

Bringing the Great War Home:

Teaching with the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery



AMERICAN BATTLE MONUMENTS COMMISSION

Preface

The impact of World War I on the world today cannot be overstated. As we experience the centennial, it's critical that we take the time to reflect on America's contribution to the war and to explore how it has shaped not just the United States, but the entire world we know today.

The American Battle Monuments Commission was established in 1923 with the specific purpose to commemorate the service, achievements and sacrifice of America's armed forces in World War I. Initially, the agency was responsible for eight permanent World War I commemorative cemeteries and 13 monuments and memorials overseas. Following World War II, another 14 cemeteries were established and today, the agency is responsible for 25 American cemeteries and 26 monuments across the globe.

ABMC's roots are in World War I. In fact, our first chairman was General of the Armies John J. Pershing, commander of the American Expeditionary Forces (AEF).

As a small agency, many Americans do not realize that we exist and indeed, many Americans are not aware that Americans from both World Wars are buried overseas. Pershing made a promise to the families who lost loved ones in Europe during the war that "time will not dim the glory of their deeds." This is a promise ABMC strives to keep to this day.

World War I is often overshadowed in history classrooms by other movements and events of the 20th century, especially World War II. While present in standards and history books, teachers are often forced to move

through World War I quickly, and unfortunately, the real impact of the conflict upon our history and culture is often missed.

This is why the ABMC World War I education program started. We realized that to best tell the story and keep Pershing's promise, we needed to engage with educators. That is exactly what we did.

ABMC developed a partnership with the University of North Carolina and Virginia Tech to develop teaching resources and materials that include aspects of ABMC cemeteries and memorials in the teaching of World War I. We asked the project team to develop the resources so the materials can be applied not only in history classrooms, but in the teaching of geography, the language arts and the fine arts. As part of the project, a small cadre of teachers, who teach in middle and high school classrooms, were recruited to develop the materials with the premise that the best resources and lesson ideas are those developed by teachers. To keep the project focused, we specifically concentrated on developing lesson plans and resources around the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, which commemorates the campaign of the same name.

Our logic for this was simple - The Meuse-Argonne campaign is one of the largest military offensives undertaken by the American armed forces in our nation's history. Arguably, it is the military campaign that forced the Central Powers into negotiations for the armistice, closing hostilities on Nov. 11, 1918. The Meuse-

Argonne campaign was a uniquely American experience in that it was planned, organized and led by Americans. It was the AEF's crowning achievement. It was also the costliest campaign of the war for the AEF with over 26,200 Americans killed in a span of 47 days. Today, over 14,200 of those Americans rest in ABMC's Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, our largest cemetery in Europe.

It is a great honor to introduce the lesson ideas and classroom activities contained in this electronic book. This is a culmination of 18 months of effort for those who participated in the program. This project involved tireless research into World War I. For many of the teachers involved with the program, this was the first time they explored this conflict in such detail. To help the teachers understand the Meuse-Argonne American Cemetery, they were sent to France where they not only had a chance to see the cemetery, but they also explored World War I trenches and ruins in the region. They worked alongside the cemetery superintendent and assisted with the daily cleaning of the headstones. As their familiarity with those buried in the cemetery grew, this became a truly emotional experience for the participating teachers.

As you read each of the chapters, you will gain a sense of their experience. Each is unique in organization and writing style. This is purposeful. It is our hope that you will gain an understanding of the teachers and their passion for the subject. We want you to see their lesson ideas as the authors intended.

There is a considerable amount of material in this e-book. In fact, we decided to break the book into four separate volumes. Each chapter explores different aspects of World War I from an American perspective. Within the volumes you will find ways to discuss the African American experience in the war, ways to teach the role of monuments and memorials in memory, and ways for your students to explore your community history through the eyes of Americans sent overseas. These are just a few of the teaching ideas that you will encounter as you browse through these volumes.

You will also notice the inclusion of many ABMC resources into the lesson ideas. What is especially distinct is the use of the book *American Armies and Battlefields in Europe*, often termed the “Blue Book.” This monumental work written by ABMC in the 1930’s stands on its own as possibly one of the best and most complete works covering the history of America’s armed forces in the war. The maps, photographs and statistics are tremendous resources with great potential for teaching. The “Blue Book” can be considered ABMC’s first effort in telling the story of those men and women we honor.

In closing, one of the inscriptions at ABMC’s Honolulu Memorial reads “We leave you our deaths. Give them their meaning.” This is from the poem *The Young Soldiers Do Not Speak* by Archibald MacLeish, who lost a brother in World War I. MacLeish challenges us to remember and reflect on the true cost and

meaning of war. It is with the ideas contained in this e-book that teachers can challenge students to do the same.

I congratulate all of the participants who contributed to this project. Thank you.

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Resources

To download editable versions of all presentations in this book, presentations including the images in each photo gallery, and PDFs of handouts for use with students, visit <https://www.abmc.gov/learning-resources>.