



## MEMORANDUM

TO: B.J. Lawrence, Commander-in-Chief  
Doc Schmitz, Sr. Vice Commander-in-Chief  
Hal Roesch, Jr. Vice Commander-in-Chief  
Kevin Jones, Adjutant General  
Bob Wallace, Executive Director, Washington Office  
Kim DeShano, Assistant Adjutant General

FROM: Debra Anderson, Quartermaster General

DATE: October 12, 2018

RE: **Trip Report – WWI Trip to France, September 21 – 24, 2018**

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### Overview & Background

The purpose of my trip was to represent the World War 1 Centennial Commission (WW1CC) and the Veterans of Foreign Wars at a series of events commemorating America's participation in two of its most significant battles: St. Mihiel and the Meuse-Argonne Offensives, which took place in the fall of 1918. There were five other commissioners and four staff members with me on the trip. Also, with us was Gerald York, grandson of Sgt. Alvin York, and Colonel Jennifer Pritzker, founder of the Pritzker Military Museum & Library. The WW1CC planned and organized the trip with special ceremonies organized by the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), supported by the U.S. Department of Defense, the French armed forces, and other international agencies.

Before arriving at the official functions, I visited several locations related to American operations in both world wars. One of the most dramatic was the Normandy American Cemetery, and its beautiful and moving visitors' center. We traveled to Cantigny, site of America's first offensive operation in Europe and visited the 1st Infantry Division memorial. Also, I had the opportunity to visit the Malmady Memorial, to those American soldiers massacred by Germans during the Battle of the Bulge. I also visited battlefield locations in the Hürtgen Forest, Elsenborn Ridge, and several places around Saint Vith and Bastogne. I had an informative meeting with the superintendent of the Henri-Chappelle American Military Cemetery and visited some of the graves of soldiers who died in these operations.

The focus of the Commission's official visit to France was to commemorate the 100th Anniversary of two of the most massive battles ever in U.S. military history, the St. Mihiel Offensive, and the Meuse-Argonne Offensive, of World War I. These operations are especially relevant to the VFW since most of our organization's leaders through the end of World War II were veterans of this intense combat.

General John J. Pershing's 550,000 American Expeditionary Force (AEF) and 110,000 French troops, fought The Battle of St. Mihiel from September 12-15, 1918, in an attempt to drive the Germans from the St. Mihiel salient in eastern France. It was the first American multi-corps operation and was a painful learning experience as American forces lost some 4,500 people killed, and 5,500 wounded during this short operation.

The Meuse Argonne Offensive remains the largest single operation in American military history. Pershing led over 1,200,000 American troops, over a thousand aircraft, and 400 tanks, in support of the Allies last campaign against the German Army. The fighting lasted for forty-seven days, from September 26 to November 11, 1918, and resulted in the German retreat that led to the Armistice. Success came at an enormous human cost, as the German defenders killed 26,277 Americans and wounded 95,786 more, making it one of America's most deadly battles.

### **Friday, September 21 – Montfaucon, Verdun, and Douamont**

We arrived Thursday evening, and activities began early on Friday. Our first stop was the Montfaucon Monument located on the rise between the Meuse River to the east and the Argonne Forest to the west. This massive column is one of several monuments built by ABMC following the war. The memorial commemorated the American success on the attack's second day of the Meuse-Argonne Offensive when the American First Army forced the enemy to conduct a general retreat in this region. The monument consists of a 200-foot granite column, topped with a statue symbolizing liberty. On the walls of the foyer are an engraved map of the operations with a narrative and a tribute to the American troops who served here. There are spiral stairs (234 steps) inside the monument leading to a platform at the top. We climbed the stairs to the top to see the view, which was spectacular. Behind the memorial are the ruins of a church that had been part of the town of Montfaucon, which German troops destroyed during the war, and was later rebuilt a few miles away. Mixed in with the ruins were a German bunker and observation tower. On the day we were there, the monument was the ending point for a 6-mile commemorative march conducted by American and French soldiers. The US Army Reserve and National Guard units participating had a direct legacy to this operation one hundred years ago.

From there, we proceeded to the present-day town of Montfaucon. We were met by city and department officials, and together we planted a tree in their "Pershing Park" to commemorate the 100th anniversary. The officials were very aware of their history and the significance of the Americans entering the war with the allies. They were so appreciative that we there, and the planting of the tree symbolized the long friendship between the French and Americans.

From there we went to Verdun. Verdun is the site of the largest and longest battle of the First World War on the Western Front between the German and French armies. It lasted 303 days from February 21 – December 18, 1916, and was one of the costliest in human history with over

700,000 casualties. We had lunch at a local restaurant with officials from the department of the Meuse. They welcomed us, and we had a lovely meal. There were speeches and the exchange of gifts. We each got a gift of a statue with two miniature helmets (French & American) and a small piece of munitions from the battlefield. Each one was unique. Following lunch, we went to the Musee de Guerre (Museum of War) at Verdun City Hall where we met the mayor and deputy mayor, who is also a history teacher. The city hall is old and historic with painting, photos, and artifacts in every room. The deputy mayor gave a detailed tour describing the war and the objects. Many of the artifacts showed the friendship between France and the United States. Our next stop was the Monument de la Victoire - a monument on the hill in the city with a memorial inside. Any descendent from a person who fought at Verdun can get a certificate honoring their service to the city.

We then drove to the Verdun Memorial Museum for a personal tour. The museum was recently renovated with a significant expansion and reopened in 2016. The museum tells the story from the soldiers' perspective, both French and German. There were descriptions of the horrors of war, the death and destruction, and the mud. The numbers killed and injured were huge. It also compared German and French uniforms and equipment. It was a very moving experience and very well done.

Our next stop was the Fort de Douamont. Initially built in 1885, it served as part of a defensive ring around Verdun. The Germans captured it in 1916, and the French later reconquered it. We took a guided tour of the fort, which is partly underground. It was a long structure with barracks and other rooms arrayed in a long corridor. It had mechanical turrets. Soldiers lived and worked there defending the border. Many soldiers from the two sides died there, and there were memorials inside to both. The ground around it showed signs of the massive shelling from the war.

A short distance away was the Douamont Ossuary, which was a French memorial and cemetery. The memorial building is a long tunnel-like structure with a tall obelisk. The ossuary contains the remains of both French and German soldiers who died on the Verdun battlefield. Through small outside windows, the skeletal remains of at least 130,000 unidentified combatants of both nations can be seen filling up alcoves at the lower edge of the building. On the inside of the ossuary building, the French have partially covered the ceiling and walls by plaques bearing names of soldiers who died during the battle. The memorial was eerie, and it was sad to think of all the lives lost.

The day ended with a reception at the Sous-Prefecture de Verdun with French officials and US senior military officers. There were speeches, and the hosts treated us to wine, hors-d'oeuvres, and desserts. We enjoyed mingling with French and US dignitaries and others in attendance.

### **Saturday, September 22 – Thiaucourt, St. Mihiel American Cemetery, and Montsec**

We drove to the ABMC cemetery at St. Mihiel. From there we walked to the town of Thiaucourt. All along the way were French and US flags in window boxes and hanging from homes. In the city center was a plaza with a WWI memorial. There was a band and French veterans with unit flags, and we took lots of pictures. Then the ceremony began. French troops and US troops of

all services marched up the street. There were speeches, music, and a wreath laying. It was all very moving - the expressions of gratitude, the troops in uniforms, and the music combined to make it a memorable experience. The weather was beautiful. At the conclusions, those involved formed a parade to the cemetery.

We followed the parade up the hill to the cemetery. There we met with the 1st Infantry Division color guard (in WWI uniforms) from Fort Riley. I had previously met one of the soldiers who does public relations at a ceremony in Kansas City. I then met up with the Department of Europe VFW contingency, which included six people. We talked and took pictures. They make a real effort to attend these commemorative events. They enjoyed meeting Colonel Gerald York, grandson of Sgt. Alvin York. We mingled and talked with other guests. Then it was time for the ceremony. It was beautifully done, and the weather was gorgeous. The speeches included a history of the St. Mihiel battle, which was really well done (by an American historian and a French official, alternating English to French). There were wreaths laid and a flyover by US planes. It was spectacular and, again, a moving experience. A Pershing quote displayed at the cemetery seems appropriate, "Time will not dim the glory of their deeds."

Following the ceremony, we drove to nearby Montsec. This is a circular colonnade monument on a hill with a broad stairway connecting it to the parking lot. In the center is a bronze relief map of the St. Mihiel salient, illustrating the military operations that took place there. It commemorates several battles, and the names of nearby villages liberated by American troops are carved on the frieze. We returned to the Thiaucourt/St. Mihiel for an evening concert outdoors.

### **Sunday, September 23 – Cornay, Battlefield Tour with Forestry officials, Meuse Argonne Ceremony**

The day started at Cornay, a small town in the Meuse Argonne region. We met with several Forestry department workers and town officials in a building near the town square. Introductions were made, and we received an explanation of the work of the French National Office of Forestry (ONF), which does environmental and historic conservation. They took us up a hillside trail to an overview station with an orientation map and described the battle from there. We had a great view of the area. In particular, they pointed out the hill of Cote de Chatillon.

From there we got in our cars and drove to another area called the "Shroud Forest." It was on the actual battlefield. There were markers for the missing, each bearing a name and unit. And there was a planting of trees - red maple and green spruce. The trees are planted in the shape of the Big Red One patch and will be visible from the sky when they grow. The ONF had four representatives with us and they told us about the war, the horses that the US Army used, the hay brought to feed them, and the plants and flowers that now grow in the region that came unintentionally from the US. It was wonderful and touching how the French paid tribute to the American soldiers through these informational markers and the planting of trees.

We then drove to another ONF Station, which featured a commemorative plaque to the Rainbow Division (42th Division) and General Douglas MacArthur. There we received an explanation of the battle in that area. There was a farmhouse in the distance and the battle objective had been to

take that hill Cote de Chatillon, which we now saw closer up. German trenches (of the Hindenburg line) were just behind it.

We drove to the farmhouse known as “La Ferme de la Musarde” and had lunch with the ONF officials, local French officials, and the owner of the farmhouse. The owner had not appreciated the significance of his land until someone had come looking for the place where his grandfather had fought and died. It took on a special meaning for him and now he welcomes visitors. One of the other guests was a man whose grandfather had fought in the area for the Germans. Also, with us were members of the 16th Infantry Regiment Association, which was a unit of 1st ID that fought in this area. After lunch, we walked a short distance up the hill behind the farmhouse to the trench lines, which were deep and well preserved after 100 years.

Next, we headed to the Meuse Argonne American Cemetery. This is the largest US cemetery in Europe with 14,246 headstones. Most of those buried there died during the Meuse Argonne offensive. The events of the day included the reading of names of the fallen and the lighting of luminary candles for each headstone, which was done throughout the day by volunteers, including VFW members from Post 10810 (Stuttgart) and the Department of Europe. We arrived as the weather was getting progressively worse. At the last minute the ceremony was moved inside the chapel due to heavy rain and winds. Speakers and guests included: Dr. Mark T. Esper, Secretary of the Army; General Curtis M. Scaparrotti, Commander of U.S. European Command and Supreme Allied Commander, Europe; General Gilles Lillo, General de Corps d’Armee; and William M. Matz, Secretary of the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC). Also, present were Sandra Pershing & Gerald York, relatives of famous American military heroes. American and French military troops participated, as did the 1<sup>st</sup> ID color guard. The ceremony included the laying of wreaths. I was honored to lay a wreath on behalf of the WWICC. Following the ceremony, I had to leave for the drive back to Paris for an early morning flight. However, there was a break in the weather, and they were able to light the candles with beautiful results.

As I reflect on the trip, I am moved by the personal stories of the soldiers, by the magnitude of the battles, and by the hospitality we received from the French people. One hundred years ago young men, and a few women, crossed the ocean to fight with our allies for the ideals of freedom and liberty. Many did not make it home. All were affected by what they had experienced. We must never forget them.