

In the Spotlight: A visit to Verdun reinforces meaning of Memorial Day

By John F. Gilligan

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Verdun, France — I know no one here. But what we have in common is that we are Americans. Before my eyes are more than 14,000 white crosses, with a sprinkling of white Stars of David. It takes a cold-hearted man not to tear up at such a sight.

It's been 50 years since I was last here. On this day I brought my 14-year-old grandson to the World War I cemetery outside of Verdun. It's the region where the mass of the WWI American Expeditionary Force under Gen. John J. Pershing fought and were killed. More Americans are buried here than in any American military cemetery in Europe.

I want him to know that men and women not only risked their lives but lost them in service to our country. And today we honor them, pray for them, draw courage from them, and remember that our nation cannot live without a willingness to die for it.

Is this kind of idealism moribund in America today? Cynicism has grown this past decade. Worst of all, a loss of faith in government and its political leadership pervades our culture. A commitment to the nation's well-being and common good hardly seems to be foremost in our hearts, minds and actions.

The Americans came late to this war that started 28 July 1914. England and France were apoplectic over American neutrality. President Woodrow Wilson feared a civil war at home if the nation went to war abroad.

More than 8 million living in America were either born in or had a parent from Germany. "The people of the United States are drawn from many nations and chiefly from the nations now at war." Wilson argued. "Some will wish one nation, others another, to succeed in the momentous struggle."

When Wilson realized that European civilization itself was on the verge of implosion, he appealed to Congress and the nation that the world had to be "made safe for democracy." And America declared war on 2 April 1917.

Known as Doughboys, American soldiers arrived for the last great offensive of the war; and they turned the tide. But it was at a great cost. One assault during the October 1918 Meuse-Argonne offensive, near Verdun, left 12,000 of them dead at day's end. Many bodies were never found because they had been blown to bits; they are remembered only by their names chiseled in a wall.

Walking among these white cross memorials, the American names strike you. They represent every nationality, ethnicity and religion on the planet. You suddenly come across a woman's name and wonder: "How'd she get here?" And then there are the White Cross and Star of David markers simply engraved: "Here Rest In Honored Glory An American Soldier Known But To God."

A line from the Gettysburg Address comes quickly to mind: "That from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion."

What better summarizes the meaning and purpose of Memorial Day?

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