europe, most of which were in France.

Among these women was the mother of Private John W. Melton. He died near Montfaucon at the Meuse-Argonne from shelling on October 3, 1918, while part of the 30th Division. His death and initial burial had been observed by the "Fighting Chaplain" Ben Lacy. He was re-interred at the Meuse-Argonne cemetery and was subsequently visited by his mother in a 1930 pilgrimage.

Similarly, the mother of 1st Sergeant Harry N. Kendall of the 1st division undertook a GSM pilgrimage to visit her son's grave. He died during the last German offensive of the war at the 2nd Marne on July 15, 1918. Initially, the War Department indicated that his

Dear Sir:

It is with profound regret that I confirm the recent telegram of The Adjutant General announcing the death of First Sergeant Harry N. Kendall, Company A, 168th Infantry, who was killed in action on July 15, 1918.

The information received does not give the place of death or other particulars, but his commander has your address and should furnish you full particulars of the sad event. Should this office receive further information you will be advised in detail.

It is not the intention of the War Department to return the bodies of our dead to the United States before the end of the war and such removal by individuals is not practicable during the emergency. It is expected, however, that the remains of all American soldiers dying abroad will ultimately be returned to the United States for burial at their former residences at public expense.

The place of burial of Sergeant Kendall has not yet been reported, but you will be advised of the details of burial as soon as received.

For information concerning his personal effects, insurance and arrears of pay due, you should apply as follows:

Concerning personal effects, to
The Effects Depot,
Base Section No. 1,
American Expeditionary Forces.

Concerning insurance, to
The Bureau of War Risk Insurance,
Treasury Department,
Washington, D. C.

Concerning arrears of pay, to
The Auditor for the War Department

War Department letter notifying the family of the death of Harry N. Kendall. National World War One museum, Kansas City.

body would be returned, as can be seen in the official letter notifying his father of Sergeant Kendall's death and the letter from his unit's chaplain. However, the family decided to leave his body

in France, at which point it was reinterred at the Meuse-Argonne cemetery. Subsequently, his mother undertook a pilgrimage in 1933 and kept a diary of her visit to France, briefly recording her visit to her son's grave on Memorial Day, May 29, 1933.

More details on the re-interring of the bodies and the subsequent pilgrimages can be seen in the case of Private Raymond Straus, 29th Division, who died at the Meuse-Argonne on Oct 12, 1918. His temporary burial site details can be seen in the gallery with the War Department letter and picture showing his temporary grave site. His mother, Rebecca Straus, undertook a pilgrimage in 1930 aboard the SS President Roosevelt, stayed the Hotel Lutetia in Paris, and visited her son's permanent grave at the Meuse-Argonne.

The American Gold Star Mothers organization is one of a number of mother's organizations active still today who commemorate their lost sons and daughters and support their families.

WASHINGTON July 10, 1919.

IN REPLY
REFER TO 201 (Straus, Raymond) CD

Mrs. Rebecca Straus,
1908 Crotona Ave.,
New York, N. Y.

Madam:

A reply has been received from the Commanding General, American Expeditionary Force, to your recent inquiry concerning Private Raymond Straus, #368062, Company B, 114th Infantry, which reply confirms the report that he was killed in action on October 12, 1918. He was buried in Grave #51, American Cemetery #750, at Moirey, Meuse, and his grave is marked with a name peg and identification tag.

Very respectfully,

P. C. Harris,
The Adjutant General,

Per: *J*

AD
Brind

Initial temporary grave letter for Raymond Straus from the War Department. National World War One museum, Kansas City.

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Activity: Gold Star Mothers

After having read the section on the Gold Star Mothers and their pilgrimages, imagine you are a U.S. Army Officer assigned to accompany the mothers in 1930 and coordinate commemoration events for them.

Design a letter to the mother of one of the soldiers mentioned in the section. In your letter, sketch out a **brief** itinerary of events for these women, from the moment they board ship in New York, to their arrival in a French port, to the events at the cemetery itself, culminating with their visit to their son's grave.

Remember that many of these women had never left the United States before, in some cases were quite elderly, and that the U.S. government wanted to honor their sacrifice with first class treatment.

Attach a brief “useful information to note” page to the letter that describes:

- a. French cultural practices and/or relevant words/phrases that may come in handy.
- b. Military protocol at the cemetery – detail the somber and respectful nature of any ceremonies there.
- c. Polite expectations of the mothers themselves as they will be seen by the local French citizens as ambassadors of the United States and may be interviewed by local newspapers.

American Gold Star Mothers



Conclusion

Today none of the soldiers' parents and very few of their siblings or same-generation kin are still alive. It's rare even for their children, nieces, or nephews to be able to visit their graves. Superintendent Dave Bedford was surprised this summer to meet two elderly daughters of a veteran who served at the Meuse-Argonne.

Nevertheless, despite the passage of over 100 years since the war began, there are many citizens of all ages and from all countries who continue to visit the American Cemetery at Romagne. Each spring up to 200 Dutch schoolchildren tour the battlefield and conduct a ceremony at the cemetery for several of the fallen they have adopted. Similarly several thousand French schoolchildren visit each year, and on Memorial Day local French villagers and Girl Scout groups from U.S. military bases in Germany place flags on each one of the 14,246 graves at the cemetery. The chapel and welcome center guestbooks record visitors from all over the U.S. and the world, from as far afield as New Zealand.

As these visits illustrate, the cemetery is a living site, a site that fulfills the ABMC's mission to honor the service, achievements, and sacrifice of the U.S. Armed Forces.

The Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery and Memorial



The power of their sacrifice and of this site can be no better illustrated than in the words of Coleman O'Flaherty of Tasmania, who travelled half the world to visit the grave of his uncle Colman, after whom he was named:

I stood there at this simple grave, and looked at his name (my name) on the gravestone. I felt emotional at being the first member of my family to visit here after all this time and I said a prayer for him to the God who is over us all. As I finished my prayer I heard the very plaintive sound of a bugle playing the Last Post, and I am not ashamed to say that the tears flowed down my face as I listened to this sad remembrance. I wept for my Uncle who had given his life to help another, I wept for my Father (his brother) who had never visited this grave, and I wept for myself (the first family member to have come to this place).so many fine young men.....died defending the freedoms that we now take so much for granted today. And I thought as I looked

around at all the headstones in rows and columns, we should never forget this.

Activity

The activity in the PDF below asks students to take a virtual tour through the battlefields of the Central Meuse-Argonne. Students will need Ben Lacy's diary and a map of the Central Meuse-Argonne. I recommend the map on page 87 of Edward G. Lengel's book, *To Conquer Hell* (2008).

Virtual Battlefield Tour



Tap or click the icon to view the document.

Ben Lacey Diary Add-on



Tap or click the icon to view the document.

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Archival sources, including remarks from Lieutenant Birmingham, H. L. Loughry, Reverend B. Weber, Ben Lacy's diary, and military citations come from the following sources:

- 1st Division archives, Marshall Museum, Lexington, Virginia
- National World War One Museum, Kansas City, MO
- North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh, NC
- South Dakota State Historical Society

Information on Colman O'Flaherty was kindly provided by his nephew, Coleman O'Flaherty of Tasmania, Australia, and Michael O'Flaherty of Ireland.

Video Transcription

A Tribute to Father O'Flaherty

Coleman O'Flaherty was a man of duty who served in many ways in World War I. First and foremost, he served Jesus Christ, his faith. Secondly he served the U.S. Army, as a chaplain. But also very importantly, he served the ordinary soldier of the first infantry division. And it was in that last role that he gave his life, trying to save wounded in battle. As in life, so also in death. His grave displays a firm sense of sacrifice and service. Of his own sacrifice, in the service of his man, and on the other hand, in the shape of the cross, of the sacrifice of his savior for all men.

Coleman O'Flaherty lived and died for his men because his faith taught that Jesus Christ lived and died for him. Therefore, there's a plaque in the church at Chateau Thierry to the American expeditionary forces, in honor of all army chaplains. And it simply states: This memorial to the chaplains of the United States Army, who made the supreme sacrifice during the Great War. And the plaque ends with the words of Jesus himself, "Greater love hath no man, than he laid down his life for his friends."

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“Time will not dim the glory of their deeds.”

GENERAL OF THE ARMIES JOHN J. PERSHING

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